

Assessing future migration among Ukrainian refugees in Poland and Norway

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This policy brief presents the main findings from a study among Ukrainian refugees and their support providers in Poland and Norway. We ask what factors shape these refugees' decisions to leave their current country of residence, and for those already abroad, what shapes their decisions to remain or repatriate. A decision to flee, return, or remain in a country of refuge is rarely easily made, and the refugees are often ambivalent when they talk of the future. They can express convincing arguments for wanting to go back to Ukraine, and within the same interview also present strong arguments for why they want to move on and start a new life abroad. The aim of our study is not to classify refugees according to migration or return intentions, but rather to point to the factors that induce them to want to go back to Ukraine, and the factors they emphasise when they talk of the desire to remain abroad.

What shaped migration from Ukraine in the summer and autumn of 2022, and why did these refugees not leave earlier?

The refugees who left Ukraine in the first months after the February 2022 invasion often left in a hurry. Their main aim was to leave Ukraine for a safe place, and they did not think much about where they wanted to go. Among those who ended up in Norway in March and April 2022, many did so by coincidence. They chose Norway because they had friends or relatives there, or because Norway was recommended by the volunteers they met when they crossed the border from Ukraine.

Among our respondents who left Ukraine after June 2022, we find a somewhat different profile, both in Poland and Norway. Some had stayed in occupied areas, or areas in the front line for months – and decided to leave after a missile hit nearby. Many link their decision to leave Ukraine to not having a job or other sources of income. Some had first stayed in

Methodology

The analyses presented in this policy brief are based on qualitative interviews with refugees, policymakers and NGOs in Poland and Norway, conducted during the summer and autumn of 2022. In Poland, fieldwork was conducted in a border area, a rural area with a history of employing Ukrainians in seasonal work and the capital, Warsaw. In Norway, we interviewed Ukrainian refugees in North, West and Central Norway. Some of our respondents came in the first months of the war, and who have just recently arrived, both in Norway and Poland. The data is analysed in light of the wider literature on migration aspirations in refugee populations.

Ukraine as internally displaced persons, before they moved on. Others left because they were exhausted, not from living in areas directly impacted by the war itself, but by constant alarms and fear of missile attacks. To a larger extent than in the first phase, the new arrivals appear to have a concrete plan of where to go and how to get there.

Several surveys have suggested that refugees with educational and economic resources are overrepresented among the refugees who left Ukraine in the early phases of the conflict. Our analysis finds support for this as well. The refugees we met who left Ukraine in the early phases of the conflict usually had access to one or more of the following:

- friends or family abroad that they could go to and stay with
- savings, or income from Ukraine, that they could rely on even if they moved abroad, or
- enough information about refugee reception systems in Europe to know that there would be a support system available for them.

The Ukrainian refugees that we have met in both Poland and Norway know surprisingly little about refugee rights and opportunities in Europe. Studies in other refugee populations have suggested that refugees who come to Europe are normally well informed about what awaits them, and what they can expect from the various locations (Brekke & Brochmann, 2015; Rottmann & Kaya, 2021; Tyldum, 2021). However, the Ukrainians we have met in Poland and Norway often do not know that they have a right to seek asylum (in countries that have ratified the refugee convention) and they do not know that most European countries have special provisions and economic support systems for refugees, so that they do not need to have a job abroad before they leave Ukraine. As more Ukrainians get settled in Europe and communicate their experiences back to friends and family who are still in Ukraine, we expect this to change, so that Ukrainians become as well informed as other refugee populations. This will make it easier for those still in occupied or war-torn areas of Ukraine to seek protection abroad, if they need to.

Will the refugees relocate from neighbouring countries to Western European countries?

In a study of migration aspirations among Syrian refugees in Turkey, Balcilar and Nugent (2019) show that the more and better quality services the refugees had access to, the less likely they were to move on to Europe. This is a mechanism that is not difficult to understand. When basic needs are not met in the first safe country of refuge, the refugees will have strong incentives for moving on to other countries known to provide better services to refugees. A key question for predicting future migration flows to Norway and other Western European countries is therefore whether Poland is able to cover the basic needs of the Ukrainian refugees currently in the country.

The Ukrainian refugees we have interviewed in Poland often express a strong preference for staying in Poland. Some explain this as due to the geographical proximity to Ukraine, making repatriation easier when this becomes possible. Others say they want to stay in Poland because of the cultural and linguistic proximity. Because the languages are relatively similar, even refugees without foreign language skills are able to communicate with locals.

Similar food and cultural practices also make the refugees feel more at home. Poland has had a large Ukrainian diaspora before the war, and because of this there are numerous cultural institutions (for instance churches or schools) that are important for Ukrainians who choose to settle there. For women with husbands and sons in Ukraine, being in Poland means being physically close to them, and for persons dependent on salaries from Ukraine, the living expenses in Poland are lower than in Western Europe. However, the large number of refugees arriving at the same time in Poland has made it difficult for some refugees to get by there.

There are a range of different actors/organisation that offer some support to Ukrainian refugees who need help to find jobs, to secure a sustainable income, to have a place to live and to access education for children. Most of these services are, however, not services that the refugees are entitled to. Although there are organisations assisting with housing, language training and economic support, far from all refugees in need of such assistance are able to obtain this assistance. Our respondents in NGOs and representatives of Polish local and central government report of little overall coordination of measures, few long-term plans for the refugees, and substantial uncertainty with regards to long-term funding. The refugees report that finding a place to live is increasingly difficult and refugees with an education struggle to find jobs where they can use their skills.

Accepting harsh conditions because they are temporary

The refugees we met in Poland were often content with having a roof over their head, food, basic healthcare and most importantly, security. They hope and assume the war will not last much longer, and their plan for the future is to return to Ukraine and their old way of life. They think of their current lodging and way of life as temporary – and are therefore prepared to endure some hardship.

But what will happen if the war does not end soon? We can expect that at some point, the refugees who think that their current way of life is temporary, will lose faith in a future that involves repatriation. And at this point what was okay when temporary, may no longer be enough. We know from studies of other refugee populations, that when the belief that

repatriation will be possible fades, refugees who have been living in neighbouring countries are more likely to want to move on to other locations. And the longer they have stayed in first safe countries without finding long term solutions, the stronger the aspirations to move on (Tyldum & Zhang, Forthcoming). This introduces time as an important factor in our assessment of potential new refugee arrivals. The longer the conflict lasts, and the less hope there is that the conflict will end soon, the higher the probability that refugees and internally displaced persons will give up on the dream of repatriation and start looking for long-term solutions.

We rarely see that the same countries are good at filling the refugees' needs in both the acute phase and when it comes to providing long-term solutions. Neighbouring countries to conflict zones are often a preferred destination in the acute phase – as geographical proximity keeps the dream of return alive, and cultural and linguistic proximity often makes daily life easier. In neighbouring countries, governmental, non-governmental and international organisations normally also join forces to ensure that basic needs are met. But as the numbers of refugees in neighbouring countries is often high – these same neighbouring countries are rarely able to offer the same quality of long-term solutions to refugees, compared to what is possible if they move on. As we describe above this is also the case for Ukrainians in Poland. Many are happy to stay in Poland, in spite of not having a proper place to live or a decent source of income, because they see their stay as only temporary. We can expect that as time goes, these refugees will increasingly start looking for long-term solutions, and this may appear to be easier if they move on to other locations.

Why are some refugees returning to Ukraine now?

Some Ukrainian refugees are currently returning to a Ukraine still at war. Some are going back to areas in Western or Central Ukraine, that have been less directly affected by the war. They left in the early phase of the conflict when no place in Ukraine felt safe, and returned this summer because they felt the immediate danger of invasion was over in these areas.

Others are returning to areas more affected by the war. Some of the refugees, in both Norway and

Poland, talked of the summer of 2022 as being a defining moment, when they had to decide if they wanted to return to their old life or start a new life as a refugee in Europe. Some feared that if they did not return now, they would lose their job, and consequently not have a job to return to if they decide to return later. Others returned to take care of houses and gardens that had been unprotected for months. Refugees from areas around Kyiv, occupied by Russian forces in February/March 2022, talk of homes with windows and roofs broken from bullets and missiles, that needed to be fixed before the winter – if they wanted a house to return to later. When we did our interviews in late July 2022, some were also returning because the new school year was approaching and they wanted their children to continue their education in Ukraine. They feared that their Ukrainian school would not accept education from other countries, forcing their children to retake a school year if they did not go back now. These factors created a sense of urgency for them to make up their mind about repatriation now. If they did not return, they feared it would be much more difficult to do so later.

It is worth noting that some of those who went back this summer explicitly said that repatriation might not be for good. Some said that they only went back to Ukraine to see what life was like there now and were open to the idea of leaving again if things did not work out. These respondents all said that they would move to another country than they did the first time if they were to leave Ukraine again.

What can trigger new large-scale refugee movements from Ukraine?

If basic needs are no longer met where the refugees or internally displaced currently stay, we can expect that some of them will move on to other locations (in line with Balcilar & Nugent, 2019). We may see increased movements due to power shortages or problems obtaining an income in Ukraine, or problems finding a place to live, a school for children or a job in Poland. However, as long as there is a belief that there will be a peaceful solution soon, refugees, internally displaced and others will probably be prepared to accept some hardship while they wait. If the refugees and internally displaced give up on the idea that peace is possible within a not too distant future, we should be prepared for increased secondary

mobility in these groups, as they will move on to look for long-term solutions.

As we write this policy brief (November 2022), Ukrainian forces are making progress on the battlefield, and many Ukrainian refugees are optimistic that repatriation, and maybe even peace, might be possible within the not-too-distant future. In the event that Russian forces are able to hold their current positions, and perhaps also regain their former positions, the optimism among those internally displaced and under temporary protection in Poland may weaken. Some may start to lose hope that the war will end soon.

Even if many Ukrainian refugees in Poland were to realise that repatriation to Ukraine will not be possible in a long while, this does not necessarily imply they that will start moving away from Poland. Labour market participation is already high among Ukrainians in Poland, and some refugees already rent their own apartments and pay rent from their own income. We expect that many Ukrainians will wish to remain in Poland also if they give up on the idea of return.

It is, however, unclear how many Ukrainian refugees will be able to find long-term solutions in Poland. Poland is, as the rest of Europe, going into what is expected to be a difficult winter, with energy shortages and high inflation leading to increasing food and energy prices. In such circumstances, it may be challenging for Polish authorities to provide the social assistance needed by those Ukrainians who are not able to enter the labour market. And although many Ukrainians have been able to enter the labour market, the jobs available to Ukrainians in Poland are often unskilled and manual. Thus far, there have been few policies in place to assist Ukrainians who wish to use their formal education in Poland.

If there will be secondary movements from Poland, other neighbouring countries and internally displaced persons in Ukraine, when should we expect these movements to start? After the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011, the major refugee movements out of Syria to neighbouring countries took place in 2012 and 2013 (Tiltnes, Zhang, & Pedersen, 2019), while the main “secondary movement” of Syrians leaving first safe countries for Europe came four

years after the outbreak of war – in 2015. However, we know that some refugees start looking for long-term solutions immediately after leaving a war zone – as they, for various reasons, have decided or realised that they will probably never return. This has also been the case for Ukrainian refugees, as some of the refugees we have met in both Poland and Norway say they have already decided that they do not wish to return. This is typical for refugees from the regions that are now occupied by Russian forces, and where homes and critical infrastructure have been heavily impacted by the war. Also, some of the refugees that are fleeing for the second time, who first left their homes after the 2014 outbreak of war, and have now fled again, seem to have relatively quickly reached the conclusion that they will probably never return. On the other hand, we know from other conflicts that some refugee populations can keep the dream of repatriation alive for years, and even decades, after they had to flee.

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