

# “Until Lasting Peace”

## Diaspora Women Building Peace Where They Are

### CASE STUDY: GERMANY

*Empowering the Ukrainian Diaspora in Germany: Building Community Resilience and Exploring Opportunities for Constructive Engagement*

This case study is part of the *“Until Lasting Peace”: Diaspora Women Building Peace Where They Are* report created by the Women PeaceMakers program.

### “Until Lasting Peace”

In an era defined by human mobility and multiple, mutually reinforcing crises, diaspora communities have emerged as vital actors in shaping peace and social cohesion—far beyond the traditional boundaries of conflict zones or homeland politics. Yet, the contributions of women within these transnational networks remain obscured by disciplinary silos and policy frameworks that too often address peacebuilding, migration and gender in isolation. The *“Until Lasting Peace”: Diaspora Women Building Peace Where They Are* report begins from the conviction that understanding diaspora women’s peace work demands an integrated lens—one that traces the trajectories of diverse migration waves, centers gendered experiences, and bridges the worlds of international law, community activism and feminist care.

At the heart of this inquiry lies the question of how existing international frameworks—embodied, among others, in the Women, Peace and Security agenda, global migration agreements and human rights treaties—create (or fail to create) an enabling environment for diaspora women to be recognized and well supported agents of peace. This research interrogates how international instruments recognize (or omit) the capacity, participation, leadership, resources and belonging of diaspora women.

This report was co-created by the three 2024-2025 Women PeaceMaker Fellows — Bochra Laghssais from Morocco and living in the Netherlands, Mariia Levchenko from Ukraine and living in Germany and Temi Mwale from the United Kingdom — and was supported by leaders in the peacebuilding field, who provided their own expertise and perspectives to shape this work. By bringing together insights from generational legacies, long-standing communities and emergent diaspora networks, this report offers a multidimensional analysis that transcends geography and history. This report seeks to chart a path toward policies and practices that not only acknowledge diaspora women’s agency but actively support their leadership in forging just and lasting peace across borders.

Since 2002, the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (Kroc IPJ) at the University of San Diego’s Kroc School has hosted the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship program. The Fellowship offers a unique opportunity for peacebuilders who focus on issues of gender, peace and conflict to engage in a cycle of learning, practice, research and participation that strengthens peacebuilding partnerships. The Women PeaceMakers Fellowship facilitates impactful collaborations between peacebuilders from conflict-affected communities and international partner organizations. The Fellows also co-create research intended to shape the peacebuilding field and highlight good practices for peacebuilding design and implementation.



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# Case Study Germany

## Empowering the Ukrainian Diaspora in Germany: Building Community Resilience and Exploring Opportunities for Constructive Engagement

By Mariia Levchenko

### CASE STUDY



### Context<sup>a</sup>

Ukrainian migration to Germany has a long history but remained modest until the political and humanitarian crises of recent decades. After World War II, small Ukrainian communities of displaced persons existed in Germany; however, many later emigrated to North America or South America. In the post-Soviet era, a fourth wave of Ukrainian migrants arrived from the 1990s onward, seeking economic opportunities. This population grew steadily but was still limited in size on the eve of the 2014 Euromaidan, a mass mobilization in Ukraine demanding democratic reforms and closer ties with the European Union (EU).<sup>1</sup> In Germany, new civic groups and associations sprang up during and after Euromaidan, forming what scholars called a “new diasporic community” of civically engaged Ukrainians.<sup>2</sup> This community strongly supported Ukraine’s pro-democracy and pro-European aspirations and began coordinating aid and advocacy for their homeland.<sup>3</sup> Their emergence marked a shift; alongside older Ukrainian diaspora organizations — some tracing back to earlier migrant waves — a younger, more activist cohort took on leadership in community mobilization.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the largest refugee movement in Europe since World War II. As of 2023, Germany hosts approximately 1.1 million Ukrainians under temporary protection — the largest share in Europe — making it a primary destination and significantly expanding the country’s Ukrainian diaspora.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, this refugee flow has been highly gendered. Under Ukraine’s martial law, most men aged 18–60 are required to stay in-country, so about 90 percent of those fleeing to the EU have been women and children.<sup>5</sup> The result is a Ukrainian diasporic community in Germany that is predominantly female and often organized around family and caregiving networks, even as its members take on public roles.

The Ukrainian diaspora’s experience has been shaped by conflict and the pursuit of justice, with key moments of political upheaval triggering waves of civic mobilization. The Euromaidan movement in 2013 and 2014 marked a significant turning point: diaspora communities in Germany organized demonstrations, raised funds for injured protesters and countered disinformation about events in Ukraine. Following the onset of war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, diaspora actors coordinated humanitarian aid, including medical supplies and protective gear, while advocating for stronger international support. These responses were often underpinned by collective memory of past traumas — such as the Holodomor and Soviet repression, events associated with famine, violence and political persecution — which served as emotional and moral catalysts for diaspora engagement.<sup>6</sup>

a Literature review support from Mia Mac Farland.

This continuity of mobilization deepened further after the full-scale invasion in 2022. Faced with a sudden influx of Ukrainian women and children seeking protection, established diaspora networks — ranging from student groups and churches to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — responded rapidly, setting up reception points, offering temporary housing and delivering basic assistance, including translation, legal advice and psychosocial support. Volunteers opened their homes, coordinated grassroots donation drives and partnered with local German actors and international organizations. The speed and scale of this response positioned the Ukrainian diaspora as a crucial actor in Europe’s humanitarian landscape, reflecting a longstanding commitment to solidarity, mobilization and resilience.

Beyond providing immediate relief, the diaspora community in Germany has become a pillar of resilience for Ukrainians and a vocal advocate for peace. Diaspora groups have taken on roles ranging from humanitarian aid and legal assistance to educational support and social integration for displaced persons. Culturally, they have worked to preserve Ukrainian identity abroad through language classes, cultural events and commemorations of Ukrainian holidays in Germany. Politically, diaspora activists have engaged in public diplomacy — organizing rallies, speaking to media and lobbying German and EU officials.<sup>7</sup> Regular demonstrations in Berlin, Munich and other cities have kept the war in the public eye. Diaspora advocacy groups also combat disinformation by sharing accurate news about the war and countering Russian propaganda narratives. In these ways, the diaspora strives to shape international discourse towards one that supports Ukraine and a just peace.

While states lead formal negotiations, diaspora groups — especially women’s organizations — foster resilience, connect civil society with international allies and help create conditions for future peace. Diaspora women’s organizations have highlighted the needs of women and children during the conflict, campaigning against gender-based violence and calling for accountability for war crimes. For example, the World Federation of Ukrainian Women’s Organizations, which has representatives in Germany and elsewhere, has lobbied for Ukraine’s accession to the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women and pushed international bodies to address Russia’s human rights abuses.<sup>8</sup> Such efforts align with broader peacebuilding by ensuring that women’s security and justice are part of the post-war agenda.

The 2014 Euromaidan and the ongoing war — intensified by the 2022 invasion — have shaped a Ukrainian diaspora, and now this community plays a vital peacebuilding role by sustaining refugees, preserving social cohesion and keeping international attention on Ukraine. This case study examines how women’s diaspora organizations contribute to these efforts, offering insight into their strategies, challenges and growing political relevance in exile.

## Methodology

This case study is led by the following research question:

- **To what extent can peacebuilding initiatives empower the Ukrainian diaspora in Germany to strengthen internal community resilience, support social adaptation and address gender-specific challenges and contributions?**

To answer this, the research draws on qualitative, interview-based methods. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews (nine women and one man) with members of the Ukrainian diaspora community in Germany to understand their experiences, perspectives and roles in peacebuilding. A purposive sampling strategy was used to capture a diverse range of participants. Interviewees were selected to represent different demographic and migration backgrounds — including gender, age and migration “wave.” In practice, this meant engaging both recent refugees (mostly women who fled after 2022) and longer-term diaspora members (some who migrated in the 1990s–2000s or around the 2014 conflict). By including participants from the post-2014 cohort and the post-2022 cohort, the research could compare insights across different waves of Ukrainian migration to Germany. The sample reflects the overall feminization of the diaspora. Ages of participants ranged roughly from early 20s to late 60s, capturing both youth activists and veteran community leaders engaged in some form of diaspora-led peacebuilding or relief activity.



Interviews were semi-structured in format. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to ensure key topics were covered, while still allowing participants the freedom to tell their stories. For data analysis, the researcher employed qualitative thematic analysis.

This qualitative approach has certain limitations. The sample size was limited, meaning findings are not statistically generalizable to all Ukrainians in Germany. There may be self-selection bias: those who agreed to be interviewed were often highly engaged in the community, which could skew the findings toward more active diaspora members. Voices of the less involved (the “silent” or less publicly engaged majority of refugees) might be underrepresented. Geographically, participants were primarily concentrated in urban centers (Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, etc.), as these are where diaspora networks and organizations are typically found; the experiences of Ukrainians in more rural parts of Germany may differ. Language posed another constraint — while interviews were done in Ukrainian or a comfortable language for participants, translation of quotes and nuance into English (for reporting) carries a risk of subtle meaning loss. Time was also a constraint: the interviews were conducted at the beginning of 2025, a relatively short time after the major refugee influx of 2022. Thus, the study captures a snapshot while the war is ongoing; longer-term perspectives (e.g., how diaspora engagement might evolve if the war ends) could only be speculative from the participants’ viewpoints. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides rich contextual insights. It centers diaspora voices, offering qualitative depth about community resilience and engagement that quantitative data alone could not convey.

## Conceptualizing the Diaspora’s Role in Peacebuilding

In the interviews, participants shared layered understandings of diaspora peacebuilding amid active conflict, with gender emerging as a central theme. The predominance of women among Ukrainian activists in Germany has significantly shaped the community’s peacebuilding approach. Since 2014, and even more visibly after 2022, women have been at the forefront of humanitarian and social efforts, often interpreting their roles through the lens of care work and emotional sustenance. Organizing support groups for refugee mothers, mediating tensions within the community or preserving cultural practices were described as vital contributions to social cohesion and healing. Several interviewees who had not been politically active before 2022 said they stepped into leadership roles out of a felt obligation to “hold our people together.”<sup>9</sup> This mobilization of women, particularly in informal and emotionally demanding roles, was framed as a form of peacebuilding rooted in everyday resilience. One interviewee, who organized trauma therapy for refugee families, emphasized that restoring dignity and emotional stability helps prevent future cycles of violence.<sup>10</sup> Across interviews, participants highlighted how emotional labor, often carried by women, is central to both healing and resilience, reinforcing the community’s capacity to endure and act.

Participants also reflected on the meanings of “peace” and “diaspora,” often linking the two as intertwined responsibilities. The diaspora was seen as an extension of the Ukrainian nation abroad, with a moral duty to advocate for a just and sustainable peace. Peace, in this framing, was not merely the end of violence but a resolution that upholds Ukraine’s sovereignty and secures justice for victims. Accordingly, diaspora activities, such as protest mobilization, fundraising and public advocacy, were described as part of a long-term struggle against impunity and misinformation. Acts of humanitarian support — whether providing legal assistance or coordinating psychosocial services — were viewed as equally essential forms of community-level peacebuilding.

On the other hand, diaspora peacebuilding also has an advocacy and international outreach dimension, which often involves more public-facing roles. Participants — both women and men — described efforts to influence public opinion and policy in Germany and beyond. They have organized information campaigns, engaged with German NGOs and charities and met with local officials to voice the Ukrainian perspective. Some interviewees<sup>11</sup> suggested that being women sometimes made German partners more receptive to their message — for instance, a mother speaking about the plight of Ukrainian children might elicit empathy that transcends politics. However, they also encountered the challenge of not being taken seriously at times. Still, the diaspora’s conceptualization of its role in building peace includes being “informal ambassadors” for Ukraine, promoting a narrative of resilience and the pursuit of a just peace. This aligns with what researchers observe globally: diasporas often engage in public diplomacy and lobbying in their host countries as part of their political activities.<sup>12</sup>

Diaspora women have increasingly taken on leadership in these advocacy initiatives, partly because they represent the majority and partly because they bring communication and networking skills honed in caregiving roles.<sup>13</sup> Gender dynamics are deeply intertwined with these roles. The feminization of the Ukrainian diaspora means that traditional gender norms both constrain and enable certain kinds of work. Many participants acknowledged that women in the community carried double loads — caring for their own families and volunteering for the community — which sometimes limited their capacity to take on formal leadership roles that require full-time commitment. Paradoxically, it was the very skills from those traditional roles that proved to be invaluable. Organizational talents often honed in managing households or social events were redirected to coordinating volunteer efforts. One male participant, one of the few men active in the refugee aid scene, since most men of military age remain in Ukraine, observed that “it’s the women who lead the work here.”<sup>14</sup> He noted that women led nearly all the local initiatives, from logistics of collecting donations to running Ukrainian-language weekend schools for kids. This feminized leadership has influenced the style of diaspora peacebuilding, described by respondents as collaborative, grassroots and informal, rather than top-down. Several women leaders eschewed formal titles or hierarchies; instead, they formed committees or chat groups to make collective decisions, reflecting what participants described as more inclusive, “maternal” approach to community peace work.

The concept of peacebuilding itself was sometimes debated among participants. A few grappled with the term “peace” because, as one put it, “there can be no real peace until the aggression stops.”<sup>15</sup> These individuals often focused on supporting Ukraine’s defensive war effort as their primary mode of engagement, through raising funds to send medical supplies to Ukrainian soldiers or even encouraging able-bodied friends to join Ukraine’s armed forces. While, at first glance, activities like supporting soldier recruitment or military defense might seem at odds with peacebuilding, participants reconciled this by emphasizing defensive action and justice. In their eyes, helping Ukraine protect itself and its people is part of achieving a just peace. This underscores a broader point: the Ukrainian diaspora’s peacebuilding concept is not neutral or strictly pacifist; it is imbued with the urgency of defending human rights and national survival. Thus, diaspora “peace” initiatives range from humanitarian relief to information warfare (countering propaganda) to supporting Ukraine’s institutional resilience.<sup>16</sup> Women interviewees especially highlighted non-military avenues through which they contribute — like petitioning for war crime investigations or helping rebuild schools and homes — viewing those as laying the groundwork for peace.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, the emotional aspect of diaspora engagement is critical to how they conceptualize their role. Many described the diaspora as an “emotional community” bound by shared grief, hope and determination. This emotional bond is a driving force: interviewees frequently used the language of family — “we are all one family abroad, trying to protect our home.”<sup>18</sup> Such language indicates that for them, peacebuilding is as much about maintaining morale and unity as it is about tangible outcomes. In fact, maintaining hope within the diaspora was cited as a deliberate strategy. Community leaders organized cultural events, such as concerts and holiday celebrations, even during dark moments because, as one put it, “celebrating our culture is a form of resistance and peacebuilding — it reminds us what we’re fighting for.”<sup>19</sup>

During the interviews, participants conceptualized the diaspora’s role in peacebuilding in an expansive way. It is highly gendered, with women’s leadership and emotional labor at the core. It is also holistic — encompassing relief, advocacy, cultural preservation and justice-seeking. For this community, peacebuilding means sustaining people through crisis, amplifying the truth of Ukraine’s cause and working towards a future where peace is secured by freedom and accountability. The Ukrainian diaspora in Germany embodies a form of peace activism that blends traditional care roles with political engagement, demonstrating how diaspora contributions to peace are both intimate and international.

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## Challenges and Costs in Doing Peacebuilding Work in the Diaspora

Interviewees encountered a range of challenges and costs to their peacebuilding efforts. These difficulties can be grouped into several broad categories: systemic barriers in the host country, internal diaspora frictions, gender-specific burdens, and emotional or personal costs. Each of these intersects with the others, creating a complex landscape of challenges for diaspora peacebuilders in Germany.

### Systemic and Institutional Barriers in Germany

Participants consistently highlighted bureaucratic obstacles in the host country. Establishing formal organizations was described as complex and inaccessible, mainly due to unfamiliarity with German legal procedures, tax codes and funding regulations.<sup>20</sup> Many self-organized groups faced delays or failed attempts to register, limiting access to institutional support. Even experienced organizations struggled with high administrative demands, a lack of office space and restrictive rules for fundraising. Funding shortages compounded these issues. Initial emergency support tapered off, leaving smaller diaspora initiatives at a disadvantage compared to larger, well-established NGOs. Limited access to decision-making spaces was another key frustration. Despite their frontline role, diaspora groups were often excluded from official discussions on refugee integration or peacebuilding. Integration bottlenecks — long waits for permits, school access or language classes — further strained diaspora capacity. Volunteers increasingly spent time navigating these systems for newcomers, diverting energy from broader advocacy or peacebuilding efforts.<sup>21</sup>

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### Gendered Burdens and Biases

Given the heavily female composition of the active diaspora, challenges often took on a gendered dimension. Women leading diaspora initiatives experience the classic double burden: managing responsibilities for home and family on top of community work. Many of the women interviewees take care of children or elderly relatives in Germany — often without their husbands, who remain in Ukraine or elsewhere. Balancing these duties with volunteer activism led to severe time constraints and stress. There is an undercurrent of the peacebuilding work being seen as “women’s work” — compassionate but not substantial which can lead to it being undervalued. For example, organizing a memorial vigil for war victims or running a peer-counseling circle might not receive the same recognition or funding as, say, a formal conference on reconciliation led by professional, often male experts. This devaluation can be disheartening.

Moreover, emotional labor falls disproportionately on women, which is a cost often taken for granted. The community relies on women to be the nurturers: comforting children, listening to others’ trauma and keeping spirits high. This expectation itself is a burden. As one participant poignantly put it, “[e]veryone turns to us to soothe the pain — but we are in pain too.”<sup>22</sup> Women reported suppressing their own anguish to stay strong for others, which can lead to mental health issues down the line. Despite these burdens, few had access to respite or professional support, partly because they prioritize the needs of those they care for above their own.

## Internal Diaspora Divisions and Engagement Challenges

Some fractures within the Ukrainian community itself limit collective action. Many interviewees candidly discussed a lack of coordination and even competition among diaspora organizations. In Germany, multiple Ukrainian groups exist, ranging from older expatriate associations (some dating back decades) to ad hoc volunteer networks formed after 2022. These groups often struggle to communicate effectively. Surveyed diaspora representatives have noted “lack of cooperation and collaboration (...) most importantly, with each other” as a problem.<sup>23</sup> The research participants confirmed this: some spoke of duplicated efforts, like two groups in the same city collecting similar aid independently rather than pooling resources, and even interpersonal rifts. One young activist from the recent refugee wave felt that some established diaspora leaders were gatekeeping access to German institutions. “The older generation has their circle, and they didn’t initially welcome us newcomers. It took time to build trust,” she said.<sup>24</sup> Generational and “wave” differences underlie some divisions. Individuals from earlier migration waves (1990s or 2000s) may have different political outlooks or levels of integration compared to those arriving after 2014 or 2022. For instance, a few older diaspora members were Russian-speaking Soviet-era emigrants, whereas the post-2014 youth are often only Ukrainian-speaking and hyper-aware of Russian aggression. While all oppose the invasion, disagreements can arise over approaches — some may prefer quieter charity work, others visible public protest. These diverse political and cultural backgrounds can lead to diaspora polarization, if not managed. One example is how to approach dialogue with Russians in Germany: some diaspora activists absolutely refuse any joint events with Russian diaspora groups, viewing them with suspicion,<sup>25</sup> while a minority thought carefully structured dialogue could be useful.<sup>26</sup> Such fissures can hinder unified diaspora lobbying or messaging. Moreover, the Ukrainian diaspora is not monolithic in its vision of peace. While the vast majority supports Ukraine’s defense, there can be differences: some favor exploring negotiations sooner, while others insist on total victory before peace, which can impact how comfortable people feel working together.<sup>27</sup> Such internal tensions, unless carefully navigated, weaken the diaspora’s collective influence.

Additionally, community passivity was mentioned as an internal challenge. The burden of activism often falls on a relatively small core of volunteers, while many others remain passive recipients of aid. One interviewee wryly called it the 90/10 problem: “90 percent of people wait for help provided by ten percent who volunteer.”<sup>28</sup> This imbalance leads to burnout and resentment. Indeed, multiple diaspora surveys found “passivity within the Ukrainian community” — evidenced by a limited number of people attending demonstrations or volunteering — as a notable challenge.<sup>29</sup>

## Emotional and Psychological Costs

Almost every active diaspora member the author spoke with touched on the personal emotional toll of their peacebuilding engagement. Chronic stress and burnout were common refrains. Activists have been operating in “crisis mode” since 2022 (or even 2014 for some), with little opportunity to process their trauma. Many carry the weight of worrying about family back in Ukraine while also dealing with the immediate needs of people in front of them in Germany. One volunteer described her mind as “constantly in two places — I’m sorting donated clothes here but thinking about my husband on the front line every minute.”<sup>30</sup> This mental split can be exhausting. Burnout manifests as physical fatigue, irritability or a sense of numbness.

Another emotional cost is vicarious trauma and grief. By helping fellow Ukrainians, diaspora volunteers inevitably absorb many heartbreaking stories about homes lost, relatives killed and atrocities witnessed. Over time, hearing these accounts (and often being a shoulder to cry on) can lead to secondary traumatic stress. Several participants mentioned trouble sleeping, intrusive thoughts or guilt.<sup>31</sup> Survivor’s guilt, feeling guilty for being safe in Germany while loved ones suffer or fight in Ukraine, is also prevalent. This guilt drives them to work even harder, creating a vicious cycle of overwork. “I can’t relax or enjoy anything knowing what’s happening to my people,”<sup>32</sup> one interviewee said, explaining why she has not taken a single day off volunteering in over a year. While dedication is admirable, it comes at the cost of personal well-being. Emotional isolation is also an issue. Ironically, those who spend all day helping others can still feel alone. A participant noted that after she spends her energy supporting others, she has little left to socialize or seek support for herself.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, not everyone in the host society understands what the diaspora volunteers are going through. Several women mentioned that German colleagues or neighbors might initially express sympathy, but they eventually expect the Ukrainians to “move on” or be less consumed by the war.<sup>34</sup> This lack of understanding can leave activists feeling that only their fellow Ukrainians truly “get it,” narrowing their support network.



Finally, uncertainty about the future weighs heavily. Peacebuilding is inherently a long-term, often abstract pursuit. With the war still raging, some diaspora peacebuilders wrestle with emotional fatigue from fighting an uphill battle with no clear end. One person likened it to running a marathon with no finish line in sight. The constant effort to keep the issue visible and aid flowing while combating fatigue and distraction, can lead to cynicism or despair. “Sometimes I wonder, does it make a difference?” a volunteer admitted, reflecting a moment of doubt that many surely feel but seldom voice.<sup>35</sup> Overcoming this emotional low is a challenge in itself — requiring peer support and reminding one another of even small successes. In sum, despite strong commitment, diaspora-led peacebuilding among Ukrainians in Germany is hindered by structural barriers, internal divisions and emotional strain, underscoring the need for lasting support.

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## Successes in Peacebuilding Work

Despite significant challenges, the Ukrainian diaspora in Germany has achieved notable successes in strengthening community resilience and advancing peace-oriented goals. Many of these achievements emerged from informal grassroots efforts driven by solidarity, creativity and the leadership of women.

A key foundation for this success was the pre-existing high level of capacity among Ukrainian women. Many organizers leveraged years of experience as NGO professionals, educators, psychologists and civil society leaders. Rather than needing training, they required structural support to apply their skills in a new context. Participants rejected the notion of “capacity building,” instead calling for “capacity unleashing.”<sup>36</sup> Their initiatives—from trauma workshops and civic education to diaspora communications—were sustained through autonomy, contextual knowledge and peer-led models. These women built much of the diaspora’s grassroots infrastructure, demonstrating how displaced professionals can quickly transition into leadership when empowered.

Grassroots mobilization was another major strength. Responding rapidly to the invasion, diaspora groups created decentralized volunteer networks across German cities, coordinating aid, housing, advocacy and integration support. One frequently cited example was “Vitsche,” a women-led platform that combined protest action with community engagement.<sup>37</sup> Their use of social media and open organizing styles attracted a broader base, including second-generation Ukrainians and local German allies. This decentralized, collaborative approach helped foster local ownership and build social capital through cross-community partnerships, though it ultimately emerged in response to, rather than prevention of, the serious burnout many had already experienced. These grassroots structures have become vital pillars of diaspora-led peacebuilding. Importantly, the predominance of women in the diaspora shaped strategies in distinct ways. Women leveraged caregiving networks—such as school and playground groups—as channels for activism and information-sharing. Their emphasis on inclusive, consensus-based decision-making supported cohesion and flexibility, while advocacy efforts often centered issues affecting women and children, including gender-based violence and the needs of single mothers. Diaspora women’s organizations have also engaged with international platforms focused on the Women, Peace and Security agenda, ensuring that these concerns remain visible in broader peacebuilding discourse. Below are key areas of success and forward-looking ideas that emerged from the interviews:

## Emotional Resilience and Mutual Support

One of the diaspora's greatest successes lies in its ability to foster emotional resilience among its members. In the face of trauma and uncertainty, the community has managed to create spaces of support and hope. For example, Ukrainian women formed informal support circles in several German cities soon after the 2022 refugee arrivals.<sup>38</sup> These were safe spaces — sometimes weekly tea gatherings, sometimes WhatsApp groups — where women could share their feelings, cry, pray and encourage one another. Participants credited these circles with preventing many from falling into isolation or despair. Simply knowing that others had similar fears and hopes provided strength. Over time, what started as small peer groups evolved into more structured initiatives, like “Mama-Schule” meetups for mothers and children, or peer counseling networks.<sup>39</sup> These efforts, often coordinated by volunteers with a background in psychology or social work, helped newcomers process their experiences.

Another critical form of success, especially highlighted by women participants, is the creation of informal care systems that plugged gaps in official services. For instance, when German language courses had waiting lists for refugees, Ukrainian volunteers with teaching experience began offering free, informal language classes in the evenings at community halls.<sup>40</sup> They not only taught German basics but also provided on-site childcare, so mothers could attend — a small innovation that significantly increased women's access to language learning. Likewise, diaspora women organized childcare co-ops, where they would take turns minding each other's children, allowing others to attend job interviews or simply have a respite. The diaspora's informal support networks filled critical gaps left by institutions, easing stress, fostering stability and strengthening community resilience through tailored, responsive care.

## Cultural Preservation and Exchange

Another area of success has been cultural programming. Diaspora organizers put significant effort into cultural events that celebrate Ukrainian identity and share it with the host country, and these events have yielded positive outcomes. In 2023, the Ukrainian community in Berlin hosted a large Vyshyvanka Day celebration featuring embroidery exhibits, folk music and a crafts fair. The event boosted morale, fostered pride and connection to home, built empathy with German audiences, and received local media attention that highlighted Ukraine's culture beyond the war. Participants noted that such initiatives often served multiple roles, including fundraising and strengthening community ties.<sup>41</sup> Another success story was a traveling photo exhibition organized by diaspora women that showed scenes of Ukrainian daily life amid war and peace.<sup>42</sup> These cultural diplomacy efforts also illustrate a gendered strategy in which women were often the curators of culture, using soft power to win hearts and minds. This kind of grassroots cultural exchange lays the groundwork for long-term people-to-people peace, strengthening social cohesion and understanding across communities.

## Long-Term Visions and Forward Thinking

Many participants, while focused on immediate needs, also look to the future. A common vision is that the diaspora will play a lasting role in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and peacebuilding.<sup>43</sup> One idea is to establish a permanent Ukrainian cultural and community center in Germany, especially in cities like Berlin or Munich, to serve as a hub for cultural exchange, support services and policy dialogue.<sup>44</sup> Some leaders have already begun informal planning. Others are working to mobilize professional networks, so that Ukrainian engineers, doctors and IT specialists in Germany can contribute to future reconstruction efforts. Diaspora women in particular called for ensuring women's voices are included in peace processes and rebuilding.<sup>45</sup> They envision a shift from informal activism to formal representation, including a transnational Ukrainian women's peace coalition that could engage both German and Ukrainian authorities on survivor support, memorialization and reconciliation. A key strategy for sustaining this momentum has been alliance-building. As one participant said, “We have done so much we never imagined we could. In the future, we see ourselves helping rebuild homes and rebuild lives. We will be there until lasting peace comes — and beyond.”<sup>46</sup> This captures the prevailing sentiment that their successes so far are stepping-stones toward an even larger contribution to peace and reconstruction in the long run.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Diaspora-led peacebuilding in Germany has strengthened community resilience, identity and advocacy, with women's leadership at the forefront. Yet structural barriers, limited mental health support, internal divisions and geopolitical tensions continue to constrain its potential, highlighting the need to move from capacity-building to resourcing existing leadership. These recommendations are directed at specific stakeholders — including German policymakers, NGOs, civil society, international partners and the Ukrainian diaspora/community itself.

### Invest in Diaspora Platforms and Trauma-Informed Dialogues

- **Inside Germany (Government, NGOs, Civil Society):** Fund inclusive digital and physical platforms for storytelling, joint learning, and coalition-building across diaspora communities (Ukrainian, Syrian, Belarusian, Afghan, etc.). Ensure dialogue facilitators are trained in trauma-sensitive practices. Embed women as co-designers and leaders of these regional initiatives.
- **International Partners and Organizations:** Support cross-diaspora initiatives at regional and international levels (e.g., EU-funded programs). Fund regional forums specifically geared toward women-led peacebuilding and solidarity through shared trauma.

### Support Language Access and Integration

- **Inside Germany (Government, NGOs, Civil Society):** Expand multilingual outreach, legal aid services, cultural mediators, and fast-track credential recognition programs. Fund interpreters and community liaisons to reduce administrative burdens on diaspora organizers.
- **International Partners and Organizations:** Advocate for integration best practices across EU contexts. Fund multilingual resources for Ukrainian communities beyond Germany. Support mobile integration teams for underserved rural areas.

### Leverage Diaspora Expertise

- **Inside Germany (Government, NGOs, Civil Society):** Recognize Ukrainian diaspora members as experts in education, health, media, diplomacy, and organizing. Include them as advisors, trainers, and decision-makers in integration, civic dialogue, and policy development.
- **International Partners and Organizations:** Fund participatory research, peer training programs, and diaspora fellowships. Support diaspora-led knowledge sharing at international conferences and policy dialogues.

### Shift from Capacity-Building to Capacity-Unleashing

- **Inside Germany (Government, NGOs, Civil Society):** Shift from generic capacity-building to enabling real autonomy by reforming donor rules that exclude grassroots groups—such as co-financing requirements in Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) grants or the development agency GIZ's complex procurement procedures. Tailor leadership programs for diaspora women and adapt EU schemes like the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) to include diaspora-led initiatives.
- **International Partners and Organizations:** Design flexible funding mechanisms that allow diaspora organizations to set their own priorities. Promote diaspora leadership within international peacebuilding, migration and humanitarian networks.

### Prioritize Mental Health and Social Support

- **Inside Germany (Government, NGOs, Civil Society):** Allocate funding for culturally and linguistically accessible mental health services (e.g., Ukrainian-speaking counselors). Partner diaspora NGOs with German health services. Support informal care networks such as mother groups and survivor circles as critical resilience infrastructure.
- **International Partners and Organizations:** Fund trauma-informed psychosocial programming in cooperation with diaspora networks. Embed mental health support into regional diaspora engagement frameworks.

## Plan for the Long Term

- **Inside Germany (Government, NGOs, Civil Society):** Invest in mentorship programs and second-generation engagement, such as youth leadership initiatives or cultural education projects to sustain diaspora resilience.
- **International Partners and Organizations:** Promote long-term diaspora engagement strategies across international institutions (e.g., UN, EU). Fund research and policy hubs focused on diaspora contributions to reconstruction and peacebuilding.

## For the Ukrainian Diaspora Community (Internal Recommendations):

- **Strengthen internal unity and capacity:** Create umbrella associations or coordinating committees (e.g., a formal “Alliance of Ukrainian Organizations in Germany”) to unify messaging and share resources. Encourage mentorship between established leaders and newer activists to transfer knowledge and avoid duplication. Use tools like newsletters and regular meetings to improve internal coordination.
- **Promote self-care and sustainability:** Rotate responsibilities, bring in new volunteers and normalize taking breaks to prevent burnout. Foster a culture where rest is valued as part of long-term contribution. Senior women can model balance by encouraging younger women to step back when needed without guilt.

The Ukrainian diaspora in Germany has demonstrated remarkable grassroots leadership and resilience. To turn this into lasting impact, stakeholders must support community-led peacebuilding by addressing structural barriers—ensuring funding autonomy, recognizing diaspora-led initiatives, investing in gender-sensitive leadership pipelines and creating spaces where diaspora actors shape, not just join, future strategies. When sustained and meaningfully supported, these efforts can strengthen democratic resilience in Germany, support long-term integration and belonging for Ukrainians in exile, and build the civic foundations for a more peaceful and just Ukraine.



# Endnotes

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