

Proud Ukrainian living rooms seek support and recognition in the Netherlands

Commissioned by the WODC, a part of the Ministry of Justice and Security, Ipsos I&O conducted a study on the contribution of Ukrainian living rooms (social hubs) to the participation and self-reliance of displaced Ukrainians in Dutch society. These hubs were initiated by the target group itself and have an informal character. They are proud of their achievements, and believe that recognition in the form of support from Dutch society is needed. This recognition and support would also facilitate their role in a potential return to Ukraine if - and when - the situation there would permit it. The research concluded with a seminar at the Ukrainian Club Zaandam, which is covered in this article.



Following the Russian invasion of February 2022, many Ukrainians were displaced. According to the latest figures, nearly 114,000 Ukrainian displaced persons are in the Netherlands. The number arriving is currently greater than those leaving. It is unlikely that this ratio will change soon, given recent developments in Ukraine, and many are expected to remain in the Netherlands for at least several years. Ukrainian social hubs support them in this.

On Monday, February 9, 2026, Ipsos I&O, in collaboration with the Ukrainian Club Zaandam, organized a seminar to discuss the research results on the structure and impact of the hubs with the relevant parties. More than 30 participants from organizations such as the Dutch Red Cross, Refugee Work Netherlands, the WODC, Opora Foundation, Clingendael, various municipalities, and ministries of Asylum & Migration, Social Affairs & Employment, and Justice & Security were present.

After a Ukrainian lunch, one of the Ipsos I&O researchers provided a brief summary of the study results. Subsequently, the findings were further discussed in the form of a world café: there were six tables with three themes (roughly: the past, the present, and the future of the social hubs). Each table had a chairperson guiding the participants through the outcomes and implications of the study. The session proceeded in three rounds, with participants exploring all three themes in various table settings. The chairpersons came from Ipsos I&O Public's qualitative research unit.

The Past: The Only Predictable Thing is Change

To understand the uncertain situation of Ukrainians, we must know the history of our immigration policy. From guest workers, who came to work in the Netherlands after World War II, it was initially expected that they would return quickly. However, when companies wanted to retain them, family reunification occurred, and the original policy was adjusted. The stress on temporary residence changed into a quest for integration into a multicultural society. Migrants could retain their identity, but this eventually led to tensions in society. Therefore, the current policy now emphasizes self-reliance, language acquisition, and active participation in society. However, for current displaced Ukrainians, like the first guest workers, a temporary stay approach has been chosen again.

Thanks to the EU Temporary Protection Directive (RTB), Ukrainians have direct access to the labor market, housing, and education. The measure is temporary. Multiple world café participants indicate that this gives rise to challenges in policy implementation and planning. Ukrainians are also not subject to integration obligations. They cannot utilize regular language and integration courses. This means that the labor potential of sometimes highly-educated Ukrainian displaced persons cannot be optimally utilized in the Netherlands. There is no integration policy for them, which feels unfair as it differs from other refugees. Social hubs fill these policy gaps without professional resources, which sometimes feels unfair to organizations playing essential roles in participation, integration, psychological processing, language development, labor market participation, and education.

The Present: Participation and Self-reliance

The performed desk research, part of the project, highlights three forms of social connections: bonding, bridging, and linking. *Bonding* entails strong and familiar ties within a homogeneous group, promoting emotional support and mental health. *Bridging* refers to contacts outside one's community for access to new information and opportunities. *Linking* is the contact between Ukrainians and (Dutch) institutions. This is critical for obtaining formal support and understanding community needs.

It emerges from the world café that social hubs have a clear *bonding* function. Some social hubs also facilitate connections between the Ukrainian and Dutch communities (*bridging*), although this function has become more challenging as the war persists. The *linking* function is limited, which is somewhat unfortunate as some municipalities use information from these formal contacts with Ukrainians to make better decisions.

Bonding is the strongest function of the hubs and it requires an informal character. Therefore, there are significant differences between the hubs. Nationally, this means there's usually room for customization somewhere. Locally, the offerings of a hub may not always fit. From a policy perspective, it can be noted that intensifying network cooperation between hubs can ensure improved bridging and linking functions. However, the grassroots nature of these hubs makes it challenging to think in these terms. There is a demand for coordination in and between hubs, but this should be self-defined by the hubs; ideally with compensation to finally acknowledge the hard work of coordinators.

The financing of social hubs varies greatly by municipality. Social hubs self-organize some of their financial support; some are adept at this, others less so. Assistance in finding financial resources can be beneficial. Networking events, like this world café, can be useful for this.

The Future of the Hubs

Many Ukrainians are uncertain whether they want to stay in the Netherlands or return to Ukraine. A complicating factor for Ukrainians with children is that their children have almost fully integrated. It may be better for them to complete their education first. The subject of return inherently frightens Ukrainian displaced people. Who says that safe areas in Ukraine are truly safe? Are people there willing to welcome returnees?

In principle, the hubs could assist those wanting to orient themselves on return by providing information and creating a space to share uncertainties and concerns. However, they wish to decide for themselves about this and not be left alone in this. There is a willingness to help in translating return information from the Dutch government. The theme of return could elicit fears and traumas. Psychological (and Ukrainian/Russian speaking) expertise is likely required to manage this appropriately.

The success of the day was evident from the positive responses received afterward. The world café setup brought policy-makers' system world in contact with the practical world. This broadened and deepened the research results and provided directions for possible alternative applications of social hubs.