

What is in going and leaving

Reasons of people who fled former Yugoslavia to stay in the Netherlands or to leave

English summary

WODC Research and Data Centre

Lilly Bogičević, Linda de Veen, Nina Breedveld, Hans Moors

October 17, 2024

E:M+MA.

English summary

Introduction

People migrate to the Netherlands for various reasons. One of these reasons is finding a safe haven when they flee their war-torn home countries. Having arrived in the Netherlands, some people settle there permanently, while others leave the country again in the course of time. In this study we looked at the considerations and motives of people who fled war to either settle in the Netherlands or to leave the country again. Starting point in our research are the experiences of people who fled former Yugoslavia in the nineties.

Research aims and questions

The current study is set out by the Ministry of Justice and Security to gain more insight into the considerations people made to stay in the Netherlands or to leave again, after having fled there to escape the war in former Yugoslavia. The underlying thought is that this may yield lessons to help the Dutch government anticipate on what Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands may do once the situation in their home country settles down. This study was conducted by EMMA on behalf of the WODC (Research and Data Centre), the independent knowledge institute that resides under the Ministry of Justice and Security.

This study aimed to answer the following two questions:

- What were the considerations for people who fled former Yugoslavia to either stay in the Netherlands or to leave the country again?
- Which lessons can the Dutch government draw from these experiences, to anticipate on what people who fled Ukraine may do once the situation in their home country settles down?

These research questions were operationalised in the following sub-questions:

1. In people who fled former Yugoslavia, which considerations played a part in their decision to either settle in the Netherlands or to leave? How did these considerations change over time? Are there differences between the various ethnic groups or the states they came from?
2. How did people who fled former Yugoslavia experience their integration into Dutch society? Which facilitating circumstances and obstacles played a part in their experiences?
3. Which personal circumstances (i.e. children, housing, family, work, education) played a part in the decision to stay in the Netherlands or to leave, and to what extent?
4. Which contextual circumstances in the Netherlands (i.e. the Dutch asylum and integration policies, perceived reception, perspectives in the Netherlands) played a part in the decision to stay in the Netherlands or to leave, and to what extent?
5. What circumstances or means could have facilitated the choice to either stay or leave?
6. What can the Dutch government learn from the role it has played in the reception and the integration of people who fled former Yugoslavia, or in their departure?

This study consisted of three parts. The first part was centred on the experiences and the motives to stay or leave of people who fled former Yugoslavia for the Netherlands in the nineties. The second part focused on people who fled Ukraine recently and are currently residing in the Netherlands. In

the third part, findings from the first two parts were translated into concrete recommendations for the Dutch government.

Methods

Given the broad wording of the research questions and the sub-questions, as well as the myriads of motives for staying or leaving, we chose to conduct a qualitative study with a multi-method design. In this study we used the following methods of data collection: two media-analyses (one on former Yugoslavia and one on Ukraine), in-depth interviews with people who fled former Yugoslavia and focus groups with people who fled Ukraine.

Findings for Yugoslavia

Media-analysis

The media-analysis illustrates quite a coherent picture of motives for staying or leaving, as expressed in Dutch newspapers from 1991 to 2014. Most prominent is the presence of an intention to leave, combined with motives to stay – at least for the time being. Among these motives are for example an unfavourable situation in the home country – the war is still ongoing, or there is nothing to return to – and the threat of personal danger on returning. Some articles point out the inability to return because the required paperwork cannot be obtained. Ties with the Netherlands ('the children have taken root here') and the (relatively) favourable facilities in the Netherlands are mentioned less frequently as motives to stay. When it comes to motives for leaving, it generally concerns returning to former Yugoslavia. Subsequent migration is hardly ever mentioned. The longing for home appears to have a greater influence than incentives offered by the Dutch government, such as financial repatriation assistance. Finally, looking at the relation between perspective in articles (who is speaking) and motives to stay or leave, the discourse of refugees and NGOs more often involves motives to stay, while that of governments or government officials generally involves motives to leave.

In-depth interviews

Out of 17 respondents, 16 stayed in the Netherlands, one returned to their home country, one tried returning for a brief period, and several people spoke of family members or acquaintances who left the Netherlands again. All cases concerned returning to one of the follow-up states of former Yugoslavia. In the in-depth interviews respondents were asked about intentions to leave the Netherlands, their motives to stay in or leave the Netherlands, and how they experienced their reception and their integration. Although we only spoke to a relatively small number of respondents, the in-depth interviews offered an opportunity to tell the entire story of the respondents' arrival, reception and integration, and their choice to either stay or leave, thereby representing the complexity and the multiple layers of these stories. These stories portray both similarities and differences in personal and contextual circumstances.

During their first years in the Netherlands most respondents did not plan to stay for a prolonged period, because they did not anticipate being allowed or able to settle, or because they expected the war would soon end. Nevertheless, the stay did not turn out to be temporary for the majority of people. Respondents who had already been internally displaced, as well as families with mixed ethnicities prepared for a longer stay in the Netherlands compared to others. Shortly after arriving in the Netherlands, motives to stay mainly concerned unsafe or unfavourable conditions in the home country. Later motives concerned integration of respondents and their children: they had built a new life in the Netherlands. A last motive for staying was the inability or the lack of will to remigrate and re-integrate. In the interviews, the main motive to leave was a longing for home. Less frequently, the duty to help rebuild the country of provenance was mentioned as a motive to leave.

For some respondents' family members social exclusion, lack of integration, or the inability to find suitable employment were reasons to leave. Although most respondents in this study had known about financial repatriation assistance, it was not perceived as an incentive to leave, merely as a means. The people in this study who left the Netherlands only did so to remigrate, none of them opted for subsequent migration.

Findings for Ukraine

Media analysis

The second media-analysis shows that – so far – there's relatively little mention in Dutch newspapers of motives for staying or leaving among people who fled the war in Ukraine. It is assumed that people will eventually return to Ukraine when possible. However, the motives to return are often not mentioned in newspaper articles. In the articles, this assumption is nuanced by some researchers and experts, who point out that over time ties with the Netherlands ('the children have settled here') will play a part in motives for staying. A relatively high number of the newspaper articles was centred on people from third countries who resided in Ukraine, even though they make up only a small portion of the population that fled Ukraine for the Netherlands. In the media-analysis, the perspective of people from these third countries illustrates low incentive or even an inability to return to their countries of origin, while politicians' perspectives are more focused on remigration.

Focus groups

Seventeen participants, all people who fled Ukraine and are currently residing in the Netherlands, took part in two focus groups. They were asked to reflect on motives for staying or leaving, previously formulated by the respondents from former Yugoslavia. In addition, they were also asked to share their own experiences and give recommendations for the Dutch government. Reflecting on motives for staying or leaving the Ukrainians could relate to most of these motives, but not all. As expected, given the shorter duration of their stay, they generally do not yet feel at home in the Netherlands. Ukrainians could relate to having children growing up and integrating in the Netherlands as a motive to stay. Whether or not they still have family or a house in Ukraine also plays a part in current ideas about staying or leaving. Most participants expressed the desire to return to Ukraine, although it is not yet considered as an option. It is unsafe and much has been destroyed. Some participants indicated the importance of eventually returning to help rebuild the country. Finally, people from Ukraine could also relate to difficulties in integration, such as learning Dutch, building social relationships with Dutch people, and finding suitable employment. All the recommendations formulated by the participants for the Dutch government, concerned policies on reception and integration. There is a need for clarity and transparency when it comes to decisions regarding placement and housing. Participants also advised to organise activities facilitating and stimulating integration.

Conclusion – Considerations of people from former Yugoslavia

The first part of this study focused on gathering the experiences of people who fled former Yugoslavia to the Netherlands. With regards to motives for staying in the Netherlands their own integration and the integration of their children played a major role, as well as a feeling of displacement and the lack of safety and perspective in their home country. The main motive for subsequently leaving the Netherlands was a longing for home. Less frequently mentioned motives for leaving were a sense of duty to help rebuild the home country, or difficulties finding suitable employment in the Netherlands. Financial repatriation assistance from the Dutch government was not mentioned as a motive for leaving, merely as a means to do so for those who had already decided to return.

Motives for staying or leaving are not fixed, instead they change over time. During their first years in the Netherlands, most people did not intend to stay for a longer period. In particular, those who fled former Yugoslavia in the early stages of the conflict indicated that they expected the war to be over quickly, enabling them to return soon. People who fled later more often prepared for a longer stay in the Netherlands. The moment of leaving in relation to the development of the conflict thus also determines considerations for staying or leaving. The extent to which people and families take root and integrate in the country of arrival also plays a role in these considerations. After some time, a *point of no return* arises. Considering that this study was based on a relatively small number of respondents, we could not determine if there were differences in motives between various ethnic groups or countries/regions of origin. However, we did find some patterns indicating that people from border areas, those with ethnically mixed families from Bosnia-Herzegovina, those who had already been internally displaced, and those who primarily identified as 'Yugoslav' (the nationality of a country which no longer existed) did prepare for a longer stay in the Netherlands.

As described above, a mix of various personal and contextual factors and motives play a role in the decision-making process of staying or leaving. Hence it is complicated to influence these decisions, which is also reflected by the limited use of repatriation policies the Dutch government offered people from former Yugoslavia. It is, however, possible to support people *once they have taken a decision*. This study and prior research have shown that for many people safety, stability and perspective for themselves and their close relatives are important factors in informing their decision to stay or to leave.

Drawing from their own experiences with integration, people from former Yugoslavia emphasised the importance of having certainty about their stay and their procedure, of language and integration courses, and of the possibility to build social networks (for example by residing in small-scale accommodations and by joining (sports) clubs or organisations). Prolonged and uncertain procedures, leading to limited self-determination and hampering the building of a new life, were seen as restricting. There was also some negative sentiment about the careless placement of people from different ethnic groups in former Yugoslavia in the same accommodations, as well as the unwelcoming atmosphere around asylum centres created by some Dutch citizens.

Conclusion - Lessons from the past (Yugoslavia) for the present (Ukraine)

The second part of this study aimed to formulate lessons for the Dutch government, drawing from experiences and motives to stay or leave from people who fled former Yugoslavia. These lessons could help the Dutch government to anticipate what people who fled Ukraine and are currently residing in the Netherlands might do once the situation in their home country stabilises. This study is not a direct comparison between people from former Yugoslavia and people from Ukraine, considering that there are fundamental differences between both situations. It is, however, useful to reflect from a position of policy making on what national and local governments can learn from the situation in the nineties to anticipate on intentions people who fled Ukraine for the Netherlands may have to stay or leave. We have formulated the study's findings in three main lessons below.

Lesson 1: most people stay in the Netherlands

In the short term, a safe return to Ukraine seems unlikely. Many people will stay in the Netherlands, at least for the time being. It is unclear what will happen after the 4th of March 2026, when the temporary policy for people who fled Ukraine ends. A similar situation occurred in the nineties with people who fled former Yugoslavia for the Netherlands. We know that 70 to 80 percent of this group

stayed in the Netherlands. A lengthy war or conflict means people will start settling in their country of arrival.

Hence the main lesson for the Dutch government is to anticipate that most people are unlikely to leave, especially in case of prolonged conflict in their country of origin, which is the case in Ukraine. People have a variety of different motives for staying or leaving, which are hard to influence. These findings could serve as a starting point for government policies offering people support for their stay for a determined or longer period of time. Based on this study, we offer the following recommendations:

Offer certainty and self-determination

For people who fled former Yugoslavia, long-lasting uncertainty about the nature of their stay in the Netherlands proved unnecessary and has harmed their employment positions and integration into Dutch society. This uncertainty also has a detrimental effect on people's wellbeing, many of whom are already experiencing psychological difficulties. Offering certainty and self-can help diminish these effects and alleviate worries. This is an important lesson in the context of the Ukrainian people, who are also facing uncertainty regarding their stay in the Netherlands.

Another lesson the government can draw from the available research regarding Ukrainians in the Netherlands (and abroad) is the importance of individual, social and societal support for people from Ukraine – as well as for all refugees fleeing violent conflict. This support should provide as much certainty as possible concerning their stay, integration, and employment position and participation, and therefore their wellbeing in general.

Invest in reception and stay

The experiences of people from former Yugoslavia highlight the negative effects of a prolonged stay without certainty about assimilation, wellbeing, integration, education, employment position and participation. The government should anticipate that people who fled Ukraine will also stay for a longer period of time. Although most Ukrainians are not awaiting an asylum procedure nor asylum status to be granted, they cannot be placed in private accommodations and reside in local primary reception centres for Ukrainians (Gemeentelijke Opvang Oekrainers or GOO), due to a housing shortage. Hence governments would do well to invest in facilities for semi-independent stay and flexible forms of housing. In turn, this will facilitate sufficient capacity for other refugees in the longer term.

Guide work and employment

People who fled former Yugoslavia in the nineties were not allowed to work in the Netherlands, which delayed and hampered their assimilation, language acquisition and integration. Having a job positively affects people's wellbeing and the amount of self-determination they experience in their life and integration, as well as the public perception of refugees. The temporary arrangement for Ukrainians offers them direct access to the employment market. Contrary to other refugees they are allowed to start working upon arrival and registration in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, Ukrainians mostly work below their qualifications, in the flexible segment of the employment market. Their relatively inferior position in the employment market appears hampers assimilation and self-esteem. An important lesson is to offer people early guidance in looking for a job (preferably when they still reside in a GOO), to recognise their foreign professional qualifications, and to facilitate contact between employers and potential employees. This would stimulate both work participation (having a job) and employment position (having a suitable job) among Ukrainians.

Invest in timely integration and assimilation

Many people from former Yugoslavia only received government aid focused on assimilation and integration, after having been in the Netherlands for a long time. Investing in activities stimulating integration – such as education, childcare, (online) language courses, assimilation support and volunteer work – in the early stages, has better effects. In addition, providing people with the possibility to build a network in the local community proves to be an important aspect in integration, assimilation and wellbeing. People who fled former Yugoslavia indicated small-scale reception locations, encounters with volunteers and local citizens, and Dutch (sports) clubs and organisations as favourable conditions to build such networks. Therefore, offering Ukrainians these types of activities in the GOOs or directing them towards such activities elsewhere should be considered.

Set up public communication

When people stay in reception locations for prolonged periods, problems with system congestion and housing occur, as well as a shift in public support. Although the effects refugees have on the housing shortage are negligible, this topic does dominate the public debate on migration. The lesson for governments is that politicians and authorities, as well as influencers on social media, play a vital role in (both positive and negative) framing of migration. Hence governments should aim their public communication to illustrate the initiatives and work people put in to build a life in the Netherlands.

Lesson 2: Prospects are of major importance for leaving

Financial repatriation assistance had a very limited effect on people who came from former Yugoslavia. At best, this type of assistance was a means to leave for people who had already decided not to stay for other reasons. This study and prior research indicate that elderly people, people with limited employment possibilities, or young, enterprising people could be amongst those who remigrate. It could thus be useful to aim support or assistance specifically at people who have already chosen to leave, even though the numbers are expected to be scarce.

An important condition for return is the presence of a (safe) place to go back to, with the potential to (re)build a life. Therefore, the readiness of people to consider a return to Ukraine will also depend on how the war ends and in what state the country will be politically, socially and economically. Although it's hard to anticipate on these conditions, in the context of facilitating intentions to return it could be useful to promote aid for the reconstruction of the region post-conflict, which would offer a perspective to the people who might want to return. Additionally, the desire to help rebuild the home country could serve as a motivation to leave the Netherlands and to actively participate in that reconstruction locally.

Lesson 3: Long-term research on motives for staying or leaving is useful

This study (literature, media-analysis and in-depth interviews) shows that while there may be a desire to leave, this can be impossible or not feasible at the same time, which is why people stay. Although people from former Yugoslavia initially expected to leave the Netherlands again in the longer term, for many of them this changed over time. On the other hand, for some people the longing for home, accompanied by the urge to return, may grow over time. It is impossible to indicate an exact tipping point between staying and leaving. In other words, motives are dynamic and change over time. A lesson this study specifically shows us, is the relevance of examining the personal stories of people who fled their country; how they see themselves and their personal life

history and what did or did not work for them while in the Netherlands. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to conduct long-term research into the ways people's motives for staying or leaving develop over time and on the influence of various factors have in this process.

think. do. connect.

Wijnhaven 88
2511 GA Den Haag
070 - 87 00 460

info@emma.nl

www.emma.nl

Volg ons op [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) en [LinkedIn](#)