

Country Profile

Ukraine

Migration and Skill Corridors

Iryna Lapshyna, Ukrainian Catholic University

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This report examines Ukraine's significant population decline and emigration, focusing on migration patterns before and after the launch of Russia's war against Ukraine. It highlights two key migration corridors: the established Ukraine-Poland skill corridor and the emerging Ukraine-Netherlands corridor. The report reveals that Ukrainians in these host countries have high employment rates, especially compared to other refugee groups. Despite this, many employed displaced Ukrainians face significant skill mismatches, working in jobs unrelated to their previous professions in Ukraine. The report underscores the exceptional scale of forced migration due to the war and the ongoing uncertainty surrounding Ukraine's migration trends.

Produced by the EU-funded Link4Skills research project, this profile is part of a series providing relevant information about countries where the project is conducting empirical fieldwork. Our focus is on transnational labour migration with particular attention given to migration skill corridors. Countries investigated by the consortium include Austria, Canada, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Morocco, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland and Ukraine.

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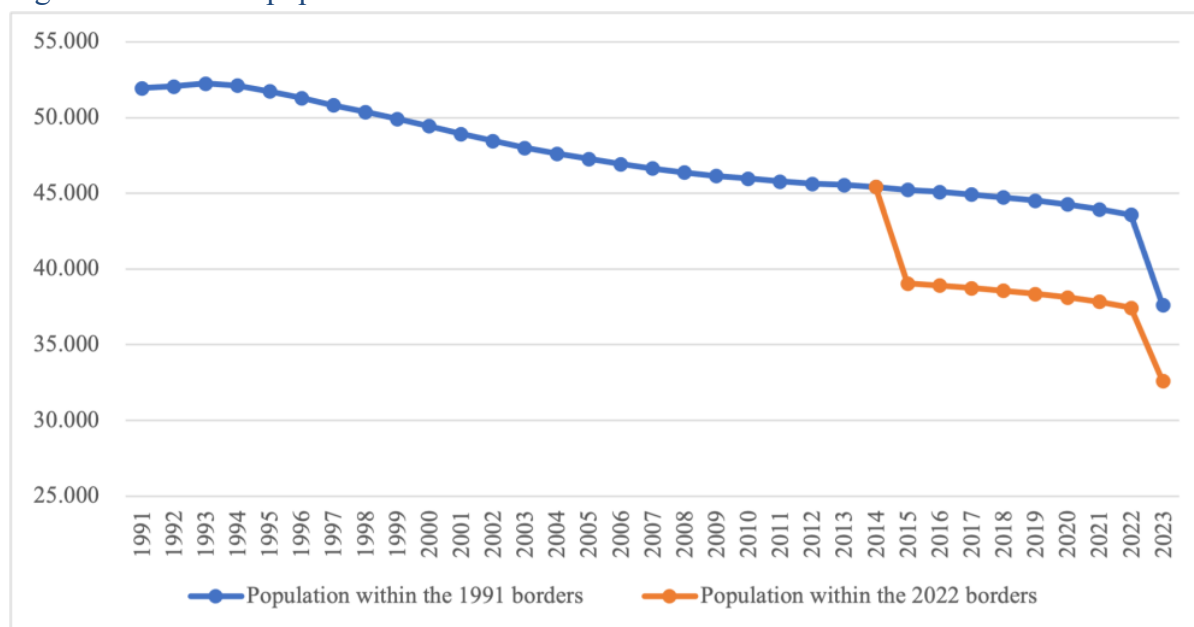
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1. Introduction

Ukraine: a country with high emigration

Emigration from Ukraine has been significant in the past few decades. The country's population has declined markedly (see Figure 1) and the society as a whole is ageing rapidly. Ukraine's population shrank from almost 52 million in 1994 to about 41 million in 2022 (a 20 % drop). This is due to high emigration coupled with high death and low birth rates ([State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2021](#)).

Figure 1: Ukraine's population within its borders before and after Russia's full-scale invasion



Source: State Statistics Service of Ukraine

During the Soviet era, Ukrainians were identified as the “most mobile group in the USSR”. More recently, Ukraine was ranked among the ten countries with the highest emigration levels in the world ([United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020](#)).

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has been torn between Russia and the West. Its government has long sought to join NATO, and in 2022 Ukraine applied to become a member of the European Union. These developments have shaped migration flows to, through, and from the territory of present-day Ukraine.

During its first years of independence, almost 85 % of Ukrainian migrants lived in other former Soviet countries, most of them in Russia. Thereafter, emigrants increasingly chose other destinations. The number of Ukrainian migrants in the USA, Canada, Western and Central Europe, and Australia rose from 700,000 in 1991 to at least 2.5 million in 2017. Their share of the total number of Ukrainians who moved abroad has increased from 13 % to 38 % ([McAuliffe, M. and Triandafyllidou, A., 2021](#)). In total, 6.1 million Ukrainian migrants lived abroad in

2020, making Ukraine the eighth most significant country of origin in the world. Ukraine is also one of the top recipients of migrant remittances in Europe, accounting for 10% of the country's GDP ([United Nations, 2020](#)).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has dramatically affected the Ukrainian population, with displacement occurring on an unprecedented scale. As of 1 July 2023, the population of Ukraine was estimated to be 36,7 million people ([United Nations, 2023](#)). By the end of 2023, there were about 4.2 million displaced persons from Ukraine in the EU and about 700,000 in other western countries (USA, Canada, UK and Turkey). Another 3.7 million to 4.8 million are displaced within Ukraine. In total, at the peak of forced migration, 13,14 million Ukrainians were fleeing from the Russian invasion. At the beginning of 2024, there were still 10.8 million persons displaced internally or internationally.

Various forecasts have been made about the possible size of Ukraine's population after hostilities finally end. Estimates range between 24 million and 35 million. They also predict that by 2030 Ukrainian society may be one of Europe's oldest, with a high proportion of the population dealing with disabilities or suffering from illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression ([Rogoza, 2023](#)).

2. Migration Corridors

Among the various migration skill corridors involving Ukraine, two stand out: the well-established corridor between Ukraine and Poland, and the emerging corridor between Ukraine and the Netherlands.

2.1 An established migration skill corridor: Ukraine-Poland

Poland is one of the main destination countries for Ukrainians migrants. Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ukrainians were by far the largest immigrant group in Poland. The increase in the number of Ukrainian migrants arriving in Poland began soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Post-communist transition in Ukraine opened up avenues for international mobility. In this initial period, Ukrainians mainly emigrated to Poland for small-scale business as well as for family reasons. Over time there was an increase in seasonal circular migration for work in agriculture and services ([Jaroszewicz, Krepa, 2024](#)). After 2006 and the introduction of a new labour migration scheme, there was an increase in temporary migration for work which included many Ukrainian citizens. Several factors contributed to the growth in the number of Ukrainian migrants moving to Poland. These include extensive pre-existing migration networks, the languages proximity, the possibility of maintaining transnational lives, and low migration.

The eruption of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 (and the subsequent economic recession in Ukraine) resulted in significant emigration of Ukrainian workers to Poland. Meanwhile, the liberalisation of regulations on employment of foreigners in Poland and an increase in activity by recruitment agencies in both Poland and Ukraine have led to intensifying movements within the already established migration corridor between the two countries (Górny et al. 2018). Between

2013 and 2018 there was substantial growth in the number of Ukrainian migrants classified as seasonal workers, work permits holders, residence permit holders, and students.

Since the EU introduced visa-free travel for Ukrainians in 2017, there has been a marked increase in the flow of Ukrainians to EU countries. Due to extensive migration networks and liberal residence and work permit regulations, Poland has become the main destination country within the EU, hosting over 1.3 million Ukrainians in 2019 ([Koval, Vaičiūna, 2021](#)). Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine accelerated pre-war migration trends within the migration corridor. Poland opened its borders and became the primary recipient of Ukrainians fleeing the war. By October of 2023, over 950,000 Ukrainians with temporary-protection status were registered in Poland ([UNHCR, 2023](#)).

It is worth noting that 50% of Ukrainian refugees in Poland have a university degree, and they are very active in the labour market ([Narodowy Bank Polski, 2022](#)). However, most who are employed work in a profession different from the one they worked in previously. In 46% of the cases there is a significant skill mismatch, with refugees either having skills suited to more demanding duties or requiring additional training to perform their job well ([Gajderowicz, Wrona, Jakubowski, 2024](#)).

2.2 An emerging migration skill corridor: Ukraine - Netherlands

Twenty years ago, in 2004, there were 774 officially registered Ukrainians in the Netherlands. By 2022, before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the number of Ukrainians in the Netherlands had increased to 78,816 ([Eurostat, 2024](#)). They were employed mostly in the construction and healthcare sectors, and their employment was facilitated largely by private agencies.

Another relevant and growing group of skilled Ukrainian migrants in the Netherlands are those who have been "posted". 72,000 Ukrainians have been sent by their employer (posted) to work in the Netherlands on a temporary basis. Most workers of this type are employed in road freight transport, followed by energy supply and construction ([Heyma et al. 2022](#)).

The war in Ukraine contributed to the increase of Ukrainians coming to the Netherlands. Between the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion (February 2022) and March 2024, more than 149,000 Ukrainians arrived in the Netherlands. They have been granted temporary protection status, which gives them the right to housing, public services, education and employment.

In 2023, there were approximately 78,000 Ukrainian refugees between the ages of 15 and 64 living in the Netherlands. More than half of them (55 %) were employed. Although they found work fairly quickly, the jobs they have been working in are often below their educational level. Despite their relatively high level of education, Ukrainian displaced persons in the Netherlands often can't find work in their own professional field and at their own level of education ([Dagevos, Rusinovic, 2024; Migration Advisory Council, 2023](#)). The vast majority of them are employed in the Netherlands on a temporary basis in the business services sector (51 %), which includes employment agencies. Apart from business services, comparatively many Ukrainian refugees (32 %) also work in trade, transport and accommodation, and food services ([Statistics](#)

[Netherlands, 2024](#)). There is no further data regarding which sectors temporary workers are being deployed in.

In comparing migration skill corridors involving Ukraine as an origin country, it is interesting to note the large employment gap between Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands and those in Germany. While 55% of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands are employed, in Germany the figure is just 20%. This gap is striking given the similar conditions for Ukrainians in the two countries. Both have similarly attractive welfare systems and offer free integration courses and social benefits. In both cases the language barrier is considered the biggest challenge that Ukrainians face. A possible explanation for the employment gap might be that the German labour market has more restrictions and access barriers. Recognition of professional qualifications seems a major obstacle to accessing the German labour market.

3. Migration and Skills

Labour migration from Ukraine to the EU was increasing steadily even before the Russian invasion. With strong labour demand, a shrinking workforce in many member states, and considerably higher wages, the EU is well poised to attract Ukrainian workers. Furthermore, the growing Ukrainian diaspora encourages further migration, not just for work purposes, but also for reasons linked to family and education. Migration has been facilitated by measures granting visa-free entry for Ukrainians to the EU starting in 2017. Improving access to the labour markets of individual member states such as Poland also played a role. The Temporary Protection Directive made it easier to migrate from Ukraine to the EU. If Ukraine manages to become a member of the EU, enhanced freedom-of-movement rights would further facilitate migration.

Ukraine does not have any formal skills mobility partnerships. Extensive migration networks - and to a lesser extent recruitment agencies - play an important role in facilitating and driving labour migration from Ukraine. Ukraine has a State Migration Policy Strategy for the period from 2017-2025, underlining the protection of rights of Ukrainian citizens working abroad and strongly emphasising labour rights. Even though the diaspora policy and diaspora engagement strategy remain underdeveloped in Ukraine, the Ukrainian government (Ministry for Reintegration) recognises the importance of the diaspora for Ukraine's future reconstruction and further development. It has also expressed an interest in the return of the country's citizens as soon as the security situation allows.

The main factor hindering the return of Ukrainians under temporary protection abroad is uncertainty surrounding the war. Many are unable to return to their hometowns. Others are concerned about potential tensions between those who left because of the war and those who remained in Ukraine. On the other hand, several host countries, which have invested significantly in integrating Ukrainians to compensate for shortages in their domestic labour force, may well have an interest in retaining a certain proportion of Ukrainians. A potential conflict of interest may arise between these actors when it comes to migrating, staying, returning, or moving to a third country. Addressing the matter will require targeted diplomatic efforts and partnership approaches.

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About the Link4Skills project

Link4Skills is an EU-funded research and project addressing the global challenge of skill shortages and mismatches through innovative, sustainable solutions that foster fair skill utilization and exchange across continents.

Focusing on Europe, Africa, Asia, and America, the project seeks to bridge the gap between skill supply and demand by facilitating re/up-skilling, promoting automation, and encouraging migration as policy options.

Link4Skills is creating an inclusive, participatory policy decision-making environment by integrating a diverse range of stakeholders, including EU decision-makers, inter-governmental institutions, national and subnational decision-makers, employers organizations, employees organizations, and civic society co-development institutions.

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