

The Effect of Conflict Intensity on Refugees' Settlement Intentions under Uncertainty

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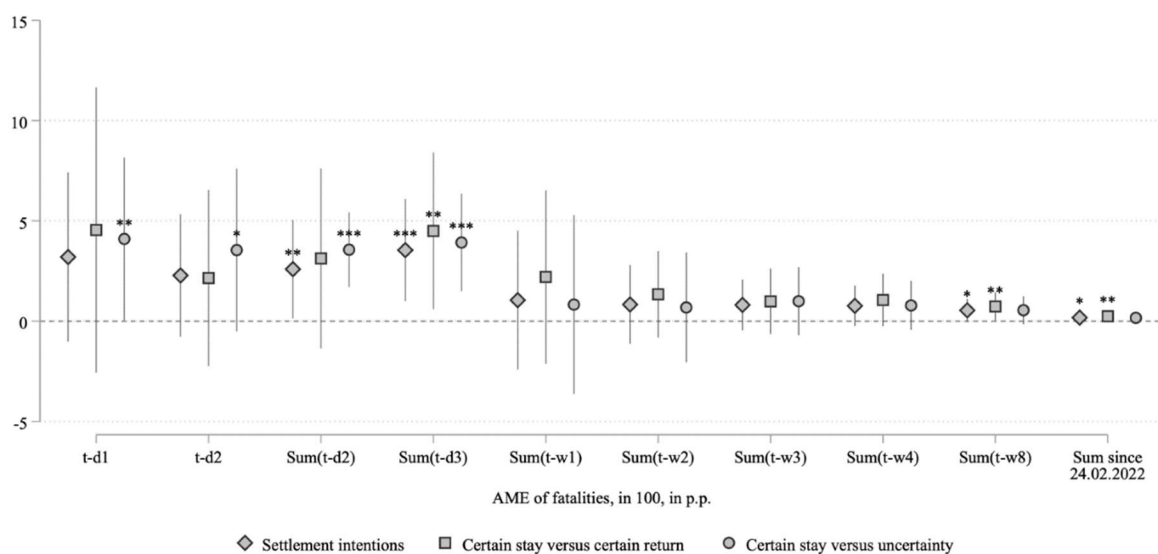
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Settlement intentions of refugees have a great impact on their further life course, as these intentions may impact decisions regarding human capital investments, participation in the labor market, or social integration. Previous literature has mainly focused on settlement and return intentions of voluntary immigrants. This strand of literature often focuses on motives for temporary migration – such as economic factors e.g., differences in relative prices, consumption preferences, accumulation of human capital, earnings potential, changes in savings (Djajic & Milbourne 1988; Constant & Massey 2003; Dustmann & Weiss 2007; Jensen & Pedersen 2007; Dustman & Görlach 2016) or socio-cultural factors e.g., closeness or existence of social networks, familiarity with environment, climate, social atmosphere in the host country (Boyd 1989; Constant & Massey 2003; Alberts & Hazen 2005; Haug 2008; Harvey 2009; de Haas & Fokkema 2011; Güngör & Tansel 2014) – or differences between temporary and permanent migrants e.g., higher work effort and performance, less leisure, lower reservation wages, as well as lower investments in human capital for temporary migrants (Galor & Stark 1991; Dustman & Görlach 2016).

In contrast, our work focuses on forced migration, namely forced migration of Ukrainian refugees due to the war between Russia and Ukraine. Even though economic and socio-cultural factors also impact refugee's settlement and return intentions, refugees additionally face different circumstances compared to other migrants (De Vroome & Van Tubergen 2013; Di Saint Pierre et al. 2015). First, desertion of their home country and arrival in the host country is often unprepared. Second, settlement or return intentions are affected by conditions and changes in the home country (e.g., ongoing fear for safety due to crises/catastrophes, such as famine, war, geopolitical upheavals, or changes in political systems). Especially if the situation in the home country is rapidly changing, as for the war in Ukraine, return intentions might be shaped by extreme events like combat maneuvers, bombardments, invasions or fatalities. To the best of our knowledge, this factor of conflict intensity has so far been neglected in the literature on settlement and return intentions.

Therefore, we invest the question how settlement intentions of Ukrainian refugees are affected by the conflict intensity - measured by fatalities in the region of origin of their home country. We argue that a higher conflict intensity is correlated with stronger settlement intentions: 1) Refugees may perceive a higher conflict intensity as an indicator for a long-term reduced security situation, increasing settlement intentions and certainty. 2) Related to the security aspect, refugees might perceive the longer-term economic and social living conditions as worse in regions with higher conflict intensity due to the destruction of infrastructure, which also results in increasing settlement intentions and certainty. 3) Further, a higher conflict intensity might lead to a higher level of anxiety and stress (due to worries about family members or friends in the home country), promoting reduced mental health and wellbeing and leading to reduced return intention and reduction of settlement uncertainty. 4) Lastly, the conflict intensity could be perceived as amplification of a political regime the refugees disapprove, which in turn leads to a stronger settlement intention and certainty in the host country. Following this line of reasoning, settlement intentions and certainty may also vary depending on characteristics like age, family status, number of children, education, place of residence of family, and indicators of wellbeing.

Figure: Probability of settlement intentions, different time lags for fatalities, in percentage points



Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. FE = Fixed effects. All terror fatality variables are measured in hundreds. (t-1) and (t-2) refer to the number of terror fatalities in the last residence county one and two days before the interview, respectively. Sum(t-d2) and Sum(t-d3) refers to the cumulative number of terror fatalities in the last residence county in two and three days before the interview. Sum(t-w1), Sum(t-w2), Sum(t-w3), Sum(t-w4), and Sum(t-w8) refer to the cumulative number of terror fatalities between three and 7 days, between three and 14 days, between three and 21 days, between three and 28 days, between three and 56 days, before the interview, respectively. Sum since 24.03.2022 refer to the cumulative number of terror fatalities in the last residence county since February 24, 2022, to the interview date. Source: IAB-BiB/FreDA-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees from Ukraine, linked to the data from the ACLED.

In this study, we use individual-level data of a recently conducted survey of refugees from Ukraine who arrived in Germany in the course of the Russian invasion. The survey was first launched between August and October 2022. The sample includes around 11,700 Ukrainian nationals aged 18 to 70 who moved to Germany between February 24 to June 8, 2022, and were registered by the population registration offices. In contrast to many other studies, refugees in our sample were surveyed shortly after leaving Ukraine and arriving in Germany. Hence, we can utilize a new identification strategy, which relies on the exogenous nature of the date at which the Ukrainian respondents completed the surveys. More precisely, we use information on the settlement intentions in the host country and link these data to time-varying exogenous sources of conflict intensity in the home country. Specifically, we measure the cumulative number of fatalities in the county (oblast) of the last residence in Ukraine in the days and weeks before the survey was completed.

We use logistic regression models with fixed effects to analyze whether and how conflict intensity in the home country influences refugee's settlement intentions. We find that conflict intensity has a positive effect on refugees' settlement intentions, even after including fixed effects for last residence region, interview completion month, and region of residence within Germany and other model covariates. To account for the fact that the actual settlement intention is strongly impacted by uncertainty about the outcome and duration of the war in Ukraine, further attention is placed on this uncertainty. Hence, we extended the analysis of settlement intentions by dividing our sample into certain stayers, certain returnees, and uncertain refugees.

For the comparison between certain stayers and uncertain refugees we find that conflict intensity reduces uncertainty of decision, which is similar to the finding regarding settlement intentions. In other words, the more intense the conflict situation becomes, the more certain the refugee becomes to stay in Germany instead of returning to Ukraine. Regarding controls, we observe that women, those in partnership, more children, more close relatives in Ukraine, older refugees and those arrived for economic reasons are more likely to be certain on return than uncertain on stay. Further robustness checks confirm that these findings are stable even after changing the time lag between interview and conflict events. However, our results rather point to the short-lived effect of the conflict intensity on the settlement intentions, which is particularly driven by more recent events.

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