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The Case of pre-24 February 2022 Ukrainian Migrants and War Refugees in Poland: How War Affects Fertility Beliefs and Intentions

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ABSTRACT

This article deepens the understanding of the effects of war as an uncertain and crisis event on fertility beliefs and intentions. It addresses the less-explored region of Central Eastern Europe and is one of the few qualitative studies in this field. Based on 24 in-depth interviews (IDIs), we analyze the fertility beliefs and intentions of pre-24 February 2022 migrants and war

refugees from Ukraine in Poland and the impact of the Russian invasion, restrictions on the movement of men from Ukraine, and war refugeehood on their family life.

We combine the heuristic frame of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) with the narratives of the future framework and terror management theory. Our findings show the need to focus on two elements of TPB to deeper understand fertility in a war context: (1) beliefs about the importance of having a child and (2) the opportunity to have a child (as a part of control). These two elements, as the Ukrainian case shows, war transforms. The analysis also reveals the complexity of neutral narratives of the future and changing fertility intentions, with the identified narratives and conditions for childbearing being useful for formulating policies addressing the demographic losses of the Ukrainian state.

Keywords: Ukraine, war, fertility intentions, crisis, uncertainty

1 INTRODUCTION

Demography can influence the beginning of a war, its course, its results, and be influenced by it in terms of the countries' future (Stone, 2022). Due to the Russian-Ukrainian war, which started in 2014 and became a full-scale on 24 February 2022, a significant share of Ukrainian women of reproductive age fled, and the fertility rates in Ukraine decreased to one of the planet's lowest total fertility rates (TFRs) of 0.7 per woman (estimated for 2023 by Libanova (2023)), compared to the pre-war Ukrainian TFR of 1.16 in 2021 (SSSU & IDSS, 2021). The large scale and share of women of reproductive age among war refugees (Brzezinska & Logvinenko, 2022; Kulu et al., 2023, p. 6) means that some "Ukrainian births" take place abroad. There are currently more than 4.1 million temporary protection beneficiaries from Ukraine (of whom 45.3% are adult women) in all 27 of the EU countries (especially Germany and Poland), Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland (Eurostat, 2024). The future

Ukrainian births anticipated in these countries, the same as in Ukraine, make it one of the most important and complex demographic issues in modern Europe. Thus, while studying the effect of war on Ukrainians' fertility, in this article, we focus on Ukrainian migrants abroad, specifically in Poland.

The situation of Ukrainian migrants in host countries—while away from immediate danger, such as having to give birth in bomb shelters, and with access to social support—still bears the shadows of war, i.e., psychological reactions to being confronted with death and destruction, uncertainty about the future, and separation from or loss of loved ones. Their beliefs and intentions in terms of family life, such as whether to give birth abroad or return to Ukraine, may influence the futures of both Ukraine and the receiving countries concerning the number of children being born, future age-dependency ratio, social policies, and pensions, as well as Ukrainian manpower for reconstruction and development. For this article, in line with TPB, we define fertility intentions as expressions of attitudes and subjective norms toward having a child, the effect of which on the outcome is moderated by the actual control the individual has. Fertility beliefs, in turn, inform those attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control and are formed with the influence of background factors, one of which is the war (see Ajzen & Klobas, 2013, p. 206).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a recent event, pregnancy takes approximately 10 months, and good research ethics practices also require that war-affected people be given time to cope and adjust before becoming participants in the research (Wylegała, 2022, p. 335). Thus, so early on, it is both more sensitive and sensible to first gather in-depth interview data on beliefs and intentions, which we concentrated on, before large-scale quantitative data on reproductive behaviors can be collected.

We have chosen to research Ukrainian migrants in Poland because since 2014, Poland has been a major destination for them; for example, in 2020, they received 488,900 first-

residence permits in Poland (Eurostat, 2021). Since 2015, the number of Ukrainian births in Poland has been increasing steadily, as have other indicators of family reunification and formation, such as the share of migrants with dependent children residing in the country of immigration (Górny et al., 2019). In 2022, since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion, Poland also received the greatest number of war refugees from Ukraine among all EU member states (1.7 million registered for temporary protection, of whom 955 thousand remained as of December 2023) (UNHCR, 2023). This unprecedented number of refugees immediately affected the number of Ukrainian births in Poland. Compared with 4,971 children born with Ukrainian citizenship in Poland in 2021, in 2022, more than 12 thousand of them were born — 5,348 registered with temporary protection status and 7,007 without it (Ovchynnikova & Kloc-Nowak, 2023). These numbers show how both prewar migrants and war refugees in Poland have experienced the consequences of Russian invasion on their childbearing and family life, i.e., choosing to stay in or being forced to move to Poland. Ukrainians in Poland are thus an interesting case of one foreign-born group composed of subgroups with different residence permits (Carlsson - this issue), gender profiles (Kraus & Milewski - this issue) and possibly different selectivity concerning fertility intentions (García-Pereiro & Paterno – this issue).

In this text, our objective is to deepen the understanding of how war(s) affect(s) both short- and long-term fertility beliefs and intentions by applying three existing theoretical frameworks on fertility to the case of Ukrainian migrants and post-24 February 2022 war refugees from Ukraine in Poland. We aim to uncover how the effect of war on fertility beliefs and intentions is shaped by gendered mobility possibilities and affected by individual circumstances related to the preceding exposure to mortality and uncertainty due to the earlier part of the war (since 2014) or the COVID-19 pandemic. To grasp the psychological influence of the war on the migrant population's reproductive intentions and behavior, we apply the terror management theory (TMT) developed by Yaakobi et al. (2014), and Solomon (2019). Ajzen

and Klobas' (2013) version of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) provides a conceptual framework for analyzing beliefs preceding fertility intentions, while we refer to the narratives of the future (NoF) approach of Vignoli et al. (2020a) to understand how people make complex family decisions in times of uncertainty such as war. Based on the analysis of our qualitative data and the TMT, TPB, and NoF theoretical frameworks, we propose modifying them to make them more comprehensive and reflective of the empirical realities and suggest implications for policies to support fertility during the war.

2 The literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Literature on the impact of crises and disasters on fertility

The literature exploring the impact of disasters—particularly war and the (im)mobility induced by it—on fertility can be grouped into three main approaches: legal, medical, and sociodemographic (including psychological and behavioral mechanisms related to fertility). Herein, we focus on the latter. The sociodemographic approach is represented mostly by country-level studies indicating, *inter alia*, the need to not only separate the effects of war and co-occurring circumstances (Lindstrom & Berhanu, 1999), as well as the short- and long-term effects of war on fertility (Avogo & Agadjanian, 2008; Lindstrom & Berhanu, 1999; Verwimp, 2020), but to also pay attention to the effects differentiated by factors such as such as the level of economic development (Skirbekk, 2022, p. 268), age and education level of the affected women, mediated by culture and religion (Cetorelli, 2014). Among those studies, those of Avogo and Agadjanian (2008) and Verwimp (2020) are especially important reference points for our case, as they also study the impact of war on fertility by comparing the childbearing of the forcibly displaced population with that of voluntary migrants. Among qualitative studies, Hossain and Hossain (2023) interviewed the forcibly displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh on

their fertility beliefs and plans, while Szebik (2022) used IDIs to explore COVID-19 crisis-related future narratives and fertility intentions. A good example of a more general review work that focuses on the psychological and behavioral mechanisms of fertility may be the one by McAllister et al. (2016), which looks, *inter alia*, into the terror management mechanism and theory of planned behavior. The theory of planned behavior is also applied by Hossain and Hossain (2023), while Szebik (2022) uses the narratives of the future framework. It is worth acknowledging, that the majority of current literature on the impact of crises and disasters, such as war, on fertility focuses on actual fertility behavior rather than beliefs and intentions. Thus Skirbekk (2022) writing about fertility beliefs or Szebik (2022) having conducted interviews about fertility intentions shortly after the crisis events, are notable exceptions. With this article, we aim to narrow the gap. Concerning our case, there are few studies on the demographics of Ukraine, investigating the war-induced and independent demographic trends causing its depopulation, such as very low fertility, high mortality, and substantial emigration (Perelli-Harris & Hilevych, 2023). In particular, Kulu et al. (2023) consider the long-term demographic consequences of the war in Ukraine through four scenarios depending on the projected proportion of returning war refugees. According to the authors, if all prewar demographic trends were to continue, Ukraine's population in 20 years would decline by 16% (the baseline scenario), while if 90%, 35% or 10% of the war refugees returned, the population would decrease by 19%, 35% or 41%, respectively, with the most significant decline occurring among the working-age population and children (Kulu et al. 2023).

Ukrainian demographers Libanova and Pozniak (2023) noted that Ukrainian refugee women from large cities (Kyiv, Kharkiv) have higher-than-average levels of educational attainment and readiness for economic activity and, as such, have a high probability of successful adaptation and staying, especially in culturally close Poland. They posit that if the war were to end quickly, 600-700 thousand Ukrainian war refugees would remain abroad, while

in the event of a prolonged conflict, more refugees would stay, and some could even be joined by their partners there, adding up to migration losses of 5-5.5 million individuals for Ukraine (Libanova & Pozniak 2023, p. 259, p. 265, pp. 271-273).

A literature review by Lee et al. (2023) showed that how disasters affect fertility depends on the definition and type of disaster, characteristics of the studied population groups, country context, and time frame applied and is prone to limitations (Lee et al., 2023, p. 1, pp. 12-13). While their particular review does not cover publications from after February 2022, excludes wars from its scope of disasters, and is focused on reviews measuring the effects of disasters at the whole-population level, it is still relevant for our study due to the rich collection of mechanisms explaining the relationship between fertility and disasters (Lee et al., 2023, pp. 7-14 and supplementary tables S1 and S2). With the current article, we complement their work by viewing war as a disaster, as war also brings about shock and disruption, threatens survival, and causes forced mobility.

Based on our review of their list of mechanisms, with the addition of the psychological mechanisms of fertility motivations (McAllister et al., 2016), accounting for the factors identified in the literature and the analysis of our empirical materials we distinguished the three most promising frameworks for understanding the effects of the ongoing war on the fertility of Ukrainian migrants: TMT, TPB and the NoF framework. TMT at the most general, existential level helps to grasp why people want to have children during war (fertility beliefs, attitudes, and intentions), while the TPB and NoF framework explain how this intention is realized (or not) through behavior and what serves as one of the major sources of differences at the individual level.

2.2 Terror management theory

To understand how wars affect fertility, it is useful to look into the nature of war what it “does” to people, and surrounding background war factors. For example, as Skirbekk writes, increases in “pro-natalistic norms and preferences” can be explained by TMT (2022, p. 268), which explores the psychological mechanisms of fertility motivations and the connection between fertility and mortality, helping to answer the question of “why” people want to have (more) children during war.

In numerous studies, it has been shown that exposure to mortality, reminders of mortality, or mortality salience increases the desire for children and fertility rates (even of unintended fertility in the Malawian study (Smith-Greenaway et al., 2022)) in the short term as a psychological terror management outcome, with parenthood becoming an existential anxiety buffer and psychological defense mechanism (Yaakobi et al., 2014; Solomon, 2019; Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005). However, such effects and causal relationships are also influenced by individual psychological characteristics (McAllister et al., 2016; Yaakobi et al., 2014; Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005), timing—individual age and stage of life when such exposure to death is experienced—and gender (Dahlberg, 2020; Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005).

During the current war in Ukraine, the extent of objective exposure may vary for different people (e.g., those who escaped from temporarily occupied or nearing frontline territories, injured, having lost loved ones as a result of shelling or a strike, military family members, war refugees as opposed to previous economic migrants). The strength of the exposure effect may also depend on subjective individual characteristics (such as health, prior life experiences, or other factors influencing the person). However, what is undeniable is that it is difficult to imagine an event that exposes Ukrainian people to mortality more than a full-scale war.

2.3 The TPB model as applied to fertility

The psychological effect of exposure to mortality on fertility intentions and (potentially) reproductive behavior is placed in a larger context of the theory of the planned behavior framework (Ajzen & Klobas, 2013), which provides us with categories to systematically cover the behavioral, normative and control beliefs of migrants about their fertility and perceptions of other factors affecting them.

The “classic” TPB model as applied to fertility contains elements such as background factors (individual, demographic, and societal), sets of beliefs (about the consequences of having a child, social support available, enabling and interfering factors), attitudes and subjective norms for having a child, perceived and actual control, the intention to have a child and the actual outcome of having a child (Ajzen & Klobas 2013, p. 206).

Considering how TMT explains the motivation to have a child during the war, we argue that for the TPB scheme to be operational and reflect the empirical reality of how fertility is affected during the war, it needs to most intently focus on two elements, which the war fills with additional meaning: **a) beliefs about the importance of having a child** and **b) the opportunity to have a child**, found among the “beliefs” and “actual control over having a child”, respectively.

The expression of belief about the value of children and the desire to have them occurring as a response to war-related exposure to death, violence, and destruction may be, as Skirbekk notices, not only emotional but also practical, i.e., a way to “ ‘rebuild’ ... own families and community” (2022, p. 269). The opportunity to have a child relates mostly to the opportunity to conceive a child in the context of very specific war-related circumstances, such as the (temporal) (un)availability of one’s partner due to mobilization, mostly men’s military deaths, injuries, separation or (re)unification of the couple and relationships among them—which are strengthened or strained in response to stress, opportunities for dating and finding a partner for those without one during the war, access to medical services, including reproductive health

services, prenatal and postnatal health care, and safety conditions while giving birth (see “opportunities to conceive”, also Skirbekk, 2022, pp. 270-271).

2.4 NoF Framework

Wars bring not only death and destruction into people’s lives but also great uncertainty about the future (for disasters causing uncertainty about the future, see, e.g., Skirbekk, 2022, p. 271). Similar to exposure to mortality, subjective individual-level factors appear to be crucial for how this uncertainty affects reproductive intentions.

Vignoli and collaborators, through a series of controlled experiments (online and laboratory experiments in Italy and Norway), have shown that under conditions of uncertainty, past and more objective factors and structural constraints (socioeconomic status, labor, housing, income, and even past experiences) matter less for individuals’ and couples’ future fertility intentions than subjective and future imagination, expectations, and people’s narratives of how the future will unfold (Guetto et al., 2022; Lappegård et al., 2022; Vignoli et al., 2022; Vignoli et al., 2020a). These narratives may be shaped or influenced by parents, peers, media, and other actors (Vignoli et al., 2020b). However, once they are there, there is a causal relationship between the positive narrative and positive fertility intention, which is the same as that between the negative narrative of the future and negative fertility intention (Lappegård et al., 2022).

Importantly, the NoF framework was initially developed to address economic uncertainty. However, it has been applied in the context of other disasters, such as COVID-19 (Guetto et al., 2022); thus, we believe that it is also applicable for understanding fertility in times of war.

3 THE CASE OF UKRAINE: HOW WAR AND MIGRATION ARE INTERTWINED

3.1 Ukrainian migration to Poland before 24 February 2022

Poland has long been a traditional destination for Ukrainian migration – albeit at the beginning, mainly labor migration, temporary and circulatory in nature (Górny, 2017). Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004 and the massive intra-EU emigration of Poles contributed to the demand for workers from abroad to fill the void in the Polish labor market, and the relatively good economic situation in Poland during the 2007-2008 global crisis supported this trend.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the beginning of the war in Donbas in Eastern Ukraine) pushed Ukrainian migration to Poland toward becoming more permanent and added humanitarian motivations to labor ones (Górny & van der Zwan, 2024, p. 23). The profile of Ukrainians coming to Poland after 2014 was also different from that of previous migrants: younger, with a greater share of men, and from the Eastern, hostilities-affected part of Ukraine (Dobroczek et al., 2017).

Other specific features of Ukrainian migration between 2014 and 2022 included migrants’ reliance on social networks and gravitation toward large cities and the Mazowieckie voivodship (with capital Warsaw) for work; a tendency toward more permanent settlement, albeit with circular migration, also continued due to the development of transportation routes between Poland and Ukraine (Wrona, 2019, pp. 13-14, pp. 16-19; Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022, p. 165). While cultural and religious differences in Ukraine and Poland were small and historical differences gradually subsided, the labor market and economic aspects of integration started to matter the most (Duszczyk et al., 2023, p. 194).

3.2 Ukrainian migrants in Poland after 24 February 2022

At the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, millions of Ukrainians fled for safety. In total, more than 1.7 million war refugees from Ukraine registered for temporary protection in Poland, with approximately 950 thousand remaining throughout 2023

(UNHCR, 2023). The dominant groups were children (46% as of December 2022) and working-age women (38%), while adult men constituted only approximately 10% (Duszczuk et al., 2023, p. 189). The war refugees were met with the mobilization and benevolence of both the Polish state and Polish society. The so-called special law (the law “On Aid to the Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Military Conflict on the Territory of This State”) was swiftly adopted on 12 March 2022 to provide Ukrainian war refugees in Poland with various forms of state support (including food and shelter, child benefits, open access to the labor market, medical services and education), in addition to support from individuals, self-governments, NGOs and international organizations (Parliament of the Republic of Poland [Sejm] 2022).

As of 2024, this support is thawing, and the length of the legal stay of the Ukrainian temporary protection beneficiaries is not very certain either. The Council of the European Union agreed to extend the temporary protection for Ukrainian war refugees in the EU until 4 March 2026 (Council of the EU, 2024). However, it is not clear now what will happen to them after this date.

At the same time, the uncertainty of the legal status of Ukrainian temporary protection beneficiaries and its potential for coming to an end may be viewed through the lens of at least three different narratives of the future: neutral, negative (if the hosting states do not come up with an option for a legal stay for those who would wish to), and positive (if the EU decides that safe and durable return is possible, this will indicate that Ukraine is on the path to obvious victory or even has already won the war).

3.3 (Legislative) factors influencing families’ (re)unification and separation during the war

Due to full-scale Russian military aggression against Ukraine beginning on 24 February 2022, Ukrainian authorities introduced a special legal regime of martial law, which is prolonged

every 90 days as the war continues (President of Ukraine, 2024, Parliament of Ukraine, 2024). This allows Ukraine to limit the right of its citizens to freely leave its territory. Mobilization was also introduced separately but simultaneously.

As a consequence, men with Ukrainian citizenship of the conscription age (18-60) as a rule cannot leave Ukraine. From the family perspective, the crucial exceptions from the leave restriction are fathers of three or more dependent children under 18 years old, single fathers of (a)child(ren) under 18 years old, guardians, and alike (State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, 2024). Apart from the thousands of men and women serving in the Ukrainian army, this ban for men on leaving Ukraine is one of the reasons for family separations, i.e., women, children, and elderly people fled abroad while men had to stay behind. The reverse situations are voluntary separations, in which Ukrainian male economic migrants returned to Ukraine to volunteer or join the army.

Given the state of the art on the topic and the above migratory, military, and legal context we formulate the following research questions to understand the migration-war-fertility nexus in the lives of Ukrainians in Poland:

- a) How does a war affecting a nation influence the fertility beliefs and intentions of its members?
- b) How can the existing TMT, TPB, and NoF theoretical frameworks help us understand fertility beliefs and intentions of individuals during a war?
- c) How the mobility trajectories of Ukrainians affected by 2014 and then full-scale Russian aggression shape their fertility intentions? And
- d) How are the reactions to war gendered, given the contrasting mobility frameworks for reproductive-age men and women?

Based on three used theories we may expect that people would wish to have (a) child(ren) during the war (TMT), but their intentions will be conditioned by the set of deterring

and enhancing factors. Previous exposure to mortality (from the beginning of the war in 2014 and/or during the COVID), combined with individual resilience and adaptability to it, may help to maintain positive fertility intentions. The same effect may occur when a person has or develops an individual belief about the importance of having a child. On top of that, hope for the positive scenario of the end of war may be correlated with more positive fertility intentions, than despair related to its outcome (NoF). At the same time, as war changes not only priorities and beliefs but also structural and material conditions, differently for men and women, the key factor that we expect to curb fertility intentions would be being with a partner (TPB).

4 DATA AND METHODS

Our analysis is based on primary data from **twenty-four in-depth interviews (IDIs)** conducted between February and June 2023 with Ukrainian citizens residing in Poland for at least 6 months who arrived in Poland as either migrants or war refugees pre- or post-24 February 2022 (a list of interviewees and their characteristics, such as gender, age range, legal, relationship and economic status, education and the number of children, is provided in **Annex 1**). We recruited both women (19) and men (5) aged 18-40 years who were either single (9) or in relationships (15), either parents (13) or childless (11). In the case of the married (partnered) respondents who were in Poland together with their partner, they were mostly prewar migrant couples (with the pioneer migrant being either the man or the woman) or female war refugees joining their prewar migrant husbands. In the case of those who were married but separated due to the war, this occurred because of men either joining the Armed Forces of Ukraine, staying in Ukraine to volunteer, or being unable/unwilling to return during the martial law (which prevents men from leaving Ukraine again upon arrival), while the remaining family is in

Ukraine. While war refugees' reasons for migrating are obviously war-related, for prewar migrants, the reasons vary from labor migration to education, professional opportunities and health-related. The predominance of female respondents can be attributed to the restriction of the movement of men during the martial law explained above (in subsection 3.3).

The interview scenario for the IDIs consisted of three parts:

(1) A narrative section with open-ended questions about the respondents' family and migration histories;

(2) A semistructured section, and

(3) A sociogram, a set of concentric circles in which the respondents drew their social contacts who influence their family life ideals and decisions, indicating the type of relationship, country of location, subjective closeness to the ego, and the kind of influence exercised (please see interview questions in **Annex 2**).

The recruitment for the interviews was carried out through a dedicated Facebook page, with announcements also posted (with administrators' permission) in other Facebook groups for migrants, parents, or similar scientific projects. Furthermore, this information was disseminated among the Polish and Ukrainian migrant NGOs and the personal networks of the researchers in various locations. Some respondents also recommended participation in the project to their partners or acquaintances (i.e., snowball sampling). Among our participants there are three couples, but each person was interviewed independently and confidentiality of their answers was kept by the interviewers.

The interviews were conducted predominantly online and in Ukrainian (with the option of speaking Polish or Russian if the participant preferred). All transcripts were translated into Polish and coded in Atlas.ti using a combination of deductive (TMT, TPB, plus NoF-based and migration-related codes) and inductive coding developed by a trilingual team of Polish and

Ukrainian researchers (Cascio et al. 2019). The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw.

5 EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To determine whether and how the TMT, TPB, and the NoF framework help explain the Ukrainian case at hand, our 24 interviews were coded using key codes such as “exposure to mortality”, “timing of exposure”, “negative fertility intentions”, “positive fertility intentions”, “ambivalent fertility intentions”, “uncertainty of the future, negative narratives”, “uncertainty of the future, positive narratives” and “uncertainty of the future, neutral narratives”, among more than 100 other codes.

The interviews revealed a new group of beliefs related to childbearing that can be conceptualized as **beliefs about the importance of having a child** for the country at war. In particular, the participants used arguments such as “...to revive the nation” (Interview No. 10) and accounted for the **individual and collective dimensions** of childbearing. Our respondents explained this as follows:

*“...I am very worried now...that young people do not want to have children, because I think that it is necessary, needed, ...**both for the person himself/herself and for the state as well.** Especially now in Ukraine, when we understand that the best representatives of the nation... young guys, many, have perished...The situation in Ukraine is such that it becomes a kind of obligation toward the state that young people should give birth to children. We understand that the population has decreased significantly in recent years, and now this also applies to young people. Moreover, we know about the problem of the*

*global aging of society, and we understand that for the development of the country and the economy, **a new generation must be born...***

(Interview No. 13, prewar migrant woman with one child).

*“I personally started to wonder...about the **individual and collective elements**. Individually, if I had a child during the war, it would be very difficult because no one is sure whether they will have a home or a job tomorrow... Collectively, we know how many people have died in Ukraine and that **Ukraine should give birth to as many Ukrainians as possible**. So, the question arises whether the collective issue should outweigh my individual one ...I ask myself this question now **because Ukraine must survive...**”*

(Interview No. 14, war refugee woman, childless.

Bold font in the quotes added by the Authors).

Other cited motivations lent support to terror management theory; for example, one of the respondents mentioned the fear of death as the motivation to have children, as when people say, “I fear death so much, and this [giving birth to a child – Authors] is the only opportunity for my genes to last” (Interview No. 14). We also observed that people with strong and immediate or double exposure to war (as two of our interviewees from the same couple, interviewed separately, who faced war in 2014 and 2022), those who expressed positive or neutral narratives of the future, had some of the most positive fertility intentions among our interviewees (Interviews Nos. 6, 13, 17).

In general, **in terms of exposure to mortality**, our respondents faced both direct and indirect exposure related to the Russian-Ukrainian war after February 24, 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the deaths of close family members; however, some of them also encountered

such experiences in the first stage of this war, as early as 2014. For the war refugees, quite expectedly, instances of such exposure were more frequent and more objectively drastic, strong or immediate. Additionally, in both groups (war refugees and prewar migrants, Interviews Nos. 16, 18, 21, and 24), there were cases of family members lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some perceived themselves as being immediately affected by the war but not by the COVID-19 pandemic (Interview No. 15) or unaffected by any such event (Interview No. 10). In this way, our analysis confirmed the previous scholarship, i.e., that the subjective impact of exposure to mortality depends on individual psychological characteristics (McAllister et al., 2016; Yaakobi et al., 2014; Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005), thus making this impact vary on a case-to-case basis.

At the same time, with the narratives of the future of Ukrainian migrants in Poland regarding their fertility intentions, we encountered a realm of neutrality, ambivalence, and dynamic change, which has not been fully described in the literature before. In particular, **in terms of the narratives of the future**, first, there were not only positive or negative narratives (9 and 4 instances, respectively) but also an overwhelming majority of neutral narratives (20 instances). Moreover, sometimes different kinds of narratives were combined in one interview, depending on the aspect the respondent touched upon. Even taking into account that coding someone's narrative in evaluative terms as "positive", "negative" or "neutral" is prone to subjective bias (which we countered through discussions held among the research team members and cross-coding by different researchers), it seems that the role of neutral narratives of the future (and their place in the NoF theory overall) has been underresearched and underexplained until now. In the Ukrainian case, three themes repeatedly appeared **concerning these neutral narratives**. The first theme was the neutrality of decisions that were "frozen" and not possible to make because of the war (e.g., "...no plans. Because no one knows what will happen tomorrow..." in Interview No. 8). Speaking of the future as not emotionally

“colored”, neither positive nor negative, corresponds to the definition of “neutral”, for example, from the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.). The second theme, slightly more specific, were the conditions that are important for decision-making but remain unknown. For example:

"...it's hard to plan anything now when the war is going on... I'm thinking about many things, whether to stay in Poland or not, whether to go to Ukraine if the war ends tomorrow immediately...or stay here for some time?... Where will they [the children] be better off? What society will receive them better...? Where and what kind of school should I choose, Ukrainian or Polish?"

(Interview No. 15, war refugee woman with two children)

The third theme was focusing on pragmatic characteristics of the place (of potential childbirth), like safety:

"A: ...I can only think about where I live and what kind of neighboring state my children will live with if I were to have these children... you feel responsible for ensuring the safety of your future children..."

B: So, the most important issue in the future is safety and what to do with our [Ukraine's] neighbor? [meaning Russia – the Authors]

A: Yes.

A: ... I also don't see a problem with giving birth in another country... [especially] if you don't have any children yet at all ..."

(Interview No. 12, war refugee woman, childless)

The analysis of the **declared fertility intentions** was perhaps the most conducive to

both theory and practice. First, we registered declarations of positive fertility intentions in more than half of the interviews, with the remaining respondents declaring ambivalent and (the smallest number) negative ones. These intentions were wavering and fluctuating even in different parts of the interviews. The ambivalence and complexity of fertility intentions are not unusual even in times of peace (Yoo et al., 2014; Jones, 2017; Gómez et al., 2019), and our interviews show how common these characteristics are in times of war and uncertainty about the future. Positive fertility intentions were most often declared by those who were together with their partners during the war, were both on the same page in terms of wishing to grow their family, and currently had 0 to 2 children. At the same time, negative fertility intentions in the majority of the cases co-occurred with ambivalent ones, an alternative, or a “but if” condition, representing instances where these intentions could become positive. For example, indicating that negative intentions might change with time and/or meeting the (right) partner with whom to have children or that their current intentions are negative because of the war and potentially might change in the future. Some of the respondents expressing negative intentions wanted to become parents but were hesitant due to current obstacles and/or the belief that they should consider alternative paths to parenthood, such as becoming a foster family or adopting (Interviews Nos. 4, 16, 18, 22). One of our respondents shared the following:

“The war, of course, has had a dramatic impact because you change your life completely, 360 degrees... your apartment, your finances, your stability, the world in general changes. Yes, I thought about it [having more children] and wanted to, but now, when I come back to this thought, I see that I have different criteria for myself... I wonder if... I have enough strength and energy... I put 40

as the last limit, not later... It depends, of course, on how it will turn out... if the war ends..."

(Interview No. 16, war refugee woman with one child)

In 11 of our interviews (Interviews Nos. 4, 6, 12-17, 20, 21, and 26), the respondents also talked about **proposed solutions**, which will make their transition to becoming a parent or to higher parity easier. In addition to practical solutions, it is also important to remember the main conclusions experimentally confirmed by the NoF framework (Lappegård et al., 2022; Vignoli et al., 2022), i.e., that for those people who declare positive childbearing intentions are important not only their material resources but also positive narratives of the future. The Ukrainian state may support such positive narratives about the future of Ukraine to encourage having children there. However, for such messages not to become propaganda or lip service and with due respect for the privacy of family life and the delicateness of family planning, this policy recommendation comes with the word of caution from one of our interviewees:

"...the state has to promote ...a healthy lifestyle. It is about the state and its interests But the state must also respect the choice of each person. To respect the law. No limiting of this right, like it used to be in the Soviet Union with them saying 'If you do not have kids, you are somehow different and stigmatized'. No, [we do] not [need something] like this".

(Interview No. 17, prewar migrant man with one child)

This sentiment has also been echoed by Ukrainian and foreign demographic experts. Although Stone (2022) underlines how crucial it is for Ukraine to create narratives for the

Ukrainians about the importance of starting a family being worth all the risks, and Libanova mentions the two-child family as a possible future Ukrainian dream, these possibilities are based on the acknowledgment that both fertility and migration decisions are deeply personal; this is in contrast to measures aimed at reducing the mortality rates among young Ukrainian men, which can be introduced as more immediately actionable state policies (Stone, 2022; Libanova as interviewed by Tverdochlib, 2023).

6 CONCLUSIONS

While the majority of the previous war and fertility country-level studies covered in this article's literature review were based on quantitative and mostly macro level analyses, in line with the emerging trend (Perelli-Harris & Hilevych, 2023 using online focus groups were used; and Szebik, 2022, Hossain & Hossain, 2023, the interviews) we offer the results of a qualitative study of 24 IDIs with Ukrainian migrants and post-24 February 2022 war refugees residing in Poland. The participants had varied family situations and represented diverse regions of origin and residence in Poland, education and economic situation profiles.

Our findings show that in war, as a psychological effect of more frequent encounters with mortality, people may reconsider their intentions to have (a) children. Their beliefs about the importance of having a child may develop in terms of the collective good, although they still balance it with individual needs and circumstances. Analysis of the IDIs confirmed that this newly formulated collective dimension of beliefs about the importance of having a child during the war, as predicted by Skirbekk, is seen as a way to “ ‘rebuild’ ... own families and community” (Skirbekk, 2022, p. 269).

Fertility intentions were, to a certain extent, found to be connected with the narratives of the future that our respondents and their partners construed. Previously, researchers have

tested the NoF theory using experiments (Vignoli et al., 2020b) relying on clearly defined, positive or negative future scenarios as stimuli to confront participants with various uncertain conditions. In contrast, our semistructured interviews have shown that in real life, people create complex and neutral narratives of the future and respond to them with fertility intentions that may be contradictory or conditional rather than clearly defined.

In terms of potential limitations of our findings due to the recruitment strategy, we are aware that we had limited chances of reaching refugees who were digitally excluded, with sparse social networks, women who had endured sexual violence during the war, or men who had left Ukraine violating the martial law mobility ban. People in such difficult situations are probably less likely to express positive fertility intentions, especially short-term. Thus, we use our analysis not to measure the level and direction of such intentions but rather to explore their complexity and the reasoning behind them. At the same time, we made an extra effort to reach participants from varying age cohorts and other than higher education levels (for Ukrainian post-24 February 2022 refugees their overall level of educational attainment is uncharacteristically high (OECD & EUAA, 2024, pp. 11-12)).

On the theoretical level, our findings constitute a call for the following developments. First, regarding Ajzen and Klobas's theory of planned behavior as applied to fertility, the Ukrainian case has highlighted the need to focus on two elements, which are heavily influenced by war. One element is beliefs about the importance of having a child (encompassing the individual and collective dimensions); the other element is the opportunity to have a child or children (in Skirbekk's terms). This is akin to "actual control over having a child" (Ajzen & Klobas, 2013, p. 206) because in the context of war and migration, the opportunity to have a child translates largely into the question of having a partner and the lack of possibility to either be with one's partner or find one. As the Ukrainian case shows, because of the war, individuals

largely lost control over this decision, as seen in situations of one's partner serving in the army or men being restricted by law from leaving the country while women sought safety abroad.

The second development that we encourage on the basis of our findings is further research of the role of neutral narratives in the narratives of the future framework and fluctuating and changing fertility intentions in times of war, which represents great uncertainty in itself. Many people have narratives of the future not clearly positive or negative but rather used for coping with uncertainty by making decisions for the future based on a neutral set of conditions (i.e., decisions will be made when the war ends or when the most important criterion, such as a safe place to live for one's family, is satisfied).

Our study also suggests directions for future research from a comparative perspective. For example, the narratives of the future and the effects of continued and direct, war-related exposure to mortality on the fertility intentions and family dynamics of residents and internally displaced people in Ukraine could be compared with their compatriots living as war refugees abroad (García-Pereiro & Paterno - this issue). Giving more voice to the reproductive-age men left in Ukraine or stay abroad would contribute to a better understanding of the gendered differences of the war and forced (im)mobility disruption of fertility (Kraus & Milewski – this issue). Another interesting comparison could be between war refugees from Ukraine, which has a very low TFR, and refugees from other countries with higher fertility levels. Transferability of the findings in relation to Ukrainian pre-war migrants and post-24-February war refugees in other countries requires a certain caution, as we have shown that the partnership and the host country context matters: in Poland, there was also a pre-war Ukrainian diaspora and refugees could have reunited with their labor migrant partners. This may be similar for other host countries with pre-war labor Ukrainian diaspora.

We have focused on Ukrainian migrants and war refugees, that is, people living abroad during the war in Ukraine, because their decisions on returning and starting (or growing) a

family will largely determine which of the future demographic scenarios (Kulu et al., 2023; see also Libanova & Pozniak, 2023) is ultimately realized in Ukraine. The existence of neutral narratives of the future and fluctuating fertility intentions of Ukrainian migrants and war refugees potentially leave room for change and provide opportunities for the Ukrainian state to support them in changing their minds through targeted family-support policies and public campaigns. In particular, it might be easier to tip the balance from neutral (in contrast to purely negative) narratives, such as those expressed by many of our participants, to positive narratives to support the hope in the future that the Ukrainian people may hold on to even in times of war. At the same time, our interviews point to the complexity and diversity of individual circumstances and reactions to war and uncertainty. It is crucial to respect at all times the individuals' agency and right to make free decisions regarding both the place of residence and the place of child bearing.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

In relation to the IDI data, research data are not shared due to the very sensitive topics related to the private and family life of the respondents, many of whom are vulnerable migrants. Such was the condition guaranteed to the participants in the informed consent form.

Annex 1. The characteristics of the IDI interviewees

No.	Gender [m/f]	Age range [18-29; 30-40]	War refugee or prewar migrant	Relationship status and, if partnered, the situation of the couple [together – in Poland or not]	Number of children	Economic activity	Education
1.	f	30-40	prewar migrant	married; together	3	works in Poland	higher
2.	m	30-40	prewar migrant	married; together	3	works in Poland	higher (UA) + secondary vocational (PL)
3.	f	30-40	war refugee	married; together	3	stay-at-home-mother	higher
4.	f	30-40	prewar migrant	married; together	0	works in Poland	higher
5.	f	30-40	war refugee	married; not together	3	casual, short-term work in Poland	higher
6.	f	30-40	war refugee	married; together	1+1 [expecting]	stay-at-home mother	higher
7.	f	30-40	prewar migrant	married; not together	2	works in Poland	higher
8.	f	30-40	war refugee	married; together	2	stay-at-home mother	higher
9.	m	30-40	prewar migrant	married; together	2	works in Poland	secondary vocational

10.	f	30-40	prewar migrant	single	0	works in Poland; own company and work in Ukraine	higher
11.	m	30-40	prewar migrant	single	0	studies in Poland; works in Ukraine	higher
12.	f	30-40	war refugee	single	0	studies in Poland; works in Ukraine	higher
13.	f	30-40	prewar migrant	married; together	1	works in Poland; own company in Ukraine	higher
14.	f	30-40	war refugee	married; not together	0	works in Poland	higher
15.	f	30-40	war refugee	single [divorced]	2	works in Poland	higher
16.	f	30-40	war refugee	married; together	1	works in Poland	higher
17.	m	30-40	prewar migrant	married; together	1	works in Ukraine	higher
18.	m	30-40	war refugee	married; not together	1	works in Poland	higher
19.	f	18-29	prewar migrant	single	0	works in Poland	unfinished higher
20.	f	18-29	prewar migrant	partnered; together	0	studies in Poland; casual, short-term work in Poland	unfinished higher
21.	f	18-29	prewar migrant	single	0	doesn't work; studies in Poland	unfinished higher

22.	f	18-29	prewar migrant	single	0	doesn't work; studies in Poland	secondary vocational
23.	f	18-29	war refugee	single	0	doesn't work; studies in Poland	secondary vocational
24.	f	18-29	war refugee	single	0	studies in Poland; casual, short-term work in Poland	unfinished higher (UA) + post-secondary non-tertiary (PL)

Annex 2. The framework interview scenario (IDIs with the Ukrainian respondents):

I. A narrative section with open-ended questions:

1. History of migration

- Please tell me how you have found yourself in Poland
- In which circumstances, at which point in your life have you migrated? How long ago has it been? What kind of experience was it?

2. Family history:

- Please tell me about your family [whether a current, own one, or where one was raised is a choice of the respondent; in case of questions we ask not to go in time back more than one's own birth]
- Helpful intermediate questions:
- What was your family home like?
- Have you always lived in the same place, where you live now?
- What stage of life you are currently at? How did you get that far?

Questions that support and deepen the narration [if partner and/or children were mentioned in the previous part, if no - clarify about them first]:

- How have you met your [current] partner?
- When in your life did kids appear? At which point in it have you thought about becoming a mother/a father?

After that the respondent is asked to **fill out the concentric circles chart with social influences (sociogram)** with the people, who influence(d) the decision for or against parenthood/growing

a family, for example, by evaluating the respondent's decisions, being a positive or negative role model in terms of family life, help that those people have provided or in the provision of which can be counted on, and alike – and we asked to comment who is being included in the chart and why (for example: “I see how my older sister suffers with her three children, so...”) and where these people are now (i.e. whether they are with the respondent in Poland, in Ukraine, or in other countries/not in touch, etc.).

II. A semi-structured thematic sections (to be asked after the narrative one):

1. Norms and expectations about relationships

- What is your husband/wife/partner like? How do you distribute house chores? Would you call these relationships equal/partner ones?
- Which relationship formulae do you find the most suitable for yourself and which – the least? Why? (For example, a religious marriage, civil registered marriage, cohabitation, living apart together, etc.)

2. Fertility desires and intentions

- Do you believe that it is necessary to have children in life? Important? Is it an obligation (towards family/society)? Can anyone in your current country of residence (and in the previous one) freely decide whether and when to have a child?
- When do you believe that it is a good moment in one's life to have (a) child(ren)? What is the ideal – and what are the basic condition(s) to have him/her (them)?
- How big a family you would like to have? Is the one you do have now [if this is the case and the respondent does], according to your feelings, “complete” or would you like a bigger one?

- Has it always been this way – or has your views changed (in any direction), and if they were changing – when and how, what has influenced that?

3. Experiences and expectations related to parenthood

- What was the biggest challenge on your path to parenthood [if any]? From where you could receive help (for example, medical, financial, or other)?
- What has changed in your life with the birth of the baby? [For respondents without children – how do you think, what changes in someone’s life with a child?]
- Does it influence other areas of life? If yes – how?
- If any of them are negatively (for example, work) – is there anything that can ease this? Are there any options that you see here?
- [For those, who migrate(d) with children: did moving to another country change your life as a mother/father – everyday functioning, raising children, future plans for yourself and your child(ren)?

4. Time perspective [i.e., comparing the past, present, and future in terms of children and parents]

- How do you think: is the role of a father/mother now and the way of parenting now different from what it used to be when you were a child? Is it easier or harder for you than it was for your parents?
- Is there any issue related to the future about which you think (or worry about) in the context of your children (or your future children)?

5. Additional aspects:

- Do you know about the rights parents have in Poland? [Like the maternity/paternity leave, 500+ payments, and other]

- How does medical pre- and post-birth care look like in Poland for mothers and their babies? Any other forms of support/policies for parents from the state (local self-government), including infertility treatments?
- If yes – does it in any way influence your decisions and contemplations about the children?
- Has the COVID-19 pandemic in any aspect touched/influenced your family and your plans?

6. Is there anything that I haven't asked and you would like to add? Something connected to our topic that was not raised? Or something the most important that you would like us to remember from this interview?

7. Metrics – check whether penned down during the interview information about gender, age, siblings of the respondent, education, region of origin, country of stay currently, and economic activity is accurate, and if anything is missing – clarify/ask.

Thanks for the dedicated to the interview effort and time.