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Navigating Uncertainty: A trajectory study of evolving mobility decisions among
displaced Ukrainians in Switzerland and Austria

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Ralf Merlin Schmid BSc

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Abstract

This thesis investigates forced mobility decision-making among displaced Ukrainians following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Drawing on qualitative interviews conducted in Austria and Switzerland, it examines how migration aspirations evolved across distinct stages of displacement. Employing a trajectory-based approach, the study extends the aspirations–capabilities framework to analyse the evolution of forced mobility decision-making across time and space, focusing on how individual decisions were shaped by emotional ties, institutional constraints, emerging opportunities, and the increasingly protracted conflict. It traces how mobility shifted from unplanned, reactive evacuation to more deliberate relocation toward perceived safe or stable environments—setting the stage for later recalibration and integration efforts. Through this lens, the thesis captures the (re)emergence of agency as individuals transitioned from emergency responses to longer-term strategic planning. The findings reveal a gradual shift in mobility aspirations, from initial expectations of returning home to a growing acceptance of medium- and long-term displacement in host countries. This evolution was closely tied to individuals' ability to develop capabilities, such as language proficiency, labour market access or legal security, within structurally constrained environments. Early success in navigating host country systems was crucial in determining future possibilities, whereas setbacks frequently restricted flexibility and exacerbated uncertainty. The thesis underscores how early acts of adaptation and capability-building influenced later mobility trajectories. Finally, it highlights how a temporal mismatch between short-term protection frameworks and the long-term realities of displacement, combined with participants' individual displacement trajectories, shaped their long-term decisions on whether to remain, return, or move further—offering a grounded account of both agency under constraint and the evolving mobility orientations in protracted displacement.

Kurzzusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Mobilitätsentscheidungen von geflüchteten Ukrainer*innen im Zuge der russischen Invasion der Ukraine im Jahr 2022. Auf Grundlage qualitativer Interviews in Österreich und der Schweiz analysiert sie die Entwicklung mobilitätsbezogener Aspirationen unter Zwang über verschiedene Etappen der Vertreibung hinweg. Durch die Kombination eines trajektorienbasierten Ansatzes mit dem *Aspirations–Capabilities-Framework* wird die zeitlich-räumliche Dynamik erzwungener Mobilitätsentscheidungen nachvollzogen. Dabei wird deutlich, wie individuelle Entscheidungen durch emotionale Bindungen, institutionelle Einschränkungen, sich wandelnde Handlungsspielräume und den anhaltenden Konflikt beeinflusst wurden. Die Studie zeigt auf, wie sich Mobilität von ungeplanten, reaktiven Evakuierungen hin zu bewusst gesteuerten Umsiedlungen in als sicher oder stabil wahrgenommene Aufnahmekontexte verlagerte – und so den Boden für spätere Neuorientierungen und Integrationsprozesse bereitete. In diesem Zusammenhang zeigt sich, wie sich unter den Bedingungen von Flucht und Zwang individuelle Handlungsfähigkeit (wieder)entfaltete, wobei sich anfänglich reaktive Entscheidungen zunehmend in bewusst geplante Mobilitätsstrategien verwandelten. Weiterhin verdeutlichen die Ergebnisse einen schrittweisen Wandel der Migrationsaspirationen: von anfänglicher Rückkehrerwartung hin zu einer wachsenden Orientierung auf mittel- bis langfristige Perspektiven im Aufnahmeland, eng verknüpft mit der Fähigkeit, unter strukturell begrenzten Bedingungen neue *Capabilities* – etwa in den Bereichen Sprache, Arbeitsmarktzugang oder rechtlicher Status – aufzubauen. Frühe Erfolge im Umgang mit den Aufnahmestrukturen erwiesen sich dabei nicht nur als zentral für spätere Entscheidungsoptionen, sondern prägten auch langfristig die individuellen Mobilitätsverläufe, während Rückschläge die Flexibilität einschränkten und Unsicherheiten vertieften. Abschließend wird aufgezeigt, wie das Spannungsverhältnis zwischen kurzfristig angelegten Schutzregelungen und der langfristigen Realität von Vertreibung – in Verbindung mit den individuellen Trajektorien der Geflüchteten – deren Entscheidungen über Verbleib, Rückkehr oder Weiterwanderung prägte. Die Arbeit liefert damit eine empirisch fundierte Analyse von Handlungsfähigkeit unter strukturellen Zwängen sowie von sich wandelnden Mobilitätsorientierungen im Kontext langandauernder Unsicherheit.

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Abbreviations

CPT	The European Union’s Committee for the Prevention of Torture
EU	European Union
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
Status S	Protection Status S in Switzerland
TPD	The European Union’s Temporary Protection Directive
UN	United Nations
UNCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1. Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered one of the most significant forced migration crises in recent European history, displacing millions of Ukrainians. Many sought international protection in neighbouring countries, while others travelled to more distant destinations. This crisis is embedded within a broader global trend of escalating and protracted displacement (UNHCR 2023), with 115 million people currently displaced worldwide, including 43 million in refugee or refugee-like situations (UNHCR 2024a). This thesis examines how the migration decisions of those displaced from Ukraine evolved across different phases of their displacement trajectories, highlighting the role of personal aspirations, capabilities, the broader conflict environment, and host-country policies in shaping their mobility pathways. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Ukrainians seeking protection in Austria and Switzerland, this study analyses the personal, political, and structural factors shaping mobility decision-making. It contributes to a deeper understanding of forced migration dynamics by following these trajectories from the first stages of flight and temporary refuge, through arrival, adaptation, and the gradual development of capabilities in host countries, to the challenges and uncertainties encountered under increasingly protracted displacement.

As the conflict in Ukraine continues without a clear resolution, humanitarian needs have intensified, bringing to light complex issues of security, social cohesion, and economic resilience. These challenges are particularly pressing for the 3.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Ukraine and the 6 million Ukrainian refugees building new lives in Europe (UNHCR 2024a; IOM 2024). While 4.4 million Ukrainian refugees have returned home, around 9% remain internally displaced, unable to return to their original communities due to ongoing instability (IOM 2024). This study not only explores individual migration decisions but also situates them within the broader context of evolving migration policies in order to provide insights into the complex landscape of forced migration in Europe today.

This prolonged conflict phase has intensified humanitarian needs and led to increasingly protracted displacement of Ukrainians, both internally and internationally. As of August 2024, 75% of internally displaced Ukrainians had been displaced for more than 1.5 years, with a median displacement duration of 750 days (IOM 2024). Such protracted displacement underscores the need for deeper research on migration decision-making and durable solutions, emphasising not only the triggers of displacement and decision-making processes during initial displacements but also the evolving conditions for return. Developing durable

solutions requires an understanding of how migration decisions adapt over time as displacement continues, reflecting the perspectives and aspirations of those affected.

Forced migrants face a series of difficult, often life-altering decisions under immense external pressures as they struggle to survive, with challenges often compounded by the demands of warring factions and political uncertainty (ICRC 2018). Leaving their hometowns—and often their countries—introduces a host of new vulnerabilities, as forced migrants leave behind established networks and support structures. While access to international protection can provide support and safety to displaced people, they also face various uncertainties, including language barriers, cultural differences and limited awareness of available resources (Kiselev et al. 2020). In Ukraine, IDPs are particularly vulnerable, facing increased risks of human trafficking, labour exploitation, and a lack of awareness of available support services (IOM 2024). Moreover, both IDPs and returnees report increased needs across all sectors, with urgent demands for financial assistance, power banks, generators, accommodation, and access to healthcare services (IOM 2024). These heightened needs deepen the already precarious circumstances of displaced populations, underscoring the critical importance of a sustainable, comprehensive response.

At the same time, the complex issues faced by refugees in host countries add another layer to the discourse, as immigration remains a divisive issue. Forced migration and displacement are pressing concerns for EU citizens, with 30% identifying it as a critical global challenge and 31% considering it one of the EU's most significant issues (European Commission and European Parliament 2022). Rising anti-immigration sentiments, coupled with the growth of anti-immigration parties, have influenced political landscapes and electoral outcomes across Europe (Pasetti 2024; Alex Clark and Pamela Duncan 2024; Krastev and Leonard 2024), prompting shifts even within mainstream political parties (Pasetti 2024).

The protracted displacement of Ukrainians, coupled with Europe's shifting policy response, underscores the need for well-informed, adaptive policy-making. Gaining insight into migration decision-making at each stage of displacement—from initial movement to long-term integration or possible return—is essential to addressing the complex, evolving needs of displaced populations. Such understanding must consider not only the experiences of displaced individuals but also the perspectives of host communities to create sustainable, compassionate, and politically viable solutions.

This thesis is structured into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the research focus and guiding questions. The second chapter provides the background, situating the Ukrainian

displacement within European protection policy and presenting a descriptive overview of temporary protection in the EU and Switzerland, which later serves as a point of reference for the analysis. The third and fourth chapters review the state of the art and outline the methodology, establishing the theoretical and empirical foundations of the study. The fifth chapter presents the findings from nine qualitative interviews with displaced Ukrainians in Austria and Switzerland, tracing the evolution of aspirations and capabilities along their displacement trajectories. The sixth chapter discusses these findings in greater depth, examining the role of trajectories, the dynamics of adaptation and capability-building, and the policy lessons that emerge from situating participants' experiences within the temporary protection frameworks introduced earlier. The seventh and final chapter concludes the thesis, highlighting the main insights and reflecting on the challenges of navigating temporary protection amid an ongoing conflict.

1.1 Terms & Definitions

In this thesis, **single quotation marks** (' ') are used for **terms** and **expressions** introduced or discussed by the author—for example, to highlight analytical concepts, interpretive framings, or colloquial expressions used within the research context. **Double quotation marks** (" ") are reserved for **direct quotations** from participants, cited sources, or published literature. This distinction allows for a clear separation between original analytical terminology and external voices or references.

1.1.1 Human Mobility

Following the frameworks developed by Sen (Sen 1999) and de Haas (2021), human mobility is understood here as the capacity or freedom to decide where to live—including the option to remain in one's current location—rather than simply the act of relocating. This perspective frames migration as a function of individuals' capabilities and choices, emphasising mobility as a form of agency rather than a mere reaction to circumstances.

In this context, I adopt Hein de Haas's (2021) definitions of aspirations and capabilities:

- **Migration aspirations** are a function of people's general life aspirations and perceived geographical opportunity structures.

These aspirations can be *intrinsic* or *instrumental*, shaped by personal and societal factors. The *intrinsic* dimension focuses on the value of mobility itself, providing well-being through the freedom to move or stay, regardless of actual migration. The *instrumental* dimension sees migration as a way to achieve goals such as improved income, education, or safety,

particularly for refugees, illustrating how migration can enhance capabilities and serve as an investment in a better future.

- **Migration capabilities** are contingent on positive ('freedom to') and negative ('freedom from') liberties.

In this context, *capabilities* refer to the real opportunities individuals have to pursue their migration aspirations, shaped by both personal resources and structural conditions. Capabilities can be *mobile*—such as transnational networks or access to travel documents—or *place-sensitive*, such as local language proficiency or legal residence status, and thus relate both to the ability to move elsewhere and to remain at the current location. The term *capability-building* describes the process through which individuals expand their real opportunities to act on their aspirations within given structural conditions.

Positive and *negative liberties* form part of the structural dimension of migration decision-making. *Positive liberty* refers to the opportunities and resources that enable an individual to act in the context of the structural limitations of the broader society which impact their migration aspirations, such as access to information, financial resources, or legal pathways. *Negative liberty* refers to the removal of constraints, such as restrictions imposed by governments, political instability, or economic hardship, which limit an individual's ability to move or make decisions about migration.

1.1.2 Displaced people

The complexities of terminology and categorisation in forced migration have significantly shaped the legal recognition and protections afforded to displaced Ukrainians in the EU. In this study, the Ukrainian interviewees will generally be referred to as "*people displaced by conflict*" or "*displaced Ukrainians*". The term "*Ukrainians under temporary protection*" will be used specifically for those within that legal category. Among interviewees, self-identification varied: those in Switzerland often referred to themselves as "*refugees*" (or *Flüchtlinge* in German), while the Austrian subgroup preferred terms like "*displaced people*" (or *Vertriebene*), consciously distancing themselves from the term "*refugee*" (*Flüchtling*). Besides legal differences, this distinction in everyday language reflects concerns about the stigmatisation associated with the term "*refugee*" and underscores its broader social implications.

1.1.3 Protracted Displacement

This thesis employs the term *protracted displacement*, acknowledging both its contested use and its growing application to the European context (Ferreira et al. 2022) and to the Ukrainian case specifically (Tarkhanova 2023). In its original sense, UNHCR defines protracted refugee

situations as cases where more than 25,000 refugees from the same country of origin remain in exile in a given low- or middle-income host country for at least five consecutive years, a definition that describes situations collectively rather than individual trajectories (UNHCR 2024a). This understanding has historically been linked to conditions of immobility in large refugee camps. More recent scholarship, however, has argued for a broader reading of protracted displacement. Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira (2021) suggest moving beyond notions of being ‘stuck’ to emphasise how protraction also encompasses continued mobility and the strategies displaced persons develop to navigate uncertainty, sustain livelihoods, and exercise agency. In line with this broader concept, I adopt the following working definition:

- **Protracted displacement** refers to situations in which displaced persons remain in conditions of prolonged precarity without access to durable solutions, often facing restricted legal status, limited rights, and barriers to rebuilding their lives (Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira 2021, 4).

In this thesis, the Ukrainian displacement is approached through this perspective: while it does not, and likely will not, meet UNHCR’s formal definition, many of the structural characteristics associated with protraction are already visible, particularly persistent uncertainty, constrained opportunities, and the reconfiguration of mobility decision-making over time.

2. Background

The question of who is a refugee and who is allowed to stay continues to divide the political landscape, arguably even more so than in the past. The rise of categories such as ‘*refugee*’ and ‘*migrant*’ to differentiate between people on the move—and to establish or revoke the legitimacy of their claims to international protection—has featured prominently during Europe’s ‘migration crisis’ and has often justified exclusionary and containment policies (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Defining who qualifies as a refugee and deciding who is allowed to stay or not present complex societal challenges rooted in legal, ethical, and political considerations.

The cornerstone of international refugee protection, the United Nations’ 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, defines a refugee as someone unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR 2010, 3,14). In practise, however, many people forced to flee due to environmental disasters, economic collapse, or conflict do not meet these strict legal criteria and may thus be excluded from

protection (Guild and Moreno-lax 2013; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). This legal distinction creates ethical dilemmas, as people fleeing from severe hardship or violence without direct persecution may be denied refuge. At a societal level, these distinctions fuel debates about immigration, national security and humanitarian responsibility, often undermining the legitimacy of some newcomers' claims to protection in the process (De Coninck 2020). These debates often reflect deep-rooted societal problems and a lack of social cohesion (Messing and Sagvari 2018), with migrants becoming convenient targets for broader fears (ibid.).

This illustrates the difficulty of designing inclusive policies that are consistent with both humanitarian principles and national interests. As migration issues grow more complex, especially in Europe, policy co-evolves with shifting border regulations and societal views on protection. The following chapters examine European protection policies in depth, focusing on their intersection with mass displacement events and open-border policy to shape contemporary understandings of protection eligibility.

2.1 The evolution of European Refugee and Protection Policy

After the Second World War, migration in Europe was mainly characterised by internal movements, particularly within Western Europe, and by labour migration from Southern Europe and the Mediterranean to industrialised countries such as Germany and France (Fassmann and Münz 1994). However, as political crises intensified in various regions, Western European countries became key destinations for individuals seeking safety and stability. In the 1980s, Member States faced a significant increase in asylum applications, particularly from those fleeing repressive regimes in Eastern Europe, the Iran-Iraq Gulf War and the civil war in Sri Lanka (Loescher 1989).

A major challenge for European refugee and protection policy has been the lack of clear guidelines in international law as to which state should assume responsibility for providing asylum to refugees (Marx 2001). This ambiguity allowed for a strict interpretation of state sovereignty until the introduction of the Dublin and Schengen Agreements, which aimed to clarify state responsibility for asylum seekers. Prior to the implementation of these frameworks, human rights protection in Europe was limited, as countries could refuse entry to refugees as long as they respected the principle of non-refoulement. This created a fragmented and inconsistent system that left refugees vulnerable to being redirected to third countries without stable protection (ibid.).

The lack of a responsibility-sharing mechanism, together with the different asylum regimes in EU Member States, has led to secondary movements, referred to and described as “*asylum*

shopping”, whereby asylum seekers who entered one Member State subsequently travelled to another Member State where their asylum claim was perceived to have a higher chance of success (European Commission 2008). In response to the growing influx of asylum seekers, Member States began to adopt various restrictive measures, including non-arrival policies to block access to their territory, non-admission policies that shifted protection responsibilities to other countries, reforms of asylum application procedures, and changes in the treatment of asylum seekers during the processing of their applications (Loescher 1989; Marx 2001).

The introduction of the Schengen Agreement in 1985, which abolished internal borders for participating countries, brought new challenges, particularly in relation to external border controls and asylum applications. To address these, the Dublin Convention was signed in 1990 to prevent “*asylum shopping*” and ensure that each asylum application was processed by only one Member State, usually the first country of entry (European Commission 2008). While this provided a framework for managing responsibility, it placed a disproportionate burden on border countries (Marx 2001). In the early 2000s, the Dublin Convention evolved into the Dublin Regulation, which was updated in 2003 (Dublin II) and later in 2013 (Dublin III) with the aim of streamlining asylum application procedures within the EU. In 2008, Switzerland joined this framework through the Dublin Association Agreement (DAA) with the EU, further integrating Swiss asylum procedures into the European system. However, the ‘first country of entry’ principle continued to place a disproportionate burden on southern and eastern EU countries, sparking criticism and calls for reform due to ethical and logistical challenges as refugee numbers increased.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the ensuing conflicts resulting from the break-up of Yugoslavia led to a significant increase in asylum seekers in the European Union in the early 1990s, highlighting the urgent need for a coherent European response to refugee protection. The Yugoslav wars led to devastating conflicts in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, resulting in one of the largest forced migration events in post-war Europe, with over 2.5 million people displaced within the Balkans and hundreds of thousands seeking asylum in Western Europe, particularly Germany and Austria (Barutciski 1994; Grecie 1997). Many of those fleeing these conflicts did not meet the strict definition of refugee under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Nevertheless, their return was deemed infeasible due to humanitarian and international law obligations, leading to their classification as “*refugees from violence*” (*Gewaltflüchtlinge*) (SEM 2019, chap. C10). This influx would eventually contribute to the formulation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) and Switzerland’s Status S (see

Chapter 2.3 Temporary Protection in the EU and Switzerland), as governments anticipated a sustained need for protection for those fleeing war and widespread violence (ibid).

The Syrian conflict triggered one of the largest refugee flows to Europe, particularly in 2015-2016, when more than one million people sought refuge, mainly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (UNHCR 2017). This led to the establishment of the EU's relocation and resettlement programmes (European Commission 2016), while also sparking heated debates about border security, integration and humanitarian responsibility. The crisis highlighted the shortcomings of the Dublin Regulation, with frontline countries such as Greece and Italy overwhelmed by asylum seekers, while other EU member states were reluctant to share responsibility. This imbalance sparked debates about European solidarity and led to temporary relocation mechanisms (Senada 2017), but a long-term, unified approach remained elusive. At the same time, the crisis led to changes in European refugee law, including increased funding for border management (such as Frontex), stricter external border controls, and the start of negotiations on a new European Pact on Migration and Asylum (Niemann and Zaun 2018). After extensive negotiations, the European Parliament adopted the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2024, which will enter into force in 2026 (European Commission 2024). This pact aims to harmonise asylum procedures across the EU, but has been controversial due to its increased border control and externalisation of border policies to third countries (Conte and Yavcan 2024).

During the Syrian refugee crisis, widespread access to smartphones transformed refugee journeys for the first time. These devices became as essential as water and food, helping refugees with planning, navigation, and documentation, and allowing them to stay in touch with family, friends, and support networks, including smugglers and facilitators (Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018). However, this development also created new challenges for European states in managing the dynamic flows of 'irregular' migration and adapting to the rapid changes in migration patterns. As legal migration routes tightened, many refugees risked dangerous, unauthorised border crossings, often navigating dangerous Mediterranean and Balkan routes that resulted in thousands of deaths (Niemann and Zaun 2018). Although the EU has tightened border security through increased patrols and surveillance, human rights organisations argue that this approach often overlooks the international right to protection and that migrants are often subjected to ill-treatment and abuse by border guards (CPT 2023; UNHCR 2021).

2.2 The Situation in Ukraine

The contemporary history of Ukraine has been marked by significant emigration, with a migration landscape shaped by intertwined historical ties, economic change and periods of political instability. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many Ukrainians emigrated, particularly to Russia and other former Soviet republics, driven by economic hardship, political uncertainty or family ties (Lapshyna 2022). This trend contributed to a significant decline in Ukraine's population, from almost 52 million in 1991 to around 42 million in 2020 (*ibid*). At the same time, Ukraine became an important source of labour migrants for European countries, especially after EU enlargement in the 2000s, which increased access to jobs in nearby labour markets (Pieńkowski 2020). Limited employment opportunities at home led Ukrainians to seek seasonal work in countries such as Poland, Italy and the Czech Republic (SSSU 2017 as cited in Pieńkowski 2020). Poland, in particular, became a preferred destination due to its proximity and favourable labour policies; Polish-Ukrainian agreements in the 2010s further facilitated access to employment (Koval, Vaičiūnas, and Reichardt 2021).

The 2014 Euromaidan protests, which began as a push for closer ties between Ukraine and the European Union, quickly escalated into a broader national movement demanding systemic reforms and an end to corruption. This led to the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich and set in motion a chain of events that would reshape Ukraine's political landscape. However, the change in power also sparked significant instability, both within Ukraine and in its relationship with Russia. In early 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and its support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine ignited the ongoing conflict in the Donbass region. The political and social upheaval has had a profound impact on Ukraine, with millions of people displaced internally or seeking refuge abroad, particularly in neighbouring countries such as Poland and Russia (Dabrowski, Domínguez-Jiménez, and Zachmann 2020).

While the conflict led to increased out-migration, the EU's visa-free travel agreement in 2017 facilitated short-term legal employment, contributing to a significant increase in the Ukrainian community across Europe, particularly in Poland, where 1.3 million Ukrainians lived by 2019 (Lapshyna 2022). This established a strong pattern of labour migration, contributing to the vital flow of remittances to the Ukrainian economy (Pieńkowski 2020). Despite these growing links with the EU, the majority of Ukraine's displaced population—around 1.6 million—remained within the country, with only around 35,000 asylum applications submitted to the EU between 2014 and 2015 (*ibid*). The ongoing conflict also led Ukraine to shift its political and economic orientation more decisively towards Europe and

NATO, increasing military spending and restructuring its defence policy, despite not being a NATO member (Dabrowski, Domínguez-Jiménez, and Zachmann 2020; Koval, Vaičiūnas, and Reichardt 2021).

Economically, the war placed an enormous strain on Ukraine, leading to a contraction in GDP, a decline in foreign investment, and a heavy reliance on international loans and aid to stabilise the economy (Dabrowski, Domínguez-Jiménez, and Zachmann 2020). At the same time, this period saw a shift in Ukraine's national identity, with citizens rallying around the ideals of sovereignty and democracy, forging a stronger and more unified resistance to Russian influence (Brantly 2024). The Ukrainian diaspora established during this period—especially the growing communities in neighbouring countries like Poland—would later provide crucial support networks for Ukrainians displaced by the 2022 invasion, as also highlighted in the interviews conducted for this thesis (see *Chapter 5. Findings*).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a significant escalation of the conflict, leading to large-scale displacement both within Ukraine and across Europe. Millions of Ukrainians were forced to flee their homes in search of safety, with the majority of refugees being adult women and children, and only about a fifth being adult men (see *Figure 1*), resulting in high levels of family separation across the displaced population. While the

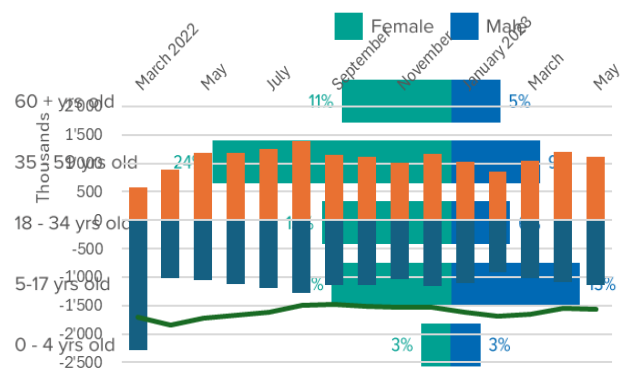


Figure 1: Household composition by age group and gender for internationally displaced Ukrainians in Eastern Europe. Figure 2: Border crossing to/from Ukraine during 27 February 2022–31 May 2023. Data: Ukrainian border guard service as calculated by Maidanik (2024). March also includes February 27th and 28th 2022.

peak of this displacement occurred during the first four months of the full-scale invasion, population movements from and to Ukraine have continued ever since, becoming more complex (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2024b). Border trends in the first year of the war show an initial high outflow of displaced persons, followed by a relatively balanced flow with low net migration thereafter (see *Figure 2*). On one side, ongoing hostilities across Ukraine continue to push people to seek refuge abroad. Simultaneously, however, many refugees now engage in pendular movements, making short-term visits between Ukraine and host countries, while others have chosen to return to Ukraine on a more permanent basis (ibid.). As of 2024, around 3.7 million people remain internally displaced within Ukraine, while approximately 6 million Ukrainian refugees continue to adapt to life across Europe (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2024a;

International Organization for Migration (IOM) 2024), primarily in Poland, Germany, and the Russian Federation (see *Figure 3*). Although 4.4 million refugees have returned home, about 9% of the pre-war population is still internally displaced, unable to return to their original communities due to ongoing instability (International Organization for Migration (IOM) 2024).

As the war continued beyond initial expectations, hopes for a quick resolution faded, especially with the failure of Ukraine's spring 2023 counteroffensive. Recognising the long-term challenges faced by displaced citizens, the Government of Ukraine introduced the State Strategy on Internal Displacement in April 2023 (MINRE 2023). This strategy aims to support IDPs throughout all stages of their displacement journey, including the initial displacement, their social adaptation and integration into new communities, and, if possible, their eventual return home. On the European front, the EU's response to the humanitarian crisis has been notably unified, with the activation of the TPD, providing millions of Ukrainians with access to protection, residence rights, and work opportunities (see *Chapter 2.3 Temporary Protection*



Figure 3: Ukrainians displaced across Europe as of May 2024 (UNHCR Europe 2024).

in the EU and Switzerland). Ukrainians abroad are increasingly confronted with mounting pressures and challenges. In several European countries, right-wing movements and Russian expatriate groups have voiced opposition to prolonged support for displaced Ukrainians

(Aleksandar Brezar 2024; van Rij 2024), leading to a decline in public solidarity as war fatigue grows among European populations (DG COMM 2024). At the same time, many Ukrainian men abroad feel the growing pressure from their compatriots to return and join the national defence, as Ukraine's need for military personnel intensifies (Moens and Barigazzi 2024).

2.3 Temporary Protection in the EU and Switzerland

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, sparked by Russia's invasion in 2022, has led to a significant humanitarian crisis, resulting in a large influx of Ukrainian refugees seeking safety and support in Europe. In light of this unprecedented situation, both the European Union and Switzerland have swiftly implemented measures to protect these displaced individuals. On March 4, 2022, the EU activated the TPD (Council Directive 2001/55/EC) for the first time, a framework originally established following the conflicts in former Yugoslavia to provide rapid assistance during mass displacements of non-EU nationals who cannot return to their homeland (European Commission n.d.). This directive allows Ukrainians granted temporary protection in the EU to remain for up to three years, with the possibility of extensions if the conflict persists.

In a similar response, Switzerland, despite not being an EU member, activated Protection “*Status S*” on March 11, 2022, under Article 4 of the Swiss Asylum Act (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 4). This status grants Ukrainian refugees a renewable one-year residency without the necessity of undergoing the standard asylum process (Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) 2024). Together, these measures ensure that Ukrainians have rapid access to essential assistance while preventing the regular asylum system from becoming overwhelmed (Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) 2024; European Commission n.d.). Although Status S is modelled closely after the EU's framework (Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) 2024), it includes notable differences in implementation.

The following sections will examine the key aspects and distinctions between the EU and Switzerland in their respective frameworks for managing forced migration. This background is crucial for understanding and contextualising the experiences and challenges faced by displaced Ukrainians residing in Austria and Switzerland, and will provide a basis for later analysis.

Legal status under Temporary Protection

Both protection systems encompass Ukrainian nationals, non-Ukrainian nationals with protection status in Ukraine, other residents of Ukraine unable to return to their country of origin, and the families of these groups (Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 Art. 2

Abs 1; SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 68; FDJP and SEM 2022). Each framework ensures essential protections, such as housing, employment access and income support, medical care, and education. Despite these similarities, variations exist regarding the scope, duration of benefits, and conditions for residency renewal. A key difference between the two systems is the approach to handling asylum applications. In Switzerland, asylum processes are suspended for five years for individuals granted temporary protection (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 69 Abs. 3, Art. 70), while EU legislation mandates that individuals under temporary protection retain the right to apply for asylum at any time (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 17 Abs. 1).

With both the EU and Switzerland emphasizing the temporary nature of protection measures, the path to permanent residency can be lengthy and uncertain. Under the TPD (Council Directive 2001/55/EC), individuals can typically transition to permanent residency after residing in the host country for specific time, subject to national legislation. For example, Austria opened a pathway to permanent residency for Ukrainians under temporary protection in October 2024 (Austrian Parliament 2024). They can now apply for a Red-White-Red Plus permit, leading to permanent residency after five years (excluding time under temporary protection). Eligibility requires a stable income, 12 months of full employment or self-employment within the past two years, and at least A1-level German language skills (City of Vienna 2024). Similarly, in Switzerland, those granted Protection Status S can apply for a regular residence permit (Permit B) after five years, but only until the end of the protection period, while permanent residency (Permit C) can be sought after ten years (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 74 Abs 2 & 3).

Decentralised Responsibility in the EU and Switzerland

Both Switzerland and the EU have adopted a decentralized approach to implementing protection measures: Switzerland allocates each person in need of protection to a canton, which is then responsible for delivering accommodation, social assistance, medical care, and primary education (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 74, Art. 80ff), but also maintains some administrative flexibility in areas like housing and integration support. The TPD grants EU member states substantial flexibility in its implementation, allowing them to establish diverse policies concerning home visits and returns, welfare criteria, and access to integration services (Council Directive 2001/55/EC). While these regional differences allow for greater administrative discretion, they can also make it challenging for displaced persons to access consistent support across regions and complicate efforts to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the protections offered.

Choice of Residence

In terms of housing, both frameworks provide assistance; however, Switzerland imposes stricter limits on residence choice by assigning Status S holders to specific cantons, with strictly limited options for relocation to another canton (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 68). The federal government, cantons, communes and private initiatives are working together to deal with the challenging task of accommodating refugees from Ukraine (Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) 2024) , with the cantons ultimately responsible for providing suitable housing. Changes to accommodation, such as moving from a communally rented apartment to a larger self-supported apartment, are generally restricted to within cantons and require prior approval from the relevant authorities (Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) 2024).

The EU, by contrast, generally allows greater flexibility in residence choice within host countries, providing individuals with more autonomy in selecting their location. Member states are responsible for ensuring that all persons enjoying temporary protection have access to accommodation or, if necessary, the means to secure housing (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 13 Abs. 1). Beneficiaries typically have the right to choose their place or region of residence, although some member states may impose specific conditions or limitations. Additionally, displaced persons may relocate to another part of the EU, with particular emphasis on the right to family reunification; however, this relocation may result in the withdrawal or pausing of their protection status in the original member state (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 15, Art. 26 Abs. 4).

Freedom of movement

Displaced persons under temporary protection in the EU and Switzerland benefit from specific travel rights, facilitating mobility within the Schengen area and visits to their home country. The travel rights for Ukrainians enjoying temporary protection in these regions are largely similar and regulated by the Schengen Agreement.

Upon initial admission into the territory, displaced persons from Ukraine can travel to the member state where they wish to enjoy the rights associated with temporary protection and to reunite with family and friends across the significant Ukrainian diaspora networks present throughout Europe (European Commission 2022a). Once a residence permit is issued, individuals under temporary protection in both Switzerland and the EU have the right to travel within the Schengen area, typically restricted to a duration of 90 days within a 180-day period under Schengen regulations (SR 143.5 RDV Art. 9 Abs. 8; Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 15, Art. 8).

Travel to Ukraine is permitted in both regions; however, there are regional differences among individual EU member states and between the EU and Switzerland. Displaced individuals under Status S in Switzerland can travel to Ukraine for short-term visits, provided they obtain consent from the relevant authorities (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 78 Abs. 2), but residing for more than 15 days in Ukraine or acquiring legal residence in a third country could lead to the revocation of their protection status (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 78 Abs. 1cd, Art. 79a; SR 142.311 AsylV 1 Art. 51).

In the EU, member states are required to ensure that displaced persons make informed decisions regarding their return to Ukraine (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 21 Abs. 1). This interpretation often involves providing necessary information about the situation in Ukraine, enabling individuals to undertake short-term visits to assess conditions personally. However, the directive does not explicitly define "*short-term*" visits, resulting in inconsistencies across member states regarding the maintenance, freezing, or deregistration of temporary protection status in response to travel patterns.

While the European Commission advocates for member states to avoid revoking residence permits when individuals temporarily return to Ukraine—suggesting that a freezing mechanism would be more appropriate (European Commission 2022b)—many member states opt to revoke protection after visits to Ukraine exceed a certain duration. For example, Poland allows for a one-month absence before protection is revoked for a duration of 18 months (European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) 2023), while Austria permits only short visits without providing a clear definition of the term (Vertriebenenverordnung § 4 Abs. 3).

Employment rights

Both the EU and Switzerland emphasize employment as a crucial element for supporting the self-reliance and integration of displaced Ukrainians. Under the TPD, displaced persons are granted the right to work or engage in self-employment without the need for additional permits, allowing access to employment on par with local citizens (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 12 Abs. 1). Article 12 also ensures access to vocational training, further education, and practical workplace experience, supporting a smooth transition into the labour market. However, the implementation varies across EU member states; some countries offer quicker, more streamlined access to jobs, while others require certain registration steps. For example, in Austria, displaced Ukrainians must first obtain an ID card for displaced persons (AuslBG § 1 Abs. 2 lit. k), though the requirement for an additional work permit was dropped in April 2023 (Austrian Parliament 2023).

In Switzerland, displaced persons with Status S also have the right to seek employment or to become self-employed. However, they must first obtain a work permit from the cantonal authorities, which often involves more procedural steps than in some EU countries (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 62a). This requirement can lead to delays in access to the labour market, as it is an additional administrative hurdle that does not exist in many EU countries. An initial three-month waiting period was lifted when the Federal Council introduced Status S (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 75 Abs. 1; SR 142.201 VZAE Art. 53). While Status S holders in Switzerland can access training and skills programmes, these vary by canton, affecting the consistency and ease of labour market entry across the country.

Access to social and welfare support measures

Displaced Ukrainians in the EU and Switzerland benefit from structured social assistance measures aimed at ensuring their well-being and integration, with particular attention being paid to the most vulnerable. Both frameworks assess applicants' employment status, self-employment and ability to support themselves when determining assistance. Those who are fully able to cover their living expenses are generally not entitled to social assistance, although supplementary assistance may be available if their income is insufficient (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 13 para. 3; SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 81).

Essential and emergency medical care is also guaranteed under both systems, in accordance with the EU Directive and Swiss asylum law (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 13 para. 2; SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 82 & Art. 82a). In Switzerland, health care is provided through private insurance, with Status S holders obliged to take out insurance; for those who are dependent on social assistance, insurance for social assistance recipients is financed by the cantons, although the choice of insurer and provider may be restricted (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 82a para. 2). In the EU, by contrast, health policies vary from one member state to another, with many having public systems that provide more direct, state-funded health care to refugees.

Both frameworks provide additional support for groups with special needs. Unaccompanied minors and persons who have experienced trauma, such as torture or sexual violence, receive specialised medical and psychological assistance (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 13 para. 4; SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 82 Abs. 3bis).

Access to Education

Both the EU and Switzerland grant displaced Ukrainian children full access to the public school system, ensuring their right to education. Under the TPD, minors benefit from the same educational rights as local children, allowing them to attend primary and secondary

schools without additional requirements (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 14 Abs. 1). In Switzerland, children with Status S have access to compulsory education in local public schools (SR 142.31 AsylA Art. 80 Abs. 4), which is managed at the cantonal level. Switzerland provides displaced Ukrainians with full access and the right to complete apprenticeships and integration vocational language courses (INVOL), which aim to prepare young people for the Swiss workforce and support language acquisition crucial for professional integration (SEM and SERI 2023).

Both the EU and Switzerland emphasize vocational training for displaced Ukrainians to promote integration and long-term stability. Within Ukraine, the EU has adapted programmes like EU4Skills to offer vocational training opportunities to internally displaced persons (IDPs), addressing the country's skilled labour shortages by providing updated facilities and resources to Ukrainian vocational schools (BMZ 2024). Additional youth programmes are available to support the displaced Ukrainian youth (EUCFI 2024).

Across the EU, countries such as Germany provide targeted programmes that equip Ukrainian refugees with skills relevant to their new job markets (BIBB 2024). Austria has recently extended its 'AusBildung bis 18' programme to Ukrainians under temporary protection, mandating vocational training or schooling until age 18 and giving access to guidance services (BMAW 2024). Nonetheless, the quality and breadth of vocational support programmes vary between EU states. Switzerland, for its part, offers comprehensive vocational training options, though access may vary by canton and require local language proficiency.

Access to higher education for displaced Ukrainians varies significantly across EU member states, though many universities are welcoming Ukrainian students with flexible entry options. For example, Austria has waived standard tuition fees for Ukrainian nationals, a policy that generally applies to third-country nationals, and offers scholarships for Ukrainian researchers and students (BMBWF 2024). By contrast, access in Switzerland is available but depends on the approval of individual institutions, and without a Swiss Matura or recognized equivalent, entry can be challenging (SEM 2024). Many Swiss universities have responded by providing guest student spots specifically for Ukrainian students, which allow participation in courses without leading to a Swiss degree (UNIBE n.d.; UZH n.d.; HSG n.d.).

Integration measures

The EU has allocated significant funding to support the integration of displaced Ukrainians through initiatives like the European Social Fund Plus and REACT-EU, which fund projects such as integration centres in Poland and language courses for foreigners in Germany (ESF+

2023). which support programmes like Poland's integration centres for Ukrainians and Germany's integration courses for all foreign residents. In contrast, Switzerland emphasizes skill maintenance with an eventual return focus, prioritizing labour market access over full societal integration, including targeted language support for employment purposes rather than comprehensive language acquisition for broader social integration (Swiss Federal Council, FDJP, and SEM 2022). Most cantons offer free German language courses up to the A2 level or until individuals achieve labour market integration, often contingent on social welfare eligibility (Canton Aargau 2024; Canton Bern 2024; Canton Solothurn n.d.).

The TPD similarly prioritizes labour market integration but leaves adult general education access as an optional provision for member states (Council Directive 2001/55/EC Art. 14 Abs. 2). However, some EU countries provide broader access to language courses and educational support than Switzerland; for example, Austria offers free language courses up to the C1 level through the Austrian Integration Fund, supporting comprehensive language acquisition beyond immediate labour market needs (ÖIF n.d.).

Conclusion

Overall, both the TPD and Status S offer adequate protection to displaced Ukrainians and meet their objectives of rapid processing, access to essential assistance and relief from the regular asylum system. Both measures are designed with return in mind and offer fewer benefits than asylum, which is designed for long-term stay and has a stronger focus on integration. However, Swiss law imposes stricter conditions, such as tighter travel restrictions, limited choice of residence and lower-level language courses for adults, indicating a stronger focus on return. Nevertheless, people under either temporary protection or status S benefit from immediate access to education and employment, as well as simplified travel permits - advantages over the typically lengthy asylum process.

3. State of the Art

The study of forced mobility has grown substantially in recent decades, driven by the increasing frequency of conflicts, environmental crises, and other threats displacing millions worldwide (Global Migration Data Portal 2024). Unlike voluntary migration, forced mobility arises from an urgent need to escape external dangers, compelling individuals and communities to seek safety and stability beyond their places of origin. Within this complex context, research has sought to examine the motivations, pathways, and challenges encountered by displaced persons, alongside the structural, social, and psychological dimensions influencing their experiences and movements.

This chapter aims to conceptualise forced migration through a range of theoretical approaches that illuminate the multifaceted experiences of displaced individuals. A key framework explored is de Haas's aspirations and capabilities approach, which highlights the interplay between individual aspirations and the structural conditions shaping capabilities to act on them. Other important perspectives in forced migration include the concept of migration thresholds, which identifies psychological barriers faced during the pre-actional phase of migration (Tarkhanova and Pyrogorova 2024), and trajectory approaches, which investigate the evolving, multidimensional pathways of migrants as their decisions, conditions, and aspirations change across time and contexts. By comparing these frameworks, this chapter seeks to enrich our understanding of the diverse factors influencing migration decisions, constraints, and opportunities at various stages of forced migration.

In addition to theoretical perspectives, this chapter reviews literature on migration decisions during and after conflict-induced displacement. It begins by examining the initial phases of flight, where immediate safety needs and available resources often dictate responses. The discussion then transitions to the evolution of migration decisions over time, exploring future trajectories such as secondary movements, aspirations to return to the country of origin, or integration into host communities. These 'future' decisions are deeply influenced by experiences during displacement and the integration process, which will be further discussed in the third subchapter. Here, the chapter considers the role of host community support in shaping migrants' well-being, sense of belonging, and long-term choices. The chapter concludes by identifying key research gaps that persist in understanding forced migration.

While migration decisions are best understood as part of a continuum, ranging from forced to voluntary and from mobile to immobile states, these experiences are shaped by evolving contexts and circumstances. Analytical categories—such as primary versus secondary movements—remain valuable for studying specific aspects of migration, though they may sometimes oversimplify the complexities inherent in migration decisions. Theoretical frameworks like the aspirations and capabilities approach, combined with innovative research designs such as trajectory studies, provide essential tools for addressing these limitations. By capturing the dynamic interplay of individual agency and structural constraints, these perspectives offer a more nuanced understanding of transitions within the migration continuum.

3.1 Conceptualising (forced) migration

Sen (1999) and de Haas (2021) argue that human mobility should be seen as the capacity or freedom to choose where to live—including the possibility of remaining—rather than solely

as the act of relocating. This approach reframes migration as an expression of agency, shaped by individuals' capabilities and preferences, rather than simply as a reaction to external forces. In the context of forced migration, however, the decision to stay or leave is often complex and fraught with constraints, making it far from self-evident. As Schewel (2020) points out, focusing solely on mobility as the expected response can lead to an oversight of immobility as a viable, albeit challenging, choice.

Some scholars studying forced migration decision-making, such as Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва (2024) in their research on the displacement of Ukrainians at the onset of the war, continue to view war-driven displacement as a partly predetermined process, explicitly avoiding the aspirations-capabilities framework in favour of a threshold approach. However, framing forced migrants as primarily reacting to external pressures risks fostering stigma and oversimplification. This perspective reduces their decisions to mere reactions to life-threatening circumstances, potentially overlooking the agency involved in their choices and the broader array of factors—beyond immediate threats—that shape their decisions.

While situations of active conflict may indeed limit options for some, the situation is not uniform across Ukraine. The CEDOS report (Bobrova et al. 2022) demonstrates that choices regarding whether to stay or leave are strongly impacted by proximity to combat zones, border locations, and other contextual factors, revealing a more nuanced reality in which decisions are shaped by a range of pressures, capacities, and personal circumstances.

In recent years, the concepts of aspirations and capabilities have become increasingly central to migration research. Scholars such as Boccagni (2017), Carling and Schewel (2018), Carling and Collins (2018), Van Praag and Timmerman (2019) and Hein de Haas (2021) have made significant theoretical contributions to this approach, which builds upon Carling's aspirations/ability model (2001; 2002) and earlier work by de Haas (2003; 2009). Boccagni (2017) expanded the understanding of evolving aspirations, showing how migrants' aspirations change over time as they grow older and face "*reality checks*". Carling and Collins (2018) grounded aspirations and capabilities within the broader developments in migration research, while Carling and Schewel (2018) further refined the aspiration/ability model by incorporating stay or leave

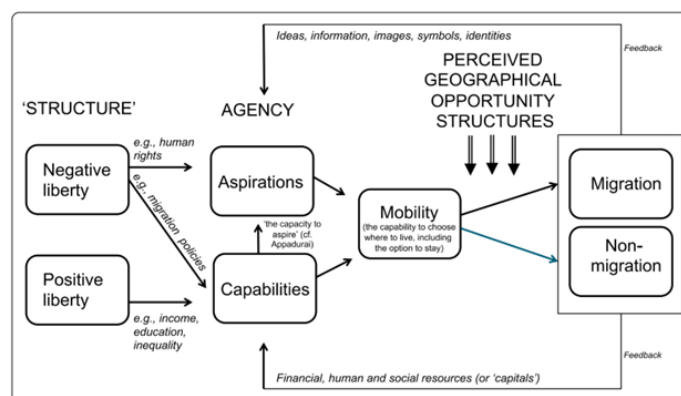


Figure 4: The expanded aspirations-capabilities framework for conceptualising migratory agency (de Haas 2021).

aspirations. Van Praag and Timmerman (2019) introduced a multilevel model, which accounts for micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors in analysing environmental migration through the lens of aspirations. Hein de Haas (2021) finally advanced the framework by incorporating Sen's (1999) capabilities theory and Berlin's (1969) ideas of positive and negative liberty (see *Figure 4*), emphasizing that migration ability is not only relevant to those who desire to migrate but also to individuals whose choices may be constrained by external factors, even if they do not wish to leave. This approach views migration as a dynamic and ongoing process, shaped by both individual aspirations and available capabilities, while considering the broader social, political, and economic contexts that influence mobility.

This framework goes beyond functionalist theories such as push-pull and neoclassical models, which typically view migration as a binary response to external conditions and often struggle to account for differentiated migration patterns. For example, they fall short in explaining why migration rates are often higher from more developed societies than from less affluent ones, where mobility might be expected to be a more common response to economic constraints (de Haas 2021, 6).

By recognising agency and structure as interdependent forces, the aspirations-capabilities approach provides a more nuanced understanding of migration decisions, acknowledging that individuals navigate both constraints and opportunities within specific social contexts. This perspective underscores that migration decisions are not merely reactive responses to external pressures; rather, they involve active choices shaped by available resources, social networks, and other enabling or restrictive factors. As a result, the aspirations-capabilities framework allows for a more dynamic and realistic understanding of migration as a process that is influenced by structural conditions but still deeply rooted in individual and collective aspirations.

Various scholars have enriched the understanding of migration decision-making by employing the aspirations-capabilities framework in diverse contexts, such as in-depth interviews (Glorius and Nienaber 2022; Brzozowska 2023; Wyngaarden et al. 2023) and for contextualising survey findings (Maidanik 2024). While the concept of migration aspirations is widely used in migration studies, it does not always refer to the same thing. Within the aspirations-capabilities framework of de Haas (2021), migration aspirations are defined as a function of individuals' general life aspirations and their perceived geographical opportunity structures. Boccagni (2017) stays relatively close to this definition, contributing to the understanding of how migration aspirations evolve over time, even without explicitly incorporating the capabilities dimension. In contrast, Kuschminder (2018), Elinder, Erixson,

and Hammar (2023), and Armağan and Ibrahim (2022) refer to a different concept altogether, focusing on migration aspirations as the inclination to leave at a population level rather than the nuanced relationship between aspirations and opportunity structures, including the option to stay.

Trajectory research is another significant approach in migration studies that has recently been gaining traction, reflecting a growing focus on understanding migration as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a static or singular event. Recent contributions, such as those by Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden (2021), challenge simplistic notions that migration outcomes depend solely on a momentous go/no-go decision in the country of origin. Instead, migration decisions evolve over time, shaped by migrants' experiences, opportunities, and constraints at various stages of their journey. For many migrants, especially those forcibly displaced, this process demands continuous adaptation to unforeseen circumstances, as initial displacement often leaves little room for extensive planning.

This approach emphasises the multilocal geographies of migration, acknowledging that migrants often sustain connections to multiple places and redefine their concept of 'home' over time. Trajectory research offers a nuanced and continuous lens for analysing migration decisions, moving beyond rigid stage-based models while still accounting for the pressures and opportunities migrants encounter along their journey. By integrating the aspirations-capabilities framework with a trajectory approach, researchers gain a deeper understanding of migration as an ongoing negotiation of aspirations, capabilities, and contextual realities.

While the term "trajectory," referring to migrants' journeys or routes, appears in multiple publications, not all of them adopt a trajectory approach that follows migrants along their journey. Some studies, such as Torfa, Almohamed, and Birner (2022), may use the term more loosely to describe the general movement or path of migrants without engaging with the dynamic, process-oriented analysis that a true trajectory approach entails. In contrast, a trajectory approach involves closely tracking the evolving experiences, decisions, and opportunities migrants encounter as they navigate various stages of migration, providing a deeper understanding of the migration process as a continuous and adaptive journey (Schapendonk and Steel 2014).

While the term "trajectory" often appears in migration studies to describe migrants' paths or movements, not all research adopts a trajectory approach that follows migrants' evolving experiences. For example, some studies, such as Torfa, Almohamed, and Birner (2022), use the term loosely to describe general patterns of movement. In contrast, a true trajectory approach,

such as advocated by Schapendonk and others (Schapendonk and Steel 2014; Schapendonk et al. 2020; Schapendonk 2020; Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden 2021), tracks migrants' decisions and opportunities as they unfold, providing insights into the continuous and adaptive nature of migration. For instance, Khelashvili (2024) employs narrative in-depth interviews to examine the journeys of displaced Ukrainians to Finland, addressing their pre-migration experiences, the journey itself, and their adaptation to life in Finland.

Another conceptual lens for migration trajectories involves thresholds, particularly locational and trajectory thresholds, as proposed by Mallett and Hagen-Zanker (2018) and based on van der Velde and van Naerssen's (2011) migration thresholds framework. These thresholds represent pivotal moments in migration when individuals transition from vague notions of their destination to clearer decisions and from uncertainty about how to migrate to actively navigating their journey. These thresholds are often revisited and re-evaluated throughout the migration process. Tarkhanova and Pyrogorova (2024) apply this framework to investigate the migration decisions of displaced Ukrainians within and outside Ukraine. Similarly, Glorius and Nienaber (2022) integrate it with the aspirations-capabilities framework and transnational networks to explore secondary movement decisions among refugees in Luxembourg and Germany.

3.2 Conflict induced displacement

Conflict-induced migration is a central aspect of forced migration, defined by its involuntary nature and driven by war, violence, and persecution. Since the 1990s, literature on forced migration has made considerable progress, addressing questions about the causes and destinations of refugee movements, host country and international responses, the impacts on host communities, and how refugees react to political developments in their countries of origin (Braithwaite, Salehyan, and Savun 2019). While some earlier research in the field highlighted that civilians in conflict zones make critical assessments about navigating their survival (Moore and Shellman 2007), much of the early work relied on aggregate refugee flows and country-level analyses, drawing only indirect conclusions about individual behaviour (Salehyan 2019).

The recent literature reviewed for this thesis includes a diverse range of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches, with qualitative methods emerging as particularly influential in migration studies, especially in the context of forced migration. These approaches have shifted the focus toward the complex and evolving dynamics of migration decisions. Coupled with theoretical advancements, this shift has deepened our understanding of the interplay between migration aspirations, capabilities, and the structural

and personal factors that shape decision-making. Both qualitative and quantitative research in recent years has significantly enhanced our understanding of migration decision-making, shedding light on the experiences of both regular and forced migrants, as well as immobile populations.

Insights from the broader field of migration studies offer valuable contributions to understanding forced migration decisions. For example, Allen and Eaton (2005) emphasize the role of distance and risk-aversion in migration decisions, noting that individuals are more likely to move to closer, less risky destinations. This concept of risk assessment is equally relevant to forced migration research, where the proximity to safer regions and the perceived risks of further movement shape displacement patterns. Fiedler (2020) further underscores the importance of a nuanced understanding of migrants' decision-making processes for effective policy-making. In her critique of awareness campaigns aimed at migrants, Fiedler highlights how these campaigns, though intended to inform and guide, often fail to align with the lived realities of migrants. This disconnect between the information provided and migrants' actual needs emphasizes the need for migration policies that are grounded in a more comprehensive understanding of the factors driving migration decisions.

Recent studies on forced migration reveal the highly contextual and evolving nature of migration decisions (Kuschminder 2018; Valenta et al. 2020; Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira 2021; Glorius and Nienaber 2022), further emphasising the importance of considering displaced persons' agency, the impact of information and networks, and the need for policies that support long-term solutions rather than short-term deterrence. Refugees' and displaced persons initial migration decisions are often driven by immediate survival needs, such as safety from violence and persecution, and are influenced by the availability of nearby safe countries (Kuschminder 2018; Valenta et al. 2020; Tarkhanova and Pyrogorova 2024). Ukrainian refugees' migration decisions during initial displacement reflect broader migration research themes, such as the influence of safety and social networks during initial displacement.

Khelashvili (2024) highlights two distinct models of decision-making: quick migration shortly after the war and a slower, more deliberate process influenced by safety, family separation, and living conditions abroad. Studies like Tarkhanova and Pyrogorova (2024) emphasise agency in decision-making, facilitated by visa-free travel and temporary protection. These insights align with earlier research on other forced migrants, such as Schon (2019), which highlights the interplay between motivations and opportunities, although the focus on evolving conflict dynamics adds a unique layer. Brzozowska (2023) and Vasylytsiv et al. (2024) reflect the aspirations of displaced Ukrainians for safety, normality and better living conditions. Specific

to Ukraine, these aspirations are shaped by cultural proximity to destinations such as Poland and the liberalisation of migration policies in Europe (Brzozowska 2023).

Studies on the Ukrainian displacement heavily focus on conflict's role in shaping trajectories. This includes Khelashvili's (2024) exploration of evolving circumstances and Maidanik's (2024) analysis of migration oscillations linked to military attacks. Tarkhanova and Pyrogova (2024) adapt the threshold approach to migration decision-making for the investigation of war-driven displacement and shows how it highlights the role of timing and affect in the decision-making process as well as its relational nature. These conflict-specific insights expand on earlier research like Schon (2019), bringing a temporal lens to forced migration flows.

Demographic factors significantly shape the migration decisions of displaced Ukrainians, with gender, family composition, access to social networks, and education emerging as key determinants. Gender and family composition, in particular, are pivotal in Ukrainian displacement. Displaced Ukrainians are predominantly female and often accompanied by children (Andrews et al. 2023; Brücker et al. 2023; Maidanik 2024; Khelashvili 2024), contrasting with displaced persons from other regions, who tend to be younger and predominantly male (Dekker et al. 2018; Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018; Schon 2019; Torfa, Almohamed, and Birner 2022). Tarkhanova and Pyrogova (2024) underscore how gender influences Ukrainian women's migration experiences, with childcare responsibilities frequently shaping their decisions.

Family composition and reunification options further shape migration pathways. Married refugees from Afghanistan, for instance, are more likely to migrate further (Kuschminder 2018). Family reunification, that plays an important role for other groups (Dekker et al. 2018; Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018), is less emphasised among displaced Ukrainians due to travel restrictions for Ukrainian men. A large-scale study by Kogan et al. (2024) demonstrates that having young children or a partner who could not leave Ukraine significantly reduces the likelihood of migration. The influence of family members and social networks is also substantial in shaping migration decisions (Mallett and Hagen-Zanker 2018; Brücker et al. 2023). Studies on Ukrainian displacement highlight the emotional and logistical challenges migrants face, with family separation often representing a significant sacrifice (Brzozowska 2023; Vasylytsiv et al. 2024; Khelashvili 2024).

The CEDOS report (Bobrova et al. 2022) further underscores the gendered nature of displacement in Ukraine, highlighting how internally displaced men face discrimination in

accessing housing, while women encounter prejudice in military contexts. The report also emphasises the interconnected nature of migration decisions, where staying may be untenable for some, while others lack the resources to leave. Maidanik (2024) further examines why some Ukrainians choose to stay despite significant risks, offering a nuanced perspective on migration decisions in conflict settings. This dynamic interplay between mobility and immobility underscores the importance of addressing both constraints and opportunities in migration decision-making, reinforcing the relevance of a combined (im)mobility concept (Sen 1999; Schewel 2020; de Haas 2021).

The role of education in influencing migration decisions in forced displacement remains underexplored. Significant differences exist among displaced populations, with internationally displaced Ukrainians generally possessing high educational qualifications (Andrews et al. 2023; Vasylytsiv et al. 2024). In contrast, the educational backgrounds of refugees from other regions are often more diverse (Dekker et al. 2018; Kuschminder 2018; Schon 2019). Kogan et al. (2024) demonstrate that for displaced Ukrainians higher education, English proficiency, and financial resources are associated with greater mobility, findings that align with Schon's (2019) study on Syrian migrants. However, other research into forced migration suggests that education levels may play a more limited role in shaping migration decisions (Kuschminder 2018).

Social networks, particularly those accessed through mobile phones, play an increasingly influential role in shaping the migration decisions of displaced persons. Information from family members, friends, or fellow migrants is often preferred over official sources (Dekker et al. 2018; Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018; Glorius and Nienaber 2022). For Ukrainian displaced persons in Europe, social ties, including prewar family connections and support from volunteers, are pivotal in reducing risks and guiding migration destination preferences (Brzozowska 2023; Khelashvili 2024; Brücker et al. 2023; Tarkhanova and Pyrogova 2024; Bobrova et al. 2022).

While research highlights the evolving nature of migration decisions and trajectory studies have been gaining traction, a large part of forced migration studies focuses on just one or two stages of displacement. This pattern is also evident in studies on the displacement of Ukrainians. Bobrova et al. (2022), Maidanik (2024), Khelashvili (2024) and Tarkhanova and Pyrogova (2024) provide insights into preparations and the initial decision to leave, with the latter two also examining migration decisions and their evolution along the journey. Tarkhanova (2023) and Voznyak et al. (2023) focus on adaptation and integration into host countries, while Maidanik (2024) additionally explores oscillating movements and return.

Although none of these studies directly address return decisions contingent on prior experiences, research into migration aspirations for Ukrainians offers insights into potential return motivations among the general Ukrainian population, youth, and expat communities (Elinder, Erixson, and Hammar 2023; Brzozowska 2023; Vasylytsiv et al. 2024).

However, insights from the broader body of research on transit migration, secondary movements, and return decisions provide essential context for understanding the evolving nature of migration decisions among displaced Ukrainians. These studies, which explore how unmet aspirations and shifting conditions drive migration choices, offer a valuable lens for examining the dynamic and multifaceted trajectories of Ukrainians navigating displacement and uncertainty. Boccagni (2017) provides a critical perspective on how labour migrants' aspirations, particularly for secondary or return migration, transform over time. His work mirrors the redistribution of aspirations as forced migrants adjust to their lived experiences, shifting from their initial concerns for safety and stability to more contextually grounded objectives. Similarly, Mallett and Hagen-Zanker (2018) emphasise the pivotal role of experiences "on the road" in reshaping motivations, trajectories, and destination choices. These insights challenge the notion of a predetermined migration path and underscore the adaptive nature of migrants' decisions.

Decisions about staying in transit locations or continuing onwards often emerge during displacement, influenced by conditions encountered on the move (Kuschminder 2018). Valenta et al. (2020) and Glorius and Nienaber (2022) highlight how the inability of initial host countries to meet migrants' needs frequently drives patterns of secondary and transit migration. Similarly, research on secondary movements by de Hoon, Vink, and Schmeets (2021) and Glorius and Nienaber (2022) underscores the adaptive nature of migration decisions, which evolve in response to shifting personal, social, and structural circumstances.

The relationship between migration policies and refugee mobility represents another critical determinant of migration decisions and outcomes. Host country policies regarding legal protections, work opportunities, and access to social services significantly shape refugees' decisions to stay, move onward, or return (Kuschminder 2018; Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira 2021; Valenta et al. 2020).

Ukrainian refugees experience distinct policy conditions, such as visa-free travel and temporary protection statuses, which provide them with greater agency and broader destination choices compared to the restrictive policies faced by other forced migrants (Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва 2024; Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira 2021). Nonetheless, structural

barriers persist, including administrative inefficiencies that mirror challenges observed in other migration contexts (Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва 2024; Valenta et al. 2020). Based on Elinder, Erixson, and Hammar's (2023) analysis of migration preferences, many Ukrainians who initially sought temporary refuge are expected to reassess their choices as living conditions evolve, opportunities for family reunification arise, legal statuses change, and the war's end remains uncertain. While many regard temporary refuge as a bridge for eventual return, many will be exploring options for longer-term integration.

Collyer (Collyer 2010) and Erdal & Oeppen (Erdal and Oeppen 2018) underscore how return migration is contingent on changes in both the home and host contexts, with structural factors such as safety, political stability, and economic opportunities heavily influencing these decisions. For Syrian refugees, insights from Alrababah et al. (2023) indicate that return intentions are primarily shaped by safety conditions in the country of origin, with local and national security playing the most significant roles. While factors such as military conscription, job availability, and public services also influence decisions, they have a lesser impact compared to the critical role of security. These findings are echoed by survey data from IMPACT Initiatives (2024), which show that a notable share of Ukrainian refugees returned despite worsening safety conditions—particularly to frontline regions—motivated largely by family reunification and opportunities for professional reintegration.

Media reports and statements from the Ukrainian government offer valuable insights into a key aspect of Ukrainian return migration, particularly regarding the government's growing efforts to manage the return of refugees. Ukrainian authorities have advocated for stricter protection policies, such as limiting the duration of temporary protection and encouraging refugees to return to assist in the country's reconstruction (Boss and Lipkowski 2024). Additionally, the shared struggle for survival, international diaspora mobilization, and the amplification of diverse narratives from across the country have helped shape a unified yet plural Ukrainian identity (Brantly 2024). These media, governmental, and empirical accounts demonstrate how return migration is influenced not only by safety and economic considerations but also by navigating a complex array of pressures, including national duty and government policies.

3.3 Arrival, Integration and Adaption

The integration and adaptation of displaced individuals represent critical stages in their displacement trajectory, shaping their well-being, future capabilities, and aspirations. For Ukrainians displaced by war, integration challenges are multifaceted, encompassing social, economic, and psychological dimensions. Policies, social conditions, and local contexts within

host countries play a critical role in shaping these experiences (Donato and Ferris 2020), influencing whether displaced individuals can access opportunities or remain reliant on support. Forced migrants often encounter considerable barriers to employment, housing, and language acquisition, all of which hinder their long-term integration into host societies (Brell, Dustmann, and Preston 2020; Kiselev et al. 2020; Donato and Ferris 2020). Common issues such as precarious employment, exploitation, and de-skilling highlight the urgent need for career counselling and targeted support systems to improve integration outcomes (Udayar et al. 2022; Donato and Ferris 2020). Furthermore, prolonged asylum processes and restrictive policies exacerbate mental health issues, perpetuate precarious living conditions, and limit durable solutions for displaced populations (Brell, Dustmann, and Preston 2020; Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira 2021; Ferreira et al. 2022).

The experiences and challenges faced by forced migrants in host countries are crucial not only from a humanitarian perspective but also as key determinants of future migration decisions. Therefore, evaluations of protection measures should consider not only the numbers of displaced people admitted but also the ways these measures impact their lives and prospects.

Integration is not merely a reflection of immediate circumstances but also a decisive factor in shaping future migration decisions. While experiences of forced migration and the hardships endured may enhance migrants' resilience during integration (Knausenberger et al. 2022), prolonged precarious conditions and protracted displacement often prompt further mobility as a coping strategy. Whether individuals choose to remain and integrate fully into host societies, undertake secondary migration, or return to their home country is frequently influenced by the support systems and experiences encountered during the integration phase (Valenta et al. 2020; Etzold and Fechter 2022). The ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the increasingly protracted and uncertain nature of displacement add complexity to these integration processes. Comparative studies suggest that inclusive policies, such as those in Canada, lead to more favourable outcomes than restrictive approaches observed during past crises in Europe (Donato and Ferris 2020). Successful integration is essential not only for enhancing the residential stability of migrants (de Hoon, Vink, and Schmeets 2021) but also for alleviating pressure on social systems in host societies. Comprehensive support measures, such as career counselling and tailored integration programmes, play an integral role in achieving these outcomes (Udayar et al. 2022).

While displaced Ukrainians in Europe benefit from hastened access to essential assistance and labour market integration, these measures are explicitly designed with return in mind and

offer fewer benefits compared to full asylum provisions, with many European countries placing limited emphasis on integration and language acquisition (see *Chapter 2.3 Temporary Protection in the EU and Switzerland*). Early research into their adaptation highlights significant challenges with language skills and integration, which remain critical barriers to effective inclusion in host societies (Brücker et al. 2023). Mijić et al. (2024) illustrate how the arrival and early integration of displaced individuals is deeply marked by a sense of a ‘half-life’, where individuals exist in a liminal state—neither fully settled nor entirely connected to their previous lives. This is accompanied by a pervasive sense of loss that encompasses their everyday certainties, past lives, future prospects, social recognition and established social positions.

These challenges in early adaptation are further compounded by high language barriers and a limited focus on long-term integration and language acquisition under temporary protection. This is especially true for forced migrants in Switzerland, where limited language skills often exacerbate financial instability and emotional distress, making integration more difficult (Kiselev et al. 2020), though similar issues exist across the EU (Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira 2021). Research indicates that early language training is crucial for improving future employment prospects and reducing skill loss during displacement, thereby enhancing self-reliance, employment opportunities, and social inclusion (Brell, Dustmann, and Preston 2020; Riordan and Claudio 2022).

Public attitudes towards displaced populations significantly impact both their initial arrival and long-term integration, as well as influencing future migration decisions. These attitudes are shaped by broader discourses on migration, forced displacement, and social support, often influenced by prevailing myths and prejudices. Trust in institutions and social cohesion play crucial roles in fostering positive attitudes, while societal insecurities and sensationalist media can amplify negative perceptions of migrants (Messing and Sagvari 2018; Coninck et al. 2018). Displaced Ukrainians, in particular, are generally perceived more favourably than other asylum-seeking groups, with less prejudice and greater willingness to offer support (Coninck 2022; Xuereb 2023; Zawadzka-Paluckta 2023). Media coverage plays a critical role in this dynamic, often framing Ukrainians as deserving of help, while marginalising or dehumanising other groups, reinforcing exclusionary narratives (Xuereb 2023). However, amidst growing anti-immigration discourses and war fatigue across Europe (Aleksandar Brezar 2024; van Rij 2024; European Commission Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM) 2024), these negative rhetorics are increasingly affecting Ukrainians as well. Both the EU’s security-focused policies and simplified portrayals of refugees as powerless victims—though often

intended to elicit sympathy—inadvertently reinforce existing stereotypes and negative myths about migrants as threats, rather than addressing their actual integration needs (Ferreira et al. 2022; Etzold and Fechter 2022).

3.4 Research gaps

Forced migration research underscores the need for interconnected approaches that examine migration decisions as dynamic processes evolving along the trajectory of displacement. Braithwaite, Salehyan, and Savun (2019) stress the importance of systematically exploring both local and macro-level processes, behaviours, and attitudes to better understand forced migration dynamics. Such research has the potential to balance humanitarian responses to displaced populations with the legitimate concerns of host communities.

3.4.1 Addressing Gaps in migration decision research

While existing studies highlight the agency of displaced individuals during their initial displacement—particularly for Ukrainians whose decisions are shaped by immediate safety concerns, family separations, and social networks (Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва 2024) — significant gaps persist. For instance, gender, family composition, and prewar social ties are recognised as key factors in decision-making (Khelashvili 2024; Brzozowska 2023). However, there is limited research that examines the intersection of these factors with education, financial resources, and legal status over time.

Current literature often isolates different stages of the migration process, such as initial displacement or early integration, without fully addressing the dynamic and iterative nature of decision-making. A more comprehensive approach, which considers the evolution of migration aspirations and capabilities across the displacement trajectory, is essential for understanding how decisions unfold over time.

Studies on other forced migrant groups highlight secondary migration as a response to unmet aspirations in host countries (Valenta et al. 2020) and return decisions shaped by safety and stability in home contexts (Alrababah et al. 2023). However, research on Ukrainian displacement tends to treat these processes as discrete phenomena, neglecting their interconnected nature. Migration decisions—including secondary migration and return—should be examined as complementary processes shaped by aspirations, capabilities, and changing conditions in both origin and host countries.

The evolution of migration decisions in conflict-induced displacement, particularly in the context of Ukraine, is closely tied to the progression of the war. While some displaced individuals from the Kyiv region and northern Ukraine have returned (Gradus Research

Company 2022), ongoing attacks and widespread devastation in eastern and southern Ukraine have rendered return unfeasible for many. Aspirations for return are further influenced by perceptions of Ukraine's post-war potential, highlighting the need to situate migration decisions within a holistic framework that accounts for the interplay of war progression, living conditions in host countries, and personal aspirations.

3.4.2 Integration and Protracted Displacement

Integration challenges are another critical area requiring deeper exploration. Adaptation strategies among Ukrainians in host countries have been shaped by several factors, including policy frameworks, public attitudes, and the unique mobility afforded by visa-free travel and temporary protection policies. These measures have provided displaced Ukrainians with a degree of flexibility not available to many other forced migrants. However, questions remain about the adequacy of these measures in addressing the long-term challenges of protracted displacement, especially as the focus on rapid integration under temporary protection policies encounters the realities of extended displacement.

Key elements of integration, such as language acquisition, labour market participation, and access to education, play central roles in shaping migration decisions. Language proficiency is essential for employment and social networking, while targeted support systems are crucial for mitigating de-skilling and promoting upward mobility. Employment experiences during displacement significantly influence aspirations for return, onward migration, or permanent settlement. Although the high educational qualifications of displaced individuals enhance mobility (Andrews et al. 2023; Kogan et al. 2024), further research is needed to clarify the role of education in decision-making.

Despite the generally favourable perception of displaced Ukrainians compared to other forced migrants, public discourse has perpetuated misconceptions. Secondary and circular migration are often misinterpreted as abuses of social systems, undermining displaced Ukrainians' entitlement to international protection (Kordes and Straatmann 2022). Similarly, stereotypes about wealth—such as owning expensive cars—have influenced policy decisions in Austria, diverting attention from issues like de-skilling and precarious living conditions (Bickner 2024).

Public attitudes and policy frameworks exert a dual influence on integration processes and long-term migration decisions. Understanding this interplay is crucial for addressing integration challenges and fostering sustainable solutions. Countering myths and

misconceptions through research and public education can promote nuanced policy responses that align with the lived realities of forced migrants.

3.4.3 Towards a holistic understanding of decision making in forced migration

Integrating the psychosocial dimensions of displacement into migration research is essential for addressing the challenges of protracted displacement. Recent studies, such as Maxwell, Leybenson, and Yemini (2024), highlight the resilience and ‘agency-in-waiting’ of middle-class Ukrainian women, offering insights into the psychological and practical complexities of extended displacement. However, long-term trajectories and evolving aspirations remain underexamined.

A combined (im)mobility perspective, grounded in the aspirations and capabilities framework, provides a robust methodological approach for understanding migration decisions across the displacement trajectory. By capturing the nuances of decisions that evolve from initial flight to aspirations for return, onward migration, or permanent settlement, such a framework can inform refugee policies that enhance agency and align with actual choices.

Situating migration decisions within this holistic perspective enables researchers to address persistent gaps in understanding the lived realities of forced migrants. Exploring interconnected processes such as integration, secondary migration, and return not only enriches academic discourse but also provides actionable insights for policymakers. Countering myths and misconceptions that distort public discourse is equally critical. Misunderstandings about the motivations and behaviours of displaced individuals often perpetuate stereotypes and hinder effective policy responses.

Aligning policies with the aspirations and capabilities of displaced individuals fosters environments that respect their agency while addressing the complexities of protracted displacement. This approach supports equitable, sustainable solutions, ensuring that the rights and needs of displaced populations are adequately met. Ultimately, adopting such a comprehensive framework is vital for bridging the gap between the challenges faced by displaced individuals and the development of informed, effective policies that reflect their realities.

4. Methodology

The aim of this research is to contribute to the body of knowledge on forced migration by examining the construction and evolution of migration aspirations and capabilities in primary and secondary refugee migration. By exploring the migration decision-making processes and

agency of refugees, the research aims to inform future refugee policies that align with refugees' actual decisions and experiences.

This research will address the research question through a qualitative design, with a literature review to identify gaps and refine the research approach. In-depth interviews will serve as the primary data source, allowing for an exploration of the evolution of migration aspirations and capabilities among Ukrainian refugees. These interviews will provide empirical insights into the migration decision-making process, tracing refugees' trajectories and their future migration aspirations while contextualising existing theoretical frameworks.

A detailed explanation of the key concepts and research methodology is provided in the following chapters.

4.1 Research Design

The research design addresses the gaps identified in the previous chapter by employing a trajectory approach, with the aspirations-capabilities framework as the guiding theoretical lens. A qualitative design has been chosen to capture the depth and nuance of individual migration decisions, primarily through in-depth interviews with displaced Ukrainians. This approach allows for the examination of migration decisions as they evolve over time and space, embracing the dynamic nature of forced migration trajectories.

The research design is rooted in grounded theory, particularly its inductive approach, which emphasizes generating insights directly from empirical data. This allows for the organic identification of emerging patterns and themes, while avoiding preconceived notions about forced migration or assumptions regarding the lack of agency. The research also integrates established theoretical frameworks, ensuring that the analysis remains both data-driven and contextually informed. The interview guide is intentionally open, enabling participants to share their stories within the framework of their migration trajectory. Participants were invited to begin at any point in their journey, and many chose to discuss their experiences in Ukraine and war-related events, which offered a sense of closure. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, particularly regarding sensitive and potentially traumatic topics.

While grounded theory serves as the methodological foundation, the research also draws on the aspirations-capabilities framework to understand how displaced individuals navigate their decisions within the context of opportunities and constraints. Additionally, the trajectory approach ensures a process-oriented perspective, capturing the evolving nature of migration decisions. By combining the flexibility of grounded theory with established theoretical approaches, the research seeks to balance data-driven discovery with analytical

rigor, enriching the study's potential to contribute both novel insights and a contextualized understanding of migration decision-making processes.

Given the flexible nature of the research approach, the research questions are designed to evolve throughout the study. The primary question guiding the research focuses on capturing migration-decisions and their evolution along the displacement trajectory through their migration aspirations and capabilities. To explore this complex phenomenon, the research is guided by sub-questions grouped into three interconnected categories: First, capturing the trajectories of displaced Ukrainians and focusing on the events and decisions during the first stages of displacement; second, examining the evolution of migration decisions along these trajectories; and third, exploring the challenges faced by displaced individuals, as well as the similarities and differences observed across demographic groups and geographic contexts. While the primary research question and subcategories have remained largely unchanged, some sub-questions were developed further as the research progressed. For instance, the question on protracted displacement emerged later when the theme of being in limbo—caught between the inability to return and uncertainty about the future in the host country—was identified during the interviews.

The sampling strategy employed snowball sampling, leveraging networks and personal connections. Austria and Switzerland were chosen as initial recruitment sites due to the availability of established networks in both countries. Selecting these two countries facilitates the exploration of potential regional differences in migration aspirations, as well as the impact of divergent governance decisions. The countries' similar legal frameworks, alongside key differences in their implementation, provide valuable insights into the practicalities of integration and highlight the advantages and limitations of each national model.

The operationalisation of our research framework draws from the definitions of mobility and migration aspirations and capabilities, as outlined by Sen (1999) and de Haas (2021), as discussed in the Terms & Definitions section (*Chapter 1.1.1 Human Mobility*). These concepts form the baseline for understanding the dynamics of forced migration in this study. Forced migration, as defined by Hein de Haas (2021), serves as the foundational lens through which this research investigates the migration decisions of forced migrants, particularly within the context of their mobility. The framework used in this study is informed by de Haas' conceptualisation of migration as a continuous process, where individuals navigate a dynamic landscape of (im)mobility (Adams 2016), influenced by their aspirations and capabilities. To reflect the specific context of conflict-induced displacement, this framework has been slightly adapted to capture the unique pressures and constraints faced by forced migrants in conflict

environments (see *Figure 5*). This adaptation allows for a more nuanced understanding of how displacement is experienced and how decisions evolve over time within the broader continuum of mobility, which encompasses both movement and non-movement as potential outcomes. Both options can be influenced and restricted by the ongoing conflict, with individuals facing constraints that limit their ability to move or, conversely, to remain in their current location. The framework serves as a guide for mapping the aspirations, capabilities, and trajectories of displaced persons, ensuring that the research accounts for the dynamic interplay between individual agency and the structural factors that shape migration decisions, whether they lead to movement or immobility.

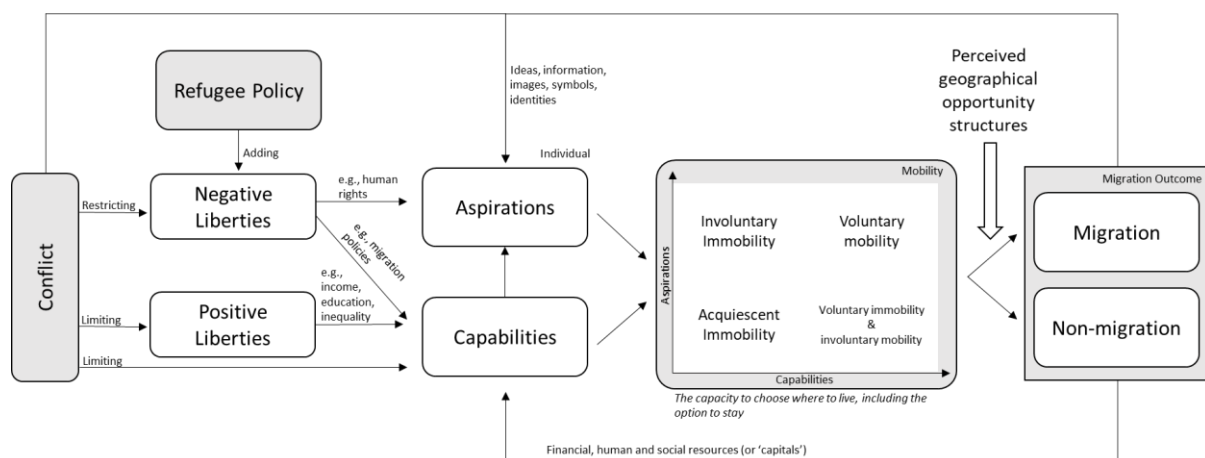


Figure 5: The aspirations-capabilities framework for conceptualising migratory agency expanded for conflict induced migration (adapted from de Haas 2021).

In operationalising forced migration for my study, I utilised a trajectory-based interview guide that was informed by insights from previous research into forced migration and the multilevel model of (environmental) migration decision-making by Van Praag and Timmerman (2019), which was adapted to specifically address forced migration contexts. The interview guide closely aligns with the Aspirations and Capabilities Framework and was designed to explore the evolving migration decisions, aspirations, and capabilities of displaced Ukrainians across different stages of their displacement journey. The checklist-based structure of the interview focused on several core areas (for more details, see *Appendix 11.3 Interview Guide*):

1. Stop-Specific Insights: For each stage of migration (e.g., initial departure, interim destinations, and current locations), the interview examined whether the situation was satisfactory for the interviewee, the feasibility of staying at each location, and the factors that influenced both the decision to leave and the choice of destination. This provided a clear picture of the interviewee's situation at each stop and helped trace the decision-making process through both internal and external factors.

2. **Evolution and Changes:** The guide also aimed to track the evolution of migration aspirations and capabilities over time, assessing how the interviewee's hopes, plans, and evaluations of different destinations changed. It inquired about the impact of external events and internal processes on their trajectory, such as changing circumstances, political developments, or shifts in personal aspirations.
3. **Migration Aspirations and Capabilities:** The interview sought to identify key personal and external factors influencing the interviewee's migration aspirations and capabilities. It explored the limitations faced by the interviewee, such as financial resources, legal status, or family obligations, as well as opportunities or newly acquired capabilities that facilitated their migration journey. This helped to highlight how aspirations and capabilities evolve over time in response to lived experiences and external factors.
4. **Narratives, Networks, and Groups:** The interview explored the role of social networks and external sources of information, assessing how connections to communities, groups, and support structures influenced the decision-making process.

This operationalisation allows for a nuanced exploration of forced migration, capturing both the personal and structural dimensions of displacement while providing insight into how individual migration paths are shaped by evolving aspirations, capabilities, and external factors.

4.1.1 Research Questions

This study is designed to provide an in-depth understanding of the migration decision-making processes of displaced Ukrainians by tracing their experiences along their displacement trajectories. The research questions are grounded in the aspirations-capabilities framework, aiming to dissect migration decisions and illuminate their evolution over time. While the primary research question and its overarching subcategories provided a stable foundation for the study, some subquestions were added or refined during the research process, reflecting the open and adaptive nature of the approach. This flexibility allowed the study to respond to emerging patterns and insights within the complex context of forced migration.

4.1.1.1 Primary Research Question

How are the migration-decisions of displaced Ukrainians evolving along their displacement trajectories, and what roles do personal aspirations, capabilities, and policies play in shaping their mobility?

4.1.1.2 Sub-Questions:

1. The Displacement Trajectory

- a. How do migrants' aspirations and capabilities influence the shaping of their displacement trajectories?
- b. How do transnational networks and diaspora communities shape the aspirations, trajectories, and later integration experiences of displaced Ukrainians?
- c. What is the role of migration policy and legislation in directing the initial displacement of Ukrainians?

2. Evolution of Migration Decisions Along Displacement Trajectories

- a. In what ways do experiences of displacement and perceptions of safety (in both Ukraine and host countries) influence migrants' decision-making processes?
- b. What factors influence the decision of displaced Ukrainians to consider returning to Ukraine, and how do these aspirations evolve over time?
- c. How do migration policies and legislation impact experiences during displacement and host-country integration?
- d. How do access to employment opportunities and economic stability in host countries shape migration aspirations and capabilities?
- e. How do experiences of protracted displacement shape the migration aspirations of displaced Ukrainians?
- f. How do experiences during displacement, alongside evolving migrants' aspirations and capabilities, shape decisions regarding future migration pathways?

3. Challenges, Similarities and Differences

- a. What key themes and patterns can be identified in the experiences of displaced Ukrainians?
- b. What major challenges do displaced Ukrainians encounter during their displacement and integration?
- c. What are the most notable similarities and differences in the experiences of displaced Ukrainians in Austria and Switzerland?

4.1.2 Ethical Considerations

In research design, balancing potential risks and benefits for participants is critical, particularly when studying forced migrants. Such research can unintentionally violate migrants' privacy and expose them to various risks, including stigmatization, (re)traumatization, and potential persecution by authorities or traffickers. Nevertheless, this research is essential for gaining invaluable insights into the experiences and perspectives of

refugees, thereby enhancing our understanding of the complexities surrounding their movements and the challenges they face.

For this research to significantly contribute to the development of informed policies regarding refugee migration, a strong commitment to ethical conduct is essential. This includes ensuring the meaningful involvement of refugees in the research process. To safeguard all participants, it is crucial to establish comprehensive safety protocols and an incidental findings policy, thereby prioritizing the welfare and rights of those involved.

The research underwent ethical approval from the Department of Geography and Regional Research (IRB-IfGR) at the University of Vienna to ensure compliance with institutional and international standards.

To ensure that neither the research process nor the publication of this thesis—or any subsequent work based on this research—causes harm to any individual or group, ethical guidelines have been established. They draw on several key resources, including the European Commission's *Guidance notes for research on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants* (2020), the *Code of Ethics* of the German Sociological Association (DGS and BDS 2017), and the article *Beyond 'do no harm': The challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research* (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007).

The ethical framework is grounded in four fundamental principles:

- Respect for autonomy (the obligation to respect the self-determination of individuals and their ability to make decisions for themselves without undue pressure, coercion or other forms of persuasion),
- Beneficence (the obligation to provide benefits and to balance benefits and risks)
- non-maleficence (the obligation to refrain from causing deliberate harm and deliberately avoiding actions that might be expected to cause harm),
- and justice (the obligation to distribute benefits and risks fairly).

Participants received detailed information about the study's aims, methods, and potential risks and benefits in their native language. Written consent was obtained, and they retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage, with identifying information removed to protect participants' privacy. Interviews were conducted sensitively, allowing participants to skip questions or pause discussions if they felt uncomfortable. Prior to the interviews, access to local support services was arranged and could be facilitated if necessary to address any emotional distress that might arise during the research.

One change was made to the initial ethical guideline, which had excluded under-18 participants. An exception was allowed to include a Ukrainian girl slightly under 18, who had contacted me through a relative and expressed a strong wish to participate. The decision to include her was made only after careful reflection on the ethical framework and the safeguards available. Family contact was ensured, and the interview was conducted in a supportive environment. During the interview, she herself raised the topic of her and her sister's flight, including references to nearby war-related violence. This part of the conversation was kept brief and approached with caution and without pressure, allowing her to decide what she wanted to share. The main focus remained on later stages of her displacement trajectory. Her proximity to adulthood, her explicit motivation to share her experiences, and the protective measures in place were considered sufficient to justify this deviation from the initial guideline, keeping the study consistent with the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice.

To acknowledge participants' contributions, they will be updated on significant research milestones and, if interested, provided with a digital copy of key publications. All participants expressed interest in receiving these updates, reflecting their engagement with the research process.

A more detailed account of all ethical considerations can be found in the Appendix under *11.1 Ethical Guideline* and *11.2 Information sheet and declaration of Consent*.

4.2 Data Collection

The data collection for this research spanned nine months, from December 2023 to August 2024, and presented several significant challenges. The first major issue was reaching the target population and gaining their trust. Establishing confidence with potential interviewees was crucial, particularly given the sensitive nature of the interviews, which touched upon potentially traumatizing experiences. The second challenge was related to language barriers. While the interviewer was fluent in English and German, most participants had a basic to intermediate level of proficiency in these languages (A2 to B1), which could limit the depth of communication. Given budget constraints, the use of translation services was not feasible. A third, albeit smaller, challenge was managing the logistics of the interviews, as participants were geographically dispersed, necessitating careful coordination across various locations.

Establishing trust and reaching out to refugees presented unique challenges in this research. Extensive effort went into preparing ethical guidelines and addressing potential concerns in advance (see *Chapter 4.1 Research Design*). To facilitate trust-building, intermediary

organisations were contacted to assist with distributing the call for participation (for reference see *Appendix 11.4 Call for Interviews*) and enabling direct personal contact with potential interviewees. This approach aimed to lower the entry barrier by fostering a sense of familiarity and security. Clearly communicating the study's purpose and the nature of the questions to be asked also played a crucial role in establishing trust.

However, significant concerns remained among certain segments of the target population. Personal conversations with young male refugees revealed deep-seated worries about their safety due to tensions within their community and persecution in their home country. Many of these individuals had opted not to serve in the ongoing conflict, which left them vulnerable to suspicion and hostility from both fellow refugees and their compatriots in Ukraine. For this group, participating in any recorded conversation was perceived as too risky, and they viewed interviews as a potential threat to their safety.

The most effective method for securing interviews turned out to be snowball sampling within the target population. Once trust had been established with a few individuals, they were able to refer others, facilitating further participation in the study.

Most of the Ukrainian refugees participating in the study had language skills at the level of B1 to B2, with one person being at the A2 level. To partially mitigate these language limitations, the interview style was adapted to a more open format with a few guiding questions. These questions were translated into Ukrainian and provided to the interviewees in advance to allow them to familiarise themselves with the topics. In two cases, the use of a translation app proved helpful in clarifying questions that were not fully understood. An initial test interview in German with the A2 level participant was successful, although it highlighted a clearly lower threshold for effective communication. The narrative interview approach, with short, open-ended questions, encouraged participants to give longer, more detailed answers. This allowed them to clearly communicate their aspirations, skills, challenges and limitations despite the language barrier.

The focus of interview planning was creating a comfortable environment for participants. Whenever feasible, face-to-face interviews were prioritized to foster trust and connection. Suitable locations included quiet cafés that offered a welcoming atmosphere conducive to open discussions. In two rural cases, interviews were conducted in participants' homes, as they expressed a preference for this arrangement and there were no nearby cafés or similar venues available, making home visits a practical solution. The familiarity of their own

environment contributed to more candid conversations, resulting in richer and more nuanced data collection.

When in-person meetings were not feasible, online interviews were organised using secure platforms, ensuring flexibility while maintaining confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained through proxy consent forms and clear, recorded verbal consent from participants. This hybrid approach allowed individuals to choose the format that felt most secure and comfortable for them, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of the data collected.

My interview guide was designed to balance consistency with adaptability, resulting in in-depth semi-structured interviews. This approach enabled the collection of detailed data on participants' migration trajectories, including their pre-migration experiences, transit periods, and settlement in host countries, while allowing flexibility to accommodate individual circumstances and narratives.

The interviews were guided by a pre-prepared checklist, which ensured that all key topics were covered, while allowing participants to steer the conversation. This flexible structure proved particularly effective in tracing the evolution of participants' migration aspirations and capabilities over time. The checklist included prompts for each stage of their migration journey, from initial displacement to settlement and future aspirations, as well as a wrap-up checklist to ensure a comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to encourage open dialogue, allowing participants to share personal stories, aspirations, and the constraints they faced during decision-making. This approach was particularly well suited to capturing the nuanced and dynamic nature of forced migration trajectories, where individual paths are shaped by a combination of external pressures and personal agency.

In practice, the interviews generally ranged from 32 to 66 minutes in duration and produced transcripts between 3 and 8 pages, with an average of 51 minutes and 5.3 pages. One exception was the interview with participant 5, which lasted 110 minutes and resulted in an 11-page transcript. While the overall depth of material was consistently high, the richness varied somewhat depending on participants' language skills. The first interview, in particular, was more limited due to linguistic challenges, but it still provided valuable insights for the analysis.

To facilitate the interviews, my guide included pre-interview notes, guiding text and pre-written statements about the interview process and academic goals. These elements provided structure and confidence, particularly during the first few interviews, when prepared snippets

were used when the interview stalled. Over time, as I gained experience, I relied less on these aids and adapted naturally to the flow of each interview.

Participants were encouraged to share their migration journeys in their preferred order, whether chronologically or thematically. This openness allowed for a more authentic and participant-driven exploration of their experiences. By following their chosen narrative structure, I was able to remain responsive while ensuring that all required topics were covered through the checklist.

The final sample (see *Table 1*) comprised nine interviewees aged between 17 and 60 years, all of whom had left Ukraine early in the war. Four interviewees resided in Austria (44%), specifically in Vienna or Lower Austria, while five lived in the Canton of Aargau in Switzerland (55%). The sample consisted predominantly of women (88%), with two adolescent women (under 25 – 22%), four adult women (44%), and two older women (aged 55 and older – 22%), alongside one adult man (11%). The adult group formed the majority, providing insights into a key demographic often responsible for household decision-making during migration.

Age	Adolescent and young Adults (17-24)	2	22%
	Middle-aged Adults (25-54)	5	55%
	Older Adults (55+)	2	22%
Gender	Male	1	11%
	Female	8	88%
Highest Education	Primary education	0	0%
	Secondary education	5	55%
	Tertiary education	4	44%
Region of Origin	Western Ukraine	0	0%
	Central Ukraine	4	44%
	Eastern Ukraine	3	33%
	Southern Ukraine	2	22%
Host Country	Austria	4	44%
	Switzerland	5	55%
Total (N)		9	100%

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

Participants exhibited diverse educational backgrounds, with over half having completed secondary education (55%) and the remaining 44% possessing tertiary qualifications. No participants reported only primary education, indicating a generally well-educated group.

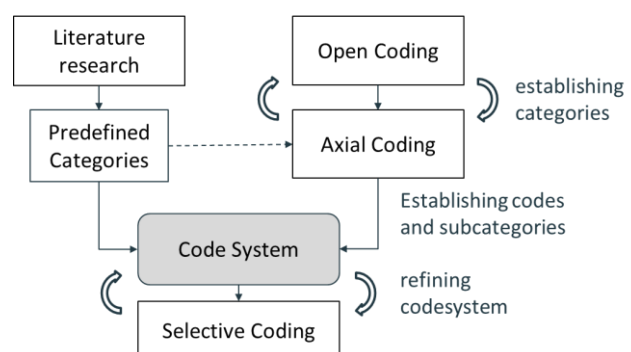
Regionally, the sample included individuals from Central Ukraine (44%), Eastern Ukraine (33%), and Southern Ukraine (22%). However, there were no participants from Western Ukraine, potentially reflecting differences in displacement patterns across regions.

While the sample provided valuable insights, it also exhibited limitations (also see *Chapter 4.5 Methodological Limitations* and *6.4 Analytical Limitations and Future Research*). Men were underrepresented, even compared to the already low proportion of adult males among the displaced Ukrainian population (UNHCR Europe 2024). Additionally, the sample included no participants with lower levels of education and only individuals who fled Ukraine during the

first months of the war, potentially missing perspectives of those who left later. These gaps highlight the need for broader representation in future research to capture a wider range of experiences.

Transcription was a vital step in preparing the interviews for subsequent analysis. All interviews were transcribed in edited form using MaxQDA, which enhanced clarity and conciseness. This approach allowed the researcher to focus on the key themes and insights shared by participants, particularly benefiting those with A2 language proficiency levels. By simplifying the language while maintaining the essence of their responses, edited transcriptions ensured that participants' voices were accurately represented without unnecessary complexities.

4.3 Data Analysis



two iterative phases alongside predefined categories derived from a classical literature review to create the code system (see *Figure 6*). Both coding and paraphrasing were conducted using MaxQDA, a software package designed for qualitative and mixed methods text analysis.

This systematic approach enables researchers to develop a profound understanding of the qualitative data collected from participants. The coding process is divided into three stages: open, axial, and selective coding, as developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) for grounded theory, and follows the coding guidance provided by Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller, and Wilderom (2011). They describe these coding phases as follows:

“Open coding is the analytical process of generating higher-abstraction level type categories from sets of concepts/variables. Axial coding is the further developing of categories and relating them to their possible sub-categories. With selective coding the categories are integrated and refined” (Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller, and Wilderom 2011, 7).

Through this method, I aim to achieve greater clarity and depth in the analysis while remaining open to discovering new patterns and insights from participants' experiences and perspectives, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of the data.

Prior to coding, paraphrasing was used to transform lengthy verbal responses into concise summaries reflecting key themes. Both English and German language interviews were paraphrased into English for interpretation. This method ensured that the essence of participants' statements was retained, while facilitating clearer analysis and interpretation. Thematic blocks allowed for better categorisation of recurring patterns and contributed to a more structured presentation of the data.

The code system was structured into several levels, with six top-level categories branching into sub-categories where necessary, and both types of category containing individual codes. Throughout the process, both categories and codes underwent several changes. Top-level categories, subcategories and codes were identified from the literature review. This stage of literature-based categorisation was important in establishing top-level categories and narrowing the scope of possible analysis for the more open-ended grounded theory-based coding process. Some categories that emerged at this or later stages were later merged and some codes were rearranged, renamed or eliminated altogether. An example of this would be the coding process for influencing factors, which was then merged with the categories of actors and events as they overlapped or were not clearly defined initially. The final top-level

categories are 'Actors', 'Events', 'Capabilities', 'Aspirations', 'Place-based Information', and 'Movement-related information'.

Most codes were generated during the open coding phase while paraphrasing the transcriptions, with additional codes emerging from notes taken during the transcription process. After this initial phase, the newly identified codes were organised into existing categories and grouped where common themes appeared. This systematic approach enabled a clearer understanding of the data and facilitated the identification of key patterns and insights. This approach was considered conclusive as the previously identified categories continued to emerge during open coding. Iterative phases of open and axial coding took place during the coding process. During axial coding the relationships between the codes are explored. In the process concepts from the open coding are rearranged, combined and correlated into categories and sub-categories. After coding five interviews, no new concepts emerged for a while. This indicated that a certain theoretical saturation had been reached and that the next coding step, selective coding, could begin. During selective coding the identified categories and subcategories were refined, and the remaining interviews were coded. All three stages of coding were carried out in an iterative, non-linear manner, constantly comparing and relating the results obtained, while remaining open to new concepts or aspects that may have gone unnoticed previously. For instance, some infrequently used codes were consolidated after the full set of interviews had been coded, as they were found to be overly specific and conceptually overlapping. Additional codes were applied as markers to facilitate later retrieval, including contextual information about interviewees, potential quotations, and closing reflections.

After coding, both the code system and the interview data were analysed to identify patterns, relationships, and deeper insights. Similarities observed during the coding process were cross-checked across participants, revealing shared experiences, contrasting perspectives, and underlying trends. This process allowed broader themes to emerge, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the data through systematic comparison of coded segments. Text segments tagged with the same codes were grouped and qualitatively analysed in depth to explore recurring meanings, contextual differences, and the ways in which participants constructed their responses. Thematic analysis provided a structured foundation for drawing conclusions and connecting findings to the research questions. The final coding system played a crucial role in the subsequent content analysis by offering an organised overview of all text segments related to specific themes or topics. Additionally, it enabled the tagging of interview numbers associated with particular assertions, supporting a more fine-grained,

interpretive examination of these segments beyond simple categorisation, ultimately enriching the analytical depth.

To ensure transparency and traceability in the research process, this thesis distinguishes clearly between descriptive and analytical stages. The findings chapter presents a largely descriptive account of the interviews, following the participants' voices and the coded categories in a grounded manner. In contrast, the discussion chapter serves as the primary site for theoretical engagement and interpretation, where patterns are critically analysed through the lens of the aspirations–capabilities framework. This structure reflects the iterative logic of grounded qualitative research, allowing the reader to trace the development of analytical insights from empirical material.

4.4 Reflections

It is impossible to separate oneself from the research process, as the researcher's perspective and understanding continually influence and shape the work as it progresses. My role as a researcher evolved alongside my thesis and was deeply influenced by my interactions with the interviewees. Their emotional experiences, openness, and hopes for the research had a profound impact on me, inspiring my desire to contribute meaningfully. While I recognize that the scope of this research limits its ability to directly impact their lives, I hope it doesn't simply become a thesis left on a shelf.

As a non-refugee researcher from another country, I do not have personal experiences that compare to the hardships they have faced. Therefore, I approached the participants as the true experts of their own stories. This meant giving them space to share their personal experiences first before seeking additional information. This approach aimed to make them feel comfortable, though it sometimes led the conversation to stray from my primary focus—often providing valuable context in the process.

Having lived in both Switzerland and Austria, I could relate to some of the struggles they encountered, particularly in dealing with government agencies and adapting to cultural differences. I also felt grateful for the support provided by local people to displaced Ukrainians. My experience teaching German to refugees in Vienna further sensitized me to their challenges, especially in language learning and integration, which were central themes in the interviews. This background allowed me to engage more deeply with the participants and interpret their experiences with greater empathy.

Ultimately, this research was a dynamic and evolving process, shaped by my growing understanding and the personal connections I built with the participants. These interactions have had a lasting impact on my perspective on displacement and migration.

4.5 Methodological Limitations

This study, while yielding valuable insights into the migration decisions of displaced Ukrainians, is subject to several limitations related to its scope, methodology, and practical constraints. These limitations shaped the scope and depth of the findings and should be considered when interpreting the results.

The first significant limitation was funding and resource constraints. As a master's thesis, the scope of the project was already stretched and additional resources such as professional translation services or research assistance, which could have increased the diversity of participants, were not available. As a result, all interviews and translations had to be carried out by a single researcher who spoke neither Russian nor Ukrainian.

This contributed to the second major limitation: Language. Participants were required to speak either German or English, which limited the pool of potential interviewees. Participants' language skills ranged from A2 to C1, with lower levels of proficiency posing a challenge in conducting the interviews and transcribing them. Fortunately, only one participant was at A2 level (in German). However, B1/B2 participants proved to be able to communicate sufficiently, often exceeding their self-assessed language skills despite initial shyness or unfamiliarity. Nevertheless, the language requirement is likely to have excluded certain displaced persons who did not have access to language training or who left Ukraine later and had fewer opportunities to develop these skills.

These major limitations were compounded by distribution challenges. Successful recruitment was limited to the areas around Vienna, Austria, and Aargau, Switzerland. Efforts to reach displaced Ukrainians in other areas or to conduct online interviews were largely unsuccessful. Of the two online interviews conducted, both participants were contacted through trusted intermediaries, highlighting the importance of trust in reaching displaced populations and discussing sensitive issues.

These difficulties resulted in an imbalance of demographic profiles between the Austrian and Swiss subsamples. While the Austrian sample contained a larger share of youth and young adults, the Swiss sample was composed primarily of middle-aged adults—especially mothers—who often reflected more extensively on long-term integration challenges and structural limitations. These compositional differences may explain the broader and more critical

engagement with structural and legal issues in the Swiss interviews, compared to the more future-oriented and individually framed reflections among the younger Austrian interviewees. As such, the contrasting perspectives in the two country cases may reflect underlying demographic variation as much as contextual differences between host states.

Sampling difficulties and gender imbalances in the displaced population also strongly influenced the demographic composition of the sample. Women—especially mothers aged 30 to 55—were well represented, with limited male perspectives and no young men at all. Additionally, the sample consisted of relatively well-educated individuals, which may, though inconclusively, indicate a capability bias in migration.

While the perspectives of adolescent and older women were sufficiently covered, insights into young women's migration decision-making highlighted notable differences compared to other demographic groups. This variation underscores the need for further research focusing on the migration aspirations and capabilities of adolescents and young adults, particularly males, to gain a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and decision-making processes.

Researching a vulnerable population presented additional challenges. Participants' traumatic experiences may have influenced their willingness to engage or shaped the depth and nature of their responses, introducing potential bias into the findings. Young male Ukrainians were notably hesitant to participate, often citing fears related to their migration circumstances. Additionally, some individuals who initially agreed to contribute later withdrew, likely due to scheduling conflicts or unresolved concerns. Despite considerable effort to approach the research with sensitivity and provide a safe, supportive environment for participants, the delicate nature of the topic inevitably influenced the data collection process.

The open and inductive research approach, while providing valuable qualitative insights, limits the depth of the findings. For example, participants' perspectives on the migration decisions and struggles of family members, such as children or close relatives, provided useful context but lacked the depth to draw definitive conclusions. Similarly, issues such as discrimination faced by Ukrainian minority groups, such as the Ukrainian Roma population, or the experiences of individuals with different migration trajectories remain underexplored.

In conclusion, this paper makes a significant contribution to understanding the migration decisions of displaced Ukrainians. However, its findings must be interpreted within the context of the limitations identified above. Future research could address these gaps by employing a more diverse sample, additional resources for language and distribution efforts,

and targeted studies of underrepresented subgroups. By building on these findings, subsequent studies can further illuminate the complexities of forced migration and displacement.

5. Findings

The following chapter presents the findings from the interviews conducted with nine individuals who fled Ukraine following the Russian invasion of 2022 and sought protection in Switzerland and Austria. Their displacement journeys varied in duration, ranging from approximately one week to one and a half months.

In addition to recounting their own migration experiences, participants often shared insights into the decisions and challenges faced by others—most notably close family members—providing a broader understanding of displacement dynamics. References to specific interviews, indicated by numbers in brackets (e.g., [1], [2]), are used throughout this chapter to support key assertions. These references do not necessarily pertain to the interviewee themselves but may relate to individuals or situations they described. The absence of a particular reference should not be taken as evidence that a certain experience or event did not occur; rather, it may simply indicate that the topic was not raised or discussed during that interview.

The chapter is structured both thematically and temporally, tracing participants' experiences from initial displacement to their current circumstances and future aspirations. It begins by examining the immediate context of their flight from Ukraine, including the conditions and decision-making processes that shaped their departure. This is followed by an analysis of their integration experiences in Switzerland and Austria, exploring key challenges and support structures in the host countries. The chapter concludes with reflections on future mobility prospects, including considerations of return, onward migration, or long-term settlement.

5.1 Initial Displacement

5.1.1 Early decisions in conflict

Our interview sample consists of nine individuals, all of whom fled Ukraine early in the war, between February and early April 2022. Their decisions to leave were made under intense pressure and uncertainty, as the war violently upended their lives. In the initial weeks of the Russian invasion, fear and confusion were overwhelming—there was no clear frontline, no sense of safety, and no way to anticipate what would come next. One interviewee captured this atmosphere of chaos: *“When we were deciding to leave, we understood that we didn’t know anything! We did not understand what was happening around us. It was the first weeks of war.*

Now, [...] we have a frontline. We know where it's safe, and where it isn't. At that time, it was chaos in Ukraine" [8]. Two-thirds of participants lived in areas under direct attack, either in eastern Ukrainian cities bombarded by Russian forces [1,8,9] or in the northern regions along the main assault on Kyiv [5-7]. The remaining three lived just behind the combat lines, where the situation was no less volatile [2-4]. Nearly all recalled facing direct threats to their lives [1,3-9], and for most, the looming or immediate danger left them no choice but to flee [1-9].

The initial reactions to the outbreak of war varied significantly among participants, reflecting the sudden and overwhelming nature of the crisis. Interviewee 3 recalls her first reaction to the sirens indicating the Russian attack: *"The 24th of February [2022] was the first day. We woke up in the middle of the night hearing sirens, so we knew that this was the start of a war. We started packing all our stuff, not everything but just the most important things: Our documents, one pair of things like socks, as we just had very small backpacks to take with us"* [3]. Apart from one family [8,9], none had concrete evacuation plans, as the full-scale invasion caught most by surprise. The rapid escalation of events left little room for careful preparation, forcing many to make swift decisions. Some individuals, particularly those with access to private vehicles, fled immediately, driven by the urgent need to escape escalating violence [2,3,8,9]. For many, the pre-migratory phase was marked by short-term, short-distance movements, often lasting just a couple of days, as they sought to regroup with family members. This involved either travelling to relatives [1,5,6,7,8,9] or hosting relatives at their own home [5], with the priority of keeping loved ones together before making further decisions. One couple took a more phased approach, initially prioritizing the safety of their children by sending them westward with a family friend, while they stayed behind temporarily to handle urgent matters before eventually fleeing themselves [3].

Though no direct questions were asked about war-related experiences, they emerged frequently in participants' accounts, underscoring the severity of the conditions they faced. Exposure to armed conflict shaped both immediate displacement decisions and long-term migration trajectories. Several interviewees described the impact of direct attacks, including bombings and missile strikes [1,2,4-9], as well as the presence of military equipment such as tanks and gunfire in their surroundings [1,3-9]. In at least one case, a participant's home was destroyed by a missile [5]. Beyond immediate threats to physical safety, participants also encountered significant disruptions to mobility and access to essential resources. Public transportation systems ceased operations [1,4], and major roads or railways were either blocked or heavily congested with people attempting to flee [1,3,8,9]. Securing public transport proved difficult [1,4], further complicating evacuation efforts [1,4]. The breakdown

of supply chains led to food shortages, long queues for basic goods [1,5], and interruptions to electricity and heating, particularly in winter conditions [5,7]. Interviewee 1 recalled the growing difficulties that ultimately led to their decision to leave: *"At that time, it was difficult because there was no public transportation—no cars or buses in the entire district. We first had to find food, as shops and supermarkets were empty. Many waited in line for hours."* She described how, on the 1st or 2nd of March, they left their apartment to go to a supermarket: *"We were overjoyed when [the supermarket chain] brought a large supply of food, allowing us to shop. But on the way to the supermarket, a bomb exploded on the street, which terrified me! That evening, I searched online and found a man offering to drive people from our small district to [Kharkiv's] main train station in his minibus. I messaged him, asking if we could join. The next morning, as we packed our clothes, a bomb hit our neighbour's house, causing a massive fire. That night was especially difficult—two planes, one Ukrainian and one Russian, crashed, and I was terrified they might fall onto our roof"* [1]. The worsening conditions, compounded by the constant threat of violence, made it increasingly clear that leaving was no longer a choice but a necessity.

For those who did not leave immediately, the following days and weeks were marked by tense waiting, uncertainty and fear. Many sheltered in place, relying on makeshift protective spaces such as basements, cellars, or even doorways to shield themselves from bombings and air raids [3-5,7]. As one participant, Interviewee 3, recalled, *"The first night in our flat was terrible, because our flat was next to the airport and we knew that the airport would be bombed. We thought we would die! Back then I was sure, because we heard a lot of bombing taking place and that we would be next! So, [during the day] we stayed downstairs, during the night we picked a place in our flat without any windows, such as the bathroom, because the glass windows were too dangerous if something, like a bomb, were to drop nearby."* Some participants described spending one or two weeks confined to their homes [3,5,7] or seeking refuge with relatives [1], grappling with food shortages [1,5], and coping with disruptions in heating and electricity [5,7]. In contrast, one couple had anticipated the possibility of war and devised a detailed contingency plan, establishing clear meeting points, predetermined actions, and specific instructions for their children in case of an emergency [8,9]. While such foresight was rare, their planning provided a sense of direction amid the chaos, highlighting the diverse ways in which individuals responded to the rapidly deteriorating situation.

The decision to leave was often made under extreme pressure, as relentless attacks on nearby streets and buildings [1,3,5,6,8,9], airways [3,4,7], and even nuclear power plants [4] became decisive triggers. For those with young children, ensuring their safety was the single most

important factor in deciding to flee [3,4,6,8,9]. Interviewee 4 vividly recalled her overwhelming fear: *“On March 7, the nuclear power plant was bombed, which caused me great fear for my children”* [4]. She further described weeks of terror before leaving: *“For about two weeks, I sat in the basement with my children every day. [...] Many bombs were falling. The airport and factories were destroyed, and the nuclear power plant, the [power] station. People were scared! Many people, maybe 2000, ran to the train or died”* [4].

At this stage, most had not yet decided on a final destination. The immediate goal was to escape imminent danger, with many first seeking safety within Ukraine [2,3,6,7,8,9] or heading toward the border [4,5]. Migration aspirations and capabilities played only a minor role at this point; a clear evaluation of options often took place only after reaching a safe haven (as discussed later). Only a few, like Interviewee 1, had already settled on a specific destination—Vienna, where their only living family member was based. For most, however, plans remained fluid, requiring constant adaptation. Interviewees 8 and 9 initially sought refuge in a city they believed to be safe, only to realise that even there, attacks had begun: *“When we left, people living there told us, ‘It’s crazy. We saw the airport from our windows; it had been damaged by rockets.’ Then we decided we couldn’t go to that place because it wasn’t safe [either]. At that moment, our plan fell apart. [...] So we chose the mountains, thinking it would be harder for the army to reach and therefore safer. But at that time, many people thought the same. Every place was really busy. We... I don’t remember... I think we drove for five, six, or eight hours to get there, and when we finally arrived, we stayed for two or three weeks”* [8]. Similarly, Interviewee 5's family initially made the decision to take refuge in her home, believing it was the safest place: *“When the war started it was my family, my mum and her sister with her daughter. They decided that my house was the safest place. They decided it like that! Because I had in my past a big wonderful house, we built it ourselves. It was our dream to build this house”* [5]. Although Interviewee 5 would later learn that her home had been destroyed, the devastating news was outweighed by their survival: *“We arrived at the border to Romania, and then I received a message from my neighbour that my house was bombed. He sent us pictures and everything was destroyed. 75% of it. So, just imagine how lucky we are! You know? We just left really on time. We escaped! And I cried at that time. I remember I was in a bus on the border, and I was crying, and some guy came to me and asked me: ‘Why are you crying, why are you crying so much?’ I said that everything was okay and that I was crying because we are really lucky, not because we lost this house or something. It is nothing! The lives are what is important! It is just wonderful!”* [5].

5.1.2 Early displacement trajectories

Once the decision to flee had been made, participants undertook their journeys in groups ranging from two to seven individuals, predominantly composed of immediate family members, though some groups also included friends [3,4] or extended relatives [1]. The duration of their displacement varied considerably, ranging from one week to one and a half months, with many passing through western Ukraine [1-4,8,9] before continuing to neighbouring countries such as Poland, Slovakia, Romania, or Hungary. While some participants remained in safe locations either within Ukraine [3,8,9] or just outside its borders [6,7] for extended periods, others proceeded more swiftly, making fewer stops along the route [1,2,4,5] (see *Table 2*).

	Sex	Age	Departure	Journey Duration ¹	Travelling with ... ²			Region of Origin	Route ³
1	F	60	March	1w	2			Kharkiv	Lviv (3 days) → Vienna, Austria
2	F	19	April	1w	3			Dnipro	Slovakia → Vienna, Austria
3	F	17	February	5w	3	4	3	Kyiv	Lviv (5 weeks) → Vienna, Austria
4	F	46	March	1w	6	3		Zaporizhzhia	Lviv → Poland, Czech Republic → Lower Austria, Austria
5	F	39	March	1w	7	6		Chernihiv	Kyiv → Romania → Aargau, Switzerland
6	F	40	February	7w	5	5		Bucha	Southern Ukraine → Croatia (6 weeks) → Aargau, Switzerland
7	F	57	March	6w	2				
8	M	-	February	3w	6			Kherson	Kherson → Carpathians (2-3 weeks) → Romania, Austria → Aargau, Switzerland
9	F	-	February	3w					

¹ In Weeks, rounded.

² Number of people travelling together.

³ Including major (non-overnight) stops.

Table 2: Overview of participants and their displacement journeys.

Transit times typically ranged from four days to a week due to slow travel within Ukraine, particularly near combat zones. Most relied on a combination of private cars or buses [1,3,5-9], public buses [2,3], and trains [1-4] within Ukraine. Interviewee 1 shared their experience of travelling from Kharkiv to Lviv on an overcrowded train during the early days of the war: “At first, only mothers with children were allowed to board. Next to each carriage, two soldiers helped people get on. All the seats were taken. The carriage had several compartments, each with four seats, but there were more than ten people in every compartment. My relative and I had to sit on our suitcase in the aisle and sleep there at night. Many elderly people were in the same situation. We left around 1:30 a.m., and the journey took more than fourteen hours. As our train had to pass through bombed villages, we weren’t travelling fast. At night, we had to turn off our phones and all the lights in the train” [1]. Interviewee 8 also recalls the difficult period of transit

during their journey, describing the challenging conditions they faced while moving through Ukraine: *“During this time, we just slept wherever we could—sometimes we saw signs for refugees, and there were spots in schools where we could sleep on the floor. We would sleep and then move on. We travelled through the rest of Ukraine for about three days, and we stayed with relatives for one night. When we arrived, we were so dirty. I’m sorry to say, we smelled terrible because we hadn’t showered in all that time. We had nothing, just terrible conditions. We looked awful. After staying there for one day, we decided to move on”* [8]. Travel generally became faster after clearing long border queues, which some individuals even did by foot [1,5], before continuing their journey. with quicker options such as trains [2], buses [1,3,4], or even planes [5,6] facilitating onward movement.

Travel groups primarily consisted of close [2-9] or extended family [1], and, in some cases, friends [3,4]. While groups consisting of friends often separated at some point along the journey, most families remained together as long as possible, with some travelling in the same constellation for the entire journey [1,2,8,9]. Most interviewees continued living with their core travel groups after arriving in Austria or Switzerland [1,3,5-9]. However, travel groups were often reshaped along the way—many male family members were not allowed to leave Ukraine due to martial law [3-7], some individuals joined relatives at transit points [3,6,7], and separations sometimes occurred as a result of differing destinations [4]. For instance, two young sisters were brought to Lviv by a family friend, where their parents joined them one week later [3]. Their father later stayed behind in western Ukraine as an internally displaced person (IDP) [3]. One mother and her children travelled with her sister-in-law until they parted ways after crossing the border [4]. As Interviewee 5 recounted, some families made careful decisions about what to leave behind in order to support those staying behind: *“We were [crossing the border by foot] and not going by car. We decided to leave our car to my husband, because maybe he would not have a place to live after the house got bombed. Maybe he would just sleep in the car”* [5]. Her husband would later go back to rebuild their destroyed home. Another woman, travelling with her children and her ex-husband, initially sought refuge at her parents' vacation home in southern Ukraine [6]. Once her sister and her partner joined them a week later, the family quickly made the decision to leave, while both their respective (ex)partners had to stay behind [6,7].

Migration decisions in the early stages of displacement were highly fluid, driven primarily by the need for immediate safety rather than long-term planning. The strain of family separation weighed most heavily on adult women who had to leave behind their husbands or partners [2-5,7], though in many cases, the decision to leave was actively encouraged and supported

by their (ex)partners [2,4-6]. Parents, in particular, prioritised the safety of their children over remaining together in Ukraine, often making the difficult choice to send family members abroad. At that time, most interviewees still viewed their displacement as temporary [2,3,6-9] or were uncertain about its duration [4,5], with only a small number contemplating a more permanent stay [1,2]. This perception is reflected in the experience of Interviewee 3, a young woman from Kyiv, who recalled her parents' reasoning: *"It was all very dangerous back then. My parents told me that we would go abroad for a couple of months—not too long—because staying in Ukraine would just be too dangerous"* [3]. The emotional toll of separation also shaped how couples handled communication while apart; one husband, for instance, decided it would be best to limit contact to make the separation easier for both of them [4]. These expectations of a short-term absence likely influenced how individuals navigated family separation, fostering the belief that reunification would occur sooner rather than later.

Throughout the early days of the war and their flight, most remained in constant contact with relatives or friends abroad, allowing them to adapt their plans continuously based on new information. Personal networks and social connections played a significant role in shaping the journey, with many participants recalling frequent calls and messages to relatives and friends before making a final decision [1,3,4,5,7]. Interviewee 6 recalled, *"Before leaving I was asking my friends or people who had already left the country during the first days [of war], where they went, to understand what [our] options were, which direction [we could go]. But back then it was very chaotic, nobody knew anything"* [6]. This social nature of decision-making persisted throughout various stages of the journey. Within these group decisions, one individual or party was typically more active or influential [1-4,6,7]. For many families, discussions primarily occurred among the adults [3,5,6,8,9], though in one instance, the aspirations of a young daughter were the deciding factor, with her mother still uncertain about the best course of action [2]. Interviewee 2 recalled, *"I was the organiser of all the events. My mother wasn't sure if she should start a new life abroad. The situation in Dnipro wasn't as bad as in other cities, but it was still dangerous"* [2]. When her relatives in Vienna contacted them about looking for an apartment, she slowly managed to convince her mother to go abroad: *"Our relative in Vienna had already started looking for an apartment for us. That's when the process began. That was also the motivation to go to Vienna. My mother, however, initially preferred to live in the west of Ukraine. After that, we went to Slovakia, where my mother decided she would rather live there, but luckily, we eventually made it to Vienna"* [2]. She added, *"My motivation was simple: my boyfriend lives in Switzerland. That was my main motivation. My mother wasn't used to*

living abroad and wanted to be closer to our hometown, but in a safer place where no rockets were flying" [2].

Displaced people often relied on a combination of private individuals, the private sector, and public services for support during their flight. Private individuals played a critical role, helping with various logistical needs such as transportation to train stations [1,3,5], providing overnight accommodation [2-4,6,7], and offering housing in their homes [1-3,5,6,8,9]. Friends and family were also instrumental, hosting and assisting with travel arrangements [1-3,5,6,8,9] and providing crucial contacts and housing in countries of transit and arrival [6-9]. The private sector contributed transportation services, such as private bus companies [1], while public services, including train networks and bus services, facilitated movement within and outside Ukraine [1-5]. Additionally, public institutions offered temporary accommodation, such as schools providing shelter [5]. Despite these supports, the displaced often had to navigate many aspects of their journey independently, including securing housing along their route [1-3,5-9] and proactively seeking employment opportunities abroad to facilitate future stability before settling in their host communities [3,8].

Among our sample, only one group directly travelled to their final host country [4], while another had already decided on their destination but made a brief stop in Lviv for three days before continuing on [1]. Despite travelling directly, Interviewee 4 recalls the difficulties of her decision and how an unexpected opportunity ultimately brought her to Austria: *"I thought about where we should go, but I wasn't really sure. I had a good job in Ukraine, a big house, acquaintances and friends, a loving husband. I had a good life there. I don't know, I had no idea where I should go with my family. I asked my companion where we should go. She told me about a friend with an ex-husband in Slovakia. After we talked, I told her that I might go to Germany or somewhere else. She then told me that she knows a girl who had worked for a man living [at our destination]" [4].* Their benefactor, who had worked in Ukraine and maintained ties with the local community, offered the family a place to stay in his village in Lower Austria.

For others, reaching the border was the immediate goal [2,5], with decisions about where to go next arising only after crossing: *"And the way to the border was very hard also. Then the question to decide where to move came. To which country? The first point was just to escape out of the country. It doesn't matter which border, Rumania, Poland or Slovakia, it doesn't matter what border. We of course decided that Romania was the closer. [...] And then came the question where to go? When we were already out of the country" [5].*

For many, decisions about their final destination were only made after finding a temporary refuge. Until that point, immediate needs took precedence, and initial decisions were largely reactive, with the final choice made only after ensuring safety. Western Ukraine served as a crucial safe haven for many interviewees [1-3,8,9]. Lviv, just 70 km from the Polish border, provided refuge with friends [1,2] or family [3]. Opportunity and personal networks played a key role in establishing these safe havens [1-3,6-9]. For example, Interviewee 6 and her group waited in their parents' village in southern Ukraine for Interviewee 7 before travelling to Croatia. There, a host they had originally planned to visit on vacation offered them free accommodation for six weeks: *"Back then it was very chaotic, nobody knew anything, so my decision was based on the fact, that I had an unused booking in Croatia. We had booked it the previous year but never used it. So those people (the owners) told us, that we could still use it and come. And I only needed to leave the country, that was my first goal. I did not know where to go, I had to pick something, so I thought we would go there for those four days, without [really] getting our heads around [that decision]. From there maybe move somewhere else? I was basically looking for the first point to go to out of the country. So, we drove through the border"* [6].

5.1.3 Navigating displacement: Deciding where to go

Following the initial displacement and the arduous journey away from the immediate dangers of war, displaced participants faced the pressing question of where to go next. The trauma of fleeing conflict, combined with the emotional burden of separation from loved ones, continued to shape their migration decisions. As in the early stages of displacement, social connections played a crucial role—not only influencing choices but also determining the resources and opportunities available for migration. Immediate and extended family members, along with friends, provided vital support, guidance, and connections abroad.

Once the decision to leave was made, practical considerations took precedence. Support networks, access to housing, and employment opportunities became decisive factors in choosing a destination. In this process, aspirations and capabilities—shaped by both personal circumstances and external constraints—played a crucial role in determining where displaced participants sought protection.

5.1.3.1 Aspirations

Assessing the initial aspirations regarding whether to leave or stay proves challenging, as these decisions were made in a short and highly turbulent period. The interview format, which allowed participants to choose how much to recall about potentially traumatic experiences, resulted in early aspirations being less clearly articulated than those formed at later stages of their migration journeys. Nevertheless, comparing initial plans, including

expectations about the duration of displacement, with their subsequent evolution provided valuable insights into these early aspirations, particularly when interviewees did not offer detailed accounts themselves.

The displacement of Ukrainians was primarily driven by an urgent need for safety, with both stay and leave aspirations often taking a secondary role. The immediate danger of war severely limited stay capabilities, forcing many to flee despite their reluctance. Several interviewees framed their stay aspirations in terms of place attachment, highlighting the emotional significance of their homes and communities [2,4,5].

During initial displacement, stay aspirations were generally very low [2-9], with only certain groups expressing low to mid-level aspirations [1,2]. Many interviewees linked their stay aspirations to their war experiences, describing the deep emotional toll of leaving behind male family members, such as a spouse or partner [4,5,7], or an adult son or father who, due to wartime restrictions, was unable to leave Ukraine [2,3,4,7,9]. A strong connection to Ukraine further reinforced these sentiments, with several individuals expressing profound grief over the lives they had built before the war [4,5]. While leaving was difficult for most, adult women with a partner appeared to face the greatest emotional struggle [2,4,5,7]. Their decision to flee was often encouraged or supported by their (ex-)husbands [3,4,5,6], with parents prioritising the safety of their children over remaining together in Ukraine.

For some, staying closer to home was initially preferable [2], particularly in western Ukraine, as it allowed them to maintain a connection to their country while avoiding the uncertainties of moving abroad. However, fear of the unknown and apprehension about foreign destinations contributed to their hesitation to leave [2]. In more extreme cases, the severity of the situation left individuals with no real choice, as remaining in their hometown was no longer a viable option [2-4,6-9].

For some from eastern Ukraine, the ongoing conflict since 2014 had already fragmented daily life, further eroding stay aspirations: *“My life in Ukraine [was] different. That is another story, but not a very happy one. In 2010, my father left me, and in 2011, my husband did as well. Then, in 2012, my best friend passed away. Many of my relatives—my aunts, uncles—it’s a difficult story—are in the Donbas. The Donbas has been [occupied] by Russia since 2014. [...]”* [1]. Interviewee 1, initially wanted to remain in her home region but ultimately left at the insistence of family and friends: *“At first, we wanted to stay at home with our relatives, but our friends and my son told us that we had to leave Kharkiv. At that time, my son was already living in Vienna with his family. For me, it was already clear that if I had to go somewhere, I wanted*

to go to Vienna. [...] I still have my friends and some of my relatives in Ukraine. We talk on the phone often. But for me, being close to my son, my grandson, and my daughter-in-law is what matters most" [1]. Pre-existing family connections in host countries often played a decisive role in shaping both aspirations and capabilities [1,2,5], offering a sense of direction in an otherwise uncertain displacement process. In her case, a history of personal loss and disconnection not only reinforced the importance of being close to family but also provided a clear motivation for her choice of destination.

While stay aspirations were largely shaped by place attachment [2,4,5] and sometimes uncertainty about the unknown [2], leave aspirations emerged as a response to necessity, safety concerns, and the search for stability. Initially, leave aspirations were not clearly defined and often hazy, as decisions had to be made under intense pressure.

Among the nine interviewees, only two expressed a clear intention to leave Ukraine permanently—one due to a lack of remaining ties to the country and the other because of a partner living abroad [1,2]. Some interviewees explored multiple possibilities before making a decision [4,6], while others followed family members' choices [3,7] or sought to reunite with relatives abroad [1]. A few briefly considered staying in their home region [1,5] or relocating as internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Ukraine before ultimately moving on [2,8,9]. While final destinations were often shaped by capabilities—where the options had often presented themselves as the first feasible [4,8,9] or most practical choice [2,3]—aspirations still played a role in determining where those options were sought, with a clear preference for western countries in our sample.

What was considered feasible varied among interviewees, with some considering distant destinations impractical [8], while others were more open to options as long as some form of connection existed [6]. Most interviewees initially assumed their displacement would be temporary, with many expecting to stay abroad only briefly [2,3,6-9]. The perceived temporary nature of displacement also influenced decisions, with most interviewees considering their choices as short-term [2,3,6-9]. Some solutions were seen as "good enough for now" [4], while others felt too far or complicated for such a short period [8,9]. The assumption that displacement would not last long made following the decisions of others the easier option for some [7]. Most explicitly believed the war would end quickly, allowing them to return home within weeks or months [2,3,6-9]. One interviewee reflected: *"Back then I was thinking, hoping, almost sure, that the war would be over soon. So, I thought we would leave and come back home again soon. A few weeks, a couple of months at best"* [7].

Differences within family dynamics were apparent, with youth generally being more open to leaving their country [2], or as discussed in the next chapter, adapting faster [2,3], partly due to perceived educational or developmental opportunities abroad [2,3]. Some particularly strong-headed youths had a significant influence on their parents' decisions [2], while most parents, particularly those with younger children, made decisions collectively [3,5,6,8,9].

Ultimately, four interviewees settled in Austria [1-4] and five in Switzerland [5-9], but their trajectories were shaped by various considerations and alternative destinations. Austria emerged as a viable option due to its German-speaking environment [3], with some viewing it as a logical alternative to Germany [3,4]. For others, pre-existing family ties [1,2] or the availability of an opportunity to relocate made Austria a natural choice [1-4]. Switzerland, by contrast, was often a more pragmatic decision, with several interviewees describing it as the first available option [5,8,9]. Others cited the presence of friends or Switzerland's reputation for stability and security as key factors, despite initial reservations about the high cost of living [6].

Germany was also widely contemplated [3-6], often seen as an obvious and desirable choice [3,4,6] due to its robust social system and the absence of strong German dialects found in Austria and Switzerland [6]. However, practical obstacles—such as the limited availability of suitable housing [5]—led some to reconsider. Beyond these three primary destinations, interviewees also considered neighbouring European countries such as Slovakia [2,4] and the Czech Republic [6], where cultural and linguistic similarities, along with personal networks, played a role [2,4,6]. Poland [6] was another option due to its geographical proximity, though it did not provide a strong personal connection. Some interviewees expressed an affinity for countries they found personally appealing, such as Portugal [6,8,9], Japan [5], and Croatia [6].

However, practical constraints—ranging from language barriers [5] to healthcare costs [6]—ultimately prevented them from settling there. Meanwhile, more distant destinations, including Spain [8,9], the USA [8,9], Italy [6], and Ireland [5], were considered due to family or personal connections [5,6,8,9], but other, more immediate options ultimately took precedence.

One interviewee encapsulated the conflicting emotions tied to migration aspirations and the hard choices during displacement: *“I even thought about Portugal, but it was more emotional. Because of the loss of everything, you somehow still seek to gain something. I still wanted to feel comfortable, maybe even more than before”* [6]. Self-perceiving herself as an international person, she further described the complexities of choosing a destination: *“But I was totally not*

ready to go to Switzerland, although I had been here once before—maybe. I had no connection to the country. German? I don't know. It's so expensive! The scariest thing was that it's crazy expensive. I am not earning anything. I have four people with me—how will I survive? It was... anxious for me! I got anxious because of this factor.” [6] Had she been travelling only with her daughter, she might have chosen a different country. However, with her elderly parents and sister dependent on her, she opted for Switzerland despite her initial reservations: “But I had such a high resistance to Switzerland because, again, it's an expensive country, I did not know how things would work out, and then again, the mentality... I knew I would struggle with it—which was true, eventually! But then I was thinking: if it were just me and my daughter, I would probably go somewhere else because it would be easier for us to start over if it was just the two of us. Here, we have money, health insurance, and eventually, a place to stay. So, with four people with me, I had no choice—I had to choose wisely! Yeah, that's why. And again, because a Swiss friend told me: 'Look, by chance, we found this apartment. People are offering it for Ukrainians, and we know the people. It might work out perfectly! Please come for a visit and look around.' So, I came from Croatia with my daughter—just for a visit—and we came here to talk to the owners of the apartment” [6].

Family dynamics and dependencies played a crucial role in shaping migration decisions. Some individuals had limited agency due to their young age [2,3] or health issues that made them reliant on others [7]. Others had to make decisions not only for themselves but under the responsibility of dependents [2-6,8,9], including children, elderly parents [6,8,9], or dependent siblings [6]. For many parents of young children, the safety of their children was the primary factor in leaving [3,4,6,8,9]. Parents emphasized the importance of a stable and secure environment for their children [5,6,8,9]. Many interviewees had to leave behind a male family member—such as a partner or spouse [4,5,7] or an adult son or father [2,3,4,7,9]—who could not leave Ukraine at that time. Although this made leaving harder for most interviewees, adult women with a partner appeared to face the most difficulty [2(mother),4,5,7]. Their decision to leave was often supported by their (ex)husbands [3,4,5,6], with parents prioritizing the safety of their children over staying together in Ukraine.

A particularly striking case was that of Interviewee 7, who had a physical medical condition requiring assistance with daily tasks. She experienced heightened vulnerability and severely limited agency during displacement. Before the war, she lived with her partner, who provided occasional support, while her son was her primary caregiver. After enduring a week of combat near Butscha airport, she ultimately decided to flee when the loss of electricity also meant the loss of heating. As was the case for many others, the initial decision focused on

regrouping with family before considering further steps. She relocated to her family's countryside residence, where her sister, Interviewee 6, along with her niece and parents, had already decided to leave the country immediately. Given her physical limitations, travelling independently was not an option, effectively leaving her with no real choice but to either stay behind with her male relatives or accompany her family abroad. The urgency of the situation and the shock of having to leave so suddenly meant she had no time to weigh alternatives. Consequently, Interviewee 7 followed her family, making a decision under duress rather than through independent choice.

5.1.3.2 Capabilities

Capabilities, particularly social networks and ties to specific countries, played a crucial role in shaping the destinations of participants. In the context of forced migration, leave capabilities encompass both the immediate means to flee a conflict zone and the availability of long-term support structures abroad. While the migration decisions of the Ukrainians interviewed were shaped by their preexisting aspirations and capabilities, they also actively worked to expand these capabilities, creating more stable conditions for their displacement and future prospects.

The general capability of our interviewees to stay at their place of origin was assessed as very low [1-9]. As described earlier (see *Chapter 5.1.1 Early decisions in conflict*), the outbreak of war created an environment of extreme uncertainty and immediate danger, depriving people of their capability to stay. Two-thirds of participants lived in areas under direct attack [1,5-9], while others resided just behind the combat lines, where the situation remained highly volatile [2-4]. Nearly all reported direct threats to their lives, bombings, missile strikes, the presence of military equipment in their surroundings [1,3-9], even including direct attacks on their homes or nearby buildings [1,5]. Beyond the imminent risk of violence, critical disruptions to infrastructure further constrained their ability to remain. Public transportation ceased operations [1,4], major roads were blocked or overcrowded [1,3,8,9], and supply shortages made daily survival increasingly difficult [1,5]. Interviewee 5 captures the dire conditions surrounding her decision to leave, as their capability to stay diminished: *"It was really terrible! And of course, we understood that it would come to us too. Maybe if not today then tomorrow or in a week. And we decided to leave! The food was also really running out. We were running out of food. And the kids, they started to get sick also. It was cold. We could not warm us up"* [5]. Although some interviewees initially sought refuge in other, seemingly safer regions within Ukraine [2,3,6-9], these areas soon proved insecure as well, leading them to reconsider their options. As one couple recounted, even after relocating, missile strikes and

attacks continued, forcing them to move again [8]. This highlights the limited viability of internal displacement as a long-term solution, reinforcing the necessity of leaving the country altogether for those who sought sustainable safety.

Overall, the individual leave capabilities among those interviewed ranged from low [7] to mid-levels [1-6,8,9], with key factors such as personal contacts [1,2,4-6,8] and foreign language proficiency [2,3,5,6,8,9] significantly influencing their ability to navigate displacement. Many interviewees spoke English [5,6,8,9] or German [2,3], often at levels above the general Ukrainian population. Education levels among those above school age were classified as mid [1,6,7] to high [3-5,8,9], further enhancing their ability to access information, make informed decisions, and integrate into host societies. In some cases, individual vulnerabilities critically shaped mobility options, as exemplified by Interviewee 7, whose physical condition and dependence on assistance substantially constrained her independent migration capabilities, ultimately only leaving her with the option of fleeing alongside her family members.

Preexisting capabilities included established social networks, access to public services such as transportation and internet, as well as private means of mobility, including cars. In some cases, individuals also had access to housing during the early stages of displacement. However, capabilities were not static; they evolved throughout the migration process. Social networks [1-9], civil society actors [1,5], public services [1-5], and online platforms [1,3] all played a role in creating new capabilities, shaping migration trajectories. These newly developed capabilities included private transport arrangements [1,3,5], employment opportunities [3,8], and housing solutions both during transit [2-4,6-9] and at final destinations [2-6,8,9].

Social networks played a central role in shaping migration trajectories, serving as key enablers for nearly all other forms of displacement capabilities. The presence of close family members abroad [1,2,5] and other personal connections [4,6,8,9] significantly influenced destination choices and access to essential resources. Additionally, previously unknown actors, contacted through private networks, further expanded opportunities by providing crucial support in securing housing, employment, and information [3,4,6,8,9].

One of the most critical functions of social networks was facilitating housing arrangements. Most interviewees relied on privately arranged accommodations [2-9], while only one individual resided in publicly provided housing [1]. The ability to secure housing at the destination was not only fundamental to enabling migration but also essential for ensuring

greater stability upon arrival. Similarly, employment opportunities, when available, played a crucial role in strengthening leave capabilities, particularly for those who had secured job offers before leaving Ukraine [3,6].

Beyond material support, preexisting connections at the destination [1,2,5,6,8,9] provided vital guidance and reassurance, easing both the displacement journey and the early stages of settlement. These networks were instrumental not only in meeting immediate practical needs, such as housing and employment, but also in fostering a sense of security and belonging—both critical in navigating the uncertainties of forced migration.

One testimony highlights how participants leveraged their social networks not only to access opportunities but also to gain clarity and reassurance in a period of great uncertainty: *“I contacted him and asked if he could please ask around: ‘What are the rules?’ Because I thought my research would not be enough. Maybe I would misunderstand something, and again, you want to be certain if you make such a big decision. It’s perfect if you have someone already there who knows something about the situation. And I know more stories about that—many friends would do it like that. They would call and say: ‘Hey, we are here, look, it’s working. You can come here, or you could go there.’ And that’s how people were doing it in the first weeks. So, I just asked him about the situation and to please check what the rules were. And he came back to me, saying the rules were this and that, it would work like this: you would come, you would be put into a camp, I could come there to help you out—to arrange everything, to support you. I would be there for you. I think you should come!”* [6] This account illustrates how social networks functioned as a critical resource, not only in providing material support but also in reducing uncertainty and fostering trust—both essential for making informed migration decisions.

Social networks remained the most critical source of information and support during displacement. Personal connections [2,4-9] and internet research [1,3] were the primary channels through which interviewees gathered crucial information. Friends [2,3,6,8,9], family members [1-5,7-9], and extended contacts [1,2,6,8,9] significantly influenced migration trajectories by offering advice [1,4-9], helping establish new contacts [1,4,5,6,8,9], and providing direct assistance [1-3,6,7]. Family connections, in particular, were frequently identified as key sources of guidance and support in migration planning [2,3,7].

While personal networks remained the predominant source of information, online resources complemented them by providing crucial details on transport options out of Ukraine [1] and accommodation or employment opportunities abroad [3] that may not have been accessible through direct contacts. Although none of the interviewees explicitly mentioned using social

media or internet-based communication, it is likely that these tools played a role in maintaining connections and facilitating information exchange. Given the importance of social networks in shaping displacement trajectories, online platforms likely contributed to the formation of new contacts and the flow of critical information.

While networks and newly created capabilities for life in displacement were crucial in shaping migration trajectories, they often became relevant only after individuals had reached a first safe haven [2-9]. Mobility capabilities played a decisive role in enabling displacement, as access to transportation determined whether and how individuals could escape conflict zones. Wartime conditions severely restricted travel options, leading to long delays and slow progress, particularly in the home regions of some interviewees [1,8,9] and during transit through Ukraine [1,4]. Successful displacement often depended on a combination of transport modes, with many relying on private cars or buses [1,3,5-9], public buses [2,3], and trains [1-4] within Ukraine. For those without private transportation, public transport—especially trains—was essential [1-4], while spontaneous volunteers and civic solidarity played a critical role in helping individuals access transport hubs [1].

Private individuals provided vital logistical support during the harsh journey, which was marked by high stress and a scarcity of essentials. This included transport to train stations [1,3,5], temporary shelter [2-4,6,7], and even long-term housing in their homes [1-3,5,6,8,9]. Generous gestures, such as receiving food [1,4] or accommodation [5] from strangers along the way, significantly eased the journey. Civic and public services also contributed, offering overnight shelter during transit [5]. When neither public nor private transport was available, walking became the last resort, especially when crossing borders [1,5].

After enduring long border queues, the obstacles to mobility caused by the conflict were overcome, and onward travel became easier, supported by faster transportation options like trains [2], buses [1,3,4], and, for some, even planes [5,6]. For those with the financial means—often facilitated by social networks [5]—air travel occasionally offered a viable alternative once they had reached another country [5,6]. Ultimately, mobility capabilities were influenced not only by the available infrastructure but also by the level of social support and civic involvement, which together shaped the possibilities and conditions of displacement.

5.2 Arrival, Integration, and Adaption

5.2.1 Arrival and Initial Adaptation

For many participants, reaching their destination represented a critical juncture, signifying both the conclusion of a strenuous journey and the onset of a new phase characterised by

uncertainty. The immediate relief from the hardships of displacement was accompanied by a profound sense of gratitude for the safety and shelter provided by hosts, friends, or family. Although the psychological burden of war persisted, the support received upon arrival played a crucial role in fostering a sense of stability and security.

Interviewee 6, who first found safety in Croatia before moving to Switzerland, described this emotional state: *“We were shocked and lost, but that is a different story... [The war] had made us totally lost, like we had no idea what would [or should] come next. But we were very happy to have this safe place and to feel that we were taken care of, and that we had walls around [us]”* [6].

Some interviewees found safety through family reunification, joining relatives who had already established themselves in the host country [1,2,5]. Interviewee 1, for instance, reunited with her son in Vienna before accessing the integration centre to secure independent accommodation. For many, initial support came from distant acquaintances or pre-existing social networks [4,6-9]. Interviewee 4, for example, was accommodated by hosts who not only provided shelter but also offered essential emotional and practical assistance to her traumatised family during the early stages of displacement.

Interviewees 8 and 9, after an exhausting three-day car journey, arrived in rural Switzerland to find themselves in an unfurnished apartment—but one that had been carefully prepared for them. Their host had placed beds and stocked up on groceries, ensuring that their most immediate needs were met. Reflecting on this moment, Interviewee 8 recalled, *“I think we will remember it in ten, twenty years! At that time, there was a lot of stress. We did not understand where we would go, what would happen to us. It was a crazy time! But everything was going to be good, because we had a place [to stay]. Our children were in a safe place. We had [groceries]. We had time to think about this situation”* [8]. The generosity of locals further eased the transition: *“People from around would come to us. Bring something. Or just speak [to us]. We felt a lot of [care and compassion]”* [8].

The majority of individuals in our sample had prearranged housing, which played a crucial role in providing stability upon arrival. For these individuals, arrival offered not an end to hardship, but a brief reprieve before confronting the challenges of rebuilding their lives in an unfamiliar environment. Social connections, whether pre-existing [1,2,4-6,8,9] or newly formed [3,6,8,9], were instrumental in shaping early experiences, offering both practical support and a sense of security in an otherwise uncertain situation. Housing secured through family members [1,2,5], acquaintances [2,4,6-9], or even strangers [3] provided a stable

foundation, helping individuals navigate bureaucratic processes [8,9], understand local norms [8,9], and, in some cases, secure employment [3,7].

5.2.1.1 Bureaucratic Hurdles

For others without immediate accommodation, arrival was more structured, facilitated by integration centres designed to provide an initial point of orientation [1]. In Vienna, for example, Interviewee 1 recalled the experience of registering at such a centre, where large queues were managed with efficiency, ensuring that people were processed swiftly [1]. Despite not being of retirement age, she and her travelling partner, her counter-mother-in-law, were assigned a place in a retirement home [1].

Once accommodation was secured, the immediate priority for participants shifted to addressing bureaucratic requirements [5,6,8]. Despite the initial desire to pause and recover from the stress of displacement, dealing with bureaucracy could not be postponed for long. Interviewee 5 described this balancing act: *“You know, like, of course when we came, we wanted to just slow down a little bit, calm down. And somehow, we made it through everything... Going through these papers, getting the Status S for refugees, kids going to school, and we somehow made it work”* [5]. Registering as a displaced person [1,5,6,8] and securing essential services, such as health insurance [6,7], were among the first tasks that needed to be completed. The process was often complex and intimidating, particularly for those unfamiliar with local administrative systems or facing language barriers [5,6,8]. For those displaced in Switzerland, the differences in administrative procedures across comparatively small regions further complicated the process, creating an additional hurdle and contributing to a sense of opacity and inconsistency within the system [8]. For those without social support, this stage was especially overwhelming [6]. Additionally, registering children for school [2-6,8,9] emerged as another critical task, adding to the challenges of navigating the bureaucratic landscape. The involvement of social contacts or pre-existing support networks was often essential in easing these processes, as they provided guidance on how to access these services and helped mitigate the stress associated with them.

However, many found help through personal contacts who guided them through these complex times. Interviewee 6, for instance, described how invaluable the assistance of a host family and local supporters had been in navigating these initial challenges: *“We arrived here. We had very strong support from this couple. Those guys I knew personally. Him and his wife. And also, there was a guy [...] he was eventually hired by the [municipality], and he was there. He also was in a way supporting [us]. So, we arrived here at a safe place. The most important thing back then and to me still until this day here is safety. Stability. Protection, like social*

protection. With a war in my country. To be honest. And that's a lot!" [8] Beyond emotional support, practical assistance was essential in ensuring a smooth transition: *"We received money straight away, so we could buy food. And after these six weeks of knowing nothing, total uncertainty for me, it was a huge relief for me. Here you are, you have something to eat, your family is fine and taken care of. It was huge"* [6].

The presence of knowledgeable individuals guiding them through administrative requirements made an enormous difference [5,6,8]. As Interviewee 6 described, *"They were helping us with like insurance, bank accounts, getting a SIM card, going to the [municipality office], register for [protection status S]. Because again: if you arrive at a new place and don't know how everything works, of course people can speak English sometimes, but it's very stressful already, so having someone that can guide you through the whole process, that is also a gamechanger"* [6]. Interviewee 5 recalled this phase marked by an overwhelming amount of paperwork and bureaucratic hurdles vividly: *"Then came the time where we had to go through all this bureaucracy. Through all this stuff"* [5]. While the process was complex, having someone with experience to rely on proved invaluable. *"And this was the godfather for my niece, the daughter of my sister. He also helped us a lot. A lot. He went through all these papers"* [5]. Support networks, whether family members [5], friends [6,8], or local contacts, often played a crucial role in helping interviewees navigate the system and secure the necessary documents.

While some were lucky to have such support, others had to navigate these challenges alone, facing a much more difficult and uncertain transition. The extent of guidance and assistance received in these early days had a lasting impact on how participants adapted to their new environment. As Interviewee 6 reflected, *"I know that other people had to do it by themselves, and their stories are different. I think we have a really happy story, considering the circumstances. But yeah, we were lucky to have it."* [6].

5.2.1.2 Schooling

Schooling played a pivotal role in restoring a sense of normality for displaced children who had endured weeks of transit and upheaval. For parents, ensuring their children's continued education was a primary concern, as Interviewee 5 reflected: *"We came here, and of course I have two daughters, and they are of different ages. One is fifteen and the other one she was eight at that time. They have to go to school, of course. And I wasn't thinking about work in the beginning"* [5].

Many parents, particularly those with older children approaching key educational milestones, sought to maintain academic continuity in both the host country and Ukraine [3-5]. To prevent their children from losing a school year in case of return, they often opted for *dual schooling*—enrolling them in evening classes after regular school hours [3-5]. Some host schools actively sought solutions to accommodate this dual enrolment by allocating time within their schedules for Ukrainian students to work on their home curriculum [3].

While schooling provided structure and routine, it also presented significant challenges. The language barrier was the most immediate and persistent obstacle for all school-aged children [2-6,8,9], complicating their adaptation to unfamiliar educational systems [8,9]. Some children encountered xenophobic attitudes or social tensions, particularly when their limited German proficiency set them apart from their peers [3,4]. However, the presence of other Ukrainian students in the classroom helped mitigate feelings of isolation for some [3,4]. As Interviewee 3 noted, openness and willingness to engage with others facilitated the adaptation process: *“I’m also not very shy—once, one of my friends who is also from Upper Austria and Ukrainian, she is very shy, and she could not ask someone or something. I said in the beginning that I need a translation, and you need to translate for me. We are friends, and I need to understand everything”* [3].

The impact of these difficulties was particularly severe for younger children, who often struggled emotionally [3,4,6]. Interviewee 4 described how the language barrier left her youngest son feeling isolated and withdrawn, to the point of avoiding interactions with Austrian children and experiencing bullying. His distress escalated to such an extent that it also took a toll on her own well-being [4]. Similarly, Interviewee 6’s young daughter, deeply traumatised by the war and unfamiliar with German, had significant difficulties making friends after their arrival in Switzerland. In contrast, older children generally found it easier to integrate, particularly when they were proactive in seeking social connections [3,4]. For some, preexisting German skills at the A2 level eased the transition [2,3], while higher-level English proficiency provided an initial means of communication, helping to bridge the gap until they developed sufficient German skills [3].

Despite these difficulties, school staff provided critical support [2,5], and the use of translation tools helped both children and parents navigate early integration challenges [5]. Schools were generally very accommodating, as Interviewee 5 recalled: *“When we came, during the first week, the school accepted us very kindly. Everybody was so kind. I would say yes. And they really understood our feelings. That we had suffered a bit, and the damaged psychology. So, they also wanted to help us. And my younger daughter, she went to primary school, and the older daughter,*

she went to secondary school. And the whole subjects: Of course, German, and Mathematics, Biology, Geography, ... Everything. You know? At school they let them use translators, it also helped us during the first year” [5]. Such measures, along with prior German language skills where available [2,3], played a crucial role in shaping how successfully children adapted to their new educational environment.

5.2.1.3 Facing cultural and linguistic differences

Finding themselves in foreign countries with stark cultural differences and, for most, a completely unfamiliar language, many participants faced significant challenges in adapting to their new environments. Interviewee 5, for instance, reflected on the initial, idealised perception of Switzerland—only to quickly realise the challenges awaiting them: *“And then we realised—Switzerland... Switzerland is such a nice country! Before that, I didn't realise... I never imagined it this way. I only thought of cows, mountains, chocolate, watches—you know! That was all. Honestly, I didn't know much about Switzerland. But it's a really beautiful country, really beautiful! And very safe, really secure! Everything—I mean, almost everything—is nice here! But we realised very, very quickly that Switzerland has four languages: German, Italian, French, and Romansh. And the Swiss German accent is strong! We started a language course at the [municipality], learning High German, but people around us were speaking Swiss German. It's difficult! It's still difficult—it's hard. You study one language, but then you hear something completely different from the people around you. There's just no balance. That, I would say, was—and still is—a challenge for us. But despite that, we are really grateful to the Swiss government. They are doing a lot for us.” [5]*

Pre-existing language skills played a crucial role in how individuals navigated daily life in their host countries. Many older individuals, including parents of the interviewed youth and those aged 55 and above, arrived with little to no prior knowledge of German or English, making even basic interactions challenging [1-3,7]. In contrast, some younger individuals had studied both German and English at school, acquiring a foundational knowledge of German at the A1 or A2 level [2,3]. Their exposure to English through media further facilitated communication, easing their initial adaptation. In the absence of German skills, English often served as an intermediary language when interacting with government officials, teachers, or the general public. However, English proficiency varied significantly—while some relied on it as their primary means of communication [4-6,8,9], others had only minimal understanding [1,7], complicating effective interactions.

Those interviewed sought to enrol in German language courses as soon as possible [3-6], typically offered by state agencies [3] or local municipalities [5]. However, long wait times—

often extending up to six months—combined with high demand resulted in significant delays in access [4,6]. These courses required substantial time commitments, which later conflicted with work schedules, leading some participants to withdraw after securing employment [5,6]. For instance, Interviewee 5 completed an intensive two-month full-time course before transitioning to six months of part-time classes, meeting twice a week, but ultimately discontinued attendance due to work obligations [5]. Interviewee 4 experienced a four-month wait before enrolling, while Interviewee 6 waited six months for a placement. She initially completed an A2-level course funded by the authorities but later resumed language education through privately funded courses, which she had to pause multiple times due to work and childcare responsibilities [6]. Additionally, the complexities of regional dialects, particularly Swiss German, posed further challenges for both adults and children [2,3,5]. For some individuals, the firm belief in an imminent return led to a complete delay in language learning and local engagement until late 2023 [2,7-9]. During this period, they relied primarily on Ukrainian networks or family support instead [7]. Despite these initial setbacks, most displaced adults eventually enrolled in state-provided language courses [2-9], while their children gradually adapted to learning German in local schools [2-6,8,9].

5.2.1.4 Finding Employment

The time it took for displaced Ukrainians to find employment varied significantly. Some individuals secured jobs even before arriving in Austria or during the first few months of displacement [3,4,8], while others faced much longer waits or, in some cases, never found work [1,2,6,7] despite their persistent efforts to refresh their skills and apply for positions [1,6]. Many displaced people had to accept jobs at much lower educational levels than they had in Ukraine, with roles often requiring fewer qualifications [4,5,8,9]. For a significant portion of the first year, many were not employed and instead focused on attending language courses [5,6] or taking on time-intensive childcare responsibilities [6,9], leading them to rely on social security during this period [1,2,5-7,9].

Deskilling posed a significant challenge for many displaced Ukrainians as they entered the labour market and persisted throughout much of their displacement. Many individuals experienced a drastic reduction in their professional status, with highly skilled jobs in fields such as electrical engineering [4], IT management [8], real estate management [5], and law [9] being replaced by low-skilled positions like cleaning [4,9], home care assistance [5], and farm work [8]. This shift not only diminished their professional standing but also highlighted the struggles of having qualifications that were not easily recognised or transferable in the new job market [1,3-6,8,9]. As Interviewee 4 reflects, *“I have a problem: I studied for a long*

time and then worked 10 years as an engineer. Now I'm cleaning floors" [4]. A major barrier to returning to high-skilled roles was the lack of sufficient language skills [1,4-6,8,9], as proficiency in German was often required, even when high level English language skills were present [6,8]. Interviewee 6 recalls struggling after registering with the regional labour service: *"They were like: 'Yes, we know, Ukrainian people are overly qualified. Yes, you guys have good skills. Yes, you are moving very fast with German. But still, you are not there, and without the language, it's hard. [...] Good luck. We cannot really help you. But keep on trying and learn the language. And try maybe'"* [6]. The resulting deskilling often left them in roles far below their previous expertise, contributing to frustration and a sense of lost (professional) identity while they worked to adapt to their new circumstances. Frustrated by the lack of guidance and without a clear direction, Interviewee 6 feels she has no real option other than to continue applying for jobs and improving her German skills: *"They did not even give me advice. I was a little disappointed because I thought they could give me a direction. 'What are your experiences? Maybe you could do this. Maybe you could do this course?' Or at least give me an idea. I am totally lost because I don't know how it works here. And I didn't get that [from the regional labour market service]. Only the special link with the same jobs. 'Apply please, be my guest.' So, [...] we decided that I will continue to learn the language now, still keep on applying, and even [my Swiss boyfriend] is helping me with sending CVs. And ahm... yeah... I don't know. I will try..."* [6].

5.2.1.5 The first year of displacement

Overall, the first year of displacement was particularly challenging for most interviewees [2-4,7-9], marked by significant difficulties in adaptation and integration [2-6]. Language barriers [2,4-8], experiences of xenophobia [3,4], and cultural differences [5,6] emerged as key obstacles, while others struggled more with financial insecurity [4], emotional distress associated with the loss of their home environment [2,4], and separation from loved ones [2,7]. Beyond these practical and social hardships, many continued to carry the psychological burden of war trauma [5,6,8,9].

Interviewee 6, for instance, describes the emotional toll experienced by her daughter and the gradual process of adjustment: *"She was still recalling the sounds of the shelling. In the beginning, she would have breakdowns from time to time. There was the stress of starting at a new school, but again, we were supported there. People did their best—no one was fully prepared for this situation, but they did what they could. And in the end, it worked out. Now she already speaks the language, and most importantly, she has friends. She is a happy child!"* [6].

For mothers navigating displacement alone while their husbands remained in Ukraine, the simultaneous demands of childcare, integration, language acquisition, and job-seeking proved especially challenging [4-6]. Many faced considerable psychological strain as they balanced unfamiliar bureaucratic and labour market structures with the well-being of their families [4-6]. Interviewee 4 described how these struggles persisted well beyond the first year: *"My youngest son told me every day that he had to go back to Ukraine. He told me that he was tired, had no friends, and couldn't communicate. It was stressful and a huge psychological burden. I had psychological problems. No job—everything was stressful! After about a year, it got a little better. Slowly, these problems disappeared, but job searching became an even bigger problem. Or the fact that the Austrian system doesn't provide support if I don't have a regular job. I also had/have problems because I need an income of €1,600 for my family. I have to cover €900 for the apartment all by myself. It's hard to find a job that pays that much. I have to speak German well and need [a letter of recommendation] from other Austrians"* [4].

While some of the individuals interviewed gradually adapted to life in their host countries [1-6], others remained reluctant to integrate during their first year [2,7-9]. Many clung to the belief that the war would soon end, viewing their displacement as temporary and expecting to return home as soon as the situation in Ukraine improved [2,3,6-9]. As one interviewee put it, *"At first, we all thought we would go home soon. Nobody planned for a long stay"* [8]. Only a few considered the possibility of a longer stay [1,2].

This expectation was particularly evident in attitudes toward language learning: those still anticipating an imminent return to Ukraine often delayed enrolling in German courses until late 2022 or even 2023 [2,7-9]. Interviewee 8 shared an anecdote that is both humorous and bittersweet, illustrating how even small, everyday purchases reflected the assumption that they would soon return home: *"Every week, we would buy a new package for our trash. [...] When we came here, two or three packages were given to us by somebody. But then, when they were used up, I needed to go buy new ones. I would say: 'Give me, please, two packages.' And they [gave] me two big rolls, ten [trash bags] each. So, then I bought 20 trash bags and read that it was for five months. So, I said: 'Wow, it's too much. I don't need that many!' It [was] a big problem for me. I even asked [my contact]: 'Maybe do you need some?' Because I didn't know. It was my mistake—because five months is too much! Two, three months maximum. It was temporary! Now, we're here"* [8].

5.2.2 Evolving Realities and Long-Term Displacement

5.2.2.1 Shifting towards long-term displacement

After an initial year of uncertainty and upheaval, 2023 marked a turning point for many participants. As the protracted nature of the conflict became increasingly apparent, expectations of a swift return began to fade. The realisation that peace would not be restored in the near future prompted a reassessment of their circumstances [3,5-9], leading to a shift towards deeper integration in their host countries [3,5,6,8,9].

Interviewee 8 reflects on this changing mindset, explaining how the failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the summer of 2023 forced them to confront the reality of prolonged displacement: *"At first, we believed this war would not continue for a long time. Secondly, we have a temporary status here. [...] We understood it is temporary. In 2022, our region stayed free, so we believed we would need to wait for some time [longer], and then everything would be good. But then, in the summer of 2023, it should have been our attack, which failed big[time]. At that moment, we realised that it would continue for a long time. I think our opinion changed then"* [8].

This realisation led to a gradual shift in priorities, moving beyond temporary coping strategies towards long-term adaptation. Interviewee 8 describes how, initially, manual labour provided a distraction from the psychological strain of war. However, as a long-term stay became inevitable, the need for deeper integration became clear: *"We understood that we needed to start learning German, start integrating. Because [waiting for all this] time—it's not good for us, for our brains. It's depressing if I don't do anything. So, I tried to find different work because my job was on a farm. It was a big difference from my work [back in Ukraine], where I used to be a manager. I had a completely different position. But that first year was full of stress for us. Many people we knew had died. So many lives were broken. And all day, every day, we were constantly watching the news from Ukraine. It was incredibly stressful. For me, my job became a safe space for my mind. It was physically demanding, but at least I had something to do. It stopped me from thinking about everything. That work became a kind of safety for my brain"* [8].

As interviewees increasingly let go of the expectation of an imminent return, their focus shifted towards securing a stable and self-determined future in their host countries. In 2023 and 2024, key steps in this process included enrolling in or continuing German language courses [1,3,6-9], changing jobs or entering the labour market for the first time [5,8,9], initiating the recognition of Ukrainian degrees [3,4,8], and planning their children's education based on local employment opportunities and school systems [2-6]. In many families, children

actively invested in their education and future choices, showing notable agency and determination in shaping their own trajectories [2-5].

The mental shift from temporary to long-term displacement was often accompanied by a growing focus on housing and accommodation [1,3,4,5]. Many interviewees sought to reshape their living situations, either by securing a private apartment [4,5] or relocating to an urban area [3,4] to better align with their evolving needs. The desire for improved living conditions, greater independence through more personal space [1,4,5], and enhanced mobility [3,4,6] were key drivers behind these decisions. However, not everyone has been able to relocate as desired [1,4]—Interviewee 1 wishes to move into her own apartment but has not yet managed to do so, while Interviewee 4 was able to move to a new apartment in her rural area but has not yet been able to relocate to Vienna as she hopes. Urban relocation, in particular, became crucial for those in rural areas, where limited public transport [3,4] and financial constraints on car ownership [4,5,6] restricted access to employment [3,4], education [3,4], and recreational opportunities [3,4].

Securing independent housing played a crucial role in restoring a sense of stability and control [5]. Interviewee 5, for example, developed a strong desire for her own apartment with her two daughters after several months of living in shared social housing with her elderly mother, her sister, and her niece. As family dynamics shifted, the need for separation became increasingly apparent, particularly as different household rules led to tensions among the children: *"You know, we lived together for six months. And in my opinion, families should live separately. They have their own rules and everything. The kids started—well, not being aggressive towards each other, not my kids—but they have their mother and their own rules. So, I decided that I wanted to live separately with my family"* [5].

However, under Swiss Status S, she was unable to freely choose her apartment or residence while receiving state support [5]. This restriction meant that financial self-sufficiency was a prerequisite for moving, ultimately influencing her decision to work full-time despite the challenges of childcare and other responsibilities. As she explains: *"But in order to choose an apartment myself—because before, we were living in social housing, and the municipality was paying for all of us—I couldn't get a new apartment until I was considered [financially] independent. That's why I made this decision: I needed to work 100% or at least 80% [of a full-time work schedule] to earn a salary that would be enough to pay for an apartment on my own"* [5].

This requirement significantly shaped her path, adding pressure to balance work, childcare, and the need to achieve independence in order to secure a stable living situation for her family: *"But it's really tight. Even if you have one kid, it's one problem, if you have two kids, it's already twice [as much], so... And then they liked me to be [self-sufficient]. Now, I'm happy, really, that I made that decision. I started to work in [care work] in the beginning. I was there for five months. I worked with a [nursing or care home resident]. [Changing pads], [...] I did everything. I helped them peeing and then I washed them. I dressed them. I cooked the food. I fed them."* [5]

For many participants, relocating to a larger city represented an opportunity to regain a sense of normalcy, access better infrastructure, and improve their overall quality of life [3,4]. Rural areas often posed significant challenges due to limited recreational activities, restricted mobility, especially in rural Austria [3,4], and the logistical difficulties of daily life [3,4,6]. Interviewee 4, for example, describes how living in a small village in Lower Austria severely constrained both her and her children's opportunities, adding considerable stress to her daily routine: *"There are simply more opportunities there. Also for the children. In the daycare centre in Ukraine, my children had the chance to paint, play football, and swim. My middle son is good at painting. Back then, he was also able to attend karate classes. This opportunity doesn't exist in [our village]! My children find it boring and spend too much time on their phones or computers. That's not healthy—only my middle son wears glasses. For me, it's stressful. I would rather paint or be active. I have to get up at 5 a.m., take care of my children, then go to work later, and then it's just daycare, daycare, daycare."* [4]

Beyond the lack of activities, she also highlights the challenges of rural life without access to a car, particularly when it comes to mobility and childcare: *"My city is on the Dnipro River. My house is five minutes from the river. Every day, I would go for a walk or swim by the shore. I was always moving. But here, there are fewer opportunities for physical activity. I had to look for another city with a daycare for my children. However, I don't have a driver's licence."* The availability of public transport played a crucial role in her daily routines back home, a convenience she now lacks in the village: *"Back in my city, I also had the bus and [the suburban train]. Baden would also be an option. It takes a little less time to get to Vienna from there, and it's a quiet city. It's similar to where I lived in Zaporizhzhia. That would be my wish."* [4]

5.2.2.2 Education and Language

Long-term cultural and linguistic adaptation varied significantly among different age groups. While some younger children initially faced challenges in adapting to their new environment [3-6], most gradually adjusted over time [2-6]. Factors such as the school environment [3-5],

friendships with local peers [3-6], and additional language courses [3,5] played a crucial role in their language development, progressively lowering the language barrier. However, a few children continued to struggle with forming friendships [5] or fully engaging with their surroundings [6]. Adolescents in the sample adapted even more successfully [3-5], finding it easier to establish social connections [3-5] and often showing strong motivation to build their future in their host countries [2-5].

After two years, younger children and adolescents generally attained an upper-intermediate to advanced level of fluency (B1 to C1) [2-5], whereas adults aged 25 and older typically reached lower-intermediate proficiency (B1) [3,4,6,8,9]. Some adults remained at a basic level (A1 to A2) [1,2,5,7], with several interviewees reporting lower fluency among adults within the same family [2-5] and a reluctance among some to engage with native speakers in German [4,6]. The school environment and continuous exposure to German-speaking peers facilitated rapid language acquisition among children, often creating a widening linguistic gap between them and their parents. Interviewee 5 highlighted this dynamic, noting that her children's fluency had surpassed her own: *"Yes, for my kids, they are better in German than we are. Especially the older daughter, she already has B2 level confirmed. And she is still visiting German courses"* [5]. However, she also described the increasing difficulty of maintaining her own language progression: *"But of course, the kids, you know, integration, they have a fresh mind! They are just accepting all the information and spend all day in school, hearing only German, German, German. Yes, for them it's better. I have no people with whom I can talk. Only in English, mostly. Or if I am working German, but you know, simple German. So somehow, I have stopped [improving]"* [5].

A key factor limiting language acquisition among adults was the lack of time for structured learning [2,4,5,8]. In the canton of Aargau, Switzerland, state-funded language courses generally covered up to the basic (A2) level [5,6,8,9], leaving many to pursue further education independently, reaching B1 [6,9], or gradually improving their skills through workplace interactions [8]. However, multiple interviewees in Aargau reported that their municipality or the labour market service was unable to provide them with additional language courses [5,6,8,9], requiring them to finance these courses privately [6,9]. This financial burden often forced families to prioritise one member's language education at a time [8,9], effectively excluding those without external support or sufficient financial resources [5].

Interviewees 8 and 9 expressed frustration over the unequal distribution of government-supported language courses, feeling that those without employment were prioritised, while working individuals struggled to access further education. They highlighted inconsistencies

in government support, noting that language policies varied between cantons: *“Now, if you speak about the government or the municipality. Government organisations. Sometimes we can see some problems with these organisations. For example, different cantons have different rules. Some are better, some are worse. It's a big problem, that if you know one standard, we should [do this or that], we should do, do, do... and we got everything”* [8]. Despite their willingness to continue improving their language skills, they faced barriers: *“You just try to study... Because, for example, we finished studying German, the next year in September. And we want to continue. We have done everything that we can. We want to continue. But we don't want this... We want normal classes. [Interviewee 9] is studying online in Ukrainian. We paid for that”* [8].

They described prolonged waiting times for courses and suspected that employment status negatively impacted their chances of obtaining government-funded lessons: *“But I didn't get it from the [labour market service]... We waited for eight months, and both of us didn't get a course. Maybe it's a problem because we work? And the first ones to get courses are the ones not employed? Because in our canton, it's different. But it's a strange situation. I have to go to work, but I don't get any classes”* [8]. Interviewee 8, in particular, perceives a paradox in the system, where working individuals seem to receive less support despite their active role in integration: *“It looks like that. It's not like that, but it looks like it. But I understand, because the priority is different [to integrate] the people that don't work [first]. About different integration: When we started working, usually we speak with people, we can see how the culture works. Because here where we live, it's really small. Yes, you can go to the neighbour, owners, or sometimes other people we know. But it's not enough. Normally. For a full integration. I see only if you work, all day, full-time, it's a quick way to integrate. But without German, it's hard... And studying German online with Ukrainians, it's not perfect. Offline, it's faster. [...] You have native speakers, it's different. Here, a course costs close to three thousand [Swiss francs]”* [8]. These accounts illustrate the tension between employment and access to language acquisition opportunities, highlighting the financial and structural obstacles that hinder full integration.

In Austria, by contrast, government-funded courses typically extended into the intermediate level (B1/B2) [2,3]. While some participants took advantage of free language cafés offered by local non-government organisations to continue their learning [1], others discontinued their studies after struggling to achieve their desired proficiency through state-sponsored courses [2]. While interviewees in both countries faced challenges such as limited time for language courses [2,4,5,8] and steep learning curves [4,6], dissatisfaction with government support was notably absent among those in Austria, in contrast to complaints expressed by interviewees in Switzerland.

As their displacement became increasingly protracted, many interviewees adjusted their children's educational paths to reflect their long-term situation. For some, this meant discontinuing dual schooling [3,5] in favour of deeper integration into the host country's education system. This shift alleviated pressure on children struggling to balance distance learning with integration challenges, such as language acquisition. Abandoning Ukrainian distance learning also underscored the uncertainty of an imminent return, signalling a broader reorientation towards long-term integration in host countries.

However, some parents maintained their older children's participation in Ukrainian education [3,4], despite the added strain, to facilitate a potential return and preserve their connection to Ukrainian. Interviewee 5 shared the emotional toll of ending her children's dual schooling: *"So it's for nothing. It's just stressful... I already wrote the teacher that we will not be enrolled in Ukrainian education next year. But then if we come back to Ukraine, we will be losing our class level and going down, down, down. So, about the future, I'm not sure... Of course, I miss it! It's my country, my land! You know, I was born there... But if I have to be more realistic, in advance it might be better to stay here and, if possible, continue education. So, for me, as a mother, should I just stay at home, lying down, watching TV? No! But honestly, then maybe have a clear plan for the future"* [5].

For others, the focus shifted towards preparing older children for vocational or higher education pathways [2-4,6], facilitating their integration into Swiss or Austrian systems through multi-year apprenticeship programmes [6] or gymnasium [3,4] and university enrolment [2,3]. Interviewees 2 and 3, for instance, recognised the importance of securing long-term prospects and chose to pursue higher education in Austria, understanding that an Austrian degree would improve their chances of remaining in the country. As Interviewee 3 explained: *"So when we started to learn German and the war in Ukraine was still ongoing, I understood that maybe we would be [in this situation] for a really long time. So, I would like to go to an Austrian university so that if I stayed here, I would have an Austrian degree"* [3]. This decision prompted their family to relocate to Vienna, aligning their educational plans with the broader goal of securing a future in Austria.

5.2.2.3 Cultural and social integration

Beyond overcoming the language barrier, cultural and social integration plays a pivotal role in shaping interviewees' sense of belonging. While some, such as Interviewee 5 and the family of Interviewees 8 and 9, have successfully established new social networks, many continue to face challenges in integrating into their host societies [1,2,6,7]. For many, language remains a significant obstacle to social participation. Some participants express feelings of self-

consciousness when speaking the local language [4,6], fearing judgment or rejection due to mistakes. Interviewee 6, for instance, shares how errors undermine her confidence in speaking German: *"I can understand a lot. Even when I spend time with [my boyfriend's] friends and they speak German, I get almost everything. But I get stressed about speaking because I feel stupid for making mistakes. I really want to, but I still haven't overcome this barrier. When I realise, I'm making mistakes, I feel like I sound silly. [...] I can't express my thoughts yet"* [6].

Interviewee 5 notes a shift in public attitudes over time: *"At the beginning, people were understanding us more. They were kinder. Somehow, now I feel it [understanding] has gone down. And there are even some people that sometimes I am ashamed even to speak German to. Because of course I'm not correctly speaking, there are many, many mistakes. And, in that point people were asking about where I am from, but now they are like: 'I don't care. Yes, Ukrainian.' Not... Not the same feeling [of understanding] anymore. But it might be a personal thing. Mostly they are kind, understanding, they are worrying with us... Maybe, I don't know what to say else"* [5].

Beyond linguistic challenges, some interviewees also struggle with cultural differences and experiences of xenophobia. Several interviewees describe how their children face exclusion and othering at school [2,3,5,6]. Interviewee 5's younger daughter has yet to fully integrate, still struggling to form friendships despite her friendly nature. She recalls instances where classmates made derogatory comments about Ukraine and the ongoing war, reinforcing a sense of not belonging: *"Some, they are even making fun of [Ukrainian children]. Like 'Oh, Russia is better. Ukraine is nothing.'"* [5]. While these encounters are not frequent, they contribute to her daughter's isolation.

Interviewee 6 shares a similar concern, noting that her daughter has never truly felt at home and has expressed a sense of being unwelcome: *"Oh, we are not welcome here. We are Ukrainians. Everyone knows we are not Swiss. They will never take us as equals"* [6]. She suspects that her daughter may be reflecting her own uncertainties, but the fact that she verbalises these feelings underscores the challenges of integration. Although their host country is highly international, social divisions persist, making full inclusion difficult.

Beyond struggles with local peers, divisions also exist within the Ukrainian community itself. Some early arrivals perceive those who fled later as more selective and opportunistic, believing that they waited for the best moment rather than fleeing out of immediate necessity [5]. At the same time, perceptions of refugee hierarchies shape how Ukrainians see themselves in relation to other displaced groups. While some feel they receive less hostility than other refugee populations [3], others believe they are at a disadvantage compared to

Middle Eastern refugees who do not fall under temporary protection [8]. These internal and external distinctions highlight broader debates about legitimacy and belonging among displaced people.

Despite these challenges, experiences of war and displacement have also fostered solidarity and understanding. Interviewee 6 recalls encountering strong support during her initial displacement in Croatia, where people had lived through war themselves. Interviewee 8 describes how his perspective on displacement has fundamentally changed: *“Before the war, I would look at the news and think: ‘Oh, it's not good.’ But I really did not understand what it was. [...] If at this moment I could pause and describe to me, really describe, the problems which happen in the region and the deeper problems, I think I would have a different view about it. But now, I understood”* [8]. These reflections illustrate how forced migration not only alters personal experiences but also reshapes broader perceptions of conflict and displacement.

NGO-run support hubs, such as the one regularly visited by Interviewee 1 in Vienna, play a vital role in fostering social engagement and language exchange with native speakers. These centres, where available, not only provide guidance on navigating daily life in their host countries but also create structured opportunities for participants and their families to connect and build a sense of community [1,6,7]. In contrast, those living in rural areas often face a lack of similar support structures and recreational activities [3,4,6,7]. Beyond language courses, opportunities for social interaction are limited, and the challenge is further compounded by restricted mobility [4-6], making it even harder for individuals in remote locations to access integration services or participate in community life. As a result, some feel or felt isolated and uncertain about how to actively engage in their host society [6,7].

Over time, many of these initial support initiatives have faded, leaving interviewees with fewer avenues for maintaining social connections [1,6,7]. Interviewee 7 reflects on this shift: *“One thing that is sticking out is that there are no more events or gatherings for Ukrainians. During the first year, we had this meeting from time to time in the local church, where we would all gather. All Ukrainians from the area would meet, bring something to eat, chat with each other, communicate. Now, those events are not organised anymore. Now we cannot communicate with Swiss people because of the different language, and we cannot communicate with Ukrainians because we don't know where they are”* [7].

Interviewee 6 similarly voiced frustration over the absence of structured opportunities for social integration: *“I feel like nothing is done in this regard. Again, no complaining—language courses, yes—but that is not enough. I get it, that we have to make our own effort to learn the*

language, but having something for socialising or giving us guidance, telling us how things work here, would help. And we are happy to make an effort, but we don't know where to put it. It's like: I'm ready, I want to be an active refugee—not like, 'Oh yeah, take care of me, I don't care.' But I don't know where to go. So this, this... I would appreciate it if there could be something—a programme or some kind of support—to help” [6].

Despite efforts to integrate, the lack of ongoing social initiatives and structured community engagement remains a significant barrier. While some participants have managed to build informal networks, many struggled to maintain social connections, highlighting the need for sustained, accessible integration efforts that extend beyond language acquisition.

Ultimately, cultural and linguistic integration remains a complex process shaped by legal status, social networks, and shifting public attitudes. Without sustained support and opportunities for meaningful interaction, many displaced individuals risk experiencing prolonged isolation, making their long-term integration even more challenging.

5.2.2.4 Employment and Financial stability

Two years into displacement, securing financial independence remains a significant challenge for many. A large number are still unemployed [1,2,6,7] or in the process of finding new employment after moving to a different location [3], leaving them reliant on social support. While a lack of motivation initially played a role for some [2,7-9], this was often linked to emotional distress, a strong attachment to Ukraine [2,7], and the early assumption that the war would soon end [7-9]. As time has passed, most have adjusted their expectations [7-9], yet finding stable employment remains an uphill battle.

Even those who have managed to find work often struggle with deskilling and career stagnation. None of the interviewees had been able to return to their previous professions after two and a half years. A key obstacle is the recognition of Ukrainian degrees, a process that took between six and nine months [1,3,4,8]. Many see this as the second major challenge, following the initial difficulty of overcoming language barriers. Additionally, prolonged absence from their fields has led to outdated skills, making re-entry into their professions even more difficult. As a result, even those who are employed remain in positions below their previous qualifications, prolonging their financial insecurity.

A big part of those living in Aargau express frustration with the regional labour service [6,8,9], feeling that while their qualifications are acknowledged, they receive little practical support. Interviewee 6 shares this sentiment, recalling how, despite her fast progress in German, she was told that without further language skills, finding a job would be difficult:

"Good luck. We cannot really help you. But keep on trying and learn the language" [6]. This left her feeling unsupported, as she was reluctant to accept deskilling. *"How hard can it be? I'm overqualified for that. But who cares? No chance!"* She felt there was little guidance on alternative paths and struggled to find direction, saying, *"I am totally lost because I don't know how it works here"* [6].

In response, Interviewee 6 continues applying for jobs, improving her German, and receiving support from her Swiss boyfriend. She firmly refuses to accept a low-skill position, stating, *"I am not ready to go and... be a cleaning lady. It's my personal thing. I'm not judging anybody"* [6], emphasizing her resistance to lower-level work despite her challenges. Although frustrated by the lack of progress, she is now considering vocational training or an apprenticeship as a way to gain local qualifications and start anew: *"Maybe it matters more? For sure it matters more."* However, she remains uncertain about the cost of such education.

To cope with these challenges, many participants have adopted various strategies to improve their employment prospects. Some have focused on refreshing their professional skills [1,8], often through online courses, while others have applied for lower-level jobs within their field [5,6,8] or switched jobs in the hope of gradually working their way back up [5,8]. Improving German language proficiency has also been a priority for some [1,6], as they see it as a key factor in regaining access to their former professions. Others, recognising the difficulties of returning to their previous careers, have considered rejoining education to obtain a new degree [5,6] or changing career paths entirely by starting their own businesses [9], hoping to regain financial stability through self-employment.

Two interviewees [1,8], both from the IT sector, have been making significant efforts to stay up to date in their field while continuing their job search. Interviewee 8 has accepted that returning to his previous position as an IT manager is unlikely, but he considers securing a junior developer position as a meaningful step forward. Interviewee 1, a former developer, has been out of the industry for an extended period and hopes that taking online courses will help her re-enter the job market. For her, financial independence would mean not only having a stable income but also being able to afford her own apartment.

For some interviewees, having their degrees or qualifications recognised is simply not an option [5,6,9]. Fields such as law [9] or real estate management [5], which are deeply tied to national legal frameworks, have proven nontransferable, making a return to their original professions impossible. Others, like Interviewee 6, have highly specialised work experience, having previously run a textile factory before transitioning to a marketing agency [6]. Faced

with these challenges, many have chosen to pursue new career paths [9] or are planning to re-enter education [4,5,6], aiming to obtain a local degree to enhance their long-term employment prospects [4,5,6], though they are concerned about the financial feasibility of such an endeavour without external support [6]. Interviewees 5 and 6 hope that vocational training and a Swiss degree will provide them with better career opportunities, but the specific steps towards rejoining education remain unclear [5,6]. Meanwhile, Interviewee 4 dreams of enrolling at the Technical University in Vienna, viewing further education as the most promising path forward. Meanwhile, Interviewee 9, a former lawyer in Ukraine, has embarked on a significant career shift since arriving in Switzerland. Initially, she focused on caring for her children, particularly her youngest, who had just reached kindergarten age, before taking on a part-time cleaning job at a physiotherapy practise. With the support of her husband, she continued studying German through online courses while working together with him towards her long-term goal of opening her own beauty studio. She believes her endeavour would meet the growing demand for beauty services among displaced Ukrainians, allowing her to cater to this community while overcoming language barriers and offering a fresh start in a field she had always dreamed of pursuing, all while continuing to improve her German skills.

While some have managed to transition into slightly better jobs [5,8], they are still far from reclaiming their former careers. Interviewee 8 moved from working as a farmhand to assisting a local show owner, while Interviewee 5 transitioned from nursing a care home resident to working as a waiter. Although the new job offers better pay, the demanding schedule has significantly affected her ability to care for her children and attend German classes: *"I'm working 100%. And it isn't a normal job—the schedule is crazy! You know, the schedule as a waitress is crazy. Until one o'clock sometimes. Sometimes split shifts, and of course, I'm not seeing my kids. I'm not seeing my little daughter! She is at home all the time. She is just sitting at home or doing something but not being outside. And of course, she needs me, she is 11 years old! She needs me. She is at school and then when she comes home, I'm already going to work. She comes home for a break, and I'm already at work. We seldom meet each other to spend time. So there is a problem."* [5]

Balancing work and family responsibilities places an immense burden on many participants, particularly single parents [2-6]. Over time, the constant pressure of managing childcare, housework, and demanding jobs leads to physical and emotional exhaustion [4,5]. The exhaustion from long working hours, combined with the struggle to develop professionally, leaves many feeling stuck: *"And I, I want to develop myself. And now I would say, like you are*

right, I am stuck now. Somehow, I blocked myself because I'm working 100%" [5]. This is particularly true for those without a partner to share responsibilities [2-6]. The lack of time for anything beyond work takes a toll on well-being: "The time, you know! For me, it's all about the time! Because I'm working." [5] Although social connections provide some relief, they cannot replace the need for proper rest and recovery. Interviewee 5 describes how the relentless cycle of work and responsibilities wears her down: "You know, the quality of a vacation

—if you are working 100%—I'm like a machine. I badly need this vacation! I feel like I'm a little bit destroying myself. Sorry to say that. In real estate, my job was different, and I'm not used to this hard work. As a waiter, I'm just working non-stop, nine hours non-stop. [...] You're not even allowed to stand still for a minute! If you stand still, it means you don't have enough to do! So, you know, this is really what I miss—really, a vacation. A quality vacation. Because with my kids, I have to go shopping, cook, clean the apartment, take care of everything. Maybe it's just my personal thing, thinking about a vacation, yeah..." [5]

Interviewee 5's struggle to balance work and the need for rest reflects a broader challenge faced by many interviewees: financial security remains fragile [1,4,5], and the demands of daily survival often outweigh the possibility of a break. Many navigate tight budgets under social assistance [1], face a stark difference in cost of living between their host countries and their places of origin [1-9], or experience deskilling [4,5,8,9] or unemployment [1,2,6,7]. The loss of financial resources during displacement only deepens these difficulties, particularly for single parents who must juggle employment with childcare, often without support networks.

For some, financial security is not just about meeting immediate needs but also about preparing for an uncertain future. Interviewee 5 emphasises the importance of saving: "*Of course, I want to put money aside. Because who knows what tomorrow will bring? Maybe I have to go back to Ukraine in a year, and then I have nothing—no house, no job. I have to start from the beginning again somehow*" [5].

High medical costs further exacerbate financial insecurity, particularly in Switzerland, where healthcare expenses can be overwhelming. Interviewee 5 was shocked by the cost of her daughter's root canal surgery: "*Switzerland! For my daughter I paid 1200 Swiss Francs, it's just so expensive! Of course we paid for it, because she had [tooth] pain. She had a root channel [surgery]. And yes, now I will go to Germany*" [5]. The high cost of insurance, lack of dental coverage, and long waiting times for medical appointments have also contributed to

disillusionment with Western European healthcare systems. Reflecting on her experience, she notes: *"We were always watching Europe and thinking, 'Oh, Europe is nice—medicine and everything.' And now we are here, and slowly we realise that people just have to go and make their appointments. They have to wait. But until that time, you could die... or already have been treated. You know? Then you would not be sick anymore. And a sickness can get worse—if you have cancer or something, you need a faster reaction"* [5].

For many participants, financial stability remains out of reach. Even those who have secured employment often face deskilling, career stagnation, and exhausting workloads. The daily struggle for financial independence leaves little room for professional growth, creating a cycle of exhaustion that makes long-term stability even harder to achieve.

5.2.3 Current situation and evolving migration decisions

By early to mid-2024, two to two and a half years after their displacement, most interviewees who had fled in early 2022 had made significant progress in adapting to and integrating into their host countries. However, their circumstances varied widely. Some were actively laying the groundwork for a long-term future abroad, taking every possible step to secure their stay even if temporary protection measures were discontinued. Many in this group also hoped their partners could join them once travel restrictions were lifted. Others, however, remained deeply tied to their home country, finding it difficult to envision a future elsewhere.

The ongoing war and its bleak outlook in the spring and summer of 2024 further shaped these experiences. With no clear end in sight, many interviewees expressed uncertainty about their long-term prospects [1-9], with some voicing concerns over the high levels of uncertainty ahead [2,6,8,9]. The temporary nature of protection measures posed a significant challenge—without guarantees of continued residency, there was a constant risk of losing the little they had managed to rebuild since their displacement. This uncertainty also affected employment opportunities, as language courses were only beginning to show results, yet job prospects remained precarious due to the unstable legal situation.

Despite the challenges they encountered, the displaced interviewees in this study generally maintained a positive outlook on life and their circumstances [1-5,7-9]. They explicitly expressed deep gratitude for their host countries and the support they received from local communities [2-6,8,9], even while recounting what was likely the most difficult time of their lives. Interviewee 3, a youth who had just completed their Matura in Austria, captures this sentiment of resilience: *"It was very hard to move to Vienna. But now everything is getting better! I was crying anyways, but everything is getting better. So I would say: 'Cry but do.'" [3]*

This subchapter examines the mobility patterns and future migration considerations of displaced Ukrainians, including visits to their home country and the possibility of return after the war. Their aspirations and capabilities at the time of the interviews serve as a key analytical lens.

5.2.3.1 Branching paths

Two groups among the interviewees had adjusted particularly well to their new environment, albeit for different reasons. The first group consisted of youth and young adults nearing the end of their schooling and preparing for the next steps in their education [2-4,6]. For them, integration into their host societies in Switzerland and Austria offered unique opportunities, as well as structured support programmes that enabled more long-term planning. The prospect of being able to stay at least until the completion of their education provided a sense of stability that many other interviewees lacked.

While some children and young adults missed Ukraine [2,4], this sentiment was more frequently and intensely expressed by adults, who maintained a strong connection to their home country [2,4-6] and longed for significant aspects of their former way of life [1,4,6,7]. A significant proportion of displaced Ukrainians possess higher education degrees [3-5,8,9] and place considerable importance on education [2-6,8,9], which can be attributed, in part, to the intense job competition within Ukrainian society [6]. This is particularly evident in the cases of Interviewees 2 and 3, whose primary focus was gaining access to higher education—whether through university or technical college. For Interviewee 2, proximity to her boyfriend also played a role in her decision to move to a technical college in Vorarlberg. Their aspirations for mobility were closely tied to their educational goals, and by securing a place in the local education system, they enhanced their long-term prospects and career opportunities in their host countries.

The second group that adapted particularly well to their new environment consisted of older women who had their adult children nearby [1,7]. While Interviewee 7 was later joined by her son during displacement, Interviewee 1 followed her son and his family to Vienna after the war began. The presence of close family members provided emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of purpose despite their forced migration, making it easier for them to settle. For Interviewee 7, in particular, the arrival of her son in 2024—who was able to leave Ukraine as her medical caregiver—marked a turning point in her trajectory. His presence gave her a concrete reason to integrate into Switzerland, helping her transition out of the state of limbo she had previously experienced.

Both women, however, adjusted their expectations to fit their current realities, reflecting a pragmatic outlook. Interviewee 1 exemplifies this mindset. Reflecting on her experience, she describes how she has adapted: *"Now I have everything I need. I believe that in a situation like this, one has to adjust their desires and way of life a little. For me, life in Vienna is very comfortable and pleasant. I like the city and its people. Everyone we have met so far has been very kind and considerate, and we have received a lot of help"* [1]. This mindset highlights their resilience and ability to find contentment, despite the challenges they face.

However, while both women had a sense of purpose in life due to the proximity of their loved ones, finding purpose in their day-to-day activities proved challenging. Despite the support of their families, both Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 7 remained unemployed, making it difficult for them to regain a sense of fulfilment in their new routines. Interviewee 1, for instance, reflected on how the loss of familiar activities left her feeling unoccupied: *"In Ukraine, I also had a large garden and worked a lot in the garden and around the house. However, in Vienna, I have no occupation; I have already visited many of the museums, but now I need to find a new activity"* [1]. This highlights the challenge of maintaining personal agency and well-being, even when surrounded by loved ones.

While both youth and older adults adapted particularly well to their new surroundings, younger children and middle-aged adults—particularly mothers who had to bear the burden of childcare alone [2-6], as their partners were still unable to leave Ukraine [2-5,7]—faced greater challenges in adjusting to their host countries. School-aged children often struggled with displacement, finding it difficult to adapt to their new environment, learn the language, or make friends at school [3-6], despite their parents' best efforts to protect them [3,6,8,9]. Over time, most younger children adjusted to their new lives [3-6], but concerns about the potential disruption to their education and future remained a significant worry for their parents [5,6,8,9].

While some children and young adults still miss their lives in Ukraine [2,4], this sentiment was more frequently and intensely expressed by adults, who maintained a strong emotional connection to their home country [2,4-6] and longed for aspects of their former way of life [1,2,4,6,7]. A clear example of this generational divide in migration aspirations can be seen in the case of Interviewee 2. While she herself envisions a future in Western Europe, her mother remains deeply attached to Ukraine, despite the challenges of returning to a post-war country [2]. Interviewee 2 expresses hope that her mother may eventually reconsider and that the entire family might join her in Austria: *"I wish that my mom could find a job in Austria—it doesn't necessarily have to be in Vienna. My sister is doing very well in school, has no problems,*

and has many friends in Vienna. Of course, I also wish that my Ukrainian relatives could live somewhere in Europe, but at the moment, it is impossible to cross the border. Additionally, they do not want to relocate. My grandparents are very old, and it would be difficult for them to start a new life. My father has his job in Ukraine. But I wish that all my acquaintances and friends could live in Europe" [2].

Middle-aged adults faced persistent challenges in adapting to their host countries, with all interviewees experiencing struggles, albeit to different extents. While some felt relatively content with their current situation despite ongoing difficulties [3,4,5,8,9], others found it particularly hard to navigate the barriers to integration, including employment uncertainty and legal instability [2,6].

Although most adults had secured employment, none had obtained long-term positions that aligned with their qualifications and skills. Their professional integration was hindered by various factors, including language barriers [1-9], the non-recognition of foreign credentials [5,6,9], deskilling [4,5,8,9], and long-term unemployment [1,2,6,7]. Many had begun learning German, but their proficiency remained insufficient to fully participate in the labour market or access jobs that matched their expertise [1-9]. This misalignment between their education and employment opportunities led to frustration, as many felt underutilised and unable to realise their full potential.

Beyond employment challenges, the uncertainty surrounding their legal status remained a pressing concern. With only temporary protection, many feared losing the fragile stability they had managed to rebuild since their displacement [1-9]. The lack of long-term guarantees made it difficult to plan for the future or invest fully in integration, as any progress could be undone by sudden policy changes [2,6,8,9]. Limited public and governmental support further exacerbated these difficulties, making it harder to advance in language acquisition, secure better employment, or navigate bureaucratic hurdles [6,8,9].

Interviewee 6, for example, describes how the ongoing uncertainty surrounding her legal status, coupled with the pressures of integration and language learning, has taken a toll on her mental well-being: *"The other anxiety I had for months is that I could be thrown out at any moment. Then I would have to pack my suitcases, and I'd be in the same situation again! I totally have no resources for that... I can't! Of course, I can, but I felt like I can't do it again... but I might be forced to! If the status [S] is over: 'Thank you very much, bye bye!' So, this affects me mentally a lot. And then I cannot be a part of society; I cannot integrate. We, of course, have our language courses. [...] Yes. So, it is a part of integration, but because it is so difficult to learn, it is more*

stress for now than a tool to integrate. I can't! But I have to, because I don't want to feel like I'm living in a vacuum. I want to communicate with people in their language. Of course, English, yes, it works. But it's not the same! And then, again, for a job, it's a necessity, in my case" [6].

This combination of precarious employment, legal uncertainty, and systemic barriers placed a significant emotional and psychological burden on displaced adults [2,5,6]. Still, many had made notable progress. Interviewee 9, for example, had begun the process of becoming self-employed as a beautician, fulfilling a lifelong dream. Although some were still hesitant to speak German with native speakers, fearing they could not fully express themselves [4,6], many had reached the B1 level and were increasingly confident in everyday conversations [3,4,6,8,9]. Given the highly educated nature of the sample, several interviewees also relied on English for more complex discussions or professional settings [3,5,6,8,9].

Despite the financial strain of displacement, and the ongoing challenges of deskilling and language barriers, many had regained financial independence and were no longer reliant on state support [3-5,8,9]. This newfound stability afforded them greater freedom, such as the ability to move into a new apartment [3,5]. However, some struggled with finding a balance in their daily lives, feeling that while they sometimes didn't have enough time [4,5,6], at other times, they had too much, not finding anything engaging to do and missing the daily routines and interactions they once had [4]. While some felt their current place of residence limited their social interactions and hoped to relocate to a city in the future [4], others had successfully formed friendships, integrated into social circles [5,6], or built meaningful relationships with colleagues and hosts through their work [8].

For some, stable employment was regarded as a key step toward securing legal status and building a long-term future in the host country, accompanied by the hope that their husbands might eventually be permitted to reunite with them under such conditions [2,3]. Others had formed new relationships in Switzerland: For interviewee 6, the first year went relatively well—she was constantly busy, which helped her cope. However, as time passed and she struggled to secure a job, the weight of unemployment and the loss of her previous status became increasingly difficult to bear. Still, her daughter was integrating well and succeeding in school, making her consider staying in Switzerland for her sake. Only much later did things start to improve again. Meeting a Swiss man changed a lot—his social circle helped her integrate better, and he covered the costs of additional language courses beyond those provided by the government. Despite this progress, she continued to feel inadequate, both due to her lack of employment and her inability to express herself at the level she could in her native language.

5.2.3.2 Home visits during conflict

For several interviewees, visiting Ukraine was a vital way to stay connected to their homeland, culture, and, most importantly, their families. For many, these visits are one of the few opportunities to reunite with loved ones and ease the painful separation caused by displacement [2,3,5]. As interviewee 5 explained, despite the risks and logistical challenges, she made the journey back to Ukraine with her children to see her husband. *"Yes. Even with... We have been in Ukraine with my kids, once, one year ago, because they wanted to see their father and I wanted to see my husband. We met each other one year ago. Of course, we need this time together, especially the kids"* [5]. These reunions, even brief, offer emotional relief and a sense of continuity in the face of prolonged uncertainty.

However, the war's unpredictability makes these visits risky. A region that may seem safe one week could become a target the next. Interviewee 5 had planned another visit in April, taking time off work for the trip, only to narrowly avoid disaster: *"And now we were planning to go again in April. I even took one week of vacation. And we were just lucky that we didn't go, because exactly at that time, on the 17th of April, they bombed my city. Exactly at that time!"* [5]. The constant volatility forces many to reconsider the feasibility of returning, even temporarily. This uncertainty has led some to abandon plans for future visits, as seen in her husband's plea: *"Never come here, please! Not even into the west of Ukraine. You know, it seems like it's the safer place... Please, never come here"* [5]. The ongoing dangers, coupled with the uncertainty, leave many feeling trapped between two worlds—unable to fully settle in their host country while becoming increasingly disconnected from their home.

For some, this separation is no longer seen as a temporary situation [4,5]. While maintaining ties to Ukraine remains important for many, the instability of the war has turned each visit into a calculated risk, making it impossible for some to travel. The long-term nature of displacement has forced difficult decisions about the future. Interviewee 5 shared that her husband, sensing the strain of waiting on both of them, encouraged her to focus on building a new life in Switzerland. Similarly, Interviewee 4's partner decided that it would be best for her and their two younger sons to remain in Austria, choosing to cut off contact to ease the burden of separation. While these decisions were intended to provide clarity, both interviewees now find themselves in uncertainty, still questioning how to move on as distance and disconnection continue to shape their realities [4,5].

In our sample, about half of the adults have managed to return to Ukraine at least once [3-6], but in most cases, their children were left behind for safety reasons [3,6]. Many travelled to western Ukraine, viewed as a safer area, while their children stayed in the host country to

avoid potential risks. For those who have yet to visit, such as interviewees 2, 3, and 7, the desire to return remains strong. This pattern reflects the ongoing uncertainty surrounding such visits, with many adults torn between the desire to reconnect with their homeland and the need to prioritize their children's safety.

5.2.3.3 Aspirations

After two to two and a half years of displacement, the mobility-related aspirations of many displaced Ukrainians had significantly evolved. With safety largely secured and a degree of stability attained, the involuntary nature of initial flight gradually gave way to more reflective and deliberate considerations of future mobility. While the early phase of displacement was characterised by reactive decisions driven by necessity, participants were now increasingly guided by personal aspirations, evolving capabilities, and shifting structural conditions in their decision-making about whether to stay, return, or move elsewhere.

At this stage, three primary trajectories were being considered: (1) aspirations to remain in the current host country, (2) aspirations to return to Ukraine, and (3) aspirations for secondary movement—either within the host country or to another destination in the European Economic Area. The first two pathways were the most frequently contemplated and often appeared inversely related—strong stay aspirations typically coincided with weak return aspirations [1-4,8,9], and vice versa [2,7]. The third pathway, though considered less often, included intra-national relocations—such as moves from rural to urban areas [2-4]—as well as potential cross-border mobility to culturally or linguistically more familiar countries [5,6], primarily driven by perceived opportunities for smoother integration.

Although a return to Ukraine remained a latent desire in some narratives, it was generally viewed as infeasible at the time of the interviews due to ongoing warfare and associated risks. Still, participants acknowledged the possibility of return in two scenarios: if legal circumstances demanded it [3,6,8,9], or if post-war recovery created favourable conditions [3,5,7]. By 2024, strong return aspirations were rare—only two individuals expressed a clear desire to return despite the risks [2,7], both of whom closely tied their eventual decision to the well-being and wishes of their children. Most respondents expressed low [1,2,4,8,9] or medium [3,5,6] levels of return aspiration. Return considerations were shaped by multiple factors, including family members who remained in Ukraine [2-5,7,9], attachment to place of origin [2,4,5], limited success with integration—especially in accessing employment [6]—and perceptions of cultural dissonance in the host society [5,6]. Across all aspiration levels, decisions were most often shaped by family dynamics rather than individual preferences [3,5-

7]. Overall, return aspirations had declined by 2023, in part due to fading hopes of a swift Ukrainian victory [8,9] and growing uncertainty about the country's future [3,5,6,8,9].

In contrast, aspirations to stay were more widespread and had grown stronger over time. At the outset of displacement, only two participants reported intentions to remain in their host country [1,2], and for both they had transformed into strong stay aspirations. Overall, these aspirations were assessed as medium [5-7] to high [1-3,8,9], with low aspirations only present in isolated cases—such as the mother of Interviewee 2, who remained in Austria primarily for her children's sake while personally wishing to be closer to her husband in Ukraine [2].

Aspirations for secondary movements tended to be situational and responsive. These included moves within the host country—typically motivated by access to work or education in urban centres [2-4]—and, in one instance, a relocation to another region to be near a loved one [2]. Onward movement within the European Economic Area also emerged, though usually as a fallback strategy rather than a proactive goal, often rooted in frustrations with integration—particularly due to language barriers or feelings of cultural exclusion [5,6].

Across all mobility trajectories—whether geared toward staying, returning, or relocating—the well-being and future prospects of children consistently emerged as central concerns shaping family decisions [2,4-9]. Educational progress, emotional security, and social stability for children often formed the most persuasive rationale behind both short- and long-term aspirations [4-6]. Importantly, youth and young adults were not merely passive beneficiaries of family decisions but frequently played an active role in shaping their own futures [2-4]. Many invested considerable effort into acquiring the host country's language [2-6], viewing it as a vital step towards integration and long-term opportunity [2-4].

However, generational and positional differences in aspirations became apparent. While adolescents and young adults—such as Interviewees 2 and 3—were generally able to pursue their own aspirations more independently, other groups, including young children [2-6,8,9], older adults [1,6,7], persons with disabilities [7], and caregivers [2-9], were more constrained by family dependencies or structural limitations. Parents frequently viewed integration as an investment in their children's future [4-7], even when their own progress was limited [2,4-6]. Interviewee 7, for instance, described how her adult son's employment trajectory shaped her own decisions, despite her strong return aspirations. Similarly, Interview 2 reflected a generational divide: while she envisioned a future in Western Europe, her mother remained emotionally tied to Ukraine. Despite struggling with integration in Austria, Interviewee 2 remained hopeful that her family would follow her lead: *“I wish that my mom could find a job*

in Austria—it doesn't necessarily have to be in Vienna. My sister is doing very well in school, has no problems, and has many friends in Vienna" [2]. Yet she also acknowledged the challenges, particularly for elderly grandparents and a father who remained employed in Ukraine. Her account illustrates the complexity of family dynamics and how diverse aspirations coexist within single family units.

Middle-aged participants—the largest group—formulated their aspirations through a dynamic interplay of personal, familial, and structural factors. Central concerns included the future of their children [2-6,8,9], the deteriorating outlook for Ukraine [3,5,6,8,9], and the need for long-term stability [5,6,8,9]. Some cited the trauma of displacement as having heightened their need for security [6], prompting investments in financial resilience and integration [4-6]. Aspirations for stability were reinforced by progress in language acquisition [3,4,6,8,9] and successful access to the labour market [3-5,8,9].

Still, mobility considerations remained fluid. For example, Interviewee 5 initially considered relocating to countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, or Germany, citing difficulties with Swiss German: *"We even once regretted that we didn't go to Germany first [...] the whole process would have been faster for us"* [5]. Despite these doubts, she now estimated an 80% likelihood of remaining in Switzerland, highlighting how integration progress and her daughter's educational achievements transformed long-term aspirations.

Aspirations for security and stability were powerful drivers behind the desire to stay [4-6,8,9]. Participants commonly linked these to perceived long-term opportunities [1-9], with language acquisition [3,4,6,8,9] and labour market participation [3-5,8,9] acting as key enablers. As Interviewee 5 noted, her daughter's motivation to succeed in school significantly shaped the family's orientation towards remaining: *"She has, like, a future. She has something, and she really wants to get this education. And I also want her to get a Swiss education"* [5].

While return aspirations persisted in several cases [2,3,5-7], long-term separation from partners in Ukraine deeply affected mobility choices. For some, this distance reinforced desires to return [2,7]; for others—where reunification seemed unlikely—it prompted coping strategies such as reducing contact or even encouraging partners to move on [4,5]. Emotional ties and cultural attachment were often outweighed by a growing disillusionment with Ukraine's future and the insecurity of war [3,5,6]. As Interviewee 5 plainly stated: *"I'm not seeing a future there. Especially with my kids. They already lost [part of their] education in Ukraine"* [5].

All participants had experienced either deskilling or periods of unemployment. However, the effects on their aspirations to stay were uneven. While experiences of deskilling did not necessarily undermine stay aspirations—often mitigated by a belief in future opportunities for requalification [4,5,8,9]—those who remained unemployed [1,2,6,7] or felt inadequately supported in their integration, especially in language learning and institutional navigation [6-9], were more likely to express low or wavering stay aspirations [2,6,7].

5.2.3.4 Capabilities

Similarly to how stay aspirations had grown stronger over time, the capabilities to remain in host countries had expanded considerably as displaced persons adapted to local conditions, acquired language skills, and gained access to employment and education. In contrast, return capabilities—the ability to go back to and live safe, stable lives in Ukraine—had often improved only marginally, if at all. Although the frontlines had largely stabilised, the persistent threat of missile strikes and the destruction of critical infrastructure continued to deter return, even to regions far from direct combat [3,4,5].

For many participants, concerns about safety and stability in Ukraine extended well beyond the war itself. Interviewee 6 articulated this broader sense of insecurity as a key reason she felt unable to return. Reflecting on her life prior to displacement, she shared: *“And what influenced me personally is this safety feeling, and I'm not talking only about war. But here, I realised how tense, in survival mode, and unsafe I [had] felt from other factors—like anything could happen to me, basically. I could be robbed or attacked. I didn't feel safe. I knew I had to be alert as a woman. I have a daughter; I wouldn't want her to [be] raised with this feeling. This is my main thing, actually—this safety. And also, [an]other survival mode. In my country, if you don't have a job, competition is very high. Everyone is skilled, everyone is educated, everyone needs to fight for their lives, so you cannot relax. And if you don't have [anything], if you don't earn it yourself, you are fucked [sic]. You have no support, you have no pension, you have no place to stay”* [6].

Her account highlights how the absence of social protection and structural security in Ukraine undermined her perceived ability to return—not only in terms of physical safety, but also in relation to long-term economic and emotional stability. While she continued to face integration barriers in Switzerland, including limited employment options and social isolation due to language, her relationship with a Swiss partner and the stable environment for her daughter increasingly shaped her aspirations to remain.

Overall, return capabilities were difficult to gauge from the accounts alone and often marked by uncertainty. Relatives who remained in Ukraine frequently advised against returning or visiting due to ongoing risks [3,4,5]. Nonetheless, occasional visits to Western Ukraine were reported [3–6], suggesting that return—as internally displaced persons—was feasible for some, though not without heightened risk. Still, for all participants, the perceived ability to return to their original regions and live there safely and securely remained low [1–9].

By contrast, the capability to remain—whether temporarily or with a view to long-term integration—had improved for many. Key enablers included progress in language learning to intermediate or conversational levels [2–6,8,9], movement toward re-entry into skilled employment [3,4,8,9], and growing economic independence marked by reduced reliance on social welfare systems [4,5,8,9]. These developments alleviated some of the constraints specifically associated with temporary protection and dependence on social support, such as limited rights or restrictions for those without employment [5]. Nevertheless, other structural limitations persisted, most notably the lack of long-term legal security, which continued to impede full planning certainty [3,6,8,9].

The capability to live a stable and safe life in displacement was assessed as medium for older adults [1,7], medium [2,4–6] to high [7–9] for middle-aged adults, and high for young adults [2,3]. Nonetheless, older adults [1,6–9] and parts of the middle-aged group [2,3,6] remained partially or fully dependent on family or state support to sustain their current stability, with their ability to live independently in displacement likely to decrease significantly without such support [1–3,6,7].

Among middle-aged adults, who represented the largest group of interviewees, employment played a central role in shaping their capabilities. While several individuals had taken steps toward regaining access to former professions [3,4,8] or were actively forging new career paths [9], all were affected either by deskilling [4,5,8,9] or by unemployment at the time of the interview [1–3,6,7]. The lack of financial reserves and mobile capital in host countries—combined with the inaccessibility or loss of assets in Ukraine—further constrained economic opportunities and heightened insecurity [1–9]. Some respondents also reported being overburdened [5], unable to rest due to precarious employment [5], financial pressures [1,4,5], and the absence of their partners, who were unable to leave Ukraine [2,4,5,7].

Although displacement initially fragmented social networks [1–9], several participants had begun to rebuild familial [1,2,5,7] and extended support systems [5,6,8,9] abroad, often through displacement pathways that involved following relatives [1,2,5,7]. For one individual,

a new intimate relationship facilitated language acquisition and improved access to local social circles [6].

Mobility constraints significantly limited capabilities, especially in rural areas. Restricted access to public transport [3,4], lack of private vehicles [3–7], and the absence of recreational or communal spaces [2–4] contributed to increased aspirations to relocate to urban areas within the host country. Limited availability of higher education or advanced vocational training in rural regions [2–4] further reinforced these aspirations [2–4]. Additionally, a lack of social proximity—through shared language, culture, or regional background [2,6,7]—as well as experiences of unemployment and isolation [1,2,5,6,7], emerged as major factors diminishing perceived capabilities and fuelling aspirations for cross-border secondary movements [5,6].

Youth and young adults exhibited comparatively higher levels of capability development. Many had taken significant steps toward educational integration by acquiring locally recognised qualifications, such as the Austrian Matura [3,4], or enrolling in vocational training programmes [5]. In this sample, most children and youth demonstrated comparatively stronger language skills in German and/or English [2–5] and appeared more embedded in peer networks within the host society [2–6] than their adult family members. For youth, participation in higher education or vocational training [2,3,5] enhanced planning stability and reduced future uncertainty, as legal provisions ensured they could complete these programmes even if temporary protection were to expire.

Older adults showed the least capability expansion. Their continued reliance on family [6–9] and state welfare systems [1,6,7] was pronounced, with language proficiency typically not exceeding basic communicative levels [1,7]. Their social networks were largely limited to family ties [1,7] or Russian-/Ukrainian-speaking local communities [1], suggesting a constrained social infrastructure that limited broader integration. Employment prospects were particularly limited, likely due to low German proficiency and broader labour market dynamics—including age-related barriers commonly faced by older individuals seeking employment [1,7].

6. Discussion

The displacement experiences of the participants unfolded along distinct but interconnected stages, each shaped by evolving structural conditions, capabilities, and aspirations. This chapter discusses these stages as part of a broader displacement trajectory, while recognising the need to analytically distinguish between them. To avoid confusion with the phases

identified within the initial displacement stage (see the five-step model developed in the first subchapter), the broader trajectory is described in terms of stages. The initial stage of displacement, marked by flight, evacuation, and early arrival into host countries, was characterised by rapid decision-making under conditions of acute insecurity and uncertainty. The subsequent stage of integration and adaptation, while emerging from these initial experiences, introduced new dynamics as participants adjusted to the legal, social, and economic conditions of temporary protection regimes and sought to re-establish a degree of stability and autonomy in their new environments. Although strongly interlinked—decisions and experiences during initial displacement influenced subsequent pathways of integration and adaptation—the two stages presented sufficiently distinct challenges and opportunities to warrant detailed and separate analysis. Both stages critically shaped the capabilities and aspirations that serve as the foundation for future migration decisions, influencing whether individuals aim to remain, return, or move onward. By first tracing the evolution of aspirations and capabilities during initial displacement and then examining how these evolved during integration and adaptation, this chapter provides a trajectory-focused understanding of how displaced Ukrainians navigated the complex interplay between structure and agency across time and space, while also laying the groundwork for a reflection on future mobility prospects.

6.1 Evacuation and Relocation: Early Stages of Displacement and the Formation of Migration Decisions

A central finding of this research is the identification of distinct phases and places during initial displacement trajectories of Ukrainian participants, reflecting how their migration decisions evolved over time. These phases reveal not only the external pressures they faced, such as the threat of war and insecurity, but also how, over time, individuals began to exercise greater agency in their decision-making, despite these continuing constraints. This dynamic process underscores the complexity of displacement, where the interplay between structural forces and personal agency shapes both short-term survival decisions and, eventually, more deliberate considerations for longer-term options.

This section focuses on the initial stages of the broader displacement trajectory, covering the period from the outbreak of conflict to participants' arrival in host countries. It begins by introducing the displacement model that emerged from the research, before examining the key places and phases that shaped participants' journeys. These findings offer insight into how individuals navigated forced movement under pressing structural constraints, balancing urgent survival needs with shifting opportunities for greater stability.

6.1.1 Mapping the initial displacement trajectory

The analysis of participants' accounts suggests that the early displacement of Ukrainians commonly unfolded in two interlinked phases—an *evacuation phase* and a *relocation phase*—connected by temporary *safe havens* that served as shelters or places where more deliberate decisions could be made (see Figure 7). These phases help illustrate how personal agency and deliberate decision-making can persist even under the severe constraints of conflict and displacement. By tracing the evolving roles of individuals' aspirations and capabilities within these trajectories, the model challenges reductive narratives that portray displaced people as primarily motivated by the pursuit of a “better life.” Instead, it shows that while aspirations did not shape these movements, they still exerted an influence within the narrow space available for decision-making—movements that were fundamentally driven by external pressures rather than personal life plans. This resonates with Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden (2021), who argue for a trajectory-based understanding of displacement, where decisions unfold across stages rather than being determined at departure. Similar findings have been observed in studies of Ukrainian displacement (Brzozowska 2023; Khelashvili 2024), which emphasise evolving aspirations and constraints along the journey.

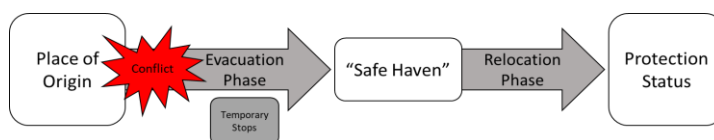


Figure 7: Displacement Trajectory during initial displacement from Ukraine in spring 2022.

This figure outlines the early displacement trajectory following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in spring 2022. Starting at the place of origin, the sudden onset of conflict prompted an emergency escape, often including brief overnight stops during transit across Ukraine.

Short-term safe havens in Western Ukraine or neighbouring countries provided temporary safety and allowed for a more deliberate relocation phase toward European host countries. The trajectory concludes with arrival under temporary protection.

The findings of this study show that participants' early displacement followed a pattern in which they first fled areas directly affected by conflict, seeking immediate safety, before making more deliberate migration decisions. This initial period of movement—termed *evacuation phase*—was primarily dominated by external, structural constraints, as participants fled their homes under immediate threat (see Chapter 5.1.1 *Early decisions in conflict*), often making improvised decisions driven by survival, insecurity, and limited options. It spanned from the place of origin—typically their home or place of residence—through a series of short, temporary stops, and continued until they reached a *safe haven*.

Safe havens, located either in more secure regions or neighbouring countries, served as temporary shelters and moments of respite—places where the immediate threat of physical harm was reduced. Rather than offering viable long-term solutions, they provided the space

for participants to assess their circumstances, begin rebuilding capabilities for onward movement, and consider emerging opportunities.

From these *safe havens*, participants entered what can be described as the *relocation phase*, during which decisions became more deliberate and reflective (see *Chapter 5.1.3 Navigating displacement: Deciding where to go*). Although their movements remained constrained by structural conditions, individuals had greater capacity to evaluate their situations, weigh available options, and make more intentional choices about where to go next—often with the aim of reaching host countries that offered protection.

Across both phases, however, decisions were largely driven by the imperative of survival and concerns for personal safety. Especially in the early stages, the space for agency was limited. More forward-looking planning and a clearer exercise of agency only became possible gradually, typically after individuals had reached relatively stable environments—sometimes not until well into the first year of displacement.

The following sections examine each component of this two-phase model in greater detail, drawing on participants' narratives to illustrate how decisions unfolded across different stages and places. These findings are then contextualised within broader migration theory, specifically the Aspirations-Capabilities framework by Hein de Haas (2021), highlighting how structural constraints, individual agency, and evolving aspirations interacted throughout the displacement process.

6.1.1.1 Pre-conflict baseline at the place of origin

The place of origin marks the starting point of displacement trajectories and offers critical insight into the abrupt rupture caused by the war. Interviews revealed that, despite underlying political tensions in parts of eastern Ukraine, many participants experienced relative stability prior to the full-scale invasion. Daily life was shaped by routines and social engagement in what several participants described as a highly competitive society with limited social safety nets but a functioning degree of normalcy. Many recounted living in well-maintained homes, tending to their gardens, or regularly attending cultural events such as theatre performances—emphasising a sense of rootedness and personal investment in their communities.

In terms of pre-conflict capabilities, participants were often engaged in good employment, particularly in mid- to high-level positions, and adults had all completed secondary to higher education. While some participants possessed language capabilities in terms of German or English language skills, English skills were mostly present in those in higher level employment while

German language skills were present amongst children and youth. Social ties, particularly through professional networks and through expat family connections, existed, but were not particularly well maintained before the start of the conflict.

Aspirations were thus generally oriented towards continuity and local stability, with participants expressing a strong preference for remaining within their communities. Approximately half of the participants exhibited high levels of place attachment, reflecting deep emotional and social investments in their local environments. Correspondingly, migration aspirations remained low, with only one young participant articulating a concrete desire to relocate to Western Europe prior to the outbreak of conflict. For the majority, the prospect of migration was distant or abstract, as daily life was focused on sustaining professional development and social embeddedness within Ukraine. When later confronted with the necessity to migrate, many participants reported distinct concerns regarding cultural dissimilarities and the high cost of living in potential host countries—factors that may previously have functioned as personal barriers and latent thresholds to migration, implicitly reinforcing low leave aspirations in the pre-conflict period.

Pre-war aspirations were thus largely directed towards maintaining local capabilities providing socio-economic stability and achieving upward mobility within familiar and locally embedded contexts, often expressed through a strong focus on education. In this sense, a misalignment between aspirations and capabilities emerged in relation to migration: while many participants possessed certain leave capabilities—such as foreign language proficiency or weakly maintained transnational ties—these resources remained largely inactivated, as aspirations continued to be rooted in continuity rather than cross-border mobility. This mismatch between latent capabilities and low leave aspirations aligns with de Haas’s (2021) emphasis on the importance of capabilities being necessary but not sufficient conditions for mobility. This also echoes Brzozowska’s (2023) findings, where many Ukrainians in Poland had pre-existing skills or transnational ties but had not previously intended to migrate, highlighting the role of conflict in activating dormant capabilities.

6.1.1.2 The start of the conflict

This stability was shattered with the Russian invasion in late February 2022, which violently disrupted these familiar settings. Participants lived across various regions, including areas that would become early targets of military action. The escalation of conflict transformed these once meaningful places into spaces of insecurity, forcing participants to confront an urgent need to flee. For some, the loss was not only material but deeply emotional, as illustrated by a participant who had lived in her “dream house” before it was destroyed. The

invasion's chaotic nature—with no clear frontlines or safety zones—fostered widespread confusion and fear. Most participants left between late February and early April 2022, often without concrete plans, prompted by direct experiences of bombings, infrastructure collapse, and a growing inability to meet basic needs.

The initial reactions to the outbreak of war reflect a trend of the abrupt erosion of stay-related capabilities and the limited space for aspirations to materialise. While the invasion clearly signalled a high-risk environment, individuals responded with varying speeds and intensities, shaped by their access to resources, information, and proximity to combat zones. Generally, those closer to Russian advances to the north of Kyiv or the eastern frontlines tended to evacuate more quickly, while individuals from areas farther—though not far—from the frontline often sought temporary shelter in cellars, bathrooms, or the homes of relatives.

For participants who initially remained at their place of origin—whether due to extreme uncertainty limiting their ability to make rapid decisions or because, as Tarkhanova and Pyrogoval's (2024) adaptation of the threshold model of migration suggests, key emotional, relational, or situational thresholds had not yet been crossed—the urgency to leave became increasingly clear as key capabilities—such as the ability to access food, secure transport, maintain communication, or ensure physical safety—rapidly diminished. Their evacuation was often triggered by pivotal events, such as attacks on a nearby nuclear power plant, experiences of nearby destruction, or the imminent presence of Russian forces and fighting. As examined in more detail in a later chapter (see *Chapter 6.1.2 The conflict environment and its influence on the evolution of migration-decisions during early displacement*), the onset of conflict profoundly reshaped the conditions under which migration decisions were made.

These decisions were rarely made in isolation but were deeply embedded in social dynamics—shaped by discussions within families or by the influence of friends and acquaintances who had already fled. Although migration decisions were often collective, some individuals assumed more central roles within these processes. Middle-aged adults—especially women—frequently coordinated logistics and guided decision-making, while older adults, though usually present, seldom acted as principal decision-makers. Children played a dual role: they were a primary concern prompting protective action, yet they also exercised limited agency by influencing family decisions, particularly when their own capabilities—such as language skills or educational needs—became increasingly relevant after evacuation.

Thus, the decision to flee emerged under intense structural pressures, shaped by eroding stay capabilities and suppressed aspirations, and triggered by war-related events—such as

bombings, infrastructure destruction, and their cascading effects on safety, mobility, and access to basic needs.

6.1.1.3 Evacuation phase

The evacuation phase, as revealed by the empirical findings of this study, was characterised by an urgent, reactive pattern of movement in which individuals fled areas directly affected by the outbreak of full-scale war. The onset of the Russian invasion introduced immediate, life-threatening danger, forcing participants to abandon their homes and familiar environments in search of basic safety. This early stage of displacement was shaped by acute structural constraints and a severe deprivation of stay capabilities. Most participants faced collapsing infrastructure, active bombardments, and diminishing access to basic services, leaving them with no viable option to remain. As a result, their movements were guided less by aspirations than by a pressing need to escape—under conditions of extreme uncertainty, fear, and constrained agency.

The evacuation phase typically spanned from the place of origin—most often the participant's home or residential area—through a series of short-term stops, continuing until a relatively safer location, conceptualised as a safe haven, had been reached. Initial moves were frequently short-distance and short-term in nature, taking place within Ukraine. Participants often relocated to stay with relatives or sought refuge in cities they perceived as safer, such as those in western Ukraine. However, the shifting nature of the conflict often rendered these assumed safe zones temporary, as new attacks forced participants to flee again. In one notable case, a participant's carefully planned relocation failed midway when the intended destination came under attack, resulting in an improvised detour toward the Carpathian Mountains, a region perceived to offer natural protection.

During the early displacement phase, most participants travelled in small groups, typically with family or close friends, ranging from two to seven individuals. These groups were formed based on immediate safety concerns, logistical constraints, and social ties. While most participants fled with immediate family members, extended relatives or friends sometimes joined depending on proximity and urgency. In some cases, such as with one family, a phased evacuation strategy was used, where children were sent ahead to safer areas before the parents followed. Although the overall displacement process could last from several days to over a month, the evacuation phase itself was typically brief, lasting only a few days to just under a week. Decisions about who to travel with were often made spontaneously and evolved as circumstances changed, influenced by factors such as mobility restrictions, martial law, or transportation availability.

Throughout this phase, participants rarely had a predefined destination. Most decisions were made without a clear endpoint in mind, shaped instead by the unfolding danger and whatever safe options were immediately accessible. The unpredictability of the situation made it extremely difficult to plan, and many ultimately headed towards the nearest border or sought refuge with family or friends living in western Ukraine, viewing these as relatively secure options.

While capabilities, especially mobility capabilities, such as access to cars or public transport, but also social networks and public solidarity facilitating overnight stays were central to the success of evacuation efforts, aspirations remained either absent or latent during this stage, suppressed by the dominance of short-term survival imperatives. While capabilities—especially mobility-related ones such as access to private vehicles, public transport, social networks, and widespread public solidarity enabling overnight stays—were central to the success of evacuation efforts, aspirations remained either absent or latent during this stage, overshadowed by the dominance of short-term survival imperatives.

6.1.1.4 Safe Havens

Safe havens refer to temporary locations—either within Ukraine or in neighbouring countries—where displaced individuals could pause after initial flight. These spaces were not destinations in themselves but served as brief intermissions along the displacement trajectory, offering a degree of safety and stability that was largely absent during earlier phases of evacuation. Their function was not to provide lasting solutions, but to offer a critical window for rest, reassessment, and the regeneration of agency.

Rather than being purposefully selected, these places emerged from immediate necessity and practical opportunity. Temporary safety and availability were the defining criteria. Accommodation was often made possible by existing social ties—such as staying with family in Lviv or at their parents' holiday home—or through ad hoc arrangements, such as a previously visited Airbnb that was offered to them for free. Frequently mentioned sites included western Ukraine—particularly the city of Lviv, located near the border—but also the Carpathian region and parts of the south, as well as neighbouring countries such as Romania, Slovakia, and, in one case, even Croatia.

The border between the evacuation and relocation phases was not always clearly demarcated, particularly for those who spent only brief periods in safe havens—sometimes just an overnight stop at border checkpoints or intermediary towns. For these individuals, decision-making and movement evolved simultaneously rather than sequentially, with the relocation

process beginning even before more stable shelter was reached. Others, by contrast, remained in safe havens for longer periods, in some cases up to five or six weeks. Regardless of duration, these pauses played a pivotal role in the displacement experience, marking a transition from the urgency of escape to a phase in which decisions could be made more reflectively and away from immediate physical threat.

Within these relatively secure environments, aspirations could begin to re-emerge. Participants used the time to re-evaluate their circumstances and consider options for onward movement. Crucially, they also began to (re)build the capabilities necessary for relocation—reconnecting with social networks, gathering information about legal pathways, securing temporary housing, and, in some cases, exploring employment opportunities abroad.

Support from others—whether in the form of advice, accommodation, or assistance with navigating integration procedures—proved especially valuable during this stage. These interactions not only enhanced individuals’ capacities to act, but also helped shape more informed and intentional mobility decisions. While broader structural constraints still influenced the available pathways, participants were now in a better position to pursue trajectories aligned with both their aspirations and evolving conditions.

6.1.1.5 Relocation phase

With arrival at safe havens and the transition from the evacuation of conflict areas to relocation within protection regimes abroad, previously suppressed aspirations gradually re-emerged, signalling the beginning of a more deliberate phase in migration decision-making. Although movements remained constrained by structural conditions, individuals now had greater capacity to evaluate their situations, consider available options, and make more intentional choices about where to go next. This shift marked a subtle but significant transition from reactive responses to more purposive forms of mobility. Importantly, migration decision-making during this phase unfolded as a fundamentally social process, shaped not only by social networks but also by the evolving dynamics within displacement groups themselves. For participants, this transformation was reflected in changes in group composition, as diverging aspirations and capabilities led subgroups towards different destinations, while others were compelled to remain within Ukraine due to persistent structural barriers. Social networks—comprising expat communities, extended family, and professional contacts—provided vital informational and logistical support, while intra-group dynamics governed how such opportunities were accessed and acted upon.

These intra-group dynamics revealed the deeply relational nature of migration decision-making. Within these small units—often families or close friends—decision-making roles, responsibilities, and dependencies became increasingly visible. Middle-aged adults, in particular, continued to play central roles in coordinating movements and assessing available options. However, as groups approached international borders or reached initial safe havens, their compositions often changed significantly. Due to martial law in Ukraine, most middle-aged husbands and fathers were prohibited from leaving the country, leading to their separation from families either at the border or within Western Ukraine. Only rare exceptions—such as families with three or more children—allowed some to remain together. This legal constraint not only shaped group compositions at a critical juncture but also had lasting effects on displacement trajectories and integration experiences, placing the burden of continued mobility and adaptation disproportionately on women, while exposing men to heightened risks within Ukraine.

Family dynamics—marked by asymmetrical responsibilities—played a decisive role among those continuing their journeys. While the burden of decision-making often fell on those responsible for the group’s wellbeing, typically women assuming caregiving or leadership roles, this was not a set pattern. Other members—such as older adults, children, or those with limited mobility—often exercised significantly less agency, relying heavily on those in charge. Decisions to move onwards thus emerged not as equal deliberations but as relational processes shaped by varying capacities, obligations, and dependencies within the group. Moreover, ties to children or extended family in other countries further influenced both the direction and feasibility of mobility, reinforcing the relevance of pre-existing transnational networks. However, these dynamics were not fixed and could shift depending on relationships, external factors, and available opportunities.

The case of Interviewees 6 and 7 exemplifies the more typical configuration of interdependence in family decision-making. Interviewee 6 assumed a central leadership role in the family, driven by concern for her daughter’s safety and the practicalities of managing a larger family group. Her sister, Interviewee 7, and their parents all followed this lead, demonstrating how migration decisions were often shaped by caregiving duties and a reliance on those with more capacity to manage displacement. In this case, agency was structured within a caregiving hierarchy, with decisions being heavily influenced by the needs of dependents and the capacities of the primary decision-makers, highlighting how familial roles often determined the trajectory of migration.

In contrast, the case of Interviewee 2 and her mother highlights a different dynamic, where even those typically seen as dependents, like children, could assert significant agency. Although her mother initially preferred staying as an IDP closer to their home in Dnipro or moving to Slovakia, Interviewee 2 played a central role in shaping their migration path. Her agency was influenced by the opportunity to move to Vienna, where family members had organised an apartment for them, and her desire to be closer to her boyfriend in Switzerland and to live in the West, which seemed to offer greater safety and opportunities. Despite her mother's reluctance to move abroad due to unfamiliarity with life outside Ukraine, the daughter's strong preference and the family's transnational connections ultimately shaped the decision.

Beyond family dynamics, a second way in which the social nature of migration decision-making became manifest was through the active formation and expansion of capabilities, largely enabled by transnational networks. These networks, including professional connections and expat family ties, played a crucial role in expanding available resources and opportunities, helping to overcome pre-conflict limitations. Participants actively activated these networks, often reaching out to old contacts and maintaining constant communication with other displaced Ukrainians. This enabled them to access housing, employment opportunities, and crucial emotional or informational support, which reduced uncertainty and guided decision-making.

Opportunities arose as participants communicated within their social networks, sharing information and sometimes providing unused opportunities to each other, which were either better suited to particular circumstances or not taken up by others who had already found suitable arrangements. While these networks sometimes facilitated onward mobility, such as transportation or plane tickets after reaching neighbouring countries, their real strength lay in enabling the identification of solutions that better matched each group's specific needs or providing opportunities to those without personal connections. This dynamic process of capability creation was driven by an increased focus on safety and stability, a concern that permeated all accounts but was especially pronounced among middle-aged adults responsible for both themselves and their dependants, as displaced Ukrainians sought to mitigate the risks associated with continued displacement. This pattern reflects broader trends observed in other displaced populations, particularly in the reliance on meta-narratives and peer discourses, as discussed by Glorius and Nienaber (2022). The capabilities developed through these networks—whether securing housing, employment, or necessary logistical support—

were not just about expanding mobility, but about establishing safer, more stable conditions in the host countries, which were central to their decision-making processes.

As such, the urgency to secure safety and stability for themselves and their families emerged as a central theme across participants' accounts. Exposure to violence, trauma, and instability fostered aspirations focused on minimising risks and ensuring immediate security, rather than pursuing long-term goals. Proximity to immediate family or loved ones abroad also became a significant aspiration, as it offered emotional support and a sense of stability in an uncertain situation. This shift in priorities was most evident during the host-country evaluation phase, where safety, social systems, economic stability, but also the presence of close family members played a dominant role in shaping migration decisions.

Individual capabilities, such as proficiency in the German language and access to local support networks, along with pre-existing perceptions of stability, played a significant role in shaping migration decisions. Germany, Austria, and Switzerland were often discussed as the most desirable destinations due to their reputation for safety, robust social systems, and economic stability. These factors made these countries particularly appealing to interviewees seeking secure and stable environments for themselves and their families. This pattern of prioritising nearby, safer destinations over more distant or uncertain options resonates with Allen and Eaton's (2005) emphasis on the role of distance and risk-aversion in migration decisions. While originally developed in the context of voluntary mobility, this framework helps explain why displaced persons often preferred countries perceived as both accessible and less risky. Indeed, a similar pattern was already visible during the evacuation phase, where participants' first instinct was often to flee to nearby regions within Ukraine that were perceived as safer, even if they lacked long-term prospects.

Interviewee 6's decision to move to Switzerland illustrates the central role of risk reduction in migration decisions. Despite initial reservations about Switzerland's high living costs and unfamiliarity, her responsibility for her parents, sister, and daughter, combined with reassurances and the offer of an apartment, ultimately led her to relocate there. Although she was anxious about the financial challenges and cultural differences, she recognised the benefits of guaranteed access to housing, health insurance, and financial stability. Her decision reflects the pragmatic approach many interviewees took, prioritising safety and stability over personal aspirations in order to support dependent family members during displacement.

In conclusion, the relocation phase marked a turning point in the trajectories of displaced Ukrainians, where mobility shifted from reactive responses to more considered strategies aimed at securing safety and stability. The re-emergence of aspirations, shaped by familial configurations and facilitated by transnational networks, was closely intertwined with the development of new capabilities. The differentiated content and orientation of these aspirations—ranging from the younger participants' aspirations to live in Europe, to older adults' prioritisation of staying near family, and the middle generation's focus on security and stability for dependants—reflect what Boccagni (2017) describes as the biographical embeddedness of aspirations. Rather than being stable or predetermined, aspirations evolve over time, shaped by life stage, personal responsibility, and contextual disruptions such as displacement. As mobility aspirations adapted to changing structural conditions, participants prioritised locations that allowed them to support their families, establish secure livelihoods, and, where possible, remain connected to close family members. These decisions ultimately resulted in their arrival within formalised protection regimes in host countries, marking the transition into a new stage of displacement. This echoes findings by Armağan and Ibrahim (2022), who document how the activation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive transformed the environment of insecurity into an 'opportunity framework' for those previously harbouring dormant migration aspirations. Khelashvili (2024) distinguishes between two modes of migration—early, rapid decisions and slower, adaptive ones—but this study shows that these patterns may co-exist even within the initial displacement trajectory itself, from evacuation through relocation. This phase thus exemplifies how displacement trajectories were shaped through the dynamic interplay of aspirations and capabilities, embedded within relational decision-making processes and structured by both legal and social constraints.

6.1.2 The conflict environment and its influence on the evolution of migration-decisions during early displacement

The theoretical adaptations introduced during the research design stage (see *Chapter 4.1 Research Design*)—drawing on Hein de Haas (2021) and explicitly incorporating conflict environments and refugee-specific dynamics—proved crucial for unpacking the complex influence of the conflict on refugee decision-making processes. Building on this foundation, the following analysis examines how the conflict environment and institutional responses reshaped migration decisions by altering the distribution of positive and negative liberties. These structural shifts set the parameters within which aspirations could emerge and capabilities could be exercised. This theoretical lens helps explain the evolution of migration

decisions, particularly by tracing the dynamic interplay between structure and agency, which shaped the evacuation and relocation phases. The analysis first explores the conflict-induced and structural constraints on decision-making, then traces how participants' capabilities were initially limited and later partially restored, alongside the evolution of their aspirations—from immediate survival strategies during evacuation to more stabilised, medium-term considerations upon arrival in host countries.

The spring 2022 Russian offensive not only upended the lives and livelihoods of Ukrainians but also profoundly reconfigured the structural conditions that shape mobility (see *Figure 8*), severely restricting both positive and negative liberties. These liberties—

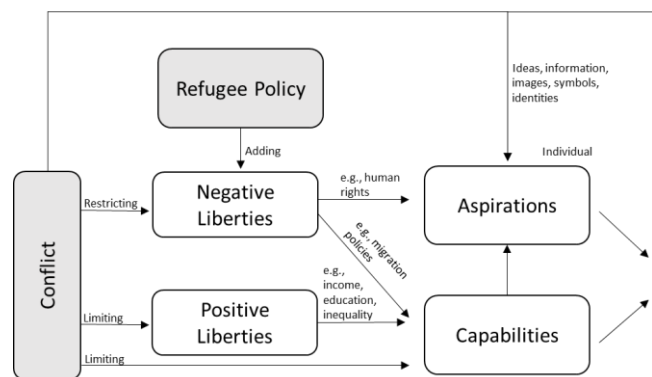


Figure 8: (excerpt from Figure 5) The influence of the conflict environment on aspirations and capabilities framework (adapted from de Haas 2021).

understood as the freedom from external constraints (negative liberty) and the freedom to act upon one's aspirations (positive liberty)—were fundamentally reshaped by the overlapping pressures of armed conflict, martial law, and refugee policy. The conflict and the legal responses it provoked both constrained and encouraged individual agency. Together, they set the structural boundaries within which mobility-related aspirations could form and capabilities could be exercised. Thus, the evolving constellation of conflict conditions and institutional frameworks did not merely influence displacement patterns in a logistical sense but also determined the distribution of freedoms that fundamentally shaped people's decisions to flee or remain.

Participants in our interviews recounted how the conflict rapidly eroded negative liberty—their freedom from external constraints—by eliminating not only essential protections but also access to basic needs. Interviewees described their experiences of nearby combat and missile strikes, which severely compromised their ability to live free from harm and introduced new layers of psychological trauma. These acute threats were compounded by shortages of food, fuel, and electricity, as well as the collapse of public transport systems, which further restricted their mobility and capacity to reach safer areas. For many, these overlapping forms of deprivation and danger turned the act of staying in place into a lethal constraint rather than a viable option, ultimately forcing displacement under duress.

The conflict environment, martial law, and international protection schemes have exerted contrasting effects on the positive liberty—the freedom to pursue one's aspirations—of

displaced Ukrainians. On one hand, the activation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive (and its Swiss equivalent) significantly enhanced positive liberty by granting immediate legal status, enabling unhindered intra-European travel, access to social services, and the right to work without undergoing protracted asylum procedures. On the other hand, martial law measures prohibiting men aged 18–60 from leaving Ukraine—save for narrowly defined exemptions—severely restricted their ability to seek safety abroad (Rose 2024; Armağan and Ibrahim 2022). These exemptions applied, for instance, to Interviewee 8, who was permitted to leave Ukraine as the father of more than three minor children, and to Interviewee 7's son, who qualified as the primary caregiver of a disabled person.

A notable feature of Ukrainian displacement is its strikingly gendered composition, with the overwhelming majority of those who fled abroad being women accompanied by children (Bobrova et al. 2022; Maidanik 2024; Khelashvili 2024; Tarkhanova and Pyrogorova 2024). This pattern differs significantly from other forced displacement contexts, where young men often make up the bulk of those on the move (Dekker et al. 2018; Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018; Schon 2019; Torfa, Almohamed, and Birner 2022). One of the key drivers of this gender imbalance lies in the unequal distribution of mobility-related liberties. While both men and women frequently lacked viable options to remain safely in place—constituting a deprivation of negative liberty—Ukrainian men were further constrained by martial law, which legally prohibited most of them from leaving the country. This restriction on men's positive liberty meant that even if they aspired to flee, they were structurally barred from doing so. As a result, many Ukrainian women fall within the spectrum of *distress migrants*, compelled to leave due to the absence of safe alternatives at home. In contrast, men face a dual constraint: not only are they denied safe options to stay, but they are also legally prevented from leaving. This often forces them either to return to unsafe regions of origin or to remain as internally displaced persons within Ukraine, where they may be exposed to ongoing violence or new vulnerabilities. These layered restrictions position them along the continuum from *precarious* to *distress migrants*, as conceptualised by Hein de Haas (2021), illustrating how forced migration trajectories are shaped by deeply unequal access to mobility and protection.

This contrast within the same national and familial contexts illustrates how positive and negative liberties, mediated through legal frameworks and war-related restrictions, produce unequal distributions of mobility and autonomy, shaping differentiated displacement experiences even among close relatives. Similar patterns are discussed by Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira (2021), who show how unequal access to mobility within displacement contexts can contribute to protracted displacement. The case of displaced Ukrainians underscores how

considering both positive and negative liberties offers a more nuanced understanding of the layered realities that influence individuals' options and choices during displacement. It further highlights how legal constraints and protections—manifested through the construction or deprivation of positive liberties—shape the mobility, vulnerability, and autonomy of displaced individuals, impacting their ability to navigate and respond to their circumstances.

While the structural environment filtered individual agency through positive and negative liberties, it is important to recognise that these liberties—and the conflict environment more broadly—not only limited the space in which migration decisions could unfold, but also directly influenced the formation and transformation of both aspirations and capabilities. As individuals transitioned through the different phases of displacement, they were gradually freed from certain constraints, while others persisted or re-emerged in altered form, evolving temporally as the war progressed and individuals adapted to shifting circumstances, and spatially as they moved from active combat zones to safer areas within Ukraine and eventually to host countries characterised by varying legal regimes and support structures.

This spatio-temporal evolution along the displacement trajectory did not only shape the structural liberties through which agency was filtered; it also profoundly reconfigured the capabilities that individuals could draw upon at each stage. The progression from active war zones to relative safety within Ukraine and eventually to legally regulated host country environments marked a gradual, uneven reconstitution of capabilities that had been abruptly destabilised at the war's onset. Capabilities, far from being static attributes, evolved dynamically across these shifting contexts, reflecting both the erosion of pre-conflict arrangements and the emergence of new, situationally bound possibilities for agency.

In the early days of the invasion, capabilities that were once embedded in place—such as property ownership, formal employment, and access to public services—were either suspended or obliterated. In this vacuum, the ability to flee became the most critical capability, contingent not only on access to private vehicles or emergency trains but also on the capacity to navigate a chaotic and dangerous environment with minimal institutional support. In the absence of reliable state structures, social capital—mobilised through digital communication, family networks, and informal information channels—became an essential resource, allowing individuals to assess danger, coordinate escape routes, and activate protective mobility. Yet beyond these broader patterns of resource distribution and social connectivity, participants' accounts also highlighted how seemingly minor, contingent factors could critically affect mobility. Filling a fuel tank the day before the invasion, for example, determined whether a family could flee or stay connected as infrastructure collapsed. Cars not only facilitated

physical escape but also served as crucial means to charge phones and thus maintain communication during widespread power outages. As such, early mobility-related capabilities were shaped by a dynamic interplay between structural conditions, social resources, and situational contingencies along the evolving trajectories of displacement. Despite emerging variations in individual capabilities, the fundamentally forced nature of displacement persisted throughout this phase, with agency manifesting primarily in navigating survival rather than in exercising true choice.

As individuals moved into safer areas within Ukraine and, subsequently, across borders into neighbouring states, capabilities began to partially recover. Though still provisional, this recovery marked a qualitative shift: mobility ceased to be solely a reactive measure of survival and increasingly became a strategic tool for navigating between perceived opportunity structures. In this phase, often described by participants as a time of pause or recovery, safe havens played a critical role. Theoretically, these sites are best understood not as fixed localities but as spatio-temporal junctures—brief windows in which basic security, social connectivity, and the absence of immediate crisis enabled a reactivation of both capabilities and aspirations. Here, structure and agency were temporarily rebalanced. Individuals could reflect, reassess, and begin preparing for the next displacement decision, even under considerable uncertainty.

During this stage, new forms of capability-building emerged, often closely aligned with participants' perceptions of accessible opportunity structures. Access to shelter, situational knowledge, and mobility infrastructure—frequently facilitated by volunteers, informal networks, and prior social ties—enabled people to reconnect with transnational contacts or arrange the next steps of their journey. Pre-existing knowledge about destination countries, such as language familiarity, the presence of relatives, or reputations for safety, guided where capabilities were built more actively. For example, Austria was seen as accessible due to its German-speaking environment and family ties, while Switzerland was chosen pragmatically for its perceived stability despite concerns over costs. Such choices illustrate that participants did not primarily aspire to economic advancement but responded as forced migrants, constructing mobility paths within limited and uneven opportunity structures. As Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва (2024) observe, while visa-free travel and temporary protection enabled a degree of agency, these movements remained fundamentally shaped by coercive conditions that should not be overlooked.

Most participants, however, prioritised immediate forms of stability—securing food, housing, childcare—before engaging in more deliberate planning. Still, even these modest acts signalled

a shift in agency: movement was no longer solely about escape but about navigating available options within constrained frameworks. While fundamental forcedness remained, a gradual, adaptive reshaping of capabilities took place, enabling participants to cautiously re-engage with situational possibilities along their evolving trajectories.

The relocation into host countries under temporary protection brought about another reconfiguration of capabilities. Legal status under protection regimes provided formal access to housing, healthcare, education, and income support. These structural inclusions significantly reduced immediate mobility pressures and enabled medium-term planning. Yet, the expansion of institutional support was accompanied by the emergence of new constraints. Legal ambiguities, bureaucratic fragmentation between federal and regional systems, and especially language barriers complicated integration and limited onward mobility. As such, capabilities at this stage were marked by an ambivalent tension between empowerment and dependency. While the structural environment now allowed for greater participation in host societies, this participation remained conditional—filtered through complex institutional settings and dependent on individuals' ability to navigate unfamiliar administrative, linguistic, and social terrains.

In sum, the trajectory of displacement was not simply one of capability loss followed by recovery. Rather, capabilities were reshaped through continuous, context-dependent negotiations between constraint and possibility. Across all phases—from initial flight to temporary protection—participants exercised agency in uneven, adaptive ways, reflecting the recursive relationship between individual capacities and the structural environments that enabled or limited their realisation.

Just as capabilities evolved across displacement phases, so too did aspirations, which were deeply entwined with both the structural conditions and the resources available to realise them. While the broader environment of positive and negative liberties created the outer boundaries within which aspirations could emerge, it was the distribution and evolution of capabilities that rendered certain aspirations attainable while rendering others inaccessible. Still, aspirations were not wholly reducible to structure or means—they remained embedded in individual subjectivities, shaped by emotional attachments, social responsibilities, and normative expectations.

Before the war, participants referred only briefly to their aspirations, which were largely taken for granted and embedded in the stability of everyday life. Their comments pointed to long-term goals related to professional, familial, and educational development, unfolding

within a society they described as ambitious and highly competitive. Migration was occasionally considered in abstract terms, particularly among the younger and more internationally connected, but such leave aspirations were typically conditional and rarely urgent. Overall, aspirations were closely tied to place-based expectations of continuity, with stay aspirations forming the normative baseline.

The onset of the Russian invasion fundamentally disrupted this aspirational landscape. In the early phase of displacement, mobility aspirations contracted sharply, giving way to urgent concerns of safety and survival. Aspirations to remain were forcibly overridden, and aspirations to leave no longer reflected personal ambition but rather the necessity of flight. Participants rarely framed their early movements as acts of aspiration; instead, they emphasised the involuntary nature of their departure and the collapse of planning horizons. Still, even under these conditions, micro-aspirations emerged—finding safe passage, reaching a particular border, reuniting with family. These were often reactive and short-term but signalled that aspiration, as a future-oriented logic of action, had not disappeared but had adapted to crisis.

As individuals reached temporary safe havens—both within Ukraine and across its borders—the aspirational horizon began to cautiously expand. The reactivation of certain capabilities, particularly those tied to mobility and social connectivity, enabled a shift from survival to situational assessment. While aspirations remained restricted and heavily conditioned by uncertainty, participants began to imagine and plan for the next stage of their journey. Crucially, these aspirations were not articulated in terms of long-term settlement or integration but rather focused on securing basic stability: finding accommodation and sometimes employment, later enrolling children in school, identifying health services. For many, the goal was not to rebuild their lives but to wait out the war in safety, with return to Ukraine remaining a plausible and often preferred scenario.

The socio-relational composition of travel groups and caregiving responsibilities significantly shaped the direction and content of aspirations during this phase. Displacement from Ukraine was, from the outset, strongly gendered—predominantly involving women and children—due to both legal constraints and traditional caregiving roles (Andrews et al. 2023; Khelashvili 2024). As Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва (2024) show, gendered dynamics are deeply embedded in how decisions to flee or remain are made, with women's choices often shaped by caregiving duties and relational dependencies—particularly towards children, elderly parents, or partners. This was reflected in the accounts of mothers with young children, who prioritised destinations that promised continuity in education, access to healthcare, and community

support structures. For these participants, aspirations were rarely framed in terms of individual advancement; instead, they revolved around ensuring the well-being of dependents and re-establishing familiar routines. In contrast, participants with existing transnational ties occasionally developed more proactive aspirations to leave, often seeking to reunite with family members in third countries. Yet such cases remained relatively rare and were typically shaped more by the erosion of stay aspirations than by strong pull factors abroad.

Upon arrival into temporary protection, aspirations continued to evolve, shaped by the stabilising effects of legal recognition and institutional support. Strong local embeddedness before displacement played a key role in shaping initial aspirations: it reinforced a strong orientation towards return and, in turn, lowered the development of stay aspirations during displacement. This baseline of return intent, widespread among participants, contributed to a perception of their situation as temporary and delayed active engagement with the idea of longer-term settlement. This echoes concerns raised by Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira(2021), who highlight the inherent tension between short-term protection mechanisms and the long-term uncertainty faced by displaced populations, often leaving them in legal and psychological limbo. As a result, many remained in an aspirational holding pattern—balancing hope for swift return with the demands of daily life—for several months, and in some cases up to a year. By contrast, the few participants who had already harboured leave aspirations prior to the conflict tended to adapt more rapidly to displacement, more readily considering settlement options and beginning to navigate integration processes earlier—a dynamic that will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

In theoretical terms, aspirations throughout the displacement trajectory functioned both as a reaction to disrupted lives and as a resource for reimagining continuity under discontinuous conditions. While positive and negative liberties delimited the range of conceivable futures, and capabilities filtered these into realisable—or unattainable—goals, aspirations mediated how individuals positioned themselves within that space of possibility. For many, strong pre-war local embeddedness sustained return-oriented aspirations and reinforced the perception of displacement as temporary. Yet aspiration itself remained a site of agency—sometimes quiet, sometimes strategic—through which participants oriented themselves amid structural rupture. In this sense, aspiration was not merely a by-product of circumstances but a persistent, adaptive capacity to formulate meaning and direction in the midst of profound uncertainty.

While this chapter has focused on Ukrainian displacement trajectories, it is important to note that some dynamics mirror or contrast with patterns observed among other forcibly displaced

groups. For example, similar research on Syrian and Afghan refugees highlights similarly adaptive use of digital tools and transnational networks during displacement (Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018; Torfa, Almohamed, and Birner 2022; Glorius and Nienaber 2022). However, these groups often display younger and more male-dominated profiles, with higher incidences of solo migration and fewer legal constraints on male mobility. This has enabled male migrants in those contexts to pursue more distant and uncertain routes, often in pursuit of longer-term opportunities. By contrast, Ukrainian displacement—highly feminised due to martial law and caregiving responsibilities—was more likely to be oriented toward proximate, legally accessible destinations. These contrasting patterns illustrate how geographical opportunity structures—defined by the interaction of legal regimes, accessibility, and perceived opportunity—guide migration trajectories in different forced migration contexts. Such comparisons underline how forced migration trajectories are not only shaped by individual agency and structural constraints but also by specific legal frameworks, family roles, and demographic patterns.

The trajectories of displaced Ukrainians analysed here reveal how migration decisions evolved within shifting structural environments that filtered agency through the dynamic distribution of positive and negative liberties. Drawing on the aspirations–capabilities framework, this chapter has shown how displacement was fundamentally rooted in forced migration dynamics, yet also featured evolving capacities for agency as individuals navigated changing opportunity structures. Capabilities were initially eroded by the collapse of local infrastructures and immediate threats but gradually reconstituted across spatio-temporal junctures, from safe havens within Ukraine to host countries under temporary protection. Aspirations, similarly, were profoundly disrupted—contracting to survival imperatives during flight before cautiously re-expanding as security and capabilities stabilised.

This analysis also speaks to de Haas’s broader conceptualisation of mobility as the capacity to choose where to live, with both migration and non-migration as outcomes shaped by the interplay between aspirations and capabilities. As illustrated in Figure 9, these outcomes are further conditioned by individuals’ perceptions of geographical opportunity structures, which guide how capabilities are activated and aspirations adjusted.

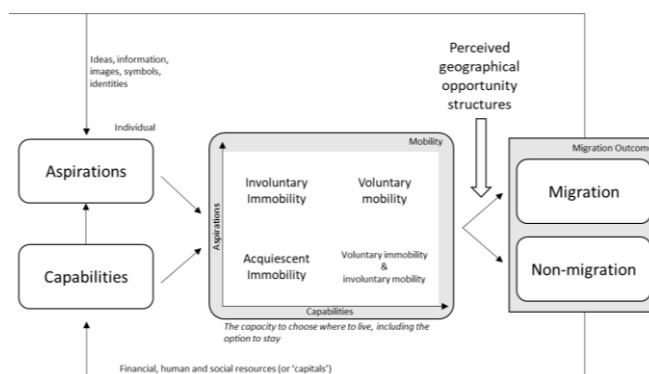


Figure 9: (excerpt from Figure 5) The influence of aspirations and capabilities on migration outcomes (adapted from de Haas 2021).

While the participants in this study were clearly subject to forced displacement, many articulated both stay and leave aspirations simultaneously—often, but not always, in tension with one another. These overlapping orientations nuance the binary between mobility and immobility, revealing how aspiration itself can be internally conflicted, and how mobility decisions—even under severe constraint—reflect ongoing negotiations between structural pressures, personal attachments, and situational possibilities. Empirically, participants’ choices were shaped by social capital, legal context, and pre-war embedding, with some gravitating toward return and others more quickly adapting to the prospect of integration. Across all phases, agency re-emerged unevenly, illustrating how participants navigated forced displacement not only as a reaction to crisis, but as a process of constrained decision-making and future-making.

6.2 Navigating Displacement: Adaptation, Aspirational Shifts, and the Reconfiguration of Mobility

While initial displacement was marked by urgency and limited choice, the experience of living in displacement—first during arrival and later throughout prolonged stay—emerged as a powerful force reshaping the mobility-related aspirations and capabilities of displaced Ukrainians. This chapter turns to the more extended middle period of participants’ trajectories, tracing how the perceived temporariness of protection gradually gave way to more complex evaluations of return, onward movement, and settlement, shaped by the lived realities of host-country life.

It is structured around three interrelated processes: adaptation to new socio-legal environments, aspirational shifts informed by emerging experiences and constraints, and the eventual reconfiguration of mobility decisions over time. Rather than viewing integration or mobility outcomes in isolation, the chapter explores how arrival conditions, early adaptation, and evolving constraints and opportunities recalibrated future decisions. In doing so, it shows how structural and emotional dimensions shaped not only the transformation of mobility aspirations and capabilities, but also the unfolding logic of the displacement trajectory itself — offering a detailed, stage-sensitive analysis that traces how distinct periods of displacement cumulatively contributed to the recalibration of decisions over time.

6.2.1 Arriving in Displacement: Coping, Grounding, and Early Adaptation

Arrival and initial adaptation marked a transitional stage in the displacement trajectories of participants—positioned between the urgency of escape and the gradual onset of longer-term adjustment. This period was characterised not only by coping with immediate disorientation

and loss, but also by early efforts to ground oneself in new surroundings through the re-establishment of routines, access to services, and initial steps toward social integration. In the accounts of participants, legal frameworks such as temporary protection offered important entry points into host-country systems, though their role in early adaptation was experienced in different ways across the sample. Early adaptation was shaped just as much by individuals' prior experiences, emotional states, and available social support. This section analyses how this initial phase influenced the formation of capabilities and mobility aspirations, focusing on how structural conditions, informal networks, and subjective orientations enabled or delayed early decision-making.

For most participants, arrival represented a moment of relative safety and material relief, yet it was equally marked by emotional exhaustion and the pressure of navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic and social systems. Many arrived in a psychologically vulnerable state, having endured the cumulative stress of war, displacement, and separation from family members. This emotional fragility strongly conditioned whether participants were able to engage meaningfully with the legal rights afforded by temporary protection, or whether they initially delayed any longer-term planning. The first weeks were characterised by a dual process: on the one hand, participants sought to rest and recover; on the other, they were required to engage with a series of administrative tasks—registering for temporary protection status, enrolling children in local schools, obtaining health insurance, and opening bank accounts. These procedures, though routine on paper, represented important moments of early capability-building—testing whether newly granted positive liberties could be translated into effective action. These early experiences of exhaustion, support, and uncertainty laid the groundwork for how interviewees began to reassess their mobility options in the host country and beyond.

In this sample, temporary protection was often experienced as an effective short-term framework for managing arrival and enabling early adaptation. Rapid legal recognition and access to essential services—such as healthcare, housing, labour market rights, and especially schooling—appeared to help stabilise early experiences for several interviewees. In this sample, these provisions supported host-country institutions in accommodating displaced persons and allowed many participants to take initial steps toward regaining stability after arrival. For participants, this often meant swift enrolment of children in school, access to housing subsidies, and the receipt of basic financial support—all contributing to a foundational sense of security from which capability-building could begin. The institutional response under both the EU Temporary Protection Directive and its Swiss equivalent shaped

the early distribution of capabilities of participants by expanding both negative and positive liberty, for example by expanding room to act and access to services. The accessibility of legal status and financial assistance supported early engagement with administrative procedures and host-country institutions. However, while Austria implemented a relatively standardised approach nationwide, the decentralised nature of the Swiss system meant that access to services could vary considerably by canton—creating confusion among some participants, who often relied on personal contacts or local support networks to navigate these fragmented structures. For participants, publicly funded German language courses were a critical enabler of early capability-building. Language skills were widely recognised as a prerequisite for employment and broader societal participation. However, the promise of these courses was frequently undercut by delayed placement, insufficient labour market guidance, and the slow, complex recognition of foreign qualifications. As a result, many participants faced deskilling and exclusion from mid- and high-level employment. For participants in this study, these early institutional limitations formed part of the broader structural constraints that shaped their adaptation trajectories. Participants reported that local systems for housing, language instruction, and employment support were operating at their limits. This pressure, likely linked to the sheer volume of arrivals, contributed to uneven capacity—mirroring findings from other European contexts (Brzozowska 2023; Maidanik 2024; Tarkhanova and Pyrogorova 2024)—produced disparities in access to key services and delayed capability development. While some individuals were able to access opportunities quickly, others experienced prolonged delays and bureaucratic opacity.

While the structural foundations provided by temporary protection frameworks created a relatively enabling legal environment, the construction of capabilities in practise was shaped as much by local social infrastructure and informal support as by legal provisions. Our data also highlight the mitigating role of actions taken prior to arrival—such as mobilising personal networks or pre-arranging accommodation—in easing some of the early strain participants faced in light of limited information, language barriers, and persistent emotional distress. In the absence of centralised reception systems, many participants relied on family members, acquaintances, or host community actors to navigate the initial stage of displacement. For several interviewees, social networks helped compensate for institutional gaps, helping individuals access housing, interpret administrative procedures, or begin language acquisition. In this context, the trajectory approach highlights the interconnected nature of different stages of displacement, demonstrating how adaptation in host countries was deeply shaped by earlier actions and decisions—such as selecting destinations with known contacts,

activating extended networks, and coordinating arrival logistics. These early acts of agency laid the groundwork for later capability development and reveal how integration trajectories are path-dependent, shaped by cumulative constraints and resources across time. In this sense, early capability-building was not only mediated by legal rights but embedded in interpersonal and community-level relations, reflecting the interplay of formal structures and social capital.

The way participants leveraged existing ties and drew on previously established capabilities underscores the role of personal agency in navigating displacement. Rather than passively receiving support, individuals actively mobilised social resources, selected destinations strategically, and responded to constraints with deliberate planning. These actions not only cushioned the immediate impacts of displacement but also created favourable conditions for engaging with early integration measures. Here, tasks such as registering for protection or enrolling children in school functioned not merely as formalities but as critical steps in restoring agency and recalibrating aspirations.

After having addressed the most immediate demands of arrival, the group of middle-aged participants gradually turned their attention towards mid- to long-term capability-building, particularly enrolling in German language courses and finding local employment. These early steps towards integration were not only shaped by structural conditions but also by individual expectations and aspirations rooted in life before displacement. Participants' prior mobility orientations—particularly their level of embeddedness in Ukraine—played a decisive role in shaping their responses. Those with strong place attachment and family ties often expressed a continued aspiration to return, frequently postponing deeper engagement with host-country institutions. The anecdote of interviewee 8 about purchasing trash bags—initially buying only a small quantity due to the belief that he would soon return—illustrates how even minor everyday decisions were shaped by the underlying assumption of temporariness. In contrast, those who had previously harboured leave aspirations—or who lacked strong ties to Ukraine—were more open to settling. This pattern reflects Maidanik's (2024) observation that many displaced Ukrainians operated within a framework of 'suspended permanence', with only a minority actively pursuing long-term integration.

Aspirational orientations also significantly influenced participants' readiness to invest in early integration. Those anticipating a short stay commonly delayed language acquisition and employment-seeking. This aligns with findings from Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва (2024), who suggest that many integration frameworks failed to align with displaced individuals' orientations—reinforcing liminality and delaying deeper engagement. In contrast, those more

open to long-term settlement generally participated more actively in integration pathways, yet still faced structural barriers that limited their ability to convert efforts into lasting capabilities.

While adults encountered bureaucratic hurdles and limited opportunities for the recognition of prior qualifications, children and younger adults—less encumbered by such constraints—generally reported steady, if demanding, progress in school. For many children, attending school offered structure and distraction, helping to restore a sense of normality after weeks of displacement. At the same time, schools represented an unfamiliar environment, and the linguistic and social challenges of integration placed significant strain on many young learners. Despite these difficulties, school staff were frequently described as supportive and accommodating, providing translation tools, adjusting teaching expectations, and fostering an inclusive atmosphere that eased the initial transition. The impact of displacement was particularly visible among younger children, whose struggles with language acquisition, social adjustment, and post-traumatic stress were often mirrored in the emotional wellbeing of their caregivers. Some children, such as Interviewees 4 and 6's youngest, became withdrawn or exhibited signs of distress that extended beyond the classroom and into the home—at times affecting the mental health of their parents. In contrast, older children occasionally managed the transition more easily, especially if they had some prior knowledge of German or English, which helped mitigate feelings of isolation and facilitated quicker adaptation. For many middle-aged adults, these responsibilities—combined with limited resources and the competing demands of work and childcare—further constrained their own capability-building. Personal language acquisition, in particular, was frequently disrupted or deprioritised in favour of fulfilling these obligations, leading to delays in broader integration processes.

Nonetheless, three middle-aged participants succeeded in securing employment relatively early—typically through personal contacts and in low-skilled sectors—offering not only immediate income but also helping to reduce dependency on state support, thereby expanding their effective capabilities. These early efforts, though limited in scope, reflected the interplay between individual agency and the structural conditions that shaped access to opportunities. In both employment and language acquisition, participants' capabilities were shaped not only by personal motivation but also by the availability of enabling conditions—such as publicly funded courses, labour market access, and institutional support—highlighting how both positive and negative liberties, as well as the competing demands of different capability-building processes, influenced divergent integration trajectories.

In sum, the arrival and early adaptation stage constituted a transitional stage in displacement trajectories—situated between emergency and settlement, agency and constraint, hope for return and the need for immediate stability. Temporary protection appeared to offer more immediate inclusion than traditional asylum systems, particularly in terms of legal status and access to essential services, a finding also noted by Brücker et al. (2023). For participants in this study, these provisions created important openings to begin restoring a sense of order in their lives. Yet these structural provisions were filtered through highly uneven local contexts, varying institutional capacity, and the availability of personal networks—leading to significant disparities in participants’ ability to translate formal rights into practical capabilities. Moreover, capabilities were not static inheritances from pre-war life but were dynamically reconfigured in response to new environments, shaped both by structural access and social relations. Informal support from hosts, relatives, or volunteers often proved essential for transforming legal entitlements into meaningful action. At the same time, participants’ evolving assessments of their futures—whether to stay, return, or wait—deeply affected their engagement with early integration pathways. As such, this stage must be understood as both a critical opportunity and a site of latent tension—where integration potential emerged alongside constraints, and where individual agency—manifested in early decisions, informal strategies, and subjective orientations—played a formative role in shaping future trajectories. The early adaptation stage was thus not merely a response to legal inclusion but a complex interplay of aspiration, local structure, and social embeddedness. The next section will explore how these early dynamics evolved into longer-term patterns of adjustment and reorientation.

6.2.2 Protracted Displacement: Aspirational Shifts and Renewed Capability-Building

This section examines how protracted displacement reshaped the lived realities, integration efforts, and mobility aspirations of displaced Ukrainians. As hopes for a swift return faded—particularly after the failure of Ukraine’s 2023 counteroffensive—displacement increasingly came to be experienced less as a temporary interruption and more as an open-ended, mid- to long-term condition. Across different initial intentions—whether grounded in hopes of quick return or early commitment to stay—participants began to engage more actively with integration processes and increasingly focused on building stay-related capabilities. This recalibration from short-term coping to longer-term adaptation was evident across all age groups and was marked by tangible changes in how individuals approached language learning, employment, education, housing, and social integration. These efforts were driven

not only by necessity but by gradually shifting aspirations, which increasingly favoured stabilisation in the host country. At the same time, success in capability-building remained deeply differentiated—shaped by caregiving responsibilities, legal frameworks, place of residence, and structural barriers—which in turn influenced how mobility decisions were re-evaluated over time.

The transition from short-term to long-term displacement represented not only a temporal progression but also a profound psychological recalibration, as initial expectations of a swift return gave way to the recognition that extended integration in host countries would be necessary. Many participants began their displacement with either uncertainty about its duration or the belief that return would be possible within a short timeframe—an assumption reinforced by public discourse surrounding potential military breakthroughs and by the legal framing of protection as temporary. This mindset sustained what Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira (2021) have termed an ‘aspirational holding pattern’ and what Maidanik (2024) refers to as a state of ‘suspended permanence’, in which displaced persons postpone long-term decisions due to the tension between short-term legal frameworks and the reality of protracted displacement. As the war dragged on into its second year and viable conditions for return failed to materialise, aspirations among displaced Ukrainians gradually shifted to align with the structural constraints that made return increasingly implausible. This trend echoes Brzozowska’s (2023) findings among Ukrainian migrants in Poland, where return aspirations were initially widespread but diminished over time as individuals adjusted to their new environments and began to contemplate longer-term settlement.

This aspirational shift did not unfold uniformly. For the majority of interviewees, it marked a turning point towards more sustained efforts at integration, though the extent of this reorientation varied considerably. While some recalibrated their aspirations decisively, engaging actively in host-country structures and investing in long-term adaptation, others did so more cautiously—maintaining hopes of return while beginning to build stay-related capabilities. A small subset had already held mobility aspirations directed towards their host countries from the outset, often influenced by pre-existing transnational ties or weaker place attachment to Ukraine. Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва (2024) have similarly emphasised that such aspirational shifts are not linear but relationally structured—shaped by family obligations, affective ties, and the evolving needs of dependants—highlighting the socially embedded nature of migration decision-making.

The recalibration of migration aspirations towards remaining in displacement—prompted by the protracted nature of the conflict and the persistent insecurity in Ukraine—was not only

conceptual but also translated into concrete changes in integration strategies. Rather than signalling opportunistic intent, this recalibration reflects a necessary and pragmatic adjustment to changing structural realities. As time passed, the viability of waiting for a swift return diminished, making it increasingly untenable for individuals to remain in a state of suspended permanence. Adapting to the host country environment—its institutional expectations, socio-economic conditions, and integration frameworks—became not only a strategic response but a psychological necessity, as participants sought to reassert control over their trajectories. This development reflects what Brzozowska (2023) observed in the Polish context, where aspirations evolved significantly after arrival, shaped by ongoing exposure to host country structures and opportunity landscapes. Taken together, these dynamics underscore the adaptive nature of aspirations over time and illustrate how forced displacement must be understood as an evolving process—shaped by cumulative pressures and shifting constraints—rather than as the outcome of static or premeditated migratory intent.

These evolving aspirations found expression in daily life, as tangible shifts in routines and integration strategies began to replace initial stopgap measures. This reorientation was reflected in a move beyond transitional coping mechanisms—such as the use of manual labour as a form of psychological distraction reported by one participant—towards more deliberate efforts to (re)build long-term stay capabilities. Education emerged as a central priority for several participants, with both adults and youth focusing on language acquisition, the pursuit of locally recognised qualifications—either through new degrees or the requalification of former professions—and efforts to secure more sustainable and private housing, even when these initiatives competed with ongoing responsibilities such as childcare or employment. In parallel, some parents began to discontinue the practise of double schooling, withdrawing their younger children from Ukrainian distance education to focus on local school integration. With a growing recognition of the protracted nature of their displacement, capability-building became central to regaining agency and establishing stability amid sustained uncertainty.

Language learning became both a major focus and a continued source of difficulty for many displaced adults. Over time, it became clear that higher-level German language skills were essential not only for accessing employment, education, and social networks, but also for achieving deeper integration. As aspirations shifted towards long-term settlement, many participants resumed or intensified their efforts—often returning to courses they had previously stopped due to time constraints or because they had completed the available state-

funded instruction. Still, for many adults—especially those over the age of 25—progressing into the intermediate level often remained difficult.

While Austria provided relatively more supportive formal structures, with public language instruction often extending into intermediate levels (B1/B2), courses in Switzerland typically ended at a basic level (A2) and varied depending on the specific federal region. As a result, adult interviewees in Switzerland who had pursued language courses early in their displacement were now often reaching their final levels, resulting in a shift towards prioritising work or other responsibilities, which made further language progression highly dependent on personal initiative and financial capacity. In contrast, adults in Austria tended to remain enrolled in language programmes for longer periods. However, despite these structural differences, several participants in Austria reported difficulties in coping with the intensity of the courses, resulting in them dropping out or pausing the courses.

For many adults in the sample, employment-related issues represented a central concern throughout their displacement trajectory—emerging as the most discussed topic alongside the wellbeing of their children. Employment was widely regarded as the single most important capability necessary for establishing a long-term future in the host country. It not only enabled financial self-sufficiency but was also seen as the primary route to a higher quality of life, greater autonomy from state-imposed restrictions—especially salient in Switzerland for individuals reliant on social support—and the gradual creation of new capabilities, such as independent mobility, housing security, and access to better social environments.

In line with broader adaptations to protracted displacement—including those related to language acquisition and employment—participants also began to reassess their living arrangements as part of a gradual shift towards more sustainable and autonomous futures. In several cases, extended families—such as sisters with their children—who had initially shared accommodation for reasons of emotional or financial support, began to aspire to or actively pursue the establishment of separate households. Others sought to relocate from rural or peripheral areas to urban centres perceived as offering better opportunities and fewer structural constraints, particularly in terms of employment access and mobility. While some of these adaptations remained aspirational at the time of the interviews, others had already been realised, reflecting a broader transition from provisional arrangements to more permanent forms of integration.

Youth and young adults frequently expressed high educational aspirations, often regarding successful integration into the host country education system as a central component of their

future plans. Language acquisition, school performance, and access to vocational and academic pathways became major areas of focus, occasionally accompanied by considerable self-imposed pressure. While mobility aspirations varied, many saw their displacement not only as a rupture but as an opportunity to re-establish stable lives through formal education. As Vasylytsiv et al. (2024) highlight, Ukrainian youth sustained long-term professional goals but recalibrated them in light of new constraints and opportunities in host societies.

For younger children, who were still far from key educational milestones, the decision to abandon dual schooling was less about preserving options and more about pragmatic adaptation to new realities. Letting go of the parallel curriculum freed up time and emotional resources, reducing pressure on both children and caregivers and facilitating deeper engagement with local schooling and social environments. In this way, evolving aspirations—often leaning towards staying—interacted with and shaped processes of capability creation, as families prioritised integration pathways that enabled greater stability and future self-sufficiency within the host society.

This sustained investment in education and training also contributed to broader aspirational shifts within families. Khelashvili (2024) notes that families with embedded children in local school systems often developed stronger stay aspirations over time. In line with these findings, several participants indicated that their children's progress and social embedding played a key role in delaying or abandoning return considerations. Although migration decisions were rarely shaped directly by children, their adaptation and well-being influenced broader family strategies.

Differences in educational pathways across age groups revealed a broader trend aligned with shifting mobility aspirations. In the early stages of displacement, older adolescents—particularly those close to completing their secondary education—often prioritised continuity by pursuing the Ukrainian *Matura* remotely or combining it with host-country schooling in hybrid formats. These approaches reflected an initial reluctance to fully abandon pre-war trajectories and were shaped by the desire to preserve future return or onward mobility options. However, as displacement became more protracted, such hybrid models were gradually phased out in favour of stronger integration into the local education systems. This transition mirrored a broader reorientation towards longer-term settlement, especially as families observed the benefits of local certification for employment or higher education within the host country.

In summary, the experience of protracted displacement prompted a gradual reconfiguration of both aspirations and capabilities among displaced Ukrainians. As return appeared increasingly unlikely, aspirations shifted towards long-term settlement, prompting renewed efforts to develop stay-related capabilities in areas such as language learning, employment, housing, and education. These shifts were not merely reactions to structural constraints but also expressions of adaptive agency, as individuals sought to realign their goals with the possibilities and limitations of their host environments. The capacity to act on emerging aspirations, however, remained deeply differentiated—shaped by age, caregiving roles, legal conditions, and local integration frameworks. This dynamic underscores the core tenet of the aspirations–capabilities model: that migration decisions and integration outcomes are shaped not simply by desire or necessity, but by the evolving interplay between what individuals want and what they are actually able to achieve within their structural context.

6.2.3 Long-Term Mobility Decisions under Protracted Displacement: Efforts, Structures, and Emerging Pathways

The re-evaluation of mobility decisions was not a discrete moment but a continuous and dynamic process that unfolded along the entire displacement trajectory. As return became increasingly unlikely and displacement more protracted, participants continually reassessed their options—not just in response to external events but through the cumulative experience of integration and everyday life in the host country. This evolving reassessment was shaped by the interplay between aspirations and capabilities, as aspirations responded to new constraints and opportunities, while renewed aspirations in turn prompted fresh efforts at capability-building.

As the analysis of individual trajectories progressed, it became increasingly clear that certain factors played a particularly important role in this process. While not exhaustive, several dimensions repeatedly emerged across cases. One key factor was the well-being and continued safety of children, including their educational development and social integration. Children’s experiences acted both as emotional reference points and as practical considerations in shaping stay-related aspirations. In parallel, participants’ perceptions of safety and stability in the host country—intensified by their prior experiences of war and displacement—repeatedly influenced the imagined feasibility of return or onward movement.

Emotional and psychological conditions, including feelings of loneliness, lack of cultural fit, and long-term family separation, also filtered how individuals evaluated their current lives and imagined their futures. Finally, socio-economic stability, especially in the domains of

housing, employment, and legal security, emerged as a decisive filter for what seemed possible or realistic over time.

These factors can be interpreted through the lens of aspirations, capabilities, and their surrounding structural conditions. In many cases, aspirations became more grounded or reconfigured in response to the structural realities participants encountered—some adapted by investing further in their integration, while others, facing persistent obstacles and failed efforts to gain a foothold, expanded the set of considered options—ranging from return despite the ongoing conflict to secondary movements towards other European countries.

This evolving process laid the groundwork for the formation of long-term mobility decisions. As capability-building efforts related to integration intensified over time—whether through language learning, the pursuit of qualifications, or efforts to stabilise housing and employment—participants began to move beyond short-term coping and towards strategic re-evaluation. These decisions were not taken in a vacuum but developed within specific legal, institutional, and social environments that either enabled or filtered the success of individual efforts.

The following chapters examine how these dynamics unfolded: how personal agency and structural conditions intersected in long-term capability-building, how mobility aspirations transformed as a result, and how the framework of temporary protection shaped—and at times limited—what displaced people could achieve or plan for.

This final section examines the situation of displaced Ukrainians after two and a half years of displacement and their future mobility considerations. It focuses on the intersection of structural dimensions and personal efforts

6.2.3.1 Structure and Agency in Long-Term Capability-Building

The integration efforts pursued by participants after their initial arrival did not occur in a vacuum. Instead, they unfolded in a structural environment that alternately enabled, constrained, or redirected these efforts, shaping the range and success of capability-building over time. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, the recognition of the protracted nature of their displacement led many participants to revise their initial aspirations and engage in renewed efforts to build capabilities that could secure a more stable future in the host country. However, the degree to which individuals could realise these ambitions varied widely depending on structural factors such as regional policy differences, programme accessibility, and the administrative limitations of temporary protection regimes.

Individual agency—reflected in the willingness to pursue language acquisition, employment, or educational requalification—was crucial, but never sufficient on its own. Several interviewees displayed clear motivation and initiative but were held back by inadequate support frameworks, local bureaucratic hurdles, or limited capabilities resulting from structural constraints. Temporary protection frameworks played a particularly central role in shaping the boundaries of capability-building. By design, they offered limited long-term perspective and prioritised short-term accommodation over sustainable integration. Over time, these design features became increasingly visible in participants' experiences, as the temporary focus of the system failed to adjust to or prepare for the evolving needs associated with prolonged displacement.

In Switzerland, for example, Status S holders often encountered obstacles in accessing sustained language instruction beyond a basic level, unless they could fund private courses themselves. In Austria, while more extended course provision was available, the intensity of the curriculum sometimes discouraged or overwhelmed participants, particularly those managing childcare or other responsibilities. Beyond institutional constraints, structural barriers such as employer expectations and market demands further inhibited individual efforts to convert motivation into realised capabilities.

Despite these diverging national approaches, language acquisition outcomes were shaped more decisively by individual life circumstances and age-related differences than by policy frameworks alone. Children and youth, embedded in structured school environments with regular peer interaction and continuous exposure to the host language, generally attained fluency much more rapidly than their adult counterparts. In contrast, adults—especially those managing employment and caregiving responsibilities—faced considerable constraints in maintaining consistent engagement. Limited financial resources also played an indirect role: tighter work schedules, reduced flexibility, and the need to prioritise income generation made it harder for many to engage in sustained language learning. These generational differences reflect an uneven distribution of integration capacities and underscore the importance of targeted policy interventions that take into account both age-specific learning environments and family-related responsibilities, such as those faced by single parents or caregivers of multiple dependants.

For adults, language learning had frequently been hindered by a combination of structural barriers, time scarcity, and financial constraints. Limited course availability, long waitlists, and rigid scheduling made sustained participation difficult, particularly for those navigating daily obligations under constrained resources. While some participants reported improving

their spoken German skills through workplace interaction, these gains only slowly extended beyond the level achieved through formal instruction and offered little structured progression. In response to these limitations, some turned to more flexible alternatives: online classes taught by Ukrainian-speaking tutors were perceived as culturally accessible and affordable, while low-threshold options—such as language cafés offered by local non-government organisations—provided informal learning spaces but typically lacked the intensity necessary for advanced acquisition.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal the double-edged nature of language acquisition in displacement: it emerged simultaneously as a site of empowerment and exclusion. From the perspective of the aspirations–capabilities framework, the ability to acquire higher-level German language skills represented not only an important capability, but also a key condition for developing and pursuing aspirations to remain in the host country. Language proficiency opened up access to employment, education, and social life, and often shaped whether staying in the host country appeared feasible and desirable in the long term. Yet, structural barriers in course availability, accessibility, and scheduling, together with everyday responsibilities, often limited individuals’ ability to act on these goals.

Experiences of working or seeking employment had made the importance of language skills unmistakably clear to most participants, reinforcing the notion that German proficiency was not only essential for everyday communication but also a crucial determinant of one’s ability to access more qualified employment. Aspirations related to employment thus significantly influenced the motivation to improve German language skills, which were widely seen as the single most important step toward regaining higher-level or more specialised employment.

Over time, employment-related aspirations increasingly focused on escaping conditions of deskilling or unemployment, both of which were experienced as sources of frustration and personal hardship. Although some interviewees initially expressed low motivation to engage in the host-country labour market, all participants had revised these assumptions by the second year of displacement and had actively begun seeking employment. However, even among those who had secured jobs, none had been able to return to their former professional positions by the summer of 2024. In most cases, the employment gained entailed considerable deskilling, with only minor upward mobility reported near the end of the observed trajectories.

The road toward reemployment at a similar level to that held in Ukraine was marked by multiple barriers. The first significant hurdle was the recognition of Ukrainian degrees, a

process that frequently took between six and nine months. This delay was often perceived as the second major structural obstacle after limited language proficiency. Furthermore, some participants reported that prolonged absences from their original professions had led to a loss of sector-specific knowledge or practical relevance, making re-entry more difficult even after formal qualifications had been recognised. These conditions resulted in continued occupational downgrading, where even employed individuals remained in roles significantly below their former level and outside their old professions, thereby extending their experience of financial insecurity and professional frustration. This dynamic also reflects structural patterns already present in pre-war Ukrainian labour migration, where precarious work conditions and limited opportunities for advancement contributed to persistent deskilling and constrained professional development (Górny and Kindler 2016).

Besides reinforced efforts towards German language acquisition, interviewees engaged in a sequence of adaptive strategies aimed at countering deskilling and navigating their evolving employment-related aspirations. As displacement continued and aspirations shifted, strategies evolved from short-term survival responses to more long-term adjustments. Among these were efforts to expand local social networks for job-seeking support and refreshing skills through online learning or informal training. Later efforts increasingly focused on more structural forms of capability-building. These included considering formal re-entry into education to obtain locally recognised qualifications, or pursuing self-employment as a viable path to self-sufficiency—such as launching businesses tailored to the needs of the Ukrainian diaspora.

However, despite these evolving strategies and continued individual effort, participants remained constrained by persistent structural barriers that undermined their attempts to regain professional standing. In the Swiss canton of Aargau, some interviewees expressed frustration with regional labour services, noting that while their qualifications were formally acknowledged, meaningful support for vocational reintegration remained limited. Labour market programmes, including subsidised training opportunities, tended to prioritise those who were still unemployed. As a result, individuals who had entered the labour market in low-skilled roles—often out of immediate necessity—faced ongoing deskilling without access to targeted upskilling or requalification pathways.

In addition to the shortcomings of labour market support systems, many interviewees—particularly women who arrived with their children—faced compounded challenges resulting from displacement and prolonged family separation. As the majority of Ukrainian refugees were women travelling without their partners due to martial law and military obligations, the

responsibility for employment, childcare, and integration fell disproportionately on them. The absence of familial support structures—especially male partners or extended family—intensified the strain and limited participation in requalification programmes or stable full-time employment. These gendered challenges often involved a difficult balancing act between caregiving responsibilities and integration demands such as language acquisition or labour market entry, as discussed by Brücker et al. (2023). The cumulative emotional toll of separation, combined with low-wage, physically demanding jobs, contributed to persistent exhaustion. In high-cost host countries like Switzerland, additional burdens such as medical expenses and unaffordable services further deepened financial precarity. These patterns echo findings by Andrews et al. (2023), who describe a sense of invisibility and deskilling among Ukrainian women—many of whom had professional backgrounds but were unable to continue their careers abroad due to support structures that failed to accommodate their dual roles as caregivers and professionals. The interplay of legal uncertainty, labour market exclusion, and unpaid care work reveals a broader set of intersectional challenges—where gender, parental status, and displacement intersect to amplify structural disadvantage. While shaped by the specific demographic profile of Ukrainian displacement, these dynamics expose persistent gaps in integration frameworks, which remain poorly equipped to meet the long-term needs of separated families navigating complex post-displacement realities.

By contrast, younger adults often reported more successful transitions into local education or training systems, not necessarily due to stronger motivation, but because of greater compatibility between their life stage and the opportunities available. Older adults nearing retirement faced different constraints. While they benefited from intergenerational support—particularly from adult children who helped with access to services and emotional stability—one participant struggled to establish social networks outside of the family. Without employment and sufficient language skills, local integration remained difficult. Their engagement in language learning was further limited by generational capability differences: for instance, the Russian language had once been more dominant, while today both German and English play more central roles, particularly for younger Ukrainians.

These patterns point to a broadly linear yet highly differentiated nature of capability-building under protracted displacement. While many trajectories followed a general arc—from initial coping to delayed engagement and, eventually, structured integration attempts—the outcomes of these efforts were stratified across age, gender, legal clarity, and caregiving roles. Some individuals advanced steadily in multiple domains, while others experienced prolonged stagnation in one or more areas despite active engagement. Work and education, in particular,

emerged as central axes around which both aspirations and capabilities evolved—shaping not only participants’ self-perception and social status but also their long-term mobility trajectories. Older adults, in particular, often found themselves unable to make use of the standard integration options available to the broader population and lacked targeted support structures suited to their life stage or specific needs. The result is a landscape marked not by uniform progress but by varied trajectories of adaptation—reflecting the evolving interplay between aspirations, capabilities, and the structural opportunities and constraints encountered over time.

6.2.3.2 Mobility Decisions after Two Years of Displacement: Outcomes, Strategic Orientations, and Theoretical Reflections

By the third year of displacement, many interviewees had arrived at more stable, though often still provisional, conclusions about their future mobility paths. These decisions did not emerge from isolated acts of will, but from a prolonged, iterative process in which aspirations and capabilities co-evolved in response to lived experiences of displacement. Across interviews, three strategic orientations stood out as particularly prominent: staying in the current host country, returning to Ukraine, and moving onward to a third country. While these paths were not mutually exclusive—nor fixed in participants’ minds—they represented the most salient options under consideration as displacement continued.

Decisions to stay were most common among participants who had achieved a degree of stability or embeddedness in their host country. While only a small number had entered displacement with clear aspirations to remain, many others saw their stay aspirations gradually strengthen as they experienced life in the host countries and actively worked to establish themselves—pursuing language acquisition, education, and employment with varying degrees of success. For them, the lived experience of displacement—combined with the safety and stability offered by Austria and Switzerland—formed a strong foundation for staying, even as integration remained challenging in other respects. A smaller subset of participants, however, continued to view staying as a reluctant necessity rather than a positive choice—rooted more in the absence of viable alternatives than in a strong desire to remain. For these individuals, an aspirational limbo persisted, shaped by unresolved emotional attachments to Ukraine or continued separation from partners who had remained behind. These patterns align with findings from other research on forced migration—for instance, among Eritrean and Congolese displaced persons, where stay intentions were often reinforced when legal status was coupled with access to work and housing (Jacobs and Rudolf 2021), or among Ukrainian migrants in Poland, many of whom gradually reoriented their

initial return intentions into hybrid strategies of staying while maintaining emotional and financial ties to Ukraine (Brzozowska 2023).

In addition to individual experiences, family relationships more broadly functioned as an important proxy for stay aspirations across all adult interviewees, with this dynamic particularly pronounced among parents. In several cases, children's gradual anchoring in local school systems and peer environments served as the foundation for deepening commitments to stay. A pattern echoing the findings of Brücker et al. (2023), who similarly highlight the stabilising role of children's educational and emotional embeddedness in consolidating stay aspirations among caregivers, even when broader conditions remained uncertain.

Return to Ukraine remained a powerful emotional reference point, though increasingly difficult to operationalise. Most participants maintained ties to family members—particularly male partners—who had remained in Ukraine and were subject to martial law or military obligations. These enduring relational bonds sustained return aspirations, yet their realisation was constrained by persistent insecurity, infrastructural destruction, and economic precarity. As observed by Interviewee 6, return was frequently discussed as a long-term or symbolic goal rather than a practical strategy. This form of deferred or abstract return orientation closely mirrors earlier findings on displaced Ukrainians, who observed that displaced Ukrainians in Poland often idealised return but rarely engaged in concrete planning due to persistent uncertainty (Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва 2024), and echoes patterns also identified among Syrian refugees, whose return intentions typically remained dormant unless a basic safety threshold was met (Alrababah et al. 2023). In both contexts, return aspirations remained emotionally significant, but lacked the structural conditions or personal capabilities needed for realisation.

At the same time, some participants articulated more immediate return aspirations—not only due to ongoing family separation, but also in response to emotional exhaustion and a growing sense of stagnation in the host country. While the idea of a safety threshold may help explain why return aspirations were often deferred, the interviews in this study suggest that such thresholds were not universally decisive. Some participants contemplated return despite the continued presence of violence and insecurity, weighing emotional strain and blocked capabilities in the host country more heavily than physical risk. These reflections align with findings from IMPACT Initiatives' *Longitudinal Survey of Ukrainian Returnees* (2024), which documented that a notable share of returnees had settled in frontline areas of Ukraine, often driven by the desire for family reunification or the recovery of professional roles, even in the

absence of improved safety conditions. Such patterns resonate with earlier findings by Collyer (2010) and Erdal & Oeppen (2018), who emphasise that return migration decisions are shaped not only by shifting structural conditions, but also by individual agency, relational attachments, and multi-sited constraints across home and host countries.

Onward movement to a third country emerged as a conditional response to host-country disappointment rather than a primary aspiration. For those considering this path, motivations ranged from unmet expectations and feelings of exclusion to pragmatic assessments of integration prospects. Participants considering onward movement were entangled in blocked access to employment, stalled language learning, and a lack of institutional support. These constraints gradually shaped a perception that conditions elsewhere—such as greater linguistic accessibility, cultural familiarity, or stronger social networks—might offer a more navigable environment. In several cases, the accumulation of disappointment with unfulfilled aspirations in Austria or Switzerland led to considerations of relocating to countries perceived as having more flexible bureaucracies or more supportive diasporic structures. This trend echoes Brzozowska's (2023) findings, where some Ukrainian migrants considered intra-EU mobility in pursuit of improved housing, family reunion, or employment opportunities after becoming disillusioned with their initial host environment, and illustrate the role of capability-informed aspiration shifts: onward movement was most seriously considered when previously invested strategies failed to yield stability, a pattern similarly observed in Kuschminder's (2018) analysis of Afghan onward migration.

In all three strategic orientations—stay, return, and onward movement—home visits to Ukraine emerged as a flexible, adaptive strategy rather than a distinct mobility pathway. These visits allowed individuals to test the viability of return, reconnect with family, or assess local developments without fully committing to a particular decision. Especially among participants with children or employment obligations, short visits enabled a form of transnational continuity that supported both emotional resilience and the ongoing re-evaluation of long-term mobility options. However, these visits were neither neutral nor risk-free. Some participants described aborting planned trips due to renewed violence, while others reported emotional exhaustion following brief reunions—highlighting the emotional volatility involved.

Rather than functioning as independent strategies or expressions of opportunistic behaviour—as sometimes implied in political discourse—these visits served as affective and evaluative mechanisms embedded within broader aspiration recalibrations. They simultaneously preserved symbolic ties to home and revealed their fragility—contributing to

a more grounded reassessment of return aspirations. In this way, they further underscore the non-linear and emotionally complex nature of mobility decision-making under protracted displacement, where intermittent movement plays a critical role in shaping both imagined futures and perceived capabilities.

These shifting mobility orientations co-evolved with a broader transformation in how displacement was experienced over time. What had initially been framed as a short-term disruption increasingly came to be understood as a protracted, life-reordering trajectory. By mid-2024, most participants no longer described their situation as temporary. Instead, the prolonged nature of displacement had restructured everyday life, introduced new institutional routines, and recalibrated personal timelines. While some individuals gradually adjusted to this new normal, legal and structural barriers in host countries contributed to ongoing uncertainty about the future and, in turn, reinforced aspirations for further movement—whether through return or onward migration.

Taken together, these mobility orientations illustrate that aspirations were not simply expressions of preference but reflections of constrained agency—shaped by what individuals had been able to achieve, what still seemed possible, and how external structures filtered both. As theorised by de Haas (2021), aspiration formation is always embedded in capability conditions: only when individuals perceive a pathway to realisation do certain aspirations gain traction. The interviews demonstrate how capability-building—particularly access to language, employment, and housing—played a central role in opening or foreclosing specific mobility strategies.

Yet capability development remained uneven and stratified. Youth and young adults generally integrated more rapidly through structured educational systems, while older adults faced significant barriers to language acquisition and re-entry into the labour market. Middle-aged participants—particularly women with caregiving responsibilities—often encountered greater challenges in the face of legal uncertainty and limited access to caregiving assistance, which compounded the complexity of their integration trajectories. These differentiated patterns of capability-building closely mirrored the mobility orientations identified above: limited capabilities often sustained aspirations for return or onward movement, whereas more stable integration trajectories fostered a willingness to stay. At the same time, familial bonds filtered aspirations not only through individual achievements, but also through the presence or absence of loved ones and their respective integration trajectories. This intersectional layering of opportunity and constraint shaped not only the feasibility of mobility strategies but also their emotional and aspirational content.

Across national contexts, divergent frameworks produced uneven opportunity structures. While Austria's integration infrastructures facilitated capability development through extended language programmes and employment support, the Swiss model offered greater long-term incentives—such as access to permanent residency—but placed heavier emphasis on individual economic performance. These structural differences filtered the viability of mobility strategies and influenced how participants assessed the benefits and limitations of staying.

Finally, the trajectories observed here show that aspirations and capabilities evolved in mutual interaction over time. Early aspirations centred on survival and short-term safety gradually gave way to more reflective and strategic orientations, shaped by both lived experience and structural conditioning. These adaptive patterns highlight the dynamic nature of migration decision-making in protracted displacement: even in the absence of formal choice, individuals engaged in ongoing evaluative processes that redefined what forms of mobility were seen as desirable, feasible, or necessary. For a small number of participants with pre-existing ties to the host country—through family, friends, or prior mobility—migration decisions were embedded in longer-term imaginaries and supported more purposeful integration. In most cases, however, aspirations emerged reactively and evolved in tandem with growing or stunted capabilities, confirming the need to understand mobility decisions as processes of situated re-evaluation rather than static intentions.

In sum, the three dominant pathways—staying, returning, or moving onward—reflected not only individual preference or opportunity, but the complex interplay between agency, structure, and emotional embeddedness. Aspirations were filtered by institutional realities, recalibrated through capability shifts, and shaped by transnational ties. Rather than representing endpoints, these orientations functioned as evolving strategies that continued to shift as participants navigated the ongoing uncertainty of displacement. This chapter, situated at the culmination of the displacement trajectory, highlights the central insight of this study: that mobility decisions are neither spontaneous nor linear, but emerge through layered interactions between aspirations, capabilities, and structural contexts across time.

6.2.4 Thematic Reflections Across the Trajectory

While the orientations to stay, return, or move onward have been presented as distinct outcomes at the later stages of displacement, they can also be understood as evolving reference points that shaped mobility-related thinking throughout the trajectory. Rather than emerging abruptly at the end of displacement, each orientation was already present in earlier stages—though often in latent or constrained form. The decision to leave Ukraine, for

instance, implicitly involved a rejection of the option to stay. At the same time, the selection of a destination country entailed the postponement of other possible destinations, including those within Ukraine. Similarly, some participants who later considered onward movement had previously contemplated such destinations during their initial relocation, but did not pursue them at the time. These unrealised options reappeared later as renewed aspirations, once shifting capabilities, disappointments with host-country conditions, or changes to the structural or conflict environment opened space for re-evaluation. In this way, onward movements often represented not a new trajectory, but a continuation of a previously unresolved one.

The link between early experiences and later mobility orientations was also visible in the case of return. Individuals who had expressed strong place attachment or reluctance to leave Ukraine during the outbreak of the war were among those who maintained more pronounced return aspirations later on—albeit increasingly tempered by the structural and emotional demands of long-term integration abroad. Conversely, participants who had experienced greater fear or disruption during the initial flight often exhibited stronger commitments to remain.

Across the trajectory, each stage featured key influences that significantly shaped later mobility decision-making. The conflict environment not only shaped trajectories by eroding stay-related capabilities and forcing evacuation under duress; it also left a lasting imprint on future aspirations—enduring place attachments reinforced return desires, while the emotional rupture of flight intensified longings for stability and safety—and continued to constrain what was safely feasible throughout the displacement trajectory.

Arrival conditions further deepened this divergence. While host countries often provided legal clarity, emotional relief, and access to basic services, participants' ability to benefit from these opportunities varied widely. These early differences—particularly in securing housing, navigating bureaucracy, or entering language courses—proved formative. They not only shaped integration success but also conditioned whether aspirations later evolved toward settlement or onward movement.

As displacement became protracted, shifts in aspiration became increasingly pronounced. Many participants began to invest more deliberately in integration, often seeing it as a necessary step toward rebuilding stability in the absence of safe return. Yet persistent barriers—such as deskilling, legal precarity, and limited access to sustainable employment—continued to constrain capability development. When such efforts stalled or became

emotionally exhausting, some individuals reopened earlier considerations, particularly with regard to onward movement. In this way, aspirations proved neither static nor predictive. Instead, they evolved in response to changing constraints, shifting family dynamics, and cumulative experiences of adaptation. What initially emerged as an emergency response could solidify into a long-term strategy, while ideas once deemed implausible could later re-emerge as realistic alternatives.

These evolving aspirations highlight the importance of looking at mobility decisions over time and in relation to the personal circumstances that shaped them. A trajectory-based perspective helps to explain why certain aspirations—such as the desire to return despite ongoing insecurity—may seem counterintuitive when viewed in isolation. Such decisions cannot be reduced to failed integration or constrained capabilities alone. Rather, they reflect the weight of personal continuities: strong place attachments, enduring emotional ties, and unresolved life plans disrupted by the war. From this angle, the persistence of return aspirations is not an exception to otherwise rational calculations, but a meaningful expression of how subjective attachments and structural constraints interact over time.

This broader reading suggests that mobility orientations are best understood not as fixed choices or definitive endpoints, but as anchoring points within a dynamic decision-making process. Their relevance fluctuated along the trajectory, shaped by unfolding capabilities and refracted through emotional attachments, social obligations, and context-specific barriers. In this sense, aspirations to stay, return, or move onward acted less as discrete decisions and more as evolving poles of orientation—continuously revisited and reconfigured in response to lived realities. A trajectory-based approach thus enriches the aspirations–capabilities framework by demonstrating how temporality, emotional depth, and unresolved alternatives shape the long-term evolution of mobility decisions under protracted displacement.

6.3 Temporary Protection in Context: Policy Lessons from a Protracted Displacement Trajectory

While the preceding sections have focused primarily on the case-based analysis of participants' displacement trajectories, this chapter takes a step back to examine the broader policy context in which these experiences unfolded. Building on the comparative overview of temporary protection frameworks in *Chapter 2.3 Temporary Protection in the EU and Switzerland* and the patterns emerging from the interviews, the analysis situates participants' accounts within a wider discussion of how Austria and Switzerland's approaches to temporary protection function under conditions of protracted displacement. Rather than

shifting away from the empirical material, this section complements it by highlighting how individual experiences both reflect and illuminate the structural logics and limitations of these protection regimes.

In participants' accounts, temporary protection clearly provided crucial relief and access to safety during the early months of displacement. Yet, as also outlined in Chapter 2.3, its institutional design revealed limitations when confronted with the evolving nature of mobility decisions and the shift from temporary to protracted displacement. The early success of these frameworks in enabling rapid access to basic services—discussed in *Chapter 6.2.1 Arriving in Displacement: Coping, Grounding, and Early Adaptation*—was essential for stabilising participants in the initial stages of flight. Yet, as participants' situations evolved, the very structures that had facilitated swift arrival and legal clarity proved ill-equipped to support longer-term integration or provide meaningful direction for the future. Although the frameworks and accompanying legal provisions did evolve during the prolonged displacement—such as Austria's removal of work permit requirements or Switzerland's expansion of vocational and language access in some cantons (see *Chapter 2.3 Temporary Protection in the EU and Switzerland*)—the initial design of these instruments contained structural weaknesses.

As discussed in *Chapter 2.3*, both the EU's TPD and Switzerland's Status S were primarily designed to accommodate large numbers of displaced persons by ensuring rapid access to safety and basic services without overburdening the regular asylum system. In line with participants' experiences, these frameworks prioritised immediate relief over long-term integration and were initially premised on the assumption that return would soon become viable. While this orientation proved effective during the arrival stage—facilitating rapid registration and swift access to housing, education, and healthcare—their limitations became more evident as displacement continued. Despite considerable efforts to adapt, several participants reported struggling to navigate protracted displacement when institutional guarantees were lacking and their capabilities for deeper integration into society and the workforce remained limited. In their accounts, the absence of a forward-looking scope to address the evolving realities of displacement fostered prolonged uncertainty and, at times, eroded aspirations by withholding durable prospects.

While these shortcomings were not the sole cause of long-term struggles, they set the conditions under which many integration challenges unfolded. Most notably, the absence of structural mechanisms for rapid requalification or recognition of prior experience meant that many participants were unable to re-enter their qualified professions. For many participants,

these barriers resulted in experiences of protracted deskilling, which they found difficult to reverse due to limited resources—especially time, income, and caregiving responsibilities. In this context, the inaccessibility of language courses—whether due to cost or scheduling barriers—further delayed language acquisition, particularly for those already experiencing financial insecurity as a result of underemployment. Limited language skills also exacerbated social isolation, especially among middle-aged and older participants who lacked exposure to the host language in daily life. For some, this resulted in social environments increasingly centred around Ukrainian or Russian-speaking communities, raising concerns about fragmented integration pathways and reduced contact with broader host society structures.

As participants struggled to overcome these interlocking constraints, many reported a gradual erosion of employment-related aspirations. Despite considerable personal effort, the combination of persistent legal limbo, restricted access to long-term planning, and limited success in re-entering the workforce led to a sense of emotional disengagement. In several cases within this study, these dynamics culminated in what can be described as a form of strategic resignation: when sustained efforts to improve their situation yielded little tangible return, some participants perceived continued reliance on public support as more viable than pursuing blocked opportunities. Initially, neither Austria nor Switzerland offered legal pathways to permanent residency, and the options introduced later remained tied to lengthy timelines and strict requirements. Instead, participants found themselves in a cycle of limited access and stalled progress: rights were formally granted, yet their full realisation was structurally blocked. This dynamic reflects broader concerns regarding temporary protection regimes, such as voiced by Kraler, Etzold, and Ferreira (2021), who argue that without pathways to permanence, such frameworks risk leaving people in prolonged uncertainty that severely constrains capability development. As noted in *Chapter 2.3*, while Austria introduced a pathway to permanent residency in late 2024, such measures came late and with high thresholds, and Switzerland's pathway through Permit B or C remains limited to those who endure extended waiting periods and meet strict conditions. At the time of writing, and in the contexts examined here, neither framework appeared to provide meaningful provisions for navigating protracted displacement or for addressing the aspirational shifts that emerge as individuals spend multiple years—potentially an entire phase of life—in host countries. While return remains a desirable outcome within the logic of temporary protection (see *Chapter 2.3*), participants' accounts suggest that these frameworks offered little in terms of structured or coordinated preparation for return. For many interviewees, the decision to consider return or onward movement was not because of failed adaptation, but due to a condition of *legal*

liminality and *structural stagnation* that curtailed further progress despite sustained individual effort.

These observations highlight the pressing need for structural reform and targeted policy responses. If temporary protection frameworks are to remain viable for future displacement contexts, they must move beyond short-term emergency relief and begin to address the lived realities of displacement. The following policy considerations are derived from the empirical insights of this research and aim to mitigate the structural stagnation, legal liminality, and aspirational erosion experienced by displaced individuals over time. They focus on improving legal transitions, enhancing support mechanisms, and ensuring greater consistency across decentralised systems—particularly in the Swiss context:

1. Structural and legal-level reforms:

- a. **Introduce clear and flexible provisions for status transition** after a certain period of residence or demonstrated engagement in host-country systems. This would offer displaced individuals a secure horizon while preserving the temporary nature of protection.
- b. **Establish predictable long-term planning frameworks**, providing not only stability during displacement but also preparing for different outcomes. This includes planning for structured reintegration into the country of origin should conditions allow, and offering clear pathways for continued residency if return remains unfeasible. If temporary protection is to remain a transitional framework, it must actively plan for both transition and resolution.

2. Strengthened support structures:

- a. **Provide additional support to those who engage proactively with host-country structures**, particularly in employment and education, through targeted recognition of work experience and re-skilling programmes to combat deskilling.
- b. **Ensure access to long-term residence or alternative status for those demonstrating sustained integration efforts**, particularly when return is not a viable option in the foreseeable future.
- c. **Expand language support**, especially for individuals balancing intersecting responsibilities—such as single parents or working adults—whose constrained time and resources limit participation in standard language instruction formats.

3. Country-specific considerations:

- a. In the Swiss context, while implementation remains a cantonal responsibility in line with federal structures, **equity in access must also be ensured across**

cantons, recognising existing income disparities and administrative capacities, but ensuring that these do not result in unequal integration outcomes for individuals based solely on canton of residence.

- i. Clearer federal-level guidance is needed to reduce confusion among displaced persons navigating regional variations and to enhance transparency for those arriving in a new system.
- ii. **Equal access to support services** (e.g. language courses, labour market access, counselling) should be ensured for all displaced persons, irrespective of their canton of residence.

In sum, these adaptations would offer displaced individuals a clearer path forward, create incentives to engage with host societies, and reduce long-term dependence on public assistance. If protection regimes remain insufficiently responsive to the differentiated realities of protracted displacement, they risk constraining individual trajectories and undermining both integration and well-being.

The aspirations–capabilities framework, combined with a trajectory-based analytical lens, has helped reveal these deeper structural limitations. By tracing how aspirations evolve and are either enabled or blocked by institutional contexts over time, this approach offers critical insight into how forced migration policy can better align with the lived experiences of those it intends to support. For temporary protection to succeed in its transitional function, it must move beyond stopgap relief and embrace adaptive governance—one that learns from displacement trajectories and treats mobility decision-making as a central element of policy design.

6.4 Analytical Limitations and Future Research

While methodological limitations related to sampling and access have been discussed in *Chapter 4.5 Methodological Limitations*, this section reflects on how these constraints may shape the interpretation and generalisability of the study’s findings. Although many of this study’s insights resonate with broader research on Ukrainian displacement from the 2023–2024 period (e.g., Brzozowska 2023; Khelashvili 2024; Maidanik 2024; Tarkhanova and Pyrogoва 2024), several important limitations remain. The following section outlines key limitations in relation to the study’s scope, sample composition, and temporal framing, while also identifying areas in which further research could refine, expand, or test the findings presented.

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of the experiences of displaced Ukrainians who settled in Switzerland and Austria. As such, the findings cannot be generalised to the broader population of displaced Ukrainians, particularly those who remained internally displaced within Ukraine or relocated to other European countries with different support systems and policy environments. While the patterns identified—such as the sequence of evacuation followed by relocation—are likely to resonate across a broader range of cases, the extent and form of these experiences may differ significantly depending on local conditions, legal contexts, and individual trajectories.

The selection of participants may have introduced a certain degree of selection bias. Those who chose to settle in Switzerland or Austria—and who remained there until the time of the interviews—may have done so because their evaluations of these countries were comparatively positive. Consequently, negative factors that may have discouraged others from choosing or remaining in these locations may not have been fully captured. Nonetheless, participants did voice concerns about structural barriers, particularly cultural and linguistic dissimilarities, even while expressing appreciation for the safety and institutional stability these countries offered.

Differences in the depth and character of accounts between the two host countries should also be considered. In Switzerland, participants offered broader reflections that included both positive and critical perspectives, often shaped by their age and long-term concerns about integration and security. The Swiss sample included a larger proportion of middle-aged adults, many of whom expressed heightened awareness of legal uncertainty and the limits of temporary protection. In contrast, the Austrian sample contained a larger share of youth and young adults, whose narratives were more strongly oriented towards individual integration trajectories and future goals, and less focused on the initial displacement experience—likely reflecting their age and vulnerability at the time of flight. A further contextual difference lies in the living environments of participants: while the Austrian sample included both rural and urban settings, the Swiss participants were located in more peri-urban areas, potentially shaping their access to services, networks, and daily routines.

Given these contextual, demographic, and sample-related particularities, future research could benefit from focused comparative studies across a wider range of host countries with varying legal and policy frameworks. Investigating how different national contexts filter, redirect, or suppress mobility aspirations would offer more systematic insight into the role of structure in shaping displaced persons' capabilities and long-term decisions. In particular,

comparative studies involving more restrictive or volatile systems may uncover different patterns of aspirational stagnation, adaptation, or resilience.

While the design of this study enabled rich, detailed insights into evolving aspirations and capability-building, it did so by tracing a relatively small and demographically uneven sample. Several population segments remain underrepresented—including adolescent males, older adults, and those who had already returned to Ukraine. Their trajectories and aspirations may differ significantly, and their inclusion in future research is essential for a more inclusive understanding of displacement dynamics. In addition, while certain patterns—especially regarding the initial displacement stage and the development of aspirational shifts—emerged clearly, they cannot be generalised without further investigation.

Building on these insights, longitudinal research that follows displaced individuals over time would allow for deeper exploration of how capability-building and migration orientations evolve dynamically across key moments in the displacement process. Such studies would be especially useful in identifying pivotal turning points along the trajectory, and in capturing the cumulative effects of integration efforts, family developments, and legal change. Targeted research focusing on underrepresented or intersectionally challenged groups—such as single parents, older adults, adolescent males, or returnees—could further extend the inclusiveness and nuance of trajectory-focused research.

Finally, the study identified several emergent themes that warrant closer attention. Among these are the sequential structure of the displacement process—marked by a distinct evacuation phase followed by a period of reassessment and relocation—as well as the function of ‘safe havens’ as pause points that enabled the reactivation of aspirations and capabilities. While grounded in empirical data, these observations have not yet been systematically explored in the literature. Targeted studies are needed to establish whether these findings represent generalisable features of conflict-induced displacement or are unique to the Ukrainian case. Such work could refine theoretical models of forced migration and provide more tailored guidance for protection and reception systems in future displacement contexts.

7. Conclusion

This thesis examined how the migration decisions of displaced Ukrainians evolved across different but interconnected stages of displacement. Rather than treating these decisions as discrete acts, it approached them as sequenced and adaptive responses to changing structural and personal conditions. Particular attention was given to the roles of personal aspirations, structural constraints, and emerging capabilities, and how these interacted across time and

space. The analysis draws on a trajectory-based lens to capture the evolving nature of decision-making under duress and integrates the aspirations–capabilities framework (de Haas 2021) to foreground the dynamic interplay between opportunity structures and individual agency. Based on qualitative interviews with Ukrainians in Austria and Switzerland, the study investigated how displacement trajectories were shaped by conflict environments, legal frameworks, institutional responses, and the adaptive strategies individuals developed in response.

Rather than treating mobility choices as isolated, one-time events, the thesis foregrounded their temporal and spatial evolution. It demonstrated how displaced individuals continually adjusted their aspirations in response to changing circumstances, influenced by emotional ties, social networks, and institutional limitations. This temporal lens also revealed a critical misalignment between the short-term orientation of temporary protection frameworks and the long-term realities of protracted displacement—an institutional lag that shaped, delayed, or constrained individual decision-making across the later stages of the trajectory. Methodologically, the study adopted a grounded theory-inspired approach that allowed theoretical refinement to emerge from the empirical material—particularly around the sequencing of displacement, the reconfiguration of agency, and the interdependence of aspirations and capabilities.

The findings reinforce and expand upon several insights from recent research into Ukrainian displacement (e.g., Brzozowska 2023; Tarkhanova and Pyrogo 2024; Maidanik 2024) by tracing mobility decisions through a longitudinal, phase-sensitive analysis of individual trajectories. By situating agency within a shifting landscape of uncertainty and limited choice, the thesis highlights how decisions were made not in the absence of constraint, but through ongoing negotiation under ambiguity. It thereby contributes a more processual and situated understanding of displacement trajectories, and shows how early disorientation, stalled integration, and aspirational reorientation all emerged from the recursive interaction between evolving aspirations and structural conditions.

The first key insight of this research is that migration decisions unfolded not as isolated events but as sequenced, adaptive responses under conditions of constraint. By identifying distinct phases in participants' early displacement trajectories—namely, an initial *evacuation phase*, followed by temporary stays in *safe havens*, and ultimately a *relocation phase*—the thesis reveals how even within environments of extreme duress, displaced participants continued to engage in adaptive and forward-looking decision-making. While these phases were not always clearly demarcated in practice, and often overlapped or unfolded unevenly depending

on individual circumstances, the overarching pattern remained identifiable across cases. The *evacuation phase* was marked by improvisation and survival-oriented flight from conflict zones, during which mobility was dictated primarily by external pressures and limited options. However, once individuals reached safer environments—whether within western Ukraine or in neighbouring countries—*safe havens* provided temporary security and the space for reflection. These transitional moments enabled participants to reassess their situations, rebuild basic capabilities, draw on social networks, and evaluate future options.

It is in this shift—between reactive flight and deliberate relocation—that the persistence of agency becomes most visible. While the space for autonomous decision-making was initially minimal, participants' accounts illustrate how, by escaping the most restrictive environments and entering spaces of relative safety, they began to re-engage not only with their own capabilities but also with the structural constraints that continued to shape their options. Over time, many made strategic, often cautious and incremental decisions about onward mobility—evaluating legal frameworks, social support systems, language barriers, and labour market access. These decisions did not reflect a sudden reassertion of autonomy, but rather a gradual regaining of agency through the continuous negotiation between individual aspirations and external limitations. Identifying the phased pattern of mobility, despite its uneven and overlapping boundaries, thus offers a valuable lens for understanding this process: it enables a grounded theorisation of agency in displacement, where decision-making is shaped not in the absence of constraint but through the adaptive navigation of it.

By tracing the evolving roles of aspirations and capabilities across the trajectory of displacement, the thesis contributes to a growing body of forced migration scholarship that challenges depictions of displaced people as passive victims. Instead, it advances a more nuanced understanding of mobility under duress—one that foregrounds displacement as a sequenced and adaptive process, marked by constrained yet enduring acts of self-determination. While some participants developed aspirations that reflected an intrinsic value of mobility—especially those who oriented toward long-term settlement and new beginnings—most mobility decisions remained instrumental in nature. Migration was primarily a means to achieve safety, secure basic rights, or provide for dependants. This pattern reflects the constrained and reactive character of forced displacement, where mobility serves immediate survival rather than self-realisation. Recognising this dimension helps clarify why long-term aspirations often remained conditional and deeply entangled with structural barriers. Building on this perspective, the thesis extends the aspirations–capabilities framework to the full displacement trajectory, showing how decisions—such as

whether to remain, return, or move onward—were shaped not only by changing contexts but also by prior constraints, opportunities, and adaptive strategies. Rather than viewing different stages in isolation, the analysis highlights the cumulative nature of displacement and the recursive interplay between legal systems, support networks, life course dynamics, and evolving aspirations. In doing so, the thesis offers a grounded theorisation of agency in displacement, showing how individual mobility trajectories unfold as interdependent and adaptive processes shaped by both continuity and change.

Several broad patterns of mobility decision-making emerged across the trajectory of displacement. While participants navigated comparable phases and encountered similar structural barriers, their decisions were shaped by the ways in which aspirations and capabilities evolved over time. Displacement initially disrupted key dimensions of participants' lives—undermining access to housing, employment, and essential services, while simultaneously eroding embedded resources such as language proficiency, educational credentials, and professional experience. These ruptures sharply reduced participants' real opportunities in the early stages, exposing them to heightened vulnerability and limiting their capacity to respond flexibly to new demands or emerging opportunities.

When combined with individual life trajectories and transnational family ties, this resulted in two broad groups at the outset: a small minority who were oriented towards Western Europe or their eventual host country early on, and those who were forced to leave despite remaining oriented towards Ukraine. From these initial positions, more differentiated aspirational trajectories evolved. Those who aligned themselves with their future host countries early on demonstrated a high level of sustained capability-building within these contexts throughout the displacement process. Despite encountering similar structural challenges to others, this group often experienced more manageable trajectories, as their aspirations were better aligned with their lived realities. This enabled them to actively seek opportunities within their host societies and maintain a greater sense of control.

These diverging trajectories can also be meaningfully interpreted through the lens of instrumental and intrinsic aspirations. For many participants, particularly those initially focused on return or uncertain about their stay, migration served primarily *instrumental* aims—securing physical safety, education for children, or economic stability. However, among those who had early forward-looking aspirations toward integration in host countries, mobility also appeared to hold *intrinsic* value. Here, mobility was not only a means to achieve specific goals but also tied to deeper motivations, such as reclaiming autonomy, building a new life, or realising personal growth. These intrinsic aspirations were typically embedded in

broader notions of future belonging and were more common among younger or more individually oriented participants.

The trajectories observed here show that aspirations and capabilities evolved in mutual interaction over time. Initial aspirations, centred on survival and short-term safety, gradually gave way to more reflective and strategic orientations, shaped by both lived experience and structural conditioning. The most prominent pattern to emerge was a gradual shift in aspirations—from an early focus on returning to Ukraine toward increasing alignment with medium- to long-term settlement in host countries. While Ukraine remained an emotional anchor point for all participants, initial expectations of return were increasingly replaced by more durable orientations toward life abroad.

This reorientation involved not only confronting and negotiating barriers in host countries, but also moving beyond a temporary understanding of displacement toward a more extended—if often uncertain—future outside Ukraine, shaped by the protracted nature of both the conflict and displacement. These evolving trajectories reflected a complex interplay of structural constraints—such as legal restrictions, limited access to resources, and precarious living conditions; personal circumstances—including family responsibilities, economic pressures, and emotional ties; as well as ongoing instability in Ukraine itself. As they navigated these overlapping pressures, participants faced heightened uncertainty while weighing diverse and often conflicting options: return, continued stay, or onward migration.

Capabilities—particularly the ability to access, manage, and rebuild them within the structural constraints of conflict and host country legal systems—were central in shaping mid- to long-term aspirations towards host countries. While successful adaptation—reflected in progress in language acquisition, workforce integration, and children’s education—often reinforced aspirations to stay, unsuccessful adaptation, even when accompanied by significant effort, tended to weaken alignment with host countries. Over time, this led to a growing divergence in mobility orientations among those initially aligned with return: many gradually shifted towards host country aspirations, while others—hindered by adaptation setbacks and persistent return aspirations, often rooted in ongoing family separation, emotional exhaustion, and a growing sense of stagnation in the host country—remained oriented towards Ukraine or found themselves in an aspirational limbo, marked by low alignment with either option.

The early (re)activation of capabilities—whether through engagement with host country systems or the mobilisation of transnational networks—proved critical for expanding

individuals' real options and shaping subsequent mobility pathways. Simultaneously, strong emotional ties to Ukraine and aspirations towards return often coincided with low investment in host-country capability-building, particularly when paired with a perception of displacement as temporary. This combination frequently delayed progress in critical areas such as language acquisition and workforce participation. Consequently, initial delays in capability-building tended to reinforce structural barriers and shaped individuals' ability to achieve medium-term stability, an important turning point influencing later mobility orientations.

As displacement became increasingly protracted, participants began to reassess the temporariness of their situation and gradually realigned their aspirations with the realities of life in host countries. What was initially seen as a temporary interruption increasingly came to be understood as an extended condition—especially as hopes for a swift resolution of the conflict began to fade following renewed military stalemates. This shift prompted a transition from short-term coping to more deliberate efforts at capability-building. These efforts often reflected an instrumental orientation toward migration as an investment in a better future. Participants re-engaged with language learning, vocational training, and bureaucratic systems—often driven by instrumental aspirations to improve their families' long-term prospects. These adaptive strategies reflected a growing recognition that long-term stability would require not only persistence but also the active reconstruction of opportunities within structurally constrained environments.

These capability-building processes, however, were deeply embedded in structural conditions shaped by both the conflict environment and national policy frameworks. The constellation of acute threats, infrastructure collapse, and mobility restrictions during the early stages of the war not only shaped displacement routes but also fundamentally influenced who was able to flee and when. While temporary protection regimes across Europe—along with Switzerland's equivalent—granted access to safety and rights through the lifting of travel restrictions and legal barriers, martial law in Ukraine imposed strict exit limitations on men, contributing to the distinctly gendered composition of displacement. These asymmetries structured the formation of early aspirations and left lasting imprints on mobility trajectories.

Once abroad, the divergent institutional responses in host countries further conditioned participants' ability to rebuild capabilities. Austria's more expansive integration support—particularly in language acquisition and employment programmes—offered broad-based entry points into host society systems. Switzerland, by contrast, provided stronger long-term incentives, such as access to permanent residency, but placed greater weight on individual

economic self-sufficiency. These differences filtered the viability of settlement strategies and shaped the extent to which participants could translate aspirations into concrete pathways forward.

Despite the initial relief provided by temporary protection, its design proved poorly equipped to support long-term inclusion. Institutional gaps—most notably in the recognition of prior qualifications and access to retraining—left many unable to return to their original professions. Barriers to language learning, whether financial or logistical, further delayed broader integration. Over time, the cumulative effect of stalled progress, limited capability-building, and unmet expectations contributed to growing disillusionment among some participants. With structural obstacles blocking deeper integration and emotional exhaustion mounting, participants faced increasingly bleak options: the prospect of staying appeared stagnant, while return remained out of reach. In a few cases, this resulted in aspirations that no longer clearly aligned with any available future, leading to a sense of disorientation or resignation rather than active mobility planning. These ambiguous orientations, though rare, revealed how protracted displacement under constrained conditions could suppress forward-looking decision-making altogether. Within this constrained landscape, return emerged as an aspirational anchor—particularly for those who experienced prolonged family separation, unmet expectations in host societies, or a continued emotional attachment to Ukraine. For some participants, return became a way to restore disrupted family unity or reclaim a lost sense of purpose and identity, especially when faced with the exhaustion of balancing low-wage labour, caregiving, and limited prospects abroad.

For most participants, however, despite repeated structural challenges—such as deskilling, legal insecurity, and slow language acquisition—their aspirations increasingly aligned with remaining in the host country. This shift was driven not by ideal integration outcomes but by a combination of prolonged absence from Ukraine, weakened return prospects, and growing embeddedness in host country environments, especially through children’s education, social ties, or partial labour market access. Even when full integration remained out of reach, the perceived risks and uncertainties of return often outweighed the limited but tangible forms of stability available abroad. As such, mobility decisions across the trajectory were shaped not by discrete moments of choice but by an ongoing negotiation between constrained opportunities and shifting aspirations—where staying became the most viable, if not always the most desired, outcome.

While the trajectory-based analysis of mobility aspirations and capability-building forms the core of this thesis, the research also revealed a number of important complexities that

extended beyond the main analytical lens. These dynamics—though not central to the evolution of mobility decisions per se—nonetheless shaped participants’ experiences of displacement and coloured the conditions under which those decisions were made. In particular, the role of social networks, age and gender-specific barriers to integration, and the long-term implications of family separation emerged as salient aspects of the broader displacement context. Addressing these themes allows for a more nuanced understanding of the structural and relational environments in which mobility aspirations were negotiated and decisions ultimately taken.

Social networks played a critical role in shaping mobility decisions across the displacement trajectory. In the early stages, these networks—often composed of relatives, friends, or peers from shared departure contexts—offered vital logistical support and emotional reassurance, frequently informing choices through peer discourse rather than formal information channels. These networks were instrumental in shaping initial flight paths and helped establish entry points into host societies. In later stages, social ties in host countries developed more slowly but gradually became significant sources of stability and orientation. For participants who succeeded in forming connections beyond the immediate family, these relationships contributed to a stronger sense of local embeddedness and reinforced stay aspirations. The presence of supportive social environments—whether through neighbours, community spaces, or informal networks—helped counterbalance structural barriers, such as limited access to formal support systems. Conversely, the absence of such ties often intensified feelings of isolation, delayed adaptation, and further complicated mobility decisions, particularly for those struggling with language acquisition or limited engagement in public life.

Intersecting with these relational dynamics were layered structural barriers that disproportionately affected specific groups—particularly middle-aged adults, older cohorts, and separated mothers. Middle-aged participants, especially those who had previously held skilled or professional roles in Ukraine, encountered persistent deskilling due to delays in qualification recognition and limited access to retraining. These challenges often clashed with their continued aspirations to re-establish themselves professionally, resulting in frustration, underemployment, or economic precarity. At the same time, educational and vocational pathways toward deeper integration were largely directed at children and young adults, leaving older cohorts with fewer accessible opportunities for long-term inclusion.

While younger participants were typically more adaptable and benefited from structured integration through schools or apprenticeships, older adults often struggled to build new

capabilities, especially in language acquisition. As a result, many experienced a growing mismatch between their aspirations—whether to regain autonomy or maintain dignity—and the constrained opportunities available to them. Among separated mothers, this gap was particularly acute: aspirations centred on providing stability for their children frequently collided with the realities of low-wage work, limited childcare, and the absence of partners. These cumulative pressures—especially in regions with weak support systems—eroded the capacity to invest in long-term planning and further limited upward mobility. Aspirations across generations thus diverged not only in content but also in feasibility—while younger participants increasingly projected their future within the host country, older adults were more likely to express ambivalence or conditional stay preferences, reflecting both structural exclusion and emotional attachment to Ukraine.

For most participants, displacement was initially characterised by instrumental aspirations—driven by the need to escape danger, secure protection, and re-establish basic stability. Mobility was less about the desire to move than about the necessity to survive. Over time, however, as individuals gradually integrated into host countries, more intrinsic aspirations emerged—centred around reclaiming autonomy, restoring dignity, or pursuing personal development beyond immediate needs. These aspirations, though still shaped by structural constraints, reflected a growing interest in mobility as a form of self-directed change, not just reactive adaptation.

In this context, short visits to Ukraine emerged as a pattern of reconnecting with loved ones and checking on the evolving situation—providing brief emotional relief rather than signalling a reversal of displacement. They illustrate how mobility could take on both instrumental and intrinsic dimensions at once: a way to attend to practical obligations while also reaffirming emotional ties and navigating personal attachments. Yet they also revealed the psychological and logistical complexity of navigating dual attachments. Return visits were often emotionally charged: while they offered moments of belonging, they simultaneously highlighted the loss of routine, community, or status in the place once considered home. For two participants, these visits reinforced the sense that a full return remained infeasible—not only due to conflict-related risks or economic uncertainty, but also because life abroad had gradually become the new reference point for daily routines and future planning. The limited frequency and scope of such visits further highlight how ongoing insecurity in Ukraine constrained the development of intrinsic mobility aspirations. Even when individuals desired to maintain ties or move more freely, security concerns placed hard limits on how mobility could be meaningfully enacted. Although occasionally misread as signs of opportunistic

mobility, these visits underscored the unresolved tension between attachment and adaptation. They reflected how even brief acts of mobility could carry layered meanings—not simply as choices, but as expressions of both necessity and longing.

Temporary protection frameworks, while instrumental in ensuring swift access to safety and essential services, were not designed to accommodate the long-term realities of protracted displacement. Their initial focus on short-term relief, combined with the assumption of early return, left participants facing structural barriers that undermined capability-building over time. A central problem was the temporal misalignment between institutional responsiveness and the evolving needs of displaced individuals. As personal trajectories became increasingly long-term, legal and bureaucratic systems often lagged behind—unable to keep pace with shifting aspirations and realities. Even when frameworks were eventually adjusted these changes frequently arrived too late to offset earlier exclusion, illustrating a clear administrative time lag between policy intent and lived experience.

Even where high-level qualifications were formally recognised, the absence of accessible language instruction and targeted employment pathways meant that these credentials often could not be translated into meaningful labour market participation. Limited and uneven language support delayed integration and reinforced social isolation—particularly for adults balancing work or caregiving responsibilities. In the contexts examined here, divergent national approaches—such as Austria’s integration-focused programmes and Switzerland’s more decentralised, performance-oriented model—were reflected in participants’ uneven access to support and opportunities. Most critically, the lack of clear pathways toward more permanent forms of residency contributed to prolonged legal liminality, constraining participants’ ability to make long-term plans for their futures.

To counter these challenges, temporary protection regimes should be reformed to combine short-term emergency access with forward-looking mechanisms. Clear and flexible pathways to more permanent residency should be introduced after a defined period of residence or demonstrated engagement in host-country systems, offering displaced individuals a stable horizon while preserving the temporary character of initial protection. Predictable planning frameworks must be established to prepare for both structured return—should conditions in the country of origin allow—and continued residence where return remains unfeasible. Strengthened support mechanisms are also needed: this includes targeted recognition of prior work experience and access to re-skilling opportunities for those actively engaging with host-country institutions, and expanded, flexible language instruction tailored to those with limited time and resources, such as single parents and working adults. For those

demonstrating sustained efforts toward integration, access to long-term residency or alternative legal statuses should be made available when return is not viable. In the Swiss context, where implementation is decentralised, greater federal coordination is necessary to ensure equity across cantons—avoiding outcomes where individuals face unequal access to support services solely due to place of residence. This includes harmonising access to language courses, labour market integration programmes, and counselling, and providing clearer national guidance to reduce administrative opacity. Together, these adjustments would align protection regimes with the lived realities of protracted displacement, create meaningful incentives for integration, and strengthen individual capabilities over time.

While this study provides nuanced insights into the evolving mobility decisions of displaced Ukrainians, several limitations should be acknowledged. As a qualitative analysis focused on Austria and Switzerland, the findings are not generalisable to all displaced Ukrainians—particularly those in other European countries or internally displaced within Ukraine. The sample was shaped by access constraints and may reflect a bias toward individuals with more sustained or positive evaluations of their host countries. In addition, differences in age composition and settlement environments between the Swiss and Austrian samples shaped how participants narrated their experiences and aspirations. These contextual particularities underscore the need to interpret the findings as situated insights rather than universal patterns.

To refine and test the findings presented here, future research should pursue cross-country comparisons that trace how different legal and institutional settings filter mobility aspirations and shape displaced persons' capabilities over time. Particular attention should be given to underrepresented groups—such as adolescent males, older adults, and returnees—whose experiences remain insufficiently explored. Longitudinal approaches would be especially valuable for tracing turning points across the displacement trajectory and for capturing the cumulative effects of integration efforts, family dynamics, and policy changes. Lastly, further conceptual work is needed to examine the sequencing of displacement phases and the role of temporary 'pause points'—such as safe havens—in enabling adaptive strategy-building during protracted displacement.

Ultimately, this thesis not only sheds light on how displaced participants navigated mobility under constraint, but also challenges simplified narratives that cast refugees or displaced people either as passive victims or as opportunistic migrants. By tracing the complex and evolving nature of mobility decisions over time, it foregrounds displacement as an adaptive, relational, and often prolonged experience shaped by structural pressures and personal

agency alike. These findings carry relevance not only for research and policymaking, but also for how we, as societies and individuals, listen to and engage with those who have been uprooted.

These insights and interviews have deepened my understanding of forced mobility decision-making by revealing the interconnected nature of individual mobility trajectories—where eventual outcomes were shaped as much by structural pressures as by people's own efforts and struggles to navigate what life had placed in their path. Listening to the personal stories of displaced individuals and being allowed into their experiences has been profoundly moving, sharpening my awareness of the complexity and emotional weight of their journeys. I remain especially grateful to those who shared their time and trust with me throughout this process.

This research journey has not only underscored the importance of trajectory-centred approaches in capturing the temporal and relational dynamics of displacement, but also reaffirmed the value of the aspirations–capabilities framework in making visible the personal agency that persists even in the most constrained of contexts. Engaging with these narratives and analytical tools has shaped not only the course of my research, but also how I approach questions of mobility, belonging, and justice more broadly—leaving me with a lasting appreciation for the resilience of those whose voices too often go unheard, and a strong motivation to carry these insights forward.

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9. Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this thesis, AI-based tools were used to improve the readability and clarity of the text. Specifically, in order to improve the overall readability of the content, ChatGPT and DeepL Write were employed to assist with language refinement, including grammar, sentence structure and rephrasing. Additionally, DeepL Translator was used for translation and further linguistic adjustments to ensure accuracy and coherence in both technical terminology and general language.

The AI tools were used solely for language enhancement and did not contribute to the conceptual, analytical or interpretive content of the research. All ideas, arguments and analyses are original and represent the author's own scholarly work in accordance with guidelines for academic integrity.

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11. Appendix

11.1 Ethical Guideline

Researching on refugees involves a delicate balance of potential risks and benefits. Research activities have the potential to violate migrants' privacy and expose them to various risks, including stigmatisation, (re)traumatisation and, in some cases, persecution by authorities or traffickers. However, research in this area is crucial in providing invaluable insights into the experiences and perspectives of refugees, facilitating a deeper understanding of the complexities of their movements and the challenges they face. Consequently, this research can significantly contribute to the development of informed policies on refugee migration. Achieving an adequate balance requires a firm commitment to ethical conduct and the significant involvement of refugees in the research process. To ensure the safety of all participants, it is essential to establish proper safety protocols along with an incidental findings policy.

This document sets out the ethical considerations and actions I have taken to ensure that neither the process of interviewing and researching, nor the publication of my Master's thesis or any subsequent work based on this research, causes harm to any individual or group. It draws on the European Commission's *Guidance notes for research on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants* (2020), the *Code of Ethics* of the German Sociological Association (DGS and BDS 2017), and the article *Beyond 'do no harm': The challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research* (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007) and the four fundamental ethical principles:

- Respect for autonomy (the obligation to respect the self-determination of individuals and their ability to make decisions for themselves without undue pressure, coercion or other forms of persuasion),
- Beneficence (the obligation to provide benefits and to balance benefits and risks)
- non-maleficence (the obligation to refrain from causing deliberate harm and deliberately avoiding actions that might be expected to cause harm),
- and justice (the obligation to distribute benefits and risks fairly).

Research design

Three primary ethical concerns were identified during the initial research design phase and subsequently incorporated into the research design and consent forms. Firstly, it is important to note that participants may experience (re)traumatization, stress, and anxiety when discussing their experiences, particularly those related to war or difficult living conditions. To reduce this risk, my study concentrates on the decision-making phase after migration instead of the initial choice to depart, intending to avoid the most traumatic experiences. Second, I recognise that refugees, especially those who have been forced to migrate, may have suffered physical, psychological, and emotional trauma. As a result, my recruitment strategy involves reaching out through trusted intermediaries to establish trust and delicately approach sensitive topics during interviews. Lastly, I am committed to

safeguarding the privacy of all participants and ensuring that the publication of my research results does not lead to reputational harm, stigmatization, or discrimination against individuals, groups, or institutions.

Sampling and Recruitment

Potential respondents are recruited with the help of intermediary organisations. Ukrainian refugees in Austria will be contacted through local NGOs working in the field of refugee assistance, who already know potential interviewees and their experiences through their work. Former refugees who have returned to Ukraine will be contacted through personal contacts within the European Geographers Association (EGEA). It is important to ensure that potential interviewees are currently in a stable, non-vulnerable situation in order to minimise the risk of (re)traumatisation through the research process. For this reason, intermediaries will be asked to only recommend people who are in a stable situation, both personally and psychologically, and over the age of 18.

The intermediary organisations will be made aware that any participation must be entirely voluntary and in the interest of the potential participants. In the interest of impartiality, interviews will only be conducted between the researcher and the respondent, but prior to the interview process, partner organisations will be asked to act as 'cultural mediators', advising on sensitive issues or potential pitfalls based on their personal or professional relationship with potential interviewees.

Informed Consent

The minimum requirements for informed consent are that participants are fully and adequately informed about the purposes, methods, risks and benefits of the research and that agreement to participate is fully voluntary (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007, 301). The principle of respect entails a responsibility on the part of researchers to be very mindful of the trust that is being placed in them by refugees and to reflect carefully on ways to build and sustain that trust (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007, 306).

The consent form provided by my supervisor at the University of Vienna has been adapted to follow the above principles. Furthermore, I will only collect the smallest amount of data necessary for my research and will describe all possible uses of the data thoroughly. In accordance with Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway's (2007) model of iterative consent, further permission will be obtained if additional information is needed from participants in the future.

Incidental findings policy

1. Definition of incidental findings: Incidental findings are unexpected information or issues outside the scope of the original research questions that are discovered during the course of the research and that may have ethical, legal, or practical implications for the well-being or rights of research participants.

A practical example involves a researcher gaining knowledge of mistreatment of refugees by officials or social workers.

2. Participant welfare: The welfare and dignity of all research participants are of utmost importance. Any incidental findings that have direct implications for their well-being, safety, or rights will be addressed promptly.

3. Notification protocol: In the event of incidental findings the researcher will take the following steps: 1. The researcher will assess the nature and potential impact of the incidental findings. If there is lasting concern about said findings, the researcher will then involve his supervisor at the University of Vienna to discuss potential next steps. 2. If the finding is deemed to be of potential harm or significant ethical concern, the participant will be informed, respecting their preferences for how, when, and by whom they would like to be informed. 3. The participant will be provided with information about available support services. 4. If necessary, the research team will seek guidance from relevant ethical review boards or institutional authorities to ensure appropriate steps are taken.

4. Privacy and confidentiality: To ensure that the participant's identity is protected, all incidental findings will be kept strictly confidential and securely stored.

5. Research documentation: To maintain transparency and accountability, incidental findings will be documented in research records, including the nature of the finding, actions taken, and dates.

6. Research ethics review: If the incidental finding reveals potential systemic issues or ethical concerns that extend beyond the individual participant, the research team will work with the appropriate research ethics review boards or authorities to address these concerns appropriately.

This policy is intended to guide the researcher in the ethical and responsible handling of incidental findings, prioritising the welfare and rights of the refugees involved in the research.

Safe procedure

In addition to the incidental findings policy, the following safety procedures are in place during interviews: At no stage of the research process will any pressure be placed on the interviewee or potential interviewee and all participation must be completely voluntary. If a participant begins to feel uncomfortable, interviews can be paused, stopped or terminated at any time. Participants will be made explicitly aware of this before the start of the interview. In addition, if the interviewer notices any signs of stress, uncertainty or discomfort, they will ask the interviewee if they would like to take a break or stop the interview. In cases where contact has been established through a trusted intermediary organisation, the researcher will also contact the organisation to ensure that appropriate support is provided to the interviewee.

Data protection policy

1. Data collection: Only the minimum amount of data necessary will be collected for this research project. Names, addresses or specific locations and exact dates will only be collected when absolutely necessary and will be replaced by placeholders in the transcription (pseudonymisation). Any information that participants wish to withhold for reasons of personal safety or privacy will be kept

completely anonymous. Informed consent will be obtained prior to any data collection to ensure that participants understand the purpose and scope of the data collection. Participants will be made aware that the recording of the interview can be stopped or paused at any time. The interviewer will then switch to taking notes by hand.

2. Data storage: All written recordings will be pseudonymised, and contact information will be stored primarily physically on the signed consent forms, separate from any other personal or communication data. Audio and video recordings will only be stored on personal devices and deleted after transcription.

3. Data security: Personal data (such as transcripts) and contact information will be stored offline on personal devices to prevent unauthorised access. Data stored on digital devices will be encrypted and password protected where possible. Where data containing personal information needs to be sent digitally for ethical or academic review, it will always be encrypted and password protected.

4. Publication of data: No personal data will be published and appropriate steps will be taken to ensure that no part of the publication can be used to identify a specific individual. If direct quotes from individuals are to be used in the publication, additional consent will be obtained from the participant. Personal trajectories or location data will not be published in any direct form, but may be aggregated (combined with the trajectories of other participants) and published as a map. If trajectories are aggregated, they will not include exact locations (such as smaller towns or villages), but rather reference regions or capital cities.

5. Compliance and Ethics: All research conducted will comply with all relevant data protection regulations and ethical guidelines, in particular the European Commission's *Guidance notes for research on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants* (2020). We will maintain open communication with participants regarding the use and storage of data and any changes to the privacy protocol.

By following this data protection protocol, you will uphold the privacy and security of participants' information and ensure that your research is conducted in an ethical and responsible manner.

Publication

In the publication I will, to the best of my knowledge and belief, ensure that there is no 'group-based harm' to Ukrainians or other refugees (stigmatisation, discrimination). Any publication containing data from this research project must protect the interests of both individuals and groups involved in this research. Therefore, when publishing or disseminating findings, due consideration must be given to possible negative consequences for participants or groups. Particular attention must be paid to ensuring that the publication cannot be used as a pretext for stigmatisation, discrimination, intimidation or xenophobic practices, and that no information is published that could lead to criminalisation, incite racism or jeopardise the social assimilation of participants. The findings of this research should not influence resettlement, relocation or status determination processes.

As my findings about participants could affect their wellbeing and be misused in public or political dialogue, particular care will be taken with the final wording. Terms and methods will be used accurately and precisely to avoid misuse or deliberate misinterpretation of my findings. Special care will be taken when referring to and interpreting official statistics (approximating figures).

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11.2 Information sheet and declaration of Consent

Information for participants and declaration of consent to participate in the study ...

Dear participant,

I would like to invite you to participate in the study “*Migration Decisions and Trajectories of Ukrainian Refugees in Europe*”.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time, without having to give a reason, refuse to answer single questions, or also withdraw your agreement to participate once the study has already started. There will be no negative consequences for you if you refuse to participate, do not answer questions, or if you withdraw from this study early.

This kind of study is necessary to gain new, reliable academic research results and to gain material for a Master Thesis. Your written consent to participate in the study is an indispensable prerequisite for us to conduct this study. Please take time to read the following information carefully, and do not hesitate to ask questions.

Please only sign the declaration of consent

- I. if you have fully understood the type and procedure of the study,
- II. if you are willing to give your consent to participate, and
- III. if you are aware of your rights as a participant in this study.

I. What is the purpose of this study?

This study will assess migration decisions and trajectories of Ukrainian refugees throughout Europe. The study aims to assess how refugees decide on where and how to flee to and how these decisions evolve over time. I am both interested in your personal decision making but also external factors that enable or restrict you as a refugee (for example, if you feel that rules about housing or schools have impacted your ability to stay at a certain city or country).

The study aims to improve our understanding of refugee migration decisions, in particular how refugees decide where to stay or which places to leave, and which personal and environmental factors are most important for refugees to succeed in their host country and/or to facilitate a safe return at a later stage. With the publication of this study, my aim is to contribute to an empirically-based and refugee-focused policy-making process.

II. What is the procedure of this study?

The study will gather data through in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis. Interviews are carried out in person (and online). Participants in the study will not receive any remuneration for their participation. There are no foreseeable costs from participating in the study. People under age (17 years old or younger) are not allowed to take part in the study.

This interview is expected to take between forty to sixty minutes.

III. Data collection, protection and retention

This policy is compliant with art. 13 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data.

Your data will be pseudonymised (e.g. through the allocation of an ID number, under which the data will be saved) and will be accessible to the Researcher only. The data will be stored on servers owned by University of Vienna for no longer than five years.

Your personal data and information (see Table 1), provided by participating in the interview, will be processed by the Researcher only, by computer and other processing tools for the completion of the research project in question and all related operations and activities, including administrative management.

TABLE 1

Personal data processing purposes	Processing legal basis	Personal data categories	Personal data retention period
Collecting personal data for the survey on refugee migration decisions and trajectories.	Public interest for institutional purposes (Art. 6, paragraph 1, letter e) of the EU Regulation)	• Identifier data (name, email, commercial name, etc.) • Voice • Images (only in case of interview through digital platforms) • Other personal data (excluding special categories of Art. 9)	Data will be stored for five years

Taking part in the project is optional. However, conferral of the data required is essential for the study to be carried out, and refusal to grant the same will mean that you will not be able to take part.

IV. Data processing methods

For the purposes indicated in Table 1, the personal data will be processed using electronic or automated tools and application tools will be adopted with appropriate technical and organizational measures. All interviews will be audio recorded, and only if you participate in the interview via online platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom may video be recorded. In the event that interviews must be conducted online, only GDPR-compliant platforms may be used, such as those licensed by the University of Vienna. The audio of the interviews will be transcribed. Video, audio and transcriptions of the interviews will be stored on personal devices only. All these operations will be carried out by the Researcher using methods aimed at guaranteeing security and confidentiality.

V. Data use, communication and dissemination

No participant will be mentioned by name but rather by their ID number, making it impossible to draw any conclusions about the participants. No recordings, minutes, transcripts or coded transcripts will be shared.

The analysis of data extracted through interviews will be used towards writing a Master Thesis, and an article in an academic journal. The participants' anonymity in relevant research outputs is ensured at all times. Towards this end, data collection and analysis will strictly comply with ethical research principles and EU law relating to data protection (GDPR).

No audio or video recordings from this interview will be disclosed nor shared with third parties. However, making sure that no identifying data (see Table 1) is included, excerpts of the interviews' transcriptions might be communicated or disseminated in a pseudonymized way, using the ID number.

VI. Rights and ethical concerns

Your engagement in the project is voluntary and you can refuse to participate. Moreover, you can drop out of the project and withdraw your consent to use your data at any time. However, this does not preclude processing before your withdrawal. You can contact the Researcher at any stage (even after conducting the interview) in order to ask for more information, either for the use of the data gathered through the interview or for other aspects of the project's implementation. In case you feel that you

have been subjected to unfair treatment, you can contact the Data Protection Officer of the University of Vienna in order to express your concerns.

VII. Rights of the data subjects

As the person involved, you may, at any time, ask the Researcher for:

- Confirmation of the existence or otherwise of personal data pertaining to you.
- Access to your personal data and information related to the same, correction of imprecise data or addition to incomplete data, deletion of personal data pertaining to you (when one of the conditions occurs that are indicated in art. 17, paragraph 1 of the Regulation, and in accordance with the exceptions provided for in paragraph 3 of said article); limitation of the processing of your personal data (when one of the cases applies that are indicated in art. 18 paragraph 1, of the Regulation), transformation into an anonymous form or blockage of data processed illegally, including that which does not need to be stored for the purposes for which said data was collected or processed at a later time.
- Deletion of your data at any time.

As the person involved you have the right to oppose, in part or entirely:

- The future processing of personal data concerning you, even if related to the purpose for which the data was collected. However, this does not preclude processing before your withdrawal.

These rights can be exercised by contacting the Researcher.

VIII. Contact details

Researcher

Merlin Ralf Schmid

Supervisor

Dr. Harald Sterly

Data Protection Officer University of Vienna

Email: dsba@univie.ac.at

Phone.: (+43) 1 4277 110 00.

Vienna, 1.11.2023

If, after carefully reading the above information, you wish to participate in this research, please keep one copy of the Consent Form and sign below to give your informed consent to participate in the interview.

Thank you very much for your time and for your collaboration in this research.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT

Name of the participant (in block letters):

Date of birth:

I agree to participate in the study "*Migration Decisions and Trajectories of Ukrainian Refugees in Europe*".

Merlin R. Schmid provided me with clear and detailed information about the objectives, significance and scope of the study, as well as about the requirements resulting from my participation in the study. In addition, I have read this information text for participants and the declaration of consent. The Researcher answered all my questions sufficiently and in a comprehensible manner. I had enough time to decide whether I would like to participate in this study. At the moment, I have no further questions.

I will follow the instructions that are necessary for conducting this study. However, I reserve the right to end my voluntary participation at any time, without this being to my disadvantage. If I want to withdraw from the study, I can do so at any time by contacting Merlin R. Schmid either in writing or verbally. At the same time, I agree that my interview with the Researcher to be recorded and transcribed and that my data collected in this study are recorded and analysed. Furthermore, I agree that excerpts of the interviews' transcriptions might be communicated or disseminated in a pseudonymized way, making sure that no identifier data is included.

I agree that my data are saved electronically in pseudonymised form for five years. The data are saved in a form that is only accessible to the project management and are secured according to current standards.

If I want my data to be deleted at a later time, I can arrange for it by contacting ralf.merlin.schmid@univie.ac.at or +43 681 105 056 01 either in writing or via telephone, and without having to give a reason. I understand that a request to erase my data does not preclude processing prior to my request.

I have read and understood the information for participants. In the explanatory meeting, I had the opportunity to ask all the questions I was interested in. My questions were answered fully and in a comprehensible manner.

I have received a copy of this information for participants and declaration of consent. The original remains with the study coordinator.

(Date and signature of the participant)

.....

(Date, name and signature of the Researcher)

.....

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name of the participant (in block letters):

Date of birth:

If the researcher discovers any information about me that could be harmful or has significant ethical implications, I request that I am informed through the following procedure:

.....
.....
.....

(Date and signature of the participant)

.....

(Date, name and signature of the Researcher)

.....

If the researcher needs more information or permission for using or publishing my data beyond what has already been stated, please contact me using the following details:

.....
.....
.....

(Date and signature of the participant)

.....

(Date, name and signature of the Researcher)

.....

11.3 Interview Guide

In-depth Interviews

Merlin Ralf Schmid

Checklist: Pre-Interview Phase

- ☐ Introduce myself.
- ☐ Introduce the topic and my research.
- ☐ Introduce the interview process (time estimate, recording).
- ☐ Introduce data handling, processing and who will be able to access what kind of information.
- ☐ State that there are no obligations to answer any particular question, and that the interview can be stopped at any time.
- ☐ Ask if there are any questions or concerns regarding the interview process or data handling.
- ☐ Have the interviewee sign the declaration of consent and data protection.
- ☐ Start the recording.

Topic

The topic of our interview is refugee migration decision making and locational choice of refugees. I am interested in how refugees, such as yourself, decide on where and how to flee to and how these decisions might evolve over time. I am both interested in the personal decision making but also external factors that enable or restrict them, so please feel free to also talk about things outside your control that were important to you.

From a theoretical standpoint, or in “science terms”, I am research migration aspirations and capabilities in refugee migration. In simpler terms, migration aspirations include the hopes, dreams or ambitions of refugees to move or, and this is important, stay somewhere and migration capabilities include the ability or means of refugees to move or stay somewhere.

Definitions:

Aspiration: A hope or ambition to achieve something.

Migration aspiration: Your hope, dream or ambition to move somewhere or to stay somewhere and build your life there, regardless of whether you actually have the ability to do so.

Capability: the ability or qualities needed to do something.

Migration Capability: Your ability or means to move or stay somewhere and build your life there, regardless of whether you actually have the desire to do so.

Interview process

I estimate our interview to take anywhere between 30 minutes and one hour. I will record the whole interview and later transcribe the recording into written form. The transcription will be anonymised and there will be no direct reference to your name anywhere outside of my personal notes and your declaration of consent. All data referencing your name will be stored on my personal devices only. The anonymised transcription will be available only to me, my supervisor and possibly reviewer.

There are no obligations to answer any particular question, and the interview can be stopped at any time. If there are any topics or events that you do not feel comfortable talking about, we can always skip ahead and avoid that topic.

Do you have any questions or concerns regarding the interview process or data handling?

Checklist: Trajectory interview phase

For each stop

- ☐ Is there a clear picture of the **interviewee's situation** at this stop?
- ☐ Was the situation at the **target destination** **satisfactory** for the interviewee?
- ☐ Was there a high **capability to stay** at the interviewee's current location?
- ☐ **Who** was involved in the **decision to leave**, and what role did they play?
- ☐ How was the **target destination** determined? Was the **target destination** clear from the beginning?
- ☐ What were the major **limiting factors** during that stage (at home or during migration)?
- ☐ What **factors** were the most important in **enabling** during this stage of the migration endeavour?
- ☐ Where there **any destinations** which **would have been feasible** but were **not considered due to personal reasons**?
- ☐ Where there **any destinations** which **would have been attractive** but were **not considered because they were not feasible**?
- ☐ How closely were the **initial decision to leave** and the initial decision on **where to go** **connected**?

Evolution and changes

- ☐ Are there any **events or changes** that the **interviewee is still waiting on**?
- ☐ Is the interviewee **considering moving somewhere else** in the future?
- ☐ Is the interviewee **considering returning to Ukraine**?
- ☐ Is there a **clear picture** of the interviewee's **plans or hopes** for the future?
- ☐ Are they happy with their past decisions? Would they do anything different now?
- ☐ Did the interviewee's **opinion/evaluation** of **different locations** change since leaving their old home? What were the **major factors** influencing that change?
- ☐ How did the interviewee's **migration aspirations** and **capabilities** **evolve over time**?
- ☐ Where there any **major events** that happened after leaving that particularly influenced the interviewee?
- ☐ Where there any **internal processes** that particularly influenced the interviewee?
- ☐ Is there a **clear picture** of possible changes the interviewee went through over time?

Checklist: Wrap-up

- ☐ Is there a clear picture of the interviewee's **migration aspiration**?
- ☐ Is there a clear picture of the interviewee's **migration capabilities**?
- ☐ Did the interviewee **apply for official recognition as a refugee**?
- ☐ Does the interviewee occasionally **visit home or other places in Ukraine**?

Migration aspirations

- ☐ Is there a **clear picture** of the interviewee's **migration aspirations**?
- ☐ What are the most important **personal factors** influencing **migration aspirations**?
- ☐ What are the most important **external factors** influencing **migration aspirations**?
- ☐ Are there options (actively or passively) **disregarded due to a lack of aspiration**?
- ☐ Where there any **newly acquired aspiration**, that influenced **future plans or locational choice**?

Migration capabilities

- ☐ Is there a **clear picture** of the interviewee's **overall migration capabilities**?
- ☐ What are the most important **personal factors** influencing **migration capabilities**?
- ☐ What are the most important **external factors** influencing **migration capabilities**?
- ☐ Are there options (actively or passively) **disregarded due to a lack of capabilities**?
- ☐ Was there a **lack of capabilities to stay** at either the area of origin or one of the destinations?
- ☐ Where there any **newly acquired capabilities**, that influenced **migration aspirations or locational choice**?

(Meta) narratives, networks, and groups

- ☐ Is there a **clear picture** of any groups or networks that were **of particular importance**?
- ☐ Is there a **clear picture** of what **sources of information** were **of particular importance**?
- ☐ Were there any **changes or evolutions during different** stages of the migration endeavour?

Checklist: Post-Interview

- ☐ Stop the recording.
- ☐ Thank the Interviewee for their time and sharing their experience.
- ☐ Ask if it is okay to contact them again if there are any follow up questions.
 - ☐ Write down their contact information.

Interview Start

Over the next 30 to 45 minutes, please tell me about your personal refugee trajectory, or 'journey' so to speak, from your original home in Ukraine to where you are now. As I mentioned before, I am interested in your migration decisions and the surrounding factors that influenced them. Why did you stop somewhere, how long did you stay there, why did you move on?

The decision to leave your home country and go somewhere else as a refugee must have been quite a difficult one. I am not primarily interested in the potentially traumatic events that may have led you to leave, but in the choices, you made along the way and the hopes, opportunities and limitations you faced while living as a refugee outside your country. If you feel uncomfortable at any point in the interview, we can stop the interview or the recording at any time, or skip certain parts or questions.

But if you feel up to it, please take me through your process from leaving Ukraine to arriving where you are now. How did you decide what to do, who to travel with, where to go?

Icebreaker

Maybe we can start by you introducing yourself and telling me a little bit about your current situation.

Afterwards, we can go through the interview by following your journey chronologically, but feel free to tell me about your experiences in your own way and order, and I will let you know if I need to know more about a particular topic.

For each stop

Please walk me through the process how you ended up there. What was your plan at the time and how did you come up with it? Did your plan work out in the end?

How has moving to your current situation impacted your life?

Are you content with how you are currently living and would you like to stay?

Future

Now that we have arrived the end of your journey, I wanted to ask you how do you see your future playing out. Do you have any dreams for future movements or maybe already made concrete plans?

Migration decision making

You already told me quite a lot about your past and future plans. To sum it up, could you please tell me what is most important to you when it comes to choosing where you want to live? How do you form a decision?

Closing Question

And now, at the end, I have one last question: If you had the opportunity to say just one thing about refugee migration or being a refugee, what would that be?

11.4 Call for Interviews

Currently looking for interview partners

Topic: Migration and location decisions during and after taking refuge

Contact: Merlin R. Schmid - / +43 681 105 056 01 – schmidmerlin@yahoo.de

«Hi! My name is Merlin Schmid, I'm studying geography at the University of Vienna and I'm currently writing my master's thesis on migration and locational decisions of refugees from Ukraine. I am currently looking for Ukrainians for a 30-45 minute interview in German or English.»



My research focuses on the individual decision-making process and the interplay of personal and external factors in migration decisions.

All information will be kept **strictly confidential**. No personal data will be collected other than a declaration of consent, and all interviews will be kept **anonymous**.

What is my research about?

- How did important locational decisions during your refugee journey come to be? What went on in your head and what factors were of particular importance?
- How did your personal escape route outside Ukraine come about? In which places did you stay longer?
- What prompted you to stay longer in one place or to leave a certain place again?
- What personal motives were particularly important for your decisions?
- Which external factors were particularly important for your decisions?
- Do your current circumstances allow you to live a decent life?
- Would you go somewhere else if the conditions were different?

I have NO interest in ...

- Questions about the war, personal experiences or strokes of fate.
- Questions about your reason for fleeing or your way out of Ukraine.
- Questions about personal data, whereabouts or business activities.
- Any other topic you don't wish to talk about!

Of course, you are welcome to talk about these points voluntarily if this is important to you.