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June 2023

Choosing Latvia: Understanding the Decision-Making Factors of Displaced Ukrainians

This policy brief is based on an empirical examination of the early-stage migration of Ukrainian war asylum seekers to Latvia in 2022, following the Russian invasion. The study highlights the urgent nature of their displacement and identifies the pivotal role of kinship in Latvia in the decision-making. Three categories of refugees emerge based on kinship ties, employment opportunities, and cultural affinity. The study also reveals the substantial influence of the pre-existing Ukrainian diaspora and underlines the significance of network effects in refugees' location decisions. Contrary to previous studies, refugees didn't necessarily settle for the first country available. The research underscores the strategy of seeking support from personal networks in acute displacement scenarios, which appears to be the most influential factor for the choice of location in the decision-making process.

Ukrainian Displaced People in Latvia

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a geopolitical upheaval in Europe and resulted in a mass exodus that had not been witnessed since World War II. With the war showing no signs of cessation, return for many of these displaced people appears difficult in the near future. Latvia, although not a bordering country, have become a haven for 36 000 Ukrainian refugees.

This brief seeks insight into Ukrainian displaced people's preference for Latvia, using interviews conducted in March 2022, a month after the war began. With no common border between Ukraine and Latvia these refugees had to transit through other countries, making the question about the choice of Latvia as their ultimate destination particularly relevant.

Unlike during the migration crisis in 2015 and during the recent influx of Syrians and other groups, the Ukrainian refugees found themselves being welcomed with open arms, belying Latvia's typically guarded stance towards immigrants. This unexpected warmth is influenced by a multifaceted kinship rooted in historical connections from the Soviet era, a pre-existing Ukrainian diaspora in Latvia, labor migration, and shared cultural elements.

These factors can also play a role in Ukrainian refugees' choice of Latvia as their ultimate destination. The study underlying this policy brief seeks to explore these facets and unravel the reasons behind the Ukrainian refugees' choice to seek safety in Latvia.

Migration Decisions

Two aspects are crucial in the analysis of migration decisions: the factors that influence refugees' choice of destination and the process underlying this decision.

Traditional assumptions surrounding asylum-seeker migration, as emphasized by Böcker and Havinga (1997), suggest that when people are forced to flee, their primary focus is safety – not destination. However, more nuanced perspectives have evolved in recent studies (see Robinson and Sergott, 2002; Brekke and Aarset, 2009). They highlight the calculated and adaptable nature of refugee destination choices throughout the asylum-seeking migration journey, demonstrating that circumstances and journey stage significantly influence destination choices.

Research indicates that host country policies and economic conditions can both enhance and limit refugee flows (Czaika and de Haas, 2017; Ortega and Peri, 2013; Brekke and Aarset, 2009; Diop-Christensen and Diop, 2021; Kang, 2021; Suzuki, 2020; Collyer, 2005). However, another line of research emphasizes that policy and economic factors are secondary to networks, cultural affinity, language, and perceptions in determining destination choices (Robinson and Sergott, 2002). Factors such as social networks (Koser and Pinkerton, 2002; Tucker 2018), kinship (Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Neumayer, 2005; Mallett and Hagen-Zanker, 2018), financial resources (Mallett and Hagen-Zanker, 2018), geography (Neumayer, 2005; Kang, 2021), destination country image (Benzer and Zetter, 2014), culture (Suzuki, 2020), and colonial links (Havinga and Böcker, 1999) have been established to be significant at various stages



of migration. Economic and education opportunities are also found to have a marginal influence on destination decision-making compared to the possibility of resolving statelessness (Tucker, 2018).

These varying determinants of destination may also be contingent on the refugee journey stage. Policies may not dominate in acute cases of forced migration (Diop-Christensen and Diop, 2021). For individuals with time to prepare for migration, a cost-benefit analysis often informs their decisions. In contrast, those in urgent circumstances, such as during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, may have to take immediate refuge and put less emphasis on benefits and policies (Robinson and Sergott, 2002). Destination determinants differ by both origin and destination countries (Havinga and Böcker, 1999, Tucker, 2018, Gilbert and Koser, 2006). Thus, research on underexplored regions and countries is valuable for a comprehensive understanding of migration patterns.

Migration, voluntary or forced, involves intricate decision-making. As Mallett and Hagen-Zanker (2018) aptly state, the dynamic experiences 'on the road' shape refugees' journey and destination choices. Robinson and Sergott (2002) and Brekke and Aarset, 2009 have pioneered models for asylum seekers' decision-making, suggesting that factors such as networks, language, cultural affinity, and perceptions evolve across different stages of the asylum journey. Others, like Gonsalves (1992) and Shultz et al. (2020), have constructed models delineating stages of refugee passage and displacement, highlighting the changing needs and preferences of refugees.

While existing literature mainly focuses on the later stages of forced migration journeys, limited

empirical evidence exists on the migration moves during acute displacement. Additionally, further understanding on migration induced by the war on Ukraine is needed. There is also incomplete coverage of asylum seeker and refugee topics in the Baltic countries, making such research particularly relevant. To address these gaps, this brief aims to provide qualitative findings on the decision-making and experiences of Ukrainian displaced people in Latvia.

Understanding the Decision

The research underlying this brief explored the reasons behind Ukrainian displaced people's choice of Latvia as their migration destination during the early part of the invasion. The study is based on 34 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with displaced people conducted in March 2022. The dataset is part of a larger study that includes continuous interviews to understand Ukrainian displaced people's lives, plans and needs in Latvia.

From the interviews, it was apparent that the predominant factor in respondents' decision-making was the presence of kin or acquaintances in Latvia.

All but one participant had some connection to Latvia, whether through distant relatives, friends, or professional contacts. The one participant without such connections arrived from Russia and not from Ukraine, working on a contract. A minority of our participants considered staying in Ukraine. One example is Lidiia, who initially planned to move near Lviv, but redirected to Riga during the journey.

"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).

Proximity of kin was not the primary concern for the interviewees; the mere fact that they had a relative in Latvia appeared more influential in their narratives. Indeed, the majority of participants had distant rather than close kin, though a few had close family in Latvia (grandparents, parents, common-law husband, and sister). As Olena explained, the presence of even distant relatives influenced her choice: "there are distant relatives, very distant... That's why we came" (Olena). However, ties in Latvia were not the only determinants as many of the participants also had family connections in other parts of Europe.

The speed of decision-making was also striking – most decisions to migrate were not a matter of long-term planning but a reaction to the sudden crisis, often influenced by incoming offers of assistance. Nataliia remembered: "My mother said, 'You have to 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" (Nataliia).

Maryana ended up choosing her 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 Slobzhanska Ukraine, so all our relatives are from

the side where very heavy fighting is going on now" (Maryana). Such testimonies illuminate how, owing to the immediacy of the situation, the eventual destination of some displaced Ukrainians was not predetermined but evolved during their respective journeys.

From the interviews with the participants who knew someone in Latvia, one can identify three groups based on the main factor that determined their decision.

Network, First of All

For respondents who did not have family in Latvia, friends, acquaintances, and professional contacts in Latvia acted as anchors. Like family members, such acquaintances often reached out, offering assistance and lodging as soon as they heard the news of the war. The influx of supportive communication from Latvian acquaintances influenced the decision for many participants.

Olha decided to flee with her friend, who had a distant cousin residing in Latvia. Upon the onset of the conflict, the cousin reached out and urged them to come to Latvia. As Olha recalls: "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" (Olha).

Lidiia received an invitation from a Latvian friend she had met through her church, even as she was already in the process of fleeing Ukraine. Similarly, Andrii, who was vacationing abroad at the time of the war's outbreak, 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" (Andrii).



Even in the absence of explicit messages, displaced individuals recalled having friends and family in Latvia and chose to make their way to Riga. Olena, like Lidiia, initially set off without a clear destination in mind. It wasn't until she reached the border that she decided to head to Latvia: "Just at the border that you decided where to go?" (Olena). Existing friendships and ongoing communication also influenced some people's choice to opt for Latvia. Olha (2) was encouraged by her daughter to relocate to Riga due to her daughter's friendships with Latvians that she had formed at a camp in Estonia: "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'" (Olha (2)).

Opportunities and Realities

The turning point for many respondents was their arrival in Poland as, initially, Latvia was not the principal or only choice of destination. These respondents emphasized that, besides having friends and relatives in Latvia, they also contemplated where they might find better opportunities. Their narratives provide a contrasting perspective of Poland and Latvia. While traversing Poland, their general impression was that the country was already 'overfilled', which in turn kindled the notion that Latvia might harbor more possibilities. For this group of displaced individuals, the importance of employment prospects was paramount.

Nataliia took the decision to head for Latvia, choosing to stay with remote kin there rather than with her sibling in Poland, as she believed Poland lacked opportunities for her. In Myroslava's case, a friend helped secure 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 in order 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" (Myroslava).

Bohdan, too, mentioned the crowdedness and the high cost of living in Poland, hence deciding to move 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, \$1600 a month, we were shocked" (Bohdan).

Anastasiia echoed similar concerns: "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... no place to work. And I would like to work somehow... not to be dependent" (Anastasiia).

These stories illuminate another stratum of decision-making, that beyond familial ties, participants also considered the opportunities available at their chosen destination. They accumulate information on their journey and recalibrate their destination accordingly.

Cultural Kinship, Language, Diaspora

Not all participants had prior personal experience with Latvia, even if they had relatives there. A lot of their understanding about the country stemmed



from stories they'd heard or news they'd come across. This third group of participants decided on Latvia not only because they knew someone in the country, but also because they saw value in shared language, culture, and history.

Political and cultural connections played a significant role in their choice. Being able to communicate in Russian and Ukrainian in Latvia was a crucial factor, as it was associated with a smoother integration process and increased job opportunities. Nadiia, who traveled to Latvia via Poland and Budapest, elaborated on this: "And I was in Latvia and here there is an opportunity to communicate in Ukrainian, in Russian" (Nadiia).

The possibility of being accepted and integrated into the local community was also mentioned as a decision-driver. Oksana shared that her father, who had previously worked in Riga, advised her to go to Latvia: "you guys, probably go to Riga, well, because you will be accepted there, accommodated" (Oksana).

Nonetheless, choosing Latvia because of the possibility to communicate in Russian does not come without complications. Nataliia B., for instance, found the topic of language stirring up strong emotions and confessed that she doesn't wish to speak Russian anymore: "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" (Nataliia B.).

Moreover, having knowledge of the Ukrainian diaspora in the country also proved an important factor. "I also found out that there is a Ukrainian diaspora in Latvia of about 50 000 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 observation underlines the role of cultural kinship in the decision-making process regarding destination, and it can indeed be seen as a decisive factor. As the diaspora expands with the influx of more displaced people, this rationale for choosing Latvia may become increasingly common.

Conclusion

The study underlying this brief provided empirical insight into the initial phases of Ukrainian war asylum seekers' journey to Latvia in 2022, enhancing our understanding of the factors that influenced the choice of Latvia over other destinations.

Ukrainians fleeing the early stage of the 2022 Russian invasion were compelled to make swift and difficult decisions due to the pressing crisis. Leaving behind their familiar lives, properties, and dear ones – often the very individuals facilitating their exodus for safety reasons – was a harrowing reality. The support from kin and acquaintances in Latvia was crucial in endorsing their decision to seek refuge in the country.

Three groups emerged among the Ukrainian refugees in Latvia, all connected by personal relationships to some degree. The factors influencing their migration ranged from the presence of kin and considerations of employment prospects, to shared language, culture, and history. The fact that the initial outreach usually originated from the Latvian side underscores the profound solidarity and active support provided by Latvians to their Ukrainian counterparts. This likely also played a significant role in the refugees' decisions. The pre-existing Ukrainian diaspora in Latvia,



estimated at around 50 000 before the invasion, also significantly influenced the choice of Latvia as a refuge.

Financially-related factors such as seeking benefits were largely absent from the narratives, likely due to the geographic proximity, relatively low costs, and the urgent nature of the displacement. The most significant determinant in choosing Latvia as the destination appeared to be the network effect, contrasting with Robinson and Sergott (2002) findings that acute asylum seekers often settle for the first country available.

Given the emergency nature of the displacement, no unambiguous pattern in the location decision could be established. The narrative varied considerably among respondents with decisions often being made, or altered, on the fly. However, in most cases, personal relationships played a primary role in shaping the choices among Ukrainian refugees in Latvia.

For policy-makers planning and responding to acute migration crises, the study highlights the importance of mapping and understanding multifaceted kinships, as well as culture and history. The mapping can be used to plan support and allocate resources to give displaced people an opportunity of a place where they feel welcomed and connected, with hopes of greater integration.

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