Reconstructing the Identities of Women Who Fled the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

In the Czech Republic, there is regularly updated quantitative data on temporary protection holders from Ukraine, which gives us a fairly good overview of their age, gender or economic activity. However, it does not allow us to understand the complexity of the processes and changes taking place in the lives of individual refugees. We therefore focused our attention on the stories of women who fled the war in Ukraine and who found refuge in the Czech Republic. Using qualitative research methods, we recorded and analyzed 15 narratives in which we trace the transformation of the identity of the female narrators, consisting in the deconstruction of their existing identity—national (e.g., related to the Russian language), social (related to education and occupational prestige) and class (related to economic status) and the construction of a new identity of a refugee. We identify aspects of this new identity that enable refugees to experience feelings of acceptance and belonging in their new society, from newly constructed social networks and community life to support in their current place of residence provided by work colleagues, neighbours or others who help them adapt to their new environment and life roles.

Keywords
migration, family, temporary protection, labour market, uncertainty, life aspirations

Introduction

This research is grounded in deeply personal accounts of women who left their homes because of the war. Their experiences reflect broader issues of belonging, the reconstruction of self-image, and the everyday struggle for stability. The aim of this study is not merely to describe changes in identity, but to illustrate how these changes unfold within a specific social context,

including both opportunities for and barriers to integration. On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a military aggression and invasion of Ukraine. As a result, millions of Ukrainian citizens emigrated in the days, weeks, and months that followed. Temporary protection is a mechanism of the European Union, governed by Council Directive 2001/55/EC on temporary protection. It constitutes an emergency EU instrument activated in exceptional circumstances involving a mass influx of displaced persons, with the objective of providing collective protection and alleviating pressure on the national asylum systems of EU member states.[1] The EU activated the Temporary Protection Mechanism for refugees from Ukraine in March 2022. The mechanism has most recently been extended until 4 March 2026. Currently, 4.49 million Ukrainian refugees are registered under temporary protection within the European Union.[2]

As of 31 December 2024, there were a total of 388,067 active registrations for temporary protection in the Czech Republic. Since the beginning of the conflict (24 February 2022) until 6 October 2024, a total of 651,457 temporary protections had been issued. The Czech Republic has consistently been the EU member state hosting the highest number of Ukrainian refugees relative to its population size. In September 2024, there were approximately 35 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants, making up about 3.5% of the Czech Republic's total population. However, Ukrainians also reside in the Czech Republic under other legal statuses, including temporary residence (92,843) and permanent residence (108,546). Thus, by 31 December 2024, a total of 589,456 Ukrainian nationals were living in the country, out of an overall foreign population of 1,094,090. Ukrainians therefore constitute the largest foreign national community in the Czech Republic.

The majority of refugees are women and children. As of 6 October 2024, women represented 61% and men 39% of all holders of temporary protection; among them, 28% were children (under the age of 18) and 4% were seniors (aged 65 and over).[3] A similar pattern can be observed across Europe. A study conducted last year among Ukrainian refugees across EU countries captured the following demographic characteristics of the sample: 81% of the refugees were women, with an average age of 39 years, meaning that the majority were of working age. Moreover, 68% of them had completed tertiary education, holding a university

[1] Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky: *Čtvrtletní zpráva o migraci za III. čtvrtletí 2024*. [online] [2025-02-01]. https://mv.gov.cz/migrace/clanek/ctvrtletni-zprava-o-migraci-za-iii-ctvrtleti-2024.aspx.
[2] Evropská rada/Rada Evropské unie: *Jak EU pomáhá uprchlíkům z Ukrajiny*. [online] [2025-02-01]. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/cs/policies/refugee-inflow-from-ukraine/#0.
[3] Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky: *Čtvrtletní zpráva o migraci za III. čtvrtletí 2024*. [online] [2025-02-01]. https://mv.gov.cz/migrace/clanek/ctvrtletni-zprava-o-migraci-za-iii-ctvrtleti-2024.aspx.

degree. More than half had fled with one or more children, with the children's average age being ten years, and 20% of the respondents were accompanied by elderly relatives.

This research, carried out by the EUAA and OECD in mid-2023 with a sample of more than three thousand respondents, closely mirrors the demographic profile of the Ukrainian refugee population in the Czech Republic.[4]

The majority of refugees in the Czech Republic reside in major urban centres, such as Prague, Brno, and Plzeň, and are predominantly economically active and highly qualified individuals. According to data from the Czech Statistical Office, as of 31 December 2023, a total of 320,042 Ukrainians living in the Czech Republic were employed, of whom 285,545 were in regular employment and 34,497 were self-employed holders of a trade licence.[5]

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) published a comprehensive report in 2023 on the socioeconomic situation of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic. The research is based on an analysis of a survey conducted with more than five thousand respondents from all regions of the Czech Republic, including Prague. Women accounted for 80% of the respondents, 46% of whom had at least one child, 39% were caring for at least one person with a serious health condition, and 28% were either over the age of 60 or living with someone who was. The sample was divided into employed and unemployed groups. Among the employed, 48% held a university degree, compared to 51% among the unemployed. The research showed that 49% of respondents of working age had completed tertiary or university education.

Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic are often employed in low-paid manual jobs that do not correspond to their educational qualifications. Up to 68% of Ukrainian women who had previously worked as managers or specialists are employed below their qualification level in the Czech Republic, compared to 50% of men. At the time of the survey, 77% of respondents of working age (18–64 years) were economically active (either employed or actively seeking employment), while 23% were economically inactive. Of those 23% who reported being unemployed and not seeking work, more than half (57%) had caregiving responsibilities for

[4] EUAA: *Asylum Report 2024* (2024). [online] [2025-02-01]. https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2024-06/2024_Asylum_Report_EN.pdf. EUAA/OECD: *Voices in Europe: Experiences, hopes and aspirations of forcibly displaced persons from Ukraine* (2024). [online] [2025-02-01]. https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2024-03/2024_03_05_Voices_in_Europe.pdf.

[5] ČSÚ: *Zaměstnaní (MPSV, MPO) a bydlící (ŘSCP) cizinci podle státní příslušnosti k 31.12.2023*. [online] [2025-02-01]. https://csu.gov.cz/docs/107508/05742040-44ca-1f91-bbd5-b2959aa5a726/290027240304.pdf?version=1.0&utm_source=chatgpt.com.

other family members (children, elderly persons, or individuals with disabilities).[6] An interesting circumstance is that Ukrainians have the lowest gross monthly wage among employed foreigners in the Czech Republic. The median gross monthly wage for Czech workers was CZK 39,421, while for the largest groups of foreign employees by nationality it was as follows: Ukrainians CZK 31,308, Slovaks CZK 45,377, Poles CZK 38,827, Romanians CZK 37,089, and Bulgarians CZK 36,748. Further research conducted by PAQ Research indicates significant differences in employment rates among Ukrainians in the Czech Republic depending on their knowledge of the Czech language. Among those who are able to communicate in Czech, 70% are employed; among those with limited Czech language skills, 51% are employed; and among those with no knowledge of Czech, only 38% are employed. Thus, refugees with Czech language skills are nearly twice as likely to be employed and are better able to utilise their qualifications.

Lucie Macková and colleagues observe that Ukrainian refugees tended to accept employment below their level of qualification, experiencing professional downgrading. This tested their resilience, altered their life aspirations, and often led to individual ontological insecurity. They summarise that the socio-economic status of Ukrainian refugees depends on their language skills, diploma recognition, family situation, and their ability to recover from the stress experienced before, during, and after displacement. All of these factors influence their prospects for either long-term integration in the Czech Republic or returning to Ukraine.[7]

This article focuses on Ukrainian women who, often as mothers and sometimes as single mothers in exile, entered the Czech labour market and have navigated their new life roles with varying degrees of success. It builds upon previous research describing the migration experiences of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic, their aspirations and ambitions in the new country, and those of their children.[8] We will describe the life strategies employed by

[6] IOM: *Česko: Socioekonomická situace ukrajinských uprchlíků: Zpráva za rok 2023*. [online] [2025-02-01].
[7] MACKOVÁ, Lucie – MEDOVÁ, Nikola – FRLIČKOVÁ, Barbora – JIRKA, Luděk: 'The plan is no plan': Ontological security and resilience of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech labour market. In: *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review*, roč. 61, č. 1 (2025), s. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2024.024.
[8] KAMIONKA Mateusz – MACKOVÁ, Lucie – JIRKA, Luděk: "Fear for children", Mother-Child Dyad and Future Mobility Trajectories of Displaced Ukrainians in Czechia and Poland: Children as a Factor for Fleeing and Living after the Full-Scale Invasion. In: *Migraciones,* č. 61 (2024), s. 1–21. https://doi.org/10.14422/mig.2024.027.
MACKOVÁ, Lucie – MEDOVÁ, Nikola – FRLIČKOVÁ, Barbora – JIRKA, Luděk: 'The plan is no plan': Ontological security and resilience of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech labour market, s. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2024.024.
HLAĎO, Petr – ŠEĎOVÁ, Klára – OBROVSKÁ, J. a kol.: *Adaptace ukrajinských žáků na vzdělávání v českých základních školách.* Studie SYRI, 2023. [online] [2025-02-01]. https://www.syri.cz/data/uploadHTML/files/PUBLIKACE/adaptace-ukrajinskych-zaku-na-vzdelavani-v-ceskych-zakladnich-skolach-syri.pdf.

these women to navigate integration processes in the Czech Republic, focusing on the reconstruction of their identities shaped by their migration experience and on the life aspirations of refugees after almost three years in exile.

Theoretical Framework

Identity

Since the 1990s, the social sciences — including cultural and social anthropology, cultural studies, and related fields — have increasingly regarded identity as a cultural or social construct. It is now paradigmatically accepted that our sense of self is shaped through the process of enculturation; identity thus possesses a discursive and performative character. „To exist as a person does not mean to possess a timeless essence; rather, it involves plasticity and changeability — the ability to respond specifically to the social and cultural configurations of one's circumstances.“[9] We adhere to this anti-essentialist model, which emphasises that identity is always in the process of becoming. Identity cannot be uncovered as a fixed underlying essence; rather, it is constructed through similarities and differences with others. Sameness and difference — the fundamental features of the concept of identity — are themselves social constructs. “It is a continually shifting description of ourselves.”[10] There is no need to seek an overarching or definitive identity; rather, our foundation lies in shifting, evolving, multiple, or fragmented identities. Identity is dynamic. Its various layers and components emerge throughout the lifetime of the individual. New life events often compel us to redefine our identity. Identity is multilayered. The categories with which we identify during our lives are defined in a wide variety of ways — by gender, ethnicity, nationality, social status, or religion. The intersection of these categories forms our identity. Identity is hybrid. A child growing up in a multicultural environment, for instance due to the diverse backgrounds of their parents, may develop a dual or mixed identity.[11] Similarly, migrants do not necessarily have to abandon their original identities. They may remain loyal and show solidarity towards their country of origin, their ethnic or national affiliation, and yet, through the new experience associated with migration processes, their identity may undergo transformation. We speak of the transnational identity of migrants, which “may have a highly particularistic character, not necessarily

BITTNEROVÁ, Dana: Kritické temporality: Vzdělávací trajektorie dětí uprchlíků z Ukrajiny. In: *Národopisná revue,* roč. 34, č. 2 (2024), s. 79–90. https://doi.org/10.62800/NR.2024.2.01.

[9] BARKER, Chris: *Slovník kulturálních studií*. Praha: Portál, 2006, s. 75.

[10] Tamtéž.

[11] MOREE, Dana: *Základy interkulturního soužití*. Praha: Portál, 2015.

transcending national, ethnic, or religious identities, but rather linking these distinct identities into a simultaneously existing constellation of relationships within transnational social fields."[12]

Moreover, individual self-conception is also shaped by group affiliation. It is group identity that provides people with a sense of ontological security, as belonging to a group — often linked by a shared history, language, or other commonalities — promises to transcend the finitude of individual existence.[13] Ethnic identity is thus understood as a kind of "imperative status, an ascribed aspect of the personality from which one cannot fully disengage." [14]

Eriksen, however, argues that just as the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms grants the right to a nationality, it should equally include the right to renounce a nationality. [15]

"Ultimately, we should bear in mind that neither ethnic groups nor nations are eternal. They emerge, flourish, and disappear." [16]

Diaspora and Community

We draw upon the sociology of knowledge, similarly to Ana Mijić, who examined the reconstruction of identity and belonging following forced migration — a framework relevant to our case as well. At the origins of the sociology of knowledge, particularly in relation to the social construction of reality, stand Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The sociology of knowledge approaches human reality as a socially constructed phenomenon.[17] Among the premises of their thinking were: the reality of everyday life is shared with others — it is intersubjective;[18] the social order exists solely as a product of human activity[19] — society is the creation of humankind; society is an objective reality — as the relationship between the individual, society, and reality is dialectical, so too is the individual a product of society.[20] Following Mijić's approach, we are interested in the fundamental social dialectic between the individual and society — specifically the issues of identity, belonging, and community life, which are profoundly affected by the experience of migration. However, "all social realities are precarious. All societies are merely constructs facing chaos."[21]. Human identity is formed

[12] SZALÓ, Csaba: *Transnacionální migrace: proměny identit, hranic a vědění o nich*. Brno: CDK, 2007, s. 114.
[13] BARŠA, Pavel: *Národní stát a etnický konflikt. Politologická perspektiva*. Brno: CDK, 1999, s. 69.
[14] ERIKSEN, Thomas Hylland: *Etnicita a nacionalismus. Antropologické perspektivy*. Praha: SLON, 2012, s. 25.
[15] ERIKSEN, Thomas Hylland: *Antropologie multikulturních společností: rozumět identitě*. Praha: Triton, 2007, s. 61.
[16] ERIKSEN, Thomas Hylland: *Sociální a kulturní antropologie: příbuzenství, národnostní příslušnost, rituál*. Praha: Portál, 2008, s. 350.
[17] BERGER, Peter L. – LUCKMANN, Thomas: *Sociální konstrukce reality*. Praha: CDK, 2001, s. 116.
[18] Tamtéž, s. 34.
[19] Tamtéž, s. 56.
[20] Tamtéž, s. 64.
[21] Tamtéž, s. 104.

through social processes as a result of sharing the reality of everyday life with others. "Once it has been formed, it is maintained, modified, and even reconstructed through social relationships. The social processes involved in the formation and maintenance of identity are shaped by the social structure."[22]

Life Aspirations

Migrants' aspirations, whether they are predominantly driven by cognitive or emotional stimuli (individual cognition and emotions), are primarily oriented towards the decision of whether it is better to leave or to stay. Within migration studies, the terms "aspirations" and "desires" are commonly used interchangeably, whereas the concept of "migration drivers" represents an analytical category that reflects a particular understanding of how the world operates. Nevertheless, these three concepts are interconnected, relating to how migration is initiated, experienced, and represented.[23]

According to Macková et al., migrants' aspirations are composed of ambitions, attitudes, expectations, intentions, plans, preferences, wishes, dreams, hopes, as well as reflections on the future, uncertainty, inertia, waiting, imaginings, needs, obligations, and willingness to migrate. Aspirations thus encompass both rational and emotional elements of decision-making.[24] According to Carling and Collins, these concepts can be simplified as "what migrants want".[25] "The war disrupted their lives and their future status remains unclear."[26] In this regard, Macková et al. highlight aspects that hinder refugees from developing a sense of belonging and security. These include the temporary nature of their stay in exile, the belief in the imminent end of the conflict, and family circumstances — all of which contributed to a disruption of ontological security and hindered the creation of coherent life plans.[27] Refugees' future aspirations are closely linked to the uncertainty experienced in the present. "Time/temporality acts as an agent that navigates the migrant and directs them onto sometimes unexpected paths. Temporal regimes associated with their incorporation into state and societal structures can exert pressures

[22] Tamtéž, s. 170.
[23] CARLING, Jørgen – COLLINS, Francis: Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, roč. 44, č. 6 (2018), s. 909–926. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384134.
[24] MACKOVÁ, Lucie – MEDOVÁ, Nikola – FRLIČKOVÁ, Barbora – JIRKA, Luděk: 'The plan is no plan': Ontological security and resilience of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech labour market, s. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2024.024.
[25] CARLING, Jørgen – COLLINS, Francis: Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration, s. 909–926. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384134.
[26] MACKOVÁ, Lucie – MEDOVÁ, Nikola – FRLIČKOVÁ, Barbora – JIRKA, Luděk: 'The plan is no plan': Ontological security and resilience of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech labour market, s. 1. https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2024.024.
[27] Tamtéž.

on them and render them vulnerable."[28] The refugee experience enters and interrupts individual life trajectories; more precisely, individuals may become trapped within them or be redirected onto new paths. "Some migration regimes, in relation to particular temporal frameworks, reinforce feelings among migrants that they belong nowhere, that their lives cannot continue in their country of origin, nor can they necessarily or meaningfully be re-established in a new place. However, being 'stuck' can sometimes hold the potential for waiting for a better opportunity — a form of waiting that is not wasted but rather used for gathering information, strategising, and planning."[29]

Younger refugees are more likely to plan to remain in the Czech Republic. Among the youngest generation (under 30 years old), 65% expressed an intention to stay, whereas among those aged 50 and above, the proportion was approximately 40%. Similarly, those who are employed in the Czech Republic are more likely to plan to stay (64% compared to 49% among those who are not employed). In general, those who are financially better off and have found employment are more inclined to remain in the country.[30]

Similar conclusions are drawn by Borselli and Toon van Meijl in their descriptions of the life trajectories of Syrian refugees. Many adapted their aspirations and chose new paths to success in response to experiences of war, displacement, and prolonged disruption to their life courses. According to their findings, age and parenthood are likely to be significant discriminatory factors in the process of forging new life trajectories. Single young individuals tended to pursue long-term education and career plans, whereas parents prioritised the economic security of their families over personal development. Successful integration strategies based on education and career ambitions are therefore more often chosen by younger individuals without caregiving responsibilities — a pattern that similarly appears among Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic.[31]

Methodology

Our research was based on a qualitative approach to data construction, which underpins the summarised conclusions presented herein. We conducted semi-structured interviews with

[28] BITTNEROVÁ, Dana: Kritické temporality: Vzdělávací trajektorie dětí uprchlíků z Ukrajiny, s. 79–90. https://doi.org/10.62800/NR.2024.2.01.
[29] Tamtéž.
[30] PAQ research – UNICEF: *Integrace ukrajinských uprchlíků: 2 roky poté a výhled na 2024+*. [online] [2025-02-01]. https://www.paqresearch.cz/content/files/2024/02/PAQ_Hlas_Ukrajincu_Dva_roky_pote-2.pdf.
[31] BORSELLI, Marco – MEIJL, Toon van: Linking Migration Aspirations to Integration Prospects: The Experience of Syrian Refugees in Sweden. In: *Journal of Refugee Studies*, roč. 34, č. 1 (2021), s. 579–595. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa043.

women — Ukrainian refugees — who arrived in the Czech Republic after the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

A precondition for participation was that the narrators had long-term work experience in the Czech labour market. One of the secondary aims of the study was to describe their experiences in job seeking and employment in the Czech Republic. Although we did not exclusively target highly educated migrants, with only one exception, all of our narrators had completed at least tertiary education, defined as holding a university degree at least at the bachelor's level. In total, we conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out between August and November 2024 and were recorded using audio devices. With one exception — a single interview conducted online via the Teams platform — all interviews were conducted face-to-face. Respondents were living in various regions of the Czech Republic; the majority were from the Olomouc Region, where the author has the strongest contacts with the Ukrainian community. However, respondents from cities in Bohemia, including Prague and Brno, were also included. All participants met the research criteria: they had been employed in the Czech Republic for an extended period and held temporary protection status.

Respondents were selected either randomly or through snowball sampling, whereby one participant recommended others. Interviews were conducted in Czech, Ukrainian, Russian, or English, depending on participants' preferences. An interpreter was present when needed to translate between Ukrainian and Czech or English.

All ethical standards commonly observed in such research were strictly followed. Participants took part voluntarily, were fully informed about the anonymisation of the interviews and the research aims, and were told that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason. Informed consent was obtained in writing from both the interviewer and the participant in advance, allowing participants sufficient time to review it and decide whether to participate. The consent form was bilingual (Czech–Ukrainian) and included agreement for recording the interviews and information about data storage. This procedure complied with the legislation of the Czech Republic.

The interviews were subsequently transcribed manually or translated into Czech and then transcribed. Open coding was carried out using Atlas.ti software. We believe that regular cross-checking of audio recordings and transcripts by the interpreter ensured minimal distortion of information despite language barriers. Narrators were anonymised and labelled

chronologically as N1, N2, and so forth. The semi-structured interviews were guided by pre-prepared core questions, but participants were encouraged to elaborate freely, and supplementary questions were posed as necessary to capture a broader context. In analysing the coded text, we applied qualitative content analysis. Texts were sorted into thematic units — code clusters — which were further classified and systematically analysed, leading to the identification of categories and subcategories and the exploration of the relationships between them.

All narrators were women. This was partly because men who could have accompanied them often remained in Ukraine due to military conscription obligations, and partly because many women arrived with children whom they needed to care for abroad. The connection between childcare and employment in the Czech Republic was a central theme of the research. Men who legally accompanied some of these women appear only indirectly in the interviews, as parts of the narrators' social networks. Data about the narrators, including their age, place of origin, and current place of residence in the Czech Republic at the time of the interview, are presented in Table 1 (appendix). All narrators had arrived during the first months of the invasion and had thus been living in the Czech Republic for their third year at the time of the research.

A significant part of the data evaluation consisted of comparing our findings with those of similarly structured, analysed, and targeted studies. Changes in the life aspirations of exiled refugees were linked to the length of time spent abroad, experiences in the labour market, and the integration of themselves and their family members into Czech society. Over time, substantial shifts in values associated with prolonged exile became evident, with exile increasingly perceived not as temporary but as potentially permanent. Describing these shifts constitutes an important secondary aim of our research.

Analysis

Factors Determining the Flight to Safety

Although many refugees felt that "things happened quickly" (N8), the decision to leave everything behind and flee with only essential personal belongings — none of the women carried more than a piece of hand luggage, most often a backpack for themselves and their children (N10, N8, N9, N7) — was made only when life in Ukraine became unbearable. The narrators experienced despair, some fell into panic, and all were gripped by fear for their own lives and those of their children.

They recalled days spent in underground shelters, the war raging outside their windows; some experienced hunger, and several witnessed death firsthand.

Those who were fleeing for the second time tended to decide more quickly, while others were forced to flee only when their lives were in imminent danger or when they were trapped in occupied territories. Traumatic experiences during the journey to safety were not exceptional (N2, N15, N13, N5, N14, etc.). The sounds of war continued to haunt them long after arriving in the Czech Republic (N8).

In several cases, the war and the days of occupation were linked to the death of a parent — specifically the death of a mother — as an indirect consequence of the conflict. “My mother died from fear and the horrors of war around her…” (N12).

Another narrator described how, despite her efforts, she could not persuade her mother to flee with her and her child; subsequently, her mother passed away, and she was unable to attend the funeral (N13).

A further narrator reported that her mother had already been gravely affected by the stress of the war in Donbas prior to the full-scale invasion; although she later managed to bring her mother to safety and secure appropriate care, it was ultimately too late (N14).

Memories also include accounts of leaving behind domestic animals, losses that left lasting emotional scars.

Except for two young women and one grandmother caring for her grandson, all our narrators were mothers fleeing to safety with at least one child, often more.

Unsurprisingly, one of the decisive factors leading to their departure was fear for their children’s lives and futures; they could not endure the threat to their children’s survival (N15, N8, N7, N6).

Among the women was also a migrant who had not initially planned to emigrate — she had been on holiday in Europe with her daughter when the war broke out, and they were unable to return home (N4).

As a consequence of the traumas they had experienced, some narrators became completely isolated during the first weeks and months of exile, avoiding contact with others for up to six months (N10). Another narrator described feeling like a character in a book:

“I couldn’t believe it, I just couldn’t believe that all this was happening to me. It was like… you see… like a book, where you read about ordinary life, but then you hear stories like… he went there and died, there was love, something happened there. And now all of it was happening to me and around me.” (N7)

Another explained that after arrival, they were unable to function:

"We didn't go anywhere, not even to the shop, nowhere. We just sat in the flat because we were afraid." (N1) Thus, even the basic necessities of life had to be secured with the help of others.

Nothing Was Left to Them…

The narrators left behind everything they had built over the course of their lives in Ukraine — houses, apartments, businesses, rural properties inherited from their parents. They also left behind their homeland, their cherished homes, and in many cases, particularly noted, their beloved seaside regions (e.g., N10).

The losses varied. Some women already knew that they had lost everything, taken from them by the war (N11, N10). Others remained uncertain about the state of their property, especially those who had lived in formerly occupied territories (N11, N15). Some had already lost their homes following the events of 2014.

A few knew that their properties were still intact, being cared for by husbands, family members, or acquaintances. While many had reconciled themselves to the possibility of losing their assets, they nevertheless remained afraid of the final, irrevocable loss (N15, N7).

One narrator reflected: "People who cannot accept reality and remain mentally trapped in their former lives — it is hard for them. The old life will not return. They know it, but they still dream about it." (N6)

On the other hand, these losses prompted another narrator to reflect on the simplicity of her needs: "Everything I needed, I had here within a month." (N5)

A particularly striking story of salvaging some value from possessions came from a refugee who, through contacts in Georgia, managed to retrieve her car after it had been seized and taken to Russia (N10).

The Czech Republic as a New Home

In their evaluations of the Czech Republic, the migrants most often highlighted the sense of safety (N9, N10, N4), along with accessible healthcare, social and health insurance (especially health insurance, which does not exist in the same form in Ukraine), financial security opportunities, and appreciation for Czech culture and cultural proximity (N14). They valued the positive atmosphere at workplaces, the friendliness of people both in public and at work, and the support their children received in schools (N14, N6).

They expressed gratitude for the possibility of earning a livelihood — being able to work, live, and travel across the Czech Republic and neighbouring European countries (N12).

Half of the refugees we interviewed do not plan to return to Ukraine for various reasons. Others currently frame their stay in the Czech Republic as temporary, although circumstances may transform this into a permanent resettlement.

“As long as there is war, I cannot return... I don't understand how people can live there! And if I have a job here and not in Ukraine — work and war are the two conditions” (N8).

One narrator described how she attempted to return to her hometown during the first year of the war but concluded that a mere ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia would not be sufficient — “the war must end completely” for her to return with her children.

“I already returned once and had to flee quickly back to safety — back to the Czech Republic. We didn’t want to go again to the Czech Republic, but life in Ukraine was so difficult that we had no choice but to leave. I had to flee again because Ukraine was dangerous for our children. You stop thinking about yourself, you think only about your children.” (N12)

For some migrants, negative developments in their homeland, particularly the possibility of a Russian victory, represent a fundamental argument against returning (N7, N10):

“I will not go to Russia” (N10).

“I will not live under the Russians” (N7).

For those with repeated refugee experiences, the prospect of returning home is often no longer viable. A refugee from Donbas described her feelings emotively:

“Since 2014, I have had no home. I don't know what tomorrow will bring. That is no longer my homeland...” (N14).

Similarly, a woman who lost everything during the occupation reflected:

“I no longer have a home. I have decided that my home is here. I am trying to fit in and learn Czech as well as possible. Here is the future for me and my child.” (N13)

Some women, reaching mid-life, reject the idea of starting over “from scratch” and therefore do not even consider returning, as they no longer have anything to return to:

“We have a house there, newly renovated just ten years ago, and they destroyed it completely. I’m 40 years old. How long would I even be able to function there if we returned? It just wouldn’t be possible.” (N2)

“When I decided to leave my home, I knew I was leaving it forever. I knew I would not return…” (N13)

Another narrator described her re-emigration experience similarly:

“During the holidays, my children were happy to visit their grandparents, but only as visitors” (N5).

In Russian-speaking regions that fell under Russian control early in the war, residents still feel betrayed because no one fought for them — this bitter feeling is another reason for permanent exile:

“We do not plan to return to Ukraine because we cannot forget that no one fought for us, no one cared” (N15).

Children are often the key reason for permanent emigration. Even if parents consider returning, they do not plan for their children to return (N5), in part because after three years in the Czech Republic, their children no longer have sufficient proficiency in Ukrainian to succeed in school, speaking primarily Russian at home and now attending Czech schools (N12).

One mother elaborated further:

“My son is twelve years old; soon he will be an adult. The Russians are our neighbours; we don't know when this war will end, and we can no longer predict anything. Many mothers are afraid that if they stayed in Ukraine, their sons would be forced to fight.” (N12)

The length of stay abroad also acts as a barrier to return. One refugee insightfully remarked:

“I am Ukrainian — here I can’t fully fit in because I am a foreigner. But if I returned home, I would no longer fit in there either. I would feel just as much a foreigner.” (N13)

She based this conclusion on observing social media from her hometown and staying in contact with friends, noting how her thinking had diverged from that of those who remained, and how the city itself had become almost unrecognisable — both through wartime destruction and changes in its inhabitants’ mentality.

All these arguments in favour of settling abroad are reinforced when no relatives remain in Ukraine (N10).

Life in the Czech Republic – … The Plan Is to Live Here and Now

Over the course of the three years during which all the narrators have been living in exile in the Czech Republic, their lives have changed significantly, and it can be said that all now live in conditions with which they are largely satisfied.

Although in the early stages they accepted accommodation arranged through centres such as KACPU or other organisations — often involving shared living spaces or stays in

hostels or hotels — today, most of them rent flats on the commercial housing market (N7, N5, N14).

Two narrators live with new partners, and one with a new husband.

After initially living in unsuitable locations during the first months of exile, many of the refugees later prioritised finding accommodation close to their children's schools and their workplaces (e.g., N5).

Nevertheless, even their memories of staying in hostels for seasonal workers or large guesthouses, where dozens of Ukrainian families lived together, are not entirely negative.

Although facilities were limited — for example, one small kitchen for sixty residents — the positive side was that people got to know each other well; everyone was aware of others' stories, experiences, and backgrounds.

This community-based way of life has evolved into the formation of community centres, where women — particularly those who often experience feelings of loneliness — meet and offer one another support (N6):

"For us, it is very important to be able to share our thoughts and emotions in our native language. We understand each other; we know how hard it is, how painful it is to leave your parents or sometimes even your children behind in Ukraine."

Language Barrier – A Major Obstacle to Integration

Ukrainian mothers are keenly aware of how closely their success in the Czech labour market and their children's success in Czech schools are linked to overcoming the language barrier. "This is the number one priority" (N7, N13).

The narrators identified socialisation — both for themselves and their children — within Czech society as fundamental to mastering the language. If they worked within Czech-speaking environments (N9), where Czech was essential for performing their jobs ("…I had to speak with the teachers in Czech. I just had to speak, and that's how I learned" N6), they overcame the language barrier more easily than others. Another factor was using Czech as the primary means of communication in households shared with Czechs during exile (N9, N13), as well as participation in Czech language courses.

They also associated their children's success in education with their ability to make friends among Czech peers. Participation in leisure activities with Czech children significantly accelerated language acquisition compared to those who did not build Czech friendships: "My grandson would like to return to Ukraine because he has practically no friends here" (N11).

Many mothers actively supported their children's language education, enrolling them in preparatory courses for university admission or arranging additional Czech tutoring if natural language acquisition through peer interaction was insufficient.

Currently, after three years in exile, many women aim to pass the Czech language exam at the B1 level; some have already achieved this milestone. Those who began studying intensively from the start of their exile now report feeling much more comfortable within Czech society (N9).

As the women's experiences abroad grew, some began to express critical reflections. They verbalised a lack of understanding for compatriots who had lived in the Czech Republic for many years without learning Czech, suggesting that this was "because they don't want to" (N13).

They also noted difficulties their children faced at school due to the lack of Russian- or Ukrainian-speaking teachers: "Often no one at school can communicate with the Ukrainian children" (N6).

Labour Market Integration

All the women interviewed had long-term work experience in the Czech Republic, which was a precondition for participating in the study. Through random selection, we found women who, with only one exception, had completed tertiary education in Ukraine, thus holding university degrees.

Combined with their strong desire for independence and employability in the Czech labour market, it is not surprising that employment is seen as a "basic necessity of life" (N7).

Some of the women were fortunate enough to find jobs during their three years in exile that provided a deeper sense of purpose, although most initially worked in positions significantly lower than those they had held in Ukraine. Several had previously earned much higher incomes in Ukraine.

One refugee, despite the socio-economic fall associated with her new job, valued the peace and the opportunity to help others (N15).

For others, job security is of primary importance, with employment in some cases being directly tied to accommodation — a situation that reduces their flexibility but fulfils their need for a stable livelihood.

As one narrator remarked: "We are doing the work that Czechs don't want to do because it's too hard" (N12).

Some of the women sought employment immediately upon arrival, while others initially waited — hoping to return home soon or focusing first on learning Czech — but all of them entered the labour market within one year of arrival.

Today, most of the women have had their qualifications officially recognised (nostrification).

Those who had worked as teachers in Ukraine are now mostly employed as teaching assistants for Ukrainian children. Career advancement for them is dependent on passing Czech language proficiency exams, which all are striving to achieve.

Teaching is often regarded as a vocation, both in Ukraine and elsewhere; however, one narrator expressed bitterness at the low pay teachers receive in Ukraine.

It is no longer exceptional for some of the women to be employed in qualified positions in their original fields. One woman acknowledges how fortunate she feels: “I am happy in the Czech Republic, and my life is beautiful,” a sentiment she does not take for granted given her situation (N8). Another works as a qualified linguist, teaching English at a university (N4).

For most, employment represents not only a path to independence from the state or relatives but also an important source of psychological support:

“Without work, it would be unbearable” (N4).

The women we interviewed were largely satisfied with their jobs; many help their fellow countrymen through their work, some have found employment in their professional fields, and others have achieved independence through work.

Employment is often a key factor in their decisions about whether or not to eventually return to Ukraine (N4).

All of the women see improved proficiency in the Czech language as essential to achieving better — and more qualified — employment.

People Are People Everywhere – Good and Bad Alike

The narrators rarely encountered overt discrimination in public spaces, although they did observe changes in behaviour, for example among zoo staff who, upon recognising them as foreigners, altered their attitude, as well as among employees of the Czech Post. More frequently, they experienced verbal attacks in public spaces or online (N13, N14, N7).

One narrator regularly read online comments in order to perceive changes in Czech society's attitudes towards acceptance and solidarity:

"Because I am not afraid of bad news. I have no illusions that life is particularly good" (N7).

The narrators also noted occasional confrontations involving Roma individuals or accusations that Ukrainians were taking jobs from Czechs. Nevertheless, there were instances where Czechs stood up for Ukrainian mothers during conflicts.

Throughout the interviews, every woman expressed repeated gratitude for the help they had received from Czechs at the beginning of their migration experience. They recalled that the promised assistance had indeed materialised: free public transport for refugees, free Czech language courses, free education for children, and access to retraining programmes — all of which were valued more highly than the financial allowances that supported them during times of need (N9).

Even more appreciated was the personal assistance provided by individuals. Many mothers with children initially stayed with Czech families (N12, N13, N6, N10, N9, N8). Some Czech families offered accommodation free of charge; others provided it in exchange for help around the house.

Living with Czech families often marked the first steps toward adaptation — learning the language and coping with cultural differences.

Accepting help from others was not taken for granted; it was associated not only with deep gratitude but also with the restart of their lives in exile.

As one narrator recalled:

"One beautiful moment. Mrs. Alena (our landlady) said she had found a nice flat for us" (N8).

Another said:

"Our landlord simply accepted strangers into his home. He wanted to help. It was just wonderful" (N9).

Help from individuals who spoke Russian was particularly valued, especially within host families (N8).

In other cases, assistance came through charities, employers who provided both jobs and housing, groups of volunteers, long-settled Ukrainians in the Czech Republic, and other individuals.

Since many had left their most treasured possessions behind, they sought help from friends or volunteers who, for example, transported one narrator's two dogs to her (N4), while another (N6) gradually arranged for the retrieval of her personal belongings.

If there were relatives remaining in Ukraine, some possessions could be sent by post or via long-distance bus services (N9).

Accepting assistance was not always easy; many refugees tried — and in some cases managed — to support themselves independently using their own savings or help from family members.

Some secured employment so quickly that they no longer qualified for emergency aid (N2) or considered themselves less deserving of it (N10).

Over time, all the narrators became economically independent, typically within a year of arrival.

Today, several women view giving back to the community as essential.

One is specialising in psychology studies to support vulnerable individuals; others work to assist Ukrainian children in Czech schools, striving to pass language exams to enhance their qualifications.

They work in various helping professions — in church organisations, community centres, as teaching assistants, or directly with refugee populations (N1, N5, N7, N6, N9, N14, N15).

Ukrainian women also maintain strong ties to those they left behind, supporting family members or friends wounded or killed in the war.

As one woman stated:

“From every bit of extra income we earn, a part goes back to Ukraine” (N5).

After Three Years in Exile – Rebuilding a New Life

Three years in exile have often led refugees to reconsider the temporary nature of their stay in the Czech Republic.

Key indicators of adaptation to the Czech environment include entering mixed partnerships with Czechs, abandoning online schooling through Ukrainian institutions, and focusing on overcoming the language barrier — particularly crucial as children move beyond primary school and seek to succeed in Czech secondary and eventually tertiary education.

“We must master Czech” (N8).

“We have focused only on Czech schools — my grandson already got a ‘B’ in Czech” (N11).

The first Ukrainian students have now graduated from Czech secondary schools; paradoxically, this has allowed some to become among the youngest students at Czech universities. Indeed, one narrator's son entered university at the age of sixteen (N7).

A third significant factor in adaptation is the acceptance of reality:

"There is nowhere left for me to return to after two wars. I like it here, and I love my partner — a Czech man" (N1).

Diaspora

With few exceptions, the war has divided large families. Long-term separation of spouses — where men are not permitted to leave Ukraine and only women and children have fled to safety — represents the most common form of transnational family separation. However, this is not a universal rule. Prolonged separation within nuclear families has often accelerated the cooling of relationships, particularly where the partnership had already been under strain:

"He let me leave with the child" (N13).

Family separation has also frequently affected relationships with grandparents or even with older children — boys who had to stay behind to enlist or continue their studies, and girls who chose not to leave their partners (N5, N14, N11:

"The younger daughter could have left with us, but she didn't want to leave her boyfriend behind in Ukraine…").

Narratives suggest that not all multigenerational living arrangements in exile were successful.

Older people tended to miss home more acutely and adapted to new environments with greater difficulty, often deciding to return to Ukraine earlier (N6).

One migrant woman recounted how her daughter eventually returned to Ukraine to be with her father, having failed to adjust to life in exile. Now, during holidays and breaks, the daughter is handed over at the Ukrainian–Slovak border.

The mother commented:

"I don't understand how my daughter manages there. I really don't. I don't understand how people can live day-to-day under such fear" (N8).

Despite this, she herself does not consider returning, as she has settled in the Czech Republic with her teenage son, who is studying there.

Another story concerns a woman who fled with her son and is the only member of her extended family in exile. However, she does not plan to return until Ukraine is completely safe:

"As long as there is war, I will not go back. But one day, I will return" (N11).

Similar sentiments are expressed by another woman:

"My family stayed in Ukraine; I am like a little tree that was taken and replanted" (N5), highlighting the sense of uprootedness and the loss of family background.

Families are now dispersed across Europe (N9), and even those accustomed to separation have been deeply affected:

"We are a family of seafarers, but the war has divided and scattered our entire family around the world" (N10).

Identity

Given that our narrators — with few exceptions — came from areas directly affected by the war or lived in occupied territories, it is not surprising that most of them listed Russian as their mother tongue. However, this does not mean that they identified as Russians; on the contrary, the armed conflict has internalised a strong sense of national identity for many:

"I am Ukrainian, but everyone in our city speaks Russian" (N12);

"I have no associations with being Russian. Odesa is a Ukrainian city, but we speak Russian there — it's our history…" (N13).

Other explanations also emerged:

"Nationality was something only recorded in our Soviet passports — there it said I was Russian" (N7).

For one narrator, the internalisation of Ukrainian identity occurred specifically in exile:

"All my life I spoke Russian, but now I only speak Ukrainian. I no longer speak Russian at all" (N7).

Yet language as a marker of identity can also be approached in an entirely different way:

"I never spoke Russian, nor did anyone in my extended family. We all spoke Ukrainian. Only after the war started, when I needed to communicate here in the Czech Republic, did I start speaking Russian" (N6).

A large proportion of the refugees declared that, although Russian was their native language, everyone in their regions understood both languages (N12, N13, N14, N15).

They also recalled the widespread use of *surzhyk* — a mixed language blending Russian and Ukrainian — noting that "pure Ukrainian is rarely heard, perhaps only at school" (N9).

One respondent elaborated on her sense of identity more extensively:

"I lost everything, everything I had. The war is between politicians, not between people. Russian is just a means of communication for me… My mother is Russian, my father Ukrainian…" (N15).

Her answer reveals an underlying uncertainty — identity is being formed, or rather re-formed.

Similarly, most of the other women consistently maintained that "they are Ukrainians, but they speak Russian," although the majority also speak Ukrainian (N2, N5, N7, N9, N11, N12, N13, N14, N15).

In their own words:

"We lived and spoke Russian. But now, with the war, I have sincerely self-identified as a Ukrainian — regardless of my ethnic background, because my parents are from Russia" (N7).

Future Prospects and Language Skills

At the beginning of their exile, many refugee women had no visions for themselves or their families, often focusing only on the immediate future — on the next few days rather than months or years.

One woman expressed this poignantly:

"When I think about the future, I start crying" (N4).

Today, however, many of them are actively planning their lives and want to shape their own trajectories.

For some, deciding whether to stay in the Czech Republic or return to Ukraine remains difficult.

Those who have justified their decision to stay see mastering the Czech language as a condition for success (N1, N14, N12):

"I want to learn Czech better; then I think it will be more comfortable for me in the Czech Republic. It will make communication with doctors, at school, at parent-teacher meetings much easier."

One narrator put it clearly: she had not wanted to stay because she did not know the language, but now she feels a sense of stability because she can communicate (N15).

Another admitted:

"I have found a new life here. My son wants to stay here 100%, and because of that, I see the future more here than in Ukraine" (N8).

While the nostrification of diplomas does not automatically lead to qualified employment, many professions require a state examination in Czech, which is a goal several of our narrators are striving towards (e.g., N5, N14).

Another woman described language learning as essential for living a normal life:

“I want to live a normal Czech life…” (N14/285).

The refugees' life goals are often closely linked to their hopes for Ukraine’s future.

“If the Russians win, then I hope my skills, abilities, and experience will help me find a role here… perhaps working with the Ukrainian community, which is now the largest ethnic minority in the Czech Republic” (N7).

Another narrator was even more cautious, expressing a wish for her children to remain in the Czech Republic even if Ukraine wins the war:

“It will take a long time to build a new Ukraine” (N11).

Of course, among the dreams of Ukrainian women are also those we might call higher aspirations:

“I would like children — not just mine, but all children — to go to sleep knowing what tomorrow will bring, waking up in peace, so that no children have to live in basements. I wish for the war to end, so that not only children but also adults have minimal losses” (N14).

Another said:

“I hope that we, those of us abroad, will realise the value of our homeland, our traditions, and that when we return to Ukraine, we will make it even more beautiful than before. It’s important that our children do not lose their roots, that they preserve their culture and heritage, and I have the support for this at our school; parents see that there is meaning in it” (N6).

Visions of the future can also be deeply personal. For some, it involves a new partnership culminating in marriage (N8); for others, the hope of reuniting the family and living where they truly wish (N10).

Naturally, for many women, planning anything while in exile remains profoundly difficult:

“Since the start of the war, I no longer plan for the future, but I miss the sea…” (N9);

“I don’t think about the future — I live in the present. If something is beyond my control, I don’t worry about it” (N4).

Several women, even after three years in exile, have not changed their stance: they do not plan, nor do they reflect on the future because they simply do not know what will happen next (N3, N12, N10, N9).

For many, visions of returning are tied to the idea of beginning again:

“For now, I don't know. I don't think about returning. If I return, I will have to start everything over again” (N10).

Aspirations

After three years in exile, during which most of our narrators started “from nothing” (N2/175, 174) — rebuilding their lives from scratch — many now express a sense of pride in their resilience.

Looking back, they acknowledge that “it was very hard, terrible at the beginning” (N2), but their positive attitude demonstrates the perseverance of many.

They believe that just as they built a good life for themselves through hard work in Ukraine, they can do so again in the Czech Republic:

“If I sit here crying with my hands in my lap, it won't help me at all, so I must believe in myself and support my children in the same way” (N15).

Some women have realised that their previous lives are firmly in the past:

“When the war started and I arrived here, I understood that everything back there was already history, that it had happened and that it was necessary to move forward” (N6).

Some are already certain that they have found a new home (N14); others, paradoxically, experienced positive life changes through exile, with their lives improving as a result (N8).

They believe they can begin a new life, one imbued with meaning (N6), and they trust that by mastering Czech and improving their qualifications, they will find work that will bring them happiness (N14).

A crucial aspect of their new lives is providing a sense of security for their children (N6, N13).

Thus, their aspirations are often tied to the possibility of building a good life in the Czech Republic.

One narrator dreams of working at a university and writing a history of Ukraine free from Russian narratives, envisioning herself and her husband contributing to the future rebuilding of Ukraine (N5).

Another narrator, however, emphasised her satisfaction with life in the Czech Republic, describing the Czech language as beautiful and expressing her fondness for Czech towns and villages (N7), which strengthens her desire to stay.

The hopes connected to the future were summarised by a refugee who had previously lived a higher middle-class life in Ukraine:

"My dream is to sell all our properties in Ukraine at a good price and buy something here.

My dream is for me and my children to speak Czech fluently, to continue living and working here.

I am afraid of what the future holds…

My dream is that there will never be war here.

My dream is that you will have patience with us and that Czechs will understand that not all Ukrainians are bad" (N15).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our aim was to focus on the construction and reconstruction of the identities of women refugees. A particularly insightful contribution to this theme was made by Ana Mijić, who, in her research, studied refugees from the civil war in Yugoslavia. She approached these individuals thirty years after their migration to Austria.[32] She examined the process of shaping various aspects of the respondents' new identities in the context of long-term exile.

In line with the sociology of knowledge developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, her research is based on the assumption that social reality is created by people who are simultaneously its product.

In this conception, identity is both reflective and reflexive — it represents a key element of subjectively experienced reality.

Of course, the difference between three and thirty years in exile is substantial.

Nevertheless, in our research, we observed signs of an emerging complex process of new self-identification among Ukrainian women in exile.

If Mijić emphasises the connection between identity and a sense of belonging, it is precisely this aspect that appears crucial within refugee communities.

Women, often isolated, find support in community centres, where they can share their experiences, thoughts, and emotions in their native language — thus mutually reinforcing their bonds (N6).

[32] MIJIĆ, Ana: (Re-)Construction of Identity and Belonging after Forced Migration: A Sociology of Knowledge Approach, s. 1107–1125. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feac020.

It seems that, within Ukrainian communities, the acceptance of a refugee identity as part of their new reality is gradually taking shape.

The importance of exchanging physical goods across distance among relatives in transnational Ukrainian families had previously been discussed by Khrenova L. and Burrell.[33] They reminded us that maintaining close family relationships is also supported through material exchange.

The parcels sent are an important component of transnational family life, and far more than providing economic assistance, they embody family bonds, support, and a sense of shared presence; they offer tangible care and firm evidence that loved ones have not been forgotten.

Already in this study, private couriers and networks of friends were described as preferred channels of transport, as they are cheaper, faster, and often more reliable.

Similarly, our narrators continue to rely on such forms of distant exchange or transport.

"For me, the clothes of my great-great-grandmother, which are over 180 years old, are important, so I bring them here, as well as the books my grandfather wrote. And those embroidered shirts, scarves, and skirts too. Because the clothing… the patterns they had, the ones they wore — that is a very important tradition in Ukraine.

Every time a friend travels to Ukraine, I ask if she could bring some clothes and books for me — the books written by my grandfather and the dresses from my great-grandmother and earlier" (N6).

Whether it concerns sending personal belongings to the Czech Republic via relatives and friends from Ukraine, rescuing family heirlooms such as collections of traditional costumes or books, or even the transfer of pets — in our case, dogs — it represents a vital part of maintaining family identity and continuity:

"My family is me, my daughter, and our two dogs" (N4).

Conversely, equally important is the help provided to those who have remained in Ukraine, particularly through financial support to children, parents, and friends who lost their health or livelihoods during the war:

"From every bit of extra income we earn, a part goes to Ukraine" (N5).

Colleagues Kamionka M. et al. have noted that among the emigrants from Ukraine they interviewed, the primary motivations for leaving were the war and the desire to secure the safety

[33] KHRENOVA Lyudmyla – BURRELL, Kathy: Materialising Care across Borders: Sent Things and Family Ties between Sweden and Ukraine. In: *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, roč. 11, č. 3 (2021), s. 250–261. https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.399.

of their children.[34] We arrived at similar conclusions: most of our narrators decided to flee their homes only when life in Ukraine became unbearable and they feared for their own lives and the lives of their children (N15, N8, N7, N6).

The aforementioned authors also highlighted the refugees' lack of preparedness for exile.

They began new lives in unfamiliar environments, marked by uncertainty and unpredictability, which often led to their acceptance of lower-quality employment.

These findings correspond closely to our own observations.

All the women interviewed had long-term work experience in the Czech Republic.

Through random selection, we found that — with only one exception — the women had completed tertiary education in Ukraine.

Some were fortunate enough to find meaningful employment within their three years in exile, while the majority initially took jobs at significantly lower positions than they had held in Ukraine; several had also earned much higher incomes in their country of origin.

We also confronted our findings with the work of Macková L. et al., who reflected on the issues of ontological security and resilience among Ukrainian refugees in the Czech labour market.[35] Among their conclusions is the observation that many refugees experienced downward social mobility upon arriving in the Czech Republic — unsurprising, given that all of their respondents had completed higher education.

We unequivocally confirm this conclusion.

Although the authors suggest that satisfaction with work and employment opportunities in their preferred fields may lead refugees to aspire to remain in the Czech Republic, the majority of their respondents — despite studying Czech — continued to stress the temporary nature of their stay and the hope of family reunification in Ukraine after the war.

They concluded that refugees often fail to create a suitable life plan in exile, living instead in a state of uncertainty, with their precarious social position in the host state impeding successful labour market integration.

Since our research was conducted more than a year after the study mentioned above, we feel justified in diverging from some of its conclusions.

[34] KAMIONKA Mateusz – MACKOVÁ, Lucie – JIRKA, Luděk: "Fear for children", Mother-Child Dyad and Future Mobility Trajectories of Displaced Ukrainians in Czechia and Poland: Children as a Factor for Fleeing and Living after the Full-Scale Invasion, s. 1–21. https://doi.org/10.14422/mig.2024.027.
[35] MACKOVÁ, Lucie – MEDOVÁ, Nikola – FRLIČKOVÁ, Barbora – JIRKA, Luděk: 'The plan is no plan': Ontological security and resilience of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech labour market, s. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2024.024.

Today, it is no longer exceptional to find Ukrainian refugee women working in qualified positions in their fields.

One woman acknowledges that she is now happy in the Czech Republic and considers her life here beautiful — which she does not view as standard in her situation (N8).

Another is employed at a university, teaching in English (N4).

For most, employment is not only a path to independence from the state or family support, but also a vital source of psychological resilience (N4).

The women we interviewed expressed satisfaction with their jobs; many assist their fellow Ukrainians, others have re-established themselves professionally or have become self-sufficient.

Employment often shapes whether or not they consider returning to Ukraine (N4).

All women identified better knowledge of Czech as the key to securing better or more qualified work.

One narrator had once held a very senior position, managing staff and even a personal driver — who later drove her and her family to the border.

Within a week, she found herself working on a factory floor in uniform.

Yet even this experience is not perceived negatively today; she has since returned to a qualified role, applying her skills in the management of refugee assistance in the Czech Republic.

She maintains that a positive attitude is crucial:

“Thinking positively is important” (N15).

In conclusion, we can state that three years in exile have often led refugees to reconsider the supposed temporariness of their stay in the Czech Republic.

Key indicators of adaptation include mixed partnerships with Czechs, abandoning online education linked to Ukraine, and focusing on overcoming language barriers — particularly for children seeking success in Czech secondary and tertiary education (N8, N1).

A third crucial factor is the acceptance of reality, even in the face of the irreversible loss of their original homes (N1).

Whereas earlier the refugee women lived only for the present, without visions for the future (“When I think about the future, I start crying” — N4), today many have regained the courage to plan and actively shape their lives.

For our narrators, choosing whether to return to Ukraine or stay in the Czech Republic is not always straightforward.

Those who have justified their decision find their career and life trajectories clearer, recognising that mastering the Czech language is the key to success:

"I want to learn Czech better; then I will feel more comfortable here" (N12).

Some originally intended to leave but have since changed their minds:

"I didn't want to stay because I didn't know the language, but now I feel stable" (N15).

Another added:

"I have found a new life here; my son wants to stay here 100%" (N8).

Diploma nostrification alone often does not guarantee qualified employment; a state language exam is required (N5, N14).

Learning Czech well is therefore seen as the pathway to living a "normal Czech life" (N14).

After three years in exile, beginning from nothing, many women now feel pride in what they have accomplished.

Some have found a new home (N14); others view exile as a paradoxically positive change (N8) or believe that, with improved qualifications, they can succeed and find happiness (N14).

A crucial motivator for many is ensuring security for their children (N6, N13) — thus, their aspirations are often tied to building a good life in the Czech Republic.

One respondent likened herself to a tree that had been transplanted.

This image captures the central dilemma these women face — how to forge new relationships and embrace a new environment without losing touch with their past.

Their testimonies are not just personal stories; they are also powerful accounts of identity transformation under the conditions of forced displacement.

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