

**How and What Targeted Labor Market Policies Can Effectively Attract
Skilled Ukrainian Professionals to Return Post-War, Thereby Facilitating
Economic Recovery?**

By
Andrii Dvornyk

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Supervisor: Martin Kahanec

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I, the undersigned, **Andrii Dvornyk**, candidate for the BA degree in Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, declare herewith that the present thesis titled “How and What Targeted Labor Market Policies Can Effectively Attract Skilled Ukrainian Professionals to Return Post-War, Thereby Facilitating Economic Recovery?” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography.

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ABSTRACT

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has caused massive refugee migration from the territory of Ukraine to the EU and other Western countries. Such a massive relocation of human capital within a relatively short period of time generates various labor force crises, including the challenging future of the national economy of Ukraine. Following the respective literature, the thesis reflects on the background of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, “pull” and “push” migration factors, the neoclassical understanding of migration, and the existing return migration policies. The thesis evaluates various return policies based on their impact on the national economy and population growth. The thesis additionally elaborates on the classic return migration studies, which highlight the importance of multifactorial (psychological, social, and economic) reintegration of returnees. The thesis exploits the approach of qualitative policy-oriented research design based on desk research and comparative case analysis. To formulate applied policies suggestions, the thesis examines the case of Croatia. The suggested policies highlight the importance of retraining, R&D jobs, psychological, social, and financial support of the returnees, and revitalization of the entrepreneurial sector. The thesis results contribute to the overall reflection on the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict and bring practical input to the post-conflict recovery of Ukraine.

Keywords: return migration, labor policies, Russian-Ukrainian crisis

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
R&D	Research and Development
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Up until today, more than 6 million Ukrainians have fled from Ukraine because of the current conflict, and the number keeps increasing. One of the biggest threats from this issue is the decline in the skilled labor force. According to the OECD (2023, 6) report, 71% of Ukrainian refugees who fled the country after the invasion began are tertiary educated, mainly with a Master's degree or above, and are highly skilled professionals. The outflow of highly skilled professionals raises two critical concerns: How will Ukraine be able to recover economically post-war, and how will it attract the skilled labor force back? This thesis argues for the proposal of multiple labor policies, which will be focused specifically on solving the problem of brain drain in Ukraine.

Firstly, this thesis presents the main factors that contribute to the non-return of displaced Ukrainians, which will be used to better understand and think about the policy proposals. The Research and Development sector (R&D), including medical, engineering, and educational industries, will require the largest share of skilled labor for exponential economic recovery in Ukraine. Moreover, based on the literature, this thesis highlights the increase in demand for professional skills (soft and analytical) and the impact that the invasion caused on the Ukrainian high-skilled labor market.

For the policy proposal suggested in this thesis, the paper first uses historical knowledge from another case of massive refugee relocation in Europe and takes the most effective components. The thesis uses a comparative study approach to understand return migration dynamics, specifically compared to the Croatian War of Independence. This approach will allow for providing input on similar brain drain issues and analyzing the solutions and their effectiveness that were proposed and used in these nations.

Subsequently, the thesis proceeds with the author's personal ideas on the attraction of high-skilled individuals in the context of modern Ukraine, as the main outcome and contribution of this paper. While the author's own ideas are built up from the background and the conducted research, they are proposed as recommendations for the return migration policy building. The suggested policies aim to strengthen job security for high-skill individuals and empower entrepreneurship in post-conflict Ukraine. The suggestions highlight the importance of retraining programs, fiscal policies with financial incentives, and investment into education and infrastructure of the high-skilled labor market in Ukraine.

This thesis incorporates an extensive comparative analysis of the relevant academic literature, news reports, press releases, and reports from official organizations like the UN, OSCE, and other EU governmental sectors. The conclusions of this thesis are relevant in the current migration context. The results can be used as a steppingstone for policymakers' further investigations and formulations of the relevant return regulatory processes. Although the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is still actively ongoing, the analysis presented in the current thesis contributes to the reflection of the current situation in Ukraine. Moreover, it adds value to the theoretical knowledge on the migration and refugee situation worldwide. One could argue that the results of this thesis, should they find a fruitful ground within the policymaking system, will contribute to the improvement of the brain drain situation in Ukraine caused by the latest Russian invasion of the country.

1.1 Methodology

This thesis is guided by the central research question: how can labor market policies effectively attract skilled Ukrainian professionals to return post-war, thereby facilitating economic recovery? In more detail, the thesis is guided by the question of which targeted labor-market policy can contribute to return migration to Ukraine after the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

To address these research questions, this study employs the approach of qualitative policy-oriented research design based on desk research and comparative case analysis. The case of post-conflict refugees' return in the Republic of Croatia was chosen for comparative analysis. The case was chosen because of the similar backgrounds of Croatia and Ukraine, both the second-largest federal units of a socialist state, and both standing for their independence and nationalism (Bralić n.d.). Additionally, the case choice was motivated by the similar refugee outflow caused by a conflict in a state located very close to Europe. After the conflict, Croatia faced an economic emergency, which required urgent reinforcement of the labor force. This led to the necessity to reattract refugees who were displaced to other countries. According to recent studies, Ukraine is starting to face similar economic issues (Epel 2024, 111). Therefore, the policies and initiatives implemented in Croatia after the conflict have an educational value for dealing with a similar situation in Ukraine.

Due to the current military conflict in Ukraine, the study incorporates secondary data analysis. This study focuses on an extensive comparative analysis of the relevant academic literature, contrasting the findings with the data provided by official UN, OSCE, and other EU organizations. In addition, to build a well-founded picture of reality, the study analyses news reports and press releases. The literature review provides a general reflection on migration policies and incorporates the main approaches to shaping them. The core approaches, taken as coordinates of this thesis, include the “push” and “pull” factors approach, which reflects on factors that trigger in- and outflow of population (Chort and Rupelle, 2016). Another guiding approach was the neoclassical approach to migration, according to which return migration results from unsuccessful migration outcomes. Additionally, the studies by van Houte (2014) and Zaika (2024) are reviewed in the current thesis to assess the perspectives of the returnees, refugees, and migrants from Ukraine and other countries. These works provide input on the

psychological state of the targeted audience and their needs. Overall, the literature is used as a guiding framework for the evaluation of the policies.

By analyzing various implemented policies, this thesis evaluates their success by reviewing their effects on long-term economic and population growth. Incorporating the literature analysis and evaluation of the existing policies, this study suggests initial policies that can be implemented by Ukraine after the conflict to execute the “pull” factor of migration and attract refugees currently placed abroad back.

Being based on the secondary data, the exploited methodology provides the current thesis with a reflective and over-viewing nature. This contributes to the big picture overview and formulates the direction for further research and policymakers’ actions. In terms of limitations, the exploited methodology lacks the incorporation of empirical data that represents the perspective of Ukrainians currently based in Ukraine and outside the country. Yet, due to ongoing active military actions, such data are challenging to collect.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BACKGROUND OF THE UKRAINIAN BRAIN DRAIN SITUATION

In order to formulate the common ground of this thesis, the current chapter summarizes the factual information concerning Ukrainian citizens displaced from Ukraine. The chapter elaborates on the EU policies applied to the displaced Ukrainian citizens after the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The chapter concludes with the evaluation of applied policies from the perspective of the potential return policies.

The migration rates from Ukraine to the neighboring countries were relatively high even before the full-scale Russian invasion. Historically, Ukraine experienced five major waves of migration and forced population displacements (Lapshyna 2022). With the first wave in the late 19th century, the second wave in the 1920s-1930s, and the third during and after the Second World War, then after establishing the independence of Ukraine in 1991, the two most recent waves were caused by Russian actions in 2014 and 2025 (Lapshyna 2022). In the 2000s, before the Crimea crisis, Ukraine was also in the top 10 destination countries for international migrants and had dropped out of this rating by the 2020s (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020, 10). By 2020, the biggest part of the Ukrainian migrants – over 3 million people – were in Russia (Lapshyna 2022, n.p.; UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2020, 2). Other top 10 countries of destination for Ukrainian migrants by 2020 were the USA (370,000), Kazakhstan (350,000), Germany (290,000), Poland (270,000), Italy (250,000), Belarus (220,000), Czechia (130,000), Israel (130,000), and Uzbekistan (125,000) (Lapshyna 2022, n.p.; UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2020, 2). Statistics show that by February 2022, the number of Ukrainian migrants

working or studying in Poland reached 1.35 million people (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk 2022, 165). It is also important to mention that, according to the UNHCR (2025), data from Ukrainian borders, while the flow into Ukraine was significantly lower than the flow out of the country before February 2022, it has been equal, with occasional prevalence, since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion.

Even though Ukraine had a history of high migration, the full-scale Russian invasion of the country provoked a massive outflux in a condensed period of time. According to the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2025 n.p.), 6.9 million refugees from Ukraine were registered globally by Spring 2025. In turn, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reports that the majority of the refugees are recorded in Europe – 5,331,270. In addition, by Summer 2023, 1.2 million Ukrainian refugees were recorded in the Russian Federation under various legal conditions (UNHCR 2025). For comparison, 3.7 million Ukrainian citizens were displaced within the country's borders after the beginning of the full-scale invasion (UN IOM 2025). Demography of the Ukrainian refugees shows that most displaced persons are females (44%), a third of the refugee group accounted for children under 18 years (30.5%), while only a quarter are men (25.5%) (UNHCR 2025). Due to the blockade of air routes and limited connection ways with Western countries, the border crossing is mainly conducted via bus or train lines to such European countries as Poland and Hungary, and the Republic of Moldova (UNHCR 2025).

In turn, the EU community and leaders have put significant effort into welcoming and accommodating refugees from Ukraine after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. One of the most extensive policies is the EU Temporary Protection Plan, first formulated by the European Commission in 2011 (European Council 2025). The EU Temporary Protection Plan was adopted after the large-scale displacement from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo into Central and Western Europe caused by the armed conflicts in the Western

Balkans (European Council 2025). In turn, according to the European Council (2025), the main objectives of the activation of the temporary protection mechanism in the exceptional circumstances of mass influx temporary protection mechanism are to protect the displaced persons and to optimize the national asylum procedures. By the date, the Temporary Protection Plan is in active phase for the refugees from Ukraine since March 2022 and to March 2027 (European Council 2025). In turn, almost 4.5 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe have registered for receiving the temporary protection status since the beginning of the full-scale invasion till Spring 2025 (European Council 2025). The applied policy assists Ukrainian refugees with integration in Europe by granting working permits, residency statuses, accommodation, and medical insurance (European Council 2025). Additionally, the program provides medical assistance, education, and legal guardianship to children under 18 years who were displaced unaccompanied (European Council 2025).

According to the European Council (2025), the funds for member states welcoming Ukrainian refugees were allocated from the EU reserve funds and accounted for almost €17.5 billion. In addition, various non-governmental organizations, like Caritas, are actively involved in accommodation and adaptation of displaced Ukrainian citizens in the EU.

In Autumn 2025, the European Council formulated the recommendations on the transition out of temporary protection for displaced Ukrainian citizens (European Council 2025). The recommendations include support in returning to Ukraine and facilitation of reintegration. Reintegration is recommended to be supported by organizing exploratory visits in collaboration with the Ukrainian government (Council of the European Union 2025). Moreover, the organization of limited voluntary return programs with further protection and assurance of medical support, accommodation, and education is suggested. On the other hand, the recommendations include transition programs that would legally change the permits of temporarily displaced persons to others, based on training, education, or employment (Council

of the European Union 2025). It is noteworthy that the recommendations highlight the importance of delivering information to the Ukrainian refugees by the EU member states (Council of the European Union 2025).

Evaluating the current situation from the perspective of the return policies, it is possible to state the following. The fact that even after the conflict in 2014, most Ukrainians relocated within the country (Lapshyna 2022) and was an attractive destination for international migrants in 2000s (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020, 10) suggests that the observed massive outflow across borders was primarily due to the onset of military operations, rather than to conditions of life in times of peace. In other words, people were forced to flee the war zones without actually wanting to leave their homes. Based on this conclusion, it is possible to assume that displaced persons will be willing to come back home. This assumption is supported by the results of the 2023 survey conducted on behalf of American University Kyiv across Poland among 937 Ukrainian refugees, who were displaced to Poland after February 24, 2022, and 202 migrants from Ukraine, who lived in Poland before the full-scale Russian invasion (Zaika 2024). The results showed that the strong feeling of homesickness is observed both among refugees and before-war migrants (4.39 and 4.01 out of 5, respectively), who participated in the survey (Zaika 2024). Moreover, more than half of the refugees who participated in the survey expressed willingness to return to Ukraine as soon as possible or in the foreseeable future (51% and 53% of the participated refugees, respectively) (Zaika 2024). Although for the migrant group, these percentages were significantly lower – 33% expressed willingness to return as soon as possible and 39% – in the foreseeable future, more than half of each group stated that they intend to return “someday” (64% of refugees and 55% of migrants) (Zaika 2024). It is noteworthy that the smallest groups – 22% of refugees and 32% of migrants – accounted for those respondents who are likely willing to return to Ukraine in the future (Zaika 2024).

Additionally, the recommendations for the transition of Ukrainian refugees out of temporary protection, started by the European Council, can have a controversial impact on the return policy. From one perspective, assistance with the voluntary return to Ukraine facilitates the overall return of refugees and can potentially secure a sustainable reintegration. On the other hand, the alternative of changing the legal status of the refugees can become a valid reason to stay abroad. Specifically, it is a concern for younger refugees who obtained education and built connections in the hosting country and in its local language. This creates an obstacle for a smooth reintegration and may require significant support from governmental structures. This also jeopardizes the inflow of young and educated labor force to Ukraine, which in turn puts the maintenance and innovation of various industries at risk.

Recent studies underline the damage to the economic prosperity of Ukraine caused by the massive outflow of the labor force. Specifically, the migration of highly educated persons influenced the Research and Development (R&D) sector of Ukraine's economy (Bezvershenko and Kolezhuk 2022, 385). In addition to the mass outflow of the labor force, the study indicates the problematic and dangerous conditions of work, under which the research process becomes challenging, and the shortcuts of funding as the main obstacles in wartime (Bezvershenko and Kolezhuk 2022, 386). Seeing the R&D sector as a driver of economic growth, providing the connection between science and the economy, the study suggests prioritizing its development after the conflict is resolved (Bezvershenko and Kolezhuk 2022, 400). It is important to note that the researchers highlight the importance of a complete restructuring of the R&D sector, which will include policies of prioritization of the scientific investigations within the economic recovery and further development (Bezvershenko and Kolezhuk 2022, 400). The core principles that the study suggests includes, preservation and training of the human capital, alongside with accurately designed reforms tailored for the R&D sector (Bezvershenko and Kolezhuk 2022, 401).

In order to contrast the Ukrainian historical background with the experience of other nations, the next chapter will discuss Croatia's case.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW – REFLECTION ON THE EXISTING RETURN MIGRATION POLICIES

The literature's recommendations on return migration are rather scarce, with the main reason being that approaches used to define, evaluate, and forecast migration cannot be applied at the same level to return migration. Another possible reason is that social studies do not have a universal term for this phenomenon. Moreover, most of the researchers prefer to focus their studies on migrants who do not come back to their home country (Bilecen 2022, 367). Thus, the existing literature does not provide an extensive overview of ways to incentivize immigrants to return. On the contrary, the academic sources mainly transmit the concept of the "minority returns", which makes the subject of return the most unsolvable migration concern (Brubaker 2013, 1). However, with the recent political developments, the topic of return migration has gained increased attention from scholars.

The authors separate factors that force immigrants to return into two categories. Mainly push and pull factors (Chort and Rupelle, 2016). By "push" aspects, authors presume external influences in the host country that to an extent, drive immigrants back, or at least to other countries. There are a number of most evident push factors that include the socio-economic situation, both personal and governmental. Immigrants who relocate to another country with a lower average salary and overall life quality often tend to move back more often, in comparison to countries that offer greater quality and financial stability. Another aspect of the "push" category involves the law that regulates the legally allowed time for living. Visas and residency permits propose a highly bureaucratic, meticulous process that requires re-approval once in a certain period. The approval could be achieved through legal reasons of staying, such as work or study in the host country. Without any legal grounds for visa approval, the migrants will be

forced to come back to their home countries. The third and fourth factors are the lack of personal and career growth and issues with adaptation to local culture and mentality.

Pull factors spread over the following standards: better job market, the strength of the relationship with families and friends in the home country, personal assets including immobility, resources, and any work, and a chance for a better retirement.

Reflecting on the current global migration situation, the literature notes that the globalized world dictates new ways of relocation, integration, and return. Due to various conflicts, the trend is to develop appropriate policies for the hosting countries to facilitate the refugees' inflow, rather than return policies for countries that experience the outflow of human capital (van Houte 2014, 15). To manage migration in the modern world, the researchers formulate three main goals (van Houte 2014, 16), which can be formulated as follows. First, in the most general sense, to manage migration with a strong control and regulative approach. This goal addresses the need to mitigate the unwanted migration, such as migration of persons who were rejected in asylum, unregistered, or granted a permanent legal status, in the hosting countries. Second, establish and defend the domestic security within the national borders. This goal implies the need to reduce the disruptive effect of the return to a country of origin. Finally, the third goal, to widely promote and spread the peace-building attitude, requires a wide investment of funds and human capacity. The third goal implies the need to monitor the constant movement of the displaced persons. Additionally, the literature suggests that the effective return policies must address all the needs to facilitate the return migration process.

Moreover, according to van Houte (2014, 175), it is important to detail the policies that aim to mitigate and facilitate the migration process. Thus, addressing different needs, the formulated goals require different budget sources (domestic or hosting nations), target different kinds of migrants (unwanted migrants or legally registered displaced persons), and employ different

methods (assisted involuntary or voluntary return). The study conducted on 178 returned migrants in Afghanistan, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Vietnam provides a valuable input on the detailed understanding of the return experience (van Houte 2014, 22). The respondents of the study returned to their home countries after spending on average 4.5 years in migration. First, the study showed that to a great extent, the return process is shaped by the experience while in migration. The living conditions in migration and the power of motivation to return often play a significant role in reintegration. This correlation personalizes the return experience and makes it harder for the general policymakers to address in the population management approach.

Next, identifying three dimensions of embeddedness, the study showed that almost 80% of the participated returnees were struggling to achieve a sufficient economic embeddedness with a stable income, sustainable housing, and official employment. Moreover, the survey participants reported that they found themselves in a worse economic position, with respect to housing and employment, after their return than while in migration. After their return, respondents were becoming a “burden to the household” instead of contributing to its prosperity (van Houte 2014, 63).

From the perspective of psychological embeddedness, 68% of respondents reported that they experienced extreme emotional suffering caused by the return. The symptoms included anger, stress, lack of sleep, depression, restlessness, and sadness. Often, the self-worth of the returnees significantly decreased; seeing themselves as failures, they were convinced their circle would think of them the same way. Overall, respondents described the experience of fleeing their country of origin due to a conflict, living in migration, and returning to their home country as traumatic. This experience had a significant influence on their psychological well-being and largely shaped their current personality. 77% of respondents admitted that even the ways they express themselves changed after going through the migration cycle. Moreover, 41% of

respondents shared that they did not feel safe in their home country after their return. Those who had a psychologically better experience and managed to leverage the acquired differences in the migration period could differentiate themselves and met a higher tolerance in the home country after return (van Houte 2014, 64).

Another type of embeddedness assessed in the study was related to the social networks and the degree to which it could provide the returnees with the required information, assistance in accommodation, access to services and goods, and employment facilitation. After returning, most returnees had to invest in building trusting relationships and mainly relied on their nuclear family or very close friends (Ruben, van Houte, and Davis, 2009). Simultaneously, 80% of the respondents reported that they kept in contact with family members who were still abroad (van Houte 2014, 65).

Lastly, the study showed that 76% of the returnees are willing to leave the home country again, should they have the chance to do so. Overall, the study by van Houte (2014, 65) observes a dramatically low embeddedness in the three dimensions in the community of the home country among returned migrants. The author connects it with the overall situation in the home country and the attitude toward incoming human capital. Thus, the investigated countries were mainly found by the returnees in a post-conflict state with an insufficient housing market and a struggling labor market. The population that stayed in the country during the conflict faces unemployment and could perceive the returnees as highly unwanted competition in the job hunt.

The study by van Houte (2014, 196) concludes with a recommendation to Western countries to change their overall migration policy and shift from the AVR strategies toward policies that help migrants integrate in the hosting country at a more profound level. The study criticizes the AVR approach, claiming that, based on the miserable experience of the returned migrants, this approach does not contribute to development. Ten years after the conducted research, in the

context of Ukrainian refugees in Europe, it is possible to claim that the conclusions of van Houte's study (2014) are being considered in the European refugee policies (European Council 2025). From the first days after the beginning of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, the EU member states have been developing policies that facilitate integration by providing free passes to museums and free transportation for the first months of war, free language courses for adults and flexible access to education programs for children, social insurance, assistance in job search, consultation centers, and free housing (European Commission 2025).

Additionally, the return policy "Welcome Home" organized in the Colombian capital, Bogota, in 2009, can be used as a successful example of alternatives to AVR programs. The massive return of Colombians to their home country was mainly caused by the worsening living conditions and the global economic downturn in the host countries (UN IOM 2009). In turn, the Colombian government acknowledged the benefits of the returnees' new skills and made an effort to facilitate reintegration in the home country. Thus, the "Welcome Home" center provided the returnees and migrating foreigners with psychological and legal support, facilitated the job market entry, helped with access to educational programs and health care services, and assisted with starting up business projects (UM IOM 2009).

The neo-classical approach, which emphasizes human capital and rational choice, is another way to classify the reasons behind return migration. Specifically, this method considers the age and educational attainment of migrants in addition to the push and pull aspects surrounding migration patterns. This viewpoint additionally clarifies return migration in terms of unmet salary expectations and/or advantages and disadvantages. The neo-classical method, which defines "failure" as a circumstance in which migrants lack the ability to reap the advantages that they believed they could, begins with the assumption that migrants often relocate in order to optimize their earnings. Since it assumes that migrants only travel to their targets in order to settle down long-term, this understanding of return migration defines migration as a one-sided

movement (Khan, 2011). Therefore, it makes little sense for migrants to return to their original homelands if their living circumstances in the host country are good enough. To put it simply, those who succeed stay, and those who don't succeed come back. But another viewpoint within the framework of the neo-classical theory sees migration as an immediate way to gain fresh abilities to improve one's financial standing upon return, taking into account things like language learning and better educational alternatives overseas. This viewpoint goes beyond the conventional dichotomy of failure and accomplishment. This method basically contends that return migration is the result of an optimal human resource investment strategy over a person's life cycle.

To create a favorable perception of Ukraine to incentivize the return of immigrants, information, education, and cultural policies must be developed in addition to economic measures and the resolution of the most pressing socioeconomic issues. Therefore, the Ukrainian state authorities are required to create an appealing return strategy with the goal of encouraging and motivating Ukrainian migrants to return to their place of origin. Facilitating the subsequent phase of the return process is crucial, followed by reintegration assistance or the introduction of the cyclical migration paradigm. The detrimental impacts caused by global migration can be reduced for both the host and origin nations, as well as for the migrants and their families, by creating a thorough returnee migration strategy (Ryndzak and Bachynska 2022, 118).

In order to create a comprehensive strategy for post-war rehabilitation, the Ukrainian government must form dedicated task forces. One of these groups should be working on ways to make it easier for Ukrainians who have been displaced overseas to come back and integrate. The organization must focus on working on projects including reconstruction of housing and public service systems and motivating refugees to return social and academic initiatives. Ukraine's current migration policy has a room for development as a result of this group's efforts,

with an emphasis on encouraging return and building relationships with individuals who have fled the country (Udovyk and Domenech 2024). Furthermore, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Ukrainian government are already discussing migration policies that will facilitate and promote the return of particularly vulnerable displaced Ukrainians. For instance, through assistance, rebuilding, and recovery initiatives, IOM is enhancing conditions in regions where there are a lot of voluntary repatriations (Jelinkova, Placek, and Ocharana 2024).

As the conflict strains available resources, Ukrainian government and the EU authorities are discussing the migration rules with the goal of promoting the return of its residents (Guild and Groenendjik 2023). For instance, Serhiy Leshchenko, Zelensky's presidential office advisor, stated in a discussion with a Swiss newspaper that accepting nations ought to cease aiding refugees so that they can go back home (Ryndzak and Bachynska 2022, 118). Through the introduction of a Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainian residents escaping their home nation, the EU has attempted to handle the problem of migration in Ukraine. This regulation offers rights and safeguards that cover housing, work, medical care, and schooling as soon as a person enters an EU nation.

In conclusion, one could claim that while the literature's recommendations on return migration policy are rather scarce, the return policies implemented in various countries are rather insufficient for the successful readaptation of returnees to their home countries. However, a significant improvement can be seen in the current situation with refugees from Ukraine, both from the sides of the hosting EU countries and from the Ukrainian government representatives. In order to formulate justified recommendations for further improvement of these policies, the current thesis continues with a case study that provides an existing perspective on the return migration policies from the EU experience.

CHAPTER FOUR: CASE STUDY OF REFUGEE RETURN MEASURES IN CROATIA

This chapter will elaborate on return migration policies implemented in the Republic of Croatia after the 1991–1995 conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, primarily the Croatian War of Independence. The after-war statistics show that 700,000 people were displaced outside and within Croatia during the conflict (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 1995, 20). According to UNHCR, in collaboration with the Croatian local government, between 1995 and 2025, the UN Refugee Agency facilitated the return of over 7,000 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, over 18,000 refugees from Serbia and Montenegro, while the Croatian authorities claim that over 100,000 displaced persons returned on their own (Crvenković 2005). Additionally, over 200,000 persons displaced within the country's borders were relocated to their places of origin.

After the conflicts, Croatia adopted a set of policies that supported the return of refugees who had left the country during the war. These policies were monitored by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In turn, the Dayton/Paris Peace Agreement significantly influenced the return policy regulations. It is noteworthy that the safe return of the refugees to their home countries was made the first priority of the Dayton/Paris Peace framework (Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, 1997). In particular, the return required assurance of property restitution and safety in terms of full protection of human rights, in particular, rights to have and peacefully enjoy their property and pensions recognition (OSCE Mission to Croatia 2005, 1).

One of the core regulations included an active housing program, which allowed for reclaiming the occupied property or receiving support in restoring damaged property (OSCE Mission to

Croatia 2005, 1). Then, local government and the EU secured the investment in infrastructure, utilities, and transportation routes in the damaged regions. Additionally, the legalization paperwork process was simplified and facilitated by the local government for all returning refugees.

For comparison, the policies applied to Bosnia and Herzegovina followed the same framework. The returning refugees were supposed to have unquestionable rights to their previously owned property or be compensated for irreparable property loss or damage (Brubaker 2013, 1). The close investigation of this policy's effect showed that after reclamation of the property, the owners mainly chose to rent or sell it. In turn, they preferred staying in the hosting countries due to poor infrastructure in their home area or in the ethnic areas due to their beliefs and strong political position (Brubaker 2013, 2).

However, UNHCR's assessment of the situation conducted in 2004 reported a rather slow resolution of the returnees' adaptation issues primarily due to the housing procedure (UNHCR 2004, 2). The main issues with the reoccupation policy concerned the relationship with persons who occupied a property during the conflict and the property condition. Thus, the unwillingness of the temporary occupants to free the properties was causing extensive conflicts and slowing down the process. Subsequently, the property conflicts could have led to discrimination and stigmatization of the population. Moreover, the damaged property and poor conditions were often the factors that would halt the migrating refugees from returning to their home country (UNHCR 2004, 3).

On the other hand, the poor economic conditions and difficulties in the socio-economic sector in the affected areas led to a dramatic rise in unemployment rates – up to 90% (UNHCR 2004, 2). While the situation in these areas had no prospects of recovery, the 2004 governmental directive was strictly formulated towards the revitalization of the economy in these areas by

profound investment plans and collaboration with the EU funds (UNHCR 2004, 2). Thus, between 2002 and 2004, almost €200 million was allocated to the socio-economic situation improvement by creating new employment opportunities to secure sustainable relocation of the returnees in the respective areas (UNHCR 2004, 2).

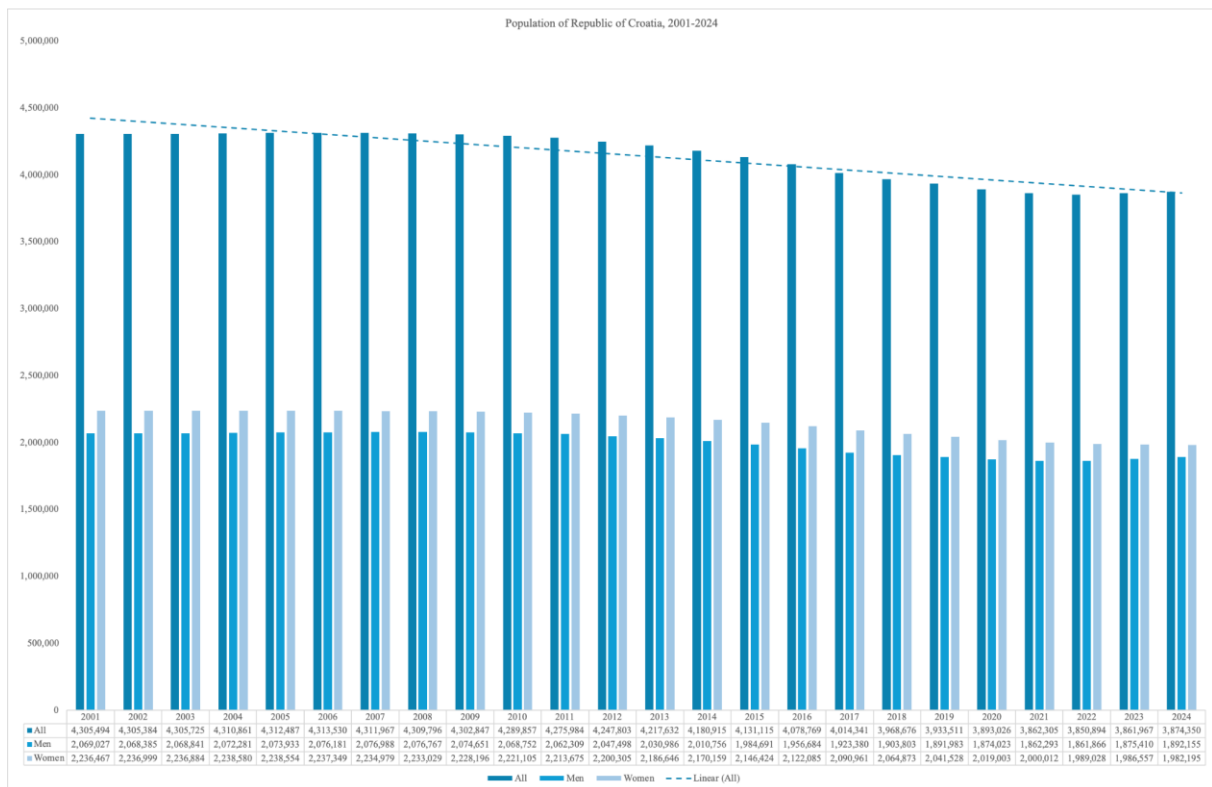
Additionally, in 2013, Croatia launched a four-year research and educational projects, such as the New International Fellowship Mobility Programme for Experienced Researchers, that attracted skilled labor. This project attracted highly skilled returnees and facilitated their integration into Croatian economic and scientific bodies (CORDIS n.d.). In total, the EU contribution accounted for over €2.7 million. One of the most global objectives of the New International Fellowship Mobility Programme for Experienced Researchers is to provide a spark for an effective research labor market that connects the industry, the education, and the scientific sectors. In addition to improving the research employment market, the project aims to facilitate knowledge transfer and overall economic innovation (CORDIS n.d.).

To evaluate the policies implemented in Croatia, it is necessary to assess the long-term economic performance of the country. Thus, by February 2025, 20 years after the end of the war, the economy of Croatia is ranked 39th in the Index of Economic Freedom, scoring 68.7 (The Heritage Foundation 2025). Given that Croatia's economy scored 48 in 1996 in the Index of Economic Freedom, it is possible to claim that the implemented policies and actions of revitalization of the economy were effective. However, one could claim that incorporating more fiscal policy into the labor market recovery could have accelerated the economic growth in Croatia even more.

Additionally, it is crucial to assess the population trends developed in the country following the conflict resolution. As Figure 1 shows, the assessment of migration and population statistics indicates a decline in the overall population from 2011 to 2024. If before 2018 the overall

population was consistently over 4 million, it is possible to claim that a significant decrease began after Croatia joined the EU in 2013. Yet, there is still a slight growth from 2023 to 2024 (from 3.862 million to 3.875 million people). In turn, as Figure 1 shows, the female population dominates the demographics over the whole period.

Figure 1: Population of the Republic of Croatia from 2011 to 2024.

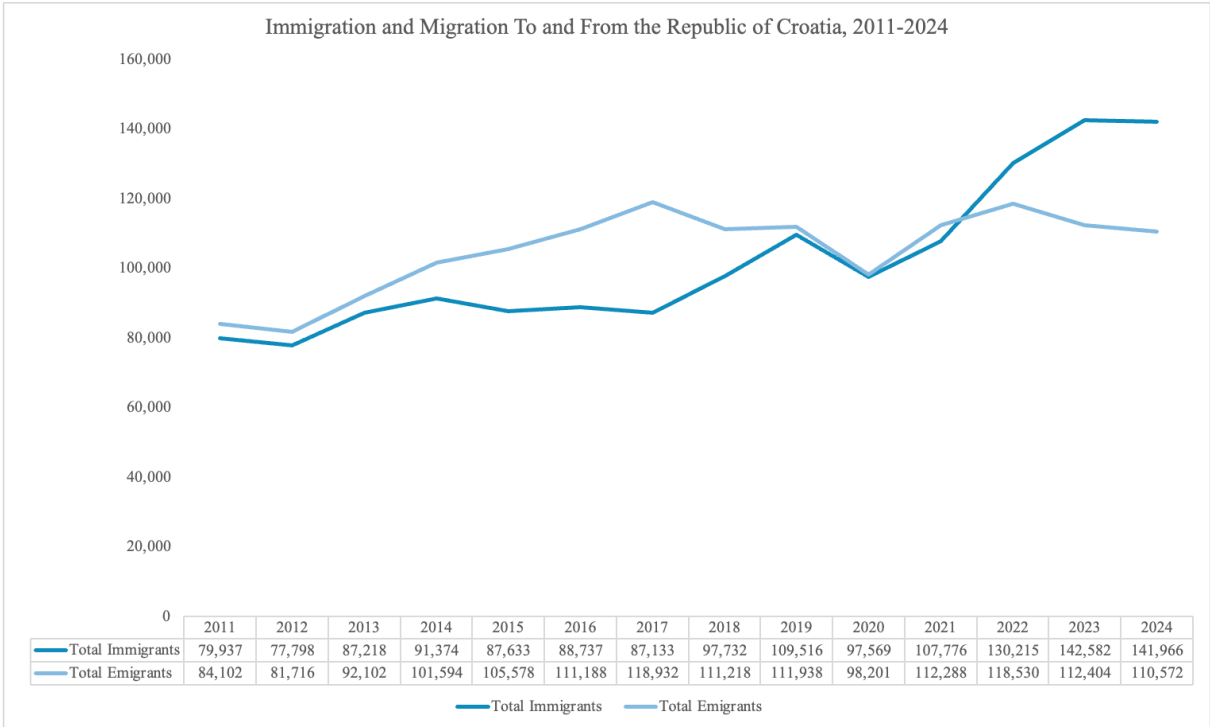


Note: Statistics provided by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2024a).

Assessing the migration statistics from the same period – 2011-2024, the dramatic change from immigration to emigration can only be seen after 2020. As Figure 2 shows, the main migration direction before 2020 continued to be out of the country. Yet, after 2020, most probably due to the COVID-19 pandemic disruption, Croatia experienced a significant growth of immigrants. The analysts note that the majority of the immigrants in this period were ethnic Croats (Barišić 2025). The main motivations for returning were the shift in economic conditions and the

increase in costs of living in Western Europe, the safety of children, and access to healthcare and education. In other words, the higher quality of life in Croatia became more affordable compared to Western countries. As illustrated in Figure 2, in 2024, the migration to the Republic of Croatia continued to prevail over the outflow of the population.

Figure 2: Immigration and Migration To and From the Republic of Croatia from 2011 to 2024.



Note: Statistics provided by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2024b).

Evaluating the implemented policies, it is possible to say that their execution facilitated the demographic and labor force crisis, but still has room for improvement. The improvements can be seen in faster economic recovery and the mitigation of population decrease. Additionally, it is important to consider the shift in the economic conditions of hosting countries as a strong influencing factor in return migration.

As Table 1 in Appendix A shows, comparing the discussed case with the current situation in Ukraine, it is possible to see several parallels. First, the background of the two countries – Croatia and Ukraine – is very similar due to their being the second largest federal parts of socialist states – Yugoslavia and the USSR, respectively (Bralić n.d.). Additionally, both Croatia and Ukraine are actively standing for their independence from the dominant economies of their respective socialist leading states – Serbia and Russia (Bralić n.d.). Additionally, the migration from Croatia and Ukraine was a familiar phenomenon for Western countries, which were accepting the migrating Croats and Ukrainians as “hostile” migrants, fleeing from socialist regimes before the respective conflicts. In terms of the current conflict in Ukraine, one can argue that the nature of the conflict differs from that of the Croatian War of Independence, in which Croatia was establishing its independence from Yugoslavia by seceding from the state. In the case of Ukraine, the conflict has an invasive character, where another state invades a sovereign state. Yet, the reaction of the Western countries, a massive outflow of refugees across the borders, population displacement within the country, and navigation toward policies that facilitate the return of the labor force still make these cases comparable. Given a similar background and similarities in the population sides of the conflicts, it is possible to base the policy suggestions on their impact on Croatia’s economy. While several policies implemented in Croatia performed with different success levels, e.g., creating a housing crisis or raising unemployment rates, Croatia’s overall economic performance improved in the long run. Consequently, given the current discussion of Ukrainian refugees’ return policies, the experience of Croatia can be taken as a steppingstone for effective policy formulation. The comparison of Croatia’s and Ukraine’s cases is overviewed in Table 1, Appendix A.

In conclusion, it is possible to claim that the efforts taken in the first years after the conflict were beneficial and crucial for the Croatian economic development. Additionally, it is important to underline that the contribution of the EU was vital in the policy application. Based

on Croatia's case review, the next chapter will discuss the author's suggestions on the refugees' return policies that could be beneficial for Ukraine's post-conflict economic recovery and further development.

CHAPTER FIVE: RETURN MIGRATION POLICY

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the EU recommendations for transition out of temporary protection, it is possible to formulate the essential elements of the return policy. Based on Croatia's experience, first, it is necessary to focus on the basic needs of the returnees and provide a solid protection of human rights (OSCE Mission to Croatia 2005, 5). In turn, accommodating the implemented policies of the EU, while welcoming the Ukrainian refugees in the member states (European Commission 2025), and assuming necessary support for the drained Ukrainian government from the EU and collaborating NGO's, it is possible to formulate the following suggested requirements:

- I. Providing medical support from the Ukrainian government, the EU, and collaborating NGO's in form of:
 - A. Medical insurance, that is available free of charge and easily accessible for returning persons;
 - B. Survival training programs, that are available free of charge and easily accessible for returning persons.
- II. Assistance in accommodation or property compensation in case of irreparable property damage, provided by the Ukrainian government or the EU funds.
- III. Simplicity of paperwork supported by comprehensible information exchange and digitalized solutions, like those provided by Dija and Monobank. While the active spreading of the information can also be performed by collaborating NGO's, the legal side of the process should be managed by the Ukrainian government
- IV. Organization of communities or regular meetings for returnees. Based on the study by van Houte (2014), it is important to exchange experiences and information about future actions to facilitate social and psychological embeddedness of the returnees. Such meetings can be

organized by NGO's and funded by the EU or national funds. In addition, governmental grants can be allocated to cultural exchange programs, in the frame of which returning Ukrainians will have an opportunity to exchange practices they have learned in migration to contribute to Ukraine's recovery and prosperity. It could also be done with foreign partners, given the in-country flow rise during the war (UNHCR 2025).

V. Investment in infrastructure, construction, and engineering – the sector that will be required after the active war actions to secure the protection of human rights. It will additionally generate new jobs.

Additionally, based on van Houte's (2014) approach, it is important to tailor labor and migration policies to the target group. The case of return migration in Croatia showed the importance of understanding the needs of the target groups. Taking into consideration the demography of Ukrainian refugees currently located abroad, which, according to the UN Refugee Agency, is predominantly females (44%) and children (30.5%) (UNHCR 2025), it is possible to conclude that the formulated policies should mainly be targeting women's professional needs. In turn, the study by Pham, Talavera, and Wu (2023, 1328), which explored a change in the Polish job market in the first year of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, also reflects on the post-conflict labor force and employment in Ukraine in general and concerning the female professionals. Thus, the study suggests expanding the job market for middle- and high-skill workers due to the disappearance of a high number of jobs during the war. Given the increasing number of high- and mid-skilled female professionals, the demand and supply of jobs keep being unmatched in the European job market due to the restructuring of the professional requirements. Additionally, the language barrier becomes a crucial obstacle to employment. The study sees one of the ways of incorporating the middle- and high-skilled workforce into the new market via training programs. While the study suggests an extensive change in demand for wartime skills compared to the pre-war period, the training programs are suggested to either provide a

new skill set or facilitate the transfer of the existing skill set to a new job. The authors recommend monitoring the job market to define and address the shift in demand through comprehensive policies.

On the other hand, a study by Epel (2024, 111) urges the need to supply the labor market with a labor force. Underscoring the importance of educational reform, vocational training programs, infrastructure investment, and overall human capital development, the study also highlights the issue of gender inclusivity. Thus, the study suggests that integration of female returnees may additionally require their retraining for male jobs.

Given concerns about the job market, highlighted in the recent research, and labor force structure, it is possible to formulate more advanced policy recommendations that will require reorganizing the employment system and fiscal regulations in Ukraine.

- VI. Vocational training programs with no charge and flexible attendance. Accessible for women and covering technical jobs.
- VII. Possible job market extension focused on the needs of persons with families. Such job opportunities may include flexible working hours, remote possibilities, and childcare programs. With an additional retraining program, such an approach will also allow for the employment of more high-skilled female returnees who have to combine their professional lives with taking care of their families.
- VIII. Educational programs for children and teenagers: simplified enrolment into educational institutions and programs, free medical support, and free extracurricular activities.
- IX. Tax benefits for new businesses that provide a threshold number of jobs for highly educated labor.
- X. Reconstruction of the Ukrainian R&D sector by national investment and the EU funds inflow. Following Croatia's example and addressing the concerns suggested by Bezvershenko

and Kolezhuk (2022), the reformation of the R&D sector will become a key investment into overall economic recovery. Additionally, it will allow for the employment of a high-skilled workforce.

XI. Possible job market extension toward ideological areas that appeared to be vital for the Ukrainian nation during the conflict with Russia. Addressing the observation made in the assessment of the return policies implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Brubaker 2013, 2), it is possible to anticipate a strong ethnic preference in Ukraine, which can affect the policies' performance. In turn, the ideological research program can help mitigate potential disruption, foster national unity, uphold historical values, and recover elements of the national legacy destroyed during the conflict. Cultural and historical studies, Ukrainian literature, science and research, and political studies. Addressing the gender issue highlighted by the recent research (Pham, Talavera, and Wu 2023), the ideological research could become a female-inclusive labor niche.

XII. Stimulation of entrepreneurs. Having obtained new skills and social network abroad, the returnees have a potential and motivation to start their own business. To stimulate economic growth through private entrepreneurship, the Ukrainian government can offer tax benefits for new businesses, educational programs for motivated entrepreneurs, lower interest rates for start-up capital, and a more straightforward registration process.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that the gradual implementation of the suggested policies aims to integrate the returnees into the employment system and economic landscape of the post-conflict Ukraine. Additionally, it addresses the experience that returning persons may have gone through abroad and makes the opportunity to come home more attractive.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Discussing the conducted case study, literature review, and secondary data analysis, one could claim that the policies suggested by this thesis return migration policies contribute to the adaptation of the returnees in the post-war context. Facilitating the psychological, social, and economic embeddedness, as described by van Houte (2014), the suggested policies prioritize human rights and safety, as outlined in Croatia's refugees return regulation (OSCE Mission to Croatia 2005, 1).

The main obstacles to the smooth return of the refugees are foremost seen in the unsafe environment created by active military actions. Assuming the resolution of the conflict, the reintegration in the country damaged by the war, with a suffering economy, becomes another challenge for the human capital return process. These challenges are seen as psychological, social, and economic embeddedness, which can halt a full integration in the home-country society (van Houte 2014).

The return migration policies implemented in Croatia after the Croatian War of Independence prioritized human rights and included housing programs, infrastructure recovery, and, in response to high unemployment rates in certain areas, intensive economic revitalization supported by the European Union. Additionally, initiatives for employment of highly educated labor force, e.g., New International Fellowship Mobility Programme for Experienced Researchers, aimed to attract the scientific community and improve economic growth.

The unique contribution of the current thesis is seen in the suggested policies of return Migration in post-conflict Ukraine. Prioritizing the protection of human rights, as in Croatia's case, it is important to provide governmental support to returnees through multilevel embeddedness, including social networking and psychological reintegration, and to facilitate

their entry into the job market via training programs, financial aid, or clear information dissemination. In particular, answering the research question that navigated this research, to effectively attract skilled Ukrainian professionals to return post-war, and thereby facilitating economic recovery, the labor market policies should consider the needs of the targeted social group. The conducted analysis showed that most of the targeted social group is women, with children being the second largest group. Answering the posed question regarding the targeted labor-market policy can contribute to return migration to Ukraine after the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the thesis suggests several initiatives formulated based on the recent studies and Croatia's case. The core suggestions comprise implementing vocational training programs for adults, educational programs with a simplified enrollment procedure for children, creating new areas of employment, such as cultural-ethnological research, active infrastructure reconstruction, or R&D, social hubs for experience exchange, and support for entrepreneurs. Given the demographics of the returnees, the suggestions underscore the importance of flexibility and accessibility of implemented programs.

In terms of this paper's limitation, one could see a geographical bias since this paper covers the EU-based cases and return migration policies. Additionally, while providing a solid theoretical basis for further investigation, the thesis lacks empirical results. Recommendations for further research include empirical evaluation of the suggested policies. Before executing the suggested policies, it is vital to collect the perspective of the target social group on whether these policies should facilitate their return process. In addition, it is important to conduct qualitative research that would provide authorities with qualitative feedback on policy drafts or a set of suggestions. Additionally, it is recommended that further research expand the geography of investigations. Potentially, the inspiration for the policy implementation could be found in countries of Latin America or Asia. It is still recommended to control for the cultural differences in the actual policy formulation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Table 1: The comparison of Croatia's and Ukraine's cases.

Comparison Criteria	Croatia	Ukraine
Overall Similarities		
The National Integration Process	Long-lasting processes of national integration began at the end of the 19th century and continued until the late 1920s. Not finished.	Still ongoing and complicated due to the language and occupation of large country.
Socialist Regimes in The Past	The second-largest federal unit of Yugoslavia, 1945–1991.	The second-largest federal unit of the USSR, 1922–1991.
"Hostile" Migration	Migration influx in Western countries due to socialist regimes.	
Similarities Of The Experienced Conflicts		
Support from Western Countries	Reluctant support at the beginning of the conflict with advocacy toward keeping Yugoslavia. Involvement with military and diplomatic aid at later conflict stages and after the conflict.	Involvement at the first stage of the conflict. Provision of military, humanitarian, and diplomatic support from the EU, UK, and the US.
Refugees During the Conflict	~700,000 people displaced internally and across the border.	6.9 million refugees from Ukraine were registered globally by Spring 2025; 3.7 million people were displaced internally. Many refugees are skilled workers who managed to integrate into the EU labour markets.
Returnee Integration Policies	Protection of human rights, housing programs, reconstruction of infrastructure, major employment projects, and intense revitalization of damaged areas.	Future policies are being discussed in the EU and Ukraine. potential for transparent and EU-funded return migration or further integration in the EU.

Note: Based on Bralić (n.d.), UN IOM (2025), UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (1995, 20), and UNHCR (2025 n.p.).