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Resilience Embedded in Psychological Capital of Ukrainian Refugees in Poland

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Abstract

By this article we want to say that we still know very little about the migration of war refugees from Ukraine as the process has been happening massively before our eyes. This article contributes to the vast literature on refugees. Firstly, it presents a new non-Western perspective because Ukrainian refugees move predominately from Eastern to Central Europe. Secondly, it discusses the resilience of refugees, which we systematically embedded into the general concept of Psychological Capital (PsyCap), and proves it statistically in an interplay with three other components of PsyCap: self-efficacy, optimism and hope. The article also presents arguments for professionals on the ground to build a support on PsyCap resources, not only on trauma to Ukrainian refugees. The article is based on a small-scale exploratory survey of Ukrainian refugees conducted between March-May 2022 and field reflections of the coordinator of the Ukrainian House in Warsaw.

Keywords: *Ukrainian refugees; resilience; psychological capital; East-Central Europe refugee flow*

Introduction

From the mi-1990s on, Ukrainian nationals have been the largest group of foreigners in Poland. At the beginning of 2022, i.e. shortly before the full-scale war in Ukraine, the number of Ukrainians in Poland was estimated at around 1.3-1.5 million (Duszczuk et al., 2023) while the combined number of foreigners from all other countries was over 800 thousand. Although the war in Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014, the number of Ukrainians fleeing their homes has risen to an unprecedented level since its escalation in February 2022, when Russia began its military invasion of the entire territory of Ukraine. This resulted in massive movements of war refugees (Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Teke Lloyd and Sirkeci, 2022). According to the Operational Data Portal of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR Data Portal), as per 17 July 2022 (the moment when we conducted the study), there have been approximately 9.2 million border crossings by Ukrainians out of Ukraine, and 3.6 million back into Ukraine. The majority of the refugees leaving Ukraine (nearly 60 percent) went to Poland. Taking into account the short timeframe, this is one of the biggest refugee waves in modern history. Worldwide, the only larger number of refugees has come from Syria (6.8 million).

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According to the Border Guard data, between 24 February and the end of 2022, approximately 9 million border crossings occurred from Ukraine to Poland, while 7 million movements took place in the opposite direction, resulting in a net number of approximately 2 million (Górny and Kaczmarczyk, 2023). This data should be read with caution (Duszczyk et al., 2023), as it refers only to border crossing; nevertheless, that does not change the fact that a variety of sources (see e.g. Wojdat and Cywiński, 2022) present the unprecedented scale of this migration phenomenon, as the size of the Ukrainian population residing in Poland was estimated at 3.2 million in March 2022 (8% of the total population of Poland) and 3.85 million in April 2022 (9%).

As an EU Member State that shares a border with Ukraine, Poland is an attractive destination for Ukrainian refugees; furthermore, Poland has extensive pre-existing migrant networks. A large group of Ukrainian migrants in Poland have become a source of support for the newly-arrived refugees: friends, acquaintances, family. Other factors influencing the refugee flow to Poland include the cultural and linguistic similarities between the two nations and, most importantly, Poland's demonstration of openness to these refugees fleeing the full-scale military invasion of their country (Baszczak et al., 2022; Bukowski and Duszczyk, 2022; Wojdat and Cywiński, 2022).

Since the escalation of the war in Ukraine, Poland has opened its borders and has allowed in refugees, even those not in possession of legal documents proving their identity. Despite the presence of this large group of Ukrainian citizens in Poland, only 60 has a legal refugee status, as per 8 May 2022 – the time of the study. The reason for this is that the legal status of Ukrainian refugees in Poland is regulated by the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine, which was specially adopted on 2 March 2022. The Act regulates a number of key issues related to the stay of Ukrainians fleeing the war, and facilitates their entrance into the labour market and the legalization of their residence in Poland. Under this act, refugees may legally reside in Poland for 18 months counting from 24 February 2022, i.e. until 24 August 2023.

War refugees from Ukraine are treated as beneficiaries of temporary protection under the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners within the Territory of the Republic of Poland and enjoy the related rights and benefits. However, in order to receive those benefits, it is necessary to apply for a PESEL registration number. On the 15th May (the time when we conducted the study), throughout Poland, 1,097,217 Ukrainian citizens had been registered in the PESEL system.

By virtue of the act adopted on the second of March 2022, refugees from Ukraine have also been granted the right to work, the right to register at district labour offices so as to be recognized as unemployed or seeking work, as well as the right to engage in economic activity in the territory of Poland on the same legal grounds as Polish citizens. Further rights and benefits include the right to the social benefits paid in Poland, a once-off benefit of PLN 300 per person, and financial and non-financial benefits from the social assistance system (on the grounds of the Act on Social Assistance), such as financial support, food, necessary clothing, material assistance and the right to healthcare on Polish territory.

By this article we want to say that we know quite a lot about the pre-war labour migration of Ukrainians to Europe (cf. Fedyuk and Kindler, 2016), but knowledge about the migration of war refugees from Ukraine is much more limited, as the process has been taking place in real



time on a massive scale. This article contributes to the literature on refugees in a number of new ways. Firstly, it presents a new non-Western perspective because Ukrainian refugees are predominately moving from Eastern to Central part of Europe. Secondly, it discusses resilience; although this is a well-analysed and extensively studied topic in refugee studies, our approach embeds it systematically into the general concept of Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and proves it statistically in an interplay with three other components of PsyCap: self-efficacy, optimism and hope. The article also presents arguments for professionals on the ground to build a support to refugees on their psychological resources, not only on trauma (Hutchinson and Dorsett, 2012).

Resilience in Psychological Capital

In order to explore the psycho-social condition of Ukrainian refugees during the first weeks of the Russian escalation of the war in 2022, we decided to use the umbrella concept of Psychological Capital (PsyCap), with a special focus on resilience as an important component thereof.

PsyCap comprises four primary psychological resources: (a) the ability to face challenges (self-efficacy); (b) a positive attitude towards present and future success (optimism); (c) the ability to create paths to success (hope); and (d) the ability to recover from setbacks and move on (resilience) (cf. Newman at al., 2016).

Self-efficacy refers to a person's confidence in their ability to mobilize motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action in order to achieve high levels of performance (Luthans at al. 2004). Persons with a high level of self-efficacy generally have a stronger belief in their ability to control outcomes and succeed in addressing difficult challenges than people with low self-efficacy (Bandura 1997).

Hope has two components: agency and pathways (Snyder at al., 1996). Agency refers to an individual's motivation to succeed at a specific task in a given context, pathways are the ways or means by which that task may be accomplished. Individuals with high levels of hope show greater agency and are more likely to exhibit the capacity to develop alternative pathways to accomplish their goals (Luthans, Avey and Patera, 2008).

Optimism refers to an individual's anticipation of positive outcomes. People with high optimism generally build positive expectations that motivate them to pursue their goals and deal with difficult situations (Seligman, 1998).

Resilience refers to an individual's ability to bounce back from adversity, uncertainty, risk or failure, and adapt to changing and stressful life demands (Masten and Reed, 2002; Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004). Individuals with high resilience tend to be better at adapting to negative experiences and changes in the external environment (Luthans, Vogelgesang, and Lester, 2006).

PsyCap as a whole has been applied to migration studies to a very limited extent, mostly in relation to supporting refugees in workplaces (cf. Newman at al., 2017). Colic-Peisker (2009) and Fozdar and Torezani (2008) found that social support predicted the psychological well-being of refugees. Young (2001) also found that social support mitigated the negative effects of stress among refugees.

The volume of literature focusing specifically on the resilience of refugees is far greater. Toth's (2003) study among refugee women suggests that optimism, adaptability and perseverance helped them cope and survive. Belief in their own capacity to deal with life's challenges (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez and Westoby, 2003), a positive attitude, and having hope for a good future helped refugee women cope with difficulties (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer and Greenslade, 2008). This ability to cope was perceived as a tool of taking control, rather than being a victim (Gorman, Brough and Ramirez, 2003). Lenette, Brough and Cox's (2012) qualitative research among single refugee women found that resilience-building was connected with "person–environment interactions", rather than being linked to psychological traits. Pulvirenti and Mason (2011) established that refugee women's resilience is constructed in a social space, with external support from friends and other people, and within their own ethnic communities, but it is dependent on the assistance of a host community (cf. Hutchinson and Dorsett, 2012).

Based on our literature review, we formulated the main research questions of this article as follows: (1) What is the resilience of Ukrainian refugees in relation to self-efficacy, hope, optimism (PsyCap as a whole)? (2) What are the predictors of PsyCap among the studied Ukrainian refugees?

Methodology

Our small-scale exploratory survey started three weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and was conducted in close cooperation with an NGO, the Ukrainian House in Warsaw. We collected data online and on-site at the premises of our partner NGO from Ukrainian war refugees, Ukrainian labour migrants and Poles involved in offering an aid. This article presents the data collected from 16 March to 31 of May 2022. We conducted the survey in two languages: Ukrainian and Polish. We used a multi-channel recruitment approach, mostly through Facebook pages and activities at our partner NGO's premises. One of the authors of this article is a professional NGO coordinator of Ukrainian origin; further on in the text, she reflects on the data in that capacity.

Before we present the sample used in our exploratory study, we feel that it is worth taking a moment to look at the population of Ukrainian refugees in Poland based on administrative statistics. According to information from the registration process for the Polish National Registration System (PESEL), as of 15 May 2022 (when we conducted the study), the number of registered people was 1.1 million, with a very specific, feminized demographic structure (see Table 1). More than 47% of the registered persons were children and youths (up to 18 years of age), 42% were working-age women and almost 7% were elderly individuals (persons of retirement age, defined as 60+ for women and 65+ for men). The greatest proportion of the registrations took place in the biggest cities in the regions of Mazovia (20%), Silesia (10%) and Lower Silesia (10%) (Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022).

The number of people who participated in our exploratory small-scale study is $N=141$, of which more than half of declared that they needed help ($n=79$; 56%), and $n=16$ (11.3%) both needed help and offered help to others. Most of the people were planning aid activities (receiving help as well as providing help) in Poland ($n=106$). Most of the respondents were women ($n=130$; 92.2%) with higher education ($n=109$; 77.3%). Almost half of the respondents worked ($n=67$; 48.6%) and 11 people (7.8%) had their own business. Most of the



respondents had children ($n=96$; 68.1%). Of all the respondents, 88 people (66.2%) defined themselves as war refugees.

Table 1. Demographic data of the general population of war refugees from Ukraine who registered for a PESEL number in Poland

	Number of war refugees	Percentage of total
Children (age 0-18)	519,567	47.35%
Working age	503,071	45.85%
Female	460,361	41.96%
Male	42,710	3.89%
Retirement age	74,579	6.80%
Female	63,878	5.82%
Male	10,701	0.98%
Total	1,097,217	100%

Source: Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk (2022) based on the PESEL register, data as of 15 May 2022.

Findings

We performed a two-step statistical analysis of the data. In step one, we aimed to explore the relation between psychological capital and emotions towards the war among all respondents who took part in our study. The objective of step two was to find predictors of the PsyCap of the Ukrainian refugees who took part in our study.

To start with, we sought to determine whether a relationship could be found between the various dimensions of PsyCap and the assessment of refugees' psychophysical condition and relationships with other people, mostly family and friends. Pearson's r correlation analysis showed a positive medium-strength relationship between all four dimensions of psychological capital as well as the overall PsyCap score on one hand, and psychophysical condition and relationships with others on the other. We established that the higher one's general psychological capital, the better one's psychophysical condition. The strongest relationship was observed for the general index of PsyCap and psycho-emotional condition ($r=0.622$; $p<0.001$). By analysing the separate components of psychological capital and the general index, we were able to observe that psycho-emotional condition and physical condition were more strongly related with the general index than the individual components. Our findings concerning relationships with family members were similar. In our analysis of relationships with friends, we found a strong correlation with resilience ($r=0.357$; $p<0.001$), meaning that the better an individual's relationships with their friends, the higher their resilience (see Table 2).

We also investigated the socio-demographic characteristics of war refugees in comparison to others (labour migrants from before the war, involved in support to refugees or observers). The war refugees in our sample ($n=88$) are mostly women (95.5%), with higher education (72.7%), who work (34.9%) or are on a temporary break from work (30.2%); most of them have children (76.1%).

In the next step, we compared the PsyCap of the refugees in our sample to other respondents. Student's t -tests for independent groups were used for the analysis. We found that there were differences in almost all components of psychological capital; the only exception was resilience. Refugees had statistically significantly lower self-efficacy, hope and optimism than other respondents. However, we found no significant difference between refugees and other

respondents for resilience. As presented in Table 3, our analysis of the psychological capital of refugees revealed that this group scores highest on optimism ($M = 14.16$; $SD = 3.65$), followed by resilience ($M = 12.02$; $SD = 3.41$).

Table 2. Correlation matrix between the dimensions of PsyCap and psycho-physical conditions and relations with family and friends

	HOPE	SELF-EFFICACY	RESILIENCE	OPTIMISM	TOTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL
psycho-emotional condition	0.499***	0.619***	0.560***	0.449***	0.622***
physical condition	0.362***	0.467***	0.476***	0.428***	0.509***
relationship with family	0.257**	0.333***	0.352***	0.334***	0.375***
relationship with friends	0.236**	0.261**	0.357***	0.238**	0.321***

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: own exploratory survey.

Table 3. Components of PsyCap of refugees and others

Psychological Capital components	Refugees M(SD)	Others M(SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
HOPE	10.67(3.01)	12.77(3.19)	3.924	139	<0.001
SELF-EFFICACY	11.54(3.12)	13.58(3.21)	3.708	139	<0.001
RESILIENCE	12.02(3.54)	12.94(3.57)	1.486	139	n.i.*
OPTIMISM	14.16(3.65)	15.45(3.41)	2.088	139	0.039
PsyCap TOTAL	48.39(11.29)	54.76(11.40)	3.228	139	0.002

* n.i. - no important significance between groups.

Source: own study.

We investigated the emotions of both groups in relation to the war. The following analyses are based on a comparison of refugees ($n=88$; 66.2%) with other people who defined themselves as migrants and other respondents ($n=45$; 33.8%). Student's t-tests for independent groups were used for the analyses. We found that refugees thought about the war more often than other respondents. The vast majority of refugees thought about the war more than once a day (94.4%). The main emotions they experienced were grief and pain (85.3%). Their level of concentration was slightly lower.

We subsequently compared the participants in terms of their declared psychological, emotional and physical condition, as well as their relationships with family and friends. The analysis showed that there was no significant difference between refugees and other respondents in terms of psycho-emotional condition, physical condition, relationships with family and relationships with friends. This might be due to the recentness of the war at the time of our study.

Our analyses portray refugees as people with high optimism and a high level of resilience - the resilience of refugees, despite having directly experienced war, does not differ from other respondents. The refugees in our sample are mostly women, are employed, have children and



are higher-educated. In the following, we will investigate what factors influence the psychological capital of refugees, and on the basis of which variables we can predict it.

In order to determine what the psychological capital of war refugees depends on, we performed a regression analysis, taking into account the psychophysical condition of refugees and their relationships with family and friends.

The regression analysis was performed using the linear method, where the dependent variable is psychological capital (all components), while the predictors are psychophysical condition and relationships with other people ($n=87$). Based on the predictors, 43.6% of psychological capital variability can be predicted. Significant predictors are psycho-emotional condition ($\beta = 0.425$; $p < 0.001$), physical condition ($\beta = 0.277$; $p = 0.003$) and family relationships ($\beta = 0.192$; $p = 0.068$). The most important factor determining psychological capital is psycho-emotional condition (see Table 4).

Table 4. Regression model - prediction of psychological capital

	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p
Constant	16.783	4.367		3.843	<0.001
psycho-emotional condition	3.384	0.736	0.425	4.598	<0.001
physical condition	2.313	0.766	0.277	3.019	0.003
relationships with family	1.427	0.772	0.192	1.848	0.068
relationships with friends	0.178	0.743	0.025	0.239	n.i.

Source: own exploratory survey.

To sum up, firstly, the higher the social support and social relationships, the better the psychophysical condition of Ukrainian refugees. Secondly, psycho-emotional and physical condition is related with the general index of PsyCap (covering all four components of hope, optimism, self-efficacy and resilience) than with any of the individual components. Thirdly, the analysis of relationships with friends revealed a strong link with resilience, which means that the better a refugee's relationships with their friends, the higher their resilience. Fourthly, refugees have statistically significantly lower self-efficacy, hope and optimism than other respondents. There is no significant difference between refugees and other people for resilience. This means that despite their immediate traumatic experiences, their resilience is as high as that of people without that experience. Nearly 44% of PsyCap variability can be predicted by psycho-emotional condition ($\beta = 0.425$; $p < 0.001$), physical condition ($\beta = 0.277$; $p = 0.003$) and family relationships ($\beta = 0.192$; $p = 0.068$).

Discussion and Conclusions

Three weeks after the escalation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, we carried out a small-scale exploratory survey to investigate the resilience of Ukrainian refugees in Poland as a component of their psychological capital. The timing of the study and its results should be interpreted both within the context of the historical momentum as well as with some methodological reservations. The survey was conducted in the period immediately following the Russian aggression, meaning that the results are affected by a collective mobilization and an imperative of optimism both among Ukrainians and Poles, which were exacerbated by Ukrainian politicians who mobilized a great deal of support from the international community. The general level of optimism in Ukrainian society regarding a positive and quick end of the war is another factor that stimulated resilience and other PsyCap

components among refugees. The high PsyCap levels that we found may also have been influenced by the support received by refugees in Poland, as well as the openness and large-scale involvement of Polish society in helping refugees from Ukraine. The existence of strong Ukrainian migrant networks of family, friends and acquaintances in Poland further help keep PsyCap high. The high level of resilience and overall PsyCap score we found may also have been impacted by the proximity of Ukraine to Poland (meaning that the refugees know that they can return to their homes on short notice should the opportunity arise) and the socio-cultural similarities between the two countries.

Time is an important factor, however. It is now a year after the full-scale war in Ukraine began, and the hostilities are still ongoing, which may well affect the results of studies such as this one. As more and more people are affected by the war, be it through direct experience of conflict or its consequences – being forced to abandon one’s family, one’s home, mourning lost friends and loved ones and the loss of one’s former life – the hopeful, resilient mood that we encountered in our study may well shift.

As such, the study has a number of limitations: the period in which the study was conducted; the size of the sample; and the lack of a large reference group for comparative analyses. The sample itself is also rich in social resources: higher educational attainment, economic activity, and the availability of support networks, all of which positively affects PsyCap levels. Future research should examine these factors after the process of settlement in another country has been completed. Furthermore, a greater number of factors that may influence the results should be taken into account, such as the political climate in Ukraine, the wider context of international support and other external factors. A specific avenue of interest would be to study the social resilience of Ukrainian extended society spread between Ukraine and Poland.

This exploratory study shows that professionals working on the ground with refugees are recommended to focus not only on traumas of refugees but also on their strengths, such as resilience, which build their PsyCap. It is important to note that the group of refugees is not homogenous and includes people who do not only need and receive help but also provide help to others, which demonstrates their resilience and strong PsyCap.

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