

Will Ukraine's Refugees Want to Go Back Home?

More than 6 million Ukrainians have left their homeland since Russia's invasion, creating an economic and demographic challenge for the country's future.



Civilians evacuate from Pokorvsk in eastern Ukraine, July 2022. Nearly 15% of Ukraine's population has fled the country in the last two years.

By Tamar Jacoby

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The startling news slipped by almost unnoticed in the last minutes of President Volodymyr Zelensky's year-end press conference in December. Asked about the 6.2 million Ukrainians—nearly 15% of the population—who have fled the country over the past two years, Zelensky dashed off a list of incentives to encourage their return: cash payments, subsidized mortgages, startup business loans. But he devoted most of his answer to a very different idea: multiple citizenship. The goal would be to allow Ukrainians who live and work elsewhere to continue visiting, investing and otherwise contributing to the nation's life.

It's not a new concept, but hearing it from Zelensky was surprising. Was he acknowledging that many Ukrainian refugees may never return? The stakes are high: If the refugees don't come back, demographic projections suggest that the country's population, already shrinking before the war, could contract by 25% in decades ahead. Surveys suggest that the people who left Ukraine are better

educated than the population at large, with two-thirds having completed higher education, so their absence would be a devastating economic blow for a country struggling to rebuild.

Zelensky expects European nations to encourage Ukrainians to return, including by tapering benefits for refugees except those in what he called “dire” circumstances. Czechia, Ireland and Switzerland are already considering travel subsidies to help Ukrainians go home when the fighting stops. Still, no one is talking about forcing them to return.

I spent a week in Germany last fall asking Ukrainians about their plans, and many were strikingly ambivalent about going home. Nearly two years after Russia’s invasion, Germany hosts more Ukrainians than any other country in Europe, just over 1.1 million. All EU countries have agreed to provide the refugees with basic benefits, including housing, healthcare and the right to work, but Germany offers an especially generous aid package. In addition to short-term subsidies for housing and food, newcomers receive education and training designed to help them integrate in Germany.

“We expect at least 50% of Ukrainians to stay in Germany even after the war,” says Wolfgang Hummel, head of legal affairs at the Berlin state office for refugee affairs. “And the number goes up every day as they put down roots and the war destroys more of Ukraine.”



Alona Kazak and her daughter in Berlin, July 2023. They left Mariupol at the beginning of the war.

Alona Kazak, 39, left Mariupol just before the shelling began. She and her infant daughter boarded a train for Kyiv, expecting her husband to follow. She spent the first week of the war in a basement shelter. Then a former co-worker introduced her to a nonprofit volunteer who offered to help her leave the country. The aid worker told her that Finland and Germany offered the best social benefits in Europe, but the climate was better in Germany. So Kazak boarded another train, and by April she was living with a widower

in Potsdam—one of the thousands of Germans who took Ukrainians into their homes.

The first months were tough. Kazak learned that her husband was missing, apparently abducted at a Russian checkpoint. She couldn’t find an apartment, so she moved into a hostel. There were no available spots for her daughter in nursery

school, and without child care she was unable to attend the courses—orientation classes, language school, job training—offered free to all Ukrainians.

By 2023, things looked better. Kazak had found a small studio and was attending full-time language classes while her daughter was in daycare. She was still living on state support—\$650 a month in rent and \$850 in cash assistance. Though she said she was eager to work—she has a chemistry degree and experience as a sales manager—she hadn’t started looking for a job. “The government says it’s better to learn the language first,” she reported. “That will enable me to get a better job later.”



*Left: Alona Kazak's husband, Ihor, plays with their daughter, Anastasia, at home in Mariupol in early February 2022
Right: Alona Kazak joins a demonstration in support of Ukraine in Berlin in January 2024.*

Asked about the future, she struggled to find words. “My daughter is growing up fast. In five years, she’ll be more German than she is Ukrainian. For a patriot, it’s very painful. But by then, it may make more sense to stay.”

A million or more Ukrainians who fled in the first days of the war may already have returned. But polls of Ukrainians abroad show a shift in their intentions since last spring. An early survey by the Ukrainian firm Info Sapiens found that 88% of refugees wanted to return home. By early 2023, a large German government study found 29% saying they wanted to stay in Germany permanently, and another 15% aimed to put down roots for at least the next few years. Almost all Ukrainian

families in Germany send their children to German schools, and three-quarters of adults are enrolled in or have completed a German language course.

Across Europe, roughly half of Ukrainian refugees have found jobs. The number is lower in Germany: only 25% of men are working, and even fewer women. Among the Ukrainians I met, men seemed readier than women to take jobs for which they were overqualified. A finance consultant from Bucha was doing odd jobs; an electrician from Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia was working off the books. But they too seemed focused on the longer term, completing the state language course and enrolling in job training.

Policymakers across the continent talk increasingly about “dual intent,” helping refugees integrate in the new country while also keeping their culture alive and maintaining ties to home. Social worker Khrystyna Valdovska, who was already living in Germany when the war began, has helped several hundred newcomers settle in Brandenburg, not far from Berlin. “I tell them this is an opportunity to show their kids Europe and learn European habits,” she explains, “then take those habits back with them and build a better Ukraine.” Valdovska’s nephew Arseni Shatro, who arrived in Brandenburg in mid-2022, dreams of two passports and an open border. “I want to go back and forth,” he says, “working in Europe but with all the rights and responsibilities of a Ukrainian citizen.”

Ultimately, it will take both Europe and Ukraine to fashion a solution. European policymakers can help by subsidizing the trip home and providing a small nest egg for returnees, and Ukraine should offer a raft of incentives, from scholarships to interest-free loans and seed capital for new businesses. Still, in the long run, the most important lure will not be special benefits. What Ukrainians abroad want most is what all Ukrainians are fighting for—a secure, independent, democratic Ukraine with a vibrant economy.

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