

“Online Work Kept Me Alive”: Psychosocial Value of Remote Work Among Protection Holders from Ukraine

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Abstract Remote work has become a noticeable but underexplored form of employment among refugees. Existing research has focused on the socioeconomic opportunities and precarities of digital labour, paying less attention to what remote work means to refugees. Drawing on interviews with protection holders from Ukraine who have worked remotely while in Sweden, this research brief examines the psychosocial value they attach to their remote employment. Using Marie Jahoda's latent deprivation model and two participants' stories, this article shows how remote work can restore purpose, sustain social ties and enable meaningful activity during displacement. This supports refugee wellbeing even when remote work provides little income or when it supplements, rather than replaces, local employment. In conclusion, the article calls on policy and practice to assess refugee labour market participation beyond local employment, enabling capabilities and self-determined, psychologically meaningful livelihoods.

INTRODUCTION

Recent research has drawn attention to the presence of remote work¹ among refugees. Much of what we know about refugee remote work comes from studies examining gig and platform work outside Europe, often in refugee camps.² This literature has been invaluable in exposing the structural vulnerabilities that shape refugee digital livelihoods: the informality of platform-based arrangements, the limited legal protections available to refugee workers and the ways in which remote work can deepen rather than ease existing precarities. In Europe, refugee remote work has primarily been studied among people displaced from Ukraine. Although research remains scarce, studies suggest that working remotely can help refugees navigate whether to remain in their destination country or return to Ukraine.³

While this emerging scholarship documents the socioeconomic, legal and mobility dimensions of refugee remote work, we know little about the meaning refugees attach to it. Do refugees engage in remote work for salary or professional

continuity—or do they attach other meanings to it? This research brief addresses this gap by demonstrating that remote work can be psychosocially significant even when providing little income. It can function as an important source of wellbeing, restoring a sense of purpose, fostering transnational embeddedness and enabling meaningful engagement in conditions of displacement.

Conceptually, the article challenges academic and policy discussions that reduce employment to a marker and means of integration, sidelining what work enables refugees themselves to feel, sustain and become. By foregrounding what remote work means to refugees, it supports the idea that employment should be understood not merely as a livelihood and integration strategy but as a matter of capabilities, expanding refugees' freedoms and opportunities to do what they value and to flourish through dignified, self-determined livelihoods.⁴

The text builds on empirical material generated through interviews with 21 remote workers among protection holders⁵ from Ukraine in Sweden. With over 47,000 having received protection by June 2026,⁶ Ukrainians represent one of the biggest recent refugee groups in Sweden. No previous displaced group has been observed to have such widespread remote work. While exact numbers are difficult to get by, survey evidence indicates that up to one-fourth of those displaced in Europe have worked remotely for employers in Ukraine post-2022 invasion.⁷

The article first outlines scholarly debates about refugee employment, foregrounding the psychosocial value refugees attach to it. It proceeds

to present the latent deprivation model⁸ as the paper's analytical lens. I then describe the empirical study and discuss the generated empirical material, highlighting two participants' stories, before deliberating on the implications for scholarship and practice.

THE VALUE OF REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT

Across policy and much scholarly debate, refugee employment is routinely positioned as both a benchmark and a motor of 'successful integration'. Labour market participation is a key indicator of refugees' incorporation into destination societies and is expected to facilitate language acquisition, social participation and long-term settlement.⁹

Recent scholarship has complicated this understanding by conceptualising integration as a dynamic process, marked by pauses, ruptures and detours. Developments in one domain may not reinforce those in others or generate sustained belonging.¹⁰ Refugees who enter employment quickly without acquiring destination-country language skills may, for example, become channelled into labour market side tracks that reinforce socioeconomic marginalisation.¹¹ The 'integration paradox',¹² on the other hand, describes how migrants who are socioeconomically integrated through language proficiency, education or employment may become less positively oriented towards the destination society as their participation heightens their exposure to, and recognition of, discrimination. These insights challenge the assumption that employment is inherently or straightforwardly integrative. Yet even critical discussions commonly assess refugee employment according to its effects on integration in the destination country.

This article shifts the analytical perspective. Rather than asking how employment contributes to refugee integration, it asks what work does for refugees themselves. Studies on local employment among refugees have shown that work can impact refugees' mental health,¹³ self-understanding and sense of identity. It may provide daily structure, purpose, dignity, self-worth and social recognition,

all of which can acquire particular significance amid the disruptions associated with displacement.¹⁴ This subjective perspective is especially relevant to remote work because financial considerations are not always the sole, or even the primary, reason people engage in it after displacement.

Latent Deprivation Model

Marie Jahoda's latent deprivation model provides an analytical lens for identifying the psychosocial functions protection holders from Ukraine assign to remote work. The model treats employment as providing more than income. Work also yields five unintended 'latent' functions: 1) time structure, 2) collective purpose, 3) social contact, 4) social status and 5) activity. Jahoda argues these align with fundamental human needs and support wellbeing, mental health and life satisfaction.¹⁵

Although widely used, the model has been criticised for assuming that employment is psychologically supportive even under bad conditions.¹⁶ Yet work quality matters. For instance, research on fixed-term employment among migrants, refugees including, shows that unstable or precarious jobs can harm wellbeing.¹⁷

I therefore use Jahoda's model as a sensitising framework, not to assume that all remote work benefits refugees. It makes visible participants' ascribed value while acknowledging that work quality, individuals' social positions and circumstances as well as structural conditions shape them.¹⁸ For instance, all interviewees in this study have tertiary education, shaping their access to and experience of remote work. The psychosocial benefits foregrounded here may be less accessible in precarious digital labour or among refugees with less formal education.¹⁹

STUDY ON REFUGEE REMOTE WORK

This article draws on my postdoctoral research on remote work among refugees.²⁰ Between winter 2025 and spring 2026, a student research assistant and I interviewed 21 protection holders from Ukraine who had worked remotely in Sweden.²¹ The interviews examined how remote work affects both

individuals' integration in Sweden and im/mobility considerations. 16 participants are women and five are men, aged 20–51. All have completed tertiary education, predominantly in engineering, humanities and social sciences, but also in IT, psychology, teaching and interpreting.

Most participants work locally or remotely, while some combine the two. Yet all had worked remotely after arriving to Sweden. Some worked for employers in Ukraine or another country, others were self-employed (for example, as psychologists or online language teachers).

Most interviews were conducted in English (18) and three were conducted in Russian by an Uzbeki student research assistant. Interviews were conducted both in person (6) and via Zoom (15). All were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated into English, when needed.

WHAT REMOTE WORK DOES FOR REFUGEES

Participants related overlapping reasons for remote work, including occupational continuity, income, but also moral obligation towards Ukraine and personal wellbeing. The importance of these benefits varied. The ensuing stories of Tetiana and Karim were selected because they markedly illustrate the psychosocial value of remote work. Moreover, they highlight how this depends on a person's work history, relationships, health, care obligations, local opportunities and the ability to control when and how work is performed.

A Lifeline for Tetiana

Tetiana²² is a middle-aged Ukrainian woman who arrived in Sweden in 2022 with her two children. Her decision to flee was shaped by caregiving responsibilities, especially for her daughter, who has a high level of autism, making it untenable to remain in Ukraine.

In Ukraine, Tetiana worked as a foreign-language tutor and ran a small language school. A few years before the Covid-19 pandemic, she gradually added online teaching to in-person lessons. As a result, during the Covid-19 lockdowns, she continued

teaching without interruption and transitioned fully to online work.

In Sweden, Tetiana participated in the establishment programme (i.e., the Swedish integration programme for refugees) and tried to find a local job. She did several internships and had short-term replacement contracts in educational settings, none leading to lasting employment. She also tried to find local students for her tutoring lessons, but without results, ascribing this to the lack of local reputation: "I tried here. But you know, what is a big difference? It's like I don't have reputation here."

At the same time, she continued her online tutoring for a limited number of her long-term students, some in Ukraine, others displaced across Europe. In Ukraine, her language school was her main and only source of income. In Sweden, her online language tutoring is limited and mostly unpaid or only lightly compensated, depending on what students can afford. It is not enough to live on. Still, she continues because these remote lessons are central to her life:

"But without that [online tutoring], I couldn't live without that. [...] It's just 8 hours [a week] [...] It's not money to live with, to survive. So anyway, it's important for me. [...] And it's also like, as I'm very, very big fan of what I'm doing and it's my love and life and everything, it's my huge source to be."

At the time of the interview, Tetiana was on sick leave due to exhaustion, partly linked to extensive caregiving for her daughter. She paused her participation in the establishment programme, putting on hold her Swedish language learning and search for local employment. While she was "very happy" working as a replacement in local schools, she could not imagine doing it presently because she did "not have that level of energy" to work with a big group of students.

However, she kept her online lessons. The one-on-one online lessons with the students she knew were essential for her to "survive [...] psychologically," calling the lessons a "miracle

window to normal life". She claimed: "Without that, I don't understand how I [would] mentally survive."

In this context, the importance of her online teaching rested primarily on two sources. For one, the remote work represented a means of connection to, for her, an essential group of people: "So, believe, just this online work kept me alive with my students because it was like a huge family." In Ukraine, Tetiana taught individuals and small groups across ages—from pre-school children to university applicants—often working with the same students and families for years, sometimes for over a decade. Students often returned for new languages or new professional or personal goals. Entire families could attend her school, forming a broad, interconnected community that recommended her to relatives and friends. After she left Ukraine, her remote language lessons enabled her to stay in contact with many former students. A small number of them still take her lessons online, regularly or occasionally, and a few even visited her in Sweden after her displacement.

Second, her online tutoring gave her a feeling of purposefulness. While being on sick leave, she reflected on how having no local employment undermined her sense of purpose and how online teaching provides that and a feeling of growth:

"But you feel yourself like totally useless. You know, I should say that it's a rather horrible feeling. So, for me, it's very important that I still have my students and I'm in contact with them. When you do in all your life something interesting, important, fantastic, with fantastic results, you know, it's not possible to survive without that. [...] At least this work gives me feeling of that I'm still in development, I still develop myself, I'm not stuck."

In sum, the lessons sustained Tetiana's connection to significant people, a feeling of usefulness and development amid local unemployment, sick leave and intensive caregiving. In Jahoda's terms, her remote work restores the latent benefits of employment by sustaining purposeful activity, anchoring collective purpose

and identity in being needed by others and preserving extra-familial contact through enduring ties with students dispersed across various countries. When local paid work is hindered by displacement and exhaustion, her remote lessons protect her wellbeing by preventing narrow social contact and feelings of purposelessness and stuckness that can accompany inactivity.

Karim: Something to Pass the Time

Karim is originally from a Middle Eastern country but moved to Ukraine as a young adult to study engineering. He spent about ten years there, completing his studies and then working; among others, for a company for which he continued working remotely after fleeing in 2022.

After moving to Sweden, where he lives under temporary protection, he sought local work within his field and soon started working for an employer in northern Sweden. He later moved to a bigger town in central Sweden where he now works for a local employer.

At the same time, Karim continued working remotely for his Ukrainian employer on various "small projects". In the beginning, this remote employment was his only job in Sweden. After he started his local position in northern Sweden, he kept his remote employment as a side job for about a year.

Karim described his engagement in remote work pragmatically. He had a good relationship with the employer and colleagues in Ukraine, and all wanted to continue projects begun in Ukraine. He was also explicit that the work provided extra income and framed it as worthwhile when weighed against the time and effort required.

At the same time, he emphasized that a central reason for his continuous engagement in remote work was that it helped him use substantial free time in his daily life. While working in northern Sweden, he was on 12-hour rotating shifts that created many days off. He linked the decision to spend his free time working remotely to the limited availability of leisure time activities where he lived. He characterized northern Sweden—especially in

winter—as offering few activities. In that context, continuing remote projects was something with which he could fill his time instead of having an “existential crisis”: “I had a lot of time and up there, you don’t do anything, especially in winter, there’s nothing going on, so you either have your existential crisis up there or you go to the gym.”

He claimed, however, that even in more populated areas with more opportunities for leisure activities, he would have taken up a remote side job in case his local work arrangement would provide so extensive free time as his job in northern Sweden did:

“Yeah, it’s more about the environment where you are, what are the things that you can do, do you actually have time or not, what kind of work you’re doing. Let’s put it in this way, even if I am in [big town in central Sweden where he lives] now and I have the same job as up in [the town in the north of Sweden] with these working hours and I have the 17 [days off each month], I would actually look for a second job, because it’s nice to wake up whenever you want, maybe go to gym, eat a good meal but then you have a lot of hours.”

Thereby, it is important to note that he was able to do his remote job on the side of his local employment in northern Sweden only because he could do his remote tasks flexibly, completing them “on [his] terms, on [his] time” and in available gaps between shifts. Like some other participants, Karim valued fitting remote work around his Swedish employment, completing it from home or during breaks at his workplace. He said that he is not a fan of commuting and that working from home suits him also because it lets him avoid office noise, distraction and what he calls “fake social stuff” in the office. According to him, it would have been difficult for him to find a local side employment that would be compatible with his other on-site job and other needs and preferences.

He also linked his inclination for remote work to a cultural expectation that available time should be used for work rather than idleness: “But, yeah,

especially also from where I come from, it’s like a cultural thing. Where you don’t just stay at home if you have a lot of time, you have to find a job in a way.” According to Jahoda’s model,²³ remote work enabled Karim to engage in a, for him, meaningful activity, preventing him from having an “existential crisis”.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The two cases foreground how remote work can function as a significant source of wellbeing even in markedly different circumstances. Viewed through Jahoda’s latent deprivation model,²⁴ remote work represented a lifeline for Tetiana that sustained her occupational identity, social contact and sense of purpose during illness, intensive caregiving and exclusion from stable local employment. For Karim, it fulfilled the functions of activity and time structure by giving form and meaning to otherwise unstructured time alongside his local job.

These findings contribute to scholarship on refugee employment in several ways. First, the psychosocial value of employment may be sustained through transnational remote work, not only participation in the local labour market. Moreover, the findings position refugee work not as an employment/unemployment dichotomy, but as a continuum of more or less adequate work, attending to not only its quantity, but also subjectively ascribed quality.²⁵ Third, the cases show that temporal and even spatial flexibility—and control thereof—matter. Remote work was valuable not merely because it existed, but because it offered the participants the possibility for engagement in meaningful activities when and where deemed desirable.

This raises important policy and practice considerations. Remote work—especially when conducted transnationally, as in the case of this study—is shaped by and, in turn, challenges administrative categories, tax regulations, eligibility for social security and pensions and integration services provided by municipal and non-state actors. These issues are sharpened by refugee-specific structural conditions linked to protection

and temporary residence status and associated integration provisions. As institutions confront this reality, assessing 'successful' refugee labour market participation requires two related shifts. First, it calls for moving beyond 'having local employment' as one of the primary indicators of refugee integration. Instead, such assessments should consider employment quality and the diversity of employment forms, including transnational remote arrangements. Second, and significantly, it requires creating space for self-determined livelihoods. Policy and practice should recognise how varied, combined and transient work arrangements—such as the cases of remote work presented here—can support refugees' psychosocial wellbeing. Refugee employment policy should thus move beyond a narrow focus on local labour market participation towards enabling capabilities: expanding refugees' freedoms and opportunities to pursue valued, dignified and self-determined livelihoods.²⁶

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¹ Remote work includes employment undertaken from another country and digitally mediated work performed by employees and self-employed workers.

² Bastaki, J., & Charles, L. (2022). The privilege to work: Syrian refugees in Jordan, technical and vocational education training, and the remote work loophole. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 41(4), 625–644; Special Issue “Refugees in the Digital Economy,” *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 4, no. 3 (2023).

³ Mozetič, K., & Kokonowskyj, L. (2026). Straddling lives: Protection holders’ transnational living between Germany and Ukraine. In B. Etzold and M. Godin (Eds.). *Translocal Lives in Times of Conflict. Understanding People’s (Im)Mobilities and (Dis)Connections under Conditions of Violence and War* (pp. 179–193). Springer.

⁴ Phillimore, J. (2024). From mere life to a good life: Shifting refugee integration policy from outcomes to capabilities. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 43(4), 387–409.

⁵ I use ‘refugee’ as an umbrella term for individuals displaced due to war, conflict, persecution, violence, environmental crises or natural disasters. In doing so, I do not distinguish between those who have applied for or received protection, nor do I specify which protection regime applies. However, when I refer to people who fled the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and were granted status under the Temporary Protection Directive, I describe them as ‘protection holders’.

⁶ UNHCR (2026). Ukraine Refugee Situation. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

⁷ Katsiaficas, C., Segeš Frelak, J., & Castelanelli, C. (2023). Displacement, integration, and return: What remote work possibilities for Ukrainians? <https://www.icmpd.org/blog/2023/displacement-integration-and-return-what-remote-work-possibilities-for-ukrainians>.

⁸ Jahoda, M. (1981). Work, employment, and unemployment: Values, theories, and approaches in social research. *American Psychologist*, 36(2), 184–191.

⁹ Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(2), 166–191; European Commission (2019). *Sustainable inclusion of migrants into society and labour market*. Publications Office of the European Union.

¹⁰ Spencer, S., & Charsley, K. (2021). Reframing ‘integration’: Acknowledging and addressing five core critiques. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(18), 1–22.

¹¹ Morrice, L., Tip, L. K., Collyer, M., & Brown, R. (2021). ‘You can’t have a good integration when you don’t have a good communication’: English-language learning among resettled refugees in England. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), 681–699.

¹² Verkuyten, M. (2016). The integration paradox: Empiric evidence from the Netherlands. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 60(5/6), 583–596.

¹³ Porter, M., & Haslam, N. (2005). Predisplacement and postdisplacement factors associated with mental health of refugees and internally displaced persons: A meta-analysis. *JAMA*, 294(5), 602–612.

¹⁴ Mozetič, K. (2018). Being highly skilled and a refugee: Self-perceptions of non-European physicians in Sweden. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 37(2), 231–251; Mozetič, K. (2021). Cartographers of their futures: The formation of occupational aspirations of highly educated refugees in Malmö and Munich. *International Migration*, 59(4), 127–140; Yijälä, A., & Luoma, T. (2019). The importance of employment in the acculturation process of well-educated Iraqis in Finland: A qualitative follow-up study. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 38(3), 314–340.

¹⁵ Jahoda (1981).

¹⁶ Fryer, D. (1992). Psychological or material deprivation: Why does unemployment have mental health consequences? In E. McLaughlin (Ed.). *Understanding Unemployment. New Perspectives on Active Labour Market Policies* (pp. 103–125). Routledge.

¹⁷ Goßner, L., & Ehab, M. (2025). Fixed-term employment and subjective well-being: A comparison of natives, migrants and refugees. *Work, Employment and Society*, 40(3), 396–420.

¹⁸ Recent research shows that remote work has negative effects on mental health when it is conducted under precarious conditions, see Vacchiano, M. (2026). *The empty office: Findings*. University of Geneva.

¹⁹ See the aforementioned Special Issue “Refugees in the Digital Economy”.

²⁰ Funded by Crafoord Foundation (nr. 20250648).

²¹ Except of one interviewee who worked completely remotely for an employer in Sweden.

²² All names are pseudonyms to secure interviewees’ anonymity. I have moreover altered some personal information to prevent re-identification.

²³ Jahoda (1981: pp. 188–189).

²⁴ Jahoda (1981).

²⁵ Dooley, D. (2003). Unemployment, underemployment, and mental health: Conceptualizing employment status as a continuum. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 32(1/2), 9–20.

²⁶ Phillimore (2024).

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