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"Let the State Decide It All for Me": The Role of Migration and Integration Policy in the Decision-Making of Ukrainian Refugee Women in Germany

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Abstract
While German migration policies aim to provide temporary protection and integrate Ukrainian refugees into German society as early as possible, the procedures and ideas of integration might be perceived differently by the beneficiaries. The feeling of "permanent temporariness" has been persistent among Ukrainians since March 2022. In this situation, some of the refugees renounce their agency and put responsibility on decision-making onto the state, while others oppose the idea of "being integrated" since they see their time in Germany as temporary, and their future in Ukraine as soon as the security situation allows them to return.
Drawing on the experiences of single Ukrainian women who received protection in Germany, the paper presents an anthropological perspective on person–state interactions in the context of refugees' future-planning. How do German policies for supporting Ukrainian refugees impact their "stay or return" decision-making? Do the policies address their needs now and allow them to make investments for the future, or, on the contrary, contribute to their decision to return to Ukraine, which appears to be "simpler" and "more predictable"? How does the experience of going through bureaucratic procedures contribute to the sense of having agency and being capable of shaping their today and tomorrow? To answer these questions, I am going to present the reasonings and emotions concerning bureaucratic procedures that are closely intertwined with the planning of their future by Ukrainian refugees in Germany.

Keywords Ukrainian refugees · Integration · Bureaucracy · Agency · Temporariness

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Introduction

Arriving in Berlin from Ukraine in late March 2022, I, similarly to the majority of people fleeing my country, had to go through numerous bureaucratic procedures to obtain temporary protection status and settle down in Germany. However, my experience of this bureaucratic quest was quite reasonable as I was already enrolled within the academia. From my very first days in Germany, I had numerous encounters with other people fleeing Ukraine, ending up mostly in discussions about the bureaucratic complexities. After one such talk during a Ukrainian-themed book launch in July 2022, I came up with the idea that the reasoning the refugees use to justify their return or non-return to Ukraine, if conceptualized, could be an important addition to the existing scholarship on the experiences of forced migration. This is how I started my research project, aiming to broaden the understanding of agency and living in a state of "permanent temporariness" using the specific case of Ukrainian women receiving temporary protection in Germany.

As Schewel points out, migration studies suffer from a mobility bias, meaning that research mostly focuses on the migration drivers and desires instead of exploring what makes migrants "immobile" (Schewel, 2020). Following up Massey's (1993) point on taking into consideration the structural forces that shape migration and staying on in the host country, I centered my research project around the idea that the bureaucratic system and German approach to "integration" of Ukrainian migrants might be a crucial factor that hinders (or, sometimes, facilitates) their aspirations to staying in the country or return to Ukraine. As argued by Carlbaum (2021), encounters with bureaucracy can be frustrating for migrants due to the bewildering regulations, the multiple actors involved, and long waits which are perceived as wasting their time. In this paper, I am going to look inside the reasonings and emotions concerning bureaucratic procedures that are closely intertwined with the planning of their futures by Ukrainian refugees in Germany.

On 4 March 2022, the Council of the European Union enacted, by means of the Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382, the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD),[1] for those fleeing Ukraine and arriving in the EU from 24 February 2022 onwards. According to the document, the beneficiaries of temporary protection in EU member states have a wide list of rights: a residence permit for the entire duration of the protection, access to employment, housing, education, social welfare and medical care, as well as the right to move freely in EU countries. Besides that, Ukrainians are able to return home for personal reasons, and, it is assumed, are able to evaluate the security situation in the country themselves in order to decide on their further plans. Such an idea was widely supported by the EU officials.[2]

[1] Full text of the document available here: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32022H0554

[2] See, for instance, the statement by EU Internal Affairs Commissionner Ylva Johansson: https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/eu-commissioner-ylva-johansson-temporary-protection-directive-for-ukrainians-will-be-active-until-march-2024/

A couple of months after the temporary protection was implemented as a procedure, the discussion refocused on transitioning from crisis response to sustainable longer-term solutions. In Germany, one of the mechanisms[3] discussed was a switch to the concept of (re)integration of people receiving temporary protection. However, as my research has shown, such a change in approach might cause ambiguous reactions from the refugees themselves.

Overall, as at April 2023, at least 1,064,000 refugees from Ukraine have arrived in Germany, according to the German Central Service Agency, with the majority arriving in March and April 2022. Out of that number, 831,521 have already been granted a residency permit. This number, however, does not indicate the exact number of Ukrainian refugees in Germany: some might have already returned to Ukraine or moved to third countries, and some might not have received temporary protection status yet.

This case is unique within the established scholarship on migration and refugee studies. For decades, anthropological explorations of living through space and time while being a refugee focused on: experiences of awaiting the decision (Andersson, 2014; Hainmueller et al., 2016; Hyndman & Giles, 2011; Schouw Iversen, 2022), immigrant detention and encampment (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Hayes, 2018; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012; Mountz, 2011; Turnbull, 2016), and temporality as opposed to stability (El-Shaarawi, 2015; El-Shaarawi, 2021; Griffiths, 2013; Jacobsen, 2022), as well as on "temporal governance" of decision-making (Griffiths, 2017; Reneman & Stronks, 2021). As El-Shaarawi points out, "…[r]efugees are often understood as people in between, both in terms of their legal status and in terms of what they denote as a category" (El-Shaarawi, 2015). Thus, their experiences may be characterized by limbo, where people are caught between places and times, and experience long-term uncertainty. However, the situation when refugees from Ukraine are granted a residence permit and basic services immediately adds another dimension to the concept of temporality and agency, highlighting the precarity of being "temporarily" protected, the uncertainty about the duration of this temporality, and their enforced integration into the communities in the hosting countries. Such a situation can be defined as a new "migration regime" (according to Schapendonk et al. (2020)), since the state sees migrants from Ukraine rather as highly skilled workers with good prospects of remaining and being integrated.

Drawing on the experiences of single Ukrainian women who received protection in Germany, I am going to explore research question with manifold aspects: *How do German policies for supporting Ukrainian refugees impact their stay or return decision-making*? Do the policies address their needs now, and allow them to make investments for the future, or, on the contrary, contribute to their decision to return to Ukraine, which appears to them to be "simpler" and "more predictable"? How does the experience of going through bureaucratic procedures contribute to their sense of having agency and of being capable of shaping their own today and tomorrow? To answer these questions, I am going to present an anthropological perspective on

[3] Source: https://www.kas.de/en/monitor/detail/-/content/nur-ein-voruebergehender-schutz-fuer-vertriebene

person–state interactions and highlight the subjective experiences of interacting with the system.

Ukrainian Refugees: The Specific Case for German Migration Policies

Unlike the approach of granting residence based on the assessment of individual cases and taking into account the "safety" status of a particular region, refugees from Ukraine were granted protection regardless of the intersection of the geography of their residency in their home country and the time when they left. However, although this was valid for refugees arriving in 2022 and early 2023, further developments in procedures and status remain unclear for now.

According to the research[4] presented by the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Homeland, Ukrainian refugees were choosing Germany as a destination because of existing family, social or working connections, as well as because of knowing about the social support and working opportunities in the country. Upon arrival, people fleeing Ukraine were able to stay without a visa for up to 90 days and, if intending to remain longer, had to apply for residence status (Aufenthaltstitel) and go through several stages of bureaucracy.

Initially, Ukrainian citizens receiving immediate protection in Germany were eligible to receive benefits under the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act (AsylbLG) and could apply to receive a monthly allowance and coverage of basic needs (accommodation, furniture, clothing). However, from June 1st 2022, refugees from Ukraine started receiving their assistance and social benefits under the Social Code (SGB II)—the tax-financed unemployment benefit system for jobseekers. Thus, the adult Ukrainians who are able to work and possess residence status in Germany received the same rights and access to the job market as other residents of the country. Those whose ability to work is limited, or receiving an old-age pension, remained on the welfare office support.

This decision challenged the overall social benefits system in Germany. As Ratzmann has shown in detail in her work, the German system of distributing social benefits was widely based on the idea of "deservedness" and thus could potentially be subject to discriminatory practices (Ratzmann, 2021; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021). This was not the case for Ukrainian refugees: The fact of leaving their country and gaining temporary protection in Germany was already a *sufficient criterion* to receive the benefits. Ukrainians, however, had a limited time—until 31st of August 2022—in which to apply for the benefits.

Job centers were supposed to be the single coordination point for refugees receiving social benefits, coordinating their social, health, educational, and other needs, including housing reimbursement for those accommodated in private or social

[4] Intermediate results presented here: http://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/veroeffentlichungen/nachrichten/2022/umfrage-ukraine-fluechtlinge.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2

housing. Since the language barrier prevented many Ukrainians from entering the job market (90% of refugees did not know German or only knew the basics[5]), job centers were also supposed to assist Ukrainian refugees with state-subsidized language integration courses with a mandatory integration module.

Overall, one cannot deny that the immediate need to provide social benefits for thousands of Ukrainian refugees was a tangible challenge for the social security system and the pre-existing bureaucratic procedures. Since Weber defined bureaucracy as a mechanism of state functioning and described it as a highly structured, formalized, and also an impersonal organization, the stability and rigidness of this system were perceived as a feature (Weber, 2009). The German bureaucracy itself, as Wegrich (2021) notes, can be characterized as a "slow moving turtle" that avoids big mistakes in the implementation of public sector reforms, relying instead on incremental steps within a broadly stable system. In the multi-level governance approach, however, reforms may proceed at different paces at different levels, with adjustments at the federal level being the most rigid, with little motivation to change the adverse system. As Ratzmann pointed out, German job centers, despite being the key institution to support one of the neediest population groups, are also a good example of "faceless" bureaucracy (Ratzmann, 2021). As numerous research have shown, beneficiaries often reported feeling misunderstood or even experiencing discrimination (Brussig et al., 2017; Holzinger, 2020; Ratzmann, 2022). However, such experiences are perhaps the result street level bureaucrats being constrained by the routinised workflow and institutional setting itself (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; Lipsky, 1980). This is why, as Leutloff-Grandits (2019) points out, a huge number of refugees experience the administrative procedures as threatening and react with feelings of fear, withdrawal, and depression.

However, the recent challenges, especially the 2015 refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, have already impacted the system by changing patterns of policy-making and multi-level governance (Kuhlmann & Franzke, 2022), and significantly challenging the workflow of the public sector employees (Seinsche et al., 2023). Moreover, the tangible increase in jobseekers was predicted in the aftermath of the pandemic (Bauer et al., 2023). On this occasion, the mass influx of Ukrainian refugees (according to the job center data, there are currently *498,000* Ukrainians jobseekers registered in Germany) and the need to address their needs immediately overlapped with an already existing crisis in the overloaded system that has shown the importance of flexibility and the need for manifold adjustments to the workflow.

The situation, however, may vary in different regions and cities, depending on the availability of resources provided by state agencies and municipal governments, and on non-governmental organizations who might have made the process of going through the bureaucratic process smoother. Thus, this paper will focus specifically on the human-system relations in the specific case of Ukrainian female refugees in Berlin.

[5] Source: the research presented by the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Homeland, http://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/veroeffentlichungen/nachrichten/2022/umfrage-ukraine-fluechtlinge.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2

Key Concept: Temporality

During recent decades, the temporary dimension of migration became a wide focus in refugee studies, since time can be also seen as a way power operates (Cwerner, 2001; Edelstein et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2021; Reneman & Stronks, 2021). Anthropologist Melanie Griffiths (2013, 2017) has introduced the concept of "temporal governance," describing it as a governmental strategy to discipline and control migrants by means of time, put into action through processes such as the asylum procedure. The means of control thus vary from qualification periods and limits to the length of detention to terms for long-term and permanent residence. Andersson (2014), drawing on the ideas of Bourdieu (2000), also highlights waiting as not a by-product but a tactic to control refugees' time and shaping their futures.

However, as Griffiths points out, time is a rather relative category in migration governance, and multiple "times" (lawful time, interrupted time, temporal restriction) can have different implications for migrants (Griffiths, 2017). Spada expands on this idea, arguing that time, used as a tool to manage contemporary migratory flows, can work differently in terms of time spent, time allowed, and time available, given the different actors involved in determining its rhythm (Spada, 2023). Policy-related temporalities affect the life experiences of the persons by hindering their ability to structure their time and plan the future for the individuals and their families. The decisions relating to the application status are frequently the turning point for the individual timescapes, as stated by Leutloff-Grandits (2019). On this occasion, time might be perceived by the one awaiting a decision as either linear or circular (as, for instance, in the case of repeated applications for a residence permit), having ruptures and return points, running fast or slow, or even put on hold (Reneman & Stronks, 2021). Such a disturbed sense of time, as Ramsey points out, can accompany refugees and displaced people long after they have obtained legal protection status, since they have experienced the feeling of being removed from the temporal rhythms of ordinary life (Ramsay, 2017).

The arrival situation of Ukrainian migrants broadens the concept of temporal governance with a need to re-conceptualize the idea of "temporality." Since the TPD was activated for the first time for the duration of two years, and then extended till March 2025, temporally protected Ukrainians appear in a liminal position with no clear vision of their future. However, unlike the cases of other refugees, Ukrainian refugees entered this state without the experience of encampment, which has been a key point of exploring temporal governance in refugee studies. Most of the recent research on German context, focusing primarily on the experiences of Syrian refugees who were granted asylum and who have experienced the comparable bureaucratic difficulties to that Ukrainians did and are experiencing, has debated on the specifics of toleration status and the suspension of deportation, as well as the emotional dimensions of living through such disrupted temporalities, oscillating between hope, fear, and disillusionment (Drangsland, 2020; Hartonen et al., 2022; Nagel & Reeger, 2021; Schütze, 2022; Schwarz, 2016; Tize, 2021). The idea of normalization of uncertainty (Griffiths, 2013) can be extrapolated to the broader population of migrants who also live in the liminal state of "permanent temporariness"

not knowing when and how their precarious status will change. However, in the situation of Ukrainians, there is a certain shift in the level of power governing their precarity: Instead of migration services assessing cases and making decisions according to established procedures, the situation for Ukrainians depends on the EU-level decision of potential prolongation of TPD and the outcome of the ongoing war. Herein, the category of waiting remains a crucial one for structuring individual timescapes (Pitzalis, 2023), but, instead of being applied to the procedures, it applies to ontological waiting for the war to end, or acceptance that return is not possible in a mid- or long-time perspective. Waiting, however, should not be seen as a passive state when one exercises power over another (Turnbull, 2016), but rather as an active practice that involves reflection and resilience (Conlon, 2011), or even a form of resistance (Scott, 1990).

Research on temporariness in refugee studies traditionally looks into the modalities of humanitarian reception, and juxtapose integration prospective to uncertainty of being on hold or having a temporal status (Carlbaum, 2021; Leutloff-Grandits, 2019; Mezzadra, 2022; Turnbull, 2016). But, in the case of those fleeing Ukraine, the idea of integration does not seem to be the most desired outcome of their stay. According to a nationwide survey in November 2022, the wish to stay in Germany permanently was expressed by only 26% of Ukrainian refugees, while others remain uncertain about their plans or desire to return to Ukraine as soon as the security situation allows (Brücker et al., 2022).

Speaking about different speeds of procedures and assessment of claims, Leutloff-Grandits (2019) pointed out that refugees might move towards "integration" at a different speed, and thus live in different time-spaces. The same interpretation might be applied to the case of Ukrainian refugees: While some are stuck in a limbo of "temporariness" of being protected and await their return, others might move towards integration, stepping on a bureaucracy-implied track. The next part of the paper will highlight the multiplicity of such experiences that I gathered through my fieldwork in Berlin, presented through three distinctive personal stories of Ukrainian refugee women.

Research Methodology

To answer the research questions and unveil the multiplicity of experiences of the interactions between Ukrainian refugees and the state system aimed to support them, I used a qualitative approach. Besides policy analysis of the national-level, regional-level, and municipal-level decisions of German authorities towards supporting displaced people from Ukraine, I opted for two main research methods: participatory observation and in-depths interviews with Ukrainian refugees.

Coming from a position of an "insider" in the field, and being a refugee myself, I had numerous and frequent encounters with other Ukrainian refugees in the early stages of our arrival. These happened mostly on public transport, and during specific Ukrainian-themed events. The insights from such encounters were put into ethnographic fieldnotes, in the form of both direct quotes and generalized notes of the stories shared by accidental informants. My reflections on the emotions the informants

put into the stories were used as a tool to point out those details of interacting with the system that acquired for them the most substantial subjective meaning.

The research was conducted from the perspective of a positioned researcher. On the one hand, this facilitated access to the field and the establishment of rapport with informants on the basis of shared experience. On the other hand, such positionality may also have affected the researcher's sense of empathy and led to blind spots in the research, which can be a limitation of current research. The need to separate personal and professional lives while conducting fieldwork, as Howlett and Lazarenko acknowledged, made the research described participatory in nature (Howlett & Lazarenko, 2023).

The main research method was in-depth interviews with Ukrainian *single* women who came from Ukraine to Berlin and got their registration within Berlin federal land. By women, I understand those persons who identify as so and have female sex stated in their passports. By single, those who arrived in Germany without kids and/or dependent persons, and have not been in a state of marriage or long-term partnership in Ukraine. Limiting the sample like this, I attempt to focus on different aspects of individual decision-making without being attached to the educational/social security system, and free from emotions associated with being in charge of others. I also mitigate the factor of transnational ties and perspectives of family reunions which might impact significantly on return aspirations.

This population seems overlooked in refugee studies since, traditionally, men are the "pathfinders" for their families, while female refugees are either viewed in the context of family relations, or within the studies of exploitation, human trafficking and gender-based violence—subjects rather than active decision-makers. While this trend is changing as more research on the issue emerges (Dlaske & Schilling, 2023; Hartmann & Steinmann, 2021; Jünemann et al., 2021; Seethaler, 2019; Tuzi, 2020), the demography of the Ukrainian refugee population opens a new gate to delve deeper into the topic. From the Ministry of Interior report of in April 2022[6] 84% of those arriving in Germany from Ukraine identified as women, since men were prohibited from leaving Ukraine according to the martial law. Seventeen percent of them have arrived on their own, and 8% arrived with friends or acquaintances (but not with family members). Those arriving as single mostly fall into the age category of 18–29 and 50+ (probably those who came to Germany to stay with grown-up children). However, this data is not segregated by gender, so the population fitting the selected criteria remains unclear.

I decided to focus on this particular category of refugees drawing upon the idea that they might be those who question their return aspirations the most, and whose cases can highlight how the intersections between bureaucracy and emotional state may impact their long-term decisions about the future. I also focus my research on Berlin, since the provision of services for Ukrainian refugees may vary from federal state to federal state, and thus complicate the findings by adding another comparative dimension.

[6] Source: https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/veroeffentlichungen/nachrichten/2022/umfrage-ukraine-fluechtlinge.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2

Participant observation comprised my personal interactions with about 40 Ukrainian women coming from different parts of Ukraine and having different demographic characteristics. Their stories and experiences were collected in the form of fieldnotes, containing direct quotes and generalizations. Insights from the field then formed a basis for formulating the research questions and designing the guidelines for the in-depths interviews. In total, 12 Ukrainian refugee women became my interview partners: aged from 21 to 62, having different education levels, and coming from different urban areas of Ukraine. Two of them had experience of being doubly displaced after leaving their homes in 2014. The interviews, conducted in Ukrainian except for one (when the informant preferred to speak Russian as she "only started to speak Ukrainian"), took place in a period from November 2022 to January 2023. The average duration of an interview was 1 h and 10 min, with the shortest being 38 min and the longest lasting for 3 h. Eight of 12 interviews were recorded and fully transcribed; the remaining were not recorded at the personal preference of the participants, with findings collected as fieldnotes.

The interviews were loosely structured around the following themes: reasoning for choosing Berlin as their destination city; obtaining the temporary protection status; experiences of receiving social benefits; career and educational opportunities (including attending the integrational courses); and future aspirations. This allowed my interview partners to be in charge of their own story flows and to reveal otherwise overlooked themes and reasonings. Concerned about the vulnerability of my informants, I avoided direct questions about them fleeing from Ukraine and coming to Germany at the beginning of the full-scale war. The informants also were informed about their right to withdraw from the interview at any moment and, as follow, have provided their consent for the data proceeding in a written form according to the requirements of the institution that was a base for the research.

The data have been coded and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), focusing on what their stories tell about the lived experience of single refugee women in Berlin. The three stories presented in the next section of the paper were chosen as exemplary because they encompassed three common themes related to bureaucracy: following the procedures offered by the state, questioning the procedures, and finding one's own agency in resisting the bureaucratic path (each of which has its own code in the analytical process). To ensure confidentiality and to meet the ethical requirements, empirical data was encoded and abstracted, and the participants' names and their personal details were altered.

Findings

Story 1: Let the State Decide It All for Me

Nadia, 27, a creative worker from Kyiv, arrived in Berlin in mid-March 2022 after spending a couple of weeks in and around the almost-besieged city. She recalls the state of emotional numbness she had at the beginning of the full-scale war: while being visibly calm, she was feeling disoriented and unable to make any specific decision. Her mother insisted on her coming from Kyiv to her home village, where

Nadia stayed for a couple of weeks "just observing what is going on around." After losing her job in Ukraine and being persuaded by her mother, Nadia went to Berlin, where some of her friends have already settled—however, stating that this decision "was not her choice":

> *I ended up in Berlin because all my close friends also headed here. Some friends had connections here, and I just followed… it is not typical of me, but then I felt so helpless I just followed them. But it was not my choice. And I do not choose anything now. What happens just happens, I follow the flow…*

Nadia adds that on her route, she had the strong feeling that her previous life was over, and she had no idea what her future steps could be, just "going from nothing to nothing." Such loss of agency as a result of trauma-driven change is typical for forced migrants, as reported by scholars (Coddington et al., 2012; Conlon, 2011; Thompson, 2017). However, the previous scholarship on forced migrants from Donbas in Ukraine in 2014 demonstrated the opposite tendency: displaced people actively opposed being called "displaced" and stated that leaving their hometowns was their conscious decision, also intersecting with showing their loyalty to Ukraine (Lazarenko, 2020).

As Schewel points out, both staying and migrating in difficult life circumstances require agency and reflection, as it is a conscious choice that is renegotiated and repeated throughout the life course (Schewel, 2020). On this occasion, the position demonstrated by Nadia, as well as some others informants of my research, shows an interesting pattern of deliberate renouncement of their own agency in critical circumstances, which also becomes for them a form of resistance—even though in a passive form (Scott, 1990). Some of the interviewees even tended to use a particular wording for describing their stay in Berlin: a passive construction which can be translated as "I ended up in Berlin." This is how Nadia recalls her feelings after arriving in Berlin and applying for social benefits, with the help of her friends:

> *I can't decide anything anymore. My decision-making ability collapsed the same moment my mother put me into that car passing through our village and I ended up in Berlin. Let the state decide it all for me now, I can't make decisions anymore.*

However, some of the procedures she needed to follow made her feeling "depersonalized" because of the need to expose all the personal information while being treated very formally, "like they really don't give a damn about you." Such treatment also made her feel insecure and anxious about the procedure of receiving benefits. For some months, between being enrolled in the job center system and starting her integration courses, Nadia also felt anxious "for just receiving the money and doing nothing." So, the start of the course was, for her, a way to occupy herself with some activity—however, she does not report any potential plans for what will happen after the course. Such a position resonates well with what Carlbaum (2021) calls "one step at a time" strategy, explaining how refugees are focusing on the current issues to mitigate their fears and anxiety about their unclear future occupied with bureaucratic thresholds and blurry perspectives.

At one point of her story, Nadia mentioned she felt "like a teenager again, but this time without parents to guide me." Such a comment made me think about the possible envisioning of the state as a Gramscian paternalistic, material, and personified entity—offering protection for those seeking it. Bureaucracy, herein, appears as a concrete form of interaction between the person and the state on the micro-level of everyday practices and encounters (Foucault, 1991; Griffiths, 2013). However, such a paternalistic view of the state can cause ambivalent feelings among the refugees: the state is trusted, but also reserved in communication, and, thus, frightening—as having the potential to punish the person for not complying with the rules. Interestingly, the informants who expressed a similar view of the state and feelings of losing their agency avoided talking about the state in the categories of "protection" and "care," seeing it more as a reserved bureaucratic machine than a socially oriented structure.

Since the state is treated with such a mixture of fear and distance, some information is coming from unverified sources such as social media groups spreading rumors and false statements. Having limited ability to verify the information, some of the informants simply followed the unspoken rules that additionally stressed them. One informant mentioned that she had constant conflicts with her Russian classmates on the integration course, but she did not attempt to change groups. Two other informants recreated the urban myth from Ukrainian groups on social media that it is mandatory to collect all the receipts from shops if you are receiving social benefits, since the job center might ask to check them anytime:

> *I keep all the receipts. Because Jobcenter has the right to check where do I spend my money. It is actually logical… I am a refugee, I get their money, and it will be strange to spend it on some tickets or in coffee shops…*
> S., around 20. Fieldnote, October 2022

State regulations, both real and imagined, can contribute to overall levels of stress and feeling trapped in the system for those Ukrainian refugees receiving social benefits. However, their trust in the state and in the path prescribed by procedures can be a coping strategy within the ontological and identity crisis caused by forced migration; and following the rules, even the absurd ones, can be a way to establish order amidst uncertainty through everyday practices.

Story 2: Bureaucracy as a Quest

Seeing arrival in Berlin as a matter of "not their own choice" was common amongst informants sharing their diverse stories. But for some of them, the need to pursue the bureaucratic quest and insert themselves into new life was a chance to regain control of their own lives. Vira, a 39-year-old from Kharkiv, arrived in Berlin in late April 2022, since at the beginning of the full-scale war she was on a long vacation on another continent. Being unable to return to her hometown, which still remains under constant attacks, she headed to Berlin where her sister was already accommodated by distant relatives. Vira notes that she did not have any plan, and came to Berlin only to "sit out," but, being enrolled on the bureaucratic track of receiving

social benefits, applying and reapplying for different documents and statuses, her perception of her stay has changed:

> *I can't say I had plans to stay here. I wanted to be here for some time, but the track here works like this, and I understand why. First, they give you some help. And of course you cannot just take this help, say thank you, and leave for elsewhere. But I never thought it will be like a snowball. So you draw up one document, then another one and other one… Until you realize you got overloaded with these papers attaching you to the place. And you don't even know if you can stop and how to stop it. You just stay on track that prescribes you your further steps.*

So, bureaucracy might be seen as something that "ties" a person to a new country of residence and endorses a certain feeling of belonging and embeddedness in the country, or, in Vira's case, in a temporary living place. However, Vira remains quite critical about the way the bureaucracy is organized in Germany, saying that she has a feeling the system is not human-oriented, complaining about the strict need to send all the documentation by post, and feeling her time is not taken into account. Moreover, Vira, like several other informants, mentioned that the chaos they encountered within the system contradicted their expectations of the German state being efficient and effective in micromanagement the individual cases. Vira constantly questions the rationale behind the various procedures, comparing them with the situation in other countries where she used to live. Some of the procedures remain extremely unclear to her, especially the case when she needed to reapply for the job center allowance:

> *When there was a need to switch to job center, I was in better thinking [than upon arrival] and could fill in all the papers myself. Signed the contract. But it was still quite uncanny, I did not understand what does it all mean…What should I do now? What about my obligations? What will happen next, for instance, in case they offer me a job I don't want, and I decline it? No-one explained anything…*

While for some of the informants such uncertainty was a reason to rethink their stay in Germany and, probably, consider return or relocation to another country, for Vira, bureaucratic procedures were rather a "quest" she had to complete, where the "prize"' would be a feeling of acceptance in German society "with no need to prove your existence to the state by a new document every week." Such a position broadens the notion of subjectification as explained by Collins (2021), where the significance of encountering barriers is seen as part of the processes of migration and might reconfigure the desire to migrate. In Vira's case, as in the two other comparable cases in my research, the desire to migrate has turned upside down: Not having had an exact desire to migrate and coming to Berlin to "sit out" the active phase of the war, the interviewed women have developed a "competitive" attitude to the bureaucracy and started seeing the processes as parts of the game on which they are not going to give up.

Such a view of bureaucracy reflects what Carling and Collins (2018) call the process of "learning to be a migrant" that emerges through different experiences of crossing borders and living in different systems and culminates in orientation or attunement (Ahmed, 2014; Collins & Shubin, 2015) to migration and the life of being a migrant. However, what was quite surprising to me is that some refugees not only attune themselves to the system, but also think of ways to attune the system to reflect the needs of fellow refugees. For instance, both Uliana (22) and Daryna (36) mentioned that they thought about some hints to improve the reception system, for instance, by organizing the document flow or elaborating some "user-friendly" guides on the procedures:

> *I study data analytics and I constantly think on what would I improve in this system. I have spoken to many people on different stages of support […] and they all are not coordinated, do not know my case and switch me to one person from another and then over and over again. I had one precise question, and had to speak to three people, but it will save so much time of different people if they [job center case managers] just had a comprehensive guide…*
> *Uliana, 22. Interview, November 2022*

Daryna, a former project manager with a degree in economy, goes further with her suggestions, and says she would be happy to assist job centers in systematizing the Ukrainian refugees' claims and simply making the system more functional. She also mentioned that she already has a unified spreadsheet with all the documents required, and their translation into Ukrainian, and will be happy to spread it through the Ukrainian community.

As Ratzmann points out in her work on social benefits in Germany, the need to submit new documents on a regular basis might be discouraging for the beneficiaries and make them withdraw from social support (Ratzmann, 2021, 2022; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021). However, while the system is seen by some migrants as a barrier to overcome, something disrespectful, and depersonalized, it is worth remembering that the Ukrainian refugees encountered the system in a state of crisis, which made these encounters even more complicated.

Story 3: Bureaucracy and Integration as a Threshold

Margaryta, a 21-year-old from Odesa, had a strict plan of what to do in case of full-scale war. Her father, an officer, instructed her to go to Germany and stay with his acquaintances, and she complied immediately after the outbreak of the full-scale war. Despite being accepted well in Berlin, Margaryta nevertheless felt frustrated by the need to deal with bureaucracy all the time, and the integration path offered by the German state seemed like a threshold, not the solution for her future-planning.

Margaryta clearly states that the biggest problem for her was not the bureaucracy itself, but the inability to receive any services in a language other than German. Describing herself as "a person genuinely terrible in languages," she felt extremely stressed every time she had to deal with state officials. Upon arrival, she had support

from native German speakers, as well as being offered translation in the state agencies. However, the situation changed at the end of summer 2022, when she realized that the translation provided by volunteers was no longer available at the job center in her district, and the only way to obtain information was to use her poor German skills, which made her feel additionally stressed and rejected.

According to the research of Nora Ratzmann, the "no German – no service" approach demonstrated by the job center's staff can make the applicants from a migrant background feel they are discriminated against, or even unwelcome in the country, as well as not being served in the same ways as those comfortable with speaking the language (Ratzmann, 2022; Scheibelhofer & Holzinger, 2018). Such discriminative practice was the case for those applicants who were granted social support on an assessment basis, and the knowledge of German was an unspoken criterion for the applicant to be "deserving" of social benefits. Interestingly, from Ratzmann's findings, the "no German – no service" approach is seen by the street-level bureaucrats not as a discriminatory practice, but rather as a way to treat all the claimants "equally," with the same wording and in the same language. However, without knowing the motivation behind the street-level bureaucrats speaking only German and treating the individual cases in a very formal way, Ukrainian refugees like Margaryta might interpret such a situation as an act of rejection by the state, or a manifestation of what Schierenbeck et al. (2023) call the "neglect" strategy leading to dissatisfaction with the response from receiving state.

Margaryta expresses another fear, also shared by other migrants: the ability to learn the language to a high enough level to obtain a job without getting de-skilled. As Collins points out, the national programs of support and integration rarely allow the migrants to transfer their skills directly, and recognition of their certificates might be a long as well as a costly procedure the migrants can scarcely afford (Collins, 2021). Even though most of Ukrainian refugees in Germany possess tertiary education diplomas, most of them are unable to find a qualified job in Germany without the language knowledge. According to Carlbaum, 30% of migrants are overqualified for their jobs: Such deskilling is commonly a result of the lack of formal recognition of the migrants' qualifications and work experience from abroad, non-transferable skills, restrictions on eligibility for professional jobs, as well as language barriers, and both gender and racial discrimination (Carlbaum, 2021). Being in a situation of uncertainty about the duration of their stay and whether they will be granted prolongation of their residence permits, refugees are even more exposed to deskilling, taking any offered job as a coping strategy to secure their stay in a receiving country. The whole idea of humanitarian protection being realized through labor market integration is therefore challenging for migrants who assume that the state sees them only as potential workers (in low-level positions, often linked to care work) rather than as temporary migrants who have come to the country in search of protection and intend to return as soon as the security situation allows. On this occasion for some Ukrainian refugees like Margaryta, the perspective of deskilling is one of the reasons to consider returning to Ukraine.

> *On the first interview in the job center they asked me about my education. I mentioned one year of training as a nurse, and stressed that I don't want to*

work in the sphere, this was the reason I dropped from the school. But they did not want to listen I worked as a digital specialist for two years. All they wanted to offer me were jobs in massage salons and nursing homes…

Similar thoughts were also expressed by other informants, who reported their feeling of despair about losing professional qualifications and being unable to find a proper job. Bygnes (2021) calls such a condition a "mobility dissonance" and defines it as a form of postmigration stress that leads to feelings of stagnation and failure to progress in life, profession, and status. However, the mobility dissonance of Ukrainian refugees has another dimension: the temporal one. Some of the informants were not only stressed about losing their skills, but also unsure about the need to invest financial and personal resources into validation of their certificates and gaining German skills, seeing their stay in Germany as something short-term and aiming to return to Ukraine as soon as possible:

To get certified and start working, I need to pay €800. But this is such an amount of money! What if I pay, and the war ends in a month and I go back home? I will rather spend this money in Ukraine restoring my city...
N., 50. Fieldnote, June 2022

However, for some of the informants, the main threshold was neither the language barrier nor entering the job market, but the idea of integration per se. Having their personal timelines and life plans tied to Ukraine, some of the refugees literally refused to participate in integration activities, planning to return home as soon as possible. When we recorded our interview with Margaryta in November 2022, she told me that she tried to postpone the start of her integration courses as long as she could, since the pressure from the job center made her think that she did not actually want to remain Germany:

I don't want to 'be integrated'. I ended up here not because of my free will. I came to 'sit over' and will go home as soon as it becomes possible. So I postpone this course as long as I can! Maybe things get better soon enough and I will go home before my course starts in mid-December...

The feeling of being forcibly "integrated" resonated with refugees' acknowledgement of the temporariness of their stay in Germany and made them regain their sense of agency in an active form. And, for some of the informants, realizing the pressure to join the "integration track" in Germany became a decisive moment to leave the country – as Margaryta did shortly before Christmas 2022, returning to her home in Odesa.

Concluding Discussion: Shaping the Future of Forced Migrants

The personal experiences of Ukrainian refugee women who came to Germany alone, and whose future aspirations are not bound to the educational system and transnational family relations, offer a new angle to assess the role of migration and integration policies in their decision-making and sense of agency. De facto, this case

shows an upside-down perspective on refugees' future-making. The whole scope of refugee studies presents the state as the main power agent capable of deciding the future and individual temporalities of migrants by means of "temporal governance" and usage of waiting time. Bureaucracy, thus, appears as a mechanism of governing through routine practices. The feeling of "permanent temporariness," as research into refugee experiences in Germany (Steigemann & Misselwitz, 2020; Tize, 2021) and other countries (Bekkering et al., 2017; Oesch, 2019; Olwig, 2023) has demonstrated, is the precise outcome in every individual of a protracted state of awaiting decisions about the future. In this case, waiting becomes an emotionally tangible manifestation of uncertainty and, as Conlon (2011) points out, a dynamic effect of international geopolitics and a lived facet of social structures. Waiting, however, is not only a passive state, but also a form of agency for those living in a specific regime of "temporal governance"—where the temporariness is determined not by the state assessing individual cases, but by the geopolitical situation around Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, and the collective response of EU member states manifested through national-level and state-level policies in Germany. Herein, the whole concept of "temporariness" of protection becomes challenged—and thus requires additional exploration by academic scholars.

However, even in this case, the clashes between the lived temporalities of refugees and the institutional mechanisms that characterize the time-politics of reception remain inevitable. Some decisions of local government, like transferring the distribution of social benefits from the social service system to unemployment benefits operated by job centers, determined refugees' individual decisions on whether or not to remain in Germany. (This meant accepting—or not accepting—that the temporariness of their stay will extend for at least a couple of months longer.) For some of the refugees, the pressurized need to make a decision in a time-limited perspective was a decisive factor in their decision to return to Ukraine and renounce temporary protection in Germany.

The question on how German policies for supporting Ukrainian refugees impact their decision to stay or return remains, however, open to discussion and is dependent on the individual's interpretations of the demands and solutions. For some of the participants in my research, the emotionally intense situation of "permanent temporariness" can be resolved by the option of embarking on the "bureaucratic pathway" offering certain steps on the way to integration. In this case, some of the refugees put part of the responsibility for their decision-making onto the state, renouncing their own agency. However, such a position leaves the refugees potentially vulnerable and too dependent on the state support. On this occasion, the newly adopted strategy for supporting the unemployed in Germany, which is focused on long-term solutions for labor market integration, might play an important role for the refugees who opt for passive resistance and let the state make decisions for them while they are processing their trauma of displacement.

The individual experiences of going through bureaucratic procedures thus significantly contributed to the refugees' sense of having agency and being capable of shaping their today and tomorrow. While some of them perceived bureaucracy as a quest, with the feeling of "acceptance" and successful submission of all the papers seen as a prize, others perceived bureaucracy as a constant obstacle. The latter group

also pointed out that some of the procedures hinder their integration and thus contribute to their decision to return to Ukraine, which appears to be "simpler" and "more predictable."

The uncertain temporariness of being a migrant, or, in other words, the question of how long the migrant remains an object of difference and hence a target of integration, remains crucial for migrants—even more than it is for the state (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012). Unlike those remaining in Ukraine under permanent stress and danger and claiming "the time has stopped on February 24th" (Lazarenko et al., 2022), the informants of the current research claimed that going through bureaucratic steps, and having routinized practices like receiving the monthly allowance, helped them to keep track of time. Even though the symbolic milestones of 3 and 6 months of living abroad were hard to cope with for some of them, the very fact of a personal timeline structured around state-endorsed practices had a reportedly positive effect on their well-being.

On the other hand, the integration-oriented bureaucratic pathway may become a challenge for some of the refugees. Since none of my informants intended to emigrate before the outbreak of the full-scale war, the very concept of being "integrated" and "included" into German society feels for most of them more a bizarre demand than a desired outcome. The fear of being detached from the Ukrainian community in the homeland was among the reasons for opposing integration. Moreover, for some of them, forced integration was seen as a threat to their Ukrainian identity. The general intensification of the sense of Ukrainian identity and belonging to the country of origin, in parallel with the need to build a life in a host country, is a remarkable phenomenon with regard to emigration from Ukraine in 2022 (Boman, 2023; Lazarenko et al., 2022), deeply rooted in the experience of guilt for leaving home at a crucial moment, and in the disruption of relationships with those who stayed (Andrews et al., 2023; Shyroka et al., 2023). Such identity is deeply rooted in the national idea—which unfolds, as Anderson (2006) points out, in the linear temporality (which, in case of Ukraine, is measured "until the victory in the war"). The bureaucratic system, in contrast, is an example of reality with cyclic time, determined by the prolongation of residence permits and other repeated actions (Leutloff-Grandits, 2019). The discrepancies between the linear national time, associated with Ukraine, and cyclic bureaucracy-endorsed time in Germany, might thus be a reason for some Ukrainian refugees in Germany finding it hard to imagine their individual futures in either of the two temporal realities.

Taking into account the specifics of the methodology, the research findings reveal the subjective experiences of Ukrainian refugee women dealing with arrival-related bureaucracy in Berlin, which should not be extrapolated to the population as a whole, but rather used to illustrate the interplay between migration policies, bureaucratic processes, and refugees' sense of agency. Although the responses at the federal, state, and especially local levels to the arrival of thousands of Ukrainian refugees in Germany have demonstrated the state's potential to deal with such disruptions, the process has not been smooth at all stages. For this reason, the findings of the research can form a basis for future research into the improvement of certain refugee reception policies in Germany.

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