

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Reintegration of War-Fleeing Ukrainians After Their Return to Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the reintegration experiences of Ukrainians who fled the country to the European Union (EU) following Russia's 2022 invasion and subsequently returned while the country was still at war. Employing a mixed-methods approach—including surveys, semi-structured interviews and field observations in Ukraine—the study focuses on the experiences of returnees. By 2025, over 1.2 million Ukrainians had returned from abroad, predominantly women and children from the EU but also from other countries. Return trajectories varied: some returned shortly after displacement, motivated by a strong sense of belonging and sustained ties to Ukraine, while others remained abroad longer and encountered more complex reintegration processes. Most returnees resettled in their original regions, and many found employment quickly amid wartime labour shortages. Although patriotic sentiment intensified during displacement, trust in Ukrainian public institutions remained low. Return was often marked by a decline in life satisfaction and mental health, underlining the psychological challenges of reintegration under war conditions. The study highlights the urgent need for evidence-based reintegration policies that respond to returnees' lived realities that are crucial for Ukraine's recovery, resilience and social cohesion.

## 1 | Introduction

The Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered one of the largest displacement crises in Europe since World War II. Millions of Ukrainians fled abroad, primarily to European Union (EU) member states, where they were granted legal residency. Their reception was facilitated through the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in March 2022—the first time the directive was ever implemented. The TPD granted displaced Ukrainians access to housing, employment, healthcare, education and social benefits with support coordinated across the European Commission, national and local governments, civil society organisations, and host communities,

illustrating a multi-level governance approach to protection (Jauhiainen and Erbsen 2023).

Since Russia's full-scale invasion, over 1 million Ukrainians have returned from the EU, despite ongoing insecurity in Ukraine and the continued availability of legal residence and support under the TPD (European Commission 2022; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2025). The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine peaked at 8.0 million in May 2022 and declined to 3.7 million by autumn 2025, though it has begun to rise again amid renewed insecurity. By that time, there were an estimated 4.5 million returnees in total, including 1.2–1.6 million who had returned from

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abroad (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2025c; Jauhiainen 2025). Ukraine thus represents a unique and complex case of large-scale and often permanent return migration occurring during an ongoing war.

This article addresses a significant research gap by examining return migration to a country still at war, with a focus on the reintegration experiences of Ukrainians who fled the 2022 Russian invasion, sought protection in the EU member states, and later returned to Ukraine during the ongoing war. It investigates the following research questions: *How is reintegration unfolding for Ukrainians who returned during wartime? How do returnees perceive their post-return life and health? What does reintegration in a country at war bring to broader reintegration theories?*

The case of Ukraine presents a rare and complex instance of large-scale return migration and reintegration to the home country taking place during an active war. This is an exception to the prevailing assumption in which reintegration in the war context refers to a post-conflict phenomenon, occurring once hostilities have ceased and when conditions start to stabilise, though not necessarily immediately. On the contrary, in a country at war, safety is unevenly distributed across regions and time, providing highly variable and unforeseeable opportunities for reintegration. Furthermore, in the war context, individuals perceive and navigate reintegration differently, depending on their personal circumstances, resources as well as sense and state of security.

International actors such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and host states often frame war-fleeing migrants' return as a preferred durable solution. However, return during an ongoing war is rare, and in particular in Europe. One of the few historical parallels can be found in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, though even then, returns were minimal prior to the cessation of military violence (Eastmond 2006; Ibričević 2024). Outside Europe, recent returns to Syria provide some parallels. Return and reintegration efforts in Syria largely began only after major hostilities subsided and security conditions improved. The large-scale war ended, but armed conflicts in certain regions have continued despite Syrians' return. Moreover, returns to Syria were closely tied to the political regime change, which differs significantly from Ukraine (Dinçer and Şahin-Mencütek 2025).

General findings indicate that many post-conflict returnees are middle-aged individual and elderly women who return for family unification and caregiving, while many men could not leave at all their home country or they remain employed abroad after the war ends. The demographic profile of Ukrainian returnees from the EU consists of primarily women and children and fewer elderly (UNHCR 2024; IOM 2025b). Martial law has prevented many men from leaving Ukraine; nonetheless, over 800,000 Ukrainian men of conscription age managed to exit and remain in the EU (Eurostat 2025). Only a few of them are expected to return during the war. In addition, Ukrainian men aged 18–22 are since August 2025 allowed to cross the Ukrainian border freely in either direction (Reuters 2025), and thousands of young men have since then left the country. Nevertheless, returns from abroad continue, recently by 14,000–22,000 individuals every month. At the same time, people are still leaving Ukraine to be protected in the EU (Eurostat 2025; IOM 2025a). In the

summer of 2025, the war expanded to new regions of Ukraine, and some people—including those who had already returned and begun reintegrating—felt compelled to leave the country after more than 3 years of the initial war escalation. However, only a small share of returnees (7%) reported intentions to leave, and just 2%–3% planned to move abroad. Among those who had remained in Ukraine for more than a year after returning, fewer than 1% expressed any intention to leave again (IOM 2025c).

In general, returnees often face the challenge of accessing housing, employment, healthcare and legal support while rebuilding social and professional networks in their home country. Their reintegration varies based on time spent abroad, return conditions and the strength of their social ties. Some adapt smoothly, while others face economic hardship, social isolation and mixed societal attitudes. Reintegration is thus multifaceted, shaped not only by individual resilience but also by the responsiveness of institutions, communities and public policy. Bureaucratic barriers, limited resources or social tensions—especially between returnees and those who never left—can hinder it. Returnees bring new experiences and skills that may not align with the realities of their home country, leading to frustration, alienation and thoughts of re-migration (Battistella 2018; Hagan and Wassink 2020; Schimmel 2022). Not all who return are able to go back to their original homes or even their home regions. In Ukraine, many instead become IDPs, which makes reintegration spatially uneven across the country.

Systematic research on return migration and reintegration under wartime conditions remains limited. Most existing research on conflict-related return focuses on return migration intentions (e.g., van Tubergen et al. 2024) or post-conflict contexts when the war has ended (e.g., Eastmond 2006; Ibričević 2024; Dinçer and Şahin-Mencütek 2025). Theories typically assume that return and consequent reintegration occur after conflict ends, as the final phase of the migration cycle. These general frameworks typically expect that public institutions in the returnees' country start to function relatively well and that reintegration opportunities are fairly uniform across the national territory (Kuschminder 2017; Hagan and Wassink 2020; Zakirova and Buzurukova 2021; Bilecen 2022). Another recent particularity is ubiquitous digitally mediated interaction among forced migrants. However, earlier studies seldom account for situations where all stakeholders remain digitally and physically connected throughout an ongoing war—those who left and stayed abroad, those who left and returned and those who never left the country (Merisalo and Jauhiainen 2021). The Ukrainian case reveals the need to study how reintegration is experienced during ongoing war across diverse demographic and spatiotemporal realities, and rethink and reconceptualise reintegration.

Wartime reintegration is best understood as a dynamic ongoing process. While significant attention has been given to Ukrainian refugees' displacement, integration in host countries and return intentions (e.g., Andrews et al. 2023; Brzozowska 2023; Amit et al. 2024; Maidanik 2024; Tarkhanova and Pyrogova 2024; van Tubergen et al. 2024), empirical research on actual return and reintegration processes remains scarce. Much available knowledge stems from general assessments by international organisations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2024, 2025a, 2025b), the UNHCR (2024) and the research

network IMPACT (2024), leaving a gap in detailed, field-based analyses of returnees' lived experiences in Ukraine.

Following this introduction, the article situates the study within the broader literature on return migrants' reintegration, emphasising both parallels and divergences between wartime and post-conflict contexts. The methodological section outlines the mixed-methods design, combining survey data, semi-structured interviews and field observations in Ukraine during 2024 and 2025. The results section presents findings on economic, social, institutional and spatial dimensions of reintegration. The conclusion reflects on the study's implications and offers directions for future research.

## 2 | Conceptual Framework

Reintegration, broadly understood as the process of readjustment leading into various degrees of adaptation following return to one's country of origin, is inherently complex and shaped by a combination of personal, structural and societal factors (White 2022). It is connected to migration away from one's familiar environment, often abroad and remaining away for a substantial time. Reintegration spans multiple domains, encompassing access to employment, housing, public services and social networks, as well as a sense of belonging and emotional well-being. While some experience a relatively smooth reintegration, particularly those with strong pre-return ties, others face challenges such as economic instability, social disconnection, insufficient institutional support and displacement in the country of origin. Rather than a uniform or linear trajectory, reintegration involves ongoing negotiation between personal agency, structural opportunities and transnational connections (Berry 2017). As reintegration experiences vary across gender, age, socioeconomic status, length of stay abroad, legal status and location of return, there is an increasing need to address intersectionality and contextual variability of reintegration.

Return migration precedes reintegration and it is not simply the reversal of out-migration. The degree of agency in the return process strongly influences the capacity to readjust (Cassarino 2004). Those who return voluntarily, often with financial resources, job prospects and maintained social ties, are typically better positioned to reintegrate. In contrast, forced or unplanned return is associated with economic instability, psychological stress and limited support (Kuschminder 2017). Returnees vary along their resources: gender, family composition, age, home region and their intersectional compositions matter substantially.

Objectively, reintegration includes access to housing, employment and legal status; subjectively, it involves feelings of belonging, well-being and stability (Lietaert and Kuschminder 2021). Both objective and subjective dimensions determine reintegration success. Time is a key factor: prolonged absence and weakened ties can hinder reintegration, while shorter stays and continued engagement with home communities, often sustained digitally, can ease the transition back to the home country (Eastmond 2006; Bilecen 2022; Moran 2023). Reintegration does not always lead to permanent stay in the home country but can include ongoing ties with the former host country, circular

migration and even onward migration, if reintegration remains incomplete.

Most reintegration research assumes a post-conflict context in which return occurs after war and violence end. However, Ukraine's case—marked by large-scale return during ongoing war—requires rethinking this model. For example, while Syrian return migration was delayed due to civil war and access restrictions (Dinçer and Şahin-Mencütek 2025), Ukrainians began returning within months, facilitated by proximity from the EU, free access and the nature of external aggression. Unlike Syria, where selective state acceptance filtered returnees, Ukraine has not applied such mechanisms and every Ukrainian has been welcomed. While most of Syria remained unstable during the war, with only a few areas offering relative calm, the opposite has been true for Ukraine. After the initial months, much of Ukrainian territory has remained relatively stable, with intensive fighting concentrated in specific areas. This makes return uneven: some can reach their homes while others need to remain internally displaced. Nevertheless, Ukraine continues to face daily airstrikes, infrastructure damage, energy disruptions and an unstable future, and at times lethal conflict extending and creating unforeseeable risks across the country. Families remain often separated, with members abroad, internally displaced or conscripted. These conditions severely constrain reintegration.

Wartime reintegration is a dynamic and ongoing process, and a negotiation between loss, transformation and adaptation. Returnees cannot simply resume pre-war or pre-migration lives, as both the individual and society have changed. This mutual adjustment echoes the concept of integration often discussed in acculturation theory, which examines how immigrants adapt to host societies and how the host society transforms with it (Berry 2017). However, returnees are not immigrants; they are citizens returning to their country of origin, often with full prior knowledge of its language, culture and institutions. Yet, in the context of a continuing war, the society they return to is no longer the same. Wartime displacement and societal disruption alter norms, structures and relationships. As a result, returnees must adapt to a transformed social environment, while local communities must also accommodate the changes experienced by those who left. This dual adaptation challenges conventional models of reintegration and highlights the need to understand return not as restoration, but as renegotiation within fluid and evolving national and local contexts. Building on Kuschminder (2017) and Lietaert and Kuschminder (2021), reintegration is understood as a multidimensional process spanning several interrelated domains. This framework was originally developed for returns to stable contexts, but it can be adapted to war settings, such as the ongoing case of Ukraine.

*Economic reintegration* involves securing employment, income and financial stability after return (Lietaert and Kuschminder 2021). It is particularly difficult due to a war-impacted economy that disrupts labour markets and brings shortages of many kinds. Returnees may struggle to find employment, especially if they become displaced within their country or hold skills mismatched to current needs. Lack of proper employment is a major obstacle for returnees' economic integration. Yet labour shortages during the war may create

opportunities for returnees in specific niches, in particular in those in which male employment rates were high before the war escalated. Therefore, female returnees can recover economically and be even in a better position than before they out-migrated.

*Social reintegration* entails rebuilding relationships, reconnecting with communities and re-establishing social networks. Psychologically, it refers to regaining a sense of belonging to the country in which one lives again, coping with emotional challenges and recognising changes in one's and others' personal identity. It involves bearing displacement trauma, war-related stress and continuous uncertainty. These affect returnees' mental health and create reintegration challenges to the community (Vathi and King 2017; Maidanik 2024). Returnees with long absences may face difficulty reconnecting socially, particularly when wartime experiences differ from those who stayed (Schimmel 2022). Having maintained strong social ties to the home country and people there while being abroad eases social reintegration, yet returning to a country under active military assault creates often precarious situations. Patriotism is often a significant dimension of reintegration, shaping how returnees reconnect emotionally, socially and ideologically with their home country. It gives meaning to their return, strengthens identity and belonging, and fosters emotional commitment to the home nation (Lietaert and Kuschminder 2021).

*Institutional reintegration* involves access to public services, healthcare, education, and navigating legal and administrative frameworks (Lietaert and Kuschminder 2021). Returnees are usually citizens of that country to which they return and start to reintegrate, so their legal position is solid. The effectiveness of reintegration often depends on national policies, administrative clarity and availability of public services. However, during martial law, elections are often suspended and active civic participation is limited. The distance between decision-makers and ordinary people contributes to mistrust in state institutions (Akimova and Ishchenko 2025). Furthermore, bureaucratic complexity, inconsistent support and resource limitations hinder returnees' re-establishment during the war and increase criticism towards public authorities. National return policies, international aid and support programmes, including IOM reintegration assistance, influence institutional reintegration outcomes.

*Spatial reintegration* refers to the ability of returnees to resettle in their original home region rather than being forced to relocate to less familiar other regions (Lietaert and Kuschminder 2021). Return to familiar environments with secure housing aids adjustment to daily routines (Bilecen 2022), but war-related destruction often makes this impossible. Furthermore, some returnees find their homes located in unsafe areas, requiring relocation to overburdened regions (IOM 2025b), disrupting spatial reintegration while being internally displaced. The evolvment of war may result in one or several relocations after initial return and restrict daily and monthly mobility.

### 3 | Methodology

Despite the large scale of Ukrainian return migration, surpassing 1 million individuals from abroad and an additional 3 million

within Ukraine (IOM 2025c), systematic research on their reintegration remains limited. This study addresses that gap using a mixed-methods approach to explore the reintegration experiences of Ukrainians returning from abroad. Surveys provide insights into the prevalence of reintegration patterns, interviews offer a deeper understanding of individual experiences, and field observations help validate findings and identify contextual factors not captured through other methods.

The research draws on survey and interview data collected in 2024, complemented by fieldwork conducted in Ukraine in March 2024 and January 2025. Participants were fully informed about the study's scope, aims and ethical guidelines. Informed consent was implied through survey completion and interview participation. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and all responses were anonymised. Fieldwork was conducted independently by the author under safe conditions, outside of any formal institutional mission but assisted by Ukrainian colleagues. Research activities were suspended during air raid alerts or other emergencies to safeguard participants and the researcher. Strict adherence to safety protocols ensured the ethical conduct of the study in a conflict-affected setting.

To situate the findings within a broader context, data from international organisations, including IOM, UNHCR and the IMPACT research network, were also incorporated. This triangulation strategy allowed for both breadth and depth, enabling a critical reflection on reintegration patterns through both quantitative and qualitative lenses. The study offers a comprehensive analysis of the reintegration process, highlighting the challenges and opportunities faced by returnees in a society shaped by war. However, the sample size was relatively small and overrepresented returnees from Western Ukraine. Nevertheless, the goal was not to generalise findings to the over 1 million returnees from the EU but to explore returnees' reintegration experiences in depth.

#### 3.1 | Survey, Interviews and Field Observations

*The survey* was conducted between March and June 2024 among Ukrainian return migrants residing in Ukraine. It included 55 structured, 4 semi-open and 7 open-ended questions in Ukrainian, focusing on migration trajectories and reintegration experiences. For the purposes of this article, a subset of relevant questions on demographic and migration backgrounds and reintegration experiences was analysed. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were employed to capture a diverse range of reintegration experiences across different regions of Ukraine and among Ukrainian citizens who left and returned at various stages of the war. A total of 125 adult returnees met the inclusion criteria: they had been permanent residents in Ukraine prior to February 24, 2022, had fled to the EU and resided there during the war, and had re-established permanent residence in Ukraine by summer 2024. Most respondents (85%) completed the survey electronically, while 15% used paper-based forms.

Respondents reflected a wide geographic distribution. Among them, 6% had lived in major war conflict or occupation zones

in Eastern Ukraine (Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts) prior to displacement. None were from Luhansk Oblast, Crimea or Sevastopol, which have been partly or fully occupied by Russia since 2014 and continue to experience intense warfare. A larger share (42%) came from oblasts with partial occupation and active war conflicts (Kyiv City, Chernihiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kyiv and Sumy oblasts), with all these areas represented except Mykolaiv. The remaining 52% were from regions with occasional and limited war conflicts, primarily in Western and Central Ukraine. Also, data from the IOM (2024) survey suggest that slightly over half of return migrants from abroad were distributed to limited war conflict areas. However, no respondents or interviewees were from the Cherniv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kirovohrad, Poltava or Vinnytsia oblasts: these oblasts contain 5% of all returnee migrants within Ukraine and even fewer of those returning from abroad (IOM 2025a).

A larger IOM (2024) survey conducted in Ukraine between June and August 2024 found that 95% of adult returnees were women, most of them under the age of 50. In this article, 90% of respondents were female, and the majority were young to middle-aged, with 33 as the median age. In terms of gender, age and geographical origin, the sample aligns well with broader patterns observed among Ukrainian return migrants. In detail, respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 75: young adults (18–29 years old) made up 42%, while 46% were aged 30–45 (referred to here as young middle-aged), and 12% were aged at least 46 (middle-aged and older). A slight majority (53%) were married or cohabiting, typically with male partners who either remained in Ukraine due to military conscription or returned earlier, and in a few cases, husbands remained in the EU. Single individuals comprised 34% of the sample, 1% were widowed and 12% were separated or divorced.

Family composition and caregiving responsibilities were central to return decisions. Overall, 82% had family members in Ukraine, and 69% maintained ties with relatives abroad: 80% had at least one parent in Ukraine, while 17% had a parent abroad. Of respondents, 44% had underage children who accompanied them during displacement and returned with them, although such cases were rare among young adults. Post-return, only 2% had underage children still abroad. A smaller proportion (16%) had adult children, and only 6% reported those children living abroad.

According to IOM (2024), the average household size among Ukrainian returnees was 2.9 persons. The most common household structure included a mother and an underage child, with the third member often being another child, a husband or a parent. Notably, 17% of returnee households included a person with a disability, often resulting from war-related causes. This significantly increases both individual and household vulnerability—economically due to lack of suitable employment and social security support as well as in daily life—given that physical environments, buildings and homes in Ukraine are rarely adapted to accommodate people with mobility challenges.

*Semi-structured interviews* were conducted with 22 Ukrainian return migrants to gain deeper insight into their reintegration

experiences and to explore key survey themes in greater depth. Participants were selected for their diverse backgrounds and varied trajectories of displacement, return and reintegration, with attention to regional origin within Ukraine and the EU countries in which they had resided. All interviewees were women, reflecting broader gendered dynamics of return migration. Their experiences varied by time of migration, host country and region of return. Interviewing male returnees was deemed inappropriate, as many were actively engaged in military service or on temporary leave from combat. Ten interviews were carried out face-to-face in March 2024, while the remaining 12 were conducted in November–December 2024 via phone due to security concerns and power outages that hindered travel and disrupted fieldwork. As thematic saturation was reached, no further interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 min and was recorded with the participants' consent. Interviews were transcribed and translated from Ukrainian or Russian into English. Translation accuracy was ensured through cross-verification between human and advanced machine translations.

*Field observations* were conducted in Ukraine. The first fieldwork took place in March 2024 to gather direct insights into the context of returnees' reintegration and to initiate the survey and interviews. It also enabled first-hand observation of the daily practices of returnees. A second fieldwork visit followed in January 2025, after preliminary analysis of the survey and interview data. This phase aimed to validate key findings and observe potential changes in returnees' everyday lives amid the ongoing war.

### 3.2 | Methods of Analysis

The analysis combined quantitative and qualitative methods to capture the multifaceted nature of returnee reintegration. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics and crosstabulations in SPSS to identify patterns and trends among return migrants. Qualitative data, including interviews and field observations, were examined through thematic content analysis, applying both inductive coding strategies in which themes emerged directly from the data as well as deductive coding strategies based on a predefined set of themes identified in return migration and reintegration literature. Triangulation of survey results, interview narratives and field insights enhanced the validity of findings and allowed for a deeper understanding of the complexities of reintegration in wartime Ukraine. Surveys recognised patterns, proportions and correlations within the data; interviews captured personal experiences, emotions and motivations; and field observations added contextual and behavioural insights.

The relatively small survey sample limits the potential for detailed regional or demographic disaggregation, particularly regarding male returnees. The overrepresentation of respondents from Western Ukraine also reduces the visibility of perspectives from those who returned to active combat zones. Direct quotations were included to reflect personal experiences and perspectives, enriching the interpretation of quantitative results.

**TABLE 1** | Ukrainians' accommodation before (b) out-migration and after (a) return (%).

	Own flat	Own house	Rented flat	Shared house	Hotel/hostel	Other	N
	b/a	b/a	b/a	b/a	b/a	b/a	
Young adults	48/37	23/17	10/12	4/12	4/12	12/12	52
Young middle-aged	62/59	28/26	5/7	3/2	0/0	2/7	58
Middle-aged and older	93/93	7/7	0/0	0/0	0/0	0/0	15
Early return in 2022	54/50	30/27	1/4	4/6	3/4	7/9	70
Medium return in 2023	71/60	9/7	7/7	5/9	2/4	7/11	42
Late return in 2024	54/54	15/15	23/8	0/15	0/0	8/8	13
Before and after out-migration	70/63	9/7	7/7	5/9	2/4	7/11	57
Before or after out-migration	57/14	29/0	0/14	0/14	14/43	0/14	7
Limited conflict area	51/49	36/34	7/8	2/2	0/2	5/5	61
Total	60/6	23/20	6/8	3/6	2/5	6/8	125

Source: Modified from Jauhiainen (2025).

## 4 | Experiences of Ukrainian Returnees' Reintegration

The reintegration of Ukrainian returnees encompasses spatial, economic, social and institutional dimensions. Spatial reintegration is about returning and adapting to familiar and unfamiliar environments and securing accommodation in the home country. Economic reintegration involves receiving employment and achieving financial stability within the home country. Social reintegration entails rebuilding personal relationships, re-engaging with local communities and potentially maintaining social networks with countries of prior residence. It also includes adapting to shifts in personal identity, addressing emotional challenges and re-establishing a sense of belonging in Ukraine, and facilitated by access to preferred housing and resettlement in familiar regions. Institutional reintegration refers to returnees' ability to navigate legal and administrative systems, alongside their satisfaction with public services and healthcare infrastructure, and the presence or absence of the state in these processes.

### 4.1 | Spatial Reintegration After Return to Ukraine

Upon returning to Ukraine from abroad, over 1 million individuals returnees faced varied spatial reintegration contexts shaped by the ongoing war. Not all were able to return to their home regions, while others could not do so. Among those who had out-migrated from Eastern Ukraine that was heavily impacted by the war, 60% settled in new regions, compared to 34% from the south and just 10% from other regions. Spatial reintegration was highly uneven, as return during wartime fuelled large-scale internal migration, primarily from heavily affected eastern regions towards safer western areas, reshaping Ukraine's overall migration patterns. In 2024, the number of IDPs in Ukraine was 3.5 million and in 2025 this number was 3.7 million (IOM 2025b, 2025c). Key destinations for internal displacement included the capital Kyiv and its surrounding areas, as well as

the Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv oblasts, the latter situated near active conflict zones and the Russian border. The most common factors influencing relocation decisions were perceived safety (42%) and proximity to relatives (31%) (IOM 2024). No systematic data were available about consistent internal displacement of returnees from abroad.

A 2024 IOM survey found that 73% of returnees resettled in their original locations, aiding spatial reintegration through familiarity with local infrastructure, environments and social ties (see Lietaert and Kuschminder 2021; IOM 2024). Similarly, IMPACT (2024) reported that 81% returned to their pre-migration oblasts, though younger adults were more likely to relocate elsewhere. Among surveyed returnees, 46% returned to Western Ukraine, 34% to Central Ukraine, and fewer to Southern (14%) and Eastern Ukraine (7%), where security risks remain most acute. The desire to return home was a key driver of Ukrainians' return migration (Jauhiainen 2025). Home is symbolic as a sense of belonging and familiarity as well as a concrete location: a physical place of residence. The ability to re-establish a home is crucial not only for spatial reintegration but also for social, economic and institutional reintegration. Returnees' housing choices reflected a complex interplay of personal circumstances, economic opportunities, and the broader dynamics of displacement and conflict. The war disrupted housing markets unevenly across regions, creating both shortages and surpluses and contributing to divergent price trends. Home ownership is an anchor to remain in one concrete place and region.

According to IOM (2024), 92% of returnees who returned to their original regions moved back into their previous homes. Similarly, IMPACT (2024) reported that 90% lived in housing owned by themselves or a family member, 8% rented, and 2% stayed with relatives, friends or in volunteer-provided accommodation. In 2025, 82% of returnees from abroad lived in owned housing (IOM 2025a). Among respondents in this study, 74% resettled in their owned apartments or houses—provided the property remained undamaged—often a key factor in the

decision to return and a facilitator of spatial reintegration. In a 2024 survey, 19% of returnees were unable to return to their original dwellings due to damage or uncertain housing conditions (UNHCR 2024). Such a situation is a major obstacle for reintegration, at least temporarily. Housing patterns shifted after return: 54% lived in apartments (down from 60% pre-displacement), 20% in detached houses (down from 23%), while rented units (8%), shared housing (6%), and living with parents or in non-traditional arrangements (8%) all increased (Table 1). Older respondents were more likely to return to their pre-war homes. Changes in housing type and location were directly and indirectly shaped by the war.

Post-return housing satisfaction was high: 93% of respondents were at least partly satisfied, with 54% fully satisfied and 39% partly satisfied. Full satisfaction was slightly lower among those who returned to their original homes (49%) compared to those who resettled elsewhere in their home oblast (56%). Returnees in rented housing reported lower satisfaction levels, with 42% fully satisfied and 18% dissatisfied.

## 4.2 | Economic Reintegration After Return to Ukraine

Securing employment was a central concern for returnees, with labour market development largely driven by private-sector demand and individual initiative rather than institutional support. Initially, Ukraine's economy was severely negatively impacted during the first year of the escalated war. However, a recovery began soon after. On the other hand, due to emigration and military mobilisation, labour shortages created new job opportunities, particularly for women. As millions of men were engaged intensively with the military and over 800,000 working-aged men were in the EU (Eurostat 2025), some women accessed better positions as fewer men remained in the civilian workforce. Returning women often adapted to new jobs through a 'learning-by-doing' approach.

Various surveys conducted in 2024 among returnees from abroad indicated a rather high employment rate. In one survey, 57% of working-age returnees (18–64) were employed, 20% were unemployed, and the remainder were caregivers (10%), retirees (8%) or engaged in other activities (5%) (IMPACT 2024). Another survey reported comparable figures, with 49% employed, 15% unemployed and 36% economically inactive (UNHCR 2024). Employment rates were highest in Kyiv (65%), reflecting both stronger economic conditions and greater income needs. A further study illustrated that in 2024, 61% of returnees were employed, 16% were looking for a job and 23% were outside the labour market, at least temporarily (IOM 2025a).

The respondents in this article show similar patterns and even higher economic integration: 49% were in full-time jobs, 17% part-time and 12% self-employed, making 70% in total. Employment was highest among the younger middle-aged group, with 53% in full-time positions, as they had the longest work experience also before out-migration. In contrast, only 33% of young adults held full-time jobs, reflecting a higher share of students. Most respondents over 60 were retired.

Employment outcomes did not significantly differ by year of return, suggesting that post-return employment was shaped more by individual qualifications and choices than by market conditions or the war context.

Not employed were 30% of respondents and their position in the labour market varied: few (5%) as retired were formally and permanently out of the market, some tried to engage but were unemployed job seekers (13%), and the remaining were voluntarily or involuntarily not active such as caregivers (8%) and students of whom a few worked occasionally. Unemployment was notably higher in war-affected regions (18%) and among very recent returnees (17%), pointing to spatial, temporal and structural barriers to labour market re-entry. Employment was only for a few a key motivator for return, as reflected in interview narratives. As regards post-return employment satisfaction, 42% of respondents were fully satisfied, particularly many among full-time employees (64%). Of the remaining, 42% were partly satisfied, and 16% dissatisfied, the latter highest among young adults.

Despite the possibility and often necessity of having a job post-return, the economic welfare of many returnees was rather limited. Of respondents, 68% stated they needed more money to improve their post-return situation. The share of such need was higher among those who did not return to their original homes (81% vs. 61%). Financial stability has been found to play a key role in successful economic reintegration of return migrants (Lietaert and Kuschminder 2021). Another survey revealed that majority (55%) of returnees reported a worse-than-expected economic situation, and only 27% could cover most or all of their basic needs—and 47% in Kyiv, where employment opportunities were more accessible (IOM 2024). A similar survey in 2025 indicated that returnees' situation had not improved substantially (IOM 2025b). Ukrainians in general, including returnees, received remittances from other Ukrainians remaining abroad during the war. Higher living costs in new environments likely contributed to this disparity. In 2024, the median monthly income per returnee household member was 131 EUR, averaging 380 EUR per household, except in Kyiv, where the median household income was almost twice as much (611 EUR) (IMPACT 2024). The life in Ukraine had become more expensive during the war and average earnings were very low.

## 4.3 | Social Reintegration to Ukraine After Return

Spatial and economic reintegration depend to a certain extent on structural factors that are partly external to returnees. However, social reintegration of Ukrainian return migrants also regards their personal feelings and sense of belonging. There were challenges in many returnees' mental health affecting their post-return adaptation. Having fled Russian military aggression, returnees' experiences abroad along with the duration of their stay significantly influenced their reintegration trajectories and post-return satisfaction. The emotional and physical burden of returning to a country still at war was considerable, with trauma, economic instability, family separation and overall insecurity contributing to a decline in overall well-being.

The length of stay abroad impacted on social reintegration. Those who spent years abroad had more difficulties maintaining and

**TABLE 2** | Ukrainians' satisfaction to life and health after return (%).

	Life			Physical health			Mental health			N
	Full	Partial	No	Full	Partial	No	Full	Partial	No	
Young adults	29	62	10	29	60	12	23	54	23	52
Young middle-aged	12	84	3	31	67	2	22	67	10	58
Middle-aged and older	27	67	7	33	60	7	40	53	7	15
Early return in 2022	26	69	6	39	56	6	33	53	14	70
Medium return in 2023	14	76	10	21	71	7	12	74	14	42
Late return in 2024	15	85	0	15	77	8	23	54	23	13
Before and after out-migration	25	70	5	28	65	7	18	61	21	57
Before or after out-migration	14	86	0	29	71	0	14	71	14	7
Limited conflict area	18	74	8	33	61	7	33	57	10	61
Total	21	73	6	30	63	6	25	60	15	125

Source: Modified from Jauhiainen (2025).

recovering pre-war social networks that had been important for them. They had also become used to different lifestyles, norms and foreign-acquired perspectives, and some felt disconnected upon return. This complicated their social reintegration and adaptation to local cultural expectations (see Berry 2017; Bossavie and Özden 2023). On the other hand, many interviewees noted that their attachment to Ukraine strengthened while living in the EU. Despite ongoing insecurity, economic hardship and social disruption in Ukraine, they saw returning as a step towards emotional stability. Returnees were generally welcomed by their communities, yet some experienced criticism from those who had remained in Ukraine throughout the war. These tensions highlight the broader societal divisions exacerbated by prolonged war.

Many Ukrainians chose to return home driven by a deep emotional and personal connection to their homeland. Return was seen as a meaningful, sometimes transformative act rooted in identity, belonging and the need to reclaim a sense of normalcy and purpose of life. Home, even in wartime, remains a powerful source of emotional stability and hope far beyond physical safety.

The account of one of the interviewees, Maria (interview in March 2024), reflects this strong pull: even amid missile strikes, she found being home together with family and friends preferable to life abroad. Her time away was always intended to be temporary, and she speaks to a shared sentiment among returnees—many feel emotionally anchored in Ukraine, despite the risks: *for various reasons, people feel good at home, even with the ongoing war*. Another interviewee, Marta (interview in March 2024), noticed a shift in the atmosphere upon returning. In 2023, people were kind and open, but by 2024, the influx of non-locals from Eastern Ukraine and visible deterioration of the urban landscape had changed the mood. Yet, her experience of displacement became a catalyst for personal growth, pushing her to *move forward*. For Daria (interview in April 2024), a further interviewee, returning brought overwhelming joy, even to a damaged apartment. She describes feeling gratitude and emotional

renewal, despite witnessing the destruction around her. Her return was thoughtful and deliberate—affirming her connection to home and her desire to stay: *I appreciate everything more now, especially knowing how good it is to be home after experiencing life abroad*.

Reintegration process was associated with a decline in returnees' physical and mental health satisfaction. In addition, dissatisfaction with overall well-being increased significantly. While 27% had reported dissatisfaction in 2022 prior to migration, this rose to 55% by 2024. Those most affected included returnees with family members still abroad (54%), individuals from heavily war-impacted areas (50%), and those who left at the onset of the escalated invasion in February–March 2022 (47%). Notably, all returnees who relocated to safer areas in Western Ukraine and experienced minimal direct war exposure reported improved well-being.

Satisfaction with physical health declined following return: only 30% of respondents reported full satisfaction, down from 49% pre-migration (Table 2). While dissatisfaction rose slightly from 5% to 7%, it remained low. Mental health satisfaction experienced a more pronounced decline, with the share of fully satisfied respondents falling from 58% to 25%, and the lowest share of feeling mentally fully fit was among respondents returning to war-affected areas, and dissatisfaction increased from 10% to 15%. The most affected were individuals from areas of intense military conflict (52%), those not employed full-time after return (51%), and those with family members still abroad (42%). Healthcare satisfaction post-return reflected these patterns. While 37% were fully satisfied and 58% partly satisfied, only 5% expressed full dissatisfaction. Positive healthcare assessments correlated strongly with overall physical and mental well-being.

Despite ongoing challenges, 94% of returnees reported some level of life satisfaction in Ukraine post-return, while only 6% were fully dissatisfied (Table 2). However, full satisfaction dropped sharply from 58% pre-war to 21% after return. Those who spent over a year abroad were less likely to report full

**TABLE 3** | Ukrainian survey respondents' reasons for visits abroad after return (%).

	I feel as a patriot			I do not like to speak Russian			N
	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	
Young adults	67	19	13	69	13	17	52
Young middle-aged	69	26	5	83	7	10	58
Middle-aged and older	73	27	0	60	7	35	15
Early return in 2022	71	23	10	76	11	16	70
Medium return in 2023	62	31	7	76	7	17	42
Late return in 2024	77	23	0	62	8	31	13
Before and after out-migration	65	28	7	63	16	21	57
Before or after out-migration	57	43	0	57	14	29	7
Limited conflict area	74	16	10	87	3	10	61
Total	69	23	8	74	4	16	125

Source: Modified from Jauhiainen (2025).

satisfaction, with delayed returns due to war-related obstacles contributing to lower well-being.

Social reintegration to Ukraine was strongly intertwined with respondents' feelings and expressions of patriotism and national identity (Table 3). Not all respondents feel and understand these exactly similarly. Patriotism is an integral multidimensional aspect of the reintegration process because it shapes how returnees reconnect with their country emotionally, socially and ideologically. It frames their return as meaningful, supports attachment with identity narratives, reinforces social belonging and fosters returnees' emotional commitment to their country of origin (Lietaert and Kuschminder 2021). A clear majority felt and openly expressed a strong sense of patriotism (69%). They felt loyal to Ukraine with a reinforced national identity. A larger share of those feeling patriotic was among those returnees who did not know the Russian language (86%), were fully satisfied in their mental and physical health (81%), and were middle-aged and older (73%). About patriotism, 23% were uncertain and 8% deliberately expressed that they did not feel patriotic, the latter share slightly higher among young adults (13%).

There were regional-cultural differences regarding sense of patriotism. It was predominantly higher among returnees to areas with occasional limited war conflict (74%), mainly in Western Ukraine, compared to those returning to regions with major or partial war conflict (65%). This is connected to the linguistic-cultural composition of people. Among native-level Ukrainian speakers, 70% self-identified as patriots compared to 62% among native-level Russian speakers. Post-return, there was a strengthened connection between language and national sentiment. The use of Russian was generally avoided in all official and public settings, and often in private interactions as well—provided all participants could understand Ukrainian.

For many Ukrainian returnees, the decision to come back during the war was deeply rooted in a strong, exclusive sense of national identity and belonging. Their narratives emphasise that Ukraine is not just their country of origin, but the only place where they truly feel at home—culturally, emotionally and mentally.

Return was not only a physical act but also a reaffirmation of national identity. Belonging to Ukraine, for these individuals, is not negotiable—it is personal, collective and deeply rooted in cultural consciousness. Oksana, an interviewee, expressed this directly in November 2024, stating she belonged only to Ukraine and identifies fully with it. Maryna (interview in April 2024) reinforces this sentiment by highlighting cultural and experiential differences between Ukrainians and others: *We are very different*. This sense of distinctiveness serves to strengthen feelings of national identity. Another interviewee, Nina (interview in December 2024), further articulates this connection through shared mentality, language and culture. For her, no other country offers the familiarity or emotional resonance of home: *After all, I understand that any other country [than Ukraine] is not my home*. Interviewed Viktoriya (interview in April 2024) draws a sharp line between geographic closeness and cultural identity—rejecting any identification with Poland despite its proximity and having been there protected before return.

Furthermore, interviews revealed that the majority of returnees actively rejected influences they were exposed to abroad or that were institutionally imposed in the EU through language courses, integration programmes and work practices. Instead, they preferred to preserve their Ukrainian cultural integrity despite the potential benefits of new habits. Personal and national identities closely affiliated with Ukraine supported respondents' social integration.

An exception was made by few returnees who, after returning to Ukraine, engaged in transnational practices from below on a more personal and informal level. These individuals kept economic, social and political ties with their former host countries and people there. Interviews revealed their cross-border networks, economic engagements and evolving senses of belonging that extended beyond Ukraine and sometimes also national borders of former host countries.

All returnee respondents had spent between several weeks and some over 2 years abroad, encountering diverse cultures, languages and daily practices. Despite their exposure abroad,

most returnees reverted to their former way of life and related practices, showing limited incorporation of new knowledge, skills or cultural practices gained during displacement. Time abroad can foster new competences and networks, yet it may also complicate reintegration and motivate onward migration (Bilecen 2022; White 2022; Jauhiainen and Erbsen 2023).

Despite concerns about foreign cultural influence, many returnees maintained cross-border ties through phone, social media or visits. After return, 73% stayed in contact with people or institutions in their former EU host countries: 10% daily, 26% weekly and 37% less often. Longer stays abroad were linked to more sustained contact, and among those in weekly or more frequent contact, 91% had formed friendships during displacement (Jauhiainen 2025).

Personal ties in former EU host countries remained robust, while professional and institutional links were rare. Among respondents, 40% kept in touch with non-Ukrainian friends, 32% with Ukrainian friends, 26% with relatives and 21% with family members residing in the EU. However, institutional connections were minimal, with only 2% reporting contact with enterprises or NGOs. Overall, cross-border ties tended to diminish over time, partly depending on whether acquaintances remained abroad. Interviews highlighted varied communication patterns: some maintained ties mainly with locals, while others only with fellow Ukrainians. Most interactions involved personal updates, while a few sustained professional relationships or visited former contacts, especially those with family abroad who made longer and more frequent trips.

Part of social reintegration were visits abroad after returning to Ukraine. In a country at war, the motivations to travel temporarily to foreign countries have particularities. For example, the most common reason was security, such as avoiding air raids and alleviating war-related stress, mentioned by 40% of respondents, rising to 47% among those returning to major war conflict regions. The second most common reason (30%), leisure, was also related to war as many did not feel right or possible to entertain themselves in Ukraine while the war persisted. Family visits motivated 17%, especially among those with spouses or relatives abroad, again a reason connected to war as spouses could not return to Ukraine. Spontaneous travel was reported by 15%, employment by 14% and other reasons, including visiting friends, by 21%.

#### 4.4 | Institutional Reintegration After Return to Ukraine

Upon return, returnees were required to reintegrate institutionally into Ukrainian legal and administrative systems. Despite being Ukrainian citizens, the national state of emergency restricted their political participation, with local, regional and national elections suspended already for several years. These constraints affect both those who remained in Ukraine during the war and those who returned from abroad. Institutional support is seen as important to facilitate reintegration (Lietaert and Kuschminder 2021), interviewees reported limited state assistance, particularly in responding to the fundamental need of adequate housing. Interviewed in April 2024, Maryna was critical

and remarked that: *The state does not support us. To improve the reintegration of returning Ukrainians, we need more support and social protection by the state at least for children, at least for pensioners. ... To remove corruption, this is the first thing. To develop the social sphere, this is the second thing.*

Institutional reintegration after return did not proceed smoothly. Returnees reported low overall satisfaction with both national and local authorities, expressing particular criticism towards social service provision in Ukraine that they felt to be clearly inferior in Ukraine to that in the EU. Of respondents, 22% were fully satisfied with social services, 72% partly satisfied, but only 6% fully dissatisfied. Satisfaction levels varied: of single respondents, more (30%) reported full satisfaction compared with those having underage children (17%).

Many returnees felt authorities distant and not actively supporting them, so respondents' satisfaction with national and local authorities was especially limited. Of respondents, 26% were dissatisfied with national authorities and 31% with local authorities. These patterns likely reflect the compounded effects of displacement, instability and unmet expectations in a war-affected country and its localities. Very few were fully satisfied with national (9%) and local (7%) authorities, while the majority were partially satisfied with them, 66% and 61%, respectively. Dissatisfaction was most acute among those internally displaced returnees and residents of heavily war-affected regions. Other studies have noted the lack of Ukrainians' trust in both national and local governments (Akimova and Ishchenko 2025).

## 5 | Conclusion

This article examines the reintegration experiences of Ukrainians who fled following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, found refuge in the EU and returned to Ukraine permanently by mid-2024 despite the war continuing. This study documents one of Europe's largest wartime return movements and challenges dominant reintegration theories, many of which assume return from host to home countries only in non-conflict or post-conflict settings. In Ukraine, returnees' reintegration has been fragmented and uncertain, as well as spatially, temporally and socially uneven, shaped by ongoing war and related threats, disrupted governance and returnees' constrained agency. Reintegration process has not been a return to normality but a continuous instability and unforeseeable future under conditions of limited support.

Return migration to a country still at war and subsequent reintegration during wartime are rare and under-researched. While facing typical post-return challenges, such as securing housing, income and services, returnees also encountered wartime-specific barriers to economic, social, institutional and spatial reintegration. Post-return economic reintegration in Ukraine often hinged on securing sustainable employment. With many men conscripted or remaining outside the country, the labour market created new opportunities for women, enabling empowerment but also highlighting gendered expectations. Institutionally, returnees reported minimal reintegration support, especially compared to the coordinated assistance received under EU temporary protection. The Ukrainian state's engagement appeared focused on returnees as a labour force or

military recruits, with little specific attention to civic participation or social inclusion.

Returnees' social and spatial reintegration were deeply intertwined with emotions of homecoming and national belonging. For many, reintegration came at a psychological cost, with reported declines in health, well-being and life satisfaction amid continued uncertainty. Not all could return to their original homes or even former home regions, but many expressed a renewed strong attachment to Ukraine as a whole, felt already before returning. This was frequently accompanied by expressed heightened patriotism, sometimes resulting in the rejection of all even useful practices experienced and learned abroad.

The article calls for reintegration policies that reflect the diversity of returnees from an intersectional perspective combining gender, region and language. Given that most returnees are women and children, and many still remain in the EU, family reunification to Ukraine must be prioritised to avoid massive future post-war emigration of male partners from Ukraine. Reintegration should also be supported through inclusive institutional engagement and community-based approaches, recognising that return is not complete without social acceptance and structural support.

Future research should explore additional dimensions of wartime reintegration, including the experiences of children, shifting spousal dynamics and the evolving sense of belonging among Ukrainians who remain abroad. The reintegration of Russian-speaking Ukrainians also deserves closer attention, as their linguistic and cultural trajectories may diverge in both wartime and post-war contexts.

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### Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges Dr. Mart Reimann, Dr. Olha Mamchur and Dr. Tetiana Kolomiiets for their assistance in the data collection, and two anonymous referees for their constructive comments. Open access publishing facilitated by Turun yliopisto, as part of the Wiley - FinELib agreement.

### Funding

The author has nothing to report.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical reasons.

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