

Return movement dynamics of IDPs and refugees

OVERVIEW

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022 has displaced one-third of the country's population. **Over 6.2 million people remain internally displaced** within Ukraine, and there were **over 5.6 million Ukrainian refugees** recorded across Europe in early July (IOM 27/06/2022; UNHCR accessed 06/07/2022; OCHA 24/04/2022). Reports suggest that displaced populations have been moving back to their place of habitual residence in Ukraine since May, although it is unclear how sustainable and permanent the return may be. This report looks at their motivations for moving back, presents the scale of their movement and the main locations involved, and provides a comprehensive overview of their humanitarian situation.

The main motivations for returning people present include a sense of having fewer **safety and security** incidents in their places of habitual residence, **reuniting with family** members that had stayed behind, and **financial reasons**.

Although there is huge uncertainty around numbers, estimations suggest that **around 5.5 million people have returned to their places of habitual residence in Ukraine** (IOM 27/06/2022). While around 90% have returned from within Ukraine, 10% have reported returning from abroad. Border-crossing figures report an increase in the number of Ukrainians coming back into Ukraine (Frontex 02/06/2022; UNCHR accessed 28/06/2022; Ukrayinska Pravda 12/04/2022; UN 14/04/2022; BBC 15/04/2022).

People moving back initially returned to oblasts predominantly in the north and west of the country. As at late June, the highest numbers of IDPs moving back were reported in northern and eastern oblasts, as well as Kyiv. Since May, the return movements from abroad have been recorded across majority of the oblasts in the country with Lviv, Kyiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts named as most popular oblasts of destinations (REACH/UNHCR 02/05/2022; REACH/UNHCR 13/06/2022; IOM 27/06/2022). Some reports suggest that people are also returning to areas with active conflict. These people are more likely to experience displacement again if insecurity worsens (Razumkov Centre 18/05/2022; REACH/UNHCR 02/05/2022; IOM 23/05/2022).

Priority needs among the people moving back **are cash assistance and materials to rebuild their damaged houses**. The affected population will continue to face long-term needs and require assistance rebuilding their lives, which may pose additional challenges to humanitarian responders.

About this report

Aim: this report aims to highlight the situation of people moving back into their places of habitual residence in Ukraine.

Methodology: the analysis is based on the secondary data review of public and non-public sources and 55 key informant interviews.

Limitations: the constant displacement of IDPs and refugees poses a significant challenge to acquiring data on numbers, locations, and needs. The dynamics remain unsteady, and the lack of reliable data makes it hard to understand movement patterns. The use of key informants poses certain limitations as key informant interviews provide a subjective perspective. They might not be aware of the needs of specific population groups, and they cannot be expected to have complete knowledge of the overall situation in an area. A detailed description of the method used can be found the end of this report.

Scope: the report focuses on the situation of people within Ukraine

Terminology

This report refrains from using the term *returnee* to avoid implying that the analysed movements back to places of habitual residence within Ukraine are sustainable or permanent, as currently there is not enough evidence to support this assumption.

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MAIN FINDINGS AND INFORMATION GAPS

- **There is an overall lack of certainty around the figures and locations of the population moving back into Ukraine from abroad or within the country.**
- **Reports suggest that since April, the number of people moving back into Ukraine from abroad or within the country has increased.** The increase suggests that the number of return movements to Ukraine might continue rising in the coming months. People will need long-term support to reintegrate into their communities. They will also need support to rebuild damaged and destroyed houses and infrastructure or find suitable hosting arrangements if returning to their homes is no longer an option (SCR 18/04/2022; OCHA 14/04/2022).
- **The majority of IDPs and refugees that moved back** surveyed by different organisations in April–May **indicated that they did not intend to leave their area of residence again in the future**, particularly those returning to the north of the country. The sentiment differed in the east, where respondents considered leaving again because of active conflict (Razumkov Centre 18/05/2022; REACH/UNHCR 02/05/2022; IOM 23/05/2022). It is hard to predict if these return movements will be permanent.
- **The security situation in Ukraine remains uncertain and is highly dynamic:** Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts experience active hostilities. There have also been reports of shelling in Dnipro, Kharkiv, Sumy, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, and Kyiv city in the first weeks of June (OCHA 15/06/2022; The Guardian 05/06/2022). The volatile security situation has made people's movements unpredictable, multiple, and sometimes temporary, making them very difficult to monitor and analyse. Since movements are constant, there is no reliable data on locations, and the accurate number of people moving back is uncertain.
- **Available information on the number of IDPs and people that have moved back to their places of habitual residence within Ukraine is based on estimations and should not be taken as a final figure.** The fluidity of IDP movements and the fact that they move multiple times in some cases make it harder to report on displacement figures. Authorities still do not disclose the number of registered IDPs, and there is no consistent data collection of IDP movements on a subnational level. **It is also hard to track if the IDPs moving back are returning to their place of residence before 24 February or to other areas.** Lastly, IDPs movements can be pendular; some people return to their places of habitual residence to assess the situation of their houses before deciding where to go next (KII 12/06/2022 c).
- **The number of border crossings to and from Ukraine does not indicate the total number of refugees abroad or people moving back to Ukraine.** Border-crossing movements can be pendular and may include repeated entries and returns. There are also other types of movements, such as temporary visits to get supplies or visit family members. The situation remains highly dynamic, and definitive figures are currently not possible to determine (IOM 31/05/2022; REACH/UNHCR 02/05/2022).

MOTIVES FOR MOVING BACK

Some of the main reasons both IDPs and refugees mentioned for moving back to their places of habitual residence were:



Source: ACAPS

Limitations: the ranking above shows the result of 49 key informant interviews by ACAPS from 5–19 June. This ranking tried to capture some of the most common answers people gave when asked about the drivers of return movements. The results should not be taken as comprehensive reasons behind people moving back but as indication. They should be read taking into consideration the limited number of answers during a short period.

The most mentioned driver was a **perception of fewer risks of safety and security incidents**. Residents of northern oblasts in particular have a perception of safety in their areas of return. In Kyiv oblast and Kyiv city, people feel like it is safe to go back as the areas are no longer under direct military attack (NPR 05/05/2022; REACH/UNHCR 02/05/2022). However, both airstrikes and missile attacks continue in and around Kyiv, posing a serious risk for the returning population. On 5 June, Kyiv city was hit by airstrikes for the first time since the end of April and on 26 June missiles hit residential areas in a central urban district of Kyiv city, resulting in civilian casualties (The Guardian 05/06/2022; Al Jazeera 26/06/2022).

Reuniting with family: most of the IDPs and refugees are women and children, as the majority of men are not allowed to leave the country due to conscription. The desire to reunite with family is one of the most common reasons people have for returning (NPR 05/05/2022; REACH/UNHCR 02/05/2022; KII 13/06/2022 b; KII 13/06/2022 c; KII 13/06/2022 d; KII 15/06/2022 h; KII 09/06/2022 c). Some IDPs and refugees return to assist their elderly parents who did not evacuate and are facing increasing difficulties in meeting their basic needs (KII 19/06/2022 e).

A lack of money to support life in areas they are currently located: since February 2022, income has declined for IDP and refugee households. IDPs and refugees face increased financial challenges while displaced given additional expenses, such as higher rents. In many cases, people move back in hopes of resuming previous jobs, improving their financial situation, and being able to support family members still displaced to other countries (KII 14/06/2022 f; KII 13/06/2022 f; KII 06/06/2022 b; KII 19/06/2022 f). More than 60% of the IDPs surveyed by IOM between 17–23 May reported losing their jobs to the conflict, and one of five reported having no income at all. More than half of the IDPs who lost their jobs attempted to find work in their location of displacement, but only 9% succeeded (IOM 31/05/2022). The ones who found new employment reported receiving significantly less income than their pre-war salary (KII 06/06/2022 b).

A lack of temporary housing in areas they are currently located: particularly in Poland, housing is scarce, and many refugees are either staying with other Ukrainians already living there before February or with Polish host families. The housing situation is not a long-term solution and, in some cases, can lead to overcrowding (NPR 05/05/2022; Euronews 08/06/2022; Portal Samorządowy 04/07/2022).

A lack of adequate living conditions in temporary housing: many IDPs are still living in temporary shelters, such as schools or gyms, with little or no prospect of accessing a long-term housing solution. In most cases, temporary housing lacks proper equipment, such as home appliances. Local officials and collective site managers have mentioned the lack of beddings, disposable tableware, drinking water and prepared meals or bread (considering the lack of kitchens), shower installations, and laundry facilities in most centres (Shelter Cluster 13/05/2022). The lack of long-term solutions to address their housing needs is encouraging IDPs to return to their own homes (CF SSS 02/06/2022; KII 19/06/2022 b).

Delays in cash support from authorities or international organisations: some IDPs have mentioned delays in cash support payments from the Ukrainian Government, increasing their financial struggles (KII 06/06/2022 b). People who come back expect fewer expenses in their places of habitual residence (CF SSS 02/06/2022).

Not wanting to settle in areas they are currently located: some IDPs are not inclined to integrate into their host communities as they anticipate that they will be able to return to their places of residence soon (CF SSS 02/06/2022).

Temporarily returning to collect necessary belongings: to a lesser extent, some have also mentioned practical reasons as drivers of return movements, as people need to collect important documents left behind (BBC 15/04/2022; REACH/UNHCR 02/05/2022).

Assisting with the evacuation of family members still in Ukraine: some are only temporarily returning to evacuate family members that had remained in Ukraine or try to persuade elderly parents to leave (BBC 15/04/2022; KII 19/06/2022 c; KII 16/06/2022 a).

Need for medical treatments: some displaced populations have mentioned the need for regular treatments as a driver of return, as some require complex regular treatments unavailable at hospitals in their areas of displacement (KII 16/06/2022 d).

SCALE OF RETURNS AND MAIN LOCATIONS

Since 24 February 2022, the conflict has displaced around one-third of the Ukrainian population within Ukraine and across the border to neighbouring countries (IOM 27/06/2022; UNHCR 24/06/2022; OCHA 24/04/2022). Reports suggest that since May, the number of people moving back to Ukraine from abroad or to their places of habitual residence within the country has increased (IOM 23/05/2022 and 27/06/2022; UNHCR 03/06/2022 and 24/06/2022).

IDPs moving back

According to IOM, as at 27 June, **6.2 million people remained internally displaced** within Ukraine. This estimated number represents a decrease of nearly 900,000 since 23 May, a second consecutive reduction in estimated numbers since February. Estimations also suggest that **around 5.5 million people have returned to their places of habitual residence, with vast majority returning from within Ukraine**. This figure represents an increase of over one million since IOM's latest survey on 23 May, confirming the rapid increase of the trend (IOM 31/05/2022 and 27/06/2022). The figure is an estimation based on IOM findings and should not be taken as a definitive number.

The trend of IDPs moving back is expected to continue in the coming weeks, particularly to areas currently less affected by fighting and shelling. The situation continues to be extremely unstable. Over 1.3 million people are still considering leaving their place of residence because of conflict, and around 12% of those who have come back may leave their homes again if insecurity worsens (IOM 23/05/2022 and 27/06/2022).

According to the latest survey carried out by IOM between 17–23 June, around 15% of IDP respondents indicated planning to return to their places of habitual residence within the upcoming two weeks, a decrease from the previous survey carried out 17-23 May, when 23% of respondents indicated planning to return. The majority of the IDPs planning to return are originally from Kyiv oblast or north of the country (IOM 27/06/2022; IOM 30/05/2022).

Refugees moving back

As at 16 June, there were approximately **5.2 million Ukrainian refugees** across Europe (UNHCR accessed 20/06/2022; UNHCR 24/06/2022).

Border-crossing figures suggest that since May, the number of Ukrainians coming back into Ukraine has increased, a trend that might continue in the coming months. 10% of the estimated 5.5 million people that have returned to their places of habitual residence were self-reported returns from abroad (IOM 27/06/2022).

Between 25–31 May, border authorities reported 260,000 border crossings back into Ukraine, with around 30,000 border crossings per day (Frontex 02/06/2022; UNHCR accessed 20/06/2022; OCHA 14/04/2022; Ukrayinska Pravda 12/04/2022; UN 14/04/2022). On 10 May, Polish border authorities reported that for the first time since February, the number of people returning to Ukraine (34,000) exceeded those leaving (29,000) (BBC 15/04/2022; France 24 12/05/2022). This difference represents a change in the dynamics since the one million border crossings into Europe recorded at the beginning of March (OCHA 03/03/2022). The number of border crossings should not be interpreted to correspond with refugees leaving or coming back, as they can include pendular movements and repeated entries and returns.

Women make up the vast majority of refugees moving back into the country, just as they made up the majority of those who left. Compared to those who left, fewer people are travelling with children and more are travelling back alone. One interpretation is that Ukrainians with children are less likely to return to Ukraine in the short term. Reports and surveys estimate that around 73% of surveyed refugees plan to settle in the same oblast they lived in before 24 February. 30% were residents of central regions, mostly Kyiv city and Kyiv oblast (Razumkov Centre 18/05/2022).

Main locations of return

Most of the IDPs and refugees moving back intend to return to the place they lived in before February (REACH/UNHCR 02/05/2022; IOM 31/05/2022; Razumkov Centre 18/05/2022; IOM 27/06/2022). Most of the estimated 5.5 million people that have started moving back have returned to large cities or their suburbs in the north and east of Ukraine (IOM 27/06/2022 and 31/05/2022). In the past month, the estimated number of people going back to the south of the country has decreased as the perception of security in that region has declined (IOM 27/06/2022).

Movements back to oblasts in the north, west, and central Ukraine

The main oblasts displaced populations are moving back to are Chernihiv, Dnipro, Kyiv, Lviv, and Sumy (REACH/UNHCR 02/05/2022; IOM 27/06/2022).

Kyiv oblast and Kyiv city

Nearly two-thirds of the 3.5 million inhabitants of Kyiv city have returned, according to local authorities (France24 12/05/2022; BBC 23/06/2022). Although the focus of the intense conflict has shifted from Kyiv oblast and Kyiv city, the region is still experiencing attacks, increasing the number of civilian deaths and damages to civilian infrastructure (AI Jazeera 26/06/2022; OCHA 24/06/2022).

Among people returning from abroad, those coming back to Ukraine are mainly returning to Kyiv city, Kyiv oblast, or other areas in the north of the country. Those not planning to go back to their previous area of residence because of active conflict are more likely to choose western regions or Kyiv oblast as their new place of residence (Razumkov Centre 18/05/2022).

Sumy oblast

There have been returns reported in Sumy oblast (KII 15/06/2022 g). While ground conflict is no longer present in the oblast, some danger remains as Russian forces still shell the oblast from across the border, leading to continued deaths and injuries (Ukrayinska Pravda 20/06/2022).

Movements back to oblasts with active conflict

IOM's latest estimations suggest that around 400,000 people have moved back from abroad or other areas of Ukraine to the east of the country since 23 May (IOM 27/06/2022). The situation in oblasts still affected by active conflict poses an additional challenge for those moving back. They will be facing increased needs in their places of habitual residence; insecurity might force them to leave again, leading to multiple displacements; and access and availability of humanitarian assistance will likely be obstructed.

Odesa oblast

Local volunteers estimate that 30% of those who had left the city have come back, although the number is a rough estimation as it is hard to quantify these movements (KII 09/06/2022 a; KII 10/06/2022 b; KII 17/06/2022 b). In June, there were reports of missile strikes, shelling, and air attacks (ISW 29/06/2022; OCHA 24/06/2022).

Kharkiv city (Kharkiv oblast)

While the security situation in Kharkiv city has slightly improved, there are still frequent shelling and missile attacks, and Russian forces continue to carry out offensive operations in the front lines northeast of the city (ISW 14/06/2022). The city has experienced massive damage because of the conflict (AA 09/06/2022). As at mid-May, a moderate influx of people moved back to Kharkiv city (CF SSS 02/06/2022; KII 10/06/2022 a; KII 14/06/2022 b; KII 14/06/2022 c; KII 14/06/2022 d; KII 19/06/2022 d). Some do not believe that Kharkiv city is secure and, in many cases, only decide to move back as a result of their strained financial situation. Any major rise in security concerns might persuade them to leave again (KII 10/06/2022 a; KII 15/06/2022 c; KII 19/06/2022 e). Others do not believe that the war will end soon; they only temporarily return to Kharkiv to gather belongings or evacuate family members that had not yet left (KII 14/06/2022 b; KII 14/06/2022 c; KII 19/06/2022 c; KII 19/06/2022 d).

Mykolaiv oblast

Mykolaiv oblast continues to experience intense shelling and active conflict, with the number of attacks on civilian infrastructure increasing. Reported violent incidents in the region increased by 240% in June compared with May (ACLEDD 09/06/2022). While people are still leaving the region because of violence, some who fled in previous months are coming back, including those who had been displaced to Odesa city (Odesa oblast) 100km away. If the security situation keeps deteriorating, those who have made their way back to the region are highly likely to leave again, displacing them a second time and increasing their needs (KII 06/06/2022 a). It is extremely hard to estimate the number of people that have decided to move back into the region as, in many cases, these movements go unregistered.

Other oblasts

Local organisations are also reporting on people moving back to different areas of Chernihiv oblast, although there are no specific numbers on how many people have decided to move back (KII 12/06/2022 a).

MAIN HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

The significant increase in the number of those coming back is expected to continue, in the coming months. The number of people moving back and the magnitude of needs pose challenges for the humanitarian response, as these populations will need support to reintegrate into their communities (SCR 18/04/2022; OCHA 13/04/2022; KII 13/06/2022 d).

Construction materials and services: extensive damage to residential buildings has been reported in the north of the country (Chernihiv, Kyiv, and Sumy oblasts) since 24 February (Shelter Cluster 13/05/2022). IDPs and refugees are, in many cases, moving back to damaged houses and residential buildings. House repair needs have considerably grown, with increased needs for building and reconstruction materials and construction services to repair the damage. There is an urgent need for reparations before October, when temperatures will start dropping (WB accessed 24/06/2022; KII 16/06/2022 c; Shelter Cluster 13/05/2022; KII 12/06/2022 a; KII 19/06/2022 b; KII 18/06/2022 a).

Financial resources: many of those moving back lost their livelihoods at the beginning of the conflict, leading to a need for financial resources. Some have seen their salaries delayed and are facing financial issues (KII 17/06/2022 a; KII 16/06/2022 d; KII 15/06/2022 f; KII 14/06/2022 e; KII 14/06/2022 f; KII 13/06/2022 e; KII 14/06/2022 d; KII 19/06/2022 a). Cash was reported as the number one priority need among IDPs in all regions surveyed by IOM (IOM 31/05/2022). In some cases, people who have returned reported delays in being able to register for assistance with local authorities and humanitarian organisations (KII15/06/2022 c). In many cases, most of them depleted their savings when they were displaced, either within Ukraine or outside the country. The lack of livelihoods and delays in IDP payments from the Government have left IDPs and refugees with no savings, and many view moving back as a coping mechanism. Among those still employed, many have experienced significant salary cuts, earning up to 60% less of their salaries before February (KII 14/06/2022 f; KII 10/06/2022 c; KII 13/06/2022 e). Elderly people whose only form of income is their pension used to depend on close family members for economic support. In many cases, younger family members who have been displaced have lost their source of income and can no longer help. Pensions alone are not enough, and the older population needs further assistance to cope with the rising cost of living (KII 12/06/2022 b). If the conflict becomes protracted, estimations suggest that almost one-third of the population will be living below the poverty line (earning USD 1.90 per day), and an additional 62% of the population will be at risk of falling into poverty in the next nine months (UNDP 16/03/2022).

Access to food: latest market monitoring trends show that the food access situation has improved since April, with food items and other goods increasingly available in most oblasts (REACH 21/06/2022). On the other hand, conflict has also led food prices to spike, and the prices of food items have increased by 124% compared to the previous year (REACH 21/06/2022).

While prices of goods have spiked, salaries and pensions remain at a pre-war level (KII 17/06/2022 c). As a result, most people that have returned cannot afford to buy all basic goods, making it harder for them to meet their basic needs (KII 06/06/2022 a; KII 08/06/2022 b; KII 10/06/2022 a; KII 09/06/2022 b; KII 06/06/2022 b; KII 19/06/2022 e). Certain products, such as baby food, remain hard to find in some oblasts, such as Odesa oblast. Families that remained in the region were able to stock up when supply was higher – something those who have just returned are not able to do (KII 10/06/2022 b).

Access to healthcare: around 12 million people in Ukraine are estimated to need health assistance between March–August 2022. Active violence continues to severely disrupt access to healthcare, crippling the health system in the country (OCHA 24/06/2022: WHO 16/06/2022). Over 20% of IDPs surveyed by IOM in June reported that they or a family member stopped using their medication because of the war and requested psychological support. People moving back will likely keep facing these challenges in their places of habitual residence (IOM 27/06/2022).

Access to drinking water and hygiene: 13 million people in Ukraine are estimated in need of water, sanitation, and hygiene assistance between March–August 2022 (OCHA 24/06/2022). Access to running water represents a growing issue for IDPs in the eastern regions of the country, where many people are moving back (IOM 27/06/2022). In Mykolaiv oblast, restricted access to drinking water and disruptions to the water supply remain critical issues for the entire population. The conflict has heavily damaged sanitation facilities and water treatment systems, and the central water supply is currently distributing only unfiltered water (REACH 10/05/2022; KII 06/06/2022 a). People moving back have reported high needs for hygiene products (KII 14/06/2022 a).

Access to education: as at 28 June, the conflict had damaged nearly 1,850 and completely destroyed more than 210 educational facilities across Ukraine (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine accessed 28/06/2022). Access to education has been particularly challenging for IDP households, with 40% of all school-aged IDP children being out of school because of poor internet access, displacement, and the closure of schools (IOM 27/06/2022; World Vision 27/06/2022). Education for children moving back will likely continue to be hindered in oblasts where conflict has heavily damaged schools or where education facilities are serving as host centres for IDPs.

Demining and risk education: the presence of a large number of mines and explosive remnants of war in areas that experienced ground fighting and shelling poses a risk of death and injury among returning populations (Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine 10/05/2022). There have been reports of mine traps being placed inside the bodies of the dead or in everyday appliances (Voices of Children/Kharkiv Institute of Social Research 24/05/2022; France 24 20/04/2022; Lieber Institute 05/04/2022).

Information: there is a lack of clear information especially among those that have only returned temporarily, including information on where to get humanitarian assistance, new employment policies, currency exchanges, and government measures, particularly regarding home reparations. Key informants mentioned deciding to move back to get a clear picture of the situation in their places of habitual residence and assess their long-term prospects (KII 19/06/2022 d; KII 15/06/2022 e; KII 17/06/2022 c).

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

For this report, ACAPS collected and analysed qualitative data and carried out a secondary data review of publicly available reports and other sources of public information and analysis.

ACAPS also remotely conducted 55 interviews with civil service organisation members and members of the displaced population located in different oblasts across the country.

Information shared by key informants and the displaced population gives insight into the potential scale of returns, movement patterns, and people's intentions of returning, but it does not provide a representative sample. Any interview provides a subjective perspective.

While conclusions can be drawn, important information gaps remain as highlighted in the report.