Will young Ukrainian refugees return? A complex issue

The Study: Background and Key Findings:

This study was funded by Ukraine Children's Action Project in partnership with the MriyDiy Educational Cluster Foundation in Poland. Its purpose was to assess the interest of externally displaced youth (ages 18-23 years) in returning to Ukraine. The online survey conducted between August and September 2025 consisted of 100 youth living in Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic since the outset of the full-scale invasion.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were also conducted with 10 participants via Zoom. These are NOT statistical sampling methods, but are rather a purposive convenience sample. Population inferences cannot be made from this dataset however general sentiments and ideas can be inferred. This study is exploratory in nature.

Note on format below: Key findings have been extracted from the executive summary provided by the 'MriyDiy' Educational Cluster Foundation. Sub-bullets in **bold** are commentary provided by UCAP's Jonathan Sury.

What We Wanted to Learn:

What are the plans and motives for displaced youth who left Ukraine due to the war to return home? How do their current education and experiences outside of Ukraine inform their decision to return home? What are the barriers and facilitators to maintaining strong ties to their home?

Sample Demographics

- Gender & age: 54% men, 46% women; 52% ages 18- 20, and 48% ages 21- 23.
- Current residence: Germany – 50%, Poland – 36%, Czech Republic – 14%.
- Prior to emigrating, 47% lived in areas under intense shelling, 31% near the front line, 6% in occupied territories, and 8% in areas that were later de-occupied.
    - **Sample had high exposure to the war prior to displacement**
- 73% experience periodic or constant psychological stress.
    - **Even though not in Ukraine, sample experiences stress. Suggests strong connection with home.**
- 51% of respondents rate their knowledge of the language of their country of residence as good/very good
    - **Either participants were already multilingual, or they have adapted quickly in their host country.**

Education

- 77% are somewhat or completely satisfied with studying abroad.
    - **This is positive. It means educational continuity and integration with the host community is conducive to learning.**
- These students enjoy a lighter academic load, better organization of the educational process, practical focus of programs, technical support of institutions, access to free education, individual approach, and *absence of corruption*. They also highly value receiving certificates that have real value in the labor market.
    - **Take note of the mention of the lack of corruption in their current location.**
- The majority of young people who left Ukraine believe that there are better employment opportunities (57%), career growth (62%), and higher income (74% within 3-5 years and 62% within 10-15 years) in their current country of residence. Significantly fewer respondents see such opportunities in Ukraine Almost half (45%) plan to start their own business, with 79% of them believing that the best conditions for entrepreneurship are abroad.
    - **The above finding did not directly compare to Ukraine, but I believe it's implied as a comparison to. Note last finding that 79% believe opportunities of entrepreneurship are NOT in Ukraine.**
- 44% of respondents believe that their chances of getting education in Ukraine will be better or equal to those of citizens who remained in Ukraine, while 39% are convinced that they will face greater difficulties.

Situation

- 65% of respondents indicated the importance of maintaining ties with their homeland (giving a rating of 8-10 on a scale of 0-10), while 68% indicated the importance of securing their position abroad.
    - **There is a fairly strong tie back to Ukraine, but 35% may feel less tied, which seems quite high. Additionally, a majority (78%) feel it's important that they anchor where they are. Again, this is good for their stability in the host community, but it may make returning more difficult if the situation is even more protracted.**
- 63% of Ukrainian students abroad believe that the overall situation in Ukraine is currently deteriorating. 64% expect the financial situation of people in Ukraine to worsen in the near future
    - **The majority feel the situation is getting worse. The negative views about the financial security in Ukraine may be a major barrier to repatriation.**
- 47% of respondents predict that the war will drag on for more than a year. 26% are not willing to make any predictions.
    - **The latter statistic notes a large degree of uncertainty if they are unable to even posit a prediction on when the war will end.**

Long-term Redevelopment

- Only 15% of respondents are optimistic and believe that in 10 years Ukraine will be a prosperous country that is part of the European Union. In fact, 63% say the overall situation is getting worse and 64% believe the financial situation of people in Ukraine will be worse in the next six months.
- 30% are convinced that in 10 years Ukraine will successfully complete the process of post-war recovery and become a country with decent wages and a decent standard of living.
- Concerningly, 24% of respondents think that Ukraine at that time will be a country with a ruined economy and a large outflow of people.
- 31% are undecided on this issue
    - **This comment is for the 4 stats above: Overall, the message here suggests that a majority of externally displaced youth feel that the future of Ukraine is dim. This means that many respondents feel that their future opportunities and security lie outside Ukraine.**

Repatriation

- 42% of young Ukrainians currently living abroad plan to return to Ukraine.
  - 3% are considering returning in the near future
  - 6% link their return to the security of the area where they used to live before the war
  - 17% - to overall security in Ukraine following the end of the war
  - 16% plan to remain abroad for several more years after the war
- 28% of respondents plan to permanently remain abroad
- 24% have not yet decided on their future plans
  - **The statistics above show that there is a significant split within these youth on when or if they will return to Ukraine. And if they do return, it will likely not be any time soon with a major decision being based on not just the end of the war, but the security of their home country and the future opportunities that will be available.**
- **Barriers to returning**:
  - 43% say lower standards of living and incomes in Ukraine
  - 34% say security risks
  - 32% say risk of being drafted into the Ukrainian Armed Forces
  - 20% say they have already settled at their new place of residence, which is holding them back from returning.
    - **These barriers suggest on top of general security concerns, that the livelihoods situation in Ukraine may not be as good as where they are currently and the risk of being drafted (I assume only while the war is ongoing) is yet another barrier.**
- **Incentives to return:**
  - 56% say accelerating the restoration of critical and social infrastructure
  - 53% say affordable housing through compensation, preferential lending, or social programs
  - 50% say support for business initiatives (grants for developing one's own business, tax breaks, etc.)
  - 49% say creation of new jobs for modern occupations with decent pay
    - **See Page 7 of the full report for several other items which may be of interest which include preferential admission to universities, free access to social, psychological, and legal assistance. It is clear that many incentives are driven by not just physical security, but economic, housing, and job security.**

- **Ukraine Connection**
    - 50% of respondents primarily identify themselves as citizens of Ukraine while 20% identify as a resident of their host county and 9% identify as a resident of Europe.
    - 69% are promoting information about Ukraine and 65% are donating to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine
        - **There is clearly still a strong connection to home with 50% saying they are still citizens of Ukraine. However, the other 50% are not as strongly tied with the identify of a Ukrainian citizen.**

Civic Trust

- 76% feel that voting matters
- 66% believe that people should have the ability to publicly express opinions without fear of persecution in Ukraine
- 60% believe that human rights and freedoms are respected in Ukraine
- Only 51% agree that fair justice is ensured in Ukraine, while 39% disagree
- 47% feel responsible for the future of Ukraine, while 40% disagree that they are
- 64% of respondents agree with the statement that the country of residence does not matter as long as there is a high level of personal material well-being.
    - **This last statistic is incredibly important. It very clearly suggests that again, their overall security (safety, economic, job, financial, etc.) is independent of their country of residence. So without those guarantees from the government of Ukraine, these connections will fade over time. The second to fourth statistic above suggests some distrust in the justice system – whether that is different due to the war is unknown, but it is worth noting the skepticism regarding freedom of speech and the integrity of the justice system.**

Recovery

- 69% express some willingness to participate in recovery, but only 8% show a high level of interest. 24% do not want to be involved at all.
- 33% see their role in post-war recovery through the private sector and 25% through their entrepreneurship
- 21% are not sure how they will participate in recovery
    - **Having clear paths of how youth can participate in recovery is going to be paramount to draw youth back to Ukraine. Creating economic incentives through private sector and startup opportunities is a clear driver for return.**

In the meantime, providing short-term opportunities for diaspora youth to participate in the post-war recovery of Ukraine should be a priority.

Call to Action for Youth Who Left and Youth Who Remained:

- Build financial security, livelihoods, housing security, and economic incentives, particularly for entrepreneurship that appeal to this generation;
- Provide needed access to social, psychological, and legal assistance; and,
- Reinforce cultural social ties to Ukraine

Jonathan Sury, Research Coordinator
Ukraine Children's Action Project
jjs2154@cumc.columbia.edu