Literature Review

UNITING THROUGH STORIES

A
A MILLION VOICES

Social
Innovation ⊕
Initiative

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Introduction to AMV

A MILLION VOICES

A Million Voices (AMV) is a European initiative aimed at supporting the psychosocial well-being and cultural integration of Ukrainian refugees through creative and therapeutic means. Implemented across Germany, Lithuania, and Poland, the project combines art therapy, storytelling, and community-based activities to foster healing, resilience, and belonging among displaced individuals especially youth and women. By using non-verbal, inclusive tools like crafts, music, and participatory arts, AMV provides safe spaces for expression and connection. The project also emphasizes training, policy advocacy, and sustainable models to embed creative interventions into local support systems.

AMV Team

AY institute
Lithuania

Active Youth is a dynamic Lithuanian non-profit organization that unites young changemakers and thinkers who drive positive social innovation. Their core mission is to create sustainable impact in communities, organizations, and policy through inclusive and innovative social initiatives. With over 30 self-coordinated projects and collaborations in more than 700 partner entities across Europe, Active Youth delivers a wealth of expertise in non-formal education, youth empowerment, inclusion, mental health, digital tools, and community development

EUth Wonders e.v.
Germany

EUth Wonders e.V. is responsible for leading the project's research-based groundwork through the coordination of the literature review, needs assessment, and evaluation framework. With deep experience in youth empowerment, social inclusion, and digital education tools, the organization ensures that the A Million Voices project is evidence-based and strategically aligned. It also contributes to dissemination and quality assurance throughout the project lifecycle.

Global connect
Poland

Global Connect is a foundation, non-governmental/non-profit youth organization which is based in Olsztyn, Poland. The main aim of our organization is to promote the concepts of active citizenship, EU integration, and gender equality through the development of the young individuals' communicative and social abilities.

EUth Wonders Germany

EU/German Literature Review

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1. Introduction and Scope of the Review

As the German partner in the AMV project, EUth Wonders e.V. was responsible for leading the initial literature review to ground the project in validated research, identify best practices, and map gaps in psychosocial support for Ukrainian refugees especially youth and women. The review focused on creative therapies, cultural integration strategies, and mental health interventions across European and national (German) contexts.

The corpus included peer-reviewed journal articles, NGO and policy reports, and academic syntheses published between 2017 - 2025. The selection spanned local (e.g., Weimar, Bielefeld) and EU-wide studies, offering a diverse landscape of evidence-based practices and practical insight for creative, art-based interventions.

2. Core Findings from the Literature

A. Art Therapy and Expressive Arts Interventions

The evidence base robustly supports the effectiveness of art-based interventions in reducing trauma symptoms, enhancing emotional regulation, and building resilience among refugees. The 2023 systematic review by Oepen & Gruber in Arts & Health found that expressive arts significantly improved well-being and intercultural communication. Similarly, Ferrario-Visini et al. (2017) emphasized how group arts foster empowerment and create emotional "safe spaces" for displaced populations in Germany and beyond.

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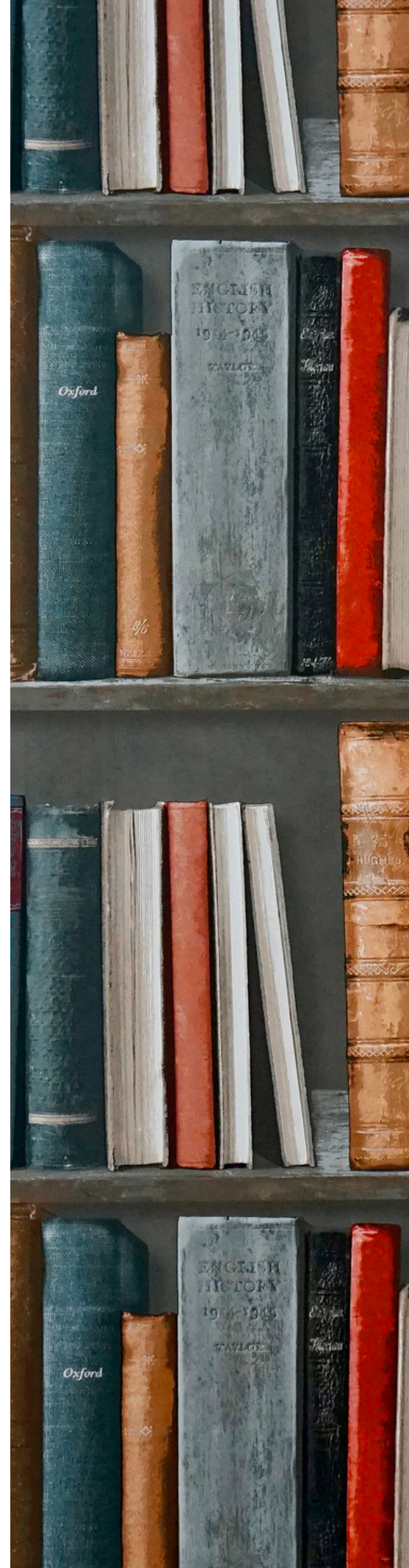
B. Refugee Youth and School-Based Interventions

Catani et al. (2023) demonstrated that German school-based mental health screenings identified high levels of PTSD and anxiety among Ukrainian adolescents, particularly girls. These findings highlight the urgency for early intervention models that incorporate non-verbal, low-threshold therapies like narrative drawing, music, and object-based storytelling methods echoed in Gordon's (2023) work on mobile-making therapy in the UK.

C. Cultural Belonging and Environmental Engagement

Kunchuliya & Eckardt (2024) utilized psychogeographic tools (mental mapping, photo elicitation) with refugee youth in Weimar. Their findings underscore how creative and spatial methods can support identity formation and civic belonging in transitional environments. These methodologies offer inspiration for spatially embedded storytelling practices.

D. Craft and Gendered Resilience

Van Gorp et al. (2023) shed light on the resilience of Ukrainian refugee women through craftwork in France, Germany, and Poland. Craft emerges as both a socio-economic pathway and a deeply personal form of expression. Their analysis affirms the potential of structured, women-led craft spaces as dual sites of therapy and micro-entrepreneurship essential for policy advocacy and AMV implementation.

E. Eastern and Southern European Innovations

From the TUTU Centre in Poland (2025), we learned that refugee-led music therapy in multilingual formats fosters both trauma recovery and educational integration. Likewise, the cross-border project in Andalusia and Greece (Magistrelli et al., 2024) exemplifies scalable, arts-based mental health systems when built into existing humanitarian infrastructures and caregiver training protocols.

3. Gaps and Challenges Identified

- Despite strong qualitative evidence, recurring challenges include:
- Insufficient longitudinal data to measure sustained therapeutic outcomes
- Fragmented funding structures that impede continuity of art-based programs
- Underrecognition of creative therapies in national health systems
- Lack of trauma-informed, culturally competent training for facilitators

These gaps must be addressed through EU and national policy integration, programmatic standardization, and academic-community collaboration.

4. Policy and Practice Recommendations

EUth Wonders e.V. proposes the following based on our synthesis:

1. Embed art-based interventions in school and community settings, particularly for newly arrived youth and women.
2. Fund trauma-informed training for art facilitators in multiple languages.
3. Institutionalize creative therapies within mental health policies through recognition frameworks and municipal support.
4. Support cross-sector partnerships between NGOs, therapists, educators, and cultural institutions.
5. Pilot hybrid models that integrate psychosocial goals with economic empowerment especially for women.

5. Conclusion

The literature reviewed validates the core premise of the AMV project: creative, culturally anchored, and community-embedded therapies are essential for refugee mental health and integration. Our findings clearly show that arts-based interventions are not ancillary but foundational to building trust, agency, and healing.
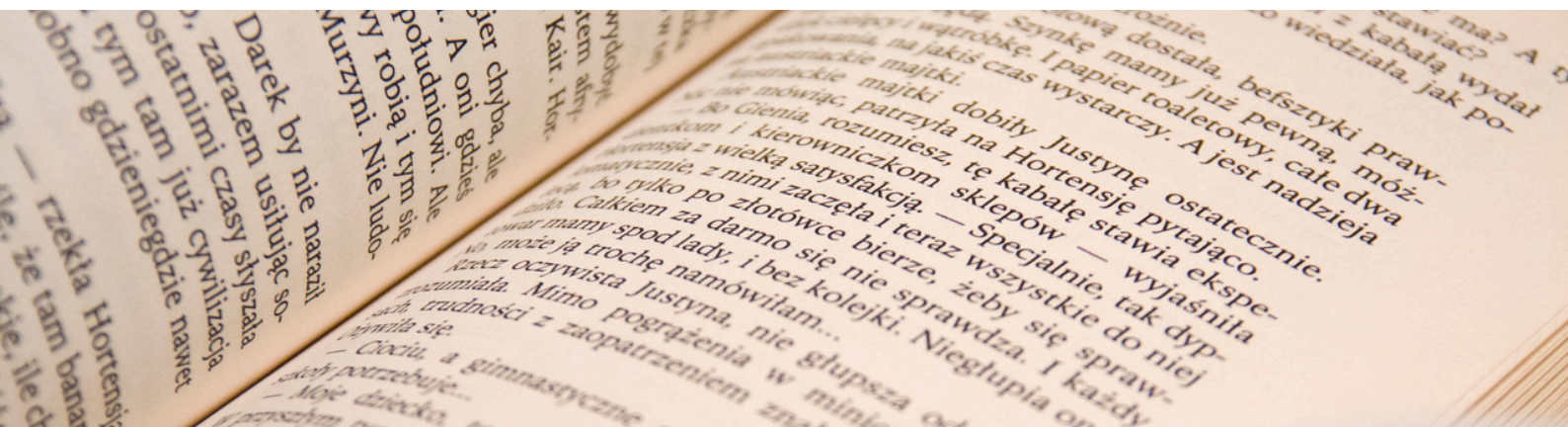
Global Connect Poland

Polish Literature Review

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I. Key Findings and Trends

Recent studies and field reports regularly highlight the significant psychological effects of conflict and displacement on Ukrainian refugees in Poland. The research indicates pervasive trauma, especially among women, children and adolescents, presenting as anxiety, sadness, PTSD and emotional detachment. These experiences are intensified by uncertain living conditions, lack of stable support systems and the gradual decline in public solidarity and resource availability.

Several converging tendencies appear from the evaluated papers:

- Significant incidence of psychological distress - quantitative findings from Cieślak et al. (2023) indicate that more than fifty percent of refugees experience symptoms of PTSD or associated mental health disorders. Women and the elderly exhibit heightened vulnerability, whilst adolescents encounter gender-specific societal barriers to obtaining care (UNICEF & SWPS, 2024).
- Efficient coping via innovative and community-oriented approaches - storytelling, journaling, needlework and visual arts are said to empower refugees, particularly women and children by facilitating trauma processing and transforming self-perception from victimhood to agency (Baran et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2023). Adolescents prefer unstructured, expressive situations over formal therapeutic settings.
- Language and cultural familiarity as facilitators of engagement - utilisation of the Ukrainian language and culturally relevant practices in therapeutic sessions or peer workshops cultivates emotional safety and trust which are crucial for engagement (UNICEF, 2023).
- Community and social support as protective factors - access to social connections via families, peer groups or host community interactions enhances psychological resilience and facilitates integration across all age demographics (PIE, 2023; Baran et al., 2024).

- Growing institutional recognition of psychosocial needs - UNHCR's 2025–2026 Poland segment of the Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) emphasises mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), particularly via non-clinical approaches including group activities and creative therapies, underscoring the strategic significance of initiatives like A Million Voices.

II. Gaps and Challenges in the Field

Despite favourable instances and a promising policy direction, numerous structural obstacles persist:

- Barriers to accessing mental health support - refugees frequently are unaware of accessible options or feel stigmatised for requesting assistance, particularly adolescent males who are culturally prohibited from displaying vulnerability (UNICEF, 2024). Language obstacles and low Polish proficiency also limit access.
- Service fragmentation and inconsistency - availability and quality of psychosocial treatments varies greatly by location and organisation. Many creative therapy efforts are still small-scale, unfunded and rely on short-term donations.
- "Integration Fatigue" in host communities - according to the PIE (2023) assessment, initial waves of solidarity had subsided. Some Polish villages are becoming fatigued or even resentful of refugee populations. Without consistent contact and inclusive programming, social cohesion may deteriorate even further.
- Underrepresentation of men and older adults in programs - most creative therapy interventions are targeted towards women and children, leaving adult men and elderly refugees under-represented. This reduces the scope and equity of existing programs.
- Lack of long-term frameworks for creative therapies - while MHPSS is emphasised in humanitarian planning documents, creative treatments are frequently viewed as supplemental rather than core to refugee care systems. Despite proven efficacy their inclusion into official frameworks is restricted.
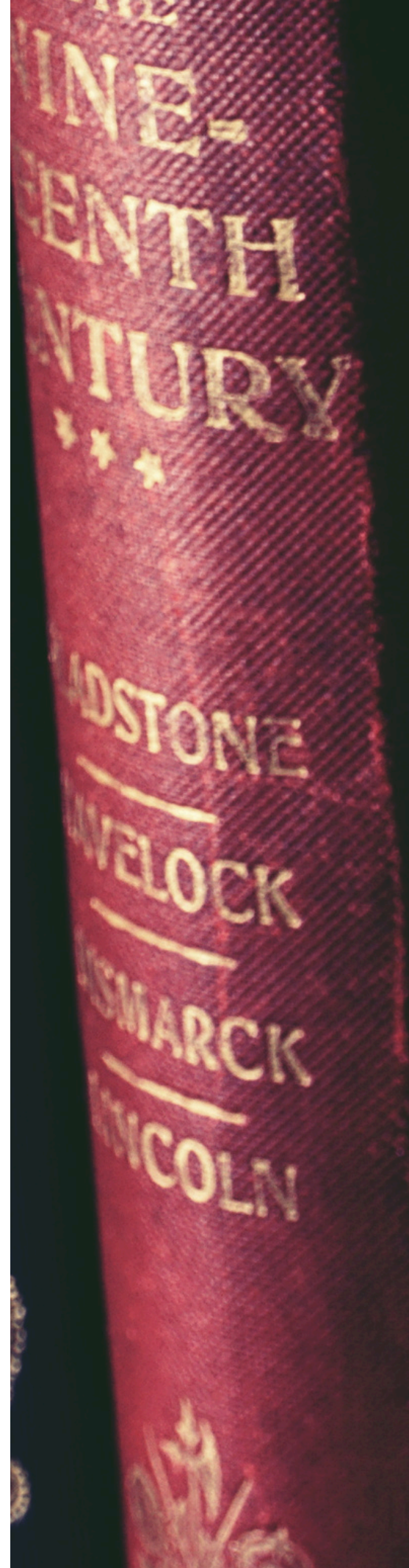
III. Recommendations for Refugee Support via Creative Therapies

Based on the evidence gathered, the following recommendations are made to improve refugee support through creative and expressive practices:
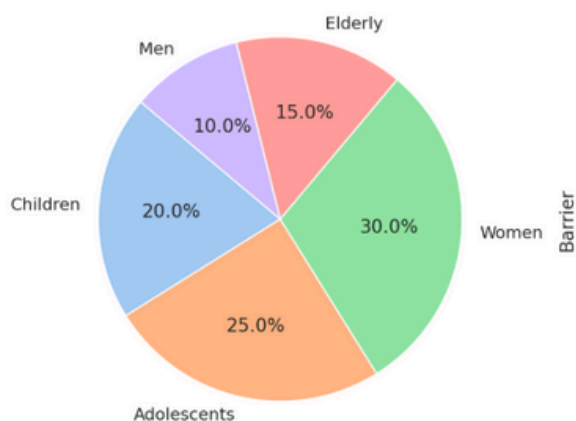
1. Institutionalize creative therapies within refugee support programs - build formal partnerships between NGOs, schools, municipalities and mental health providers to embed storytelling, art therapy and other non-verbal therapeutic approaches into regular programming. Align these initiatives with RRP priorities to ensure funding sustainability.

2. Design gender and age-sensitive workshops - create individualised techniques for various demographic groups, such as needlework, journaling and storytelling for women. Art and play therapy for toddlers. Informal - peer-led expressive spaces for teens and inclusive storytelling for adults and men.

3. Ensure cultural and linguistic accessibility - all sessions should be conducted in Ukrainian or led by multilingual professionals. Incorporate culturally appropriate symbols, stories and rituals to increase emotional safety and resonance.

4. Strengthen community integration through joint creative activities - use public art installations, nature walks and storytelling picnics to bring Polish and Ukrainian communities together. These shared experiences combat "integration fatigue" and foster empathy, belonging and mutual recognition.

5. Support male participation through peer-led, non-therapeutic formats - to combat social stigma and established gender norms, offer male-focused creative workshops that emphasise action-oriented, group-based storytelling such as digital storytelling, theatre or community painting projects

6. Scale up and monitor impact through research and evaluation - invest in long-term research and feedback mechanisms to assess the psychological and social effects of creative therapy. Create an evidence basis to support funding applications and push for widespread adoption.

7. Train and support facilitators especially refugee leaders - develop ability among Ukrainian-speaking facilitators, preferably those who have lived as refugees themselves. Peer leadership ensures cultural relevance and builds trust in communities.
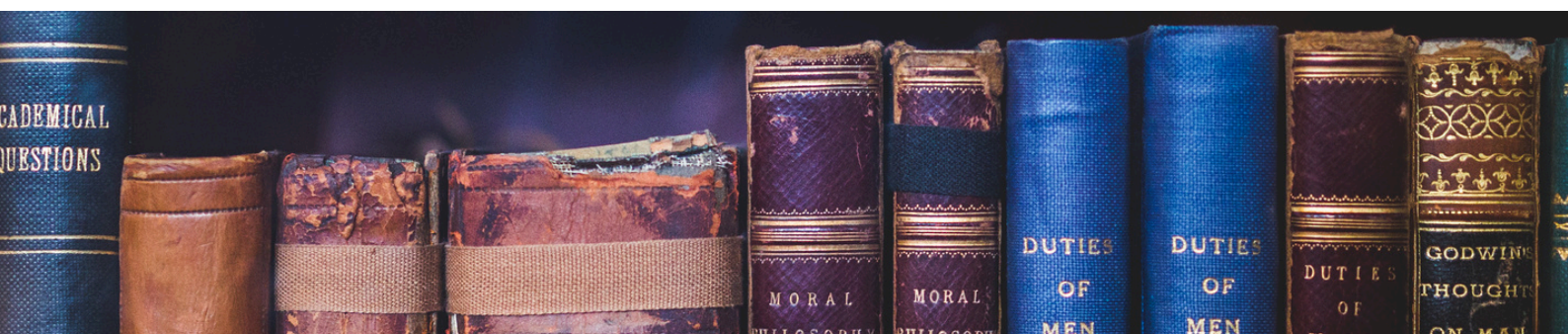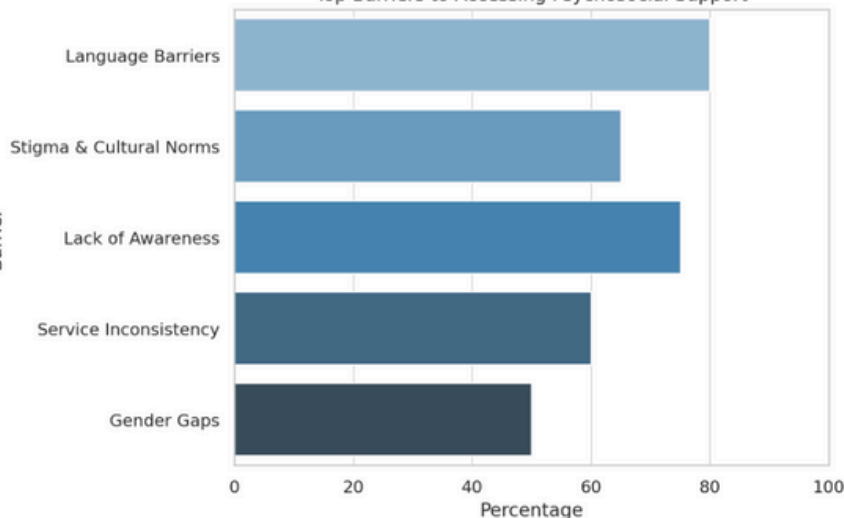
Summary

To sum up all mentioned above, creative therapies such as art, storytelling, music and symbolic expression, provide a highly humanistic and low-threshold approach to meeting the psychosocial needs of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. They transcend language, promote resilience and restore communal relationships in the aftermath of displacement. Projects such as A Million Voices exemplify these characteristics and should be recognised, extended and institutionalised as critical components of Poland's ongoing refugee response.
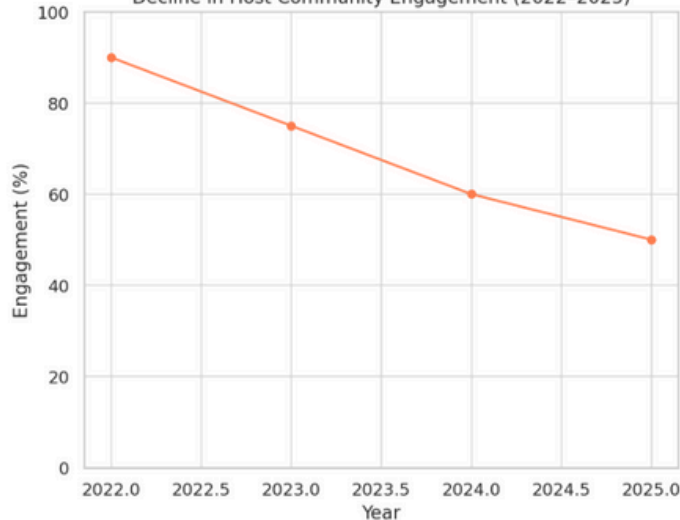
Distribution of Psychological Distress Among Refugees

- Elderly 15.0%
- Men 10.0%
- Children 20.0%
- Adolescents 25.0%
- Women 30.0%

Top Barriers to Accessing Psychosocial Support

- Language Barriers
- Stigma & Cultural Norms
- Lack of Awareness
- Service Inconsistency
- Gender Gaps

Decline in Host Community Engagement (2022–2025)

**Creative Therapies
Empowerment Through Expression**
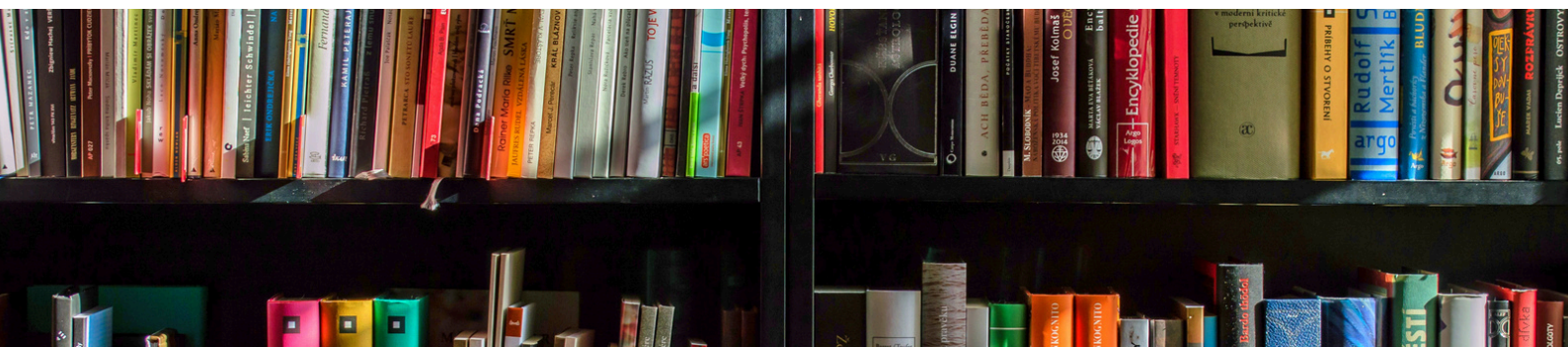
Active Youth Lithuania

Lithuanian Literature Review

Social Innovation ⊕ Initiative

Overview of the Lithuanian literature

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Lithuania has welcomed tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. As of 2025, Lithuania has received 96,085 Ukrainian refugees, of whom 99% are Ukrainian citizens, with ongoing arrivals averaging 28 per day. While the country has shown solidarity and introduced multiple support measures, the integration of refugees is a complex and evolving challenge. A review of recent studies reveals common barriers, vulnerabilities, and opportunities shaping the lives of Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania. This article outlines key themes from the literature, including social structures, education systems, psychological needs, language barriers, and socio-economic inclusion.

Social Structures and Refugee Agency The integration of Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania is shaped by both systemic structures and individual agency. According to research applying Giddens' Structuration Theory, refugees are not passive recipients of aid but active agents navigating bureaucratic systems, labor markets, and social norms. However, their ability to act is often constrained by factors such as age, gender, income, and education level. Younger, educated, higher-income refugees tend to adapt more easily, while older individuals, women (especially single mothers), and those with limited education face greater obstacles. Demographic data illustrates these patterns: 56% of arrivals are adults (18–64), 29% school-aged youth (6–17), and 10.5% children under 6. As of May 2022, 27% of working-age refugees (7,600 of 28,000) had secured employment, primarily in medium-skilled roles such as cleaning or retail, with an average gross salary of €900/month.
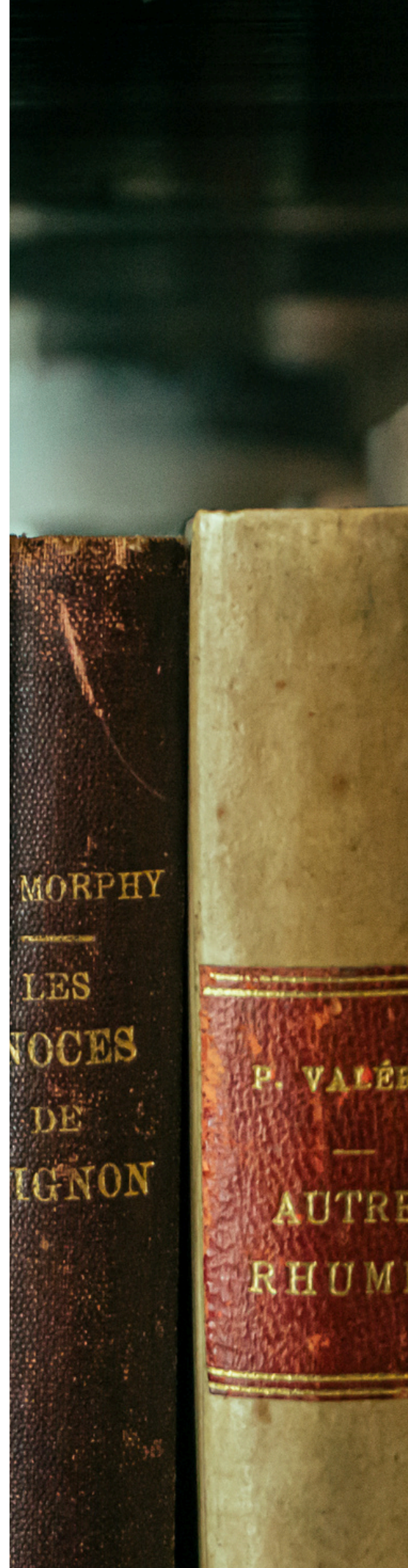
Education and School Inclusion Education plays a critical role in refugee integration, especially for children. Lithuania has adopted several models, from full immersion in mainstream classrooms to equalization classes and distance learning. Efforts to recruit Ukrainian teachers and provide bilingual resources have helped address immediate needs. However, structural barriers remain. Many children are still learning via the Ukrainian online system, and some fail to enroll in Lithuanian schools. Surveys also show that educators feel unprepared to work with refugee students, pointing to a demand for new methodologies, language support, and inclusive practices.

Inconsistent school enrollment and a shortage of Ukrainian-speaking educators further hinder integration, exacerbated by a lack of appropriate Lithuanian-language resources.

Educators' Perspective and Training Needs A national survey of over 2,600 Lithuanian teachers revealed critical training gaps. Educators called for practical guidance on working with students from different language backgrounds, social-emotional learning strategies, and methods to reduce their own workload. Mixed and distance learning formats were preferred for professional development. These findings signal the need for nationwide investment in teacher training and resource development to create inclusive school environments.

Healthcare and Mental Health Access Access to healthcare, including psychological support, remains inconsistent. Language barriers, long wait times, and lack of local information hinder refugees' ability to get timely care. In smaller municipalities, bureaucratic challenges further complicate access to social services. Despite free healthcare being available via electronic certificates[3], the quality and speed of services often fall short. Refugees especially value mental health services but underutilize them due to stigma, lack of awareness, or cultural norms. Studies recommend community-based, bilingual mental health programs and better healthcare navigation support.
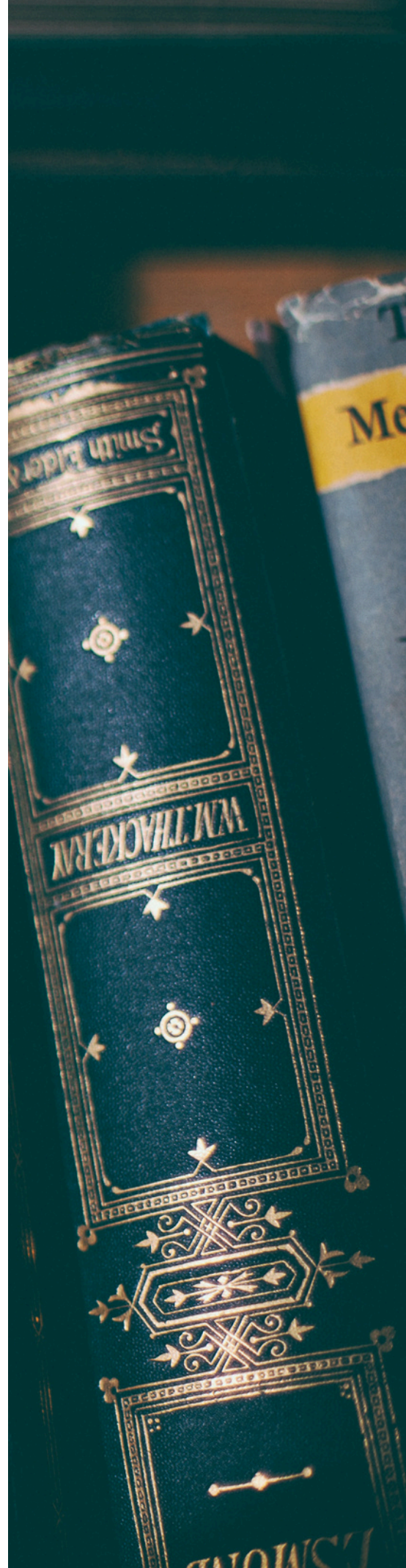
Employment, Income, and Livelihoods Unemployment and underemployment are persistent issues. Refugees often accept low-paid jobs due to language constraints and limited recognition of their qualifications. Employment services are viewed as inflexible, and single parents in particular struggle to balance work with childcare. Meanwhile, those with chronic illnesses or disabilities face even more severe barriers.

By 2025, **53% of working-age refugees** were employed, often in roles below their qualifications. Importantly, **Lithuanian language exemptions for employment expired in March 2025**, making language proficiency a requirement for continued job retention[5]. Housing insecurity affects about **30% of refugees**, and living expenses frequently outpace income.

Language as a Cross-Cutting Challenge Language proficiency is a consistent obstacle across all domains—from education and employment to healthcare and social integration. Most refugees report limited Lithuanian skills, and while many have attended courses, free programs are often basic and undersubscribed. The need for intensive, flexible, and incentivized language training is clear. Language access also intersects with emotional well-being, as lack of communication contributes to isolation and stress—particularly among older individuals and rural populations.

Housing and Financial Pressure Housing remains a major source of insecurity. Nearly one-third of refugees have trouble securing affordable housing, and living expenses often exceed earnings. This financial stress undermines efforts at long-term integration. While NGOs and municipalities have stepped in with temporary solutions, more structured support for housing stability is needed—especially for newly arrived or vulnerable populations.

Community Perception and Social Cohesion Most refugees report positive relations with local communities, though hostility and discrimination do occur. Women and youth report more friendships and social connections than men and older individuals. Cultural events, storytelling activities, and joint community projects have been successful in fostering empathy and social cohesion. Strengthening these initiatives can improve mutual understanding and reduce tension.

Policy Implications and the Way Forward Lithuania's legal framework and strategic plans, such as the Refugee Response Plan (RRP), acknowledge the importance of inclusive integration. However, implementation at the local level often faces funding, coordination, and administrative challenges. NGOs play a key role in filling gaps, but a more unified, data-informed, and people-centered approach is needed.
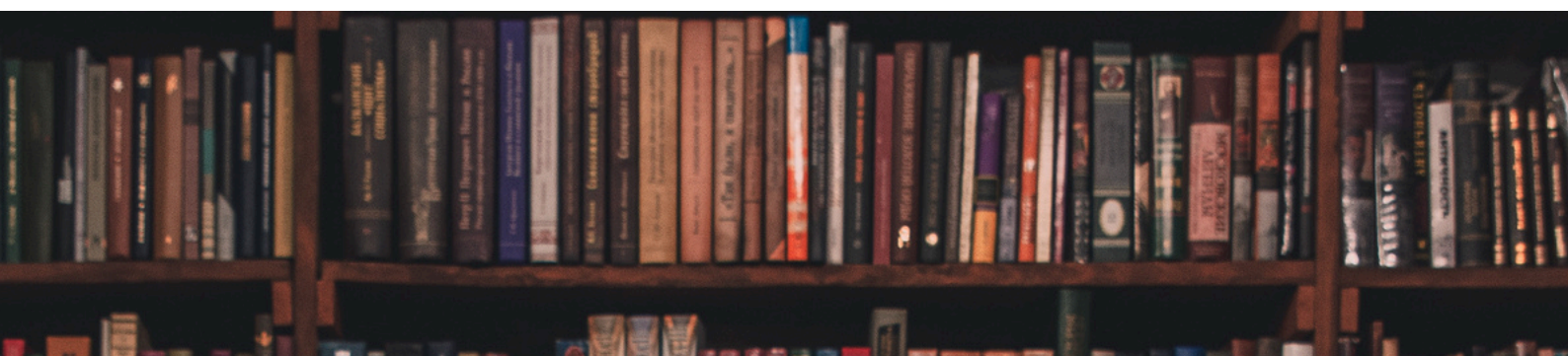
Strategic initiatives such as A Million Voices apply storytelling for social cohesion and emotional healing[6], while EU-funded programs have expanded vocational training access for refugees[2]. Experts recommend unifying services across healthcare, employment, and social support at the municipal level, and directing targeted aid to vulnerable populations like single mothers and the elderly.

Lithuania hosts nearly 100,000 Ukrainian refugees, with progress visible in employment (53% workforce participation) and education initiatives[4][7]. Persistent gaps in language access, mental health support, and equitable job matching require culturally responsive policies. Community-driven initiatives, like narrative therapy projects, offer scalable models for psychosocial resilience and integration.

As part of this effort, the project "A Million Voices: Uniting Through Stories" is now being launched in Lithuania, Poland, and Germany. Funded by the European Social Fund Agency (ESFA), this initiative will use storytelling as a tool for social integration and mental health support for Ukrainian refugees. Through creative expression, shared narratives, and community-building activities, the project aims to empower refugees, promote empathy, and strengthen bonds between displaced persons and host communities.