

# Experience of Forced Displacement Abroad and Thoughts about Returning to Ukraine

Research report (conclusions  
and recommendations)



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We express our gratitude to the participants of the study, as well as to the organizations that facilitated the dissemination of the survey abroad.

This study was conducted by the Cedos Think Tank at the request of the [Council of Europe Office in Ukraine](#).

Cedos is an independent think tank, an urban bureau, and a community that has been working on social and spatial development issues since 2010. We believe that every person is entitled to a dignified standard of living. Therefore, Cedos's goal is to identify the systemic causes of social problems and develop strategies to solve them. Our approach is research-based. We study social processes and public policies, spread critical knowledge, promote and implement progressive changes, and educate and empower a community of supporters for these changes. In our work, we are guided by the values of dignity, equality, solidarity, participation, quality, and empathy.

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## ● Introduction

This study was aimed at describing the experience of people staying abroad and their thoughts about returning to Ukraine.

### **Key objectives of the study:**

1. To clarify what challenges and problems were faced by people who have been forced to relocate from Ukraine to other countries, in the following areas:
  - adjustment to living in a new country;
  - employment and financial situation;
  - housing;
  - education;
  - health care.
2. To examine what thoughts people had about returning to Ukraine and what aspects they took into account while considering this question.
3. To consider which factors incline people to return to Ukraine, and which factors contribute to people remaining abroad.
4. To examine which urgent problems people may face after returning to Ukraine and what kind of support they may need.

To meet these objectives, a mixed research design was chosen: it included **a quantitative component**, which involved conducting a survey, and **a qualitative component**, within which focus group discussions were held. The methodology of the quantitative component of the study was based on the analysis of existing information about the challenges and problems faced by people abroad, as well as their plans regarding return. Thus, the goal was to deepen existing knowledge and record key trends in the experience of living abroad and reflections on return. The qualitative component was applied to interpret and complement the quantitative data. Data from the focus group discussions helped to find out how people describe and perceive challenges and problems, and how they explain their causes.

**The study does not represent the experience of all people who were forced to move from Ukraine abroad.** This group of people is not homogeneous. Among those forcibly displaced abroad, middle-aged women prevail; however, apart from

them, various people also moved abroad, including people of other genders, with different marital status, number (or absence) of children, different ages, etc. Efforts were made to represent the widest possible range of experiences in this study. However, due to limited access to respondents, not all groups of people are equally represented.

### **The field stage of the study took place in October–December 2024.**

**The survey** took place from October 30 to December 10. Data collection was conducted online using a self-administered questionnaire in Google Forms. A total of 4,141 people from 43 countries participated in it.

**Focus group discussions** were conducted in December 2024. They took place online using Zoom. Recruitment of participants for the focus group discussions was carried out through the survey. At the end of the questionnaire, there was an option to share contact information in order to participate in a focus group discussion.

In total, **10 focus group discussions** were conducted as part of the study. 6–8 people were invited to participate in each discussion.

During the formation of the sample for the qualitative and quantitative components of the study, efforts were made to ensure the representation of informants with different characteristics by gender, region in which they lived before leaving Ukraine, country of stay, age, and period of departure from Ukraine.

### **The study has a number of limitations:**

- **The study is not representative of all people who were forced to move abroad.** Its goal was to collect as many diverse experiences as possible, to identify the main difficulties faced by the respondents and participants of the study, as well as their needs. At the same time, the possibility to draw conclusions about the prevalence of the problems among all people displaced abroad is limited.
- **Insufficient representation of men and older people in the sample.** There was an intention to involve a larger number of men and people over 60 years old in the study, but the representation of these groups is not high. This is due, in particular, to the fact that among people

who were forcibly displaced abroad, the majority are women. In addition, among men, the refusal rate to participate in the study was somewhat higher than among women. In the case of people over 60 years old, the main obstacle to participation in the study could have been the online method of conducting the survey.

- **Underrepresentation of the experience of people in difficult life circumstances.** It can be assumed that people who are in difficult life circumstances may not have had the opportunity to participate in the study, therefore their experience may not have been sufficiently reflected in the study.
- **Uneven representation of people from different countries in the qualitative component.** During the recruitment of participants for the focus group discussions, efforts were made to ensure equal representation of people from 10 countries that were in the focus of the study. However, fewer participants were involved from several of these countries than from others. This creates limitations in comparing the experience of living in different countries.
- **Unrepresented experience of people who did not want to share it.** The study included people who agreed to share their experience and thoughts. At the same time, the experience of people who, for various reasons, may not have wanted to share their stories, is not included in this study.
- The obtained **data regarding return to Ukraine** demonstrate the main trends at the time of the study; however, these data **may change** depending on the development of the war, internal political factors, and the situation in the world. Therefore, in case of significant changes both in Ukraine and in the world, the data regarding return may lose relevance.

## ● Conclusions

This study examined the experiences of people who moved from Ukraine abroad due to Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. The study focused on several key areas of life and analyzed the main challenges and problems in these areas. In addition, the study addressed the question of return to Ukraine, focusing on the factors that people take into account when considering return, and the urgent needs that may arise for people in case of return. The study demonstrates that **the situation of people abroad depends on various factors**, such as the country of stay, the year of departure abroad, the duration of stay in the country, financial situation, family composition, health condition, openness of the host country's community to the integration of forcibly displaced people, etc.

Some people **did not feel part of the society in these countries**. Participants of the study said they felt differences in attitudes toward various issues and in habits between themselves and the society of the host countries. The feeling of being integrated was also negatively affected by, in some cases, biased attitudes from local people and the Ukrainian diaspora.

Integration into the society of the host country was facilitated by a higher level of proficiency in the language of that country. However, the opportunities to learn the language in the host countries varied: not all countries offered integration or language courses to people from Ukraine. In addition, the quality of language courses was not always satisfactory. **A low level of proficiency in the language of the host country negatively affected adaptation** to society. It also hindered access to services and opportunities in various areas of life: it limited opportunities for employment, for obtaining education, and created obstacles in obtaining administrative, medical, or social services.

More than a third of the respondents of the study assessed their financial situation as low. About a third of people relied on social benefits from the host countries. Such a situation may be related, in particular, to difficulties in finding a job. **More than half of the surveyed people encountered problems when looking for a job in the host country**. They mostly mentioned the following challenges: the availability of offers only for low-skilled jobs that did not correspond to their level of education and work experience, and difficulties in finding a job that would match their qualifications. In addition, a

significant obstacle to employment for people with children was the unmet need for childcare assistance, which forced them to agree only to the vacancies that would allow them to combine work and childcare.

More than a third of the surveyed people faced difficulties while working abroad. The most common problems were the following: combining work with caring for family members, the need to validate Ukrainian education, excessive workload, being denied promotion due to insufficient language proficiency, and overtime work without additional payment.

More than half of the surveyed people responded that they lived in housing rented on commercial terms. Common types of housing among the respondents also included housing rented on preferential terms, social housing, and temporary centers for the accommodation of refugees. **The majority of the surveyed people encountered problems in the housing sector.** The most common problems were the high cost of rent and related expenses, the temporary nature of the housing, and insufficient housing space for comfortable living.

Among people who were abroad with children under 18 years old (their own or those they care for), two-thirds indicated that they encountered problems in the field of children's education. People who were raising a child alone, caring for a person with a disability, had incurable diseases or illnesses requiring long-term treatment faced difficulties more often. The main problems in the field of children's education were the presence of a language barrier and the difficulty of combining attendance at a local school and a Ukrainian one. **The presence of a certain share of the children in two educational systems at once placed a significant burden on the children.**

In the field of vocational, higher, or adult education, the most common difficulties were the language barrier, difficulties in validating Ukrainian degrees, as well as financial difficulties in paying for education and the difficulty of combining studies with work or side jobs.

The most common problem in the field of healthcare was the long waiting time for a consultation with a doctor. In addition, the surveyed people faced such problems as the language barrier and the high cost of insurance or medical services.

In the context of the difficulties people faced abroad, participants of the study also pointed to the need to **increase access to consular services** and the possibility to turn to the



Ukrainian state for help if necessary. Another need mentioned was the **possibility to process documents online** and receive them in electronic form.

Study participants sought to feel **a symbolic connection with Ukraine** and to maintain contact with Ukrainian society and the state. At the same time, people understood that during the war, Ukraine does not have the resources that could be directed toward maintaining contact with people forcibly displaced abroad. However, in their opinion, maintaining the symbolic connection will encourage them to return after the end of the war.

In this context, informants during the focus group discussions shared that they paid attention to public statements regarding people staying abroad. Some of them wanted to feel a more sensitive attitude toward the reasons why they were forced to leave the country: the occupation of their city or town, the loss of their homes, jobs, or sources of income. Such sensitivity, in their opinion, would also contribute to a sense of connection with Ukrainian society.

In the context of return to Ukraine, the study shows that **people choose different strategies regarding return**, and there is no significant predominance of one strategy over another. The obtained data also illustrate that **people do not perceive return solely as a choice between two options** – to return to Ukraine or to remain abroad. There are intermediate options, such as living equally in Ukraine and abroad, and part of the surveyed people indicated this option as a desirable strategy for themselves.

**Thoughts and plans regarding return may also change quickly depending on the situation in Ukraine and in the world.** The most common factor that people took into account in the discussion about return was the end of hostilities throughout the entire territory of Ukraine. However, **thoughts about return were influenced not only by the security factor but also by a wide range of factors**, including housing conditions, employment, ties with loved ones and family, educational and other opportunities for children, social protection and medical services, etc.

One of the most common factors mentioned by participants of the study was **employment opportunities and a decent wage**. The low wages in some professions discouraged people from thoughts about returning. In addition, people of middle and



older working age were concerned that it would be more difficult for them to find employment due to their age.

In the context of return, housing was also important for the participants of the study, in particular the **affordability of rent, rental security, and the possibility of using temporary housing from the state** during the initial period after return. People also paid attention to the availability of medical care and the accessibility of social services for people with disabilities, elderly people, single mothers and fathers, etc.

An important factor was the **presence of family and loved ones in Ukraine**, which inclined people toward return. At the same time, during the focus group discussions, **the priority of children's well-being** was often mentioned. People who were abroad with children, apart from the security factor, primarily thought about their children's comfort and prospects, comparing the opportunities for children in Ukraine and abroad.

Thoughts about returning to Ukraine were also influenced by the duration of stay abroad: some informants expressed the belief that **the longer they live abroad, the lower the likelihood of their return to Ukraine**. This happens due to integration into the societies of the host countries, as well as everyday factors: the need to transport belongings, having plans regarding housing, working in the host country, etc.

Despite the fact that most people from Ukraine were under temporary protection in the host countries, some participants of the focus group discussions already had plans to change their residence permit at the time of the study. Temporary protection and its extension for a certain period caused a sense of uncertainty and inability to plan for the future. In addition, some people planned to change their residence permit because they wished to remain abroad even after the end of the war in Ukraine or in case of the termination of temporary protection.

Study participants mostly had not visited Ukraine during the past year or visited it quite rarely. Among the factors that prevented people from visiting Ukraine were safety, the long duration of the trip to Ukraine due to the absence of air traffic during the war, the need to obtain permission to travel to Ukraine from the employment center or other institutions in the host countries, the high cost of the trip, health conditions, etc. However, people were mostly involved in the Ukrainian information space. Most of the surveyed people constantly

followed the news about Ukraine, they read the news every day or several times a day.

The study identified **the main needs that people expect to have in case of return to Ukraine**. First of all, participants of the study spoke about **affordable housing with secure conditions for renting**. People would like to receive support in finding housing, to have options for temporary housing where they could live during the initial period after returning. This issue was especially relevant for people from temporarily occupied territories and people whose housing was destroyed or damaged by bombing. The study participants who, in case of return to Ukraine, would become internally displaced persons, were mostly not informed about the support measures for IDPs, and therefore did not know what kind of assistance they could count on in case of return.

Regarding employment, study participants noted that after returning to Ukraine they would, first and foremost, **need assistance in finding a job**. The need for employment arose both from the perspective of professional self-realization and in order to be able to independently ensure a decent standard of living. Informants during the focus group discussions shared positive experiences of turning to employment centers in the host countries and mentioned the **relevance of changes in the work of employment centers in Ukraine**, bringing their approaches closer to EU standards. They also spoke about the need for financial unemployment benefits during the period until people find a job. Some participants of the study would need help in starting their own business, and they mentioned the importance of ease of doing business and the absence of corruption.

In the context of returning to Ukraine, people mentioned **access to quality medical and social services** so that in case of deteriorating health or finding themselves in a difficult situation, they could be confident that they can rely on assistance. About half of the respondents expected to face challenges in the field of healthcare; in particular, they spoke about deterioration of their mental health and the high cost of medications. Other needs that were mentioned included access to preschool and quality secondary school education, and the affordability of public transportation fees.

The analysis of the factors that influence return to Ukraine, as well as the needs in case of return, indicates **the importance of the country's comprehensive socio-economic development**

**and strengthening the capacity of hromadas.** The data obtained from the focus group discussions show that **people often compare the living conditions abroad and in Ukraine.** Rather than the possibilities of receiving targeted assistance, they primarily take into account the general standard of living among the population and the conditions for their development in the country. In this context, study participants shared observations regarding the assistance provided to internally displaced people in Ukraine: they considered it insufficient and did not have expectations that the state would have enough resources to support them in case of return. For the people we spoke with, **it was important to feel confident that they would be able to independently establish their lives in Ukraine.**

Some participants emphasized in conversations that they **did not expect any assistance in case of return.** For some of them, the reason for this was the confidence that they would have housing and employment opportunities. Other people said that they did not expect support because, in their opinion, funds should primarily be directed to help those who live in Ukraine during the war. They also **would not want support programs to prioritize people with the experience of forced displacement abroad** over other groups of people.

**The introduction of targeted support programs may increase a sense of injustice within society.** Participants of the focus group discussions often shared concerns about possible negative attitudes from people who did not have the experience of forced displacement abroad. Informants in the discussions often considered this as a factor that discouraged them from returning to Ukraine. The creation of programs aimed exclusively at supporting people forcibly displaced abroad may reinforce these feelings, which would not contribute to people's return to Ukraine.

In the context of returning, **support and connection from the community where people used to live in Ukraine** may be important. Maintaining contact with family, loved ones, acquaintances, and people from their locality gave people a sense of belonging to the community in Ukraine. Those who often communicated with loved ones and friends in Ukraine and who visited the country were less likely to express concerns about potential negative reactions to their stay abroad.

## ● Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the Cedos think tank proposes to consider the following recommendations for improving the situation of Ukrainians abroad, preserving their connection with Ukraine, and creating pathways for their return to Ukraine. It is important that all opportunities implemented as part of creating conditions for return to Ukraine are accessible not only to people with the experience of forced displacement abroad, but also to other groups of Ukraine's population. Prioritizing the needs of the group of people forcibly displaced abroad over other population groups may cause social tension and have the opposite effect. In such a case, people will be less inclined to return, realizing that the assistance they receive will cause a sense of injustice among other people.

1. Continue to conduct regular monitoring of the situation of people from Ukraine abroad in order to track the problems they face and to develop means of responding to human rights violations and crisis situations.
2. Develop informational materials about the host country, which Ukrainian representative offices abroad will be able to distribute to forcibly displaced people upon arrival in the country. These materials should contain information about the following areas:
  - the basics of the host country's legislation, social norms, and political system;
  - ways to search for employment;
  - the housing rental system, sources that can be used to search for housing;
  - the educational system and available opportunities for adult education in the host country;
  - the functioning of the healthcare system, how to seek help from interpreters when receiving medical services, or a list of hospitals where translation services are available;
  - opportunities to learn the language;
  - a list of Ukrainian organizations or local organizations that provide support to people forcibly displaced from Ukraine;
  - opportunities to participate in activities and

- events in the local community.
3. Create conditions for returning to the Ukrainian education system after a period of residency abroad:
    - develop integration and adaptation measures in Ukrainian schools that would help schoolchildren (re)integrate into the Ukrainian education system after studying abroad;
    - inform people about the possibility and procedure for using a secondary education certificate obtained in another country for admission to institutions of higher and vocational education in Ukraine;
    - increase the coverage of the population with preschool education in Ukraine.
  4. Develop the capacity of Ukrainian consulates to provide services to a higher number of people.
  5. Expand the list of documents that can be obtained online and develop the use of electronic document management.
  6. Promote the continued involvement of people forcibly displaced abroad in the Ukrainian cultural sphere. For this purpose:
    - promote the creation of Ukrainian cultural centers and develop the capacity of Ukrainian organizations and initiatives abroad;
    - consider the possibility of organizing conversation clubs and cultural-educational events based on such centers and initiatives;
    - involve forcibly displaced people in the activities of Ukrainian organizations abroad.
  7. Promote the connection of children from Ukraine abroad with the Ukrainian cultural and educational sphere:
    - promote the initiation and operation of online leisure clubs and circles (book clubs, computer clubs, etc.) to provide a space for communication and interaction between children who are in Ukraine and abroad;
    - promote the provision of children abroad with Ukrainian literature and educational materials, continue initiatives that support the distribution of Ukrainian-language children's books abroad.
  8. Promote the involvement of the Ukrainian diaspora in

the integration and adaptation of people forcibly displaced from Ukraine:

- promote the involvement of people from the Ukrainian diaspora in teaching language and/or integration courses;
  - consider the possibility of involving the Ukrainian diaspora and local people in organizing and conducting conversation clubs to practice the spoken language of the host country;
  - consider the possibility of involving people from the Ukrainian diaspora in the employment of people from Ukraine, so that during the initial period these people could provide support with translation and clarification of work tasks.
9. Develop cooperation between Ukrainian and local communities:
    - develop opportunities for the involvement of the Ukrainian diaspora and the local population of host countries in the activities of Ukrainian centers and initiatives abroad;
    - promote cooperation between Ukrainian and local organizations and initiatives through the organization of joint events and projects.
  10. Avoid critical claims about people from Ukraine abroad in public statements by state officials.
  11. Increase the number of events that would promote the development of inclusivity in Ukrainian society, sensitivity to the situation of various population groups, their problems and experiences.
  12. Promote the socio-economic development of Ukrainian territorial hromadas, work on reducing social and spatial inequalities, and contribute to improving the standard of living, particularly through increasing employment opportunities and the availability of affordable housing.
  13. Strengthen the capacity of state employment centers:
    - increase the accessibility and quality of employment center services, including career counseling and soft skills training;
    - develop the capacity of employment centers to connect employers and jobseekers, in particular through the use of digital tools;
    - increase the availability of professional development and retraining courses;



- counter gender and age discrimination in the hiring process;
  - review the amount of unemployment benefits, the period of their provision, and the list of population categories eligible to receive them.
14. Implement new approaches to housing policies:
- develop the social housing stock;
  - regulate the procedure for renting housing from private individuals, promote the expansion of the practice of concluding contracts between tenants and landlords, and ensure that tenants and landlords have the opportunity to seek protection of their rights.
15. Introduce the provision of an information service for people returning to Ukraine. In particular, the information should include the following elements:
- availability of housing, particularly in which hromadas people can apply for social housing;
  - employment opportunities;
  - opportunities for children to receive preschool education;
  - steps that need to be taken to enroll children in preschool and secondary school education institutions;
  - steps that need to be taken to enroll in higher education institutions with a secondary education certificate obtained in another country;
  - ways to access medical, social services, and mental health care.
- This service can be provided in Centers for the Provision of Administrative Services, as well as be available for use in the Diia service. This service should also be accessible to people who have IDP status.
16. Develop the capacity of territorial hromadas to provide social services:
- review the content of the social adaptation service and consider the possibility of providing this service to people returning from abroad;
  - inform people returning to Ukraine about the possibility of receiving social services, the ways to access them, and the cases in which support can be expected.



17. Develop the capacity of hromadas to provide mental health care. Inform people about the possibility and ways to receive mental health care.
18. Inform people about the possibility of receiving free medications and about the Affordable Medicine program.
19. Develop the accessibility of public spaces, educational institutions, administrative institutions, leisure facilities, etc. When arranging spaces, take into account the needs of all population groups.
20. Develop transit connections within territorial hromadas and with other hromadas. Pay special attention to small hromadas located far from regional and district centers. Ensure the possibility of reaching medical institutions, administrative institutions, and social protection institutions by public transport.
21. Facilitate the evacuation of the population from temporarily occupied territories.
22. Promote the increase of social cohesion among the population in territorial hromadas, develop opportunities for organizing offline and online spaces for communication. Involve the population of hromadas in maintaining contact with people who are abroad.