

Searching for ways to live here

A report based on a study of the needs of people from refugee backgrounds leaving centres for foreigners in Poland

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Table of contents

Introduction	3
Purpose of the study and research questions	4
Methodology	5
Results	10
Staying in a centre for foreigners - first experiences after leaving a detention centre	11
Mental state	20
First challenges	25
Work	25
Accommodation	31
Setting into the Polish society	33
Vulnerable group	37
Resources	40
What helps?	44
Unused resources	46
Summary	49
Recommendations for NGOs	56

Introduction

People from refugee backgrounds and those seeking international protection in Poland face a number of challenges in adapting to the new reality and the process of integration into Polish society. Once they leave **the centres for foreigners**, they have to navigate the new circumstances - securing **stable living conditions, finding employment and building their future anew**. Linguistic, formal and financial barriers often hinder this process, and the lack of consistent and tailored public **support mechanisms** leaves many of these people **feeling lost**.

The integration of people from refugee backgrounds in Poland **should be based on a well-coordinated state policy** and the responsibility of public institutions, including local government institutions. Unfortunately, **the public support system for preintegration and integration is not effective enough** and its offer doesn't meet the needs of people from refugee backgrounds. The lack of coherence in programmes and the insufficient involvement of state institutions mean that **non-governmental organisations**

(NGOs) take responsibility for the integration process of people from refugee backgrounds.

These organisations provide a wide range of assistance including informational, social, legal, psychological, educational, linguistic, medical, casework or vocational activation support. However, **the support system offered by NGOs is not always able to provide a comprehensive response to all needs** - there are gaps in the services provided due to the lack of permanent funding and the functioning of an organisation in a project mode. Often, aid is also dispersed and not fully coordinated, which limits its effectiveness.

In carrying out the study, we were keen to **better understand where the greatest difficulties** faced by people seeking international protection in Poland are in order to more effectively support their process of

becoming independent. The **recommendations of people** who stayed in **Guarded Centres for Foreigners (detention centres)** and/or in **Open Centres for Foreigners (open centres)** are of key importance in this context. Their perspective makes it possible to better tailor the NGO's support offer to real needs, as well as to identify concrete actions to foster more effective independence.

Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of our study was to learn about the experiences of people after leaving detention and open centres, with a particular focus on their adaptation process to life in Poland. The analysis focuses on the challenges these people face, their motivations for integration and the resources that support this process. The study also sought to identify key needs and barriers to meeting them, including gaps in access to information and available forms of support.

The **research questions** that guided us through the research process were:

1. What were their **first experiences** after leaving the detention or open centres?
2. What was **the process of adapting** to the new Polish reality like?
3. What **challenges** have they encountered in the process?
4. What was **the process of integration** into Polish society like (if relevant)?
5. What was their **motivation** for **integration**?
6. What **barriers** have they encountered?
7. Which **resources supported integration**?
8. What **needs** did they identify after leaving the detention/open centre?
9. Which needs were **most urgent** and needed to be addressed immediately?
10. What **gaps** in access to information and offer of support do people identify after leaving the detention/open centre?

By analysing the answers to the above questions, the study aimed to gain a **deeper understanding of the situation of people** who have passed through the system of centres for foreigners in Poland. We focused on key aspects of the adaptation process, identifying challenges and resources to support integration. The results of the study are

intended to provide NGOs, state and local government institutions with information for **more effective planning of activities to support people from refugee backgrounds in Poland.**

Methodology

Research method

The study was conducted **at the end of 2024** using **qualitative research methods**, specifically by conducting ***in-depth interviews (IDI)*** of a **semi-structured nature**. This form of interview combines elements of a structured interview with a free-flowing conversation. This allowed us to ask key questions while giving the interviewees the space to freely express their thoughts and feelings, which allowed us to gain a deep understanding of their situation.

The interview script focused on **the experiences of people who had left the detention or open centres**. We studied their **process of adaptation and integration in Poland**, paying particular attention to their **lives after leaving the centres**. Interview topics included the **experience of staying in detention or open centres, first impressions** of leaving the centre, **difficulties they encountered and forms of support** available. The search for accommodation, access to the labour market and education,

as well as difficulties in learning the Polish language, were also important areas of discussion. In addition, personal issues such as the presence of family and loved ones, support networks and relations with the local community were raised during the interviews. The study also covered the topics of contact with public institutions, such as dealing with official matters, healthcare and accessing information on support for foreigners. At the end of the interviews, the participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 means very bad and 5 means very good) their current mental and material condition, allowing us to juxtapose the level of these ratings with the information obtained during the interview.

Each interview was **recorded** with a recording device with the consent of the study participant, and then transcribed word for word. 4 interviews were conducted in English, 4 with the support of an interpreter (3 in the Arabic-Polish language pair, 1 in the Farsi-Polish language pair). In the case of translated

interviews, only excerpts translated into Polish were transcribed.

We conducted the first few interviews in pairs: one person conducted the interview, the other listened and observed without actively participating in the process (*shadowing*). Right after the interview, we exchanged our thoughts and observations from the conversation. This added great value to the study, as the attentive presence of the other person allowed for grasping details which the interviewer would not have been able to see. After the interview, the impressions were immediately written down in a separate file, documenting the research process and thoughts on the recorded material.



Sampling

Recruitment to the study included three main groups:

- people who **have left the detention centre** and are now living independently
- people who **have left the open centre** and are now living independently
- people who are still **in the open centre** (who may have been in the detention centre)

Recruitment for the study was done intentionally to reach people who had experience of staying in the detention or open centre, **regardless of their nationality**, excluding people from **the former republics of the USSR**. We were particularly keen to reach people who had crossed **the Polish-Belarusian border**, as there are already many publications on the situation of people from Ukraine and other countries of the former USSR, and the experiences of people from other countries are, in our opinion, still insufficiently researched. There were no other restrictions in recruitment, allowing a wide range of experiences to be considered.

Ultimately, **eight people** (seven men and one woman) took part in the study. The sample included individuals from countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Iran and Sudan. Most of the participants were **in the process of applying for international protection** in Poland (1 person had received a deportation order, but was in the process of appeal at the time of the interview). Five of the people interviewed are **living independently**, renting flats or staying in hostels, while the remaining three are currently staying at an open centre. Participants varied in age (from 21 to 47) and living situation. Some people were in the process of looking for a job, others were supported by families and some were in difficult financial circumstances.

Table 1. Characteristics of study participants

In- terview code	Country	Gen- der	Age	Lan- guage of the interview	Online/ live	History of residence	Is he/she employed or self-suppor- ting?	Does he/ she sup- port his/her children/ family?	Residence status	How would you rate your general wellbeing on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - very bad; 5 - very good)?	How would you rate your living/ financial situation on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - very bad; 5 - very good)?
W_1_O	Egypt	M	37	Arabic (transla- tion)	online	detention centre, now in an open centr	He is waiting for work per- mit; for now, he is receiving financial sup- port from fam.	no	in the proce- dure	5	4
W_2_S	Iraq	M	21	Arabic (transla.)	online	detention centre, then open centre, now renting a flat	He is working	no	in the proce- dure	0	0
W_3_S	Turkey	M	30	English	live	detention centre, then open centre, now renting a flat	He is working	no	in the proce- dure	no answer	no answer
W_4_O	Demo- cratic Rep- ublic of Congo	M	28	English	live	was placed un an open cen- tre (from the border), now lives in a different open centre	He isn't working	no	in the proced- ure	2	1
W_6_S	Nigeria	M	25	English	online	detention centre, open cen- tre, now rents a flat	It's unknown	no	has received a deportation order, against which he is now appealing	2	4
W_7_S	Iran	K	47	Farsi (transla- tion)	online	detention centre, open cen- tre, now in a different open centre	no	has an adu- lt son	in the proce- dure	was unable to answer	was unable to answer
W_8_S	Sudan	M	23	English	live	detention centre, two open centre, now renting a room in a hostel	yes	no	in the proce- dure	2	2
W_9_S	Iraq	M	24	Arabic (transla.)	live	detention centre, two open centres, now lives in a hostel	yes	no	in the proce- dure	2	2

Methodological challenges

One of the key challenges of the study was to **reach interviewees** who would agree to participate in an interview. These difficulties stemmed - in our view - from the dynamically changing life situations of refugees and their fear of sharing their difficult experiences with us. Many participants were reluctant **to talk openly** about their experiences, and additional problems such as changes in place of residence, instability of legal status and general uncertainty which made it difficult to maintain regular contact with people from this group. We often made appointments, but people didn't show up or changed their plans, making it significantly difficult to complete the interviews. To minimise these difficulties, we have used the partner organisations' networks and the snowball method, i.e. recruiting participants through recommendations of people already taking part in the study.

Another major challenge was **language and cultural issues**, which presented some barriers to communication. Although we attempted to reach English speakers to prevent the presence of a third-party in the contact, in a few cases it was necessary to use an

interpreter (Arabic and Farsi), which may have affected the accuracy of the message and the subsequent interpretation of the stories of our study participants. In order to minimise the risk of errors due to translation, we worked with translators with extensive experience of working with refugees, which allowed us to better capture the context and nuances of the conversation.

Another important methodological aspect was to **ensure the comfort and sense of security of the respondents**. For this reason, the study was conducted in accordance with social research ethics, taking into account the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymisation of data and the possibility to conduct interviews online if this increased participants' sense of security. The sensitivity of the research topic required adequate preparation of the researchers, who had experience of working with people in crisis situations. Before starting the study, members of the research team received additional training on working with people who had experienced trauma, which enabled them to conduct interviews in an empathetic

and supportive manner and prepared the researchers to respond appropriately when interviewees' emotions escalated or when they reported thoughts of resignation or suicide.

Ethical issues

During the implementation of the study, particular attention was paid to ethical issues such as obtaining **informed consent** from participants, ensuring their **right to resign** at any stage of the study and respecting **data protection principles**. In addition, interviews were conducted in safe, neutral spaces or online if the participants preferred this form of contact.

As part of the project implementation, participants were provided with **compensation** in the form of Pluxee vouchers or equivalent, as a token of appreciation for their time and commitment to the study. Rewarding research participants is becoming the standard in social science and applied research. This recognises the effort and valuable contribution of the participants in expanding their knowledge on the chosen topic and makes the exchange more **transparent and fair**. Compensating for participation in the study therefore serves the ethics of the research process.

Data analysis

We analysed the qualitative data using **Atlas.ti**. The first step was an in-depth review of the interview transcripts, noting down initial insights and observations and open coding. Content important to the research questions was coded. We looked for participants' specific experiences, recurring themes in their stories, topics centred around the challenges, needs, barriers and resources. In the next phase, the codes generated at the beginning were revised and grouped into broader categories, corresponding to the main subsections in the 'Results' section. The codes and created categories attempted to reconstruct the experiences of the participants in the study and allowed for telling the story presented below.



Results

Staying in a centre for foreigners - first experiences after leaving the detention centre.

The first experience of most people leaving detention centres is being placed in and staying in an open centre for foreigners. How was it for our interviewees? What common, recurring themes can be noticed in their stories?

When they opened the door, I had nothing.

One of the key problems faced by people from refugee backgrounds after leaving detention centres is the lack of information and organisational support. This process often involves stress and a lack of basic resources. The moment of leaving can be an extremely **confusing experience** for many people - there is a lack of clear guidance on next steps, which exacerbates **the feeling of being lost**.

One of our interviewees described the moment of leaving the detention centre as follows:

When they opened the door, I had nothing. I had no clothes, I had no money, I had no food. I didn't see anything, they didn't explain anything to me like, 'you go there, that's the way'. As I said, I waited there for 15-20 minutes until I met someone by accident (...). But in a nutshell: [you need] information or someone to help you there, not just when they open the door and tell you to go. What can you do? And there was no information, even those who were with me, they don't have information either, because no one was there, they left and came back, all the people came straight from the forest.

Other people feel the same way - many leave the centres without any guidance on what are the next steps. They don't know how to get to their new location, where to buy transport tickets or where exactly they have to go. The lack of basic material help and information means that **the first moments of freedom are often full of uncertainty**.



How do I move on?

The lack of knowledge and ability to find their way in the Polish reality immediately after leaving the detention centre is a common experience of people who leave them. While in the detention centre, they are cut off from the world, with no smartphones, no internet access, no language skills and often no understanding of the legal procedures they are subject to. One interviewee described his fear of signing a document because he didn't understand its content. Fearing deportation, he initially refused to sign it, despite being assured that the document could be translated:

They asked me in a closed centre to sign something. (...) I was afraid it was a deportation document, so I refused to sign it. They told me, 'Here's your phone, you can translate'. (...) Nevertheless, I did not believe that the document was talking about getting out. They said I didn't have much choice if I wanted to leave. (...) Eventually I signed it, they gave me my things and opened the door.

People leaving detention centres often **don't know how they are supposed to get** to their new place of residence - an open centre. They don't know which means of transport to use, where to buy and validate the ticket, and often - which centre they are supposed to go to or what the address is. They talk about the lack of clear instructions to help them navigate a country they don't know. They often ask random people at train stations or bus stops for help:

Then, at the bus stop or at the train station, I met with one gentleman from Africa, I asked him for the phone, just to call someone, to give me, I don't know, at least an address where to go.

I asked him [the taxi driver] to call me, I called the closed centre, which... There was one boy who had contact with Anna¹ and I called him and said... Just give me the address to Debak, or where to go next.

Name changed.

I thought they knew

An additional difficulty is the **lack of clear information on legal procedures**. In some cases, this leads to important dates being missed, as in the case of one of our interviewees, who hadn't been informed of the date of her hearing. The belief that the authorities knew of her whereabouts and would provide her with the relevant information proved to be wrong. Because of that, she had to ask for a new hearing date with the help of organisations supporting refugees.

Anyway, I was due to have an interview in a closed centre, and we left before the interview date. They did not inform us where the interview was, when exactly, and we let the date pass. We thought the authorities knew where we were and would come and get us or send some information because we were under their control. We let [the date of] the first interview pass, then the lawyer asked us to the second one. Many thanks to the IOM group, because they helped us a lot and asked for a second date.

You're already broke

Many foreigners who end up in detention or open centres don't have a lot of cash with them when they set off on their journey. During that time, it is relatively easy to be robbed or ripped off. Once they are in a detention centre, they have to manage the savings they have left over for six months. **Financial resources are depleting** and when they get to an open centre, they often have no money left. One of our interviewees highlighted the importance of the financial situation of those seeking or already granted international protection:

When you already spent a lot of time in detention centre, it's possible to spend all of your money in detention centre, because you don't take too much money if you use this way to travel. Because everybody on the way they are trying to steal your money, scam you, so it's better not to take money with you for this way. So when you get to closed camp, you are already broke and with (...) that little money you have to survive six months in the detention centre and usually all people are broke when they get to open camp. So we don't have even enough money

to get sim card. So without sim card, you don't have internet, you don't have access for anything.

Not everyone can rely on financial support from their family, and **access to their own bank accounts is sometimes hindered** by restrictions on the use of smartphones. The financial benefit for residents of open centres is 75 zloty per month, which is not enough to cover basic needs. One of our respondents highlighted:

The money we get is definitely not enough to survive.

The lack of financial resources affects the daily functioning of migrants - limiting their ability to communicate, buy the most necessary products and organise their lives independently in their new place.

I got released in the winter

Many people leaving detention centres for foreigners and later staying in open centres **are not prepared for the weather conditions**, especially in autumn and winter. Often **they don't have warm clothing** or appropriate footwear to protect them from the cold, rain and snow. One interviewee recalled his experience of leaving the centre in winter:

So I got released at the winter but still I had some winter clothes. Some people, they don't, I saw in the open camp.

The lack of adequate clothing makes migrants particularly vulnerable to harsh weather conditions, which further aggravates their situation after leaving the detention centre. In many cases, they have to rely on the help of humanitarian organisations or other residents of the centres to get the basic clothing items which are necessary to survive the winter.

Smartphone is a game changer

Those who end up in detention or open centres after crossing the green border often don't have their mobile phones and therefore have no means of communication - including the ability to contact their families or receive money from them. Not having a phone is isolating and poses additional difficulties in finding their way in the new reality:

The mobile phone is very important if someone is leaving a detention centre and does not have their phone with them. You can't call anyone, you can't call your family, because the phone makes things much easier and is very helpful for people who are leaving a detention centre. At least you can call someone, you can call your family that you don't have money, so they can send it to you. Without this, it is very difficult.

A smartphone is not just a communication tool, but actually **a key element of survival and integration**. It gives access to the internet, maps, translation apps and, above all, it allows you to find your way around quicker:

With the smartphone you are able to speed up your integration process, because in detention centre we didn't have smartphones, so yes, smartphone was a game changer.

Lack of access to a telephone and the internet makes daily life much more difficult. The ability to stay in touch, get information and navigate a new place makes a smartphone one of the most important tools for people starting a life in a new country.

Cut off from the world

Most open centres for foreigners are located **on the outskirts of cities or in small towns**. Their location means that in practice, despite **formal freedom of movement**, the residents have limited access to basic services, aid organisations and the labour market. Getting to a big city from many centres for foreigners **takes several hours** and requires transfers. In some cases, if they want to **get to the nearest bus stop** or train station, they have to walk **a few kilometres**.

Dębak is very far from the capital. It is far from the city centre. This in itself is also a difficulty for us.

The open centre in Dębak near Warsaw is located **in a forest**. You have to walk about 3 km to the nearest train station and the journey to the centre of Warsaw takes between 1.5 and 2 hours, depending on the available connections. The situation is similar in other centres for foreigners - for example, it takes up to 2.5 hours to get from Łuków to Lublin. Long and complicated connections mean

that running daily errands, going to the city hall or to the doctor's office requires organising a full-day.

Isolation also means difficult access to NGOs supporting refugees. Legal aid, language courses, vocational training - these **are available mainly in large cities**. One of our interviewees admitted that he deliberately asked to be transferred to Linin because it is closer to Warsaw, where many aid organisations are. However, not everyone has the opportunity to change the centre, making distance an insurmountable barrier for many.

Then from there, I usually go to Warsaw, from Biała Podlaska I will travel to Warsaw to make some organization for help, you know, because in procedure we don't have... you know, they provide us shelter, but we don't have food to eat. So, we used to go to Warszawa to organise, and they really support us, you know.

The isolation of the centres **is not just a matter of distance** - it is a real **obstacle to building a new life**. Difficulties in getting to work, for example, mean that many people, despite wanting to, have no chance of becoming independent. Despite the formal freedom to leave the centre, the outside world is out of reach for many.

Simple mistake, big problem

Once out of the detention centre, in order to get around they need to learn the rules of public transport. There is often a lack of available information on local procedures and **differences in the system** can lead to **errors** that result in **financial consequences**. The following statement from our interviewee shows how easy it is to unknowingly violate transport rules - even if the process of buying a ticket seems straightforward. You buy a ticket from a ticket machine, get on a bus or a train, and then find that you still have to validate it. Lack of this knowledge will result in a fine of 266 zloty. With an income of 75 zloty per month, it is a significant burden.

For example, the easiest thing, how to buy a ticket. Whether from a ticket machine or on your phone, whether it's... Because we don't know. Let me give you an example, one of my colleagues, he normally bought a ticket from a ticket machine, but when he got on the bus, he didn't validate it, that is, he didn't put it in that machine. And that is why it was from lack of knowledge he got a very big fine. This is a problem for us at the beginning.

It certainly wasn't enough

Access to **right food** in open centres is one of the most frequently discussed topics in our conversations. Many people point out the **insufficient number of meals** and their **poor quality**. Food is not only a matter of satisfying hunger, but also of daily comfort and well-being. Some stressed that **the portions were too small**, while others mentioned health problems caused by the food they consumed:

I adapted to eat everything as I know myself, but in this camp, when I arrived over there, it was difficult for me to eat even something. I didn't want to. Because if I try to eat, or if I say that I should just eat, even if it's not good, after that, I will have stomach ache, problem in stomach, and it will be very difficult for me to stay good.

On the other hand, there is a **fear of making negative comments** - the food is free of charge, which makes criticism of its quality not well-received. In the detention centre the food was considered good, while in the open

centre both the quality and quantity were a problem:

The biggest challenge for me? Food, I would say. Yeah, definitely. Because everybody knows that in Biała Podlaska, closed camp, we had good food. Unlike the open camp. Yeah, open camp is the worst. Maybe, I don't know, it wasn't enough. I'm not saying it wasn't tasty because I don't know, I feel like we can't complain about it. Maybe we can, but still they can say, oh, you are taking food for free and still you are complaining. So I don't want to have such a drama, but for sure it wasn't enough.

Access to a sufficient amount of food remains an important aspect of daily functioning. Not being able to express their needs or report difficulties makes the topic of food one of the most sensitive in the experiences of people in open centres.

Plenty of time, nothing to do

The collective experience of those in centres for foreigners is **a state of limbo and waiting**. People waiting for a decision on their case, for a work permit or refugee status spend **long hours in uncertainty** - not knowing what tomorrow will bring. Although they have **plenty of spare time**, their **ability to manage it** is very **limited**. With no access to work, no classes or other activities, everyday life becomes monotonous and overwhelming. In many cases, this leads to a sense of futility, weariness, spiritlessness and, ultimately, frustration.

The most difficult thing for refugees, who are in a detention centre, is a lot of free time and also this unawareness, the lack of awareness of what is going to happen next.

One of the most difficult aspects for refugees, especially those in detention centres, is precisely this **void in time**. A long wait without any control over one's destiny quickly turns 'free time' into a burden, increasing the feeling of helplessness. Being in limbo means

you can't relax - instead, it often becomes a source of stress and anxiety.





When being different is a problem

Centres for foreigners are places where people from **different countries, cultures and backgrounds** come together. This diversity can be an opportunity to get to know and understand each other, but it can also sometimes be a source of tension and difficulties in **functioning together**. Living in a confined space, often under difficult conditions, can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts and a sense of exclusion in people who somehow differ from the majority.

Some centre residents **experience prejudice** because of their background, religion or identity. Sometimes these are small gestures, other times - open expressions of resentment. People who stand out from other residents - for example because of the colour of their skin, the way they dress or their religion - may feel less accepted. The situation can be particularly difficult for LGBTQ+ people, who sometimes face misunderstanding

or resentment from other residents. In some cases, this leads to tensions and difficulties in living together.

They gave me a room, I stayed there for twenty days, but then I had a problem, I argued with the resident who lived there. These very arguments were because of my sexual orientation. (...) I asked to be transferred to Linin. And after twenty days they transported me there.

People who feel **unaccepted** in a particular centre sometimes decide to **change their place** of residence. However, this is not always easy and may take time. The administration's support and being open to the needs of residents play a key role in such moments.

I ended up on the worst floor

In centres for foreigners, **the layout of the space** often seems to reflect **social divisions**. In Linin, the division into floors is not just a matter of architecture - for many residents it is a clear symbol of the hierarchy they feel every day.

Some residents indicate that **the placement of people in the building is not random**. Different floors may have a certain character - some are quieter, other floors are more crowded, and on some there are more conflicts and tensions. Some people felt excluded or marginalised when they ended up in a particular part of the building.

They moved me to Linin, there are four floors there, they put me on the fourth floor, on the first floor it was one point, one room was occupied, or one gentleman was there, and the rest was empty. On the second floor, there were several rooms just for people from Ukraine. On the third floor it was kind of mixed, Chechens, non-Chechens and all that kind of mixing, and on the fourth floor it was actually for those, it was the worst floor, and they threw me out there. And even in an

open centre, even there I experienced this... racism.

Those placed on **the top floors of the centre** often spoke of more difficult conditions, more people in a small space and no sense of security. Some stressed that this **division doesn't foster integration** and makes already existing cultural or linguistic differences even more apparent.

The space in which applicants for international protection live has a huge impact on their daily life. Appropriate organisation of accommodation could not only improve the comfort of life in the centres, but also help to foster a sense of equality and community among residents.



Mental state

You feel nothing

After staying in a detention centre, refugees need time to recover - both physically and emotionally. Being free doesn't always give immediate relief. Many people describe this moment as a **state of numbness** in which it is difficult to return to normal functioning straight away. Living in a detention centre forces many people to adopt a certain survival strategy of disconnecting from their emotions - **dissociation**.

I don't know what to say to be honest, because when I left that centre, I don't know how much time, but probably a week I didn't even touch my phone, I didn't look at it at all and I wanted to be outside all the time. Because there was no one to tell me that the walk was over, or there were no guards to harass me. And I was free. I could see the trees all around me, peacefully, and I could walk as much as I wanted. But as I said, leaving the detention centre is a lot after difficult three months. And you are happy, but on the other hand you feel nothing.

Some described their mental state after leaving the detention centre as **complete emptiness** - no joy, but also no stress:

Honestly, people in the detention centre experience such things that when they leave, they have no feelings at all. I wasn't neither lucky nor stressed. Nothing, I just felt nothing, and that was it. I really didn't feel anything, that I didn't come out of a detention centre and I'm already in an open one, in an open one I can leave, I can go where I want. No, this was not the case. I just don't remember being there, because I forgot everything, but two, three, four days we were there in Dębak and it was also in the middle of the forest and I couldn't go anywhere. But still, as I said, a person doesn't feel anything then, because a detention centre is such a place that it will take away your feelings.

Being in a place with restrictive rules for a long time can cause difficulties in readjusting to life outside the detention centre. Feelings of numbness, lack of emotional response or the need to be isolated from external stimuli are mechanisms that can persist long after leaving the centre.

You don't think beforehand, you try to survive

People in the centres for foreigners **function in survival mode**, under constant stress. Particularly at the beginning, they lack the sense of security to think about the future in peace and take concrete steps. Lack of control over one's own destiny, **lack of agency** and no influence over the living situation are additional difficulties that make everyday life hard to survive and 'stay afloat'. One interviewee described the moment he arrived at a centre and suddenly felt better, and only from this perspective did he understand the mode he was in in the previous centre.

But when we arrive in Łuków, then we realize that here it's good. Here it is comfortable. Then we begin also to think about other things. How to manage, how to live here, what we can do after maybe get decision. When we get interview. We begin to think about other step about our case of asylum. But in Biała Podlaska, never. We never think about it. And it was very, very difficult.

Some people emphasised that only after leaving one centre they started to realise how difficult were the conditions they had previously been in:

And when we were there in Biała Podlaska, we never imagined that there is a good camp. Which can provide you best service or best other thing, we would never imagine. But just when we leave, after two weeks, we come in Łuków, when we see Łuków, then we realize that where we were before, it was not good.

This contrast shows how much of **an impact the environment has on the psyche and daily functioning**. As long as refugees stay in conditions that do not give them a sense of security, their thoughts are focused solely on survival. Only then can they begin to realistically plan their future.

Everything depends on this decision

A huge part of the experience of our interviewees is waiting for a decision while in the procedure and the prolonged state of uncertainty about the possibility of staying in Poland. The long-term stress related to instability makes it difficult to focus on everyday matters, planning the future or their own needs. Everyday life is subordinated to waiting for the decision that will determine their fate.

And the fact that Poland doesn't like migrants, the fact that Polish governments don't welcome migrants very much and that they may send us back to their country and may not listen to us. I just think about things like that all the time, what's going to happen to me, what's going to happen to my son. I haven't taken the time to think about what I like, or what I want, what makes my life easier. I haven't thought about it yet and I don't know, I just don't want to be scared anymore and I want to have a peaceful life and that's it.

This story demonstrates the psychological burden of living in uncertainty and waiting

for a decision on which the whole future depends. The lack of stability and prospects for a longer stay makes it impossible to function normally, forcing people to constantly think about survival rather than self-development or plans for the future. For many migrants, Poland is becoming a place of hope, but also of enormous challenges, where the struggle to stay here becomes a daily reality.



I was so scared that I couldn't leave the room

The journey and experiences that residents of the centres have had, as well as the conditions in these places, affect their mental state. Many people in detention and open centres can suffer from depression and low mood.

In my case it was different, they released me with psychiatrist opinion because I got diagnosed with depression.

And then they sent us to an open centre and somehow for a week (...) I didn't leave my room at all, because I was very scared and my mental state was terrible and I just didn't leave my room, but after a week I started going to church, because I wanted to pray there, then to a shop near us, to buy some products there and that was it (...) I didn't know anyone in the centre, of course, but there are two ladies there who I like a lot (...) and I have a lot of contact with them (...) they help me a lot, I talk to them (...) they help me a lot... But like I said, to leave the room, the centre, is something I'm very scared of. It's not that

I don't trust Poles or I've experienced something bad, but I'm just very scared myself and I don't leave the room.

Those fears I had in my own country didn't devastate me the way this detention centre did. It destroyed both my life and my mental state, and me.

The mental state of people in detention and open centres often requires pharmacological treatment. According to the Polish Migration Forum report¹, at least 25 detention centre residents have attempted suicide between 2021 and 2023. The others witness it, and the very stay in the detention centre is a traumatic experience for them. Some say that it was worse than what they were fleeing from - than what they experienced in their country of origin:

Polskie Forum Migracyjne, Save The Children, Everyone around is suffering - Report on psychological support offered by the Polish Migration Forum Foundation to persons staying in guarded detention centres for foreigners, Warsaw, May 2024, available online: <https://forum-migracyjne.org/en/publikacja/everyone-around-is-suffering/>, [access: 20.02.2025].

Psychological support is not a priority

For many people in an open centre who are trying to become independent and build a life from scratch in a new place, psychological support is not a priority. The most important thing is to stabilise your situation - find a job and a flat.

I think such [psychological] help exists. The only thing... We don't have time for it, and we don't have such a culture. Still, even in Turkey, which is relatively more developed than the other countries, the psychological support, the psychiatric support... We don't have such a culture. Also, we are so panicked that we think only about how we can survive. Even I get my first psychological meeting last week, and I was so surprised that I didn't think it would be that helpful. All organizations everywhere, even in detention centre and open camp, like IOM, civil organizations, NGOs, all of them, they told us that if you need psychological support, we have budget for it, we can provide it. We just... we have already a lot on our plate. So, the psychological support is not the priority. Maybe we just don't know how it can be useful.

That's not the way to go, because I feel that I am... When a person sees a nightmare at night and gets up, that's the end of the nightmare, and that's not the case with me. I get up, but it's not the end of the nightmare I'm in, and I can't wake up from the nightmare I'm in.

The first statement above illustrates how **low psychological assistance** ranks in the hierarchy of needs of people who have experienced forced migration and stay in detention centres. Not being used to this type of support is both due to **cultural background** and **the intense stress** of having to survive in a new reality.

For our interviewees, the priority is to provide themselves with **the basic necessities of life** - food, clothing and a sense of security. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, before a person is ready to face their psychological needs and trauma, they need to satisfy their basic needs and have a stable life. If someone is uncertain about whether they will

have a roof over their head and what they will eat the next day, they will not be able to focus on their mental health.

It is only after some time that some people begin to see how psychological help could bring them relief. For many, however, it is still a luxury for which they 'don't have time' or they don't feel that it would be valuable. As a result, they are left alone with trauma and a long-lasting feeling of being lost. The second statement touches on an even deeper psychological suffering - for some people, the reality they find themselves in resembles a never-ending nightmare. Despite the passing of time, they are not relieved, and the anxiety and tension do not disappear, but become a part of their everyday life.

First challenges: Work

I don't want to sit idle

For those who want to stay in Poland, there are two main challenges: finding work and a place to stay. Overcoming them is the first step to becoming independent and leaving the open centre. An important part of this process is also learning the Polish language, which improves employability. People in open centres emphasise that they find the idle state - while waiting for a work permit or benefits - extremely difficult. They want to earn their own money and not rely solely on help:

Because I want to work. I don't want to be at home, I've had enough. And I am ashamed to go to a canteen in Poland and take food. Because I feel like I am like a person who is not working. They wait all the time for food to be brought in by others. And I don't like anything. And there are a few things in there that I have in my head all the time that I want to work and not be...

For many people in institutions, **welfare dependency** is a source of discomfort and a sense of losing dignity. Some emphasise that they would like to give something back in return, rather than just receive:

In fact it is that way, because I want to work, and I want to work and get some food or money in return, for some needs of my own, because I don't want to sit around without anything, getting help (...). I don't do anything and I get help or I get food and it makes me feel bad then, it makes me feel really bad.

So that the refugee is not a burden on the organisation, so that the refugee is not a burden on the government or on the office for foreigners, then the refugee will quickly find a job and work for himself.

A significant obstacle is the **schedule of the centres**. Some of them have return hours, which makes it significantly more difficult to undertake shift work. In addition, many centres are located in **places that are excluded by transport**, making **going to the city and the daily commute difficult and often impossible**. The situation also depends on the location - near smaller towns, the language barrier becomes a problem instead of transport, as it is almost impossible to find employment in English there.

Open centres, in terms of job, they are really bad. Only Biała Podlaska open centre is close to the city, but it's hard to get a job because people don't speak English. The other open centres, they all are out of town. So it's kind of impossible to work in the city with living in the open camp.

The benefits received at the centre are not enough to cover basic needs, so getting any kind of job is crucial to start getting back on their feet. The first and most achievable way for refugees is to **take up work in gastronomy**. However, some of the open centres cannot be accessed after 8pm - it is required to return before that time, and working in a restaurant is an evening job. Irreconcilable circumstances take away the option of employment for those who want to become independent.

For example, the Linin, the closest camp to Warsaw, you cannot get there after 8 p.m. And usually, the first step is gastronomy, for refugees. And you cannot say to any gastronomy place that, oh, I need to leave at 7. Or even if they accept it, so you need to

be really early in the morning, how you get to Warsaw? Because also, for a train station, you need to walk around 40 minutes. From the camp, they have only one bus, like, once an hour. And they have to be really early in the morning. In terms of open camps, we have much bigger problems.

Due to these limitations, people living in centres try to find work with accommodation. This allows them to avoid problems of commuting and return times:

Some websites for job offers, they could be useful for open camps because also you can find some jobs with accommodation on these websites. Yeah, yeah. It's important to find a job with accommodation while you are living in an open camp.





Physical work is too hard

For many people, working in warehouses is one of the first employment opportunities available. It is a physically demanding job, often involving long working hours. At the same time, there is a risk of misconduct, such as lack of contract, insurance or difficulties in enforcing labour rights.

I know that the work in warehouse is so very hard. And it take a lot of time because I work in the same situation when I was in Russia. When I was in Belarus, I run away from there when migrant people have so many problems in 2022 - they were deporting so many migrant people. I run away. I go to Russia to stay for two months and after I come back again to Belarus. When I make two months in Russia, I was working in a warehouse. And I was working about 12 hours per day. I woke up at 5. I come back at home at 10. I wake up at 5 every day. And when I come here, I know how the condition of warehouse is very hard.

Physical work is extremely exhausting, and doing it for long periods of time can lead to

serious health problems. That is why many people try to avoid this type of employment:

Really, I don't like to have a physical job. Especially as I project myself, physical job you can begin today, but there is one day that you will stop.

It is difficult to reconcile both

Taking up a job often means having to **give up intensive language study**. Reconciling work with courses that take place at specific hours can be difficult, and the lack of flexible learning options means that many people have to make a choice: either work or language.

So we started to work together. I was the manager of the restaurant at first month and half of the second month. But it was so intense and I couldn't have enough time to learn Polish for the other things, like for my case. Then I quit.

Some organisations offer language courses, but their schedules don't always suit working people, especially those working shifts:

Actually there is one organization who send me a link but during a period I was a bit busy at work. The classes took place at 6 p.m. to 8

p.m. which I wasn't be able to attend, because I'm working in warehouse, so I don't have opportunity to attend this class. We start work by 6 p.m. and close by 4 a.m.



You will be here for a short period of time

The lack of knowledge of international protection procedures and the frequent **prolongation of legalisation processes** make many employers **reluctant to hire people without permanent residence** (i.e. people who, although they currently have the right to work, may lose their right overnight due to the ongoing procedure and uncertainty of the decision). They see them as temporary employees who are not worth investing time and resources in. The language barrier is an additional problem, as is the openly expressed unwillingness to hire people from outside the European Union.

It is worth noting that through **the first stage of the procedure, applicants for international protection in Poland cannot legally take up employment**. Those people receive a temporary identity document, which entitles them to stay but doesn't give them permission to work. It is only after six months (if no decision has been made in the meantime) that a special certificate is issued, which, together with the foreigner's temporary identity document, is the basis for taking up legal

employment. This situation further prevents migrants from finding work and securing financial stability.

When I go to work, they begin to ask me some questions, 'Oh, do you have visa?' I told them I don't. 'And do you apply for TRC?' I told them I don't know it. 'You don't know TRC, it's something that students apply for to get a resident permit'. I told them I'm not a student, and they say, 'you are illegal'. Directly I understand that here is not my place.

The lack of a stable document proving the right to stay and work is also a frequent barrier. Applicants for international protection only receive a temporary document for a maximum of six months. It must be renewed regularly. This creates uncertainty for both the migrants and potential employers. Companies are reluctant to invest time and resources in training an employee who may not be able to continue working after a few months. As one interviewee noted:

People think you will not stay longer, so they don't want to invest in you the effort and money, because some jobs, they require education, you know.

It's not your CV that counts, it's where you're from

For many, **the process of looking for a job in Poland** involves not only a language barrier or formal requirements, but also the **experience of discrimination**. Candidates who don't have a permanent residence here or are from outside Europe are often told that without knowing the language or a Polish background they will not find employment. Recruitment is not always based on competence - country of origin proves to be decisive, and it becomes almost impossible to find a job without a third-party recommendation and/or the engagement of an employment agency.

People from African countries often experience this mechanism even more than those from other countries. In the words of one of our interviewees:

Most of people that I met here in Poland, [coming from Africa] who are working here, they told me you cannot find a job yourself here in Poland.

And maybe I can say I need a job. But how? How can I get it? Maybe you can say, 'I apply in this website.' But I know in this website that even I apply over there, they will look to my... They will not look to the CV, but they will look to who is this person. Where is he from? Is he Polish? Is he European? Is he from Africa? Which country? I already know how the system decides about getting a job when you don't have resident permit. It makes you like... without hope. You don't have hope. And you don't even need to try to have hope.

Discrimination in the labour market is not only limited to the recruitment process - the problem also affects those who have already found employment. Migrants, especially those from Africa, often face **unequal treatment in the workplace**, which manifests itself, among other things, in poorer conditions, lower sense of security or fear of not getting support in crisis situations. One interviewee emphasises that social attitudes towards people of African descent translate

into their work experience, including in terms of job security:

Here in Poland... I can say until now they don't feel to be mixed with African people. Until now. And if you work in a physical job, if maybe you have an accident... They will not treat you as a normal worker. You see? And I don't want to be in this kind of way that you have an accident in the work and they don't provide for you assistance. Because maybe you are an African, you are not Polish.

This account demonstrates the serious problem of inequality in the workplace, which goes beyond employment issues and also covers aspects of safety and labour rights. Concerns about the lack of assistance in the event of an accident indicate a low level of confidence in institutions and employers to provide the same level of protection and support to all employees.

First challenges: Accommodation

I can't afford accommodation

Finding accommodation in Warsaw is one of the biggest challenges for people leaving centres for foreigners. High rental costs, the deposit requirement and the lack of a stable income often make it impossible to rent a flat on their own. In this situation, many people seek **support from aid organisations** or use temporary solutions such as hostels or renting shared rooms. This problem is perfectly illustrated by the account of one interviewee who describes the difficulties of finding a place to live:

I searched and waited because, as you know, it costs a lot of money and I didn't have the funds. Plus, as you know, a single room in Warsaw costs one and a half thousand, and you also need to pay a deposit. No, that's why I contacted organisations to support me. Otherwise, I had no other option.

The lack of available and affordable accommodation forces many people to use overcrowded hostels, which often do not provide suitable conditions for a longer stay:

I am currently staying at a hostel, and it looks like a detention centre, with 8 people in one room.

Temporary accommodation, although a short-term solution, does not allow for normal functioning and doesn't foster social integration. High rental costs combined with administrative and financial barriers leave many people from refugee backgrounds in an unstable housing situation for an extended period of time.

**When they see from the window that you are dark-skinned,
they just disappear.**

However, even with the proper resources, finding accommodation can be difficult - some landlords openly refuse to rent to non-Europeans, making the search process even more complicated. Our interviewee talked about his experience of looking for a room/apartment in this way:

I mean, it's hard to find support on this topic. In Kuchnia, we have caseworkers and they are helping people to find a flat and to rent a room or flat. But also, we are hearing some cases that they don't want to rent their flat to foreigners, especially to immigrants. I was also lucky that I'm not so dark-skinned, but we are hearing such stories. Even when they are waiting for meeting, the first meeting, the landlords, when they see from the window that you are dark-skinned, they just disappear.

Such situations make it impossible for many refugees, even with adequate financial means, to rent a room or a flat on the usual terms. Discrimination on the part of landlords means that the only chance of finding accommodation comes with the help of NGOs, intermediaries or recommendations from friends. Limited access to the rental market often forces them to accept inferior housing conditions, often in overcrowded hostels or substandard housing. The lack of effective mechanisms to counter such practices means that many people from refugee backgrounds face long-term housing insecurity and limited opportunities to improve their situation.



First challenges: Setting into Polish society.

They are staring, they are always staring

After leaving the centre for foreigners, many refugees face distrust and hostility from wider society. Racism and xenophobia are present in public spaces - in shops, offices and even on the street. Sometimes they manifest themselves in gazes, in outright aggression. Some participants of the study emphasise that it is the experience of discrimination, rather than material or bureaucratic difficulties, that makes them leave Poland. They feel that they will never be treated equally here, that their presence is unwelcome. They describe situations in which they have feared for their safety or have been warned to avoid certain locations. Some have the impression that the system itself pushes them out of the country - through lack of support, administrative difficulties and an atmosphere of resentment.

And the another thing that I dislike when I was in Biała Podlaska, even in Łuków... It's like the same case. When you get out, directly Polish, they begin to look at you like you are strange. (...) Even someone who was driving, when he see directly a black man passing, directly... Looking, staring at you. Yeah. Even someone who was driving, even bicycled directly, if he see you, he should look at you... I don't understand why.

However, it is not just about the gazes. Sometimes refugees experience **an obvious sense of danger**. One interviewee described an encounter with informal "civic patrol":

Every day when we see what's happened to people, as asylum here in Poland, especially I can say, according to me, I'm afraid. I'm really, really afraid. One day I met a group of, it was some patrol of Polish who were working sometime in Warsaw, but inside of Warsaw, because it was like so many patrol of Polish people [SPEAKER_07: But officers or no?] No. [SPEAKER_07: Normal, like regular guys?] Regular guys! It was because maybe

Why are you here?

they told, as I read in information, it was that a foreigner killed a Polish man. And Polish men said that they begin to make some patrol to... Yeah. It was this time. It was, I don't remember the city where this thing happened. And I meet them, but I was very careful and I skip them. I skip them. I try to skip them. I take another bus and I skip them. Because when I see this, I have sent it to my lawyer. My lawyer look at it. And told me, when you see them, just skip them. And don't go inside of village, in Warsaw. Just rest in the camp. Don't go inside. Because when you go inside, maybe you can meet them and it can be very bad for you.

Some people pointed out that **the system itself** makes them feel pushed out of the country:

It's like a system who make you to believe that Poland is not good. It's not good for you. You should leave. You cannot stay here. There is no hope here. I can say, Polish people, they don't make foreigners to believe that they can make life here.

Many refugees staying in Poland regularly hear **questions about why they chose to stay here**. Both random people and those from their surroundings often suggest that emigrating to Germany, France or the UK would be a better choice. Some Poles don't understand why refugees would want to stay in a country they perceive as less economically attractive. Those who took part in the study emphasised that such comments are sometimes repetitive - no matter how often they explain their reasons for staying in Poland, the questions come back.

And also, the poor Polish people, the same, they come to you and talk to you, why you come here? Even in the centre that's high, I live over there, they talk to my disabled friend. And even to me, to the security who, I can say, who secures the camp. They talk to us, why you live here? Go to Germany. And we say, we didn't come with this goal in our project. We didn't come with it.

Some refugees stress that **their decision to stay in Poland was a conscious one**. Their

experiences in other countries have taught them how difficult it can be to live in a place where you have no support and where you have to hide from the police every day.

Especially me, I told them that I didn't dream about Germany. Nor about France, nor about England, nor about the Netherlands. Because when I lived in Belarus, I know what it's like to be a foreigner, how difficult it is, if you have no one to help you, in a country where you are a stranger. And I wouldn't want to leave here I would have to move to another place where there would be no one to help me again. I would start running away from here all over again. (...) I don't have to start the same life I had in Belarus all over again, so to speak.

Despite this, many refugees feel that their choice is being questioned and even undermined:

I must fight to be able to stay here

But you will see, you talk to them, you discuss with them today and you tell them, and next time, maybe after two weeks, they come again with the same subject. (...) They will come to tell you, why do you live here? You can go to Germany. Why do you live here? There is nothing. Go, go to Germany. Even when you want to prove them, that here it's good for me. I should live there. No. No. rcYou will say, here there is nothing good.

For some refugees, Poland was supposed to be a place where they would finally feel stable and safe. However, confronted with constant hints that they should leave, some are beginning to wonder whether there is really any space for them to build a future here.

After leaving the centre for foreigners, some decided to stay in Poland even though they were still planning to leave while in detention. The initial experience of staying in a detention centre often shapes a negative image of the country and reinforces the desire to leave Poland as soon as possible. However, **after leaving, the situation changes** - interaction with Poles, support from organisations and churches, and an understanding of the local culture make some people start to consider the possibility of staying differently. One of our interviewees described how his decision evolved:

Actually, when I was in the closed camp, I was like, the way I've been treated in the closed, in the Guarded Centre, which I said: "if I'm out, I'm going out of Poland", you know, but when I came out, then I relate with a Polish citizen, but then I see that they are familiar and most of them don't know what is going on in the Guarded Centre.

However, staying in Poland is **not only a decision but also a challenge**. The legal

uncertainty associated with the time-consuming process of a residence permit makes life and plans difficult. As one interviewee noted, his status is still pending, and each subsequent refusal means having to fight for the opportunity to stay:

You know, I told you earlier that my current status now is obligation to return back home, which I already appeal. But now, I don't know, because now I have some of my family, when I contacted them, they told me, ah, you can, you know, when they say they want to return home or leave Poland, because they gave me two options. Is there an obligation to return back home or leave the Polish territory? And I contacted them, they said, oh, no, you have to, you know, leave the country and look for another country. They said, no, I understand the system, I understand the culture, but I can't go anywhere, you know, to start from scratch. Yeah, I understand the culture and the system. So I have to fight for my stay in Poland.

The decision to stay is therefore often not an easy situation, until one realises **that starting all over again in another country would be even more difficult**. Some refugees point out that Poland, despite its challenges, is a place where they have managed to establish social ties and understand the culture. As one interviewee emphasised:

Actually, you know, I can say because I'm according to the Polish people. So, to my own understanding, I see that they really value their culture, you know, I've met so many Polish people, that they are explaining some of their culture to me, which I know that in Poland, their family, and they have this family, the family-oriented approach is very strong. Which is different, you know, from the other Western European countries. But for Poland, the family-orientation is very strong. So I can say that, for me, I've not been abused of racists here in Poland, which gave me the opportunity to stay back again, and the way the people treat, you know, when I'm out. I contacted some people for help, you know, some organization, some churches, you know. And they are supporting me then. So, just like, you know, I just choose to stay back.

I just like, you know, I just choose to stay back.

For many refugees, **staying in Poland is a choice that stems from real-life relationships and experiences**, not just a lack of other options. The support they have been offered and the sense of understanding of the local culture make them decide to fight for the right to remain in this country, despite the difficulties.

Work, home, sleep

Loneliness is an experience that appears in many of our interviewees' stories.

After leaving the centre for foreigners, they often face not only new challenges related to work and housing, but also the lack of close connections that could help them find their way in a new place. One of our interviewees described his daily life in Poland as a cycle of working and returning home alone:

I live alone and do everything myself. I do the washing, the cooking and the cleaning. My job is the same: I go to work and finish at 2pm. Because of the traffic, it takes me an hour to get back. I go to work at 4 in the

morning and it's the same when I get back. Work, home, sleep, work, home.

The feeling of isolation comes not only due to the lack of close friends, but also because of **difficulties in making new connections**. Language can be a barrier - even among Poles with whom they spend time, it is not always possible to practice Polish:

Currently, now? I spend most of my time with Polish people, but because I find it difficult not to understand because they all speak English so for them it's like..."No I want to, because I learned English from school but I don't have noone to communicate it to". So if I'm communicating with them then they say "No, English" I said no, I mean you can speak Polish to me they said, "no, English". So I find it difficult to learn the language from them because they are not speaking Polish to me, they all speak English.

The lack of close connections, the solitude with day-to-day responsibilities and the difficulty of learning the language make the process of adapting to a new reality even more challenging.

Vulnerable group

Exposed to abuse

People coming to Poland as refugees are often in an extremely difficult situation - they are cut off from their previous lives, deprived of employment opportunities, stability and social support. They do not speak the language, don't have access to reliable information and often don't know where to seek help. This makes them **an exceptionally vulnerable group to various forms of exploitation** - both from criminals and from people who take advantage of their dependency.

Some refugees face **exploitation in the labour market** - working without contracts, for less than minimum wage, often in difficult conditions. Others face scam attempts - false promises of help to legalise their stay, which end with them losing money and becoming even more dependent on others.

These foreigners, these refugees, are so vulnerable to abuse, and can be exploited so easily.

Lack of language skills, uncertainty about the future and lack of a stable income mean that these people are often unable to uphold their rights and become a particularly vulnerable group to this type of abuse.

They do it all

Many refugees, especially in the first months after arrival, **rely on the help of** NGOs, volunteers or individuals. They are the ones who help them find housing, jobs, enrol their children in schools or obtain documents. **Lack of independence** in these aspects of life can lead to a sense of dependence and, consequently, helplessness.

To be honest, I haven't done anything about official matters like that because Ania is always with me and they take care of all my business. I'm only there to sign or go to the doctor and that's it, they do everything.

[Who are these people who help?] I honestly don't know. I feel like I'm a little child who is with my mum. And without my mum, I will get lost and won't know what to do.

Although the support of organisations is often invaluable, **long-term dependence on others can lead to social exclusion**. People who do not take control of their matters at some stage may feel disempowered and dependent. On the other hand, dependence on NGOs may also perpetuate the stereotype

of refugees as **unable to function independently and not integrating** into the local community. However, the situation is much more complex - many of our interviewees, despite their desire to become independent, face many structural barriers, such as lack of access to the labour market, difficulties in obtaining documents or lack of adequate systemic support.

Long-term dependency on NGO assistance can also create frustration - both on the part of refugees who sometimes feel stuck but also on the part of organisations which, with limited resources, are unable to support everybody who needs assistance in the long term. As a result, the integration process can become protracted and refugees can feel stuck between two worlds - the one they escaped from and the one in which they still cannot function fully on their own.



It is easy to lose yourself

A lack of life purpose and stability can lead to serious problems. In Poland, where alcohol is relatively cheap and easily available, many refugees - lacking prospects and support - **fall into addictions.**

Also, it's easy to get lost for them. That alcohol is so cheap in here. So, if they don't have any goal, any purpose in their life, it's too easy to get lost for them. Because you can get drunk with the coins in your pocket from a Żabka, you know? So, I know if a guy who doesn't have a purpose in their life, you know what I mean?

People who see no opportunities ahead of them often fall into a vicious circle of homelessness and addiction. Lack of stability, low income and lack of purpose sometimes cause refugees to seek solace in alcohol:

Then what we'll get? That we'll get some homeless alcoholics on the streets with those people. So, it's important to give them an opportunity

Social marginalisation and a lack of perspectives can turn these people, who once had dreams and plans, into long-lost individuals with no motivation to continue their struggle. This is why it is so important to create the appropriate integration conditions for refugees to help them find meaning and purpose in their new place. Language learning plays a key role here:

So, they need to be integrated and... I think everything starts with language. They need to learn the language.

Without these basics, it is difficult to talk about any adaptation and recovery from the situation they found themselves in after fleeing their country of origin.

Resources

When starting their lives outside the centre for foreigners, refugees enter the process **with a variety of resources**. By resources we mean those internal and external factors that will facilitate and provide significant support in the adaptation process. Some of these will be 'existing' resources, i.e. the person had already possessed them when crossing the border and arriving in Poland, others will be developed by them along the way, others will simply be external factors to which the person is lucky enough to have access to (e.g. family sending money). Below we describe a **list of resources that resonated as key** in our interviews and significantly influenced the fate of our interviewees.

It's easier with English

Being able to speak English makes it much easier to function in Poland, especially in big cities. With English, it is less difficult to make new friends among young people, it is also easier to communicate with organisations supporting foreigners, which reduces the feeling of exclusion in a new environment. Knowledge of the language also gives more opportunities to find a job, but it should be noted that this applies mainly to the largest Polish cities. In smaller towns and in jobs requiring contact with customers, not knowing Polish is a significant barrier. English is sometimes sufficient in the first stage of adaptation, but people who want to develop professionally often find it necessary to learn Polish, as one of our interviewees said:

The language barrier was huge. Like, okay, in Warsaw it's better than other cities because mostly people do speak English. But to find a job., sometimes they are forcing you to know Polish. I applied to some restaurants, but the Polish was a barrier for me.

I can find everything online

Internet access and digital literacy significantly increases the possibility of acquiring information.

I mean for me, in my personal case it was easy to get information, because after access for internet I can check everything on the internet.

Those familiar with modern technology can find their way into a new environment much quicker. For many younger migrants, the Internet is becoming a primary tool for obtaining information, also through AI tools such as ChatGPT. People with low digital literacy, including those who are digitally illiterate, will face much greater challenges in finding their way in a foreign country.

There is nothing without it at the beginning

Financial support from the family remaining in the country of origin is crucial for many people starting their lives in Poland, especially those who do not have access to legal work or any savings during their first period of being here. In such cases, money sent by the family is the only form of income. Lack of funds results not only in difficulties in meeting basic needs, but also greater dependence on aid organisations and a reduced ability to function independently.

I have friends here, so I can manage

A huge resource for people from refugee backgrounds in Poland are acquaintances, their social networks. Connections turn out to be crucial in meeting basic living needs - finding a job or a flat.

Actually, my colleague worked there, or my friend from Iraq. He said he found me a job there. He said they had work there.

Many of our interviewees were supported in finding a job by friends who had already managed to get employed somewhere. One study participant openly talks about the need for brokering services:

I can say most of people that I met here in Poland, who are working here in Poland, who are African people, they told me you cannot find a job yourself here in Poland. (...) It's just a Polish man called the company and seek for them.

Group chats and other channels on popular messengers are an important source of information and useful tips for the migrant community. There, you can find information about available job offers, housing options, offers of aid organisations supporting foreigners, events, meetings or just mutual help. One interviewee mentions that he regularly passed on newly acquired information to friends he met at the centre:

I took photos and sent an email with brief information to my friends about the centres that are closed, and that you can report to or contact this organisation.

What is important and worth noting, not all social media popular in Poland will be effective in reaching out to the migrant community. Facebook is not always a main source of information exchange for migrants. In some countries, e.g. Turkey, it is not a popular platform and therefore some people are not in the habit of looking for job offers or support there. **NGOs advertising their services mainly through this platform may have reduced effectiveness in reaching certain audience groups.**

Acquaintances also give refugees **a fundamental sense of security**, a feeling that they are not alone.

I have friends here, colleagues, and even if I lose one job, I will always find another one, and thanks to the fact that I have many contacts and acquaintances, I will manage.

People from migration and refugee backgrounds often form **communities with similar experiences**, which replace traditional support networks. These relationships do not necessarily have to be based on a common language or nationality - understanding based on shared experiences becomes crucial. In this way, migrants can count on support and solidarity in their daily challenges, making it easier for them to find their way in the new environment. One participant in the study puts it as follows:

It is kind of like brotherhood. You know? Like, if you are in that group, then you are a family. (...) Because you have the same story, same challenges. (...) So, we just created a community which is not based on country or nationality, just based on the story of being a refugee.

In a qualitative study we conducted, in a collective accommodation centre for Ukrainian refugees, one key finding was the recognition of the community as a protective and supportive factor, especially for the senior citizens living in the centre. The friendships formed in places of collective accommodation become a real support and often a source of access to services or other goods. **At the same time, participants of our study indicate that the inability to communicate in one language and a deterioration in mental state can form barriers preventing people from establishing relationships and being a resource for one another.** The language barrier makes it difficult to make connections, especially among people from different national and ethnic groups. It limits the possibility to build relationships and support each other, but does not completely exclude them. Often interactions are based on other forms of communication - shared activities, gestures or emotional bonds. Spending time together, e.g. with children, makes it possible to bridge the gap and build relationships despite language differences.

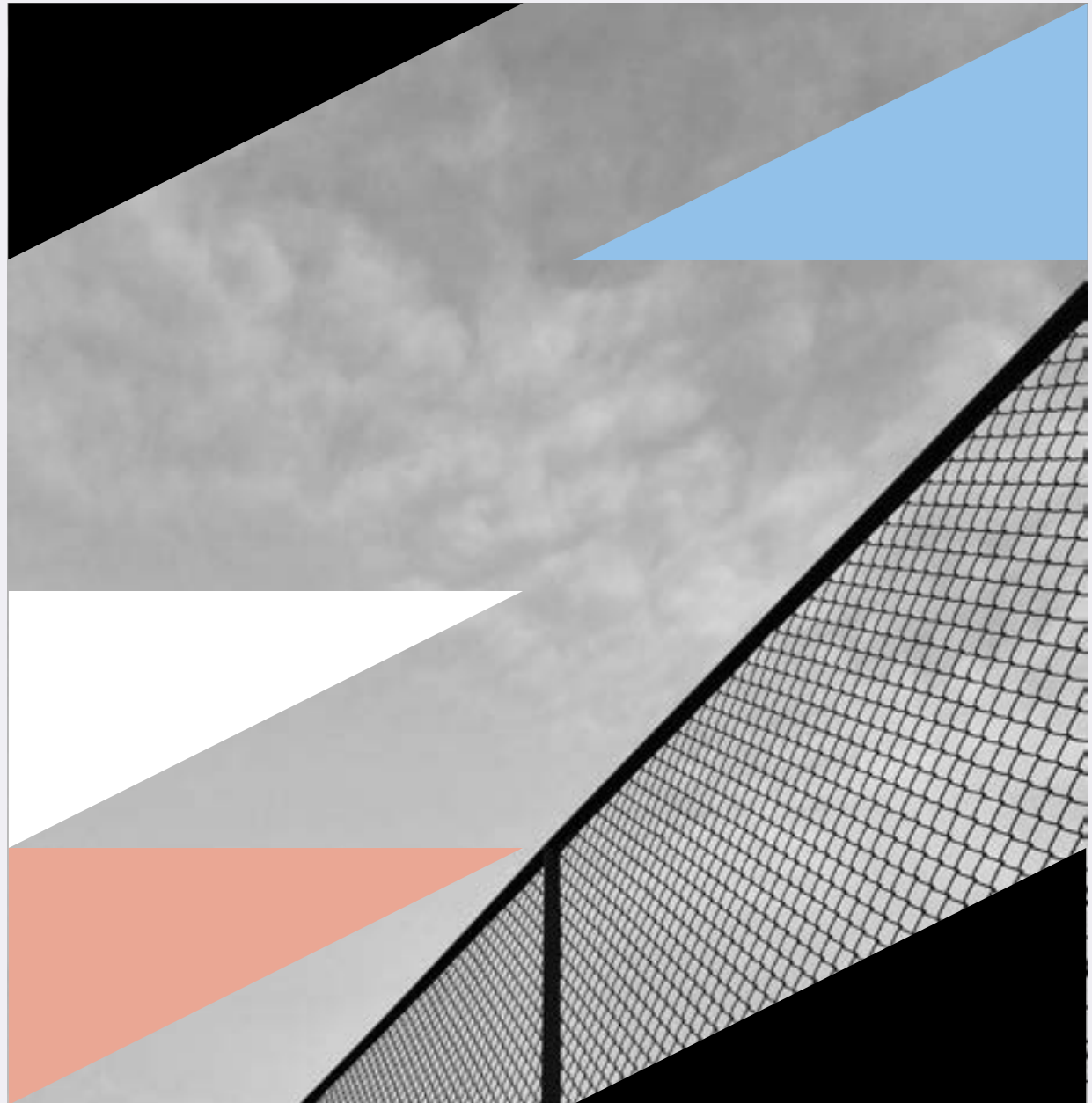
There are more Chechens and Ukrainians here. And because I don't speak the language, I can't really communicate with them. But there are also a lot of people from Africa. And there is one lady here who has a son who is 4 or 5 months old. And I often visit her and play with her son.

Openness and the ability to connect with people are internal resources that are going to facilitate building a social network and reaching out for support. It is precisely the ability to make new friends and sociableness that makes it easier for people to cope in new circumstances. This resource will often allow them to establish relationships even without knowing the language.

I am communicative, I get along with people quickly. I was just searching on Facebook, saw who was here, who was from Iraq, and added them on Facebook. Then I chatted and messaged them, and that was it.

The use of social media allows migrants to quickly reach out to their compatriots, which can lead to getting support and information, navigating more easily in the new - Polish - reality.

Pretty good mental state and a basic sense of security will be a factor that facilitates openness and willingness to make contact with others. Many people who have crossed the green border and stayed in a detention centre have had border experiences, i.e. experiences on the verge of life and death. The build-up of trauma and stressors from their new living reality means that this resource, at least initially, may be beyond their reach.



What helps?

In addition to the existing resources available in different ways, participants of the study also mentioned other forms of support activities or practices that allowed them to cope with the circumstances they found themselves in.

Support from NGOs

For many migrants, **NGOs are the first place they turn to for help**. The names of NGO staff who supported them while they were still in the detention centre or freshly after they left the centre were repeatedly mentioned in the stories of our interviewees. They mentioned their names in response to questions about the closest people in Poland. It is not always about a specific service the organisation provides - often the mere fact that someone will listen, explain procedures or point out where to look for further support is of great importance. NGOs act as a point of reference in the new environment - they are often also a point of assistance, e.g. by

providing temporary accommodation or mediating in networking with migrant communities. They also often act as guides in the Polish administrative system, accompanying refugees at meetings with authorities or interpreting during medical appointments. Naturally, NGO staff are often the first contact for people from refugee backgrounds and are confronted with the responsible role of providing support to the beneficiaries to foster their independence in their new environment.

Sport, physical activity

Physical activity and participation in movement-oriented activities can be an important part of the daily life of people in detention centres for foreigners. Sport keeps you busy, allows you to fill your time and can be associated with a sense of empowerment, with the satisfaction of achievement, even in limited conditions

Then, after some time, I realised that I had to do something with my life and started doing sports. I won a few competitions, I think I won two sports competitions.

Sport and physical activity can be a coping strategy for helplessness caused by procedures that force people to wait for their residence status to be resolved. **Education can play a similar role** - attending courses or language classes regularly gives a sense of routine to the day and takes one's mind off the difficulties. One participant in the study puts it this way:

When you are in depression also it depends. The recent day you feel good. The recent day you don't feel good. But that's why when I come to the Polish course, it's just to skip my brain to think about a lot of things. Because I know when I come to Polish, Polish courses may help me. Because I have some time to make other things. I can say that even I don't have a job, but I am making something.

Prayer, faith

Prayer and faith can also provide a sense of stability and agency in uncertain circumstances. In situations beyond one's control, faith helps to rely on something greater than just one's capacities. For some people, religious practices are a source of inner strength, to preserve their hope or to put their daily life in order.

And you are happy, but on the other hand, you feel nothing. And I also went out with my son and we prayed.

Prayer can also become a ritual which supports the recovery of psychological well-being. Faith communities are also sometimes a place of social support, which can be particularly important for people experiencing loneliness.

Unused resources

There is no integration path for you

In Poland, the lack of a system that effectively supports the professional integration of highly qualified workers with migration background is a problem - both in the context of diploma nostrification and recognition of qualifications in practice. One of our interviewees, a doctor, talked about his struggles in finding a rewarding job like:

If you are well-educated, you have a good profession. And, okay, right now, I feel really useful because I'm helping refugees. Like, in my opinion, it is also kind of being a doctor. But if I couldn't have this job, I would be working in a kebab restaurant. Like, for 14 hours per day with this knowledge and skills. I'm not saying this job is not important. It is... But just... I might say less, you know? So, in this term, there is literally nothing.

His attempts to get information on job opportunities were unsuccessful. The institutions he visited didn't know how to guide him or which procedures to follow. His diploma supplement, intended to allow for the recognition of his professional qualifications within

Europe, was not proven effective.

Izba Lekarska saying, you need to ask to Ministry of Health. Ministry of Health, they are saying, you need to ask to Medicine University. Medicine University, they are saying, you need to talk with Izba Lekarska. They don't know what to do with you.

For many migrants, this means taking on jobs below their qualifications or changing their career path, which entails additional difficulties, especially if costly and time-consuming courses are required to be completed. The lack of support in this area leads to the underutilisation of skills that could enrich the labour market and the hosting society, as our interviewee notes:

If you have a good system to integrate me to the system, a doctor costs millions for a country to educate a doctor, so I would be more valuable.

Accepting where I am - Mr Ahmad's story¹

We would like to conclude with Mr Ahmad's story, which we extracted from the main part of the report, as his narrative was different from the others. Our interviewee shared his story of being placed in a detention centre for foreigners. He indicated that his readiness to accept the consequences of his decision and coming to terms with his situation made it easier for him to function there:

As I said, I would like to talk about myself because they dublined me [abbreviation of the Dublin Regulation which is used to determine which EU member state is responsible for processing an application for international protection - author's note], in the sense that they sent me back from Germany to Poland. When they took me to the Border Guard, I was told I had two options. Either I leave the country voluntarily or I am taken to a detention centre. I chose the latter. (...) I said that yes, I am guilty of crossing the border illegally and I am ready for the punishment you are giving me. So I agree to all the punishments you are giving me, and I think that helped me feel better mentally.

His agency and self-determination was reflected in taking responsibility for his own decisions and making the choice to be placed in the detention centre. He emphasised that he had good conditions there, the possibility for physical activities and contact with people with different cultural backgrounds, which he considered to be of big value. He was aware that his attitude was one of the exceptions in a detention centre. He talked about his mental resilience as follows:

I was in a better mental state, also because I had already come to terms with what had happened, I had accepted the punishment. And that's why I was more prepared, in the sense that I was more... I accepted the place where I was and that's why I wanted to learn more from some people or other priorities were important to me in being there. (...) because not everyone there was as prepared as I was or had already accepted what happened to them in that place. Most of them were not ready for it.

His attitude of acceptance allowed him to stop fighting against reality and channel his saved energy into the things he had control over - in this case, activities such as sport and language classes.

I have also improved my CV. Of course, as soon as I get a work permit, I will submit my CV in the profession I am working in, in the field of dental engineering. I think I have a good profession. As soon as I find a job, I can live better. But in the meantime, I am waiting for what is to come. At the moment, I am focusing on learning Polish because I think it is very important.

This process can also be supported by preparation for entering the labour market in Poland in the future. Statements from the study show that people who focus on learning the language, improving their CVs and anticipating the possibility of taking up a legal job consider this to be a crucial part of building their future. Furthermore, the study shows that it is the lack of access to basic information about Poland and its realities that causes

people to set off in search of another country to live in. The lack of access to information is a real barrier to integration.

People who can adapt to new circumstances can find their way in a new reality much easier. Accepting the consequences of their actions and focusing on the options available can help to maintain mental balance and make plans for the future.

Summary

The purpose of our study was **to better understand the experiences of people who left detention and open centres, to identify the challenges** they face and, consequently, **to recognise the needs and determine the most effective ways for public institutions and NGOs to respond to them.**

The findings of the study take the readers through **the stages of the process that refugees must go through after leaving the detention centre.** From the moment the door closes behind them, as they search for a new destination and means of transport; through the gradual return to mental well-being and recovery from survival mode; then attempts to get a job and find accommodation; and attempts to find their place in Polish society.

During this process, **people from refugee backgrounds face several challenges.** Among the most significant, they mention **the difficulties in obtaining stable employment**, resulting, among other things, from

language barriers, lack of recognition of professional qualifications, and unfamiliarity with the local labour market. Another major challenge is **finding suitable housing**, especially given the high costs, and the reluctance of landlords to rent flats to people from refugee backgrounds. Other barriers include **institutional problems with residence regulations and difficulties in social integration**, due to the lack of support in learning the language and the aversion that Poles sometimes demonstrate towards them.

We conclude the report by pointing out the **resources that make it easier for refugees to adapt**, as well as those that these people bring with them, even if they are not used by the state.

We aimed to firmly ground the emerging themes in the qualitative data collected. The quotes illustrating the issues discussed are the voice of the participants in the study, which best captures and illustrates the nuances of what they face. Their story and the

recommendations identified are intended to serve as a key signpost for institutions, public bodies and NGOs providing support to refugee and migrant communities in adapting their offer and forms of assistance.

Recommendations for organisations supporting refugees and migrants

To support refugees more effectively, public institutions and non-governmental organisations should adapt their activities to the real needs of this community, especially in the immediate period after leaving detention centres. Particularly important in this respect is the cooperation of institutions such as **the Border Guard, the Office for Foreigners, the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, the Ministry of the Family, Labour and Social Policy, County Family Assistance Centres, Social Welfare Centres** with the support of **NGOs**.

Based on our study, we have identified **key areas of support**:

1. Basic information support - user manual for Poland

People leaving detention centres often do not have access to basic information about living in Poland. The above-mentioned institutions and NGOs supporting refugees should focus on providing practical guidance, among others:

- How to use public transport, where to buy tickets, who can travel for free?
- What are the weather conditions in Poland and how to better prepare for them?
- What organisations provide support and what do they specialise in?
- On which websites should people look for job offers? When reviewing adverts, what is the most important aspect to look out for? What is the general norm around CV writing (what to write and what not to write)?
- How does the health care system function and where to seek medical assistance?
- What rights and obligations do people have while in the procedure and those who already have a refugee status in Poland?
- How does everyday life look like, where to do groceries, how to find accommodation? When are public holidays and days off in Poland?
- How does the Polish education system function and what are the educational opportunities?

Recommendations for organisations supporting refugees and migrants

It is also important **to adapt communication channels to the audience** - Facebook or other Polish websites are not always popular among migrants. Networking and using the ripple effect method to pass on information about services to potentially interested people can be a good solution.

As one participant in the study suggested, **materials with basic information about Poland could also be published in the form of videos easily accessible on the Internet**: "I also have a suggestion, because it might be difficult to do training in a detention centre, but to have videos on YouTube or in a detention centre to have several informative videos to show to these people who are there, because I understand that the training will take a long time. For example, one informative video about communication, another about something else."

Recommended actions further include:

- creating a **basic handbook** for people leaving the detention centres (e.g. in the form of a brochure, app, downloadable pdf file),
- providing **short information videos** in different languages (created in cooperation with the migrant community),
- sharing a continuously **updated list of support organisations** by area of expertise- where to find social, legal, housing or employment assistance, where to find psychological support.

Recommendations for organisations supporting refugees and migrants

2. Building social networks as a key resource

Our study demonstrated that one of the most important factors facilitating the stabilisation of life after leaving the detention centre is social capital. Friendships often help in finding a job, housing and accessing NGO support. In addition, they are a source of support and a protective factor in the face of mental crises. The above institutions and NGOs should:

- create **spaces for integration and relationship building** (e.g. support groups recognising the similarities of experiences, networking meetings, language courses with integrative elements),
- foster the development of **local support networks**, e.g. by linking newly arrived refugees with more experienced people who themselves also have a migration background,
- where possible - **develop activities to animate the community of residents of open centres**, to facilitate communication and create an environment that nurtures meeting, networking to counter loneliness and support mental health recovery,
- promote **volunteering** as a form of social inclusion and gaining experience.

Recommendations for organisations supporting refugees and migrants

3. Language courses as a key to integration

Language skills are crucial for the integration and empowerment of people from refugee backgrounds. It is also in many cases a prerequisite for a satisfactory job. The above institutions and NGOs should:

- organise **professional language courses** adapted to different levels and learning intensity,
- combine **learning the Polish language with practicalities**, e.g. workshops on culture and life in Poland,
- provide **a tailored and flexible offer** - organise courses online, in the evenings, but also directly in open centres, so that different people can benefit from them
- offer **vocational language courses** for specific groups (e.g. doctors, engineers, teachers).

Recommendations for organisations supporting refugees and migrants

4. Support for integration into the labour market

Access to the labour market and getting into work are the key focus areas important to our interviewees. The above institutions and NGOs should:

- provide **training to employers**, raising awareness of the employment of migrants and refugees and pointing out its benefits
- conduct **proactive career counselling** including, among other things, organising networking meetings with employers to enable refugees to make professional contacts
- create **informational resources** on the legality of employment, contracts or working conditions in Poland
- **increase beneficiaries' awareness of how to navigate the Polish labour market**, including: adequate adjustment of CVs, preparation for job interviews, strengthening of culturally relevant soft skills
- create **databases of 'migrant- and refugee-friendly' employers**
- **provide information** on available programmes and rules for applications or enrolment in **vocational, post-secondary or higher education**

Recommendations for organisations supporting refugees and migrants

5. Mobilisation through sport

Physical activity improves wellbeing and encourages motivation. It is also an excellent opportunity for community building and networking. The above institutions and NGOs should:

- organise **collective sports activities** in the centres and for those who have already left them,
- combine **sports activities with social integration** (e.g. joint matches, walks, charity runs),
- **test different forms of mobilisation**, e.g. exercising in the morning as part of introducing routine and structure into daily life.

6. Psychological support

People from refugee backgrounds often struggle with depressed moods, post-traumatic stress and adaptation difficulties. The above institutions and NGOs should:

- provide **access to professional, culturally and linguistically adapted psychological support**, also on the premises of centres for foreigners,
- **use a variety of support methods**, not limited to traditional psychotherapy, but also include alternative forms of support, e.g. therapy through joint activities, art classes, psycho-educational workshops, integration activities or simply accompanying.

Recommendations for organisations supporting refugees and migrants

7. Proactive approach to support

The above institutions and NGOs should not wait for refugees to reach out to organisations themselves - it is necessary to reach out beforehand to those who have just left detention centres or are in open centres. This is what is needed:

- well-marked **mobile support teams** reaching places where refugees are residing,
- **information stands** at open centres,
- **systemic cooperation** with institutions/organisations/local leaders in towns close to centres for foreigners.

8. Advocacy efforts and public education

It is necessary to work towards changing the public perception of migration and refugee experiences, both among institutions and in society. The above institutions and NGOs should:

- organise **training for public servants and institutions** to increase their competence in working with migrants and refugees,
- **promote the recognition of the qualifications** of migrants and refugees through advocacy to put pressure on the institutions responsible for recognising qualifications,
- **promote positive examples of integration and success stories of migrants and refugees,**
- conduct information and advocacy campaigns to protect the rights of migrants and refugees.i uchodźców.