Ukrainian Homecoming: A Study of Refugee Returns from Poland

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Cover photo: Adam Rostkowski/NRC

Ukrainian refugees arriving at the NRC reception centre in Warsaw, Poland. March 2022.



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1 Introduction

Since February 28, a staggering 11 million people have been recorded as having crossed the border out of Ukraine, fleeing the international armed conflict in the country in search of safety and international protection.¹ This represents Europe's largest and fastest growing displacement crisis since World War II. An additional 6.6 million people have been internally displaced inside Ukraine (IDPs),² with 17.7 million people estimated to urgently require humanitarian assistance across the country.³

Although UNHCR estimates over 6.6 million refugees from Ukraine remain across Europe, over the last few months more than 4.7 million people have been recorded crossing the border back into Ukraine. The majority of returns have happened through Poland (3.2 million), but sizeable returns have also happened through Romania and Slovakia.⁴ The international armed conflict in Ukraine has not abated, but a variety of factors are motivating refugee returns, including a desire for reunification with family members in Ukraine (largely with men subject to military conscription restrictions who cannot leave the country), a sense that some parts of Ukraine may be safe to return to, and a general desire to return to their homes. However, the return of refugees does not mean that movement trends out of the country have completely reversed: the exodus out of Ukraine continues, with 1.5 million people recorded as having left Ukraine between July 11 and August 11, 2022.⁵

In July, during a high-level international conference in Lugano (Switzerland) on planning for Ukraine's recovery, Ukrainian authorities presented the draft National Recovery Plan.⁶ One of the priorities is addressing the needs of the returning diaspora and IDPs, including through adequate social protection measures. The Government of Ukraine has also recently launched a revision of the National Strategy on IDP Integration and Durable Solutions,⁷ originally adopted in late 2021. They aim to adjust this nation-wide policy to the current context and scale of displacement and to expand it to include the situation of refugee returns from abroad.

In order to inform these ongoing discussions and policy making, it is crucial to better understand the push and pull factors motivating refugee returns at this time, as well as people's experience once they arrive home. Information on people's needs and intentions is also necessary to ensure humanitarian assistance is fit for purpose, both inside Ukraine and in refugee-hosting countries. Needs-based assistance, data-driven policies and inclusion of IDPs' perspectives in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and practices directly affecting them will better support durable solutions for all those affected by forced displacement.

2 Methodology

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has been assisting people affected by the conflict in Ukraine since 2014. After the escalation of the international armed conflict on 24 February 2022, NRC scaled up its response inside Ukraine and initiated assistance for those fleeing to neighbouring Poland, Moldova and Romania. In cooperation with the City of Warsaw and the Polish Centre for International Aid (PCPM), NRC opened a refugee reception transit site at the East Warsaw train station in Poland. As of writing, the site has supported over 29,000 refugees since opening in March. In the past few months NRC has started providing services to people returning to Ukraine, some of whom stop off at NRC's Warsaw reception centre before taking the train back to Kyiv.

In order to better understand the motivations and needs of people returning to Ukraine, and to inform programming and advocacy in support of durable solutions for all those affected by forced displacement, NRC conducted a survey with families undertaking the return journey from Poland to Ukraine. *Between July 4 and July 15 NRC interviewed 371 people who were about to board a train to Ukraine from either East or West Warsaw train stations.* Enumerators carried out face-to-face interviews which lasted approximately 20 minutes. Interviews were conducted by Ukrainians in either Ukrainian or Russian, depending on the respondent's preference.

NRC then carried out follow-up interviews via telephone with respondents once they were back in Ukraine – approximately one month after return (August 9 to 11). Of those who agreed to be contacted, NRC was able to reach 110 individuals. The purpose of these follow-up interviews was to ascertain whether or not people had remained in Ukraine, what their return experience had been like so far, and what they saw as their needs now that they were back in their home country.

Most of the findings from NRC's survey are consistent with findings from similar exercises conducted by the UNHCR,⁸ IOM⁹ and other Protection Cluster partners in Ukraine. However, some differences arise, likely due to the specific demographic of people who participated in NRC's survey. UNHCR's July intentions survey across neighbouring countries found that, while most refugees want to go home, two thirds expected to stay in their refugee hosting country until the security situation inside Ukraine improved.¹⁰ UNHCR's survey also found different intentions depending on where people were currently residing and where they were from, with those from Kyiv or the west of the country more likely to be considering return. Among refugees hosted by Poland, a higher proportion than average was planning to stay there for the time being compared to those in other host countries surveyed (Czech Republic, Hungary, Republic Of Moldova, Romania & Slovakia).¹¹

The individuals surveyed by NRC represent a particular subset of refugees. Respondents had already made the decision to return and were in the active phase of return. Their experience and motivations are representative of a particular group of people who largely knew they had homes to go to, had the resources to pay for their journey and had been residing in Poland for the majority of their forced displacement. 84 per cent of NRC's survey respondents said they were intending to return to, and live in, their original home when they got back to Ukraine. All findings in this report must therefore be understood within that context. For a more comprehensive understanding of push and pull factors, further data collection and surveys would need to be undertaken with people in Poland who are not currently planning to return home, and why that might be.

2.1 Demographics

Of the 371 respondents, 94 per cent were women. Following Ukraine's declaration of martial law which obliged most men aged 18 to 60 to remain in the country for military service, very few have left. All respondents except for two were Ukrainian; the other two were Polish and Indian nationals. When surveyed at transit points in Warsaw before undertaking their return journey, 75 per cent were travelling back to Ukraine with immediate family who had originally left with them. However, 25 per cent had a family member staying behind in displacement in their place of temporary residence – primarily for concerns over safety in Ukraine, and some for work reasons.

One third (1/3) of respondents had been living outside of Ukraine for over three months, one third (1/3) for between one to three months, and the remainder either less than a month or had been living outside of Ukraine prior to the escalation of the conflict in February. Two thirds (2/3) of respondents had spent most of their time in Poland (expected as the survey was conducted in Poland). Other countries of temporary stay included countries such as Germany, USA, Spain, France and the UK. Participants in the follow up survey in Ukraine were 95 per cent women, the majority of whom (67 per cent) were aged 18-49.

3 Conditions during displacement: overview of findings from the Poland data set

3.1 Documentation and registration

An overwhelming majority of respondents (94 per cent) in NRC's survey reported not having faced any issues related to documentation during their period of stay in third countries. This was the case both for respondents registered with local authorities (62 per cent), and for those who were not registered (38 per cent). Of those who had registered, none reported facing barriers accessing services or assistance, although *just over nine per cent of respondents stated their primary reason for returning to Ukraine was to get new or replacement documents.*

63 per cent of respondents reported they had received temporary protection status in their host country, while 27 per cent had received a temporary residence permit. Documentation does not seem to have represented a barrier either for residency or temporary protection in people's main host country, primarily Poland.

In early March the EU activated its Temporary Protection Directive for those fleeing the international armed conflict in Ukraine, but individual EU Member States have applied the directive differently, both in terms of eligibility and implementation.¹²

3.2 Accommodation

During their displacement outside of Ukraine, just over one third (1/3) of respondents stayed with family or friends, and one quarter (1/4) stayed in rented accommodation. The rest found a host through social media or volunteers or stayed in collective shelters/housing provided by authorities or NGOs. This is consistent with other refugee accommodation figures in Poland, which estimate 40 per cent of the 1.2 million registered refugees from Ukraine are currently being hosted by Polish families, with about 41 per cent in rented accommodation and 14 per cent in collective shelters.¹³

Of those NRC surveyed, 70 per cent did not have to pay for accommodation. For respondents who had been staying in paying accommodation, the majority said it was affordable; less than a quarter claimed accommodation costs were unaffordable. For several individuals these costs in turn influenced their decision to return to Ukraine, but did not represent a significant factor for the majority of respondents.

3.3 Income

56 per cent of respondents did not engage in any income-generating activities during their periods of stay outside of Ukraine. 37 per cent engaged in employment or business opportunities in their host country. The remaining seven per cent received income from Ukraine but did not specify the source. For the latter two categories with access to income, three quarters (3/4) of respondents stated that these amounts were sufficient to cover their basic needs. Of those who said that this was not the case, income was a contributing factor in the decision to return to Ukraine for a third of this sub-set of respondents.

Other NRC research into employment and income-generating opportunities for Ukrainian refugees in Poland found that people voiced the need for income, however the types of employment and opportunities they were seeking varied greatly based on expected duration of stay, access to childcare, housing and transportation.¹⁴ Furthermore, uncertainty about the future was inhibiting their ability to commit to staying in Poland for a specific duration or, sometimes, commit to longer-term job opportunities. Barriers to seeking employment identified by women in focus group discussions conducted by NRC in May 2022 in Warsaw included language, childcare, and validation or translation of key legal documents such as diplomas.¹⁵

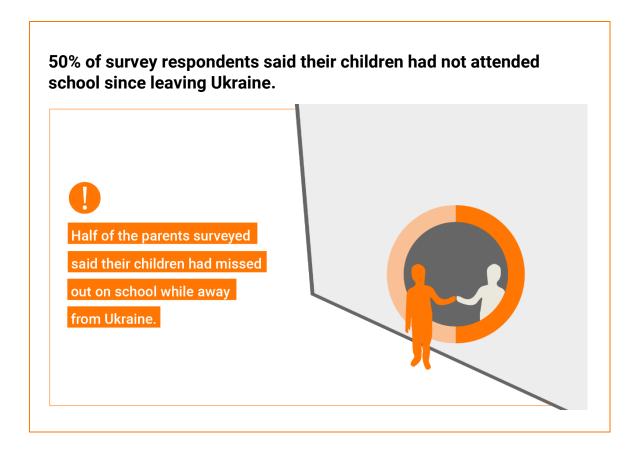
NRC's returns survey found that, as well as work opportunities in host countries, support from host governments and remittances from family members still in Ukraine were other sources of income during displacement. Savings and humanitarian assistance were mentioned by some respondents but were not statistically significant. Nine per cent of respondents had incurred debt since leaving Ukraine, citing an average of 1000 Euros.

3.4 Access to education

Of the 145 respondents with children, 48 per cent said that their children had been able to attend school without interruptions since leaving Ukraine (and two per cent with minor interruptions). However, 50 per cent of survey respondents said their children had not attended school since leaving Ukraine. The children of the remaining 16 per cent were not of school age.

The main form of education was via in-person attendance at local schools in their host country, followed by remote online learning with schools in Ukraine. *When*

asked whether their children's education needs were part of the reason for returning to Ukraine, 28 per cent of respondents answered in the affirmative.



It is estimated there are 800,000 Ukrainian refugee children in Poland, with 183,000 enrolled in the national Polish education system for the school year ending July 2022. Up to 300,000 more are expected to enrol for the new academic year.¹⁶ Many children are also likely to be enrolled in remote online schooling with a school in Ukraine, but gaps remain, particularly for families without access to online schooling options.

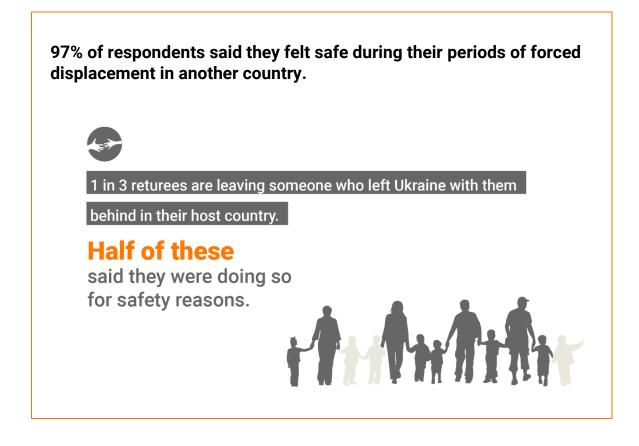
3.5 Assistance

Just under half of respondents stated they had not received any type of additional assistance during their period of displacement. When asked whether this was a factor in their decision to return, 11 per cent stated that this was the case. However, for 89 per cent it was not part of their reasons for return.

Of the just over half of respondents who did receive assistance during their stay in third countries, the main source was from governments (at national level and local authority level), followed by international NGOs or UN agencies, and local civil society organisations. This assistance mainly consisted of cash, together with accommodation, food, and clothing.

3.6 Safety and integration

An overwhelming majority (97 per cent) of respondents felt safe during their temporary stay in host countries. 71 per cent of respondents felt integrated and said that lack of integration was not a major factor in influencing their decision to return.



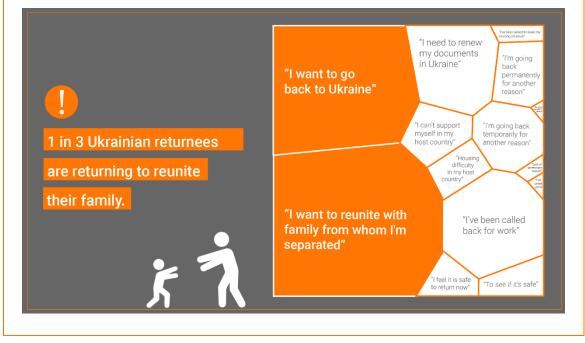
3.7 Reasons for return and intentions

The main factor driving return for a third of respondents was family reunification and the wish to return to their country. This is consistent with findings from the Protection Cluster's Monitoring of Returns¹⁷ and IOM's border crossing survey,¹⁸ illustrating homesickness and a strong desire to reunite with families as the main driving factor for return. Access to job opportunities and cost of living in host countries do not feature promiently amongst reasons for return given by respondents.

11 per cent of survey respondents had been called back to Ukraine for work, while nine per cent stated their primary reason for return was the need to renew or re-issue documentation in Ukraine. A small minority mentioned other reasons including lack of livelihood opportunities during displacement, difficulty finding housing in their host country, and wanting to check the situation in their place of habitual residence to see if the conditions were safe for returning in the long term. Only a few individuals had been asked to leave their hosting situation (but did not specify whether this was a request by local authorities, landlords, or other).

Of the 371 individuals interviewed at transit centres in Warsaw before undertaking their trips to Ukraine, *87 per cent were planning on returning to their place of habitual residence and 84 per cent intended to live in their own home upon return.* Of the nine per cent who planned to travel to a different region, the main reason given was that their place of habitual residence was currently within an active conflict zone. They selected different regions based on friends/family/support network residing there.

The main factor driving return for a third of respondents was family reunification and the wish to return to their country.



UNHCR's intentions survey found that a significant proportion (88 per cent) of their interviewees in neighbouring countries reported concerns about returning, mostly related to fears due to ongoing conflict, indicating that returns might not materialize or be sustainable if the situation in their home communities continues to deteriorate.¹⁹

4 Conditions upon return: overview of findings from the Ukraine data set

One month after the first set of face-to-face interviews in Poland, NRC carried out follow-up interviews via telephone with respondents once they were back in Ukraine. Of the 222 who agreed to be contacted for these purposes, NRC was able to reach 110 individuals. *95 of these 110 (87 per cent) had returned to their place of origin,* seven had returned to a different place inside Ukraine, five had left Ukraine and returned to where they had been staying outside of the country, and two had left Ukraine but moved on to a different country.

This is consistent with findings from IOM, where 87 per cent of the refugees interviewed declared their intention to go back to the same region as their previous usual place of residence. Out of those who chose different regions for return, nearly 50 per cent were either from Donetsk or Kharkiv regions, both currently heavily affected by active hostilities.²⁰ In NRC's survey, areas of return were primarily Kyiv, Dnipro and Ivano-Frankivsk regions, which is a mix of conflict and relatively safe areas.

4.1 Accommodation

93 per cent of the 110 respondents reached by NRC were staying in the same accommodation as before displacement, whether owned or rented. A few individuals were staying in newly rented accommodation or hosted by friends or family members. None were at risk of eviction from their places of residence.

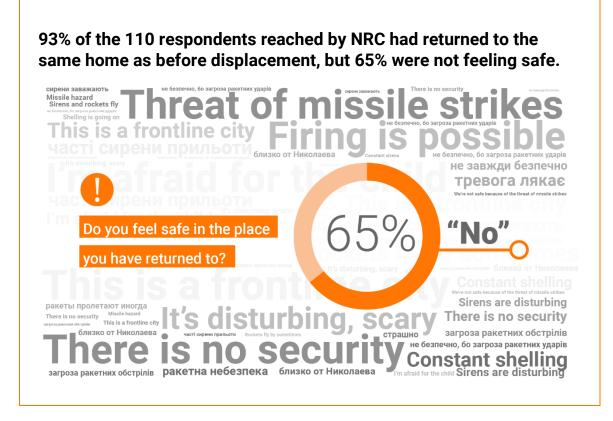


When asked about the condition of housing in their place of habitual residence, *87 per cent of respondents said that their housing had not been damaged or destroyed*, ten per cent said their housing was moderately damaged but liveable, and two per cent said their homes had been completely destroyed. The damaged houses were either in regions affected by armed hostilities earlier in the year (Kyiv or Sumy regions), or in areas of active fighting and shelling (Kharkiv, Dnipro, Mykolaiv, Donetsk).

4.2 Safety

64 per cent of those reached by NRC reported not feeling safe in the place they had chosen to return to. Reasons included hearing shelling or sirens, proximity to frontlines, and feelings of general anxiety. This is telling of people's desire to be home and close to facilities is often outweighing personal, physical and emotional security.

The Protection Cluster's Monitoring of Returns has shown that security and safety were often compromised by shelling, risk of missile attacks or actual attacks, and that returnees often felt anxious about the risk of renewed fighting. Despite this, the security situation in places of origin is not the primary factor prompting people to return. Yet it remains a concern for many and is one of the reasons people mention being ready to leave again.²¹



4.3 Access to services

95 per cent of 110 respondents said they have been able to access all utilities/services at all times since their return. Of the five per cent who reported interrupted or no access to services, this was in relation to water supply and heating.

Of the 36 individuals with school-age children, all except for three had enrolled their children in schools in their current area of residence. An overwhelming majority of respondents (98 per cent or 93 individuals) reported being able to access the necessary medical care and services upon return.

4.4 Assistance

79 per cent of respondents had not received any assistance during or upon return; 14 per cent had received some form of assistance from government entities (whether national or local), and seven per cent from international NGOs or UN agencies – primarily in the form of multipurpose cash, cash for accommodation, or food. *The main challenges upon return expressed by respondents included employment, as previous occupations were no longer available (21 per cent), the need for cash assistance (19 per cent), and support for house repairs (14 per cent).*

4.5 Sources of income

Amongst working-age adults surveyed, 40 per cent told NRC they had a full time or part time job they had been able to return to. However, almost half of these individuals felt their employment was unstable or not very stable (for unspecified reasons) and some reported their previous occupation was no longer available. 21 per cent reported borrowing money from friends or family in order to meet their needs. 16 per cent of respondents had access to a government pension or social welfare scheme.

4.6 Intentions over the coming months

60 per cent of the 110 reached by NRC for the follow-up survey reported they intended to stay in their place of usual residence for the coming two to three months, whilst ten per cent intended to move back outside of Ukraine. 30 per cent did not have clear intentions at this stage in time.

This supports the findings from IOM's survey where more than half of the sample (54 per cent) reported their intention of staying in Ukraine, while 30 per cent reported they were doing a short visit and another 17 per cent were uncertain of how long they would be staying in Ukraine.²²

When asked by NRC if moving abroad again would pose any challenges, most respondents claimed this would not be the case. Potential obstacles mentioned by some included lack of finances, issues linked to EU 90-day visas, and the loss of certain documents.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

The international armed conflict in Ukraine is ongoing and the security situation remains unpredictable across the country due to the risk of active hostilities. Not all refugee returns can be considered safe or dignified, which puts into question their sustainability over the long term. It is clear however, that people do want to return to their homes if they can, and are willing to compromise on security and certainty in order to do so.

Displacement dynamics will remain fluid for the time being as people continue to leave Ukraine at the same time others return. Support and assistance should therefore remain flexible to meet a variety of needs and intentions, which may shift over time.

5.1 Freedom of movement

The majority of people NRC surveyed (60 per cent) intended to stay in Ukraine for at least two to three months, but many people indicated this decision might change dependent on the security situation; 30 per cent stated they had not yet decided on their plans. Amidst the uncertainty people feel about their future, *the EU should provide explicit guidance to Member States and assurances to refugees that:*

- Neither registration for Temporary Protection nor residence permits will be affected should a refugee return to Ukraine temporarily.
- People re-entering Ukraine for short visits should be guaranteed passage in and out of international borders, as well as receive guarantees that re-entry will not have any impact on their status in EU Member States or elsewhere.
- People who re-enter Ukraine for longer periods should be allowed to cross international borders should the deterioration of the situation force them to flee again.

5.2 Access to housing during displacement

In Poland, the impact of increased rental costs, decreased availability of rental options in urban locations and concerns over the sustainability of solidarity and host family hospitality are creating immediate humanitarian shelter needs. NRC calls for:

- Existing shelters, including collective centres, to be maintained until the situation improves. Shelter actors should supplement the government's financial assistance for hosting where there is funding to support this.
- There is a need for the longer-term creation of additional affordable housing, increased number and capacity of social renting agencies, and enhanced coordination and communication with national authorities.
- Social protection schemes should be reviewed and, if necessary, adapted to ensure a sustainable transition from humanitarian cash assistance to national social assistance programmes.
- The leadership of the Polish Government at all levels is critical to plan and coordinate how to sustainably address this potential refugee housing crisis.

5.3 Children's access to education during displacement

Gaps in children's access to education during displacement was evident from the survey findings. 50 per cent said their children had not attended school since leaving Ukraine. EU directives require all Member States to integrate refugee and migrant children into their national education systems no later than three months from the date of their application for international protection, and provide preparatory classes, including language classes.

Integrating refugee children and young people into national education systems is the most effective and sustainable way to meet their need for relevant, quality education that is recognised. There are significant resource and capacity challenges with this approach, but a policy framework to encourage and work on long term integration can be balanced now with a hybrid remote and integrated approach. For *refugee hosting countries and EU Member States:*

- Local language proficiency should not be a requirement or barrier to school attendance, especially for lessons and activities where local language requirement is less necessary (eg: Music, Physical Education, Maths, Art).
- Plan and resource for the inclusion of all refugee children from Ukraine into national systems by the beginning of the coming school year (September-October 2022).
- Solutions should not be temporary, but should instead guarantee adequate funding for local education authorities and be inclusive of different groups of Ukrainian students.

- States should run and resource additional classes, so students can engage in intensive language classes, catch up on missed curriculum and establish relationships with local children and teachers.
- Recognise and register Ukrainian teachers' qualifications to increase capacity for education integration.
- Work closely with relevant education authorities, including the Ministry of Education in Ukraine, to ensure learning undertaken in their countries is recognised, with clear pathways for children who have studied in national systems for potential return and transfer to education systems in Ukraine.

5.4 Durable solutions for returnees in Ukraine

In Ukraine, where early recovery planning is ongoing alongside the emergency humanitarian response, durable solutions for returnees should be supported from the start. Considering fluid movement dynamics and the changing context inside Ukraine, systematic data collection and analysis on returns should be further strengthened to inform the humanitarian response, early recovery programming, policy-making and advocacy on durable solutions for returnees.

The Government of Ukraine should:

- Take full ownership of and adopt a "whole-of-Government approach" to durable solutions for IDPs and returnees, which should be reflected in the revised National Strategy on IDP Integration and Durable Solutions and the final National Recovery Framework.
- Closely coordinate humanitarian assistance for the needs of returnees with wider government-led recovery actions together with development partners. This is particularly relevant for the relatively safe areas mostly chosen for return, where critical infrastructure and housing has been damaged or destroyed as a result of hostilities.
- In areas of return, emergency shelter assistance aimed at providing people with adequate living conditions upon their return to Ukraine should create synergies with support to longer-term housing solutions for returnees.

Humanitarian agencies should:

- Ensure that cash assistance to returnees is implemented coherently with government-led social protection schemes.
- Coordinate humanitarian mine action, protection, legal aid and livelihood interventions with larger-scale infrastructure, social cohesion and economic inclusion programmes championed by authorities and development partners, in order to make durable solutions practical for millions of returnees.
- Strenghten data collection efforts to better inform needs-responsive programming and advocacy in a context of fluid population movements.

Endnotes

¹ UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, <u>Ukraine Refugee Situation as of August 17, 2022</u> (accessed August 23, 2022)

² IOM, DTM, Ukraine, <u>Round 7 as of July 23, 2022</u> (accessed August 23, 2022)

³ UN OCHA, <u>Ukraine Flash Appeal (March to December 2022)</u> as of August 8, 2022 (accessed August 23, 2022)

⁴ UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, <u>Ukraine Refugee Situation as of August 17, 2022</u> (accessed August 23, 2022) Note: This figure reflects cross-border movements (and not individuals). Movements back to Ukraine can be pendular, and does not necessarily indicate sustainable returns as the situation across Ukraine remains highly volatile and unpredictable.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <u>Ukraine's National Recovery Plan</u>, July 2022. More <u>information</u> on the Ukraine Recovery Conference, July 4-5, 2022 (accessed August 23, 2022).

⁷ Cabinet of Minister of Ukraine, <u>National Strategy on IDP Integration and Mid-Term Solutions</u> <u>for the Period until 2024</u>, adopted by the Resolution No. 1354-p dated October 28 (accessed August 23, 2022)

⁸ UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, <u>Ukraine Refugee Situation as of August 17, 2022</u> (accessed August 23, 2022)

⁹ IOM, Ukraine Response 2022 – Poland, <u>Crossing to Ukraine Surveys</u>, 21 April – 21 June 2022 (accessed August 23, 2022)

¹⁰ UNHCR, <u>Lives on Hold: Profiles and Intentions of Refugees from Ukraine</u>, July 12, 2022 (accessed August 23, 2022)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² European Council on Refugees and Exiles, <u>Information Sheet – Measures in response to the arrival of displaced people fleeing the war in Ukraine</u>, June 17, 2022 (accessed August 23, 2022).

¹³ <u>https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/94176</u>

¹⁴ "<u>Economic Inclusion of Ukrainian refugees in Poland</u>," NRC Poland, July 10, 2022

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶"<u>Hospitable Poland 2022+</u>," Wise Europa, August 23, 2022; "<u>Minister edukacji: kolejne 200-300 tys. dzieci ukrainskich w polskich szkolach.</u>" August 16, 2022; <u>'Uczniowie - uchodźcy z</u> <u>Ukrainy.</u>' (dane.gov.pl)

¹⁷ From 31 May to 20 June 2022, a number of Ukraine Protection Cluster partners, including NRC, contributed to protection monitoring of returns to collect qualitative information for analysis of the voluntariness of returns, conditions in return areas and sustainability of returns.

¹⁸ IOM, Ukraine Response 2022 – Poland, <u>Crossing to Ukraine Surveys</u>, 21 April – 21 June 2022 (accessed August 23, 2022).

¹⁹ UNHCR, *Lives on Hold: Profiles and Intentions of Refugees from Ukraine*, July 12, 2022 (accessed August 23, 2022).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ukraine Protection Cluster returns monitoring.

²² IOM, Ukraine Response 2022 – Poland, <u>Crossing to Ukraine Surveys</u>, 21 April – 21 June 2022 (accessed August 23, 2022).