

# **Do Ukrainian Refugees Work More Than Other Refugees?**

## **Employment Rates from Denmark Compared to Germany<sup>1</sup>**

Edith Zink (University of Copenhagen)

Mette Foged (University of Copenhagen and Rockwool Foundation Research Unit)

Karen-Inge Karstoft (University of Copenhagen)

Prepared for ifo Schnelldienst 10/2024: Return or Integration

[Link \(German\)](#)

### **Refugees from Ukraine – a special group?**

More than six million people fled from Ukraine to Europe within the first two and a half years after Russia's invasion on February 24, 2022.<sup>2</sup> Most arrived shortly after the invasion and were welcomed by an active civil society. The majority of displaced Ukrainians also reported no issues entering the European Union (EU) (FRA, 2023). Upon arrival in Europe, they faced different rules than refugees from other countries, such as being able to decide where to settle and having immediate access to the labor market. Typical countries of origin for other refugees are further away from Europe, making the journey long and dangerous. Many refugees spend months in the asylum system before being placed in a municipality and given access to the labor market. The situation for Ukrainian refugees is very different.

This article first presents the employment rates of Ukrainian refugees in Denmark compared to refugees from other countries. We compare these rates with available figures from Germany and Europe and discuss possible reasons for differences. Finally, we discuss the potential role of traumatic experiences and early signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the generally lower employment rates of refugees compared to natives and other immigrants. This is based on new survey data we collected from Ukrainian refugees in Denmark asking about traumatic experiences and PTSD symptoms.

---

<sup>1</sup>We are deeply grateful to Jacob Arendt and Panu Poutvaara for their detailed feedback. We also thank Herbert Brücker and Yuliya Kosyakova for their assistance with our comparisons of employment rates in Germany. This piece was written as a contribution to the ifo Schnelldienst 10/2024: Return and Integration. The cover story can be accessed under this link <https://www.ifo.de/en/publications/2024/article-journal/rueckkehr-oder-integration-welche-perspektiven-haben-gefluchtete>. The full publication under this link: <https://www.ifo.de/en/publications/2024/journal-complete-issue/ifo-schnelldienst-102024-return-or-integration>.

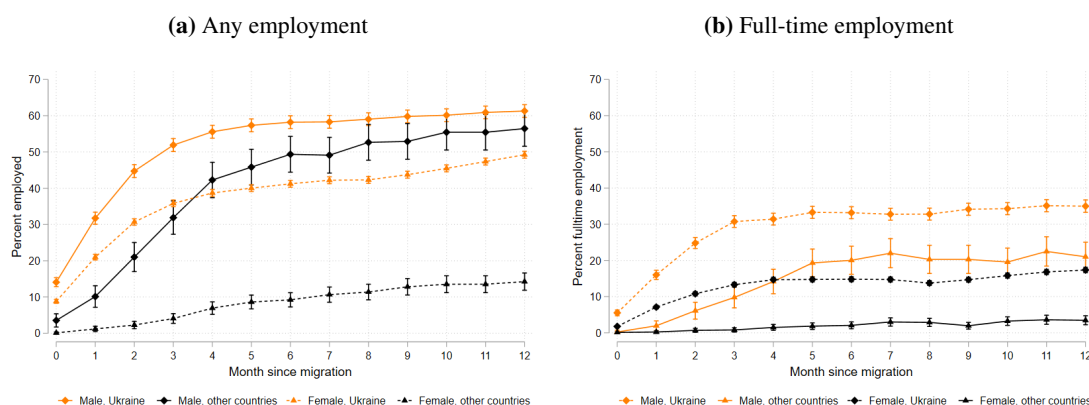
<sup>2</sup>The figure was provided by the UNHCR and is accessible online (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>), last accessed on September 14, 2024. Europe includes all European subregions, including non-EU countries.

# Employment rates of refugees in Denmark

We use full-population register data from Denmark to calculate the monthly employment rates of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees. The information on refugee employment comes from monthly tax records, which capture all taxable income in Denmark. At this point, we can track the data of all Ukrainian refugees who arrived in the first three quarters of 2022 for one year after their arrival. We compare this with data from refugees from other countries who received asylum between 2021 and 2022.<sup>3</sup> Most non-Ukrainian refugees came from Syria (32%), followed by Afghanistan (24%), Eritrea (11%), and Iran (10%).

Figure 1 shows the employment rates of 18- to 64-year-old Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees, divided by the proportion with at least one hour of paid work per month (a) and the proportion who worked full-time (b).

**Figure 1: Share of Ukrainian refugees and non-Ukrainian refugees in employment**



*Note:* Individuals aged 18 to 64 years old when admitted to Denmark in second and third quarter of 2022 (Ukrainians) or first quarter 2021 to third quarter 2022 (other origin countries). Using only refugees who were still in Denmark one year after migration.

Ukrainian refugees found work faster than other refugees. More than 10% had employment in the month of their arrival in Denmark, and the employment rate rose steeply in the first three months after arrival before leveling off. Half (52%) of the Ukrainian refugees in Denmark were employed one year after arrival, which is not significantly different from the employment rate of male refugees from other countries (56%). Notably, the employment rate of female non-Ukrainian refugees is low, at 14%, which is about a quarter of the employment rate of Ukrainian refugees and male non-Ukrainian refugees.

<sup>3</sup>Specifically, our sample includes all refugees from Ukraine who came to Denmark for the first time between February 24 and September 30, 2022, and received a residence permit either under the special law for displaced persons from Ukraine or as Ukrainian citizens. The group of refugees from other countries includes all those who came to Denmark for the first time between January 1, 2021, and September 30, 2022, and received a residence permit for asylum or family reunification with a refugee. We exclude a small number of individuals who registered as having left Denmark within one year of arrival (0.003%) to have a balanced group. We could also restrict the group of non-Ukrainian refugees to arrivals in the first three quarters of 2022. However, this group is small (< 600 people), and we decided to include arrivals in 2021 to improve the precision and accuracy of the employment rates.

About 21% of Ukrainian refugees had full-time employment one year after arrival (see Fig. 1b). This level is comparable to the proportion of full-time employed male refugees from other countries, which is also 21% one year after arrival.

The gender differences are more pronounced in full-time employment compared to any employment. The proportion of full-time employment is twice as high among male Ukrainian refugees as among female Ukrainian refugees (35% versus 17%, one year after arrival). Among non-Ukrainian refugees, the gender difference is greater. In this group, male refugees are seven times more likely to be employed full-time than female refugees (21% versus 3%, one year after arrival).

## Comparison with Germany

Survey data from Germany suggests that only about 17% of Ukrainian refugees had employment at least six months after arrival (Brücker et al., 2023).<sup>4</sup> After at least one year in Germany, Kosyakova et al. (2023) calculate that the employment rate rose to 28%. This implies a 60% increase in the employment rate compared to the 17% after at least six months. This increase is significantly larger than what we observe in the second half of the first year for Ukrainian refugees in Denmark. Nevertheless, the level of employment after one year in Germany is only about half as high as the comparable employment rates of Ukrainian refugees in Denmark.

Kosyakova and Brücker (2024) simulate various scenarios of labor market integration for Ukrainian refugees in Germany based on the trajectories of previous refugees from the former Soviet Union. They conclude that it will likely take four to five years for Ukrainian refugees in Germany to reach employment rates at the level we observe in Denmark after just one year.

The gender differences in employment rates are very similar in Denmark and Germany. Brücker et al. (2023) find that after at least six months in Germany, the employment rate among male Ukrainian refugees is 1.5 times higher than among female Ukrainian refugees (24% of men, 16% of women). The figures reported for Denmark show that the employment rate of male Ukrainian refugees in the sixth month after arrival is about 1.4 times higher than that of female Ukrainian refugees (58% of men, 41% of women).

---

<sup>4</sup>See Figure 9 on page 412 of Brücker et al. (2023). Employment is defined as any paid or self-employed activity. The respondents are a representative sample of 18- to 64-year-old Ukrainian nationals who sought protection in Germany between February 24, 2022, and June 2022 and were surveyed between August and October 2022. The employment rate six months after arrival is therefore only observed for refugees who arrived within the first two months after the invasion. We obtain a similar employment rate six months after arrival as in Figure 1 if we also restrict our group to arrivals within the first two months after the Russian invasion and use all in month six after arrival, without restricting to at least one year of residence in Denmark. The employment rate in month six is then 48% (62% for men, 45% for women).

## Comparison with other European countries

[Adema et al. \(2024\)](#) calculate the employment rates of Ukrainian refugees across Europe based on an online panel survey of Ukrainian refugees recruited through Facebook ads.<sup>5</sup> The respondents had fled Ukraine on average 194 days earlier (i.e., about six months) and 36% of them were employed at the time of the survey. [FRA \(2023\)](#) conducted a survey among Ukrainian citizens or residents who had lived permanently in Ukraine before February 24, 2022, and had arrived in the EU shortly before or after February 24, 2022.<sup>6</sup> [FRA \(2023\)](#) finds a similar employment rate of 35% in Europe.

Both studies document significant differences in the employment rates of Ukrainian refugees in various countries and show that Germany stands out with significantly lower employment rates. The employment rates for Germany in the data from [Adema et al. \(2024\)](#) and [FRA \(2023\)](#) are similar to those from [Brücker et al. \(2023\)](#), which are based on a representative sample within Germany. [FRA \(2023\)](#) finds the highest employment rates in Slovakia: 45% of women and 56% of men among Ukrainian refugees – a similar magnitude to what we observe in Denmark.<sup>7</sup>

The gender differences in the employment rates of Ukrainian refugees in host countries are evident across Europe. [FRA \(2023\)](#) shows that 39% of male respondents and 31% of female respondents had paid work. This implies that 1.25 times more men than women are working – a slightly smaller but comparable factor to what we find in Denmark and what [Brücker et al. \(2023\)](#) find in Germany.<sup>8</sup>

## Why is employment of Ukrainian refugees lower in Germany?

The differences in employment rates of Ukrainian refugees between Denmark and Germany seem specific to the early employment rates of Ukrainian refugees. [Aksoy et al. \(2023\)](#) use all arrivals between 2013 and 2016 and show that in Germany, the employment rate of 18- to 49-year-old male refugees is 47% four years after arrival and 41% five years after arrival. In Denmark, for the same arrival years, we see that 59% of male refugees aged 18 to 49 are employed four years after arrival and 61% five years after arrival. Here, the differences between Denmark and Germany are relatively smaller than for Ukrainian refugees in the first year after arrival.

---

<sup>5</sup>Their sample includes responses from Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Their data are not representative at the country level, and for most target countries, the samples are small. The first survey round took place between June and December 2022. [Adema et al. \(2024\)](#) excluded 42 of 11,783 respondents who had left Ukraine before 2022. Of the remaining respondents, 3% left Ukraine in January 2022, 87% from February to April, 9% from May to August, and 1% from September to December.

<sup>6</sup>The data collection took place in August and September 2022, which corresponds to five to six months after arrival. The survey covers ten EU countries (Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Estonia) and is representative at the country level.

<sup>7</sup>Denmark is not part of [FRA \(2023\)](#)'s sample.

<sup>8</sup>An overview of all the studies we used to compare employment rates can be found in Table 1 in the appendix.

What can we learn from comparing the employment rates of Ukrainian refugees? In the following, we will discuss whether the lower employment of Ukrainian refugees in Germany compared to Denmark might be specific to the early employment outcomes and the composition of the Ukrainian refugee population, which consists of a relatively high proportion of women with children. We conclude with a discussion of ongoing research projects on the role of traumatic experiences for the employment of refugees.

## **Will employment rates converge in the long-run?**

FRA (2023) asks about barriers to finding paid work. Insufficient knowledge of the host country's language was the main barrier (51%) and was most frequently mentioned in Germany (67%). Similarly, Brücker et al. (2023) document that the most frequently identified support and counseling need among Ukrainian refugees in Germany was learning the German language (49%), followed by job search (31%).

While knowledge of the host country's language is important for the long-term employment of refugees (Arendt et al., 2022; Foged et al., 2024a; Fouka, 2024), language training has a so-called lock-in effect. It initially delays entry into employment. Denmark switched from a language-first to a work-first principle in integration policy in 2015 (Arendt, 2022). In Germany, a language-first principle is still followed. This could contribute to the lower employment rates in Germany in the first year after arrival. If the lock-in effects of language training are the main reason for the lower employment rates among Ukrainian refugees in Germany, the picture could very well change in the coming years (Hernes et al., 2020; Arendt and Bolvig, 2023).

However, participation in language training does not seem to differ much between Ukrainian refugees in Germany and Denmark. In Denmark, about half of the adult population of Ukrainian refugees attend language courses.<sup>9</sup> In Germany, 51% of Ukrainian refugees are enrolled in or have completed a German course (Brücker et al., 2023).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is questionable whether a lock-in effect from language training is the main driver behind the differences in employment rates that we observe.

## **Is the need for childcare among Ukrainian refugees better met in Denmark?**

The second most common barrier to finding paid work in the FRA (2023) analysis was care-taking responsibilities (28%). Furthermore, research from Germany suggests that difficulties navigating the childcare system are a barrier to labor market integration for refugee parents (Cornelissen et al., 2018; Gambaro et al., 2021). Gambaro et al. (2024) estimate the causal relationship between the availability of childcare

---

<sup>9</sup>Own calculation based on (<https://integrationsbarometer.dk/ukrainere/hvor-mange-laerer-dansk>), last accessed on September 14, 2024.

<sup>10</sup>Kosyakova et al. (2024) show that the number is 70% of non-employed.

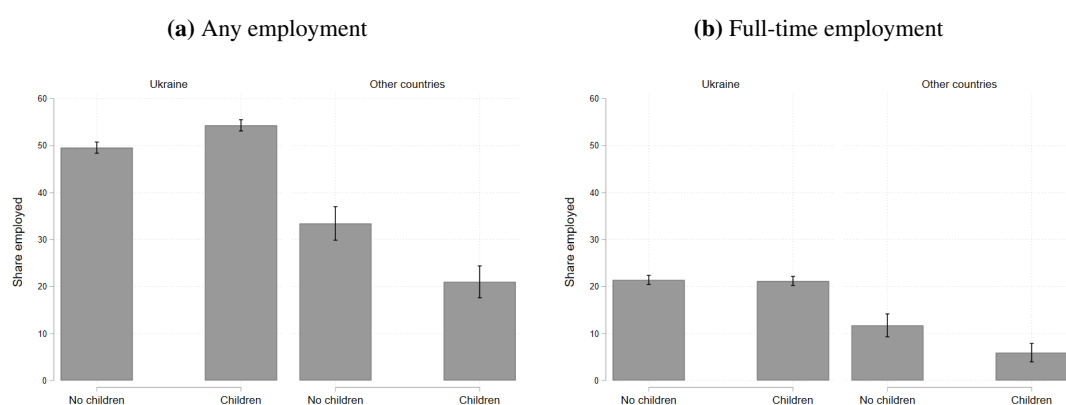
services and the participation of Ukrainian refugee mothers in language and integration programs, employment, and their overall social integration in Germany. According to their calculations, the availability of childcare increases the likelihood of being employed by 18 percentage points. Given the low employment rate of Ukrainian female refugees in Germany, this seems to be a very significant effect.

Consistent with the idea that the availability of childcare could contribute to the lower employment rate of Ukrainian refugees in Germany compared to Denmark, [Kosyakova et al. \(2024\)](#) correlate a number of factors that – according to current research – affect the employment of refugees with differences in the employment of Ukrainian refugees at an aggregate level in Europe. They show that the childcare infrastructure is strongly correlated with the employment of Ukrainian refugees in Europe.

In Figure 2, we calculate the employment rates among refugees who arrive in Denmark with or without children. These are based on the same group of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees as in Figure 1. Figure 2 (a) shows the employment rates one year after arrival. Among Ukrainian refugees, the presence of a child does not seem to hinder their labor market participation. On the contrary, we even see higher employment among parents than among non-parents. Refugees from other countries have, on average, lower employment if they have children. This overall picture does not change when we consider female and male refugees separately.

When we look at full-time employment among parents and non-parents in Figure 2 (b), we see that there is no significant difference in full-time employment between parents and non-parents among Ukrainian refugees. Full-time employment among parents from other countries is somewhat lower than among non-parents. We take this as an indication that access to childcare is not a major barrier to the employment of refugees in Denmark. Therefore, we think that easy access to childcare could be part of the explanation for why Ukrainian refugees, many of whom are women with children, seem to be more successful in the Danish labor market than in the German one.

**Figure 2:** Employment one year after arrival by parental status



*Note:* Individuals aged 18 to 64 at the time of admission to Denmark in the second and third quarters of 2022 (Ukrainians) or in the first quarter of 2021 to the third quarter of 2022 (other countries). Only refugees who were still in Denmark one year after migration. Vertical lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals. Source: Authors' calculations.

## Traumatic experiences contribute to the underemployment of refugees

In ongoing research projects, we are investigating the role of trauma-related mental health issues for the employment of refugees (Foged et al., 2024b). For this, we combine survey data from the first round of the Danish Refugee Cohort (DARECO) survey with monthly tax data. We find that early symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are associated with significant declines in employment one year after arrival.

Employment among refugees with PTSD symptoms is on average 7 percentage points lower than the employment rates of refugees without symptoms. Among refugees with symptoms of complex PTSD (CPTSD), which is a more severe and likely chronic condition, the difference in employment rate is 12 percentage points. This difference is comparable in magnitude to the labor market returns from the ability to speak English at a conversational level compared to no English skills. Overall, PTSD/CPTSD symptoms are associated with a 10 percentage point lower employment rate. This corresponds to 40% of the employment gap between refugees and natives in Denmark in 2023. About one-third of Ukrainian refugees in Denmark report symptoms of PTSD/CPTSD within the first six months after arrival. Given this prevalence, early symptoms can explain about 12% of the employment gap between refugees and natives.

We consider PTSD and CPTSD symptoms because they are directly related to potentially traumatic experiences often encountered by refugees. Accordingly, we also find a strong correlation between war-related, potentially traumatic experiences and the occurrence of PTSD/CPTSD symptoms. The loss of close friends or relatives and the direct experience of combat in one's hometown are strongly correlated with the early symptoms we observe in our survey data. Typically, integration policies, such as partici-

pation in active labor market programs and language courses, do not address these mental health issues of refugees. At the same time, refugees often have difficulty navigating the healthcare system of the host country. With mental health issues, where linguistic and cultural barriers to seeking help are likely higher, this could be particularly challenging.

## Conclusions

Our comparison of employment rates provides three interesting insights:

First, we find that Ukrainian refugees were able to find employment faster than other refugees when we look at the employment trajectories of Ukrainian refugees in Denmark. However, the employment rates one year after arrival are just as high as those of male refugees from other countries.

Second, the comparison across Europe shows that the employment rates up to one year after arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Germany are relatively low compared to Denmark and other countries in Europe.

Third, we highlight an important and under-researched role of trauma in the underemployment of refugees.

Further research is needed to understand the causes of the different employment rates of refugees in host countries and the general underemployment of refugees. In terms of cross-country comparisons, it is important to consider both the composition of refugees by host country and the societal differences in the policies and social institutions of these countries. It is important to think beyond the typical scope of integration policy. Aspects such as easy and affordable access to daycare or schools could be very important — especially given the large proportion of women with children among the refugees displaced by the current war in Ukraine. Moreover, typical integration measures do not address mental health issues in the refugee group. Our current research findings suggest that trauma is a relevant factor in understanding the general employment gap between refugees and natives or other migrants.



## Appendix

**Table 1:** Overview of Studies with Employment Rates of Ukrainians in Germany

Study	Host Country	Arrival Period	Months Since Migration	Employment Rate (%)	Sample and Data Collection
Adema et al. (2024)	Europe	2022 (87% Feb. – Apr.)	6 (Average)	36	Sample of Ukrainian refugees, recruited via Facebook ads, 94% arrived after Feb. 24
Brücker et al. (2023)	Germany	Feb. 24 – Jun. 8, 2022	$\geq 6$	17	Representative sample of Ukrainian refugees, 18–64, IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP survey, 1st wave Aug.–Oct. 2022
Kosyakova et al. (2023)	Germany	Feb. 24 – Jun. 8, 2022	$\geq 12$	28	Representative sample of Ukrainian refugees, 18–64, IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP survey, 2nd wave Jan.–Mar. 2023
FRA (2023)	Europe	Feb. 2022	5–6	35	Representative sample of Ukrainian refugees in Europe
FRA (2023)	Germany	Feb. 2022	5–6	15	Representative sample of Ukrainian refugees in Germany

## References

- Adema, J. A. H., Aksoy, C. G., Giesing, Y., and Poutvaara, P. (2024). The Effect of Conflict on Refugees' Return and Integration: Evidence from Ukraine. *IZA Discussion Paper*, (16962).
- Aksoy, C. G., Poutvaara, P., and Schikora, F. (2023). First time around: Local conditions and multi-dimensional integration of refugees. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 137:103588.
- Arendt, J. N. (2022). Labor market effects of a work-first policy for refugees. *Journal of Population Economics*, 35:169–196.
- Arendt, J. N. and Bolvig, I. (2023). Trade-offs between work-first and language-first strategies for refugees. *Economics of Education Review*, 92:102353.
- Arendt, J. N., Dustmann, C., and Ku, H. (2022). Refugee migration and the labour market: Lessons from 40 years of post-arrival policies in Denmark. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 38(3):531–556.
- Brücker, H., Ette, A., Grabka, M. M., Kosyakova, Y., Niehues, W., Rother, N., Spieß, C. K., Zinn, S., Bujard, M., Cardozo Silva, A. R., Décieux, J. P., Maddox, A., Milewski, N., Sauer, L., Schmitz, S., Schwanhäuser, S., Siegert, M., Steinhauer, H., and Tanis, K. (2023). Ukrainian Refugees in Germany: Evidence From a Large Representative Survey. *Comparative Population Studies*, 48.
- Cornelissen, T., Dustmann, C., Raute, A., and Schönberg, U. (2018). Who benefits from universal child care? estimating marginal returns to early child care attendance. *Journal of Political Economy*, 126(6):2356–2409.
- Foged, M., Hasager, L., and Peri, G. (2024a). Comparing the effects of policies for the labor market integration of refugees. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 42(S1):S335–S377.

- Foged, M., Karstoft, K.-I., and Zink, E. (2024b). Trauma and refugees' employment: Evidence from people displaced from Ukraine. *Manuscript in preparation*.
- Fouka, V. (2024). State Policy and Immigrant Integration. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 27(1):25–46.
- FRA (2023). Fleeing Ukraine: Displaced people's experience in the EU. *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights*.
- Gambaro, L., Huebener, M., Schmitz, S., and Spiess, C. K. (2024). Unlocking Potential: Childcare Services and Refugees' Integration, Employment and Well-Being. *IZA Discussion Paper*, (17181).
- Gambaro, L., Neidhöfer, G., and Spiess, C. K. (2021). The effect of early childhood education and care services on the integration of refugee families. *Labour Economics*, 72:102053.
- Hernes, V., Arendt, J., Andersson Joona, P., and Tronstad, K. (2020). Rapid or long-term employment? a scandinavian comparative study of refugee integration policies and employment outcomes. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29(2):238–258.
- Kosyakova, Y. and Brücker, H. (2024). On the labour market integration of refugees from Ukraine: A simulation study. *IAB Research Report*, (9|2024en). <https://doku.iab.de/forschungsbericht/2024/fb0924en.pdf>.
- Kosyakova, Y., Brücker, H., Gatskova, K., and Schwanhäuser, S. (2023). Arbeitsmarktintegration ukrainischer Geflüchteter: Erwerbstätigkeit steigt ein Jahr nach dem Zuzug. *IAB-Kurzbericht*.
- Kosyakova, Y., Gatskova, K., Koch, T., Adunts, D., Braunfels, J., Goßner, L., Konle-Seidl, R., Schwanhäuser, S., and Vandenhirtz, M. (2024). Labour Market Integration of Ukrainian Refugees: An International Perspective. *IAB Research Report*, (16|2024en). <https://doku.iab.de/forschungsbericht/2024/fb1624en.pdf>.