BRIEF

What do we know about Ukrainian refugees returning home since the full scale invasion?

Longitudinal Survey of Ukrainian Refugees, Round 18 — Late October/Early November 2023

KEY FINDINGS

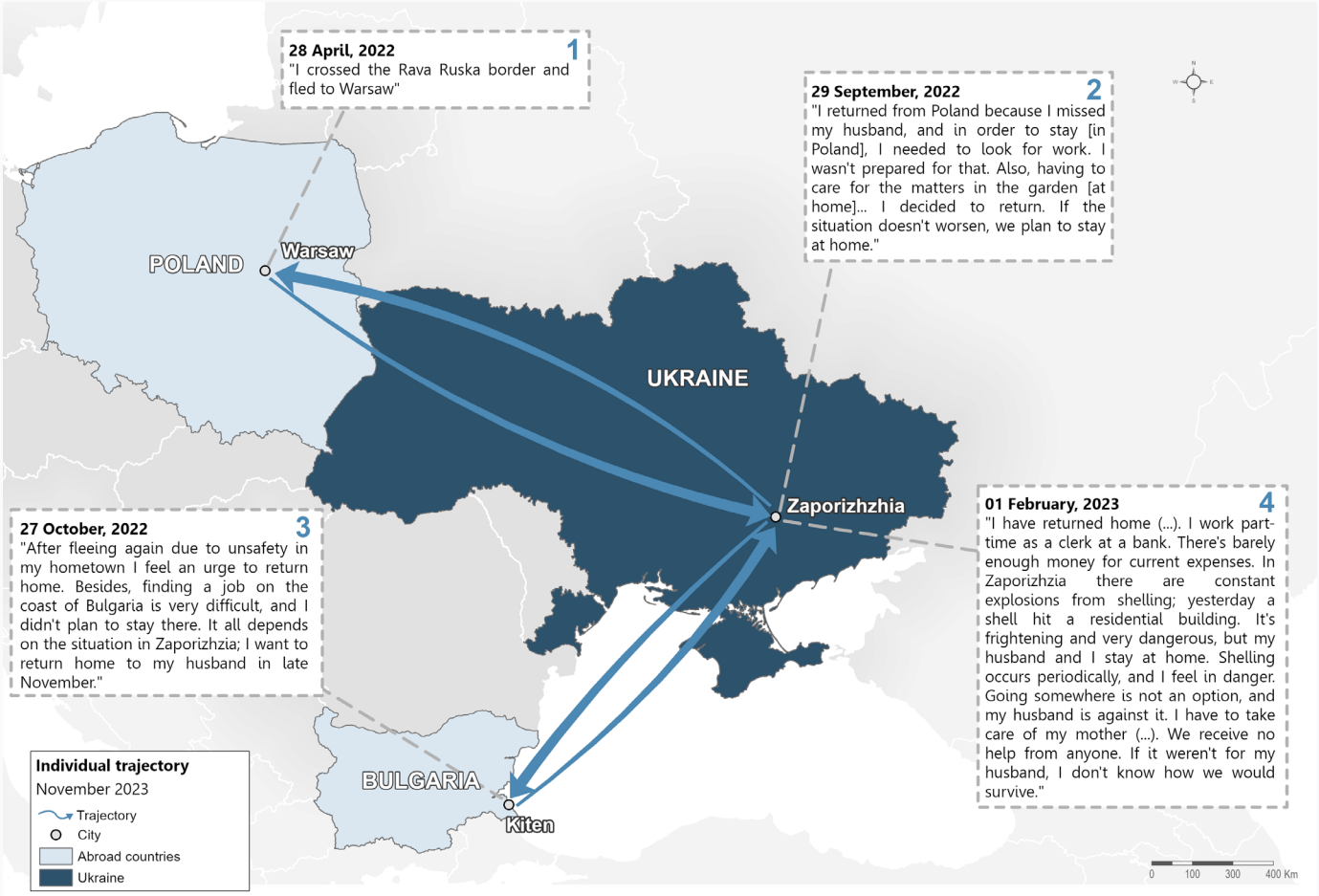
The likelihood of Ukrainian refugees returning home is significantly related to their choice of the host country abroad. Those most inclined to return are the respondents who sought asylum in neighbouring countries like Poland. On the contrary, refugees in Germany and Czechia are less likely to return to Ukraine.

The level of income and type of accommodation respondents are living in are both strong predictors of refugees' decision to return to Ukraine. People with lower incomes and those who stayed in collective sites or other temporary housing options are more inclined to return, while respondents with higher incomes and those staying in rented flats or apartments supported by governments are more likely to stay in the host country.

Personal and emotional reasons for returning were those most often reported by respondents: nearly half of them (50%) expressed a desire to be reunited with their family and 35% mentioned feeling homesick as driving their desire to go home.

Many returnees go back to places where they do not necessarily feel safe: more than half (53%) of the surveyed returnees reported feeling somewhat or completely unsafe in their current location.

Map 1. The journey of a married woman in her 40's who fled her hometown alone twice due to safety reasons



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IMPACT Shaping practices Influencing policies Impacting lives

ABOUT

The escalation of the war in Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 resulted in unprecedented displacement. According to UNHCR[1] estimates as of September 2023, 6,203,600 people remain displaced abroad.

Since March 2022, IMPACT has been conducting a monthly longitudinal survey of people who fled the escalation of hostilities in Ukraine to understand their mobility patterns, integration trajectories, intentions to return, and how these change over time. Respondents were initially identified through convenience sampling among people who have crossed the border from Ukraine and were interviewed through a data collection initiative since 28 February 2022 in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova at border crossings, transit sites, and reception centres, in partnership with UNHCR. From October 2022 onwards, IMPACT began to complement the existing sample through Viber and Facebook dissemination campaigns. While results are not statistically representative, triangulation with other data sources suggests that IMPACT's sample broadly echoes other available data sources on the population of interest, both in terms of geographic distribution and socio-economic background. The Longitudinal Study sample is divided between refugees, people who are living outside Ukraine following their displacement after the 2022 escalation of the war, and returnees, who in the context of this brief are those who left Ukraine following the 2022 escalation of the war for a period longer than one month and have since returned either to their home settlement or elsewhere in Ukraine.[2]

Round 18 of the longitudinal survey was funded by the Belgian Red Cross and the Red Cross in Ukraine.

Map 2. The journey of a woman aged 47 who fled with her son from a currently occupied area and eventually returned to Ukraine.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

In light of the return a big proportion of all surveyed refugees[3] are back into the country. This brief seeks to understand the demographic and socio-economic profile of returnees as well as the main factors predicting the likelihood of their return. The analysis is divided into 3 sections. The first considers the demographic profile of returnees along with their oblasts of origin and their host countries as refugees, second presents the results of the statistical analysis of the return predictors, while the third considers their current situation, from their livelihoods and accommodation to their sense of safety.

The brief builds on two methods: a simple indicator analysis, contrasting returnees' results with those of refugees from a previous Round, and a more advanced statistical analysis that considers the relation between different variables and their connection with the decision to return to Ukraine.

Round 18 of the Longitudinal Survey collected 2,213 phone interviews with returnees between 26 October and 8 November 2023. The reference point for comparison for the simple indicator analysis being the Round 17 which took place from 21 September to 11 October 2023 and surveyed refugees outside of Ukraine.

The statistical analysis builds on a composite sample of 4,693 respondents from both Rounds 17 and 18: returnees that have at some point been refugees and for which IMPACT has data from their time abroad (1,047 respondents) and refugees (3,646 respondents). The analysis thus focuses on the data of respondents before they returned to Ukraine (when they were still abroad) by comparing their answers in refugee status with the answers to the same questions of those who are currently refugees.

The sampling for the analysis is constrained by cases with intricate mobility patterns, having some respondents move both back to Ukraine and abroad. Furthermore, there is a disparity in the time span of the last values for both samples, with all refugees' data collected in September 2023, while returnees' data abroad extends from 2022 to 2023.

1. UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP - September 2023)

2. This brief does not consider 'internal' returnees who have never crossed the border, i.e., people who were internally displaced elsewhere in Ukraine and have returned to their settlement of origin.

3. Thirty-seven per cent (37%), based on the sample, which contains respondents from latest Rounds (Round 17 and Round 18)

1. RETURNEES' PROFILE

To facilitate a concise comparison, it is essential to outline the common traits of all respondents from Rounds 17 and 18 (compiling together two samples separately focused on refugees and returnees). This preliminary overview serves to establish a baseline for understanding the unique characteristics of returnees among those who have ever fled the war and are either current refugees or have already returned to Ukraine.

The respondents to Rounds 17 and 18 of the Longitudinal study are overwhelmingly (94%) female.[4] Considering all household members, the share of adult women (from 18 to 64 years old) stands at 40%, while the proportion of adult men is 15%. In addition, 38% of all household members are children (from newborn to 17) and 7% are people who are 65 years old and above. The average household size is 2,9 and the average number of kids is 1,1. Thirty-three per cent (33%) of the households are childless, 36% have one child, 22% have two, and 9% have three or more. Twenty per cent (20%) of all households have at least one person with a disability, 2% a pregnant or breastfeeding women, and 1% care for children not under their legal responsibility. Most of the surveyed people who fled the war came from the following oblasts in Ukraine: Kyiv-city (13%), Kharkivska (12%), Dnipropetrovska (10%), Odeska (8%), Donetska (7%), Mykolaivska (7%), Zaporizka (7%), Kyivska (6%).

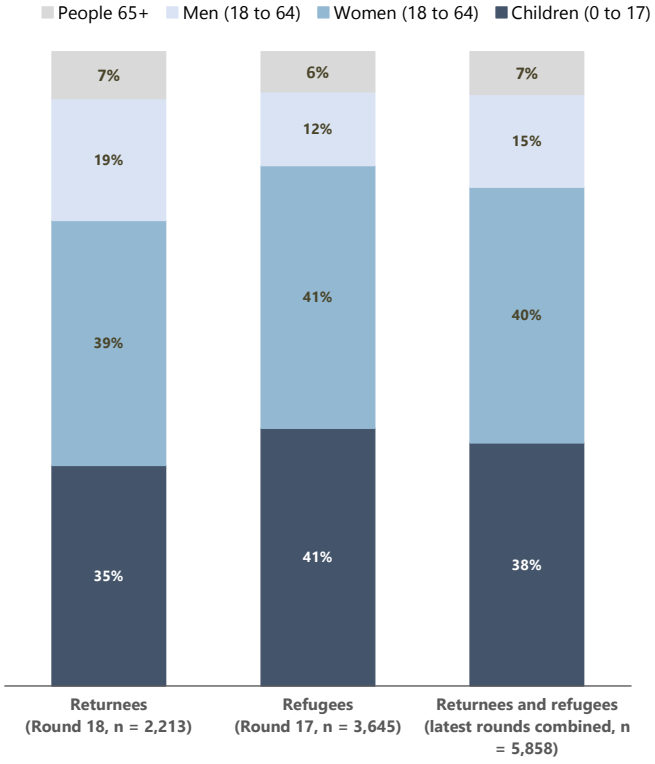
Those oblasts were either amongst the most populated or those most affected by the war. The most frequent destinations abroad (host countries) are Poland (50%), Germany (15%), Slovakia (7%), Moldova (5%), Romania (4%), Czechia (4%).

1.1. DEMOGRAPHICS

Household composition

The average size of the returnee household is 3 members, which is slightly larger than the average refugee household (2.8 members). This might be caused by the fact that some of the returned refugees were able to reunite with their family members upon return. This is also explained by the higher presence of adult males among returnees' households, 19% of the returnee household members against 12% among refugees, suggesting that women who fled could reunite with their male family members upon return.

Figure 1. Household composition by household status



When specifically considering respondents to the survey (who speak on behalf of their households), we observe a bigger proportion of women among returnees (97%) than among refugees (92%), showing that men might be less inclined to return once became refugees. Due the martial law in Ukraine, most of the adult male population aged from 18 to 60 are restricted from leaving the country.

Children make up 35% of returnee household members and 41% of refugee household members. Additionally, households with three or more children are more represented in the refugee sample (10%) than in the returnee one (6%), showing a tendency for larger families to remain abroad.

Vulnerable household members

Seventeen per cent (17%) of all returnee households have at least one person with a disability,[5] a smaller proportion than refugee households, at 21%. This might signal specific difficulties or barriers to return for such vulnerable groups as well as possible better conditions for them in hosting countries. Households with at least one member from other vulnerable groups (pregnant/breastfeeding women and those who care for children, not under their legal responsibility) have the same distribution among both refugee and returnee samples (around 2% and 1% respectively).

Education

The most notable difference in terms of education between the returnee and refugee samples lies in higher education: while the proportion of respondents with a university degree is higher amidst returnees (48% of refugees against 52% of returnees), the proportion of respondents with a post-university level of education is higher amidst refugees (13% of refugees against 9% of returnees). While the rest of education levels vary little between returnees and refugees, the analysis of predictors of return shows[6] that respondents with a master's degree or PhD are a bit more likely to stay abroad than to return.

4. Moreover: 64% of all respondents are 31 to 50 years old, 15% are 18 to 30 years old, 17% are 51 to 64 years old, and 5% are 65 years old and above.
5. The self-reported disability was measured using the Washington Group short set of questions. This data is available here.
6. Effect size (w = 0.05)

1.2. HOSTING COUNTRIES AND AREAS OF ORIGIN

Host country

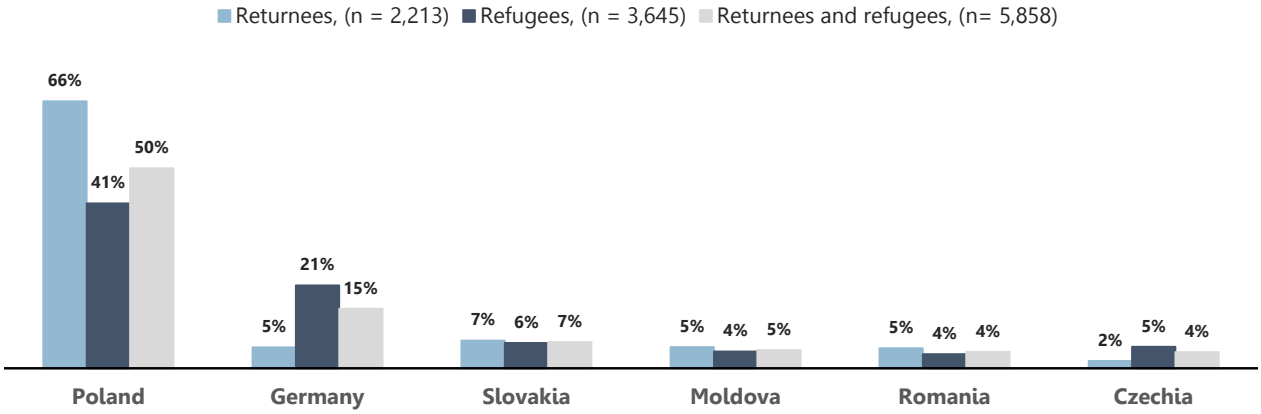
There are notable differences in the distribution of returns across different countries.

Poland has a higher rate of return than other host countries: fourty nine per cent (49%) of all who fled to Poland have already come back to Ukraine. Several other neighbouring countries have similar rates: Romania (46% have returned), Moldova (43% have returned), Slovakia (40% have returned). Germany presents the opposite picture, with only 13% of all who fled there to have returned to Ukraine. Czechia is a similar, if less marked, case, with 17% of refugees who returned.

The analysis of predictors of return confirms that the host country plays a statistically significant role[7] in the likelihood of the desicion to come back. Refugees in certain countries bordering Ukraine show a higher tendency to return. This could be attributed to geographical proximity, family ties, cultural similarities, or differing host country policies, impacting the refugees.

The opposite can be seen with regards to Germany (and to a lesser extent, Czechia). The decreased tendency to return for refugees in such countries could be linked to better integration opportunities or more robust support systems. However, the choice of host country is also, possibly, influenced by the refugees' intentions, with host countries near Ukraine likely prioritised by those with stronger intentions to return.

Figure 2. Top Six Host Countries abroad by the proportion of respondents

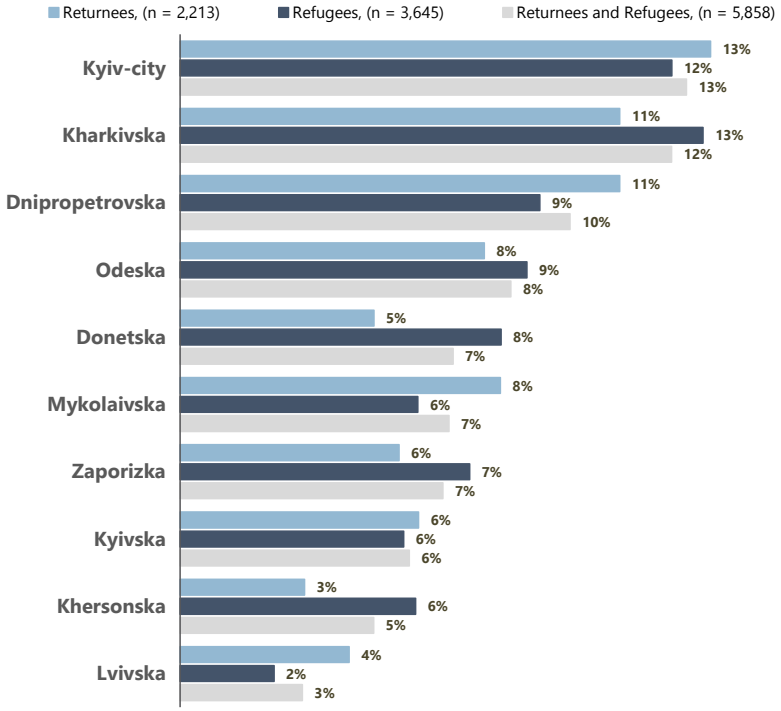


Oblast of origin[8]

Looking at the top ten oblasts of origin in both refugee and returnee samples can indicate higher tendencies of return or staying abroad depending on the oblast of origin. Oblasts directly affected by the war tend to have a smaller proportion of refugees who came back: Khersonska (only 22% of those who fled from this oblast returned to Ukraine), Donetska (27%), Zaporizka (30%), Kharkivska (33%). The opposite tendency is seen in the distribution of respondents who fled from oblasts like Lvivska (52% of those who fled from this oblast returned to Ukraine), Mykolaivska (45%) and Dnipropetrovska (42%).

The analysis indicates that the oblast of origin is one of the predictors[9] of refugees' decision to return to Ukraine. This suggests that factors likes safety, economic opportunities, and social networks, have a noticeable impact on the likelihood of refugees returning. Results show a higher return rate for refugees from Dnipropetrovska, Mykolaivksa, Volynska and Zhytomyrska, versus lower returns for those from Khersonska, Luhanska and Zaporizka oblasts.

Figure 3. Top Ten Oblast of Origin by the proportion of respondents



7. Effect size (w = 0.16)

8. By oblast of origin this study defines oblast where the respondent had resided prior to the escalation 2022 and from where they fled the war, not an actual oblast where person was born.

9. Effect size (w = 0.15)

2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS INFLUENCING THE LIKELIHOOD OF RETURN

The analysis of return predictors tested different variables for their significance and effect size (the full list and results can be found in the Annex B). In addition to the factors noted in the previous section (education level, host country, oblast of origin), this section first discusses additional variables that were found to influence likelihood of return: accommodation type, income, occupation, language proficiency, and the desire for family reunification. The variables included in the model have been deliberately chosen and driven by theoretical considerations.

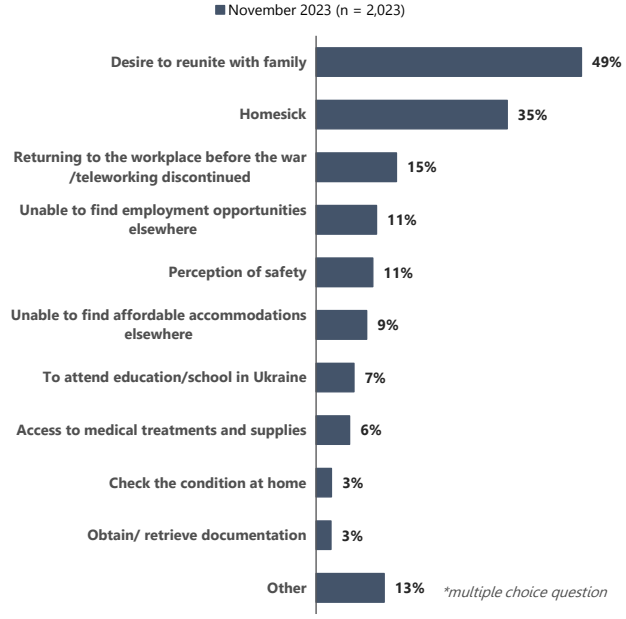
2.1 ANALYSIS OF RETURN PREDICTORS

Accommodation type

The type of accommodation in host country has statistically significant relation[10] to refugees' experiences and their subsequent choices about returning. The analysis shows that refugees staying in rented accommodations as well as those staying in accommodation provided by authorities are more likely to stay abroad. In contrast, those in collective centres or other temporary housing arrangements, such as those provided by NGOs or volunteers, are more likely to return.

More stable and comfortable accommodations may provide a sense of security and belonging in the host country, influencing refugees to stay longer. In contrast, temporary housing solutions, such as collective centres or accommodations provided by volunteers do not offer long-term security, possibly prompting refugees to contemplate returning as soon as feasible. The type of accommodation can also be linked with the level of integration into the host community, with private accommodations potentially offering better opportunities for forming social connections and integrating into the local society. Finally, the capacity to afford rent may indicate that refugees have stable income opportunities, which may also influence their decision to remain abroad.

Figure 4. Reasons for returning to Ukraine*



Income

Refugees' incomes in hosting countries have a significant relation with their decision to return.[11] The analysis shows a statistically significant difference[12] in per capita income between refugees and returnees, suggesting a significant association between lower income abroad and the inclination to return. For refugee respondents who remain abroad, the average per capita income is 330.3 euros, while for those who have returned, it was 200.3 euros when last abroad.

Occupation

Current occupation status has a statistically significant effect[13] on the likelihood of return. Returnees were less likely to have a job in their last host country (28% with a job in the host country) than those who have remained refugees (45%). In turn, those caring for children or working remotely in Ukraine show the highest incidence of return (9% of all refugees who chose to stay in comparison with 17% who chose to return). This points to the importance of employment and job stability in the lives of refugees and its influence on their decisions to return.

Language proficiency

Language proficiency has a statistically significant, although weak, effect on the likelihood of return:[14] refugees with better language skills are more inclined to stay. Sixty seven per cent (67%) of all returnees estimated their language skills in the host country as poor or very poor, while only 51% of those who have remained refugees estimate their language skills as poor or very poor. This can be understood as a proxy for ease of integration or longer-term plans to remain in the host country.

2.2 SELF-REPORTED REASONS FOR RETURNING

According to the latest returnee survey (Round 18), the most frequently reported reasons for returning were personal and emotional: nearly half of the respondents (49%) expressed a desire to be reunited with their family and 35% mentioned feeling homesick as driving their desire to go home. There is a statistically significant moderate connection between the desire for family reunification[15] and desicion to return showing that family ties and the desire for reunion play an important role in the return decision-making process.

10. Effect size (w = 0.28)
11. Significant trend (w = 0,14) was observed in income non-disclosure, particularly among returnees. This is difficult to interpret but may indicate more sensitivities or uncertainties related to financial matters amidst returnees.
12. Effect size (Cohen's d = 0.73)
13. Effect size (w = 0.15)
14. Effect size (w = 0.14)
15. Effect size (w = 0.13)

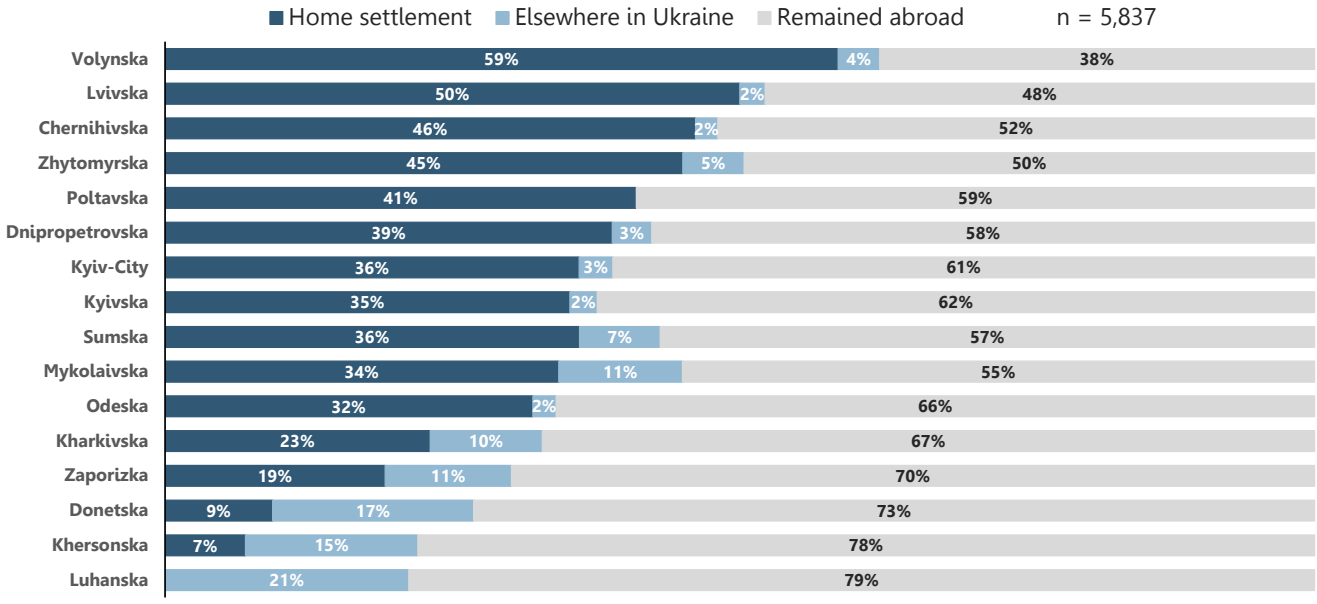
The third most prevalent response was related to employment: 15% of respondents who returned from abroad said the reason for returning was either resuming their old jobs or because the employer had discontinued the teleworking. Eleven per cent (11%) said they could not find employment opportunities abroad. When considering solely respondents who were employed before the war, one out of five (20%) cited that they had to return to their workplace place before war (or switch to offline form of work). Safety perception played a role in the return decision for 10% of the respondents. Lack of housing or suitable living conditions prompted 9% of respondents to return to Ukraine, while 6% of respondents indicated being only able to access specific medical treatment and supplies in Ukraine as one of the driving factors behind their return.

3. CURRENT SITUATION FOR RETURNEES

3.1 OBLAST OF RETURN

While the majority (82%) of returnees have come back to their home settlement (rather than elsewhere in Ukraine) the overall rates of return show disparities across macro-regions.[16] Overall, 47% of the respondents who left the Western macro-region have returned to Ukraine, which is the highest proportion of all macro-regions. Fourty-three per cent (43%) of the respondents who left the North macro-region have returned as well. The Centre macro-region and Kyiv-city closely follow in this regard, with 40% both of the groups of respondents from these areas respectively returning. The Southern (36% of respondents) and Eastern (34%) macro-regions show the lowest return rates.

Figure 5. Current place of residence by the oblast of origin*



** only oblasts of origin with 100 and more respondents included*

16. A macro-region is understood in this survey as a territorial unit comprised of multiple oblasts. To ease the readability of the findings, oblasts were grouped by macro-regions in the following way with the following proportion of respondents: **North:** Kyivska (45.3%), Zhytomyrska (20.7%), Sumka (19.1%), Chernihivska (14.9%). **East:** Dnipropetrovska (43.2%), Kharkivska (34.9%), Zaporizka (14.9%), Donetska (7%). **West:** Lvivska (36.2%), Volynska (19.2%), Ivano-Frankivska (9.6%), Rivnenska (9.6%), Ternopilska (7.9%), Khmelnytska (7.7%), Zakarpatska (7.7%), Chernivetska (5.8%). **South:** Odeska (53.2%), Mykolaivska (40.3%), Khersonska (6.5%). **Centre:** Poltavska (39.6%), Vinnytska (24.4%), Cherkaska (21.3%),Kirovohradska (14.7%). **Kyiv-city**, **Sevastopol-city**, and the **Autonomous Republic of Crimea** are separate administrative units and are not included in the macro-regions mentioned above.

3.2 ACCOMMODATION

On average, 76% of returnees now resided in their own or a family member's housing. Among respondents who returned to home settlement (82%), nearly 90% reported living in such type of housing, contrasting with 13% of those who returned to a different settlement. The second-highest category – rented housing – was the living arrangement for 18% of all returnees, encompassing 8% for returnees who came back to their home settlement and 62% for those in other settlements.

Another 4% of the respondents stayed with family or friends who were not part of their usual household. Within the subset of returnees to the home settlement, only 2% stayed with family or friends, in contrast to returnees to other settlements, where 16% of respondents had this accommodation arrangement in place. Two per cent (2%) of all returnees indicated living with volunteers (defined as persons other than family or friends who provide voluntary housing), compared to 5% of those respondents who returned to a place other than their pre-war location

3.3 EMPLOYMENT & LIVELIHOODS

Income

Returnee households, typically comprising three individuals on average, most commonly fell within the income brackets of €300-€599 (44%) and €0-€299 (33%). The median household income averaged at €469, while the mean household income stood at €384.

Household income varied by oblast, with the capital exhibiting the highest average and median income at €681 and €511, respectively.

Following Kyiv in a descending order, there were Kyivska oblast (€569 average, €466 median), Lvivska (€572 average, €435 median), and Zakarpatska (€483 average, €511 median) oblasts. The lowest household incomes were reported in Khersonska, Volynska, Kharkivska, Chernivetska, and Mykolaivska oblasts, ranging approximately from €300-€350 for average incomes and €220-€300 for median incomes, with Khersonska oblast at the bottom of the range.

Employment

Among all surveyed returnees, 58% are either employed or work independently (people who own a business (2%), do freelancing (2%) or work remotely (0.7%)). On the contrary, 20% of all returnees reported not working, 8% are retired, 0.5% are students and the rest perform unpaid labour (11% are child caregivers, 2% are caregivers for persons of age or in need of special care, 0.4% are volunteers

Of those who are employed, the top three types of employment are Professionals (39%), Services and Sales Workers (19%) and Managers (13%), showing that the majority of returnees who are employed are hired for high-skilled positions (either professionals or managers). Elementary work is performed only by 6% of the respondents.

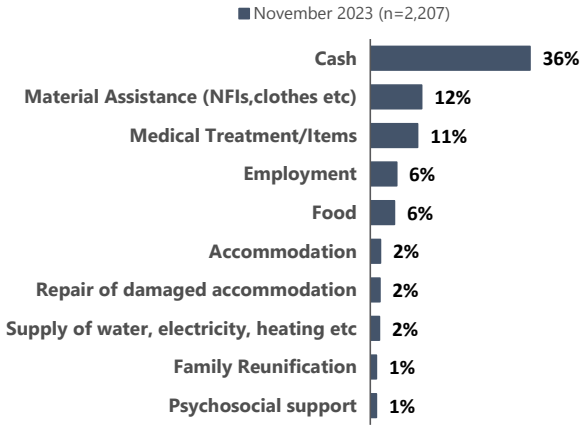
Figure 6. Current employment among all working returnees

3.4 NEEDS

As of Round 18, 52% of returnees reported having unmet urgent needs, while 48% reported not needing anything. The most reported need was cash (36%). Material assistance, encompassing items like NFIs and clothes, was cited by 12% of all returnees and was reported in notably higher proportions by those returnees who were living elsewhere than their home settlement (19%). Medical treatment/items were needed by 11% of all returnees.

Employment needs were reported by 6% of the respondents. A total of 6% of all returnees conveyed a need for food, with a higher proportion, 8%, amidst those who returned to other places than their home settlements. Accommodation needs were cited by 2% of all returnees, a proportion that was again higher, 6%, for those resettling elsewhere than their home settlements.

Figure 7. Top ten Unmet Needs



multiple choice question

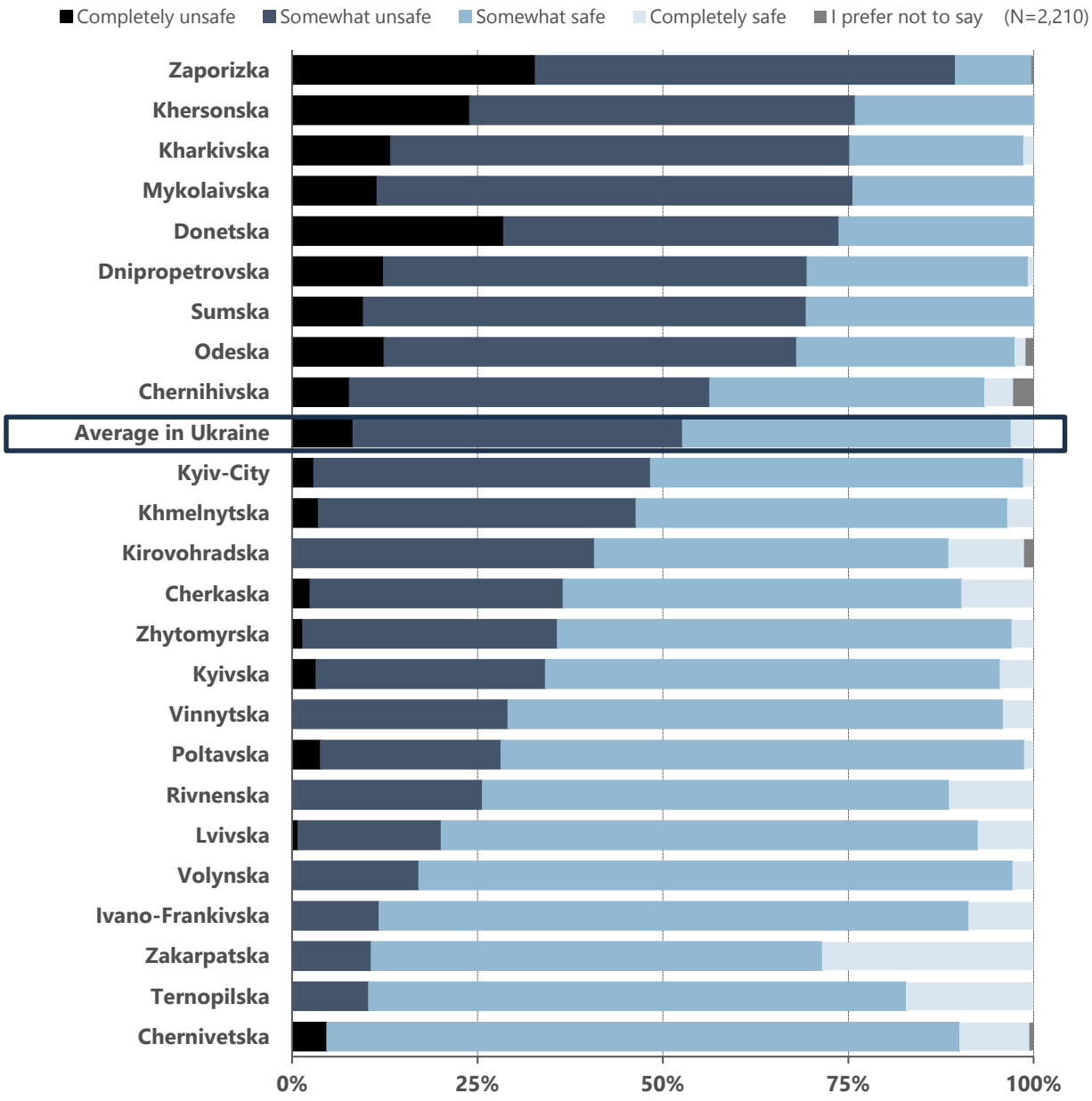
3.5 SAFETY & SECURITY

The majority of surveyed returnees (53%) indicated feeling rather unsafe, with 8% of them expressing feeling completely unsafe. Only 47% of returnees reported feeling safe rather than unsafe in their current location. Within this percentage, 44% felt somewhat safe, and 3% felt completely safe. Within the subset of returnees from abroad who resettled in a different location than their home settlement, 82% reported evaluating their home settlement as completely (57%) or somewhat (25%) unsafe.

Safety perceptions varied across macro-regions, with the East and South showing the highest levels of perceived unsafety. In these areas, 75% and 72% of the respondents respectively felt completely or somewhat unsafe. Specifically, 33% of the respondents in Zaporizka, 29% in Donetska, and 24% in Khersonska felt completely unsafe.

On the other hand, respondents in the West and Centre felt safer compared to other regions, with 81% in the West and 68% in the Centre expressing a sense of complete or partial safety. The highest safety perception was in Chernivetska, with 95% of residents saying they felt somewhat or completely safe, followed by Ternopilska (90%), and Zakarpatska (89%).

Figure 8. Safety perception in the current place of residence, by oblast of return



ANNEX A. METHODOLOGY FOR RETURN PREDICTORS ANALYSIS

To analyse and identify the main predictors of the decision to return of Ukrainian refugees, we use contingency tables and the chi-square test of independence to explore and quantify the relationships between the categorical variables recorded through the longitudinal survey and the return status.

Contingency tables are constructed and plotted to assess the associations between various pairs of categorical variables, such as the correlation between refugees' language skills and their return status. These tables facilitate a detailed breakdown of the frequencies within each category, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how different variables interact. The chi-square test of independence is applied to evaluate whether the observed differences in the contingency tables were statistically significant or could be attributed to random variation. The test calculates the expected frequencies, standardized residuals, and the chi-square statistic itself, thereby providing a robust measure of the independence between the variables. Cohen's measure of effect size (w) is used to standardize the chi-square values and offer a scale for interpreting the strength of the associations observed. Effect sizes are categorized as weak (w = 0.1), medium (w = 0.3), or large (w = 0.5), thereby providing a clear metric to gauge the relative impact of each variable. For continuous variables that are not normally distributed, such as income, we use the on-parametric Mann-Whitney test, as it does not rely on the assumption of normal distribution and is less sensitive to outliers in the data.

ANNEX B. RESULTS OF THE RETURN PREDICTORS ANALYSIS

variables	chi.square	p.value	w	sample.size
short-term intentions to stay	1375.62	0.00	**0.55**	4,546
accommodation	364.29	0.00	**0.28**	4,678
pay rent type	165.28	0.00	**0.19**	4,541
host country abroad	113.93	0.00	**0.16**	4,693
occupation_now	96.37	0.00	**0.15**	4,231
oblast_origin	99.33	0.00	**0.15**	4,676
language_skills	86.68	0.00	**0.14**	4,550
income	95.04	0.00	**0.14**	4,693
obtained docs/temporary_protection	81.40	0.00	**0.14**	4,296
urgent needs/family_reunification	70.70	0.00	**0.13**	4,550
employment_now_isco	14.54	0.15	**0.08**	2,059
urgent needs/dont need anything	31.22	0.00	**0.08**	4,550
employment_prio-war_isco	24.25	0.06	**0.07**	4,498
urgent needs/acces_school_childcare	18.42	0.00	**0.07**	4,550
number of kids	12.89	0.00	**0.05**	4,536
education	9.60	0.02	**0.05**	4,515
obtained docs/residence	9.51	0.00	**0.05**	4,296
obtained docs/work_permit	9.54	0.00	**0.05**	4,296
age	7.34	0.12	**0.04**	4,674
urgent needs/accommodation	5.28	0.02	**0.04**	4,550
urgent needs/education	6.78	0.01	**0.04**	4,550
urgent needs/employment	5.42	0.02	**0.04**	4,550
urgent needs/food	7.70	0.01	**0.04**	4,550
urgent needs/psychosocial_support	7.93	0.00	**0.04**	4,550

variables	chi.square	p.value	w	sample.size
household_size	4.45	0.11	**0.03**	4,664
discrimination	3.25	0.07	**0.03**	4,539
urgent needs/transportation	2.29	0.13	**0.03**	4,550
urgent needs/other	2.33	0.13	**0.03**	4,550
obtained docs/other_visa	2.95	0.09	**0.03**	4,296
urgent needs/information_services	0.59	0.44	**0.02**	4,550
urgent needs/legal_advice	1.16	0.28	**0.02**	4,550
urgent needs/medical_treatment_items	2.28	0.13	**0.02**	4,550
urgent needs/repair_house	1.44	0.23	**0.02**	4,550
urgent needs/utilities	0.00	1.00	**0.01**	4,550
urgent needs/cash	0.02	0.89	**0.00**	4,550
urgent needs/material_assistance	0.00	0.98	**0.00**	4,550
urgent needs/visa_documentation	0.02	0.88	**0.00**	4,550
urgent needs/language_training	0.04	0.83	**0.00**	4,550
obtained docs/refugee_status	0.00	1.00	**0.00**	4,296