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Article — Published Version

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Current Issues in Migration Research

Suggested Citation: Romashchenko, Taras (2025) : Why the Bias within Ukraine towards Forced Emigrants in the EU is Debatable and Risky, Current Issues in Migration Research, ISSN 3035-7500, Malmo Institute for Studies of Migration (MIM), Malmö, Vol. 2, Iss. 1, pp. 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.24834/cimr.2025.1.1887>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/331556>

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Why the Bias within Ukraine towards Forced Emigrants in the EU is Debatable and Risky

Taras Romashchenko

Abstract: The Russian aggression forced millions of Ukrainians to flee their homes in search of safety outside Ukraine. Europe took most of the refugees – 6.3 million out of almost 7 million recorded globally. In this context, the return of millions of refugees to Ukraine will largely determine its socio-economic recovery in the post-war era. However, re-emigration en masse may be challenged due to the growing tension within Ukrainian society with those in Ukraine making intolerant remarks about compatriots abroad. Hence, the article points to media examples of bias towards Ukrainian forced migrants on the part of the general public and authorities. It is argued that such attitudes are often groundless and may also have adverse implications for the future return of Ukrainian refugees and upcoming reconstruction of the war-torn country. It is emphasised that the government should mitigate such tension between Ukrainians in and outside Ukraine by all available means. Otherwise, millions of Ukrainians may remain in exile even after the end of hostilities.

INTRODUCTION

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian occupation troops, which has been going on for more than three years, has exacerbated the demographic crisis in the country. Since the start of the aggression in February 2022, more than 6.9 million Ukrainians have been forced to leave the country, finding refuge mainly in EU countries.¹ In fact, Ukraine was in deep demographic decline long before the outbreak of an unjust war. For many reasons, by 2022, its population had decreased by 20% since 1991 – from 52 to 42 million.² And as of 2025, the last figure looks distant and unattainable having decreased to about 34 million (including those living in the occupied territories).³ Thus, in recent years, Ukraine has been rapidly losing its population and human capital, without which the new Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of the destroyed country looks very dim.⁴ It is hardly expected that a war-torn territory with the highest mortality⁵ and lowest birth rate in the world and with critical labour shortages⁶ will receive a flood of foreign capital and large investment projects for its

economic and infrastructural recovery. Therefore, without millions of displaced Ukrainians returning home, it will be extremely challenging to implement ambitious reconstruction plans.

UNBALANCED DOMESTIC DISCOURSE

Yet, the voluntary repatriation of Ukrainian forced emigrants may encounter significant challenges. These extend beyond security concerns in the country of origin or the absence of socio-economic prospects. This is also about the growing tension in the Ukrainian society, whose members are divided into roughly two camps: *internal*, i.e., those who remained and still live in Ukraine at war, and *external*, which are those who have been forced to flee because of the invasion. At the level of informal conversations in Ukraine – face-to-face or in various social media (Facebook communities, Telegram groups, etc.) – one can increasingly catch certain discontent and even resentment on the part of some internal Ukrainians towards forced emigrants abroad. Refugees are sometimes accused of having left the country at the most critical moment in its history, choosing host societies with relatively safe lives, rather than staying and resisting the aggressors in one way or another. It is certainly possible to accept such arguments from within Ukraine. Particularly when considering the perspective of individuals who daily survive under the deadly attacks of the Russian invaders, or those who have lost family members or friends to the war or are actively engaged in defensive measures against such attacks. However, the articulation of such sentiments in the media on behalf of authorities and opinion leaders constitutes a

separate issue due to a certain bias on the part of the speakers. For example, statements by some officials are aimed at forcing refugees to return home⁷ or even intimidating them when it comes to displaced males who fled the country instead of joining the Armed Forces of Ukraine.⁸ The arguments range from blackmailing their children to suggesting the deprivation of civil rights.⁹ As for the general public, some of its representatives are rhetorically wondering in their claims, if the state still needs its external citizens – “parasites” – back from the host countries?¹⁰ In my view, the corresponding media discourse within Ukraine may create additional information hurdles for the return of displaced Ukrainians.¹¹

THE GROUNDLESSNESS OF REFUGEE BLAMING

Of course, in a democratic state the right to express one's opinion remains. However, the manipulation of facts and misleading of the public, even if unintentional, should be avoided. Firstly, assume that all refugees without exception did not initially leave the territory of Ukraine but tried to seek shelter somewhere inside the country. Thus, the number of internally displaced persons¹² would almost triple from the present 3.7 to 10.5 million people. It is hard to imagine how much the socio-economic and humanitarian situation in the country at war would have deteriorated in such a case.

Furthermore, it would also adversely affect the chances of resisting the Russian invasion. Obviously, Ukraine is critically dependent on external financial assistance from its allies. Much of this support goes to military needs. But when millions of women, children and the elderly are left without shelter, food and livelihoods in Ukraine, difficult choices must be made in redistributing always lacking donor funds from the military to the civilian needs.

Secondly, media attacks on Ukrainian men of conscription age who have left their homeland are understandable to some extent. At the same time, they are in an overwhelming minority, which is not the case with women and children. The latter

constitute more than 80% of all Ukrainian forced emigrants in host countries.¹³ Being in exile, this most vulnerable part of the Ukrainian society increases the survival rate of the whole population. Here one may recall the cynical rule used by every successful investor stating the necessity to diversify risks by putting eggs in different baskets.

Thirdly, the call by authorities for displaced Ukrainians to return and defend their homeland as a civic duty (often pointing at Israel's case) seems debatable. Citizens of any country have not only duties but also rights. The right to a decent standard of living, access to healthcare and education, for instance. While in February 2022 the average salary in Israel¹⁴ exceeded in equivalent \$4,400, in Ukraine it was 10 times lower – \$485.¹⁵ In fact, lots of Ukrainians were at the poverty line. Millions of them have solved the socio-economic challenges of their families through external labour migration, mostly to Poland, Czech Republic and Italy.

Ironically, the migration of Ukrainians to work abroad has been encouraged by the authorities for decades. Unable to create decent jobs in Ukraine, officials wanted not only to reduce unemployment but also to effortlessly receive a significant inflow of foreign currency in the form of remittances from migrant workers. But after the invasion, the situation changed dramatically. Now Ukraine is in dire need of its citizens abroad, but many of them have already integrated into their host countries and, therefore, are in no hurry to return at the first or further calls.

Moreover, it is hardly possible to accuse male Ukrainian refugees of unwillingness to return and defend their homeland when the mobilisation touches the ordinary majority but not the privileged minority. While in Israel, top officials and their children are called up to defend their country,¹⁶ in Ukraine, war is the “domain of the poor”,¹⁷ while officials in the main are either not subject to mobilisation or quietly leave the country.¹⁸

Finally, all the above does not mean that Ukrainian refugees have completely broken with Ukraine. On the contrary, the new Ukrainian diaspora¹⁹ represents a valuable resource for the

country's ongoing and post-war reconstruction. Many forced emigrants are helping their homeland and the front in active and diverse ways, which would have been unlikely if they – impoverished and homeless – had remained in Ukraine.

“REFUGEE-FRIENDLY” STATE POLICY IS KEY INCENTIVE FOR THE RETURN OF UKRAINIANS

It must be realised that the biased approach towards its refugees abroad poses a particular danger to Ukraine. On the one hand, it brings discord into society – which only pleases the Russian invaders. On the other hand, there is a growing risk that the Ukrainian forced emigrants will refuse the very idea of ever returning home, a country in which they feel not welcome. At the moment, the Ukrainian authorities have already received hundreds of thousands of applications to renounce Ukrainian citizenship,²⁰ and the National Bank of Ukraine predicts that by the end of 2025, the country will lose another 700,000 people through emigration.²¹ Therefore, the government must act as a fair arbiter, reducing public tension and conveying by all means possible the message to all Ukrainians, both internal and external ones, that without the voluntary return of refugees *en masse*, the chances for Ukraine's economic recovery and successful future will be precarious. In this regard, it is encouraging that the country's authorities realise the urgency of the issue and have empowered the Ministry of National Unity of Ukraine to address it with all gravity. In recent months, the Ministry has initiated the establishment of so-called “Unity Hubs” in host countries²² to provide comprehensive support to refugees on-site as well as to promote their voluntary return home.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was written in the framework of the project “Competence Network Interdisciplinary Ukrainian Studies Frankfurt (Oder) – Berlin (KIU)” by the DAAD with funds from the Federal Foreign Office.

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