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# Using the lens of emotions: Exploring Ukrainian refugee women's anchoring processes in Berlin

## Abstract

Drawing on a series of interviews with four Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin, this essay employs the lens of emotions to discern which integration opportunity structures shape their settlement, and how they do so. To capture the latter, we approach settlement as a process of anchoring. The prism of emotions enables us to grasp Ukrainian refugee women's subjective and often contradictory orientations towards their settlement trajectories in Berlin, all while discerning how these are informed by social as well as policy- and place-related opportunity structures. The German implementation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive is relevant here, as well as familial relations. Though integration opportunity structures on the local, national and transnational levels all play into these refugees' settlement, we observe that these structures do not either facilitate or hinder the refugees' anchoring, but that anchoring processes are tightly interwoven with un-anchoring ones, and that both can change over time. This exploratory essay highlights both the non-instrumental role of familial relations in refugee settlement as well as the malleable, multi-layered, and multi-directional character of settlement processes.

**Keywords:** Emotions, anchoring, integration opportunity structures, refugees, Ukraine

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## 1. Introduction

As of October 2023, over six million people have fled Ukraine due to Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 (UNHCR, 2023). Uncertainty about the duration and scope of the ongoing war, imaginaries of possible return and everyday struggles of settling in a foreign country have left many torn between staying abroad and returning to Ukraine. In this research essay, we explore the value of an emotions lens when studying refugee settlement. To do so, we draw on a series of interviews with four Ukrainian female refugees about their experiences of settlement in Berlin,

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Germany, after having fled Ukraine after the Russian invasion in February 2022. Specifically, our contribution asks how these individuals react emotionally to specific integration opportunity structures (Phillimore, 2021), and what this can tell us about their anchoring processes (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016, 2018) in their new place of residence.

While migration scholarship has long refrained from paying attention to the emotional dimensions of migration processes (Mai & King, 2009, 297), this situation has in recent years been partially rectified. Researchers have, for instance, explored migrants' emotional experiences tied to processes of belonging, home-making and transnational caring practices (see, e.g., Aquino, Chanamuto & Christou, 2022; Baldassar, 2015; Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Svašek, 2010). In this essay, we move beyond these themes to apply the lens of emotions to studying refugee settlement processes. We find that issues connected to establishing their new lives in Berlin are very emotionally loaded for these individuals, hence reflecting their sense of settlement. With that, we do not claim that settlement is emotionally laden only for refugees. We do acknowledge, however, that peoples' emotional orientations are socioculturally grounded (Ahmed, 2004) and, more importantly, cannot be detached from social, economic and political contexts which place individuals (including migrants) into hierarchies of privilege and inclusion/ exclusion (Assmuth et al., 2023, 12). In Germany's public discourses, for instance, economic immigration is narrated as more desirable than immigration of forced migrants such as refugees (Bauder, 2008). Concurrently, certain categories of forced migrants are seen as more deserving of assistance than others (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). Indeed, the European and American public reactions to the displacement of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 have been much more positive and filled with solidarity than those relating to Afghani refugees following the Taliban takeover in 2021 (De Coninck, 2023). The lens of emotions enables us to grasp Ukrainian refugee women's subjective and often contradictory orientations towards their settlement trajectories in Berlin, all while discerning how these are embedded within the broader meso- and macro-level contexts within the local, national and transnational spaces.

A note on terminology: In this essay, we employ the term 'refugee' for individuals who move due to war, civil conflict, violence, persecution, natural disaster or the like. We do so while recognising that people fleeing the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine after February 2022 did not receive asylum in Germany, but were offered protection through the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) (Council of the European Union, 2001). Indeed, the case of Ukrainian refugees is particularly interesting considering the specific rights they have acquired through the German implementation of the TPD. Unlike other refugee groups, Ukrainian refugees in Germany are entitled to, among others, free choice of place of residency and immediate access to language courses and the labour market (BAMF, 2022). Moreover, war-torn families and friendships, paired with the relative geographical proximity of Ukraine, create a particular transnational space which shapes Ukraini-

an refugees' future imaginaries. As such, the structures shaping their settlement processes differ not only from voluntary migrants, but also other refugee groups who have obtained asylum in Germany.

Our approach is data-driven, as our respondents talked a lot about their emotional orientations when speaking about their settlement process. Moreover, our longitudinal research design allows us to track the changes and continuities in their settlement, capturing both the dynamic anchoring processes in Germany and their intertwinement with developments in Ukraine.

After we outline our conceptual framework and describe our research methodology, we present preliminary findings from our qualitative longitudinal panel with four Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin. While we provide paradigmatic examples from our empirical material, a comprehensive and systematic analysis goes beyond the scope of this essay.

## **2. Discerning (un-)anchoring processes through the lens of emotions**

While a substantial body of literature on refugee settlement focuses on outcomes, this essay seeks to explore the processes underpinning settlement while recognising their fluid and variable character (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018, 186–188). Moreover, we understand refugee settlement as a two-way process (Spencer & Charsley, 2021), acknowledging that it is shaped not merely by refugees' motivations and capacities, but also by integration opportunity structures (Phillimore, 2021). These opportunity structures are mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that potentially facilitate or impede refugee settlement (Phillimore, 2021). While scholarship on refugee settlement has discerned which opportunity structures inform refugee settlement (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2021; Spencer & Charsley, 2021), how exactly is very much still debated.

Here, we employ the optic of emotions to discern which refugee integration opportunity structures shape their settlement, and how they do so. We follow the understanding put forward by the sociology of emotions, which views emotions as socially and culturally structured expressions of unconscious and unnamed bodily sensations (i.e. affects). As such, while emotions are subjective, they do not emerge in a vacuum. Indeed, emotions are “*object- or situation-directed* affective comportments that are sorted into culturally established and linguistically labeled categories or prototypes, such as, for instance, fear, anger, happiness, grief, envy, pride, shame, and guilt” (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019, 43). Yet looking at emotions not only discerns how individuals position themselves towards specific matters of concern; by reflecting matters that are of importance to individuals, emotions have the potential to prompt actors to engage with them (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019, 45). Adopting the prism of emotions thus allows us to recognize that emotions represent an inherent part of refugees' reflexive processes (Burkitt, 2012; Holmes,

2010, 2015), informing how they position themselves towards and respond to the integration opportunity structures embedded in their settlement process.

Refugee integration opportunity structures come in many forms. They are connected to refugees' *places* of residence (through the availability of housing, employment, healthcare etc.); media and political *discourses* that inform *receiving society's orientation* towards refugees; immigration, integration and citizenship *policies*; *support services* offered through, for instance, civil society organisations; and *social networks* as well as other forms of (*transnational*) *ties* (Phillimore, 2021; Spencer & Charsley, 2021). In our preliminary exploration of the empirical material, we focus on *social relations* and the availability of housing and employment in both *local* and *transnational spaces*, as well as on the *policy-related* integration opportunity structures, as our data-driven approach has highlighted their relevance for the Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin.

To account for the ways these different integration opportunity structures mould refugee settlement, we deem it useful to approach settlement as processes of anchoring (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016, 2018). Anchoring here means acquiring footholds which enable refugees to acquire sociopsychological stability and security in their new setting. These footholds can be both internal as well as external. Whereas internal footholds relate to one's identification processes, values, memories, as well as feelings of belonging and rootedness, this essay is interested primarily in external ones that stem from the social- and policy-related integration opportunity structures that were outlined above. External footholds take on various forms: institutional (e.g. documents, legal status, access to institutions), economic (e.g. economic resources and activities, consumable goods) or social (social connections). They can be spatial (e.g. one's place of birth or residence), material (e.g. books, photos, personal possessions), or physical (e.g. appearance) (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016, 1131).

The value of approaching refugee settlement as processes of anchoring lies in its ability to highlight the complexity, flexibility and simultaneity of anchoring and the reverse processes of un-anchoring which prove particularly relevant for Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin. It also recognises both the simultaneity of (un-)anchoring processes in local and transnational spaces, and their multilayeredness, as they can be related to social, institutional and material footholds (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Ryan, 2022, 4–5). What is more, by emphasising the importance of emotional security for establishing life in a new place, it brings to the fore the emotional dimension of Ukrainian refugees' settlement, while simultaneously never losing the sight of the structural constraints they are embedded in (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018, 191).

Indeed, the concept of anchoring recognises several aspects of the emotional dimension of settlement processes: 1.) emotions in themselves can act as anchors; 2.) other types of anchors, like material, social or institutional ones, can be emotionally

loaded; and 3.) there exists an emotional dimension of settlement outcomes (i.e. it is important for individuals to acquire sociopsychological stability and security) (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016, 2018). In this essay, we are interested particularly in the second aspect. By employing the prism of emotions, we are able to disentangle which integration opportunity structures contribute to processes of (un-)anchoring and how they do so.

### 3. Methods of research

This essay draws on interview material from a qualitative longitudinal panel study with 15 Ukrainian refugees about their settlement process in Germany. In the study, respondents were interviewed four times over a period of six months between September 2022 and March 2023, with five to six weeks between each interview.

Sampling followed a purposive approach, mainly focussing on women of Ukrainian nationality with (small) children, living in Berlin or Munich at the time of the first interview in September 2022. The sample's sociodemographic characteristics mirror that of the overall Ukrainian refugee population in Germany, being mostly female, relatively young and highly educated (Brücker et al., 2022). Due to the ongoing analysis of the material at the time of this writing, this contribution focusses only on interviews (16 interviews in total) with four Ukrainian women who live in Berlin with their children (see Table 1). We consider Berlin a worthwhile case for our exploration because it has been the major place of residence for Ukrainian refugees arriving to Germany since 2022, among others due to its geographical closeness to the Polish border and the existence of a relatively large Ukrainian diaspora prior to February 2022.

**Table 1: Overview of the sample**

	Age	Arrival to Germany	Marital status	Children
Darya	42	March 2022	divorced	<i>Four children (all above 10 years of age)</i>
Olha	37	March 2022	married	<i>Two t(w)eenage children</i>
Valeria	41	February 2022	divorced	<i>A teenage child</i>
Larysa	37	February 2022	married	<i>A baby</i>

Source: Own elaboration.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Ukrainian by a young female research assistant with a German-Ukrainian background. Her hyphenated identity (Boland, 2020) helped her establish a trusting relationship with the interviewees, which was crucial for their continued participation in the interviews (Calman, Brunton & Molassiotis, 2013). Her hybrid insider-outsider position (Carling, Erdal & Ezzati, 2014, 51), in combination with her age and gender, furthermore fostered a simultaneously proximate and distant researcher–interviewee relationship,

allowing the interviewees to open up to her in ways that they might not have done to either an insider or an outsider. The interview guide consisted of two parts. The first section remained the same throughout the four interview waves, consisting of questions relating to the participants' living and working situation, their children's childcare and schooling, contact with German public institutions, as well as participants' future outlook, their social networks and mood. This section sought to map the interviewees' living situation and their interactions with state actors, while documenting any continuity and changes in these areas of their lives in Germany. The second section of the interview guide altered between each wave, enabling us to address topics such as employment trajectories in greater detail and to take up topics that emerged as particularly relevant during previous interview waves, like considerations of returning to Ukraine. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and later translated into English.

The interviewees' emotional orientations were not addressed directly in the interview, except in the question pertaining to the interviewees' mood. This question ("How are you doing right now?") was included as an opener for each interview, however, rather than due to our pre-conceived interest in emotions. Nevertheless, when analysing the interview material, we noted the relative prevalence of references to emotions when discussing interviewees' settlement, so we considered them worthy of exploring further. When coding for the interviewees' emotional orientations towards their settlement, we limited ourselves to research participants' direct expressions of emotions ("I am grateful that..."). While we recognize that emotions can also be inferred through interviewees' non-verbal cues, description of atmospheres and usage of metaphors (Kane, 2001; Saldaña, 2016, 125), such a comprehensive approach to labelling emotions within our interview material transcended the scope of this exploratory essay. To account for any continuity and change between the four interview waves, we employed longitudinal coding (Saldaña, 2016, 260–268), which was complemented by a trajectory approach (Grossohme & Lipstein, 2016). We created an analysis matrix to follow the developments in interviewees' various life domains and their subjective perceptions thereof to distil the factors influencing these trajectories and perceptions.

## 4. Exploration of the empirical material

In this section, we present our preliminary findings, which illustrate how emotional orientations towards spatial, social and structural opportunity structures enable us to unpack (un-)anchoring processes of Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin.

### 4.1 The interplay of anchoring and un-anchoring

Our analysis of the interview material indicates that the settlement of Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin is a non-linear and multidirectional process in which anchoring processes are intertwined with un-anchoring ones. We observe that local

integration opportunity structures, such as housing, as well as structural ones (e.g. the TPD's implementation in Germany) particularly propel these processes.

When reflecting on the specific rights provided to them through the German implementation of the TPD, our research participants referred to feelings of security, and above all, gratitude towards the German state, commonly amplified by perceptions of privilege when comparing their situation to other refugee groups who obtained protection through different legal means. For instance, Larysa, who arrived in Berlin in February 2022, was filled with gratitude and confidence for having been granted particular rights tied to their temporary protection:

*“[In comparison to Syrian refugees] I feel more like, not that I am a resident of the country, not a citizen, but I feel more confident. [...] We can work, [...] we were given this right. Germany gave us more rights than other refugees. Our special status [...] is nice. We are grateful for it.”*

Interestingly, however, the very same integration opportunity structure relating to the rights associated with the TDP in Germany had an un-anchoring effect in a different context. While Olha was “grateful that we got this status, that we can go to work right away”, she expressed fear of being perceived by the majority population as an undeserving social tourist, especially because of her insufficient German language skills:

*“Here I have such a strong language barrier, [...] what if they don't like the fact that I'm a Ukrainian [...] that the government is paying for me and that I'm living here on the taxes they pay.”*

We also noted how some interviewees used footholds in Ukraine as stabilising forces while seeking to anchor themselves in their current place of residence. As Grzymala-Kazalowska (2018, 255) suggests, to feel stable and secure in a new environment, migrants often transfer already developed anchors into the new environment rather than establishing new ones. As one of our interviewees, Darya, mentions, she kept her job in the environmental sector in Ukraine thanks to advancements in being able to working remotely, which she perceived made her settlement in Germany less turbulent and hopeless:

*“I have access to everything due to the fact that I am more or less settled here. I haven't lost my job, I haven't lost my status, [...] because I have this job. I have a job in Ukraine that I can do remotely. So I don't have a feeling [...] of hopelessness.”*

This highlights that integration opportunity structures do not only exist at a local or national level, but that they can be transnational. The following section elaborates on this point, particularly regarding family relations near and far.

#### 4.2 The role of (transnational) family members

Next to the spatial integration opportunity structures (in the form of, for instance, access to housing and work) and the structural ones (such as the rights associated with the German implementation of the TPD), social relations also inform our research participants' (un-)anchoring processes. Family members, in both Berlin

and Ukraine, are of particular importance. To start with, family members sharing the same household in Berlin influence participants' emotional orientations towards specific integration opportunity structures. In other words, our interviewees' emotional orientations towards, for instance, housing were affected by those of their children, in turn shaping their (un-)anchoring processes. For example, Valeria's desperation stemming from her struggle to find housing was mitigated by her daughter's positive approach:

*"(S)he [her daughter] is constantly trying to be positive. At our apartment, I sometimes say: 'I'm so desperate, you know?' I say: 'Shit, I've never faced a situation where you can't find an apartment. I can't find it, well.' And she said: 'No, you shouldn't give up.' And sometimes I tell her: 'I'm giving up everything. I'm going to Kyiv, [...] I'll be sitting there without light, but there is a place to live there.' And she says something like this: 'Well, no, but we're going to get there...' Things like that."*

While this illustrates how children can curb un-anchoring processes, their emotional responses can also amplify them. Darya struggled with her children's homesickness and desire to return to Ukraine: "I think it's even more the kids that are tearing me apart. They complain that they want to go home."

Transnational family ties also contribute to our interviewees' (un-)anchoring processes. How their relatives in Ukraine orient themselves towards our respondents' living in Berlin impacts the sense of security in their settlement endeavours, strengthening their anchoring in Germany or fuelling their un-anchoring. For instance, Olha who lives in Berlin with her husband and their two children, felt unsettled by her grandparents' constant questions about returning, amplifying her own feelings of discomfort about her situation:

*"Well, the only thing that's annoying is that they keep asking when we're coming back. And, well, it annoys me that I keep saying that we're coming back when the war is over. And they still keep asking this question. And it makes me feel very uncomfortable, I say: 'Well, can you stop asking this question?' It's just salt in the wound."*

This hinting disapproval of her transnational family relations contributed to her un-anchoring, especially when directed not only at her, but also at her children:

*"It is very difficult. It's scary. I say: 'Listen, don't torture me with these questions.' And even more so, they call [...] my daughter, and she is very vulnerable. And she always cries after all these conversations. I say: 'Why are you doing this?'"*

In sum, this section has discerned how (transnational) family members contribute to (un-)anchoring processes, indicating that integration opportunity structures do not necessarily act as either anchors or un-anchors.

#### 4.3 Changes over time

The contribution of integration opportunity structures to, and their importance for (un-)anchoring processes can, moreover, change over time. Integration opportunity structures that facilitate our research participants' anchoring in Berlin can propel

their un-anchoring at another time, and vice versa (Grzymala-Kazalowska, 2018, 255).

As our preliminary analysis indicates, housing represents one such local integration opportunity structure. In our second interview, Valeria explained that her inability to find an apartment of her own in Berlin made her feel as if she “can’t breathe out somehow”, making her doubt whether she can stay in Germany. Yet, while housing contributed to un-anchoring during that period of her stay, this changed later on. By our third interview, she reported she had found an apartment. This filled her with a sense of stability, hence fostering her anchoring in Berlin:

*“It gave me a positive thing, when you have more stability, at least, you have a place to live. [...] I consider it an achievement that I was looking for this apartment for six months, every day, all the time. So, it was a moment for me. A very big burst of positivity.”*

While the above example indicates how a specific local integration opportunity structure can both facilitate as well as hinder anchoring at different points in time, our material also highlights that the importance of specific integration opportunity structures shaping respondents’ anchoring can decrease or increase over time. Darya, for instance who at the beginning of her stay in Berlin felt guilty about not being part of the collective experience of war in Ukraine, highlighted how these feelings diminished: “In general, I feel calmer when I’m – I mean, it’s calmer to be here, there’s no such feeling of guilt that I’m here and not in Ukraine.”

## 5. Concluding remarks

In this exploratory essay, we employ the lens of emotions to disentangle which refugee integration opportunity structures shape Ukrainian refugee women’s settlement in Berlin, and how they do so. To account for the latter, we use the concept of anchoring, which designates processes of acquiring footholds which enable refugees to acquire sociopsychological stability and security in their new setting. Our preliminary findings indicate that policy-related opportunity structures, social networks as well as place matter in particular. Indeed, our insights point to how the German TPD implementation, with its immediate access to integration courses and the labour market, enables these Ukrainian refugee women to anchor in Germany. At the same time, we show how familial relations in Germany and Ukraine also impact (un-)anchoring processes. In doing so, we draw attention to the importance of local, national and transnational spaces, as it is within these that social networks and policy implementation are enacted and that access to, for instance, housing is determined.

That said, the outlined integration opportunity structures should not be thought of as static and isolated entities that *either* facilitate *or* hinder Ukrainian refugee settlement. Rather, they should be understood as points in a complex web of structures that interact and span across various spatial scales. Their intertwining can enable settlement, yet also impede it. Indeed, anchoring and un-anchoring

processes do not cancel each other out but are tightly interwoven and can occur at the same time. While the German implementation of the TPD may ground our research participants in Germany, this anchoring can be disturbed by individuals' inability to find housing in Berlin and by emotional pressure from their family members abroad.

Moreover, the qualitative longitudinal panel design of our study points to the fluidity and changeability of footholds. While a certain integration opportunity structure might facilitate an individual's anchoring in Berlin at some point, it can contribute to their un-anchoring in another, and vice versa (also Grzymala-Kazalowska, 2018, 253). In the case of Ukrainian women refugees living in Berlin, housing represents one of such footholds.

To conclude, the lens of emotions enables us to grasp Ukrainian refugee women's subjective and often contradictory orientations towards their settlement trajectories in Berlin, all while discerning how these are embedded within the broader meso- and macro-level contexts within the local, national and transnational spaces. While we do not reject the idea that a more comprehensive analysis might produce different results, this exploratory essay highlights two main insights. First, refugee settlement has to be understood as embedded in local and transnational familial relations (Eastmond, 2011). These should, however, not be understood merely as means towards a specific (settlement) end, but as ends in themselves, as they represent a constitutive element of refugees' (un-)anchoring (see also Povrzanović, Frykman & Mozeić, 2020). Second, it shows that refugee settlement is not a linear, unidirectional process (Cheung & Phillimore 2014, 520) that can be easily compartmentalised according to specific life domains or localities (Spencer & Charsley, 2021). Instead, it underlines that settlement consists of a complex interplay of individuals anchoring themselves to a new place of residence and un-anchoring themselves from it at the same time. This entanglement spans across various dimensions and spaces, and dynamically changes over time.

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