

— SPECIAL SECTION —

Editorial Introduction: Reflexivity of Migration Processes in the Context of Ukrainian Displacement

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This editorial introduction situates research on Ukrainian refugees within broader trends in migration studies. It seeks to bridge the gap between critical migration studies and the growing body of scholarship on refugees from Ukraine. The articles in this special section introduce new themes and perspectives to the study of migration processes involving Ukrainian refugees. They also offer new analytical lenses through which these processes can be examined, including migration infrastructures, institutional practices, and displaced persons' own understandings of temporariness. Importantly, the aim is to move beyond understanding Ukrainian refugees solely through the lens of forced displacement. Viewing them primarily as victims limits our understanding of their experiences and other key aspects of their lives. This special section seeks to broaden that perspective by introducing new analytical approaches and identifying promising directions for future research.

Keywords: forced migration, migration processes, refugees, Ukrainian displacement

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This editorial introduction presents the context for the *CEEMR* special section dedicated to the reflexivity of migration trends in research on Ukrainian refugees. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, triggered a displacement of Ukrainians worldwide; however, the European Union member states remain the primary host countries. It has already been more than four years since the invasion began and this special section consists of articles illustrating how research on Ukrainian displacement has developed and changed. In line with the focus of this special section, the authors discuss issues of identity, belonging and boundary-making, as well as intersectional categories such as gender and class, along with language-related issues. In this introductory article, we comment on the development of research on Ukrainian refugees and connect this issue to broader trends of reflexivity in migration studies (Dahinden, Fischer and Menet 2021; Dieterich and Nieswand 2025; Iosifides 2018).

The displacement from Ukraine after 24 February 2022, caused by Russian military action, should not be regarded as the beginning of the conflict. As many Ukrainians emphasise, the Russian military operations against Ukraine started in 2014 in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. In the European Union, these events were not initially regarded as the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine (Mikheieva and Jaroszewicz 2023). However, the events also caused changes in migration trends from Ukraine. While, before 2014, many Ukrainians migrated both to the European Union and to Russia – on either a temporary or a permanent basis – from 2014 onwards Ukrainians from different regions increasingly began to see new opportunities in the European Union (Drbohlav and Jaroszewicz 2016). Furthermore, after 2014, many displaced Ukrainians from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which were the most affected by the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, fled to central and western parts of Ukraine in order to establish new lives as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Many others moved to Poland and other countries in the European Union. However, in the European Union they did not usually receive refugee status (Mikheieva, Kuzemska and Sereda 2023). Displaced Ukrainians who fled after 24 February 2022 were treated significantly differently. They obtained temporary protection (TP) under the Temporary Protection Directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC), which provides both protection and new opportunities.

The Ukrainian displacement after 24 February 2022 has generated extensive interest among migration scholars. While migration from Ukraine before this date was primarily studied by scholars originating from Central and Eastern Europe, it was a somewhat marginal topic for scholars in Northern, Southern or Western Europe (even though there are many exceptions, such as Vianello 2014). However, after the Russian invasion, academics from all European countries became interested in the Ukrainian 'topic', which is evident in the increasing number of academic texts on Ukrainian displacement produced by scholars from various corners of Europe. The increasing number of academic texts on Ukrainian migration is also patterned in leading migration journals. For example, in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, there is a 271 per cent increase in the number of articles using the term 'Ukrainian' during the years 2022–2026 in comparison to 2018–2022. In the leading migration journal in Central Europe, the *CEEMR*, there is (based on the authors' own calculation) a 223 per cent increase in the production of articles using the term 'Ukrainian' over the same period. It should also be noted that this output has also increased due to Ukrainian academics who have established positions in European institutions and who are often refugees themselves. Their output is a positive development, as it amplifies their voices, which were previously, to some extent, under-represented in influential migration journals. In summary, since 2022, there has been a marked increase in academic interest in migration from Ukraine and this raises the issue of how knowledge is produced and transferred or, more specifically, of how Ukrainian displacement is perceived and studied. Therefore, four years after the

beginning of the Russian invasion, it is now time to reflect on and discuss the trajectories of research on Ukrainian displacement and emphasise how the research has been developing.

In the first year after displacement, scholars frequently studied how Ukrainian refugees navigate their lives in the host countries (including transnational ties) under temporary protection, as well as how specific policies in different European countries have treated (or governed) Ukrainian refugees. More recently, we have seen a shift towards discussing the gender dimension (Byelikova 2024; Mezihorák 2025), criticism of the temporary protection status and its use (Gheorghiev 2025; Grigoleit-Richter and Föbbecke 2026) – including its neocolonial sense (Mayerchuk, Plakhotnik and Yaremchishyn 2026) – or return migration and the recovery of Ukraine after the war (Romashchenko 2025). Furthermore, the production of knowledge about Ukrainian refugees is focused on refugees who live in European cities (Kohlenberger, Buber-Ennsner, Pędziwiatr, Rengs, Setz, Brzozowski, Riederer, Tarasiuk and Pronizius 2023), which is likely to produce knowledge on urbanised patterns of Ukrainian refugees' settlement, while simultaneously omitting the living circumstances of Ukrainian refugees in rural areas.

Scholars often use quantitative research instead of qualitative – which limits the understanding of refugees' subjectivities. This is related to centring on empirical studies without theoretical contextualisation (Mikheieva and Jaroszewicz 2023). Scholars also often focus on women while research on men is less stressed (Kogan and Kosyakova 2025; Mickelsson 2025). Finally, the existing research does not provide a sufficient answer to whether Ukrainian refugees will return to Ukraine or stay in their countries of settlement (Mikheieva and Jaroszewicz 2023), although the more time they spend in the host countries, the more they are willing to stay (Mykhailishyna, Samoiliuk, Tomilina, Myronenko, Levchenko and Vyshlinsky 2025). Current research also focuses on mental health, education and demographic characteristics. While this production of knowledge is understandable – early research prioritised rapid empirical insights into Ukrainian displacement – important topics remain underexplored, including the critical insight into migration governance and temporary protection, conceptualising empirical insights into a theoretical framework and introducing intersectional issues. This special section tries to fill this gap.

The first article, written by Katarzyna Krakowska and Kamil Łuczaj, addresses the organisational disorder in reception centres in Poland (facilities offering initial shelter, food, medical and psychological care and guidance for Ukrainian refugees) using qualitative research. Based on the theoretical approach of the Multilevel Governance (MLG) Framework and anomie, they refer to 'organisational crisis' and institutional anomie in a Polish reception centre which provided social infrastructure and support for Ukrainian refugees during the first months of their displacement from Ukraine (spring and summer 2022). The authors highlighted how the reception centre suffered from the disorder while, at the same time, there were many volunteers and also refugees willing to assist newcomers. This disorder led to ambiguity between solidarity and market-based logic and the authors conclude that a market-based logic focusing on economic profit was the prevailing aspect for the organisation in the reception centre. This organisation leads to conflict between volunteers, employees and the manager of the centre because humanitarian efforts were penetrated by market-oriented rationality. In that context, this article refers to the inequalities and tensions created during the first months of Ukrainian displacement. It provides a critical insight into migration governance in Poland and offers theoretically underpinned research reflecting the notions of legitimacy and representation.

The second article, written by Martina Wilsch, Miroslava Hlinčíková, Marketa Štefková and Helena Tužinská, offers insights into Ukrainian refugees' access to housing practices and healthcare in Slovakia. Drawing on qualitative research and the theoretical concept of epistemic injustice, the authors examine

the interplay between the living conditions of Ukrainian refugees, interpreters and institutional actors. They argue that migration governance and epistemic authority contribute to the disempowerment and misrecognition of refugees' agency, ultimately resulting in the exclusion of refugees' voices. These barriers are not only caused by the state; the authors also stressed the role of interpreters who are not competent enough, while both lead to a failing recognition of refugees' perspectives. The problem, as the authors put it, also lies in the emergence of interpreters as private actors who operate outside state control. While Ukrainian refugees exercise epistemic resistance, its effects are largely limited to their adaptation to existing institutional structures rather than challenging the underlying mechanisms of epistemic marginalisation. Therefore, Slovakia should adopt state-operated language services to promote epistemic justice. Overall, this article provides critical insights into migration governance in Slovakia and offers a theoretically grounded discussion of the ways in which language mediation, institutional practices and epistemic authority shape the experiences and agency of Ukrainian refugees.

The third article, by Ivanna Kyliushyk, Dominika Winogrodzka and Emil Chról, examines the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Poland through the theoretical concept of liminality. The authors scrutinised the different factors shaping the liminality process and analysed both the external conditions and the psychological (inner) mechanisms for inducing liminality. Based on qualitative research in Warsaw with highly educated refugee women in 2023, the authors offer three key dimensions for understanding the women's experiences – disrupted life paths, fractured identity and belonging tensions. The first dimension stems from uncertainty, living in spatio-temporal limbo and being trapped between the past and an uncertain future which leads to agency-in-waiting (Maxwell, Leybenson and Yemini 2024). The second dimension refers to the socio-professional establishment of refugees' lives in Poland, which enables them to navigate their new circumstances in the host country. However, this process is often accompanied by an identity crisis stemming from the tension between their previous lives and the rational recognition of the need to redefine their roles and identities in a new social context. The third dimension is about belonging tensions which are connected to social exclusion and the neocolonial perception of Ukrainian refugees as less-educated, inferior and passive victims, which undermines their agency. Ivanna Kyliushyk, Dominika Winogrodzka and Emil Chról directly refer to the neocolonial attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees and critically discuss their situation as holders of temporary protection in Poland. This reflects unequal power relations and the issue of not recognising the refugees' pre-war identities.

Although these articles focus on diverse topics, ranging from migration governance and marketisation to language, epistemic injustice and the liminal experiences of Ukrainian refugees, they share several important features that deserve particular attention:

1. While the existing literature on Ukrainian refugees extensively employs a quantitative methodology, the articles in this special section adopt qualitative approaches, enabling a deeper focus on identities and the subjective perceptions of Ukrainian refugees.
2. At the onset of the Ukrainian displacement, many scholars emphasised both governmental and civil society support for Ukrainian refugees. In contrast, the articles in this special section highlight the limitations and weaknesses of such support, reflecting an important shift in scholarly perspectives on the situation of Ukrainian refugees.
3. Earlier studies on Ukrainian refugees were often criticised for lacking a strong theoretical framework. However, the contributions in this special section demonstrate that all the articles explicitly engage with the relevant theoretical conceptualisations in interpreting their empirical findings.

4. The authors also distinguish between subjective self-perception and the external social environment, differentiating between self-narratives and the perceived or prescribed place of refugees within society.
5. Finally, the articles emphasise belonging and exclusion as processes shaped by refugees' (non-) acceptance within society. They show that belonging is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by cultural integration, legal frameworks, institutional embeddedness and economic conditions.

Recently, in the fifth year of displacement, many refugees have returned to Ukraine, while others continue to enter the European Union. However, the situation is not clear-cut, as many Ukrainians move back and forth, crossing borders frequently. This mobility suggests that their lived experience cannot be understood solely in terms of either integration into host societies or the abandonment of their lives in Ukrainian society. In that context, their belonging is a complex scene influenced by many factors – not necessarily affected only by their 'migrantised' identity (Dahinden 2016) but also by intersectional factors influencing belonging and exclusion in both the host society and their country of origin; they build upon the interplay between culture, class, gender, age, norms, values, language, family expectations, social networks, structure and other outer conditions which relate to their lived experience (Anthias 2008). While Ukrainian refugees are categorised primarily through the lens of forced displacement, they can contest and negotiate their social identities and challenge being defined by displacement.

Scholars should reflect on the use of terms such as 'Ukrainian refugees' and the biases inherent in these categories. This is visible in media representations and research about Ukrainian refugees (Ajana, Connell and Liddle 2024; De Coninck 2023; Krivonos 2025; Zawadzka-Palucka 2023). In migration studies, there have been calls for greater reflexivity (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014), particularly regarding processes of knowledge production and representation – and the voices that are included or excluded. Dahinden *et al.* (2021) argue that categories such as migrant descendants are political and performative rather than neutral – and that knowledge is co-produced with research participants, who actively negotiate and contest migratory labels. The same applies to Ukrainian refugees. Consequently, there is a need to create spaces for these latter to participate in the co-production of knowledge. Such an approach may help to counteract the tendency of migration research to construct epistemic objects and reproduce its categories (Dieterich and Nieswand 2025).

Several additional issues remain unresolved and warrant further research. For instance, despite the recent emphasis on the agency of Ukrainian refugees, they are still frequently conceptualised primarily through lenses of vulnerability and victimisation, suggesting that a fully developed understanding of refugee agency has yet to be achieved. Another limitation concerns the predominant focus on the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in the European Union, as well as in countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia, while the situation of Ukrainian refugees in other countries, including in Russia, remains underexplored and calls for state-of-the-art research. Furthermore, a significant body of work produced by Ukrainian scholars is published outside the leading migration journals and is often overlooked in European academic discourse. Incorporating these contributions could substantially enrich the existing knowledge base on Ukrainian refugees and help to further decentre the research field (Triandafyllidou 2022).

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