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Research on the connection between national identity and the intentions of forced migrants from Ukraine to return

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The article examines the connection between national identity and the return intentions of forced migrants from Ukraine. The relevance of the study is determined by the scale of forced displacement caused by the full-scale Russian invasion and by the need for return policies that account for the heterogeneity of displaced persons. The research is theoretical and conceptual: it systematizes existing studies on return migration and interprets national identity as a mediating framework through which displaced persons assess security, family ties, integration abroad, belonging, and future expectations. The article identifies civic identity, ethnic self-identification, linguistic practices, region of origin, and religious practices as key dimensions of Ukrainian national identity relevant to return intentions. The main result is a set of hypotheses and indicators for future empirical research, including the assumption that inclusion in the dominant national narrative may strengthen return intentions, while perceived exclusion or discrimination may weaken them. The article concludes that post-war return policies should use a segmented and inclusive approach sensitive to different identity configurations among Ukrainian displaced persons.

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Keywords: return intentions, Ukrainian forced migrants, national identity, self-identification, return policy, return factors.

Кутюк Володимир. Дослідження зв'язку між національною ідентичністю та намірами повернення вимушених мігрантів з України. У статті розглядається зв'язок між національною ідентичністю та намірами вимушених мігрантів з України повернутися. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена масштабами вимушеного переміщення внаслідок повномасштабного російського вторгнення та потребою в політиках повернення, які враховують неоднорідність досвіду переміщених осіб. Дослідження має теоретико-концептуальний характер: у ньому систематизовано наявні підходи до аналізу повернення та запропоновано розглядати національну ідентичність як посередницьку рамку, через яку переміщені особи інтерпретують безпеку, сімейні зв'язки, інтеграцію за кордоном, належність і майбутні очікування. Виокремлено громадянську ідентичність, етнічну самоідентифікацію, мовні практики, регіон походження та релігійні практики як ключові виміри, релевантні для подальшого емпіричного вивчення намірів повернення. Зроблено висновок, що післявоєнні політики повернення мають бути сегментованими, інклюзивними та чутливими до різних конфігурацій ідентичності.

Ключові слова: наміри повернення, українські вимушені мігранти, національна ідентичність, самоідентифікація, політика повернення, фактори повернення.

INTRODUCTION

The forced displacement of Ukrainians caused by the full-scale Russian invasion is unprecedented. Millions of Ukrainian residents have moved abroad. Such large-scale forced migration creates a complex and dynamic social reality in which displaced persons may develop diverse life strategies over time. Some may orient themselves toward eventual return, others may combine mobility between countries, while others may focus on long-term settlement and integration in host societies. These trajectories are not fixed and can change depending on a wide range of structural, social, and individual factors. For this reason, it is particularly important to study not only migration itself, but also the potential for return among forced migrants from Ukraine, as well as the conditions and mechanisms that shape their intentions, choices, and future plans.

The issue of return is particularly important in the context of forced migration, as return is not merely a physical movement back to the country of origin but a complex social decision shaped by expectations, perceptions, and future-oriented reasoning. Intentions to return may reflect how displaced persons evaluate security, belonging, social recognition, and their imagined place within the national community. Studying return intentions therefore allows researchers to capture not only migration outcomes, but also deeper social and psychological mechanisms that structure decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for anticipating post-war social dynamics and for designing policies that take into account the diversity of experiences, identities, and life strategies among displaced populations.

The question arises: what factors could contribute to an increase in the number of citizens wishing to return to Ukraine? What exactly shapes their willingness to return? In my view, for an effective return policy in the post-war period, it is necessary to understand the differences between the various segments of the large mass of Ukrainian refugees. These differences can be observed through different characteristics - race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, age, etc. I am looking specifically at identity and self-identification. Existing sociological research on Ukrainian forced displacement has paid limited attention to identity and self-identification as analytical categories, despite their potential relevance for understanding return intentions. Using "identity" view could potentially create a new frame of segmenting such a huge population as displaced Ukrainian residents abroad. Such a segmentation frame could potentially be applicable for policymaking, especially for creation of the programs and policies that are focused on the return of Ukrainian citizens back to Ukraine, to soften this process for this audience and to motivate more people to return, focused on their characteristics and aspects of their perception of different cultural and political contexts. In case of Ukrainian refugees, which operates with conflict context, forced migration and displacement, such factors as an emotional connection to the country, group belonging, self-identification and identities, political practices and preferences could be sensitive in the context of return. National identity is conceptualized here not as an independent causal factor, but as a mediating framework through which displaced persons interpret security conditions, family ties, integration experiences, and future expectations. Rather than determining return intentions directly, identity shapes the meaning attributed to these factors, influencing whether return is perceived as desirable, feasible, or legitimate.

Therefore, in the context of forced displacement, it is important to study identity, as it can reveal non-obvious discursive and emotional factors that might be important for the return of Ukrainian citizens. In my opinion, it is important for Ukraine to develop as a democratic, law-abiding state that values and respects diversity among its citizens and the individuality of each person. Therefore, it may be important to study the national identity of displaced persons from Ukraine, in particular their ethnic, linguistic, religious, civic, and regional components. This will reveal how different segments of displaced persons from Ukraine perceive certain circumstances in the context of their possible desire to return to Ukraine. Taking everyone's opinions into account and respecting diversity will increase the proportion of refugees willing to return.

The **aim** of this study is to analyse the possible relationship between national identity and return intentions among forced migrants from Ukraine and to propose a conceptual framework for its further empirical investigation.

1. MIGRATION FACTORS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RETURN OF UKRAINIAN DISPLACED PERSONS

1.1. General factors

Simpson emphasizes that migration and returnment is the result of a combination of demographic characteristics, economic incentives, expected risks, and family strategies. Regarding the role of risk and uncertainty, people make decisions about migration not only by comparing economic benefits, but also through expectations of stability, social protection, and predictability of the future. Crises, conflicts, or wars dramatically increase mobility as a "push off" factor (Simpson, 2017). Therefore, return is more likely when: 1) the initial migration was planned as temporary; 2) conditions at home are improving (economy, infrastructure, security); 3) family and emotional ties in the country of origin remain strong. Return is less likely when people integrate abroad, when children are born there, or when war/crisis continues. These mechanisms correlate extremely well with the empirical results of contemporary Ukrainian studies (Vakhitov et al., 2025; Hernes et al., 2025; Adema et al., 2024a; 2024b).

Adema and others say that the initial plans are a good predictor of actual return within displaced Ukrainians, however the time could significantly affect the desire to return, especially within “uncertain” groups. De-occupation of an area increases the likelihood of return. Intense fighting does not reduce the intention to return to Ukraine, but it does influence the place of return: people seek safer regions within Ukraine (Adema et al., 2024b).

The strongest predictor of return is family ties in Ukraine. Having children or grandchildren in Ukraine is the most powerful factor increasing the likelihood of intending to return. Conversely, the absence of any close family in Ukraine sharply reduces the intention to return (Hernes et al., 2025). Simpson also explores the role of family and migration networks. Networks in destination countries (relatives, acquaintances, diasporas) significantly reduce both the real and psychological costs of migration, making it more likely (Simpson, 2017). For the purposes of my research and study of the potential for return, it is also important to pay attention to the existence of ties and networks in Ukraine: “Does the person have someone to return to?”. It could mean that people from abroad will be more likely to return to their relatives in Ukraine, or the opposite - they will be a magnet for more Ukrainian newcomers to come and settle in the European Union or other countries after the war. This powerful factor, which was not mentioned in my initial hypothesis, should be accounted for in any future research.

Desire to return home and other sentimental reasons were the most commonly reported primary reason for returning to the place of origin (26 %). This was followed by the proximity to family and friends (18 %), favourable security situation in place of origin (17 %), availability of affordable housing (16 %), and perceptions of opportunities to earn money or find jobs (14 %) (International Organization for Migration, 2024a).

Personal factors (family needs, desire to raise children in their culture of origin, fatigue, nostalgia, feelings of failure) are often stronger than macroeconomic motives (Battistella, 2018).

At the beginning of 2023, long-term returns were more about homesickness + family + duty (International Organization for Migration, 2024b).

Van Tubergen and others also identify strong individual effects. Refugees from regions with the most intense fighting (especially Donbas) are significantly less likely to plan to return, which is consistent with security motives. They also mention that partners remaining in Ukraine is a factor that pushes refugees to return. Women with better English language skills show a lower intention to return, reflecting the role of integration potential in the EU. The authors associate higher education with a lower desire to return, probably due to better prospects in Europe. Interestingly, a better financial situation before the war correlates with a higher probability of return (van Tubergen et al., 2024). Sydorov also mentions that chances of returning are largely depend on the region from which forced migrants left (Sydorov et al., 2024).

Therefore, there are various factors that can influence the decision to return. These factors include external – structural – factors such as security, de-occupation, stability, absence of hostilities, economic security, and job availability. There are also personal factors, such as the respondent's age, availability of housing, and the nature of the individual's social network, including family and friends. The length of time the respondent has been living abroad is also a factor: over time, some displaced persons become less eager to return. Emotional factors are also important, such as homesickness, the desire to return, and nostalgia.

Most studies focus on security conditions, family ties, integration trajectories, socio-economic resources, and individual characteristics, treating return primarily as a response to external constraints and personal circumstances. However, these approaches rarely examine how displaced persons understand and negotiate their own national belonging, self-identification, and symbolic attachment to the country of origin. National identity may function not simply as an additional factor, but as a mediating framework through which security, family relations, integration experiences, and future expectations are interpreted. This gap in the literature points to the need for a focused analysis of national identity and self-identification as potential mechanisms shaping return intentions. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how different dimensions of national identity relate to intentions to return among forced migrants from Ukraine, and by formulating testable hypotheses that conceptualize identity as a key analytical lens rather than a background characteristic.

1.2. Identity and Identification

The concept of “identity” is widely used to refer to various forms of self-determination and commonality. This term is popular in different studies such as race, ethnicity, gender studies, nationality,

politics, cultural studies. Brubaker and Cooper point out that people do use the word “identity” in their speech to describe themselves, their origins, their belonging, and their differences from others. Authors are mentioning that the context of studying identity and identification was tied to the concept of ethnicity from its origins (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). For my study it means that the terms “identity”, “identification”, “self-identification” are relevant for its context and correctly chosen. The word “identity” could be contextually used to refer to the deep, fundamental essence of an individual or group. Accounting the Brubaker’s work, and adding my own contextualization, term “identity” could be used in such meanings as: sameness, a sense of belonging (to a collective or a nation or an ethnic group - in context of my research), collective solidarity, or group identity.

Brubaker empathizes that if a researcher analyzes practices of self-determination, it is worth using the concept of identification, which describes an active, contextual process, rather than a fixed “identity” (Brubaker, 2004). Verkuyten (2016) views identity not as an internal individual construct, but as a process of self-determination through a group, its position in society, and interaction with other groups. This opinion also strengthens my point that it is correct to choose such a term as “identity” for this study, because it is tied to communities and social groups, for example, national communities as well. While concepts such as social relations or interrelations are indeed useful for describing patterns of interaction between individuals and groups, they do not fully capture how individuals interpret these relations in terms of belonging, loyalty, and self-understanding. The concept of identity allows the analysis to move beyond observable interactions and to examine how individuals symbolically locate themselves within national, ethnic, or civic communities, how they perceive social boundaries, and how these perceptions inform their motivations and future-oriented decisions. In the context of forced migration and potential return, it is precisely this interpretative and meaning-making dimension - how people understand their place within the national community - that is analytically central. Therefore, the concept of identity is not used here as a static label, but as a relational and processual framework that links social structures, group relations, and individual self-positioning.

Bucholtz and Hall argue that identity always arises in the interaction between the “self” and “others” and is based on certain contrasts and similarities. They identify three broad groups of such relational tactics:

- differentiation (we are “similar” or “not like them”),
- authentication/denaturalization (we are “real” or, conversely, we expose the artificiality of the other’s identity),
- authorization/delegitimization (identity that is supported or rejected by the authorities) (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This is conceptually important in the context of studying such segments of migrants from Ukraine as national minorities and their relationship with the “majority” and power structures and relations in Ukraine. As I mentioned, if people from some minorities could feel themselves rejected by the majority or state officials or in the discourse of the majority, it could correlate with their lower desire to return.

In addition, the authors suggest that identity consists of a mixture of conscious choice, habit, perception of others, interaction, ideological structures, and social institutions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In my research this opinion could reinforce the statement that such dimensions of national identity as linguistic and religious practices are also, as practices, connected to the person’s national identity and ethnic self-identification or belonging.

2. HYPOTHESIS AND INDICATORS

Vakhitov and others define national identity as an internal sense of belonging to a nation (Vakhitov et al., 2025). This definition correlates with the previously described definitions of identity as a way of describing an individual’s origin, their belonging to a group, and is associated with a sense of belonging, collective solidarity, and group identity. However, national identity is a definition that can barely be reduced to a single question. In my opinion, and in agreement with Golovakha et al. (2023), and Dembitskyi (2022) and others, national identity is linked to a complex set of components that determine an individual’s complex national and social identity and everyday practices. These components, which are important in the Ukrainian context, are discussed below.

In their article “Everyday Nationhood”, John Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss identify types of practices through which the nation is reproduced in everyday life. “Talking the nation” is the discursive construction

of the nation. People adapt national ideas to their life contexts. “Performing the nation” is the reproduction of symbols, rituals, and collective acts, such as national holidays, etc. (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). These and other practices are important in the context of forming and maintaining national identity and collective action. National holidays, for example, could be often tied with religious holidays, and the way the “nation is talked” is closely tied with the linguistic patterns and norms, which are connected to linguistic practices.

Based on reading scholars Golovakha et al. (2023), Dembitskyi (2022), Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008), Ukrainian national identity, as a factor, that could influence refugees' desire to return, could be described through such components as citizenship, ethnic self-identification, linguistic practices, region of origin and religious practices which are interconnected and, through shaping “sense of belonging to Ukrainian nation”, could shape people's attitudes, perceptions, views and desires. This influence could be measured in the following ways.

In the article “Conceptualizing and Measuring Ethnicity,” the authors says that ethnicity is generally characterized as a sense of group belonging, based on ideas of common origins, history, culture, language, experience and values (Brown & Langer, 2010). This view explains the importance of choosing linguistic practices as one of the dimensions of national identity, as well as ethnic self-identification itself and that it could affect persons behaviour through shared values. They also mention that religious perspective also shapes ethnic landscape. It strengthens my opinion that religious practices should be accounted for in this research.

It should be added that Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) data (Dembitskyi, 2022) demonstrate differences in identities that correlate with regional, ethnic, and linguistic dimensions. This data shows that it could be important to add these components in research. These components could particularly help to identify local/regional identities and study the connection between people's experiences of their local identities in connection with the “majority culture” in Ukraine. These components could help to identify practices such as supporting the use of the Ukrainian language, attending the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, living in Ukraine, etc.

It is a table of hypotheses below, that includes all mentioned components of national identity and a relevant hypothesis.

Table 1

**Hypotheses and indicators of national identity components
in relation to return intentions**

Component	Indicators for measuring	Hypothesis
1	2	3
Citizenship	– Possession of Ukrainian and/or other citizenship, or permanent residence (residential status), – next steps within a few years (receiving new citizenship or preserving existing, etc.)	The intention to integrate into another country through citizenship or status is a negative predictor of return.
Ethnic self-identification	Direct question about ethnicity (“Ukrainian” vs. others).	A clearly defined ethnic self-identification as Ukrainian is a factor that correlates with further intentions to return. In contrast, non-Ukrainian ethnic self identification correlates with further intentions to relocate or integrate in new places.
Linguistic practices	Use of Ukrainian vs. other languages in: – Work matters – Communication with friends – Communication with family (parents, partner, children) – Consumption of media or other art-content (videos, news, literature, movies and series). Native language.	Actively practicing the Ukrainian language correlates with a greater desire to return.

The End of the Table 1

1	2	3
Region of origin	The region where a person was born and spent most of their life	1) Bright regional identity, if a person has it, (e.g. Bulgarian from Odesa region or Hungarian from Zakarpattia) could be a factor that correlates with further intentions to relocate or integrate in new places. 2) Origin from regions that has stereotypical perception as “more Ukrainian” (e.g. Western oblasts) is a factor that correlates with further intentions to return.
Religious practices	Membership in the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) or another denomination, frequency of religious practices - praying, fasting, attending church, celebration of religious holidays.	Affiliation with religious institutions that are publicly associated with the dominant national narrative may correlate with stronger return intentions, insofar as such affiliation is perceived by individuals as a marker of civic belonging and social recognition

Source: created by the author; components compiled by the author based on the data (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Vakhitov et al., 2025; Golovakha et al., 2023; Dembitskyi, 2022; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Brown & Langer, 2010; Kulyk, 2013; Karner, 2007; Sydorov et al., 2024).

It is important to note that described components of national identity often work together so it is difficult to separate their mechanics, and some statistical methods like linear regression models could be helpful to identify the strongest ties between desire to return and one or several of these factors.

Regarding the civic component of national identity – Golovakha and others argue that a new type of national-civic identity has gradually formed in Ukraine, which became dominant in 2022. In their opinion, national identity in modern Ukraine is based mainly on civic affiliation and political loyalty to the Ukrainian state. The identification “I am a citizen of Ukraine” is dominant in 2022, at 82 %. And language, culture, and ethnic origin also remain part of national branding (Golovakha et al., 2023). According to a KIIS survey, almost 85 % in July 2022 defined their primary identity as “citizen of Ukraine” (Dembitskyi, 2022). All of these statements in literature indicate that I correctly choose components to work with. Kulyk (2013) also calls the Ukrainian language an important element of Ukrainian identity. It supports my opinion that people could identify themselves through their linguistic practices and it is an important element of National identity, which could help people to distinguish between “friends and strangers”, form groups, social connections and distances, and influence desire to return as well as a result of such a complex multidimensional influence. Language could play the role of an “index” of group membership.

Therefore, the first component of national identity that should be included in the study is civic identity. What does it mean for refugees - to be a citizen of Ukraine? What are their plans regarding citizenship? What other dimensions about citizenships or residentships are important for them in their present or in future? At the same time, it is important to include ethnicity, language, and region of origin in the study, as this may be related to the respondent's “local/regional” identity, “dual identification,” membership in national communities, etc., which in turn may be decisive for some respondents in shaping their future plans.

Verifying the hypothesis that ethnic self-identification as Ukrainian increases the potential for return is also difficult, as existing sociological studies do not often include direct testing of this hypothesis. Minorities, especially who has their own countries or strong traditions and ties to their national practices, languages, regions etc., might feel themselves pushed into the background of modern Ukrainian political life due to various reasons (stress because of war, occupation of their cities or villages, maybe some internal political reasons in Ukraine) and could have more desire to stay in their national countries or new host countries in comparison with Ukrainians. This hypothesis should be verified.

Karner (2007) emphasizes that people often experience their ethnicity as ascriptive, “given” – a fact of life that shapes their responsibilities, solidarity, and sense of connection with other members of the group.

On the one hand, ethnicity can be an instrument of exclusion, discrimination, and violence – a source of boundaries that divide people. On the other hand, it can be a resource for solidarity, collective support, and the struggle for rights. In addition to this important for my research concept – ethnicity as a resource for solidarity. He also says that nations tend to be associated with territories, state institutions and cultural histories. And while I do not deconstruct the definition of “culture” in my research, I can summarize that these statements by Karner illustrates that, primarily, I correctly choose my components of national identity, and secondly, it shows the connection: through culture – social practices, interactions and norms. Though, ethnicity, as a “given” component of national identity, through stereotypes, linguistic and other social practices, could affect social relations, distances, norms, collective solidarity, and as a result – affect the desire to return or stay among the particular groups of displaced Ukrainians - particularly ethnic groups, or groups by language.

Karner (2007) mentioned that ethnicity is highly connected to language and culture. The role of language in Ukrainian discourse is politicized, for instance there were a lot of discussions in the media in 2014-2022 – regarding old and new laws, the myth of oppression of Russian language in Ukraine, etc. (Dvorianyn & Teliachyi, 2024). And in the context of return, in my opinion, linguistic practices could also have different dimensions and may be considered as an indicator of group identity and act as a barrier to return, or an indicator of loyalty and incentive to return. Active preservation of Ukrainian language practice among adults – usage at home, with friends, within communities, or among children, in particular through distance learning in Ukrainian schools, may correlate, in my opinion, with a greater desire to return. Support for Ukrainian education could be interpreted as a proactive effort by parents to raise their children's national identity. At the same time, I suggest, it should be tested, that Russian-speaking Ukrainians or minorities could feel themselves marginalized in Ukraine (because of possible public disapproval of Russian language after the beginning of full-scale invasion of Russia) and, as a result, could feel complex emotions that pushed themselves to stay in new countries. As well as, probably, stronger pro-Ukrainian language media and state narrative could evoke complex and difficult emotions within these parts of Ukrainian society while, probably, they might want to preserve more of their national languages in use. However, the question of language is not simply black and white and this should be checked whether some people feel their personal rights regarding the linguistic issue oppressed and how these feelings could act in context of desire to return.

Language, in agreement with Golovakha et al. (2023) and Kulyk (2013), could serve as an indicator of identity. It indexes for other people, who may know the same language that they are able to communicate with the particular person. As a result, language influences social distances, influences a formation of social groups that are tied through common language. Language could also become a mechanism of inequality: people who possess the legitimate standard gain access to positions of power, while speakers of other linguistic practices could feel themselves stigmatized and socially or legislatively excluded. A person may speak in a certain way to emphasize their belonging to a group (in particular, an ethnic group – speak in Ukrainian with Ukrainians). Language may be used to demonstrate distance (for example, demonstratively speaking in Ukrainian to inform others about their identity - to avoid misidentification with other slavs or Russians).

I already mentioned that some authors mentioned religion in their works and this aspect could be tied to the general concept of national identity. Religious choice in Ukraine could be a politicized issue as well, especially in the context of the confrontation between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). For example, KIIS data demonstrates that there exists a discussion within Ukrainian society and a lot of Ukrainians think that some UOC hierarchs are connected to Russia (Hrushetskyi, 2024) Belonging to the OCU could be perceived as a marker of civic loyalty and national identity, consistent with the mainstream discourse narrative. A qualitative interpretation could be that belonging to the OCU is a conscious act of patriotic allegiance. This should correlate with a higher desire to return, as choosing such an identity already aligns individual actions with Ukraine's political trajectory. Religious affiliation with the OCU can serve as a “loyalty filter” for assessing readiness to return and support the national community and institutions. Therefore, in-depth interviews should include questions about religious practice and affiliation in order to qualitatively measure the level of identification with Ukraine's political trajectory. Also, the religious question is not black and white, in some cases, belonging to the UOC might not mean not having loyalty to Ukraine, but being used to a particular priest and community.

Regional origin is also important in context of minorities or strong regional identities, as there are regions that are places of compact settlement of national communities, such as: Zakarpattia (Hungarian community of Ukraine), Odesa region (Bulgarian, Romanian, Moldovan communities), Chernivtsi region (Romanian community), Donetsk region (Greeks). Recent empirical data confirm that return intentions among Ukrainian refugees vary by region of origin, with refugees from Eastern and Southern Ukraine showing a distinct pattern of lower willingness to relocate within Ukraine and stronger orientation toward returning specifically to their home region (Prus & Kvitka, 2025), which may indicate regional identities important for my research.

It is also important to note that some of the regions (e.g. Western oblasts of Ukraine – Halychyna (Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil), Volyn (Volyn, Rivne), Podillya (Khmelnyskyi) oblasts, and some of Central-Northern oblasts (Vinnytsia, Zhytomyr, Cherkasy, Chernihiv...), could associate with “stronger Ukrainian identity” among citizens from these oblasts so that could indicate stronger desire of return. For instance, there are a little less people in the East identify themselves as citizens of Ukraine than in other regions of Ukraine (Dembitskyi, 2022). However, there is one essential limitation of this regional-based hypothesis – geographical proximity to the war zone. It is possible that people from Eastern oblasts may not want to return to Ukraine – to the places of their origin – not because of their strong regional identity, but because of conflict intensity in their regions or occupation.

Also important to repeat, that these factors of identity are tied: for example, due to historical reasons, there are more people that speak in Russian, belong to minorities and visiting UOC from southern and eastern oblasts of Ukraine than from central or western oblasts. And these divisions and intersections is a field to research.

The perception of systemic discrimination against people who speak Russian, belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, or are excluded from the “majority narrative” due to their membership in national communities may, conversely, correlate with a lower desire to return. The level of exclusion and social pressure due to practices and identity can directly determine the further trajectory of return.

Therefore, in the context of national identity, the following components are important: civic identity, ethnicity, language practices, region of origin, and, in the Ukrainian context, it is also important to examine religious practices, since belonging to certain religious groups can also shape attitudes and relationships with the “authorities” and the “majority.”

CONCLUSIONS

The intentions of forcibly displaced persons from Ukraine to return cannot be adequately explained by economic models of migration, which are based on a rational comparison of costs and benefits. In the context of war and forced displacement, decisions to return are influenced by a much wider range of factors, among which a sense of security, predictability of the future, emotional ties to home, and a sense of belonging to the national community play a key role. Thus, return should be viewed not only as an economic process, but also as a socio-psychological one.

National identity in this context emerges as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon, shaped by a combination of civic, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional components. These dimensions of identity do not operate in isolation but interact with each other, creating complex configurations that can either strengthen or weaken the intention to return. The influence of identity on the decision to return is indirect and depends on the specific social context, life experience, and how a person perceives their place in Ukrainian society.

Components that shape National identity of Ukrainian displaced persons abroad includes:

- civic belonging and identity (Ukrainian and/or other citizenship(s), self-identification as a citizen of Ukraine or other);
- ethnical self-identification;
- linguistic practices (including mother tongue, and different practices such as language of media consumption, language of communication - with relatives, friends, at work etc.);
- religion practices;
- regional origin.

Different components of Ukrainian national identity are important in the modern and historical Ukrainian context. They are politicized in modern days. And accounting these factors in surveys or

qualitative research could open new interesting dimensions of identifying what exactly could influence the return behaviour patterns of different groups of Ukrainian refugees. Accounting of these factors is possibly an approach that could help to classify millions of Ukrainian refugees into smaller groups for deeper research, targeted communication and policymaking.

All of these components of identity in their different expressions could influence emotional attachment to Ukraine among particular groups of refugees and as a result influence their desire to return. Some of the groups could feel themselves excluded from “majority” in Ukraine and this feeling could lead them to stay rather than return. Stigma, discrimination or exclusion are important for studying return in the context of different minorities or groups.

An important factor influencing willingness to return is the sense of inclusion or exclusion from the dominant national narrative. For certain groups – particularly linguistic, religious, or ethnic minorities – the perception of social pressure, discrimination, or delegitimization of their practices can reduce the desire to return, even in the presence of strong emotional and family ties to Ukraine. At the same time, a sense of recognition, respect for diversity, and the opportunity to preserve one's identity within the Ukrainian political nation can be an important incentive to return.

Language practices are not only a tool for communication but also a powerful marker of social belonging and group identity. In the contemporary Ukrainian context, language can simultaneously serve as a symbol of loyalty, a means of integration, and a source of social tension. The choice of language practices, their support or rejection, influence how displaced persons perceive their future in Ukraine and abroad, and can either facilitate or hinder the formation of intentions to return.

Religious affiliation in the context under study also takes on political and symbolic significance. Belonging to certain religious institutions can be perceived as a form of civic identification and loyalty to the state, which correlates with a greater willingness to return. At the same time, religious choice can be a source of tension or alienation for those whose practices do not coincide with the dominant social discourse.

There are also some other important factors that should be accounted for while thinking about potential return, such as emotional factors – attachment to the homeland, national pride, family ties in Ukraine. Over time, the intention to return weakens. The decision to return is increasingly subject to external structural factors: the availability of housing and security, as well as successful economic integration. Successful integration abroad creates an opportunity to stay, which may outweigh the desire to return. Adaptation and the acquisition of human capital (language skills, work) abroad are factors in non-return.

Given this, effective return policies in the post-war period must be based on a segmented approach that takes into account the different configurations of identity, social experience, and life circumstances of displaced persons. Universal narratives and standardized incentives may have limited effectiveness or even provoke resistance among certain groups. Understanding identity as a process and as a moderator of return decisions is a necessary prerequisite for developing inclusive, sensitive, and effective reintegration strategies for Ukrainian citizens.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

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