A Long-Term View of Refugee Flows from Ukraine: War, Insecurities, and Migration

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Abstract

This article examines the exodus of migrants from Ukraine in the context of the Russian invasion, making use of the conflict model of migration. We argue that Ukraine has long been characterized by insecurities which have already fueled large waves of emigration from the country. Indeed, the most recent phase of Ukrainian emigration should be seen as a continuation of the ongoing tendency of people residing in the country to seek escape from the overarching conditions of insecurity there. Earlier migrations from Ukraine have also established a culture of migration which has mediated the outflow of Ukrainians during the current crisis. Ukrainians who had already harboured inclinations to leave the country and who were possessed of the necessary capabilities (i.e. social capital, financial capital, human capital and physical ability) became mobile at the onset of the invasion in February, while many others were left behind. At the same time, the welcoming attitude of many European states has been key to the fast and safe exodus of Ukrainian migrants thus far.

Keywords: *Ukraine; international migration; conflict; human insecurity; culture of migration; capabilities*

Introduction

Ongoing military tensions between Russia and Ukraine, which escalated with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, have now transformed into a full-scale war as Russian troops entered Ukraine on the 24th of February, 2022. A direct result of the conflict has been the mass exodus of Ukrainians from the country and a promise of temporary protection by the European Union to those Ukrainians fleeing the conflict. This article discusses Ukrainian emigration with reference to a continuum of human (in)security as a key driver of human mobility. Ukraine can aptly be characterized as an environment of human insecurity (see Sirkeci, 2006 and 2009; Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011 and 2016) and Ukraine's migration experience illustrates how people have responded to the conflict by seeking security within the country and, as tensions have grown, beyond its borders. Ukrainians have long voted with their feet, seeking to escape from various forms and degrees of human insecurity and the latest mass outflow follows the same pattern. Since February and as of this writing, approximately 7.7 million people have fled Ukraine and 7.1 million more have been internally displaced (UNHCR Data Portal).

Ukraine's democracy has often been characterized as fragile and political instability has worsened as a result of ongoing tensions with Russia surrounding Ukrainian aspirations to join the European Union. The heightened insecurities in Ukraine are partly a function of the demographic fault lines which separate the Russian minority and Ukrainian majority, as well

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as the violent conflict and aggression unleashed by Russia and its secessionist allies in Ukraine. Armed clashes, political crises, and economic inequality have all acted to increase migration pressures.

To better understand migration from Ukraine, we draw attention to the fluid, dynamic nature of perceived human insecurity as a key driver of human mobility. This is moderated by the presence of cultures of migration, which build upon migration experience and networks (Cohen, 2004; Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011). Heightened conflicts, including war, also serve as an opportunity framework for those harbouring migration aspirations (Sirkeci, 2006). However, financial, social, and human capital, as well as physical capability are also moderators of migration (Sirkeci et al., 2019). Hence, even civil wars are perceived subjectively and not everyone exposed to the same threats chooses to migrate or has the ability to do so.

Although the decision to migrate under extreme conditions of conflict and violence might be sudden, international migration often follows predictable and familiar routes which have been established throughout earlier migration waves (i.e. cultures of migration).

One further factor moderating human mobility is the variety of admission systems and the willingness of the receiving countries to accept migrants. When receiving countries adopt a non-confrontational and welcoming posture to immigrants, as has been the case for Ukrainians since March 2022, many who are at immediate risk but also many who seek to migrate for other reasons will tend to relocate to these 'welcoming' destinations which serve as opportunity frameworks for migrants.

In this article, we examine long term migration patterns with reference to various insecurities in Ukraine, relying on early reports of displacement due to the Russian invasion. We argue that the most recent exodus from Ukraine should be seen as the continuation of a legacy of human insecurity in the country. Utilizing statistics released by the United Nations and records and surveys of the International Organization of Migration (IOM) in the major receiving countries (e.g. Moldova, Poland, Slovakia, Belgium, and Romania), we argue that past and present migrations illustrate mixed motivations, including the flight from economic and political insecurities as well as the existential military threat posed by Russia. The environment of insecurity characterized by multiple factors, along with the welcoming approach of the European Union, also presents an opportunity framework for those seeking to migrate.

The environment of insecurity and mixed migratory aspirations in Ukraine

As postulated by the conflict model of migration, Ukraine was plagued by both material and non-material environments of insecurity characterized by poverty, deprivation, and armed conflict on the one hand and fear of persecution and discrimination on the other, since 1991. Economic insecurity has been the primary impetus for significant labour migration flows from Ukraine since its independence from the Soviet Union due to the country's development deficit. In the 2000s and 2010s, political insecurities increased due to instability (partly due to external interference) and civil unrest and armed conflict with pro-Russian separatist groups, fostering a democratic deficit. Hence in the two decades leading up to the current crisis, Ukraine had already seen large volumes of internally displaced people from Crimea, Luhansk, and Donbass. This had already placed Ukraine among the top l0 refugee sending countries.

In the post-independence era, Jewish Ukrainians migrated to the USA, Canada and Israel first (Visnevsky, 2003: 158) and sought refuge on the basis of religious and ethnic discrimination

(Burds 2008; Klokiw 2019). During the 1990s, large numbers of ethnic Germans and Hungarians also fled Ukraine (Fedyuk and Kindler 2016). At the same time, sizeable labour migration was directed to Russia and Western Europe. Throughout, Ukraine has suffered from financial instability, income inequality and wage inflation. In 1992, the highest quintile accrued 37.8 per cent of all income, 4.7 times more than the lowest 20 per cent of the population, who accrued only 8 per cent (Yurchenko et al. 2021, 109). Despite the various labels assigned to Ukrainian migrants, escaping poverty and deepening inequalities were key drivers of emigration (Fedyuk and Kindler 2016). As Klokiw (2019) affirms, all of these differing categories – from asylum seeking to ethnic based resettlements – have been used opportunistically by Ukrainians who are seeking to escape the endemic material insecurity in the country. Thus, the Ukrainian diaspora has already grown in size (see Table 1).

Table 1. Ukrainian Diaspora

Countries	Ukrainian Diaspora
Canada	1.360.000
United States	1.009.874
Republic of Moldova	181.035
Germany	155.000
Russian Federation	1.900.000

Source: Country Census Data in 2010s

Over the last three decades, Ukrainians have harboured strong migratory aspirations (Mol et al., 2017). Economic deprivation, in addition to large scale corruption and paternalistic economic activity organized around the power of a small group of oligarchs, have significantly dampened Ukrainians' hopes for any upward economic mobility (Lapshyna, 2014). Women and men have utilized various channels to acquire short and long-term labour mobility. While Greece, Portugal and Italy attracted women workers, particularly to the domestic care industry in the early phase of labour mobility (Kindler and Szulecka, 2012), Poland and the Czech Republic attracted mainly male workers in the construction and agriculture sectors, increasingly after the start of the armed conflict in 2014. Poland has been the most receptive toward Ukrainian migrants due to its demographic deficit and labour shortages in certain sectors. Several legal options have been made available to movers by Poland including short-term/long-term residence permits, work permits, and local border traffic agreements. Poland's local border traffic (LBT) agreement with Ukraine involved the creation of a multiple entry visa for workers arriving from the Western provinces that came into force in 2009. The number of people using this easy channel to reach Poland increased from 4 million in 2010 to over 10 million in 2016 (Jozwiak and Piechowska, 2017). Before 2014, it was estimated that 6 million Ukrainians were working and living abroad (IOM, 2008; Kubal, 2012; Vollmer et al., 2010).

While earlier migration to Europe was mainly motivated by economic insecurity, the conflict in Ukraine following the 2013 Euro Maiden protests, Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea (2014) and the conflict with Kremlin-backed separatist militias in the Eastern part of Ukraine (2014) has changed the composition of mobility significantly. The transformation of Ukraine from a country suffering from economic insecurity to one ridden with civil/armed conflict has played a major part in this shift. The civil uprising in Ukraine in 2013 targeted the pro-Russian president, Yanukovych, whose political project involved deepening the economic integration of Ukraine with Russia, after refusing to sign the accession agreement with the

EU. Although the civilian uprising, despite its violent suppression, was able to unseat the government, the political crisis turned into a long-term military conflict with Russia. In the ensuing conflict, 1.7 million Ukrainians were internally displaced (Charron, 2020; Sereda, 2020).[3]

By employing a conflict model, we can better appreciate the links between the internal-international migration nexus in the context of Ukraine after 2014. In 2014 and 2015, the number of asylum applicants from Ukraine reached historical highs. In 2013, Ukraine was not even in the top 30 countries of origin for asylum seekers; however applications rose to 34,380 after the conflict started, making Ukraine third among the European countries of origin for asylum seekers in the EU (Solodko and Fitisova, 2016). Asylum applications were made on the basis of the ongoing war in the East, discrimination against displaced persons, absence of governmental assistance to IDPs, and the need to evade military service, as is the case in many other countries (Lapshyan and Düvell, 2015).

The rise in asylum applications was also associated with the country's worsening economic plight. The conflict destroyed the economic infrastructure in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which previously accounted for 14 per cent of GDP and 25 per cent of total exports (Mykhenonko 2020). As a result, internally displaced individuals and their families have lost their primary income. The economic situation has also impacted those not living in the immediate conflict zones, as Ukraine's overall economy has suffered from anemic growth. Furthermore, hopes to further integrate with Europe have been dashed with the country's growing political and economic turmoil at that time. The middle classes, students and professionals in Ukraine considered EU accession an important avenue for attaining higher socio-economic mobility. Already before the war, general dissatisfaction with life in Ukraine was high and according to a survey conducted between 2011-2013, 49% of Ukrainians harboured aspirations to migrate (Lapshyan and Düvell, 2015). All these insecurities served to increase mobility from Ukraine. The conflict has, therefore, created an opportunity structure for those already seeking to leave the country, meaning that the composition of asylum seekers as a group is somewhat more mixed, as they are subject to differing forms of insecurity.

Since migration is not viewed holistically as a function of generalized human insecurity, European countries tended to regard Ukrainians, until more recently, as 'opportunistic' labour migrants rather than as genuine refugees (Lyman, 2015; Szczepanik and Tylec, 2016; Solodko and Fitisova, 2016). According to some estimates, only 13.3 per cent of the applicants received protection in Europe (Solodko and Fitisova, 2016), while rejections were issued on the basis of the existence of safe areas within Ukraine for IDPs.

The changing composition of labour migration from Ukraine has been reflective of the new conditions of the environment of insecurity (EOI) (Vakhitova and Fihel, 2020). Between 2013 and 2016, the total volume of migration from Ukraine to Poland increased by about 3 million to exceed 10 million. About half of this was circular labour mobility. It has been reported that an increasing share of Ukrainians in Poland were coming from the Eastern Oblasts, the main are of internal displacement (Figure 1). There was also a significant increase in youth migration (aged up to 30) (Vakhitova and Fihel, 2020). Human capital is an essential ingredient in the

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[3] An important body of scholarship has emerged around this topic, addressing the humanitarian crisis (Bulakh, 2017; Kuznetsova and Mikheieva, 2020) and providing a gendered analysis of IDPs (Khrystova and Uvarova, 2020).

capability of migrants to move and there was a sharp increase in Ukrainian student mobility as over 23,000 students enrolled at Polish universities in 2015 were Ukrainian (Vakhitova and Fihel, 2020). At the same time, high skilled emigration from Ukraine increased as people were concerned about political tensions as well as economic insecurities. These are clear indicators of declining economic security in the country.

Figure 1. Origins of Ukrainians migrated to Poland

Source: National Bank of Poland, 2015 (cited in Dobroczek et al. 2017)

Historic and recent flows from Ukraine to Poland point to the emergence of a culture of migration linking the two countries as the latter became the preferred destination for Ukrainians with the largest diaspora in Europe. According to 2020 UN immigrant stock data, other countries also host large numbers of Ukrainian migrants (Table 2), though it seems reasonable to suggest that Poland will remain a special case for the reasons already stated.

Table 2. Ukrainian Immigration Stock in Selected Countries, 2020.

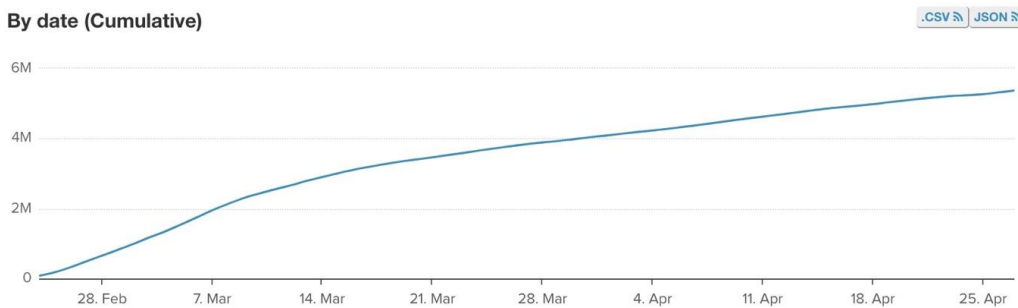| Countries	Number of Ukrainians
Russian Federation	3.272.304
United States	377.365
Kazakhstan	346.445
Germany	262.027
Poland	209.001
Italy	236.420
Belarus	224.847
Israel	131.780
Czechia	136.287
Uzbekistan	123.355
Spain	82.392
Canada	76.098
Hungary	50.253
Portugal	47.360
Romania	15.698
Republic of Moldova	62.728

Source: United Nations Population Division

Displacement in the Context of the Russian Invasion

At the beginning of the 2022 invasion, it was difficult to anticipate the scale of the war and whether it would be contained within the Eastern regions or seek to topple the Ukrainian government itself. Even before February 2022, it was reported that Ukrainian billionaires began fleeing in anticipation of the war. Apart from the media reporting, it is difficult to obtain an accurate picture. However, the first movers are those physically able to move by virtue of their access to financial, human, and social capital (Sirkeci et al., 2019; also see: Schon, 2019). Early reports from the neighboring states also confirm that those first to flee Ukraine were more privileged Ukrainians.[4]

Earlier emigration from Ukraine had been due to relative insecurity, however the full-scale Russian invasion created a more threatening EOI in the country, leading to a mass exodus (Figure 2). As Sirkeci and Cohen (2015) have documented, mass international migration is always correlated with armed conflict which means a shift from perceptions of relative insecurity to life-threatening insecurity (Sirkeci et al., 2019) as has been the case for Ukraine since February 2022.

Figure 2. Number of Ukrainians Fleeing

Source: UNHCR, the number of Ukrainians exiting the country day by day.

The sudden and rapid growth of Ukrainian migration has been facilitated by the availability of safe exit options, a welcoming attitude in Europe, and an existing culture of migration. This is in contrast to, for example, what Syrians faced in the 2010s when there was a more generalized sense of animosity in Europe, excepting the welcoming attitude evinced the Turkish government (Yazgan et al., 2015; Balkılıç and Teke Lloyd, 2020). During the 2014 conflict, the EU had similarly closed its doors to asylum-seeking IDPs from Ukraine. Following the Russian invasion, however, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive within a week, by the 2nd of March 2022, to offer quick and effective assistance to people fleeing the war in Ukraine (European Commission Website, "Commission proposes"). This and various other positive measures in Europe enabled a rapid exodus of millions from Ukraine (Schengen Visa info News; ReliefWeb "Ukrainian Crisis"; Government of Ireland,

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[4] In an panel organized by the Presidential Office of Communication branch in Ankara entitled "WAR in Ukraine: Regional and Humanitarian Consequences", the Ministry of the Interior Disaster and Emergency Manangement Presidency (AFAD) vice president Hamza Taşdelen shared his obsevrations from the border zone between Ukraine and Romania, remarking that the early comers were realtively wealthier and had more social connections than those arriving subsequently.

Press Release). Cultural, political and emotional reasons behind such contrasting attitudes are beyond the scope of this paper but would be worthy of some future analysis.

To further flesh out the Syrian analogy, by 2013, two years after the conflict began, only 855,000 Syrians had crossed the border to one of the neighbouring countries (Relief Web, "Syrian Arab Republic"). After the first refugee Zaatari camp was established in Jordan to host 120,000 Syrian refugees in July 2012, it took almost a year for the number of registered Syrian refugees to reach 1 million (UNCHR). For Syrians fleeing the conflict, their numbers grew gradually over a period of 8-10 years. By 2017, there were approximately 5 million registered Syrian refugees worldwide (Mercy Corps). We should also note that several EU countries, including Hungary, Greece, Slovakia and Poland, have adopted strict border controls to prevent Syrian immigration.

Cultures of migration facilitate and expedite human mobility on a larger scale. Even in the event of war, the character of such mobility differs little, except perhaps for the speed with which migration decisions are made. Like Syrian migration to Turkey, Ukrainian migration to Poland following the outbreak of armed conflict has followed a typical pattern as migrants have moved to those places where networks of family and friends or some ethnic minority or diaspora has already been established. Whereas, Syrians moved to border provinces in Southern Turkey, the vast majority of Ukrainians moved to Poland. An irregular border economy that had existed prior to the armed conflict also played a role in prefiguring migration routes and destinations. Sirkeci (2005), in his examination of the invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s, also showed that the initial movement of Iraqi immigrants into Europe laid the basis for ongoing patterns of settlement by future migrants. Ukrainians, too, are arriving in places where they have pre-existing ties and it is likely that these locations will continue to be preferred by them.[5]

Poland is the main magnet for Ukrainian immigration because of the long history of Ukrainian labour immigration. Unsurprisingly, Poland hosts the largest number of Ukrainian refugees, followed by Russia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Moldova (See Table 3). Interestingly, Slovakia, a small central European country, has become a major locus for Ukrainian labour immigration since the 2014 conflict and is also favored due to increased student migration and the development of a sizeable Ukrainian diaspora in the country (Levoniuk, 2019). Despite limited data, surveys carried out by the IOM on Ukrainian migration demonstrate that the presence of relatives and friends was the main pull factor in the choice of destination: Moldova (58%), Romania (48%), Poland (60%) (IOM Moldova, Romania and Poland Surveys, 2022).

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[5] In the IOM surveys, accomodation and safe transportation are often the two most cited needs by immigrants.

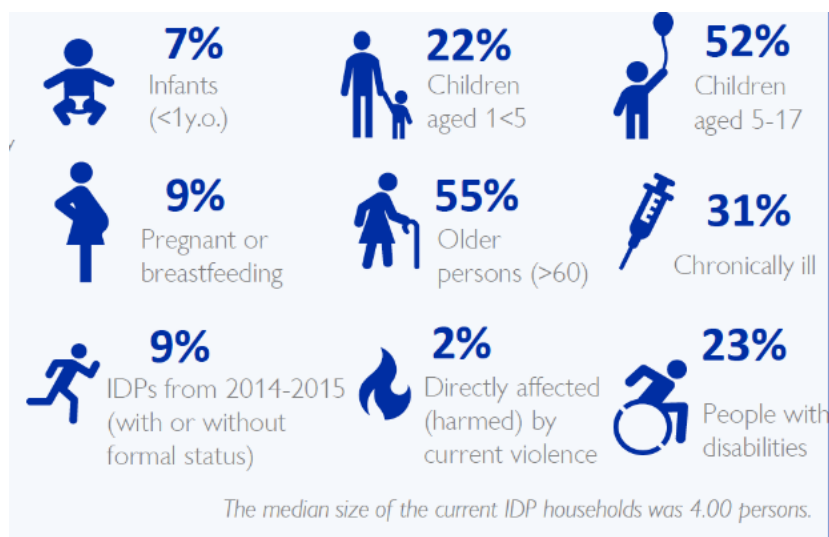**Table 3.** Number of Ukrainians in Neighbouring Countries, June, 2022

Neighbouring Countries	Individual refugees from Ukraine Recorded across Europe	Refugees from Ukraine registered for TP or similar national protection schemes	Border crossings from Ukraine	Border crossings to Ukraine
Russian Federation	1.230.800	NA	1.230.800	NA
Poland	1.169.497	1.169.497	4.001.921	1.877.811
Romania	90.297	37.832	659.009	309.136
Republic of Moldova	85.497	NA	502.716	132.371
Slovakia	78.302	78.113	510.014	239.599
Hungary	24.452	24.452	782.742	NA

Source: UNHCR, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine

According to the conflict model of migration, war can sometimes serve as an opportunity framework for those seeking to migrate (Sirkeci, 2003a; Sirkeci, 2003b; Sirkeci, 2005; Sirkeci, 2006; Mejía-Arango et al., 2015). Data collected by the IOM on the most recent Ukrainian refugee flows provide evidence in line with this argument. Accordingly, the majority of Ukrainian refugees had already harboured a desire to move to European destinations. For example, those who arrived in Romania and Moldova had the highest inclination to move elsewhere in Europe, while slightly less than a third favored these countries as final destinations (IOM Romania Survey; IOM Moldova Survey). Further evidence shows that for many Ukrainians, living in a European country was seen as preferable even in the event that their homeland was somehow made safe from war (IOM Surveys Poland and Slovakia) This is in line with broader premises of the conflict model, which has been used to study the frequent secondary migrations which occur under these circumstances (Tuzi 2019).

The conflict model predicts that the 4Cs – human capital, financial capital, social capital and physical capability – will play a significant role in migration decision making, including the choice of destination. Due to the restrictions on male mobility (re: conscription), 90% of migrants have been women, children and the elderly. Unsurprisingly, the majority of those who chose to move to the nearest destination countries, such as Moldova, were elderly and disabled people (IOM Moldova Survey). Their share was negligible among those arriving in Slovakia and Poland as these countries are more difficult to reach.

Figure 3: Vulnerable households among internally displaced.

7% Infants (<1y.o.)	**22%** Children aged 1<5	**52%** Children aged 5-17
9% Pregnant or breastfeeding	**55%** Older persons (>60)	**31%** Chronically ill
9% IDPs from 2014-2015 (with or without formal status)	**2%** Directly affected (harmed) by current violence	**23%** People with disabilities

The median size of the current IDP households was 4.00 persons.

Source: IOM survey of Internally Displaced People

The conflict model asserts that the conditions of non-movers are equally important as a means of understanding international migration (Sirkeci 2006; 2005; Cohen and Sirkeci 2011; Sirkeci and Teke Lloyd 2022). Despite the existence of a very conducive environment for migration, not everyone has been able or willing to relocate from Ukraine, creating two further categories: internally displaced and non-displaced. Physical ability/inability to move is one of the most critical determinants of internal displacement[6]. According to the last round of surveys conducted by the IOM in May, over 8 million people were internally displaced, among whom 63% were women and their primary destination was Western Ukraine. The households who are internally displaced often report one or more vulnerable family members. Breastfeeding women, chronically ill individuals, older adults and people with disabilities are strongly represented among the internally displaced (Figure 3). IDPs are also overall relatively poorer and a substantial majority of them come from rural areas (IOM Survey of IDPs). A similar pattern also applies to those who unable or unwilling to migrate, as indicated in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Vulnerable populations among the non-displaced people in Ukraine.
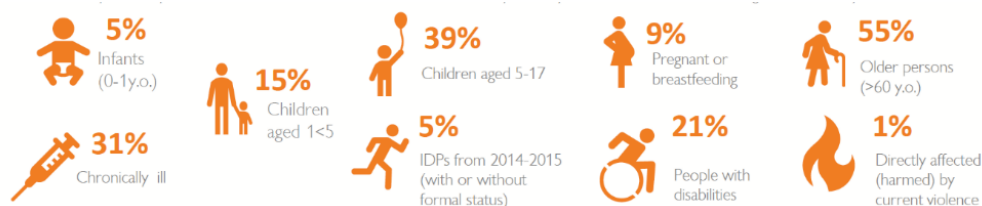
Source: IOM Survey of non-Displaced people

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[6] There may be other factors such as human, economic and social capital underlying these migratory flows but these are more difficult to estimate. This subject could be of interest to future researchers on the topic.

Conclusion

Migration, even in the most dire of circumstances such as war, tends to follow a predictable pattern. People migrate when they face insecurity and only if they have the capabilities to do so. Migrants generally move toward familiar destinations where they can benefit from established social networks. War can also provide an opportunity framework for those already seeking to migrate to escape from various forms of insecurity (in addition to war itself). In the case of Ukraine, this general pattern seems consistent with the existing data. The conflict model which we have relied upon in this paper has been useful as a means of illustrating the connection between Ukraine's longstanding insecurities (3Ds) and the heightened perception of insecurity in the context of war. This has highlighted the importance of the internal-international migration nexus, the blurring of migrant categories, pre-existing cultures of migration, and the 4Cs of immigration.

Ukrainian emigration has been triggered by various insecurities. However, emigration from Russia has also grown considerably in size following the outbreak of the war. The imposed sanctions, in addition to the growing democratic deficit in the country under Putin's leadership, are fueling international migration, particularly on the part of the middle classes and intellectuals. Furthermore, Russia may be unable to continue to serve as a magnet for labour migrants from many of the post-Soviet countries due to the growing economic difficulties in the country. Labour migrants' growing insecurities will undoubtedly encourage them to seek out other destination countries to sustain their remittances to their families.

A further uncertainty surrounding the status of the Ukrainian immigrants is the posture of their host countries. It is difficult to foresee whether the current welcoming attitude on the part of most European states will translate into long term security for vulnerable Ukrainian immigrants, many of whom are women and who face gender specific insecurities. It is entirely possible that many Ukrainians might seek out residence elsewhere if they continue to feel insecure socially and economically, leading to substantial secondary immigration. Therefore, a plethora of insecurities have been unleashed as a result of the current war in Ukraine at multiple sites, and we believe that the conflict model could prove useful as a means of understanding and responding to its emerging ramifications for international migration.

The conflict model of migration can help us to make sense of the data emerging from the latest phase of displacement in Ukraine and could form the basis for future research on Ukrainian migration. The model has been used in the past to explain large exoduses from Iraq, Mexico, Lebanon, Turkey, and Syria (Sirkeci, 2000; Sirkeci, 2005; Hourani and Sensenig-Dabbous, 2007; Cohen and Sirkeci, 2016; Utku et al., 2017; Tuzi, 2019; Sirkeci and Teke Lloyd, 2022). To better understand migration from Ukraine, the fluid, dynamic nature of perceived human insecurity as a key driver of human mobility needs to be emphasized.

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