How Social Capital and Support Structures Shape the Experiences of People Affected by the War in Ukraine

The Case of Ukraine, Poland, and Germany

2024 - 2025

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Introduction

3 March 2022. Ukrainian refugees gather at Przemysl railway station.
Photo: Francesco Pistilli for IRC © International Rescue Committee

The report presents the findings of a regional research project conducted by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Ukraine, Poland, and Germany between late May and mid-August 2024.

As the war in Ukraine enters its third year, gaining a comprehensive understanding of its impact beyond immediate humanitarian needs, becomes increasingly important. The conflict has triggered massive waves of internal and external displacement, as well as a significant number of refugees returning to Ukraine. These movements have been shaped by legal frameworks, such as the European Union's (EU) Temporary Protection Directive and Ukraine's simplified IDP registration process, as well as the varying levels of support across EU countries, influencing individuals' mobility decisions.

The report explores the journeys of people affected by the war in Poland and Germany — the two EU countries hosting the largest Ukrainian refugee populations — as well as those who remained in or returned to Ukraine.

The presence of IRC operations in these countries enabled in-depth research, but the study also acknowledges the experiences of those who have not received direct support from the organization, ensuring a broader and more inclusive analysis.

The report examines the different types of support received by individuals affected by the war in Ukraine from close networks, aid organizations, and government institutions, identifying key needs, gaps in assistance, and how available resources influence decision-making.

By classifying similar experiences into common scenarios, the report highlights how individuals — despite vastly different living conditions — often share similar challenges, concerns, and aspirations.

This report serves as a resource for understanding both country-specific dynamics and the broader regional context, helping policymakers, humanitarian organizations, and stakeholders prepare for future developments that could shape the course of the war in Ukraine.

Refugees, migrants, people on the move — the unique situation of people fleeing Ukraine

The EU's Temporary Protection Directive was activated for the first time in response to the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022. This decision granted individuals fleeing Ukraine collective temporary protection status, which removed the requirement for individual asylum applications and provided wide access to labor markets and social welfare systems in host countries[1].

From a legal perspective, the temporary protection status places refugees from Ukraine in **a unique position** outside Ukraine compared to other refugees and asylum-seekers, who must go through the asylum process before gaining access to welfare benefits and the labor market. Additionally, a degree of geographic mobility allows refugees to move between EU countries, an option not available to other nationalities.

The exception from this rule are Ukrainian men of draft age who are prohibited from leaving Ukraine due to martial law. While few openly argue that this is discriminatory[2], the Ukrainian government's stance on the issue has remained consistent since the onset of the full-scale war.

At the same time, there are very few restrictions on internal movement within Ukraine, and the process for obtaining the status of an internally displaced person (IDP) is generally straightforward.

[1] Although people fleeing Ukraine are technically not classified as refugees or asylum-seekers, the term "refugee from Ukraine" is used in this report to describe this population.
2 Voice of Ukrainians (2024) https://voiceofukrainians.org/Rights-Breach/Unlawful-Discrimination-in-Times-of-Martial-Law.13 (access: February 14, 2025).

Pre-war emigration situation in Ukraine

Even before the full-scale invasion, migration balance of Ukraine was not optimistic, the country was a big labor exporter. This factor is an important piece of puzzle to understand the mobility patterns of people affected by the war in Ukraine.

Back in 2017 survey found that 1.3 million Ukrainian citizens, aged 15—70, were either working or seeking employment abroad between 2015 and mid-2017, representing 4.5% of the population in that age group[3]. In 2021, International Organization for Migration, estimated that 3 million Ukrainians worked abroad. The number constituted 7% of the total population of the country in 2021 before the beginning of the full-scale war [4].

With a significant population of labor migrants, alongside earlier waves of migration linked to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Ukrainians established a strong and well-organized network of diaspora organizations[5] across many EU countries and beyond. These organizations, as well as individual Ukrainians abroad, became instrumental in assisting people fleeing Ukraine after the beginning of the full-scale war in 2022.

In addition, two migration flows from the Soviet Union — ethnic Germans and ethnic Jews repatriated to Germany starting in the 1970s — played a role in shaping the support structures for Ukrainian refugees. By 2022, many of these repatriates had established lives in Germany and their support networks became a pull factor for Ukrainians seeking refuge in the country.

When analyzing the displacement patterns of people fleeing Ukraine**, in the situation of protracted conflict with only partially restricted mobility, the migrant network theory seems to be the most appropriate tool despite analyzing the patterns of forced migration.**

The theory has become one of the most widely utilized frameworks for understanding migration patterns and why they remain persistent over the past three decades. According to Massey et al. (1993), migrant networks are defined as social connections that link migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in both origin and destination areas through relationships of kinship, friendship, and shared community background. This theory emphasizes the role of social networks in facilitating, maintaining, and perpetuating migration flows[6].

Internal migration in Ukraine

Ukraine experienced its first wave of internal displacement in 2014. According to the Ministry of Social Policy, 1.8 million people were displaced during this period. Researchers observed that internally displaced people (IDPs) tended to settle in host communities that could meet their economic, cultural, and linguistic needs or chose locations based purely on safety considerations[7]. To some extent, these patterns may be understood through a theoretical framework similar to the migrant network theory.

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3 Ukrainian Statistical Office (2017). Zovnishnya Trudova Mihratsiya Naselennya (za Rezul'tatamy Modul'noho Vybirkovoho Obstezhennya), http://www.ukrstat.gov.ua/druk/publicat/kat_u/2017/bl/12/bl_ztm_2017.zip (access: February 14, 2025).
4 International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2021) https://ukraine.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1861/files/documents/migration_in_ukraine_facts_and_figures_2021-ukr_web.pdf (access: February 14, 2025).
5 Lazarenko V. (2024) The Role of the Ukrainian Diaspora in Crisis Response, Future Return, and Reconstruction of Ukraine: A Case Study from Germany, Czech Republic, and Poland https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/60826/file/UA_Diaspora_Report_RRR_Project.pdf (access: February 14, 2025).
6 Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A. and Taylor, J. E. 1993. 'Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal'. Population and Development Review, 19 (3), 431-466.
7 Voznyak H., O. Mulska, O.Druhov, K.Patytska and I. Tymechko (2023). Internal migration during the war in Ukraine: Recent challenges and problems. Problems and Perspectives in Management, 21(1), 312-325. https://www.businessperspectives.org/images/pdf/applications/publishing/templates/article/assets/17789/PPM_2023_01_Voznyak.pdf (access: February 14, 2025).

8 December 2022 - Malynivka, Kharkiv Oblast, Ukraine
Natalia Samoilova (mother), Yana(aunt) with Eva after receiving winter kits and registering for financial aid
Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

Population under study

Given these unique circumstances and the prolonged nature of the conflict, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) conducted an exploratory qualitative study to examine the situation of various groups affected by the war in Ukraine. The IRC currently serves these populations in Ukraine, Poland, and Germany among other countries. Despite the differing contexts, comparative analysis of the support structures and approaches to legalization procedures across these countries can offer valuable insights and help formulate common recommendations.

The study categorizes participants into four groups:

- **Remainers**
  Individuals who voluntarily or involuntarily stayed in their place of residence in Ukraine.

- **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)**
  People who relocated within Ukraine after the onset of the full-scale war or earlier (since 2014).

- **Returnees**
  People who fled Ukraine after the full-scale war started, stayed abroad, and later returned to Ukraine.

- **Refugees**
  Individuals who fled Ukraine and remain abroad.

The scale of displacement caused by the war in Ukraine is unprecedented. In 2024, over 6 million of Ukrainian refuges were spread over Europe. Of those, 4.2 million benefits from the Temporary protection mechanism[8].

8 European Council (2024) https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/ukraine-refugees-eu/ (access: February 14, 2025)

While numbers remain relatively stable, there is evidence of secondary movement, notably from Poland to Germany, as well as returns to Ukraine from various European countries[9].

In addition to over 6 million refugees, there are 3.665 million IDPs within Ukraine, particularly concentrated in Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kyiv city, and Kyiv oblast[10]. UNHCR estimates that in 2024, approximately 15 million people in Ukraine—comprising remainers and IDPs—required humanitarian assistance[11]. Given the ongoing destruction of critical infrastructure and the worsening security situation, this number is unlikely to decrease soon.

Initially, Poland hosted the largest number of Ukrainian refugees, but the high rate of returns there has led to Germany becoming the country with the largest stable refugee population.

The current number of refugees from Ukraine stands at 1,234,445 in Germany and 993,795 in Poland[12]. While these numbers had shown little fluctuation for over a year now, some studies suggest that 49% of refugees who arrived in Poland after the beginning of the full-scale war seeking safety, returned to Ukraine, mostly in 2022, while only 13% in the similar situation returned from Germany[13].

To stay or to leave — the decision-making factors in protracted conflict

While each situation is unique, there are certain factors associated with the mobility pattern people affected by the war in Ukraine had followed over last three years. For example, it has been noted that people with lower incomes and those who stayed in collective sites or other temporary housing abroad are more inclined to return to Ukraine from Poland, while respondents with higher incomes and those staying in rented flats or apartments supported by governments are more likely to stay in the host country.

Other than the economic factors, personal and emotional reasons for return were those most often reported by respondents: nearly half expressed a desire to be reunited with their family and 35% mentioned they were feeling homesick as a factor driving their desire to return to Ukraine after fleeing at the beginning of the war. Regardless of the motivation, many returnees went back to places in Ukraine where they do not necessarily feel safe: more than half (53%) of the surveyed returnees reported feeling somewhat or completely unsafe in their current location[14].

According to the cited study's findings, in the case of returns from Poland, push factors are typically attributed to the geographical proximity of the two countries, host-country policies, and the wish to reunite with families in Ukraine. In the case of Germany, researchers emphasized support systems in places and integration opportunities as pull factors impacting the decision to stay in the country rather than return, even despite the abovementioned emotional reasons.

While structural and formal support available, along with the socio-demographic characteristics of individuals, including family composition, are often the subject of research, little attention to date has been paid to the informal support ("weak") networks, which are created because of disasters and based on altruistic tendencies[15].

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9 Zymnin A. (2023) From Poland to Germany. New Trends in Ukrainian Refugee Migration, https://ewl.com.pl/en/report-from-poland-to-germany-new-trends-in-ukrainian-refugee-migration/ (access: February 14, 2025).

10The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR (2024), https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/ukr (access: February 14, 2025).

11The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR (2024), https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/ (access: February 14, 2025).

12 The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR (2024), https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine (access: February 14, 2025).

13 What do we know about Ukrainian refugees returning home since the full scale invasion? Longitudinal Survey of Ukrainian Refugees, Round 18 — Late October/Early November 2023 [EN/UK] (2023) https://reliefweb.int/report/poland/what-do-we-know-about-ukrainian-refugees-returning-home-full-scale-invasion-longitudinal-survey-ukrainian-refugees-round-18-late-octoberearly-november-2023-enuk (access: February 14, 2025).

14 Same as above

15 Shinya U., S.Matthewman, D. F. Lorenz (2020) Conceptualising disaster social capital: what it is, why it matters, and how it can be enhanced, Disasters, Volume 46, Issue 1,pp 56-79 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/disa.12470 (access: February 14, 2025).

The key aim of the research was to analyze what types of support refugees and IDPs, as well as remainers and returnees received and provided to others after the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022. Types of support were conceptualized depending on the type of capital utilized.

Types of social capital

The networks and relationships among people, which enable the functioning of society, are the simplest definitions of social capital. While there are ongoing discussions in the academic world on what social capital is and whether it is a measurable, there are some points that re-appear in these discussions and seem to be relevant to the subject of this research, namely, potential derived from social relations, norms of reciprocity, capacity to command scarce resources, constraining or stimulating factor to behave a certain way toward others, benefits or preferential treatment of the member of one's network[16].

There are 3 different forms of social capital, namely **bonding** or within-group ties built on thick trust and close networks (e.g., family or closest friend), **bridging** or between-group thin trust and open network, and **linking** or social capital aiming to connect people in different states in the hierarchy of power[17].

While generally perceived positively, bonding capital can result in exclusion, whereas bridging capital is less likely to have negative effects. It's generally perceived as an instrument to overcome the barriers. Some researchers argue that NGOs, including INGOs and other organizations (e.g., volunteers or faith-based organizations), have the potential to support refugees, IDPs, and people affected by the war or natural disasters by building the bridging social capital required to cope with the crisis and build resilience. Some earlier research suggests that NGOs develop social capital by promoting information sharing and advocacy and acting as change agents[18] . The advocacy and promotion of change in the capacity of NGOs can also be perceived as linking social capital or the possibility of appealing to government officials.

In the context of Ukraine's response, it seems like no study to date has managed to integrate different levels of available support ranging from macro (government-provided), followed by the meso- (non-government institutionalized support and weak social networks or so-called bridging social capital), and concluded by the micro-level (socio-demographic characteristics of individual and strong social networks or bonding social capital) to analyze the push and pull factors impacting decisions to stay, leave or change the country of settlement and whether these decisions are stable or a subject to change over time.

The fragmentation of research inevitably results in showing only part of the picture. It may emphasize the more obvious and feasible factors (e.g., available government support) rather than looking at the full picture, including the available social capital of the refugees. Specifically, little to no attention seems to be paid to the bridging social capital of refugees or so-called "weak ties," which may include support from organizations, diaspora, other refugees, volunteer organizations, or faith-based organizations.

The IRC's research sought to analyze and summarize the various levels of support provided to individuals affected by the war in Ukraine, ensuring a comprehensive and comparative perspective.

16 Robison, L.J., A. A. Schmidt, M.E, Siles. (1999) Is social capital really capital?, https://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/11649?ln=en&v=pdf (access: February 14, 2025).
17 Tristan C. (2018) Functions of social capital – bonding, bridging, linking Social capital research, https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Functions-of-Social-Capital.pdf (access: February 14, 2025).
18 Clark J. (1991) Democratizing Development: The Role of Voluntary Organizations, A Kumarian Press Book, https://www.rienner.com/title/Democratizing_Development_The_Role_of_Voluntary_Organizations (access: February 14, 2025).

Methodology

The research utilized qualitative methods, mostly individual semi-structured in-depth interviews. This research method is grounded in the principle of a human-centered approach, which puts the participant at the center of the research process. For triangulation purposes, the key informant interviews with the service providers and government representatives were conducted.

The research results were categorized into clusters presenting the most common scenarios described by the refugees, IDPs, and Ukrainians affected by the conflict who decided to stay in Ukraine, considering available support networks and institutional support for each group. The categorization goes beyond the traditional demographic approach and combines different types of respondent characteristics (e.g., motivations, reported attitudes, and history of displacement or changes in lifestyle caused by the full-scale conflict as of 2022)

Key objectives of the study were to analyze the individual journey of refugees currently staying in Poland and Germany, as well as IDPs in Ukraine (including situations of multiple displacements after 2014), returnees and those who decided to stay in the place of residence in Ukraine (remainers), considering their characteristics, available social capital, and support structures (formal/government and informal) in place to specify the push and pull factors leading to the decision to stay or move, identify key needs of the group and ways to provide support.

Methods & techniques: Qualitative approach realized through individual in-depth interviews and key informant interviews to contextualize the findings

Participants selection: participants were recruited among the IRC and partner organizations' clients[19], but not limited to them. Some participants were recruited using the personal networks of the researchers to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the situation of the IDPs, refugees, returnees and remainers.

Limitations: qualitative, non-representative sample, limited geographic coverage

The research team:

- **Olena Oleksiyenko**, IRC Poland— research coordinator, researcher — Ukraine & Germany
- **Kateryna Bielova**, IRC Ukraine — fieldwork coordination — Ukraine (East)
- **Kateryna Matviienko**, IRC Ukraine — fieldwork coordination — Ukraine (South)
- **Taras Maslov**, IRC Poland — fieldwork coordination & researcher — Poland

The research team is incredibly grateful to colleagues from IRC Ukraine, Poland & Germany who supported the Team with useful contacts and made the data collection possible.

Fieldwork: Ukraine (May- June 2024), Poland (June-August 2024), Germany (August 2024)

[19] IRC & Partner organizations clients are individuals who received services or financial support from IRC or Partner organizations

Participants profile

Geographic coverage of the study
Illustration: Own elaboration

Ukraine

21 individual in-depth interviews in Ukraine:
4 males and 17 females.

- 11 IDPs from Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk, Kherson oblast.
- 7 returnees from Moldova, Poland, Lithuania, Germany and Canada.
- 3 persons who did not leave Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

11 Key informant interviews with representatives of CSO, government, social services, and academia.

Geographic breakdown:

- 9 interviews in the Eastern Ukraine — Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia and Zaporizhzhia oblast.
- 8 interviews in the Southern Ukraine — Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Mykolaiv oblast.
- 4 interviews in the Central Ukraine — Kyiv.

The youngest interviewee — 17, the oldest — 68 years old.

14 participants have higher education, 7 secondary or vocational.

2 August 2022 — Warsaw, Poland
Oksana Shendyryk (54 years old) is employed in PCPM and lives in the PCPM center.
Photo: Karolina Jonderko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

Poland

28 individual in-depth interviews in Poland:
27 females and 1 male.

27 refugees and 1 economic migrant (who arrived in Poland in 2021) are currently hosted by the refugee family.

- 11 refugees from the Central Ukraine, including 2 who were previously internally displaced.
- 7 refugees from the Eastern Ukraine, including 2 who were previously internally displaced.
- 7 refugees from the Southern Ukraine.
- 2 refugees from the Western Ukraine.

Geographic breakdown:

- 6 interviews in the Southern Poland - Katowice and Silesia region.
- 6 interviews in the Northern Poland - Gdynia and Pomerania region.
- 16 interviews in the Central Poland - Warsaw and Mazovia.

The youngest interviewee — 19, the oldest — 73 years old.

23 participants have higher education, 5 secondary or vocational.

Germany

12 individual in-depth interviews in Germany:
11 females and 1 male

3 key informant interviews with representatives of the NGOs and Ukrainian diaspora organizations in Germany

Geographic breakdown:

- 3 interviews in the North-Eastern Germany - Berlin
- 1 interview in the Eastern Germany - Chemnitz
- 8 interviews in the North-Wester Germany - Hannover

The youngest interviewee — 21, the oldest — 70

Participants journeys

Each participant in the study was asked to share their experiences following the onset of the full-scale war in 2022. Some participants described literal movements, relocating from one place to another, while others spoke about more metaphorical journeys, such as shifts in their daily routines and habits.

The case studies presented below highlight selected stories from the participants, offering a summary of the support they received and outlining the most common scenarios faced by populations affected by the war in Ukraine.

Returnees' journeys

Case study #1

Returnee journey from Zaporizhzhia (Ukraine) to Moldova and back. (Female, 34)
Source: own elaboration

A 34-year-old woman from Zaporizhzhia left her hometown with her daughter, who has a disability, just days after the full-scale war began. Accompanied by her mother, she sought refuge in Moldova, where they stayed with her uncle at no cost.

While some humanitarian aid was available, the participant noted that financial support for refugees in Moldova was almost non-existent. Given her daughter's need for constant medical care and rehabilitation, she did not see Moldova as a viable long-term option. Additionally, she missed her father, who had remained in Ukraine, and wished to reunite with him.

After three months, she returned to Zaporizhzhia, where she now lives with her parents, who provide financial assistance and caregiver support. Unable to work full-time, she relies on welfare benefits, occasional aid from humanitarian organizations, and support from the church. Her primary motivation for returning was to rebuild her existing support system and ensure stability for both her and her daughter.

Case study #2

Returnee journey from Zaporizhzhia (Ukraine) to Poland and back. (Female, 30)
Source: own elaboration

A 30-year-old woman from Zaporizhzhia left her hometown with her husband, who was exempt from the martial law as a non-Ukrainian national, and newborn son following the outbreak of the full-scale war. The family settled in a small town near Wroclaw, Poland, where she did not work but relied on child benefits, which she highly valued. Her husband, despite not being Ukrainian national, benefitted from the temporary protection in Poland and secured a full-time job.

However, over time, the husband subjected her to physical and emotional violence. After one of the instances of domestic violence, she was hospitalized and received free medical care. Despite this, she did not seek psychological or legal support.

As a result of experiencing domestic violence, she chose to return to Zaporizhzhia to reunite with her parents, who now provide her with support and stability. She continues to receive child benefits and hopes to find a job in her hometown to regain independence.

IDPs journeys

Case study #3

IDP's journey from/to Mykolaiv. (Female, 21)
Source: own elaboration

A 21-year-old woman was studying in Mykolaiv when the full-scale war began. A few days into the invasion, she decided to reunite with her parents in the Kherson region, which was soon occupied and became a non-government-controlled area (NGA).

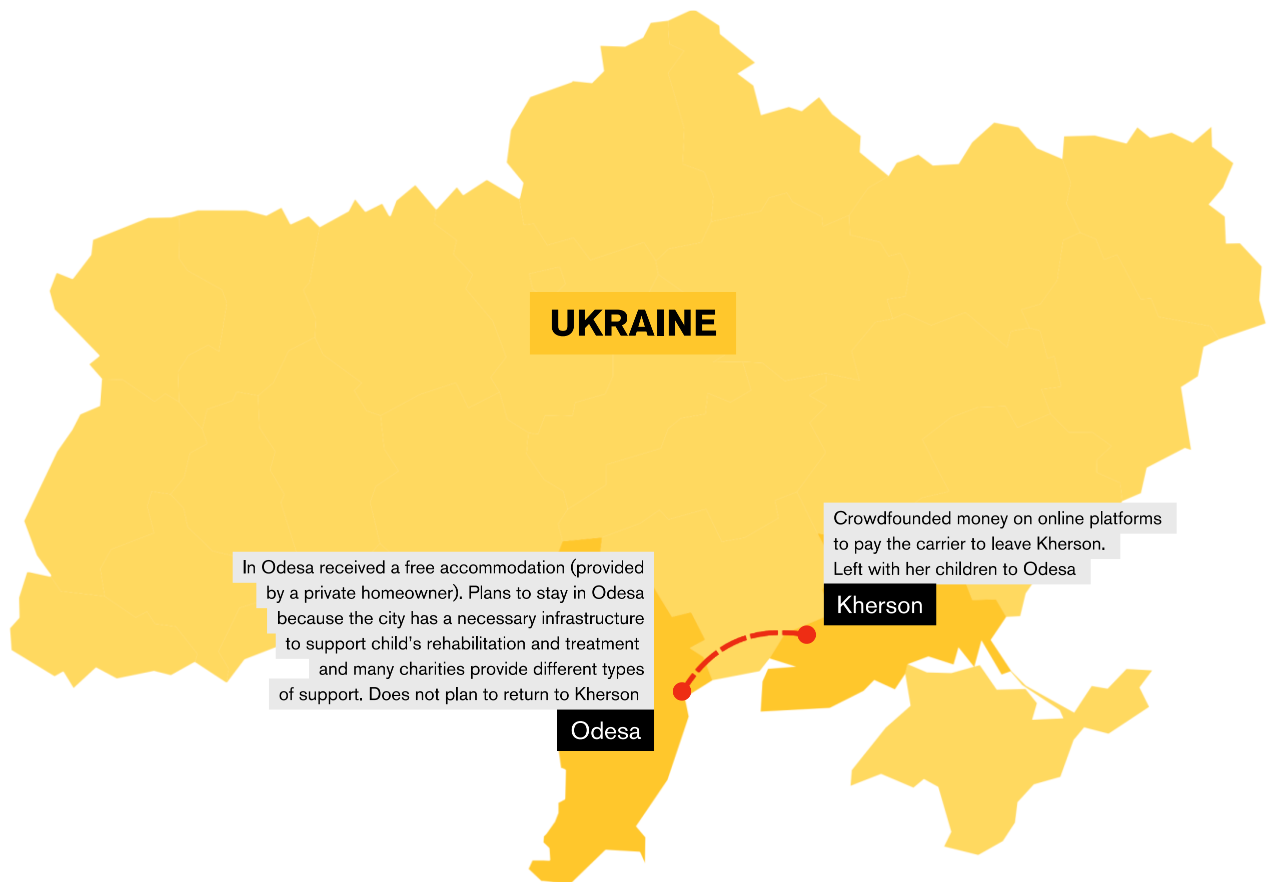
After several months, rumors spread that the Russian army would begin forced conscription of men in the occupied territories. Fearing for her father's safety, the family decided to flee, relocating to a relative's home in central Ukraine. While they had free housing and received humanitarian aid, there were no job opportunities in the town.

Seeking employment, the woman moved to Zhytomyr, where her sister was living at the time. In the larger city, she was able to find a job and support herself. However, determined to complete her education, she returned to Mykolaiv, where she successfully graduated and found work at a local NGO. She is also actively involved in an advocacy group for IDPs.

Her mother later joined her in Mykolaiv, and they now share an apartment as they rebuild their lives.

Case study #4

A 36-year-old woman from Kherson fled with her three children after the city was occupied at the start of the full-scale war. Lacking the funds to pay for transportation to government-controlled Ukraine, she turned to an online platform, where she crowdsourced donations from strangers to cover the cost of their escape.



IDP's journey from Kherson to Odesa. (Female, 36)
Source: own elaboration

Upon arriving in Odesa, she received assistance from volunteers, who helped her find a flat, as she had no prior connections in the city. She now shares the apartment with her sister and their children.

Her husband serves in the army and provides some financial support, but the family also relies on humanitarian aid from various organizations, which she considers a crucial source of assistance.

The woman does not work but hopes to start a small business that would allow her to balance caregiving responsibilities with financial independence. However, lack of startup capital remains a significant barrier to achieving this goal.

Refugees journey

Case study #5

A 38-year-old man from Kherson with mobility issues received little to no assistance during the city's occupation. After the Ukrainian army regained control, an evacuation-focused NGO offered him free transportation to Germany, which he accepted.

Upon arrival in Hannover, the man was provided with free housing, medical care, and rehabilitation services. He also receives welfare benefits and, due to the disability status, is not required to work or learn German.

While he plans to stay in Germany until the war ends, his goal is to return to Kherson and reunite with his friends once it is safe.

Refugee from Kherson, Germany (Male, 38)
Source: own elaboration

Case study #6

A 46-year-old woman was first displaced from Horlivka in 2014, relocating to Bakhmut, where she successfully started her own business and became actively involved in civil society initiatives. She also invested in her education and professional development, including studying abroad.

In 2022, after the full-scale invasion, she fled Bakhmut with her two teenage children, seeking refuge with former colleagues in Berlin, Germany. There, her family received welfare benefits and secured housing partially subsidized by the government. Her children enrolled in school, ensuring continuity in their education.

She joined an IRC Germany program focused on labor market integration, and after completing it, she chose to become a mentor for other Ukrainians struggling to advance professionally in Germany. While she appreciates government support, her priority is to develop her own career.

Her previous experience and connections to civil society organizations have been instrumental in this pursuit. Although she remains engaged with Ukraine, she does not plan to return for now, as she feels useful and professionally fulfilled in Germany.

Refugee from Bakhmut, Germany (Female, 46)
Source: own elaboration

Case study #7

Refugee from Myrnohrad, Poland (Female, 71)
Source: own elaboration

A 71-years old woman fled from a village near Avdiivka to her family in Myrnohrad. In two weeks, the woman, her daughter, and two grandchildren moved to a remote village in Ivano-Frankivsk region. No houses in the village had access to tap water or wells, gas, heating, proper mobile connection, there was no cash in the local ATMs.

Failing to convince her grandson, who had been nearing 18 years of age, to leave with her to Poland, the woman accepted an offer from a local resident to go to Poland alone, on a free evacuation bus ride to Katowice. There she was welcomed by local volunteers who were contacted beforehand by the bus driver and placed into a free hostel room. By the time of the interview, she had been relocated 4 times to different free accommodations. She is still entitled to a free shelter as a senior refugee but admitted that shelter administrations had been becoming increasingly irresponsive to troublemakers and punitive towards the whistleblowers.

The woman used her stay in Poland as an opportunity to access free healthcare services for both treatment and diagnostics, which eventually uncovered her eligibility for disability benefits. She recalls receiving extensive information support from local state and non-government organizations. The woman was able to qualify for financial aid, part of which she donated to her shelter neighbor — a single mother from Bucha who lost her only daughter when their house got destroyed which led to severe mental issues — who was not eligible for any financial assistance herself.

Additionally, the woman was able to successfully use psychological help to deal with the negative family dynamics trends, in which both she and her grandson broke any contact with her daughter. She joined IRC's psychosocial support activities and noted strong community ties.

The woman plans to go back to Myrnohrad and move her grandson to safety.

Case study #8

A 72-years-old woman from Kharkiv fled the city together with her daughter and granddaughter after losing their apartment after the missile attack. The family chose Poland for a destination point because of their Polish roots, previous experience of living in the country, and knowledge of Polish language. In March 2022, the family arrived in Przemysl and spent one month in a local shelter. They were able to receive child support and free healthcare, also qualifying for financial aid

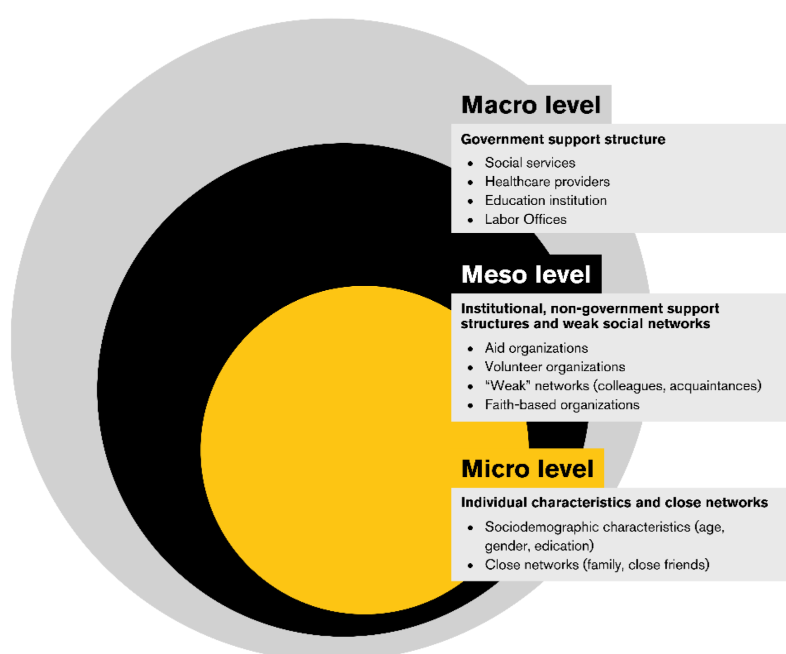
After moving to Warsaw, the family received social housing but later got evicted. The authorities rejected application for new social housing due to apparent changes in the social housing ownership within the governmental system and lack of permanent residence address. The latter also prevents the family from enrolling the grandkid into a school which may lead to a child support loss and disqualifies them from social benefits for low-income households.

Currently, the family stays in the Warsaw Crisis Centre due to lack of other housing opportunities, but they still hope to stay in Poland due to their emotional connectedness to the country.

Refugee from Myrnohrad, Poland (Female, 46)
Source: own elaboration

Perception of different levels of support

The study focused mostly on social capital in different forms and the support structures it creates. As graphically presented below the assumption is that all levels can be present simultaneously and interplay creating a unique support structure for each person.



Theoretical framework of the research project
Source: own elaboration

The research team analyzed the individual journey (including but not limited to the case studies presented in the previous chapter) of refugees currently staying in Poland and Germany, as well as IDPs in Ukraine (including persons who experienced multiple displacements after 2014), returnees from different European and non-European countries, and those who decided to stay in their place of residence in Ukraine (remainers). Apart from the basic socio-demographic characteristics, available social capital, and support structures (formal/government and informal/non-government) in place were analyzed.

The goal was to specify the push and pull factors leading to the decision to stay or move. Additionally, the gaps in support structures were identified and some recommendations on addressing them were formulated.

Moreover, special attention was paid to the accumulated social capital of the most vulnerable groups affected by the war in Ukraine or "earned strength" — the resilience built as the result of the need to cope with disaster or marginalization[20].

The perception and key finding for each type of support participants received or provided to others are summarized in this chapter of the report starting from the micro level — individual support networks, followed by the meso level (aid providers) and concluded by the macro level (government support).

Micro-level support — close ties (family, closest friends)

- Close ties, such as family and close friends, are perceived as the most important and reliable source of support.
- These relationships are often cited as a **key factor influencing critical decisions** (including the decision to stay or to leave).
- Close ties play a significant role as both push and pull factors when deciding where to reside.
- Most participants identified family and close friends **as their primary support** network.
- These networks, however, can sometimes be a source of tension, particularly in the context of internally displaced people (IDPs) versus local populations, refugees versus host communities, or refugees vs remainers.
- If the actual close networks are not available, participants often used a **"personalization of help"** strategy which is based on treating the institutionalized help as help received from a specific person rather than representative of the organization.

Interpersonal trust is one of the key elements of stable networks and social capital. Some sociological studies conducted in Ukraine suggest, that the level of trust in other people increased during the war. One of the studies conducted in 2022 showed that the level of trust in other people increased from 45% in 2021 to 63% in 2022. In the case of the people someone knows, the level of trust was 80%[21].

Most participants mentioned the consolidation of Ukrainian society after the beginning of the full-scale war, a sense of solidarity, and unconditional support both in the country and abroad. **Receiving help from people they did not know or someone from a distant network was the experience shared by almost every participant — either in Ukraine, Poland, or Germany. However, if the participant left Ukraine after the first few months of the full-scale invasion or looked for support in Ukraine, their experiences were very different — they often felt left out.**

Sociological data seems to support the hypothesis on the return to the pre-war state, as one of the studies measuring the sense of closeness to Ukrainians in other regions, and the nationals of neighboring countries, showed a decrease in 2024 compared to 2023[22].

With the erosion of solidarity after a short period, close social networks yet again became the most common and available support structures. Existing pre-war networks (family, friends, link to a specific place) — both in Ukraine and abroad, in case of the most participants, were the decisive factor in going to a specific location. The exceptions were the participants who had very limited networks and concentrated on the place or origin.

For such participants, organizations, volunteer associations and other weak ties (e.g., virtual contacts in social media) became the key support structure and a pull factor to attract them to a specific location.

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20 Uekusa S., Matthewman S. (2017) Vulnerable and resilient? Immigrants and refugees in the 2010–2011 Canterbury and Tohoku disasters, International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, Volume 22, June 2017, Pages 355-361 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2212420916307038 (access: February 14, 2025).
21 Gradus Research (2022) Trust in Ukrainian society during the war; https://gradus.app/documents/272/TRUST_IN_UKRAINIAN_SOCIETY_DURING_THE_WAR_UKR.pdf (access: February 14, 2025).
22 Razumkov Center (2024) Changes in the Ukrainian society; https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/identychnist-gromadian-ukrainy-tendentsii-zmin-cherven-2024r (access: February 14, 2025).

One of the participants in Hannover, Germany shared:

> *My family members in Germany just called everyone in Ukraine and helped them to settle in Germany if they decided to come to Germany*
>
> **[Woman, 21, Hannover]**

Having family or friends abroad or in a different location in Ukraine was indicated as the most important support network by most of the participants, even if the support is not measurable, but simply the fact of being present and helping navigate some daily tasks.

For some participants their closest networks were based on shared values and beliefs and often consisted of church/faith-based organization members or members of the diaspora organizations abroad serving as a symbolic representation of Ukraine and, who, at the same time, are capable of navigating reality abroad.

However, notably, the people from these organizations were rarely mentioned as employees or volunteers of a specific organization, but rather as individuals. For instance, they were mentioned by name rather than their position in the organization or diaspora association.

Considering the generally low level of trust in organizations, especially government actors, personalization of help received from outside of the closest network might be a mechanism of shifting the perception of help from institutionalized to personalized which is considered more acceptable.

A similar conceptualization was shared by the key informant from Germany mentioning that the bureaucracy has a human face and the support one gets often depends on a specific person working for the government institution.

In Poland, one of the participants followed the same approach to portray the support received from the local government representatives:

> *When we arrived in the village, the representatives of the local government helped us a lot. They were like our mentors — they helped us with all the paperwork, applying for child benefits*
>
> **[Woman, 42, Katowice]**

Some of the examples of such personalization can be observed in the stories of the IRC clients in Ukraine who participated in the study:

> *Just a few days ago, a missile hit our building in Odesa. It left us with no windows and no roof. My child fell and injured his leg. We contacted the {name}, IRC case worker, and two days later we had all the necessary clothes and hygiene items. My mom is a pensioner, and my husband is in the army, except for the case worker, I had no one to contact.*
>
> **[Female, 33, Odesa]**

> *I found information about the organization helping to solve issues with documentation, I don't remember the name of the organization. I called, and the guys {IRC case workers} came to the shelter, and they assisted me with applying for the disability certificate, they drove me to the hospital. Everything was free.*
>
> **[Male, 68, Dnipro]**

While generally perceived positively and cited as important, the close social networks and bonding social capital may have a negative side and can serve as a mechanism of exclusion rather than support. It can foster the us-them division and dissolution of social trust.

Not overwhelmingly, but especially refugees from regions in the closer proximity to the frontline, mentioned that they feel like they have lost the connection with their families and friends who remained in Ukraine, the refugee from the Donetsk region in Poland mentioned

> *We are constantly talking over the phone, but we don't have the same level of connectedness. Our life here is less intense, and they only talk about war and missiles.*
>
> **[Female, 32, Katowice]**

Also, regional ties and regional divisions, built on the close identification with their group and sometimes hostile attitude toward others, in some cases intensified the erosion of trust in others and a sense of alienation in their county, or abroad:

> *If your registration is in the Donetsk region, in many cases, landlords in Kyiv or Kharkiv will refuse to rent the flat to you. For those who already had similar experiences in their home country, going abroad was the better and sometimes the only option.*
>
> **[Female, 46, Berlin]**

> *If I had the power, if it were up to me, I would make it so people from Western Ukraine do not receive any aid at all. Back in Ukraine, they rent their flats to us, people from the East, at crazy prices, move to Poland, and then they have these organized groups, where they grab as much humanitarian aid goods, pack them into the vans, and get them delivered to Ukraine where they end up selling them – to IDPs from the eastern regions.*
>
> **[Female, 71, Katowice]**

There are also some within-group tensions among the refugees and IDPs:

> *I think some people use their IDP status for the wrong purpose. For example, when the situation in Mykolaiv became more stable, some people went to the nearby villages or Odesa and applied for IDP status to receive financial benefits.*
>
> **[Female, 21, Mykolaiv]**

The need to build a close network, however, seems to remain low and if there are tensions, participants mentioned some alternative ways to find a support network abroad. As mentioned previously, refugees from Ukraine abroad were incorporated into existing migrant/refugee networks, which do not exclusively consist of Ukrainians:

13 October 2022 — Mykolaiv, Ukraine
Residential buildings that were heavily damaged during a missile attack on October 1st, 2022.
Photo: Diana Zeyneb Alhindawi for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

> *Around 20-25 years ago, a lot of ethnic Jews and Germans arrived in Germany, they were mostly Russian speakers from the former Soviet states. And many of those people are not very well-integrated in Germany, they keep closer ties with each other, and they live in a parallel society. I wish I could speak German more often, but it's difficult for me to find someone to communicate with.*
>
> **[Female, 51, Hannover]**

But not all refugees choose to lock themselves in culturally or ethnically similar groups, some see an opportunity to obtain an intercultural experience while abroad:

> *I live in the city center. Germans don't live there. There are mostly families of Arabic descent in our building, very nice people, very polite. I had a slightly negative opinion about this ethnic group, but now it had changed*
>
> **[Female, 27, Chemnitz]**

At the same time, many participants abroad mentioned that it's difficult for them to integrate into host societies. Despite not feeling discriminated against, they don't feel connected to the host society:

> *Don't get me wrong, I don't think the German government did anything wrong. They provided us with all the help we needed. But how can they force Germans to accept us?*
>
> **[Female, 51, Hannover]**

Non-government support

- Viewed as more accessible than government assistance.
- Recognized as important, particularly when it has a long-term impact or is provided consistently (e.g., job se arch support, mentoring, psycho-social support or case management).
- Rarely cited as the primary support structure.
- Not typically considered as either a pull or push factor.

According to the Razumkov Center study published in October 2024[23], 80% of Ukrainians trust volunteer organizations, and 59% the non-government organizations. In comparison, only over 20% trust the parliament and the government.

According to the official statistics, in 2023 the number of charities and NGOs increased by 74%[24].

Similarly, UN Agencies, international organizations, and NGOs increased or established their presence in Ukraine after 2022[25]. While exact numbers are not known, most probably, thousands of international organizations, as well as local volunteers and civil society organization (CSOs), operate in Ukraine to respond to the needs of the affected population.

In Poland, especially in the first months after the escalation of the conflict, almost 29,000 organizations — NGOs, CSOs, and informal groups engaged in supporting refugees from Ukraine in Poland[26]. According to Mapujpomoc[27], over 800 service points, including local and international organizations still operating in Poland, are available to provide different forms of support, including material aid, housing and employment, psychological support, and healthcare.

In Germany, apart from the generous and comprehensive government support, diaspora organizations, NGOs, and charity organizations are engaged in supporting refugees from Ukraine. . It's difficult to estimate the numbers though.

Support provided by various aid organizations, while generally more accessible and easier to obtain, is not always viewed as impartial, and the criteria for receiving support are sometimes unclear to people seeking help.

Additionally, participants frequently had difficulty recalling which organization had offered support and seldom had a clear understanding of the type of organization involved. **Terms like UN, NGO, charity, and foundation were often used interchangeably.**

The returnee from Moldova mentioned: "

> *I receive aid from different organizations, including the church. I receive financial help from an UN agency once a year. Each organization treats our family differently — for some my pensioner parents are more vulnerable, for others it's me and my daughter with disability.*
>
> **[Female, 34, Zaporizhzhia]**

Similar stories were shared by participants in Poland, who mentioned that, for example, some organizations supported only households with more than 3 children, or financial aid was provided only to some households based on the vulnerabilities, but the patterns were not necessarily clear from the beginning.

The motive of shame and not needing the assistance was also prominent among the participants, as most of them had to face the need to ask and receive help for the first time:

> *I received some hygiene items, like soap or detergent, when we arrived. But now I would be ashamed to take anything for free. I think I should be the one helping others now, since many elderly people need help, not me.*
>
> **[Male, 39, Katowice]**

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23 Razumkov Center (2024) Trust in institutions; https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-sytuatsii-v-kraini-ta-diialnosti-vlady-dovira-do-sotsialnykh-instytutiv-politykiv-posadovtsiv-ta-gromadskykh-diiachiv-vira-v-peremogu-veresen-2024r (access: February 14, 2025).

24 Ministry of National Unity of Ukraine (2023) https://unity.gov.ua/2023/12/16/z-pochatku-vijny-v-ukrayini-suttyevo-zrosla-chyselnist-blagodijnyh-organizaczij/ (access: February 14, 2025).

25 OCHA. Ukraine humanitarian contact list (2022-2025) https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiMzFiNDQ2MTEtZDI-wOC00ODI1LTg1NjEtZmU5YTZkYThkODQxIiwidCI6IjBmOWUzNWRiLTU0NGYtNG Y2MC1iZGNjLTVlYTQxNmU2ZGM3MCIsImMiOjh9

26 https://www.ekai.pl/jak-polskie-organizacje-pozarzadowe-pomogly-ukrainie-raport/ (access: February 14, 2025).

27 The platform gathering information on available support services for refugees from Ukraine in Poland

In Germany, however, asking and receiving help seems to be more normalized thanks to a wide range of local organizations providing help to everyone who needs it, not only refugees from Ukraine:

> *There is an organization (Tafel) that regularly provides food to everyone who needs it, not only refugees, but it's also not unusual for locals to receive it too.*
> **[Female, 21, Hannover]**

At the more radical side, some participants indicated that there is no real help provided by the organizations that mushroomed after the beginning of the war in Ukraine abroad or the help they provide is not relevant.

> *You can visit many NGOs, and they promise you a lot, but then you just walk away with nothing.*
> **(Female, 42, Warsaw)**

This perception is much more common among the later arrivals, the participant who arrived in Germany in March 2023 mentioned:

> *I haven't come across any organizations providing psychological help, any help. Maybe they existed at the beginning of the war, but not anymore.*
> **[Female, 47, Hannover]**

Psychological help was mentioned by several participants as more accessible when provided by the NGOs than official government services. The IDP participant in Dnipro mentioned:

> *I think people trust non-governmental organizations more. It's easier to consult the psychologist at such an organization than to see a psychiatrist in your local hospital. They don't judge you and you can trust it's confidential and will not be shared with anyone.*
> **[Female, 17, Dnipro]**

The assistance participants mentioned as the most valuable is supporting self-reliance rather than humanitarian assistance per se.

Among the services that participants perceived as the most important, especially in Germany, there was tailored support for finding employment, whereas the government support was seen as limiting or insufficient.

One of the IRC Germany clients mentioned:

> *There were lots of projects supporting Ukrainians in Germany in 2022, and thanks to one of these projects with IRC, I learned how to look for jobs, write a CV, to communicate with Germans. Germany is an interesting case of a country where often you need to write a traditional paper letter. It's a cultural context I did not understand.*
> **[Female, 46, Berlin]**

Another participant, who was supported by the Ukrainian diaspora organization in Hannover added:

> *I'm very grateful to the Ukrainian diaspora organization. They helped me with translation and all diploma recognition procedures. And they said once the diploma is recognized, they will help me to find a job.*
> **[Female, 47, Hannover]**

13 October 2022 — Mykolaiv, Ukraine
Olga registers for a cash transfer program at a site on the outskirts of Mykolaiv.
Photo: Diana Zeyneb Alhindawi for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

In general, many participants felt like they needed a mentor, someone to help them reset their career in the new reality and ensure they are on track to self-sufficiency abroad:

> *Whatever I decide to do with my career, I need a mentor, someone to guide me. I have experience with the frame I'm used to functioning in, but it's not applicable anymore. I cannot say that my Job Center consultant is my mentor.*
>
> **[Female 39, Hannover]**

In both Ukraine and Poland, more participants expressed a preference for receiving support to start their own small business rather than seeking employment in the more challenging economic conditions. One participant also mentioned considering a move to Poland to start a business, citing the more complex bureaucratic procedures in Germany.

Grants to start a business, offered by NGOs alongside employment support, were also seen as a valuable path to self-sufficiency, with many participants suggesting that NGOs could focus more on providing this type of assistance.

The IDP participants in Mykolaiv and Odesa said:

> *What is missing are programs supporting starting micro-businesses, like co-operatives. For women in their fifties, who are not retired, but can't be very active in the labor market, this would be a perfect solution.*
>
> **[Female, 21, Mykolaiv]**

> *I completed a free manicure course, but if I wanted to start my business, I would need to buy a lot of supplies, and I don't have money to do that.*
>
> **[Female, 36, Odesa]**

27 November 2024 — Kherson region, Ukraine
Oleksandra is standing in their home yard. The household was damaged by shrapnel due to the missile attacks.
Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

Government support

- Government support is **often approached with caution, frequently viewed as insufficient** and **difficult to access** due to bureaucratic barriers. This perception may stem from a generally low level of trust in government institutions
- Government support, especially in Germany, while highly praised, is often seen as pigeonholing (e.g., assigning individuals to specific jobs)
- In Ukraine and Poland, decentralized support from local government bodies is more frequently cited as an important additional resource
- Government support is primarily recognized as a vital support structure by the most vulnerable populations
- While government assistance plays a significant role as a pull factor for refugees in Germany, it is less influential in Poland

Government support, as predicted, was cited as an important support structure mostly in Germany, where generous financial benefits are provided for the refugees from Ukraine. However, it was unconditionally perceived as positive only by the most vulnerable participants who cannot provide for themselves.

Certain categories of participants in Germany, such as pensioners or persons with disabilities, cited government support as the key factor influencing their decision to stay, at least until the end of the war. One participant shared that in Germany, all the necessary conditions had been established to help people with disabilities function effectively. He explained,

> *In Ukraine, I couldn't even go to the city center by myself. In Germany, I was able to buy a new wheelchair. I could have waited and received it for free, but that would have taken much longer*
>
> **(Male, 38, Hannover).**

Another participant, a pensioner, added:

> *I can support myself here, which I couldn't do in Ukraine. I will stay in Germany as long as I can, and I'm also able to financially support my daughter in Ukraine*
>
> **[Female, 68, Hannover].**

The stability provided by welfare benefits and access to medical care was also seen as important by participants who experienced temporary challenges in sustaining their livelihoods. One participant from Berlin shared:

> *In December 2023, after working for over a year and a half, I felt completely exhausted. I ended up in the hospital. I was just so tired that I couldn't even stand up. It was the first time in my life I'd been on medical leave for six months. In a few months, I want to start working again*
>
> **[Female, 45, Berlin]**

At the same time, another participant offered a different perspective, noting that while government support is an important factor in her decision to stay in Germany, the underlying reason lies in the impossibility of returning to her place of residence. She explained:

> *Of course, this financial aid is very important, and it keeps me here, but then – I have nowhere to return to. Horlivka is occupied, Bakhmut is destroyed.*
>
> **[Female, 46, Berlin]**

The perception of the importance of government support may also vary depending on the priorities associated with different stages of life:

> *When I speak with my sister, who is older and has been living in Germany for a long time, she always points to good healthcare, social services, and pensions in Germany. She wanted our mom to stay and get the pension too. But I think I might be too young to understand the importance of all these factors when deciding to stay or to leave. I think she is right, but for me having family or friends is more important.*
>
> **[Female, 32, Berlin]**

While generally receiving high praise, some participants noted that generous government support can sometimes act as a barrier to personal development and career advancement. As one participant mentioned:

> *My niece was in Germany for a few months, and she couldn't adapt. She held managerial positions in Ukraine and in Germany, the Job Center told to learn the language and take any job they would offer. It's difficult for someone in their 40s to lose their position in society.*
>
> **[Female, 64, Kyiv]**

This perception was shared by many participants in Germany, as most had to significantly alter their career paths. For some, this experience proved to be beneficial and enriching, while for others, it became a challenging period during which they had to seek support from friends, family, or non-governmental organizations.

Moving to Poland and available government support, most participants with children benefit from child allowances (so-called 800+), which they value as a helpful additional source of income. Nonetheless, none of the participants considered the child allowance a decisive factor in their decision-making.

The returnee from Poland, who had been residing in a small town with her husband working full-time, however, expressed a positive view of the child benefits. She noted that these benefits served as a significant support system for mothers with young children, providing a crucial safety net. According to this participant:

> *In Poland they have a perfectly calculated amount of money a mother needs for the child. I was not worried we would have nothing to eat, it took a lot of psychological burden off my shoulders. In Ukraine, with child benefits, you can't cover any of the needs.*
>
> **[Female, 30, Zaporizhzhia]**

Certain patterns of self-selection were also noticeable—many participants in Poland chose the country as their temporary residence with the understanding that they would not be able to support themselves without salaried work. For instance, one IRC client in Warsaw shared:

> *I cannot reply on behalf of all refugees from Ukraine, but I want to work. If I wanted to receive all these benefits, I would just have to put life on pause and wait. That would be precisely like the situation with my friend in Norway, where they do not go to work because they earn more from support than they can earn by going to a job.*
>
> **(Female, 44, Warsaw)**

In Ukraine, only specific categories of internally displaced persons (IDPs) continued to receive financial support at the time of data collection. Remainers and returnees, on the other hand, often receive minimal financial assistance, such as child benefits or pensions if eligible.

Some IDPs from the non-governmental areas (NGA) reported receiving non-financial aid (e.g., food or hygiene products) from their local governments relocated to different cities in Ukraine, for example Dnipro as one of the key hubs hosting large populations of IDPs. One IDP participant shared that government financial support is regarded as a supplementary income source, rather than a primary one. She said:

> *I would not say it is a big help for us. My salary is sufficient to cover our expenses. This is just an extra help.*
>
> **[Female, 24, Dnipro]**

The most common scenarios

28 November 2023 — Kherson oblast, Ukraine
A shelled school bus. The remote village in Kherson region was on the frontline for many months.
Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

Recognizing the unique circumstances of each participant, but aiming to provide a broader perspective, this chapter outlines the most common scenarios, categorizing them based on the key motives behind participants' decisions. While some characteristics may overlap, the goal is to offer the most thorough analysis possible.

Life on hold or “trapped” populations

While the feeling of „putting life on hold” was a sentiment often shared by participants in all three countries, for some it was more prominent than their usual routines were broken after the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

One of the most shared experiences was losing the ability to freely and openly communicate with other people due to moving to a different country without speaking the language, like the two female participants in Hannover, who volunteer in the Ukrainian diaspora organization. One of them shared:

> *Now I can't ask a simple question. If it was not for my friend (who speaks Russian and German), I would be completely mute.*
>
> **[Female, 68, Hannover].**

Another one, the 70-year-old female also added that her grandson became her voice, and he is responsible for all communication in German on her behalf. Similar stories were shared by participants in Poland.

For some IDPs in Ukraine and remainers, the pause is caused and associated with bureaucracy or legal limitations for a specific group. The stories of the two men, completely different in demographic characteristics are quoted below to illustrate this case.

The 68-year-old man, an IDP from the Luhansk region in Dnipro, said:

> *I don't make any plans, because I don't know what I can expect. My wife applied for compensation for the ruined house, but they just said — wait. When the war is over, the inspector must go to your village and take pictures of the ruined house. The committee will decide based on the pictures what portion of the price can be reimbursed.*
>
> **[Male, 68, Dnipro]**

Other participants, especially those displaced from rural areas, often mentioned that their houses and farms were not only the source of their livelihoods, but all their lives. Losing them put these participants in limbo, especially if they couldn't work and provide for themselves another way.

At the same time, due to martial law and mandatory conscription for male citizens of Ukraine, for some men, the job may become the only possibility to avoid mobilization they oppose for various reasons. A 35-year-old male respondent who works in the state enterprise said:

> *I can't say my job is a dead-end, but if I were to change it, I wouldn't receive a mobilization reservation. State enterprises don't pay high salaries, but they provide you with this stability, even if it is a career stagnation.*
>
> **[Male, 35, Kyiv]**

The third sub-group included in this category is "military wives". One of the examples below illustrates how the military service of the husband or another significant male family member can influence the lives of other household members, especially women.

> *All my plans are correlated with my husband's military service. And there are many ambiguities around when and whether he will return to a normal life. My life is stable otherwise, I have an apartment, and a good job, but on the other hand, there is no stability.*
>
> **[Female, 37, Kyiv]**

Moreover, the inability to regularly see the husband/partner or another male family member who could not/did not want to leave Ukraine was often quoted as a reason to return to Ukraine or a key decisive factor to stay in Ukraine despite safety concerns. The selected quotes below illustrate this finding:

> *Among my peers, all women who moved to Western Ukraine, are already back in Kyiv. All who moved abroad are still there. Many are already divorced.*

> *If the man is in the army, most likely his family is falling apart or already has fallen apart. I'm not even talking about men who died. There are three types of women: the woman who waits for her man to return, a widow, and a woman who decides to live her life somewhere else.*
>
> **[Female, 37, Kyiv]**

> *Not seeing your children growing up, and not seeing your family is the biggest tragedy of Ukrainian men.*
>
> **[Male, 36, Mykolaiv]**

All the participants in this group, despite huge demographic differences, indicated that they do not need any help apart from what they already receive somewhat unconditionally. The working-age participants also stressed that despite putting their professional development on hold, they do not seek support from others as they have an overall positive assessment of their situation.

Who?

- People who had lost their houses and/or livelihoods
- Men in "safe" jobs in Ukraine
- "Military wives"

What?

- Putting career development on hold (intentionally or not)
- Limiting communication outside the closes circle of family/friends
- Short-term planning or lack of planning for the future
- Not asking for help unless provided unconditionally

What can be done for these groups?

- Creating tailored support structures (e.g., combination of legal and financial support to rebuild the destroyed property)
- Psychological support/support groups with flexible access
- Possibilities to develop skills or obtain new skills (even if not for the immediate use)

Living the lives of others

The second group of participants sometimes overlaps with the group "Life on hold", but attending to the needs of dependents or other family members was the main task of most of them even before the full-scale war.

When the full-scale war started, for some it became the goal and mission to take care of others who are not able to do it themselves. The caregivers, typically women, are keeping the families and communities together in times of crises, therefore this group consists of female participants only. They also, more often than other groups analyzed in this research, find themselves in precarious or informal employment or, on the contrary, prolonged unemployment.

The returnee from Poland and Canada, who stayed with her children and grandchildren for over a year in 2022-2023, a 63-year-old female in Mykolaiv shared:

> *My only tragedy caused by this war is that my family is not here. Nothing else matters for me*
>
> **[Female, 63, Mykolaiv].**

15 February 2023 — Odesa, Ukraine
Tetiana and her two children —13-year-old Katya who has special needs and 4-year-old Arisha— receive washing machine and kits from the IRC
Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

The participant works despite being a pensioner and she decided to return to Ukraine to be with her husband, who did not want to leave Ukraine. She mentioned that she found a new job in Mykolaiv, and it is a good time for her development but knowing that her children and grandchildren are staying abroad breaks her heart and she spends most of her day talking to them online.

Similarly, a 71-year-old female in Katowice (Poland) mentioned:

> *I plan to return to Poland once my grandkid is safe. That is, unless I find him a place where I can stay too.*
>
> **[Female, 71, Katowice)]**

A 70-year-old woman in Hannover added:

> *I will do whatever my daughter and son-in-law decide to do. They plan to come to Germany and maybe buy some property. In Ukraine they already have a successful business, here they will have to start from scratch. Also, my grandson in his twenties cannot return.*
>
> **[Female, 70, Hannover]**

When the child or children have a disability, the caregiver responsibilities are even more commonly placed on women alone — in the recent study conducted in Ukraine, 72% of women reported that they are single parents of children with disability. Most of these participants are of productive age, but due to being unemployed or underemployed and discrimination, they experience economic and social marginalization[28].

At least 13% of families fleeing Ukraine have a child with disabilities[29]. One in five internally displaced persons in Ukraine has a development delay or disability[30].

28 Kurylo H., Biriukova T., Ilchenko Y., Levshukova O., Ahern L., Milovanovic D.C., Brizuela L., Kowalski C., Rodriguez P. (2023) Families find a way: children with disabilities in war-torn Ukraine; https://www.driadvocacy.org/reports/families-find-way-children-disabilities-war-torn-ukraine (access: February 14, 2025).
29 The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR (2022) https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/94176 (access: February 14, 2025).
30 The United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF (2022), https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/ukraine-war-response-children-disabilities (access: February 14, 2025).

Juggling multiple caregiver responsibilities and non-mother and caregiver-friendly jobs may cause women to withdraw from the labor market and rely on the income of other household members or welfare benefits, or search for lower paid (e.g. part-time or less demanding jobs below qualifications). In the situation of displacement — whether internal or external, finding employment can be even more challenging for women with caregiver responsibilities, especially considering displacement is often linked to losing support networks, access to medical services, and educational opportunities for children. The returnee from Lithuania in Zaporizhzhia shared:

> *I just wish the schools and pre-schools would reopen and be safe. I would be able to go to work, even part-time, and I would be able to talk to someone outside my house. I want to do something for myself, read a book, brush my hair, and be back to the normal life I had before the war*
>
> **[Female, 34, Zaporizhzhia]**

An IDP in Odesa, mother of a child with a disability added:

> *The kindergartens are rarely open in general. Even if they are, they do not accept children with special needs. I wish I could have some time for myself, to learn something, to run errands and my child would spend time with other children at the same time.*
>
> **[Female, 33, Odesa]**

Another participant in the similar situation pointed that ensuring safety and accessing the services for her children became her main motivation to stay in Ukraine, but a safer location, after the beginning of the war in her hometown of Kherson:

> *I decided to come to Odesa [from Kherson], because of the services available here. My child is 5 years old, and he does not speak at all, I wanted to find specialists to help him. The doctors here understand what happened to children like that, I'm not sure they would know what to do with a child whose development stopped due to the war if we went abroad*
>
> **[Female, 49, Odesa]**

Who?

- Mothers of young children and children with special needs
- Grandmothers
- Members of separated families

What?

- Focusing on the needs of others (dependents or not)
- Neglecting one's needs to help others
- Relying on others financially
- "Giving up control" over one's life
- Planning depends on the needs of others

What can be done?

- Creating a support group (people with similar interests)
- Investing in development
- Financial support (e.g., to cover the cost of services ensuring caregiver relief) or other forms of caregiver relief

14 September 2024 — Katowice, Poland
Ukrainian refugee from Mykolaiv, Maryna, a client of the IRC and partners Livelihood center, next to the tram at the training area.
Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

Redefinition — a new beginning

While the name of the groups suggests that the participants were on track to defining their lives and careers, which is generally perceived as a positive change, many shared that despite being on the path to self-reliance and adapting to the new realities, they face many challenges. One of the IRC clients, who received a grant to start a small business shared:

> *In Ukraine, I was focused on development, I had a few small businesses. And when I arrived in rural Poland, a whole new sphere of development opened for me, but mostly in the cleaning services. But I don't regret it, I had an opportunity to learn the language at that time. I had to accept that new reality and deal with it. After one year, having basic language skills, I decided I could move out and find better opportunities for myself.*

[Female, 32, Katowice]

For another participant, who is a medical doctor currently living in Germany, the experience is still stressful, but she is finding ways to adapt with the support she receives from the local diaspora organization:

> *I never thought that I would have to start my life from scratch at the age of 45. It's very difficult to start over, to move to a new country with a small suitcase. All my achievements and all my knowledge are there, but I'm sure I will be able to use them in Germany.*

[Female, 47, Hannover]

For younger participants who value their freedom and education, the redefinition could have been both returning to Ukraine and moving to a different country if they feel supported:

> *I found peace when I returned to Ukraine. In Germany you can't live the life you want to live — you must attend the language course and take the job they offer you. If you don't want to follow the rules, the state will not support you. Here I have choices, I did not want to go to university this year, I took a gap year, I work part-time, and my parents support me financially*
>
> **[Female, 18, Dnipro]**

> *I would like to continue studying in Germany. I spoke with the recruitment office at the German university of my choice, but they were not sure if I could continue the same specialization or would need to switch to something similar. But if I can't continue with the same specialization, I would probably consider other universities in Germany.*
>
> **[Female, 21, Hannover]**

While trying hard to invest in professional development, many participants in this group noted that they face language barriers, like the IRC client in Katowice:

> *At first, I felt like they [coworkers] tried to understand me. But after some time, they started mocking me for my poor Polish language. When everyone went out for a cigarette, I was standing there with them and felt like I was mute. This is when I realized I would not be able to live here without speaking the language. When I opened my workshop and thought it would be a problem, it was not. Some clients mock my accent, but they return and bring new clients because I'm good at what I do.*
>
> **[Male, 39, Katowice]**

Who?

- Mostly participants utilizing previous experiences
- Mostly younger participants
- Participants who felt supported at critical moments of their journeys

What?

- Feeling supported and offering support to others
- Using resources available
- Integration efforts
- Self-development as a priority

What can be done?

- Financial support to develop
- Non-financial support (coaching, mentoring) to grow

(De)Normalizing the unthinkable — (un)safety bias

After the beginning of the full-scale war, each of the research participants needed to decide on what to do next – stay, move to a different location in Ukraine, or move abroad. The key aspect they considered was safety; however, the sense and perception of safety are subjective.

The difference in perception was visible between the remainers and "leavers", however, both seem to be the sides of the same coin – normalizing the safety threats in those who stayed and rejecting the possibility to return for those who left.

While one group prioritizes safety over other factors, including being homesick or unable to realize the potential fully elsewhere, another one uses normalizing strategies to cope with the sense of uncertainty and unsafety. What both groups have in common though, is refusing to seek help and trying to resolve their issues on their own. Moreover, the IDPs and remainers in Ukraine, seem to perceive the need to ask for help as stigmatizing and emphasize their own capacity to deal with distress.

Notably, returnees who had negative some experiences abroad are also part of this group, and their perception of safety is associated with their situation rather than the safety situation in the country.

One of the participants, who left Zaporizhzhia in the first week after the beginning of the full-scale invasion with her husband, experienced domestic violence in Poland and decided to return to her home city, despite it being close to the frontline and under constant attack. She shared:

> *During the last two years, I realized that it was scary in Ukraine, but overall, I can live here. These massive attacks and the fear I experience here are nothing compared to what I have been through in Poland.*
>
> **[Female, 30, Zaporizhzhia]**

Another participant from Mykolaiv - another city in a similar situation, an IDP from the Kherson region, mentioned that despite going through huge emotional stress when a missile hit her apartment building, she was able to cope herself and did not ask for support.

> *I think Ukrainians in Ukraine normalized so many events that are unacceptable for people abroad. Like death, living under constant threat, or even lack of electricity. I wasn't seeking professional psychological help even after a missile hit the building where I lived. It was crazy. I remember sleeping through the following few days. But in hindsight, I think it was not so bad, I did not feel the need to seek psychological help.*
>
> **[Female, 21, Mykolaiv]**

At the same time, another IDP from Kherson in Odesa had an opposite opinion and mentioned:

> *I don't want to go back, not anymore. I understand that everything is destroyed there, there is nothing to return to. And I want my children to grow up in a better place, not the war-torn Kherson.*
>
> **[Female, 36, Odesa]**

Motivation to ensure that the children grow up in safe place also seems to be more socially desirable than openly speaking about the fears and not wanting to cope with unsafe environment as the returnee from Poland commented:

> *I think most people like me returned, I mean the pensioners. Younger colleagues who have children stayed abroad.*
>
> **[Female, 64, Kyiv]**

Unlike the returnees, who rarely spent a long time abroad, most of the participants of this research lived in Poland or Germany for over 2 years at the time of the interview. Most did not feel well-integrated or realizing their full potential, however, they often presented the opposite of risk aversion strategies mentioned by participants in Ukraine, especially when they had already experienced internal displacement in Ukraine before:

> *I am honestly scared to go back, even though I have seen what war is before. Humans adapt quickly to anything, but faster to a good life perhaps.*
>
> **[Female, 68, Gdynia]**

15 February 2023 — Odesa, Ukraine
Tetiana and her two children —13-year-old Katya who has special needs and 4-year-old Arisha—receive washing machine and kits from the IRC
Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

For others, the criteria were the safety concerns and limited perspectives of development in Ukraine, even if the active war phase is over:

> *I cannot imagine what the country after the war ends will look like.*
> **[Female, 27, Chemnitz]**

Who?

- Younger participants
- Participants with experience of multiple displacements
- Participants valuing safety over emotional attachments to the place of residence

What?

- Not asking/stigmatizing asking for help
- Not willing to change the situation or claiming the situation is the best possible option
- Returning to unsafe locations or the wish never to return to the habitual place of residence
- Conflicting priorities

What can be done?

- Psychological support to help cope with the uncertainty
- Financial support (e.g., to cover the costs of moving to a safer location)
- Support structures to ensure adaptation in case of the move

What is next?

12 August 2024 — Mykolaiv, Ukraine
Ivan (all blue) and David (white shorts), are playing outside their house.
Their house burned down as a result of a missile attack, but the family is rebuilding it now.
Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

In September 2024, 83% of Ukrainians surveyed in Ukraine believed that Ukraine will win the war, and majority of them thought that it will happen within the next year or two [31]. In November, a different poll showed a result of 88% believing in the victory of Ukraine [32].

With the new president of US Donald Trump entering the office and promising to broker a peace deal within a short period, the hopes for the war to end are becoming even more prominent [33].

At the same time, according to the latest data, it is reported that half of those currently in Germany plan to stay after the war ends [34]. In Poland, the proportion is even higher – 71% of surveyed refugees, plan to

31 Razumkov Center (2024) Trust to institutions and trust in the victory; https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-sytuatsii-v-kraini-ta-diialnosti-vlady-dovira-do-sotsialnykh-instytutiv-polytykiv-posadovtsiv-ta-gromadskykh-diiachiv-vira-v-peremogu-veresen-2024r (access: February 14, 2025).
32 Ukrainska Pravda (2024) Poll shows 88% of Ukrainians believe Ukraine will win war against Russia, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/11/13/7484332/ (access: February 14, 2025)
33 New York Times (2025) Trump Vowed to End the Ukraine War Before Taking Office. The War Rages On https://www.ny-times.com/2025/01/19/us/politics/trump-promise-ending-ukraine-war.html (access: February 14, 2025).
34 Frymark K. (2023) Ukrainians are slowly adapting to life in Germany; https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-08-25/ukrainians-are-slowly-adapting-to-life-germany (access: February 14, 2025).

stay in the present location in Poland at least for the next 12 months[35]. And the Ukrainian government launches the unity hubs in the countries with the largest populations of Ukrainian refugees. The main aim is to keep Ukrainians connected to their homeland[36]

While even after 3 years of the full-scale war in Ukraine it's unclear what the future holds, most of the participants of this research project and millions of others affected, most likely will have to reconsider some of their choices. For example, if the martial law is suspended, will male participants who can't leave Ukraine now, decide to leave? Will refugees who managed to find stability abroad return? Will those who coped with the reality of war successfully adapt to the post-war situation?

One thing is clear: while there were some "success stories," most participants faced instability, particularly given their lower tendency to take risks or pursue new initiatives.

Even if refugees abroad are not employed or integrated, it is unclear who will decide to return to Ukraine and when. Most of the key informants in Ukraine, who work for the government, social services or in education institutions, pointed that after over 2 years of the conflict, the peace or cease fire will not be enough to bring back people who will be looking for stable employment, housing, availability of the third places for leisure activities. Only some cities in Ukraine will be able to provide those opportunities, however, none of them would be the same as before the beginning of the full-scale war. The participant from the NGAs will have even more difficult choice to make:

> *I think benefits are important, but you also need to think about the situation in Ukraine the person will be returning to. If someone has a house or a flat that is not damaged or destroyed, they can focus on finding a "good" job, knowing that they can return anytime if it's not happening. People from the territories under Russia's control or those who have lost their houses are probably more prone to accept any job and learn the language faster*
>
> **[Female, 32, Berlin]**

Some participant expressed a more emotional assessment of the situation and saw no chance of returning to Ukraine:

> *I don't see my future in Ukraine. After living in Germany for some time, I feel like something broke, I would not be able to return to Ukraine, live in the same flat, work at the same hospital. I want to try something new. If I will be able to make it, I want to stay, become a citizen, pay taxes in Germany. I think that even when the war is over, there is still a long time to wait until it's livable again*
>
> **[Female, 47, Hannover]**

The same might be true for participants from different parts of Ukraine, who don't own the property or those who see better development perspective elsewhere:

> *Even if the war is over in the next 6 months, I don't think I would come back to Kharkiv. I don't have a job, a flat, or my family there.*
>
> **[Female, 27, Chemnitz]**

For others, particularly some of the most vulnerable participants, staying abroad may not be driven by work opportunities but by the availability of social protection mechanisms.

35 The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR (2025) Poland - Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS) - Results Analysis, November 2024; https://reliefweb.int/report/poland/poland-socio-economic-insights-survey-seis-results-analysis-november-2024 (access: February 14, 2025).

36 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2025) Ukraine Races To Bring Back Refugees As Labor Crisis Deepens, https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-labor-shortage-refugee-return-unity-hubs/33300521.html (access: February 14, 2025)

> *One of my friends has a child with special needs. She says that here, in Germany, she knows that she will not be left alone and homeless while she learns the German language. She has a part-time job and financial support from the government, which makes it possible to provide for herself and the child. They live, they breathe. And people Germany accept the child with special needs without any limitation*
>
> **[Female, 46, Berlin]**

While all provided quotes are from the participants from Germany, the participants in Poland shared very similar thoughts.

Other participants also pointed to the identity struggles they go through when trying to establish new lives abroad:

> *30% of the infrastructure in my hometown is destroyed, and there is no electricity. I was considering buying a property somewhere else in Ukraine, but then I realized that there is a negative aura around me in Ukraine – I'm bad because I'm from the Donetsk region, and I'm bad because I speak Russian. In Poland, I'm bad for other Ukrainians because I don't work 12-hour shifts in the factory but have an office job. I'm very tired of being perceived as bad by everyone. I think I might consider working in both Poland and Ukraine, but returning to Ukraine permanently is not an option for me.*
>
> **[Female, 42, Katowice]**

While it is impossible to predict if new waves of displacement from Ukraine will occur, for now, most people who remained, were internally displaced, or returned to Ukraine do not consider leaving. At the same time, very few are making long-term plans and are open to different scenarios depending on the security situation in Ukraine. However, some have tried to cope with the uncertainty by creating a more comfortable environment for themselves and their children.

> *I don't plan to move anywhere. I depend on my husband, and he has a job here. I can't imagine going somewhere without any money. We are adapted to the new situation here. My only pain point is education. I realized many professionals left and there are very few high-level professionals who stayed in Ukraine. The best teachers left. And online school is terrible. During air alert children sit in the basement, it's not a real education. I do everything I can to improve my children's access to education here instead of thinking how to leave*
>
> **[Female, 36, Dnipro]**

As noted at the beginning of the report, Ukrainians who fled the country in 2022 possess a certain degree of geographic mobility. However, at the time of the interview, only three participants expressed any intention to change their country of residence. One had moved from Germany to Poland, another was considering relocating to either Poland or Czechia due to more favorable conditions for starting a business compared to Germany, and the third mentioned a desire to fulfill her dream of living in the U.S. and pursuing a career in the movie industry.

Key push & pull factors by country

12 January 2023 — Kherson, Ukraine
Lyubov, a local citizen. Her apartment, where she lives with her paralyzed husband, was heavily damaged because of the explosions next to the house two days ago. She has registered her house for the IRC installation of the OSB-panels.
Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

To conclude the report, the key push and pull factors by country will be presented to summarize the research findings. Notably, despite representing a diverse range of socio-demographic groups, nearly all participants consistently highlighted the same factors. When asked to identify the most important consideration in their decision to stay or leave their current country, the most frequently mentioned factor was the presence of close family and friends, followed by security conditions and available services. This trend remains consistent throughout the report and is essential to understanding the mobility patterns of those affected by the war in Ukraine.

Ukraine

Push factors

- Security situation
- Residing in NGA (non-government-controlled area)

Pull factors

- Family and/or support networks
- Opportunities (e.g., for professional development compared to other countries)
- Feeling homesick & difficulty adapting abroad

Poland

Push factors

- Financial situation
- Lack of employment
- Inability to cover the costs of living
- Lack of housing

Pull factors

- Family and/or support networks
- Geographic, cultural, and linguistic proximity
- Easy access to the labor market and/or starting the business

Germany

Push factors

- Bureaucracy (long waiting time, rigid procedures)
- Limited possibilities for career development and/or starting the business

Pull factors

- Generous welfare
- Family and/or support networks
- Previous connection to the country or previous interest to migrate to Germany

12 August 2024 — Mykolaiv, Ukraine
Iryna, an IRC client, and a senior resident of the village is showing around her house. Her house was destroyed as a result of missile attack, but woman is rebuilding it now. Photo: Tamara Kiptenko for the IRC © International Rescue Committee

How Social Capital and Support Structures Shape the Experiences of People Affected by the War in Ukraine. The Case of Ukraine, Poland, and Germany. 2024-2025

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