

**Bielefeld Anthropological
Papers on
Issues of the Global World
(BAPGW)**



Working Paper Nr. 6
September 2025

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ISSN:

2939-9149

Webpage:

https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/fakultaeten/soziologie/fakultaet/arbeitsbereiche/ab6/ag_sozialanthropologie/

Bringing Ukrainian Refugees Home: Scrutinising Economic Incentives and Challenges to Return

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Abstract

In this working paper I focus on the critical demographic situation in Ukraine caused by the 2022 Russian invasion, which threatens the prospects of post-war recovery and socio-economic revival. By and large, I argue for the need to develop and implement nationwide repatriation programmes targeting Ukrainian refugees based on economic (investment) incentives that may be effective in the context of the country of origin. Drawing on desk research of previous return scenarios in some post-conflict countries and a series of in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugees in Austria and Germany, I launch into this discussion by outlining a conceptual framework for the voluntary return of forced migrants to Ukraine. These include: financing the restoration of destroyed housing for refugees and providing them with land plots for independent reconstruction, payment of significant financial assistance upon return, targeted grants to forced migrants for business development in Ukraine, financial incentives enhancing social welfare particularly for families with children and launching powerful investment projects with the participation of foreign capital.

Then I deal with potential challenges that could significantly complicate the process of mass re-emigration. These include: the ongoing active hostilities, the conflict of economic interests between Ukraine and host countries (the case of Germany is considered), the socio-economic collapse of the homeland implying the lack of decently paid jobs in the country of origin, as well as inconsistent and often contradictory policy of the Ukrainian authorities towards returnees.

I end with a number of policy suggestions which, if taken into account by the Ukrainian government, could increase the likelihood of voluntary return of forced migrants to Ukraine.

Keywords

forced migrants, refugees, economic incentives, investments, repatriation, return, challenges, Ukraine

Introduction

The process of rebuilding a war-torn country should primarily take into account and rely on the available human capital, its qualitative and quantitative characteristics. Obviously, without sufficient workforce, even the most ambitious goals of accelerated socio-economic development in the post-war era will remain unattainable. In this context, Ukraine, which due to forced emigration alone has lost at least 6.9 million people since February 2022 (UNHCR 2025) when the Russian army invaded Ukraine, faces a challenging task. The latter supposes finding convincing arguments and effective mechanisms to bring home millions of Ukrainians who have found themselves abroad as a result of a full-scale invasion. Without the repatriation of refugees, the post-war recovery and economic renaissance in Ukraine will be challenged, as the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine estimates that in the coming years the state will need to attract 4.5 million additional workers of various specifics to the labour market (Ministry of Economy 2023). At the same time, the “recovery input” of women and children, who make up about 80% of the total number of forced migrants, will only grow. Already today, employers in Ukraine are increasingly hiring women and youth amid serious labour shortages (Harmash 2024).

In view of the above, the Ukrainian authorities are already facing the problem of developing an effective strategy for the return of forced migrants from abroad during the war and beyond. However, despite the high relevance of Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction topic, so far, there are no comprehensive studies regarding economic encouragement for the repatriation of forced migrants, which is crucial for such revitalisation. Incentives that can induce large-scale and voluntarily return of the Ukrainians to their homeland during and after the hostilities have not been examined and therefore an appropriate state policy is lacking. Suffice it to say that the relevant legal documents of Ukraine, namely the Concept of State Migration Policy (President of Ukraine 2011) and the Human Development Strategy (President of Ukraine 2021), being outdated do not take into account the critical consequences of the loss of millions of its citizens by the state as a result of forced emigration. Thus, they do not propose efficient measures to overcome such implications by creating adequate conditions, including economic ones, for the voluntary return of Ukrainians. Numerous threats that could become an insurmountable obstacle to the mass repatriation of Ukrainians are also virtually absent from the academic discourse.

In light of this gap, this discussion paper aims to substantiate the possibility of voluntary return of Ukrainian refugees due to reasonable economic incentives as part of comprehensive repatriation programmes, implemented, first of all, by the country of origin. Based on qualitative research and theoretical analyses of previous return scenarios in certain post-conflict countries of Europe and Africa, I argue that specific economic guarantees as well as investment stimuli for repatriation of Ukrainian refugees may prove effective in the challenging Ukrainian context.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Return Migration Research

For decades, there has been an ongoing debate in academia regarding the determinants that motivate individuals to return to their countries of origin (Sjaastad 1962; Constant and Massey 2002). According to neoclassical migration theory, voluntary return migration is a logical outcome of unsuccessful integration of migrants in receiving countries (Jensen and Pedersen 2007). On the contrary, the new economics of labour migration posits that the decision to return home is determined by migrants’ successful attainment of their primary economic objectives in host societies (de Haas et al. 2014). The existence of disparate perspectives on the genesis of return migration in the context of these and other theoretical frameworks, substantiated by the

findings of empirical research, serves to illustrate not so much the veracity of one approach over the others, but rather the complementarity of each. Concurrently, the integral elements in explaining return migration in the academic literature remain the intentions of the direct actors of re-emigration and the incentives that condition it (Del Carpio 2016; Güngör and Tansel 2014; Toren 1975).

When analysing the intentions of migrants to return to their countries of origin, most authors point to the complex nature of personal aspirations, socio-political conditions and general opportunity structures. In other words, the decision-making process does not depend on a single factor – no matter how crucial it is – but on their totality, which is formed at both macro- and micro-level (Bonifazi and Paparusso 2019; Nekby 2006). In fact, the intention to return is shaped by personal experiences (i.e. structural, social, political and cultural aspects of integration) as well as the unique context of the host and sending countries (de Haas et al. 2014; Kayaoglu et al. 2021; Stefanovic and Loizides 2017).

It is notable that in their attempts to substantiate migrants' intentions to return to their countries of origin, some researchers reveal unexpected findings of their empirical research. To illustrate, there are arguments for the existence of the so-called "integration paradox" when highly educated and structurally well integrated immigrants are more likely to re-emigrate, rather than to stay in the host country (Verkuyten 2016).

Another crucial area of research within the given theoretical framework is the justification of return intentions of forced migrants (refugees). In particular, the works of some authors argue that the decision to return home for this group of migrants often takes into account specific conditions. These include, first of all, the security factor, change of political regime in the home country as well as personal experience of physical and moral suffering prior to the displacement abroad (Müller-Funk and Fransen 2023; Özkan et al. 2023; Stefanovic and Loizides 2017; Van Tubergen et al. 2024).

Return intentions, whether they are strengthened or weakened, are inextricably linked to the direct or indirect policies of both host and home countries as well as international organisations (Martin 2002). Furthermore, an essential component of such policies is the implementation of incentives that can facilitate the voluntarily or forced repatriation of migrants to their countries of origin (Rogers 1997).

Incentives provided by host societies are typically associated with categories of migrants who are deemed undesirable for continued residence in the country. A notable example is foreign nationals in the Middle East and Western Europe in the 1970s-1980s who have been unable to effectively integrate into the local labour market and contribute to their host country (Rogers 1997). No less undesirable are forced migrants and refugees, whose mass reception at a certain stage becomes a serious challenge for the governments that once granted them shelter as in case of Syrian refugees in some host societies (Valenta et al. 2020).

In each of the aforementioned cases, the host countries are able to implement a diverse range of incentives. For instance, they can influence the decision to return home by creating an atmosphere of intolerance towards outsiders, particularly in the period preceding elections. It is evident that the politicization of the return process in host countries (consider the case of Syrian refugees in Turkey), coupled with an anti-migrant/refugee agenda and prevalent populism, can result in spontaneous returns that are not genuinely voluntary (Mencütek 2021). While implementing repatriation policies, host governments also employ a range of economic incentives. Such stimuli typically encompass a range of financial measures, including one-off payments to initiate return, repayment of previous social security contributions, travel expenses coverage, and the implementation of job-training programmes for prospective returnees (Gerver 2017; Rogers 1997). Nonetheless, the impact of such incentives appears to be relatively weak, failing to encourage a large-scale and voluntary outflow of expatriates. The main reasons for this lie in the lack of consideration of the genuine intentions of immigrants, insufficient funding for these programmes, and the multifaceted realities of the country of origin, including its

security, political, socio-economic, infrastructural, and other developmental aspects (Cohen and Kranz 2014; Rogers 1997; Zakirova and Buzurukov 2021).

Home countries also have their own approach to initiate return migration. Concurrently, most researchers point to the main distinguishing feature of such policies in China, Malaysia and other countries of origin, i.e. incentivising of the return of highly skilled specialists (Del Carpio et al. 2016; Ivanova 2015; Wang et al. 2015). In order to achieve voluntary mass inflow of their citizens, these countries rely on a variety of incentives as part of return migration policy. At one time, for instance, Israel and Germany emphasized the unique status of homeland, ethnic belonging and cultural fitting to encourage voluntary re-emigration (Cohen and Kranz 2014). However, economic stimuli still prevail, providing direct (pay-to-come schemes, targeted competitive salaries, favourable tax regimes for returnees or other family-oriented pecuniary benefits) and indirect (job creation and career prospects, enhanced social environment and infrastructure as well as reduction in human rights violations) inducements to return (Toren 1975; Wang et al. 2015; Zakirova and Buzurukov 2021). In turn, entrepreneurs can count on special additional benefits. These may include administrative assistance upon return, favourable conditions to remit financial resources and invest, tax exemptions for starting business, etc. (Jonkers 2008).

By themselves, such repatriation initiatives do not typically result in mass re-emigration even in peacetime (Toren 1975; Valenta et al. 2020), let alone during an ongoing conflict, as in the case of Ukraine. However, a number of empirical studies indicate that the economic incentives offered by countries of origin represent a significant additional motivating factor for some groups of migrants influencing their positive decision to return home (Cohen and Kranz 2014; Del Carpio et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2015).

A further noteworthy finding of research in this field is the identification of potential conflicts of interest between the host countries and the countries of origin. While the former may introduce initiatives for the return of foreigners to their home countries, the latter oppose it because they do not possess, first and foremost, the socio-economic and infrastructural capacity to take back their citizens en masse (Martin 2002; Rogers 1997). Alternatively, the interests may be reversed, which can be illustrated by the example of Ukraine. For its government under the current conditions, it is crucial to encourage mass return of the citizens (Boss and Lipkowski 2024), while many receiving countries, like Germany, are interested in keeping them because of economic reasons (Bryl 2024).

Despite the variety of incentives mentioned and their mixed effects in various post-conflict societies, my key argument is that certain economic stimuli can become an important factor in triggering voluntary return migration to Ukraine, with due consideration of refugees' personal intentions and the challenges derived from the distinctive context of the country of origin. This context encompasses the demographic catastrophe, ongoing hostilities, socio-economic background in the home country and inconsistent national policies.

Taking that, the paper is structured in the following way. In the first section, I briefly outline the demographic crisis in Ukraine, which has become catastrophically acute since the outbreak of full-scale invasion in 2022. I also argue that this crisis, if neglected by the government, can become a serious barrier to all optimistic plans for the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. In the second part, I substantiate the importance of particular economic (monetary and investment) incentives to accelerate voluntary refugee returns. In the third section, I reveal potential challenges to the re-emigration of forced migrants that could significantly reduce the effectiveness of the proposed incentives. The concluding part builds on the previous findings and puts forward some proposals that could facilitate the expeditious and voluntary repatriation of Ukrainians from abroad and, in turn, guarantee the realisation of the ambitious post-war socio-economic revitalisation plans for Ukraine. The reasoning behind the initiatives and challenges is based on the analyses of past return scenarios in post-conflict countries (including

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Burundi, etc.), as well as testimonies of forced migrants from Ukraine.

This working paper draws in mixed research methods. First, carrying out a qualitative content analysis to pursue the stated goal of the conceptual investigation. In addition, desk research was based on digital/printed academic and public sources as well as on data analysis provided by leading German, Ukrainian and international institutions.

Second, the findings of the theoretical analysis are supported by 13 in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugees currently residing in Austria (7) and Germany (6). The interviews were conducted between June 2024 and March 2025. A purposeful sampling approach was employed to identify and get respondents who had fled Ukraine after 24 February 2022, the date on which the full-scale invasion began. For the purposes of the study, a snowball sampling technique was used, starting with a small group of participants established through personal connections. This initial group was then asked to recommend other candidates who met the basic requirement of being Ukrainian forced migrants ready to sharing their return intentions. No specific criteria were applied with regard to age, gender, profession or other characteristics. The majority of interviewees were women (10/13). By prior agreement of the parties, the interviews were conducted in Ukrainian via Google Meet and lasted on average up to 60 minutes. Subsequent processing of the received input implied the recording of the voice data.

Demographic Collapse versus Future Recovery

Despite Russia's ongoing attempt to occupy Ukraine, there is speculation that the invaded country may experience an economic boom in the post-war era. This belief is held not only by the majority of Ukrainians but also by Kyiv's allies, who consider the new Marshall Plan to be almost a done deal (Romashchenko 2023b). Furthermore, representatives of leading international organisations admit that by 2030, Ukraine will not only fully recover but will also exhibit an improved economic standing relative to its pre-invasion condition (Ukrinform 2024).

However, this virtual positivity may encounter an unfavourable actuality for Ukraine's reconstruction. The main challenge here may be insufficient skilled labour necessary to rebuild the war-torn country. Some experts say, if Ukraine fails to return home a significant part of its refugees, it should expect not economic revival, but further decline, as the annual losses of the domestic economy will reach 7.7% of pre-war GDP (Mykhajlyshyna 2023). In addition, recent projections indicate that in the post-war period Ukraine will remain a "poor country" for many years, having to attract 300,000 migrants annually to keep the total population over 30 million people (Poroschuk 2024).

But even before the full-scale aggression, Ukraine was in a deep demographic knockdown: for many years, the mortality rate significantly exceeded the birth rate, and millions of Ukrainians left to live and work in other countries. Considering that the country's population has decreased by 20% since 1991, reaching 42 million in 2022 (Romashchenko 2023a), it was difficult to express optimism regarding its prospects for sustainable socio-economic development.

The barbaric attack by Russia has worsened the situation many times over, and one can only guess at the horrifying demographic hole in which Ukraine will find itself as a result of this war, having lost a part of the able-bodied and reproductive male population who died and were seriously wounded on the battlefields with the Russian invaders. The figures vary sharply. While President Zelensky said in December 2024 that since Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine has lost 43,000 of its warriors killed, President Trump claimed shortly afterwards that Ukraine had lost around 700,000 soldiers (Méheut 2024; Melkozerova 2025). The case of women and children – the future of any country – fleeing and settling abroad is no less painful for Ukraine. According to the latest estimates by the Ptoukha Institute for Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the number of Ukrainians

within the country may fluctuate between 26-35 million people by 2033. In the opinion of the Institute's director, Ella Libanova, the forecast of 35 million people, unfortunately, looks very optimistic (Vons 2023). This means that in the next few years Ukraine is at risk of a much more severe demographic crisis, involving, above all, galloping depopulation as a result of forced migration, declining birth rates and rising mortality rates. Ukraine already tops the most recent list of the world's countries with the highest mortality and lowest birth rate (CIA 2024).

Given the above, precipitous and extensive population decline may threaten the prospects of Ukraine's recovery. Once the hostilities are over, it is unlikely that there will be lots of foreign companies willing to invest in the reconstruction of the war-torn country, knowing that there is a significant shortage of the required workforce in addition to all the other challenges existing in Ukrainian society, namely corruption, imperfect legislation, etc. Such assumptions can be confirmed by recent statements of Ukrainian authorities, who do not expect serious investments in Ukrainian assets from abroad, as foreign investors are frankly "lacking appetite" (Vodiani and Fomichev 2024).

Therefore, I argue that Ukraine's objective interests lie in the return of its forced migrants, including women and children, whose importance for future reconstruction cannot be overestimated. This can be facilitated by the development and implementation of effective repatriation initiatives, in particular, on the part of the country of origin. Evidence from other post-conflict societies, combined with the intentions and attitudes of Ukrainian refugees, suggest that such programmes could be based on various economic incentives to encourage the voluntary repatriation. In other words, the Ukrainian government should be prepared to invest, directly or indirectly, significant funds and material resources in the return of its citizens.

Investment Incentives to Promote Re-emigration

Drawing on the topical content analysis and the data obtained from the in-depth interviews, I see several key incentives that, if used effectively as part of nationwide repatriation programmes aimed at voluntary return of refugees, could activate a reverse wave of Ukrainian migration after and even during the war.

Land and housing upon return. The war, which is turning flourishing cities and towns into a post-apocalyptic wasteland, has deprived hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians of their homes. Obviously, with no place to return to, no one will. Consequently, refugees should be offered a real, not hypothetical, chance to get a new home again soon after returning to Ukraine. In this situation, providing yesterday's forced migrants with a free right to own a plot of land to build their own house could be a strong stimulus for return (Zakirova and Buzurukov 2021). In fact, the land spoiled by the Russian invaders is now very plentiful in Ukraine (Korsun 2024). Sooner or later, it will have to be re-developed either for infrastructure reconstruction or for agricultural purposes, so why not involve the Ukrainian returnees themselves? The experience of other post-conflict societies demonstrates the effectiveness of such initiatives. For instance, Burundi, a country in the Great Lakes region of Africa, has experienced several waves of conflict, the longest of which lasted from 1993 to 2005. By 2009, the majority of Burundian refugees had returned home. In the country of origin, returnees could officially claim agricultural land, which provided a strong incentive for them to repatriate (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2025). Similarly, the state's guarantee to provide refugees with new flats to replace those lost because of hostilities may also be a decisive factor for returning home.

It is important to acknowledge that the Ukrainian government has already initiated preliminary measures in this regard. To illustrate, in May 2023 it launched "eRecovery" assistance programme for proprietors of residential property damaged or destroyed as a consequence of hostilities (eRecovery 2023). It provides financial compensation for the independent reconstruction or purchase of new housing. The importance of this incentive to return to Ukraine was mentioned, in particular, by my respondent now residing in Austria:

“Of course, if in Ukraine shortly after the return I can actually get new housing from the state to replace the one destroyed, that would certainly speed up my re-emigration.”

However, the programme is subject to a number of significant financial, territorial and other constraints, and does not currently address the specific issue of forced migrants, which directly affects their decision to return.

Within the same bundle of initiatives, the possibility for refugees to obtain preferential (interest-free) loans should be developed and implemented separately.¹ The launch of real estate loans for those returning to Ukraine could be implemented within the framework of the existing affordable housing programme – “eOselia” (eOselia 2022). At the same time, this programme also has serious limitations, as only certain categories of Ukrainians can access preferential financing: contract servicemen, medical, pedagogical, scientific and academic staff. Yet, according to another interviewee, the programme is tacitly closed to forced migrants abroad even if they fall into one of the mentioned target groups:

“As a displaced scholar who lost her housing in Ukraine due to hostilities, it turns out that I do not qualify for this programme. I started the procedure of submitting online the relevant documents to an affiliated Ukrainian bank, but literally immediately got a rejection. I received a call from the bank informing me that I was blocked from participating in the programme. The reason was that I was abroad at the time of application. I guess they can see where I go online. That said, I have not received any kind of official (documented) rejection. So, I guess it’s an unspoken rule.”

In my opinion, this implicit discrimination should be eliminated, and the list of eligible programme participants should be expanded to include returning refugees. This could greatly increase the likelihood of their voluntary return to Ukraine.

One-off repatriation payments and tax reliefs. In this case, the Ukrainian government can act similarly to its Swiss or Norwegian colleagues, who are ready to pay from 1,500 to 4,200 Euro in national currency equivalents for the voluntary departure of Ukrainians to their homeland (Romashchenko 2023a; UDI 2023). Obviously, country of origin could try to enhance the traditionally limited efficiency of such pay-to-go schemes on the part of the host countries and non-governmental organisations (Gerver 2017) by also paying its citizens to return. In Ukraine’s situation, future pay-to-come programmes may turn out to be successful after the end of the war, when the actual nationwide reconstruction begins. As Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo argue, such repatriation payments greatly add to return intentions when the country of origin is experiencing strong economic growth (Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo 2018). Besides, some Ukrainian forced migrants even in times of warfare see potential cash payments from Ukraine as a valid incentive to come back:

“I realise that Ukraine will not be able to offer much money for returnees. However, if such payments would indeed be part of the authorities’ call to return home sooner rather than later, I would certainly consider this option.”

Given the potential interest of refugees in repatriation payments, it can be advised that the amount of monetary assistance in this case should be substantial. Although it may differ depending on the category of refugees wishing to participate in it. Let me assume that one

¹ Such mortgages for the purchase of own housing should have the longest possible repayment period and offer some additional bonuses. For example, a family that has a child or several children during the mortgage period will be entitled to pay a lower amount on the loan.

payment will be for family reunification² and another when only one person without family returns. The development of this programme could involve multiple payments to refugees over a period of time after the return while they are reintegrating and looking for housing, employment, etc.

The implementation of customs and income tax relief programmes for returning refugees can be seen as an extension of such monetary incentives, although, the weight of such measures for re-emigration should not be over-emphasised (Toren 1975). They should be considered exclusively as an element of comprehensive government programmes to encourage return migration. However, in some cases tax benefits introduced by the country of origin for certain groups of returnees can be an important incentive for their homecoming. To illustrate, following a unique policy to induce return migration of young high-skilled migrants implemented in Italy in 2010, eligible migrants were 27% more likely to move back from the receiving countries like Germany, Switzerland and the UK (Bassetto and Ippedico 2024).

Targeted grant programmes for returning Ukrainians. First and foremost, such state-guaranteed funding should be allocated for the development of returnees' own business under a favourable tax regime (Jonkers 2008), which, upon coming home, would provide them and their families with a sufficient standard of living that would not be inferior to that of their host country. Some Ukrainian refugees express positive views regarding the "return impact" of such initiatives:

"Undoubtedly, the key reason for returning home is the end of the war. But if, in addition to the cessation of hostilities, the state offers, for example, real financial grants for opening a business in Ukraine or guarantees lower taxes for returning investors, then in this case I will decide to come back much faster."

The Ukrainian government is already implementing similar nationwide initiatives as part of the "eRobota" programme (eRobota 2022), but I have reasonable doubts as to whether the existing grant proposals can really stimulate the voluntary return of forced migrants. It is unlikely that a grant of up to 250,000 hryvnias³ for starting a business (even if the application is approved) can be considered an effective incentive to return to Ukraine. Especially given the fact that in the countries to which Ukrainians have fled and where have already joined the local labour market, refugees can earn this amount in equivalent within a few months, or even faster. For instance, the average net salary of a working Ukrainian in Germany is 1,334 Euro (Davyhora 2024). That is why, the main efforts of the government, which really intends to encourage Ukrainians abroad to return home, should focus on significantly increasing the amount of funding for such grant programmes for "business" refugees. If not, the lack of adequate funding for such repatriation initiatives will limit the number of those wishing to return (Rogers 1997). In addition, it is worth recognising that grant incentives for return migration should be accompanied by improved conditions for doing business and institutional recovery in post-conflict societies (Kotorri 2017). Otherwise, as Kosovo's case shows, the intention to move back and go into business may be challenged (Krasniqi and Williams 2019).

Generally, the future targeted grant programmes should become an important part of government's repatriation policy, along with other related initiatives aimed at returning established entrepreneurs and those just planning to start business in post-war Ukraine. As Williams rightly argues, drawing on the examples of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo and Montenegro, post-conflict economies should learn from successful return policies elsewhere and transfer them to their own contexts (Williams 2018). For example, schemes which facilitate collaboration between economic actors in the host and origin countries to

² The return of mom and child/children to dad.

³ Equivalent to approximately 5,500 Euro as of March 2025.

develop business networks and encourage inward investment also have the potential to promote voluntary repatriation (Krasniqi and Williams 2019).

Enhancing social welfare particularly for families with children. As mentioned above, the demographic situation in a country suffering from a full-scale war is catastrophic. According to recent estimates, the death rate in Ukraine is three times higher than the birth rate (Opendatabot 2024). Obviously, the demographic crisis can be alleviated, among other things, by supporting young families, encouraging their return from exile and increasing the birth rate. Achieving this objective presents a considerable challenge during active hostilities and/or the absence of post-conflict security and socio-economic stability, as evidenced in the cases of BiH and Eritrea (OECD 2024). However, this does not mean that the state should wait until the war is over and only then start acting in this direction. Firstly, the potential for family return can be strong, even when the situation in the country of origin leaves much to be desired. As Nikolka confirms, schooling considerations, as well as factors related to children's age and cultural identity, can play a positive role in the return decisions of parents with children (Nikolka 2018). Secondly, Ukrainian refugees, in particular females with children, expect the government to assist them address their welfare concerns right now, even during wartime and emigration. And so, one refugee mother with a child in an interview briefly stated the following:

“Yes, we would really like Ukrainian officials to be aware of our needs and to motivate our return to Ukraine in some material way.”

Therefore, I argue that the promotion of social welfare, especially for families with children should be the primary focus of public policy, as is the case in Israel, which has been facing similar to Ukraine security challenges for decades. Despite existing funding constraints, child allowances, an affordable health care system, the right to free education from the age of three, and programmes to encourage childbearing all underscore the care for children in Israel (Nir 2022).

To ensure the birth of children, their comprehensive and harmonious development, upbringing and education, Ukraine must create the right conditions for families and invest the necessary funds. In times of a critical exacerbation of the demographic crisis, the strategic goal for the state should not be to rely on inexpensive foreign labour (Samaieva 2024), but rather to encourage Ukrainian parents to have at least three children. Such a solution for the demographic revival of the nation should form the basis of national strategy in the post-conflict era, as finally recognised by the Ukrainian authorities (Tsurkan 2024). In this context, it is worthwhile to start social welfare improvement with re-evaluating the amount of childbirth assistance with a view to increasing it severalfold. It should be noted that this figure has remained unchanged since 2014 and equates to 41,280 hryvnias⁴, irrespective of the number of children born to the family.

A progressive approach to birth payments, where the amount of state aid increases significantly for each subsequent child, should become one of the important incentives in this regard. The positive impact of this policy has been proven in the recent past. In 2011, a law was adopted in Ukraine (UNIAN 2011) that raised the payment for the birth of the first child to 24,480 hryvnias, the second to 48,960 hryvnias, the third and each subsequent to 97,920 hryvnias⁵. Consequently, in 2012 Ukraine witnessed a significant increase in birth rates, with 520,000 children being born in the country. However, following the initial Russian invasion in 2014, the government abolished the increase in payments for the second and third child, introducing again a fixed amount for each. Subsequent to that period, the birth rate in Ukraine has undergone a gradual decline, reaching 293,000 newborns in 2020 (Nahorna 2021).

⁴ Equivalent to approximately 920 Euro as of April 2025. This amount is divided and paid in instalments over a period of three years from the date of the child's birth.

⁵ Equivalent to approximately 2,170 Euro, 4,340 Euro and 8,681 Euro respectively.

The introduction of the financial stimulus in the form of the increased childbirth assistance along with overall enhancement of well-being for young families and the dissemination of the related information among forced migrants may encourage some of them to return to relatively safe regions of Ukraine even before the actual ceasefire. Acting this way, the Ukrainian authorities will be able to count on a comprehensive result – to achieve a gradual improvement in the demographic situation through re-emigration and an increase in the birth rate. Moreover, it is important to emphasise that economic incentives for fertility in Ukraine may strengthen already high rates of future maternal readiness. It is widely recognised that many post-conflict societies, particularly in Europe, after prolonged military, political and economic crises experienced a peacetime baby boom (Sánchez-Barricarte 2018).

Another equally important consequence of “investing” in social welfare should be the resolution of the problem of gender imbalance, which significantly complicates family formation in modern Ukraine (Méheut and Mitiuk 2024). With hundreds of thousands of men returning, anticipating post-war prospects at home, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian women, who are already objectively short of partners in Ukraine due to military losses and emigration, will have a chance to find a mate and have a child.

Investment boom as a prerequisite for homecoming. Implementation of various investment projects with large-scale attraction of foreign capital to Ukraine will help not directly, but indirectly to increase the flow of returning refugees in the medium and long run. Of course, gaining the support of foreign investors for Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction will be a serious challenge for its government. For those willing to invest serious money in a war-torn country with a missing population, the government will need to find special arguments and guarantees. But if it succeeds, the possible “Ukrainian economic miracle” following the ceasefire can also imply a return of Ukrainians to their homeland.

In this regard, the recent signing of the agreement to establish United States-Ukraine Reconstruction Investment Fund is of particular significance (U.S. Embassy in Ukraine 2025). The Fund is expected to invest in minerals, hydrocarbons as well as related infrastructure projects in Ukraine. The upcoming joint partnership reflects the United States’ strong commitment to ensuring a free, peaceful, and sovereign future for Ukraine. In addition, this agreement will enhance the economic and political ties between the two countries for long-term recovery in response to the massive destruction caused by Russia’s full-scale invasion.

Of course, the effectiveness of this partnership can only be measured over time, and especially after the end of hostilities. However, the conclusion of this agreement has the potential to stimulate global investment in Ukraine and, therefore, encourage the voluntary return of forced migrants. The latter assumption is supported by the following statement of one of my respondents:

“If there are actual projects for the revival of Ukraine and the opportunity to get decent wages offered by international companies, then I will return home without any trouble.”

However, not only the immediate expectations of the Ukrainian forced migrants, but also the cases of other post-conflict societies speak in favour of the “investment driver” of voluntary return. BiH’s experience is illustrative in this context. A minimum level of economic security, achieved through self-employment or work in industries revitalised by investment, was identified as a determining factor in the repatriation of refugees to Bosnia. Lots of returnees, guided by their own reasoning, left quite successful careers in Austria, Germany or Switzerland to return and work in their home country (Ibričević 2024).

Challenges to the Return of Forced Migrants

While there is a clear imperative to develop and implement nationwide repatriation programmes for Ukrainian refugees based on economic incentives, it is also important to recognise that their effectiveness can be significantly undermined by numerous threats. Furthermore, the feasibility of such challenges is substantiated not only through the desk research, but also through the findings of the interviews conducted.

The factor of the ongoing war. The longer the war lasts, and the longer Ukrainian refugees stay abroad, the more of them will be left behind forever. To illustrate, at the outset of the invasion in 2022, 91% of those surveyed indicated a desire to return (Razumkov Centre 2022). However, the following year saw a notable decline in this figure. For instance, in Germany, which has welcomed over 1.1 million Ukrainians, 44% of all refugees express a desire to remain in the country permanently or for an extended period (Brücker et al. 2023). The finding that intentions to return decrease over time can be supported by a quote from another respondent:

“I am going to return to Ukraine, but it has to be in the next year. If it does not happen within this period, then I will not go back. One has to realise that stopping shooting is only one side of the issue. But there are many other related challenges associated with return. I’m talking about landmines and similar security threats, about the perception of returnees by those who have remained in Ukraine all this time, etc. Equally important is the comparison of wage rates in the host country and Ukraine. Over time, all these conditions do not speak in favour of return.”

The conclusions of the study conducted by German colleagues are almost identical to the results of sociological surveys conducted in 2023 by Ukrainian organisations. According to the aforementioned sources, only 50% of Ukrainians “definitely plan” to return to Ukraine (Mykhajlyshyna 2023). Furthermore, 51% of respondents indicated that the termination of the war would be the primary stimulus for repatriation. Consequently, it can be reasonably assumed that without a cessation of hostilities and a guarantee of long-term security, it will be challenging to achieve a significant return of Ukrainians.

National interests of the receiving countries. Recipient countries may have their own plans for the Ukrainians they host. Such plans are, among other things, related to a significant shortage of labour in the local market. In this context, the experience of Germany is illustrative. In 2022, almost 2 million jobs in Germany were vacant.⁶ The country’s authorities have already openly recognised that a lack of skilled workers could permanently hamper Germany’s economic growth. Moreover, the former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, speaking at the East German Economic Forum in July 2023, argued that the country will not be able to cope with the existing labour shortage at the expense of its own employees (Rampe 2023).

Having invested so much in all respects in the integration of forced migrants, it is unlikely that Germany will give up on them overnight solely because of Ukraine’s keen desire to return its citizens. Given the qualitative characteristics of Ukrainian forced migrants⁷, it can be reasonably assumed that they are already making a meaningful contribution to German economy with nearly 300,000 Ukrainians already employed in sectors such as industry, trade, healthcare, construction, catering, social and commercial services (Tagesschau 2025). That is why the Federal Chancellor has also called on German companies to actively recruit Ukrainian refugees, who have significant human capital (Metz 2023). In addition, it is important to

⁶ There was an acute shortage of healthcare workers, carpenters, butchers, and other labourers. Even the IT sector is experiencing difficulties with personnel, with the shortage of staff here estimated at 100,000 workers.

⁷ Ukrainians are highly qualified, young, in good health, willing to work and actively integrate into the host society.

acknowledge the notable shift in German policy towards greater inclusion of Ukrainians in the local labour market during the course of the war. While previously employers used to insist on mandatory language and integration courses before hiring, recently there have been more calls among Germans themselves for Ukrainians to be hired without language skills. For instance, officials of the Association of German Cities and Municipalities now consider that integration and language learning activities should be carried out in parallel with the start of employment (Bryl 2024).

This implies that the post-war goals of Ukraine and Germany towards Ukrainian refugees may differ significantly. In fact, there may be a conflict of interests between the two countries. And this conflict is already visible at the level of forced migrants themselves. For example, one interviewee stated the following:

“I depend more on the host society than on my country of origin for re-emigration. If I have favourable employment and career opportunities here, as well as a settled legal status for a longer period, I do not plan to return. Conversely, if there are no job prospects abroad and the legal status in the host country is in question or cancelled, only then will I be forced to return to Ukraine.”

As can be observed from the citation, Germany’s potential ability to integrate Ukrainian refugees come into conflict with Ukraine’s return objectives. However, it is possible to find a compromise between the parties involved. In particular, I believe that German investment in Ukraine not only after, but also during the war can have a positive impact on the return of Ukrainians home. Furthermore, the host country itself may be interested in this. Direct investments in Ukraine to restore and support its socio-economic potential along with the defence industry will increase the expansion and influence of German capital in Eastern Europe, as well as help to save on the wage bill and boost corporate profits. Obviously, wages at enterprises with German investments in Ukraine will be high by Ukrainian standards, but still lower than if such enterprises were opened and operated in Germany itself. One can even assume that in such a situation the German government would go so far as to encourage some Ukrainian refugees to return home to secure employment at its enterprises in Ukraine. But even if this does not happen, the establishment of modern German production facilities in Ukraine with the prospect of decent wages will bring back Ukrainian refugees from other less wealthy European countries. This may include countries such as Romania or Moldova, where Ukrainians have much higher “economic” intentions of returning to their homeland compared to those in Germany (Van Tubergen et al. 2024).

It should be emphasised that the first investment projects from Germany are already underway. German concern *Rheinmetall* announced in May 2023 its intention to set up a joint venture with Ukrainian state-owned conglomerate *Ukroboronprom* to manufacture and repair armoured vehicles in Ukraine (Murray 2023). The factor of a competitive salary at German and other foreign production facilities in Ukraine as a stimulus for return is mentioned by many forced migrants. In particular, one of the answers during the interview was as follows:

“After I had the experience of earning completely different, much more money in Germany, it would be very difficult, if possible at all, to accept the previous income in Ukraine. However, if the level of remuneration at home increases significantly, then the return will be much easier.”

Another compromise option that would be beneficial to Ukraine cannot be ruled out. Even though there is a constant need for foreign labour, Germany will still financially encourage less integrated Ukrainian refugees to return home after the war. Already mentioned Switzerland and Norway, as well as the Czech Republic, can serve as examples to follow. However, the latter

receiving country went its own way, launching a pilot project for the voluntary return of Ukrainians in 2024.⁸

Socio-economic deterioration. Another real threat to the voluntary return of forced migrants is the overall state of Ukraine's socio-economic development. Even before the full-scale aggression, it was far from ideal. Since 24 February 2022, it has started to deteriorate rapidly. As a result, Ukraine in 2024 was a country where, despite all the financial support from foreign partners, every third resident lived in poverty (Shalal 2024). It was also the country in which many employers, even in the face of a huge shortage of personnel, continued to look for cheap labour, ignoring the need to radically increase wages (Minprom 2024). Under such conditions, there are no grounds to speak of a strong re-emigration of Ukrainians. On the contrary, the catastrophic implications of the Russian invasion for the domestic economy and demographic sphere are forcing Ukrainian refugees to settle down more actively in their host countries, refusing in principle to return to their homeland. This is indirectly evidenced by the state of the Ukrainian real estate market in 2024, where the supply of apartments for sale increased by 25% in comparison to the previous year (Zagorodna 2024).⁹ As for refugees themselves, during our interviews many of them clearly stated their reluctance to return due to the lack of socio-economic prospects in their home country:

“Material well-being is the main reason to stay in the receiving country. Yes, many people I know have taken jobs in Austria in positions that are inappropriate, below their qualifications. However, in Ukraine, even prior to the war, they worked hard and literally survived, whereas here they also work a lot but can live relatively decently.”

Nevertheless, there are still avenues through which the appeal of voluntary repatriation to Ukraine can be enhanced. First and foremost, one should talk about such a significant economic motivation for re-emigration as higher wages along with career prospects (Jonkers 2008; Wang et al. 2015). According to sociological surveys, for 28% of Ukrainian forced migrants, this incentive is primary in their decision to return (Mykhajlyshyna 2023). Today, Ukrainian refugees residing in EU countries receive salaries that are 3-4 times higher than at home (Davyhora 2024). It is therefore of the utmost importance for the Ukrainian government and business sector to identify financial resources to reduce the considerable disparity in wages.

It is encouraging to observe that the first steps in this direction are already being taken. For example, as part of the “*Create Ukraine*” pilot programme, young Ukrainians who have gained valuable experience abroad are invited to return and continue their professional growth at home by joining the advisory board of the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine (Ministry of Economy 2024). The remuneration offered to returnees is quite competitive in today's Ukrainian reality – 1,250 Euro in hryvnia equivalent.

Inconsistent national policies and resulting lack of credibility. Serious issues related to the repatriation of Ukrainian refugees may arise due to questionable domestic policy, which, even after the end of hostilities, proposes to use a prescriptive and even repressive mechanism in relation to certain categories of citizens. In particular, recent statements made by some representatives of the Ukrainian authorities may hinder efforts to encourage the voluntary return of forced migrants. For example, imposing a three-year travel ban on Ukrainian men after the war ends (Zhabska 2023) is likely to deter many from returning. Equally damaging to the significant repatriation of Ukrainian men from abroad after the war are the regular statements that Ukraine intends to penalize upon return those of them who illegally left the country during

⁸ For those who agree to return to Ukraine, the Czech Republic will help with the purchase of return tickets or provide specialised transportation to their homeland for people with physical disabilities (European Commission 2024).

⁹ According to market experts, the massive sale of private housing is the result of forced migrants abandoning it. They want to get rid of their property as soon as possible to get money to buy housing abroad.

the announced mobilisation (Kobzar 2023). It is evident that such threats from the state will deter not only men, but also their families and relatives, which includes millions of Ukrainians, from returning to Ukraine.

In general, the list of punitive initiatives that are still being discussed at the legislative level and in society is truly impressive. While some proposals during martial law seem debatable¹⁰, others are arguably counterproductive to the implementation of voluntary repatriation programmes. This is particularly the case with restrictions or deprivation of civil rights for those men who did not return to Ukraine in time (Ekonomichni novyny 2024).

Some concepts may seem even absurd. For instance, banning children of men who evade mobilisation from entering Ukrainian higher education institutions. Not least because of such information blackmail of the younger generation, which is hardly responsible for the actions of their parents and does not want to be held hostage to the situation, the number of those planning to become students in Ukraine has decreased by a third in just one year – from 282,000 in 2023 to 189,000 in 2024 (Kovalenko 2024). Young Ukrainians on a mass scale are merely reorienting themselves to pursue studies at universities abroad. And while emotional statements in the media by some representatives of civil society may still be regarded as acceptable, when members of the current and past Ukrainian authorities speak about the need for actual financial sanctions against millions of their own citizens, it is unacceptable. In this context, it is worth recalling the calls by top Ukrainian officials to stop any support for Ukrainian refugees abroad from host countries (Sydorzhovsky 2024; Boss and Lipkowski 2024). Such actions, according to Ukrainian officials, should result in a significant influx of repatriation. However, I am convinced, the reality is that it will merely exacerbate the socio-economic challenges faced by forced migrants in their host countries, leading to a growing desire for many to sever ties with their homeland permanently. This is a reasonable reaction to the fact that their own government prohibits countries of residence from providing assistance to Ukrainians facing significant difficulties and adversity in times of war and displacement. Such my convictions can be confirmed by the words of one Ukrainian refugee in Germany who stated:

“No state attempts to bring me back to Ukraine against my will – will work. Moreover, even if the host country denies my current legal residence status, I will do everything I can to remain there. If that fails, I will move to another EU country.”

The aforementioned words are supported by a quotation from another respondent:

“I would like to return to Ukraine someday, but to do it only voluntarily and with dignity, not because someone forced me to this decision. I love my country very much and I am ready to help it in every possible way here or back there, but I will not agree to be coerced to return.”

Apparently, the debatable discourse on the part of the Ukrainian authorities and some members of the general public (Romashchenko 2024), combined with adverse experiences of residing in Ukraine before the invasion, can negatively affect the overall level of trust in repatriation programmes within the external forced migrant community. In fact, many of the refugees in private conversations express scepticism regarding Ukraine's real interest in their voluntary return and readiness to facilitate it through effective incentives. For example, some refugees point to the traditionally huge gaps between the loud promises of the authorities and the harsh reality for citizens in the end:

¹⁰ A refusal to provide consular and other services to men abroad or blocking their bank accounts (Gor 2024).

“Theoretically, I admit that the Ukraine may launch certain repatriation programmes based on financial incentives, but I do not believe in their success in practice. I just know how our state works...”

Among the respondents there were also those who were disillusioned in principle with Ukraine as a country where it is good to grow old:

“It would be possible to return to Ukraine if there were prerequisites for improving the socio-economic situation, the political and legal regime and a real anti-corruption struggle. However, there is no longer any faith in this, so my family is by no means going to return. We plan to stay in Austria. Here you can age with the hope that you will be taken care of and will not starve to death in your old times.”

Of course, in the context of the ongoing war, it is extremely difficult for the Ukrainian authorities to maintain a balance between military needs, the demands of the economy, citizens' welfare and the democratic development of society. I have no doubt or objection to this. At the same time, it is my firm belief that the most effective means of encouraging the voluntary repatriation of Ukrainian refugees is through the provision of diverse and flexible incentives, as opposed to the use of coercion and threats. Otherwise, one should not expect Ukrainians to come home, but rather to see a significant increase in the intention to leave Ukraine by those who have not yet done so. This assertion can be confirmed by the latest forecasts of the National Bank of Ukraine, according to which, Ukraine will lose another 700,000 of its citizens due to emigration by the end of 2025 (National Bank 2024).

The aforementioned challenges associated with the voluntary return of Ukrainian refugees do not negate the necessity for the development and implementation of the national repatriation programmes that have been proposed. It is evident that in order to enhance the efficiency of economic and, in particular, investment incentives, it is imperative that the Ukrainian government consider all those threats and introduce measures to mitigate their adverse impact on mass re-emigration. If this is achieved, based on recent opinion polls (Mykhajlyshyna 2023), one may estimate that the launch of financial initiatives to provide direct monetary stimuli for return, renovation of refugee housing and the provision of highly paid jobs alone could bring back at least 50% of forced migrants to Ukraine.

“Start immediately, involve diaspora and be prepared for a public outcry”

In addition, the following policy recommendations appear to be justified with regard to the voluntary repatriation of Ukrainian refugees. **First**, the development of ambitious investment programmes, encouraging return migration, should not be postponed until the war is over. No matter how difficult it may be, it is necessary to start now, when, unfortunately, the outlines of the end of the Russian invasion are not yet visible. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that such re-emigration initiatives in post-conflict environment should be comprehensive in nature (Stefanovic and Loizides 2017), i.e. not only based on economic incentives, but also take into account the diverse intentions of the forced migrants themselves, as well as the unique context of their stay in the host countries. The need for such an approach is evidenced by the words of a highly skilled refugee from Ukraine:

“Sure, I plan to return to Ukraine one day. However, this will depend on a number of circumstances: availability of a high-paying job here in Germany or in my home country, the end of the war and family matters.”

Second, in the search for the most courageous foreign investors at the initial stage, Ukraine should turn its attention to the numerous Ukrainian diasporas around the world. The existing ethnic, cultural and historical roots that any diaspora possesses concerning the country of origin very often cause a strong desire to invest back against all odds. Consequently, representatives of the diaspora frequently disregard the objective risks and threats inherent to the socio-economic, military, and political context of the country in which they intend to export capital.¹¹ Of course, traditional foreign direct investors do not possess such connections and are mostly not willing to take risks, even if the expected returns may be very high. This means that, under favourable conditions, the existing diaspora can and should become a pioneer in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine (Koinova 2024) and, hence, facilitate the return of forced migrants.

Third, without the assistance of international financial institutions, partner countries and global business, Ukraine will encounter significant challenges in undertaking comprehensive post-war reconstruction, including the introduction of the discussed repatriation stimuli. It is therefore equally imperative to engage the support of interested foreign partners and allies in the implementation of these initiatives. Concurrently, the search for financial resources to actualise incentives proposed above can be pursued along a slightly unexpected trajectory. In particular, the Ukrainian government should raise with its international partners the issue of utilising the proceeds from the frozen assets of the Russian Federation, including for the implementation of repatriation programmes. It should be noted that at this time, the utilization of these funds is solely for military purposes (Barigazzi 2024), the priority of which is beyond doubt. However, in the future, the range of purposes for the use of such funds should be expanded, given the urgent need of the state, its economy and demographic sphere to implement economic incentives for the voluntary return.

Finally, **fourth**, the Ukrainian authorities should be prepared for a public outcry by implementing various repatriation programmes and allocating significant funds and material resources for them. In expert circles, there is a view that such substantial investment in the re-emigration may be perceived negatively by the population that stayed in the country (Toren 1975). Such concerns are evidenced by the experience of other societies that have undergone armed conflicts. In particular, some African countries faced the fact that the mass return of refugees led to local tensions between returnees and non-migrants over land, access to public goods, property or citizenship rights, etc. (Schwartz 2019). It seems inevitable that societal polarisation will occur in post-war Ukraine, let alone in times of hostilities. These assumptions were voiced by one interviewee in Austria:

“Let’s assume that a relevant decision is made by our authorities to invest in one way or another in the return of Ukrainian forced migrants. People who have lived abroad for the last few years, learnt the language, developed professional contacts and built a certain career there will be entitled to claim higher salaries upon their return. But as soon as those who were in Ukraine throughout the war become aware of such government initiatives, a revolution will break out in the country.”

Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon the authorities to neutralise any potential misunderstandings and tension among different groups of the society and convey the fundamental truth to all – the future recovery of Ukraine is unfeasible without the return of those who left its territory due to the war. In other words, the state and its leadership must make a strategic decision and answer a simple question: does it need millions of its foreign citizens

¹¹ It is worth mentioning here the case of Sudanese immigrants who now live in the UK. At one time, they ignored the lack of necessary infrastructure and ongoing armed conflicts in Africa by establishing a telecommunications business there. Subsequently, this business not only made them billionaires, but also provided modern mobile communications to 21 million people in 14 countries on the continent (Newland and Plaza 2013).

or not? I assume that it does, which means that workable incentives must be introduced to ensure that refugees return home voluntarily and *en masse*.

Conclusions

Ukraine's ambitious plans for post-war recovery and reconstruction may be impeded by a significant deficit in human capital, resulting from the extensive destruction and displacement caused by the ongoing war. To address this demographic crisis and ensure the availability of workforce, it is imperative that the Ukrainian government assumes a proactive role in the development and implementation of effective repatriation programmes. The voluntary and mass return of forced migrants to Ukraine will be a crucial factor in the socio-economic and demographic revitalisation of the homeland.

At the same time, economic (investment) incentives may become an important impetus for the re-emigration of Ukrainians. These could entail the provision of state guarantees for the restoration of destroyed housing for refugees and the allocation of land for their independent reconstruction, substantial monetary assistance upon return (pay-to-come schemes), targeted grants to refugees for business development in Ukraine, financial incentives for social welfare enhancing and the launch of substantial investment projects with the participation of foreign capital that would create highly paid jobs in Ukraine. The potential appeal of such incentives is evidenced by the findings of the in-depth interviews I conducted. Most of my respondents prioritised economic stimuli for returning to Ukraine. Ukrainian refugees also emphasised the security factor and the voluntariness of the repatriation process among the other key return drivers. Thus, confirming the relevance of a comprehensive approach to their decision-making.

In the course of developing and implementing the national repatriation initiatives, it is important to consider the various external and internal challenges that may impede the voluntary return of displaced Ukrainians during and after the war. Additionally, the personal interests and intentions of forced migrants must be taken into account, as they directly influence their decision to return. The primary obstacles to mass repatriation are the ongoing hostilities, the competition between Ukraine and the host countries for the use of Ukrainian human capital, the economic decline of Ukraine and the shortage of decent jobs for returnees, as well as the inconsistent state policy and lack of trust in the state. These threats, if neglected by the Ukrainian authorities, may prove to be a significant impediment to the voluntary re-emigration of Ukrainians.

While this working paper has shed light on the topical issue of incentivising return migration in the challenging context of Ukraine, I acknowledge that it also has a number of limitations. In particular, in theorising economic incentives that could encourage displaced Ukrainians to return voluntarily, I assume that active hostilities should cease shortly. However, there is no such guarantee, which is a key obstacle to return. Furthermore, in advocating for the Ukrainian government to allocate funds facilitating the repatriation process, it is anticipated that adequate financial resources will be obtained, potentially through the release of frozen Russian assets. Nevertheless, given Ukraine's acute dependence on external funding in recent years, the realisation of the proposed financial initiatives remains questionable. The article also considers the case of Ukrainian forced migrants in general, without taking into account their various socio-economic characteristics (age, gender, ability to work, etc.). This, in turn, limits the understanding of the impact of the proposed incentives, as they may affect various target groups of refugees differently. Consequently, there is an urgent need to significantly expand the scope of qualitative and quantitative analyses among Ukrainian refugees in different host countries, thus shifting from some theoretical arguments to more empirical research. The aforementioned expansion would provide a more robust argument for the introduction of definitive economic incentives as a part of comprehensive repatriation programmes. These potential limitations will be addressed in my future research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express sincere gratitude to PD Dr. Inka Stock for valuable comments as an official reviewer of the manuscript. Special thanks to Prof. Dr. Antje Missbach and Prof. Dr. Maria Koinova for their insightful ideas, which significantly improved this working paper. Finally, I would like to acknowledge all my respondents for their time and frankness, as well as Dr. Phill Wilcox and research assistant Nguyen Vo for their technical support along the way.

Citation Guide

If you wish to cite this document, please refer to the example below:

Romashchenko, Taras. 2025. "Bringing Ukrainian Refugees Home: Scrutinising Economic Incentives and Challenges to Return." *Bielefeld Anthropological Papers on Issues of the Global World (BAPGW)* No. 6. https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/fakultaeten/soziologie/fakultaet/arbeitsbereiche/ab6/ag_sozialanthropologie/bielefeld-anthropological/published-papers/6-bringing-ukrainian-refu/

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