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Abstract

We analyze the wellbeing socio-economic characteristics of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and compare them with their co-nationals who remained in Ukraine. Specifically, we identify the determinants of happiness, trust and self-declared health, and the patterns of self-selection into becoming a refugee in Poland. We focus on how having experienced violence in the course of the current conflict affects socio-economic outcomes of refugees and stayers. We find that the refugees are less well-off both economically and in terms of their general wellbeing (happiness). Having experienced violence does not seem to compel Ukrainians to become refugees, suggesting that they move preemptively, due to the threat of violence, and not after having experienced it. Having suffered violence, however, has a lasting adverse impact on the happiness, trust and health of Ukrainians in Poland and Ukraine alike.

JEL-Codes: F220, F510, I100, I300.

Keywords: refugees, violence, happiness, trust, health, Ukraine.

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1 Introduction

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine caused the largest population displacement in Europe since the end of the 2nd World War. Immediately after the start of the invasion, over 8 million Ukrainians¹ left their country. At present, 4.7 million remain abroad, mainly in Europe.² The refugees³ are rather unevenly spread out, with three countries – Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic – hosting approximately half of their number: 1.2 million, 960 thousand and 340 thousand, respectively.⁴ Another seven countries – Slovakia, Moldova, The Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom – offered protection to 100 thousand or more refugees each. Given the massive scale of the refugee influx it is important to study their socio-economic outcomes, and to understand how the refugees compare to Ukrainians staying at home country.

The existing literature on labor-market and social integration of refugees is based on the experience from the previous waves of refugees: from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, and others. The consensus so far is that integration is a slow and lengthy process (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2018; Martén, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2019; Brell, Dustmann, and Preston 2020; Fasani, Frattini, and Minale 2021), displaying substantial heterogeneity across host countries (Brell et al., 2020). Refugees tend to have substantially lower employment rates and earn lower wages than economic migrants (Brell et al., 2020). The worse labor-market outcomes of refugees can be attributed to factors such as their poor physical and mental health (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2018; Brell et al., 2020), and lacking language proficiency (Brell et al., 2020). In addition, the employment restrictions imposed on refugees (Fasani et al., 2021), the length of the asylum process (Brell et al., 2020), and the forced regional dispersion of refugees in some host countries (which disrupts their social networks, see Brell et al., 2020, and Martén et al., 2019) also impede their integration.

Ukrainian refugees, however, are different from other refugees in several respects. In Europe (and some other host countries), they enjoy automatic right to work, study or to draw welfare benefits. This removes an important barrier to their effective labor-market participation and social integration that other asylum seekers face. They are culturally closer to the natives in their new European homes than the previous refugee waves. In some countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic, both of which host large numbers of Ukrainians, they benefit from linguistic and cultural proximity. In contrast to the previous incomers, Ukrainian refugees tend to possess quite favorable socio-economic characteristics. In particular, the (limited) evidence available so far suggests that Ukrainian refugees are well educated and have high employment rates, but they suffer from significant occupational downgrading. Their employment rates by far exceed those observed among refugees who arrived during previous waves, but there are also significant differences across different host countries (Brücker et al., 2023; Kohlenberger et al., 2023; Van Tubergen, 2023; Gromadzki and Lewandowski, 2023; Zyzik et al., 2023; Kubiciel–Łodzińska et al., 2024).

While the existing studies shed light on the labor-market outcomes and socio-economic characteristics of Ukrainian refugees, little is known about the what specific factors compel them to leave Ukraine, or how becoming a refugee affects their economic and subjective wellbeing. This is largely due to the recent nature of this refugee wave, and the related dearth of data. This paper seeks to contribute to closing these gaps.

In the next Section, we discuss the data and methodology underlying our analysis. This is followed by a presentation of our results in Sections 3. The final Section offers some concluding remarks.

2 Data

The data used in our analysis is drawn from two sources. First, we surveyed over 400 Ukrainian refugees in Cracow, Poland, by means of an online questionnaire in November/December 2023.⁵ The participants were recruited on

¹ We denote as Ukrainians anyone who is a citizen of Ukraine, regardless of their ethnicity.

² See Ukraine Refugee Situation, UNHCR (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>, accessed April 2024). The 4.7 million does not include Ukrainians reported to be in Russia and Belarus, who may have been forcibly moved there in the course of the occupation. In addition, there are 3.7 million refugees who are internally displaced in Ukraine.

³ We consider as refugee anyone who has fled their home because of (a threat of) physical harm or persecution. In some studies, a distinction is made between asylum seekers and refugees: the former applied for protection but the outcome of that application is pending, while the latter had their claim recognized. We refer to both groups collectively as refugees. This is in line with the current approach in Europe to Ukrainians fleeing the conflict: they are given (temporary) protection immediately, without needing formal verification of their status.

⁴ Ukraine Refugee Situation, UNHCR (cited above).

⁵ The participants were recruited to take part in a training program supported by the project entitled “Determinants of labor-market performance and well-being of high-skilled Ukrainian refugees in Poland” (KRAUKLAB), funded by the Foundation

social media (Facebook, Instagram, X, and Telegram). As such, the sample is not necessarily representative of the Ukrainian refugee population in Poland or of the Ukrainian population overall. We discuss below to what extent our respondents differ from their counterparts back in Ukraine. Second, we commissioned a number of questions to be included in the December 2023 wave of the survey administered by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS). The KIIS Omnibus is a nationally representative survey of the Ukrainian population (living in the parts of Ukraine under the control of the Ukrainian government at the time of the survey). The KIIS sample size is approximately 2000.

These two surveys were combined, resulting in a merged dataset of over 2,400 observations. Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics, separately for the Ukrainian and Polish subsamples. After dropping the missing observations, we end up with 1980 and 334 respondents in the Ukrainian and Polish sub-samples, respectively. The Kruskal–Wallis test⁶ indicates that the median values are not the same in the Ukrainian and Polish samples for many variables. In particular, respondents in Poland are more likely to be a female (90.7% vs 56.0%) and younger (the average age of 38.1 vs 53.1 years), live in cities with more than 500 thousand (49.4% vs 29.3%), visited the EU before 24/02/2022 as a tourist (72.2% vs 32.4%), have higher education (82.3% vs 43.2%), have occupation of a skilled professional (40.4% vs 19.3%) or be unemployed (23.4% vs 2.9%). They are less likely to have graduated from a technical school (3.3% vs 34.5%), be a retiree (0.3% vs 37.2%), and to have experienced injury or death of a close contact (12.6% vs 22.4%) or a minor inconvenience (58.4% vs 69.1%) after the full-scale Russian invasion. For the outcome variables that we are interested in, both sub-samples demonstrate similar level of happiness (64.4% and 62.6%) and trust (29.0% and 28.6%), while the respondents in Poland are more likely to self-report good health (51.2% vs 31.2%). Some of these differences may be driven by the constraints that the refugees face: for example, the high share of women reflects the existing restrictions on the emigration of Ukrainian males imposed by the Ukrainian government. Others reflect patterns of self-selection into becoming a refugee in Poland. We discuss these in the next section.

3 Refugees vs Stayers and the Role of Violence

We use the merged dataset to estimate linear probability models of self-selection into being a refugee (that is, being in the Polish subsample), and of the determinants of happiness, generalized trust and self-assessed health.⁷ The results of the linear probability models are reported in Table 2. First, we consider the differences between the Ukrainian and Polish subsamples, reported in column (4). This can reveal any self-selection into becoming a refugee, and at the same time also show whether the respondents in Poland differ substantially from Ukrainians who did not leave their country.⁸ As was already apparent based on the descriptive statistics, the refugees are younger, more likely to be female, and come mainly from urban areas. They are more educated and less likely to be low-skilled workers than stayers⁹, and more likely to have visited the EU before the full-scale invasion. A greater proportion of the refugees are students or unemployed.¹⁰ Refugees report to be less economically well-off: fewer of them can afford luxuries, or even more than the basic necessities.

Somewhat surprisingly, at least at first, having experienced direct adverse effects of the war during or before the full-scale invasion does not seem to be a motivating factor for moving to Poland. This suggests that the refugees flee because of the threat of violence, not because of having experienced it. Alternatively, having suffered from adverse implications of the conflict may impose financial, physical (health or safety related) or psychological constraints on the ability of the affected persons to move. The latter explanation would be consistent with the observation that those who moved to Poland are significantly less likely to have experienced death or injury or a minor inconvenience, and marginally less likely to have experienced a major inconvenience.

Turning now to the determinants of happiness, health and trust, the results suggest that the Ukrainian refugees in Poland are significantly less happy: this could be due to separation from their family and friends, hardship due to

for Polish Science (FNP) (see <https://www.fnp.org.pl/en/trzeci-konkurs-w-programie-dla-ukrainy-rozstrzygniety-znamy-zwycieskie-projekty/>), and the LEM, Université de Lille. The effects of the training sessions are not analyzed in this paper.

⁶ A more standard one-way ANOVA test could not be used because of unequal variances in many instances.

⁷ The questions were “Do you consider yourself a happy person?”, “Would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”, and “How would you assess your current health compared to people of your age?” (translated into Ukrainian), with a five-point scale for answers. We recoded them so that those answering yes or rather yes (good or rather good for health) were given the value of 1, with 0 being assigned for the remaining responses. ‘Refuse to answer’ and ‘Don’t know’ responses were dropped.

⁸ Given the limited information available on Ukrainian refugees in Poland, we are unable to ascertain to what extent our subsample of respondents is representative for the Ukrainian refugee population in Poland.

⁹ However, the greater share of educated and high-skilled individuals may be also due to the training program offered to them, which was more relevant to white-collar skilled workers.

¹⁰ Again, this could be due to the training session being of more use to such individuals.

living in a foreign country, or the result of traumatic experiences before and during their escape from Ukraine. On the other hand, their generalized trust and health are similar to those observed in the Ukrainian sample. The findings for happiness and health contrast with the picture conveyed by the descriptive statistics, which suggest similar happiness level and better health. The happiness penalty incurred by the refugees and their similar levels of health only become apparent when we control for individual characteristics (Hendriks, 2015, reports a similar finding). Thus, the refugees report lower happiness and worse health than their relatively favorable socio-economic characteristics (such as younger age and higher education) would suggest. Interestingly, the happiness gap is moderated for those who have visited the EU, and especially for those who worked there before the full-scale invasion.

An issue of particular importance in this context is the effects of violence on socio-economic outcomes of Ukrainians. Surprisingly, the most tragic events such as injuries or death of close contacts do not seem to be associated with worse happiness, health or trust. However, a major inconvenience, such as a life-threatening lack of food, is associated with 6.4 percentage-point lower probability of being happy and 6.0 percentage-point lower probability of good health. A minor inconvenience (e.g. blackouts) lowers the probability of reporting being happy by 4 percentage points, and the probability of trusting strangers by 4.9 percentage points. Experiencing violence before the 2022 full-scale aggression is likewise associated with additional 6.1 percentage-point lower probability of being happy. Thus, having experienced direct adverse repercussion of the conflict has significant and lasting negative impact on subjective wellbeing, health, and trust.

Among the remaining determinants, we see that higher education is associated with higher happiness and generalized trust (the latter is also increased for skilled workers). Being economically well off, not surprisingly, translates into higher happiness, trust and health alike. In this respect, the Ukrainians (refugees and stayers) appear similar to survey respondents in other countries.

4 Conclusions

The Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022 caused an unprecedented refugee inflow to European countries and beyond. So far, little is known about who the refugees are, what factors compelled them to leave their homes, and how they fare in the host countries. This paper is one of the first attempts to fill these gaps in our knowledge. To this effect, surveyed over 400 Ukrainians living in and around Cracow, Poland. In this paper, we look at the factors that compelled them to leave their country, and especially the impact of violence and other adverse effects of the conflict on their decision to flee. Furthermore, we consider their overall wellbeing (happiness), self-declared health and generalized trust and compare them to a representative sample of Ukrainians back in Ukraine.

The results of our analysis suggest that the refugees are less likely to have experienced violence and other adverse repercussions of the conflict than their compatriots who have stayed in Ukraine. Thus, the refugees leave preemptively, to avoid adverse occurrences, and not only after having been affected by the war. Furthermore, rather than enjoy an improvement in their material and subjective wellbeing, refugees in fact pay a significant price for leaving. The cost of leaving is both material and non-tangible: Ukrainians in Poland are less economically well-off than their counterparts back in Ukraine, and they report significantly lower levels of happiness too.

While the direct traumatic experiences of conflict and violence do not correlate with being a refugee, such adverse repercussions of the war have an important negative impact on the happiness and, to a lesser extent, generalized trust and health of refugees and stayers alike. The costs of the conflict thus go beyond the human and material losses. By lowering the wellbeing of refugees, these costs even extend to those who escaped from their country to the safety of European countries.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of variables in Ukrainian and Polish samples

	UKR mean (sd)	PL mean (sd)		UKR mean (sd)	PL mean (sd)
Happy or rather happy	0.626 (0.484)	0.644 (0.480)	Employee without higher education	0.072 (0.258)	0.045 (0.207)
Trust or rather trust others	0.286 (0.452)	0.29 (0.455)	Professional with higher education	0.193 (0.395)	0.404 (0.491)
Health good or very good	0.312 (0.464)	0.512 (0.501)	Self-employed	0.041 (0.198)	0.09 (0.286)
Female	0.56 (0.497)	0.907 (0.291)	Entrepreneur	0.06 (0.237)	0.039 (0.194)
Age, years	53.126 (15.833)	38.168 (9.372)	Househusband/wife	0.076 (0.265)	0.018 (0.133)
Small city up to 20K	0.079 (0.269)	0.045 (0.207)	Retiree	0.372 (0.484)	0.003 (0.055)
Medium city 20-49K	0.078 (0.269)	0.072 (0.259)	Student	0.014 (0.116)	0.063 (0.243)
City 50-99K	0.065 (0.246)	0.078 (0.268)	Unemployed	0.029 (0.167)	0.234 (0.424)
Big city 100-499K	0.189 (0.392)	0.231 (0.422)	Enough money just for food	0.361 (0.480)	0.41 (0.493)
Very big city 500K+	0.293 (0.455)	0.494 (0.501)	Enough money for food and clothing	0.387 (0.487)	0.362 (0.481)
Tourist in EU before 24.02.22	0.324 (0.468)	0.722 (0.449)	Can afford some expensive things	0.174 (0.379)	0.186 (0.389)
Business trip in EU before 24.02.22	0.072 (0.259)	0.105 (0.307)	Can afford anything	0.029 (0.167)	0.012 (0.109)
Worked in EU before 24.02.22	0.087 (0.282)	0.078 (0.268)	Property damage after 24.02.2022	0.222 (0.416)	0.234 (0.424)
Vocational school	0.059 (0.236)	0.027 (0.162)	Injuries after after 24.02.2022	0.224 (0.417)	0.126 (0.332)
Technical school	0.345 (0.476)	0.033 (0.179)	Major inconvenience after 24.02.2022	0.268 (0.443)	0.222 (0.416)
Incomplete higher education	0.051 (0.220)	0.081 (0.273)	Minor inconvenience after 24.02.2022	0.691 (0.462)	0.584 (0.494)
Higher education	0.432 (0.495)	0.823 (0.382)	Prior violence before 24.02.2022	0.166 (0.372)	0.111 (0.314)

Table 2. Results from linear probability models

	(1) Happy	(2) Trust	(3) Health	(4) Poland
Polish subsample	-0.070** (0.035)	-0.0170 (0.034)	0.0460 (0.035)	
Female	0.038* (0.023)	0.0000 (0.022)	0.0040 (0.021)	0.160*** (0.013)
Age, years	0.0000 (0.001)	0.002** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.001)
Small city up to 20K	-0.0570 (0.043)	-0.0300 (0.038)	0.0060 (0.037)	0.0150 (0.021)
Medium city 20-49K	0.0370 (0.039)	-0.0120 (0.039)	0.0060 (0.036)	0.046** (0.022)
City 50-99K	0.0300 (0.043)	0.0030 (0.042)	0.0430 (0.040)	0.090*** (0.025)
Big city 100-499K	-0.0160 (0.031)	-0.0150 (0.029)	0.0290 (0.028)	0.043** (0.017)
Very big city 500K+	-0.0020 (0.028)	-0.0100 (0.027)	0.0420 (0.026)	0.072*** (0.015)
Tourist in EU before 24.02.22	0.040* (0.023)	0.0350 (0.022)	0.0170 (0.023)	0.108*** (0.014)
Business trip in EU before 24.02.22	-0.0310 (0.037)	0.0240 (0.038)	0.0580 (0.038)	0.0210 (0.026)
Worked in EU before 24.02.22	0.082** (0.034)	-0.0260 (0.033)	0.0330 (0.035)	0.041* (0.021)
Vocational school	0.0380 (0.055)	0.0230 (0.046)	-0.0100 (0.046)	0.057** (0.025)
Technical school	0.067* (0.038)	0.077** (0.031)	-0.0200 (0.031)	-0.036** (0.014)
Incomplete higher education	0.121** (0.054)	0.0380 (0.047)	0.0320 (0.053)	0.0260 (0.034)
Higher education	0.116*** (0.039)	0.079** (0.033)	0.078** (0.033)	0.110*** (0.017)
Employee without higher education	0.0330 (0.047)	0.0490 (0.045)	0.094** (0.047)	-0.076*** (0.027)
Professional with higher education	0.0350 (0.037)	0.093*** (0.035)	-0.0270 (0.037)	-0.0030 (0.024)
Self-employed	0.0610 (0.050)	0.100** (0.051)	-0.0640 (0.052)	0.072* (0.040)
Entrepreneur	0.0340 (0.048)	0.0090 (0.048)	0.0370 (0.052)	-0.090*** (0.030)
Househusband/wife	-0.0300 (0.049)	-0.0360 (0.042)	-0.076* (0.044)	-0.136*** (0.023)
Retiree	-0.0510 (0.039)	0.0070 (0.036)	-0.095*** (0.036)	-0.048*** (0.018)
Student	0.1140 (0.072)	0.1190 (0.075)	0.0860 (0.074)	0.134** (0.067)
Unemployed	-0.094* (0.055)	-0.0020 (0.046)	-0.0300 (0.050)	0.259*** (0.040)

	(1) Happy	(2) Trust	(3) Health	(4) Poland
Enough money	0.201***	0.0580	0.0300	0.0090
just for food	(0.050)	(0.042)	(0.033)	(0.024)
Enough money	0.262***	0.0660	0.117***	-0.061**
for food and clothing	(0.052)	(0.043)	(0.036)	(0.026)
Can afford some	0.371***	0.126***	0.253***	-0.085***
expensive things	(0.055)	(0.048)	(0.042)	(0.029)
Can afford anything	0.431***	0.0210	0.227***	-0.087**
	(0.071)	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.043)
Property damage	0.0110	0.0050	0.0160	0.0140
after 24.02.2022	(0.025)	(0.024)	(0.023)	(0.015)
Injuries after	0.0050	0.043*	-0.0200	-0.031**
after 24.02.2022	(0.025)	(0.024)	(0.023)	(0.013)
Major inconvenience	-0.064**	0.0100	-0.060***	-0.027*
after 24.02.2022	(0.025)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.014)
Minor inconvenience	-0.040*	-0.049**	0.0220	-0.073***
after 24.02.2022	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.014)
Prior violence	-0.061**	0.0080	-0.0380	-0.0240
before 24.02.22	(0.028)	(0.026)	(0.025)	(0.015)
Constant	0.323***	0.0370	0.435***	0.330***
	(0.081)	(0.072)	(0.069)	(0.041)
Observations	2,256	2,300	2,292	2,313
Adjusted R-squared	0.0680	0.0150	0.1480	0.3590

Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. The base category includes living in settlements with less than 20 thousand people, being a manual worker, having high school education or less, not having enough money for food.

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