

Ukraine Working Group

2025



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This document presents policy recommendations for the effective post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, developed as part of the **Ukraine Working Group 2025**. The policies are organized into three thematic categories: Security, Economic Development, and Humanitarian Needs. All policy memos are addressed to the Ukrainian government.

The **Ukraine Working Group 2025** is a fully student-led, nonpartisan, and voluntary initiative. The contributing authors are undergraduate and graduate students from George Washington University, Georgetown University, and Sciences Po Paris. The information presented is based on open-source materials considered reliable at the time of writing.

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Security

Deterring Russia Without Binding Security Guarantees from Western Powers — William Zadeskey

Executive Summary

This policy memo presents a multifaceted strategy to successfully deter Russia and prevent another full-scale invasion. Ukraine must rely on its large, technologically superior military and display high morale to deter Russia. These actions will demonstrate that Ukraine has the capabilities and will to successfully defend itself and inflict severe harm on Russia. While a European deterrence force in Ukraine will contribute to deterring Moscow, Ukraine cannot rely on this force. The presence of American business interests provides little deterrence value in the short-term, increasing the need for a strong Ukrainian military.

Background: Three Aspects of Successful Deterrence

Michael Mazarr, a senior political scientist at RAND, provides three Fundamental Conditions for successful deterrence:

1. Low aggressor motivation
2. Clear consequences for aggression
3. Aggressor must believe that the defender has the **capabilities** and **will** to carry out these threats ([Mazarr 2018](#))

By fulfilling these three criteria, a defender can adequately deter conflict from an aggressor. The most crucial aspect of this strategy is creating the perception that the defender has the will and capacity to carry out its threats ([Schelling 2020](#)). This policy memo focuses on creating the perception that Ukraine will adequately and severely respond to Russian aggression.

Analysis

Ukraine Has Favorable Conditions to Deter Russia

Kyiv can deter Russia by creating the perception within Russia that Ukraine cannot be defeated. Russia's motivation for full-scale war will be lowered, given its failure to conquer Ukraine. Kyiv will need to publicly establish clear consequences for Russian aggression. Finally, by maintaining its large, lethal, and technologically superior military and demonstrating national morale, Ukraine can convince the Russian people and military leadership that Ukraine is united, determined, and unconquerable.

Deterrence Capabilities of the Ukrainian Military

Ukraine has several advantages that will allow it to deter Russia: the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU) are far stronger than in 2014 or 2022, Kyiv's Western and domestic military technology is superior to Russia's largely Soviet-equipped force, and the ZSU has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to repel Russian offensives and inflict large casualties.

Convince Russia of Ukraine's Strength Using Public Displays of Morale, Readiness, and Unity

Convincing Russian leaders and society that Ukraine has adequate defense capabilities is crucial to deterring Russia. Public displays of high national morale, military readiness, and national political unity will contribute to creating the perception that Ukraine cannot be defeated.

Visible military exercises that project readiness will demonstrate Ukraine's military strength and national unity. The major parties in the *Verkhovna Rada* can agree to a shared foreign policy to ensure that Russia cannot create divisions in Ukrainian domestic politics and demonstrate Ukrainian unity on the world stage. Ukraine must continue and expand its successful efforts to reach the Russian audience. Combined, these measures will help convince the Russian public and military leaders that war with Ukraine is unwinnable.

Limited Deterrence Power of European Forces in Ukraine

A European force in Ukraine will provide limited deterrence value because Russia will not believe that Europe will fight on behalf of Ukraine. Europe's reluctance to provide advanced weapon systems and offer clear security guarantees has demonstrated to Russia that Europe prefers to avoid a direct confrontation. Survey data from May 2024 indicates broad European opposition to fighting in Ukraine, particularly in Ukraine's top European allies: 66% opposition in Great Britain, 69% in France and 81% in Germany ([Krastev and Leonard 2024](#)).

European forces may withdraw when given a Russian ultimatum, given this widespread opposition. Similarly, a pro-Russian party may come to power in a key European country, such as France or Germany, and withdraw their forces, weakening the deterrence coalition. European reluctance to provide binding commitments to Ukraine's defense and directly confront Russia undermines the effectiveness of the "Reassurance Force."

Beware Implied American "Security Guarantees"

The implied American security guarantees generated by U.S. business interests in Ukraine offer no practical deterrence value. It will take many years to establish the deep business and economic ties that the Trump administration asserts would provide a tacit reason for the United States to preserve Ukrainian sovereignty.

Recommended Deterrence Policy

1. Deter using the size, technological superiority, and proven capabilities of the ZSU;
2. Demonstrate Ukrainian morale and unity to convince Russia it cannot defeat Ukraine:
 - a. Hold highly-choreographed military parades and drills;
 - a. Have leaders of major parties in the *Verkhovna Rada* agree to pursue a multi-partisan foreign policy, centered on hindering Russia's ability to exploit divisions in Ukrainian politics;
 - a. Continue covert and overt campaign to influence Russian public opinion;
2. Avoid becoming reliant on European armies as a deterrence force and on American business interests as an implicit security guarantee.

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Ukraine's Military Reconstruction Plan — Carter Johnston

Executive Summary

In the post-war environment, Ukraine must rebuild its military in a way that would ensure strategic deterrence and allow Ukraine to quickly respond in the event of an attack. This policy memo presents the steps that Ukraine must take to achieve this goal. The policy recommendations focus on Ukraine's Air Force, Ground Force, and Ground-Based Air Defense. They represent the most ideal circumstances for the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU) in the post-war era, in which economic growth allows for continued spending on defense materials.

Background: Rebuilding for Deterrence

Ukraine must focus its military rebuilding on resilience, advanced technology, and strategic deterrence, instead of matching adversaries in raw numbers. By leveraging Western support, strengthening domestic defense industries, and maintaining a highly mobile, well-trained military force, Ukraine can create a hard-hitting, highly lethal force that ensures long-term security, as well as the ability to deter and to defend against adversaries.

To sustain a force capable of such deterrence, Ukraine must look to its domestic industry, strengthening its defense industrial base to spur economic growth in a post-war environment that will be replete with experienced veterans, while also rebuilding its military. Combined with focused and intentional acquisition efforts, this approach will result in a stronger, more lethal ZSU.

Analysis

Ukraine's Air Force: Tip of the Spear

Ukraine must rebuild its Air Force around the following five principles: Lethality, Survivability, Dispersal Effectiveness, Multirole Capabilities, and Maintainability and Opportunities for Local Industry. As such, Ukraine must look to divest its entire inventory of Soviet-era aircraft through the purchase of additional inventory of F-16 Fighting Falcon multirole aircraft.

An inventory of F-16 Fighting Falcon multirole aircraft presents the following advantages:

1. A versatile weapon load including long-range standoff weapons and counter-UAS missiles, for adaptable roles and quick turnaround times in combat. ([Command Database, 2025](#))
2. Significantly lower airframe operating costs as compared to alternatives such as JAS-39C Gripen. ([DOD Comptroller, 2022](#))
3. A larger variety of upgrades when compared to alternative platforms like the Eurofighter Typhoon
4. Superior avionics when compared to recently delivered Mirage 2000Cs or legacy Mig-29MU1s and Su-27UB1Ms. ([Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, 2025](#))
5. Multi-function datalink buses that integrate with ground-based air defenses, improving situational awareness for ground crews fighting against incoming threats. ([West Point University, 2022](#))
6. Current second-hand F-16 airframes are significantly cheaper than alternative platforms and can be life-extended through ‘kit modernizations’ provided to Ukraine. ([DSCA, 2024](#))
7. Avionics upgrades can be delivered as ‘kits’, allowing Ukraine’s domestic industry to employ workers in the overhaul of airframes to modern specs, aiding in economic recovery while improving the lethality of Ukraine’s Air Force. ([Defense News, 2023](#))

Ukraine’s Ground Force: Designed for Logistics and Lethality

In the post-war environment, Ukraine must opt for a highly mobile force and reduce the range of vehicles in operation due to associated logistical costs. This mobile force must be supported by a robust fire support backbone from multiple sources, such as artillery, aircraft, and front-line forces. Ukraine must center its military around distributed mobile lethality to quickly respond to adversary movements with the help of mobile forces. A larger structure of heavy armor and mechanized infantry brigades would provide heavy-hitting maneuver forces for the exploitation of weak front lines.

Ukraine must also consider acquiring rifle fire control systems. These systems would provide force multiplication and unparalleled lethality to the SV ZSU’s infantry, as they require minimal training and enable operators to hit infantry targets or FPV drones without prior experience ([Smartshooter, 2025](#)).

Artillery remains the pacing threat from Russia. Therefore, Ukraine must cooperate with European allies to improve Research Development Test & Evaluation (RDT&E) time from concept to Early Operational Capability (EOC). Long-range acoustic detection of cruise missiles and one-way attack unmanned aerial systems (OWA-UAS) is possible and should be pursued ([The War Zone, 2024](#)). Such an approach would save lives in the event of an attack and would improve military reconnaissance and targeting capabilities.

Additionally, Ukraine can become the hub of European ammunition production through mutual cooperation with major European defense firms that produce raw ammunition, including 155mm and 105mm shells, 120mm and 125mm tank rounds, 5.56mm, 7.62mm, and 9mm small arms rounds, as well as other specialized solid rocket motors for the European supply chain.

Protecting the Skies: Ground-Based Air Defense In Future Force Design

The backbone of the PS ZSU included hundreds of batteries of ground-based air defense (GBAD) systems prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022 ([Key Aero, 2022](#)).

These systems remain the first line of defense against a wide range of aerial threats, even with Western aid and inventories of Soviet-era 5V55 and 9M38/9M317 surface-to-air missiles that were at critically low levels as of January 2025 ([New York Times, 2023](#)). Ukraine must reconsider its approach regarding additional acquisition of ABM-oriented batteries—specifically Patriot—due to high cost and limited availability ([Defence UA, 2025](#)). Instead, Ukraine must supplement their role with more cost-effective European systems in a joint venture that can yield better results. French-Italian SAMP/T systems can provide combat-proven anti-ballistic missile coverage to Ukraine at a cheaper cost of around \$2,000,000 per interceptor, compared to the Patriot’s PAC-3 Missile Segment Enhancement (MSE)’s \$4,200,000 price tag ([Missile Defense Advocacy, 2024](#)). SAMP/T provides similar capabilities to Patriot, allowing Ukraine’s PAC-3 Patriot batteries to specialize in the defense of cities against high-end Russian threats like Kinzhal, Zircon, and Iskander-M.

Ukraine must also pursue the family of NASAMS-3 for national airspace coverage. SAMP/T should not provide the baseline level of air defense coverage due to its high cost and high-end capability. NASAMS-3 provides highly effective and proven systems in a greater European-centric family of systems for the cruise missile defense (CMD) role. These platforms offer cheaper interceptors in larger numbers, with more capable, dispersed fire control systems. NASAMS-3 offers a wide range of launcher and command vehicles for tailored missions for Ukraine’s airspace, including highly mobile Norwegian-developed HMMWVs capable of performing cruise missile defense roles as a maneuverable platform. This should be a priority for acquisition due to its cheap cost relative to other systems of the same family and caliber ([Kongsberg, 2022](#)), ([RTX, 2025](#)). Legacy systems, such as S-300PMU and S-300P should be retired on a 1:1 basis for each new battery introduced into service.

Policy Recommendations

1. Diversify Air Force inventory with the F-16 Fighting Falcon multirole aircraft.
2. Develop a highly mobile force through:
 - a. Acquisition of rifle fire control systems;
 - b. Continued development of long-range acoustic detection of cruise missiles and OWA-UAS through cooperation with European allies;
 - c. Partner with major European defense firms that produce raw ammunition;
3. Redesign ground-based air defense through:
 - a. Replacement of ABM-oriented batteries, Patriot, purchases with more cost-effective European systems in a joint venture;
 - b. National airspace coverage with NASAMS-3 systems;
 - c. Retirement of legacy systems on a 1:1 basis for each new battery.

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Drone Warfare and The Spider's Web — Matteo Allen

Executive Summary

Over the next 3–5 years, Ukraine must prioritize the development of a robust, cost-effective, and lethal drone force to deter future Russian incursions. Such an effort will require the comprehensive integration of advanced detection systems, cost-effective short-

and long-range One-Way Attack (OWA) drones, large-scale production of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), as well as the establishment of a sophisticated logistical infrastructure.

Background: An Evolution of Drone Warfare

Over the past three years of combat, the frontline has shifted from a conventional battlefield dominated by tanks and artillery to a chaotic storm of unmanned systems. Nearly 70% of frontline casualties are now caused by drones ([Santora 2025](#)). Ukraine has announced plans to produce nearly four million drones this year ([Axe 2025](#)). These range from highly advanced, long-range guided weapons to swarms of small, cheaply made First-Person View (FPV) One-Way Attack (OWA) drones ([Peleschuk 2025](#)). Capable of decimating both troops and armored vehicles, drones have become central to Ukraine's defense: their ability to overwhelm anti-aircraft defenses and evade detection may prove to be Ukraine's great equalizer.

Analysis

Requirements for an Effective Ukrainian Drone Program

1. It must be a homegrown and built in-house program.
 - a. This will allow Ukraine to dictate the terms of engagement.
2. It must be cost effective with the Ukrainian defense budget.
3. It must effectively cover the potentially 2500+ km frontline. ([Institute for the Study Of War](#))
 - a. This assumes a restoration of the pre-2022 Ukrainian border; This value may vary based upon the outcome of the current conflict, but will invariably be a substantial distance.
4. It must provoke legitimate fear and caution in the Russian military and government.
 - a. Deterrence is a mental game.

Layered Drone-Based Border Defense

To achieve deterrence, Ukraine must implement a combined-force drone program. This "spider's web" of detection and threat elimination will be a key component of future Ukrainian defense.

The first stage of deterrence along the Russian border is detection, achieved by establishing a buffer zone of complete awareness. This involves the use of various UAV detection techniques. Within approximately 1 km of the border, small-scale thermal imaging-equipped, automated detection drones should be deployed. These must be outfitted with Ukrainian-programmed detection software capable of identifying threats ranging from individual soldiers to armored columns. This technology is comparable to the target acquisition systems of modern attack helicopters and main battle tanks but would function on a smaller scale ([Pearson Threat Detection 2025](#)). Upon identifying a threat, the drone must relay information to human-operated reconnaissance headquarters. To this end, these drones must be inexpensive, expendable, and made from plastic and fiberglass, enabling widespread distribution.

Between 1–10 km from the border lies the second zone of defense. A smaller number of medium-range reconnaissance UAVs must verify threats by transmitting live data to

human-operated stations. Drone deployment sites within this zone should house fleets of OWA drones, similar to commercial models already in service. These drones must be inexpensive (excluding munitions), forming a “kill zone” to eliminate confirmed threats. Small FPV OWA drones must be guided by reconnaissance inputs, with one operator managing multiple drones via organizational software similar to that used in drone light shows. This second zone should also include heavy bomber drones, such as Ukraine’s “vampire” drone, based in bunkers or deployment sites ([Army Recognition](#)). Overall, these assets would be highly reactive, difficult to detect, and thus capable of engaging remaining targets.

The overarching surveillance layer should consist of a limited number of larger, more advanced UAVs, comparable to the U.S.-made MQ-9 Reaper ([Air Force MQ-9](#)). These drones must monitor the entire detection area and relay threat data to command points. Such an integrated network would allow Ukraine to rapidly identify and respond to threats, serving as a targeting platform for artillery and precision weapons, and fostering a sense of constant surveillance among potential Russian aggressors.

Logistical Infrastructure and Government Coordination

This multi-layered system would require an extensive support network of drone repair and service stations, along with reconnaissance hubs behind the frontline. Given the Ukrainian economy’s demonstrated ability to scale private drone production, industrial efforts should remain in the hands of private companies. However, Ukraine should also establish a government body under the Ministry of Defense to coordinate across manufacturers and manage manufacturing decisions such as setting production rates for specific drone models. Additionally, this body should oversee the training of drone operators, repair technicians, and handlers, potentially functioning as an almost-independent military branch focused on drone warfare.

Risks and Strategic Impact

This program comes with risks. It will be costly, though cheaper than investing in traditional weapons systems, and could require up to 10% of the Ukrainian defense budget over 3–5 years ([Harmash 2025](#)). It will also be complex, demanding significant investment in training and logistics. Additionally, the “spider’s web” remains vulnerable to Electronic Warfare (EW). Although the goal is to build a deep and resilient enough network against EW, this will always remain a dynamic operational challenge.

Nonetheless, the creation of this “spider’s web” defense system, supported by robust logistics, would give Ukraine the first formidable drone-based border defense in modern warfare. It would be reactive, adaptable, lethal, and cost-effective, thus operational around the clock in all weather conditions. In the event of another Russian incursion, such a system could cause hesitation and increase the cost of aggression for Moscow.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Over the next 3–5 years, Ukraine should prioritize the development of a comprehensive drone deterrence force, incorporating unmanned detection systems,

swarms of bomber and First-Person View (FPV) One-Way Attack (OWA) drones, and layered reconnaissance networks;

2. Ukraine should allocate 5–10% of its annual defense budget to drone production, the creation of a centralized government body to oversee manufacturing and training, and the continued advancement of innovative software for unmanned combat systems;
3. Drones represent a strategic equalizer for Ukraine and must serve as a cornerstone of future military deterrence planning;
4. **Risks:** This program will be costly, require significant time to implement, and remain vulnerable to Electronic Warfare (EW) systems.

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Economic Development

Creation of a Strong and Resilient Energy System in Ukraine — Oleksandra Pashkina

Executive Summary

Ukraine must modernize and restructure its energy grid to strengthen energy security and enhance resilience, as well as to enable rapid responses to fluctuations in demand. Ensuring the security of Ukraine's energy system begins with protecting infrastructure, securing supply chains, and developing robust transmission, distribution, and storage networks. To achieve long-term sustainability and competitiveness, Ukraine should also align its energy market design with European Union standards.

Background

Since the start of the war on February 24, 2022, Russia has been constantly targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure, which led to long hours of blackouts in Ukrainian cities. By April 2023, the Ukrainian power system had lost nearly half its available production capacity ([United Nations, 2024](#)). Additionally, 45% of autotransformers were damaged, which led to significant disruptions to the distribution of electricity to the civilian population ([United Nations, 2024](#)). In the period between 22 March and 31 August 2024, the Russian Federation launched nine waves of long-range and large-scale coordinated attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure ([United Nations, 2024](#)). Russia continues targeting Ukrainian infrastructure with missiles every day. Before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ukraine generated half of its electricity from nuclear power, followed by thermal power (including coal-fired plants that corresponded to about 23% and gas-fired plants at 9%), ([International Energy Agency, 2024](#)). Ukraine also depended on imports for around 83% of its oil consumption, 33% of natural gas, and 50% of coal ([International Energy Agency, 7, 2020](#)). The remaining electricity generation was achieved through renewables. Therefore, Ukraine must develop a resilient energy supply system that reduces dependence on foreign actors.

Analysis

Securing Ukraine's Energy Future

The war exposed a high vulnerability of the energy market in Ukraine. Ukraine must create a secure and resilient energy system that can quickly respond to any emergencies without reliance on foreign partners.

Strengthening Energy Infrastructure Security

The war exposed severe vulnerabilities in Ukraine's energy sector. To ensure long-term resilience and independence, Ukraine must secure all major energy generation sites, especially in areas previously occupied by Russian forces. This includes inspecting facilities to demine affected zones and installing anti-missile defense systems to protect against future attacks. A comprehensive national strategy for energy security must also be developed to guide this process and build lasting resistance to disruptions.

Completing Energy Market Restructuring

Ukraine's transition from a vertically integrated electricity market to a competitive model remains incomplete. To accelerate this process, Ukraine should align its market framework with the European Union. Inviting representatives of the Directorate-General for Energy and the U.S. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to provide oversight

and guidance would improve transparency and efficiency, as well as foster international investor confidence.

Securing and Diversifying Energy Supply Chains

Ukraine's pre-war reliance on fossil fuels, many of which were sourced from currently Russian-controlled territories, underscores the need for supply chain diversification. Ukraine should increase exploration and extraction in the western regions, including the Carpathian Mountains (for oil and natural gas) and the Lviv-Volyn Basin (for coal). In the long term and if security conditions allow, the Black Sea region could also become viable for exploration. Simultaneously, Ukraine should expand its Green Hydrogen production and maintain nuclear energy as a key energy source. Although Ukraine currently extracts uranium, it currently lacks the ability to manufacture nuclear fuel. Therefore, Ukraine should continue investing in its domestic fuel production capacity while remaining mindful of budget constraints.

Modernizing Transmission and Distribution Systems

Ukraine's transmission and distribution infrastructure must be upgraded to handle fluctuations in demand and withstand future threats. Adoption of "Smart Grids" technology, as recommended by the International Energy Agency, would enable better demand-response capacity, increase resilience, and reduce operational inefficiencies across the national grid ([International Energy Agency, 2023](#)).

Expanding Energy Storage Capacity

A resilient energy system also requires scalable storage solutions. Ukraine should promote the development of energy storage systems, such as lithium-ion batteries and pumped hydro, to ensure supply flexibility during peak demand or emergencies. Government incentives, such as tax breaks and subsidies, should also be used to stimulate private investment in storage infrastructure.

Policy Recommendations

1. Secure all energy infrastructure by inspecting key sites to demine former conflict zones, and by deploying anti-missile defenses;
2. Finalize the transition to a restructured energy market by aligning with EU regulatory models and inviting external oversight from the Directorate-General for Energy and FERC;
3. Diversify energy supply by increasing domestic extraction in secure regions and expanding nuclear fuel production as well as green hydrogen capacities;
4. Upgrade Ukraine's transmission and distribution network using "Smart Grids" technologies to improve grid resilience and efficiency;
5. Develop national energy storage capacity through technologies like lithium-ion batteries and pumped hydro, supported by government incentives.

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Humanitarian Needs

Strengthening Futures: Holistic Support for Ukraine's Lasting Economic Reintegration — Marianna Mikheyeva

Executive Summary

As of January 2025, 3.7 million Ukrainians remain internally displaced, facing widespread housing shortages and growing mental health challenges. While many wish to remain in their current locations, long-term reintegration is hindered by inadequate shelter and limited access to psychological support. This policy memo recommends a holistic, cross-sectoral approach that addresses both material and mental health needs. Establishing integrated community centers that offer housing assistance and mental health services, alongside public campaigns to reduce stigma, will promote stability and resilience. Ukraine's situation also demands flexible, transitional solutions that reflect the current conflict's ongoing nature. Funding should combine NGO support, philanthropic grants, and incentivized private investment to build lasting infrastructure. Supporting reintegration within Ukraine reduces long-term reliance on international aid and enables displaced people to rebuild their lives at home, easing domestic pressures on host countries and contributing to broader regional recovery.

Background: Displacement, Housing Instability and the Mental Health Toll

As of January 2025, an estimated 3.7 million individuals have been internally displaced (IDPs) in Ukraine, as reported by the International Organization for Migration ([International Organization for Migration, 2025](#)). Internally displaced peoples are particularly affected by the damage and destruction of over 2 million housing units, causing the majority (59%) to rent their homes, while often facing fears of eviction due to lack of legal tenure documents ([International Organization for Migration, 2025](#)). Despite this, over 70% of interviewed individuals reported wanting to stay in their current location, living in damaged housing and emergency shelters, beyond the next three months ([International Organization](#)

[for Migration, 2024](#)). Oblasts with larger populations of internally displaced peoples, such as Dnipropetrovska (14%), Kharkivska (12%), and Kyiv city (11%) should consider post-war reconstruction plans with the expectation that most of the population will remain, as they seek a more permanent, affordable, and safe living environment ([International Organization for Migration 2024](#)).

While shelter is a fundamental necessity, housing efforts in Ukraine often overlook the mental health challenges that accompany displacement. Millions of Ukrainians have experienced severe trauma, including the destruction of their homes, loss of loved ones, and prolonged exposure to war ([Seleznova, et al., 2023](#)). The psychological toll of these experiences can lead to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as other long-term mental health conditions ([ReliefWeb, 2024](#); [Shevlin, et al., 2023](#)). Critically, access to mental health services remains limited due to overwhelmed healthcare systems with a shortage of trained professionals, as well as the prioritization of physical survival needs over psychological well-being.

International humanitarian organizations, such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), have attempted to bridge this gap by providing psychological support programs, but the scale of the crisis far exceeds current resources. Many IDPs do not have consistent access to therapy or psychiatric care, and cultural stigmas surrounding mental health can prevent people from seeking help. Without adequate psychological support, the stress of displacement and uncertainty about the future can lead to further instability, making it difficult for individuals to rebuild their lives even when they receive housing assistance ([Seleznova, et al., 2023](#)).

Analysis

Why Housing First Falls Short in Wartime Ukraine

The Housing First model, widely used in Western countries to address homelessness, prioritizes providing stable, permanent housing before requiring individuals to address other challenges such as unemployment, mental health, or substance abuse. While this approach has been successful in many settings, it may not be fully applicable in Ukraine due to the unique circumstances of the ongoing war and the resulting mass displacement.

Structural Barriers to Permanent Housing

The destruction of housing infrastructure is a significant barrier. Ukraine faces a massive shortage of livable spaces ([Karageorgieva, 2025](#)). Entire cities have been reduced to rubble, meaning that even if financial resources were available, there is simply not enough housing stock to implement a Housing First model effectively ([The Guardian, 2024](#)).

Additionally, the displacement crisis in Ukraine is not a traditional homelessness issue. Ukrainians who have lost their homes were displaced due to war, making their situation more comparable to that of refugees than to those experiencing systemic homelessness ([Depaul International, 2024](#)). The need for housing in Ukraine is often temporary, as many displaced individuals intend to return to their original homes once it is safe to do so ([International Organization for Migration, 2024](#)). Housing First programs are designed for long-term residency, whereas many Ukrainian IDPs are seeking transitional housing until reconstruction efforts are completed. The lack of security in conflicted regions, particularly

where the highest percentages of IDPs are currently residing, inhibits potential progress towards long term reconstruction efforts.

Psychological Dimensions of Displacement

The strong correlation between economic insecurity and poor mental health suggests that, without adequate psychological support, the stress of displacement and uncertainty about the future can lead to further instability, making it difficult for individuals to rebuild their lives, even when they receive housing assistance.

For this reason, it is critical that Ukrainian humanitarian assistance organizations implement a comprehensive program that combines both material and mental health support conjointly. This dual approach will build the strongest foundation for societal reintegration and long-term community resilience.

Policy Recommendations

1. Build integrated housing and mental health support systems:
 - a. A cross-sectoral response is essential. Achieving a favorable outcome will require material and mental health assistance to work in unison;
 - b. Establish community-based Integrated Support Centers that offer both mental health services and housing assistance. These centers should provide counseling, psychiatric care, and support in securing both temporary and long-term housing;
 - c. Address mental health stigma by incorporating post-war trauma recovery into school curricula;
 - d. Launch community-led awareness campaigns and peer-support programs to reduce help-seeking fears and normalize mental health care.
2. Secure sustainable funding for social infrastructure:
 - a. Leverage funding from international and local NGOs, which can offer both expertise and financial support for integrated service delivery;
 - b. Seek grants from philanthropic foundations, particularly those focused on post-conflict recovery or mental health;
 - c. Encourage foreign direct investment in social infrastructure by offering targeted incentives to attract private sector engagement.

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The Lost Generation? The Strategic Return of Refugees Among Youth — Kateryna Kvasha

Executive Summary

The return of young Ukrainian refugees is crucial for Ukraine's post-war recovery. Analysis shows that factors like concerns over safety, lack of career prospects, and insufficient support systems play a significant role in these decisions. To address these challenges, Ukraine must start thinking about how to return refugees to post-war Ukraine. Potential solutions include cooperation with host countries' governments, targeted financial incentives for returnees, expanding the system for internship opportunities across crucial sectors, and engaging with diaspora. Such measures will not only attract youth back but also contribute to Ukraine's long-term economic and social resilience.

Background: Ukraine's Displaced Youth and the Challenge of Return

As of February 2025, over 6.8 million ([UNHCR 2025](#)) Ukrainians have been forced to flee the country since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Half of them are children; over 80% of adults are women of working age, which means a significant loss for Ukraine's labor force in the future ([Mykhailyshyna 2023](#)). The longer the war continues, the less likely these refugees are to return: by the end of 2022, 50% of surveyed Ukrainian refugees indicated a

strong desire to return, with an additional 24% saying they were likely to do so; by early 2024, the percentage dropped to 22% and 25% respectively ([Mykhailyshyna 2024](#)). Key factors contributing to such change in decisions include finding employment opportunities abroad, language acquisition and cultural assimilation, education for kids, uncertainty about the future, and the geographic distance from Ukraine.

One of the most pressing migration challenges is the departure of Ukrainian youth. Under 50% of the youth aged 18–24 abroad plan to return home ([Mandziy 2025](#)), making them a particularly vulnerable demographic for the Ukrainian migration policymakers. Many in this age group express a desire to remain in host countries, even if their parents choose to return. According to the Centre for Economic Strategy, Ukraine could face a shortfall of 3.1–4.5 million workers by 2032, potentially resulting in an economic loss of approximately \$113 billion ([Vinokurov 2023](#)).

Security remains the foremost concern in any repatriation effort. While it must be accepted that some people will return to Ukraine, a key post-war priority for the government should be to encourage as many as possible to return. Particular attention should be given to Ukrainian youth abroad, as they represent a substantial portion of the future workforce and are at risk of permanent resettlement.

Analysis

The Strategic Importance of Youth Refugee Return

As of February 2025, over 6.8 million Ukrainians remain displaced abroad ([UNHCR 2025](#)), with a significant portion being working-age individuals. This mass outflow has severely strained Ukraine's labor market, leading to critical shortages in sectors such as construction, energy, defense, engineering, and healthcare ([Visit Ukraine 2025](#)). Even if military and security concerns are resolved, there is no guarantee that displaced Ukrainians will return. With the war now in its fourth year, many have begun establishing new lives abroad, creating a significant obstacle for Ukraine's post-war recovery.

Where Are Ukrainian Refugees Now?

The majority of Ukrainian refugees have resettled in European countries with strong labor markets and integration policies. The countries with the most Ukrainians include Poland (~1 million refugees), Germany (~1.2 million refugees), Czech Republic (~400,000 refugees), United States (~270,000 refugees), and the UK (~250,000 refugees), ([UNHCR 2025](#), [Andrle 2025](#)). Host country policies play a key role in determining whether Ukrainians return. Financial aid, work permits, and pathways to permanent residency created incentives for them to stay, making their decision to return even harder.

What are the Long-Term Risks of Youth Non-Return?

Among the refugee population, youth represent a critical demographic for Ukraine's long-term recovery. If Ukraine fails to facilitate the return of refugee youth, the country will face severe long-term consequences that could undermine its recovery and stability. A shrinking workforce would stall economic growth, limit investment potential, and slow innovation, leading to prolonged stagnation. Additionally, Ukraine's long-term modernization depends on a skilled, adaptable workforce, particularly in emerging sectors such as

technology and defense innovation. If youth refugees choose to remain abroad, Ukraine risks a permanent “brain drain,” undermining the country’s ability to rebuild and grow. Demographically, the absence of returning youth would accelerate population decline, creating an aging society increasingly dependent on foreign labor. Other than economic and demographic risks, there is also the danger of weakened national cohesion, as young people who build their lives abroad may become permanently disengaged from Ukraine, reducing their economic and civic contributions. Without targeted policies to encourage return, Ukraine risks losing an entire generation that should instead be shaping its future.

Policy Recommendations

1. Support the Return of Displaced Ukrainians:
 - a. Partner with host countries to co-finance travel costs for Ukrainian refugees returning home;
 - b. Provide one-time return grants for skilled workers, such as engineers, medical professionals, and IT specialists, to prevent permanent brain drain;
 - c. Establish a dedicated department within the Ministry of National Unity focused on coordinating the return of internationally displaced Ukrainians and maintaining direct communication with host countries;
 - d. Create economic incentives for returnees by offering tax benefits or interest-free loans to Ukrainian-owned businesses relocating from abroad, and by supporting startups launched by returnees during their first one to two years in Ukraine;
 - e. Engage the Ukrainian diaspora as ambassadors to promote business investment in Ukraine. This effort should also be integrated into Ukraine’s broader public diplomacy strategy.
2. Incentivize Youth Reintegration:
 - a. Develop an internship program across strategic sectors, such as technology, defense, healthcare, engineering, and public administration, to offer practical experience and clear career pathways for young returnees;
 - b. Expand employment opportunities in Ukraine’s defense and security sectors by highlighting job prospects in military training, manufacturing, cybersecurity, and logistics;
 - c. Offer direct financial support to young families through one-time grants, tax benefits, and child allowances. Expand access to affordable childcare and education by subsidizing kindergartens and providing school support.

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