

Study Examines Flight Decisions of Ukrainian Refugees

Flight and displacement are becoming key challenges of the 21st century. It is therefore all the more important to understand how people make decisions before and during their flight. A new study by sociologist Céline Teney of Freie Universität Berlin on displaced Ukrainians shows: refugees' perceived sense of agency affects the course of their flight. In addition, social contacts influence both the timing of departure and the choice of destination.

The study, titled "Applying Classical Migration Theories to Forced Displacement: The Case of Displaced Ukrainians in Berlin, Warsaw, and Budapest," has just been published in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* and is available online at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11577-025-01034-9>.

When people leave their homes during war, where they go, and whether they stay there or move on—all depend on a variety of motivations: Am I in immediate danger or still relatively safe? Do I have to leave behind elderly parents? What awaits me and my children? Sociology refers to these as push and pull factors: "push" describes the reasons for fleeing, while "pull" refers to the attractiveness of the destination.

According to Professor Dr. Céline Teney, one key aspect has been largely overlooked in the academic analysis of push-and-pull factors: refugees' perceived capacity to act and make decisions. "Those who, even in the midst of war, feel able to act autonomously and consciously make different choices than those who see themselves as powerless," she emphasizes. This is confirmed by her analysis of interviews with 255 Ukrainians who fled to Berlin, Warsaw, or Budapest during the 2022 Russian invasion.

People who experienced the Russian invasion up close often recall their flight and choice of destination as rushed and lacking alternatives. For these respondents, the main pull factor was physical safety. By contrast, refugees who lived farther from the front lines viewed their decision-making scope as much broader. They cited not only physical but also psychological security, support structures, and job prospects as pull factors. Many also reported having considered multiple possible destinations, including North America and Israel.

The study also highlights the importance of social contacts in flight decisions. Close relatives often provided the initial motivation to flee, while more distant acquaintances influenced where people decided to go. In her study, Céline Teney develops a theoretical model that captures the decision-making processes of Ukrainian refugees. She advocates the continued relevance of classical migration theories for understanding patterns of forced displacement.

Further information

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