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Educational Strategies of Displaced Ukrainians in Berlin and Warsaw: The Role of Transnational Opportunity Structure

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the educational strategies of displaced Ukrainian parents regarding their school-age children who fled to Poland and Germany after the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. The study is based on an abductive analysis of a unique longitudinal qualitative panel data set of 82 semi-structured interviews with displaced Ukrainians with school-age children in Berlin and Warsaw in summer 2022, as well as 60 and 44 follow-up interviews in spring 2023 and spring 2024, respectively. Three distinct educational strategies are identified: (1) online enrolment in the Ukrainian school system while living in the destination country; (2) exclusive incorporation into the education system of the destination country; (3) return to Ukraine and continuing the Ukrainian school curriculum on site. The extent to which interviewees endorse one strategy over the others varies between Warsaw and Berlin and between the three interview waves. The paper highlights the relevance of "transnational opportunity structure" to better understand migrant's agency and strategies of action. This is conceptualised as the set of opportunities and constraints provided by the contexts in which migrants navigate.

1 | Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has led to an unprecedented flow of displaced migrants entering the EU: according to the UNHCR, almost six million Ukrainians had fled to the EU by the end of 2023. Besides its demographic importance, this wave of displaced migrants in Europe stands out due to two key characteristics. First, displaced Ukrainians within the EU constitute a unique case of displaced migrants with a particularly benevolent receiving context. Indeed, the Temporary Protection Directive activated by the EU directly after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion provides displaced Ukrainians within the EU with exceptional freedom of movement and several rights that were not allocated to other asylum seekers, such as direct access to employment, education or social protection. Second, the demographic composition of displaced Ukrainians strongly contrasts with the composition of other recent flows of displaced migrants within the EU that are largely composed of men without family. As Ukrainian martial law—with a few exceptions—forbids men aged 18–60 years from emigrating, the vast majority of displaced Ukrainians are women and children. In Germany for instance, 80% of the displaced Ukrainian adults are women, and 48% of them came with underaged children (Brücker 2022).

The numerous underaged children who sought refuge within the EU underline the importance of assessing the incorporation

of displaced Ukrainian children into the education system of the destination country. From a societal perspective, a better understanding of parental educational strategies could help improve the situation of millions of Ukrainian children currently attending a school within the EU. Education—as one of the pillars of structural incorporation—is the key determinant of other incorporation dimensions, such as the social, political and cultural dimensions (Gordon 1964). Moreover, from a state perspective, the education system plays a critical role in nation-state building by propagating the order of a shared culture (Anderson 2006; Gellner 1983). The nationalised institution of the school has been credited with assimilationist virtue since the nation-state building process of the 19th Century (Brubaker 1990). Education therefore constitutes an essential element of immigrant incorporation policies for destination countries.

In this paper, I follow an agent-centred perspective to investigate the dynamics of displaced parents' educational strategies regarding their school-age children who fled to two of the most popular destinations. For this purpose, I conduct an abductive analysis of a unique qualitative panel data set of 82 interviews with displaced Ukrainians with school-age children in Berlin and Warsaw in summer 2022, as well as 60 interviews in spring 2023 and 44 interviews in spring 2024 with the same sample of respondents.

Mapping the educational strategies of displaced Ukrainian parents enables me to shed light on their perceived opportunities of access to education. As I will show, not only does the place of residence provide displaced Ukrainians with access to education through on-site school attendance, but the place of origin can also provide such access through online teaching programmes. Whenever this online Ukrainian educational programme is accessible to displaced children, their parents have the capability to simultaneously navigate between two school systems - those of the place of residence and the place of origin. This opens up a "transnational opportunity structure" to displaced Ukrainians. This transnational opportunity structure contradicts the traditional logic of the national school system, which assumes the full assimilation into its educational structure of all its residents—whether nationals or non-nationals. Moreover, I show that this transnational opportunity structure changes over time, leading parents to adapt their educational strategies. The aim of this article is to advance the transnational perspective by examining the dynamics of transnational coping strategies employed by migrants as they navigate fields in both origin and destination countries that are traditionally shaped by a nation-state assimilationist logic. Analyzing transnational practices within the field of compulsory education offers valuable insights into the interaction between migrants' agency and transnational opportunity structures embedded in fields historically governed by nation-states.

In the next section, I will draw on the transnationalism perspective to develop the concept of transnational opportunity structure. After this theoretical section, I will describe the contexts in which displaced Ukrainians navigate, the analysed data and my methodological approach. I will then present my analysis of the educational strategies of displaced Ukrainian parents for their school-age children, and highlight cross-national differences between the two destination contexts. Furthermore, I will analyse how this transnational opportunity structure evolves over time and how displaced migrants react to these perceived changes. I will then conclude this paper by discussing the concept of transnational opportunity structure in light of my case study.

2 | The Transnationalism Perspective and Access to Nationally Regulated Fields

Basch et al. (1994) introduced the concept of transnationalism by defining it as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and destination. Such classical definitions of transnationalism focus on social interactions between individuals across contexts and highlight the agent-centred approach underlying transnationalism. Other popular concepts among transnationalism researchers are transnational social spaces or transnational social fields, which refer to sustained ties of persons, networks and organisations across the borders of multiple nation-states, ranging from little to highly institutionalised forms (Faist 2000; Pries 2022). Accordingly, the transnationalism perspective assumes that social relations, fields and spaces can span different places and localities across nation-states, and can thereby structure social life locally and transnationally (Pries 2022, S. 233).

Transnational scholars tend to use a relational perspective to operationalise transnational spatiality (e.g., Amelina and Faist 2012; Voigt-Graf 2004). They argue that immigrants get access to resources via transnational social networks (for instance through social capital driven by these transnational social networks). According to this transnationalism perspective, the expansion of transnational relational spaces implies that social systems in which individuals are integrated are no longer bounded by the nation states (Voigt-Graf 2004). Indeed, both social relations and the social positions of actors across borders instead build transnational social spaces (Amelina and Faist 2012). This implies that individuals can more or less conduct their lives beyond nation-state borders.

However, according to Bommes (2003), transnationalism scholars do not specify how resources retrieved from transnational social networks can be translated into the resources and prerequisites necessary for individuals to participate in the fields of their place of residence, which are still organised and regulated by nation-states. Indeed, key fields in individuals' life course - such as the labour market, compulsory education or healthcare - remain largely structured and regulated by the nation-state. While the prerequisites to participate in such key fields remain regulated by nation-states, the national fields of the destination country do not necessarily constitute the only fields in which migrants seek to get access. Indeed, migrants might seek to get access to the resources provided by fields of other national contexts, such as those of their origin country (Amelina 2010). The digital revolution has transformed the forms and intensity of migrants' transnational practices (Nedelcu 2020) – including by facilitating participation in the fields of different national contexts. By relying on a relational understanding of transnational space, the classical transnationalism perspective fails to

acknowledge the national logic behind the structuring of fields relevant to migrants in the conduct of their lives.

In contrast to tertiary education, which has seen global growth in its transnational educational programmes (Healey 2020; Li et al. 2021), compulsory school institutions constitute a traditional field that follows a strict nation-state logic: regulation of school attendance or the school curriculum are the exclusive prerogatives of the nation-state and its federal entities. Moreover, the assimilationist virtue assigned to the school institution points to its key role in nation-state building. This assimilationist virtue of the school institution applies to both immigrants and non-immigrants alike (Brubaker 1990). Thus, the school system plays a key role for the destination countries by assimilating immigrants into their national value framework, but also for the origin countries by propagating their cultural values and sustaining a national identity among their diaspora. Investigating transnational practices related to a highly nationally structured field - such as the school institution - could therefore provide valuable insights into the contradicting logic of migrants with their transnational strategies and the school institution with its assimilationist function.

3 | Transnational Opportunity Structure

To overcome this shortcoming of the classical transnationalism perspective, I introduce the concept of "transnational opportunity structure", which encompasses the opportunities and constraints provided by the contexts in which migrants navigate (see Figure 1). As this study focuses on a transnational opportunity structure composed of two traditional national fields (school institutions in the origin and destination countries), the regulations, prerequisites, facilities and services of these national fields constitute the transnational opportunities and constraints relevant to migrants' access to the schooling programmes of these educational fields. However, transnational opportunity structure might encompass other contexts and levels of governance (local, regional or supranational) relevant to other types of transnational practices. Transnational opportunities and constraints can be provided by all kinds of actors, institutions and organisations from the contexts in question. Understanding the transnational practices of migrants by considering their transnational opportunity structure enables us to follow an agent-oriented approach while incorporating the (perceived or experienced) structural opportunities and constraints faced by migrants in their agency.

The concept of transnational opportunity structure also highlights the necessity to consider time dynamics in migrants' transnational practices. Besides changes over time in migrants' willingness to undertake transnational practices, their capacities to do so might also evolve over time. Indeed, these capacities depend on the structural opportunities and constraints provided by the contexts in which they navigate, which are themselves not necessarily fixed, rigid or stable. Changes in transnational opportunity structure are likely to influence migrants' capacities to undertake transnational practices and will thus affect the scope and intensity of such practices. Furthermore, migrants' transnational practices might also lead to adaptation of some of the prerequisites, regulations or services provided by the transnational opportunity structure. Indeed, there might be feedback loops between individual transnational practices and the composition of the transnational opportunity structure, as will be discussed in the next section. Considering time dynamics is therefore essential to unpacking potential feedback loops between transnational opportunity structures and migrants' transnational practices. Moreover, considering a time dimension in the interaction between transnational opportunity structure and individual agency empirically applies Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceptualisation of agency, which they define as "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environment -the temporal-relational contexts of action- which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, S. 970).

This concept of transnational opportunity structure is similar to the perceived opportunity structure introduced by de Haas (2021) in his migration aspiration-capability model. However, de Haas' model aims to explain the decision to immigrate, whereas the transnational opportunity structure presented here

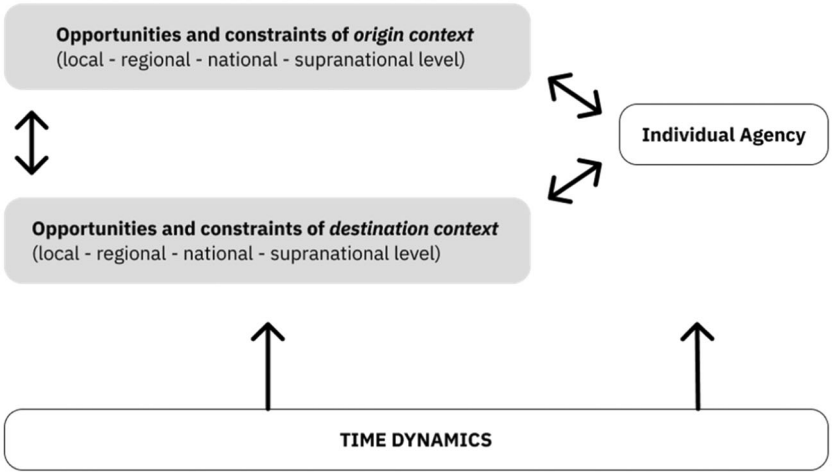

FIGURE 1 | Transnational opportunity structure.

also applies to the adaptation strategies that migrants develop through their life course. Moreover, de Haas understands the perceived opportunity structure of the destination and origin countries in a static way, as he uses it to understand a single decision made within a limited timeframe. By contrast, applying the concept of transnational opportunity structure to understand migrants' adaptation strategies requires consideration of time dynamics to identify potential feedback loops between the transnational opportunity structure and migrants' transnational practices

While this study focuses on the transnational opportunity structure within the educational field, other studies have already highlighted the importance of such transnational opportunity structures when undertaking transnational practices. These include the transnational political and discursive opportunity structure (e.g., Aydın 2021), the transnational opportunity structure for the diffusion of standards and practices (e.g., Soysal 2014), the creation of financial structures to facilitate transnational businesses (e.g., Guarnizo 2003) or the development of infrastructure facilitating cross-border trade (e.g., Zhurzhenko 2024 for the case of the Ukrainian-Polish border).

4 | The Context of This Study

4.1 | Poland and Germany as Destination Countries

Poland and Germany are two of the most popular destination countries for displaced Ukrainians: according to the UNHCR, Poland and Germany had respectively registered 1,600,000 and 1,000,000 displaced Ukrainians for Temporary Protection or a similar national temporary protection scheme as of March 2024. However, the two destination countries differ on two factors relevant to this study. First, Ukrainian immigration to EU countries in the last decade has largely increased due to the 2017 liberalisation of visa regulations between Ukraine and the EU, as well as economic insecurity in Ukraine and the civil and armed conflict following the 2013–2014 Maidan revolution (Teke Lloyd and Sirkeci 2022). Poland, in particular, welcomed a large Ukrainian community primarily for work purposes before the full-scale Russian invasion (including temporary and circular labour migration) (Górny and Kindler 2016; Sokołowicz and Lishchynskyy 2018). The cultural and geographical proximity of Poland and Ukraine (Toruńczyk-Ruiz 2014), together with the large Ukrainian community before the outbreak of the 2022 war, might be relevant to the opportunities and constraints provided by the Polish state on educational matters. Second, in contrast to Poland, Germany has a long history of (voluntary and involuntary) postwar immigration. It therefore has a much more developed and institutionalised infrastructure to receive and settle displaced migrants, which is also likely to affect the opportunities and constraints provided by state actors on educational matters.

4.2 | Ukrainian, German and Polish School Policies for Internationally Displaced Ukrainians

The Ukrainian school system has been characterised by very well-developed digitalization and implementation of distance learning programmes since the COVID pandemic. Moreover, since 2020, territorial self-government bodies have had the authority to decide whether security - in times of pandemic or war - within their locality is high enough to enable offline teaching[1]. Based on these recommendations from the territorial educational authorities and their actual situation (e.g. the availability of bomb shelters and technology, the situation and wishes of parents and children), each school head decides on the best teaching form (online synchronous, online asynchronous, mixed remote and offline teaching classes or entirely offline). When the full-scale Russian invasion broke out, Ukrainian school heads were therefore very quickly able to implement an efficient and flexible system of online and offline schooling adapted to the day-to-day war situation at the local level. School-age children who fled from Ukraine were allowed to attend these online classes directly after the breakout of the full-scale invasion (as reflected in our first-wave interviews in spring/summer 2022). However, from September 2022 onwards, some Ukrainian schools began offline learning after receiving authorisation from the local authorities. This, in turn, excluded the displaced Ukrainian children from remaining remotely enrolled in these particular Ukrainian schools. Thus, at the time of our second interview wave (spring 2023), not all interviewed displaced Ukrainians had the option of maintaining online access to their prewar Ukrainian school. The opportunity structure provided by the online Ukrainian schooling system was not therefore equally distributed among our respondents and evolved between the first and second interview waves.

In addition to these online teaching facilities provided in times of war or pandemic, Ukraine also allows home or individual schooling to facilitate basic education for all children[2]. For this purpose, the Ukrainian educational authorities organise regular remote exams to obtain school certificates. Thus, displaced Ukrainian children can take part in these online exams even if they do not attend a regular online Ukrainian class. In this case, the children do not have regular online contact with teachers but prepare for these online exams at home.

Turning now to the school regulations of the destination countries, these differ diametrically regarding the obligation for children who are enrolled in a regular Ukrainian online school programme to attend school. Without exception, all school-age children residing in German territory have to attend a German school - even if they can prove that they are enrolled in a Ukrainian online school programme. By contrast, school-age Ukrainian children in Poland who are enrolled in a regular Ukrainian online class are exempt from attending a Polish school (but are allowed to do so) at the time of our three interview waves.

While the obligation to attend school in Germany has remained stable over time, in 2024, Poland drastically changed its school attendance policy regarding displaced Ukrainians: as of September 2024, attending a Polish school became compulsory for all displaced Ukrainian children to obtain the monthly child allowance (with the exception of Ukrainians enrolled in the last year of Ukrainian secondary school). The Polish Minister of Education justified this new policy of making school attendance obligatory by stating that displaced Ukrainians exclusively enrolled in the Ukrainian schooling system for more than 4 years

tend not to engage with Polish traditions, culture, history and language, and might become marginalised because they are outside of the Polish system[3]. The implementation of compulsory school attendance in Poland is thus mainly based on assimilationist reasoning. Furthermore, access to online classes and online exams from the Ukrainian school system for internationally displaced Ukrainians has also seen some changes. Since 2024, the Ukrainian Ministry of Education has been striving to incentivise return migration by restricting access to online schooling for internationally displaced Ukrainians to Ukrainian school subjects[4]. Unfortunately, this new Polish policy for compulsory school attendance, as well as the new restrictions on online schooling by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education, were implemented after the end of our third interview wave (spring 2024). I cannot therefore assess the adaptation of displaced Ukrainians' strategies as a result of these policy changes. However, these changes do point to a feedback loop between migrants' transnational practices and transnational opportunity structure, as both the Polish and Ukrainian Ministries of Education restricted this transnational opportunity structure in reaction to the large share of displaced Ukrainians who made use of it.

5 | Data and Methods

5.1 | Longitudinal Panel Data Collection

Together with a team of Ukrainian research assistants, between April and August 2022, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of 100 Ukrainians in Berlin and 100 Ukrainians in Warsaw who fled Ukraine after 24th February 2022. The interviews cover the topics of the migration journey and experience, further migration plans and expectations, adaptation experiences and aspirations in multiple social and economic aspects (including education). We repeated these interviews between January and March 2023 with the participants of the first wave willing to conduct a second interview, including those who returned to Ukraine (in total 70 respondents in Berlin and 65 respondents in Warsaw agreed to participate in a second interview). The second-wave interviews cover the topics of adaptation strategies and aspirations in multiple social and economic aspects (including education), and further migration plans and expectations. The third wave took place between January and April 2024 and covered the same topics as the second-wave interview guidelines (in total, 55 participants in Berlin and 30 participants in Warsaw agreed to participate in a third interview). The interviews lasted about 45–60 min. They were conducted in Ukrainian (with the option of also conducting the interview in Russian) by Ukrainian research assistants who were trained to interview such a vulnerable population. Participation was voluntary, the interviewees were informed about the intentions of the study, and we followed German data protection regulations (including the use of pseudonyms in the presentation of the results). Interviewees received a €20 drugstore voucher as a reward for their participation in each interview. This study project has received approval from the ethics committee of the author's University (ethical committee reference number: ZEA- 2022-011).

We sampled the capitals of Poland and Germany to facilitate the identification of the target groups, as the capitals of our two selected countries received the most displaced migrants in absolute terms. We diversified the recruitment channels, which included the distribution of flyers at central locations visited by newly arrived displaced Ukrainians (e.g. supportive local organisations); contact with voluntary associations of Ukrainian expatriates; advertising on social media and snowball sampling. We followed a maximum variation sampling strategy based on the following subcategories that were assumed to be important in both the migration and adaptation processes of displaced Ukrainians: (1) gender; (2) with vs without children; (3) age; (4) region of origin; (5) level of formal education; (6) foreign language skills; and (7) prior contact in the host country vs not. Except for gender and level of education, we were able to obtain a balanced sample of these core socio-demographic characteristics. Due to the Ukrainian martial law forbidding Ukrainian men aged 18-60 years - with a few exceptions—from emigrating, we were only able to include 18% and 9% of men in the Berlin and Warsaw samples, respectively. Moreover, we have an oversampling of highly educated displaced Ukrainians, which reflects expectations surrounding this migration of displaced Ukrainians (Brücker 2022): 78% and 76% of our respondents in Berlin and Warsaw, respectively, have a tertiary education degree. The average age is 36 and 39 years old for our respondents in Berlin and Warsaw, respectively. In this study, I only considered respondents of both waves with school-age children. In total, the analysis is based on 51, 34 and 20 interviews in Warsaw for the first, second and third waves, respectively, and 31, 26 and 24 interviews in Berlin for the first, second and third waves, respectively. Among the respondents of the second and third waves, the children of 6 of our Berlin participants and 15 of our Warsaw participants returned to Ukraine. We also interviewed the returnees and, among other aspects, asked them about their return decision-making process. These interviews with returnees are also included in the following analysis.

5.2 | Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and translated into English by Ukrainians with the required transcription and translation expertise and were quality-checked by bilingual Ukrainian social scientists. The interview translations were then imported into MaxQDA and were first coded thematically according to the main interview guideline topics. Given that this study seeks theoretical generalisability, I followed an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) in the next coding phase by developing codes on the educational strategies that interviewed parents mentioned for their school-age children, as well as their justification. These codes were developed inductively, since new themes and issues emerged during the analysis, as well as deductively, reflecting the transnationalism perspective discussed above. I then compared the codes to identify similarities and differences in interviewees' statements, which led me to develop three distinct educational strategy profiles. I analysed these profiles by interpreting the justifications provided by the interviewees for endorsing these educational strategies. Moreover, I compared the variation in the endorsement of these strategies between respondents from Warsaw and Berlin, between interview waves, and according to the children's age.

6 | Three Distinct Parental Educational Strategies

The educational strategies of displaced Ukrainians with school-age children in our three destination countries can be classified into three different profiles: (1) online enrolment in the Ukrainian school system; (2) exclusive incorporation into the education system of the destination country; (3) return to Ukraine and continuing the Ukrainian school curriculum on-site. I will present each of these three profiles and their variation over time and across destinations.

6.1 | Strategy 1: Online Enrolment in the Ukrainian School System

The first strategy refers to displaced Ukrainian parents who decided that their children should remain remotely enrolled in the Ukrainian school system. This strategy highlights the relevance of the concept of transnational opportunity structure to understand how migrants can draw on the education fields of different national contexts. As previously mentioned, until September 2024, Poland exempted displaced Ukrainians attending an online Ukrainian school programme from enrolment in a Polish school, while displaced Ukrainians in Germany had to be enrolled in a German school regardless of whether they attended a Ukrainian school programme. These distinct national regulations imply large differences in the burden of displaced Ukrainian children who continue to enrol in the Ukrainian school system. In Poland, displaced Ukrainians only have to focus on the Ukrainian school curriculum. By contrast, in Germany, displaced Ukrainian children have to attend daily classes on-site in their German school and then follow the online schooling to prepare for the Ukrainian online exams in their spare time. This explains why this first strategy is more widely endorsed among our respondents in Warsaw than among our respondents in Berlin.

Furthermore, this strategy was more frequent in the first than in the second and third interview waves. Our first interview wave took place during the months following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (April–June 2022). At that time, many of our respondents believed that the war would end soon and that they would be able to return to Ukraine after only a few months of displacement. In the first interview wave, many respondents decided to keep their children enrolled in the Ukrainian online education system because they did not consider it worthwhile registering their children in schools in the destination country for an—expected—short period. For instance, in the first wave, Ukrainian parents in Berlin tended to give priority to finding sustainable housing, obtaining a residence permit, registering for social and health protection over enrolling their children in a German school. Furthermore, they fled during the last third of the school year in 2022. Many parents thought it would be more beneficial for their children to finish their school year within the same school system, and thus kept their children enrolled in the Ukrainian school system. By contrast, in the second and third interview waves (spring 2023 and 2024, respectively), displaced Ukrainians acknowledged that the war would last longer than expected. Among those whose children were enrolled in a Ukrainian online school programme in the first wave, many changed their educational strategy by either enrolling their children exclusively in the school of the destination country or by returning to Ukraine. About a third of our interviewees (mainly those who came to Warsaw) returned to Ukraine in wave 2 or 3. Among those who stayed in Warsaw and Berlin, about a quarter kept their children enrolled in some form of online schooling. Several of them opted over time for a less intensive form of online schooling than daily online classes, which was more compatible with their everyday life in Berlin or Warsaw, as illustrated by the following quote from the mother of a twelve-year-old daughter in Berlin:

> *Online learning continues, they have built such a system, it's convenient, it's good that they're adjusting to kids who are abroad. She doesn't study with her class because it's not possible to combine online classes with school in Germany. But they send assignments in the form of tests for each subject once at the end of each quarter, and from what Olga tells me, the assignments are quite simple, so she passes them quickly and sends them back. And she gets a grade, so she will finish 7th grade with a Ukrainian school.*
>
> (DE_58_W2, 41-year-old woman from Kyiv)

Thus, this first educational strategy of online schooling was much more common in the first wave. Over time, it either tends to be replaced by the exclusive incorporation or returnee strategies or to be adapted with a less intensive form of online teaching. The children of about a fifth of our sample do nevertheless continue to pursue an intensive form of remote teaching with regular online classes in waves 2 and 3.

6.2 | Justification 1: Uncertainty Regarding the Length of Stay

Considering both destination countries and the three interview waves, displaced Ukrainian parents provide four distinct justifications for following this strategy of online teaching. The first justification concerns the level of uncertainty that displaced Ukrainian parents feel regarding the duration of their stay in the destination country. This justification was more common in the first-wave interviews, as illustrated by the following quote from a father of children between 5 and 12 years old in Berlin:

> *Does it make sense to learn a language, go to school, get a job here? Tomorrow, for example, the martial law will be cancelled in our country for political reasons or for any reason and we will be told, well, that's it, goodbye, go where you came from. And we will lose there, and we will not be able to stay here.*
>
> (DE_74W1, 41-year-old male from a small city in Oblast Vinnytsia)

While such a justification is less common in the second and third waves, some parents still mention it, as in the following example of an 8-year-old child in Warsaw who exclusively attends Ukrainian online schooling:

She [the daughter] studied in a Ukrainian school and attended courses. In general, we could have studied in Poland, but we were still planning to return in the fall.

(PL_68_W2, 34-year-old female from Oblast Luhansk)

The children of the above interviewees followed daily Ukrainian online classes. The following respondent in wave 2, also living in Warsaw, decided that her 6-year-old daughter should be enrolled in a Polish school and at the same time continue to submit regular assignments to her Ukrainian school without following regular online classes. Her aim is to keep her child's spot in this Ukrainian school to simplify their potential return:

We are using a homeschooling method to preserve her place in school. We don't know what the future holds, so to keep her spot in our school, we switched to homeschooling. (...) we do tests once a quarter, and that's it. We don't have daily assignments.

(PL_21_ W2, 38-year-old female from a small city in Oblast Dnipropetrovsk)

Such justifications are also present among our respondents in Germany. Due to the German obligation to attend a German school in person, displaced Ukrainian children in Germany who want to remain enrolled in the Ukrainian education system tend to only submit regular assignments to the Ukrainian school, without attending daily online classes. Nevertheless, some displaced Ukrainian children do attend German school (which usually ends around noon) and follow Ukrainian online classes in the afternoon, as illustrated by this excerpt from a second-wave interview:

They learn German because it is very difficult. They study here at school and study online at a Ukrainian school, so it's hard. They can't devote themselves to learning German as a whole, they need to go both ways. It would be nice to have something better, but we have what we have.

MODERATOR: And you don't want to take them out of Ukrainian schools yet?

Of course not, because we are here under paragraph 24, which allows us to stay as long as the war is going on. So we don't know whether we will stay or not, what will happen with work. Everything is very complicated, we like it and the children like it, but how to find a job, will it work and what will it be like?

(DE_80_W2, 40-year-old male from Kharkiv)

6.3 | Justification 2: Dissatisfaction with the School System in the Destination Country

The second type of justification provided by displaced Ukrainians for remaining remotely enrolled in the Ukrainian education system concerns their level of dissatisfaction with the school system in the destination country. Keeping their children remotely enrolled in the Ukrainian educational programme constitutes a strategy for displaced Ukrainian parents to cope with their disappointment regarding the on-site schools in the destination country. This justification was mainly present in the second and third interview waves and in both Berlin and Warsaw.

The main form of disappointment perceived by our respondents concerns the fact that many Ukrainian children had to repeat a school grade in the destination country to enable them to adapt to the new institution. In Germany, many Ukrainian children first have to attend a "Welcome class" before being enrolled in a regular class. These "Welcome classes" are composed of newly arrived migrant children from diverse countries of origin and aim to teach them the German language. Several displaced Ukrainian parents considered this practice a waste of time in their children's academic development. The following excerpt from the mother of a 10-year-old son points to this feeling of a waste of time when attending a welcome class for 2 years in Berlin:

Maybe I've overdone it. But I just want him to be occupied, and have less opportunity to think and suffer about us not going back. I explained to him that he needs to keep up with [online teaching]. Because I found out that in Ukraine, if we go back, he'll lose 2 years. The German certificate won't count, because it was just a welcome class, language learning. They don't teach anything that a 10-year-old should learn. I explained to him that if it turns out that we go back to Ukraine, you have to finish 4th grade in [Ukrainian online teaching system], move on to 5th, somehow transition from class to class, so that he doesn't end up losing those years if we return to Ukraine. And he accepted that. It's okay for him. "Maybe we'll go back, then I won't be forever in 3rd grade," as he left Ukraine, he should move on.

(DE_20_KS_W3; 32-year-old female from Kyiv)

6.4 | Justification 3: Uncertainty Regarding Successful Adaptation to School in the Destination Country

The third type of justification refers to the uncertainty of the children successfully adapting to the school system in the destination country. This justification was exclusively provided by displaced Ukrainians in Berlin. The period of time that newly arrived migrant children have to attend the Welcome classes is undetermined and depends on the speed of acquisition of sufficient German language skills to attend a regular German class. This duration indeterminacy of the Welcome class makes parents unsure about the future school career of their children in Germany. Some of them therefore decide to keep their children enrolled in the Ukrainian online school system until they know when and in which grade their children will be enrolled in a regular German school.

Another type of indeterminacy relates to the German early school tracking system. As long as parents are not certain that their child will be allowed to enrol in a Gymnasium (the most academic educational track), some of them will want to keep

online access to the Ukrainian school system. The latter is then considered a Plan B if their children do not successfully enrol in a German Gymnasium. The following excerpt from a second-wave interview nicely illustrates this strategy. It is from the mother of a child in the 8th grade in a Berlin school who regularly submits assignments and tests to a Ukrainian school:

> *Yeah, when she enters the gymnasium because if we stop now and it doesn't work out, she still needs to get an education. Yes, we want her to go to the gymnasium, and if we are already 100% going to the gymnasium, there is no point in going to a Ukrainian school.*
>
> (DE_59_W2, 41-year-old female from a small city in Oblast Kharkiv).

Interestingly, in this type of justification, parents follow a temporary online schooling strategy with the long-term aim of a more successful incorporation into the education field of the *destination* country. Thus, transnational practices can constitute strategies aimed at more successful access to the nationally-regulated field of the destination country.

6.5 | Justification 4: Fastest and Easiest Track to the Secondary School Certificate

The last type of justification was only mentioned by some interviewees from Berlin whose children were about to finish secondary school. These interviewees explained that it would be easier and faster for their children to obtain the Ukrainian secondary school certificate through online teaching than by trying to adapt to the German school system, as this would mean learning German at a sufficient proficiency level and country-specific subjects of study (such as history) to pass the "Abitur", the German secondary school certificate enabling access to tertiary academic education in Germany. Ukrainian secondary school certificates give access to German university education after completing a preparatory course in a German "Studienkolleg" and successfully passing an assessment test. These interviewees consider the completion of Ukrainian secondary education the fastest and easiest track to get access to tertiary education. In the following excerpt, the interviewee is 17 years old by the time of the second interview wave. She is enrolled in a German school that concentrates on art subjects and simultaneously follows Ukrainian online classes. She plans to finish Ukrainian secondary school to avoid taking the Abitur exam in Germany without fluent language knowledge:

> *I was considering whether I could take the "Abitur" exams, because in 2 years I could have taken the "Abitur", but it's very difficult for native Germans. The German language requirement is at a very high level. Honestly, to be admitted to the profession I want, I would need to have excellent grades. I understand that it's impossible, and I realistically assess my abilities. I think it will be much easier to transfer [the secondary educational certificate] from Ukraine to Germany than to take the exams here.*
>
> (DE_28_W2; 17-year-old daughter with her 44-year-old mother from Mariupol).

Similar to the previous justification, displaced Ukrainians continue these transnational educational practices because they consider it the fastest strategy to successfully adapt to the (tertiary) education field of the *destination* country.

6.6 | Strategy 2: Exclusive Incorporation Into the Education System of the Destination Country

Displaced Ukrainian parents within this profile made the decision for their children to incorporate into the school system in the destination country without keeping any online access to the Ukrainian school system. This educational strategy corresponds to the assumption of classical assimilation theories stating that immigrants aim to incorporate structurally and entirely in the destination country (e.g. Alba and Nee 1997; Gordon 1964). This profile is the most common one among our interviewees. However, endorsement of this strategy varies across destination countries and interview waves. First, our interviewees in Berlin follow this strategy more frequently than our interviewees in Warsaw. This is likely due to the aforementioned obligation for every school-age child residing in Germany to attend a German school on-site. Thus, German school regulations exert significant pressure on Ukrainian parents to fully incorporate their children into the German school system, which could explain these country differences in the likelihood of endorsing this incorporation strategy.

Furthermore, this strategy is less common in the first than in the second and third waves At the time of the second and third interview waves (spring 2023 and spring 2024), most displaced Ukrainians had realised that the full-scale war in Ukraine was likely to last for a long time and thus adapted their educational strategies accordingly, focusing more on adaptation in the destination country. The following interview excerpt highlights the acceptance of both the mother and the 10-year-old child in the second wave to incorporate into a Warsaw school:

> *Moderator: Overall, how does Tanya feel at school?*
>
> *Respondent: The first year was really tough, she didn't want to go to school during the first 6 months. She started having nervous breakdowns, and now I'm beginning to realize what a stress it was for her. Now it's better; she has adapted, and she has found motivation. We do homework together at home.*
>
> *Moderator: Where did she find the motivation?*
>
> *Respondent: The motivation came from the realization that if you want to stay here, you need to learn the language.*
>
> *Moderator: Does she want to stay here?*
>
> *Respondent: Yes, she likes it here. I tell her that if she studies well, I might buy her a phone; that's the main motivation.*

Moderator: So, you're not considering returning to Ukraine?

Respondent: No.

(PL_51_W2; 31-year-old female from Dnipro)

There were however some respondents - mostly originating from front-line or occupied Ukrainian territory - who decided directly upon arrival to incorporate into the school system in the destination country and decided against online access to the Ukrainian education system, as the following excerpt from the mother of a 14-year-old son in Berlin illustrates:

And the online classes... he was already going to school here when his school had online classes. So I said, "No, you'd better attend the school here and learn the language because it's unclear when we go back to Ukraine. What's the purpose of you sitting and being bored at these Ukrainian online classes when I need you to start learning the language and attend the school." So of course, he went to school here and didn't attend his online classes. So he didn't finish the 8th grade in his Ukrainian school.

(DE_71_W1; 41-year-old female from Oblast Mykolaiv)

Displaced Ukrainians endorsing this strategy accept the fact that their children are likely to experience some delay in their school careers. Indeed, Ukrainian children first have to learn the language of their new school system before they can follow the curriculum on the same path as the native children. Incorporating into a new education system in an unknown language requires some adaptation time, which is perceived and accepted by parents with this strategy, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

My job is to pull the kids here...My job is to rescue them. We will have time to catch up with our studies if necessary, with the help of tutors.

(DE20_W2; 32-year-old female from Kyiv).

6.7 | Strategy 3: Return to Ukraine

Returning to Ukraine constitutes the last strategy observed in our interviews with displaced migrants with school-age children. About a third of our interviewees (mainly those who came to Warsaw) returned to Ukraine in wave 2 or 3. The justification provided by those respondents whose children returned to Ukraine at the time of the second or third interview waves is twofold. First, they returned to Ukraine because they considered Ukraine to provide better educational prospects than the former country of refuge. In the following excerpt, a Ukrainian mother fled with her son to Warsaw. At the time of the second interview, her son was 17 years old, in his last year of secondary education, and wanted to obtain a Ukrainian secondary education certificate. They considered it easier to prepare for the final secondary education exam on-site in Ukraine than to continue with online teaching in Poland and therefore decided to return to Ukraine:

We decided that it was necessary to come back, because the child is in the 11th grade. Meaning that it is the time for tutors, external independent evaluation preparations. We weren't interested in online education, so we are preparing here in Ukraine.

(PL_12_W2, 37-year-old female from Lviv)

Second, most of the parents who returned to Ukraine decided to do so to mitigate their children's emotional stress resulting from separation from their beloved ones. The following excerpt highlights this justification in which a Ukrainian mother living in Berlin with her 5-year-old child decided to remain in Ukraine after a visit there because of the emotional stress felt by her son:

But when we arrived in Ukraine, my son had a strong emotional reaction - he refused to go back to Germany. My son started having crazy tantrums. When we tried to take a train to western Ukraine to return to Germany, he had such a fit that I couldn't even get him on the train. No excuses or distractions worked, and in the end, my husband, my relatives and I made the decision to stay in Ukraine for a while because we all suffered a traumatic experience.

(DE18_W2; 31-year-old female, from a small city in Oblast Kyiv)

7 | Conclusion

This study sheds light on the relevance of transnational opportunity structure to better understand migrants' agency and strategies of action. Transnational opportunity structure refers to the opportunities and constraints of both the destination and origin contexts perceived and experienced by migrants. I argue that migrants navigate within this transnational opportunity structure and draw on it to develop their individual strategies of action. Understanding how transnational practices of migrants are embedded within a transnational opportunity structure enables us to reconcile practices that are conducted across borders but are nevertheless based on access to fields strictly regulated by the nation-states, such as attending compulsory education. More broadly, considering how transnational practices are embedded within a transnational opportunity structure enables us to reconcile the agency-centred approach of transnationalism research with the structuralist approach.

Furthermore, I argue that the relationship between transnational practices and transnational opportunity structure should be conceived in a dynamic way. Both transnational opportunity structure and transnational practices might change over time and could be altered by the other through feedback loops—migrants' strategies are not only shaped by the opportunities and constraints of the destination and origin contexts but can also lead to the adaptation of these opportunities and constraints in both the destination and origin contexts.

This dynamic conceptualisation of transnational opportunity structures offers a twofold contribution to transnational studies. First, drawing on Bommes (2003), it moves beyond a purely relational understanding of transnational practices as social relations and positions of actors across borders, by also considering cross-border practices that enable individuals to engage in fields traditionally shaped by nation-state logics. Second, it challenges the static view of transnational practices and structures by exploring the dynamic interaction between transnational opportunity structures and individual agency.

I developed the concept of transnational opportunity structure when analysing the educational strategies of displaced Ukrainian parents in Berlin and Warsaw for their school-age children. For this purpose, I use an abductive approach to analyse a unique qualitative panel data set of 82 interviews with displaced Ukrainians with school-age children in Berlin and Warsaw in summer 2022, 60 interviews in spring 2023 and 44 interviews in spring 2024 with the same sample of respondents.

My analysis shows that transnational opportunity structure enables us to better understand displaced Ukrainians' educational strategies for their school-age offspring. Indeed, my findings highlight three distinct educational strategies among the respondents. First, some displaced Ukrainians living in Berlin and Warsaw opted for their children to attend Ukrainian online schooling. This strategy was more popular in Warsaw, as Poland - in contrast to Germany—did not at the time of this study have an obligation for its school-age residents to attend school on-site, as long as every school-age child was enrolled in an educational curriculum—including a foreign educational curriculum. Moreover, this strategy was more frequent in the first wave of our interviews, when most displaced Ukrainians expected the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine to be short-term. Indeed, many displaced Ukrainians had revised their educational strategy for their children by the second interview wave, once they realised that the war in Ukraine would last much longer than first anticipated. Transnational opportunity structure in which displaced Ukrainians developed this online schooling strategy also adapted over time: some schools in Ukraine restarted full-time on-site teaching, which restricted the option of staying enrolled in the Ukrainian school system to internationally displaced Ukrainians. Furthermore, as of September 2024, the Polish Ministry of Education stopped exempting displaced Ukrainians enrolled in the Ukrainian online school system from attending a Polish school to incentivise their integration in Poland. This first educational strategy highlights the relevance of transnational opportunity structure to shaping migrants' agency and strategies of action, as well as the importance of considering time dynamics in both transnational practices and transnational opportunity structure.

The second strategy endorsed by displaced Ukrainian parents was exclusive incorporation into the school system of the destination country. This strategy was the most popular one among our respondents and more frequent in the second and third interview waves, as our respondents had by then acknowledged the long duration of the full-scale war in Ukraine. This strategy clearly fits with the traditional integration theory that expects immigrants to want to assimilate structurally in the destination context.

Lastly, the third strategy was to return to Ukraine. About a third of our interviewees (mainly those who came to Warsaw) returned to Ukraine in wave 2 or 3. They justified their decision to return either by explaining that they considered the educational opportunities for their children to be better in Ukraine than in the former country of refuge or by explaining that their children had suffered from too much emotional stress in their lives of refuge.

I would like to end this paper by discussing the generalisability of these educational strategies to other types of displaced migrants. The Ukrainian educational institutions were characterised at the time of the full-scale Russian invasion by a particularly high level of digitalization developed during the COVID pandemic to enable distance schooling. This, in turn, greatly facilitated the rapid activation of efficient access to online schooling after 24 February 2022. This speaks in favour of the uniqueness of the case of the educational strategies of displaced Ukrainians highlighted in this study. However, the current trend for digitalization of educational institutions observed in many countries might increase the likelihood of such transnational educational strategies in the future among migrants from other origin countries. Educational curricula are indeed an essential component of nation-state building and countries at war might strive to use this digitalization of schools to keep as many school-age citizens as possible enrolled in their educational institutions.

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Ethics Statement

This study project has received approval on May 11, 2022 from the central ethics committee of the author's University (ethical committee reference number: ZEA- 2022-011).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] See https://mon.gov.ua/ua/npa/deyaki-pitannya-organizaciyi-distancijnogo-navchannya-zareyestrovano-v-ministerstvi-yusticiyi-ukrayini-94735224-vid-28-veresnya-2020-roku.

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