

# How it started, how it evolved: Ukrainian entrepreneurship in Poland

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This exploratory article analyses the entrepreneurial activities of Ukrainian immigrants in Poland from 2018 to the present. We examine immigrant and refugee entrepreneurship as part of socio-economic adaptation. Despite being the largest immigrant group, Ukrainian entrepreneurship remained limited until 2022. The article highlights three key events—the Revolution of Dignity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion—and their effects on entrepreneurial activity.

**Research Design & Methods:** We used a mixed methods approach, focusing on three waves of qualitative surveys with Ukrainian entrepreneurs in Małopolska, Southern Poland. The first round (April–August 2018) included 32 interviews. The second round (May–August 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic involved 20 immigrant entrepreneurs, including seven Ukrainians. The third round (May–October 2023) focused on 10 Ukrainian refugees. This qualitative data is supplemented by two large-scale surveys: one with 607 respondents (November 2021–January 2022) and another with 500 Ukrainian refugees (May–June 2022), both in Małopolska.

**Findings:** Initially, Ukrainian entrepreneurs in Poland focused on mainstream businesses with limited use of ethnic or transnational networks. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted business but prompted proactive measures. Paradoxically, border closures increased demand for ethnic goods and services. Businesses established by refugees after 2022 now mainly cater to ethnic customers, marking the rise of an ethnic enclave economy.

**Implications & Recommendations:** Our study shows that refugees benefit from an expanded ethnic market and ethnic solidarity when settling in areas with established immigrants from the same background. However, the key factor is Poland's favourable entrepreneurial environment, with ease of starting a business. Poland's laissez-faire approach, marked by limited social benefits, can support socio-economic integration, especially when refugees have immediate access to the labor market and the ability to start businesses.

**Contribution & Value Added:** This study contributes to the literature on immigrant and refugee entrepreneurship in several ways. First, it highlights the unique dynamic between economic immigrants and war refugees in the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland, where refugees leverage existing ethnic networks for socio-economic adaptation. Second, the cultural and linguistic proximity between Poles and Ukrainians aids smoother integration. Third, despite the war, many Ukrainian entrepreneurs maintain transnational networks with clients and partners in Ukraine.

**Article type:** research article

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## INTRODUCTION

The influx of Ukrainian refugees following the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 stands as one of the most significant refugee crises in the contemporary world. As of April 15, 2024, approximately 6.5 million Ukrainian refugees are dispersed globally, with an estimated 6 million residing in Europe and 960 thousand in Poland alone. However, the emergence of the Ukrainian diaspora in Europe, particularly

in Poland, is a complex outcome shaped by political and economic dynamics. Since the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, a multitude of Ukrainians have departed their homeland, driven by both voluntary migration and internal displacement stemming from the Russian-invaded Donbas and Crimea regions. By February 2020 (*i.e.* before the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic) Poland alone hosted about 1.3 million Ukrainian citizens, while their number before the full scale-invasion on 24 February 2022 was estimated around 1.1-1.2 million (Duszczuk *et al.*, 2023).

As a result of the aforementioned processes, Poland hosts a composition of both (mostly) economic immigrants and refugees from the same country, which is a relatively unique situation in contemporary migration dynamics in Europe. Understanding the interplay and differences between these two distinct groups of migrants is essential for designing sound migrant and integration policies in major host countries. In this aspect, the Polish case is extremely interesting as the country adopted a rather liberal regime towards the forced migrants arriving after February 2022: instead of granting them asylum, the Ukrainians received temporary protection, which enabled immediate and full access to the labour market, but also to entrepreneurial activities (Kohlenberger *et al.*, 2023).

This article primarily focuses on a specific aspect of the socio-economic adaptation of immigrants in a host country, particularly on their entrepreneurial activities. It contributes to the extensive literature on ethnic, immigrant, and refugee entrepreneurship in several ways. Firstly, it offers a dynamic perspective on the rapidly evolving Ukrainian community in Poland by examining the entrepreneurial endeavours of migrants and refugees in 2018, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, and following the full-scale war in 2023. Secondly, it compares the entrepreneurial activities of forced and voluntary migrants. Existing literature suggests that refugees are typically more entrepreneurial than economic immigrants, although their motivations for starting their own businesses are not always positive, as they may seek to escape discrimination or challenging labour market conditions (Newman *et al.*, 2023). However, in the Polish context, both types of migrants originating from the same home country – forced and voluntary – are concurrently visible. Understanding the motivations, opportunity structures, and enterprise development strategies of such individuals constitutes an original contribution to both entrepreneurship and migration studies, particularly as an increasing number of scholars advocate for a more inclusive and flexible examination of forced and voluntary migrants (Erdal & Oeppen, 2020). Lastly, the qualitative analysis is complemented by quantitative data from two original surveys conducted by the authors. The incorporation of a mixed-methods approach remains relatively novel in entrepreneurship studies.

The primary objective of our article is to analyse the dynamics of entrepreneurial activities carried out by Ukrainian immigrants in Poland from 2018 to the present day. Specifically, we investigate the entrepreneurship of immigrants and refugees as part of their socio-economic adaptation process in the host country. In doing so, we aim to address the following research questions:

- RQ1:** What are the primary motivations for entrepreneurship among Ukrainians in Poland? Are there systematic differences between economic and forced migrants in this regard?
- RQ2:** How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the entrepreneurial activities of Ukrainians?
- RQ3:** What role does entrepreneurship play in the socio-economic activities of Ukrainians? Is it a means of economic integration in the host country, or is it a short-term survival tactic?

The structure of our article is as follows. In the second section, we will discuss the literature on immigrant and refugee entrepreneurship, linking the entrepreneurship with socio-economic adaptation of foreigners in a host country. Next, we will discuss the recent literature to provide a logical framework for our research questions. The third section will present the research methodology. It will show how we collected and analysed our data. The fourth section is the core of the article: this empirical section will discuss the survey results in three distinctive periods (2018, 2021, and 2023) and outline the major differences between those periods and two groups of respondents immigrant entrepreneurs and refugee entrepreneurs. Finally, we will present conclusions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion on immigrant and refugee entrepreneurship is problematic, as those two types of business people resemble two 'perfect' types of mobility: voluntary and involuntary. It is expected that immigrant entrepreneurs were economic migrants, who have cautiously planned their migration strategy and have selected the right destination based on clear and logical criteria. As migration is a form of investment, the future migrants possess some assets – financial, cultural, social and human capital, which can then yield a higher return on their investments in a different destination than their home country. Moreover, immigrant entrepreneurs are also expected to foresee business activity in the host country from the very beginning, being intentional entrepreneurs who moved internationally to start a business or transfer a currently existing one. On the other hand, refugees are those vulnerable movers who had no comfort in planning: they were caught by surprise and had to depart abruptly from their homes, fleeing war or persecution. Consequently, they possess little or no financial capital, and much of their wealth has been destroyed or taken over by aggressors. Moreover, their social networks became disrupted by the military conflict, and in many cases, they did not even have a chance to secure proper documents, which would assert their formal qualifications (like a university diploma).

This initial dichotomy is of course very naïve and in the real world, the motivations for international movement are mixed. Many individuals consider international migration within the bounded rationality framework, taking suboptimal migration decisions: either because they do not have complete information on the socio-economic reality in the host country, or because they do not have proper resources. Moreover, the voluntary nature of international mobility can be problematic: many economic migrants were forced to move to repay their debts or to escape from difficult family situation at home. Moreover, not all refugees are the same: while most of them are escaping with bare hands and almost no resources, there are still some who can prepare for further migration and secure considerable assets. For instance, in his study on Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, Chang (2023) presents some respondents as very affluent persons, who openly question the stereotype of 'poor refugee.'

Consequently, contemporary migration studies call for a more inclusive and flexible examination of forced and voluntary migrants (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018), and encourage researchers to analyse both of these groups together, in comparative perspective (Newman *et al.*, 2023). This is exactly taking place in the current research on refugee entrepreneurship, which – as an emerging field of study – relies mostly on theoretical concepts developed in the area of immigrant and entrepreneurship studies (see the review of Voznyuk and Brzozowski (2024) in this issue for more details). The traditional approach proposed by Waldinger (1989) discussed the opportunity structure, which was available to immigrants coming to a new host country. Those of them who were willing to start a business activity were usually short of financial capital and had limited networks embedded in the receiving society. Consequently, the opportunity structure which was available for them was usually the least attractive markets that were left over by native entrepreneurs – for instance, liquor stores in poorer neighbourhoods, opened 24 hours per day, seven days a week. Such markets were often dominated additionally by co-ethnic clients. The entry into such markets was relatively easy, as it did not require substantial financial capital. However, such businesses offered long and hard-working hours, little profit margin and a high risk of defaulting. Moreover, refugees and other forced migrants are pushed to such forms of entrepreneurship. A typical example of such a business is Spaza grocery shops run by Somalis in poor neighbourhoods in South Africa (Thompson, 2016). Please note that in our article, we are treating refugees in a wider sense, equating it with forced migration.

The opportunity structure concept is linked to the ethnic enclave theory, developed by Light *et al.* (1994). In this view, the economy of the host country is comprised of two sectors: the dominant economy and the migrant and minority economy. Within the second one, most migrants either find employment or create businesses. An ethnic enclave is a sub-sector of migrant & minority economy with a geographical concentration of one or few similar ethnic groups in one location. In the ethnic enclave, most businesses are controlled by one ethnic group, which also relies on the employment of co-ethnic individuals. The benefits of the ethnic enclave are numerous: first, the clustering effect enables further

specialization through the learning-by-doing effect. This means that a member of a family can first work in the ethnic family enterprise, and then – with the financial help of the relatives and additional business knowledge – can start a similar firm. Second, the firms located in the enclave can rely on vertical integration: most of the suppliers are co-ethnic firms, which implies that the business owners can often rely on trade credit. Moreover, a vast majority of clients are members of the same ethnic community. Third, there are horizontal integration benefits: informal institutions which provide business consultancy services or access to financial capital (Light *et al.*, 1994). Of course, the ethnic enclave does not arise with each immigration inflow. It requires a certain degree of ethnic concentration in one location to reach the critical mass of efficiency. Such massive inflow and a high degree of ethnic concentration is yet more likely with refugee inflow, as it is less planned and refugees prefer to cluster in the same locations, often close to their home countries.

An extension of the aforementioned theories is the mixed embeddedness approach. The mixed embeddedness model looks at immigrant entrepreneurship from 3 distinct levels of analysis (Kloosterman, 2010). The macro level is the regulatory framework and economic conditions of the host country. The meso-level links the model to opportunity structure, in line with Waldinger's (1989) approach. The immigrant entrepreneurs can choose between the co-ethnic market and the mainstream one. Access to the co-ethnic market is relatively easy but offers fewer chances for business development, whereas the mainstream market is difficult to access, yet provides better development prospects. The last level of analysis is the micro one, consisting of the individual characteristics and resources of an immigrant (human, social, and financial capital). Curci and Mackoy (2010) extend this market framework available to immigrant entrepreneurs, by classifying them along two axes: the ethnic and non-ethnic customers and the ethnic and non-ethnic products and services. They distinguish highly segmented businesses offering ethnic goods and services to ethnic customers, product-integrated firms providing non-ethnic goods and services to ethnic customers, market-integrated ventures that sell ethnic goods and services to non-ethnic clients and the highly integrated firms that act on the mainstream market with non-ethnic, general products and services offered to the general public.

During our research approach, the opportunity structures available for Ukrainian entrepreneurs in Poland have evolved. Initially, with the first wave (mostly voluntary) economic migration after the revolution of the dignity of 2014 most Ukrainians sought employment in Poland. The entrepreneurial activities were less popular, which we can explain both by the increased demand for workers in the Polish economy and the relatively unfriendly legal framework (*i.e.* macro layer of mixed embeddedness concept). For instance, Ukrainians as third-world country citizens were mostly deprived of the possibility to open a single proprietorship enterprise. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic period was particularly difficult for immigrants: the anti-covid support measures provided by the Polish government favoured long-established businesses, consequently, many recent firms created by immigrants were not entitled to public support. The full-scale Russian aggression on Ukraine was a major game-changer in this aspect. Firstly, the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland nearly doubled within the following two years, with a vast concentration of both economic immigrants and war refugees in the biggest Polish cities. This created favourable conditions for the creation of ethnic enclaves in major agglomerations such as Warsaw, Kraków, Gdańsk, Poznań or Wrocław. Secondly, the regulatory system has been changed into a more friendly to small-scale entrepreneurship and Ukrainian citizens have been granted a right to open single proprietorship enterprises.

Within such an institutional framework, our study strived to answer the following research questions. Firstly, we look for entrepreneurial motivations among Ukrainian economic migrants and refugees. Consequently, our first research question is formulated as follows:

**RQ1:** What are the primary motivations for entrepreneurship among Ukrainians in Poland? Are there systematic differences between economic and forced migrants in this regard?

Secondly, we tried to get a deeper understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Ukrainian entrepreneurship. In particular, we wanted to learn whether the Ukrainians adopted a more proactive or rather conservative strategy to cope with such an external shock to their business activity. Therefore, we formulated our second research question in the following way:

**RQ2:** How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the entrepreneurial activities of Ukrainians?

Finally, turning to the most recent wave of war refugees from Ukraine, we would like to better understand why does entrepreneurial activity emerge and what are the plans and their sustainability prospects. Consequently, we formulated our last research question as follows:

**RQ3:** What role does entrepreneurship play in the socio-economic activities of Ukrainians? Is it a means of economic integration in the host country, or is it a short-term survival tactic?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We adopted a mixed methods approach, primarily relying on three waves of qualitative surveys conducted among Ukrainian entrepreneurs in the Małopolska region of Southern Poland. The initial round, conducted between April and August 2018, comprised 32 semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted face-to-face. In this phase, we were mostly interested in the motivations of starting a business in Poland, adopted approaches to opportunity structured in the host country and market orientation. In this period, the inflow of Ukrainians into Poland was mostly guided by economic motives, although some of our respondents turned out to be internally displaced persons, forced to flee from Eastern Ukraine due to military intervention of Russian separatist movements. We conducted the second round of qualitative survey during the COVID-19 pandemic. We did it mostly online. The period of data collection spanned from May to August 2021 and involved 20 immigrant entrepreneurs, including seven Ukrainians. We conducted the third survey wave already after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, between May and October 2023, focusing on 10 Ukrainian refugees in Poland. All the interviews have been recorded, transcribed and translated into English for further analysis. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes.

Qualitative data from in-depth interviews is complemented with quantitative data derived from two large-scale surveys conducted by the authors. The first survey, conducted by the Centre for Advanced Studies of Population and Religion (CASPAR at Krakow University between November 2021 and January 2022, involved 607 respondents, including Ukrainian immigrants, within the Małopolska region. This survey was conducted within a project Future Migration Scenarios for Europe (FUME), funded from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant ID 870649. The second survey, also conducted by the CASPAR team between May and June 2022, targeted 500 Ukrainian refugees in the same region. This survey was carried out within the project Migration and Multicultural Observatory, financed by the municipality of Kraków in 2022. Quantitative data is utilized to provide insights into the broader context of labour market integration in Poland and the prior entrepreneurial experiences of the respondents.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In what follows, we will provide the overview of our empirical analysis, describing the results separately for each period. Then we will discuss the evolution of entrepreneurial activities among Ukrainian economic migrants and refugees for the entire respondents sample.

### Early Phase of Entrepreneurial Activity (2018)

Migrants in this surveyed period (*i.e.* 2018) can traditionally be defined as economic migrants. However, among the common reasons for leaving, Ukrainians mentioned not only economic reasons, namely, improving their financial situation or possibilities for further business development. Respondents often mentioned political reasons and the internal political situation in Ukraine as a result of the annexation of Crimea and the Maidan events ('Because I was simply not feeling secure (...) I did not feel safe after the annexation of Crimea' [30.05\_18, J]). Besides, the interviewees also indicated the high level of corruption in Ukraine as a reason to migrate ('The main point is that there is less or no corruption here in the 3 years I have lived in Poland.' [18.05\_18, A], 'There is good order, there is no corruption and there are lots of opportunities to achieve your goals.' [06.06\_18\_2, A]), the

presence of a sense of security in Poland ('It's hard to do business in Ukraine now, because you don't have the same security as in Poland. In Poland, there is everything in order. You have a business, you sign articles at the office, you are an entrepreneur and that's it. You have security. There is no quality in Ukraine. In some moments you can do it yourself. There are no rules. You can do more and more. There is no such thing in Poland, I like that.' [18.06\_18, W]) and confidence in the future, as opposed to the situation in this aspect in Ukraine ('Then there is the peace of mind. You come home from work and you know that tomorrow will be the same as it was today. Because in Ukraine it looks a little different. Every day you leave home with the thought of what tomorrow will be. There will be a tomorrow at all. You can do that. Stability.' [18.05\_18, A]). The lack of trust towards Ukrainian institutions and relative pessimism about the entrepreneurial ecosystem at home was therefore the main reason for a relatively modest of transnational business involvement of respondents in Ukraine. Only 12 out of 32 respondents conducted at least some of their businesses in connection with their home country, despite relative geographical proximity. Regarding the maintenance of business ties with Ukraine, most parts of the respondents stated that such ties are either not critical for their business or they do not have any at all and emphasised that most or the vast majority of contacts are in Poland: 'All business contacts are concentrated only in Poland. It does not even maintain partnership contacts with Ukrainians who have moved here' (13.05\_14, I).

Some migrants specifically mentioned macro-level opportunity structure from the mixed embeddedness model as a motivation to move to Poland. This was, for instance, the general openness of Poland as a country to entrepreneurs ('Poland is very open to small and medium-sized entrepreneurship and it doesn't take that much big money to get started.' [30.05\_18, J]), public support for entrepreneurs in their activities ('Poland is very open to entrepreneurs, Poland understands that if I want taxes, I have to help, yet the Polish market is growing because we still want more.' [30.05\_18, J]), Poland's favourable geographical location ('Good location and good contacts with European countries. And at the same time, the cost of doing business is lower than in Western countries' [09.05\_7, I,S]) and country's cultural similarity to Ukraine ('Poland is mentally close' [08.05\_O], 'Poland is a country close to Ukraine. And the language is similar' [09.05\_7, S,R]).

It is important to consider the main characteristics of migrants as respondents to our research, as they, being subjective factors, can have a significant impact on the decision to start a business and influence the effectiveness of adaptation in the host country. As for the region of origin, the vast majority of the 29 respondents lived in Kyiv before leaving for Poland (some of them had previously lived in Donetsk and moved to Kyiv after the outbreak of hostilities as a result of Russian aggression), a smaller number came from Dnipro (five respondents), Kharkiv and Kremenchuk (six respondents), and there were also representatives from Kherson, Donetsk, Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, as well as Rivne and Lviv.

In terms of education, all the respondents had a tertiary education, some also had an MBA degree, and there were also cases when the respondent had a PhD degree. As for the specialisations of higher education, these were: IT, psychology, law, philology, economics, and medicine. The age characteristics of migrants are notable for the fact that all migrants were of active and productive age – the minimum age was 23 years and the maximum age was 53 years. In terms of gender, the vast majority were men (19 out of 29 respondents). In this context, it is relevant to note that this gender gap may affect the entrepreneurial activity of migrants, as Brieger and Gielnik found in their study that male refugees (defined as forced migrants in this study) are more likely to start an entrepreneurial activity than female refugees (Brieger & Gielnik, 2021).

As for the former entrepreneurial experience, the overwhelming majority of respondents (20) had been doing business in Ukraine before migration. These were business activities in the following formats: providing business advice, business partnerships with colleagues, and participation in family businesses. There was even a case of a large-scale business when a migrant had 650 employees under his control in Ukraine. Such a factor may also influence migrants' motivation to start their own businesses and their further entrepreneurial activity. Indeed, according to human capital theory, researches show that those who have entrepreneurial experience in their home country are more likely to become entrepreneurs after arriving in a host country (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006).

As for the areas of business activity in Poland, we can find: the provision of employment services for Ukrainians in Poland and other European countries (employment agencies with branches in Ukraine), IT businesses, foreign language schools, trade businesses selling parts for electric cars, culinary business (cafes, pubs, pizzerias, confectionery), provision of beauty services (beauty salons), sale of printing products, sale of polypropylene products and sale of protective masks, providing cleaning services, providing marketing services, passenger transportation services (in particular, sale of electronic tickets).

When it comes to the opportunity structure, the newly arrived immigrant entrepreneurs are expected to be mostly active in the markets left over by natives and orient themselves to ethnic clientele (Kloosterman, 2010). Consequently, such businesses should be either highly segmented or product – or market-integrated (Curci & Mackoy, 2010). However, our study exhibited rather surprising results: most of the respondents (14) had a highly integrated business, which in turn requires a high level of business relations specifically with Polish partners. Among these firms which offered non-ethnic goods or services to the general public were a confectionery, cafe, pizzeria, construction company, firms from the ICT sector and two manufacturing companies. The second category was the product-integrated firms, offering general goods and services (mostly) to ethnic clients. However, this tendency to orient a business towards co-ethnic customers was highly diversified when it came to the motivations of the entrepreneurs. In particular, respondents who run gastronomy-related businesses (*e.g.* coffee shops) indicate that their clients are Poles and tourists, as well as Ukrainians. Those providing employment consultancy services also indicated that their clients are Ukrainians and Poles. Of course, there is another specificity in this regard among representatives providing Polish language learning services – in this case, the clients are Ukrainians (*i.e.* product-integrated businesses).

Among the respondents, there are just a few examples when the services were used exclusively by immigrants: ‘Mainly immigrants (Ukraine, Belarus, Russia) and employees of large IT companies.’ [24\_04, I]. However, this cannot be attributed to the fact that the business was initially focused on providing services to immigrants. Rather, this situation is because the services are used by a specific group of migrants (representatives of the IT sector) who need space to conduct their work processes. It is important to note that in this perspective, some respondents indicated that they would like to avoid the ethnic orientation of their business and planned to develop their business, on the contrary, in the direction of avoiding the above-mentioned process and moving towards internationalisation of clients to avoid the emergence of so-called migrant enclaves (‘To make it not a centre for immigrants, but a business hub.’ [30.05\_18, J]) and the maximum involvement of Polish clients (‘I think the way I think about this is that you open a business in Poland, you have to rely on the fact that... you have to make it so that Poles go to you.’ [22.06\_18, A]).

Thus, in the context of the issue of forming a target audience and client base among Ukrainian migrants, no tendencies can be observed among respondents that would indicate that the business they created was focused exclusively on representatives of a particular and specific ethnic group: ‘And Poles, and tourists, and Ukrainians also stop by sometimes. We didn’t show anywhere that we were Ukrainian and we opened our café’ [17.05\_16, A].

When it comes to civic participation and political integration, the respondents identified obtaining citizenship or a permanent residence permit as a key factor that would facilitate their business activities and further development. In the context of Polish legal and regulatory realities regarding business opportunities for migrants, as of 2018, they had difficulties obtaining loans (‘Access to credit, access to the possibility of buying land, to so I could buy some local, some piece of land. It would be better.’ [20.06\_18, I]). The most serious obstacle was the restrictions on business registration, as immigrants from outside of the EU could open a private enterprise only in the form of a limited liability company. Such legal arrangement in turn made access to residence permits more difficult, as it required higher income thresholds and higher taxes to be paid: ‘I think that’s how it can affect you. I have heard that you pay the only tax and it is easier to carry out your business. It is not compulsory to set up a partnership. Because foreigners can only set up partnerships [13.05\_14, I].

That is why, in the context of the above-mentioned obtaining of Polish citizenship, respondents identified this factor as one that would facilitate business development (‘...<...>Now I think if I have a passport, that it won’t change much, but it will be a bit easier.’ [06.06\_18, A]; ‘<...>.. and will have the

same rights as Polish citizens, will have access to credits, leases and loans.’ [06.06\_18\_2, A]; ‘So just life itself is easier, there are no different problems.’ [09.06\_18, S]).

Thus, acquiring citizenship is not the only condition for legal residence in Poland, but, in the context of our research, it also becomes a condition for the development and facilitation of business activities by Ukrainian migrants. Still, acquiring such citizenship is problematic from a Ukrainian point of view, as Ukrainian law does not allow for double citizenship (while Polish does so).

Certainly, the change of social space and the change of occupation as a result of migration has an impact on the perception of a person by the society of the host country and their immediate environment. Regarding the impact of starting a business on their status among relatives and friends, the prevailing number of respondents noted that it had not changed categorically and strongly (‘The only thing is that it didn’t affect. I have friends, I have family, everything is fine we are always in contact.’ [22.06\_18, Y]). Some respondents mentioned that they had changed for the worse as a result of psychological factors such as envy from friends, acquaintances, and family.

However, there was also a proportion of respondents who noted that the perception of their close environment had changed in the direction of raising their status, and some even specifically mentioned that this was influenced by the foreign location of their business: ‘I think so, because the company is abroad it is always more interesting.’ [22.06\_18,Y]. Turning to the perception of a migrant as an entrepreneur in Poland by Polish society, respondents rarely noted any particular perception. However, there were cases in which the perception changed towards a more respectful attitude (‘Because if I come somewhere and say I have a business, this property and I can present it and so on, they already look at you differently’ [22.06\_18, A]). But at the same time, there were also cases of negative perceptions of Polish society and breaking off contacts with migrants (‘but when it comes to such close friends I have experienced this, even contacts have broken off’ [18.08\_18,K]) because members of the host society believed that migrants create a shortage of vacant positions on the Polish labour market (‘<..> that I occupy a place, which means some Polish woman could work instead of me’ [18.08\_18, K]).

Some respondents noted that although their perception of society and acquaintances has not changed, it has affected their sense of self-worth and intrinsic value: ‘Well, what I feel is the social status hasn’t changed, but my sense of value has.’ [18.08\_18,K].

However, we cannot ignore the examples of losing the social status that a migrant had in Ukraine: ‘The status is different in Ukraine and Poland because I have a background as a lawyer. In Ukraine, I worked in state structures, so had a higher social status than in Poland, and here I have my own company, but have to work in it myself, and the attitude to professions like truck driver is different, so I try to adapt to that.’ [06.06\_18\_2, A]. In particular, one of the respondents describes this process of losing social belonging to certain strata of society in Ukraine quite tragically: ‘Here I lost my social identity. Here I lost my social status. From CEO of a big, big company to just an immigrant, to zero points, minus ten points. I was happy that I had money. It is very important when you come to a foreign country just to have money, to feel comfortable at least in this field not to be dependent on physical jobs that most immigrants start here. I felt free and I did not lack money, I just, maybe I am so arrogant that I felt this...’ [30.05\_18, J]. In this aspect, entrepreneurial activity for many highly skilled migrants was a way to prevent them from working below their formal qualifications. Although their original competences were not always fully exploited in business, at least this enabled them to empower themselves and partially regain the social status of the middle class.

### **Covid Pandemic (2020-2021)**

For all entrepreneurs, immigrants included, the COVID-19 pandemic was the most severe external shock in recent years. Many countries adopted drastic measures to prevent the rapid spreading of infections fearing that the medical sector might be overrun. These included the closure of borders and passenger movement between countries, as well as temporary lockdowns. In Poland, these policies started to be introduced from 14 March 2020 onwards so 10 days after the Ministry of Health’s announcement of the first official case of a person infected with COVID-19 and the moment when ‘the state of epidemiological threat’ was announced. Along with it, control was temporarily restored on Poland’s border with Germany, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as in seaports and airports. Most importantly



from the perspective of over 1 million Ukrainian immigrants living in Poland at that time, restrictions were introduced at the external border European Union (border crossings with Belarus, Russia and Ukraine) for all foreigners (RCB 14/03/2020). Polish citizens, Polish Card holders and persons holding Polish residence cards were able to return to Poland but had to undergo 14-days of obligatory quarantine. From mid-March 2020 also increasing number of restrictions were being introduced in different sectors of the economy. For example, state closures severely affected the functioning of shops, fitness clubs, museums, libraries, cinemas and theatres. Restrictions have also been introduced on the operations of restaurants, cafes and bars which meant that they could only provide takeaway and delivery services. Very severe restrictions were also introduced concerning public gatherings (both indoor and outdoor meetings – including those of a religious nature). In the second half of March 2020, forced closures affected numerous other sectors of the economy (Brzozowski *et al.*, 2020, pp. 13-15).

Being aware of the critical condition of the economy, the government began to introduce from the beginning of April 2020 a number of solutions aimed at supporting various types of enterprises and people employed in them. These solutions, called the anti-crisis shields, included, among other things: more flexibility in employment conditions, co-financing by the state of the salaries of employees affected by reduced working hours, support for micro – small and medium-sized enterprises that have experienced a high decline in turnover, co-financing costs of business activity of self-employed persons, subsidizing salaries of persons employed in non-governmental organizations and other business entities of public benefit, exemption of private business entities from paying contributions to ZUS for the period from March to May 2020. Very importantly, the anti-crisis shields measures also took into account entrepreneurs' appeals for the automatic extension of visas and work permits for employees from Ukraine. Such simplified procedures in hiring foreign workers responded to employers' concerns about finding new employees if those who were in the country would have to leave due to lack of residence permits. They also argued that in a situation where it is very difficult to obtain legal arrivals employees from Ukraine, we must try to keep those who are already here and want to come to Poland to work. Moreover, the critical condition of the healthcare sector meant that many people could not access compulsory medical examinations before starting formal employment. From 20 April 2020 onwards restrictions began to be lifted and the country's economy – initially in the new sanitary regime stipulating for example how many persons there can be in a given place (*e.g.* one person per 15 m<sup>2</sup>) – started to slowly return to the pre-pandemic mode (Brzozowski *et al.*, 2020, pp. 13-15).

Various measures introduced by the government within the anti-Covid shields had a diversified impact on immigrant entrepreneurs. This is because the level of support significantly depended for example on the revenues obtained (and taxes paid) by them in the years before the pandemic. Those immigrants who had just started a company had limited access to these instruments. Many of these persons – for example in the restaurant/café sector kept generating significant costs without being able to operate normally. For many companies from these sectors, it meant that they had to close their business causing significant losses and even debts.

Our research has shown that Ukrainian entrepreneurs (depending on the sector of the economy and the stage of development of their business) have adopted both a proactive strategy – trying to use the crisis to their advantage and slightly or significantly changing the character of their business model – as well as reactive one – using all the available tools to survive in new hostile conditions. One of our interviewees who proactively responded to new COVID-19 conditions was the owner of the fitness studio. She said that before the pandemic she had never carried out her training online and the COVID-19 lockdowns have forced her to do so. She has accounted for this situation in the following way: 'I just needed to go online. It was very difficult for me because I really like the human contact. I am, you know, from this age group, just like you, that we appreciate the contact, not only online. I understand that the world is going in that direction so I need to do it anyway... There are many pluses but ... minuses too. During Covid lockdowns and other restrictions, I did all my training – if I only could – online. It was sometimes difficult because not everyone was able to do the training online – not everyone had for example proper conditions to do the training.' [MEP-6, TR\_NS4] Despite lack of experience in online training and reservations about carrying out training in this way, our interviewee was able to adapt and fairly smoothly pass through the most difficult periods of the pandemic. She has achieved

relative success as people wanted to do some physical exercise even (or particularly) while being forced to immobility during the lockdown.

Another Ukrainian entrepreneur who was able to very quickly and efficiently change his business model and adapt to the new conditions was active in the education sector. He moved from a traditional recruitment agency for private universities in Poland to a new business – matching universities and recruitment agencies (worldwide). Before the pandemic, he was doing it on-site, in the form of special fairs (usually in conference rooms in large hotels), but with COVID-19 lockdowns and barriers to international mobility, he moved online and organized a matching online platform, which is working well. [MEP-2, MD]

Some of the interviewed entrepreneurs who found the adaptations to the new conditions more challenging were the owners of the newly opened zero waste shop and education centre. The planned launch of their business coincided with the most severe lockdown and freezing of the economy. They described this period in the following ways: ‘We were supposed to open on the 4 April, that’s what we planned. But when the pandemic started, we had to do it later. And we chose the 8 May. It wasn’t the best time to open. If he had known the pandemic would come, he wouldn’t have opened. But we survived, right? It’s fine! We needed a few months to breathe because it was quite hard at the beginning. People were scared of going out, of coming to us. And it was a new shop, you had to trust it, you had to get inside’ [MEP-7, NS5]

Some of our interviewees told us also that they were forced to make very significant adjustments in their business model to be able to survive the pandemic and all the negative economic implications of it. One such person was the owner of the construction and transportation company who had to shift between the two. He explained that ‘I’m in the transport field. Unfortunately, I’m going out of this branch. Unfortunately, and happily because the pay rates decreased significantly on the market because of that virus. We have many contractors who haven’t paid us money. There are many lawsuits right now, you know. For example, one of the companies hasn’t paid us more than 200 000 PLN, just one company (...). And because of that reason, we have to go out of this, there’s no sense in it. We’re giving the cars to other companies. And the construction stays because it’s possible to make money on this.’ [MEP-9, NS-7] As a result of COVID-19-related problems with his businesses, he decided to close one of the branches of his economic activity and concentrate only on the more profitable one – construction.

Finally, some of the entrepreneurs adopted a more reactive – wait-and-see strategy to cope with such a shock for their business activity. One of them was the owner of the café who was very concerned about the lockdown, as the city in which he was running the business – Kraków – is a popular tourist destination. During the pandemic, the city centre was almost deserted, and the business was kept on the surface by regular Polish customers who were dropping in for takeaway coffee: ‘Tourists ... Now, the coronavirus ... Now it’s a problem ... And in general, we have our regular clients in our café.’ Moreover, the business consisted of confectionery with delivery options, so some clients were ordering cakes and sweets to their homes. However, as most of the biggest clients were other businesses who ordered cakes for larger events (conferences, training etc.) the business has suffered during the pandemic ‘Just recently we had a collaboration, a deal with a restaurant in the [Name] Hotel. When they have a wedding, they send the fiancées to us. Such a collaboration. So, we wanted to do that before the coronavirus. They had those big banquets, big orders and it’s all gone.’ He also explained that their business has incurred huge losses: ‘compared to 100% July 2019 and July 2020, our sales dropped (...) by 30-34%. I didn’t get this 30–34% and it’s a big problem already’ [MEP-5, TR\_NS3]. As for today, the business is still operating, but the on-site shop and café had to be temporarily closed. On the other hand, the pandemic and lockdowns have forced the business to invest more in online sales and now online delivery of confectionary products consists of an important part of the company’s turnover.

For some of the analysed entrepreneurs, the anti-Covid shields were very important measures which enabled them to maintain their business during the critical time. Some of these persons were the owners of the newly opened shop-education centre. They said ‘it helped us a lot because it was difficult. It was our beginning and such a crisis ... So, it was perfect for the start’ [MEP-7, NS5]. Other interviewees said that they had managed to adjust to new conditions without using anti-COVID shield instruments (e.g. owner of the fitness business – [MEP-6, TR\_NS4]). For all interviewed entrepreneurs

the COVID-19 crisis was an important lesson which allowed them to learn new things about their businesses and the larger ramifications of them.

### Situation After the Full-scale Invasion (2023)

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine launched on 24 February 2022. It has completely changed the composition of the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland. Just before the eruption of war, in January 2022, the research team of the Centre for Advanced Studies of Population and Religion at Krakow University of Economics has concluded a representative survey of the immigrant population in the Małopolska region. Therefore, this survey presents the most recent picture of the population of economic migrants from Ukraine and other countries prior to this military conflict (Table 1).

**Table 1. Personal characteristics of the immigrant population in the Małopolska region (2022)**

Characteristics	Ukrainians	EU nationals	All migrants
Number	427	110	607
Female (%)	46%	35.6%	43.9%
Age (mean)	34.7	33.6	34.7
Married or partnership	57.5%	64.2%	58.4%
Having children (%)	50.2%	42.2%	48.2%
Tertiary education	54.1%	57.2%	56%
Employment	78.2%	65.5%	74.5%
Self-employment	3.5%	9.1%	5.3%

Source: own study.

Regarding gender structure, the Ukrainian population was dominated by male individuals (54% of the sample), but this trend was even more pronounced among EU nationals and migrants from other countries. All migrants were relatively young: the average age for Ukrainians was below 35 years, quite similar to other foreigners living in the Małopolska region. Moreover, when it comes to civil status, 57.5% of Ukrainians lived in marriages or long-term relationships, a percentage quite similar for all migrants but slightly less than in the case of EU nationals. When it comes to the share of immigrants who had at least one child and had tertiary education, Ukrainians did not differ much from the average. However, the biggest systematic differences can be found in economic activity. Among Ukrainians, 78.2% of respondents were full-time employed: a very high proportion, higher than the already impressive 74.5% for all migrants. On the other hand, only 3.5% of Ukrainians were self-employed, compared to 5.3% for all migrants and 9.1% among EU nationals. This finding confirms partially the narratives of our respondents from 2018, who complained about administrative barriers to starting a single-proprietorship enterprise, a form of entrepreneurship which at that time was fully available to EU citizens.

After February 2022, the structure of refugee inflow became completely different and the situation changed abruptly. As demonstrated on an international level, refugees who left Ukraine were mostly females with children. Males were only allowed to leave Ukraine under special circumstances (f.i. having more than three children, being a single parent, or having children with disabilities). Consequently, the survey conducted by the CASPAR team in the very early phase of the refugee crisis, between May and June 2022 has demonstrated a completely new composition of new Ukrainian diaspora coming to Poland (Table 2).

Almost all respondents who participated in the survey were females (96%) who came to Poland with their children. Their former economic activity in Ukraine, including labour, was lower than the average, but on the other hand surprisingly high was the share of individuals with entrepreneurial activity in the home country (14.4%). We could observe the same, although less female-dominated flows of Ukrainian refugees in other countries of the region, including for instance Austria (Kohlenberger *et al.*, 2023). As we conducted our survey in the very early phase of the conflict, within the frame of great unpredictability, only 30% of the respondents worked or were economically active, while most of them adopted a wait-and-see strategy, living on social benefits, savings and financial support sent from Ukraine. However, many Ukrainian females started to consider entrepreneurial ac-

tivity shortly after they arrived in Poland. This was the case of our respondent from an explorative survey carried out in 2023 among 10 female Ukrainian entrepreneurs. In spite of the critical situation, she was thinking about bringing her working tools while departing from Ukraine. She basically moved part of her enterprise (a beauty centre with manicure, pedicure, depilation and tattooing services in Eastern Ukraine) with her and transferred it to a new environment: 'Immediately I packed (my laser hair removal machine) to a car. I had not even taken my personal belongings, my suitcase. I took my child, and my equipment and left. I knew this was the only way to earn money. I would not go to some factory. I could not leave my child alone. I knew I would make some money out of it. I just needed my equipment. That's all' [K\_6\_34P].

**Table 2. Personal characteristics of Ukrainian refugees in the Małopolska region (2023)**

Characteristics	Refugees
Number	500
Female (%)	96%
Age (mean)	38.9
Married or partnership	59.8%
Having children (%)	81%
Tertiary education	58.8%
Employment in UA	57.1%
Self-employment in UA	14.4%
Currently working	30%

Source: own study.

Many of the refugees who came to Poland never migrated before. In fact, only 4 out of 10 respondents had previous migration experience. However, almost all of them came to Poland because they knew somebody from Ukraine who was living in this country: a close relative, friend or even more distant colleague. The reliance on migrant networks was crucial in the first days of settlement in Poland, as refugees were often offered accommodation and other forms of financial, but also emotional support. However, the family and diaspora resources played an even more important role in the mid-term. One of our respondents, a de-facto refugee herself (who arrived in Poland in 2019, but as a displaced person from Donetsk) has decided to open a small-scale enterprise (bakery and confectionery). One of the main reasons for running this business was the empowerment and employment opportunities for her mother, who recently arrived to Poland as a refugee: 'for years mom has always done this at home (...) mom is a gingerbread cookies specialist' [K\_1\_37P]. Although the business was in the early phase of development and was not making much of a profit, it already played a very important role in the successful socio-economic adaptation of the members of the family in Poland.

New refugee entrepreneurs can also rely on ethnic clientele and ethnic networks. 'Well and word of mouth also works' [K\_2\_36P] Ukrainian diaspora, already well-integrated economically in Poland, is an important facilitator for the successful engagement of refugees in social activities at the destination. Thanks to such networking, refugees can spot new business opportunities at a new location. One of the key opportunity structures is the ethnic market for specific products and services. As most of the recent refugees are females, there is a growing demand for beauty services: manicure, pedicure, hairdressers, hair depilation etc. This sector is much more developed and competitive in Ukraine than in Poland. Consequently, the Ukrainian female refugees are looking for a higher standard of beauty services, that only other Ukrainian entrepreneurs can provide: 'Just we have, ee, we have, well, so to say, in Ukraine, a bit more DEMANDING clients, but we in return, also, so to say, yes, constantly motivate ourselves for some new knowledge to do it even better' [K\_4\_39P].

This is a surprising finding. We would expect that the refugee entrepreneurs should rather find their competitive advantage in lowering the costs of their services. However, in this case, we observed the opposite: focus on excellence in service delivery as a key factor. Of course, this is because the main customers are from the same ethnic group, but such a strategy has a prospect for expanding the business into a highly integrated one.

The main problem with our respondents was – quite understandable for the early phase of the conflict – their strategy of intentional unpredictability (cf. Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015; Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2018). Most of them had unspecified plans for the future and wanted to return to their home country. Actually, to our knowledge 4 out of 10 respondents had successfully come back to Ukraine. Therefore, their entrepreneurial activity at that time was marketed by temporariness: they were not eager to make long-term planning and commitments. Although Polish regulations were changed already in March 2022, opening a full labour market, but also small-scale entrepreneurial activity to all Ukrainians, only one respondent had registered her firm at the moment of the survey, and the other one was in the process of the business registration.

Despite the very early phase of our investigation and the explorative nature of our study, some emerging patterns call for detailed attention and further, more systematic research. The first one is the relationship between the Ukrainian economic diaspora and the recent refugee population. It is a fact that those Ukrainians who arrived in Poland before 2022 played a key role in supporting their co-nationals who came here involuntarily. They were extremely dedicated to offering them accommodation, financial support and even brokerage in finding employment. This diasporic support is in a way a unique situation for most recent forced migration movements and should be further investigated. Nevertheless, it is interesting to look also for potential tensions between those two groups, especially as the war in Ukraine seems now far from ending. How do economic immigrants from Ukraine perceive now their refugee co-nationals from an economic perspective? As potential employees in their companies? Or rather as a threat and competition?

Another highly interesting topic is the transnational framework for business conducted by Ukrainian migrants and refugees. Whereas in the initial phase of economic migration, Ukrainian entrepreneurs were less inclined to cooperate economically with their home country, the situation – paradoxically – is now changing. Our female respondents often rely on suppliers from Ukraine, despite the ongoing military conflict. It is important to bear in mind that in spite of the dramatic war in the Eastern and Southern parts of the country, Ukrainian territory is quite large. Therefore, business activities in Lviv or even Kyiv are conducted on a normal basis, and many Ukrainian entrepreneurs are willing to extend these business ties – not only for patriotic motivations but simply because they are profitable. This aspect of transnational refugee entrepreneurship is also novel for refugee entrepreneurship research and calls for closer analysis.

Finally, with such a dynamic inflow of refugees from the same ethnic group as the former waves of economic immigrants, the geographical concentration of Ukrainians in the largest Polish cities has visibly increased. Consequently, it would be interesting to learn whether the process of developing an ethnic enclave economy is taking place, and if yes – how it affects the development prospects of heavily segmented immigrant and refugee enterprises.

## CONCLUSIONS

This explorative study aimed to present a short overview of the Ukrainian entrepreneurial activities in Poland, starting with the first wave of economic migrants who arrived in Poland after 2014, then the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on Ukrainians doing business in Poland and the very initial situation of Ukrainian refugee entrepreneurs, who started to run their firms in Poland after 22 February 2022. Our analysis demonstrated that initially most of the Ukrainians who arrived in Poland were mostly interested in taking the waged employment, and the share of entrepreneurs among economic migrants was relatively small. This could be partially explained by the legal framework. As third-country citizens, Ukrainians were not allowed to become self-employed (*i.e.* open single proprietorship enterprises) and the reliance on the public limited companies created additional hurdles in access to residence permits. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the surveyed Ukrainian entrepreneurs were either running product-integrated businesses, aimed at other fellow Ukrainian customers, or operated on a mainstream market. Moreover, these individuals had relatively small transnational involvement

with their home country, in spite of the geographical proximity. This was often explained by a disillusionment with the political situation at home: many respondents complained that it was much easier and safer to conduct business in Poland than at home.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major external shock for Ukrainian respondents, and many of them incurred substantial losses during the economic lockdown. Some of them had even either to close some of their operations or even shut down their businesses completely. However, for some of the proactive individuals, the pandemic period came as an unexpected opportunity for change and to do their business differently, with positive outcomes for their entrepreneurial profitability and sustainability.

The outbreak of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine marks a completely new chapter for the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland and their business activity. The massive inflow of Ukrainian refugees resulted in a fast amendment of the legal framework, allowing for the liberalization of entrepreneurial activity including its most simple form – single proprietorship entrepreneurship. Moreover, the composition of refugees differed substantially from former economic migrants from Ukraine – most of them were females, but also there was a higher share of persons with former entrepreneurial experience gained in their home country. Consequently, we are now observing a rapid increase in Ukrainian entrepreneurial activity. New refugee entrepreneurs usually focus their activity in beauty sector, and direct their services to co-ethnic customers. A massive inflow of the Ukrainian war refugees results in the development of important ethnic market: as for now, the total number of Ukrainians in Poland surpasses 2.1 million persons. As most of them live in the major cities, ethnic concentration occurs which in turn favours the development of the ethnic enclave economy.

Obviously, our research was just explorative and our three waves of qualitative survey present just a part of the general picture of the economic activity of Ukrainians residing in Poland. We need now more detailed, in depth analyses, in which the qualitative approaches will be supplemented with representative, quantitative surveys with potential to generalize the results. The Ukrainian refugees in Poland are now in a unique position, which is extremely interesting from the perspective of researchers studying immigrant and refugee socio-economic integration and immigrant and refugee entrepreneurship. They can rely on the support and existence of a large, already well-settled community of Ukrainian diasporans already living in the country prior to the full-scale Russian invasion. Consequently, they can potentially capitalize on the ethnic networks, ethnic solidarity and the development of the ethnic enclave economy in some locations. At the same time, paradoxically the increased patriotism among Ukrainians contributes to a higher incidence of transnational practices in diaspora, as compared to the pre-war situation. In this aspect, female refugees are in an advantageous situation, as they can move relatively freely between their home country and Poland. This is a very novel, almost unprecedented situation as in the case of most refugee entrepreneurs: usually, they are deprived of the possibility to interact socio-economically from the home country they have to flee. Consequently, studying the transnational refugee entrepreneurship of Ukrainians is extremely valuable, as it can extend substantially our understanding of the transnational activities of refugees.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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