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Ukrainian Refugees' Return Intentions and Integration in the Course of Time

KEY MESSAGES

■ **Most Ukrainians plan to return, but the share of Ukrainian refugees planning to settle outside of Ukraine has gradually increased and reached 25 percent by mid-2024**

■ **By June 2024, 12 percent of Ukrainian refugees had returned to Ukraine and 7 percent had moved to another host country compared to 2022**

■ **Liberation of certain districts in late 2022 increased the probability of people from there returning to Ukraine by 5 percentage points**

■ **Local conflict in home municipality has redirected return to other parts of Ukraine, without reducing the overall probability of returning**

■ **The EU should encourage Ukrainian refugees to return once the conflict is over, but also help them to find work while under temporary protection**

More than four million Ukrainians are currently staying in the EU with temporary protection status. The return of these refugees is vital for Ukraine's reconstruction, as many would bring with them essential skills and resources that are crucial for rebuilding their country. Moreover, their return can help relieve the economic, social, and political pressures experienced by host countries – pressures such as overburdened public services, increased job competition, and social cohesion challenges. However, it is unrealistic to expect that all refugees will return, and it is in the interest of refugees and their host countries to help those who do not return to Ukraine to integrate as well as possible into their new homes.

Little is known about how refugees' intentions to return change over time, how intentions predict actual return, and how they are affected by conflict in their home regions. This article uses eight waves of survey data to examine the case of Ukrainian refugees across Europe. Ukrainian refugees initially had exceptionally high return intentions, and most of them are still planning to return at the latest once it is safe. However, over time, fewer refugees say they would return when it is safe and more refugees plan to settle outside Ukraine. The liberation of their home district significantly increases the likelihood of an individual returning home, while more intense conflict in the home municipality makes refugees less likely to return to their home municipality, but not to Ukraine altogether.

Previous literature suggests that although many refugees, particularly those in countries neighboring their own, initially intend to return when conditions are safe, a substantial number ultimately choose to remain in their host countries (Alrababa'h et al. 2023; UNHCR 2023). However, there is a lack of systematic evidence on how refugees' intentions to return change over time, how accurately these intentions predict actual return, and the impact of conflict in refugees' home regions on their return plans, actual return, and integration. This evidence gap arises from the limited availability of longitudinal data that tracks refugees over time and across countries. The analysis of cross-sectional data is often insufficient to determine the causal effect of conflict on return (intentions), as unobserved heterogeneity among individuals may depend on the intensity of conflict prior to departure.

In Adema et al. (2024), we address these issues through a longitudinal survey of Ukrainian refugees. We launched this survey in partnership with Verian (formerly Kantar Public) across Europe in June 2022. This initiative was born in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which caused the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War Two. We repeatedly ask respondents about their current location, return plans, and integration outcomes, and link this information to time-stamped and geocoded data on conflict intensity in their home municipality from ACLED and UCDP and on the current occupation status of their home district based on frontline maps from ISW. By exploiting conflict intensity between interviews, we estimate the causal effect of local conflict on actual return, return plans, and integration outcomes. In addition, by collecting refugees' expectations about the duration and resolution of the war, we examine how changes in these expectations affect the same set of outcomes. Here are some key takeaways from our research.

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THERE IS A STRONG DESIRE AMONG UKRAINIANS TO RETURN HOME

Our descriptive findings reveal a strong desire among Ukrainians to return home. Figure 1 shows how individual responses to the questions on refugees' current place of residence and return plans have changed over time, between different survey waves, among those respondents who participated in the survey in at least two waves. Initially, around two-thirds of Ukrainian refugees intended to return either soon or once it becomes safe, and one in ten planned to settle permanently abroad. Return plans strongly predict actual return among those responding at least twice: 35 percent of those who initially intended to return soon did so by June 2024, whereas none of those who planned to settle permanently outside Ukraine have returned. By June 2024 (wave 8), 12 percent of respondents had returned to Ukraine. Among those that returned, more than 80 percent went back to the same municipality they resided in before leaving Ukraine. Nevertheless, the share of Ukrainian refugees planning to settle outside Ukraine is gradually increasing. Across Europe, around 25 percent of refugees indicated that they want to settle abroad by mid-2024.

Figure 2 shows how the share of respondents that returned to Ukraine and those with different return plans has developed over time. We incorporate individual fixed effects, so changes in the levels are driven by within-individual changes in residence of return plans. Until June 2024, the realized return rate was 2.0 percentage points per 100 days while the net increase in plans to settle outside Ukraine was 1.9 percentage points per 100 days. As a flip side of actual return and gradual increase in plans to settle outside Ukraine, the number of individuals who said they would return when it was safe to do so has decreased sharply over time (4.5 percentage points per 100 days). In 2024, return has largely stagnated, with the share planning to return soon and the share planning to return when safe remaining stable. At the same time, there has been a steady increase in the share planning to settle outside Ukraine.

LIBERATION OF HOME DISTRICT INCREASES RETURN WHILE INTENSIVE LOCAL CONFLICT REDIRECTS RETURN
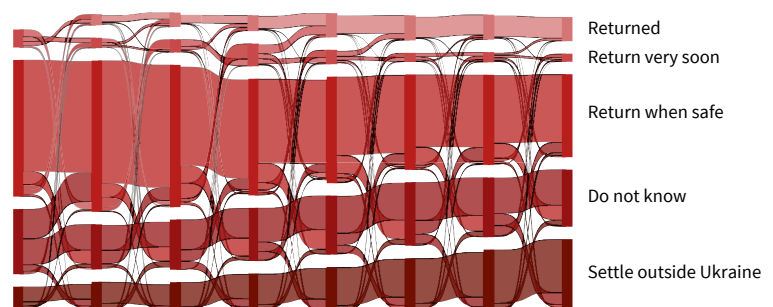
Figure 3 presents results on the effect of conflict and other predictors on changes in return and return intentions between the first (wave 1) and last answered wave. We find that the liberation of their home district significantly increases the likelihood of an individual returning to Ukraine and simultaneously reduces the propensity to make new plans to settle outside Ukraine. Conversely, continued occupation does not have a statistically significant impact on any of the outcomes.

Turning to the effect of conflict intensity, we find that more intense conflict in one's home municipality reduces return there, but less strongly to Ukraine in general. A one standard deviation higher conflict intensity reduces return to one's home municipality by 1.8 percentage points but return to Ukraine altogether by only 0.7 percentage points. The difference between these two suggest that the small share of respondents returning to other regions of Ukraine are individuals from high-conflict areas. However, more intense conflict in the home municipality does not make it more likely that refugees start planning to settle outside Ukraine.

We also examined additional predictors of return and plans to settle outside Ukraine in Figure 3. Having a partner left behind in Ukraine increases the likelihood of return by 9 percentage points. Tertiary education does not correlate with return or return plans. Surprisingly, proficiency in English increases

Figure 1

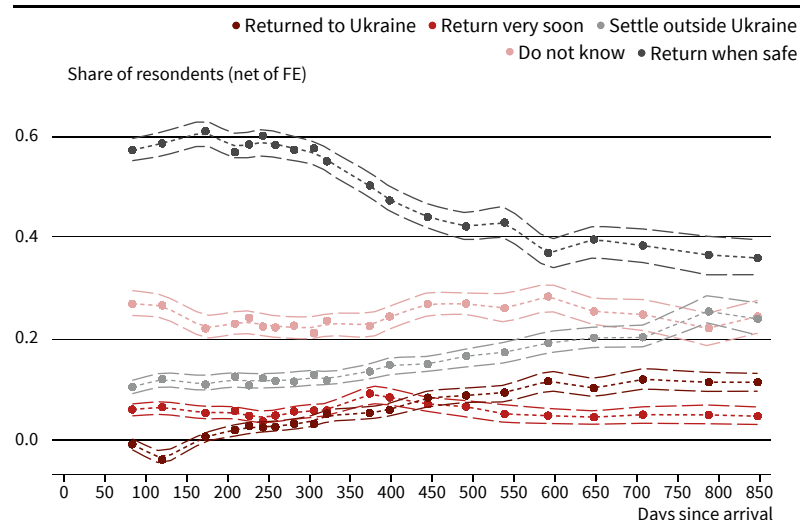**Sankey Diagram of Changes in Return Intentions and Behavior over Time**

Note: This Sankey diagram shows how return intentions have evolved over time. As we move from one column to the next, we move from one survey wave to the next. The time difference between each wave is approximately three months.
Source: Adema et al. (2024). © ifo Institute

Figure 2

Within-Individual Return Intentions and Return over Time since Arrival
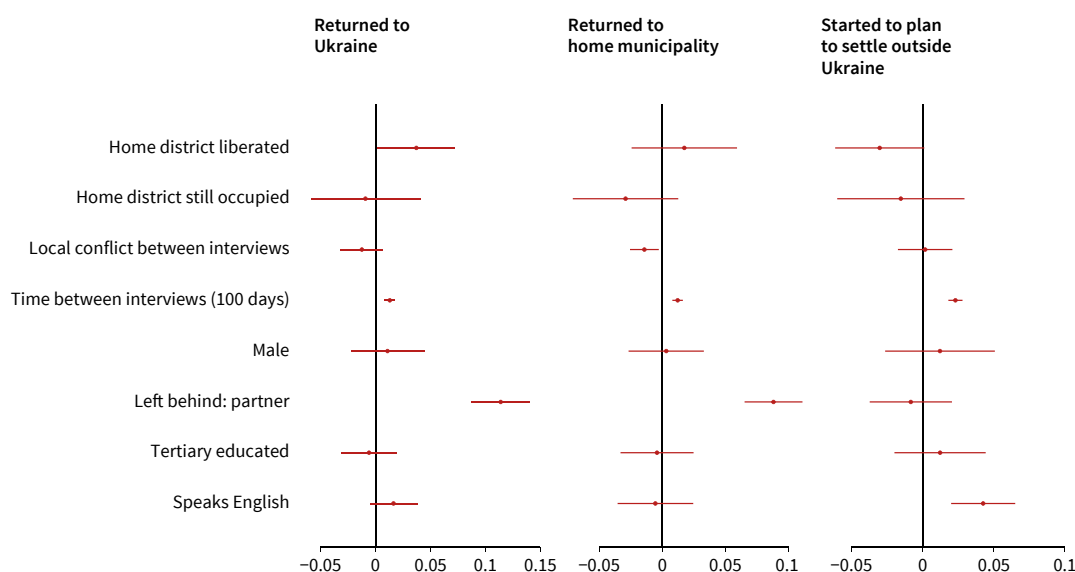

Note: Binned scatterplot with non-parametric trend for levels of return intentions over time since arrival in the destination country, net of individual fixed effects, with 90% confidence interval. For each level of return intentions, we perform the following procedure. First, we assign all observations to 20 equally sized bins over the number of days since arrival in the destination country of residence in the baseline survey. We residualize the outcome by regressing it on individual fixed effects and the number of days since arrival in the first destination country. We perform this procedure for 100 bootstrap samples to obtain smoothed 90% confidence intervals. We draw markers for (i) the mean for each of the 20 equally sized bins, (ii) a predicted mean for each bin of the number of days since arrival, and (iii) a 90% confidence interval around the predicted mean. N = 11,115.
Source: Adema et al. (2024). © ifo Institute

Figure 3

The Effect of Conflict and Predictors of Changes in Return and Starting to Plan to Settle Outside Ukraine

Note: This figure shows coefficient plots of three multivariate OLS regressions. The outcomes (from left to right) are 'returned to Ukraine', 'returned to home municipality', and 'started to plan to settle outside Ukraine' on conflict-related variables and personal characteristics. 95% confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the district level. 'Home district liberated' and 'Home district still occupied' are binary indicators for full liberation of one's home district and whether one's district is at least partially occupied during both survey waves. The reference category consists of districts continuously under Ukrainian control. 'Local conflict between interviews' is the standardized first PCA of the number of events and number of casualties in both UCDP and ACLED. Baseline controls are initial levels of return intentions, age bins (18–24; 25–34; 35–44; 45–54; 55–59; 60–64; 65 and older), the number of days elapsed between the two waves, the population of one's home municipality, population squared, and binary indicators for gender, partnership status, tertiary education, speaking English, originating from an urban area in Ukraine, being accompanied by children, having a partner left in Ukraine, having children left in Ukraine, continuing one's Ukrainian job remotely, having left Ukraine before 24 February 2022, originating from a territory that was occupied by Russia or allied forces before 24 February 2022, and answering the survey in Russian. For simplicity of exposition, not all control variables are shown in the figure.
Source: Adema et al. (2024).   © ifo Institute

the likelihood of return to Ukraine. At the same time, English speakers are also more likely to start considering settling outside Ukraine. These findings suggest that, if anything, return migrants are not negatively selected from the available sample of migrants.

As we ask for their current place of residence in every wave, we can study onward migration between different countries outside Ukraine. Figure 4 shows a Sankey diagram for residence in Ukraine and main destination countries (Germany, Poland, Czechia, rest of Eastern Europe, and rest of the world – mostly countries in Western and Southern Europe, except Germany). The main migration flows in each wave are directed to Ukraine, Germany, and the rest of the world. Most of these secondary migrants come from Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe. There is very limited return migration or onward migration

from Germany and Czechia. In June 2024, 7 percent of Ukrainian refugees resided in a different host country outside Ukraine compared to 2022.

INTEGRATION OUTCOMES

Theory suggests that refugees who do not intend to return invest more in acquiring host-country-specific human capital, such as language skills, and integrating into the local labor market (Chiswick and Miller 1994). Figure 5 displays regression coefficients for four key measures of economic, subjective, and linguistic integration using the same specification as Figure 3. Our results suggest that the three conflict-related variables have no significant effect on whether refugees are employed. The liberation of one's home district appears to make refugees less likely to participate in any kind of training, which aligns with a higher likelihood of return reducing incentives to invest in integration in the host country (Cortes 2004; Adda et al. 2022). Conversely, if one's home district remains occupied for the duration of our surveys, refugees report a positive change in their subjective integration and a somewhat increased likelihood of starting a language course. This can be attributed to the lower return intentions among this group, which encourages investment in integration. Conflict intensity in the home municipality does not appear to systematically affect integration

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outcomes. Individuals from regions with higher conflict intensity are slightly less likely to have started a language course.
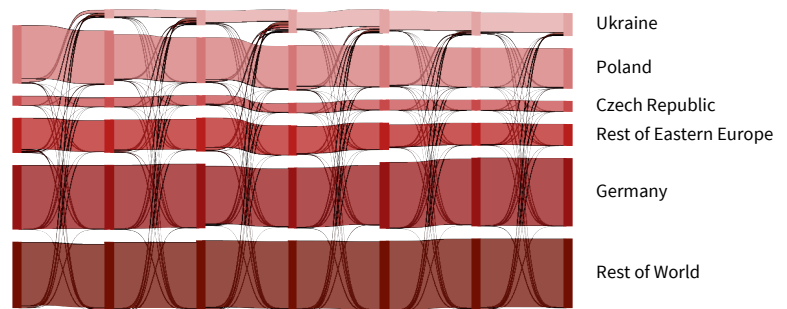
SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The success of post-war reconstruction and development efforts in Ukraine will depend crucially on the quantity and quality of the available human capital. The Ukrainian population had been declining even before the Russian invasion, with deaths outnumbering births every year since 1991 (Djankov and Blinov 2022). Furthermore, pervasive corruption and low confidence in the judiciary – underscored by Ukraine's ranking of 104th out of 180 countries in the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index – act as deterrents to return migration. A critical challenge for Ukraine will be to leverage the common purpose fostered by the war to drive broader institutional changes. By addressing these challenges, Ukraine can enhance the appeal of returning for refugees and effectively utilize their human capital in the post-war rebuilding process.

From the perspective of EU countries, there is a tension between swift integration of Ukrainian refugees into host societies and the successful reconstruction of Ukraine after the war. From a purely national perspective, successfully integrating Ukrainian refugees can help host countries mitigate skill shortages and address the challenges of an aging

Figure 4

Migration Between Main Host Countries and Country Groups, and Ukraine
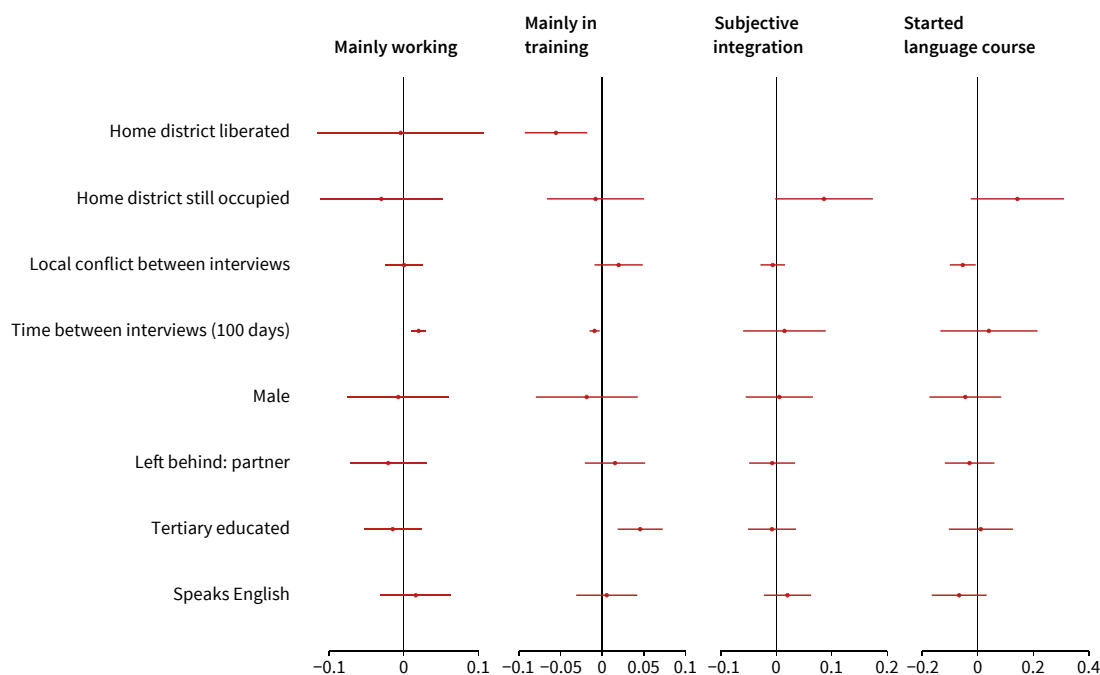

Note: This Sankey diagram shows how migration between different regions has evolved over time. As we move from one column to the next, we move from one survey wave to the next. As not all respondents in all host countries recruited in the baseline wave were asked to respond in the second wave, this figure omits the second wave.
Source: Adema et al. (2024).   © ifo Institute

population. However, European countries also have a strong interest in the successful post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. Therefore, European countries should encourage Ukrainian refugees who are willing to return to do so, including through the provision of financial assistance to returnees. Of course, those Ukrainian refugees with a prospect of return should also be helped to find employment during their stay abroad. Ideally, the experience they gain in EU countries could improve their productivity upon their return to Ukraine and help build bridges between their host country and Ukraine.

Figure 5

Conflict and Four Integration Outcomes

Note: This figure shows coefficient plots of four multivariate OLS regressions. 95% confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered on the district level. We restrict the sample to all respondents 25–59 years old. The outcomes in the first two columns are in levels on the long differences sample, and control for initial levels of started working or not in wave 1. N = 2,120 for both. The last two columns are changes on the sample of long differences between the earliest response in waves 2 and 3 and the response in wave 6. N = 503 and N = 544, respectively. The latter two do not include estimates for 'home district liberated', as no district was liberated during the sample period. All other regressors are identical to those in Figure 3.
Source: Adema et al. 2024.   © ifo Institute

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