

Diasporas at War. The Mobilisation of Ukrainian Diasporas in two different Host Contexts

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Short abstract

In 2022, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, with indiscriminate attacks on civilian objects, mass killings and torture of civilians, led to a mass exodus of war refugees. Within a short period of time, the Ukrainian diaspora (of different generations and different social and political backgrounds) transformed into an extensive and effective network of organisations and less formal groups involved in providing humanitarian and political support to emigrants and compatriots left behind in their homeland. This study examines the extent and types of collective action undertaken by the Ukrainian diaspora, and the importance of the different host country contexts in which this mobilisation takes place.

This original and up-to-date research is based on desk research, social media analysis and in-depth interviews with 12 representatives of Ukrainian diaspora organisations in France and Poland. The findings reveal a widespread mobilisation involving different diaspora groups and most migrants in both countries. As the challenges related to the war and refugee influx are not the same in France and Poland, relevant differences can be observed in the scope of actions and interactions with the public and political actors in the host countries. Diasporic associations in France mainly focus on raising public awareness in the host society. Organisations in Poland, on the other hand, focus more on supporting Ukrainians who arrived in Poland or stayed in Ukraine, and on building an institutionalized representation of Ukrainian migrants in the host country. In both countries, social media have been crucial for mobilisation, self-organisation and communication both within the diaspora and in transnational cooperation.

Extended abstract

Background

In 2022, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, with indiscriminate attacks on civilian objects, mass killings and torture of civilians, led to a mass exodus of war refugees. The Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 resulted in an outflow of more than 8 million people (as of June 2023), mostly women and children, who spread across Europe, with Poland remaining the main (in quantitative terms) receiving country. In response to the growing needs of this massive influx, civil society organisations in most EU countries started to get involved and expand their activities, providing material aid and support to Ukrainian nationals who fled abroad or stayed at home. Within a short period of time, the Ukrainian diaspora transformed into an extensive and effective network of organisations and less formal groups involved in providing humanitarian and political support to emigrants and compatriots left behind in their homeland.

Objectives / Research questions

In this study, we analyse the mobilisation of the diaspora (people of Ukrainian origin and migrants) in *critical moments* of war and the involvement of the diaspora in the politics of the country of origin, the so-called *homeland politics* (Betts, Jones 2017). To this end, we present the original and recent (2022-2023) research focusing on organised groups of Ukrainian populations in France and Poland. These two receiving countries, the former being a geographically distant destination for different post-Soviet diasporas and the latter being a closer country with well-established minorities and relatively recent waves of immigration from Ukraine and Belarus, were chosen to highlight the different *political opportunity structures* in which diasporic mobilisation takes place (Soekefeld 2006). The study aims to address the following research questions:

- What were the reactions of the diaspora towards the political and humanitarian crisis attributed to the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022? How did the extent and scope of mobilisation change due to the ongoing war?
- In what ways did the two diaspora interact with the public and political actors of their host countries?
- How much did the organizations strive to establish a political representation of their homeland?
- How did the diaspora use social media for communication and mobilisation? Furthermore, did these social media groups progress to become formal non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and if so, what was this process like?

Methodology

The research consisted of two stages. First, we conducted documentary research on the websites and social network accounts (Facebook, Twitter) of various diaspora organizations in France and Poland. The content analysis included the types of organizations, their histories,

missions, objectives and scope of activities. The aim of this analysis was to select different (in terms of scope of activities and history) organizations for the second phase of the research, the in-depth interviews. Between November 2022 and February 2023, we conducted 12 interviews with leaders/representatives of Ukrainian organizations established in France and Poland.

Results

REACTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONS TO THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION ON UKRAINE

In both host countries, Ukrainian minority and migrant groups swiftly mobilized immediately after the outbreak of the war. This involved staging mass demonstrations and protests, issuing countless statements through various media outlets and in Poland, providing humanitarian support for exiles at the Ukrainian border and in other locations, e.g. at the railway stations. In their mobilisation efforts, Ukrainians collaborated with pre-existing humanitarian and migrant organisations, or alternatively established new groups either independently or in conjunction with members representing host societies and other diasporas. The growth of new associations has occurred extensively throughout France, including in the most isolated rural areas. This expansion has encompassed all categories of Ukrainians, ranging from long-standing second-generation minorities to the newest labour migrants lacking prior experience in non-governmental organisations, *acting as blind people*¹ in this respect.

The Russian aggression and subsequent exodus of exiles to European countries have resulted in significant humanitarian needs. Ukrainian associations have responded to these needs by reorienting their objectives, areas of public activity, and even administrative procedures leading to changes in the statuses of existing diaspora organizations. A Ukrainian activist based in Poland asserted that humanitarian aid *was not like that that it was the goal we had set for our organization. (...) And it didn't matter whether we are ready or not, whether we had this potential or not. (...) The most difficult thing for us was to define things that we do not do.* In Poland, priority was given to humanitarian aid for Ukrainians crossing the Polish border and, through the convoys, for those remaining in their home country.

The situation in France differed. As one activist explained, the Ukrainian diaspora feared that the issue of Russian aggression and the defense of Ukraine would, over time, cease to be a leading topic of public opinion, as it was the case during the Euromaidan events in 2014. An ambiguous attitude of leading French politicians, including Emmanuel Macron, reinforced these fears. Therefore, the mobilization of Belarusian and Ukrainian organizations, as these two diasporas worked closely together in France, was divided into humanitarian convoys sent to Ukraine and information campaigns to raise awareness in the host society, to counter fake news and the Russian discourse, and to *deny stereotypes that need to be explained to people.*

¹ All italics are quotes come from the in-depth interviews.

INTERACTIONS WITH THE HOST COUNTRIES' PUBLICS AND POLITICAL ACTORS

Interactions with the public and political actors depend primarily on the context of the host countries, particularly the existing diaspora structures, their development, and the quantitative aspect of immigration. These findings from our study highlight the critical role that context plays in shaping interactions between diasporas, host countries, and political actors. Before 2022, Poland had already become the destination for significant immigration from Ukraine, with Ukrainians being the most substantial immigrant group. In this country, Ukrainians have established significant diaspora frameworks and collaborate closely with the Polish non-governmental organisation sector, local, and high-level central authorities. Besides offering humanitarian aid to exiles, both diasporas view their role as providing legal advice and representing migrants and refugees. Therefore, organizations lobby authorities and international bodies on matters concerning settled migrants in Poland, including combating abuse and discrimination in the labour market.

In France, Ukrainian organizations are less numerous and less diverse. The eruption of war in 2022 presented a chance for pre-existing groups to establish contact with other institutions, including other diaspora organizations, local and central authorities in France. The primary Ukrainian organization based in Paris sustains several connections with French politicians and officials, regularly inviting them to participate in rallies. The Ukrainian organizations define their role in relation to the host society as *spokesmen for Ukraine and Ukrainians* (in Ukraine), *a bridge between Ukraine and the rest of Europe*, or *the third front in the war*, hand in hand with Ukrainian militaries and Ukrainian civilians remaining in the country of origin.

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has played an integral role in connecting new volunteers, potential activists, and established activists, representing both the old and new migration waves, along with various organizations, both old and new. This mode of communication has enabled an egalitarian approach, facilitating connectivity between various locations, including cities, small towns, rural areas, and countries. *We all know each other from social media*, stated a Ukrainian campaigner from a rural and thinly populated area in France.

Conclusions

The findings reveal a widespread mobilisation involving different diaspora groups and most migrants in both countries. As the challenges related to the war and refugee influx are not the same in France and Poland, relevant differences can be observed in the scope of actions and interactions with the public and political actors in the host countries. Diasporic associations in France mainly focus on raising public awareness in the host society. Organisations in Poland, on the other hand, focus more on supporting Ukrainians who arrived in Poland or stayed in Ukraine, and on building an institutionalized representation of Ukrainian migrants in the host country. In both countries, social media have been crucial for mobilisation, self-organisation and communication both within the diaspora and in transnational cooperation.

These preliminary findings enable us to recognise the key aspects of the political and social context in recipient countries that are relevant to the degree and types of diaspora mobilisation. These factors encompass not only the historical scope and nature of migration from Ukraine to those countries, or the strength of connections preserved by the diaspora with their country of origin, but also the diaspora integration in the host country and its political influence. The backing of the host communities, more pronounced in Poland than in France owing to the perception of peril, and the support of the political stakeholders in the recipient countries are also vital, and somewhat contingent on the collective efforts of the diaspora.

References

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