Lidia Kuzemska (ed.)

Fragmented Lives in Times of War

Displacement Within and From Ukraine

Dossiers

[transcript] Forum Transregionale Studien - Dossiers

Lidia Kuzemska (ed.)
Fragmented Lives in Times of War

Editorial

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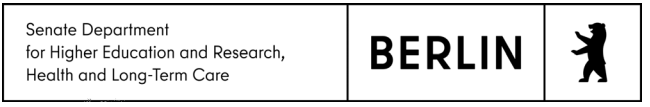
Fragmented Lives in Times of War

Displacement Within and From Ukraine

[transcript]

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Introduction. Fragmented Lives in Times of War

Displacement Within and From Ukraine

Lidia Kuzemska

The Rationale of the Dossier

Ukrainians feel, live with, and live through uncertainties, whether psychologically, intellectually, or bodily. Their lives are fragmented temporally, spatially and socially into "before" and "after" the war began. This book focuses on the experiences of those Ukrainians forced to migrate within and from Ukraine as a result of the Russian invasion. It is driven by the commitment and the urgency to document and discuss how they cope with the uncertainties and fragmentations of their lives. This Dossier marks the end of a collective research project that started more than three years ago. Soon after the Russian full-scale invasion began, we constituted our research group "War, Migration, Memory" within the framework of the PRISMA UKRAÏNA program at the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien. We began discussing and studying the unfolding situation as a group and, at that time, we did not expect the war to be ongoing for so long. The uncertainty about the end of the war and the impossibility of imagining its aftermath urged us since the beginning of our collaborative work to focus on the present, to document, and to consider the implications of war and displacement. Owing to our location at the Forum, we also benefited from the exchanges and work of colleagues from different programs studying conflict-induced displacement, homeland-diaspora relations and return in other regions.[1] They generously shared their experiences of creating workable and ethical methodologies of doing research in unsafe environments, strategies of storing sensitive data and advice on how to make academic research visible in home and host countries. Learning about how fragmentation and uncertainties are dealt with in other contexts was helpful in shaping our thinking about these issues.

This edited collection stems from a conference that our research group organised in November 2024 on the questions of "Ukrainian Un/Certainties: Mobilities,

1 See, for instance, EUME (Europe in the Middle East – the Middle East in Europe, https://www.eume-berlin.de/en/homepage) and SYRASP (The Prison Narratives of Assad's Syria: Voices, Texts, Publics, https://www.eume-berlin.de/en/projects/syrasp).

Memories and Representations in Times of War" at the Forum.[2] Though migration was only one part of a broader programme, the topic of uncertainties caused by mass displacement within and outside of Ukraine (due to the Russian full-scale invasion) manifested itself repeatedly in scholars' presentations and discussions. We wanted to gather these empirical testimonies and theoretical considerations in a published volume to document how displaced Ukrainians navigate uncertainties in their lives. Our aim was to analyse what has been done to alleviate these uncertainties and to explore their implications beyond the immediate context of Ukrainian displacement.

Fragmented Lives in Times of War is the third volume in a series of open-access, blind peer-reviewed Dossiers resulting from the work of our research group at the Forum throughout the years 2022–2025.[3] Forced displacement was a key topic within our research group. We looked at the diversity of displacement experiences, recognising that depicting Ukrainian forced migrants as a homogeneous group – either inside or outside of Ukraine – did not align with the empirical evidence we were collecting. We saw how similar the experiences of ethnic and religious minorities, of people with disabilities or with severe medical needs, of people from diverse socio-demographic and age groups, and of people coming from both occupied regions and areas farther from the frontline of Ukraine were; however, we also noted important differences. Moreover, it became apparent that such diverse experiences of displacement will have profound implications for the post-war needs and expectations of these diverse groups, for their plans and decisions to stay, return or live, as it were, transnationally, and for the unfolding dialogue between Ukrainians, that is, between groups with different war experiences.

Fragmented Lives

What comes to mind when we think about "fragments" or about something being "fragmented"? Broken, detached, disrupted, fractured, separated, incomplete, imperfect, disunified, chaotic, something smaller than a "whole" – such synonyms usually flash across the mind's eye, where they feel loaded with negative connotations.

Yet there is another way of looking at fragments: in the Japanese traditional method of pottery repair called Kintsugi, the broken pieces are glued back together with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold. The outcomes are uniquely

2 See the program of the conference here: https://www.prisma-ukraina.de/fileadmin/pdf/Prisma/PRISMA_-_UA_Un_certainties-WS_Program_web.pdf

3 Viktoriya Sereda (ed.), *War, Migration, Memory. Perspectives on Russia's War against Ukraine*, Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers, 4/2025, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2025; Natasha Klimenko, Miglė Bareikytė and Viktoriya Sereda (eds.), *Images and Objects of Russia's War against Ukraine*, Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers, 5/2025, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2025.

beautiful objects, where broken fragments are connected by the golden lines of glue to form a new pattern. "Unlike traditional repair methods that seek to hide the damage, Kintsugi celebrates the imperfections, making the repaired piece unique and valuable."[4] Based on the philosophy of Wabi-Sabi, which embraces imperfection and impermanence, Kintsugi calls for the acceptance of life's transient nature and the appreciation of "the scars of life as integral parts of one's journey".[5] These restored objects serve as metaphors for human resilience, as ways to accept adversities, and as sources of strength and beauty.

Thinking about lives as being "fragmented" consequently reveals a dual meaning. Lives are simultaneously replete with imperfections and challenges, but they also show how resilient and resourceful people can be, despite circumstances often beyond their control. *Fragmented Lives in Times of War* is a deliberate choice for this book, one that carries the weight of difficulty in it; collectively, these examples of "fragments" and "fragmentation" already signal to readers that this book will reveal many difficult stories of displaced Ukrainians.

Yet it will also testify to Ukrainians' resourcefulness and resilience, despite their uncertain life circumstances, and to how they find strength and agency to endure regardless of adversities or the indeterminate futures they face. We offer this volume as an illustration not only of immediate, "fragmented" associations of imperfection and disruption, but also as a demonstration of the qualities of Kintsugi – resilience and adaptation.

Uncertainties and Displacement

Uncertainty is an equally ambivalent concept, yet it is omnipresent in the research of forced migration. It may be seen "as a state of anxiety and doom, emerging from potential violence and risk […] or as a focus of potentiality and source of hope."[6] There are two forms of uncertainty: internal ("I am uncertain") and external ("it is uncertain"). The first kind of uncertainty emerges from insufficient knowledge about something, whereas external uncertainty reflects the unpredictability of the external world.[7] Therefore, individuals and institutions use different coping strategies to

4 Fuyuko Kuroiwa, "Kintsugi: The Myth of Beauty in Brokenness", *Japanese Mythology*, 02 December 2024, https://japanese.mythologyworldwide.com/kintsugi-the-myth-of-beauty-in-brokenness/ [accessed: 03.12.2025].

5 Ibid.

6 Anna Triandafyllidou, "De-Centring Migration Governance: The Role of Narratives", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51/18, 2025, 4579–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2544077 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

7 Marie Juanchich, Amelie Gourdon-Kanhukamwe and Miroslav Sirota, "'I Am Uncertain' vs 'It Is Uncertain'. How Linguistic Markers of the Uncertainty Source Affect Uncertainty Commu-

deal with these two types of uncertainties: searching for more information, patterns and causality in the first instance; and trying to determine the probability of different events and scenarios in the second instance.[8]

The concept of uncertainty is central to studies of forced displacement. War-induced migration usually produces radical and protracted uncertainty, characterised by a sudden, extreme level of unpredictability with respect to unfolding events, an acute lack of knowledge, and a prolonged situation of spatial and temporal in-betweenness.[9] Waiting and hoping are common coping mechanisms in the face of such radical and protracted uncertainty. Yet both are psychologically exhausting because they assume – despite its radical uncertainty – the present situation's impermanence. Either strategy can also prevent people from accepting their current situation and prevent them from acting in the present while they continue to hope the situation might change.[10]

Individuals' and groups' uncertainties about their future actions can exacerbate the unpredictability faced by the institutions and states that are trying to anticipate these actions. Conversely, policies and interventions from the state and other actors often lack predictability, which intensifies the uncertainty faced by individuals and groups dependent on their care and support. It is not surprising, then, that we see a proliferation of studies about the future intentions of Ukrainians in the EU that are filled with "I don't know" or "I am uncertain" answers about their plans.[11] Even less surprising is the fact that many Ukrainians answer that they want to wait for the decisions of host states and evaluate the situation in Ukraine before making their own decisions about the future. The circle of uncertainty proliferates.

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nication", *Judgment and Decision Making* 12/5, 2017, 445–65, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1930297500006483 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

8 Craig Fox and Gulden Ulkumen, "Distinguishing Two Dimensions of Uncertainty", *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3695311 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

9 Cindy Horst and Katarzyna Grabska, "Introduction: Flight and Exile – Uncertainty in the Context of Conflict-Induced Displacement", *Social Analysis* 59/1, 2015, 1–18, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24718355 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

10 Ibid.

11 *UNHCR*, "Forecasting Refugee Return to Ukraine amid Ongoing War and Uncertainty", 2025, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/117421 [accessed: 30.10.2025]; *UNHCR*, "Lives on Hold #6: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees, Refugee Returnee's and Internally Displaced People from Ukraine", 19 November 2024, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/112600 [accessed: 30.10.2025]; Dariia Mykhailyshyna et al., "Ukrainian Refugees after Three Years Abroad: How Many and Who Will Return? The Fourth Wave of the Research", *Centre for Economic Strategy*, 2025, https://ces.org.ua/en/refugees-fourth-wave/ [accessed: 30.10.2025].

Equally, though, it should be kept in mind that dealing with uncertainty requires resources that are unequally distributed.[12] People with more health, wealth, language competencies and extensive social connections – whether at home or in displacement – can better manage internal and external uncertainties. Those with fewer such resources are thus less flexible and more dependent on the decisions of external actors. Living with uncertainty is costly.

People in a situation of forced displacement, state institutions and civil society organisations all deal with both internal and external uncertainties. They seek strategies to act in the present, while keeping in mind the uncertainty of the future. At the same time, by acting now, they can also *build* the future.[13] Thus, for forced migrants, uncertainty is socially constructed by the decisions (or the lack thereof) of policymakers, by practices of institutions and by the decrees of states that, collectively, regulate migrants' mobility, rights and choices.[14] The uncertain situation of migrants is often used as a form of capital by those who can exploit it: employers, landlords, smugglers, and even state actors.[15]

Uncertainties of War Displacement within and from Ukraine

Uncertainty is the golden thread that runs through numerous studies on Ukrainian forced migrants.[16] Apart from the dominating uncertainty about the future, caused

12 Kathryn T. Dennler, "Uncertain future, unsettled present: suspending and embracing engagement with life among newcomers in Toronto, Canada", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49/7, 2021, 1864–1880, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1927684 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

13 Elena Esposito, "Can we use the open future? Preparedness and innovation in times of self-generated uncertainty", *European Journal of Social Theory* 27/2, 2024, 209–224, https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310231224546 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

14 Felix Maas, Sybille Münch, Miriam Schader and Hannes Schammann, "The Politics of Uncertainty: Producing, Reinforcing, and Mediating (Legal) Uncertainty in Local Refugee Reception—Introduction to the Special Issue", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34/4, 2021, 3559–3569, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab064 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

15 Kristen S. Biehl, "Governing through Uncertainty: Experiences of Being a Refugee in Turkey as a Country for Temporary Asylum", *Social Analysis* 59/1, 2015, 57–75.

16 To name a few: Ana Mijić, "(Re-)Construction of Identity and Belonging after Forced Migration: A Sociology of Knowledge Approach", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 35/3, 2022, 1107–1125, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feac020 [accessed: 03.12.2025]; Brienna Perelli-Harris and Orsola Torrisi, "The Uncertainty of Forced Displacement How Language and Violence Shaped Displacement Trajectories during Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", *International Migration Review* 00/0, 2025, 1–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183251359172 [accessed: 03.12.2025]; Iryna Lapshyna, "Forced Migration, Uncertainty and Transnationalism of Ukrainians in Germany", *Mobilities* 00/0, 2025, 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2024.2445806 [accessed: 03.12.2025]; Oleksandra Tarkhanova and Daryna Pyrogova, "Forced Displacement in Ukraine:

by the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, this proliferation of documented hesitations about the future stems from legal and institutional uncertainties, both within Ukraine and in the EU, which are caused by the (non-)decisions of stakeholders. Those stakeholders, in turn, continue to wait for the war to end, too.

At the time of writing this text (November 2025), the International Organisation for Migration estimates that there are 3.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine. Most of them continue to experience protracted displacement, with 73% having been displaced for over two years. Over 2 million IDPs are from areas under occupation, and 9% are IDPs from 2014–2021. Approximately 10% of IDPs (366,000) have returned to Ukraine from abroad but have remained in displacement,[17] with many of them struggling to find affordable accommodation, secure adequately paid employment, and access necessary social services.

In addition to daily challenges, there has been a rapid change of institutional actors responsible for IDPs over the last year. In December 2024, the Cabinet of Ministers renamed the Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine – for years responsible for the affairs of IDPs and Ukrainians in occupied territories – to the Ministry of National Unity of Ukraine, whose primary objective was to liaise with Ukrainians abroad.[18] This change of responsibilities left civil society rightly worried that the affairs of IDPs and Ukrainians in occupied territories would be left neglected by the state in the absence of a dedicated governmental institution.[19] The institutional chaos continued in July 2025, following a corruption scandal involving Oleksiy Chernyshov, the Minister for National Unity, when Chernyshov's ministry, then barely six months old, was merged with the Ministry of Social Policy.[20] The responsibility for the IDPs in Ukraine is now split between the

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Understanding the Decision-Making Process", *European Societies* 26/2, 2024, 481–500, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2280680 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

17 *International Organization for Migration*, "Ukraine Internal Displacement Report. Global Population Survey. Round 21", 01 October 2025, https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-21-october-2025?close=true [accessed: 14.11.2025].

18 *UNN*, "The Cabinet of Ministers renamed the Ministry of Reintegration to the Ministry of National Unity", 3 December 2024, https://unn.ua/en/news/cabinet-of-ministers-renamed-the-ministry-of-regional-integration-to-the-ministry-of-national-unity-shmygal [accessed: 03.12.2025].

19 Mariia Krasnenko, Alena Lunova, Yaroslav Taranets, "Has the Government Lost Important Powers when Liquidating the Ministry of Reintegration?", 2025, https://zmina.ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/06/min_eng_web-1.pdf [accessed: 14.11.2025].

20 *UNN*, "The Cabinet of Ministers reorganized the Ministry of National Unity and merged it with the Ministry of Social Policy", 21 July 2025, https://unn.ua/en/news/the-cabinet-of-ministers-reorganized-the-ministry-of-national-unity-and-merged-it-with-the-ministry-of-social-policy [accessed: 03.12.2025].

Ministry of Social Policy (registration and social payments), the Ministry for the Development of Communities and Territories (lost/damaged housing compensation support), and local authorities on the ground (social services and local accommodation). The absence of any unified policy or consistent implementation leaves IDPs (and potential returnees to Ukraine from abroad who will become internally displaced) vulnerable to slipping between the cracks of inter-institutional mismanagement.

Across the EU, the situation of displaced Ukrainians is also far from certain. According to Ylva Johannson, a former EU Commissioner for Home Affairs and, since June 2025, Special Envoy for Ukrainians in the EU, 4.7 million Ukrainians live in the EU under temporary protection,[21] with the Czech Republic receiving the highest ratio of beneficiaries of temporary protection relative to the population (35.4 per 1000 persons), followed by Poland (27.3) and Estonia (25.4).[22] In June 2025, the EU extended the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) ostensibly for the last time until 4 March 2027.[23] The absence of a common EU framework for the Ukrainians after the end of the TPD, though, carries the risk of fragmenting protection and support across the Member States. Previous research on decision-making with respect to EU migration policy indicates that, in situations of uncertainty, EU Member States tend to opt for fine-tuning existing policies, avoid significant changes, and use "shortcuts, such as mimicking past policy decisions or emulating successful practices of other international actors when comprehensive ex ante evaluations and impact analyses are not readily available."[24] In other words, they continue with what roughly worked in the past.

In September 2025, the European Council adopted a recommendation to transition out of temporary protection that establishes a "common framework for displaced Ukrainians to ensure a sustainable return and reintegration into Ukraine, when conditions allow, as well as a gradual transition to other residence statuses for

21 Tetiana Vysotska, "EU special envoy reveals how many Ukrainian refugees live in EU", *European Pravda*, 28 October 2025, https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2025/10/28/7223559/ [accessed: 03.12.2025].

22 *Eurostat*, "Temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine – monthly statistics", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics [accessed: 03.12.2025].

23 *Council of the EU*, EU member states agree to extend temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine, 13 June 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/06/13/eu-member-states-agree-to-extend-temporary-protection-for-refugees-from-ukraine/ [accessed: 03.12.2025].

24 Mathias Czaika, Heidrun Bohnet, Federica Zardo, Jakub Bijak, "European migration governance in the context of uncertainty", *International Migration* 62, 2024, 93–110, https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13308 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

those eligible."[25] This recommendation signals that Member States should prepare to offer displaced Ukrainians transitional pathways to national residence permits based on employment, training, education or family grounds, once the applicant meets certain conditions. Alternatively, those who qualify should be allowed to apply for some form of residency status under EU law (e.g., the Single Permit Directive or the EU Blue Card). As I argued earlier, displaced Ukrainians in the EU are now seen primarily as labourers adding value to the local economies rather than as escapees from the war in need of support.[26]

The recommendation also mentions that Member States should provide voluntary time-bound return programmes for Ukrainians and coordinate the conditions of those programmes with the Ukrainian authorities and other Member States. It is noteworthy, though, that the recommendation does not explicitly mention what will happen to those who do not qualify for national or EU residence permits (e.g. pensioners, people with disabilities, health issues, or low income, etc.), or to those who are unwilling or unable to return to Ukraine (e.g. persons whose housing remains in the Temporarily Occupied Territories or has been ruined because of the war). In short, the recommendation omits provisions for those who have the least resources to deal with uncertainty. Will they be able to apply for individual protection in the EU? Will they be offered alternative residence statuses in some Member States? Will they be encouraged to (prematurely) return to Ukraine or, worse, to the Russian-occupied territories? How will the issue of potential secondary migration between EU Member States be addressed after the end of Temporary Protection in March 2027? For the European Council's recommendation to achieve its supposed aim of introducing some certainty into future debates on planning for displaced Ukrainians and Member States, such questions will require answers.

As already mentioned, the legal and practical implications of the lack of such decisions create additional uncertainties for displaced Ukrainians. "Their lives are punctuated not only by the fact of displacement *per se*, but also by the changing policies and attitudes of their host and home countries and societies, by strained cross-border family dynamics and blurred future aspirations. Most of all, they are frag-

25 Council of the EU, *Protection of displaced Ukrainians: Council adopts recommendation about transition out of temporary protection*, 16 September 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/09/16/protection-of-displaced-ukrainians-council-adopts-recommendation-about-transition-out-of-temporary-protection/ [accessed: 03.12.2025].

26 Lidia Kuzemska, "Dual-Intent Approach to Ukrainians Abroad: A Post-Script to the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2024", *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*, 22 August 2024, https://doi.org/10.58079/126ux [accessed: 03.12.2025].

mented by the uncertainty of what comes next: in a year, when the war ends, when life can become 'whole again'."[27]

Overview of Fragmented Lives in Times of War

This book consists of nine chapters, two of which are dedicated to the situation in Ukraine (one to IDPs and one to those who decided to remain in their homes). The following seven chapters analyse the situation outside the country, including six chapters about displaced Ukrainians in multiple EU countries and one chapter specifically focused on Germany, discussing the situation of the Ukrainian diaspora here.

For consistency, the book uses the term "forced migrants from Ukraine" or "displaced Ukrainians" and avoids the term "Ukrainian refugees". This way, we acknowledge the difference in legal status between collective temporary protection (under Council Directive 2001/55/EC) and individual international protection (refugee status as defined under the 1951 Refugee Convention) and we hope to avoid the common confusion brought about by the colloquial use of "refugees" vis-à-vis Ukrainians who are beneficiaries of collective temporary protection in the EU.

All chapters but one are written or co-written by women, predominantly Ukrainian, some of whom have their own experiences of migration or forced displacement. The profiles of the authors reflect the broader reality of current research about Ukrainian forced migration, one dominated by Ukrainian female researchers who often have their own migration history. The chapters draw from a variety of theoretical approaches, but all are written based on testimonies (interviews and surveys) with Ukrainians inside and outside the country.

Daryna Dvornichenko and Marnie Howlett explore the impact of displacement and of IDPs being labelled as "displaced" on their sense of belonging. The authors analyse how female IDPs find themselves again after feeling disoriented by displacement, how they encounter stereotypes and how they find ways to continually negotiate their belonging through practices of adaptation and strategies that foster recognition and help them feel no less "Ukrainian" than their non-displaced compatriots.

Natalia Zaitseva-Chipak focuses on understanding why women who have the right to leave nevertheless decide to stay in Ukraine. Her findings reveal that, for those choosing immobility, the dangers of war are apparently less important than the fear of the unknown of what might come in a new country. She argues that women remaining in Ukraine (or those returning after some time abroad) value

27 Lidia Kuzemska, "Fragmented Lives: 10 Pieces of Ukrainian Displacement Puzzle", *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*, 22 October 2024, https://doi.org/10.58079/12jne [accessed: 03.12.2025].

dignity and the freedom of being more fully themselves in their home country, where they are family members, professionals, citizens, and even pet owners. Furthermore, voluntarily immobile women often perceive themselves as part of the national resistance when staying is viewed as a responsible and beneficial act for the country.

Svitlana Odynets and Oksana Shmulyar Gréen consider displacement as a temporal rupture, where displaced women's sense of belonging and their willingness to integrate quickly collide with the Swedish bureaucratic machine's slower pace. This pace in turn frustrates their attempts at integration and impedes their ability to establish a sense of belonging. The article points to how displaced Ukrainian women find strategies to regain their agency, for instance, by taking charge of their time despite being kept waiting for the authorities' decisions.

Kristina Šliavaitė's article extends the analysis of how displacement and war change the construction of the self. Based on narratives of displaced Ukrainians in Lithuania, she explores how they navigate the uncertainty of their situation, a situation filled with a sense of temporariness, homelessness and insecurity. Šliavaitė's findings reveal that, in these difficult circumstances, a sense of national belonging – being part of the Ukrainian nation in a civic sense – plays a key role in building forced migrants' agency.

Taisiia Ratushna examines digital transnational connections of Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Telegram, help Ukrainians to stay connected and care for and about their loved ones in Ukraine. However, she shows that asymmetries in experiences between those who remained in Ukraine and those who were forced to move may reinforce emotional distancing and leave those displaced with a sense of helplessness when they do not know how to support their loved ones at a distance. Ratushna also demonstrates that digital platforms have enabled virtual communities of help and support for displaced people to form, thus alleviating feelings of isolation while providing practical tips for everyday life in a new country.

Vira Kutyrova's article analyses the phenomenon of "intense motherhood" by looking at how displacement affects Ukrainian women's maternal practices as well as other transnational caring obligations they feel bound by. Building on interviews with women in Slovenia, Germany and Poland, she argues that women's decision-making is based primarily on the perception of their children's prospects. Motherhood in exile impacts how the displaced women organise their everyday life, employment, volunteering, and integration strategies. It also amplifies their self-perception as "resilient Ukrainian women", capable of combining successful integration into a new country, de facto single motherhood, and transnational care for family members remaining in Ukraine. Yet such "intense motherhood" has significant and mounting emotional and physical costs which respondents tend to temporarily set aside.

Matej Jungwirth and Neonila Glukhodid, in their article, develop a four-pronged typology of displaced Ukrainians' decision-making states by looking at mixed-method data drawn from a survey with Ukrainians in the Czech Republic and from interviews with the displaced there and in Germany. The authors make several powerful observations that echo and build on the current literature. First, they acknowledge that it is often difficult for the respondents to talk about their own return plans; instead preferring to discuss others' decision-making logics. Second, the authors note an increased feeling of competition for jobs between the labour migrants from Ukraine who had been in the Czech Republic before the full-scale invasion and those who came afterwards. In Germany, on the other hand, they notice an emerging cleavage within the community of displaced Ukrainians, a split centred around one's place of origin in Ukraine (those from frontline regions versus those from relatively safer territories).

Iryna Lapshyna looks at the Ukrainian diaspora in Germany, its mobilisation during the initial months of the full-scale invasion and massive arrival of Ukrainians to Germany and how this activism reactivated the diasporic consciousness among those who had migrated decades ago.

Finally, using an emotional lens, **Olha Haidamachuk** delves deeper into an analysis of how individual memories of those displaced were affected by the war. She looks at the fragmentation of memories: rifts, silences, flashbacks and disruptions in people's recollections of both distant and near pasts. Her findings vividly illustrate how war and displacement fragment the lives and memories into "Before and After", "Then and Now", and "There and Here" – seminal points in time and space. However, these points are not universal either for all displaced Ukrainians or for their acquaintances – in Ukraine or elsewhere – a dissonance that at times caused tensions in relationships. Haidamachuk also notices that the ongoing war and displacement often led to memories about family histories of similar experiences resurfacing. These memories, though, seldom contain reflections about the future – another sign of profound uncertainty.

Together, the authors of *Fragmented Lives in Times of War* tell a story of loss, disruption, and in-betweenness – all inherent to war displacement. They also tell a story of hope, resilience and agency enacted by ordinary people in situations of radical and protracted uncertainties during wartime. We hope these reflections might add some answers in these volatile times to the universal question: How to live *with* and *within* uncertainty?

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"Displaced" as a Label, Not an Identity for Internally Displaced Ukrainian Women

Daryna Dvornichenko and Marnie Howlett[1]

> "I am not a *pereselenka*, I am a citizen of this country. I am Ukrainian."[2]

Forced displacement is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that disrupts how individuals understand and relate to themselves, their surroundings, and other people within their societies. These processes are especially complex in situations wherein individuals are displaced within the territory of their home states. Although internally displaced people (IDPs) are citizens of the countries within which they are forcibly relocated and thus do not ultimately change one society for another, the arrival of new people in local communities prompts novel interactions and expectations.[3]

The label of "displaced person" applied to forcibly moved people by administrative and legal frameworks particularly implicates local dynamics, as well as individuals' lived experiences of displacement. While this label indeed describes displaced persons' situations and may even complement their "citizen" identities, it can also breed tensions, especially within host communities. This is because the category of "displaced" risks constructing and reinforcing social boundaries by positioning certain citizens as insiders (the "non-displaced") and others as outsiders (the "displaced"). These divisions can impact both internally displaced individuals' integration prospects and social cohesion in societies affected by forced displacement. Yet,

1 This research is partially supported by the British Academy's Researchers at Risk Fellowships Programme.

2 In Ukrainian, "pereselenka" is the feminine form of "displaced person". Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.

3 While we use "internally displaced persons" in this chapter with reference to forcibly moved people, we acknowledge that this label does not fully reflect their lived realities. See: Kerilyn Schewel, "Understanding Immobility: Moving Beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies", *International Migration Review* 54/2, 2019, 328–355.

as the label of "displaced" is externally imposed by governments and societies, it remains unclear whether and how forcibly moved people themselves engage with this categorisation.

Ukraine provides a valuable case to study how internally displaced persons perceive their "displaced" status after forced displacement. Since the beginning of Russia's war on Ukraine in 2014, the number of internally displaced Ukrainians has grown immensely. Approximately 1.5 million people were internally displaced during the first eight years of the war, and it is estimated that this number grew to 6.9 million by August 2022, the peak of the displacement following Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022.[4] While this number fluctuates as people both leave and return to their original homes, and as not all displaced persons register with local governments, an estimated 4.6 million people were internally displaced at the end of 2024.[5] Crucially, there is a significant gender dimension to displacement in Ukraine as women have constituted 61%[6] of all IDPs and 72%[7] of social protection recipients since 2022. Internally displaced women's socioeconomic vulnerability is further demonstrated by the fact that job losses among them are twice as high as among internally displaced men,[8] while many have become the primary caregivers in their households with men serving in the military.[9] Limited access to childcare and education has also restricted many Ukrainian women's ability to seek employment and integrate into their host communities.[10]

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4 *International Organisation for Migration (IOM)*, "Displacement in Ukraine Again on the Rise, IOM Data Shows", *IOM Office to the United Nations*, 31 August 2022, https://unofficeny.iom.int/news/displacement-ukraine-again-rise-iom-data-shows [accessed: 18.11.2025].

5 Natalija Jurčenko, "Skil'ky v Ukraïni pereselenciv i de naïbil'she VPO: statystyka za oblastiamy" ("How many displaced persons are there in Ukraine and where are most IDPs located: statistics by region"), *RBK-Ukraïna*, 22 October 2024, https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/skilki-ukrayini-pereselentsiv-i-de-naybilshe-1729603384.html [accessed: 18.11.2025].

6 Victoria Polishchuk et al., "Internally Displaced Women in Ukraine during the Full-scale Russian Invasion", *YurFem*, 2024, https://jurfem.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Internally-Displaced-Women-in-Ukraine.pdf [accessed: 18.11.2025].

7 *Country Gender Profile: Ukraine* (EU4GenderEquality Reform Helpdesk, 2023), https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/eu4genderhelpdesk_ukrainegenderprofile_2023-cgp_v3.pdf [accessed: 18.11.2025].

8 Inna Volosevych, "The Economic Effects of Russia's War on Ukraine's Internally Displaced Women", *ZOiS Spotlight*, 26 July 2023, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-economic-effects-of-russias-war-on-ukraines-internally-displaced-women [accessed: 18.11.2025].

9 *Country Gender Profile* "EU4GenderEquality".

10 *CARE International*, "Rapid Gender Analysis Ukraine October 2023", 27 October 2023, https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/rapid-gender-analysis-ukraine-october-2023-enuk [accessed: 18.11.2025].

Although a growing number of studies since 2014 has explored the challenges and reintegration experiences of IDPs in Ukraine, especially women, no research has investigated how they perceive the label of "displaced person" applied to them by policymakers and Ukrainian society more broadly. Prior research on internal displacement and identity – in Ukraine and elsewhere – has also failed to examine how externally imposed labels intersect with broader patterns of marginalisation, such as those related to gender. Although many studies highlight that women and men experience forced displacement differently, with the former facing distinct constraints[11] and limited economic opportunities[12] – even when they are legally granted equal or preferential economic rights following their forced relocations[13] – the ways their "displaced" status may affect their experiences of displacement remains underexplored. This chapter, therefore, examines the lived experiences of internally displaced Ukrainian women by asking how they perceive the label of "displaced person."

To answer this question, the chapter focuses on 70 interviews with Ukrainian women who were internally displaced following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. By investigating their perceptions of the label "*pereselenka*" (the feminine form of "displaced person" in Ukrainian) used by Ukrainian policymakers and society to describe them following their forced displacements, the analysis shows how this externally imposed category shapes female IDPs' experiences of displacement. Specifically, the label "displaced person" institutionalises forcibly moved women as "others" within their own society, denies them of their agency, and reduces them to stereotypes. Importantly, this study does not address the question of how the Ukrainian state or media frames displaced citizens, nor does it examine how narratives and assumptions associated with the label of "displaced person" are (re)produced in Ukrainian society. A detailed comparison of societal attitudes toward displaced persons in Ukraine similarly falls outside the focus of this research. Nevertheless, the chapter offers an important empirical contribution to

11 Jane Freedman, Zeynep Kivilcim and Nurcan Özgür Baklacıoğlu (eds.), *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, New York: Routledge, 2017; and Anoji Ekanayake et al., "Gender and Forced Displacement in Humanitarian Policy Discourse: The Missing Link", *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 11/3, 2023, 243–260, https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024231189487 [accessed: 18.11.2025].

12 Lucia Hanmer, Eliana Rubiano, Julieth Santamaria and Diana J. Arango, "How does poverty differ among refugees? Taking a gender lens to the data on Syrian refugees in Jordan", *Middle East Development Journal* 12/2, 2020, 208–242, https://doi.org/10.1080/17938120.2020.1753995 [accessed: 18.11.2025].

13 Kristen Schuettler and Laura Caron, "Jobs Interventions for Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons", *International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/ The World Bank*, Jobs Working Paper 48, 2020, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/467251592598151781/pdf/Jobs-Interventions-for-Refugees-and-Internally-Displaced-Persons.pdf [accessed: 18.11.2025].

the literature on displacement and identity, particularly related to self- and external categorisations during and following war. It moreover reveals acute grassroots implications of the Russia-Ukraine war and challenges to social cohesion in Ukraine.

Identity, Labeling, and Displacement

Much prior research highlights how forced displacement can complicate individuals' self-identifications. As identity is inherently relational, shaped by narrated processes of self-reflection, assessment, and societal influences across different contexts, circumstances, and opportunities,[14] it integrates both *being* who we are in the present and *becoming* who we aspire to be in the future. Affiliations with social groups play a significant role in shaping individuals' identities, as people tend to align their attitudes with and adopt the dominant discourses of the groups they support ("in-group favouritism") while devaluing and rejecting those they do not ("out-group denigration").[15] In this way, identity gains relevance through comparisons between ingroups and outgroups, in addition to one's self-categorisation with a group and distinction from others.[16] As people draw on their various identities in different times and places in response to their own self-perceptions, beliefs, and memories, as well as external factors, interactions within and across in-/out-groups can both foster solidarity and reinforce divisions.[17]

The impact of forced displacement on individuals' self-identifications is particularly complex. Unlike other types of movement, such as recreational travel or eco-

14 Andrew Butler et al., "Landscape Identity, before and after a Forest Fire", *Landscape Research* 43/6, 2017, 878–889, https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2017.1344205 [accessed: 18.11.2025].

15 Martyn Barrett, Evanthia Lyons and Arantza del Valle, "The Development of National Identity and Social Identity Processes: Do Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory Provide Useful Heuristic Frameworks for Developmental Research?" in: Mark Bennett and Fabio Sani (eds.), *The Development of the Social Self*, Hove: Psychology Press, 2004, 159–188, here 163; Bart Duriez et al., "Which National Group Will I Identify Myself With? The Role of Preferred and Perceived Identity Representations", *Nations and Nationalism* 19/3, 2013, 456–474, here 457, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12004 [accessed: 18.11.2025].

16 Duriez et al., "Which National Group Will I Identify Myself With?", 458; Adriana Petryna and Karolina Follis, "Risks of Citizenship and Fault Lines of Survival", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44, 2015, 401–417, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102313-030329 [accessed: 18.11.2025].

17 Anna Rabinovich et al., "Collective self and individual choice: the effects of inter-group comparative context on environmental values and behaviour", *British Journal of Social Psychology* 51/4, 2012, 551–569, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2011.02022.x [accessed: 18.11.2025].

nomic migration, which typically involves a degree of anticipation and preparation, forced displacement can cause an abrupt, involuntary, and often traumatic rupture to one's sense of self. The experience of forced displacement may therefore destabilise individuals' sense of continuity and belonging, creating both a sense of dislocation from place and from oneself. Katrina Powell argues that this rupture – a "jolt" around one's identity – is violent, as it forces individuals to quickly renegotiate their place in the world, often without the emotional resources to process the transition.[18] Displacement may therefore leave people in a state of liminality or "in-betweenness", where old certainties no longer apply and new foundations have yet to emerge. At the same time, displaced individuals may resist being defined by this liminality and, instead, choose to inhabit a metaphorical "third space", wherein a hybrid identity forms through the blending of their old and new associations and affiliations.[19] Within this space, they can (re)negotiate their belonging through practices of adaptation and resilience.

External actors, such as media, political institutions, and host societies, also greatly influence how displaced individuals self-identify following forced displacement.[20] The labels of "displaced person" and "refugee" used to categorise forcibly moved individuals in official and administrative frameworks, as well as in society, are particularly acute for identity (re)negotiation. While these terms accurately describe displaced persons' situations, they classify them in distinct ways. As Kiros Hiruy notes, after a forcibly moved person receives a paper with an official ID number, they acquire a new one-dimensional status.[21] Unlike self-identifications or categorisations, these externally imposed categories are neither flexible nor open to individual negotiation; they are at the service of public institutions, or what Roger Zetter calls "institutional agency."[22] Categories like "displaced person" and "refugee" may hence be used as instruments of control to establish a fixed set of expectations and limitations on displaced individuals' behaviour by conceptually separating them from the places they originated from and relocating them into unfamiliar spaces

18 Katrina Powell, "Rhetorics of Displacement: Constructing Identities in Forced Relocations", *College English* 74/4, 2012, 301.

19 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2003, 38–39.

20 Kari Burnett, *Feeling Like an Outsider: A Case Study of Refugee Identity in the Czech Republic*, Geneva: UNHCR, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, 2013, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/759256?ln=en&v=pdf [accessed: 18.11.2025].

21 Kiros Hiruy, *Finding Home Far Away from Home: Place Attachment, Place-Identity, Belonging and Resettlement among African-Australians in Hobart*, University of Tasmania, Master Thesis, 2009.

22 Roger Zetter, "More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20/2, 2007, 172–192, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem011 [accessed: 18.11.2025].

that belong to others.[23] State authorities and political elites, acting as "political and identity entrepreneurs", may also strategically deploy their power, resources, and influence to use the category of "displaced" for broader political claims.[24] This was seen in Georgia after Russia invaded Abkhazia in 2008, wherein the integration of displaced persons into local communities risked weakening the state's bargaining position by limiting the population available to exert political pressure on the international community – the Georgian government consequently maintained clear boundaries between displaced and non-displaced populations, leaving the former in a protracted state of liminality "at the edge of society."[25] Institutional actions like these fundamentally shape sociopolitical narratives, cultural norms, and public policies around displaced people.

The labels used to categorise displaced people can equally be, and often are, imbued with particular assumptions, stereotypes, and biases, which are categorically prescribed to all those to whom they refer. Crucially, these assumptions are regularly linked to other aspects of individuals' identities, such as their age, gender, and social status. The label of "displaced" may thus not only construct or uphold social boundaries between "displaced" and "non-displaced" members of society but also enable, or even actively drive, the marginalisation of certain people by positioning them as "different" or "outsiders" in society. This can then affect their inclusion in and access to labour markets, social networks, and other vital opportunities.[26] Categories like "displaced person" additionally risk assuming the needs of certain individuals and reinforcing gender stereotypes, xenophobia, and even racism.[27] For example, displaced women are often perceived as passive, vulnerable, and in need of protection.[28] Because of these implicit expectations and assumptions, forcibly moved people may be compelled to accept external categorisations that do not reflect their lived realities or the ways they wish to be perceived. They may equally struggle with the

23 Umut Ozkaleli, "Displaced Selves, Dislocated Emotions and Transforming Identities: Syrian Refugee Women Reinventing Selves", *Women's Studies International Forum* 70, 2018, 17–23, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.07.010 [accessed 18.11.2025].

24 Jacquelien van Stekelenburg, Anouk van Leeuwen and Dunya van Troost, "Politicized Identity", in: Donatella della Porta et al. (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 976.

25 Annefloor Robijn, *From People to Pawns: A Constructivist Approach to the Debate on Internally Displaced People in Ethnically Divided Georgia*, Utrecht University, Master Thesis, 2021.

26 Prince C. Ekoh and Uzoma O. Okoye, "More than just forced migrants: using intersectionality to understand the challenges and experiences of older refugees in Western societies", *Journal of Social Work in Developing Societies* 4/2, 2022, 33–52.

27 Somidha Ray, "What Is in a Label? Exploring How Labelling Shapes Refugees' Experiences", *Essex Student Journal* 16/1, 2024, https://doi.org/10.5526/esj.403 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

28 Neha S. Singh et al., "Research in Forced Displacement: Guidance for a Feminist and Decolonial Approach", *The Lancet* 397/10274, 2021, 560–562.

imposed nature of these new statuses,[29] especially in cases when they cannot be incorporated into their existing definition of themselves,[30] thus affecting their integration prospects and social cohesion more broadly. In this way, displaced individuals' identities are not only shaped through ongoing processes of self-definition and the ways they wish to be perceived by others,[31] but by external categorisations[32] and the conditions under which these are internalised.

Internal Displacement in Ukraine

Ukraine offers an acute case to investigate how displaced individuals' self-identifications interact with externally imposed categories. Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2014, a growing number of studies has examined the experiences of IDPs in Ukraine, and particularly, their reintegration into host communities.[33] Although it may be expected that Ukrainian IDPs face(d) few barriers to reintegration as they remain within their home country and thus the same society, those fleeing the conflict during the first wave of forced displacement between 2014 and 2021 had mixed experiences of reintegration because of their regional identities and social marginalisation.[34] Ian Thompson, Lyudmila Nurse, and Mina Fazel found out

29 Manuela Barreto and Naomi Ellemers, "The Effects of Being Categorised: The Interplay Between Internal and External Social Identities", *European Review of Social Psychology* 14/1, 2003, 159, https://doi.org/10.1080/10463280340000045 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

30 Richard Jenkins, "Categorization: Identity, Social Process and Epistemology", *Current Sociology* 48/3, 2000, 7, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392100048003003 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

31 Joshua Rutt and Corinna Löckenhoff, "From Past to Future: Temporal Self-Continuity Across the Life Span", *Psychology and Aging* 31/6, 2016, 631–639; Maya Becker et al., "Being oneself through time: Bases of self-continuity across 55 cultures", *Self and Identity* 17/3, 2018, 276–293, https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2017.1330222 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Heather Piper and Dean Garratt, "Identity and Citizenship: Some Contradictions in Practice", *British Journal of Educational Studies* 52/3, 2004, 276–292.

32 Barreto and Ellemers, "The Effects of Being Categorised", 159.

33 See, for example: Oksana Mikheieva and Irina Kuznetsova, "Internally Displaced and Immobile People in Ukraine Between 2014 and 2022: Older Age and Disabilities as Factors of Vulnerability", *Migration Research Series* 77, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva 2023, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/pub2023-031-r-mrs77-internally-displaced.pdf [accessed: 17.11.2025].

34 Tetyana Bulakh, "Entangled in Social Safety Nets: Administrative Responses to and Lived Experiences of Internally Displaced Persons in Ukraine", *Europe-Asia Studies* 72/3, 2020, 455–480, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1687648 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Irina Kuznetsova and Oksana Mikheieva, "Forced Displacement from Ukraine's War-Torn Territories: Intersectionality and Power Geometry", *Nationalities Papers* 48/4, 2020, 690–706; and Irina Kuznetsova et al., *The social consequences of population displacement in Ukraine: the risks of marginalization and social exclusion*, Zenodo, 2018, 8, https://zenodo.org/records/1217838 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

that after the outbreak of the war in 2014, IDPs often faced challenges to reintegrating due to their competing "Ukrainian" and bilingual "Donbas" identities, which, in some cases, caused tensions in their host communities.[35] Emma Rimpiläinen moreover shows that media discourses affected the reintegration experiences of IDPs during the first wave of displacement by shaping the Ukrainian public's perceptions of them.[36] Specifically, Ukrainian media used the concept of "displacement" for political purposes by constructing negative representations of IDPs from Donbas as those who abuse social benefits and exhibit anti-Ukrainian sympathies.[37] The effects of these representations were seen through large attitudinal shifts in Ukrainian society over time as the initial charitable solidarity with IDPs turned highly critical, including blaming displaced people for the overall decreasing quality of life in Ukraine, and framing them as different, burdens on local economies, and politically suspect or even complicit in the war.[38]

Other scholars have highlighted how the official classification of "displaced" has created divisions in Ukraine since the beginning of the war. As IDP registration in government-controlled areas became a precondition for receiving state benefits, including pensions,[39] since 2014, these state-mandated processes underscored IDPs'

35 Gwendolyn Sasse and Alice Lackner, "War and identity: the case of the Donbas in Ukraine", *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34/2/3, 2018, 139–157, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1452209 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Ian Thompson et al., "Tensions in Cultural Identity and Sense of Belonging for Internally Displaced Adolescents in Ukraine", *Child Care in Practice* 29/3, 2023, 319–334, https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2023.2199192 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Valeria Lazarenko, "Mapping identities: Narratives of displacement in Ukraine", *Emotion, Space and Society* 35, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2020.100674 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Maria Lewicka and Bartłomiej Iwańczak, "Regional differentiation of identities in Ukraine: how many regions?", in: Ulrich Schmid and Oksana Myshlovska (eds.), *Regionalism without regions: reconceptualizing Ukraine's heterogeneity*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2019, 25–66.

36 Emma Rimpiläinen, "Victims, Villains, or Geopolitical Tools? Representations of Donbas Displacement in Ukrainian and Russian Government Media", *Europe Asia Studies* 72/3, 2020, 481–504, here 497, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1672622 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

37 Ibid.

38 Tetyana Bulakh, "Strangers Among Ours: State and Civil Responses to the Phenomenon of Internal Displacement in Ukraine", in: Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Greta Uehling (eds.), *Migration and the Ukraine Crisis: A Two-Country Perspective*, E-International Relations, 2017, 51.

39 Suleiman Mamutov et al., *Off to a Shaky Start: Ukrainian Government Responses to Internally Displaced Persons*, Brookings Institution, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/research/off-to-a-shaky-start-ukrainian-government-responses-to-internally-displaced-persons/ [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Dorota Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and Nika Palaguta, "Internally Displaced Persons and Elections under Military Conflict in Ukraine", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30/1, 2017, 27–46, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/few021 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

"otherness" and reinforced a persistent denial of their belonging within society.[40] It also prompted discourses around "fake" IDPs – a label applied to all "politically suspicious migrants" from non-government-controlled areas who had left their homes to receive benefits from the Ukrainian government.[41] While some scholars argue that there has become "a clearer sense of what it means to be Ukrainian" since the beginning of the war in 2014,[42] these studies nevertheless suggest that a shared national identity or even citizenship has not eliminated discrimination towards IDPs or led to the seamless reintegration of all individuals displaced because of Russia's war on Ukraine.[43]

These issues have only become more critical with the quickly growing number of displaced people following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion. As displaced people now constitute a larger percentage of Ukraine's population, much research has consequently examined and compared patterns of displacement across these two "waves."[44] Still, no studies have explored how Ukrainian IDPs perceive their "displaced" status, or the ways that this label might contrast their lived experiences of displacement. Given the significant empirical lacuna, the remainder of this chapter accordingly focuses on how internally displaced Ukrainians engage with the categorisation of "displaced person". Because of the gender dimension of displacement

40 Viktoriya Sereda, "'Social Distancing' and Hierarchies of Belonging: The Case of Displaced Population from Donbas and Crimea", *Europe-Asia Studies* 72/3, 2020, 404–431, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1719043 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

41 Rimpiläinen, "Victims, Villains, or Geopolitical Tools?", 497.

42 Greta Uehling, "A Hybrid Deportation: Internally Displaced from Crimea in Ukraine", in: Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Greta Uehling (eds.), *Migration and the Ukraine Crisis: A Two-Country Perspective*, E-International Relations, 2017, 70. See also: Greta Uehling, "Three rationalities for making sense of internal displacement in Ukraine", *Migration Studies* 9/3, 2021, 1536–1559, https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnaa005 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

43 Oleksandra Tarkhanova and Daryna Pyrogova, "Forced Displacement in Ukraine: Understanding the Decision-Making Process", *European Societies 26/2*, 2024, 481–500, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2280680 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; See also: Evgenii Golovakha et al., "From Patronalism to Civic Belonging: The Changing Dynamics of the National-Civic Identity in Ukraine", in: Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar (eds.) *The Russia-Ukraine War*, vol. 1, *Ukraine's Patronal Democracy and the Russian Invasion*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2023.

44 Viktoriya Sereda, *Displacement in War-Torn Ukraine: State, Displacement and Belonging*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023; Vlad Mykhnenko et al., "Understanding forced internal displacement in Ukraine: insights and lessons for today's crises", *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 38/3, 2022, 699–716, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grac020 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Oksana Mikheieva et al., "Forced Displacement of Ukrainians during the War: Patterns of Internal and External Migration (2014–2022)", in: Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar (eds.), *The Russia-Ukraine War*, vol. 1, *Ukraine's Patronal Democracy and the Russian Invasion*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2023.

in Ukraine since 2014, the analysis focuses specifically on the experiences of internally displaced women.

Methodology

This study draws on 70 semi-structured online interviews conducted between August 2023 and August 2024 with internally displaced Ukrainian women. All participants were forcibly moved from Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasti (regions), to cities and towns in Chernivtsi, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil, Zakarpattia, Odesa, and Kyiv oblasti following Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022.[45] The interlocutors varied by age (18 to 80 years), educational experience, employment status, and profession, including university professors, civil society activists, humanitarian aid workers, entrepreneurs, and housewives. 37 of the interviewees lost their jobs and ten ceased their entrepreneurial activities following Russia's 2022 invasion. At the time of the interviews, 12 respondents were retired and 12 were unemployed and dependent on social benefits and humanitarian aid. 65 interviewees resided in private houses, while three lived in shared accommodation with other families and five lived in shelters or public facilities for IDPs. 46 participants were married or in civil partnerships. The participants were accessed via snowball sampling utilising the authors' diverse social and professional networks in Ukraine and through community organisations supporting IDPs.

Extreme sensitivity was exercised throughout the entire research process to safeguard a high level of ethics.[46] This was important as many participants shared that they had experienced immense trauma during their displacements and because of Russia's ongoing assaults on Ukraine.[47] Still, most participants expressed a strong desire to share their stories, viewing their participation in the study as a way to voice their experiences. The establishment of trust and rapport was thus a critical element of the research design. To ensure comfort and foster trust and openness, the first author – a forcibly displaced Ukrainian woman herself – conducted all interviews. Her shared cultural background aided in establishing rapport, which complemented the "outsider" identity of the second author. Together, the authors'

45 Thirty participants were first displaced from the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014 following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, while the remaining 40 were first displaced after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion.

46 Marnie Howlett and Valeria Lazarenko, "How and when should we (not) speak?: Ethical knowledge production about the Russia–Ukraine war", *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26/4, 2023, 722–732.

47 For example, 37 participants recounted direct exposure to violence in their hometowns or during evacuation, 22 had a close relative or partner serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and two had survived captivity and torture.

positionalities and prior work on several projects on internal displacement and the Russia-Ukraine war allowed them to approach the research with empathy and critical insight, as well as enabling a feedback loop that ensured a balanced analysis.[48] All participants were provided with information about free psychological support services in Ukraine, and the interviewer followed up with each interviewee within a day of the interview to ensure they felt supported. Informed consent was obtained and the studies' protocols and questions were approved by the University of Oxford before any data collection began.

The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian or Russian, depending on each participant's preference, and lasted one to four hours to allow interlocutors to share their full views. All conversations were recorded and transcribed into Ukrainian before they were analysed using NVivo 12. In line with Kathy Charmaz,[49] a grounded theoretical approach was applied to first identify significant themes and then to explore deeper meanings within the transcripts through hermeneutic analyses. This constructivist approach was used for its balance of flexibility and structure, making it well-suited to examine the complexities of forced displacement. The following section is subdivided into the main categories that arose from the data and showcase how internally displaced Ukrainian women perceive and engage with the label of "*pereselenka*".

Findings

Disoriented Sense of Self

A common theme expressed by all participants in this study was a disoriented sense of self following their forced relocations after Russia's 2022 invasion. Many women explained that their displacements left them feeling detached from both the places where they had previously lived and their host communities. Several echoed the sentiments of a woman in her late thirties who moved with her husband and child from Berdiansk to Lviv and shared that she cannot call herself a "*Lvivyanka* [a resident of Lviv], but on the other hand, [she] cannot call [her]self a *Berdianka* [a resident of Berdiansk] any longer."[50] Numerous other women similarly admitted that they feel like "a stranger" in Ukraine after their displacements in 2022, which, some shared,

48 Viktoriya Sereda and Oksana Mikheieva, "How (Not) to Study a War-Affected Society: Challenges of Knowledge Production in Ukraine and Elsewhere", *Nationalities Papers*, 2025, 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.56 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

49 Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2006.

50 Interview conducted on 10 August 2023.

was the second or even third time they were forced to move since the war began in 2014.[51]

To explain why they feel unable to fully engage in the broader social norms, values, and practices of Ukrainian society, participants in this study regularly stated that they "lost everything" because of their displacement, particularly citing their hometowns, apartments, and members of their families.[52] Some women stressed their lost social connections, sharing that their friendships and professional relationships had broken down after they and their friends and colleagues had moved to different communities – in Ukraine and abroad. This was disclosed by a mother of two children who admitted that she found it "very difficult to establish personal connections" after her displacement in 2022 "because all of [her] friends stayed in her hometown in the Donetsk oblast or moved around the world".[53] Another respondent, a university lecturer, also divulged that she has struggled to adapt to new social environments after her two displacements because her "former colleagues are dispersed all over the world."[54]

In addition to losing social ties because of their physical relocations, several participants admitted that they had deliberately severed ties with friends and family who remained in their home communities following Russia's 2022 invasion. Many held views similar to those of a middle-aged woman from Zaporizhzhia oblast, who explained that she does not "have anything in common with people who stayed" in her occupied hometown after 2022.[55] Another interlocutor confessed that her relationships with her mother-in-law and some friends have worsened since she left her hometown in Donetsk oblast, as they stayed and now hold opposing views about Russia.[56] Five other participants in this study likewise expressed that people from their home communities, such as their former close friends, began showing pro-Russian views and even started collaborating with Russians after the full-scale invasion – this included people who had previously been pro-Ukrainian. In fact, one woman from Luhansk oblast noted that half of her former classmates are now on Russia's side.[57] While not all participants shared such anecdotes, many admitted that they have cut off contact with once-close friends and relatives whose political views they have questioned since Russia's 2022 invasion.

Beyond the relationships that have been lost because of their forced displacements, differences between displaced Ukrainian women's home and host localities

51 Interviews conducted on 26 August 2023.
52 Interview conducted on 21 August 2023.
53 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.
54 Interview conducted on 5 August 2023.
55 Interview conducted on 10 August 2023.
56 Interview conducted on 5 September 2024.
57 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.

have also impacted their ability to establish a sense of self and belonging since 2022. Several participants in this study detailed that moving from big, industrialised cities, predominantly in eastern Ukraine, to smaller towns and villages, often in western Ukraine, was very difficult for them. For example, a woman now living in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk confessed that she "cannot get used to the narrow streets and small buildings" as she misses "the broad avenues and multi-story buildings in Donetsk and Mariupol", where she lived before her two displacements.[58] Another interlocutor from Crimea similarly referenced the architectural and environmental differences between where she previously lived and her host community, Dnipro, admitting that the latter is "not the place of [her] power [as] there is no sea".[59] Others described feeling a sense of alienation and even "culture shock" after their displacements because of differences between the local cultures in their home and host communities. This was demonstrated, for example, by a young woman from Kharkiv (Kharkiv oblast) who moved to Vinnytsia (Vinnytsia oblast) in 2022:

> The attitude to work is different. Moving from central Ukraine to the west, the pace slows down. People are reluctant to take on interesting projects and are not interested in working harder, faster, or more efficiently. Life here in Vinnytsia is not suitable for my development. So, even here in Vinnytsia, I try to find people from Kharkiv with whom I can arrange everything much faster.[60]

Analogous views were expressed by another respondent displaced twice – in 2014 and then again in 2022. When speaking about her two experiences of displacement, she shared that she did not feel very different from other people in her host community located not far from her hometown in Donetsk oblast when she was first displaced in 2014, but after her second displacement in 2022, she feels "absolutely different" from her host community in western Ukraine.[61] To demonstrate these "differences", she elucidated that people in eastern Ukraine "are used to going to work at 6 am. Here [in Ivano-Frankivsk], a doctor can turn up at 10:15 am and immediately leave the hospital to enjoy a morning coffee".[62] Implicit in these views is the importance of the physical environment and social cultures in local communities for IDPs' ability to (re)establish their sense of self.

Crucially, internally displaced Ukrainian women's experiences of the war have also greatly affected their (in)ability to reintegrate into their host communities. Although not widely discussed in the literature on forced migration and the Russia-

58 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.
59 Interview conducted on 29 July 2023.
60 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.
61 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.
62 Ibid.

Ukraine war, several participants mentioned how much they have struggled to connect with other people in their host communities because of their diverging war experiences. For example, a woman in her late fifties disclosed that she feels tensions between local people and IDPs in western Ukraine because the former have predominantly seen the war through their TVs, while the latter have first-hand experiences of the conflict. She stated: "[T]hey [locals] live their own lives here. They do not understand what the war is. They are very far from all these atrocities, murders, and destruction. They cannot even imagine the scale of what has happened in Mariupol. They do not understand how terrifying it is."[63] She elucidated that these differences, and the fact that local people "never ask and talk about" IDPs' experiences of the war or displacement, make it challenging for displaced persons to relate to them.[64] This woman, like many other participants in this study, consequently admitted that she only engages with other displaced people in her host community. This self-imposed segregation has consequently created a divide between displaced and non-displaced Ukrainians within both host localities and Ukraine more broadly. It has also made it difficult for many internally displaced women to reintegrate and regain a sense of belonging after their forced displacements, leaving some with a disoriented sense of self.

"Pereselenka" as an Imposed Label

When describing the struggles they have faced integrating into their host communities following their displacements, participants in this study frequently admitted that their status as a "*pereselenka*" has greatly influenced their experiences. Specifically, they elucidated that they felt "*pereselenka*" has become a negative category within Ukrainian society since 2022. Several described instances when they encountered adverse attitudes and judgments in their host localities when engaging in mundane activities like shopping at the market, walking their children to school, using public transport, or attending community events, because of their "displaced" status. A young participant from Alchevsk (Luhansk oblast) articulated these negative views when describing how she had intervened in a small dispute between a woman and a man on a bus soon after her displacement: "I just asked them to stop and the woman turned to me and said, 'what are you, an IDP?' As if, just because I expressed my displeasure, it automatically made me an outsider, like something was wrong with me simply because I am displaced."[65] An interlocutor from the city of Kherson similarly disclosed that she could not find a doctor to treat her son after arriving in her host city, Ternopil, because they were not local. When she finally

63 Interview conducted on 5 August 2023.

64 Ibid.

65 Interview conducted on 10 August 2024.

contacted the head of the hospital, the doctor inquired: "'Who are you? We do not know you and do not want to know you. You are strangers to us.'"[66] In addition to this overt discrimination, other women shared that they feel local people in their host communities make false judgments about them, such as assuming that they are poor and facing economic hardships simply because they are displaced. This was disclosed by a woman displaced from Makiivka (Donetsk oblast) to Irshava (Zakarpattia oblast), who stressed that she "cannot even buy a cake without being discussed in the neighbourhood" as everyone starts asking how she has enough money to buy a cake because she is a displaced person, and therefore, likely "cannot afford it."[67]

Aside from stigmatising them, the women in this study emphasised that they believe the label of "*pereselenka*" is imbued with certain assumptions within Ukrainian society. Many women admitted that they think this category risks (re)producing gender stereotypes about their vulnerability, dependence, and passivity, which conflicts with how they see themselves. While forced displacement can indeed lead to economic vulnerability, especially for women, most participants in this study retained their jobs after their forced displacements or expressed a desire to work, and only 17% were dependent on social benefits and humanitarian aid. Yet, several interlocutors admitted that they believe locals see them as unable to work because they are displaced. Those with school-aged children emphasised that, despite seeking flexible or online work, they are perceived as having limited employment capacities due to their care-giving responsibilities. One unemployed participant divulged that she has repeatedly failed to find a job because she is displaced with children and, therefore, employers do not want to hire her.[68] She stressed: "[O]ther women I see at my son's school can find a job as they are locals, [so] what is wrong with me?" This perceived discrimination due to both displacement status and gender hence constitutes a structural barrier to internally displaced women's reintegration prospects and the (re)establishment of their identities and sense of belonging.

At the same time as being "othered", participants also confessed that the label of "*pereselenka*" has left them feeling that they are a burden for their host communities and the Ukrainian state. These sentiments were articulated, for example, by a young mother from Vuhledar (Luhansk oblast) now living in Pavlohrad (Dnipropetrovsk oblast), who stated, "I have heard these remarks several times: 'you have moved here, you are displaced. This means we have to pay you extra pensions and so on from our local budget.'"[69] Whereas numerous participants shared similar views, some expressed that they believe their "otherness" in Ukrainian society is institutionalised by

66 Interview conducted on 26 August 2024.
67 Interview conducted on 5 August 2023.
68 Interview conducted on 6 August 2023.
69 Interview conducted on 21 August 2023.

the government, as it grants their statuses and provides their payments. As one participant noted, the distinction established by the government between "displaced" and "non-displaced" Ukrainians "stirs envy among locals, and IDPs end up relying on aid instead of finding ways to work. It creates learned helplessness. The state should unite us."[70] Several women stressed that humanitarian organisations also contribute to this marginalisation by exclusively providing aid to IDPs[71] or offering aid packages that differ in both content and size from what is available to non-displaced citizens.[72] Others underscored that it is not IDPs but local people who create problems in host communities, especially in terms of evading taxes. As a displaced businesswoman argued, "ten years ago in Donetsk, it was shameful not to pay taxes. All of us, big and small businesses in Donetsk oblast paid taxes. Here in Odesa oblast, people still try to avoid it."[73] These findings consequently highlight the paradox of institutional support: while intended to provide protection and aid for conflict-affected individuals, it can also contribute to the marginalisation that displaced individuals often seek to overcome and create new divisions within society.

Unsurprisingly, then, interviewees repeatedly echoed this chapter's opening idiom in rejecting the label "*pereselenka*". Many women emphasised how substantially this label marginalises them within Ukrainian society, making them feel like second-class citizens and less than other people who have not been displaced. A young woman from Luhansk (Luhansk oblast) explained that being called "*pereselenka*" immediately "ignites a conflict" within her that she would rather avoid.[74] She stated: "I do not want pity or worse – judgment. People might tell me how I should live or what I've done wrong. I already feel guilty for what our region has brought."[75] This was repeated by several interlocutors, including some who now avoid disclosing to others that they are displaced[76] or have deliberately not registered as an IDP and rejected state aid because they "do not want to be pointed at as a '*pereselenka*'".[77] Many women even admitted that they feel more comfortable living in areas closer to the front line of the conflict, despite the greater security risks, because people there "do not differentiate between IDPs and locals."[78] One example is a woman from Berdiansk (Zaporizhzhia oblast) who spent two months in Ivano-Frankivsk (Ivano-Frankivsk oblast) in 2022 before moving to central Ukraine, where she "felt a different attitude" as "the

70 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.
71 Ibid.
72 Interview conducted on 16 August 2024.
73 Interview conducted on 15 August 2024.
74 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.
75 Ibid.
76 Interviews conducted on 10 August 2023, and 16 August 2024.
77 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.
78 Interviews conducted on 10 August 2023, and 16 August 2024.

war is so close to people there."[79] These sentiments underscore how considerably the labels used in administrative and legal frameworks and colloquially by society can impact displaced individuals' lived experiences of displacement.

"Ukrainian" as Self-Identification

While continuously negotiating the externally imposed label of "*pereselenka*," the women in this study also regularly stressed their self-identification as Ukrainians. Participants particularly asserted that even though they have been forced from their homes because of Russia's war against Ukraine, they are no less "Ukrainian" than their non-displaced compatriots. Rather, when asked how they identify, they repeatedly underscored that they are "Ukrainian" first and foremost.[80]

To demonstrate their Ukrainian identities and attachments to Ukraine, interlocutors often outlined criteria that they believe define someone as "Ukrainian". Among the various identity markers cited, speaking Ukrainian was the most common amongst all participants. In fact, numerous respondents stated that a true Ukrainian must speak Ukrainian, with many divulging that they made a conscious decision after their displacements in 2022 to switch from Russian to Ukrainian. One demonstration is a middle-aged woman from Kramatorsk (Donetsk oblast) who shared that she "switched to Ukrainian" after speaking in Russian for her whole life, even though it "is not easy, but it will come gradually".[81] Another participant from Berdiansk (Zaporizhzhia oblast) articulated similar sentiments when telling a story about how she felt extremely annoyed when a colleague in a neighbouring department at her work was watching Russian channels after Russia's 2022 invasion. Although she had previously spoken Russian and also watched Russian television before her displacement, she admitted that she can no longer tolerate the language and asked her colleague to turn the Russian television off.[82] Other participants also confessed that hearing Russian now triggers traumatic memories for them, even though Russian remains their primary language for thinking. Importantly, this linguistic shift is part of a larger trend in Ukraine since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, especially after 2022.[83] Still, many respondents shared that their decisions to only speak Ukrainian is their attempt to show that they are equally Ukrainian citizens, as well as to eradicate the distinctions they feel between displaced and non-displaced people. As an illustration, a woman from Kyiv who

79 Interview conducted on 12 August 2023.

80 Interview conducted on 15 August 2024.

81 Interview conducted on 21 August 2023.

82 Interview conducted on 11 August 2023.

83 For more on this, see: Volodymyr Kulyk, "Language Shift in Time of War: The Abandonment of Russian in Ukraine", *Post-Soviet Affairs* 40/3, 2024, 159–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2024.2318141 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

now lives in Lviv explained that she solely speaks Ukrainian because she wants to empathise with those who are most "triggered by the Russian language".[84] In this way, speaking Ukrainian is not only internally displaced Ukrainian women's response to external pressure, but a personal act of self-identification.

Beyond speaking in Ukrainian, paying taxes was another criterion that participants frequently stated showcases Ukrainians' commitment to each other and their state. While many argued that paying taxes is important for all citizens because it is fundamental for rebuilding Ukraine, others argued that the fact that they pay taxes is a key reason why they should be viewed as equal to their non-displaced compatriots. As one woman from Mariupol (Donetsk oblast) now living in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk remarked, "I am a citizen of this country, born here and paying taxes all my life."[85] Another participant from Donetsk likewise asserted that paying taxes is critical to rebuilding and supporting local institutions like schools and kindergartens.[86] These sentiments were also echoed by a middle-aged respondent from Crimea who emphasised that it is the duty of all Ukrainians to contribute to their country's struggle. As she stated, "everyone has their own front", and paying taxes is one way to support the Ukrainian state.[87]

Finally, staying in Ukraine rather than seeking refuge abroad was cited by many internally displaced women as an important marker of their "Ukrainian" identities. As a young woman displaced with two children from Mariupol (Donetsk oblast) to Ivano-Frankivsk (Ivano-Frankivsk oblast) explained: "I never wanted to leave Ukraine, not even temporarily. As we say, 'you can only benefit where you are born.' I love Ukraine and want to live here."[88] Many interviewees shared similar views, including women who had initially moved abroad after their displacements but later decided to return to Ukraine. One example is a woman who moved from the city of Luhansk to Kharkiv in 2014 and then to Italy with her two children after Russia's 2022 invasion, where she stayed for six months before deciding to return to Ukraine. When speaking about her reasons for returning, even though her hometown was still occupied by Russia, she shared that she "was homesick and couldn't be happy there".[89] She added that she had "learned Italian, made friends, and appreciated their culture", but knew that she could "never truly feel Italian" if she stayed.[90] Another woman who moved from Mariupol (Donetsk oblast) to Warsaw in February 2022 similarly confessed that she returned from Poland and moved

84 Interview conducted on 9 August 2023.
85 Interview conducted on 14 August 2023.
86 Interview conducted on 15 August 2024.
87 Interview conducted on 29 July 2023.
88 Interview conducted on 13 August 2023.
89 Ibid.
90 Interview conducted on 13 August 2024.

to Ivano-Frankivsk (Ivano-Frankivsk oblast) because she believes that "Ukrainians should live in Ukraine. If you can stay and work for the country's economy, you should."[91] Our participants' decisions to live in Ukraine during Russia's war against their country thus reflect the strength of their attachments to their homeland and national community. Their actions moreover illustrate their self-identifications as "Ukrainian", and desire to be recognised this way, rather than categorised as "displaced."

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how internally displaced Ukrainian women perceive the label of "*pereselenka*" applied to them by their government and society following their forced displacements after Russia's 2022 invasion. The analysis revealed how the category of "displaced person" used in administrative and legal frameworks codifies power dynamics and institutionalises a sense of "otherness" in Ukrainian society by distinguishing forcibly moved people from their non-displaced compatriots. As this category is reinforced through interactions in local communities and by institutions like government and the media, it consequently differentiates IDPs and makes them feel marginalised and "less-than" Ukrainian citizens – a phenomenon that Homi Bhabha calls the "emergence of the others among ourselves".[92]

This investigation pushes forward prior research around labelling, forced migration, identity, and gender during and after war by illustrating how the feminised version of the term "displaced person" ("*pereselenka*") is especially loaded with negative connotations in Ukrainian society. Namely, it compounds the general stigma of displacement with gender stereotypes associated with vulnerability, dependence, and passivity. In doing so, this label (re)produces and positions displaced Ukrainian women as docile recipients of aid, denies them of their agency, and reduces them to passive actors. Like prior research thus shows how imposed labels misrepresent displaced individuals' lived experiences and self-identifications, subsequently threatening their attachments to their states and larger national communities.[93]

At the same time, and by focusing on the voices and experiences of internally displaced Ukrainian women, this chapter offers new insight into how the people most affected by forced displacement – in the Russia-Ukraine war and elsewhere – perceive and negotiate the external labels used to categorise them. Specifically, as the discussion showed, internally displaced Ukrainian women largely reject the label of "*pereselenka*". In fact, none of the participants in this study identified themselves as

91 Interview conducted on 21 August 2024.

92 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38–39.

93 Ekoh and Okoye, "More than just forced migrants"; and Ray, "What Is in a Label?".

a "displaced woman". Rather than internalising the categories imposed onto them, or the liminal status often associated with displacement, they stressed their self-identification as Ukrainian citizens first and foremost. Since their forced displacements, they have additionally challenged and reinterpreted the boundaries between belonging and exclusion by dismissing gender and displacement as central markers in their self-identification. Instead, they emphasised ungendered markers like language and paying taxes, which primarily reflect their attachments to their state and nation. These findings add to prior research arguing that external categorisations are less likely to be accepted and internalised when they cannot be incorporated into people's existing definitions of self.[94]

While understanding how internally displaced Ukrainian women engage with the label of "displaced" is crucial for theoretically and empirically advancing studies on forced migration and identity, as well as research into the Russia-Ukraine war more generally, it evidently also has significant implications for policymaking. Recognising these identity dynamics is essential for fostering social cohesion and designing more inclusive and responsive policies that address the specific challenges faced by displaced women. In Ukraine, acknowledging these perceptions is important as they influence individuals' responses to forced relocation and reintegration, identity (re)negotiation, and adoption of different coping strategies. Failing to understand how individuals engage with the label of "displaced person" risks (re)producing the exclusion and marginalisation of displaced people rather than supporting their meaningful integration.

Conversations about the situation of IDPs in Ukraine and elsewhere should thus more thoroughly consider how war-affected communities can gain greater control over the criteria used by states and humanitarians to determine their eligibility for assistance. This involves rethinking the role of both state institutions and humanitarian actors in shaping displaced persons' identities. Instead of reinforcing rigid categories that define IDPs primarily through their vulnerability, as this chapter suggests, policies should focus on enabling their meaningful participation in economic, social, and political life. This requires moving beyond short-term aid toward long-term strategies that facilitate integration while respecting displaced persons' agency. Greater involvement of IDPs in decision-making processes, whether in local governance, policy design, or humanitarian programming, can also help to dismantle the structures that perpetuate their perceived "otherness". Ultimately, addressing challenges to social cohesion in war-affected countries like Ukraine requires a shift from framing "displaced" individuals as passive requiring external intervention to viewing them as social actors with the capacity to determine their own futures.

94 Barreto and Ellemers, "The Effects of Being Categorised", 159.

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The Voluntary Immobility among Women in Ukraine

A Social Action Theory Analysis

Natalia Zaitseva-Chipak

Burst the chains that bind you
And be friends to one another,
Friends and brothers!... Vainly
Seek you do, I vow, in Heaven
And in strange and alien
Lands the many things of wonder
That you crave. Pray, heed me:
In your house, your own, you'll find them—
Truth and strength and freedom.
("To the Dead, the Living and the Unborn,"
Taras Shevchenko)[1]

Introduction

Voluntary immobility is a relatively new subject in the study of migration processes. Traditional theoretical frameworks suggest that the process of displacement should be perceived as a deviation from the norm. By contrast, the choice to remain in place is seen as a perfectly understandable and static phenomenon. Thus, many scholarly publications have focused on migration, ignoring the aspects that lead to immobility. Kerilyn Schewel refers to this trend in the academic community as mobility bias. She argues that it is necessary to redefine immobility as a complex and dynamic process with uncertain determinants, as opposed to understanding the phenomenon as absolute.[2]

1 Taras Shevchenko, "To the Dead, the Living and the Unborn", trans. Irina Zheleznova, https://taras-shevchenko.storinka.org/taras-shevchenko's-poem-to-the-dead-the-living-and-the-unborn-translation-by-irina-zheleznova.html [accessed: 10.04.2025].

2 Kerilyn Schewel, "Understanding Immobility: Moving Beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies", *International migration review* 54/2, 2020, 328–355, https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319831952 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

This approach is particularly relevant in the context of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. Even a cursory comparison of living conditions in Ukraine and the European Union shows that migration seems like an obvious solution. This appears to be the case for at least security reasons, but also in terms of economic and social stability and development prospects. Today, apocalyptic forecasts are being made in Ukraine regarding depopulation, an ageing population, economic decline, and a reduction in tax revenues due to a decreasing working population. The destruction of energy infrastructure and industrial facilities, areas that have been mined (which will take years to clear), and a deeply traumatised society do not inspire optimism regarding these future forecasts. Yet, a significant number of Ukrainian women choose to remain in Ukraine. Some of them became internally displaced, while others live in frontline areas (and even return from abroad to do so), which are regularly targeted by missiles and drones. It seems that these people chose risk and vague prospects over protection and social guarantees, albeit small ones. In a situation where voluntary immobility is the result of a conscious and strong-willed decision in the face of a vital threat and significant risks, it becomes an important topic of scientific research.

The fundamental and complex studies on voluntary immobility were conducted mainly in peaceful countries where the decision to migrate is most often driven by pragmatic considerations. For example, Schewel and Sonja Fransen study the motives for voluntary immobility among young people from Ethiopia, India, and Vietnam.[3] Similarly, Ludmila Bogdan investigates the reasons for the voluntary immobility of low-income Moldovans.[4] As Ukraine is a country at war, the main driver of migration is security. According to the results of a survey conducted by Gradus Research, among the top ten factors that encourage people to leave the country are personal safety and the safety of their loved ones (61% of respondents), the threat of a possible attack on their region of residence (47%), and direct military attacks (37%).[5]

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3 Kerilyn Schewel and Sonja Fransen, "Who prefers to stay? Voluntary immobility among youth in Ethiopia, India, and Vietnam", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48/19, 2022, 4457–4484, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2092085 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

4 Ludmila Bogdan, "Immobility in Moldova: Beyond the migration paradigm", *International Migration* 62/2, 2024, 199–214, https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13241 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

5 Tetiana Pavlushenko, "Migra͡siia pid chas viĭny. Bliz'ko 20% ukraïn͡siv mozhut' vyĭkhaty za kordon u razi zagostrennia sytua͡sii. Shch, krim bezpeky, sponukae do t͡s'go naselennia? Doslidzhennia Gradus Research pro migra͡siĭni namiry ukraïn͡siv", ("Migration during wartime. About 20% of Ukrainians may leave the country if the situation worsens. What, apart from security, motivates the population to do so? Gradus Research study on the migration intensions of Ukrainians"), *Forbes Ukraine*, 20 March 2024, https://forbes.ua/war-in-ukraine/migratsiya-pid-chas-viyni-blizko-20-ukraintsiv-mozhut-viikhati-za-kordon-u-razi-zagostrennya-situatsii-shcho-krim-bezpeki-sponukae-do-tsogo-naselennya-visnovki-z-doslidzhennya-gradus-research-pro-migr-20032024-20013 [accesed 24.11.2025].

The fact that Ukraine is a country at war, in turn, can have a significant impact on the list and priority of factors for voluntary refusal to migrate.

The refusal to migrate in times of war requires stronger reasons than refusal to migrate from a peaceful country. Therefore, the objectives of my research were: to identify the motives for voluntary immobility among Ukrainian women during the war; to categorise them; and to determine the specifics of the voluntary immobility in a country at war as compared to peaceful countries.

Research on immobility has been conducted by Ukrainian scholars for more than ten years of war. However, some have focused mainly on forced immobility and the role of political institutions in this.[6] Immobility here is viewed more as an object of influence, while the choice and motivation of the subject are given little emphasis. Other studies examined the motivations of narrow target groups: Ukrainians who have moved abroad[7], people with disabilities and the elderly.[8] Lastly, some studies were conducted in different security circumstances, before Russia's full-scale invasion, and therefore need to be updated with data from the current context.[9] The results of a 2024 quantitative study by Volodymyr Vakhitov, Hanna Vakhitova, and Natalia Zaika are more relevant to this chapter.[10] They investigated the motives of women for staying in Ukraine, barriers to leaving the country, and their hierarchy. By contrast, my study is qualitative, thus giving respondents more freedom to describe their motives and allowing for a deeper understanding of them.

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6 Tetiana Havlin, "War-induced (im)mobilities and immobilizing effects in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war", *Mobilities*, 2025, 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2024.2445803 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Oleksandra Tarkhanova, "The Politics of (Im)mobility: The Effects of the Pandemic on Movement Across the 'Contact Line' in Eastern Ukraine", *Europe-Asia Studies* 76/9, 2024, 1392–1416, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2281239 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

7 Oleksandra Tarkhanova and Daryna Pyrogova, "Forced displacement in Ukraine: understanding the decision-making process", *European Societies* 26/2, 2024, 481–500, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2280680 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

8 Oksana Mikheieva and Irina Kuznetsova, *Internally displaced and immobile people in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022: Older age and disabilities as factors of vulnerability*, Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2023, https://publications.iom.int/books/mrs-no-77-internally-displaced-and-immobile-people-ukraine-between-2014-and-2022-older-age [accessed: 24.11.2025].

9 Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach et al., "Navigating (im)mobility in an urban space: migrant's lived experience in Kyiv/Ukraine before 2022", *Comparative Migration Studies* 13/1, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-025-00442-2 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Viktoriya Sereda, *Displacement in War-Torn Ukraine: State, Displacement and Belonging*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

10 Volodymyr Vakhitov et al., Women in War: Motivations to Stay and Reasons to Leave, *Centre for Economic Strategy*, 2025, https://ces.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/the-research-1.pdf [accessed: 24.11.2025].

The first section of this chapter is theoretical. I discuss the concept of voluntary immobility, describe studies on voluntary immobility and approaches to grouping motives for immobility, and justify choosing Max Weber's theory of social action as the theoretical framework of my study. The second section is dedicated to the research methodology, with a discussion of my research method and sample, respondents' characteristics, and the ethical challenges of the study. In sections three and four, I analyse the motives for voluntary immobility among Ukrainian women grouped according to Weber's theory of social action. I conclude by discussing how the motives for voluntary immobility in a country at war compare to those of a peaceful country.

Theoretical Framework

Voluntary Immobility

An analysis of studies on voluntary immobility in peaceful regions and countries allows us to better understand the best approaches to identify and group the factors or motives that determine it. For example, Schewel[11] takes as her basis the aspiration-ability framework proposed by Jørgen Carling,[12] which considers the processes of immobility/migration in relation to two components: the presence/absence of structural constraints and the desire/unwillingness to stay. According to this framework, voluntary immobility combines the desire to stay and the ability to move. Building on the aspiration-capability framework, Lea Müller-Funk, Ayşem Üstübici, and Milena Belloni refer to "aspiration" as individual ideas about future trajectories based on pragmatic considerations regarding the possibilities of realising one's intentions at home or abroad.[13] Meanwhile, "capability" is described as the personal capacity to realise aspirations in a certain structural context, which is linked to economic, social, and cultural capital.[14]

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11 Schewel, "Understanding Immobility".

12 Jørgen Carling, "Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28/1, 2002, 5–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830120103912 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

13 Jørgen Carling and Kerilyn Schewel, "Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44/6, 2018, 945–963, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Hein de Haas, "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework", *Comparative Migration Studies* 9/8, 2021, 1–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

14 Lea Müller-Funk et al., "Daring to Aspire: Theorising Aspirations in Contexts of Displacement and Highly Constrained Mobility", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34/2, 2021, 1721–1738, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2208291 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

It is important to emphasise that the ability to leave a country is a key feature of voluntary immobility that distinguishes it from forced immobility. For example, some Ukrainians remain in the country because they are unable to cross the border, for example, due to a legal ban on men of military age leaving the country or restrictions by the occupying regime on residents of the temporarily occupied territories.[15] Accordingly, if these categories of people declare their desire to remain in place, we cannot be sure that their decision was completely free from the influence of structural constraints. By contrast, there are no structural constraints on the emigration of Ukrainian women from government-controlled areas. First, Ukrainian law gives them the right to cross the state border in times of war. Second, the EU provides temporary protection and even support programs for forcefully displaced people from Ukraine. Therefore, if women stay in Ukraine or return from abroad to live in the country, it is most likely their voluntary choice.

Voluntary Immobility and Approaches to Grouping Motives for Immobility

The approach to studying immobility through the aspiration-capability analytical framework is an indicative outline of the issue, as aspirations and capacities to migrate are variable. To better analyse the process of voluntary immobility, we need to understand the decision-making process, which is based on subjective preferences and involves "irrational" (non-pragmatic) behaviour. Schewel divides the factors that deter migration into three categories:

- factors that indicate a personal preference to remain in place, such as the length of residence and "rootedness" to the local context (attachment to the place of residence through economic activity, a social circle, family ties, participation in community life, membership in a religious community, satisfaction with the political regime, etc.);
- factors that discourage displacement, such as knowledge of the negative aspects of life outside their country, the influence of social networks (feedback from migrants), negative perceptions of the potential place of migration, and media narratives;
- and internal (personal) factors, such as ones attitude to risk (risk avoidance) or gender roles (e.g., thinking that women must stay at home to do care work).[16]

At the same time, this categorisation of motives has drawbacks. In particular, the same factor or motive may fall into different categories. For example, the housing

15 In this chapter, I consider mobility exclusively in the context of traveling abroad and treat internal displacement (within Ukraine) as immobility.

16 Schewel, "Understanding Immobility".

factor can be classified both as a retention factor (e.g., "I am staying in the country because I have comfortable housing here") or as a repelling factor (e.g., "It is very difficult to rent housing or buy your own home in the country of migration"). Social networks (e.g., "I am here because I have friends here" versus "it is very difficult to live without support in a foreign country") and professional considerations (e.g., "I have a good job at home" versus "there, I can only apply for low-skilled work") can play a similar role.

Meanwhile, Schewel's model draws attention to the theoretical basis for studying voluntary immobility as a combination of pragmatic and non-pragmatic motivations. This is confirmed by empirical research. For example, Schewel and Fransen conducted a quantitative study among young people from countries in the Global South (Ethiopia, India, and Vietnam) to show their motivation to remain in place for the next ten years. The researchers identified the top factors that deter young people from internal or external migration: family, a good job, satisfaction with their lives, owning real estate, and enrolment or studying at an educational institution. They noticed that the more resources and effort a person invests in creating a comfortable life at the local level (e.g., starting a family or establishing a business), the less likely they are to leave. The study also showed gender differences: women with family obligations have fewer migration aspirations. Men, meanwhile, are less likely to migrate if they have a good job.[17]

Bogdan points out the importance of considering non-pragmatic factors of voluntary immobility, investigating why low-income citizens from Moldova chose to stay in the country. Her qualitative study found that structural inequalities and sociocultural constraints hinder migration aspirations. For example, interviewees from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are sensitive to social status. They are afraid to be visible in the new environment, stand out, and, thus, be discriminated against or rejected by the local population. The desire to belong is closely linked to the desire to maintain respect and dignity, even in the absence of sufficient finances. Those who are used to social recognition in their home country find it more difficult to adapt to the need to work in low-skilled jobs abroad. By contrast, the participants in the study with a better financial situation demonstrated greater social flexibility: the loss of social status is a justified sacrifice in the context of long-term prospects. This group of interviewees was also more open to new experiences and immersion in the cultural context of a new environment. However, pragmatic motives (in terms of the socioeconomic situation) also had a significant impact on the perception of the idea of leaving their country. The lower the level of earnings of the study participants, the greater their attachment to social capital. Thus, they perceived migration as a loss rather than an opportunity and potential.[18]

17 Schewel and Fransen, "Who prefers to stay?".

18 Bogdan, "Immobility in Moldova".

These conclusions are confirmed by Ukrainian realities. Oleksandra Tarkhanova and Daryna Pyrogova, analysing decision-making on (im)mobility, conclude that alongside pragmatic motives, emotions permeate and guide people's decisions and actions: "Strong emotions of fear, uncertainty, hope, among others, are equally important and need to be taken seriously if we want to understand the decision-making process as well as the economic, social, and cultural aspects."[19] According to the quantitative study by Vakhitov, Vakhitova, and Zaika, the main reasons for staying in Ukraine are pragmatic (e.g., having housing or a household in Ukraine, better access to medical services, an availability of good jobs, and a better standard of living than abroad) and social (e.g., family and friends, language barrier). Refusing to migrate also includes material (e.g., expected difficulties in finding housing and work), psychological (e.g., fear of change and uncertainty about the future) and language barrier reasons. The authors conclude that all these motives have a significant impact on (im)migration attitudes.[20]

Müller-Funk, Üstübici, and Belloni additionally draw attention to collective factors that deter individuals from migrating, even if they live in unfavourable, crisis conditions. These include a sense of belonging to the local environment, political protest (resistance to the current regime) in the form of voluntary (non-)mobility, and social support as a factor of survival (hope for a better future).[21] The decision to voluntarily refuse to migrate may be based on pragmatic, emotional, and value-based motives, but it may also have a less volitional component when people want to live for as long as possible in the way they used to. A study by Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach, Konrad Pędziwiatr and Olena Sobolieva confirms this conclusion. They note that patriotism, national identity, a sense of belonging and civic duties are powerful retention factors, creating a sense of responsibility and connection to Ukraine.[22]

Social Action as the Theoretical Framework of this Study

The theoretical and empirical considerations outlined above, together with Weber's social action theory, allow for a consistent classification of decisions and motives leading to voluntary immobility. According to Weber, social action is characterised by two features: the presence of subjective meaning and the orientation towards others. The classification of types of social action is based on different degrees of consciousness and rationality of the action. Weber distinguishes four types of social actions: traditional action (based on habit), affective action (based on the emotional

19 Tarkhanova and Pyrogova, "Forced displacement in Ukraine", 496–497.

20 Vakhitov et al., *Women in War*.

21 Müller-Funk et al., "Daring to Aspire".

22 Wiktor-Mach et al., "Navigating (im)mobility in an urban space".

state of the actor), goal-rational action (based on goal-oriented, rational considerations), and value-rational action (based on values).[23]

Weber distinguishes these types of social action as "ideal types, while real actions"[24], according to him, can be a mixture of two or more types. Nevertheless, this typology reflects the set of motives (subjective meanings) that my interviewees used in their decision-making quite well. Consequently, motives for the voluntary refusal to migrate voiced during the interviews can be grouped according to Weber's theory of social action.

Methodology

The findings presented below are based on empirical, qualitative fieldwork. Specifically, I conducted 18 in-depth interviews that were semi-structured and took place online (via Zoom). I developed the methodology, moderated and translated the interviews. The interviews were transcribed by the Sociological Center Socioinform. The sample included women aged 20 to over 55 years, who are either internally displaced or residents of frontline areas. Almost a quarter of them returned to Ukraine after temporarily living abroad in Germany, Austria, Italy, or Poland. The respondents were of different ages,[25] and had different levels of education.[26] They also had different employment and marital statuses and were from different-sized locations.[27] Before the war, 15 of the respondents lived in territories that are now on the front line[28] and three in now-occupied territories.[29] Currently, five people live in the "rear" regions of Ukraine[30] and 13 in the frontline regions.[31]

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23 Max Weber, "The Nature of Social Action", in: W. G. Runciman (ed.), *Weber: Selections in Translation*, trans. E. Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, 7.

24 Ibid.

25 Five interviewees were aged 20 to 34 years, 12 were aged 35 to 55 years, and one was over 55 years.

26 Two interviewees had finished a secondary education, two had finished a secondary specialised education, two had not completed a higher education, eight had completed a higher education, and one held a scientific degree.

27 One interviewee was from the capital, 11 were from large cities (regional centres), three from small towns, and two from rural areas.

28 Four interviewees were from Mykolaiv oblast, four were from Kharkiv oblast, three from Kherson oblast, two from Donetsk oblast, and one was from Zaporizhzhia oblast, and one from Sumy oblast.

29 Two interviewees were from Kherson oblast, and one from Donetsk oblast.

30 Three interviewees were in Lviv oblast, two in Kyiv oblast, and one in Chernivtsi oblast.

31 Five interviewees lived in Mykolaiv oblast, three in Kherson oblast, two in Kharkiv oblast, and two lived in in Dnipro oblast, one in Zaporizhzhia oblast, and one lived in Sumy oblast.

I conducted 10 interviews in March 2023. At that time, a significant part of the Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, as well as a large part of the Kharkiv and Kherson oblasti had been liberated. Ukraine was preparing for a powerful counter-offensive, with hopes of liberating the south of the country and ending the war soon. The remaining eight interviews I conducted in June 2024, when it became clear that the war could last for years, Ukraine's situation on the front had deteriorated significantly, and the country's life prospects in terms of economy and security had become even more unclear. Accordingly, I had the opportunity to examine the motivations for voluntary immobility from both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives on Ukraine's prospects, with the latter requiring even stronger arguments for not migrating.

The main blocks of my questions covered the experience of living through the war, displacement, the specifics of living conditions in Ukraine and in other countries of forced displacement, future migration intentions (adaptation or returning), motives for refusal to migrate, and forecasts for Ukraine's development (the degree of optimism). The guiding questions and methodology were the same in both waves of the interviews. The respondents were guaranteed complete anonymity and confidentiality of their answers. They had the right to refuse to answer any of the questions. In general, the women were open and sincere.

However, I assume that some of the respondents may have been prone to social desirability bias, e.g., downplaying the pragmatism of their decisions and motives and emphasising emotional and value-based ones, as this is more socially acceptable behaviour in Ukrainian culture. It is also important to note that I am a woman who lives in Ukraine and chose to stay in Ukraine during the war (i.e., I chose immobility as well). Among the limitations of the study is the small sample of respondents, which, together with the large diversity of respondents, does not allow for a comparative analysis between groups of interviewees. Aware of the risk that the study may have had a negative impact on the mental health of participants (due to feelings of stress, anxiety, or helplessness), or could have had a retraumatising effect by bringing up memories of the first months of the war, when the decisions about staying or leaving were made, I tried my best to mitigate these potential negative consequences before, during, and after the interviews.

Motives for Voluntary Immobility among Ukrainian Women Grouped According to the Theory of Social Action

It is important to emphasise that the motivational structure of the women who chose to live in Ukraine during the war is quite complex. As a rule, the decision is based on a combination of motivations coming from different directions and having varying degrees of importance. Given the small amount of material to analyse and the exclusively qualitative method of my data collection, I do not claim to provide

an exhaustive description of the decision-making model. However, I do try to compile a list of Ukrainian women's motives and group them for a more convenient consideration of the material. The section is structured according to the four types of social action outlined by Weber.

To Live in Ukraine: Traditional Action

Traditional and affective actions, according to Weber, are not social actions in a direct sense, since they do not deal with a conscious and underlying content (i.e., a rational motive). Nevertheless, he interprets them as a "limited case" of social action[32]. In practice, this means that those of my interviewees engaging in such actions tended to act according to their "usual scenario". They were not ready for a radical change in life and had no idea how to leave their home. For example, one stated, "I was born in Ukraine, I will live in Ukraine, why should I go somewhere else?"[33] Similarly, another interviewee expressed: "Maybe I would have succeeded there [abroad]. But somewhere inside, somewhere in my soul, in my heart, I see my life here."[34]

Affective Action: A Choice Influenced by Emotions

Almost all my interviewees voiced emotional motives as the basis for their voluntary immobility. These motives are diverse, based on both positive emotions such as attachment, love, and harmony, and on negative ones like fear, anxiety, and rejection. Among the motives with positive connotations, attachment and love for one's motherland, hometown, village, and home dominate. Most often, the women referred to a connection to their "small homeland" – the area where they grew up:

> I lived there for so many years! I really like this city! It's beautiful to me! There are very beautiful sights, if you sail along the small bays, it's unreal. You just feel a buzz. You probably wouldn't even feel such a buzz anywhere else! Kherson is my love![35]

> I have never thought anything bad about our country. For me, it is a golden, sacred land, because we live here, because my children live here.[36]

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32 Max Weber, "The Nature of Social Action", 7.

33 Female, 45 years old, housewife, resident of a rural frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

34 Female, 45 years old, driver (temporarily unemployed), resident of a small town in a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

35 Female, 28 years old, merchandiser, IDP in a regional center of a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Poland. Interview conducted in 2024.

36 Female, 45 years old, housewife, resident of a rural frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

In many cases, the women were deterred from leaving by a sense of emotional comfort and security due to, on the one hand, belonging to a community that includes a wide range of social contacts like friends, neighbours, and work colleagues, and, on the other hand, the fact that this belonging involves a community. It is not only the desire to feel the friendship and love of close people that is important, but also the connection with a wider circle of compatriots with whom they share a common history, culture, and traditions:

> In our village of Vesele, we held events such as the best street, the best house in the village […] All the neighbours would gather at our house, rehearse songs, decorate the house with viburnum, and serve pierogi and dumplings in Ukrainian jugs and *makitras* [clay bowls]. This is a rich Ukrainian flavour. I don't know how you can want anything else.[37]

> For me, I do not consider leaving at all. For me, communication is important; there are many people around, family and all these family values. There is a different culture, different holidays. Here, I have 20 friends coming to visit me [on a holiday], but there, no one would come.[38]

Although the interviewees acknowledged that their communities, that is, their social environments at home, have changed, and a significant number of their friends have left the country, it was important for them to be among people with whom they grew up and to live in a single cultural and information space. This creates feelings of being in demand, acceptance, and an understanding of how to act in order to gain social approval. It allows them to share their thoughts and emotions with those who are close to them. They were not ready to adapt to another society or a community with a different culture and mentality:

> I would be worse off there. I know that. Because I lived in Vienna and Poznan. I don't feel comfortable there […] I don't feel them […] First of all, the mentality of the people is very unusual. It takes me a long time to get used to something new. And it was a lot of stress for me every time. I don't like to leave my comfort zone.[39]

37 Female, 33 years old, on maternity leave, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

38 Female, 34 years old, obtaining a new profession, IDP from a frontline area now in a regional center of a rear area. Interview conducted in 2024.

39 Female, 21 years old, sales consultant, resident of a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

> I don't want to integrate into any other society. And I want to live here myself. It's important for me to feel like I belong.[40]

By contrast, migration is associated with fear, loneliness, and cultural and social isolation:

> Nobody needs you there, that's the most important thing. You know, it's like isolation. I understand that when you are not accepted into the collective of that country – specifically you – you are a stranger and you stay one forever.[41]

Fear of the unknown, particularly, was a powerful deterrent. It was difficult for the women to imagine what awaited them there; they did not know whether they would be able to find housing, work, or friends. They did not understand how to navigate life in a new country. They were not sure if they would be able to settle down in another society. This fear was particularly pronounced among women who had never been abroad before:

> There are big risks in leaving and starting from scratch. If we were younger […] I understand that we will go there and face difficulties. And we don't know what will happen there. Whether something will work out or not. It is already difficult to start all over again. Even if our house is destroyed, we will still stay in Ukraine […] we would think about leaving […] [i]f there were some guarantees to settle down [elsewhere].[42]

Occasionally, an interviewee also expressed fear of facing unfriendly attitudes from the citizens of other countries: "Polish is closer to Ukrainian. Well, you can understand it, but, as they say, in Poland, we are now being treated negatively."[43]

Value-Based Motives for Staying in Ukraine

Approximately two-thirds of the interviewees mentioned value-based motivations for voluntary immobility. Such motives are based on values like patriotism, responsibility, dignity, self-respect, and freedom. In the context of patriotism, there were

40 Female, 34 years old, obtaining a new profession, IDP from a frontline area now in a regional center of a rear area. Interview conducted in 2024.

41 Female, 46 years old, businesswoman, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

42 Female, 45 years old, driver (temporarily unemployed), resident of a small town in a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

43 Female, 33 years old, employee, resident of a regional center in a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2024.

three intertwined aspects. First, it was pride in one's country, a love for one's homeland, and the desire to live on one's own land:

> I love our Ukrainian language very much, I love our motherland, no matter how difficult and how dangerous it is. I remain within the borders of our state and its territory. And, as they say, I am proud of that.[44]

> It is hard to stay. It's hard because that's how we were brought up. Only Ukraine![45]

Second, the women perceived themselves as part of the national resistance. For many of them, living in the country means sharing its fate and increasing its resilience in the fight against the enemy. Every person who lives in Ukraine helps its economy, even if they just buy products and services, supports their loved ones morally or organisationally, and thus counteracts the enemy. By contrast, going abroad, in some interviewees' opinions, means hiding and giving up the fight, and thus putting one's own needs above the needs of the community:

> Having gone through this year of war, each of us feels like a part of our Ukraine. And Ukraine will hold on as long as it fights. We cannot give up, no matter what happens. There are people who go abroad to relax and have fun, and then there are the lives of those who are on the frontline. It's about different life values.[46]

> We were firmly convinced that we should not leave, because if everyone leaves, who will protect us?[47]

> I do not think it is normal [to go] abroad. We are all needed here![48]

Third, and in a similar vein, there was a desire to support their country during postwar recovery and an awareness of their responsibility for the future of the country:

> Before the war, I really wanted to leave here. My mother and I almost paid for a study program in the Czech Republic for me. But then I decided that I wanted

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44 Female, 33 years old, on maternity leave, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

45 Female, 46 years old, businesswoman, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

46 Female, 50 years old, salesperson (temporarily unemployed), resident of a regional center in a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

47 Female, 21 years old, sales consultant, resident of a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

48 Female, 46 years old, businesswoman, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

> to stay in Ukraine. I thought that I want to become a person who will work for the benefit of our country in the future, develop it, and be involved in myself, in Ukraine.[49]

> This is my home. This is my country. I thought I would be more useful here than abroad.[50]

Some Ukrainian women were guided by their responsibility for their country and their environment. In some cases, women refused to leave because of professional obligations (to not disrupt the work of their enterprise or institution) and responsibility for their immediate environment, like family, neighbours, friends, and pets:

> Shelling. Dispersal of rallies. All sorts of things happened [under the occupation]. Then people started to disappear. But we believed that we were at home, that we lived here, in our country, so we had to be together. There are elderly people, animals that you can't just leave behind, neighbours who count on you to be there for them. That's why we stayed here. We have to be there for each other when we are together. This is a strong feeling that obliges us to fight and move on.[51]

In the context of dignity, it was first and foremost important for the women to feel equal and valuable and to be protected from humiliation. Often, they argued that refugees cannot become full-fledged citizens in another country and that they can only hold their heads high and defend their rights at home:

> Here, you understand where you are, who you are. Here you are, as they say, a human being, and there you are not… well… you are a human being, but not really. I've just been abroad, and it's cool there, and you earn money there. But I like to be appreciated. And in Poland, for example, Ukrainians were mostly treated as… labourers. Well, as second-class people, so to speak.[52]

> And in any case, we live in our country, you are a citizen of your country. Abroad, the attitude is still different toward people who are not citizens of [that] country.[53]

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49 Female, 21 years old, sales consultant, resident of a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

50 Female, 44 years old, nurse, resident of a regional center in a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Austria and Italy. Interview conducted in 2024.

51 Female, 50 years old, salesperson (temporarily unemployed), resident of a regional center in a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

52 Female, 28 years old, merchandiser, IDP in a regional center of a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Poland. Interview conducted in 2024.

53 Female, 48 years old, civil servant, IDP from an occupied area now in a regional center in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

Some of the interviewees also noted that it was important for them to support themselves on their own, and not to claim "charity" from other people. Independence allows them to live by their own rules and not feel "in debt". In Ukraine, they fulfil this scenario, and abroad, at least temporarily, they may find themselves in a situation of dependency:

> You have already reconciled. If [a missile] hits my house, it means that it's my fate to be disabled, and that's it. Because to escape and go somewhere […] I am the kind of person who does not want to walk around with my hand out.[54]

> To go to a foreign country […] what will I do there, what will I do? Just walk the streets? Receive benefits and go out to spend them? Well, no. To live on everything that belongs to someone else? No! It doesn't suit me![55]

Finally, in the context of dignity and self-respect, it was important for many of the women to feel useful and to be of service: "I think it is more important for me to stay in my hometown and in my country, in order to be useful directly to the city, the country, and people in general."[56]

Occasionally, the interviewees explained their desire to live in Ukraine as connected to having a higher level of freedom. This referred to freedom in different contexts: the freedom of communication, due to the absence of a language barrier; the freedom to express one's opinion in a debate without fear, the risk of being disrespected, or being seen as unethical in another culture; and the freedom of action to choose a job, travel, or invite friends to visit. The latter, especially, my interviewees viewed as often not possible in a foreign country due to functional (e.g., a lack of knowledge of the language or local context) and regulatory (e.g., requirements for diploma confirmations, the prohibition to bring guests to a dormitory or converted rental accommodation, or the need to register movements) restrictions:

> We have the opportunity to leave. But I don't want to. Because there is an opportunity to breathe differently here. People are free here; they think what they want and say what they want. You know, as they say, freedom of thought.[57]

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54 Female, 43 years old, driver (temporarily unemployed), resident of a small town in a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

55 Female, 44 years old, embroidery master, IDP from an occupied area now in a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2024.

56 Female, 33 years old, employee, resident of a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2024.

57 Female, 33 years old, on maternity leave, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

> You depend on everything there. Here you are a free person, there you seem to be free too, but […] what my friends in Germany shared with me, you are still in prison there. It's not like being at home, when you can go wherever you want, visit your friends, and have [free] communication. Maybe it's because there is no communication [there].[58]

Ultimately, freedom is the ability to be yourself, live according to your own desires, and influence the rules by which you live. As the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko wrote, "In your house, your own, you'll find them—/ Truth and strength and freedom."[59] Similarly, one interviewee expressed:

> No matter how good it is abroad. No matter how much help they give you […], people who care will give you everything. But at home, that is at home. On your own territory, in your own country […] it's different.[60]

Rational Motives for Living in Ukraine

Rational motives influenced the decisions of all the women I interviewed to some extent. However, in some cases these motives were decisive and in others they were secondary. Rational motives could be related to both weighing the material and immaterial benefits of living in Ukraine. The most significant (and most frequently mentioned) rational motive for refusing to leave Ukraine was the unwillingness to break up the family. Some of the women were not ready to leave their elderly parents, who refused or were unable to travel abroad for health reasons, without care. Some did not wish to live separated from their husbands or partners, who either categorically refused to move or could not cross the border due to restrictions on men of military age leaving the country:

> We didn't consider [the option of leaving the country] because our dad is not allowed to leave the country. He is liable for military service; he will not be allowed to leave the country. We are together! I will leave with the child, and he will stay here? No! If we left as a family, maybe we would. Alone, no![61]

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58 Female, 46 years old, businesswoman, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

59 Shevchenko, "To the Dead, the Living and the Unborn".

60 Female, 33 years old, on maternity leave, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

61 Female, 48 years old, civil servant, IDP from an occupied area now in a regional center in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

The motive to preserve the family has different forms: unwillingness to risk the marriage, the opportunity to raise children in a full family, and the absence of relatives who could care for sick parents. In a sense, this can be interpreted as forced immobility, but thousands of Ukrainian women in this situation have made the opposite choice. Therefore, it seems fair to discuss this as a conscious and voluntary refusal to migrate. At the same time, given that some women stayed in the country only for family reasons, there is an assumption that with the end or suspension of hostilities in Ukraine and the opening of borders for men, Europe will face an influx of a new wave of migrants. Part of the male population will move to join their families who have already adapted to other European countries. Some women, therefore, stated that they will move abroad if they can do so with their partners: "My boyfriend is not allowed to leave, but he says that as soon as he can, he will propose to me and we will go [abroad]."[62]

Professional fulfilment, a career, and status constitute another considerable group of rational motives. The women were deterred by the high probability of losing their professional status. This argument was important for those who are specialists in Ukraine (performing intellectual or creative work), have built a career, or own a business. Abroad, such people are most likely to be forced to start their careers from scratch or switch to lower-skilled and less creative work:

> They lower you in status. People from Germany told me this. You can't work in Germany or Switzerland according to your speciality at all. Canada seems to accept you, but you are only a labourer. And a person with a university degree must be what? Nobody! This is a very big problem.[63]

> If there was an opportunity for me to work (not for survival, but where my talents and qualities would be valuable), I could move.[64]

This situation occurs due to several factors. First, in many European countries, Ukrainian specialists must undergo a rather complicated procedure to confirm their qualifications. For example, despite the shortage of doctors in Germany, specialists from Ukraine cannot work there without confirming their medical qualifications. According to Anna Savchuk, "in Germany, this is a process that can take

62 Female, 20 years old, student, IDP in a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2024.

63 Female, 46 years old, businesswoman, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

64 Female, 44 years old, embroidery master, IDP from an occupied area now in a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2024.

years."[65] Second, a significant number of women who have chosen to live in Ukraine do not speak a foreign language sufficiently enough to work in a wide range of professions and therefore can only apply for unskilled (often menial and low-paid) jobs. Finally, the skills of some specialists are not relevant outside of Ukraine (e.g., officials, lawyers, etc.).

All these considerations are closely related to the concept of social status. Women who have fulfilled themselves professionally and gained respect in their community are accustomed to attention and recognition. At home, they feel respected, valued, and useful, and therefore have high self-esteem. In another country, according to them, these achievements level out and the attitudes of others change to sympathy at best and passive aggression or disdain at worst:

> I have a lot of business experience; I have a lot of experience in public activities. I have a certain status in the city. To get close to the social status I have here, it would take eight years […] I don't have [that time]. I'll be over 50 by then.[66]

> I started working as a cleaner, then a dishwasher, then in delivery. Poles hardly ever do this, and even those who did were mocking [me]. I was morally uncomfortable, I did not feel like a princess, a queen, as I like to feel. And my mental state and my feelings – I think this is one of the most important factors that led me forward.[67]

Often, the women weighed the amount of effort they would need to adapt abroad and concluded that they were not ready to give up their established life or did not have the mental and physical resources to build a life from scratch. Younger interviewees (under 30 years of age) were more likely to cite an unwillingness to make excessive efforts to change their lives dramatically. Meanwhile, older interviewees (over 45 years of age) cited health problems and a lack of strength to adapt:

> There are other people there, I will have to meet people, go and learn the language […] I will have to do something with my distance learning, somehow combine all this […] and I thought: why?[68]

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65 Anna Savchuk, "Likari z Ukraïny: iak znaĭty robotu v Nimechchyni", ("Doctors from Ukraine: how to find work in Germany"), *Deutsche Welle*, 24 January 2024, https://www.dw.com/uk/ak-likaram-z-ukraini-znajti-robotu-v-nimeccini/a-68064521 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

66 Female, 38 years old, businesswoman, resident of a regional center in a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Austria. Interview conducted in 2024.

67 Female, 28 years old, merchandiser, IDP in a regional center of a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Poland. Interview conducted in 2024.

68 Female, 20 years old, student, IDP in a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2024.

> You know, probably, if we were younger, if we were 30 years old, we would probably think about leaving and building our lives there. It's a bit of a different age.[69]

It was also difficult for women to come to terms with the loss of the property that they had paid for their entire lives. In frontline cities, it is unlikely that anyone will agree to buy their real estate. Therefore, first, this would lead to a direct material loss, and second, result in a devaluation of the work and effort they had invested:

> Well, perhaps, when you earn your house and property with your own hands, with your own labour […] perhaps, you don't want to give it away. Although globally, it's unreasonable, because life is the most important thing. But there is also a moment when you realise that it will be even harder, and you will not earn enough for it. For 20 years, I have been working hard with my husband to pay for that house, that dacha, that car, and now I just turn around and give up?[70]

In addition, there was a fear that despite their best efforts, they would not be able to ensure a decent standard of living abroad. The interviewees did not believe that the support from European governments would be sufficient and long-lasting. And they were not sure that they would be able to figure out how to support themselves in another country on their own. This motive was particularly common for women over 45 years of age:

> Of course, there is help from the state – money, housing. But I know that it's all easy in the beginning. If you have family ties or friends there, if someone helps you get settled there, there are no questions and no difficulties with housing. But if not [then it is very difficult]. And I just can't imagine [it]. Where would I be able to fulfil myself there?[71]

Also, given the prospect of employment in mostly unskilled and low-paid jobs, paired with the need to pay high rent for housing, most women believed that moving would doom them to a life of hard work and poverty:

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69 Female, 48 years old, civil servant, IDP from an occupied area now in a regional center in a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

70 Female, 39 years old, manager, resident of a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2024.

71 Female, 34 years old, obtaining a new profession, IDP from a frontline area now in a regional center of a rear area. Interview conducted in 2024.

> What do you have to do in Austria? You have to sell groceries in a supermarket for 1,200 euros, of which you pay about 700–800 for rent. It makes no sense, it's not economically viable.[72]

Finally, the interviewees were convinced that they would not be able to earn enough money to buy a house abroad, and therefore, they were afraid of being left without their own housing in old age when they would no longer be able to earn enough to pay rent. However, this motive was rather secondary. Many interviewees remained in the country even if their housing was destroyed. Therefore, if life in Ukraine was bearable, a significant number of women chose certainty over the risks of resettlement and adaptation. This argument was especially relevant for those women who have managed to find or keep a job with a salary that allows them to maintain an acceptable standard of living:

> I don't know, why should I go somewhere else if I'm happy here? You have to go somewhere if it's really bad here, right? Everything works, everyone lives, and we will live.[73]

> When the Kharkiv offensive started [in 2024], I quickly packed my things, but I see that life seems to be getting better here, everything is working. I've stayed for now. People are adapting to the conditions. At least the packed bags are still there.[74]

The interviewees were also encouraged in their intentions to stay in the country by negative feedback from or the experiences of their relatives, friends, and acquaintances who had gone abroad. Many of them call home (to Ukraine) in moments of acute nostalgia. Naturally, during these moments, they express their frustration and the desire to return home. Such conversations revealed to the respondents the difficulties they could face abroad. Some of the interviewees mentioned that people from their immediate environment returned to Ukraine after a certain period of living in Europe because they could not adapt to their new location:

> When my daughter went to the Netherlands, she said: "Mum, I'll probably stay there, God willing, the war will end, my husband will come, and we'll live there." And then, as she said: "Mum, Berlin is close by, and I don't want to go there, and I

72 Female, 38 years old, businesswoman, resident of a regional center in a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Austria. Interview conducted in 2024.

73 Female, 28 years old, merchandiser, IDP in a regional center of a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Poland. Interview conducted in 2024.

74 Female, 44 years old, embroidery master, IDP from an occupied area now in a regional center of a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2024.

> don't want to see it. We want to go home. It's very nice here, we like the schools, we like everything. But everyone wants to go home." And they arrived in worse conditions, because their house was destroyed in Mykolaiv. But they are happy to be home.[75]

> Those who have been there are sharing their impressions now, they have received payments and housing, but they all want to go back. No one wants to [stay], even those who dreamed of [moving] before the war and living abroad – it turns out that it is better in Ukraine.[76]

For many interviewees, the language barrier was also a problem; they were afraid of social isolation and limitations around communication, work, and meeting their needs. Ultimately, every person builds their own circle of communication and social relations during their lives. This circle provides not only an emotionally comfortable environment but also support in crisis situations. It is difficult to rely on the support of others abroad because of a lack of friends and acquaintances. And establishing a new social circle seemed difficult for these women due to language barriers and differences in mentality and life experience:

> For example, I had a big problem […] I have a lot of acquaintances, friends, colleagues, and enemies here. I know that even my enemies will help me, but over there, who do I turn to? I like to be surrounded by people who love me, appreciate me, respect me, and there are no such people there. So, I'd rather stay here.[77]

The younger interviewees also emphasised the importance of the comfort of life in Ukraine. They referred to the greater accessibility of various services and the high level of service and digitalisation:

> I have a godmother who really wants to go home. She says, 'I understand that I can't go back yet, because everything is under fire', but she doesn't see herself there. There is nothing we are used to there. "We have electronic queues, if we decide to cut our child's hair, we go and cut it. And there [they have] a separate day to cut a child's hair. Their services are not as developed as ours."[78]

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75 Female, 34 years old, deputy school principal, IDP in a rural area in a frontline area. Interview conducted in 2023.

76 Female, 46 years old, businesswoman, IDP from an occupied area now in a small town of a rear area. Interview conducted in 2023.

77 Female, 28 years old, merchandiser, IDP in a regional center of a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Poland. Interview conducted in 2024.

78 Female, 35 years old, accountant, IDP from a frontline area now in a regional center of a rear area, has experienced forced displacement to Austria. Interview conducted in 2023.

> It's very good here, better than in Europe. The banking system here is great, everything is done in five minutes. And [with] Diya, all the documents can be issued very quickly. Shops are open around the clock. It's better to live here than in Germany. There is a big problem with medicine there. Here, everything is fast, and the specialists are great. Ukraine is an advanced country in general, if not for the war. We used to underestimate our country and medicine, and everything else in the world.[79]

Finally, some of the interviewees believed that Ukraine would become a very promising country after the war, with wide economic opportunities for its residents:

> I think that after the devastation […] we need to seize the moment and work. There will be great opportunities, great reconstruction. There are a lot of interesting proposals from our partners. It will be much more fun here. Even they will come to us, work, and we will not go somewhere else.[80]

Conclusion

The motives for voluntary immobility fit into Weber's concept of social action. The decision to stay in Ukraine was often part of traditional action. My interviewees were not ready to dramatically change their lives unless it was necessary. Moreover, they tended to stick to traditional models of behaviour for as long as they could. This choice was also largely an affective action, showing a sense of deep attachment to their land, community, and culture; love for their family or friends; or, on the contrary, a fear of the unknown, loneliness, rejection, or difficulties with adaptation.

Quite often, voluntary immobility was also a rational action, such as when the women weighed the pros and cons of, for instance, their opportunities for professional fulfilment, family preservation, or maintaining their desired social status or level of income. In the context of goal-oriented rational action, age differences played a role in the arguments for voluntary immobility. Women over 45 years old had significantly more rational arguments for staying in Ukraine than younger women. As a rule, by that age, they had already built a life, established a career, and achieved a certain status – and risked losing all these achievements with emigration. At the same time, they had significantly less strength and health to start life from scratch. Meanwhile, the younger interviewees were more likely to be held back by

79 Female, 36 years old, hairdresser, resident of a regional center in a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Germany. Interview conducted in 2024.

80 Female, 28 years old, merchandiser, IDP in a regional center of a frontline area, has experienced forced displacement to Poland. Interview conducted in 2024.

fears of losing psychological comforts or services that determined their quality of life, such as digital, entertainment, or beauty services.

Finally, value-based rationality was also present when decisions were based on such values as patriotism, care, responsibility, dignity, self-respect, and freedom. Values were the main priority of the choices of only a part of my respondents. However, for many, they were an auxiliary argument that persuaded those who were in doubt to choose to live in Ukraine.

Noticeably, only a few interviewees relied exclusively on one of the groups of motives. Mostly, those who wanted to leave but were not ready to break up their families or were unsure if they would be able to earn enough in Europe, were guided by rational motives. Others were guided by a complex set of motives that included rational, emotional, and value factors with varying degrees of the dominance of each.

These conclusions echo the results of the quantitative study by Vakhitov, Vakhitova, and Zaika. The Ukrainian women who participated in that study explained their immobility as "simply not wanting to go anywhere" (66%), which constitutes traditional behaviour; the desire to be with their family (91%), which is an affective action; the desire to live in their own country (88%), which is a value-rational action; and the availability of housing for their household (73%) and better access to medical services (65%), both of which are rational actions. Such high indicators of the relevance of diverse motives indicate their complexity.[81] Similarly, the results of my study correspond with the findings of Wiktor-Mach, Pędziwiatr, and Sobolieva. They identified factors that, although adhering to a different classification of migration factors from before the full-scale invasion, highlighted similar factors of influence that can be interpreted as traditional action (where immobility was not so much the result of a choice to stay, but rather the absence of strong migration aspirations), affective action (identity and belonging), value-rational action (patriotic sentiments, ethnic identity, statehood, and (a lack of) opportunities to preserve dignity in a foreign country), and rational factors (housing, work, family ties, age, and health).[82]

When comparing the motives for voluntary immobility among people from peaceful and war-torn countries, we can conclude that women living in war-torn countries are often guided by the same arguments as people from peaceful countries. These include "rootedness" in the local context (attachment to the place of residence through economic activity, a social circle, family ties, and participation in community life), knowledge of the negative aspects of life outside their country from the feedback of other migrants, gender roles (e.g., women should stay at home to perform care work), the desire to maintain respect and dignity, and freedom of communication and action. This means that those choosing immobility are inclined

81 Vakhitov et al., *Women in War*.

82 Wiktor-Mach et al., "Navigating (im)mobility in an urban space".

to ignore the dangers of war or place security significantly lower in their hierarchy of personal values.

However, there are several characteristic factors that apply particularly to women from war-torn countries, as based on my study. First, they articulated value-rational motives more strongly, including patriotism and the desire to support their country, to be part of the resistance during the war, and to join the recovery forces after the end of hostilities. They also had more pronounced motives of responsibility to their environment, employers, and pets. These women worried that, due to mass departure from the country, there would be no one to replace them. And, finally, it was important for them to be in demand and useful – and in Ukraine, this demand was very tangible for them.

In the context of goal-oriented rational actions, the women I interviewed were much more often guided in their decision to refuse migration due to two arguments. First, this was the desire to preserve their family (including reacting to the ban on their husbands from leaving). Second, this was the desire to preserve their status or highly qualified professional position. Because of the war, "white-collar" workers and successful businesswomen – who would never have thought of leaving the country in peacetime – were now thinking about migration. However, they decided against this due to the difficulties of getting their diplomas recognised and the lack of demand for their professional skills and expertise in other countries.

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Navigating the Temporal Dissonance of Displacement

Women from Ukraine and their Encounters with the Swedish Welfare System

Svitlana Odynets and Oksana Shmulyar Gréen

Introduction

In response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, millions of people from Ukraine were granted safe passage to the European Union under the Temporary Protection Directive (Directive 2001/55/EC, TPD). At the time of writing, in October 2025, 4.4 million people remain beneficiaries of this protection across various EU countries,[1] including 46,570 in Sweden.[2] The TPD, invoked by the EU in March 2022 to collectively protect displaced people from Ukraine, introduced a specific form of temporariness that differs from what asylum seekers and refugees in Europe previously experienced. Although the TPD initially guaranteed three years of protection – later extended to five – it neither provides a pathway to permanent residence after 2027 nor allows time spent under the TPD to count toward permanent residency in most EU countries.[3]

Distinctively, this war-induced displacement is marked by feminisation[4] – meaning that the majority of those who left Ukraine after 2022 are women and

1 Eurostat, "4.3 million under temporary protection in January 2025", 10 March 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250310-2 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

2 UNHCR, "Ukraine Refugee Situation", *Operational Data Portal*, 31 August 2025, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine [accessed: 24.11.2025].

3 Saara Koikkalainen et al., "Unpacking the temporary protection of displaced people from Ukraine within the tightening migration governance in Sweden and Finland", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2025, 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2565913 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Enes Zaimović, "The EU and the Mass Influx from Ukraine: Is There a Future for Temporary Protection?" *Croatian Yearbook of European Law and Policy* 19/1, 2023, 133–156, https://www.cyelp.com/index.php/cyelp/article/view/533/276 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

4 Josephine Andrews et al., "Feminized forced migration: Ukrainian war refugees", *Women's Studies International Forum* 99, 2023, 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102756 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

children, as men largely remained behind.[5] Focusing on early arrivals in Sweden, our data is similarly dominated by women's narratives and their experiences of displacement. Nonetheless, the feminisation of migration from Ukraine, along with its transnational character, is not entirely new.[6] What sets this displacement apart is its unprecedented scale, which has separated thousands of Ukrainian families. Not only men but also older children and the elderly typically remain in Ukraine.

Moreover, Ukrainians who had to leave their homes are now experiencing the long-term consequences of protracted displacement, with its inherent and temporal dynamics[7] impacting their transnational families, an issue that remains largely unexplored in current migration debates. Arguably, displaced Ukrainians in all host countries continue to live in an extreme state of uncertainty and without predictability.[8]

As Natalia Otrishchenko eloquently writes, "Russian aggression commits the *theft of time* on individual and social levels," and "destroys all meaningful connections between the past and the future."[9] The sense of "being dispossessed of time"[10] is shared by the majority of Ukrainians in and outside their home country. This conceptualisation also resonates with Georgina Ramsey's framing of displacement

5 Oksana Dutchak, "Together We Stand: Enforced Single Motherhood and Ukrainian Refugees' Care Networks", *LeftEast*, 19 January 2023, https://lefteast.org/enforced-single-motherhood-and-ukrainian-refugees-care-networks/ [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and UN Women and CARE International, *Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine*, 2022, https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf [accessed: 24.11.2025].

6 Olena Fedyuk and Marta Kindler (eds.), *Ukrainian Migration to the European Union: Lessons from Migration Studies*, Springer Open and Centre of Research Migration, 2016; and Iryna Lapshyna, "Migration and Diaspora at Times of Crisis: Public Perceptions of Emigrants in Ukraine", in: Othon Anastasakis et al. (eds.), *Diaspora Engagement in Times of Severe Economic Crisis: Greece and Beyond*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

7 Benjamin Etzold and Anne-Meike Fechter, "Unsettling protracted displacement: connectivity and mobility beyond 'Limbo'", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48/18, 2022, 4295–4312, doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2090153 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Victoria K. Sakti and Megha Amrith, "Introduction: Living in the 'Here and Now': Extended Temporalities of Forced Migration", *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 43/4, 2022, 457–463, https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2022.2088084 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

8 Lidia Kuzemska, "Fragmented Lives: 10 Pieces of the Ukrainian Displacement Puzzle", *TRAFO–Blog for Transregional Research*, 22 October 2024, https://trafo.hypotheses.org/53378 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

9 Natalia Otrishchenko, "The time that was taken from us: Temporal experiences after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine", in: Catherine Wanner (ed.), *Dispossession: Anthropological Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, London: Routledge, 2022, 27 and 37. Italics added by us.

10 Otrishchenko, "The time that was taken from us", 26.

"as a sense of temporal dispossession."[11] With the war continuing into its fourth year, people are forced to reorganise their time horizons, reclaim their everyday life from frozen conditions, and engage in meaningful activities to be able to imagine a desirable future.

The perspectives of those who remained in their hometowns in Ukraine may differ from those who sought protection abroad or became internally displaced. Moreover, each of these situations allows for a wide range of experiences, attitudes, and forms of agency. In this article, we examine how displaced Ukrainian women living in Sweden navigate different layers of suspended temporality partly inherent to their temporary protection status in the EU, generating differential tempos between the Swedish migration system and their own aspirations for stability in their host society.

In this article, we first discuss the concepts of displacement as a condition,[12] temporality and temporal dissonances,[13] and differential tempos[14] in various spheres of human life. Second, we present our empirical material and the ethical considerations on which it draws. Third, when showing our findings, we consider three types of temporalities produced by the condition of displacement: legal temporalities, institutional temporalities, and lived temporalities. In the conclusion, we argue that displaced Ukrainian women develop various strategies to navigate the differential tempos of the Swedish migration system and society, where norms that are often presented as egalitarian frequently come into conflict with individual qualifications and ambitions.

Theoretical Approach

The notion of displacement, prominent in research on involuntary mobility, is central to understanding the experiences of Ukrainians affected by the war. However,

11 Georgina Ramsay, "Time and the other in crisis: How anthropology makes its displaced object", *Anthropological Theory* 20/4, 2020, 385, https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499619840464 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

12 Georgina Ramsay and Hedda Haugen Askland, "Displacement as Condition: A Refugee, a Farmer and the Teleology of Life", *Ethnos* 87/ 3, 2022, 600–621, https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2020.1804971 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

13 Goshu Wolde Tefera and Aland Gamlen, "Temporal logics in geographical research on migration and refugees", *Progress in Human Geography* 48/6, 2024, 861–878, https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325241282023 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

14 Melanie Griffiths et al., *Migration, time and temporalities: Review and Prospect*, COMPAS Research Resources Paper, 2013; and Melanie Griffiths, "Epilogue: 'Claiming Time' Special Issue", *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 25, 2024, 1231–1247, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-024-01162-9 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

we propose to do so in a new light. Following Georgina Ramsay and Hedda Haugen Askland, we define displacement not only as spatial and forced movement, but as an ongoing condition of "being lost," one "generated through external forces, and [with] the disorientation and detachment of feeling totally unable to navigate oneself through this state as a result of it being so outside of individual control."[15] The authors argue that displacement carries with it a distinct temporality as "a sense of indefinite indeterminacy."[16] Viewed from this angle, displacement means losing agency and autonomy in relation to space, but it is also inherently linked to a "temporal rupture" of both present and future trajectories.[17] Research on time and temporality in migration studies is abundant.[18] However, the application of these concepts to the war-driven displacement of Ukrainians is just beginning to develop.[19]

Sarah Sharma defines temporality as "lived time embedded within a grid of power relations, unfolding through time."[20] As she argues, "temporalities are not times; like continually broken clocks, they must be reset again and again."[21] In her understanding, temporalities are not uniform time but rather a time specific to the labour that produces them. Sharma emphasises that under capitalism, time is managed and structured differently for various subjects, as can be seen through her examples of the contrasting schedules of business travellers, hotel maids, and taxi drivers, among others. While some individuals, like business travellers, are

15 Ramsay and Askland, "Displacement as Condition", 601.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 618. See also: Sakti and Amrith, "Introduction".

18 Saulo Cwerner, "The Times of Migration", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27/ 1, 2001, 7–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830125283 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Griffiths et al., *Migration, time and temporalities*; Griffiths, "Epilogue"; and Adrian Little, "The complex temporality of borders: Contingency and normativity", *European Journal of Political Theory* 14/4, 2015, 429–447, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885115584831. [accessed: 13.10.2025].

19 Anita Brzozowska, "'All is not yet lost here.' The role of aspirations and capabilities in migration projects of Ukrainian migrants in Poland", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49/ 9, 2023, 2373–2390, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2157804 [accessed: 24.11.22025]; Ana Mijić et al., "Experiencing forced migration: challenges of arriving after displacement from Ukraine", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50/14, 2024, 3396–3414, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2323666 [accessed: 24.11.2025]; Otrishchenko, "The time that was taken from us"; and Oksana Shmulyar Gréen and Svitlana Odynets, "Handling uncertainty of present and future: Ukrainian transnational families in Sweden and Romania strategising their lives in protracted displacement", in: Vida Česnuitytė et al. (eds.), *European Families Facing Hard Times: Challenges, Strategies, and Family Policies*, (Emerald Publishing, forthcoming 2026). Regarding the war in the Donbas starting in 2014, see: Emma Rimpiläinen, "The Time of displacement", *Spil'ne/Commons*, 14 September 2020, https://commons.com.ua/en/chas-peremishchenih-pereselenci/ [accessed: 24.11.2025].

20 Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, 9.

21 Ibid., 8.

afforded opportunities to thrive through time (e.g., due to access to special zones in airports), others, such as hotel maids, must adhere to strict schedules to accommodate the daily routines of guests in jet-lagged conditions. Accordingly, for Sharma, temporality operates "as a form of social power and a marker of social difference."[22]

For Melanie Griffiths, Ali Rogers, and Bridget Anderson, tempos highlight that, for migrants, movement in both time and space is loaded with "expectations, experiences and conflicts of speed," which often create temporal tensions between so-called fast and stagnant time modes.[23] The concept of temporal dissonance, coined by Goshu Wolde Tefera and Aland Gamlen, is specifically relevant for our analysis in this article.[24] It reveals the discrepancy between the different perceptions of time and "temporal logics"[25] of newly arrived individuals, established populations and the institutions they represent in host societies – leading to frustrations on both sides. Tefera and Gamlen developed this concept while researching Ethiopian refugees in Melbourne, Australia. For them, it highlights oppositions in "temporal frameworks that interviewees had internalised in their origin countries and transit journeys, versus the dominant temporal logic of a major Australian city."[26] Tefera's and Gamlen's study emphasises that migrants frequently adjust and mediate between their own temporal frameworks and those of the host country to address temporal dissonance.

Applying the concepts of displacement as an ongoing condition, tempos, and temporal dissonance enables a closer examination of the agency that displaced women from Ukraine exercise as they navigate Sweden. Their sphere of action is distinctly transnational, as they not only work to establish new life trajectories in their host society, but also actively coordinate care and manage responsibilities across borders with family members remaining in Ukraine.[27]

Methodology

The research for this paper draws on a project we conducted in 2023 and 2024.[28] Our empirical focus in that study was TPD regulations for the reception of displaced Ukrainians in Sweden, as well as on the personal experiences of the displaced in

22 Ibid., 9.

23 Griffiths et al., *Migration, time and temporalities*, 17.

24 Tefera and Gamlen, "Temporal logics in geographical research".

25 Ibid., 863.

26 Ibid.

27 Shmulyar Gréen and Odynets, "Handling uncertainty of present and future".

28 The project is titled "Forced migrants from Ukraine in transnational Europe: A case of the Swedish reception", held at the University of Gothenburg, funded by the Centre for European Research of the University of Gothenburg, and led by Oksana Shmulyar Gréen.

relation to the TPD shaping their access to work, housing, and schooling for their children. We conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews, and in some cases we used visual materials, such as network maps and diagrams, to enable the participants to talk about significant life events and their family ties and support networks during their displacement. This was done to allow the participants to actively construct their own representations and share their own perspectives on protracted displacement. In total, we met 15 women born in Ukraine who had relocated to Sweden and had temporary protection status there. The study focused on western and southern Sweden, where 28% of all arrivals from Ukraine settled.[29] Importantly, the temporal dimension of our findings pertains only to the early waves of displacement, as we conducted our interviews in the spring and early summer of 2023, and all our interlocutors who participated in this study left Ukraine in the spring of 2022. This means that both regulations covering displaced persons from Ukraine and their strategies to navigate uncertainty may have changed over the last three years, including their physical place of residence and their family situation.

The women we interviewed were between 19 and 57 years old. Seven were residing in western Sweden and eight in the south. Before fleeing to Sweden, the women lived in eight different Ukrainian *oblasti*: three were from those in western Ukraine, four from those in southern Ukraine, four from those in eastern Ukraine, and four from the capital city of Kyiv. One-third of the participants were married or had a partner, while the remaining participants were divorced or single parents. Around half of the participants arrived in Sweden with school-age children and one-third had older children who remained in Ukraine or lived in other EU countries. All but one of the study participants had close relatives still in Ukraine, including elderly parents. All participants except one held Ukrainian university degrees in fields including pedagogy, language, journalism, design, management, psychology, economics, cybernetics, and physiotherapy. Similarly, all but one of the women were employed in Sweden, but few worked in their fields of study.

Marnie Howlett and Valeria Lazarenko argue that, in conflict settings, scholars' positionalities are "fundamental for ensuring the conduct of ethical research."[30] Accordingly, we disclosed that we were both born and raised in Ukraine and position ourselves along a continuum of "insider–outsider" relations to those we studied. As insiders whose relatives currently live and struggle in Ukraine, we share with our participants a deep understanding of the Ukrainian context, detailed knowledge of

29 Laura Bartolini and Caterina Francesca Guidi, "Temporary Protection Holders in Sweden – Needs, Intentions and Challenges", 2nd ed., *International Organization for Migration*, 2024, https://dtm.iom.int/es/node/40606 [accessed: 05.08.2025].

30 Marnie Howlett and Valeria Lazarenko, "How and when should we (not) speak?: Ethical knowledge production about the Russia–Ukraine war", *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26, 2023, 3, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-023-00305-2 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

how a society functions under war conditions, experiences of loss and grief, and personal engagement in Ukrainian resistance. This created an additional level of rapport between us and our interlocutors, not least because many of them were highly reflective and viewed the act of sharing their stories of violence and subsequent migration as a way to speak about these issues for a wider international audience.

Beyond this, having researched Ukrainian migration even prior to 2022, we invested time and careful preparation in designing this study. In particular, we approached the current displacement situation through a broader context of previous massive labour migrations, which millions of Ukrainians or their close family members have experienced. Additionally, because we are native speakers of Ukrainian, participants could speak without a translator, as Ukrainian was native to many of the women, and several emphasised that they preferred to speak Ukrainian (rather than Russian), viewing it as an act of distancing themselves from Russia and Russian culture. However, when some women found it easier to speak Russian, we continued the conversation in that language. In these and other ways, we were well-suited to, as stated by Howlett and Lazarenko, "facilitate trust-building, [and] connect with/or comfort participants"[31] throughout the whole research process.

We continuously reflected on the stories we heard and made careful choices regarding which personal details should be concealed to reduce the risk of harm once the results were published. In general, we were guided by the conviction that, in inviting the participants to talk, we create a safe space for them to reflect on their experiences of their first year in Sweden without being judged or questioned. We tried to assuage their feelings of loss or loneliness by suggesting that, as Victoria Sakti and Megha Amrith write, the "'here and now', while often long, uncertain, precarious and hard to navigate, rests on hopes that there is a future with more possibilities."[32] Notably, since we have both resided in Sweden for a longer period, we were able to share our own experiences as migrants and researchers, making space for any questions the participants might have about the challenges and opportunities of living in Swedish society.

To analyse the data generated during the study, we employed a reflexive thematic analysis, inspired by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke.[33] Reflexive thematic analysis involves several steps of immersion in the data, starting with familiarisation, coding, and generating initial themes. Guided by the theoretical concepts of displacement, tempos, and temporal dissonance, we reviewed the themes and de-

31 Ibid., 5.

32 Sakti and Amrith, "Introduction", 462.

33 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?", *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18/3, 2021, 328–352, https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

veloped new ones, refining different dimensions of temporality and its implications for the participants.

Findings

As mentioned above, when analysing Ukrainian women's experiences of displacement in Sweden, we identified three types of temporalities. First, legal temporalities illuminate how the TPD structures the women's access to and generates differential tempos relating to work, education, and other opportunities, which become even more strenuous in light of the temporary status for Ukrainians. Second, institutional temporalities produced by the Swedish migration system through the ways it interacts with displaced people. Finally, lived temporalities reveal how people exercise their agency and regain control over their time in Sweden, despite the tensions and frustrations of the temporal dissonances they experience.

Legal Temporalities

Compared to other receiving welfare state countries, Sweden provided the lowest level of state support to people from Ukraine in 2022 and over the next two and half years.[34] Consequently, the Swedish implementation of the TPD produced a specific temporality that significantly constrained the lives of displaced Ukrainians.

Sweden opted to implement the TPD through its national legislation on asylum seekers.[35] In practice, this meant that individuals with temporary protection were entitled to minimal social support, including housing (often in collective accommodations), urgent medical care that could not be postponed, and a social allowance of approximately 180 euros a month per adult. Unlike asylum seekers, who may view their precarious situation as a temporary phase potentially leading to refugee status

34 Anna Berlina, *Implementation of temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine: A systematic review of the Nordic countries*, Copenhagen: NordPub, 2022, https://doi.org/10.6027/nord2022-026 [accessed: 25.11.2025]; Vilde Hernes et al., *Governance and policy changes during times of high influxes of protection seekers: A comparative governance and policy analysis in eight European countries, 2015–June 2023*, Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), 2023, https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/handle/11250/3112660 [accessed 25.11.2025]; and Koikkalainen et al., "Unpacking the temporary protection of displaced people".

35 Berlina, *Implementation of temporary protection*; Oksana Shmulyar Gréen and Svitlana Odynets, "Fleeing Russia's War of Aggression in Transnational Europe: Reception of Displaced Ukrainians in Sweden", *Delmi Policy Brief and the Migration Studies Delegation* 7, 2024, https://www.delmi.se/Media/qzufewke/policy-brief-web-eng.pdf [accessed: 24.11.2025]; and Aadne Aasland and Vilde Hernes, "Reception, integration and future prospects of Ukrainian refugees in the Nordic countries", *Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR)*, 2025, https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/handle/11250/3185731 [accessed 24.11.2025].

and a more predictable future, Ukrainians under collective protection cannot expect such a future. As we indicated elsewhere, most Ukrainian women managed to endure this period largely due to support from Swedish civil society and quick entry into the labour market, albeit often at the cost of downward social mobility.[36]

Because of such implementations, Ukrainians with collective protection status were, for the first two and a half years, unable to register in the Swedish population register and, consequently, were ineligible to attend Swedish language classes or enrol at university for further education. These legal obstacles were well described by Diana, 41, who arrived in Sweden from Odesa oblast in March 2022, together with her 19-year-old daughter, whom she wanted to protect from potential violence in case their village were to be occupied by the Russian army. Diana's 21-year-old son stayed in Ukraine, as all men over 18 years of age are subject to mobilisation and restricted from leaving the country.

Having obtained a teaching diploma in Ukraine, Diana ran her own business in the education sector before the war. She continued to manage her business after migrating to Sweden, and paid salaries to her employees and taxes in Ukraine. However, despite being highly motivated to start a similar venture in Sweden, she soon encountered numerous obstacles and experienced what Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson call "chronic waiting"[37] from the moment of her first contact with the Swedish Tax Agency. After several unsuccessful attempts to determine whether she was eligible to open a business using a coordination ID number, which all Ukrainians received instead of an ordinary ID, she abandoned the idea. Diana explained that the Swedish bureaucracy was, for the first time, encountering a new category of migrants who, while granted full access to the labour market under EU regulations, were not provided with the essential documentation to be able to navigate and interact with Swedish authorities. Being fluent in English, Diana considered a second option and hoped to be able to work as a substitute teacher in a Swedish school. However, the school administrators informed her that she needed to speak at least some Swedish to get employment. Diana and several other women in her situation felt very frustrated for not having the right to attend Swedish for Immigrants (in Swedish, SFI), a language course provided free of charge by the Swedish state to all newcomers with a legal status.

Importantly, unlike many other displaced Ukrainians, Diana had a specific reason to come to this country, as she had married a Swedish citizen a year before the invasion and was living with him in Ukraine when the war began. Despite this, the Swedish Migration Agency issued her temporary protection status instead of a residence permit as a family member of a Swedish citizen, which would have immediately opened other opportunities for her in Sweden. When, a year after arrival, she

36 Shmulyar Gréen and Odynets, "Fleeing Russia's War of Aggression in Transnational Europe".

37 Griffiths et al., "Migration, time and temporalities", 20.

turned to the authorities with a request to change her status, she was told it was not possible:

> The officer in [the] migration agency did not understand why I wanted to be registered as a partner to a Swedish citizen. In his opinion, the temporary protection status is much easier and quicker to get. He did not know, though, that I cannot attend SFI with my current residence permit. I have lived in Sweden for a year now, but I still cannot register and get an ID number. All these things delay me from moving forward, doing something, integrating. If I had already gotten the ID, I could have attended the SFI a long time ago and started working properly. I could have validated my Ukrainian diploma and started working as a teacher, for example. I could have been useful. I know that there is a need for teachers in the Swedish education system. But the system doesn't allow me to do anything in this regard.[38]

Only in the autumn of 2024 did displaced Ukrainians gain the right to register in the Swedish public register and obtain an ID number. However, these changes had a clear temporal aspect: they applied only to those who had lived in Sweden for at least two years and planned to stay at least a year longer. In November 2024, this legislation changed, allowing displaced Ukrainians to apply for an ID number after one year of residency. Arguably, policies affecting Ukrainians under the TPD reflect Sweden's continued move toward restrictive migration policies, which began in 2016 and culminated in the adoption of more stringent regulations later.[39]

Institutional Temporalities

Many of those who left Ukraine in the first months believed that the war would end in a few weeks or months. Having realised that the war was no longer "temporary", some decided to return, even with risks to their own and their children's lives, to be together with their families and remain in a familiar environment.[40] Others chose

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38 Diana, 41, from Odesa oblast.

39 Koikkalainen et al., *Unpacking the temporary protection of displaced people*; and Jens Rydgren and Sara Van der Meiden, "Sweden, now a country like all the others? The radical right and the end of Swedish exceptionalism", *Department of Sociology Working Paper Series*, 2016, https://doi.org/10.17045/sthlmuni.14040098.v1 [accessed 25.11.2025].

40 Despite the ongoing atrocities of the war, after the initial shock of the first months, the flow of displaced people has decreased significantly, dropping from 8 million people in May 2022 to approximately 4 million, with half having returned to their homes by September 2023. See: Organization for Migration (IOM), "Almost 4.5 Million Ukrainians Returned Home from Displacement, Need Recovery Support – IOM", 7 June 2022, https://ukraine.iom.int/news/almost-45-million-ukrainians-returned-home-displacement-need-recovery-support-iom [accessed 25.11.2025]. Since then, the statistics have remained relatively stable and there are no predictions of a new influx unless further escalations occur.

to prolong their stay in their host country and began to create future horizons there, while still maintaining close emotional, material, and financial connections with their family and friends in Ukraine.[41]

Migrants who decided to stay in their host country tend to develop different strategies to cope with the asynchronicity and disharmony that govern their time in displacement.[42] Some of the women we interviewed remained in a state of waiting, refraining from pursuing alternatives to establish themselves within the social environment of their host country. Others strove to move more rapidly up the "integration ladder," which they think the host society expects of them. These strategies are similar to those observed by Kathryn Tomko Dennler in a study of newcomers with uncertain status or under threat of deportation in Canada, who respond to this uncertainty either by embracing or suspending engagement with their host society.[43]

As Ana Mijic and her co-authors observe, Ukrainians in various destinations in Europe had to deal with the challenges of arrival, defined by the authors as "a delicate balance between resonance and alienation within the receiving community."[44] We observed in our interviews that many women perceived life in Sweden as being much slower compared to life in Ukraine. This perception is particularly reflected in their experiences with the Swedish authorities and the healthcare system. For example, Yulia, 32, who came to Sweden from Kharkiv with her 11-year-old son in April 2022, after her home was destroyed. Unlike most Ukrainians abroad, who, after their initial displacement, continued to visit Ukraine regularly, struggling to decide whether to stay in their host country or return home, Yulia was certain that her opportunities in Ukraine were limited, as she no longer had a place to live. Therefore, she decided to invest in adapting to life in Sweden. Just a week after her arrival, she found a job as a cleaner to cover her basic living expenses. In the long term, she was highly motivated to obtain a nursing licence in Sweden, as she held a university degree and had work experience in the medical field in Ukraine. However, to achieve this goal, she needed to pass the Swedish medical exam, which required proficiency in Swedish. Like Diana and many others, Yulia could not realise her plans, as she was not eligible for the SFI courses.

At the time of our interview in the summer of 2023, she was working 20 hours per week in a hotel, taking two self-funded Swedish courses online, actively volun-

41 Shmulyar Gréen and Odynets, "Handling uncertainty of present and future".

42 Griffiths, "Epilogue".

43 Kathryn Tomko Dennler, "Uncertain future, unsettled present: suspending and embracing engagement with life among newcomers in Toronto, Canada", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49/7, 2021, 1864–1880, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1927684 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

44 Mijić et al., "Experiencing forced migration", 3397.

teering, and continuing to raise her 11-year-old son as a single parent. Like many other Ukrainian children, he attended two schools – one in Sweden and one online in Ukraine.[45] Comparing her situation with that of her sister, who was in Germany at the time, Yulia noted significant differences – akin to what Griffiths calls "the differential modes of time management"[46] – which led her to postpone her own ambitions for rapid integration in Sweden. She saw this path as a potential means of obtaining a long-term residence permit. Yulia stated:

> We are okay here. It's just that I have the feeling that nothing is happening. I need to manage, to organise my time so much – to learn Swedish, to validate my nurse diploma, to earn money for a living, to help my son in both schools, and to find a new apartment. My sister, with whom we left Ukraine at the same time, is in Germany these days. She will have a language exam to confirm [her] quite good level of German that she has by now achieved in Germany, and I am not even close to that… I know this is my only chance to stay in this country after the temporary directive ends […] I think if we show Sweden that we are working and speaking Swedish, then we will get to stay here. We do not have a place to go back to, our house in Ukraine is destroyed.[47]

Sharma argues that so-called "chronographies of power" control the "speed" or tempo of individuals' interactions within global societies.[48] Like many other Ukrainian professionals in Sweden living under temporary protection, Yulia began learning the language on her own, using free online resources and attending language cafes organised by civil society groups for newcomers. In the municipality where she lives, she connected with Swedish families, including doctors, who helped her practice professional medical vocabulary. This effort enabled her to complete the first level of professional medical courses in Swedish, which is required to validate her diploma.

When the Swedish government finally opened SFI courses for displaced Ukrainians in July 2023, Yulia began attending classes alongside her job as a cleaner. Later, in July 2024, when she was granted the right to register in the social welfare system and obtain an ID, she sought to continue her studies in medicine. However, at the Swedish Employment Agency, she was told that she could not choose her own educational path or pace of study. Instead of continuing to take the necessary steps

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45 Helen Pidgorna, "The Uncertain Education of Ukrainian Refugee Children", *Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien (ZOiS)*, 22 November 2023, https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-uncertain-education-of-ukrainian-refugee-children [accessed: 25.11.2025].

46 Griffiths, "Epilogue", 1236.

47 Yulia, 32, from Kharkiv.

48 Sharma, *In the Meantime*.

to validate her nursing diploma, she was required to accept a job offer as a home care assistant to be eligible for the state allowance provided to her as a participant in the Swedish establishment programme (etableringsprogrammet)[49]. Despite of this, Yulia was convinced that continuing her studies and validating her nursing diploma in Sweden would guarantee her a greater stability and professional fulfilment than working as a home care assistant, a position she perceived as emotionally overwhelming. This instrumental response to the complex situation of displacement is documented by other researchers as well. For example, Anita Brzozowska observes that the aspirations of Ukrainian migrants "must be seen in relation to the life course, their relational references, and the space–time horizon."[50]

Yulia was one of many others who had to accept "the differential tempos"[51] of Swedish migration policies, ignoring her aspirations and future plans, and taking a job below her qualifications to provide for her son and create stability for both of them in Sweden. When one of the desk officers at the municipality noticed Yulia's frustration and complaints, he expressed irritation towards "much too active" individuals, who sometimes forget that they came to Sweden because of the war, and not to pursue their careers. As Yulia explained, the municipality worker told her that she needs to follow the same rules as everyone and not try to invent her own, unless she becomes economically self-sufficient, which might happen in the future.

In Tefera and Gamlen's terms, Yulia and other displaced Ukrainians experienced temporal dissonance while meeting the representatives of various institutions in Sweden.[52] Particularly, they experienced many obstacles in a system supposedly based on egalitarian norms, where standards are intentionally set lower to make it accessible for all. Being aware of their educational competencies and feeling an urgency to advance to "normal life" as soon as possible, they could not reconcile with the slow tempo of the Swedish migration system. Yulia's example illustrates that the Ukrainian women's own timelines are largely governed by what Griffiths calls "temporal conditionalities" and "temporal safeguards,"[53] inhibiting them from integrating at their own pace and starting to contribute to Swedish society while also continuing to support their families in Ukraine.

The rigidity, slowness, and incongruity of the Swedish integration system, especially for people with university degrees, has been discussed by scholars in relation

49 The establishment programme is a 24-month, full-time initiative run by the Swedish Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen). It is aimed at helping newly arrived immigrants (aged 20–67) to enter the labour market. The programme combines mandatory Swedish language instruction (SFI), a course on civic orientation, job-seeking activities, and professional training with financial support.

50 Brzozowska, "'All is not yet lost here'", 2387.

51 Griffiths, "Epilogue", 1244.

52 Tefera and Gamlen, "Temporal logics in geographical research on migration".

53 Griffiths, "Epilogue", 1233.

to other migration flows to Sweden. For instance, Nina Gren, Dalia Abdelhady, and Martin Joormann analyse the integration paths of Afghan youth in Sweden and reveal the slow pace of the system for educated individuals from Afghanistan and the lengthy processes required to validate their diplomas and acknowledge their social status.[54] In another work, they apply the concept of "bureaucratic violence" to describe the modes of interaction between refugees and some authorities in Sweden.[55] They cite Karen Fog Olwig's study where she shows that Scandinavian countries have a strong demand for "reciprocity" between the welfare state and citizens, according to which a "good citizen" does not remain dependent on the welfare state longer than necessary.[56] However, this idea of reciprocity allows Scandinavian welfare institutions to intervene in people's private lives (especially when they are migrants) more extensively than occurs in other countries. This is done with the "good intention" of encouraging recipients to reciprocate for the previously received benefits as quickly as possible.

Lived Temporalities

Our interviews, as well as those conducted by other researchers,[57] show that displaced people from Ukraine tend to adopt a strategy of living transnationally, with what Marita Eastmond calls an "attachment to both places."[58] In our case, this is an attachment to Sweden and Ukraine. Thanks to the mobility rights guaranteed by the TPD in Sweden, many displaced Ukrainians can travel to and from Ukraine, which contributes to this transnational life. They may also choose to continue working online in Ukraine within their professional fields, while also having low-skilled jobs in their host country. By doing so, they assert their own pace of adaptation to the host country, even if this creates temporal ruptures and discontinuities with the rhythm of their host society.[59] For many, this results in a postponement of social adaptation in Sweden.

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54 Nina Gren et al., "Unmasking the Impact of Bureaucratic Violence", *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 39/2, 2023, 1–13, https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41163 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

55 Dalia Abdelhady et al., *Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in Northern Europe*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020.

56 Karen Fog Olwig, "'Integration': Migrants and Refugees between Scandinavian Welfare Societies and Family Relations", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37/2, 2011, 179–196, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2010.521327 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

57 For example, see: Brzozowska, "'All is not yet lost here'"; Kuzemska, "Fragmented Lives"; and Lapshyna, "Migration and Diaspora at Times of Crisis".

58 Marita Eastmond, "Transnational Returns and Reconstruction in Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina", *International Migration* 44/3, 2006, 153, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2006.00375.x [accessed: 25.11.2025].

59 Griffiths et al., *Migration, time and temporalities*.

One of the novel findings of our study is an observation that some participants find relief in regular visits to Ukraine, where life rhythms are predictable and can be taken for granted. This observation can be linked to other research arguing that the loss of predictability is an essential challenge for displaced people from Ukraine.[60] When the frustration of being "stuck" in their host country reaches its limits, several participants reported travelling to Ukraine for periods ranging from a few days to a few weeks. This allowed them to recharge psychologically, reconnect with family members, and find comfort in their former environment.

Ukrainians go to Ukraine for other reasons as well: to obtain a new passport, undergo health exams – which often involve shorter waiting times than abroad – check on their homes, and simply engage in everyday routines that they were used to before the invasion. These movements occur with a high level of ambiguity and contradiction, yet they may serve to alleviate the stress often caused by cultural differences between the two countries.[61] At the same time, sustaining life in two countries requires good mental health, which several participants said they were lacking. These movements are particularly relevant for women who continue to maintain ties with their professional communities in Ukraine or work remotely, and who understand that achieving the same level of professional success in their new country would take many years. For them, the option of returning becomes their primary future aspiration – either for when the war ends or at least when it lessens in intensity.

For example, Maria, 43, is a psychologist who moved with her 9-year-old daughter from Kyiv to Sweden after their district was heavily bombed during the first days of the Russian full-scale invasion. Her husband, the girl's father, remained in Kyiv. She travels regularly between Ukraine and Sweden to maintain the relationship with her partner, to regain psychological well-being from the familiar environment, and to sustain ties with her professional networks. She reflected that "insecure" Kyiv feels calmer for her than "safe" Sweden:

> Even when it is dangerous, we go to the shelters, and sometimes we even spend the whole night there. But it feels different, because it is my home, where we all want to stay and live. My life in Sweden, on the contrary, is a constant struggle for everything – for an apartment, for work, for decisions from the authorities.[62]

For other participants, their temporary stay in Sweden is a burden because it comes from the desires of their family members, often their spouses, while they themselves would return to Ukraine "tomorrow". Raja, 35, went to Sweden from western

60 Mijić et al., "Experiencing forced migration".

61 Olena Yermakova, "Back home to the warzone. Emotions of displacement among returning Ukrainian migrants", *New Eastern Europe*, 15 February 2023, https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/02/15/ukrainian-refugees-returning-home/ [accessed: 25.11.2025].

62 Maria, 43, from Kyiv.

Ukraine with her 6-year-old daughter. She explained how she navigates the uncertainty of time in Sweden by constantly being prepared to leave and try to restore her family relations:

> I try not to get used to life here [in Sweden]. I live one day at a time. And a year has already passed. […] I don't know what happens next. If my husband would call me today and say, "come home", I would go tomorrow. I would leave it all and go. But he doesn't call me or tell me to do just this, so I adapt as much as possible here. […] I don't know if our relationships will improve in the future. We had absolutely no problems with each other at all before the war, but now I don't know. Recently, I have had many problems with communication with my husband – it is difficult for me, as I cannot concentrate on things I should do in Sweden.[63]

Raja, as well as some of the other women we met, remained in Sweden and tried daily, to quote Sakti and Amrith, to "negotiate multiple incompatible temporalities in the 'here and now.'"[64] She lived with a constant tension; she was neither ready to invest effort and resources toward staying in Sweden, nor was she free to plan returning home to Ukraine.

Conclusions

With the activation of the EU's TPD, tens of thousands of displaced women from Ukraine found shelter in Sweden. However, following Otrishchenko, their time spent under temporary protection status can be described as yet another "theft",[65] because it does not lead toward potentially permanent residency after 2027, when the protection expires.[66] To obtain a more nuanced understanding of how temporality structured the lives of these displaced Ukrainians right from the start of the full-scale war, we applied Tefera and Gamlen's concept of temporal dissonance,[67] shedding light on differential tempos nested within three types of temporalities. We provided examples of how legal temporalities create legal cracks for Ukrainians under the TPD, hampering their pace of integration into Swedish society and making future plans. Second, looking at institutional temporalities, we illustrated how the displaced women are subjected to the wider Swedish integration framework, in which supposedly egalitarian norms repeatedly come into conflict with the participants' individual ambitions and qualifications. Finally, we highlighted the women's

63 Raja, 35, from Rivne.

64 Sakti and Amrith, "Introduction", 458.

65 Otrishchenko, "The time that was taken from us".

66 Koikkalainen, "Unpacking the temporary protection of displaced people".

67 Tefera and Gamlen, "Temporal logics".

subjective experiences of living in displacement. Our participants expressed difficulties in imagining their future – and indeed having hope – because their near future is punctured and the distant future is uncertain and often dependent on family members, both in Sweden and Ukraine.

The tensions and difficulties generated by what Griffiths calls "displacement as a condition"[68] notwithstanding, the participants in the study have been actively establishing themselves in the Swedish labour market. Meanwhile, they are aware of the potentially brief temporal frames of their stay. As observed by Brzozowska, it is important for Ukrainians to be active and responsible in their host society, both to sustain themselves economically and to ensure that they do not waste time in case they are allowed to remain on a permanent basis.[69] Our interviewees invested time and energy in different educational projects on their own, often combining this with low-skilled jobs. They did so despite the slow pace and dismissive attitudes of Swedish institutions working with immigrants.

As our analysis shows, for displaced people from Ukraine, arriving from a war zone and landing in the lowest rungs of Swedish society, this temporal order does not correspond with their aspirations. Many highly educated displaced women feel that the time they must put into harmonising the differential tempos of the Swedish bureaucracy is too precious. They could have spent it on further education and meaningful occupations that could bring them and their families stability and hope. Meanwhile, the Swedish migration system watches their efforts indifferently, encouraging them to "not stress" and "take one step at a time". Displaced Ukrainians in Sweden and in other countries have now been handling such situations for over three years, postponing their temporal and spatial horizons of self-realisation and stability for an indefinite amount of time.

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68 Ramsay and Askland, "Displacement as Condition".

69 Brzozowska, "'All is not yet lost here'".

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Violence, Uncertainty and Agency in the Narratives of Ukrainian Forced Migrants in Lithuania

Kristina Šliavaitė

"I Have the Feeling that the World Has Changed"[1]

The full-scale war against Ukraine was started by the Russian Federation on 24 February, 2022. The brutal intrusion into the territory of Ukraine led to the forced migration of more than 7 million people from Ukraine to other European countries,[2] Lithuania being one of those destinations, as well as more distant nations. According to a variety of sources, more than 90,000 citizens of Ukraine, the majority of them women, have chosen Lithuania as a host country for their forced migration.[3] As many surveys demonstrate, Ukrainian migrants are the most positively-accepted group of migrants in Lithuanian society.[4]

1 Yulia, in her 50s, from Donetsk oblast, interview no. 15.

2 UNHCR cited in Oksana Mikheieva, Viktoriya Sereda, and Lidia Kuzemska, "Forced Displacement of Ukrainians during the War: Patterns of Internal and External Migration (2014–2022)", in: Bálint Madlovics, and Magyar Bálint (eds.), *Russia's Imperial Endeavor and Its Geopolitical Consequences: the Russia-Ukraine War*, Volume Two, Central European University Press, 2023, 210.

3 State Data Agency, MIGRIS of Migration Department, *War Refugees from Ukraine*, https://osp.stat.gov.lt/ukraine-dashboards, [accessed: 05.07.2025]. [This is the total number of war refugees from Ukraine who came to Lithuania and registered with the Migration Department. This statistic does not reflect further migration processes and does not include those who came to Lithuania but did not register with the Migration Department].

4 IOM, 2023–10-21, *IOM Lietuva – ukrainiečiai palankiausiai vertinami migrantai Lietuvoje [IOM Lithuania – Ukrainians are the most positively perceived migrants in Lithuania]*, https://lithuania.iom.int/lt/news/iom-lietuva-ukrainieciai-palankiausiai-vertinami-migrantai-lietuvoje [accessed 05.07.2025]; Monika Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Kęstutis Grumodas, *Visuomenės nuostatos etninių, religinių, migrantų ir kitų socialinių grupių atžvilgiu Lietuvoje: 2024 [Public attitudes towards ethnic, religous, migrant and other groups in Lithuania: 2024]*, LSMC sociologijos institutas, Diversity development group, http://ets.lstc.lt/, [accessed 05.07.2025].

In 2023, for instance, 76% of surveyed respondents supported the acceptance of war refugees from Ukraine in Lithuania.[5]

Research conducted by anthropologists and other social scientists in societies affected by military conflicts highlights the consequences of war for demography, education, health care, environment, and the challenges of inclusion for forced migrants into host societies.[6] In her book on violence and the ordinary, Veena Das emphasises that violence is experienced not only physically by our bodies, but it is also related to the violation of something essential, of our "sense of being".[7] Human experience during the war is understood as "extreme suffering".[8] War involves violence that encompasses physical, psychological, symbolic, and emotional damage.[9] When we experience violence, it penetrates us and our conceptualisation of who we are, i.e. our identity.[10] These inner perspectives we hold of ourselves are the focus of this paper, how the "self" is constructed in the narratives of people who have faced the atrocities of war and have been forced to leave their country in search for security.

Ukrainian and international researchers investigate the forced migration from Ukraine resulting from the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion in 2022 at international, national, societal, institutional, and individual levels. They do so via the lenses of institutional and societal responses in the host societies,[11] of forced mi-

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5 IOM, IOM Lietuva.

6 Andrea Mazzarino, Marcia C. Inhorn, and Catherine Lutz, "Introduction: The Health Consequences of War", in: Catherine Lutz and Andrea Mazzarino (eds.), *War and Health: the Medical Consequences of Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, New York: New York University Press, 2019, 1.

7 Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007, 9.

8 Hannah Bradby and Gillian Lewando Hundt, "Introduction", in: Hannah Bradby and Gillian Lewando Hundt (eds), *Global Perspectives on War, Gender and Health: The Sociology and Anthropology of Suffering*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, 1–17, here 1.

9 Stanko 1996, cited in Sabine Bauer-Amin, Leonardo Schiocchet, Maria Six-Hohenbalken, "Introduction: Embodied Violence and Agency in Refugee Regimes", in: Sabine Bauer-Amin, Leonardo Schiocchet, and Maria Six-Hohenbalken (eds.), *Embodied Violence and Agency in Refugee Regimes: Anthropological Perspectives*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2022, 24.

10 See e.g., Ana Mijić, Michael Parzer, Olena Tkalich and Yelyzaveta Zolotarova, "Experiencing forced migration: challenges of arriving after displacement from Ukraine", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50/14, 2024, 3396–3414, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2323666 [accessed: 25.11.2025]; Tetiana Shestopalova, "The Russo-Ukrainian War as a Challenge to the Identity and Memory of Ukrainian Writers", in: Viktoriya Sereda (ed.), *War, Migration, Memory: Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers, 4/2025, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 177–192; Viktoriya Sereda and Andrii Portnov, "Introduction: War, Migration, Memory", in: Viktoriya Sereda (ed.), *War, Migration, Memory: Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers, 4/2025, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 13–28, here 17.

11 See e.g. Malgorzata Rataj and Iryna Berezovska, "Addressing challenges with Ukrainian refugees through sustainable integration: response of the educational community in

grants' resilience and coping strategies,[12] of national identity and identification processes among Ukrainian forced migrants,[13] among many more lenses of interest.

Those researchers who particularly propose a phenomenological approach to the experience of violence and seek to understand the sense of self shaped by experiences of violence provide important insights.[14] For example, Ana Mijić, Michael Parzer, Olena Tkalich, and Yelyzaveta Zolotarova investigate experiences of forced migrants from Ukraine in Austria by focusing on their everyday life and their interaction with the host society, and they refer to a "pervasive sense of loss" that captures the inner feelings of research participants.[15]

The aim of this paper is to investigate the devastating ways violence and displacement affect the ways we constitute ourselves, as well as to pay attention to how our sense of belonging becomes articulated and serves as a key means in agency building in such situations. It begins with an introduction to academic discussions on the applicability of phenomenological approaches and introduces some important concepts drawn from anthropology and other social research. The following sections

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12 See e.g. Olga Kuzmuk, "Ukrainian refugee women's experiences in Poland in the first months of Russian invasion: a qualitative account", *European Societies*, 26/2, 2024, 501–521, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2024.2351595 [accessed: 25.11.2025]; Chiara Pierobon, "Crafting Individual Resilience Through Social Capital in Times of Conflict: A Qualitative Study on Ukrainian Refugees in Germany", *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 12, September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2024.2403069 [accessed: 25.11.2025]; Kristina Šliavaitė, "'Maniau kad išvykstu dviems savaitėms': karo nulemtų krizių įveikimo strategijos migrančių iš Ukrainos Lietuvoje pasakojimuose", ("'I thought I left for two weeks': war related crises and coping strategies in the narratives of female forced migrants from Ukraine in Lithuania"), *Filosofija. Sociologija* 35/4, 2024, 389–398, http://dx.doi.org/10.6001/fil-soc.2024.35.4.1 [accessed: 25.11.2025]; Iryna Lapshyna, "Forced migration, uncertainty and transnationalism of Ukrainians in Germany", *Mobilities* 3, January 2025, 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2024.2445806 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

13 See e.g., Ivan Kozachenko, "National Identity and Memory Among Ukrainian Refugees in Poland", in: Viktoriya Sereda (ed.), *War, Migration, Memory: Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers, 4/2025, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 281–290; Shestopalova, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*.

14 Sami Hermez, *War is coming. Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon*, PENN, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017; Vieda Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005; Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling. Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt*, Copenhagen: Copenhagen University Press, 2013; Mijić et al., "Experiencing forced migration".

15 Mijić et al., "Experiencing forced migration", 3396.

present an analysis of key themes that emerged from the interview analysis: the experiences of war that are narrated as embodied; migrants' sense of temporariness and homelessness in host societies; and their re-affirmation of national belonging in the face of uncertainty. This research confirms that when we experience violence and displacement, it deeply affects our sense of self, contributing to feelings of vulnerability and insecurity, forcing us to focus on the present. The research demonstrates that a sense of belonging – the notion of being part of the Ukrainian nation in a civic sense – is articulated by migrants and serves as a key means of building agency in such situations.

Ethnography and the Phenomenology of Violence and Displacement

As an anthropologist, I am trained to conduct ethnographic research over prolonged periods in selected locations. However, ethnographers are not always prepared to conduct research in sites affected by violence. My research with forced migrants from Ukraine in Lithuania led to the interviews as the primary method of inquiry regarding their war and migration experiences. The study of war at a distance is often based on interviews with those who have left the conflict zones, as well as on available written or visual material, and has been described as "ethnographic imagination", connoting the lack of first-hand war experience of the researchers themselves.[16] Ethnographies of war demonstrate how, in the midst of conflict, people live their lives, struggle, interpret events, seek rescue and conduct all the other human actions that are often shaped by social and cultural identities, values and previous experiences.[17] I turned to phenomenology and its application to social inquiry to understand the experiences of my research participants' narratives and interpret them.

Phenomenology is the philosophical school which arises from the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and other prominent thinkers.[18] Robert Desjarlais and C. Jason Throop note that, over

16 Antonius C. G. M. Robben, "Ethnographic Imagination at a Distance: An Introduction to the Anthropological Study of the Iraq War", in: Antonius C. G. M. Robben (ed.), *Iraq at a Distance What Anthropologists Can Teach Us About the War*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, 3–5.

17 Stephen C. Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos. An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2008; Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, "Introduction", in: Veena Das et al. (eds.), *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001, 3–4; Alessandro Monsutti, *War and Migration. Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan*, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, xiv.

18 John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design. Choosing Among Five Approaches*, Los Angeles, London: Sage, 2013, 77.

the last few decades, phenomenology has been widely adopted in the field of anthropology.[19] Notably, the existential anthropologist Michael Jackson emphasises that ethnography and phenomenology prioritise "lived experience over theoretical knowledge."[20] Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston perceive phenomenology as related to human perceptions, experiences and a comprehension of particular phenomena, thus phenomenology in anthropology may be defined as "a theory of perception and experience that pertains to every man, woman, and child in every society."[21] Desjarlais and Throop also indicate that "suspending judgment about the natural world" is a characteristic of both phenomenology and anthropology.[22] They conclude that anthropologists apply phenomenological approaches in studying illness, violence, suffering and other experiences as "they have helped anthropologists to reconfigure what it means to be human, to have a body, to suffer and to heal, and to live among others."[23] Researchers discuss key phenomenological concepts, such as subjectivity, experience, orientation, disorientation, embodiment, among other important ideas, and their applicability in social sciences.[24]

Experience is the key term conceptualised in phenomenology as contextualised, historicised, mediated, interpreted, also "situated and placed in the body."[25] Phenomenological inquiry addresses the experiences of particular individuals, and focuses on the subjective attitudes and perspectives of "life worlds" or "the subject's horizon of perception, orientation, and action."[26] However, the phenomenological approach also navigates between the individual and group levels by identifying experiences that are characteristic of a given group of individuals.[27] Ram and Houston

19 Robert Desjarlais and C. Jason Throop, "Phenomenological Approaches in Anthropology", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40, 2011, 87, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092010-153345 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

20 Michael Jackson, "Introduction: Phenomenology, Radical Empiricism, and Anthropological Critique", in: Michael Jackson (ed.), *Things As They Are. New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, 1–50, here 6.

21 Kalpana Ram and Christopher Houston, "Introduction. Phenomenology's Methodological Invitation", in: Kalpana Ram, Christopher Houston (eds.), Afterword by Michael Jackson, *Phenomenology in Anthropology*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015, 1.

22 Desjarlais and Throop, "Phenomenological Approaches", 88.

23 Ibid.

24 Desjarlais and Throop, "Phenomenological Approaches"; Ram and Houston, "Introduction"; Jackson, "Introduction".

25 Silvia Stoller, "Phenomenology and the Poststructural Critique of Experience", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17/5, 2009, 728, https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550903301762 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

26 Anne Honer and Ronald Hitzler, "Life-World-Analytical Ethnography: A Phenomenology Based Research Approach", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 44/5, 2015, 545, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241615588589 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

27 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 76.

understand phenomenology as the investigation of particular experiences that reveal universal aspects.[28] Joan E. Dodgson emphasises that "phenomenology requires that the researcher focuses on the first-person perspective as it is lived within their environment (sociocultural, historical, geographic) referred to as their lifeworld."[29] This all leads us to an understanding of phenomenology as an approach that locates phenomena in particular social cultural contexts and navigates between individual and group levels.

Sara Ahmed describes "orientation" as referring to the ways "we come to find our way in a world that acquires new shapes depending on which way we turn."[30] For Ahmed, "orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward."[31] Conversely, disorientation is related to disorder,[32] which is noticed when orientation is lost, when the familiar disappears.[33] Orientation is applied both to the space and to the location of the body in space,[34] it is about "intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places",[35] about "feeling at home" and "finding our way".[36] Ahmed concludes that "migration could be described as a process of disorientation and reorientation: as bodies 'move away' as well as 'arrive,' as they reinhabit spaces."[37] Orientation and disorientation are related to our bodies as spaces shape our bodies when we encounter the unknown and unfamiliar.[38]

Kirsten Simonsen further elaborates on the interplay between body and orientation and suggests that "disorientation is a bodily feeling that can shape insecurity and shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground of one's existence."[39] Disorientation leads to such feelings as anxiety, stress, vulnerability, helplessness, unsafety, confusion, and isolation.[40] In this perspective experiences such as illness, suffering,

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28 Ram and Houston, "Introduction", 1–2.

29 Joan E. Dodgson, "Phenomenology: Researching the Lived Experience", *Journal of Human Lactation* 39/3, 2023, 387, https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344231176453 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

30 Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 1.

31 Ibid., 3.

32 Ibid., 4.

33 Ibid., 6.

34 Ibid., 7.

35 Ibid., 8.

36 Ibid., 9.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Kirsten Simonsen, "In quest of a new humanism: Embodiment, experience and phenomenology as critical geography", *Progress in Human Geography* 37/1, 2012, 20, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512467573 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

40 Pablo Fernández Velasco, "Disorientation and self-consciousness: a phenomenological inquiry", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 21, 2022, 218.

happiness, disability, violence, displacement, etc. are embodied.[41] Embodied experiences can be grasped, e.g., by the phenomenological exploration of "whiteness"[42], by exploring experiences through the skin,[43] or by the investigation of what is defined as "refugee regimes" that regulate forced migrants' everyday lives and movements of bodies in space.[44] As it will be demonstrated in this paper, experiences of war are narrated in the interviews as embodied, i.e., with multiple references to the reaction of the body to violence. As data analysis demonstrates, violence does not preclude agency.

"Agency" is one more highly debated term in phenomenology[45] and in social sciences.[46] On the one hand, the very act of sharing one's life story can be seen as act of agency. For example, Michael Jackson perceives storytelling "as a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances."[47] Narrating a story, Vieda Skultans opines, is a victory for the narrator since "the victims of history may reverse their status and devise strategies for wresting personal victories, however small, from history."[48] In the stories told, we can construct ourselves as passive recipients of destiny or as active agents who provide meanings to the events, decisions and actions.[49] Moreover, we should keep at least two levels of agency in mind. On one level, the telling of a story is the very act that allows for the active rethinking and reinterpretation of events.[50] On another level, people talk about actions and decisions they made in the most complicated situations, which reveals the agency of individuals regained in making changes to their situation.[51] Nevertheless, the actions and choices of an individual are influenced and constrained by the existing structural contexts.[52]

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41 Csordas 1990, cited in Jarrett Zigon and Jason Throop, "Phenomenology", in: Felix Stein (ed.), *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, (2021) 2023, http://doi.org/10.29164/21phenomenology [accessed: 05.07.2025].

42 Sarah Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness", *Feminist Theory* 8/2, 2007, 149–168, here 149, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

43 Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, "Introduction: dermographies", in: Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds.), *Thinking Through the Skin*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, 1–18.

44 Bauer-Amin, Schiocchet, Six-Hohenbalken, "Introduction", 15–16.

45 See e.g. Tim Bayne, "The Phenomenology of Agency", *Philosophy Compass* 3/1, 2008, 182–202.

46 See e.g. Katherine Frank, "Agency", *Anthropological Theory* 6/3, 2006, 281–302, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2007.00122.x [accessed: 25.11.2025].

47 Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, 34.

48 Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives*, 19.

49 Ibid., xi, 43–62.

50 Ibid., Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*.

51 Victoria Ana Goddard, "Introduction", in: Victoria Ana Goddard (ed.), *Gender, Agency and Change. Anthropological Perspectives*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 2.

52 Bauer-Amin, Schiocchet, Six-Hohenbalken, "Introduction", 20–22.

This paper is based on interview narratives. Narratives are tools for constructing and presenting ourselves to others, that is, in constructing our identities.[53] In contemporary theories, identity is seen as a continuously constructed process rather than a fixed category.[54] Identities constructed through narratives can be understood as developed in specific situations and contexts, and for particular audiences.[55] In this paper, "identity" refers not only to social self-categorisation – perceiving ourselves as belonging to certain social groups – but also to a deeper sense of self that has been marked by experiences of violence.

Methodology and Methods

The paper is based on 30 interviews with Ukrainian forced migrants in Lithuania. The absolute majority (n = 26) of research participants are women who were forced to leave Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February, 2022. The majority of research participants came to Lithuania together with the younger generation of their family (children or grandchildren). Four interviews were conducted with men. The gender division of interview participants reflects the general structure of the migration flow from Ukraine to Lithuania, where the absolute majority of migrants are women.[56] One male interviewee came to Lithuania before 24 February, 2022, but experienced internal migration after 2014 when Russia invaded the eastern territories of Ukraine. Three other men came to Lithuania after Russia's full-scale invasion, but all of them were allowed to leave Ukraine either because of their family situation or health problems. The age of the research participants ranges from 18 to 75 years. The research participants came from different oblasts of Ukraine, but the majority of them (n = 20) are from eastern parts of Ukraine, some of which remain under Russian occupation. The research participants had different professions and most of them high education. The research participants were recruited using snowball sampling, initially targeting the organisations and institutions that provide assis-

53 Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives*, Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2010, 17.

54 Rogers Brubaker and Frederik Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", *Theory & Society* 29/1, 2000, 1–47, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3108478 [accessed: 25.11.2025]; Fredrik Barth, "Introduction", in: Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Boston: Little Brown and Co, 1996, 9–38.

55 Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts: the Social Construction of Oral History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

56 Anastasiia Tkachuk, Svitlana Kostrykina and Tomas Janeliūnas, "Migrantų iš Ukrainos adaptacija ir integracija Lietuvoje", ("Adaptation and integration of migrants from Ukraine in Lithuania"), Eastern Europe Studies Centre, 24 November 2023, https://www.gssc.lt/en/publication/adaptation-and-integration-of-ukrainian-migrants-in-lithuania/ [accessed: 10.07.1025].

tance or that attract forced migrants from Ukraine by providing humanitarian aid or safe spaces for social and cultural interaction.

The research is being conducted as part of a collaborative research project on identity and migration, funded by the Lithuanian Research Council. The interviews were conducted from September 2023 to March 2025 in three major Lithuanian cities: Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda. The interviews were conducted in Russian by myself. The Russian language is a widely used language in Ukraine, especially in the eastern parts of Ukraine, therefore it did not create serious linguistic barriers for me or the interviewees. We learnt Russian as part of our school education during the Soviet occupation. However, sensitivity to the use of the Russian language in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine was often acknowledged upon the first meeting between me, the interviewer, and the interviewees. I translated the answers presented in the texts into English. In the paper, the interviews are anonymised.

In-depth, unstructured or semi-structured interviews were preferred due to the sensitivity of the experiences of research participants. Rather than controlling the interview with narrow, pre-planned questions, I aimed to formulate broad, open questions that promoted longer responses. The analysis of the narratives led me to focus on questions about the self in situations of violence and forced displacement. The interviews lasted from one to three hours, with the oral or written consent of the research participant. All interviews were audio recorded and later fully transcribed for analysis. The interviews were coded focusing on the bottom-up constructed categories and analysed thematically. The research design, data collection and storage were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Lithuanian Center for Social Sciences.[57]

In the interviews, trauma caused by the war was apparent via loss of words, tears, silence, and the impossibility to verbalise certain experiences.[58] As a researcher working with individuals who have experienced trauma, I ensured that they shared their stories only to the extent they felt comfortable. I positioned myself as a listener, allowing them to speak without interruption, especially when addressing deep emotional themes. At the end of the interviews, most participants expressed that having the opportunity to tell their story and to be listened to contributed to their healing process. My own Baltic background enabled me to a deeper understanding of Ukrainian history under the Soviet regime and post-Soviet transformations. The themes of the terror of the Soviet period experienced at family and societal levels and shared in the interviews correspond to the way the Soviet system is conceptualised and narrated in the social context from which the

57 Approval number AMTEK-P-1, 2023–12-22.

58 Gadi, BenEzer, "Trauma signals in life stories", in: Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydestorff, and Graham Dawson (eds.), *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, 29–44.

researcher comes. The strong and continuous support of Lithuania and other Baltic states for Ukraine during the war created trust in the interview situation.

Embodied Experiences of Violence

This section focuses on the research participants' accounts of the outbreak of the war. Phenomenological approaches call attention to our experiences as embodied[59] and in the interviews, the body occupies a central role in the narration of experiences at the start of the war, the occupation, or migration. The embodiment of war experiences is revealed in the narratives through constant references to body conditions, such as paralysis, pain, a lack of food, and darkness. This resonates with findings in other contexts, e.g., forced migrants from Ukraine in Austria describing themselves as "frozen" or being in a "trance", and researchers interpreting these feelings as indicating a "loss of ontological security".[60]

In most interviews, the start of the war is narrated with references to the emotional situation, such as astonishment, denial, and shock. For the research participants from the occupied eastern parts of Ukraine, the war began in 2014, those from other regions of Ukraine refer to February 2022 when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The interviewees describe the shock they felt at the mere possibility of military invasion. They refer to some attempts to carry out the usual routines of everyday life: taking their children to school or some other educational institution, going to work places, but within hours they realised that life has changed and everyday routines could not be practised. A woman in her thirties, originally from central Ukraine, described the situation when the news of the beginning of the war arrived in the midst of her attempts to complete her ordinary morning tasks:

> In the morning [on 24 February 2022] we got ready and went [to the kindergarten]. We wanted to enter from the back. We got to the doors and they were closed. We saw that the director and the teachers were standing by the fence looking at us. They asked us "good morning, why have you come?" I could not understand why they were asking. We came to the kindergarten, what does it mean "why"? They asked "are you following the news? The war has started, go home and stay with [your] child." It was very scary. … We came back home and my mother asked why we came back. I said, "Mom, the war started." Why we did not know? We have a little child. She likes to watch cartoons very much. We watched this TV program for children. We did not watch the news.[61]

59 See e.g. Zigon and Throop, "Phenomenology".

60 Mijić, Parzer and Tkalich, Zolotarova, "Experiencing forced migration", 3404.

61 Interview no. 25, Klaipėda, in person, 14 February 2025.

The feeling of unpreparedness for the new situation is a recurring theme in the interviews. Phenomenologically, this may be related to the feeling of disorientation that occurs when the usual signs of orientation no longer work.[62] A woman in her fifties who worked in culture and education, experienced the occupation of the Donetsk oblast in 2014, and was internally displaced before leaving Ukraine in 2022, described the changes in the daily lives of local people in occupied territories, referring to changed norms and what constituted "normality":

> You know, life changes at once and so radically. What was normal yesterday, is not accessible today. People are not able to adjust so quickly. They are not able to change their behaviour. They live as they used to and get into situations when they are fired at. They used to walk in the streets in the evenings and suddenly they get to some control post.[63]

An interviewee in Vilnius, a woman in her thirties from the Poltav oblast of Ukraine, whom I met at a humanitarian organisation where she had come with her 10-year-old daughter for help with documentation upon arrival, agreed to meet me for an interview in which she recalled the beginning of the war as such, when she felt lost and unprepared for the changes in the routines of life:

> In the morning of the 24th I woke up and we did not hear any explosions that were in Kharkiv. I woke up and checked my phone. As usually we started to prepare for school, for work. And parents of other school pupils started to inquiry via chat if they plan to bring the kids to school. I could not understand at the beginning why they are discussing this, this is a usual work day so why the kids should not go to school. Then they said "check the news."[64]

Ethnographies of war zones address the loss of familiar everydayness in the context of violence.[65] In his book on war in Lebanon, Sami Hermez shares his insight that, even in situations of war and conflict, people start to "experience political violence as a type of normality"[66] and suggests that certain aspects of life under the war "became normalized".[67] Hermez notes that his interlocutors "often held multiple standards of normalcy in mind at the same time, and felt their experiences in ways that were

62 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 6.

63 Interview no. 15, Kaunas, in person, 2 May 2024.

64 Interview no. 1, Vilnius, in person, 12 September 2023.

65 See e.g. Ivana Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege. Anthropology in Wartime*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

66 Hermez, *War is coming*, 13.

67 Ibid., 14.

simultaneously normal and incomprehensible (or abnormal)."[68] The forced migrants from Ukraine referred to their life subject to war in terms of a "changed normality", where people experience physical threats to health and life.

Experiences of war were told with numerous references to the body. A recurring theme in the interviews was a sense of physical vulnerability, insecurity, fear and anxiety.[69] The research participants shared memories of situations in which they had experienced life-threatening risks over a longer period of time. The interviews contain themes of physical torture experienced by neighbours and community members, risks to life in everyday situations, e.g., on the way home after filling some bottles with water. The self is described as unprotected and as a person who can be stopped, killed, whose property can be taken, and who cannot voice their opinion in public. The liberation of territories of Ukraine by the Ukrainian army, in contrast, is related with regained individual safety and security:

> "We were simply lucky [that we stayed alive], I think that God protected us … I started to cry from joy when our Ukrainian soldiers came with the [Ukrainian] flags."[70]

Those who stayed in the territories occupied by the Russian Federation for some time tell of the necessity to hide in a house or cellar for months, living in darkness, and surviving on minimal resources. They described fear, cold, and hunger. There were parallels drawn to the experiences of family members living during the Second World War. A woman in her thirties from Kyiv oblast, who found shelter for herself and her family outside the city in some summer houses in the region, emphasised the similarity of her experience with that of her grandparents during the Second World War:

> I finally understood my deceased grandfather who used to tell us about the life during the Second World War when they did not have anything to eat, when they were eating pigeons. Thanks be to God, we did not have to do this, but I understood the value of bread.[71]

The borders between the occupied territory of Ukraine and the territory of sovereign Ukraine also became zones of risks and defenselessness as long as you are on the side of the occupied territory. The zone around the border, which is inspected by the occupiers, is a grey zone, where people are attacked, checked, can lose lives and

68 Ibid., 13.

69 See also, for example, Mijić, Parzer, Tkalich and Zolotarova, "Experiencing forced migration", 3404.

70 Interview no. 3, Vilnius, in person, 23 September 2023.

71 Interview no. 3, Vilnius, in person, 25 September 2024.

are often prevented from reaching sovereign Ukraine. It is a "liminal" zone, to borrow Victor Turner's[72] terminology, which belongs to nobody and therefore a zone where a person is vulnerable and could lose their life. A successful crossing of the border of Ukraine means a return to greater normalcy and the protection provided by Ukrainian citizenship. The border between occupied territories and sovereign Ukraine is the border of hope if you reach Ukraine alive:

> You know, it was the border, we had to cross it, there stayed our soldiers, Ukrainians and between borders, the grey zone. There were some village and field and nobody was living there. And it was the way out. They [the occupiers] could allow [us] to leave or close it. They could shoot at the cars. Many people died. I was praying to God that we were not shot. … It was the most terrifying to go via this zone … and we got through. When we did it, we crossed ourselves and entered the post and were greeted in Ukrainian. We all were in tears [of joy].[73]

The interviewees referred to mental fragility caused by the war. Some were diagnosed with depression and needed medical intervention. They referred to an inability to accept the situation as real, a sense of injustice, emotional instability, and stress. An interviewee from Kryvyi Rih in her seventies described the violent events in Ukraine as causing enormous psychological damage to her, although she did not experience direct physical violence: "I could not accept this reality. I did not know how… The first time I went into deep depression was when I learnt about Bucha and what was happening there [during Russian occupation]."[74] A young, educated man in his late twenties from the eastern region of Ukraine, who has been living in Lithuania since 2021, recalled his exceptionally sensitive emotional condition on the day the war began, even though he was in a safe place in Western Europe:

> Then in the evening on the 24th [of February 2022]… I was in Brussels in the central part of the city. I went out in the evening after nine o'clock and started to cry. I was walking for about one and a half hours and then I cried, then I stopped, then I started crying again. I was trying to understand why this is happening to Ukraine, why again we have to go through this. We had this in 2014. And back then, when I was 14, I understood that the war is the worst what can happen.[75]

The body language of the research participants usually made it clear that the narrative of the war that intruded into their daily lives had to be told in full and in detail

72 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

73 Interview no. 6, Vilnius, in person, 14 November 2023.

74 Interview no. 19, Kaunas, in person, 12 June 2024.

75 Interview no. 9, Vilnius, in person, 18 January 2024.

without interruption. Only afterwards, when the narrative reached the time of arrival at a safe place (Poland, Lithuania, etc.), the emotional state of the interviewees allowed additional questions. The emotional signals through body language, such as tears, a tense body, the impossibility of speaking, silence, and sometimes the need to leave the room of the interview and stay alone for some time, were clear indications that many of my interlocutors were traumatised.[76] In their accounts of life in war-torn regions, research participants described themselves as physically vulnerable and insecure. However, even in such situations, the narratives contain references to agency when people were active in helping others, acting in support of the Ukrainian army, and aiming to regain some normalcy for life under such circumstances.

Extended Uncertainty in the Host Society

In this section, I focus on the ways research participants narrated and comprehended their encounters with the host society. In phenomenology, "orientation" is understood as being able to navigate and "feeling at home".[77] The experiences of violence and forced displacement can lead to a loss of familiarity with social and cultural contexts, which phenomenology conceptualises as "disorientation".[78] As stated before, Ahmed suggests that "migration could be described as a process of disorientation and reorientation."[79] The initial experiences of research participants in the host society could be grasped by the phenomenological concept of disorientation[80] as research participants refer to situations that cause social or cultural stress due to unfamiliarity with local societal norms and laws. The primary stage of disorientation is accompanied by, or replaced with, a prolonged condition of uncertainty about the future situation.[81]

I suggest that the term "liminality" can be adopted to describe the ways the interviewees reflected on their social situation when their life conditions have changed drastically and the future is seen as unpredictable. "Liminality" is a term suggested by Turner in studying rituals that accompany the key changes in social status or spatial location.[82] Liminal individuals find themselves as "neither here nor there; they

76 BenEzer, "Trauma signals", 34–36.
77 Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 9.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 6.
81 On uncertainty in forced migration of Ukrainians see Lapshyna, "Forced migration, uncertainty".
82 Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

are betwixt and between the positions."[83] In the interview narratives of forced migrants from Ukraine, the future is seen as determined by macro-level actors and does not rest on individual decisions alone. As the interviews revealed, one of the ways to confront such situations is to focus on the present and perceive oneself to be flexible and ready for any future scenario. Similarly, Sami Hermez, writing on everyday life during war in Lebanon, notes that local people talked of their everydayness as living in the present or "meanwhile".[84]

A sense of social and cultural familiarity and the proximity of ways of living both enable people to feel oriented in drastically changed situations and new locations.[85] Many of my interlocutors chose Lithuania as a temporary residence because of its perceived cultural proximity. This proximity is related by some interviewees to the ability to converse in Russian with the older generation of locals and to shared historical periods. A woman in her fifties in Klaipėda, who came to Lithuania from eastern-occupied Ukraine, described Russian as a language that is no longer liked after Russia's aggression, but as an instrument of direct communication with the host society:

> When we arrived in Lithuania, we were very happy. First of all, Lithuania is very beautiful. I also liked that many people understand Russian, even though it is the language we hate [rus. очень ненавистный], but it is also an instrument of communication and I am grateful that Lithuanians do not refuse to answer in Russian. I did not feel that I was far from my homeland, that I felt uncomfortable, that I did not understand the context, just the opposite.[86]

In the quoted interview, language is indicated as an important instrument for communication with the local society since it enables one to find one's own way around or to orient oneself in unfamiliar situations. Cultural and social proximity is also seen as enabled by a shared history and its interpretation, as evidenced by Lithuania's support for Ukraine. A young woman whom I interviewed in Kaunas and who came to Lithuania from eastern Ukraine, referred to common historical experiences as bridging Ukrainian and Lithuanian societies:

> When I was in that [help] center, I noticed that the Lithuanians, I don't know how to say it properly, I think that Lithuania has the experience of living with Russia in the Soviet Union, and that is why they [the Lithuanians] understand us better. Most Lithuanians do not want to live like before 1990 [when Lithuania gained independence]. People are close to us. They understood us so well in the centre. They

83 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

84 Hermez, *War is coming*, 2.

85 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 9.

86 Interview no. 23, Klaipėda, in person, 13 February 2025.

> were complete strangers to us, and they waited for us until two o'clock at night, trying to show that they cared about us. There were volunteers who surrounded us with love [Rus. Волонтеры, которые нас любовью окутывали]. I even had the feeling that we were not complete strangers there. They treated us like their own people.[87]

Disorientation in the host society is reported in the situations of health care or employment, when local social and cultural norms differ from those at home. In some cases, disorientation in the local employment system can result in the exploitation of forced migrants as they report to agree to work in unfavourable conditions in exchange for free housing:

> You know, I worked and I have not had a day off in the last 15 days. I understand that I began to fall asleep when I sat down. The work was very difficult, but since we were so happy that we are free, that we got out [of the occupied territory], that we are alive. And why did we agree to work in this place? You know, they offered us a place to live for free. […] I felt that I had some nice time when we went to buy things in the grocery store.[88]

In the countries of the European Union, including Lithuania, Ukrainian migrants have been granted temporary protection status. In Lithuania, this status provides the right to work, establish private businesses, receive services in public health institutions, and attend public schools. As in many other European countries, Ukrainian forced migrants were assisted with housing needs by public programs, non-governmental initiatives, and private individuals.[89] The very need for this assistance indicates the drastic changes in the social and economic lives of forced migrants. The future is unpredictable and dependent on external decisions that are not controllable by an individual, such as the status they hold in host countries at the end of the war, the circumstances of the ending of the war, the fate of different territories of Ukraine that the forced migrants came from:

> I thought I was leaving for two weeks. When I was travelling in the train for migrants, I thought I was leaving for two weeks. These two weeks last a bit too long

87 Interview no. 22, Kaunas, 11 December 2024.

88 Interview no. 23, Klaipėda, in person, 13 February 2025.

89 On public policies see e.g., *LR Socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija*, "Parama Ukrainos karo pabėgėliams pagal asmens status", ("Support to Ukrainian war refugees by personal status"), 2024, https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/socialine-integracija/lietuva-ukrainai/socialine-parama-ukrainieciams/parama-ukrainos-karo-pabegeliams-pagal-asmens-statusa/ [accessed: 25.11.2025].

> now. And nobody knows how much longer. As long as the war goes, we cannot return home.[90]

The war is described as disrupting not only the material world of the research participants, social relations, health, but also their sense of general security in the world: the peaceful everyday life in exile is in some cases described as being in danger of ending at any moment due to possible new violent activities by the Russian Federation in other territories, including the Baltic states. In this way, living is seen as marked by uncertainty and people prepare themselves to be ready for fast changes and risks to life. In this way, life is suspended in the present without clear plans for the future, similar to the testimonies from Lebanon analysed by Hermez that speak of "living in meantime".[91] The interviews with forcefully displaced people from Ukraine contain the repeating narratives of temporariness:

> I, my family, we had this idea that everything is just temporary, that we have to wait, to live through. Even now I think that it is just temporary. My husband and me are apart only temporary. … Everything will end, pass away. The most important [thing] is to survive.[92]

> I do not plan anything for the future at all. I do not plan anything since 2014. I realised that we are in the situation that we do not belong to ourselves, we do not know what will happen in the future.[93]

Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda and Anne-Marie Fortier investigate migration via the lenses of "uprootings/regroundings" which "makes it possible to consider home and migration in terms of a plurality of experiences, histories and constituencies, and of the workings of institutional structures."[94] The notions of home and homelessness are important dimensions of narratives about uncertainty. Mijić et al. conclude that forced migrants from Ukraine in Austria experience a "pervasive sense of loss – of their everyday certainties, past lives, future prospects, social recognition, and established social positions."[95] This sense of loss repeats in the narratives of the

90 Interview no. 1, Vilnius, in person, 12 September 2023.

91 Hermez, *War is coming*, 2.

92 Interview no. 3, Vilnius, in person, 25 September 2023.

93 Interview no. 14, Kaunas, in person, 2 May 2024.

94 Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller, "Introduction: Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration", in: Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller, *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, Oxford, New York: Berg, 2003, 2.

95 Mijić, et al., "Experiencing forced migration", 3396.

forced migrants from Ukraine in Lithuania when they referred to a sense of homelessness, to their lives being divided by the war which brought them to the situation of "having nothing". Most interviews recounted the experience of being homeless, which is accompanied by deeply felt emotions. Home is associated with stability and certainty, while their situation was described as unstable and lacking resources:

> I used to think that at the age of 45 I had made my life stable. I had my own place, a job, a child with clear plans. I could just enjoy life. … Then, when we were leaving, my friend asked: "Do you understand that we are homeless, we have nothing?" I calmed her. … Then here [upon arrival] I went to the balcony and started to cry. I understood that I have nothing.[96]

In some cases, when a person comes from territories that are occupied by the Russian Federation, their home is considered lost. Home implies a physical location as well as social connections based on trust, love, and emotional ties. Therefore, culturally and socially significant dates are associated with the sharpest sense of homelessness, which is accompanied by the lack of close family ties in a new place:

> The most difficult is before Christmas. When all people or most of them, also in Ukraine, we have this festival with family, everyone comes back home, and now you understand that you do not have a place to return to. And the worst is that you do not know when you can come back and whether you see your family.[97]

In some cases, the self is depicted as having been transformed by the experiences of violence, loss, and homelessness. The self is explicitly described as being transformed by the war to a person who is ready to re-locate under the situation of new threats:

> I have a feeling that I do not have a home at all. The house of my Mom, it is almost ruined, it is close to the front. … I do not care anymore. I do not care what will happen with my house, my belongings, or the apple trees that were planted by me. … If I had to change my place of living again, I would do it easily. I have that feeling that the world has changed.[98]

The experiences of research participants might be conceptualised as "prolonged liminality" to adopt a term coined by Turner.[99] By this I mean a sense of living with your life drastically changed by the war and not being able to predict the future, to build

96 Interview no. 26, Klaipėda, in person, 14 February 2025.

97 Interview no. 9, Vilnius, in person, 18 January 2024.

98 Interview no. 15, Kaunas, in person, 2 May 2024.

99 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95, 137. On uncertainty, see also Lapshyna, 2025.

firm plans. The research participants discussed overlapping feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. These feelings are associated with homelessness, temporary living situations, and the avoidance of making fixed or unchangeable plans for the future. The narratives included themes of loss or lack of home and homeliness, referring not only to the loss of material buildings but also to disrupted social connections and the impossibility of visiting occupied or war-torn territories to which the research participants feel connected via family ties and histories.

Belonging and Agency

This section will explore how national identity is perceived and serves as important means of agency for forced migrants from Ukraine in Lithuania. National identity ("Ukraine-ness") can be seen as helping to find meaning in terrible experiences and connecting people to social circles where they can share these experiences. These spaces foster a sense of community and offer social networks that help people deal with feelings of social insecurity. Thus, an inclusive and civic understanding of Ukrainian national identity becomes an important cultural and social resource, enacted and maintained through narratives and social practices.

After the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and massive forced migration, a number of organisations and institutions that aimed to address the needs of forcibly displaced migrants from Ukraine were created in Lithuania by locals or by the Ukrainian forced migrants themselves. These organisations provide humanitarian aid to displaced people, offer spaces for meetings and cultural practices, the opportunity to demonstrate Ukrainian cultural artifacts, or provide classes for children. Chains of Ukrainian-language schools were established by Ukrainians in cooperation with local authorities in the major cities of Lithuania, where school children can gain their education in Ukrainian and at the same time have classes of Lithuanian.

The participants of the research noted numerous activities that they organise or join, which aim at helping Ukrainian society or the Ukrainian army: fund raising, producing heating candles or weaving camouflage nets. Loyalty to the Ukrainian state and national identity is expressed and demonstrated at sites in displacement, where forced Ukrainian migrants regularly participate in activities that maintain and cherish Ukrainian culture, or collect resources for the Ukrainian army and society. Mijić et al. interpret these activities among forced migrants from Ukraine in Austria as "survivor guilt" which enables migrants to contribute to the needs of Ukrainian society in Ukraine.[100] As revealed in the interviews with forced migrants from Ukraine, participation in the activities that bring migrants into common

100 Mijić, Parzer, Tkalich and Zolotarova, "Experiencing forced migration", 3408.

spaces also enables them to practice Ukrainian identity and share experiences what is an important instrument for individual wellbeing in displacement:

> I was sitting at home. I tried to work, but physically I could not. I understood that I had to look for my Ukrainian community [громаду украинскую], because there was no hope to go back [to Ukraine]. … We started to make some [camouflage] nets, we also have some fellowship in the church. I also started going there to make nets. So I joined the Ukrainian community.[101]

The linguistic, religious, and regional diversity of the Ukrainian population is seen as posing serious challenges to civic nation-building in the context of Russian propaganda.[102] In numerous interviews the full-scale war launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine was perceived as a trigger for the recognition of Ukrainian identity, even among those who, prior to the war, considered their national identity more negotiable or fluid due to family roots in Ukraine and Russia.[103] The choice of language, Ukrainian or Russian, was an important theme addressed in most interviews. Choosing to speak Ukrainian or Russian can be seen as a politically-informed action and is involved in negotiating national boundaries.[104] Communicating in Ukrainian in both public and private contexts is considered an act of agency demonstrating ones civic position and loyalty to Ukraine amid Russia's war against Ukraine.[105] This is an important aspect of self-identity that has gained key importance amid violence and displacement, as it affirms one's loyalty and belonging:

> These questions about language and self-identity, already in 2019, I made a decision that I will turn to Ukrainian. This is not so easy, because I work in some companies with some requirements.[106]

The direct relation between linguistic preferences and national identity is negotiated by some interviewees. A research participant made an observation about the local population in Kharkiv. According to this participant, speaking Russian in Kharkiv did not necessarily indicate that the speakers identify as Russians. The participant

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101 Interview no. 19, Kaunas, in person, 12 June 2024.

102 Catherine Wanner, "'Fraternal' nations and challenges to sovereignty in Ukraine: The Politics of linguistic and religious ties", *American Ethnologist*, 41/3, 2014, 427–439, https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12097 [accessed: 25.11.2025]; Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "A Divided Nation? Reconsidering the Role of Identity Politics in the Ukraine Crisis", *Die Friedens-Warte*, 89/1–2, 2014, 249–267, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24868495 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

103 cf. Kozachenko, *National Identity*.

104 Wanner, "Fraternal", 430–432.

105 cf. Shestopalova, "The Russo-Ukrainian War".

106 Interview no 7, Vilnius, in person, 8 December 2023.

also referred to the numerous volunteers who have defended Ukraine in Kharkiv after the war began:

> On that side [Russian Federation] they thought that since we speak Russian in Kharkiv, we are neutral … more loyal, calm. In Russia they thought that they would easily enter Kharkiv. We speak Russian, but we are not Russians, and we love our city. You know, in the first days the men were standing in line at the military recruitment office [Rus. военкомат].[107]

The research participants referred to Ukrainian forced migrants in Lithuania as united by their war experience, Ukrainian identity, and loyalty to the Ukrainian state. Their loyalty to the Ukrainian nation was expressed in the very decision to leave the occupied territories and participate in activities aimed at helping Ukrainian society and the armed forces of Ukraine. The research participants perceived belonging to the Ukrainian nation primarily as a matter of self-identification. A woman in her seventies indicated that her family members represent different nationalities, however, she identifies as Ukrainian, as she is rooted in Ukraine:

> When I started to research my roots, I did not find Ukrainian roots there. … My grandmother on my mother's side was Moldavian. My grandfather was … a Jew. On the other side, my grandfather was Serbian, my grandmother was Polish. Who am I? I am from Ukraine, I am Ukrainian.[108]

The interlocutors shared situations when loyalty to the Ukrainian state led to broken connections in the close family or work circles. Forcibly displaced Ukrainians view national identity as an important aspect of their identity and a valuable social resource. They enact and maintain this identity through narratives and social practices. Ukrainian national identity serves as a shield for individuals by providing a sense of belonging to a collective and a means of interpreting experienced violence and displacement. Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman note that "in the midst of horrors, people continue to live, to survive and to cope."[109] One way to cope with terrifying experiences and their consequences is to create a public space where you can share your story and participate in a public discourse by offering your own interpretations of violent events.[110] The inclusive civic notion of Ukrainian identity plays a significant role in forming these spaces in exile.

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107 Interview no. 4, Klaipėda, in person, 14 February 2025.

108 Interview no. 19, in person, Kaunas, 12 June 2024.

109 Das and Kleinman, *Introduction*, 1.

110 Ibid., 3–4.

Final Remarks

The full-scale war launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in 2022 resulted in the massive forced migration and displacement of Ukrainians, primarily women and children, seeking security and stability in host societies. This paper applied phenomenological and anthropological approaches to understand how experiences of war and forced displacement affect individuals by focusing on the ways the self is conceptualised in interviews with Ukrainian forced migrants in Lithuania.

The concept of embodiment, as it is used in phenomenology and anthropology, provided a way to understand how people experience and talk about living in situations of violence. In the narratives, the embodiment of war experiences was revealed through references to paralysis, pain, starvation, and darkness. The self was perceived as being physically and mentally fragile due to the experiences of war and forced migration. The initial experiences in the host society can be understood through the phenomenological concept of disorientation,[111] as research participants referred to uncomfortable or stressful situations caused by the cultural and social differences between host and home societies. The primary stage of disorientation was accompanied by, or replaced with, uncertainty about the future, a sense of homelessness and temporariness. The war was perceived as dividing lives into two periods, with the new period marked by uncertainty formed by macro processes and forces, which affected individuals by impacting their ability to plan for the future.

The war, violence and displacement deeply affect forced migrants' self-perception by contributing to feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. My research demonstrates that a sense of belonging – the notion of being part of the Ukrainian nation in a civic sense – is articulated and serves as a key means of building agency in such situations. Ukrainian national identity that is understood in a civic and inclusive way can help to restore the agency in displacement. The terrible experiences of war are interpreted via the lenses of national identity, thus providing meaning to the violence and displacement experienced. Additionally, cultural commonality and unity of experiences connect individuals to the communities that are active in helping Ukraine, but also provide participants with instruments of psychological healing via possibilities to communicate, share, and participate.

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111 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 6–9.

Memory Research Group for the inspiring, fruitful discussions at the workshop, "Ukrainian Un/certainties: Mobilities, Memories, and Representations in Times of War," they have organised in Berlin in 2024. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer(s), whose comments enabled me to improve the paper. I am alone responsible for any remaining inconsistencies.

Table 1: List of research participants

Number of interview	Interviewee	Date and place of interview
1	A woman in her thirties, higher education, originally from the central part of Ukraine.	12 September 2023, Vilnius.
2	A woman in her late twenties, high education, originally from the eastern territories of Ukraine.	19 September 2023, Vilnius.
3	A woman in late thirties, high education, originally from Kyiv.	25 September 2023, Vilnius.
4	A woman in late thirties, high education, originally from the eastern territories of Ukraine.	17 October 2023, Vilnius.
5	A woman in forties, high education, originally from Kyiv.	31 October 2023, Vilnius.
6	A woman in her sixties, high education, originally from the Kherson oblast.	14 November 2023, Vilnius.
7	A woman in her early thirties, high education, originally from Kyiv.	8 December 2023, Vilnius.
8	A woman, eighteen years old, a student, originally from central Ukraine.	14 December 2023, Vilnius.
9	A man in his twenties, high education, originally from the eastern part of Ukraine.	18 January 2024, Vilnius.
10	A woman in her thirties, high education, originally from the eastern part of Ukraine.	5 February 2024, Vilnius.
11	A woman in her forties, high education, originally from Kharkiv oblast.	22 February 2024, Vilnius.
12	A woman in her late forties, high education, originally from Kharkiv oblast.	21 March 2024, Vilnius.
13	A woman in her early thirties, high education, originally from the eastern regions of Ukraine.	04 April 2024, Vilnius
14	A woman in her twenties, high education, originally from Kharkiv oblast.	23 April 2024, Kaunas.

Number of interview	Interviewee	Date and place of interview
15	A woman in her fifties, high education, originally from Donetsk oblast.	2 May 2024, Kaunas.
16	A woman in her thirties, professional education, originally from Kherson oblast.	15 May 2024, Kaunas.
17	A woman in her thirties, professional education, originally from Kherson oblast.	15 May 2024, Kaunas.
18	A woman in her late sixties, high education, originally from Zaporizhzhia oblast.	12 June 2024, Kaunas.
19	A woman in her seventies, high education, originally from the central part of Ukraine.	12 June 2024, Kaunas.
20	A woman in her fifties, professional education, originally from Donetsk oblast.	10 October 2024, Kaunas
21	A woman in her forties, high education, originally from Kharkiv oblast.	8 November 2024, Kaunas
22	A woman in her thirties, professional education, originally from the eastern part of Ukraine.	11 December 2024, Kaunas.
23	A woman in her fifties, high education, originally from the eastern part of Ukraine.	13 February 2025, Klaipėda.
24	A woman in her early fifties, high education, originally from the eastern part of Ukraine.	14 February 2025, Klaipėda.
25	A woman in her thirties, high education, originally from the central part of Ukraine.	14 February 2025, Klaipėda.
26	A woman in her forties, high education, originally from the Kherson oblast.	14 February 2025, Klaipėda.
27	A woman in her sixties, high education, originally from the Kherson oblast.	14 February 2025, Klaipėda.
28	A man in his fifties, high education, originally from the Kharkiv oblast.	14 February 2025, Klaipėda.
29	A man in his fifties, high education, originally from the Kyiv oblast.	20 March 2025, Klaipėda.
30	A man in his late fifties, professional education, originally from the eastern part of Ukraine.	20 March 2025, Klaipėda.

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Digital Connections of Ukrainian Forced Migrants with Family and Homeland in Times of War

Taisiia Ratushna

Introduction

This paper examines how digital connectivity shapes the return intentions and integration processes of different Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany. In the context of the ongoing war, security risks, and chronic uncertainty surrounding Ukraine's future reconstruction, many migrants are unsure about their future and are hesitant to return, even though they maintain strong emotional ties to their homeland. Qualitative observations suggest that migrants who actively follow Ukrainian news and maintain close digital contact with their families tend to be more deeply and thoughtfully engaged with their homeland. These digital practices reflect not only a means of emotional regulation but also of symbolic attachment to the country of origin. Such behaviours resonate with the concept of virtual return, which describes an emotional and symbolic reconnection with one's homeland through digital practices in the absence of physical mobility.[1] Although these qualitative findings require further quantitative investigation before they can be generalised, they indicate how digital practices extend beyond technical connectivity to shape migrants' emotional landscapes and their everyday experiences of displacement.

Building on this perspective, the study contributes to the broader discussion on "connected migrants" by demonstrating how digital communication fosters emotional bonds with loved ones and sustains a sense of involvement in the everyday reality of the home country. Focusing on Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany, it offers new insights into how digital practices mediate belonging, care, and transnational presence during displacement.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to a massive migration crisis, one of the most severe in Europe since the Second World War. Many

1 Oksana Udovyk, and Míriam Acebillo-Baqué, "Will displaced Ukrainians return home? Exploring return migration through an aspirations-capabilities lens: cases from Spain and Sweden", *Comparative Migration Studies* 13/20, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-025-00437-z [accessed: 26.11.2025].

Ukrainians have been forced to flee their homes to escape the fighting, bombing, destroyed infrastructure, and humanitarian problems caused by the war. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that approximately 14 million people have been displaced, with around 8 million fleeing abroad and more than 6 million remaining internally displaced. As of 15 October 2024, according to UNHCR, 6.75 million Ukrainian forced migrants were registered outside of Ukraine, with 6.19 million registered in Europe.[2]

The most significant concentration of Ukrainian forced migrants is currently in European countries: Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, and other European Union countries. In 2022, the European Union (EU) responded quickly to this migration crisis by granting temporary protection (or similar status) to Ukrainian migrants.[3] This mechanism has allowed Ukrainians to access social services, the labour market, health care, and education in the EU without going through lengthy bureaucratic procedures. However, the status is temporary; the European Commission can withdraw it following a special decision. In November 2024, the German government amended the legislation governing the entry and stay of forced migrants from Ukraine, adopting a law to regulate the extension of residence permits, issued according to Article 24, paragraph 1 of the Residence Act for individuals with temporary protection from Ukraine (known as the Ukraine Residence Permit Continued Validity Ordinance – UkraineAufenthFGV).[4] This regulation establishes that temporary protection status will expire on 4 March 2026. While the Council of Europe decided in June 2025 to extend temporary protection until 4 March 2027,[5] national authorities have not yet approved this decision. After this date, Ukrainian migrants in Germany will need to make decisions regarding their future legal status. As the temporary residence permit program ends, individuals must choose either a strategy for legal residence or consider returning to Ukraine.

One option available to them now is to apply for a new residence permit. Ukrainians can seek a work, study, or training permit should they qualify, which will allow

2 United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), "Ukraine Refugee Situation", Operational Data Portal, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine [accessed: 01.11.2024].

3 European Commission (EC), "Ukraine: Commission proposes temporary protection for people fleeing war in Ukraine and guidelines for border checks", 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1469 [accessed: 25.10.2024].

4 Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, "Changes in entry and residence for individuals from Ukraine seeking protection", 13 December 2024, https://www.germany4ukraine.de/SharedDocs/Meldungen/EN/2024/1213-aenderungen-einreise-aufenthalt [accessed: 26.11.2025].

5 *Council of the EU*, "EU member states agree to extend temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine", 13 June 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/06/13/eu-member-states-agree-to-extend-temporary-protection-for-refugees-from-ukraine/ [accessed: 26.11.2025].

them to remain in Germany legally and further integrate into society. Alternatively, Ukrainian forced migrants may consider returning to Ukraine voluntarily. The government offers programs that can provide financial and organisational assistance for their return now. However, this option remains challenging due to the ongoing security situation in Ukraine. Another alternative for those who cannot secure a new residence permit or safely return to Ukraine is to apply for asylum in Germany. The asylum process, managed by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF),[6] requires individuals to demonstrate that they face serious risks upon returning to their home country. However, the asylum process can be lengthy and complex, with no guarantee of being approved. Therefore, those considering this option should seek legal advice and prepare for potential challenges in proving their need for international protection.

In addition to legal issues, the situation also raises broader questions about integration and long-term stability for Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany. Many have already established lives, found employment, and have been contributing to local communities. For them, navigating post-2026 options will involve both a bureaucratic process and an emotional and social decision. Finding pathways to permanent residency or securing employment-based permits could become key strategies for those wishing to stay.

The German government's approach to Ukrainian forced migrants beyond 2026 will also play a crucial role in shaping their future. Policies regarding labour market access, housing, and integration programs will determine how many Ukrainians can transition to long-term residency. Ukrainian forced migrants should assess their options to determine the best path to continue their lives in Germany or make other crucial decisions about their future. As the war persists and their time abroad extends, many Ukrainian migrants find themselves in a state of uncertainty. This prolonged displacement forces them to weigh their options carefully, whether to return to their homeland when conditions allow or to focus on deeper integration into their host countries. Thus, the future of Ukrainian forced migrants will depend on their legal status, the level of integration, and the policy decisions of the governments in Germany and Ukraine.

Personal circumstances, migration policy, and the conditions of post-war reconstruction in Ukraine will shape decisions on whether to return or to stay. According to a report published in February 2024 by the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe and UNHCR Ukraine, the proportion of Ukrainian forced migrants planning or hoping to return to Ukraine in the future has decreased, compared to 2023, from 77% to 65%, while the share of those who are undecided about returning has increased (from 18% to 24%) as well as those who report no hope of returning (from

6 BAMF stands for "Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge".

5% to 11%).[7] This number is even starker when compared to the data from another wave of this survey in 2022, where 81% of respondents declared that they hoped to return to Ukraine one day.[8] The longer they stay in host countries, the greater the number of Ukrainians who no longer plan to return becomes. Nonetheless, so far, we can see that a majority of Ukrainians still wants to return to their homeland.

Essential factors in this decision to remain abroad or to return include difficulties adapting because of language barriers, cultural differences, limited integration opportunities, the desire to reunite with family members in Ukraine, and unsatisfactory housing conditions in the host countries. However, another significant factor that influences the desire to return or permanently settle abroad is the situation in Ukraine. According to the National Institute for Strategic Studies,[9] Ukrainians with more information about the situation in Ukraine and their own locality are more likely to plan to return.[10] Digital and social media play a significant role in providing this information and establishing and maintaining communication between Ukrainian forced migrants and their homeland, families and friends who remain in Ukraine.

Research shows that media and communication technologies play an essential role in the daily lives of migrants worldwide.[11] Migrants can maintain long-distance connections and build new social networks online. Over the past decade, the scale, intensity, and forms of migration and digital connections have changed and accel-

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7 *United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee Regional Bureau for Europe and United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee for Ukraine*, "Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees, Refugee Returnees and IDPs from Ukraine #5 Summary Findings", 2024, 4, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106738 [accessed 01.11.2024].

8 *United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee Regional Bureau for Europe and United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee for Ukraine*, "Lives on Hold", 6. However, the rise in the number of migrants who do not plan to return is influenced not only by shifting attitudes. This trend may also reflect that some individuals who initially intended to return have already done so and are outside the current samples.

9 The National Institute for Strategic Studies is the main research institution that provides analytic and forecasting support to the President of Ukraine.

10 Olena Malynovska, "Ukrainski bizhentsi viiny v Yevropi: mizh intehratsiieiu ta povernenniam", ("Ukrainian war refugees in Europe: between integration and return"), *National Institute for Strategic Studies*, 31 January 2024, https://niss.gov.ua/doslidzhennya/sotsialna-politika/ukrayinski-bizhentsi-viyny-v-yevropi-mizh-intehratsiyeyu-ta [accessed 14.10.2024].

11 Mihaela Nedelcu and Ibrahim Soysüren, "Precarious Migrants, Migration Regimes and Digital Technologies: The Empowerment-Control Nexus", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48/8, 2020, 1821–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1796263 [accessed: 26.11.2025]; Sandra Ponzanesi and Koen Leurs, "Digital Migration Practices and the Everyday", *Communication Culture and Critique* 15/2, 2022, 103–21, https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcac016 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

erated significantly.[12] Social media not only serves as a new channel of communication in migration networks but also changes how those networks operate by facilitating migration and helping migrants to keep in touch between their home country and the host country.[13] Social media facilitates migration as migrants use it to maintain strong ties with family and friends, develop weak ties in host countries to organise migration and integration, create a new social infrastructure of hidden ties, and access unofficial information about migration.[14] Digital platforms provide a space for communication that empowers separated migrant families to maintain long-distance relationships.[15] Through social media platforms and digital devices, migrants create "digital diasporas"[16] that do not oppose or replace traditional diasporas but somewhat expand and transform those diasporas' activities in the digital age, helping migrants to build new social networks[17] and better integrate into host societies.[18]

Indeed, for Ukrainian forced migrants, social media platforms such as Facebook and Telegram have become a place to form new virtual communities for help and support. In these communities, they exchange information, share experiences of adaptation and solving everyday problems, and support each other. These communities help Ukrainian forced migrants adapt to new conditions, alleviating the

12 Koen Leurs and Kevin Smets, "Five Questions for Digital Migration Studies: Learning From Digital Connectivity and Forced Migration In(to) Europe", *Social Media + Society* 4/1, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764425 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

13 Dana Diminescu, "The connected migrant: an epistemological manifesto", *Social Science Information* 47/4, 2008, 565–579, https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018408096447 [accessed: 26.11.2025]. Dana Diminescu, "Researching the Connected Migrant", in: Kevin Smets et al. (eds.), The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526476982.n12 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

14 Rianne Dekker and Godfried Engbersen, "How social media transform migrant networks and facilitate migration", *Global Networks* 14/4, 2013, 401–418, https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12040 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

15 Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, *Migration and New Media*, London: Routledge, 2013. Mihaela Nedelcu and Malika Wyss, "'Doing family' through ICT-mediatedordinary co-presence: transnational communication practices of Romanian migrants in Switzerland", *Global Networks* 16/2, 2016, 202–218, https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12110 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

16 Mihaela Nedelcu, "Digital diasporas", in: Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer, *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*, London: Routledge, 2018.

17 Laura Candidatu and Sandra Ponzanesi, "Digital Diasporas: Staying with the Trouble", *Communication, Culture and Critique* 15/2, 2022, 261–268, https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcac010 [accessed: 25.11.2025].

18 Amanda Alencar, "Refugee integration and social media: a local and experiential perspective", *Information, Communication & Society* 21/11, 2017, 1588–1603, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1340500 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

isolation often accompanying displacement.[19] Social media channels and platforms empower Ukrainians by giving them access to information about their country of arrival and helping them create new social ties. However, at the same time, as most Ukrainian forced migrants in EU countries have temporary protection, their status is still uncertain, and most are eager to return; they also try to maintain ties with their homeland and family members. Thus, social media can also work in another direction, strengthening connections with the country of origin through shared information, news from home, and communication with family and friends.

This introduction has outlined the context of Ukrainian forced migration and presents the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis. The following methodology section explains the empirical data on which the study is based. The main findings are presented in two parts. The first part examines how Ukrainian forced migrants consume news from Ukraine and how this consumption influences their decisions regarding return or integration, emphasising the crucial role of the information environment. The second part focuses on digital family connections, demonstrating how maintaining contact with relatives helps to alleviate emotional distress and sustain a strong link with the homeland, keeping the possibility of return open.

Research Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research design focused on the personal experiences of Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany. The primary data were collected through in-depth interviews (n = 12), which aimed to explore: (1) how migrants follow events in Ukraine; (2) how they maintain communication with family and friends; and (3) how these practices influence their intentions to return or integrate into German society.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy. Initial recruitment took place through announcements posted in Telegram groups created by and for Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany. Snowball sampling was also employed, allowing existing participants to recommend others who met the inclusion criteria.

Eligibility criteria included: (a) forced displacement to Germany after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022; (b) a minimum of one year of residence in Germany; (c) possession of legal residence status (temporary protection or other

19 Taisiia Ratushna, "What the Telegram Channels of Ukrainian Migrants in Germany 'Talk' and 'Keep Silent' About", in: Viktoriya Sereda (ed.), *War, Migration, Memory: Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers, 4/2025, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2025.

official grounds such as study or employment); and (d) regular use of social media platforms (e.g., Telegram, Facebook, Instagram) for communication.

The sample includes men and women aged 18 to 48 (a demographic typically highly active on social media), originally from various regions of Ukraine, including Zaporizhzhia oblast, Kyiv, Kharkiv oblast, and Kherson oblast, and currently residing in different parts of Germany, such as Berlin, Baden-Württemberg, Hamburg, and Lower Saxony.

Interviews were conducted between July and December 2024, face-to-face (n = 6) or via Zoom (n = 6), allowing participation from various locations. All respondents gave informed verbal consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded. All interviews were conducted in Ukrainian or Russian, depending on the participants' language preferences.

Recordings were fully transcribed. The author produced five transcripts using the Transkriptor platform, which provides secure, encrypted data processing. The research agency *Info Sapiens* (Kyiv, Ukraine) transcribed the remaining seven. The author translated all quotations into English. Anonymity was ensured by removing or altering all personally identifiable information. The data is stored in encrypted digital formats that are accessible only to the researcher.

The analysis focused on generating a rich, contextualised understanding of migrants' digital communication practices by identifying recurring patterns, meanings, and social nuances that emerged from the material.[20]

In addition to interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted on four Telegram channels frequently used by Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany. The empirical data were gathered from two general-purpose Telegram channels: "Berlin helps Ukrainians"[21] and "Ukraina in Tübingen Reutlingen Süd-BW Ukraine",[22] both created in Germany to assist Ukrainian forced migrants. These channels do not focus on specific topics, instead offering a wide range of discussions.

Two additional Telegram channels were included in the research in 2024. The first, "Zakony v Germanii – yuridicheskaya pomoshch' bezhencam iz Ukrainy s formal'nym statusom i soc-vyplatami" (Laws in Germany – legal assistance to refugees from Ukraine with formal status and social benefits[23]), is not geographically specific but focuses thematically on legal support. As indicated in its title, the channel primarily addresses issues faced by migrants who have already obtained official status in Germany and are receiving social benefits. The second channel, "Ukraintsi u

20 Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008.

21 https://t.me/berlinhelpsukrainians.

22 https://t.me/ReutlingenTubingen.

23 https://t.me/help4ukrainerefugee2.

Nimechchyni. Ukrayntsy v Hermanyy. Ukraintsi u Hermanii. Ukrainer in Deutschland" (Ukrainians in Germany[24]) was selected due to its lack of geographical and thematic constraints, suggesting that it aims to connect all Ukrainians in Germany.

The analysis focused on recurring themes related to legal procedures, humanitarian assistance, social support, integration, and everyday adaptation to life in Germany. The results of quantitative research by Ukrainian research organisations (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, Razumkow Centre, and The National Institute for Strategic Studies) and data from the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe and the UNHCR Ukraine report were also used to triangulate the data.

Despite some variation in age and gender, the sample is small and exploratory and is thus not representative of the entire population of Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany. However, the goal of this study is not to generalise but to be illuminative; to gain an in-depth understanding of how individual experiences and digital communication practices help migrants maintain transnational connections with their families and homeland under conditions of displacement. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited number of interviews, the author recognises that the analysis may overlook other important patterns; for example, older individuals or those less engaged in digital communication may not feature prominently in the dataset, which limits the ability to capture the full diversity of experiences within the broader displaced population.

The researcher is a Ukrainian academic with a shared cultural and linguistic background with the participants. This positionality facilitated trust and openness during interviews but required continuous reflection on a potential bias and the importance of maintaining an analytical distance.

Principal Results

Among the Ukrainians who travelled abroad at the onset of the full-scale invasion and became migrants, the majority were married women with children whose husbands remained in Ukraine, so keeping them connected was crucial. Mobile operators in the EU and Ukraine quickly set up special initiatives to support Ukrainians. For example, in Germany, getting free SIM cards from Vodafone, Telekom, and O2 mobile operators was possible. They included the possibility of free (or reduced) calls and SMS to Ukraine, mobile internet, and other special offers. Some preferential tariffs for Ukrainians are still in existence. These initiatives helped Ukrainian forced

24 https://t.me/ukraintsyvgermanii. In the title of the channel, the phrase "Ukrainians in Germany" is repeated four times in Ukrainian, Russian, Surzhik and German. In the text, the title of the channel will be indicated as "Ukrainians in Germany".

migrants to stay in touch with their families during the journey and after they arrived in Germany. They received timely updates on the situation in Ukraine and actively participated in local Facebook and Telegram groups created for Ukrainian migrants arriving in Germany; Ukrainian forced migrants have thus become a prime example of connected migrants.[25]

These early digital connections were not only technical solutions but also the foundation for the everyday digital practices that would emerge during displacement. Based on the interview data, two main domains of such practices were identified: (1) news consumption related to the war in Ukraine, and (2) interpersonal communication with family and friends. These categories structure the main findings of this study.

While the interview questions also addressed the issue of return versus integration, this dimension proved more analytically challenging. In most cases, participants did not provide direct responses to this question or gave non-committal responses. This hesitation may reflect their then current state of uncertainty. Some have not yet made a clear decision regarding their future. For others, reluctance to speak openly may have stemmed from their perception that expressing a desire to stay abroad could be socially stigmatised or interpreted as disloyalty to Ukraine. As a result, the analysis relies primarily on indirect indications rather than explicit declarations.

The interview data also revealed minor age- and gender-related differences in digital behaviour. All respondents used Telegram, but younger women (18–35) also used Instagram, while women over 35 preferred Facebook and Viber. Women generally demonstrated more varied and frequent engagement across platforms for following news and staying in touch with relatives. Male participants tended to rely on fewer sources and platforms, leading to more streamlined but also narrower communication patterns. These differences, however, were not substantial enough to alter the study's overall findings.

Receiving Information About Events in Ukraine

In almost all interviews, participants mentioned a higher interest in the news in the first months after the start of the full-scale invasion.

Yuliia[26] describes how she followed the situation during a journey to Germany in March 2022:

25 Diminescu, "The connected migrant: an epistemological manifesto"; Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi, "Connected migrants: Encapsulation and cosmopolitanization", *Popular Communication* 16/1, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1418359 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

26 The real names of all participants have been changed for anonymisation purposes.

> I couldn't look away from my phone, as if I was afraid that I would get out [of the news feed] just now and miss something very important. I was constantly scrolling through the feed, refreshing it. I read everything that was on Facebook, Telegram, and Viber, and in the chat of my apartment building, if anyone knew anything about where they [Russian troops] were, they wrote there.[27]

All the respondents regularly follow the news from Ukraine. Oleksandr, who arrived in Germany in 2023:

> I check the news every night. … My curiosity, as they say, does not fade, I still worry, especially since my relatives live there, so I don't feel like I don't care what's going on.[28]

In the first months after the start of the full-scale invasion, it was more often 'constant monitoring'. Nevertheless, over time, they began to limit the frequency of news updates. Maryna, who came to Germany in 2022, recalls:

> When the war started, of course, I started following many channels, first of all Telegram channels, but it turned out to be such slag and much rubbish. […] I started listening to everyone who said something; I couldn't stop listening. I lived in this bubble; I listened to it all the time, every free minute, and realised that it could drive me crazy. So, I decided to limit myself […] I limited my Telegram channels to two Kyiv live and Ukraine news. I check them every morning and before going to bed.[29]

Quantitative surveys of Ukrainian forced migrants also confirm this tendency to follow the news. For example, according to a study by The Razumkov Centre[30] conducted in July and August of 2022, 91% of Ukrainian forced migrants followed events in Ukraine daily. In addition, 85% of respondents received information about events in Ukraine from social media, 62% from Ukrainian websites and online publications, 59% from relatives and friends, and 24% from Ukrainian television programs (including online).[31]

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27 Female, 38, originally from Kharkiv oblast, currently residing in Berlin, interview conducted in Ukrainian.

28 Male, 46, originally from Zaporizhzhia oblast, currently residing in Lower Saxony, interview conducted in Ukrainian.

29 Female, 47, originally from Kyiv, currently residing in Baden-Württemberg, interview conducted in Ukrainian.

30 The Razumkov Centre is a non-governmental think-tank founded in Ukraine in 1994.

31 *Razumkov Centre*, "Nastroi ta otsinky ukrainskykh bizhentsiv (lypen–serpen 2022r")*,* ("Attitudes and assessments of Ukrainian refugees (July-August 2022)"), 2022, https://razumkov.

However, Ukrainian researchers have recorded a decline in interest in news from Ukraine among Ukrainian forced migrants. According to a KIIS[32] survey conducted in April 2024, 56% of respondents said they "periodically" receive information about Ukraine, while 34% said they were "not interested" in information about Ukraine. Another 11% avoided answering this question. At the same time, among 56% of respondents, 42% receive information from Ukrainian sources, while the remaining 14% rely exclusively on foreign sources.[33]

Respondents during the in-depth interviews said that they follow the news from Ukraine regularly, but not as often as they did at the beginning of the invasion. Everyone uses digital technologies for this purpose, most often social media (YouTube and Telegram channels), news aggregator sites, and Ukrainian media sites. Family members and friends who remained in Ukraine are also important sources of news.

Ukrainian forced migrants mainly follow the news and events from the oblast they left, as well as specific local events, as they have family members and friends there, and such information reassures them that they remain safe. Oleksandr notes:

> When I see that there has been shelling or something else and it is reported on the channels, I can then call, find out and immediately understand whether it is true.[34]

More respondents follow the news from the frontline than the general Ukrainian news, which is likely related to anxiety about their relatives and friends who stayed behind, as well as the proximity of their former home to the frontline. Opinions were divided on political news, with some informants trying to distance themselves from any political news and considering this topic insignificant compared to the challenges of the war. Natalia, who arrived in Germany in the spring of 2022, says:

> I am not very interested in Ukraine's politics. For me, this is some traumatic information, and I do not want to worry about it because I can't influence it in any way. I am already upset by the military actions taking place in the country, and if I also

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org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/nastroi-ta-otsinky-ukrainskykh-bizhentsiv-lypen-serpen-2022p [accessed 27.10.2024].

32 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) is a private Ukrainian company which works in collaboration with the National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy".

33 Anton Hrushetskyi, "Opytuvannia ukrainskykh bizhentsiv u Nimechchyni, Polshchi ta Chekhii: zadovolenist zhyttiam zakordonom, povernennia v Ukrainu, interes do sytuatsii v Ukraini", ("Survey of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic: Satisfaction with life abroad, return to Ukraine, interest towards the situation in Ukraine"), 2024, *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology*, https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1408&page=1&s=35#_ftnref1, [accessed 14.10.2024].

34 Male, 46, originally from Zaporizhzhia oblast, currently residing in Lower Saxony, interview conducted in Ukrainian.

> think about those [politicians] who are doing something wrong, it will be a double burden.[35]

However, most respondents indicate that they became more interested in political life in Ukraine after fleeing, and now they try to follow and understand political events in their homeland.

The majority of respondents consider themselves media literate and believe they obtain up-to-date and objective information about current events. For them, a primary marker of reliability and truthfulness is the absence of analytical commentary, focusing instead on straightforward, factual reporting in the news. Analytical texts or videos are more trusted, for instance, if they do not "embellish reality". Maryna, for example, describes a YouTube observer she trusts, saying: "He does not try to say what you want to hear; he says what he thinks and does not put pressure on you." Most respondents said they had no one to discuss the news with, while some tried to discuss it with new acquaintances who did not show much interest.

Interestingly, respondents receive news about local life in Germany, including German government decisions regarding Ukrainians living in Germany, mainly from Telegram channels created for Ukrainian forced migrants. Sometimes, they also watch the news on German television, but these practices are rare, and in such cases, the purpose is to learn German rather than any interest in the news itself.

Another notable observation regarding Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany is that the hypothesis that consumption of and engagement with the host country's media has a positive impact on migrants' integration into the host society[36] is only partially relevant for them. Previous studies have indicated that migrants often engage with the host country's news media as part of a deliberate strategy to assimilate into the local culture, politics, and language.[37] However, many Ukrainian forced migrants interviewed reported that they do not intentionally follow news or events in Germany. They express little interest in political developments within the host country. When they do interact with German media, it is mainly to learn the language.

Information regarding significant decisions made by the German government that affect them, such as the extension of temporary protection status or new

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35 Female, 39, originally from Zaporizhzhia oblast, currently residing in Berlin, interview conducted in Russian.

36 Amanda Alencar and Mark Deuze, "News for assimilation or integration? Examining the functions of news in shaping acculturation experiences of immigrants in the Netherlands and Spain", *European Journal of Communication* 32/2, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323117689993 [accessed: 01.12.2025]; Lara Hoffmann et al., "Migration and community in an age of digital connectivity: A survey of media use and integration amongst migrants in Iceland", *Nordicom Review* 43/1, 2022, https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2022-0002 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

37 Alencar and Deuze, "News for assimilation or integration? Examining the functions of news in shaping acculturation experiences of immigrants in the Netherlands and Spain".

employment policies like JobTurbo,[38] is primarily sourced from Telegram channels specifically created for Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany.[39] For example, Oleksandr recounts his experience of searching for information:

> I rarely watch German television because I do not have the level of German to understand what they are saying. Again, I learn more from Internet channels that offer some news about what is happening to Ukrainians [in Germany]. … I understand that there is a diaspora from Ukraine in almost every city, and there are Telegram channels. For example, we have a Telegram channel that covers about 20 topics. … People post information there.[40]

Consequently, Ukrainian forced migrants hardly use the host country's media (either official or informal channels) to integrate into the host society and do not join online communities consisting of representatives of the host country, relying more on virtual communities created by Ukrainians.

Such a strong informational orientation toward Ukraine may indicate a tendency toward virtual return, that is fostering a symbolic connection to the homeland that is not dependent on physical mobility or future settlement plans.[41] Even without physical mobility, Ukrainian forced migrants often engage symbolically and emotionally with life in their home country from a distance, primarily through digital channels. However, the limited scope of this qualitative study suggests that further investigation is needed to explore these patterns.

The way migrants consume information shapes how they engage with the host society. Most participants rely on Ukrainian media, social networks, and Telegram channels that target Ukrainian audiences. By focusing on these sources, migrants strengthen their connection to the Ukrainian information space and maintain emotional ties to their homeland. At the same time, few participants follow German media, and many obtain information about Germany through Ukrainian-language sources. This informational behaviour may lead to slower or more selective integration, as some migrants feel less immersed in the local context.

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38 An initiative of the German government to ensure that migrants are employed quickly and successfully integrated: https://www.bmas.de/DE/Arbeit/Migration-und-Arbeit/Flucht-und-Aysl/Turbo-zur-Arbeitsmarktintegration-von-Gefluechteten/turbo-zur-arbeitsmarktintegration-von-gefluechteten.html [accessed: 01.12.2025].

39 These channels have predominantly been established by Ukrainians and individuals from the former Soviet Union who emigrated before 2022, aimed at helping newcomers adapt following the onset of the full-scale invasion.

40 Male, 46, originally from Zaporizhzhia oblast, currently residing in Lower Saxony, interview conducted in Ukrainian.

41 Oksana Udovyk and Míriam Acebillo-Baqué, "Will displaced Ukrainians return home? Exploring return migration through an aspirations-capabilities lens: cases from Spain and Sweden".

Connection with Ukraine Through Family Relationships

Family ties and caring for family members in Ukraine are important for Ukrainian forced migrants. A significant number of Ukrainian forced migrant families in Germany have become "transnational families", a term that refers to a social unit whose members are separated by migration but maintain contact despite geographical distance.[42] In the case of Ukrainian forced migrants, geographical borders and migration policies divide Ukrainian families. Statistically, 80% of adult Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany are women, 48% of whom are residing there with young children.[43] Their husbands remain in Ukraine due to martial law, which restricts most men of conscription age from leaving the country in response to the Russian invasion. However, the separation extends beyond spouses. Older family members often choose to stay in Ukraine despite the dangers posed by shelling and the shifting front line. Leaving their home and familiar environment is difficult for them, as they often cannot imagine their lives in another country with a different language and culture.

Additionally, adult children may be reluctant to leave because they wish to continue their education, maintain social circles in person, or stay employed. At the same time, their younger siblings may need to relocate for safety. These divided families face significant emotional, logistical, and financial challenges as they navigate life between two worlds. They must balance the need for security with the desire to remain connected to their homeland and loved ones.

In a new country, part of the family has to adapt to the new environment, find housing, learn a new language, look for a job, and adjust to many other demands. Equally, they need to cope with family separation and related difficulties,[44] such as establishing and maintaining communication, caring for and supporting family members who remained in Ukraine, preserving emotional ties, and, in the case of married partners separated by great distances, maintaining intimate relationships. According to Loretta Baldassar, maintaining family relationships in transnational families is possible (though still quite difficult) both in the virtual space through communication technologies and with face-to-face contact through travel technolo-

42 Loretta Baldassar et al., "Transnational Families", in: Judith Treas, Jacqueline Scott, Martin Richards (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118374085.ch8 [accessed: 01.12.2025]; Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, *Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*, London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.

43 Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, "Brief Analysis: Ukrainian Refugees in Germany. Escape, Arrival and Everyday Life in Germany", 2022, https://doi.org/10.48570/bamf.fz.ka.04/2022.en.2023.ukrkurzbericht.1.0 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

44 Constance L. Shehan, *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Family Studies*, West Susssex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

gies.[45] Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany rely heavily on communication technologies to keep in touch with their families. Phone calls, video calls, messengers, and social media have become the primary means to maintain family and social ties because migration policies in Germany and Ukraine and security risks present significant barriers to their ability to travel home. However, despite these complications, many still make the journey to have face-to-face meetings whenever possible.

The temporary protection status for Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany does not completely limit their ability to leave and re-enter the country. As a result, Ukrainians can visit their homeland to see family members and return without jeopardising their protected status. However, travelling to and from Ukraine remains challenging and time-consuming. Staying in Ukraine also entails significant security risks due to ongoing shelling and rocket attacks, which are not confined to the eastern regions near the front line. Consequently, each trip requires a careful assessment of potential dangers.

Conversely, family members can travel from Ukraine to Germany, although restrictions apply to men of military age who are subject to mobilisation under martial law. Nevertheless, Ukrainian legislation provides certain exceptions; for example, military personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine who are on leave can travel abroad to meet with family after obtaining the appropriate permission. In the Telegram channels, users mention such cases and offer advice on preparing the required travel documents.

Most transnational families around the world exchange care and support between family members,[46] but some forms are limited due to geographical separation. The most limited is practical daily or weekly support, such as help with household work, childcare, accompanying family members to shopping, or medical visits. Such care practices are also present in the families of Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany; for example, in Telegram channels, there are often posts about how grandmothers come to help a family with young children for whom there is no place in a kindergarten. There have also been posts from women asking how to apply to the Jobcenter[47] for a leave of absence so that they can go to Ukraine and accompany their elderly parents to the doctor or help with post-surgical recovery.

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45 Loretta Baldassar, "Transnational Families and the Provision of Moral and Emotional Support: the Relationship between Truth and Distance", *Identities* 14/4, 2007, 385–409, https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890701578423 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

46 Loretta Baldassar et al. (eds.), *Families Caring Across Borders: Migration, Ageing and Transnational Caregiving*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

47 Those Ukrainian migrants who have not yet found a job receive unemployment benefits from the Jobcenter. This authority sends migrants to integration language courses and assists them in finding jobs, further education, or professional development opportunities: https://handbookgermany.de/uk/jobcenter [accessed: 01.01.2025].

It is important to clarify that, while Ukrainian forced migrants under temporary protection status face no legal barriers to leaving Germany, those receiving assistance from the Jobcenter are subject to specific obligations that may restrict their mobility. For instance, recipients must be available at their registered postal address to receive official correspondence from the Jobcenter from Monday to Saturday. They can be absent for up to three weeks per year; however, they must inform the Jobcenter in advance and obtain official approval. Additionally, they must report any significant changes in their circumstances, such as a change of address or phone number, pregnancy, pension payments, divorce, or marriage.

As a result, many Ukrainian forced migrants who rely on social assistance and wish to retain their benefits cannot spontaneously travel to visit relatives in Ukraine, or stay for an indefinite period. Instead, they must carefully plan and coordinate such trips in advance. These bureaucratic constraints limit their ability to travel freely and reduce their opportunities to provide or receive practical support from their families in Ukraine.

A notable aspect of care and support within Ukrainian forced migrant families is the shared use and management of housing. Those who still own property in Ukraine often rely on their relatives to maintain it by performing tasks such as watering plants, photographing and submitting utility meter readings. In some cases, children who have relocated abroad offer their homes to parents who have lost their property due to hostilities.

When family members from Ukraine visit Germany, they typically try to stay with their relatives rather than renting separate housing or booking a hotel. This situation has led to frequent discussions in Telegram channels, where Ukrainian forced migrants seek advice on whether they need to officially notify landlords about hosting visiting family members and how long such stays are legally permissible. Many also inquire about legal support in cases where landlords refuse to allow them to accommodate visiting parents or children.[48] These concerns highlight the challenges migrants face in balancing family reunification with housing restrictions and legal obligations in their host country.

Financial support plays a significant role in maintaining relationships in separated families. Discussions in Telegram channels frequently focus on ways to transfer money to relatives in Ukraine, reflecting the ongoing need for cross-border financial assistance. Interviews with Ukrainian forced migrants reveal that many provide financial support to their parents who have remained in Ukraine, often by covering utility bills or other essential expenses.

However, financial assistance is not unidirectional. In some cases, parents in Ukraine support their children studying in Germany, helping them manage living

48 There are cases when the landlord does not agree to allow family members visiting tenants to stay in the provided housing for a short period of time or overnight.

expenses while they pursue their education. This mutual exchange of financial aid underscores the resilience of family ties, despite geographical separation, and highlights the importance of economic interdependence in sustaining these relationships.

An essential aspect of care within divided families is the exchange of goods and personal items which of course relies not only on digital infrastructures. Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany frequently rely on private carriers and postal services to send and receive packages from their relatives in Ukraine. In Telegram channels, users actively seek recommendations for reliable carriers or share contacts for organising parcel deliveries between the two countries.

The majority of requests focus on private transportation services, as many Ukrainian independent carriers operate regular routes between Germany and Ukraine. These carriers facilitate the delivery of parcels, clothing, food (particularly Ukrainian-made products) and other essential items. This exchange not only helps migrants maintain a connection to their homeland but also provides practical support to family members on both sides of the border.

Nova Post, a subsidiary of Nova Poshta (the leading private postal and express delivery service in Ukraine),[49] is widely used by Ukrainian forced migrants to exchange goods and offers specialised logistics services for international shipments. In May 2022, Nova Poshta expanded into the European market under the Nova Post brand, aiming to serve the growing needs of Ukrainian communities abroad. By the end of 2023, Nova Post had established 13 branches in major German cities, including Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Dresden, Frankfurt, Cologne, and Dortmund. Additionally, the company operates through a network of 7,700 partner service points across Germany, allowing customers to conveniently send and receive parcels. This expansion has significantly facilitated cross-border exchanges, enabling Ukrainian forced migrants to stay connected with their families through the shipment of essential goods and personal items.

The accessibility of Nova Post makes it one of the most preferred logistics solutions for the Ukrainian community abroad. Ukrainians in Germany actively use Nova Post's services to send food, clothing, and other necessities to their relatives in Ukraine and to receive Ukrainian products that help them maintain a sense of home and cultural connection. Based on my own qualitative findings, for Ukrainian forced migrants, a package received from relatives serves as a link to their homeland. The receipt of familiar goods helps them to recharge their connection to their native culture and counteract the feeling of detachment from it that can creep into their lives. At the same time, though, parcels from Germany are a practical form of assistance and a material symbol of care, demonstrating the will and capacity to support loved

49 Nova Post today: https://novapost.com/en-ua/more/novapost-today [accessed: 01.12.2025].

ones from afar. These material exchanges thus help to keep migrants and their families emotionally close and resilient.

The experience of Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany demonstrates that care for relatives does not disappear due to distance but rather transforms by adapting. Some studies show that caring in the context of forced migration takes two forms: "caring for" – direct assistance, which is complicated by physical distance, and "caring about" – emotional support, which is maintained through remote communication.[50]

Despite the loss of mutual or co-presence, Ukrainian forced migrants actively support their relatives through digital technologies, using video calls, messages, and social media, which allows them to recreate a common social space.

Maintaining ties with family in Ukraine remains extremely important for many Ukrainian migrants who have found themselves abroad due to Russia's full-scale invasion. According to a report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Ukrainians who have a spouse or children in Ukraine are significantly more likely to plan to return home (72%, compared to 57% for those with no immediate relatives).[51] This trend illustrates the importance of family ties, which become not only emotional support but also a significant factor in making decisions about the future.

The stories of Ukrainian forced migrants such as Yuliia, who arrived in Germany with her daughter in early March 2022 and left her husband behind in Ukraine, illustrate such connections:

> I had a tariff with almost unlimited internet, and while we were travelling, I could call my husband or mum several times a day via Telegram to say that we were okay and where we were going […] because it was scary […].[52]

Like Yuliia, other respondents report that they keep in touch with their relatives daily through digital messenger platforms (using mobile internet) and phone calls at reduced roaming rates.[53] Communication can be short (only a few minutes) but it tends to be regular, which helps to reduce emotional distance and provide a sense of stability.

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50 Monika Palmberger, "Refugees enacting (digital) citizenship through placemaking and care practices near and far", *Citizenship Studies*, 26/6, 2022, 781–798, https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2022.2103971 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

51 United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee Regional Bureau for Europe and United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee for Ukraine, "Lives on Hold".

52 Female, 38, originally from Kharkiv oblast, currently residing in Berlin, interview conducted in Ukrainian.

53 Both German and Ukrainian mobile operators offer such special tariffs.

Although the connection can be limited to short conversations, sometimes it lasts much longer. Yuliia talks about her communication with her husband: "Sometimes, we talk for ten minutes because we are tired and have nothing new to say. But often, we can talk with my husband for an hour or two, turn on the video, and our daughter joins us." Such long video calls help the family maintain their usual rituals and feel together, even at a distance.

However, despite the widespread use of communication technologies to maintain contact, most respondents mentioned during interviews that they lack in-person interactions and meetings. Roman describes the changes in his communication with relatives as follows:

> Communication has become less frequent… because everyone is busy with their own issues, work, and the situation, let's say, is tense [in Ukraine]… And now, it's just communication through messengers, and of course, it's not as frequent as when you live nearby. If you visit relatives, it takes a few hours, but a phone call can't last for hours, it's inconvenient for both…[54]

Some respondents also reported experiencing emotional distancing from their relatives in Ukraine. This distancing may be caused by differences in lived experiences, particularly in the context of war. One of the key aspects of this process is the difficulty of providing emotional support when one party resides in a relatively safe environment while the other faces more immediate danger. Three respondents noted that they struggle to communicate with their relatives due to a sense of helplessness: They do not know how to properly support their loved ones during or after missile strikes, as they themselves are in a safety place.

Research shows that feelings of powerlessness over circumstances abroad can lead to guilt, anxiety, and sadness.[55] Those who have left Ukraine often experience guilt for their safety when they are unable to help family and friends in critical moments. Ukrainian forced migrants may also avoid discussions on complex topics such as living under shelling, damage to or destruction of housing, or the end of the war, because they are unsure how to provide appropriate support. One respondent described her experience:

> It's difficult to offer any words of support. While before we might have said that everything would end soon or in the near future […] and things would get better

54 Male, 47, originally from Zaporizhzhia oblast, currently residing in Baden-Württemberg, interview conducted in Ukrainian.

55 Michael Savic et al., "Separation from family and its impact on the mental health of Sudanese refugees in Australia: a qualitative study", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 37/4, 2013, https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12088 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

> for us. It is of course now [after more than two years of war] impossible to offer support with such words any more.[56]

The asymmetry of experience may also reinforce emotional distancing, precisely the "gap" between realities abroad and in Ukraine. For instance, Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany and other EU countries are preoccupied with adapting to a new environment, focusing on daily life and integration challenges. Meanwhile, their relatives in Ukraine endure security crises, economic hardship, and even life-threatening situations. This difference in daily realities can make conversations fragmented, tense, and even less frequent, as both sides struggle to find common ground. Alina, who moved to Germany from a frontline region in 2023, describes her difficulties in communicating with friends:

> It's hard in the sense that they [my friends] mostly say they have nothing to talk about, and it doesn't really work out to communicate. […] I feel like they are tired; maybe it's hard for them to hear me because they think that life here [in Germany] is somehow easier.[57]

Natalia also highlights this in her account: "We don't have a mutual understanding, and I'm sure it's because we are in different situations." This form of communication distancing between Ukrainian forced migrants and their relatives and friends in Ukraine, which includes emotional, psychological, and social aspects, may have long-term consequences. It may affect the ability to maintain family ties and complicate any future reintegration process for Ukrainians returning to their homeland, as they will lack a shared experience of living through the war.

Lack of shared wartime experiences may create a sense of alienation upon return, as migrants and those who remained in Ukraine may struggle to relate to each other's challenges and perspectives. Differences in coping mechanisms, priorities, and resilience could further complicate reintegration, making it harder to rebuild close relationships.

Thus, maintaining digital connections with ones' family can help relieve emotional distress and preserve migrants' homeland ties, keeping the possibility of return open and desirable. However, this form of communication cannot replace shared wartime experiences, which may lead to emotional and social disconnect upon their return. At the same time, staying digitally connected may also increase

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56 Female, 39, originally from Zaporizhzhia oblast, currently residing in Berlin, interview conducted in Russian.

57 Female, 48, originally from Zaporizhzhia oblast, currently residing in Baden-Württemberg, interview conducted in Ukrainian.

psychological stress, as many migrants remain deeply concerned about the safety of their loved ones in Ukraine.

Conclusions

This study suggests three strong patterns emerging from the dataset, all of which would be greatly enhanced by more extensive investigation: the key role of maintaining family ties in Ukraine while abroad; the power of social media to provide unprecedented access to home news, which helps Ukrainian forced migrants stay current and connected to the broader national context; and, the necessity of networks based in the host country in helping newer arrivals navigate the complex realities of being forced to migrate to a foreign country.

Maintaining ties with family and friends in Ukraine plays a critical role for Ukrainian forced migrants abroad. For many, family relationships serve as a source of emotional support and motivate them to stay informed about events in their homeland. These connections help reduce feelings of isolation and reinforce a sense of belonging. Even so, digital communication can have a dual effect. While it offers comfort and strengthens personal ties, it may also intensify psychological stress, particularly when migrants remain constantly preoccupied with the safety of their loved ones. In addition, the absence of shared experiences and everyday interactions, even in the presence of regular contact, can make it more challenging to sustain close family and social relationships over time.

Aside from helping to maintain social connections, social media and digital platforms have considerably facilitated access to important information for Ukrainian forced migrants. They actively use messengers and thematic groups to keep in touch with relatives, receive news, and discuss issues related to migration and integration in a new environment. Constantly monitoring news on social media allows Ukrainian forced migrants not only to stay informed about events in the country but also to maintain an emotional connection with home.

News about military operations and the security situation in their region or city is particularly important for Ukrainian forced migrants, as such news allows migrants to assess the risks and prospects of a possible return. In addition, consistent communication with relatives through messengers and social media can also help to support return intentions, reinforcing migrants' desires to reunite with family and friends remaining in Ukraine.

When Ukrainian forced migrants maintain an ongoing engagement with Ukrainian news and sustain involvement in the Ukrainian information space, this may influence their integration trajectories in the host country. Such informational engagement can foster a strong emotional bond with the country of origin, potentially shaping migrants' perceptions of their stay as temporary rather than

permanent. Rather than directing attention toward adaptation and integration, some individuals remain primarily focused on events in Ukraine, which may indirectly affect their motivation to integrate. The data suggest that emotional attachments to Ukraine remain significant, often shaped by family ties and hopes of eventual return. However, this pattern warrants further empirical investigation, and these attachments may evolve over time, particularly in the context of prolonged displacement.

Online connections with local Ukrainian communities can foster a sense of familiarity and offer practical support in navigating the host society, which may ease certain aspects of adaptation. However, frequent use of information channels created by Ukrainian communities tends to reinforce interaction within a digital sphere composed predominantly of fellow countrymen and -women. This reliance may limit opportunities for building social relationships with local residents and reduce engagement with the broader cultural landscape of the host country, which is critical for long-term integration.

In sum, this study illustrates the nuanced role of digital connectivity in shaping the lived experiences of Ukrainian forced migrants in Germany. While digital tools facilitate sustained emotional and informational links with Ukraine, they also contribute to a dual engagement with both the country of origin and the host society. This complex interplay may influence migrants' decisions regarding integration and future mobility.

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United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee Regional Bureau for Europe and United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee for Ukraine, *"Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees, Refugee Returnees and IDPs from Ukraine #5 Summary Findings (Regional Intentions Report #5)"*, 2024, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106738 [accessed 01.11.2024].

Displaced Ukrainian Mothers

Maternal Practices of Caregiving and Identities in Germany, Poland and Slovenia

Vira Kutyrova

Introduction

In connection with the start of the full-scale war on 24 February 2022, migration, both within Ukraine and to other countries, significantly increased. European countries have become the main destination of international migration for Ukrainian forced migrants. This is due to several factors, particularly territorial proximity, as well as favourable state policies and welcoming reception by the civil society of these countries. One of the primary goals of European migration policy is the creation of conditions for guaranteeing people's right, effective system of solidarity and responsibility, embedding migration in international partnerships[1] These tasks require appropriate monitoring of the processes of migrants' adaptation to the new social conditions of host countries and studying their social integration, their problems, and how the identities of migrants are supported and how they change, as well as the factors that condition possible change.

Research attention particularly falls on Ukrainian forced migrant mothers as a social group. According to the policy paper "Ukrainian Refugees after Three Years Abroad" published by the Centre for Economic Strategy, as of the end of November 2024, 5.2 million Ukrainians were abroad due to the war. Most of them were women and children. The largest category (gender/age) was women aged 35 to 44 years (13%). As of November 2024, the largest shares of displaced Ukrainians in Europe were in Germany (27%) and Poland (23%).[2] Most of these women found themselves far from

1 See: Pact on Migration and Asylum, accessed by the European Parliament and Council on 21 May 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en.

2 Dariia Mykhailyshyna et al., "Ukrainian Refugees after Three Years Abroad: How Many and Who Will Return? The Fourth Wave of the Research", *Centre for Economic Strategy*, 3 March 2025, https://ces.org.ua/en/refugees-fourth-wave/ [accessed: 01.12.2025].

their usual support networks. In these conditions, we can observe significant transformations of the social roles of these women, who must individually combine work and childcare and implement new adaptation practices (attending integration and language courses, solving legal and medical issues, overseeing their children's education in the host country, etc.). This multitasking, on the one hand, opens new perspectives for them; on the other hand, it becomes a significant source of social and psychological overload, which can lead to emotional burnout, depressive states, and other issues. Accordingly, the goal of my research was to determine the integration peculiarities of Ukrainian forced migrant women with children in their new sociocultural conditions through the prism of maternal practices of caregiving and their identities.

These processes have been studied by feminist scholars and migration researchers in the context of "motherhood in exile"[3]. This concept emerged in critical migration and refugee studies to highlight the gendered experiences of forced migration, especially how displacement transforms the practices, meanings, and social positions of motherhood. In "Feminized forced migration: Ukrainian war refugees", Josephine Andrews and her co-authors highlight that feminising migration is associated with both the growing share of women in migration flows and the fact that female refugees are one of the most vulnerable groups of migrants.[4] On the one hand, women can become victims of violence, sometimes systematically, including rape and assault. On the other hand, a growing number of women who often migrate with their children are doing so independently as breadwinners instead of following their husbands or male relatives as family dependents. These changes and their impact on children and family members left behind require increasing attention both in Ukraine and worldwide.

Looking at women migrants as a vulnerable category and acknowledging that women experience migration differently is essential to designing appropriate and targeted policies. In "Women on the move: Understanding the female face of migration to develop targeted policies", Loredana Teodorescu considers women's agency and the role of women migrants as drivers of change.[5] She highlights that we cannot consider women migrants simply as passive victims, thus amplifying their discrimination and isolation, and must instead recognise their agency and the positive impact of their integration.

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3 Josephine Andrews et al., "Feminized forced migration: Ukrainian war refugees", *Women's Studies International Forum* 99/11, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102756 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

4 Josephine Andrews et al., "Feminized forced migration: Ukrainian war refugees".

5 Loredana Teodorescu, "Women on the move: Understanding the female face of migration to develop targeted policies", *European View* 23/1, 2024, 55–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/17816858241246662 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

Erel Umut and his colleagues also consider the topics of agency, resistance, and the integration of migrant mothers in "Migrant mothers' creative interventions into racialized citizenship", where they describe how migrant mothers engage in different creative strategies (e.g., participatory theatre and storytelling) to redefine citizenship and assert their identity.[6] In this case, the mothers are considered not only as caregivers but also as cultural and political agents.

Spatial and symbolic practices of motherhood are the focus of the work of Agata Lisiak, who researches the visibility/invisibility of migrant mothers in public urban spaces, and Dara Ivanova, who proposes the metaphor of "dwelling-in-folds" to describe how migrant mothers navigate fragmented places and lives.[7] Importantly, these studies present motherhood as a spatial practice that challenges boundaries between public/private and host/home, where refugee mothers create new relational "homes" despite displacement and liminality.

Meanwhile, in her recent work, Jonna Rock considers the problems of solidarity, belonging, and new maternal roles in situations of forced migration.[8] She looks at refugee mothers in Germany engaging in solidarity work, which reinforces their sense of agency and helps anchor them socially and emotionally. Here, maternal identity becomes a driver of community-building. Participation in solidarity work becomes both an important form of collective care and a path to belonging for migrant women. Jonna Rock and Zeynep Yanaşmayan similarly address the topics of temporality and maternal subjectivity, arguing that maternal identity is formed during disrupted time: uncertainty, waiting, and longing.[9] Mothers develop new subjectivities shaped by care, trauma, and aspiration in exile. Lastly, Taoran Yang, Rebecca Featherston, and Aron Shlonsky discuss the experience of motherhood in exile

6 Umut Erel et al., "Migrant mothers' creative interventions into racialized citizenship", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41/1, 2018, 55–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1317825 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

7 Agata Lisiak, "Other Mothers: Encountering In/Visible Femininities in Migration and Urban Contexts", *Feminist Review* 117/1, 2017, 41–55, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-017-0086-3 [accessed: 01.12.2025]; and Dara Ivanova, "(Un)folding places with care: Migrant caregivers 'dwelling-in-folds'", *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 22/2, 2022, 211–225, https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12340 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

8 Jonna Rock, "Perspectives on Refugeehood and Motherhood: Germany-Based Ukrainians' Life Aspirations over Time", *Nationalities Papers*, 2025, 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.99 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

9 Jonna Rock and Zeynep Yanaşmayan, "Motherhood on the move: forced migrant women from Ukraine", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 38/3, 2024, 690–703, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae084 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

in the context of alienation via isolation, normlessness, and the aspects of powerlessness.[10]

In my study, I stress the importance of female agency and migrant mothers' engagement in different activities to assert their identities. In this sense, I consider mothers not only as caregivers but also as social agents. At the same time, an appeal to the transnational experience of care was important for me – that is, how women living through transnational separation develop new forms of relationality and adaptation. Studying the structured experience of maternal care by forced migrants, which includes different practices of caregiving, allows us to see how these practices change under conditions of forced migration and what factors affect this.

In the case of Ukrainians, most of whom acquired the status of temporary protection, forced migrants' integration may take some modified forms. On 4 March 2022, the Council of the European Union enacted, according to the Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382, the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for those fleeing Ukraine and arriving in the EU from 24 February 2022, onward. According to the document, the beneficiaries of temporary protection in EU Member States have a wide list of rights: a residence permit for the entire duration of the protection, access to employment, accommodation, education, social welfare, and medical care, and the right to move freely between EU countries.

In my study, I proceed from the assumption that integration in a host society is a three-way process, which depends on the characteristics of the country of origin; on the size, role, and functioning of the immigrant community in the host country; and on the characteristics of the receiving country, which is determined by its immigration policy, the structures of migrant groups, and the degree of acceptance of migrants in its society.[11]

The bureaucratic system and state approach to the implementation of the TPD for Ukrainian forced migrant women can be considered a crucial factor that hinders (or, sometimes, facilitates) their aspirations to stay in the country or return to Ukraine. These migrants live between different places and times and experience long-term uncertainty. Forced migrants from Ukraine being granted a residence permit and basic services adds another dimension to their temporality and agency, highlighting the uncertainty of the duration of this state and of the integration expectations of their hosting countries. Joris Schapendonk and his co-authors define

10 Taoran Yang et al., "Exploring migrant mothers' experiences of alienation in association with parenting: A scoping review", *Child & Family Social Work* 27/3, 2022, 567–582, https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12904 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

11 Mateja Sedmak et al. (eds.), *Migrant Children's Integration and Education in Europe: Approaches, Methodologies and Policies*, Barcelona: Octaedro, 2021.

this as a new "migration regime",[12] because states see migrants from Ukraine as highly skilled professionals with good prospects for integration, rather than temporary residents.

In this context, Ukrainian forced migrant women try to integrate into the host society while also trying to maintain close ties with their home country. This situation determines the process of reintegration into Ukrainian society at a distance as well (which is connected, above all, with maintaining ties to family and friends, working remotely in Ukraine-based jobs, etc.). All this significantly affects the organisation of maternal care practices. As the object of my study is forced migrant women with children, I try to reflect on how such women navigate motherhood while adapting to displacement, managing trauma, and negotiating their roles in unfamiliar sociocultural and institutional contexts.

Conceptual Framework

This study is primarily an analysis of maternal practices under forced migration and the transformations of such practices in the context of carrying out other care practices (e.g., care for elderly family members or those who live elsewhere or stayed behind) and other maternal roles, including materially supporting their family. Due to a lack of resources, language barriers, and an unfamiliar legal system, maternal practices in migration conditions often result in changes in childcare, emotional labour, and parenting styles. Forced migrant women are often sole caregivers due to family separation. They must combine caregiving with new tasks, such as securing housing, earning income, and so on, resulting in intense physical and emotional labour. Performing emotional and psychological care also becomes crucial, especially for children traumatised by violence or displacement.

Studying maternal practices of caregiving can be done through an analysis of these women's descriptions of their experiences of motherhood in exile, the role that maternal identity plays in their broader self-understanding, and how they evaluate their experiences.[13] To discuss the maternal practices of Ukrainian forced migrant women with children, I used the research framework of transnational caregiving, which includes a variety of care exchanges:[14] financial and material (including cash remittances or goods such as food, clothing, and paying household and other bills),

12 Joris Schapendonk et al., "Re-routing migration geographies: Migrants, trajectories and mobility regimes", *Geoforum* 116, 2020, 211–216, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.06.007 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

13 Luisa Passerini et al. (eds.), *Women Migrants from East to West: Gender, Mobility and Belonging in Contemporary Europe*, New York: Berghan Books, 2010.

14 Loretta Baldassar et al. (eds.), *Families Caring Across Borders: Migration, Ageing and Transnational Caregiving*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

practical (exchanging advice and assisting with tasks, as well as assisting in educational activities and organising admission to educational institutions), emotional and moral (aimed at improving psychological well-being), personal care (e.g., feeding, bathing, and medical care), and accommodation (providing shelter and security). Given that in conditions of forced migration, women often take on the role of breadwinner and provider for their children, I considered such women's employment and related practices of integration (e.g., visiting language courses) in the context of ensuring material caregiving. Accordingly, I examined the maternal practices of Ukrainian forced migrant women through this multidimensional definition of caregiving.

This definition of maternal care practices makes it possible to identify how the experience of forced migration can restructure maternal care, e.g. by problematising some of its components, and to understand what factors affect these changes. This definition of care also enables making distinctions between care practices (typically financial and emotional) that can be exchanged across borders through communication technologies, proximate care practices, and proxy care practices, involving the coordination of support provided by others.[15] I considered these elements as connected to maternal practices, because the caregiving of forced migrant women often goes beyond exclusively caring for their children and applies to other relatives, including through transnational care.

To describe the spatial-temporal dimension of maternal care, Helen Jarvis proposes the concept of the "infrastructure of everyday life", which covers the "material context" (schools and nursery schools, shops, and the transport connections between them); institutional regimes (all the spaces that regulate everyday life, from a single household to the state); and the "moral climate" (e.g., the idea of "good motherhood"). These categories form a matrix of the spatial-temporal solutions and actions related to everyday maternal care practices.[16] In my study, I also consider the components of everyday maternal care through the spatial and temporal dimensions by describing the everyday experiences of forced migrant women with children.

The emergence of new phenomena related to their motherhood (in the context of forced migrant women, this includes separated families, transnational families, and women in the role of the main breadwinner of the family) also significantly affects discourse around motherhood, requiring an reconceptualisation of maternal identities in terms of the permissible/possible/acceptable.

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15 Majella Kilkey and Laura Merla, "Situating transnational families' care-giving arrangements: the role of institutional contexts", *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 14/2, 2014, 210–229, https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12034 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

16 Helen Jarvis, "Moving to London Time: Household co-ordination and the infrastructure of everyday life", *Time & Society* 14/1, 2005, 133–154, https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X05050302 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

I define identity as a social construct through which women express their awareness and experience of belonging to social communities, as well as their personal self-realisation in these communities. To analyse these identities, I turn to the work of Anthony Giddens, who discusses the dynamism and reflexivity of identity, its properties constantly being rebuilt and reconsidered.[17] In general, Giddens analyses identity not as something sustainable, but as a process that, on the one hand, is carried out by the individual, and on the other, is socially motivated and relies on reflection. Gender researcher Judith Butler stresses the performativity of social identities and their consolidation through repeated actions and utterances.[18] Meanwhile, Pierre Bourdieu defines identity as a result of the "work" of habitus, which is formed in particular social fields, determined by access to appropriate capital (economic, social, and cultural), and transmitted through daily rituals: family practices, educational practices, and lifestyles.[19] Lastly, Richard Jenkins, who is particularly relevant for my research, considers identity through a three-level system: as individual self-perception, as a product of social interaction, and as a result of the influence of institutional structures.[20] This is especially important for an analysis of forced migration, where all three levels transform.

In my research, I did not cover the entire diversity of women's social identities but rather focused on descriptions of identification that occurred in the conducted interviews, where women recalled their experience of forced migration and, above all, their experience of motherhood in exile. Maternal identities are constructed and renegotiated during displacement, often shaped by institutional narratives (e.g., welfare agencies, schools, etc.) and public discourses about refugees or migrants. This refers to how women see themselves as mothers and how they are seen by others. Influences from culture, religion, and the host country's expectations on maternal identities may lead to feelings of empowerment, guilt, or loss of status, often occurring through a tension between continuity (preserving traditions) and change (adapting to new roles).

Maternal identities can also be considered a discursive construct, the result of connections between dominant paradigms of understanding and explaining the maternal experience (e.g., popular ideas about relevant norms, values, and practices of motherhood) and the personal experiences of a woman-mother in a

17 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

18 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 2006.

19 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984.

20 Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, London: Routledge, 2014.

situation of forced migration.[21] In such circumstances, many women become the sole caregivers for their children, forced to provide care in conditions that have to be created anew, which results in an intensive form of motherhood.

Importantly, displaced women often also become custodians of national cultural values and practices, using caregiving to maintain identity in exile (e.g., through a native language, national cuisine, and/or rituals). Mothers play a key role in transmitting resilience and helping children adapt to the host culture while preserving a sense of their homeland identity. Additionally, forced migrant women often become informal mental health providers, supporting children, elders, or peers dealing with trauma. However, this caregiving work is often not remunerated and may be excluded from economic or policy planning in a host country. I discuss the issues of providing care alone and the difficulties associated with it at length in this chapter through an analysis of my interviews with Ukrainian forced migrant women with children.

Methodology

I conducted this research through the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, supported by a grant from the FLAX Foundation. I used qualitative methods – specifically, in-depth interviews in Ukrainian and Russian, depending on the language preferences of the interviewee. I selected participants through the "snowball method" and by placing requests for participation in this survey in Telegram and Facebook groups that unite representatives of the Ukrainian community and refugees in European countries. While snowball sampling provided valuable access to participants with migration experience, it also carried some methodological and ethical limitations. Participants tended to refer individuals with similar backgrounds in terms of migration trajectory and region of origin, resulting in an overrepresentation of participants from the Kharkiv oblast of Ukraine. Given that this oblast has been and remains one with the most active military operations since the beginning of the war, the experience of forced migration and future life plans of women from this oblast are especially valuable. Additionally, the snowball method presumably means that women without strong social ties – due to trauma, stigma, or geographic isolation – were unlikely to be referred and thus are absent in this study, despite often facing the most acute forms of vulnerability.

21 Olena Strelnyk, *Turbota iak robota*, Krytyka, 2017; and H. S. Shevchuk, "Materyns'ka identychnist' u strukturi ia-kont͡sept sii ź͡hinky," *Problemy suchasnoï psykholohiï*, 2019/9, 765–777, http://bulletin.kpi.ua/index.php/2227-6246/article/view/161987 [accessed 17.11.2025].

Table 1: Interviews by country (Total: 17)

Country, number of interviews	**Family Status**	**Left with husband**	**Left with other relatives**	**Children's age (years)**				**Number of children**			**(Un)employment in the host country**
				Up to 6	7–11	12–15	Older than 16	1	2	3 or more	
Slovenia, 8	6 married, 2 divorced	2	2	2	6	3	2	5	1	2	6 employed, 2 unemployed
Germany, 5	3 married, 2 divorced	1	1	2	1	4	-	3	2	-	3 employed, 2 unemployed
Poland, 4	4 married	2	2	-	2	4	2	1	2	1	4 employed

In-depth biographical interviews, in contrast to other research procedures, allow a researcher to follow the transformational processes in identities and life strategies under the conditions of war. Given my own migration experience, I was in the position of an insider during the interviews, sharing the experiences of my informants and using common language and cultural codes, which allowed me to build a conversation grounded on trust. For some participants, the interviews became a space of understanding and emotional support, which can be considered an element of a coping strategy.

I conducted the research through 17 in-depth biographical interviews with Ukrainian forced migrant women with children (from November 2023 to February 2024) in Slovenia (8), Germany (5), and Poland (4) by recruiting interviewees who differed in family status, the number of relatives migrating with them, the number and age of their children, and their employment status in their host country (see Table 1).

To study the adaptation of Ukrainian mothers in their host country through the prism of their maternal practices and their identities, I outlined the main cases in which this adaptation manifested. In the interviews, I asked about migration history, satisfaction with the registration process, healthcare, existing networks of support, integration and language courses, work experience, settlement, children's education, problems with children's adaptation, situations of bullying of forced migrant children in schools, psychological support for mothers and children, everyday life and communication, information requests and information sources, experiences of discrimination in the new conditions, their thoughts about the future, their prospects of return, and other issues.

For me, studying the transnational experience of forced migrant women was determined not so much by the need for the widest possible coverage of the geography of the forced migration, but the consideration of the specifics of the migrant policies of host countries in relation to Ukrainian forced migrants. These policies are an important factor in differentiated experiences of integration and motherhood in exile.

The similarities between the Slovenian,[22] German,[23] and Polish[24] systems of Temporary Protection for Ukrainians stem from their shared legal foundation

22 See: GOV.SI, "Support for Ukrainian Nationals in Slovenia", *Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants*, https://www.gov.si/en/topics/slovenias-assistance-to-the-citizens-of-ukraine/ [accessed 19.08.2025].

23 See: Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, "The Gemany4Ukraine Informational Guide", https://www.germany4ukraine.de/EN/startseite_node.html [accessed: 10.07.2025].

24 See: GOV, "Nowelizacja ustawy o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy w związku z konfliktem zbrojnym na terytorium tego państwa. Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców", https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/nowelizacja-ustawy-o-pomocy-obywatelom-ukrainy-w-zwiazku-z-konfliktem-zbrojnym-na-terytorium-tego-panstwa2 [accessed: 25.06.2025].

under the EU Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC),[25] despite differences in national implementation, core similarities apply across all three countries. All of them grant temporary protection status to Ukrainians and eligible non-Ukrainians who fled Ukraine after 24 February 2022. The status allows access to the labour market, the immediate right to work without needing a work permit, basic healthcare access (all three systems provide free or subsidised healthcare, and though the extent varies, Ukrainians can access emergency care and primary medical services), access to the education system (all countries aim to integrate children into their regular school system with language support), as well as shelter and housing support. Housing support differs in the three countries. The greatest state support is offered in Germany and includes emergency shelters, state-provided apartments, or private rentals with subsidies. In Poland, the initially free accommodations become cost-share accommodations (the first 120 days in state or volunteer shelters are covered, and after that, forced migrants contribute to the costs). In Slovenia, financial aid is available, but private accommodation is very difficult to acquire due to limited housing. As I show later, these housing-related restrictions can significantly affect the prospects of whether Ukrainian migrants remain in the host country or leave it.

This study adheres to the ethical principles of qualitative research with vulnerable population groups, especially forced migrants.[26] All interviewees were provided with general information about the research project, voluntary participation, the participants' rights in terms of withdrawing, and the researcher's obligations regarding data storage. I conducted interviews with some of the participants offline, and with the rest, I communicated online via Telegram. In all cases, I recorded the audio of the conversations. I analysed the interview transcripts without the use of any special programs. I also informed the interviewees about the voluntary nature of their participation, that any information that could identify them would not be used in the report, and that I would ensure their anonymity and integrity. In cases where a response to a question was emotionally intense, I gave the participants the option to stop the interview or to talk about other issues. Therefore, I developed the design and research methods in accordance with the ethical standards of sociological research.

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25 "Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof", Document 32001L0055, EUR-Lex, August 7, 2001, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2001/55/oj/eng [accessed: 17.11.2025].

26 Ana M. Sobočan et al., "Ethical considerations in social work research", ("Etični razmisleki v raziskovanju v socialnem delu", Considerazioni etiche nella ricerca di servizio sociale"), *European Journal of Social Work* 22/5, 2019, 805–818, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1544117 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

To analyse the data, I used the thematic analysis method based on the identification of patterns/topics in the interviews and their development. The deductive-inductive logic of thematic analysis allows for the possibility of determining topics in advance and their further saturation/development during coding. In thematic analysis, the topics can be determined deductively (i.e., there is a ready-made list in advance, as in my study) and are developed/saturated during the analysis, after data collection.

Findings and Discussion

The Material and Practical Dimensions of Maternal Practices of Caregiving

The material and practical dimensions of maternal practices of caregiving, as well as the effectiveness of the implementation of these maternal practices and the degree of women's satisfaction with these needs, are largely determined by state support. In this regard, it was important for me to study how forced migrants assessed the degree of support from governmental and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). Displaced Ukrainians received temporary protection status, which provided them with special rights and opportunities – financial assistance, integration courses, housing, and educational and medical services. Such government initiatives were complemented by the initiatives of NGOs, the active support of which was described by many interviewees. In addition, interviewees often noted the help of people who were not associated with organisations but did so on a volunteer basis or assisted beyond the scope of their professional responsibilities.

For women with children, the educational institutions where their children study provide crucial assistance. This is confirmed by data from European studies on the integration of migrants into the European educational system, according to which representatives of educational institutions often provide information and advisory support to migrants whose children are studying in educational institutions.[27] Generally, for many of the women that I interviewed, the experience of such help became a real test of their ability to accept help in general. For instance, one interviewee stated:

> For me, it was, considering that I am the kind of person who always helped, it was difficult for me to come to the point that I was being helped… For me, it was a terrible state. I was ashamed, I was uncomfortable […] All people tell you, why

27 Lucija Dežan and Mateja Sedmak, "Policy and practice: the integration of (newly arrived) migrant children in Slovenian schools", *Annales: Series historia et sociologia* 30/4, 2020, 559–574, https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2020.37 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

> don't you say [something], why are you silent, and you don't know what you should say. You need everything from the smallest thing to… Because you only have the clothes that you have on. I thought that we were going for two weeks when we left Kharkiv.[28]

This experience of receiving help also became an impetus for women to participate in volunteer activities and a kind of coping strategy and practice for overcoming stress:

> The first year [before I found a job] I participated in various charitable initiatives, volunteered, I did it as a kind of psychotherapy, because it was necessary to feel needed, that I was helping someone.[29]

The ability of women to provide material and practical care is largely determined by the effectiveness of their integration into the host society. Language skills and employment prospects are important indicators for assessing such effectiveness. Satisfaction with language-learning opportunities available to forced migrants depends largely on how intensive and accessible the language courses are. To improve communication skills and master the language of the host country, temporary part-time work and participation in volunteer activities became a kind of "lifehack" for the Ukrainian forced migrants I spoke to:

> I want to learn the language to communicate independently, without the help of a social worker. And for this purpose, I would like to get into a living language environment, to learn the language, find a job that would allow me to continue working in Ukraine and communicate here, a job that would allow me to be in the local communication environment. Not so much for earning money, but for communication skills.[30]

Some interviewees were very active in looking for individual opportunities to learn the language and master it fast. As a rule, such motivation was characteristic of those who had the goal of fast employment. This was also the case for those who already had high foreign-language competencies, such as one of the interviewees, who, due to her profession in international logistics, has a high-level proficiency in several foreign languages and considers good knowledge of the official language of a host country a necessity:

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28 Interviewee 3 Slovenia, arrived from Kharkiv with her husband, mother-in-law, and three sons, who are 11, 12, and 17 years old.

29 Interviewee 3 Slovenia.

30 Interviewee 3 Germany, married, arrived from Kharkiv with her daughter, who is 13 years old.

> We started learning Slovenian last year, the language is needed where you live. We also found a tutor thanks to the Facebook group *Ukrainians in Slovenia*, and prepared [our] daughters for school. They studied Slovenian with him. And when they went to school, my husband and I started learning Slovenian with this teacher […] Then we attended 180 hours of courses at the Adult Educational Center of Kranj.[31]

In Germany, where there are many more Ukrainian forced migrants than in Slovenia, the availability of language courses largely depends on the location of the course and number of free places in such groups. Ukrainian women lined up in advance, sometimes even for several courses, to have a better chance of quickly being accepted to one:

> Here we have a less populated area, there are few courses, but there are many people interested. I've been going to classes for six months now, signing up everywhere, but so far, they're only making promises. They say when the current course ends, and the next one begins [providing information only about the schedule but not about the actual placements]. I'm in five lines, although officially I must stand in one line [laughs]. Plus, I take courses online that I pay for. This is [with] a Ukrainian teacher from Lviv. And he just teaches German courses online, twice a week. The lesson lasts two hours. And I've been going for almost six months.[32]

As for employment prospects, Ukrainian forced migrant women recognised that it is difficult to find a job that matches their education and previous work experience. It's possible to highlight different strategies regarding refugees' views on their prospects of finding a job and their professional identity.

First, some were ready to take any kind of job to gain financial independence and speed up the integration process:

> Without knowing the language, it is difficult to find a qualified job in Germany, […] since my speciality is specific – legal – I will need to relearn all the basics of law. It will take several years if I want to be a lawyer in Germany. Therefore, I don't set such goals for myself. But I see prospects in simple areas. For now. And I need to learn the language. And I have a small child. Therefore, the service sector. I'm currently working a little in this area [cleaning]. The situation suits me, it doesn't take me much time, in principle. The same salary as I received in Ukraine in a month, I can get here by working several hours a week. But of course, this is incomparable with the prices here, but in principle, I'm happy with it for now. Plus, for me, this

31 Interviewee 5 Slovenia, arrived from Kyiv with her husband and two daughters, who are nine and 12 years old, and two sons, who are four and six years old.

32 Interviewee 3 Germany.

> is not so much a job for making money, but a job for establishing some contacts, for communicating in another language. It's some kind of social skill. [33]

Second, some women had the opportunity to return to the profession they had in Ukraine, but with significantly higher wages. These women called this opportunity great luck and generally spoke positively about their experience working in the host country:

> In Ukraine, I worked in the service sector. There were no difficulties with employment in Slovenia. It was not [difficult] because Slovenians do not want to work in this field. No Slovenian will go into this field. I don't even understand why, they [the customers] are very easy for me [to deal with]. Here [in the coffee shop] the men , the hard workers, come to discuss work issues among themselves, [they] do not talk about politics.[34]

Third, some were only oriented towards qualified jobs that align with their education or previous job experiences. For certain highly qualified interviewees with extensive work experience, the dilemma between finding any kind of job and finding one that matched their prior experience and education was viewed as a key challenge, and one that was associated with the risk of loss of social status:

> Yes, I was thinking about the possibility of employment. I am interested in a position, if not as a teacher, then something similar. Because I received offers of unskilled work, but I am not very interested in them, since now I can work professionally [at the time, the interviewee worked as a teacher in an online format at a Kharkiv university, participated in a project at the University of Maribor, and was engaged in tutoring], so I did not follow these suggestions. But if the offer was worthy, it would be interesting. Because the proposals that were made – to go to the store to lay out the goods or [work in] a laundromat – well, I am not considering this now.[35]

In countries with high financial support for Ukrainian forced migrants (e.g., Germany), interviewees often pointed out that deciding to postpone their job search in favour of more intensive language study would allow them to have a more qualified job in the future. Such opinions were often typical for women with children of

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33 Interviewee 2 Germany, arrived from Kharkiv with her husband, daughter, who is 17 years old, and son, who is five years old.

34 Interviewee 6 Slovenia, married, arrived from Zhytomyr with her daughter, who is 12 years old.

35 Interviewee 1 Slovenia, married, arrived from Kharkiv with her daughter, who is nine years old.

primary-school age, whose childcare usually requires much more time, and those women who provide care for sick and/or elderly relatives:

> There is very good financial support here, and I see, to be honest, there is simply no point in going to work. It makes sense to learn the language and then look for a more qualified and well-paid job. Otherwise, you go to a low-skilled job, and as a result, you don't have enough time to learn the language to get a more qualified job. Because at first everyone ran to work, and then they started leaving and leaving, and with the financial support that is there, you don't have any difficulties without working. When they ran to work, they were deprived of payments accordingly. Accordingly, it was a weighing of costs and profits.[36]

Lastly, there were those who were ready to take any available job initially, but who aspired to find a more suitable professional position later.

Importantly, some interviewees did not see a low-skilled job through the lens of a loss of social status but rather as a space of opportunities for self-development and the attempt to explore something new in their lives. Women who were curious about mastering a new craft and who urgently needed employment due to financial circumstances expressed this more often:

> This [working as a florist] is a completely new profession for me. Yes, I have always loved flowers. So, it was [in] May. That is, two months had passed since my arrival. I don't know where this mobilisation resource came from, I am very grateful to myself for it, because this work really supported me. It turned out that I was up to it. I always complained that my grandmother is talented, a real needlewoman, my sister is talented, and I have hands in the wrong place [laughs]. But it turned out that no one really put anything useful in my hands. There was a lot of work, it was so that I worked with one day off a month, but this work really supported me psychologically, because otherwise there was a constant desire to slide into the abyss of tears and sadness.[37]

Practising the local language and establishing connections in the workplace significantly expanded my participants' opportunities for integration into the local community. Interviewees with experiences of employment in the host country stressed that this experience was the main factor in a significant acceleration of their integration.

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36 Interviewee 3 Germany.

37 Interviewee 2 Poland, arrived from Kharkiv with two sons, who are eight and 15 years old.

The Maternal Practices of Personal Caregiving: Issues of Healthcare and Access to Quality Medical Care

Another dimension of forced migrant women's caregiving is associated with personal care obligations, for the health of family members. In this regard, it was important for me to turn to the study of the women's experiences of seeking medical services in their host country. Issues of medicine and access to quality medical care are one of the main indicators of ensuring life safety conditions. Providing children with quality medical services is one of the components of responsible parenthood.

My informants' encounters with medical institutions turned out to be contradictory. On the one hand, the interviewees were generally satisfied with the quality of the services provided. On the other hand, some health problems that would have been solved quickly in Ukraine were considered as either not requiring medical care in European countries, which worried some of the interviewees, or not requiring emergency medical care (in which case an appointment is scheduled for a long time in advance). Sometimes, such differences in medical approaches led to a loss of security and increased despair, especially when health problems were related to children, the most vulnerable group for which the forced migrant women often bore sole responsibility:

> A very disturbing story happened when my youngest son got sick. […] In the winter, he had a stomach ache, and he couldn't sleep at night. That's when we got nervous, because we had to go to the ER late at night, take all the tests for my son, give him a certificate for a hospital in another city – Ljubljana – where we were supposed to go by bus the next day. In Ljubljana, we took the tests again and then waited for more than six hours for an ultrasound. Finally, it turned out that, according to the test results, my son didn't need an ultrasound, we were prescribed medicine that was given to us for free at the pharmacy, it was usually a painkiller, which we didn't have to give to our son. The stomach [ache] was gone after another two or three days […]. These days were very difficult, in a foreign country, an unfamiliar language, another medical care system – the good thing is that everything ended well, and the child recovered. I can't imagine if the situation would have been more difficult […] I have never felt such loneliness and helplessness.[38]

The forced migrant women's experiences with healthcare systems in host countries emphasise the accessibility, limitations, emotional challenges, and coping strategies related to medical needs. Interviewees reported efficient, free, and high-quality treatment, especially in urgent cases. They mentioned the advantages of medical insurance, which covered multiple procedures at no cost:

38 Interviewee 2 Slovenia, married, arrived from Kharkiv with her two sons, who are nine and 14 years old.

> Germany has good medical insurance, which was very important to us. Because my husband is not completely healthy in my opinion, so to speak. Therefore, I believe that the level is quite good. At least they help us and for as long as we were here, we have repeatedly turned [up] and did the procedures that we need, all cost-free, we did not pay anything. I think this is very good. [A] high level of medicine.[39]

Interviewees also mentioned a professional and effective approach in the emergency rooms and during planned operations:

> [It was] the most positive experience. Everything was planned out. I was lucky […] But as for the help itself, the operation that was performed on [my] mother-in-law, everything was done beautifully. I often went with my children to the emergency room, [when] they would cut their hands or something else.[40]

However, the interviewees came across some limitations as well, namely, delayed, or conditional care, where doctors postponed treatment, or cases that required long waits and bureaucratic hurdles:

> We applied for medical services more than once. The first time, when we just arrived and my teeth hurt, I went to the dentist on duty, they put temporary fillings on [my teeth] and told me to treat my teeth in Ukraine when we return. In general, we often hear this from doctors here, and when you return, they try to assess whether your health is good enough to wait for treatment in the homeland [laughs].[41]

Therefore, the need for medical services was sometimes related to emotional and psychological strain. Navigating a foreign medical system without language fluency led to helplessness and isolation, causing feelings of stress, fear, and loneliness, especially in child-related emergencies: "I've never felt such loneliness and helplessness".[42]

Sometimes, a lack of local language skills made some of the women feel disempowered. One woman, for example, believes her mother's medical care might have been better if she had been more persistent and spoken better German:

> I would not have lost my mother if I had shown more courage… [even] not knowing the German language but having been more persistent. There have been cases

39 Interviewee 4 Germany, divorced, arrived from Kharkiv with her mother and daughter, who is 11 years old.

40 Interviewee 3 Slovenia.

41 Interviewee 2 Slovenia.

42 Interviewee 2 Slovenia.

> when you sit in the reception for a very long time, waiting for three hours. [Causing] scandals do not work, you fight, just lose the appointment.[43]

At the same time, some began to use alternatives to their usual practices of healthcare for children and other relatives, such as homeopathy or personal medical contacts from Ukraine. Those with pre-existing care networks in Ukraine chose to postpone certain treatments until they returned.

Lastly, experiences of medical caregiving also varied according to institution and provider, not only the country: "The quality depends on who you land on […] it's a colossal difference".[44]

Among the interviewees, there was recognition of some contrast between their expectations and the reality, and an awareness of the high importance of language skills and personal support networks. The interviewees preferred help from people they could trust, especially familiar help when it was possible, even if it meant a temporary return to Ukraine or the use of online consulting.

Maternal Practices of Practical Caregiving: Children's Education and Dual Schooling as Maternal Achievements

For children, one of the main spaces of social integration in a host country is the educational system. Also the integration of adults is often significantly accelerated by the integration of children into the host country's educational system. Mothers of preschool-age children discussed problems with enrolment and availability, such as finding spots in nursery schools:

> With the younger [child] – maybe because of [our] location, we are in small village here – it is difficult with nursery schools. We applied at the beginning of the year, but we were refused. Up until August next year, there are no places in the nursery schools. It's generally difficult with nursery schools.[45]

Problems with enrolling a child in a nursery school, on the one hand, forced the women to worry about the effective socialisation of their children; on the other hand, these problems also limited the women's own possibilities for integration, particularly because mothers may otherwise not have time for visiting language and integration courses, engaging in employment, and other related issues.

A positive point mentioned was that children are prepared for school in nursery school, a practice that is also applied in the Ukrainian educational system on the

43 Interviewee 4 Germany.

44 Interviewee 4 Germany.

45 Interviewee 2 Germany.

principle of territorial registration. The interviewees also discussed the positive impressions of children visiting local nursery schools, in particular, many opportunities for the development of a child which are offered for free compared to Ukrainian nursery schools:

> [Our] child already speaks Slovenian. He is very communicative. He likes it here. And in Ukraine, he did not want to go to the nursery school. Children develop more here, [there is a lot of] physical activity, English. We have all this in Ukraine for [a fee]. And here, everything is free in the nursery schools.[46]

In general, the women were satisfied with the quality of the services provided in nursery schools, but they mentioned issues with arranging for their children to attend them, based on their location and a limited availability of spots in them. As the interviews show, the women discussed these difficulties in the context of their own limited time resources and the need to attend integration courses and search for work.

As for the secondary school educational system, the interviewees highlighted some cultural differences between Ukrainian and Western European educational practices. In Ukraine, there is stricter discipline enforced during classes, a strong emphasis on following the curriculum, and intensive training focusing on the child's achievements. In Western European schools, and especially elementary schools, the educational process is less focused on children's achievements and more on games, freedom, sports, and outdoor activities:

> In Slovenia, the advantages are that children learn not only from textbooks but also see many things in real life. I was very impressed, and these are real examples, when they went to a park in Ljubljana last April and studied the types of trees with printed materials. Or a trip to the farm to see the animals and to learn some traditions and just to be together with classmates – they lived without their parents for a week, they organised themselves there. [My] daughter was also very impressed when emergency doctors came to their classes and showed them what was in their medical bags and how all those instruments are used.[47]

Some forced migrants chose to continue their children's education in both Ukrainian schools and those of their host countries. They explained the decision as stemming from an uncertainty about the future. This uncertainty included their prospects for extending the temporary protection status and corresponding social guarantees, as well as their desire to return to their homeland while accepting the difficulty of predicting the end of the war and ensuring security guarantees in Ukraine. All this led

46 Interviewee 4 Slovenia, divorced, arrived from Zhytomyr with her son, who is six years old.

47 Interviewee 1 Slovenia.

parents to choose a dual education for their children. Another reason for the dual education of Ukrainian children was educational initiatives by the Ukrainian government. According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, education received abroad will be accepted when children return to Ukraine in the future. However, some subjects, such as the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian literature and history, are often mandatory for national university entrance exams in Ukraine. Therefore, some of the interviewees were frustrated that their children may fall behind in these subjects while abroad.

This practice of combining two educational systems was done differently depending on the requirements of both schools, the child's capabilities, and daily schedules. At the same time, women noted that it was difficult for children to combine two schools, and this sometimes led to overworking, but they tried to find ways of supporting their children's motivation to combine both systems:

> There is fatigue, there is overload, but we can motivate our children because, for example, I am going to Ukraine tomorrow and I will take [my] daughters to their Ukrainian friends at the Ukrainian Bukovel campsite, so they understand their motivation [to study]. Their job is to be able to combine Ukrainian and Slovenian schools, but it is easy for them, especially since they already speak Slovenian fluently, they have integrated very well into the Slovenian school.[48]

Regardless of plans, interviewees often mentioned the wide spectrum and accessibility of other educational and leisure opportunities (sports and creative programs, children's camps, and field trips) that are provided to Ukrainian children in the host country. However, for children in high schools, adaptation to the educational system turned out to be more stressful due to its higher complexity, more advanced terminology in a foreign language, and the specifics of adolescence, which were influenced by the experience of war.

Sometimes, the reluctance of a child to continue to study in the local educational system became one of the reasons for returning to Ukraine. For example, one of my interviewees returned to Ukraine, and one of the reasons for this was the unwillingness of her eldest son to continue to study in Poland:

> [My] son does not particularly mention the Polish school. He says, 'You understand that here in Ukraine, I'm a person at school, I don't have to think about how to express my thoughts. And [in Poland] there are poems by Adam Mickiewicz [a Polish poet] in my head, and a mix [of languages] in my mouth.'[49]

48 Interviewee 5 Slovenia.

49 Interviewee 2 Poland.

This adaptation process was easier for children who were in classes with others from a familiar linguistic environment, especially those with similar experiences of (forced) migration. However, some mothers viewed interaction in a native language environment as a contradictory element, as something that can provide psychological support in the process of their children's adaptation, but also impede a quick language integration of their children into new sociocultural conditions:

> [My] son had Ukrainian children at school, but they somehow did not become friends much, he talked with the German ones, but basically [they] talked in English. And from the new school year, friends from Kharkiv arrived, he began to communicate more with three friends from Ukraine, [they] closed themselves off in this communication, and then [my] son began to remember Ukraine more often.[50]

The interviewees also described informal communication in the educational environment as an integration factor. For the children, making friends in school and enjoying learning and communication with their classmates became important factors of integration into the school environment and the new sociocultural conditions overall:

> [My] daughter likes this school. She made a friend, Margarita, who is German, and the day before yesterday, Margarita came for the first time for an overnight stay […] But as soon as Margarita gets sick, [my] daughter says that she will not go to school – although [she] is passionate about the educational process itself, especially music, drawing, sculpture.[51]

An important advantage of schools in the host country, e.g. in Germany was the organisation of all kinds of educational activities, practical classes, interactive games, a lot of attention to physical activity, class excursions, school camps, and financial support for all of this. Generally, the children's interest in participating in school activities is an important indicator of the successful integration of not only the children themselves, but also their mothers, for whom the maternal role becomes the most important priority and biggest challenge during their forced migration:

> Here I see the future. Tomorrow, the school will organise an Advent Bazaar. Children have prepared souvenirs, gifts, songs, dances. [My] daughter's picture [was included] in an information letter for the parents, where everyone knows her as an appreciated artist. They are very afraid to lose her. If I start saying that we will

50 Interviewee 5 Germany, married, arrived from Kharkiv with her son, who is 13 years old, and daughter, who is five years old.

51 Interviewee 4 Germany.

> leave, they will begin to worry that she will leave. Children are appreciated here. And they [the school staff] try to develop some individuality in the children.[52]

The opposite is also true: a reluctance by the children to integrate into the educational system in the host country may affect their mothers' further prospects of remaining there.

Maternal Practices of Emotional and Moral Caregiving

The women who left active war zones often indicated a deterioration in the emotional state of their children and a need for psychological support. Some children became withdrawn, aggressive, or emotionally blocked:

> They [my sons] came here, they are going through puberty, and the war, and sometimes also aggression from other people, and [my] middle son went into denial, [and] the younger one had a certain regression.[53]

In this case, a gradual emotional opening took place through integration into favourable social environments (basketball, school, friendship):

> They play basketball at the Triglav Professional School. They really like it. There, both Vietnamese and German [players] are on the team, [they] also poorly understand the Slovenian language. That is, the children are already in this environment.[54]

Emotional openness allowed the children to share their traumatic experiences more frankly. Psychological support for migrants must necessarily consider the specifics of post-traumatic stress disorder, which can manifest only after some time, rather than immediately. That mothers noticed these manifestations and were attentive to the psychological needs of their child testifies to their emotional contact with their child. This also confirms the need for long-term psychological support for families who have experienced forced migration:

> The first three months, the children did not reveal themselves, and then, closer to the end of 2022, they had breakthroughs, they did not accept anything, [exhibited] a constant provocation. And so, they behaved terribly, and then they had conversations about their experience of the war, how they sat in the basements – not that they cried, but at least they began to talk about it. When they dived

52 Interviewee 4 Germany.

53 Interviewee 3 Slovenia.

54 Interviewee 3 Slovenia.

> into this environment and realised that they were here – and at some point, even communication with [other] children became better – they began to open up. It became easier for them to show sincerity.[55]

Most of the women noted that they and their children needed psychological help at the beginning of their stay abroad. At the same time, many emphasised that turning to a psychologist (an adult whom the child does not know) would be a traumatic experience for the child. Accordingly, for many women, providing psychological help for their children meant independently building a trusting dialogue with the children and organising space and time in a way that the children have more opportunities to do what they like and talk about topics they are interested in:

> Help was offered more than once, but I didn't choose it, probably the habit of calming myself down remained. Plus, I'm in touch with my family in Ukraine, we're very close, and that helps a lot… I remember that my daughter who is nine years old cried for no reason, she started crying and could not explain why. [This was only] for some time, it did not last very long. It was difficult for her to explain why. Well, I guess she was bored, it was hard for her. At such moments, I hugged her and talked about something good, that everything would be all right. That now there are these difficulties, but later everything will be fine.[56]

Some women also emphasised that even if they initially understood that their child needed psychological help, a lack of experience with such treatment prevented them from pursuing this option. Those women who had prior experience with individual consultations with a psychologist were more likely to be interested in this for their children and, as a rule, used these opportunities:

> It turned out that I always treated this very carefully, and I had a psychologist in Kyiv who knows all my children. And when we were going through age crises, all my children know this woman as a good family friend, so for the oldest one, who is going through puberty, I arranged for the oldest one to have 10 sessions of therapy, and [the psychologist] talked to [my daughter] about everything that she was not ready to tell me.[57]

The psychological state of women going through forced migration and family separation was also strained. The women often mentioned having resources to cope with this process. They associated having this stability with the awareness of needing to be strong and hardy for their children and for supporting loved ones.

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55 Interviewee 3 Slovenia.

56 Interviewee 1 Slovenia.

57 Interviewee 5 Slovenia.

Maternal Practices of Accommodation (Shelter and Security) and Future Life Prospects

The growing awareness among the Ukrainian forced migrants that the war might be prolonged influenced their outlook on the future. Some interviewees said that they simply had no place to return to, due to a lack of physical security in the places they had lived. Others said there were no job opportunities or that they anticipated significant financial and other challenges in postwar Ukraine, meaning they would not be able to provide their children with sufficient security:

> And I don't see any possibility of returning to Kharkiv for the next five years. Because our region is heavily mined. We have constant threats. And to be honest, I don't understand those people who live there and don't leave. But there are those who have a reason – their parents are there – but if they stay with young children – I don't understand [it].[58]

> The main motivation is my child. Her life has become much better here, I want a better life for my child. [I] discuss it with my husband, he also supports it.[59]

For these Ukrainian forced migrants, the uncertainty of the situation made it difficult to plan. And for many of them, their children's perspective also influences every decision they make. Those who found that their children face challenges with integration reported that they would take this into account when eventually deciding on whether to stay or return. At the same time, for those who wanted to return, a key factor of such a choice, in addition to family reunification, was the return to their usual comforts and good living conditions, which for some interviewees were much higher in Ukraine (at least before the war). For example, for some interviewees, having their own accommodation in Ukraine is meaningful and influences their plans. Presumably, the presence of comfortable housing is a likely indicator of the interviewee's former high level of living in Ukraine, which also explains the desire to return as a condition for maintaining their position in the social hierarchy:

> If we talk about dreams, we are in our house in Kyiv, we live our lives, we do our jobs, and we can always visit our friends in Slovenia for the holidays. This is a return to normal life. Children study without overload at their school, I work where I am supposed to work. I don't know, honestly, maybe I will say that [our] history in Ukraine is done, we will stay in Europe, but this is a very small chance. I want to go to my house, and there I will decide what to do, whether to go or stay. Now I have been forced to leave the house I built, and I have the right to return to it, [it is]

58 Interviewee 3 Slovenia.

59 Interviewee 6 Slovenia.

> within my rights. And then to sit and think whether we want our children to study in European schools or not – it is a good experience, my husband and I consider it a good experience to live in another country, which we talked about even before the war. In forced conditions, I believe, we did it successfully. And the children will have a lot of life experience about new ways of life. But we will return home first, and then we will decide what we will do.[60]

The stories of my interviewees indicated that returning can also fit into the category of forced migration, for example, if due to some key intra-familial event that caused the return (e.g., deciding to return to Ukraine even with a young child after something tragic happens to one's parents in Ukraine, the children's strong longing for their father, or experiencing financial difficulties and issues with providing children with normal living conditions abroad). And this is not always a balanced, well-thought-out decision, but a necessity that is also related to caregiving practices.

Even if they have the desire to return because of longing for loved ones, family breakdowns, or other similar issues, the interviewees were in no hurry to make decisions about returning if their conditions for survival in the host country are ensured. One of the motives for returning could be the curtailment of social support programs for Ukrainian forced migrants. One of the interviewees noted that for her, the need to pay for housing became an overwhelming task, since her salary could not cover the rent, and, in addition to this, the reluctance of her eldest son to continue his studies in Poland finally convinced her to return:

> I would have returned earlier, but my eldest son studied, he passed his exams well, and he was even considering the possibility of going to college. My mother-in-law even persuaded us to stay in Poland for the sake of our eldest son… But then they said that housing must be paid for, and my salary was small, and it was very difficult to survive there [in Poland] when you are alone. Therefore, a lot of Ukrainian women returned because housing is not covered. Or you need to live with someone, share rooms, or have a very good financial cushion in Ukraine. When it's on one's own shoulders, it's incredibly difficult. And when the question arose that there was nowhere to live, and this question with the studies – [my] son did not want to continue studying in Poland. He kept saying, "Mom, did you ask me? I don't want to study here. Maybe later when I finish 11th grade." It was like a decision that was made for me, but I was very happy about it. [61]

"It was like a decision that was made for me", this woman described her choice. This case of maternal decision-making reveals the role of the state in maintaining moth-

60 Interviewee 5 Slovenia.

61 Interviewee 2 Poland.

erhood in exile and stresses the question: How do European policies for supporting Ukrainian forced migrants impact their decision to stay or return?[62]

Another story of return occurred due to tragic events in Ukraine. The death of the interviewee's father and her reluctance to leave her mother alone in such circumstances forced the interviewee to go back with her young daughter. Moreover, the return was not to her personal home but to the home of her parents. This case is a vivid example of women implementing care practices for loved ones:

> For me, this return was unconscious, thoughtless. It was a family tragedy. My father died. I didn't come back thinking I was going home. There was grief, despair. I went to support my mother. I stayed there for a while and realised that I could not leave my mother.[63]

Here, the problem of the "sandwich generation"[64] arises. This was indicated by some of the women as an important dilemma, which they solved in different ways. This is an additional burden that is not only physical, but also emotional, which can take different forms for these Ukrainian forced migrant women but is still related to the implementation of care practices. They must solve the medical problems of their parents in new conditions, deal with tragic experiences associated with the death of their parents while in a foreign country, and decide whether to return to Ukraine with a young child when something happens to their parents who stayed behind:

> When I lived in Poland, I clearly understood that I wanted to return to my husband. When we talk about returning, we must ask the questions, who is waiting for us, where is waiting for us, and what is waiting for us. We must understand where we are returning and to whom we are returning.[65]

Additionally, some women touched on their loneliness while abroad and their anxiety about their sole responsibility for their children:

> When I was in Poland, I felt that for the first time I was on my own – my husband, his parents, my mother were always next to me, and here the question became, what will happen if, God forbid, I get sick, what will happen to my children?[66]

62 Lazarenko, "'Let the State Decide It All for Me'".

63 Interviewee 1 Slovenia.

64 This refers to adults (often of about middle age) who care for both their aging parents and their children.

65 Interviewee 2 Poland.

66 Interviewee 2 Poland.

> In Slovenia, for example, I had to go somewhere, but I had no one to leave my child with. And when I was invited somewhere, or there were business trips, my daughter went with me, because there was no one to leave [her] with. Although this was no place for a child [to go].[67]

In this regard, the returning women saw going back to familiar support networks as an important benefit of their decision. The experience of returning from abroad is a separate case that requires further research. However, this process can be characterised as the experience of the return of women who have someone waiting for them.

In the interviews, the women often mentioned (especially when they spoke about their psychological states) the changes they experienced in the foreign country, their new plans, and a shift in their attitude toward their home. I consider these reflections on home as an indicator of the women's transforming identities: "I feel like a woman with one backpack. This is my feeling all the time" (Interviewee 4 Poland, arrived from Kharkiv with her husband and two daughters, who are 11 and 16 years old). The apartment of this informant is in Kharkiv, where she does not plan to return to. However, she missed the things that remained in her house: "If it were possible to transport the things that remained there, I would be comfortable" (Interviewee 4 Poland). But then she recalled that in Poland, she does not have her own housing, and frequent moves make it impossible to have the feeling of home that she had in Kharkiv before the war. She concluded: "The value of things has changed very much [...] Let my things be in Kharkiv. Where my home is" (Interviewee 4 Poland). This is a paradoxical situation, where the feeling of home remains even if she does not plan to return. Meanwhile, she perceived her new location without attaching herself to it but rather recognised the value of the people who surround her and the significance that her relatives are nearby: "In this whole situation, I understood a main thing – to hold on to people, not things. [My] children, husband... This is the most important thing" (Interviewee 4 Poland).

In Ukraine, many of the interviewees had their own housing. In their new conditions, they are forced to rent and face issues around extending their leases, which always remain uncertain. This forces them to revise their ideas about home. Home, as a stable space of comfort and a quiet harbour, is replaced by the awareness of its temporality.

For the one interviewee just mentioned (Interviewee 4 Poland) the sense of safety in her current location was also a problem. She discussed the risks of a Russian invasion of Poland and the possible need for new forced movement. Her sense of safety was lost along with her sense of home. At the same time, the main resources of re-

67 Interviewee 1 Slovenia.

silience and optimism of this woman in these conditions were the knowledge that all her relatives are nearby, and the family is together.

Another woman returned from Slovenia to Ukraine to her parents' house in the Chernihiv oblast. Going back to her homeland did not bring a feeling of returning home. This was partly because before the war, the woman lived with her family in Kharkiv, where she cannot return to for now because of active warfare in the Kharkiv oblast. Additionally, after the death of her father, she wanted to stay with her mother in the Chernihiv oblast and be closer to her relatives, who help with organisational things and caring for her child:

> I am still not calm. I'm still not home. Yes, I live with my parents, I have conveniences here. But I would like [to be] in Kharkiv. I love Kharkiv, all its cultural life, theatres… This joy of returning to the motherland was not complete. I have a constant feeling that we are in danger – as if we're always walking the edge of a perimeter someone else drew.[68]

The informant realised that returning home does not mean a return to life before the war. Her idea of home remains her idea of it from before the war: "Returning to the homeland did not return [me] to [my] former life at home" (Interviewee 8 Slovenia).

At the same time, through such awareness, the women began to think more about themselves. Isolation from their usual circles of communication allowed them to look at themselves and their interests and opportunities, and sometimes to feel a great sense of freedom through self-expression and attempts to try something new. For example, an interviewee from Germany, answering how she sees her future in three years, described changes in awareness around her own life that happened in connection with the move:

> If I understand the vector of where we are going, so far, I do not know, it's hard to say. […] This is a state of uncertainty. And over the past year, my priority has not shifted to where I am, not toward which country, how everything is arranged, but [my] priority is toward my favourite activities, what I do. Wherever I am, it is important for me to maintain a relationship with my husband and children. [It's] as if the binding to a place has gone, and what's important is the meaning of my life, and it is not so important where.[69]

Thus, the value of her home is replaced by an awareness of the priority of other values – self-realisation and family solidarity. This does not mean that they were not important earlier, but during the loss of her attachment to a specific space and the need

68 Interviewee 8 Slovenia, married, at the time of the interview, she returned to Chernihiv oblast with her daughter, who is nine years old.

69 Interviewee 5 Germany.

to adapt to new conditions, these values are filled with new meaning and require a new interpretation.

For the interviewees, the status of temporary protection is simultaneously both a status of protection and one associated with an awareness of the temporariness of their current position. When space becomes unstable and resources of support are temporary, these women learn to count on themselves, their own strengths, and to adapt to rapidly changing situations. This partially reflects a certain detraditionalisation of female roles. In conditions where home is temporary, these women devote more time and effort to ensure access to resources that will allow them to effectively react to possible risks and be more flexible and adaptive in the face of changes in particular. Primarily, this means ensuring a safe physical space, determining their professional prospects, and providing the optimal educational prospects and quality of life for their children.

Maternal Identities through the Prism of the Implementation of Maternal Practices

These women's stories about their organisation of an ordinary day allow us to understand which identities these forced migrant women prioritise. Specifically, this can be found in what their descriptions revolve around and the main topics the women return to in such descriptions. As this study shows, a typical day still revolves around maternal care tasks. However, this was especially difficult for working women who had to combine work and care for children of primary- and secondary-school age.

The typical day of a forced migrant woman looks different depending on the tasks she must deal with and the support networks she has access to. The daily infrastructures of motherhood in a new sociocultural setting can encompass a new "moral climate" (e.g., different notions of "good mothering") and a new "material context" (e.g., new schools and nursery schools, shops, and transport links between them).[70] For some of the women I spoke to, fulfilling their maternal role requires most of their energy and consumes most of their time. For example, one woman who left with her husband and four children jokingly described her main role as follows: "Temporarily [I] work as a taxi driver for my four children" (Interviewee 5 Slovenia), even though she has extensive professional experience working in international logistics. Under the conditions of forced migration, however, she prioritised taking care of her family and children.

Another woman, who left with only her two children and got a job in Poland, reveals a contrasting case. For this woman, an ordinary day is spent at work, lasting almost from morning to evening. Her work schedule is possible thanks to the support of her eldest son, who took on the function of caring for his younger brother

70 Jarvis, "Moving to London Time".

and cousins. She experienced motherhood in exile through restrictions in the implementation of her maternal role and expressed some dissatisfaction about this:

> My eldest son helped me out a lot. I couldn't cope with this schedule. He picked up the youngest from school. In the evening, my sister and I come [home]. The result is that the younger ones are under supervision. He was my lifesaver. The elder took the younger one for a massage, worked as a courier, delivered bouquets, earned his own money so that he could have his [own] money, took the younger one to a tutor. He was my main assistant. I don't know what I would do if I were alone with a six-year-old child. I don't know what kind of job I could go for… It's very difficult when you have a young child, and you are alone – where will you go?[71]

Mothers of high-school children had an easier time combining professional and maternal responsibilities, because at that age, their children no longer required such active and direct maternal care. At the same time, these women often spoke about not communicating enough with their children:

> My problem is that I spend little time with my child. I spend little time [with her] because I need to earn money. But my daughter needs me… So, this is my day – I get up, quickly prepare food, clean up, do everything necessary for [my] daughter's arrival from school, and go to work. She is very independent, 12 years old. We are always on the phone. I also take the day off when she has the day off to spend more time with her.[72]

Many interviewees reported that children over 10 years old could organise their lives and daily routines independently and take care of younger siblings. But for some women, the need to combine work and childcare was accompanied by a feeling of lack of communication with their children, which can be considered an invisible social problem of working forced migrant women who held the sole parenting responsibility.

The Maternal Multitasking of Forced Migrant Women as "Resistance in the Rear"

As I noted earlier, the need to combine childcare, implement new adaptation practices, and engage in professional responsibilities may become a source of social and psychological overload for forced migrant women. This multitasking defines new contours of responsible parenthood during the absence of or limited access to familiar institutions and agents that help with care. But the interviews showed that, for many of the women, the increase in multitasking became normal. This effect

71 Interviewee 2 Poland.

72 Interviewee 6 Slovenia.

can be called "resistance in the rear". On the one hand, this can be an indicator of women's perceived responsibility for their own and their children's integration in the host country. On the other hand, it can be a manifested national identity of these Ukrainian women. It is no coincidence that in some interviews, the women mentioned how the war transforms the image of them which may also be an important component of their current national identity:

> I think that I have completely stopped biting myself. I'm no longer afraid of anything. I understand that if I was able "to saddle this horse" in Poland, I was able to speak Polish, I was able to learn a new profession, I was able to get out of all this, if anything will happen and something will have to change, I'm not afraid of it, it doesn't scare me. We are cool… You won't see a Ukrainian mother sitting on the porch. This will be a well-groomed woman with a higher education, often two, who does not need to be taught the alphabet. Therefore, we showed our capacity to the whole world that we can come, learn a language, master a profession, [and] our children are all educated, go to school, and do well in it.[73]

> I believe that those [Ukrainians] who are currently in other countries must prove that Ukraine is a nation capable of living with dignity, [that its people are capable of] knowing the language of the country they moved to and bearing the title of Ukrainian with dignity.[74]

There is a certain image that they tried to convey here. There are significance and pride in "being a Ukrainian woman" "who has coped with everything". These ideas are expressed by women who have had good results with integration, found a job, volunteered, and demonstrated a high level of social activity. It can also be assumed that such a position of resistance results from a certain guilt complex of forced migrant women who do not want to complain, thinking that this is unethical in relation to those who are still in unsafe conditions in Ukraine. This position can also be seen as a form of national solidarity.

Conclusion

The experiences of Ukrainian forced migrant women illustrate the complex interplay between gender, displacement, caregiving, and integration into host countries. In this research, to study the experience of such women with children, I used a synthesised theoretical framework, which combines feminist theories of motherhood,

73 Interviewee 2 Poland.

74 Interviewee 5 Slovenia.

theories of caregiving in transnational contexts, and theories of care regimes and temporality.

A unifying analytical lens that synthesises these theories into a qualitative study devoted to the experience of the forced migration of Ukrainian mothers made it possible to distinguish some features of their motherhood. First, the temporary protection status places women in suspended time– legally accepted but without long-term guarantees – forcing them to continuously improvise their maternal roles and family strategies. Second, the caregiving work of these women has a transnational format, as they operate – emotionally, economically, and culturally – in multiple national contexts simultaneously, maintaining ties with Ukraine while adapting to the host country's systems (e.g., education, healthcare, social norms). Third, maternal agency is expressed through material, emotional, practical, and moral caregiving, the effectiveness of which is determined largely by formal (institutional) and informal (volunteer, familial) networks. Finally, forced migration induces a shift in how women understand and perform motherhood, often amplifying their self-perception as capable, resilient, and socially visible agents – what some refer to as the rise of the identity of the "resilient Ukrainian woman".

For my interviewees, motherhood emerges not only as a site of vulnerability but also as a source of resilience, activism, and women's agency. This analysis highlights how different types of caregiving – material, emotional, moral, practical, and personal – function as central organising principles in these women's everyday lives, reshaping their adaptation strategies and future planning. Support networks, both institutional and informal, are pivotal in mediating these women's integration and influencing their employment trajectories, access to the healthcare and education systems, and decisions regarding whether to remain or return. Language-learning, volunteering, and flexible labour strategies become tools not just of survival but of empowerment. Despite initial feelings of helplessness, shame, and trauma, these women actively engage in reconstructing their lives. At the same time, some phenomena recorded in the study – bureaucratic delays, housing insecurity, education system misfits, and emotional isolation – indicate an urgent necessity for more targeted, gender-sensitive policies that recognise and support the multifaceted roles these women fulfil.

Forced migration challenges traditional maternal roles, while simultaneously expanding their meanings. Women are compelled to renegotiate their identities as mothers, workers, caregivers, and migrants within unfamiliar sociocultural contexts. For my interviewees, the transition from maternal care embedded in familiar support systems in Ukraine to caregiving in host countries results in new infrastructures, expectations, and temporal-spatial demands. This shift is most clearly reflected in the ways these women organise their daily life, manage childcare, access medical and educational services, and seek psychological stability for themselves and their children. The women's stories also demonstrate the emotional cost

of caregiving amid trauma, particularly in situations of family separation, language barriers, and medical uncertainty. The psychological well-being of both mothers and children is closely tied to their ability to maintain a sense of control and continuity, especially through educational engagement and cultural adaptation. The emotional labour of sustaining children's mental health often falls solely on mothers, who must act as mediators, motivators, and emotional anchors while simultaneously managing their own grief and displacement.

Education emerges as both a stressor and a stabiliser. While institutional inclusion of children into host country schools helps accelerate family integration, dual schooling reflects ongoing uncertainties about returning. Mothers are deeply involved in managing their children's educational trajectories, viewing school not only as an academic domain but a site of cultural negotiation, identity preservation, and future planning.

Crucially, decisions about staying or returning are heavily influenced by caregiving considerations. Women who return do so not simply due to failed integration, but often as a continuation of maternal and familial obligations – caring for elderly parents, addressing children's problems in local schools, or coping with financial pressure. The decision to return, as shown, is often reactive rather than planned, illustrating how caregiving responsibilities restructure women's mobility and life strategies.

The experience of forced migration described by these women indicates the non-linearity of this process, its determination by various factors of planned (e.g., features of migration policy, employment prospects in Ukraine and abroad, educational opportunities) and spontaneous events (e.g., sickness or death of family members, military losses, etc.). In this regard, life trajectories are difficult to predict. At the same time, it is obvious that the experience of forced migration significantly transforms maternal practices for many women due to them becoming the main carers for their children, and leads to a reassessment of their identities, not only related to motherhood, but also in professional, national, and civil terms. In this sense, descriptions of transforming identities during a woman's longer-term stay in a foreign country on a temporary basis allow for studying phenomena such as double integration, forced solo motherhood, and a postmigration work-life balance, among other issues.

"Resistance in the rear" also permeates many narratives. For some, their maternal efforts become part of a broader national identity: proving Ukrainian dignity, adaptability, and strength to the host society and themselves. Here, maternal care is not only a personal or familial endeavour but a symbolic act of cultural representation and resistance.

In summary, this study offers a multifaceted understanding of motherhood under forced migration: one that intertwines vulnerability with resilience, constraint with creativity, and caregiving with empowerment. It emphasises that policies and

integration programs must account for the nuanced realities of migrant women's lives – not only in terms of legal status and employment, but also in terms of caregiving infrastructure, emotional labour, and the relational dynamics that define their everyday experiences. These insights should inform more comprehensive and humane approaches to refugee and migrant support that focus on the lives, experiences, and voices of women who, despite profound disruption, continue to build futures for themselves and their children.

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Returning to the Past?

Typology of Decision-Making of Ukrainian Forced Migrants in the Czech Republic and Germany[1]

Matej Jungwirth and Neonila Glukhodid

Introduction

Meaning-making and motivations for refugee return are understudied in general and they are particularly puzzling in the case of Ukrainians displaced after the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. First, returns to Ukraine are occurring in the middle of an ongoing conflict characterised, inter alia, by widespread airstrikes on civilian infrastructure; this contradicts the most basic international understandings of refugee repatriation as a process principally undertaken when conditions at home are both safe and sustainable. Second, EU member states hosting Ukrainian forced migrants after 2022 have been exceptionally receptive, both relative to other crises of forced displacement and overall – invoking for the first time the European Union's temporary protection directive that grants Ukrainian refugees unprecedented access to education, housing, health, and work in EU member states.[2] Third, although refugee return is almost always the preferred "durable solution" to

1 This research project was generously supported by Northwestern University's Department of Political Science, the Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies cluster at Northwestern University, and the Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Affairs. We thank Rana Khoury and Sarah Moore for their immensely helpful advice and support in the early stages of this research. Victoria Haykal was instrumental in interpreting and facilitating the refugee interviews in the Czech Republic. We are grateful for the excellent feedback and comments we received from Dr. Kuzemska, who expertly edited this volume, an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript, at the ASEEES 2023 meeting, at the Interdisciplinary Workshop "Ukrainian Refugees in Germany and the United States after the War: Implications for Global Refugee Policy" in June 2024 at the University of Passau, and the Prisma Ukraïna 2024 workshop. Finally, and most importantly, we are indebted to the displaced Ukrainians who spent countless hours in conversations with us and who trusted us with sharing their personal experiences and narratives.

2 Nicholas R. Micinski, "The E.U. Granted Ukrainian Refugees Temporary Protection. Why the Different Response from Past Migrant Crises?", *Washington Post Monkey Cage*, 16 March 2022,

displacement crises in the view of international organisations, donor governments, and host and origin states of refugees, voluntary repatriation has been in global decline since its peak in the late twentieth century. Between 2010 and 2019, fewer than 4 million refugees voluntarily returned to their countries of origin globally, compared to 10 million in the previous decade and more than 15 million two decades prior – even as the world refugee population has continuously increased over the same period.[3]

In light of these paradoxes and the significant crossings of Ukrainians into a home state at war, we ask two overarching research questions. First, how do individual Ukrainians displaced abroad navigate, in their own words, the decision-making around a return? Second, we ask, why are some displaced Ukrainians actively committing to remaining abroad or returning while others remain indecisive?

In answering these admittedly intertwined questions, we build on existing research into the meanings of refugee return,[4] as well as the drivers of return[5] and the politics of return in host states,[6] origin states,[7] and the international refugee regime.[8] In particular, we foreground understandings of refugees and forced mi-

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/16/eu-granted-ukrainian-refugees-temporary-protection-why-different-response-past-migrant-crises/ [accessed: 01.12.2025].

3 *UNHCR*, "Global Trends Report 2021", 16 June 2022, https://www.unhcr.org/media/40152 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

4 Barry N. Stein and Frederick C. Cuny, "Refugee Repatriation during Conflict: Protection and Post-Return Assistance", *Development in Practice* 4/3, 1994, 173–187, https://doi.org/10.1080/09614529100077811 [accessed: 01.12.2025]; Khalid Koser and Richard Black, "The End of the Refugee Cycle?", in: Richard Black and Khalid Koser (eds.), *The End of the Refugee Cycle? Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999; Roger Zetter, "Refugees and Their Return Home: Unsettling Matters*", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34/1, 2021, 7–22, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab005 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

5 Faten Ghosn et al., "The Journey Home: Violence, Anchoring, and Refugee Decisions to Return", *American Political Science Review* 115/3, 2021, 982–998, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000344 [accessed: 01.12.2025]. Ala Alrababah et al., "The Dynamics of Refugee Return: Syrian Refugees and Their Migration Intentions", *SocArXiv*, 2022, https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/7t2wd [accessed: 01.12.2025].

6 Tamirace Fakhoury, "Refugee Return and Fragmented Governance in the Host State: Displaced Syrians in the Face of Lebanon's Divided Politics", *Third World Quarterly* 42/1, 2021, 162–180, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1762485 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

7 Stephanie Schwartz, "Home, Again: Refugee Return and Post-Conflict Violence in Burundi", *International Security* 44/2, 2019, 110–145, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00362 [accessed: 01.12.2025]; Megan Bradley, *Refugee Repatriation: Justice, Responsibility and Redress*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

8 Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, "Repatriation: Under What Conditions Is It the Most Desirable Solution for Refugees? An Agenda for Research", *African Studies Review* 32/1, 1989, 41–69, https://doi.org/10.2307/524493 [accessed: 01.12.2025].

grants, not as mere victims, but as survivors of adversity[9] with unique political agency and aspirations.[10] That is, to understand the meanings and drivers of return, we begin with a view of forced migrants as whole and individual persons with politics and attachments that precede, persist in, and succeed their displacement.

In this article, we first outline our two-pronged research design, using a mix of in-depth interviews with forced migrants from Ukraine in the Czech Republic and Germany and an original survey fielded in the Czech Republic in the fall of 2024. We then offer a concise summary and descriptive insights concerning the questions of return and decision-making. In the main part of the article, we then build on existing scholarship on refugees' decision-making and cognitive states to inductively develop a typology of their return decision-making states, based primarily on our interview data. This typology is built along two constitutive dimensions: *Commitment to Action* and *Future Imaginaries of Ukraine*, which are both described in detail. This draft typology is our major contribution to the study of how individuals displaced outside their own country think about going back home.[11] We then empirically test the utility of this typology using a recent survey of forced migrants from Ukraine in the Czech Republic. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for both academics and policymakers in the EU (and beyond) who ponder the medium and long-term dynamics of refugee returns (or lack thereof).

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9 Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, "Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees Be Humane?", *Human Rights Quarterly* 24, 2002, 51–85.

10 Karen Jacobsen, "Durable Solutions and the Political Action of Refugees", in: Megan Bradley, James Milner, and Blair Peruniak (eds.), *Refugees' Roles in Resolving Displacement and Building Peace*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019, 23–38; Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts, and Evan Easton-Calabria, *The Global Governed? Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020; Ashwini Vasanthakumar, "Exiles on Main Street", *Aeon*, 23 February 2021, https://aeon.co/essays/to-respect-exiles-dont-think-of-them-as-angels-or-demons [accessed: 01.12.2025]; Laia Balcells and Abbey Steele, "Warfare, Political Identities, and Displacement in Spain and Colombia", *Political Geography* 51, 2016, 15–29, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.11.007 [accessed: 01.12.2025]; Abbey Steele, *Democracy and Displacement in Colombia's Civil War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017; Cindy Horst, "Refugees, Peacebuilding, and the Anthropology of the Good", in: Megan Bradley, James Milner, and Blair Peruniak (eds.), *Refugees' Roles in Resolving Displacement and Building Peace*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019, 39–54.

11 In this article, we approach return decision-making through a binary perspective, as a choice between remaining in the current place of refuge (Germany and the Czech Republic in our case) and returning to Ukraine; this is, of course, a simplification that does not, for now, take into account scenarios where Ukrainian forced migrants would move to another EU country or elsewhere, beyond the EU.

Discussion

As Müller-Funk and Fransen point out, most research addressing the question of the return of so-called Forcibly Displaced Persons investigates the structural and material conditions shaping individuals' decision whether to return to their home countries.[12] Scholars of this tradition compare and contrast different aspects of economic, legal, security, and social conditions in both the refugee host countries and home countries (also known as the "push and pull factors" theory, which has been a mainstay of the migration scholarship since at least 1960[13]). A more recent wave of scholarship has turned to micro-level affective drivers of return such as emotive states,[14] memories,[15] a sense of political and or social belonging,[16] and feelings of aspirations and hope.[17] There have already been many surveys targeting Ukrainians displaced abroad after the full-scale Russian invasion in early 2022. Within the EU alone, these include, inter alia, surveys in Germany,[18] Poland,[19] and the Czech Re-

12 Lea Müller-Funk and Sonja Fransen, "'I Will Return Strong': The Role of Life Aspirations in Refugees' Return Aspirations", *International Migration Review* 57/4, 2023, 1739–1770, https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183221131554 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

13 Everett S. Lee, "A Theory of Migration", *Demography* 3/1, 1966, 47–57, https://doi.org/10.2307/2060063 [accessed: 02.12.2025]; Nicholas Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell, and Katy Long, "Push-Pull plus: Reconsidering the Drivers of Migration", in: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44/6, 2018, 927–944, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384135 [accessed: 02.12.2025]; Hein de Haas, "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework", *Comparative Migration Studies* 9/1, 2021, 8, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

14 Francis L. Collins, "Desire as a Theory for Migration Studies: Temporality, Assemblage and Becoming in the Narratives of Migrants", in: Francis L. Collins (ed.), *Aspiration, Desire and the Drivers of Migration* London: Routledge, 2020, 56–72.

15 Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia, "'The Sweet Memories of Home Have Gone': Displaced People Searching for Home in a Liminal Space", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45/9, 2019, 1515–1531, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1491299 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

16 Faten Ghosn et al., "The Journey Home: Violence, Anchoring, and Refugee Decisions to Return", *American Political Science Review* 115/3, 2021, 982–998, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000344 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

17 Cathrine Brun, "Active Waiting and Changing Hopes: Toward a Time Perspective on Protracted Displacement", *Social Analysis* 59/1, 2015, 19–37, https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2015.590102 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

18 Herbert Brücker et al., "Ukrainian Refugees in Germany: Evidence From a Large Representative Survey", *Comparative Population Studies* 48, 2023, 395–424, https://doi.org/10.12765/CPoS-2023-16 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

19 Maciej Duszczyk and Paweł Kaczmarczyk, "Poland and War Refugees from Ukraine – Beyond Pure Aid", *CESifo Forum* 23/4, 2022, 36–40.

public.[20] These country-level studies of Ukrainian return aspirations tend to rely on either descriptive survey data from a variety of samples or on a smaller number of qualitative in-depth interviews with displaced Ukrainians. Further, there have been a few studies using a cross-country sample of Ukrainian forced migrants spanning several EU countries; one of these, fielded in eight European countries, found that, among Ukrainian forced migrants, "individual-level effects are remarkably consistent across different European countries, suggesting that country- and individual-level conditions independently shape return intentions".[21] Additionally, others have found that, when it comes to understanding what triggers the return of displaced Ukrainians, the quality of life, availability of work abroad and conflict intensity in Ukrainian territories play significant roles in the calculus of return for displaced individuals, which maps well onto the existing push-pull framework of forced displacement and returns.[22]

While many of the existing surveys cover the question of the return of displaced Ukrainians in different ways, the theme of return decision-making is too often either undertheorised or even presented in merely descriptive terms. Qualitative studies typically cover the respondents' return plans but then fail to inductively build an overarching framework governing the return decision-making of displaced Ukrainians. Quantitative studies, on the other hand, too often stop at merely reporting the aggregate frequencies of displaced Ukrainians declaring their willingness to return, without investigating it further. With this research project, we contribute to this budding theorising of refugee returns by foregrounding individual emotive and cognitive states as drivers of return. Drawing from our granular, individual-level interviews with displaced Ukrainians, we argue that refugees' return decision-making is influenced by two main factors: cognitive updating vis-à-vis the situation in their home country and a commitment to a specific future course of action (remain or return). Thus, our research offers an important contribution to the existing literature on refugee returns in the main and, more specifically, to the expanding study of Ukrainians displaced from their homeland after 2022. Additionally, the proposed typology should be of interest to policymakers and NGOs in EU countries

20 Martina Kavanova, "Voice of Ukrainians: Education, Housing, Employment, Poverty, Mental Health", *PAQ Research*, 7 November 2022, https://www.paqresearch.cz/post/voice-of-ukrainians-education-housing-employment-poverty-mental-health/ [accessed: 02.12.2025].

21 Frank van Tubergen et al., "Return Intentions among Ukrainian Refugees in Europe: A Cross-National Study", *International Migration* 62/5, 2024, 181–198, https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13291 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

22 Mykola Sydorov, Svitlana Salnikova, and Anna Severyn, "(Non-)Return of Ukrainian War Refugees: Modeling Repatriation Using Logistic Regression", *Sociological Studios* 2/25, 2024, 81–93, https://doi.org/10.29038/2306-3971-2024-02-33-33 [accessed: 02.12.2025]; Joop Adema et al., "The Effect of Conflict on Ukrainian Refugees' Return and Integration", *CESifo Working Paper No. 10877*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4696018 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

hosting large numbers of displaced Ukrainians. The proposed framework allows for a more precise and nuanced differentiation within the population of Ukrainian recipients of the Temporary Protection status and, consequently, permits a more effective long-term support and service provision.

Research Design and Methodology

Our analysis and conceptualisation of refugee decision-making states relies on two distinct, yet related, data sources: in-depth interviews and a panel survey of displaced Ukrainians. The first (interview) part of this project took place in the summer of 2023 in two EU countries hosting large populations of displaced Ukrainians, the Czech Republic and Germany. These countries were chosen because the co-authors had close professional and personal connections there, which significantly eased the process of interviewee recruitment and familiarity with host country norms. The semi-structured interviews undertaken in both countries followed the same general template while also permitting the exploration of new topics emerging during these conversations. Prior to the commencement of the interview-phase, the authors also secured approval for the recruitment strategy, informed consent procedure and data management from Northwestern University's IRB office. With the consent of our interview partners, we recorded the interviews and ensured that these recordings were stored separately from any personal identifiers for the sake of anonymity and human subject protection. Interviews conducted in Ukrainian or Russian were then transcribed using Whisper AI software and translated into English. These transcriptions were then reviewed for accuracy and precision by the authors of this study.

The table below summarises the interview phase of the research project in the two EU countries. We used snowball recruitment and interviewee referrals in both countries. In the Czech Republic, all interviews took place in Prague and most of them (12 out of 17) were with Czech volunteers, NGO representatives and government officials who have been involved in the process of receiving and processing the influx of displaced Ukrainians. However, for the purposes of this article, we omitted these interviews with host country nationals, as we chose to foreground the perspectives of the displaced Ukrainians themselves. In the Czech Republic, the interviews were carried out in Russian or English. In Germany, on the other hand, most of the interviews were with forced migrants themselves (11 out of 15) and Ukrainian was the dominant language for these people. Finally, all interviewees but one were women in both countries and the sample in the Czech Republic had a lower average age than in Germany. Nearly all the interviews were recorded, with the verbal consent of the interviewees. Where the permission for recording was not granted, the interviewers wrote down notes during the interviews. All interview quotes used in this paper are direct quotes that have been de-identified to protect the respondents' anonymity.

Table 1: Summary of the fieldwork with displaced Ukrainians in Germany and Czech Republic.

	Czech Republic	Germany
Total no. of interviews	17	15
Location	Prague	Berlin, Munich, Nuremberg, Franconia region of Bavaria
Interviews with displaced Ukrainians	5	11
Interviews with volunteers	12	4
Language	Russian/English	Ukrainian/Russian
Gender (displaced Ukrainians)	All female	10 female, 1 male
Mean age (displaced Ukrainians)	31	42
Interview length	∼1 hour	∼2.5 hours

It should be noted, however, that the sample of displaced Ukrainians that we interviewed is not representative of the displaced Ukrainian population in Germany or the Czech Republic, despite the diversity of our sample. This is due to the nature and aim of research questions and the methodology that we utilised at this stage of the project. Specifically, we relied on snowball sampling to recruit our interviewees before and during our fieldwork. Snowball sampling is used as a recruitment strategy when studying hard-to-reach populations such as discriminated minorities, undocumented migrants or (relevant for the research at hand), forcibly displaced people.[23] With this strategy, the previously recruited participants refer other potential participants to the researchers at the end of the interview. There are additional benefits to snowball sampling as well. Since the introduction to the study and its interlocutors happens through the refugees' personal network, it helps to establish the initial level of trust between the interviewer(s) and refugees. This is beneficial in terms of helping to reduce the social desirability bias inherent in research pertaining to questions of using social benefits, (non)return home, and various social, economic, and political drivers of displacement. Further, in practical terms, snowball sampling helps re-

23 Jean Faugier and Mary Sargeant, "Sampling Hard to Reach Populations", *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 26/4, 1997, 790–797, https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1997.00371.x [accessed: 02.12.2025]; Abdolreza Shaghaghi, Raj S Bhopal, and Aziz Sheikh, "Approaches to Recruiting 'Hard-To-Reach' Populations into Research: A Review of the Literature", *Health Promotion Perspectives* 1/2, 2011, 86–94, https://doi.org/10.5681/hpp.2011.009 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

cruit participants by providing a personal point of contact in an environment where the researcher is inevitably in an outsider position and unfamiliar with, for example, the social networks that refugees use.

Nevertheless, snowball sampling also carries considerably downsides with it, such as the lack of representativeness,[24] relatedly limited sample heterogeneity,[25] and external validity of the research findings.[26] As critics have noted, researchers deploying snowball sampling in various contexts risk getting trapped in a single, homogeneous network of refugees which even further limits the generalisability of the conclusions. To minimise the odds of this occurring in our study of displaced Ukrainians, we made sure to explore various locations, social media applications, and to gain multiple entry points into different communities of displaced Ukrainians in Germany and the Czech Republic. While this does not make our sample representative, it helps reduce selection bias.

Still, our second data source offers a methodologically fitting complement to the in-depth interviews with displaced Ukrainians. In the summer of 2024, we partnered with the Prague-based Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences. This organisation has been responsible for setting up and maintaining a panel survey of displaced Ukrainians in the Czech Republic titled "The Voice of the Ukrainians".[27] With the first wave of surveys collected in June 2022, this panel survey has become an invaluable source for assessing the needs and preferences of the rapidly increasing population of displaced Ukrainians in the Czech Republic. Profoundly informed and guided by our interviews from the summer prior, we designed a survey module (also IRB-compliant) for the ninth wave of this panel survey, focusing on the return decision-making of displaced Ukrainians in the Czech Republic. This module included direct questions about the choice between returning to Ukraine and remaining in the Czech Republic, the number of visits to Ukraine since displacement

24 Nissim Cohen and Tamar Arieli, "Field Research in Conflict Environments: Methodological Challenges and Snowball Sampling", *Journal of Peace Research* 48/4, 2011, 423–435, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343311405698 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

25 Xeturah Woodley and Megan Lockard, "Womanism and Snowball Sampling: Engaging Marginalized Populations in Holistic Research", *The Qualitative Report* 21/1, 2016, 321–329, https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2198 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

26 Ruth Fassinger and Susan L. Morrow, "Toward Best Practices in Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed- Method Research: A Social Justice Perspective", *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology* 5/2, 1 May 2013, 69–83, https://doi.org/10.33043/JSACP.5.2 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

27 Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, "Hlas Ukrajinců v Česku: Výzkum zkušeností a potřeb uprchlíků v českém vzdělávání", ("The voice of Ukrainians in Czechia: research into the experiences and needs of refugees in Czech education"), 01 August 2022, https://www.soc.cas.cz/cz/aktuality/z-medii/aktualita-hlas-ukrajincu-v-cesku-vyzkum-zkusenosti-potreb-uprchliku-v-ceskem-vzdelavani [accessed: 02.12.2025].

and an open-ended question seeking to ascertain, in their own words, the respondents' top considerations and concerns when thinking about returning to Ukraine.

The survey was collected online (Computer-Assisted Web Interview [CAWI] via respondents' smartphones) in November 2024 with a total sample of 1,048 respondents. The response rate for this wave of the panel survey was 27% and average completion time was 33 minutes. The survey sample is representative of the population of displaced Ukrainians who have applied for temporary protection in the Czech Republic after February 2022 based on gender, age category and region of residence in the Czech Republic. The last category is of particular importance from a survey methodology standpoint, as many displaced Ukrainians in the Czech Republic (and indeed in other EU countries) have, understandably, clustered in large urban centres. The official registration statistics of the Czech Ministry of Interior, which oversees the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), were used as population frames. This panel survey is unique in the European context both due to its long-running nature with frequent waves of data collection and to its formal synchronisation with official, country-wide population statistics about displaced Ukrainians to ensure robust sample representativeness.

Thus, to distinguish between these two distinct data sources in our analysis, we mark the origin of a given citation clearly. Interview sources are prefaced with "Interview" while quotes from the panel survey are prefaced with "Survey". Additionally, we make a point of including additional anonymised demographic and background information about our interviewees, such as approximate age and the date and location of the interview as well as other biographical information about the respondents, when appropriate and relevant.

While the interviews with displaced Ukrainians took place through research trips to both Germany and the Czech Republic in the summer of 2023, the online survey was fielded only among the displaced Ukrainians in the Czech Republic in the fall of 2024. This raises three related concerns: one with regards to the logic of cross-case comparison, the second with regards to temporal separation between the two modes of data collection and the third about the two different types of input data used. We decided against focusing exclusively on one European country hosting large numbers of displaced Ukrainians precisely because we wanted to evaluate the extent of cross-country differences in refugees' experiences and return aspirations. Interestingly, while the overarching legal framework of the TPD should be uniform across the entire EU, it quickly became clear that there was variation in its implementation and operationalisation even between Germany and the neighbouring Czech Republic. Secondly, there was a gap of approximately one year between the interview phase and the survey phase, which is important to keep in mind with regards to inquiries into the return decision-making of displaced Ukrainians.

Finally, while the interviews draw from conversations with displaced Ukrainians in both Germany and the Czech Republic, the 2024 survey was only fielded

among Ukrainians in the Czech Republic. The chief reasons for this were financial constraints and the cost-burden of collecting high-quality survey data among vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations. We still believe in the value of combining these two data sources, with the necessary caveat that the survey findings are limited to the Czech Republic only. Taken together, these methodological choices are different ways to triangulate and study a core question in this article: How do displaced Ukrainians in Europe think about returning to Ukraine? To this end, we cover two different EU countries (Germany and the Czech Republic), two different moments after the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine (summer of 2023 and fall of 2024) and two different methods of inquiry (in-depth qualitative interviews and an online survey).

Summary Fieldwork Impressions and Survey Description

Before outlining our novel typology of return decision-making of displaced people, we present some broader insights drawn from both our interviews and the panel survey data. When our fieldwork took place in the summer of 2023, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine had already been ongoing for some 18 months, which means that the majority of our respondents had spent more than a year abroad. In the Czech Republic, the displaced Ukrainians had to reapply for their Temporary Protection Status to be renewed in March 2023, which created a distinct marker of the time spent in displacement, as these permits had to be renewed annually.

Among the displaced Ukrainians in the Czech Republic, the interviews revealed a widely shared sense of disappointment with the lived reality of the host country. Before the war, many Ukrainians idolised life in Western Europe, which, in their minds, included the Czech Republic, but having lived there for months after their displacement, many Ukrainians were disillusioned and once more appreciated their pre-war lives in Ukraine with a renewed enthusiasm. An often-mentioned example was an app called Dia, a widely implemented and popular e-Government tool in Ukraine; in the Czech Republic, no such equivalent exists. Any contact with the Czech state thus required time- and energy-consuming personal visits to various offices.

Further, during these conversations, a clear rift emerged between the Ukrainian community living in the Czech Republic before the full-scale invasion and those who came because of it. Our interviews with members of the latter group, who often spoke Russian and hailed from eastern and southern Ukraine, revealed their sense of rejection and alienation from the Ukrainian professionals (most often employed in construction or services) who had lived in the Czech Republic long before the full-scale invasion, and who, largely speaking Ukrainian, hailed mainly from western Ukraine. There was also a sense of increased economic competition for scarce jobs

available to Ukrainians in the country and worries about the wage-suppression effects of the sudden influx of thousands of new jobseekers.

In Germany, many displaced Ukrainians similarly complained about the amount of bureaucracy that accompanied any interaction with the German state, such as when obtaining documents or setting up welfare support. There was also a palpable sense of a job-skills mismatch among displaced Ukrainians with insufficient German skills who took up temporary jobs below their skill levels and professional experience, a reality shared by most refugees everywhere, as noted by the UNHCR.[28] Similar to what we have seen in the Czech Republic, rifts arose between Ukrainians present in Germany since before the full-scale invasion, who either hail from a professional immigration stream or various repatriation programs, and the displaced Ukrainians who started to arrive in 2022. Additionally, through our interviews we observed a newly emerging cleavage *within* the community of the displaced Ukrainians, one centred around one's place of origin within Ukraine; those who fled frontlines or occupied territories versus those displaced from relatively safer territories such as western or central Ukraine. Finally, for both our German and Czech respondents, many immediate, material concerns, such as securing income or finding stable housing, seemed to overshadow other factors (around political identity or national belonging) shaping individual approaches to the choice between remaining in the host country or returning to Ukraine. This finding ran somewhat contrary to our theoretical expectations of political identity being a key factor in the decision-making processes of displaced Ukrainians.

The panel survey, fielded in the Czech Republic in late 2024, provides a snapshot from nearly three years after the full-scale invasion and 18 months after we concluded our in-country interview phase. The topline results reveal a substantial preference towards staying in the Czech Republic within the next two years, with only one in five displaced Ukrainians in the country indicating a willingness to return to Ukraine (and a mere 9% of the total declaring that they would "definitely" do so). Even among those Ukrainians who profess their desire to return to Ukraine, only some 15% of them have made specific arrangements or plans for enacting their return. Thus, in late 2024, returning to Ukraine was a preferred short-term outcome for a minority of Ukrainians in the Czech Republic (and there is little reason to assume that similar numbers would not apply to the Ukrainian population of Germany as well) and individuals with a pre-determined plan of return were an exception rather than the norm.

28 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "High Employment Rates, but Low Wages: A Poverty Assessment of Ukrainian Refugees in Neighboring Countries", 17 March 2025, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/115013 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

Figure 1: Return intentions of displaced Ukrainians in the Czech Republic.

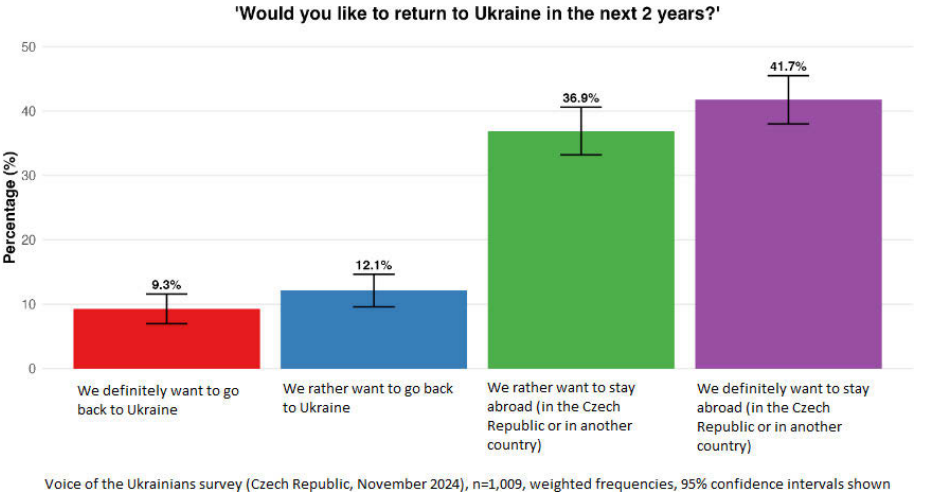
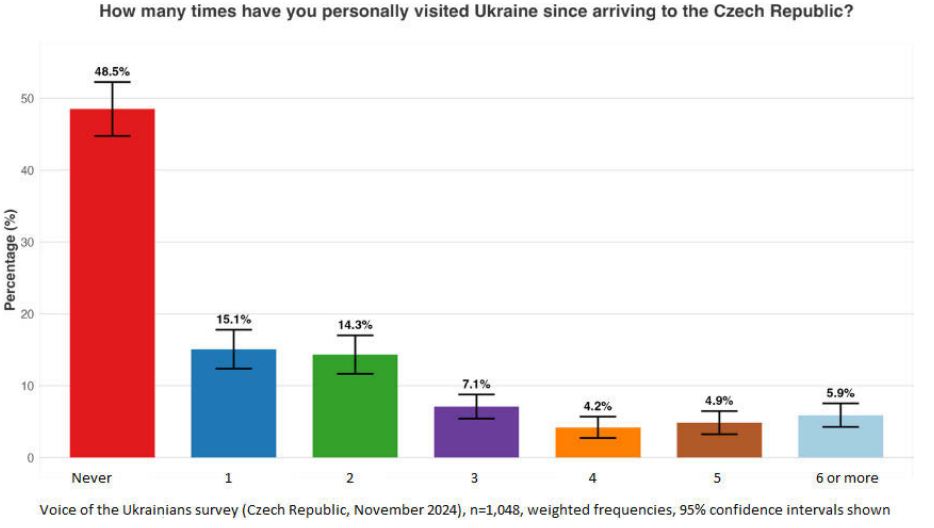


Figure 2: Frequency of temporary returns to Ukraine since displacement to the Czech Republic.



However, the survey results also show that short-term and temporary visits to Ukraine are more frequent than the general preference towards staying in the Czech Republic would suggest. As shown below, approximately half the displaced Ukrainians in the Czech Republic have gone back to Ukraine at least once since their displacement from their homeland. Further, some 11% of the displaced Ukrainians pop-

ulation in the country have gone back to Ukraine five or more times, demonstrating remarkable mobility and resilience in the face of an ongoing war of aggression.

Typology of Refugee Return Decision-states

Through our fieldwork in the summer of 2023, we were afforded the rare opportunity of multiple hours-long interviews with displaced Ukrainians (with host country officials aiding). Thus, the proposed typology represents an inductive process resulting from these in-depth, semi-structured conversations with displaced individuals in Germany and the Czech Republic.

Some of our interviewees were more at ease describing the return trajectories or decision-making of others (family members, close friends or even acquaintances), than their own return plans. We suggest that this seemingly minor detail masks a broader underlying trend; the act of return might be contentious and fraught with normative implications, which makes some displaced Ukrainians more comfortable discussing the return plans of others than sharing their own plans directly. However, this could also be a sign of their broader approach to return decision-making. In the absence of clarity and confidence about their own future course of actions, then, these individuals might be searching for the best course of action through explicit evaluations and accounts of the actions of other displaced individuals in a similar predicament.

Regardless of the willingness of individual displaced Ukrainians to freely disclose their own preferences around return, we propose that the typology we developed below offers a helpful way of interpreting forcibly displaced individuals' thinking about return. The first vertical axis, *Commitment to Action*, indicates whether an individual displaced Ukrainian has resolved to either return home or stay in the host country in the foreseeable future. This does not preclude envisioning a return to Ukraine at some point in the distant future, but it means that the person is actively committed to either leaving or remaining in the host country in the medium term and is making plans and life choices accordingly (by seeking a permanent housing solution, for example, or by pursuing employment opportunities). Importantly, for this dimension, the distinction between the two categories is not between "remain" and "leave" (as in most traditional approaches to mobility of displaced people) but rather between "committed" and "not committed" to a particular course of action. That is, the key consideration here is whether any given displaced individual has *reached a decision* regarding their future mobility. We argue that whether an individual has committed to a particular course of action depends on the agency-in-waiting and how it shapes an imaginary of the future at home or abroad.

Agency and waiting in the context of protracted displacement have been explored in depth by other researchers. Earlier work on the subject matter con-

ceptualised the experience of displacement and connected it with waiting for the resolution of the state in terms of suspended, passive, or absent agency.[29] More recently, however, others have pointed out that refugees exercise a remarkable amount of agency even in waiting.[30] Far from being in a passive state of waiting for the war to end or for the asylum decision to come through, for example, refugees exercise agency through imaginaries of resettlement[31] or through specific steps taken towards resettlement.[32]

Through our interviews with displaced Ukrainians, we have observed a substantial variation in the lived experiences of waiting. We encountered individuals who have exhibited remarkable amounts of agency pursuing concrete actions and committed to a concrete imagery of the future. On the other hand, we also spoke to people whose personal testimonies of displacement showed that they find themselves in a passive state of waiting for circumstances to be resolved into a concrete pathway for them to pursue. In terms of narratives, these two *Commitment* categories differed in how concretely they spoke about how they imagined their future, be it in the host country or in Ukraine. In terms of actions, individuals with high *Commitment* spoke of concrete steps towards securing employment and integration in the host country or described detailed and actionable return plans. Conversely, those who were low in the *Commitment* dimension did not commit to a specific course of action in terms of job searches abroad, language course attendance, or searches for long-term accommodation solution either in the host country or back in Ukraine.

Among our interviewees, the narratives of the respondents that we placed in the category of passive waiting (low *Commitment* in our typology) were dominated by themes of generalised uncertainty and an emphasis on the need for predictability and certainty. When talking about the future, we encountered a generalised and diffuse imagery of what it means for Ukraine to be safe and what the respondents said

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29 Alison Mountz, "Where Asylum-Seekers Wait: Feminist Counter-Topographies of Sites between States", *Gender, Place & Culture* 18/3, 381–399, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2011.566370 [accessed: 02.12.2025]; Simon Turner, "What Is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29/2, 2016, 139–148, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev024 [accessed: 02.12.2025]; Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

30 Cathrine Brun, "Active Waiting and Changing Hopes: Toward a Time Perspective on Protracted Displacement", *Social Analysis* 59/1, 2015, 19–37; Retika Adhikari, "Temporalities of Resettlement: Date-Waiting for an American Future in a Bhutanese Refugee Camp in Nepal", *American Anthropologist* 123/2, June 2021, 237–249, https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13537 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

31 Niroshan Ramachandran and Zana Vathi, "Agency in Waiting? Everyday Tactics of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Glasgow", *European Journal of Social Work* 25/6, 22, 1104–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2117135 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

32 Adhikari, "Temporalities of Resettlement".

they needed in order to commit to a particular future in Ukraine or in a host country, for example: "it needs to be completely safe",[33] "that there is no danger from Russia",[34] "when the war *really* ends",[35] "when it becomes meaningful to build a future in Ukraine",[36] "when there is certainty about the future in Ukraine".[37] This stands in contrast to the group who articulated much more concrete expectations and ideas about the future. They tended to be more specific about the conditions of return or remain and they articulated a significantly more specific image of the place they would want to return to.

Table 2: Typology of refugee return decision-making states.

		Future Imaginaries of Ukraine	
		Future-in-the-future	**Future-in-the-past**
Commitment to Action	High	Acceptance	Denial
	Low	Pragmatism	Limbo

The second horizontal axis of our typology, *Future Imaginaries of Ukraine*, indicates whether a given displaced Ukrainian has internalised the reality in Ukraine they would be returning to, one very different from the lived reality of pre-invasion Ukraine. While this sentiment might be harder to glean from interviews or survey data, we consider these imageries of the future Ukraine a key factor in decision-making upon return. Of course, Ukrainians in Europe have been able to follow both national and local news from their homeland to a remarkable degree. What our interviews revealed, however, is that the factual knowledge of news from Ukraine alone does not imply any ability or readiness on the behalf of individuals to accept the post-war reality and its impact on their potential plans to return. Being in the *future-in-the-future* category in the *Future Imaginaries of Ukraine* dimension indicates that the individual is aware that they would be returning to a very different country

33 Interview in Russian, female Ukrainian in her early twenties, from eastern Ukrainian town, interviewed online, Germany, July 2023.

34 Interview in Ukrainian, female Ukrainian retiree, interviewed in Bavaria, Germany, July 2023.

35 Interview in Ukrainian, female Ukrainian in her forties (former administrative worker), from southern Ukrainian city, interviewed in Bavaria, Germany, July 2023.

36 Interview in Ukrainian, female Ukrainian in her early thirties (IT professional), from Kyiv in Ukraine, interviewed in Berlin, Germany, July 2023.

37 Interview in Russian, female Ukrainian in her early twenties, from eastern Ukrainian town, interviewed online, Germany, July 2023.

and society than the one they left, one fraught with physical destruction, poor economic prospects, and new inequalities within Ukrainian society. Conversely, being in the *future-in-the-past* category indicates that the respondents predominantly populate the image of the future with ideas and imageries drawn from the past. In other words, our respondents from this category tended to expect to be able to return to the past, be it to previous social relations, to their jobs, or to physically unaltered hometowns.

In scholarship on migration, researchers have offered a useful conceptualisation of the role of cognitive processes in migration aspirations. Koikkalainen and Kyle refer to this as "cognitive migration", a process where future migrants engage in imagining their future in a destination country either in material or relational terms.[38] They also argue that imageries of the future shape the decisions, plans and choices of individuals. We incorporate this into the *Future Imaginaries of Ukraine* dimension: a cognitive and affective act of realising that any return to the past-in-the-future, through physical return to one's homeland, is no longer possible.

Refugees whose image of the future is populated by the past often dream of "a future they cannot reach, which often lies in the past and is represented by the places and lives they were forced to leave".[39] We devised the concept of future-in-the-past as an image that shapes the decision-making process on return by imposing a dissonance constraint: Future-in-the-past thinkers, when confronting reality, must either reject it at the expense of their own image of the future or reject their own image of what a possible future must actually entail. For the latter type, they thus risk ending up in a state of protracted uncertainty, which is often accompanied by feelings of being stuck, of experiencing time as if at standstill, of meaninglessness with respect to the present, and, equally importantly, of the experience of boredom.[40]

As is clear from Table 2 above, for the sake of brevity, we chose to use both the *Commitment to Action* and *Future Imaginaries of Ukraine* dimensions as a binary, with a High/Low classification. This is assuredly a simplification but one that suffices in our project of inductive theory-building from our interviews and which offers, we believe, great clarity. Together, these two dimensions produce a typology of four different results that summarise the different mental states accompanying return decision-making among refugees.

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38 Saara Koikkalainen and David Kyle, "Imagining Mobility: The Prospective Cognition Question in Migration Research", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42/5, 2016, 759–776, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1111133 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

39 Brun, "Active Waiting and Changing Hopes".

40 Ben Anderson, "Time-Stilled Space-Slowed: How Boredom Matters", *Geoforum* 35/6, 2004, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.02.005 [accessed: 02.12.2025].

Categories of Refugee Decision-making States

In the following section we bring the theorised two-by-two typology of the decision-making states of displaced Ukrainians to life through the words of our interviewees and survey respondents.

Refugees Accepting a Chosen Trajectory

In the top left quadrant are those displaced Ukrainians who are aware of the reality of return and who are committed to remaining abroad or returning home in the foreseeable future. Among our respondents, these individuals either had returned home already or were pursuing concrete plans with regards to staying or returning. Their narratives around return and life-planning tended to be very specific. A female respondent from the south of Ukraine offered her thinking on the drivers of return, based on her conversations with fellow displaced people:

> But it is different in Kherson or Kharkiv from the situation in Kyiv or L'viv. … These are people who more or less understand where they will work. They understand how much their salary will be and where they will work.[41]

> We return because it is our home. We knew about the difficulties with water but it is our home, so we have to go back. It is how it is supposed to be.[42]

The other subgroup of *accepting refugees* is composed of those who have firmly decided to remain outside of Ukraine and are fully updated to the present reality of Ukraine under attack:

> I'm not going to build, you know, some sandcastles and say that the war will end […] The place is very much destroyed […] So no, we will not be going back. We will be looking for a job.[43]

Another survey respondent describes her thoughts on return: "I have no intention of returning, as I have a Czech husband, my son is studying successfully, and I have a decent job, which I could not get in Ukraine."[44] A third survey respondent, com-

41 Interview in Ukrainian, female Ukrainian in her mid-thirties (former business owner), Berlin, Germany, July 2023.

42 Interview in Ukrainian conducted online, retired Ukrainian couple, who returned to Ukraine after six months in Germany, July 2023.

43 Interview in Russian, female Ukrainian in her early twenties, from an eastern Ukrainian town, interviewed online, Germany, July 2023.

44 Survey, Ukrainian refugee, Czech Republic, November 2024.

mitted to remaining in the Czech Republic, hints at the chimeric nature of the future-in-the-past reasoning: "I would return to Ukraine only if everything was as before. But unfortunately, that is not possible, so I have to get used to it and adapt to the Czech Republic."[45] Finally, a survey respondent makes the connection between the two proposed dimensions explicit in her response, emblematic of the accepting refugees' approach:

> The risks to the life and health of my children while staying in Ukraine do not allow me to return to Ukraine. Given the impossibility of planning anything in Ukraine, I want to stay in the Czech Republic and ensure a decent standard of living, education and safety for my children.[46]

Denying Refugees

In the next, top-right, quadrant, are the so-called *denying refugees*, who have decided their future course of action for themselves (and often their families), but who are envisioning a return to Ukraine through the future-in-the-past perspective. These respondents typically spoke of the hardships they endured abroad and the longing they had for life as it had been prior to invasion. They tended to evoke concrete images of the activities and circumstances that they felt motivated their return. In the Czech Republic, one of the respondents spoke of the longing for her own tomato and vegetable plot and that having one was a key aspect of the fulfilled life that she felt she could only have in Ukraine.[47]

A respondent in Germany recounted missing her previous social circle and her desire to get back to the exact job that she had, that of selling fish and fishing supplies: "I want to be busy, go to my market so that people come to me, communicate with people, communicate with colleagues who also trade in the market."[48] Another interviewee rejects returning to Ukraine, citing bad economic prospects for the country and the widespread level of destruction, but recalls other cases of Ukrainians returning home that she knows of:

> They say: I'm leaving because I can't be here any more, I miss home, I want to go home, I can't be here, everything is a foreign language to me here, I have no friends here, I won't go anywhere. My depression started, I just sit closed in my house, I

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Interview, female Ukrainian with two young children in her thirties, Prague, Czech Republic, August 2023.

48 Interview in Ukrainian, female Ukrainian in her forties, from a large southern city in Ukraine, interviewed in Berlin, Germany, July 2023.

> don't go out, I don't have anyone to talk to, I don't understand anything, at most I go to the store, buy something, figure out how to pay, and that's it.[49]

Pragmatic Refugees

The bottom left quadrant of our proposed decision states includes *pragmatic refugees* who have updated themselves to the reality of returning to post-invasion Ukraine but who have not decisively chosen between staying abroad and returning to Ukraine. Participants in this group are not naïve about the reality of return but are as yet unwilling (or unable) to tie themselves to a specific course of action. This was, by far, the least represented group in our interviews and we have the least information about them as a result. However, the recollections of a displaced Ukrainian from the occupied territory summarise the cognitive decision-state of this group of displaced individuals well:

> Well, maybe, well, it's impossible, it's probably so, that, well, it's kind of selfish for me, but what if there was some kind of feeling or understanding that my country is waiting for me, that, for example, tomorrow the war will end, I will say goodbye there, my love, Ukraine, but I will stay here, because, well, I have already started here, well, I have already left, I have already left for Ukraine.
> Goodbye, my love, Ukraine, but I'm staying here, because, well, I've already started something new here, I'm going to myself, and there's Ukraine, I don't know who there, well, for example, there, our head of the village council said, Alyona [name changed], what are you, we need you here in order to do something, in order to, well, somehow restore this country, well, but I know that it will not happen, because they are already fine without us there.[50]

Another survey respondent in this group declares her willingness to plan for staying in the Czech Republic in the medium-term, but simultaneously admits that her return to Ukraine would be possible, contingent on favourable future developments:

> The lack of stability is very scary and disturbing. I don't have an answer for myself: "What will happen tomorrow?" It's very sad, but for myself I see no other way out than to plan my life in the Czech Republic for the long term and see it as a new home. My town has been occupied for ten years, but now there is less and less hope that the town will be liberated and returned to Ukraine. If I saw unity with the authorities, I would return.[51]

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49 Interview in Ukrainian, female Ukrainian in her forties, from a mid-sized southern city in Ukraine, Germany, July 2023.

50 Ibid.

51 Survey, Ukrainian forced migrant, Czech Republic, November 2024.

Limbo-Lingering Refugees

Finally, the most intriguing group that this two-dimensional typology yields is the bottom right quadrant, titled *Limbo*. We chose this label because we believe it neatly captures the liminal state of in-betweenness that the participants from this group find themselves in. Displaced Ukrainians in this group are neither committed to a specific future course of action, nor have they adjusted to the reality of what returning to their homes in war-torn Ukraine might entail, that is, they take the future-in-the-past approach. Thus, these displaced Ukrainians find themselves in a cognitive limbo and in an attendant state of protracted and indefinite uncertainty. These types of individuals most often appeared in our interviews indirectly, when interviewees referred to other displaced Ukrainians whom they knew and who fit the bill of the "Limbo" mental state.[52] As a result of this protracted uncertainty, the displaced Ukrainians in this group appear to fall through the cracks of the host state welfare support system and they appear to be "stuck" in their displacement, unable to decide with finality between return and remaining abroad and unable to face the harsh reality of returning to Ukraine.

One female respondent in her thirties speaks of her thinking about returning to Ukraine. She was unemployed at the time and her trajectory of being displaced abroad in terms of psychological state was as follows: For the first six months in Germany, she quite intensely disliked being there and wanted to return, but then she accepted the protracted state of affairs. At this point, the imagery of return shifted from a concrete desire to return to a specific place (her house) and specific job (as a business owner) to a more diffuse idea of returning to Ukraine at some point, when it is safe and stable:

> And I, it turns out that I already know that feeling of helplessness, and I don't want to go back to it, and suddenly something like that happens again, and, like, I have sleep apnea, you know, that's why I'm already scared, because I'll be waiting as soon as the end of the war, because there are different people, I'm like, oops, it's fine, it's fine, I say, well, I've come, and I'm like, that's it, I won't come until I feel comfortable. That is, it is a safety factor.[53]

For her, people primarily wish to return not just home but to a pre-war conception of the home (future-in-the-past approach to return). She recalls another couple she is acquainted with, who she says decided not to do anything like trying to start a

52 This suggests the possibility that there is a certain level of social desirability bias in discussing a return to Ukraine, that is, individual Ukrainian forced migrants are more comfortable and open in discussing the return choices or plans of others than revealing their own preferences.

53 Interview in Russian, female Ukrainian in her thirties from a city in eastern Ukraine, Bavaria, Germany, July 2023.

business or learn the language while in Germany because they anticipated returning home to a coastal city currently under occupation. This couple kept updating their decision roughly every six months. She states that a lot of people who want to return really want to return to some sense of the everyday and to the stability they had that is now gone and a lot of these people still do not understand it; thus, they are stuck waiting.

Another respondent in Prague talks of other members of the Ukrainian displaced community in the country who appear unable to commit to deciding between staying and returning:

> [MJ:] And you think, do you think there's a lot of people who already now are decided I'm going back, but maybe in six months, maybe in a year, but they're like I'm going back no matter what?
> Interviewee: Yeah, I've encountered a lot of people like this.
> [MJ:] And what and what, what are these people then waiting for? They're waiting for the security to get better?
> Interviewee: That that's a good question. Like, that's not something I would ask them, like what are you waiting for? I think that's impolite to ask, but I think just to … I mean for things to stabilise a bit, which they're not stabilising.[54]

One response from the survey captures the future-in-the-past approach of this group well, as well as the solace and respite that recollections of the pre-war past can bring: "I really want to go back home, but I want it to be like before the war!"[55] Another respondent describes his thoughts on return thusly:

> It is difficult to plan my future. Now I live with the thought, "one day has passed, that's okay." I would like to have a stable job in my profession, then I would be more or less sure of my financial situation. In general, it is difficult for me to plan the future both in the Czech Republic and in Ukraine. I feel like an abandoned person.[56]

Implications and Conclusion

In this article, we strove to understand how displaced Ukrainians approach their decision-making surrounding their intentions to return and what factors might explain the presence or absence of decisiveness with regards to the choice between

54 Interviews, Ukrainian female in her twenties, student from Kyiv, Prague, Czech Republic, August 2023.

55 Survey, Ukrainian forced migrant, Czech Republic, November 2024.

56 Ibid.

remaining abroad or returning to one's homeland. Through in-depth interviews in Germany and the Czech Republic and a supplementary survey of displaced Ukrainians in the latter host country, we found a considerable variation at the individual level. However, we also noted that there are an underlying structure and recurring themes in the decision-making processes of displaced Ukrainians. To formalise this, we developed a novel typology of refugee decision-making states that is of high relevance to both scholars of forced displacement and policy practitioners for several reasons.

Firstly, our interviews revealed that while material conditions both in the host country and back home still matter in individuals thinking about return, these factors do not tell the whole story. In response, we foreground *Commitment to Action* and *Future Imaginaries of Ukraine* as two key constitutive dimensions through which the cognitive aspects of decision-making should be approached. Assuredly, we are not arguing for an exclusive focus on these two dimensions, rather we believe that these two factors and their intersections offer an insightful approach to interpreting the choices (or lack thereof) on return among forcibly displaced people, which is crucial for long-term policy and program planning in host countries. Third, we introduced the novel typology of the different cognitive states that displaced people pondering return find themselves in. Crucially, we do not see membership within these types as static and immutable; to the contrary, given the dynamic and long-term character of Ukrainian displacement we would expect displaced individuals to move between these different ways of considering their future and return options. This holds especially true the more protracted the period of displacement becomes. This finding goes a long way in answering our second research question that seeks to ascertain why, under similar conditions both in the shared host country and at home, some Ukrainians commit decisively to returning or remaining abroad while others are unable to make a final decision.

In the future, we would like to focus on developing more accurate survey instruments, inclusive of specific modules, to accurately capture individual positions along the two dimensions of refugee decision-making on return. This would allow for the development of a standard questionnaire available to researchers in different countries (akin to the various integration indexes, for example) and permit more direct comparisons of displaced Ukrainians populations in different EU countries, for example. Additionally, panel surveys, such as the *Voice of the Ukrainians* survey fielded in the Czech Republic, would be able to monitor the frequency distributions in different categories of the proposed return decision-making states over time, an important policy-planning contribution.

Finally, we see the *Limbo* quadrant as the key area of concern, especially in the light of the increasing length of displacement of so many displaced Ukrainians and the unfortunate lack of conclusive developments in Ukraine's defence against the Russian aggression. Displaced Ukrainians in this group remain abroad but

are deeply ambivalent about their future and see a return to Ukraine as a way of restoring the pre-war reality that they have lived in in their pre-invasion lives. As a result, a significant part of the population of displaced Ukrainians is barely eking out a living by taking on temporary jobs. At the same time, these Ukrainians are unable to bring themselves to return to Ukraine. We believe that the overall well-being and living situation of these Ukrainians should be of utmost concern to host country institutions, policymakers and NGO workers providing long-term support and counselling for displaced Ukrainians.

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Diasporisation, Dediasporisation, and Rediasporisation in the Context of a Homeland War

The Case of Ukrainians in Germany

Iryna Lapshyna

Introduction

When talking to long-term German residents of Ukrainian origin about the impact of the war on their identity, I was most struck by the spectrum of their experiences, which ran from "I tried to be as German as possible" (Interviewee 24) to "I am moving in the opposite direction" (Interviewee 25). In an effort to study such people's experiences, this chapter seeks to analyse processes of diasporisation, dediasporisation, and rediasporisation of the pre-war Ukrainian community in Germany. Considering that Ukrainians living in Germany have engaged with homeland politics in the aftermath of the Russian aggression since the end of 2013, I map transnational diasporic mobilisation, shedding light on the various material and affective connections that have emerged in the specific processes of rediasporisation under the conditions of a homeland crisis. I ask: How does a homeland crisis trigger a new (re)diasporisation process? Furthermore, I explore how the contemporary Ukrainian diaspora in Germany has evolved and how dediasporisation transforms into rediasporisation under certain conditions. I highlight the awakening of a latent diaspora, namely the generational continuation in a diasporic context through a second generation's interest in mobilising for homeland politics.

My research addresses questions of diasporisation (the construction of a diasporic identity), social dediasporisation (the process of shedding or losing a diasporic identity or cultural ties without necessarily involving physical relocation), and rediasporisation (reviving a diasporic consciousness, in which the context of homeland crises plays a key role). The chapter's aim is to use empirical findings to better understand diasporisation, dediasporisation, and rediasporisation processes in a given host country.

This chapter is composed of four sections. In the first, I define the key concepts that orient my research – diaspora and diasporisation. I focus on the diasporisation process of Ukrainians in Germany instead of a well-defined diaspora community.

I argue that focusing on the process of diasporisation allows approaching the dynamic and hybrid character of the diasporic more accurately. In the second section, I map the transnational diasporic mobilisation of Ukrainians living in Germany in the aftermath of Russian aggression towards Ukraine since the end of 2013. In the third section, I delve into the phenomenon of dediasporisation. Here, I look beyond the returnee population and their reincorporation into their country of origin. Particularly, I explore evidence that shows that dediasporisation can take place without returning to the homeland but rather within a host country. In the fourth section, I elaborate on rediasporisaton or the process of "discovering one's inner Ukrainian", which implies that a war in a homeland can turn a first- or second-generation migrant into a diasporic individual and intensify the newly awakened identity of the diaspora. I demonstrate that the formation of a diasporic consciousness can be triggered long after migration has taken place. In the conclusion, I reflect on the dynamic and hybrid character of the diasporic, arguing that diasporic processes are neither predetermined nor linear.

Research Process and Methodology

This qualitative research study uses primary data from in-depth interviews that I conducted between January 2023 and June 2024 with 24 heads and co-founders of Ukrainian diaspora organisations in different parts of Germany. Alongside these interviews, I also conducted six interviews with diasporic individuals. I used purposive sampling to find the interviewees, who came from first and second generations of Ukrainian migrants, large and small towns, and established as well as newly founded diaspora organisations, which provide different types of services. The qualitative interviews were semi-structured, and I carried them out in Ukrainian both in person and online. Most respondents were eager to talk, so the interviews were often long, lasting between 45 minutes and two hours, providing ample time for the interviewees to reflect.

I studied the first and second generations of Ukrainians in Germany who migrated between 2013 and 2025 in the context of two threshold events: Euromaidan and the continued Russian aggression. These interviews provided a great opportunity to identify novel and contemporary aspects of diasporisation, social dediasporisation, and rediasporisation. Whereas the representatives of formal diaspora organisations provided insights into their personal views of diasporisation, Ukrainian migrants and their descendants who were not members of these organisations reflected on the impact of the war on their identities and formations of diasporic consciousness. Additionally, I conducted field observations, a literature survey, and utilised digital resources (websites and social media) to map Ukrainian

diaspora organisations. I carried out descriptive and content analyses with all the data obtained from these different sources.

I myself am a Ukrainian academic with a shared linguistic and cultural background with my interviewees. On the one hand, this positionality facilitated my access to participants, an understanding of their contexts, trust, and openness during interviews. On the other hand, continuous self-reflection on my own worldview was essential, as it influenced how I posed questions, used language, and interpreted data – ultimately shaping the research findings and conclusions.

Conceptual Framework: From Diaspora to (Re)diasporisation

Rather than viewing diaspora communities as static entities that either act or are acted upon, some scholars of diaspora politics challenge this traditional perspective by emphasising the dynamic and evolving nature of diasporas.[1] I follow Fiona Abramson's processual ontology of diasporas, which moves beyond reified notions of the diaspora as a fixed entity and instead stresses the ongoing construction of diasporic identities.[2] In this chapter, rather than linking diaspora-formation solely to dispersal,[3] I employ the concept of diasporisation to demonstrate how war in the homeland can trigger diasporisation at a distance, transforming migrants and their descendants into diasporic individuals and intensifying their newly awakened identities connected to the diaspora.

Research on diasporas and conflicts in the homeland shows that wars in countries of origin can mobilise diasporas, contribute to conflict transportation,[4] and even shape the very notion of what constitutes a "homeland".[5] A homeland conflict often shapes the lives of diasporic communities, and it can even mobilise diasporas

1 Fiona Adamson, "Mechanisms of Diaspora Mobilization and the Transnationalization of Civil War", in: Jeffrey T. Checkel (ed.), *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 63–88; and Elizabeth Mavroudi, "Revisiting diaspora as process: timespace, performative diasporas?", in: Katharyne Mitchell et al. (eds.), *Handbook on Critical Geographies of Migration*, Lansdown: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020, 279–290.

2 Yehonatan Abramson, "Making a homeland, constructing a diaspora: The case of Taglit-Birthright Israel", *Political Geography* 58, 2017, 14–23, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.01.002 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

3 Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2008.

4 Elise Féron, "Transporting and Re-Inventing Conflicts: Conflict-Generated Diasporas and Conflict Autonomisation", *Cooperation and Conflict* 52/3, 2017, 360–376, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836716671759 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

5 Brian Keith Axel, *The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora"*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

into existence.[6] Research has shown that diasporas may mobilise in different ways, reshape group boundaries based on homeland events and host-country contexts, or remain unmobilised.[7] On an individual level, a sudden eruption of conflict in the homeland might make a migrant suddenly aware of their homeland, eventually leading to their diasporisation.[8] Previous studies have also examined the concepts of diasporisation and conflict deterritorialisation,[9] which are important for understanding diasporas as processes. In line with Élise Féron, I show that processes of diaspora-formation can happen at individual and collective levels, and can both turn a migrant into a diasporic individual as well as mobilise diasporic individuals for collective action. I also endorse the concept of a "diasporic moment" to show how the outbreak of war in Ukraine triggered diasporic activism, reactivated and reconfigured diaspora organisations, and activated previously inactive migrants and their descendants.[10]

I employ notions of dediasporisation and rediasporisation for this chapter to show the processes through which diasporic individuals can feel emotional and psychological detachment, assimilate into the culture of their new home, disengage from diasporic activities, and then, after certain critical events in their homeland, revive their diasporic consciousness. In this sense, I aim to complement existing theories that have focused on (re)diasporisation and dediasporisation.

Nicholas Van Hear defines dediasporisation as "the regrouping or in-gathering of dispersed people […] when a community returned to its place of origin."[11] This definition emphasises only one aspect of the process and equates it with physical relocation to the homeland. Michel Laguerre adds that dediasporisation is characterised as a process in which a diasporic subject either reacquires homeland citizenship by returning to their country of origin, engages in generational assimilation in

6 Dilyara Müller-Suleymanova, "Remembering and Dealing with Violent Past: Diasporic Experiences and Transnational Dimensions", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 47/2, 2024, 259–273, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2260882 [accessed: 03.12.2025]; and Martin Sökefeld, "Mobilizing in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora", *Global Networks* 6/3, 2006, 265–284, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2006.00144.x [accessed: 03.12.2025].

7 Élise Féron and Sofiya-Yaryna Voytiv, "Towards a Theory of Diaspora Formation Through Conflict Deterritorialization", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 21/3, 2021, 210–224, https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12354 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

8 Jolle Demmers, "Diaspora and Conflict: Locality, Long-Distance Nationalism, and Delocalisation of Conflict Dynamics", *Javnost – The Public* 9/1, 2002, 85–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2002.11008795 [accessed: 03.12.2025].

9 Féron, "Transporting and Re-Inventing Conflicts".

10 Alexander Betts and Will Jones, *Mobilising the Diaspora: How Refugees Challenge Authoritarianism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

11 Nicholas Van Hear, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1998, 298.

their host country, or reinscribes themself in the transnational circuit of a transnational state.[12] This definition identifies three sites for dediasporisation: the country of birth or origin, the host country, and the transnational environment.[13] However, for second- or third-generation residents the term "return" is somewhat misleading. The individual must be willing to initiate the process of dediasporisation, and there are multiple reasons for doing so: a desire to return to the homeland, generational factors, or a subjective redefinition of oneself through assimilation in the host country.

According to Laguerre, in practice, a diasporan cannot dediasporise themself without going through formal state procedures to reacquire nationality and citizenship. My research findings challenge this approach and show that diasporans can dediasporise themselves without going through such formal state procedures. Here, I refer to non-physical or social dediasporisation. By social dediasporisation, I mean processes of shedding or losing diasporic identities or cultural ties without necessarily involving physical relocation. This can happen through various means, including emotional and psychological disconnection from the diaspora, cultural assimilation, or a shift in identity focus – away from a diasporic (homeland-oriented, transnational) identity toward a more territorially embedded, host-society or local identity. Accordingly, I argue that dediasporisation is a complex process that can involve emotional, psychological, cultural, and identity-based shifts, often without any physical relocation or change to citizenship status. To date, aside from the literature I have cited, diaspora research has placed little emphasis on the phenomenon of dediasporisation. Highlighting this process could serve as a valuable counterweight to the extensive body of research on structural and cultural assimilation.

Rediasporisation occurs in the cases of assimilationist and generational dediasporisation and does not require relocation. For example, emigrants from the homeland may revive the diasporic consciousness of individuals who have long been assimilated into the culture of the host country. As Michel Wieviorka has shown in the case of Jewish communities, new migrants from Poland, Romania, Lithuania, and Russia have revived diasporic Jewish consciousness among those long assimilated into French society.[14]

Similarly, new Ukrainian migrants – particularly after 2014 and especially following the 2022 full-scale invasion – have acted as emotional triggers, cultural revitalisers, and carriers of contemporary homeland narratives. However, unlike Wieviorka's example, rediasporisation in the Ukrainian case is explicitly politicised and

12 Michel Laguerre, "Dediasporization: Homeland and Hostland", in: *Diaspora, Politics, and Globalization*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 133–161.

13 Ibid.

14 Michel Wieviorka, "Racism and Diasporas", *Thesis Eleven* 52/1, 1998, 69–81.

shaped by an ongoing war, state-building processes, European integration politics, and global security discourses.

Drawing on my empirical findings, I demonstrate how Ukrainian migrants and their descendants have reactivated diasporic consciousness within their respective host societies, producing a renewed transnational political and emotional orientation toward their homeland.

Ukrainian Diaspora Organisations in Germany before 2022

Before 2013, the civic activity of Ukrainian diaspora organisations in Germany usually concentrated on cultural themes.[15] Many initiatives aimed primarily at maintaining the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian cultural heritage and history, and popularising it among younger generations. Local Ukrainian communities were mainly organised around Ukrainian or Polish-Greek Catholic churches, older diaspora organisations connected to the postwar period, or newer diaspora organisations related to independent Ukraine.

Several prominent organisations were united under the umbrella of the Association of Ukrainian Organisations in Germany (Obednannia Ukraïns'kykh Orhanizat͡siĭ u Nimechchyni or Dachverband der Ukrainischen Organisationen in Deutschland e.V.), a member of the Ukrainian World Congress.[16] This association has focused on promoting Ukrainian culture as well as supporting Ukrainian migrants in Germany. Moreover, there are 20 other organisations under their umbrella, including Plast, the Ukrainian Scouting Association, the Ukrainian Youth Association, the Association of Ukrainian Students in Germany, and the Central Association of Ukrainians in Germany.[17]

However, according to a young Ukrainian activist from Ukraine, there was not enough of a Ukrainian presence, at least in Berlin:

> I have been here [in Berlin] since 2005, having initially come here to study. At that time, there were very, very little Ukrainian [activities]. There was the Ukrainian

15 Iryna Lapshyna, "Do Diasporas Matter? The Growing Role of the Ukrainian Diaspora in the UK and Poland in the Development of the Homeland in Times of War", *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 8/1, 2019, 51–73.

16 Ukrainian World Congress is a non-profit organisation, nonpartisan association, international coordination assembly of all Ukrainian public organisations in diaspora, https://www.ukrainianworldcongress.org/ [accessed: 15.02.2026].

17 Valeria Lazarenko, "The role of Ukrainian diaspora in crisis response, future return and reconstruction of Ukraine: Case study from Germany, Czech Republic and Poland", *International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)*, 2024, https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/60826/file/UA_Diaspora_Report_RRR_Project.pdf [accessed: 03.12.2025].

> Greek Catholic Church, [and] the Central Union of Ukrainians in Germany. It was, overall, a rather [culturally] conservative diaspora. We started organising meetings of Ukrainians in Berlin at the end of 2006. The goal was to gather Germans who are interested in Ukraine, because here few people know anything about Ukraine, and the knowledge about Ukraine is full of clichés. We wanted to counteract negative clichés about Ukraine. I wanted people in Berlin to watch movies about Ukraine and open Ukraine on the map of their consciousness. I sent out invitations, we had really cool meetings, the cafes were full of people interested in Ukraine. So, in 2009, I founded the Ukrainian Kinoklub in Berlin.[18]

More Ukrainian diaspora organisations were founded after the unrest of 2013 and 2014. Euromaidan in 2013, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and continued Russian aggression triggered transnational-diaspora-led activities. Notably, there was a trend of formalising diasporic activities. As a result, a new array of diaspora initiatives and organisations emerged in Germany. Organisations like Euromaidan Wache Berlin, CineMova e.V., Ukraine Hilfe Berlin, the Initiative for Knowledge Exchange, Empowerment and Culture (IWEK e.V.), AG Ukraine-Chemnitz-Europa e.V., Ukrainische Landsleute in Thüringen e.V., Ukrainischer Verein in Niedersachsen, Freie Ukraine Braunschweig e.V., SIC Kulturzentrum in Schwerin, Ukrainischer Verein in Niedersachsen e.V., Kolos Verein, We Help Ukraine e.V., the Ukrainian School in Berlin, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and others, were founded after 2013 and mobilised to provide various kinds of support to Ukraine during and after Euromaidan. Their activities included political mobilisation, involving protests, demonstrations, and humanitarian aid, which was delivered to those in need in Ukraine.

The online media platform Ukrainian Dim e.V. was launched in 2020. It unites the Ukrainian diaspora of Berlin and serves as a platform for the dissemination of important, useful, and interesting information for Ukrainians in Germany. One of the founders of Ukrainian Dim shared:

> At that time, there were already more than 100,000 Ukrainians in Germany, but they didn't know each other, and they didn't know much about Germany either. They had to get acquainted with a new country that seemed European and quite close, but at the same time quite different for Ukrainians. They had to face German bureaucracy. […] And we started writing articles. That was our first activity, providing content. That is, creating something that would be useful for Ukrainians and writing about life in Germany. We are 100% a diaspora organisation, we talk about it openly, it is written in our statute that we focus on helping Ukrainians.[19]

18 Interviewee 13.

19 Interviewee 19.

Ukrainian Diaspora Organisations in Germany since 2022

The Ukrainian diaspora has actively responded to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by mobilising resources, providing humanitarian aid, and advocating for Ukraine's cause internationally. As a result of extensive diaspora networks formed following Euromaidan in 2013, Ukrainians abroad were able to mobilise rapidly in response to the onset of the full-scale war. According to my interviewees, due to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the activities of Ukrainian diaspora organisations changed and expanded. Within a short period of time, the Ukrainian diaspora (of people from different generations and different social and political backgrounds) transformed into an extensive and effective network of both formal organisations and less formal groups.

As a response to the full-scale invasion in 2022, more Ukrainian diaspora organisations were established all over Germany. Among the most recent are Plast Berlin, Leipzig Helps Ukraine, München hilft Ukraine e.V., Hamburg hilft Ukraine, LARU Helps Ukraine, Jena hilft, Herz für die Ukraine e.V., the Ukrainian School in Osnabrück, Leleka, and others. The rapid mobilisation of humanitarian relief and longer-term support for Ukraine came from several engaged social actors. The Ukrainian diaspora was a fast, efficient, and often first-responding actor. For example, the webpage of München hilft Ukraine states:

> We started volunteering activities on 24 February 2022 – the first day of the war in Ukraine. We have grown from zero to a community of more than 2,000 volunteers. Together, we have raised more than half a million euros in donations and shipped more than 2,000 tons of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, which reached thousands of people. We also helped thousands of refugees in Munich.[20]

The response was not limited to conventional diaspora organisations. Instead, a diverse set of local groups, activists, and entrepreneurs initially provided humanitarian relief – such as food, clothing, transport, shelter, and legal support – and later collaborated with local governments, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), international organisations, and the state: "Four of us – my husband, our friend [who is] a lawyer, another friend, and I – established our organisation on the second day of the war, 25 February 2022" (Interviewee 7).

Diasporans' actions were well-planned and organised. Many volunteers, including non-Ukrainian nationals, were engaged and clearly demonstrated their solidarity, suggesting a high level of cooperation and shared purpose:

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20 München Hilft Ukraine e.V., https://www.betterplace.org/en/organisations/52089-muenchen-hilft-ukraine-e-v [accessed: 03.12.2025].

> By 26 February, we already had a group of volunteers and a large collection of donated goods. It all began with humanitarian aid – there was even a queue of people eager to contribute! We started by sorting clothes and food. Then we coordinated cars to transport supplies to the border, where people – mostly women with children – were already waiting. On 27 February, my husband and I met our first family at the train station. Next, we began helping people with registration in Germany. By early March, Paragraph 24[21] was already widely known. At first, I supported my own relatives who had come to stay with us. I hadn't filled out that many documents in over 20 years! I went through every step with them from the very beginning – and in doing so, I realised that I could help others as well.[22]

The activities of the Ukrainian diaspora encompassed new areas and forms aimed at supporting Ukrainians fleeing the war. The representative of one diaspora organisation in Berlin shared:

> After the full-scale invasion, our focus shifted. We began concentrating more on helping newcomers. In the first months, most questions were about paperwork – especially how to apply for protection under Paragraph 24 in Germany. Now, the concerns have evolved to issues like housing, learning the language, and finding work. Sometimes, for example, someone faces problems with the Social Welfare Office, and we explain what steps to take in that situation. We now refer people to Ukrainian-speaking lawyers whose contact information we've gathered and published on our website. These are professionals we know and trust. The website also includes a list of medical doctors, interpreters, et cetera.[23]

Diaspora organisations acted proactively, becoming a bridge between the institutions of the host country and the refugee community:

> In March 2022, the first group of Ukrainian refugees arrived – and there was nothing in place at the time. We reached out to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and offered our help with translations, finding accommodations, and supporting the refugees in any way we could.[24]

> While organising the reception of displaced Ukrainians, we worked closely with the mayor's office.[25]

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21 Paragraph 24 refers to a specific section within the German Residence Act (*Aufenthaltsgesetz*) that grants temporary protection to individuals who have fled Ukraine due to the war.It is designed to provide temporary protection for those displaced by the war in Ukraine.

22 Interviewee 7.

23 Interviewee 19.

24 Interviewee 24.

25 Interviewee 5.

Another diaspora organisation, among its various activities, developed a database of Germans offering housing to displaced Ukrainians (Interviewee 20). Most interviewees reported that Germans have provided substantial support to Ukrainian refugees, including financial assistance for municipalities, integration services, and aid for those in need in Ukraine. A representative of a diaspora organisation in Chemnitz shared: "One German citizen generously offered his four-star hotel to house displaced Ukrainians – 150 people lived there free of charge" (Interviewee 5).

Apart from providing essentials for displaced people, such as assisting with reception, registration, translation, benefits, housing, childcare, and healthcare support, the Ukrainian diaspora also played an advocacy role and promoted official employment in Germany to Ukrainian citizens: "We fight against illegal work, explain to the Ukrainian refugees the advantages of legal employment" (Interviewee 18).

Interestingly, in some cases, support from diaspora organisations was a decisive factor in choosing migration destinations for Ukrainian forced migrants: "Many refugees wanted to come to Jena because they heard that the volunteers here were offering exceptional support" (Interviewee 18). Additionally, many of my interviewees facilitated the hiring of forced Ukrainian migrants: "We hired two Ukrainian psychologists who initially came to us to volunteer. They were extremely motivated and wanted to help others and just to be involved" (Interviewee 10).

Ukrainian refugees often become part of an active Ukrainian community, find jobs, and help other refugees. Olena, a 42-year-old with two higher education degrees, shared:

> I work as a psychologist in Der Verein Refugio Thüringen and help Ukrainian women cope with mental health conditions, [and] PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], navigate life transitions, and address all sorts of mental health concerns.[26]

Many admitted that there is a big demand for the psychological support of refugees in Germany and people in Ukraine: "Within our project Overcoming Traumas, we have prepared 12 Ukrainian trainers to work with people with post-traumatic stress disorder in Ukraine" (Interviewee 2).

Most of my interviewees noted that because of the war, the Ukrainian diaspora became more mobilised and united. In 2022, the Alliance of Ukrainian Organisations was established, with its main office located in Berlin. The Alliance includes more than 10 member organisations, among which are IWEK (Initiative für Wissensaustausch, Empowerment und Kultur), Ukraine Hilfe Berlin, Plast, the Ukrainian School in Berlin, Ukrainian Radio, Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kultura,

26 Interviewee 13.

Open Platform, Feine Ukraine, Opora Eberswalde, SD Platform, Ukraine-Chemnitz-Europa, and Ukrainian Dim. In an interview, one of the Alliance founders told me:

> We founded the Alliance of Ukrainian Organisations – an association of Ukrainian diaspora groups and NGOs. Our goal is to speak with one voice to the outside world in support of all Ukrainians, especially those who remain in Ukraine during the Russian military invasion. We engage with politicians, organise protests, deliver humanitarian aid to people in Ukraine, and provide comprehensive support and advice to refugees.[27]

In addition to the mentioned registered formal diaspora organisations, there are many informal diaspora groups, coordinated via WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram. These groups often arise organically within and outside of diaspora communities to address specific needs or interests, are not registered, and do not have a formal structure. They appear to be crucial for facilitating communication, sharing resources, and advocating for the community, often playing a significant role in grassroots initiatives and community development: "Our group originated on Telegram. It was formed on the first day after the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on 24 February, 2022" (Interviewee 8).

Many of the newly established organisations are either unfunded or severely underfunded, relying primarily – or entirely – on volunteers to function. In response to the ongoing crisis, several groups have significantly scaled up their human resources, bringing in more volunteers and, where possible, hiring paid staff. However, a concerning trend has emerged – many individuals report feeling tired, exhausted, and burned out from the sustained effort:

> People are deeply motivated and committed, but at the same time, they are tired – mentally and physically exhausted, even burned out. Many volunteer after their full- or part-time jobs, working day and night, with no weekends or rest.[28]

From 2014 to 2022, Ukrainian diaspora organisations transitioned their humanitarian activities from a spontaneous approach based on supporting those most in need to developing longer-term relationships with communities and local organisations.

27 Interviewee 12.

28 Interviewee 14.

The Dediasporisation Phenomenon, or "I Tried to be as German as Possible"

While it is important to examine how diaspora organisations form and transform in response to critical global events, it is equally vital to focus on diasporic individuals and their processes of dediasporisation and rediasporisation. This requires what Jonathan Rosa and Trivedi Sunny call "thinking diaspora from below"[29] – that is, tracing the dynamic and complex ways in which diasporic identities are constructed, enacted, rejected, transformed, and revived.

One of my interviewees, Lydmyla, is 26 years old and was born in Germany to Ukrainian parents. She is a so-called second-generation migrant and shared her childhood memories and experiences:

> I was born and brought up here in Germany. We spoke Ukrainian at home. I started to learn the German language in nursery school, so I didn't speak any German before the Germans themselves taught me.[30]

Ludmyla's migrant parents integrated her into the Ukrainian diaspora in their town. She attended the Ukrainian school to learn the language and culture of "home", and she regularly visited the Ukrainian church. She stated:

> There was a Ukrainian community. Like my grandparents, they were engaged in a Ukrainian church. And their generation was very established in this place. And when I was a child, I also went to this church. I went each Sunday to Ukrainian school to learn about Ukrainian history, the Ukrainian language.[31]

However, at some point, Ludmyla noticed that she and her brother felt like "outsiders". She explained:

> There weren't many of us in the Ukrainian school. My brother and I were the youngest, and while I picked up Ukrainian quite quickly – since I often sat in on the lessons meant for the older students – I never fully felt like I belonged. I could read, write, and keep up with the classes, but being younger set us apart. We were always a little on the outside, never quite fitting in with the older children. Eventually, we stopped going as often, and those connections slowly faded away.[32]

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29 Jonathan Rosa and Trivedi Sunny, "Diaspora and language", in: Suresh Canagarajah (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Migration and Language*, London: Routledge, 2017.

30 Interviewee 24.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

Ludmyla also reflected on how she gradually dediasporised herself. She recalled deliberately distancing herself from her heritage, avoiding close ties with co-ethnic people, and even hiding her ethnic identity:

> When we were children and we were playing games, I always imagined myself as having a very German name. I came up with the most German names because I very much wanted to be like all of the others. I had several German names that I used […]. My Ukrainian last name was really too complicated for Germans to even say. So, it was always a big deal. I always wanted to be a Müller, Schmidt, or whatever German name was convenient – and not this crazy [Ukrainian] one.[33]

According to Ludmyla, for "the sake of her career, and having the possibility to be part of German society," she felt she "needed to reject this part of her identity – her Ukrainianism" (Interviewee 24). Otherwise, she believed that she "would not be like the others, and not being like the others meant being an outsider" (Interviewee 24), which she did not want.

Ludmyla further pointed out the importance of assimilation to her:

> I started to assimilate a lot. I tried to be as German as possible, which meant I didn't speak Ukrainian on the phone with my parents. When they called me and I was with friends, I spoke German. Then I resisted going on holiday to Ukraine during the summer because I wanted to stay with my friends in Germany.[34]

Ludmyla explicitly made clear the success of her assimilation into German society despite being born and raised in Germany:

> It worked out. I mean, if I say I am German, people will say, "Oh, yeah, of course. She is German. She looks German. She speaks German perfectly." Also, my behaviour is very German.[35]

Ostap, who is 63 years old, was born in Ukraine, and migrated to Germany 31 years ago, demonstrates another example of dediasporisation. He shared:

> I live in a small town. When we came here, there were no Ukrainians. We found our way to the Ukrainian diaspora in 1992. We found the contact of a *Zwangsarbeiter* [those brought to Germany for forced labour during Second World War]. At that time, there was only the Ukrainian church community, mostly women. Until

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.

> 2014, our community was not big, around 50 people gathered for some big/important celebrations. Meanwhile, I learned the German language, found a job in a big German company.[36]

In contrast to Ludmyla, Ostap did not try to hide his Ukrainian identity. His integration into German society alongside his dediasporisation happened naturally. He reported:

> I have worked for the German company for many years. I was singing for 27 years in a German choir, I have many German friends here. I am also active in the Kolpingsfamilie, which is a Catholic charity organisation. We are now very well integrated here [in Germany].[37]

In the case of Ludmyla, dediasporisation occurred due to generational assimilation and a desire to reject part of her Ukrainian identity, whereas Ostap's dediasporisation happened naturally, through his full integration into the host society. In both cases, there was no physical relocation from the host country or a change in citizenship status, but emotional and psychological disconnection from the diasporans.

Rediasporisation, or Rediscovering the "Inner Ukrainian"

My research shows that political developments in Ukraine triggered the mobilisation of a Ukrainian diaspora that was previously inactive. This "awakening" occurred in response to events like Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in eastern Ukraine. The diaspora then actively engaged in transnational activism, contributing to social, economic, and political support for their homeland.

Ostap migrated to Germany from Ukraine 31 years ago and, as shown above, dediasporised. He explained how he changed his trajectory:

> We were very well integrated here in Germany. When the war began and Ukrainians arrived in my city, I suddenly found myself with many more Ukrainian friends. I am even singing in a Ukrainian choir now! Slowly but surely, I feel like I am moving in the opposite direction [laughs].[38]

What Ostap called "the opposite direction", I refer to this as a process of rediasporisation. In line with the findings of Wieviorka,[39] Ostap had revived his diasporic con-

36 Interviewee 25.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Wieviorka, "Racism and Diasporas".

sciousness when many forced migrants came to his German city. He became particularly active and engaged in the Ukrainian community in his town, participating in diaspora organisations and helping Ukrainian refugees.

My research also shows that second-generation individuals often reinvent connections to their parents' countries of origin, including through political engagement, cultural practices, or digital diaspora networks. This happened to Ludmyla as well, a second-generation migrant, who, after dediasporisation and successful assimilation into German society, experienced a personal tragedy and rediscovered her "inner Ukrainian":

> Then, in 2021, my grandfather became very ill – he was diagnosed with cancer. I felt super bad for having rejected so much that had been offered to me, which I now realised was truly valuable. For a long time, I completely disregarded that heritage. That was when I began to immerse myself in Ukrainian history. I started reading extensively in Ukrainian and made a dedicated effort to reconnect with my cultural roots. I was searching for book stores where I could get Ukrainian books. It was impossible. I was importing them from Ukraine. I asked people who went to Ukraine to bring me Ukrainian books.[40]

The start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine acted as an additional significant trigger, motivating Ludmyla to become more involved in the situation and mobilisation process and act as a diaspora member:

> After my grandfather passed away, just a few months later, the worst began. In 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Suddenly, there was a desperate need for people who could speak Ukrainian.[41]

Ludmyla reflected on her "diasporic moment"[42] and explained how the outbreak of war in Ukraine triggered her diasporic consciousness:

> I thought to myself: This is my time. I have to do something. The only way I could contribute on the ground was through volunteering. I realised I had this seemingly random skill – I spoke Ukrainian – and I felt an obligation to put it to use. It became deeply important to act, so I shifted into action mode. I went to Berlin's main train station, which had become a central hub for supporting Ukrainians fleeing the war. Many of them needed translation assistance, and I was ready to help in any way I could.[43]

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40 Interviewee 24.

41 Ibid.

42 Betts and Jones, *Mobilising the Diaspora*.

43 Ibid.

In commenting on the crisis, Ludmyla added: "I am really happy about the opportunities that come along with those crises" (Interviewee 24).

The testimony above is not exceptional. On the contrary, this interviewee was one of many second-generation Ukrainians who started to show a sudden interest in their homeland and mobilised resources to help Ukrainian refugees, both in Ukraine and those who fled to other countries. Both the cases of Ludmyla and Ostap clearly demonstrate how dynamic, fluid, and non-linear the whole process of diasporisation is. Critical events in the homeland can suddenly turn previously inactive migrants into diasporic individuals and mobilise entire diasporas. Diasporans can be dediasporised and rediasporised over time, depending on what is happening in their host and home countries as well as the broader transnational context.

Concluding Remarks

Engagement by the Ukrainian diaspora – including both diaspora organisations and migrants and their descendants – has evolved over time, reaching a turning point with Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and entering a new phase following the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. The Ukrainian community in Germany has actively responded to the war in Ukraine by providing humanitarian aid, financial support, and advocacy, while also countering Russian misinformation. The mobilisation of civil society has been remarkable in terms of the levels of engagement and participation across all segments of the Ukrainian diaspora, ranging from second-generation migrants to the newest labour migrants with or without prior experience in working with NGOs.

The response to the threshold events in Ukraine resulted in a fresh surge of diasporic activities that have been unique in scale and creativity, displaying new forms of engagement. Some engage in political and civic movements, raising awareness and advocacy efforts and collecting donations to provide humanitarian aid to those affected by the war in Ukraine, while others support forced migrants under temporary protection in Germany. This includes providing support on arrival (collecting migrants at the border or train stations); providing accommodation to Ukrainian citizens fleeing the war; informational support (explaining how to register legally, how to apply for Temporary Protection, how to apply for social benefits and insurance, and how to open a bank account); help with housing (help with finding temporary and long-term accommodation and understanding rental agreements); and organising thematic meet-ups and info sessions on healthcare rights and access, consumer protection and rights, and jobs and employment (finding legal work, writing a CV, and knowing labour rights). Once forced migrants have completed their registration and received temporary protection, the Ukrainian diaspora helps with integration support, which includes teaching the language of the host country or or-

ganising language courses; helping to enrol children in schools and nursery schools; support to find legal employment or connecting migrants with employers; and advocating for the rights of Ukrainian workers and the promotion of official employment.

Most of my interviewees agreed that there is a great demand for psychological support for women and children affected by the war due to the disproportionate mental health impacts they often experience. Some diaspora organisations organise community-based services like mother support groups, yoga courses, and art therapy, while others provide specialised services for women in difficult situations, from trauma counselling to independent advocacy services for women and families, and help for victims of domestic abuse or violence.

The Ukrainian diaspora became both a frontline responder providing first aid, a medium-term supporter, and a vital medium- and long-term bridge between the institutions of the host country and the forced migrant community. This engagement led to the empowerment of the Ukrainian diaspora in Germany, strengthening their sense of agency and, in some cases, leading to the awakening of a latent diaspora – namely, the generational continuation in a diaspora through a second generation's interest in mobilising for the homeland.

In this chapter, I examine the engagements of Ukrainian diaspora organisations in Germany and contextualise them through the individual experiences of first- and second-generation migrants. Drawing on my analysis of participants' narratives, I argue that the outbreak of critical threshold events in Ukraine – particularly the escalation of war – constituted a necessary condition for triggering processes of rediasporisation among individuals who had previously been inactive, loosely connected, or generationally dediasporised.

My findings suggest that some individuals had, over time, shifted their identity focus toward the host society and away from active homeland engagement. In many cases, this shift followed what is often implicitly assumed to be an automatic or linear trajectory of assimilation: as time passes, generations succeed one another, and structural integration deepens, diasporic consciousness is expected to gradually weaken. Under this assumption, dediasporisation appears almost self-propelling – an incremental and irreversible process in which attachment to the homeland steadily declines across generations.

However, my empirical material challenges this linear understanding. The participants' narratives demonstrate that diasporic disengagement was neither final nor irreversible. Rather, it remained contingent and latent. The outbreak of war disrupted what might otherwise have been interpreted as a stable trajectory of assimilation. It reactivated emotional, moral, and political attachments to Ukraine, leading individuals to reorient their identity focus toward the homeland without relocating or withdrawing from German society.

I therefore argue that dediasporisation should not be conceptualised as an automatic generational outcome. Instead, it is better understood as a historically contingent and reversible process. In the Ukrainian case, threshold events functioned as catalysts that transformed previously diffuse or dormant identifications into active, politicised forms of diasporic engagement.

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Rifts and Dissonances in Displaced Ukrainians' Memories about the War

Olha Haidamachuk

Introduction

Sundered, as if torn by an explosion into Before and After, memories – full of emotions, self-censorship, and silenced traumas – are the unwritten personal archives that Ukrainians, forcibly displaced from a peaceful life due to the realities of Russia's seemingly endless war against Ukraine,[1] are trying to put in order. The Ukrainians were forced to find their way out of labyrinths of panic and fear, clinging to optimism like Ariadne's thread. Expelled from their homes, packing their lives into suitcases, they carried their limitless memories with them, too, unhindered through every checkpoint and border. And this "cloud of memories" in which every person lives,[2] sometimes weightless, at other times too heavy to bear, is only partly conscious. It is thus a nebulous burden that can affect the density and vulnerability of their personal cloud, yet it can also determine their relationships with other people and the broader environment.

During wartime, stressful conditions provoke increased anxious tonality in memories, because "negative discourse prosodies were evident in the discussion of war and some of its agents."[3] By "tonality", I mean a concentration of the expressive

1 Serhy Yekelchyk brings up the issue of understanding the nuances of naming this war and also the need for a deep revision of those concepts that can trigger memory: Serhy Yekelchyk, "Naming the War: Russian Aggression in Ukrainian Official Discourse and Mass Culture", *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64/2–3, 2022, 232–246, https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2022.2106688 [accessed: 20.10.2025].

2 Daria Mendola, Alessandra Pera, "Vulnerability of refugees: Some reflections on definitions and measurement practices", *International Migration* 60/5, 2021, 108–121, https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12942 [accessed: 20.10.2025].

3 Marianna Lőrincz, "A Corpus Analysis of the Representation of the War in Ukraine in the International Press", *The Journal of V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University. Series: Foreign philology. Methods of foreign language teaching* 96, 2022, 61, https://doi.org/10.26565/2786-5312-2022-96-08 [accessed: 20.10.2025].

means of a text[4] (such as emotional and evaluative vocabulary, logical and emotional accents, pauses, repetitions, contradictions, paradoxes, metaphors, irony, or laughter) that transmits the speaker's intention and attitude toward the objects of their discourse.

Memory as such is not something stable; it is constantly updated and revised with new data, which is not retained in short-term memory and often is not even be transferred fully into long-term memory. Events accompanied by powerful emotions and feelings are more likely to be stored in long-term memory, because a person frequently recalls them to try to make sense of them. Events that disrupt routines may challenge some recalls that have become entrenched in long-term memory, especially if current events reveal existentially dangerous errors, such as the Russian discourse of Brotherhood[5] or the ideology of the "Russian world"[6] in general. Memory, then, becomes even more mobile in times of upheaval. By trying to uncover previously unnoticed signs of unexpected current problems in remembered events,[7] people seek not only to identify causes and predict consequences, but also to prepare for the unknown. Such a revision prompts a rethinking of different layers of memory – various events in different periods of individual, family and cultural remembrance.

However, the need to revise memory is heightened not only in those communities directly experiencing war, but also in communities that observe war from a safe distance. According to Sofiya Voytiv, "Revising the memories, narratives and symbols to fit the new reality of a full-scale war also has meant renegotiating group boundaries in the solidarity with Ukraine movement."[8] Since solidarity and non-solidarity are choices not only declared in words but also manifested in actions, only the indifferent can distance themselves from reflections, revisions, and a re/deconstruction of collective memory.

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4 Svitlana Ivanenko, *Polifonia tekstu, (Polyphony of a Text)*, Kyiv: Vydavnychyj centr KNLU, Publishing center of the Kyiv National Linguistic University, 1999, 77.

5 Liudmyla Pidkuimukha, "Are We Brothers? Pseudo-peaceful Discourse in Russian Media Manipulation", in: Aleksandra Salamurović (ed.), *Konzepte der NATION im europäischen Kontext im 21. Jahrhundert. Linguistik in Empirie und Theorie [Empirical and Theoretical Linguistics]*, Berlin, Heidelberg: J.B. Metzler, 2023, 159–177. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-66332-5_8 [accessed 20.03.2026].

6 Nadiya Kiss, Liudmyla Pidkuimukha, Yuliia Kolisnyk, "Resistance Through Pop Culture and the Ideology of the "Russian World": on Deconstruction in Times of War", AREI: *Journal for Central and Eastern European History and Politics*, 2/2024 Nations in and after Trauma, 2024, 57–97, https://doi.org/10.54881/202424 [accessed: 25.04.2026].

7 For example, the former commemoration of World War II shared with the Russians.

8 Sofiya Voytiv, "Diasporic Group Boundaries and Solidarity in the Making: Collective Memory in the Anti-war Protests in Sweden", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 47/2 2023, 391–410, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2261289 [accessed 20.10.2025].

Memory, as something in a process of "(re)constructing" (including "an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it"[9]), is in a state of permanent deconstruction, as people tend to rearrange their reasoning in accordance with their current beliefs.[10] Retrospective shifts in emphasis, changes in priorities, rethinking of self-censorship, etc., will affect the place of some remembrances in transforming the structures of memory. On the one hand, memory can provide a conditionally safe space, a shelter (a personal "cloud"). On the other hand, it can equally contain some traps and blind spots. Sometimes it can be used as a "tool in struggles",[11] as a "battlefield"[12] or even in a "war of memories".[13]

To study cultural memory is to research how the perception of the past is created and recreated in certain cultural contexts. Since the flow of current events has become the past, the re-creation of the past is a constantly updated process. Varying even during observation, cultural memory is a changeable phenomenon influenced by external factors at the collective level, such as censorship/freedom of speech or ideological pressure, and by internal factors on the individual level, like self-censorship, rebellion, or emotional investment. Thus, we also need to rely on the respondents' ideas about memory as well as on their ways of remembering and sharing

9 Audace Mbonyingingo, Olena Moiseyenko, and Dmytro Mazin, "The Representation of Psychological War-Related Traumas in the Literary Works of Contemporary Burundian and Ukrainian Writers: African and European Perspectives", *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 10, 2023, 98–119, here: 98, https://doi.org/10.18523/kmhj270983.2023-10.89-119 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

10 "(M)uch research on war and violence focuses on how individuals' memories, perceptions, and experiences of past violence may influence their present beliefs". Kristin M. Bakke, Kit Rickard, John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal, "Politicizing Memory: Evidence from Ukraine", *Problems of Post-Communism* 72/1, 2024, 16–35, here: 17, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2024.2316037 [accessed 20.10.2025].

11 For example: "Since the fall of the Soviet Union, collective memories of the past have been tools in struggles over Ukrainian identity" in: Kristin M. Bakke, Kit Rickard, John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal, "Politicizing Memory: Evidence from Ukraine", 17.

12 Memory "as a weapon" was the key phrase in the title of the International Conference "The Politics of Memory as a Weapon: Perspectives on Russia's War in Ukraine", February 8–10, 2023 at Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation, Berlin. This concept is used not only in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine, for example: 1) Alistair Thomson, "Memory as a Battlefield: Personal and Political Investments in the National Military Past", *The Oral History Review* 22/2, 1995, 55–73, https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/22.2.55 [accessed: 26.11.2025]; 2) Tamas Kisantal, "Beyond the Battlefields of Memory: Historical Traumas and Hungarian Literature", *Porównania* 2/27, 2020, 47–58, https://doi.org/10.14746/por.2020.2.3 [accessed: 24.11.2025].

13 Roman Holyk, "Memories of the War and the War of Memories", in: Viktoriya Sereda (ed.), *War, Migration, Memory. Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers, 4/2025, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2025, 291–312.

their memories. In this study, I focus on rifts as disruptions in the flows of people's narratives and on dissonances as mixed, contradictory attitudes towards some memories.

Memories can inspire, calm, fill one with strength or resilience, but they can also be destructive and potentially "explosive". By treating interview texts as memories, we can analyse respondents' perceptions of reality as a repository of culturally rooted emotions[14] in memories influenced by the war. In particular, these perceptions can be manifested when interviewees' autobiographies echo fragments of memories from previous generations (parents, grandparents).[15] In a situation of uncertainty[16] about their future physical, economic and psychological security, it can be difficult for interviewees to maintain emotional neutrality. Therefore, we observe contrasting variability in a wide range of opposing emotional tonalities in their discourses – from inspiration to deep despair or anger.

Memory is an essential basis of life that becomes fragmented when forcibly torn apart by war. The main rift in memories lies between Before and After[17] traumatic events caused by the war[18]. Fragmentation is manifested in various forms of chaos in the narrative of memories because temporal linearity – inherent to chronology of real events – is disrupted.[19] Fragmentation thus complicates the structure of testimonies, with ramifications for associative memories, flashbacks, interpolations, dissociations, reflections, comments, and silences. Such silences may range from

14 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2014, 13–14.

15 Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung*. Stuttgart: Springer, 2017.

16 Iryna Lapshyna, "Forced migration, uncertainty and transnationalism of Ukrainians in Germany", *Mobilities* 21/1, 2025, 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2024.2445806 [accessed: 20.10.2025].

17 Tamara Martsenyuk, Alexi Gugushvili, Evelyn Ersanilli, and Patrick Präg, "Understanding Ukrainian society before and after the Russian invasion", *European Societies* 26/2, 2024, 173–177, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2024.2350780 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

18 The Ukrainian Law "On the Principles of the State Policy of the National Memory of the Ukrainian People", adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament in August 2025 (registration number 13273), officially defined the war that has been ongoing in Ukraine since February 19, 2014, as the "War for Independence of Ukraine", https://www.rada.gov.ua/news/razom/265262.html [accessed 20.03.2026]. But the law did not put an end to the international discussion about its definition, because the war is still ongoing. Examples of the discussion: Marek Górka, "A Definitional Framework for Cyber Warfare. The Ukrainian Aspect", *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 54/3, 2025, 127–140, https://doi.org/10.15804/ppsy202272 [accessed 20.03.2026]. Or: Ruth Breeze and María Fernanda Novoa-Jaso, "Is this War? Naming the Russia-Ukraine dispute in three international news providers", *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 13/2, 2025, 182–209, https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00092.bre [accessed 20.03.2026].

19 Karyn Ball, "Trauma and Memory Studies", in: Deidre Shauna Lynch (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedias of Literature*, 2021, 4.

a nuanced, unspoken, and "unspeakable"[20] to unrepresented and unrepresentable. Noteworthy is the respondents' citation of third-person direct speech. For example, a respondent cites their family member, neighbour or colleague as an expression of the plurality of "voices" in their memory narrative (multi-perspective narrative). By using the third, instead of the first-person form singular or plural when recounting their own experience,[21] the respondents distance or separate themselves from certain memories. The frequent use of repetition may also indicate disruption in the flow of respondents' memories because of different kinds of barriers: a lack of words, an emotional outburst, self-censorship etc.[22] According to Maurice Halbwachs, memories not only undergo a continuous reshaping, but their emotional power is also recalibrated over time.[23]

In this research, I use an emotional lens[24] to study the memories of Ukrainians to answer the following questions: How was a re/deconstruction of individual memories of displaced Ukrainians affected by the war, and which fragments of layered memories contain tension? To do so, I draw on three collections of interviews with Ukrainians (mostly women) about their experiences and memories after having been displaced because of the Russian invasion in February 2022. Specifically, my contribution asks how emotions,[25] influencing the rhetoric of testimonies, complement or modify the content of their memories. Which words in the interview corpus are used the most, and what does this reveal? What is silenced?

The three interview collections on which I draw in my research were conducted and gathered within the joint project Prisma Ukraïna: War, Migration, Memory

20 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence From Domestic Abuse To Political Terror*, New York: Basic Books, 1997.

21 According to Emile Benveniste, the third person is a form of the verbal (or pronominal) paradigm that refers to an object outside the addressee. So its status is non-personal. Moreover, the third person is characterised only by its opposition to the singularity of the first person of the speaker, who, by uttering it, establishes it as non-personal. The form "he / she / it" is valuable by the very fact of its obligatory belonging to the discourse uttered by the "I". Emile Benveniste, "Die Natur der Pronomen", in: Emile Benveniste, *Probleme der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*. translated from the French by Wilhelm Bolle. München: Paul List Verlag KG, Syndikat-Reprise, 1974, 279–286, here 296.

22 Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 280.

23 Maurice Halbwachs, "The Collective Memory", in: Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Daniel Levy (eds.), *The Collective Memory Reader*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 139–149.

24 Katarina Mozetič, Karolina Lebek, and Nora Ratzmann, "Using the lens of emotions: Exploring Ukrainian refugee women's anchoring processes in Berlin", *Culture, Practice and Europeanization* 8/2, 2023, 238–248, https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2023-2-238 [accessed: 27.04.2026].

25 Emotions as a kind of "investment … [can] … provide a script", that is why any "'figures of speech' are crucial to the emotionality of texts", Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.

and, at the same time, more narrowly, within slightly different individual research topics. All interviews share common questions concerning memory and history:

- Have you or your relatives ever had an experience of forced displacement?
- Now, because of the war, there is a lot of talk about Ukraine's past, but what about your personal context?

I employ a frame of emotions as cultural constructions[26] to discern, *firstly*, the emotional axes that memories of displaced Ukrainians revolve around, and, *secondly*, the Ukrainians' moods are guided by to reconstruct and deconstruct their memories. Subjective emotions are informative, expressive means as "object- or situation-directed affective comportments that are sorted into culturally established and linguistically labelled categories."[27] Emotions are an inherent part of any reflection[28] and memory. They can provide indications of how displaced Ukrainians reconcile the dissonances by coping with the challenges to and of memories caused by the war.

Methodology

I use an interdisciplinary approach to study narratives of fragmented memories of displaced Ukrainians. Within the frameworks of the philosophy of culture and memory studies, I use interviews, corpus linguistic analysis, speech act theory, hermeneutics, close reading and discourse analysis. The methodology included three stages: 1) preparing the selected empirical data of collected interviews for analysis (transcribing, proofreading, creating corpora); 2) corpora analysis[29] to identify the most frequently used words, key words in context of chosen corpora with the AntConc software[30] (a freeware, multiplatform tool for carrying out corpus

26 Batja Mesquita, Michael Boiger and Jozefien De Leersnyder, "The cultural construction of emotions", *Current Opinion in Psychology* 8, 2016, 31–36, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.09.015 [accessed: 20.10.2025].

27 Christian von Scheve and Jan Slaby, "Emotion, emotion concept", in: Christian van Scheve, Jan Slaby (eds.), *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, London, New York: Routledge, 2019, 42–51, here, 43.

28 Yvonne Albrecht, "Emotional reflexivity in contexts of migration. How the consideration of internal processes is necessary to explain agency", *Digithum* 21, 2018, 43–53, http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i21.3119 [accessed: 20.10.2025]; Mary Holmes, "Researching emotional reflexivity", *Emotion Review* 7/1, 2015, 61–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073914544478 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

29 Corpus analysis facilitates systematic comparisons between textual objects at a large scale.

30 Anthony Laurence, "AntConc", AntLab Solutions, 2022, https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/ [accessed: 26.11.2025].

linguistics research[31]); and 3) close reading, hermeneutics, and discourse analysis of selected fragments of testimonies.

Three Collections of Interviews from the Prisma Ukraïna Archive[32]

The interview collection phase for the Prisma Ukraïna research group took place between the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023 in Germany and Poland, countries hosting the largest populations of displaced Ukrainians due to the Russian full-scale invasion.[33] This study draws only on three collections (from six) of the Prisma Ukraïna archive, namely on 49 semi-structured interviews focused on Ukrainians' experience of living under the conditions of war and displacement. Interviews were conducted either in Ukrainian (38 interviews) or in Russian (11 interviews), according to the respondents' preferences and were recorded with their consent. Some interviewees used a mix of both languages. In the study, mainly female adult respondents of various ages were interviewed. Two collections (21 online interviews by Viktoriya Sereda and 15 online interviews by Natalia Zaitseva-Chipak) contain only female testimonies, while the author's collection contains 11 female and two male face-to-face interviews. Sampling mainly focused on Ukrainians, displaced abroad since 2022 because of the war. Interviewees were recruited through Ukrainian communities in Germany (Zaitseva-Chipak), in Poland and Germany (Sereda) and through Ukrainian participants of German language courses in the Volkshochschulen[34] in Berlin (Haidamachuk). The interviewees were between 18 and 70 years old, and most were highly educated.[35] At the time of the interviews, the participants were displaced from various Ukrainian oblasts and were residing in different German federal states and in different Polish Voivodeships (see the summary of the fieldwork in Table 1). The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 2.5 hours. They were recorded, transcribed[36] and stored in a shared cloud archive

31 Heather Froehlich, "Corpus Analysis with Antconc", *The Programming Historian*, 2015, https://doi.org/10.46430/phen0043 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

32 The Prisma Ukraïna Archive I refer to is a non-public collection of interviews (104 in total) conducted in 2022–2023 by six members of the Prisma Ukraïna: War, Migration, Memory research group.

33 UNHCR. Operational data portal: Ukrainian refugee situation, 2023, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine [accessed: 15.02.2026].

34 Volkshochschulen (VHS) are public adult education centers in Germany.

35 Herbert Brücker et al, "Ukrainian refugees in Germany: Escape, arrival and eve Disinformation in Poland ryday life", *IAB-Forschungsbericht* 24/2022, 2023, https://doi.org/10.48720/IAB.FB.2224EN [accessed: 22.10.2025].

36 Most of the interviews were transcribed by two Ukrainian companies: https://www.sapiens.com.ua/ and https://socioinform.com/.

with restricted access. Some empirical data from these interviews have previously been used in other qualitative studies.[37] All quotations used in this article have been anonymised to protect the confidentiality of the respondents. Overall, all the interviewees self-identify as Ukrainians who were forcibly displaced (to Germany or Poland) due to the war.

Table 1: Summary of the fieldwork with displaced Ukrainians in Germany and Poland

	Olha Haidamachuk (OH)	**Viktoriya Sereda (VS)**	**Natalia Zaitseva-Chipak (NZCh)**
The project 2022–2023	The Tonality of the Archives of Ukrainian Migrants' Memory	Prisma Ukraïna: War, Migration and Memory	Ukrainians Displaced: The Fluidity of Roles
Respondent group	Displaced Ukrainians in Berlin	Displaced Ukrainian women in Germany and Poland	Displaced Ukrainian women in Germany
Number of interviews	13 / face-to-face	21 / online	15 / online
Female + Male respondents	11 F + 2 M	21 F	15 F
Age	20–70	18–62	20–69
Language Ukr – Ru	11 U + 2 R	18 U + 3 R	9 U + 6 R
Time Frame	30.10.2022-12.12.2022	February 2023	5.12.2022-30.01.2023

Source: Author's elaboration.

37 Natalia Zaitseva-Chipak, "Ukrainian Forcefully Displaced Persons in Germany: To Stay or to Leave?", *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*, 27 July 2023, https://doi.org/10.58079/ut7f [accessed: 16.10.2025]; Natalia Zaitseva-Chipak, "Ukrainian Forcibly Displaced Persons in Germany Post-Migration Strategies," in: Viktoriya Sereda (ed.), *War, Migration, Memory. Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers 4/2025, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2025, 291–312; Olha Haidamachuk, "The Tonality of the Archives of the Memories of Forcibly Displaced Ukrainians", in: Viktoriya Sereda (ed.), *War, Migration, Memory. Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, Forum Transregionale Studien – Dossiers 4/2025, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2025, 103–121.

Corpus-based Analysis of Word Frequency

I used the Word-tool[38] from the AntConc program to find out the most frequently used meaningful words[39] in the whole corpus of the interview transcripts because "corpus-based conceptual analysis facilitates the rapid and objective identification of frequently used words."[40] The frequency analysis helped to clarify variations of hits in the corpus (see Table 2).

Table 2: The most frequently used meaningful words (hits) in 49 interviews (from three collections from the Prisma Ukraïna Archive 2022–2023).

Hits (among top 50) of the whole corpus				
Type	Ukr. / Rus.	Part of speech	Rank	Freq
there [там / tam]	Ukr. ≈ Rus.	*adverb* of place	11[41]	3115[42]
(it) was [було / bulo]	Ukr.	*verb* (past tense)	20	1949
very [дуже / duzhe]	Ukr.	*adverb* (intensifier)	25	1747
here [тут / tut]	Ukr. ≈ Rus.	*adverb* of place	30	1513
now [зараз / zaraz]	Ukr.	*adverb* of time	42	934
(I) know [знаю / znaju]	Ukr. ≈ Rus.	*verb* (present tense)	47	923

Source: Author's elaboration using Word-tool of AntConc program.

In particular, I was interested in whether an emotional-evaluative vocabulary would be included in this list of hits and, if so, what tone they would evoke. Among

38 This tool counts all the words in the corpus and presents them in an ordered list, which allows you to quickly find which words are the most frequent in a corpus.

39 For example, nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, not structure words such as conjunctions, prepositions.

40 Illia Ilin, "Exploring and Constructing Philosophical Concepts: a Corpus Approach", *Visnyk of L'viv University. Series Philos.-Political Studies* 48, 2023, 53–62, here: 53, https://doi.org/10.30970/PPS.2023.48.7 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

41 This ranking is topped by structure words such as prepositions, conjunctions like *in* or *and*, which I did not include in this table as "not meaningful" words. "Rank" means that among 50 the most frequent words in the whole corpus the word "там" ranks 11th on this list.

42 The AntConc program found 3115 instances of using the word "там" in the whole corpus of the interviews.

the 49 interviews, 38 are in Ukrainian and 11 in Russian[43]. The transcripts for the analysis were not translated.

Considering the (Ukrainian-Russian) bilingualism of the three corpora, the words "there" [там / tam], "here" [тут / tut], and "I know" [знаю / znaju] are written the same in both languages. This may be one of the reasons for a higher frequency of these words in the bilingual corpus. In contrast, the Ukrainian word "now" [за́раз / zaraz] could only be used by the Ukrainian-speaking respondents; therefore, only their testimonies are considered in this case. Another reason for such a high frequency of words ""there" [там / tam] "here" [тут / tut]; "now" [зараз / zaraz]; and "very" [дуже / duzhe] could be that they are formally invariable (i.e., not inflected).

This case illustrates a disadvantage of analysing inflected languages, such as Ukrainian and Russian, with AntConc, as different forms of the same word are counted separately. For instance, the Ukrainian verbs "було[44]" [(it) was / bulo] and "знаю" [(I) know / znaju] have conjugations, different personal and temporal forms, the frequency of the past tense form of the third person "it" singular (case of *було*) and the present tense form of the first-person singular (case of *знаю*).

As shown in Table 2, there are six meaningful words among the 50 most frequently used in the whole corpus of 49 interviews. Two of the most frequently used words are: 1) the adverb with spatial semantics "there" [там / tam] and 2) the Ukrainian verb "було" [(it) was / bulo] in the grammatical form of the past tense, which indicates a certain distancing of the speakers from the discussed locations in space and time (rather *there-and-then*), and which corresponds to both the theme of memory and experience. The frequency of the Ukrainian grammatical form "було" [(it) was/ bulo] in the past tense clearly indicates an emphasis on the past experience in the interviews.

It is important, however, to consider the correlation of the *there-and-then* coordinate with the equally expressive *here-and-now* coordinate ("here" [тут / tut]; "now" [зараз / zaraz]), which, although less frequent, also plays a significant role in these narratives. Moreover, the word "now" [зараз / zaraz] could be used only by the Ukrainian-speaking respondents, and, therefore, its frequency is actually even higher if we add the frequency of use of the word "now" [сейчас / sejchas] from Russian-language transcripts.[45] But even taking into account these data, it is clear that the frequency of *there-and-then* significantly outweighs *here-and-now*. Therefore,

43 Although several respondents answered in a mixed Ukrainian-Russian language, I did not separate them in the third group here. Instead, I divided them also into these two groups, depending on the greater use of one of the two languages in the respondent's testimony.

44 The third person: вона була / she was; він був / he was.

45 In these three corpuses there are 142 cases of the word "сейча́с" being used. It is therefore possible to take into account "зараз" and "сейчас" together: $1016 + 142 = 1158$ cases.

in general, the transcripts as a corpus focus less on current experiences or plans, but more on the past, mostly influenced by the interview questionnaire.

Contrary to my expectations, in the corpus of the interview texts, the hits (the most frequently used words) do not contain any words with emotional (like *terribly*) and evaluative (like *unfairly*) connotations, although the Ukrainian adverb "very" [дуже / duzhe] was often used as a positive or a negative intensifier. Its frequency reveals a tendency to emotionally expressive statements by simple means determined by the principle of the least effort. For example, a speaker prefers to say "very much / many" instead of "plenty", "multitude" or "dozens".[46] Most often in the corpus, "very" is used with adjectives or adverbs in such phrases (KWIC-tool[47]): "very much"; "very hard"; "very good"; "very long", each time reinforcing its positive or negative meaning.[48]

If "now" emphasises the present moment, the modal predicate "I know" represents epistemic modality[49] and "performs a reinforcing function and expresses the authenticity of the message."[50] Unlike English,[51] the Ukrainian and Russian forms of "know" in the present tense are used only in the first-person singular. According to John Austin, by saying "I know," the speaker guarantees to the interlocutor with their own authority that what was said is exactly so in their perception. At the same time, the speaker extends this guarantee to the interlocutor, allowing themselves to

46 According to George Zimpf, speakers tend to minimize their effort by using as small vocabulary as possible, while hearers need as large vocabulary as possible to minimize ambiguity in a word use. George Kingsley Zipf, *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort: An Introduction to Human Ecology*, Cambridge: Addison-Wesley Press, Inc., 1949, 5–8.

47 KWIC means KeyWord In Context. It is a Concordance Tool which allows one to see how words and phrases are commonly used in a corpus of texts. Laurence Antony explains the basics of the KWIC tool basics in AntConc 4 (ver. 4.0), https://youtu.be/2tW2c5zf40Q?si=OfhuleUM9F002rVE [accessed: 26.11.2025].

48 Each time it depends on a used verb and a certain context.

49 Nina Horholiuk, "Modalni ihry v mediynomu dyskursi: znannya i vira", (Modal games in media discourse: knowledge and belief)", in: N. H. Horholyuk, L. M. Kolibaba, V. M. Fursa (eds.), *Hramatychnyy portret ukrayins'koyi movy u KHKHI storichchi: zbirnyk tez naukovykh dopovidey uchasnykiv Mizhnarodnoyi naukovoyi konferentsiyi na poshanu doktora filolohichnykh nauk, profesora Horodens'koyi Kateryny Hryhorivny, (Grammatical portrait of the Ukrainian language in the twenty-first century: a collection of abstracts of scientific reports of participants of the International Scientific Conference in honor of Doctor of Philological Sciences, Professor Kateryna Hryhorivna Horodenska)*, Kyiv: Vydavnychyy dim Dmytra Buraho, 2024, 106–110, here: 106, https://iul-nasu.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Gramatychnyj-portret.pdf [accessed: 26.11.2025].

50 Ibid., 107.

51 In addition, in English there is a problem of distinguishing between the phrases *you know* and *I mean*, which are close in basic meaning, in: Jean Fox Tree and Josef Schrock, "Basic meanings of *you know* and *I mean*".

say: "I know that they know"[52] something in a certain cultural context, thus taking into account that both the words spoken and the emotions expressed are culturally rooted. It is important that "know" not only denotes an internal passive state, the subject of which has a "feeling of truth," but also affects the "mental perspective of reflecting reality."[53] The analysed testimonies illustrate the interviewees' focus on a unique *I*-perception of reality.[54]

Despite some limitations related to the bilingual nature of the corpora, my analysis shows that conversations about the memory and experience of Ukrainians under the influence of the war unfold in the spatio-temporal coordinates of *there-and-then* with a clear correlation to the *here-and-now*. If in the corpora "there" was often used in phrases like "there (with me / with us / with them)" in the sense of a narrow circle of *relationships*, then "here" was often used with "in Germany," "in Poland," etc., in a broad *geographical* sense (KWIC-tool). In comparison, I observed only a neutral marker ("very") of a tendency towards emotional expression of testimonies. By closely reading the transcripts, I also discovered how deep the *there-and-then* reaches into individual memories, as well as the range of tonalities they evoke.[55]

Exploration of Selected Fragments of Memory Narratives

As corpus analysis revealed a general opposition of chronotopes (the verbally expressed contrast of time-spaces like *here-and-now* and *there-and-then*) in the interviews, further close reading and discourse analysis illustrate this opposition. A large Before-After rift manifested in the structure of almost every memory narrative, while the smaller rifts caused by shifts in the assessment of the *past-future* diverged from it. The smaller shifts occurred both in terms of the *quality of one's own life* or *relationships* with relatives and friends, and in terms of *identification challenges* in the system of one's own versus others.

Close reading, hermeneutics and discourse analysis reveal the rifts and dissonances, schematically presented below:

a) Powerful Anxiety and a Lack of Words
b) The *Before-After* Rift in the Flow from *Then* to *Now*
    a. The *Before-After* Rift in Inner Life

52 John Langshaw Austin, "Other minds", in: John Langshaw Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, 67.

53 Horholiuk, "Modalni ihry v mediynomu dyskursi: znannya i vira", 107–108.

54 Including several cases of negation (since the particle *не / not* is counted separately) when *I know* was used in the phrase *I don't know*.

55 David Pugmire, *Rediscovering Emotion: Emotion and the Claims of Feeling*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998, 7.

b. The *Before-After* Rift in Relationships
   i. Deterioration of attitude towards Russians
   ii. Warming of attitudes towards Poles and Germans
c. The Echoes of Former Confrontations
d. Traces of Silenced Scars in the Collective Memory of Ukrainians

c) Gratitude, Solidarity and Optimism vs. Anxiety

Below is a detailed analysis of the empirical material according to this scheme.

Powerful Anxiety and the Lack of Words

Situating my contribution within research on the forced displacement of Ukrainians abroad,[56] including the emotional landscape of their testimonies,[57] I seek to fill a gap in the study of the emotional resonances of different layers of Ukrainians' memories under the influence of war and of their displacement. While analysing this corpus, I revealed some kind of literal and figurative awakening influenced by the war.[58] Stressful experiences can stir a person to revise, or even to deconstruct[59] one's memories under pressure to reconsider the foundations of one's worldview, or to retrospectively trace the causes of the catastrophe into which one was dragged.

The interviewees described the first days of the full-scale war with words such as: *dangerous*, *alarming*, *restless*, *scary* (VS-15: F40s[60]), the semantics of which evoke a tone of anxiety. In general, the vocabulary they draw on not only divides the continuous

56 Viktoriya Sereda, *Displacement in War-Torn Ukraine: State, Displacement and Belonging*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023; Oleksandra Tarkhanova and Daryna Pyrogova, "Forced displacement in Ukraine: understanding the decision-making process", *European Societies* 26/2, 2024, 481–500, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2280680 [accessed: 26.11.2025]; Richard Lemoine-Rodríguez et al., "The voices of the displaced: Mobility and Twitter conversations of migrants of Ukraine in 2022", *Information Processing and Management* 61/3, 103670, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2024.103670 [accessed: 26.11.2025]; Halyna Voznyak et al., "Adaptation of internally displaced persons in host communities under conditions of war in Ukraine: The role of local governments", *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 21/2, 2023, 323–335, https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.21(2).2023.32 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

57 GrainneMcGinty et al., "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Complex Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, and Coping Styles among Internally Displaced Ukrainians", *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 28/7, 2023, 571–587, https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2023.2217002 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

58 Olha Haidamachuk, "War / Awakening", *Almanac of Ukrainian Studies Journal* 34, 2024, 40–50, https://doi.org/10.17721/2520-2626/2024 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

59 Olha Haidamachuk, "The Tonality of the Archives of the Memories of Forcibly Displaced Ukrainians", 109.

60 Here and further in the text, all references to interviews in brackets mean the following: (abbreviation of the name and surname of the author of the interview collection – interview number: a letter indicating the gender of the respondent and a number indicating the age of the respondent). For example, here the initials VS indicate Viktoriya Sereda's collection, and

stream of personal experiences "into discrete units, but also catalog[s] experiences in memory for future use."[61] Sometimes an emotionally charged narrative may not contain any emotional-evaluative vocabulary at all; instead, numerous pauses, repetitions, the incoherence of single words and the admission of a lack of words more eloquently convey the state of emotional anxiety:

> … *after 24 February*[62] … just … well, just … even, … and *after 24 February I don't even know how to describe it.* It's some kind of … *I don't even know* … what … how to pick up something, because … here … a person can't plan anything *for themselves … for themselves* … because you *don't know* what to expect from tomorrow. That's it.[63]

The date in this quote is repeated twice, but the name of the event is silenced. This may be one of the symptoms of a traumatic experience.[64] The respondent struggles to find words, especially when they do not seem sufficient to express her feelings adequately. Memories evoke strong, mostly negative, emotions, but the new experience has not yet been understood or processed. Therefore, emotions confuse thoughts and impede the flow of a rationally coherent discourse, especially when influenced by shock expressed with a tonality of fear or despair.

The *Before-After* Rift in the Flow from *Then* to *Now*

In their narratives of memories, displaced Ukrainians mostly choose the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine as the starting point in a certain space-time coordinate system of *there-and-then* in relation to *here-and-now*. Such a choice articulates the break in the narrative as *Before-After:* "Life is truly divided into Before and After"[65] (OH-8: F20s). For some Ukrainians, "the turning point came in 2014"[66] (OH-9; VS-13). Therefore, temporal relations are complicated by non-linearity, since

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the number of the interview in this collection given by me. "F" means that the respondent is a woman. "40s" means that her age was from 40–49 years at the time of the interview.

61 Vera Vine, Rajan L. Boyd and James W. Pennebaker, "Natural emotion vocabularies as windows on distress and well-being", *Nature Communication* 11/4525, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-18349-0 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

62 All italics in the quote here and below are mine.

63 VS-4: F40s: "… *після 24 лютого* … просто … ну, просто … навіть, … *а після 24 лютого я навіть не знаю, як то описати*. То якесь … *навіть не знаю*, … яким, … як то і що підібрати, бо то … тут … нічого людина не може ні спланувати *собі* нічого. … *Собі* … бо *не знаєш*, чого чекати від завтрашнього дня. Ось так."

64 Maria Ritter, "Silence as the Voice of Trauma", *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 74, 2014, 176–194, https://doi.org/10.1057/ajp.2014.5 [accessed: 05.03.2026].

65 "(…) дійсно життя поділилось на До і Після".

66 Natalia Otrishchenko, "The time that was taken from us", in: Catherine Wanner (ed.), *Dispossession*, 2023, 25–44, here:33.

the flow of narrated events from the *point of trauma* can move in different directions, especially when a person contrasts events occurring *before* and *after* several different traumatic events.[67]

The rift of *Before-After* in the perception of one's own biographical narrative has many manifestations. Sometimes deep anxiety lies in the pauses of unspoken words around, even if this rift is articulated as a *possibility*, that is, as if this division is conditional and in fact can be made elsewhere, taking another event as a starting point (*there/before – here/after*):

> It is *possible* to distinguish between life *before* and *after* [the displacement caused by the full-scale war], who we [Ukrainians] were *there* [in Ukraine], this is no longer the case. Who are we *here* [in Germany]? We are nobody *yet*.[68]

The respondent attributes significant changes in her social life to the loss of social status (as a "successful entrepreneur with big plans") after a forced move abroad in 2022, which determined the starting point for her. This shift in emphasis from *war* to *displacement* as a turning point contains an unspoken tension. Using conditional modality, the respondent emphasises several times that for her, as a Ukrainian citizen of Luhansk oblast, the war began in 2014, because she lived near the frontline:

> I *would not focus* here on 24 February, since the hostilities here [in the Luhansk oblast] have been going on since 2014. … And now I do not always like that everyone [Ukrainians] is focusing attention, … *[Ukrainians] in the L'viv and Ivano-Frankivsk oblasts, [that] the war really started after 24 February [2022], but here* [in the Luhansk oblast] *it has been going on since 2014. This is a very big principle*.[69]

This self-correction, when the broad generalisation of "all Ukrainians" is reduced only to those who were "in the L'viv and Ivano-Frankivsk oblasts," shifts the emphasis from *all Ukrainians* to *Ukrainians of only two named western Ukrainian oblasts* (to the unnamed eastern Ukrainian Luhansk and Donetsk ones). But the respondent did not explain why this difference is so important to her. This omission again points

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67 Svitlana Kuranova, "War – Writer – Text: Discursive Features (on the Material of Oksana Zabuzhko's Essays)", *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 10, 2023, 68–78, here 77, https://doi.org/10.18523/kmhj270983.2023-10.68-88 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

68 NZCh-7: F30s: "*Можно* разграничить жизнь *до* и *после* (вынужденного переселения из-за полномасштабной войны), кто мы были *там* (дома в Украине), уже этого нет. Кто мы *здесь* (за границей)? Мы *еще* никто."

69 NZCh-7: F30s: "*Я бы здесь не акцентировала внимания* на 24 февраля, поскольку у нас (в Луганской области) боевые действия длятся с 14-го года… И мне сейчас не всегда нравится то, что все (украинцы) акцентируют внимание.., *(украинцы) в Львовском, Ивано-Франковском регионе, (что) война действительно началась после 24 февраля (2022), а у нас* (в Луганской области) *она идет с 2014-го года. Вот это, очень большой принцип*".

to an unspoken tension. However, her very focus on the different perceptions of the war starting dates by Ukrainians from more distant regions of Ukraine emphasises a significant difference in the duration of the war traumatic experience. Furthermore, when it comes to her personal worldview and values system, she articulates that "the war changed our views on life, on what is important, while displacement basically did not change them."[70] And here she didn't specify any date of war. Thus, her practice of re/deconstructing traumatic experience is retrospectively complicated by the double manifestation of the unspoken tension and different shifts of emphasis regarding her perception of her own social and individual life. She seems aware of a turning point in life and being back to square one due to the loss of her former social status and comfort. She needs to rebuild everything from scratch: learn a language, find a job and housing, and arrange her life. However, the word "yet" indicates her sensitivity to such difficulties, perceived as temporary. *Not* having the same social status abroad as she had in Ukraine, the respondent understands that *here* she needs to "start from scratch" and make some effort to achieve her desired status abroad in the future, which she does *not yet* have, but which she sees as achievable. If she did not have these hopes, she would not say this meaningful "yet".

The *Before-After* Rift in Inner Life

The totality of war is also articulated as not only external, but also internal, which, being pervasive, thus also feels inevitable and inescapable:

> Now *I* am *a lost* person *who*, honestly, *does not know at all* what will happen in the future and even vice versa, *I try not to think about the future at all*. Because living in such conditions that each of us is going through, those who stayed in Ukraine or those who went abroad, *everyone has their own mini-war in their inner world*, and in order *to survive* in this inner world, *you need to create some kind of barrier*, or think about something completely different, *distract yourself so that you still remain a person*. But *you* understand that *a little bit, you are no longer the person you were before*, *you* are *a little bit dead*, but in this sense, it is so figurative. Now *I* am just a refugee *who* is *trying to live as best as she can, to live for today*.[71]

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70 "Война изменила наши взгляды на жизнь, на то что важно, а переезд в принципе нет".

71 NZCh-8: F20s: "*Зараз* я *загублена* людина, яка,ої чесно, в*она взагалі, не знає*, що буде в майбутньому і навіть навпаки, *я стараюся повністю не думати про майбутнє*. Бо живучи в таких умовах, які проходить кожен з нас, ті хто зостались в Україні чи ті, хто поїхали за кордон, *у всіх своя міні-війна у внутрішньому світі*, і щоб *вижити* в цьому внутрішньому світі, *тобі треба якісь створити чи бар'єр*, чи думати зовсім про інше, *відволікати себе, щоб ти ще зоставався людиною*. Але *ти* розумієш, що *трошечки ти вже не та людина, яка була раніше, ти трошечки мертвий*, але в цьому плані, це так образно. Зараз я просто біженець, *який старається жити так, як може, жити сьогоднішнім днем*."

This woman perceived war as a destructive factor of irreversible internal transformation. There is uncertainty, confusion, and self-loss voiced in her introspection, but also a feeling of a frontline within herself, with a need to confront this threat ("everyone has their own mini-war in their inner world"). Behind the self-prohibition of even thinking about the future ("I try not to think about the future at all") there may be a powerful fear paralysing actions towards any future. This fear narrowed the time horizon, limiting it to the focus on the now ("to live for today"). At the same time, in the respondent's discourse, her "self" was split into several grammatical categories of person. Instead of speaking of herself not only in the first-person singular ("I am"), she also positioned herself in the second ("you need"), the third ("as she can"), and in the generalised "everyone". She interpreted her self-limiting procedures, such as setting up internal barriers and seeking self-distraction, as her self-rescuing for "survival as a human being". Even when she distracted herself, she felt it was impossible to escape from the war, regardless of the distance from the real frontline or the number of borders, just as it was impossible to escape from herself. The remark about the figurativeness of self-feeling[72] perceiving herself as a "little bit dead" revealed her traumatic experience. Having accepted her own partial "death" as a kind of self-sacrifice, with the greater part of what is human in her, she was ready to live fully, but only through the frame of the *here-and-now*. This 20-year-old woman used her memory as an alternative temporal "shelter". However, older respondents also testified to a temporary narrowing of their time horizon to the "now": "(t)he future and the past meet in the "now" as its different projections,"[73] even though "you don't look at life with a long-term perspective anymore".[74]

The *Before-After* Rift in Relationships

This rift in the memory of Before-After directly affects people's relationships, which, for example, manifests in the growing gap of misunderstanding between friends or relatives on different sides of the front (*there-here*):

> (T)his is not a *situation*, this is a *war*, because I have relatives who are in Russia, they are afraid to even pronounce it: 'this is *a situation*'. I say: 'no, this is not *a situation*, this is far from *a situation*, because this is a *war* that you started'.[75]

72 Gerhard Kreuch, "Appropriateness of Self-Feeling", in: Gerhard Kreuch, *Self-Feeling: Can Self-Consciousness be Understood as a Feeling?*, Contributions to Phenomenology Book 107, Berlin: Springer, 2019, 171–195.

73 Olha Haidamachuk, "War / Awakening", 41.

74 NZCh-1: F40s: "не дивишся вже далекоглядно на життя".

75 NZCh-15: F30s: **"**это не *ситуация*, это *война*, потому что есть у меня родственники, которые в России, они боятся даже произнести : это, это *ситуация*. Я говорю : нет, это не *ситуация*, это далеко не *ситуация*, потому что это *война*, которую начали вы.**"**

The speaker's use of quoting and self-quoting in the form of direct speech not only emphasises the contrast in the tones of the interlocutors (frightened caution versus indignant accusation) but also highlights the polarisation of their positions and the tense rift in their relationships. The interviewee emotionally reacted to the apparent neutrality of the euphemism "situation", which was dissonant with the reality, but sounded in line with the Kremlin censorship, which only allowed the use of "special military operations", or "SMO".[76] After denying such usage three times, she uncompromisingly articulated the word with the negative semantics of "war" instead (because "(f)or most people, war is associated with coercion, loss, destruction and death"[77]), as the only correct definition. This terminological-hermeneutic conflict (of people connected by family ties but separated by real and ideological front lines) reveals a split in relationships as a clash of two opposite ideologies, rooted in different cultures that produce different media discourses[78]. In addition, we see that consumers of opposing mass media discourses find themselves in completely different "clouds of memories". Despite speaking the same language, they cannot understand each other. The frontline stitches the information field of this hybrid war with numerous discursive battles in the media and social networks. Due to the interactive nature of social networks, the information frontline is increasingly decentralised: "wars are inseparable from verbal, discursive practices."[79] A similar rift between "my war" and "your special operation"[80] or the "polarising discourse of 'us'

76 Oleh Morozov, "Between Self-Victimization and Shared Memory: Russia's War against Ukraine in Russian Independent Media", *Political Studies* 2/8, 2024, 94–115, here 103, http://pd.ipiend.gov.ua/article/view/315761 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

77 Solomiia Albota, "Linguistic and Semantic Representation of the WAR Concept by Phraseological Units", *SCIA-2023: 2nd International Workshop on Social Communication and Information Activity in Digital Humanities*, November 9, 2023, Lviv, Ukraine, https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-3608/paper27.pdf [accessed: 26.11.2025].

78 The research of two conflicting forms of media memory: Oleh Morozov, "Between Self-Victimization and Shared Memory: Russia's War against Ukraine in Russian Independent Media".

79 Galina Yavorska, "Hibrydna viyna yak dyskursyvnyy konstrukt", ("Hybrid warfare as a discursive construct"), *Stratehichni priorytety, (Strategic priorities)* 4, 2016, 41–48, here 42, http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/sppol_2016_4_7 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

80 Aleksandra Urman, and Mykola Makhortykh, "My war is your special operation: Engagement with pro- and anti-regime framing of the war in Ukraine on Russian social media", *Media, War & Conflict*, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352251371864 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

vs. 'them"[81] can be traced in "media memories"[82] of social networks also in a kind of an "information war" (VS-5: F30s).

The Deterioration of Attitudes towards Russians

A student from Kharkiv did not even mention the name of the aggressor state, replacing it with "this bad country" (OH-2: F20s). A pensioner originally from Belgorod, who was displaced for the second time (in 2015 from Donetsk oblast, and in 2022 from Kharkiv oblast), also reacted deeply emotional to the Russians' war crimes in Bucha, Irpin, and Bakhmut. She completely switched to the Ukrainian language, striving to distance herself from the obsessive kinship rhetoric of the neighbouring Russian people, the rejection of which unconsciously extends to the rejection of its name: "Now I can't, I … no way. It's somehow … everything … this nation has closed itself off for me"[83] (OH-7: F70s). The tonal tension regarding any "shared memory"[84] with Russians indicates another direction of fragmentation, in particular, the awareness of the absurdity (VS-6: F20s) and insidiousness of the Russian media-imposed myth of the "fraternity" of Ukrainians and Russians,[85] the false tone of which was revealed fully by the full-scale war for many Ukrainians (VS-1; VS-6; VS-9 etc.):

> Even sometimes Muscovites tell us that … I always thought that Russia and Ukraine were brothers, right, that we were "one people". … But now everyone there [understands], if everyone digs deeper, we are completely different.[86]

The respondent here contemptuously calls the Russians "Muscovites", many call them "moskali" (VS-2; VS-4; VS-4; VS-21; NZCh-12), "wolves in sheep's clothing"

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81 Neringa Klumbytė and Kateryna Yeremieieva. "Ukrainian War Humor and Civic Activism in 2022", *Nationalities Papers*, 2024, 1–38, https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.90 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

82 Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg, *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age*, New York: Springer, 2011. Memories created and preserved through mass media (which have their own archives).

83 "Зараз от я не можу, я …ніяк. Це для мене якось… все… закрилася ця нація".

84 Oleh Morozov, "Between Self-Victimization and Shared Memory: Russia's War against Ukraine in Russian Independent Media".

85 Maryna Starodubska, "Excessive Brotherly Love? – 'Fraternity' of Russians and Ukrainians as a Russian Propaganda Narrative", *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 21/3, 2022, 47–66, https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.21.3.33 [accessed: 26.11.2025]; Liudmyla Pidkuimukha, "Are We Brothers? Pseudo-peaceful Discourse in Russian Media Manipulation".

86 NZC-12: F30s: "От навіть деколи таке говорять москалі там нам … от я завжди думала, що Росія і Україна були брати, правильно, що ми один народ. І ми там цей. А зараз там кожен, якщо глибше кожен копається, то ми зовсім різні."

(VS-13), or use other "rhetorical strategies of naming the enemy,"[87] thereby clearly emphasising their negative attitude towards them. Alienation, denial, and the desire to negate any hint of similarity can be heard in the interviews. Many interviewees emotionally criticise and debunk not only the Russian myth of "brotherly relations", but also their myth of a "poor relative" (VS-18) towards Ukrainians. The range of tonality of respondents' attitudes towards Russians varies from restrained disappointment or outright hatred (VS-3) to the full scale of humour, including irony, dark humour or sarcasm.[88] This indicates not only a general deterioration in attitudes toward Russians (VS-7; VS-12 etc.), but also varying degrees of intensity in the desire to distance themselves from them, even by severing the family ties (VS-9). Moreover, the respondents find no place for a neighbouring terrorist state (VS-4), for example: "My dream: I want to see this empire collapse during my lifetime" (OH-6). Ukrainians' principal optimistic visions of the future (as articulated in 2022–2023) revolved around the Kremlin's defeat.

Warming of Attitudes towards Poles and Germans

In contrast to the worsening attitudes towards Russians, the rapid warming of relations towards Poles and Germans was noticeable in interviews. Feeling they made a painful mistake regarding Russians, respondents stressed they started to judge people by actions, not only by words. For instance, they expressed deep gratitude towards the Poles (VS-9; VS-10; VS-19) for their help and support, sincerely recognising them as true brothers:

> Poles are *brothers*. They are people who *feel* our calamity *with their hearts*. They are people who *understand* that God forbid, they could be next. Their attitude, *so warm*, it … it aroused *great gratitude*.[89]

The interviewee acknowledged a certain affinity with Poles through a shared feeling of the existential threat she recognised. The affinity of feelings (*feel, hearts*), and only then of thoughts (*understand*), forms a strong foundation for togetherness, the experience of which strengthens feelings of gratitude (*great gratitude*). The deep gratitude was expressed by appealing to God to include those to whom she was grateful in the community to which God's protection should be extended: "*God forbid*" (OH-3)

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87 Oleksandr Zabirko, "Zombies, Orks, and Fascists", in: Sereda, Viktoriya (ed.), *War, Migration, Memory. Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2025, 159.

88 Klumbytė, "Ukrainian War Humor".

89 OH-3: F60s: "Поляки – то *брати*. То люди, які *серцем відчувають* нашу *біду*. То люди, які *розуміють*, що не дай бог шо, вони можуть бути наступними. Їхнє ставлення, *таке тепле*, воно … воно викликало *велику вдячність*".

and by using vocabulary with meaning intensifiers like "very, very, infinitely grateful" (VS-3) or like "really great, really, really great" and "*very cool, really very, very cool*. I am *very grateful* to this country" (NZCh-13).

The desire of respondents to verbally and tonally strengthen the articulation of their gratitude to host societies is noticeable throughout many interviews (NZCh-3; NZCh-5; NZCh-12; VS-6; OH-4). Sometimes the gratitude was expressed through a detailed description of their extremely emotional state (as *disarming*), sentimentality and the desire for reactive gratitude:

> Such *a disarming*, such a state, well, *you don't know how* they are, *you want to*, *you want to thank* them, and *you don't know how*. It seems that they are *helping* you, and *you want to help* them somehow. Well, that is such a state. I mean, we drove four days here to Germany all the way, and we … *wept all the way*. That's *how they help, how they want to help.*[90]

Emotional uplift is expressed here by numerous repetitions and emotional semantics, which indicate the difficulty of selecting the right words due to a surge of emotions.

The Echoes of Former Confrontations

This gratitude itself is by no means tonally uniform.[91] Moreover, in some cases, the deep gratitude of Ukrainians could evoke self-censorship with respect to the conflict of interpretations of the common past. For example, they tried to neutralise the negative echo of the past struggle between Ukrainians and Poles by emphasising their gratitude to Poles. Such fragments of their memory discourses are filled with dissonances:

> Ukraine and Poland *were at war* for a very long time. And even if we talk about it, I don't think Przemysl is included in that. But these pieces of land, Lemko and another part, were also Ukrainian lands. That is, Ukraine and Poland also *had their own period of war* and different relations. And to be honest, yes, *I am grateful to them*

90 VS-5: F30s:"Такое *обезоруживающее*, такое состояние, ну, *ты не знаешь, как* их, *хочется*, *ты хочешь их отблагодарить* и *не знаешь как*. Вроде как бы они тебе *помогают*, а *ты хочешь* как-то тоже им *помочь*. Ну, то есть такое состояние. Я ж говорю, вот всю дорогу мы ехали четыре дня сюда в Германию, и мы с Наташей *всю дорогу ревели*. От того, что *как они помогают, как они хотят помочь…*"

91 Kamil Luczaj, Katarzyna Krakowska, Anastasiia Mykolenko, "Gratitude, Gratefulness, and Indebtedness: The Case of Ukrainian Refugees Hosted in Polish Households (2022–2023)", in: Malgorzata Dziekońska and Kamil Luczaj (eds.), *Assistance to Ukrainian War Refugees in Central Europe (2022–2024)*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, 169–196, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-86181-9_8 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

> *for helping* me in particular. But there is, well, there is also this historical thing that happened. It's just that it's not on an official level. Well, on an official level, it's clear, because as Poland says now. But well, *everyone really* picked up on this message that *Poles are our friends*, that Poles are. … Well, *let's not consider them enemies at the moment*. But well, *history knows*. It wasn't a one-time thing. There was, as far as *I know, I remember*, now, there *was this struggle between* Ukraine and Poland many times.[92]

Both members of the semantic opposition "(now) friends" – "(once) enemies" create a dissonance in relation to Poles, since these two tonalities (attitude towards friends – attitude towards enemies) contrast, especially since they are inscribed in the context of *deep gratitude*, the tonal uniformity of which is disrupted by the interventions of narratives of collective memory about the *past confrontation*. These dissonances can be as disturbing as phantom limb pain. They may be potentially dangerous and explosive if they remain unspoken in a mutually respectful dialogue. The respondent carefully chose her words, as if guided by the logic of magical thinking. She warned: "*let's not consider them enemies at the moment*". With this cautious gesture, she expressed her fear that current friends may behave in an unfriendly way in the future, since this had happened more than once in the past. Moreover, Russian propaganda[93] targets such scars of "shared memory"[94] to undermine unity, cohesion and trust between Europeans. Therefore, such scars and dissonances need to be carefully studied, not silenced, especially in the context of their impact on the relationship of exclusion/inclusion in one's "memorial community".[95]

A similar overtone, muted by self-censorship, was also evident in the context of respondents' gratitude to the Germans, often rooted in a memory narrative

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92 VS-19: F30s: "Україна з Польщею дуже довгий час *воювали*. І навіть, якщо говорити там про, здається, я не знаю, чи туди Перемишель входить. Але оці ці куски землі, Лемківщина і ще одна частина, це також були українські землі. Тобто, Україна з Польщею – це також *був свій період такої і війни* і різних стосунків. І, чесно кажучи, ну так, *я вдячна їм, що вони допомагали*, і, зокрема, мені. Але є, ну є і це історичне що було. Просто якщо воно з, ну, не на офіційному рівні. Ну на офіційному рівні зрозуміло, бо як говорить Польща зараз. Але ну, *всі дуже* підхопили оцю, цей меседж, що *поляки – це наші друзі*, що поляки це… ну так, *не будемо на даний момент їх вважати ворогами*. Але ну *історія знає*. Це не одноразово були. Була, наскільки *я знаю, я пригадую, от зараз, неодноразово була от така от боротьба* України з Польщею."

93 Agnieszka Demczuk, "Disinformation in Poland – Diagnosis, Combating, Counteracting", in: Ewelina Kancik-Kołtun (ed.) *Contemporary Security Problems of Poland and the Czech Republic*, Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press, 2024, 55–66.

94 Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press. 2022, 51–54.

95 James Wertch, *How Nations Remember: A Narrative Approach*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021, 97–102, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197551462.001.0001 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

about the Second World War concentration camps: "distribution camps resemble concentration camps" (NZCh-7: F30s), or "[during the Second World War] my husband's grandfather was in a concentration camp in Germany"[96] (VS-3: F40s). Such dissonances created favourable conditions for identifying and rethinking outdated stereotypes: "Personally, I just thought it was some kind of *paradox* that Germany in 1941, yes, came to us with the war, and now we are fleeing the war to Germany"[97] (NZCh-5: F30s). Another respondent also felt the paradox of the recent turn of history: "Both my father and mother participated in the [Second World] War. *Paradoxically*, here in Spandau there was a hospital until 1946, where my mother worked"[98] (OH-6: M60s). The experience of the current war resonated with the deeper layers of family memories of the Second World War, prompting comparison and rethinking. Some respondents, reflecting on their perception of foreign aid and support, explained their habit of expecting a hidden trickery (deceit) when everything seemed unexpectedly "too good", therefore suspicious and potentially dangerous.

> And I was very impressed, for example, that sometimes there are such thoughts: if they treat you well, then you should expect some *kind of trick*, right? Sometimes, I won't say that I live with such people, with such confidence, but when I moved into my room with my son [here in Berlin], yes, [German] people did everything! I just walked in – and that was it: and [I] went to sleep there. Being with everything ready in terms of the kitchen, and in terms of the bedroom, and in terms of everything that can be given to a person.[99]

The respondent, having caught herself in these subconscious self-warnings, felt a little embarrassed and sought self-justifications, especially because everything turned out better than she could have imagined. Used to caring alone for her son and mother, she was impressed by the comprehensive care received from strangers in a foreign country. The habit of not trusting anyone blindly, not letting her guard

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96 "[під час Другої світової війни] в нас був в концтаборі дідусь мого чоловіка тільки в Німеччині".

97 "особисто я тільки думала за те, що це якийсь *парадокс*, що Німеччина в 41-му, так, приходила з війною до нас, а тепер ми тікаємо від війни в Німеччину."

98 "Как ни парадоксально, здесь в Шпандау стоял госпиталь до (19)46 года, в котором моя мама работала, вот."

99 OH-4: F40s: "І мене дуже вразило, наприклад те, що інколи такі думки є: якщо до тебе гарно відносяться, значить, треба чекати якогось *підвоху*, да? От інколи, не скажу, що я живу з такими, з такою впевненістю, але ж коли я заселялася в свою кімнатку з сином (тут, в Берліні), да, то (німецькі) люди зробили все! Я лише зайшла – і все: і лягла спати там. Будучи на всьому готовому і в плані кухні, і в плані спальні, і в плані взагалі всього, що тільки тільки можна дати людині …"

down, and being ready for the hidden meanness of strangers may be a manifestation of her previous experience of betrayed trust. This is typical, as in Ukraine, many usually rely on their own strength due to a low trust in state institutions.

Traces of Silenced Scars in the Collective Memory of Ukrainians

Many respondents reflected on their shifting priorities. Despite some postponement, such as the intention to "put life on pause" (VS-16; OH-12) or, conversely, the rush to "live to the fullest" (OH-8), most of them still voiced the imperative "we must live today" (VS-14; NZCh-1; NZCh-14; OH-4; OH-8, etc.). This approach allowed them to cope with painful memories, emphasising the *now* but drawing on the *aforetime* (from their past, family, country).

Traumatic experiences of ancestors revealed gaps in such memories due to lost generational connections or silenced experiences. These silent scars of lost testimonies remind us of the pain hidden behind them.

> And my grandmother was actually from the Zhytomyrshchyna [Zhytomyr oblast]. … That is, *she came here, she was directed* here to work as a land surveyor engineer in the 1950s. And *she was there … she, well, she told me that she survived* those *famines*, and that's all [that I remember].[100]

Clarifying the biographical data about her grandmother in repeated phrases, the respondent changed the active predicate to the passive ("she came here" and "she was sent here"). This change indirectly indicates that the grandmother's relocation was not voluntary but forced. Then, the respondent seemed to get bogged down in the unspoken, trying to find the right words through the pauses. Ultimately, the articulated memories were so sparse that they pointed to the scar rather than revealed its history. The memories of a woman from Vinnytsia about her great-grandmother, who survived the famine and then lived a long life to the age of 99 (VS-1: F20s), are equally too stingy. Another respondent, talking about her grandmother's experience, drew attention to the fact that the military was well-fed during the Holodomor (1931–1933):

> She [my grandmother] *survived* that *famine*, but not [only] the first one, in 1933, she *survived* it when she was still little, and the second one [famine] in 1944, no, 1946. … 1946, she was the eldest in her family and, thanks to her, all others [in her family] *survived*, she had five brothers and sisters, everybody of them *survived*, because [her] mother brought them [brothers and sisters] to her [home] one by one.

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100 VS-19: F30s: "А бабця в мене взагалі було з-під Житомирщини (…). Тобто, *вона сюди приїхала, її сюди скерували* на роботу в 1950-х роках інженером-землепорядником. І *вона там … вона, от ну, вона розказувала, що вона пережила оці голодомори*, і це все (що я пам'ятаю)".

> She was already married to [my] grandfather, grandfather [was] a soldier, and only because soldiers were given rations by the military, she economised, distributed, she gave her mother some [food] handouts every time and left one of her brothers and sisters with her in order to feed [them].[101]

The word *survived* was repeated throughout. There was some confusion in the dates, but even during the war (in 1944), it was hardly easy to survive. The lesson learned from this experience is clear: It is easier to survive in a group. In structure, it is a story of a happy rescue with elements of altruism. The main focus on the image of the grandmother-saviour overshadowed the grandfather's role in this story, which, for example, lacks details about his military profession. Some of the descendants of those who survived the famine have remembered the individual life hacks of their ancestors:

> [M]y mother's father, they lived all their lives in the Poltava region, in a village. That's where. Their grandfather *survived*, I know, *the Holodomor*. They, I know, told me that they *dug up buried cellars with potatoes* and *made from starch* … what is it called? … I don't eat that. … They *cooked kissel*.[102]

A famine caused by the Holodomors is one of the many manifestations of Soviet "necropolitics"[103] as a form of state power over their citizens' lives and deaths. According to Oleg Perepelitsa and Olga Khrabrova, the arrangement of famine for people and nations as a practical implementation of a theory of necropolitics and dehumanisation is based on the creation of a horizon of death to elevate the sovereignty of the ruler. In their opinion, this is "proved by Russian aggression, when at first Ukrainian cities are completely destroyed, and then propaganda shows how 'humanitarian aid' is delivered for people on the ruins." Such concealments

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101 VS-9: F40s: "Вона (моя бабуся) *пережила* той *голодомор*, тільки вже не (тільки) перший, (а саме) в (19)33-му вона *пережила*, ще будучи маленькою, а (також) той другий (голодомор був) (19)44-го, нет, (19)46-го року (…). (19)46-го, то вона була найстарша (дитина) в сім'ї і, завдяки їй, *вижили* всі інші (в родині), в неї п'ятеро було братиків, сестричок, *вижили* всі інші, тому що (її) матуся до неї (додому) привозила їх (братів і сестер) почергово по одному. Вона (моя бабуся) вже була одружена за (моїм) дідусем, дідусь (був) військовий, і тільки завдяки тому, що (всім) військовим давали пайки (їжі) військові, вона (моя бабуся) економила, складала, вона мамі давала якісь кожен раз (продуктові) передачки і залишала в себе одного когось з братиків, сестричок для того, щоб (їх) підгодувати".

102 OH-8: F20s: "(…) мамин батько, вони все життя прожили в Полтавському районі, в селі. От там. Їхній дід *пережив*, я знаю, *Голодомор*. Вони, я знаю, розповідали, що вони *відкопували засипані підвали з картоплею і робили з крохмалю*… як це називається? …Я такого не їм. (…) *Кисіль вони варили*".

103 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2019.

and silences eloquently indicate the "real oblivion of the living".[104] In addition, I would also note the mnemonic function of mass media, as they are capable of creating, clarifying or otherwise influencing collective memory, but also of erasing certain remembrances.[105] In the tattered memory of Ukrainian descendants of those who survived, the Holodomors of the twentieth century resonate with the Russian genocidal aggression against Ukraine in the twenty-first century.

> The deceased father told how his grandfather was treated … how he *was dispossessed* [in Soviet times], yes, at the time when [communists] *were dispossessing* people, and, by the way, he [the great-grandfather] had seven children. In front of these children, they *threw* [their] father and mother *out* into the street, *poured out* all the food that was there – this is what I heard from my father – and he [the great-grandfather] *went crazy*. He *went crazy* from what he saw, that he couldn't, maybe he gave some slack himself, but over time he was seen in another oblast. And he *couldn't cope with it morally*. This is what I heard from my parents, that it was like that. This was *painful* in our generation.[106]

This narrative is characterised by an avoidance of directly naming the true culprit (Soviet or communist authorities) of the disaster through the grammar of impersonal sentences and passive voice predicates ("was dispossessed"). According to Aleida Assmann, silencing is a technique of forgetting that "does not erase a difficult event from memory, but only removes it from communication."[107] It seems the respondent transmitted the original "artefact" of her family memory in this probably unchanged form, in which the silent traumas of previous generations were preserved. The actor is understandable only to those who are included in the

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104 Oleh Perepelytsia and Olha Khrabrova, "Nekropolityka dehumanizatsiyi", ("Necropolitics of Dehumanisation"), *The Journal of V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Series Philosophy. Philosophical Peripeteias* 69, 2023, 6–14, here: 10, https://doi.org/10.26565/2226-0994-2023-69-1 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

105 Maren Röger, "News Media and Historical Remembrance: Reporting on the Expulsion of Germans in Polish and German Magazines", in: Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2009, 187–204, here: 189.

106 OH-4: F40s: "Батько покойний розказував, як його дідуся проводилося… (як його в радянські часи) *розкуркулювали*, да, в той час, коли (комуністи) *розкуркулювали* людей, і, до речі, він (пра-дідусь) мав сімох дітей. На очах цих дітей (комуністи) *вигнали* (їхніх) батька з матір'ю на вулицю, *повиливали* всю (їхню) їжу, яка була, – це то, шо я чула від батька, – і він (пра-дідусь) *зійшов з розуму*. Він *зійшов з розуму* від того, що він бачив, що він не зміг, можливо, дав десь якусь слабину, але ж з часом його взагалі в іншій області бачили. І він *не справився з цим морально*. Це то, шо я чула від своїх батьків, шо було таке. Таке було *болюче* у нашому поколінні".

107 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, München: Beck, 2006, 22.

same context, that of Ukrainian history. Being implicitly expressed, this unspoken aggressor will become increasingly difficult to reconstruct over time, away from this context.

Dissonances or tensions between different layers of memory can intensify a demand for a kind of "archaeology"[108] (an attempt to define discourses as practices that obey certain rules or norms of remembrance) in relation to collective memories by looking at them through the lens of individual experiences. What can an "archaeology" of these memories reveal, except some "mnemonic artefacts"?[109] Some of them can reveal "the conflict of post-totalitarian memories in Ukrainian culture, later as a social national trauma, and finally as a personal trauma at the level of a separate destiny and a separate experience."[110] Individual landscapes of memory abound with fragments of the deep layers of collective memory of previous generations. Retrospectively brought to the surface of discourse, these strata of memory revealed the growing tension regarding the Soviet past, namely a whole complex of subversive or destabilising issues related to it. These are the Holodomor[111], *rozkurkulennya*[112] as dispossession[113], collectivisation[114], the experience of forced resettlement of ancestors[115], whether as a result of Soviet repressions, the Polish Operation "Vistula,"[116] or German occupation during the Second World War. Also resonant was the rethinking the events of the Second World War in light of the events of the war today.

> When … the Soviet troops *came to liberate* … the village where my father lived, he was not yet 17 years old, they gathered all the boys and *sent them to demining*. Of the 23 people who *were sent to demining*, only seven people returned (alive) to the village. That was an *inhuman attitude*.[117]

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108 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Translated from the French by A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books. 1972, 138–140.

109 Bradd Shore and Sara Kauko, "The Landscape of Family Memory" in: Brady Wagoner (ed.), *Handbook of Culture and Memory, Frontiers in Culture and Psychology*, New York: Oxford Academic, 2017, 85–116, here 96, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190230814.003.0005 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

110 Mbonyingingo, "The Representation of Psychological War-Related Traumas", 93.

111 VS-1; VS-9; VS-21; NZCh-3; OH-3; OH-8; OH-10; OH-13.

112 This was a Soviet procedure for the economic extermination of Ukrainian peasants.

113 VS-9; VS-14; OH-4.

114 OH-10.

115 VS-9; VS-10; VS-18; VS-20; VS-21; NZCh-2; NZCh-12; OH-8; OH-10.

116 A part of the operation was the deportation of Ukrainians and Lemkos by Polish authorities from southern and eastern areas to the west or the north of Poland in 1947.

117 OH-6: M60s: "когда пришли… советские войска *освобождать* … село, где был мой отец, ему еще не было семнадцати лет, собрали всех пацанов и *отправили на разминирование*. Из 23 человек, которых *отправили на разминирование*, вернулось (живых) в село только 7 человек. Это было *бесчеловеческое отношение*…".

The memory of the inhumane treatment of Ukrainian civilians by the Soviet soldiers during the Second World War resonated in the respondent's memory with the modern Russian narrative of "liberation", which is similar in content and form. Having *liberated* a Ukrainian village from the Nazi army, the Soviet "liberators" used locals as tools for demining, resulting in the death of 16 young men, which is mentioned only indirectly between the lines.

Some respondents also mentioned the aggressive Soviet policy not only towards Ukrainians but also towards Poles (VS-8; VS-18), which they know about from their relatives. Amidst the general growth of interest about the history of Ukraine among the respondents[118], there was also awareness about fact-checking (VS-6), skepticism: "Everything in information should be treated *critically*. Everything should be *checked* and cast *into doubt*"[119] (OH-8: F 20s), or even discrediting: "the past history is so… I would say, when we were in school, it turns out to be *spoiled*."[120] (VS-12: F60s). The respondent experienced Soviet schooling.

By cultivating their own "family memory",[121] some respondents persistently and carefully trace their lineage back several generations to the Cossack times (OH-3: F60s). Others protect their own family tree like a relic, conscientiously passing on the preserved information to their descendants (OH-6: M60s). Yet some have lost touch with relatives who are alive but scattered around the world, having only been informed of their existence (VS-19: F30s).

Gratitude, Solidarity and Optimism versus Anxiety

In 2022/2023, despite all the hardships, the displaced Ukrainians' memories revolved around an optimistic axis that run from the past to a future that seemed victorious for Ukraine[122]. "[What I want most is] Victories. Only victories! It can't be any other way! Well, how can it be [any other way]? Only victories!" (OH-7: F70s).[123] Depending on the degree of enthusiasm, itself rooted in life experience, perceptions

118 VS-1; VS-9; VS-12; VS-20; VS-21; NZCh-9; OH-2; OH-6 and others.

119 "(…) до всього інформаційного треба ставитися *критично*. Все треба *перевіряти* і *піддавати сумніву*".

120 "минула історія настільки…, я би сказала, коли ми вчились в школі, – *спаплюжена* виявляється". This was largely a consequence of the experience of older generations studying fabricated Soviet history in school.

121 Svitlana Potapenko, "Family Library as a Site of Memory: the Rozumovskys' / Razumovskys' Book Collection from the Mid-Eighteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century", *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 10, 2023, 147–148, https://doi.org/10.18523/kmhj270983.2023-10.145-168 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

122 VS-6; VS-7; VS-8; VS-13; VS-15; VS-16; VS-20; NZCh-1; NZCh-3; NZCh-13; OH-6; OH-7 and others.

123 "(Найбільше хочеться) Перемоги. Тільки перемоги! Так не можна ж по-іншому! Ну, як можна (інакше)? Тільки перемоги!".

of the temporal distance to this imagined bright future of Ukraine were seen differently. The foundation of optimistic hopes for a happy future was the conviction in the right to justice. In turn, the expected justice was seen not only in the complete victory of Ukraine (with the liberation of all occupied territories: NZCh-12; OH-3), but also in the fair punishment of the Russian aggressors. The respondents did not doubt the "just nature of Ukraine's war against the aggression of the Russian Federation,"[124] because for them the Ukrainian side was in a completely "justified war"[125] as a "positive phenomenon in a moral sense,"[126] if only because it was a "preventive measure against even greater evil"[127] like a Third World War. The sense of unity and solidarity among Ukrainians, reinforced by the gratitude to the Poles and Germans for their powerful support and help, as stated in the interviews, resembled a conscious, optimistic stance against a common threat. However, despite the strong desire of respondents to focus on something positive, the tonality of anxieties was evident throughout their testimonies.

Concluding Remarks

Emotional upheavals trigger shifts in the deepest layers of individual-collective, cultural and historical memory. Emotionally coloured memories can determine relationships with other people and the environment. In turn, others can cause modifications or changes of any emotional colouring in the tonality of both individual and collective memories, especially in the conditions of long-term war and predominantly anxious tonality of news. Memory becomes more mobile and more in demand during times of upheaval, as people look for explanations of the reasons why some things went wrong. My research shows that the memory people rely on in their everyday lives is always being re/deconstructed (refined, updated, revised) in accordance with perceived reality. The reality of full-scale war is a challenge for significant reconstructing and deconstructing not only of individual, collective, cultural, but also of intercultural memory.

Using the Word-tool and KWIC-tool of the AntConc program to provide corpus analysis of the interviews conducted from November 2022 to March 2023, I found that displaced Ukrainians' narratives about their memory, influenced by the war, unfold in the spatio-temporal coordinates of *there-and-then* with a clear correlation

124 Serhii Yosypenko, "Vid spravedlyvoyi viyny do spravedlyvoho myru. Moralni zasady ta mezhi kompromisiv pid chas viyny", ("From a just war to a just peace. Moral principles and limits of compromise during war"), *Filosofska dumka* 4/88, 2024, 87–112, https://doi.org/10.15407/fd2024.04.087 [accessed: 26.11.2025].

125 Ibid., 91.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid., 93.

to the *here-and-now*. If "there" was often in the sense of a narrow circle of relationships, then "here" was often used rather in a geographical sense. The neutral intensifier *very* revealed a tendency to emotional expression of testimonies, which was also confirmed by close reading.

The structure of almost all respondents' memory narratives is characterised by the *Before-After* rift. The deepest rift for many of them was caused by the full-scale invasion of Russian troops, by the Russian annexation of Crimea, or by the interviewees' displacement. The life split into before and after, determining the trajectory of cracks in the relationships of friends, relatives, and acquaintances on different sides of the front (real and figurative). The split leads to the (re)fragmentation of memory, causing dissonances in its various layers, and shifting the assessment of the past-present in self-perception and in relationships with others.

The war evoked deep transformations in displaced Ukrainians' attitudes to Russians (mostly deterioration), as well as to Germans and Poles (mostly warming). Moreover, emotional dissonances engaged deeper layers of family and collective memories, giving voice to some echoes of former confrontations between these nations.

The interviewees used words with the semantics of anxiety. At the time of fieldwork, from a distance of seven or more months of reflecting on those events, they could specify some of their emotions experienced then. When the emotions evoked by the memories went beyond their control, instead of emotional and evaluative vocabulary, their narratives were saturated with pauses, repetitions, or incoherence. Fractures, cracks and dissonances in the discourse of memories were manifested through the lack of words, struggles with word choice, simplification of wording (the principle of least effort), iterations, shifted accents, silenced scars, gaps, impersonal sentences, passive voice predicates, split speaker's position, self-trapped in temporariness, triggers of euphemisms, terminological conflicts, polarisations, relabelling, self-censorship, and self-imperatives.

Against the backdrop of their powerful anxiety at the heart of this large *Before-After* rift, the interviewed Ukrainians, focused on their resistance, tended to build their memories around three axes, namely: gratitude for help and support, a sense of solidarity in the face of a common threat, and insistent belief in the victory of Ukraine.

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