



Factsheet 2026-7

Developments in labour market participation and language skills of Ukrainian refugees

Results from longitudinal survey research

Authors: Wybren Nooitgedagt, Hannah Oijevaar & Ben van Enk

Summary

- Labour force participation is high, both in comparison to other refugees as to labour force participation prior to fleeing.
- Jobs are still at a low level and little change was observed between 2023 and 2025. A large proportion (62%) held jobs requiring a higher level of professional qualification in Ukraine than they do in the Netherlands.
- Employed Ukrainian refugees are relatively satisfied with their work. At the same time, a significant number face unfavorable working conditions, such as physically demanding work, very long hours, or unsafe or unhealthy environments.
- Despite high labor force participation, there is untapped labour potential: compared to the general population, a higher proportion of Ukrainians are unemployed or underemployed.
- The main obstacles to finding work remain the same as in 2023: little to no proficiency in Dutch; childcare responsibilities (particularly for women); and a mismatch with the labour market.
- Speaking Dutch remains difficult for most Ukrainians. There has been only limited improvement in language proficiency between 2023 and 2025.

Introduction

Unlike other refugees in the Netherlands, Ukrainian refugees are permitted to take up paid employment immediately without a work permit. Furthermore, they are neither required nor able to participate in the civic integration programme. Does the right to work also mean they can effectively participate in the labour market? And to what extent is their limited access to resources for learning Dutch problematic?

In this factsheet we describe the labour market participation and Dutch language skills of Ukrainian refugees, and examine changes that occurred between 2023 and 2025.

Data

This factsheet is based on data collected in two large-scale surveys among Ukrainian refugees aged 15 and older who arrived in the Netherlands between 24 February 2022 and 1 July 2023 (the LOCOV survey), using a representative sample drawn by Statistics Netherlands (CBS). The first wave of data collection took place in late 2023, surveying 3,460 Ukrainians about their lives in the Netherlands. In late 2025, these individuals (provided they were still living in the Netherlands) were contacted again to participate; 2,383 Ukrainians took part in this second wave. The data have been weighted to provide the most accurate possible reflection of the Ukrainian refugees in that cohort. References in this factsheet to differences between groups or over time refer to statistically significant differences. For further information on weighting, statistical testing, and question wording, please refer to online appendix B1.

Labour force participation

(Un)employment and the labour force

The proportion of Ukrainian refugees in employment has risen from 61% to 67%. This brings their employment rate increasingly close to that of the general population (73%; see CBS, 2026a) and means it is now higher than the percentage of this group who were employed in Ukraine (66%). An increase in the number of employed individuals is evident among both women and men, as well as across all age and educational groups (see Figure 1).

Unused labour potential

Not everyone who wants to work and/or is able to do so is currently employed. Consequently, there is unused labor potential among Ukrainian refugees.

Firstly, there is still a relatively large number of unemployed individuals. These are people who do not have paid work, but have recently looked for employment and are immediately available to start (CBS, 2026a). The unemployment rate among Ukrainian refugees fell from 17% to 12% between 2023 and 2025. Despite this decline, unemployment remains relatively high: in the autumn of 2025, 4% of the general Dutch labor force was unemployed (CBS, 2026c).

Secondly, there is a significant group of so-called 'semi-unemployed' individuals; people who are either available for work or have recently looked for work (CBS, 2026b). This figure is considerably higher among Ukrainian refugees, standing at 24% in 2023 and 25% in 2025. In contrast, the figure is much lower for the general population, where approximately 9% are semi-unemployed (CBS, 2026a).

Figure 1 Ukrainian refugee labour force and non-labour force (2023 & 2024)

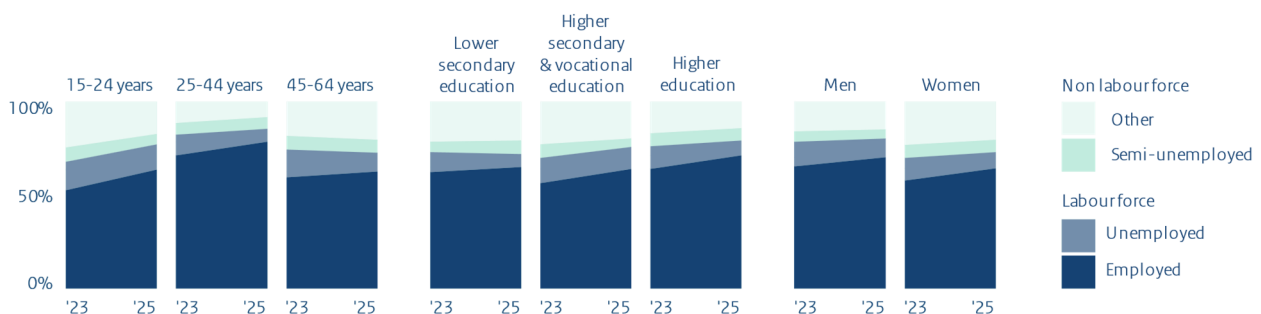
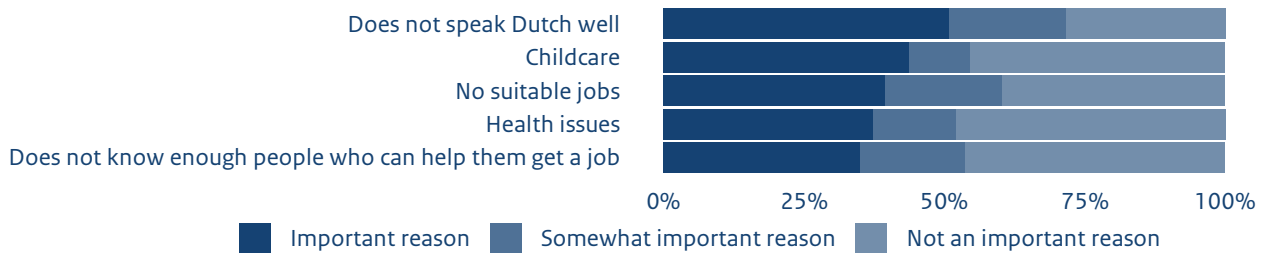


Figure 2 Top 5 reasons cited by Ukrainian refugees for not having a job



Reasons for unused labour potential

Language remains the main obstacle to finding employment

Ukrainian refugees without paid employment were asked about the reasons for their lack of work (see Figure 2). The primary reason cited is a lack of Dutch language proficiency; 51% identify language as a major factor. While a lack of Dutch skills does not need to be an insurmountable barrier to finding employment in the Netherlands, 49% of unemployed Ukrainians report speaking neither Dutch nor English, or struggling significantly with both languages.

Other frequently cited reasons include childcare responsibilities and difficulty finding suitable job vacancies. Difficulties in finding suitable vacancies may indicate a mismatch with the labour market.

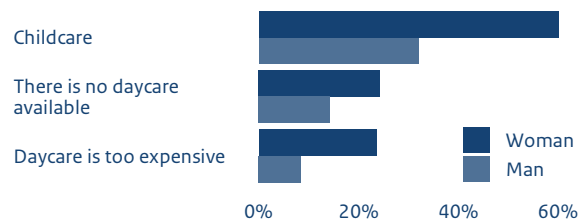
These findings closely mirror the reasons identified as most significant in 2023 (Van Enk et al., 2024). Previous international research has also shown that Ukrainian refugees in other European countries faced very similar challenges (Central Statistics Office, 2023; FRA, 2023).

Women more frequently cite childcare as a reason for not having a job

There are significant differences in the extent to which women and men cite caregiving responsibilities as a reason for not having a job (see Figure 3). Among people with children living at home, 60% of women cite childcare as a major or somewhat important reason for not having a job, compared to 32% of men.

Caregiving responsibilities pose an obstacle to finding work more often for women than for men. In previous European research, one in three Ukrainian women indicated that they were unable to work due to caring for children or others (FRA, 2023).

Figure 3 Proportion of women and men citing care responsibilities as a (somewhat) important reason for not having a job

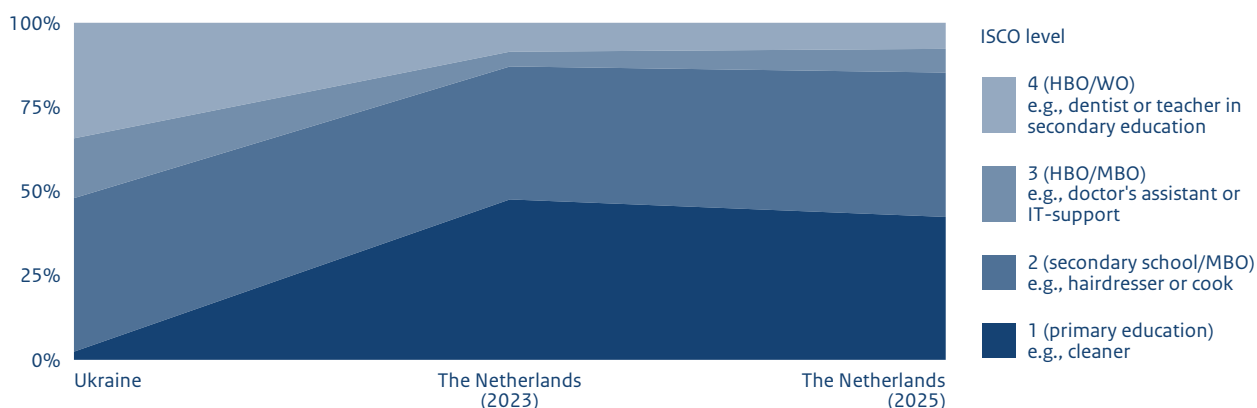


How do people look for and find work?

A large proportion of Ukrainian refugees looking for work utilized advertisements (79%), social media (47%), and family, friends, or personal contacts (46%). Compared to 2023, a significantly larger share sought work through UWV/werk.nl (24% versus 13%). This may indicate that they are becoming more familiar with how to access UWV and werk.nl.

As in 2023, Ukrainian refugees found work most frequently through family, friends, or personal contacts (38%). Although more Ukrainians sought work via UWV/werk.nl in 2025, the percentage that actually secured a job through that channel remains very low (1%).

Figure 4 Job levels (ISCO) in Ukraine (pre-migration) and the Netherlands (2023, 2025)



Large differences in job levels between Ukraine and the Netherlands

Many Ukrainian refugees work in low-level jobs requiring little formal education (see Figure 4). In recent years, the occupational levels at which Ukrainians work have remained virtually unchanged. There has been limited upward mobility to higher job levels.

Ukrainian refugees generally held higher-level jobs in Ukraine than they do in the Netherlands. As of 2025, 62% are working below the level they held in Ukraine. The most significant disparities in job levels between Ukraine and the Netherlands are evident in the rise in the number of people working at level 1 (the lowest level) and the decline in those working at level 4 (the highest level). While only 2% of people worked at level 1 in Ukraine, that figure stood at 42% in the Netherlands in 2025. Consequently, the high number of people working in low-level jobs in the Netherlands is not due to them having held similar jobs in Ukraine.

Of those who worked at level 3 or 4 in Ukraine (52%), only 21% were working at that same level in 2025. A decline in occupational level is also observed among those who worked at level 2 in Ukraine; only 42% of this group were working at level 2 or higher in the Netherlands.

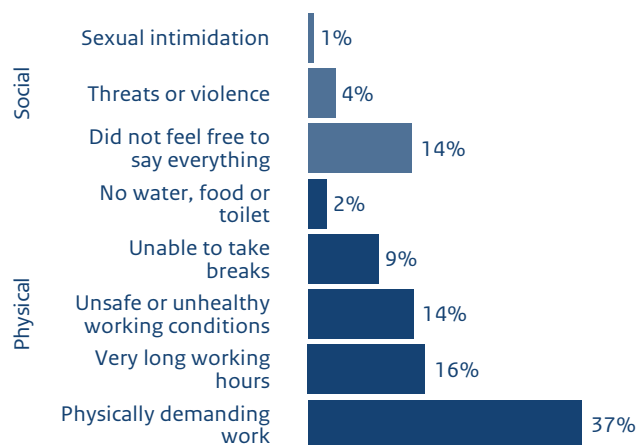
Women in the Netherlands generally work at lower occupational levels than men; in 2025, 49% of employed Ukrainian women worked at job level 1, compared to 31% of men. Women are also more likely to work below the level they held in Ukraine, 70% compared to 45% of men.

Job satisfaction and working conditions

As in 2023, average job satisfaction is relatively high (an average score of 7), with 78% rating their job satisfaction at 6 or higher. There are only minimal differences in job satisfaction across age groups, education levels, or gender.

Despite this positive picture regarding job satisfaction, a proportion of Ukrainian refugees report working in poor conditions. Ukrainians in paid employment in the Netherlands were asked whether they had experienced any of seven adverse working conditions (see Figure 5). Physically demanding work was the most frequently cited issue (37%). Very long working hours were also frequently mentioned (16%).

Figure 5 Working conditions



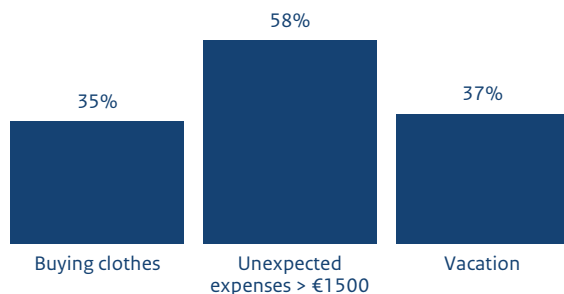
Financial self-reliance

Despite high labor market participation, the majority of Ukrainian refugees (58%) report not having enough money to cover unexpected expenses exceeding €1,500 (see Figure 6). Women report this more frequently than men (63% and 49%, respectively). In 2023, 20% of households in the Netherlands reported not having enough money for unexpected necessary expenses (CBS, 2024).

Ukrainians in municipal reception centers appear to be in a weaker financial position. They are less likely to report having enough money for unexpected expenses (39%) compared to Ukrainians not living in municipal reception centers (50%).

Ukrainians who are not employed are more likely to report lacking sufficient funds for unexpected expenses (75%) than those who are employed (49%). Similarly, unemployed Ukrainians are more likely to report that their household has insufficient funds left over at the end of the month (44%) compared to employed Ukrainians (20%).

Figure 6 Financial situation in 2025



Dutch and English language proficiency

Dutch language proficiency

Unlike other refugees, Ukrainian refugees are neither required nor able to participate in the civic integration programme. Consequently, the extent to which Ukrainian refugees succeed in learning Dutch depends more on their own motivation and resources (both local and personal).

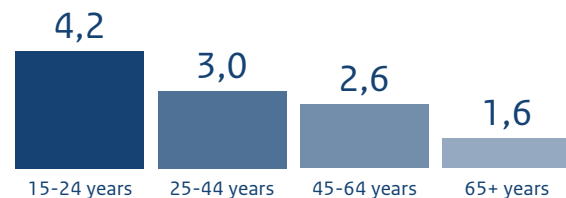
Ukrainians continue to struggle with the Dutch language. Many report frequent difficulties speaking (76%), reading (65%), and writing (71%) Dutch. While there has been a slight improvement in the self-assessed proficiency

scores given by Ukrainian refugees, the average score remains low. In 2023, they gave themselves an average score of 2.2; in 2025, this rose to an average of 3.0. Only 14% rate themselves a 6 or higher.

This trajectory of language proficiency among Ukrainian refugees stands in stark contrast to the language development seen in other refugee groups. By 2025, the Ukrainian refugees in this cohort will have been in the Netherlands for three to four years. By comparison, after four years in the Netherlands, Syrian refugees rated their Dutch proficiency at an average of 5.5 (Nooitgedagt & Dagevos, 2024).

Younger people rate their language proficiency higher on average; however, even the youngest group of Ukrainians gives themselves an average score of only 4.2 in 2025 (see Figure 7), with 32% rating themselves a 6 or higher. It is not surprising that younger people pick up the language more quickly; previous research has consistently shown that age plays a crucial role in learning a new language (Hartshorne, Tenenbaum, & Pinker, 2018).

Figure 7 Self-reported Dutch language skills (1-10) in 2025, by age



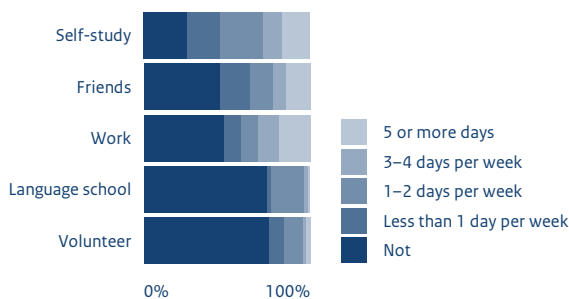
Intention to learn the language & course participation

Many Ukrainian refugees express motivation to improve their Dutch: 75% indicate a desire to learn the language better. More than half (61%) state that they need help doing so.

Currently, 30% of Ukrainians are taking a Dutch course, and 46% have taken one in the past. Among those who have not yet taken a course, 47% plan to do so in the future. Motivation to learn Dutch appears high: only 7% of the entire group are not taking a course, have not taken one, and do not plan to take one.

When asked where and how often they learn the language, it is notable that self-study is the most common method, while learning via a volunteer (such as a language buddy) is the least common (see Figure 8). The frequency of self-study, learning through friends, and learning at work has increased since 2023. In the workplace, Ukrainians primarily use English (58%), followed by Dutch (29%). There has been an increase in the number of people using Dutch as their main language at work; in 2023, 17% used Dutch as their primary language. Only 7% use Ukrainian or Russian as their main language at work.

Figure 8 Ways in which Ukrainian refugees learn Dutch



English language proficiency

Regarding the English language, 42% of Ukrainians report that they do not speak English or often struggle with it. There does appear to be a slight improvement: in 2023, 18% indicated they never had trouble with English, whereas in 2025, this figure stands at 23%. Notably, a large majority (57%) would like to improve their English, yet only 30% are currently taking a course to do so.

Conclusion and reflection on the findings

Unlike other refugees, Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands can immediately take up paid employment without a work permit. However, they do not have access to civic integration programs. Thus, while Ukrainian refugees can start working right away, they receive no structural support at the national level for learning Dutch. This factsheet examines the labor market participation and Dutch language proficiency of Ukrainian refugees who arrived in the Netherlands during the first eighteen months following the large-scale invasion.

Ukrainian refugees have high employment rates, both compared to Ukrainian refugees in other European countries (Kosyakova et al.,

2024) and to other refugees who have been in the Netherlands for a similar length of time (CBS, 2025). Their labor market participation is now only a few percentage points lower than that of the general population (CBS, 2026a).

Despite this high level of participation, there remains untapped labor potential. A larger proportion of Ukrainian refugees are unemployed or underemployed compared to the general population. Thus, despite a strong willingness to work, some Ukrainian refugees are unable to find employment.

Ukrainian refugees cite language barriers, childcare responsibilities (particularly among women), and a mismatch with the labor market as the primary obstacles. International research shows that Ukrainian refugees in other European countries often face the same challenges (Central Statistics Office, 2023; FRA, 2023; Kosyakova et al., 2024).

Research indicates that civic integration policy plays a significant role in language acquisition. While Syrian refugees were engaged in civic integration programs, their language proficiency improved significantly faster than afterwards (Nooitgedagt & Dagevos, 2026), and participation in integration courses in Germany was associated with better German language proficiency among Ukrainian refugees there (Kosyakova et al., 2024). Moreover, previous research shows that improvements in language proficiency can have a major impact on refugees' labor market participation (Kanas & Kosyakova, 2023; Nikolov, Salarpour Goodarzi, & Titus, 2022). Offering free language courses—whether or not as part of a civic integration program—could therefore make it easier for many Ukrainian refugees to participate in the labor market.

Improving access to childcare would make it easier for Ukrainian refugees with children living at home to find paid employment. Furthermore, this could help reduce gender inequality regarding labor market access, given that Ukrainian women cite childcare responsibilities as an obstacle far more frequently than Ukrainian men.

Finally, in 2025, a significant proportion of employed Ukrainian refugees are still working below the level at which they were employed in Ukraine, resulting in the underutilization of their qualifications. International research

indicates that virtually all migrants experience "occupational downgrading," and that refugees are often hit even harder (Akresh, 2008). The situation is no different for Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands or other European countries (Guzi, Duszczek, Huber, Huemer, & Veselková, 2024; Lewandowski, 2025). To address this problem effectively, it is important to focus on guidance towards suitable employment, combined with the provision of language training or dual work-study programs with a language focus.

Literature

- Akresh, I. R. (2008). Occupational trajectories of legal US immigrants: Downgrading and recovery. *Population and development review*, 34(3), 435–456.
- CBS (2024). *Inkomensbeoordeling en financiële problemen: Huishoudens*. Geraadpleegd op 28 mei 2026, van [opendata CBS - dataset 82253NED- table](#).
- CBS (2025). *Asiel en integratie 2025: Cohortonderzoek asielzoekers en statushouders*.
- CBS (2026a). *Dashboard beroepsbevolking*. Geraadpleegd op 6 mei 2026, van [CBS - visualisaties - dashboard beroepsbevolking](#).
- CBS (2026b). *Onbenut arbeidspotentieel*. Geraadpleegd op 6 mei 2026, van [CBS - begrippen - onbenut arbeidspotentieel](#).
- CBS (2026c). *Arbeidsdeelname: Kerncijfers seizongecorrigeerd*. Geraadpleegd op 6 mei 2026, van [opendata CBS - dataset 80590NED - table](#).
- Central Statistics Office (2023). *Arrivals from Ukraine in Ireland series 10*. Geraadpleegd op 27 mei 2026, van [CSO - Arrivals from Ukraine in Ireland series10](#).
- FRA (2023). *Fleeing Ukraine – Displaced people's experiences in the EU*.
- Guzi, M., Duszczek, M., Huber, P., Huemer, U., & Veselková, M. (2024). Pathways to inclusion: Labour market perspectives on Ukrainian refugees. In L. Mátyás (Red.), *Central and Eastern European economies and the war in Ukraine: Between a rock and a hard place*. Springer Nature.
- Hartshorne, J. K., Tenenbaum, J. B., & Pinker, S. (2018). A critical period for second language acquisition: Evidence from 2/3 million English speakers. *Cognition*, 177, 263–277.
- Kanas, A., & Kosyakova, Y. (2023). Greater local supply of language courses improves refugees' labor market integration. *European Societies*, 25(1), 1–36.
- Kosyakova, Y., Gatskova, K., Koch, T., Adunts, D., Braunfels, J., Goßner, L., . . . Vandenhirtz, M. (2024). *Labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees: An international perspective*. IAB.
- Lewandowski, P. (2025). Occupational downgrading, job tasks, and the return intentions of the Ukrainian refugees in Poland. *EconPol Forum*, 26(1), 35–37.
- Nikolov, P., Salarpour Goodarzi, L., & Titus, D. (2022). Skill downgrading among refugees and economic immigrants in Germany: Evidence from the Syrian refugee crisis. *IZA discussion papers*, No. 15426.
- Nooitgedagt, W., & Dagevos, J. (2024). Ontwikkelingen in de taalverwerving van Syrische Nederlanders. In J. Dagevos, M. Maliepaard & D. Schans (Reds.), *Met beleid vooruit? Wat betekent het opvang-, inburgerings- en spreidingsbeleid voor ontwikkelingen in de positie en leefsituatie van statushouders?* WODC.
- Nooitgedagt, W., & Dagevos, J. (2026). Policy matters: Developments in the language acquisition of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and the impact of reception and civic integration policies. *[Manuscript submitted for publication]*.

This series comprises short research reports conducted by or commissioned by the Research and Data Centre (WODC). Inclusion in the series does not imply that the content reflects the position of the Minister of Justice and Security. All WODC reports can be downloaded free of charge from the [WODC Repository](#).

The Research and Data Centre (WODC) is an independent knowledge institute under the Ministry of Justice and Security. The WODC contributes to the preservation and improvement of the rule of law by conducting (and commissioning) high-quality scientific research. It also does so by providing requested and unsolicited knowledge, suggestions for improvement and, where possible, avenues for reflection.

Additional information:

english.wodc.nl