

The Repatriation of Ukrainian War Refugees as a Factor of European Security

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Abstract

This chapter examines the “human dimension” of European security, focusing on the issue of Ukrainian war refugees and the potential for their repatriation. Pushing people out of Ukraine is becoming one of Russia’s most important strategies for achieving its so-called “special military operation” goals. Cynical attacks on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, including thermal and electrical generation, combined with information and psychological operations are working towards this goal daily. The consequences of people leaving Ukraine could be painful for both Ukraine’s future and European security. The situation of millions of Ukrainian citizens, who are unable to find fulfilment in the EU and have no place to return home, represents a real catastrophe for the European continent. To avoid this, Ukraine and its allies need to start planning the return of their citizens today, with appropriate adjustments to the state’s socio-economic policy.

Introduction

The annexation of Crimea and the beginning of Russia’s proxy war against Ukraine turned a new page in the relations between both Ukraine and Russia, and between Russia and the West. Prominent Ukrainian researcher and statesman Volodymyr Horbulin notes that in 2014, Russia de facto launched a global hybrid war against the West, and one of its fronts was localised in Ukraine (Horbulin, 2017). Horbulin states that Russia is not solely responsible for the destruction of the old-world order; the West shares responsibility, and their interaction has led to the latest form of global confrontation – hybrid warfare. In turn, Russia’s geopolitical goal in unleashing the global hybrid conflict was to destroy the existing world order.

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Ambiguity was the main attribute of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine during the period between 2014 and 2022. The aggressor cited the "civil war" in Ukraine, the inalienable right of Donbas residents to defend their cultural and linguistic rights, and their hostility towards the idea of Ukraine ever joining NATO. After 2022, Russia dropped its mask and openly invaded Ukraine. However, Russia's strategic goals have not changed. Despite its change in tactic, its goals remain the destruction of Ukraine as a sovereign country and forging Russia's return to global political leadership with the use of force.

To implement this strategic plan, Russia is using an array of tools such as occupying territory through a scorched-earth tactic, destroying Ukraine's major metallurgical enterprises, damaging energy infrastructure and gas production facilities. In addition to these tools, one proves to be particularly insidious: the creation of conditions that trigger a mass exodus of the population from Ukraine. It is well established that a state is inconceivable without human resources; therefore, efforts to forcibly displace people from a territory gradually undermine the practical significance of the struggle to control it. In this section, we will delve into the issue of Ukrainian war refugees in detail, their current status in EU countries, and the prospects for their reintegration into Ukrainian society.

The Crisis of Depopulation

In 2025, around 6.9 million Ukrainians continue to reside abroad as a consequence of the war (UNHCR, 2025). The migration dynamics in Ukraine, four years into the war, remain unfavourable: the number of individuals returning home is less than those departing. Donald Trump's triumph in the US presidential election was perceived as an opportunity to initiate peace negotiations with Russia. A durable peace accord or ceasefire, or at least the initiation of a negotiation process, could potentially serve as a catalyst for some citizens to return home. Thus far, US-Russia conversations have transitioned to matters of international and bilateral ties, excluding Ukraine (Ivanova, 2025).

The depopulation of Ukraine has been a topic of considerable discussion for the past three years owing to the significant migration of its population. The Russian invasion in 2022 displaced millions of Ukrainians, resulting in some individuals becoming homeless and certain areas falling under

Russian control. Nonetheless, depopulation has been a protracted trend, characterised by phases of both acceleration and deceleration. Demographers estimate that Ukraine's population was 52 million in 1991, declining to 42 million by 2015 (Dettmer, 2025). During the 30 years of independence, around 3 million Ukrainians have become economic migrants, with a significant number relocating to Poland and Germany. As of the end of October 2023, Eurostat reported that 63.2% of Ukrainian citizens in the EU were women (Eurostat, 2025a). Given that one-third of forced migrants overseas are children and adolescents, their non-return may result in irrevocable demographic losses for Ukraine. Alongside the persistent conflict, the primary factors prompting emigration from Ukraine are an adverse economic climate and political instability.

Depopulation is significantly exacerbated by low birth rates and relatively high mortality, both of which are notably influenced by migration and the effects of war. In 2024, Ukraine experienced a mortality rate nearly three times higher than its birth rate, with 176,679 live births and 495,090 deaths reported (Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, 2025). This adverse trend results in a further socio-economic issue: an ageing population accompanied by a decline in the working-age demographic. The World Health Organisation (WHO) projects that by 2050, nearly 25% of Ukraine's population will be aged over 65, accompanied by a notable decrease in the youth demographic. This demographic shift will necessitate substantial changes in the country's labour policies (World Health Organisation, 2023).

Ukrainians Under Temporary Protection in EU: The Case of Estonia

As of 24 February 2022, 54,000 Ukrainian refugees have registered for temporary protection in Estonia. By June 2025, approximately 34,000 individuals held active temporary protection status, representing about 3% of the host nation's population (Eurostat, 2025b). The figures reported by the Police and Border Guard Board and Statistics Estonia may under-represent the total number of Ukrainian citizens in the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, 2025).

The highest proportions of temporary protection beneficiaries per thousand individuals among EU member states were recorded in Czechia (35.7), Poland (27.1), and Estonia (25.8), compared to the EU average of 9.5. As of 31 December 2024, Ukrainians represented over 98.3% of individuals granted

temporary protection within the EU, with nearly half being women (44.8%) and children (approximately 31.9%); adult men constituted less than 23.2% of the total (Eurostat, 2025c). The majority of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia successfully legalised their stay via the temporary protection mechanism. This status facilitates adaptation to socio-cultural conditions and enables access to the labour market, along with social and medical services.

In 2024, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) conducted a Socio-Economic Insights Survey and organised workshops with refugees, NGOs, and government partners to assess the primary needs of refugees in Estonia. This initiative revealed ongoing challenges in protection, education, livelihood, and healthcare (UNCR, 2025). Statistics reveal that 93% of Ukrainian refugees express a sense of safety, and approximately 77% report maintaining positive relationships with the host community in Estonia (ERR, 2024).

The survey indicates that the largest proportion of Ukrainian citizens (27%) entered Estonia in March 2022. Data indicates a significant decline in new arrivals over the subsequent months and years. Approximately 65% have been displaced for more than two years, with 50% having arrived within the first three months after the full-scale invasion. Middle-aged women and children constitute the majority of Ukrainian refugees. The male-to-female ratio in Ukrainian households in Estonia is roughly 40% male to 60% female. Over fifty percent of households have children (51%), with one-third of household members being minors, predominantly aged 5 to 17. Approximately 22% of Ukrainian households in Estonia consist of single-parent families, lacking male members aged 18 and older. Individuals over the age of 60 comprise 9% of Ukrainian refugees, whereas those within the active age range of 18 to 59 account for 60%. Three percent of households included breastfeeding or pregnant women, while forty-one percent contained individuals with chronic health conditions (ERR, 2024).

The primary mechanism employed by the EU to assist Ukrainian war refugees is the formulation of Refugee Response Plans (RRPs). The Estonian government's objective regarding immigration is to integrate Ukrainian refugees into the national social support and protection framework. This will guarantee that refugees receive the essential conditions for attaining self-sufficiency and independence, facilitating their integration into Estonian society while preserving their connection to the Ukrainian language and culture. Despite the government's and civil society's coordinated efforts, refugees still encounter difficulties in effectively supporting themselves

and their families. RRP's partners in Estonia will continue their efforts to address challenges, including language barriers and job shortages, in collaboration with government initiatives through 2025–26.

As of 1 September 2024, Estonia has revised its regulations regarding rental compensation for Ukrainian refugees, restricting eligibility to those who have arrived recently (Visit Ukraine, 2024). Refugees residing in the country for over a year may qualify for rental assistance only if they submit their application within the initial six months following the issuance of their residence permit. Local authorities provide compensation, which is subsequently reimbursed by the state via the Social Insurance Board.

The available data support the assertion of successful adaptation among Ukrainians. Notable mechanisms of government support policy in Estonia include simplified bureaucratic procedures for acquiring temporary protection status, the provision of free Estonian language courses and adaptation training, and housing compensation. For effective repatriation, the Ukrainian government must recognise the need for a streamlined process and adjust social protection policies to support returnees, especially in the early stages of reintegration, while considering socio-cultural factors.

Estonia's policies regarding Ukrainian war refugees in 2025 reflect a dual approach of providing immediate assistance while also focusing on long-term integration strategies. High rates of employment and education enrolment among refugees suggest successful adaptation; however, economic vulnerabilities and decreased financial assistance present significant risks. Estonia's provision of temporary protection, healthcare, and education, coupled with support from civil society, enhances its appeal as a destination for Ukrainian refugees. Addressing war fatigue among Estonians, ensuring equitable labour conditions, and sustaining support for vulnerable groups will be essential in the future.

Does Ukraine Have a Plan to Repatriate Ukrainian Citizens?

In September 2025, the EU Council adopted a new Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the expiry of temporary protection for displaced persons from Ukraine. According to the document, temporary protection for Ukrainians in the EU will end after March 4, 2027, and will no longer be extended (European Council, 2025). Following the adoption of the recommendations, the leaders of Germany and Poland confirmed in their

statements that the EU should ensure a managed process for Ukrainians to return home (Nöstlinger and Hülsemann, 2025; President of Poland, 2025). Thus, Ukraine, in cooperation with its European allies, needs to formulate a strategy for the return of Ukrainians home and the creation of the necessary conditions for this.

In November 2024, the President of Ukraine introduced the 'Internal Resilience Plan' to the public (President of Ukraine, 2024). Despite the document remaining unpublished, several key elements can be inferred from the presentation. The plan comprises ten points that should serve as the basis for establishing social resilience in Ukraine. The document addresses the provision of new weapons to the front, the stimulation of the economy via programmes supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and the reconstruction of affected territorial communities. The president emphasised the importance of human capital and the necessity of establishing favourable conditions for Ukrainian citizens to live abroad and return to their homeland.

The plan outlines targeted strategies for the preservation of human capital, including the allowance of multiple citizenships, the reform of the diplomatic service, the provision of free school meals, post-war reconstruction efforts, and the reintegration of military veterans into the civilian workforce. The government has restructured the Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories into the Ministry of National Unity to facilitate the coordination of these tasks (Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine, 2024). Successful implementation necessitates structural changes in the economy, as Ukraine can no longer depend on profits from large Soviet-era enterprises, many of which have been destroyed by hostilities or have significantly lost production capacity. The state's economic policies will focus on supporting SMEs by establishing preferential conditions for businesses in the post-war period.

The Ukrainian authorities acknowledge that addressing intricate economic and social issues is unfeasible without mitigating the demographic crisis. The repatriation of Ukrainian citizens is emerging as a strategic objective for the authorities, aimed at preserving national identity and bolstering the economy. Furthermore, Ukraine is expected to require an annual influx of labour migrants, estimated at 300,000 to 400,000 individuals (Agroreview, 2025). The immigrant workforce is poised to enhance economic growth while also markedly altering the ethnic composition of Ukraine.

In the previous year, the Ukrainian government approved the Strategy for Demographic Development of the State, which is set to guide policies until 2040 (Ukrainian Government Portal, 2024). The strategy aims to ensure sustainable, long-term population reproduction and enhance key socio-demographic characteristics by increasing the resilience of the state and society in the face of demographic changes, particularly those resulting from armed aggression, epidemics, poverty, and other adverse factors (Libanova, 2024). The strategy encompasses five objectives: enhancing the birth rate in Ukraine, decreasing premature mortality, adapting to an ageing population, (re)distributing the post-war demography, and addressing migration challenges.

The document outlines Ukraine's policy for the repatriation of refugees under Strategic Goal 1, which aims to foster conditions that promote population migration growth and mitigate the outflow of Ukrainians abroad (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2024a). The experience of developed nations in addressing the demographic crisis linked to chronically low birth rates indicates that a primary strategy for stabilising the demographic landscape is the maintenance of a positive migration balance, defined as the ratio of incoming individuals to outgoing ones. This primarily addresses the repatriation of Ukrainians from overseas.

This strategic goal pertains not only to individuals who departed following the full-scale invasion but also to those who left prior, in addition to the current Ukrainian diaspora. The return must occur in alignment with the fundamental principles established by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), specifically ensuring safety and dignity. Minimising youth emigration from Ukraine constitutes a strategic priority. The government intends to implement contemporary training programmes aimed at retaining youth in the country, aligning with labour market demands and global trends, including the instruction of soft competitive skills to enhance professional development (European Commission, 2024). Effective practices, such as academic integrity, the internationalisation of higher education, and a focus on student-centredness in universities, are expected to persist. Furthermore, establishing partnerships between educational institutions and businesses is essential for integrating practical courses, internships, and dual education, which combines theoretical knowledge with real-world experience in the workplace.

The Ukrainian government has approved a plan of measures for implementation from 2024 to 2027, designating responsible officials and

establishing deadlines (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2024b). In 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of National Unity will prioritise support for Ukrainians returning from temporary residence abroad and their subsequent adaptation in Ukraine, following the government's approval of the pertinent legislation. The authorities are tasked with implementing awareness and educational campaigns, in addition to offering free legal and psychological support to facilitate full reintegration. Dmytro Kuleba, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, recently emphasised the importance of using appropriate language and tools to encourage Ukrainians to return home, while cautioning against excessive pressure (Kuleba, 2024).

The Ministry of Infrastructure was assigned the responsibility of developing social housing funds, preferential mortgage programmes, rental subsidies, and other housing support mechanisms for the period 2026–27, to be made available upon return to Ukraine. Over the next three years, the EU will allocate €50 billion to support Ukraine's state budget, promote investment, and offer technical assistance for the programme (Ukraine Facility, 2024). Ukraine intends to increase domestic production of construction materials, targeting an annual output of 5–6 million windows, 300 thousand tonnes of glass, and 13 million m³ of thermal insulation materials (Recovery of Ukraine, 2025).

A crucial step in the repatriation process involves identifying high-risk areas, particularly border regions and those near the demarcation line, and evaluating the feasibility of resettling residents from these locations, while considering the requirements of the defence forces. The Ministry of National Unity is responsible for this task and will collaborate with the Defence Ministry and civil-military administrations to establish the methodology for identifying areas appropriate for residential or military use.

Conclusions

Ukraine is one of the major fronts in the global confrontation between Russia and the West. In addition to direct military tools of influence on Ukraine, Russia is actively inducing migration flows as a strategic tool. The exodus of the population from the territory of left-bank Ukraine is one of Russia's important goals at this stage of the war. Therefore, it is important for Ukraine and the West to develop countermeasures: to create reliable

and adaptive institutional mechanisms for the return of Ukrainians to their homeland to normalise socio-economic processes in the country.

The government's policy framework aimed at facilitating the return of Ukrainians is currently under development, with only a limited number of strategic documents published to date. The Ministry of National Unity is responsible for coordinating the activities of various government entities and formulating a cohesive repatriation policy. The conclusion of the active conflict phase is expected to initiate extensive reconstruction efforts in Ukraine and facilitate the strategy for repatriating Ukrainians.

The repatriation of Ukrainians from abroad presents significant challenges for authorities and constitutes a critical societal issue. Effective institutional mechanisms and a favourable psychological atmosphere are essential for motivating individuals to repatriate. Post-war Ukraine will face significant challenges due to depopulation, including labour market shortages and an escalating tax burden on enterprises. The success of the return of Ukrainians from abroad notwithstanding, the state is likely to require the attraction of up to 400,000 labour migrants annually, which will undoubtedly present new challenges for societal integration.

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