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Host Country Policies and the Prospects for the Return of Ukrainian Refugees

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The relevance of the research is driven by the large-scale forced migration of Ukrainian citizens caused by the full-scale war and the gradual shift of host countries from emergency temporary protection regimes toward managed migration models. In this context, the analysis of the prospects for the voluntary return of Ukrainian refugees and the role of host country policies in shaping return-related decisions becomes increasingly important. The aim of the article is to analyze the factors and scenarios of Ukrainian refugees' return to Ukraine, taking into account the impact of host country policies. The empirical basis of the study consists of the results of a survey of 200 Ukrainian refugees conducted in September–October 2025. The data were processed using descriptive statistics and elements of quantitative analysis. The article examines the transformation of the legal status of Ukrainian refugees in EU and non-EU countries, including trends toward limiting universal access to temporary protection, introducing selective approaches, and encouraging integration. The survey results show that only about 43 % of respondents definitely or rather plan to return to Ukraine, while a significant share either do not plan to return or remain undecided. Key determinants of return decisions include security conditions, economic prospects, living standards, as well as residence conditions and social support in host countries. Differences in return intentions are identified depending on the country of residence, age, region of origin, and level of integration. The research concludes that host country policies play a significant role in shaping Ukrainian refugees' return decisions, while Ukraine's state policy in this area remains insufficiently institutionalized and requires a comprehensive and differentiated approach.

Юлія Прус, Юлія Квітка. Державна політика країн-реципієнтів та перспективи повернення українських біженців. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена масштабною вимушеною міграцією громадян України внаслідок повномасштабної війни та поступовим переходом країн-реципієнтів від надзвичайних режимів тимчасового захисту до керованих міграційних моделей. У цих умовах зростає значущість аналізу перспектив добровільного повернення українських біженців та ролі державної політики приймаючих країн у формуванні відповідних рішень. Метою статті є аналіз чинників і сценаріїв повернення українських біженців в Україну з урахуванням впливу політики країн-реципієнтів. Емпірична база дослідження – результати опитування 200 українських біженців, проведеного у вересні–жовтні 2025 року. Дані оброблялися з використанням методів описової статистики та елементів кількісного аналізу. У статті розглянуто трансформацію правового статусу українських біженців у країнах ЄС і поза його межами, зокрема тенденції до звуження універсального доступу

до тимчасового захисту, запровадження селективних підходів та заохочення інтеграції. Результати опитування засвідчують, що лише близько 43 % респондентів точно або скоріше планують повернення в Україну, тоді як значна частина або не планує повернення, або вагається. Ключовими чинниками прийняття рішення залишаються безпекова ситуація, економічні перспективи, рівень життя, а також умови перебування та соціальна підтримка в країнах-реципієнтах. Виявлено відмінності в намірах повернення залежно від країни перебування, віку, регіону походження та рівня інтеграції. Зроблено висновок, що політика країн-реципієнтів істотно впливає на рішення українських біженців щодо повернення, тоді як державна політика України в цій сфері залишається недостатньо інституціоналізованою та потребує комплексного, диференційованого підходу.

Ключові слова: міграційні процеси, політика повернення, тимчасовий захист, українські біженці.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as of mid-November 2025, more than 5,88 million people from Ukraine continue to reside abroad under various forms of temporary or humanitarian protection (UNHCR, 2025a). The majority of them are Ukrainian citizens who require guarantees of the protection of their rights and the maintenance of ties with the state. Ukraine, in turn, has an obligation to ensure such ties in legal, social, and informational dimensions by safeguarding the rights of its citizens abroad and creating conditions for their dignified and voluntary return after the expiration of international protection mechanisms.

The European Union (EU), along with other destination countries for refugees from Ukraine, is preparing for the gradual termination of the temporary protection regime. This may involve extending temporary protection schemes at the national level, a gradual transition of Ukrainian citizens to other forms of regularized stay – such as residence permits linked to employment, education, or family reunification – or voluntary return to Ukraine.

In this context, Ukraine requires a coherent policy toward its citizens abroad that ensures stable access to public and social services, maintains links with Ukrainian educational, social, and legal systems, and creates conditions for informed and safe return in compliance with the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The aim of the article is to systematize the drivers and scenarios of Ukrainian refugees' return to Ukraine and to analyze the impact of host country policies on these processes.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN RESEARCH ON THIS ISSUE

The intensification of migration flows, the transformation of migration behavior, the expansion of youth migration, and the emergence of new migration networks generate a multidimensional set of risks affecting the resilience of social institutions, the balance of regional labor markets, demographic structures, human capital quality, and spatial development. Under these conditions, migration security becomes a key prerequisite for ensuring the socio-economic resilience of Ukraine's regions, as it determines the degree of control over migration flows and the capacity of institutional systems to mitigate the destabilizing effects of internal and external migration pressures while maintaining socio-economic equilibrium (Skrypnychenko et al., 2025).

The experience of European Union countries demonstrates a diversified set of migration governance models aimed at managing mobility, integrating displaced populations into host communities, and strengthening territorial socio-economic resilience. Comparative analysis of these approaches enables the identification of policy instruments relevant to enhancing the adaptive capacity of Ukraine's socio-economic system in the context of a protracted migration crisis and increasing structural vulnerabilities.

Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, forced migration from Ukraine has become one of the largest displacement crises in Europe in the 21st century (Borzenko et al., 2025). Consequently, a rapidly expanding body of international and Ukrainian scholarship has focused on various dimensions of this phenomenon, including temporary protection regimes, integration trajectories, identity transformations, labour market participation, political subjectivity, and return migration intentions.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the socio-economic, institutional, and policy dimensions of forced migration from Ukraine in the context of the full-scale Russian invasion. A substantial body of Ukrainian research emphasizes the interlinkages between forced migration, labor market resilience, and social sustainability. Blyzniuk (2023) conceptualizes labor market resilience through the lens of social

quality policy, highlighting inclusiveness, non-discrimination, and effective use of human capital as key prerequisites for social stability in crisis and post-war recovery contexts. Complementing this approach, Petrova and Blyzniuk (2023) frame labor mobility as a core determinant of structural labor market transformations, arguing that wartime shocks exacerbate existing vulnerabilities while simultaneously accelerating mobility across sectors, regions, and countries. Holovkova and Kovalchuk (2023) further systematize the challenges and consequences of forced migration of Ukrainians, underscoring its multidimensional impacts on employment, social integration, and long-term development trajectories.

At the international level, empirical studies have examined both host-country responses and the experiences of Ukrainian forced migrants. Krawczyk et al. (2023), using a large-scale conjoint experiment in six EU Member States, demonstrate that public support for temporary protection is shaped by migrants' demographic characteristics, origin, and reasons for flight, with significantly higher acceptance of war-displaced Ukrainians compared to other migrant groups. Milova and Trushevych (2023) provide a comprehensive review of Ukrainian and EU-level research, identifying key challenges of linguistic, cultural, psychological, and social adaptation, as well as the evolving regulatory framework of EU migration policy since 2022. Pozniak (2023), drawing on official statistics and expert interviews, highlights discrepancies across data sources, outlines the hierarchy of problems faced by Ukrainian forced migrants in Europe, and assesses their impact on host-country markets. Collectively, these studies underline that forced migration from Ukraine is not only a humanitarian and political phenomenon, but also a structural factor reshaping labor markets, social policy, and long-term demographic and economic resilience in both Ukraine and receiving countries.

A significant strand of research addresses return intentions and decision-making processes of Ukrainian refugees. Drawing on the aspirations–capabilities framework, Udovyk and Acebillo-Baqué (2025) emphasise the interaction between macro-level political environments and micro-level factors such as trauma, stigma, and gendered experiences in shaping return narratives. Their introduction of the concept of “virtual return” highlights the growing role of digital connectivity in maintaining transnational ties and contributing to post-war recovery without physical repatriation. Quantitative experimental research by Vakhitov et al. (2025) complements this perspective by demonstrating that psychological factors – particularly national identity and pride – affect return intentions in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, suggesting that symbolic policy instruments may have uneven effects across population groups.

Another well-developed line of inquiry focuses on temporary protection as a structural condition of uncertainty. Comparative analyses of EU countries (Macková et al., 2024; Krilić, & Zavrtnik, 2025; Xhardez, & Soennecken, 2023) reveal that while temporary protection schemes facilitated rapid access to labour markets, social services, and education, their limited duration reinforces a state of “permanent temporariness.” Research conducted in Denmark (Kusk, 2023) and Central Europe (Mezihorák, 2025) further demonstrates that prolonged temporary status shapes refugees' aspirations, labour market positioning, and coping strategies, often reproducing precarity despite formal inclusion. These findings align with broader theoretical debates on temporality, liminality, and “deservingness” in migration governance.

A growing body of empirical studies examines integration outcomes and labour market trajectories. Evidence from Poland and Czechia (Jirka et al., 2023; Macková et al., 2024) indicates that despite relatively high educational attainment and favourable public attitudes, many Ukrainian refugees experience downward occupational mobility due to language barriers and weak integration policies. Similar patterns are observed in Germany and the United Kingdom (Sydorov, & Kovalska, 2022; Oliinyk, & Oliinyk, 2024), where employment, housing shortages, and institutional ambiguity constrain long-term planning and reinforce intentions to remain abroad or delay return.

Several scholars approach forced migration from a political and citizenship perspective. Dziadyk's ethnographic research demonstrates how displaced Ukrainians challenge conventional notions of political invisibility by engaging in solidarity networks and asserting political agency within host societies. These studies expand the analytical focus beyond economic and demographic outcomes toward transformations of political subjectivity and transnational civic engagement (Dziadyk, 2024).

At the macro level, comparative policy research highlights divergent national responses to the Ukrainian displacement crisis. Studies of the Visegrad Group (Pędziwiatr, & Magdziarz, 2022) and EU–Canada comparisons (Xhardez, & Soennecken, 2023) show that institutional capacity, historical migration

experience, and governance traditions significantly shape reception and integration outcomes. While emergency measures were initially inclusive, weak coordination, limited infrastructure, and policy fragmentation constrained their effectiveness over time.

Ukrainian scholarship provides an essential complementary perspective by situating forced migration within broader frameworks of migration security, demographic sustainability, and socio-economic resilience (Mulska et al., 2025a, 2025b; Kurilo et al., 2023). These works conceptualise migration not only as a humanitarian or labour market issue but also as a strategic challenge to national security, regional development, and human capital reproduction. Quantitative modelling of repatriation scenarios (Sydorov et al., 2024) further underscores that return decisions are strongly conditioned by host-country context, economic stability, life satisfaction, and perceived future prospects rather than solely by initial displacement factors.

The relevance of this research is further underscored by the increasing policy attention to migration issues in Ukraine. Government authorities, in cooperation with diverse stakeholder groups, are currently developing the State Migration Policy Strategy of Ukraine until 2035, with a particular focus on labor resources. As emphasized by Ella Libanova, Director of the Ptoukha Institute for Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, migration policy should be differentiated by host country, reflecting the distinct demographic profiles of Ukrainian migrants – for instance, a higher concentration of women and younger cohorts in Poland and a greater share of men and older individuals in Germany. Accordingly, return and reintegration policies should be tailored to these heterogeneous needs (Libanova, 2025).

Despite the richness of existing research, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature analyses either host-country integration or return intentions in isolation, while fewer studies explicitly examine how host-country migration and social policies shape long-term return scenarios. Second, although gender, age, and class dimensions are increasingly acknowledged, their interaction with national policy regimes remains underexplored. Third, Ukrainian policy discourse on return migration has received limited systematic academic scrutiny, particularly regarding its coherence with EU-level transition planning after the expiration of temporary protection.

By addressing these gaps, the present study contributes to the literature by analysing return intentions of Ukrainian refugees in the context of evolving host-country policies, combining empirical evidence with a migration security and socio-economic resilience perspective. This approach allows for a more integrated understanding of return migration as a multi-level, policy-dependent, and temporally contingent process.

2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The empirical basis of the article is an analysis of the results of a survey of Ukrainian refugees residing abroad (sample size: 200 respondents). The survey did not include Ukrainian citizens residing in the Russian Federation or Belarus. Geographically, the respondents are represented across the following countries: Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Spain, Italy, Romania, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Lithuania, Austria, and Sweden. Data collection was conducted using online survey system between September and October 2025. The survey link was disseminated through multiple channels. Specifically, the link was distributed via email to representatives of the target audience (approximately 850 emails were sent in total), and it was also posted in thematic social media groups of Ukrainians residing abroad. Responses were automatically recorded in tabular format and subsequently imported for further processing. Since the sample was non-random (spontaneous), our discussion of the results will focus on identifying trends.

Data processing and analysis were carried out using descriptive statistical methods and elements of quantitative analysis. The majority of variables were presented as frequency distributions and visualized using bar charts, pie charts, and combined graphical representations. All calculations were performed using spreadsheet tools (Microsoft Excel). The resulting empirical findings provided the basis for the analytical conclusions presented in the article.

3. LEGAL STATUS OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

Following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, more than 5,88 million Ukrainian citizens have remained abroad under various forms of temporary or humanitarian protection

(UNHCR, 2025a). In the fourth year of the operation of temporary protection and similar mechanisms, an increasing number of states have begun to move away from a generalized “mass protection” approach, under which all Ukrainian nationals were automatically recognized as in need of protection. Instead, a growing tendency toward individualized assessment has emerged, based on the assumption that certain regions of Ukraine are currently considered relatively safe and that internal displacement or return may be possible without a substantial risk to life or persecution. This policy shift reflects a gradual transition from a predominantly humanitarian logic to a managed migration response model.

The temporary protection regime established under Council Directive 2001/55/EC was activated by the EU Council on 4 March 2022 in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Eurostat, 2025b). This mechanism enabled Member States to rapidly regularize the legal status of Ukrainians and grant access to labor markets, housing, education, and healthcare without requiring the initiation of asylum procedures. In June 2025, the validity of the temporary protection regime was officially extended until 4 March 2027.

As of the end of September 2025, approximately 4,39 million individuals who fled Ukraine were residing in countries of the European Economic Area and the Schengen zone under temporary protection status (Council of the EU, 2025a). Throughout 2025, a moderate increase in their number was recorded: in May, the net growth amounted to 10,8 thousand persons (+0,3 %), primarily driven by inflows to Germany, Czechia, and Spain, while Bulgaria, France, and Slovakia experienced declines (Eurostat, 2025a). These fluctuations likely reflect intra-EU mobility among temporary protection beneficiaries.

In September 2025, 79,205 new decisions granting temporary protection were issued – 49 % more than in August – marking the highest monthly figure in the past two years. This increase is likely associated with the decision of the Government of Ukraine in late August 2025 to allow men aged 18–22 to travel abroad, which resulted in a surge of new applications (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2025).

The majority of temporary protection beneficiaries are concentrated in a limited number of host countries, which together account for more than half of all Ukrainians abroad: Germany (28 %), Poland (24 %), and Czechia (9 %) (Fig. 1).

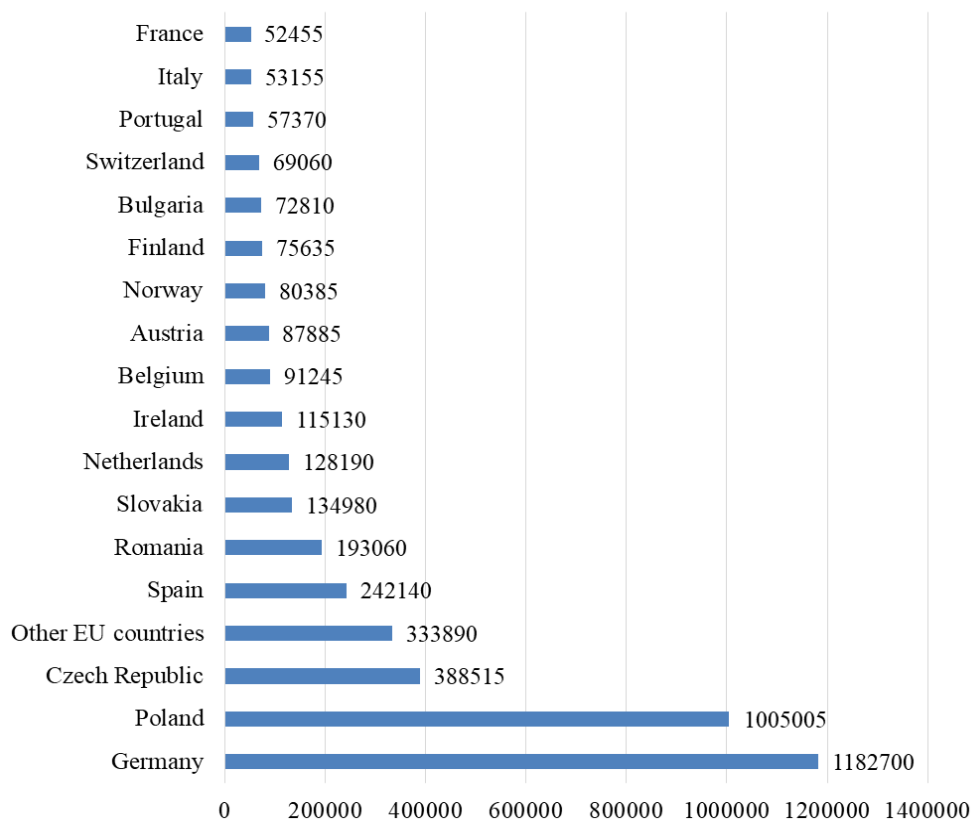


Fig. 1. Number of Ukrainian Citizens under Temporary Protection as of the End of September 2025
Source: (Eurostat, 2025a).

At present, temporary protection in EU countries is increasingly framed as a mechanism that requires planning for a gradual transition. Article 4 of the Directive stipulates that the maximum duration of the temporary protection mechanism is three years; however, its current application has effectively exceeded this time limit (PICUM, 2025).

Since 2024, a growing number of countries have introduced restrictions on the admission of new refugees from Ukraine. For example, since January 2025, Norway has discontinued the automatic granting of collective protection to residents of 14 regions in central and western Ukraine, classifying these areas as “relatively safe” and transferring applicants to individual asylum procedures (Directorate of Immigration, 2025). Similarly, as of 1 November 2025, Switzerland has adopted a selective approach to temporary protection, continuing to grant it only to persons originating from areas affected by active hostilities or from occupied territories (State Secretariat for Migration SEM, 2025). In addition, several countries – including Czechia, Poland, Switzerland, and Norway – no longer grant temporary protection on a repeat basis; Ukrainian nationals who have already benefited from this status in one country are no longer eligible to obtain it again.

As a result, temporary protection is no longer a universal mechanism and has become increasingly contingent upon applicants’ geographic origin, individual vulnerability, and prior legal status.

With regard to transition planning for individuals already benefiting from temporary protection, in 2025 the Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the gradual termination of the temporary protection regime (Council of the EU, 2025b). Its objective is to prevent a legal vacuum after March 2027 and to avoid the emergence of a large population with irregular legal status. At the same time, most countries have not yet introduced specific transitional mechanisms, instead assuming that temporary protection beneficiaries will shift to standard residence permits under general migration legislation.

One notable exception is Poland, which has adopted legislation providing three-year residence permits (CUKR cards) for Ukrainian nationals who have resided in the country for more than one year, regardless of their employment status (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców, 2025). Similar transitional mechanisms have been developed or are currently under consideration in Czechia, Italy, and Germany.

In addition, several European countries have introduced support programs for those wishing to return to Ukraine on a voluntary basis, including Czechia and the Netherlands.

Outside the European Union, the governments of several countries – including the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States – have implemented programs analogous to temporary protection mechanisms, granting Ukrainian nationals the right to lawful residence, employment, and access to social services. In the United Kingdom, approximately 217 000 individuals reside under the Ukraine Family Scheme and Homes for Ukraine programs (House of Commons Library, 2025), with the validity of residence permissions extended until 2028 (UK Visas & Immigration, 2024). In Canada, around 300 000 individuals are present under the Canada–Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel program, with open work permits valid until 2026 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2025). In the United States, approximately 187 000 Ukrainians reside under the Uniting for Ukraine program, with temporary stay authorization extended until April 2026 (NBC Connecticut, 2025).

Overall, as in EU countries, a clear trend can be observed toward the gradual phasing out of emergency protection regimes and a transition to more stabilized forms of stay. Governments are extending existing permits for those already admitted while refraining from launching new programs, instead focusing on the longer-term integration of Ukrainians into host societies.

4. PLANS OF UKRAINIANS REGARDING THEIR RETURN TO UKRAINE

In the context of these processes – namely the gradual phase-out of temporary protection, the tightening of eligibility criteria, and the growing emphasis on the integration of Ukrainians in host countries – the issue of their potential return to Ukraine is becoming increasingly salient. According to various analytical reports (UNHCR, 2025b; National Bank of Ukraine, 2025), large-scale return of Ukrainian nationals should not be expected before 2027. Return dynamics remain constrained by a combination of interrelated factors, most notably the adaptation of a substantial share of Ukrainians in host countries, the extension of temporary protection regimes in destination states, and persistently high security and economic risks in Ukraine.

The survey results confirm these trends: 19,9 % of respondents reported that they definitely plan to return to Ukraine, 23,1 % indicated that they are rather inclined to return, 19,9 % stated that they rather do not plan to return, 13,5 % reported that they definitely do not plan to return, and 23,5 % remained undecided (Fig. 2).

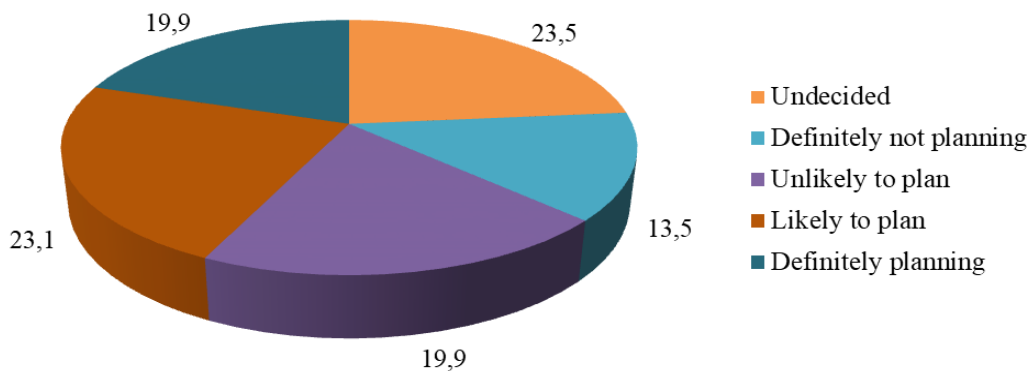


Fig. 2. Respondents' Answers to the Question "Do You Plan to Return to Ukraine?", %
Source: authors' survey.

The largest share of respondents who definitely or are most likely planning to return to Ukraine is observed in Romania (59 %), followed by Poland (51 %), the United States (49 %), and Spain (48 %). Conversely, Italy records the highest proportion of refugees who definitely or are most likely not planning to return to Ukraine (45 %), followed by the United States (43 %) and Germany (37 %) (Fig. 3).

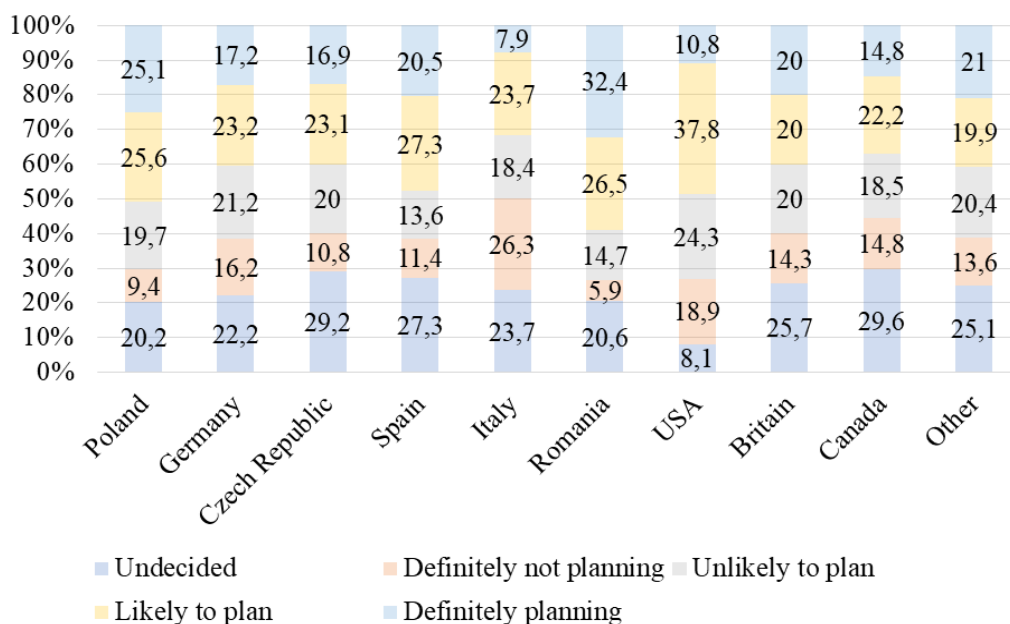


Fig. 3. Respondents' Answers to the Question "Do You Plan to Return to Ukraine?" by Country of Residence, %
Source: authors' survey.

To understand whether Ukrainian refugees have actually changed their plans regarding returning to Ukraine, or if those who intended to return have already done so, respondents were asked whether their plans had changed compared to their intentions at the end of January 2025.

Among refugees who left over a year ago, 50 % of Ukrainian refugees have not changed their plans during this period, 27 % are now more inclined not to return, 18 % are considering returning later than

originally planned, 2 % plan to return earlier than initially intended, and only 3 % plan to return despite not having planned to do so in January 2025 (Fig. 4).

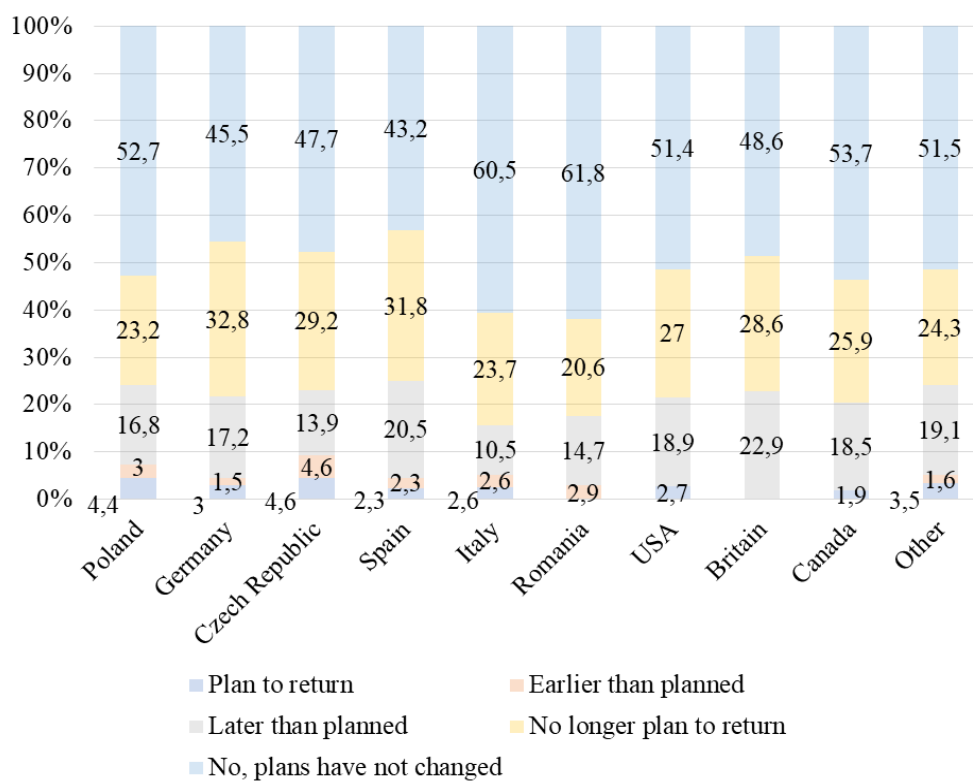


Fig. 4. *Have Refugees Changed Their Plans to Return to Ukraine between January 2025 and November 2025, by Country of Residence, %*

Source: authors' survey.

When asked whether they expect to be living in Ukraine in three years, 21 % of Ukrainian refugees responded affirmatively. The highest proportion of these respondents is located in Romania (35 %). In contrast, 28 % believe they will remain in their current country of residence, with the largest shares of such refugees residing in Italy (42 %) and Germany (32 %).

The majority of Ukrainian refugee respondents (53 %) indicated that the definitive end of the war would be the primary factor motivating their return to Ukraine. Other significant factors include a higher standard of living in Ukraine (46 %), the possibility of finding well-paid employment (33 %), cessation of hostilities and airstrikes in the city they plan to return to (31 %), and the end of combat operations in their home region (24 %) (Fig. 5).

Thus, Ukrainian citizens' decisions to return home are influenced not only by security factors but also by economic considerations. Unsurprisingly, for youth aged 18–24, a higher standard of living and access to well-paid employment are among the primary incentives for returning. Additional motivating factors for this age group include receiving financial assistance from Ukraine, reported by 14 % of respondents, which exceeds the corresponding figures for other age groups.

For individuals aged 25–34, the key criteria for return are a higher standard of living (57 %) and the complete end of the war (55 %). Another significant factor for this group is the restoration of infrastructure in their region, highlighted by 22 % of respondents, representing the highest share among all age groups. This age group also shows the highest proportion of individuals not constrained by any factors preventing their return to Ukraine (13 %).

In contrast, for older individuals (over 65 years), one of the main factors motivating return is the expiration of temporary protection in their current country of residence. This factor was cited by 33 % of

respondents, the highest share among all age groups. Only 13 % of those aged 18–34 and 15 % of those aged 35–65 identified this as a motivating factor. Across all age groups, the proportion of men and women who would return if temporary protection ends is 12 % and 17 %, respectively.



Fig. 5. Respondents' Answers to the Question "Which of the Following Factors Could Motivate You to Return to Ukraine?", % of All Respondents

Source: authors' survey.

A small share of refugees (14 %) is willing to return to regions other than their home region if it remains unsafe. Regional differences are evident: refugees from Eastern and Southern Ukraine are the least willing to relocate to other regions (63 % and 55 %, respectively) but are the most likely to return to their region of origin following the onset of the full-scale invasion (30 % of those from the East and South, compared to 14 % across all regions). Conversely, those from Central and Western Ukraine are less inclined to move to other regions, considering their home regions relatively safe: 65 % for Western Ukraine and 36 % for Central Ukraine.

To further contextualize the findings, the results of a survey conducted by Info Sapiens on behalf of the Center for Economic Strategy regarding whether children would like to return to Ukraine are noteworthy (Mykailyshyna et al., 2025). Children often adapt more easily to a new country than their parents, particularly when attending local schools, learning the language, and making new friends. Older school-age children may plan to enroll in local universities after graduation and remain abroad even if their parents decide to return to Ukraine. Therefore, children's individual preferences should be considered, as their choices may influence the decisions of the entire family.

Fig. 6 presents parental responses regarding whether their children prefer returning to Ukraine or remaining abroad, broken down by age. By almost 2024, the share of children who definitely or likely want to return to Ukraine declined to 13 % and 18 %, respectively, which is lower compared to adults (20 % definitely and 23 % likely). Notably, younger children (ages 0–5) are the least inclined to return to Ukraine (7 % definitely and 11 % likely), as parents largely make these decisions and may not intend for their children to return. Additionally, a substantial portion of children in this age group were born abroad or left Ukraine at an age too young to remember it, and thus they have limited emotional attachment to the country.

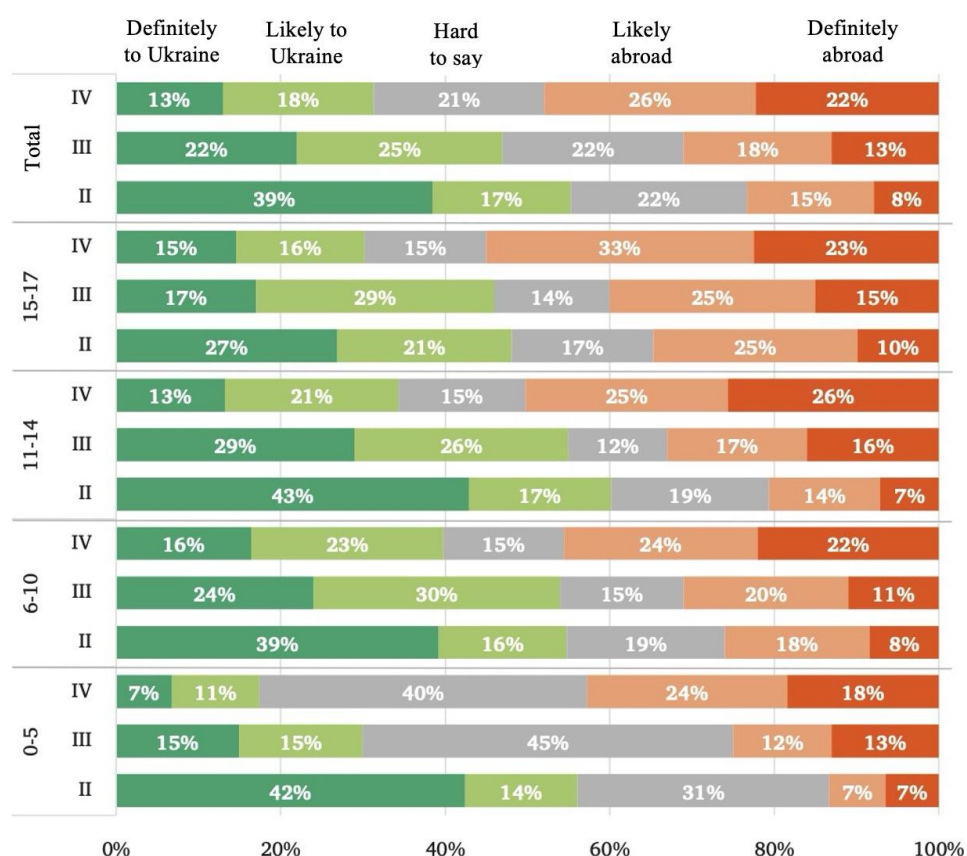


Fig. 6. Respondents' Answers to the Question "Does Your Child Want to Return to Ukraine or Stay Abroad?" by Age Group, %

Source: (Mykailyshyna et al., 2025).

Among older children, those in upper secondary school (ages 15–17) are the least inclined to return to Ukraine: 15 % definitely prefer returning, and 16 % rather prefer it. This may be related to the fact that many children in this age group have the opportunity to enter universities abroad and remain there, even if their parents return. Additionally, 56 % of boys in this age group may be more likely to stay abroad due to concerns that, upon returning to Ukraine, they may be unable to leave again because of exit restrictions for men aged 18 and above. The corresponding figure for girls is similar – 53 % (28 % definitely want to stay abroad and 24 % rather) – though in their case, the decision may also reflect assimilation into the host country and the desire to pursue education abroad.

Children in middle childhood (ages 6–10) show the strongest preference for returning to Ukraine: 16 % definitely and 23 % rather. This may be explained by the fact that children of this age have not yet fully adapted to the host country and may retain a strong emotional connection to their home and friends in Ukraine.

Experts also analyzed whether children's intentions to return differ depending on where they are studying – at a school in the host country or remotely through a Ukrainian school. Predictably, children who maintain contact with Ukrainian schools are more inclined to return home than those studying at local schools abroad.

Children who continue their studies in Ukrainian schools remotely maintain a strong connection with Ukrainian culture, language, and the national education system. This allows them to keep in touch with classmates and teachers, fostering a sense of belonging to Ukraine. For those planning to return, remote learning represents a deliberate choice that facilitates a smooth transition back into the Ukrainian educational system.

In contrast, children attending schools in the host country adapt more quickly to the new environment, integrate into local culture, and form social networks. This can reduce their desire to return to Ukraine, as the new environment becomes more familiar and comfortable for them.

A survey conducted by Info Sapiens in November–December 2024 indicates that 14 % of refugees do not plan to return to Ukraine, while 24 % remain undecided about their future plans. Key factors deterring their return include:

1. Deteriorating security situation and high uncertainty. 32 % of respondents expect the war to continue in a “frozen” state (similar to 2015–2022), while 29 % report high uncertainty regarding the evolution of hostilities, which may inhibit their return.

2. Damaged housing. For 6 % of refugees, their homes are completely destroyed (with the highest share residing in the UK – 14 %). The lack of habitable housing naturally discourages refugees from returning to their residences.

3. Economic motivations. Currently, 66 % of Ukrainian refugees are able to afford both everyday goods (food, clothing, footwear) and luxury items, which nearly corresponds to the pre-war level of 67 %. Furthermore, 49 % of Ukrainian refugees expect their standard of living to improve within three years compared to November–December 2024. This expectation is highest among individuals aged 18–24 (69 %) and among those residing in the USA (57 %), Germany (53 %), and Canada (52 %).

4. Integration in the host country. Approximately 43 % of Ukrainian refugees have already secured employment, with the highest employment rates observed in Italy (66 %), Poland (59 %), the Czech Republic (55 %), and Canada (54 %). Additionally, 39 % work in the same profession as they did in Ukraine prior to the full-scale invasion (highest in Spain and the USA – 53 % in both countries), while 13 % are employed in related fields. Moreover, 36 % of Ukrainian refugees have attained sufficient language proficiency in their host country to function effectively.

5. Preference for living abroad. When asked about their preferred place of residence, a majority of adult Ukrainian refugees currently favor living abroad over returning to Ukraine – 42 % versus 34 %. The highest shares of those preferring life abroad are found in Spain (52 %), Italy (47 %), the United Kingdom (46 %), and the USA (46 %), whereas refugees in Romania show the strongest preference to return to Ukraine (53 %). In addition, 52 % of Ukrainian refugees wish to reunite with family members abroad, which may further reinforce their settlement outside Ukraine.

Under a scenario of continued hostilities until 2028, with maintained or even intensified attacks, return migration is expected to be minimal: models developed by UNHCR and Brunel University estimate approximately 266 000 returnees between 2025 and 2028. Conversely, in scenarios of de-escalation or cessation of active hostilities – regardless of whether through Ukrainian victory, political compromise, or gradual reduction in conflict intensity – return migration is expected to increase significantly, potentially reaching around 2.8 million individuals by the end of 2028.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that return intentions among Ukrainian refugees remain highly heterogeneous and strongly conditioned by the interaction of security, economic, institutional, and life-course factors. While a substantial share of respondents continues to express an intention or inclination to return to Ukraine, the overall dynamics point to delayed, selective, and uncertain return trajectories rather than a rapid or large-scale repatriation. The persistence of temporary protection regimes, combined with improving integration outcomes in host countries and ongoing security risks in Ukraine, contributes to the stabilization of refugees abroad and reinforces patterns of prolonged displacement. Importantly, the data confirm that return aspirations are not static: for a considerable proportion of refugees, intentions have shifted over time toward postponement or non-return, reflecting adaptive decision-making under prolonged uncertainty.

Economic considerations emerge as nearly as influential as security-related factors in shaping return decisions, particularly among younger and working-age cohorts. Expectations regarding living standards, employment opportunities, infrastructure recovery, and overall life satisfaction in Ukraine play a decisive role alongside the definitive end of the war. At the same time, institutional factors – most notably the duration and potential expiration of temporary protection – carry differentiated weight across age groups, exerting stronger influence on older refugees. These results underscore that return migration cannot be

understood solely as a response to the cessation of hostilities, but rather as a multidimensional process embedded in comparative evaluations of opportunity structures between Ukraine and host countries.

The analysis further highlights the critical role of children's preferences and educational trajectories in shaping household-level decisions. Stronger integration of children into host-country education systems, particularly at older ages, significantly reduces the likelihood of family return, whereas continued engagement with Ukrainian schooling sustains transnational ties and return-oriented aspirations. Taken together, the evidence suggests that future return migration will be highly contingent on both macro-level developments – most notably security outcomes and reconstruction prospects – and micro-level factors related to integration, family strategies, and perceived life chances. These insights have important implications for policy, indicating that effective return-oriented strategies must be coordinated with reconstruction efforts, targeted economic incentives, and sustained engagement with refugee families, rather than relying on security improvements alone.

The results presented in this research differ from the existing body of research in several important respects. While much of the prior literature relies predominantly on qualitative methods (e.g., ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, participatory observation) or experimental designs to explore identity, subjectivity, policy frameworks, or lived experiences of displacement, the present analysis provides a systematic, quantitative, and cross-country assessment of return intentions, their temporal dynamics, and underlying drivers among Ukrainian refugees. Unlike studies that emphasize symbolic, psychological, or discursive dimensions – such as national identity, pride, stigma, trauma, or political subjectivity – this research foregrounds the interaction between security conditions, economic expectations, institutional arrangements (temporary protection regimes), and life-course characteristics in shaping return behavior. Moreover, in contrast to policy-focused analyses centered on host-country responses or the institutional design of temporary protection, this study directly captures refugees' evolving intentions over time, including postponed, conditional, and declining return aspirations. A further distinguishing contribution lies in the explicit incorporation of children's preferences and educational trajectories into the analysis of return migration, an aspect largely underexplored in prior work. Taken together, the findings extend existing research by shifting the focus from static or context-specific explanations toward a dynamic, multi-level understanding of return intentions that integrates individual adaptation, family strategies, and macro-level uncertainty.

Despite increased attention to demographic recovery, the rhetoric of the Ukrainian government regarding the return of citizens from abroad remains largely declarative. It is not accompanied by systemic institutional mechanisms or specialized programs aimed at facilitating return and reintegration. As outlined in the Demographic Development Strategy of Ukraine until 2040, return is considered one of the policy directions to address depopulation trends and restore the labor potential (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2024). Nevertheless, the strategy lacks operational goals, clear performance indicators, and a designated responsible body, indicating the absence of an integrated approach to planning return policies.

Promising avenues for further research include examining the strategies of host countries regarding the return of Ukrainian refugees during and after the war, as well as developing practical recommendations for supporting the return process to Ukraine.

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