Ukrainian asylum seekers in Latvia: the circumstances of destination choice

Zane Varpina[1] and Kata Fredheim[2]

Abstract

Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022 has created the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since WWII. Close to 7 million people have left the country as of August 2022 and figures keep growing. Latvia has accommodated a mere 36 thousand of them, but it exemplifies other smaller countries in the refugee flows. Patterns and factors of asylee destination decisions for less popular destinations have not been explored making one wonder what makes refugees deviate from the mainstream migration flows.

We explore why and how Ukrainian war-displaced people have chosen Latvia using the narratives of Ukrainian displaced people who arrived in Latvia in early stages of the conflict. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with refugees in Latvia, we find that networks are the primary determinant of the choice to flee to Latvia. The closeness of kinship is not as important as the fact of having the contact as such, nor does it determine the level of support. Close or distant relatives and friends are the first instance to turn to for war-displaced civilians, while financial factors do not appear to be decisive. In the situation of acute displacement, the first asylee strategy is to seek support in kinship and other networks.

Keywords: *Ukraine war displaced; asylum seekers; refugees; destination choice; Latvia*

Introduction

The 2022 Russian military aggression in Ukraine has created an unprecedented geopolitical situation in 21st century Europe. It is likely that the war "will cause the biggest surge of refugees in Europe since the second world war" (The Economist, 2022). 6.1 million people have fled Ukraine by July 2022 (UNHCR, n.d.), and the flow would not drain soon as Russia keeps shelling cities and civilian shelters. Back in 2015 1.2 million Syrians crossed European Union (EU) borders, by then the highest number of refugees in its' history, and it was considered a 'migration crisis'. In July 2022, that number has been exceeded sixfold by Ukrainians fleeing war. Poland and Germany have sheltered most asylum seekers outside Russian Federation, followed by Czech Republic, Italy Turkey and Spain (UNHCR, n.d). There are 1.8 million Ukrainian refugees in Russia too (UNHCR, n.d). Latvia has accommodated 36 thousand Ukrainian people under temporary protection residence scheme and issued permissions to work. Per capita, it is Lithuania that has granted most temporary protection to Ukrainians (Eurostat, 2022). Thus, the popularity of regions as Ukrainian refugee destinations differ, and the circumstances and reasons for the choices are to be explained yet.

Unlike previous immigration waves that triggered resistance from many EU populations, the Ukrainian asylees were welcome with generous and pragmatic support (Lloyd and Sirkeci,

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[1] Zane Varpina, Stockholm School of Economics, Latvia. E-mail: zane.varpina@sseriga.edu
[2] Kata Fredheim, Stockholm School of Economics in Riga, Latvia. E-mail: kata.fredheim@sseriga.edu

2022). The difference from previous wave lies in such factors as racism – Europeans feel more comfortable welcoming Ukrainians than Syrians or Afghans; composition of refugee flows – there are mostly women with children coming from Ukraine as opposed to single young men from Arab countries; and proximity – Ukraine is part of Europe and a close neighbour that has aspired to become an EU and NATO member since regaining independence. Another factor that distinguishes the Ukrainian war refugees is the obvious and undeniable urgency, illuminated by the efficient information flows from war territories.

So far, the European scholarly interest on refugees has largely focused on Western countries - United Kingdom, Belgium, The Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, the dominant refugee destinations in recent decades. Refugee questions in Central and Eastern Europe are more scarcely covered, and the recent conflict implications are yet to be analysed. We aim to partly fill this gap and study forced emigration of the Ukrainian population and immigration to Latvia following 2022 Russian invasion in Ukraine. We do not differentiate between asylum seekers and refugees in this study, hence commonly use the terms interchangeably. This approach is consistent with the policies in support of Ukrainian nationals in Latvia that issue residence and work permits to all civilians requesting them (Ukrainas Civiliedzīvotāju atbalsta likums, 2022).

With this study we aim to learn *why and how Ukrainian asylum seekers have chosen to migrate to Latvia*. Traditionally, Latvia is not among the most desired migration target countries as it does not offer the level of financial support Western European countries do. However, many Ukrainian refugees found their way to Latvia and at least 35 thousand have settled there. At the time of fieldwork of this study (March 2022), the number was just a fifth of that.

Background

Ukrainian migration

Ukraine had a turbulent history lately – the Orange Revolution, Maidan, 2014 Russian invasion with subsequent annexation of Crimea, corruption scandals, sluggish economic growth – to name the key. Directly and indirectly the events have created a culture of migration. The concept *culture of migration* was coined by Cohen and Sirkeci (2011), and more recently elaborated by Sirkeci and Lloyd (2022), establishing that these are not solely individual level choices or macro level influences, but rather meso level determinants – the social universe – that make mobility an acceptable and familiar coping strategy in difficulties. In Ukraine, the presence of culture of migration was found to be important in explaining previous mobility to EU (Van Mol, Snel, Hemmerechts and Timmermann, 2017).

Ukraine is among the leading migration source countries in the world with more than ten percent of the population living abroad (Van Mol et al, 2017; see also Leontyeva, 2014) hence the networks and familiar routes are there to facilitate mobility. If they is to hold for the emergency forced migration, we would expect social contacts to be among prime determinants of migration decisions. Indeed, Lloyd and Sirkeci (2022) find that during emergencies migrants tend to flow to places where familiar support networks are present.

Poland has been one of the most common gates for Ukrainians into EU. Both countries have had tight migration connections since early 2010s as documented, for example, by Van Mol (2017), Andrejuk (2019), Jaroszewicz (2018), Gorny (2017), Vasyltsiv, Lupak and Levytska (2020). Studies show that the migration flows to different EU countries have been particularly

strong after 2014, but they were mainly temporary, consisting of low skilled labour and highly gendered by countries, as well as often migrants have been un-unofficially employed. Due to the nature of migratory flows, precise numbers have been difficult to establish (Jaroszewitcz, 2018).

UNHCR (n.d.) estimates that by July 2022 one third of Ukrainians have been forced to leave their homes after 24 February 2022. Seven million people have been internally displaced, while 6.4 million refugees are recorded across Europe. Further, a third of population is seen to be stuck in war-affected areas and unable to leave because of damaged infrastructure, lack of resources or information (UNHCR, n.d.), or physical inability, particularly vulnerable population groups (Lloyd and Sirkeci, 2022). Thus, the actual opportunities to emigrate differ and determine the choice and timing of destination, as was seen from Syrian crisis after 2011 (Yagzan, Utku and Sirkeci, 2015; Schon, 2019). 33% of the internally displaced Ukrainians reside with their friends or family members (IOM, 2022) pointing to the importance of kinship networks in the mobility decisions. From the previous wave, the displaced tend to integrate in local communities reducing the likelihood of return (IOM, 2018).

Six months into the war Ukrainian migration patterns are still forming. After the primary destinations to countries bordering Ukraine, the refugees seek asylum in further destinations, as evident also from the difference between registered flows across borders and registered population under refugee protection schemes (UNHCR, n.d.). Latvia and other Baltic countries do not border with Ukraine but have provided asylum to substantial number of persons (relative to the country size).

Ukrainians in Latvia

Owing to the Soviet occupation experience, the Latvian population is generally considered hostile towards immigrants, refugees included. Immigration is commonly seen as a threat that needs to be treated with caution. Attitudes are negative despite only a small portion of Latvian residents having interacted with refugees (Murasovs, Ruza, Rascevskis and Dombrovskis, 2016). People who have been more exposed to ethnic diversity are more positive towards migrants. Geography matters too – the closer the country, the more open is stance towards immigration from respective country (Kaprans, Saulitis and Mierina, 2021). Attitudes towards refugees had been largely formed by negative stereotypes rather than personal experience (Murasovs et al, 2016). Overall, before 2022 asylum seekers provoked strong opposition in society. Ethnic Latvians and Russians who commonly disagree were rather united in response to the 2015 European Commission plan to redistribute asylum seekers (Politico, 2015). The Ukrainian asylees fleeing the war changed their position dramatically.

The best way to describe the Latvian – Ukrainian relationship is that of multi-layered kinship. Ukrainians in Latvia was the third largest minority before the war began, with 42 thousand Ukrainians living there (in 2021, OSP Latvia database (n.d.), IRE020). 5.7 thousand of them were citizens of Ukraine. Riga Ukrainian Secondary School has operated in Latvia since 1989. There is a kind of relatedness because of the shared history of being part of the USSR. This led to increased mobility between the two countries, for studies, work, travel, and life. Most of Ukrainians had arrived in Latvia during the Soviet times. It is not surprising with most migration taking place in the last eighty years that family ties remain between Ukrainians in Latvia and in Ukraine. Thus, there is biological kinship. Many Ukrainians have family in Latvia, and Latvians have family in Ukraine. Because of shared history and geographical proximity,

Ukrainians and Latvians often think of themselves as neighbours. Trade between Ukraine and Latvia remains large (226m EUR in imports and 230m EUR in exports in 2021, OSP Latvia (n.d.) database, ADT020).

Migration between Ukraine and Latvia has been active in recent years, in particular labour migration. Ukraine has been an important source of workers for Latvian labour market. In 2021 966 temporary residence and work permits were active for Ukrainians in Latvia (PMLP, 2021), however large part of the labour was not represented in the statistics. Due to restrictive employment permit issuance regulations, many Ukrainian (and other non-EU) workers were employed unofficially or worked in the country as outsourced from Polish companies with EU work permits, hence real number substantially exceeds official figures. Estimates suggest they reached four to six thousand people, mostly males and commonly employed in construction and transport industries. As with shadow economy, the exact numbers could not be verified. It is difficult to directly attribute previous Ukrainian exodus to Latvia to the uncertainties and conflicts in Ukraine after 2014, but for many the situation likely did set the background for emigration. The labour connections may have played a role when the war started.

Factors affecting refugee destinations

Regarding asylum destinations, the traditional claim, as represented for example by Bocker and Haviga (1997), insists that if people are forced to flee, it is of little difference where to go but to remain safe. However, more recent studies, e.g. Robinson and Sergott (2002) and Brekke and Aarset (2009) have established conceptual models and empirically shown that destination choices are considered from early stages of the asylum-seeking migration journey. The destinations are shown to change on the way depending on circumstances and stage of journey. Research suggests that policies in host countries matter and affect (mostly limit) refugee flows among countries (e.g. Czaika and de Haas, 2017; Ortega and Peri, 2013; Brekke et al., 2009; Diop-Christensen and Diop, 2021). Economic factors - level of development, income, and employment - are also shown to affect refugee settlement (Kang, 2021; Suzuki, 2020; Collyer, 2005).

Another series of research, however, argues that policies and economic opportunities are of minor importance, instead networks, language, cultural affinity, and perceptions – in the stated order – are the prime determinants of destination country choice (Robinson et al. 2002). Other and more recent research confirms and expands on factors that matter at different stages of the migration journey: social networks (Koser and Pinkerton, 2002; Tucker 2018; Lloyd and Sirkeci, 2022); kinship, incl. family, friends, acquaintances, or someone the person knows (Haviga and Bocker, 1999; Neumayer, 2005; Mallett and Hagen-Zanker, 2018), language (Haviga and Bocker, 1999), financial capital (Mallett et al. 2018); agents (Gilbert and Koser, 2006; Mallett et al. 2018), geographic proximity (Neumayer, 2005, 2004; Kang, 2021), the image of the destination country (Benzer and Zetter, 2014), culture (Suzuki, 2020), colonial links (Haviga et al 1999). Tucker (2018) elaborates that economic and education opportunities play only a marginal role in destination decision making, instead, it is the possibility to resolve statelessness that is a significant aspect.

The difference in determinants is likely to be explained by the stage of the refugee journey. The policies are not dominant in acute cases of forced migration (Diop-Christensen et al., 2021). Acuteness is emphasised as a separate critical factor as such (Robinson et al. 2002;

Brekke and Aarset, 2009). If people spend weeks, months, or years preparing to leave, they are likely to weigh different options and perform a sort of benefit-cost analysis. Whereas in cases of emergency, like Russian invasion in Ukraine, people might have had few hours to make the decision and flee. As Robinson et al (2002, p.62) put it: "Where time is of the essence, acute asylum seekers may have to take the first country offered to them. Anticipatory asylum seekers may be able to wait for what they perceive as a better offer".

Comparative studies find that determinants of target destination differ by country of destination and by country of origin (Haviga at al, 1999; Tucker, 2018, Gilbert and Kosher, 2006). Hence it is meaningful to perform refugee research on the regions and countries that have not been explored in scientific literature. With this research, we partly fill the gap and analyse the circumstances of refugee flows between two Eastern European countries.

Asylum seeker decision-making process

Migration, voluntary or forced, involves a series of complex decisions contingent on the circumstances and gradual adjustments to the plan. The decision-making process hence needs to be considered to deeply understand the factors determining the destination. The dynamic experience as such plays a role, especially with regards to forced urgent migration cases: "when people leave without a clear destination in mind, it is their experience 'on the road', the people they encounter, and the information gathered which all shape where they go next" (Mallett et al., 2018).

Two seminal studies featuring asylum seeker decision-making regarding migration destinations should be cited here. Robinson et al. (2002) developed a general model of asylum seekers' decision-making. They assume the decisions are time-status bound and divide the process into four stages. Empirically they prove that democracy, modernity, and affluence are taken for granted when considering the spectrum of destination countries, but further four factors (networks, language, cultural affinity, and perceptions) evolve and play roles in different stages. The study of Brekke et al. (2009) builds on Robinson et al. (2002) findings and offers an alternative sequential asylum journey model that incorporates explicitly the possibility of multiple decision points. It follows chronologically from origin, caused by a set of possible push factors, to transit and destination where pull factors are the strongest. Empirically they investigate Norway as the accepting country and find security, future, networks, asylum policy and reputation to be important determinants.

Several other authors have modelled forced migration journeys. Gonsalves (1992) offers a time-framed model consisting of five stages of refugee passage: early arrival, destabilisation, exploration and restabilization, return to normal life, and decompensation. He recognises different needs in different stages of migration and accordingly settlement preferences may differ. Roads to Refuge (2017) maps refugee journey and location decisions for Australia. Finally, a more recent study by Shultz, Barrios, Krasnikov et al. (2020) develops a refuge pathway model. It starts with a trigger event initiating the displacement and starting the journey. It can lead to permanent settlement, however, if not possible, it can start cycles of movements: temporary settlement - displacement - journey - temporary or permanent settlement.

Despite the merits of the literature on asylum seekers' destination decision strategies and choices, we see at least three gaps. First, most literature studies asylum seekers at later stages of the forced migration journeys that often can be considered secondary movements, but

there is limited empirical evidence on primary migration moves and strategies during the first weeks or months of acute displacement. Second, to the moment of this study and to the best of our knowledge, there has been a lot of media attention, but scarce coverage of Ukrainian war-induced migration in scientific literature. In the years to follow, we are likely to see a growing body of research on the topic, and we aim to provide the first qualitative findings in the area. Third, asylum seeker and refugee topics have incomplete coverage in Baltics.

Method

This study was undertaken at a relatively early stage of the Ukraine war. We took a qualitative approach and based our findings on 34 semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian war-displaced people. The timing of interviews was chosen within 4-5 weeks after the arrival to Latvia (21- 25 March 2022). Brekke and Aarset (2009) argue that it is best to interview asylees as early as possible after their arrival while the memory is still fresh and minimally justified by the outcome, which is what we have aimed for.

Study participants were recruited via different personal contacts of the researchers, NGOs, and Ukrainian refugee support organisations. We aimed for a maximum variety sample, especially reaching out to people of various backgrounds, ages, education, both genders. The participants were either in the process of receiving refugee status or had already acquired it. Due to the urgency and unambiguous political support to Ukraine, the law had been passed to facilitate and ensure rapid paperwork (Ukrainas Civiliedzīvotāju atbalsta likums, 2022).

Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes, in Ukrainian language. The material was transcribed and translated to English, followed by coding and analysis. The people were aged 21 to 67. The sample consisted of 30 women and 4 men, resembling the demographics of Ukrainian asylum seekers in Europe and portraying the fact that men aged 18-65 were not allowed to leave the country. Interviews took place in Riga, Latvia. As the initial intention was, the sample had a variety of backgrounds – from hairdresser, to actress, to doctor and pensioner. We do not have data about educational background, but based on the professions (lawyer, engineer etc.) at least a third of the sample had university education. About third of displaced people came from Kyiv and regions, five from Kharkiv while the rest from diverse provinces (oblasts) across the country (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Origins of war displaced refugees in the sample.
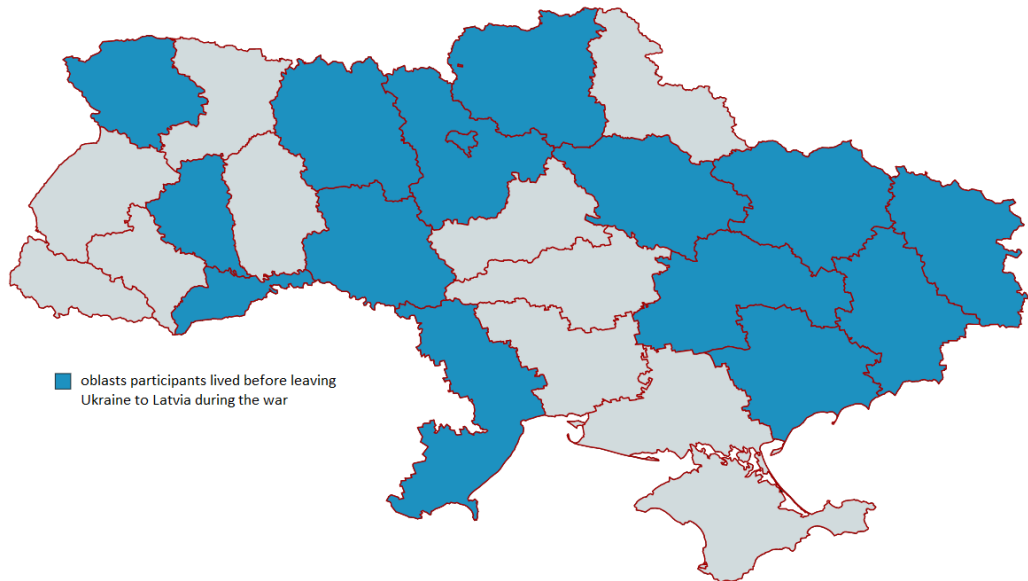
Source: authors' illustration.

Most people had arrived together with someone or several people. Sixteen respondents travelled with children, and all together there were 53 people that came with the 34 interviewees, just four people travelled alone. Hence the information basis for our analysis is significantly larger than the 34 persons we spoke with.

Asylum seekers are a vulnerable group. We acted with high attention, respect, and sensitivity towards informants, in addition to applying the fundamental ethical principles of research protecting the participants from any harm our actions intentionally or unintentionally may cause. The participation was voluntary, the informants were informed about the intentions of the study, and we obtained their written consent. All names in the article are changed and bear no similarity to the original name. As a matter of respect and attention, the employed interviewers were Ukrainian displaced people themselves, who arrived in Latvia during the same period.

Conceptually, we follow the framework by Robinson et al. (2002), who established a model of asylum seeker decision making consisting of three consecutive steps (Table 1). We focus the attention on the decision-making factors between departure and decision on a particular country. As cross-cutting topics we explore two further perspectives: the moment in the process during which the destination decision is made, and the role of financial resources.

Table 1. Generalised model of asylum seeker decision-making process

	Decision	Influencing factors	Options
Stage 1	Leave?	Balance of push and pull forces	Decide between: - Leave country - Relocate within-country - Remain
Stage 2	How?	Availability of resources: - Networks - Knowledge - Ease of entry / proximity - Resources	Decide between: - Means - Use of agent
Stage 3	Where to?	Social networks Language Cultural affinity Images and perceptions Opportunities	Choice of specific destination

Source: Authors, based on Robinson and Sergott, 2002.

We recognise two limitations. First, the research was performed at the stage of the crisis while the situation was unfolding, less than one month after the beginning of the Russian invasion in Ukraine. The situation was changing rapidly and is likely to keep changing in the months and years to follow. However, our aim was to capture the primary movements and destination reasoning of refugees arriving in Latvia. Second, as with qualitative research, we do not claim representativity of the entire Ukrainian asylum seeker population from the sample interviewed. We believe the study is externally valid as we ensured that participants had different socio-demographic characteristics, though we cannot confidently say if some groups were unrepresented or underrepresented.

Results

We explored why and how Ukrainian displaced people have chosen to migrate to Latvia using the narratives of Ukrainian displaced people who arrived in Latvia during the early stage of the conflict. Specifically, we looked at how and when they made their decisions to choose Latvia rather than other destinations.

Of those we interviewed, only a few discussed moving to another region in Ukraine. Lidiia considered going to Lviv or to the suburbs, near where her daughter lives.

> *"She found a family that would host us, 100 km from Lviv … We agreed, but then our friends… called us on the way, we were leaving Kyiv under bombardment. Our train was delayed because of the air alarm. When we just arrived there, a shell exploded above the railway station... And on the way, friends from Riga called us and invited us: "Come, everyone will help here". Therefore, everything changed while we were on the train, we decided everything." (Lidiia)*

The speed of decision was a topic often mentioned, and it was quick. Participants described how they heard of events or received offers from acquaintances. Nataliia remembered: *"My mother said "You must leave because everything is so fatally bad. Take the children and leave. And literally overnight I packed up, bought the tickets. But first I went to Poland, to my brother".*

Most participants knew someone from Latvia through friends, family, or professional links. Indeed, kinship and social networks were cited as the primary motive to choose Latvia. Only

one participant did not know anyone in Latvia, however, she felt they did not have a choice, they came to Latvia because there were no other options at that time (like Nina who worked in Russia on a contract before the war). Within the sample, the predominant form of kinship can be described as having distant relatives in Latvia. A few had acquaintances or work contracts or nuclear families (specifically grandparents, parents, common-law husband, and sister). For most, the determining factor to choose Latvia was kinship itself rather than the proximity of kin. Most participants had a relative in Latvia, and as Olena explained: *"there are distant relatives, very distant… That's why we came" (Olena).* The very fact that they had kin in Latvia was featured more in the narratives than how well they knew the person. However, this was not a singular factor since participants had kin elsewhere in Europe also. From the stories, three groups of participants who knew someone in Latvia can be identified.

For most participants, the main consideration was knowing someone in Latvia. As soon as the war started, friends and family abroad offered help and accommodation to Ukrainian displaced people. Messages and calls offering help reportedly influenced participants' decisions. Several participants received messages from Latvian relatives and acquaintances offering help. Olha fled with her friend, who had a distant cousin in Latvia. When the war started, her friend's cousin got in touch, saying "come". Olha explained: *"As soon as she heard that there was a bombing in Kharkiv, she said, 'Come'. My friend, with whom I came, Lesya, does not have a car, so she immediately told me "...Let's run away".*

Lidiia received an offer from a friend in Latvia, whom she knew from her local church, while on the way out of Ukraine already. Yehor was on holiday abroad when the war started, he remembered: *"On the 25th our best friend wrote to us that, "There is housing, come here" and we began to negotiate with the embassy to fly here".* This is by far the largest group of respondents, reflecting how the decision to leave was not contemplated for many months and years. Instead, people had to leave their lives, homes, and loved ones from one day to another. Maryana described how she found the destination only after leaving home: *"At first we thought to go to Poland, but it is completely crowded, and then we called to whoever we could. There are no relatives in other countries. No, there are relatives in other cities, but these are Luhansk, Donetsk, we are from Slobozhanska (Ukraine), so all our relatives are from the side where very heavy fighting is going on now".* These narratives highlight that due to the urgency of the situation, the destinations of Ukrainian displaced people were not singular, instead, they changed *en route.*

For many, this change happened when they arrived in Poland. Latvia was not the only and main choice for participants. The second group of participants highlighted that in addition to having friends and family in Latvia, they considered where they may find better opportunities when deciding where to go. Their narratives contrast Poland with Latvia. Traveling through Poland, their impression was that the country is 'full' and there may be more opportunities in Latvia. For this group of displaced people work and finding work were important. Nataliia chose to come to Latvia, opting to stay with distant relatives rather than with her brother in Poland because she felt there were no opportunities for her in Poland anymore. For Myroslava an acquaintance helped to find a job in Latvia: *"We didn't choose Latvia for any particular reason – better or worse, we didn't care. We needed somewhere to stay, somewhere to work to live. Well, that's why when a job turned up through acquaintances, they said that a person was needed here, we immediately gathered. Could not be found in Poland. In Poland, there was simply no work, no housing".* Bohdan argued that Poland was full and expensive, hence they moved further North to Latvia: *"We didn't have a specific plan because we weren't at all sure we would succeed. In general, my wife benefits from going to Poland,*

she works for an IT company operating in Poland. And we thought about getting there at first, but when we got to Poland, everything was already full. There were such expensive options, $ 1,600 a month, we were shocked" (Bohdan). Anastasiia explains: *"We arrived in Warsaw, reunited there, and tried to stay in Warsaw and look for a place, but there are a lot of people there, and there is no place to live, very ... food, maybe cheaper than in Latvia, but there is no place to live at all, no place to work. And I would like to work somehow, so that, well, not to be dependent".*

These narratives highlight another layer of choice, that beyond kinship some participants considered what opportunities would be available for them in the choice of destination. They gathered knowledge and information on the way, and they changed their destination accordingly. Yet, none of the participants mentioned financial reasons of the benefits provided by the Latvian state as an incentive to choose Latvia over another country in the sample. The topics of the registration process and benefits were discussed in the interviews, participants even expressed frustration about the bureaucracy and gratefulness for the assistance. However, they did not know about this in advance, and it was not featured in their often quick decision to leave to Latvia. It was finding work rather than seeking assistance that was stressed by interviewees.

Even without messages, displaced people remembered relatives and friends in Latvia and decided to go to Riga. Olena, like Lidiia left without a destination. It was only at the border that she decided to go to Latvia: *"Just at the border that you decided where to go? … I knew I had distant relatives. And, that is you intentionally went from Kharkiv to Latvia? Of course… Well, there are distant relatives, very distant… That's why we came!" (Olena).* Friendship and frequent communication in the past months too prompted people to choose Latvia. Olha was persuaded by her daughter to come to Riga who made Latvian friends in a camp in Estonia during the summer: *"Friends appeared, with whom she was in close contact for six months. That's why for her there was no choice at all "Where?". She immediately said: "To Riga".* These narratives again highlight that those decisions were made quickly, as displaced people chose to flee fearing for their lives and the lives of their families.

Not all participants have been to Latvia, even if they had relatives here. Much of their knowledge about the country comes from stories or things they read and heard in the news. The third group of participants chose Latvia because they knew someone in the country and because they felt that the shared language, culture, and history would be a benefit. References to political and cultural kinship played a large influence. Being able to communicate in Russian and Ukrainian in Latvia was an important factor, it was tied to fitting in better, and finding a job also. Nadiia, who came to Latvia through Poland and then Budapest was the participant who explained it in the most detail: *"And I was in Latvia and here there is an opportunity to communicate in Ukrainian, in Russian,"* (Nadiia). Being able to communicate, integrate, and be accepted was also cited as a reason. *Oksana's* dad worked in Riga before and he advised: *"you guys, probably go to Riga, well, because you will be accepted there, accommodated"* (Oksana). However, the Russian language as a good reason to choose Latvia was not without complexities. For Nina, even thinking of the language stirred strong emotions. Nina explained that she no longer wants to speak Russian: *"I had such a psychological reaction - I didn't speak Ukrainian for many years, and when all these events began, I read, I remember well how I woke up in the morning and began to speak Ukrainian. My thoughts have become Ukrainian".*

In addition, rather than knowing anyone personally, knowledge of the Ukrainian diaspora was a crucial factor: "I also found out that there is a Ukrainian diaspora in Latvia of about 50

thousand people, as I heard in the Latvian news. And this also encouraged me, I realised that I could find help from my compatriots." (Nadiia). This finding speaks for the role of cultural affinity as the destination choice is made and seemingly becomes decisive. As the diaspora grows with more displaced people arriving, this may become a more frequent reason to choose Latvia and establishing the culture of migration there. One interviewee already followed a displaced person, an acquaintance, who arrived in Latvia.

Conclusions

This study contributes to literature by empirically studying the early stage of Ukrainian war asylum seekers' journey to Latvia in 2022. We set out to study the determinants of Ukrainian displacement to Latvia, a country that is not among the common and popular asylee destinations. We contribute to empirical evidence on why and where people go under sudden armed conflicts situations. The knowledge could serve decision makers to predict and expect mobility directions during crises and other life-threatening emergencies.

The Ukrainian asylum seekers who arrived in Latvia during first months of the Russian invasion in Ukraine were all triggered by an emergency. They had little time to leave and could not contemplate the decision for long. The choice was difficult. They left behind their loved ones – husbands, fathers, parents, as well as properties and the life as they knew it. The decision to leave the country however was often facilitated by the same loved ones who wanted to make sure the families were safe and by the migration culture present in Ukraine before the war. The kin in Latvia were also supportive of the decision to leave the country for safety.

The choice on how to move was relatively straightforward – Ukraine borders EU countries where their entry has no legal restrictions, and there are no natural barriers either, hence the border can be crossed via personal transport or on foot as many of them did. In other circumstances, the literature suggests, the role of agent to organise and plan the move is important. For refugees in Latvia, their relatives who invited and actively agitated for coming to Latvia may have acted as agents, since they helped to organise the transport and, in most situations, provided accommodation at least for the initial period.

Most Ukrainian refugees who migrated to Latvia came because they knew someone. We distinguished three groups among them: the ones for whom kinship, close or distant relatives or acquaintances, was the main determinant of choice; the ones who in addition to having friends or relatives were actively assessing opportunities for employment and life, and the ones who in addition to networks felt that the shared language, culture, history would be beneficial. The first contact was commonly from the Latvian part, reaching out even to distant relatives and offering help. This points to the close ties between the populations of both countries, and the compassion and active support Latvians are willing to offer. Further, in line with previous literature, the Ukrainian diaspora in Latvia, estimated to be around 50 thousand people before the war, has been a determining reason to relocate to Latvia, even if there were no personal kin.

We cannot unambiguously conclude a common pattern in the location decision moment, partly because the moves typically happened within hours and days, and the experiences differ from one informant to another. The decisions were made while still at home, on the go, as well as changed in response to circumstances. For many, the travel to Latvia led through

multiple countries. Financial factors as determinants of the destination choice do not appear in narratives. We recon, it is because of the suddenness and acute urgency of the forced migration, as well as owing to the geographical proximity and associated relatively low costs.

The network effect hence proves to be the most important factor to influence the location decision of Ukrainian refugees in Latvia. This conclusion contrasts the findings of Robinson et al (2002) that acute asylum seekers take the first country offered to them, but is in line with Lloyd and Sirkeci, 2022) results. Close or distant relatives and friends are the first instance to turn to for war-displaced civilians. In the situation of acute displacement, the first asylee strategy is to seek support in kinship and other networks.

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