Vocational Opportunities and Integration for Refugee Community Empowerment

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Report

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1. Executive Summary

A needs assessment was conducted under the VOICE (Vocational Opportunities and Integration for Refugee Community Empowerment) project. This assessment identified the main challenges and opportunities regarding the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Spain. The assessment particularly emphasised the alignment of existing skills with national labour market needs. The analysis, conducted through desk research and local stakeholders' analysis, focused on mapping existing training initiatives, identifying upskilling and reskilling needs, as well as identifying barriers to work and social inclusion.

Recent data indicates that Ukraine's war has led to over 236,000 Ukrainian refugees arriving in Spain under the EU Temporary Protection Directive. Although many of these refugees possess medium to high educational attainment, they confront significant obstacles to full labour market participation, working primarily in low-paid and precarious roles with employment rates ranging from 10% to 40%.

A comprehensive needs analysis highlights several critical areas requiring upskilling: Spanish language proficiency, foundational and intermediate digital literacy, and vocational training aligned with market demand. While many refugees hold tertiary qualifications, they are frequently employed in jobs that do not match their skill levels. This mismatch is prevalent in sectors such as hospitality, construction, domestic services, and agriculture—roles that often underutilize their competencies.

Language barriers represent a significant impediment to the integration of refugees into the Spanish labour market. Many refugees encounter difficulties in acquiring Spanish and comprehending the content of training programmes, thus limiting their autonomy in terms of training pathways and future employment opportunities. Furthermore, there is a dearth of digital literacy, which hinders the complete utilisation of online training opportunities and access to digital services, which are increasingly central in the post-pandemic context.

Another critical element in this regard is the recognition of qualifications and experience. The absence of streamlined and uniform procedures for the validation of qualifications and skills acquired abroad has been demonstrated to result in unequal access to training and employment opportunities. This is evidenced by marked differences between the different Spanish regions in terms of support services and integration policies. This regional diversity is also reflected in the distribution and effectiveness of interventions, with autonomous communities such as Andalusia, where several third sector actors are active (including Arrabal-AID), better equipped to respond to the needs of refugees. In other regions, such as the Community of Madrid or Catalonia, the efficacy of interventions is contingent on the capacity of local networks to coordinate public services and training, yielding varied outcomes.

There exist distinct shortfalls in digital entrepreneurship capabilities, such as business planning, regulatory awareness, and marketing expertise. Language barriers, especially among women with caregiving responsibilities, restrict access to training, employment opportunities, and formal qualification recognition. Legal and administrative hurdles—especially related to

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qualification accreditation—further impede integration into professional fields. Moreover, soft skills like teamwork, problem-solving, and intercultural communication are lacking, affecting refugees' ability to fully participate in the workforce.

From a standpoint of vulnerability, the gender perspective assumes a pivotal role: Refugee women from Ukraine residing in Spain encounter a number of challenges, including the balancing act between family and professional obligations, cultural stereotypes, and an elevated risk of social isolation. In order to ensure equal opportunities for access and success, it is necessary to implement inclusive and gender-sensitive learning pathways.

To address these gaps, VOICE should adopt a modular, multilingual training model that blends digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and employability modules. Language instruction should be contextualized within vocational pathways and delivered via fast-track certification, combining online platforms with in-person support. Digital entrepreneurship support must include incubator-style mentorship, micro-funding mechanisms, and market-relevant training. Efforts to validate prior learning need to be simplified and streamlined. Training design should be gender-sensitive, particularly attentive to the structural barriers faced by women.

Spain's legal framework facilitates swift refugee integration through Temporary Protection, vocational route recognition, and public–private employment initiatives, such as "Companies for Ukraine." Regional diversity in welfare strategies enables locally tailored integration efforts, though systemic complexity sometimes delays benefit access. Stakeholder analysis—including organisations like CEAR, ACCEM, UNHCR, regional employment services, NGOs, and vocational providers—has been proactive, emphasizing the need for better coordination in skills matching, recognition of qualifications, and gender-sensitive service delivery.

Stakeholders' analysis has resulted in the formulation of several key recommendations for the future development of VOICE actions in Spain:

- The development of training content is to be undertaken, with a view to its subsequent adaptation to the cultural and linguistic context of refugees.
- Enhance the accessibility of training via digital channels, with a particular emphasis on ensuring digital inclusion.
- The tools for self-assessment and informal recognition of skills be integrated.
- A gender perspective shall be incorporated across all training modules and initiatives.
- Ensure the sustainability and scalability of the instruments through the active involvement of local actors.

The findings and recommendations outlined in this report provide a robust foundation for the development of targeted interventions. These interventions have the potential to facilitate the socio-labour integration of Ukrainian refugees in Spain, thereby effectively addressing the challenges identified within the national context.

In this sense, VOICE is strategically positioned to bridge critical gaps in language, digital, and entrepreneurial competencies, aligning its training modules with Spain's socio-economic realities and building upon a foundation of engaged stakeholders committed to refugee integration. Spain's refugee population presents both a challenge and a unique opportunity for

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VOICE to deliver inclusive, scalable, and effective training. With the right design—leveraging Spain's existing structures and addressing critical gaps—the project can significantly enhance the employability, self-reliance, and social integration of Ukrainian refugees, while contributing to local community resilience and economic diversity.

2. National Context Overview

Recent data show that Ukraine's war has driven a significant wave of refugees into Spain, with a high proportion entering under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive. This legal framework guarantees immediate access to employment, healthcare, housing, education, and other public services. Spain is currently the fourth-largest recipient of Ukrainian refugees in the EU, having granted temporary protection to approximately 236,570 individuals as of early 2025. The majority are women with children, with an average age of 40, reflecting broader EU trends. According to data from the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and the German Institute for Employment Research (IAB), most beneficiaries arrive with medium to high levels of education, yet face systemic barriers to full labour market participation.

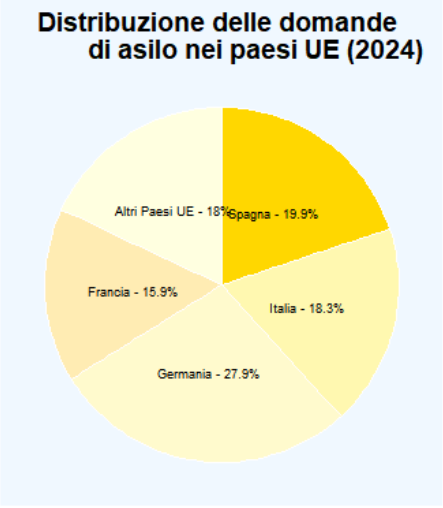

Figure 1. *Percentage distribution of asylum applications received by the main European Union countries in 2024.*

Within the EU demographic breakdown, women (44.6%) and minors (31.4%) predominate, indicating a large contingent of families and children present in Spain.
Spanish reception authorities report that the majority of arrivals are women—many accompanied by children—while men often remain behind due to conscription. Educational enrollment among refugee children is encouraging, with more than three-quarters integrated into local school systems. Adults, however, have highly fragmented employment situations, and while employment rates hover between 10% and 40%, many refugees work in low-paid, precarious jobs without long-term contracts.

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The Spanish Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration implemented a national 'Reception Plan for Ukrainian refugees', which includes temporary housing, social work support, and services at CARs (Centros de Acogida de Refugiados).

This facilitates linguistics integration, legal support, and training access. Ukrainians with Temporary Protection enjoy equal rights to reside, work, access healthcare, and enroll their children in school. Efforts to simplify job entry have resulted in work authorizations accompanying their residence permits. Furthermore, the government introduced university-level integration measures through the "Plan de Acción Universidad-Refugio," supporting degree recognition, language learning, and cultural orientation. Private-public initiatives such as the CEOE Foundation's "Companies for Ukraine" platform have brought nearly 450 companies and around 2,000 job offers into the ecosystem.

Spain has adopted several integration policies targeting Ukrainian refugees, ranging from recognition of previous qualifications to employment support schemes. Access to the job market is legally unrestricted, and applicants receive financial support to validate their foreign documentation. National Employment Services, NGOs like Accem and CEAR, and public–private partnerships—such as Tent España, which draws on employers like IKEA or Santander—support vocational training and job placement. Authorities have also launched initiatives to streamline childcare, address language acquisition, and adapt occupational licensing, especially in traditionally regulated professions.

Spain's immigration model empowers regional and local governments to tailor integration strategies, resulting in varied approaches across regions like Catalonia and Andalusia This decentralization encourages innovative local policies but occasionally leads to administrative delays—such as stalled cash support payments in Madrid, Valencia, and Catalonia due to bureaucratic issues. Economically, although Spain's recovery from previous crises has been robust, employment demand exists primarily in low- and medium-skilled sectors like services and technology, which aligns with refugees' educational profiles, given many are highly educated and possess pre-conflict professional experience.

Spain also stands out for its recognition of vocational qualifications acquired abroad, as well as for its promotion of retraining and reskilling pathways, particularly for refugees from crisis contexts. However, Spain's socio-economic context, characterised by moderate economic recovery and high youth unemployment, affects opportunities for refugee placement. The main challenges are matching skills to market demands, acquiring knowledge of the Spanish language, and overcoming bureaucratic barriers to qualification recognition.

Spain's diverse and regionally decentralized welfare system shapes integration experiences unevenly. In regions with labor shortages—such as hospitality and logistics—refugees can find employment more quickly. Yet the linguistic and bureaucratic hurdles remain significant: delayed processing of qualification recognition, scarcity of accessible childcare, and limited Spanish language training continue to hinder full integration. Women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, face steeper obstacles in entering stable employment.

Spain's decentralized approach enables pioneering local initiatives but also introduces

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administrative complexity, as seen in delayed welfare disbursements. A significant challenge lies in the timely recognition of professional qualifications, particularly affecting highly skilled Ukrainians (via NARIC and University-Refugee plans). Refugees benefit from strong community solidarity—fueled by existing Ukrainian diasporas—and the accessible EU-wide Temporary Protection Directive granting immediate employment rights. Opportunities further stem from platforms such as "Companies for Ukraine," which bridge refugees with private sector vacancies. Moreover, Spain's openness to educational integration via universities presents a path for long-term professional reskilling.

Persistent challenges include the concentration of refugees in informal and unstable jobs, with overqualification but underemployment being common. Delays in validating professional credentials continue to depress labor market outcomes. However, there are distinct opportunities: employers in high-demand sectors actively recruit refugees, and Spain's legal openness—absence of labor-market restrictions—is a major asset. Digital upskilling programs, such as ICDL (International Computer Driving License), have shown success in equipping refugees with key competencies. Moreover, initiatives promoting validation of non-formal learning and recognition of prior skills, championed by EU tools, are creating new pathways for refugee employability.

While Spanish legal frameworks and employer demand present solid foundations, the refugee experience is still marred by precarious employment and slow credential recognition. Targeted digital entrepreneurship programs, combined with accessible childcare, expedited licensing, and robust language support, would substantially elevate integration outcomes. Programs like VOICE, with its tailored vocational training, digital upskilling, and soft-skills modules, are thus positioned to provide timely interventions that bridge existing gaps and foster more meaningful employment opportunities for Ukrainian refugees in Spain.

As of 2024, employment rates among Ukrainian refugees in Spain remain below 20%, consistent with the EU average in receiving countries. The challenges are multifaceted: limited availability of entry-level or low-skilled jobs, language barriers, lack of recognition of qualifications, childcare responsibilities, and poor digital literacy in some segments. The Spanish labour market, known for relatively high unemployment rates and rigid access to formal employment, adds an additional layer of complexity.

3. Methodology

The methodology adopted for the development of the present country report on Spain within VOICE project involved a structured and critical desk-based review of a range of authoritative sources. These included recent policy reports, official databases, and academic or institutional studies with a focus on Ukrainian refugees' socio-economic integration in Spain. Priority was given to publications issued by European and international bodies such as the European Commission, Eurofound, UNHCR, OECD, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), and national organizations like the Spanish Ministry of Inclusion and Migration, as well as reputable civil society actors like CEAR and Accem. The scope was intentionally limited to sources

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published after 2022 or within the last five years to reflect the post-invasion context and ensure that the findings remain current and applicable. The selection of sources followed a priority scale that favoured official European and national statistics, peer-reviewed academic publications and project reports evaluated by the European Commission. Information from the media or non-scientific sources was only considered when the content was both relevant and verifiable.

Stakeholders were identified through a mapping of institutional actors and NGOs actively involved in refugee support, vocational training, and labor market integration. Engagement with these stakeholders occurred through public records, published interviews, stakeholder platforms, and secondary data analysis of consultation findings, allowing the report to draw on established initiatives and frontline perspectives. While no direct fieldwork was conducted for this report, the selection of stakeholders and referenced practices was guided by their involvement in refugee-specific policies and by their role in implementing EU-funded or national support measures.

Information was prioritized based on its relevance to three core thematic areas defined by the VOICE project: employment, digital entrepreneurship, and upskilling. Within these domains, special attention was given to materials that included empirical data, qualitative findings on refugee experiences, or evaluations of integration interventions. Keywords used to guide the research included "Ukrainian refugees Spain employment," "Ukrainian refugee integration Spain," "digital upskilling migrants Spain," "ESF+ refugee projects Spain," and "vocational training for Ukrainian displaced persons."

To ensure the applicability of the report to current circumstances, only publications issued after the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2022 or within the last five years were considered. This time frame was chosen to reflect the rapid evolution of refugee needs and responses in the Spanish context and to maintain alignment with the objectives of the ESF+ initiative. The report thus draws exclusively on sources that are contemporaneous with the displacement crisis, ensuring that the insights provided are grounded in the realities of the current migration and integration landscape.

4. Key Findings

According to recent social security data from mid-2022, over 13,000 Ukrainians were employed in Spain, corresponding to an employment rate estimated between 18% and 38% of working-age Ukrainian beneficiaries of Temporary Protection.

The Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration reports that in 2021, the employment rate of Ukraine-born residents aged 16–64 in Spain stood at 52.7%, compared to 64.4% for Spanish nationals and 52% for other non-EU nationals. Sector-wise, they were disproportionately represented in household services (22.2%), general employment (64.7%), self-employment (9.2%), agriculture (3.7%), construction (13.6%), industry (13.3%), and services (66.4%).

Recent data indicates that Ukrainian refugees in Spain tend to be highly educated, but face

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systemic barriers to employment and recognition of their skills. As of March 2023, around 33% of Ukrainians under temporary protection were children and young people who require access to education and support to continue their studies. The majority of adults hold upper-secondary or tertiary qualifications, yet they encounter difficulties in having their credentials recognised within the Spanish system.

Ukraine-born residents are notably well-educated: 30.4% have tertiary education, compared to 17.7% among other non-EU nationals and 22.7% among Spanish natives. This high qualification level, however, often clashes with employment outcomes, which tend to be concentrated in lower-skilled roles.

The Ukrainian community in Spain is predominantly female (57.3%). Women tend to seek employment in domestic work, administrative jobs, communications, health, social services, and trade, whereas men more often work in transport, construction, and hospitality—reflecting both gender segmentation and structural labor market gaps, according to UNHCR.

Women face significant barriers to employment. These include a lack of accessible childcare, cultural expectations around caregiving and limited opportunities for flexible working. Only 34% of working-age women with children under 12 are employed, compared to 52% of men in similar circumstances. These gender-specific constraints exacerbate general integration difficulties and restrict women's autonomy and economic participation.

In terms of labour market integration, 20,593 Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection were employed in Spain as of May 2023. Women constituted around 53% of the employed population, primarily in low-skilled sectors such as domestic services, hospitality, and agriculture (CEAR, 2024). A significant mismatch persists between refugee qualifications and job placement: 51% of employed women and 39% of employed men are working in roles that do not match their level of education and skills.

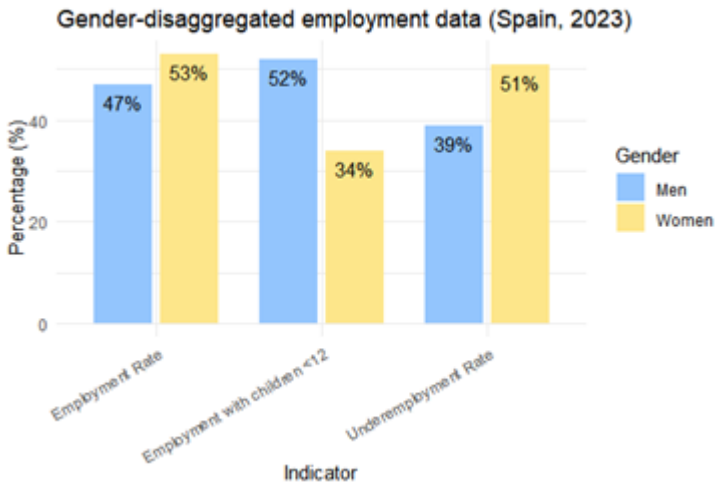

Figure 2. *Gender-disaggregated employment data for Ukrainian refugees in Spain (2023). This chart illustrates key employment indicators disaggregated by gender, including overall employment rates, employment among parents with children under 12, and underemployment levels. The data highlight that Ukrainian women face higher underemployment and lower*

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employment rates when balancing caregiving responsibilities.

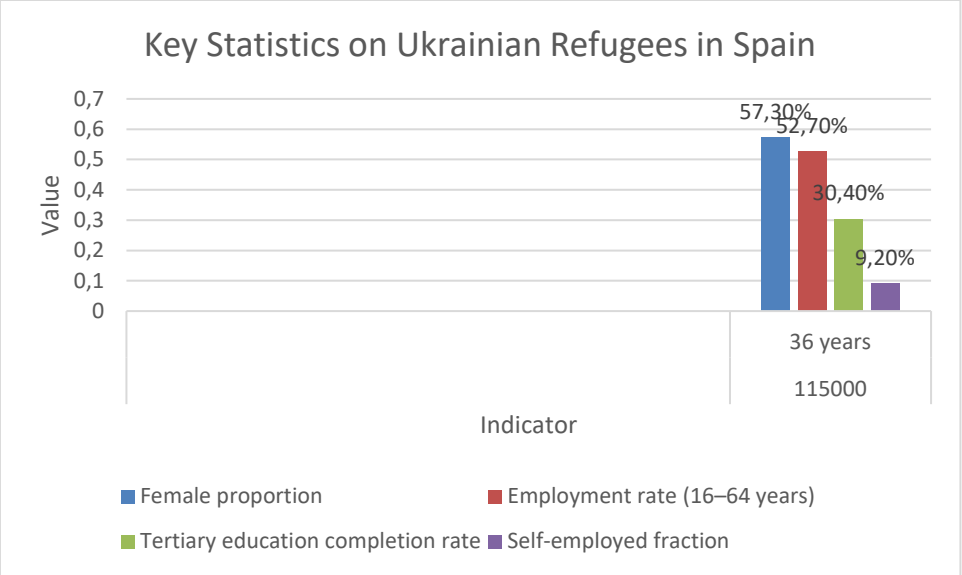

Table 1. *The table highlights values for different indicators for a sample of 115,000 Ukrainian residents in Spain (2021), with average age of 36 years, showing a female proportion of 57.3%, with employment rate (16–64 years) of 52.7%, tertiary education completion rate equals to 30.4% and self-employed fraction of 9.2%.*

In early 2024, Spain was among the countries with relatively low employment rates for Ukrainian refugees (under 20%), alongside Finland, Norway, and Romania. This contrasts with higher rates in Lithuania, Denmark, and Poland (40–60%), indicating underutilized potential in Spain.

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Table 2: *This table shows the Sector Distribution Among Ukrainian Workers in Spain.*

The figures point to a highly educated refugee population whose potential is undervalued in the Spanish labor market. The roughly 52–53% employment rate, primarily in lower-skilled sectors, signals significant skills mismatches and underemployment. Women—constituting the majority—face concentrated occupational segregation and double burdens from care responsibilities, as reported in broader European contexts.

This data reveals critical needs: improved recognition of Ukrainian qualifications, tailored vocational training, and gender-sensitive labor integration policies. The VOICE project can address these needs by providing targeted re-skilling opportunities, bridging formal qualifications with accessible, relevant job pathways, and empowering women to enter more equitable employment sectors.

In Spain, government initiatives such as those led by SEPE provide access to free vocational training, Spanish language courses and job placement support, as do non-profit organisations including Cruz Roja and CEAR. Participation in these programmes has been associated with improved long-term employability. However, studies report an initial 'lock-in effect', whereby individuals are temporarily delayed in entering the workforce while attending training. Nevertheless, bespoke training and certification pathways are crucial for long-term integration into the Spanish labour market, particularly for individuals with existing but unrecognised qualifications.

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Identified Gaps

The integration of Ukrainian refugees into Spain's workforce is hampered by clear skill gaps that undermine their employability and potential for digital entrepreneurship. Language proficiency remains a fundamental barrier—not only does insufficient Spanish fluency restrict access to formal employment, it also severely limits their ability to participate in training, access online resources and navigate administrative systems. This challenge is especially pronounced among women refugees, a demographic that makes up around seventy percent of arrivals in Europe, many of whom shoulder childcare responsibilities that further impact digital upskilling and entry into the labour market.

In addition to language, there is a significant digital divide among the refugee population. Many older people and those with lower levels of formal education possess minimal digital literacy, which restricts their ability to engage with e-learning platforms or pursue remote work and entrepreneurial opportunities. While Ukrainian arrivals often held higher-skilled professions prior to displacement, a lack of recognized qualifications and technical skills adapted to the Spanish context results in underemployment within low-skilled or precarious sectors.

Asylum seekers frequently participate in educational and vocational training programmes that are not always formally recognised or aligned with the standards of the host country. This can result in limitations to their access to skilled employment opportunities. Furthermore, the absence of language skills in the local language constitutes a significant impediment to employability and social integration. The challenges associated with the documentation and validation of professional qualifications further exacerbate the situation.

Furthermore, legal and administrative barriers are frequently cited as a significant impediment, and the absence of professional networks is also highlighted as a crucial factor. In Spain, as in other European countries, the mismatch between skills possessed by the workforce and local labour market demand is a further critical element.
As demonstrated in Figures 3 and 4, the majority of Ukrainian refugees in the Spanish labour market are employed in the hospitality, construction and trade sectors, often in roles that do not align with their educational background. Concurrently, the evolution of Social Security enrolment between 2021 and 2024 demonstrates a gradual increase in labour participation, characterised by steady but partial growth.

Concerning digital entrepreneurship, there is a notable deficiency in business management and online trade skills, which was documented by the OECD as a key obstacle even among displaced populations. Many refugees lack familiarity with the basics of starting a business—such as marketing, financial planning, regulatory compliance—and so tend to gravitate toward sectors with lower entry barriers, such as domestic services or hospitality.

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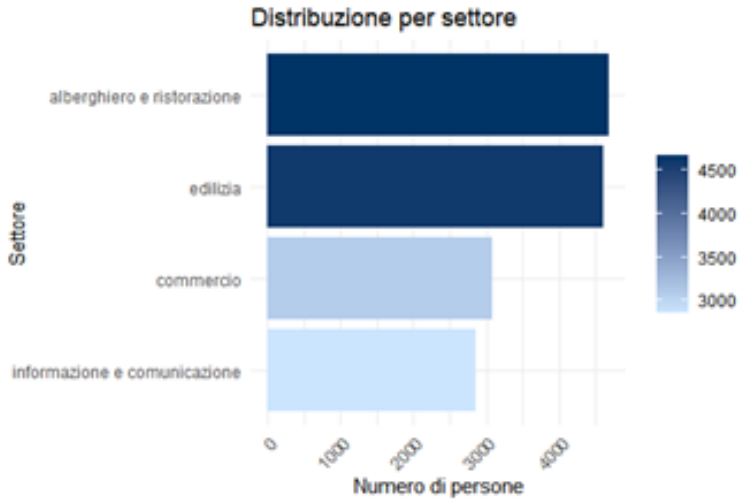

***Figure 3**. Distribution of Ukrainian refugees with temporary protection registered with the Spanish Social Security (as of 31 December 2024)*
The graph shows the main employment sectors of the 28,197 Ukrainian citizens registered with the Spanish Social Security system. The majority of these workers are employed on permanent, full-time contracts.

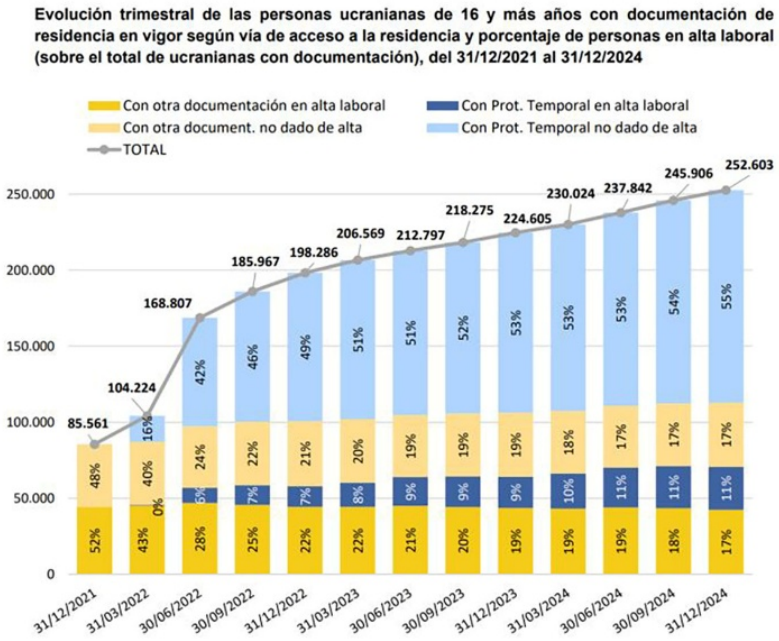

Figure 4. *Quarterly evolution of Ukrainian residents with valid residence documentation and Social Security registration in Spain (2021–2024).*
The graph shows the total number of Ukrainian citizens aged 16 and over with valid residence documentation in Spain from 31 December 2021 to 31 December 2024, broken down by permit type (temporary protection or other) and employment status (registered or not with the Social Security). By the end of 2024, 55 per cent of the total were active in the labour market, 11 per cent of whom had temporary protection.

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Digital skills and digital entrepreneurship are frequently identified as areas of weakness among refugee populations. As asserted by official sources, in the absence of adequate digital training and entrepreneurship support programmes, refugees risk being marginalised in rapidly evolving sectors and self-employment opportunities.

Soft skills also show noticeable gaps. Refugees may be highly qualified professionally, but they often lack experience interacting with local stakeholders, navigating job interview norms, workplace communication, and understanding the social customs of Spanish work environments.

The ability to communicate effectively, work collaboratively in a team, solve problems, and adapt to changing circumstances are all soft skills that are of critical importance for both employment and social integration. The development of these skills may be hindered by linguistic and cultural difficulties, which in turn may reduce refugees' ability to integrate into Spanish work contexts. Furthermore, social isolation and the absence of support networks have the potential to impede the development and application of soft skills.

In summary, Ukrainian refugees in Spain face overlapping deficiencies: a lack of language proficiency, low digital literacy, unrecognized or outdated credentials, limited business and entrepreneurship competencies, and underdeveloped soft skills. These deficits make it difficult for them to access high-quality employment, take advantage of digital or self-employment pathways, or fully benefit from integration and empowerment programs.

Language and Digital Literacy Barriers

Refugees and migrants in Spain face numerous challenges in acquiring the local language. This poses a fundamental barrier to accessing employment, training and social integration. The Council of Europe highlights that, while mastering the language of the host country is seen as a vital part of integration by the host society, this does not always lead to full integration or equal employment opportunities for migrants.
Knowledge of the language alone does not guarantee linguistic integration: even those who achieve a good level may encounter obstacles due to social, cultural or discriminatory factors. Language training programmes often fail to take sufficient account of migrants' languages of origin, previous experience, and diverse communication needs.

In this sense, Ukrainian refugees in Spain encounter significant language barriers that directly affect their capacity to integrate into society, access public services, and enter the labor market. Despite being granted temporary protection status, many arrive with little or no knowledge of Spanish, and while some possess English proficiency, it is not sufficient to navigate Spain’s administrative systems or participate effectively in training programs that are predominantly conducted in Spanish. The lack of tailored language learning opportunities that accommodate their diverse educational backgrounds and personal responsibilities—particularly among women with caregiving duties—further exacerbates the issue. Training

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programs must therefore consider linguistic diversity, incorporate multi-level instruction approaches, and integrate practical vocabulary related to employment sectors. Cultural nuances in communication, especially in professional contexts, should also be embedded into curricula to enhance workplace readiness.

The following are factors to be taken into account in the linguistic adaptation of training.

- The recognition of languages already known is an important consideration. The enhancement of migrants' prior language skills has been demonstrated to foster self-esteem and facilitate success in learning a new language.
- The identification of language needs is an essential preliminary step. In order to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of training courses, it is essential that the specific needs of migrants are thoroughly discussed with them.
- The presence of diverse migrant populations is a salient feature of contemporary societies. It is imperative that programmes are adapted to cater to the cultural and linguistic differences of the participants.

Digital illiteracy compounds these difficulties. Although many Ukrainian refugees are well-educated, disparities in access to technology and prior experience with digital tools create a divide, especially among older individuals or those from rural areas. Limited digital literacy restricts the ability to search for jobs online, access e-learning platforms, and utilize essential services such as banking, health care, or social security registration. Even when digital devices are available, refugees may not be familiar with Spanish-language interfaces or digital systems used in Spain, making navigation difficult without additional support. These challenges underscore the importance of embedding foundational digital skills into training, with content adapted for non-native speakers and contextualized within daily tasks and employment scenarios. Digital exclusion not only limits access to information and opportunities but also isolates refugees socially and economically, undermining their autonomy and long-term prospects.

Benchmarking with Labor Market Needs

The Spanish labour market, as indicated by data from the Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, necessitates a workforce with diversified skills at both the national and regional levels. The following subjects are to be considered: technology (with particular reference to cybersecurity and software development), logistics, tourism, renewable energy and health.

The demand for STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) profiles is notably high, with a 12% increase in ICT offers in 2023. In the region of Murcia, the agricultural and agri-food sector is responsible for 40% of regional demand. This sector is characterised by a demand for skills in the areas of supply chain management and agricultural mechanisation.

The possession of technical and occupational skills is of paramount importance. A significant proportion of refugees in Spain, specifically 34%, have previously been employed in critical sectors such as healthcare, construction and IT. A high incidence of STEM qualifications is demonstrated by Ukrainian nationals (22%), and 78% of the population speak English as a

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second language.

A significant proportion of professional qualifications are not recognised in Spain due to the presence of bureaucratic barriers. It is evident that certain professional domains, such as law and education, necessitate bespoke training and development.

As demonstrated in Figure 5, the percentage distribution of refugees' key skills and characteristics highlights both strengths (e.g. experience in healthcare, construction and IT) and significant obstacles, such as the high rate of unrecognised qualifications and the still limited level of proficiency in Spanish.

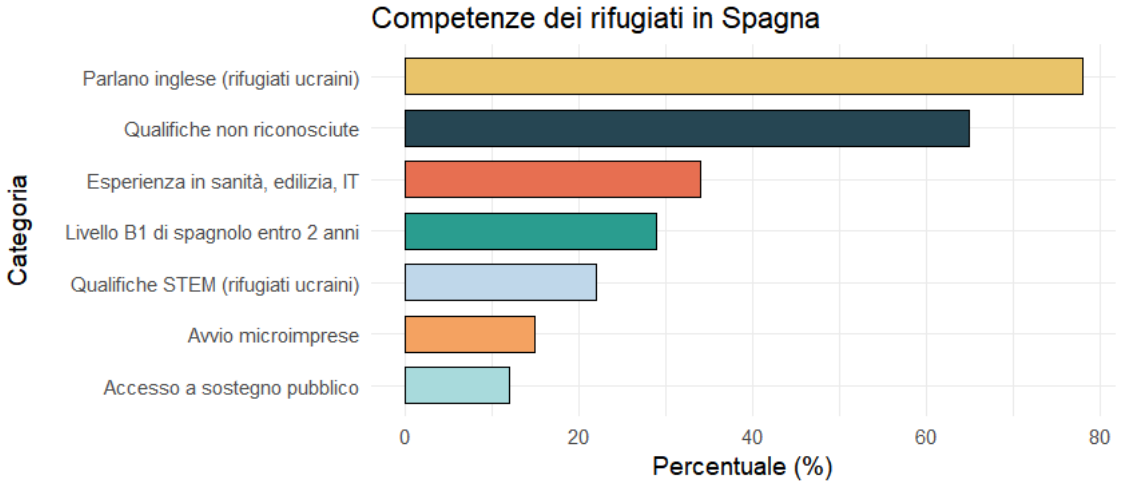

Figure 5. *Percentage distribution of skills and key characteristics of refugees in Spain. The graph illustrates the proportion of refugees with experience in particular sectors (e.g. health, construction and IT), STEM qualifications, multilingualism, recognised qualifications, proficiency in Spanish and entrepreneurial activity. It also highlights the challenges associated with accessing public support programmes.*

In Spain, employers are increasingly demanding digital and soft skills that align with the country's broader digital transformation strategy. The Digital Decade Report highlights Spain's ambitious goal to raise the share of adults with basic digital skills to 85% by 2030, exceeding the EU's 80% target. This national push is mirrored in the growth of technical roles, where nearly 940,000 ICT positions have emerged over the last decade, reflecting a 76% increase—yet an ongoing talent gap remains, with some 6,000 roles unfilled.

The most sought-after competencies include proficiency in Python, AI, cloud platforms like AWS and Azure, cybersecurity, and data analytics. Research demonstrates a clear wage premium tied to digital literacy, reinforcing the positive correlation between access to technology and improved earnings. These demands coincide with broader economic drivers in Spain—which benefits considerably from immigrant labor, including skilled ICT professionals who are filling vital vacancies and boosting national productivity.

Against this backdrop, there is a persistent skills mismatch among Ukrainian refugees. The OECD

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reports that, while their labour market integration has proceeded faster than that of other refugee groups, it has often been restricted to low-skilled work, leaving higher-level credentials underutilized. This suggests that refugees, many of whom possess advanced qualifications, are not yet accessing the digital and entrepreneurial roles that Spain's labor market demands.

The OECD's "Missing Entrepreneurs" report (2023) stresses the potential of refugee-led entrepreneurship in stimulating inclusive economic growth, provided there is access to mentoring, micro-finance, and legal/administrative support.

Spain's digital start-up ecosystem (especially in regions like Andalusia and Madrid) and the presence of EU-funded platforms such as EPALE and EURES create a strong foundation for digital and entrepreneurial training programs targeting this group.

A study of refugee micro-entrepreneurship in the catering and handicraft sectors reveals that 15% of refugees initiate micro-enterprises, yet access to finance remains constrained, with only 12% benefitting from public support programmes.

Consequently, VOICE's tailored training—emphasizing digital entrepreneurship, AI, cloud tools, and cybersecurity—addresses a direct gap in refugee skillsets. By aligning modules with market-relevant technical skills and digital tools, VOICE enhances employability and bridges the disparity between refugee competencies and Spain's evolving economic needs.

Overview of Available Training Offers

In the aftermath of the activation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive (March 2022), Ukrainian refugees in Spain are granted immediate access to fundamental rights, encompassing employment, social assistance, and vocational training. The European Commission has repeatedly emphasised the necessity of ensuring access to education, vocational training and adult learning for Ukrainian refugees. The Commission has called upon member states to enhance their public employment services and training channels.

In Spain, a wide array of training programs exists for refugees, particularly targeting displaced Ukrainians since the onset of the war in 2022. These programs are offered by a combination of public institutions, international organizations, regional governments, NGOs, and community-based initiatives. The national government, through the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, coordinates many of these efforts, while partnerships with the Red Cross, CEAR (Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado), ACCEM, and UNHCR ensure that refugee-specific needs are prioritized in both content and delivery.

Training offers generally fall within vocational education and training (VET), language acquisition, and upskilling in sectors with high employability potential such as hospitality, care services, ICT, and entrepreneurship. For instance, under the National Strategy for the Socioeconomic Inclusion of Refugees, the Spanish government supports the provision of targeted courses that include job orientation, Spanish language classes, and short-cycle vocational training. These programs are often supported by ESF+ funds and regional labour

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market programs like “Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia,” which has a strong digital inclusion component.

In terms of accessibility, Spain has made substantial efforts to reduce linguistic and administrative barriers. Many courses are now offered in Ukrainian or with interpretation support, and organizations such as UNHCR and the Red Cross provide cultural mediation services. Additionally, platforms like Aula Mentor and UNED Abierta offer flexible online learning opportunities, making training accessible regardless of geographical location. However, challenges remain. While urban centers like Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia offer a rich array of training options, access can be more limited in rural or peripheral regions. Furthermore, while digital tools and online courses are increasingly common, digital literacy and access to stable internet can limit effective participation among some refugees.

Although much progress has been made in adapting training to meet the specific needs of Ukrainian refugees, a gap remains in the systematic integration of soft skills, digital entrepreneurship, and personalized job-matching. Programs tend to be fragmented, with differing levels of quality, and not always aligned with labor market demands or refugees’ prior qualifications. As a result, while refugees in Spain benefit from a considerable volume of available training, not all offerings fully support their long-term integration into skilled, stable employment.

Stakeholder Input

In Spain, stakeholder insights gathered from NGOs, public employment agencies, and training centers reveals a consistent set of perspectives regarding the integration and employability of Ukrainian refugees. Organizations such as CEAR, the Spanish Red Cross, ACCEM, and local employment services emphasize that while Ukrainian refugees often arrive with relatively high levels of education and professional experience, they encounter significant challenges in converting those qualifications into meaningful employment. A common concern expressed by these stakeholders is the limited recognition of professional credentials and diplomas issued in Ukraine, which continues to act as a major barrier to entry into regulated professions or skilled employment sectors.

Employment and training centers also note that Ukrainian refugees show strong motivation to enter the labor market, but face difficulties in accessing structured, long-term career pathways. Stakeholders frequently underline the mismatch between available jobs and refugee aspirations or skillsets. Many refugees are funneled into low-skill sectors such as domestic work, agriculture, or hospitality due to immediate economic needs, while their existing qualifications remain underutilized. This creates a sense of professional stagnation and frustration, which stakeholders believe could be addressed through more tailored training programs and improved job matching services.

It was asserted by public employment agencies, most notably at the regional level, that personalised skills assessments were of paramount importance, particularly in relation to sectors that are characterised by skill shortages. Furthermore, the importance of language

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training as a prerequisite for accessing the labour market, particularly in the tertiary and health sectors, was emphasised, a point that was concurred with by the OECD.

Vocational training centres engaged in EU programmes have reported the efficacy of pathways that integrate the certification of prior skills with sectoral training, in accordance with OECD recommendations. However, it was also noted that there are critical issues related to the recognition of Ukrainian academic qualifications, with significant delays hindering access to regulated professions.

NGOs and regional integration agencies further report that language barriers, though less pronounced for Ukrainian refugees than for other refugee groups, still pose an obstacle to accessing higher-level employment and training. There is widespread agreement on the need for accelerated Spanish language learning integrated with vocational training. Additionally, stakeholders highlight that digital literacy levels vary widely among Ukrainian refugees, with older refugees and women disproportionately affected by digital skill gaps. This was especially visible in digital learning environments, where lack of familiarity with learning platforms or remote work tools hindered effective participation.

Another recurrent theme in stakeholder feedback is the importance of psychological support and social inclusion measures. Service providers stress that integration into the labor market cannot be seen in isolation, and must be accompanied by community-building efforts, housing stability, and mental health support. Employment centers and NGOs advocate for holistic models that combine training, legal guidance, and psychosocial services to foster long-term integration.

A review of stakeholder feedback revealed a number of recurrent themes. Among these themes was the issue of fragmentation between public and private services, which was identified as a systemic barrier. This finding calls for the implementation of more integrated governance models, with a view to improving the effectiveness of interventions. It is considered best practice at European level, as described in UNHCR and OECD reports, to employ training models that combine language courses with specific technical skills.

Overall, stakeholders converge on the idea that while the response from the Spanish government and civil society has been proactive and generous, systemic improvements are needed. These include better coordination among actors, standardized validation of qualifications, and training offers more closely aligned with labor market demands. Their input suggests that an integrated, multi-level response is crucial to unlock the full potential of Ukrainian refugees in Spain and ensure their meaningful inclusion.

Finally, the financial sustainability of projects is a critical issue, as the dependence on temporary EU funds, such as ESF+ and AMIF, requires structural mechanisms to ensure the continuity of initiatives.

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5. Recommendations

To effectively address the integration challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees in Spain and close the gaps in employability, digital entrepreneurship, and soft skills development, a series of targeted, practical actions should be implemented. First, training programs should be co-designed with refugees and stakeholders to ensure alignment with the specific socio-economic profiles and professional backgrounds of Ukrainian beneficiaries. This participatory design should include contextualized learning objectives, adapted language levels, and modular structures that allow flexible engagement, especially for those balancing employment or caregiving responsibilities.

Language acquisition should be embedded within vocational training pathways, so that refugees not only improve their Spanish language proficiency but also acquire job-relevant vocabulary and communication skills. This integration of language and professional training increases the likelihood of both retention and employability. Moreover, fast-track language certification programs should be expanded, with digital and in-person options to suit different learner profiles and levels of digital access.

Digital literacy must be addressed through basic and intermediate ICT training specifically tailored to refugees, with content that focuses on digital tools required for employment, job searching, and entrepreneurship. This includes use of productivity software, digital communication tools, and online administrative platforms. To facilitate this, user-friendly, multilingual digital learning environments should be developed, ensuring accessibility through mobile devices, offline options, and low-bandwidth formats. Special attention must be paid to gender-sensitive approaches, recognizing the particular barriers faced by women in accessing digital tools due to care responsibilities, confidence gaps, or past exposure.

To foster digital entrepreneurship, targeted incubator programs should be launched offering mentorship, micro-funding, and digital marketing training for refugees interested in starting small businesses. These programs should build on best practices from existing EU-funded initiatives and focus on local market opportunities, regulatory frameworks, and integration into digital value chains. Soft skills training should be incorporated into all training modules and include intercultural communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional resilience—competencies that are crucial not only for employment but also for long-term integration.

The validation and recognition of prior learning and qualifications must be streamlined through improved partnerships with Spanish institutions and employers. Simplified procedures for the recognition of Ukrainian degrees and the introduction of skills assessment tools in multiple languages would allow refugees to access jobs commensurate with their experience.

Finally, coordination between national, regional, and local stakeholders—including employment agencies, NGOs, municipalities, and training providers—must be enhanced to avoid duplication, ensure continuity of support, and deliver comprehensive services. Stronger referral pathways, shared databases of services, and regular cross-sectoral meetings would

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ensure that refugee needs are holistically met and that training initiatives are scalable and sustainable.

To sum up, based on the assessment:

- Modular, multilingual training that blends digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and job readiness is essential.
- Training must be contextualized—reflecting Spanish labour market needs while addressing refugee-specific constraints.
- Courses should be delivered via flexible online platforms, but also include in-person support (language classes, orientation workshops).
- Partnering with local NGOs, WISEs, and regional governments will ensure sustainable reach and impact.
- A gender-sensitive approach should be integrated from design to delivery, ensuring that women (who make up the majority of the refugee cohort) are not excluded.
- Promote the recognition of prior learning and credentials, and include micro-certifications for digital skills that are easily transferable.

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