

March 2024

Voices in Europe: Experiences, hopes and aspirations of forcibly displaced persons from Ukraine

Executive Summary

Since the onset of Russia's large-scale war against Ukraine, millions of people have been forced to flee their homes in search of a safe haven. This report brings together the results of the Survey of Arriving Migrants from Ukraine (SAM-UKR), conducted by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) in collaboration with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to investigate the prevailing themes of forced displacement from Ukraine, discerned through first-hand testimonies of the affected populations. The Gradus Research company provides an indispensable perspective from Ukraine and enhanced this analysis through a thorough review and insights garnered from own surveys.

State of Play

At the end of August 2023, close to 4.3 million displaced people from Ukraine, primarily Ukrainians, but also including third-country nationals residing in Ukraine before the war, benefited from temporary protection in the 29 EU+ countries (European Union Member States plus Norway and Switzerland). In addition, over 10,000 Ukrainian asylum applicants, some of whom may have migrated before February 2022, were awaiting a decision on international protection and an undetermined number of Ukrainians, who left after February 2022, were granted a residence permit on other grounds. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), there were still 3.6 million internally displaced people in Ukraine in September 2023. While the volume of new registrations has reduced, European and international organisations continue to mobilise resources to address the needs of the displaced population.

To follow these developments, the EUAA and the OECD jointly launched the SAM-UKR project to collect data directly from displaced people from Ukraine. The survey encompasses questions pertaining to demographics, reasons for departure and experiences along the journey, return intentions, life in the host country and future intentions. In addition, an open-ended question allowed respondents to elaborate on aspects that they felt may not have been adequately addressed by the questionnaire, thereby adding nuanced personal perspectives to the survey findings.

The narratives shared by persons compelled to leave Ukraine reflected various themes which ranged from people and family, the experiences of war, life in the host country, legal status considerations,

to the journey itself and future intentions. The sentiments expressed spanned from negative or adverse, notably in the context to war-related experiences to positive, particularly regarding the support from volunteers and the European Union (EU).

Results

People and family

The predominant demographic profile of respondents revealed that the vast majority were Ukrainian citizens (98 %), female (81 %) and more than half travelled with children. Only one third of the adults were accompanied by their spouse, a phenomenon attributed in part to the Martial Law imposing restrictions on most adult men for leaving Ukraine. A third travelled without any dependents. A significant proportion of Ukrainian refugeesⁱ in the receiving countries indicated a notably high level of education, as evidenced by two thirds having completed tertiary education. The main languages spoken by respondents include Ukrainian, Russian, and English, followed at a distance by Polish and German.

Examination of the testimonies revealed a recurring thematic focus on people and family among respondents. This theme frequently intersected with other overarching narratives, such as accounts of war, traumatic travel experiences, access to reception services, and a diverse array of life events and considerations for future intentions. Notably, one in five testimonies specifically highlighted children, shedding light on the extreme hardships and traumas experienced by this group. The testimonies also reflected a significant impact on decision-making with respondents often basing their next steps on the well-being of their children. Other family members, comprising adults, children or parents of the respondents, as well as friends, were often cited as offering support while in displacement, but also as representing a source of anxiety when they were not with the respondents. The responsibility of caring for vulnerable and elderly people emerged as important considerations for the respondents, with the support required for these dependents often acting as a constraining factor in their mobility.

War experiences

People were forced to undergo displacement for multiple reasons. Direct military attacks and the apprehension of potential military attacks were identified as the main reasons prompting the decision to flee Ukraine. Most respondents departed from Ukraine in the first quarter of 2022, with 38% having left in March 2022, while a quarter had previously experienced internal displacement within Ukraine before seeking entry into the EU.

More than one third of respondents provided extensive narratives detailing their experiences from the war in their testimonies. These accounts delved into the trauma and psychological repercussions associated with the war, elaborating on the reasons that compelled them to leave Ukraine. Additionally, vivid descriptions of bombardments, shelling, property destruction and other military actions were put forward. Respondents also reported the deprivation of necessities, such as food, fuel and electricity. The prevailing sentiments expressed prominently featured intense feelings of hopelessness and sadness over the loss of their homes, coupled with trauma resulting from

witnessing first-hand despicable acts of war.

The journey to the EU

Ukraine shares its borders with four EU Member States: Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. Poland has served as the primary point of entry for half of the SAM-UKR respondents. Two thirds of respondents had already reached their preferred destination at the time of participating in the survey and had no intentions of further travel, while one in five expressed uncertainties about their stay, and one in eight were certain they would eventually leave their current host country. The most important factors influencing the choice of host country were safety considerations and employment opportunities, followed by the presence of friends and family as well as educational opportunities for their children.

References to the journey to the EU were present in one fifth of testimonies, with most accounts describing the harsh conditions of evacuating from their homes in Ukraine to the EU border. These accounts highlighted prolonged waits at border crossing points, frequent roadblocks, and journeys marked by a lack of access to water and food. The already arduous circumstance was further aggravated by fear and stress induced by frequent explosions and reported military activities as detailed in the testimonies. In stark contrast, the initial reception upon entering the EU was positive, marked by the assistance of volunteers and offers of complimentary transportation and accommodation. The onwards journey within the EU was also described in positive terms, with ongoing support from both friends and strangers, fostering feelings of safety and appreciation toward the EU.

Protection status

Most respondents had received some form of legal protection status in their current country of residence, predominantly in the form of temporary protection, though one in five had not yet obtained this status at the time of the survey. Those who arrived in 2022 were more likely to have been registered for temporary protection, while regional variations were evident in registration rates. Respondents who had not registered were more likely to reside in Central and Eastern European countries and reported higher hope to return to Ukraine.

The legal status of forcibly displaced people from Ukraine emerged as a significant concern for many respondents who shared their experiences with registration processes and discussed the evolution and understanding of the policy environment and its implications on their lives. Some expressed feelings of anxiety stemming from the broader impact of the war in Ukraine on their future, particularly concerning their rights and the duration of their legal status in the host country. Concurrently, others emphasised the lack of available information in their language regarding policies and regulations.

Experiences and needs in the host country

The survey also studied the experiences and needs of respondents in their host countries, including housing and employment. Initially, most displaced people resided in reception centres or with local families on a temporary basis before transitioning to government-provided housing or renting their own apartments. Government support and wages, along with personal savings constituted the

primary sources of income. While half of the respondents indicated being employed, the employment landscape was characterised by a concentration in low- skilled positions, revealing widespread skills mismatches. The primary reasons for not being in employment included language barriers and childcare responsibilities. Most children were enrolled in local schools, while a minority continued remote learning from Ukraine, especially among those with intentions to return to Ukraine. The most pressing needs identified included learning the host country's language, financial support, employment and education for children. Satisfaction with provided services tended to be more positive when respondents were already situated in their preferred destination.

The most prevalent theme addressed by respondents in their testimonies pertained to their experiences in the host country. Within this narrative, expressions of gratitude and appreciation toward the EU, volunteers and charitable organisations, as well as local residents in the host countries were reported. Many testimonies often included a nuanced blend of both positive and negative sentiments. Specifically, respondents often provided feedback on how certain services related to accommodation, employment language learning, health and education could be enhanced to provide better support. Finding longer-term affordable accommodation was a salient issue, frequently intersecting with the difficulty of securing employment when not proficient in the local language, or when job opportunities within the respondent's respective field were scarce. Factors such as a lack of childcare, or the duty to care for elderly or disabled family members, and the prevalence of low-skilled jobs were additional considerations raised in relation to employment challenges. Language training and its potential to improve employment and integration prospects was frequently and positively mentioned. However, a subset of respondents questioned the appropriateness of the level or mode of training.

The availability and extent of financial support were described in detail, expressing both appreciation and occasional frustration over administrative burdens or the absence of services offered in their own native language. Medical care emerged as a significant concern, especially for those with urgent health needs. Some respondents reported inadequate medical coverage or having different expectations of these processes, while others appreciated the high-quality treatment received for chronic diseases or emergency situations. Access to education was sometimes constrained by administrative burdens or a limited number of places, and sentiments regarding inclusiveness of displaced people varied.

The experiences of war had a detrimental impact on the mental well-being of respondents, with many disclosing feelings of stress, anxiety, hopelessness, panic attacks, and depression. These challenges were compounded by the uncertainty in their lives in the host country, due to difficulties in adapting, securing employment, and finding affordable accommodation, in addition to constant concerns for families still affected by the conflict in Ukraine. The significance of psychological support was underscored, with respondents explicitly mentioning the importance of having a support network and a local community in the host country, as well as the value of safety and shelter towards regaining psychological well-being.

Future intentions

While the conflict persists, most respondents mentioned not having been back to Ukraine since their departure, while some have made one or more visits, mostly to visit other family and friends, including partners who stayed behind, or check on their properties and belongings. The evidence suggests

that those who left accompanied by their partner are less inclined to return after the war, and almost half of respondents expressed plans for family members to join them in their current country. There was a geographical disparity in intentions to return after the war, with those in countries neighbouring Ukraine more likely to return than those elsewhere, for example in Scandinavia. The primary reasons cited for intending to return included family reunification, resuming their previous way of life and contributing to the reconstruction of their home country. Conversely, those who did not intend to return mentioned concerns about safety, the deteriorating economic situation in Ukraine and the presence of better opportunities in their current host country as the main reasons influencing their decisions to stay.

The desire to return to Ukraine to actively contribute to the country's reconstruction was elaborated upon in the testimonies. However, this sentiment was not always unanimous within families. Dissatisfaction with life in the EU, including challenges in accessing employment due to language barriers or perceived lower quality of life compared to Ukraine, and a strong desire to contribute to the war effort against Russia were among the main reasons cited for considering a return.

Some respondents mentioned an intention to move onwards from their current host country due to bureaucratic hurdles as well as uncertainty about their longer term legal status. The perceived prospects of increased employment opportunities, better integration schemes, and the presence of friends and family or the diaspora were indicated as reasons to contemplate a move to another EU country.

Reasons to avoid returning to Ukraine included the fear that their homes and lives in Ukraine have been destroyed, anxiety stemming from war experiences, and a reluctance to undergo repeated displacement. The desire to stay in the EU was underpinned by perceived better employment opportunities for the respondents and education for their children, along with the hope for a better future.

ⁱ The term “refugee” is used in this report to refer to all persons who are fleeing from Russia’s war against Ukraine since February 2022, including individuals not only with a formal refugee status (as per the Geneva Convention) but also subsidiary and temporary protection (as in the case of most arrivals from Ukraine) and other legal bases for stay.