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REINTEGRATION OF UKRAINIANS: CULTURAL-IDENTITY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF RETURN





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Analytical report



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REINTEGRATION OF UKRAINIANS: CULTURAL-IDENTITY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF RETURN

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The analytical report aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the conditions, barriers, and potential for the return of Ukrainians, as well as to develop recommendations for the state, local self-government, international partners, and civil society. Particular attention is paid to the interconnection between cultural-identity and socio-economic factors, as the balance between them will determine the success of future reintegration and Ukraine's ability to leverage the experience gained for post-war recovery and development.

DISCLAIMER

The recommendations presented in this publication are a synthesis of proposals made by participants of focus groups and expert discussions, prepared by the Razumkov Centre for further analysis, deliberation, and policy development. They do not represent the official position of the Centre or of any governmental bodies or international institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of the project «Reintegration of Ukrainians: Cultural-Identity and Socio-Economic Aspects of Return», implemented with support of the Hanns Seidel Foundation in Ukraine, a study was conducted with the objective not only of examining the scale and trends of Ukrainian migration but also of deeply analyzing the social, cultural, and economic mechanisms that shape motivations for return and subsequent reintegration — or, conversely, encourage continued stay abroad.

Ukrainian migration to EU countries creates a new dimension of identity that combines national markers with the experience of living in European societies. Transborder and hybrid identities emerge at the intersection of cultures, when migrants maintain self-identification with Ukraine while simultaneously adapting to the values, social norms, and behavioral models of the host countries. The European experience of life shapes new expectations regarding public services, governance transparency, social standards, and civic participation, which in turn influence the value orientations of Ukrainians.

In this context, reintegration ceases to be merely a physical return and encompasses a broader spectrum of tasks: from restoring participation in economic and social life to adapting new practices, multilingualism, and civic behavioral models to Ukrainian conditions. Post-war development of Ukraine depends on the state's ability to integrate this transformed human capital, minimizing demographic and labor losses while leveraging the potential for innovation and international connections that migrants bring.

The study's key research tools included desk research, focus-group discussions with various categories of Ukrainian migrants, and expert discussions involving specialists in sociology, economics, migration policy, urban studies, labor market, education, and public administration. The focus-group approach made it possible to identify the real motives, experiences, and behavioral patterns that shape Ukrainians' adaptation and future plans.

In an open yet structured discussion format, participants discussed their experiences of integration into European society, evaluated the quality of services, accessibility of social benefits, local labor market conditions, and their sense of belonging and identity. This allowed for an understanding of how their perception of «quality of life» is formed and which elements – from security to everyday conveniences – affect the decision to return to Ukraine.

In parallel, expert interviews and discussions revealed the systemic side of the processes. Experts analyzed the opportunities and limitations of the Ukrainian economy in receiving specialists with new experience from the EU; assessed the readiness of state institutions to provide the service-oriented approach necessary for return; and identified barriers in housing, education, healthcare, digital services, and local governance policies.

I.

IDENTITY OF UKRAINIAN CITIZENS IN CONDITIONS OF WAR: STATUS, TRENDS, FACTORS

UKRAINIAN IDENTITY: EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AS A VALUE ORIENTATION

Since Ukraine declared independence and established itself as a sovereign state, the primary trend and highest-level objective has been the formation of a shared, nationwide civic identity. The process of developing Ukrainian national identity in the context of European integration is considered one of the key factors of contemporary state-building. For Ukraine, situated between two civilizational models – post-Soviet and European – the question of identity has acquired not only a cultural but also a strategic dimension. European integration has become not merely an external political course but a symbol of a value-based choice that defines the societal model, development priorities, and national self-understanding.

This is confirmed by research conducted by the Razumkov Center on the issues of Ukrainian citizens' identity, carried out since the early 2000s.¹

There is strong reason to assert that the beginning of the Russian military aggression in 2014 acted as a catalyst for the consolidation of Ukrainian society, as evidenced by the observable dynamics of changes in the main dimensions of identity.

On December 13, 2022, after the start of the large-scale invasion, the Law of Ukraine «*On the Basic Principles of State Policy in the Field of*

¹ The identity of Ukraine's citizens: trends of change (June, 2024) – <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/component/k2/the-identity-of-ukraine-s-citizens-trends-of-change-june-2024>.
Identity of Ukrainian citizens: trends of change (May, 2023). – <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/research-areas/surveys/identity-of-ukrainian-citizens-trends-of-change-may-2023>.

*Establishing Ukrainian National and Civic Identity*² was adopted (entered into force on January 1, 2023). Unfortunately, the law does not take into account the situation of Ukrainian migration abroad resulting from the war. It only addresses cooperation with Ukrainians abroad in matters of consolidating Ukrainian national and civic identity.

Since the beginning of 2022, millions of Ukrainians have received temporary protection in EU countries, North America, and other regions of the world. This process has influenced the transformation of social practices, economic models, and cultural-identity orientations of Ukrainian citizens. Ukrainians have, in fact, formed an extensive transborder community.

Ukrainians receiving temporary protection abroad are not considered «Ukrainians abroad» as referred to in the aforementioned law, which pertains to the Ukrainian diaspora. They are in a transitional state, with some currently seeing return to the homeland as the way forward, while others intend to remain abroad and thus join the diaspora. Special approaches from the state are necessary to facilitate their return.

IDENTITY OF UKRAINIAN MIGRANTS: DIRECTIONS OF CHANGE

In today's world, identity is influenced by a variety of factors that drive its multifaceted transformation, including globalization, digitalization, migration, and political conflicts. Under such influences, identity becomes dynamic, layered, and situational, reducing the stability characteristic of traditional forms such as ethnic, national, or religious identity.

At the same time, an opposing trend emerges – the localization of identity, reflecting a desire to reconnect with authentic roots. Modern identity thus exists in a field of tension between the global and the local, the virtual and the real, and between the freedom of choice and the need for belonging.

² The Law of Ukraine «On the Basic Principles of State Policy in the Field of Establishing Ukrainian National and Civic Identity» (Law No. 2834-IX, December 3, 2022) – <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2834-20#Text>.



In this study, we focus primarily on the hybrid identity of Ukrainian citizens, as it is the most characteristic for the experience of contemporary forced migrants.³

The term «*hybridity*» is widely used in social sciences and humanities to describe a condition of existing between two states – cultures, languages, or communities – which can have both positive and negative effects on an individual. It is not merely a mixing of habits, but a deep internal state shaped by migration, globalization, multiculturalism, and interethnic unions. The main manifestations of hybrid identity are observed among national minorities, migrants, and migrant diasporas.

KEY ASPECTS OF HYBRID IDENTITY	
Cultural Integration	Hybrid identity arises at the intersection of cultures, combining elements of different cultural traditions, languages, values, and worldviews.
Impact of Globalization and Migration	In the contemporary world, hybrid identity is increasingly widespread due to global migration processes and the blurring of cultural boundaries.
Formation Process	Hybrid identity develops gradually and is influenced by cultural environment, migration experience, social interaction, and education.
Self-Identification	Individuals with hybrid identity are aware of their ambivalence and may simultaneously belong to multiple cultures – for example, identifying as German, Orthodox, and Ukrainian at the same time.
Manifestations	Hybrid identity can appear in national minorities, migrant communities, virtual communities, or even within one country under diverse cultural influences.

³ Wagner Consuela, Migration and the Creation of Hybrid Identity: Chances and Challenges. – <http://rais.education/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/16.pdf>; Migrate hybride identity to cloud native identity. – <https://wolkenman.wordpress.com/2025/11/03/migrate-hybride-identity-to-cloud-native-identity/>; The relationship between national identity and hybrid identities facilitated by migration in western multicultural societies. – <https://www.grin.com/document/149313?srsltid=AfmBOoqBaP5VzO505oLoGX7iPmkvHiS7VUlqeUfWX-ZQibpV2ytExj5>

Hybrid identity is an ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand, it provides access to a broader range of resources, experiences, and opportunities for self-realization, fostering cognitive flexibility, cross-cultural competence, and adaptability to change.

On the other hand, its development can be accompanied by feelings of duality, loss of cohesion, or unstable belonging, which may create risks of psychological stress, social isolation, or susceptibility to external manipulation. This duality – the combination of opportunities and risks – makes hybrid identity a key subject of study in the context of migration experiences.

ADVANTAGES AND RISKS OF HYBRID IDENTITY	
Positive Aspects	Challenges
Openness to cultural dialogue, high social adaptability, critical thinking, ability to integrate experiences from different systems	Risk of losing cultural continuity if connection to the national environment is weak
Formation of a flexible identity – individuals may simultaneously identify as Ukrainian, European, and local residents (e.g., a «Ukrainian in Berlin»)	Blurred sense of «home» – dual belonging may create internal uncertainty
Normalization of distance from Ukraine – reduction of emotional tension, creation of another sense of home	Reintegration challenges upon return, when expectations formed in the EU do not match Ukrainian societal realities
Development of a new diaspora-type identity, where Ukrainianness is maintained more as a cultural code than as a daily social practice	Ethical ambivalence: feelings of guilt for being «safe» abroad, combined with fear of returning, especially among younger generations

III.

BETWEEN UKRAINE AND EUROPE – TRANSFORMATION OR PRESERVATION OF IDENTITY

In our analysis, we proceed from the assumption that hybridization is associated with the mixing of different cultural traditions, which, through mutual influence, form new cultural traditions. Hence, our task is to find out how Ukrainian identity is being transformed under the influence of forced migration processes.

Even before the war, Ukrainian identity in the migration environment was quite blurred. For some people, national identity did not play a significant role in everyday life, giving way to pragmatic aspects such as work, income, and children's education. War and migration became the turning point that radically changed this situation.

Results of focus group discussions



«This national self-identification became more pronounced. Before (before the war in 2022), it was just Ukrainians and Ukrainians. But while I was in Germany, I wanted to shout to the whole world that I was Ukrainian, and this feeling became even more acute... I began to understand even more how cool our country is, how incredibly cool our people are...», (Woman, 32, Mykolaiv, higher education, civil marriage, 2 children, returned to Ukraine).

Almost all respondents indicated that they perceived themselves primarily as Ukrainians. None described themselves primarily as European. This self-identification was evident regardless of the length of stay abroad, level of integration, or type of employment. For most respondents, Ukrainian identity remained the basic, primary category that defines their belonging, value system, and symbolic landmarks. At the same time, respondents emphasized that the European component is not a substitute for them, but an additional layer of identity – a set of norms, practices, and behavioral models that they accept and integrate into their own experience, but without blurring their national identity. This dynamic demonstrates the formation of a multi-level but clearly hierarchical identity, where the Ukrainian component occupies a leading place.

Results of focus group discussions

«I am definitely proud to be Ukrainian. Our holidays are dear to us, Ukrainian holidays, we listen to Ukrainian songs, and all of this is close to our hearts. We did not become Europeans.», (Woman, 26, Odessa, higher education, divorced, 1 child, Germany).

Even three years of forced migration to Germany, learning German, changing lifestyles, complying with different laws, norms, and traditions, and adapting to everyday life, culture, and work did not prompt any changes in terms of self-identification. They concluded that they no longer considered themselves more European than Ukrainian, even though they live in Europe.

Results of focus group discussions

«I identify more with the Ukrainian people and cannot yet say that I identify with the European people. And I cannot say that I am drawn there. A little time has passed», (Woman, 46, Kharkiv, higher education, married, Germany).

Some consider themselves Ukrainians «by default» and sincerely do not understand why and under what circumstances something should change in their self-identification. At the same time, it cannot be said that such Ukrainian identity, as an unconditional given, is something unconscious or unclaimed, since respondents repeatedly emphasized that with the start of the war, they felt an acute need to rethink, preserve, and strengthen their Ukrainian identity as one of the important components of achieving victory.

Results of focus group discussions

«There was always a subconscious awareness that I am Ukrainian, and in principle, I never thought about this question: I am Ukrainian, period», (Woman, 29, Odesa, higher education, married, 3 children, Germany).

Overall, the study revealed a trend toward strengthening Ukrainian self-identification. The majority of respondents demonstrated not only the preservation but also the strengthening of Ukrainian self-identification. At the same time, there is a strong impression that this is more about strengthening national (ethnic, cultural) self-identification: language, traditions, history, cultural heritage, shared experience, lifestyle, rather than civic



identity – as belonging to a particular nation or state based on shared political values and a vision of the future.

In the context of discussing identity and cultural self-identity, respondents emphasized that since the start of the war, Ukraine has been perceived as a brand of resilience, capable of defending its freedom and independence in the fight against a more numerous and militarily powerful country, which commands respect from European citizens and strengthens the desire to belong, strengthens Ukrainian self-identification and its external manifestations abroad. Ukrainians abroad feel interest and respect towards themselves and can count on help and support from local residents.

Results of focus group discussions



«Before the war, we weren't a particularly vibrant nation. But now we've fought back against the enemy. Girls in Germany volunteered, went to rallies, demanded those Leopard tanks... Our people abroad did a tremendous job. The Germans looked at us with completely different eyes», (Woman, 47, Odesa, higher education, divorced, 3 children, returned to Ukraine).

Only a few, when reflecting on the question of self-identification, indicated that they consider themselves more of a «person without borders» because during the war they had the opportunity to visit different continents, live in different countries, communicate and collaborate with representatives of different races and cultures; They value «freedom» and liberty, obviously in the sense of the opportunity to gain new impressions, life experience, and self-improvement: to travel the world, change professions, conditions, and lifestyles. They feel confident in their abilities and capable of achieving success in different linguistic and cultural environments.

Results of focus group discussions



«I feel more like a 'person without borders'. Because there is only one Earth, but different governments come and go... A feeling of freedom. People do what they want to do. They want to work and get paid, luxury! And once they've earned money, they can go wherever they want, to Luxembourg, the Netherlands», (Man, 50, Kyiv, secondary vocational education, married, 2 children, Germany).

Generational identity: youth and the diaspora. Age and social differences significantly influence both the nature of identity and behavioral strategies. Older generations, especially those with strong family and property ties in Ukraine, often retain traditional notions of «home» and may be more inclined to return once the situation stabilizes. Their identity is more strongly linked to territory, family, language, religious and everyday practices. At the same time, older generations tend to have a nostalgic type of identity, fixed on memories of «home Ukraine» – values that become the basis for preserving the community abroad.

Young people, on the other hand, demonstrate greater flexibility – their identity is more often «hybrid» in nature, combining Ukrainian roots with European values. But this does not mean a loss of connection with their homeland: rather, there is a transition from an ethnocultural to a value-based civic model of Ukrainian identity. Younger Ukrainians, especially those who are integrating into European education or labor systems, are usually more open to new practices and norms. Their identity is formed in the process of combining Ukrainian and European experiences and largely depends on the success of their adaptation – educational, professional, and communicative.

Accordingly, the process of hybridization is more characteristic of the younger generation of Ukrainians who are growing up or studying in EU countries. For these children and teenagers, Ukrainian identity is often associated with their homeland and cultural heritage, while European identity is associated with everyday life, school, and friends. This is how an integrated two-layer identity is formed: they feel themselves to be both Ukrainian and European at the same time, seeing no contradiction between these categories.

Thus, different models of self-identification coexist within the diaspora: traditional-national, adaptive, and hybrid, reflecting the complex social structure of the migrant community.



For those who have returned, Ukrainian identity is not simply preserved – it is strengthened by their return to an environment where war, solidarity, risks, and collective responsibility are a daily reality.

Unlike those who remained in the EU, returning citizens feel a stronger impulse to connect with their «own place,» so their identity is transformed through practical participation in community life, reconstruction, work, and defense of the country. Returning is not a return to the old identity, but rather its renewal through the experience of comparison with the EU, confirmation of the need to be «at home» and rooted in the Ukrainian context. As a result, a clearer, more conscious civic identity is formed, where Ukrainian identity is not a background, but a conscious life choice.

Results of focus group discussions



«My return is motivated by patriotic reasons. It is important for me to support our economy and rebuild our country», (Woman, 40, Chernihiv, higher education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

«It's easier to breathe at home, after all, there is my native language, food, traditions, and family support. Even though there is danger, you feel better when you are surrounded by your family and loved ones. And it's better to work for your own country than for a foreign one», (Woman, 38, Kyiv, secondary vocational education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

For those who remain in the EU after 2022, the transformation of identity is different from that of classic migrants, as most Ukrainians left as temporary displaced persons rather than as those seeking integration or to «become European.» This means that they retain a predominantly Ukrainian identity, even while adapting to EU institutional and social norms.

Their transformation is not one of assimilation, but rather a combination of two realities: Ukrainian belonging and a European environment that provides stability and security, but does not form a sense of their own «cultural home.» Their identity becomes more reflective: they are more acutely aware of who they are because they are in a contrasting environment, but they do not adopt it as their new identity basis.

The EU countries where Ukrainians have ended up differ significantly from one another. For example, the language and cultural barriers in Poland or the Czech Republic are much lower than in Germany or Ireland. Social systems, attitudes toward refugees, levels of support for integration, and housing conditions also vary.

However, even in countries with the most favorable conditions for residence, such as Germany, adaptation does not mean assimilation: Ukrainians remain a visible community with their own values, customs, and narrative of war as sources of collective identity.

For those respondents who currently remain in Germany, Ukrainian self-identification does not disappear, but it becomes an internal resource that helps them survive the trials and tribulations of a new country, overcome stress, and find the strength to adapt. A significant number of forced migrants hold on to their language, traditions, and Ukrainian community, regularly communicating with relatives and friends who remain in Ukraine, but at the same time creating new social ties, making German friends, and trying to integrate.

Their ethnic identity is not currently a motive for returning to Ukraine, but rather a foundation on which they are trying to build a new life in Germany. In this context, communication with the Ukrainian diaspora and various communities of Ukrainians abroad is an important factor.

Factors influencing self-identification. In analyzing the experiences of forced migrants, it becomes clear that their self-identification is shaped by a complex combination of external circumstances and internal experiences. Changes in the social environment, the need to adapt and rethink one's role in a new context highlight the multidimensional nature of this process.

KEY FACTORS IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF UKRAINIAN MIGRANTS' IDENTITY

Cultural adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Accepting a new culture: Ukrainians face the need to adapt to a new cultural environment, which may include learning the language, customs, and traditions.✓ Preserving cultural heritage: Many strive to preserve their Ukrainian identity by participating in cultural events, creating Ukrainian communities, and promoting the Ukrainian language.
Social ties	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Formation of diasporas: New Ukrainian communities are forming in EU countries, helping to preserve mutual assistance and support.✓ Integration: Ukrainians often face challenges integrating into new societies, which can affect their sense of self and identity.
Political identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Strengthening national identity: The war in Ukraine has strengthened feelings of patriotism and unity among Ukrainians. Many emigrants become active participants in political life, supporting Ukraine on the international stage.✓ Reassessment of values: Emigration can lead to a reassessment of personal and social values based on the experience of war and migration.
Economic adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Seeking opportunities: Ukrainians are often forced to look for work in new circumstances, which can affect their self-esteem and identity.✓ Entrepreneurial activity: some Ukrainians start their own businesses or develop new skills, which helps to strengthen their new identity.
Emotional aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Trauma and loss: Emigration can be associated with feelings of loss and trauma, which affect mental health and identity.✓ Hope and optimism: Despite the difficulties, many remain hopeful about returning and rebuilding their homeland, which becomes an important part of their identity.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that war and migration have not only strengthened Ukrainian identity, but also made it more multidimensional. It is no longer vague or purely ethnic, but is increasingly taking on the characteristics of a conscious shared belonging that includes various experiences – adaptive, cultural, and value-based.

At the same time, when discussing the transformation of Ukrainian identity under the influence of forced migration, Ukrainian migrants in Europe cannot be viewed as a homogeneous community. Ukrainian identity outside the country has always been multi-layered and contradictory – even before the full-scale war, it was shaped by different generations of labour migrants, students, specialists, as well as those who already had experience of working or studying in EU countries. After 2022, a new wave of forced migration only reinforced this diversity, adding new social, age, regional, and cultural dimensions.

III.

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIANS INTO THE EUROPEAN SPACE

ADAPTATION BARRIERS: SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

The process of adaptation of Ukrainians in the EU has become a key factor in their social well-being and a determining element for planning their future in their countries of temporary residence.

Adaptation in a new country involves achieving a standard of living that is perceived as comparable to that in Ukraine – this includes having one's own home, a job that matches one's qualifications and offers prospects for professional development, access to quality healthcare and education (especially for children), and forming a social circle that includes local acquaintances and friends. Respondents cite these elements as the criteria for successful integration.

The adaptation of Ukrainians is uneven, depending on the national policies of different countries, available resources, and the individual trajectories of migrants, and is accompanied by a complex set of social, cultural, economic, and psychological challenges, including:

Language barrier. This remains the most systemic obstacle: even with accessible language courses, language proficiency is often insufficient for quality integration into the labor market, obtaining skilled jobs, and ensuring autonomy in everyday life. This is not only about the difficulties of everyday communication, but also about barriers to accessing decent employment and successful job placement.



Results of focus group discussions



«I don't know the language, I need a higher level to get a good job», (Woman, 43, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, 2 children, Germany).

«Language is the main thing. Without language, you feel like a blind kitten. Language level is very important because Germans are not very closed. They are very similar to us. And when you reach a certain level, you can communicate normally. I already have a German circle of friends...», (Man, 27, Khmelnytskyi, higher education, single, Germany).

A significant proportion of Ukrainian migrants faced systemic barriers, namely the high cost of C1+ language courses, which are not covered by state integration programs. Language training and financial constraints have become a serious barrier for those seeking to work in highly skilled positions.

Results of focus group discussions



«First, the language level must be C1, but the job center only pays for B2, at least in the area where I live. This means that I have to find another job to pay for these courses. Then I have to pass the test, then go back to university to finish my studies, because most likely my qualifications in Ukraine do not match those in Germany. And all this takes years. During this time, you either sit on benefits or just go and wash dishes», (Woman, 29, Dnipro, higher education, unmarried, Germany).

Access to social services – education, healthcare, administrative services – is often complicated by bureaucracy, language barriers, and system overload. Attention is drawn to the low quality and complexity of access to healthcare services. This includes long queues, a shortage of specialists, difficulties in making appointments with doctors, language barriers, and the geographical inaccessibility of medical facilities.

Results of focus group discussions



«Finding a therapist and a pediatrician is the most difficult thing. We found one in the city of Leipzig. It takes about an hour and a half to get to the pediatrician. There are simply no places closer», (Woman, 29, Odesa, higher education, married, 3 children, Germany).

«The queues here are very long. You can wait six months for an appointment, seven months to see a dermatologist», (Woman, 46, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Results of focus group discussions



«If a child gets sick in Ukraine, I can call a therapist and ask what to do. But there, you can wait six months for a doctor's appointment. That's not normal when it comes to children», (Woman, 47, Odessa, higher education, divorced, 3 children, returned to Ukraine).

Housing stability. High rents and the difficulty of finding housing, especially in medium-sized and small towns, are significant obstacles. In many countries, housing is expensive, contract terms are unstable, and high demand creates competition, which particularly affects families with children. Landlords' refusal to rent to Ukrainian forced migrants due to doubts about their financial stability only exacerbates the vulnerability of Ukrainians.

Results of focus group discussions



«In my city, although it is not very large, with a population of 80-100 thousand, there can be a queue of 20 candidates for one apartment. And in such cases, Germans are chosen among the candidates», (Man, 20, Lviv, secondary education, unmarried, Germany).

«I have been looking for an apartment for myself and my child for a little over a year. We are still looking. We have been to two viewings. Two Germans came with me to the viewing. They gave preference to the Germans, not to me, a Ukrainian», (Woman, 26, Odesa, higher education, divorced, 1 child, Germany).

Structural barriers in the labor market. The non-recognition of Ukrainian diplomas, limited access to skilled fields, and competition for jobs with local workers often lead to «professional degradation» and forced employment at a lower level. Difficulties in finding employment, especially in positions comparable to previous professional activities in Ukraine. Ukrainians are often forced to accept low-paid jobs that do not require qualifications and offer no prospects for career growth.

Results of focus group discussions



«If you don't know the language, that's the maximum. For me, this is a low-profile job. In Ukraine, I would never have taken such a job», (Woman, 38, Kyiv, secondary education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

Only a small proportion of respondents were able to start working immediately after arriving in Germany, and mostly in low-skilled positions that did not match their professional level acquired in Ukraine. A significant



proportion were not interested in unskilled work due to low pay and lack of social status.

Results of focus group discussions



«Because without qualifications, you get minimum wage, 12 kopecks», (Woman, 48, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

The recognition of professional qualifications and Ukrainian diplomas remains a problem. The procedure is considered complicated, lengthy, and, again, requires fluency in the language.

Results of focus group discussions



«Our diplomas are not accepted in Germany. They need to be validated and you have to take a bunch of exams, and you need to have a high level of language proficiency, above B1», (Woman, 32, Mykolaiv, higher education, civil marriage, 2 children, returned to Ukraine).

It is acknowledged that finding employment in Germany is not a problem, but it is difficult to find a job in your field and with the desired qualifications.

Results of focus group discussions



«That is, it is easy to find a job, but it is not always possible to find a job at the level and in the field that you need», (Woman, 36, Kyiv, secondary vocational education, married, 2 children, returned to Ukraine).

At the same time, professional development and career growth remain accessible to those who are willing to undergo a lengthy process of diploma verification, achieve a high level of language proficiency, and undergo additional training in their profession – in other words, those who are likely to stay in the country for a long time and do not plan to return to their homeland.

Results of focus group discussions



«I want to work in my profession in Germany, but it's a very long road. I passed the integration course and have a B2 certificate. In November, I will start C1 medical training and preparation for the language exam. After that, my documents still have to be examined, and then I will either get a six-month internship at a pharmacy or a job under supervision. And then I may have to take another exam, depending on how well my education matches the German system», (Woman, 46, Nizhyn, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Results of focus group discussions



«When you arrive as you are, already formed, you have to verify your diplomas, acquire a certain level of language proficiency, and it's such a long process. So, not right away», (Woman, 50, Lviv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

Limited long-term contracts and career prospects. Respondents noted that employers are unwilling to offer long-term contracts to people with temporary status and are not keen to train such employees. As a result, most Ukrainian forced migrants work mainly in short-term or temporary positions, which does not contribute to professional development and career growth, long-term plans for employment and residence in the country, in other words, it is not an incentive for deep integration.

Results of focus group discussions



«This temporary residence status affects the term of the contract. None of my friends have received a permanent contract, which gives you the confidence that you will work for several years and keep your job. They renew it every year», (Woman, 46, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

When it comes to the adaptability of small businesses, studies show that Ukrainian businesses quickly entered Europe but were unable to gain a foothold there. After the war began, Ukrainian entrepreneurs received favorable conditions, moral support, and administrative privileges. However, the long-term prospects for Ukrainian businesses in the EU remain low. Since the start of the war, Ukrainians have registered more than 100,000 companies in Poland alone, 17,000 in the Czech Republic, and about 2,600 in Lithuania. However, a significant portion of them close within the first year.

The main reason for the difficulty of doing business in the EU is the lack of cross-cultural communication skills, i.e., a lack of understanding of how European consumers think. The difference is that the European market is based on logic, consistency, and trust. The Ukrainian market is based on energy, improvisation, and personal agreements. What is considered flexibility and openness in Ukraine is perceived as a lack of structure or familiarity in Germany or France, for example. In Britain, it may be seen as a lack of strategy. The formula «faster and cheaper» is not an advantage for Europeans, but a sign of risk.

In addition, Western and Northern European countries have a different consumer culture, which determines the specifics of small business operations in these countries. For example, the functioning of the service business in Western and Eastern Europe shows significant systemic differences due to the institutional environment, consumer expectations, and historical economic models. In Western Europe, small service enterprises focus on compliance with protocols, safety control, and transparency of processes. The service sector is less personalized, more often based on a self-service model, and consumers tend to have minimalist demands and rational consumption of services. In Eastern European countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, the Ukrainian business style is easier to adapt to: the mentality is closer, communication is more understandable. But the opportunities for growth and profit there are much more modest than in the old EU countries.

Although, in general, labor adaptation in Germany and doing business in the EU have certain cultural, bureaucratic, and institutional barriers, at the same time, the decision to take temporary unskilled work, the choice to learn a new profession, gradual training, and the use of integration programs allow forced migrants to gradually integrate into the economic environment, realize their professional potential, and achieve a certain degree of financial independence in their new country.

Legal ignorance and a lack of understanding of one's rights are also obstacles to successful adaptation, which increases feelings of vulnerability and complicates the adaptation and integration processes. There are also problems of excessive bureaucracy, which permeates everyday life, business processes, and the implementation of social projects.

Results of focus group discussions



«Bureaucracy. It's very difficult to find out anything for yourself, and the staff are very difficult to get in touch with. Job center, intimidation with fines. You don't know your rights... We signed documents without even understanding what we were signing... I still have the impression that we don't know many laws», (Woman, 48, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany)

«The same job center and other government organizations sometimes don't tell us everything so that we don't fully know our rights. They don't tell us how it works here, when you can come and find out everything. Explain your problem and solve it from start to finish. Here, they only answer the question you ask. But they don't help you solve the problem, they don't tell you all the pitfalls», (Woman, 46, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Results of focus group discussions



«German bureaucracy and all its derivatives. You have to wait for everything, you have to demand everything. And all these letters. I started to fear all these letters.

You don't know what they will send you and what problem or non-problem will arise. You have to wait a very long time for everything. They will either refuse you or not refuse you, and it's very difficult. If you have all your documents in «Dii» and it's all a matter of minutes (in Ukraine), then in Germany it's a matter of months, unfortunately...», (Woman, 30, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, returned to Ukraine).

«Germans really like rules, but they lack flexibility when it's needed. Their ideas are good, but the execution... if they need to renovate a house, how long will it take them?», (Woman, 41, Odessa, higher education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

Respondents also reported cases of discrimination during employment, when potential employers, guided by ethnic and national prejudices, gave preference to other candidates, mainly compatriots. In a number of situations, this manifested itself in the form of indirect refusals: employers emphasized «cultural compatibility» and «better understanding of work processes by local workers» or imposed excessive requirements for documents and confirmation of qualifications, which effectively made it impossible for Ukrainians to find employment.

Results of focus group discussions



«You come to a foreign country, even with knowledge of the language, as if you are integrating, but you can't. When I arrived, I immediately went to work; I didn't allow myself to live on benefits and taxes. I went there knowing English, started studying German, and worked for a well-known German company called Budnikowski. What's interesting is that no matter how smart and beautiful you are, no matter what status and salary you earn in Ukraine, the Germans won't give you what you're worth there!», (Woman, 50, Lviv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

Lack of information and unwillingness to engage in long-term learning. Not all Ukrainians are aware of educational and professional programs for forced migrants that allow them to stabilize their status and plan for long-term integration. Among those who are aware of such opportunities, many are not prepared for long-term education, in particular due to their existing higher education in Ukraine, limited financial resources, or psychological inability to invest significant time in education. As a result, they choose more expedient ways to improve their qualifications, obtain additional professional education, and confirm their diplomas.



Results of focus group discussions



«I don't have any friends who would go on a three-year course. I have a professional course that ends in February next year, and it's enough for my work and education, and I have a certified diploma», (Woman, 26, Odesa, higher education, divorced, 1 child, Germany).

At the same time, educational and professional programs are a significant stabilizing factor. Respondents who chose dual education (Ausbildung) noted that it provides a certain stability of residence and future employment in Germany, reducing feelings of uncertainty.

Results of focus group discussions



«If you are studying for an Ausbildung, you move on to another paragraph – educational – and continue your studies. And the issue of residence permits in the country no longer concerns you. You are not moved for 3 or 4 and a half years. But if you are studying for a dual Ausbildung, you study for 3 days and work at a company for 2 days. Then the next week is the opposite. You study for 2 days and work for 3 days. And 95% of the time, you stay on to work at the company where you studied. You simply move from the educational stage to the working stage» (Woman, 46, Nizhyn, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

«It has no effect on professional development. You can complete any courses, study for 3 years, for example, if it is necessary for your profession. If you need any courses, professional or educational, they are provided and there are no restrictions», (Woman, 46, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Thus, educational and professional integration programs for forced migrants not only create an opportunity to stabilize their legal and socio-economic status, but also form the basis for long-term career planning. Participation in such programs allows migrants to gain additional competencies, adapt their professional skills to the requirements of the local labor market, increase their competitiveness, and remove barriers related to the recognition of diplomas or qualifications. In addition, these tools help to strengthen integration confidence, expand access to information resources and professional networks, which in the long term increases opportunities for transition to more stable, higher-paid or skilled positions. Taken together, this creates conditions for greater social inclusion and economic autonomy of Ukrainian migrants in their countries of residence.

In addition, adaptation is influenced by:

- ✓ **Cultural challenges** manifest themselves in feelings of «otherness», differences in behavioral norms, social distance, and more formalized relationships in Western European societies.
- ✓ **The psychological dimension** includes nostalgia, anxiety about the war, uncertainty about the future, and emotional exhaustion from living between two lives – in the host country and in Ukraine.
- ✓ **Problems with adaptation:** adaptation of children – language requirements of schools, differences in education systems, social integration among peers, as well as the dual identity challenges of adolescents.
- ✓ **Fatigue of host societies.** Changes in public attitudes in host countries have a direct and often very tangible impact on the adaptation of Ukrainian migrants.

Some respondents also reported cases of **negative or unfriendly attitudes among local residents toward Ukrainian forced migrants**. Some participants in the study emphasized that such behavior was often accompanied by stereotypical assumptions about Ukrainians, unjustified accusations, or an emphasis on their status as forced migrants. These daily microaggressions created a sense of psychological pressure and emotional exhaustion in people, as well as deepening barriers to trust and social inclusion in the host environment.

Results of focus group discussions



«There was constant aggression from Germans in all kinds of situations: on public transport, in communication, at school...», (Woman, 47, Odessa, higher education, divorced, 3 children, returned to Ukraine).

In addition, changes in the media landscape and political rhetoric of host societies, from loyal to more reserved or critical, directly affect the daily interactions of migrants with local communities. The rise of polarized discussions, the use of migration issues in domestic politics, and the emergence of negative stereotypes can complicate social contacts, increase cultural distance, and reduce the local population's willingness to interact.

Overall, adaptation in Germany proved to be a difficult process for Ukrainian citizens due to cultural, social, and infrastructural barriers.

Although the German system provides a high level of stability, respondents often emphasize the lack of emotional closeness and support, as well as differences in mentality. Germans are perceived as more laconic, task- and procedure-oriented, restrained in their emotional expressions, maintaining a clear social distance and separating professional and personal relationships.

Those respondents who were unable to accept the German way of life and the values inherent in local society were most likely to return to Ukraine. This refers to difficulties in adapting to highly regulated everyday practices, a stricter system of rules, formalized social relations, a slower pace of establishing personal contacts, and a clear distinction between private and public space. Some people felt that they could not accept the German mentality as a cultural set of behavioral norms: restraint, emotional distance, pragmatism, and increased attention to discipline. For many, this created an impression of a lack of warmth, emotional support, and spontaneity, which they were accustomed to in Ukraine. As a result, some migrants decided to return, believing that it was easier for them to maintain a sense of authenticity, psychological comfort, and social belonging in the Ukrainian environment.

Results of focus group discussions



«Germans are 'geschäftlich', meaning 'businesslike'. They only like to talk about business. When you come to a meeting, you understand from the outset that your time is limited. And a person has a lot of problems», (Woman, 32, Mykolaiv, higher education, civil marriage, 2 children, returned to Ukraine).

«They (Germans) don't accept emotions at all. They want to simplify the situation with short sentences. Wherever you go, they will tell you: but now you are safe. When you answer the question of how you are doing, they just blush. They definitely don't accept emotions!», (Woman, 41, Odesa, higher education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

«I think that our Ukrainian people are more sincere and friendly than Germans. Our people are more resilient and open. More human. I really missed that», (Woman, 38, Kyiv, secondary education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

«They follow the rules just enough to avoid being held accountable. And it's not sincere», (Woman, 41, Odessa, higher education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

«It was very difficult for me when I was there, how they plan everything, the whole team. Everyone should be equal and everyone has the right to express themselves, and all this takes a lot of time. But in this order, everything is discussed, and when something needs to be done, everyone knows who does what, everyone has their own task, and it works very well», (Woman, 26, Kharkiv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

Together, these challenges determine the heterogeneity of Ukrainians' adaptation trajectories, influence their integration into new societies, and simultaneously shape the conditions and motivations for potential return. All these and other factors create a complex set of adaptation barriers that form the real limits of Ukrainians' integration opportunities in the EU. At the same time, analysis of the challenges allows for a better understanding of the logic behind adaptation strategies, in particular the desire to ensure stability, a sense of control over one's life, professional fulfilment and opportunities for children's development, which are generally key aspects of respondents' perceptions of successful integration.

EXTENSION OF TEMPORARY PROTECTION

The extension of temporary protection in the EU does not scare most Ukrainians in terms of their adaptation for several key reasons:

Temporary protection status has already become a «normal framework of life» for most and contributes to a sense of security and predictability. It is not perceived as instability, but rather as a formal procedure that allows them to continue living under familiar rules. The extension of status removes uncertainty and allows them to plan their lives, work, housing, and children's education. This facilitates emotional adaptation and reduces stress.

Temporary protection provides all the basic rights necessary for full adaptation. Ukrainians have access to healthcare, education, the labor market, social services, housing programs, i.e., everything that ensures the normal functioning of a family and gradual integration. From a practical point of view, this is sufficient for everyday life.

Extension does not pose a threat of «expulsion» from the status. The EU announces the extension in advance and guarantees that no one will be deported or deprived of their rights. This reduces anxiety: Ukrainians do not expect sudden changes in the rules of stay.

Temporariness has become «flexible»; it does not limit the future. Many Ukrainians did not plan to become long-term migrants, and it is precisely the status of temporary protection that allows them to remain psychologically «open» to returning. The extension of status does not preclude the possibility of returning home when circumstances allow.

For many, it is not status that is important, but the quality of adaptation conditions. The decision to stay or return depends more on work, income stability, schools, security, and housing than on the formal legal type of permit. Therefore, the extension of status is perceived neutrally or even positively.

Temporary protection does not encourage «deep» integration, but it does not hinder it either. Temporary protection status does not grant the full set of rights that long-term residence or permanent residence does, so some Ukrainians do not invest in deep integration (e.g., learning the language to a high level or complete retraining). However, it does not prevent those who want to integrate more actively from doing so. Since the status is formally temporary, people do not feel pressure to «put down roots forever.» This maintains a balance between integration into the EU and maintaining a focus on a possible return to Ukraine. Adaptation remains functional, without transitioning to deep assimilation.

It provides access to key resources for adaptation. Continuation guarantees access to work, education, healthcare, and social services, which form the basis of social and economic adaptation. Without this, adaptation would be much more difficult.

At the same time, temporary protection status causes uncertainty about the future and has a negative psychological effect. On the one hand, this feeling of uncertainty stimulates active job searching and employment, but on the other hand, it creates psychological pressure that forces people to make urgent decisions and generates uncertainty about long-term stability, confirming previous conclusions about «flexible» temporariness and maintaining psychological openness to return.

Results of focus group discussions



«Either you work, or goodbye! How it will actually turn out is a very big question. Now it's getting a little scary, and accordingly, it's a good kick for Ukrainians to go to work. And the Germans need workers. They don't need people they have to pay. They need people who pay taxes!», (Woman, 29, Odessa, higher education, married, 3 children, Germany).

The contradiction between EU pragmatism and Ukraine's recovery interests

Overall, it should be noted that despite its pragmatism, extending temporary protection for Ukrainians until 2027, while logical from a humanitarian policy perspective, may have negative consequences for Ukraine in demographic, economic, and socio-identity terms. This effectively locks Ukrainian citizens into a «waiting mode»:

- ✓ People do not know whether to return, apply for documents, or transfer their children to Ukrainian schools.
- ✓ At the same time, they are not fully integrated into the host society, and their temporary protection status limits their access to long-term contracts, mortgages, and career growth. As a result, a borderline situation is formed: neither full emigration nor return.

This reduces the motivation to plan for Ukraine's future, and for Ukraine this means:

Deepening demographic fragmentation of Ukraine – migration becomes prolonged, especially for women and children who have already adapted:

- ✓ Children get used to schools, languages, and friends, so returning becomes psychologically difficult.
- ✓ The younger generation integrates into European education systems and thus loses its connection with Ukraine as a place of future prospects. After 3–5 years of residence, a new generation of «Ukrainians of Europe» is formed, for whom returning is not a priority.

Weakening of Ukraine's labor potential. Millions of Ukrainians (especially women of working age) are currently residing in the EU:

- ✓ Ukraine is losing human capital in critical sectors such as education, medicine, IT, and social services.
- ✓ Even the temporary absence of this group reduces the tax base and complicates reforms and recovery. If people permanently switch to national residence in the EU, they will not return to the Ukrainian labor market.

Risk of increased secondary migration. By 2027, some Ukrainians will:

- ✓ obtain citizenship or permanent residence permits,
- ✓ move from Eastern Europe to Western Europe (where conditions are better). This means a further outflow of human resources from Ukraine, as each year makes a return less likely.

Complications in the reintegration process. After 3–4 years abroad:

- ✓ differences in experience, values, language, and professional practice will increase;
- ✓ a sociocultural gap will emerge between those who stayed and those who left.

In fact, if Ukraine and its international partners do not begin to actively develop incentives and programs for return (educational, economic, tax, business), then after 2027, some Ukrainians may remain outside the country permanently.

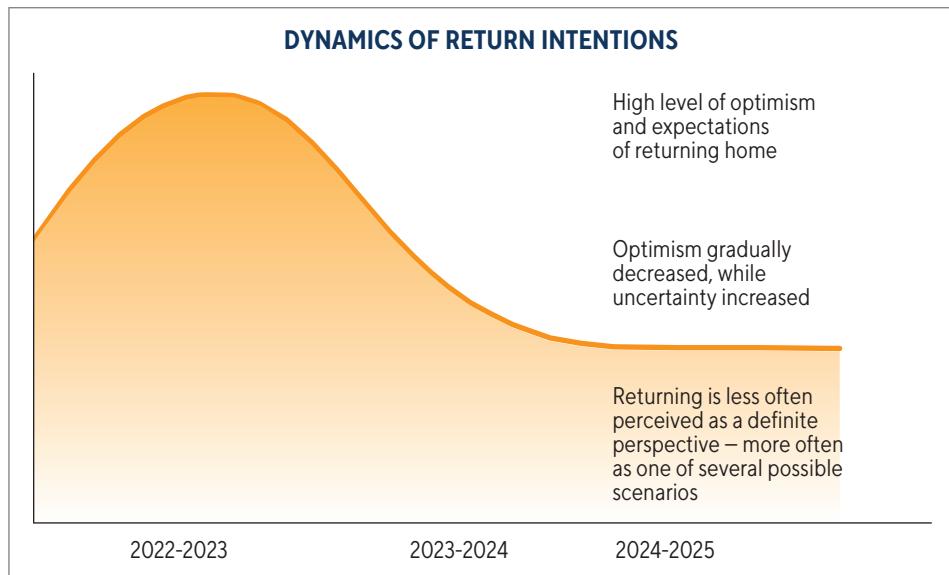
IV.

RETURNING HOME: SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND IDENTITY FACTORS

The dynamics of Ukrainians' intentions to return show a gradual shift from short-term expectations to long-term uncertainty: while in 2022, studies showed that most Ukrainians abroad declared their intention to return quickly after the end of active hostilities, since 2023, the proportion of those who are hesitant or postponing their decision has been growing.

In 2024-2025, intentions to return remain high in terms of values, with most Ukrainians continuing to consider Ukraine their home, but realistic plans to return are becoming increasingly context-dependent: on the availability of housing, work, security, and opportunities for children. Thus, returning is transforming from an emotional impulse in the first months of the war into a rational decision that requires clear state guarantees and strategic support tools.

RETURNING AS A CHOICE: WHAT DETERMINES MIGRANTS' WILLINGNESS TO RETURN	
Security and war	The deterioration of the security situation, the duration of the war, and uncertainty about reconstruction are deterring returns.
Economic and living conditions	Stable employment, integration abroad, the opportunity to earn money, provide for children, etc. reduce the motivation to return.
Psychological factors and uncertainty:	Adaptation abroad, a new life, less willingness to take risks.
Mobility/relocation does not necessarily mean return	The tendency to «circulate» – short visits, visiting relatives, preparing for possible permanent migration, or simply maintaining ties with the homeland. ✓ <i>Return/reintegration policies and programs should take into account that even those who «intend to return» may postpone this step or choose temporary/flexible models (visits, housing, work).</i>



RETURN STRATEGIES – INCENTIVES AND OBSTACLES

(expert assessments)

Among experts, opinions on the prospects for return are almost diametrically opposed. The diametrically opposed assessments of the prospects for Ukrainians to return are explained by the fact that different social groups analyze the return process through incompatible horizons, interests, and experiences: for some, the decisive factors are macro conditions, security, reconstruction, the labor market, and housing in Ukraine, while for others, it is individual life strategies shaped by successful integration, stability, and social guarantees in Europe.

Optimists about returning are betting on the end of the war, economic recovery, and preserved emotional ties to their homeland, while pessimists are basing their views on the fact of deep institutional differences between Ukraine and EU countries, the strengthening of families' «roots» abroad, and the accumulation of human capital in their new countries of residence. Ultimately, the discussion diverges because one side looks at the structural factors of the state, while the other looks at the life trajectories of people, which often change irreversibly after several years of living in Europe.

Arguments for returning/not returning	
Experts who predict that Ukrainians will return	Experts who predict that most will remain in Europe
Patriotic motive and identity Many Ukrainians, even while abroad, continue to consider themselves part of Ukrainian society, preserve their language and connections, and participate in volunteering and helping Ukraine. ✓ This creates a potential willingness to return as soon as conditions of security and stability arise.	Socio-economic stability in the EU Ukrainians have quickly integrated into European labor markets, especially in Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic. ✓ Stable salaries, social guarantees, and education for children create an «anchor».
Family and social ties Most families are divided: parents remain in Ukraine, while children and women are abroad. ✓ Family reunification is a powerful factor in return migration.	Children and education The younger generation adapts more quickly (language, friends, education). ✓ Returning may mean disrupting the child's social environment, which slows down the family's decision
Economic opportunities after the war The country is expected to undergo reconstruction, attract international investment, create new jobs, and launch programs for small businesses. ✓ Ukraine could become a market for the development of technology, energy, and logistics.	Demographic factor After a long stay (3-5 years), a new identity is formed – «European Ukrainians». ✓ People start businesses, buy homes, obtain citizenship, and the process becomes irreversible.
Fatigue from temporary status In many countries, temporary protection status does not grant full rights – it is difficult to find housing, education, and career growth. ✓ This encourages people to consider returning if Ukraine becomes safer.	Uncertainty about security and politics in Ukraine ✓ If the war drags on or there are no guarantees of protection, return is postponed indefinitely.
Emotional factor Feeling «alien» in a new cultural environment, nostalgia, desire to rebuild the homeland. ✓ leads to the formation of an internal motivation to return, which over time can develop into a real decision to repatriate.	Professional self-realization Many Ukrainians in the EU have gained new qualifications, experience, and improved their language skills. ✓ Returning is often perceived as a «step backward» if there are no similar opportunities in Ukraine.

The factors determining the willingness of forced migrants to return to Ukraine are complex and multidimensional, combining security, economic, social, and identity dimensions. The decision to return is influenced by both objective conditions, such as the duration of the war, the state of infrastructure, and access to housing and work in Ukraine, and subjective factors, such as a sense of belonging, the level of integration in EU countries, family circumstances, and personal expectations for the future. At the same time, a number of conditions may deter even those who declare their desire to return: stability and predictability of life abroad, educational opportunities for children, social guarantees, established professional and social networks. Therefore, the analysis of the factors of return requires consideration of their interrelationship, taking into account both the incentives to return and the barriers that keep Ukrainians outside the country.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO/NOT CONTRIBUTING TO THE RETURN OF FORCED MIGRANTS TO UKRAINE		
Factor	Contributes to return	Contributes to remaining in the EU
Security	End of war, guarantees of peace	Continued danger
Economy	Reconstruction programs, grants, benefits	High salaries, stability
Family	Family reunification in Ukraine	Education and integration of children in the EU
Identity	Patriotism, nostalgia	New European identity
Politics	Reforms, transparency	Distrust of authorities, corruption

Incentives should operate on **five levels: economic, social, cultural-identity, communicative, and institutional.**

The key condition is that incentives should be realistic, not declarative: returning should not be seen as a «sacrifice for patriotism,» but as an attractive opportunity for professional and personal growth. Incentives and programs for the return of Ukrainians should form a comprehensive policy that combines economic benefits, social security, and identity motivation, in particular:

Economic measures: tax holidays, grants for small businesses, recognition of European qualifications, designed to make returning financially attractive and reduce barriers to professional self-realization.

Social tools: affordable housing, family support, and child adaptation create the conditions of stability necessary for long-term settlement.

Cultural and identity initiatives, such as the «Come Home» campaigns or soft reintegration programs, are designed to restore emotional ties with the homeland and restore a sense of shared participation in the country's reconstruction.

Communicative incentives for return consist of creating clear, convincing, and regular messages from the state and society that build trust, explain the opportunities for returnees, and show that their contribution to the country's recovery is important and necessary.

At the institutional level, it is crucial to establish a National Agency for the Return of Ukrainians and develop partnership agreements with the EU for a gradual transition from temporary protection to reintegration in Ukraine. This approach will transform return from a forced step into a strategically attractive opportunity that will contribute to the restoration of the human, economic, and intellectual potential of the state.

SYNTHETIC APPROACH – HYBRID PERSPECTIVE («BOTH HERE AND THERE»**) (Results of Focus Group Discussions)**

Analyzing the results of both expert discussions and focus group discussions, it should be noted that Ukrainian migrants demonstrate a model of «conditional return»: the majority want to return, but only on condition of security, stability, and accessible socio-economic opportunities. On the other hand, 15–20% have already integrated to such an extent that returning is not part of their life plan. The decisive factors for a real return will be state policy, housing reconstruction, jobs, as well as stability and security.

For a significant portion of Ukrainians who left after 2022, the choice between «returning» or «staying» is becoming less clear: they maintain close ties with Ukraine by participating in volunteer, cultural, or professional initiatives, while also integrating into European societies. This dual belonging forms a new form of mobility, a life «in two spaces,» where people maintain their identity and social and economic ties on both sides of the border.



This approach has been called the transnational (hybrid) model, where a person's life is organized between two countries at the same time. In the transnational model:

- ✓ part of the family lives in Ukraine, the other part in the EU;
- ✓ business, work, or study can be «divided» between countries;
- ✓ a hybrid (multiple) identity of Ukrainians in Europe emerges: they do not renounce Ukraine, but live in two cultural systems at the same time: they feel both Ukrainian and European, without losing either of these roles.

This is not classic emigration, where there is a «breakaway», but rather circulation, a constant movement of people, capital, ideas, knowledge and cultural practices between Ukraine and EU countries.

Although it should be noted that the issues of identity and return are certainly related, they are not directly dependent on each other: a sense of belonging to Ukraine does not always mean a willingness to return, just as the decision to stay abroad does not indicate a loss of identity.

Despite the widespread perception in public discourse, there is no direct causal link between a sense of Ukrainian identity and the decision to return. A huge number of Ukrainians abroad maintain strong emotional and cultural ties with Ukraine, but this does not necessarily mean that they intend to return in the near future.

For Ukraine, this hybrid reality can be both a challenge and a resource. On the one hand, it complicates a full return, as part of life is transferred to Europe. On the other hand, it opens up the possibility of forming a transnational community capable of supporting the country's reconstruction, investing, transferring experience, and preserving cultural continuity. Recognizing this model in reintegration policy is a key step toward a modern understanding of migration as a networked rather than a unidirectional dynamic.

For Ukraine, this model has an ambivalent effect: on the one hand, it reduces the risk of permanently losing the diaspora, as people do not sever ties; on the other hand, it complicates a full return, as part of their lives

is transferred to the EU. But in a strategic sense, the hybrid perspective can be a resource if Ukraine:

- ✓ creates channels for remote participation in the economy (investments, online work, cultural projects);
- ✓ supports dual citizenship or simplified return;
- ✓ considers the diaspora not as «lost,» but as a transnational part of Ukrainian society.

Returning to Ukraine is primarily an economic decision, rooted in security conditions, access to housing, infrastructure quality, employment opportunities, and social standards. It is also a decision related to caring for children, their education, and their future. In this sense, identity is more of a «background» to the choice than its main driver.

Factors that reduce the likelihood of forced migrants returning from Germany to Ukraine

The focus group study identified a number of barriers that respondents consider key in their decision to return. Their assessments combine individual experiences, objective risks, and comparisons of living conditions in Ukraine and Germany.

The results of the study demonstrate the existence of a number of structural, social, and psychological barriers that hinder this process. The combination of external circumstances in the countries of residence, conditions in Ukraine, and personal integration trajectories forms a complex system of factors that reduce migrants' willingness to return in the short or medium term.

The main factors, supported by participants' statements, are presented below.

Security issues as a key deterrent

Feeling of physical danger remains a decisive factor in the decision to return. In this context, respondents mentioned both nationwide risks (continuation of the war, possibility of new attacks) and local risks (proximity to the front line, danger of returning to regions that were occupied or suffer

from regular shelling). They separately highlighted the problem of uncontrolled circulation of weapons and explosive devices and the increase in everyday dangers, which will remain relevant even after the end of the war.

These factors create a persistent fear of returning to their homeland, where there are currently no guarantees of basic security, especially among female respondents with children.

Results of focus group discussions



«When we go to bed, we don't know what tomorrow will bring. Unfortunately, this is true for all Ukrainians, and it has a strong impact on me», (Woman, 29, Odessa, higher education, married, 3 children, Germany).

«The war (the main barrier to returning), I am from Dnipro, and the war is quite close», (Woman, 29, Dnipro, higher education, single, Germany).

«A lot of people are coming back from the war, a lot of them with weapons, and that makes me afraid», (Woman, 46, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Economic instability and lack of social guarantees and social security

Socio-economic factors are the second most important set of barriers. Respondents describe the Ukrainian labor market as unpromising and the state social security and protection system as ineffective, unfair, and insufficient to support a family. There were many comments about low wages, insignificant social benefits, and difficulties in finding work in the region or town in Ukraine where they plan to return.

Results of focus group discussions



«Work is a difficult issue. The labor market is more developed in other places, but in Chernihiv there are some problems with this», (Woman, 30, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, returned to Ukraine).

Against the backdrop of Ukraine's socio-economic problems, the comparison with the relative stability in Germany reinforces the feeling that returning could lead to a loss of socio-economic status; in other words, life in Ukraine will be less comfortable, less stable, and less socially secure.

Results of focus group discussions



«I am a teacher, and you know what teachers' salaries are like in Ukraine right now. I don't understand how anyone can live on a teacher's salary in my city. It's just not realistic», (Woman, 29, Dnipro, higher education, single, Germany).

«The key problem right now is that wages do not meet the minimum subsistence level. Even if you live in Kyiv, 30-40 thousand hryvnia is a very small amount. If a person does not have their own housing, they have to rent, and prices are very high. You have to understand that the standard of living has changed a lot compared to when people left. They will face a huge problem, because salaries have remained the same, but prices have risen exponentially», (Woman, 32, Mykolaiv, higher education, civil marriage, 2 children, returned to Ukraine).

«In Ukraine, everything is bad in terms of social protection and providing for children. They still pay 860 hryvnia per child», (Woman, 26, Odesa, higher education, divorced, 1 child, Germany).

«If I lose my job and I have a child, 2, 5 or 10 children, I know for sure that I will not be left on the street and I will receive state support (in Germany). In Ukraine, this is not the case», (Woman, 48, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Accordingly, respondents repeatedly emphasized that return (apart from the security factor) is only possible if there is stable employment and social guarantees. The lack of a predictable future increases the sense of risk and reduces the willingness to repatriate.

Results of focus group discussions



«Reasons to return: I am going to my country, it is more of a cultural aspect. Because I love my traditions, my land, my nation. I want to continue to develop in my country... But (reasons) not to return: first, if I don't see that my children are protected and provided for, and second, if I don't see that there is a promising job, that is, one that would allow me to support myself and my family», (Woman, 43, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, 2 children, Germany).

Corruption and lack of rule of law in Ukraine

Respondents repeatedly emphasized that there is a lack of clarity and predictability in the enforcement of laws in Ukraine, and corruption remains an everyday experience. This undermines trust in state institutions and creates a belief that it is impossible to plan for the long term in such conditions.

For many participants, the rule of law and legal protection, rather than economic or security factors alone, are essential for a stable life.



Results of focus group discussions



«There is no order in Ukraine. There is no law in Ukraine. Our parliament passes laws that they themselves violate. Whatever else may be said, there is order in Germany», (Woman, 43, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, 2 children, Germany).

«We need to change not the name of the president, but the laws themselves, or more precisely, our attitude towards them. Nepotism and so on», (Woman, 29, Odesa, higher education, married, 3 children, Germany).

The threat of punishment and legal uncertainty for male migrants of conscription age

This factor proved to be quite sensitive. Respondents, especially women whose partners left Ukraine under various, not always legal, circumstances, expressed deep concern about the possible negative consequences, administrative or even criminal punishment for their husbands upon their return. For some families, this uncertainty is an unacceptable risk.

Results of focus group discussions



«I am currently in a relationship, we live together. This person is Ukrainian, we met here in Germany after I divorced my husband during the war. The question is, the war is over, we hear this wonderful news... If we return... the first thing is to understand what will happen to the men: some managed to leave officially, some defected unofficially... How will the men return, will they return, what punishments will there be?», (Woman, 26, Odessa, higher education, divorced, 1 child, Germany).

Loss or partial destruction of housing

Some respondents report the loss of housing, property, or the ability to return to their community due to destruction or a complete lack of conditions. This transforms the concept of «return» from a physically possible option to a theoretical or unattainable one. Such situations effectively make return impossible and result in irreversible migration.

Results of focus group discussions



«Some people's homes have been destroyed, they have no one left in Ukraine, so they moved here with their families», (Woman, 48, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Psychological difficulties of reintegration and fear of «starting all over again» in the homeland

A significant number of respondents emphasize the paradox that after living in Germany, adapting to their own country can be even more difficult than adapting abroad. Returning is associated with the loss of the life they have built, their social connections, and their sense of stability in Germany. Returning is perceived not as a restoration of the past, but as a new beginning in unpredictable circumstances.

Results of focus group discussions



«The disadvantages of not returning (to Ukraine): I don't want to start all over again, look for a job again, look for new friends if I don't return to my city. And I also don't want to lose everything I have here (in Germany): friends, connections – it's the same as losing again what I lost when the war started», (Woman, 29, Dnipro, higher education, unmarried, Germany).

Social tension between returnees and those who did not leave Ukraine

Respondents pointed to the high probability of a potential split in Ukrainian society due to different attitudes towards forced migrants. Some already have their own negative experiences, namely, they have faced condemnation and criticism from acquaintances, colleagues, and neighbors, as well as general negative comments on social media. The main thrust of the criticism and condemnation can be described as follows: fellow migrants were in safe conditions, received financial and legal support, traveled, and continued their normal lives, while others suffered from shelling, blackouts, and other challenges of war.

Although respondents indicated that such condemnation or even accusations of betrayal were not a decisive barrier to their return, the emotional discomfort caused by such assessments and accusations was palpable during the focus group discussions.

Results of focus group discussions



«I've heard these comments before: 'We went through the whole war here, people helped each other, and you came back. There are many opinions like this'», (Woman, 29, Dnipro, higher education, unmarried, Germany).



Results of focus group discussions



«There are quite a few opinions like this: refugees live in Germany on welfare, they have millions, euros fall into their pockets, they have enough money to travel. In short, we are lucky. My initial opinion was that it was a crime to stay in Kharkiv. Kharkiv was under fire. My child and I lived here under fire. Why? It's a crime to put your children in danger», (Woman, 48, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Factors contributing to return

The data obtained during focus group discussions demonstrate the multi-layered nature of motivations for return and the complexity of decisions that forced migrants have to make in the context of war, security uncertainty, and prolonged integration in EU countries. Unlike expert assessments, which appeal to macro-level and structural preconditions, participants in the discussions describe their decision to return mainly through the prism of personal experience, life circumstances, emotional states, and everyday realities. For some respondents, return is a rational step associated with the restoration of life plans, while for others it is primarily an emotional need and an element of maintaining their own identity and belonging. This creates a more microsocial, «down-to-earth» dimension in which motives, barriers, and situational factors interact in complex combinations.

Psychological and professional barriers to integration abroad.

The return is motivated by an unwillingness or inability to adapt to a new country, a feeling of reduced professional status, and a loss of meaning in the long-term restructuring of one's life. Some respondents openly stated that a long stay abroad was accompanied by psychological fatigue, a feeling of constantly starting «from scratch» and a loss of professional status. Above all, the inability to realize their potential and establish a standard of living comparable to that to which they were accustomed in Ukraine created additional pressure and motivated them to return.

Results of focus group discussions



«I have already achieved something in my country, I am a certified specialist, but here I feel like a child», (Woman, 29, Dnipro, higher education, unmarried, Germany).

Results of focus group discussions



«No matter how smart and beautiful you are, no matter what status and salary you earn in Ukraine, the Germans won't give you what you're worth there!», (Woman, 50, Lviv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

The need to reunite with family. Having loved ones in Ukraine, the need to support elderly relatives or keep the family together are critically important motives for returning for a significant portion of respondents.

Results of focus group discussions



«The children missed their friends, even though they had friends there (in Germany), they still missed home, their family... The second reason: our elders, our parents, stayed here (in Ukraine), and everything we had was here – our house, our home – so we returned. And the third reason was that we had a choice: either stay there and build a life there, because it wasn't right for my husband to stay there (in Ukraine) while I was here, or come back. And we decided to return so that we could all be together», (Woman, 42, Lviv, higher education, married, 3 children, returned to Ukraine).

«My husband lives in Kyiv, and it was quite difficult to maintain a long-distance relationship for 3 years. It was quite a difficult experience», (Woman, 26, Kharkiv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

Nostalgia, longing for home. In respondents' answers, nostalgia appears not as an abstract feeling, but as an inner need to return to an environment where a person felt emotionally stable and happy.

Results of focus group discussions



«I just want to go home. I want to live where I was born. I love my city and every corner of it. It is a very big part of my life. I don't have children yet, but I want my children to grow up in Ukraine», (Woman, 29, Dnipro, higher education, unmarried, Germany).

«No matter how good it was for the child there, the child wanted to go home», (Woman, 40, Chernihiv, higher education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

«The sun didn't shine as brightly there anymore, the dogs didn't bark as much. I came here, sat down on a bench, the sun was shining, and I was feeling great», (Woman, 50, Lviv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

Material factors and understandable conditions and rules for living and doing business in Ukraine. It is quite obvious that return becomes more likely when migrants have housing, work, or, for example, experience, knowledge, and resources to start or restart a business in Ukraine.



Results of focus group discussions



«If I return, I have somewhere to go, both my parents' house and my husband's house», (Woman, 29, Odessa, higher education, married, 3 children, Germany).

«I have a lot of unfinished business in Ukraine. A new apartment is waiting for me, I'm waiting for it to be finished... I've been an entrepreneur all my life, I had my own businesses before the war. The war destroyed everything, but I think it's possible to develop a business, and I can only do that in Ukraine», (Woman, 48, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Naturally, those who have something to lose in Ukraine and whose well-being and social status were higher than they are now in immigration are more inclined to return. In other words, the availability of resources and prerequisites for resuming life in Ukraine can significantly facilitate the reintegration process. According to some respondents, Ukraine remains the most favorable environment for the possible implementation of business plans, since the conditions for doing business abroad are perceived as less flexible, overly bureaucratic, and less accessible to Ukrainians.

Cultural and ethnic identity, emotional ties to the homeland, Ukrainian identity against the backdrop of feeling alienated in the EU. Cultural, emotional, and ethnic attachment to Ukraine remains one of the key motives. Respondents emphasize the importance of traditions, language, and cultural environment, which cannot be fully replaced abroad. This also intersects with the factor of inability or unwillingness to integrate into the society of the host country. This points to a deeper aspect of self-identification: integration is understood not only as a set of competencies or social practices, but as an internal sense of acceptance and belonging.

Results of focus group discussions



«Reasons to return: I am going back to my country, it is more of a cultural aspect. Because I love my traditions, my land, my nation. Furthermore, I want to continue to develop in my country», (Woman, 43, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, 2 children, Germany).

«You will always be a stranger here (in Germany)! You are an immigrant and will never be able to integrate into the country completely», (Woman, 30, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, returned to Ukraine).

«Roughly speaking, a Ukrainian will never become a German», (Woman, 43, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, 2 children, Germany).

In this context, return is seen not only as a geographical relocation, but also as a way to preserve cultural integrity and maintain the familiar symbolic structure of everyday life.

Some participants emphasized that the positive attitude of Ukrainian society towards returnees could be a significant motivator for many.

Results of focus group discussions



«One of the best motivators to return home is for our society to say: come back, we are waiting for you», (Male, 20, Lviv, secondary education, unmarried, Germany).

Patriotism, desire to participate in the restoration of Ukraine. For some respondents, the decision to return has a clear value dimension. Some respondents tend to associate returning with active citizenship and a desire to participate in transformational processes, considering returning to be part of a common cause – helping Ukraine recover after the war.

Results of focus group discussions



«I am a simple Ukrainian student who wants to get an education (in Germany), I want to return home, transfer my experience to Ukraine, and create a European-style company», (Male, 20, Lviv, secondary education, unmarried, Germany).

«The first reason is my patriotic motives. It is important for me to support our economy and rebuild our country», (Female, 40, Chernihiv, higher education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

In general, the decision to return is formed at the intersection of structural (security, economy) and life (family, self-realization, belonging, self-identification) factors. Contrary to expert predictions, participants characterize this decision as a personal life choice that depends on the experience of a particular family and family circumstances, rather than on national trends.

An analysis of the verbal and nonverbal reactions of focus group participants allows us to identify the following aspects in the system of motivations and incentives for return:

- ✓ emotional and ethnic belonging to the native environment (native home, city, region, country);
- ✓ incomplete or problematic adaptation/integration in the host country;
- ✓ structural advantages of living at home, where resources (real estate, other property) and social networks are preserved;

- ✓ the desire for stability, which is not always achievable in the EU due to temporary status and integration problems;
- ✓ willingness to rebuild one's own country, especially among young people and professionals.

At the same time, focus groups confirm the key conclusion of the expert panel: the decision to return is not linear or instantaneous, but depends on a combination of circumstances that may change over time. This means that real return policies require simultaneous attention to security guarantees, economic conditions, family policy, cultural and identity support, and effective communication with the diaspora and Ukrainian forced migrants.

The incentives and motives for deciding to return to Ukraine are reinforced by a certain disappointment with the experience of forced migration and the realization that the barriers to full integration into German society outweigh the favorable conditions for adaptation. This combination of objective and subjective factors made returning the most rational and attractive decision for the participants.

Results of focus group discussions



«I voiced my wishes, I asked, but they gave me (in Germany) an apartment on the 11th floor, where there is no elevator. My child cannot walk, has a severe disability, and a bunch of diagnoses, including epilepsy», (Woman, 47, Odesa, higher education, divorced, 3 children, returned to Ukraine).

Analysis of the focus group results provided a deeper understanding of the structure of the respondents' migration experience. The participants' statements clearly showed the difference between the logic of departure and the logic of return: **while emigration was mainly a rational response to external circumstances (danger and other challenges of war), the decision to return was described as an internally motivated, emotionally charged choice.**

For many participants, returning was a way to regain a sense of control over their own lives and restore their multidimensional identity: national, cultural, territorial, professional, and personal. Despite the ongoing war and its risks and challenges, returning was seen as a step towards inner stability, harmony, and alignment with one's own values and civic position.

It is noteworthy that among the participants who have already returned to Ukraine, not a single person reported significant doubts or regrets about their decision to return. On the contrary, their statements were dominated by the conviction that they had made the right choice, although certain difficulties after their return were acknowledged as inevitable or expected.

Respondents indicated that it was in Ukraine that they once again felt part of a close social and family environment, were able to realize their professional potential, and find inner balance and peace, which they had partially lost while abroad.

Results of focus group discussions



«I immediately felt calm and peaceful in my soul. But there (in immigration), I lost that feeling. I had mental attacks and depression, and the climate affected me because I am from Odessa, and I missed the climate, the sea, and everything else in Germany. When I returned, I was very happy...», (Woman, 47, Odessa, higher education, divorced, 3 children, returned to Ukraine).

«I expected that it would be easier to breathe at home, because there is my native language, food, traditions, that is, the support of my family. And of course, everything came true when I returned. I resumed my job, I work officially, and it's easier for my child here... I don't regret it... It was good abroad, but you're never a native in a foreign country», (Woman, 40, Chernihiv, higher education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

Life after returning

Along with studying the motivations for returning, it was also important to analyze how focus group participants assessed the reality of life in Ukraine after their return. The data obtained show that returning not only activates emotional, value-based, and identification motives, but also triggers a process of re-encountering a transformed social environment, its strengths, new opportunities, and existing limitations and challenges.

On the one hand, respondents highlighted a number of positive processes they noticed after returning to Ukraine, including the high level of self-organisation among citizens and businesses, the ability of society to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the search for new, non-standard solutions in the context of a protracted war. It was important that economic activity did not stop, businesses adapted to the new realities, and even new jobs and areas of activity appeared. The high resilience of



the population and their willingness to overcome everyday challenges, from blackouts to infrastructure destruction, are perceived as a sign of the country's internal strength and resilience.

Results of focus group discussions



«Business has recovered, everything is developing, not standing still, and I am very happy that I found a job here and returned to my profession and am not forced to go abroad again in search of work», (Woman, 38, Kyiv, secondary education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

«The country has been broken, but it has not been destroyed. It was resilient before, and it remains so now», (Woman, 30, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, returned to Ukraine).

At the same time, a number of negative changes are highlighted that complicate everyday life and increase uncertainty: a significant decline in the standard of living and quality of life compared to the pre-war period, deterioration in the availability of basic services due to the destruction of infrastructure, and the physical and psychological exhaustion of a significant part of the population, which has been surviving in war conditions for a long time. In addition, attention is drawn to the ineffectiveness of state institutions in working with citizens from occupied and frontline territories, which creates a sense of insecurity and inequality.

Results of focus group discussions



«Even now, our country cannot help all the people from the occupied territories or frontline cities», (Woman, 32, Mykolaiv, higher education, civil marriage, 2 children, returned to Ukraine).

Respondents drew attention to such problems as widespread human rights violations and a sense of social disunity, with some citizens directly involved in the war or volunteering, while others live in relatively peaceful conditions, focusing on their own private needs and not particularly concerned about the challenges of war and the need to fight for victory.

A separate block can be identified as the difficulties that respondents personally encountered after their return. Among the most common are: a renewed sense of danger associated with air raid sirens and shelling, difficulties in finding work, especially in small towns, and high competition from IDPs. Some participants pointed to an increased workload, lower salaries compared to European ones, and noticeable gender bias in the professional environment.

Results of focus group discussions



«As soon as I arrived and entered the apartment, an air raid siren went off. After a long period of peace, this was a bit shocking for me. It's not that I wasn't ready, but I didn't know how to behave, where to run, where the bomb shelter or shelter was», (Woman, 50, Lviv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

«There are a lot of IDPs and these people are taking jobs. Competition is already higher than it was before the full-scale war started», (Woman, 30, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, returned to Ukraine).

«Before, I had one job, but now I'm practically working two jobs», (Woman, 38, Kyiv, secondary education, married, 1 child, returned to Ukraine).

«The attitude towards women in the military is not serious! If you have come to a serious position, you must have earned it in some way, unprofessionally. As for performing official duties, we are on equal footing», (Woman, 32, Mykolaiv, higher education, civil marriage, 2 children, returned to Ukraine).

Thus, the results of the focus groups show that returning to Ukraine is accompanied by complex interactions between the strengths of society in wartime and new challenges that require additional efforts to adapt. **It is clear that positive changes reinforce the respondents' — the returnees' — feeling that their decision was the right one. Negative changes and difficulties in everyday life, while not destroying the motivation to return, point to the need for a comprehensive state policy that combines security, socio-economic, and institutional solutions, as well as targeted, multifaceted support for those who return.**

Thus, return can take many forms, not just physical ones. The process of return itself cannot be viewed as something instantaneous and momentary. Most likely, this process will be wave-like in nature, reflecting the natural dynamics of any post-war society:

- ✓ The first waves — those who have housing, ties, resources, and clear plans.
- ✓ The second waves — families with children, after the infrastructure has stabilized.
- ✓ The third wave — some of those who tried to integrate into the EU but, for various reasons, were unable or unwilling to stay.
- ✓ Reverse movement — some of those who return may leave again if they become disappointed.

Therefore, the success of the return will depend not only on politics but also on the pace of the country's recovery.

APPLYING EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE AFTER RETURNING TO UKRAINE

After returning to Ukraine, Ukrainians are increasingly applying the European experience they gained during forced migration. This is reflected in higher expectations for transparency in governance and safety standards, as well as a desire for a more structured work process and compliance with rules. Many of those who have returned bring with them practices of sustainable consumption, a culture of responsibility, and an understanding of the importance of inclusiveness. They are becoming agents of change in their communities, influencing local self-government, educational approaches, social initiatives, and business processes, effectively accelerating the European transformation of the country from the bottom up.

Social habits and behavior patterns that respondents would like to adopt from the EU. The long-term experience of Ukrainian forced migrants living in an orderly, predictable German environment has changed their general expectations of the state, society, and interpersonal relationships in a certain way, and has also shaped their vision of which elements and practices should be adapted in Ukraine.

One of the most frequently mentioned practices is the social security system, which guarantees basic living conditions regardless of personal circumstances. Respondents emphasized that state support mechanisms in Germany prevent situations of social insecurity among citizens.

Results of focus group discussions



«In Germany, there will never be a situation where a person is left without a job, medical care, and housing – on the street», (Woman, 32, Mykolaiv, higher education, civil marriage, 2 children, returned to Ukraine).

Respondents cited everyday friendliness and openness in communication between people as an important difference compared to their Ukrainian experience, which is associated with a general sense of stability and lack of hostility in the social environment.

Results of focus group discussions

«You get used to walking around with a serious face (in Ukraine) because if you are kind, it means you are weak. You have to be strong. But here, people are so stable that they don't feel any malice towards each other», (Male, 27, Khmelnytskyi, higher education, unmarried, Germany).

At the same time, they noted clear rules of communication that regulate social boundaries and permissible and impermissible topics, ensuring comfort in communication and avoiding conflicts.

Results of focus group discussions

«Germans are not allowed to talk about at least three topics: religion, politics, and money», (Woman, 29, Odesa, higher education, married, 3 children, Germany).

Analyzing their experience abroad, respondents described a measured lifestyle, absence of excessive stress, financial stability, and confidence in the future as important social values that positively affect the psychological state of citizens.

Results of focus group discussions

«People are happy, calm, and have everything planned out. They understand that if something happens, they will not be left on the street. The state will support them», (Woman, 46, Nizhyn, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Among the important elements of the social environment, respondents also mentioned the conditions created for a healthy lifestyle, access to sports facilities, environmentally friendly transport, and a generally favorable environmental situation in their places of residence. Respondents with children with disabilities paid particular attention to the inclusiveness of infrastructure and services, which provides equal opportunities for people with disabilities in transport, education, and public spaces.

Results of focus group discussions

«Everything at train stations and on public transport is very well thought out so that people with special needs can travel around the country without barriers», (Woman, 47, Odesa, higher education, divorced, 3 children, returned to Ukraine).



Among other important practices, participants noted the well-developed public transport system, which reduces the need for private cars and eases traffic congestion.

Results of focus group discussions



«People in cities don't need to use cars so much; they will use public transport», (Woman, 26, Kharkiv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

An equally important element of the social experience of migration was the work culture, which is oriented toward a standard working day, additional pay for overtime, and the value of personal time. Some respondents emphasized that in Germany they had rethought the role of work-life balance.

Results of focus group discussions



«But this lifestyle, what we were talking about, when a person values themselves, their working time, their health, doesn't overwork, that's the only thing I would really bring back from Germany, that love for yourself. It's selfish, but that's how it is. I compare how my husband worked in Ukraine, I could go weeks without seeing him. He just came home to sleep and that was it», (Woman, 29, Odessa, higher education, married, 3 children, Germany public transport), (Woman, 26, Kharkiv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

A separate important topic was the upbringing of children and the organization of the educational process – the availability of kindergartens and schools, a partnership-based style of interaction between teachers and students, and the absence of excessive academic workload and stress.

Results of focus group discussions



«We found a kindergarten quickly... We applied in December, and in January we already brought our child there... It's not like in Ukraine, where you have to wait 2-3 years for a place...», (Woman, 48, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Respondents also noted harmonious family relationships, division of responsibilities, and respect for the personal space and emotional boundaries of family members.

Results of focus group discussions

«I like that they don't dissolve into each other... no one overburdens anyone else with their problems», (Woman, 46, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Other characteristics of the social environment that were praised included traffic management, mutual respect between drivers and pedestrians, the rule of law, and the absence of everyday corruption, where the rules are the same for everyone.

Results of focus group discussions

«If parking is prohibited somewhere, a car cannot be parked there, regardless of a person's status...», (Male, 50, Kyiv, secondary education, married, 2 children, Germany).

In summary, respondents emphasized that their experience of living in Germany/the EU allowed them to form clear ideas about the social standards they expect from the state and society after their return, which could serve as guidelines for Ukrainian policies to support and integrate returnees.

Thus, the results of the focus groups confirm that the effective return of Ukrainians requires a comprehensive approach: the integration of economic, social, educational, psychological, and cultural incentives, as well as the consideration of useful practices borrowed during their stay abroad. These data complement basic expert programs and help formulate realistic mechanisms for supporting returnees, taking into account their expectations and needs.

V.

EXPECTATIONS FROM THE STATE AND SOCIETY: RESULTS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Ukrainians, both those who remained in the country and those who experienced forced migration, have similar expectations regarding the role of the state and society in post-war recovery. Participants emphasized the need for effective, honest, and accessible institutions capable of providing security, social support, and conditions for return and development. At the same time, they expect greater solidarity, mutual respect, and support within society to minimize the risks of division and restore trust between different groups of citizens, in particular:

Reform of state institutions and the fight against corruption

Respondents emphasize the importance of reforming state institutions, reducing bureaucracy and the security apparatus, and creating conditions for economic recovery after the war. They note that the success of return largely depends on Ukraine's perception as a reliable and transparent state at the international level.

Results of focus group discussions



«Yesterday my husband went to a job fair. In addition to other jobs, they were hiring for the police, and my husband went over to ask if he could try his hand at it, but they just laughed and asked, 'Ukrainian? Yes.' They said, 'No. Ukrainian means corruption'», (Woman, 29, Odessa, higher education, married, 3 children, Germany).

«Corruption and impunity in Ukraine are very much deterring investors from around the world. God forbid that Ukraine should fail to rebuild itself. Because no one wants to invest in something that is unreliable», (Male, 20, Lviv, secondary education, single, Germany).

The state must not only implement formal institutional changes, but also shape a positive investment image to encourage Ukrainians to return and attract international resources and investments.

Social protection and support programs for returnees

Respondents emphasize the need for financial and social support, especially for women, families with children, and people with disabilities. This includes housing restoration, employment support, starting a business, and access to social services.

Results of focus group discussions



«There should be social security in Ukraine. Everyone pays taxes, and they should get something in return for those taxes: full payment for medical treatment, vacation, unemployment benefits according to the law. Child benefits, social package», (Woman, 43, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, 2 children, Germany).

«The state should provide jobs, decent wages, and housing opportunities for young families or people who lost their homes in the war», (Woman, 47, Odesa, higher education, divorced, 3 children, returned to Ukraine).

Psychological support and rehabilitation

Respondents emphasize the need for psychological support for various categories of the population: returnees after a long stay abroad, military personnel after participating in combat operations, as well as civilians who have survived the war in Ukraine. Psychological programs are a critical component of reintegration, especially for people who have been abroad for a long time.

Results of focus group discussions



«Free psychological support hotlines, free volunteer organizations. I know that IMOM and UNICEF have such initiatives, where there are visiting psychologists and hotlines», (Woman, 32, Mykolaiv, higher education, civil marriage, 2 children, returned to Ukraine).

«Perhaps some work with a psychologist. If I returned to Ukraine, it would be very difficult for me because everything has changed, even though it looks the same. It is very important to have someone nearby who can help you adapt again. Adapting to your own country – it sounds strange, but that is exactly what happened to me», (Woman, 29, Dnipro, higher education, unmarried, Germany).

Involvement of non-governmental organizations, diaspora, and business

Respondents expect that the return and adaptation process will be supported not only by the state, but also by volunteer communities, public initiatives, international partners, and business, in particular in the form of organizational, financial, advisory, and legal assistance. As an example of such support, participants cite the need for assistance in completing bureaucratic procedures abroad, including closing bank accounts, terminating contracts, and completing the necessary paperwork, which often pose a significant barrier to return.

Results of focus group discussions



«It's not so easy to leave Germany: you have to give up your apartment and close your accounts. Some friends of mine just left for Ukraine. It took them four months to close their affairs. And they didn't get all their money back; they were told it would take six months to a year», (Woman, 48, Kharkiv, higher education, married, 1 child, Germany).

Educational and professional programs

The return of young people and students depends on the availability of competitive educational programs, grants, scholarships, and opportunities for professional development. Respondents compared Ukrainian programs with European ones and emphasized the urgent need for education reform.

Results of focus group discussions



«It would be great if students went to Europe on exchange programs so that Ukraine could work on its education system», (Woman, 29, Dnipro, higher education, unmarried, Germany).

«Two words that make my heart ache. Most of the 20-30-year-olds who left are now studying there. My observation is that the Germans are doing everything they can to make our children stay there... I think the Germans have stolen our children. They had higher scholarships, the Germans immediately provided them with dormitories, and found jobs for these children. They learn the language and get high-level jobs», (Woman, 50, Lviv, higher education, married, returned to Ukraine).

These expectations point to the need to create a system of incentives to bring young people back and retain highly qualified personnel in Ukraine.

Possibility of applying amnesty mechanisms for certain categories of violations during wartime

For some potential returnees, a clearly formulated state policy on the legal consequences of violating the law during wartime, including issues of evading mobilization, illegally crossing the border, or deserting, may be a motive for returning. This does not mean unconditional forgiveness, but rather a transparent and differentiated model of settlement with defined limits, categories of offenses, procedures for restoring legal status, and exceptions for serious crimes.

The existence of such clear rules will reduce the fear of legal uncertainty and may act as an incentive to return. However, some of the respondents emphasized the need for a full amnesty for men of mobilization age who left Ukraine during the war, which, in their opinion, would best encourage men with families to return home.

State policy to strengthen national unity and prevent social division

According to respondents, the formation of inclusive policies that prevent the stigmatization of those returning from abroad is an important factor in their return. Respondents emphasize the risk of negative attitudes towards returnees, mutual accusations, or mistrust, which could exacerbate divisions in Ukrainian society. Consistent government communications about shared experiences, the contribution of migrants to supporting Ukraine, and the unacceptability of confrontation will help create a favorable environment for return and promote social cohesion and the country's recovery.

Results of focus group discussions



«I was often asked for advice on whether to return or not. We (forced migrants) are considered traitors by our own people. My answer has always been: you are not traitors, your country needs you, your people need you. So come back and rebuild your country! Work for Ukraine, work for the defense sector, and in this way victory will come closer and faster», (Woman, 30, Chernihiv, higher education, divorced, returned to Ukraine).



A clear and vocal state position on interest in the return of citizens

For many migrants, it is important to understand whether the state really wants them to return and whether there are strategies and programs aimed at reintegration. Currently, some respondents are unaware of or do not feel such a signal or message from the authorities. A publicly stated position, backed up by official statements, information campaigns, and accessible services for returnees, can have a significant motivational effect, reinforcing feelings of belonging and confidence in the predictability of the return process and the advisability of returning.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STATE POLICY ON THE REINTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN FORCED MIGRANTS

The recommendations presented here are not intended to be definitive and do not represent the official position of the Razumkov Center or Hanns Seidel Foundation in Ukraine. The recommendations are the result of a synthesis of the opinions and suggestions of focus group participants and expert discussions.

When developing recommendations aimed at the return to Ukraine and reintegration into Ukrainian society of citizens who have received temporary shelter from the war abroad, two fundamental points must be observed.

1. The proposed measures must be balanced with measures to support other vulnerable groups in Ukrainian society, be targeted and purposeful, not create unjustified preferences for returnees over citizens who remained in Ukraine during the war and supported the functioning of the state, and, accordingly, avoid provoking social tension.
2. These measures should take into account the real financial situation of the state and its overall ability to meet the needs of all citizens under the restrictions caused by the war.

1. Development and Implementation of a National Reintegration Strategy

State policy on reintegration should be institutionally formalised through a comprehensive National Reintegration Strategy that ensures coherence, predictability, and long-term sustainability of approaches to the return of Ukrainian citizens. The Strategy should be based on the principle of voluntary return and focus not only on physical relocation, but on the full social, economic, and cultural reintegration of returnees.

It is recommended to:

- ✓ establish a **phased reintegration framework** covering pre-return preparation, transitional adaptation, and long-term integration;
- ✓ differentiate policy instruments for various target groups (families with children, highly skilled professionals, entrepreneurs, vulnerable populations);
- ✓ integrate reintegration policy into broader post-war recovery, employment, education, and regional development strategies;
- ✓ ensure effective coordination between central government, local authorities, and international partners.

The effectiveness of the Strategy depends on its alignment with real motivators and barriers to return, including security, housing, employment opportunities, quality of public services, and trust in state institutions.

2. Using Identity as an Instrument of State Policy

Ukraine should adopt a systematic approach to identity as an active resource of state policy. This implies building on the strengthened **civic, national, and European identities** of Ukrainians shaped by war, mobility, and interaction with democratic institutions, rather than constructing artificial identity models.

It is recommended to:

- ✓ strengthen the sense of belonging through transparent public services, civic participation, and sustained socio-economic ties with Ukraine regardless of place of residence;
- ✓ develop communication campaigns emphasising the value of every Ukrainian and multiple forms of contribution to national development, both from abroad and after return;
- ✓ support diverse linguistic, cultural, and professional identity practices that align with a shared political core of the Ukrainian nation;
- ✓ leverage Ukraine's positive image in Europe as an element of soft power.

Updating the Law of Ukraine «On the Basic Principles of State Policy in the Sphere of Affirming Ukrainian National and Civic Identity» is advisable to reflect the transnational and mobile nature of contemporary Ukrainian society.

3. Strengthening the Value of Ukrainian Citizenship

In conditions of high mobility, the state should foster not only emotional attachment but also a rational understanding of the value of Ukrainian citizenship.

It is recommended to:

- ✓ ensure transparent communication regarding the rights, guarantees, and opportunities associated with citizenship;
- ✓ enhance the practical value of citizenship through access to public services, state programmes, business support, and educational pathways;
- ✓ develop «citizenship plus» mechanisms for Ukrainians abroad (digital participation, investment and reconstruction programmes);

promote a positive image of Ukrainian citizenship as modern, effective, and aligned with European standards.

4. Fostering Positive Public Attitudes Toward Return Migration

Successful reintegration requires a shift in domestic public discourse. Return should be perceived as a development opportunity rather than a moral obligation or exceptional act.

It is recommended to:

- ✓ reframe public narratives toward «return as opportunity»;
- ✓ systematically showcase successful reintegration cases;
- ✓ counter stigma and disinformation targeting migrants;
- ✓ strengthen the capacity of local communities to engage with returnees.

5. Macroeconomic Incentives and Labour Market Policy

Economic instruments should play a central role in encouraging return.

It is recommended to:

- ✓ introduce temporary tax incentives for employment and entrepreneurship among returnees;
- ✓ develop high-productivity sectors and large-scale reconstruction projects;
- ✓ create targeted investment instruments for the Ukrainian diaspora;
- ✓ ensure regulatory stability and predictability.

6. Strengthening Minimum Labour Guarantees and Wage Quality

Reducing the gap with EU labour standards requires comprehensive labour policy modernisation.

It is recommended to:

- ✓ gradually increase the minimum wage based on productivity, inflation, and social benchmarks;
- ✓ ensure transparency and fairness in wage-setting mechanisms;
- ✓ strengthen social protections and measures to reduce informal employment.

7. Social Support Mechanisms for Families with Children

Families with children should constitute a distinct priority within reintegration policy.

It is recommended to:

- ✓ establish systems for educational and psychological adaptation of children returning from abroad;
- ✓ ensure adequate access to early childhood education;

- ✓ introduce temporary financial support mechanisms for returning families;
- ✓ develop housing support programmes tailored to family needs.

8. Development of Reintegration Infrastructure

A centralised coordination infrastructure should become the backbone of reintegration policy implementation.

It is recommended to:

- ✓ establish a national «one-stop-shop» online portal for returnees;
- ✓ ensure the operation of regional Reintegration Coordination Centres;
- ✓ integrate digital, social, and advisory services into a unified system.

Implementation of these recommendations would transform return migration from a reactive policy response into a strategic instrument for post-war recovery, modernisation, and long-term development of Ukraine.

ANNEX 1

UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN GERMANY: KEY FIGURES

Social assistance	<p>In 2025, 497,210 Ukrainians aged 15 to 65 (working-age population) received <i>Bürgergeld</i>, social assistance provided only to German citizens and Ukrainians with temporary protection status. This group includes 317,250 women and 179,970 men¹.</p> <p>As of April 2025, a total of 693,420 Ukrainian citizens in Germany received <i>Bürgergeld</i>, including 413,290 women and 280,120 men. This figure includes not only adults of working age, but also children, young people, and the elderly. Among male recipients, 150,660 were between the ages of 18 and 63.</p> <p>The Federal Employment Agency reported that in March 2025, the average monthly <i>Bürgergeld</i> payment was €882.</p> <p>The amount depends on age and family status:</p> <p>Single adults and single parents receive €563 per month.</p> <p>Couples receive €506 each.</p> <p>Children receive between €357 and €471 depending on their age.</p>
Work and employment	<p>More than a third of Ukrainians in Germany who have been granted refugee status currently have a job. As of November 2024, approximately 296,000 Ukrainians were working in Germany (174,080 women and 125,590 men).</p> <p>Of these, 245,200 were in formal employment with social security contributions².</p> <p>In 2025, the proportion of employed Ukrainians rose from around 16% at the end of 2022 to 51% in 2025. The Federal Institute for Population Research (BiB) reported that 50% of Ukrainian women and 57% of men are employed³.</p> <p>The employment sector is diverse: manufacturing, retail, health and social services, construction, hotel/restaurant business, etc.</p> <p>Satisfaction with working conditions among 20-50-year-olds is 94% (up from 87%)⁴.</p> <p>A significant proportion work below their qualifications, especially those who previously had high-level professions. Reasons: difficulties with the recognition of diplomas and previously obtained qualifications, language barriers, childcare and caregiving responsibilities, and a lack of affordable housing⁵.</p>

¹ Over one-third of Ukrainian refugees in Germany are employed. – https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/08/05/7524817/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

² Nearly 300,000 people from Ukraine are working in Germany. – https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/en/press/2025-07-nearly-300000-people-from-ukraine-are-working-in-germany?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³ Temporary Protection Germany 2024 Update. – https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AIDA-DE_Temporary-Protection_2024.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴ Over half of Ukrainian refugees in Germany have found employment. – https://unn.ua/en/news/over-half-of-ukrainian-refugees-in-germany-have-found-employment?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁵ Ukrainians are slowly adapting to life in Germany. – https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-08-25/ukrainians-are-slowly-adapting-to-life-germany?utm_source=chatgpt.com

UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN GERMANY: KEY FIGURES

Education of migrants	The first waves of arrivals were the most qualified, but later the average level of education among new arrivals declined Relationships 29% of women who left without a partner are now single. Women with partners are more likely to plan to stay, and families with children have the most stable long-term plans
Children: education, integration	As of March 2025, around 223,830 children from Ukraine were enrolled in schools across Germany Various German states offer «welcome classes» and other adaptation measures; however, implementation varies greatly from region to region ⁶ . Around 25% of children do not plan to stay, and their parents are more likely to seek permanent residence.
Language and integration	Only 8% of parents have a good command of German, compared to almost 50% of children. Online learning makes socialization difficult; extracurricular activities and new friends play a key role. Among those who are not yet working, approximately 70% attend integration/language courses or vocational training, which offers prospects for future integration ⁸ .
Housing, social conditions/ Approximately	79% of Ukrainian refugees live in rented apartments ⁹ . Only a small portion reside in shelters or refuges.

⁶ COUNTRY REPORT, June 2025/ – https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AIDA-DE_2024-Update.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁷ Overview of the main changes since the previous report update Germany. – https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/overview-main-changes-previous-report-update/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁸ Ukrainians are slowly adapting to life in Germany. – https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-08-25/ukrainians-are-slowly-adapting-to-life-germany?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁹ Ukrainians are slowly adapting to life in Germany. – https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-08-25/ukrainians-are-slowly-adapting-to-life-germany?utm_source=chatgpt.com