

## Introduction

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, nearly six million Ukrainians have migrated abroad and almost 1.2 million Ukrainian refugees were registered in Germany, making it one of the most important destination countries within the EU (UNHCR 2025). These refugee flows cause substantial economic, demographic, and social challenges for both Ukraine and the receiving countries. While Ukraine faces severe population loss with potential long-term effects on its labour force, economy, and social cohesion, receiving countries must address sudden and urgent needs to provide protection, integration, and support to a large refugee population.

A crucial question in this context concerns the temporality of this migration: will those who fled return home, or will many settle permanently abroad? In public and policy debates, it is often assumed that most Ukrainians will eventually return after the war. Empirical research so far, however, has focused primarily on return intentions or aspirations rather than actual return behaviour (e.g. Hernes et al. 2024; Tubergen et al. 2024). There is still limited understanding of who ultimately returns, when, and why.

This knowledge gap is largely due to the lack of adequate longitudinal data that tracks and surveys refugees over time and across borders. As a result, research usually treats return intentions and actual return behaviour as equivalent. Yet, existing studies on labour migrants provide mixed evidence on whether stated intentions are reliable predictors of behaviour (Monti & Mussino 2021; Wanner 2021; Van Dalen & Henkens 2013) - a discrepancy often referred to as the intention-behaviour gap. Evidence on this issue in the context of forced migration remains fragmentary. Furthermore, while refugees may express a desire to return, their ability to do so may be constrained by security, economic, or family-related factors (aspirations vs. capabilities) (Carling 2002; De Haas 2021).

To address these gaps, this paper investigates the actual return migration behaviour of Ukrainian refugees by using the 'BiB/FReDA: Refugees from Ukraine in Germany' - a unique longitudinal probability-based dataset that not only follows Ukrainian refugees residing in Germany but also tracks and surveys those who have returned to Ukraine. We want to answer the following research questions:

- Are those who actually returned the same individuals who initially expressed strong intentions to return?
- To what extent can early intentions predict actual return behaviour?
- How do returnees differ from stayers - particularly from those who had expressed an intention to return but ultimately did not?

By examining these questions, the paper contributes to understanding how temporary or permanent migrations from Ukraine may be and provides evidence-based insights relevant for both Ukrainian and receiving countries policies.

## Data

The paper makes use of the 'BiB/FReDA: Refugees from Ukraine in Germany'. The panel includes approximately 2,600 individuals who arrived in Germany from Ukraine between 24 February and 8 June 2022. It is well suited for this analysis for at least three reasons: First, Germany, with approximately 1.2 million Ukrainian refugees is one of the primary destinations of Ukrainian refugees within the EU. Second, the panel study is probability-based and by this offers high-quality data on

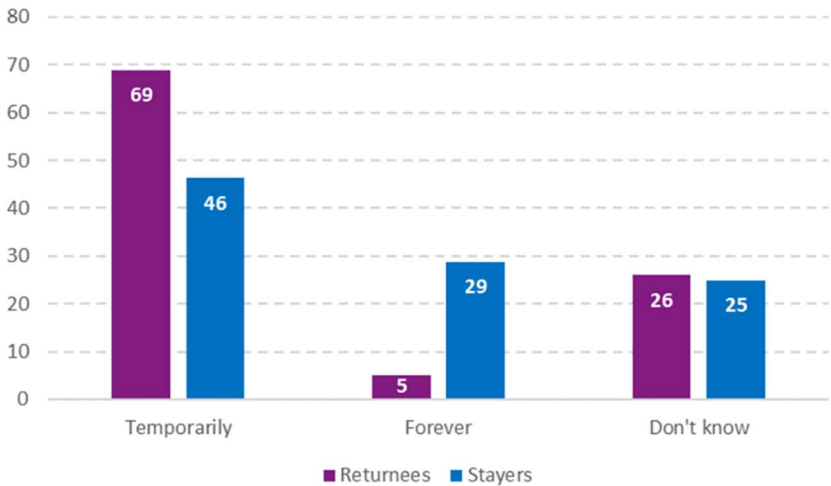
Ukrainian refugees across six bi-annual waves and within three years. This design allows for a longitudinal assessment of both intentions and actual behaviour. Third, the panel study follows an open sampling design, allowing to track and interview respondents who have moved back to Ukraine (Ette et al. 2023).

The dataset provides extensive information on whereabouts of family members and family composition, integration experiences, employment, language proficiency, social ties, and subjective well-being. These variables enable the identification of determinants of both return intentions and actual return behaviour and help to assess whether, and under what conditions, early intentions are reliable predictors of actual return. Analytically, we compare two groups of respondents: (1) those who have returned to Ukraine (“returnees”), and (2) those who have remained in Germany (“stayers”) and who continue to participate in the final available wave (wave 6), ensuring that they are indeed still residing in Germany. To assess predictors of actual return behaviour, random and fixed effects logistic regression models are applied, accounting for both time-invariant and time-varying characteristics.

**Preliminary results**

Preliminary descriptive results show that between 1 and 4 % per cent of the respondents in each wave have actually return to Ukraine, corresponding approximately 400 respondents who have returned within the timeframe of six waves. These returnees are compared with stayers. In the first wave, respondents were asked who long they intended to stay in Germany. Among those who later returned, nearly 70 per cent reported that they planned to stay temporarily, compared with only 46 per cent among the stayers (see Figure 1).

**Fig. 1: Initially expressed intentions to stay in Germany of returnees and stayers**



Data source: IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP survey, waves 1- 2; BiB/FReDA survey, starting cohort 1, waves 3–6.

At first glance, this suggests that early return intentions capture at least part of the subsequent return behaviour. Multivariate analyses (fixed and random effect models) controlling for family ties, employment status, integration indicators, and well-being reveal a more nuanced picture. Returnees are more likely to have a partner but no children in Ukraine, to be employed, to report medium rather than low or high German language proficiency, and to have fewer social contacts with Germans as well as a lower perceived sense of welcome. Even when these factors are taken into account, early return intentions remain a significant predictor of actual return behaviour.

By linking intentions and actual behaviour in a longitudinal perspective, this study provides rare and more precise empirical evidence on the dynamics of actual return migration among Ukrainian refugees.

## References

- Carling, J. (2002): Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (1): 5–42.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830120103912>.
- De Haas, H. (2021): A theory of migration: The aspirations–capabilities framework. In: *Comparative Migration Studies* 9 (1): 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4>.
- Ette, A.; Spieß, K. C.; Bujard, M.; Décieux, J.; Gambaro, L.; Gutu, L.; Milewski, N.; Ruckdeschel, K.; Sauer, L.; Schmitz, S. (2023): Lebenssituation ukrainischer Geflüchteter. Höhere gesellschaftliche Teilhabe nach eineinhalb Jahren in Deutschland. In: *Bevölkerungsforschung Aktuell* 6/2023: 3–16.
- Hernes, V.; Aasland, A.; Deineko, O.; Myhre, M. H. (2024): Where does the future lie? Initial aspirations for return among newly arrived Ukrainian refugees in Norway. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2383729>.
- Monti, A.; Mussino, E. (2021): Did they stay or did they go: The role of intention behind re-migration behaviour. Stockholm, Stockholm Research Reports in Demography 2021:5.
- van Tubergen, F., Wachter, G.G., Kosyakova, Y. & Kogan, I. (2024): Return intentions among Ukrainian refugees in Europe: A Cross-National Study. In: *International Migration* 62: 181–198.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13291>.
- UNHCR (2025): Operational Data Portal: Ukrainian Refugee Situation,  
<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> (2025-10-21)
- Van Dalen, H. P.; Henkens, K. (2013): Explaining emigration intentions and behaviour in the Netherlands, 2005–10. In: *Population Studies* 67(2): 225–241.
- Wanner, Philippe (2021): Can Migrants’ Emigration Intentions Predict Their Actual Behaviors? Evidence from a Swiss Survey. In: *Journal of International Migration and Integration* (2021) 22:1151–1179.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-020-00798-7>.