

ARTICLE

Perspectives on Refugeehood and Motherhood: Germany-Based Ukrainians' Life Aspirations over Time

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Abstract

Drawing from the experiences of thirty-two refugee women who fled with their children from Ukraine to two German cities, Berlin and Frankfurt Oder, this article explores how being a refugee and a mother affects the anchoring, along with the un-anchoring and embedding of Ukrainian refugees in their new environment. It illustrates that solidarity practices and (inter)actions play a crucial role in mobility considerations, as the interlocutors engaging in solidarity work find meaning in building lives in their new environment. The identities of the interlocutors as refugees and mothers play an important role in shaping the solidarity they articulate as they work to support others in a similar situation in cultivating agency, which, at the same time, gives the interlocutors comfort in their own struggles. This article also makes a valuable contribution to the scholarly literature on transnational family ties through the case of Ukrainian refugee women in Germany, who often have family members remaining in/returning to Ukraine. The interlocutors positioning as mothers and refugees means that they engage in negotiating mobility considerations with these positions in hindsight — providing new avenues of enquiry into the agency of refugee-mothers, reflecting on life aspirations, and considering their specific positionalities and forced migration context.

Keywords: Ukraine; Germany; forced migration; life aspirations; anchoring; solidarity; transnational family ties

*ich flieg über bergkämme, ich flieg über flusstäler
ich flieg über den mount-ICH und tauch durch nen
SPEICHELOZEAN
es ist ein Krieg in mir, der will mich ziehn
zieht aber andre
und ich denk mich nur
denk hin
(Yevgeniy Breyger, 2023).¹*

Introduction

The displacement of Ukrainian newcomers to Germany and the EU at large took place rapidly, and EU states developed a swift policy response by triggering the EU Temporary Protection Directive for the very first time since its adoption in 2001 (Council Directive 2001/55/EC). Drawing from the

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experiences of thirty-two women who fled with their children from Ukraine to two German cities, Berlin, and Frankfurt Oder, this work explores how being a refugee² and a mother affects the anchoring, along with un-anchoring and embedding of Ukrainian refugees in their new environment. The article is based on an analysis of original data collected between August and November 2022 and approximately one year later, between September and December 2023, consisting of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Consequently, it outlines how the interlocutors' life aspirations have developed over time.

This work focuses on mothers' experiences because of the specific nature of the Ukrainian migration — most Ukrainian men are not allowed to leave Ukraine due to restrictions on men being mobilized for military service, although men can leave the country under certain circumstances; for example, in the case of disability or if there are three or more children in the family.³ As of October 2024, the majority of around 1.2 million registered Ukrainian refugees in Germany were women (63 percent) and almost half of them (48 percent) have care responsibilities for children.⁴ The article also focuses on mothers because they are important bearers and transmitters of culture and language, who, at the same time, are often marginalized by the societies in which they live (German and Ukrainian alike), as feminist migration scholars have pointed out (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2018; Liebig and Tronstad 2018; Yax-Fraser and Josefa 2011; McClintock 1993, 63). Against this backdrop, this research aims to make the voices of the mothers in this study heard, respected, and placed at the center of scholarly debates.

The article demonstrates how the identities of the interlocutors as refugees and mothers play an important role in shaping the solidarity they articulate as they work to support others in a similar situation in cultivating agency, which, at the same time, gives them comfort in their own struggles. This also means that they engage in negotiating mobility considerations with these positions in hindsight—providing new avenues of enquiry into the agency of refugee-mothers as regards to their life aspirations, considering their specific positionalities and forced migration context.

Research Context

Ukrainian forced migrants are one of the other post-Soviet groups in Germany who have (had) different legal preconditions for entering the country — that is, different than displaced refugees from Africa and the Middle East, for example, who have (had) to go through the asylum procedure — depending on political decisions made by Germany's government.

Before the Russo-Ukrainian war,⁵ Germany already had the largest post-Soviet population outside the former Soviet Union, estimated at 3.5 million individuals (Pürckhauer 2022). Although this work focuses on Ukrainian refugees, it shall, in order to provide context, and since it also looks at the interlocutors' anchoring and embedding in the German society, also refer to the migration of the two major post-Soviet migrant groups; ethnic German descendants⁶ and post-Soviet Jews.

Grounded in the Grundgesetz, the German Constitution, Article 116(1), ethnic German descendants in Central Asia, Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe have the right to "return" to Germany and receive German citizenship. This immigration programme is based on the understanding that they have a co-ethnic status with Germans, as descendants of those Germans who were invited to Eastern and South-Eastern Europe many centuries ago to help modernise agricultural methods, among other things. During WWII, Soviet Germans were associated with Nazi Germany; Stalin therefore ordered "preventive deportations" of four million Germans to remote regions in the Asian part of the country, to Siberia and to Kazakhstan (Kaiser and Schönhuth 2015, 12; Kühl 2000, 256). German descendants' "return" migration to Germany gained particular momentum after the collapse of the Soviet Union. More than 2.3 million German descendants from the Soviet Union and its successor states have come to Germany (Panagiotidis 2019, 5).

As regards post-Soviet Jewish migration; in 1990, the Jewish Cultural Association in Berlin called on the German Democratic Republic's government to allow Jews from the Soviet Union to enter the country because of the antisemitic hostilities in the Soviet Union. After reunification, the *Bundestag*

took up this initiative, allowing Jews from the disintegrating Soviet Union to settle in Germany under the Quota Refugee Act (HumHAG).⁷ As opposed to the German descendants who, as mentioned, were granted German citizenship, the post-Soviet Jews received a residence permit (Beck 2019). This immigration encouragement can be seen as an attempt to rebuild German Jewry, which was almost completely destroyed during WWII (Körber and Gotzmann 2022). Between 1990 and 2010, Berlin had the fastest-growing Jewish community in the world (Plamper 2019, 238).

In 2005, the Immigration Act replaced the Quota Refugee Act. The significance of this was that post-Soviet Jews were now expected to show a “positive integration prognosis.” This meant that, for example, adult applicants under the new regulation needed to demonstrate at least a beginner’s proficiency in German and provide a record of employment in order to obtain residence rights. From 2007, the Residence Law has served as the legal basis for post-Soviet Jewish migration. Since then, they have applied to reside in Germany on the same legal basis as other non-EU citizens.

Around 40 percent out of 220,000 post-Soviet Jewish contingent refugees to Germany in the 1990s come from Ukraine (BAMF 2022; BAMF 2009). Thus, the post-Soviet Jewish contingent refugees and Ukrainian refugees in Germany, as well as the other post-Soviet population groups are overlapping. They share historical experiences and often have complex, hybrid identities regarding ethnicity, language practices, and even religion.

Turning to the more recently arrived Ukrainian refugees, they too enjoy a differential status and treatment vis-à-vis other protection-seekers in Germany (and Europe), as I mentioned previously. They do not have to undergo the asylum application procedure, which is associated with long waiting times and legal precarity (Suerbaum 2022; Wyss and Fischer 2021). At the same time, displaced Ukrainians are in a time-bound protected status due to their temporary protection status, the extension of which depends on the political will of Germany and the governments of other EU countries (Lazarenko 2024).

Among other things, the EU Temporary Protection Directive grants refugees from Ukraine direct access to the labor market and social benefits, such as “Bürgergeld” — unemployment support,⁸ which is considered to support their integration. The entitlement to unemployment benefits allows for a different level of access to the housing market than for asylum seekers because rent is paid by the “Job Centre” (the unemployment authority).⁹ It follows that the Job Centre must grant approval for the accommodation and certain criteria must be considered, such as a maximum rent amount (426 Euro for a single person, not including utilities). Due to this framework, refugees from Ukraine are mainly dependent on social housing, which entails a lower amount of rent. Social housing is accessible to all who have a *Wohnberechtigungsschein* (a social housing entitlement certificate), whereby the income limit for obtaining such a certificate is 16,800 Euros for a single person. So here, Ukrainian refugees compete with applicants with similarly low or lower incomes; that is, in cities like Berlin and Frankfurt Oder, which are experiencing a housing shortage.¹⁰

When it comes to family reunification, if a person has been granted asylum in Germany, grandparents may only join the person who has been granted asylum in exceptional cases; for example, if they are dependent on help due to a disability or serious illness and no other person can support them in Germany.¹¹ For Ukrainian refugees, on the other hand, grandparents can join them if they wish to do so and are allowed to leave the country by the Ukrainian government.

Thus, Ukrainian refugees, like post-Soviet German descendants and Jews, have been treated differently than asylum seekers/holders by the German (and in the case of Ukrainian refugees, the EU) government. The activation of temporary protection and the associated consequences, such as faster access to childcare, housing, and integration courses, are likely to have an impact on the life trajectories of Ukrainians living in Germany. The already existing post-Soviet diaspora in Germany could also facilitate interactions more easily than other refugee groups who have no such potential access to extended networks. I will return to these considerations in my analysis of the interlocutors’ accounts.

Anchoring and Embedding

Already before the escalation of the Russian war against Ukraine, emigration from Ukraine was widespread. Often mothers migrated in order to improve their families' living standards back home in Ukraine — with higher wages and more stability of earnings abroad. This, in turn, led to women taking on the role of providers (Tolstokorova 2021, 63–71; Fedyuk and Kindler 2016).

Recent research has explored the arrival and reception of Ukrainian forced migrants¹² after the escalation of the war in February 2022, in EU countries, which includes Germany (see, for example, Byelikova 2024; Lazarenko 2024; Mijić et al. 2024; Hierro and Maza 2024; Rock and Yanaşmayan 2024; Tyldum, Kjeøy, and Lillevik 2023). For example, Lazarenko (2024) pinpoints how the refugees from Ukraine experience the uncertainty of being “temporarily” protected, making it difficult for them to make plans for their future. Nevertheless, she identifies bureaucratic processes — for example, applying for social benefits — as a process that creates feelings of accomplishment in Germany. Similarly, however, the bureaucracy in the new environment may also be a crucial factor when deciding to return to Ukraine (Lazarenko 2024, 16). Along the same line of thought, and as regards the uncertainty accompanying the temporary protection for Ukrainian refugees, Mijić et al. (2024) discuss how the absence of predictability may lead to a loss of meaning and, hence, a loss of trust in one's competencies. The overall experience of loss is shaped by lacking interactions with others; they argue that while Ukrainian refugees often have had to leave their spouses and parents and other family members and friends behind, this lack of accustomed interactions negatively impacts the self-perception of the participants in their work (Mijić et al. 2024, 9).

Moving beyond existing studies on Ukrainian refugees in Germany, research on refugees in general has shown that interactions with the “host” society and integration opportunities shape refugees' experiences (Spencer and Charsley 2021; Phillimore 2021). In this context, refugees' “embeddedness” concerns their access to and place in institutional frameworks such as the labor market and immigration regulations, as well as social contexts; that is, local networks (Ryan and Mulholland 2015). This means that to understand embedding processes, one must ask in which specific contexts refugees attempt to embed themselves (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022).

“Embedding” is defined as a process of rooting that enables migrants and refugees to achieve relative socio-psychological stability and security in their new environment (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Brzozowska 2017). Through their so-called “anchors” (such as legal status, language skills, and network contacts), they can develop bonds and connections and begin to embed themselves in certain environments/networks/relationships. For example, when learning the official language of a host country, migrants and refugees may feel more anchored there. Some anchors may be more secure than others, leading to different depths of embeddedness (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022). Refugees' experiences with, for example, barriers to housing, transnational family relationships, war, and feelings of isolation can have adverse effects on anchoring, meaning that negative or suboptimal experiences can lead to *un*-anchoring, which in turn affects their embeddedness.

I will return to the concept of “anchoring” and “embeddedness” when I discuss the interlocutors' accounts. More specifically, I identify key anchors/*un*-anchors impacting their aspirations to stay in Germany, or in their considerations regarding onward migration to another country or returning to Ukraine. One such key anchor is the significance of “solidarity relationships” after the interlocutors' forced migration to Berlin and Frankfurt Oder.

Previous extensive research has focused on solidarity relationships in the context of refugeehood (for example, Sharp 2024; Fotaki 2022; Schwabenland and Hirst 2022; della Porta and Steinhilper 2021; Fleischmann 2020; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019; Vandevoordt 2019; Agustín and Jørgensen 2016; Malkki 2015; Kapeller and Wolkenstein, 2013). While interpretations of solidarity in the migration and refugee literature differ, scholars have varyingly described it as a personal matter based on friendships (Kapeller and Wolkenstein 2013) — although “allies” do not require any friendships; a universal moral obligation (Malkki 2015); and/or a political stance that generates new constellations for political and social relations, subjectivities, and spaces (Agustín and Jørgensen 2016, 17). Indeed, the concept of solidarity is contested and its meaning is open to negotiation

(Fleischmann 2020). Accordingly, della Porta and Steinhilper (2021, 181) argue that in times of crisis, there is room for complexity and hybridity as regards solidarity relationships — for example, between the arenas of activism and community mobilization.

Within the framework of the abovementioned research, I have identified solidarity relationships in this study, specifically as both private and professional (inter)actions that are cultivated as “anchors,” and are impacted by broader socio-political conditions such as the landscape of an already existing post-Soviet population in Germany; that is, prior to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Agency and Transnational Family Ties

Forced migrants may experience a “permanent temporariness,” as they are often in limbo between longing for safety and a meaningful livelihood, on the one hand, and having to stay away from “home” and deal with the temporariness of legal papers, housing contracts, etc. These circumstances contribute to the already precarious conditions displaced persons face (Baas and Yeoh 2018; Brun and Fábos 2015). Although, even while in a temporary state in-between “homes,” people question static arrangements and are productive, reflective, and engaged in the process of living while waiting (Baas and Yeoh 2018, 163; Brun and Fábos 2015, 10; Brun 2015, 20; Griffiths 2014; Conlon 2011; Yax-Fraser 2011). “Agency in waiting” after displacement is an active waiting, an embracing of life in the presence and of future possibilities despite precarious and uncertain circumstances (Brun 2015). This may include developing routines, making plans for the future, and engaging in activities despite facing uncertainty (Griffiths 2014).¹³

I rely on refugee agency as a starting point for exploring forced migration and its significant impact on life aspirations. Against this backdrop, Brun (2015, 20) links the uncertainty accompanying displacement to “hope”; that is, hoping to one day return to the place one has been forced to leave behind. It is in this context that I consider in this study the implications for the interlocutors with respect to their transnational family ties, as their partners and/or the fathers of the refugee-mothers’ children often remain behind in Ukraine (Byelikova 2024; Miljić et al. 2024). I approach the experience of motherhood and displacement as dynamic and heterogeneous processes.

Extensive research shows how refugees’ family ties across national borders shape their family dynamics (for example, Carella, García-Pereiro, and Pace 2020; Caarls et al. 2018; Guo et al. 2018; Tyldum 2015; Yax-Fraser 2011; Zontini 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Carella et al. (2020), for example, show that transnational partnerships and parenthood play an important role in immigrants’ subjective perceptions of well-being. They conclude that immigrants who live in a transnational family are more likely to report greater degrees of loneliness than those who live with their partners and children (Carella et al. 2020, 807). In Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila’s (1997) study on “transnational motherhood” (a concept they have coined), the focus is on how Latina immigrant women, working as nannies or housekeepers in Los Angeles, whose children have remained in their Central American countries of origin, negotiate meanings of motherhood. Although the mothers in their study are determined to provide their children with better food, clothing, and schooling with the dollars they earn in the USA, at the same time, they worry about the impact of their absence on their children and experience a personal loss of family life (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, 562). Another case in point is Tyldum’s (2015) work on migrant women from western Ukraine who emigrated to Italy for better job opportunities (prior to the escalation of the war in 2022) and still have children back in Ukraine. Rather than focusing on the mothers’ absence, Tyldum (2015, 63) shows how their decision to leave Ukraine to improve their own lives and those of their children manifests a sense of agency. Several other studies focus on migrant mothers who have left their children behind in their country of origin and the psychological effects of such a migration trajectory (Pineros-Leano et al. 2021; Parreñas 2001; Juozeliūnienė and Budginaitė 2018; McCallum 2018; McCabe et al. 2017). In the study by Pineros-Leano et al. (2021), they found a higher level of depressive symptoms and emotional distress (sadness and insomnia, for example) among transnational mothers who have one or more children back home in their country of origin.

In the section in which I analyze the interlocutors' accounts, I show that transnational families and/or transnational motherhood after displacement have an *un-anchoring* impact on the refugee mothers and their life aspirations. The absence of physical family ties in the new environment pushes the women to want to return home and has, in some cases, led to their return. The emotional cost of their loneliness and lacking family support also causes illness and distress.

Method

The thirty-two interlocutors' participation in this study was voluntary and complied with research ethics procedures at The German Centre for Integration and Migration Research, my home institution.

The interlocutors were recruited through social media channels, especially Facebook and Telegram groups designed for Ukrainians in Germany. I have also used snowballing sampling (Noy 2008); however, not more than one person was referred to by individual interlocutors. During the follow-up interviews, I was able to trace changes over time and deepen the conversations with the interlocutors. In addition to recording interlocutors' testimonies, I also took notes of my own reflections during interviews to be able to reconstruct the quality of our interactions and analyze them in depth later (cf. Sherman-Heyl 2001, 377).

It is noteworthy that Ukrainian refugees coming to Germany have, on average, a very high level of education. Almost three-quarters of them (72%) are highly qualified; that is, they have a university degree or a degree from a university of applied sciences. Compared to the Ukrainian population, refugees who have come to Germany are also particularly well-qualified (Brücker et al. 2022, 2). Van Tubergen et al. (2023, 85) show that Ukrainian women with a high level of education were more likely to leave Ukraine when the war escalated. They also found that in their sample, which consisted of 2,400 Ukrainian refugee women in nine countries (including Ukraine), those who came to Germany had an especially high level of education (van Tubergen et al. 2023, 89–90).

The varying socio-demographic parameters of interlocutors in this study show how heterogeneous the sample is, with the exception of educational level. They come from different professional backgrounds in Ukraine, including a museum director, a hotel director, medical doctors, a lawyer, journalists, marketing and IT professionals, a hairdresser, a veterinarian, and a waitress. Most of the interlocutors have a university/polytechnic degree while three of them have completed secondary education. The higher education degrees are diverse: business, engineering, psychology, journalism, law, cooking, nursing, education, philology, finance/IT, chemistry, sociology/media, veterinary medicine, accounting, and medicine. The respondents come from all over Ukraine, having been exposed to various degrees of conflict intensity. All but one individual indicates that they are religious, rather passively, through following religious Christian Orthodox and Jewish customs. I was also able to reach out to Jewish individuals, which may be due to the fact that I have a Jewish background and a Jewish name, which, possibly, helped recruit them and allay any suspicions they may have harbored toward my research. I have neither a German nor a Ukrainian background — which makes me an outsider in both German and Ukrainian society, but at the same time, I share with the interlocutors the experience of being a migrant and mother — which, I believe, has made it easier for them to share their experiences with me.

During fieldwork, I was sensitive to the language question and wanted to accommodate the interlocutors' wishes. Before the interviews, I communicated that I have better knowledge of Russian than Ukrainian and would therefore have a preference to speak in Russian, or English/German if the interlocutors would prefer. Since the escalation of the war, Ukrainians have not only developed a stronger bond with the Ukrainian language, but they have also come to use it more in their everyday lives (Kulyk 2023). Nonetheless, none of the interlocutors expressed any discomfort about speaking in Russian with me — a language I conceive of in the context of Ukraine and other post-Soviet republics as postcolonial.

I conducted the interviews using the methodological tools of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2021; Zahavi 2002). This has allowed me to analyze the

interlocutors' subjective perceptions and how they make sense of their lived experiences. Epistemologically speaking, however, I cannot know how they came to form their perceptions. I nevertheless work to map both the spoken and unspoken parameters that I perceived frame the interlocutors' narratives for the purpose of identifying latent content in the statements. Meaning arises from the social dynamic between me (the interviewer) and the interlocutors (Amit 2000, 11; Sherman-Heyl 2001, 373; Lamnek 2010, 14). Thus, I, in my position as a migrant and mother, among others, am involved in the meaning-making process through my interaction with the participants (Smith et al. 2021).

Selected quotes from the interlocutors are included in this work and, as I analyze the overall interlocutor accounts, I synthesize the main thematic threads with regards to their life aspirations. The decision about what was and was not relevant from the transcribed interview data derived from my coding work, for which I also used MAXQDA (a software for qualitative data analysis) as regards the interlocutors' mobility considerations and how these changed over the course of time.

All the interlocutors have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Refugeehood, Motherhood, and Mobility

Of the thirty-two mothers in this study, fourteen had children aged 0–6 years, twenty-three had children aged 7–12 years, ten had children aged 13–17 years, and four had children aged 18 years and older.

In two cases, the children who were over twenty years old stayed in Germany while the mothers returned to Ukraine. In one case the whole family returned, and in another case, the mother stayed in Germany while her 15-year-old son returned to Ukraine. At the time of the first interviews (in the autumn of 2022), all but four of the interlocutors' partners and/or the fathers of their children were still in Ukraine. During the second round of interviews (approximately one year later), three more partners had moved to Germany to join their families.

During the first round of interviews, all but one of the interlocutors reported having difficulties finding adequate accommodation other than short-term accommodation in private flats, apart-hotels, refugee shelters, etc. During follow-up interviews, they had found longer-term accommodation via housing portals or with help from friends and acquaintances.

Solidarity (Inter)actions

A recurring account among interlocutors during both rounds of interviews is recollections about their acts of solidarity. These activities appear to have an anchoring effect in the new German environment, making everyday life more manageable and meaningful.

Lilya, 40 years old from Odesa, came to Berlin together with her three middle school-aged children in March 2022. During our first meeting, Lilya explained that she had started leading a support group for Jewish women refugees from Ukraine, who were in a similar situation as herself, to provide them emotional support. When we met the second time, after more than a year had passed, Lilya explained how she had since the previous interview further developed her solidarity work.

I've been conducting group counseling for a long time now. As you remember, I'm a psychologist. I've helped more than 3,000 people in Berlin. Ukrainians, Russians, Moldovans, and other Russian speakers come [to my sessions]. Not only those who have arrived recently [around the time I started this work], but also people from [the] former Soviet Union who have lived here [in Germany] for 30 years attend. I've created a community, a safe space for happiness and self-expression, where people become happier and more confident, [and] find friends and answers to questions. I still work for free. I'm provided with a meeting space by non-profit communities. I recently registered myself as self-employed. I need to find a more permanent place for carrying out my work. The question of returning [to Ukraine] is not relevant.

It is safe to assume that the counseling Lilya offers gives her life in Berlin an anchor. Initially, upon arrival, she worked with Ukrainian Jewish war refugees but has extended her support to various Jewish and non-Jewish post-Soviet migrant women, including Russians. Her solidarity work — that is, her professional support for those reaching out to her — thus stems from the broader socio-political conditions of both the Russo-Ukrainian war and of Berlin's post-Soviet community, which I discussed earlier. This post-Soviet community is not limited to a specific group but unites multi-group post-Soviet migrants to Germany, through a common language, Russian.

Lilya gives a voice to how her position as a refugee and as a woman with a professional background in psychology drives her volunteer counseling work, which in turn generates agency and resilience in her new, uncertain environment. Lilya's engagement is an "embracing of life in the present," despite precarious and uncertain circumstances (Brun 2015). Her temporary protection status allowed her to enroll her children in school almost immediately after arriving in Berlin, which gave her time to devote to solidarity work.

The solidarity (inter)actions that the interlocutors perform are not usually informed by a professional background in, for example, psychology. For Lilya, however, this was indeed the case, whereas 44-year-old Veronica, who fled to Berlin from Bakhmut with her two teenage children at the beginning of March 2022, has a background in the economy. Veronica started working as a volunteer a couple of weeks after arriving in the new city. Together with other volunteers at an organization called *Berlin Plast e.V.*, she helped with fundraising, collecting food products, clothes, and medicine to send to Ukraine. During our second meeting, Veronica, together with her colleague, had founded a support group for Ukrainian refugee women. They obtain support from organizations in Berlin that pay for their services.

Many women here find themselves in a completely torn and fragmented state. They don't know what to do next, [and] don't understand what strategy they should pursue. We provide them with a much-needed foundation, a base so that they can find a sense of peace, take advantage of some resources, and communicate with other women. Some of them have already gone through some integration paths in Germany, [and] some of them need help regarding where to socialise, which authority to contact to address certain issues. This work that we do distracts me from negative thoughts, it allows me to feel needed. Of course, we plan to return to Ukraine later, but in order to return there, we need schools to reopen for the children, and for it to be safe. Well, we'll return. For now, I believe all we can do, all our children can do, is to study, learn the language, [and] gain experience. Because here in Germany, there are a lot of good, interesting things that we can bring back to Ukraine later.

The follow-up interview with Veronica, one year later, shows how she developed deeper professional embedding in Berlin through the anchor of professionalized solidarity work with other Ukrainian refugees. This does not mean that she does not see a future for herself in Ukraine. Veronica eventually wants to return there and bring back the knowledge she acquired through experiences in Germany. She nonetheless engages in solidarity work that she feels energizes her life in the new environment.

I interact with people a lot, I attend various groups here, [and] I play sports. Mostly with Ukrainians who came here because of the war, but some have been here for a long time. I also attended a workshop for people who are experienced in working in public organizations, because in Ukraine I was the head of a public organization. I found this workshop here. It was conducted by a girl who is also Ukrainian, but she has been here for a long time. So, at this workshop, we discussed what we Ukrainians can do here in Berlin, here and now, how we can integrate into society, [and] how we can show Ukraine what we can do specifically for ourselves and for the society we live in. And I like these meetings, they give me resources.

The interaction with migrants from Ukraine who have lived in Germany long before the escalation of the war (that is, the already existing Ukrainian diaspora in Germany), has an anchoring effect, too. The old migrants are helping the new (as we can learn from Veronica, among others), and the new also assist the old (as in Lilya's case, also a recurring one among the interlocutors). Embedding in such diverse relationships and networks enables Lilya and Veronica, among other interlocutors, to gain a foothold in their new environment. Consequently, old and more recently arrived Ukrainian, and other post-Soviet migrants and refugees generate new constellations, alliances, and subjectivities while engaging in solidarity relations.

Many interlocutors also express how they would like to pursue solidarity work but feel no access to do so, which, in turn, has a negative impact on their life aspirations in Germany. One case in point is 39-year-old Maria, who fled to Berlin from Kyiv with her middle school-aged son in March 2022. When I met her in August 2022, she was ready to return to Ukraine straight away and said she had her suitcase packed. But because Maria had lost her brother in the war, she was aware that her return plans were not realistic. She said she felt obliged to stay in Berlin to protect her son. What is more, she had just started doing voluntary work in a Jewish family center, facilitating support for Ukrainian Jewish refugees and their children. This gave her the strength to overcome a depression she had developed after her arrival in Berlin.

When I met Maria one year later, she told me that because of an incident with an influential Jewish Community member, she was no longer welcome to work voluntarily at the family center. She was also kicked out of the room at the apartment hotel that the Community had provided for her and her son upon arrival in Berlin.

Earlier [in Berlin], my son attended a Jewish school. But since we had to move, and he's in the seventh grade, we tried to enrol him in a Jewish Gymnasium (high school), but we were told that his level of German was insufficient, so he wasn't admitted. But when people from Ukraine arrived, they were admitted to the Jewish gymnasium with zero knowledge of the German language, while my child had already studied for a year and a half in a Jewish school. I think it's because of this incident when they made sure I had to leave the family centre, which is [also] behind why they didn't admit my child to the Jewish high school. We found a place in a German school, but it doesn't suit him. It's difficult for him there.

Maria voices how important the solidarity work she used to do in the Jewish family center was to her. Now, without this engagement, and without access to the network enabling her to pursue such work, and with her son no longer attending a Jewish school, she and her son lack the support of being part of a familiar Jewish environment. As I mentioned earlier, previous research has shown that to understand embedding processes, one must ask in which specific contexts refugees attempt to embed themselves (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022). In Maria's case, it is a Jewish context in Berlin that is most important to her, an environment in which she would like to see her son nurtured. Unfortunately, this opportunity was taken away from both her and her son. Being forced to abandon her volunteer work in the family center was an unsettling event for Maria and has impacted her life aspirations.

I feel depressed again ... My family is there [in Ukraine] and I don't know what will happen when the war ends. Will there be jobs and the good life we used to have? When I start to think about it, I enter a state where I don't know what to do and how to pull myself together. I often sit at home and contemplate life. And tears start flowing. Maybe it's also because I'm alone with my child, I have no support whatsoever, I have no help from anyone. I receive money from the Jobcenter, but it's not enough. I have friends here, but it's just to talk and socialise. In Ukraine, I was very independent, and I had a completely different status and standard of living. People used to turn to me for help.

Maria experiences depression again and feels isolated. She would like to be engaged in the Jewish social networks again, to find anchoring for herself and her son to help navigate life and create embeddedness in the unfamiliar environment, but she expresses disempowerment to do so, and that the lack of solidarity relations has an un-anchoring impact — causing her psychological illness.

Viktorija, 33-year-old, escaped the war with her five- and eight-year-old children and moved to Berlin from Kaniv in mid-March 2022, in the late stages of her pregnancy. During the first interview, she was keen to return to Ukraine anytime soon, explaining, “We have a house there!” But when I met her a year later, her husband had joined her and the children in Berlin. Men, such as Viktorija’s husband, are allowed to leave Ukraine only on the basis of certain criteria, as mentioned before. Viktorija now tells me that she no longer wants to return to Ukraine.

Here [in Berlin], there is this programme called Notmütterdienst Ukraine-Hilfe [Emergency Mothers’ Service Ukraine Aid], and when I was alone [before my husband came] I got a lot of help. A woman came, she went to buy groceries while I was pregnant, sometimes picked up the kids. She’s Ukrainian. It seems that there was an organization that gave Ukrainians who lived here since a long time these jobs. Ukrainians help Ukrainians. And they [the organization] pay the women for their work. In the last year, I have also completed several projects involving puppets that I made and decorated with traditional Ukrainian clothing. At the end of the year [2023], I held a performance at the Brandenburg Gate to commemorate the victims of the Holodomor tragedy. I have also held a workshop with Ukrainian refugee women at the Ethnographic Museum of the Humboldt Forum and I exhibited my dolls at several museums, and during the Berliner Festspiele [Berlin Festival] “Struggle for Existence and Solidarity” event.

The household and childcare support that Viktorija received from a fellow Ukrainian woman working for the Emergency Mothers’ Service Ukraine Aid program, who had lived in Germany since before the escalation of the war, helped her embedding. Embedding in terms of her artistic work in creating dolls dressed in Ukrainian traditional clothing also manifests Viktorija’s professionalized solidarity work, a creative work that she has cultivated and a manifestation of agency in her new environment. Her new status as a refugee, having escaped the war and settled in Berlin, leads her to participate in solidarity actions, shaping her wish to stay in Berlin.

Two-thirds of the Berlin interlocutors had professionalized their solidarity activities by the second round of interviews. For the interlocutors living in Frankfurt Oder, however, the expressions of solidarity in both rounds of interviews focused on private initiatives such as organizing playdates for their children and using Viber or Telegram groups to exchange useful information with other Germany-based refugee mothers from Ukraine. The reason why the Berlin-based interlocutors professionalized their solidarity work, while the interlocutors in Frankfurt Oder did not, may be due to the opportunities offered by the capital, but may also be related to the fact that the interlocutors in Frankfurt Oder did not consciously choose this city but, rather, ended up there by chance. Most of the women interviewed in Berlin, on the other hand, specifically chose the German capital because they had relatives and/or acquaintances there or because their religious communities in Ukraine had organized their flight there. The support structures that existed for the Berlin-based interlocutors from the start probably made it easier for them to professionalize their solidarity interactions.

Based on all thirty-two interlocutors’ accounts, private and professional initiatives and networking cultivated an important anchor in their new environment, making life more manageable, meaningful, and sociable. This demonstrates that solidarity interactions in the form of support and care for one another serve as an anchor for facilitating life aspirations in a new and unfamiliar environment, while also manifesting a multi-layered meaning of solidarity that includes private networking initiatives. The solidarity interactions also demonstrate how clever and entrepreneurial refugee women are “taking time into their hands” to find meaning amidst the uncertainty of being displaced.

Transnational Family Ties

A central manifestation of unanchoring experiences among the interlocutors in Germany is the impact of the spatial separation from family members who stayed behind in Ukraine. This spatial separation led three of my interlocutors to return to Ukraine, as I mentioned previously. This was for example the case for 35-year-old Alina, who came to Berlin from Odesa with her husband and three middle school-aged children in March 2022. The flight for Alina and her family out of Ukraine was co-organized by the Jewish Communities in Odesa and Berlin, respectively; 400 Odesan Jewish Community members were taken by bus to Berlin.

I had no adaptation, absorption here [in Berlin] because I have no such goal, I understand this place as a temporary place. When our grandmothers evacuated during the Second World War, they understood that they would go home at the first opportunity. It's the same with us, we're always ready. We can only plan for tomorrow or the day after tomorrow because everything's so unclear. It's very difficult to integrate because I thought with English, Russian, and Hebrew it would be easy. But the language here's completely different, the mentality is also different.

Alina was forced to leave Ukraine due to the war and did not have any intention to leave for Germany. The flight was organized by others, by Jewish Communities in Odesa and Berlin. Being in Berlin triggered the collective memory of her ancestral experience with WWII. She did not like being there at all. We had the second interview online as Alina had already returned with her family to Ukraine by then. It was when she was expecting a fourth child that her husband asked her to make the decision.

It was an insane responsibility to bear because I didn't know what was going on here [in Odesa]. I had just heard some from people or from the news. From friends and from my mom. And I had to make that decision with blind eyes whether to go home or not. But going home was the responsible thing to do. I hadn't seen home in a year. And right when we arrived home, that's when I cried. I cried so much. When we entered Ukrainian soil, I cried like crazy. Just like a child. It's such a feeling ... like when my youngest daughter, who is five now, entered the flat, at the door, she asked "mum, is it our house?" And when I explained to her that we were home, it was ... She didn't come out of her room for half a day, she touched every toy, she played by herself, she didn't need anybody. She just needed that feeling of her room.

Alina felt that it was safer to be in war-torn Ukraine, next to her extended family — a recurring narrative among the returnees — as she was expecting a fourth child, than to be in an unsettling, upsetting German environment, triggering, in her case, second-hand memories of another past war. Hence, her family ties in Ukraine and the collective family memory had un-anchoring effects on Alina's settlement in Berlin, which led to her re-anchoring in war-torn Odesa.

During the second round of interviews, one of my interlocutors had also moved on to Canada. Kristina, who left for Canada, initially came to Berlin in July 2022, having fled Donezk with her 11-year-old daughter. We had our second meeting online.

I'd been planning to leave Germany for a long time, everything was good, support from the state, work, and my daughter in school, but the mental comfort... The first attempt to return to Ukraine was in September [2023], I took my daughter home, then it turned out that there was heavy shelling, and I took her back to Germany again. The decision to go to Canada was spontaneous, we had visas and my cousin emigrated [t]here a long time ago and after the escalation of war, she wanted to help. I got a job after three months. I work as an accountant in a large company. I'll always be grateful to them [the employer], because I have a good job, even with a poor level of English. My daughter goes to school. She is communicative and the integration was easy. But we live in a small town ... The infrastructure is so bad. My husband's in Kyiv. He's working. Of course, it is hard to live apart, and of course we realise that we'll have

to learn to live together again ... My parents, sister, and brother are in Ukraine. Many friends have returned home, so I collect information, opinions ... As of today, no one in my circle has regretted the decision. I've bought tickets for the end of August; we'll be returning home. Canada is a beautiful country, but I'm not living my life. I've something to lose in Ukraine, so for me Germany, Canada, and other countries are not a "chance" really, but rather forced migration destinations.

Kristina's feeling of loss and of having been forced to leave home is impacting her life in the new environment, which influences her "decision," which is a multi-layered concept, especially in the context of forced migration, as the choice is not likely to be free, to return to Ukraine. It was her cousin living in Canada and her psychological discomfort in Germany that encouraged her to move there, and, then again, the family ties in Ukraine and the forced migration context prompted her to return to Ukraine.

Another returnee is 45-year-old Lilia, who fled with her two children, 17 and 22 years old, from Dnepr to Frankfurt Oder in mid-March 2022. Her oldest 27-year-old daughter came along in May, while her husband stayed in Ukraine although he could have left, as he is 60 years old, but did not want to go. When I met Lilia for the first time she was certain she would return to Ukraine as soon as it would be more safe there. "I've got my husband, my parents back home, I've got sisters there too. All relatives stayed." During our second meeting, which took place online, Lilia returned with her son and oldest daughter, while the young adult middle daughter, now 24 years old, remained in Frankfurt Oder.

My son, who turned 18 in August, doesn't want to live or study in Germany. That means he has to go to university, and for that he needs our presence here in Ukraine. That's the first thing. Secondly, my parents are here, my sisters are here, my husband is here, my home is here. Of course there is a lot of military, a lot of military vehicles, but basically the shops remain open, the restaurants, the bars, everything works. The hospitals are working, it's normal life ... People are having children, getting married, having birthdays, [and] funerals ... Worrying all the time ... Well, I don't see much point in doing so. You can go crazy if you're constantly worrying about what might happen. That's why we live by the realities of today, how calm it is today, how calm it is at this moment. Of course, nobody makes special plans for the future.

The difficulty of being separated from family members and being displaced from the home environment led to Lilia's return. She contemplated being a transnational mother and came to the conclusion that it was more important for her to be there for her son while he enrolled in university in Ukraine than to settle into a foreign, but non-war-torn place. Despite her lack of perspective and inability to plan for the future, Lilia remains hopeful and embraces life in the present.

During the first round of interviews, those interlocutors who had teenage children often expressed intentions to stay in Germany for several years. They wanted their children to complete secondary school and be able to study in Germany. The importance of the children's social integration was a recurring narrative among all interlocutors. During the follow-up interviews, they are continuously preoccupied with worries about whether their children are feeling safe and settled in their new environment. They worry about the lack of friendships and language skills, as well as the longing the children experience to return home. The transnational family life is marked by the impact of war on family dynamics, which has also led to the circumstance that most mothers in this study are forced to perform single mothering — as the fathers are not allowed to leave Ukraine. Interlocutors also feel the urge to stay in Germany even when their older children are in Ukraine or have returned there. Thus, their life-building aspirations depend on the age of their children — and on the will and wishes expressed by their teenagers and young adults, which also leads to mothers to become separated from their older children.

Tat'jana, 41 years old, who fled to Berlin with her 15-year-old son in mid-March 2022 from Kharkiv, which had been badly affected by the war, explained during our first meeting that she wanted to stay in Berlin but was sad that her husband, who was now living in Kyiv, was unable to join her and her son. Tat'jana developed depression and went to see a psychiatrist in Berlin who prescribed her antidepressants. She also saw a sexologist as she was suffering from a lack of sexual intimacy. When we met a year later, Tat'jana was going through a divorce.

I was tired of living without a husband, without a man, being married. I chose to stay in Berlin, my husband did not choose where to live. But he did nothing to come to Berlin and visit us — in fact, he chose to stay in Ukraine. I chose freedom, to go on separately. One and a half years of war and of living at a distance, with stress and uncertainty — all this accelerated and contributed to the divorce. And I must admit that I feel good now, I feel at ease, I see prospects for myself, and opportunities ... I mean, I see security. All these aspects are very important, and I've already come a long way: a flat has been found, stability has been gained. And to scrap it all and rush into the unknown ... There's nowhere to return in Ukraine. I had to make an inner decision myself. I had the courage, given that our child wanted the opposite ... He's a teenager, and he was like ... As if he was ripped out from his roots and it wasn't possible for him here. The language barrier. It was very important for him to communicate with his mates, to communicate as he would like ... I mean it was ... Everyone was friendly to him, but he was drawn back to his dad, and we made the decision that I would stay and that he would return to Ukraine. Because it was useless to persuade him. Well, he already had the right to cross the border alone at the age of 16, and we decided that to prevent further escalation within the family, it would be better to let him return to his dad.

Tat'jana has settled in Berlin, found a flat, and is determined to stay — and not be uprooted by the transnational family ties that have emerged. She has decided to stay where she feels safe and stable at this moment, while, at the same time, having divorced her husband, she lives apart from her teenage son, who returned to Ukraine. Tat'jana's forced migration and the torn family ties that have accompanied the mobility are the predicaments/life events in which she finds herself on her own in Berlin.

Becoming transnational mothers or wives is not always a negotiable process for the interlocutors. Yulia, 45 years old, fled from L'viv to Frankfurt Oder with her 7- and 15-year-old daughters mid-March 2022. Yulia's husband stayed behind and was mobilized for military service. During our first meeting, Yulia aspired to return, telling me: "Of course there is still hope. All my dreams have remained in Ukraine. I haven't moved completely. My body is here, but my soul is there, hope remains. I've spent my whole life there." Yulia says that since the escalation of the war, she has lost 14 cousins at the front. Her brother has not been called up because of a heart problem, but he is nevertheless not allowed to leave the country, which worries Yulia greatly. She also finds the climate in her new environment unbearable.

The climate here is so difficult, my health is suffering. Especially because of the humidity. As soon as the sun barely shines, it gets damp outside and the cold penetrates. And when the sun really comes out, it just burns you up. The climate is like a double-edged sword. There is no golden middle.

When I met Yulia a year later, she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She says the disease developed because of her post-flight stress and the struggle with adapting to the new environment with such weather conditions. Yulia explains that her husband had left her for another woman six months after she fled to Frankfurt Oder. She is no longer in touch with him. Yulia also no longer dreams of returning home. However, the loss of several transnational relationships, including her now ex-husband and many perished cousins, seem to have an un-anchoring effect on her

embedding in Frankfurt Oder. She recalls: “I’ve dug two trenches: one to the grocery store, the other to the unemployment center, and I walk quietly back and forth, back and forth ...” Yulia expresses having few aspirations for herself and her future, but at the same time, she expresses the hope that she will be able to return to her old life in Ukraine. She is also appreciative of the presence, for the opportunity to deepen the relationships with her children.

In Ukraine, I didn’t really feel like a mom at all because I was working all the time. I even remember when my youngest daughter was a baby and I had to breastfeed her while I was driving. Can you imagine? Comparing that life in Ukraine to our current situation in Germany, it’s like night and day! Here, I can raise my children, communicate with them, go somewhere. In Ukraine, if you go on maternity leave, you’ll starve to death. The difference is colossal. Well, consider this. In Ukraine, we got 20 € per child per month, which isn’t even enough to buy diapers, and the prices are more or less the same as here. How is it possible to survive?

Yulia’s reflection on how the German social system with its *Kindergeld* (financial support for children and their parents) and unemployment support provides her the possibility to mother in a secure environment, and is a recurring theme among the interlocutors. The sense of security that accompanies the social benefits exerts an anchoring function, despite the physical separation from loved ones and amidst feelings of loss and geographical displacement.

Alena, 45 years old, who fled from Odesa to Frankfurt Oder at the beginning of March 2022, did not need to apply for unemployment support in Germany as she started working straight away. Alena’s daughter had been living in Frankfurt Oder for a year as a student before the war escalated, and Alena, after having fled Ukraine, moved in with her daughter into her university dorm room. Her husband and 24-year-old son had had to stay behind in Ukraine. Her parents also remained behind. When we met the first time, Alena told me that she learned German at school already as a child and later in life studied German, speaking the language fluently. Upon arrival in Frankfurt Oder, she signed a one-year contract at a school, working full-time, teaching German to Ukrainian children. When we met a second time, Alena told me that she had renewed the employment contract at the same school.

I also found an apartment a year ago so now I live by myself... I don’t know what I will do after the war, whether my husband could come ... But he works, and so do my parents. Everyone works, everyone lives, somehow, we have adapted, we are resilient. If my husband came here, he wouldn’t sit idle on benefits either; he would probably look for a job. But we were just talking on the phone. He said that if he could come, he would simply come to see me and leave again. He wouldn’t leave everything behind there. We have a nice apartment in Odesa, our own apartment, we don’t rent. We live 15 minutes from the sea ... My son doesn’t know what to do next. He is studying to become a surgeon. Nobody knows anything, everyone lives, and wonders what should they do next. Before the war, we envisioned our future, planned that we would go somewhere in the summer, that we would do that, visit our daughter there. And now we just don’t know.

Even though Alena speaks German and has a job and a flat, she is unsure whether she should stay in Germany or return to Ukraine. The family relationships with her partner, her son, and her parents in Ukraine seem to be the main reason for her indecisiveness, the very un-anchor that impacts her not knowing where she will be in the foreseeable future.

Given the uncertainty, which we might conceive of as an ongoing “not-knowing-ness,” however, women in this study exercise agency by seizing opportunities in the present and hoping for a better future, perhaps also due to the “relatively precarious” circumstances compared to other forced migrants in Germany, who sometimes have to wait several years for asylum or its refusal.

Conclusion

This article sought to extend the literature on motherhood and refugeehood by conceptualizing the anchoring and un-anchoring that refugee mothers experience over time in their new environment. I identify two specific manifestations of anchoring and un-anchoring that influence the interlocutors' reasons to stay in Germany, move on elsewhere, return to Ukraine, or aspire to do so. These manifestations are ever-changing over the course of time and are dependent on their experience of solidarity and/or exercising solidarity work, or the lack thereof, and on transnational family ties or the loss of such ties.

The article shows how the position of being a mother and a refugee at the same time is the starting point for anchoring work and thus for the consideration of mobility. It also demonstrates how family life can be built and led after forced migration. Thereby, in the process of searching for footholds in their new environment, Ukrainian refugees in this study engage in solidarity work on private and professionalized levels, facilitating anchoring. The process of anchoring, however, is challenged when interlocutors have their partners and/or other family members back home in Ukraine.

The article brings together the concept of anchoring with solidary (inter)action and with the implications of transnational motherhood. Based on the subjective perspectives of the interlocutors, it makes visible ongoing dynamics in relation to the life aspirations of forced migrant women from Ukraine living in Germany, in Berlin, and in Frankfurt Oder. It makes evident how refugee mothers reconfigure their understanding of what it means to become *both* a mother and a refugee; that is, in the backdrop of having had to flee war with their children and how they then find ways of cultivating agency based on those circumstances. What specifically marks the life aspirations of interlocutors thus seems to be that solidarity work gives meaning and makes one want to stay, whereas the transnational family ties pull one back home or to the uncertainty of not knowing what to do next.

It is relevant to see whether belonging to different Ukrainian subgroups (such as the Jewish one) changes the ways of solidarity work and life aspirations in Germany. It seems, however, that other than the availability of different support networks for the Ukrainian Jewish interlocutors, there is not much that distinguishes their experiences with displacement. Instead, we can conclude that there is a high degree of diversity of backgrounds of Ukrainian refugee mothers, the complexity of which the interlocutors in this study have voiced in conversation with me.

Perhaps, needless to say, the present work represents a specific snapshot in time. I captured the experiences of Ukrainian refugee mothers shortly after they arrived in Berlin and Frankfurt Oder, and then again approximately one year later. My interviews demonstrate more often than not that they find meaning in the time they spend engaged in solidarity work. My work also shows that they carry out their solidarity work in synergy with a wider Ukrainian and/or post-Soviet diaspora network, creating new constellations and alliances. It would be valuable to observe these constellations and alliances over a longer span of time and to further explore how such solidarity relationships are embedded in the societies in which Ukrainian refugees live. A project conducted with a wider temporal framework in mind would, I believe, prompt further reflection on solidarity responses as a pathway for the inclusion of Ukrainian and other refugees in Germany and beyond.

Acknowledgments. Above all, I would like to thank the interlocutors for sharing their experiences and thoughts. While working on this article, the feedback and support from Dr. Zeynep Yanaşmayan and Dr. Ramona Rischke has been extremely encouraging. I also thank Agnès Bouché and Polina Semyonova for their student assistance. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to present the work while in progress at the "EASA2024: Doing and Undoing with Anthropology" conference of the University of Barcelona in the panel "Mothering Times: experiences of motherhood in the process of migration". I am particularly indebted to Professor Milena Belloni and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on how to improve this work. I am also grateful to Dejan Djokić for honouring this research endeavour, which I dedicate to the memory of Michal Rokem-Negev.

Financial support. The German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

- 1 In this untitled opening poem of the collection “Frieden ohne Krieg” (Peace without War), Yevgeniy Breyger, who migrated from Kharkiv to Germany in 1999, addresses the war in Ukraine. My translation into English:

*I fly over mountain ridges, I fly over river valleys
I fly over mount-ME and dive through a
SALIVAOCEAN
there's a war inside me, it wants to draw me in
but draws others instead
and I'm left thinking to myself
think to there, in the direction of home*

- 2 Throughout this text, I use “refugee” and “forced migrant” interchangeably.
- 3 Закон України про мобілізаційну підготовку та мобілізацію, ст. 23 [Law of Ukraine on mobilization training and mobilization, art. 23]. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3543-12#top>. Last accessed 9 July 2024.
- 4 Mediendienst Integration. <https://mediendienst-integration.de/migration/flucht-asyl/ukrainische-fluechtlinge.html>. Accessed 19 December 2024; UNHCR. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>. Last accessed 19 December 2024.
- 5 The war often described as Russia’s war against Ukraine is better described as a Russo-Ukrainian war, as the invaders encountered resistance from the regular army as well as partisans, as convincingly argued by Serhii Plokhyy (2023).
- 6 The ethnic German descendants are referred to as *Aussiedler* (resettlers) if they immigrated before 1992 and *Spätaussiedler* (late resettlers) if they came after 1993. The distinction is based on the time of resettlement without substantive legal implications.
- 7 Bundesgesetzblatt. (1980). Gesetz über Maßnahmen für im Rahmen humanitärer Aktionen aufgenommene Flüchtlinge (HumHAG). https://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav#_bgbl_%2F%2F%5B%40attr_id%3D%27bgbl180s1057.pdf%27%5D__1669202319202. Last accessed 2 August 2024.
- 8 BMAS. <https://www.bmas.de/DE/Europa-und-die-Welt/Europa/Ukraine/FAQ-DE/faq-art-de.html>. Last accessed 29 June 2024.
- 9 Asylum seekers must live in a reception center for a certain period, a maximum, however, of eighteen months. After that, they are accommodated in a refugee shelter. From the day on which the confirmation of arrival is issued, asylum seekers are entitled to social benefits in accordance with the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act (AsylbLG). Such benefits are paid by the social welfare office (Sozialamt) and are significantly lower than the benefits paid to unemployed people by the unemployment authorities (Jobcenters) (Integrationsbeauftragte. <https://www.integrationsbeauftragte.de/ib-de/ich-moechte-mehr-wissen-ueber/flucht-und-asyl/unterbringung-und-versorgung-1864972>. Last accessed 29 June 2024.)
- 10 BAMF. <https://www.germany4ukraine.de/hilfeportal-de/unterkunft-fuer-ukrainer/staatlichewohnfoerderung>. Last accessed 21 January 2024.
- 11 AsylG, § 26. https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/asylvfg_1992/__26.html. Last accessed 1 August 2024; UNHCR. <https://help.unhcr.org/germany/family-reunification/>. Last accessed 19 January 2024.
- 12 Even though I consider forced and voluntary migration as a continuum (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018), I still recognize that certain challenges affecting migration experiences may be more accentuated for forced migrants (Hunkler et al. 2022).
- 13 In my study with Yanaşmayan, “Motherhood on the move: forced migrant women from Ukraine” (2024), we show how Ukrainian refugee mothers use an “active waiting” to rebuild their lives in Germany. This work builds on the first round of interviews (in the autumn of 2022) with the same interlocutors as in this work. The different focus of the present work is on the changes over time in the interlocutors’ lived experiences, taking into account follow-up interviews about a year later.

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Cite this article: Rock, Jonna. 2025. "Perspectives on Refugeehood and Motherhood: Germany-Based Ukrainians' Life Aspirations over Time". *Nationalities Papers*: 1–19, doi:10.1017/nps.2024.99