Ukrainian Forcibly Displaced Persons in Germany

Post-Migration Strategies

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Return migration has received limited attention in migration studies, and the literature remains fragmented. This is partially due to the difficulty of recording return migration in many countries and the lack of adequate data. However, to grasp the phenomenon, it is necessary to define several trends in the research. The first concentrates on labour migrants who intend to return or have returned to their home countries and their self-reported motives.[1] The second looks at forced returnees (due to a legal decision of the receiving country) and the motives for compliance or resistance by migrants subjected to assisted or forced return.[2] A third focuses on migrants returning from Europe to post-conflict countries.[3] This literature proposes different classifications of respondents' self-reported motives. Michael Sinnige, Marieke van Houte, and Arjen Leerkes argue for a regulative,

1 Thomas Niedomysl and Jan Amcoff, "Why return migrants return: Survey evidence on motives for internal return migration in Sweden", *Population, Space and Place* 17/5, 2011, 656–673; Eva A. Duda-Mikulin, "*Should I stay or should I go now?* Exploring Polish women's returns 'home'", *International Migration* 56/4, 2018, 140–153; and Lemlem F. Weldemariam, Ayansina Ayanlade, Marion Borderon, and Karoline Möslinger, "Dynamics and factors influencing return migration to Sub-Saharan Africa: A systematic review", *Heliyon* 9/8, 2023, e18791.

2 Michael Sinnige, Marieke van Houte, and Arjen Leerkes, "Talking about return: Governmental caseworkers' regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive strategies during 'return conversations' with irregularised migrants", *International Migration* 61/1, 2023, 288–303.

3 Marieke van Houte and Tine Davids, "Moving Back or Moving Forward? Return Migration, Development and Peace-Building", *New Diversities* 16/2, 2014, 71–87, https://newdiversities.mmg.mpg.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/2014_16-02_06_vanHoute.pdf [accessed: 12.04.2024]; Dany Bahar, Cem Özgüzel, Andreas Hauptmann, and Hillel Rapoport, "Migration and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: The Effect of Returning Refugees on Export Performance in the Former Yugoslavia", IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Discussion Paper no. 12412, 2019, https://docs.iza.org/dp12412.pdf [accessed: 12.04.2024]; and Richard Black and Saskia Gent, "Sustainable Return in Post-conflict Contexts", *International Migration* 44/3, 2006, 5–38, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2006.00370.x [accessed: 31.07.2024].

normative, and cultural-cognitive understanding.[4] Meanwhile, Thomas Niedomysl and Jan Amcoff stress the importance of economic issues (e.g., job opportunities and income options for returning individuals) and social reasons as key motivators in understanding why migrants return.[5] This perspective considers the potential impact on a life course.

The case of the current displacement of Ukrainian citizens to European Union countries differs from many others in size, and legislation applied to Ukrainian refugees. It is also an ongoing conflict. Therefore, the motivations for staying or moving back may include many elements (including physical and psychological trauma, as well as the risk of loss of life and property and the potential for rapidly deteriorating living conditions in the country of origin) and can radically change with time. Simultaneously, in their attempts to predict refugee movements to adjust their refugee policies, the Ukrainian government as well as the governments of the receiving countries started to ask questions about the refugees' intentions to return as early as March 2022.[6] Most of these enquiries are quantitative and often limited to one or a few questions. They do not consider emotional reactions or present the complexity of factors and how the interlocutors prioritise them. Accordingly, this study conducts qualitative exploratory research on Ukrainian refugees' self-reported motives to prolong their stay in Germany or to return to Ukraine.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), since the beginning of the Russo–Ukrainian War, as of April 2024, Germany has accepted about 1.4 million forcibly displaced persons (FDPs) from Ukraine, and more than 1,053,000 people have registered for temporary protection or similar national protection programmes.[7] This is a staggering figure. Incoming migrants to Germany have also received numerous benefits: financial aid, health insurance, housing, compensation for utilities and travel, and free German language courses. This strains the country's social system. It is enough to multiply the cost of these benefits by the number of FDPs to understand that this support is worth billions of euros.

However, these costs are temporary. Soon, Ukrainian FDPs could adapt and be able to join the German economy, which could become a potentially powerful factor in its growth. For example, 2023 EU survey data indicates that about 40 percent of

4 Sinnige, Houte, and Leerkes, "Talking about return".

5 Niedomysl and Amcoff, "Why return migrants return".

6 Holger Liljeberg, Sindy Krambeer, and Yvonne Blunck, *Geflüchtete aus der Ukraine, Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat – März 2022* (*Refugees from Ukraine, Federal Ministry of the Interior and for Home Affairs – March 2022 – March 2022*), INFO GmbH Markt und Meinungsforschung (INFO GmbH Market and Opinion Research), report, 4 April 2022, https://rathaus.jena.de/sites/default/files/2022-04/BMI_Umfrage_Gefl%C3%BCchtete_aus_der_Ukraine.pdf [accessed: 12.04.2022].

7 Numbers given as of 12 April 2024, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine [accessed: 31.07.2024].

Ukrainian FDPs have already integrated into the labour markets of EU countries. In general, at the end of 2022, Ukrainian FDPs increased the available labour force in the EU by 0.5 percent.[8] Given that most of the migrants are women (of working age) with children,[9] these contributions are significant, not only for the near but also for the more distant future.

At the same time, the loss of these people will be detrimental to postwar Ukraine. Even today, Ukrainian demographers fear the country's depopulation.[10] This, in turn, could be a critical factor slowing down the country's reconstruction, as it requires labour, skilled workers, and young people. Currently, it is difficult to predict what most Ukrainians who moved to Germany due to the war will want in the future. Quantitative sociological studies show that the majority of surveyed FDPs plan to return home after the war ends but under different conditions.[11] According to the Razumkov Centre's opinion poll conducted in August 2022, 36 percent of respondents intend to return when they are convinced that it is safe to stay in the area where they lived, 35 percent immediately after the end of the war, 13 percent a year or several years after the end of the war, seven percent once the company they worked for resumes work or they are sure that they will find another job at home, 11 percent generally in the near future, and 7 percent do not plan to return to Ukraine at all (among these last respondents, 18 percent of them have a permanent job in the host country).[12] Of course, this is an equation with many unknown variables. People's motivations also depend on the duration of the war, the extent of the destruction in Ukraine and their region, the amount of support for the country's

8 See the UNHCR document titled "Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees fr om Ukraine #3", 22 February 2023, for further details. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/99072 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

9 According to the data from Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (German Institute for Economic Research): Nykyta Zholkver, "Ukrainskie bezhentsy v Germanii. Kakie oni?" ("Ukrainian refugees in Germany: What are they like?"), *Deutsche Welle* (*German Wave*), 15 December 2022, https://www.dw.com/ru/ukrainskie-bezency-v-germanii-kakie-oni/a-64107524?maca=rus-rss-ru-all-1126-rdf [accessed: 31.07.2024].

10 Ukrainske radio (Ukrainian Radio), "'90% bizhentsiv z Ukrainy ne povernetsia dodomu' — dyrektorka Instytutu demohrafii ta sotsdoslidzhen im. Ptukhy Ella Libanova" ("'90% of refugees from Ukraine will not return home" – Ella Libanova, Director of the Ptukha Institute for Demography and Social Studies"), 09 February 2023, http://www.nrcu.gov.ua/news.html?newsID=100692 [accessed: 13.04.2024]; and World Population Review, "Ukraine Population 2024 (Live)", https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/ukraine-population [accessed: 31.07.2024].

11 Razumkov Centre, "Nastroi ta otsinky ukrainskykh bizhentsiv (lypen–serpen 2022r.)" ("Attitudes and assessments of Ukrainian refugees (July–August 2022)"), 30 August 2022, https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/nastroi-ta-otsinky-ukrainskykh-bizhentsiv-lypen-serpen-2022p [accessed: 31.07.2024].

12 Ibid.

reconstruction after the war, the pace of economic development, the reliability of the social system, and sufficient guarantees of future security.

Ukrainian demographer Ella Libanova claims that, based on the experience of other war-induced displacement experiences, usually only a third of those who left return.[13] High indicators of readiness to return in opinion polls can be attributed to the feeling of patriotism or the discomfort of admitting the desire to stay to strangers. Moreover, questions about the return plans of Ukrainian FDPs are often asked by people who are in a stable and secure situation and who debate whether Ukrainians will return to a country that was devastated by the largest war in recent European history.

To be able to predict future return migration, it is necessary to consider multiple factors. It is possible to start with Abraham Maslow's pyramid of needs: security (of health, property, future, etc.) is at the core of human needs. However, the weight of these issues may turn out to be less significant than that of the longing for home and familiar circles of communication and culture or difficulties with adapting.

Research has shown that even those FDPs who declare their readiness to return home consider different scenarios for the future, which may delay their return or force them to stay in Germany for a long time. Therefore, methodologically, the prediction of the behaviour of Ukrainian FDPs cannot be based on a single question measuring the strength of their intentions to return. It should include complex indicators that consider various aspects of their motivations, including those related to security as well as psychological, economic, cultural, and social reasons, among others. What other conditions do Ukrainians, forcefully displaced by the war, consider when building their post-migration strategy? Their final choice is still an open question.

My research aims to determine a list of decision-making motives that is as complete as possible. Additionally, it intends to establish the significance of such motives and to understand the mechanisms of choice formation. Finally, it sets out to model (or predict) which choices different social groups of FDPs from Ukraine could be inclined to make. I argue that understanding the intentions of FDPs from Ukraine will allow both Germany and Ukraine to build their social and economic policies in an effective and balanced manner.

This is especially important given that quantitative forecasts can be accurate only up to a certain point and do not allow us to fully predict FDPs' future choices. Addi-

13 Iryna Krykunenko, "Zazvychai povertaietsia tretyna. Skilky ukraintsiv zalyshatsia za kordonom ta yak blekauty zminiuiut demohrafiiu – Libanova" ("Usually a Third Returns: How Many Ukrainians Will Stay Abroad and How Blackouts Change Demographics – Libanova"), *New Voice* (*NV*), 11 December 2022, https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/skilki-ukrajinciv-zalishitsya-pislya-peremogi-naslidki-dlya-ukrajini-ekspert-ostanni-novini-50289318.html [accessed: 31.07.2024].

tionally, pure numbers do not provide a clear understanding of how such choices are made – that is, what factors are taken into account and what the impact of each of them is. By contrast, in the paradigm of 'interpretive sociology' (which, incidentally, originated in Germany as *verstehende Soziologie*)[14], we can focus on the inner worldviews of people and better understand how their choices form.

Given that both countries will be interested in this development potential and will (likely) compete for human resources in the future, it is important to examine which influences could shape such decisions. Additionally, this study helps identify areas of Germany's aid policies towards Ukrainian FDPs that, in my opinion, require improvement.

Methodology

To answer my research questions, I interviewed 15 female Ukrainians who experienced displacement to Germany. The respondents were of different ages (four aged 20 to 34, ten aged 35 to 55, and one over 55), from different regions (three from Ukrainian rear regions (places far from the frontline), nine from frontline territories, and three from occupied territories), and from areas of different sizes (two from the capital, eight from large cities or regional centres, four from small towns, and one from a rural area). The participants currently live in different places in Germany (including large and small cities and rural areas). The sample included people who experienced living in refugee camps, with German families, and in housing provided by local authorities. I conducted semi-structured online interviews. The main blocks of questions covered the experience of living through war and displacement, the specifics of living conditions in Germany, their future strategies, post-migration intentions (adapting or returning), motives for migration or a refusal to migrate, and forecasts of Ukraine's development (specifically their degree of optimism). I conducted the interviews between 5 December 2022 and 30 January 2023.

The Intentions of Ukrainian FDPs in Germany (at the Time of This Research)

My study, of course, does not claim to be representative, but it confirms the results of previous quantitative studies: my respondents mostly declared their desire to re-

14 Interpretive sociology studies the meaning of behaviour (its causes and motives), as opposed to positivist sociology, which focuses on action. Interpretive sociology also relies on qualitative data, while positivist sociology tends to use quantitative data.

turn to Ukraine.[15] Only one respondent made a final decision to stay in Germany. Her main motive is that her city is in the occupied territories and was destroyed by the war. One of the families I interviewed has already returned to Ukraine, but because of the recent attacks on energy infrastructure, they do not rule out coming back to Germany. Interestingly, the forcefully displaced women I interviewed who plan to return to Ukraine show two key behavioural strategies. Some of them seem to be 'putting their lives on hold' – that is, they are waiting out the war in a safe environment and plan to return to Ukraine once the war is over to start rebuilding their lives there. Others, however, are trying to use their new opportunities to become more resourceful in the future. For example, they plan to learn or are learning a language that will be an added competitive advantage at home, or they are acquiring experiences in Germany that they can transfer to their communities in Ukraine. The first group is less likely to adapt in Germany and more likely to leave, while the second group is likely to adapt better and will therefore have more reasons to remain.

Meanwhile, a minority of the respondents admitted that they are at a crossroads and are hesitant about their future life strategies:

> Some people want to return to Ukraine. Some don't. Everyone is very uncertain. Everyone is stressed (F, 42, from a rear region).

> I can't say 100 percent that I'm ready to live here and 100 percent that I'm ready to return to Ukraine. At the moment, I can't say. But my mother wants to go home, so she's sitting and waiting for spring to come, when they are promising that everything will be over, and she can return home, and everything will be fine (F, 35, from a frontline region).

There are two key strategies for making decisions that align with the aforementioned behavioural strategies. Some try to think according to algorithms by which they will make their decisions (i.e., they define the conditions under which they will leave or stay), while others believe that it is inappropriate to try to make decisions until the war is over and the situation in Ukraine is stable. The first group tends to work more actively on influencing their conditions in Germany because the conditions in Ukraine are beyond their control. For this reason, they have a higher chance of adapting to their new place of residence and will most likely refuse to return:

> If the war ends in two months, that's one situation. If it ends in two years, that's a different situation. It depends on what my position here will be at that moment. If I can find a job and know German to some degree, I might try to stay here. But this is not a fact, it's not 100 percent certain (F, 38, from an occupied region).

15 Razumkov Centre, "Nastroi ta otsinky".

The second group is more likely to passively observe how circumstances will develop.

Intentions to stay in Germany or return to Ukraine also significantly correlate with the sociodemographic backgrounds of the FDPs as well as how much their regions of origin are affected by the war and their proximity to the frontline. Residents from regions less affected by the war are more likely to declare their intention to return, as their regions have not suffered large-scale destruction or occupation.

A significant number of women left Ukraine in the first weeks of the war, when its consequences were unclear: the occupation was spreading rapidly, rocket attacks destroyed residential buildings across the country, and the state's ability to provide the population with the most basic necessities was unpredictable. With the stabilisation of the frontline in late summer of 2022, and reports that life in the rear regions farthest from the front was relatively safe (or at least not as risky as previously thought), the opportunity to live in their own home, with their family, and in a familiar social circle and cultural environment became a strong arguments for returning. Many Ukrainian FDPs were inclined to return at this point, but the recent attacks on energy infrastructure changed their plans.

Another distinct point is that FDPs who have higher chances of adaptation tend to stay in Germany. This includes, for example, those who are fluent in German or work in a field that is in demand in Germany. Such people have higher chances of building a career or obtaining a higher-quality education in the country. Young people (17–25 years old), for instance, are much more likely to express an intention to stay. They often speak the German language, have an easier time adapting, have not yet started a family, and have opportunities to receive higher education in the country. I frequently heard from middle-aged people (26–54 years old) that they planned to return to Ukraine but insisted that their children should remain abroad (at least until they graduate). Some parents with school-age children who expressed a willingness to return to Ukraine explained that they are ready to sacrifice their desire for the sake of their children having a better future in a stable Europe:

> I plan to take the language exam in March, leave my son and mom here, and return to Ukraine to find a job, to live in Ukraine for some time and to come visit my son [here] (F, 42, from a rear region).

> My older daughter went back to Germany because she's studying and working there [she knows the language], and I stayed in Ukraine with my younger children (F, 41, from a rear region).

In contrast, middle-aged Ukrainian women who have built a career, started a family, and had a home in Ukraine are more likely to return:

> I would like to return home. I'm afraid now about when this will be. I've never had such aspirations [to go abroad]. I have a house there. I had a perfectly good job that I loved, I had a life there that suited me perfectly. I see no reason to lose it. If everything is restored, I want to restore it [my previous life] as well (F, 34, from an occupied region).

Reasons for Choosing a Country to Live in and Motivations to Remain Abroad

First, I should note that each of the respondents emphasised that their main motivation for going abroad was security concerns. Respondents from the frontline regions of Ukraine fled from the occupation forces and active bombardment; those from the rear regions left the country because of difficulties in caring for elderly parents or young children amid constant air raids and fears of the unpredictable risks of war:

> There was only one argument for leaving: to feel safe and not to hear those sounds and not to see what was happening. Not to feel that fear (F, 35, from a frontline region).

Ukrainians could count on taking refuge in many Western countries. The choice of Germany as a destination for these FDPs often stemmed from three factors:

- Social contacts in Germany: Family or friends removed the factor of uncertainty and facilitated adaptation in the first weeks of the war. They offered housing and advised on how to apply for refugee status and social aid. However, eventually, the majority of respondents left the homes of their loved ones and sought support from the state.
- Access to medical care: The ability to receive health insurance was important for half of the FDPs I interviewed. This issue was especially relevant for elderly people with chronic diseases, parents with young children, and people who needed surgical interventions.
- The availability of social benefits: This was particularly relevant for the period of adaptation (i.e., when they were learning a language and searching for a job).

My interviewees also provided a wide range of reasons for staying in Germany after the end of the war. Their level of optimism or pessimism about the future of Ukraine plays a key role in this decision. FDPs are scared by the prospect of returning to a country with a ruined economy, a lack of jobs, and only vague prospects for recovery:

> You see, after the war, the situation will be unstable, it won't end on the last day of the war. Especially in my city. It's a small, economically depressed city. And I don't understand at all what will happen there when the war ends (F, 38, from an occupied region).

> There will be an unstable economic situation, part of the country has already been destroyed, and the people who used to live there are already losing their jobs. New ones will appear after these cities are rebuilt, but that's another issue. It's not yet clear what will be left of our city, what will happen there (F, 20, from a rear region).

Some FDPs see going back to Ukraine not as a return to a familiar environment but as a step into the unknown. Due to their long absence from the country, they often lost not only their jobs but also their emotional closeness with their social environments. By contrast, they perceive Germany as a zone of stability and a country of economic prosperity. Here, finding a job with decent pay is more probable.

This leads to another important motive for staying in Germany: social security. The war in Ukraine has led to inflation and a devaluation of the hryvnia (the Ukrainian currency). Consequently, as of July 2022, almost half of Ukrainians received pensions no higher than what equals to about 80 euros per month;[16] internally displaced person (IDP) payments amount to about 53 euros per adult and 80 euros per child per month.[17] After the war, Ukraine will face depopulation (especially the outflow of young people), economic devastation, the need to pay off debts, and a likely reduction of international support. Therefore, the situation of social security may worsen. FDPs are not sure that they will be able to maintain a decent standard of living in postwar Ukraine. Germany, however, has already demonstrated the ability to provide decent social security, including a sufficient degree of social benefits and health insurance (e.g., FDPs can have chronic diseases treated or undergo surgery free of charge):

> Socially, we are more protected here. We have health insurance. In Ukraine, I receive the minimum pension. I worked for thirty years in agriculture, but I have the minimum pension, and my husband has a little more. And we will not be able to live off our pensions – or rather, even now we're not able to live [off them]. People who moved from Donetsk, Luhansk, and Odesa… They told

16 This is according to the Pension Fund of Ukraine: Pensiinyi fond Ukrainy (Pension Fund of Ukraine) (Facebook page), "Rozpodil pensioneriv po vydakh…" ("Distribution of pensioners by type…"), Facebook post, 15 July 2022, https://www.facebook.com/pfu.gov.ua/posts/412375920933627 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

17 This is according to the Ukrainian Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories: https://minre.gov.ua/2023/11/01/vyplaty-vpo-teper-pryznachatymutsya-na-sim%ca%bcyu/ [accessed: 31.07.2024].

> me what kinds of benefits our social security system gave them. A person gets two thousand hryvnia [about 50 euros] for moving, three thousand hryvnia [about 75 euros] for a child. I understand that there is a war… and the budget is low, but is it possible to survive on such amounts, to find an apartment, and to find a job? Now you can't even find a job (F, 69, from a rear region).

In the context of social protection, my interviewees specifically mentioned better-protected labour rights and housing. Germany has provided private housing for a considerable number of Ukrainian FDPs. This factor is especially important for those who lost their homes in Ukraine. They often do not believe that their housing will be rebuilt or that the state will be able to find them decent housing if they return; it will not be easy to accumulate the necessary funds under conditions of postwar devastation. Rents in Ukraine are also quite high. For example, according to the statistics of the trading platform OLX, in 2022, the average price per square metre on the secondary market in Ukraine was 24,277 hryvnia (606 euros if one is buying).[18] According to the Stated Service of Ukraine, the average monthly rent for a one-room apartment in Ukraine in January 2023 was 5,994 hryvnias (150 euros), and the average salary in 2022 was 14,577 hryvnias (364 euros).[19] Therefore, for FDPs who have lost their homes, access to a place to live encourages them to stay in Germany:

> I had several of these impulses during the period that I've been here. I wanted to return to Ukraine. But I was restrained by the fact that I had nowhere to return to. I told myself that if I had a place to live, if I had a house in Lviv or Kyiv, I probably would have returned by now (F, 38, from an occupied region).

On the other hand, losing their housing in Germany may encourage FDPs to return to Ukraine.

For some FDPs, working or studying in Germany can be a significant deterrent to a possible return. Part of my interviewees say that they may delay returning home if they find employment and self-realisation in Germany. This factor becomes even more important given the uncertainty of employment prospects and the low level of salaries in Ukraine:

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18 Mariia Babenko, "Kvartyra za 30 tysiach dolariv: yak zminiuiutsia tsiny na zhytlo u Kyievi ta v Ukraini" ("Apartment for 30 Thousand Dollars: How Housing Prices in Kyiv and Ukraine Are Changing"), *Fokus* (*Focus*), 15 February 2023, https://focus.ua/uk/economics/550204-kvartira-za-30-tysyach-dollarov-kak-menyayutsya-ceny-na-zhile-v-kieve-i-po-ukraine [accessed: 31.07.2024].

19 See by category reports of the State Statistics Service of Ukraine at: https://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/ [accessed: 31.07.2024].

> If I get a job and am able to provide for myself, why would I go back to Ukraine? (F, 35, from a frontline region).

In this context, educational opportunities in Germany deserve special attention. The possibility of receiving a high-quality European education and an internationally recognised diploma attracts young people. They see this, in turn, as allowing them to build a career in the West:

> A European university is the best education. And not even that is important, but the fact that you can stay here afterwards (F, 20, from a rear region).

However, some of the research participants expressed wanting to leave just their children in Germany temporarily so that they can study (e.g., obtain a diploma or improve their language skills):

> I kept thinking that we were about to return home. Then my son started school, and it turned out to be such a good opportunity for him. Because now in Ukraine, the situation in education, in my opinion, is haphazard. This is logical, because there is a war in the country. But in Germany, he studies in an integration class. He already speaks German. He has improved his English a lot. I plan to return to Ukraine if there's no major crisis. And I plan to leave my son here for another year to learn German (F, 41, from a rear region).

Based on these responses, we can conclude that another key factor in my respondents' decision-making is German-language proficiency. People who are educated in Germany have a language level that is close to native and better access to job opportunities, career development, and education. Overall, they are better adapted and, therefore, more likely to stay in Germany.

The people I interviewed occasionally, yet infrequently, mentioned a few other motives for remaining in Germany:

- A higher level of personal safety (e.g., lower crime rates, the absence of land mines, and low risks of war in Germany):

  > These are life-threatening risks because the whole of Ukraine is mined. If after the Second World War a lot of places were not cleared of mines, after this war it will take years (F, 35, from a frontline region).

  > [My] main fear is that the war in Ukraine, even if it temporarily stops, will eventually start again (F, 35, from a frontline region).

- Newly established social contacts (e.g., the emergence of a circle of friends and loved ones)
- More opportunities to travel within Europe (e.g., the proximity to France, Switzerland, and other countries)

Some respondents noted that some FDPs choose to stay in Germany because they can return to Ukraine at any time. Conversely, they fear that if they return and the events in Ukraine unfold negatively, access to Germany will be denied to them:

> You can always return to Ukraine, but to here [Germany], unfortunately, you can't (F, 35, from a frontline region).

The condition of the infrastructure in Ukrainian cities on the frontlines is another extremely important factor. With the absence of electricity, water, or heating, FPDs tend to delay their return home. Finally, the willingness to stay in Germany gradually increases as they become familiar with and adapt to the new location. Therefore, the longer the war lasts, the less likely it is that some FDPs will return to Ukraine:

> One gets used to a place. I don't know whether I'll stay here or not [because my city is occupied now], but I'm already starting to get used to the life I have here (F, 38, from an occupied region).

Motivations for Returning to Ukraine

The range of motivations for returning to Ukraine is broad, intertwining social, pragmatic, psychological, and ideological considerations. Socially, the main motivation for returning is the desire to reunite with family and re-enter a former circle of friends:

> [My] main goal is to return to my relatives, to my husband, to my family, to my parents (F, 41, from a rear region).

Often, moving to Germany is impossible or undesirable for all family members (especially men and older people who did not leave the country during the war and do not want to start life anew in another country or adapt to foreign customs):

> My husband will definitely not be able to live in Germany because he feels very secure in Ukraine. And he won't work as an ordinary worker, he'll definitely fail in this. It'll be a complete loss of social status for him (F, 38, from an occupied region).

This desire is reinforced by the fact that Ukrainians in Germany are in a kind of linguistic bubble. Because they do not know the language, their communication is limited. My respondents also claim that it is difficult for them to protect their rights without sufficient language proficiency. According to a survey conducted in Germany in November 2022, close to a quarter of the surveyed Ukrainian refugees admitted experiencing discrimination.[20] In my interviews, among many other situations, refugee women with school-age children complained that their children were bullied by children from Russian families. Without knowledge of the German language, it is difficult for them to explain the situation to teachers to defend their children:

> [There's a] very limited social circle. [My] parents do not speak any [foreign] language. When they go outside, they can't even ask where to go or how to get there. Their life is centred solely around their grandchildren in the apartment. My father doesn't like it very much, and every day he says that he wants to return to Ukraine (F, 42, from a rear region).

Respondents also report that without the help of an interpreter, it is difficult for them to get medical advice, find necessary information, and properly study. All this creates an extremely stressful and uncomfortable situation for them:

> The main problem is that it's very difficult to explain something, to achieve something, to find something if you don't know the language. In the beginning, volunteers helped. Now, there is no such help. So now, it's my problem, my personal problem (F, 38, from an occupied region).

Additionally, the vast majority of my respondents' in-person communication happens with other FDPs, or, at best, with representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora or with volunteers. Meanwhile, communication with locals is extremely limited. Consequently, FDPs do not establish friendships, do not learn about the local culture, and often misinterpret the behaviour of others:

> In general, it seems to me that Germans are very closed [off] people. If you didn't go to school or kindergarten with them, I don't know how to make friends with them. They're very emotionally closed [off]. And to arrange a

20 Viktoriya Sereda, Olena Havrysh, Jörg Fischer, and Kariem Soliman, *Aus der Ukraine nach Thüringen geflohen: Ergebnisse einer landesweiten Befragung* (*Having Fled from Ukraine to Thuringia: Results of a Nationwide Survey*), Institut für kommunale Planung und Entwicklung e.V. (IKPE) (Institute for Communal Planning and Development e.V.), report, November 2022, DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.14478.02884 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

> meeting with them, well, it's just a joke among Ukrainians that you have to make an appointment [with them] (F, 42, from a rear region).

The poor cultural adaptation of many FPDs, in turn, reflects this. Even after nine months of living in Germany, the local culture seems incomprehensible and alien to them:

> I can't say for sure that I want to stay here, that I have everything here. No. Everything here is someone else's. At the moment, it's all foreign. When you're as old as I am, 40, and you have lived all your life in another country, with other rules, with other views, then, of course, when you come here, you will not be yourself (F, 38, from an occupied region).

It is also difficult for them to protect their rights in everyday life. However, as they learn the language, this problem gradually improves. Social ties expand, and they find shared meanings and values with the local population:

> My son says […] that it was hard for him at first. Not because he was in a different environment, but because he missed his friends. He lost his social circle. And until he had such a solid circle of friends [again], he said that he wanted to return. And now… now he doesn't have these conversations. And he thinks that he'll study here at some point in the near future (F, 42, from a rear region).

Among the psychological factors that motivate my respondents to want to leave, the most significant is the feeling of homesickness. Often, they openly declare that Germany has done the impossible in terms of material support. Rationally, they understand that most of their needs have been met. However, it is difficult for them to cope with some of their emotions:

> My husband tells me, you're now in a beautiful city, the children drink iodised water. The air there is beautiful, enriched with iodine. What else is missing, why are you so upset? I didn't want this. Nothing makes me happy anymore. I don't want anything anymore. I'm no longer happy with the sea or the free ice cream the Germans offer us. I don't want anything. I want to go home (F, 41, from a rear region).

Some FPDs, however, want to return home for patriotic reasons. They understand that Ukraine's success is linked to whether it will be able to retain its human capacities for reconstruction:

> Ukraine needs to be rebuilt. That is, we're needed there (F, 41, from a rear region).

War and migration forced these people to take a fresh look at their lives and their country:

> I used to consider myself a patriot, but I didn't think I was that patriotic […] You see, when it's like, "Well, yes, I love my country, but here this isn't right, and this isn't good, and in general I want to go live in Germany, marry a German, and forget [this place]". And now I live in Germany, and I want to go home, to Ukraine (F, 20, from a rear region).

Ukrainian FDPs also discovered that they had overestimated the quality of life in Germany and underestimated it in Ukraine. According to the respondents, it turned out that Ukraine has much more progressive state bureaucratic procedures (many more are digitised and conducted without special appeals to officials) and banking systems (which allow you to get a bank card instantly and online and to conduct financial transactions within one or two minutes). Similarly, they often also consider Ukraine to have better services and more affordable entertainment and facilities:

> Germany is far behind Ukraine in many ways. They don't know what an ID card is, they don't know what it means to transfer money and receive it within a minute, they don't understand many things (F, 41, from a rear region).

> It's a very bureaucratic country, everything takes a long time. There is less digitalisation than in Ukraine. I mean, everything is faster there [in Ukraine]. Here, everything is so outdated (F, 38, from an occupied region).

> It's hard for me to communicate with their government agencies. With their letters. With the waiting time. With the constant confusion (F, 42, from a rear region).

Also, according to the informants, despite its lower social standards, in Ukraine there are fewer bureaucratic restrictions and more opportunities to develop your business and generate capital:

> We have less social protection, less of all these perks from the state, but in Ukraine, it's freer to live, in the sense that in business you can do whatever you want (F, 42, from a rear region).

> Germany is very good at providing social assistance, but the taxes here are so crazy. I mean, they won't let you die, but they won't let you get rich either (F, 35, from a frontline region).

As a result, people with a high level of entrepreneurial activity and ideas for their own businesses, those who strive to achieve a higher than average social and financial status, consider Ukraine a more promising country to live in and are more likely to plan to return home.

The most important pragmatic factor that encourages Ukrainians to return home is the low prospect of maintaining a high social status in Germany (i.e., getting a white-collar job). FDPs often believe that it will take them several years to reach the required language level, so a career in their field is not available to them. Additionally, they believe that the local market currently offers only blue-collar jobs. Most Ukrainians completed higher education, and many of them had successful white-collar careers before the war and are not ready to lose their status:

> It's hard without knowledge of the language, it seems like you're unlikely to find the kind of job you'd like to find. It's more like service work, or working in a factory somewhere (F, 35, from a frontline region).

> You can't work in your field here (F, 69, from a rear region).

In only a few cases did FDPs from Ukraine explain their desire to return home as motivated by being dissatisfied with their living conditions in Germany or by limited access to social services. These instances included:

- A lack of kindergarten places for their children (and thus, an inability for mothers to learn the language and work)
- A lack of permanent housing (and instead living in camps or having difficulties finding an apartment)
- Long waiting times for medical appointments

National Identity and Intentions to Return to Ukraine

The potential return to Ukraine also correlates with the informants' sense of identity. Although this factor is rarely reflected by the research participants as an argument for migration, it is noticeable that those who actively identify themselves as Ukrainian are more likely to return home than those who do not spontaneously mention this identity. Those who plan to return to Ukraine interpret their 'Ukrainianess' as an active position: one of being actively involved in the country's life and inter-

ested in its history and politics. A willingness to help compatriots is an important civic identity that reinforces a national one. Those who have doubts about returning to Ukraine have a less pronounced civic identity. They are less interested in the history of Ukraine and politics in general and less active in volunteering.

At the same time, the interviews show that the war had a significant impact on the identity shifts of Ukrainian women in Germany. Many respondents claim that their level of patriotism and pride for their country and people has increased, as has their interest in national and international politics and history. They also admit that their readiness for civic participation and volunteering also grew. Some of the Russian-speaking respondents confess to switching (at least in public communication) to the Ukrainian language. Such a rethinking of one's identity is an important factor that motivates displaced persons to keep strong ties with Ukraine and to return after the end of the war. However, another important point that strongly correlates with the refugees' return strategy is the experience of internal displacement. Those for whom it was negative question the prospect of return because they connect it to their quality of life after the war.

Conclusions

As of the beginning of 2023, the Ukrainian FDPs who I interviewed for this research mostly plan to return to Ukraine. However, these intentions are unstable and might change depending on the duration of the war. The respondents' answers show that the longer Ukrainians stay in Germany, the more they tend to adapt to their new location and feel less inclined to return home.

The desire to stay in Germany is often based on pragmatic considerations of which country will provide a more effective life strategy and better prospects. The main motivations here are the opportunity to live in a stable and predictable environment, a higher level of safety (no mined areas, a lower risk of future hostilities), social security, housing, quality and affordable education for children and young people, access to free healthcare, and high wages. The motives for returning to Ukraine are primarily social: the desire to reunite with family and return to the usual circle of friends. Due to the lack of language skills, many of the respondents experienced an acute sense of isolation and limited opportunities: a lack of integration into local society, poor cultural adaptation, and the inability to protect their rights on their own. The ability to maintain a high social status (i.e., the former prestige they had in their community in Ukraine, a white-collar profession, or a career generally) is also essential.

At the same time, emotional motives to return to Ukraine are strong as well. These include a sense of homesickness, patriotism, and a desire to contribute to the reconstruction of their country. Other pragmatic motives, such as convenient

government and banking services, inexpensive entertainment and amenities, and greater prospects for small businesses, are the least important in these considerations.

The motivation for choosing a country to live in is quite complex. The dominance of certain motives depends on the extent to which the war has affected the territories of the former residences of the Ukrainian FDPs. Those whose regions are occupied or destroyed are less likely to return. In this case, their property and usual social environment have been lost, rebuilding life from scratch appears exhausting, and the risks that come with returning to a postwar country are high. The prewar social status of Ukrainian women also matters strongly. There seems to be a belief among refugee women that Germany is more promising for young people (who can get an education there), workers in blue-collar occupations, the elderly, and people in need of social support. Conversely, Ukraine may be more promising for an economically active population, white-collar workers, and entrepreneurs (especially from areas not affected by the war). However, these factors are only relevant if there are available jobs and decent wages.

The motivation to return is not a stable construct; rather, it is in flux. If the war continues and Ukrainians manage to learn the language of their host country, find a job or study position, and adapt to their new environment, their decision to return may change. In the context of formulating state social policy to attract human resources, Ukraine and Germany should keep in mind that the availability of medical services (e.g., free healthcare or free health insurance), housing programmes,[21] and educational and employment opportunities are all important conditions that could influence the migration intentions of Ukrainian women. Germany has provided these opportunities in its migration policy. However, aspects such as employment, education (the education of children and retraining of adults), and housing require more attention. At the same time, the extent of a refugee's adaptation and their cultural and social integration also largely determine their desire to live in Germany. Therefore, compulsory German language courses are a useful instrument for helping Ukrainians settle in Germany. This, however, is not enough.

In addition to getting from zero to gradually improving language skills, Ukrainians also need cultural adaptation, inclusion in social relations, and more active interaction with and integration into their new environments. An example of this could be the involvement of Ukrainians in activities with the German population (e.g., through volunteer work, internships at enterprises, or joint events):

21 Even now, forcibly displaced Ukrainians are having trouble finding accommodation in big German cities (e.g., Munich). However, in Ukraine, the issue of compensation for lost housing has not yet been resolved.

> I would even go to some kind of job training. Once a week… I don't know, some nearby factory to do something, do some public works. At least it would help me get acquainted with the culture, to meet the locals (F, 34, from an occupied region).

An equally important aspect that my interviewees report as overlooked in Germany is the lack of sufficient counteraction to the aggressive behaviour of some immigrants from Russia towards Ukrainians:

> The son of one of our classmates from the language course is 11 or 13 years old and goes to a city school, where, in addition to Germans and other refugee children, he is also studying with Russian children. The Russian children used to disgrace the children, strip them naked in winter, throw away their clothes, trample [children] on the ground, beat them, insult them. An ordinary child would have just burst into tears, but the boy to whom this all happened, he wiped his tears away and went straight for the person who insulted him with his fists. German teachers reacted with, "Oh, God, what have you done?" They don't understand that there is a conflict between two states! They do not understand this! They don't see it! (F, 20, from a rear region).

Forced migrants also request information and counselling services from mentors for successful adaptation and integration. To a certain extent, this role could be fulfilled by a unified digital platform (with information for FDPs on where and how to prepare documents, receive social services, or find housing or work in Germany) or chatbots that could answer the most common questions and provide guidance on the proper actions in difficult situations. However, a human mentor would also be effective in the cultural adaptation of FDPs.

It is important to make refugees from Ukraine understand what Germany's strategy is for them in the future. They need to understand whether the country is interested in them staying or whether it prefers them to return to Ukraine. Germany's migration policy after the war is also an open but crucial factor in the decision-making processes of forcibly displaced Ukrainians. For example, will the country accept Ukrainian men who could not leave Ukraine earlier due to martial law restrictions but, after the war, would like to join their families? It is crucial to provide a clear understanding of the conditions under which it will be possible for Ukrainians to stay in the country as permanent residents.

At the same time, my respondents' accounts suggest that it will be important for Ukraine to prove its capability and prospects during its postwar development. The country will need active reforms, like fighting corruption, introducing health insurance, and enacting tax and judicial reform:

> I will return if we really change as a country. If the system becomes similar to the one in European countries, particularly in Germany. [Only] if there are some programmes to restore the country's economic situation, to change the insurance system, to change the taxation system. [Not] if everything remains as it was, with a lot of corrupt officials, with these crony-brother-in-law relationships. Well, there's no such thing here [in Germany]. Here, almost everyone is equal. Nobody brings you a box of chocolates and says, "Here, do this for me (F, 38, from an occupied region).

Based on my findings, I argue that Ukraine's ability to guarantee its security in the future is critical, so joining the EU and NATO (or building closer alliances with them) is a priority. Among other things, this will hopefully attract domestic and foreign investment, create new jobs and decent wages, and improve social protection. I believe that a sense of social justice will also provide an incentive for increased citizen engagement. For the Ukrainian government, launching programmes to encourage the return of FDPs, such as compensation for lost or damaged property and preferential mortgage programmes, will be important. My findings suggest that these programmes are especially relevant for young people.

Moreover, it is important to restore the infrastructure of frontline cities, as refugees tend to return to their earlier places of residence rather than to new ones. Particular attention should be paid to the reconstruction and economic recovery of small towns, as they have a high chance of becoming economically depressed. Finally, it is, in my view, important to clearly articulate the need for the return of every citizen, and the Ukrainian government should appeal to the patriotism of the forcibly displaced and emphasise their value and potential contribution to the country's recovery. Any shaming of citizens who left the country during the war should stop in Ukraine.

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