

Does the “beaten path” break? Spatial distribution of Ukrainian immigrants and refugees in Germany, Poland and Italy

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Abstract

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has led to unprecedented consequences, making millions of people internally displaced and seeking safety in the European Union (EU) countries. This unprecedented movement of refugees in Europe since the World War II raises relevant questions related to their integration, spatial allocation and whether such geographical presence coincides or diverges from established Ukrainian diasporas in hosting countries.

The literature on international migration, and its spatial patterns, is well-established, offering a wide range of approaches to explain people’s cross-border movements. Moving beyond the “purely” economic push-pull mechanisms, more recent studies have highlighted the role of *network effects*, namely the influence of pre-existing immigrant population from the same origin country residing at a destination country. Empirical evidence confirms a significant role of such networks: once a certain threshold is reached, international migration flows, connecting specific origins with destinations, tend to become self-reinforcing (Bertoli and Ruysen, 2018; Bachmeier, 2013; Beine and Salomone, 2013; Beine et al., 2011; Pedersen et al., 2008). This phenomenon, also known as “beaten paths”, indicates persistent spatial patterns in international migration.

While the importance of migrant networks is more established in the context of international voluntary migration, less is known about whether similar mechanisms operate in case of forced

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migration. Most studies on refugees have traditionally focused on integration-related outcomes, such as labour market participation, language skills acquisition, housing conditions etc. However, refugees' spatial allocation has received comparatively less attention (Wiśniewski et al., 2024). Recent contributions show that network effects outperform economic factors in predicting country-level destination choices of asylum seekers (Di Iasio and Wahba, 2024). At the subnational level, a growing number of studies investigate refugees' internal or secondary mobility after initial placement, broadly confirming that co-nationals' concentration plays a role for relocation decisions of refugees (de Hoon et al., 2021; Mossaad et al., 2020). However, the research on this is limited and it is also motivated by the fact that initial placement of refugees is dictated by government-led policies. Moreover, secondary mobility of refugees is often reported to be relatively low in Europe (Vogiazides and Mondani, 2021), suggesting that government allocation policies have long-lasting effects.

The arrival of Ukrainian refugees constitutes a distinct case compared to the earlier cohorts of refugees. Ukrainian refugees arriving in the EU were not subject to allocation policies and could choose their initial location freely. This mobility was further facilitated by visa-free entry available for Ukrainian citizens, who possess the biometric passport, and the immediate border between Ukraine and the EU Member States. Hence, this is calling for a better understanding of Ukrainian refugees' spatial distribution and the role of established Ukrainian immigrant community for such spatial patterns.

Evidence on the within-country spatial distribution of Ukrainian refugees remains scarce. Wiśniewski et al. (2024) show that refugees from Ukraine settled in metropolitan areas and in the western regions of Poland. Although authors do not empirically analyze it, this pattern might be broadly consistent with the spatial presence of pre-war Ukrainian immigrants in Poland. One of the first attempts to investigate the role of existing immigrants' geographies for spatial patterns of refugees was done by Sauer et al. (2023) for Germany, who show that spatial presence of Ukrainian refugees mostly reflects the location of established immigrant communities from Ukraine. Despite this evidence, little is known on the spatial allocation of Ukrainian refugees and the role of network effects for this process.

With this paper we aim to contribute to this knowledge gap by analysing the within-country allocation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, Italy and Poland. By using province-level (NUTS 3) administrative data, we explore spatial presence of Ukrainian refugees and compare it to the one of Ukrainian immigrants, who settled in these three countries prior to the invasion. By doing so, we offer new evidence on network effects in the context of forced migration, when allocation constraints are largely eliminated.

The three countries in our study – Italy, Germany and Poland – provide an informative, and complementary, setting in terms of Ukrainian immigrants’ presence. Over the past decades, Italy has become an important destination for international immigrants, with Ukrainian citizens being among the largest foreign-born communities (Michelangeli et al., 2019). Although Germany has become a major destination country for asylum seekers and intra-EU migration (Jähnen and Helbig, 2024), it hosted a comparatively smaller Ukrainian community. At the end of 2021, around 155,000 Ukrainian citizens were residing in Germany, while after the arrival of refugees, Ukrainian nationals became Germany’s second-largest group of foreign citizens (Ette et al., 2025). Poland, traditionally characterized by emigration rather than immigration, has become an important destination for Ukrainian migrants due to its geographical proximity and cultural ties.

Our findings confirm an important role of the established Ukrainian immigrant community for the subnational allocation of Ukrainian refugees at province level. There is a positive and significant association between the spatial distribution of Ukrainian immigrants and the flow of Ukrainian refugees locally, and the strength of such association is country specific. In particular, the magnitude of network effects in Italy is roughly half the one observed in Germany. This weaker role of network effects might be related to distinct occupational profiles of the established Ukrainian immigrants in Italy, who are often employed in domestic care work, and forcedly displaced Ukrainians. Moreover, unlike earlier cohort of refugees arriving in Europe, our results do not show that large metropolitan areas attracted significantly higher numbers of Ukrainian refugees. The only notable exception is Warsaw.

Keywords: forced migration; displaced persons; Ukrainian refugees; network effects

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