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BY JOHN P. RUEHL

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How Many Ukrainian Refugees Will Return Home?



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Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has created the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. While millions of Ukrainian refugees have since returned home, almost 2.9 million moved to Russia, according to October 2022 figures, and roughly 7.9 million were registered across Europe between February and December 27, 2022. Besides Russia, Poland (1.5 million), Germany (1 million), and the Czech Republic (474,731) have welcomed the largest numbers of Ukrainian refugees, while Italy, Spain, France, Romania, and the UK have also accepted more than 100,000 each.

There is little reason to suggest many Ukrainian refugees will return home soon. A June survey by polling group Rating, for example, found that 24 percent of Ukrainian refugees wanted to return but were waiting for a certain time, 48 percent said they would return after the end of the war, and 8 percent said they would not go back to Ukraine. A German

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government-backed survey from December 2022, meanwhile, found that around 37 percent of Ukrainian refugees wanted to settle in the country permanently or at least for the next few years.

As part of the Temporary Protection Directive that was invoked by the EU in March 2022, Ukrainians can now live, work, and study in EU countries for a period of three years. Many Ukrainian refugees have already found employment in host countries and may—like the temporary guest workers invited to Europe in the 1960s—choose to permanently settle in those countries eventually. Millions of Ukrainians also left their country before the 2022 Russian invasion, with 1.4 million Ukrainians having lived and worked in Poland in 2020 (most of whom came after the initial round of unrest in 2014) and another 250,000 having lived in Italy before the war alone.

The incentive for Ukrainian foreign workers and refugees to return home has been significantly reduced following the widespread destruction across the country since the war began in February 2022. Much of the country's population has been suffering from limited and sporadic access to electricity, heat, and water, and Ukraine's economy "shrank by 30 percent in 2022." Ukraine is now Europe's poorest country, and its entry into the EU will likely take years. Instability in the country's Donbas region since 2014 coupled with almost a year of open conflict with Russia means that peace will likely continue to elude Ukraine.

While some Ukrainian refugees have returned, "'unliveable' conditions" during winters and the crumbling basic infrastructure will drive more Ukrainians to seek refuge in Europe, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council. Additionally, it is estimated that 90 percent of Ukrainian refugees are women and children, as conscription prevented most Ukrainian men from leaving the country. The men that remained in Ukraine may try to reunite with their families abroad, while those men that managed to leave may face the risk of being recruited into military service or being punished for evading it if they do return to Ukraine.

Other countries that have suffered from conflicts in recent decades demonstrate that the longer violence continues, the less likely refugees are to return home. "In the Kosovo war of 1999, when NATO bombed Yugoslavia to prevent the brutalization of ethnic Albanians who make up Kosovo's majority, hundreds of thousands fled, or were forcibly moved, to neighboring Albania and Macedonia." These refugees eventually returned to Kosovo since the war lasted only 78 days, explained an article in the Economist. During the war in

nearby Bosnia, which took place from 1992 to 1995, however, many Bosnians left “and far fewer returned.”

More recently, the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, resulted in 6.8 million Syrian refugees fleeing mostly to neighboring states as well as to Europe until 2021. The conflict, soon to enter its 12th year, has reinforced the perception that both the desire of refugees to return, as well as the ability of host countries to deport them, is limited as long as violence is ongoing.

Between 2016 and 2022, for instance, just 336,496 Syrians returned to the country from neighboring host countries according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). And a UNHCR poll from June 2022 showed that more than 92.8 percent of Syrian refugees in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq do not plan to return to their country within the next year. As a new generation of Syrian children born outside the country emerges, the likelihood of Syrian families returning will continue to decline.

The Turkish government stated in May 2022 that it intends to relocate up to 1 million Syrian refugees back to northern Syria in regions controlled by Turkish-backed forces, and is increasingly using force to move them back across the border, even at gunpoint.

But the failed efforts by Turkey to return Syrian refugees suggest that European countries will struggle to do the same with Ukrainian refugees who refuse to turn home. Additionally, Ukrainian refugees have received a relatively warm welcome across Europe. While poorer EU countries bordering Ukraine, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, may seek to curtail future refugee intake, Ukrainian refugees may instead head further west into the continent.

The creation of millions of Ukrainian refugees has compounded the demographic crisis that Ukraine has faced since the 1990s. Falling birth rates, rising death rates, an aging population, and high emigration even before 2014 saw Ukraine’s population decline from 52 million in 1991 to about 42 million in 2020.

While other Eastern European countries, as well as Russia, have faced similar predicaments, Ukraine’s population decline has been far more acute. Due to low wages and high unemployment, Ukraine has been unable to attract immigrants, while the possible accession of Ukraine into the EU risks further emigration in the future. Furthermore, the large number of casualties of prime-aged men because of the conflict will also undermine Ukraine’s demographic position for decades.

French philosopher Auguste Comte is attributed with stating “Demography is destiny,” noting a link between a country’s future and the youthfulness of its population. A UN

report from 2022 predicts that Ukraine's population will likely never recover from the ongoing conflict and will continue to experience a significant population decline this century. A less populated Ukraine may be part of the Kremlin's strategy of weakening the country, ominously hinted at by Russian President Vladimir Putin in March 2022, who declared "If they continue to do what they are doing, they are calling into question the future of Ukrainian statehood."

Russia has of course played an active part in depopulating Ukraine. In addition to launching its destabilizing military operations, since 2014 it has facilitated the migration of Ukrainian refugees into Russia, policies that seem to have continued with additional Ukrainian refugees making their way to Russia since the invasion in February 2022. And in May 2022, Putin signed a decree easing constraints on Russians seeking to adopt Ukrainian children in war-torn regions, while making it harder for relatives of these children in Ukraine to have them returned.

Many Ukrainians in Europe may never come back, including those who traveled to Russia. Thus, without enough Ukrainians to repopulate the country, the ability of the Ukrainian government to reestablish a strong state and national identity in some regions risks becoming increasingly limited as the war drags on.

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John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C. He is a contributing editor to Strategic Policy and a contributor to several other foreign affairs publications. He is currently finishing a book on Russia to be published in 2022.

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