

Returns to unsafe frontline areas: exploring the drivers of return and the experiences of returnees in Zaporizka Oblast

September 2026 | Ukraine

Introduction

As displacement patterns in Ukraine have become relatively stable, a notable share of returnees continues to return to areas within reach of the front line. Returns within 30 kilometres of the front line or border with the Russian Federation account for roughly one-third of return movements¹. Decisions to return often reflect an interplay of economic exhaustion, housing accessibility, psychological and relational factors, and access to familiar public, administrative, and social services. Understanding these factors and how they interact is important for humanitarian actors seeking to support vulnerable people displacing or returning to areas where security risks persist.

In July 2026, REACH, in partnership with the non-governmental organisation The Tenth of April, conducted a qualitative assessment to provide a nuanced understanding of why people return to unsafe areas of Zaporizka Oblast, defined as within 0-to-30 kilometres of the front line, and the challenges they face upon returning. The assessment aims to inform targeting and response strategies for organisations engaged in return, reintegration, and protection programming in the oblast and across communities along the front line.

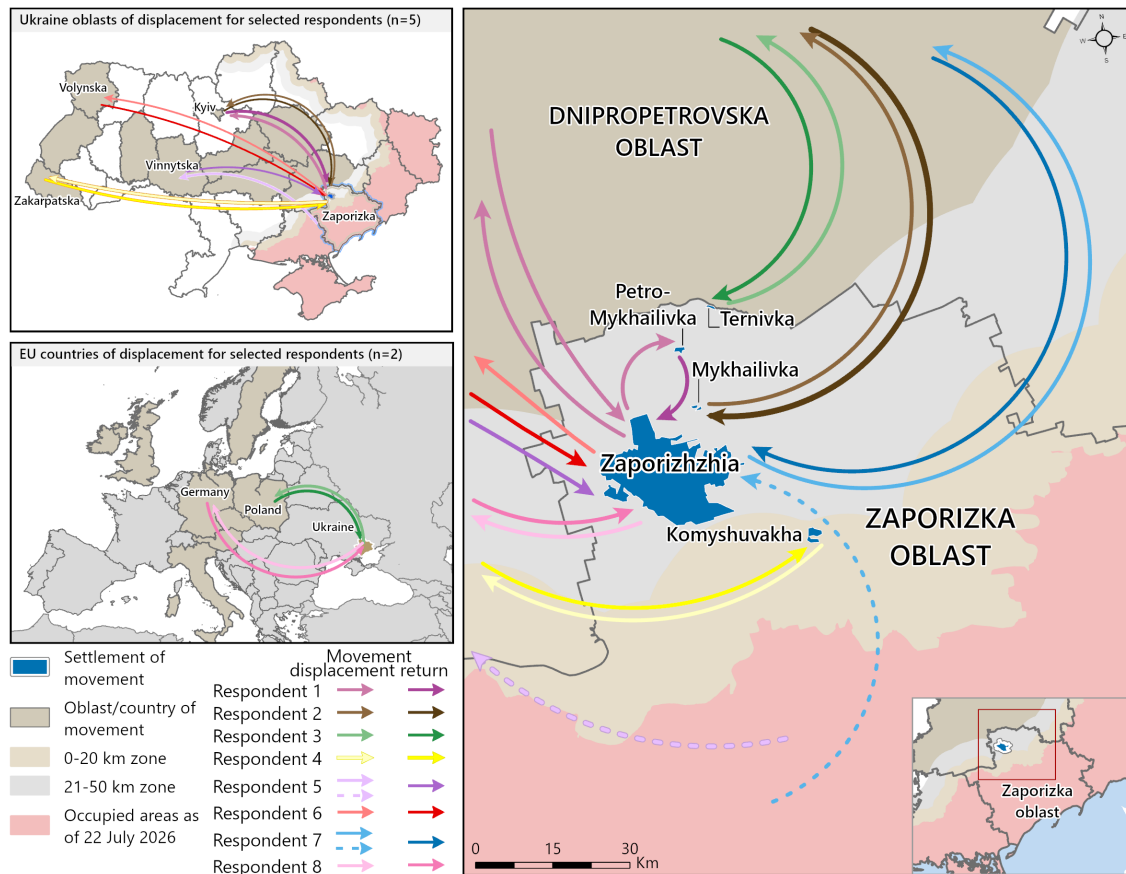
The assessment sought to answer three main research questions: *What are the primary drivers of return to unsafe areas of Zaporizka Oblast? How do returnees navigate the security, economic, and social challenges present in their home communities upon return? And what are the most pressing unmet needs and support priorities of this population?*

Data collection comprised 30 semi-structured interviews with returnees across Zaporizka, Mykhailivska, and Petro-Mykhailivska hromadas. Interview data were analysed thematically to identify the factors shaping return decisions and the experiences of returnees after coming home.

Key Findings

- **Relational and emotional considerations featured in almost all respondents' accounts of return (28/30)**, including emotional well-being and belonging, family considerations, community and social ties, and attachment to place. Several respondents described accepting a worsened financial situation upon return in exchange for improved psychosocial well-being associated with being home.
- **Economic pressures during displacement played a substantial role in return decisions but return often did not lead to better economic conditions.** Housing and living costs, depleted savings, and difficulty accessing stable employment during displacement placed considerable strain on households, while access to owned property and familiar employment opportunities made return more attractive. Financial recovery upon return remained mixed, with several respondents describing ongoing precarity tied to unstable employment, low wages, or debt accumulated during displacement.
- **Security conditions had not improved upon return and rarely factored into the decision to come back.** Most respondents (21/30) reported ongoing danger in their settlement of return, and roughly one-third stated that security played no role in their decision. Where the location of displacement became less safe, particularly for a small group displaced to Kyiv, this operated as a push factor toward return.
- **Respondents displaced from temporarily occupied territory within Zaporizka Oblast faced distinct housing, administrative, and psychosocial challenges upon return to Government-controlled parts of the region.** Unable to return to their settlement of origin, this subgroup often lacked owned property in their place of return and encountered additional administrative barriers. At the same time, several described returning to Government-controlled Zaporizka Oblast as a way of being geographically and emotionally closer to a home they could no longer access.
- **Unmet needs upon return skewed toward immediate assistance.** Among respondents who articulated unmet needs, commonly mentioned forms of support included cash assistance, support with housing and utility costs, essential goods and non-food items, and winter preparedness. Longer-term needs stated included access to better-quality employment, psychosocial support, and children's socialisation and education.

Map 1: Selected respondents' displacement and return movements (8/30)



Context: Returns In Ukraine and Zaporizka Oblast

Return movements in Ukraine have slowed relative to the first years of the full-scale invasion but continue to represent an important component of the country's displacement dynamics. As of March 2026, an estimated 4.2 million individuals had returned to their areas of origin or habitual residence in Ukraine, representing 14% of the population living in Government-controlled areas². While most large-scale return movements were completed in the first two years of the full-scale war, more recent movements have continued at a smaller rate and have become increasingly characterised by intra-oblast rather than inter-oblast movement³.

A particularly important concern is the phenomenon of returns to unsafe zones. Returns within 30 kilometres of the front line or border with the Russian Federation have accounted for roughly one-third of all internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugee returns since February 2022, corresponding to an estimated 1.6 million people. The large majority of these returns have been to urban settlements (92%)⁴. Unlike returns elsewhere in the country, these are rarely explained by an improving security situation: IDPs returning to areas within 30 kilometres of the frontline are instead most commonly driven by personal and familial considerations, such as family reunification or a need to care for older relatives who remained behind, while push factors such as economic and housing challenges in the place of displacement appear at higher rates among

recent returnees⁵. The demographic profile of households returning to unsafe areas remains similar to returnee households elsewhere in the country, with around half of returns to within 30 kilometres of the frontline involving households with children⁶.

An estimated 22% of the Zaporizka Oblast's population are internally displaced individuals (IDPs), 11% returned, and the remainder were never displaced⁷. The large majority of IDPs in the oblast had displaced within it (86%), and six in ten reported their pre-displacement home was in an area now under occupation⁸. Recent returns taking place during the first half of 2026 accounted for one in ten returnees⁹. Zaporizka Oblast is also among the oblasts with high humanitarian needs: approximately 20% of Zaporizka Oblast households were classified as in extreme need¹⁰. This pattern of return is unfolding against a backdrop of intensifying hostilities: as of early September 2026, Russian forces recorded further territorial gains in Zaporizka Oblast¹¹.

These trends make Zaporizka Oblast an important area for understanding why people return to unsafe locations. The oblast continues to experience high levels of displacement and return, alongside ongoing insecurity linked to the Russian Federation advances. While existing studies provide quantitative data on the main drivers of return, there is less evidence on how returnees themselves describe the reasons behind their decisions and the challenges they face afterwards. This assessment addresses that gap through qualitative interviews with returnees in Zaporizka, Mykhailivska, and Petro-Mykhailivska hromadas,

aiming to inform humanitarian programming, targeting, and response strategies for organisations engaged in protection, return, and reintegration work in the Oblast.

How displacement and return decisions were made

Displacement

For most respondents, the decision to displace was sudden rather than planned. Several respondents described gradually losing their tolerance for the security situation, while others recalled a specific event that triggered departure. Some respondents (6/30) described leaving with little to no advance preparation: *"It was a very spontaneous decision; the panic got to me in one day. In the morning, I was still at work. In the evening, I called my boss in tears that I wouldn't be there tomorrow because I was leaving. At six in the morning, I was already at the station with two backpacks and my child"* (respondent from Mykhailivka, returned from Germany). One respondent's displacement was triggered by a direct strike on her own home in Zaporizhzhia: a Shahed drone landed under her apartment window, destroying walls and furniture in her home, burning her family's vehicles and injuring both her and her children, leaving them to be evacuated by a local charity organisation.

A smaller group (3/30) described displacement as a planned process, including arranging transport, employment, and disposing of property before departure. A respondent from Mykhailivka described giving away livestock to neighbours before leaving, so that nothing would require the family to return. Another contacted a volunteer coordinating evacuations and compared several destination countries before leaving.

Household separation during displacement was a common pattern (10/30), most frequently because a spouse stayed behind for work or because military-aged male household members were unable to leave at all (4/30). Other cases were linked to caregiving responsibilities or relatives' unwillingness to leave.

Most respondents chose to displace because of worsening security conditions in their settlements of origin. In some cases, however, displacement abroad was understood from the outset as voluntary and temporary rather than permanent. One respondent described leaving Zaporizhzhia primarily to take a break from the security situation: *"Well, firstly, when we left Zaporizhzhia with our daughter, we definitely did not go to stay abroad to live, but simply to change the situation for a while"* (respondent from Zaporizhzhia, returned from the UK). For two younger respondents displacement abroad was influenced by a 2025 legislative change permitting men up to the age of 22 to travel abroad. This created a temporary opportunity for eligible young men and their partners to leave Ukraine for short-term earnings while still expecting to return.

Return

Returns were almost evenly divided between respondents who described their decision as planned (17/30) and those who characterised it as sudden (13/30). Planned returns were typically preceded by concrete logistical preparation, including saving up money for the move, arranging housing and employment in advance, quitting a job, ending rental agreements, closing out registrations abroad, and booking transport ahead of time to secure lower fares. Sudden returns, by contrast, often followed a prolonged accumulation of financial, social or psychological strain that culminated in a specific triggering event, such as a rent increase, workplace conflict, move-out deadline, or reaching a point of exhaustion with the displacement situation.

"Honestly, [not planned]. One day I simply decided I had enough. I have always supported my family and myself, but there I could not do it. So, one day I just decided to return because this is my home."

– Returnee from Zaporizhzhia
(displaced in Cherkaska Oblast)

Many respondents relied on personal networks to inform their return decision (9/30). Respondents commonly relied on relatives, friends, or neighbours who had remained in or returned to the area for updates on security conditions. Among these respondents, some reported asking their contacts about the state of their property before deciding to return: a respondent from Mykhailivka, before returning from Kyiv, had called her neighbors to ask to check on whether her house was still standing. A separate group (3/30) relied on continuous monitoring of news and Telegram channels, both to inform their decisions and to stay connected with their communities of origin:

"My son was nine when we left, and even when we were in Khmelnytskyi, he was constantly checking Telegram channels. I'd ask him, 'What are you doing?' and he'd say, 'There's an alert in Zaporizhzhia. I'm checking where it's headed.' I'd tell him, 'Why do you need that?' and he'd reply, 'Maybe I can warn my friends so they can hide.'"

– Returnee from Zaporizhzhia
(displaced in Khmelnytska Oblast)

While some families reunited upon return, family separation persisted for many respondents: 11 of 30 respondents described still living apart from at least one family member after returning. Separation after return was reported by several older respondents (4/11) whose adult children had settled elsewhere for work. Some younger respondents aged less than 30 years old (3/11) also reported being separated from parents who chose to remain abroad.

Respondents' accounts point to displacement being most often driven by an immediate or accumulating security threat, whereas return tended to reflect a broader calculation involving housing, finances, family, social ties, and emotional wellbeing. Even returns described as sudden frequently followed a prolonged period of reassessing the costs and benefits of remaining displaced.

Caregiving responsibilities were employment barriers for some respondents (3/30). A respondent from Petro-Mykhailivka, displaced in Poland, reported searching for work but finding nothing compatible with childcare, since open positions required 12-to-13-hour shifts. Another respondent from Mykhailivka, displaced in Kyiv, said she would have sought work if not for the ongoing responsibility of caring for two family members with disabilities.

Where formal employment was deemed inaccessible, three respondents relied on informal work to get by: *"It was hard for me, yes, but we made acquaintances. I'd go clean someone's house, earn a little extra here, something else there, little by little"* (respondent from Mykhailivka, returned from Poland). A respondent from Mykhailivka relied on casual jobs during his displacement in Kyiv (*"help around, screw in a light bulb, fix a switch"*), stating that better employment opportunities might have prevented his return.

For some respondents who managed to secure employment during displacement, demanding working conditions served as a direct push factor (3/30). In all three cases, younger women displaced abroad described work that was available but physically or psychologically difficult to sustain. One, displaced in Austria, pointed to the combined weight of a language barrier and physically demanding labour, saying she might have stayed had the work not worn her down. Another respondent, displaced in Poland, framed her decision explicitly around preserving

"The work there was really hard... I just didn't want to ruin my health, for what? Just to live there in some sort of 'safety'..."

– Returnee from Zaporizhzhia
(displaced in Poland)

Some returnees (6/30) reported continuing to work throughout their displacement by shifting to remote arrangements. Examples of occupations held remotely include teaching, translation work, and speech therapy. For most of these respondents, remote work meant continuing in the same position and with the same employer they had prior to displacement, rather than finding new work in their displacement location. A respondent from Zaporizhzhia described this as a decisive factor in being able to leave: *"I work as a teacher remotely. This saved me. That's why we were able to break away. Because if there was a job, say, tied to a permanent place, then there would be no options at all, because there would be nothing to live for."*

Employment functioned as a pull factor, primarily through the ability to return to a prior job or workplace. Eleven respondents reported finding work or improving their employment situation after returning, most often by resuming a position they had held before displacement. For example, a respondent from Mykhailivka returned to the same role within the cultural sector she had before the war. Other respondents found new employment: a respondent from Petro-Mykhailivka described an improvement in her financial situation because she started formal employment

upon return, which she did not have prior to displacement.

Return also allowed a small number of respondents (2/30) to re-establish or start a business. A respondent from Zaporizhzhia cited the difficulty of relocating a business that depended on dedicated workspace as a reason for returning: *"It would be very problematic to move my business there, because while I still have a little bit of income from it, it requires additional space that my mother does not have in the apartment."* Another respondent from Mykhailivka, who had worked remotely as a speech therapist during her displacement in Sweden, used savings and a family contribution to open her own speech-therapy development centre for children, describing it as something she had originally expected to do only much later in life.

Financial Situation Upon Return

Return did not result in employment recovery for all respondents. Several respondents (4/30), all from Zaporizhzhia, remained unemployed at the time of interview, for reasons ranging from having returned too recently or facing health-related limitations to not yet having found suitable work. One other respondent from Mykhailivka described relying on informal labour upon return together with his spouse.

Financial conditions upon return varied notably across the sample. Several respondents (5/30) described their income as sufficient to cover basic needs but leaving no margin for savings or additional expenses. A small number of respondents (3/30) reported a financial situation broadly comparable to that before displacement, with one respondent from Mykhailivka specifying that his household's financial situation remained *"consistently low"* throughout the displacement process and upon return.

Financial precarity upon return was more widely reported (10/30), particularly in relation to housing costs, lack of stable employment, low salaries, and debt. A returnee from Zaporizhzhia linked this precarity to housing insecurity: *"Here, you're only able to live as long as you have money. Tomorrow, if I can't pay the rent because I genuinely have nothing left to pay with, that's it. We'd end up on the street."* Another respondent from Mykhailivka described relying on small loans to cover costs such as school preparation or children's activities.

Several returnees (4/30), all of whom had been displaced abroad, described their finances as worse after returning compared to their economic situation during displacement. A respondent from Zaporizhzhia who had been displaced in Austria, attributed this to the gap between wages and living costs in Ukraine. Another returnee from Mykhailivka who had come back from Germany contrasted her current part-time employment with the combination of full-time work and government assistance available during displacement.

Access to Services

Access to Administrative Services

Government services and administrative access rarely drove returns. Experiences differed considerably depending on the place of origin and displacement.

Many respondents displaced abroad (9/17) described their experience of administrative services, ranging from functional to unwelcoming. Several respondents described access to assigned caseworkers, consulate support, and help with school enrolment and document translation. A respondent from Petro-Mykhailivka expressed satisfaction with the local government authorities in Poland, describing them as centralised and efficient. At the other end, a respondent from Zaporizhzhia described an absence of institutional support and a dismissive attitude from Polish officials: *“There was no help at all here. No help from Polish government employees [...] the attitude is like... ‘Again, oh my God, come on, what do you want?’”* A respondent from Mykhailivka cited feeling deprioritised relative to local citizens at the job centre.

Among respondents displaced within Ukraine (16/30), several (5/16) described the ability to obtain IDP registration with relative ease, including crediting digital registration through Diia. However, respondents originally from temporarily occupied territories faced distinct administrative obstacles. Three of the eight respondents in this group described difficulties related to documentation and IDP payments: a respondent originally displaced in Zaporizhzhia temporarily lost payments due to a records dispute between Pavlohrad and Zaporizhzhia. Another respondent who returned to Zaporizhzhia was unable to register her youngest child, born during displacement, because the family’s address remained in occupied territory. Another respondent displaced to Zaporizhzhia and Lvivska Oblast described a five-month delay in the issuance of a pension certificate, which she resolved only after escalating the matter to the government appeals hotline. While limited in number, these examples suggest that respondents displaced from occupied areas may face distinct documentation and registration challenges compared to other returnees.

Access to Education

Enrolment in education, both within Ukraine and abroad, was generally described as unproblematic. Some returnees (8/30) discussed their children’s enrollment abroad, most describing the process as straightforward. One respondent who displaced to Ireland with her mother as a minor described satisfaction with the enrolment process. Another respondent reported no issues with enrolling her eldest child in a school in Sweden but stated that her youngest could only attend kindergarten conditional on the respondent attending Swedish classes.

Some respondents displaced within Ukraine (3/30) reported keeping their children enrolled remotely with their school of origin rather than transferring them to a local school at

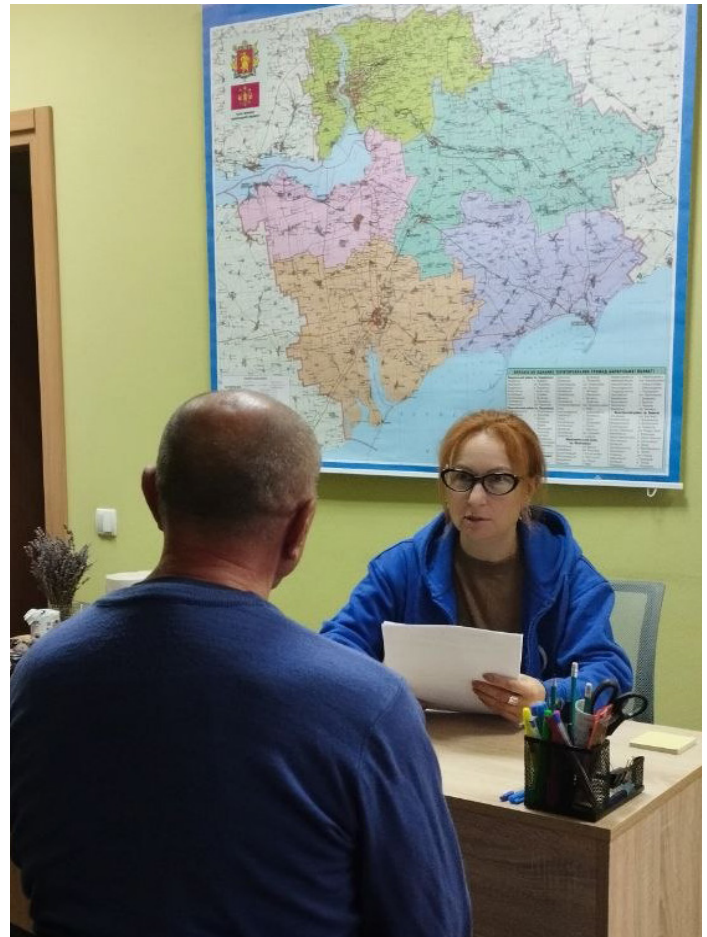


Photo 1: A colleague from REACH’s partner The Tenth of April conducting an interview in Zaporizhzhia

the displacement location; none of them reported facing any administrative difficulties with this process.

For some households with school-age children (4/30), the possibility of resuming in-person education in Zaporizka Oblast contributed directly to the decision to return. *“Schools with shelters began to open in Zaporizhzhia, and our daughter studied offline for a year. She went to school offline, saw the teachers in person, and that’s why it also played a role.”* (a respondent from Zaporizhzhia, returned from Dnipropetrovska Oblast). Two respondents from Petro-Mykhailivka timed their return around the start of the school year to prepare children to start school in their settlement of origin. For a respondent from Mykhailivka, however, in-person education had not resumed at the time of interview, and her children remained in remote learning.

Despite few administrative barriers to enrollment, some respondents (6/30) described difficulties with their children’s social and emotional adjustment during displacement, ranging in severity. One respondent from Mykhailivka described her daughter’s refusal to eat as a direct effect of the strain of displacement, citing it as the specific reason for the family’s return. Another respondent, also from Mykhailivka, described her son as socially isolated at his Swedish school, being the only Ukrainian pupil, while respondent from Petro-Mykhailivka described a hostile attitude at her child’s kindergarten in Poland which *“came less from the children themselves than from their parents”*.

Three other respondents described difficulty adjusting socially and linguistically at school abroad as a contributing factor in their households' return decisions.

A few respondents referenced pursuing higher education in their accounts of return drivers. One respondent in her early twenties from Zaporizhzhia, reported returning to Ukraine to pursue of a university degree which she believed she would not have been able to seek abroad: *"I would have liked to go to college, to study, but in Europe I simply could not do it, because I did not have enough of those skills to enter."* Another older respondent decided to begin a bachelor's degree as a coping mechanism to distract from the war, the completion of which also served as a factor for return.

Another case illustrates how family separation may persist even when all family members have returned from abroad to Ukraine. A respondent who returned from Cherkaska Oblast moved back to Zaporizhzhia, while his university-aged son settled in Lviv. The respondent felt that Zaporizhzhia could not currently provide the in-person university and social environment his son needed, while he himself could not find suitable employment in Lviv. The family therefore remained geographically separated.

Access to Healthcare

Healthcare access did not emerge as a widespread barrier during displacement, particularly for respondents displaced within Ukraine. However, several respondents described familiarity with healthcare providers, shorter perceived waiting times, and continuity of care in their home communities as contributing factors in return decisions.

Several respondents (5/30) of different age groups described deterioration in their health during displacement. This included flare-ups of chronic conditions as well as perceived declines in physical well-being, associated with changes in lifestyle; one of the younger respondents attributed this decline to a lower standard of the sports facilities available to him in the settlement of displacement. Two respondents reported getting diagnosed with depression during displacement: *"I burned out very quickly. And I was just very tired. I began to have health problems and depression there"*.

One of the respondents, despite seeking both psychological counseling and psychiatric treatment, reported thinking that returning home was the only way for her to feel better: *"Honestly, I couldn't get past it psychologically. Not even with the psychologist, nothing. Eventually my psychologist herself gave up trying to talk me out of it and said, 'just go already'. She said one of her clients had also gone back to Kyiv and started feeling better without psychologists, without antidepressants"*.

Beyond acute medical needs, access to healthcare functioned as a broader return driver for several respondents (6/30), framed primarily around trust and familiarity with known providers. One respondent from Mykhailivka described this in terms of continuity of care: *"There we were, as they say, new people, but back home our own doctors already knew us. It was easier at home, and*

the doctors already knew our conditions well." Other respondents gave comparable accounts, citing the availability or quality of specific routine services as comparatively more accessible in Ukraine than at their displacement location.

"But healthcare, let's say, leaves something to be desired. You can get to see a doctor after half a year — by which point you don't need it anymore; they'll carry you out feet first. Our healthcare, I'll say, is simply fantastic by comparison. They have real difficulty with it. Some medicines that we can buy in Ukraine without a prescription are only available there with a prescription."

– Returnee from Mykhailivka
(displaced in Poland)

Experiences of healthcare services among the respondents displaced abroad were mixed. Several (5/17) provided positive accounts including free treatment, access to Ukrainian interpreters, and ability to seek services from Ukrainian-speaking providers where available.

Among the bottlenecks commonly reported were wait times, language barriers, and difficulty getting prescriptions the respondents deemed necessary (5/17). A respondent displaced in Poland described having to travel to another city for a routine medical exam and struggling to communicate throughout the process, having waited from January to June for a single specialist appointment. One respondent displaced within Czechia shared she felt afraid to seek medical care because of the inability to explain her condition adequately in the local language. Another respondent referenced dissatisfaction with the way her child was not being treated by medical professionals in Sweden: *"My daughter had this terrible cough, to the point of vomiting. And she had a fever, and they'd say, 'that's normal, why are you worried'. I said, 'prescribe her some medicine.' [...] A month, two months, three months — everything's 'normal'. That was, of course, awful"*. This respondent ended up treating her daughter with over-the-counter medicine brought from Ukraine by another recently displaced person.

Many respondents displaced within Ukraine, by contrast, described healthcare access within Ukraine as largely unproblematic (12/16). Examples included obtaining a referral in the location of displacement using Ukraine's electronic referral system, receiving free vaccination, and accessing examination and medication for family members with disability: *"We went to the doctor in Lviv itself. We were registered there. From the Lviv Regional Council, he (my son) was given free medicines in full. [...] During these years, he was treated there. He was examined in a military clinic very quickly within three to four days. We did all possible examinations for free and got prescribed some drugs. That is, he received very high-quality medical care there"* (respondent from Zaporizhzhia, returned from Lvivska Oblast).

daughters managed legal paperwork in Germany: “My children didn’t want me to leave. I was very much, well, I don’t know, maybe it’s a blunt way to put it, a useful presence; someone they could constantly rely on for support. They didn’t want me to leave.” A different respondent described a return prompted by her adult son’s improved health and independence after a period of supporting him abroad, talking about the timing of her return as tied to the resolution of a specific caregiving role.

Attachment to Community and Broader Social Ties

Community and social ties were cited by many as a further driver of return (11/30). One respondent described wanting to return from Ireland to Zaporizhzhia specifically because of two friends who lived nearby and had wanted her to come back. Another respondent from Zaporizhzhia, displaced in Volynska Oblast, described her return in terms of being needed at a volunteer centre where she wove camouflage netting and had built strong social ties. Another respondent from Mykhailivka described the emotional value of being surrounded by people who had known him since childhood, explaining that this made hardship easier to bear emotionally.

Limited social integration in the community of displacement was an important push factor, reported by 14 respondents, a comparable number of people displaced within Ukraine (8/14) and abroad (6/14).

Among people displaced within Ukraine, difficulties integrating tended to focus on social distance rather than outright exclusion. One person from Mykhailivka said she felt “like [she] was unneeded” in her place of displacement, while another, also from Mykhailivka described feeling like “a guest there” despite cordial interactions with neighbours in Kyiv. A further respondent in a larger city of displacement pointed to scale itself as a barrier, explaining that loneliness was felt most acutely there, contrasting it to her smaller settlement of Petro-Mykhailivka where she felt “people treat each other more kindly.”

Among refugees, integration difficulties were tied to language barriers or cultural differences. One respondent displaced in Poland noted difficulty forming relationships with local people in her town of displacement due to not knowing the language, thus limiting her socialisation to her partner whom she displaced with. Other respondents mentioned only being able to form surface-level connections: “Well, I did feel [lonely], in that there wasn’t anyone to go out for a walk with, to sit and talk with” (respondent from Petro-Mykhailivka, returned from Italy). Some people reported attempting to stick to communities of Ukrainians abroad; some faced relative success with finding friends among the Ukrainian diaspora (e.g., respondent from Zaporizhzhia displaced in Austria), while others reported feeling a sense of hostility from their compatriots.

Aside from limited social integration, some respondents highlighted experiences of discrimination (11/30). This trend was more prominent for respondents displaced abroad (9/11), including two cases where the respondents

felt discriminated against not by the local people but by fellow Ukrainians abroad: “I was fired from that workplace because of the clash between Eastern Ukraine and Western Ukraine languages. I spoke mostly Russian, and they spoke mostly Ukrainian. They didn’t like it. When I moved to a new place, they set me up, and I was simply fired on my own birthday” (respondent from Zaporizhzhia, returned from Poland/Germany). As for negative experiences with locals, respondents mostly highlighted xenophobic attitudes at work and in school. One respondent shared that her children would get sideways looks and hear statements about them “being refugees, them having nothing” in their school in Czechia. Some respondents who were displaced at the beginning of the full-scale invasion reported noticing a gradual worsening of the attitude towards them over time, which eventually prompted them to leave.

“We didn’t really make friends with anyone at all. There are loads of Ukrainians, but they’re the sort who’ve been living there for years—seven or eight years, to be precise—and they’ve settled in Poland, so they’re not at all keen on chatting to you. I mean, I got the impression that the Poles treat us a bit better than the Ukrainians who’ve been living there for ages.”

– Returnee from Zaporizhzhia
(displaced in Poland)

The testimonies suggest that relational and emotional considerations, spanning emotional well-being, family, community, and attachment to both home and settlement, generally outweighed economic drivers of return in this sample. Other times, emotional and financial motivations overlapped. For example, for a respondent in Zaporizhzhia, the ability to return to her volunteer work was mostly driven by a sense of contributing to a cause and community she perceived as important, though she said that being paid for it was “an additional reason to return.” Similarly, for several respondents returning to their own houses this was not only a matter of financial advantage but also emotional investment.

Security Factors and Coping with Continued Risk

Security Considerations

Accounts of improved security did not emerge as a prominent pull factor for respondents in this sample. Only two respondents, both from Mykhailivka, cited the perception that the situation has “quieted down” as a contributing factor to their decision to return. Generally, respondents described security as not decisive in their decision to return. For a small but notable subgroup, worsening conditions in the place of displacement acted as a push factor towards returning.

Across Zaporizhzhia, Mykhailivka, and Petro-Mykhailivka, respondents consistently described security conditions as unchanged or deteriorated compared to before their displacement. Respondents from Zaporizhzhia often noted the emergence of less predictable threats, particularly First-Person View (FPV)

drones and guided aerial bombs, alongside more familiar threats, such as missiles and Shahed drones. Some associated these threats with a reduced ability to anticipate danger:

"This is such an unhealthy perception — you feel safe when you see a Shahed or a KAB flying at you, because at least you know it's flying and can get behind the walls. But with FPV drones... two weeks ago, I saw one fly overhead, then return, and hit the building through the window. And there wasn't even an alarm. After that it became a little scarier, because you don't even know when to be afraid."

– Returnee from Zaporizhzhia
(displaced in Kirovohradska Oblast)

Respondents in Mykhailivka generally described the settlement as calmer than Zaporizhzhia city, with several noting relief at increased distance from intense shelling even as they acknowledged that strikes had already reached the settlement and that no one had truly grown used to the risk. Returnees to Petro-Mykhailivka described a similar environment to Mykhailivka, reporting a sense of relative safety but worries about the security situation.

Many respondents (11/30) stated that security considerations played no role in their return decision. Several explicitly noted that they expected or already knew the return location to be more dangerous than their place of displacement. One respondent from Mykhailivka expected greater danger upon return, but other problems outweighed the fear. Another respondent explained that social isolation abroad, combined with regular contact with friends and colleagues back home, made security risks feel less important in her decision to return.

Respondents often indicated that, although they recognised the continued security risks, they did not consider them severe enough to prevent their return: *"Let's put it this way, everything in Zaporizhzhia is not so scary that it would be scary to return here"* (respondent from Zaporizhzhia, returned from Volynska Oblast).

A small group of three respondents, all displaced in Kyiv, described a deteriorating security situation there as a driver of their return¹². One respondent explained that increased shelling in Kyiv made her reconsider the notion of safety within Ukraine altogether. Facing insecurity in both locations, she preferred to return home to Petro-Mykhailivka than remain in displacement. She described the immediate lead-up to her return as marked by nighttime mass strikes and hours spent in shelters with little sleep. Another respondent from Mykhailivka described a similar reversal of expectations: *"I went to my relatives, thinking that Kyiv was a more protected city. Then it turned out that Kyiv started being shelled too. It was even more frightening for me there than here. And I came back"*

Coping Strategies

Respondents' accounts suggested that family, social ties, and a sense of community helped them cope with continued insecurity after return, even though these did not reduce the underlying physical risk. Very few

respondents referenced more conventional safety measures: one respondent from Zaporizhzhia described everyone in his family having a military first-aid kit, including a tourniquet, and intentionally renting ground-floor housing.

Family and social contact were the most frequently cited coping mechanism with continued insecurity (11/30). Several respondents described family reunification after prolonged separation as a comforting factor in the face of security risk. One respondent described hugging her husband and children during shelling, while another pointed to neighbors gathering over tea and conversation as something that *"makes things easier"*.

"Safer? Well, safer in what sense? I don't know that I feel safety exactly. Well, that I'm not alone. That there are people like me here, that it's a whole community, and we're together. We help each other, given these circumstances. It somehow motivated people to support each other, even in small details. Even bringing over some groceries, and you understand you've already supported someone..."

– Returnee from Mykhailivka
(displaced in Germany)

Among other coping strategies, a small number of respondents (3/30) described routine, land, and small domestic tasks as psychological anchors: one respondent from Mykhailivka called her garden her *"therapist,"* a way of getting her mind off the war. Some people also referenced a sense of being home as a grounding factor: one man said the city of Zaporizhzhia itself *"supports [him]"*. Some respondents had difficulty attributing their coping to any specific factor: *"What makes my life here acceptable? I don't know, plain optimism, some kind of hope. Logically, I understand that the situation could still get worse rather than better, but nonetheless I hope things will somehow work out"* (respondent from Ternivka, returned from Poland).

Unmet Needs Upon Return

Most respondents (19/30) articulated at least one unmet need or needed support after return. These needs fell broadly into two groups: immediate financial and material needs, particularly financial assistance, housing and utilities, basic items and winter preparedness; and longer-term needs related to employment, healthcare and psychosocial well-being.

Financial support was the most frequently requested form of assistance (5/30). The request was most often tied to the cost of living. For instance, one respondent from Mykhailivka explained that a full paycheck now covered groceries and utilities and little else given rising prices. Another older respondent originally from an occupied settlement residing in Zaporizhzhia took up employment as a street cleaner to afford the living expenses in the city.

Housing-related needs were cited by 4 of 30 respondents and clustered around the burden of rent and utility costs. One respondent from Zaporizhzhia described housing as the single overriding need, stating that *"everything else is secondary"* and that assistance with rent would substantially

reduce the household's financial pressure.

A small number of respondents (2/30) also reported needing WASH interventions and energy assistance.

One respondent from Mykhailivka referred to generators, while another person from Petro-Mykhailivka described needing to resolve a long-standing water instability issue: *"It's very bad with our water supply in the settlement. It's all been sad, long-standing, and hopeless. [...] Bringing in water would be good [...] Because drilling a well is expensive. It's basically all the money we'd manage to save up in a season, we'd need to put it all toward drilling a well."*

Winterisation support and in-kind assistance were cited by a small number of respondents (3/30):

"You know, you can never really have too many material resources, and when you've lost everything, that kind of support becomes essential. Even receiving food assistance is very important, because when you go to the store, nobody gives you anything for free. And when you have children and elderly parents to care for, it's especially difficult."

– Returnee from Zaporizhzhia
(displaced in Khmelnytska Oblast)

One respondent, a single parent from Zaporizhzhia, reported needing basic items such as cleaning products and washing powder, alongside the more pressing needs to clothe his son before winter.

Unmet needs related to children's wellbeing made up another theme (4/30). Some respondents requested structured activities or safe spaces for children specifically. One respondent discussed the need for psychosocial assistance for children to deal with anxiety during strikes. A further response articulated a need for returnee-specific support for children: *"For the children, some kind of communication with a professional who could help them adapt after returning, because they'd adapted there, and now they're adapting here again. All of that adds up into a kind of stress for the children too"* (respondent from Mykhailivka, returned from Czechia). One more respondent requested a tablet for her child to use for remote learning.

Separately, two respondents reported needing psychological support, one expressing a wish for both herself and her child to speak with a psychologist, and another describing her own psychological state since returning from abroad by saying she could *"hardly hold back her tears"* while discussing it.

Lack of medical infrastructure and accessibility concerns were also cited by a small group of respondents from Mykhailivka (3/30), in line with REACH settlement-level findings outlining the absence of critical health services¹³. One respondent described not being able to take her infant daughter for necessary health check-ups because of the security situation: *"We don't go into town at all right now. As for my daughter, generally, if I can still go, she stays either at home with my husband, or with my parents. Nobody takes her anywhere. Although, in fact, I'd like to have her checked. Her heart, her blood, that sort of thing — to get that done. Some tests, to get checked. That's a need"*. Another respondent put

forward a request for medications and first-aid kits to be available for everyone, including children.

Employment support was cited by a small number of respondents as a distinct need (3/30). Respondents in this group described wanting more opportunities and better-paid work: one respondent from Zaporizhzhia stated that available employers offered inadequate wages, a difficulty she linked in part to her gender; another respondent from Mykhailivka described unavailability of vacancies as the deciding factor, adding that the relevant employment centres had little to offer since local enterprises themselves had closed.

Returnee and Non-Displaced Needs

Respondents were almost evenly divided on whether their needs differed from those of people who had never displaced, and the small qualitative sample does not allow for a definitive comparison between the two groups.

Among respondents who described a difference in needs between returnees and non-displaced individuals (13/30), the most recurring theme was housing status, specifically the distinction between owning a home and having to rent or secure housing after return. This was noted primarily by respondents who had earlier experiences of displacement from the occupied settlements within Zaporizka Oblast. One respondent stated that those with their own housing are *"slightly different"* from people like her who left occupied territory without property to return to and must *"constantly think about housing"* as a result.

"I'm not ashamed of being an IDP, it just pains me. I am hurt, devastated and annoyed. Because how is it that I don't have a home? Why don't I have a home? Why did this happen to me?"

– Returnee from Zaporizhzhia
(displaced in Khmelnytska Oblast)

A second cluster of responses centered on psychological and emotional strain. A respondent from Zaporizhzhia pointed out the difference between people who never left Ukraine and those, like her, who had the chance to take a break from the difficult security situation in the country: *"It seems to me that people who have never left, that for more than four years of war they do not leave, they have a much worse morale now than I did when I returned from abroad. I have such friends, acquaintances, they are now in a very nervous state. And I, on the contrary, advise them to leave, perhaps rest for six months and then return home"*. Two respondents pointed to a perception gap: one described a common misconception among those who stayed, that people abroad were *"raking in money hand over fist"* and living easily, which she said was *"absolutely not the case"*, and another respondent who returned from abroad partly because of the straining employment conditions she faced there said that those who never worked abroad will not understand the psychological pressure these conditions may put one through.

Respondents who saw no difference between themselves and non-displaced neighbours (14/30) most frequently

grounded this in a shared experience of the war itself. One respondent described the war as a common condition, stating that whether someone lost property or cannot go home because it is occupied, *“we all have problems”*. Another respondent noted the involuntary nature of her displacement as a factor that does not distinguish her from people who never displaced: *“My circumstances just turned out that way, you understand — I wouldn’t have left otherwise. But when I was faced with the fact of it, whether I wanted to or not, I had to go. It was about my grandson”* (respondent from Mykhailivka, returned from Germany).

Attitudes towards future displacement

Most respondents reflected positively on their decision to return: eighteen explicitly stated that they did not regret it, with several describing improvements in emotional or family well-being despite financial deterioration: *“Yes, the financial situation has worsened, but I don’t even regret it. But I’m at home, I’m with my family, I can breathe calmly”* (respondent from Zaporizhzhia, returned from Poland/Germany). Another returnee from Czechia to Mykhailivka cited an improvement in her children’s psychosocial well-being upon return.

Four respondents did not regret leaving but did express regret about their choice of displacement destination. Two respondents who relocated within Ukraine regretted not having left the country, while two who had displaced abroad regretted their specific destination country.

Respondents’ outlook on the possibility of future displacement was mixed. Many respondents (17/30) said they may leave again if security conditions worsened beyond a certain threshold. Among this group, around two-thirds (11/17) said they would prefer to remain within Ukraine rather than move abroad. For those considering future displacement, the decision was generally framed as conditional on a substantial deterioration in security rather than as an immediate intention to leave: *“I think a significant deterioration in the situation in the city, when there’s regular shelling – it’s, in principle, already regular now, but it’s still relatively contained. I reckon that if the situation in the city deteriorates too much – to the point where you basically can’t go to the shops or get to work because it’s dangerous – then I suppose I would, but I certainly wouldn’t leave the country”* (respondent from Zaporizhzhia, returned from Poland).

Beyond the general security-worsening threshold, some respondents (3/30) cited direct destruction of their home as a specific trigger: *“I’ll only leave if there’s nothing left of the house, not even the foundation. Then, I suppose, I’ll pack my life into a little backpack and go out into the wide world”* (respondent from Mykhailivka, returned from Kyiv).

Many respondents (11/30) expressed a clear intention to stay regardless of how conditions evolve. A respondent originally from an occupied settlement stated she believes that the only circumstances that could force her to displace again – occupation – she perceives as unlikely to happen for Zaporizhzhia; thus, she sees no further displacement in her future.

Responses were not necessarily mutually exclusive: six respondents also expressed difficulty or reluctance to speculate about future displacement, even where they had discussed circumstances that might eventually prompt them to leave. *“I won’t make any guesses. I don’t know, honestly, I don’t know. There is no such thing yet. I hope that nothing like this will happen. I don’t want to speak anything bad into existence”* (respondent from Zaporizhzhia, returned from Austria). Another respondent from Zaporizhzhia reported that her attitude toward future displacement changed frequently as attacks intensified.

Finally, some respondents described feeling fatigued by or fearing potential displacement (4/30). Reluctance to displace again was linked to the financial and practical costs of starting over, including securing housing, employment, and schooling. A respondent from Zaporizhzhia described feeling reluctant about future displacement for the fear of not securing suitable employment elsewhere. Another older respondent from Mykhailivka noted that she would need to save up before she could leave again.

“If you go somewhere there, to Western Ukraine, you understand that here you have your own housing, and there you need to rent it, pay for it, you need to find a new job, find a new school. Everything is needed. Start life from scratch. And that’s why we’re still here, despite everything”

– Returnee from Mykhailivka
(displaced in Poland)

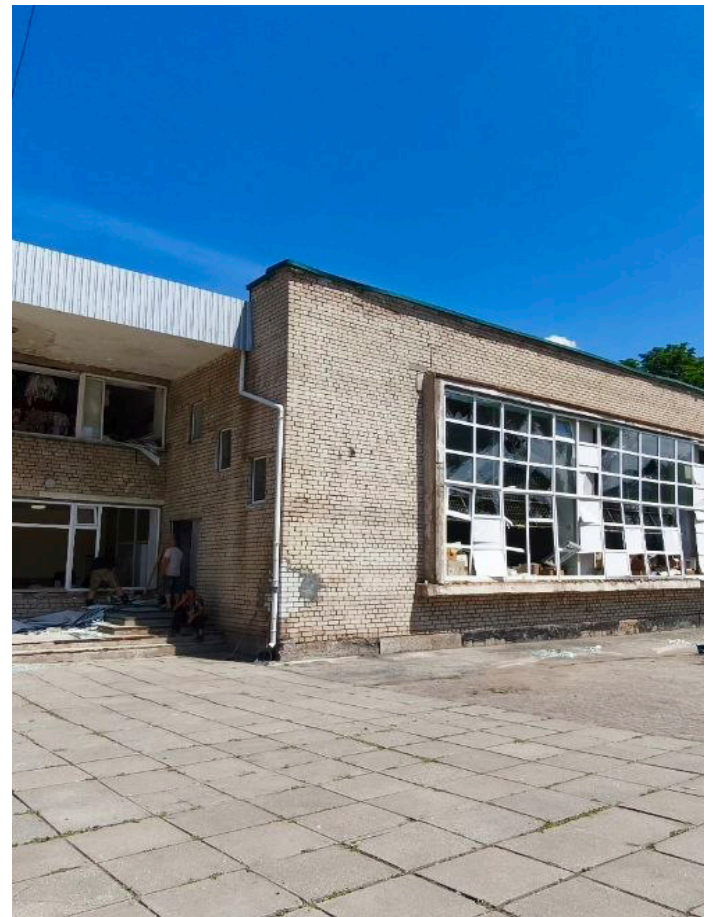


Photo 2: Damage to an administrative building in Mykhailivka

Conclusion

This qualitative assessment of drivers of unsafe returns in Zaporizka Oblast illustrated that return decisions were shaped mostly by a combination of relational and financial considerations. The assessment found that relational and emotional factors were the most cited drivers of return in face of increased security risks, aligning with existing survey evidence¹⁴. Family reunification, attachment to place, and community ties encouraged return, while social isolation during displacement pushed respondents to leave their places of displacement. Economic factors played a substantial role too: high housing costs and unstable employment during displacement pushed some respondents home, while owned property and familiar labour markets pulled others back, often valued as much for psychological stability as for financial relief.

Importantly, respondents generally made these decisions while recognising that substantial security risks remained. Security conditions had generally not improved upon return, and the majority of respondents stated that safety played no role in their decision. The findings indicate that return to unsafe frontline areas in this sample reflected a compromise between continued physical risk and relational, financial, and psychosocial considerations, rather than a response to reduced risk.

The findings suggest that, in some cases, unsafe returns may reflect a broader set of motivations and constraints than a negative or preventable coping strategy alone. Respondents largely described return as a deliberate decision rather than one imposed by circumstance, and most did not express regret.

Needs identified after returning reflected both immediate assistance and long-term aid: financial support, rent costs, and material basics ahead of winter were among the most frequently cited. At the same time, concerns around employment quality, children's socialisation and psychosocial wellbeing point to needs extending beyond immediate assistance. Respondents originally displaced from occupied territory within the oblast reported an additional set of unresolved housing and administrative needs, linked to their inability to return to their settlement of origin.

Finally, return should not be understood as a fixed or final outcome. A majority of respondents indicated they would consider leaving again if the security situation deteriorated further, with most of this group stating a preference for relocating within Ukraine rather than abroad. A smaller number of respondents expressed an intention to remain regardless of conditions. These findings suggest that many returnees continually reassess the balance between security risks and emotional ties and livelihoods bonding them to their community of origin. For a substantial proportion of respondents, a major escalation or loss of housing and infrastructure could trigger renewed displacement, creating the possibility of repeated cycles of displacement and return.

Endnotes

- 1 REACH Ukraine, [Ukraine Brief: What the Data Says About IDP Returns to Unsafe Areas?](#), December 2024.
- 2 International Organization for Migration (IOM), [Ukraine — Returns Report — General Population Survey Round 23](#), May 2026.
- 3 International Organization for Migration (IOM), [Ukraine — Returns Report — General Population Survey Round 23](#), May 2026.
- 4 REACH Ukraine, [Ukraine Brief: What the Data Says About IDP Returns to Unsafe Areas?](#), December 2024.
- 5 REACH Ukraine, [Ukraine Brief: What the Data Says About IDP Returns to Unsafe Areas?](#), December 2024.
- 6 REACH Ukraine, [Ukraine Brief: What the Data Says About IDP Returns to Unsafe Areas?](#), December 2024.
- 7 International Organization for Migration (IOM), [Ukraine — Oblast Profiles — General Population Survey Round 24](#), August 2026.
- 8 International Organization for Migration (IOM), [Ukraine — Oblast Profiles — General Population Survey Round 24](#), August 2026.
- 9 International Organization for Migration (IOM), [Ukraine — Oblast Profiles — General Population Survey Round 24](#), August 2026.
- 10 REACH Ukraine, [Calibration Round 4 – Key Findings on Prioritized frontline Oblasts – Factsheet](#), May 2026.
- 11 ACLED, [Ukraine Conflict Monitor](#), Situation update 29 August–4 September 2026, September 2026.
- 12 BBC, [“Kyiv Air Raid Alerts at Record High as Russia Launches Round the Clock Strikes”](#), September 2026.
- 13 REACH Humanitarian Situation Monitoring – Round 26 (April-May 2026) – Dataset (restricted access), July 2026.
- 14 REACH Ukraine, [Ukraine Brief: What the Data Says About IDP Returns to Unsafe Areas?](#), December 2024.

Methodology Overview

This assessment used a qualitative approach to examine the experiences of respondents who returned to unsafe frontline areas of Zaporizka Oblast (defined as within 0-30 kilometres to the front line) after a period of displacement. The assessment focused on Zaporizka (city of Zaporizhzhia), Mykhailivska – Zaporizhzhia Raion (Mykhailivka), and Petro-Mykhailivska (Petro-Mykhailivka, Ternivka) hromadas. Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted by REACH's local partner, The Tenth of April. Locations were selected based on stakeholder consultations, a review of return trends, feasibility of access, and the partner's access to target communities. Most of the respondents were selected into the study based on their recent returns (defined as within the past 6 months), though some returned earlier (n=9).

A total of 30 interviews were conducted between July 7 and July 29, 2026. Interviews were carried out in-person with appropriate safety measures in mind: locations were agreed upon based on their safety, and The Tenth of April closely monitored real-time security updates.

All respondents gave informed consent before participating, during which they were briefed on the purpose of the research and informed of their right to withdraw at any point. Data were anonymised, securely stored, and accessible only to authorised research staff; any audio recordings were used solely for transcription and analysis and deleted once analysis was complete.

For the period of data collection, The Tenth of April engaged a psychologist to support both respondents and field staff.

The psychologist accompanied the team during selected interviews where additional psychosocial support was perceived as potentially appropriate and remained available to respondents and interviewers following interviews where needed.

Respondents were identified through purposive sampling via Tenth of April's existing networks, supplemented by outreach through local authorities and service providers. The sample comprised 6 men and 24 women, ranging in age from 18 to 68, split evenly between urban and rural settlement types. Two respondents had a registered disability status.

Thirteen respondents had been internally displaced within Ukraine, 14 had been displaced as refugees abroad, and 3 had experienced both IDP and refugee registration. Eight respondents had earlier experiences of displacement triggered by occupation of their settlements of origin within Zaporizka Oblast. For these respondents, 'return' refers to a subsequent move back to Government-controlled Zaporizka Oblast rather than to their settlement of origin. Some had previously resided in Government-controlled parts of the oblast for an extended period before further displacement, while others had moved through the oblast as part of a longer displacement trajectory.

Interview data were analysed thematically to identify recurring experiences, perceptions, and factors influencing return decisions.

Limitations

- This qualitative assessment offers in-depth, contextualised insight into return experiences in the assessed hromadas; its findings are not statistically representative and should not be interpreted as representative of returnee experiences across Zaporizka Oblast or other frontline areas of Ukraine more broadly.
- Findings reflect the situation at the time of data collection (July 2026). As the security situation in Zaporizka Oblast continues to evolve, the conditions shaping displacement and return decisions, along with respondents' own perceptions of safety, may shift over time. Changes to national or international displacement and assistance policy may similarly affect the continued relevance of specific findings.
- Respondents were recruited through Tenth of April's existing networks, meaning the sample is likely skewed toward individuals already connected to, or aware of, available services and assistance. The experiences of more isolated or harder-to-reach returnees may not be fully captured here.
- With 24 of 30 respondents being women and only 6 men, findings disproportionately reflect women's experiences and accounts of male household members (e.g., military-aged men who could not displace) are often second-hand.
- Security considerations limited the field team's access to certain locations within Zaporizka Oblast, which means the experiences of returnees residing in areas in closer proximity to the frontline may be underrepresented. Their motivations and experiences may differ from those reflected in this assessment.
- Given the sensitive nature of displacement and return experiences, some respondents may have been reluctant to discuss certain topics in full depth. Protection risks, negative experiences, and coping strategies during displacement or upon return may consequently be underreported.

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