# ‘The Plan Is No Plan’: Ontological Security and Resilience of Ukrainian Refugees in the Czech Labour Market*

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**Abstract:** After 24 February 2022, tens of thousands of refugees from Ukraine fled to the Czech Republic. The war disrupted their lives, and their future status remains unclear. This article utilises 19 semistructured interviews with highly skilled Ukrainian refugees in different parts of the Czech Republic. It focuses on their ontological security and migration aspirations and, according to these theoretical implications, identifies the key elements that make participants’ lives insecure and limit their position in the Czech labour market. This study explores the uncertainties and resilience associated with temporary protection status and other obstacles, such as proficiency in the Czech language, family ties, the temporality of one’s stay, the feeling of ‘home’ in Ukraine, perceived xenophobia and discrimination. These factors cause unpredictability about the future and their position in the labour market. The result is downwards social mobility, which lowers migration aspirations in the sense of a better life in the Czech Republic.

**Keywords:** migration, aspirations, ontological security, social mobility, Ukraine

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## Introduction

As a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (beginning on 24 February 2022), more than 5 million Ukrainians fled to European Union member states and obtained temporary protection (UN Refugee Agency, 2023). This movement represents another depopulation process in Ukraine, which has suffered a loss of population since the 1990s, but recently, this loss was triggered by invading forces. The Czech Republic as well as other countries in the European Union adopted the Temporary Protection Directive in 2001, and temporary protection was first activated in 2022. According to the Czech Ministry of the Interior, the Czech Republic granted protection to 504,000 refugees until April 2023 (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR [MVČR], 2023). However, one-third returned to Ukraine or moved to other countries in the European Union. In April 2023, 325,000 records of temporary protection were issued. The number of temporary protection holders in 2024 was similar at 338,000 persons (MVČR, 2024). Temporary protection allows certain benefits, such as immediate access to the labour market, health insurance and social insurance. However, the temporality of refugees' stay is the hallmark of their prospects. Their personal development, aspirations, self-realisation and continuity of individual experiences strongly depend on nonpermanent residence permits, leading to their resilience, ontological (in)security and specific migration aspirations. It is worth mentioning that the Czech government also cannot be sure about the type of residence status of Ukrainian refugees, mainly because of uncertainty about the future development of the war in Ukraine.

Most refugees from Ukraine have been women (65%), followed by men (35%). Among them, children have constituted 28%, with seniors at only 4% (MVČR, 2023). Most refugees have settled in large cities—Prague, Brno and Pilsen—and have been usually young and highly skilled. In July 2022, 75% of refugees were up to 45 years old, and the number of tertiary educated people outnumbered that of Czech citizens with university degrees (Klimešová et al., 2022). The educational level compared with Czech citizens remained unchanged in 2023 (PAQ Research, 2023). Two-thirds were economically active (PAQ Research, 2023), but they usually worked in poorly paid low-skilled jobs (earning average of 154 Czech crowns per hour; PAQ Research, 2023). The reason is that they have been expected to work immediately after their arrival, but certain integration policies, such as obligatory learning of the Czech language for a specific period before their entrance to the labour market (such as in Germany), are missing. The result is that, among those who were economically active in Ukraine, half had a job in the Czech Republic in order to escape poverty (PAQ Research, 2023). This indicates their poverty and precarious conditions—most refugees live below the poverty line, and the support provided by the state decreased significantly starting in July 2023, meaning that almost two-thirds of the refugees were below the poverty line (PAQ Research, 2023). Vulnerable women were mainly single women who needed to take care of their children and unable to work. Thus, most families with young children (and newly incoming refugees) have been strongly dependent (from 68%) on humanitarian aid (PAQ Research, 2023).

Ukrainian refugees have tended to take jobs below their qualifications, and many of them experienced professional decline. Refugees with high qualification levels have had strong potential for the Czech labour market. However, there have been significant constraints, such as the incompetency to handle bureaucratic issues, insufficient language knowledge where only 25% can speak Czech fluently (PAQ Research, 2023) and nonrecognition of diplomas ('nostrification'). Problematic is also the position of the state, which cannot provide suitable working positions or other opportunities because the Czech Republic usually relies on the efforts of the migrants to be individually integrated into Czech society and the job market (Jelínková & Valenta, 2022), and the Czech government was unprepared for the situation that occurred. This has led to dependence on individual ontological insecurity, resilience and aspirations. The refugees' new conditions can provide opportunities but also uncertainty. The socioeconomic status of Ukrainian refugees depends on their language skills, recognition of diploma, family situation and ability to recover from strains. All of these factors influence their perspective of staying in the Czech Republic or returning to their country of origin.

The present article focuses on highly skilled Ukrainian refugees and their entry into the Czech labour market. For the purposes of the current article, highly skilled refugees are defined as people who earned at least a bachelor's degree before fleeing from Ukraine. We can then ask how these refugees are resilient to new conditions in the Czech Republic regarding ontological security and migration aspirations. Here, the concept of ontological security refers to a continuity or discontinuity in life derived from individual experiences. According to the refugees, their lives have been disrupted by the war, and ontological security is the concept of how to understand it. Migration aspirations study the personal ambitions of migrants, such as their subjective desires, wishes and goals, in a new country. Both concepts are associated with individual experience and ambitions related to events in personal life and resilient strategies that individuals adopt. The labour market is one of the crucial domains that refugees need to navigate to establish their lives in a new country. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to show how the status of temporary protection affects the resilience strategies of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech labour market. These strategies are associated with ontological security and future migration and life aspirations. The following sections focus on the theoretical implications of ontological security, resilience and migration aspirations. Then, we turn to the methodology, analysis and discussion.

## Ontological security and resilience

The concept of ontological security has been discussed at the state and transnational levels (Steele, 2008), but it also encompasses the security of the individual. We understand ontological security as a mental state that is based on the continuity of events in human life. Some scholars have sought to understand how

international events are cocreated with local, intimate and private subjectivities (Botterill et al., 2019). For example, the conflict in Ukraine led to the distortion of individuals' lives and a sense of disruption and insecurity. For some scholars, an ontologically secure life is experienced as 'real, alive, whole, and continuous' (Laing, 2010, p. 39). For those who are ontologically insecure, anxiety manifests in three ways: engulfment, which involves fear of other relationships overwhelming them; implosion, whereby the fear is of the world collapsing at any time; and petrification, which is the experience of terror and a sense of depersonalisation (Laing, 2010, pp. 44–46). Ontological (in)security affects possible engagement in all spheres of life. There are certain stressors for refugees, and they adopt resilient strategies that guide them in ensuring their ontological security. Ontological insecurity can also affect relatively privileged actors. Furthermore, Bondi (2014) conceptualises ontological security and insecurity as a continuum rather than binary distinction. Therefore, continuity is essential for perceived ontological security.

Ontological security relates to peoples' resilience. For example, Zapata-Barrero (2021) argues that the normative path of resilience is ontological security; it involves the set of routines that individuals follow in their daily lives that allow them to use their agency (Giddens, 1991). Although ontological security can mean security in housing (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998), it is also connected to the labour market and economy. Similar situations might usually be experienced by refugees, and the present case will mainly address the latter situation. Insertion into the labour market is usually important at certain life course stages because it provides the conditions that help protect individuals from economic insecurity. Holding temporary protected status makes Ukrainian refugees peripheral to the economy because it is not yet clear whether they will be able to stay with their employers for a longer period of time. This activates diverse resilience strategies that can be used to overcome this issue. Garnier et al. (2018) have called for more research into the vulnerability–resilience paradox of refugees regarding their economic status. Such research can prevent the stereotyping of refugees and reveal ways to decrease structural obstacles to the expression of their resilience.

Porter et al. (2018, p. 387) describe resilience as the capability of a system to withstand shock and then 'bounce back' after the shock. Some studies have investigated the ontological insecurity experienced by migrants and refugees in their countries of origin and transit. For example, Vaughan-Williams and Pisani (2020) interview people on the move in Malta, and among the migrant and refugee fleeing conflict zones, peace and security were listed as the main motivating factors for leaving their countries of origin. At the same time, many people fleeing could be viewed as 'economic migrants' by different actors. Previous case studies have also investigated the role of the informal economy for migrants, as in the case of Ukrainian migrants in Naples, Italy (Harney, 2012). As Harney states (2012), migrant networks usually serve a greater sense of ontological security, economic advancement, social cohesion and insertion in mainstream society. Therefore, social networks and knowledge distribution might serve as resilience strategies for migrants who are spatially dislocated and want to adapt to the labour market. However, as Porter (2018) and Vaughan-Williams and Pisani (2020) reveal, the

social reality for refugees might be more complicated because they may no longer return to their original place. Refugees may face an even greater sense of disruption and ontological insecurity and may be pressured to activate their resilience strategies because of a temporary legal pathway to the labour market.

## Migration and life aspirations

The ideas about aspirations and capabilities originated in Sen's (1999) work and were further developed by various migration scholars (Carling, 2002; De Haas, 2011). Migration aspirations refer to a series of cognitive and emotional orientations relating to future migration as an opportunity in the lives of individuals and whether it is better to leave or stay. These aspirations consist of 'ambitions, attitudes, expectations, intentions, plans, preferences, wants and wishes, desires, dreams, hopes, longings and yearnings, as well as (…) considerations, imaginings, needs, necessity, obligations and willingness to migrate' (Aslany et al., 2021, p. 6). Here, aspirations include both the rational and emotional components of decision-making (Carling & Collins, 2018). We can distinguish between aspirations (formation and migration potential) and ability (realisation of migration aspirations) (Carling, 2014). Carling and Schewel (2018) see migration aspirations as a form of attitude that includes two separate steps: (1) the evaluation of migration potential and (2) the realisation of actual mobility or immobility in a given moment.

According to Carling (2014), there are two levels of migration aspirations. The first is the macro level, which might refer to a particular emigration environment, which includes social, economic and political contexts. The second is the micro-level scale of those who want to stay and who want to migrate. Carling (2002) also points to the interconnectedness of life aspirations with migration aspirations. This is connected with broader life projects, such as attaining better education or income. Thus, aspirations can also refer to future perspectives that migrants would like to achieve to attain a 'satisfactory life' (Van Heelsum, 2017) or 'good life' (De Haas, 2021) associated with personal development. Some scholars have also discussed the role of life aspirations in refugees' aspirations to return (Cerase, 1974; Müller-Funk & Fransen, 2022). All of these are part of the individual level of migrant aspirations. According to Boneva and Frieze (2001), those people willing to migrate tend to be more work oriented. Therefore, they have greater achievement and power motivation. Personal motivations are also influenced by family members who can encourage people to migrate (Aslany et al., 2021). If a receiving country offers conditions that suit the needs of the migrant, including available desired or adequate job positions and quality of life standards, the aspiration to migrate can change accordingly.

When discussing forced migration, the agency of refugees is usually limited, and the need to move arises notwithstanding prior migration aspirations. Nevertheless, movement still follows agency, imaginations and evaluations of different places (Schiefer et al., 2023). After reaching the first safe space, there

is still scope for onwards migration based on previous migration aspirations. Moreover, migration aspirations may change over time and can be repeatedly revisited (Boccagni, 2017). Boccagni (2017) has sought to encompass both the subjective and relational elements of migrants' aspirations by breaking them down into three fundamental dimensions: *content* (what are they aspiring to?), *relational reference* (to the benefit of whom?) and *time-space horizon* (when and where?). Boccagni shows that aspirations could be displaced, deferred, passed down through generations or curtailed over time. Similarly, by considering subjective priorities and diverse constraints and opportunities, Borselli and Meijl (2021) examine how aspirations evolve during migration and in the destination country.

Migration aspirations can be connected to the skill levels of migrants and refugees. Previous studies have highlighted a positive link between attained education and aspirations to migrate (Aslany et al., 2021). The authors also highlight that migrants with higher skills might face lower institutional barriers in destination countries (Berlinschi & Harutyunyan, 2019). However, this might take place at the discursive level of policies that attract highly skilled migrants, but the reality is often different because highly skilled migrants undergo lengthy procedures to recognise their qualifications and skills. If they manage to do so, there is a greater probability of being employed and having higher wages (Tibajev & Hellgren, 2019). In other contexts, tertiary educated migrants choose to devalue their skills obtained abroad to fit the labour market in terms of job type and remuneration (Nowicka, 2014). At the same time, exclusionary narratives, such as assumptions or stereotypes, might prevent highly skilled migrants' formal and informal recognition of qualifications (Wagner & Childs, 2006).

## Methodology

In our research, we used interviews with highly skilled Ukrainian refugees who arrived in the Czech Republic after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Highly skilled refugees might have higher aspirations, and they could reveal the interplay between ontological security (the continuity of life course was disrupted), aspirations (highly skilled refugees might be more aspirational) and resilience in the Czech labour market (the capacity to recover from economic insecurity). We define a highly educated migrant as one with a tertiary level of education (completed tertiary education of at least four years, i.e., a bachelor's degree[1]). In total, we carried out 19 semistructured interviews. The interviews took place between November 2022 and August 2023. The respondents lived in different regions of the Czech Republic but mainly in the Olomouc Region and in Prague (or near Prague). All our respondents met the research criteria of being highly qualified (having a tertiary education) and holders of tem-

[1] Earning a bachelor's degree in Ukraine takes four years after completing 11th class, but it might also take three years after completing college (this depends on the field of study).

porary protection. We included only those who were active in the labour market at the time of the interview so that we could reveal their experience with job searches and the working environment in the Czech Republic.

The interviews were conducted online via Zoom or in person. We recruited the majority of participants via various Facebook groups. In total, we addressed members of 27 Facebook groups associated with Ukrainians in the Czech Republic, including Olomouc pomáhá Ukrajině, Ostrava pro Ukrajinu, Olomouc helps Ukraine, Ukrajinci v Čechiji, UKRAJINCI V ČECHIJI – ROBOTA, FUŠKY, ŽYTLO TA DOKUMENTY DLJA UKRAJINCIV, Naši v Čechiji, Ukrajinci v Čechiji l Žytlo/Robota/Perevezennja and others. In addition, we used a snowball sampling method in which participants could recommend other interview participants. The interviews took place in Czech, Ukrainian or English based on the participants' preferences. An interpreter was also involved in the interviews and translated them into Ukrainian, when necessary. All ethical standards were followed in the interviews. The participants participated voluntarily and were informed about the anonymisation of the interview. Moreover, they did not have to answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable, and they could end the interview at any time without giving a reason for doing so. The interviews were recorded with each participant's consent. Informed consent was signed in the case of in-person interviews, and verbal consent was given in the case of online interviews. This process follows the legislature of the Czech Republic.

The interviews were transcribed into English, and we then carried out the coding in the Atlas.ti programme. Although we understand that the language barrier could have limited some of the information we obtained, we still engaged experienced interpreters, when needed. We are also aware of specific words or phrases used in the Ukrainian language whose meanings could be easily shifted when translated into English. Some specificities here were consulted with interpreters. The respondents were designated R1, R2, and so forth based on the chronological order of the interviews. The interviews were semistructured; therefore, questions were prepared, but some additional questions were asked during the interviews to provide a more comprehensive context. There was a set of open questions related to studying and working in Ukraine and arriving and settling in the Czech Republic. The interviews also included questions about employment in the Czech Republic, assistance from the Czech authorities, problems faced by refugees in the Czech Republic and their future plans. We used thematic analysis, in which patterns of analysis were identified and then grouped by themes (Taylor et al., 2015; Terry et al., 2017).

All participants in the research were women (n = 19). Although some men who had resided in the Czech Republic or elsewhere in Europe before the start of the war could also apply for temporary protection, most were under conscription and could not leave Ukraine. Therefore, a limited number of men would be able to participate. We do not view omitting them as a major drawback of our research, but there were limited opportunities to reach them. We originally wanted to include only those refugees who worked in positions that matched their qualifica-

tions. However, this proved to be problematic because we received very limited responses from potential research participants. Therefore, we included all temporary protection holders with higher qualifications who were employed at the time of the interviews. Most of the participants used the help of the Czech authorities after their arrival and later became employed in the Czech Republic. The details of the research participants, including their position in their country of origin and in the Czech Republic at the time of the interview, are listed in Table 1. It should be noted that all respondents arrived during the first months of the invasions (from February until April 2022), and they had been in the Czech Republic for approximately a year and a half at the time of the interviews. This applies to all the participants, and their length of stay possibly impacts their aspirations, decisions and feelings of security. The majority of respondents arrived in March 2022, with the exception of respondent 8 (February 2022) and respondent 16 (April 2022).

**Table 1. Research participants**

| Respondent | Age | Employment in Ukraine | Employment in the Czech Republic |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 30 | flight attendant | flight attendant |
| 2 | 43 | doctor | doctor |
| 3 | 34 | English teacher | assistant teacher |
| 4 | 39 | banker | cleaner |
| 5 | 35 | carpenter and painter | painter |
| 6 | 42 | ecologist and photographer | laboratory technician |
| 7 | 33 | HR manager | manual worker |
| 8 | 33 | advertising manager, teacher in an art school | project manager |
| 9 | 40 | assistant professor at the university | project manager, doctoral student |
| 10 | 28 | library manager | cleaner |
| 11 | 36 | factory manager | factory worker |
| 12 | 51 | associate professor | university lecturer |
| 13 | 36 | history teacher | assistant teacher |
| 14 | 33 | kindergarten teacher and speech therapist | manual worker |
| 15 | 52 | teaching English at the university | university lecturer |
| 16 | 39 | accountant | assistant teacher |
| 17 | 45 | book printing business owner | IT worker |
| 18 | 34 | musician in the orchestra | confectioner |
| 19 | 27 | media worker | TV editor |

**Feelings of belonging and security**

We will now turn to discussing Ukrainian refugees' sense of security and belonging before turning to their future aspirations and how they play out in labour market insertion and outcomes. It should be stressed that refugees live in transnational circumstances and some of the interviewees discussed the 'two realities' of being both 'here and there'. Although living and working in the Czech Republic, they also heard news from Ukraine, which they found distressing.

> We are not happy about everything that is happening. However, we are lucky to be safe. Therefore, when people ask me, how are you? I say apart from the bad news, from the warring news from home, apart from worrying messages from my colleagues every day, which I read every day in the morning and in the evening and during the day, I'm fine here. Therefore, it's kind of living two realities. In the Czech Republic, we are fine. However, our minds are still at home. (R15)

Similarly, people viewed their lives as divided into two parts.

> Life is divided into two halves. I have already lost the life I had at home, with the fact that, thanks to the reality I live in, I perceive my home as very far away. I truly miss the normal and real life I always had. Here in the Czech Republic, I still don't feel adapted enough to feel at home. I feel like a stranger here, and it's a very complicated situation in that life is divided into two halves, and I don't feel comfortable in either of them right now. (R10)

The respondents also mentioned different types of stress experienced by Ukrainian people (both in Ukraine and the Czech Republic). The developments in Ukraine and the daily reality of life in the Czech Republic have made it difficult for refugees. Some of them also argued that it was increasingly difficult for Ukrainians who stayed behind to understand what the other group experienced.

> There is a big difference between us [people in Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Czech Republic]. (…) We also don't understand each other and feel each other's stress. People in Ukraine are more stressed because of fears and explosions. During the war, they worked and built a life under this stress. We who emigrate have stress from other things. Here, again, we address the rules, laws and documents. The language barrier is also a stress. That is why we can harm each other and do not understand each other. (R14)

Not only the two realities of keeping up with the situation in Ukraine and staying on top of the situation in the Czech Republic but also the issue of temporary stay is an issue that prevents the feeling of security. The temporariness of refugees' stay has also manifested in a lack of planning for the future.

> Now, it is very difficult to have any plans for the future because nobody knows what tomorrow will bring. Before arriving in the Czech Republic, I hoped that, by this

> time, I would be home and that the war would be over, but it is taking time and there is an enormous question about what we will do next. (R10)

Some of them might perceive the time differently, and time compression was apparent, especially at the beginning of their stay in the Czech Republic.

> Whatever happened here last year, we were deeply shocked. In addition, when it settled down a little bit, we understood that our feelings of time were different. We were missing a month, at least a month, when people were asking, 'What date is it today?' And in March, I was saying February. In April, I was saying March. So we have been missing at least a month. That's for sure. Most likely, somewhere in August, only in August. I started feeling the time as it was. (R15)

Many refugees perceived their stay only as temporary at first and thought it would last months, at most.

> And there was also the bombing of the airport, and we were afraid for the children and for ourselves, but we thought it would be for a short time. We went away for a short time—a month or two—and we thought we would come back. We hoped. (R16)

Others also had difficulties in planning their stays. When discussing the labour market, there were some problems that prevented them from staying employed. When asked about the future, some participants remarked on their employment contracts and the time for which they 'were bound' to stay in the Czech Republic but did not plan anything beyond that.

> Well, the point is that the plan is no plan. The plan is no plan—just living the day. I have responsibilities. I have responsibilities under the contract, and I have to fulfil them. Most likely, that's the only plan that people entrusted me with, and I must not betray them. That's probably it. Yeah, no plans for the future. (R15)

Similarly, other respondents commented that their future plans were interconnected with the situation in Ukraine.

> I think I want to go back. I still have such thoughts. I truly don't know how long the war will last. Well, as long as there's a war, I'll be here. They even told us at work: 'As long as there is a war, you will work [for us]'. When the war is over, we'll probably go home. (R19)

Feelings of belonging and employability were marked by the perceived temporariness of their stay. However, some noted that feeling at home was connected to where they currently were ('I have always known that my home is where I feel at peace. It's here *today*'. R7), while others still did not feel 'at home' in the Czech Republic ('Even though it is good here, it does not feel at home in the Czech Republic'. R6), which influenced their position in the labour market.

In addition to their employability, several other factors have emerged influencing their position in the labour market. These were mainly associated with civic life, hence impacting their ontological security and aspirations. Examples include instances of xenophobia and discrimination encountered by Ukrainian refugees. Some experienced hostility, which prevented them from feeling a sense of belonging. These experiences ranged from strange looks and insistence on speaking Czech to outright verbal and physical abuse.

> I just noticed that some people can look at me with such a strange look, such a 'not welcome' look, but it's not difficult for me' I don't always see it, nobody has ever said anything bad to me. (R3)

> Some political conflicts are growing here; I notice that Ukrainians bother some people. For example, in kindergarten, my child speaks good Czech, but when they ask her where she is from and she says she is from Ukraine, and they look at her differently. (R1)

> I once met a man who started yelling at me because I was on the phone and speaking Ukrainian. The man shouted, 'If you speak Ukrainian, then go back to Ukraine'. (R5)

In one instance, people felt threatened by physical violence when someone took away the Ukrainian flag and burned it.

> The family we live with had a big [Ukrainian] flag on the window; they told me they were with us, so they wanted to put it there. After some time, some people came here, tore down the flag and then set it on fire. Then, our family told me that I should also take my flag down from the window so that nothing happens. Then, I also told my daughter not to sing Ukrainian songs because we did not know what reaction might come. I was a little scared because of the situation with the flag. (R1)

The cultural differences between Ukrainian refugees and Czech majority can also hinder feelings of belonging among refugees. Apart from the language barrier, there were strong negative attitudes towards the government, state institutions, officials and employers. Such strong animosity towards official institutions is incomparable with how these institutions are perceived in the Czech Republic. There were other meaningful cultural distinctions in contrast to the Czech majority, such as stronger anti-Russian and nationalistic orientations (than the Czech Republic has), suspicion of public health insurance (because this is missing in Ukraine) or perceptions of bribery as a part of ordinary life. However, most respondents emphasised that they needed to adapt to the Czech Republic's environment. Because of the unfamiliar Czech environment, Ukrainian refugees also found it difficult to understand Czech laws and employee rights, which led to greater employment through semilegal labour brokers.

Refugees with a university education also experienced bewilderment at their predicament if their jobs did not match their qualifications. The situation

took place not only in the workplace but also in official institutions, such as the Labour Office.

> I would also like to add that, at the Labour Office, they laughed at us a little bit, that we have a university degree but go to work in a factory. I hear and see derision on this subject almost everywhere. They also laughed about it in the new job. I think the Czech Republic does not understand our situation. They find it strange that a person with a university degree goes to work in a factory. (R7)

All these instances of xenophobia prevented the refugees from obtaining ontological security, feelings of belonging and position in the labour market. Despite being in a 'safe' country, they might struggle with expressions of xenophobia in their daily lives. On the other hand, refugees, through their agency, expressed adaptation to these challenging circumstances and further resilience.

**Adaptation and future aspirations**

Regarding adaptation, learning the language was seen as a key aspect of Ukrainians' lives in the Czech Republic, including its influence on their working position. The refugees acknowledged the stress faced by people living in Ukraine but at the same time added that their reality of living as refugees in another country was also stressful when dealing with authorities and having to use another language.

> And I could solve any question in my country, even with state authorities and health, but here, you feel a lack of freedom[2]. Because you know little about what the rules are here, you don't know the language, and you have no friends. This is very difficult. It can take years to adapt. (R17)

Once they started understanding the language, it could help them integrate, have the freedom to communicate and even help others who might need some support.

> I think [I feel] integrated and adapted, and the language helps a lot in communicating with people, and I also like to help our Ukrainian people who don't speak that well yet. Language is a big source of support. I understand much better than I can speak yet, but I write pretty well; I read, too. So I'm making more progress there than speaking, but language, that is the most important thing. (R13)

Knowing the Czech language also influences one's aspiration to stay in the Czech Republic or obtain better job opportunities.

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[2] By saying a 'lack of freedom', the respondent refers to the lack of knowledge of the language. Not knowing the language leads to the inability to communicate enough on a daily basis and be able to solve any issue related to life in a foreign country.

> Now, my education from Ukraine is enough, and I also have my Ukrainian diploma verified in the Czech Republic. I go to the courses [Czech language and teacher's assistant] because then, I want to stay here in the Czech Republic and work at the school. I would also like to have a better job. (R13)

The refugees also discussed how persevering helped them with changing positions. In a way, many experienced downwards social mobility when coming to the Czech Republic (bearing in mind that all of our respondents had a university-level education).

> First, I worked in other factories in different positions. In one factory, I worked as a cleaner; in another, I worked as a carpenter. I searched for all these jobs myself through Facebook. I found the job I am currently working on the website Práce.cz. I sent my CV to the website, which I translated through an internet translator. One company from Prostějov responded to my resume. Now, I work there. (R5)

The respondents started to work in any job available, but once they saw that they would be staying in the Czech Republic for a longer period of time—all of them had been in the Czech Republic for a year and a half when interviews were conducted—they started looking for other jobs to strengthen their position in the Czech Republic. They also used different strategies that included not only using their social capital but also responding to job offers on different online platforms. Other respondents actively sent CVs to companies with a 'good reputation' in their area.

> I started working in a warehouse. I was ready for any job, but I understood that, without knowing the language, I could not claim anything. I worked in a warehouse as a part-time worker. That made it a little easier for me because, sitting between four walls [at home], it is possible to go completely crazy. In addition, at that time, we were actively looking for a university for our son, documents and translations. It was a completely different education system for us as well, and we were getting to know it. So I worked as a part-time worker until December 2022. My son was already studying, and I understood that I was very uncomfortable at the job because I wanted to do something more intellectual. (…) I was learning [Czech] and had a job, but I wanted a more qualified job. And sometime in February, I saw an ad for Czechitas courses on Facebook. (R17)

In this case, the person was ready for a new field and started to learn about IT. In other cases, people preferred to work in better-paying jobs that were not adequate for their qualifications, but they still had certain expectations. Satisfaction at work and job opportunities in the preferred field in which a person already has work or study experience can create stability and might lead to aspirations to stay in the Czech Republic.

> I studied philosophy and culturology, but then, I went to the Work and Travel programme and started working at the airport in Zhulany, Ukraine. Here, in the Czech

> Republic, I work as a flight attendant. I have been working as a flight attendant since April; it took me a month to get a job, so I am working as a flight attendant, and I am satisfied. (R1)

Another respondent found a similar job that she had in Ukraine and studied for. The limitations for her were the administrative burden and a final approbation test.

> In Ukraine, I worked as an ophthalmologist in the city of Dnipro. I studied medicine. For half a year, I worked as an assistant at a school in the town of Trutnov. Since November, I have been working as an ophthalmologist in the eye department in the city of Mladá Boleslav. I was helped by a friend who asked at the hospital. Then, I received permission from the Ministry of Health, and my diploma was recognised. (…) I have a contract for one year, and I have to take the approbation test. Until then, I had to work under supervision. I only have the nostrification of my diploma. Now, I have prepared the papers and I will send them to Prague to VZP [General Health Insurance Company], … for postgraduate education and when I send everything, I think that in half a year I can start the approbation exams. Now, I don't have the approbation exams yet. (R2)

The issue of recognising the qualifications for highly skilled migrants is crucial in some fields. However, despite learning Czech, the majority of respondents did not plan to officially recognise their qualifications. Some interviewees were aware that they did not need 'nostrification' for their current job. Others also expressed the need to start working as soon as possible, and they did not want to wait longer. Hence, process can be seen as lengthy and too difficult for refugees because it was not worth it unless they worked in specific fields, such as healthcare.

> At the beginning, I thought about getting my diploma notarised, but all my friends who have a similar education and work in education mostly work part time as teaching assistants, and I changed my mind that it wouldn't be worthwhile for me because they are most often only half time and it takes more responsibility in the workplace and it's not worth it. It's not worth it to me financially. In addition, since I don't plan to stay in the Czech Republic, nostrification is not a question. However, I attend Czech language courses three times a week so that I can find a better job. (R10)

When discussing their future (migration) aspirations, many refugees stressed the importance of linking their lives with other family members. Some refugees noted that they would like their families to be reunited in Ukraine, despite still having certain work-related expectations.

> Additionally, our return to the house depends on my husband. He is in Ukraine in the army, so I don't know how soon I will be back. If my husband continues to be in the army, I see no reason to return to Ukraine. (R8)

> As I would like to live somewhere as a family, here it would be difficult for us to live together as a family. To be in the Czech Republic, we would have to work a lot, have a lot of money, have an apartment and rent an apartment. In addition, I think it would also be a bit difficult for my husband because he only speaks Ukrainian, Russian and English and does not know Czech. However, I think if he wanted to, he could study a bit and have some work, too. We will still talk about it and watch the news about how it looks (in Ukraine). (R18)

Other refugees discussed the role of their children and their well-being in different stages of education.

> There are no immediate plans, either. I like the work because it is very similar to my work in Ukraine. The child goes to kindergarten but feels bad there because he has no friends. It's hard to talk about plans for this war. Both the Czech Republic and Ukraine have their pluses, so I don't know where we would stay. I will focus on the psycho-emotional state of my child. If my child continues to be sad and sick in the future, we will return to Ukraine. (R5)

Other refugees with older children discussed the role of university education for them and the opportunities they might have outside of Ukraine.

> I don't know what will be the fate of my son because he has prospects and is now in the first year of his bachelor's degree, and they are already offering him a job because he can do a lot. I understand that he would have more opportunities here in Europe than in Ukraine because he is so talented, and I could work in some international companies. His childhood dream was (to work at) Google, and I don't know how it will be. Therefore, if he wanted to stay in Europe, I would say, 'Well, son, it's your life. You must decide for yourself'. (R17)

The same respondent continued.

> And as for me, I have a family and a husband, and I am impatiently waiting for the end of the war so that we can be together. My husband and I will make a decision about what to do next. Because our business is not working and I am not sure if after the end of the war our business can be successful. (…) And what decision we will make with him, I don't know. At this time, what is important to me is simply that our family is together. (R17)

As the findings show, the refugees have been experiencing a disruption of ontological security over time compression, xenophobia, a belief in finishing the conflict in just a few months, a feeling of home in Ukraine and a family situation, but the temporality of their stay has also been problematic. All these aspects prevented them from feeling a sense of belonging and security in their stay, stopping them from creating a suitable plan for their living. This relates to their aspirations.

Despite their university degrees, many do not work in their original professions (although they aspire to it) or in high-skilled jobs and experience downwards social mobility because of positions below their qualifications with lower remuneration (the language barrier is the most crucial factor, and on-the-job language learning is more suitable for low-skilled jobs). By comparing their insecurity and aspirations, the present research suggests that these are intertwined perspectives when insecure positions drive respondents out of successful integration in the labour market. The resilient strategy is to learn the language to improve their social position. The language skills and knowledge of the labour market can increase, and some respondents have sought better employment by adopting specific strategies. However, it should be noted that it is also the Czech state and its policy that pushes Ukrainian refugees into this situation because it prefers the quick employability of Ukrainian refugees instead of providing them with suitable language courses for more permanent integration into the labour market.

## Discussion

Our research has focused on forced Ukrainian migration, which occurred after the Russian invasion in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, analysing refugees' access to the Czech labour market. Ukrainian refugees have faced several problems influencing their resilience and future life aspirations. Here, ontological security is understood as a mental state associated with an uninterruptedness of events in life, and some scholars have searched for an understanding of how international events are coconstructed in relation to local and intimate (un)interrupted subjectivities (Botterill et al., 2019). The conflict in Ukraine might also be considered an example of a disruption of ontological security. We have identified a significant disruption of participants' ontological security associated with the temporality of stay, time compression, fallible presumption that participants stay for only a few months, difficulties that prevent them from fully integrating into the labour market, feelings of home in Ukraine, xenophobia, discrimination and insufficient knowledge of the Czech language, which may cause downwards social mobility. The 'split lives' perceived by refugees are related to their perceptions of living in two realities—here (working in the Czech Republic) and there (connecting with relatives in Ukraine) (Žmegač, 2007). Hence, some respondents conceptualised their lives as being divided into two halves. The resulting events are linked to a disruption of ontological security.

Many respondents also felt stressed and insecure about their stay in the Czech Republic. Because of the temporary nature of their stay, they could not plan for the future. This, in turn, made it difficult for them to become employed or invest in a job search for an adequate position. Immediate needs preceded longer-term aspirations. The present research has shown that Ukrainian refugees were willing to do any kind of work after their arrival. However, when they decided and planned to stay longer in the Czech Republic, they started looking for jobs that could match their qualifications. When discussing migrants' future aspirations, the Ukrainian refugees emphasised the importance of linking their lives

with their relatives in Ukraine. Thus, some respondents wanted to find an adequate job, but on the other hand, they wanted to be reunited with their families in Ukraine. Aspirations and ontological security have also been influenced by the perspective of how migrants' families feel in the Czech Republic. The refugees stressed their well-being or educational opportunities for their children. Similarly, ontological security, feelings of belonging and aspirations were distorted by discrimination and xenophobia. The uncertainty of refugees is logical compared with other migrant groups, such as labour migrants, who are more capable of preparing for their migration route. The case of refugees is specific in the sense of disruption and unpreparedness to migrate, and constraints associated with ontological security are expected because the abrupt change in lives was more immediate than in the case of labour migrants.

The respondents used different resilience strategies when dealing with the situation. One of the strategies that the refugees used was learning the language or taking other measures that would allow them to improve their situation and social mobility. Our research has indicated that knowledge of the Czech language is a key factor affecting respondents' lives, adaptation and aspirations in the Czech Republic. The education skills mismatch is closely related to knowledge of Czech, and respondents stressed their limited knowledge of the Czech language. PAQ Research (2023) stated that 36% refugees who can speak Czech in everyday situations worked in jobs with qualifications similar to or higher than those in Ukraine. This is higher than for those who did not speak Czech (29%). Some respondents reported that they had attended Czech language courses to be employed in a better position. Once refugees can understand language, the integration process and adaptation are smoother and faster. Knowing the language of the host country also impacted refugees' aspirations to stay in the Czech Republic and obtain better and more qualified job opportunities. However, for the respondents, it was not easy to know the language before their work placement. Unlike in other countries (e.g., Germany or Norway), Ukrainian refugees were expected to start working immediately without longer language courses. In the short term, this led to faster integration in the labour market. On the other hand, they did not have enough time to learn the language, and even though on-the-job language learning might work in some low-skilled jobs, it is not sufficient for highly skilled workers who need thorough language knowledge for their work placement. This policy might have led to downward social mobility for some refugees. It should be noted that these complications are also related to the position of the Czech migration policy, which aims at accepting migrants as a 'cheap' labour force while being conservative in the area of language and cultural diversity.

The research on Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic (PAQ Research, 2023) has shown that most Ukrainian refugees were employed in skilled positions in Ukraine; in the Czech Republic, they work in the least-qualified and lowest-paid occupations (manual and assisting positions). Almost 50% of highly educated refugees work in significantly lower-skilled occupations (PAQ Research, 2023). In our research, we found that 12 of the 19 respondents were employed in a medium- or lower-skilled position.

## Conclusion

The present paper has investigated the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic. The results of 19 semistructured interviews with highly skilled Ukrainian refugees provide insights into the experiences of these refugees in the Czech Republic, focusing on their sense of security, belonging and future aspirations in the context of the labour market. The concept of ontological security has been employed to understand how the war disrupted the lives of these refugees and how they navigated this disruption. Ontological security refers to the continuity or discontinuity in life that is derived from individual experiences. Migration aspirations, on the other hand, delve into personal ambitions, encompassing the individual's subjective desires, wishes and goals in their new country. Both concepts are intertwined with individual experiences and ambitions, shaping the resilient strategies adopted by individuals.

The refugees struggled with their dual reality, feeling both physically present in the Czech Republic and emotionally connected to events in Ukraine. The temporary nature of their stay hindered future planning. Some initially perceived their stay as short term, which affected their sense of belonging and employability. In some cases, instances of xenophobia and discrimination further impacted their overall well-being. Despite these adversities, the refugees have exhibited resilience and adaptability to their circumstances. Learning the language and finding information about labour market requirements are important resilience strategies.

Access to Czech language courses and knowledge of the language play a crucial role in finding an adequate job. Language proficiency is also closely tied to refugees' aspirations to remain in the Czech Republic and access improved job prospects. However, some refugees found jobs that required little Czech knowledge (in academia, aviation or with NGOs working with Ukrainian refugees). The refugees shared their experiences in adapting to new job positions, initially facing downwards social mobility by accepting any available work, most often work unrelated to their qualifications. As language skills and job market familiarity grow, some have actively searched for more suitable employment, employing strategies such as leveraging social connections, responding to online job offers and even transitioning to entirely new fields. The emphasis on language is not new to migration studies (Wodak & Boukala, 2015), and it is widely acknowledged as an important factor in the successful adaptation of migrants to society. Although the importance of language is usually pronounced by host societies, including the Czech majority, our research suggests that the respondents were also aware of the crucial impact of language. Thus, this point connects the views of the country of the settlement and the respondents.

Family reunification stands out as an important factor in refugees' future aspirations. Many expressed a desire to return to Ukraine when their family members were there. Their decisions were also influenced by considerations such as the well-being of children, their education and potential opportunities in both countries. Despite facing numerous challenges, the refugees demonstrated resilience and adaptability. The narratives highlight the interplay of employment and

family dynamics in shaping their experiences and aspirations. Nevertheless, we identified a high degree of uncertainty regarding future migration aspirations for the majority of our respondents.

Studying ontological security and aspirations in the case of refugees is important. It was found that these concepts were intertwined because insecurity is mirrored in aspirations and results in hindering the success of adaptation. From the refugees' perspectives, the present has research confirmed the stressful beginning of refugees' new lives in their host countries, full of uncertainties and insecurity. However, the novelty of the current study is that it explains why uncertainties occur in the case of refugees obtaining temporary protection. It may be stated that the holders of temporary protection have even more rights than asylum seekers—for example, immediate access to the labour market and full health insurance—but this does not necessarily mean that these rights are fully used because of unpredictability and anxiety.

The current research has certain limitations. First, the results are limited by the sample of respondents who were active in the labour market and, therefore, were in a particular age group and life course stage. Second, it would also be interesting to compare our respondents' situation to that of refugees who were not employed and inquire about their resilience strategies to understand the similarities and differences between employed and unemployed refugees. Third, we interviewed only women from Ukraine, and we acknowledge that including men might add another dimension to the analysis. Nevertheless, researching highly skilled female refugees is worthwhile because they use different aspirations and resilience strategies while adapting to life in the Czech Republic.

The present research has revealed certain problems that could be translated into implications for the elaboration of the status of Ukrainian holders of temporary protection in the Czech Republic as well as in other European countries. Temporary protections are fabricated on the political level, while the subjectivities of refugees themselves and their own positions are not something that was counted on—at least during the legislative preparation of the Temporary Protection Directive. Thus, the current article has addressed these problems from the viewpoint of the refugees themselves. Regarding the Czech context, the present article has revealed how important language is for adaptation to Czech society. Pressure on quick employment—which the Czech government has focused on—might have resulted in a high percentage of employed refugees, but its success may be questioned based on the skills–employment mismatch. At least from a long-term perspective, the Czech state's insufficient emphasis on the acquisition of the Czech language can mean a future downwards social mobility of Ukrainian refugees and associated social problems. The respondents also faced a problem with the recognition of university diplomas. Recognition of a diploma is a problematic bureaucratic issue that is worthwhile only in certain fields, such as medicine. Based on our research and the findings of PAQ Research (2023), strengthening, accelerating and simplifying the possibility of recognising qualifications to allow Ukrainian refugees to work in their respective fields is recommended. This will benefit not only individual refugees but also the Czech state.

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