The Worldviews of Teenagers: Role Models, Educational Pathways, and Visions of the Future

Research Report

Cedos

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Cedos is an independent think tank, urban bureau, and community that has been working on issues of social and spatial development since 2010. We believe that everyone has the right to a decent standard of living. Therefore, Cedos's mission is to identify the systemic causes of social problems and develop strategies to address them. Our approach is research-based. We study social processes and public policies, disseminate critical knowledge, advocate for and implement progressive change, and educate and strengthen the community of people who support these changes. In our work, we are guided by the values of dignity, equality, solidarity, participation, quality, and empathy.

Cedos website: https://cedos.org.ua/

The NGO Zminotvortsi is an education-focused organization that works both online and offline with 9th–11th grade students from small towns and villages, aiming to broaden young people's horizons and build a community of conscious, engaged citizens. Zminotvortsi's activities include online courses, educational camps, and intensive weekend programs. As of January 2026, a total of 1,897 participants had joined the project.

Zminotvortsi website: https://zminotvortsi.org/

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- Introduction

People's value systems and worldviews undergo transformation during adolescence. This process is shaped by many factors, including social circles and surroundings, political, economic, and social conditions, as well as the particularities of socialization. That is why it is important to provide children and teenagers with opportunities to explore themselves, the world around them, and their place in it within a safe environment. The education system, and schools in particular, serve as an environment where these processes happen for many teenagers. The years spent in school provide children and teenagers with opportunities to build relationships beyond their family circle, learn how to communicate and interact with others, and absorb the basic principles of living in society. Among the benefits people gain from school are not only academic knowledge, but also the foundations of critical thinking and the early development of their personal and civic outlook.

However, as of 2026, Ukraine's education system is operating under the combined pressure of multiple crises. One of the first major disruptions was the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a shift to remote learning and further deepened existing inequalities among students. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine not only intensified preexisting challenges but also put the educational process, as well as students' lives and health, at risk. As of the end of 2025, 412 educational institutions had been completely destroyed. More than 4,000 others had been damaged as a result of hostilities.[1] The full-scale war has made access to education more difficult, particularly for children and teenagers facing challenging life circumstances, and has negatively affected students' psychological well-being overall.[2]

The quality of education also differs between rural schools and those in urban areas. According to the PISA 2022 report, there is a significant gap in reading, mathematics, and science performance between 15-year-old students living in rural areas and their peers in cities.[3] In 2021, the *Survey of Rural School Students on the Key Aspects of Education Quality* was conducted on behalf of the Ukrainian State Service for Education

[1] *Save Schools* (2025). *Save Schools* (Освіта під загрозою). https://saveschools.in.ua/.
[2] Zakharchenko, T., Bell, A., Drushchak, N. *et al.* Estimating the impact of the Russian invasion on the displacement of graduating high school students in Ukraine. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 12, 836 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04675-5.
[3] PISA Ukraine (2023). *National Report on the Results of the PISA 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (Національний звіт за результатами Міжнародного дослідження якості освіти PISA-2022)*. https://pisa.testportal.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/PISA-2022_Naczionalnyj-zvit_povnyj.pdf.

Quality. Among the teenagers who participated in the study, some identified obstacles to receiving a quality education, including a lack of modern learning equipment in schools, neglected school buildings, and excessive pressure from teachers during instruction. In addition, some teenagers pointed to a lack of extracurricular activities focused specifically on the leisure and self-development of teenagers.[4] According to the findings of the Future Index study conducted by the Olena Zelenska Foundation, children and teenagers in rural areas are more likely to engage in volunteer activities and student self-government than their peers in cities. The study partially attributes this trend to the smaller number of extracurricular activities and clubs available in rural communities. This, in turn, increases the role of schools as a central part of teenagers' social lives.[5] These findings highlight the differences between educational experiences in urban and rural settings.

That is why the Cedos Think Tank, in collaboration with the NGO Zminotvortsi, has conducted a study of the worldviews of Ukrainian teenagers living in small towns and villages. The foundation of the study was a values assessment test conducted by Zminotvortsi. This survey reached more than 7,000 teenagers[6] from across Ukraine[7] and included questions aimed at exploring their values and worldviews. As a result, it produced quantitative data that provide insight into the views and worldviews of Ukrainian teenagers living in small communities, as well as their perceptions of their place in the world and their future. To further explore this topic and gain a deeper understanding of the trends identified through the values assessment, we conducted a qualitative study.

The report consists of three parts. The first focuses on teenagers' social circles and the role models identified by study participants: people and public figures whom they look up to and consider personal points of reference. In the second part, we

[4] Ukrainian State Service for Education Quality, Vox Populi, & SURGe (2021). *Survey of Rural School Students on the Key Aspects of Education Quality (Опитування учнів сільських шкіл щодо ключових аспектів якості освіти)*. https://sqe.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Rural_Schools_Students_Report_2021_SURGe_SQEua.pdf.

[5] Olena Zelenska Foundation, KSE Institute, People in Need (2025). Future Index: Professional Expectations and Development of Teenagers in Ukraine (Індекс майбутнього: професійні очікування та розвиток підлітків в Україні). *Olena Zelenska Foundation*. https://foundation-s3.s3.eu-north-1.amazonaws.com/Indeks_majbutnogo_Profesijni_ochikuvannya_2025_6b1deb470a.pdf.

[6] The respondents were teenagers aged 14–18 who lived in small towns and villages with populations of up to 10,000 people, as well as teenagers who had registered in the online system of the NGO Zminotvortsi.

[7] Excluding temporarily occupied territories and settlements that are located in/are close to the front line

examine participants' plans after graduating from school, including their educational pathways, career choices, and views on the education system as a whole. In the third part, we present teenagers' visions of their more distant future, their understanding of what success means, as well as their views on Ukraine's future and reflections on whether they see themselves continuing to live in Ukraine or moving abroad.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to identify the factors that shape the worldviews of teenagers living in small towns and villages, particularly those influencing the formation of role models, perceptions, and plans for the future.

The overall objectives of the study included:

1. Identifying how teenagers from small towns and villages choose their role models and describing the influence these role models have on them.
2. Examining how teenagers choose and shape their social circles.
3. Determining how teenagers envision their future.

We also had specific objectives for two subgroups of teenagers:

1. For teenagers living in Ukraine, we sought to identify the factors that influence their decision to remain in the country.
2. For teenagers living abroad, our additional objective was to identify the factors that influence teenagers' decision to return to Ukraine.

Because the study's aim and objectives involved exploring people's experiences and worldviews, it employed a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis. The focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted by the Cedos team, while participant recruitment was carried out by the NGO Zminotvortsi. The fieldwork phase of the study took place from December 2025 to February 2026.

A total of 11 FGDs were conducted with teenagers aged 14–16 from small towns and villages across Ukraine, including those who:

- had completed educational programs offered by the

NGO Zminotvortsi and were living in Ukraine (3 FGDs);

- had no prior interaction with the NGO Zminotvortsi and were living in Ukraine (6 FGDs);
- were living and studying abroad at the time of the fieldwork phase of the study (2 FGDs);
- were living in residential care institutions without parental care (1 FGD).

Recruitment of teenagers who had participated in educational programs offered by the NGO Zminotvortsi was conducted using the organization's contact database: teenagers who had previously registered on the online platform were invited to take part in the study. Teenagers who had no prior interaction with Zminotvortsi were recruited through schools: administrations of schools with which the organization had previously communicated distributed information about the study to students. School administrators shared invitations to participate in the study with students and passed information about potential participants on to representatives of the NGO Zminotvortsi. Recruitment of teenagers living abroad and those living in residential care institutions was conducted in a similar manner. During recruitment, all potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the topics that would be discussed during the FGDs, and the potential risks associated with participation in the study.

According to current legislation, surveys involving minors must be conducted with the consent of their parents or legal guardians. Therefore, to participate in the study, teenagers were required to provide the research team with a signed informed consent form from their parents or guardians. The informed consent form was developed by the research team in accordance with the principles of the ICC/ESOMAR International Code.[8] The informed consent form consisted of several components:

- Information about the organizations conducting the study and the contact details of the project coordinators.
- An information sheet describing the topic and purpose of the study, the FGD procedure, participants' rights, the

[8] ICC — International Chamber of Commerce (2026, January 29). *ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics.* https://iccwbo.org/news-publications/business-solutions/iccesomar-international-code-market-opinion-social-research-data-analytics/#top.

benefits and risks of participation, and how the information obtained during the FGDs would be used.

- A consent form summarizing the contents of the previous sections. In the consent form, guardians formally recorded their consent by providing their signature.

When invited to participate in the focus groups, all study participants were informed of their rights and of the conditions governing the storage and use of the collected data. Before the start of each FGD, teenagers were again informed of their rights as research participants and asked for permission to make video and audio recordings. They were guaranteed confidentiality: the data collected through the FGDs were accessible only to the research team, and all quotations used in the report were anonymized, with any information that could reveal a participant's identity removed.

In total, 41 girls and 20 boys took part in the FGDs. Of all the focus groups, 2 were conducted in person during the Zminotvortsi winter camp, while the rest were held online using the Zoom video conferencing platform.

The study has a number of limitations:

1. Because the study used a qualitative methodology, its findings are not representative of all teenagers living in villages and small towns across Ukraine. Likewise, we cannot provide counts or percentage distributions of how common particular responses were among the teenagers.
2. Due to the characteristics of the chosen research design, the findings cannot serve as a basis for comparisons between participants by gender, region of residence, or other sociodemographic characteristics.
3. Given the limited resources available for conducting the study, we were unable to include teenagers from all of the social groups originally envisioned during the research design phase. In particular, this applied to teenagers with disabilities and those whose families were facing difficult life circumstances.
4. Some study participants had experience of internal displacement and/or living abroad, as well as moving to large cities. Their experiences therefore extended beyond living in small communities alone, which may have influenced their responses.

Part 1 ● Role Models and Social Circles of Teenagers

Part of our focus group discussions centered on the role models that teenagers have. **A role model is** generally **understood as a person whose behavior serves as a point of reference for others**. By observing how such a person acts in a particular social role, others may develop ideas about possible or desirable ways of behaving. At the same time, a role model does not have to be someone from a person's immediate environment. They can be a public figure, a historical figure, or even a fictional character (a role model does not necessarily have to be a real person).[9]

In the first part of this section, we describe who teenagers identify as their role models and what qualities and characteristics attracted them to these individuals. It is important to note that during the focus group discussions, we did not directly ask participants whether they had role models. Instead, we asked whom they admired or wanted to be like and why. In the second part, we describe teenagers' immediate social circles, including the qualities they find appealing in other people, those they find off-putting, and the influence of their surroundings on them. We also discuss how teenagers living abroad maintain connections with people in Ukraine.

Role models

For most focus group participants, **role models were adults from their immediate circle, primarily teachers and coaches**. **Public figures** whom teenagers knew through traditional or social media also frequently served as role models, and in some cases, **peers** whose behavior or achievements they considered worthy of emulation. At the same time, some teenagers stated that they did not have any specific role models at all.

Below, we examine the qualities and characteristics that attracted teenagers when choosing their role models.

The criteria by which teenagers selected role models from among the adults they knew can be broadly grouped into four categories:

- **Emotional aspects of the relationship**, particularly the ability to support teenagers and help them with their studies or during difficult life situations.
- **Achievements**: overall success and/or accomplishments

[9] Merton, R. K. (1949). *Social Theory and Social Structure*. The Free Press.

in a career or education. These are typically the areas in which teenagers themselves consider it important to achieve success.

- **Active civic stance**: teenagers admire people who serve in the military, engage in charitable work, support military service members and vulnerable groups, and promote Ukrainian culture and language.
- **Personal qualities** such as optimism, joyfulness, intelligence, a commitment to self-improvement, and similar traits.

Teenagers often identified their teachers and coaches among the adults they knew as people they admired. Among the qualities they found appealing, participants most frequently mentioned **the ability to connect with students**, relate to them on their level, **provide support**, reassure them about personal concerns, share experiences, offer advice, and motivate them. Teenagers also highlighted **personal qualities** such as positivity, openness, and ease of communication, as well as **professional competence**: being able to explain a subject clearly and spark others' interest in it.

> "I go to a volleyball club after school, and we have this coach whom I really admire. Somehow, he knows how to [...] explain things in a way that gives you motivation. Even when you feel like nothing is working out for you. And once he starts explaining and talking things through, you realize that you're capable of much more than you think."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student*[10]

For teenagers living abroad in a foreign-language environment, **teachers' support for and promotion of the Ukrainian language, as well as their efforts to create a Ukrainian-speaking community**, were particularly important.

> "Honestly, I admire all of our teachers [...], who also help us preserve our Ukrainian language so that we don't forget it while we're studying in an English-speaking environment. [...] And I keep speaking it as well, and I hope I won't forget it."
>
> *Female school student, 14 years old, living abroad*

[10] We created the participant labels based on the information that teenagers shared during the FGDs. Some labels lack certain details because the participants did not provide that information. A part of the research participants were living outside of Ukraine at the time when interviews were being conducted. We added a description, "living abroad," to their quotes. If this description is missing, it means that this person was living in Ukraine at the time interviews were being conducted.

For some of the teenagers interviewed, **role models also included peers they knew personally**: classmates, friends, or acquaintances from clubs and sports teams. The most commonly mentioned trait was **social activity**: "always doing something," "going places," or "taking part in different events." Teenagers also valued **academic or athletic success**, an aptitude for the exact sciences, and involvement in creative pursuits among their peer role models. Among personal qualities, they highlighted responsibility, the ability to express oneself, a lack of excessive self-criticism, friendliness, and openness. Some study participants noted that having peer role models inspired them to begin developing similar qualities themselves.

> "For example, when I met [name], I saw that she was very... well, friendly, always making new connections and meeting new people, and I really liked that. I'm trying to become more open toward people myself."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student, 15 years old*

Many teenagers named **well-known figures as their role models**. The specific individuals mentioned included both Ukrainians and foreigners from a variety of fields:[11]

- **culture and media**: Vasyl Baidak, Hlib Stryzhko, Oleksii Kovzhun, Mykhailo Lebiha, Daria Pidlubna, SadSvit (Bohdan Rozvadovskyi), Shchastia, MUR, Måneskin, Emma Antoniuk, Emma Watson;
- **business**: Steve Jobs;
- **politicians and public officials**: Margaret Thatcher, Valeriia Hontareva, Volodymyr Zelenskyi;
- **historical figures**: Vasyl Stus, Volodymyr Vynnychenko, Vasyl Symonenko.

While teenagers tended to highlight a broader range of personal qualities in role models from their immediate surroundings, **when speaking about well-known figures they focused more on achievements**, such as building a successful business, gaining international recognition, or attaining notable success in a professional or public career. At the same time, **civic engagement was no less important**: supporting the military, participating in the country's defense, promoting Ukrainian culture, and being willing to speak openly about difficult social issues.

[11] The list below was compiled from teenagers' responses. All of the individuals mentioned were named by study participants during the FGDs.

> "I also really like and admire people who promote Ukrainian culture. For example, those who popularize the Ukrainian language on platforms like TikTok or Instagram. I really look up to people like that because they're promoting what's ours."
>
> *Female school student*

Some teenagers said that they **did not have anyone they would consider a role model**. Such responses were usually given without detailed explanations (for example, "I don't have any role models"); in some cases, participants expressed a reluctance to model themselves after others ("I don't want to be like anyone else"). This may indicate, for example, either **the absence or limited availability of positive, visible examples** in their immediate environment, or a negative attitude toward the very idea of role models and **a desire to be completely independent**.

> "Well, there's a saying: 'Don't make idols for yourself.' In the sense that nobody is perfect. And I'd rather have people look up to me, for example. I'd like people to look at me and follow my example. I have a blog too, and I'd like others to look up to me. I'm my own person who expresses their personality in different ways. I don't have an ideal person I'd want to be like or become."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student*

Among teenagers living in residential care institutions, we observed trends similar to those described above. However, there was a notable difference in **how they explained the absence of role models** among the people they knew personally: this was often linked to the absence of adult relatives or to a lack of close relationships with them.

The choice of a role model and teenagers' value orientations are closely interconnected. On the one hand, influential figures can shape young people's ideas about possible life paths, ways of achieving self-realization, and socially meaningful accomplishments. On the other hand, choosing a particular person as a role model reflects the values, interests, and priorities that study participants already hold.

Social circles of teenagers

Teenagers described **the qualities that influence whether they want to interact with someone or, conversely, avoid doing so**. While achievements, personal qualities, active civic

stance, and the ability to provide emotional support were important in role models, the key factors in choosing people to hang out with were primarily **the general ability to communicate and maintain comfortable relationships**. The qualities participants mentioned most often were sincerity and honesty: teenagers emphasized the importance of a person being **open in communication**, "telling the truth without embellishment," and not deceiving others. This points to the importance of trust in interpersonal relationships.

> "Well, what attracts me, for example, is when people tell the truth. That's the most important quality, that people are honest, truthful. That's something I'm really drawn to."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student*

Study participants also said that they valued **a sense of interest and reciprocity in others**. This can take different forms: some appreciate people who talk a lot and help keep a conversation going, while others, on the contrary, value those who know how to listen attentively.

> "What attracts me to people is their ability to communicate with one another, and having... well, something in common. Even when there isn't anything in common, sometimes a person makes an effort to learn about your interests, maybe read something about them, and then talk to you about it afterward. I really like that."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student*

Another important quality is **a sense of humor**. Many teenagers mentioned that it is important to be able to joke around with friends, laugh at the same things, and simply have a good time together. What matters, however, is not just having a sense of humor, but sharing a similar sense of humor, which creates a feeling of commonality.

The importance of **shared interests** was also very apparent. Teenagers often said directly that it was easier for them to be friends with people who watched the same movies and TV shows, read the same books, played sports, or had similar hobbies. Shared interests serve as a natural starting point for conversations and help maintain regular contact. Participants also mentioned shared values and similar outlooks on life.

> "Well, for example, I also do nails. I just do my own nails and my friends' nails. And I'd like it, I mean... if she did nails too, so that we'd have common interests. Maybe she'd watch the same TV shows as I do, so we'd have things to talk about."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student*

At the same time, teenagers also pay attention to **moral and ethical qualities**: kindness, respect, tolerance, responsibility, and a willingness to stand up for or help others.

> "I think what would make me want to communicate with someone is the way they treat other people. If they help others, can stand up for someone, if they don't care what a person looks like and simply treat them with kindness, then I would want to be friends with that person."
>
> *Female school student, living abroad*

Teenagers occasionally mentioned additional characteristics, both personal traits and achievements (such as charisma, a desire for self-improvement, being well-read, or success in sports). However, these qualities were mentioned much less frequently and tended to complement the overall picture rather than define it.

Overall, the responses suggest that when forming their social circles, teenagers are guided primarily by **a sense of emotional comfort.**

In teenagers' responses, **the qualities that discourage communication are often the opposite of those they value in friends and acquaintances**. Above all, these are characteristics that undermine trust and create tension in relationships. One of the most frequently mentioned was **lying, hypocrisy, and insincerity**. Teenagers expressed negative attitudes toward people who are "performatively" friendly but spread gossip behind others' backs or take advantage of other people's kindness for their own benefit.

> *"[...] I don't like hypocrisy in people, and in general when they tell you one thing and then spread rumors about you afterward. I don't support that, and I don't feel comfortable around people like that. I can't trust them, and you have to think carefully about what you say to them."*
>
> *Female 10th-grade student*

Another group of undesirable traits is associated with **aggressive or disrespectful behavior**. Participants mentioned a lack of friendliness, snapping at others, harsh responses, unjustified anger, and insults. This category also includes indifference: showing no interest in the other person, focusing exclusively on oneself, one's own interests, desires, and beliefs, and disregarding the requests and opinions of others. Teenagers also reacted negatively to toxic behavior in relationships, such as jealousy, condescension, an inability to admit mistakes, and building one's self-esteem at the expense of others. Such behavior

undermines the possibility of an equal dialogue, creates a tense emotional atmosphere, and consequently discourages communication. Teenagers living in residential care institutions reported experiencing **bullying from other children**. They stated that they considered such behavior unacceptable and were unwilling to interact with people who engaged in it.

> "Well, it's fakeness, negativity, and toxicity, jealousy and competition. When a person wants to put others down in order to feel better about themselves in comparison. And also indifference."
>
> *Female school student, 13 years old*

Teenagers also separately pointed to **a lack of interests, goals, or hobbies**. People who are "not interested in anything" or who are not growing personally are perceived as less interesting conversation partners, with whom it is difficult to maintain meaningful discussions.

> "What puts me off are people who don't have any goals or, um... any hobbies. They seem like they're not interested in anything, and that kind of person pushes me away a little."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student, 14 years old*

Overall, the responses suggested that the qualities which discourage teenagers from interacting with others are primarily associated with breaches of trust, disrespect toward others, and an unwillingness to engage in open and equal communication.

How social circles influence teenagers

Social circles can influence teenagers in different ways, **creating either a supportive or a judgmental environment**. Study participants shared a variety of experiences, some of them contrasting with one another.

Most often, **teenagers spoke about support from their families, particularly their parents**. In many cases, parents are the people teenagers turn to for advice or help. Participants emphasized that their parents want what is best for them, can offer guidance, or support their plans for the future. At the same time, **family support is sometimes accompanied by certain conditions or limitations**. For example, parents might support

a teenager's choice of study program but insist on an institution located closer to home or within a particular region. In some cases, parental preferences led teenagers to change their plans, for instance, by giving up the idea of studying in another city.

> "Well, my parents supported me whether I chose to enroll after 9th grade or after 11th grade. They were fine with either option, but they were firm about one thing: they didn't want me going to Western Ukraine because it's too far away. Kyiv or Khmelnytskyi, maybe, but nothing farther than that."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

> "Well, I haven't really discussed it much with anyone. My parents are supportive of whatever I decide: study wherever you want. My mom would like me to become a doctor, but she's not pushing me or anything, just... She'd just like me to study medicine. But otherwise, if you want to be an engineer, then go be an engineer."
>
> *Male school student, 17 years old, living abroad*

At the same time, **not all teenagers felt supported by their families**. Parents could be unsupportive of their decisions or critical of their wishes and choices. In such cases, teenagers tended to share their plans less with their parents and rely more on other people in their lives: friends, teachers, or acquaintances.

> "[...] My mom doesn't really support me very much in my decisions. So I hardly share my decisions with her. For example, my grandmother knows almost everything about what I'd like to do, though even then it's usually passed along indirectly. But at school, the teachers and pretty much everyone around me—friends, acquaintances—they always support me."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student, 15 years old*

Teachers and other adult mentors also played a distinct role in participants' responses. Some teenagers mentioned teachers, homeroom teachers, or school counselors as people they could turn to for advice or support. In some cases, educators helped them identify possible career paths or encouraged them to believe in their own abilities. At the same time, experiences with teachers were not always positive: some study participants recalled situations in which teachers gave them unfairly low grades, doubted their abilities, or discouraged them from pursuing certain educational goals. Such experiences could lead to self-doubt or a feeling that they needed to prove their competence.

Among **teenagers living in residential care institutions, caregivers, mentors, and older friends often served as important**

sources of support. For these participants, such individuals frequently became the adults they could turn to for advice or emotional support, as well as sources of closeness and trust.

Overall, the responses showed that teenagers exist within a complex network of social influences. Family members, friends, and teachers can simultaneously serve as sources of support, guidance, and role models, while at times also becoming sources of pressure or criticism.

How teenagers living abroad maintain connections with people in Ukraine

For study participants who were living abroad at the time of the focus groups, **relationships with people who remained in Ukraine had, unsurprisingly, changed to some extent**. Some participants noted that staying in touch was more of a formality, since they continued to attend a Ukrainian school online and therefore still had to communicate with classmates. In such cases, teenagers described this communication as being driven more by necessity and a lack of alternatives than by personal choice: the connection existed primarily because of the circumstances rather than as a consciously maintained relationship.

Others, by contrast, stayed in touch with classmates and friends in Ukraine, talked about school and everyday life, called relatives, and saw one another during school breaks. At the same time, they noted that these relationships had also been affected. More details about the engagement of teenagers living abroad with the Ukrainian information space are provided in Part 3.

Teenagers **attributed changes in their relationships** with people in Ukraine to the distance between them and to the prolonged nature of the war, which coincided with a period of growing up during which both they themselves and their views of other people were changing. In other words, the natural process of adolescence and psychological development overlapped with physical separation, as well as conflicts arising for various reasons and a gradual loss of shared context. Attending the same school online and meeting occasionally helped them maintain these relationships.

Part 2 ● Choosing an Educational Path after School

In this section, we describe what teenagers plan to do after finishing school, including which educational paths they intend to pursue and what factors influence their choices. In this context, we examine teenagers' attitudes toward higher education, vocational education, and the possibility of taking a gap year after completing school. We also briefly describe how teenagers compare studying abroad with studying in Ukraine. At the end of the section, we discuss teenagers' experiences with career guidance both in and outside of school, as well as their suggestions for improving such activities.

Plans for the near future

We asked teenagers about their plans for the first two years after finishing school. Most participants spoke about choosing a future educational path, with higher education being the most common aspiration. Less frequently mentioned options included enrolling in professional pre-higher education institutions or vocational education programs, and only a few participants mentioned taking professional courses and then looking for work.

Many teenagers **had not yet decided on a specific educational institution or field of study**, and some were unsure whether they wanted to go on to high school after completing 9th grade. At the same time, some participants had a clearly defined plan for what they wanted to do after graduation, including a specific field of study and a particular institution they hoped to attend. These trends were also evident among young people living abroad.

> "Well, I'm definitely going to continue studying somewhere. […] I used to be 100% sure that I wanted to become a canine specialist or do something along those lines. But now I'm completely confused and don't even know what I'd like to do anymore. And that scares me a little."
>
> *Female school student*

> "I'm going to stay in school through 11th grade, and then I'll enroll in a medical academy to become a nurse. After that, I want to work in a surgical department as a surgical nurse."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student, 15 years old*

Some teenagers **were uncertain about their plans for life after secondary school**. Decisive factors in choosing their future path included their results on the National Multi-subject Test

(NMT) and the course of the Russia–Ukraine war, particularly when deciding whether to study in Ukraine or abroad. Although many teenagers viewed passing the NMT as their primary objective, some of them still had no clear plans for what would come afterward. Overall, the need to prepare for and take these exams caused significant stress and made exam preparation the central focus of their daily lives.

> "Well, a lot depends on how I do on the NMT, how I do on my exams. A lot really depends on that, because I might not pass, and I might have to [...] go back and enroll in some [vocational] college instead."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student, 15 years old*

> "Honestly, I don't know what my future plans are. The main thing for me is to pass the NMT [...] and get enrolled."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student*

Several factors influenced teenagers' decisions to pursue higher education:

- viewing higher education as a mandatory stage of life;
- viewing higher education as necessary for personal development and for obtaining their dream job;
- believing that having a university degree is a marker of being educated and professional;
- perceiving university enrollment as the starting point of adult life;
- the opportunity to move away from their hometown and gain access to a wider range of opportunities.

The **influence of social surroundings on teenagers' decisions** to attend university and on their attitudes toward higher education in general was evident in their responses. Some participants explained their decision using phrases such as "like everyone else" or "that's where everyone goes." Others said that their perception of higher education had been shaped by their parents.

> "[After school, I plan to] get a degree and work in my field, and to me, it's just part of a system: first you go to kindergarten, then to school, and after school you're supposed to go to university."
>
> *Female school student, 14 years old*

Views on enrolling in colleges or vocational education institutions

We also asked teenagers what they thought about studying at a professional college or vocational education institution and whether they had considered pursuing education there. It is important to note that **teenagers often did not distinguish between these types of institutions**, and some **knew nothing about them**.

Overall, teenagers frequently **expressed negative perceptions** of colleges, vocational education institutions, or vocational and professional pre-higher education pathways in general, often citing examples from other people's experiences. Their impressions were shaped by **the experiences of relatives and acquaintances**, including classmates, by feedback from teachers, **through interactions** with such institutions during school presentations or open-house events, as well as by the **generally negative perception of these institutions within their social environment**.

Teenagers' negative views of vocational education institutions can be grouped into the following themes:

- **doubts about the quality of education:** specifically, teenagers perceive it as being **lower than that offered by universities**, and believe that some of the coursework simply repeats material already covered in school;
- **perceptions of low prestige and limited prospects**, as teenagers view the range of specialties as restricted and the professions taught there as uncompetitive;
- a belief that such institutions provide **fewer opportunities for professional and personal development**;
- **doubts about the motivation of students and applicants**: teenagers often repeated the narrative that vocational education institutions are attended only by those who do not care where they study, those who do not really want to learn, and that some students attend merely to receive a stipend rather than to study. At the same time, the 2025 study *Future Index* by KSE Institute found that although academic performance does correlate with educational pathway choices, 67% of teenagers who choose vocational education have grades that are fully sufficient for university admission. Other factors influ-

encing educational pathway choices include family traditions, pragmatic considerations, and a lack of information about alternatives.[12]

> "[...] There's a vocational school like that in our town. And honestly, it's not even clear what kind of people study there or what they do. Or even whether there are any teachers there at all. From what we've heard, when qualified teachers try to get jobs there, they're told, 'No, we don't need you.' That's based on stories from our teachers at school who wanted to go work there."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student*

> "In our town, there are two institutions like that. Kids who study there tell you things like, 'Oh, we don't do anything there, they gave us all Bs, I'm happy, everything's great.' [...] They just went there just to have somewhere to go. Because of that, it creates the impression that these schools really only exist for the sake of existing, and that's it."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student*

In addition to these general perceptions, some teenagers held **negative views about specific educational institutions**, often those located close to where they lived. Based on feedback from acquaintances or personal visits to these institutions, they believed that **corruption** was present there and that **the quality of education and learning conditions were unsatisfactory**. Some teenagers were unwilling to consider vocational education institutions because they **did not like the curriculum** offered by a particular school or because **none of the available specialties matched their interests**.

> "[I'm planning to apply to a university] because of the major. As far as I know, there are only about three colleges that offer journalism, and none of them are particularly good. One has corruption issues, another has an outdated curriculum, and the third is more focused on radio broadcasting, which doesn't really interest me."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

When discussing the option of leaving school after 9th grade, some participants expressed the view that **teenagers are not independent enough** to make such a decision and pursue education outside the school system at that age. At the same time, some teenagers identified one of the advantages of vocational

[12] Olena Zelenska Foundation, KSE Institute, People in Need (2025). Future Index: Professional Expectations and Development of Teenagers in Ukraine (Індекс майбутнього: професійні очікування та розвиток підлітків в Україні). Olena Zelenska Foundation. https://foundation-s3.s3.eu-north-1.amazonaws.com/Indeks_majbutnogo_Profesijni_ochikuvannya_2025_6b1deb470a.pdf.

or professional pre-higher education as the **opportunity to become independent more quickly and enter the workforce at an earlier age**.

> "I think that [by going to a college] you can become independent more quickly. And then, after college, you can also enroll in a university. So, in a way, you end up getting the same education anyway."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student*

When discussing their specific plans for future education, some teenagers said they **did not intend to pursue vocational or professional pre-higher education** for a variety of reasons. In some cases, their chosen profession **required a university degree**; in others, they wanted to remain in school through 11th grade **in order to have more time to decide on a career path**. Many teenagers also noted that their parents wanted them to obtain a university education specifically. This topic is discussed in greater detail in the subsection *The Influence of Others on Teenagers' Decisions About Their Future*.

> "I'm planning to leave after 11th grade, and I think that's ideal because it gives you time to prepare for the NMT and also to prepare yourself mentally and physically. Well, just more time, really."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student, 15 years old*

Some teenagers were **considering pursuing vocational or professional pre-higher education**. Some of them decided to enroll in vocational education institutions after 9th grade because, as a result of education reforms, their **schools were planning to reduce the number of grades to nine or close altogether**, and for various reasons they did not want to continue studying in another locality. One participant in this situation noted that if 10th and 11th grades were reinstated, they would prefer to continue studying at their current school. Some of these teenagers planned to pursue higher education later on.

> "I'm going to vocational college because I'm leaving after 9th grade. They're closing our school, and I don't want to transfer to another one because I'd have to commute and get up at five in the morning while they pick everyone up. It's already hard enough for me to wake up at seven. So I decided to go to college, and after that I'll probably want to continue my education and transfer to a university, since the program allows for that."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student, 15 years old*

Some teenagers noted that **their chosen profession specifically required vocational education**. One factor that may influence teenagers' decisions is the **stipend** that students at such institutions often receive. One participant considered enrolling in a vocational education institution solely for this reason. Another participant said that people had tried to persuade him to enroll in such an institution because of the ease of admission and the opportunity to receive a stipend, but he ultimately chose a different path. Some teenagers viewed enrolling in a college or vocational education institution as **a backup option in case they did not pass the NMT**.

Career guidance

We also asked teenagers whether their schools offered any activities that helped them decide on a future profession and path after graduation.

Such activities were available **only to some** of the study participants. Most often, they were organized by **school counselors**; less frequently by homeroom teachers and subject teachers, and more rarely by principals or vice principals. Schools were also visited by **representatives of other educational institutions, university students, and professionals from various fields**. These activities were often targeted at 11th-grade students. However, since many teenagers make decisions about their future profession as early as 9th or 10th grade, career guidance provided later may no longer be relevant to them.

> "Well, it didn't really help me because it happened in 10th grade, and I had already chosen the field I wanted to work in by the end of 9th grade, right after I finished 9th grade, in May. So by then, I didn't really need it anymore, so to speak."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

Teenagers mentioned a variety of career guidance activities and events available at their schools, which can be summarized as follows:

- **dividing classes into subject-specific tracks**: teenagers both in Ukraine and abroad described this as a form of career guidance;
- **taking aptitude and career-orientation tests**: in some schools, the results of these tests were used to assign students to subject-specific tracks;

- **learning about different professions**, including during health education classes, as well as through career guidance videos and lectures delivered by professionals from various fields;
- **discussions and conversations about career choice and future plans**;
- **advice from teachers** regarding different professions;
- receiving **informational materials** about educational institutions;
- participating in school-organized **open house events and tours to educational institutions**;
- **visits from representatives of educational institutions**:
    - particularly technical, military, and agricultural schools and programs;
    - in some cases, university and college students also visited schools;
    - during these visits, institutions and academic programs were typically presented to students, while less frequently workshops or aptitude assessments were conducted for teenagers;
- **visits from representatives of the Ukrainian Leadership Academy.**

Teenagers living abroad also described taking aptitude and career-orientation tests, going on university tours, and attending presentations by university representatives who visited their schools. In addition, they could participate in workshops with psychologists or consult career counselors, choose academic tracks and elective subjects at school designed to help them determine their future profession. One participant described a program that allows teenagers to select a profession and try working in that field for five days.

Teenagers living in residential care institutions also mentioned that representatives of higher education institutions and civil society organizations visited them to talk about different professions and explain the process of obtaining a higher education degree.

Some teenagers **viewed career guidance in Ukrainian schools negatively or had negative experiences with it**. Their comments concerned the limited effectiveness and practical usefulness of such activities, specifically:

- representatives of universities often focused solely on presenting their institution and did not provide the information or guidance about choosing a field of study that teenagers expected;
- when first-year university students were invited to present an institution, they were sometimes unable to provide all the necessary information about the university and studying there; additionally, students viewed their advice skeptically because of the minimal age difference between them;
- in some cases, students felt that teachers and school councilors were not genuinely interested in helping them;
- among teenagers living in residential care institutions, not everyone had access to a personal smartphone during career guidance events, which prevented some from completing the career aptitude tests offered by university representatives;
- during some activities, students felt that they were being pressured or steered toward a particular educational or career path.

> "We had this total mess, I don't know, the teachers and psychologists themselves didn't even want to talk about it. They would just turn on a video and leave. Then the video would end, and they'd come back and say, 'Everything clear? Goodbye.'"
>
> *Female 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

> "We only had an event like that once this year at my school. It was because our school was being reduced to a nine-grade school. They told us, basically, that if we leave after 9th grade, we can go to a vocational school or a college, and then after college go on to university and get our education that way. 'Why do you even need 11th grade?' they said."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student, 15 years old*

We also asked teenagers what had helped them decide on a field of study and a university, and found that **only some school-based career guidance activities had been useful to them**.

For some teenagers, the most helpful factor was **the opportunity to talk with professionals working in fields** that interested them, and such interactions often took place outside of school. For example, participants who had engaged with the NGO Zminotvortsi had opportunities to connect with experts

through the organization's extensive network. For some teenagers, career aptitude tests conducted at school were also helpful, as they enabled them to gain a better understanding of themselves.

> "I made my decision, then I started talking to people who worked in that profession. I liked their experience, and that was pretty much it."
>
> *Male 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

> "I have a clear plan. I'm going to finish school through 11th grade. Then I'll enroll in a university to study law and become a notary. [...] I've talked to people who work in that field and know it well. And I've also discussed it a lot with my parents."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student*

Teenagers also mentioned other activities outside of school, useful sources of information and support from others that helped them with career guidance:

- **courses**, including specialized courses such as programming classes, as well as courses offered by the NGO Zminotvortsi, which helped teenagers make decisions about their future profession;
- **the internet, social media, books, and films**: teenagers obtained useful information about professions from these sources, which influenced their choices;
- **the experiences of relatives and acquaintances**: when choosing universities, teenagers often relied on the experiences of people they knew who had studied at particular institutions;
- **activities organized by higher education institutions**: one participant attended a university summer school, which helped her decide whether she wanted to study there; teenagers from residential care institutions also emphasized the value of events where university students spoke about the programs they were enrolled in;
- **support from tutors and coaches**: some inspired teenagers to become interested in a particular subject or field, influencing their choice of major and university, while also providing advice;
- **career guidance camps**: one participant said that attending such a program helped them decide on a profession by giving them the opportunity to work directly with professionals in the field.

For teenagers living abroad, **consultations with school career counselors** were among the most useful forms of support. During these consultations, they discussed the advantages and disadvantages of different professions, as well as which elective subjects they should choose in school. This practice is not widespread in Ukraine. However, one participant noted the creation of a community-level system of career counselors who, after receiving specialized training, will help children choose a profession. For some teenagers abroad, **conversations with representatives of higher education institutions** were also helpful because these representatives not only talked about their institutions but also assisted students in selecting a suitable field of study. Another valuable opportunity was the **ability to choose school subjects** and focus on those most relevant to their future profession, while also being able to change them during their studies.

Summarizing teenagers' reflections on career guidance, several key expectations and demands regarding career guidance in schools can be identified:

- **more opportunities to communicate with and learn from other people**, including teachers, graduates of their school or lyceum, and experts from various fields. Teenagers' experiences suggest that personalized support, as well as conversations with people who work in different professions or study at institutions and in programs that interest them, are among the most valuable forms of career guidance;
- **regularity rather than one-time events**: for example, a dedicated lesson once a week or once a month; teenagers also spoke positively about participating in courses offered by the NGO Zminotvortsi, as these provide a systematic approach that helps them gradually build their identity and better understand the world over an extended period of time;
- **more informative activities**: in the view of teenagers, career guidance often was not useful and did not help them choose a profession; instead, they would like more meaningful support, including exposure to a wider range of career options; they also emphasized the importance of experiencing professions in real-life settings, for example, through visits to companies;
- **involvement of young people in delivering career guidance activities**: some teenagers believed that such programs should be led by young adults, as they are better

able to understand teenagers;

- **affordability of activities**: some teenagers expressed the view that career guidance programs should be free of charge or available at a low cost.

> "I'd like graduates who finished our lyceum [...] to come back and tell us about their experiences: where they enrolled, what it's like there, how things work there, that sort of thing."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student, 15 years old*

> "And overall, what helps the most are newly created projects. Because they involve younger people. First of all, they understand how to communicate with us. And secondly, they know which professions are more interesting to young people today. [...] Projects where young people create things themselves and take the initiative, that's what helps the most."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student, 14 years old*

Alternative pathways: Gap year

Some teenagers said that when thinking about their near future, they considered alternatives other than pursuing higher, professional pre-higher, or vocational education. One such option was **taking a year off**, commonly known as a gap year. Most study participants were aware of this alternative to continuing formal education, having heard about it through career guidance activities or from people they knew.

Overall, **teenagers had mixed views about the possibility of taking a gap year** and identified a wide range of potential advantages and disadvantages. These are summarized in the table below.

Teenagers' views on taking a gap year after school

Arguments in favor	Arguments against
• a gap year provides more time to prepare for university admission; • it allows more time to pursue hobbies and personal interests; • it offers an opportunity to better understand one's future career path and life direction; • it provides a chance to rest after the intensive studying and exam preparation in 11th grade; • it creates an opportunity to earn some money and become more self-sufficient and independent from parents; • it is an opportunity to try new things and meet new people.	• it is as a waste of time; • after taking a year off, a person may become too relaxed, making it difficult to return to studying; • knowledge and academic skills can be forgotten during the gap year, making university admission more difficult; • taking a gap year may create an undesirable age difference between a student and their university classmates; • there may not be enough financial resources to support oneself during that year.

For the most part, teenagers were **only considering** the possibility of taking a gap year, and **only a few had a firm plan to do so**. Those who considered it mentioned several reasons: earning some money before continuing their education, improving their exam preparation in order to gain admission to a better university, gaining new experiences and meeting new people, becoming more independent from their parents, and having additional time to decide where and what they wanted to study. Some were considering this option because they had not yet decided on a field of study or a university. Others were interested in applying to the Ukrainian Leadership Academy[13] or participating in the FLEX exchange program.[14]

> "I actually want to take a gap year so I can go work and, first of all, understand how life really works. Meet lots of other people. [...] Overall, just to figure out who you are, what you're about, and where you're headed. And if you get a job, that's good too, because you have your own money and can already be considered independent, in a way."
>
> *2nd year female college student*

[13] The Ukrainian Leadership Academy is an educational program for secondary school graduates in Ukraine that aims to develop leadership skills, civic responsibility, and personal competencies before they enter university.
[14] The Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX) is a U.S. government-funded exchange program that gives high school students the opportunity to study at an American high school and live with a host family in the United States for one academic year free of charge.

Some teenagers said **they would take a gap year if they did not pass the NMT or were not admitted to their preferred educational institution**. During that time, they would work and prepare to retake the exams. This perspective was also shared by teenagers living abroad.

> "[If I didn't pass the NMT], I wouldn't go to college. I'd just take a gap year. I'd get some kind of job, work for a while, and then use my free time [...] to prepare for the NMT, hire tutors. Just to make absolutely sure I pass the NMT and get into the university I want."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student, 14 years old*

For the most part, those who were considering taking a gap year or had a plan to do so still **intended to enroll in university** afterward. Only one participant planned to attend the Ukrainian Leadership Academy without subsequently pursuing higher education.

Among those who rejected the idea of taking a gap year were teenagers whose parents would not allow them to interrupt their studies. Others had previously considered this option but later independently decided on a different future path.

Influence of others on teenagers' decisions about their future

When considering different options for continuing their education, teenagers often **looked to friends, acquaintances, relatives, and especially their parents** for guidance. For example, some parents insisted that their children enroll in a university and did not support the idea of taking a gap year, or offered advice and tried to influence their children's choice of where to study; others gave teenagers more freedom to make their own decisions and were willing to support whatever choice they ultimately made.

> "My mom fully supported me no matter what path I chose, but her one main condition was that I finish all 11 grades of school."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

> "I probably wouldn't have continued studying at all, but my parents made me do it [...]."
>
> *Female student, 14 years old*

Teenagers also spoke about **the influence of teachers and other school staff**. Some **conveyed the message that higher education is mandatory** and that choosing not to enroll in further education after school would be a mistake. Other teenagers **received support from teachers, school psychologists, or social pedagogues**, particularly in making decisions about their post-school pathway and in coping with anxiety and uncertainty during the period of preparing for and taking the NMT.

> "The school puts a lot of pressure on us to go to university. But I made my own decision. Overall, they don't support their students in any way or tell them what options are available and so on. They just think that if you don't get admitted somewhere, you'll end up uneducated."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student*

> "I thought, 'That's it, if I don't pass the NMT, it's the end of the world.' But actually, that teacher, the counselor, the psychologist at our school, [...] we talked about it, and she basically told me that it's not the end of the world and that I shouldn't treat the NMT as something quite so dramatic, meaning that I should worry less, prepare seriously, of course, but not think of it as, 'I absolutely have to get 200–300 points and that's it.'"
>
> *Female 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

Teenagers living in residential care institutions **spoke about the role of their teachers and caregivers in shaping their future paths in different ways**. Some described hearing dismissive comments from adults, doubts that they would be able to achieve their dreams. It is important to note that for teenagers deprived of parental care, experiences of rejection or judgment from people around them often had a stronger negative impact on their mental and emotional well-being. This can be partly explained by their more **limited ability to offset negative experiences through support from other people**, because when conflicts arise between children living in the same institution, caregivers are generally expected to remain neutral. In addition, teenagers in residential care do not always feel a sufficiently close emotional connection with mentors and staff members to seek their help. At the same time, despite some participants' negative experiences with adults and peers, others, in contrast, described receiving support, valuable advice, and encouragement from the people around them, who tried to inspire them to pursue new goals.

Choosing a field of study and a university

Some of the teenagers who planned to pursue higher education **already knew which institution and field of study** they wanted to apply to. Others were still **uncertain** and weighing different options. Among the study participants, those in 11th grade were more likely to have a clear idea of both the educational institution and the specialization they wanted to pursue. Younger teenagers, by contrast, often had a general sense of the profession they would like to have but were less certain about their future education.

Parents often influenced teenagers' choices of university and field of study, although this influence was generally weaker than their influence on broader decisions about future pathways. For many parents, **the specific university or major their child chose was less critical** than the fact that the child continued their education. Some teenagers discussed their options with their parents, while others received advice and opinions from them. **A university's location** was often an important consideration for parents, primarily because of safety concerns and, less frequently, because of its distance from home. Some teenagers said that their parents **fully supported** them and gave them the freedom to make their own decisions. At the same time, the parents, relatives, and acquaintances of some teenagers expressed **critical views about particular fields of study**, often based on factors such as career prospects and potential earnings. Some teenagers took these opinions into account and ultimately changed their plans.

> "I wanted to apply [to a university], preferably one in eastern Ukraine, but [there were] some conflicts with my family over it. Because, as they put it, it's too dangerous there."
>
> *Male 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

> "Well, now that I'm choosing my path for the future, everyone supports me. They share their opinions, but ultimately the choice is mine, and everyone accepts it and supports it. If it's Kyiv, then it's Kyiv. We weigh all the pros and cons together and come to a shared decision that reflects what I want."
>
> *Male school student, 16 years old*

When choosing a field of study, teenagers were sometimes influenced by **the examples of people** they looked up to, including relatives, friends, and teachers. One advantage of this was

that it helped them better understand what a particular profession actually looks like. Some teenagers primarily focused on **their own interests, abilities, and the subjects they enjoyed or performed well in** at school. Others paid attention to more **practical considerations**, such as future employment opportunities, the long-term development prospects of a particular field, and whether the profession would allow for remote work. At the same time, **some teenagers' career aspirations were not fixed**: they initially planned to pursue one field of study but later decided to choose another.

> "[I] want to enroll in a medical university after finishing 11th grade. I want to become a doctor, like my grandmother, and for me that's the goal [...]"
>
> *Male 10th-grade student*

> "I like biology, my homeroom teacher teaches biology. She always pushed me to take part in all competitions [...]. I wrote several research projects for the Junior Science Academy. And I really enjoyed it, so I decided: this is probably what I should pursue."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student, 16 years old*

> "I decided to apply for Artificial Intelligence Systems. One thing that influenced me was that this field is developing, there are many directions within it, new things are being created. And, well, there's a chance to create something interesting yourself and contribute to the further development of the field."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student*

When choosing a university, teenagers considered the following criteria:

- **Location**. This was an important factor for some teenagers, particularly because of security considerations. Some wanted to study specifically in Ukraine or in a particular region in order to stay closer to home, while others simply wanted to study in a city they liked.
- **Quality of education and prestige.** Some teenagers paid attention to a university's prestige, as well as the quality of education offered in their chosen field of study.
- **Study and living conditions**. For some teenagers, important considerations included the quality of student housing and the proper condition of classrooms.
- **Reputation and integrity**. Several participants emphasized the importance of attending a university free from corruption and corruption-related scandals.
- **Diverse educational opportunities.** For some teenagers,

important factors included strong international partnerships, opportunities to earn a dual degree, prospects for career advancement, and connections with companies that could provide insight into professional practice and potentially lead to future employment.

- **Student community and extracurricular activities**. Some teenagers considered the university community and the availability of activities outside the classroom to be important aspects.
- **Successful alumni and positive reviews** from people who had studied at the educational institution.

Studying in Ukraine or abroad

Summarizing the advantages and disadvantages of studying in Ukraine and abroad as described by the teenagers, **two categories of advantages of studying abroad** can be identified.

- **Conditions for studying are safer and generally more comfortable** in countries not affected by war, particularly because there are no power outages. Stable and secure conditions also make it easier to plan for the future.
- **Higher-quality education and greater opportunities**. Beyond perceiving education abroad as being of higher quality, teenagers also believed that universities abroad tend to have lower levels of corruption and offer more opportunities for student development and well-being, including academic exchange programs. Participants further expressed the view that foreign degrees are valued more highly by employers and provide better prospects. In addition, living in another country allows students to learn a foreign language through immersion in a native-speaking environment.

However, not all participants shared these views. For some teenagers, in contrast, **studying in Ukraine offered more advantages**, including:

- the opportunity to study in a familiar environment: this included the language, cultural norms, and social surroundings;
- a high standard of education and a demanding educational system;
- the country's rapid development and the involvement of

international faculty.

A more detailed discussion of teenagers' reflections on this topic can be found in the subsection *Choosing between living in Ukraine and moving abroad* in Part 3.

Part 3 ● Teenagers' Perceptions of the Future

In this section, we explore teenagers' perceptions of a more distant future. In particular, we examine how participants envisioned their lives after completing their education (for example, after graduating from a vocational, professional pre-higher, or higher education institution), the kind of people they hoped to become as adults, and what they aspired to achieve in the future.

Reflections on the future after completing their education

For many participants, envisioning their lives five to ten years into the future was a rather difficult task: they had not previously reflected on it, making it **challenging to articulate long-term plans**—or, for some, even dreams. Some spoke about pursuing an extended educational path, such as earning a master's degree before entering the workforce, as well as their desire to find a job they would genuinely enjoy.

Some participants **deliberately chose not to focus on their future**. They explained that they preferred to live in the present and not invest too much energy in making detailed plans because of the changing circumstances around them. Similar responses were also given by a number of teenagers living in residential care institutions. At the same time, some of these teenagers said the opposite: they thought about their future more deliberately and tried to plan ahead, explaining that they **could not rely on support from others**.

> "In my opinion, there's no need to look that far ahead. I do have goals and plans, but my thinking, and my understanding in general, can change, I don't know, even in just a couple of days or a week."
>
> *Female school student*

A large share of the participants spoke about their hopes and dreams for the future rather than concrete plans. In particular, they mentioned **wanting to travel and gain new experiences, to have close people around them, and to work in a field they found interesting**. Some of the teenagers also thought about the possibility of starting a family.

A common aspiration for the future among the teenagers was **stability**. This referred to having a long-term job and an income that would allow them to meet their basic needs (such as housing, food, and the opportunity to spend time on leisure

activities) without extraordinary effort. Some participants also expressed **hope that the sense of uncertainty they currently felt would diminish in the future**, and that they would be able to plan and build their lives without feeling stressed. For some of the teenagers who took part in the study, this desire was intensified by anxiety and a sense of confusion caused by the need to choose a life path after finishing school.

How teenagers understand the concept of success

Ideas about the distant future overlapped with teenagers' views on what the concept of success meant to them. A large share of the participants said that being successful meant **having financial stability and the ability to improve their quality of life**. For most, this meant having enough financial security to live comfortably without worrying about meeting their basic needs, while also being able to save money. Some teenagers also included **the ability to support their loved ones financially** and to spend quality time together (for example, by traveling).

Some participants **associated success with self-development and self-actualization.** These teenagers expressed a desire to continuously gain new skills and experiences. Accordingly, this group viewed success primarily as an ongoing process, one in which there is always room for further achievement.

> "To me, this means having goals and constantly working toward achieving them. It also means learning new things, doing something, not standing still. Not just reaching some minimum and living like that, but always achieving something, doing something."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student*

Some teenagers **associated success with their professional lives**. In this understanding, success meant mastering a particular profession, developing expertise, and advancing in their chosen field. It is important to note that, for this group of participants, what mattered was **professional growth within a field they genuinely enjoyed**. When referring to a "favorite occupation," the teenagers meant a type of work they had chosen themselves and one that genuinely interested and engaged them.

Some of the teenagers who participated in the focus groups **viewed independence and self-sufficiency as key components**

of success. For this group of participants, it was important that their achievements be the result of their own efforts alone. A central aspect of their understanding of success was **the ability to control their own lives, make their own decisions, and avoid being subject to the influence of others**. They said they wanted their accomplishments to be attributable to themselves rather than to the people around them or to external circumstances. It is worth noting that this tendency may be explained by teenagers' sense of external control. As discussed in Part 2, choosing a life path after finishing school is often accompanied by influence from adults (relatives and teachers), peers, and broader social pressure. This is most evident in decisions about whether to continue studying, which educational institution to attend, and which profession to pursue. Teenagers' limited control over how these decisions are made may strengthen their desire to achieve independence as soon as possible in the future.

> "For me, it probably means being completely in control of your own life, and being able to make a spontaneous decision, for example, and still feel comfortable."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student, 15 years old*

For some teenagers, success was associated not only with having personal achievements but also with **receiving recognition from others**. These participants wanted the people around them to respect their accomplishments and to see them as someone worth looking up to and emulating.

> "Success, to me, is when other people look up to you. I mean in a good way, not a bad one: being able to support yourself and not give in to other people's influence, bad influence, I mean."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student, 15 years old*

Teenagers' concepts of the ideal place to live

Plans and dreams about the future were closely connected to teenagers' thoughts about where they wanted to live. This topic was touched upon in Part 2, which discussed teenagers' plans after finishing school. A large share of the participants said they **planned to move in order to attend their chosen educational institution**. When discussing the more distant future, most teenagers also said they would like to move away from the towns and communities where they were living at the

time of the study. The main reasons were **the low standard of living and the lack of career opportunities in their local communities**. The desire to move was mentioned more often by teenagers from smaller towns and communities, where they did not see prospects for positive change.

> "[...] I'll definitely move to a bigger city. Because I just don't see any opportunities for growth in our community."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student, 16 years old*

Accordingly, one of the main criteria participants used when choosing the place where they would like to live in the future was **the availability of sufficient employment opportunities**. Beyond career prospects, some participants also said that moving to another city or town would give them **the chance to meet new people** and experience life outside their familiar surroundings. Teenagers who were motivated by the search for broader opportunities hoped to live in large cities such as Kyiv or Lviv in the future. Some also considered moving to larger cities within their current region. It is worth noting that, when discussing the possibility of relocating, participants did not consider villages or rural towns as potential places to live.

Some participants were **guided by safety considerations** and therefore considered only places located far from the front line as potential places to live, particularly the western regions of Ukraine.

Another criterion was **the atmosphere of the city.** By this, participants meant **the sense of comfort and coziness** they associated with living in a particular place. Accordingly, some teenagers preferred quieter towns and cities, valuing their slower pace of life and peaceful environment.

> "Maybe a quiet town. Somewhere without too much noise or all that commotion. A quiet place. Maybe one where I'll be working too, so that my job is close by."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student*

Some participants **considered staying in their current communities** or returning to them after completing their education. The main reasons were a **desire to remain close to their relatives and the sense of comfort that came from living in familiar surroundings**. Some teenagers wanted to live specifically in their hometowns because they **hoped to contribute to the development of their communities**. This included both ad-

dressing existing social problems and improving local economic conditions. For example, some spoke about starting their own businesses and creating new jobs.

There were also teenagers who **did not have specific plans or preferences regarding where they would live in the future**. Some participants deliberately chose not to make detailed plans. Others wanted to spend time traveling and living in different places before deciding which location would suit them best.

Choosing between living in Ukraine and moving abroad

When choosing between living abroad and living in Ukraine, **most of the teenagers who participated in the study and were living in Ukraine at the time of the research did not plan to move abroad**. A common reason for this decision was **patriotism and a strong sense of belonging to their country and culture**. In addition, one of the main factors that motivated teenagers to build their lives in Ukraine was the people. In their view, people in Ukraine are more likely than those in other countries to support and help one another. Teenagers also highlighted other positive qualities, such as courage, heroism, and determination, and said they were proud to live in the same country as such people and felt a sense of unity with other Ukrainians.

> "There aren't people like ours abroad. Ours are, well, how do I put it... brave. Just look at what's happening now, with martial law in Ukraine, I don't think nearly as many people abroad would have stepped up."
>
> *Male 9th-grade student, 14 years old*

Some participants said that they **had wanted to move abroad in the past but had changed their minds over time**. Some teenagers explained that they decided to stay in Ukraine because their patriotic values had strengthened after the start of the full-scale invasion. Others said they did not want to leave their loved ones behind or give up the familiar environment in which they lived. Among the participants who spoke about changing their minds were teenagers who had previously lived abroad themselves or had learned about that experience from family members or friends. They said that **their earlier desire to move abroad had been shaped by stereotypical ideas about**

life in other countries — for example, higher salaries, a better standard of living, and greater cultural, social, and economic development. However, after experiencing life abroad themselves or hearing about it from people close to them, they changed their minds and decided to build their future in Ukraine.

> "I changed my mind around the 9th grade. Before that, for about 3 or 4 years, I had been completely set on going abroad to study. Then I met someone from that country. I was telling them how much I admired it, practically idealized it. And they said to me, 'Do you really think everything is that great there? It has its downsides too, it has its own problems.' After that, I started thinking about it more deeply. And I decided to stay in Ukraine."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student, 16 years old*

Notably different explanations regarding migration were given by teenagers who had participated in educational programs run by the NGO Zminotvortsi. They said that **these courses had helped them look at the question of living in Ukraine versus abroad from a different perspective**. In particular, they helped them assess the advantages and disadvantages of living in Ukraine and moving abroad in a more thoughtful way, as well as better understand the broader **impact of their personal decisions in the context of the country**. This finding may point to the importance of educational opportunities, particularly those outside the formal school system, that help teenagers understand how they can influence the country's future and develop an active civic outlook.

> "What really made that position [the decision to stay in Ukraine] something firm was probably Zminotvortsi. It was there that we started talking about the problems associated with leaving the country. Specifically about brain drain. About how it is, essentially, a problem at the national level. So I wouldn't want to become part of that problem. Instead, I'd like to help address it and contribute to development from within."
>
> *Male 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

For some teenagers, **living in Ukraine represented a kind of "comfort zone,"** as their knowledge of the language, cultural and social context, as well as the possibility of receiving support from relatives and friends, made life in the country much easier. Some participants also believed that **the quality of services available in Ukraine was better** than in other countries. They mentioned, for example, the accessibility and quality of healthcare, lower levels of bureaucracy, and the ability to obtain necessary services more quickly.

Some participants also **viewed staying in Ukraine as the more advantageous option for themselves**. They pointed out that, abroad, they might be at a disadvantage in the labor market because of their limited familiarity with the local cultural context and a lower level of language proficiency than native speakers. Some participants also noted that they would have **better opportunities to find higher-paying jobs** in Ukraine because of labor shortages in certain sectors and the country's demographic crisis.

Although most teenagers wanted to build their lives in Ukraine, a large share of the participants **considered the possibility of temporarily going abroad**, for example, to study through an exchange program, earn money, or travel. For some, the idea of living abroad for a period of time reflected their curiosity and **desire to see the world**, learn about other cultures, and experience different ways of life. Some participants also viewed going abroad as **an opportunity to gain valuable knowledge and experience** that they could later bring back and use to help develop Ukraine.

There were also teenagers who took a more **situational approach to moving abroad**. This group planned to make a final decision depending on how the full-scale war unfolded and on the state of Ukraine's economy after the end of the fighting.

> "I'll probably stay [in Ukraine] for as long as the war is going on. Then, once it's over, I'll live here for a while, and if nothing changes for the better, I'll probably leave [...]."
>
> *Male school student*

For those teenagers who were **inclined to move abroad**, the main reasons were **a sense of uncertainty about the future and the further course of the full-scale war**. Some participants expressed concern about the security situation. Many teenagers also felt **uneasy about the prospect of a deepening economic crisis** and a worsening labor market. The lack of a clear understanding of how Ukrainian cities would be rebuilt after the end of the fighting, and what financial burden this process would place on people in Ukraine, further heightened their anxiety and made them more willing to consider moving abroad.

Some teenagers also said that, **during the full-scale war, they saw more opportunities for themselves abroad**. In their view, the security situation, reliable energy infrastructure, and greater economic and social stability made other countries

more attractive places to live. At the same time, some participants chose to remain in Ukraine despite recognizing these advantages.

> "I wouldn't really want to move abroad. I mean, I do see a lot of opportunities there, and honestly, if you really think about it, things are pretty bad in Ukraine right now, and they're probably not going to get much better anytime soon. [...] I'd only want to go abroad for a short period of time."
>
> *Female 10th-grade student, 15 years old*

Negative experiences in interactions with other people also prompted some teenagers to consider moving abroad. For example, participants recalled encountering prejudice after becoming internally displaced, as well as experiencing bullying from their peers. Teenagers living in residential care institutions also spoke about bullying and its influence on their desire to leave the country. They said that, because of these experiences, they had come to see this way of interacting with others as something common among people in Ukraine.

Views on the future among teenagers living abroad[15]

As part of this study, we conducted two focus group discussions with teenagers who were living and studying abroad. For this group of participants, planning for the future looked somewhat different. Teenagers living outside Ukraine planned to **continue their education after finishing school at educational institutions abroad**. When reflecting on their future after completing their education, participants living abroad **expressed uncertainty about the idea of returning to Ukraine**. Some planned to remain abroad, at least for a period after finishing their studies. In particular, they intended to continue their education after school at higher education or vocational education institutions outside Ukraine. Some also planned to begin looking for work and building their careers abroad after completing their higher education or vocational qualification. For this group of participants, **the decision to return to Ukraine depended largely on how the full-scale war would unfold**. Accordingly, they planned to return only after the fighting in Ukraine had ended and after enough time had

[15] At the time the fieldwork was conducted.

passed for damaged infrastructure to be rebuilt and for the country's economic situation to stabilize.

Some teenagers **did not plan to return to Ukraine and saw themselves making only short visits** to see relatives who remained there. They explained this decision by saying that they saw **more opportunities for themselves abroad**. In the view of these participants, wages and the standard of living are higher abroad, making it more likely that they would be able to find well-paid jobs and achieve greater stability. Some participants also believed that higher-quality education and a wider range of career opportunities were available to them abroad.

> "I like living in Ukraine, but I think it would be more promising, better, to stay abroad. Since my relatives are back there [in Ukraine], I'd just like to be able to visit them from time to time."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student, 16 years old, living abroad*

Teenagers also noted that, **after living abroad for an extended period, they had become more accustomed to the habits and ways of life in the countries where they were living.** This included learning the language, adapting to the local pace and way of life, developing new routines and habits, and building new social circles. Participants who already had relatives who had moved abroad earlier adapted to life in their new country more quickly and generally felt more comfortable living abroad.

> "Well, the reason we moved to England was that my grandmother has been living here for more than 20 years. She speaks English really well. My brother and I do too. We'd also been here many times before the war. So England already feels more like home because I've spent a large part of my life here."
>
> *Male school student, living abroad*

It is important to note that, among the teenagers who planned to build their future abroad, **most were no longer engaged with the Ukrainian information space**, did not follow news from Ukraine, and had limited contact with people living there. This group of participants said they rarely kept in touch with friends and acquaintances who had remained in Ukraine. Instead, most of their friends and people in their social circles were also living abroad.

> "I'm not even considering that option [returning to Ukraine]. I've been back since the war started, but I don't really have anyone there anymore. I don't keep in touch with anyone from Ukraine, and I don't have any friends left there. Only my grandparents are still there. I just don't feel comfortable in Ukraine anymore—I don't feel the way I do here, for example."
>
> *Female 11th-grade student, 17 years old, living abroad*

When explaining why they had lost touch with their friends, the teenagers spoke about **the difficulties of maintaining relationships while living in different countries**. This included having fewer shared topics to talk about because they were living in different contexts, as well as finding it difficult to make time to stay in touch. They also noted that, over the past few years, their personalities and interests had changed, which further complicated communication with former friends.

> "It's become harder for me to talk to my friends, probably because of the distance, too. Because we're living in different countries. Because we have fewer things we can talk about. They have things to talk about that, for example, I don't know about, I haven't heard of them or experienced them. So it's just harder to talk to them."
>
> *Female school student, 14 years old, living abroad*

At the same time, some participants **continued to stay in touch with friends who had remained in Ukraine**. Although these teenagers said that they communicated less frequently than before, maintaining those relationships was important to them. Participants explained that, in some cases, **online learning at Ukrainian schools** helped them stay connected. It allowed them to remain in the same shared context and gave them common topics to discuss through homework assignments and group projects. In addition, the teenagers **made an effort to plan shared activities using digital technologies**, such as video calls and other forms of online communication. For example, some participants said they kept in touch with friends by watching sports competitions and other events together, playing online cooperative video games, and taking part in other activities that could be done online.

Teenagers who maintained closer contact with friends in Ukraine and continued studying in Ukrainian schools remained more immersed in the Ukrainian information context. This was reflected in their consumption of Ukrainian media content and their habit of following news from Ukraine. These teenagers were **more inclined to return to Ukraine after the end of the full-scale war** and build their future in their home country. In addition, they were **more likely to reflect on the possibility**

of playing an active role in rebuilding Ukraine's infrastructure and economy after the fighting ends.

> "In the long run, I'd still like to return to Ukraine and help rebuild its sovereignty and infrastructure."
>
> *Male school student, living abroad*

Teenagers' views on the future of Ukraine

In addition to asking about their personal futures, this study explored teenagers' views on the future of Ukraine. In particular, we asked about their expectations regarding the further course of the full-scale war, what they thought Ukraine might look like after the hostilities end, and how the teenagers saw their own role in that future.

A large share of the participants expressed **a sense of uncertainty** when reflecting on these questions. Some preferred not to think about how events might unfold because of the unpredictable and rapidly changing nature of the situation. They said they could imagine many possible scenarios, both positive and negative with equal likelihood.

Some participants said that **trying to predict the future made them feel anxious and worried**. These emotions were driven by fears of Ukraine losing the war, the possibility of Russia temporarily occupying additional territories, and a further escalation of the fighting. Some participants also **felt that they had no control over how events would unfold**. In turn, this lack of control over external circumstances that could shape their lives, combined with the prolonged duration of the war, further intensified their anxiety and uncertainty about the future.

> "...I'm honestly scared to look into the future. Because, in a way, I've gotten used to living with the war, air raid alerts and everything else. Thankfully, it hasn't affected us too badly here... yet. But I just don't understand... what, for example, will the consequences of a peace agreement be? What will happen if one side wins or the other? It's honestly scary to even think about it. We went into COVID lockdown when I was in the 5th grade, then we studied remotely. Then the war started, and we were studying remotely again. We were still kids, we were in the 6th grade. Now I'm in the 11th, and it's like... have we just gotten used to all of this? What are we supposed to do? What will life be like? I don't know."
>
> *Male school student*

At the same time, some teenagers believed that although Ukraine's future largely depends on external and political circumstances, people's actions also influence how the situation develops. Accordingly, they viewed **Ukraine's future as the responsibility of every resident of the country and believed that it requires purposeful efforts** to support the military, strengthen the country's economy, and remain engaged in political processes and self-government.

> "[...] There are just so many factors involved. It depends to a great extent on foreign policy, which is even harder to predict than domestic policy. [...] The only thing I would add is that the future really depends, I think... not so much on people's choices as on what they do. Every person can have an impact in their own way. People can make a meaningful contribution to Ukraine's future by supporting it at many different levels."
>
> *Male 11th-grade student, 16 years old*

Some participants said that although they did not have a clear vision of Ukraine's future, **they hoped for and believed in a positive scenario**: Ukraine's victory in the Russia-Ukraine war within the next few years, the return of the temporarily occupied territories, and the reconstruction of damaged infrastructure. All of the teenagers **agreed that achieving victory and rebuilding the country in the post-war years would be difficult processes**. Some also said they were prepared for a prolonged economic crisis. Despite this, they expressed hope that Ukraine would recover and prosper within a few years after the end of the full-scale war. This included a stronger economy as well as the development of the country's cultural and social spheres.

Most of the teenagers **expressed a desire to contribute to Ukraine's post-war recovery**. This included the economic dimension: a willingness to become part of Ukraine's workforce and pay taxes. Some also said they would be willing to make charitable donations to support humanitarian needs. Some participants considered **pursuing careers related to the reconstruction of Ukraine's infrastructure and economy**, seeing their future professions as a way to contribute to the country's recovery. Others planned to engage in **volunteer work** and help people facing difficult life circumstances, as well as animals affected by the war.

> "Once the war is over, and I really hope that happens very soon, we'll have to rebuild the country somehow. A lot of people may leave, but someone has to do it all, stay, rebuild it, and help it develop. That's exactly why I'm staying here to study."
>
> *Female 9th-grade student*

Among the teenagers who participated in the study were those who **expressed a desire to play a more active role in Ukraine's recovery**. Some participants aspired **to hold positions related to the development and implementation of public policy**. Others considered becoming involved in the **civil society sector** and implementing social projects, particularly those aimed at community development. Some teenagers also hoped to contribute to **promoting Ukrainian culture internationally**, strengthening the country's positive image abroad, and raising awareness of Ukrainians' traditions, history, and achievements.

> "Well, I'd also like to help raise Ukraine's profile internationally. I don't want Ukraine to be associated only with being a country at war. I want people to see our culture and the kind of people we are [...]."
>
> *Female school student, 13 years old*

- Conclusions

After completing the 9th grade, teenagers enter a transitional period in their lives. During this time, they are expected to choose their future path: decide what profession they want to pursue, whether to continue or discontinue their education, and begin making plans for adult life. At the same time, their systems of values become more clearly defined, and their social circles take shape. In this study, we explored how teenagers experience this period of life: their emotions and concerns, the challenges they face, how they cope with those challenges, and how they plan for their future.

As part of the study, teenagers also spoke about their role models: people, historical figures, or fictional characters who had influenced the formation of their values and served as examples for them. Most often, participants mentioned adults from their immediate surroundings, including relatives, teachers, staff at their educational institutions, as well as coaches and private tutors from extracurricular activities. Some teenagers also named well-known public figures, such as actors, musicians, bloggers, and influencers. Others described their peers, including classmates and siblings, as their role models.

Most often, teenagers explained their choice of role models by referring to their personal attachment and emotional connection to particular people, as well as to the achievements of those role models that they admired. These achievements included educational attainment, professional success, financial well-being, and accomplishments related to lifestyle, such as traveling and personal growth. For some teenagers, their role models' civic engagement and clear demonstration of pro-Ukrainian values were also important. Some participants, in turn, said that they themselves would like to become role models for others in the future.

It is also worth noting that some teenagers said during the focus group discussions that they did not have any role models at all. Some explained this by saying that they wanted to make their own decisions and avoid giving in to social pressure or the influence of those around them.

Teenagers' social circles also influenced the formation of their values and their mental and emotional well-being. When deciding whom to talk to and build friendships with, participants most often looked for qualities such as openness, honesty, and respect for others. They also emphasized the importance of shared interests and communication skills (such as the ability to listen to others and to be tolerant of different opinions). In

contrast, aggression, disrespect, and hypocrisy discouraged them from forming relationships.

In some cases, teenagers' social circles served as a source of support. Some participants said that their friends helped them make important life decisions. Others, however, described negative experiences in their interactions with people around them, including being judged for their interests and life choices, such as their choice of future field of study.

In addition to friends and role models, teenagers' decisions were often influenced by their relatives (most commonly their parents) and by adults in their lives, including teachers, coaches, private tutors, and other mentor figures. These were the people they most often turned to for help and support in difficult situations and when making decisions. At the same time, as with friendships, some teenagers shared negative experiences in their interactions with these adults, including a lack of support and condemnation of their decisions. It is important to note that some participants also described experiencing pressure from adults around them. This included authoritarian decision-making, dismissal of their opinions or ideas, and other attempts to steer them toward particular choices. Such experiences often had a negative impact on teenagers' mental and emotional well-being, leaving them with feelings of anxiety and a lack of control over their own lives.

When reflecting on life after school, most participants described feeling uncertain. In particular, this uncertainty was related to the need to make decisions about their future life trajectory—for example, whether to continue their education after school, what profession to pursue, and which educational institution they would like to attend. Teenagers viewed taking the NMT (National Multi-subject Test) as one of the key events shaping their future, since their scores would determine their chances of being admitted to highly ranked educational institutions.

When planning their future after finishing school, the teenagers who participated in the focus group discussions generally followed one of two paths: planning to enroll in higher education or deciding not to pursue higher education.
A large share of the participants planned to continue their education after school by enrolling in higher education institutions. The most common choice was to study at a university. Some participants considered attending a college, while a few

others mentioned the possibility of enrolling in vocational education and training institutions. At the same time, many teenagers held negative stereotypes about vocational education and training—for example, believing that it offers lower-quality education and fewer future opportunities than other educational pathways. They generally viewed a university education as providing more opportunities and better long-term prospects. These stereotypes were partly shaped by broader societal attitudes. However, many teenagers also said that they had adopted these views under the influence of adults around them, including their parents, relatives, teachers, and others.

Choosing not to continue education after finishing school was less common among the participants. The main reasons were a desire to gain life experience, try different professions, and begin building a career and achieving independence immediately after school. Some participants also considered taking a gap year and returning to the question of applying to higher education institutions later. However, for most teenagers this life trajectory was seen primarily as a backup plan in case they were unable to achieve a successful score on the NMT.

For the participants in the study, planning their future after school was a challenging process. All of the teenagers who took part in the focus group discussions hoped to have a profession and a job that they would enjoy. Most complained about the poor quality of career guidance activities at their schools, while some said that their schools offered no career guidance at all. At the same time, participants emphasized that career guidance could have made it much easier for them to decide on a future profession. Some teenagers compensated for the lack of quality career guidance at school by seeking out other opportunities, such as taking career aptitude tests (both free and paid), attending private courses or workshops, or turning to civil society organizations. The most valuable forms of career guidance were opportunities to speak with people working in professions they were interested in, so they could learn about their experiences, gain practical exposure to the field, and receive personalized guidance from career counselors (for example, through conversations about the teenagers' interests and skills). Participants who had access to high-quality career guidance felt less anxious and more confident about their choices.

Some teenagers chose their field of study based on career prospects, including the availability of jobs in a particular profession and the potential level of income. Others chose a profes-

sion that matched their interests and hobbies. Some participants relied on the experiences and advice of people around them, including their parents, teachers, and older siblings. At the same time, some teenagers, feeling uncertain and worried about whether they were making the right decision, became more vulnerable to pressure from those around them. In particular, some participants described a lack of acceptance from the adults closest to them. This included teachers deliberately creating an unfavorable atmosphere at school or lowering their grades, as well as parents imposing strict prohibitions on their choices. As a result, these teenagers sometimes set aside their own preferences and accept the choices favored by those around them instead of following their own plans.

When choosing a higher education institution, teenagers considered several factors: the quality of education, the institution's reputation (including the absence of corruption scandals, positive reviews, and the success stories of its graduates), the student community, and the availability of extracurricular activities, as well as the security situation. Some participants also viewed enrolling in a higher education institution as an opportunity to relocate from the communities where they currently lived. These teenagers chose educational institutions based on where they wanted to live, most often preferring large cities that offered more employment opportunities and a wider range of leisure activities.

Most of the teenagers who participated in the study did not have clear plans or a concrete vision of their more distant future (5–10 years after finishing school). Instead, participants spoke more about their hopes and aspirations for the future. In particular, they hoped to be happy in life and to achieve stability, namely a sufficient level of income that would allow them to meet their basic needs (such as housing, quality food, and the ability to spend money on leisure activities).

When reflecting on the future, teenagers also discussed where they wanted to live. Most participants said they would like to move away from the communities and localities where they were living at the time of the study and build their lives in larger cities. The main reasons were the lack of sufficient career opportunities and a desire for a higher standard of living than they believed was available in their hometowns.

At the same time, many of the teenagers who participated in the focus group discussions did not plan to move abroad

and preferred to remain in Ukraine. Most explained this decision in terms of patriotism. Some participants wanted to stay in Ukraine in order to remain close to their families and friends. Others said that moving abroad would be uncomfortable because it would require adapting to life in a new place without an established support network, familiarity with the local cultural and social context, or, in some cases, sufficient language skills.

Some teenagers actually considered the possibility of moving abroad. Most of them planned to make that decision depending on how the future unfolds, particularly with regard to Ukraine's economic and security situation.

It is worth noting that some participants had planned to move abroad in the past but later changed their minds. This shift was influenced by their own experience of living abroad or by conversations with relatives and friends about life in other countries. The teenagers said that their earlier views about moving abroad had been based on stereotypes about Ukraine offering fewer career opportunities. Learning about the realities of moving abroad helped them realize that life in other countries comes with its own challenges and does not guarantee a higher quality of life than in Ukraine.

The responses of teenagers who were living abroad at the time of the study were somewhat different. Most of them planned to continue their education after finishing school and begin looking for work abroad. An important finding was that the decision of whether to return to Ukraine was influenced not only by the country's security and economic situation, but also by whether the teenagers maintained social ties with people living in Ukraine. Participants who stayed in touch with friends, continued studying in Ukrainian schools, and remained more engaged with the Ukrainian information space were more likely to express a desire to return to Ukraine. In contrast, teenagers who no longer had social ties with people in Ukraine were more likely to plan to live abroad permanently.

When reflecting on the future of Ukraine, teenagers felt uncertainty. Participants were particularly anxious about the possibility of Russia occupying more Ukrainian territory or of a ceasefire being reached on terms unfavorable to Ukraine. At the same time, they expressed hope that Ukraine would achieve victory and that the hostilities would end in the near future, while recognizing that the post-war period would be a difficult one for the country. Most teenagers said they wanted

to contribute to rebuilding Ukraine's infrastructure and economy. Most commonly, this meant working in the Ukrainian labor market and paying taxes. Some participants also expressed a willingness to engage in volunteer work and make charitable financial donations.

Based on the views and experiences shared by the participants, the study points to a high level of uncertainty among teenagers. The need to choose their future path causes many of them stress and anxiety. The lack of high-quality career guidance and opportunities to receive meaningful support further intensifies this psychological strain. For some participants, being able to seek support from people close to them—such as parents, teachers, and friends—or to look up to role models helped them cope with these challenges. However, others did not receive the support they needed or experienced a lack of acceptance from the people around them. The availability of civil society organizations that provide free career guidance, as well as private companies offering such services for a fee, helps to address this gap to some extent. However, because paid services are not affordable for most teenagers, they remain accessible only to a small share of young people. At the same time, the lack of high-quality career guidance within schools remains a significant problem that makes the process of planning for the future more difficult for teenagers.

● Key findings of the study for stakeholder groups

For the Ministry of Education and Science and educational institution administrators:

- Teenagers demonstrate a high level of uncertainty about their future educational and career paths, while existing career guidance practices often do not meet their needs.
- Career guidance is one of the factors that helps reduce teenagers' anxiety and enables them to make more informed decisions about their future education and careers.
- Negative stereotypes about vocational education are widespread among teenagers. Vocational education institutions are often perceived as a less prestigious pathway than university education. These perceptions are reinforced by the stigma surrounding vocational education in society.
- A substantial share of teenagers see their future in Ukraine. However, their decisions are influenced by the country's security, economic, and educational prospects.

For educational institutions and educators:

- Teachers are among the most important adults in teenagers' lives and often serve as role models and sources of support when they are making important life decisions.
- At the same time, some teenagers report experiencing judgment, pressure, or a lack of acceptance from educators, which negatively affects their self-confidence and their ability to plan their futures independently.
- Teenagers particularly value opportunities for open dialogue, support for their own choices, and exposure to real-life career pathways.
- For teenagers, high-quality career guidance is associated not only with aptitude testing, but above all with direct interaction with professionals, hands-on experience, and personalized guidance.

For parents, guardians, and close circle members:

- Family remains one of the primary influences on teenagers' educational and career choices.
- Support and a willingness to discuss different options

for the future help teenagers cope more effectively with uncertainty and anxiety.

- Conversely, pressure, attempts to impose particular career choices, or dismissing teenagers' interests may lead them to abandon their own plans and reduce their sense of control over their own lives.

For civil society organizations and youth support programs:

- There is a strong demand for high-quality career guidance programs.
- Teenagers place the greatest value on practical formats, including meetings with professionals, mentoring, exposure to real-life career journeys, and opportunities to explore different fields through hands-on experience.
- Young people demonstrate a willingness to build their future in Ukraine and contribute to its recovery, creating strong potential for programs focused on civic engagement and youth leadership.

For vocational and higher education institutions:

- Vocational education institutions face persistent stigma among teenagers and those around them, despite a genuine demand for practical professions and faster entry into the labor market.
- When choosing an educational institution, teenagers place particular importance on its reputation, the quality of education, employment opportunities, an active student community, and the absence of corruption.
- Many teenagers view enrolling in a Ukrainian higher education institution as a tool for professional fulfillment and career development.