

Research article

Ukrainians In Spain: Imaginaries And Discourses of Settlement Refugees In Low Population Density Areas

Ucranianas en España: Imaginarios y Discursos de Reasentamiento de Refugiados en Áreas de Baja Densidad Poblacional

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Abstract

Introduction: The war in Ukraine and the massive outflow of refugees in search of safety have marked a milestone in the history of refugee reception in Europe, remarkable for its speed and efficiency. Spain has quickly adapted its administration to receive thousands of Ukrainian refugees, many of whom have been resettled in low population density territories.
Methodology: This research uses a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugees to study their imaginaries and discourses about their resettlement in the

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province of Cuenca. **Discussion:** The study examines the extent to which low population density territories meet the needs of refugees and whether they fulfil the objective of being a good destination for their resettlement. **Conclusions:** The results provide valuable insights for refining refugee reception strategies and offer possible solutions to counteract the depopulation of low population density territories, thus presenting an opportunity to rejuvenate Spain's rural areas.

Keywords: Ukrainians; reception; refugees; resettlement; remote areas; integration; in-depth interviews; depopulation.

Resumen

Introducción: La guerra en Ucrania y la salida masiva de refugiados en busca de seguridad han marcado un hito en la historia de la acogida de refugiados en Europa, destacando por su rapidez y eficacia. España ha adaptado rápidamente su administración para acoger a miles de refugiados ucranianos, muchos de los cuales han sido reubicados en territorios de baja densidad demográfica. **Metodología:** Esta investigación utiliza un enfoque cualitativo mediante entrevistas en profundidad a refugiadas ucranianas para estudiar sus imaginarios y discursos sobre su reasentamiento en la provincia de Cuenca. **Discusión:** El estudio examina en qué medida los territorios de baja densidad demográfica satisfacen las necesidades de los refugiados y si cumplen con el objetivo de ser un buen destino para su reasentamiento. **Conclusiones:** Los resultados proporcionan valiosas ideas para perfeccionar las estrategias de acogida de refugiados y ofrecen posibles soluciones para contrarrestar la despoblación de los territorios de baja densidad poblacional, presentando así una oportunidad para rejuvenecer las zonas rurales españolas.

Palabras clave: Ucranianos; acogida; refugiados; reasentamiento; zonas remotas; integración; entrevistas en profundidad; despoblación.

1. Introduction

The war in Ukraine and the consequent departure of thousands of refugees seeking safety has been a milestone in terms of refugee reception processes in Europe due to the speed and efficiency with which it has taken place. Spain is one of the countries that has arranged an agile administration for the reception of refugees, receiving thousands of Ukrainian citizens relocated to different parts of the national territory.

Many of them are in low-density territories, areas marked by a continued process of depopulation that has plagued the country since the last third of the twentieth century (Fernández Prieto, 2016). This situation provides a unique opportunity to study the dynamics of refugee integration in areas struggling with population decline for decades.

The overall objective of this work is to study the effectiveness of the reception strategy for the Ukrainian population in low-density territories. This general objective has been pursued through two secondary objectives:

- 1) to assess the experience and degree of satisfaction of Ukrainians regarding their arrival and settlement process;
- 2) to identify key elements of Ukrainian refugee resettlement to develop strategies aimed at reversing the process of rural exodus, thus offering a new opportunity to revive depopulated Spanish territories.

To address these objectives, a purely qualitative research design has been proposed based on in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugees in the municipality of Cuenca. Cuenca is one of the municipalities most affected by the depopulation process in Spain.

The in-depth interviews will provide insights into the narratives and perceptions this population has developed during their asylum experience, helping to identify the successes and failures of the reception plan and the territory's suitability for this population. This approach will also shed light on how refugees adapt to new environments and their specific challenges in low-density areas.

The research focuses on the degree of satisfaction and personal fulfillment that low-density territories offer these refugees, considering various dimensions: housing, access to resources and services, labor opportunities, socialization, and cultural adjustment. Additionally, it examines whether these territories are seen as permanent destinations or temporary transit points (springboards) for refugees after fleeing the war.

The results of this research not only provide essential knowledge to inform future strategies for the accelerated reception of refugees in Spain but also offer valuable insights for developing strategies aimed at reversing the process of depopulation, thus presenting a new opportunity to revive Spain's low-density territories. This study aims to bridge the gap between immediate humanitarian needs and long-term regional development goals, ensuring a sustainable future for both refugees and host communities.

1.1. Reception and Settlement of Ukrainian Refugees in Spain

Following the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in mid-February 2022, the Ukrainian civilian population began seeking refuge in various European territories in search of safety. In response to this humanitarian crisis, the Spanish government implemented a reception plan through the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration (2023) to assist Ukrainians fleeing the war. This plan, executed in collaboration with the Autonomous Communities and Municipalities, offered 12,000 reception places.

The initiative was launched shortly after the European Union agreed on March 3, 2022, to provide temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine, applying this directive for the first time since its inception in 2001. One year after these events, Spain hosted more than 90,000 people across different territories. Part of this population has been resettled in areas of low demographic density, characterized by a significant depopulation process.

According to data from the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration as of January 15, 2023, the first Ukrainians arrived in Spain on March 9, 2022, with a continuous influx since then, with April and May 2022 being the months of highest intensity. Most arrivals are from Kiev, the capital (31.6%), the eastern province of Kharkiv (10.8%), and the coastal province of Odessa (9.8%), on the shores of the Black Sea. Various means of transport have been used to reach Spain, with air travel (42%), car (29%), and bus (24%) being predominant.

As of January 15, 2023, a total of 90,497 people has arrived in Spain due to the conflict, of whom 12,757 require shelter. The distribution of refugees across national territory has not been uniform, with the Valencian Community receiving the highest number of Ukrainians (34,649 persons), followed by Catalonia (31,347 persons) and the Community of Madrid (20,716 persons).

1.2. Spanish police to receive Ukrainian refugees

People of Ukrainian origin who have been fleeing the war since its outbreak in February 2022, regardless of the Member State they arrive in, could obtain a residence permit allowing them to enjoy the same social benefits as Spanish citizens. This measure applies to displaced persons from Ukraine since the onset of the war on February 24, 2022, as well as Ukrainian citizens who were in Spain on that date and unable to return, including cases of both regular and irregular situations. It encompasses Ukrainian nationals residing in Ukraine, those from third countries, or stateless individuals with legal residence permits in Ukraine, as well as their partners and children without Spanish nationality.

The reception and integration process for refugees in Spain is conducted under the Program for the Reception and Integration of Persons Requesting International Protection by the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration. This program involves two phases: Firstly, it operates based on the autonomy acquired by each participant through the state network, including Refugee Reception Centers (CAR) under the Ministry, and other subsidized facilities managed by non-profit organizations such as Red Cross, ACCEM, or CEAR. These entities coordinate with the Ministry to determine capacity across different regions of Spain. The initial phase focuses on providing basic needs and supporting individuals in acquiring skills necessary for independent living (Ministry, 2023). The second phase begins after individuals complete their stay in shelters, requiring ongoing support such as financial aid for rent and continued attention to basic needs.

Throughout these phases, the reception and social integration process in Spain for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection revolves around nine fundamental aspects. These include ensuring basic needs such as food, safety, health, clothing, and accommodation upon arrival in hostels or hotels, followed by transition to centers and eventually autonomous housing. Legal assistance is provided to ensure equal access to International Protection rights, including guidance and support for application procedures and related formalities like approval, inadmissibility, or denial. Moreover, efforts focus on enhancing personal autonomy through tailored socio-labor interventions that facilitate environmental adaptation, language acquisition, orientation, job training, housing search, and promotion of networks and equal citizen participation in host societies.

1.3. Key questions on settling refugees

Resettlement is one of the key issues in the refugee reception process, as the territory has a decisive influence on the possibilities and limitations, they can experience in developing their lives. Depending on the context, a person will be able to develop more or less fully depending on the opportunities it offers and the kindness with which he or she is received. These issues will not only condition their future position within the group but also their physical and psychological health (Byrow et al., 2020; Danso, 2002; Lebano et al., 2020).

Therefore, the resettlement process is strongly linked to other cross-cutting reception issues, such as the integration process and well-being. However, these areas have been extensively addressed with other mobility groups, such as migrants; in the case of refugees, they take on a more sensitive nuance because, on many occasions, these people come from traumatic experiences, such as war and persecution.

In terms of well-being, various studies have indicated that it is significantly influenced by a range of elements impacting overall quality of life.

Key factors affecting well-being include the psychological impacts of past traumas, challenges faced during adaptation to a new environment, the experience of losing one's cultural heritage, and the availability of emotional and practical support systems. These elements play a crucial role in shaping the refugees' overall sense of well-being and their ability to navigate their new circumstances effectively (Carswell et al., 2011)

Regarding the process of integration, this is a concept with a long presence in the literature on migration and refugee status. However, its meaning has varied considerably over time, with multiple frameworks of interpretation existing today. Traditionally, integration was understood mainly from an administrative point of view, considering that a person was integrated to the extent that he or she had acquired the host country's citizenship (Strang & Ager, 2010; Strang & Quinn, 2021).

Over time, this perspective was problematized, with the realization that the individual's fulfillment and development within society were important indicators for measuring the level of integration. As a result, new frameworks began to be created that pointed to different areas or domains to assess the success of integration: means (employment, housing, education and health) sociability, facilitators (language, stability, etc.) and foundations (Ager & Strang, 2008). However, integration is not only linked to material issues such as access to and availability of resources, but also involves symbolic aspects such as culture.

An important part of the debates on integration has discussed how to reconcile the culture of origin with the culture of destination. Traditionally, the prevailing perspective was the assimilationist one, which considered it appropriate for the refugee or migrant to adopt the customs of the host society and abandon his or her own. Nevertheless, this perspective was problematized by the identity conflicts arising from such acculturation.

Recently, new approaches that are more respectful of refugees' culture and identity have gained considerable popularity, promoting bottom-up strategies, i.e. strategies that place the individual at the center of the design and development of integration plans (Phillimore, 2011; Strang and Quinn, 2021). This way, specific needs can be identified and the plan's chances of success increase.

This is beneficial for the well-being of the individuals and the host society, which invests resources in favor of integration. It is important to remember that migration and refugee projects often do not end once people are settled; they may consider the host place as a place of transit if it does not meet their needs. It is, therefore, crucial to know their objectives so that the investment in integration is optimal and in line with their needs.

1.4. Settlement Refugees in Low Population Density Areas

Within refugee resettlement research, resettlement in remote, rural or poor areas is particularly interesting. These territories are often characterized by low economic activity, which can translate into deprivation for the newly arrived population, as they may not offer sufficient employment opportunities, adequate housing, or a sufficient population to enable them to achieve the social capital necessary to thrive and fulfill themselves as individuals.

Regarding sociability, these territories present an ambivalence. On the one hand, they can be spaces with less diversity and fewer opportunities for group building than urban centers. However, they can offer an environment of greater social friendliness, less isolation, and easier socialization due to a more cohesive social fabric (Gauci, 2020).

In addition to the challenges that this type of resettlement poses, there are beneficial aspects for both the refugee and host populations. Integration process was a 'two-way process', implying that it involves not only the refugee but also the host population and that both groups undergo change (Phillimore, 2021). This means the adjustment between refugee and territory must also occur between the host and receiving populations. This adjustment varies depending on the cultural or ethnic markers and ethnic biases that the host population faces, affecting levels of integration.

Regardless of ethnic prejudice and the level of inclusiveness of the receiving society, most research agrees that the reception of migrants or refugees in these territories is particularly beneficial, as it addresses the main problems afflicting these places (Galera et al., 2018; Gauci, 2020). On the one hand, it can reverse depopulation processes and, on the other, activate the local economy.

Some studies even show how refugees have enabled the recovery of traditional labor practices that had fallen into disuse through their assimilation. However, while these groups may be highly desirable at the political level, they may not achieve the same degree of acceptance among the local population.

2. Methodology

By the state of the art and the literature review, the research has set as an objective to collect the imaginaries and discourses of refugees about their settlement in Spain in territories of low demographic density. The overall objective of this work is to study the effectiveness of the reception strategy for the Ukrainian population in low-density territories. This general objective has been pursued through two secondary objectives:

- 1) to assess the experience and degree of satisfaction of Ukrainians regarding their arrival and settlement process;
- 2) to identify key elements of Ukrainian refugee resettlement to develop strategies aimed at reversing the process of rural exodus, thus offering a new opportunity to revive depopulated Spanish territories.

To meet these objectives, a purely qualitative approach based on semi-structured in-depth interviews was used. The fieldwork was carried out in the province of Cuenca, where a total of 10 surveys were conducted with Ukrainian women. The reason for choosing to work only with women lies in the fact that in this episode the displacement has been mostly executed by women, since men have been forced to stay in Ukraine fighting in the war.

Although it is true that there are some exceptions, we have chosen to have a non-mixed sample that would allow for greater completeness, focusing on the majority profile of the subjects that make up the phenomenon. In addition to gender, a broad set of variables was considered for the sample design to achieve the greatest heterogeneity of profiles and discourses.

The variables considered were: whether they knew people in Spain before their arrival, whether they have a reunited family and whether they have dependents, in addition to sociodemographic variables such as age or socioeconomic status.

The tool used to collect information for the analysis was the in-depth interview. The interviews in question were semi-structured to give the interviewer room to maneuver, given the delicate situation of the interviewees, and to achieve greater depth of responses encouraged by a dynamic interaction with the interviewee.

To conduct the interviews, a guide was prepared, structured in thematic blocks and predefined questions on the main areas of interest. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. After transcription, a preliminary analysis was carried out by means of labeling to identify topics of interest for the research.

The fieldwork was subject to two important limitations. The first limitation we had to face was the language barrier, as neither the team members nor the interviewees, given their recent arrival, had a common language. Therefore, the use of a simultaneous translator was required during the interviews. The analyses were carried out with Nvivo12 software.

The second limitation has to do with the well-being and psychological state of the people interviewed, given their situation of having fled the war, which is still ongoing, and having family members still in the conflict. This issue has affected the research on many levels; on the one hand, it has made it difficult to recruit subjects for the sample.

In addition, being a sensitive and potentially hurtful topic, talking about their situation was considered during the fieldwork, respecting people and trying to avoid any possible adverse effect, which had an impact on the length of the interviews.

This study was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Pontificia de Comillas (Madrid) as part of a larger research project. The objective of the research, the guarantee of their anonymity, the introduction of the interviewer, and the confidentiality of the data collected were explained to the interviewees.

Informed consent was signed, and any doubts were resolved before starting the interview. All of them agreed to participate and to be recorded only for research purposes to transcribe the interview.

3. Results

The main findings of the analyses carried out are presented below. The results are presented in thematic blocks according to the research design.

3.1. Departure from Ukraine and arrival in Spain

The war is a devastating event, and this is how the women express it during the interviews. Some of them cry, others become tearful, and others show difficulties in relating the facts. For this reason, when the subject of the war was discussed at the beginning of the interviews, it was done as gently as possible so as not to stir up the pain of the interviewees.

However, it became clear that the same episode encompasses a multitude of experiences. The distance with which the armed conflict was experienced, as well as who they lost in the war or left behind in their flight, are differential aspects when recalling the events.

One of the participants mentions that living in a place close to the Russian border, she had to leave the country at a very early stage to avoid seeing the conflict directly: *"Well, I was in Ukraine, it's the city of the first occupiers, right? So, I didn't suffer as much as other communities, and I was there for a very short time. I, just escaped because now it's much worse". (P10).*

Two other interviewees, on the other hand, were on vacation outside the country when the war broke out, which not only allowed them to avoid the conflict but also allowed them to leave the country accompanied by their husbands. This was an exceptional circumstance, as the Ukrainian state obliges all men to join the army during wartime.

Not only the experience of the war but also the journey to Spain has been very different from them. Although regardless of the route followed or the means of transport used, mainly by road, although some did it by plane, the people interviewed do not reveal it as a particularly traumatic episode. On the contrary, they relate it, showing gratitude towards the organizations and civilian volunteers who helped them.

These results should be relativized in order not to generalize them to the rest of the population, recognizing that for many people, fleeing the war and leaving Ukraine has been a traumatic episode. The trip, in general, was carried out in several stages. They started with a first stop in Poland from where they left for one of the main cities in Spain, Madrid or Barcelona, to be relocated in Cuenca finally.

The resettlement process also varies significantly. Some interviewees participated in choosing their relocation site, while others, such as participant 10, due to her age and her son's disability, faced a high level of dependency, passively accepting the Administration's decisions regarding their relocation and subsistence.

3.2. Housing

Upon arrival, all the people interviewed were provided with housing, thanks to the social entities that manage the ministry's shelter program, which offers resources at the national level. Regarding housing, there were two types of situations: those who stayed in a hotel and those who lived in a house, alone or shared, with the help of the shelter program:

Red Cross has left me an apartment because I cannot pay for the apartment. Because for my retirement I have only 100 euros and a son because of his disability has €50 a month, so with this very little we cannot rent and Red Cross rented the apartment. (P1).

People in this situation showed a high level of satisfaction and optimism even in cases where housing was shared with other refugees.

About housing, we are in the Red Cross program, yes, we are in the Red Cross program, and we live in a, let's say, a house, okay, we share this house with 3, with 3 other families. I live with my husband and a child. We like it very much, well, between everything there is and what I have, I like it very much because I have my own room, I have my child's toys, I have resources, since the Red Cross gives us the most basic and most necessary things, they cover us, okay and well, that's why I am satisfied and very happy because we have the most essential things.

On the other hand, most people staying in hotels show a very contrary position. The accommodation in hotels is temporary during the first phase of the reception. Once this phase is over, the refugees must look for accommodation.

It is that as Red Cross has the phases, and as I finished the first phase, then now I must become independent now that it is in the second phase. So, I have to look for the apartment and rent it. I have two months left to find an apartment, and I am now looking for it. (P5).

Well, I live with my husband and our two children. And since we has already finished the first phase, and in the second phase, we must rent her apartment... (P1).

And although the search for housing is supported by the shelter program, they live the wait with anguish and uncertainty as they understand their situation as precarious, due to their refugee status and the territorial context.

to rent the apartment in Cuenca is... You have to be very, very lucky. because I am thinking that since the Red Cross is with many people in Cuenca, they (the landlords) think that since we are refugees, we don't have a salary, tomorrow they will leave and leave the apartment. (P2).

3.3. Labor situation

The fieldwork was carried out at an early stage of the people's reception, so none of them had managed to find employment yet. As one of the participants mentions: *"Well, about work. As I have never worked because I am a newcomer, I was not working in Spain, I can't say anything about work"* (P4). However, most of these people did perform care work, being in charge of dependents, such as children or family members with disabilities.

The welcome program includes attendance at job training courses to facilitate the insertion of people of working age. However, they are generally dissatisfied with these courses. Their criticism focuses on the difficulty in understanding the content: *"Sure, and now it is in these courses, and I don't understand anything at all and it is very difficult for me. It is very complicated with these charcuterie courses and..."* (P6). They believe that this situation prevents them from taking advantage of the courses and hinders their insertion into the labor market.

I was also in classes at the beginning, in the Red Cross, right? And then, I was in classes to learn about butchery, delicatessen, fishmongers, everything. And of course, since I didn't learn very well, it has yet to reach the level of knowledge so much. (P7).

In addition, they also express dissatisfaction with the mandatory nature of the courses, as they perceive it as a threat and a control mechanism.

My daughter works and, well, she goes on courses as well and I as I was not in the courses, it is mandatory for most of them. For, you know... For most of them it is a big problem, because the mandatory courses: one day you fail, you can leave the program already. (P3).

3.4. Imaginaries and Discourses about Cuenca and Spain

With the exception of two participants, most of the sample had no prior relationship with Cuenca or Spain. The ex-husband of Interviewee 6, with whom she currently lived in Cuenca, had migrated years earlier. Interviewee 4 also maintained a relationship with a cousin who had arrived in the area earlier due to the war.

The rest of the participants, in addition to having no connections in the region, had very little prior knowledge about it. Their image of Spain before arriving was formed by a vague notion of its climate: *"I only knew that it was hot. [they laugh] and nothing else about Spain."* (P6); the Latin character; or atavistic notions of folklore, such as bullfighting.

In turn, they conceive of Spain as a remote place, where they never would have thought of going. This idea is widely shared and is concretized in the expression mentioned by Interviewee 9 when she paraphrases her daughter saying: *"Spain is where Christ lost his flip-flop"* (P9). However, this sensation of physical and symbolic distance from Spain, instead of producing estrangement from the environment, ends up playing in favor of their well-being, as the distance from the war reinforces a feeling of security.

And now the second war has passed. That is why it is very far from Ukraine, which is not a neighbor, you know? It is very far away. And she is very happy. The only thing that, well, she's not working, she doesn't have a job. (P7).

This situation, along with the challenges posed by the resettlement process such as learning the language or trying to continue their lives in a new place, enhances the oasis effect, allowing them to avoid suffering.

Well, I in Ukraine, I am the city of those who were the first occupiers, right? So, it has not suffered as much as other communities, and I had very little time. I escaped just escaped because now it's much worse. And so, I didn't have so much, you know, but all this situation that is here is a little bit stressful for me and the language has helped her because it's distracting, studying the language, culture, tradition and all this, it distracts and they don't have, I don't suffer so much because of, you know, it doesn't overwhelm. (P6).

However, this distance from their homeland not only provides a refuge from the horrors of war but also brings a sense of sadness and guilt for the perceived forgetfulness, as reflected in the attitudes of some participants.

On a shared basis, they show a very good general opinion of Spain and specifically of Cuenca. The arguments supporting this idea are built on three pillars, all related to environmental issues: the climate, the landscape, and the character of the people.

Most of them point out how pleasant the climate is for them, which is one of the most significant factors for choosing it as a resettlement destination.

Well, why did I choose Spain? Well one of the reasons is because it is very hot, it is the country where I was looking for the least cold and the hottest. Another reason, the language is easier, lighter, softer, prettier, cooler, that's why I was choosing Spain. (P5).

And for forming their positive opinion about the country: *"I love Spain, I like everything because it is very beautiful, but it is very hot."* (P1)

Although the climate plays an ambiguous role, on the one hand they celebrate the warmth of the new territory, while on the other, they miss the snow of their homeland. The snow, which initially is an adverse phenomenon for daily life, encapsulates an emotional component linked to the shelter of home, family, land, and ultimately the homeland.

Along with the climate, nature also plays a central role in their discourse to express their satisfaction with the area: *"I love nature. I like nature very much!"* (P5). Again, the differences between the current territory and their homeland play an ambivalent role. In some cases, the difference is valued.

Well, I always dreamed of living in a city where there are many mountains and I have fulfilled my dream, to live where there are many mountains, if Cuenca is so beautiful, but Cuenca is very beautiful. I really like being in Cuenca. (P7).

While in other cases, the similarity is appreciated: *"What do I miss? Our mountains. And now when I come to Cuenca and there are mountains, it's like a sign of life. It's mine and I don't leave here [they laugh]."* (P9).

Regarding the environment, they not only value nature, but also how pleasant the city is for them in terms of beauty, size, and the services it offers.

I am very happy, very happy to be here in Spain, in Cuenca from the first day that I got here, I love landscapes, nature, city and everything, I enjoy a lot going up in the Plaza Mayor or down here in the city, walking and strolling a lot, I have Spanish friends, and among them 5 Cármenes. (P3).

I wasn't looking at some of them in cultural centers, I didn't participate, I was much more at home. Then, I like everything, the most is landscapes, the mountains, nature, on the street, yes, he loves it. I really like the old town, which is very beautiful, architecture and all this. (P10).

Also, from city very small, from city very small, but it is from city in Ukraine that, yes it is small, but I did not have so many possibilities as I have here in Cuenca. In Cuenca I have many possibilities to find work, there are many things for the children, like the swimming pool, they have gymnastics...that children have gymnastics, acrobatics, they have many activities like now for example science, this that is a lookout, you know, some I don't remember if activities, that there are many activities for children. They like them a lot. Oh, then I also have a girl with a very serious and important disability, so I am very grateful to the rehabilitation doctors, I have many things for her, to adapt here. They have helped me a lot to buy the prosthesis, helped a lot with doctors treatments and then confirms that I cannot say about others like countries or whatever, but yes it was very much, they help many here there are resources for Ukrainians like me, refugees as a refugee who receive a lot of support among volunteers there, among Red Cross, Caritas, that there are many resources for them to support here. I like it very much. (P8).

Although the level of satisfaction with the city, especially regarding its size, depends greatly on the size of their place of origin. People from larger cities do not find it entirely satisfactory: *"Well, as her hometown Mariúpol is very big, but very big, she is used to living in very big cities, you know? So, in Cuenca for her it is a little bit, it is very little"* (translator about P7).

Other deficiencies they point out as problematic include the condition or sufficient provision of some public facilities, which not only compromises their satisfaction with the environment but also reduces perceived levels of safety in public spaces:

Ah, well, I wanted to comment from the beginning, from the beginning when I arrived in Spain, I was very scared of the graffiti on the walls and I have a lot of graffiti, even in churches it is growing, everything, so I don't control it, whatever, and what happens, why? it is a shock. Until today, I can't, I can't understand and I'm very afraid of graffiti, it's very scary, okay? (P2).

We don't like it, come on, we don't like it at all, just like other Ukrainian girls that we commented that there are very few things for children. There are only parks, and the parks are a little bit broken, abandoned and mixed with dogs, what we talked about. [They laugh] You know, where children play, there are dogs, what...I mentioned it. (P7).

Another element questioned is the quality of public services received. At times, the level of satisfaction with public services is worse than in their country of origin, which leads them to experience a bad feeling: *"If I need an ultrasound or whatever, they do it tomorrow, you know? In Ukraine it's... They are all used to it being fast. Not here. That's why, you know, I'm surprised, I'm surprised."* (P9).

3.5. Imaginaries and Discourses about Future

In terms of their imaginary and vision of their life project in the medium to long term, there are three types of discourse:

- 1) Those who like Spain and aspire to stay;
- 2) Those who are less fond of the country and aspire to return; and
- 3) Refugees who are marked by total uncertainty.

War is a fundamental element, since it is the common denominator for the construction of the three types of discourses. The first ones, optimistic about their relocation, warn that their home in Ukraine is not the same after the devastation of the war and find in Spain a good option from where to start from scratch a new life project, far from the pain and the rubble of war.

It is that the house, what I had is destroyed, it is destroyed. And I have nowhere to go back to. I have nowhere to go back to. On top of that, that city is occupied by Russians with enemies who have destroyed all my life. I don't want to go back where it is no longer mine, everything is destroyed. Now it is here. (P7).

The second type of discourse, the one that longs to return, is built on the feeling of hope of those who aspire to regain their previous life, their land and social relations, once the war is over. For these people Spain is presented as the oasis where they can spend their waiting time: *"I miss Ukraine a lot less, but nature is also good, and everything is also nice, and of course, I want to go back, but until the war is over, I cannot go back, I adapt to anything."* (P10).

The last position, of uncertainty, is characterized by bewilderment, a dizziness, shock in which they have not even asked themselves the question of the future because they live in an impasse that keeps them in time as long as the war lasts.

I was commenting before that I still don't know about the future, if it goes this way or that way, you know that life is... I already have habits here, it's already difficult to think that I'm going to come back, but you know. (P6).

In turn, these discourses are related in a very important way to certain social positionings, demarcated by different issues. One of the most determining aspects is age; older people do not stop elaborating plans but prioritize staying with the family and long for home, sustaining a melancholic vision of life going back is their ultimate aspiration. Young families of working age, show a greater capacity for resilience and ability to overcome adversity, they can adapt and develop strategies to safeguard their environment whose ultimate goal is the welfare of the family.

As everything I have already achieved so much, in the short term quite a lot of things and as I am very young, and all life is for future, yes, for ahead and I have very good future, I already started to build, to pursue, to build my skyscraper, my skyscraper, and well, you know. And, as my mother is also 52 years old and she can't go out and is a pity because they don't want to come, but she herself says that we are right that she is young, and she has her life ahead of her. (P9).

That is another fundamental element, the situation of the close family, those divided families in which one of the parents, mainly the husband, although there is also the case of women who are forced to stay because they have a job of primary necessity, are generally unable to disengage in their imagination about the future outside Ukraine. Another important element, in addition to age and family grouping, is the experience in the host country, which is strongly determined, in the presence of children, by their degree of satisfaction: *"my daughter plays basketball, she is happy here"*. (P4).

The children, if there are any, are the cornerstone for the configuration of life projects, their well-being in the territory is key for the parents to see the possibilities of a future in the new country. An example of this was the bad experience of interviewee 5, in which one of her children suffered bullying during summer school; this fact is presented as a traumatic event that tinges on her expertise in the country with uneasiness and rejection. Another example of the significant influence children has in shaping certain plans is the words of interviewee 8. in which her main objective is to satisfy her daughter's desires: *"And I tell her that now we must live for the children. For the children. It is our future. It is the future."* (P5).

4. Discussion

The analysis of the perceptions, discourses, and imaginaries of Ukrainian refugees in Spain, resettled in low-density population areas, reveals key elements, limitations, and successes of the reception program. The research results indicate that the fast-track administrative model for welcoming the Ukrainian population has been highly effective.

The reduction in administrative processing time, along with the automatic granting of residence and work permits, and streamlined procedures in health and education, have facilitated quick settlement with minimal bureaucratic burden. These measures are exceptional, contrasting sharply with the reality for conventional asylum seekers, who typically experience long waiting periods and administrative rigidity, negatively impacting their stress and frustration levels (Fee, 2022).

These issues were not found among the Ukrainian refugees studied, who did not express any dissatisfaction with their interactions with the administration upon arrival in Spain.

Regarding territorial relocation in low-density areas, refugees have found Cuenca to be a highly suitable destination due to its positive eco-social environment. The geographical distance from the conflict, the scenic value of the Serranía de Cuenca, the climate, the welcoming attitude of the local population, and the public cultural offerings have all contributed to Cuenca's appeal as a refuge from the harsh realities of their homeland.

However, the size of the refugees' hometowns influences their perception of the territory's potential. Refugees from large Ukrainian cities generally display less enthusiasm than those from smaller or similarly sized areas, likely due to differing expectations and previous experiences.

Other two important negative aspects of the environment are the quality and deterioration of street furniture, which intensify the feeling of public insecurity, and the quality of the health service, which, from the refugees' perspective, is deficient compared to that of their country of origin. This observation is part of a broader critique of the decline in public health services in low-density areas.

The study, conducted at an early stage, has not yielded definitive findings regarding successful integration in terms of employment and housing. However, it highlights two emerging issues. On the one hand, relocating people en masse to hotels presents difficulties. Hotels, being transient spaces, raise concerns about housing stability, which can have a considerable negative impact on individuals' emotional and psychological well-being.

In addition, having to leave on a fixed date increases the stress related to rent-seeking, which is perceived as difficult due to the context of a territory with few opportunities and the perception of refugee status as a constraint. On the other hand, the training courses designed for future job integration have proven ineffective. Participants struggle to assimilate the content, feel lost, and perceive these courses as a waste of time and a form of control, as attending them is a condition for receiving aid.

Finally, concerning their plans and the consideration of a sparsely populated territory as a permanent or temporary residence, it has been observed that the characteristics of the environment are secondary in elaborating these plans. The refugees' personal situation is most influential, especially with the war and the family.

The ongoing war limits their ability to plan for the future. Some consider the war a turning point and consider Spain a possible place to start afresh rather than returning to their conflict-torn country. This perspective is more common among those who have reunited families, are young, or have children who have adapted well. The well-being of children is the main concern of adults, who assess their well-being in terms of their children's adaptation.

As all participants in the study were women, it is impossible to analyze the results in terms of gender. However, it is hypothesized that the centrality of the family may be related to the greater socialization into care that women tend to experience.

In summary, our work aligns with previous studies indicating that small cities and low-density areas are positive environments for the relocation of individuals (Galera et al., 2018; Gauci, 2020). However, we emphasize that this is particularly advantageous for those fleeing dangerous situations such as war.

These areas are perceived as oases of tranquility compared to their places of origin. Nonetheless, physical and socio-cultural distance can generate negative feelings such as guilt or longing. Therefore, it would be beneficial to encourage the formation of refugee communities with a common background to maintain links with their home society and support their integration more effectively.

Another important aspect to consider in developing refugee reception plans is promoting a bottom-up perspective. Some reception strategies, such as using hotels for temporary housing or mandatory integration courses, have proved problematic in not following this perspective.

This will not only allow for better management of resources and avoid unnecessary expenses but will also help to reduce negative experiences of anxiety and stress associated with meeting deadlines or demands, thus promoting better development of individuals.

In addition, valuable information has been obtained that could contribute to developing strategies to counteract the depopulation process. The socio-ecological context of Cuenca has proven to be an attractive place for the development of life, with a landscape and urban value that reflects a good quality of life.

However, it is essential to address important challenges such as the adequate provision of housing, employment and public resources, especially in the area of health, to ensure that residents can develop a satisfactory life (Carazo Sánchez, 2021; Domínguez Álvarez, 2020).

5. Conclusions

This paper has analyzed the discourses and imaginaries of Ukrainian women war refugees about their resettlement process in Cuenca, a region with low population density. The study has revealed findings in three areas: how to improve the relocation strategies of people in general, evaluate the suitability of these spaces for the relocation of refugees and find keys to stop the depopulation that affects these territories in Spain.

Regarding the reception process, positive aspects such as the rapid intervention and the low bureaucratic burden were highlighted, which has generated a mostly positive perception among the refugees. However, deficiencies were identified in “top-down” approaches, especially in areas such as housing and job placement, which have caused anxiety and stress, as well as wasting resources by not adapting to individual needs and capacities. These approaches should be replaced by more flexible strategies focused on personal needs.

The relocation of refugees to areas of low population density has been a wise choice, highlighting the socio-ecological value, the beauty of the surroundings, the climate and the tranquility, which have offered a haven of peace. However, the physical and geographical distance from their places of origin has generated feelings of guilt and homesickness. Therefore, it would be useful to combine the tranquility offered by distance with strategies to maintain a link with their countries of origin.

Finally, to curb depopulation in these territories, it is suggested to take advantage of the benefits of these places, such as tranquility and nature, to attract young families. However, important shortcomings, such as the negative perception of health services due to long waiting times and the deterioration of public infrastructures, need to be addressed to make these places more attractive to live in.

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