SMART UA PROJECT ESF+

POLICY BRIEF

"You need work to have a secure housing, and you need housing to have a stable work"

Martin Fero, Trnava University, researcher

The SMART UA project, funded by the European Social Fund Plus and Social Innovation, supports Ukrainian refugees in Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. Coordinated by JRS Europe with 11 partners, it fosters collaboration among authorities, NGOs, and service providers to improve access to housing and jobs through skills recognition, capacity building, and innovative pilot initiatives. Core partners include ***JRS Hungary****,* ***JRS Romania****,* ***Lutheran Diaconia****,* ***Szociometrum****,* ***LifeStarter****, the* ***Family Help Center****, and the* ***Association of Schools of Social Work in Romania****. They are joined by associated partners such as* ***Trnava University****, the* ***City of Trnava****, and* ***Personal Service****, who contribute research, local expertise, dissemination, and labour market connections. Based across Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, these partners combine social, academic, and community strengths to support refugee integration.*

The right to adequate housing and the right to work, which includes the dimension of enjoyment of favorable conditions of work, are fundamental human rights that allow people to live in dignity and enjoy other rights and liberties, such as right to private and family life.

According to the European Council, housing crisis is a Europe-wide phenomenon, of multifaceted and intergenerational nature, that concerns both local and migrant population. However, migrants and refugees constitute per se vulnerable social groups

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with special needs and thus they require tailormade policies to boost their inclusion and integration.

Local vulnerable social groups, including refugees and migrants, face discrimination when it comes to housing, as local owners of apartments are reluctant to rent their property to them. In Pillar IV of the European Affordable Housing Plan, "supporting the most affected", we read that migrants, being among the social minority groups at risk of exclusion or discrimination, face critical challenges in accessing housing.

The project partners conducted research and implemented a multi-stakeholder methodology, which allowed them to share their findings with local authorities, NGOs and civil society, UN agencies, academia, political parties and other relevant strategic stakeholders and actors. Their respective reports can be found on the website of the project.

One of the key findings of the SMART UA project is that all barriers to housing and access to labour market reinforce each other and cannot be seen or addressed in a separate way. In other words, renting a home is inextricably linked with employment and vice versa.

Project partners found out also that financial support is critical and necessary to enable stable housing, but social work is crucial for long-term integration. SMART UA project offered a sense of community and belonging for people.

The language barrier is of utmost importance both for access to adequate housing as well as for access to the labour market.

Labour market integration is a structural challenge that requires systemic and coordinated responses. In the Romanian context, a substantial number of Ukrainian refugees found to be working without formal contracts, whereas in all national contexts studied under this project the skills of this group remain often mismatched. This is confirmed by a recent UNHCR report, which found that more than 60% of employed Ukrainian refuges work below their skill level. This mismatch results in a significant wage gap.

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Legislative frameworks governing entrepreneurship exhibit stark disparities across the region; while beneficiaries of Temporary Protection are granted full access to start self-employed businesses in Slovakia and Romania, Hungary continues to deny them the legal pathway to register as sole traders.

Our evidence shows that finding a stable job is a decisive factor in building a new life and a sustainable future. It supports long-term social and economic inclusion and thus people are empowered and encouraged, which in turn can create further opportunities for a life in dignity and with agency. In fact, an established conclusion from Eurostat is that unemployed persons are at much higher risk of poverty and/or social exclusion than the ones who work.

At the same time, Temporary Protection Directive has been extended until March 2028. This will mark 6 years since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and 6 years of activation period of the protection regime at European level, which legally is intended for rapid response. However, the Member States where our research was conducted still lack comprehensive national strategies for transition into national protection systems after the expiry of the Temporary Protection Directive, despite the Commission speaking about this since 2024 and the Council of the EU adopting recommendations regarding transition options. Our empirical evidence showed that, following this uncertainty, Temporary Protection beneficiaries are led to vulnerability but also landlords face uncertainty that in turn affects the Ukrainian community, as the absence of stability cannot lead neither to considering stable housing or formal long-term work contracts.

Good and Replicable Practices

Cooperation between actors and multi-stakeholder approach took place in all three partnering countries and resulted in tangible results like the co-creation of the city's strategic action plan on integration of migrants.

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- The **Integrated Community Model** showed, in the Romanian context, that community support, including civil society action, brings results as it complements systemic gaps. Employment mediation with language support and community trust-building have been combined.
- The **Labour Market Office** of the Hungarian Lutheran Diaconia functions both as an entry point for refugees and as a professional support structure for employers. It operates with a low entry threshold, with no prior documentation requirements. The main objective is to support clients in accessing legal and sustainable employment, while simultaneously assisting employers in recruiting foreign workers.
- The **Integration Center** OPORA in Slovakia run by Family Help Center constitutes a relatively new model of intervention within the domestic social services system. It tries to address and enhance community life, provide opportunities for activities to disadvantaged individuals who face difficulties in finding a job, offer material assistance and social counselling. It has effectively led, among others, to the empowerment of marginalized groups and their social stabilization.

Also...

- Offering tailored vocational training and job placement as well as soft skills training led to a holistic approach that took into account personal circumstances and needs.
- Combination of practical assistance with personalized support proved necessary. Flexibility is key when it comes to training and language courses.
- Information sessions about the national requirements and legal framework for entrepreneurship has been beneficial for newcomers and provided them with a sense of control.
- Landlord mediation through NGO-facilitated trust-building has been effective.

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Key Policy Recommendations

-About housing and employment

Integrate Temporary Protection Beneficiaries into the scope of the EU long-term residence permit. Transition to national protection schemes to include also rules and measures for transition to stable housing and promotion of access to labour market. This way, landlord uncertainty will be mitigated, which will have a positive impact on the community.

Develop labour mobility and long-term residency frameworks to address long-term stay of people.

Design and Implement policies that take into consideration the needs of people, and especially of vulnerable groups, to ensure success and sustainability of the practice at national level.

Reduce administrative barriers related to the obligation to have a registered address to access benefits and get a formal job contract. The inability to have permanent accommodation can be inherent to the situation of a Temporary Protection beneficiary and, more in general, of a displaced person. Landlord consent or proof of accommodation should be sufficient.

Make legal and administrative information about housing and access to labour market widely available and reachable at national level. Promote measures of short-term integration, like language learning for both access to the labour market and access to housing, mediation and interpretation services.

Strengthen partnerships and foster synergies between public sector and civil society; learn from and replicate successful NGO-led housing models and community initiatives.

Combine housing assistance with employment and social support.

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-About Housing

Design and implement housing policies based on understanding and considering of the needs of refugees and vulnerable groups, like elderly people and single mothers.

Broaden public housing support policies and integrate housing framework in all national policies.

Provide rent subsidies based on clear and attainable eligibility criteria and monitor high renting prices, especially for vulnerable people, while setting maximum limits for monthly rent prices. Consider introducing a rent guarantee fund (deposit/advance), managed by local authorities or in partnership with NGOs, to reduce initial barriers to access the private rental market.

Forbid by law clauses that result in discrimination and build legislation to protect tenants from landlords' abuse. Details related to the personal life of refugees like smoking, pet owning, having small kids have been factors that led to exclusion from accessing adequate housing.

Establish a time-limited 'bridge support' financial mechanism to prevent evictions.

Promote and monitor compliance with the findings and recommendations of initiatives, like the Housing Summit and the European Housing Alliance.

-About Employment

Allow Temporary Protection beneficiaries' transfer to legal statuses based on work. They should have the option to apply for temporary residence permits based on employment or business activity, with flexible eligibility criteria.

Use the EU Talent Pool for people fleeing Ukraine and explore its efficacy. This initiative could lay a basis for efficient job matching for Temporary Protection beneficiaries in light of the skills mismatch that is observed.

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Monitor formal employment uptake to address resorting to informal job market.

Extend employment support beyond job placement. Provide solutions for transport and childcare support for parents and especially single mothers, of which the lack can directly prevent labour market participation.

Promote diploma and qualifications recognition and reduce bureaucratic and administrative obstacles, by taking into consideration how the absence of necessary documents or qualifications can be linked with legal discrepancies, cultural differences as well as inherent incapability of a person fleeing war to hold always and upon request needed documentation.

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