
Interdisciplinary Workshop

Narratives of Displacement: Inquiring Mobility, Integration, and Agency in the Ukrainian Refugee Experience

University of Passau (HK 28 SR 103)

June 25, 2025

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, several states introduced new refugee admission policies. Most European states activated the EU-wide Temporary Protection Directive, granting immediate and collective protection to Ukrainians, while the United States and Canada launched specific, more inclusive resettlement programs for Ukrainian refugees. Compared to other refugee groups, these measures combined with widespread solidarity and support, sparked a debate about preferential treatment, due to Ukrainian's perceived proximity to Whiteness. However, the prolonged war, and a turn towards nativist and right-wing populist movements, resulted in shrinking legal protection status in receiving countries, with growing fears of deportation in the U.S. and a general sense of insecurity and precariousness among refugees.

This workshop therefore aims to stimulate a broader discussion on refugee mobility and the appropriate use of concepts and terminology, such as belonging, home, or integration and resettlement policies. Drawing on the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugees, this interdisciplinary workshop offers nuanced perspectives on the racialization processes underlying resettlement and integration in Canada, the U.S., and Germany, as well as the agency of Ukrainian female migrants.

Organizer:

DR. GRIT GRIGOLEIT-RICHTER (American Studies/BMBF: US-Immigration, U Passau)
PD DR. ANNA-LISA MÜLLER (IKG, Bielefeld University)

PROGRAM, June 25, 2025

10:00	Welcome & Opening
10:15 – 11:15	<i>ELEN FÜBEKKER</i> (University of Rostock, Germany): Displacement and Agency: Biographical Experiences of Ukrainian Mothers in the Wake of War
11:30 – 12:30	<i>IULIA LASHCHUK</i> (European University Institute, Italy): Art as agentic practice. (Self)representation of Ukrainian women artists displaced by war
12:30 – 14:30	<i>Light Lunch & Film Screening: “Veselka”</i> (1:45 min)
14:30 – 15:30	<i>MONIKA IMERI</i> (Carleton University, Canada): Proximity to Whiteness: Racial Hierarchies and the Resettlement of Ukrainian Refugees in Canada
15:45 – 16:45	<i>CLAUDIA SADOWSKI-SMITH</i> (Arizona State University, USA): ‘They let us in but they don’t know what to do with us’: Temporarily Protected Ukrainian Refugees, Private Sponsorship, and the Ukrainian Diaspora in the United States
17:00	Closing

ABSTRACTS

ELEN FÜBBEKKER (Chair of Educational Theory and History of Education, University of Rostock)

Displacement and Agency: Biographical Experiences of Ukrainian Mothers in the Wake of War

The Russian full-scale invasion has had a profound and sudden impact on the lives and life plans of people in Ukraine. The repercussions of this exodus are manifold, including psychological distress, manifesting in the form of traumatic war experiences. These experiences have had a considerable impact on the ability of affected families to continue with their original life plans. Concurrently, Ukraine and its population have accumulated substantial experience in addressing crises, a capacity that can be attributed to the nation's historical and social evolution. The social und socio-political change have influenced the population's response to societal transformation and crises.

The paper is an excerpt from an ongoing doctoral research project that aims to reconstruct the overall biographical significance of the Russian war of aggression and thus the societal crisis

experiences from the perspective of those affected. The study is grounded in autobiographic-narrative interviews with 19 mothers from Ukraine. Using the example of a mother from Irpin, the paper offers an initial insight into the empirical data. It discusses how the woman remains capable of agency within the tensions of transnational parenthood, welfare-state expectations, and individual distancing from her family of origin, while trying to cope with the experience of war and displacement. Particular focus is placed on the family biographical and individual experiences from the country of origin, which may contribute to navigating everyday challenges in Germany.

IULIA LASHCHUK (Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute, Florence, Italy)

Art as agentic practice. (Self)representation of Ukrainian women artists displaced by war

In 1984, photographer Steven McCurry took a photo of a 12-year-old girl, Sharbat Gula, an Afghan refugee in Pakistan. This photo portrait, published at National Geographic, became an iconic and controversial symbol of representation of Afghan women to the West as “First World's Third World Mona Lisa, an exoticised Other” (Hesford, Kozol 2005). It also became a symbol of refugee women in general, portraying them as scared, vulnerable, and poor, arousing a feeling of pity rather than solidarity in a viewer. It is not surprising that since the 80s, the visual representation of female migrants, especially refugees, adopted by asylum advocacy and humanitarian actors rely upon discourses of victimisation that depoliticise those women and often deprive them of their agency and reduce them to “abstract symbols of victimhood” (Massari 2021). But what if the Afghan Girl could speak for herself? Would her testimony and, therefore, perception of displaced women be different? I will specifically explore the Ukrainian case and critically study the visuality of Ukrainian female migration on two levels: visual attitudes (how Ukrainian female migration is visually present) and visual identities (how Ukrainian female artists present themselves and their experiences of displacement both as action and reaction). I claim that art has the potential to be gender-transformative, challenging traditional migration narratives and promoting the agency of migrant women. This approach can influence migration governance, leading to more inclusive policies that reflect the realities of migration of women, particularly in the context of forced displacement.

MONIKA IMERI (Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada)

Proximity to Whiteness: Racial Hierarchies and the Resettlement of Ukrainian Refugees in Canada

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Canada has become a key destination for displaced Ukrainians. While Ukrainian refugees are often portrayed as “desirable” within Canada’s humanitarian narrative, their actual resettlement experiences reveal a more complex reality. This paper explores the racial hierarchies at play in the resettlement of Ukrainian refugees, focusing on how “proximity to whiteness” shapes both their inclusion and exclusion in Canadian society. Although many Ukrainians are white or of European descent, there are also Ukrainians of mixed racial heritage and from minority groups within Ukraine. By

examining these dynamics, the study aims to uncover how processes of racialization influence access to housing, employment, protection, and social services—often contradicting the seemingly benevolent public discourse surrounding their arrival to Canada. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Ukrainian women refugees and settlement workers, alongside a discourse analysis of policy documents and media coverage, this study addresses the following questions: How do Canada’s immigration policies treat Ukrainian refugees compared to non-European refugees? What public discourses are being circulated about welcoming Ukrainian refugees, and how do these narratives intersect with national identity, "othering", and systemic power relations in Canada? Additionally, how do Ukrainian refugees themselves articulate their experiences or “arrival” and “integration” in the host society, particularly in relation to the intersections of race, gender, and class? In exploring these questions, the paper critically examines the layered racial hierarchies embedded in migration policies and the need for more inclusive frameworks that address the complexities of refugee resettlement across different social categories.

CLAUDIA SADOWSKI-SMITH (English Department, Arizona State University, Tempe, USA)

‘They let us in but they don’t know what to do with us’: Temporarily Protected Ukrainian Refugees, Private Sponsorship, and the Ukrainian Diaspora in the United States

This paper examines the experiences of Ukrainians in Arizona living under humanitarian parole and/or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) 2022-2024, contributing to scholarship on the social impacts of temporary protections, which has primarily focused on long-term TPS holders from Honduras and El Salvador. In addition to exploring how Ukrainians’ shorter-lived periods of legal uncertainty shape their transnational ties and return intentions, the paper also highlights underexplored aspects of TPS. Findings suggest that temporary protections, particularly in connection with the now defunct private sponsorship program Uniting for Ukraine (U4U), play a key role in shaping migrants’ self-identification and influencing their perspectives on U.S. immigration debates and the Ukrainian diaspora in Arizona. While the Ukrainian diaspora has actively supported Ukraine’s war effort through fundraising and advocacy, direct assistance for newcomers—such as volunteering, job referrals, and sponsorship—has largely fallen to individual sponsors within the community, despite U4U not requiring familial ties. Because these efforts were individual and inconsistent, they at times deepened divisions between recent arrivals and earlier immigrants, reflecting differing migration histories and legal statuses. However, as support for Ukraine declines and U4U ended in early 2025, these shifting dynamics may prompt increased advocacy for Ukrainians and others living under temporary protections.
