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Fafo

Degrees of uncertainty: certain stayers, or considering return? Return aspirations and expectations among Ukrainian refugees in Norway

This policy brief examines return aspirations and future place-of-residence expectations among Ukrainian refugees in Norway, and how these vary across different groups. We describe who aspires to settle in Norway, who remains uncertain, and what factors shape considerations of return. We find that very few have concrete plans to return. The main divide in return aspirations is not between those who want to stay and those who want to return, but between those who want to stay and those who are uncertain about the future.

Background

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Norway has granted temporary collective protection to more than 105,000 displaced Ukrainians, marking the largest refugee arrival in Norwegian history. At present, more than 86,000 Ukrainians covered by the temporary collective protection scheme reside in Norway (UDI, 2026a).

The Ukrainian authorities have expressed a desire for the displaced to return once the war ends and have developed several policies for return and reintegration (Holm-Hansen et al., 2025). The Norwegian authorities wish to facilitate return when the situation allows (Utenriksdepartementet, 2024). At the same time, the government has recently proposed that employed Ukrainian refugees who meet an income requirement can obtain work-based residence permit, which after three years can lead to a permanent residence permit (Regjeringen, 2026). Some return migration has already taken place: More than 4,000 persons have received repatriation support from the Norwegian authorities and returned since the scheme was reactivated (1,640 in 2024 and 2,540 in 2025), and a considerably larger number have returned or moved onward without support (UDI, 2026b).

This policy brief is produced as part of the project "Aspirations, decisions and experiences of return

Data and methods

The analyses draw on the two-wave panel survey conducted under the Research Council of Norway-funded project "Trust among refugees: The impact of welfare state institutions (MIGTRUST)", led by Fafo. The survey covers Ukrainian and Syrian refugees in Norway and Denmark aged 18 years or older. The analyses in this policy brief are based on data from the Ukrainian sample in Norway in 2026 and include a total of 1,077 respondents who fully completed both waves of the survey, conducted in 2023 and 2026. All respondents had been granted temporary protection in 2022–2023 (later arrivals are thus not included). Return intentions were measured exclusively in the second wave, thus the responses reported here are from refugees who had resided in Norway a minimum of two years. Because the sample excludes the most recently arrived refugees, our findings cannot speak to the factors motivating return among this group.

Return intentions in the survey are measured with three indicators: (1) return aspirations: whether respondents would like to move back to Ukraine, (2) intentions: whether respondents aspiring to return to Ukraine have concrete plans to move back within the next year, and (3) return expectations: where respondents believe they will be living in 3–5 years, regardless of their aspirations.

In addition, the survey includes a multiple-choice question asking respondents to select the three most important factors, out of seven, that they consider most important for where they will live in the future. The survey is based on a probability sample drawn from lists of registered residents, with telephone follow-up of non-respondents. Participation in the survey was voluntary, meaning that if refugees with intentions to return to Ukraine are less inclined to participate, this could lead to an underestimation of return aspirations and plans. For more information about the survey, see *Technical report and preliminary findings from the MIGTRUST survey*: www.fafo.no/images/pub/20922.pdf

and repatriation among Ukrainian refugees", carried out by Fafo on behalf of the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI). The purpose of this brief is to provide updated insight on the return aspirations and plans among different groups of Ukrainian refugees in Norway.

Low return aspirations and even lower concrete return plans

Few Ukrainian refugees in Norway express aspirations to return, and even fewer have concrete return plans. 12 percent (130 respondents) say they would like to move back to Ukraine, while 60 percent do not. 23 percent say they do not know whether they will return, while 5 percent do not wish to answer. The level of return aspirations corresponds to what is reported in surveys in other European countries (OECD, 2026).

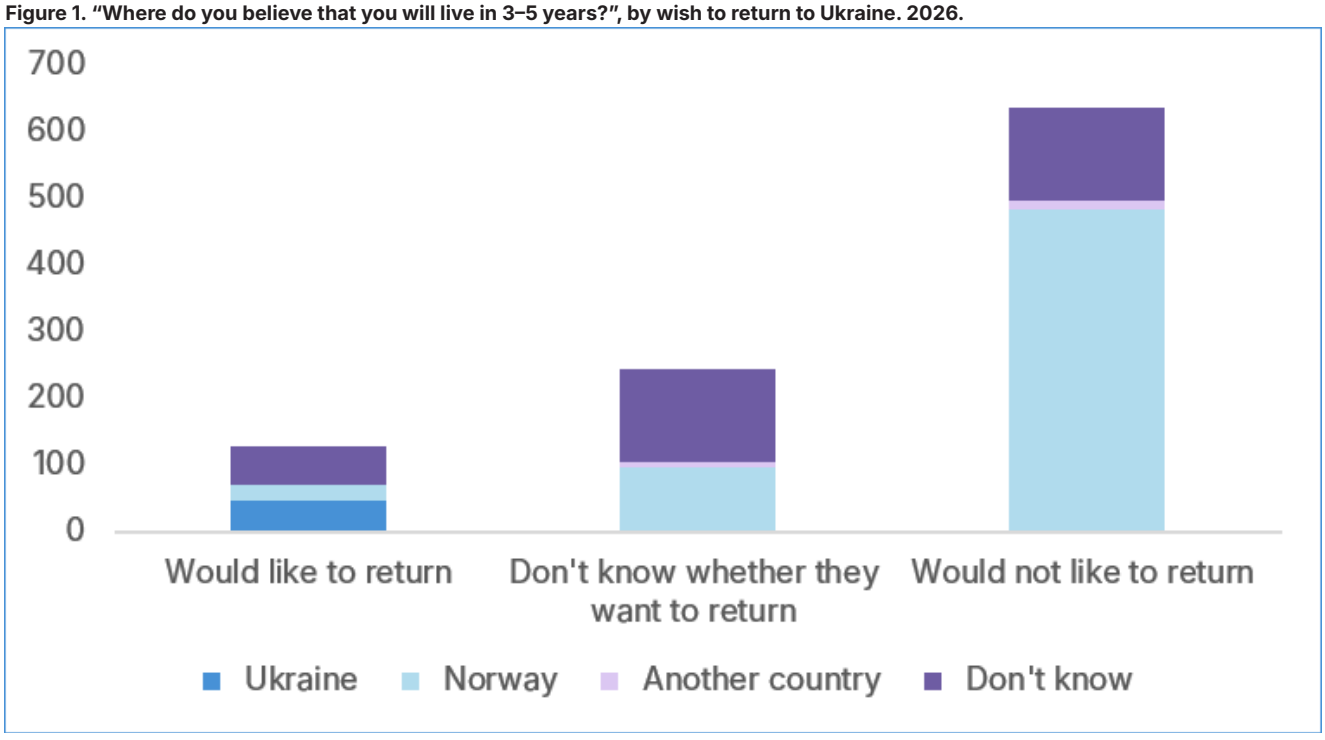
Although 12 percent say they wish to return one day, the number of persons who express concrete plans to return soon is far lower. Only one percent (12 individuals) report concrete plans to move back within the next year.

The share of Ukrainians who think they will live in Ukraine in the near future is also small. When asked in which country they believe they will be living in 3–5 years, 58 percent answer Norway and only 5 percent Ukraine. For this question the uncertainty is even larger than for return aspirations, as one third of the respondents say they are not sure.

We know from previous studies of return in refugee populations that expressions of return aspirations are a poor predictor of actual return (Zetter, 1999; Al-Rasheed, 1994; Müller-Funk & Fransen, 2023; Alrababah et al., 2023). Our analysis points in the same direction. In Figure 1, we compare respondents' expressed return aspirations and their thoughts about where they will live in the future. The figure demonstrates that an aspiration to return does not always align with a belief that return will actually take place in the near future. Among the relatively small group of Ukrainians who stated that they would like to return, only 38 percent believe they will be living in Ukraine in 3–5 years; 17 percent believe they will still be in Norway, while close to half (44 percent) say they do not know where they will live. For the majority of Ukrainians who expressed return aspirations in the survey, the desire to return should not be understood as a concrete plan, but rather as a conditional hope for the future.

Respondents who say they do not know whether they wish to return and believe that they will live in Ukraine in the near future are almost non-existent. Among the ones who say they do not know if they want to return, 39 percent believe they will still be living in Norway in 3–5 years. Although they express uncertainty about their return aspirations, their expectations for the future leans to some degree towards staying in Norway. Among those who do not want to return, three out of four believe that they will still be in Norway in 3–5 years, but also in this group

Figure 1. "Where do you believe that you will live in 3–5 years?", by wish to return to Ukraine. 2026.



there is a significant share who say they do not know where they will live in the near future.

The Ukrainian refugees in Europe live under strong uncertainty. They do not know how long they will be allowed to stay in Europe, when the war will end, and what Ukraine will be like when it does. It is therefore challenging for them to say whether they are going to return or not, as reflected in the fact that only about 5 percent of the survey population both express a desire to return to Ukraine and see a return as likely within the next 3–5 years.

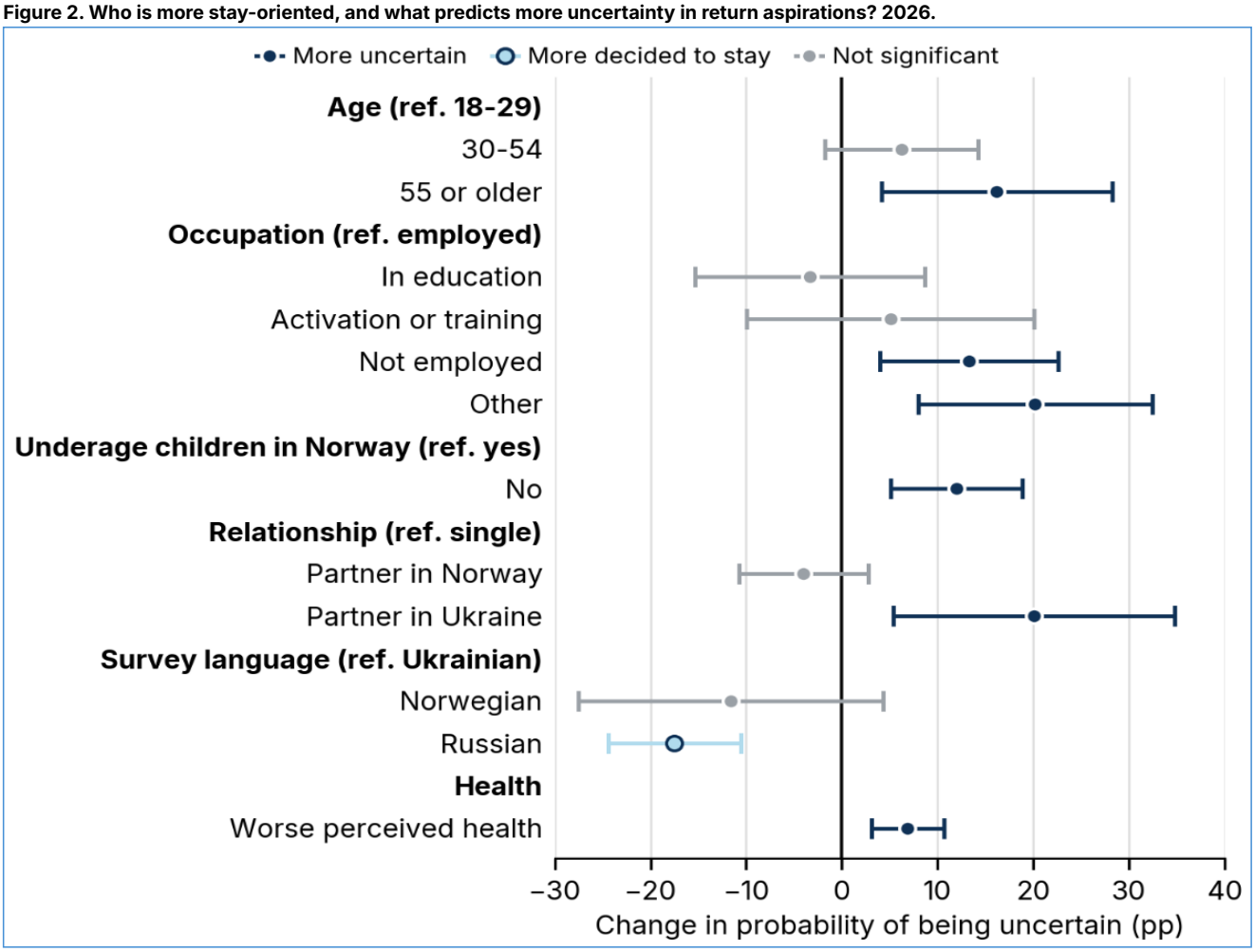
We do, however, find more variation in how much uncertainty refugees express. 45 percent of our survey respondents express little uncertainty; they aspire to remain in Norway, and do not expect to return to Ukraine in the next 3–5 years. The remaining 55 percent either say they do not know, express a desire to go back, or find it likely that they will have left Norway within 3–5 years.

In our further analysis of return aspirations and expectations, we divide respondents into two groups: 1) the more stay-oriented group – respondents who neither wish to return nor believe that they will leave Norway in the next 3–5 years (483 respondents) and 2) the more uncertain group, comprising all remaining respondents, including the return-oriented minority (594 respondents).

Who expects to stay and who is more unsure?

Uncertainty about where the future will unfold is not spread evenly in the population. To examine which factors distinguish those who are uncertain about their future plans from those who are certain they will stay in Norway, we estimate a linear probability model. The coefficients can be interpreted as the change in the probability of being uncertain rather than a certain stayer, holding other variables constant. As shown in the figure below, uncertainty is more concentrated among older refugees, as well as

Figure 2. Who is more stay-oriented, and what predicts more uncertainty in return aspirations? 2026.



Note: OLS regression. Points show the estimated change in the probability of being in the uncertain group rather than a certain stayer, with 95 % confidence intervals. Perceived health is measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where higher values indicate worse health, and is included as a continuous variable. The model also controls for gender and education level, none of which are statistically significant. n = 1,016, R^2 = 0.113.

those with poorer health. Family ties matter as well: Those with a partner in Ukraine are more uncertain and return-oriented, while those with underage children in Norway are clearer in their ambitions to stay. Attachment to the Norwegian labour market is also clearly associated with being more decided to stay.

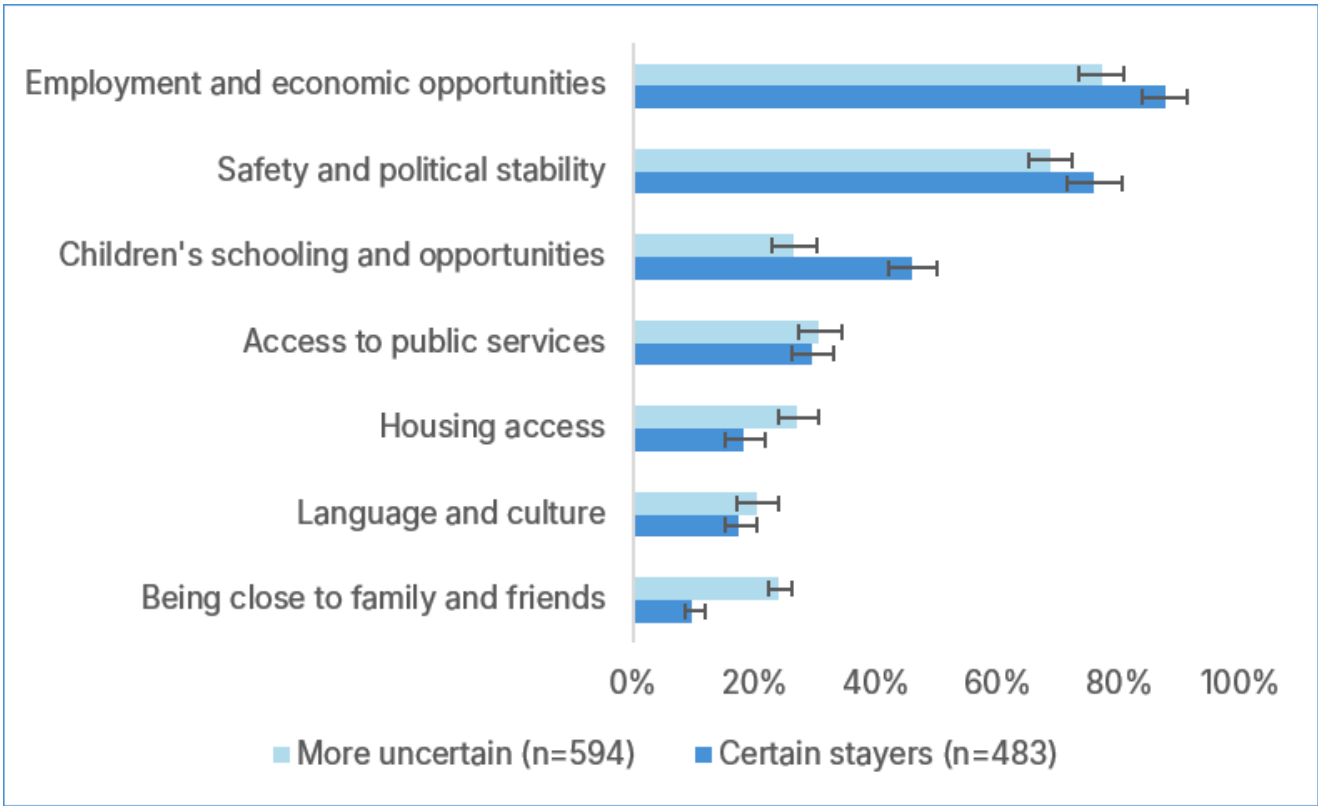
We do not have information about where in Ukraine respondents resided before the war. We do however know what language the survey was answered in as they could choose between Norwegian, English, Russian and Ukrainian questionnaires. 28 percent filled in the questionnaire in Russian. Their choice of language can be used as a proxy, albeit very rough, of regional background. The population in Ukraine's eastern and southern parts is more often Russian speaking, and these parts of the country are more severely affected by the war, and often occupied, or close to the front line. As shown in Figure 2, respondents who completed the survey in Russian are more oriented towards staying in Norway, while those who answered in Ukrainian are more uncertain.

In our analysis we find that also Norwegian language proficiency is positively correlated with being more certain about staying. Among respondents who describe their Norwegian skills as being at beginner or elementary levels, 37 percent are more decided on staying, compared to 54 percent among those at intermediate level and above.

We know from previous research on refugees that employment in the host country is associated with lower return aspirations (Sohst et al., 2024), but these findings should nonetheless be interpreted with care. This correlation may partly reflect different strategies among refugees who are return-oriented or not: Those who are already oriented towards staying may invest more resources in learning a new language and finding work. Conversely, those who are uncertain about their future country of residence may hesitate to commit to language learning, education, or job seeking, potentially delaying their integration (Adunts et al., 2026).

Earlier research and theories of return migration emphasize that weak integration in the host country does not equate to a high likelihood or high preparedness to return. Expressing a wish to return is one thing, but carrying it out demands preparation and mobilization of various resources (such as savings, qualifications and skills, housing, networks, health etc.) (Cassarino, 2004; Tyldum, 2025). Successful integration may provide such resources, increase the refugees' readiness to return and contribute to more sustainable and per-

Figure 3. "When you think about where you will live in the future, what are the three most important things to you?" Percent of respondent answers. 2026.



manent returns (Ruben et al., 2009; OECD, 2023). Seen in this light, integration and return may be complementary, as integration may benefit Norway while refugees remain, and strengthen the skills and resources that refugees could bring to Ukraine if they return. Some research suggests that returnees who have had opportunities to work and build social networks during their stay abroad may be in a better position to re-integrate after return (Ruben et al., 2009). However, it is uncertain to what extent such patterns apply among Ukrainian refugees in Norway.

What factors shape return intentions among Ukrainian refugees?

In the MIGTRUST survey, respondents were asked to choose three things that matter most for where they believe they will live in the future. Two factors stand out among the answers: employment and economic opportunities (82 percent of the respondents chose this answer), and safety and political stability (72 percent).

Research has consistently shown that conditions in the country of origin, first of all security, are the key factor for both return intentions and actual return. Refugees under-stand security broadly, not only as the absence of hostilities, but also predictability, institutional stability and the rule of law. Intentions rarely translate into action before a threshold of safety is reached, largely irrespective of conditions in the host country (Alrababah et al., 2023; Sønsterudbråten, 2018). Earlier studies among Ukrainian refugees have uncovered that the course of the war, local security in the home region and the prospects of a stable peace are decisive preconditions for expressed return aspirations (Kosyakova et al., 2026; Sohst et al., 2024; Hernes et al., 2025; OECD, 2026). In this light, it is interesting that 28 percent do not point to safety and political stability as one of the most important factors determining where they will live in the future.

In Figure 3, we describe which factors the respondents themselves think matter for the decision of staying or returning to Ukraine. As the figure illustrates, there are differences in what aspects the certain stayers emphasize compared with those who are more uncertain and partly return-oriented.

Among those who are more uncertain, a larger share puts weight on being close to family and friends, housing access, language and culture. For those who are more decided on staying in Norway, future residence is to a larger degree a question of opportunities, such as employment, safety, stability and the children's schooling.

Conclusions and policy implications

- In our analysis of return aspirations and expectations among Ukrainians in Norway, we found that the main dividing line is not between the return-oriented and the stay-oriented. It is between the stay-oriented and the ones that are uncertain. Four out of ten are not sure if they wish to return to Ukraine, or where they will live in the future. This group is, however, not simply undecided. For many, the decision is not theirs to make: It hinges on the security situation and political development in Ukraine, on their family's situation and on the temporary nature of their protection in Norway, and on what opportunities they will have to rebuild their life in Ukraine. Our analysis suggests that among those undecided, many are leaning towards staying in Norway, and almost no one expects to be living in Ukraine in the near future.

- Uncertainty about the future and willingness to return are more common among older refugees, those reporting poorer health, respondents outside of employment and individuals in split households where family members still live in Ukraine. Among these are a number of subgroups who are outside the labour market due to their age or health.

- Refugees who are better integrated in the labour market (employed, higher Norwegian language proficiency) have lower return aspirations. However, weak economic integration is not necessarily the same as willingness or readiness to return. To be able to plan and carry out return, refugees need resources such as savings, qualifications, networks, health and access to housing. Earlier research suggests that returnees who were employed during their stay in the host country may be in a better position to re-integrate after return. We need more knowledge about whether this is the case among refugees returning from Norway to Ukraine.

- Economic opportunities and safety are the main factors Ukrainian refugees emphasize when they consider future return possibilities. These factors are dependent mainly on the developments in Ukraine, and to a lesser degree on instruments available to authorities in Norway.

Additionally, return decisions are made, weighing children's needs and family members' situations alongside the respondent's own. Whether return is seen as a realistic option may depend on children's well-being and schooling opportunities, in addition to refugees' own prospects for using skills they have acquired in Norway upon returning to Ukraine.

- Closeness to family and friends is the consideration that most sharply distinguishes the more uncertain and return-oriented group, and having a partner in Ukraine is strongly correlated with return intentions. Since December 2023, Ukrainians with temporary collective protection in Norway risk losing their permit if they travel to Ukraine. More evidence is needed on whether the restrictions on visits to Ukraine function to break down social ties to family and friends in Ukraine, and as such work as a barrier to return.

- Return aspirations are not the same as concrete plans or actions. Therefore, the expression of return aspirations should not be read as prediction of who will eventually return. Our analysis gives insights into expressions of return aspirations and expectations in a situation of great uncertainty among refugees residing in Norway. In future publications we will supplement these findings with studies of actual return behavior: who returns, who applies for repatriation support, where do they go, how do they fare, and whether – and how – do they differ from those who express the strongest wishes to stay.

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