CMR SPOTLIGHT

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# Between Ukraine and Poland. Ukrainian migrants in Poland during the war

One year after the Russian attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Agata Górny @AgataGorny and Paweł Kaczmarczyk @kaczmarczyk_cmr draw attention to the diversity of the population of Ukrainians in Poland with respect to the circumstances of their arrival and migratory experiences, while presenting information regarding their individual characteristics, housing situation and labour market status in Poland. The data is based on a Poland-wide survey among Ukrainian nationals, conducted @CMR_Warsaw in July-September 2022.

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CENTRE OF MIGRATION RESEARCH

# Between Ukraine and Poland. Ukrainian migrants in Poland during the war

**Agata Górny and Paweł Kaczmarczyk**

**Introduction**

The migratory situation in Poland changed dramatically with the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent massive influx of displaced persons from that country. Nevertheless, this process, commonly described as one of the largest in recent history, is not occurring in a social vacuum. On the contrary, there are at least two important contextual features to consider when analysing migratory war-related developments.

The first feature relates to the case of Poland: a country that for decades (and even centuries) could have been described as a typical emigration country and only recently has changed its status to a net immigration country, and this change was uniquely rapid. At the beginning of the 2010s, the number of foreigners living in Poland was very low (in terms of their share of the total population, it was one of the lowest of all EU Member States). After 2013, following the first Russian invasion of Ukraine, the situation began to change due to the factors operating on both the supply and demand side. On the one hand, there was a large emigration potential on the side of Ukrainian citizens ready to search for better opportunities abroad. On the other, their massive inflow and smooth integration into the Polish labour market was possible only because of very liberal admission rules and a very strong demand for foreign labour due to the rapid development of the Polish economy (Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2018). Available evidence suggests that countries having undergone such a rapid transformation share many similarities (Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2020; McAreavey, 2017). These include the absence of well-developed ethnic economies capable of absorbing incoming migrants and – most importantly – the underdevelopment of institutions dealing with immigration. The latter implies a limited capacity to record and statistically analyse flows and stocks of migrants and to absorb and integrate newcomers.

The second feature refers to the process of migration from Ukraine to Poland before the outburst of the full-scale war. All the available data indicate that among almost all the categories of foreigners coming to Poland, citizens of this country dominated, and concerning labour migration they were responsible for 70-95% of the total. As a result, the number of Ukrainians living in Poland at the

beginning of 2022, i.e. immediately before the full-scale war in Ukraine, had been estimated at around 1.3-1.5 million (Duszczyk et al., 2023). The presence of such a large Ukrainian group in Poland partly explains why it has become such an important destination for displaced persons, but it also helps to interpret many of the issues that we will discuss in this text.

Mobility related to the full-scale war in Ukraine has been already widely discussed in the literature, with a focus on the reception process, the support provided to war refugees and their livelihoods (Baszczak et al., 2022; Bukowski & Duszczyk, 2022; Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Jaroszewicz et al., 2022; Wojdat & Cywiński, 2022). Our objective is slightly different – with this Spotlight we aim at overviewing, in quantitative and statistical terms, selected characteristics and tendencies in the wartime Ukrainian migration to Poland. Importantly, we do not limit our attention to persons arriving in Poland after the outburst of the full-scale war in Ukraine, but we look at the overall diversified Ukrainian group in Poland. We also go beyond the traditionally discussed data sources and focus on the unique data collected in a survey conducted by the CMR in July and September 2002 within the Programme "Between Ukraine and Poland".

**Towards an explanation – imperfect data on a massive and rapidly changing social process**

Data on migration are known for their deficiencies and limits in covering certain forms of mobility (e.g. short-term, irregular migration). These issues take on even greater importance in the case of massive and rapidly evolving migratory processes.

After the opening of the border with Ukraine, the first and most important issue was the assessment of the general scale and general trends of the influx to Poland, which soon became massive. The source of information that was used in the first place was the data provided by the Border Guard, relating to border traffic. As it was presented daily (via BG's Twitter account), it began to be treated as a kind of instant monitoring of inflow from Ukraine. According to these data, around 9 million border crossings from Ukraine to Poland and 7 million movements in the opposite direction were recorded between 24 February and the end of 2022. That gives a net figure of around 2 million, but it should be read with caution (Duszczyk et al., 2023). The data provided by the Border Guard refer only to border crossings, i.e. not to individual persons, and do not capture the full complexity of the migration movements. Notwithstanding such interpretation problems, the data are useful in monitoring the intensity of flows and demonstrate that most border crossings occurred in the first eight weeks after the full war broke out. Since then, i.e. since May 2022, we observe a gradual stabilisation of border traffic with occasional net outflows to Ukraine (e.g. more people crossing into Ukraine than in the opposite direction). Such a tendency suggests at least a partial restoration of the pre-war circular migration from Ukraine to Poland and related transnational social spaces (although the drivers of mobility are now substantially different).

The increasing number of war refugees living in Polish cities has prompted the Polish administration and various institutions to introduce new methods of assessment. The first example is the Union of Polish Metropolises,

which commissioned a series of studies using mobile phone data to assess the scale and types of spatial concentration of Ukrainians living in Poland (Wojdat & Cywiński, 2022). The data presented in a series of reports showed the unprecedented scale of the phenomenon, as the size of the Ukrainian population residing in Poland was estimated at 3.2 million in March 2022 (8% of the total population), 3.85 million in April 2022 (9%) and 3.37 million in May 2022 (8%). There was a clear concentration in several Polish cities, with Warsaw, Krakow and Wrocław as the main destinations. The above figures might seem unexpectedly high, but it must be remembered that they include both Ukrainians fleeing the war and those who had lived in Poland before the outburst of the full-scale war and whose lives had been affected by the Russian aggression on Ukraine. However, the estimations compiled by the Union of Polish Metropolises do not address any individual characteristics of Ukrainians (except for very broad age brackets), therefore they fail to assess the structural characteristics of the Ukrainian population in Poland.

This kind of assessment is possible based on registered data. As registration (through the PESEL UKR system) was free, relatively easy and provided access to social benefits and services, the register data have become a very useful source, with broad coverage and some important socio-demographic characteristics. After a few months, at the end of the summer of 2022, there were nearly 1.5 million citizens of Ukraine in the system, but then the figure dropped to around 1 million by the end of 2022. This decrease is partly due to the growing trend to return to Ukraine (at least temporarily), but it is also the result of mobility to other destinations in Europe and beyond. According to the register, the group of war refugees is clearly dominated by women, who represent about 46% of the adult population (as of the end of 2022), in contrast to the relatively masculinised pre-war migration. Furthermore, the registered group includes very high proportions of children (46%) and some elderly people (6.5%). These two characteristics are particularly important as they represent a completely new quality in the structural composition of immigration in Poland (Górny, 2017; Górny et al., 2020).

Twelve months after the outbreak of the war, our knowledge of war-related displacement is quite extensive. We can assess the scale of the process, its main structural features and its spatial patterns. Nevertheless, the available official data are deficient in many areas. First, the set of available variables is too limited for an assessment of the complexity of the process and the experience of flight. We do not know about war refugees' previous migration experiences, their migration trajectories and, in particular, their plans and tactics/strategies. We know very little about the situation of their families and how this is likely to evolve over time. There is still a lack of information about their needs and expectations (in many areas). Without insights into the process of labour market matching, the register data provide only a very basic picture of labour market integration. Second, we do not know how the situation of war refugees, including people living in Poland at the beginning of 2022, changes over time and what factors cause possible changes. These are the reasons which led us to initiate the study, the first results of which we present below.

**Method of the study**

The online survey was conducted in July-September 2022 among 7617 Ukrainian nationals residing in Poland, notwithstanding the time of their arrival in Poland and legal status. Recruitment for the study was conducted based on various channels: social media, migrant organisations, and leaflets. However, around 90% of respondents were recruited via Facebook and Instagram adds. To enhance the representativeness of the study, weights based on the PESEL register were compiled with respect to gender, age and voivodeship of residence in Poland. Such an approach was justified, as 96% of respondents declared to have a registration in PESEL, either with Ukrainian war refugee status (62% of the sample) or without (34%).

## One nation – complex migration trajectories

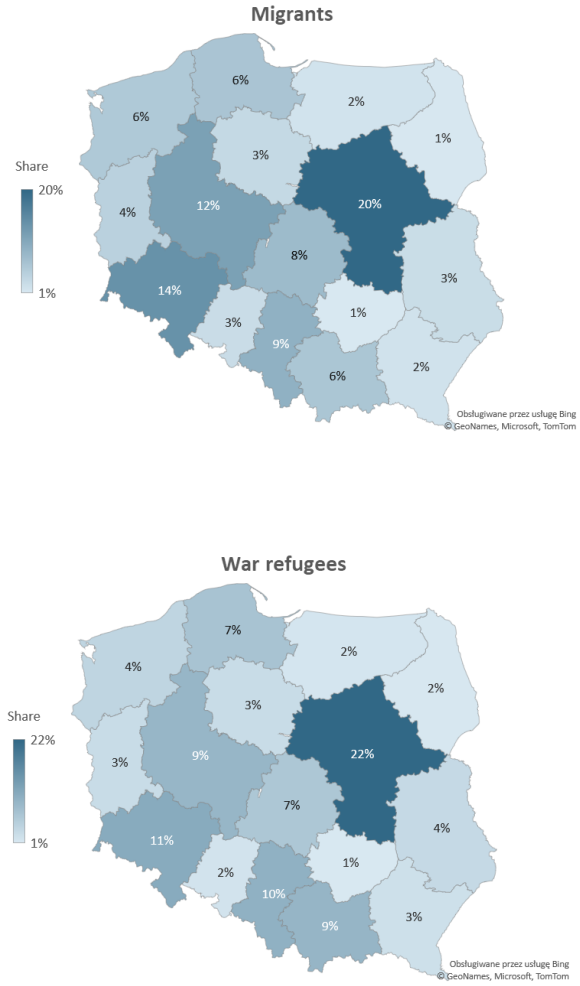
### *Migrants and war refugees*

All Ukrainians in Poland and beyond suffer from the consequences of the war in Ukraine. This was one of the main reasons why we decided to include in the survey not only war refugees but also those citizens of Ukraine who lived in Poland prior to the war. However, it can be expected that the situation and experiences of persons that have never planned emigration to Poland and of those having prior migration experience differ. At the same time, distinguishing a specific group of war refugees in the population of Ukrainians in Poland is not always straightforward. According to the legal definition, persons under temporary protection (in this text we refer to them as war refugees) are persons possessing so-called PESEL UKR. Ukrainian nationals having arrived in Poland on 24 February or later are entitled to this status according to the Act of 12 March 2022 on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine. However, also persons who had resided in Poland (or migrated to Poland) before the outburst of the full-scale war in Ukraine could have acquired such status if they left Poland at some point and returned during the war. Overall, as regards the distinction between refugees and migrants, the Ukrainian community constitutes a unique example of how these statuses might interact and sometimes overlap (Donato & Ferris, 2020). This has been observed already in previous years following the initiation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

Against this background, we account for the diversity in the Ukrainian community by distinguishing between three groups. The first among them is **'migrants'** – persons having arrived (for the current stay) before the outburst of the full-scale war in Ukraine. They account for 37% of the surveyed Ukrainian group. The second group is **'war refugees without migratory experience (related to Poland)'** who arrived in Poland for the first time on 24th February, 2022 or later. They constitute the biggest group in the studied sample, with a share of 45%. The third group, the smallest one (18%), can be considered an in-between type, as it encompasses **'war refugees with migratory experience (related to Poland)'**, i.e. persons having arrived after the outburst of the full-scale war in Ukraine (for the current stay), but for whom it was not the first migration to Poland.

Interestingly, over 30% of war refugees with migration experience arrived in Poland for the

Figure 1. Ukrainian migrants and war refugees by the region of residence in Poland (in %)




Source: Own elaboration, CMR/CESS survey July-September 2022

first time already before 2014, while for migrants the respective share reaches only 13%. Thus, the latter group encompasses more recent cohorts of Ukrainian migrants than the former one, and its vast majority constitute migrants having arrived after the outburst of war in 2014. It is also the youngest group with a mean age of 36, while the average war refugee was 39-41 years old at the moment of the study. Apparently, some war refugees used to migrate to Poland, then stopped, and re-migrated after the outburst of the full-scale war. How this impacts their functioning in Poland nowadays is a question that deserves further analysis.

Available data suggest that the spatial distribution of war refugees largely reflects the presence of Ukrainian group in Poland before the war. The survey data corroborate this while highlighting some differences between these two main categories (Fig. 1). Ukrainian labour migrants tended to be concentrated in large Polish cities in the period before 2022 (and, as a consequence, in regions with the largest Polish metropolitan areas). New arrivals are – in general – more evenly distributed. What stands out is the role of Warsaw, which became the place of residence for over 25% of the war refugees without previous migration experiences.

### *Gender and family*

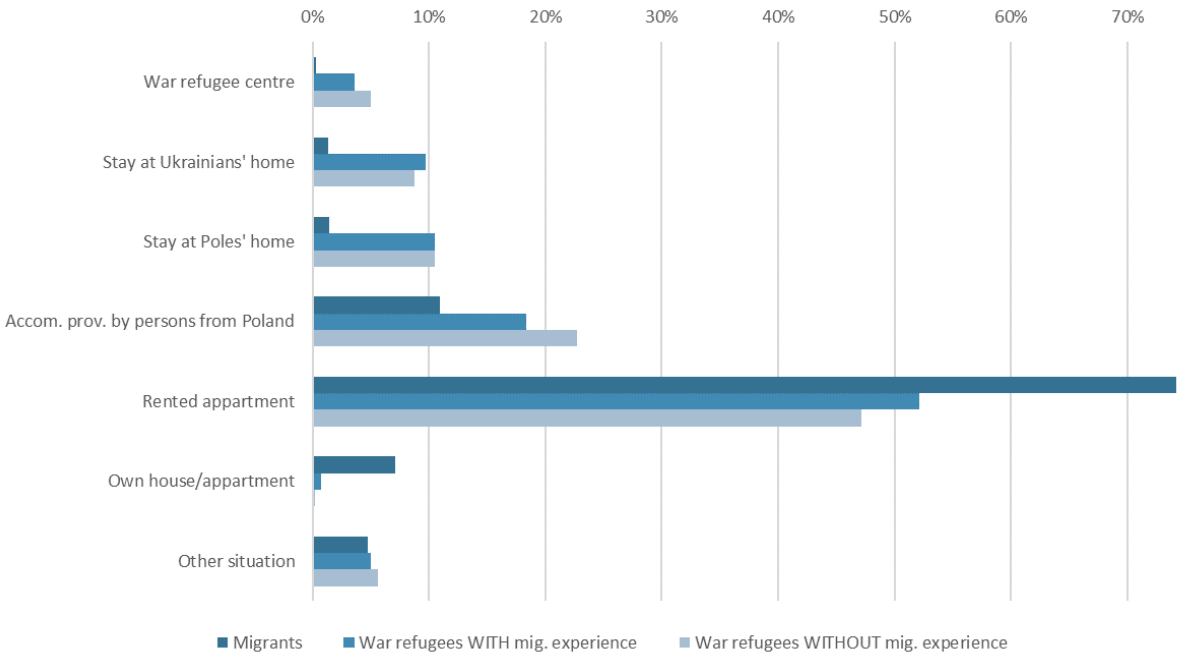
The majority of war refugees are women, which is portrayed also in the described survey. Females account for 78-84% of the two distinguished groups of war refugees. By comparison, in the case of migrants they constitute only 34%, which corresponds with the gender structure of the Ukrainian migrant population in Poland before the outburst of the full-scale war in Ukraine (Górny et al., 2018, 2020). What migrant and refugee groups have in common is that half of them are married persons. In addition, 14-20% of migrants and war refugees remained in a stable partner relationship during the study. However, while the vast majority of migrants (over 85%) stayed in Poland with their partners, in the case of war refugees it was around 50%. The result pertaining to the war refugees thus supports the widely acknowledged fact that it is in large part a migration of single women, separated from

their partners who had not been able to leave Ukraine. However, it also demonstrates that a visible part of this group either joined their partners in Poland or managed to come to Poland with their male partners. Not surprisingly, the majority of war refugees (over 66%) are in Poland with their children. The respective share for migrants is visibly smaller – around 33%.

### *Accommodation and sources of income*

Around half of the refugees without migration experience (47%) and 42% of those with such experience stayed in Poland either in war refugee centres, with Poles or Ukrainians in their houses, or in accommodation provided by Polish persons or firms (Fig 2). Roughly half of war refugees lived in rented apartments for which they paid – 52% of those with prior migration experience and 47% of those lacking it. The shares of owners of an apartment or house in Poland were negligible in the case of war refugees – not exceeding 1%. It can, thus, be observed that war refugees with migration experience, more often than persons who had never been in Poland before the 24th of February, were paying for their accommodation. However, the differences are small – not exceeding five percentage points. By contrast, migrants differ from war refugees visibly as regards accommodation in Poland – almost three-fourths of them were paying the rent for accommodation in Poland, and 7% were owners of apartments or houses. Overall, the survey suggests that around half of the war refugees group did not have a stable accommodation in Poland at the moment of the study, as they relied on the help of Poles, Ukrainians and on institutional help.

Figure 2. Ukrainian migrants and war refugees by type of accommodation in Poland (in %)



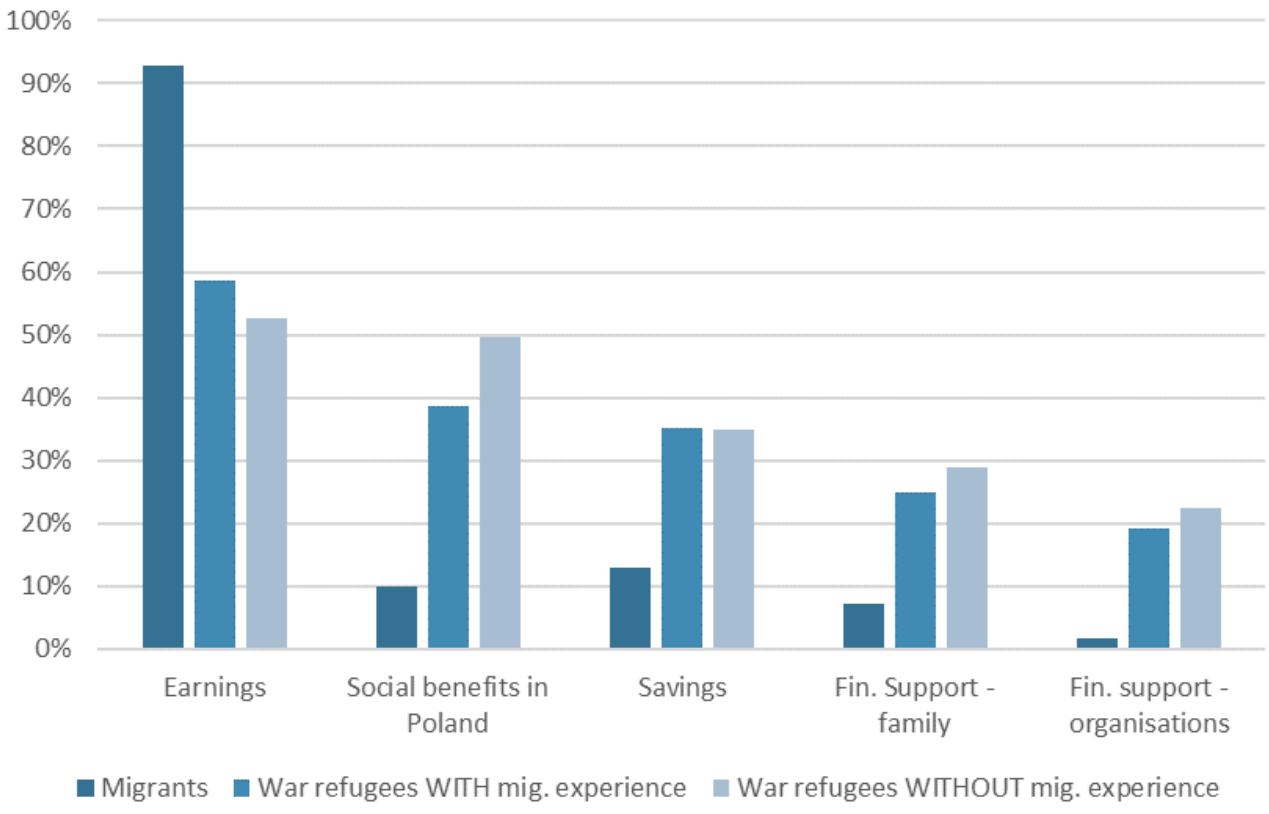

Source: Own elaboration, CMR/CESS survey July-September 2022

What corresponds with the type of accommodation that Ukrainian migrants and war refugees can afford in Poland is the source of their income. For the vast majority of surveyed migrants (93%), at least one source of income was earnings from work, compared to 53-59% in the case of war refugees (Fig. 3). As many as 50% of war refugees without prior migration experience and 39% of war refuges with such experience received social benefits in Poland and 35% of both groups counted on savings. In addition, financial support from social organisations and family constituted a source of income for 19-22% of migrants and 25-29% of war refugees, respectively. It is noticeable that war refugees without prior migration experience reported these two income sources more frequently than persons with migration experience, but the differences were small, not exceeding five percentage points.

***Labour market participation***

Participation of Ukrainian migrants and war refugees in the labour market in Poland constitutes a circumstance crucial for their self-sustaining in Poland in the longer term. At the same time, Ukrainians arriving in Poland seem to have a high potential with regard to human

Figure 3. Ukrainian migrants and war refugees by sources of income (in %).



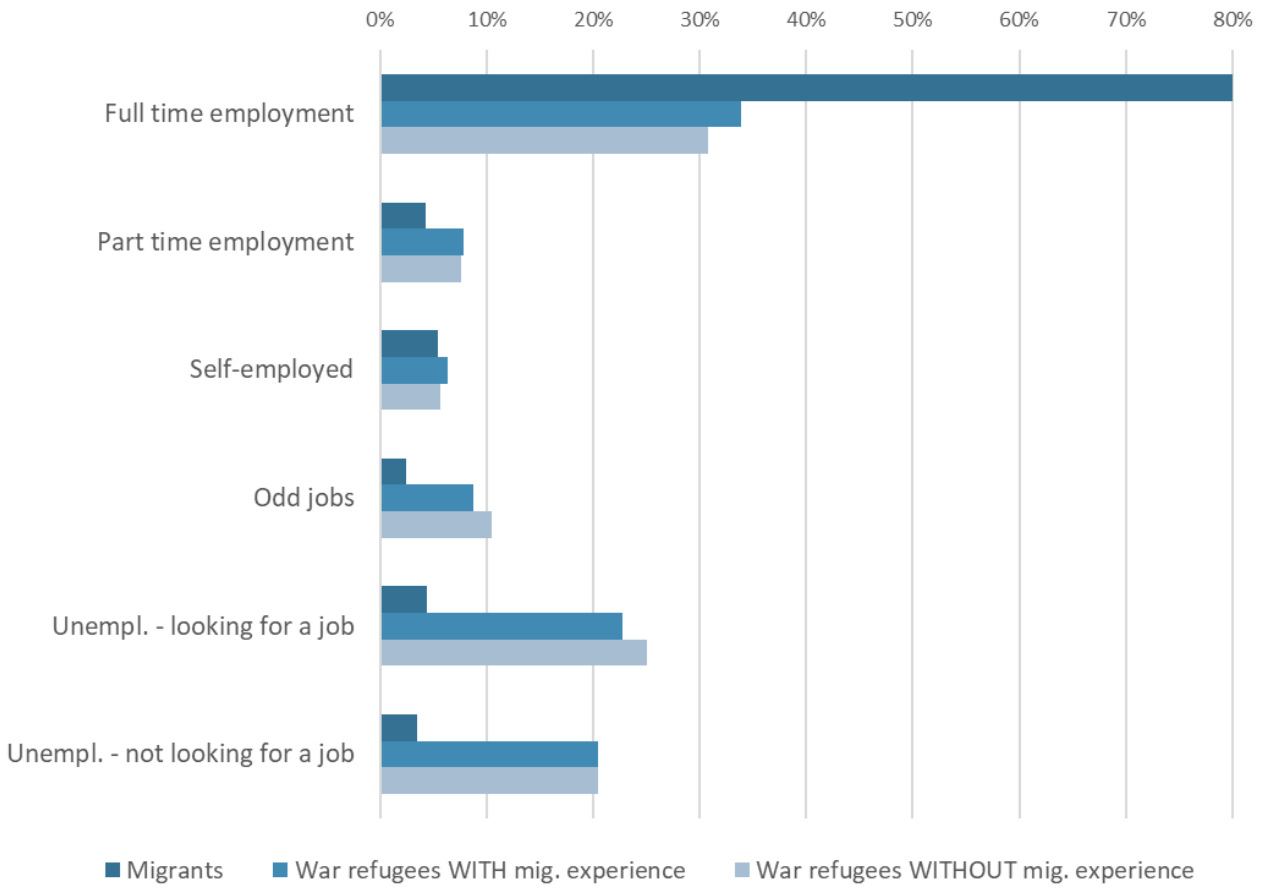

Notes. The figure demonstrates the most frequently reported sources of income. Percentages do not sum up to 100%, as respondents could have pointed to more than one answer.

Source: Own elaboration, CMR/CESS survey July-September 2022

capital. Two thirds of surveyed war refugees, notwithstanding previous migration experience, were persons with higher education. In the case of migrants, the respective share was smaller, but still exceeding half. However, not surprisingly, migrants, not war refugees were far more active in the labour market: 93% of them were working at the moment of the study, compared to 55-57% of war refugees (Fig. 4). For working Ukrainian migrants and war refugees, full-time employment was the most common that some (10-15%) war refugees in Poland continue to work in Ukraine remotely, i.e., survey and previous studies (UMP 2022) suggest option. Importantly, results of the described pursue transnational practices with regard to work. It is a topic that definitely deserves further research. It is important to note that the majority of war refugees who stated that they were not looking for a job (around 20%) were unable to do so because of care responsibilities (up to 40%) and health problems (up to 20%).

Differences between migrants and war refugees materialise also with regard to occupation in Poland (or rather during their stay in Poland, remembering the transnational activities of Ukrainians). For migrants, the two most

Figure 4. Ukrainian migrants and war refugees by labour market status (in %)

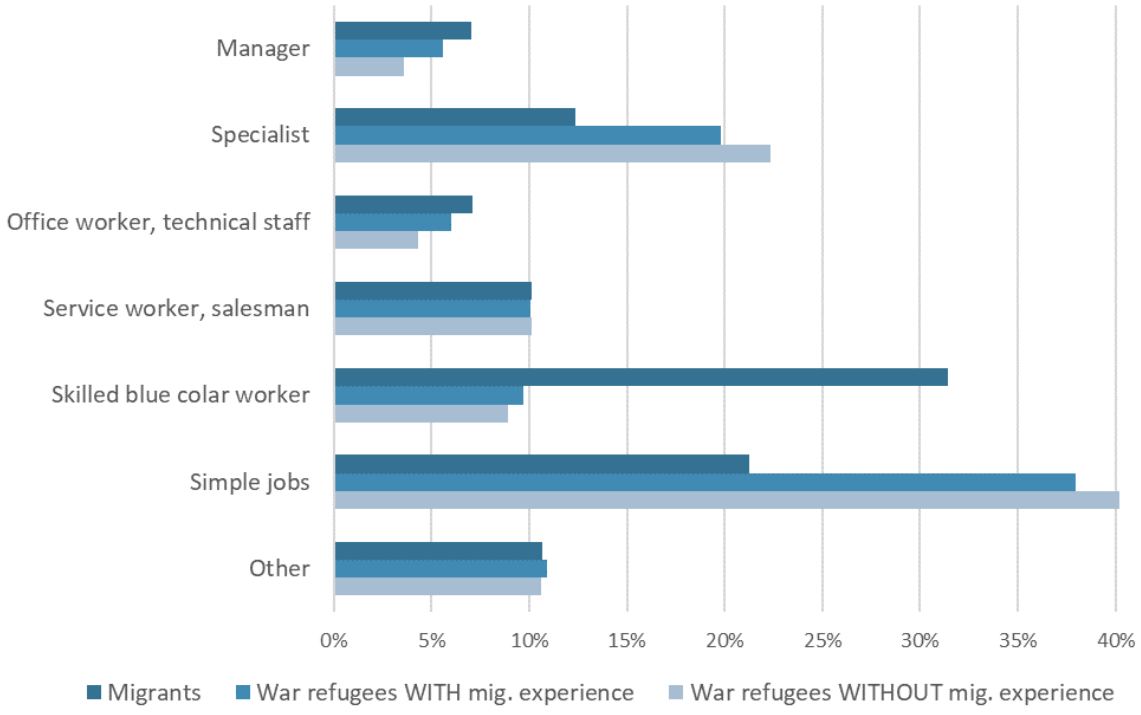



Source: Own elaboration, CMR/CESS survey July-September 2022

migrants, respectively (Fig. 5). This corresponds to the profile of Ukrainian labour migration to Poland before the outburst of the full-scale war in Ukraine (Górny et al., 2018, 2020, 2022). In contrast, as many as 38-40% of war refugees were unskilled blue-collar workers at the moment of the study – with a much higher incidence of this occupation type than in the case of migrants. However, the next most popular occupation-group among war refugees was specialists (20-22%), much less frequent among migrants (12%). Thus, we observe a polarisation among war refugees from Ukraine with regards to occupational type/status. On the one hand, a high share has to work in simple, unskilled jobs in Poland, which are below refugees' qualifications in many cases. On the other hand, a substantial proportion of war refugees are specialists taking advantage of their qualifications in work while staying in Poland. It is difficult to assess how many of these jobs are the continuation of jobs in Ukraine performed remotely.

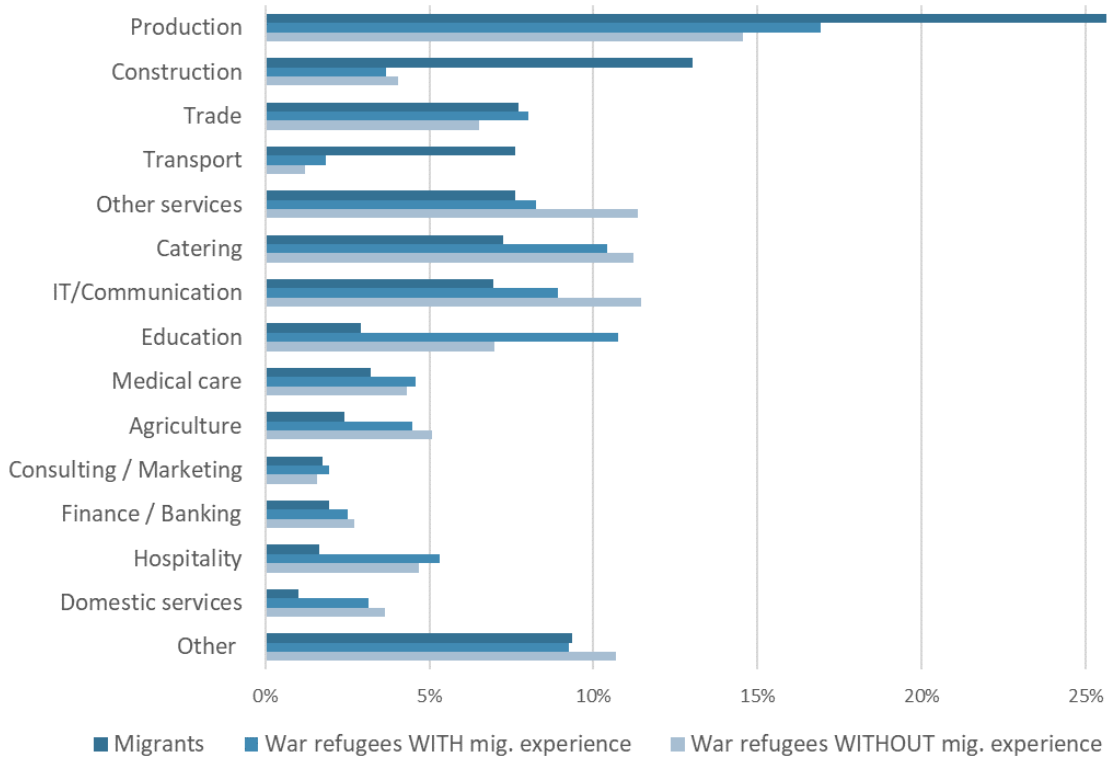
As regards sectors of employment, one can notice many commonalities between migrants and war refugees, which might suggest that the newcomers fleeing the war enter sectors characteristics for some migrant niching. For example, the production sector is the most important place of employment for both migrants and war refugees: 26% and 15-17%, respectively (Fig. 6). However, the next most popular sector among migrants – construction (13%) is not important in the case of, mainly female, war refugees (4%). On the opposite, trade is the sector in which migrants and war

Figure 5. Working Ukrainian migrants and war refugees by occupation while in Poland (in %)




Source: Own elaboration, CMR/CESS survey July-September 2022

Figure 6. Working Ukrainian migrants and war refugees by sector of employment while in Poland (in %)




Source: Own elaboration, CMR/CESS survey July-September 2022

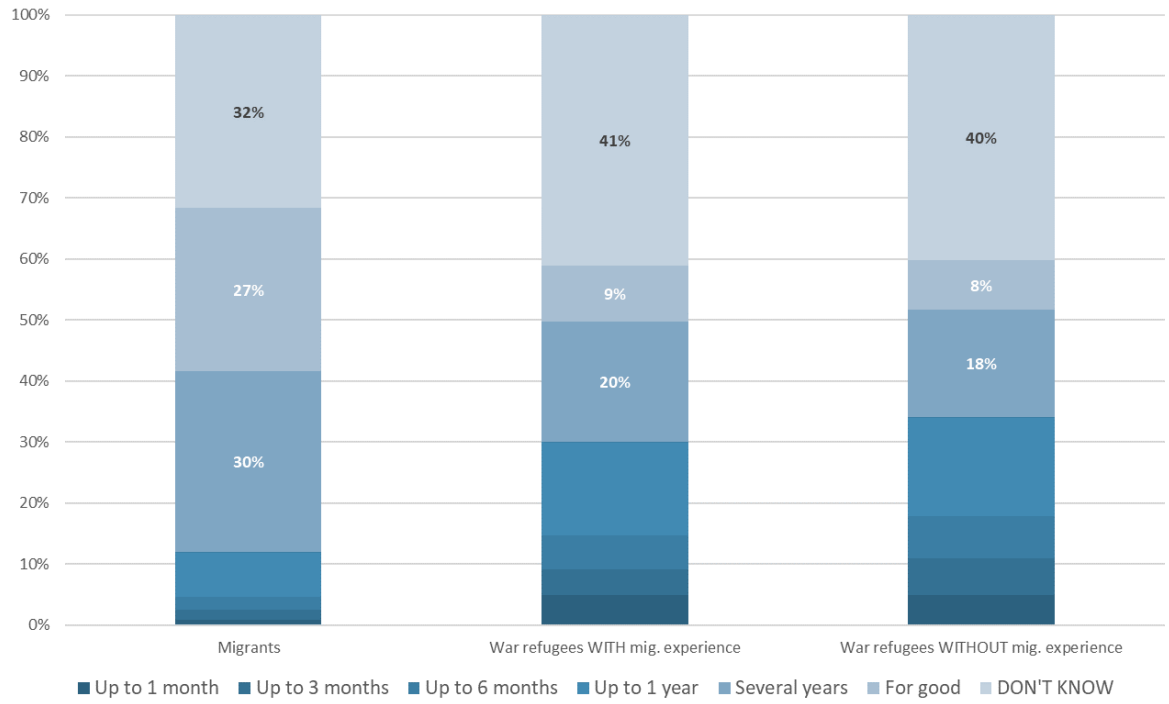
refugees work with similar frequency (7-8%). What attracts attention, war refugees are more likely than migrants to work in sectors usually considered high-end ones, like education and translations, IT, finance and banking, management and marketing. As many as 27-29% of war refugees worked in either of these sectors when compared to 17% of migrants.

### *Plans and uncertainty*

Many migrants and particularly war refugees do not know how long they will stay in Poland, echoing high uncertainty about the development of the situation in Ukraine. They accounted for as many as 40% of war refugees and 30% of migrants in the described survey (Fig. 7). War refugees were more likely than migrants to treat their stay in Poland as temporary. Only one fourth planned to stay in Poland over one year or forever at the moment of the study, while in the case of migrants, it was almost 60%. Importantly, such a result for migrants suggests the growth of permanency of Ukrainian migration to Poland when compared to earlier years, especially before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (Górny, Madej & Porwit 2020).

Uncertainty is also visible among those who know that they do not plan to stay for long in Poland (at most one year). As many as 34-36% of such war refugees and 37% of migrants did not

Figure 7. Ukrainian migrants and war refugees by plans regarding the duration of stay in Poland (in %)




Source: Own elaboration, CMR/CESS survey July-September 2022

know, at the moment of the study, whether they would go back to Ukraine for good or temporarily, visiting Poland in the future, or move to another country. The share of those who intended to return to Ukraine for good reaches 52% of war refugees without prior migration experience, 43% of those without such experience, and only 19% of migrants.

Migrants, in turn, more often than refugees planned to come to Poland after temporarily returning to Ukraine, which corresponds to the circular migration pattern, observed in Ukraine-to-Poland migration before the outburst of the war (Górny, 2017). Among Ukrainians planning at most a one year stay in Poland, it applied to 30% of migrants, 17% of war refugees with prior migration and to only 10% of war refugees without such experience. It can thus be argued that migrants differ visibly from war refugees with regard to migratory plans. Moreover, migration experience and lack thereof differentiate war refugees in this respect. War refugees, being first timers in Poland, are most likely to plan only a short-term stay in Poland and to return to Ukraine for good at some point, not considering future migration to Poland or elsewhere.

**What next?**

Twelve months on from the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, there is one word that best describes the situation: uncertainty. We do not know when and how the war will end. We do not know how damaging it will be to Ukraine's economy and society. Finally, we do not know what the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine will

be like. Given this, it is not surprising that the vast majority of war refugees in Poland also tend to describe their situation and plans as uncertain. The results of the survey discussed in this Spotlight show that, on the contrary, those Ukrainians who lived in Poland before the war tended to prolong their stay in Poland and seriously consider settling (and this should be seen as a clear continuation of a trend observed since 2018 or so). This is just one of many signals indicating that as time goes on, we can expect to see further diversification of the plans and strategies of war refugees in Poland. This would depend on the situation in Ukraine, the family situation, the support received in Poland, and also on access to the labour market and integration opportunities. Against this background, one of the responsibilities of the academic community is to provide good quality, detailed and reliable data on migrants, their situation, their needs and their expectations. We believe that the research programme "Between Ukraine and Poland..." (Box 2) will fulfil this role, at least in part, especially through the provision of longitudinal data on war-related migration from Ukraine.

**About the Programme**

The Programme "Between Ukraine and Poland" is an initiative of the University of Warsaw, created within the Centre of Excellence in Social Studies – a part of the Excellence Initiative – Research University and run by the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw.

Its main objective is to provide high-quality and reliable data on the ongoing displacement from Ukraine due to the Russian invasion, which began in February 2022. The programme has been designed to meet the following characteristics: i) high methodological and ethical standards; ii) longitudinal approach (an established survey with successive waves focusing on specific issues); iii) inclusiveness (open access to data for UW researchers and UW research teams) and high accessibility for other researchers; iv) open structure (with an assumed option to add new quantitative and qualitative modules); and v) international cooperation, particularly in the framework of the Research Network on Ukrainian Migration – a collaborative initiative of four European universities: European University Institute (Migration Policy Centre), Maastricht University, UNU-MERIT University and University of Warsaw (Centre of Migration Research).

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