

POLICY BRIEF

Final Policy Brief

Digital spaces, skills, and competencies of Ukrainian forced migrants in Israel

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Introduction

This policy brief highlights key findings and policy implications regarding digital spaces, skills, and competencies of Ukrainian forced migrants (olim and refugees) who arrived in Israel following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (February 24, 2022). Olim are migrants to Israel with Jewish ancestry and their spouses, who are granted Israeli citizenship upon arrival under the Law of Return (1950). Following the Russia-Ukraine war, 20,000 olim¹ and 15,000 refugees² from Ukraine arrived in Israel, and about 90,000 olim from Russia.

Unfortunately, some of the newcomers unexpectedly found themselves in the midst of another war. The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israeli communities near the Gaza border, along with the subsequent war and military operations in Israel's southern and northern regions, resulted in the evacuation of approximately 125,000 Israeli residents due to security concerns. Among them were approximately 2,200 newly arrived migrants (primarily olim) from Ukraine and Russia, who had settled in absorption centers and housing clusters near the conflict zones. Both Israeli citizens and migrant populations experienced sudden displacement, highlighting shared challenges in emergency response, mental health support, and community resilience. However, Ukrainian forced migrants faced compounded hardships. They fled one war only to find themselves in another—this time in an unfamiliar country with a different language and culture. Many remained deeply concerned about the ongoing war in Ukraine and the safety of their families.³

This situation underscored the urgent need for targeted policy interventions, including enhanced support for displaced populations, culturally sensitive mental health services, and long-term integration strategies for migrants affected by conflict.

This report examines effective communication strategies for engaging with Ukrainian forced migrants, identifies existing communication gaps both before and during the war in Israel, and outlines practical approaches to enhance communication with this population.

¹ https://www.gov.il/he/departments/publications/reports/aliyah_2022; https://www.gov.il/he/pages/aliyah_2023;
<https://www.gov.il/he/pages/aliyah-data-2024>

² <https://main.knesset.gov.il/News/PressReleases/Pages/press07.06.22.aspx>

³ <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctechnews/article/h16cgynsc>

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In 2023, before the war in Israel, an assessment was conducted to evaluate the digital spaces, skills, and competencies of Ukrainian forced migrants. This included mapping available sources of information and services provided to this population. Reports on migrants' digital skills, published by Israeli governmental institutions and academic sources, were reviewed and analyzed. To further assess accessible information, a systematic analysis of websites operated by government ministries, municipalities, and NGOs was conducted (Amit, 2023a). Additionally, 20 semi-structured interviews were held with Ukrainian migrants, primarily olim, who lived in Jewish Agency-operated hotels in northern Israel (Nof HaGalil or Haifa). These interviewees were referred by a Jewish Agency representative. The interviews were thematically coded and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework (Amit, 2023b).

Following the outbreak of the war in Israel, we conducted an updated assessment of information channels and support mechanisms available to Ukrainian forced migrants. This included a review of websites operated by government ministries, municipalities, and NGOs, as well as an analysis of media coverage, policy reports, and webinars produced by the Institute for Immigration & Social Integration (IISI) at Ruppin Academic Center.⁴ Additionally, interviews were conducted with researchers engaged in ongoing studies on Ukrainian forced migrants who were navigating the complexities of displacement between two wars.

Evidence and Analysis

The systematic mapping of sources related to Ukrainian forced migrants revealed the following key findings:

Ministry of Aliyah and Integration as the Primary Service Provider for Olim

Before and during the war in Israel, the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration⁵ served as the main provider of information and services for Ukrainian olim. Following the outbreak of war, the Ministry began initial preparations. These included: **1. Evacuation of immigrants:** The Ministry focused on evacuating new immigrants from combat and emergency zones, addressing both short-term and, in some cases, long-term needs. **2. Situation assessments:** Ongoing evaluations were conducted to adjust responses to the changing reality and coordinate efforts with various organizations and security bodies. **3. Active communication:** The Ministry initiated proactive communication with immigrants to understand their situation, monitor their needs, and provide assistance. The Ministry established special emergency call centers⁶ and facilitated connections between olim and aid organizations offering targeted assistance.⁷

⁴ <https://www.ruppin.ac.il/research-authority/research-centers-and-institutes/the-institute-for-immigration/the-swords-of-iron-war/>

⁵ <https://hometoisrael.co.il/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.il/he/pages/swords-of-iron-summary-of-activities-3>

⁷ <https://www.gov.il/he/pages/support-organizations-for-olim>

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While these activities were designed to support all newly arrived olim, most were immigrants from Russia and Ukraine who arrived in response to the war.

The Ministry of Aliyah and Integration implemented comprehensive emergency response measures for new migrants during the conflict. These included: **1. Personalized support:** Dedicated support systems were established to address the unique needs of migrants affected by the war, including those who experienced loss or trauma. **2. Direct communication with the IDF (Israel Defense Forces):** Direct channels for communication with the IDF were established, to ensure a rapid response to the challenges faced by immigrants. **3. Strengthening mental resilience:** Through its Welfare Division and in collaboration with municipalities, the Ministry provided psychological support, including resilience workshops for new migrants aimed at enhancing the psychological resilience of migrants, particularly those living in frontline areas. Special attention was paid to forced migrants fleeing the Russia-Ukraine war. **4. Economic assistance:** Offering financial support and economic relief to families impacted by the war.

To ensure that migrants had access to information and received the necessary support, several initiatives were undertaken: **1. Conversations on building resilience:** Staff and volunteers were trained in municipalities and integration organizations to conduct constructive conversations aimed at fostering mental resilience. **2. Educational videos:** Four informative videos about the war were produced. These videos were translated into five languages – English, Russian, French, Spanish, and Amharic – to help relieve anxiety and support newcomers.⁸ **3. Public awareness campaign:** A radio and social media campaign was launched in Hebrew, titled *"Pay Attention to Immigrants,"* encouraging the Israeli public to support newcomers and direct them to governmental resources for assistance. The Ministry published a document summarizing its activities with olim during the first year of the war in Israel.⁹

After the war began, the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration prioritized the accessibility of crucial information for immigrants, particularly during times of crisis. Key initiatives included: **1. Multilingual information pages:** The Ministry developed and published essential information pages in multiple languages, including English, Russian, Amharic, French, and Hebrew. This was aimed at ensuring that immigrants could easily access relevant and updated information during the national emergency. **2. Digital platforms:** The Ministry collaborated with the National Digital Agency and other government bodies to create a user-friendly digital platform with a questionnaire that encouraged immigrants to describe their needs. The responses were forwarded to relevant authorities for prompt assistance. **3. Guidance videos:**¹⁰ Instructional videos were created to guide immigrants on connecting to the Ministry and registering for national identity services. The videos were translated into several

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/user/KlitaGov>

⁹ <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/swords-of-iron-war-one-year/he/swords-of-iron-war-one-year.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/user/KlitaGov>

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languages. These resources helped them understand how to access their personal account on the Ministry website, as well as information about available support and payments. **4. Outreach and communication:** In addition to digital resources, the Ministry conducted outreach through direct phone calls and SMS messages to newly arrived migrants, to check on their needs and provide information about emergency services. **5. Workshops and seminars:** The Ministry organized workshops and seminars targeting independent immigrants, focusing on their eligibility for compensation from tax authorities and providing individual assistance and clarifications.

Support for Ukrainian Refugees through the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs

Following their arrival in Israel, Ukrainian refugees received assistance primarily from the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, in collaboration with NGOs, through the *Tzav HaSha'a* program.¹¹ While the program was extended beyond its initial timeline, since 2023 it has been operated—due to practical considerations—by Magen David Adom (MDA), Israel's national emergency medical service organization.¹² Nearly three years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian refugees in Israel remain without regular status, rights, or certainty about their future. Fleeing war in their homeland—only to face another conflict in their place of refuge—has further exacerbated their already vulnerable situation.

E-Government Services and Language Barriers

Most official Israeli government services tailored specifically for Ukrainian forced migrants (both olim and refugees) are accessible online (e-government services) and available in Russian and Ukrainian. However, many general e-government services require Hebrew proficiency, limiting accessibility for some migrants. Ukrainian refugees primarily rely on NGOs for information and assistance.

Role of Municipalities in Migrant Support

Municipalities play a crucial role in providing both online and in-person support to Ukrainian forced migrants, through a network of municipal coordinators. This assistance is highly valued by the migrant community. The coordinators support new migrants throughout their first year in the country, providing information and assistance in dealing with government ministries and authorities. In many cases, coordinators continue to assist migrants beyond the officially allotted period. After the war in Israel began, municipalities collaborated with the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration to organize resilience workshops for both migrants along with municipal staff. Information regarding the war was shared with migrants through WhatsApp groups and referrals to the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration's information centers. Special emphasis is placed on Ukrainian migrant youth, in light of the distress they experience due to the parallel wars in Ukraine and Israel. Several programs have been

¹¹ <https://govextra.gov.il/molisa/tzav-hashaa/home>

¹² <https://www.mdais.org/101/ukraine?page=6>

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implemented to support this population, aiming to help them connect with their local communities and strengthen their sense of belonging in Israel.

Community and Volunteer Support During the War

Preliminary findings from ongoing studies among Ukrainian forced migrants during the war in Israel indicate increased support from local communities in areas where these migrants reside. Additionally, volunteer initiatives led by the migrants themselves have emerged during the war, strengthening both social cohesion and community resilience. For example, in the city of Nof HaGalil, Ukrainian migrants (olim) actively participated in collecting and distributing food to Israeli soldiers.

Digital Skills and Access

Many Ukrainian forced migrants (olim and refugees) are highly educated, of working age, and possess strong digital competencies. However, a digital gap exists among elderly migrants, particularly in their ability to navigate various social media applications. Following the outbreak of war, greater emphasis was placed on supporting elderly migrants to ensure that emergency information was accessible to them. This was done primarily through direct communication facilitated by municipalities.

Use of Social Networks for Information and Communication

Ukrainian forced migrants actively use social media platforms—primarily Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Telegram—to access information and stay connected with friends and relatives in Israel. For communication with those still in Ukraine, the most used applications are Facebook, WhatsApp, and Viber. This communication remained strong, and even intensified, following the outbreak of war in Israel.

Shifts in NGO Support and Special Initiatives

Special non-governmental initiatives, such as TechForChanges,¹³ which supported Ukrainian refugees in particular, remained active until 2023. However, since the war in Israel began, aid organizations have shifted their focus to war-related initiatives, which also provide assistance to Ukrainian forced migrants. One of the NGO's assisting Ukrainian refugees is ASSAF, which works to promote the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Israel to a life of dignity, security, belonging, and equality.¹⁴ It is evident that the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Israel became more vulnerable following the outbreak of war.

¹³ <https://www.techforchanges.org/services>

¹⁴ <https://assaf.org.il/en/about/>

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Policy implications, recommendations, and lessons learned from the dual war situation

- ✓ **Enhanced coordination across agencies:** Strengthen collaboration between government ministries, local authorities, and civil society organizations to streamline services for migrants, especially in times of crisis. This will help in the efficient identification of needs and coordination of resources and ensure that migrants receive comprehensive support.
- ✓ **Flexible and responsive policies:** Develop and implement flexible policies that can quickly adapt to the changing circumstances faced by migrants, especially during emergencies. This includes reassessing funding allocations for local authorities and organizations to respond swiftly to urgent integration needs.
- ✓ **Multilingual information and resources to improve access to institutional and emergency services:** Ensure that all critical information related to integration is available in multiple languages. To improve accessibility, all e-government services should be made available in migrants' native languages, ensuring they can access essential information and support without language barriers. Ongoing updates and translations should be made accessible through various platforms (digital, community centers, etc.). In addition, Ukrainian forced migrants should receive clear guidance in their language on navigating key institutions such as banks, health maintenance organizations (HMOs), and emergency services related to the ongoing war in Israel. Where possible, initial support should be provided by dedicated representatives. Consideration should be given to extending the period of support provided by coordinators in local authorities.
- ✓ **Enhancing digital and linguistic skills:** Establish digital literacy programs aimed at equipping migrants with the skills necessary to navigate online platforms for accessing services and support. This includes training sessions on using governmental websites and digital applications for personal assistance. Special emphasis should be placed on improving digital literacy and Hebrew language skills, particularly for elderly migrants.
- ✓ **Strengthening mental health support:** Increase investment in mental health resources specifically designed for Ukrainian migrants, focusing on trauma-informed care. This could involve training local service providers to address the unique psychological needs associated with migration and resettlement. Special attention should be given to providing psychological assistance to Ukrainian forced migrants, recognizing their unique trauma from experiencing displacement due to war, sometimes twice. Mental health services should be culturally sensitive and accessible.
- ✓ **Community engagement and outreach programs:** Implement proactive outreach initiatives that foster community engagement between migrants and local residents. This could include cultural exchange programs which facilitate interaction and understanding, thereby promoting social cohesion. Virtual communities should be fostered and reinforced both as support networks and as platforms for learning the local language and culture. These spaces can facilitate integration, provide emotional support, and enhance migrants' sense of belonging.
- ✓ **The temporary status of Ukrainian refugees:** As Ukrainian refugees in Israel (who are olim) remain without regular status or certainty about their future, their status should be examined.

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The refugees who have chosen to remain in Israel are currently being cared for mainly by NGOs.

- ✓ **Long-term integration strategies:** Design long-term integration strategies that address pathways to employment, education, and social inclusion. This requires assessing the skill sets of Ukrainian forced migrants and providing training tailored to the job market.
- ✓ **Monitoring and evaluation:** Create systematic processes for monitoring and evaluating integration programs and policies. This should involve collecting feedback from Ukrainian forced migrants to ensure that services are meeting their needs effectively and are adjusted based on real-time insights.
- ✓ **Emergency preparedness plans:** Establish and communicate clear emergency preparedness plans at the various governance levels, specifically for migrant populations. This should include guidance on what to do in times of crisis, ensuring that migrants are informed and able to act promptly during emergencies.

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