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ZOIS REPORT

DISPLACED UKRAINIAN YOUTH: DISPLACED FUTURES?

Sabine v. Löwis (ZOIS), Gwendolyn Sasse (ZOIS),
Inna Volosevych (Info Sapiens)

in collaboration with Ivaylo Dinev (ZOIS, KonKoop DataLab)



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Summary

Displacement from Ukraine has affected people from very different walks of life. Their experiences, needs, and strategies vary. Through two contrasting case studies, this ZOiS Report considers the different trajectories of displaced young Ukrainians, examining the implications of their journeys and highlighting the agency of the individuals involved.

- The report focuses on Ukrainian youth (those aged 18–34), a dimension of displacement that has not yet gained sufficient attention in public debate beyond the issue of schooling. Ultimately, young Ukrainians are a vital component of Ukraine’s recovery. Their experiences, identities, and intentions to either return home or engage from abroad are important aspects of their potential roles in Ukraine’s future.
- Young Ukrainians share a strong commitment to playing an active role in Ukraine’s recovery, but their ideas about how to do so vary considerably. Some are in a holding pattern, waiting for the possibility to return, while others are making their lives and careers abroad and want to have a stake in Ukraine’s recovery from there. The policy challenge for Ukraine and its international partners is to enable both approaches, rather than assume the large-scale return of young people based on a narrow definition of human capital.
- Members of this age group typically find themselves abroad without their parents or other family members. They keep in close contact with relatives in Ukraine but have to rely on the networks they build in their new places of residence, often around Ukrainian or local contacts they already had. The displaced youth seem not to rely much on the help of non-governmental organisations or social benefits paid out by host countries. They also tend not to consider themselves entitled to support. Some receive support from their families in Ukraine.
- Young displaced individuals face particular challenges, for example finding a job despite incomplete education or limited work experience. However, they may on average have fewer problems with learning or using the language of their host country, in particular in Poland.

Introduction*

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, between a quarter and a third of the Ukrainian population has been displaced internally or externally. According to current estimates by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), about 6.5 million displaced Ukrainians are based outside Ukraine.¹ Of the 2.2 million Ukrainian refugees living in 11 Central and Eastern European countries, roughly 30 per cent are young people aged between 18 and 34, with nearly three times as many women as men in this age group.²

The displaced youth are forced to take important life decisions about their education and careers, including choices about their social networks and work experience. While each age group deserves attention, this sub-group and the challenges it faces have not been prominent in policy-making and discussions about displaced Ukrainians beyond the recent focus on military mobilisation. Rather, the focus has been on the integration of children and teenagers into schools or of the adult population into the job market. In the cases described in this ZOiS Report, which combines specific experiences with overarching trends, the young individuals' conscious decisions to leave Ukraine amid the ongoing war offer perspectives on the diversity of displaced Ukrainians and their needs, expectations, hopes, and identities.

Ukrainian youth face different challenges from other generations, such as children, the middle-aged, or the elderly. The displaced youth are perceived as a vulnerable group because they undergo developmental changes while facing the challenges of settling in a new place and context, often after traumatic experiences. Possibly without having completed their education before leaving Ukraine, they face specific difficulties in securing a livelihood, accessing mobility schemes, or requesting flexibility from universities in Ukraine and their host societies.³ Those who have fled without their parents may develop networks of peers who support each other.

Young Ukrainians are not necessarily more vulnerable than older generations or children and teenagers living in intergenerational contexts.⁴ However, they are at a crucial phase in their lives, and their experiences and choices in this period are likely to critically shape their future trajectories and, by extension, their future personal and professional connections to Ukraine. Comparative research on displaced children and youth has demonstrated that the youth are not a homogeneous group and should be seen not only as problematic and vulnerable but also as a group with agency.⁵ Ukrainian youth can play an important role in shaping Ukraine's future, whether they return home or stay abroad.⁶

Young people's experiences and choices are likely to shape their future trajectories and their future connections to Ukraine.

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In 2017, only a quarter of young Ukrainians (14–29) wished to emigrate.

A 2017 survey by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, conducted after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the onset of the war in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region but long before the full-scale invasion, revealed several insights into the Ukrainian youth.⁷ According to the survey, they were rather disinterested in politics and tended to distrust political leaders. Similarly, these young people showed low levels of tolerance towards LGBTQ+ people, Roma communities, drug addicts, and ex-prisoners. At the time, they did not consider language—in particular, the use of Russian—to be an obstacle to national identity. The survey found that a clear majority of young Ukrainians were in favour of the European Union (EU) but believed Ukraine would not be welcome in the bloc. In 2017, most young Ukrainians lived with their families in their parents' home, mainly for reasons of convenience. The young people surveyed believed that their parents retained a rather strong influence over them. Only a few had gained experiences abroad and only a quarter wished to emigrate, the main motivations behind this desire being a hope for better living standards and higher salaries. Many young Ukrainians had not been abroad before because they simply could not afford to do so. Migration, even forced migration, requires resources.

This report looks at the experiences, attitudes, identities, and strategies of selected young Ukrainians who have been displaced to Poland. The report focuses on Poland because it is the country that initially had the highest total number of Ukrainian refugees in absolute terms; now, the overall number is estimated to be somewhat higher in Germany. Exact numbers do not exist, not least because displaced people follow fluid migratory patterns and not all of them register in their host countries. In Poland, some 957,000 Ukrainians were registered as of 7 May 2024.⁸ Of these, 24 per cent were aged between 18 and 34, with twice as many women as men. Only the 35–59 age group was larger, at 28 per cent. For 2024, the overall number of displaced Ukrainians in Poland was estimated to be around 1.1 million.⁹

Young Ukrainians are committed to playing an active role in Ukraine's recovery but have differing ideas about how to achieve this. While some are waiting for a time when they will be able to return home, others are making a life for themselves abroad and want to contribute to Ukraine's recovery from there. The task for Ukraine and its partners is to enable the active involvement of both groups of young Ukrainians, based on a more nuanced understanding of the situations, choices, and agency of displaced individuals.

Methodology

This ZOiS Report presents qualitative data from semi-structured repeat interviews with displaced individuals in Poland, supplemented with data from two surveys about the displaced by the research agency Info Sapiens. While the former provide detailed insights into two young individuals who have settled in Warsaw, the survey data help contextualise their trajectories with reference to displaced populations in general and those in Poland and Germany in particular.

The in-depth qualitative data, used in this report for the first time, stem from a longitudinal ZOiS study that explores the trajectories of displaced Ukrainians (not only the youth) in Poland, Germany, and Moldova. Since

spring 2023, the same displaced Ukrainians have been interviewed five times in each country's capital and a smaller city or town.¹⁰ In Poland, 20 people—ten in Warsaw and ten in Rzeszów—were interviewed between April 2023 and March 2024. The interviews were designed by ZOiS and implemented by the Zatoka Foundation. The selection of interviewees was guided by the aim to capture diversity in terms of age, gender, educational background, family status, region of origin, language use, housing, and other indicators of integration.

The interviews included questions that were asked only once or twice, for example about the respondents' experiences of fleeing, crossing borders, and arriving at their current locations, as well as questions that were repeated in each round, for instance on living conditions, social networks, and identity issues, to understand potential changes over time. The longitudinal nature of the study helps build trust between interviewer and interviewee. The exchanges also comprised mental mapping exercises on specific questions, which can help visualise aspects that are difficult to talk about.

For this ZOiS Report, we selected two people from the interviews—a young woman and a young man—who both settled in Warsaw. We deliberately let their experiences and complex reflections come to life. While the interview data are not representative, they aptly illustrate the diversity and trends in experiences of displacement and highlight the interviewees' agency over time. In the two case studies, the potential implications of this agency are even more tangible. While each individual has a distinctive profile and we can only present their perceptions as conveyed in the interviews, the ways in which they have actively shaped their situations in a new social and cultural context draw attention to issues and processes that can be generalised but tend to disappear from view.

The interview data illustrate the diversity and trends in experiences of displacement.

For the purposes of contextualisation, the ZOiS Report presents data from sub-samples of displaced Ukrainians in Poland and Germany from an SMS-based survey conducted by Info Sapiens for the Centre for Economic Strategy (CES) in January 2024. The survey included 1,009 respondents globally, with proportional shares by country of residence, including 161 individuals in Poland and 177 in Germany; 33 per cent of all respondents were aged 18–34.¹¹ Sending an SMS with a survey link to a random sample of displaced Ukrainians' mobile phone numbers is one method to aim for a random and representative sample without a clear sampling frame. The qualitative research is also supplemented by data from a study on the national identity of Ukrainian youth, conducted by Info Sapiens for the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) in November–December 2023, including through 321 online responses from displaced Ukrainians aged 18–35 living in Poland.¹² The data were analysed in collaboration with the KonKoop DataLab at ZOiS.¹³

The trajectories of two young Ukrainians moving to Warsaw

The series of five repeat interviews conducted between April 2023 and March 2024 paint a picture of the two individuals' journeys to Warsaw, processes of settling in, future plans, and potential intentions to return to Ukraine. Each story as presented here follows the interviewee's language and reflections, combining selected quotes and brief summaries of his or her answers. The interviews are not drawn on chronologically; rather, particular thoughts or feelings that reflect the interviewees' overall trajectories have been chosen for illustrative purposes. The names of the interviewees have been changed.

Olena, art student: 'I feel comfortable here'

Originally from the central Ukrainian city of Vinnytsia, Olena moved to Lviv in 2017 for her bachelor's degree at the Lviv National Academy of Arts. By the time of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, she was enrolled in a master's programme in art history. She decided to move to Warsaw, where she found a way to continue her studies in Lviv while also embarking on a new master's degree at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. She rejects the label 'refugee':

„Honestly, I don't feel like a refugee here. And I didn't feel like a refugee in the beginning [...] thanks to both my academies, the one in Lviv [...] and the one in Warsaw, because I was accepted as a student under such emergency conditions. [...] Of course, I was aware in my head that we were at war, but I was trying to alleviate this stress, and so I thought, well, I should take advantage of this opportunity. And now, as a student, I will be finishing my master's degree this year, at this academy, it's just [...] wow.

Olena's interviews and mental maps consistently show that in these turbulent times, she is anchored by her art degrees, her work as a tour guide at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, a close school friend from Vinnytsia she has lived with since she arrived, and her close contact with her parents, who remained in Vinnytsia. The Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts helped her to find the job at the museum and a patron who supported her with a scholarship.

Olena is committed to finding her path in what she calls 'the creative world'. Her decision to stay in Warsaw for the foreseeable future is motivated primarily by her job prospects. Despite the dramatic wider context of her move to Warsaw, she is generally happy with her position and considers her experience to have been comparatively easy and not typical. Continuing her studies provided her with a path towards at least partial integration into student life and society more generally. She almost apologises for her relatively smooth transition to Poland.

The seemingly more straightforward cases, such as Olena's, seem less noteworthy. However, focusing on them does not downplay the difficulties of others but highlights the fact that displacement affects an extremely heterogeneous group of people with different needs, opportunities, and choices. Olena's story draws attention to the educational and professional integration of young educated individuals in their current places of residence and their scope to create or maintain personal and professional connections to Ukraine.

Student Olena considers her experience to have been comparatively easy.

Olena's story combines contingency with personal initiative to build a medium-term perspective. Overall, she describes the experience of displacement as having helped her personal development despite the context: 'Of course, it had a great impact [...] because I received a lot of information and a lot of communication, which helped me to study myself more, to reveal myself more. It gave me the courage to do some new things.'

Choice of destination

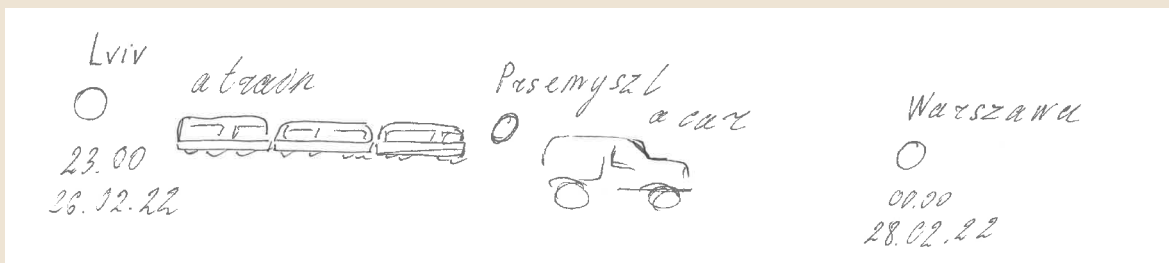
When Russia's full-scale invasion started, Olena saw two options for herself: to either go home to her parents in Vinnytsia and therefore remain in the vicinity of military action or move to Warsaw, where a close friend from school had already been studying. Her mother encouraged her to go to Poland; returning to Vinnytsia has been on Olena's mind as a back-up option. She also felt somewhat mentally prepared for the move, as she had been considering studying abroad but had not yet decided on a specific location:

„I never wanted to move permanently and settle in another country, but I have always considered this option of going to study or work for a while. [...] To be honest, I didn't think about which country in particular, but given that I knew Polish, and Poland is the closest to Ukraine in terms of mentality, development, and the cultural sphere in which I work—it's not that far from us—maybe at some point I would have come to the conclusion that I should try to go to Poland first, and then maybe somewhere else.

Drawing her journey to Warsaw by train and car with a two-day wait at the Ukrainian-Polish border, Olena paused several times to disentangle the stops and her feelings about them. In the end, however, her drawing depicts a very streamlined journey. ► **MENTAL MAP 1** This discrepancy captures a more general difficulty in communicating the multitude of experiences and needs hidden behind the generic term 'displacement'. Even seemingly straightforward cases are much more complex when looked at in more detail.

MENTAL MAP 1

Picturing displacement



While drawing her journey, Olena reflected on her displacement from Lviv to Warsaw: 'The funny thing is that I'm an artist, but I don't even know how to draw it properly. Well, the experience of this move [...] yes. I was in Lviv, or if I put it in a primitive way, I travelled from Lviv to Przemyśl on an evacuation train, and then from

there, volunteers [...] a girl I knew, whom I met on that train, drove me to Warsaw. I mean, if you think about it like that [...] it looks quite easy and orderly, but in fact it was very, very difficult to travel on this evacuation train. [...] In fact, it was such an experience that everything was really mixed up for those two days, two or three.'

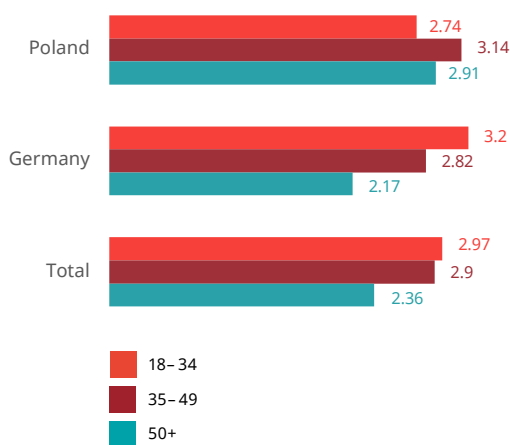
Integration and intention to stay

Olena recalled an urgent need on arriving in Poland ‘to settle down, firstly, to recover, and secondly, to understand how everything works here in terms of medicine, and to get a place to study, and also to understand how to live here’. With hindsight, her path looks more straightforward than it clearly was to begin with. She further recalled that although there was no language barrier as such, many things initially felt very different and incomprehensible to her. Olena said that she needed help from her friend, for example with paperwork related to her immigration status and the university, and had to work on her language skills, even though English proved to be a bridging language:

„At first, during my first exchange semester, I was still writing papers for the academy in English, but now I’m writing in Polish, and I work and give tours in Polish, English, and Ukrainian. And at work I constantly speak Polish. In general, work and study helped me a lot in this, because even though it was not impossible to speak English, because everyone understands it perfectly, I wanted to overcome this barrier as soon as possible [...] and I managed to cope with it quite quickly.

Olena’s knowledge of Polish and networks in the academy helped her to adapt easily and be able to work in Polish. Among displaced Ukrainians in Poland in general, those aged 35–49 reported slightly higher levels of language proficiency, and therefore fewer communication problems, than older and younger age groups. ► FIGURES 1 + 2 Olena felt that she had adapted well and found the process of registering for temporary protection status, which allows for free education, easy enough and well organised. Interestingly, she referred to her mother assisting her from Vinnytsia, for example by researching groups on Facebook or Viber that could help locate necessary information.

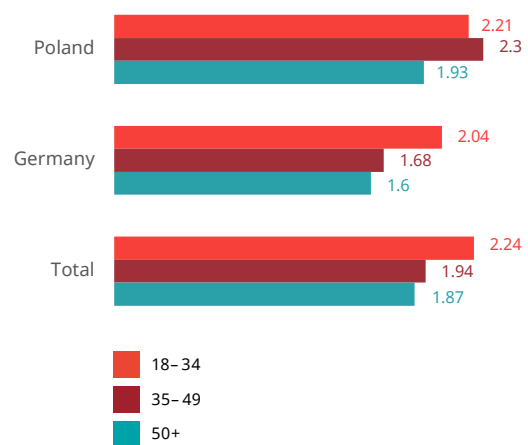
FIGURE 1
What is your level of language proficiency in your host country?



Note: A higher value indicates higher proficiency. Values range from 1 to 4, where 1 corresponds to ‘I don’t know the language at all’ and 4 means ‘I’m fluent enough to understand everything I read and hear. I can speak and write fluently.’

Source: Info Sapiens survey for CES, January 2024, Poland: n=177; Germany: n=161 (proportional country shares in global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees)

FIGURE 2
Does your level of language proficiency cause you problems in your host country?



Note: A higher value indicates fewer problems. Values range from 1 to 4, where 1 corresponds to ‘Yes, it often creates problems’ and 4 means ‘No, never’.

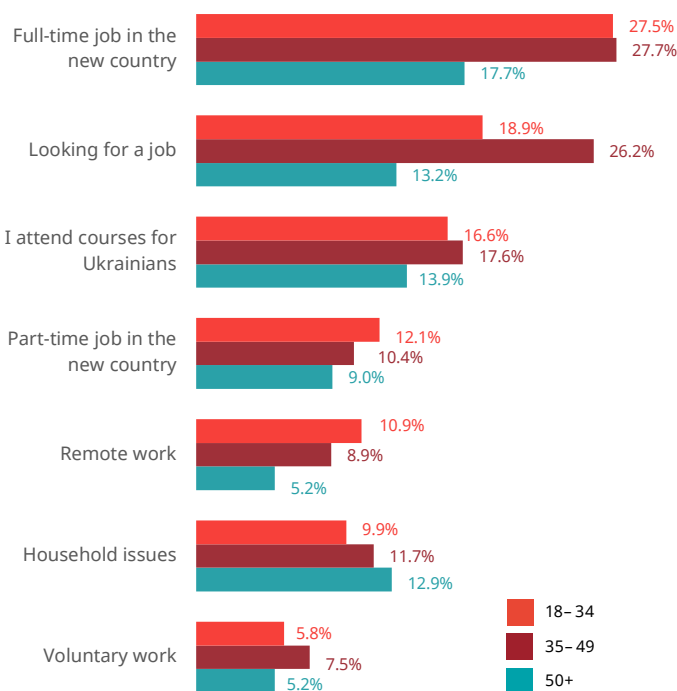
Source: Info Sapiens survey for CES, January 2024, Poland: n=177; Germany: n=161 (proportional country shares in global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees)

Olena stayed with her old school friend in a dormitory room for about a year and tried to find a flat with her; they succeeded after several months of intensive flat hunting. Olena did not receive or ask for material assistance, as she was convinced that she could support herself better than others, such as mothers with children. Among displaced Ukrainians worldwide, the largest number of those aged 18–34 were in full-time employment in their new country, followed by those looking for a job. ► FIGURE 3

Asked in her first interview how she felt in Warsaw, Olena answered, ‘It’s very good. I have adapted perfectly. I feel comfortable here [...] I like studying here, I have my own social circle, so I have everything I need for life.’ She maintained this positive outlook throughout the subsequent interviews, which may also be part of a conscious adaptation strategy. Especially in the early interviews, she repeatedly expressed her gratitude without being prompted to do so. This is at least in part linked to the fact that she receives medical care for a treatable variant of leukaemia but could also reflect a perceived need to convey gratitude.

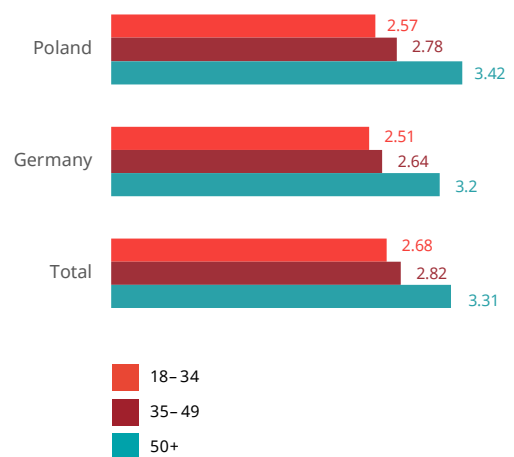
Olena said that she had not experienced negative attitudes towards Ukrainians in her social interactions in Poland, although she was aware of the politicisation of farmers’ protests against Ukrainian grain exports. Currently, she has no intention to return to Ukraine, reflecting a trend of younger displaced Ukrainians being less likely than older age groups to be planning to return home. ► FIGURE 4 But Olena also mentioned that she only makes concrete plans for a year at a time and only allows herself to think in a time frame of up to three years. In principle, she also feels ready to move to a different country at some point to pursue a career in the arts.

FIGURE 3
What is your current employment status?
(Select all options that apply.)



Note: Some options with low numbers of responses are not shown.

FIGURE 4
Are you planning to return to Ukraine?



Note: A higher value indicates a higher probability of returning. Values range from 1 to 4, where 1 corresponds to ‘Definitely not planning to return’ and 4 means ‘Definitely planning to return’.

Source: Info Sapiens survey among displaced Ukrainians for CES, January 2024, Poland: n=177; Germany: n=161 (proportional country shares in global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees)

Source: Info Sapiens global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees for CES, January 2024

Personal network

In moving to Warsaw, where her school friend from Vinnytsia was already located, Olena confirmed a typical migration pattern of going where one’s family or friends have gone before. At the same time, she made the difficult journey by herself and integrated into a primarily Polish network around the art academy in Warsaw. Among displaced Ukrainians worldwide, almost 60 per cent of those aged 18–34 have made friends or close acquaintances since arriving in their host country, with higher figures for older age groups. ► [FIGURE 5](#)

Olena’s parents and other close relatives remained in Vinnytsia, and she communicates with them every day. Most of her friends who had left Ukraine after the start of the full-scale invasion returned to Lviv after some time, whereas she stayed abroad. Her medical condition makes travelling difficult, so she has only been back to Lviv twice—once to collect her diploma from the Lviv academy, combined with a week in Vinnytsia to see her family and friends. Her main social network consists of Poles she met through the academy. She knows some Ukrainians through her work at the museum—some had migrated before the invasion, others since—but she does not consider them close friends.

The sketch Olena drew to depict her network of friends and family is very creative. ► [MENTAL MAP 2](#) It reflects the situation of many Ukrainians—not only the young—across Europe who remain in close contact with their parents and families in Ukraine. ► [FIGURE 6](#)

FIGURE 5
Do you have friends or good acquaintances among the locals?

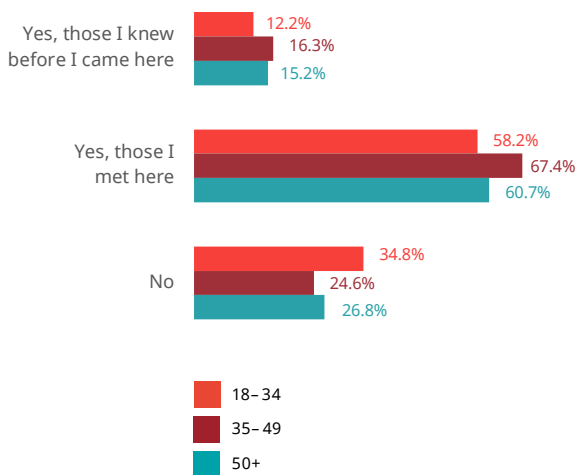
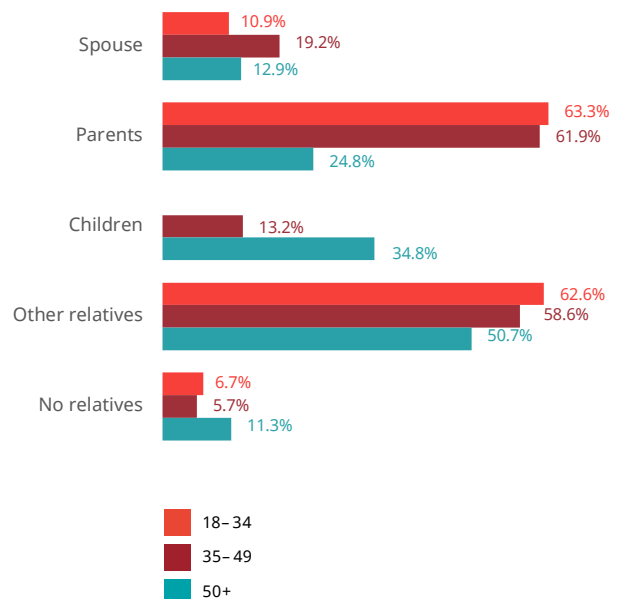


FIGURE 6
Do you have close relatives who have stayed in Ukraine?

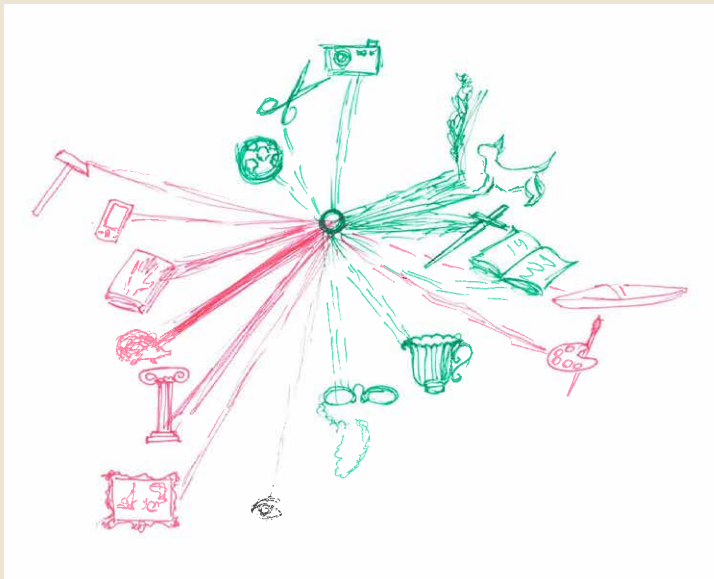


Source: Info Sapiens global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees for CES, January 2024

Source: Info Sapiens global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees for CES, January 2024

MENTAL MAP 2

A personal network both close and transnational



Olena's drawing of her network with friends and family shows family connections in green and ties to close friends in red. She chose different symbols to illustrate the associations and emotions that connect her with different people. A gladiolus represents her link to her mother, while a hedgehog symbolises one of her best friends. The thickness of the lines indicates the intensity of contact: the links are strongest to her family and one of her friends, originally from Vinnytsia.

Olena spoke repeatedly about her contacts with her closest friends in Ukraine having become less frequent; this seems to have happened early on after the full-scale invasion started:

„Nowadays, you know, this contact is very sporadic. We mostly correspond on social media. The fact is that they have their own problems now, dictated by the current situation. And I [...] I have my own life here, as it were, [I] also have some problems, but compared to theirs, it's a completely different story.

Olena was convinced, though, that her contacts in Ukraine could be quickly reactivated if she (and others) were back in Vinnytsia. She intermittently referred to many of her old friends from Vinnytsia as having left Ukraine before the invasion, for example to study abroad.

Identity

Olena described her experience of studying in a different setting as having stimulated her to rethink her views and identities, including 'gender issues, self-awareness, work, and everything'. She described herself as 'both very close [to] and very far from Ukraine'. Throughout the interviews, being an artist remained Olena's main identity, but being Ukrainian gained importance:

Olena described herself as 'both very close [to] and very far from Ukraine'.

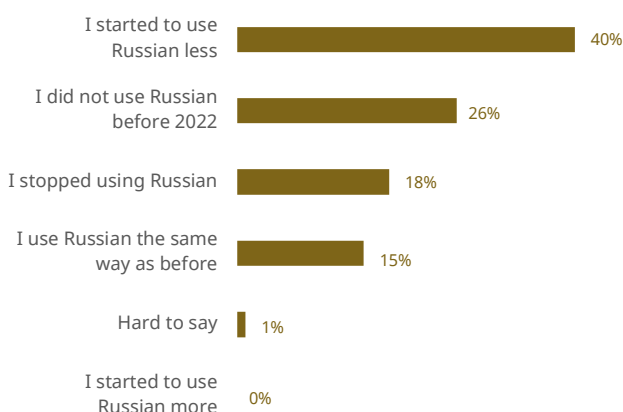
„I’m becoming more and more proud of being Ukrainian. [...] Now I’m just comparing Ukraine through my studies, so to speak, to other countries and [...] other cultures. I realise that Ukraine is really important, it is very underrated, so it is a real treasure. [...] And I understand that to be Ukrainian is simply to be a strong person, adaptable, and able to keep yourself in check in all this chaos.

She referred to having spoken Russian with her friends and family in the past but not since the full-scale invasion. When studying in Lviv, she had already switched to Ukrainian, having spoken both Ukrainian and Russian in Vinnytsia, reflecting a trend among displaced Ukrainians in general, 40 per cent of whom have used the Russian language less since the start of the full-scale invasion. ► FIGURE 7

For a clear majority of young Ukrainians in Poland, being a citizen of Ukraine is their most prevalent identity (72 per cent). Only 7 per cent of those surveyed defined themselves primarily by their Ukrainian ethnicity or nationality. ► FIGURE 8

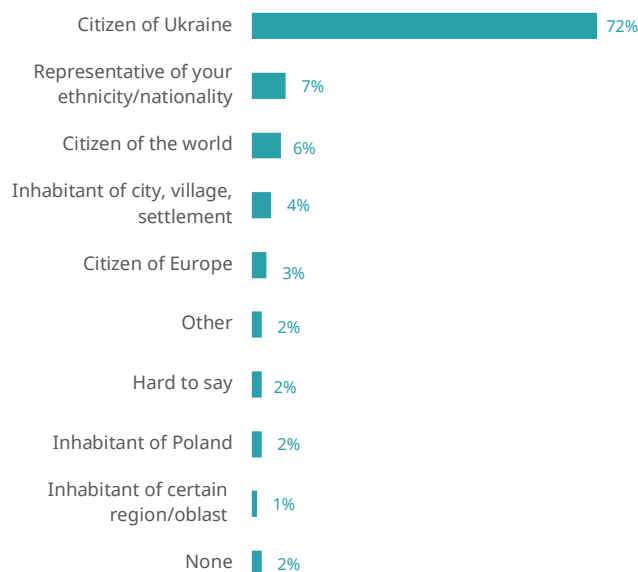
When asked what their national identity meant to them, about two-thirds of Ukrainians surveyed mentioned an emotional attachment to culture, music, or cuisine. ► FIGURE 9 Thus, questions about the term ‘national identity’ prompted a different set of answers compared to those about self-defined identity.

FIGURE 7
How did your use of language change after the full-scale invasion?



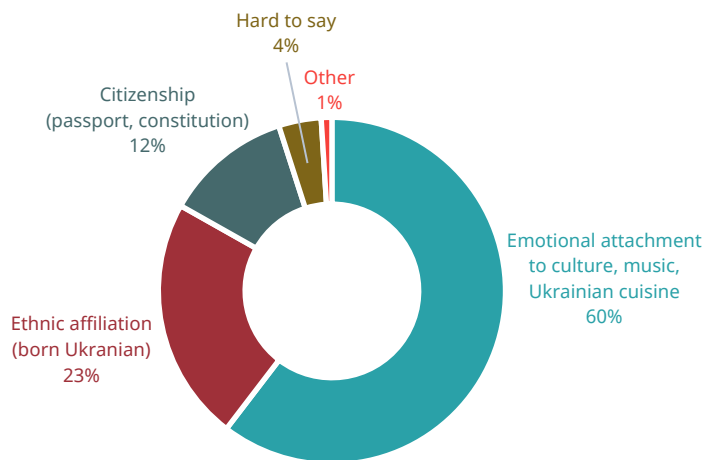
Source: Info Sapiens and IREX, Nov – Dec 2023, sample size: 321 Ukrainian refugees in Poland, aged 18 – 35

FIGURE 8
How do you primarily see yourself?



Source: Info Sapiens and IREX, Nov – Dec 2023, sample size: 321 Ukrainian refugees in Poland, aged 18 – 35

FIGURE 9

What does Ukrainian national identity mean to you?

Source: Info Sapiens and IREX, Nov – Dec 2023, sample size: 321 Ukrainian refugees in Poland, aged 18 – 35

When asked specifically about ethnicity and citizenship, Olena gave a nuanced answer that integrated both aspects:

„ The basis of my roots [is] Ukrainian roots, but I have never denied that my family is mixed with many ethnic groups, many ethnicities, yes, I have Poles, Greeks, Bulgarians, Tatars, and everyone else, and it is difficult to find a family in our territories that is purely, purely Ukrainian, that is, everyone has some other roots, and being a citizen of Ukraine is important to me. I mean, both are important to me, and to identify myself by ethnicity, the fact that I grew up in Ukraine and was brought up in Ukrainian culture is important to me first and foremost, and to be a citizen is [...] not just to love my Ukraine primitively, but to try to contribute something to its development through my activities, my life.

Engagement in Ukraine’s recovery

Throughout her interviews, Olena displayed a growing sense of urgency in wishing to play an active role in Ukraine’s recovery:

„ I’m just thinking more and more about the fact [...] that I want to use my knowledge and skills acquired here to help the country recover somehow. [...] Not that I’m pessimistic, but I think about how long we will be rebuilding this, and how many problems there are that are not known to change after this war, so that it would be easier for us, those who are here now, to just bring something new to our country. It will take a very, very long time.

She highlighted the important integrative function of the cultural sphere as part of Ukraine’s recovery:

„I understand perfectly well that this is not the first thing that money will be spent on. And how this will affect what is happening in this area in Ukraine, because I understand that there are people who are so enthusiastic, but a lot of young people, when they don't see any prospects in the near future, they can simply give up.

Olena carries out art projects with her former teacher at the art academy in Lviv and is realistic about her future engagement. She is clearly a positive person and may well express a wider feeling, shared by the Ukrainian youth in particular, of being committed to EU membership, playing an active part in speeding up this process and Ukraine's recovery, and, especially, correcting perceptions about Ukraine:

„I understand that we have a lot of work ahead of us, but there is still a lot of hope for positive changes, for us to become a full member of the European Union. [...] I especially hope for our young people, those who have left, just like I did, they represent our country to other countries. [...] I don't know who will return, who won't, who will use their opportunities, who won't. But if at least some of these people somehow transfer their experience gained abroad to Ukraine, not necessarily returning there themselves, but at least somehow cooperating, establishing some international contacts from their position, this will have a very, very positive impact on the development of all spheres in Ukraine.

‘We have a lot of work ahead of us, but there is still a lot of hope for positive changes.’

Viktor, ballroom dancer: ‘I don't want to build a life here’

Viktor is a young man who left Ukraine at the age of 17. He belongs to the ballroom community, a queer community that has developed in Ukraine in the last few years and has its roots in 1960s New York. It is a community of diverse genders and sexualities that originally came together to dance in a specific way, called voguing.¹⁴ Many other forms of dance and expressions of diversity have developed in recent decades. It is a well-connected community across Europe and internationally, forming a strong network and creating robust social relationships to support its members.¹⁵

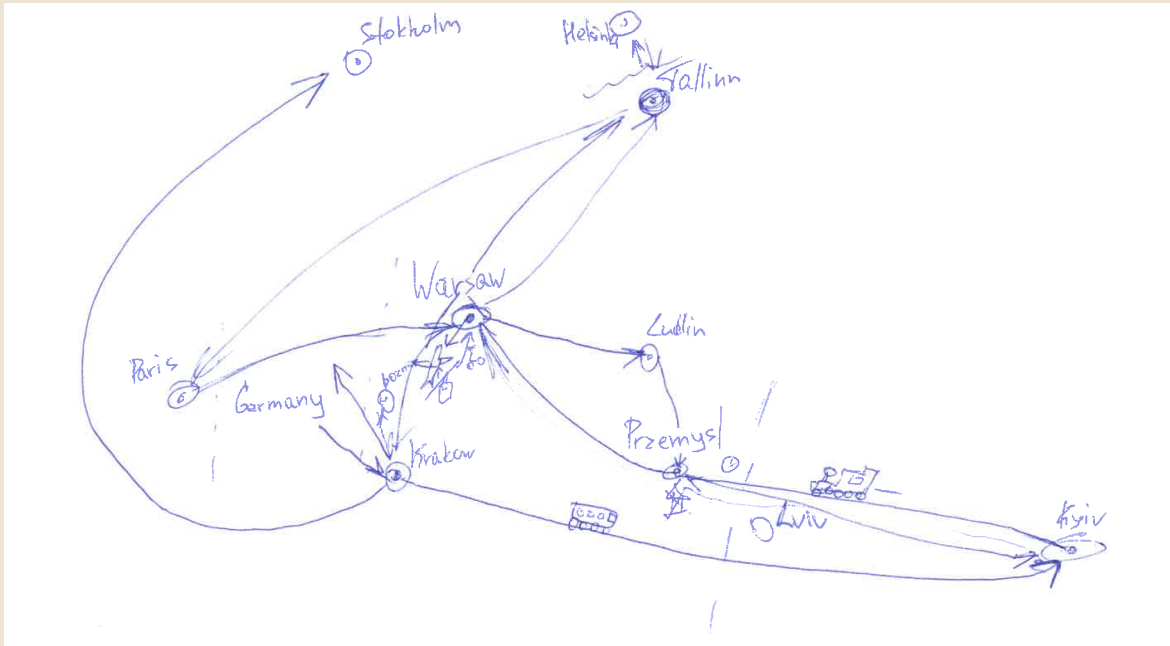
This is important background information to understand Viktor's motivation to leave, his journey to and settlement in Warsaw, and his perspective on the future. It becomes even more important when one considers that Ukraine and Poland are not among the leading supporters of LGBTQ+ rights.¹⁶ In his interviews, Viktor talked about the fact that he would not be able to leave Ukraine now as a young male, but he did not mention the issue of mobilisation, which has become a pressing issue in Ukraine and among displaced Ukrainians.

Deciding to leave and travelling across Europe

Viktor turned 18 in September 2022. The last time he visited Ukraine and his family and friends was a few days before his 18th birthday. He had left Ukraine five months earlier, in May 2022. After the Russian invasion, he had continued to study and, despite the war, started to follow a routine in Kyiv as much as possible: university, dancing training, ballroom competitions. He was living with his parents and two younger brothers. But his community

MENTAL MAP 3

A journey around Europe



Viktor's mental map depicts a trip around Europe. Even this detailed drawing does not include all 13 countries and the numerous places he visited before deciding to settle in Warsaw. He recalled, 'I knew right away that I was going to travel and I wasn't going to settle

somewhere specific. I mean, I would be travelling to these events as well. Because I wanted to export it all [to Ukraine], to study how it is there. And my first stop was to visit my friend, my best friend at the time, in Estonia.'

was dwindling, as many of his friends were leaving for different places in Europe.

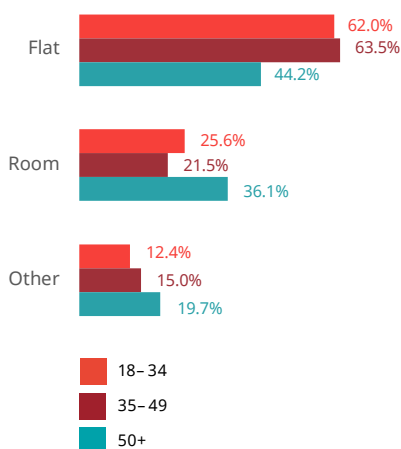
Viktor's drawing of his journey from leaving Ukraine to finally settling in Warsaw shows almost an odyssey of travelling and staying in different places with friends and at events of the ballroom community across Europe.

► **MENTAL MAP 3** He did this for about five months until September, when he realised that he needed a place to stay and a base to call home.

On this journey across Europe, he relied on himself, his friends, the ballroom community in places where he did not know anyone, and his family's financial support. He did not contact any local or Ukrainian community organisations to ask for help or to use their services. Although able to travel freely and be part of the European ballroom community, which was an important motivation for leaving Ukraine, Viktor suffered a lot mentally and decided to settle in one place after his 18th birthday:

„ I celebrated my birthday in Helsinki. I didn't celebrate, it was kind of hard. I had a breakdown mentally and so on, because a lot of things are f***ed up. For me, my birthday is an important holiday, and it's also my coming of age. It's kind of like that. Anyway, it was very sad.

FIGURE 10

What kind of housing do you currently live in?

Note: ‘Flat’ refers to a separate flat or house; ‘room’ refers to a room in a flat or house, with either other Ukrainians or locals; and ‘other’ refers to a dormitory or refugee centre, a hotel, resort, or boarding house, or any other type of housing.

Source: Info Sapiens global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees for CES, January 2024

Settling in Warsaw

Viktor opted for Warsaw as it seemed to be a good place in relation to Ukraine and cheaper than other places he had seen and visited. Warsaw has a considerable dance community, which he wanted to join. The biggest stress for him was finding a place to live. After living with friends and in temporary places for a year, in September 2023 he was able to rent a flat with a Pole who is an acquaintance from the ballroom community. Among young displaced Ukrainians worldwide, over 60 per cent live in a flat or house, while a quarter have a room in a shared flat or house. ► **FIGURE 10** Viktor reported having experienced discrimination in the housing market, as Polish landlords often refuse to rent to Ukrainians:

„And then [the landlord] tells me another story from his life. He says, ‘Yesterday a couple came over. A Polish guy. He was with a girl. And I found out later that the girl was Ukrainian. And I said, “Sorry, I’m not going to rent her an apartment because she’s from Ukraine.””

Losing touch with Kyiv but staying detached from Warsaw

Viktor’s displacement is a temporary situation for him, although he does not know when it will end. He put it very well in his second interview, and this continued to be an important theme in all subsequent interviews:

„Yeah, I have everything in Kyiv and the fact that I’m in Warsaw, I have nothing, it’s temporary. That’s why I’m kind of relaxed, because I understand that I’ll be back. [...] I mean, I don’t want to build a life here [...] So, yeah, I’m waiting. That’s it. Well, yes, I can only see myself in Ukraine.

Viktor was indifferent to where he was living and repeated in the interviews that he felt like a welcome guest but not at home. He chose Poland for pragmatic reasons: it was cheaper, and many of his friends from the ballroom community were based there. ‘I don’t feel like I’m in Warsaw. I’m just living, that’s all. I am not really tied to a place. I’m tied to it because that’s where I live and that’s where most of the ballrooms and events are,’ he said.

Viktor explained that he did not take advantage of the financial and social support available in Poland, including from the Ukrainian community there, but received financial support from his parents. Over 40 per cent of young displaced Ukrainians worldwide do not currently receive any assistance. ► **FIGURE 11**

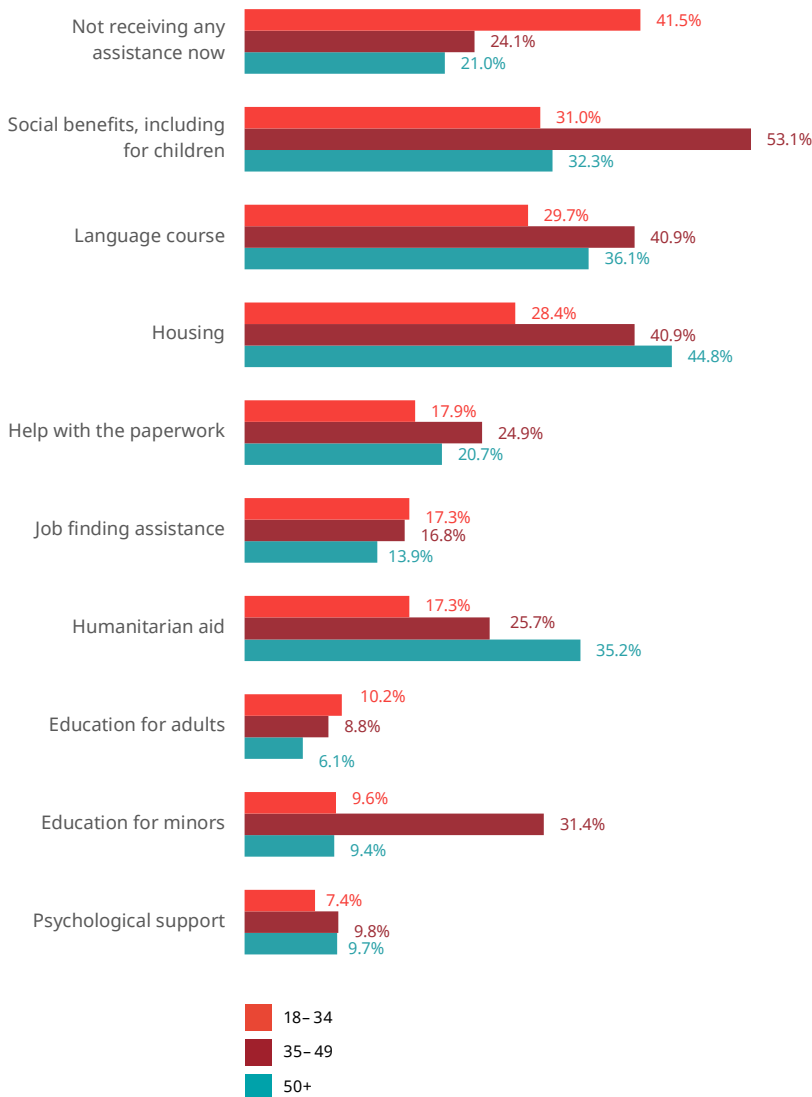
Viktor is waiting for the war to be over and martial law to end so he can return to Kyiv to continue his life, although he never mentions this directly. At the same time, he feels an increasing distance from his community and network in Kyiv, in part because staying in touch with people from Ukraine depends on meeting them in other places. ‘In Kyiv I know that everything is my own, and here [in Warsaw] it’s familiar, but I still know that it’s not my own.’

Viktor’s social contacts are diminishing with his friends in Ukraine and strengthening with the international ballroom community, but his ties are still mainly with Ukrainians who left and are now in Poland or other countries. He is basically not integrated into Polish society and does not want to be. He knows Poles, but his Polish social network is limited to the ballroom community, which means he is not dependent on his location.

‘Here it’s familiar, but I still know that it’s not my own.’

However, Viktor does have a Polish electronic registration number, which is required for anybody who wants to stay in Poland for more than two months. This registration allows Ukrainians to stay for 18 months, study, use medical services, and work. As a Ukrainian refugee, Viktor is entitled to a monthly allowance of 300 zloty (\$75), which he does not use. After nine months in Poland, he can apply for a temporary residence permit to stay in Poland for another three years, which he is considering. He is learning Polish online. Asked what his expectations are, he replied that he wanted to be left alone by Poland: ‘Don’t bother me and don’t fine me,’ he said, laughing, in reference to being caught on a tram in Warsaw without a ticket. ‘I’m like that. I’m used to doing everything with my own efforts, roughly speaking, or my parents.’

FIGURE 11
Which of the following types of support do you receive in your host country?
 (Select all options that apply.)



Note: Some options with low numbers of responses are not shown.

Source: Info Sapiens global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees for CES, January 2024

Personal development and financial situation

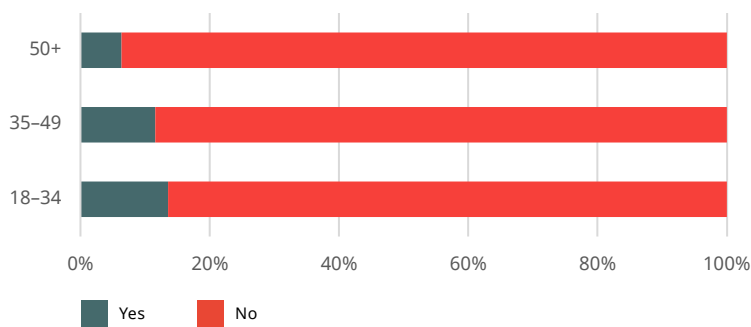
Being a young Ukrainian displaced without his parents has had a huge impact on Viktor’s personal development. During the interviews, Viktor reflected on how his trajectory has affected him:

„ It has made me more independent, more responsible. Because a year ago, when I was just travelling, I was such a child. [...] I grew up a lot because of it. [...] Well, with my parents, in case of emergency, I was almost completely independent, but if something happened, there was always someone to turn to. Here there is in principle, but not physically.

Viktor’s parents continue to send him money to support him. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of displaced Ukrainians worldwide in all age groups do not receive financial assistance from relatives in Ukraine. ► FIGURE 12 At the same time, Viktor struggles with his parents from a distance, which is normal at this stage in life. He would like to be more independent but finds it difficult to do so:

„ I want to separate myself from my family a little bit. Because now I’m keeping [in touch with them] just because they often help me financially. But I wouldn’t want to. My father is a misogynist, my mother is something else. The kids have been pissing me off for a long time, my brothers.

FIGURE 12
Do you receive financial assistance from relatives in Ukraine?



Source: Info Sapiens global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees for CES, January 2024

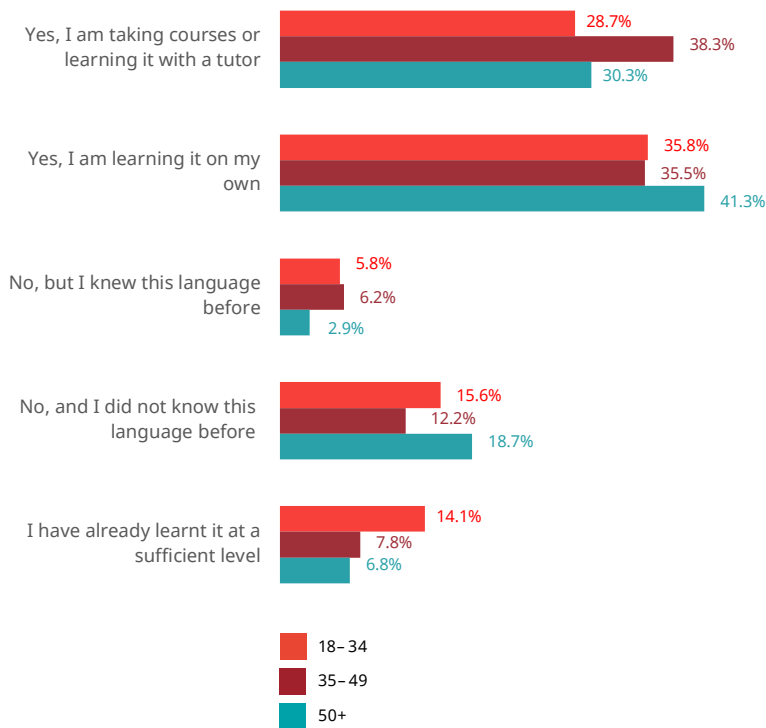
Work and education

As Viktor has a strong intention to return to Ukraine after the war ends, he has decided not to study in Poland or become too familiar with the place. He started choreography studies in Kyiv during the Covid-19 pandemic but does not want to continue online, preferring to study in person, perhaps after returning to Ukraine.

Viktor is looking for job opportunities, but as he has not finished his education in Ukraine, he does not have any qualifications. ‘It’s hard to find a job without an education,’ he said. He is also taking courses in project management and the Polish language to improve his job prospects. Globally, almost

65 per cent of displaced Ukrainians aged 18–34 are learning the language of their host country, with even higher figures for older age groups. ► **FIGURE 13** Viktor’s job search has so far been unsuccessful. He is looking for a position with hybrid working, as his life revolves around competing in ballroom competitions across Europe, which is a big part of his identity. But this requires money. He is in constant economic uncertainty. But again, the local community helps as he gives dance workshops and training from time to time to earn some money.

FIGURE 13
Are you studying the language of your host country?



Source: Info Sapiens global survey of 1,009 Ukrainian refugees for CES, January 2024

Identity

The war has accelerated the formation of Viktor’s identity. While he spoke Russian with his friends and family before February 2022, he started speaking Ukrainian immediately afterwards. He not only criticises the presence of Russians in the ballroom community but has also become an activist in opposing the use of the Russian language. As a result, he switches to English when someone speaks to him in Russian. There are very few people in his circle of friends with whom he tolerates Russian. ‘I trash Russian speakers and I am not ashamed of it,’ he said.

When Viktor talks about Ukrainian identity, he makes a distinction between being a Ukrainian citizen because he has a Ukrainian passport and being a ‘conscious Ukrainian’ citizen. He sees himself as belonging to the latter group:

While Viktor spoke Russian with his friends and family before February 2022, he started speaking Ukrainian immediately afterwards.

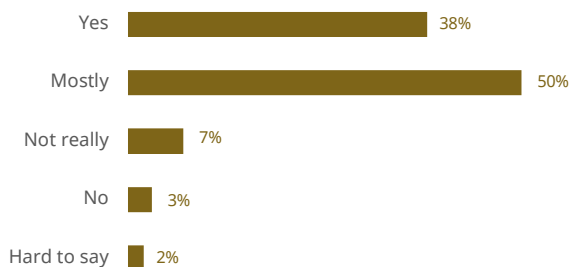
‘To be a Ukrainian is to have Ukrainian citizenship. [...] Another thing is to be a patriot.’

„ Well, in fact, to be a Ukrainian is to have Ukrainian citizenship. [...] Another thing is to be a patriot and a conscious Ukrainian there. This is clear. Understanding history, culture, values, and so on. That is, if you defend Russian-speaking Ukrainians, you are not a conscious Ukrainian, you are a Ukrainian. You have a Ukrainian passport. Maybe you even speak Ukrainian. But you do not have this consciousness, you are not a conscious Ukrainian. Or you are not a patriot. Or you don't hate Russians.

The notion of patriotism resonates strongly with a majority of young Ukrainians in Poland: 88 per cent of young Ukrainian refugees in Poland surveyed describing themselves as either patriots or leaning towards patriotism. ► FIGURE 14 Interestingly, Viktor is becoming politically aware in a way that he did not consider himself to be before. Although he has not taken part in any protests or marches, he has signed petitions and raised money at an event he organised.

The ballroom community is organised into houses, which compete against each other in competitions. The community states that it is not political and welcomes Russian citizens as anybody else. Yet, Viktor has become a very strong critic of Russians' participation in competitions and the community. He would not enter a ballroom dancing house if there were Russians in it.

FIGURE 14
Do you consider yourself a patriot?



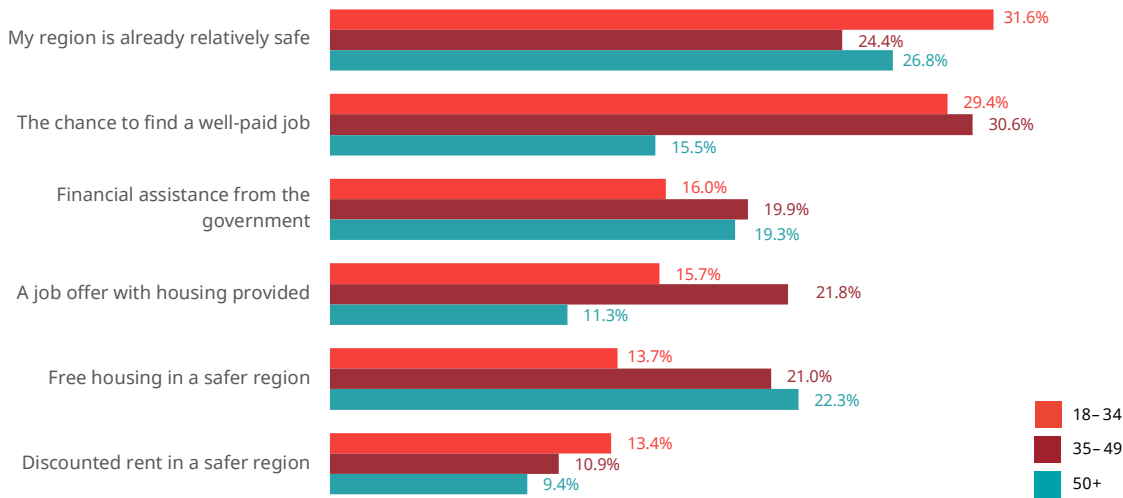
Source: Info Sapiens and IREX, Nov – Dec 2023, Sample Size 321 Ukrainian refugees in Poland, aged 18 – 35

Viktor's future and Ukraine's future

From the beginning of Viktor's interviews, his main reason for leaving Ukraine was that as a man he could not travel freely: 'The main problem is probably that I can't leave, and that really holds me back. [...] I understand that it would be much easier for me to build my life in Kyiv.' He did not say that he feared mobilisation, although he sometimes said that the war must end so that he can return and travel freely. In surveys, displaced Ukrainians worldwide gave a number of conditions under which they might return home, one of which was an end to the war. ► FIGURES 15 + 16 Viktor is aware of the difficult economic situation in Ukraine and the fact that it would be difficult to make a living there. But that does not stop him. His main concern is to be able to leave the country to be part of his community across Europe and the world.

FIGURE 15

Under what conditions would you consider returning to a safer region of Ukraine than your home region?
(Select all options that apply.)

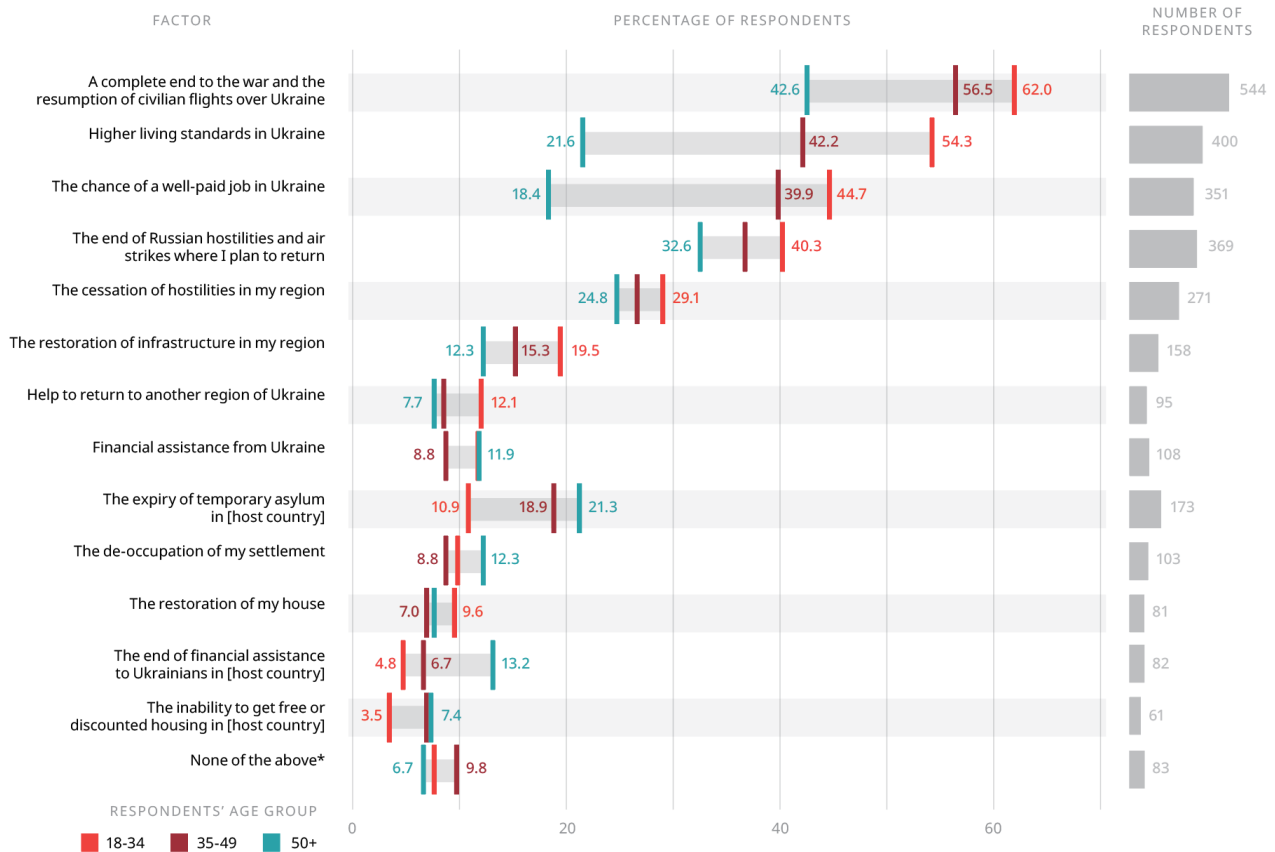


Note: Some options with low numbers of responses are not shown.

Source: Info Sapiens survey for CES, January 2024

FIGURE 16

Which factors might encourage you to return to Ukraine? (Select all options that apply.)



Note: Some options with low numbers of responses are not shown.

Source: Info Sapiens survey for CES, January 2024

Viktor's creativity shapes his priorities when it comes to Ukraine's recovery. In particular, he believes that the cultural scene—heritage, museums, and theatres—needs to be rebuilt and developed as something that keeps people and society going. His contribution would be to support and develop the ballroom community in Ukraine and link it to the international community. This perspective shows that groups like the LGBTQ+ community have to find their place to contribute to Ukraine's recovery. LGBTQ+ individuals still do not enjoy full rights in Ukraine, and no previous government has been particularly supportive of the community.¹⁷

Groups like the LGBTQ+ community have to find their place to contribute to Ukraine's recovery.

That said, Viktor was very positive about Ukraine's future and was convinced of his own role in it: 'I know that this will be a chapter, I know that I will participate in the future of Ukraine, I know that Ukraine will participate in my future, I just want it as soon as possible.'

His vision for his personal future and that of Ukraine became visible in his depiction of Ukraine and neighbouring countries. ► **MENTAL MAP 4** We asked him to draw Ukraine and its neighbours and mark them with colours or other symbols to show the relations between them.

MENTAL MAP 4

Ukraine and its neighbours



Viktor's map shows not only Ukraine's direct neighbours but also many other countries where his friends live and where he is connected to the ballroom community. He chose the colours carefully, with brighter shades for countries with which he has positive associations. Only Russia and Belarus he drew in black, while Hungary, Romania, and Moldova appear in dark blue. He described these countries as nice places but difficult for different reasons, some of them political.

Conclusions

The two case studies presented in this ZOiS Report highlight the many decisions that young displaced Ukrainians are having to make. Knowledge about their motivations for leaving Ukraine, the ways they settle in a new place and rebuild their lives, and their aspirations to return or not is essential for understanding their needs and the prospects of their involvement in Ukraine's recovery.¹⁸

Both examples show that displaced young Ukrainians can develop reliable social networks that enable them to settle into their new places of residence. In both case studies, the networks the two individuals have built are closely linked to their personal development and their education or career. Their links to friends in Ukraine are getting weaker, while their family connections remain strong, and their local and transnational networks of other displaced Ukrainians and/or locals are growing.

In terms of the displaced youth's integration into their host communities, continued higher education proves to be a path towards integration, while an incomplete education, a lack of opportunities to adapt and continue education, and a lack of work experience can be obstacles to integration. Flexible education schemes can be an ad hoc solution and should be a general policy priority in host countries and at the EU level, as such schemes enable young people to develop and find a job.¹⁹ Individual time horizons vary, but the two case studies in this report show vividly that young people's futures can accelerate and be on hold at the same time as a result of their displacement.

Both individuals in this study are keen to be an active part of Ukraine's recovery, but on different timelines. While Viktor stated that he would return immediately if he could travel freely (and, by implication, not face the possibility of being mobilised), regardless of the economic, infrastructural, and educational devastation of his country. Given the restrictions on male citizens, he connects his future with that of postwar Ukraine. Olena, meanwhile, is focused on her professional creative career, which she recognises she can build outside Ukraine. She returns to Ukraine occasionally and is driven by the idea of contributing to the development of Ukraine's cultural scene. Despite their different timelines, both young people want to apply their individual experience, knowledge, and passion, all of which have evolved during their displacement, to Ukraine's recovery. In both cases, the two individuals' focus is on the development of the cultural sphere, which has been a less prominent topic in debates about recovery, although the Ukrainian government's Ukraine Plan mentions it prominently as a way to maintain social cohesion.²⁰

Both individuals in this study are keen to be an active part of Ukraine's recovery, but on different timelines.

More generally, young Ukrainians share a strong commitment to playing an active role in Ukraine's recovery, but their ideas about how to do so vary considerably. Some are in a holding pattern, waiting for the possibility to return, while others are making their lives and careers abroad and want to have a stake in Ukraine's recovery from there. This divergence mirrors an increasingly tangible split in intentions to return. An April 2024 poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology among displaced Ukrainians of all ages in the Czech Republic, Germany, and Poland identified a turning point: roughly 50 per cent are currently thinking of returning to Ukraine, while the other 50 per cent lean towards staying abroad.²¹

It helps to think of young Ukrainians as sending social, political, and possibly economic remittances to Ukraine.

The policy challenge for Ukraine and its international partners is to enable the active involvement both of young Ukrainians who return and of those who remain abroad, rather than assume the large-scale return of young people based on a narrow definition of human capital. It helps to think of young Ukrainians as sending social, political, and possibly economic remittances to Ukraine, irrespective of whether they return, stay abroad, or circulate between different locations.

The survey data included in this ZOIS Report help describe general trends at certain moments in time. However, percentages cannot explain individual and social contexts. Longitudinal data allow for an understanding of the personal decisions people make in their own specific circumstances, and of the implications of these decisions over time. Following individual trajectories deepens and enhances prior knowledge of displacement and brings to life the heterogeneous experiences of those displaced.

Taken together, the contextual data and a deeper understanding of the situations, choices, and agency of specific displaced individuals highlight issues that have not been at the centre of policy-making or public debates about displacement. This approach also underlines the need for greater awareness of the development of particular displaced generations based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data.

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Authors

Sabine v. Löwis, Gwendolyn Sasse, Inna Volosevych,
in collaboration with Ivaylo Dinev

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Address

**Centre for East European and
International Studies (ZOiS) gGmbH**
Mohrenstraße 60
10117 Berlin
info@zois-berlin.de
www.zois-berlin.de

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