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# Ukraine's fight for its people

## Strategies for refugee and diaspora engagement

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## Summary

- Almost 7 million Ukrainians have left their country since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, according to UN figures. The numbers who say they plan to return are dropping steadily. Many of the adults who left are highly educated and skilled. As the Ukrainian government is keenly aware, the permanent loss of these people will have profound negative effects on Ukraine's economy, demography and prospects for rebuilding.
- This paper offers strategies to mitigate the effects of this outflow from Ukraine. Based on available data and original research, the paper considers the situation of Ukrainian refugees abroad and their pre-conditions for returning; how the flight of people affects the country's economic and demographic outlook; and Ukrainian government approaches to the return of refugees and to Ukraine's diaspora community.
- Most of the refugees are women and children, although rising numbers of fighting-age men are leaving, despite the prohibition placed on them under martial law. Ukrainian refugees have integrated into host countries' labour markets more quickly than other refugee groups, notwithstanding some variations. However, in many cases, Ukrainian refugees are in low-skilled jobs that do not match their abilities and education.
- Ukrainian refugees fleeing the invasion have 'temporary protection status' in host countries, whereby they can work and receive social assistance, but have no right to permanent residency. What happens when their temporary status expires is uncertain in most cases. Some countries (such as the UK, Norway) refuse to consider permanent settlement. However, host-country concerns about accommodating a long-term Ukrainian population contrast with evidence (as in Poland, Czechia) of the economic benefits of having young, skilled arrivals.
- The longer the full-scale war continues, the smaller will be the percentage of refugees who are willing to return to Ukraine. The focus group and expert interviews conducted for this paper revealed several pre-conditions that would influence refugees' decisions to return. 'Pull' factors attracting returnees to Ukraine would include: an improved security situation in the country; improved economic prospects; de-mining and infrastructure rebuilding; Ukrainian government support for returnees; and progress on democratic reforms and EU integration. 'Push' factors likely to increase refugees' desire to leave their host country include: an inability to find appropriate work in the host country; high living costs; reduction of social support by the host country; and the inability to acquire permanent residency abroad.

- In a worst-case scenario, the Ukrainian government foresees up to 3.3 million Ukrainians remaining abroad, which would cause significant economic losses. It estimates needing 4.5 million people for the rebuilding effort. Population decline is another serious risk, given that women of child-bearing age and their children are the main groups who left. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has repeatedly stated that the return of refugees is vital for the country's future, and has warned that the pension system will be unsustainable if millions of Ukrainians do not return.
- Many Ukrainians abroad – both refugees and those who left before 2022 – express a willingness to contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction. Yet they criticize previous official approaches that have seemed coercive in trying to increase returns, or divisive in comparing those who stayed with those who left. Until recently, no coherent strategy existed to engage with the diaspora. Government efforts to rectify this have included creating a dedicated Ministry of National Unity and a position of ambassador-at-large for global Ukrainians.
- This paper argues for a two-pronged approach to addressing the challenges arising from the presence of large numbers of Ukrainians abroad: (i) create conditions for and encourage the return of refugees; and (ii) cooperate more effectively with Ukrainians abroad, whether refugees or non-refugee members of the diaspora, to involve them in Ukraine's reconstruction. The paper offers recommendations with a key theme: that the Ukrainian government should take a 'human-centred' approach, acknowledging individuals' intentions and avoiding the perception of pressuring them to return.
  - **Short-term actions for the government should include:** public-private partnerships to provide housing and jobs to Ukrainians motivated to return; possibilities for those staying abroad to work remotely with Ukrainian public and private entities; simplified consular services for Ukrainians abroad; completion of legislation to allow multiple citizenship; the creation of physical and digital spaces to connect Ukrainians at home and abroad; and automatic recognition of qualifications gained abroad.
  - **Medium- and long-term aims for the government should be to:** simplify rules for businesses; offer grants or loans to entrepreneurs; encourage economic contributions by Ukrainians abroad via remittances, investments and joint business projects; develop financial incentives such as 'diaspora bonds'; offer global Ukrainians the chance to participate more easily in decision-making in Ukraine; continue to fight corruption, enhance democracy and the rule of law; and pursue EU integration.
  - **Actions for Ukraine's partners should be to:** upskill and reskill Ukrainian refugees in host countries to match Ukraine's labour market and reconstruction needs; support human capital initiatives under existing EU programmes like the Ukraine Facility; plan for the expiry of temporary protection; support displaced Ukrainians to work remotely; and allow freedom of movement back to Ukraine, so refugees do not have to choose to stay abroad permanently.

## Introduction

Almost 7 million Ukrainians – one in six of the pre-war population – have left their country since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, according to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR.<sup>1</sup> Many have not yet returned, and, with the war at its three-year mark, many are unlikely to be returning in the near future – if ever. Less than half of Ukrainian refugees declared that they intend to go back home, when asked in late 2024. This was in stark contrast with the early months of the full-scale invasion, when three-quarters of Ukrainians abroad saw their displacement as temporary.<sup>2</sup> The majority of Ukraine's war refugees are women and children, although the numbers of men who are refugees have been growing steadily. Many adults are highly educated and skilled. The permanent loss of these people and the human capital they represent will have a profoundly negative impact on Ukraine in terms of its demographic composition, its economy and its prospects for post-war rebuilding.

The Ukrainian government is trying to encourage the return of Ukrainians from abroad. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has repeatedly stated that their return is vital for the country's future.<sup>3</sup> In September 2024, the government approved a demographic strategy for the period up to 2040. The strategy identifies the return of Ukrainians as a priority, along with other measures, such as encouraging childbirth and policy changes to attract foreign migrants to Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> In December 2024, a new Ministry of National Unity was created to focus on fostering ties with Ukrainians abroad and encouraging their return to the country.

Based on the available data and the author's original research, this paper seeks to address the following questions:

1. What is the situation of Ukrainian refugees abroad and what pre-conditions for return have they expressed? How can their return be encouraged?
2. How is the outflow of refugees affecting Ukraine's demographics and economy?
3. What is the Ukrainian government's current approach to its diaspora community?
4. Assuming that a number of Ukrainians will remain abroad post-war, what would be an effective strategy of engagement with the global community of Ukrainians?

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<sup>1</sup> State Statistics Service of Ukraine (2023), 'Demographic situation in 2021', 12 June 2023, <https://stat.gov.ua/en/publications/demographic-situation-2021>; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2025), 'Ukraine Refugee Situation', Operational Data Portal, updated 19 February 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> (accessed 23 Feb. 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Economic Strategy (2025), 'Ukrainian Refugees After Three Years Abroad. Fourth Wave of Research', <https://ces.org.ua/en/refugees-fourth-wave>.

<sup>3</sup> Polyakovska, T. (2024), 'Зеленський зробив заяву про повернення українців з-за кордону "без примусу"' [Zelenskyy made a statement about Ukrainians abroad returning 'without coercion'], *Unian*, 27 August 2024, <https://www.unian.ua/society/ukrajinci-za-kordonom-zelenskiy-zrobiv-zayavu-pro-povernennya-ukrajinciv-bez-primusu-12739986.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2024), 'Decree on the approval of the demographic development strategy until 2040', 30 September 2024, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/npas/pro-skhvalennia-stratehii-demohrafichnoho-rozvytku-ukrainy-na-period-do-2040-roku-922r-300924>.

Drawing on a variety of research methods, including a focus group of 12 Ukrainian refugees in the UK, in-depth interviews with sociologists, economists, migration studies experts and Ukrainian government officials, and a roundtable on the initial findings of this research, the paper will provide actionable recommendations to Ukraine and its international partners.

## Ukrainian refugees and their shifting situation

The outflow of people from Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion has significantly increased the size of the Ukrainian global community. Before 2022, that community comprised mostly economic migrants who had left during the period 1990 to 2010, as well as descendants of the Ukrainian diaspora who had left in the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. This paper will mainly focus on those Ukrainians who fled the country after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. While this paper refers to Ukrainian citizens who have fled since 2022 as 'refugees', it acknowledges the limitations of the terminology as most Ukrainians who left have received 'temporary protection status', which is different from that of an 'asylum seeker' or a 'refugee' due to its temporary nature.<sup>5</sup> Ukrainians who were granted temporary protection status in the EU and other countries received immediate access to the job market and social support; however, they do not have a right to permanent residency in host countries.<sup>6</sup>

## The outflow of people from Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion has significantly increased the size of the Ukrainian global community.

There is conflicting data on the number of Ukrainian refugees who have fled abroad since the invasion. UNHCR provides a figure of 6.3 million Ukrainians in Europe and 6.9 million globally.<sup>7</sup> However, these numbers include official data on Ukrainians from the governments of Russia and Belarus; such data is hard to verify and might be exaggerated. An important caveat is that many Ukrainians, especially children, have been forcibly deported to Russia and are unable to leave.<sup>8</sup> The Ukrainian government's estimate is higher: in August 2024, President Zelenskyy referred to there being 7.5 million Ukrainian refugees.<sup>9</sup> Eurostat data as of 31 December 2024 indicated that more than 4.2 million people who fled Ukraine

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR (2023), 'Temporary Protection', *Emergency Handbook*, updated 7 December 2023, <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/legal-framework/temporary-protection>.

<sup>6</sup> Vernes, H. (2024), 'EU migration policy could turn into a race to the bottom – even for Ukrainians', Politico, 15 April 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-migration-policy-turn-race-bottom-ukraine>.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR (2025), 'Ukraine Refugee Situation'.

<sup>8</sup> Van Esveld, B. (2023), 'Investigation Launches into Forcible Transfer of Children in Ukraine', Human Rights Watch, 6 April 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/06/investigation-launches-forcible-transfer-children-ukraine>.

<sup>9</sup> Polyakovska (2024), 'Зеленський зробив заяву про повернення українців з-за кордону "без примусу"' [Zelenskyy made a statement about Ukrainians abroad returning 'without coercion'].

had received temporary protection status in the European Union.<sup>10</sup> Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians are also in non-EU countries, most notably in the UK, the US, Canada, Norway, Switzerland and Moldova. A Kyiv-based think-tank, the Centre for Economic Strategy (CES), which surveyed Ukrainian refugees about their situation and future intentions in four waves of research, puts their number at 5.2 million.<sup>11</sup> It is safe to conclude, therefore, that there are currently more than 5 million Ukrainian refugees in other countries, excluding Russia and Belarus.

The countries hosting the highest numbers of Ukrainian refugees, as of September 2024, were Germany, Poland, Czechia, Canada, the UK, Spain, the US and Italy (in descending order of numbers of refugees hosted).<sup>12</sup> As mentioned, most of the refugees are women and children. Following the February 2022 invasion, martial law was introduced in Ukraine, which prohibited men between the ages of 18 and 60 from leaving the country. Despite the law, the share of adult males among Ukrainian refugees has been growing. According to Eurostat, as of December 2024, 21.5 per cent of beneficiaries of temporary protection status in the EU were males aged from 18 to 64 years; 40.4 per cent were women of the same age group; 31.8 per cent were children under 18; and 6.1 per cent were people aged over 64.<sup>13</sup>

There has been an upward trend in EU temporary protection decisions granted in favour of adult men since the first quarter of 2022, when their proportion constituted only 7.7 per cent of all Ukrainians who received this status. It is unclear how many of these adult men left Ukraine legally, how many bribed their way out or crossed the border illegally, and how many left via Russia (usually the only way to leave the occupied territories of Ukraine).

### Box 1. Controversy regarding Ukrainian men abroad

According to the provisions of the martial law introduced in February 2022, men between the ages of 18 and 60 can legally leave Ukraine only in a limited number of circumstances: if they have three or more children; are disabled or care for a disabled person; are a single parent; or have been demobilized from the armed forces (for example, as a result of an injury).

The fact that some men of fighting age – media estimates put their number at 20,000 in late 2023<sup>14</sup> – might have fled abroad illegally generates heated debates in Ukraine, as the country struggles to mobilize more troops and as those who joined the armed forces in early 2022 still await news on the timing of their demobilization. The Ukrainian government faces a difficult task: it has to find more manpower to fight Russia without lowering the conscription age further (as a lower conscription age would be unpopular,

<sup>10</sup> Eurostat (2025), 'Temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine – monthly statistics', updated 3 February 2025, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary\\_protection\\_for\\_persons\\_fleeing\\_Ukraine\\_-\\_monthly\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics) (accessed 15 Feb. 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Centre for Economic Strategy (2025), 'Ukrainian Refugees After Three Years Abroad. Fourth Wave of Research'.  
<sup>12</sup> Cuibus, M. V., Walsh, P. W. and Sumption, M. (2024), *Ukrainian migration to the UK*, Migration Observatory Briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/ukrainian-migration-to-the-uk>.

<sup>13</sup> Eurostat (2025), 'Temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine – monthly statistics' (accessed 15 Feb. 2025).

<sup>14</sup> BBC Media Centre (2023), 'BBC Eye investigation: Nearly 20,000 men have fled Ukraine to avoid being drafted', 17 November 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2023/bbc-eye-ukraine-draft-dodgers>.

and could also worsen Ukraine's demographic challenges by increasing war casualties among young men). The government also has to respond to the demand for justice inside the country, as many people believe that men who bribed their way out of Ukraine or crossed the border illegally to avoid mobilization must be held accountable.

In 2024, the government introduced several measures to recruit more people into the army. These measures included lowering the mobilization age from 27 to 25 years and obliging all men of fighting age to register in an app, 'Reserve+', with their current personal information and address. Those who fail to do so face hefty fines. In April 2024, the government also announced that consular services to Ukrainian males abroad (including those who left Ukraine before 2022) would be suspended if they failed to update their data in a military register. According to media reports, the measures meant that many Ukrainian men abroad were unable to receive new passports and other essential documents, even if they had applied before the changes were introduced. In Poland, the changes sparked protests by Ukrainians.<sup>15</sup> Some observers, including the author of this paper, consider that the measures could potentially undermine the loyalty of Ukrainians abroad to their state and reduce the prospects of their return.<sup>16</sup>

There are indications, however, that the government is changing its approach and plans to focus instead on incentives to encourage men to return to Ukraine, not just to fight, but to meet labour shortages. In January 2025, the newly appointed minister for national unity, Oleksii Chernyshov, said that Ukrainian men who return to work in defence enterprises will be offered a temporary exemption from military service. In his view, half of Ukrainian men abroad would be ready to return to Ukraine if exempted from mobilization.<sup>17</sup>

A distinctive feature of refugees from Ukraine is their high level of education. Two-thirds of adult Ukrainians under temporary protection in the EU had completed tertiary education and more than 40 per cent had a master's degree or higher, according to a survey by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA).<sup>18</sup> Three years since the start of the all-out war, displaced Ukrainians are increasingly integrated into their host countries. Analysis by UNHCR<sup>19</sup> suggests that Ukrainians have integrated into host countries' labour markets more quickly than other refugee groups, but there is significant variance across different countries. In Estonia,

<sup>15</sup> Volosatska, N. (2024), 'Не хочуть оновлювати військово-облікові дані і вимагають видати паспорти. Що говорять чоловіки за кордоном? (відео)' [Do not want to update their military registration data and demand that passports are issued. What do men abroad say? (video)], *Radio Svoboda*, 18 November 2024, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/video-shcho-hovoryat-choloviky-za-kordonom/33206922.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Tokariuk, O. (2024), 'Чи потрібні нам українці за кордоном?' [Do we need Ukrainians abroad?], *Ukrainska Pravda*, 30 April 2024, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2024/04/30/7453648>.

<sup>17</sup> Prots, A. (2025), 'Чернишов: Україна готова дати роботу із бронюванням від мобілізації чоловікам, які перебувають за кордоном' [Chernyshov: Ukraine is ready to provide jobs with mobilization exemption to men who are currently abroad], *Ukrainska Pravda*, 9 January 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2025/01/9/7492688>.

<sup>18</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) (2024), *Voices in Europe: Experiences, Hopes and Aspirations of Forcibly Displaced Persons from Ukraine*, Paris: OECD Publishing, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ae33637c-en>.

<sup>19</sup> UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe (2023), *Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees from Ukraine*, Regional Intentions Report #3, 22 February 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/99072>.



Lithuania and Poland, around 60 per cent of Ukrainian refugees were employed or self-employed in November 2023,<sup>20</sup> as were 69 per cent of Ukrainians in the UK in April 2024.<sup>21</sup> Yet in Germany – which hosts the largest number of Ukrainians – the percentage was much lower: around 30 per cent of Ukrainian refugees were employed or self-employed in the spring of 2024.<sup>22</sup> The disparities can be explained by differences in local labour markets and approaches to the integration of refugees, varying levels of social protection for the unemployed, as well as the presence of pre-existing Ukrainian support networks.

## In many cases, Ukrainian refugees are working in jobs in their host countries that do not match their skills.

However, in many cases, Ukrainian refugees are working in jobs in their host countries that do not match their skills and are instead concentrated in low-skill labour sectors. Only around one-third of Ukrainians employed in the UK were working in the same field as they had been previously in Ukraine, with 20 per cent having found employment in the UK's hospitality sector. In EU countries, displaced Ukrainians mostly worked in accommodation and food services, administrative and support service activities, and in manufacturing. Many Ukrainian refugees also seek to obtain additional qualifications in their host countries. In the UK, for instance, as of April 2024, 31 per cent of adult Ukrainians were undertaking education or study (one-third of these were studying for a qualification at degree level or above).<sup>23</sup>

Another sign that Ukrainian refugees are increasingly integrating into their host countries is a growing percentage of people who are independently renting their accommodation (for instance, 30 per cent of Ukrainians in the EU,<sup>24</sup> 45 per cent in the UK).<sup>25</sup> Initially many refugees lived with host families, in refugee camps, or in hotels or state-funded housing.

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<sup>20</sup> European Migration Network (EMN) (2024), *Labour market integration of beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine: Joint EMN-OECD inform*, Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission, 21 May 2024, [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-issues/migration/OECD-EMN%20Inform\\_%20Labour-market-integration-of-beneficiaries-of-temporary-protection-from-Ukraine.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-issues/migration/OECD-EMN%20Inform_%20Labour-market-integration-of-beneficiaries-of-temporary-protection-from-Ukraine.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Office for National Statistics (2024), 'Visa holders living in the UK under the Ukraine Humanitarian Schemes, follow-up survey: 15 April to 22 April 2024', statistical bulletin, 3 June 2024, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/people-populationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/visaholdersenteringtheukundertheukrainehumanitarianschemes/latest#future-intentions>.

<sup>22</sup> Federal Institute for Population Research (BiB) (2024), 'Protection seekers from Ukraine: making better use of potential for the German labour market', press release, 12 October 2024, <https://www.bib.bund.de/EN/Service/Press/2024/2024-10-24-Protection-seekers-from-Ukraine-making-better-use-of-potential-for-the-German-labour-market.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Office for National Statistics (2024), 'Visa holders living in the UK under the Ukraine Humanitarian Schemes, follow-up survey: 15 April to 22 April 2024'.

<sup>24</sup> OECD/EUAA (2024), *Voices in Europe: Experiences, Hopes and Aspirations of Forcibly Displaced Persons from Ukraine*.

<sup>25</sup> Office for National Statistics (2024), 'Visa holders living in the UK under the Ukraine Humanitarian Schemes, follow-up survey: 15 April to 22 April 2024'.

## Host countries' approaches to Ukrainian refugees

Host countries vary in their approaches to integrating Ukrainians. On the one hand, most of them encourage Ukrainians to learn the local language and find jobs as soon as possible. Some countries, notably Germany, the UK and Nordic countries, offer generous benefits and social protection for Ukrainians. Others provide only initial support, either a one-time payment (Canada) or several payments spread over the first few months after arrival (Italy). Increasingly, host countries require Ukrainian children to attend local schools instead of continuing distance learning in online Ukrainian schools. Since September 2024, Poland has stopped paying child benefits to Ukrainian families if their children are not enrolled in Polish schools;<sup>26</sup> this has prompted some Ukrainian families to return to their home country.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, the temporary protection status provided to Ukrainian refugees by most host countries only allows them to reside in that country temporarily. The EU Temporary Protection Directive, activated in March 2022 to give protection to Ukrainians until 'the situation in Ukraine allows [their] safe and durable return',<sup>28</sup> has been extended until March 2026.<sup>29</sup> However, the years spent by Ukrainians under temporary protection in EU countries do not count towards obtaining permanent residency status, normally available after several years of uninterrupted residency. It is unclear what will happen once the temporary protection to Ukrainians ends,<sup>30</sup> either when it expires or when some sort of a negotiated settlement with Russia is signed (although this might not necessarily mean that Ukraine is safe enough to return to, or that a stable peace has been achieved).

The case of Syrian refugees offers an interesting parallel. After the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024, the UK and some EU countries ceased to accept new asylum applications from Syrians<sup>31</sup> while Austria announced immediate plans for deportations.<sup>32</sup> This serves as a warning of how host countries may approach Ukrainian refugees if or when a ceasefire is signed (even if no credible

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<sup>26</sup> Chrostowska, P. (transl. Szkudłapska, A.) (2024), *Refugee students from Ukraine in the Polish education system*, Centre for Citizenship Education (CEO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), July 2024, [https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/poland-refugee-students-ukraine-polish-education-system\\_en](https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/poland-refugee-students-ukraine-polish-education-system_en).

<sup>27</sup> Ptak, A. (2024), 'Far fewer Ukrainian refugee children started school in Poland than expected after benefits change', Notes from Poland, 8 October 2024, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/10/08/far-fewer-ukrainian-refugee-children-started-school-in-poland-than-expected-after-benefits-change>.

<sup>28</sup> European Commission (2022), 'Ukraine: Commission proposes temporary protection for people fleeing war in Ukraine and guidelines for border checks', press release, 2 March 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_1469](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1469).

<sup>29</sup> Council of the European Union (2024), 'Ukrainian refugees: Council extends temporary protection until March 2026', press release, 25 June 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/25/ukrainian-refugees-council-extends-temporary-protection-until-march-2026>.

<sup>30</sup> Ciğer, M. I. (2023), 'When Temporary Protection Ends: longer-term solutions for refugees from Ukraine', Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, European Policy Analysis, September 2023: 11epa, [https://www.sieps.se/globalassets/publikationer/2023/2023\\_11epa.pdf](https://www.sieps.se/globalassets/publikationer/2023/2023_11epa.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Bell, B., McGuinness, D. and McArthur, T. (2024), 'Syrian asylum seekers in limbo as countries stop applications', BBC News, 9 December 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cnv3qzz7rjo>.

<sup>32</sup> Starcevic, S., Bloom, D., Stamouli, N. and McDonald, A. (2024), 'Austria prepares to deport Syrian migrants after Assad regime falls', Politico.eu, 9 December 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/austria-deport-syria-migrant-bashar-assad-regime-fall>.

security guarantees are offered to Ukraine that would prevent a possible new invasion by Russia). Unless changes to the EU Long-term Residence Directive are adopted,<sup>33</sup> Ukrainians would have few options to obtain residence permits to remain in the EU after the end of temporary protection. As it stands now, only those who meet strict criteria related to work and income would be able to remain. All the others, including those in vulnerable categories, might be forced to return to their home country, despite their intentions and efforts to integrate and settle – as first encouraged by host-country governments.

In the UK, both the previous Conservative and the current Labour government policy is that Ukrainians under temporary protection will not have a right to permanent settlement. People who arrived in the UK under the Ukraine Schemes visas, which were initially issued for three years, are able to extend these for a further 18 months from February 2025.<sup>34</sup> However, time spent in the UK under these visas will not count towards an eventual right to permanent settlement. This is different, for instance, from Hong Kong nationals who are under humanitarian protection and would be able to obtain settled status in the UK after five years of residence.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, as things stand, Ukrainians will be expected to leave the UK after 4.5 years of living and integrating there – or to convert their status into other visa types, such as a skilled worker visa, which requires meeting a high threshold of qualifying criteria. This situation clashes with the intentions of Ukrainians in the UK regarding return, and might become a challenge for the UK government.<sup>36</sup> Ukrainians under temporary protection have submitted numerous petitions to the UK parliament asking for the right to settled status. The Home Office response has reiterated the temporary status of Ukrainians in the UK and has ‘recognised that the country of Ukraine will need the return of its citizens, from around the world, to help recover and rebuild their economy and infrastructure’.<sup>37</sup>

Some countries apply travel restrictions to Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection. Norway offers a time-limited protection status which does not lead to permanent settlement and does not allow refugees to travel back and forth between Norway and Ukraine. This means that if they do travel, they risk losing the ‘collective protection’ that most Ukrainians received.<sup>38</sup> There may be exceptions in a limited number of circumstances, such as a death or serious illness of a close relative, but no pre-authorizations are given and the decision is made at the discretion of Norwegian authorities only after the trip. This approach could deter

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<sup>33</sup> Ciğer, M. I. (2023), ‘When Temporary Protection Ends: longer-term solutions for refugees from Ukraine’.

<sup>34</sup> GOV.UK (2024), ‘Applying to the Ukraine Permission Extension scheme’, updated 5 December 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/applying-to-the-ukraine-permission-extension-scheme>.

<sup>35</sup> Benson, M. and Sigona, N. (2024), ‘Comparing the Hong Kong BN(O) and Ukraine humanitarian visa schemes’, UK in a Changing Europe, 20 January 2024, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/comparing-the-hong-kong-bno-and-ukraine-humanitarian-visa-schemes>.

<sup>36</sup> *The Economist* (2024), ‘Ukrainians are settling down in Britain. That creates a problem’, 3 October 2024, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/10/03/ukrainians-are-settling-down-in-britain-that-creates-a-problem>.

<sup>37</sup> Petitions – UK Government and Parliament (2023), ‘Provide Ukrainian refugees with settled status to enable a stable life in the UK’, <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/642280>.

<sup>38</sup> Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) (undated), ‘I want to leave Norway’, <https://www.udi.no/en/information-ukraine-and-russia/ukraine/i-want-to-leave-norway/#link-35011>.

Ukrainians from undertaking any travel to Ukraine. The US also does not allow Ukrainians on Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) visas to travel to Ukraine or abroad without obtaining a new humanitarian 'parole' for re-entry.<sup>39</sup> These types of travel restrictions could lead to the erosion of refugees' links to their home country and could increase the likelihood of non-return to Ukraine.

At the same time, other countries may want to hold on to Ukrainian refugees after the end of the war and may offer them simplified pathways to permanent settlement. Ukrainians already contribute significantly to the local economies in countries like Poland<sup>40</sup> and Czechia,<sup>41</sup> where the budget income from their taxes and spending exceeds the expenditure to host them. Some countries may be interested in keeping Ukrainian refugees, many of whom are young and highly skilled, as a solution to their labour shortages and demographic challenges, like ageing populations.

## **The Ukrainian government's desire to bring people back may clash with the intentions of refugees themselves, and with the economic and demographic interests of those host countries that are benefiting from the presence of Ukrainians.**

To summarize, countries hosting Ukrainian refugees will face a difficult choice if and when a peace agreement in Ukraine is signed (which might not necessarily mean the end of the war). They will need to decide what to do with Ukrainians who have settled, integrated and wish to continue living abroad. The Ukrainian government's desire to bring people back may clash with the intentions of refugees themselves, and with the economic and demographic interests of those host countries that are benefiting from the presence of Ukrainians. Ukraine's partners need to be prepared to balance these competing factors and respond to the challenge in a manner that does not jeopardize Ukraine's future and that, at the same time, takes into account the human aspect of the issue.

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<sup>39</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2024), 'Humanitarian or Significant Public Benefit Parole for Noncitizens Outside the United States', 10 November 2024, [https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/humanitarian\\_parole](https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/humanitarian_parole).

<sup>40</sup> Deloitte (2024), *Analysis of the impact of refugees from Ukraine on the economy of Poland*, UNHCR, 5 March 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106993>.

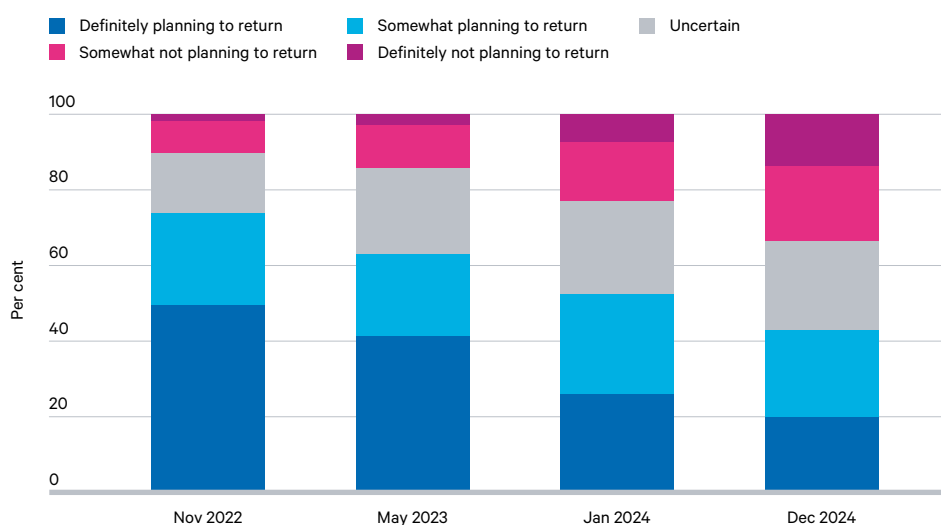
<sup>41</sup> Kroupová, A. and Andrlé, J. (2024), 'Ukrainian refugees already contribute more money to the state than they receive in support', People in Need, press release, 11 April 2024, <https://www.peopleinneed.net/ukrainian-refugees-already-contribute-more-money-to-the-state-than-they-receive-in-support-11360gp>.

## Ukrainian refugees' future plans and their ties to home

Surveys indicate that the longer the full-scale war continues, the smaller the percentage of refugees will be who are willing to return to Ukraine. Four waves of research by the Kyiv-based CES think-tank, conducted in 2022, 2023, and January and December 2024, demonstrate that the proportion of Ukrainian refugees abroad who plan to return to their country has fallen from 74 per cent in November 2022 to 43 per cent in December 2024.<sup>42</sup>

A survey by the UK Office for National Statistics in April 2024 found that 68 per cent of Ukrainian respondents intend to 'live in the UK most of the time' even after it becomes safe to return to Ukraine – by comparison, in 2023 that figure was 52 per cent.<sup>43</sup> However, the possibility to stay in host countries will be conditional on as yet uncertain policies and criteria that will be applied to Ukrainian refugees once their temporary protection status ends.

**Figure 1.** Ukrainian refugees' intentions to return home (percentage of respondents)



Source: Info Sapiens Survey commissioned by Centre for Economic Strategy.

Despite their wavering intentions to return, Ukrainian refugees maintain strong ties to their home country. A Vox Ukraine survey of Ukrainian refugees in more than 15 countries in July–August 2023<sup>44</sup> showed that more than 90 per cent check the news about Ukraine several times or more a week. About 60 per cent check the news daily; 64 per cent discuss news from Ukraine with the local population; and

<sup>42</sup> Centre for Economic Strategy (2025), 'Ukrainian Refugees After Three Years Abroad. Fourth Wave of Research'.

<sup>43</sup> Office for National Statistics (2024), 'Visa holders living in the UK under the Ukraine Humanitarian Schemes, follow-up survey: 15 April to 22 April 2024'.

<sup>44</sup> Sologoub, I. (2024), 'Return or stay? What factors impact the decisions of Ukrainian refugees', Vox Ukraine, 16 January 2024, <https://voxukraine.org/en/return-or-stay-what-factors-impact-the-decisions-of-ukrainian-refugees>.

around 40 per cent participate in rallies in support of Ukraine. Many Ukrainian children continue to study in Ukrainian schools online, sometimes after their classes in a local school, or attend weekend Ukrainian schools in host countries.

More than one-third of Ukrainian refugees have visited Ukraine at least once since the full-scale invasion began, according to data from the OECD/EUAA report (a figure that is likely affected by restrictions on travel to Ukraine imposed by some host countries).<sup>45</sup> People who are abroad without their partners tend to go back to Ukraine more frequently (43 per cent of that group visited at least once) than others. The main reasons for these trips are to visit family and friends, to check up on property and to help the local community in Ukraine.

Evidence from the Vox Ukraine study also suggests that even if a significant proportion of Ukrainian refugees remain abroad in the near future, they are very loyal to Ukraine and are willing to contribute to its development. More than 70 per cent of respondents believe that their experience will be useful for the reconstruction of Ukraine, and at least half think that the new skills which they have gained abroad could be applied during reconstruction.<sup>46</sup> This includes newly acquired soft skills and social norm changes, such as tolerance, the habit of helping people and community, observing rules and paying taxes.

These findings are corroborated by the results of a focus group with 12 Ukrainian refugees in the UK, which Chatham House organized in March 2024. Its gender composition and geographical distribution reflected a general picture of Ukrainian refugees abroad (the majority were women; participants represented different age groups and all macro-regions of Ukraine, including Russian-occupied territories such as Mariupol and Donetsk). Although the size and location of this exercise mean that it cannot be representative of the experiences and attitudes of the vast majority of Ukrainian refugees, it did offer first-hand insights into the situations and intentions of Ukrainians in the UK.

All the focus group participants expressed the desire to contribute to the reconstruction of Ukraine, either after their return or while they are abroad. They believed their knowledge could be applied in the areas of:

- architecture and urban planning for post-war reconstruction;
- education, and the development of new curricula for Ukrainian schools and higher education institutions;
- business and commerce, creating partnerships to facilitate Ukrainian exports, building bridges between Ukrainian and foreign businesses;
- non-governmental organizations' work and their cooperation with the Ukrainian government;
- technology and innovation;
- cultural diplomacy and the promotion of Ukraine abroad; and
- mental health support, increasingly relevant to Ukrainians affected by war.

<sup>45</sup> OECD/EUAA (2024), *Voices in Europe: Experiences, Hopes and Aspirations of Forcibly Displaced Persons from Ukraine*.

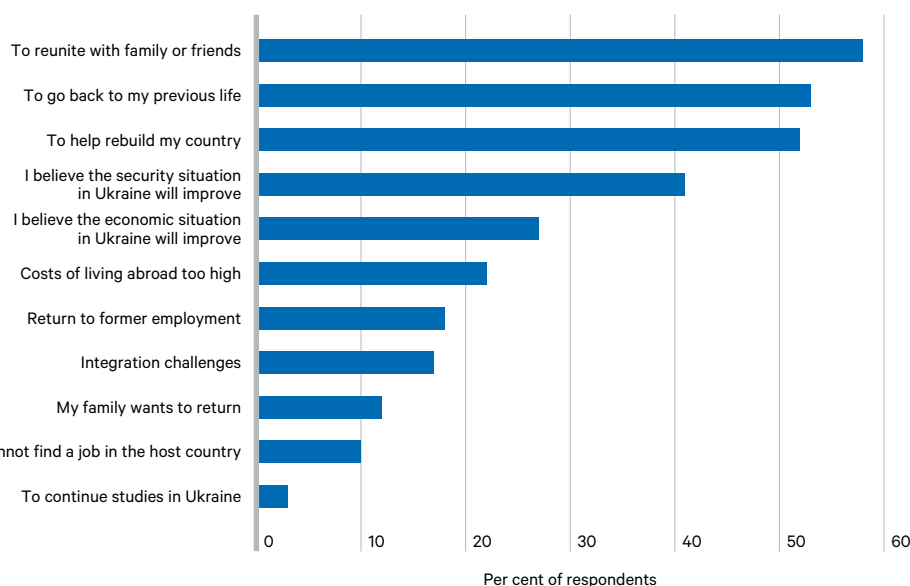
<sup>46</sup> Sologoub (2024), 'Return or stay? What factors impact the decisions of Ukrainian refugees'.

Focus group participants said that they wanted the Ukrainian state to take a more proactive role in reaching out to them and engaging them in the reconstruction process. As one participant said, ‘Ukrainians will help Ukraine anyway, whether the government does something [to involve them] or not. If the government decides to step in, it would just bring more significant results, that’s it.’<sup>47</sup>

## Pre-conditions for Ukrainian refugees’ return

According to the OECD/EUAA study, the main motivation for returning to Ukraine for the majority of those Ukrainians who said they plan to do so was to reunite with family and friends (58 per cent). Other significant motivations were to resume their previous life (53 per cent) and to help rebuild Ukraine (52 per cent).<sup>48</sup>

**Figure 2.** Main reasons for planning to return to Ukraine – multiple answers possible (percentage of respondents)



Source: Survey of Arriving Migrants from Ukraine (SAM-UKR), conducted by the EUAA in collaboration with the OECD, February–September 2023.

The focus group and expert interviews for this paper revealed a range of ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors that could encourage displaced Ukrainians to return to their home country.

### Pull factors

- An improved security situation in Ukraine. This is a main pre-condition for return. Yet, how different refugees perceive security and when it would be safe to return to Ukraine varies significantly and may not necessarily coincide with the end of the war. As one focus group participant said: ‘For me, the pre-condition

<sup>47</sup> Focus group with Ukrainian refugees in the UK, hosted at Chatham House, 26 March 2024.

<sup>48</sup> OECD/EUAA (2024), *Voices in Europe: Experiences, Hopes and Aspirations of Forcibly Displaced Persons from Ukraine*.

for return is efficient air defence. It's not even [Ukraine's] victory, it's not even security, it's efficient air defence over Odesa' [their home region]. Indeed, some evidence suggests that many Ukrainians who left the country in 2022 have already returned, but the exact number is unknown.<sup>49</sup> However, experience from other conflict zones indicates that security is the main pre-condition for sustainable and long-term return, as without it, returning refugees tend to leave the country again. In the case of Ukraine, returnees' desire to leave the country again might be prompted by deteriorating living conditions, blackouts due to Russian attacks on the energy grid, and fears of a harsh winter with poor access to electricity and heating.

- An improved economic situation. This is another important factor, especially access to jobs and the potential for decent earnings in Ukraine.
- De-mining and the rebuilding of infrastructure through humanitarian interventions. This includes rebuilding housing, roads and industrial facilities, as well as rebuilding and ensuring the stability of Ukraine's energy system, which has been severely damaged by Russian strikes.
- Government support for returnees. This was mentioned as especially relevant for people from the occupied territories and for those whose housing has been destroyed in the war.
- Progress in the fight against corruption, and progress on democratic reforms and Ukraine's EU integration. Ukrainians abroad say that they are more likely to return if Ukraine remains a democracy and there is progress with anti-corruption reforms. Ukraine's EU integration and the conditionality attached to it can facilitate this process.

### **Push factors**

- The inability to find a higher-skilled job abroad that matches the applicant's qualifications.
- High living costs in the host country. From the OECD/EUAA survey, 22 per cent of those willing to return to Ukraine said high costs were a major factor in their thinking.<sup>50</sup>
- Integration challenges and difficulties in accessing suitable housing.
- Children's desire to return to Ukraine or a parent's desire to educate their children in Ukraine – especially if access to Ukrainian schooling online in the host country is restricted.
- The reduction of social support to Ukrainians in host countries.
- The prospect of the end of temporary protection status and the inability to convert that status into other types of residency.

<sup>49</sup> Sologoub (2024), 'Return or stay? What factors impact the decisions of Ukrainian refugees'.

<sup>50</sup> OECD/EUAA (2024), *Voices in Europe: Experiences, Hopes and Aspirations of Forcibly Displaced Persons from Ukraine*.



Groups most likely to return to Ukraine, according to CES and Vox Ukraine surveys,<sup>51</sup> are older people, people whose partners are still in Ukraine, and high-skilled refugees who in their host country have been unable to find jobs for which they are qualified. People who are more likely to stay abroad are single, those whose partners are with them, people from the occupied territories of Ukraine or those whose housing has been destroyed, students in foreign higher education institutions, and those who run a business abroad.

## Impact of human capital flight on Ukraine's economy and demographics

The outflow of millions of Ukrainians is having a profound negative impact on the country's economy and demographics, especially combined with the wide-scale destruction caused by Russia's war. Ukraine has lost around one-third of its consumers because of internal and external displacement. Levels of investment have also fallen significantly. The non-return of refugees may exacerbate this situation and hamper Ukraine's reconstruction. In the most pessimistic scenario, according to Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policy, up to 3.3 million Ukrainians may remain abroad.<sup>52</sup> Projected annual economic losses could be equivalent to up to 7.8 per cent of Ukraine's pre-2022 GDP, according to CES calculations.<sup>53</sup>

The year before the full-scale invasion, foreign direct investment (FDI) into Ukraine stood at \$7.95 billion (4 per cent of GDP) in 2021; in 2022, FDI had fallen to just \$220 million (0.1 per cent of GDP that year).<sup>54</sup> However, remittances from abroad – an even more important source of revenue for Ukraine's budget – remained largely unchanged, both in absolute value and as a percentage of GDP. Remittances from Ukrainians abroad accounted for 9 per cent of Ukraine's GDP in 2021; this share rose to 10.4 per cent in 2022 and decreased slightly to 8.4 per cent in 2023.<sup>55</sup> Given that FDI into Ukraine is limited due to war-related risks, Ukrainians abroad are providing an important lifeline for the economy by sending money back home. The government could do more to engage Ukrainians abroad more efficiently, with the goal of maximizing remittances and channelling these into Ukraine's reconstruction needs – for example, by issuing so-called 'diaspora bonds'.

Ukraine also needs people to help with rebuilding. The Ministry of Economics estimates that 4.5 million workers will be necessary for the reconstruction effort.<sup>56</sup> The country already struggles to fill all available vacancies. Structural changes

<sup>51</sup> Sologoub (2024), 'Return or stay? What factors impact the decisions of Ukrainian refugees'; and Mykhailishyna, D. et al. (2024), *Ukrainian refugees. Future abroad and plans to return*, 12 March 2024, Kyiv: Centre for Economic Strategy, <https://ces.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/refugees-eng.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2024), 'Decree on the approval of the demographic development strategy until 2040'.

<sup>53</sup> Centre for Economic Strategy (2025), 'Ukrainian Refugees After Three Years Abroad. Fourth Wave of Research'.

<sup>54</sup> World Bank (2024), 'Foreign direct investment, net inflows (% of GDP) – Ukraine', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.WD.GD.ZS?locations=UA> (accessed 9 Jan. 2025).

<sup>55</sup> World Bank (2024), 'Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) – Ukraine', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=UA> (accessed 9 Jan. 2025).

<sup>56</sup> Krytska, I. and Shevchuk, S. (2023), 'Прибутки бізнесу на армії, €50 млрд від ЄС та складний пошук інвесторів. Як міністерка економіки Юлія Свириденко планує збільшити ВВП до \$1 трлн? Велике інтерв'ю' [Business gains from the army, €50 billion from the EU and difficult search for investors. How the minister of economy Yuliia Svyrydenko plans to increase GDP to \$1 trillion? Big interview], *Forbes Ukraine*, 2 November 2023, <https://forbes.ua/money/pributki-biznesu-na-armii-50-mlrd-vid-es-ta-skladnyi-poshuk-investoriv-yak-ministerka-ekonomiki-yuliya-sviridenko-planue-zbilshiti-vvp-do-1-trln-velike-intervyu-02112023-17010>.

to Ukraine's economy due to the invasion have led to changes in the labour market and have created imbalances. For example, the types of job available do not match people's skills, and a lack of qualified workers in some sectors coexists with unemployment in others.<sup>57</sup> Some experts believe that Ukraine will need to attract foreign workers to help fill skills gaps.<sup>58</sup> The government's new demographic strategy states that:

... if the return of persons, who were forcibly displaced outside of Ukraine as a result of a military aggression, and involvement of diaspora Ukrainians will not be sufficient to compensate for further natural population decline and labor market shortages, migration policy in the future may be expanded to include the engagement of immigrants.<sup>59</sup>

The country also faces major demographic challenges due to the war and displacement. Ukraine currently has the highest mortality and lowest birth rates in the world.<sup>60</sup> Given that the main groups to have left Ukraine are women aged 20 to 49 and their children, this poses a significant risk of population decline affecting the country's future. President Zelenskyy has told the media that there would be no possibility of paying pensions to an ageing population in the future if millions of Ukrainians who are currently abroad do not return.<sup>61</sup> If current trends continue, the number of people living in Ukraine is expected to decrease from 43 million in 2021 to 25.2 million in 2051, according to projections by the Institute of Demographics and Quality of Life at Ukraine's Academy of Sciences, quoted in Ukraine's demographic strategy.<sup>62</sup> This dire demographic forecast is also one of the reasons why Ukraine is resisting calls by some of its partners to lower the army mobilization age for its men, which is currently set at 25 years old. As mentioned, there are fears that doing so would add to already substantial demographic pressures by contributing to casualties in the young.<sup>63</sup>

CES calculations indicate that the numbers of women of child-bearing age and children left in Ukraine have decreased the most. Approximately 18 per cent of Ukrainian children aged 0–9 are now living abroad. The 10 to 19 age group has also decreased considerably: 17.3 per cent of girls and 22.8 per cent of boys of that age are now living abroad. Among adults, the numbers of women aged 20 to 49 have declined the most: 12.5 per cent of women aged 20–29 have left Ukraine, as well as 19.3 per cent of women in the 30–39 and 40–49 age groups.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Research interview with Dmytro Lyvch, CEO of Easy Business and adviser to Ukrainian government, Kyiv, 11 April 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Research interview with Andriy Haidutskyi, economist, Kyiv, 10 April 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2024), 'Decree on the approval of the demographic development strategy until 2040'.

<sup>60</sup> CIA (2024), 'Country Comparisons – Birth rate, The World Factbook', <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/birth-rate/country-comparison> (accessed 9 Jan. 2025).

<sup>61</sup> Zelenskyy, V. via YouTube (2024), 'Україна хоче створити міністерство "повернення українців з-за кордону"! Чоловіків примусово?' [Ukraine wants to create the ministry of 'return of Ukrainians from abroad'! Will men be forced?], 27 August 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8D71ovMwJDC>.

<sup>62</sup> Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2024), 'Decree on the approval of the demographic development strategy until 2040'.

<sup>63</sup> Court, E. (2024), 'As US pushes Kyiv to lower draft age, why won't Ukraine conscript younger men?', *Kyiv Independent*, 16 December 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/as-us-pushes-for-ukraine-to-lower-draft-age-why-wont-ukraine-conscript-younger-men>.

<sup>64</sup> Centre for Economic Strategy (2025), 'Ukrainian Refugees After Three Years Abroad. Fourth Wave of Research'.

## Ukraine and its global community: in search of a sustainable strategy

The Ukrainian government is looking for ways to mitigate the negative impacts of the human capital outflow due to the full-scale war. The demographic strategy, developed by the Ministry of Social Policy, identifies the return of Ukrainians from abroad as a priority, including both refugees and those who left Ukraine prior to 2022. It states:

The task of return must focus not only on the citizens of Ukraine who left abroad at the beginning of the full-scale military aggression, but also on those who left before and on representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora – people of Ukrainian heritage and their descendants, who have citizenship of other countries.<sup>65</sup>

It also notes that the return ‘must proceed in accordance with the main principles of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees: safely and with dignity’.<sup>66</sup> Despite having a sizeable diaspora around the world before 2022, Ukraine lacked a coherent strategy for cooperation with its global community or a separate body to work with Ukrainians abroad. Now, as their numbers grow along with the likelihood that many will remain abroad, the need for a strategy is finally being recognized and articulated by Ukraine’s top officials. A position of ambassador-at-large for global Ukrainians has been created within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the task of working more closely with Ukrainians abroad and developing a diaspora engagement strategy. On 3 December 2024, a separate ministry, called ‘the Ministry of National Unity’, was launched.<sup>67</sup>

However, previous government communications and actions had been judged by the focus group participants to be controversial and not necessarily taking into consideration the situation and needs of Ukrainian refugees. In early 2024, Kyiv faced pushback from Ukrainian refugees and from countries hosting them when it tried to persuade host governments to deny Ukrainians social benefit payments<sup>68</sup> or to give that money directly to the Ukrainian state.<sup>69</sup> Many Ukrainians abroad also reacted negatively when restrictions were imposed on access to consular services for Ukrainian men of fighting age, including for those who had left Ukraine before 2022 or who had legal reasons to cross the border under martial law. Since May 2024, to receive consular services, Ukrainian men have needed to provide proof of having updated their details in military enlistment offices (or via the Reserve +

<sup>65</sup> Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2024), ‘Decree on the approval of the demographic development strategy until 2040’.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ноббан, М. (2024), ‘Міністерство єдності, про яке нічого не відомо, і множинне громадянство. Як влада збирається повертати українців?’ [Ministry of National Unity that nobody knows anything about, and multiple citizenship. How the government plans to return Ukrainians?], *Radio Svoboda*, 3 December 2024, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/ty-iak-ministerstvo-iednosti-chernyshov/33225426.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Boss C. and Lipkowski, C. (2024), ‘Berater in Kiew: Ukraine-Flüchtlinge sollen ins Heimatland zurück’ [Adviser in Kyiv: Ukraine refugees should return to their home country], *Tagesanzeiger*, 20 January 2024, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/ukraine-news-berater-von-selenski-team-kritisierst-gastlaender-521321310376>.

<sup>69</sup> *Ukrinform* (2024), ‘Зеленський вважає, що виплати українським біженцям у Європі краще б проходили через Україну’ [Zelenskyy thinks that payments to Ukrainian refugees in Europe should rather go via Ukraine], 29 January 2024, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3819628-zelenskij-vvazae-so-viplati-ukrainskim-biz-encam-u-evropi-krase-b-prohodili-cerez-ukrainu.html>.

app).<sup>70</sup> The Ukrainian government also sought support from host countries, notably Poland,<sup>71</sup> in helping to bring Ukrainian men back. This approach, however, was viewed negatively by Ukrainians abroad, who perceived it as the government trying to 'force' or 'coerce' them to return.

Inside Ukraine the issue is divisive too. President Zelenskyy's 2023 New Year's Eve speech<sup>72</sup> caused a lot of controversy. 'I know that one day I will have to ask myself: who am I? To make a choice about who I want to be. A victim or a winner? A refugee or a citizen?', he said. For many Ukrainians, the president seemed to be saying that the two identities could not coexist and implying that refugees were not real citizens because they did not live in Ukraine during the war.

People who stayed in Ukraine or returned to the country during the full-scale war, and who live under constant Russian missile and drone attacks, indeed have very different experiences to those of Ukrainians who fled abroad. Those still in Ukraine face life-threatening situations every day. Many have been displaced inside the country. Those who left struggle with other challenges, such as the need to learn a new language and adjust to a new country, to find work and accommodation, and to care for children and older people, often without support networks. The challenges for Ukrainians abroad, however, are often seen as less serious than those endured by people in Ukraine. Ukrainian refugees interviewed for this paper spoke about self-censorship that prevented them from sharing information about the difficulties of their life abroad due to a sense of guilt and a fear of being shamed and misunderstood by people inside Ukraine. Some voiced concerns that they or their children might face negative attitudes if they decided to return to Ukraine.<sup>73</sup> Yet, a recent study by Opora, a Ukrainian non-governmental organization, found no hard evidence of a 'mutual dislike between Ukrainians abroad and Ukrainians in Ukraine toward each other'.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (2024), 'Роз'яснення МЗС щодо відновлення прийому заяв на отримання консульських послуг для окремих категорій громадян' [Clarification by the MFA about the resumption of consular services applications for certain categories of citizens], 17 May 2024, <https://mfa.gov.ua/consul/forua/rozyasnennya-mzs-shchodo-vidnovlennya-prijomu-zayav-na-otrimannya-konsulskih-poslug-dlya-okremih-kategorij-gromadyan>.

<sup>71</sup> Chernovol, K. (2024), 'Польща готова допомогти повернути в Україну військовозобов'язаних чоловіків, – Подоляк' [Poland is ready to help return to Ukraine men eligible for military service – Podolyak], *Unian*, 29 August 2024, <https://www.unian.ua/society/polshcha-gotova-dopomogti-povernuti-v-ukrajinu-viyskovozobov-yazanih-cholovikiv-podolyak-12741321.html>.

<sup>72</sup> President of Ukraine official website (2023), 'New Year address by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy', 31 December 2023, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/novorichne-privitannya-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelens-88037>.

<sup>73</sup> Focus group with Ukrainian refugees in the UK, hosted at Chatham House, 26 March 2024.

<sup>74</sup> Opora (2024), '(Dis)connected: polarization in Ukrainian society, Findings of the study by the Civil Network Opora and the Kyiv School of Economics, conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology', September 2024, <https://www.oporua.org/en/viyna/study-dis-connected-polarization-in-ukrainian-society-25505>.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It is clear, based on the above, that to mitigate the consequences of the outflow of its people, Ukraine needs to be proactive in two ways: (i) it needs to encourage and create conditions for the return of refugees; and (ii) it needs to cooperate effectively with Ukrainians who live abroad, and involve them in Ukraine's reconstruction and development.

Ukraine is facing a huge task: its primary goal is to survive as a sovereign and independent state, and to stop Russian military aggression while keeping control of most of its territory. At the same time, it needs to plan for the reconstruction of the country and create conditions that would prompt Ukrainian citizens abroad to return and participate.

### **Ukraine needs to be prepared for a scenario in which, despite all efforts, many of its citizens decide to remain abroad after the war ends.**

Experience from other post-conflict states suggests that more than half of refugees may not return to their home country if the war continues for several years. Ukraine needs to be prepared for a scenario in which, despite all efforts, many of its citizens decide to remain abroad after the war ends. While working on conditions to encourage refugees' return, Ukraine also needs to rethink its approach to its nationals abroad. The government should improve the quality of services provided to the global Ukrainian community, and improve communication with that community. The aim should be to create stable cooperation between the Ukrainian state and the diaspora, in order to attract human and economic resources from within the diaspora to aid Ukraine's reconstruction and development.

A first step would be to make consular services to Ukrainian citizens abroad more accessible. Ukrainian nationals face long waiting times to receive the most basic services, such as applying for passports and birth certificates in consular institutions abroad. Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs interviewed by Chatham House<sup>75</sup> recognized the problem exists, but admitted that they struggle with a lack of personnel and resources. Digitization is one way this issue could be addressed, with applications and documentation submitted online only. Ukraine should also plan for providing its citizens abroad with the possibility to participate more easily in the electoral process; simpler procedures for overseas voting would help to achieve this. By solving such issues, Ukraine would demonstrate that it cares for its citizens abroad and considers them an important asset. This would contribute to fostering among Ukrainians abroad a sense of loyalty to their home country.

Ukraine should also capitalize on the desire of its nationals to contribute to rebuilding the country even if they remain abroad. The emphasis on physical return should shift to offering opportunities and concrete pathways to participate

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<sup>75</sup> Research interview with Mariana Betsa, then ambassador-at-large for global Ukrainians at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, conducted in Kyiv, 9 April 2024.

in the reconstruction effort for Ukrainians who live abroad. Experts interviewed by Chatham House suggested different ways to achieve this:<sup>76</sup>

- The creation of advisory 'refugee councils' which could gather remotely to discuss Ukrainian refugees' needs and their engagement in the reconstruction effort. These could be modelled on existing councils for internally displaced persons (IDPs). More than 1,000 IDP councils exist in Ukraine;<sup>77</sup> these consultative bodies work together with the Ukrainian authorities, UNHCR and donor organizations to advocate for the needs of IDPs.
- Channelling remittances into reconstruction projects, potentially in the regions from which Ukrainians abroad originate. 'Diaspora bonds' (modelled on the 'Israel bonds' experience, for example) could be issued by the state to guarantee those investments.
- Encouraging capital investments by Ukrainians abroad into businesses in Ukraine. These could be joint projects with international organizations, which would help to increase trust.
- Providing more opportunities that boost social connections between Ukrainians at home and those abroad, such as volunteer exchanges, summer camps for children or joint cultural events.

Ukraine can also learn how to engage effectively with its global community from the experience of other countries with considerable diasporas, such as Poland, Greece or Ireland (see Box 2).

### Box 2. Ireland's engagement with its global community – a template for Ukraine?

Around 70 million people of Irish heritage live in other countries,<sup>78</sup> while Ireland itself has a population of 5 million. According to Nathan Mannion, head of exhibitions and programmes at EPIC – The Irish Emigration Museum, for much of the 20th century, emigration from Ireland was associated with a sense of shame, both among emigrants and within the country itself.<sup>79</sup> In the early 1990s, attitudes began to shift. The diaspora was recognized not just as a source of remittances, but as a valuable global community that could support Ireland politically and economically. This change was symbolized by the first female president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, who acknowledged the diaspora in her inaugural speech and initiated symbolic gestures, such as lighting a candle in the presidential residence to represent the connection with Irish people abroad.

<sup>76</sup> Expert roundtable on initial research findings, hosted online by Chatham House's Ukraine Forum, 23 May 2024.

<sup>77</sup> Kuras, T. (2024), 'Displaced themselves, and now advocating for the rights and durable solutions for all internally displaced in communities across Ukraine', UNHCR Ukraine, 20 August 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/71799-idp-councils-ukraine.html>.

<sup>78</sup> Knighton, C. (2024), 'The history of Irish emigration, and the pride of the Emerald Isle', CBS News, 17 March 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-history-of-irish-emigration-epic-museum-in-dublin>.

<sup>79</sup> Research interview with Nathan Mannion, head of exhibitions and programmes at EPIC – The Irish Emigration Museum, conducted in Dublin, 22 August 2024.

In 2004, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) established the Irish Abroad Unit, which marked a formal recognition of the diaspora's importance. This unit began funding Irish community groups worldwide through its Emigrant Support Programme,<sup>80</sup> which includes welfare support for the vulnerable and efforts to nurture Ireland's cultural heritage abroad among the diaspora. This financial support was largely enabled by the economic growth that Ireland experienced over the past two decades.

However, other initiatives do not require a lot of financial resources and could potentially be replicated in countries like Ukraine. In 2013, 'The Gathering' initiative was launched, inviting people of Irish descent to return to Ireland for tourism, to discover their heritage and to contribute with their spending to the Irish economy.<sup>81</sup> This was a proactive step to engage with the diaspora. The revenue from visitors of Irish heritage from across the globe vastly exceeded the government's expenses and income projections for the event. According to Mannion, 'the Gathering was largely a reverse genealogical project to invite the Irish to come back and visit Ireland, to build direct personal connections between communities all the way down to small villages'. He added: 'What made it different was the communities were actively reaching out, as opposed to what the usual case is where the diaspora actually tried to come back and track their own roots themselves.'<sup>82</sup>

Ireland's diaspora strategy has a human-centred approach by the state towards people of Irish heritage abroad. The strategy is defined in close consultation with the Irish global community. In-person events that connect people of Irish heritage with people in Ireland, such as the Global Irish Civic Forum and Global Irish Economic Forum, are held regularly. The DFAT is currently finalizing a new strategy for 2026–30, indicating a continued commitment to engaging with the diaspora.

The Irish Emigration Museum was founded in 2016 with funding from Neville Isdell, former head of The Coca-Cola Company and also of Irish heritage.<sup>83</sup> It is an example of a physical space that pays tribute to the Irish global community and facilitates links with the country of origin by providing genealogical research services. A similar physical space could be established in Kyiv or another major Ukrainian city, potentially with private funding, to serve as a point of connection. Human stories of Ukrainians who left could make their experiences more understandable and relatable to Ukrainians who stayed, strengthening unity between the communities at home and abroad.

<sup>80</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (undated), 'Emigrant Support Programme', <https://www.ireland.ie/en/irish-diaspora/emigrant-support-programme>.

<sup>81</sup> National Tourism Development Authority (2013), *The Gathering Ireland: Final Report*, December 2013, [https://www.failteireland.ie/failteireland/media/websitestructure/documents/ezine/thegathering\\_finalreport\\_jimmiley\\_december2013.pdf](https://www.failteireland.ie/failteireland/media/websitestructure/documents/ezine/thegathering_finalreport_jimmiley_december2013.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> Research interview with Nathan Mannion, 22 August 2024.

<sup>83</sup> EPIC – The Irish Emigration Museum (undated), 'History of the Museum', <https://epicchq.com/explore/epic-history-and-vision>.

## Recommendations to the Ukrainian government

### Short-term actions

- **Adopt a two-pronged, cross-institutional approach to global Ukrainians.**  
The focus of the Ministry of National Unity and other government entities should be both on encouraging the return of Ukrainians and on closer cooperation with Ukrainians who remain abroad.
- **Adopt a human-centred approach to the Ukrainian global community.**  
The government's actions and communications should show respect for people's individual choices, be honest about what the Ukrainian state can offer to returnees at this time, and, as far as possible, avoid creating a perception that the government is pressuring Ukrainians to return.
- **Diversify the approach to Ukrainians abroad.** Different options should be offered to people according to their situation and return intentions. For instance, public–private partnerships could help to provide accessible (possibly social) housing and jobs to Ukrainians who are in need and are motivated to return. For those who decide to stay abroad, the options should include possibilities to work remotely with Ukrainian public and private entities. The government should help returnees to adapt to living in Ukraine again and support their reintegration into Ukrainian society.
- **Simplify access to consular services for Ukrainian citizens abroad.**  
The quality and speed of consular service provision to Ukrainian citizens should be improved. Embassies should provide access to local contact persons with whom Ukrainian community members can informally engage.
- **Finalize legislation allowing multiple citizenship.** A draft law on multiple citizenship was adopted at its first reading by the Ukrainian parliament in December 2024 (but has further stages to go through before formal enactment). Until now, Ukrainians have not been permitted to hold multiple citizenships and have been expected to give up their Ukrainian passports if they acquire citizenship elsewhere. However, many Ukrainians who have been living abroad for years have citizenship of another country while also keeping a Ukrainian passport. The law on multiple citizenship should legalize this practice so that Ukrainians abroad do not have to give up their original citizenship. It could also serve as a first step towards encouraging a new generation of migrants with Ukrainian roots to apply for Ukrainian citizenship and to come to rebuild and settle in Ukraine.
- **Create physical and digital spaces** to bring Ukrainian communities at home and abroad together, such as a diaspora/emigration museum in Ukraine and a digital platform to connect global Ukrainians. Among other things, a digital platform could help to match Ukraine's job market needs with the skills of Ukrainians abroad who are able to work remotely.
- **Automatically recognize foreign educational qualifications** achieved by Ukrainians abroad and simplify the re-enrolment of children who studied abroad back into the Ukrainian education system.



### Medium- and long-term actions

- **Simplify the rules for businesses** and offer grants or loans to entrepreneurs who seek to restart companies or other economic ventures in Ukraine, as this could help to incentivize refugees to return.
- **Encourage the economic contribution to Ukraine by Ukrainians abroad.** This could be via remittances, investments, or joint business projects between Ukrainian companies and companies in the countries of residence of Ukrainians abroad. However, efforts should avoid overly focusing on Ukrainians as ‘a resource for the state’: they are humans, with free will and intentions, and want to be recognized as such.
- **Develop financial incentives, such as ‘diaspora bonds’,** to attract capital into priority reconstruction projects. The cost of transferring money to Ukraine should be lowered.
- **Maintain continuous communication with Ukrainians abroad** to let them know that they are appreciated and valued as part of the wider community of global Ukrainians. The aim should be to inform them about reforms and positive developments in Ukraine that might encourage their return. Get-togethers in Ukraine, such as camps or educational exchanges for young people, could be organized between diaspora members and Ukrainian residents.
- **Offer Ukrainian refugees and diaspora members the possibility to participate more easily in decision-making in Ukraine.** Potentially, this could be based on the existing practice of IDP councils. It could also offer an opportunity for Ukrainians resident outside the country to be represented politically in parliament.
- **Fight corruption, enhance democracy and the rule of law, and continue pursuing integration with the EU.** These are important pre-conditions for Ukrainians’ return in the future.

Ukrainian government officials interviewed by Chatham House acknowledged the lack of human and financial resources to deal with all the challenges facing the country, including refugees’ return and diaspora engagement. While officials recognize the need to encourage refugees’ return, they also expect Ukrainians abroad to be proactive, suggest ideas and get in touch if they want to contribute. Daryna Marchak, the deputy minister for social policy of Ukraine, said:

Citizens who wish to work [for Ukraine] while abroad, who are ready to write analytical, normative documents, share best practices and policy recommendations, are really needed in Ukraine. Experience, knowledge and skills are very much welcome. However, we also need hands: people who not only suggest ideas, but actually help implementing them. We need people who are ready to take up responsibility.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Research interview with Daryna Marchak, Ukraine’s deputy minister for social policy, conducted in Kyiv, Ukraine, 9 April 2024.

## Recommendations to Ukraine's partners

### Short-term actions

- **Upskill and reskill Ukrainian refugees in host countries** to match Ukraine's labour market and reconstruction needs. The International Skills Alliance Initiative should be expanded to train Ukrainians abroad. Needs should be identified in cooperation with the private sector by involving business associations and economic think-tanks.
- **Provide support to human capital initiatives under existing EU programmes, such as the Ukraine Facility.** This dedicated support mechanism offers up to €50 billion for the period 2024–27 to bolster Ukraine's resilience, support its reconstruction, and facilitate its path towards sustainable development and EU membership.<sup>85</sup>
- **Start planning for the period when temporary protection for Ukrainians ends.** Host countries will need to find a balance between the need for the Ukrainian state to bring its people back and the situations and intentions of Ukrainian refugees themselves, many of whom will have settled, found jobs and now wish to continue living in their host countries. Host countries can support those Ukrainians who are willing to return, while offering pathways to settlement and supporting the maintenance of ties with Ukraine for those who meet the criteria to remain.
- **Support displaced Ukrainians in working remotely** for Ukrainian companies or doing business with Ukraine – or at least, do not discourage them from doing so.
- **Provide freedom of movement to encourage the circular migration of Ukrainians** between their home and host countries. If there is a possibility to go back and forth and maintain ties with both countries, this might prevent people from making a decision to stay abroad permanently and could encourage their eventual return to Ukraine.

### Medium- and long-term actions

- **Help to negotiate a just peace deal and provide security guarantees for Ukraine** that would enable the sustainable return of refugees and the rebuilding of Ukraine.
- **Support Ukraine on its path towards EU integration**, while recognizing the challenges and limitations that the country faces while under military aggression.
- **Support cultural and educational initiatives** that help global Ukrainians to maintain ties with Ukraine. This could include work with Ukrainian embassies and communities to open more schools and cultural institutions abroad to preserve the Ukrainian identity among younger generations of people with Ukrainian heritage.
- **Offer opportunities for learning the Ukrainian language** to children abroad. In the UK, Ukrainian could be added to the list of languages examined at GCSE level.
- **Provide guarantees for potential Ukrainian 'diaspora bonds'.**

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<sup>85</sup> European Commission (undated), 'Ukraine Facility', [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/ukraine-facility\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/ukraine-facility_en).

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Cover image: Members of London's Ukrainian community march towards the Russian Embassy in London, 24 February 2023.

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