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(RE)BUILDING THE FUTURE

HARNESSING YOUTH POTENTIAL FOR THE POST-WAR RECOVERY AND TRANSFORMATION OF UKRAINE

Alonso Escamilla



FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG
RennerInstitut
Fondation Jean Jaurès
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European Political Foundation - Nº 4 BE 896.230.213
Avenue des Arts 46, 1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe



FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG

Ukraine and Belarus Office
wul. Borysohlibska 15A, 04070 Kyiw (Ukraine)
www.fes.kiev.ua
@FESUkraine



KARL-RENNER-INSTITUT

Karl-Popper-Straße 8, A-1100 Vienna (Austria)
www.renner-institut.at
@RennerInstitut



FONDATION JEAN-JAURÈS

12 Cité Malesherbes, 75009 Paris (France)
www.jean-jaures.org
@j_jaures

KALEVI SORSA FOUNDATION

Siltasaarenkatu 18–20 C, 6. krs, 00530 Helsinki (Finland)
www.sorsafoundation.fi
@SorsaFoundation

FOUNDATION MAX VAN DER STOEL

Leeghwaterplein 45, 5e verdieping,
2521 DB Den Haag (Netherlands)
www.foundationmaxvanderstoel.nl
@FMS_Foundation

FOUNDATION AMICUS EUROPAE

Al. Przyjaciół 8/5, 00-565 Warszawa (Poland)
www.fae.pl
@FAE_pl

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SUMMARY

The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has had a catastrophic effect on Ukrainian youth, and this will continue into the future. As a result, young Ukrainians emerge as an important target group for public policies once the post-war recovery process commences. This policy study highlights the importance of perceiving youth positively, as active stakeholders who themselves should be involved in Ukraine's reconstruction and transformation. Indeed, this perspective is substantiated by our review of current literature and by our analysis of secondary sources on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in post-war contexts, as well as on Digital Transformation programmes, which we carried out to identify the key factors Ukraine needs to take into account for its post-war recovery. Our methodological focus and chosen approach certainly do not exhaust the plethora of complex issues facing Ukraine. However, at the time of writing, it is clear that the rightful pursuit of bolstering Ukraine's defence capabilities should go hand in hand with the pursuit of strengthening its social security. This latter pursuit warrants in-depth analysis in relation to a variety of policy areas (e.g., the health sector, labour relations, education) because strengthening social security will be crucial not only to prevent further brain drain, but also to encourage the return of those who have fled the country over the last decade due to war.

Based on our analysis, this policy study proposes a possible path for the design, implementation, and evaluation of youth policy so that it leads to the effective and successful reintegration of Ukraine's youth into the country's society. This path includes:

- following an empirical and data-driven approach to policymaking (e.g., ensuring a baseline analysis prior to policy elaboration and implementation);
- putting inclusiveness and the community at the heart of recovery efforts;
- ensuring social and psychological well-being through instruments strengthening perceived and actual togetherness;
- providing vocational education, and apprenticeships or on-the-job training;
- embedding social security in efforts to engage youth;
- pursuing a sustainable model of youth entrepreneurship.

In addition, this policy study highlights the importance of developing an approach that engages youth. Indeed, evidence indicates that young people can overcome structural challenges and go on to become leaders in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. An approach that engages Ukrainian youth would thus advance the economic, social, political, and digital transformation of Ukraine.

(RE)BUILDING THE FUTURE

HARNESSING YOUTH POTENTIAL FOR POST-WAR RECOVERY AND TRANSFORMATION OF UKRAINE

1. CURRENT CONTEXT

Youth policy must be born from a process of reflection on what type of country and what type of society we want to build. It is important for young people to be at the centre of this process in order firstly to guarantee that youth policy reflects young people's experiences,[1] and secondly to guarantee that young people are considered valuable human capital who can contribute to social change, economic development and technological innovation.[2] If young people are involved in this way and youth policy is effective, a context of socio-economic resilience can be generated that allows for the construction of a more egalitarian, democratic and sustainable society.

The situation in Ukraine before 2022 was already marked by a number of challenges for young people. Firstly, Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas in 2014 resulted in mental discomfort among young Ukrainians. This discomfort manifested for many in intrusive thoughts, anxiety or depression. Indeed, such psychological changes are referred to by some experts as the Ukrainian syndrome, which is defined as "a certain pattern of adaptive behaviour and an individual position of a Ukrainian with regard to the Russo-Ukrainian war".[3] Secondly, youth unemployment was high and constituted a pressing challenge.[4] These challenges in turn contributed to the desire of some young people to leave Ukraine in the hope of improving their physical, social and financial well-being elsewhere.[5]

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This act of aggression has created an unprecedented humanitarian, economic and geopolitical crisis with catastrophic ramifications spanning beyond Europe. Since the beginning of the full-scale aggression, it is estimated that 8 million Ukrainians have decided to seek shelter abroad, another 7 million have been internally displaced, 11 000 civilians are missing, 17 500 civilians have sustained injuries of varying severity, and 9 614 civilians have died.[6] With hostilities still ongoing, it is not yet possible to determine the exact human cost of the war.

It should be added that young Ukrainians were catapulted from one big challenge to another in no time. The Covid-19 pandemic and its associated consequences (such as confinement, social distancing, and online education) again had a damaging impact on the mental well-being of Ukrainian youth. More specifically, young Ukrainians suffered high levels of burnout and stress as a result of the pandemic, causing them to be re-traumatised.

It is important to be aware that the ongoing war will continue to exacerbate existing problems as well as create new ones. The combination of the negative effects of the pandemic with those of the war is leading to a further reduction in educational and training opportunities, further job instability, lower wages, prolonged psychological stress and a loss of hope for the future. Indeed, this escalation has led to migration and internal displacement, changes in demographic composition, and the inability to attract and retain talent.

> *Young people will have to live with the burden of Ukraine's post-war recovery and transformation. The success of Ukrainian youth will therefore also be the success of Ukraine itself.*

The result of all these factors is that Ukraine is now facing the enormous challenge of a lack of (qualified) human capital for the country's recovery process and development. Moreover, it is today's young people who will have to live with the burden of Ukraine's post-war recovery and transformation. Their unfulfilled expectations may then become another reason for Ukraine to have to address the situation of a lost generation(s).

Despite this above, Ukraine's young people have been playing an important role in Ukrainian society since the start of the war. Not only are they actively protecting their homeland on the frontline (it is estimated that almost 30 % of the armed forces are composed of young people) but they are also working in the rear through humanitarian, educational and anti-disinformation initiatives, and through the development of programmes for the participation of youth in the reconstruction of Ukraine.[7]

The success of Ukrainian youth will therefore also be the success of Ukraine itself. Furthermore, it is important to develop youth policy that not only responds effectively to the needs of young people, but that also creates the necessary conditions and guarantees for the development of present and future generations.

With youth policy being so crucial, this policy study seeks to analyse some already-existing (post) conflict recovery experiences in other countries and to identify some characteristics for the design and implementation of Ukraine's youth policy.

> *Pursuing strategy of directly involving youth in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies that concern them will allow Ukraine to better link its (post)war recovery with accession process, eventually leading to the EU membership.*

2. YOUTH AND YOUTH POLICY

At the political level, there are various definitions of youth in Ukraine. The law "On the Basic Principles of Youth Policy" № 1414-IX, adopted in 2021, defines youth as those who are between 14 and 35 years old. For its part, the "Strategy of State Youth Policy – 2020" differentiates between those aged 14 to 18, which it calls minors, and those aged 19 to 35, which it calls youth.[8][9]

While it is important to remember that youth is not therefore a homogeneous group,[10] it is furthermore not only the demographic or socio-economic data that must be considered in Ukraine, but also the particularities of the situation of young people who either:

- stayed on the occupied territories after 2014;
- have remained on occupied territories since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022;
- have remained on territories controlled by the legitimate Ukrainian government;
- seek shelter abroad.

Indeed, youth can also be conceptualised using the category that decision-makers choose to adopt within public policy. For example, youth can be categorised as those in:

- a transitional stage towards adulthood, in which the only characteristic taken into account is age or life cycle;
- a problem stage, in which a vulnerable sector is perceived as being in a permanent situation of risk and is therefore seen as a problem within society;
- an affirmative stage, in which young people come to play a leading role both in their own development and in the society in which they live, as they come to be recognised for their diverse expressions, trajectories, and experiences.

The approach taken to youth policy is of the utmost importance, as it will have implications at all levels for the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies. In other words, the application of one approach or another will result in very different measures – the rationale, and implications of which need to be carefully considered. Preventing is not the same as intervening, targeting problems is not the same as focusing on opportunities, and proactive actions are not the same as reactive ones.

It therefore follows that as well as being based on human rights and democratic standards, public policies should perceive youth from an affirmative perspective. Unlike the first two categories above, affirmative policies assess youth as an invaluable social resource. Young people will thus firstly be encouraged to participate actively in the construction of their future, and secondly they will be allowed to become one of the driving forces of change for the development and growth of their societies.[11]

This affirmative perspective is indeed promoted by the EU Youth Strategy, where engaging young people is considered a cornerstone of present and future youth policies. This means that youth should be directly involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies that concern them.[12] Pursuing this strategy will furthermore allow Ukraine to better link its (post)war recovery to its accession path to EU membership.

At the EU level, Youth Tests serve as impact assessment tools to ensure that young people are taken into account during policymaking processes. In 2013, Austria introduced an overarching impact assessment aiming to provide clarity on the priorities of its public policy proposals, as well as the effects of these proposals on the budget and their effectiveness. In 2017, Germany then implemented a Youth Check to confirm whether its legislation has a relevance for youth, and to determine whether young people or specific groups of youth, between the ages of 12 and 27, are affected by proposed legislation.[13] The creation of a Ukrainian Youth Test would be a way to ensure that all the country's policies always consider the perspective of Ukraine's young people and the impact of these policies on their needs.

While inclusive and participatory practices take time to develop, especially in fragile or emerging democracies such as in Ukraine, the creation of a Ukrainian Youth Test for the country's policies would nevertheless play an important part in Ukraine's democratic development and consolidation.

3. ENGAGEMENT AND REINTEGRATION OF YOUTH IN POST-WAR RECOVERY

Our literature review and analysis indicate that a youth engagement approach is of the utmost importance for young people to be able to overcome structural challenges and to become leaders in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.[14] Such an approach means that young people actively participate in initiatives and opportunities that allow them to acquire experience, increase their competences, assume responsibility, and contribute to the decisions that affect their lives.[15]

Although Ukraine's situation is not that of a civil war, the experience from such wars and from conflicts in other countries can nevertheless be explored to understand better how young people in Ukraine can be involved in efforts to deal with the potential polarisation in society and with the deep trauma caused by Russia's decade-long aggression. In Northern Ireland for example, young people contributed to the peace process by taking a leading role in civil society, promoting voluntary activities (e.g., collecting funds, painting peace walls, playing intergroup sports with people from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds), and by encouraging political participation outside the main historical parties. Indeed, it was forms of civic engagement that were instrumental in building a peaceful society in Northern Ireland.[16]

Another example of youth engagement is that of Liberia where in 2005 young people became agents of social transformation and leaders in peacebuilding.[17] In post-conflict elections in 2005, Liberia's Youth Parliament generated an intense political dialogue on the engagement of children and youth in national and community development efforts.

In 2011, the same Youth Parliament launched the "Vote Your Future" campaign to encourage and register young people to stand in the elections, and it called for non-violence throughout the electoral processes. In both elections, National Youth Dialogue forums were created to enable young people to participate in all stages of consultation on policies that affected them and contribute to the various stages of policy planning and design.

Evidence from Northern Ireland and Liberia therefore shows that for successful reintegration of young people in post-conflict contexts,[18] a country's youth should not be approached from a perspective in which they are mere spectators of social change. Instead, they should be approached as active agents in socio-economic and political processes, to the extent that they participate in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of political decisions that affect them directly.[19]

Reintegration has been defined as "a long-term development process that enables ex-combatants to acquire civilian status, gain sustainable employment and income, and integrate socio-economically into their communities".[20] Yet this concept of reintegration is closely linked to ex-combatants, and in fact the spectrum of reintegration should be broadened to include all youth (regardless of whether they are ex-combatants or not). This is because reintegration programmes often fail when they only target a specific group and not the entire community,[21] given that targeting a specific group tends to generate differences between individuals, and given that communities tend to see the aid received by ex-combatants as a privilege. Furthermore, it often leaves out young women or young people under the age of 18[22] when reintegration programmes focus only on the specific profile of ex-combatants, without considering the whole diversity of youth.

These observations indicate that it is essential to directly involve not only the protagonists of a conflict but also the community where they reside. Not taking this into account may become one of the greatest obstacles to the achievement of reintegration. Indeed, it crucial to involve all political, economic, social, educational and youth actors from the beginning and in a horizontal manner, in order to develop a common framework for the peacebuilding processes. The active participation of young people and beneficiary communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of reintegration measures is essential because their involvement enables:

- a better assessment of the socio-economic context of their territory and their needs;
- the elaboration of more precise profiles of young people and the identification of each of their characteristics and needs;
- young people and beneficiary communities to increase their sense of belonging to the reintegration measures, and to influence the decisions that affect them, ensuring a more meaningful engagement in the process.

Young people in Ukraine are one of the most vulnerable and war-affected groups. It is therefore crucial that policies be made to ensure that young people are truly engaged and reintegrated into Ukrainian society in the post-war period.

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4. METHODOLOGY

In the preparation of this policy study we carried out a literature review and an analysis of secondary sources on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in post-war contexts. The experiences of the following countries were taken into account:

- Afghanistan
- Bosnia & Herzegovina
- Colombia
- Israel
- Kosovo
- Liberia
- Sierra Leone
- Sri Lanka
- United States of America

Similarly, a literature review and analysis were also carried out with regard to digital transformation. In this case, we considered the experiences of the following countries:

- Estonia
- Finland
- Ireland
- Spain
- Sweden

Reintegration and digitalisation measures were analysed from both a youth and a gender perspective. Special emphasis was placed on the following aspects: supporting a sense of belonging, ensuring psychosocial well-being, and guaranteeing access to the labour market. The aim of our literature review and analysis was to identify not only the most common actions, but also which factors had been conducive or detrimental to the successful integration of young people in post-war contexts. In order to achieve all of the above, we sought answers to the questions below.

- What strategies and programmes are required to be able to address the specific psychosocial and mental health needs of Ukraine's young people who have been directly impacted by the war?
- What role should education and vocational training play in empowering Ukrainian young people to contribute to the country's economic and social recovery after the war?
- What policies and support mechanisms should the Ukrainian government implement to assist young people (including ex-combatants) in their reintegration into civilian life and the workforce?

5. RESULTS

The results obtained from the experiences that we identified and analysed in other countries are described below. Our findings are then presented as a proposal for a path for Ukraine can consider following when designing and implementing its youth policy when the war is over.

5.1. CREATE A BASELINE

The first step to be taken in the post-war recovery context is that of collecting data and creating a baseline of the socio-economic profile of the territory and citizens.[23] [24] The importance of this measure is exemplified in the case of Kosovo, where a damage and needs assessment was conducted after the war. This assessment formed the cornerstone for Kosovo's recovery. Priority was given in the assessment to the following sectors: housing, water supply, rural electricity, transport, and the health and education infrastructure. Categories were created according to the level of damage suffered in order to identify what human, technical and economic resources were needed.[25]

Creating a baseline can be a mammoth task on its own, especially in the case of Ukraine, which will not be able to do so until the war is over. The experience of Kosovo exemplifies the need to seek support from both national and international organisations in order to build a solid and reliable database that will, in turn, enable the correct diagnosis to be made.

Baseline analysis and evidence-based policy are recognised by experts as essential for successful policy development. In the case of Ukraine this will be paramount, as there will be neither the time nor the resources to repeat the implementation of a measure if the first attempt fails. Having such a baseline will be critical for Ukraine to be able to identify the different challenges and how to prepare solutions for its citizens (in general) and young people (in particular).



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In terms of youth, the baseline in the territory will have to focus on institutional resources, public-private services, infrastructure, the labour market, and the educational situation. The baseline for citizens will meanwhile have to determine their age, gender, place of residence, individual circumstances, income level, competences and needs. This is essential for the following reasons:

- disaggregating data by territory makes it possible to obtain a detailed picture of the needs of each community, as well as to avoid homogenising areas that may require different interventions (e.g. urban vs. rural areas, occupied vs. unoccupied territories);
- disaggregating data by citizen allows a profile of young people (in general) to be created, as well as allowing attention to be paid to gender aspects and to the situation of vulnerable groups within youth itself (in particular);
- disaggregating data by both territory and citizen enables the state to have the necessary information to create tailored policy responses according to the needs of the different youth profiles, as well as to match these responses to the territorial context where these young people live.

5.2. EQUAL TREATMENT OF DIFFERENT GROUPS

When implementing reintegration programmes, the experiences we analysed all show that it is of utomost importance not to favour one group above the others. In post-war contexts, it is common for efforts to focus on the reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian life. However, the communities that take back ex-combatants are often overlooked, as are other groups that have also suffered the consequences of war. The fact that the only group to receive support or to be involved in reintegration programmes is that of ex-combatants can lead to the reintegration process being seen as a privilege rather than a necessity.

It is therefore essential to find the right balance between addressing the needs both of ex-combatants and civilians. This balance was attempted in Liberia with the "Liberia Community Infrastructure Project" that targeted 30 000 war-affected people, divided between 18 000 ex-combatants and 12 000 civilians. In fact, however, it is necessary to be even more specific in identifying groups and their characteristics. Indeed, in Sierra Leone reintegration programmes for male and adult ex-combatants were implemented without taking into account adolescents and females who also fought and whose needs were therefore completely neglected.[26]

From a youth perspective, it is crucial not to favour one group over another for the following reasons:

- youth is likely to become stigmatised unless similar measures are also available for other groups;
- a particular group of youth is not only likely to become stigmatised but also segregated unless various youth profiles (ex-combatants, women, youth with disabilities, migrant backgrounds) are taken into account.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2014, experts have regularly drawn attention to the importance of an inclusive community-based approach when it comes to the reintegration of ex-combatants and to policies targeted at the internally displaced population. Reflections and lessons learned from such efforts should contribute to the improvement of future policies.

In the United States, trauma- and grief-focused group treatment was implemented in secondary schools for young people traumatised by violence. Its implementation resulted in significant improvements in post-traumatic stress symptoms, as well as improvements in complicated grief symptoms and school performance.

5.3. TOGETHERNESS ENSURES SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Another key factor highlighted by post-conflict experiences in other countries is that of addressing people's social and psychological well-being directly and actively in the aftermath of conflict.[27] This becomes even more relevant among children, adolescents and young people who have been exposed to armed conflict, as they are at greater risk of developing mental disorders and of these being sustained into adulthood.[28]

The following two approaches (which are closely related) have been identified as good practice:

- school-based mental health programmes because formal educational settings (at all levels) offer an ideal place to carry out mental health interventions;
- community-based mental health programmes that can be carried out by civil society organisations or community centres.

In the United States, trauma- and grief-focused group treatment was implemented in secondary schools for young people traumatised by violence. Its implementation resulted in significant improvements in post-traumatic stress symptoms, as well as improvements in complicated grief symptoms and school performance.[29] Another example of an effective mental health programme is from Bosnia & Herzegovina, where a specific group intervention was implemented with war-affected youth and was successful in reducing post-traumatic symptoms.[30] In both cases, programmes provided the following actions:

- psycho-education on anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, trauma, loss and grief;
- trauma-focused group treatment, with a special focus on existential dilemmas and the thoughts that generate them;
- training in social skills to manage grief, overcome social distancing and facilitate coping with adversity.

From a youth perspective, these programmes are critical because they:[31] [32] [33]

- provide young people with a safe transitional environment in which they can process the experiences of conflict and be rehabilitated;
- foster peer support, intergenerational understanding and relationship building with society;
- increase young people's interest in school and their community;
- reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, grief reactions, psychological distress and emotional symptoms.

> *Health programmes are more effective when ex-combatants and civilians work together to address the effects of war.*

Evidence shows, however, that health programmes are ineffective when they are designed from a military perspective or only address the needs of ex-combatants, as was the case in Afghanistan.[34] By contrast, health programmes are more effective when ex-combatants and civilians work together to address the effects of war, as has been the case in Colombia[35] and Sri Lanka.[36]

In order to make truly successful school and community health programmes for Ukraine, consideration needs to be given to :

- the level of exposure to war that each young person has undergone because although programmes are primarily focused on peer support, they cannot homogenise young people and assume that everyone (regardless of their age, gender, social status) has been affected to the same degree;
- a tailor-made follow-up to the assessment of the young person's trauma so that they finish the programme according to their needs.

It is essential not to suddenly cut these health programmes, especially when the contextual situation (several months after the war) or the young person themselves (when they have already established a routine) do not seem to need it.

5.4. VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND APPRENTICESHIPS OR ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

When addressing educational support, we refer to actions that aim to enable people to acquire learning, knowledge and skills to access the labour market,[37] whether employed or self-employed. Our analysis shows that the most recurrent measures to link the human capital of young people with educational priorities and job opportunities are:

- vocational training courses;
- apprenticeships or on-the-job training.

Implementation of these two educational modalities enables young people to:[38]

- respond to the needs of the labour market immediately, unlike with more rigid educational models;
- adopt a high level of flexibility in adjusting educational pathways to respond to the changing and variable post-war recovery needs of the labour market;

- receive practical training in established companies (or other labour actors) that is linked to the achievement of a real job.

Our analysis of post-conflict experiences in other countries showed us that educational programmes often fail because of a lack of:

- detailed analysis of young people's skills and the needs of the labour market in the short-medium (for immediate recovery) and long term (for socio-economic consolidation);

- coordination between the state, public administrations, companies (or other actors linked to the labour market) and educational institutions – which is common and means that although both educational and employment opportunities exist they do not materialise because they are not known to interested citizens;

- realistic expectations that a job may not necessarily be found immediately after completing the training (unrealistic expectations tend to create frustration and mistrust among young people).

> *It will be necessary for Ukraine to design ad hoc continuous vocational training, apprenticeships and on-the-job training programmes in strategic areas that allow young people to acquire the competences that the labour market requires at any given moment (moving towards the concept of lifelong learning).*

Evidence of programme failure due to these shortcomings can be seen in Kosovo,[39] where half of the ex-combatants in reintegration programmes were trained as mechanics – but where it became clear after a few months that the Kosovar labour market did not require such a profile. Similar programme failure occurred in Sierra Leone,[40] where ex-combatants were given courses in tailoring and soap-making despite the demand for these services being extremely low. In both cases, these programmes were intended to have an immediate effect on post-war recovery, but they did not take account of medium- to long-term reintegration.

These examples highlight that it will be necessary for Ukraine to design ad hoc continuous vocational training, apprenticeships and on-the-job training programmes in strategic areas that allow young people to acquire the competences that the labour market requires at any given moment (moving towards the concept of lifelong learning).

5.5. ENSURING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SECURITY

An analysis of experience in other countries shows that another decisive factor in post-war recovery is to ensure the economic security of citizens, especially those whose economic livelihoods have been crippled by war or who are ex-combatants returning to civilian life. Two measures particularly stand out:[41] [42]

- cash-grants, which provide money to citizens to meet their basic needs or restore their livelihoods;

- cash-for-work schemes, which allow citizens to earn a fixed wage in exchange for working directly on public works programmes that improve or rehabilitate services or infrastructure that have been destroyed during the war.

From a youth perspective, provision for the immediate livelihoods of young people in extremely vulnerable situations in a post-war recovery context is essential in the short term in order to:[43]

- prevent young people from falling into cycles of poverty (from which it is very difficult to exit);
- promote young people's ability to participate in the economic recovery of their community;
- equip young people with a sense of normality and routine, which then contributes to their socio-economic stability.

Such measures have been found to be effective even in very challenging contexts, such as pertaining to countries suffering from a lack of security, high levels of corruption and gender inequalities. To ensure their effectiveness, Afghanistan opted for a lottery process to select the beneficiaries of cash-grants and cash-for-work schemes. This meant that, although the lottery process prevented the best candidates from being chosen, it prevented less corruption in the transfer of public funds. These initiatives have been particularly effective in increasing the monthly income of young women.[44]

The counterargument that cash grants may disincentivize young people to work is often based on the assumption that providing financial assistance could lead to a reduction in the motivation to seek employment. However, one should account for the fact that in context of limited job opportunities and economic challenges (such as large-scale, brutal war), young people may face significant barriers to finding employment. Furthermore, by addressing financial barriers to education because of war, young people can acquire the necessary qualifications and skills to access better employment opportunities. It should also be noted that these types of measures may not only help the economic security of youth, but also enable them to finance job search, reduce school dropout, continue their studies or specialising, and increasing income earned and household growth[45]. Furthermore, the experiences reviewed have shown that young people recognise that the value of obtaining a high school diploma or work experience exceeds the short-term cash-grants or cash-for-work schemes programmes[46].

While our analysis shows that these two measures are effective from an immediate survival perspective, they are nevertheless not effective in the long-term reintegration of young people.

5.6. MICROFINANCE (TO PROMOTE YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP)

Our analysis further showed that microfinance is widely used in post-war recovery contexts. However, caution must be applied regarding the applicability and sustainability of this instrument in a specific context such as Ukraine. A successful example of microfinance being used in post-war recovery is that of Bosnia & Herzegovina, where this measure was structured through the "Local Initiatives Project".[47] The aim of the programme was to provide financial resources for citizens to become entrepreneurs and actively participate in rebuilding their livelihoods. An estimated 200 000 jobs were retained or created in Bosnia & Herzegovina between the start of the project in 1997 and its completion in June 2005.[48]

> *Given the existing and new challenges created by the war to Ukraine's business environment, the sustainability of youth entrepreneurship emerges as a considerable challenge.*

Microfinance can therefore play a fundamental role in the economic self-sufficiency of people in post-war recovery contexts. This is because small-scale credit and loans allow greater access to financial

resources, create potential opportunities to promote capital investment, encourage the adoption of new technologies,[49] and foster financial citizenship.[50]

From a youth perspective, microfinance programmes have been proven to have a significant impact on young women, young returnees, and young ex-combatants because it allows them to:[51]

- recover economically, contribute to their community, and stay out of the cycle of poverty;
- play an active role in rebuilding their livelihoods and have a better self-concept of themselves;
- empower themselves and increase their social recognition within their communities.

For this economic intervention to be successful, our analysis showed that microfinance programmes should:

- be accompanied by training courses to acquire basic management, accounting, and entrepreneurship skills, as well as to acquire competences in the sector in which they are going to start their entrepreneurial idea;
- establish a long-term repayment period, ensure a flexible disbursement schedule and provide a social guarantee;
- be linked to certain incentives in terms of taxation, awards, and property rights.

By contrast, the following factors have been identified as detrimental to microfinance:

- a lack of monitoring mechanism;
- a lack of coordination among the actors involved;
- insufficient funds and a lack of long-term vision.

Given the existing and new challenges created by the war to Ukraine's business environment, the sustainability of youth entrepreneurship emerges as a considerable challenge. Due to the shortage of qualified labour, it would be expedient for Ukraine to provide guarantees that would encourage young people to build a career in the field of public works financed by the state. The following policies could be considered:

- creation of a "youth ombudsman" at enterprises, for consultations with the employer;
- reduction of the tax burden for young workers;
- provision of social housing that can be rented by young workers;
- extra benefits when combining work with skills development.

5.7. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Ukraine's educational space and labour market are under constant attack. Shelling, air raid warnings and power blackouts make it difficult for them to develop in such minimum conditions. Yet despite the current limitations, strategies need to be devised to incorporate digital transformation in these areas of education and the labour market.[52] Our analysis suggests that the acquisition of digital infrastructure and skills enables the implementation of e-government initiatives, stimulates young professionals to train for a changing educational space and labour market, promotes the digital consumption of goods and services, and supports citizens in locating and evaluating reliable information.

Although social and economic security is crucial for the immediate short-term needs of young Ukrainians, digital transformation is likely to emerge as an important factor contributing to the overall resilience of Ukraine against possible democratic backsliding and/or stagnation. It is essential to ensure that after the war the young generation are encouraged to participate in decision-making and democratic governance through participatory (e.g., elections) and deliberative channels (consultative forums). The further development of digital infrastructure across the country will help boost this process.

In contrast to previous chapters, where the international practices analysed focused on post-war recovery contexts, here we present experiences of countries that have been developing this digital transformation in the last years, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic. While Ukraine has been widely praised for its targeted activities to create a digital ecosystem of public services (such as the Diia platform), good practice from other countries can be used to further improve its operability and implementation. Indeed, digital transformation should be an integral component of Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and modernisation process.

> *It is essential to ensure that after the war the young generation are encouraged to participate in decision-making and democratic governance through participatory (e.g., elections) and deliberative channels (consultative forums). The further development of digital infrastructure across the country will help boost this process.*

5.7.1. Digital infrastructure

Digital infrastructure and e-communication should play a key role in ensuring Ukraine's post-war economic resilience, democratic participation, access to public services and peacebuilding.

As is currently the case in the midst of the war, access to the internet for all of society will remain a key component of the country's successful and operational digital transformation. The destruction caused by the war should be met with modernisation and expansion of Ukraine's digital infrastructure – for example, by extending the laying of fibre optic cables throughout the territory, acquiring technological equipment and reaching the most remote areas of the country.[53] Equally important is to remember that Russia's military strategy during its invasion of Ukraine has furthermore highlighted the importance for Ukraine of protecting critical infrastructure.

The main barriers to this digital transformation will be accessibility and the lack of digital skills among both developers and users. Each digital service or solution will need to be reviewed not only for its efficiency or usefulness, but also for the ease with which the service can be accessed, especially for the most disadvantaged young people.

5.7.2. Educational space[54]

Once internet access has been secured for the country, the next step in Ukraine's post-war recovery should be to modernise the country's education system, updating and/or transforming teaching practices while ensuring the psychosocial well-being of students. To this end, the examples of Finland and Sweden should be highlighted where, since the Covid-19 pandemic, all teaching materials and content produced with public funds must be made available in digital and open-source formats.

It will thus be important for Ukraine's update in pedagogical methods and practices to be accompanied by digital materials. In Ireland and Sweden, online platforms have been developed not only to provide access to teaching resources, but also to assess the knowledge of refugee children. In the case of young Ukrainians who are internally displaced or who are in other countries, it would be of interest to have a similar platform that allows access both to the pedagogical material and to a tracking of the individual educational itinerary of each student.

Digital transformation in Ukraine will also allow interested parties to be directly and quickly involved in decision-making. Estonia serves as an example, where teachers, parents and students participate digitally in the development of educational policies and solutions. Meanwhile in Ireland, digital surveys and focus groups are carried out with teaching unions and school leaders in the redesign of curricula. It will be crucial for young people and communities in Ukraine to play a leading role in post-war recovery, including in the ways the digital transformation should impact education.

5.7.3. Labour market

Labour market reform in Ukraine has been a matter of heated discussion and often disagreement between the government and actors in favour of stronger social dialogue. The full-scale war may have shifted attention to the battlefield but the question of social security has meanwhile only grown in significance. This particular area requires a separate in-depth analysis, which should cover the possible role of trade unions in protecting the welfare of young people.



The full-scale war may have shifted attention to the battlefield but the question of social security has meanwhile only grown in significance.



This policy study links Ukraine's digital transformation in the labour market to two main aspects: (a) the financing of small and medium-sized, technology-based enterprises; and (b) the retention of human talent with IT and digital skills. When implementing Ukraine's digital transformation, fiscal, regulatory and financial mechanisms will need to be put in place to support the post-war development of the digital economy.[55]

Spain offers a good example, where during the pandemic the regional governments, with the support of the national government, launched a "Credit Guarantee Fund"[56] which was designed to enable SMEs to upgrade their infrastructure and digital skills in order to continue operating despite social constraints. To this end, the Credit Guarantee Fund provided access to lower-cost, longer-term loans, including grace periods and partial subsidies. This system reduced information asymmetries between companies and banks, allowed business activity to increase considerably in 2020 and had a significant effect on the country's economic welfare (in terms of maintaining employment, safeguarding the survival of the companies themselves, and adapting to a changing market).

The implementation of a Credit Guarantee Fund in Ukraine would help support the development of its digital economy, facilitating access to credit for new technology-based start-ups, as well as for more traditional companies that want to invest in R&D or incorporate digital tools into their operations. Moreover, the implementation of this measure would enable young people in Ukraine to set up social enterprises that respond to post-war needs. It would also help young Ukrainians abroad to see the opportunity to return.

Alongside the provision of a Credit Guarantee Fund, it will be essential for the curricula of vocational training courses, or the educational component of apprenticeships or on-the-job training, to contain the acquisition of digital skills because to retain and repatriate young Ukrainian talent, it will be necessary to develop strong digital competences. This includes both the specific technical skills to implement digitalisation, and broader skills to make the most of online work environments. Such skills will give Ukraine's workforce a competitive advantage to boost its services on the internal and external market.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

As observed earlier in the Results section of this policy study, the measures identified in the practices of other countries that we analysed could contribute positively in Ukraine to the reintegration of young people and to sustainable peacebuilding, as well as to the design, implementation, and evaluation of youth policy in the country's post-war recovery. Based on these findings, the following recommendation is provided and the final conclusions are shared.

6.1. ONE-STOP SHOP FOR YOUTH

Ukraine has two electronic platforms that are proving key to enabling Ukrainian citizens to access government services through their smartphones during the war:[57]

- Diia – which allows the government to reach its citizens in the most remote areas of the country, as well as to track Ukrainians fleeing war-affected areas and help them access essential public services.

- eDopomoga – which collects requests from Ukrainians and puts them in contact with social organisations that can help them, and which also supports the government in distributing aid exactly where and when it is needed.

Based on both experiences, Ukrainian stakeholders would be recommended to consider whether the Diia or eDopomoga platforms can be adapted to become a "one-stop shop for youth" on post-war recovery.[58] This would:

- create a baseline database that allows a clear breakdown of the characteristics of young people: age, gender, residence/location, personal situation (ex-combatant, refugee, internally displaced person), educational status, family situation, economic situation, skills and interests;

- allow the state to have sufficient data to create public policies that are tailored to each specific group (age range, ex-combatant, refugee, internally displaced persons, to each geographical territory (inside and outside Ukraine) and to each specific context (urban and rural);

- consolidate a bi-directional space where young people can come into direct contact with the State (to be informed about aid, to be provided with advice, to be encouraged to invest), and where young people can actively participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies that directly affect them in this recovery.

Consideration of this adaptation to a one-stop shop is key because it would:

- save costs to implement a service for which the technological infrastructure is already in place and already known;

- ensure that no preference is given to one group over another as these platforms are already open to all citizens;

- allow for the consolidation of synergies, optimise resources, and know what services are available for young people given that other Ukrainian actors, linked to the education sector, are already involved in these two existing platforms.

6.2. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite the fact that the measures we have identified have contributed positively to the post-conflict reintegration of young people in other countries, Ukrainian stakeholders need to assess which of the measures described in this analysis are the most relevant for each profile, for each area and for each situation in Ukraine. They also need to know how to apply them to the particularities of their territory (at local, regional or national level). In order for the measures to be truly effective, the Ukrainian stakeholders need to take ownership of the development of the actions to be implemented for the post-war recovery.

> *In order for the measures to be truly effective, the Ukrainian stakeholders need to take ownership of the development of the actions to be implemented for the post-war recovery.*

It must nevertheless be underlined that the measures identified here will not solve all the needs of young people in a post-war recovery context. It is therefore important not to set unrealistic expectations that, in the long run, can generate more conflicts than solutions. In this regard, it is essential for these measures to be incorporated in a broader recovery strategy, where industrial structures are consolidated, labour markets are nurtured, investments (both internal and external) are encouraged, and where intersectoral links are strengthened between all the Ukrainian stakeholders involved in the post-war recovery.

The main limitation of this policy study is that the good practices we have identified and analysed in post-war recovery are from conflicts with a completely different temporal reality from today (especially in terms of ongoing, rapid digitalisation). Yet despite this, we have sought to provide key inputs that have worked in other contexts and that can support Ukraine to design its public policies in the field of youth.

This temporal constraint is also a challenge for Ukraine's allies, as Ukraine will be the first country to face a post-war recovery linked to a digital transformation. An accurate baseline diagnosis will therefore be crucial, firstly because Ukraine is the centrepiece of the new peace and security architecture in Europe; and secondly because if more armed conflicts take place, the measures Ukraine develops will be those that are considered elsewhere in the future.

It is clear that the long-term impact of Russian aggression will be felt for generations. It should therefore be highlighted that post-conflict recovery in Ukraine will not have a deep foundation if it is not built with and for its youth. Young people need to be seen as active and valid actors not only in the recovery, but also in the economic, social and political transformation of their country, so that the future of Ukraine is stable, democratic, prosperous and peaceful. Because the destiny of Ukraine will shape the destiny of us all.

> *Young people need to be seen as active and valid actors not only in the recovery, but also in the economic, social and political transformation of their country, so that the future of Ukraine is stable, democratic, prosperous and peaceful.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alonso Escamilla

Alonso Escamilla is Project and Research Manager at the Catholic University of Avila. He has developed several research projects on the field of youth for the Council of Europe, European Commission, European Youth Forum, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund and the EU-LAC Foundation. He also is member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) of the EU–CoE Youth Partnership and member of the Pool of Trainers of the Spanish Youth Council.

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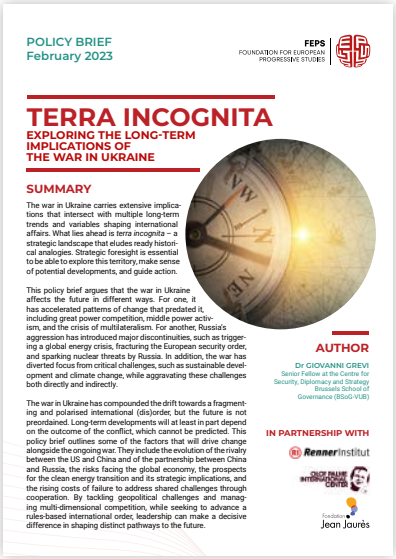





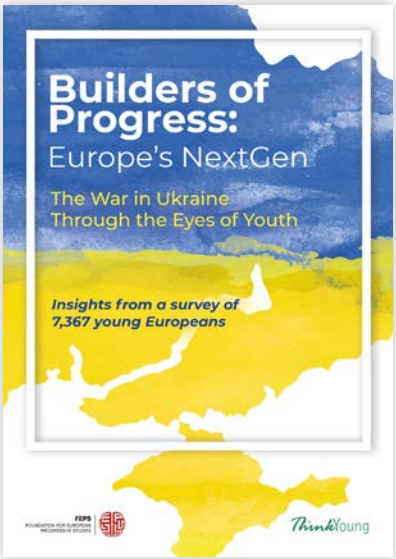





This policy study underscores that the enduring impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine demands a youth-centric approach to secure Ukraine's stable, democratic, prosperous, and peaceful future. The analysis reflects on the imperative of recognizing Ukrainian youth as active stakeholders in their nation's transformation and post-war recovery. It offers valuable insights from successful post-war recovery practices, while urging relevant stakeholders to tailor these measures to their specific profiles, regions, and situations in Ukraine. The approach outlined in the policy study advocates for data-driven policymaking, prioritizing inclusiveness, and fostering community-centric recovery efforts. It emphasizes the importance of social and psychological well-being, vocational education, and social security, arguing for a holistic framework for successful youth reintegration. Finally, throughout the analysis attention is drawn to the pivotal role of engaging youth in driving economic, social, political and digital transformation of Ukraine.

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