Settlement intentions of Ukrainian refugees in Germany: Adhering to social status back home or restarting again abroad?

Andreas Ette

Yuliya Kosyakova

Christian Kothe

Contents

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Andreas Ette[1]

Yuliya Kosyakova[2]

Christian Kothe[3]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
The choice between permanent settlement and temporary migration has garnered increased attention in international migration studies, yet the decisions of refugees remain underexplored.

OBJECTIVE
Building on the existing literature on return migration among voluntary migrants, this paper investigates the importance of socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts in refugees' home and host countries for their settlement intentions.

METHODS
We use the register-based probability sample of the IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP survey on Ukrainian refugees in Germany following the Russian invasion of February 2022. We employ linear probability regression models and sheaf coefficient analyses.

RESULTS
Similar to voluntary migrants, socio-psychological context shapes the settlement decisions of forced migrants. However, Ukrainian refugees who intend to settle are more economically disadvantaged than their counterparts, exhibiting differences in education, financial status, and welfare dependency. Notably, the highly educated and previously economically successful express a strong desire to return due to significant losses incurred as a result of the conflict.

[1] Head of the Migration Research Group at the Federal Institute for Population Research, Wiesbaden, Germany and Visiting Researcher at the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, UK. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7268-9164.

[2] Corresponding author. Head of the Research Department at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), Nuremberg, Germany and Professor of Migration Research at the University of Bamberg, Germany. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9621-1755. Email: yuliya.kosyakova@iab.de.

[3] Researcher at the Research Centre 'Migration, Integration and Asylum' of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), Nuremberg, Germany. ORCID ID: 0009-0009-3751-1908.

CONCLUSIONS

Both socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts significantly shape refugees' settlement intentions, with economic factors proving slightly more influential, especially for men. That economic disadvantage challenges traditional hypotheses about settlement and return highlights the gendered and volatile conditions of the conflict.

CONTRIBUTION

This paper extends the general literature on the settlement and return migration processes of voluntary migrants to the specific context of forced migration. Moreover, it conceptually differentiates between and empirically compares the relative importance of socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts in refugees' countries of origin and destination.

1. Introduction

The choice between permanent settlement and temporary migration is a prominent focus in international migration research, yet refugees' decisions often remain underexamined (King and Kuschminder 2022). With more than 123 million people forcibly displaced by the end of 2024 (UNHCR 2025), and numerous ongoing conflicts that generate large-scale refugee flows, understanding why some refugees return to their countries of origin while others remain abroad is increasingly urgent. Such insights would not only support policy efforts to find durable solutions for refugees through their long-term participation and inclusion in destination countries, but also assist origin countries in post-conflict reconstruction (Black and Gent 2006; Féron and Lefort 2019).

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine exemplifies one of the recent international conflicts necessitating durable solutions for affected populations. On 24 February 2022, the Russian invasion sparked one of Europe's largest migration movements since the Second World War, with around 8.1 million Ukrainian refugees registered in other European countries by early 2023 (UNHCR 2023). The paper focuses on the main EU destination country of Ukrainian refugees, Germany, which hosted about 1.2 million newly arrived Ukrainians in mid-2024 (DESTATIS 2024). Drawing on the IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany (Brücker et al. 2023),[4] which provides data on 11,215 randomly selected Ukrainian refugees between August and October 2022, this study examines their settlement and return migration

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[4] The IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey on Ukrainian Refugees in Germany is a panel survey conducted by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the Federal Institute for Population Research (BiB), the Research Centre of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF-FZ), and the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW).

intentions. Although intentions do not necessarily translate into actual behaviour (e.g., due to a lack of ability: Carling and Schewel 2018), numerous studies reveal their high predictive power to understand migration decisions (e.g., Tjaden, Auer, and Laczko 2019; Van Dalen and Henkens 2013). Compared to previous research, our data benefits not only from its sample size but also from (1) capturing mobility intentions in a very homogeneous population that (2) arrived within the same period, and (3) surveying respondents only 0 to 8 months after their arrival, reducing thereby selection bias resulting from early returnees (see also Hernes et al. 2025).

A substantial body of work has examined immigrants' settlement intentions, identifying factors such as family situation (Carling and Pettersen 2014; Constant and Massey 2002), attitudes towards immigrants (Reitz 1998), contact with the ethnic majority (de Vroome and van Tubergen 2014), educational background (Adda, Dustmann, and Görlach 2022), language proficiency (Chabé-Ferret, Machado, and Wahba 2018), and structural integration (Jensen and Pedersen 2007). However, forced migration – often abrupt and unplanned – may not align with standard predictors derived from voluntary migration (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Van Tubergen et al. 2024). This is particularly true for Ukrainian refugees, many of whom fled without prior preparation and under considerable uncertainty, often selecting their destination country only en route (Tarkhanova and Pyrogova 2024). From a theoretical perspective, the present study extends the literature on immigrants' settlement intentions to forced migration contexts by distinguishing between refugees' socio-psychological and economic-skills conditions in both origin and destination countries. Rather than assuming that conflict alone drives decisions, we incorporate pre-migration aspirations and assess their relative importance. While our empirical analysis is grounded in the Ukrainian case in Germany, our broader aim is comparative and theoretical: we examine whether conceptual models of settlement that were originally developed for voluntary migrants hold in the context of large-scale displacement. In doing so, we seek to contribute both to the growing literature on Ukrainian refugees and to foundational debates in migration and refugee studies, including how intentions to stay or return are shaped under conditions of forced mobility.

Focusing on Ukrainian refugees – a group distinct in demographic characteristics and institutional frameworks – adds new insights to the limited literature on refugees' settlement intentions (Alrababah et al. 2023; Beaman, Onder, and Onder 2022; Ghosn et al. 2021; Kaya and Orchard 2020; de Vroome and van Tubergen 2014). Due to a ban on men leaving military service, many Ukrainians fleeing the war are women, who frequently travel with children and have relatively high educational levels (e.g., Kohlenberger et al. 2023; van Tubergen et al. 2023). This contrasts with earlier refugee groups, which were often predominantly male and arrived mainly from developing countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, or Eritrea (e.g., Brücker, Kosyakova, and Vallizadeh 2020; de Vroome and van Tubergen 2014). Additionally, unlike other refugee

groups in Europe, Ukrainian refugees benefit from the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC), granting immediate temporary residence permits, access to the labour market and education, and freedom of movement within the EU (Brücker et al. 2023). This directive was initially valid for two years and has since been extended twice. Notably, compared to many other refugee groups, Ukrainian refugees encounter generally favourable public attitudes (De Coninck 2022).

Our study contributes to the growing literature on Ukrainian refugees' settlement intentions in Europe, which so far has yielded mixed evidence. Hernes et al. (2025) find that only a quarter of Ukrainian refugees in Norway plan to return. Kohlenberger et al. (2023) report that 28% in Kraków and 47% in Vienna intend to stay. By contrast, Van Tubergen et al. (2024) find very low settlement intentions (4%) and high return intentions (65%–87%) among women, particularly in countries close to Ukraine. Similarly, in initial surveys Adema et al. (2024) observe that only around 10% of refugees living across several European countries express a willingness to settle abroad. Novotný et al. (2026) report that, in Czechia, return intentions among Ukrainian refugees have declined substantially over time, from 76% in 2022 to 51% in 2023, illustrating how such preferences may evolve with prolonged displacement. However, these studies rely on non-probability samples recruited via NGOs, social media, and personal networks, raising concerns about selection bias and limited generalizability. Qualitative research complements these findings, highlighting how many refugees face prolonged uncertainty and experience emotional ambivalence (e.g., Fredheim and Varpina 2025). Lazarenko (2024) describes exilic life as shaped by a sense of permanent temporariness, while others emphasize a political and economic insecurity that hinders long-term planning (Jaroszewicz, Shkoda, and Ovchynnikova 2025; Lapshyna 2025). Chargaziia and Panchenko (2025) identify several adaptation models among Ukrainian refugees in Germany, some oriented toward return, others toward settlement, and one reflecting indecision, illustrating the diversity of responses to displacement.

Our study builds on and advances this literature by using a probability sample representative of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, thus avoiding the limitations of prior non-random sampling. While Brücker et al. (2023) use the same data, their analysis is largely exploratory and based on a limited set of variables, offering only a preliminary account of settlement intentions without a theoretical framework. Our results reveal that both the socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts significantly shape Ukrainian refugees' settlement intentions. The economic factors are slightly more decisive, especially for men, highlighting the highly gendered context of departure from Ukraine, as well as the highly volatile and uncertain individual conditions in this conflict. Whereas a positive relationship exists between the socio-psychological context and settlement intentions, in the economic realm our findings reveal negative selectivity, challenging established hypotheses on settlement and return for forced migrants.

2. Importance of socio-psychological vs. economic-skills context in refugees' settlement intentions

Recent advances have greatly enhanced our understanding of why some migrants return to their origin country while others choose permanent settlement in their destination country. Theoretical frameworks such as neoclassical economics, the new economics of labour migration, and transnationalism have proved fruitful for studying return migration (e.g., Cassarino 2004; Constant and Massey 2002). However, the analyses of refugee return and settlement are still dominated by structuralist accounts, emphasizing conflict-driven displacement, home-country economic opportunities, and host-country policies (Hagan and Wassink 2020; Nguyen et al. 2024; Zakirova and Buzurukov 2021). Despite refugees having limited control over their initial escape from conflict, their individual aspirations play a crucial role in the decision to return or settle. This makes refugees' settlement intentions a key area for integrating insights from refugee studies with the broader field of the sociology of international migration (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Kogan and Kosyakova 2023).

Existing research on settlement intentions often distinguishes between socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts. De Vroome and van Tubergen (2014) apply this framework to recently settled immigrants in the Netherlands, while Carling and Schewel (2018), from a different theoretical angle, highlight how intentions to migrate or settle emerge in both social and economic environments. Although recent approaches have started to conceptualize settlement intentions under broader umbrella frameworks (Grzymala-Kazlowska 2016; Maxwell, Leybenson, and Yemini 2024; Mozetič, Lebek, and Ratzmann 2023; Rock 2025), disciplinary divides persist: many studies focus primarily on economic factors such as education, language skills, and financial resources (Adda, Dustmann, and Görlach 2022; Constant and Massey 2002), while others emphasize social ties, family connections, and well-being (e.g., Carling and Pettersen 2014; De Haas, Fokkema, and Fihri 2015).

We adopt this two-dimensional distinction to analyse the case of Ukrainian refugees. While we acknowledge that mapping empirical indicators onto abstract theoretical categories is not always clear-cut, we base our grouping on substantive reasoning and treat the two contexts as heuristic rather than rigid classifications. This approach improves conceptual clarity while accommodating the complexity of migration processes.

2.1 Socio-psychological context

Our first set of hypotheses centres on how refugees' socio-psychological context shapes permanent settlement intentions, particularly via household and family factors. The new economics of labour migration theory views migration as a risk minimization strategy, where return decisions often involve coordination between household and family members and the origin-country household plays a central role. As economic or, alternatively, conceptualised risk lessens, migrants are more inclined to return (Stark and Bloom 1985). Having a spouse remain in the country of origin is the most expressive indication of this theoretical perspective and is consequently associated with decreasing permanent settlement intentions abroad. This reasoning aligns with the social anchors theory, which posits that settlement intentions are shaped by ties to other family members and social contacts who provide the necessary resources to secure the return back home (Maxwell, Leybenson, and Yemini 2024; Mozetič, Lebek, and Ratzmann 2023). Therefore, we expect that not only spouses but also parents, sisters, or children remaining in the origin country are likely linked to more temporary stays abroad (Carling and Pettersen 2014; Ghosn et al. 2021). Turning this reasoning on its head, Constant and Massey (2002) show a positive relationship between having a partner and children in the destination country and the propensity for permanent settlement.

Although the Russian war is the major reason for almost all Ukrainian refugees (Brücker et al. 2023), having relatives already living abroad is generally seen as an important motivation for migration (Palloni et al. 2001). Particularly in the refugee context, these relatives not only provide necessary resources but may also encourage migration. The family's influence likely extends beyond these migration decisions to the settlement intentions of refugees. The household and family situation leads to three hypotheses:

H1a: Living together with partner and children in the destination country increases permanent settlement intentions.

H1b: Having family members and close relatives still living in the origin country decrease permanent settlement intentions.

H1c: Leaving the origin country because of family related migration motives increases permanent settlement intentions.

Alongside household and family situation, the psychosocial condition of refugees – encompassing health, well-being and perceived welcome – forms a critical dimension of their socio-psychological context. The phenomenon known as "Salmon bias" illustrates a strong link between health and migration patterns, where relatively ill immigrants often

return to their origin countries for better support networks or cultural reasons like burial preferences (Diaz, Koning, and Martinez-Donate 2016; Pablos-Méndez 1994). Conversely, there should exist a positive relationship between health and settlement intentions (Arenas et al. 2015; Cela and Bettin 2018).

Expanding beyond physical and mental health, subjective well-being encompasses evaluations of life quality, including affective experiences such as positive and negative emotions as well as personal reflections about the contentment with one life (Hendriks and Burger 2021). In the migration context, those more satisfied are more likely to intend permanent settlement, whereas the less satisfied are more likely to contemplate returning to their origin countries (Schiele 2021). For refugees, the intersection of household and family situations with psychosocial conditions is particularly poignant. Research shows that family separation and having family abroad can significantly diminish life satisfaction and mental health, potentially undermining intentions to settle (Löbel and Jacobsen 2021).

Beyond individual psychosocial conditions, the "warmth of welcome" in the destination country significantly influences integration and settlement decisions (Reitz 1998). The societal climate – encompassing attitudes toward immigrants – can profoundly shape newcomers' plans (Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger 2018). Refugees who feel discriminated against or face hostilities are more inclined to consider returning home, whereas those who encounter a hospitable reception tend to plan permanent stays (Al Husein and Wagner 2023; Ghosn et al. 2021; Zaika and Vakhitov 2024).

H2a: Better health status increases permanent settlement intentions.

H2b: A higher level of well-being increases permanent settlement intentions.

H2c: Feeling welcomed in the destination country increases permanent settlement intentions.

A final dimension of the socio-psychological context that shapes refugees' settlement intentions concerns social integration in their destination countries. In general, forming social bonds is viewed as an investment in the destination country – one not easily transferable elsewhere. Successful social integration should therefore correlate positively with refugees' settlement intentions. The direction of the relationship between social integration and settlement is not straightforward, as individuals with longer-term intentions naturally invest more in their destination country. Nevertheless, a positive and close connection between the following four key facets of social integration and settlement intentions are expected (Adda, Dustmann, and Görlach 2022; Wachter and Fleischmann 2018).

First, host-country language proficiency is a key investment that facilitates adaptation and strengthens settlement intentions (Chabé-Ferret, Machado, and Wahba 2018). Supporting this, Stefanovic, Loizides, and Parsons (2014) show that improved Turkish language skills among Kurdish refugees are linked to lower return intentions. Second, inter-ethnic networks, manifested through contacts with the local population, serve as social capital that supports both economic integration (Waldinger 1994) and attachment to the host society, thus fostering settlement intentions (de Vroome and van Tubergen 2014). By contrast, intra-ethnic ties often sustain transnational attachments and return aspirations. While such ties, especially family support, are crucial during initial settlement, they may hinder longer-term integration (Portes 1998; Tezcan 2019). Finally, stable housing – particularly living in one's own apartment – enhances security and belonging, whereas prolonged stays in shared accommodation can impede integration and reduce the desire to stay (Hannafi and Marouani 2022).

H3a: Greater proficiency in the language of the destination country increases permanent settlement intentions.

H3b: More inter-ethnic contact with the native population in the destination country increases permanent settlement intentions.

H3c: More intra-ethnic contact with the people from own origin country reduces permanent settlement intentions.

H3d: Living in shared accommodation decreases permanent settlement intentions.

2.2 Economic-skills context

Alongside the socio-psychological context, the economic-skills context plays a pivotal role in shaping refugees' decisions to settle or return. The first dimension of the economic-skills context focuses on refugees' pre-migration situation. Neoclassical economic theory posits that individuals migrate to maximize expected returns, so those with better employment prospects or earning power abroad are more likely to settle permanently (Sjaastad 1962). Conversely, migrants whose cost–benefit analyses fail, due to unforeseen obstacles or unmet expectations, often return home, contributing to 'negative selection' in employment and occupational status among returnees (Wahba 2015).

However, empirical studies on the return migration of voluntary migrants frequently reveal a positive selectivity of returnees in terms of education. This phenomenon is

explained by the initial aspiration of migrants who reside abroad temporarily: Educationally advantaged migrants want to acquire new skills such as language or intercultural skills as well as all sorts of tacit knowledge, or use their stay abroad as a signalling device for employers in order to gain a competitive edge in the labour market in their origin country (e.g., Ette and Witte 2021; Jensen and Pedersen 2007). Another explanation for the return of the better educated and economically more successful is the potential rewards that migrants can gain abroad for qualifications acquired in the origin country. Return migrants may thus be positively selected in both educational qualifications and pre-migration economic standing (Constant and Massey 2002). Similar findings emerge for forced migrants, where higher education is correlated with the likelihood of return – at least in some contexts (e.g., Beaman, Onder, and Onder 2021; Hannafi and Marouani 2023; Müeller-Funk and Fransen 2022). In line with this reasoning, refugees with fewer premigration economic resources have fewer incentives to return, as they stand to gain less. Those with greater financial means may see flight as a temporary refuge, especially if conflict disruption is counterbalanced by potential post-war reconstruction opportunities.

Additionally, refugees who cite economic motives for leaving their home country may have already contemplated emigration before the conflict. According to the new economics of labour migration, such 'target savers' use migration as a tool for specific economic goals, with little interest in permanent settlement. Altogether, we derive three hypotheses regarding refugees' economic pre-migration context:

H4a: Higher educational qualifications decrease permanent settlement intentions.

H4b: Less favourable economic situations before leaving the origin country increase permanent settlement intentions.

H4c: Leaving the origin country for economic migration motives decreases permanent settlement intentions.

A second dimension of the economic-skills context concerns economic integration in the destination country. As discussed above, migrants whose initial cost–benefit calculations fail to materialise and whose expectations remain unmet are more inclined to return. For instance, unemployment or non-participation in the labour market has been found to increase the odds of return migration (Constant and Massey 2002; Hoogeveen, Rossi, and Sansone 2019). Applied to the context of Ukrainian refugees, obtaining employment or actively seeking work in Germany should promote permanent settlement intentions (Waldorf 1995; Wanner, Pecoraro, and Tani 2021).

Furthermore, we expect that effectively utilizing one's skills in the destination country positively correlates with settlement intentions. Skills under-utilization may undermine job satisfaction, impede long-term economic integration, and weaken financial returns on education, thereby lowering the likelihood of staying. Certified occupations pose particular challenges, as they are often less accessible to individuals with foreign credentials than other skilled jobs (Brücker et al. 2021; Tibajev and Hellgren 2019). Refugees working in such occupations in their origin countries must navigate lengthy credential recognition processes to continue their professions abroad – barriers that often result in significant skill under-utilization and reduced chances of permanent settlement (Chiswick and Miller 2007; Sommer 2021; Weeden 2002).

Additionally, the pursuit of further education and training in the destination country is a critical component of economic integration. While refugees' displacement is not voluntary, some proactively seek ways to make productive use of their stay abroad. Refugees with concrete plans for professional or educational training are more likely to settle permanently in Germany. Therefore we expect:

H5a: Being employed or aspiring to be employed in the destination country increases permanent settlement intentions.

H5b: Previous employment in the origin country in a certified occupation decreases permanent settlement intentions.

H5c: Professional or educational training aspirations in the destination country increase permanent settlement intentions.

A final dimension of the economic-skills context driving refugees' settlement intentions involves refugees' dependency on external support. Such intentions are often influenced by individuals' sense of agency (Ajzen 1991); feeling under-resourced and dependent can undermine the desire to settle permanently. Because most refugees cannot prepare financially for forced displacement, fleeing entails high costs, increased living expenses, and the challenge of finding new accommodation. Studies show that financially stable and independent refugees are more inclined to plan for permanent settlement (Jensen and Pedersen 2007), and satisfaction with household income negatively correlates with return intentions (Tezcan 2019). Beyond financial concerns, refugees also face difficulties with language acquisition, labour market access, and childcare. The more they rely on external help the less they feel in control of their situation, which further dampens their settlement intentions. Accordingly, we expect that:

H6a: Satisfaction with one's financial situation in the destination country increases permanent settlement intentions.

H6b: Dependence on support from others decreases settlement intentions.

3. Data and methods

3.1 The IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany

The following analyses rely on the IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany (Brücker et al. 2023), a probability sample of Ukrainian nationals who sought protection in Germany between the beginning of the Russian war of aggression on 24 February 2022 and the beginning of June 2022.[5] Sampling was based on the two administrative registers available in Germany that allow drawing high-quality samples of international migrants and refugees, the population register and the central register of foreigners. A two-stage sampling procedure was used to draw a gross sample of 48,000 Ukrainian nationals aged between 18 and 70 who were registered in 100 cities and counties in Germany (for more information on the sampling frame, see Steinhauer et al. 2024).

The survey followed a push-to-web mixed-mode design, inviting respondents to complete a self-administered questionnaire either online or via paper and pencil. A total of 11,754 individuals participated between 24 August and 4 October 2022, with 81.0% completing the survey online and the remainder returning mailed questionnaires. The overall AAPOR I response rate was 24.6%, which is comparable to studies with similar research design or target groups (e.g., Cornesse et al. 2022), and additional assessments of data quality indicate minimal systematic sampling bias.

To ensure that we focused on the intended target population of adult Ukrainian refugees, we excluded (1) individuals who had left Ukraine before 2022, or entered Germany before 24 February 2022, as well as cases where this information was missing (454 observations); respondents aged over 70 years (30 observations); and those reported their last residence region as not in Ukraine (2 observations). We further excluded

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[5] This study analysed secondary data, with all methods carried out in accordance with applicable guidelines and regulations. Because refugees constitute a particularly vulnerable group that has experienced war, flight, and expulsion, a code of ethics was developed. This included: (1) obtaining informed consent through a data protection declaration confirming voluntary participation and confidentiality; (2) informing respondents that non-participation would not affect their residence status; (3) avoiding potentially sensitive and re-traumatizing questions; (4) conducting an extensive pre-test with Ukrainian refugees, supported by a telephone hotline, to identify and revise or remove sensitive items (Torregroza et al. 2025). The final questionnaire was then checked against the IAB Code of Ethics and IAB Ethics Form (IAB 2021), which identified no ethical concerns.

respondents with missing values for the dependent variable (53 observations; but see Section 3.3). The resulting sample covers 11,215 individuals (95% of the original data). While studies on refugee settlement and return migration processes regularly suffer from a lack of reliable survey data (Schiefer et al. 2023), the random sample of Ukrainian refugees, combined with hardly any selective return migration, provides an ideal test case for analysing the relationship between the socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts of refugees and their permanent settlement or return migration intentions.

3.2 Variables

3.2.1 Dependent variable

We measure the dependent variable, permanent settlement intentions, using the question 'How long would you like to stay in Germany?', which captures preferences as one dimension of intentions (Mjelva and Carling 2023). Following other recent studies (e.g., Ette, Heß, and Sauer 2016; Koenings et al. 2021), a binary indicator is coded as 1 if respondents select 'forever', and 0 if they choose 'until the end of the war', 'up to another year at most', 'for a few more years', or 'don't know'.

3.2.2 Variables for socio-psychological context

To test the hypotheses regarding the relationship between the household and family factors and the settlement intentions of refugees (H1a–H1c), we examine respondents' family situation in the destination country, contrasting individuals without a partner and children with two other constellations: individuals with core family in Germany (partner and children under 18) or abroad. Family obligations and personal ties to the country of origin are measured by a continuous variable counting the number of relatives (children, siblings, parents and in-laws, grandchildren and grandparents, and other relatives) still living in Ukraine, with a maximum of 5 and a mean of 1.74 (summary statistics for all independent variables appear in Table 1 (with gender-specific data in Online Appendix Table A-1). In line with studies on voluntary migration (Luthra, Platt, and Salamonska 2018), individual motives are used to analyse the pre-migration context. Using self-reported responses to the question 'What reasons were decisive for you to leave Ukraine?', we code a binary indicator as 1 for respondents who say they left Ukraine for family-related reasons – e.g., 'because family members, friends, or acquaintances have left this country' or 'I wanted to move to join family members' – and 0 in all other cases.

We include three constructs for the living situation of Ukrainian refugees in the destination country (H2a–H2c). First, self-rated health is based on a single-item scale validated against objective health (e.g., Jylhä 2009); we compare those reporting (very) good health with those indicating poorer health. Second, well-being is based on the 11-point life satisfaction scale (Diener, Inglehart, and Tay 2013). Third, perceived welcome at arrival is measured by recoding the question 'Did you feel welcome when you arrived in Germany?' as 1 if the response was 'completely' or 'predominantly', and 0 otherwise.

Table 1:   Summary statistics of independent variables

	Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min/Max
Socio-psychological context	Family situation: No partner, no children		0.17	-	0/1
	Family situation: Core family in Germany		0.38	-	0/1
	Family situation: Core family member not in Germany	11,050	0.45	-	0/1
	Number of relatives in Ukraine	11,193	1.73	1.16	0–5
	Left Ukraine for family reasons	11,082	0.10	-	0/1
	(Very) good health status	11,188	0.38	-	0/1
	Life satisfaction	11,169	5.83	1.99	0–10
	Perceived welcome at arrival	11,192	0.77	-	0/1
	German language skills	11,154	1.84	0.82	1–5
	Weekly time with Germans	11,185	0.58	-	0/1
	Weekly time with Ukrainians	11,168	0.66	-	0/1
	Shared accommodation	11,190	0.39	-	0/1
Economic-skills context	Education: Low secondary or less		0.02	-	0/1
	Education: Upper secondary		0.18	-	0/1
	Education: Post-secondary non-tertiary		0.10	-	0/1
	Education: Tertiary bachelor or unfinished		0.16	-	0/1
	Education: Tertiary Master or higher	11,182	0.53	-	0/1
	Premigration economic situation: Above average		0.19	-	0/1
	Premigration economic situation: Average		0.55	-	0/1
	Premigration economic situation: Below average	11,166	0.25	-	0/1
	Left Ukraine for economic reasons	11,082	0.11	-	0/1
	In work or want to work	11,101	0.68	-	0/1
	Level of pre-migration job certification [1]	8,760	0.59	0.29	0–1
	Intending to further education	11,113	0.25	-	0/1
	Satisfaction with current income	11,138	3.20	1.08	1–6
	Amount of support required	10,916	2.49	1.76	0–10

Table 1:   (Continued)

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min/Max
Female	11,205	0.82	-	0/1
Current age	11,215	41.12	13.56	18–70
Months since arrival	11,215	4.98	1.44	0–8
Worked before arrival	11,186	0.83	-	0/1
Region in Ukraine: West		0.10	-	0/1
Region in Ukraine: Kyiv		0.19	-	0/1
Region in Ukraine: North		0.13	-	0/1
Region in Ukraine: Centre		0.12	-	0/1
Region in Ukraine: East		0.31	-	0/1
Region in Ukraine: South		0.14	-	0/1
Region in Ukraine: Crimea	11,150	0.00	-	0/1
PAPI Mode	11,215	0.18	-	0/1
Completion month: August		0.55	-	0/1
Completion month: September		0.41	-	0/1
Completion month: October	11,215	0.04	-	0/1
Federal state: Schleswig-Holstein		0.02	-	0/1
Federal state: Hamburg		0.06	-	0/1
Federal state: Lower Saxony		0.06	-	0/1
Federal state: Bremen		0.01	-	0/1
Federal state: North Rhine-Westphalia		0.21	-	0/1
Federal state: Hesse		0.07	-	0/1
Federal state: Rhineland-Palatinate		0.05	-	0/1
Federal state: Baden-Wuerttemberg		0.08	-	0/1
Federal state: Bavaria		0.19	-	0/1
Federal state: Saarland		0.01	-	0/1
Federal state: Berlin		0.13	-	0/1
Federal state: Brandenburg		0.01	-	0/1
Federal state: Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania		0.02	-	0/1
Federal state: Saxony		0.03	-	0/1
Federal state: Saxony-Anhalt		0.03	-	0/1
Federal state: Thuringia	11,215	0.03	-	0/1

Note: Variation in the sample size (column 2) is due to the differences in missing data across variables. In the multivariate model, we impute missing values in the variables of interest. [1] Missing values are predicted only for those who worked before arrival.
Source: IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany (2022).

The measurement of social integration (H3a–H3d) begins with relatively poor German language skills (1.84) when assessed via a mean index ranging from 1 to 5 based on self-rated speaking, writing, and reading skills. We also examine inter- and intra-ethnic contacts by asking how frequently respondents spend time with Germans and with other Ukrainians in Germany. Answers are recorded on a six-point scale from 'never' to 'daily' and recoded into binary indicators distinguishing those who spend time with Germans at least weekly and time with Ukrainians weekly from those who interact with

the corresponding groups less frequently. Lastly, the housing situation contrasts refugees living in their own private accommodation with those living in hotels, pensions, or refugee accommodation centres, or who share accommodation with other individuals.

3.2.3 Variables for economic-skills context

We use eight variables to test how refugees' economic-skills context relates to settlement intentions. For the premigration situation (H4a–H4c), we first categorize education level using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011). The premigration economic situation is based on respondents' self-assessed economic situation before February 2022, compared with others in Ukraine, and collapsed into three groups: (well) below average, average, and (well) above average. In line with our approach to family-related migration motives, we include a dummy variable indicating whether respondents left Ukraine for economic reasons, coded as 1 if they cited 'poor personal living conditions' or 'general economic situation in the country', and 0 otherwise.

Ukrainian refugees' economic integration in Germany (H5a–H5c) is captured by three variables. First, we distinguish respondents in work or wanting to work (i.e., those with definite work aspirations) from those who are not working and do not plan (or are unlikely) to enter the labour market. Second, to gauge potential job satisfaction we use the level of pre-migration job certification measured by the degree of standardised certification of the last occupation in Ukraine before fleeing the country (Vicari 2014). Occupations with higher certification are typically more standardized, which can create greater challenges when trying to continue the same profession in Germany. Refugees' educational aspirations are indicated by whether respondents are currently intending to further their education based on the question 'Are you currently actively looking for a vocational training opportunity or a place at university?'.

Refugees' dependency on support forms the final dimension (H6a–H6b) and is captured by two indicators. Financial dependency is self-assessed on a 6-point scale (from severe difficulties to very good), reflecting respondents' satisfaction with current income and how they and any accompanying family members make ends meet. The need for support in Germany is measured by a continuous variable that captures the number of supports required, derived from ten possible assistance areas.

3.2.4 Control variables

We further control for gender, age, and age squared, recognizing the importance of personal demographics. Refugees' integration outcomes and settlement intentions are highly dependent on contextual factors such as time spent in the destination country, regional institutional context, and the security situation in the region of origin (Al Husein and Wagner 2023; Müeller-Funk and Fransen 2022). To control for temporal and regional influences, all models include fixed effects for the month of the interview, region of origin, and federal state in Germany. Mode-specific fixed effects account for web-based or paper-and-pencil responses.

3.3 Method

Following the binary dependent variable, we estimate linear probability models with robust standard errors. Analyses are replicated for all respondents as well as separately for male and female refugees to account for gendered opportunities to leave Ukraine and gendered risks of personal involvement in the conflict. All explanatory and control variables are entered simultaneously in the multivariate analyses.

In a final step, we employ sheaf coefficients (Heise 1972), a type of regression model that uses parametrically weighted explanatory variables (Yamaguchi 2002). This method allows us to group correlated variables according to our theoretical constructs – socio-psychological and economic-skills – and assess their collective influence on refugees' settlement intentions, while controlling for other factors. Sheaf coefficients, which are standardized multiple-partial regression coefficients, represent the combined impact of a latent variable composed of each grouped set of items. In our application, these latent variables correspond to the aggregated socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts. Because the coefficients are standardized (mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1), they allow a tentative comparison of how strongly each construct shapes settlement intentions.[6] As noted above, the grouping of variables involves ambiguities: a precise one-to-one correspondence between each measure and the constructs is not always feasible, and the chosen items may not fully or uniformly capture their respective constructs. Therefore, we present the sheaf coefficients primarily as a descriptive tool, providing an overview of the patterns among the included measures.

To address item nonresponse, we apply multiple imputation via chained equations (van Buuren 2012), generating 20 imputed datasets. Following Rubin's (1987) method,

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[6] In migration research, this method has been used to group variables in line with theoretical constructs such as efficiency, incentives, and exposure to second language acquisition (Kosyakova, Kristen, and Spörlein 2022) and in examining how social and human capital influence immigrants' structural integration (Kanas et al. 2012).

we combine results across datasets considering the imputation variances within and between the imputed data sets. Respondents with missing information on settlement intentions were considered in the multiple imputation but not in the analyses of settlement intentions. Table 1 (column 2) shows the extent of missing data across measures.

4. Results

4.1 Settlement intentions of Ukrainian refugees

Within the first few months of arrival, over a quarter of adult Ukrainian refugees intended to settle permanently in Germany (see Figure 1, left graph). Approximately 14% planned to stay for a few years or less, while a third intended to remain only until the end of the war in Ukraine. Among those not committed to permanent settlement in Germany or who were uncertain, follow-up questions about return intentions were posed. Two-thirds indicated a willingness to return to Ukraine, less than 2% considered moving to another country, and one third remained uncertain about their future plans (see Figure 1, right graph).

Figure 1: **Settlement intentions of Ukrainian refugees in Germany (weighted)**
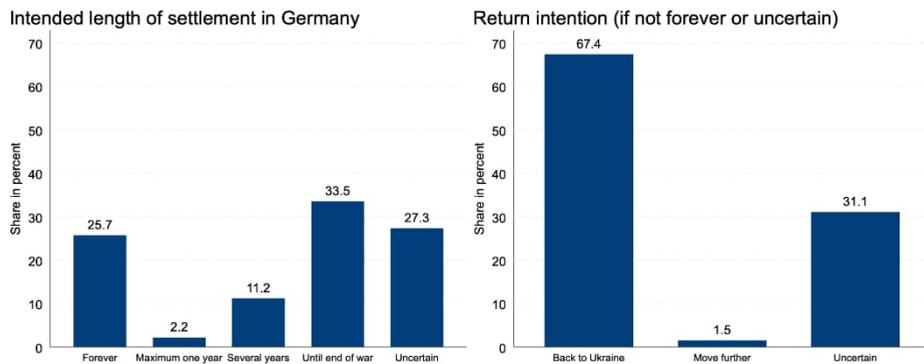
Source: IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany (2022).

In the following two subsections, we focus on our core research question of how socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts shape Ukrainian refugees' permanent settlement intentions in Germany.

4.2 Socio-psychological context

Figure 2 illustrates the results from our multivariate analyses of the socio-psychological context factors affecting Ukrainian refugees' settlement intentions, expressed as average marginal effects. In a snapshot, our empirical findings largely fit the theoretically expected relation with the household and family situation, both the psychosocial conditions and the refugee's social integration in their destination country.

In line with hypothesis H1a, refugee households in Germany that include all core family members are more likely to express intentions to settle permanently than spatially separated partnerships (see Figure 2). Empirical support is also provided for hypothesis H1b: the number of family members and close relatives still living in Ukraine is negatively related to the probability of settling permanently in Germany. For each additional person in the network still living in Ukraine, the probability is reduced by 2.6 percentage points (see Table A-2). These results underscore the ambivalent role of personal networks in Ukraine, which offer both emotional bonds and obligations and can discourage long-term absence. This aligns with previous research showing that having family in the country of origin increases return orientation among both refugee and non-refugee migrants (Al Husein and Wagner 2023; Hernes et al. 2025; but see, Kayaoglu, Şahin-Mencütek, and Erdoğan 2022). The findings are further consistent with studies on the anchoring processes of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, which show that transnational family ties can hinder settlement and, in some cases, prompt return (Maxwell, Leybenson, and Yemini 2024; Mozetič, Lebek, and Ratzmann 2023; Rock 2025).

While the determinants of settlement intentions are largely similar for male and female refugees, notable gender differences emerge in the influence of family networks in Ukraine. Ties to family members and close relatives play a stronger role for women than for men, suggesting gendered differences in opportunity structures and the salience of transnational social ties. One possible explanation for men's overall higher settlement intentions is the heightened risk facing younger male refugees of being drafted into the Ukrainian army and personally drawn into the conflict (Kogan and Kosyakova 2025). Another reason may be the fear of stigmatization for having attempted to avoid conscription (Hernes et al. 2025; Sohst et al. 2025), an explanation also supported by recent qualitative evidence findings on Ukrainian refugees' return intentions (Müeller-Funk and Fransen 2022). Compared to these structural conditions, the pre-migration situation, as measured by the existence of family-related migration motives, has little effect on settlement intentions. While the association is visible in the pooled model, it weakens in the gendered analyses and is no longer estimated with precision (H1c).

Figure 2: **Average marginal effects of the probability of permanent settlement intentions in Germany (rather than temporary stay) depending on the socio-psychological context of refugees, in percentage points (with 95% CIs)**
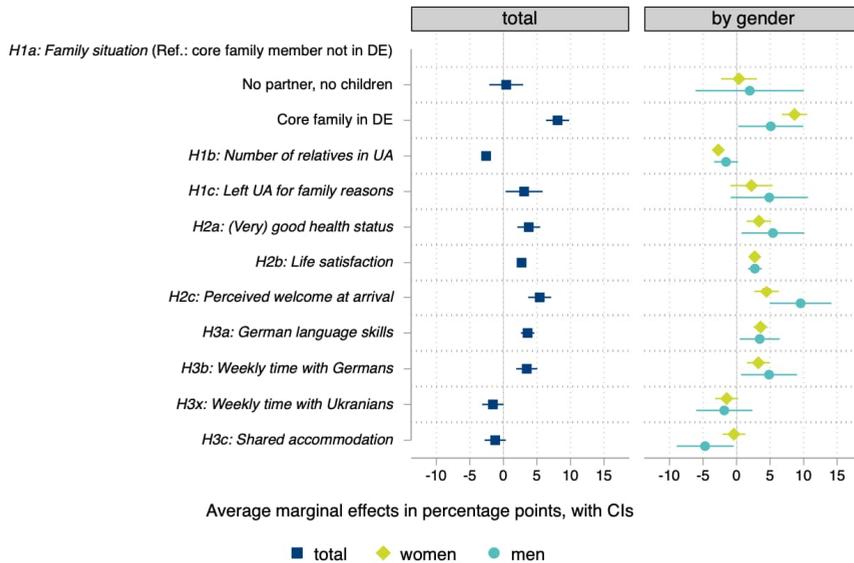
Note: Results from linear regression models, Models 1 (total), 2 (women), 3 (men) in Table A-2 in Online Appendix. Robust standard errors. CIs = confidence intervals. DE = Germany. UA = Ukraine. All models account additionally for the economic-skills context variables and controls (Section 3).
Source: IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany (2022).

Beyond pre-migration context, refugees' psychosocial conditions play an important role. In line with H2a, the 'salmon bias' observed in other migration contexts also applies to Ukrainian refugees. Despite Germany having a better healthcare system than Ukraine, especially now medical care is limited due to the war, those in good or very good health are 3.8 percentage points more likely to intend to settle permanently in Germany compared to those with poor health status. This trend extends to well-being (H2b): The average life satisfaction of Ukrainian refugees in Germany is comparatively low (Brücker et al. 2023), and male refugees show the strongest effect, with those who report better self-rated health and higher life-satisfaction being the least likely to return. Future studies using longitudinal data should explore whether improved health influences settlement intentions or if the intent to settle permanently enhances physical and mental health. Likewise, refugees who perceive the societal climate in Germany as welcoming are more inclined to settle permanently, conforming to hypothesis H2c.

The last three hypotheses examine the link between social integration in the destination country and refugees' settlement intentions. Consistent with research on both voluntary and forced migrants (Kayaoglu, Şahin-Mencütek, and Erdoğan 2022; Stefanovic, Loizides, and Parsons 2014), better German language proficiency increases Ukrainian refugees' settlement intentions by 3.6 percentage points (H3a). Similarly, frequent interactions with the native German population positively influence the desire to settle permanently (H3b), whereas the opposite is true for frequent interactions with Ukrainian non-family members (H3c), though the estimated effects are imprecise. However, the hypothesis concerning the housing situation (H3d) only found empirical support for male refugees. In the first few months after arrival, shared accommodation compared to private accommodation is a less relevant aspect of social integration driving settlement prospects.

4.3 Economic-skills context

While most of the hypotheses regarding the relationship between the socio-psychological context and the settlement intentions of Ukrainian refugees are generally supported, the picture regarding the economic-skills context is more ambivalent (Figure 3).

Starting from the pre-migration situation, we find support for negative selectivity of Ukrainian refugees with permanent settlement intentions (H4a). Indeed, settlement intentions decline with higher education levels and are lowest among those with a master's degree. Notably, this pattern emerges only for women, indicating that while the overall refugee population from Ukraine is positively selected (Kohlenberger et al. 2023; van Tubergen et al. 2023), better-educated women are less inclined to remain in Germany. Consistent with this finding and our expectations (H4b), those with below-average pre-migration economic resources are more likely to settle permanently in Germany, again only among women. This resonates with findings by Gorbach, Polshchykova, and Ryabchuk (2024), who report lower settlement intentions among more privileged refugees due to the risk of status decline, as well as with the 'active expectation of return' adaptation model identified by Chargaziia and Panchenko (2025), often expressed by those with strong professional prospects in Ukraine.

Figure 3: **Average marginal effects of the probability of permanent settlement intentions in Germany (rather than temporary stay) depending on the economic-skills context of refugees, in percentage points (with 95% CIs)**
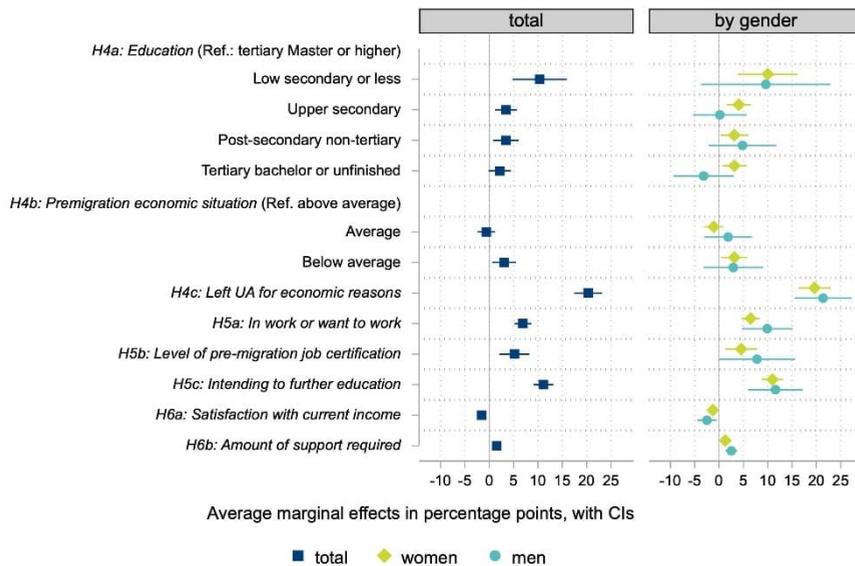
Note: Results from linear regression models, Models 1 (total), 2 (women), 3 (men) in Table A-2 in Online Appendix. Robust standard errors. CIs = confidence intervals. All models account additionally for the socio-psychological context variables and controls (Section 3).
Source: IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany (2022).

The empirical evidence largely challenges our expectations derived from the new economics of labour migration. Notably, motives of economic migration, distinct from the family-related motives previously discussed, play a significant role in determining the likelihood of refugees intending permanent settlement. Only 10% of refugees cited economic reasons for leaving Ukraine (Brücker et al. 2023), yet, contrary to our hypothesis (H4c), these individuals are 20.2 percentage points more likely to intend permanent settlement in Germany than those without such motives. This suggests that for refugees who had contemplated emigration even before the conflict, the Russian invasion may have provided an unexpected window of opportunity to restart their lives abroad (Jirka, Mackova, and Kamionka 2024; Karimi and Byelikova 2024; Lubkemann 2008).

The empirical findings regarding employment (H5a) are in line with our original hypothesis, but also with the idea of the opportunity to restart abroad. Those who are already working or intending to work in the German labour market are more likely to aspire to permanent settlement in Germany.[7] It certainly also applies to Hypothesis 5c, where refugees who are actively seeking vocational or educational training in Germany are 11 percentage point more likely to intend permanent settlement. We further expected that refugees previously employed in certified occupations in Ukraine would face greater challenges in finding adequate jobs in Germany, making them less inclined to settle permanently (H5b). The empirical findings point in the opposite direction: those who are likely to face institutional barriers in the German labour market are, paradoxically, more likely to express intentions to remain. This pattern may reflect an acceptance of initial bureaucratic and labour market hurdles or the perception that any economic marginalization is only temporary. The desire for long-term security may outweigh short-term difficulties experienced during the early post-arrival period (Gorbach, Polshchykova, and Ryabchuk 2024; Lazarenko 2024).

Finally, those who are more satisfied with their financial situation in Germany are less likely to intend to settle permanently compared to refugees stating sever difficulties. This contradicts hypothesis H6a, as do the findings for H6b: Refugees with a higher subjective need for support from others report a higher intention to settle permanently.

4.4 Relative importance of socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts

To assess the relative importance of the socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts in shaping settlement intentions, Table 2 illustrates the standardized sheaf coefficients. These coefficients provide a single effect size for grouped variables related to each context, simplifying the comparison (see also Kanas et al. 2012; Kosyakova, Kristen, and Spörlein 2022). The findings indicate that both socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts significantly shape the settlement intentions of Ukrainian refugees. While both contexts are influential, the economic-skills context has a slightly greater impact than the socio-psychological context, particularly for male refugees.

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[7] We explored distinguishing currently employed refugees from those not yet employed but definitely intending to work, but both groups showed high permanent settlement intentions, making the model less parsimonious. Consequently, we maintained a single variable indicating whether respondents are employed or intend to work.

Table 2: **Relative influence of socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts on permanent settlement intentions, with standardized sheaf coefficient**

	Total	Women	Men
Socio-psychological context	0.23	0.23	0.23
Economic-skills context	0.25	0.24	0.30
Controls	0.13	0.14	0.17

Source: IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany (2022).

4.5 Robustness checks

Several alternative models were estimated to check the robustness of the reported results. These included (1) excluding all paper-and-pencil questionnaires (Model 1.1, Table A-3), and (2) applying design weights (Model 1.2, Table A-3). These tests consistently supported the main findings. Notably, two hypotheses that had shown ambivalent results received further empirical support through these robustness tests, particularly regarding housing situation (H3c). Only with regard to the impact of family motives' (H1c) and premigration economic conditions (H4b) do the robustness checks cast doubt on a substantial effect.

Refugees from (partially) occupied regions may perceive return opportunities differently (see, e.g., Sohst et al. 2025), which could moderate the influence of various factors on their settlement intentions in the host country. For instance, individuals with family members still in the occupied territories may remain psychologically tied to them and prioritize family reunification in Germany over long-term settlement plans, thereby attenuating their intention to stay. To explore this possibility, we re-estimated our benchmark models by refugees' pre-migration counties of residence. We define occupied areas based on territorial control during the respondents' arrival period in Germany (February–September 2022; see Models 1.3–1.4, Table A-4) and during the survey period (August–October 2022; see Models 1.5–1.6, Table A-4). During these phases, occupied territories included the north-eastern front, including parts of Kyiv (partially occupied until April 2022) and Kharkiv (occupied until September 2022); Crimea and the Donbas (including areas in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts that were still under Ukrainian control on 23 February 2022); Zaporizhzhia and Kherson (largely occupied); and Mykolaiv (partially occupied). Overall, the results remain robust across these subgroups, with some notable exceptions. Certain socio-psychological factors – such as family-related reasons for leaving Ukraine and contact with Germans – show stronger effects for refugees from rear (non-occupied) regions. Conversely, factors related to the economic-skills context, such as economic motivations for leaving, pre-migration job certification, and active

pursuit of education in Germany, appear more important to those from occupied regions. This pattern suggests that refugees from rear regions may still consider return a viable option and are more influenced by social and familial dynamics, whereas those from occupied areas are more likely to perceive their displacement as long-term and respond with stronger economic investment strategies in the host country.

Beyond methodological validations, we also accounted for the inherent uncertainty and volatility of refugees' stated settlement intentions. While uncertainty is a core feature of all migration decisions (e.g., Czaika, Bijak, and Prike 2021; Williams and Baláž 2012), it is especially pronounced in the context of ongoing war and forced displacement. Prior research emphasizes the unpredictability and instability experienced by Ukrainian refugees (e.g., Lapshyna 2025), underscoring the limits of planning under such conditions (see also Hernes et al. 2025; Koenings et al. 2021). To address this, we reclassified our dependent variable into three categories: 'permanent settlement intention' (coded as 1), 'return intention' (combining responses such as 'until the end of the war', 'another year at most', and 'a few more years', if paired with a stated desire to return), and 'uncertain' (for those who selected 'don't know'). Respondents planning to move elsewhere were excluded. Based on this classification, we estimated two additional models: one comparing permanent settlement to return intentions (excluding uncertain cases, Table A-5, Model 4), and another comparing permanent settlement to uncertainty (excluding return intentions, Table A-5, Model 5). The results reinforce the importance of family context: refugees without a partner or children were more likely to express permanent settlement intentions, consistent with findings by Hernes et al. (2025).

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper analyses the intentions of forced migrants to settle permanently abroad. The large-scale displacement of Ukrainians following the Russian military invasion in February 2022 provides an opportunity to test existing hypotheses regarding the permanent settlement intentions of voluntary migrants in the context of forced migration. Three main findings stand out and are documented in Table 3.

First, forced migrants are in many respects very similar to voluntary migrants and the drivers of settlement intentions apply equally to both types of migrants. The example of Ukrainian refugees in Germany shows that particularly in terms of the socio-psychological context – household and family situation, psychosocial conditions, and social integration in the destination country – in at least 8 out of our 10 hypotheses, the drivers that explain the intentions of voluntary migrants also explain the experiences of refugees.

Second, the Russian war against Ukraine has resulted in an overwhelming number of humanitarian migrants. The number of refugees who cite family or economic motives (in addition to humanitarian reasons) is comparatively low, at 10% and 11% respectively. While both the family context and the economic-skills context prior to migration are particularly relevant for explaining the settlement intentions of voluntary migrants, it is the economic motives that play a role for refugees. There is a comparatively small group of refugees for whom the war acted as a catalyst, transforming into action intentions to leave Ukraine that may have existed prior to the outbreak of the war.

Table 3:   Hypothesized and observed permanent settlement intention patterns

		Hypotheses	Hypothesized effects	Observed effects for		
				Total	Women	Men
Socio-psychological context	H1a	Living together with partner and children in the destination country	+	+	+	+
	H1b	Family members and close relatives still living in origin country	–	–	–	ip.
	H1c	Leaving the origin country because of family-related migration motives	+	+	ip.	ip.
	H2a	Better health status	+	+	+	+
	H2b	Higher level of well-being	+	+	+	+
	H2c	Feeling welcomed in the destination country	+	+	+	+
	H3a	Better destination-country language skills	+	+	+	+
	H3b	Inter-ethnic contacts with the native population in the destination country	+	+	+	+
	H3c	Intra-ethnic contacts with Ukrainians in the destination country	–	ip.	ip.	ip.
	H3d	Living in shared accommodation	–	ip.	ip.	–
Economic-skills context	H4a	Higher educational qualifications	–	–	–	ip.
	H4b	Less favourable economic situation before leaving the origin country	+	+	+	ip.
	H4c	Leaving the origin country for economic migration motives	–	+	+	+
	H5a	Being or aspiring to be employed in the destination country	+	+	+	+
	H5b	Previous employment in the origin country in certified occupations	–	+	+	+
	H5c	Professional or educational training aspirations in the destination country	+	+	+	+
	H6a	Satisfaction with financial situation in the destination country	+	–	–	–
	H6b	Dependence on support from others	–	+	+	+

Note: the symbols '+' and '-' indicate positive or negative associations with the probability of permanent settlement intentions. 'ip.' indicates that the estimate is imprecise, i.e., not clearly distinguishable from zero based on wide confidence intervals or small effect sizes. These designations are based on model estimates reported in Figures 2 and 3.

Third, the sheaf coefficients show that both socio-psychological and economic-skills contexts significantly shape the settlement intentions of Ukrainian refugees, with the economic-skills context having a slightly greater impact than the socio-psychological context, particularly for male refugees. Additionally, the settlement intentions of refugees are not only "strongly stratified" (Müeller-Funk and Fransen 2022), as others have documented. In line with recent research in other geographical contexts (e.g., Beaman, Onder, and Onder 2021; Stefanovic, Loizides, and Parsons 2014; de Vroome and van Tubergen 2014), our random sample of Ukrainian refugees provides additional evidence

that forced migrants expressing settlement intentions are rather negatively selected. While refugees are regularly a positively selected group from their origin societies (Aksoy and Poutvaara 2021; Spörlein and Kristen 2019), their potential return back home does not reinforce the selectivity of the initial migration flow. For most refugees, the initial decision to flee a conflict in their origin country is hardly based on a cost–benefit calculation aimed at maximising their lifetime earnings. Contingent on the situation in the origin country after the conflict has come to an end, the economic returns will be higher back home, especially for the better educated and economically more successful, who have greater difficulty exploiting their qualifications in the destination country and achieving a social status comparable to their previous situation. In the Ukrainian context, it is the highly educated and economically successful who have lost the most by leaving the origin country – their social status, their further professional career, their secure income – and who therefore have the greatest interest in returning as soon as conditions in the origin country allow. The evidence regarding Ukrainian refugees in Germany contradicts Borjas and Bratsberg (1996), who argue that return migration usually reinforces the selectivity of the initial migration flow, at least in regard to reported settlement and return intentions: Refugees with lower qualifications are on average more likely to be willing to start again abroad and to take advantage of additional training or labour market opportunities, and refugees with permanent settlement intentions are negatively selected in terms of education, financial situation, and welfare dependency.

Compared to previous research, our large and homogeneous sample, which is hardly affected by selective return migration, allows more robust conclusions regarding the drivers of refugees' permanent or temporary migration intentions. Moreover, our use of a probability sample addresses issues related to the selective survey participation observed in recent research on Ukrainian refugees in Europe. Notably, our findings align with those by Hernes et al. (2025) and van Tubergen et al. (2024), who also note that Ukrainian refugees with family members remaining in Ukraine are more likely to express intentions to return. Similar to our findings on pre-migration resources, van Tubergen et al. (2024) find a positive impact of pre-migration economic resources on return intentions. However, while Hernes et al. (2025) report no significant educational differences, van Tubergen et al. (2024) observe opposite patterns to those in our study, with those with a tertiary degree having a lower probability of intending to return. These results seem to be driven by respondents in countries with close proximity to Ukraine or strong migration ties, such as Moldova and Czech Republic (van Tubergen et al. 2024), and likely reflect the less positive educational selectivity of Ukrainian refugees in these destination countries (Kohlenberger et al. 2023; van Tubergen et al. 2023).

Our conclusions are based on the specific case of recently arrived refugees from Ukraine and are subject to several important limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of our data precludes causal inference and raises the possibility of reverse causality.

Second, our findings rely on intentions expressed within the first 0–8 months after arrival in Germany – a period of exceptional uncertainty and adaptation (Lapshyna 2025; Mijić et al. 2024; Milewski et al. 2023). Prior research suggests that such intentions may evolve with prolonged residence abroad, the course of the war, or emerging patterns of transnational mobility and 'virtual returns' (see Lapshyna 2025; Udovyk and Acebillo-Baqué 2025:13ff). As the conflict endures and the destruction of infrastructure, assets, and social networks deepens, preferences for return may weaken, especially for initially better-off groups. Conversely, prolonged stay in Germany may facilitate integration, particularly among the better-educated and more resourceful. Correspondingly, the stratified pattern of settlement intentions in the early period of the conflict observed in this study could change (Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al. 2024; see also Novotný et al. 2026). Only the forthcoming waves of the IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany, with their longitudinal design, will enable researchers to track the dynamic development of these intentions.

Finally, our findings may not generalize to Ukrainian refugees in other host countries, where different legal regimes, reception conditions, and opportunity structures – all of which shape integration trajectories (Kosyakova et al. 2024) – may shape both aspirations and capabilities. Comparative studies have already documented substantial cross-country variation in settlement intentions that likely reflects these contextual differences (Adema et al. 2024; Kohlenberger et al. 2023; Van Tubergen et al. 2024). Differences in survey timing, measurement strategies, and national frameworks may account for the partial convergence or divergence in findings, and must be considered when interpreting our results and situating them within the broader literature.

6. Acknowledgements

7. Availability of data

Replication codes for data preparation and analyses are available at https://osf.io/xdc7u. Information about the underlying IAB-BiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany can be found at: https://www.doi.org/10.5684/soep.iab-bib_freda-bamf-soep.2022-2023. All analyses have been conducted using Stata. The study design and analysis were not preregistered.

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