



Improving Frontline Encounters with Displaced Ukrainians

Evidence and policy recommendations from the MAGnituDe project in Sweden, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Finland

Authors

Oksana Shmulyar Gréen
Andrea Spehar

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KEY MESSAGES

- Reception outcomes depend too much on whom a displaced person happens to meet.
- Frontline workers and civil society bridge institutional gaps, often at significant personal cost.
- Consistent services, support to frontline workers, tailored pathways and clear legal futures are essential.

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Executive Summary

Context: Now in its fifth year, Russia's war against Ukraine leaves 4.38 million people in the EU under the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), extended to 4 March 2028 by Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2026/1912. Across the six countries studied — Sweden, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Finland — rapid legal access has not translated into quality of reception, and post-TPD residence pathways remain undefined in most member states. The MAGnituDe project argues that Russia's war against Ukraine is reshaping the Baltic Sea region not only through military and political aggression but also affectively, at the scale of everyday encounters. Solidarity, exhaustion and personal proximity to the war shape how frontline workers meet displaced Ukrainians, and it is largely through these encounters - not through legal status alone - that displaced people form their relationship with the receiving state.

Finding: Reception outcomes depend on which frontline worker a displaced person happens to encounter rather than on a consistent institutional framework. Through these encounters, displaced people learn how the receiving state operates and whether its institutions can be trusted. Inconsistency at the frontline therefore translates directly into uneven integration outcomes and varying levels of confidence in democratic governance. Meanwhile, frontline workers absorb the costs of structural gaps through the exercise of informal discretion, while uncertainty about life after temporary protection permeates each encounter.

Recommendation: Amid the recent extension of TPD legal framework, Member states and municipalities should establish consistent and accessible frontline services; train and support frontline workers; fund civil society as core reception infrastructure; tailor support to people's skills and family trajectories; and guarantee practical access and clear, mobility-sensitive legal pathways beyond temporary protection.

Extended Version: Under the following link, you will find the extended version of this Policy Brief, including key concepts and methodology used to produce the findings. <https://magnitude-horizon.eu/deliverables/d2-2-policy-brief-and-recommendations/>

Introduction

Policy Context

Following Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2026/1912 of 30 July 2026, the TPD for people displaced from Ukraine is extended until 4 March 2028. The Council Recommendation of 16 September 2025 on a coordinated transition out of temporary protection is a soft-law instrument. The residence pathways remain undefined in most EU member states. Each annual extension renews protection without resolving what follows it. It is this open-ended provisionality, rather than any single expiry date, that shapes the encounters analysed here.

Why encounters matter?

These PRs present an integrated analysis of encounters between street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and Ukrainian forcibly displaced people (FDPs) in six European Union states of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) —Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden. MAGnituDe treats these encounters as important sites, where displaced people form their trust — or distrust — in democratic governance and in the receiving state, which conditions their willingness to invest in integration and to participate politically.

This brief addresses the gap between the legal status provided to Ukrainian FDPs and the practical access to their rights: arguing that protection was granted rapidly, but access to language learning, employment, housing and healthcare remains delayed and inconsistent. Because SLBs had to adapt rapidly to new situations, often with CSOs meeting immediate needs first, the encounters of FDPs with SLBs and CSOs became the point at which the reception system was, in practice, defined.

Evidence base

The analysis draws on 17 focus groups with 55 frontline workers in labour market, housing and education services; 73 interviews with Ukrainian displaced persons; and 18 interviews with people who returned to Ukraine after displacement to one of the six countries. Material was collected and analysed by the MAGnituDe national teams between autumn 2025 and spring 2026.

Fieldwork used SensArticulate methods, art-based, experiential and embodied techniques for researching sensitive experience in traumatic contexts, which are well suited to capturing the affective dimensions both of living through displacement and of working with its consequences.

Results of Analysis

Finding 1: Reception Outcomes Depend on People, Not Institutional Design

Across all six countries, displaced persons describe positive treatment as “luck”, and frontline workers describe extending discretion well beyond their formal role to compensate for institutional gaps. Civil society organisations are evaluated more positively than state institutions in every country and they have absorbed services state systems could not deliver — particularly in Sweden and Germany — but this depends on informal commitment, not mandate.

Finding 2: Frontline Workers Absorb the Emotional Cost of Institutional Gaps

Frontline workers describe giving out personal phone numbers, working outside contracted hours, and using their own money to fill institutional absences. Signs of burnout, vicarious trauma, and moral strain are reported in all six countries. Trauma-informed training and clinical supervision exist as exceptions in some organisations across the countries studied — but not as routine policy.

Finding 3: Frontline Workers Implement Rules They Consider Unjust Without Support

Frontline workers implement rules they consider unjust without institutional support for navigating the resulting dilemmas. Swedish displaced persons lose housing entitlement on receipt of a personal identification number; Latvian residence rights are revoked for travel home via Russia even when it is the only route from occupied territories; Polish workers manage acute client anxiety after sudden withdrawal of state support. These are predictable outcomes of delegating moral responsibility downward without the authority or resources to exercise it.

Finding 4: Reception Systems Are Blind to Skills and Qualifications

Although most displaced Ukrainians are highly educated and have substantial professional experience, reception systems often channel them into standardised, low-skilled employment. The mismatch is enacted in each encounter: a Jobcentre officer offering an inappropriate job, a case worker failing to ask about qualifications. Critically, Ukrainians who can see a defined route upward do not describe feeling devalued — what frontline workers offer in the encounter shapes whether the system feels dignified.

Finding 5: Policy Frameworks Ignore the Intergenerational Complexity of Families

Workers in Germany, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden describe families in which parents remain oriented toward return while children have built lives in the host country. There are no policy frameworks for these tensions: no guidance for housing

workers managing changed family situations, no training for employment counsellors whose clients' decisions are shaped by a teenager's school friendships. Returnee evidence confirms that return is rarely an endpoint; repeated mobility is common.

Finding 6: Despite the TPD's Extension to 2028, Prolonged Uncertainty Pervades Every Encounter

Displaced persons delay language learning; employers hesitate on permanent contracts; frontline workers cannot support long-term planning while legal status remains unresolved. The 30th of July 2026 Council Recommendation on coordinated transition is non-binding, and the underlying legal pathways remain undefined in most member states. In Finland and Poland, workers describe being unable to advise on alternatives that do not yet legally exist.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, this brief puts forward the following recommendations to decision-makers and relevant stakeholders.

Recommendation 1: Adopt Binding Post-TPD Legal Pathways Before March 2028

Addressed to: Council of the EU · European Commission · Member States · **Timeframe:** Short term

Far in advance of 4th of March 2028, the Council should adopt a binding instrument defining residence pathways for current TPD beneficiaries, going beyond the non-binding Council Recommendation of September 2025. Two feasible vehicles: amending the Long-Term Residents Directive (2003/109/EC) so that TPD residence counts toward the five-year threshold, or a dedicated post-TPD Council Decision. An instrument agreed in good time is worth far more than one negotiated under crisis conditions.

Recommendation 2: Guarantee Immediate Practical Access Alongside Legal Recognition

Addressed to: European Commission · Member States · **Timeframe:** Medium term

Future EU reception must ensure that formal legal protection is accompanied by immediate practical access to language learning, employment services, housing pathways, and healthcare. The pattern documented across all six countries combines rapid legal access with delayed or inconsistent practical access, leaving personal networks to function as the primary equaliser. This should be treated as a policy failure, not an operational inevitability. Particular attention is needed for displaced persons, who arrive without prior networks and face systematically worse outcomes across every domain studied.

Recommendation 3: Establish Enforceable Service Standards for Frontline Encounters

Addressed to: Member States · Municipalities · Public Sector Institutions · **Timeframe:** Medium term

EU member states should adopt enforceable service standards for housing, employment, and education frontline services: consistent information provision, defined response times, multilingual communication, and access to human review of consequential decisions. Member states should invest in proactive, multilingual digital communication, including direct notification of changes in status and entitlements, and equip frontline workers to communicate major regulatory changes in accessible formats. The goal is not to eliminate discretion, which is necessary in any complex individual case, but to ensure that the floor of dignified treatment is institutional, not personal.

Recommendation 4: Mandate Proactive Wellbeing Support for Frontline Workers

Addressed to: European Commission · Member States · Public Sector Institutions · Funders
Timeframe: Medium term

Trauma-informed training, clinical supervision, and structured peer exchange should be mandatory features of any SLB's or CSO's role involving regular contact with displaced persons and must be provided before crisis rather than after burnout. This applies equally to permanent and non-permanent staff, and to civil society workers funded through state grants. Evidence from Lithuania and Germany shows that proactive support cultures produce better outcomes for workers and clients alike, while Sweden, Poland, and Latvia show the cost of the current reactive approach.

Recommendation 5: Fund Civil Society as Essential Reception Infrastructure

Addressed to: European Commission · Member States · Municipalities · **Timeframe:** Medium term

Civil society organisations are evaluated more positively than state institutions by displaced persons in every country studied, and in Sweden and Germany they delivered services state systems could not. The current pattern of short-term project grants — which rewards delivery over institutional learning — is incompatible with the structural role CSOs now play. Formal CSO–state coordination mechanisms should be established as permanent reception infrastructure, not improvised through personal relationships.

Recommendation 6: Design Differentiated, Needs-Based Support Pathways

Addressed to: Member States · Municipalities · CSOs · **Timeframe:** Medium term

Ukrainian FDPs are not a homogeneous group: they differ in educational background, professional experience, trauma exposure, language proficiency, family situation, and future orientation. Reception systems that treat them as homogeneous produce systematic mismatches between available support and actual need. Differentiated pathways should distinguish those with clear professional routes from those needing intensive guidance; families with well-integrated children from those oriented towards return; and people settled for several years from recent arrivals.

Recommendation 7: Accelerate and Subsidise Qualification Recognition

Addressed to: Member States · Education Institutions · European Commission (ESF+) · **Timeframe:** Medium–long term

Professional devaluation is most acute when there is no visible pathway upward; those working below their qualification level who can envisage a route to advancement do not describe feeling devalued. Member states should streamline qualification recognition procedures, cap diploma-validation costs, and develop accelerated requalification programmes in labour-shortage sectors — particularly

healthcare, education, and engineering. Finland's free access to education for adult immigrants and Sweden's Express Svenska placement pilot are evidence-based templates worth evaluating for scaling.

Recommendation 8: Enable Pendulum Mobility Within Protection Frameworks

Addressed to: European Commission · Member States · **Timeframe:** Long term

Departure and return are phases in ongoing trajectories, not final decisions. Many families remain mobile between Ukraine and host countries. Return frequently does not end displacement. Policy frameworks should enable ongoing mobility and transnational pathways that preserve rights and entitlements during periods of return or re-migration, rather than treating mobility as a breach of protection conditions.

Key Concepts

Frontline workers: all workers at the frontline of public services — street-level bureaucrats and civil society staff — working directly with Ukrainian displaced persons.

Street-level bureaucrat (SLB): a public worker who implements policy through direct, discretionary contact with citizens).

Civil society organisations (CSOs): non-governmental organisations providing social services, advocacy, and community support outside state structures.

Forcibly displaced person (FDP): Ukrainian nationals in the six host countries under TPD protection.

Temporary Protection Directive (TPD): Council Directive 2001/55/EC, activated March 2022; currently in force until 4 March 2028.

Discretion: the capacity of frontline workers to interpret and adapt policy rules in individual cases — enabling flexibility but also risking arbitrariness and unequal treatment.

Further Information & Contact

Project website: <https://magnitude-horizon.eu>

Contact: Olga Sasunkevich (PI), olga.sasunkevich@gu.se; Oksana Shmulyar Gréen, Oksana.shmulyar@socav.gu.se; and Andrea Spehar, andrea.spehar@pol.gu.se, University of Gothenburg

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