

Solutions to Refugee Crises: A Comprehensive Analysis of Return Intentions

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Introduction

The global refugee crisis has reached an all-time high of more than 100 million forcibly displaced individuals worldwide. While the ideal scenario is for refugees to return home when peace prevails, the reality is far more complex. Peace alone is insufficient; sustainable security and opportunities in home countries, such as employment and education, are equally crucial. This study explores the nuanced factors influencing refugees' intentions to return home.

By asking *How can the number of refugees returning home or successfully integrating into host countries be increased?*, this study investigates in the durable solutions for refugees. At the end of 2022, 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced, of those 35.3 million are refugees and 62.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs) (UNHCR, 2023). Yet, only a small minority of refugees, and even less IDPs, benefited from one of the three solutions promoted by the UNHCR: Return, integration or resettlement. In context of the pressing humanitarian concerns and the needs of both refugees and policymakers, this study examines lasting solutions to refugee crises, with a focus on the preferences and intentions of the displaced individuals themselves. This study utilizes interview data collected by the UNHCR from Ukrainian refugees across multiple European countries in 2022 and 2023, totaling over 8'700 participants. The research investigates the complex interplay of factors that affect refugees' aspirations for returning home

Literature Review

This literature review provides a comprehensive overview of previous research on forced migration, with a specific focus on solutions for refugees. The review is structured into four key sections: Causes of flight, flight direction, situation in the country of asylum, and solutions for refugees, which include return, integration, and resettlement. All these stages of the flight process are expected to influence potential solutions for refugees.

Causes of Flight: A refugee is defined as “a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality...” (UNHCR, 2007, 17).¹ Political violence, including conflicts, civil wars, and oppressive regimes, is identified as a major driver of refugee flows (Davenport et al., 2003; Melander and Öberg, 2006; Moore and Shellman, 2004; Schmeidl, 1997; Weiner, 1996; Wood, 1994; Zolberg et al., 1986). However, achieving a durable solution for refugees is complicated by the protracted nature of many political conflicts and the challenges involved in post-conflict repatriation.

Flight Direction: Refugees' decisions regarding where to seek asylum are influenced by a combination of push and pull factors. Push factors, such as insecurity and violence in their home country, primarily drive refugees to flee involuntarily. However, pull factors, including the political situation, economic

¹The 1951 UN Refugee Convention is often criticized for excluding other categories that require protection, e.g. gender-based or environmental causes of flight (see e.g. Feller, 2001; Koubi et al., 2016; Piguet et al., 2011).

opportunities, cultural affinities, and past migration patterns in potential asylum states, also play a significant role in determining flight directions. The choice of the asylum state is crucial for finding solutions for refugees, as it impacts integration prospects, language acquisition, and proximity to the home country, which facilitates repatriation (Barthel and Neumayer, 2015; Czaika, 2009; Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Hein, 1993; Iqbal and Zorn, 2007; Melander and Öberg, 2007; Moore and Shellman, 2007; Neumayer, 2004; Rubin and Moore, 2007; Rügger and Bohnet, 2018; Schmeidl, 1997; Warziniack, 2013).

Situation in the Country of Asylum: The challenges refugees face in their host countries can impede durable solutions. Refugees usually live in camps or self-settled, both of which present unique challenges (Bakewell, 2014; Corsellis and Vitale, 2005; Crisp and Jacobsen, 1998). While camps provide control and efficient aid distribution, they are associated with insecurity, disease, limited access to education and employment, and weak rule of law. Urban self-settlement is another common option, but it often leads to issues such as unrecognized legal status, discrimination, and limited access to essential services.² Protracted refugee situations, lasting more than five years and affecting large populations, pose further challenges. They result from ongoing violence in the home country, restrictive asylum policies, and the limited interest of the international community in addressing these crises. These protracted situations have adverse consequences for refugees, host states, and the security of the entire region (Bohnet, 2015; Crisp, 2000; Fisk, 2018; Hargreaves et al., 2020; Johnson, 2011).

Solutions for Refugees: Return: Research on solutions for refugees commonly either focuses on return, integration or resettlement, and typically draws evidence from case studies. In particular, there are few quantitative studies on the solutions for refugees (see Bloch, 2020; Salehyan, 2019; Smyth et al., 2010). Return has been a prominent policy choice, but it is not without controversy (see e.g. Black and Gent, 2006; Chimni, 2004; Long, 2013; Stein, 1986; Takahashi, 1997). In some cases, it has led to forced rather than voluntary return, raising ethical concerns. Successful return depends on factors such as security in the home country, land and shelter access, economic opportunities, and social reintegration. Returnees often face a range of challenges, including security risks, land disputes, economic hardships, marginalization, and the need to rebuild their lives in a changed environment (Bohnet, 2016; Omata, 2013; Schmeidl, 2009).

Integration Integration remains challenging to define and measure (Harrell-Bond, 1989; Kuhlman, 1991). Sociological debates on integration versus assimilation are ongoing. Integration encompasses various dimensions, including economic, political, social and cultural aspects (UNHCR, 2014). Economic integration is of particular interest due to its potential to reduce dependence on humanitarian aid and contribute to host countries' economic growth. Factors such as the right to employment, fast asylum decisions, and personal networks play significant roles in refugees' economic integration (Bansak et al., 2018; Hainmueller et al., 2016; Marbach et al., 2018; Martén et al., 2019).

Resettlement Resettled refugees begin the integration process in a second asylum country. This solution depends on the willingness of host governments to admit refugees. Resettlement is advocated for the most vulnerable refugees but is limited in practice, with only approximately 1% of refugees resettled each year (UNHCR, 2020). Academic work on refugee resettlement examines the role of international organizations, particularly the UNHCR, in promoting resettlement (e.g. Cochetel, 2007; Garnier, 2014; Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Troeller, 2002), when and why governments commit to resettlement programs (e.g. Esses et al., 2017; Fozdar and Hartley, 2013; Hashimoto, 2018; Lanphier, 1983), how

²The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the risks associated with large refugee accommodations.

the premise that the most vulnerable refugees should be eligible for resettlement affects flight dynamics (Armbruster, 2019; Ikanda, 2018; Jansen, 2008; Smith and Waite, 2019), and the challenges of resettled refugees in the new host states (see e.g. Curry et al., 2018). Scholars and representatives of refugee organizations both stress the political need to increase resettlement options.

Critique and Data: The mobility of displaced populations challenges the static nature of traditional durable solutions, emphasizing the importance of more flexible approaches that consider people’s mobility and transnationalism (Black and Gent, 2006; Brun and Fábos, 2017; Dahinden, 2010; Monsutti, 2008; Moretti, 2015; Omata, 2012; Van Hear, 2006). Additionally, concerns regarding the precision of refugee data have been raised, particularly due to unregistered refugees and variations in data collection (Ball, 2000; Crisp, 1999; Echevarria-Coco and Gardeazabal, 2020; Marbach, 2018; Polzer and Hammond, 2008).

In conclusion, this summarized literature review provides a foundation for understanding the complexities and challenges related to durable solutions for refugees. It highlights the need for further research to address existing gaps in refugees’ own intentions and develop more effective approaches to assist displaced populations.

Theoretical Focus

In the context of the unprecedented refugee crisis, it is imperative to place refugees’ own intentions at the center of analysis. The academic focus has largely revolved around the causes of forced displacement and the consequences of refugee inflows in host countries. Furthermore, existing literature primarily explores successful integration in developed countries.

To address this gap, this study takes a broader perspective, emphasizing the interconnections among three key solutions: Return, integration, and resettlement. We posit that the likelihood of one solution increases when opportunities for another decrease, forming a dynamic relationship between these options. For example, people are more willing to return when opportunities for integration in the country of asylum are limited. The theoretical framework is inspired by classical migration studies, which consider push and pull factors as determinants of migration (Dorigo and Tobler, 1983; Fafchamps and Shilpi, 2013; Kunz, 1973; Lee, 1966; Petersen, 1958), and more recent research that investigates in the “drivers of migration” (Carling and Collins, 2018; Castelli, 2018; Hear et al., 2018).

Ideally return movements are voluntary, information-based and ensure the returnees’ safety and dignity (Chimni, 2002, 2004). However, in practice, the voluntariness of return is questioned, when refugees prefer returning over staying in host states with inadequate protection (Black and Gent, 2006; Chimni, 2004; Crisp, 1986; Gerver, 2015, 2018; Keith and Shawaf, 2018). Sustainable return requires a stable and secure country of origin (Chimni, 2002; Crisp, 2002; Graham and Khosravi, 1997; Hardgrove, 2009), and successful reintegration depends on access to housing, livelihood opportunities, such as education and employment, personal networks and state services (Koser, 2011; Omata, 2012, 2013; Walsh et al., 1999). The study will contribute to better understanding both voluntary and successful return by analyzing different solutions in combination.

This approach also emphasizes motivation and opportunity factors, examining how individual and group-level refugee characteristics, such as language proficiency or employment opportunities in host and home state, alongside country-level and international factors, influence the likelihood and type of solution. In essence, we argue that all solutions for forced migrants, including refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), converge around the concept of integration, whether in the host country, a third

state, or through reintegration in the home country.

Data and Methods

To investigate the factors influencing refugees' desire to return home, this study employs interview data collected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from Ukrainian refugees in several European countries in 2022 and 2023 (UNHCR, 2023), with a combined sample size of over 8'700 individuals. The data analysis employs quantitative methods, specifically logistic regression models, to estimate the likelihood of return intentions among respondents. The statistical analysis is carried out using STATA, controlling for a comprehensive set of influential factors in home, host, and third states, for example immigration policies or GDP. These explanatory factors also encompass individual refugee characteristics, including language proficiency and access to education in the home and host country, enabling a comprehensive examination of return intentions.

Descriptive analysis of the data reveals that 14 % of the refugees from Ukraine report plans to return permanently in next three months, despite the ongoing invasion, hostilities and the large-scale infrastructure and housing damage in Ukraine. Moreover, despite the ongoing conflict, 62% of refugees respectively express a desire to return in the future (UNHCR, 2023). Notably, hopes of returning are higher among refugees hosted in countries neighboring Ukraine, underlining the importance of proximity to the place of origin. Vulnerability and challenges in the host country, access to information about the place of origin, and the desire to reunite with close relatives or protect property all play crucial roles in shaping these intentions. The emphasis placed on security conditions and access to basic services, livelihoods, and housing in the place of origin highlights the importance of addressing these factors to facilitate return. Specific regions, including Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Kyiv and Mykolaiv, are identified as top areas for intended return (UNHCR, 2023).

The quantitative analysis will investigate in the causes of these relatively high number of return intentions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study are expected to have significant policy and practical implications. First, it advances our theoretical understanding of durable solutions for refugee crises, adding depth to the migration and refugee literature. Second, it emphasizes the need to respect refugees' individual wishes and life plans, moving away from viewing them as mere numbers or caseloads. Finally, the evidence-based findings from this study can inform a set of policy recommendations that have the potential to reduce the duration of displacement. This is of immense interest to both refugees and policymakers, offering a glimpse of hope for those trapped in the turmoil of conflict and forced migration.

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