



# Report

On the needs, interests & engagement levels of the target group of refugees from Ukraine

# Introduction

## About the project

The Erasmus+ project Ukraine Now is led by non-governmental organizations that work with people with migrant experience and provide integration services for them, in four partner countries: Greece (OCC Greece), Romania (ARCA), Slovakia (Mareena) and Spain (OCC Spain). The project's main objective and goal is to respond to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine after the start of the war by training youth workers in the field of awareness raising and refugee inclusion. So far, a methodology about communication on migration was created, an awareness raising campaign showed the national responses to the influx of refugees from Ukraine in each of the partners countries, action plans and experiences were shared between the partners to show how educational projects can be transferred from emergency to sustainable forms and during the last stage of the project, youth workers or volunteers were trained and encouraged to be active participants in community engagement as well as to become voices of their community to express their needs in each of the partners countries.

## About the needs, interests and engagement

The last part of the project, as previously mentioned, focused on training the Ukrainian youth in community participation and giving them a platform to express their needs and interests. The participants took part in educational and volunteering activities with the main goal being their active involvement. They participated in sports activities, cultural and language activities, as well as well-being workshops focused on self confidence. During one-day training activities, the partner organizations organized focus groups as well, where the participants could share their insights on various topics, namely employment, education and social integration.

In the first part of this report, we provide results from the focus groups of each partner country where we mapped perspectives and experiences of the Ukrainian youth. In the second part, we provide guidelines and recommendations on implementing the training activities the partner organizations piloted, and activities that the organizations consider a good example of including refugees and migrant people. By gathering the information and data on their experiences coming to and living in the partner countries, the partner organizations are able to accommodate their activities to the particular target group. Moreover, the information recorded in this report can serve as best practices for organizations and other actors that provide similar services and are working with similar target groups.

# I. Focus groups

## 1. ARCA, Bucharest (Romania)

Participating in the focus group were 14 people, women, one aged 18-35 and all others aged 35+, belonging to the Ukrainian community who currently reside in Bucharest. All of the participants had already been living in Romania for approximately 2 years.

### Education

In terms of educational integration into Romanian society, it has been noticed that the responsibility for this key aspect represented a common effort shared by both governmental and nongovernmental actors. As an example we observed that not only the government, but also grassroots organizations assisted with registering children in schools (Ukrainian hubs or Romanian schools). All participants in the focus group stated that they managed to easily find out essential information about such registration processes and that they were provided with adequate support to make the process as smooth as possible. However, they hardly had guidance on how to register into universities and how to obtain language certification for such enrollment. This information was given only by some organizations and only upon request. Regardless of the large number of Ukrainian people fleeing to Romania, only one university officially published translated instructions for enrollment on their official website.

The most challenging aspect was represented by language learning. First of all, the Ministry of Education created an easy step by step support mechanism for grassroots organizations to apply for the recognition of educational hubs. Many organizations working in the field of integration offered intensive Romanian and English language courses, but due to the proximity to Ukraine and the uncertainty around the duration of the conflict in Ukraine, many people found it difficult to assume the full process of integration, implicitly consistently learning the host country language, thus having high hopes of returning to their home country. Moreover, most of the participants in the focus group emphasized that Romanian is a very difficult language to learn and that there is not enough available time to learn it, as most Ukrainian people living in Romania are women, particularly mothers with children in their care.

Having an educational or professional environment where Romanian is frequently spoken and continuous interaction with the Romanian community proved to be beneficial in accelerating the language learning process. However, those who had a slower learning pace mentioned that they still use Google Translate to communicate with other Romanian people, as the basic knowledge acquired is not sufficient to have a conversation on different topics.

## Employability

Ukrainians became very familiar with the job market in Romania with the help of organizations providing vocational counseling and workshops or with the help of the Labour Agencies' professional orientation and integration programmes. Another useful communication channel was Telegram, as well as the internet as a whole. Friends and relatives also played an important part in the transmission of such information.

Most people can access low level jobs, which do not require a certain level of spoken language and where communication is not relevant for the activity. However, for those with diplomas/certificates, labor integration has proven to be extremely difficult due to the language barrier, even if for most professions no official recognition of diplomas is required in Romania. Another relevant obstacle that was mentioned is that some women have children in their care and they are not able to find a school to keep children for an extensive amount of time so that they can afford going to work.

The participants in the focus group did not mention encountering problems while working. In one of the cases, the team from work speaks Russian, which comes in as extremely useful. Another person mentioned that they are working without an official employment contract, however this is not an issue for her.

The unemployed persons mentioned that they are dependent on financial help from other family members or on other organizations or authorities. They also require food from other organizations. Their own savings were extremely helpful in supporting themselves financially. Moreover, they are looking forward to the continuation of governmental programmes through which they benefit from housing and food support.

## Social Integration

The participants in the focus group discussion mentioned that they spend their free time in various activities, the most important ones being: time spent with children and taking care of them; activities within organizations, concerts, dances, sports and other relevant hobbies.

They collectively mentioned that they mostly meet people in organizations that provide support to people fleeing Ukraine. They also engage with the local people in parks, stores, playgrounds, neighborhoods, apartment buildings, while driving or commuting. In their jobs they have conversations and exchange knowledge very easily, as well as in restaurants. They stated that communication and developing deeper connections are an important part of their overall wellbeing and happiness and they highly valued the presence of large numbers of their community members in their city, as this acted as guidance in navigating the challenges and opportunities offered by a new society.

When asked about their experience with volunteering, one of the participants said that she has been volunteering with the Association of Independent Midwives. Another woman mentioned that she volunteered with Terre des Hommes, during an environmental action with the purpose of cleaning the roads in Bucharest. Many of the participating women mentioned that they also gathered materials to be sent to Ukrainian soldiers. Some of them

also made donations to support victims of the earthquake in Turkey. Volunteering positively impacted their life, they got inspired to do more in the future and to share their experiences with their friends. They also managed to make new acquaintances and they gained useful knowledge. Another side effect was that their overall mental state improved during and after the volunteering activities.

## 2. Mareena, Bratislava (Slovakia)

The number of participants in the whole day-activity was 14 (2 male, 12 female in the age range 18-37, 11 Ukrainians, 3 Slovaks - staff members and facilitators). The focus group was attended by 11 persons. One of the Ukrainian citizens came to Slovakia before February 2022 to study at a university, the rest of the Ukrainian participants came after the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

### Education

The Ukrainian youth refugees living in Slovakia highlighted significant challenges regarding the institutional support and processes. Participants reported a lack of willingness from Slovak universities to explain the administrative processes and offer guidance, leading to a reluctant approach from institutions. Many students had to rely heavily on themselves to navigate the educational system. An interesting fact that came up during the discussion was that some participants viewed applying to Slovak universities as a way to escape Ukraine - even when it was not their initial plan but the circumstances pushed them towards this decision. They moved to Slovakia and attended university only after receiving acceptance letters.

There was a strong emphasis on the importance of language acquisition. Many participants expressed the importance of learning language on a higher level and not just the basic proficiency as this was seen as crucial for finding jobs. Some of them started learning Slovak while still in Ukraine, often through self-teaching methods. This early preparation was afterwards viewed positively as it helped with a smoother transition into life in Slovakia. There was a slight difference between those who planned to stay in Slovakia for longer periods and those who did not. Those who were clearer about their long-term stay in Slovakia were naturally more motivated to learn the language.

As mentioned above, language skills play a huge role in a successful job seeking. If you were lucky to find a job, your workplace was a great place for language exposure, allowing participants to converse on day-to-day topics with the local colleagues. However, participants noted that to work in factories immediately upon arrival, which were already employing many Ukrainians since before, hindered their ability to properly use and practice the Slovak language. Since it's easier for them to understand Slovak than to speak it, they were not motivated to learn it on a higher level, especially in environments with many Ukrainian colleagues where Slovak wasn't necessary. The importance of knowing Slovak, and most importantly to speak Slovak, increased once they realized they might stay in Slovakia longer than initially expected.

Working and attending schools and/or universities provided practical language exposure. Some benefitted from individuals who helped them learn the language, some from language learning applications or even studying with their own children who attended the school. Certification from language courses and retraining programs, particularly those offered by the Labour Office, were valued highly as well. The participants mentioned even other learning mechanisms that helped them such as active listening to Slovak podcasts and music, reading newspapers and books as well as listening to news broadcasts.

## Employability

Significant barriers in employment for Ukrainian youth, and the Ukrainian community in general, were identified and the primary cause was the lack of language skills as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Finding employment without knowing Slovak was highlighted as a significant challenge. Participants found that their job prospects were severely limited by their language skills.

When talking about job searching, the participants shared that the searching process involved sending a CV to every available position they found - without it being focused only on one job field; they used job search websites as profesia.sk, Google as well as the services of the Labor Office where they could join retraining courses and programmes and could get a consultation regarding the labor market. A few NGOs, Mareena included, provide job counseling for them too. The participants shared that even personal recommendations, friends and networking played crucial roles in finding job opportunities.

A few of the participants experienced negative situations while working that were mostly connected to working overtime, which they viewed as necessary to secure and retain employment and not be impacted by layoffs in their workplace. One of the participants reported discrimination due to their Ukrainian origin. However, the manager supported her when such issues arose, providing a measure of protection and advocacy in the workplace.

## Social Integration

The focus group discussion highlighted proactive efforts by Ukrainian youth refugees to socially integrate into Slovak society. Most participants are students, which has a significant impact on their social integration experiences and which, in many cases, helped them to integrate better since the opportunities to engage in social activities are wider at universities.

Participants shared that hobbies played a huge role in social engagement. They actively sought hobbies to help them integrate into the society, among these were sports, reading, and meeting with friends. Engaging in these activities provided a sense of normality and connection. One participant created a Telegram group for cycling enthusiasts, demonstrating proactive efforts to build social networks around shared interests.

Volunteering was highlighted as a valuable tool to connect with people and communities as well. It provided opportunities for participants to engage with locals, practice the language, learn new skills, and feel part of the community. For some of them, volunteering brought even bigger impact hence they created a network of contact and found job opportunities.

Many participants made efforts to communicate with neighbors, work colleagues or classmates. They were actively sharing traditions, learning about Slovak customs and engaging in everyday conversations which helped to bridge cultural gaps and foster a sense of belonging. These efforts were seen as a positive way to integrate by both the Ukrainian youth refugees as well as the locals. Participants noted that these exchanges often led to deeper connections and mutual understanding.

### 3. OCC Spain, Barcelona (Spain)

Participating in the focus group were five people from the Ukrainian community who currently reside in Barcelona. It was subsequently possible to collect 2 written responses on the same questions from people who were unable to attend the event but were willing to share their experience. Overall, the people involved have been living in Barcelona between 2 and 7 years, with the exception of one person who has lived in Spain for more than 20 years. The feedback is varied, even though there is a common thread running through the different experiences: the language barrier, a double obstacle in the case of Catalonia where, in many contexts, both Spanish and Catalan are required. Added to this is the housing crisis that Barcelona is going through.

#### Education

Most of the people who took part in the focus group had obtained university degrees (economic and managerial fields being the most popular) and certifications of various kinds, mainly in Ukraine, but also later in Spain.

With regard to the nostrification of previous diplomas, different answers were obtained. Overall, it appears to be a slow and difficult process, especially for university degrees and subjects outside the scientific field (e.g. mathematics / IT). In addition, as a participant noted, in some fields of study, like the marketing field, a B2 level of Spanish is required in the approval process for previous certificates. Some participants have participated in non formal education courses such as web development bootcamps or others, which allowed them to bypass the difficulty of diploma recognition.

Turning now to language courses, all focus group participants took several, both Spanish and Catalan courses. From language apps, to public and private courses (the latter recommended over the former), online or in-person, there are various options for learning the language. All participants chose to start with learning Spanish, with Catalan being experienced as the next step. Several participants have followed or are following courses at the Escola Oficial de Idiomas, a recognised semi-public institute for language learning (paid courses). Participants noted they were unable to find free qualitative/official Spanish courses, whereas the Consorci per la Normalització Lingüística offers free official levels Catalan courses for all Catalonia residents.

The main difficulties regarding language learning are reportedly having to learn two languages at the same time, or at least within a short time span. This is understood as



necessary for a gradual integration into the host society: in the participants' opinion, although it is possible to live in Spain, and especially in Barcelona, a very international city, without knowing the two local languages, it is recommended to know them.

In the language learning process, several people claim that having young children going to school in Barcelona has helped them a lot.

## Employability

Regarding the labor market in Barcelona, opinions and experiences are mixed. For some participants it was easy to find a job, especially for those whose occupation is within an international company, where English and their mother tongue are requested. In other cases, the requirement of previous experience and knowledge of the language slowed down and complicated the job search.

The main sites used to find jobs were LinkedIn, Infojobs, SOC (Public Employment Service in Catalonia), Barcelona Activa (Municipal Employment Service in Barcelona), ThinkSpain, Facebook group and glassdoor websites more generally. Again, three participants noted they obtained their current job thanks to their network and contacts. A participant specified she found her job through her Ukrainian network in Barcelona.

Some of the participants work as freelancers, others are working in the social field with Caritas and others with foreign companies.

In general, finding work seems complex. Among the main difficulties is often the requirement of previous experience in the sector, which results in a denial of entry for those who lack it, feeding a vicious circle whereby some are continually excluded. Added to this is the fact that salaries are low, especially for freelancers. Finally, the language barrier is aggravated in the case of bureaucracy, which often takes a long time to understand, if at all. In fact, participants highlight how it is extremely difficult to comprehend laws and the language they are written in is not transparent. Also it takes quite some time to get an appointment.

## Social Integration

When discussing leisure time, many participants reported a general sense of distance from the local culture. Several participants find it quite complicated to integrate due to the language barrier, and the high turnover of people passing through Barcelona without the plan to stay over for the long term. Some participants report an increased sense of loneliness due to a friendly approach from locals, but difficulty to dig deeper in relationships and building friendships. For many, this perception of Catalan people being warm and close but at the same time distant and difficult to access is affected by cultural differences and distance from local traditions. For these reasons, it often seems easier to be with and among Ukrainian people.

In approaching the local culture, having children is seen as a positive opportunity, as they learn quickly and surround themselves with children whose families are in most cases originally from Barcelona. Practicing sports, such as paddle and table tennis, was another strategy mentioned by the participants to create networks with the local community.



Participants also mentioned cultural activities such as visits to museums, parks, doing excursions and other various activities as ways to approach the local culture and understand it better. To facilitate meeting new people many participants mentioned apps such as Meetup or Facebook and Whatsapp groups.

None of them has ever volunteered in Barcelona, but many would like to start, convinced that it could be a good opportunity for them to dive into the local culture.

Finally, participants emphasized their desire to take part in more local events, in order to get closer to Catalan culture, in which, although they feel partly welcomed, they hardly find ways to integrate.

## 4. OCC Greece, Polykastro (Greece)

The data presented in the following sections are based on discussions with participants from a group of 15 people. All participants were women, 10 of whom were in the 18-35 age group. These women live and work in the Thessaloniki area and are involved in a wide range of professional and social activities. The findings provide a comprehensive view of their perspectives and experiences from the moment they arrived in Greece.

### Education

Recognition of skills and qualifications acquired outside Greece is a major challenge for adults. The official process for recognition of certificates is complex, time consuming and expensive (translation costs, lawyers, etc.), and there is a lack of clear guidance in Ukrainian for individuals seeking to address these issues. Bureaucracy adds to the complexity of navigating this process.

Access to formal education for adults is closely linked to Greek language skills. Without a sufficient level of Greek, Ukrainian refugees find it difficult to participate in vocational or adult education courses. Language learning programmes are mainly provided by local NGOs, which support the learning process but also the registration and exam fees. Among the participants there were people who had successfully passed English language learning exams and who, individually and with the support of NGOs, followed programmes to obtain certification in the Greek language.

Furthermore, while introductory courses in Greek are available in certain forms of formal education, such as evening schools/second chance schools, in smaller communities they often start late or are not formed at all, due to limited capacity or delays in the recruitment process for teachers.

Participants emphasized that access to recognition of qualifications and educational pathways supports their long-term integration in Greece.

## Employability

After receiving temporary protection documents on arrival, Ukrainian refugees have immediate access to the Greek labor market. This allows them to seek employment opportunities in different sectors.

However, the wider Greek labor market poses significant challenges, such as low salaries and job instability, which affect refugees seeking employment.

As a result, some have decided not to stay in Greece because of these factors. However, the tourism sector is accessible and popular among Ukrainian workers, with a large number of participants already working in the sector or expressing an interest in working in tourism.

However, the fact is that these jobs are characterized by seasonal work. Those who have decided to stay in Greece are exploring different ways of working and some mentioned working remotely from Greece in job positions they had in Ukraine before the war started or other remote opportunities.

## Social Integration

Participants actively participate in social activities organized by NGOs, join sports clubs and use their personal networks to integrate into the host communities. Living in houses in cities, rather than in refugee camps, allows them to integrate more easily into local society and interact with locals.

There is also a Ukrainian community network where refugees share information and opportunities through social media and other communication channels. Moreover, we can highlight the strong interest among refugees in supporting each other and volunteering to make a positive contribution to their communities. This helps refugees to build connections and support networks, but also fosters a sense of belonging in their new environment in Greece.

An important challenge is access to medical services due to language barriers, compounded by financial issues. This is partly addressed by community members who speak the language and help with interpretation to facilitate communication in hospitals and pharmacies.

## II. Conclusions

The analysis of challenges faced by Ukrainians living in partners' countries reveals common themes as well as country specific issues. Some of those challenges are closely connected and are affecting all topics - education, employability, social integration - discussed during the focus group discussions.

The overarching challenge and barrier for integration among all topics discussed in the focus groups were the language skills of Ukrainians living in the partner countries. Language proficiency affects all aspects of the daily lives of the Ukrainian youth, and all foreigners in general. One of the mentioned reasons for lacking or not acquiring the language skills was the uncertainty in the duration of the conflict in Ukraine, and therefore the uncertainty in the duration of stay, as the Ukrainian youth had a great desire to return home. This resulted in the inability to fully integrate into the local community. Secondly, the majority of people in the Ukrainian communities throughout the partner countries were women with children who, in many cases, did not have time to attend language courses provided by the state offices, educational institutions or NGOs. The country specific issues emerged in the discussion in Spain, where the participants identified difficulty in learning Spanish and also Catalan, as it is recommended to know both to be able to integrate into the local community fully. Moreover, in Greece the participants identified the need for interpreting at health care facilities, as the language barrier prevented them from fully accessing healthcare services.

On the other hand, the participants also discussed the positive influences on learning the language, namely having an environment where you actively hear and use the local language, be it the workplace or social community gatherings. Some mentioned that having their children in local schools helped them get closer to the local language as well.

One of the biggest challenges identified and connected to both education and employability is the recognition of diplomas or professional qualifications. The focus group participants in all partners' countries experienced difficulties with recognition of their foreign qualifications. It was reported that the processes were too slow, complex and expensive → the translation fees, lawyer services. The bureaucratic burden of the recognition process is heavy in all partners' countries, with the exception of Romania, where the official recognition of diplomas is not required for most professions, except for 9 main regulated professions. The fact that their previous qualifications are not being formally recognized is leading to acceptance of low-salary job or entry-level positions for which they are often overqualified. The instability in the job market in all partners' countries plays a huge role in the employability of Ukrainian refugees. They are often engaging in non-formal education to advance their careers or are seeking remote opportunities from their previous employers, or elsewhere.

Even though a workplace is a good environment for engaging with the host society and practicing the local language, it is not enough and the language barrier prevails as the biggest obstacle. Access to job opportunities and gaining stable employment is limited for those who do not speak the local language.

The participants reacted mostly positively regarding the topic of social integration. Participation in social events, volunteering, joining sports clubs were identified as common strategies to integrate better in the host society. The participants shared that they often benefit from strong community networks - both local and Ukrainian communities, sometimes even creating their own networks. The focus group discussions and shared experiences have proven that the proactive effort to engage in community life and the support from local volunteer organizations and NGOs, who significantly contribute to the integration experience, are having a positive impact on the overall integration in the host country. Engagement in social activities and volunteering have been referred to as a good tool for improving mental health and providing a sense of purpose and connection with others.

However, there are still some challenges present. Language remains a primary obstacle to full social integration and the difficulties in learning and using the local languages impact even deeper cultural integration. According to the focus group participants, the low or non existing language proficiency is negatively affecting the ability to form lasting, meaningful and deeper relationships and contributing to feelings of loneliness.

Overall, the experiences shared by the focus group participants showed that language skills are crucial for accessing better education and employment opportunities. Despite the vital role language proficiency plays in the integration, it still remains the biggest overarching issue.

It can be concluded that long term strategies must be developed. These strategies should address the relevant challenges with the aim to effectively support the integration of Ukrainian refugees in the partners' countries. This includes the simplification of bureaucracy, enhancing language learning, improving job market conditions and cherishing the community engagement. By doing so, the Ukrainian refugees can receive better support which will naturally lead to more successful integration.

# III. Best practices on adaptation of volunteering and educational opportunities

In this chapter, all partner organizations present their work experiences on adaptation of volunteering and educational opportunities they offer to the target group - refugees or migrant people in general. Although each organization has its unique ways of working and implementing volunteering and educational opportunities to ensure better integration of people with migrant backgrounds, there are common methods that occur and overlap in each organization. These are presented at the end as the best practices used and recommended by all partner organizations.

## OCC Spain

Among the different activities involving the Ukrainian community in Barcelona, we want to highlight best practices developed in two activities, which we think have had a noticeable positive impact towards the integration of Ukrainian people.

### Cultural workshops

Over the past year, we have tried to involve members of the Ukrainian community in the creation and implementation of cultural workshops. The idea was to offer a space and a platform for people to create a workshop according to their interests and skills, so that the initiative came directly from the community.

Leading the first workshop was Mariia, an artist and art teacher who offered the community a workshop on the theme of 'Heart and Home'. During the session, she guided the participants in drawing hearts and houses, encouraging them to incorporate the symbols that resonate with them, while also teaching some painting techniques. Mariia was already an arts teacher in Ukraine, and wanted to offer a workshop to give back to the community and continue passing on her artistic skills and knowledge.

The second workshop provided an introduction to Ukrainian traditional embroidery and proved to be an effective technique that allowed, through embracing a traditional and ancient art, to understand and compare different points of view, undertaking a profound cultural exploration.

What made these two activities an example of good practices was certainly the change of perspective that ran through both workshops. The community was offered to design an activity according to their own interests, and promote Ukrainian culture as well as their personal skills, giving them ownership over them. This changes the positionality of migrant

people from always having to learn, be taught about the hosting country's culture, to being able to teach and share their own culture and skills. It also values the culture of origin of the people, and their pre-existing skills, which is often something dismissed in the migration process.

### **The Castellars Workshop**

We also want to highlight the Castellars Workshop we organized during the Ukraine Now project, which saw the Ukrainian community approaching a local activity, the Castellars. Human towers (or *castells* in Catalan) are one of Catalonia's most deeply rooted traditions and cultural manifestations. They are human towers several storeys high built by a large group of people, called Castellars, who pile their bodies on top of each other. Elements such as a sense of community and teamwork are the basis of the construction of castells, where each member of the group has a specific role and must trust their companions. Also contributing to this community feeling is the frequency with which participants come together (every week) to train, and each training session is always followed by a collective dinner.

In this activity, organized in English, even though Catalan is the language spoken in the contexts of the Castellars, people from the Ukrainian community had the opportunity to get to know this tradition first hand as told by members of the *colla casteller* (human towers team) themselves. They were then able to take part in the activity itself, composing what is called the *pinya*, which is the solid and stable base of the entire structure.

The added value of this workshop, besides the discovery of a rooted Catalan tradition, was certainly the social aspect of getting to know new people, facilitating the access in a new group where the language and the access modalities could have been obstacles to participation and thus supporting their inclusion in a local culture.

## **OCC Greece**

The inclusion and empowerment of people with a migrant or refugee background, requires a multi-dimensional approach that addresses different aspects of social life, including education, health, sport and employment. At Open Cultural Centre (OCC) in Greece, we have developed a successful methodology based on our work with diverse communities. This approach, inspired by best practices, aims to create inclusive and impactful activities.

### **Sports for social inclusion / Importance of networks and collaboration between organizations**

Sport has proven to be a powerful tool for promoting social inclusion. The OCC initiative, which focused on young refugee women, created an inclusive environment where women from different cultural backgrounds (Ukraine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, etc.) participated together in sports activities. These activities not only promoted physical and mental well-being, but also encouraged personal growth, teamwork and leadership. Through sports activities, refugee women gain confidence, increase their self-esteem and develop a sense of belonging, which is crucial for successful integration. Collaboration between different

organizations has been a key factor in the positive result of the activity. By partnering with Irida Center and the historic Iraklis Sports Club in Thessaloniki, OCC was able to combine resources, expertise, and networks to create a comprehensive program that meets the diverse needs of refugee women.

### **Intercultural dialogue and community engagement**

The OCC's methodology places a strong emphasis on intercultural dialogue and community engagement, both of which are crucial for fostering social cohesion and designing effective activities. By bringing together refugees from diverse cultural backgrounds, we create opportunities for participants to learn from one another, to challenge stereotypes, and to build relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. A key element of our approach is the participatory process, which involves the active engagement of communities in identifying their needs. Through focused group discussions, consultations, and questionnaires, we involve refugees directly in the needs analysis process, ensuring that the activities we develop are targeted and responsive to their real necessities. This participatory approach not only builds trust but also empowers the community by giving them ownership of the initiatives that affect their lives. In addition, community outreach facilitates interaction between refugees and local people through joint activities, helping to build trust and mutual understanding between different groups. This engagement fosters a sense of community and belonging for refugee people, while enriching the cultural diversity of the host community.

These elements work together to create a supportive environment in which refugees can thrive, bridge cultural divides and make a positive contribution to their host communities.

## **ARCA**

Integration is defined as a dynamic two-way process of mutual adaptation. We consider that the successful implementation of an activity or service for a new community highly depends also on the community's perspective and contribution, thus openness from both sides and an efficient dialogue are key elements to achieve it.

### **Enhanced community engagement**

One of the aspects that highly contributed to an increased sense of inclusion for the target group was an enhanced community engagement. Community engagement was considered through the following:

- Inclusion of staff members from the Ukrainian community within the organization in key positions such as psychologists, tutors, teachers, translators. This approach has enhanced the level of trust from the Ukrainian community in the organization itself, as well as the services offered.
- The participatory approach included the community members in the decision-making process related to the needs analysis, focus groups, feedback forms, Q/A forms considering their responses as key to the continuous development and improvement of various activities within the project.



- Online communication was adapted to the community's preferences such as common groups on Telegram channels and/or online classes. This decision improved and maintained continuous communication to and from Ukrainian community members.
- Volunteers from the community were recruited and included in the activities organized for the target group.

### **Increased cultural integration and personal development**

Multiple activities undergone by a psychologist and a tutor, both with adults and children, focused on volunteer participation and revolved around personal development and cultural integration.

One group of activities aimed at assisting children to acquire knowledge about the surrounding environment, as well as to socially and culturally adapt faster and better to the new society. The volunteers offered their knowledge in terms of working with very young children, to aid them develop their visual and motor skills, as well as their creative and critical thinking abilities.

Another group of activities was specifically focused on psychological and spiritual development, and the expertise of volunteers offered a broader and deeper perspective on such topics. As an example, neurography was used as a technique to work with one's own mental, emotional and subconscious landscape, in order to better understand problems people are being confronted with and to identify creative solutions to them. Drawing lines and shapes while processing different thoughts and emotions helped participants to intuitively design new behavioral patterns. Other examples were techniques and games used to enhance confidence, to restore balance, to learn how to be mindful and present, and to develop healthier relationships with others.

We considered participation from volunteers highly effective in reaching and impacting Ukrainians and offering them a sense of familiarity, as well as diversity.

Cultural integration and personal development was also achieved through indoor and outdoor activities, while the involvement of key community members eased the process of transitioning into a new culture. During the activities, participants had the opportunity to develop their sense of discovery, become more social, build relationships, improve their overall wellbeing, as well as explore cultural differences and similarities or particularities of the new culture.

## **MAREENA**

At Mareena, we believe that a cohesive and accepting society is built by all of us together. We strive to create an inclusive environment for refugees and foreigners, allowing them to achieve their personal and professional goals and to gain a sense of belonging. We provide them diverse opportunities for an active inclusion into Slovak society and we support the local community and foreigners in building relationships.

## Community outreach volunteering

In alignment with our mission, a community outreach volunteering concept was developed in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. The goal was to engage, train, and include people from the Ukrainian community as volunteers. This initiative helped them to integrate better into Slovak society while also empowering them to become leaders and voices for their community. Our previous experience with volunteers helped us to create a comprehensive volunteer manual and training sessions with the aim to prepare the volunteers for their volunteering activities. These included for example information provision, mapping of the community needs, protection profiling and monitoring or special assistance. Ukrainian volunteers were particularly helpful in reaching out to beneficiaries, as they spoke the same language, shared similar experiences, and could better understand the challenges faced by their fellow Ukrainians. This built trust and made the support provided more effective.

However, several challenges emerged. Some volunteers were unfamiliar with the concept of volunteering or lacked previous volunteering experience, leading to misunderstandings about boundaries and time commitments. The language barrier also complicated communication at times. To address these issues, coordinators from the Ukrainian community were hired to manage and lead volunteer teams. These coordinators acted as links between the organization and the volunteers, providing language support and helping to ensure good collaboration. Volunteers also participated in a range of inclusive community events that gave them the opportunity for a multicultural exchange and supported connections with other communities.

Over time, the volunteers grew more experienced and independent, ultimately becoming true leaders within their community. They began to lead their own initiatives, transform their ideas into reality and learn valuable skills like responsibility, time management, planning, and leadership. Thanks to their experiences as volunteers and gained network, many volunteers also found employment. The volunteer experience further strengthened their role as important leaders in their community that were helping other community members with integration into Slovak society.

### “Day at Mareena”

The "Day at Mareena" was an engaging activity organized with the help of our volunteers as part of the Ukraine Now project and focused on the concept of volunteering and education.

Both coordinators and volunteers actively participated in the planning process, deciding together about the agenda, how they wanted the day to unfold and which activities to include. During the event, they took on key roles in organizing, just as they would during a community event—preparing the meeting room, arranging refreshments, and preparing lunch. They also played an active part in the educational part of the day - the language exchange where the participants practiced both Slovak and Ukrainian and discussed the language similarities and differences. In addition to linguistic learning, there was also a cultural exchange, with presentations and fun facts shared about the cities each participant comes from. Overall, this activity was a dynamic blend of education, cultural sharing, and community building where our volunteers had the opportunity to create the agenda and play a vital role in preparing and conducting the activity.

## Recommendations

Each of the partner organizations have extensive know-how in working with migrant people. Based on the experiences of the organizations we summarized a list of best practices proven to be helpful in forming activities aimed at improving inclusion and integration of migrant people into the local communities.

### List of common best practices:

#### 1. Inclusion of migrant volunteers and staff

Involve volunteers and staff from migrant communities in key roles, especially from the same background as the beneficiaries. This helps to better connect with and support their community. Volunteers who speak the same language and share similar experiences can reach beneficiaries more effectively. Including migrants in staff roles builds trust and credibility within the community (= enhanced trust to the organization itself) and supports social cohesion.

#### 2. Community engagement

Allow volunteers to create activities based on their own interests, skills and expertise (e.g. art, language, psychology). Provide a platform for them to take initiative and lead workshops. Empowering the community to take charge of activities fosters a sense of ownership and allows the diverse talents within the group to shine. This approach is showing to be successful in reaching others in the same position, offering them familiarity and trust.

#### 3. Leadership and skill development through volunteer engagement

Encourage migrant people to be active and engaged, to become volunteers, to lead and develop their own initiatives or to even manage projects. It gives them a chance to learn and gain a broader skill set (e.g. leadership, teamwork, time management, coordination). Leading their own activities builds their confidence, supports personal growth and provides skills that are valuable for the labor market → improving employability and long-term integration.

#### **4. Culture sharing and mutual learning**

Organize a variety of multicultural community events and workshops to encourage exchange between different cultural groups and create opportunities for connection. Focus on showcasing the skills and cultural knowledge of migrant people. This shifts the positionality of migrant people from passive learners to active teachers, valuing their culture and pre-existing skills. These events promote mutual respect, understanding and collaboration between communities, supporting the integration process while building relationships and breaking down stereotypes.

#### **5. Inclusive informal activities**

Host informal, relaxed activities such as sports events, hiking tours, picnics or city tours that can bring together local and foreign communities. Informal setting provides a relaxed and safe space for people to build friendships, engage in discussions and cherish a sense of belonging. Sports and outdoor activities even promote physical and mental well-being.

#### **6. Collaboration with other organizations**

Partner with other organizations that share similar goals to broaden reach, share knowledge and experience, as well as combine resources. Such a collaboration enhances the impact of activities, allows sharing of expertise and helps with reaching a wider audience, ultimately producing more positive outcomes.

#### **7. Needs assessment and participatory approach**

Conduct a needs assessment with direct involvement of migrant communities before creating an activity. Use a participatory approach to ensure activities address the specific needs and interests of migrant people. Involving them in the assessment and decision making processes ensures that the activities are responsive to real needs which increases their relevance and effectiveness. It also empowers the community by giving them ownership of the initiatives.

By following these best practices, like-minded organizations can ensure that their activities support integration, personal growth and social cohesion while empowering migrant people to take active roles in their new communities.