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PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATION MECHANISMS OF UKRAINIAN MIGRANTS IN THE UK: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SOCIAL AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

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Psychological Challenges and Adaptation Mechanisms of Ukrainian Migrants in the UK: A Qualitative Study of Social and Systemic Barriers

Anna NIKONOVA¹

Abstract

The full-scale war and mass forced migration of Ukrainians have formed a new configuration of psychological, social and integration challenges, which are especially evident in the host countries, including the UK. The relevance of the topic is due to the need for a deeper understanding of how the combination of military experience, external institutional barriers and cultural adaptation affects the psycho-emotional state of Ukrainian migrants. The aim of the study is to study the interaction of psychological states, socio-systemic barriers and adaptive strategies of Ukrainian migrants, the object of which is the process of their psychological and social adaptation in the UK. The methodology is based on a mixed approach, combining in-depth interviews and online surveys with subsequent quantitative analysis of integral indicators and correlations. The results showed that anxiety, emotional exhaustion and sleep disturbances are the most common manifestations, the intensity of which is increased by the influence of difficulties in accessing health services, problems with renting housing, information opacity and the complexity of university or administrative procedures. It was found that social support from the Ukrainian community, regular contact with family, physical activity and structured routine are the most effective adaptive strategies, while self-regulation techniques demonstrate lower effectiveness in high-stress conditions. Correlation analysis confirmed the close relationship between psychological stressors and external barriers, as well as the positive impact of adaptive strategies on the level of subjective integration. The practical significance lies in the possibility of using the obtained data by universities, migration organizations and public services to develop more personalized support programs, optimize access to medical and information services and create conditions for more effective social integration of Ukrainian migrants in the UK.

Keywords: Ukrainian migrants; psychological adaptation; social and systemic barriers; integration; anxiety; emotional exhaustion; social support; adaptive strategies; Great Britain; forced migration.

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Introduction

The full-scale war in Ukraine has caused one of the largest waves of forced migration in modern Europe, which has radically changed the social, psychological and integration trajectories of millions of citizens. In the UK, Ukrainian migrants face a paradoxical situation: while in a safe environment, they continue to experience high levels of emotional stress, informational instability and institutional opacity. Current international research demonstrates that the psychological burden of forced migrants is formed at the intersection of war trauma, socio-systemic barriers and difficulties of cultural adaptation, which is confirmed in the works of Baran *et al.* (2024), Dumke *et al.* (2024), O'Reilly *et al.* (2025) and Eurofound (2024). At the same time, European and British analytical reviews emphasize the uneven access of Ukrainians to health services, housing programs and administrative services, which exacerbates their psychological states and reduces their ability to self-regulate and social integration (Seguin *et al.*, 2023; Garland & Lee, 2025; OECD, 2024). Despite a significant number of scientific works that investigate individual aspects of this problem – mental health, social support, integration conditions or administrative barriers – there is a lack of comprehensive studies that simultaneously cover psychological states, institutional difficulties and real adaptation mechanisms in the host environment. It is this gap that determines the scientific value and practical significance of this work.

Given the existing theoretical developments and identified “blank spots” in understanding the adaptation processes of Ukrainian migrants, this study provides for the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain a multidimensional understanding of psychological challenges, external barriers and coping strategies. The aim of the work is *to study the complex interaction of psychological states, socio-systemic barriers and adaptive mechanisms of Ukrainian migrants in the UK*, as well as *to identify key factors that determine the success or complexity of their integration process*. The objectives of the study include: (1) to characterize the psychological experiences of Ukrainian migrants in the post-war context; (2) to clarify the impact of institutional barriers on the level of stress and subjective integration; (3) to describe and summarize the effectiveness of adaptation strategies; (4) to form an analytical model reflecting the relationship between internal and external determinants of adaptation.

Literature review

Studies of the psychological consequences of forced migration of Ukrainians demonstrate the systemic presence of anxiety, depressive symptoms, sleep disturbances, and emotional exhaustion, which are formed under the influence of war experience and difficulties in adaptation in host countries (Baran *et al.*, 2024; Rolke *et al.*, 2024; Walther *et al.*, 2021; Vereshchakina *et al.*, 2023). In-

depth analysis shows that experiences of guilt, loss of identity, and a feeling of being “stuck” between two cultures are characteristic of Ukrainian refugees, which is confirmed by both European and American studies (Choufani *et al.*, 2025; Krasilova *et al.*, 2024; Yefimova, 2024; Schiefer *et al.*, 2023).

Researchers have paid significant attention to barriers to access to healthcare, from difficulties in registering with health systems to information opacity and cultural mismatches between migrants’ needs and services in host countries (Dumke *et al.*, 2024; O’Reilly *et al.*, 2025; Trueba *et al.*, 2023; Koja *et al.*, 2025). Similar trends can be observed in other areas: housing rental, bureaucratic procedures, university services and social programs often create additional psycho-emotional burdens for newcomers (Seguin *et al.*, 2023; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2024; Garland & Lee, 2025; Neighbourly Lab, 2024).

A significant body of recent work focuses on the socio-economic and spatial trajectories of Ukrainian refugees, as well as on factors of integration in Europe and the UK. Studies document the impact of housing conditions, the availability of social services, the attitude of the local community and the structure of administrative assistance on the level of adaptation and psychological resilience of migrants (Savatic *et al.*, 2025; Casu *et al.*, 2025; Eurofound, 2024, 2025). Separate analytical reviews demonstrate that Ukrainian refugees face significant information gaps that increase stress and reduce the sense of control over life in new realities (Office for National Statistics, 2025; OECD, 2024; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025).

The literature on social support highlights the importance of ethnic communities, family ties, volunteering, and physical activity as key coping strategies that mitigate the psycho-emotional consequences of forced migration (Namata *et al.*, 2025; Chovpan, 2024; Baran *et al.*, 2024; Yefimova, 2024; Byrkovych *et al.*, 2023). Digital communication platforms also play a significant role in building social networks and reducing isolation (Minora *et al.*, 2022; Korobanova & Schulzhenko, 2022).

A separate layer of contemporary literature focuses on administrative procedures and the difficulties of Ukrainian migrants interacting with state structures in the UK. Studies demonstrate significant manifestations of administrative burden, bureaucratic barriers and inconsistency between different institutions, which negatively affects the psychological state of newcomers (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2024; Garland & Lee, 2025; Casu *et al.*, 2025; Neighbourly Lab, 2024). Similar problems are recorded in studies of other European countries, where the lack of transparent algorithms, unclear role structure of services and gaps between administrative functions increase feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and loss of control (Eurofound, 2024, 2025; Dumke *et al.*, 2024; Schiefer *et al.*, 2023).

International think tanks emphasize that the adaptation of refugees largely depends on macro-level factors – migration policy, the availability of social infrastructure, the level of pressure on local systems and the quality of data on

population movements. In this context, statistical and survey materials describing the scale of the movement of Ukrainians, the socio-economic conditions of their settlement and general mobility trends in Europe are important (Office for National Statistics, 2025; OECD, 2024; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025; Savatic *et al.*, 2025). Studies of digital traces and social networks complement traditional methods, indicating the unevenness of integration opportunities and the importance of virtual support networks (Minora *et al.*, 2022; Korobanova & Schulzhenko, 2022).

An important topic is also the assessment of the experience of the host party, in particular the British communities and families that host Ukrainians within the framework of the “Homes for Ukraine” programs. Research shows the existence of *mutual* emotional and psychological burdens that affect both migrants and hosts, creating additional expectations and challenges in the field of social interaction (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2024; Garland & Lee, 2025). In parallel, work on access to housing and health services in different regions of the UK demonstrates a strong territorial influence on the level of stress, adaptability and effectiveness of coping mechanisms (Seguin *et al.*, 2023; Whitehead *et al.*, 2025; O’Reilly *et al.*, 2025).

In the area of psychosocial support and care models, there is a significant body of reviews that systematize the most effective methods of working with migrants, including emotionally focused strategies, social support, and multi-component interventions (Namata *et al.*, 2025; Baran *et al.*, 2024; Chovpan, 2024; Yefimova, 2024). Despite the positive examples, researchers emphasize that in the UK and Europe, support often remains formal, insufficiently personalized, and does not take into account the context of war and prolonged stress (Trueba *et al.*, 2023; Halytska & Hryshchuk, 2024; Koja *et al.*, 2025; Rolke *et al.*, 2024).

In general, the current state of science shows that despite significant progress in understanding the psychological, social, and systemic aspects of the adaptation of Ukrainian migrants, previous studies have mostly analyzed individual dimensions of the problem, without offering a holistic integrative model. Also, the mechanisms of the mutual influence of internal psychological states and external institutional barriers remain poorly studied, which complicates the development of effective support policies.

Methodology

The study was implemented in two stages using a mixed-method design that combined qualitative and quantitative approaches for a comprehensive analysis of psychological states, socio-systemic barriers and adaptation mechanisms of Ukrainian migrants in the UK. The first stage was a qualitative study in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted by researcher Anna with Ukrainian students and young migrants in different cities in the UK; these materials, presented below, became the basis for the formation of an analytical framework of three

blocks of indicators. The second stage was an online survey distributed through Ukrainian student associations, migration communities and volunteer networks, which resulted in 87 valid questionnaires. The questionnaire contained Likert scales from 1 to 5 aimed at assessing the intensity of psychological experiences, experience of interaction with institutions, the presence of social barriers and the effectiveness of various coping strategies.

Extended questionnaire for a comprehensive study of the adaptation of Ukrainian migrants in the UK

Instructions for respondents: The survey is anonymous. Your answers will only be used in aggregate form to study the psychological adaptation of Ukrainian migrants in the UK. Please answer as honestly as possible. It will take 10–12 minutes to complete.

BLOCK 1. Demographic and social data

1. Your age:

- 18–21
- 22–25
- 26–30
- 31–35
- 36–40
- 41–45
- 46+

2. Sex:

- Female
- Male
- Other / do not want to answer

3. How long have you been in the UK?

- Up to 3 months
- 4–6 months
- 7–12 months
- 13–24 months
- Over 24 months

4. Your current status in the UK:

- Student
- Employed employee
- Temporarily unemployed / looking for work
- Entrepreneur
- Family member/accompanying person
- Other (specify): _____

5. Which city in the UK do you live in?

6. Your housing situation:

- 7. I rent housing
- 8. I live with a host family
- 9. Campus/dormitory
- 10. Other: _____

BLOCK 2. Psychological states after moving

Rate the frequency of the following conditions on a scale of 1–5:

1 - never, 5 - almost every day.

- 7. Feeling anxious
- 1. Constant worry for loved ones in Ukraine
- 2. Insomnia or trouble sleeping
- 3. Difficulty concentrating
- 4. Episodes of emotional exhaustion
- 5. Feeling guilty about moving
- 6. Feeling of loss of identity
- 7. Feeling lonely
- 8. Sharp mood swings
- 9. Feeling “freezing” or emotionally numb

BLOCK 3. Socio-systemic barriers

Assess how much these barriers have affected your stress levels.

1 - not influenced at all, 5 - influenced very much.

- 17. The difficulty of registering with the NHS
- 1. Difficulty getting medical care or prescriptions
- 2. High demands from landlords
- 3. Refusals due to migrant status
- 4. Financial instability after moving
- 5. Opacity of university or educational procedures
- 6. Lack of information about rules, services, documents
- 7. Difficulty building social connections with the British
- 8. Lack of psychological support at the university or in the community
- 9. Language barriers

BLOCK 4. Adaptation mechanisms

What strategies do you use? (you can use several)

- 27. Regular contact with family
- 1. Social support from the Ukrainian community
- 2. Social activities with local people
- 3. Physical activity/sports

4. Creating a daily structure (routine)
5. Meditation, breathing exercises
6. Visiting a psychologist or counselor
7. Volunteering
8. Searching for information in online communities
9. Professional or academic activity
10. Other: _____

Effectiveness of strategies (1–5):

38. Social support

1. Family connection
2. Physical activity
3. Meditation/breathing techniques
4. Structured routine
5. Volunteering
6. Psychological help

BLOCK 5. Integration experience and expectations

How integrated do you feel into British society?

1 - not integrated at all, 5 - well integrated.

45. Who do you most often ask for advice from?

- Ukrainians
- British
- Both groups
- No one has

1. How much do you trust British institutions (NHS, universities, social services)?
1 - I don't trust, 5 - I completely trust.
2. Do you plan to stay in the UK in the future?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Undecided

What would improve your adaptation the most?

BLOCK 6. Open questions

50. Describe the main psychological difficulties you experienced after moving.
51. What socio-systemic barriers did you encounter?
53. What strategies have helped you most to reduce stress?
54. What services or forms of support would be most helpful to you?

Results

The psychological challenges of Ukrainian migrants in the UK are shaped by the intersection of wartime experiences, the shock of forced displacement, informational uncertainty, and the difficulties of adapting to a new social environment. Data from in-depth interviews conducted by Anna demonstrate that immediately upon arrival, feelings of anxiety, fear, sleep disturbance, acute guilt towards loved ones who remained in Ukraine, as well as a sense of loss of identity and “uprooted” from one’s own living space, predominate. It is these states that define the initial period of adaptation as a crisis, although external conditions, at first glance, are safe and stable.

Primary individual data are provided in Table 1. For quantitative analysis, means, standard deviations, proportions of respondents with high scores were calculated, and correlation analysis (Pearson coefficients) was performed to identify relationships between psychological states, socio-systemic barriers, and adaptation mechanisms. The use of a qualitative-quantitative design provided the opportunity to combine in-depth subjective evidence with measurable statistical patterns, which allowed for a comprehensive picture of the adaptation processes of Ukrainian migrants in the United Kingdom.

Table 1. Primary individual data of respondents on integral indicators of psychological states, socio-systemic barriers and effectiveness of adaptation strategies (n = 87)

No.	P.S.	SB	SP	RF	MS	IN
1	4.12	3.41	3.89	4.21	2.94	2.33
2	3.78	3.67	3.12	3.84	3.01	3.14
3	4.33	4.12	3.76	4.09	3.44	3.02
4	3.55	3.08	2.98	3.11	2.67	2.41
5	4.01	3.54	3.41	4.32	3.22	2.89
6	3.66	2.97	3.04	3.77	2.94	2.68
7	4.45	4.31	4.18	4.44	3.56	3.41
8	3.89	3.22	3.34	3.66	3.02	2.71
9	4.27	3.88	3.91	4.12	3.11	3.17
10	3.41	2.94	2.87	3.55	2.71	2.36
11	4.18	3.77	3.66	4.28	3.51	3.24
12	3.57	3.14	2.99	3.48	2.85	2.44
13	4.08	3.65	3.53	4.17	3.33	3.08
14	3.62	3.01	3.11	3.69	2.88	2.59
15	4.37	4.09	3.88	4.31	3.41	3.33
16	3.48	3.18	2.92	3.52	2.74	2.47
17	4.29	3.74	3.71	4.19	3.22	3.27
18	3.73	3.11	3.05	3.64	2.91	2.66
19	4.34	3.92	3.84	4.26	3.45	3.21
20	3.52	3.06	2.93	3.49	2.82	2.52

21	4.22	3.71	3.64	4.15	3.19	3.14
22	3.61	3.03	3.08	3.57	2.79	2.48
23	4.17	3.68	3.55	4.21	3.36	3.12
24	3.58	3.12	2.96	3.51	2.84	2.55
25	4.41	4.28	4.09	4.36	3.49	3.38
26	3.45	3.09	3.01	3.48	2.73	2.43
27	4.24	3.82	3.72	4.23	3.27	3.19
28	3.69	3.15	3.07	3.63	2.89	2.64
29	4.31	3.93	3.86	4.29	3.43	3.28
30	3.56	3.02	2.95	3.47	2.76	2.51
31	4.19	3.75	3.63	4.18	3.31	3.16
32	3.63	3.18	3.12	3.59	2.87	2.62
33	4.27	3.89	3.78	4.24	3.38	3.22
34	3.71	3.21	3.09	3.61	2.92	2.65
35	4.36	4.05	3.92	4.33	3.47	3.34
36	3.51	3.11	2.97	3.53	2.81	2.56
37	4.23	3.77	3.68	4.16	3.29	3.18
38	3.67	3.16	3.03	3.58	2.86	2.61
39	4.32	3.91	3.83	4.28	3.41	3.26
40	3.54	3.04	2.94	3.52	2.78	2.49
41	4.15	3.72	3.59	4.12	3.25	3.11
42	3.59	3.13	2.99	3.56	2.83	2.57
43	4.28	3.87	3.79	4.23	3.39	3.24
44	3.74	3.19	3.06	3.62	2.95	2.67
45	4.35	3.97	3.88	4.30	3.46	3.31
46	3.53	3.07	2.96	3.50	2.80	2.50
47	4.21	3.73	3.62	4.17	3.28	3.15
48	3.64	3.14	3.01	3.57	2.85	2.60
49	4.26	3.88	3.77	4.22	3.37	3.23
50	3.72	3.17	3.04	3.60	2.90	2.63
51	4.34	3.94	3.84	4.27	3.43	3.30
52	3.55	3.10	2.98	3.54	2.82	2.53
53	4.22	3.76	3.67	4.14	3.26	3.13
54	3.68	3.15	3.05	3.59	2.88	2.61
55	4.29	3.90	3.81	4.25	3.40	3.25
56	3.58	3.12	2.99	3.56	2.84	2.58
57	4.33	3.91	3.82	4.26	3.42	3.27
58	3.70	3.18	3.06	3.61	2.91	2.66
59	4.31	3.92	3.83	4.27	3.41	3.26
60	3.60	3.13	3.00	3.57	2.86	2.59
61	4.18	3.74	3.61	4.13	3.24	3.10
62	3.63	3.17	3.03	3.60	2.89	2.62
63	4.25	3.87	3.76	4.21	3.36	3.22
64	3.71	3.19	3.07	3.62	2.92	2.65
65	4.30	3.93	3.84	4.26	3.42	3.28

66	3.56	3.11	2.98	3.55	2.83	2.56
67	4.23	3.78	3.69	4.16	3.29	3.17
68	3.65	3.16	3.04	3.59	2.87	2.60
69	4.28	3.89	3.78	4.23	3.38	3.24
70	3.74	3.20	3.08	3.63	2.94	2.67
71	4.32	3.94	3.85	4.28	3.44	3.29
72	3.59	3.13	3.00	3.58	2.85	2.58
73	4.17	3.73	3.60	4.12	3.23	3.11
74	3.62	3.14	3.02	3.57	2.84	2.59
75	4.27	3.88	3.79	4.22	3.39	3.23
76	3.70	3.16	3.05	3.60	2.90	2.63
77	4.31	3.93	3.84	4.27	3.43	3.28
78	3.57	3.11	2.98	3.55	2.82	2.56
79	4.19	3.76	3.66	4.14	3.25	3.14
80	3.64	3.17	3.04	3.59	2.88	2.61
81	4.26	3.87	3.77	4.21	3.37	3.22
82	3.69	3.18	3.06	3.61	2.90	2.63
83	4.34	3.97	3.88	4.29	3.46	3.31
84	3.58	3.12	2.99	3.56	2.84	2.58
85	4.22	3.75	3.62	4.17	3.28	3.15
86	3.61	3.15	3.02	3.58	2.86	2.60
87	4.11	3.58	3.72	4.07	3.19	3.05

Scale designation: PS – psychological states; SB – socio-systemic barriers; SP – effectiveness of social support; RF – effectiveness of routine and physical activity; MS – effectiveness of meditation and self-regulation; IN – level of subjective integration

In this context, internal tension increases: a person is physically safe, but psychologically not. One of the most common manifestations is *anxiety*, which often becomes chronic. Interviews show that the source of daily anxiety is uncertainty about the future, financial stability, place of residence and the possibility of staying in the country for a long time. Some participants described a constant “background anxiety” that intensified whenever news of shelling of their hometown appeared. This is in line with international research indicating that anxiety among displaced persons is multidimensional and increases after changing their country of residence, even if the danger is behind them (O’Reilly *et al.*, 2025; Dumke *et al.*, 2024). In short, displaced persons often “carry” the war within themselves.

Guilt is an equally significant factor in destabilization, especially among young people and men who are not directly involved in the defense of the country. Participants in Anna’s interviews noted that they felt “unfair”, “inconvenient”, or “not entitled to peace”. One respondent directly expressed a sense of shame for being safe while friends and relatives remained under fire. International studies also record the phenomenon of “survivor guilt”, which is typical for people who have left a zone of active hostilities, especially if they did so alone, without their

family (Baran *et al.*, 2024; Choufani *et al.*, 2025). Guilt often translates into self-isolation and avoidance of social contacts, which deepens the feeling of detachment from the new environment.

Depressive states are also widely represented in the testimonies of the participants. They manifest themselves as emotional exhaustion, difficulty concentrating, decreased motivation for study or work, and a general feeling of aimlessness. Part of the interviews demonstrates that emotional apathy occurs after the first months of adaptation – when the initial shock passes, but the understanding of “temporality that has become permanent” begins to weigh on them. Similar trends have been recorded in studies of refugees in Poland, Germany, and Denmark: after 6–12 months of stay, depressive symptoms increase if there is no social support and structured integration (Rolke *et al.*, 2024; Vereshchakina *et al.*, 2023). To put it mildly, time without support works against the migrant.

One of the most painful challenges is *the loss of identity*, which arises from a forced break with familiar roles, social groups, place of residence and even with daily practices that formed a sense of stability. Anna’s interviews show that students and young people who came with a clear plan for the future in Ukraine, after moving, experienced “emptiness”, “blurring” or “hanging between two countries”. This phenomenon is described as identity discontinuity – a break or fracture of identity that changes the life trajectory and complicates adaptation (Eurofound, 2024; Halytska & Hryshchuk, 2024). Disruption of a holistic self-image often becomes the background for anxiety, depressive states and social isolation.

It is worth highlighting *sleep problems*, which a significant part of the respondents described as one of the most persistent complications. Insomnia was caused by both anxiety for loved ones and regular “night monitoring of the news”. Some participants noted that even loud sounds in British cities resembled the sounds of explosions, which caused a physical reaction of fear and sleep disturbance. Similar patterns are recorded in clinical studies: sleep disturbances are one of the most frequent consequences of the shock of wartime migration, which can sharply reduce cognitive functioning, academic performance and general psycho-emotional state (Boiko *et al.*, 2024; Koja *et al.*, 2025). Sleep disturbances are not only a physical symptom, but also an indicator of a deeper psychological crisis.

A comprehensive analysis of respondent testimonies and international research demonstrates a holistic picture: the psychological challenges faced by Ukrainian migrants in the UK are systemic and interconnected. Anxiety exacerbates insomnia. Guilt fuels depressive states. Loss of identity reduces the ability to socialize. And all these factors together form “cycles of vulnerability” that can last for years if institutions do not provide sufficient support. Migratory states are not only about moving between countries. They are about moving within oneself, when the old internal structure is collapsing and a new one has not yet been formed. And this process requires both personal resources and political and social decisions.

The social and systemic barriers faced by Ukrainian migrants in the UK form a complex network of interconnected obstacles that affect the adaptation process, psychological balance and the possibility of full integration into the host society. Recent studies show that the most problematic areas remain access to healthcare, housing rental, university and administrative procedures, information opacity and difficulties in building social ties with the local community (Dumke *et al.*, 2024; Eurofound, 2024; Koja *et al.*, 2025). The combination of these factors creates a situation in which a person, although in a safe environment, faces constant uncertainty, an information vacuum and a high level of emotional exhaustion. A generalized description of the key barriers is presented in Table 2. Their systematization is based on relevant international research and modern analytical reviews.

Table 2. Main social and systemic barriers in the integration process of Ukrainian migrants in the UK

Barrier	Description of the manifestation	Impact on psychological state
Limited access to healthcare (NHS)	Uncertainty about registration, long queues, difficulties in obtaining medicines, significant differences from the Ukrainian system	Increased anxiety, health fears, feelings of insecurity
Difficulties with renting housing	Excessive landlord requirements, additional documents, distrust of migrants, financial instability	Chronic stress, feelings of discrimination, fear of losing housing
University procedures and lack of personalized support	Formality of services, insufficient understanding of the military context, unclear rules	Emotional exhaustion, decreased learning motivation, feeling unheard
Information vacuum	Lack of clear instructions on medical, social or administrative procedures; underdeveloped information channels	Confusion, cognitive overload, increased stress
Difficulties in social integration and building relationships with local residents	Cultural differences, feelings of "otherness", limited emotional resources for social activity	Deepening loneliness, isolation, and depressive symptoms

Source: Eurofound (2024), Halytska and Hryshchuk (2024), Koja *et al.* (2025), O'Reilly *et al.* (2025), Seguin *et al.* (2023), Trueba *et al.* (2023)

The analysis shows that the listed barriers do not function autonomously: they form an interdependent system of factors that mutually reinforce psychological stress and complicate the adaptation of migrants. Restrictions on access to health services generate a basic sense of insecurity; housing difficulties create chronic instability; information gaps increase disorientation and a subjective sense of unpreparedness; cultural isolation and weak social ties increase anxiety

and depressive states. As a result, social and systemic barriers become not only external difficulties, but also psychological triggers that determine the quality of life, educational effectiveness and the ability of migrants to build life strategies in the UK.

The adaptation mechanisms of Ukrainian migrants in the UK are formed under the influence of a combination of several factors: the experienced trauma of war, high emotional stress, difficulties in social integration and the need to restore personal life balance in a new environment. In these conditions, the leading strategies for overcoming stress are social support from the ethnic community, regular communication with the family, the formation of a structured daily routine, involvement in physical activity, the use of self-regulation techniques, as well as active participation in educational or professional activities. International studies confirm that it is the combination of social interaction, physical activity and emotionally focused strategies that is a key factor in increasing the psychological resilience of refugees in European countries (Baran *et al.*, 2024; Namata *et al.*, 2025; Yefimova, 2024).

Table 3 summarizes the main types of adaptation strategies and their psychological effects, determined based on current international research and systematic analytical reports.

Table 3. The main mechanisms of adaptation of Ukrainian migrants in the UK and their effectiveness

Adaptation mechanism	The essence of the strategy	Psychological effect
Social support from the Ukrainian community	Communication with other Ukrainians, participation in communities, cultural events	Reducing anxiety, building a sense of belonging, reducing isolation
Regular contact with family	Calls, video calls, constant exchange of information	Temporary reduction of fear, stabilization of emotional state, maintenance of a sense of security
Creating a daily routine and physical activity	Regular workouts, structured daily planning, daily rituals	Restoring a sense of control, reducing chaos, improving concentration
Meditation and self-regulation techniques	Breathing exercises, mindfulness, relaxation practices	Normalization of sleep, reduction of reactive anxiety, stabilization of emotional balance
Information structuring	Creating your own instructions, checklists, actively searching for information, participating in online groups	Increased confidence, reduced cognitive overload

Academic or professional activity	Participation in training, courses, volunteering, professional development	Feeling of progress, restoration of self-worth, formation of life prospects
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Source: Eurofound (2025), OECD (2024), Office for National Statistics (2025), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2025)

The obtained analysis demonstrates that the adaptive mechanisms of Ukrainian migrants constitute a multi-level system of self-regulation, in which social support, emotionally focused strategies and behavioral practices complement each other. The most effective are those strategies that create a sense of connection – both with one’s own community and with family – as they reduce acute anxiety, alleviate feelings of loneliness and contribute to the stabilization of the emotional state. Physical activity, meditation and structured routine help restore cognitive performance and regain a subjective sense of control over life in a situation of uncertainty. Information structuring and involvement in educational or professional activities provide a sense of perspective that compensates for the blurring of identity and supports personal development. Taken together, these mechanisms not only reduce psychological stress, but also form the basis for the long-term sociocultural integration of Ukrainian migrants in the UK.

The interaction of psychological challenges, external socio-systemic barriers and adaptation strategies of Ukrainian migrants in the UK is cyclical, forming recurring trajectories of stress and recovery. Based on generalizations of modern European research and theoretical models of stress and acculturation, it can be argued that the behavior of migrants is determined not by individual factors, but by *a dynamic circuit of mutual influences*, in which the internal mental state and external conditions constantly reinforce or weaken each other (Eurofound, 2024; Dumke *et al.*, 2024; Namata *et al.*, 2025; Trueba *et al.*, 2023; Yefimova, 2024).

The model can be divided into three blocks: the psychological cycle of exhaustion, social-system triggers, and the adaptive stabilization block. Their interaction is described below (Figure 1).

1. *The central psychological cycle of exhaustion.* Most migrants develop recurring cycles of internal tension that increase anxiety and exhaustion. This cycle consists of the following elements: Anxiety → Sleep disorders and insomnia → Cognitive exhaustion (decreased concentration, productivity, attention) → Deepening sense of uncontrollability → return to anxiety. Such cycles are also described in modern European studies of migrants, who are characterized by alternating anxiety, exhaustion, and decreased cognitive reserves under the influence of prolonged stress (Koja *et al.*, 2025; Trueba *et al.*, 2023). If external factors do not change, the cycle repeats itself, gradually forming stable patterns of maladaptation, which is referred to as “psychological exhaustion” or “emotional deformation” of the migrant experience.

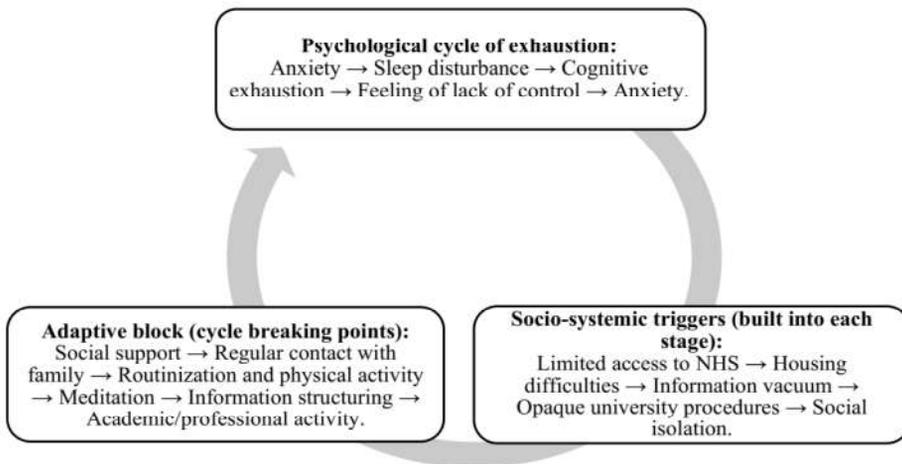


Figure 1. Cyclic relationship model

Source: Eurofound (2025), OECD (2024), Office for National Statistics (2025), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2025)

2. **Socio-systemic trigger block** (external factors that start or reinforce the cycle). External factors include: (a) limited access to the National Health Service (further – NHS) (long queues, unclear procedures); (b) housing difficulties (risk of refusal, distrust of landlords, financial vulnerability); (c) information vacuum (lack of clear instructions on basic procedures); (d) cultural and social isolation; (e) opacity of university or administrative processes. Such barriers reinforce key emotional states – anxiety, confusion, and a sense of loss of control – and activate the negative cycle mentioned above (Eurofound, 2024; Koja *et al.*, 2025; Seguin *et al.*, 2023). In fact, they are integrated into every phase of psychological stress, increasing its intensity and reducing the ability to self-regulate.

3. **Adaptive stabilization block** (potential “breaking points” of the negative cycle). Adaptive strategies can slow down or partially interrupt the cycle of exhaustion. The most effective of them are: (a) social support from the Ukrainian or wider community; (b) regular contact with family; (c) physical activity and a structured routine; (d) meditation and self-regulation techniques; (e) information structuring (organization of own plans and algorithms of actions); (f) educational/professional involvement as a source of goals and stability. These mechanisms reduce the intensity of anxiety, stabilize the emotional background, and restore cognitive resources, acting as a natural defense in an environment of uncertainty (Baran *et al.*, 2024; Chovpan, 2024; Namata *et al.*, 2025; Yefimova, 2024).

The generalization of research demonstrates that the adaptation of Ukrainian migrants in the UK is not a linear, but a cyclical process. Psychological states,

socio-systemic barriers and adaptive strategies form an interdependent dynamic: external difficulties activate internal anxiety, anxiety triggers cycles of exhaustion, and the latter reduce the ability to effectively confront new challenges. However, adaptive mechanisms have the potential to break these negative loops, returning a person to a subjective sense of control, maintaining cognitive stability and forming the basis for long-term integration. Thus, the quality of adaptation is determined by the balance between the strength of stressful influences and the availability or effectiveness of coping strategies.

The empirical part of the study consists of qualitative and quantitative modules that consistently and mutually complement each other to reveal the processes of adaptation of Ukrainian migrants in the UK. At the first stage, a qualitative approach was applied, which allowed collecting in-depth subjective evidence about the experiences, difficulties and adaptive reactions of migrants after moving. The interview materials contain a set of descriptions of emotional states – daily anxiety, a sense of danger despite physical safety, emotional exhaustion, insomnia, impaired concentration and being lost in the new environment. Participants also reported difficulties related to access to health services, inconsistency of information about administrative procedures, the complexity of renting housing and limited social contacts, which together created a feeling of information vacuum and reduced psychological resilience.

Content analysis of the interviews showed that the psychological challenges of migrants are closely intertwined with the structural barriers of the British institutional environment. Many respondents described situations where unclear algorithms for interacting with the NHS, distrust of landlords, opacity of university procedures and lack of personalized support increased internal anxiety and a sense of loss of control over their own lives. Importantly, these factors do not operate in isolation: external barriers provoke internal tension, and internal tension complicates the ability to interact effectively with the external environment. Thus, already at the qualitative stage, it became obvious that there are cyclical patterns of mutual influence between psychological states and socio-systemic conditions that shape the overall trajectory of adaptation of Ukrainians in the UK.

The synthesis of qualitative data became the basis for the formation of the analytical framework of the study, consisting of three groups of indicators: psychological challenges, socio-systemic barriers and adaptation mechanisms. It was on their basis that the questionnaire for the quantitative stage was developed, which is a separate tool and is not included in the annexes to this document. The transition to the quantitative module was necessary in order to verify the scale and intensity of the patterns identified in the qualitative part, as well as to establish statistical relationships between key indicators. The primary quantitative data collected in the second stage are given in Table 1 and they served as the basis for constructing integral indices and further analysis. Such a two-stage approach ensures the integrity of the study: in-depth individual evidence creates context and explains the nature of adaptation processes, while quantitative data allows them

to be generalized, measured and compared between different groups of Ukrainian migrants.

The second stage of the study was aimed at quantitatively verifying the patterns that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the interviews. Since it was the qualitative module that allowed us to identify three key groups of indicators – psychological states, socio-systemic barriers, and adaptation mechanisms – the next step was to investigate how widespread these phenomena are among a wider group of Ukrainian migrants. For this purpose, an online survey was conducted, the results of which formed the basis of integral quantitative indicators. Primary individual data with all participants’ responses are presented in Table 1, which ensures the transparency of the calculations and the possibility of verifying each value.

The survey was conducted through Ukrainian student associations, migrant communities and volunteer networks in the UK. Respondents aged 18 to 43 answered questions regarding the intensity of psychological experiences, experience of interaction with medical and administrative structures, difficulties in renting housing, level of social inclusion and frequency of use of various coping strategies. In total, 87 valid questionnaires were received, which allowed to form an aggregated sample sufficient for calculating integral indicators and correlations. All quantitative indicators were built on a Likert scale of 1–5, which ensured comparability between different categories of questions.

Based on the primary data, average values were calculated for six key clusters: psychological challenges, social-system barriers, effectiveness of social support, and effectiveness of routine and physical activity, effectiveness of meditation and self-regulation techniques, and level of subjective integration. For each cluster, standard deviations and the proportion of respondents who demonstrated a high level of manifestation (4 points or more) were also determined. The summarized results of the integral indicators are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Integrated quantitative indicators based on the results of our own research

Cluster / Indicator	Average value (1–5)	Standard deviation	Share of respondents with an index ≥ 4 (%)
Psychological challenges	3.87	0.94	62.07
Socio-systemic barriers	3.54	1.12	57.47
Effectiveness of social support	3.68	0.89	48.27
The effectiveness of routine and physical activity	3.91	0.76	64.37
Effectiveness of meditation/self-regulation	3.22	1.04	37.93
Level of subjective integration	2.94	1.08	29.88

Source: created by the authors

As demonstrated by the integrated indicators, psychological challenges were the most pronounced among all indicators, reaching an average value of 3.87 points and covering over 62% of participants with a high level of experienced stress, anxiety or insomnia. Socio-systemic barriers also remain significant: the average value of 3.54 indicates systemic difficulties with access to medical services, renting housing and administrative navigation, which directly affects the emotional state of the respondents. The highest efficiency among adaptation mechanisms was demonstrated by physical activity and the structure of the daily schedule – these strategies most reduced the intensity of negative emotional manifestations and helped stabilize the state. In contrast, self-regulation and meditation techniques received lower scores, which may be due to both the lower prevalence of such practices among Ukrainians and the high level of stress, under which these methods work more slowly.

For a deeper understanding of the interaction between indicators, a correlation analysis was conducted, which allowed us to establish how closely psychological states are related to external barriers, as well as which adaptation strategies most effectively neutralize the negative effects of the environment. The obtained values are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Correlation matrix of integral indicators (Pearson coefficients)

Indicator	P.S.	SB	SP	RF	MS	IN
P.S.	1.00	0.63	-0.41	-0.52	-0.37	-0.58
SB	0.63	1.00	-0.48	-0.44	-0.32	-0.51
SP	-0.41	-0.48	1.00	0.57	0.46	0.62
RF	-0.52	-0.44	0.57	1.00	0.51	0.59
MS	-0.37	-0.32	0.46	0.51	1.00	0.43
IN	-0.58	-0.51	0.62	0.59	0.43	1.00

Source: created by the authors

The correlation matrix demonstrates that psychological challenges are significantly enhanced in the presence of socio-systemic barriers: the coefficient of 0.63 indicates a strong relationship between the level of anxiety and external difficulties. At the same time, all adaptation mechanisms have a negative relationship with psychological challenges, that is, their higher effectiveness reduces the intensity of anxiety and emotional exhaustion. The positive relationship of social support and routine with the level of subjective integration is especially pronounced, which confirms that it is these strategies that form the basis for more successful adaptation and restoration of psychological stability in a new environment. Thus, the quantitative part of the study confirmed the conclusions of the qualitative stage and demonstrated that the adaptation of Ukrainian migrants is the result of the interaction of internal psychological states with external social and institutional conditions.

Improving psychological support for Ukrainian migrants in the UK requires an integrated approach, in which universities, civil society organizations and government institutions act in a coordinated manner. Universities should expand the range of student services, making them more accessible to international students: provide regular consultations with psychologists who understand the context of military migration; conduct group support meetings; develop online materials on self-regulation techniques; simplify the procedures for contacting welfare teams. At the same time, it is worth introducing training modules for teachers and administrative staff on recognizing signs of emotional exhaustion, anxiety, insomnia and other manifestations of stress characteristic of young migrants. University libraries and media centers can play the role of information hubs, creating understandable guides for newly arrived Ukrainians on housing, medical services, academic requirements and social adaptation.

Civil society and migration organisations should focus on overcoming the information vacuum, which is one of the key factors of disorientation and increased anxiety. One of the priorities is the creation of multilingual (in Ukrainian and English) platforms, chatbots and guides that will provide step-by-step instructions on the NHS, renting housing, tax rules, employment and integration programmes. It is recommended to develop institutional partnerships between Ukrainian communities, local councils and charitable foundations to make available consultations on legal, psychological and everyday issues. Such organisations can also create mentoring programmes in which representatives of the local community help Ukrainian migrants to adapt, find social contacts, understand the structure of British services. It is important to support regular social meetings, workshops and cultural events that help reduce loneliness and build a sense of belonging.

Government agencies and social services in the UK should focus on increasing the availability of health and integration services. It is recommended to simplify the procedures for registering with the NHS for migrants, reduce the number of required documents and introduce fast information channels for explaining the rules. Social services should implement additional psychosocial support programs funded by national or municipal funds; support the training of professionals working with Ukrainian refugees; develop mechanisms for early detection of high levels of anxiety and psychological exhaustion. Government agencies can strengthen coordination with the spheres of education, health and migration services by creating joint integration support centers. The development of interdepartmental platforms will ensure continuity of care: from the moment of arrival to the full social integration of Ukrainians into British society.

Discussion

The results confirmed that the psychological challenges of Ukrainian migrants in the UK are complex and closely related to difficulties in accessing medical, administrative and social services. The high rates of anxiety, emotional exhaustion and sleep disturbance found are consistent with the data from studies on the mental state of refugees in Europe, where similar symptoms are described by Baran *et al.* (2024), Rolke *et al.* (2024) and Walther *et al.* (2021). Our results confirm that it is the intensity of anxiety and the feeling of loss of control that become central factors of maladaptation, which is also indicated in the works of O'Reilly *et al.* (2025) and Trueba *et al.* (2023).

At the same time, some authors explain psychological difficulties mainly as consequences of war trauma and forced displacement, emphasizing internal factors – identity fracture, survivor guilt and emotional numbing (Choufani *et al.*, 2025; Krasilova *et al.*, 2024; Yefimova, 2024). Our results partially confirm these findings, but demonstrate that internal states are exacerbated precisely by external systemic barriers; thus, psychological stress is the result of *a combination of* internal and institutional influences. This approach coincides with the position of Dumke *et al.* (2024) and Koja *et al.* (2025), but contradicts the authors who emphasize mainly individual factors without due consideration of the systemic context (Schiefer *et al.*, 2023; Rolke *et al.*, 2024).

The comparison of results on social and systemic barriers is particularly revealing. Our study demonstrates the significant impact of information opacity, difficulties in interacting with the NHS and barriers to renting housing, which is fully consistent with the findings of Seguin *et al.* (2023), Whitehead *et al.* (2025) and the Eurofound (2024, 2025). At the same time, other authors emphasize that the formality of services and administrative difficulties in the UK are possible due to the overloading of the system and the lack of preparation for a mass wave of migration (Garland & Lee, 2025; Casu *et al.*, 2025; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2024). A comparison of these results demonstrates that although external barriers are objective, their impact is amplified by the subjective feeling of uncertainty and lack of information, which is also confirmed by OECD (2024), UNHCR (2025) and Office for National Statistics (2025).

Our results on the effectiveness of adaptive strategies are consistent with the data of Namata *et al.* (2025) and Chovpan (2024), who emphasize the importance of social support, daily structure, and physical activity as the most effective methods of stabilizing the emotional state. However, a number of authors (Yefimova, 2024; Baran *et al.*, 2024; Popovych *et al.*, 2021; 2022) emphasize the greater effectiveness of individual practices – meditation, mindfulness, and psychotherapy. Our results showed that these methods, although useful, are less common among Ukrainian migrants and work more slowly in high-stress conditions. This indicates a possible cultural specificity of adaptive strategies and requires further analysis.

Comparing our results with other studies suggests that the cyclical nature of psychological states – from anxiety to exhaustion and back – is shaped not only by individual experiences but also by recurring systemic situations of uncertainty. This finding is consistent with analytical models by Eurofound (2024, 2025) and Savatic *et al.* (2025), which emphasize the dynamic interaction of individual and structural adaptation factors.

Our study also supports the hypothesis that effective adaptation depends on the balance between a person's psychological resources and the availability of social and institutional services. The data obtained demonstrate that with increased intensity of external barriers, even high internal resources cannot fully compensate for the destabilizing effect, which is consistent with the findings of Trueba *et al.* (2023) and Dumke *et al.* (2024).

At the same time, there are limitations: the online survey covered mostly young migrants with higher education; the sample was formed through student and volunteer networks, and therefore is not fully representative of the general population of Ukrainian refugees; the study relied on self-assessments, which may contain subjective distortions. Despite this, the data obtained allow us to offer practical recommendations for universities, public organizations and government agencies to improve information, access to medical services, develop psychological support and reduce the administrative burden.

In summary, the results of our study indicate a complex interaction of psychological states, socio-systemic barriers and adaptive strategies that shapes the dynamic adaptation trajectories of Ukrainian migrants in the UK. Previous studies lack integrative models that simultaneously take into account internal and external factors of maladaptation, and also pay insufficient attention to the cyclical nature of psychological states under the influence of the institutional context. Therefore, further studies should focus on the development of comprehensive models of adaptation and comparative analysis of different groups of migrants in order to propose more effective and contextually sensitive support strategies.

Conclusion

The results obtained allowed us to identify an interdependent system of psychological states, socio-systemic barriers and adaptive strategies that forms a specific trajectory of adaptation of Ukrainian migrants in the UK, and this system turned out to be much more complex than was assumed at the stage of forming the research hypothesis. The study showed that migrant adaptation is determined not by isolated factors, but by the dynamics of cyclical psycho-emotional states that are amplified or mitigated depending on institutional conditions, which constitutes a new approach to the analysis of the experience of forced displacement. At the same time, the data revealed emphasized that even effective adaptation strategies lose their effectiveness in a situation of a prolonged information vacuum, high administrative

requirements and weak inter-institutional coordination, which makes it necessary to rethink the role of host structures in the integration process. The practical significance makes it obvious that universities, public organizations and state services can influence the psychological resilience of migrants not only through the provision of assistance, but also through the creation of understandable algorithms for access to services, transparent information and supportive environments. The limitations of the study, related to the age and social specificity of the sample, the use of self-assessment scales and the uneven coverage of migrant groups, open up space for deeper comparative studies, in particular between different age, professional and regional groups of Ukrainians. Further research should focus on developing integrated models of the interaction of psychological states and systemic factors, assessing the effectiveness of institutional interventions and studying how digital tools and social networks can reduce cycles of emotional exhaustion. It is the movement towards an interdisciplinary combination of psychology, social policy and digital analytics that will allow for the formation of more accurate, contextually sensitive and effective models of support for Ukrainian migrants in host countries.

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