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# How Ukrainian Refugees Can Shape Ukrainian Political and Social Landscape?



The new Ukrainian diaspora—refugees of Russia’s full-scale invasion—has the potential to reshape the political and social landscape back home. Since February 2022, around 8 million people have fled Ukraine. While 1.2 million have reportedly returned, the majority—6.7 million—are still living outside the country.

Despite hopes of a large-scale repatriation, migration trends in 2024 suggest a different reality. This year, Ukraine has seen a net loss of around 443,000 people—three times more than in 2023.

And the longer the war drags on, the more Ukrainians are leaving—not just fleeing missiles but escaping a collapsing economy, failing schools, and an overstretched healthcare system.

For parents, the decision is particularly difficult: return and send their children to school in bomb shelters, or stay abroad, where stability and opportunities outweigh patriotism. In regions like Chernihiv, where the air raid sirens rarely fall silent, even online education is a fragile lifeline.

“Our kids play sports, go to activities, speak the (foreign) language now,” says Anna (a pseudonym), who fled to the EU with her husband and two children in 2022. “Going back to a life of missiles and PTSD, with no real support—it’s just not an option.”

For many, Ukraine’s rhetoric towards those who left has only deepened their disillusionment. “They branded us as traitors, draft dodgers. It feels like our country doesn’t need us,” Anna adds.

Natalia, who left last year, is even more blunt: “Ukraine abandoned us. We have no choice but to move on.”

## A refugee or a citizen?

Their frustration speaks to a deeper issue—Kyiv’s clumsy policies towards those who fled. Efforts to bring back men who left

illegally have turned into a broader suspicion of all Ukrainians abroad. The backlash intensified after President Zelenskyy’s 2024 New Year’s address.

“Who do I want to be? A victim or a victor? A refugee or a citizen?” he asked. Meant as a call to return for those forced into exile, it felt less like a call to return and more like an accusation, sparking a wave of outrage among those who had no choice but to flee.

Anastasiia Stepula, now in Switzerland with her son, took to Facebook to push back against the blame placed on those who fled.

“I work for Ukraine, pay taxes there and in Switzerland, and donate regularly—not for recognition, but because it matters. I talk to Swiss people about the war every day. But I also allow myself to live,” she wrote.

## Most children taken abroad will never return

Her son, a Ukrainian citizen with severe autism, made staying impossible. “Keeping him in a war zone wasn’t an option,” she said. For many like her, survival was not a choice—it was the only path forward.

Public reaction to Zelenskyy’s speech was sharply divided. Some defended his call for resilience; others saw it as tone-deaf. “A leader should unite a nation, not divide it,” one critic wrote.

Another was more blunt: “Most children taken abroad will never return. Their mothers didn’t move them to Canada or Ireland just to bring them back to a post-war, devastated country.”

## Incentives to return

Tensions deepened over Zelenskyy’s 2024 proposal to redirect EU social benefits for Ukrainian refugees into Ukraine’s state budget. “Sometimes, a person receives support from both your country and ours... It would be better if Germany, for example, directed

money to Ukraine,” he argued in an interview with ARD.

The policy gained no traction in the EU but was widely seen as an attempt to strip refugees of financial aid. For many already feeling abandoned by Kyiv, it only reinforced their sense of alienation. Instead of incentives to return, they saw yet another reminder that Ukraine valued their money more than their presence.

In three years, Ukraine has done little to make returning an attractive option for refugees. Job programmes offer low-paying construction work, while efforts to lure foreign investors have stalled without an end to the war.

Some pre-war businesses continue investing, but most remain in a holding pattern, drafting post-war entry plans rather than committing real capital.

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For refugees building new lives abroad, these efforts feel distant. With no clear end to the war, many are settling permanently or moving further west. Poland, once a primary destination, is now a transit point, with many Ukrainians relocating to Germany in search of better jobs and higher wages.

Before the war, Germany had around 150,000 Ukrainians; today, that number has **surged** to 1.1 million. The reasons are clear—stronger social safety nets, better pay, and established communities. For many, the decision is not just about security. It is about opportunity.

Ivan (a pseudonym) paid “an enormous sum” to escape Ukraine, fearing conscription. Now a driver in a neighbouring country and is already looking further west—for better pay, stability, and a future beyond war.

Like him, millions of Ukrainians forced abroad still hold Ukrainian passports but now see

their homeland from a different vantage point. Free from both Russian and Ukrainian propaganda, they have first-hand experience with transparent governance and functioning institutions. This has made them one of Ukraine’s most politically engaged electorates.

## Valuable assets

If elections were held today, this diaspora could dramatically shift the outcome—much like Moldova’s Western-leaning voters did in recent **elections**.

Only a third of Ukrainian refugees plan to **return**. But Ukraine can still do better, as these people will be valuable assets for rebuilding the post-war state.



*Only a third of Ukrainian refugees plan to return. But Ukraine can still do better*

Having adapted to transparent governance, digitalised public services, and accountable democracies, they could help reshape Ukraine’s political culture. They know what a functioning system looks like and would push for real reforms, not just symbolic gestures.

These returnees could also bridge the gap between those who stayed and those who left by explaining necessary reforms to a population that has endured war in isolation.

But this will not happen on its own. Ukraine must do more than just end the war. It must engage refugees in reconstruction, guarantee them political voice, and create real incentives for them to return.

Most crucially, it must stop blaming them for wartime struggles—problems the government itself has yet to solve.