



DOI: 10.2478/genst-2025-0003

**RESILIENT ADAPTATION OR RECLAIMED AGENCY? UKRAINIAN WOMEN'S
NEGOTIATION OF INTEGRATION IN ROMANIA¹**

MĂLINA CIOCEA

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest
malina.ciocea@comunicare.ro

ELENA NEGREA-BUSUIOC

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest
elena.negrea@comunicare.ro

FLORENȚA TOADER

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest
florenta.toader@comunicare.ro

BIANCA-FLORENTINA CHEREGI

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest
bianca.cheregi@comunicare.ro

***Abstract:** This paper adds to the growing body of literature investigating Ukrainian women refugees' framing of their experience as forced migrants. Using semi-structured interviews with 11 Ukrainian women refugees currently residing in Romania, we explore how these women navigate the complexities of adaptation and integration in Romania. We examine their perception of refugee status, negotiation of belonging to various transnational social spaces and problematization of their lived experiences as women, mothers and main decision-makers of their families. We are equally interested in identifying the factors that empower them to rebuild their lives and foster resilience in the host country. Our analysis*

¹ This article belongs to the special section titled "Women's Migration from Central and Eastern Europe: Discursive, Sociocultural and Historical Perspectives," edited by Irina Diana Mădroane and Ruxandra Trandafoiu, this issue (*Gender Studies*, 24(1), 2025).

shows that resilient adaptation is the result of an accumulation of everyday problem-solving, professional achievement and anchoring in re-invented roles as caregivers and advocates for Ukrainian communities.

Keywords: *Ukrainian refugees, agency, anchoring, resilience*

1. Introduction

February 2022 saw the largest human displacement crisis in the world today (UNHCR, 2023), as millions of Ukrainians fled to the neighbouring countries. In the first months of the war, about 90% of refugees were women and children (UN Women and Care International, 2022). Under EU temporary protection, Ukrainian refugees are entitled, among others, to social welfare assistance, access to housing, education, and the labour market (European Commission, 2025). In April 2024, 154,617 individuals had received temporary protection in Romania. From the total number of temporary protection beneficiaries, 12.46% were children aged 0-6, 18.47% were children aged 7-18, and 5.42% were individuals aged over 65 (protectieucraina.gov.ro, 2024).

While recent research focuses on the “permanent temporariness” of forced migrants (Lazarenko, 2024) and the anchors enabling or blocking the refugees’ “agency-in-waiting” in host societies (Maxwell et al., 2024), a lot more research is needed into migrants’ engagement with various claims concerning their identities as people in transit. The inherent fluidity of their citizenship, negotiated among source and host societies, and transnational social spaces, challenges not just decision-makers’ positions, but also the attitudes, practices and narratives around identity in host communities. Furthermore, the feminization of Ukrainian forced migration (Isański & Nowak, 2023), which translates into the multidimensional anchoring of women refugees, raises new identity-related challenges.

In this context, this paper seeks to explore how Ukrainian women understand and navigate the complexities of integration in Romania. Despite scholarly acknowledgment of the importance of gender in migration (Boyd, 2018), with some exceptions (Hillmann & Toğral Koca, 2021; Lazarenko, 2024), empirical studies that focus explicitly on women refugees’ integration are scarce. We draw on approaches to refugee integration as a multidimensional process (Strang & Ager, 2010) to explore how women engage with the host society and with the knowledge produced about their experience. We use qualitative analysis based on semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian women refugees to find out: (1) how these women describe the complexities of resilient adaptation to the host society; and (2) to what extent

refugeeism has contributed to women empowerment and identity renegotiation in a new social and cultural context.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

2.1. Problematizing the interactions of migrants with host societies

Theoretical approaches to immigration are inherently political, in that they reflect competing views on the pathway taken by migrants in relation to host societies and they are in their turn reflected in migration policies and public perception (Laubenthal, 2023). In this sense, an investigation of the relationship between migrants and host societies reflects understandings of power relations, agency and political positionings. The theories of assimilation, integration and transnationalism account for structural changes which occur in societies, while also having different interpretations of the individual as a political subject. They reflect different political eras, realities and discourses on migration: assimilation of the values and norms of the host society, integration as a way of reducing social inequality and, finally, negotiation of position in transnational social spaces.

In parallel to these theories, the acculturation paradigm (Berry, 2005) examines the cultural and psychological aspects of migrant interaction with other cultures, moving the focus on cultural groups and individual members, and how they build acculturation strategies to manage the inherent conflict in intercultural encounters. Through psychological and sociocultural adaptation, the individual connects to others in the new society, acquiring competence in intercultural living. In this sense, adaptation is a strategic goal of both individuals, and the groups of which they are members.

Integration resulting from these strategies depends on the orientation of the host society towards accommodating diversity. Acculturation is thus a two-way interaction (Berry, 2009) and a multidimensional process involving practices, values and identifications from both the sending and receiving culture (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Outlining a comprehensive model of intergenerational integration, Esser starts from an understanding of migrants as actors who have situationally reasonable reactions to societal conditions (Esser, 2004, p. 1127); these individual responses lead to structural consequences which in turn create a new situation. Esser distinguishes between the social integration of

individual migrants (illustrated by integration into the labour market, for instance), the emergence of social structures (indicative of patterns of social inequality and social differentiation), and integration into a complete societal system. This focus on the conditions and mechanisms that lead to structural outcomes has empirical value for policy making, although in terms of discursive construction, the integration concept builds the migrants as a problematic group, a situation which is later on addressed by the transnationalism paradigm (Basch et al., 1994), which shifts the emphasis on social spaces that transcend the nation-state and on migrants as actors of migration.

2.2. Particularities of refugee integration

In the case of refugees, the problem of integration is different, in terms of public perception and governance of these political subjects. The resettlement policies of receiving countries (the services and social support to assist resettlement and address trauma) extend beyond acculturation strategies to ensure resilience (Allen, Vaage & Hauff, 2006). As such, we posit that an analysis of refugees' adaptation to host societies would benefit from a change in focus towards how they negotiate simultaneity, which concerns family relations and societal expectations alike, in both sending and host countries.

The concept of transnational social field (Basch et al., 1994) serves well to explain this process of negotiating belonging, which has its roots in ethnic identity and citizenship, but eludes definitive assimilation into the host society or definitive rupture from the relations in the sending country. This transnational social space is characterized by norms, expectations and practices which, although fluid, in the sense that they both reflect and obscure the culture of both sending and receiving communities, configure "homemaking," which might prove a better category of analysis to describe migrants' local incorporation (Boccagni & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2021). Homemaking fills the middle ground between theories of assimilation and transnationalism, multiplying the points of reference used by migrants to negotiate belonging, while also recognizing that transnational practices are grounded in "specific contexts of settlement, life-course positions, and structures of opportunities" (Boccagni & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2021, p. 6). As an analytical category, homemaking opens up more sites of investigation, adding to the materiality of migrant incorporation of emotions and understandings of home, which inform practices and relationships. Furthermore, it addresses both individual inclusion in society and the broader societal context and, finally, it avoids

prescriptive visions of integration by focusing on how migrants reproduce or contest various claims concerning themselves. As such, rather than contradicting the theoretical acquisitions of Berry's and Esser's paradigms, the concept of homemaking accommodates their interest for the psychological, sociocultural and structural integration of migrants while recognising the changing nature of social spaces in contemporary society. In our understanding, homemaking is an integrative practice which mediates between various degrees of adaptation and structural outcomes.

The integration of refugees in host societies is both a matter of personal choice and a matter of public policy. Integration processes and outcomes depend on a variety of mechanisms and determinants. The conceptual framework for operationalizing integration developed by Ager and Strang (2008) lists indicators for: the foundation of integration, based on rights and citizenship; facilitators (language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability); social connection (social bridges, social bonds and social links); and markers and means of integration (employment, housing, education and health). Integration is shaped by how communities and institutions imagine nationhood and citizenship (Strang & Ager, 2010). The principles articulating the understanding of citizenship and the rights of citizens shape the refugees' feeling of belonging, but also the debate surrounding refugees and public policies. In addition to this relationship between belonging and values, an operational framework of integration needs to explore the role of social capital and of bonded social networks in three key areas: information and material resources, emotional resources and capacity building resources. Another key element to consider is that integration is a two-way process in which both individuals and host societies need to be ready to adapt. Factors such as employment, housing, education and health are both markers and means of integration, which again points to the bi-directionality of the integration process (Strang & Ager, 2010).

At individual level, resilience is fed by several sources. A systematic review of studies conducted on young refugees shows that some of these sources are the following: the social support offered by family, people with the same cultural background, peers and professionals; acculturation strategies; education; religion; avoidance and hope (Sleijpen et al., 2016). Self-efficacy, optimism and hope as dimensions of psychological capital can build resilience in refugees (Grabowska et al., 2023).

2.3. Operationalising women refugees' interaction with the host society

The current refugee wave is, similarly to previous refugee movements, characterized by displacement, trauma, transnational networks and a very dense web of social relations and (usually unequal) power relations between refugees and their families, ethnic communities, the host country, the countries of origin and state and humanitarian actors. Unlike other displaced persons, the Ukrainian refugees are mostly women with dependent children and older parents. The “gendered nature of the refugee process” (Boyd, 2018) is not unique to Ukrainian refugees, in the sense that gender determines much of a refugee’s journey, from the decision to flee to the final settlements. Gender roles and relations shape experiences, with women being traditionally dependent on the spouse as the main applicant. But in the case of Ukrainian refugees, women who may have fit more conventional gender roles in the community of origin became the main decision-makers of their families, a role that was most often superposed on the more traditional one of main carers for children and older family members.

This newfound agency of Ukrainian refugee women shapes much of mobility, communicative and care practices, as well as transactional practices in the host country. They find themselves in various figurations (defined as “dynamic social constellations which emerge in the context of displacement between displaced people and state and other actors at the local, translocal, and transnational scale,” Christ et al., 2021, p. 2), shaped by the forces that support the host communities (from institutions to social relations), everyday practices and lived experiences (in both the host countries and transnational social fields). In the continuum between forced displacement and settlement, women refugees navigate both bureaucratic figurations and family figurations, which have both a local and a transnational character. Various governance actors (from the countries of origin, such as educational actors exercising governance over the refugee children who attend online classes, the host countries, such as social welfare systems, or transnational actors, such as humanitarian agencies) shape the decision of women refugees to stay or move. Similarly, family connections, disrupted by the forced movement, are upheld and recreated by transnational communicative practices. Negotiating between these various social constellations requires women refugees to exert agency.

The refugee experience is characterized by fluidity and uncertainty about the future. The process of coping with this uncertainty and “in-betweenness” of displacement and making

sense of this experience is theorized by Brun as “agency-in-waiting,” “a particular way of understanding the time perspective of protracted displacement” (2015, p. 20) and of negotiating their relation to “a future that lies in the past” (2015, p. 33). Much of this inquietude about the future is related to the fact that as refugees they are “outside of history,” meaning that they are governed as a distinct category of political and humanitarian subjects, outside the scope of any polity – a status which encourages both instrumentalizations from political actors and the refugees’ own engagement with the polity.

The Ukrainian refugees’ permanent temporariness is fed not only by the uncertainty of their future back in Ukraine, but also by the uncertainty of their status in the host countries as temporarily protected citizens, who at the same time are expected to demonstrate a degree of integration into the new community. This migration regime has immobility at its heart, understood as a complex, dynamic process driven by “structural and personal forces,” which are equally powerful for the individual as the ones driving mobility (Schewel, 2019). Learning to function in this new immobility regime involves not only reflection on the new status but also exercising one’s agency. Building on “an anthropological perspective on person–state interactions in the context of refugees’ future-planning,” Lazarenko (2024, p. 1571) finds that going through bureaucratic procedures, but also, paradoxically, the “deliberate renouncement” of agency as a form of resistance to bureaucratic constraints contributes to the refugees’ sense of having agency over their current situation and their future.

The reality of a disrupted existence (and of disrupted social roles and structures), impacting the refugees’ sense of belonging, raises the problem of securitizing the relationship with the host societies and countries of origin. Acquisition of cultural competencies which facilitate integration into host communities goes hand in hand with maintaining a sense of identity (ethnic, social, professional, etc.). Adaptation and integration depend on anchoring, defined as “the process of finding significant references and grounded points which enable migrants to restore their socio-psychological stability in new life settings and establish their (subjective and objective) footholds in a receiving society” (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016, p. 1134) but also in countries of origin (such as family ties with immobile members of the family). Anchoring facilitates embeddedness, which focuses on “relationality within specific systems and structures” (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Ryan, 2022, p. 5), such as the labour market or various immigration regimes. Both anchoring and embeddedness are flexible (as are un-anchoring, re-

anchoring, dis-embedding, re-embedding) and cannot happen in the absence of refugees' agency.

The uniqueness of the current Ukrainian refugee wave (gender specificity, but also previous forced migration waves, dating back to the occupation of Crimea in 2014) reflects in the uniqueness of adaptation to host societies. Isański and Nowak (2023) remark on “the peculiarities of Ukrainian refugeeism” (p. 210) and “the specifics of ‘woman in exile’” (p. 214), characterized by “the ‘bridging’ condition of female forced migrants” (p. 217) defined by a multiplicity of anchors – from those related to social roles (providing help for the family; staying in relative geographical proximity to spouses fighting in the war), to those related to the labour market (such as previous labour migration experience or maintaining professional relationships in Ukraine). To these “multi-modal strategies of anchoring” (p. 226), the analyst needs to add the specificity of their refugeeism: the traumatic experience of escaping war, accompanied by children and older family members.

Another aspect to consider is the unique combination of external and internal anchors which can help explain refugees' different orientations towards their present situation and their future. Each refugee experiences anchors differently, whether they are external and tangible (legal status; interaction with institutions; economic resources; place of residence, etc.) or subjective and internal (individual values and beliefs, memory) (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016, p. 1131). Maxwell and collaborators (2024) distinguish between various categories of women refugees from Ukraine: “*living in limbo* (a largely non-agentic approach to living with protracted displacement); *waiting to return – but embracing life* (a more agentic engagement with the everyday); and *determined to remain – actively working towards this future* (practices replete with agency that challenge the notion of protracted displacement)” (p. 456). These distinct degrees of agency are attributable to the workings of different anchors: from external ones, such as having social ties, finding a job which matches their professional experience, the ability to speak the language of the host country, experience with institutions and volunteers, to subjective forms of anchoring, such as doing what is best for children or following their dreams. How refugees engage with their present lives and how they exercise different degrees of agency-in-waiting depends on the tension between these external and internal anchors, and between competing anchors in Ukraine (from family left behind to their former selves).

While migration itself is likely to create social inequality, women refugees are also very different from one another in terms of education, social capital, anchors and life choices. Some of these differences are inherited from the country of origin; some are inherent to their refugee

status. Their gender roles, knowledge of the language and of the institutions in the host society, recognition of work experience and of degrees lead to distinct access to various forms of capital, which reflect in hierarchies (Hillmann & Toğral Koca, 2021).

To understand how women develop new roles in this changed social reality, researchers need to explore their role typology and the stability factors which can prevent role conflicts (Kuzmuk, 2024, p. 505). Those who have more initial advantages are more likely to adapt and recover some of their self-trust; lack of prospects for personal accomplishment leads to poor integration. For some, this new reality is an impulse to change and look for opportunities; for others, return to their former life is an indicator of success. In both cases, resilience is related to the refugees' capacity to take decisions which they see as most aligned with their roles, and not to adaptation and integration in the host society. The civic engagement of refugees with their own ethnic community or with the larger society enhances social and human capital, maintains identity and connection, and is a measure of success and integration (Weng & Lee, 2016).

3. Methodology

This study investigates how Ukrainian women refugees perceive and navigate the complexities of their adaptation and integration in Romania. We also examine their perception of refugee status and the social capital resources that they draw upon to foster resilience in the host country. Our analysis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Ukrainian women refugees problematize their lived experiences?

RQ2. How do Ukrainian women refugees negotiate their status in the host country?

The first research question explores how Ukrainian women personally frame their experiences as refugees. With this question, we wanted to understand, first, how they negotiate belonging to various transnational social spaces and what degrees of temporariness they attach to their situation. A second point of interest was to see how they frame their status as women/mothers/individuals in a new social and cultural context, and to what extent refugeeism has contributed to their empowerment and identity renegotiation.

The second research question addresses Ukrainian women's perceptions of the institutional construction of refugee status. Consequently, we aimed to find out how they

perceive the governance of refugees by institutions and how they react to initiatives to support them. Moreover, we were interested in understanding how they engage with attitudes, practices, narratives and claims concerning their identity, how they react to knowledge produced about them, and whether they problematize (and denounce/resist) instrumentalization by institutional actors.

To address these questions and illuminate the transformative experiences of Ukrainian women refugees in Romania, we employed a qualitative research design.

3.1. Participants

Data were collected between March and May 2025 through semi-structured interviews with 11 Ukrainian women refugees currently residing in Romania. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowballing sampling. Each interview lasted, on average, 40 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English and Romanian (see Table 1). Given the linguistic challenges faced by the respondents, it became evident that conducting interviews solely in English or Romanian was not feasible, as many participants lacked full confidence in either language. Thus, for three of the interviews, we used assistance provided by one of the participants who volunteered as an interpreter. We also acknowledge the role of gatekeeping in facilitating access to this hard-to-reach population by leveraging trusted community members to build rapport and trust, which are critical in qualitative analysis. All ethical guidelines were rigorously followed, and the study was approved by the university ethical review committee (Decision 76/26.02.2025).

Table 1. Interview participants

No.	Interview date	Ethnicity	Language	Interpreter	Respondent code
1	March 2025	Ukrainian	English	No	R1
2	April 2025	Ukrainian of Romanian origins	Romanian	No	R2
3	April 2025	Ukrainian	Romanian	Yes - R2	R3
4	April 2025	Ukrainian	Romanian	Yes - R2	R4
5	May 2025	Ukrainian	Romanian	Yes - R2	R5
6	May 2025	Ukrainian	English	No	R6
7	May 2025	Ukrainian	Romanian (learned during stay in Romania)	No	R7
8	May 2025	Ukrainian of Romanian origins	Romanian	No	R8
9	May 2025	Ukrainian of Romanian origins	Romanian	No	R9
10	May 2025	Ukrainian	English	No	R10
11	May 2025	Ukrainian of Romanian origins	Romanian	No	R11

3.2. Coding procedure and data analysis

The interviews focused on themes of belonging, empowerment, and agency. We attempted to discern how participants represented “home” and various transnational practices; their understanding of representations of values (including occurrences of exemplary lives/experiences); their representations of social identity and social imagery (otherness, status inconsistency); the categories of legitimization employed by women to manifest agency. To minimize distress, we avoided questions that might evoke the war-related trauma experienced by the women refugees.

Data were processed through an iterative, theory-informed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were transcribed, anonymized and translated into English where necessary. The initial coding scheme was developed deductively drawing on established integration frameworks (Strang & Ager, 2010; see also Brun, 2015; Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016) and was refined iteratively as new patterns emerged from the data. Coding and theme

development were discussed and validated collaboratively. Representative quotes were selected for each major theme to illustrate both shared experiences and individual perspectives. The data analysis also accounted for less frequent mentioned themes and muted subjects.

4. Findings

This research unveils the complex, layered processes through which Ukrainian women refugees adapt, survive and transform their identities in Romania. Drawing on rich interview data, our analysis has identified nine main themes, each composed of several sub-themes. The themes follow a progression from material anchors to symbolic negotiations of identity. These findings shed light on the nuanced realities of refugee life, adaptation, and empowerment (see Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of themes and sub-themes

Main theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Respondent
Anchoring (external and internal anchors)	Children as anchor	9	R1, R3, R4, R5, R6, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Work/routine as anchor	9	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R8, R10, R11
	Support networks (friends, NGOs)	7	R1, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R11
	Resilience/faith/duty (internal)	7	R1, R3, R4, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Housemates/ “chosen family”/pets	2	R6, R7
	Linguistic/cultural continuity	2	R2, R11
	Faith/fatalism as primary anchor	1	R9
Agency-in-waiting and permanent temporariness	Provisional living (“on hold”)	10	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Economic/job insecurity as engine	7	R1, R2, R4, R5, R8, R9, R11
	No long-term plans/contingent future	10	R1-R5, R7-R11
	Return-oriented (“after the war”)	6	R2, R3, R7, R8, R9, R11
	Adaptation-within-liminality	1	R6
	Agency shaped by gender/identity	2	R7, R11
	Fatalism/faith as default	1	R9
Gendered agency: caregiving as identity	Motherhood as central identity	8	R1, R3, R4, R5, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Professional caregiving (teaching, etc.)	6	R2, R3, R4, R5, R10, R11
	Multi-generational (“sandwich”) care	3	R5, R11

	Non-maternal caregiving (friends/pets)	2	R6, R7
	Collective/non-personal care	3	R4, R10, R11
	Fatigue/invisibility of caregiving	2	R8, R9
Relationship with home and host country	Romania as haven, not “home”	9	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Emotional/identity roots in Ukraine	11	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Cultural/linguistic proximity eases adaptation	4	R2, R5, R6, R11
	Family scattered across countries	3	R2, R9, R11
	Desire/willingness to settle in Romania	3	R2, R10, R11
	Pragmatic, detached stance	1	R6
	Multiple migrations, “secondary” homes	2	R3, R7
Gratitude towards Romanians	Consistent gratitude for support/help	11	R1-R11
	Concrete stories of kindness (volunteers, etc.)	9	R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Early intense support, later fatigue	3	R1, R4, R5
Embeddedness: social, professional, cultural	Social embeddedness, mainly Ukrainians	9	R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Professional embeddedness (education/NGO)	6	R2, R3, R4, R5, R10, R11
	Functional Romanian contacts (school, work, etc.)	8	R1, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R10, R11
	Cross-cultural deep friendship	3	R2, R6, R7
	Chosen family/pets as embeddedness	2	R6, R7
	Cultural participation (city life, events)	1	R10
Barriers to full integration	Economic instability (rent, work)	8	R1, R2, R4, R5, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Language barriers	8	R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10
	Bureaucracy/paperwork	7	R1, R4, R5, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Healthcare access	4	R3, R8, R9, R10, R11
	Degree/qualification recognition	5	R1, R2, R7, R10
	Time/energy/work-family conflict	5	R4, R7, R8, R9, R11
Empowerment and transformation	Empowerment as survival, “small victories”	6	R1, R3, R5, R8, R9, R11
	Professional/personal growth under pressure	7	R2, R3, R4, R5, R7, R10, R11
	Adaptation/ “living now” changed perspective	6	R1, R4, R6, R8, R10, R11
	Community/advocacy as empowerment	1	R7
	Fatigue/fragility of power	3	R6, R8, R9

	Learning to value self/care for self	1	R11
	Recognition/small household/work successes	2	R10, R11
Media consumption: Sources and preferences	Ukrainian news (Telegram/social/family)	11	R1-R11
	Romanian news: rare/practical/passive	11	R1-R11
	Emotional filtering/avoidance	4	R6, R9, R10, R11
	Selective trust/personal expert channels	3	R1, R2, R7
	News as community/connection	2	R6, R7
	Family/word-of-mouth as main network	3	R8, R9, R11

Each of the analytical categories identified will be discussed in the following subsections.

4.1. Anchoring (external and internal anchors)

For many respondents, the initial rupture of displacement was met with a pressing need to re-establish both external and internal anchors. Material stability, such as secure housing, employment and income, was a primary concern. Most of the respondents mention children as the single most consistent anchor, structuring all other priorities. The choice to leave Ukraine is determined by the safety and emotional wellbeing of their children, and all their activities in the host country revolve around maintaining this wellbeing:

I left the country to come somewhere safer and calmer for the safety of my daughter. (R3)

The children were the motor of this decision [to leave]. (R11)

The sense of duty to provide for the children, to ensure stability for their wellbeing acts as an internal anchor, but resilience and faith play an important role too:

Life has shown us that we can step over any obstacle. (R4)

How do I manage? God knows. I just take each day as it comes. (R9)

Daily routines and performing familiar roles provide a sense of continuity for the interviewed women. For many respondents, caregiving and routine overlap, which makes the whole experience of displacement feel less intense:

Every day: I get up, take coffee, take my daughter to work, work until five, then go home, store, playground, dinner, reading, sleep, repeat. (R10)

Life here is similar to how it was in Ukraine before the war: work, home, children, school, lessons, household chores. As usual. (R5)

By preserving routines (working, taking care of children, attending lessons, and managing household chores) these respondents draw a direct line between their current life as refugees and their life before the war. These ordinary tasks transcend place and circumstance, offering predictability and structure to the refugee and her family. They become an anchor, grounding their identity and daily existence amid the uncertainties of displacement. These quotes encapsulate the anchoring theme by showing how the preservation of everyday life, however ordinary, serves as a bridge between past and present, homeland and host country, loss and resilience.

One interviewee explains her daily routine as follows:

I wake up, I feed my cats. [...] I go for a walk and I draw. My hobbies are drawing, painting, sketching. So I find a place to sit and sketch, draw, whatever. And then, three times a week I have my Romanian lessons and I go home at like 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. and I start working. I work in the evening and I work until midnight. Then I go to sleep. (R6)

Amidst enormous upheaval and uncertainty, our respondent describes how she structures her days with familiar activities and roles. Each element of her routine serves as an anchor, grounding her in daily life and helping her maintain a sense of normalcy. The routines she describes are deeply ordinary. Yet, in the context of displacement, these everyday practices take on vital significance. They offer continuity with her life before displacement and foster small islands of stability within an unfamiliar environment. By performing these familiar roles, our respondent reclaims agency and asserts her identity, even as external circumstances have changed.

Language familiarity eases adaptation for some women coming from Ukrainian southern border regions where Romanian is also spoken:

For my family, it was fairly easy, because we are from a region where Romanian is spoken, so the language barrier wasn't an issue. [...] When I arrived, I found a job, I enrolled my children in school, in kindergarten, we did all that we could to integrate in the Romanian system. (R2)

This linguistic familiarity serves as a significant anchor, smoothing transition and allowing Ukrainian women to quickly establish daily routines, access services, and participate in community life. Unlike many refugees who find language to be a major hurdle and source of isolation, R2's family could maintain continuity in practical aspects of life, such as securing a job and enrolling the children in school. Language thus becomes a stabilizing force, an anchor that enables a smoother adaptation and allows them to focus on restoring normalcy rather than struggling with communication.

External anchoring is provided by the support networks these women build, through friends, neighbours, NGO help. Still, the way these networks are described by the respondents is mostly as functional or survival strategies, not as emotionally deep as the ones provided by caring for children or family members. This may be a result of the fact that caregiving and professional duties often leave too little space for anything else:

I'm always working, if I'm not at my job, I'm taking care of the children, making food, running the house.
(R8)

In terms of absent themes, there is very little mention of romantic partnership or marital relationship as an anchor. When spouses are referenced, it's logistical or even as a source of stress/ambiguity:

My husband's also putting a bit of pressure on, because he's worn himself out [her husband has remained in Ukraine a.n.]. I've suffered in some ways (...). He's all white, has a white beard just like that. Well, what can we do? I told him I'm still carrying my cross in one way, and he's carrying his in another. What's there to do? Yeah, no one expected it would be like this. (R11)

At the same time, very little explicit anchoring is seen in host country identity. Romania is mostly a site of routine and support, not a source of deep belonging.

These findings echo Strang & Ager's (2010) "core domains" of integration and Grzymala-Kazłowska's (2016) concept of "external and internal anchors," highlighting the interplay between external resources and internal resilience. Beyond coping, these women's

everyday routines perform a quiet re-definition of home and normality. They enact acculturation not through assimilation but through homemaking, turning continuity of care into an ethical claim to belonging. These practices exemplify integration rather than assimilation: maintaining cultural identity while engaging with the host context.

4.2. Agency-in-waiting and permanent temporariness

Refugee life is characterized by ongoing uncertainty and a sense of permanent temporariness. Nearly every respondent describes life as provisional, suspended or defined by contracts and bureaucracy. Because long-term planning is often impossible, agency is exercised through pragmatic, day-to-day survival. This precariousness is further amplified by unstable funding and shifting support structures.

There is a sense of not yet living, only surviving and searching for steadiness:

In June, my work contract ends and we still don't know if funding will be renewed... we're in a boat, just looking around. (R4)

In the beginning, it was more like a frozen mode. Then it was acceptance. And now it's more like search for stability. (...) Journey teaches you that you cannot really plan. You cannot really hope for stability. You just have to kind of live in the moment. (...) I still haven't started to live in Romania so far... it's still a process. (R1)

R1's words capture the state of ongoing uncertainty in which many refugees find themselves. Life is experienced as a series of interim phases that never resolve into lasting security or a new, stable normal. In this context, refugees cannot make long-term plans or build for the future in ways that many non-displaced people take for granted. Instead, their agency, expressed in setting goals and working towards them, shifts to what scholars have called agency-in-waiting. Here, agency is less about taking decisive, future-oriented action, and more about adapting to a shifting present, making pragmatic choices and exercising resourcefulness in day-to-day survival:

I can't answer if I'll stay here long-term, I don't know what I'll do tomorrow. God knows. (R9)

Such remarks highlight the profound uncertainty that characterizes life in displacement: a state in which the future is unknown, stability seems perpetually out of reach, and plans cannot be made with confidence. Refugees exist within an ongoing present, where tomorrow cannot be anticipated or shaped in the usual ways. These experiences underscore the psychological toll of living in limbo.

The sense of temporariness and the suspension of agency is mostly connected to unstable jobs, short-term contracts, low pay and the inability to afford secure housing. Survival depends on external funding, shifting organizational support, or uncertain aid projects. As a result, the future is set on “pause” and decisions are either made on the spot, or are tied to contingencies (buying a house, finding a secure job, the ending of the war, etc.). Several respondents link agency to the possibility of returning to Ukraine when/if conditions allow. For them the homeland acts as a horizon of action, which is inaccessible at the moment:

If the war ends, I will go back to Ukraine for at least a month, to recharge, see my parents... but whether I return for good depends on many factors. (R3)

I don't know if I'll live here in the future... no matter how good my language, I'll always be a foreigner here. (...) I want to help make Ukraine a better place for everyone after the war, especially for marginalized people. (R7)

There is very little optimism or claiming of agency. Agency is reactive (to events, bureaucracy, others' decisions), almost never proactive. Romania is where waiting happens, not where the future is actively built.

4.3. Gendered agency: Caregiving as identity

Women's agency is deeply intertwined with caregiving and maternal identity. Survival and adaptation are enacted primarily “for the children,” with caregiving reframed as a source of strength and competence:

I'm the main provider [for underage children a.n.]. The bills keep coming, so I didn't think it's difficult. (R1)

I felt strongest in the first four months, when I realized that as a woman with children, I could solve anything, if I truly wanted to. (R5)

For many women refugees, agency is deeply connected to caregiving responsibilities, which are not only obligations but sources of strength and empowerment. The imperative to protect and provide for their children becomes a powerful motivator, shaping their decisions, actions and resilience in the face of displacement. Rather than experiencing caregiving solely as a burden, these women reframe it as competence, resourcefulness and self-efficacy. This insight reveals how motherhood and caregiving roles create a specific form of agency that is gendered: women exercise control and adapt their lives primarily through the lens of their children's well-being. Such adaptation strategies, reaffirming intersectional theories on gender, migration and agency (see Kofman, Saharso & Vacchelli, 2015), reinforce their identity as capable problem-solvers and decision-makers despite the extreme uncertainties they face:

I feel strong and when people ask me how do you manage with the children? The house is clean; the children are clean and fed. I feel very good that I managed to do this, today. (R11)

This sense of strength is closely tied to the success in fulfilling and managing the daily caregiving tasks that define the refugee's role as a mother and caregiver, which are significant markers of competence and resilience. Their agency is affirmed in the active role they play in creating stability and continuity for family amidst uncertainty.

Fewer respondents mention caring not only for their children but also for their own mothers, emphasizing "sandwich" caregiving under stress:

We brought my mother with us. She passed away last year. This entire situation, it really brought on her end. She was 70, but she faded, especially because she loved being in the countryside, having her hands in the earth. We took her away from that, bringing her to live with us. (R11)

Caregiving also extends beyond immediate family and may entail supporting other children at school, housemates, friends or other Ukrainian women:

We are all in the same situation, as mothers with children, we each have our own problems, but we help each other. (...) We help each other, if someone gets sick, we check what medicine they need, bring what we can, and look after each other's kids. (R3)

Respondents emphasize not only the centrality of caregiving, but also its invisibility and exhaustion:

The children don't always understand the sacrifices. (R8)

All my time goes to the children, nobody sees the work. (R9)

Self-care is rarely mentioned. Most of the time, care is directed outward, not inward.

4.4. Relationship with home and host country

All respondents describe emotional roots, longing or primary identity as anchored in Ukraine:

In Ukraine you are at home... even if something goes bad, you have a network of friends, relatives...

Here, you don't have this established network. (...) I see Romania as a haven. But I'm still in the process of learning how to live. (R1)

My heart is still there... If the war ends, I want to see my family, even just for a while. (R3)

Emotional ties to Ukraine remain strong, even as women build new lives in Romania:

My parents are still there; I promised to visit for Easter, but emotionally it's very hard. ... We left for the safety of the children, but our hearts stayed there. (R2)

This quote vividly expresses the ambivalence of belonging that many refugees experience: although our informant and her family physically left for safety, their emotional and relational ties remain strongly connected to their homeland and loved ones left behind. This duality creates a powerful sense of “in-betweenness”: the tension between these two realities, feeling “welcome” in the host country yet never fully “at home,” reflects the ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging that defines the refugee experience:

You see, my own country doesn't really want to help me in a way. ... Nobody really wants you. You don't really belong anywhere. (R1)

This quote reveals a profound sense of alienation and displacement occurring at multiple levels. On the one hand, our respondent feels a painful disconnect from her home country, which she perceives as unwilling or unable to offer genuine support. This perception

undermines traditional notions of homeland as a source of safety, identity, and belonging. On the other hand, the phrase “Nobody really wants you” highlights the rejection or marginalization refugees may face in the host country, intensifying feelings of exclusion and rootlessness.

Several respondents find adaptation less jarring because of linguistic or cultural similarities between Romania and southern Ukraine/Moldova:

We have a similar sense of humour. We have a similar cuisine. The language is different. But who cares, in these three years, we have understood each other. (R1)

At first, coming to Romania was very scary and stressful. But over time, we saw that Romanians are very close to us, culturally, in traditions, much closer than other countries. (...) Most of the traditions are similar, they overlap with what we had in Ukraine. (R5)

Cultural similarities and kindness generally ease, rather than complicate, adaptation.

4.5. Gratitude toward Romanians

Nearly all respondents express deep gratitude for Romanians’ help, especially in the early days of arrival:

Since I’ve been in Bucharest, I haven’t met a single bad person. I’ve only met people with good hearts, with help, with kind words, with support at work. For everything I needed, I received help. If I didn’t understand something, they explained it to me. (R8)

They were very nice, kind people. They were very supportive and they asked us what we needed and gave us food and a place where we could spend the night. So it was a very, very warm first impression because they were smiling and they were asking us how we were ... They offered my daughter snacks or toys, some colouring books. So it was a very nice and very, very warm meeting with the Romanian people. (R10)

All interviewees describe their deeply positive relationship with the host community in Bucharest, highlighting the significance of kindness, support and effective communication in the refugee experience. Such positive experiences not only facilitate practical adaptation but also nurture refugees’ emotional well-being and sense of belonging.

Most respondents recount concrete anecdotes about volunteers at the border or railway station, medical staff, neighbours and landlords going “above and beyond,” strangers offering resources:

At Gara de Nord there were many volunteers who helped with information... some left, some stayed, but they all helped us survive here. (R4)

My landlord (...) is a very good friend. She's always there when I need her. (R11)

The help was immense... the amount of sympathy, the support that we received. I can't describe it. It was wonderful. (...) Everybody was so, so kind. (R6)

Some respondents note that initial support and patience were stronger in the early years of the war:

The first year, a lot of people were willing to share contacts and help you get connected... people were full of patience. (R1)

At the beginning, there was so much support from both organizations and regular people. (R5)

The respondents rarely criticize Romanians or the Romanian society as a whole. If negatives appear, they are individualized (“one person, not all”). There are no major breakdowns of trust or major rupture in the gratitude narrative.

4.6. Embeddedness: Social, professional, cultural

Embeddedness in Romanian society is multifaceted. Institutional ties, such as employment and children's schooling, facilitate adaptation, while language acquisition opens doors to broader participation. Most respondents report primary social circles made up of other Ukrainians. These networks offer solidarity, practical support and “survival friendship”:

I had a very close friend here, but she had to return to Ukraine to her husband. (R4)

Most of my friends here are also from Ukraine, people who fled the war. We met in Romania. (R5)

In rarer cases, relations with Romanians are preferred as a way to ease the displacement trauma:

I have a lot of Romanian friends. (...) I prefer to be with Romanians than with Ukrainians... I want to put my mind off the trauma. I want to see people who have normal problems, who are enjoying their lives. (R1)

Most respondents report connections to Romanians through children's schools, work, NGOs, or neighbours/landlords. These ties are mostly practical rather than emotionally deep:

We adapted quite well here... Children go to Romanian school, learn the language, take courses. (R5)

I have a Romanian friend, maybe a couple... I kind of have a social circle here. (R6)

For some, language and time constraints limit further integration:

I don't have time for friends outside work... my only social life is at work or at my children's school. (R8)

Deep cultural integration with Romanians is rare. Most connections are practical or circumstantial, not chosen for emotional affinity. Professional embeddedness rarely leads to social or cultural depth. Many work with Romanians, but report limited personal connection.

4.7. Media consumption: Source and preferences

Most respondents check news from Ukraine regularly, usually via Telegram, messenger groups, or direct updates from relatives and friends. This is often a ritual of care and vigilance:

I follow about 15 Telegram groups... every morning before I even get ready, I check if a drone landed near us, if everyone is okay. (R2)

Every morning begins with checking the news – what happened overnight in Ukraine. (..) I keep in touch with people in Ukraine through various social networks, especially with older people. (R3)

Respondents rarely follow Romanian traditional media (TV/newspapers) as a primary source of information. Some rely on translated summaries, social media reposts or indirect exposure (e.g. from school or work updates):

I don't really follow the news from Romania anymore. I don't want to hear it. (R4)

I follow Romanian news, but more rarely. What matters most is what happens to my family. (R5)

Some respondents limit or avoid news, especially about the war, for emotional protection:

I don't follow the news much anymore... my heart is too weak for all that information. (...) I left most Telegram groups because I couldn't take the news anymore. (R11)

Media consumption habits are reflective of the suspended status of refugees and of their agency-in-waiting. Keeping in touch with the events through social media or family gives them a sense of connection to the events and keeps alive the hope of peace and the possibility to return to their home country.

4.8. Barriers to full integration

Despite personal adaptation, structural barriers persist. Language acquisition, bureaucracy, economic insecurity, housing and healthcare access are significant challenges. Most respondents cite unstable, short-term contracts, low wages and especially the high cost of rent or other school related necessities as persistent, demoralizing barriers:

Rent is high, and after paying bills, we are left with barely anything for the kids. (R2)

The most difficult thing was that my level of income has decreased like three times... also not having my own house. (R6)

Nearly all respondents cite Romanian language proficiency as a central challenge for social, cultural and, especially, professional integration. Even with regular courses, schedules rarely align with work, and "it's really hard" as an adult learner:

There was no system of integration for Ukrainians... It's difficult to learn a new language when you're over 40, 50, 60 years old. (R1)

The most difficult thing for me was to realize that if I want to stay here, I must learn the Romanian language. It is a very difficult language. The language courses are held during working hours and it's impossible for me to attend. (R3).

Language courses being held during working hours adds a structural barrier: the scheduling of essential integration support conflicts with employment or caregiving responsibilities. This creates a dilemma where refugees cannot attend language classes without sacrificing income or childcare, limiting their capacity to improve language skills. However, language learning functions as a key facilitator, per Ager and Strang's framework (2008), enabling both structural participation and everyday belonging.

Some respondents note that long work hours and care responsibilities make it "impossible" to build social life, and exhaustion itself becomes a barrier:

There's no time for rest or friends: work, house, children, repeat. (R8)

Several respondents struggle with navigating bureaucracy and the health system for themselves, children or elderly families:

Bureaucracy... you need a document for a document for a document... this is very archaic, very old. (R1)
Healthcare is complicated... I have insurance, but sometimes it doesn't show up in the system; other times I'm told I'm not registered. (R8)

Some respondents highlight difficulties having degrees recognized, or being forced into lower-status jobs:

Nobody is talking about the fact that one Ukrainian woman whose diploma is not recognized in the EU cannot have a salary that covers [the needs of] her two, three children and her rent and everything. (R1)
Looking for work... something close to my profession was the hardest thing when I came here. (...)
Many people, even with two or three degrees, take any job just to earn a little, because you feel the prices, the rent. (R2)

Almost no one cites personal motivation or lack of will as a barrier. The obstacles are structural, not psychological, and prevent full integration.

4.9. Empowerment and transformation

Empowerment is found in adaptation, advocacy, small victories and moments of public engagement or personal growth. Most respondents describe empowerment as getting through adversity, solving daily problems or simply surviving and keeping family intact:

Romania helped me to learn how to survive... not only Romania, the war helped me to learn. So now I enjoy life more. (R1)

I manage to get through every month, somehow... but I'm always tired. Sometimes I feel proud, but other times I'm just exhausted. (R8)

Several respondents cite professional upskilling, new roles or personal transformation as sources of strength:

At home in Ukraine, everyone around me, parents, relatives, took care of everything. I was like a flower, but now I must solve things myself. (...) I have become incredibly responsible... it's a different life here.

Despite everything, I've managed to work in my field and keep going. (R3)

Every time I had the possibility to do public speeches... you feel really powerful that you're making a change, a good change, that you're helping people, you're changing your life. (R1)

R1's quote highlights how empowerment often emerges through active adaptation and advocacy, where refugees move beyond survival to adopt visible, impactful roles in their communities. For R1, public speaking is not just an act of communication but a moment of personal growth and agency, through which she asserts her voice, influences others and reshapes her own trajectory. Such experiences transform the refugee identity from one of passivity and vulnerability into one of strength and purposeful action.

For some women, motherhood serves a powerful catalyst for empowerment:

In the first four months, when I realized a woman with children could solve anything she wanted to, I felt most powerful. (R5)

This realization marks a personal transformation, where maternal identity becomes a source of strength and problem-solving capacity:

I like sweets, I bake cakes, I like doing this and I wish to start a business with baking in the future. Maybe something on the Internet. (R8)

R8's narrative highlights empowerment on a more personal and entrepreneurial level. Her passion for baking and aspiration to start an online business represent small victories and future-oriented transformation, showing how hobbies and skills can be reframed as pathways to economic autonomy and identity reconstruction. Transformation is practical, not heroic, grounded in cumulative resilience, echoing literature on "refugee resilience" and meaning-making under constraint.

Many respondents speak of learning to appreciate small joys, to "live in the present," or to adapt to new realities:

The most important lesson: to live now. We don't know what will happen tomorrow... we need to do what we want now, while we can. (...) I used to wait until everything was in order before I enjoyed life; now I understand I have to do things while I can. (R10)

Overall, across themes, homemaking emerges from our data as a connective practice mediating between adaptation and structural integration. This is an everyday labour of belonging that both materializes and symbolizes settlement. Our empirical insights align with the framework proposed by Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2021), who conceptualize homemaking as a key process in migrants' negotiations of place and identity. Taken together, these findings reveal how Ukrainian women construct continuity through relational and material practices that sustain belonging under precarious conditions.

5. Discussion

Our theoretical framework presents homemaking as an integrative practice which mediates between adaptation strategies and structural outcomes in society. Our findings illustrate how these dimensions intertwine: daily adaptation practices (work, care, language) embody integration markers such as employment and education. The individual negotiations of bounded agency feed into emergent structural patterns of inclusion, which allow for the simultaneous maintenance of cultural identity and functional adaptation.

Building on this theoretical lens, our analysis examines how refugees themselves problematize belonging, how they interpret and narrate their own positions within, and sometimes against, institutional expectations. These profoundly subjective accounts move beyond official discourses about displacement, even as they engage with the roles and categories imposed by public actors. This self-reflection forms the starting point for understanding the structural consequences of their presence in the host society.

5.1. Problematizing lived experiences (RQ1)

In response to our first research question, the women in our study problematize their lived experiences primarily through a lens of precarity and structural constraint. While they demonstrate profound resilience in daily life, their narratives are not simple stories of adaptation. Instead, they frame their lives as being “on hold,” a state of “permanent temporariness” that they identify as a core problem. This precarity is driven by tangible, external factors: economic insecurity, unstable housing and short-term work contracts. They explicitly problematize the structural barriers that impede fuller integration. These are framed not as personal failings but as systemic issues: the high cost of rent, “archaic” bureaucracy, the challenge of having degrees recognized, and language courses scheduled in conflict with work hours. Furthermore, they problematize the very nature of their mediated interactions. When women describe bureaucracy and contract precarity as exhausting or “archaic,” they implicitly critique the host system. Their problematization of such structures reframes integration as a condition negotiated under constraint.

Within these limits, the interviewees actively construct forms of belonging through work, schooling and everyday networks. These practices reflect what Ager and Strang (2008; 2010) identify as the means and markers of integration (such as employment, education, and housing), and extend into the social bonds and bridges that sustain community attachment. This belonging remains mediated and fragile: participants repeatedly express gratitude towards NGOs, schools and employers, while acknowledging their dependence on these intermediaries. This frames their position not as one of independent integration, but of a fragile, mediated belonging, contingent on support systems they do not control.

From an analytical perspective, these experiences unfolded within a framework of structural integration enabled by the EU Temporary Protection Directive, which ensured access to work, housing and education for Ukrainian refugees. Although participants did not refer to

the Directive directly, it provided the policy infrastructure that made such functional integration possible. These narratives also speak to Ager and Strang's (2008; 2010) facilitators (language, safety and stability), showing how everyday practices of care and work create minimal predictability within uncertainty. Taken together, these dimensions (the markers, facilitators, bonds and rights) trace the full architecture of integration envisioned by Ager and Strang (2008; 2010), realized here through the lived labour of homemaking under constraint.

5.2. Negotiating status and belonging (RQ2)

Our second research question addressed how women negotiate their status. We found that this negotiation is a constant balancing act between agency and constraint, deeply shaped by gendered roles and relational solidarity. It exemplifies bounded agency: gendered responsibility fuels engagement with institutions yet restricts self-focused advancement.

Agency is primarily negotiated through their identity as mothers and caregivers. This gendered agency acts as both an anchor and a weight; they find profound strength and motivation in providing for their children's safety and well-being, which in turn pushes them to engage with local systems. Nevertheless, this same role constrains their ability to negotiate status for themselves, limiting their time and energy for language study, professional advancement or social life.

Negotiation also occurs through relational solidarity. Women build crucial support networks, mostly with other Ukrainians navigating similar terrain. This solidarity is a key negotiation strategy for survival, mutual support, and information sharing. At the same time, this balancing act means their social embeddedness remains largely within the refugee community, limiting broader interaction with the host society. Their engagement with "markers of integration" like language learning and work is another site of negotiation, pursued as pragmatic acts of survival, weighed against the constraints of time, fatigue and caregiving responsibilities.

While agency and empowerment are deeply interconnected, our analysis separates them to highlight a crucial distinction observed in the women's experiences. The themes of "agency-in-waiting" and "gendered agency" describe forms of agency rooted in coping, survival and the fulfilment of established roles, particularly that of the mother and caregiver. This agency is often reactive and tied to maintaining stability and continuity in a "provisional" life. In contrast, the "empowerment and transformation" theme captures a distinct process of proactive growth and identity renegotiation. This empowerment emerges not just from coping, but from

transcending the immediate survival context through advocacy, acquiring new skills and developing new self-understandings as capable, public actors.

For the Ukrainian women refugees we interviewed, integration is a layered and unfinished process. Daily routines and new anchors in work, language and caregiving bring stability, yet the shadow of precarity and permanent temporariness never fully changes. Agency here is both gendered and collective: adaptation and resilience are forged in the crucible of relational labour and community solidarity, with women's efforts inseparable from caregiving and mutual support. Structural barriers persist, for instance: economic insecurity, housing difficulties, bureaucratic hurdles and language gaps all impede the path to full integration, undiminished by individual effort. Belonging itself remains contingent: emotional ties to Ukraine persist even as gratitude for Romania grows, turning "home" into a plural, shifting, sometimes elusive concept.

The degree of integration often depends on the age of children; when children require more support, mothers become more involved in local systems. Yet, their relationships with Romanians remain limited due to language barriers, time constraints, multiple responsibilities and a degree of hesitancy. Most interactions with Romanians are mediated through NGOs, schools and institutions, and are limited to individuals providing direct assistance, such as hosts, employers or social workers. There is considerable anxiety about the potential loss of these intermediaries: many fear losing access to contracts, jobs or current support systems. Limited Romanian language proficiency makes this mediated support essential.

In sum, empowerment among Ukrainian women refugees unfolds incrementally, through the steady accumulation of everyday problem-solving, "small victories" and new routines. It is sustained by an ethic of care (for self, children, and community) and by the courage to persist within constraint. Identities are renegotiated at the crossroads of motherhood, professional life and survival: transformation is real, yet modest, grounded in the steady labour of adaptation and relational endurance.

Much of this agency stems from caregiving roles that both sustain and limit women's possibilities, keeping many in a suspended state between continuity and change. Integration is thus lived less as arrival than as ongoing survival, which is unfinished yet sustaining. Across this continuum, resilient adaptation and reclaimed agency are not opposites but interwoven processes: care becomes strategy, advocacy becomes transformation and resilience itself becomes a form of empowerment, a critical endurance that redefines normality and asserts the right to stability amid precarity.

References:

- Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(2), 166–191. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>
- Allen, J., Vaage, A. B., & Hauff, E. (2006). Refugees and asylum seekers in societies. In Sam, D.L., Berry, J.W., (eds.). *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology* (pp. 198–217). Cambridge University Press.
- Basch, L.G., Glick Schiller, N. & Blanc-Szanton, C. (1994). *Nations unbound: transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized nation-states*. London: Gordon and Breach.
- Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697–712. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013>
- Berry, J. W. (2009). A critique of critical acculturation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33(5), 361–371. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.06.003>
- Boccagni, P., & Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2021). Integration and the struggle to turn space into “our” place: Homemaking as a way beyond the stalemate of assimilationism vs transnationalism. *International Migration*, 61(1), 154–167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12846>
- Boyd, M. (2018). Gender, refugee status, and permanent settlement. In R.J. Simon (ed.) *Immigrant women* (pp. 103–124). Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brun, C. (2015). Active waiting and changing hopes: Toward a time perspective on protracted displacement. *Social analysis*, 59(1), 19–37. <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2015.590102>
- Christ, S., Etzold, B., Güzelant, G. G., Puers, M., Steffens, D., Themann, P., & Thiem, M. (2021). *Figurations of displacement in and beyond Germany: empirical findings and reflections on mobility and translocal connections of refugees living in Germany*. <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/84959>. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5841892>
- Esser, H. (2004). Does the “new” immigration require a “new” theory of intergenerational integration? *International migration review*, 38(3), 1126–1159. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00231.x>
- European Commission (2025). *Temporary Protection*. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/asylum-eu/temporary-protection_en
- Grabowska, I., Jastrzebowska, A., & Kyliushyk, I. (2023). Resilience embedded in psychological capital of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. *Migration Letters*, 20(3), 421–429. <https://doi.org/10.47059/ml.v20i3.2887>
- Grzymala-Kazłowska, A. (2016). Social anchoring: Immigrant identity, security and integration reconnected?. *Sociology*, 50(6), 1123–1139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515594091>
- Grzymala-Kazłowska, A., & Ryan, L. (2022). Bringing anchoring and embedding together: Theorising migrants’ lives over-time. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(1), 46, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00322-z>

- Hillmann, F., & Toğral Koca, B. (2021). “By women, for women, and with women”: on the integration of highly qualified female refugees into the labour Markets of Berlin and Brandenburg. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1), 3, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00211-3>
- Isański, J., & Nowak, M. (2023). Auto-biographies of Ukrainian war refugees. From forced migration to anchoring. *Political Science Studies/Studia Politologiczne*, 68, 209–230. <https://doi.org/10.33896/SPolit.2023.68.12>
- Kofman, E., Saharso, S., & Vacchelli, E. (2015). Gendered perspectives on integration discourses and measures. *International migration*, 53(4), 77–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12102>
- Kuzmuk, O. (2024). Ukrainian refugee women's experiences in Poland in the first months of Russian invasion: a qualitative account. *European societies*, 26(2), 501–521. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2024.2351595>
- Laubenthal, B. (2023). Introduction: Assimilation, integration or transnationalism? An overview of theories of migrant incorporation. *International Migration*, 61(1), 84–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13118>
- Lazarenko, V. (2024). “Let the State Decide It All for Me”: The Role of Migration and Integration Policy in the Decision-Making of Ukrainian Refugee Women in Germany. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 25(3), 1571–1591. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-024-01138-9>
- Maxwell, C., Leybenson, M., & Yemini, M. (2024). Managing protracted displacement: How anchoring shapes ‘agency-in-waiting’ among middle-class Ukrainian female refugees in Berlin. *International Sociology*, 39(4), 445–461. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026858092412521>
- Protectieucraina.gov.ro. (2024). *Report on the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania*. https://protectieucraina.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Monthly-report-April_English.pdf
- Schewel, K. (2019). Understanding immobility: Moving beyond the mobility bias in migration studies. *International migration review*, 54(2), 328–355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319831952>
- Schwartz, S. J., Unger, J. B., Zamboanga, B. L., & Szapocznik, J. (2010). Rethinking the concept of acculturation: implications for theory and research. *American psychologist*, 65(4), 237–251. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019330>
- Sleijpen, M., Boeije, H. R., Kleber, R. J., & Mooren, T. (2016). Between power and powerlessness: a meta-ethnography of sources of resilience in young refugees. *Ethnicity & health*, 21(2), 158–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13557858.2015.1044946>
- Strang, A., & Ager, A. (2010). Refugee integration: Emerging trends and remaining agendas. *Journal of refugee studies*, 23(4), 589–607. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feq046>
- UN Women and Care International (2022). *Rapid gender analysis of Ukraine*. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Rapid-Gender-Analysis-of-Ukraine-en.pdf>
- UNHCR. (2023). *Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees and IDPS from Ukraine*. <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2023/07/UNHCR-LIVES-ON-HOLD-4-INTENTIONS-AND-PERSPECTIVES-OF-REFUGEES-FROM-UKRAINE.pdf>
- Weng, S. S., & Lee, J. S. (2016). Why do immigrants and refugees give back to their communities and what can we learn from their civic engagement?. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 27, 509–524. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-015-9636-5>

Mălina CIOCEA is a Professor at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest (Romania). She is the coordinator of the CoDiPo (Communication, Discourse, Public Problems) Laboratory, Centre for Research in Communication at SNSPA. In her research, she is interested in the topics of the Romanian diaspora in media and political discourse, public problems and media debates in the Romanian public sphere, identity, and memory studies. She has published several chapters and articles on these topics, among which: *Crowdsourcing Platforms for Ukrainian Refugees: Meaning Making in Infrastructures of Problem-Solving, Signs and Society*, 2024 (co-authored with Bianca-Florentina Cheregi); *Diasporic media and counterpublics. Engaging anti-immigration stances in the UK. Journal of Language and Politics*, 2020 (co-authored with I.D. Mădroane and A.I. Cărlan); *Discourse in Transnational Social Fields* (special issue in *Critical Discourse Studies*, 2017, guest co-edited with C. Beciu, I.D. Mădroane and A.I. Cărlan).

Elena NEGREA-BUSUIOC is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, where she teaches classes on metaphor, visual communication and public opinion in the EU. She has a background in communication (BA in Communication, MA in Media Studies) and linguistics (PhD in Philology). Her research interests revolve around metaphor in communication, discourse analysis, communication and public opinion. She has been involved in several research projects on deliberate metaphor in communication (Fulbright grant, 2013-2014), metaphor in science communication (Romanian National Research Council grant, 2019-2022), populist communication (COST Action IS1308, 2014-2018), hate speech in social media (SNSPA Small Grants, 2019-2021), opinionated communication (COST Action CA21129, 2022-2026). She has published several book chapters and articles on metaphor, populist communication, and media effects. Elena is the editor-in-chief of the *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, a peer-reviewed international journal.

Florența TOADER is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest (Romania). She is a member of the Communication, Discourse, Public Issues Laboratory (CoDiPo), part of the Centre for Research in Communication. She is a Spiru Haret fellow and has been involved in several research projects on migration and Romanian diaspora, social media and civic participation, and discourse analysis. She is a member of the editorial board of *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*.

Bianca-Florentina CHEREGI is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest (Romania). She is a member of CoDiPo (Communication, Discourse, Public Problems) Laboratory, Centre for Research in Communication. She is a Spiru Haret fellow, with a research project on interactive media campaigns on Romanian migration. Her research interests lie in the area of migration and nation branding, multimodality, discourse analysis and semiotics. She has been involved in several research grants, the most recent with CIVICA, The European University of Social Sciences. Her latest publication is: "Crowdsourcing Platforms for Ukrainian Refugees: Meaning Making in Infrastructures of Problem-Solving" (co-authored with Mălina Ciocea, *Signs and Society*, 2024).