RIVER-EU Reflections

Supporting Mothers and Children from Ukraine in Poland

Funded by the European Union

Executive Summary

Reading time: ca. 3 mins

About this Resource

This SEKI learning resource was developed as part of the RIVER-EU project (EU Horizon 2020, 2021–2026). It is intended for junior-to-mid-level healthcare professionals — including doctors, nurses, immunisation program officials, and public health workers — and is available on the SEKI.eu learning platform.

The insights presented here are drawn directly from field experience and research conducted by the Polish RIVER-EU team and are designed to remain relevant well beyond the project's lifetime.

Why This Matters

Following the large-scale displacement of people from Ukraine after 2022, Poland became home to one of the largest Ukrainian migrant populations in Europe. This created both immediate healthcare needs and longer-term challenges for vaccination delivery. The Polish RIVER-EU team explored how healthcare systems can build trust and improve vaccine uptake among migrant and refugee communities.

The Challenge

The team encountered multiple barriers to vaccination, including:

- Historical distrust of institutions and healthcare systems
- Language and communication barriers
- Practical challenges such as transportation, work schedules, and incomplete vaccination records
- Concerns about unfamiliar vaccines and publicly funded services
- Diverse needs within the Ukrainian community, including economic migrants, refugees, and highly mobile populations

What RIVER-EU Did

The intervention combined academic research, epidemiological expertise, and frontline healthcare delivery.

Key strategies included:

- Conducting focus groups and open community discussions
- Providing language-concordant care through Ukrainian-speaking healthcare professionals
- Prioritising mental health and immediate needs before introducing vaccination discussions
- Using accessible epidemiological evidence to explain vaccine benefits
- Maintaining dual vaccination records to support continuity of care

What Worked

Several approaches proved particularly effective:

· Building trust through dialogue rather than one-way information campaigns
· Creating opportunities for questions and discussion
· Providing healthcare services in culturally sensitive ways
· Recognising and responding to high levels of health literacy among many Ukrainian migrants
· Supporting healthcare professionals through ongoing education and training

Key Lessons

1. Trust is built through relationships, not information alone.
2. Migrant communities are diverse and require tailored approaches.
3. Language-concordant care can significantly improve communication and confidence.
4. Preventive healthcare conversations are more successful when immediate community needs are addressed first.
5. Cross-border electronic vaccination records would greatly improve continuity of care.

Transferability Considerations

Many of these lessons apply beyond Ukraine and Poland. Healthcare providers working with refugees, migrants, and other underserved populations can adapt these principles by focusing on trust-building, community engagement, cultural responsiveness, and practical access to services.

Quick Takeaways

- Start with trust.
- Listen before persuading.
- Tailor approaches to different subgroups.
- Invest in language access.
- Support frontline staff.
- Design systems that follow people across borders.

Conclusion

The Polish RIVER-EU experience demonstrates that vaccine confidence grows when healthcare systems combine evidence-based practice with culturally responsive care and genuine community engagement.

Acknowledgements and Disclaimers

This handout was developed based on the work and insights of the Polish RIVER-EU team: Prof. Maria Ganczak, Prof. Pawel Kalinovsky, and Dr. Mufida Nazri. Their fieldwork, research, and dedication to improving vaccination rates among vulnerable populations form the foundation of this educational resource. This resource is made available through the SEKI.eu learning platform.

The RIVER-EU project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 964353.

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