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"Fear for children", Mother-Child Dyad and Future Mobility Trajectories of Displaced Ukrainians in Czechia and Poland: Children as a Factor for Fleeing and Living after the Full-Scale Invasion

"Miedo por los niños", vínculo madre-hijo y trayectorias futuras de movilidad de los desplazados ucranianos en Chequia y Polonia: los niños como factor de huida y vida tras la invasión a gran escala

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This article addresses the issue of children's care-receiving practices in the context of Ukrainian displacement in Czechia and Poland. Single mothers often need to care for their children alone, creating specific family power dynamics, especially in the setting of transnational reconfiguration, as fathers remain in Ukraine. This article aims to adopt the subjective bottom-up perception of connections associated with navigation in the new environment and shows that power dynamics is on the side of children as they are the dominant driver in the living arrange-

Abstract

ment in a new country and in the case of future mobility trajectories of the families. Using a qualitative methodology, drawing on 56 semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian displaced women in Czechia and Poland in 2023, this paper sheds light on the issue of family in the war situation. While studying the position of children in migration studies is not new, examining displaced family arrangements offers promising new insights into this topic. The focus on children will be provided from the perspective of Ukrainian female participants living in Czechia and Poland, using the concept of "doing family".

Este artículo aborda la cuestión de las prácticas de cuidado infantil en el contexto del desplazamiento ucraniano en Chequia y Polonia. Las madres solteras a menudo deben cuidar solas de sus hijos, lo que genera dinámicas específicas de poder familiar, especialmente en el marco de una reconfiguración transnacional, ya que los padres permanecen en Ucrania. El artículo analiza la adaptación al nuevo entorno desde la perspectiva subjetiva de las personas desplazadas, mostrando que las dinámicas de poder tienden a favorecer a los niños, quienes se convierten en el motor principal de la organización de la vida, tanto en el país de acogida como en las trayectorias de movilidad futura de las familias. Utilizando una metodología cualitativa basada en 56 entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas en 2023 con mujeres desplazadas ucranianas en Chequia y Polonia, este trabajo arroja luz sobre el tema de la familia en una situación de guerra. Aunque el estudio de la posición de los niños en investigaciones sobre migración no es nuevo, el análisis de la organización de familiares desplazados ofrece nuevas perspectivas prometedoras sobre este tema. El enfoque en los niños se aborda desde la perspectiva de las participantes ucranianas que viven en Chequia y Polonia, utilizando el concepto de "hacer familia".

Children's positionality; displaced persons from Ukraine; temporary protection; transnational family; caregiving practices

Key words

Situación de los niños; personas desplazadas de Ucrania; protección temporal; familia transnacional; cuidados

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1. Introduction

On 24 February 2022, the Russian invasion in Ukraine caused the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the end of the Second World War started, and nearly 6.5 million Ukrainians sought refuge globally while 3.7 million were internally displaced (UNHCR, 2024). In the first month of the full-scale Russian invasion, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2022) estimated that more than 2.5 million children were internally displaced, and 2 million children fled from Ukraine in search of a safe shelter. However, many children did not survive the invasion. At the beginning of the conflict, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights documented that till the end of March 2022, more than 100 children were killed during the conflict, and another 134 children were injured (UNICEF, 2022). After two years, nearly 1,800 children have been killed or wounded since the escalation of the hostilities, even though the number is likely far higher (UN NEWS, 2024). Unfortu-

nately, Ukrainian children were also among the victims of forced deportation. As Ukrainian officials have demonstrated, many children were transported to the Russian Federation. More specifically, the Ukrainian government indicated that 16,221 children had been relocated to the Russian Federation by the end of February 2023 (Human Rights Council, 2023). All of these situations are the reasons why it is so important to study the position of Ukrainian children affected by the Russian invasion after 24 February 2022.

The unprovoked Russian aggression primarily motivated mothers with children to flee Ukraine and reconfigure their family dynamics, as men of conscription age were not allowed to leave the country due to martial law (apart from exceptions such as disability, work related to international shipping or having more than three children to support). This situation leads to the physical separation of families, forcing women to secure basic necessities on their own in their countries of destination and grapple with the daily challenges of life as displaced persons. Furthermore, this resulted in a transnational arrangement of families (Sørensen & Vammen, 2014). The transnational family might be defined as a type of family when one or more family members are physically separated from the rest of the family because they live separately in two or more states, but they still maintain mutual ties and relationships (Schmalzbauer, 2004). These ties are maintained, for example, by digital communication (using ICT) or visits and they create the sense of (family) groupness, care and (not physical) presence (Ariza, 2012). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that some women who fled with children had their spouses already living in Czechia or Poland.

After fleeing to Czechia and Poland, the responsibility for care arrangements and securing basic needs falls primarily on Ukrainian women. They must find ways to navigate the relational spheres—school, friendships, neighbour relationships—often differently than what they were used to having in the countries of origin (Bonizzoni & Leonini, 2013). The children must develop all the linguistic and social skills required to make friends in a new environment (Smith et al., 2004). This is worth emphasising in terms of bullying targeting Ukrainians at schools in Central European countries (Stetsenko & Furlong, 2023). Moreover, children miss their other family members and it is challenging to maintain bonds transnationally. For displaced mothers, the situation of their children is paramount. Additionally, they also need to overcome other major obstacles related to finances, housing, health issues or adaptation in a new environment. This may pose challenges, but it also led to the creation of specific care arrangements.

The traditional Ukrainian family is typically viewed within the nuclear family framework, consisting of a father, mother, and their children (Nour, 2002), and is characterized by a patriarchal structure that governs family responsibilities, including upbringing of children, is the responsibility of women (Fedyuk, 2016), while men are breadwinners (Khrenova & Burrel, 2021). However, this traditional (patriarchal) gender division of Ukrainian families cannot be taken for granted. The conventional division of family ties can be more related to the top-down framework of preset roles and emphasises that intimate ties and care practices are strictly divided along parental and gender roles. Still, this article focuses on a relativistic bottom-up perspective because family members usually negotiate their ties instead of fulfilling normative family frameworks (Montero-Sieburth et al., 2021). It is necessary to understand how nuclear families maintain and negotiate their relationships to capture subjective perceptions of diverse aspects of care, intimate ties, everyday experiences, and emotions based on everyday interactions, experiences, and practices. This reveals the dynamism of ties by unveiling the divergent importance of these bonds towards family members instead of emphasising standardised nu-

clear family roles and pre-given adult-centric power dynamics in care arrangements. In this context, international migration is a process that induces changes in family configurations in terms of the meanings of familial ties and the roles and responsibilities assigned to relatives (Bonizzoni & Leonini, 2013). Furthermore, as Myriam Denov and Bree Akesson (2017) underline, armed conflict may have an impact on children's lives in a myriad of ways that can be both direct and indirect, immediate and long-term, individual and collective.

To sum up, the purpose of this article is to reveal, by using the bottom-up perspective and interviews with mothers, relational perspective of the power dynamics in the families in the contexts of forced displacement as well as in the context of transnationalism. It reveals the positions of mothers and children in countries of settlement, as well as how children contribute to the future mobility trajectories of their families. Participants experienced a lot of challenges, including working in low-skilled jobs and simultaneously taking care of children, but the power dynamics is on the side of children as they are the decisive driver for the future mobility trajectory. The following part presents background information about displaced persons from Ukraine, particularly children, in Czechia and Poland. The next section presents methodology, followed by the analysis and conclusion.

2. Background

Ukraine is currently facing the aggression of its eastern neighbour, which is why the lives of many Ukrainians have dramatically changed. Many of the children became injured, did not survive the shelling or were transported to Russia. UNICEF also emphasises that children are threatened by mines covering approximately one-third of the country. Moreover, 3,800 schools and educational institutions were bombed or shelled, of which 368 were completely destroyed, and another 2,300 schools were closed down for safety reasons. Even though two million Ukrainian students receive education partly or exclusively online, this is only a poor substitute for what children would gain from participating in in-person lessons (UNICEF, 2022). An additional threat is the forced displacement of Ukrainian children from occupied territories into the Russian Federation (Rosyjski polityk, 2023). Understandably, many Ukrainian women decided to flee with their children in search of shelter abroad.

The situation of escaping from Ukraine to Poland in the first days of the war was shown by UNHCR data (Table 1). More than 40% of people crossing the border were under 17. These results may indicate that the initial weeks of the war were focused on evacuating children from war-torn areas. According to data, approximately 200,000 Ukrainian children attended school in 2022 in Poland (Ptak, 2022).

Table 1. Children fleeing to Poland from Ukraine by age

Age in years	Boys/men	Girls/women	Total
0–4	3.4%	3.3%	6.7%
5–12	10.1%	9.9%	20%
12–17	8.1%	8.5%	16.6%
17+	6.8%	49.9%	56.7%

Source: UNHCR (2022)

From the beginning of the invasion, approximately 700,000 children left Ukraine for other countries, including Poland and Czechia. Poland as a neighbouring country assisted 1.6 million Ukrainians (UNHCR, 2024) and Czechia assisted the highest number of Ukrainians per 100,000 inhabitants (Klimešová et al., 2022). The countries are understood as safe countries due to belonging to NATO and the European Union, but important are also linguistic similarities and the previous numbers of migrants from Ukraine in both countries. In these countries, Ukrainians were the biggest minorities even before the Russian invasion and many displaced persons had their social ties or relatives there. They provide support for newcomers and influence both the knowledge and logistical aspects. These are the advantages of both host countries in contrast to Slovakia, Moldova, Romania and Hungary, which are also supportive and are the neighbouring countries of Ukraine. Czechia and Poland offer free housing, humanitarian aid, social benefits, health insurance and free entry to all educational levels as well as to the labour market without any restrictions. However, neither country offers obligatory language courses, which poses a barrier to integration.

There were about 98,000 Ukrainian displaced children in Czechia in 2024 (out of 383,000 persons granted temporary protection). More than 22,600 children were under 6 years old, 53,000 were between 6 and 15, and more than 22,300 were aged 15 to 18 (Ministry of the Interior of Czech Republic, 2024). Ukrainian children also attend schools in Czechia. Their number increased to 49,539 in April 2024 (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2024). Their greatest challenges were associated with language skills and insufficient available places in schools (Kavanová et al., 2023). According to the data obtained from the Polish Educational Information System, the number of all Ukrainian students in the Polish education system was 247,998 as of 1 October 2024 (Cygonik, 2024).

3. Position of children and the relativistic notions

The position of children was previously overlooked in migration studies. Children were initially ignored (Hardman, 2001; Fresnoza-Flot & Nagasaka, 2015; Sime, 2017), but later they were recognized as key "reasons" for the migration of the entire family, as they became crucial in parental decisions about mobility (Dobson, 2009; Fresnoza-Flot & Nagasaka, 2015) The position of children was later discussed in migration studies (Ackers, 2000; Sime, 2017), and the parental goals were also considered as intertwined with desirable results for children. Nevertheless, parents were still seen as the main "arrangers" of migration, which might carry an important caveat—children were not studied as active agents in terms of the constituency of their social world. The authors of this article are aware of the recently discussed children-oriented perspective and consider children as persons who reflect and shape their own world by their own agency to make changes (Knörr & Nunes, 2005). Still, this article focuses on the adult-centric perspective of displaced Ukrainians who decide about their children. The reason is associated with ethical issues and accessibility of children.

It is important to highlight the care configuration in different life course stages and its impact on family. This configuration can be divided along the categories of infancy, toddler, childhood, preadolescence age and adolescence age with varying capabilities at specific ages. However, chronological age is not the social age and social categories are often set up without the context of behaviour. Therefore, chronological social categories do not express processes of everyday interactions (Huijsmans, 2015) and the social context is more adequate than the social category related to chronological age and demographic standards (Huijsmans, 2017).

In that regard, specific chronological social categories cannot be seen as a matter for independence, self-realization and capability to act. The care configuration thus might be reflected in the social, but also in cultural context and this creates the expectations of care.

The term "refugee journeys" (Benezer & Zetter, 2014) might be important for displaced persons from Ukraine. This means that the transnational splitting of a family does not allow one to start a new life abruptly. Mothers want to ensure the safety of their children by moving as far away from the war as possible, on the other hand, the issue of fathers remaining in Ukraine remains unresolved for the future. This separation is problematic because children's worlds might be built on a physical closeness to mother and father (Gizicka, 2010), and the transnational arrangements interrupt mutual local dependencies. Regarding that, scholars in countries of destinations discussed children's mental health, post-traumatic stress and psychological well-being (Pfeiffer, Garbade & Sachser, 2024), adaptation, homesickness (Toros, Falch-Eriksen & Kozmenko, 2024) but also their social relations (Macková & Preissová-Krejčí, 2023).

In this regard, it is important to adopt a subjective recognition of the diverse aspects of intimacy, family practices and caregiving (Montero-Sieburth et al., 2021). Therefore, a relativistic approach focusing on identification, subjectivity, negotiation and belonging is crucial. This approach should be achieved by emphasizing everyday practices, connections and affinities (Morgan, 2011). This helps to understand how the power dynamics of family ties and care arrangements are constructed (Mortero-Sieburth et al., 2021) because family bonds are based on multiple relational facets.

Consequently, the emphasis on cultural conditions—such as traditional gender roles in Ukrainian families—could not fully explain the reality of relationships. To avoid the ossified division of gender roles, culturally embedded aspects might be only seen as the starting point from which one could derive relational family ties. However, it all depends on everyday experiences of how cultural ties are changed, shaped or fulfilled, and, in some cases, cultural conditions do not even correspond to states of connections (Morgan, 2011). As Morgan (2011) and Smart (2007) also discussed how family practices emerge in relational interactionism, highlighting that what matters is who the practices focus on and how. Engaging in these activities, along with the way how they are carried out, serves as an affirmation of specific affiliations (Morgan, 2011). This also enables us to study particular dimensions of experience manifested by relational intimacy, caring and sharing (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). To sum up, this article provides bottom-up relational subjective perspectives on the arrangement of family ties between children and mothers in their countries of destination and the role and position of children.

4. Methodology

The research focused on citizens of Ukraine who came to Poland and Czechia as displaced persons after 24 February 2022. It was conducted between June and August 2023, and 56 interviews were held (16 in Poland and 40 in Czechia). Participants were mostly born in Ukraine; 54 were born on its territory, while two people were born in the town of Tynda in the Amur region (Russia) and the city of Shymkent (Kazakhstan). However, both respondents had parents with Ukrainian citizenship as of 24 February 2022. Additionally, two participants were born in Crimea but moved to Kyiv before the Russian annexation of the peninsula in 2014.

Participants were from different parts of Ukraine: 15 were from eastern Ukraine, 15 people lived in central Ukraine before the outbreak of the full-scale war, 14 in western Ukraine and 12 in southern Ukraine (Table 2). All participants were women. Interviews were mostly conducted in Prague, Czechia, or near it (Kolín, Beroun, Tursko, Kladno, Lány). One interview was conducted in Hradec Králové and one in Pardubice. The Polish part was conducted in Olkusz, a town in southern Poland near Kraków (Table 2). The interview location was chosen according to the preferences of the respondents. Thus, in Czechia, most studies were carried out in private homes, parks and cafes. Two interviews were held in the university office of one of the authors and one in the Department for Asylum and Migration Policy. In Poland, the research was conducted in hostels for displaced persons, playgrounds and a hypermarket. Therefore, it was not always possible to ensure that the location provided a quiet environment, which lowered the quality of the recordings due to passing cars or children accompanying their mothers. One interview, at the respondent's request, was conducted online. Each interview was conducted separately using the semi-structured interviews and it was a single meeting. The authors met with one participant on two occasions.

In both countries, the authors recruited participants online. In Czechia, Facebook was used for this purpose. Authors advertised research on specific Facebook groups for Ukrainians. In Poland, a Telegram group for displaced persons living in Olkusz was used. Additionally, in Poland, information about the research spread among Ukrainians in the town, and they were often advised to take part in interviews. Displaced persons were motivated to participate in the study, frequently expressing their gratitude for the assistance provided by Poles and Czechs at the onset of the invasion. They also explained their participation by wanting to share their stories but also emphasised the role of Russia in their predicament.

The authors used qualitative methodology and semi-structured interviews. This method is suitable for studying the issue of children's care-receiving practices because it can be used to explore values, motivations, affiliations and identifications. The same list of questions was prepared for each participant, and the semi-structured interview method allowed for additional questions to be asked during participants' narratives. In the interviews, the authors especially focused on the displaced persons' motivation to leave conflict-torn Ukraine, considering the decision in the context of the entire family and the influence of children. The authors used the term "women with children," which is usually claimed to describe the situation of displaced persons from Ukraine (Euronews, 2024). The authors received sufficient data to analyse the research topic related to mothers' and children experiences as displaced persons.

The authors conducted interviews with mothers instead of children, mainly due to ethical reasons. Children might have experienced significant trauma, and the authors did not want to traumatise them further. Still, other authors studied Ukrainian displaced children using art workshop group sessions (Lukito et al., 2023) or by interpreting their drawings (Popławska & Bocharova, 2023). Therefore, this research focuses on the perspective of adults (Fresnoza-Flot & Nagasaka, 2015) when displaced women spoke on behalf of children, while fully acknowledging the importance of a child-centred perspective (Montero-Sieburth et al., 2021).

The family structure of participants is important. Participants usually maintained the nuclear family framework, but also single mothering and one participant had extended family members (mother of her spouse) in the host country. The nuclear family was also sustained across borders. Thus, while 26 participants had a spouse in Czechia or Poland, 11 participants had spouses in Ukraine and others were single or divorced. Altogether 22 women took care of their young children and 7 participants had children younger than 6 years of age. Importantly, from

the sample of 22 participants, 16 had to care alone for their children in host countries (however, the spouse of one participant frequently travelled back and forth to Czechia and one participant has already returned to Ukraine). In the case of our participants, no one had lost contact with spouses due to the war circumstances (death/missing person/disappearance). In addition, we interviewed four grandmothers (respondents 19, 33, 43 and 49), who often had caring responsibilities for their grandchildren. Regarding cultural norms in Ukraine, taking care of children was usually seen as the matter of women and also participants with spouses in Czechia and Poland were usually seen as those who needed to provide care while men were perceived as breadwinners.

Each respondent was informed about the purpose of the research and signed informed consent. The consent covered agreement to audio recording, no data sharing with third parties, retention of data only in the authors' personal archives, anonymity and the possibility to withdraw from research. The ethics committee at the University of Hradec Králové approved the research (reference number 10/2023). The authors were aware that ethical approval is necessary due to handling personal and sensitive materials that refer to fleeing from Ukraine and war circumstances. Interviews were held in Ukrainian as two authors are fluent in this language. These two authors learned Ukrainian thanks to their long-term study and research stays in Ukraine in the pre-war period. This linguistic proficiency limited possible misunderstandings.

Regarding ethical principles, we respect the participant´s rights and agency by informed consent, personal privacy as well as free access to confidential recording. Participants had he right to withdraw from the research at any time. The authors maintained the integrity of the study and did not deceive the participants. Vulnerable children were not subject to interviews as only adults were interviewed, based on their own will to participate in the research. As might be expected, authors were guided by the "do no harm" principle. Additionally, we wanted to minimize the risks for participants and we, furthermore, wanted to maximize the benefit of the research. However, this is related to our obligation as researchers not to use the materials for something that has not been approved by the participants. Regarding the material, it was securely stored in accordance with legislation and institutional policy and only team members could access it. As for neutrality, we used triangulation with other sources to validate our findings, engaged in reflexivity and had no conflict of interest.

5. Analysis: the power dynamics of a Ukrainian refugee family

The positionality of displaced Ukrainian children is especially valuable to study not only because their future trajectories in the European Union are discussed in media, political and sociological contexts. The importance is also patterned in regard to single mothering by Ukrainian women in the countries of destination while their spouses remained in Ukraine. This relates to our research. Due to ethical constraints, the interviewees were women instead of children, but discussing the children's positionality remains the main research focus. It is also worth mentioning that all participants left Ukraine in the first three months after the invasion. At the time of fleeing, the invasion was still in its full dynamics.

Children are strongly associated with the participants' decision to flee from Ukraine. When asked about their first and second motivation to leave the country, participants mentioned war and the safety of their children. It is worth noting that both motivations were intertwined because participants who claim fear of war as the main motivation refer to protecting children

as their secondary motivation. Others who mentioned getting their children to a safe haven as their first motivation cited fear of war as their following reason.

The participant from Sumy in eastern Ukraine underlined that they "left because our city was under occupation, and we were afraid for the child."[1] Another from Kharkiv pointed out that they wanted to protect children because the "greatest danger for children is shelling and bombing."[2] The next participant gave the same argument: "We left to protect our children."[3] The participant from occupied Melitopol stated:

> I did not want my children to attend their [Russian] school, to teach their [Russian] anthem. I did not even want my children to be in places where there were many soldiers with their weapons. They [Russian soldiers] lived close to us, and I did not want my children to see it all. When the war began, we transferred our children to the village. Together with my husband, we lived in Melitopol for three months, but the children lived behind the city, and then we all left for Czechia.[4]

Interestingly, a similar rationale is provided by those participants who refer to the aspirations of other displaced persons from Ukraine, arguing that the reason for leaving Ukraine is the safety of their children:

> Displaced persons left because they had children and wanted to protect them. We don't have children, but if we had, maybe we would have left [earlier]. If we had our own, we would have probably gone with the children [earlier], and those who emigrated usually left because of the children.[5]

In some cases, the spontaneous decisions were made during life-threatening situations:

> Because it was terrible for a child, one time, after three weeks of hiding in the basement, my daughter woke up in the morning and asked: "Mum, have we already died or are we still alive?" After these words, I took the backpack, I took the child's clothes and supplies for one day, and we left.[6]

Although children are seen as the main driver for fleeing, participants also mentioned childless families. In such cases, they strongly stressed that spouses in Ukraine impacted the decisions of women to stay in their country despite the bombing:

> In Zaporizhzhia, I had cousins, and they [Russians] also bombed that city. One cousin also wanted to leave for Czechia with her child. She wanted to take out the child here

1 Participant 41 (from Sumy, eastern Ukraine).

2 Participant 44 (from Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine).

3 Participant 42 (from Rivne, western Ukraine).

4 Participant 14 (from Melitopol, southern Ukraine).

5 Participant 43 (from Rudzka, central Ukraine).

6 Participant 46 (from Bialokrynica, western Ukraine).

> and then maybe leave somewhere else. And the second cousin is without children, she lives alone with her husband, and she will not leave him.[7]

However, in some cases, children are the driver for other families to stay in Ukraine:

> I have a sister. She stayed in Ukraine due to her husband. He is serving as a soldier in the war. She said that she would stay because she had four children. She was afraid that she would flee with them to Czechia, and then she could have problems with school, employment, kindergarten, language and so on. So, she is afraid of changes. She is now in Khmelnytskyi.[8]

Whether to stay or flee, children—as participants stated—are an important motivation for their decision about (im)mobility. Staying close with children is not only the expectation of Ukrainian society towards participants as women (Solari, 2017), but also the result of the strong position of family ties in Ukrainian society (Diuk, 2012). One participant from Kyiv confirmed this: "I am 60 years old, and I was not afraid. I was afraid for my daughter and for my grandchildren. The grandchildren were 13 and 15 at that time. And we just want to save children."[9]

For some participants, the arguments made by spouses were the main driver to leave Ukraine: "We did not live in a war environment, we were far away, but it was simply terrible. The children were crying, and under the pressure from my husband, we left."[10] Moreover, despite the ban on military-age men (18-60 years of age) from crossing the border, 26 fathers were located in Poland and Czechia. Therefore, participants also left for Poland or Czechia after their spouses: "I left because my husband worked in Poland."[11]

However, the decision to leave was made by participants and their spouses, and they did not discuss fleeing with children (regardless of their age). This confirms that only parents made the decision to leave:

> We didn't leave immediately, but two weeks before the beginning of the war, we took the children outside Kyiv because foreign ambassadors and embassy representatives started to leave. So we took the children away, but when the war started, we went to stay with the children outside Kyiv with my parents. And on 4 March or 2 [March], there was a spontaneous decision to go abroad because Russians were simply destroying the neighbouring village. And I was very concerned about the children, and our decision as parents [to leave] was made within two hours.[12]

7 Participant 18 (from Bucha, central Ukraine).

8 Participant 28 (from Odesa, southern Ukraine).

9 Participant 49 (from Kyiv, central Ukraine).

10 Participant 52 (from Radekhiv, western Ukraine).

11 Participant 54 (from Stryi, western Ukraine).

12 Participant 50 (from Kyiv, central Ukraine).

In Czechia and Poland, as countries of destinations, children are often accustomed to the local environment. Participants frequently mentioned schools in this context. Schooling is obligatory in both countries for displaced children from Ukraine, forcing them to learn the local language and get along with their schoolmates.[13] On the other hand, distance learning at Ukrainian schools was also possible. Schooling in Czechia and Poland may bring psychological distress to children: "My children are learning poorly, they have some psychological problems, do not want to speak Czech and want to go back to Ukraine. My son is not able to make friends with Czech children. He has huge problems in school."[14] Sudden uprooting from their original school environment in Ukraine and transfer to Czech or Polish schools without any previous preparation is problematic. In some schools, Ukrainian children are bullied by their schoolmates who openly support Russia. The bullies are probably influenced by their Czech parents:

> [In schools], there is strong Russian influence. It first influenced the son because he was younger, and then it also impacted his older sister. I wanted to say that some Czechs support Ukraine, and some Czechs do not, and they are more oriented towards Russia. But I understand that these children copy their parents.[15]

Interestingly, in the Polish part of the research, the issue of children's education often appeared in the interviews, but problems at school or among the child's peers were not mentioned. However, some problems emerged outside school: "My teenage son had a situation where he was beaten up by his [Polish] peers in the park. But fortunately, he came out of the shock because at that time we thought that we would return to Ukraine."[16] Therefore, there are sometimes unpleasant nationalistic feelings of the local people in Czechia and Poland.

Participants need to take care of their children in a new country, which limits their job opportunities and the possibility of attending Polish or Czech language courses. In general, taking care of children constrains participants' self-fulfilment and negatively affects not only single mothers but also those who are living with their spouses in Czechia:

> Language courses are until the evening, from eight in the morning until the evening, and I could not be on time. I have to go to school with my son, and I have to be there at nine. I will not be able to manage it. At five, I should bring him back home. So I could attend Czech lessons only in the first half of the day, but there are only paid courses during this time. And I can't pay for it.[17]

Accordingly, participants are seen as individuals who should put aside their own needs because they are expected to live for the sake of the family (Fedyuk, 2016). Their challenging sit-

13 However, in some cases the studies are different because children learnt online in Ukrainian schools; Ukrainian families had problems with enrolling children in kindergarten and they were not necessarily accepted due to capacity; some children were not enrolled in appropriate school due to limited capacities.

14 Participant 10 (from Donetsk, eastern Ukraine).

15 Participant 7 (from Mykolaiv, southern Ukraine).

16 Participant 46 (from Bialokrynica, western Ukraine).

17 Participant 30 (from Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine).

uation is also related to the jobs because participants often have poorly paid, low-skilled jobs (such as in cleaning, manufacturing, sales or supporting roles) due to insufficient knowledge of the local language and/or the necessity to take care of children: "I do not have a job. I will not work in a factory because there are night shifts, and I could not leave children at night alone."[18] Participants often work below their qualifications which additionally affects their financial problems and which is related to childcare (Jirka et al., 2023). Due to their situation, they are financially supported by their spouses, but also by other relatives. This support is managed in a transnational way by spouses who stay in Ukraine due to martial law, but also locally by spouses or other distant relatives who are in Czechia or Poland (one exception is a participant who is living with the mother of her spouse in Czechia).

Fleeing with children and focusing on them in a new environment might hinder participants' adaptation, and, as a result, those who did not see their own or children self-fulfilment in Czechia or Poland want to return to Ukraine. However, in some cases, participants view their own situation and that of children in countries of destination more positively and do not feel they should return. Even though the perspective of participants in terms of return or stay might differ, children and their positions play a crucial role in the decision:

> I would live here longer if I were alone. But when my children did not want to attend school, I understood that they might have a problem. I cannot be in a place which is bad for them. I talked with teachers and the headmaster about it, but they did not understand me.[19]

Another participant stated: "We are not planning to move to other places in Poland. Everything depends on the child's education. We will choose the best option for us."[20] Scholars often discuss reunification of families in those cases when one or both parents migrated first, and children followed their parents after they became established in the country of immigration (Sime, 2017) because parents see opportunities for having a "better future" for children (Sime, Fox & Pietka, 2011). Djajić (2008) also highlights the wish of families to remain united while migrating. However, in the case of participants as displaced persons, their decisions are more associated with sudden fleeing from their original country without sufficient preparation for migration, which brings many significant problems. While reunification of families usually needs more time to make investments and social advancement, displaced participants had only limited opportunities to establish their living arrangements before being forced to flee abruptly. They lacked preparation and had to begin their new lives in an unknown environment with uncertainty and unpredictability. This also resulted in obtaining inferior job positions in the labour market and psychological issues.[21] Another issue is the temporary nature of the stay, as temporary protection is extended annually, but the question is what will happen afterwards. These barriers restrain the future mobility trajectories in the countries of immigration. However, some participants consider Poland or Czechia as the current suitable

18 Participant 14 (from Melitopol, southern Ukraine).

19 Participant 7 (from Mykolaiv, southern Ukraine).

20 Participant 48 (from Izium, eastern Ukraine).

21 The European Union member countries did not homologate the technical requirements for professional careers.

option for their children: "We don't want to go to another country from Poland because it will be another stress for my children, a new language, everything from the beginning again, they have already experienced a lot of changes."[22] Others, who have been "torn" from their former lives and cannot find their place in the new reality, state the opposite:

> [My sister] was here for three months, and then she could not stand it and went back [...] she could not exist here. She sat in the house and could not go on the street. I saw that Ukrainians experienced many similar situations. Those who came here and then returned. I think it has a hard psychological impact.[23]

In the research, 25 participants wanted to go back to Ukraine. To summarise, participants refer to children not only as a crucial point for fleeing but also for the future mobility trajectories of participants and the whole family. Participants might evaluate what is desirable for children differently, but still accommodate themselves locally in the children's best interest.

Regarding the transnational ties, it was found that participants with husbands remaining in Ukraine usually call them every day, but participants also travel back to Ukraine temporarily because their children (and participants themselves) want to see the children's fathers or even children (usually older than 18 years of age) who stayed in Ukraine:

> In May, we travelled back to Ukraine because my daughter and I wanted to see my husband. It is hard for him, he misses me, and I miss him too because when he is not close, it is very hard [...] when we came back to our father, my daughter spent a lot of time playing together. And I asked her: "Why do you not want to talk to him online? Because I could not hug him, I cannot do anything." She is upset with the situation, that he is not close to her.[24]

Children appreciate physical closeness to their fathers, which is why they travel back to Ukraine. According to stay or return, the father is usually the driver of going back home:

> Children want to come back to be with their father. They want to see their friends [in Czechia], but they do not go back to this place. They already have friends here, and they have been in school for one year here. They did not remember the shelling. They just want to come back to be with their father.[25]

The transnational ties involve certain disunity because some participants evaluate the Czech environment as more suitable for living in, and some reveal their autonomy and empowerment, but they also perceive the necessity of children being close to their fathers. Their indecision contributes to the uncertainty about whether to stay or return to Ukraine. The analysis of interviews implies that the bottom-up subjective perception and its relational character must be adopted to understand the development of care and mobility. The familial bonds are

22 Participant 54 (from Stryi, western Ukraine).

23 Participant 16 (from Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine).

24 Participant 35 (from Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine).

25 Participant 8 (from Kyiv, central Ukraine).

negotiated in specific social contexts and translated into specific power dynamics of family ties and care practices. In the case of participants, despite children usually not having a direct influence on the decision-making process, it is shown that power dynamics in mobility trajectory revolve around children and are based on caring for them. The practices associated with fleeing are not just ordinary practices, but they show the capacity between participants and their children in terms of the power of children. The findings indicate that children could be the driver of mobility even in war-torn situations. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt the dynamism of family practices (Morgan, 2011; Montero-Sieburth et al., 2021).

6. Discussion and conclusion

Participants refer to children as the main motivation for fleeing Ukraine. It is worth noting that despite the initial motivation to leave to ensure the children's safety, the desire to guarantee education and a future for the child becomes a central concern later on. Participants have problems with language, jobs and care of children at the same time because the power dynamics between participants and their children are on the side of their children. Despite the traditional adult-centric focus in migration studies and the conventional framework of paternal capability, children are the dominant driver in the living arrangement and future mobility trajectory of the whole family. These findings support the recognition of children's tremendous impact on family decisions and show the necessity to take into account the positionality of children in the case of war in Ukraine.

This research has certain implications for reconsidering the positionality of children in conflicts. While the children-oriented perspectives and positionality are already discussed in migration studies in terms of reunification of families (among others) in a peaceful situation, this research shows that children's positionality might be even more crucial in conflict. The power dynamics emerging between participants and children in conflict situations appear to be logical (parents firstly take care of children), but thanks to the bottom-up perspective, this research revealed the decisive power of children based on "doing family" (Montero-Sieburth et al., 2021). It is worth mentioning that this article was about the power of children, but other relatives, primarily spouses, are also crucial for participants' living arrangements. Furthermore, these findings came up in a situation when Ukraine still fights for its independence, but the end of the war may affect the power dynamics between participants and children in a different way. This research has certain limitations. First, the focus was on women for ethical reasons, but naturally, this topic has an importance from a children-oriented perspective. The authors are fully aware of discussing children's social agency in migration studies, but they also considered ethical issues when researching children in case of war and displacement. The authors preferred to avoid involving children due to their vulnerability and the potential for triggering painful memories. Second, to avoid some problematic points, the authors decided to have the participants talk about what they think about care arrangement and family dynamics, and the participants' reasoning could provide categorisation. Third, the research relies strongly on participants and their narratives, while other persons involved—mainly spouses—were not interviewed.

Due to ethical constraints, future research might elaborate on the children-oriented perspective of displaced minors from Ukraine whenever possible. Their own perspective is vital not only for the explanation of their future arrangement in countries of destination as displaced persons but also for the decisions of the whole family. Future research might also discuss the

situation of spouses and their role in the future trajectories of the family. Scholars might also elaborate on how time and living circumstances in countries of destination affect the socialisation of children. The period of stay may also result in difficulties after they return (if that is the case), and thus, additional stress and problems for families.

This article focuses on temporarily protected Ukrainian children and their positionality within the family from the bottom-up perspective. Interviews were conducted with their mothers and caregivers, and it was found that children have a key role not only in the motivations for fleeing Ukraine but also in living arrangements in countries of destination and staying or returning to Ukraine. The emphasis on the well-being of children is tremendous in that regard, and it shows the importance of children in the case of Ukrainian displaced persons.

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Appendix

Table 2. Distribution of participants according to their location of birth, location of departure and place of interview

Part.	Region and city/ town/village before invasion	Location/year of birth	Location of interview	The role in the family	Type of family they refer to	Support received transnationally
1.	Central/ Kyiv	Mykolaiv/ 1993	Prague	Single	-	-
2.	Central/ Kyiv	Kyiv/ 1986	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear	Reverse remittances, emotional support

Part.	Region and city/ town/village before invasion	Location/year of birth	Location of interview	The role in the family	Type of family they refer to	Support received transnationally
3.	East/ Kharkiv	Dergachi/ 2001	Prague	Single	-	-
4.	East/ Kharkiv	Zaporizhia/ 2001	Lány	Single	-	-
5.	West/ Uzhhorod	Mukachevo/ 1985	Beroun	Mother/ divorced	Single mothering	-
6.	East/ Druzhkovka	Tynda (Russia)/ 1984	Prague	Single	-	-
7.	South/ Mykolaiv	Novopetrivka/ 1989	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	-
8.	Central/ Kyiv	Sofijivska Borshchahivka/ 1982	Lány	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	Reverse remittances, emotional support, sending products
9.	West/ Chernivtsi	Chernivtsi/ 1983	Kolín	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
10.	East/ Donetsk	Donetsk/ 1983	Hradec Králové	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
11.	East/ Sumy	Sumy/ 1974	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	Reverse remittances, emotional support
12.	South/ Mykolaiv	Shymkent (Kazakhstan)/ 1978	Kladno	Mother/ divorced	Single mothering	-
13.	South/ Bilozerka	Bilozerka/ 1990	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
14.	South/ Melitopol	Zaporizhia/ 1980	Pardubice	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
15.	East/ Kharkiv	Mariupol/ 1976	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
16.	East/ Kharkiv	Kharkiv/ 1986	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	Reverse remittances, emotional support
17.	East/ Kharkiv	Kharkiv/ 1986	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
18.	Central/ Bucha	Sevastopol/ 1989	Tursko	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	Reverse remittances, emotional support
19.	East/ Pavlohrad	Ternivka/ 1968	Prague	Mother/ wife/ grandmother	Extended family	-
20.	South/ Odesa	Rovenskaya/ 1990	Prague	Single	-	-
21.	West/ Bushtyno	Sheky/ 1991	Milovice	Mother/ divorced	Nuclear family	-
22.	Central/ Kyiv	Zaporizhzhia/ 1992	Prague	Mother/ wife	Extended family	-
23.	West/ Ivano-Frankivsk	Pidberezhzhya/ 1974	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	Emotional support
24.	South/ Mykolaiv	Mykolaiv/ 1973	Prague	Single	-	(spouse and children died)
25.	West/ Ivano-Frankivsk	Ivano-Frankivsk/ 1990	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	Reverse remittances, emotional support, sending products
26.	Central/ Chopovychi	Chopovychi/ 1991	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	Reverse remittances

Part.	Region and city/ town/village before invasion	Location/year of birth	Location of interview	The role in the family	Type of family they refer to	Support received transnationally
27.	West/ Ternopil	Shumsk/ 1983	Online	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Ukraine - returned back)
28.	South/ Odesa	Ladyzhyn/ 1989	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	-
29.	East/ Kharkiv	Kotovsk/ 1982	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
30.	East/ Kharkiv	Kharkiv/ 1971	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
31.	Central/ Kyiv	Kyiv/ 1974	Lány	Mother/ divorced	Single mothering	-
32.	East/ Sumy	Sumy/ 1986	Online	Mother/ divorced	Single mothering	-
33.	Central/ Kyiv	Kryvyj Rih/ 1964	Prague	Mother/ wife/ grandmother	Extended family	-
34.	West/ Uzhhorod	Uzhhorod/ 1978	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
35.	East/ Kharkiv	Kolomak/ 1982	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
36.	West/ Ivano-Frankivsk	Kalush/ 1999	Hradec Králové	Single	-	-
37.	Central/ Kyiv	Yalta/ 1996	Prague	Single	-	-
38.	Central/ Nova Basan	Kyiv/ 1985	Kopidlno	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	Reverse remittances, emotional support
39.	West/ Zaluzhia	Ternopil/ 1985	Hradec Králové	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
40.	West/ Lutsk	Lutsk/1 985	Prague	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Czechia)
41.	East/ Rommy	Romny/ 1994	Olkusz	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Poland)
42.	West/ Rivne	Rivne/ 1985	Olkusz	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Poland)
43.	Central/ Rudzka	Rudzka/ 1939	Olkusz	Widow/ grandmother	-	(together with children and grandchildren in Poland)
44.	East/ Kharkiv	Kharkiv/ 1969	Olkusz	Divorced	-	-
45.	East/ Konotop	Konotop/ 1985	Olkusz	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Poland)
46.	West/ Bialokrynica	Bialokrynica/ 1986	Olkusz	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Poland)
47.	Central/ Dnipro	Dnipro/ 1993	Olkusz	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Poland)
48.	East/ Izium	Izium/ 1968	Olkusz	Wife	Childless nuclear family	(together with her husband in Poland; she supports a single older sister and a disabled mother in Ukraine)

Part.	Region and city/ town/village before invasion	Location/year of birth	Location of interview	The role in the family	Type of family they refer to	Support received transnationally
49.	Central/ Kyiv	Kyiv/ 1961	Olkusz	Mother/ divorced/ grandmother	Extended Family	(lives in Poland with her daughter and granddaughters)
50.	Central/ Kyiv	Kyiv/ 1983	Olkusz	Mother/ divorced	Single parent	(together with children in Poland)
51.	South/ Melitopol	Melitopol/ 2006	Olkusz	Single	-	-
52.	West/ Radekhiv	Radekhiv/ 1984	Olkusz	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Poland)
53.	South/ Zaporizhia	Zaporizhia/ 1993	Olkusz	Wife	Childless family	(together with husband in Poland)
54.	West/ Stryi	Stryi/ 1985	Olkusz	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Poland)
55.	Central/ Cherkasy	Cherkasy/ 1975	Olkusz	Mother/ wife	Nuclear family	(together with husband and children in Poland)
56.	Central/ Kryviy Rih	Kryviy Rih/ 1993	Olkusz	Mother	Single parent	(helps a sick mother in Ukraine)

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