

WELL-BEING OF UKRAINIAN IMMIGRANTS WITH A MINORITY BACKGROUND

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SHORT SUMMARY

Our research aims to understand the experiences of LGBTQIA+ immigrants from Ukraine residing in the Czech Republic, including their integration into Czech society, interactions with authorities and healthcare systems, psychological well-being, unmet needs, and areas of potential improvement. Through confidential and respectful in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted between February and March 2024, we sought to gather insights and trace important nuances. Subsequently, based on our findings, we developed and facilitated workshops and other activities that fostered connections among individuals from Slovakia, Bohemia, Moravia, and Ukraine. The project was generously supported by EEA/Norway grants allocated for the period of 2014 to 2021 and was implemented by the organization Jiný Pohled z.s., in collaboration with Masaryk University in Brno and Skeiv Verden, from Oslo, Norway.

1. INTRODUCTION

The migration journey is a multifaceted experience fraught with challenges and opportunities as individuals navigate new environments, cultures, and social dynamics. For LGBTQIA+ migrants, this journey is further complicated by the intersectionality of their identities, encompassing factors such as sexual orientation, gender identity, migrant status, ethnicity and cultural heritage. This group runs a risk of being subjected to discrimination due to ethnicity, and national background on the one hand, and sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression on the other. Amidst the complexities of migration and gender and sexual identity, the mental health challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ migrants are particularly pronounced, as they deal with the traumas of war, social exclusion, and

identity negotiation in their country of origin as well as new host countries (Crenshaw 1989; Jansen, 2013; Lewis, 2014; Gartner, 2015). This research aims to delve into the nuanced experiences of LGBTQIA+ immigrants, with a specific focus on their well-being.

In this research, we conceptualized well-being as a multidimensional construct comprising objective indicators of functioning and subjective evaluations of life satisfaction, happiness, and fulfilment. It refers to a holistic state of an individual's physical, mental, and social health (Dodge, Daly, Huyton & Sanders, 2012).

The term “LGBTQIA+ immigrants” is used, when we refer to:

- a) LGBTQIA+ persons who have applied for temporary protection (or asylum) after arriving to Czech Republic due to the conflict in Ukraine and are war refugees.
- b) LGBTQIA+ persons of Ukrainian origin who hold a valid visa and have resided in the Czech Republic no longer than 5 years.

Depression and anxiety, arising from ongoing stressors encountered in refugees' daily lives, are pervasive conditions among refugee populations (Blackmore, 2020). According to PAQ and NÚDZ (2022) research among Ukrainian refugees in Czechia, 45% of them suffer from symptoms of mental illness. Symptoms of 14% correspond to severe depression and 7% to very severe depression. In the Czech population last year, 8% of people had symptoms of moderate depression or worse, which means that depression is more than five times more common among refugees. The mental health of Ukrainians is exacerbated by the situation in their home country - worrying about family or home - as well as poor socio-economic conditions in the Czech Republic (PAQ and NÚDZ, 2022). These mental health challenges not only significantly impact the daily functioning of LGBTQIA+ migrants but also extend their effects to their families and communities. Moreover, the enduring toll of stressors such as unemployment, economic instability, language barriers, and lack of social support exacerbates the mental health burden faced by LGBTQIA+ migrants, underscoring the critical need for targeted intervention programs (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). As a recent study by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has shown – LGBTQIA+ respondents manifested worsened psychical states to a greater extent than other groups. Researchers claim that “com-

pared with non-LGBT respondents, respondents who self-identified as LGBT disproportionately experienced depression, anxiety or panic attacks (80 % versus 62 %), difficulty sleeping and/or concentrating (78 % versus 60 %) and a loss of self-confidence or feeling vulnerable (81 % versus 60 %) as a result of the incidents.” (FRA, 2023: 67). Our research is just a first step which shall lead to the changing of structures, overcoming barriers, and meeting challenges in a practical way.

Central to our analysis is the exploration of the intersecting factors contributing to the mental health challenges of Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ migrants residing in the Czech Republic. By centring the voices and experiences of LGBTQIA+ migrants, we seek to identify the specific stressors and barriers to well-being that they encounter, with the ultimate goal of creating targeted intervention programs and support services.

It is important to mention that the Czech law (as of May 2024) no. 89/2012 Sb., regarding marriage and registered partnership has changed and gave more rights to people in a same-sex partnership. Czech parliament, the senate and the president approved a new institution called “partnership” at the end of April 2024. This amended law about partnership is, as the document claims, analogous to a marriage between a man and a woman when it comes to its rules and regulations. The only difference is that same-sex couples cannot adopt a child from an orphanage or children’s home together as a couple, but only separately (first, one of them adopts the child and then the other one can adopt his or her partner’s child), and the name (instead of “manželství,” i.e. marriage, the designation reads “partnersví.”) The amended law will also change the rules (making it easier) regarding visa and Czech citizenship for a partner with a migrant background who marries/becomes a partner of a Czech person, in a same-sex couple. The new amendment (243) will come into effect on January 1st, 2025.

Also, in May 2024 the law (§ 29 par. 1, first sentence of the Civil Code and also § 21 par. 1, first sentence of the law about specific health services, which is related to forced change of sex/castration and sterilization of trans people) was canceled by the Constitutional Court. Trans people will be able to have their (different) sex written in their ID and other documents without the requirement of change of organs or sterilization.

Another regulation that is in the process of change (also for the better) is LEX Ukrajina VII. This law has been in preparation by the Ministry of Interior and it should soon offer Ukrainian persons living in the Czech Republic for more than 2 years who do not need financial support of the state and were not convicted of any crime a chance to obtain a long-term

residence in the second half of 2025, and later also - if they apply and fulfill the requirements - Czech citizenship.

In the following sections, we will delve into the key findings and insights gleaned from our research, offering a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ immigrants influenced by a war conflict and the implications for intervention and support. Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to the development of more effective and inclusive mental health services for LGBTQIA+ migrants, fostering their resilience and well-being as they navigate the complexities of migration and identity.

2. METHODOLOGY

This applied research endeavour comprised nine in-depth interviews and one focus group involving seven participants. Our study targeted individuals of Ukrainian origin who self-identify within the LGBTQ+ spectrum and have resided in the Czech Republic for fewer than seven years. Additionally, we sought insights from immigrants residing in Czechia for a longer duration to facilitate a comparative analysis with individuals displaced due to the war conflict in Ukraine.

Informants were recruited using a combination of the snowball sampling technique and direct outreach, leveraging email contacts provided by intermediaries or identifying potential participants through their online presence on social media platforms. We disseminated information about the research through various channels, including posters circulated through Czech LGBTQ+ organizations such as Prague Pride and Transparent, as well as collaboration with the Equality project on the Grinder app. Some participants expressed interest, following exposure to our outreach efforts, while others encountered our posters at Czech universities and other places. Their participation in the research was compensated by 300 CZK. Our aim was to interview diverse groups of people to be able to cover experiences of people with different gender identities and sexual orientation.

Interviews:

Name	Age	Pronouns	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Living in
Alyna	47	she/her	woman	bisexual	Kiev
Anton	19	he/him	man	gay	Prague

Elena	21	she/her	woman	lesbian	Prague
Katya	42	she/her	woman	lesbian	Prague
Ludmila	29	she/her	woman	lesbian	Prague
Mo	24	she/they	non-binary	bisexual	Ostrava
Stepan	21	he/him	trans man	bisexual	Prague
Vadim	56	he/him	man	gay	Prague
Yuri	30	she/they	non-binary	bisexual or lesbian	Pardubice

Focus group:

Name	Age	Pronouns	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Living in
Anhelina	19	she/her	woman	lesbian	Prague
Bohdana	39	she/her	woman	pansexual	Olomouc
Inna	22	she/her	woman	lesbian	Small town near Prague
Georgiy	25	he/him	man	gay	Prague
Nataliya	28	she/her	woman	lesbian	Prague

Thematic analysis, facilitated by the MaxQDA software for coding, was employed to sift through and interpret the data, enabling us to discern prevalent themes and subjects within informants' narratives. To safeguard anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Our team of researchers investigated the circumstances of Ukrainian LGBTQ+ refugees and migrants currently residing in the Czech Republic. Our primary objective was to gain

comprehensive insights into the challenges faced by this vulnerable community, their overall well-being, integration processes, and the treatment they receive from the state.

Our research questions were the following:

- How do Ukrainian LGBTQ+ immigrants in Czechia experience their mental states?
- What are the challenges that Ukrainian LGBTQ+ immigrants in Czechia face?
- What are the needs of Ukrainian LGBTQ+ immigrants in Czechia?

The purpose of this investigation has been to provide research-based and up-to-date knowledge, which can contribute to safe and good integration of LGBTIQ+ persons with a refugee background in Czechia. By listening to their stories and experiences, we aim to develop tailored community programs and workshops. These initiatives would be designed to address the specific needs of queer immigrants, fostering a supportive environment that facilitates their integration and assimilation within Czech society.

For the focus group we focused especially on collecting potential ideas for community events and workshops for the immigrant group (LGBTQ+ Ukrainians) and challenges they face, as well as we were asking specifically about their situation regarding integration and connection or disconnection from Czech society.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. ASSISTANCE UPON ARRIVAL

Upon their arrival in the Czech Republic, the informants who fled Ukraine due to the war were confronted with chaos and uncertainty. While their individual narratives varied, a common thread of stress, anxiety, and an overwhelming sense of unpredictability characterized their initial days in the country. Many cited personal connections as the primary reason for choosing Czechia as their destination, whether it be family ties, friendships, or acquaintances already established in the country. The decision to seek refuge in Czechia, rather than in other countries, often hinged on the availability of housing or accommodation opportunities. For some (Alyna, Anton, Ludmila, Mo, Vadim), the choice to leave Ukraine was not initially their preference. However, faced with the harsh reality of unsafe living conditions, the imminent danger of bombing, uncertain developments in the conflict, or familial pressures, they felt compelled to seek safety elsewhere.

Stepan, on the other hand, had a different journey. As a trans man in the midst of transitioning, he wanted to arrive to more open minded Western European country with more favourable laws for trans people. However, upon reaching the Czech border with his mother, they found themselves abruptly registered by Czech authorities, who provided little information or guidance regarding their options. This lack of clarity and support was a shared experience among many informants, who found themselves navigating the complexities of their new reality with minimal official assistance, relying on the help of family members or friends.

As the informants shared in the interviews, amidst the chaos of their arrival, Ukrainian war refugees relied heavily on online resources, word-of-mouth from fellow Ukrainians, volunteers, and non-profit organizations for information and support. The absence of clear directives from official channels exacerbated feelings of confusion and vulnerability, underscoring the critical need for more comprehensive and responsive assistance mechanisms for incoming LGBTQIA+ refugees.

They also highlighted their unfamiliarity with the Czech bureaucratic system, describing it as antiquated and vastly different from the digitized processes they were accustomed to in Ukraine. Despite this unfamiliarity, all informants found the visa application process relatively straightforward. While they encountered bureaucratic hurdles and endured long queues dur-

ing the initial stages, they generally perceived the process as manageable. This contrasts with the experience of Katya, who arrived in Czechia in 2019 and faced complications, including visa denial, necessitating a protracted and burdensome reapplication process. Furthermore, none of the informants reported receiving any information or support on LGBTQIA+ topics from official authorities while settling in Czechia. They would have appreciated such information to facilitate access to resources, community, or simply to enhance their sense of safety. Stepan suggested, that:

“Even if there would be just a little rainbow heart on the door. It's such a...(relief), you can breathe out, like nobody would be bothered by it. Such little signs of - you're okay, you're safe.”

(Stepan, 21, trans man)

Feeling of safety regarding their identity and sense of community was very important for all my informants, see in chapter 4.3.3. *FEELING SAFE*.

4.2.THE IMPORTANCE OF LGBTQIA+ ORGANISATIONS

In instances where official assistance was lacking, certain informants (including Anton, Stepan, Mo) turned to LGBTQ+ organizations such as Prague Pride, Transparent, and local Pride branches for support. Their accounts highlight the invaluable assistance provided by these organizations. For instance, Anton secured employment through Prague Pride, Mo found a supportive community through Ostravan Pride, and Transparent aided Stepan in accessing necessary healthcare services for his transition:

„I went to the Prague Pride community center, got the flyers and I immediately contacted Transparent. That's when it started to be good. They went to all the places with me to translate and to emotionally support me. I was really afraid of a train, of missing it or anything. I guess all I have now I can again thank them for.” (Stepan, 21, trans man)

These organizations also played a crucial role in assisting the informants to establish a sense of safety, support, and community. Notably, Stepan and Mo shared with me their remarkable journey of improved mental well-being since arriving in Czechia. They expressed

feelings of happiness and belonging in their new home, a stark contrast to the loneliness they experienced in Ukraine. For them, migrating to Czechia not only offered refuge from discrimination based on their identities but also presented an opportunity for a better life, which had previously been financially out of reach. As refugees under temporary protection, the war provided them with an unexpected opportunity to relocate to a more accepting and progressive country. Consequently, they were able to integrate successfully into their new environment, forging meaningful social connections and networks.

4.3. WELL-BEING & CHALLENGES

During the interviews, as they shared their narratives, the informants, except for Katya, exhibited various symptoms indicative of mental health issues. These manifestations ranged from occasional anxiety and depressive symptoms to formal diagnoses such as bipolar disorder, severe depression, anxiety disorder or autism spectrum disorder. Despite experiencing these psychological challenges, many informants tended to minimize the severity of their symptoms, comparing their struggles favourably to „*those who have it worse*“ (Alyna, Anton, and Vadim). Furthermore, they expressed a self-reliant attitude toward managing their mental health issues, acknowledging the possibilities of getting help but citing a lack of resources and motivation to seek assistance.

Among those who sought psychological support, only a few received consistent care. Some went to psychiatrists only to get prescriptions for medication, while others, such as Ludmila (private sessions) and Mo (public insurance), were able to access regular psychotherapy sessions. However, the majority of informants expressed a desire for psychological assistance but faced barriers to accessing such care. Financial constraints hindered their ability to afford therapy, compounded by challenges in obtaining coverage through insurance due to language barriers and a perceived lack of queer-friendly mental health practitioners.

Several informants asked me for recommendations for therapy or mental health organizations, underscoring a pervasive lack of information and resources available to them. The importance of needing finances in order to be able to afford these services was explained by Inna during the focus group.

„I don't consider Czech helplines, because I have only money on my Ukrainian sim card.

I had 30 or 40 minutes free, so I called the Ukrainian number of mental help. Once time passed, we were disconnected in the middle of the sentence, and I was not able to call again.”

(Inna, 22, lesbian)

This insufficiency of accessible care, exacerbated by systemic barriers such as inadequate access to queer-friendly mental health professionals, perpetuated the cycle of unmet mental health needs among the informants. In the next chapters, I will outline the specific stressors, challenges, and barriers to well-being described in the testimonies and narratives of the 9 people we interviewed and 5 participants of the focus group.

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