

A Photovoice Analysis of Ukrainian Adolescents' Coping Strategies and Future Orientation in the Context of Forced Migration

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Abstract. The forced internal and external displacement to which children and young people are exposed during and as a result of war stands in stark opposition to their developmental requirements and entitlement to grow up in an environment that is physically and emotionally secure and stable. Adolescents' perceptions of the future are linked to the maintenance and modification of social structures and their surroundings, which are affected by forced migration. The feeling of uncertainty characteristic of the transition period of children and young people affected by the Ukrainian armed conflict can influence the temporal orientation towards the past and future, both of which are important for understanding their present reality and specific needs. We use a Photovoice approach to illustrate the changes that appeared in their everyday lives after the outbreak of the war. This study aims to explore how Ukrainian adolescents assert agency throughout their experience of forced migration. Engaging adolescents in Photovoice participatory research allows them to capture and describe images of what is meaningful to them as co-constructors of knowledge and meaning. Having 15 Ukrainian adolescents as co-researchers, we aimed to explore the present life circumstances, giving them voice and potential to illustrate their future priorities, orientations, aspirations, and expectations through photography. This participatory approach comes as a resource for the personal empowerment of adolescents, imagined futures implicitly builds on the assumption that the capacity to conceive and aspire to the future serves as a tool for individual self-empowerment. With future aspirations determined by interlocking structural forces, which are constantly revised in the context of forced displacement, the

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future orientation of adolescents starts from the resource system currently available to respond to their basic needs.

Keywords: participatory research; photovoice; war; children; adolescents; forced migration; displacement.

1. Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has caused one of the largest forced migrations in recent history, affecting millions and disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations, such as children and adolescents. Following the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, records indicate that over 6.6 million Ukrainians have sought asylum across Europe, predominantly in countries close to Ukraine, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. Women and children comprise over 80% of these refugees (UNICEF 2023). Since February 24, 2022, Romania has accommodated over 1.6 million Ukrainian refugees, with approximately 83,748 remaining within its borders and about 74,000 granted temporary protection. Recent trends show a reverse migration, with roughly 1,091,000 individuals returning to Ukraine. In Romania, 33% of Ukrainian refugees are under the age of 18.

Research focusing on refugee children and youth is relatively scarce, highlighting the critical need for careful consideration of ethical guidelines, particularly in balancing the autonomy and protection of young participants who have experienced forced migration. The escalation in forced migration underscores the necessity of integrating ethical considerations into research methodologies, particularly within a human rights framework (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). A methodology incorporating participants' cultural practices and perspectives can enrich the understanding of the forced migration experience (Green and Kloos 2009). This consideration is essential in conducting ethically responsible research.

This paper aims to explore the agency, coping strategies, and future orientations of Ukrainian adolescent refugees who have resettled in Cluj-Napoca, Romania amidst the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Utilizing the Photovoice methodology, the research addressed 15 adolescents, exploring their daily lives and the personal significance they attach to their experiences of forced migration. Adolescents demonstrated significant reliance on peer groups for emotional support and social integration, which are fundamental in adjusting to new environments. Additionally, engagement in recreational activities and the maintenance of routines emerged as vital coping mechanisms, providing both a sense of normalcy and a connection to cultural identities.

This study highlights the nuanced roles of peer support, hobbies, and structured routines in fostering resilience and emotional well-being among displaced adolescents. Through Photovoice, adolescents articulated their struggles and aspirations, offering insights into their complex adaptation journey. This participatory approach allows young participants to express and document their experiences through pictures, providing insights into their daily lives and adjustments to new realities. Photovoice facilitates a deeper understanding of these experiences and supports refugee empowerment by enabling individuals to narrate their own stories.

2. Agency in the context of forced migration

Over the past decade, migration issues have become increasingly significant in European policy and public debates (Eberl et al. 2018). However, a comprehensive perspective that addresses the intersection of youth, forced migration, and future-related aspirations remains underexplored (Doumas and Averay 2024). In environments characterized by substantial uncertainties and inequalities that impact personal independence and decision-making capabilities (Cairns 2014), their life paths are complex and non-linear, often deviating from a straightforward progression (Worth 2009; Dator 2022). Research indicates that well-being stems from the ability to control current and past life aspects, a strong sense of belonging, and a self-concept projected onto a future trajectory (Caprara et al. 2006). Extended periods of uncertainty and insecure futures can have long-term effects on adolescents' trust in institutions, understanding of democracy, level of civic engagement, and social and emotional well-being. The environment in which refugee youth settle plays a crucial role in their access to essential resources, such as money, shelter, and education, which are vital for their physical and psychological well-being and their ability to advocate for themselves (Correa-Velez et al. 2010). Images of the future may include both elements of aspirations and expectations, whether realistic or imaginary, and these images guide decision-making and actions (Polak 1973). Rubin and Kaivo-Oja (1999) emphasize that young people's future projections are closely linked to power and agency.

From a normative and politically endorsed perspective, mostly portraying displaced people as passive victims, it may appear that forced migration can hardly accommodate agency-related strategies such as decision-making capacity or aspirations. In general terms, agency may be defined as "the capacity for an agent to act based on choices, aspirations, and needs" (Safouane, Junemann and Gottsche 2020: 3). Concerning migration, the same authors argue that agency can be understood as the capacity to produce one's

subjectivity in a social context described by specific power relations. As opposed to the humanitarian and political discourse on refugees as victims “unable to author their own narratives” (Rajaram 2002: 247), we argue in favour of the investigation of the multiple forms of subjectivity production beyond the ascribed reduction of agency to resistance against oppression, or to political action and activism (Safouane, Junemann and Gottsche 2020). In the case of young refugees, it is equally important to acknowledge that agency can unfold in multiple forms and that subjectivity production can be depicted in various everyday strategies and interactions. In this vein, the everyday mechanisms refugees employ to survive and navigate challenging circumstances such as joining activities and making friends are nonetheless agency strategies that have the potential to improve their everyday lives (Ramachandran and Vathi 2022).

From a different viewpoint, focused on aspirations as a form of expressing agency and performing particular coping strategies, agency emerges from aspirations as the capacity to imagine alternative futures, but also to “act in the present” (Muller-Funk et al. 2023: 3818) as the capability to accomplish one’s aspirations in a specific social structure (Appadurai 2004).

Research into coping behaviours has predominantly been guided by Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping (1984), which identifies two main strategies: problem-focused coping, which involves actions to alter the stressor, and emotion-focused coping, which includes efforts to manage or lessen emotional distress without directly addressing the stressor. While the precise factors influencing the choice of coping strategies remain somewhat elusive, it is suggested that various elements, such as an individual's personality, identity, beliefs, available coping resources, and the nature of the stressor itself, contribute to this decision (Folkman 2008). Traumatic experiences in the country of origin or during displacement play an important role in refugees' emotional health, conversely, the focus is on the difficulties of accurately portraying the social reality of youth within the context of forced migration (Minkkinen 2020).

Exploring agency, coping mechanisms, and future orientation among young refugees reveals a multifaceted interaction in which each element influences and reinforces others. Agency in this context refers not only to making decisions in the face of adversity but also encompasses the ability of these youths to project their identities into future possibilities, shaping their aspirations and actions accordingly. Their coping strategies, whether problem-focused or emotion-focused, are deeply intertwined with their sense of agency. These strategies enable them to manage the stress and uncertainty inherent in

their situations, thereby supporting their emotional well-being. Moreover, the future orientations of young refugees, as expressions of agency, are not merely dreams or desires but rather become important components of their coping mechanisms. This capacity to imagine and option to strive for a better future, as well as to hope for a safe future become essential to their resilience and adaptability.

Ultimately, understanding the complex interplay between agency, coping mechanisms, and future orientation in the lives of young refugees is vital for developing policies and interventions that effectively support their integration and well-being. It challenges the simplistic view of forced migrants as passive victims and highlights their active engagement in shaping their lives, demonstrating the importance of acknowledging and fostering their inherent capacities as agents of their own futures. A clearer understanding of the constraints and options faced by refugee adolescents could enable these groups, or others in liminal situations, to act more effectively based on their ability to "read the world" (Wenger et al. 2020).

3. The potential use of participatory methods with young migrants

The framework for studies focusing on the cultural analysis of coping mechanisms is particularly constrained when considering adolescents in the context of forced migration. Park points out that "the broader culture in which individuals are situated may exert effects on their meaning-making processes" (2010: 292), with the majority of coping studies at the individual level proceeding under the assumption that refugees navigate their identity across various dimensions and are exposed to diverse cultures throughout this process. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss the effects of a single culture and inquire how exposure to various cultures encountered along the migratory route shapes adolescents' coping behaviours. During the process of forced migration, individuals absorb and selectively internalize cultural resources from their adoptive societies while they discard, preserve, re-adopt, reinterpret, or recombine those from their origin societies (Berry 2003; Schwartz et al. 2010). Youth have long been excluded from discussions concerning the issues that involve them (Clark 2005; Women's Refugee Commission 2022). This exclusion has increasingly been acknowledged in declarations such as the 2022 Youth Declaration from the Transforming Education Summit (UN 2022), which advocates for significant youth engagement in educational policy and decision-making processes. Participatory research methods represent a valuable means of ensuring that young people's voices inform the research that impacts them. These diverse methods are supported by the foundational principles of

democratic decision-making, inclusion and amplification of marginalized voices, and opportunities for reciprocal learning among participants.

The requirement of political systems to classify refugees and internally displaced persons to form policy directives influences research methodologies. Hallioovich (2013) indicates that within this exploration of issues concerning refugees, the refugees themselves are often problematized, seen as foreign elements, or even threats to societal well-being. Consequently, they face hostility in their host countries, where they are either stigmatized, perceived as a monolithic entity, or viewed as powerless. Zetter (2018) characterizes forced migration as driven by persecution and associated risks, with multiple factors like socio-economic instability, armed conflicts, state fragility, violence, and violations of human rights contributing to this phenomenon. The complexity of forced migration necessitates an intersectional approach in social research and public policy, demanding a heightened sense of ethical responsibility. In forced migration settings, refugees often undergo fragmented experiences and inhabit liminal spaces in which their rights and citizen status remain uncertain (Collyer 2010; Kraly et al. 2023).

Researchers are challenged to uphold scientific integrity while navigating the moral dilemmas presented by the vulnerability, legal uncertainties, and loss of autonomy experienced by refugees. Turton (2006) emphasizes that reducing human suffering should be a primary goal in such research. Conversely, Hirsch and O'Hanlon (1995) warn against the pitfalls of scientism, where scientific neutrality is misused to perpetuate existing inequities or to serve political ends. Birman (2006) suggests that adopting participatory research methods can help align methodologies and ethical considerations with participants' cultural contexts and specific needs. At this juncture, it is essential to recognize that participatory research is identified as a methodology that bridges research with actionable outcomes (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995), involving collaborative efforts at every stage of the research process to foster change (Vaughn and Jacquez 2020). This approach prioritizes inclusion and the reciprocal development of knowledge non-hierarchically (Pain, 2004), and is especially beneficial in studies involving vulnerable populations. This method stresses collective engagement, enabling children and young adults to challenge not only the prevailing norms upheld by adults in society but also existing theories, power dynamics, societal views, and institutional practices (Prout and Christensen 2005; Lundy et al. 2011; Bishop 2014; Bradburry-Jones 2014). Echoing this notion, Aldridge (2012) suggests that empowerment, much like power, should not be seen as a straightforward

process but rather as a complex web of relationships that offers varying levels of empowerment.

Empowerment theories encompass both the processes and outcomes of empowerment, suggesting that various actions, activities, and structures might facilitate the attainment of power, resulting in a state of empowerment (Swift and Levin 1987). These processes and outcomes manifest differently across different contexts and populations, illustrating that empowerment cannot be universally defined or measured using a single standard (Zimmerman 1995). Empowerment is conceptualized as a framework that integrates individual capabilities and strengths, support from natural helping systems, and proactive behaviours with social policy and change (Rappaport 1984, 1990). Theories, research, and interventions within this framework strive to connect personal well-being with broader societal and political dynamics. Empowerment is the process through which individuals gain control over their own lives, participate democratically in their community's affairs (Rappaport 1987), and develop a critical awareness of their surroundings (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, Checkoway 1992).

Research indicates that refugee integration is significantly enhanced by developing a sense of belonging through involvement in community organizations, which helps build cultural and social connections within the host community (Lee and Fiske 2006; Kawachi and Berkman 2001). A particular study highlighted the crucial role of social support from the host community in helping Cuban refugees in Texas cope with the stress of resettlement and integrate into their new environment (Barnes and Aguilar 2007). Furthermore, Işık-Ercan (2012) explored the perception among refugees that education serves as a pathway to social advancement.

Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) discuss the application of empowerment theory at the micro (community) and macro levels of social program planning and policymaking. He advocates for a nuanced understanding of how empowerment models function effectively across different populations and settings. It considers the broader socio-political and economic contexts that can oppress certain groups. From this perspective, empowerment is a multifaceted process involving participation and control over one's life within both local and broader societal frameworks (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988).

Photovoice methodology aims to conduct research collaboratively, focusing on producing knowledge that not only meets community needs but also encourages the necessary social changes to address these needs. This approach prioritizes social change through collaborative action research.

Photovoice aims to include and empower individuals by allowing them to (1) document and reflect on their daily experiences through photography, (2) engage in critical discussions about these photographs, and (3) communicate with decision-makers to foster societal change. Wang (2006) describes the Photovoice process as a structured approach that begins with identifying a specific audience, assembling a participant group, and educating them about the Photovoice techniques while securing their informed consent. Subsequent steps involve clarifying the initial theme, guiding the photography process, and scheduling times and venues for group discussions. The final step involves organizing how the group's findings will be presented to policymakers or other key stakeholders.

4. Ethical considerations in participatory research

To address criticisms regarding ethical considerations, we follow Foucault's conceptualisation of power: ubiquitous, dynamic, and inherent in every individual (Foucault 1983). Practically, this means considering power as a series of strategic actions rather than a static resource like wealth or status, capable of being activated in suitable conditions (Gallagher 2008). Echoing this perspective, Aldridge (2012) suggests that empowerment, much like power, is a complex network of relationships rather than a straightforward progression, permitting varying levels of empowerment. Such views support the use of Photovoice in research involving children and young people, contributing to its popularity. Yet, it is crucial to address specific ethical considerations such as maintaining confidentiality and anonymity with visual materials and ensuring informed consent, all while balancing participant autonomy and protection (Shaw 2021).

The autonomy given to participants in controlling the outcome of the research must be critically evaluated. This involves assessing whether researchers provide the freedom for participants to explore using their chosen photographs, potentially deviating from initial guidelines or engaging creatively with the process (Abma et al. 2022).

Bradbury-Jones, Isham, and Taylor (2018) articulate the shift towards viewing children as active contributors within participatory research. Defined as a method linking research to actionable outcomes (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995), participatory research involves collaborative production at every stage and aims to promote social change (Vaughn and Jacquez 2020). This approach prioritizes inclusive and egalitarian knowledge creation (Pain 2004), making it particularly effective for engaging vulnerable groups. A fundamental aim is to empower children and young individuals to challenge not only prevailing

societal norms but also entrenched theories, power structures, and institutional practices (Lundy et al. 2011; Bradburry-Jones 2014). This reorientation towards participant-driven inquiry places a significant ethical focus on how participants navigate decisions about the visual content they find pertinent, fundamentally questioning who ultimately governs the research outcomes.

5. The research context

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Romania has seen a significant influx of Ukrainian refugees due to ongoing attacks and worsening weather conditions in Ukraine. This situation has brought economic, security, and energy challenges to the forefront, necessitating comprehensive strategies for refugee integration and inclusion. Romania has responded with several legislative and administrative measures aimed at providing support and assistance to these refugees. Key actions include Government Emergency Ordinance No. 15/2022 and Government Decisions Nos. 367/2022, 337/2022, 336/2022, and 315/2022, which collectively establish mechanisms for temporary protection, financial support for host families, transportation gratuities, and accommodation provisions. Additionally, the government has facilitated educational integration for displaced students through Ministry of Education Order no. 3325/2022 and has enhanced cooperation with international bodies to aid refugees effectively. The National Plan of Measures (Government Emergency Ordinance no. 100/2022) further underscores Romania's commitment to ensuring the protection and inclusion of displaced Ukrainians within its borders (Porumbescu 2023).

In 2023, the International Organization for Migration launched a survey to assess the needs, intentions, and integration hurdles faced by Ukrainian refugees in Romania. The survey revealed that the principal challenges for these refugees are financial strain and language barriers, with a notable lack of information on health care and economic opportunities also reported. A study conducted between February and March 2023 by the Romanian Association for Health Promotion for UNICEF Romania indicated a decline in Romanian public support for refugees since the war began, with a quarter of the population expressing feelings of insecurity due to the refugees' presence. This research also found that the integration of Ukrainian refugees into Romanian society is perceived to involve learning the Romanian language, securing employment, participating in community activities, and enrolling children in local schools.

Romania's strategy for addressing the refugee crisis consists of two main phases: an initial emergency response and a subsequent phase focused on

longer-term protection and inclusion. The initial response, managed by the Department for Emergency Situations (DES), includes immediate aid at border crossings, such as humanitarian aid transports and the provision of shelter, food, and basic medical care. The second phase involves more sustained measures for protection and inclusion, enhancing cooperation with national services and social systems, and improving the dissemination of information about resources and needs. These efforts are part of a three-year National Plan of Measures aimed at facilitating the inclusion and protection of Ukrainian refugees in Romania.

6. Research objectives

Located near significant border crossings with Ukraine, Cluj-Napoca in Romania has become a crucial hub for Ukrainian refugees, likely due to its expansive urban infrastructure (UNHCR 2023). Since February 2022, over 3,000 refugees have registered for Temporary Protection in the city. The authors of this study have been actively involved as volunteers within various local organizations in Cluj-Napoca, providing emergency support to these refugees. One researcher, who shares cultural and linguistic similarities with the refugees, has extensively engaged with this community. It was noted that while substantial support exists for younger children through educational and recreational programs, adolescent refugees face limited opportunities. To address this, a group of Ukrainian adolescents formed an online forum, inviting one of the authors to lead discussions and aid in organizing face-to-face social events.

In partnership with the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, where one author is employed and the other a PhD student, and a local non-governmental organization, a recreational program specifically meant for these adolescents was established. The adolescents convened weekly to plan and conduct the various activities. Their active participation in online platforms, including photo sharing and discussions, set the foundation for a Photovoice project.

This research focuses on the experiences of Ukrainian adolescents who have relocated to Romania due to the conflict in Ukraine, aiming to delve into the nuances of their daily lives' agency strategies. Using the Photovoice methodology (Wang and Burris 1997; Strack et al. 2004; Green and Kloos 2009; Liebenberg 2018), this study seeks to capture and analyse the adolescents' perspectives and experiences, specifically highlighting what they consider significant in their current circumstances.

7. Methods

7.1. Participants

In our study, we involved a group of 15 Ukrainian adolescents (See Table 1), ranging from 11 to 17 years old, comprising 9 females and 7 males (See Table 1). Since February- March 2022, as volunteers, we have been in contact with the co-researcher group through weekly recreational activities. After four and a half months of these activities, we introduced the idea of Photovoice research. This decision was influenced by their regular online interactions, where they shared photos and discussions about their daily experiences. We proposed transitioning these discussions to a face-to-face setting. Initially, 20-25 adolescents were consistently involved in recreational activities, of whom 15 opted to join the research. The researchers' contribution was limited to the proposal and invitation to develop and build together the way to discuss their daily routine, allowing each adolescent the opportunity to communicate what they considered to be important for themselves.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

No.	Age	Gender	The city of origin	When they came to Romania	Whom they are accompanied by
1	12	F	Kyiv	Feb-2022	Mother, 2 sisters, and grandmother.
2	11	F	Dnipro	Mar-2022	Mother, brother, and aunt with her child.
3	12	F	Dnipro	Feb-2022	Mother, father, and older brother.
4	14	F	Kyiv	Mar-2022	Father and younger sister.
5	15	F	Odessa	Feb-2022	Mother and younger sister.
6	16	F	Odessa	Mar-2022	Mother, both grandparents (from both sides, paternal and maternal), aunt, and neighbor (who is the mother's best friend).
7	16	F	Mykolaiv	Apr-2022	Mother and grandmother.
8	13	F	Bucha	May-2022	Mother, father, brother, dog, and cat.
9	12	F	Kharkiv	Feb-2022	Mother, older sister, and cat.
10	14	M	Ivano-Frankivsk	Apr-2022	Aunt and 2 cousins.

11	13	M	Kherson	Feb-2022	Mother and the other 2 brothers.
12	13	M	Kharkiv	May-2022	Mother.
13	16	M	Odessa	May-2022	Mother, sisters, and godmother.
14	17	M	Kherson	Apr-2022	Mother.
15	15	M	Vinita	Apr-2022	Mother, grandparents, aunt, and younger cousin.

Source: Generated by the authors

7.2. Procedure

Noticing adolescents' adept use of technology and active participation in online dialogues, we introduced the Photovoice concept in October 2022. An initial meeting drew 15 adolescents who showed an interest in shaping the research direction. At this meeting, we explained the Photovoice methodology and encouraged their input in planning the research. The discussion centred on capturing their daily experiences and the aspects they found significant through photography. Participants were instructed to use their personal devices to capture unlimited photos, selecting six that they felt most effectively represented their daily lives for discussion in the planned group setting.

These selected images were to serve as focal points in discussions based on the SHOWED model (Wang and Burris 1997; Wang 1999), with certain adaptations to better suit our group's dynamics. Modifications included posing personalized questions about the photos and introducing various communication-enhancing techniques, such as titling the images or writing brief descriptions, to deepen the discussion and understanding of the visual content.

We scheduled two group discussions for November and December, aiming to finalize and decide on the dissemination of the results by mid-December 2022. The initial focus group session lasted 88 minutes, featuring the participation of 15 adolescents who shared and discussed 22 photographs. The follow-up session extended for 101 minutes with 10 adolescents present, during which 18 photographs were analysed and discussed. It is important to note that the absence of five participants in the second session is not detailed, as they are entitled to withdraw from the study at any point without explanation. Each session was recorded, and the audio was transcribed verbatim into Ukrainian and Romanian. Special attention was given to recording pauses, interruptions, and non-verbal cues to enhance the analysis of the group interactions.

7.3. Ethical considerations

Given the participatory nature of this study, the ethical dimensions of this research were considered throughout the planning, implementation, and data interpretation stages. Prior to participation, the adolescents were presented with information on the Photovoice method and were offered time for questions and discussions. Informed consent was diligently obtained from the participants and their tutors where necessary before their engagement in this study. The participants were provided comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They were also informed of their right not to participate or withdraw from the study at any point without any explanation or consequence. As we were already in contact with the group from our recreational activities, we explained that they had no obligation to participate in the Photovoice study and could continue participating only in the recreational program if they wished.

The principle of utility and benefit is illustrated by the imperative to provide evidence-based policy recommendations that integrate children's perspectives. Another ethical principle that was applied was anonymity and confidentiality, and every effort was made to safeguard participants' privacy.

7.4. Data analysis

In our research employing the Photovoice method, we integrated the data collection and analysis phases more closely than in traditional research methods. Utilizing the SHOWED model, a semi-structured, action-oriented inquiry approach, we framed our group discussions around a series of probing questions: "What do you see here?", "What is happening in this scene?", "How does this relate to your life?", "Why is this situation significant?", and "What actions might be taken in response to this scenario?" (Wang and Burris 1997).

To accommodate the adolescents' personal experiences and emotions, our discussions were adaptively structured, incorporating personalized queries about the photographs and employing projective techniques, such as assigning titles or crafting brief descriptions to each photograph (McIntyre 2003). This initial analysis phase was conducted collaboratively with adolescents serving as co-researchers, focusing on the content and meaning of their photographs. During these sessions, each participant presented their photographs, sharing the personal meanings and responses elicited, guided by semi-structured questions and any additional elements they included. Each meeting concluded with a comprehensive analysis where all photographs were reviewed, their meanings interpreted, and themes were collaboratively identified and explored with the participants.

After this initial phase, we developed the codes and grouped them into themes in a participatory manner. Data from the group discussions were then analysed using MAXQDA, a tool that supports the efficient management and deeper analysis of data, facilitating the coding, categorization, and comparison of information from the focus groups (Strack et al. 2004).

The coding process in both phases allowed us to organize the codes hierarchically and systematically identify the themes and sub-themes. We followed a hybrid approach in our thematic analysis by combining inductive and deductive methodologies (Hennink et al. 2006; Hennink et al. 2011). The inductive approach (Patton 2002) facilitates the identification of patterns and themes directly from the data, whereas the deductive analysis aligns with the initial goals of the Photovoice process to explore specific research aims. This analysis ultimately revealed two overarching themes that reflect the everyday life perceptions and experiences of young migrants (See Table 2).

Throughout the thematic analysis process, we involved the adolescents in reviewing and refining the themes to ensure their perspectives were accurately represented, adhering to the principles of participatory research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Discussions were conducted within the research team, including the authors and co-researchers, in both face-to-face meetings and online communications until a consensus was reached on the findings.

Table 2. Main theme, subtheme, and specific elements of thematic analysis

Main theme	Subtheme	Specific elements
<i>Specific coping mechanism</i>	Leveraging social networks	Collective coping and peer support
		Positive influence in peer group settings
	Recreation and hobbies	Adapting to the Unknown
	Normalization through routine	Establishing daily practices to foster a sense of normalcy
	Adapting to change and resilience	Building resilience through flexibility and adaptation
	Emotional protection strategies	Leisure time
		Regulating the use of information and communication technology (ict)
		Maintaining connections with extended family

<i>Future orientations, aspirations, and expectations in the context of forced migration</i>	Exploring personal and community identity	Understanding identity shifts in new environments
	Integration and acceptance in the host society	Seeking acceptance and finding <i>one's place</i> within new cultural settings
	Educational and professional aspirations	Pursuing new educational and professional opportunities as a means of advancement
	Return to the country of origin	Contemplating the feasibility and desirability of returning to one's homeland
	Hopes for stability and security	Aspiring to a stable and secure future amid uncertainty

Source: Generated by the authors

8. Results

The research findings are presented in a narrative form, focusing initially on adolescents' specific coping and agency mechanisms. Subsequently, the discussion shifts to examining *future orientations in the context of forced migration*.

8.1. Specific coping mechanisms

As a primary coping mechanism, adolescents consider *the expansion of their social network* to be primarily important, stemming from the need for socialization and belonging to a peer group. The expansion of social networks includes two fundamental dimensions: *Collective Coping and Peer Support* and *Positive Influence in Group Settings*, both of which possess a procedural and phased character. Affiliation with a peer group stems not only from the need for social interaction but also from the intention to cultivate relationships grounded in solidarity and mutual support. Belonging to a peer group aids in the development of collective coping strategies shaped by the dynamics of the group setting.

The role of peer groups is highlighted by the importance of friendship in adapting to new environments. Adolescents illustrate this through their interactions: "*This is X, we went to the mall and played with guns... I chose this photograph because he is my best friend.*" (M, 15 years old). Collective coping, in which individuals support each other in managing stress, is an important aspect of refugee communities (Guribye et al. 2011). Studies indicate that adolescents

discuss the importance of friendships and group activities as methods of mutual support and reducing feelings of isolation (Betancourt et al. 2012). Interactions between adolescents and other examples of peer support demonstrate how relationships can serve as powerful coping mechanisms.

Finding a peer friend has allowed them to engage in age-adequate activities and adjust their coping strategies. Some adolescents shared photos of where they first met their friends because they considered this a key moment that had helped them overcome their difficulties. These shared experiences not only provide a "distraction" from their worries, but also reinforce a supportive network that is vital for their well-being. Unlike the often war-centric conversations with family members and within the Ukrainian community, interactions with friends offer a reprieve, allowing adolescents to experience moments of relief from constant reminders of conflict.

“Friends are very important to me; they help me deal with all kinds of thoughts that I have. Whether you want it or not, you think about what is happening in the country. Everybody around you talks only about this all day long.” (M, 15 years old).

Adolescents' friendships are not merely social connections but are essential components of their emotional well-being and adaptation strategies in the face of adversity and forced migration. The supportive role of peers is crucial in helping them navigate new realities, offering both escapism and emotional grounding. This dual role of friends as sources of diversion and confidants supports adolescents in balancing their emotional states. By engaging in typical teenage activities, they temporarily set aside the heavy burden of war while finding opportunities to express and regulate their emotions through shared concerns and experiences. These shared histories strengthen friendships and foster peer understanding and support.

The dynamics within a group can lead to changes in individual behaviour, either overtly or covertly, through mechanisms like majority or minority influence (Levine and Tindale 2015). Social influence within groups encompasses aspects such as negotiation, group creativity, polarization, and decision-making, highlighting how group dynamics can significantly shape individual behaviours and attitudes.

One of the co-researchers, in her reflection and dialogue about the photos, constantly mentioned her intention to maintain a positive attitude, even in the context of war: *“For example, I don't want to keep talking about the war; I chose funny pictures and want to stay more positive, even though I know that there is a war at home.”* (F, 14 years old).

Adolescents experience a myriad of emotions that arise about their immediate social space, which can influence their perceptions of members within their microsystem. In the context of forced migration, peer groups can emerge as a buffer between perceptions and reactions to the new environment and the newly formed microsystem.

Adolescents highlight how the absence of friends can intensify their difficulties. At the same time, the presence of a supportive social network can help overcome negative thoughts and adapt to a new environment.

“I don't know if anything in my life has changed, but I've realized it's very hard if you don't have friends.” (M, 17 years old)

“For me, it's very important, it helps me get over all sorts of thoughts because whether you like it or not you think about what's happening back in the country. Everyone around you talks about it all day.” (F, 16 years old)

Peer support not only provides a sense of normalcy and belonging but can also be a catalyst for developing healthy coping strategies in the face of challenges. Friendship relationships among adolescents can serve as a buffer against social isolation. These connections also provide a safe space for expressing emotions and for open discussions about difficult experiences, thus reducing the inferiority feeling associated with refugee status.

8.2. Recreation and hobbies – adapting to the *unknown*

Adolescents mention participating in recreational activities as an important aspect of their everyday lives. They engage in a variety of recreational activities, such as hiking, hanging out in parks, and gaming, which are perceived as coping mechanisms and ways to establish social connections with peers, including the host community. A teenage girl highlighted a significant aspect of the discussion on the role of extracurricular activities in adapting to the new environment through a detailed description of pictures taken during a visit to a natural park. The image, capturing a sunset seen from a car, illustrates a common perspective in the group: nature as an essential resource for recreation and distress. Describing the scene in vivid detail, the teenager notes how the colours of the sunset and the landscape provide her with a state of peace and artistic inspiration: *“I really liked the colours and how the sunset was just beginning. I like how the light reflects off the guardrail on the roadside...”* (F, 14 years old). This account highlights how photography serves not just as a hobby but also as an emotional tool that helps adolescents process their feelings and share their experiences with others: *“I often go with a friend of mine to the forest near Mănăstur... This calms me down. It is my time to think, to decide.”* (F, 14 years old)

Among the discussions in focus groups, the crafting activities that adolescents engage in were also detailed. One teenager elaborately described how he and his mother are involved in creating artisanal objects. They collect natural materials from nearby forests to create decorative pieces, which they sell online and at charity fairs. The activity is not only a therapeutic refuge but also a means of contributing to the community by raising funds: *“My mom has an Instagram page and sells them there. Most of what she makes is sold at fairs organized for Ukrainians, charity fairs.”* (M, 15 years old). Community support emerges as a recurring theme throughout the discussion. Adolescents talk about their involvement in community activities, such as charity fairs, where they sell items to raise funds for those affected by the conflict in Ukraine.

Discussions around other pictures representing hobbies and the emotional significance behind them emphasized the role of visual expression in managing the new unknown and adapting to new environments. Adolescents find consolation and a sense of identity through their ability to capture and share significant moments.

“My life has become quieter since I moved here. Sadly, I don't see my family who stayed in Ukraine, but I'm glad I found a soccer club to go to. Doing more things seems to make you forget about the war.” (M, 16 Years old)

Recreation and hobbies are important in helping displaced adolescents navigate the challenges of their new environments. These activities not only provide emotional relief and a sense of normalcy but also foster a sense of community and solidarity among displaced Ukrainian youth.

8.3. Normalization through routine

This theme is prominently explored through descriptions of how routines, either preserved or newly established, provide a sense of normalcy and stability for adolescents amidst significant changes in their lives. Discussions about online schooling show how daily routines bring about an element of stability. Maintaining regular activities, even in a modified format, helps to create a sense of order and predictability.

Resilience is the capacity to recover from adversity and is often studied in the context of refugees. Adolescents exhibit resilience by adapting to new cultural and social environments, maintaining stable relationships, and maintaining a positive outlook despite challenging circumstances (Southwick et al. 2014). Normalization through routine also plays a pivotal role in future planning. Establishing a routine can help individuals look beyond their immediate circumstances and plan their future. This could be as simple as setting educational goals, planning career paths, or organizing future activities.

“I usually wake up at 9:00 even though classes start at 8:30. Often the teachers don't join the online classes because they don't have mobile signal or electricity. I couldn't do this when I was at home because I had to be at school by eight thirty, but now even my mom doesn't wake me up because she knows that online school isn't serious.” (M, 15 years old)

The adolescents reveal that community-and family focused activities, such as going shopping for groceries or visiting a local park, are part of their routine. These activities are not only recreational but also serve to strengthen communal bonds and provide emotional support, illustrating the normalization of their lives through coethnic community integration (we refer to the integration in the Ukrainian community). The discussions highlight how routines are adapted to new environments, mentioning attending local schools and participating in local community centers for Ukrainian refugees. These routines help adolescents feel more grounded and integrated in their new surroundings.

“I wake up at 8 even if there are no classes. I like to wake up as I used to for school. I don't even need to set an alarm, I wake up naturally.” (F, 13 years old).

Several adolescents talk about their pets as part of their daily routines, providing emotional support and a sense of continuity from their lives before displacement.

“As I mentioned, we have two cats and a dog; the next photo is of my dog Sherry. Among the cats and the dog, I love him the most. Every morning I take him for a walk, and for me, this is sacred; I do nothing else before taking the dog out. We also sleep together. When I was in Ukraine, I did the same thing, every morning, afternoon, and evening I would take him out, and we do the same here. We try to maintain this habit; in the evening and afternoon, grandma comes with me too.” (F, 16 years old)

Discussions on how routines provide a coping mechanism in times of distress are relevant. One teenager mentioned that sticking to her morning routine helps maintain a sense of normalcy despite the chaos around her. Maintaining and forming new social connections is a routine on which many adolescents focus. They talk about the importance of having friends to spend time with regularly, which helps them deal with the emotional toll of displacement and creates a semblance of normal life. These insights illustrate how routines, whether around leisure, artistic expression, community involvement, or daily

chores, play an important role in helping adolescents adapt to new circumstances while providing a sense of stability and normalcy.

Routines are powerful tools to assert resilience. Normalization strategies within routines contribute to the processes of *adaptation and resilience*. Adolescents discuss engaging in social activities as a means of adapting to their new environment. For instance, one participant said that exploring the city and engaging in various activities almost daily was a way to integrate and feel less isolated.

“As I said, we go out almost every day to the city to play something; we look for different ways to spend our free time.” (M, 15 years old)

Adolescents engage in various social activities, such as community (local Ukrainian community) crafts and excursions, which not only provide a sense of belonging but also reinforce their social support networks that are essential for resilience in times of change. Routines can facilitate smoother transitions for those adapting to new cultural or physical environments. By integrating local customs or norms into daily activities, adolescents can begin to feel more at home in their new settings. This adaptation process might include adopting local eating habits, participating in community activities, or learning and incorporating the local language into everyday use.

“I was very happy because when I arrived, I felt very lonely without friends in a foreign country where I don't know the language and don't know anything.” (F, 12 years old)

Emotional resilience is evident in adolescents' coping with challenging circumstances. Discussions often revolve around overcoming daily challenges as part of building resilience. Adolescents use various ways in which they adapt to changes and exhibit resilience, from forming new social bonds to creating routines that help them manage their new realities.

conversation about selling things made by the mother of one participant on Instagram and at fairs shows the family's adaptability and resilience in the face of difficult situations: *“Mom has been doing this in Ukraine as well, but it was more like a hobby because she works, has worked, and continues to work as a teacher of Ukrainian language and literature.”* (M, 14 years old). This adaptation to new economic and social realities reflects an aspiration to maintain a sense of normality and stability through creative activities.

As strategies for emotional protection, teenagers refer to two aspects: *managing free time* and *regulating the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)*. Adolescents place a significant emphasis on structuring their leisure time, acknowledging its critical role in maintaining emotional balance. A large

share of the mechanisms for regulating and managing leisure time discussed herein relates to the coping strategies presented earlier in the results section of this article. These strategies are not merely coping mechanisms, but also represent how adolescents reconstruct a sense of control and normality.

Adolescents discuss their feelings and emotions experienced in various contexts, such as playing Escape Room games or interacting with pets, emphasizing the importance of emotional support within the group: “*I heard the alert, I stopped searching. I wasn't scared*” (M, 17 years old); “*For me, my cat means... I'm not sure how to say... my best friend*” (F, 13 years old). These comments underscore the role of emotions in shaping expectations and navigating daily experiences.

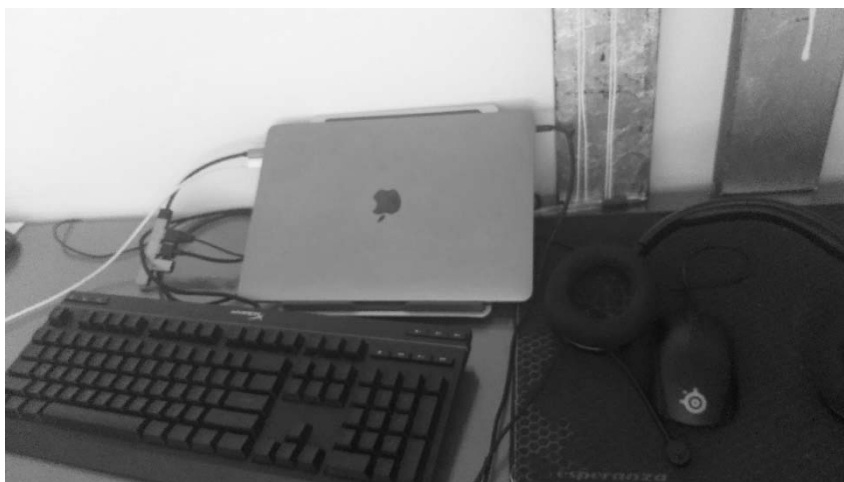
Regulating access to technology represents another important dimension. Adolescents are aware of the potential negative impacts of information overload, particularly in the context of an ongoing conflict that affects their families and communities directly or indirectly: “*We use technology, but we try not to lose ourselves in it, to ensure it does not impact us negatively.*” (F, 16 years old). This approach demonstrates an awareness of the need to balance connection and online presence with the overwhelming nature of war-related news. The use of ICT, mobile devices, and social networks by adolescents requires them to filter and control the information they receive, thus protecting themselves from the negative impact of news. Adolescents discuss the importance of carefully selecting the information they have access to and avoiding news that could exacerbate stress or anxiety. Adolescents discuss watching series and avoiding news about war as strategies to maintain their emotional balance. Focus group discussions have highlighted the challenge of avoiding ubiquitous content on social media platforms. Many adolescents emphasize the importance of periods in which they completely disconnect from digital devices. This may include time spent engaging in physical activities, face-to-face interactions, or hobbies that do not involve technology. Adolescents mention developing skills to filter and select online content, thereby avoiding overly graphic or violent news. ICT regulation is crucial for refugee adolescents, enabling them not only to stay safely connected but also to shield themselves from the potentially harmful effects of uncontrolled digital media consumption.

Co-researchers associate the alternative use of ICT with two needs: the need for entertainment and the maintenance of relationships with their extended family. For entertainment purposes, the majority of adolescents use their devices to engage in online gaming, either in real time or asynchronously. This activity serves as a form of leisure and provides a virtual space for

interaction and socialization, which is particularly valuable for maintaining a sense of normalcy and continuity in their disrupted lives. By participating in these gaming activities, adolescents associate this with an escape from the stresses of their daily realities, even if momentarily, and enjoy a sense of camaraderie with peers.

“I like playing online games, usually network games, and I am glad that there is internet here so I can continue playing. If there was no internet, I don't know what I would do all day, probably just stare at the ceiling.” (M, 15 years old)

Photo 1: Presented by an adolescent while discussing his daily routine.



It can be inferred from the general context that young individuals utilize technology to stay connected with family and friends: *“He calls us when he has time and can talk,”* says A. about his conversations with his brother.

The data reveals that adolescents not only use ICT for entertainment and personal enjoyment but also as a vital means of sustaining familial bonds that might otherwise be strained by geographical separation. Maintaining connections with extended family via ICT is a complex activity for adolescents. While it presents certain challenges, the benefits of sustaining these familial ties are profound and contribute significantly to young individuals' emotional well-being and cultural identity.

Adolescents extensively use various communication platforms, such as social media (Instagram, TikTok) and more direct messaging and video calling applications (Telegram, Viber, and WhatsApp). ICT allows for the continuation of familial relationships, despite physical barriers. Regular communication helps to keep family members involved in each other's lives,

fostering a sense of belonging and emotional support. Especially for adolescents facing the challenges of adapting to new environments, having a robust support system consisting of extended family members accessible via ICT can provide emotional grounding and a sense of security.

“I will return to Ukraine with my mother, younger brother, and older sister. We will meet up with our father and stay with other family members. We want to be together with them for the holidays. Even though it's risky, I'm anxious about what it will be like on the road, but we haven't seen our relatives since March and we want to go and be together.” (F, 15 years old)

8.4. Orientations in the context of forced migration

Building on the model of the classifications of the future as a social fact proposed by Beckert & Suckert (2021), the dimensions identified in our research on future orientations can be categorized as follows: *Construction process of future orientations*; *Space of the future*; and *Stability of the future*.

It is not surprising, given that the co-researchers are adolescents, that a significant part of the orientations concerning the future are presented as a fundamental part of identity construction (Future-based identity).

Exploring personal and community identity is strongly related to the *integration and acceptance in the host society*. Attending a local school comes with benefits related to social inclusion, the broadening of social networks, and cultural exchange.

“Yes, but have you tried to make Romanian friends, not just Ukrainian ones? For example, I go to a Romanian language school every afternoon and have made two friends there. We get along; we play Minecraft together, do streaming.” (M, 15 Years old)

They also speak about the challenges of integrating into the new community: *“Yes, but you need to know Romanian or English to make friends among them. I don't know.”* (F, 17 years old) This statement highlights the role of language in the integration process and in establishing new social relationships within the host society. According to UNHCR (2023), the education of refugee children in Cluj-Napoca has been problematic, with approximately 24% of the children from surveyed households not receiving any formal education, primarily due to language barriers. Participants comment on the challenges of focusing on education during wartime:

“Now, with the war, it's hard to concentrate on learning anything; it's been a year, and I don't know if I've learned anything new.” (F, 13 Years old)

It is noteworthy that adolescents report having only limited interactions with the host community and do not feel like active members of the local community, despite frequently expressing a need for acceptance and inclusion. Referring to the *spatial and temporal perceptions of the future* - the future was associated with specific geographical locations. However, how space and temporalities are perceived by adolescents differ from their current contexts. In several cases, imagined future locations might be an undefined 'somewhere else' rather than a specific place. Yet, a recurring theme in the spatial-geographical integration of the future is the desire to return to the country of origin.

“However, I still want to go home, I want us to return home as soon as possible. I've told my mom several times that we should go back, but she doesn't want to. After all, this isn't your country here, the same language isn't spoken. That's it.”
(F, 16 years old)

Departing from Beckert and Suckert's (2021) distinction between linear (viewing life as progressing linearly) and circular (being stuck in a moment due to uncertainty) conceptualizations, adolescents exhibited a mixed approach in this regard. These categories are intertwined in narratives regarding future orientation. While some adolescents have long-term orientations and expectations, their ability to plan in detail is simultaneously limited by the uncertainties of war.

Photo 2. Presented by a teenager while discussing the migration route from the beginning of the war until arriving in Cluj.



8.5. Stability of the future

The potential for perceptions of the future to change over time (Stability of the Future) is identified by adolescents as a distinctive feature of how the conflict situation in their country of origin might evolve. Most align their future dreams and aspirations with the hope of stability and security. They discuss the long-term impact of war on their lives: *“It's war! Do you realize that people are dying there?!”* (M, 15 years old)

Adolescents share insights into their family's actions to support their Ukrainian relatives or the Ukrainian army to reaffirm their belongingness. The glorifying and hopeful talk about the close victory of the Ukrainian army shapes their discourse, and some overlap their pictures and significance with popular heroic characters.

“The next picture, also with X, and written large ZSU (Armed Forces of Ukraine). We are very grateful to the army for defending our country. I also have an older brother who is a soldier, I appreciate him more since the war started and he went to fight. Many his age have fled or hidden; he went.” (M, 16 years old)

Adolescents recognize the potential for future perceptions to change over time, depending on the evolution of conflict. They align their future dreams with hopes for stability and security, discussing the war's long-term impact. Future orientations are seen as an integral part of their identity, with personal and Ukrainian community identity strongly linked to integration into the host community. Participants exhibit both linear and circular conceptualizations of time, reflecting aspirations for long-term stability while being constrained by the uncertainties of war.

9. Conclusion

In this participatory Photovoice study, we explored the current situation of Ukrainian adolescents who migrated to Romania. We employed a Photovoice approach (Wang and Burris 1997; Strack et al. 2004; Liebenberg 2018) to gain insight into adolescents' perceptions and experiences about what is meaningful to them in their everyday lives, in the current life context. Our research was developed in a participatory manner with 15 adolescents.

This research provides insights into the coping and agency mechanisms employed by adolescent refugees to manage their experiences of forced migration. The findings underscore the significant role of peer support in adolescent refugees' lives. Peer groups serve not only as social outlets, but also as critical support systems that facilitate emotional coping and adjustment to new environments. The shared experiences within these groups, whether through everyday activities or collective coping during stress, enhance their

resilience and provide a sense of normalcy. At the same time, friends provide a context for emotional regulation and adjustment of their emotional state when they safely allow for experiences, worries, and hopes to be shared and contained through age-specific communication. This is particularly relevant in cases where adolescents consider that sharing their emotions with their families would add to the already difficult state of the family, or that some topics, such as death, would create too much emotional fragility within their family.

Expanding social networks have been identified as a crucial coping mechanism. Adolescents rely on these networks for emotional support and to reduce feelings of isolation. Engagement in cultural and recreational activities is a vital component of adolescents' coping strategies. These activities not only offer distraction and relief from the stresses of displacement, but also aid in maintaining cultural connections and personal identities. The role of hobbies and recreation in fostering a sense of belonging and community among co-ethnicities is particularly emphasized.

Establishing and maintaining routines is crucial for creating a sense of stability and normalcy. Regular routines help adolescents manage uncertainty in their situations by providing structure and predictability. This aspect is particularly important for psychological well-being and integration into new social and educational settings. Despite the various coping mechanisms and support of peer groups, adolescents face significant challenges in adapting to new environments. Language barriers, educational disruptions, and cultural differences pose ongoing challenges.

The aspirations and future orientations of adolescent refugees are closely tied to their experiences of migration. Many express a desire to return to their home countries or to find stability and security. Their future planning is influenced by their current experiences and the coping strategies they have developed. Finally, we argue that a variety of agency strategies can be found in adolescents' narratives about how their lives unfold in the context of forced migration. Pursuing their hobbies, developing interactions with friends, or managing a daily routine while pragmatically accounting for the social constraints in which they are currently embedded are relevant means to produce subjectivity and improve their everyday lives.

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