

UDC 316

Jirka, L., Kamionka, M., & Macková, L. (2023). High-Skilled Precarity: The Situation of Ukrainian Refugees in the Czech Republic and Poland. *Sociological Studios*, 2 (23), 51–61. <https://doi.org/10.29038/2306-3971-2023-02-24-24>

## High-Skilled Precarity: The Situation of Ukrainian Refugees in the Czech Republic and Poland

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The situation of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic and Poland significantly differs from their Syrian counterparts in terms of acceptance. Ukrainians were offered temporary protection and this is associated with receiving humanitarian aid, housing, social and health insurance and free entrance on the labor market and all levels of education. They were also widely accepted by public, regional administrations and non-governmental organizations. However, in spite of their dispositions, they still struggle with livelihood in both countries due to weaker integration policies. This article is based on semi-structural interviews with fifty-seven Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic and Poland, and it shows that despite their prospective dispositions, educational level and general acceptance, they often work in low-skilled jobs due to weak language proficiency and this hinders their adaptation. Thus they often fall into a precarious position although some of them may still feel satisfied as holders of temporary protection.

DOI: 10.29038/2306-3971-2023-02-24-24

Received: November, 2023

1<sup>st</sup> Revision: December, 2023

Accepted: December, 2023

**Key words:** Ukraine, refugees, temporary protection, low-skilled employability, war in Ukraine, precarious position.

**Лудек Їрка, Камьонка Матеуш, Мацкова Луціє. Висококваліфікована прекарність: ситуація українських біженців у Чехії та Польщі.** Ситуація українських біженців у Чехії та Польщі суттєво відрізняється від їхніх сирійських колег щодо прийому. Українцям запропонували тимчасовий захист, пов'язаний з отриманням гуманітарної допомоги, житла, соціального та медичного страхування й вільним доступом до ринку праці та всіх рівнів освіти. Вони також були широко сприйняті громадськістю, регіональними адміністраціями й неурядовими організаціями. Однак, незважаючи на їхні схильності, вони все ще борються із засобами до існування в обох країнах через слабшу політику інтеграції. Ця стаття ґрунтується на напівструктурованих інтерв'ю з п'ятдесятьма сімома українськими біженцями в Чехії та Польщі, і вона показує, що, незважаючи на їхні перспективні схильності, рівень освіти й загальне визнання, вони часто працюють на низькокваліфікованих роботах через слабе знання мови, і це заважає їх адаптації. Отже, вони часто потрапляють у ненадійне становище, хоча деякі з них усе ще можуть почуватися задоволеними як власники тимчасового захисту.

**Ключові слова:** Україна, біженці, тимчасовий захист, малокваліфіковане працевлаштування, війна в Україні, нестійке становище.

## INTRODUCTION

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (24th of February, 2022), Europe faced the biggest humanitarian crisis since the end of the Second World War. The Russian Federation's full-scale aggression against Ukraine led to migration from the affected regions, with at least 12 million people forced to flee their homes (BBC, 2022). By 28th of November, 2023, a total of 6,3 million refugees had crossed the borders from Ukraine. Half of them are located in three countries: Russia (1,2 million), Germany (1,1 million), and Poland (0,9 million)<sup>1</sup> (UNHCR, 2023). Poland helped 1,6 millions of refugees (UNHCR, 2023). The Czech Republic also accepted a large number of refugees from Ukraine. The country assisted to the highest number of refugees per 100 000 inhabitants (Klimešová, Šatava, & Ondruška, 2022).

It is worth noting that the situation at the beginning of 2022 was completely different from the one known from media reports on the Polish-Belarusian border (TVN24, 2023). The humanitarian crisis artificially created on Poland's eastern border (also in the Baltic States) by Russia and Belarus was probably intended to negatively affect the societies of Central Europe towards potential refugees (Chochowski, 2021). The response of Poland and the Czech Republic to Ukrainian refugees can be considered as astonishing, especially after the clear rejection of Syrian and Afghan refugees in the previous years. Unlike displaced persons from Syria, who faced difficulties in entering these countries, Ukrainians with temporary protection, as based on the Temporary Protection Directive (Council of the European Union, 2001), were not restricted in terms of housing, language courses, social benefits, health insurance and access to the labor market or education system. This has a numerous reasons; among them is also the cultural, geographical and ethnic proximity (Andrejuk, 2023; Moise, Dennison, & Kriesi, 2023). However, the situation of Ukrainian refugees is specific in other important aspects - for example, men between 18–60 years of age are not allowed to leave Ukraine.

However, life in a “safe” environment may not be what the refugees imagined, especially in terms of professional development. Life in Western countries is often vigorously idealized by those Ukrainians who had already lived in Europe before the full-scale invasion. They intended to show the advantages of their decision to leave and did not focus on the difficulties of everyday life. Even before the full-scale invasion, some Ukrainian researchers emphasized that the “pro-European” approach, currently prevalent in Ukrainian society, is based on simplified emotional understanding of European integration. It is the result of a lack of awareness of what Europe really is and includes a plethora of mottos and ideological rhetoric (Sidenko et al., 2019). As a result, some refugees may not find their way in the new reality. Highly qualified refugees often work below their qualifications and they experience rapid class degradation. The **purpose** of this article is to identify the reasons why participants, who previously worked in skilled jobs and had university degrees, experience class degradation or even precariousness in the Czech Republic and Poland. This research is related to research conducted in Germany by Mykola Sydorov and Yeliena Kovalska (2022), which clearly shows that over 45% of respondents believe that their financial situation only allows them to buy basic items (goods and clothes) and another 40% believe that they only have enough money for daily food.

In line with this research, we define highly qualified refugees as individuals with at least a bachelor degree who have worked in a higher or middle working position (see below) in Ukraine. We also define precariousness in terms of insecurity and uncertainty as a lack of sufficient and regular income that negatively affects living standards, psychological well-being (mental health) and material welfare while, at the same time, people in this position are not able to completely control the circumstances around them (Standing, 2011). This can also lead to living below the poverty line. While insecurity and psychological well-being are subjective, lack of income and the poverty line are considered as objective criteria defined by the laws in the Czech Republic and Poland.

This article elaborates on the conditions of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and in the Czech Republic, then introduces the methodology and the last part, the analysis, consists of the results of qualitative research. Our **hypothesis** is that participants in our research sample might work significantly below their qualifications and precariousness experience mainly the single mothers with young children (less than

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<sup>1</sup> Other neighboring countries also host smaller numbers of refugees: 112 810 in Moldova; 113 935 in Slovakia; 83 765 in Romania; and 63 775 in Hungary (UNHCR, 2023).

6 years of age) due to living conditions in the Czech Republic and Poland, but also because of individual aspirations. The in-depth research conducted in the Czech Republic and Poland might shed light on Ukrainian refugees in Central Europe and it can be considered as an introduction to a larger analysis on a European scale.

## 1. ADMISSION OF UKRAINIANS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND IN POLAND

The reception of Ukrainian refugees in both countries has been extraordinarily positive. However, the current steps taken by both governments – in connection with “Lex Ukraine” in the Czech Republic and “The Act on Assistance to Ukrainian citizens” in Poland (which are the packages of governmental laws related to the Ukrainian refugees) – lead to the reduction of the social benefits. In this way, the Polish and Czech governments are “forcing” Ukrainian refugees to work. This goes hand in hand with the low unemployment rate among Ukrainian refugees.

The number of issued temporary protection in the Czech Republic from the beginning of the full-scale invasion until April 2023 was 504 107 and in April 2023 were still active 325 742 registered protections. Of these, 35 % were men, 65 % women, 28 % children and only 4 % seniors (Dlupalová, 2023). Most refugees are located in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, and the typical household consists of women with small children (Klimešová, Šatava, & Ondruška, 2022). The share of Ukrainian newcomers with a university degree is 35 %, followed by 18 % of refugees with a secondary school (Klimešová, Šatava, & Ondruška, 2022).

In Poland, the number of refugees reached 968 390 in March 2023 (Statista, 2023) and by the end of 2022, according to the Polish PESEL database, 80 % were women and 20 % men (Social Progress Imperative, 2023). In addition, 12 % are people over 60 years of age, 32 % are between the ages of 40–59 and 55 % are between the ages of 18–39 (Social Progress Imperative, 2023). Refugees are mostly concentrated in Poland's largest cities, and the typical household is headed by a woman with small children. It is worth noting that in the survey conducted in May 2022, overall 50 % of refugees had a university education and in November 2022, the percentage dropped to 48 % (Dudek, Panuciak, & Strzelecki, 2023).

One year after the invasion, almost half of the refugees in both countries had a job. According to the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), Ukrainian refugees in February 2023 worked as construction workers, assistant workers, in manufacturing or in transport. In Prague, where there are more opportunities to find a job, Ukrainian refugees worked mainly as assistant workers, in construction, manufacturing, transport and cleaning services (Svoboda, 2023). According to another survey in November 2023, 58 % of refugees reported having full-time jobs (PAQ Research, 2023b). However, they often worked in poorly paid non-qualified or low qualified jobs while 58 % of them were in precarious situations (PAQ Research, 2023b) and 61 % were materially deprived (Svoboda, 2023). At least in November 2022, there was a significant number of unemployed refugees (PAQ Research, 2022). In the case of Poland, refugees from Ukraine were most likely to be employed in the hotels, catering industries, services, production and trade and less likely in agriculture and logistics (Zymnin et al., 2022).

In the Czech Republic, the whole situation negatively affected refugees with university degrees because in November 2022 a total of 49 % of them were working significantly below their qualification, compared to 27% of secondary school graduates (PAQ Research, 2022). Thus, it is possible for refugees with secondary education to use their skills in contrast to their university educated counterparts. It can be told that Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic generally lose their human capital. The situation is similar in Poland. According to the report of the National Bank of Poland (Chmielewska-Kalińska, Dudek, & Strzelecki, 2023), about 50 % of refugees with university education and 31 % with secondary education reported jobs below their qualifications. Thus, the Czech Republic and Poland do not properly take into account the high level of education of Ukrainian refugees and their potential.

As a result, 57 % of refugees in the Czech Republic live below the poverty line, meaning that 60 % of their finances are below the average wage. Specifically, it is USD<sup>1</sup> 611 for a one-person household (PAQ Research, 2023b). The minimum take-home wage in Poland is USD 685 from January 1, 2023 and, according to the National Bank of Poland (Dudek, Panuciak, & Strzelecki, 2023), almost half of refugees

<sup>1</sup> The currency in this article is transferred as of 11th of November, 2023.

receive monthly amounts at the level of the above minimum wage. In the case of Poland, one should also add social support +500 (126 USD) for each child, which will increase to 202 USD per child from January 1, 2024. According to the report, 44 % of refugees from 2022 and 52 % from 2023 receive this benefit.

Regarding the Czech Republic, an important element in increasing the cost of living is the end of state financial support for accommodation. Therefore, refugees need to pay for rented accommodation from July 2023. In November 2023, almost 70 % of them had a rented apartment (PAQ Research, 2023b), but paying is a challenge even with salary and funds from humanitarian aid. This aid is USD 223 per person for five months and then is reduced to USD 206 for special groups of people, such as the disabled people or pensioners, or USD 148 for children. However, the aid is also specially counted for families (PAQ Research, 2023b).

The conditions of Ukrainian refugees in both countries are unequivocally caused by the policies. Unlike in Germany, Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic and in Poland are not required to attend language courses before entering the labor market. However, without sufficient knowledge of the Czech or Polish language, many refugees fall into the trap of the non-qualified and low qualified jobs with low salaries. In February 2023, only 31 % attended Czech language courses, while 55 % studied the language individually and 13 % did not study at all. The reason for this is related to preference for work (50 %), the cost of language courses (41 %), and taking care of children (24 %) (PAQ Research, 2023a).

Due to the harsh conditions in the Czech Republic and Poland, many refugees decided to go to Germany where they perceive better economic and social conditions and work-related integration processes. As a result, at the turn of 2022, Germany overtook the Czech Republic and Poland in terms of the number of Ukrainian refugees.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The participants were citizens of Ukraine who arrived in the Czech Republic and Poland after the 24th of February, 2022. The only condition for selection was only on the possession of temporary protection. The research was conducted from June to December 2023. A total number of 57 interviews were conducted, 40 participants were interviewed in the Czech Republic and 17 participants in Poland.

Most interviewees were born in Ukraine. One participant was born in Tynda, Amur region (Russia) and another in Shymkent (Kazakhstan). Two participants were born in Crimea (one in Jalta and another in Sevastopol), which was annexed by Russian forces, but both moved to the Ukrainian interior before the annexation. One participant experienced expulsion twice, as she moved from Donetsk to Kyiv after 2014 and migrated to the Czech Republic after the full-scale invasion. In terms of regional distribution, fourteen participants were from western Ukraine, fifteen from eastern Ukraine, sixteen from central Ukraine and twelve from southern Ukraine. Two participants were from places that became known for their serious affection due to the war (Bucha and Mariupol) and one participant was a tourist in Egypt at the beginning of the invasion and she traveled to Poland to get temporary protection here. One exception was a soldier who was injured during the war and recovered in Poland. In terms of gender, one participant was male and the 56 participants were female.

Interviews were mostly conducted in Prague and surrounding area (Kolín, Kladno, Lány, Tursko, Milovice, Beroun, Kopidlno). Two interviews were conducted in Hradec Králové and one in Pardubice. In Poland, interviews were conducted in the smaller town Olkusz, 35 kilometers from Cracow. All interviews were usually held at the participants' preferred locations which means their dormitories, flats, houses, parks or cafés. Two interviews were conducted in the author's office at the university and one in the police department for foreigners. The authors insisted on face-to-face interviews, but two interviews were held online because of the participants' strong desire to be interviewed online. An interesting exception was a participant who had fled Ukraine, but returned to Ukraine in the summer 2022. She was interviewed online because of her strong desire to express her delightfulness about being accepted by the Czech Republic.

In the Polish part of the research, participants were approached on the streets, parks and places where they live (like hostels). Contact with individual respondents often came through recommendations from those who had already been interviewed, which is the reason why the research in Olkusz was carried out by snowball sampling method. The Czech part was conducted differently, as the authors decided to place an advertisement on Facebook and participants – especially those from regions seriously affected by the war –

responded on Messenger and then face-to-face meetings were arranged. Some responses requested online provision of interviews, but the authors tried to minimize online meetings because they wanted to conduct face-to-face interviews. The assumption was that interviews will be longer if meetings are realized in person. The problem was to find participants from western Ukraine because only two responded on Messenger. Therefore participants from western Ukraine were approached through personal contacts of one of the authors thanks to his previous involvement in the Ukrainian community.

Qualitative methodology was applied and the method used was a semi-structured interview. This method allowed the authors to obtain in-depth interviews with subjective self-expression. The same list of questions was used for each participant, but additional questions were asked depending on the context of the interview. For the purpose of this article, the questions about education, former and current working and living positions in the Czech Republic and Poland and related circumstances were used. The purpose was to reveal the participants' assessment of their working and living situation before and after fleeing.

In accordance with the ethics, each participant was informed about the purpose of the research and each signed informed consent which secures their anonymity, disclosure of not giving the data to third parties, retention of data only in personal archives of the authors and possibility to be retained from interviews in case of reconsideration of being part of the research. The ethics committee at the University of Hradec Králové confirmed the ethical integrity of the research (reference number 10/2023). The authors are aware of distressing memories associated with the war, as well as the handling of participants' personal data and their personal materials. Therefore, the authors did not ask about the names of the participants' relatives and about the situations of those relatives who serve as soldiers in the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Table 1 shows the distribution of participants by age. Most participants were in their thirties and forties at the time of interview. Table 2 provides distribution by level of education and, as it is noticeable, the vast majority of participants were university graduates. It was not the purpose of the research to conduct interviews primarily with university graduates. This was more of a coincidence.

Table 1

**Division of Participants by Decade of Birth**

| Decade of Participant's Birth | Number of Participants |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1961–1970                     | 5                      |
| 1971–1980                     | 12                     |
| 1981–1990                     | 26                     |
| 1991–2000                     | 11                     |
| 2001–2010                     | 3                      |

Source: authors.

Table 2

**Division of Participants by Level of Education**

| Education                                             | Number of participants |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Secondary education (including unfinished university) | 11                     |
| University (including students)                       | 46                     |

Source: authors.

Table 4 reveals the partner engagement. Almost half of the participants had a partner in the Czech Republic or in Poland, but the second half had a partner in Ukraine, were divorced or single. In any case, the

relatively high number of women living with their partners in the host societies is astonishing, given the departure of men from Ukraine.

Most importantly, table 3 provides data on participants' working positions before and after fleeing from Ukraine. In their country of origin, many participants had higher working positions (such as directors or managers) or middle (such as accountants), but in the Czech Republic and in Poland they experience a dramatic professional oblivion to middle-lower (such as barmans or taxi-drivers) or lower jobs (such as cleaning). This is associated with a low standard of living.

Table 3

**Working Position of Participants Before and After Fleeing from Ukraine**

| Working Position in Ukraine                 | Number of Participants | Working Position in the Czech Republic      | Number of Participants |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Higher                                      | 17                     | Higher                                      | 0                      |
| Middle                                      | 21                     | Middle                                      | 12                     |
| Middle-lower                                | 6                      | Middle-lower                                | 17                     |
| Lower                                       | 0                      | Lower                                       | 10                     |
| Entrepreneurship                            | 6                      | Entrepreneurship                            | 2                      |
| Student                                     | 3                      | Student                                     | 1                      |
| Other                                       | 4                      | Other                                       | 1                      |
| Unemployed                                  | 0                      | Unemployed                                  | 14                     |
| From all: Working online (in the same work) | 3                      | From all: Working online (in the same work) | 3                      |

Source: authors.

Table 4

**Partner Engagement and Location**

| Status                               | Partner |
|--------------------------------------|---------|
| Partner in the Czech Republic/Poland | 26      |
| Partner in Ukraine                   | 16      |
| Divorced                             | 6       |
| Single                               | 9       |

Source: authors.

### 3. REASONS BEHIND THE PRECARIOUS POSITION OF HIGH-SKILLED REFUGEES

This article focuses on the situation of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic and Poland after they fled from Ukraine in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The analysis is based on a comparison of the participants' working positions and living conditions before and after migration. In Ukraine, most participants (46) earned a university degree and fewer participants (11) completed secondary education (or did not finish university). For the majority of participants, their level of education was

appropriate for their job in Ukraine. Participants mostly worked in higher and middle working positions, covering the whole range of professions – from lawyers to accountants – and as most of them said, they were satisfied with their living situation.

Furthermore, 9 participants had university degrees but worked in jobs that did not require bachelor or master degree<sup>1</sup>. In addition, 16 participants did not work in the profession for which they were trained<sup>2</sup>. However, in most cases this was still their choice. For example, one participant completed the Polytechnical University in Kyiv, but she voluntarily worked as an organizer of corporate parties and other events. The mismatch between the field of education and the achieved job is generally quite usual in the Ukrainian environment (Roberts, 2009), and participants also stated that it is not uncommon in Ukraine to have a job unrelated to the field of study. The reason for this, as mentioned by participants, is lack of interest in their academic discipline or the realization that they could earn more money in a different way: *“You have a good education and you should start with your first job or internship with a small salary. It might be a qualified job, but your first salary might be only used for the cheapest rent in Kyiv. You will have more money if you will work in a supermarket, even in a non-qualified position. You will have money for rent. So some people decide to be employed in a non-qualified position because they have no other option”*<sup>3</sup>.

As mentioned above, most participants were satisfied with their standard of living. However, some participants struggled with life even in their country of origin. For example, one participant with young children had been divorced and found herself in a precarious situation as she was unable to work due to caring for her children. Although in Ukraine – unlike their situation in the Czech Republic and in Poland – they still had friends or extended family networks to help them.

After arrival to the Czech Republic and Poland, participants reported psychological distress. For several months, participants were unable to work or continue with their daily routine because their minds were preoccupied with the war in Ukraine. They also expressed hope that the war would soon be over and they would be able to return back to Ukraine<sup>4</sup>. Especially in the case of Olkusz, which is the town not far away from the Ukrainian border, the participants feel that they could return back or travel back and forth (also because the transport to Ukraine from Olkusz is easy to reach).

After the distress period, participants acknowledged certain barriers to entering the labor market. The main barriers were: 1) having small children without a partner, 2) language barrier, 3) readiness to return back to Ukraine (and they did not take steps to adapt because they perceive their stay as temporary) and 4) differences between the Czech/Polish and Ukrainian environments. These factors pushed participants into poorly paid non-qualified or low qualified jobs, to unemployment status or to precarious positions.

The first factor is associated with single women and their children (until 6 years of age, after which the children have to go to elementary school; this category also includes single mothers with older disabled children, as these mothers also have to take care of their children and they are in the same situation in term of lack of time to work). While 26 (!) women have a partner in the Czech Republic or in Poland and they are more or less economically secure, 22 women are divorced or they have a partner in Ukraine. A total of 15 participants from this group of 22 women need to take care of their small children (7 participants have children older than 6 years of age). In Ukraine, they could rely on the help of their own older parents, but after the invasion, the parents usually refused to leave Ukraine (only 4 participants from the total sample of 57 participants have parents in the Czech Republic or in Poland at the time of interview, but these participants are out of a group of 22 women). In Ukraine, participants could also rely on close friends, godfathers, godmothers or extended family networks, but now these ties are broken (only 2 participants have these ties in the host societies), and in the Czech Republic or in Poland they could only rely on newly established ties with other Ukrainian refugees. These findings can be supported by other research (Yashkina,

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<sup>1</sup> It could not be told that these participants are highly exceptional (9 participants out of a total sample of 57), but it is still a small number.

<sup>2</sup> In addition, one participant experienced only a partial mismatch. She studied psychology and journalism at university, which could be seen as different fields of study, and she decided to work as a journalist.

<sup>3</sup> Participant 3.

<sup>4</sup> They were able to find accommodation through their social networks (relatives, friends or acquaintances), and the Czech and Polish governments, as well as non-governmental organizations and grassroots movements, were able to provide them humanitarian aid, clothing and food.

2022). However, newly formed ties are described as unstable and less reliable. Moreover, children younger than 6 years of age could be enrolled in kindergartens, but these facilities were full and the participants did not have the financial means for private kindergartens.

In spite of the humanitarian aid (see above), the mentioned 15 participants live in a precarious situation because they are not able to have a full-time official job. Therefore, 4 work unofficially (participants considered unofficial employment as common because they are accustomed to unofficial employability in Ukraine) and 10 are without jobs. This pushes participants in a precarious position and uncertainty: *"Recently they reduced the aid and it is really difficult because the prices of products have increased. And school. We have to save money. I wanted to get a job to have more money, but it is not possible with children"*<sup>1</sup>. Participants who look after disabled children are in a similar situation: *"I have mush in my head. I do not know what to do, how to live. First of all, I am without a husband, my children want to meet him. And I do not know what else, what is right, what is better for the children, for me, I just do not know what else. I could not do anything because of the children. Even morally, it is very difficult. And children. He (son) is psychologically nervous and he needs a psychologist"*<sup>2</sup>. To sum up, 15 women have not been able to achieve prospective working positions because they have small or disabled children. Among them are 13 participants with a university degree and 2 with secondary education.

Another important factor is associated with language barrier. The Czech Republic and Poland did not introduce compulsory language courses for Ukrainian refugees (as Germany did) and the level of language proficiency became a pitfall leading to placement in low paid jobs. Only one participant learnt Polish language at school and the second passed the Polish language exam. Otherwise, most participants learned the language on their own thanks to the people with whom they share a household or thanks to non-governmental organizations and grassroots movements. However, the quality of these courses is questionable and they certainly did not provide language proficiency that could be used in a higher or middle working position.

Furthermore, instead of learning Czech or Polish language<sup>3</sup>, the participants themselves decided to work. They have to cover their basic needs financially. In addition, participants also mentioned that finances and free time are necessary to attend language courses: *"In the Czech Republic you have to learn Czech, but to learn Czech (in a course of high quality), you need money, because it is not for free. These courses are not for free. And you need time (to attend courses). And how do you do that? To have time and money when you are working? When do you have to pay for this and that? You are alone, you have only one daughter and you have to do this and this. How do you solve that?"*<sup>4</sup>. In the case of these participants, without sufficient knowledge of language they will not be able to get a skilled and better paid job without sufficient knowledge of language. Importantly, the participants themselves expressed a willingness to work rather than be dependent on humanitarian aid and social benefits.

Another factor is readiness to return back to Ukraine. A total of 25 participants consider their stay in the Czech Republic or Poland to be a temporary sojourn and they have no ambitions to adapt to the countries of destinations (see (Malynovska, 2023)). In order to secure their temporary stay, they work in low qualified and non-qualified working positions: *"I will not find a job here. In order to work here in my profession, I need my diploma to be recognized. So I have to learn a language, which takes at least a year, and then get a certificate for my diploma. That could take two or three years, but it could also take four years. And I do not want to be in the Czech Republic for such a long time, I will go back"*<sup>5</sup>. Among these participants are 12 women with partners in Ukraine.

Also important are the differences between the Czech/Polish and Ukrainian environments in terms of legislation, economy, technologies and other relevant factors, which limit the transfer of skills and knowledge from Ukraine. For example, a lawyer in Ukraine cannot work in the same profession in the

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<sup>1</sup> Participant 37.

<sup>2</sup> Participant 31.

<sup>3</sup> However, participants also mentioned Polish or Czech language is easier to learn for refugees from western part of Ukraine, while these languages are more difficult for Russian speakers from the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine.

<sup>4</sup> Participant 33.

<sup>5</sup> Participant 22.

Czech Republic or in Poland because he/she studied a different legislation than it takes place in the countries of destination. In other cases - for example in the case of a psychologist – language becomes an important factor. It is necessary to learn the Czech or Polish language perfectly to be able to express oneself abstractly in clinical psychology. For these reasons, the university degrees of 19 participants who worked in Ukraine as economists-accountants, psychologists or lawyers are not valid, and they also work in non-qualified or low qualified jobs or are unemployed.

However, for participants with a secondary education, it is not such a problem to find a job in their profession because the barriers are not as limiting for them. For example, participants who originally worked as confectioners in Ukraine could also work as confectioners in the Czech Republic or in Poland because this work is not as demanding in terms of language, knowledge, skills and procedures as the profession of a lawyer, which is more nationally oriented. Thus, participants with secondary education did not find it as difficult to enter the Czech or Polish labor market. However, those with a university degree could not easily transfer their skills and knowledge due to Czech and Polish peculiarities.

For participants with university degrees, their situation often means a drop in qualification, which is psychologically difficult: *“On the first floor (of the dormitory) there are women with children up to three years of age. They do not work. On the second floor there are many women who work in the same jobs as me or Tatiana, like cleaning. Some work in the supermarket, some are confectioners, some sew clothes. Different things. Those who worked with their hands until the invasion could still work with their hands here. Those who worked with their brains will not work with their brains here. Unfortunately. I never worked with my hands, so the first three months were very hard for me. You know, from chief accountant to cleaning toilets. That beats self-esteem”*<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, 7 participants with a secondary education have a job in the Czech Republic or in Poland that was the same as in Ukraine and only 4 with secondary education experience a downfall of their employment (or they became unemployed), while 35 with a university education work in the Czech Republic and in Poland much below their qualification (or they became unemployed). Only 5 participants with university education were able to find a job that more or less corresponded to their education<sup>2</sup>. These data contrast sharply with the research conducted in Germany by Mykola Sydorov and Yeliena Kovalska (2022) who found that more than 30% of the participants work in “professional” jobs and only 2 % are unskilled workers.

Although the participants do not directly refer to precariousness, 15 single mothers with young children are in a precarious situation. Although 4 of them work unofficially as cleaners, their salary ranges from USD 267 to 446 and even with humanitarian aid their income for the whole household is below the poverty line in the Czech Republic. The standard of living of single mothers with small children and their material welfare is thus not sufficiently satisfactory and it causes uncertainty about the future. There are also psychological consequences.

It is also worth mentioning that 3 participants remained in the same working position as in Ukraine because they resettled in the Czech Republic or in Poland, but they still work remotely and remained in the same job. Elderly and disabled people were also not affected by the resettlement in terms of work (and they also find the new conditions in the Czech Republic and in Poland as more advantageous due to the medical development of these countries).

## CONCLUSION

This article examines the working and living conditions of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and in the Czech Republic. It is based on the analysis of 57 interviews and identified were four main barriers to entering the labor market: 1) having small children without a partner, 2) language barrier, 3) readiness to return back to Ukraine, 4) differences between Czech/Polish and Ukrainian environments. These reasons lead to participants' establishment in low qualified or non-qualified working positions, but also to unemployment. However, the host countries, which create unpleasant reception for Ukrainian refugees, have a decisive influence on the situation.

More specifically, the research was conducted with a majority of university educated participants (46 compared to 11 participants with secondary education) and the results show that of the total sample of

<sup>1</sup> Participant 20.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding our research, the data used in this paragraph excludes working remotely and students.

46 university education participants, 35 are working below their qualification or are unemployed. This is a significant downfall of employment status. Comparing the data with the participants who completed secondary education, more participants (7 compared to 4) achieve the same working positions as they had in Ukraine. According to the results, participants with a lower level of education transfer their skills more smoothly while participants with a university education have jobs far below their qualification. This can even lead to psychological difficulties.

In this research, 15 women with children under 6 years of age are living in precarious situations. This is associated with a feeling of uncertainty and accused may also be conditions of admission in the Czech Republic and in Poland. These countries are not in a position to take participants out of precarious situations and force them into insecurity. However, their situation could be seen only as temporary, as these participants could return in Ukraine or their partners could reunite with them in the host countries.

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