

FORCED MIGRATION, VOLUNTARY RETURN, AND RESHAPED SAFETY OF THE UKRAINIAN POPULATION AFTER THE FULL SCALE RUSSIAN INVASION

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***Abstract.** The full-scale Russian aggression has brought about a significant shift in Ukraine's migration landscape. A massive outflow through the western Ukrainian border began following the onset of the full scale war. To comprehensively understand and effectively manage the scale and key characteristics of migration under these wartime conditions, this article aims to investigate the forced migration of Ukrainians abroad and their subsequent return. It seeks to uncover the primary drivers influencing the outflow and return movement after the full-scale invasion. The research employs a range of scientific methods, including scientific abstraction, analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, as well as systemic and structural approaches, along with document analysis and statistical observations.*

The number of Ukrainians who fled the country due to full-scale Russian aggression is a subject of varying estimates. There is an urgent need for clarification in this area. Relocation decisions were among the most crucial choices made by the Ukrainian population following the full-scale Russian invasion. The safety-related situation plays a pivotal role in shaping intentions to leave hazardous areas, but additional factors, such as financial and logistical considerations, also influence these decisions. The war has introduced a relativistic safety paradigm, and the end of the war does not necessarily equate to safety in the current perspective of Ukrainians. The constructed concept of safety has become apparent through regional security considerations, marking a shift from absolute safety standards toward relative ones.

Keywords: population migration, forced migration, return, Ukraine, full scale Russian invasion.

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Introduction and literature review. Migration has consistently been widespread in contemporary Ukraine, primarily characterized by its voluntary nature. Before the onset of Russian aggression, labor migration was the most extensive form of population mobility. Ukrainian migrant workers were dispersed widely among EU countries, contributing to their economies and earning income to support relatives left behind. Consequently, their gradual integration into host societies gave rise to new Ukrainian diasporas in European states. Numerous studies have investigated Ukrainian communities in various countries within the

European Union and other regions around the world. Research interest in these communities tended to increase with the size of the Ukrainian population in a given area. Comprehensive studies have been dedicated to Ukrainian migration issues in countries such as Poland (Brunarska Z., et al., 2016), Spain (Stanek and Hosnedlova, 2012), Italy (Vianello, 2014; Marchetti et al., 2013), and others. Five years ago, the newspaper *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* ranked the 50 most influential figures in the Polish economy. Ukrainian migrants, as a collective entity, secured the second position on this list, second only to the Prime Minister of the country, Mateusz Morawiecki (UNIAN, 2018).

The war has dramatically altered Ukraine's migration landscape. Unprovoked Russian aggression, beginning in February 2014, led to the occupation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, condemned internationally by the UN General Assembly Resolution (UN, 2014). It resulted in the emergence of large groups of forced migrants, including refugees and internally displaced people. The subsequent full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, further increased the number of Ukrainian migrants, driven by the need to escape life-threatening risks such as violence, deportation, and harm.

According to the UNHCR, the estimated number of civilians who have died as a result of the full-scale invasion stands at nine thousand people. Another 15 thousand civilians have been injured (Interfax Україна, 2023). These numbers are likely underestimated due to the limited information available about the situation in territories currently occupied by Russian troops. Economic factors driving forced mobility include property expropriation, destruction, and famine. Russian attacks have caused extensive damage to thousands of civilian targets in Ukraine, including residential buildings, factories, secondary and higher education institutions, healthcare facilities, airports, and thermal power plants/hydroelectric power (KSE, 2023). Therefore, the humanitarian aspect of migration during times of war is of utmost importance, as relocating away from active hostilities significantly reduces the risks to human life and well-being. Despite the ongoing insecurity across the entire territory of Ukraine, the country's year-and-a-half-long fight for freedom has created relative safety in certain regions compared to others, leading to the emergence of return flows among Ukrainian forced migrants.

The **purpose** of this article is to investigate the process of forced migration of the Ukrainian population abroad, their return, and the primary drivers influencing both the outflow and return following the full-scale invasion.

Research methodology. Multiple data sources were utilized in this study. The analysis is based on information collected in Ukraine and abroad following the full-scale Russian invasion. These sources include administrative data from the Border Guard Service of Ukraine and the Ministry of the Interior and Administration of Poland, surveys conducted by international agencies (UNHCR, IOM) and Ukrainian research centers (CEDOS, Sociological Group "Rating"). Additionally, secondary analysis of various publications in the field of migration was applied. To investigate the decision-making process behind forced migration, I primarily conducted secondary analyses of data from the CEDOS study (CEDOS, 2022), which was carried out in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion that began on February 24, 2022. The fieldwork took place from March 2 to March

7, 2022. To address the issue of the actual and planned return of Ukrainian forced migrants, I analyzed data from various studies, including research conducted by the UNHCR with 518 individuals crossing into Ukraine from Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova (UNHCR, 2022); the Razumkov Centre study among 511 Ukrainian refugees in 30 countries worldwide, mainly in EU countries (Razumkov Centre, 2022); and a representative survey conducted by the Rating Group among 1,000 individuals in Ukraine, specifically in territories under the government's control (Rating, 2022).

Main results. *The scales of forced migration from Ukraine after the full-scaled invasion.* No matter what type of migration is being analyzed, the question of its scale always arises as a primary concern. Answering this question is no easy task, as it's a challenge to find a single country where migration statistics fully and accurately represent population movements. However, some countries are more successful in this regard than others. The state of Ukrainian migration statistics has consistently drawn the attention of experts. Despite gradual improvements reported by scholars, Ukraine still has much work to do in order to meet European standards of migration statistics (Poznyak and Malynovska, 2015). In fact, aligning Ukrainian statistics with Eurostat standards is one of the areas of cooperation outlined in the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU. One significant challenge is that a substantial portion of important migration indicators falls outside the jurisdiction of the State Statistics Service of Ukraine. Many of these indicators are part of administrative data collected by various entities, including the State Migration Service of Ukraine, State Border Guard Service, State Employment Service, and Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Although the State Migration Service of Ukraine is responsible for migration policy, it doesn't have the authority to harmonize migration data with Eurostat.

There are also indirect data sources that were not initially designed for migration information but could be repurposed for this use if they contain data about an individual's place of birth and citizenship. In Ukraine, these indirect data sources include specialized registers such as the State Register of Individual Taxpayers, the State Register of the Civil Status Acts of Citizens, the Unified State Register of Legal Entities and Individual Entrepreneurs, among others. Additionally, data from the National Bank of Ukraine on cross-border transfers can provide valuable insights (IOM, 2015).

Fragmentation in migration data collection complicates scientific analysis, with the most significant challenge being the prevalence of undocumented movements. There are two primary ways for migrants to enter an irregular status – illegal entry into the country and the expiration of visas or other necessary documents. Even having a proper legal status is not permanent, and undocumented stays can be altered, for instance, through regularization campaigns. All of these factors make it challenging to assess the scale of migration, both in terms of flows and stocks. This task is often addressed through the application of assessment procedures, which can sometimes lead to confusion due to significant differences in numbers reported in the media and by the expert community.

In Ukraine, the deviation between estimations of the same migration phenomena conducted by different scholars or agencies can reach millions of

individuals or cases. For instance, in the sphere of labor migration, officials had to debunk the myth of 12 million Ukrainians working abroad (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2018). More reasonable estimates suggest around 2.6 to 2.7 million people working abroad simultaneously (Centre for Economic Strategy, 2018), and even fewer (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2017). A similar situation arises with immigration data in Ukraine. Some sources reported 1.6 million irregular immigrants in Ukraine before the full scale invasion (Mansoor and Quikkin, 2006), while others indicated 0.7 million (Kresina and Stoiko, 2009). However, an IOM study suggests that the number of immigrants in Ukraine without regular legal status before the full-scale war could range from 37,700 to 60,900 individuals (IOM, 2021).

The number of Ukrainians who fled the country due to full-scale Russian aggression is also subject to various estimations with diverse results. The most commonly cited figure in Ukraine and recipient countries is provided by the UNHCR, which indicates 5.8 million individual refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe as of August 29, 2023 (UNHCR, 2023). Simultaneously, the Border Guard Service of Ukraine reports 22.2 million cases of people crossing the Ukrainian border from Ukraine between February 24, 2022, and August 26, 2023, with 20.5 million border crossings to Ukraine during the same period. The difference between these two figures is 1.7 million cases, which is considerably smaller than the number of Ukrainian refugees in the EU according to UNHCR.

It is an important task to comprehensively analyze the methodology of data collection from each source to reveal the real numbers. At the moment, it is challenging to justify such a significant difference in figures. Data inconsistency could be partly explained by undocumented border crossings, although it can't be the sole reason. Firstly, there seems to be little rationale for massive undocumented entrance of civilians from the EU to Ukraine during the war. Irregularly leaving Ukraine may make sense for certain men who are not allowed to do so openly due to restrictions outlined in the "Law on Mobilization Training and Mobilization." However, it's doubtful that this process is highly active. Moreover, if we were to imagine that millions of Ukrainian men went to the EU illegally, they would likely constitute a noticeable group in Europe, which is not the case currently. For instance, among the 1.1 million Ukrainians who received a state ID number in Poland (PESEL), 94 percent were women and children (UNHCR, 2022 (2)). Additionally, certain groups of Ukrainians left the country from territories that were already occupied via the Russian border. Ukrainian statistics couldn't account for these movements. However, given that the occupied territories are considerably smaller compared to those under government control, it's unlikely that the majority of Ukrainian refugees originated from there.

The im(mobility) decisions of the Ukrainian population after the full-scale Russian invasion. The large-scale migration movements depend on millions of personal decisions, sets of resources, and capabilities. The dominant perspective in contemporary migration literature often neglects the analysis of immobility. This imbalance has been conceptualized as the 'mobility bias' in migration studies (Shewel, 2019). In simpler terms, this means that a sedentary life is usually considered the norm, while migration is seen as a deviation that attracts the interest

of researchers. Recent theoretical findings provide a tool that might help incorporate both mobility and immobility issues into a single framework. The aspiration-capability framework holds significant potential in this regard. The definition of human mobility formulated within this approach describes it as people's capability to choose where to live, including the option to stay, in contrast to the act of migrating itself (De Haas, 2021). The issue of remaining in a country during a state of war or in territories close to active hostilities needs to be investigated and understood more deeply. While it is reasonable to assume that refugees have no option but to leave (De Haas, 2021), in reality, some people do stay even in very dangerous areas. For example, around 700-800 thousand inhabitants remained in Kharkiv city as of the middle of July 2022, despite the city being under constant bombardment and missile attacks during that period (News LIVE, 2022). During only 55 days of the full scale war, at least 560 civilians from Kharkiv region died due to Russian attacks (HB, 2022). The simplest and most obvious reason for people staying in a place of continuous danger is their inability to flee, but there are surely more factors to consider in this context. Among those who stayed, there was a certain proportion of the able-bodied population who continued to work and run enterprises. In theory, this group could have left but chose to stay.

The CEDOS study reports that the vast majority of their respondents had to decide whether to leave or stay at their permanent place after the start of the Russian invasion. This was a difficult decision for many (CEDOS, 2022). In conventional migration studies, the issue of migration intentions is extensively investigated. People are asked about their inclination to go abroad in the nearest six months, a year, or even longer term. However, during a war, especially in its initial stages, having long-term plans becomes an unaffordable luxury. Available empirical evidence shows that the Ukrainian population, during the early period of the war, either refrained from planning their future or had very short-term plans only, spanning several hours, a day, or a couple of days. Nevertheless, decisions to move to another city or country were sometimes considered as part of long-term plans. In the context of war, the 'long run' often meant one month or sometimes even longer (CEDOS, 2022).

The security situation is perhaps the most relevant factor in times of war, but it is not the only one. The capability approach, built on the ideas of Amartya Sen (1993), helps explain many other characteristics of decisions related to (im)mobility. It focuses not only on what a person actually ends up doing but also on what he or she is, in fact, able to do (A. Sen, 2010, p. 235). Empirical evidence shows significant inequality in migration opportunities among the Ukrainian population after the full-scale invasion. Respondents in the CEDOS study often explained their decisions related to departure by factors such as the accessibility of financial resources, transportation for departure, housing, job prospects, the availability of connections to safer locations, and their physical and psychological health (CEDOS, 2022). A study of displacement due to violence in Colombia reveals that financial resources are not only a means to flee danger; on the other hand, they may increase the likelihood of facing direct threats (Engel and Ibáñez, 2007), for example, under occupation or while leaving a dangerous area.

Migration decision-making is rarely solely an individual process. Every person has a network of connections, and each of these connections may influence the decision to move somewhere. This holds true for both conventional and violent times. Empirical evidence from Ukraine after the Russian invasion demonstrates the significant role of "others" (parents, partners, relatives, etc.) in shaping mobility decisions. Such influence can take both direct and implied forms. Direct influence arises in collective decision-making or when the initial plan is altered after communication with close individuals. Implied influence stems from having legal or moral obligations towards someone, such as children, relatives with disabilities, pets, and more. Both forms of influence can either encourage people to move or convince them to stay. In the CEDOS study, respondents frequently articulated the direct and implied influences they experienced. Therefore, available data regarding mobility decisions after the invasion reveal that in the extreme situation of war, Ukrainians relied more on their own resources than on state support. The government should play a more active role by providing assistance for evacuation to all those in need.

The actual and planned return of the Ukrainian forced migrants under the war conditions. Forced migration, like voluntary migration, can be either temporary or permanent. Temporariness raises the question of return, with a significant concern being the circumstances that might enable the return process. As people are assumed to belong to a certain place, it is often expected that displaced individuals will return there after a conflict (Hammond, 1999). In situations where the violence is short-lived, the return process typically unfolds after it has ended. However, the case of the full-scale Russian invasion is different. Ukraine has been defending its territory and freedom for one and a half years already, and it is challenging to predict the duration of this war. Under such conditions, the process of forced migrants' return has already begun. The phenomenon of returning to a country under armed invasion requires in-depth analysis and conceptualization.

The transition from war to peace is complex, unique, and unpredictable. A country's actual war-to-peace experience is only revealed as it progresses through each stage of the transition (Ibrahim B. et al, 2022). Shortly after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, various actors believed that Russia could occupy Kyiv within a matter of days (Fox News, 2022; Newsnpr, 2022). Ukrainian military experts, in contrast, demonstrated the capacity of the Ukrainian army to protect the country from the invaders (Ukrinform, 2022). Nowadays, it is evident that this war is unlikely to end abruptly. It is a gradual process that strongly depends on the situation on the battlefield and also includes a political aspect. Every action that initially allowed for the repulsion of the invaders and subsequently led to the de-occupation of certain territories makes a significant contribution to the overall and regional security situation in Ukraine, as well as to the population's perception of safety. This, in turn, influences people's migration behavior, including actual and planned returns.

In late April 2022 the situation with the population outflow through the western border of Ukraine has stabilized. The inflow became stronger, and there were certain periods when the number of people crossing into Ukraine exceeded the number of those leaving the country. Around the same time, the first surveys

dedicated to forced migrants' return to Ukraine appeared. The UNHCR study, conducted with 518 people crossing into Ukraine from Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova, showed that the main reasons for returning were the perception of safety in the area of return (32%) and family reunification (31%). Every fifth respondent (20%) returned home temporarily for shopping, visits, etc. A very small proportion of people returned because of a lack of employment opportunities abroad (5%) or difficulty in finding housing there (5%) (UNHCR, 2022). According to other sources, household composition plays a role in the decision to return. For instance, Ukrainians with minor children return to the country less often compared to others, presumably due to concerns about their safety. There is also a pattern where parents leave their children abroad with other relatives and return to Ukraine alone (Razumkov Centre, 2022).

These data highlight the significance of security issues within the discussion on return. The respondents' attitudes in the UNHCR survey regarding safety in the area of return may seem somewhat unusual considering the country is at war. We believe this is due to a reconceptualization of the safety concept by the Ukrainian population following the full-scale invasion. This transformation can be attributed to two mechanisms. The first mechanism is security regionalization, which means that the population distinguishes between the security situation at the national and local levels. There is a significant disparity in people's assessments of the overall situation in Ukraine as a whole compared to their own localities. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents believe the overall situation in the country is tense, 22% consider it critical, and only 4% report it as calm. In contrast, the figures for respondents' localities are very different: 34%, 4%, and 61%, respectively (Rating, 2022). In addition to security regionalization, safety standards are shifting from absolute to relative. Under these circumstances, people compare the security situation in their locality with more dangerous areas. Ukraine's current media landscape is filled with accounts of dire conditions and the consequences of war, which leads many people to conclude that their locality is relatively calm. Safety relativism influences the process of internal displacement and facilitates returns from abroad.

The intentions of actual Ukrainian refugees regarding possible return home are deeply influenced by safety concerns. However, in the case of planned return, respondents express a wide range of security considerations. According to the data, 36% of forced Ukrainian migrants intend to return after ensuring that staying in their area is safe, 35% plan to return immediately after the end of the war, 13% aim to return a year or several years after the war's conclusion, 7% will return when their former employer resumes work, 11% plan to return in the near future, and 7% do not intend to return to Ukraine at all (Razumkov Centre (2), 2022). Black (2002) raises important questions regarding return that are highly applicable to the Ukrainian case: Should refugees return to their home or their homeland? Who should decide where they should return—refugees themselves, governments, or international organizations? What is the deeper meaning of "home"? Empirical studies of both actual and planned return show a pattern where Ukrainians return (or intend to return) not to their area of origin. In the UNHCR study, this was reported by 16% of actual returnees, while in the Razumkov Centre survey, 7% of

intended returnees reported the same. This pattern is evident in current returns, especially in areas that are currently extremely dangerous due to ongoing hostilities or occupation. However, this attitude might persist even after the end of the war, leading to population redistribution within the country. The end of the war will undoubtedly lead to a significant increase in return processes, with diverse scenarios for its conclusion resulting in varying scales and characteristics of return.

Discussion and conclusions. The Russian-Ukrainian war poses significant challenges to the quality of migration statistics. However, despite the evident difficulties in estimating the actual number of forced migrants from Ukraine, there is no doubt that this phenomenon involves millions of cases. Relocation decisions were among the most critical choices made after the full-scale invasion. Such decisions encompass both mobility and immobility perspectives. The safety-related situation is essential for shaping intentions to leave dangerous areas, but there are additional factors that influence the ability to act according to one's preferred scenario. Factors such as financial resources, transportation for departure, housing, employment opportunities, connections in safer localities, and the state of health all play a significant role in the forced migration agenda. However, staying is not always an act of despair but a conscious choice in many cases. This phenomenon is quite intriguing and warrants further investigation, preferably using qualitative research methods.

The return of forced migrants, as well as their departure abroad, is primarily explained and motivated by the security variable. The war has introduced a relativistic safety paradigm, and the end of the war does not equate to the safety notion in the current views of Ukrainians. The constructed meaning of safety has become evident through security regionalization and the shift from absolute safety standards towards relative ones. Security exists along a spectrum, and under war conditions, people in different regions of Ukraine might experience a sense of safety to varying degrees. However, this varying proportion of security often influences people's decisions on whether to stay or move out. The strong reliance on personal or household resources in the process of evacuating danger underscores the limited role of the government in the evacuation process, especially during the initial period of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

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