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Beyond Temporary Protection: Aligning Europe's exit strategies with Ukraine's return reality

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The future of temporary protection cannot be separated from Ukraine's recovery and the conditions for sustainable return.

1. Ukrainian displacement: scale and duration reconsidered
2. What the evidence tells us about who returns and under what conditions
3. Building the conditions for sustainable return and reintegration
4. What does this mean for Europe and the rest of the world?

* disclaimer

drawing on this evidence base



This presentation builds on my past and current work, but the views and reflections are my own.

It draws on my work at the OECD, particularly the Return and Reintegration Review, as well as my current role coordinating the Human Dimension of the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2027 with the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research.



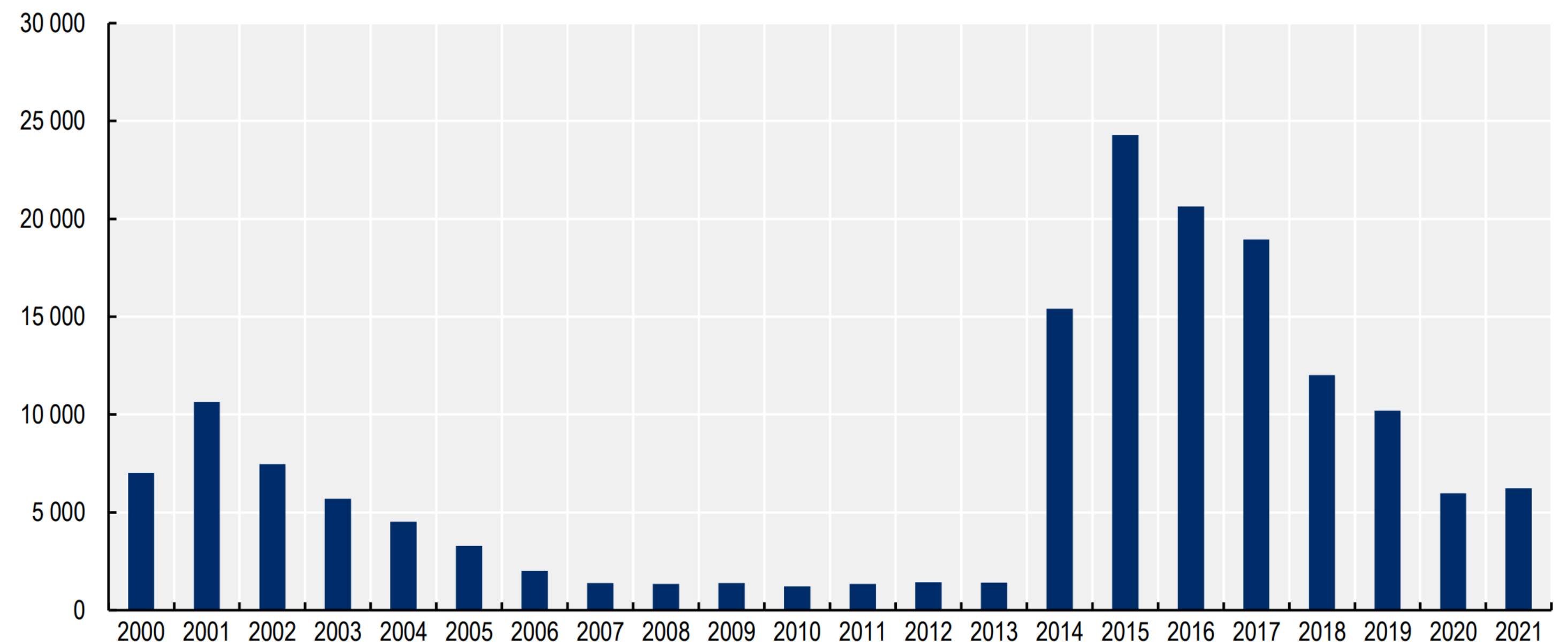
and inspired by this process

Ukrainian displacement crisis did not begin in 2022

Temporary Protection captures only one chapter of a much longer displacement crisis.

Figure 2.4. Asylum requests from Ukrainian citizens in OECD countries, 2000-2021

Persons

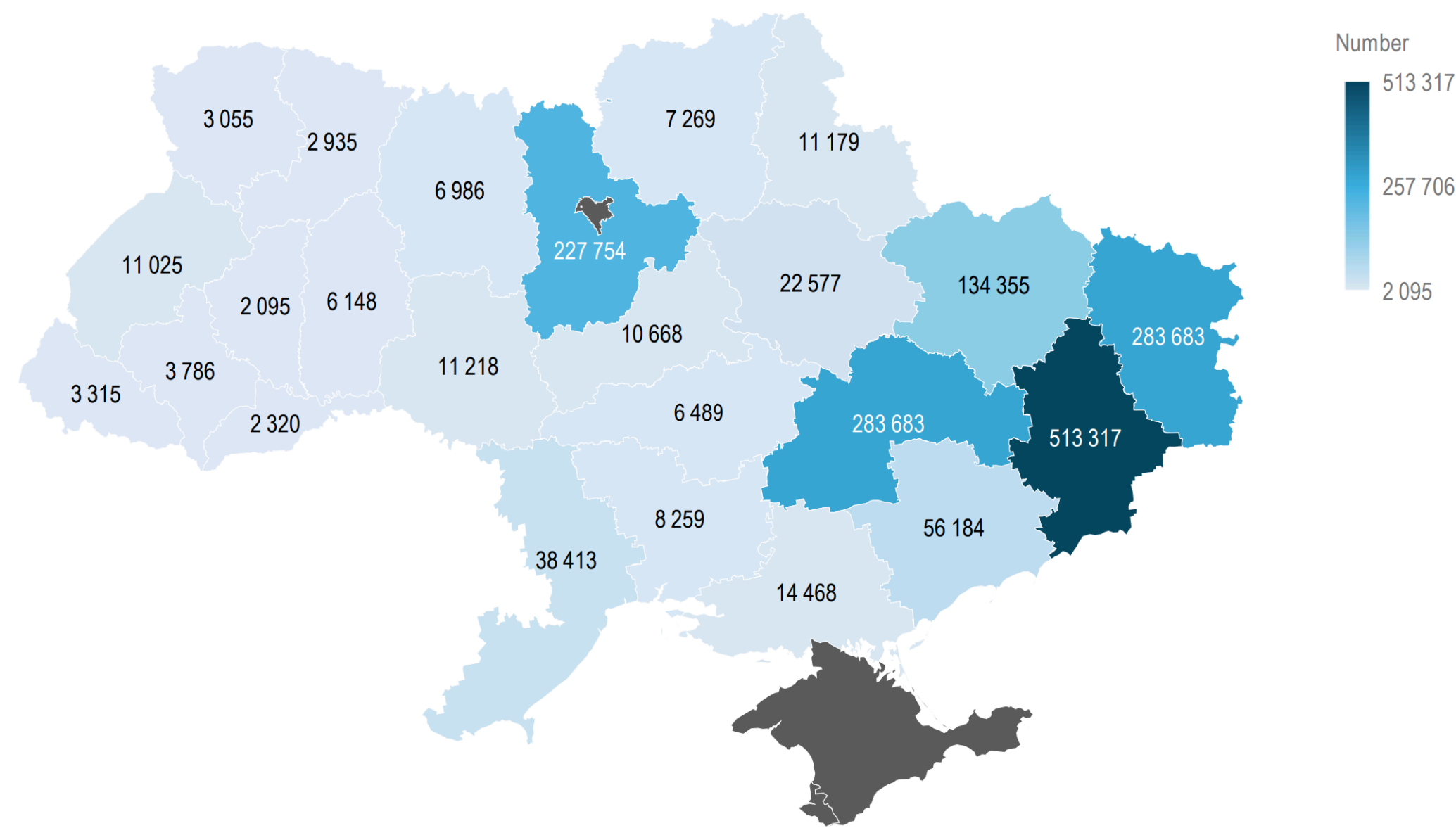


Note: Data available for AUS, AUT, BEL, CAN, CHL, COL, CRI, CZE, DNK, EST, FIN, FRA, DEU, GRC, HUN, ISL, IRL, ISR, ITA, JPN, KOR, LVA, LTU, LUX, MEX, NLD, NZL, NOR, POL, PRT, SVK, SVN, ESP, SWE, CHE, TUR, GBR, USA.

Source: OECD International Migration Database.

Ukraine entered 2022 with a large displaced population already in place.

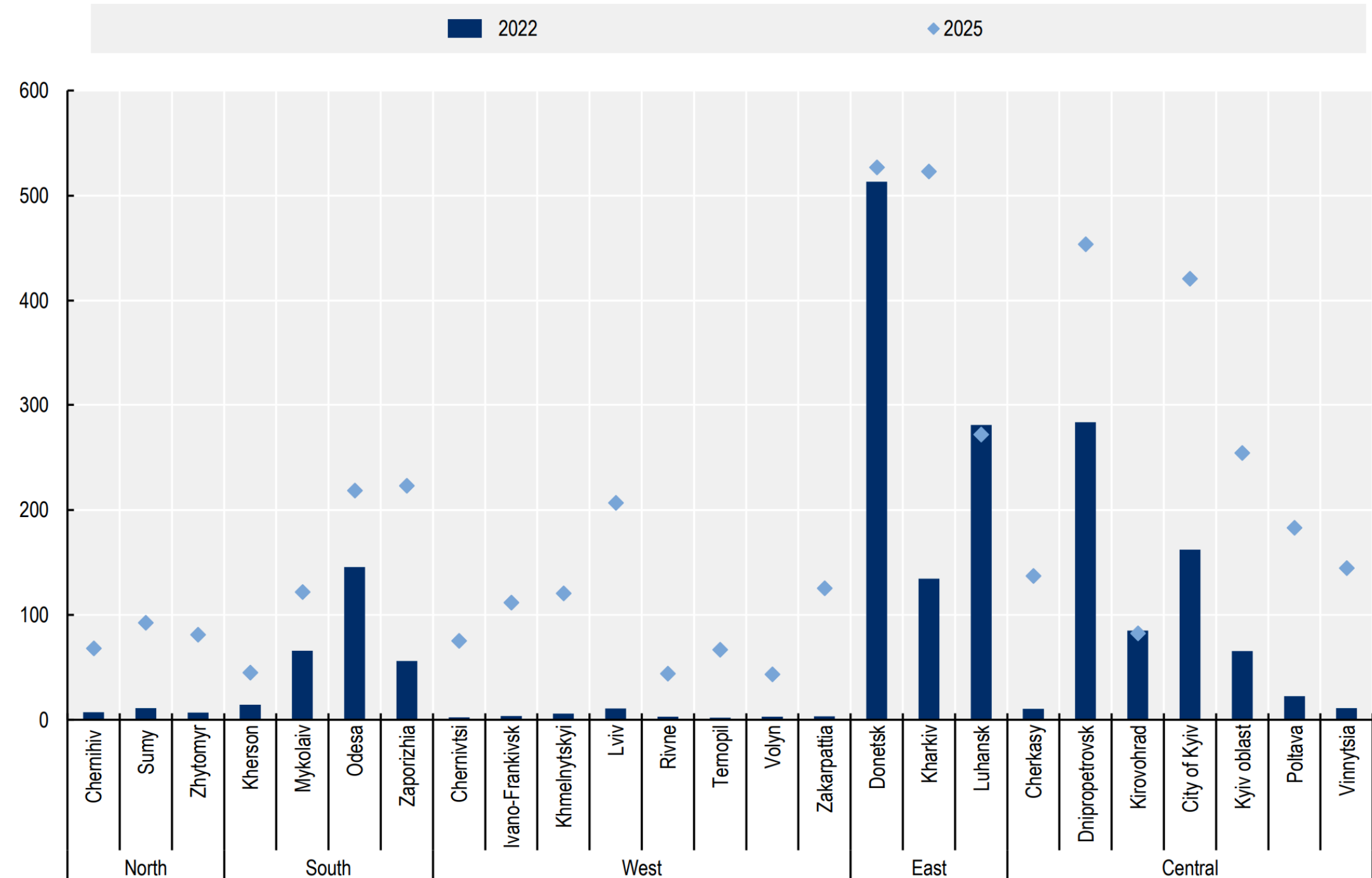
Figure 2.13. Distribution of IDPs across the oblasts of Ukraine prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion, 1 January 2022



Note: The grey colour indicates that no data is available.
Source: Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine.

Figure 2.18. Evolution of the number of IDPs, by oblast

Thousands, data as of 1 January of respective year



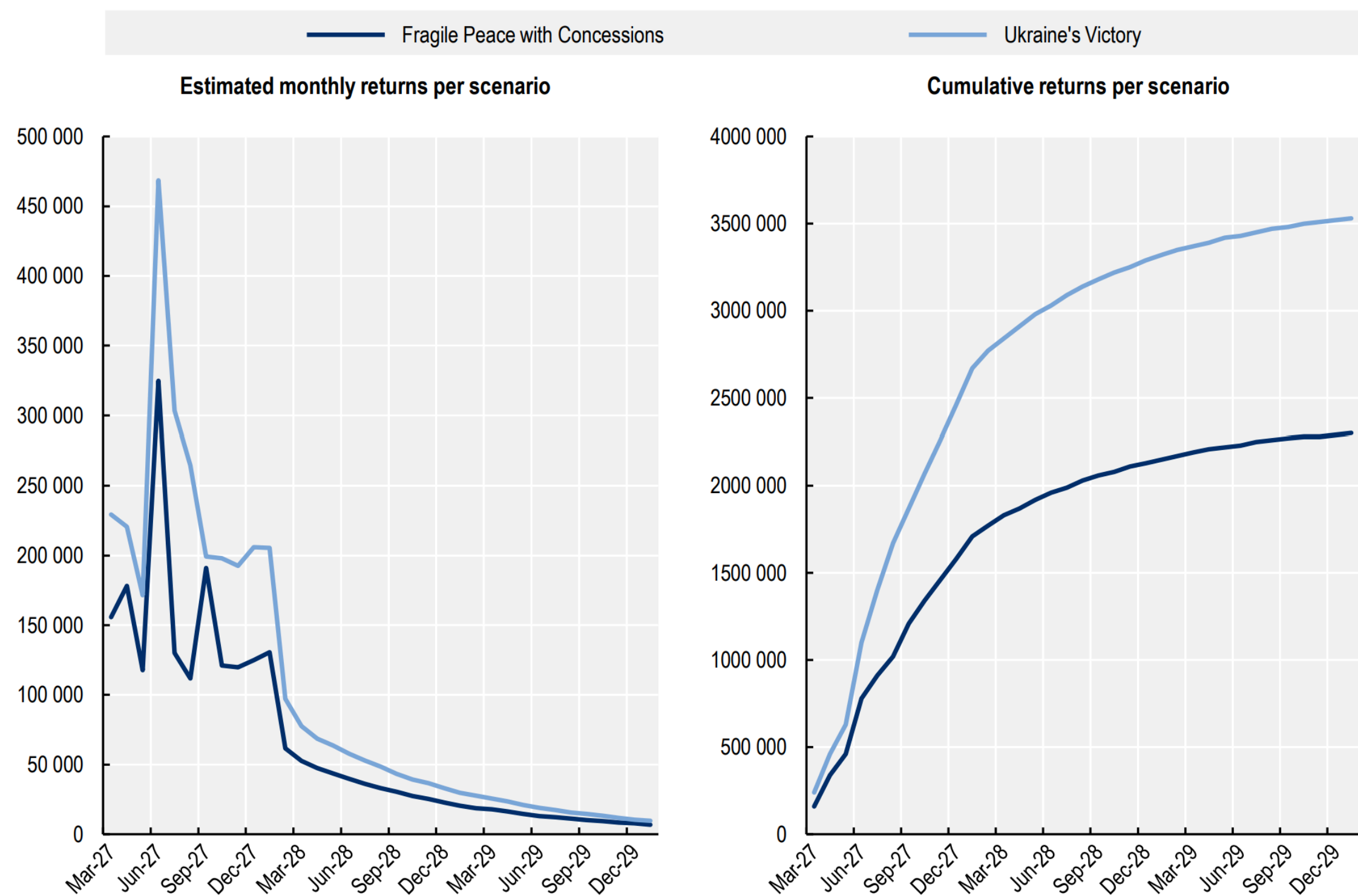
Source: Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine.

In 2022, displacement reached an unprecedented scale and has since become increasingly protracted.

By June 2026, Eurostat reported more than 4.4 million people under temporary protection in the EU, while IOM estimated that 3.9 million people remained internally displaced within Ukraine.

How many will return from abroad? The answer depends on what happens next.

Figure 4.19. Projected monthly and cumulative returns to Ukraine under alternative post-war scenarios



Source: UNHCR – Brunel ABM.

Figure 4.30. Distribution of returnees by host country under alternative post-war scenarios

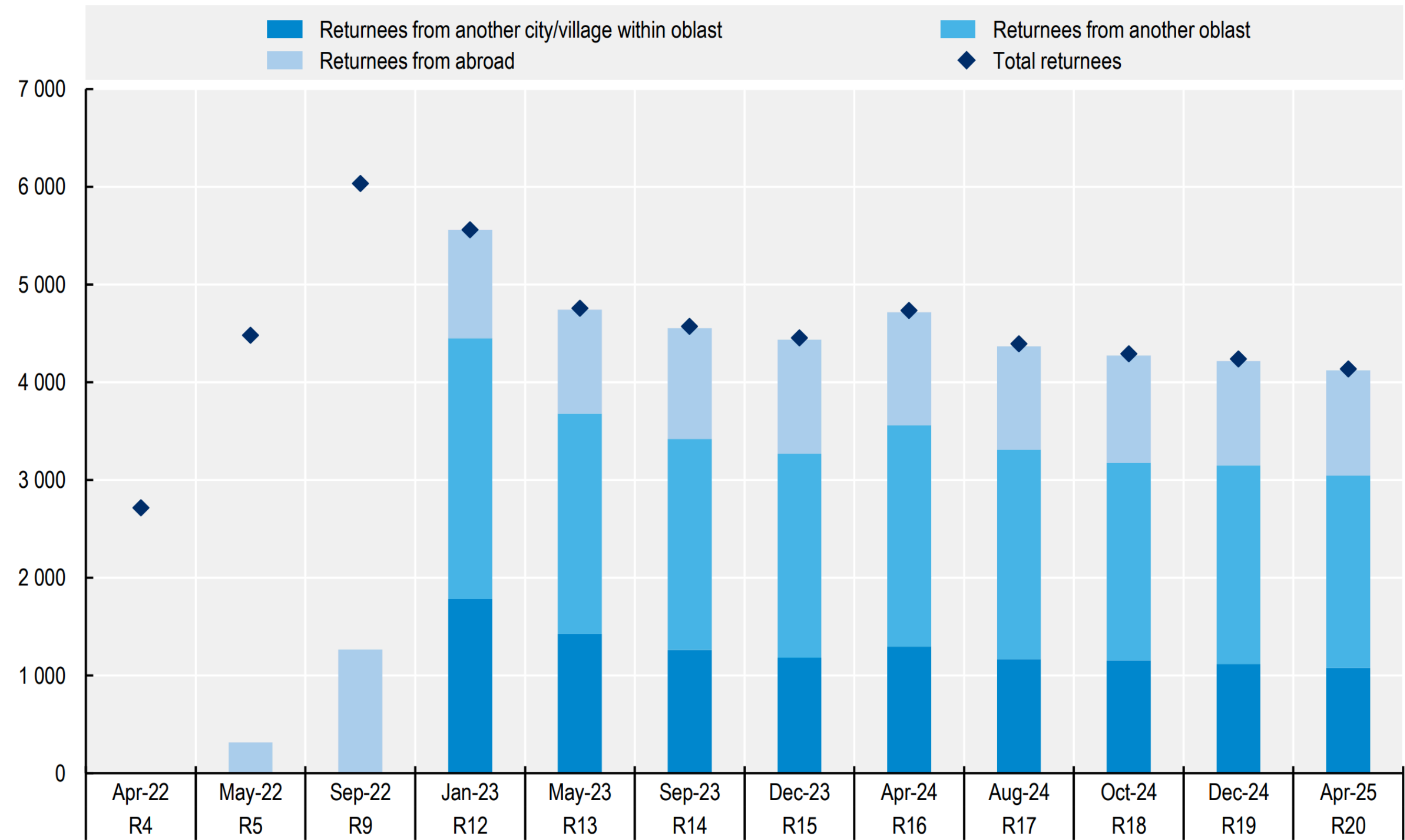
Percentage of returnees

Host country	Refugees by start of simulation	Fragile peace with concessions	Ukraine's victory
Germany	1,184,000	33%	59%
Poland	997,000	47%	70%
Czechia	366,000	49%	71%
Spain	234,000	43%	66%
Romania	184,000	56%	79%
Italy	165,000	45%	73%
Slovak Republic	132,000	52%	75%
Rep. of Moldova	128,000	66%	83%
Netherlands	123,000	45%	68%
Ireland	112,000	42%	65%
Belgium	90,000	43%	64%
Austria	81,000	52%	71%
Bulgaria	73,000	55%	81%
Finland	71,000	46%	69%
Portugal	66,000	47%	71%
France	56,000	45%	68%
Latvia	49,000	45%	78%
Lithuania	45,000	50%	80%
Hungary	40,000	63%	78%
Denmark	36,000	44%	69%
Estonia	34,000	39%	73%
Greece	33,000	53%	79%
Sweden	27,000	48%	70%
Croatia	26,000	50%	73%
Cyprus	23,000	52%	78%
Slovenia	11,000	36%	64%
Total	4,386,000	44%	68%

Source: UNHCR – Brunel ABM.

Figure 2.19. Estimated number of returnees, April 2022-April 2025

Thousands



Source: OECD Secretariat computations based on IOM (2025^[61]), General Population Surveys / Ukraine Returns Reports, Rounds 4-20.

Returns are already taking place.

Despite continued insecurity and ongoing displacement, people have also been returning, including around 1 million from abroad. These early returnees are not representative of future returns, but their experiences offer valuable evidence on what makes return possible.

What do we know?

OECD analysis of IOM and IMPACT data shows that return, and non-return, vary significantly by individual characteristics, place of origin and location of displacement.

Security and family unity are the strongest determinants of intentions to return.

Actual return is strongly shaped by economic and housing conditions, as well as by how long people have been displaced and when they left.

In Ukraine, employment and adequate housing emerge as two of the strongest practical enablers of return.

So what does sustainable return and reintegration actually require?

Ukraine's displacement crisis is unprecedented in scale and character. There is no single international blueprint, but past experiences offer clear lessons about the conditions that make return more sustainable.

- 1. Safety first.** Sustainable return requires more than an end to hostilities. It depends on credible security, perceptions of safety, social acceptance and trust in the conditions for reintegration.
- 2. Housing as enabler.** Housing reconstruction works best when combined with affordable and social housing, functioning rental markets, and links to jobs and public services.
- 3. Support for a new reality.** Returnees need support to adapt to a changed economic and social environment, not policies built around restoring pre-war conditions.
- 4. Diaspora as partner.** Those who remain abroad can make a major contribution to recovery, but engagement depends on credible channels for investment, knowledge exchange and civic participation.

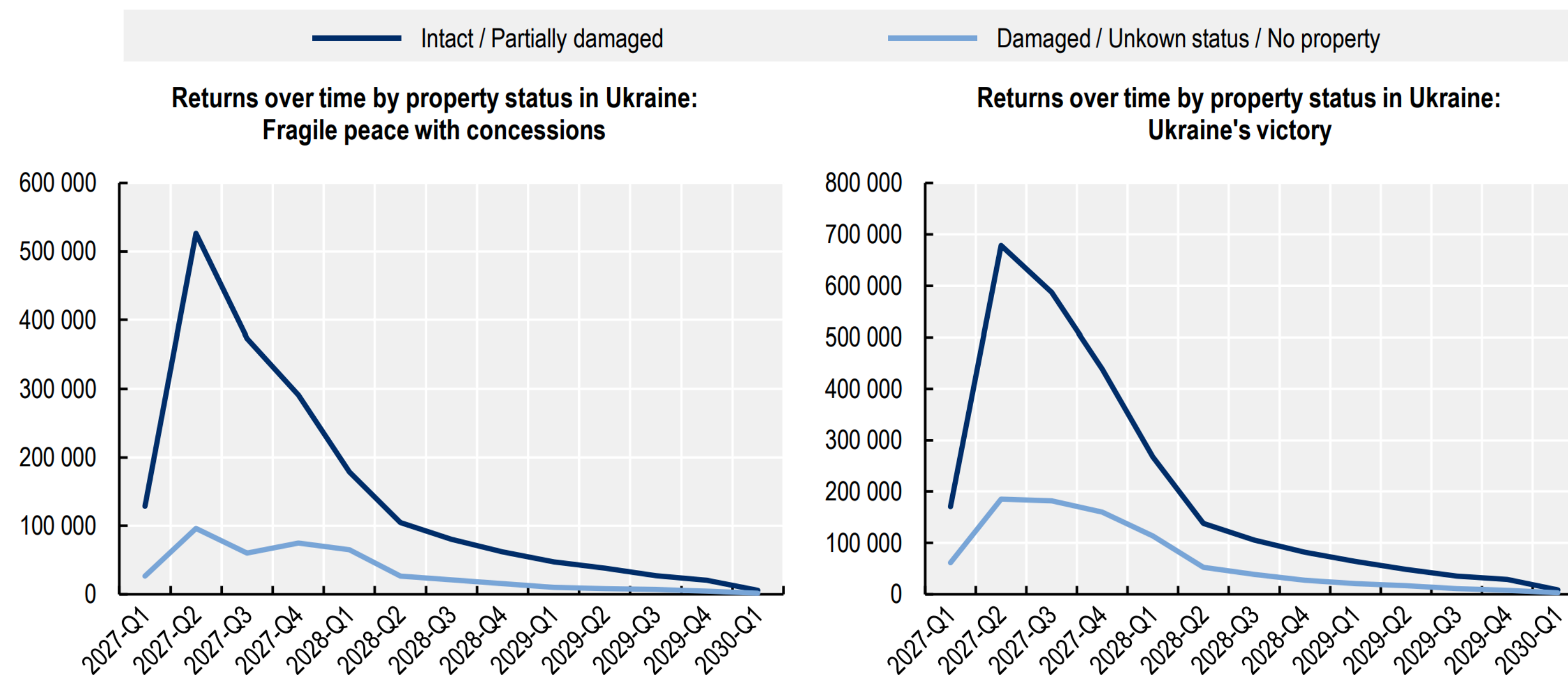
And this is where the discussion about return and the end of temporary protection starts to become a discussion about recovery.

Sustainable return depends on the conditions people return to. Creating those conditions takes time, and many of the foundations for recovery cannot wait until the war is over.

Housing conditions can fundamentally change the return picture

The UNHCR-Brunel model projects substantially higher returns among people with intact or partially damaged property in Ukraine than among those with damaged housing, uncertain property status or no property.

Figure 4.26. Projected returns to Ukraine over time by property status under alternative post-war scenarios



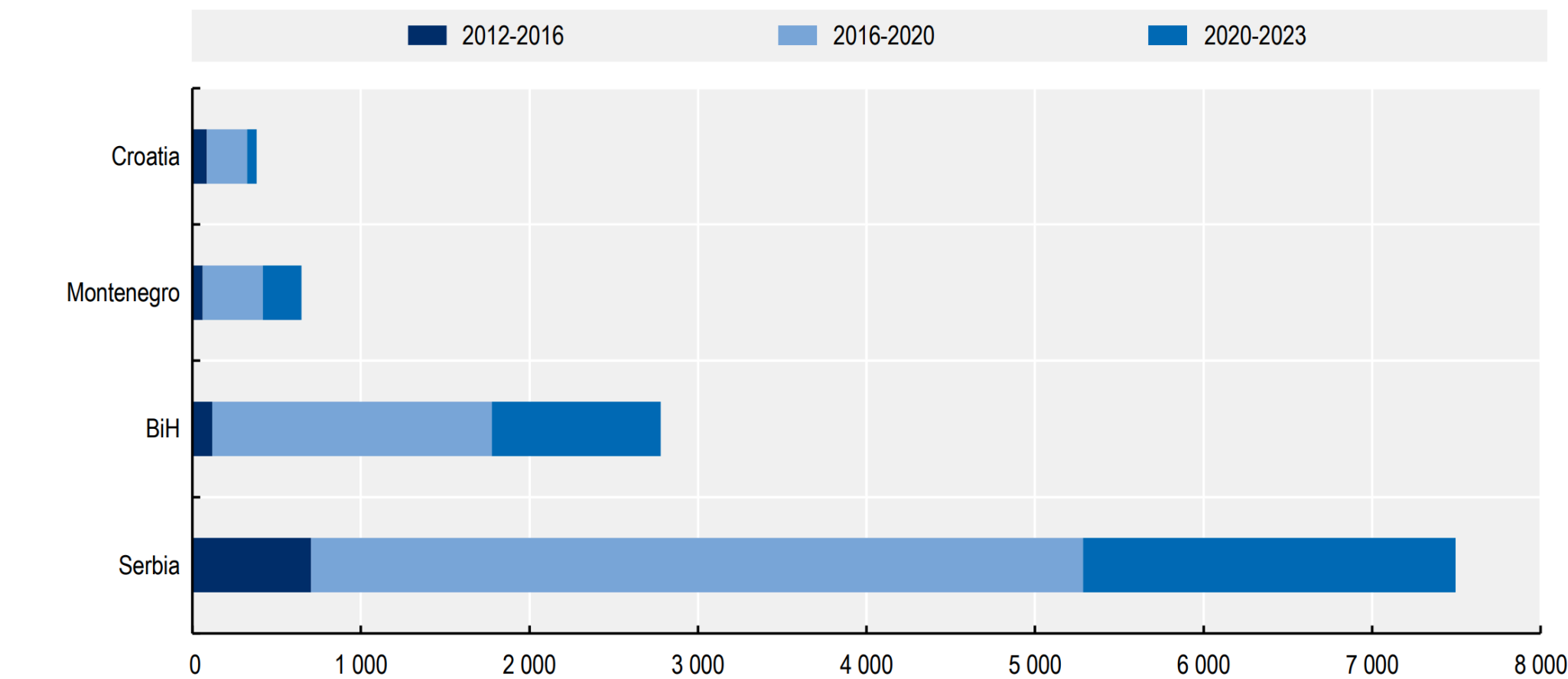
Source: UNHCR – Brunel ABM.

The Western Balkans show why housing systems need to be ready early

- 1. Reconstruction focused on rebuilding.** Early efforts focused heavily on rebuilding homes in places of origin, sometimes without sufficient links to jobs and local economic opportunities.
- 2. Housing reforms were secondary.** Legal and institutional reforms needed for more sustainable housing solutions developed slowly, delaying implementation.
- 3. The people most in need had the fewest options.** Displacement had depleted savings and disrupted employment, while limited access to credit and affordable and social housing made return particularly difficult for vulnerable households.

By the time the system was ready to deliver at scale, years had passed.

Figure 5.1. Number of housing units built through the Regional Housing Programme (2012-2023)



Source: Compilation based on the Regional Housing Programme Country Factsheets 2023, to be accessed via <https://regionalhousingprogramme.org/media/publications/>.

Table 5.2. Outcomes of the Regional Housing Programme (2012-2023)

	Number of beneficiaries	Housing units	Total costs of housing projects (EUR)	National contribution
Bosnia and Herzegovina	9 000	2 778	74 million	10 million
Croatia	934	382	20.6 million	5.8 million
Montenegro	2 000	646	25.3 million	5.5 million
Serbia	24 000	7 495	162.9 million	30.3 million

Source: Compilation based on the Regional Housing Programme Country Factsheets 2023, to be accessed via <https://regionalhousingprogramme.org/media/publications/>.

The Regional Housing Programme ultimately delivered at scale, but only after the necessary legal, institutional and financing frameworks had been put in place.

Recovery is not only about what gets rebuilt. It is also about the systems people return to.

Housing, employment, services, transport and local economies need to work together if return is to be sustainable.

But recovery is also legal and institutional: housing regulation, social housing systems, labour market policies, skills frameworks and delivery capacity all shape whether people can actually rebuild their lives.

Many of these foundations can be - and should be - put in place now, even while large-scale physical reconstruction remains constrained by the war.



So what does this mean in the context of
moving beyond temporary protection?

Europe's temporary protection strategy and Ukraine's recovery strategy cannot be developed in parallel.

MOVING BEYOND TEMPORARY PROTECTION

- Legal status after temporary protection
- Pathways to longer-term residence
- Conditions and support for voluntary return
- Avoiding irregularity and legal limbo
- Continued mobility between Ukraine and Europe

RECOVERY AND REINTEGRATION

- Security and conditions for sustainable return
- Housing and employment
- Public services and local recovery
- Reintegration of IDPs, returnees and veterans
- Ukraine's longer-term human capital needs

These are not separate transitions. Decisions on one side will shape the options available on the other.

Different post-protection pathways are in the interest of both Europe and Ukraine.

Europe needs a managed transition, not a single exit

- Return will be uneven and will not be viable for everyone.
- A return-only approach risks legal limbo, irregularity and poorly managed onward movement.
- Differentiated pathways make the transition more orderly and predictable.

The aim should be to avoid turning the end of Temporary Protection into a new migration-management problem.

Ukraine needs return, but not at any cost or at any pace

- Large-scale return must be absorbed alongside IDPs, veterans and major reconstruction needs.
- Recovery capacity, housing, services and labour markets will constrain how quickly return can happen.
- Ukraine's human-capital strategy must include return, continued mobility and engagement with those who remain abroad.

The objective is to strengthen Ukraine's human capital and future, whether people return, remain abroad or move between the two.

Use the time we have now to prepare for the transition that comes next.

We do not know when large-scale return will become possible, or how many people will choose it. But we do know that the conditions for sustainable return, orderly stay and continued connection take time to build.

Make return sustainable.

Make stay lawful and predictable.

Keep people connected to Ukraine.

What Europe does next will shape not only migration outcomes here, but recovery outcomes in Ukraine.

Thank you!