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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Elusive privilege: class, race and gender in Ukrainian war migrants' (un)employment in France

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Abstract

What happens when the state removes the usual obstacles preventing refugees to 'integrate'? Our article analyses the case of Ukrainians who fled the war to settle in France. Their legal status is different from that of 'classic' refugees: the EU directive on temporary protection gives them the freedom to move and the right to work. Moreover, they benefit from a rather positive attitude of the general public. The absence of racist stereotypes and institutional barriers, however, does not translate into easy integration into the labour market: 2 years after the beginning of the Ukrainian exile, two thirds of the refugees in Western Europe remain unemployed. Based on our fieldwork made in three French regions from February to August 2023, we analyse the predicament of Ukrainian war migrants. We conclude that granting formal access to jobs and putting racist discrimination on pause is not enough to overcome other handicaps: lack of language and other 'soft' skills; lack of social capital that would allow insertion into formal and informal labour markets; the burden of social reproduction magnified by forced single motherhood; and the temporary nature of one's supposedly generous legal status. The latter turns the perceived privilege into a handicap: Ukrainians are tolerated temporarily and being increasingly differentiated into 'deserving' and 'undeserving', 'productive' and 'unproductive' migrants. While those deemed 'productive' may be encouraged to remain in the EU, those who fail to integrate into the labour market are likely to gradually be cut off from social support and forced to return to Ukraine.

Keywords Deservingness · France · Migrant labour · Refugees · Ukraine · War migrants

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Introduction

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has inadvertently launched a natural experiment on an enormous scale: well over ten million people have fled their homes in the war-torn country. Seven years after the so-called 'migrant crisis' of 2015, when 1.3 million people arrived from Syria and other countries of the Global South, the EU had to deal with the arrival of 5.2 million Ukrainians in 2022. The political response was more resolute this time: Brussels quickly granted Ukrainian refugees the right of prolonged legal stay in the 27 European countries, as well as a wide range of social rights, including access to healthcare, the right to work, and free movement. This package, known as Temporary Protection (TP), differs dramatically from the legal rights of a refugee or asylum seeker in the EU.

Progressive movements across Europe underline the difference in responses to the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 and to the influx of war migrants from Ukraine in 2022, taking two tonalities: either accusing decision makers of implicitly racist attitudes, or celebrating the fact that the EU was able to unfold such generous policies, which should now be generalised. Both accounts converge on the fact that Ukrainians receive privileged treatment compared to the rest of the refugee population in the EU. However, Ukrainians who received temporary protection in France do not feel privileged, which is partially corroborated by statistics: their number reached 100 thousand by early 2023 only to fall to 63 thousand a year later. The French welfare state, comparatively generous in general and offering attractive social aid to Ukrainian refugees in particular, does not evoke massive interest—contrary to the stereotypes of 'benefits shopping' refugees. Among those who do stay in France, only 41% are economically active, the majority failing to seize the legal possibility offered by TP status (Mykhailyshyna et al. 2024).

This gap between the seemingly generous policies and the demand for them raises a question: how does the lifting of legal barriers and racial prejudices affect the integration of refugees into the host country's labour market? The case of Ukrainian war migrants allows a peek into a hypothetical situation where all refugees become genuinely welcome in rich Western countries, in terms of legal frameworks and popular attitudes. What other obstacles, usually hidden between these two, become visible in this case?

Initially conceived as a field of applied academic knowledge at the service of governments struggling to manage new immigrant populations, at the turn of the century refugee studies formulated a powerful critique of the normative concept of 'integration', developed by the discipline at an earlier stage. The concept of 'transnationalism' (Schiller et al. 1992) rejected the normativity of unidirectional integration, assuming an optimist perspective of erasing national borders and ethnic distinctions (Schiller et al. 2006). The optimist belief in the liberal end of history came after 2008, when migration studies took a progressively more critical and activist stance, facing the resurgence of racism and inequalities, and the reinforcement rather than the vanishing of borders in an increasingly nation-centred politics. Rejecting the traditional distinction between the 'natives' and the 'immigrants' requiring 'integration', critical migration studies problematise 'the

formation and sustaining of ongoing, governable national populations from the flux of mobilities and global diversities, as the core governmental operation of modernity and modernisation' (Favell 2022).

Having shifted from the national integration paradigm to that of transnational mobility, academics take interest in the agency of migrants, problematising both individualising and communitarian optics (Greschke and Ott 2020). Instead of an 'integration' where one side has to actively adapt to the passive and homogeneous 'receiving' society, we are invited to interrogate the reciprocity and the interactive dimension of the refugees' arrival (Pries 2018).

This angle is also present in the recent studies on Ukrainian refugees in the EU. Contrary to the normative image of a migrant making efforts at assimilating in the new country, they do not cut ties with Ukraine, existing between two social realities without being securely anchored in either of the two. In order to demonstrate their good will to the 'receiving' public, they face the task of double adaptation: to the general rules applied to 'normal' citizens in the country and to the specific rules governing TP beneficiaries. Besides cracking the mainstream cultural and procedural codes, Ukrainians also have to understand 'what is expected from people classified as displaced within this institutional framework' (Mijić et al. 2024:14), and what informal channels and tools may be available to them (Sunam 2023). In answering these questions, it seems particularly helpful to focus on the interplay of race, class and gender in the case of Ukrainian refugees' attempts to navigate the French labour market.

The article is structured as follows. After a brief description of our research methodology, we focus on the 'classical trio' of race, class and gender, as we discuss the trajectories of our interlocutors and the obstacles they face on the French labour market. In the section on class, we examine the middle-class background of many refugees and their resistance to prospects of deskilling. In the section on race, we look at Ukrainians highlighting their 'Whiteness' and 'Europeanness', dissociating themselves from other refugees. Finally, in the section on gender we focus on the interplay between social reproduction and the 'productive' activities of Ukrainian refugees, most of whom experience enforced single motherhood. In the conclusion, we combine these lenses to produce an overarching analysis of the predicament of Ukrainian refugees in the EU: privileges that are limited by their temporariness.

Research methodology

Between January and August 2023, we conducted 42 in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection in France, as well as with activists accompanying them in their efforts to find jobs and housing.[1] Besides

[1] This research was conducted with the support of the French Red Cross Foundation, a public utility foundation dedicated to supporting research on humanitarian and social action, by awarding research grants and prizes. The Foundation embodies the French Red Cross' desire to promote scientific knowledge and social innovation to improve action in the service of the most vulnerable, in France and around the world.

interviews, we did participant observations in food queues, legal aid offices and local Ukrainian associations that serve as places of sociability for this public. Geographically, we mainly focused on three regions of France: Île-de-France (Paris and suburbs), Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (Aix, Marseille, Nice), and Hauts de France (Lille and suburbs). We have also managed to find several informants living in rural areas situated far away from large cities; they were not our main focus, but discussions with them helped us put into perspective the situation of 'urban' refugees.

Epistemologically, our study can be defined as an extended case method (Burawoy 1998). We start off with a generally accepted theoretical statement that generous legal provisions and positive public opinion contribute to refugees' sense of being well-accommodated. We then focus on a specific case where this theory has limits: Ukrainian refugees are often unhappy with their temporary protection status in France despite the exceptional generosity of this status compared to that of other refugees and asylum seekers. As a result, the initial theory is not rejected, but refined to better explain the facts of the case study.

Our study followed general ethical guidelines of qualitative research. Confidentiality was assured to all respondents, their names were replaced by pseudonyms in this paper, and any details that could identify them have been omitted. Informed consent was obtained prior to the beginning of interviews, and interlocutors were informed of the nature and objectives of our research, and of their right to withdraw from participation at any moment. Agreement to participate was recorded either orally at the beginning of the audio recording, or was secured in communication via telephone, email or social media messengers prior to each encounter. Interviews were recorded and trascribed in the original languages (Ukrainian, Russian or French) that all three researchers are fluent in. We gave preference to qualitative manual theoretically-informed coding, with a particular focus on obstacles faced on the labour market.

The collective nature of research required a certain degree of coordination between the three researchers who collected data, and collaboration was on the whole fruitful and allowed for triangulation of researchers' analytical insights into data. Interestingly, all three researchers who collected data independently, reached the point of data saturation roughly at the same time in June. At our meetings, we agreed that further interviews were generally confirming previous findings and not adding new themes, thus a decision to conclude data collection was reached, with the last couple of interviews conducted in August.

Temporary protection, 'Europeanness' and dissociation from other refugees

The exceptional legal status of Ukrainian refugees is governed by the EU Council Directive 2001/55/EC, passed in the aftermath of the Balkan wars. The Russian invasion of 2022 triggered the first ever invocation of this mechanism in the EU's

history[2]. Aiming to attenuate refugee crises following wars or other cataclysms on the EU's frontiers, the Directive introduces an intermediary status to be awarded to people chaotically and massively arriving in a context of emergency—temporary protection. As the name indicates, it is different from the classic institution of asylum in that it does not imply a permanent right to stay in the country. The maximum duration of temporary protection is three years, during which beneficiaries are granted access to healthcare, social protection, education, and the labour market. Contrary to refugees and asylum seekers, they are also able to circulate freely, including to their country of origin and back. However, after the end of the given period, beneficiaries of temporary protection should leave the territory or change their status.

The formal distinction from refugees 'per se' is assumed by the concerned population: many Ukrainians insist that they are not refugees, citing the legal intricacies. This differentiation does an important semantic job along two dimensions: distinction from other refugees; and Ukrainians' Europeanness. Ukrainian and Western media have been routinely assigning a negative valence to the very word 'refugee', associating it with criminality, parasitism, and political extremism; it is only natural to seize the opportunity to declare oneself something else than a refugee. 'Temporary protection', on the contrary, conveys the sense of respectability: the person in question requests protection for a limited time due to extraordinary circumstances, unlike a 'refugee' they are not defined by this biographical circumstance. Thus, Maya, a schoolteacher of English in her forties from Crimea who fled to Kyiv in 2014 only to emigrate in 2022, is offended by implicit expectations that she 'looks like a refugee': 'They say, you Ukrainians are wearing fur coats, why are you standing in the food queue? Well, what should I do, tear my coat, put stains on it and maybe smother my face with something to look like a refugee?' Talking to us in the office of the local Franco-Ukrainian association where she comes to socialise over a cup of tea after her language courses, Maya is wearing the white coat in question, which does look nicer than one could expect based on miserabilist media accounts of refugees' life. Zoriana, Maya's friend from the suburbs of Kyiv, chimes in: 'We are different: we are fleeing war, they are fleeing bad economy.' Similarly, Larysa, a single mother who spent her life in a Donbas city before fleeing to France with her teenage daughter and an elderly neighbour, does not understand why she has to be put in the same basket as refugees from other continents, while 'we do not come from a village, we have higher education, sometimes two!'.

Along with dissociation from other refugees, our interlocutors persistently stressed their 'Europeanness', in particular their willingness to obey the law and act in a 'civilised' way. The element of informality is usually prominent in migrants' strategies: when the law offers few possibilities to make a decent living, the dominated groups

[2] It is often portrayed as an unprecedented demonstration of international solidarity; however, similar legal mechanisms were previously enacted elsewhere. In Turkey, a comparable status has been awarded to Syrians fleeing the war; in the US, temporary protection was activated for Venezuelans, Afghans, and other refugees, including Ukrainians.

use extra-legal strategies of 'making-do' or 'débrouillardise' (Browne 2002) to assure day-to-day survival. Soviet and post-Soviet culture is famous for these kinds of strategies animating everyday economic life (Cherkaev 2018; Gorbach 2019; Morris 2018). Compared to cases typically described in the literature, our field yielded surprisingly few stories about informal adaptations and fixes bypassing the law. Many, if not most, of our interlocutors are extremely law-abiding. This is puzzling given the preponderance of informality in all spheres of life in Ukraine. Ongoing research on Ukrainian refugees in other countries, not yet published, shows that they willingly engage in informal schemes in Romania (Artyukh and Fedirko 2025, forthcoming), and other countries of Eastern Europe. What is different in France?

Many of our interlocutors were sincerely indignant at the idea of cheating. Asked about avoiding the declaration of incomes, Kateryna from Dnipro, who lives in Aix-en-Provence, said: 'I know that there are people who say that you can cheat and avoid declaring, but I don't think this is very nice'. The key to understanding this insistence on 'good behaviour' is the idealised normative image of 'Europe', widespread in the Ukrainian public sphere.

Besides the simple personalisation of relations between the 'receiving state' and the refugee who ought to show gratitude, we are dealing here with a particular moral geography. In it, Ukraine is a periphery that strives to assert its rightful place among the 'civilised' international community, the pinnacle of which is (Western) Europe. France is constructed as part of the European 'civilisation', where people live well because they adhere to laws. Paying one's taxes and respecting all other legal norms is supposed to be the superior cultural trait that Ukrainians should feign if they want to be taken for the Europeans they claim to be. This reading allows us to understand why Ukrainians do not demonstrate the same ardent commitment to the rule of law in places like Romania: countries of CEE are perceived to be less 'civilised', closer to the more intuitive Ukrainian legal culture, therefore informal employment there is much more customary among the same Ukrainian refugees.

The discussion on the 'new immigrant Whiteness' of post-Soviet diasporas has received a new impetus from the book of Claudia Sadowski-Smith (2018), who studied the way immigrants from the former Soviet Union construct their belonging to the White race in seeking to merge seamlessly into the accepting society. The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war has further stimulated these debates—not only in the markedly different attitudes of the Polish government and society to Ukrainian refugees and to refugees from Africa and the Middle East storming the Polish-Belarusian border at the same time, but also by drawing attention to the way the influx of Ukrainian refugees helps reproduce Whiteness in other European countries (Schmidt 2022). Indeed, for the receiving society, 'the Ukrainian refugee may be the most "deserving" refugee in contemporary times, being predominantly White, female (and/or youth), perceived to be in need of protection and not as a security threat, all the while sharing cultural features with fellow Europeans' (Mickelsson 2024). Racial capitalism pushes those who pass for White, e.g. Ukrainian refugees, to strive towards Whiteness as a survival tool (Tsymbalyuk 2023). Our fieldwork continues this discussion by showing the ways in which Ukrainian lay understandings of race and global hierarchies (Gorbach 2020) articulate with the politics of

race in France to both prevent the creation of solidarities and open certain avenues towards employment for incoming Ukrainians—all while foreclosing others.

Deskilling and class dissonance

The symbolic distancing from 'actual refugees' performed by Ukrainian refugees has a lot to do with the reproduction of class distinctions. Among our interlocutors were men and women with working-class backgrounds, but the proportion of middle-class refugees that we met was quite high. For these people, forced migration presented a threat of the loss of their class privileges in the new environment. Indeed, class downgrading is a constant menace facing refugees possessing a certain amount of symbolic capital. Such refugees are rarely discussed in academic literature, since so-called skilled migration is usually conceived of as voluntary displacement, motivated by economic or status gains. The migration of 'expats' is represented not as an end in itself but as a stage in a strategy of augmenting one's class position. However, this is not the case for Ukrainian refugees or for Middle Eastern artists and scholars seeking asylum in the global North. Among the tactics of resistance that can be employed by this population one finds mobilisation of social capital, notably built up before exile in the relevant professional field. It can help ensure logistical support upon arrival but also open doors towards grants and jobs in the receiving country. The other strategy of resistance to sliding down the social ladder amounts to playing with the status of a refugee—performing one's refugee identity in one's scholarly or artistic activities:

> On one hand, exiles feel the need to justify their uprooting by articulating the lack of an alternative to their exile (characterising the danger present in their country of origin); on the other hand, they feel the need to articulate a form of attachment and longing for their country of origin, without which they expose themselves to a negative judgement based on the set of moral precepts that accord an essential importance to keeping one's origins, one's roots in high esteem (Nimer et al. 2023).

Studying Bulgarian middle-class subjectivities in migration, Polina Manolova stipulates that performing these subjectivities does not necessarily mean that the person in question belonged to middle class in their country of origin. Often it is rather an aspirational category of belonging, conjured by the vilification of the post-socialist worker in public discourse (Kideckel 2002) and by the image of European 'good life' opening itself up to a migrant (Bulakh 2020). If Bourdieu posits that popular classes construct their own universe of meaning, orthogonal to that of the middle classes (Bourdieu 1979:444), this is not the case for the economic losers of the postsocialist transition. Manolova's Bulgarian interlocutors instead 'try to strategically adopt new models of personhood, modes of thought and practices in an effort to improve their chances for success in the new market realities. (…) they borrow on the language and cultural registers provided by dominant middle-class models to actively 're-train' incorporated worldviews and dispositions in a way that enables them to claim an upward identification, inconsistent with their fragmented social

trajectories' (Manolova 2020:518). In order to mitigate the dissonance between the aspiration and reality, such migrants build boundaries that distinguish them from the less deserving population on the move: they notably avoid defining themselves as 'migrants', speaking rather about 'transnational journeys', 'adventures', 'excursions' or 'language trips' that have no economic motive.

Maxwell et al. (2024) explore the ways in which Ukrainian middle-class refugees in Germany exercise their 'agency-in-waiting'. Following Brun (2015), they define the latter as the capacity to act based on experience of displacement and on critical reflection upon future possibilities. According to these authors, the 'middle-classness' of their Ukrainian interlocutors structures the resources they command and thereby reinforces the determination of those who clearly decided to stay in Germany. However, the orientation towards remaining in the new place is not the only one. Two other orientations are living in limbo or waiting to return to Ukraine but in the meantime participating in social life in Germany.

In the final account, analysis of migration waves such as Ukrainian exile to the EU should encourage us to move away from the national scale when discussing social class. Debates about transnationalism, launched three decades ago (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Schiller et al. 1992), have yet to make themselves heard among scholars interested in class. The Ukrainian case may be productively used to analyse the simultaneity of class-making happening both on the 'sending' and the 'receiving' end (Amelina and Schäfer 2023).

According to the polls, people who fled Ukraine had higher revenues than the average national figures (Mykhailyshyna et al. 2024). This is not surprising: fleeing your country in an emergency requires the possession of certain resources that are not available to everyone. Those who left their homes to settle in a different region of Ukraine were more numerous than those who were prepared to leave the country. The richer you were, the more likely you were to move to faraway countries like France; this self-selection is well documented (Kohlenberger et al. 2023). The first ones to leave were people who were better off economically and had sufficient social and cultural capital to allow consideration of moving abroad. The first wave of migrants was more likely to have personal savings to cover basic needs while waiting for temporary protection applications to be processed. They were more likely to have private vehicles (so could leave the country in the first days of war), some prior contacts in receiving countries—either personal or professional, knowledge of at least one foreign language, higher education, etc. A Razumkov Centre study found a higher percentage of managers (14% compared to 1.5% of the Ukrainian population as a whole) and private entrepreneurs (14% compared to 4% of the Ukrainian population as a whole), with a further 12% self-identifying as skilled workers, and another 11% as housewives (Ryabchuk 2023). Thus, those who left Ukraine often have a higher socio-economic status compared to those who remained. They are also more likely to come from urban areas (nine in ten respondents in the Razumkov study) and have higher education (86% have either completed or were in the process of obtaining higher education). Even if we did have occasions to talk to working-class Ukrainian refugees in France, the proportion of relatively well-established middle-class migrants is higher here than in countries that are more popular destinations, such as Germany or Poland.

Many of such middle-class refugees came with their savings and counted on living on these resources for a while, before returning home. Guided by an optimistic perspective on the outcome of the war, they did not make significant efforts to look for a job. Danylo and Alina, a middle-class couple with kids, lived in Dnipro. When the invasion began, initially they went to Danylo's friend in Romania, whose father offered his large house to refugees. Having spent two weeks there, they decided to go further west because they were convinced that the war would be over before the end of spring: 'So we thought, where will we have the time to go by then? Maybe France. Where in France? Well, since I like seafood, never been to Belgium—why not Lille? We took off, crossing Romania, Hungary, Austria, Germany, France'. In Lille, they rented a place to stay for one month, remaining under the impression that they were undertaking a pleasant roadtrip that would come to an end when the brief interlude of the war was over. A month later, they had to accept free housing from the Red Cross and adjust their consumption habits. Nevertheless, Danylo kept working at a distance with his old Ukrainian contacts rather than looking for opportunities in the French labour market.

Similarly, Vania and Olga did not believe the invasion would become a reality until the very last moment. Vania was a wealthy businessman in Odesa, Olga makes sure to let us understand: 'we are not poor'. When the invasion did begin, they took their five-year-old son and went to Nice, together with Olga's sister and her French husband who owns property there. Over a year later, they were still in Nice, unwilling to return to Ukraine before the end of all hostilities, but also unwilling to establish a new life in France. They kept relying on their savings for daily consumption, but in the long run for Vania the situation was 'unsustainable'. The family had no better strategy than sending donations to the Ukrainian army and hoping it wins the war as soon as possible.

Another reason not to look for employment is the discrepancy between available jobs and migrants' previous qualifications and work experience. Such was the case of Zoriana, who held an office job in Kyiv before leaving it behind and moving to a Parisian suburb. She soon found out that her skills are incompatible with the needs of the local labour market. The single most popular job proposed to Ukrainians is cleaner. Zoriana, like many others, sees this as an affront to her education and professional credentials. Despite her desperate economic situation, she refuses to take the cleaning job. It is nearly impossible in France to find jobs matching the skills of Ukrainian bank employees, accountants, doctors, and teachers: besides the different national standards in accounting and the need to confirm a degree in medicine, every profession requires a certain level of knowledge of French.

Deskilling is seen as humiliation. It is not necessary to accept it if one intends to return back quickly to Ukraine, into the familiar socio-economic and cultural context, with comfortable social hierarchies. This prospect, becoming more and more illusory with the passing of time, allows people such as Zoriana to maintain their symbolic privilege at the cost of increasing social and economic marginalisation: there is no need to downgrade if soon all will be back to normal in Ukraine. In the meantime, one can try to survive on various types of welfare aid.

In the words of Maryna, the head of a Ukrainian association in Lille:

> We need to help the person cross the psychological barrier: "In Ukraine, I was a factory director, and here I am going to wash dishes, to clean". Not everyone can make this step. And then they set a trap for themselves: learning the language for five or six years to reach the level [necessary for the kind of job they want]. But there are people who do not ask questions: I want a job, I go and work. It all depends on the personality.

However, personality traits are not the only factors: what also matters is class background and social capital. Paradoxically, those coming from less privileged backgrounds are more successful because they have less of a problem taking on 'dirty' jobs. Oleksandr, a retired miner from Eastern Ukraine, was able to leave Ukraine thanks to the handicap he got in the mine. Upon arrival in Lille, he, his wife and their daughter all found low-skilled jobs—correspondingly, in a supermarket, at a farm, and at a textile factory. Their collective income is sufficient to financially support not only their household in France but also their son, a student who had to remain in Ukraine. Oleksandr sees the situation of Ukrainian refugees in France in much brighter colours compared to Zoriana. If anything, he is worried about his French co-workers who, according to him, are not ambitious enough: instead of starting their own businesses or otherwise 'developing themselves', they are content with their low-paying jobs and social assistance. On his part, he refused to apply for eventual social aid for the handicapped in France. Currently, the family lives in a house they got for free from the city council, but they contacted the mayor suggesting they start paying for it. Oleksandr is an 'unruly entrepreneur' who internalised the imperative of incessant economic activity and self-reliance. This is a recognisable figure, typical of the post-Soviet working class (Morris 2012).

The working-class habitus, i.e. willingness to take on 'dirty' jobs, is not the only factor that makes it easier to join the labour market as a refugee in a foreign country. Another reason is the more adequate forms of social capital. Poorer refugees living in cramped conditions in dormitories have greater chances to learn about an interesting vacancy by word of mouth, or to get to know useful people. In this sense, the more comfortable conditions of middle-class refugees (e.g. a room or an entire apartment offered by a compassionate local family) turn out to be a handicap in a more long-term perspective. The same is true for other places of sociability—food queues, schools, online groups, where poorer migrants are overrepresented (Dutchak 2023).

Some refugees were involved in migrant labour before the invasion, which gave them access to the most useful type of preexisting social networks. Antonina lived in a village in Western Ukraine; her parents have been living in France for a long time. Together with her husband, Antonina used to spend two or three months each year in Paris, doing renovation works in private apartments. When the invasion started in Ukraine, they were about to return from one such trip. They reconsidered their plans and stayed in Paris: first at the apartment that her mother normally lets to tourists, then in a studio of her sister's friend who went to Italy for half a year. Finally, her cousin tipped her off about an apartment available for rent in her housing block. Antonina's husband managed to legalise his economic activity, doing the same job he had been doing previously but now on a permanent basis. The

configuration of social networks at this couple's disposal was optimal for swift integration into the economic circuits.

The Robinsonade of social reproduction

Like many other refugees we talked to, Nataliia made her sacrifices in the name of her daughter. Children are often cited as the main reason why refugees decide to pursue the path of 'integration' in France instead of returning to the familiar landscape in Ukraine: while some mothers talk about the everyday physical dangers of the ongoing war, others are convinced that even after the war there will hardly be any future for their children in the country, even if they personally would live more comfortably there. However, children can also be a major obstacle on the way to employment.

The majority of our interlocutors find themselves in the situation that Oksana Dutchak (2023) conceptualises as 'enforced single motherhood'. Having fled Ukraine with their children, they left behind their male partners, who typically used to be the main breadwinners. In social isolation abroad, they have to combine care work with 'breadwinning' on their own. Often, they are accompanied by other dependents, notably elderly parents. In this way, a small piece of the informal familial infrastructure of care travels with them: it is still possible to entrust your child to the grandmother, as one commonly does in Ukraine. However, the grandmother's own social autonomy is usually limited—by her age, but also by the situation of exile. She is able to take care of the child at home, but cannot fulfil her typical roles at school, in the doctor's office or even at the supermarket. What is more, she herself remains dependent on the care work that falls on her daughter, the 'female breadwinner'. It is difficult to conclude whether grandparents are, mathematically speaking, a burden or an asset. In any case, the help they can provide in exile is not equal to their usual roles back in Ukraine.

Social reproduction is a collective labour that relies on social networks providing mutual aid and informal exchange. In most cases, these networks are inaccessible to Ukrainian refugees in France. The extensive French system of public education and extracurricular activities aims to replace these informal networks: every child has the right and an obligation to attend school; crèches and kindergartens are available (at least in theory) from a very young age, with the express purpose of alleviating the burden of childcare and of economically activating mothers. However, this replacement works only partially. Not all refugees have enough trust in the public institutions of another country: for Lilia, a photographer from Odesa who moved to the Paris region with her three children, school is a burdensome obligation rather than liberation. She fought with the public education institutions to exempt at least her eldest daughter from the obligation to attend school. Teenage refugees have a hard time connecting with their 'native' peers; arts or athletic clubs and friendships are not always there to discharge some care obligations of the mother.

Moreover, many if not most Ukrainian refugee children attend two schools at the same time: they have to follow the Ukrainian school programme and attend classes online if they want to get a certificate of high school education that will allow

them to enter a university. Knowing little to no French, Ukrainian teenagers cannot expect to pass the French *baccalauréat* exam, hence Ukrainian school is primordial. This doubles the work for the mother accompanying her child through two school curricula.

Faced with the impossible task of combining 'productive' breadwinning activities and social reproduction tasks, many refugees prioritise the latter. They choose to focus on care responsibilities and on the acquisition of language skills over employment, especially since the type of employment is often substandard compared to their professional qualifications. The 'social experiment' shows that even the developed French system of socialised public childrearing does not fully replace the unpaid work of social reproduction performed in the private domain. Struggling to replace this informal social infrastructure with their individual efforts, many refugee women give up on the idea of employment, perpetuating their dependence on social aid—a source of subsistence notorious for its unsustainable nature.

Discussion: The trap of temporariness

The majority of Ukrainian war refugees left the country in the first weeks of the invasion, which took them by surprise. Most of them thought it was some kind of misunderstanding that could be resolved by political leaders' negotiations within a matter of days or weeks.

By September 2022, the certainty of a quick end to war was slowly vanishing. Instead, new waves of Ukrainian refugees to the EU followed, with a more sombre perspective on the war (Ryabchuk 2023).

The prospect of return has gained in importance due to a change of tone in the discourse of the Ukrainian state: if in the autumn of 2022, foreseeing a difficult winter due to blackouts and broken heating systems, the government implored refugees to stay in the EU instead of coming back to Ukraine and thereby increasing the load on infrastructure, it has made a discursive U-turn 1 year later. From then on, refugees have rather been portrayed as freeloaders refusing to share the hardships of the war with the nation. In the media, stories about virtuous Ukrainians who shock Western social workers with their willingness to toil and who contribute to the Ukrainian cause abroad by means of financial support and cultural diplomacy, gave way to stories about women abandoning their husbands and their country for a better life elsewhere. This discourse continues the portrayal of Ukrainian female labour migrants in the EU prior to the Russian invasion as prostitutes and traitors, who abandon their children as orphans and only care about material gain, while the same migrants talked about themselves as caring mothers who make sacrifices to secure a better future for their children (Vianello 2013, 2016; Solari 2014; Penkala et al 2023).

The moral panic about the demographic abyss exacerbated by the war and mass exile contributes to seeing exiles not as virtuous compatriots but as an asset gone astray that needs to be reclaimed by the national body—be those women valuable for their fertility, children as fertility realised but now at risk of being lost, or men needed on the battlefield. In his 2024 New Year address to the nation, President

Zelenskyi notably said that everyone should make a choice on who they want to be—refugees or citizens. This rhetoric contradicts the previously established theses about refugees as vehicles of Ukraine's European integration, doing the important job of 'diplomacy from below'.

In fact, avoidance of the label of refugees that we focused on earlier, is also a way for Ukrainian war migrants to preserve the sense of belonging to the Ukrainian imagined community. The key difference between the two statuses is the expected result: ideally, a refugee gets integrated into the host country and lives there for the rest of their life; a person under TP is supposed to spend some time in safety and later go back home.

All of the aforementioned barriers to the successful labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees in France are aggravated by the barrier of temporariness, suggested by their temporary protection status. What seems like Ukrainians' privileged position turns into a handicap when you look at it closer: contrary to 'normal' migrants or refugees, Ukrainians have no certainty about their future in this country. Objectively, many of them will stay one way or another, but their subjective horizon is still focused on the perspective of return, which affects their choices. These choices are also limited by the design of their legal status: public agencies and private employers have less interest in investing efforts in the integration of people who are expected to leave the country soon. For example, our interlocutors complained that professional courses offered by the official employment agency are unavailable to them in practice: officials tell them they would not learn anything without first learning the language.

At the same time, however, the nominal open access to employment prompts the public to judge Ukrainians on the basis of their initiative: the lazy migrant myth comes back with a vengeance, including in the midst of the Ukrainian refugees themselves. Gradually, the field is structured according to the moral criteria of deservingness: those who were able to overcome difficulties and find an actual job are declared (and declare themselves) productive, whereas those who took at face value the promises of the temporary protection status (some welfare and legal stay for a limited period) progressively see the welfare support diminish and the attitude of the state and of society becoming less patient. They are being pushed to go back to Ukraine or to 'integrate', something they were unable to do and did not feel necessary to do up to this point. A conflict of interpretation over the temporal limits is likely to arise, when the EU declares the end of special schemes for Ukrainians but they will say that the war is still ongoing and they cannot return.

There are broader political concerns of the temporary protection schemes replacing traditional long-term asylum status. As Biziukova, Koziienko and Lazareva (2023) observe, the ambivalent vague formulations of the TP directive give more space for manoeuvre for each national government (for instance, regarding the duration of protection, which in the case of France is offered for only 6 months at a time, or in the size of financial benefits, which in the case of France were reduced in half after the first six months of the implementation of the Directive in 2022). Not only are protection measures temporary, they are particularly vulnerable to a change of interpretation.

We can also observe a growing gap in receiving countries' capacities to accommodate refugees, and the more educated middle-class refugees migrating further west to countries with better provisions. For instance, although initially Poland hosted the bulk of refugees due to its physical and cultural proximity to Ukraine, a year later the number of refugees in Germany reached one million and was already exceeding Polish numbers, and this trend continues today. Many in this group had initially settled in Poland and only moved to Germany later for better levels of social protection. Similarly, Bulgaria reported almost half a million Ukrainians entering their country, but only one in ten chose to stay and obtain temporary protection, with the remaining 90% continuing their journey to other countries. There is a tendency to stop on the way for a few months to explore options of further migration: Facebook groups of Ukrainian refugees in neighbouring countries often have discussions of 'where can we have better provisions?', 'what is the situation like for refugees in France, Spain, the Netherlands, etc.?' Compared to those who stay in the first country of entry, those who choose to migrate further are likely to be more motivated and focused—having done their 'research' of where they can receive better protection, knowing more clearly where exactly they are going, what they can count on etc. Among our respondents, several regretted having gone to France and not to Germany, and were perplexed at why the French, being as 'developed' economically as the Germans, could not offer the same level of protection. One of our respondents, when asked what advice she would give to those who are considering asking for temporary protection in France, exclaimed 'I would advise them to go to Germany instead!' Larysa, a refugee from a Donbas town destroyed by the Russian army in 2022, stayed in France slightly more than a year together with her daughter and an elderly lady that used to be their neighbour back home. Living in a host family in a village 1 h away from Paris, she managed to find language courses in the capital, investing a lot of personal resources in attending them. However, she has finally lost hope in finding a job she would consider feasible and acceptable; in September 2023, the three Ukrainian women left their temporary home for a new one in Germany.

There was also indignation at the reduction of benefits offered in the first months of the war, including free transport (both local and on long-distance trains), free housing in hotels, 200 euro vouchers upon arrival, etc. One of our respondents who came to Paris in January 2023, following the footsteps of her sister who came in spring 2022, complained that she had to look for her own accommodation, as no options were available in Paris when she arrived, while her sister received free accommodation for the first 6 months. She also complained that the Ukrainian refugee reception centre in Paris stopped offering 200 euro vouchers in December 2022, and that she could not make use of the free transport options that her sister benefited from. 'How am I less in need than my sister? Am I punished for arriving too late?' Another respondent shared with us that her son's preschool that welcomed their son for free in the first months of the war, asked for full payment beginning with September 2022; and a similar change of policy was reported by parents of schoolchildren with regard to free school meals and afterschool clubs. In contrast, Iryna arrived 'too early', a couple of weeks before most of the schemes offered by the state and charity organisations started

working. To her, the temporal injustice works in the other direction: she feels that she lost some opportunities that other people were able to seize thanks to the necessary head start upon arrival. These examples point to the problems with the temporary protection measures that can be modified at any time as the government or local authorities choose.

Another political concern with temporary protection is in the reduction of more permanent international protection of refugees. With no stable and universal system of asylum welcome, each new wave of migrants is treated as a unique crisis that requires a targeted temporary solution. As Ayşe Çaglar observes, such processes of classifying and dividing refugees into different 'waves' or 'crises' that are somehow 'unique' and 'extraordinary' and thus require special targeted protection programs, leads to fragmentation of ties between different groups of refugees, and to our failure to note more systemic failures of the European labour markets and welfare regimes. Ukrainians have been led to believe their case is sufficiently 'extraordinary' to make them more deserving of aid than 'ordinary' refugees: in the words of one of them, 'they flee from poverty, we flee from war, this is not the same'. This moral hierarchy, which erases other wars, located further away from Europe, is only partially confirmed by the really existing policies: enough to generate tension between different migrant populations and to discourage some NGOs specialising in helping migrants from aiding Ukrainians 'who do not need our aid', but not enough to satisfy the privileged group of migrants.

The privileged legal status and the positive image created by the media helped Ukrainian refugees overcome the two common obstacles on the way towards 'integration through employment': formal restrictions and lay prejudices. However, the racialized dissociation from other refugees and insistence on one's 'Europeanness', the resistance to deskilling and refusal to accept 'dirty' jobs, and the reproductive burden associated with enforced single motherhood, these refugees turned out to be still very far away from the desired track. Finding comfort in their status of 'special guests', they struggle to become something more than simply guests, limited by the laws of hospitality.

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