

Migration Skill Corridor Brief

Ukraine - Netherlands

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The Ukraine-Netherlands migration skill corridor is a humanitarian and ad hoc corridor that emerged following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Drawing on 26 stakeholder interviews and desk research, this brief outlines how migration flows shifted from small-scale family, study, and highly skilled migration to large-scale forced displacement under the EU Temporary Protection Directive. While Ukrainians benefit from immediate labour market access and relatively high employment rates, their skills are often underutilised due to structural barriers such as language, qualification recognition, and uncertainty regarding length of stay.

This Migration Skill Corridor Brief is part of a Link4Skills compact publication series examining labour mobility and skills mobility pathways between select countries across Europe, Africa, Asia, and North Ame. Based on the project's more extensive Migration Skill Corridor reports, the briefs provide concise analyses of migration dynamics, policy frameworks, good practices, and challenges shaping skills mobility, with the aim of supporting fair, sustainable, and mutually beneficial migration pathways.

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1. Executive summary

The Ukraine–Netherlands migration corridor represents a distinct and rapidly evolving form of migration, fundamentally shaped by forced displacement following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Prior to this event, migration from Ukraine to the Netherlands was limited in scale and primarily consisted of family migration, a small number of highly skilled workers, particularly in IT, and international students.

The war triggered a dramatic transformation of the corridor into a humanitarian migration system. More than 100,000 Ukrainians arrived in the Netherlands in 2022 under the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), followed by tens of thousands in subsequent years. This legal framework grants immediate access to the labour market, setting Ukrainians apart from other migrant and refugee groups. As a result, the corridor is best characterised as a humanitarian migration skill corridor with ad hoc governance structures.

A defining feature of the corridor is the relatively high level of labour market participation among Ukrainian migrants. Employment rates reached approximately 60% by late 2024, reflecting both strong labour demand in the Netherlands and the willingness of Ukrainians to work. However, this apparent success masks significant structural challenges. Many Ukrainians are employed below their qualification levels, leading to widespread deskilling. This is primarily due to barriers such as slow recognition of qualifications, language requirements, and mismatches between Ukrainian and Dutch professional systems.

The governance of the corridor is fragmented and largely reactive. There are no dedicated bilateral agreements on labour migration between Ukraine and the Netherlands. Instead, governance relies on EU-level instruments, particularly the Temporary Protection Directive, and a mix of national and local actors, including municipalities, employment agencies, and civil society organisations. The private sector plays a key role in facilitating employment, especially through recruitment agencies.

A central paradox characterises the corridor. On the one hand, there is strong societal support for Ukrainian migrants and significant employer demand for labour. On the other hand, policy frameworks remain focused on temporariness and return, limiting long-term investments in integration and skill development. Employers are often reluctant to invest in training due to uncertainty about migrants’ future residence status.

At the same time, migrants themselves demonstrate strong agency. Ukrainian communities and civil society initiatives actively support integration, information exchange, and social cohesion. However, structural barriers, particularly housing shortages and limited access to language training, continue to constrain deeper integration.

Overall, the Ukraine–Netherlands corridor represents a “corridor apart”: a humanitarian migration system with significant potential for addressing labour shortages, yet constrained by policy ambiguity and underutilisation of skills. Unlocking this potential requires a transition from short-term crisis management to a more strategic and long-term approach to integration and skill development.

2. Migration dynamics

The Ukraine-Netherlands migration corridor is characterised by a sharp transformation in scale and composition following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Prior to this, migration flows were relatively small and consisted mainly of family migration, a limited number of highly skilled workers (particularly in IT), and students. On 1 January 2022, shortly before the war began, the Netherlands had 21 thousand people of Ukrainian origin, with over a quarter were born in the Netherlands and have one or two parents born in Ukraine and three quarters were born in Ukraine (CBS).

Since 2022, migration has been dominated by forced displacement under the Temporary Protection Directive. More than 100,000 Ukrainians were registered under temporary protection in 2022, followed by 36,950 in 2023 and 29,405 in 2024. In contrast, other migration channels, such as high-skilled migration, study, and family migration, declined sharply and became marginal. This demonstrates the overwhelming importance of humanitarian migration within the corridor.

Migration is largely self-organised, with individuals moving independently, often supported by social and professional networks. These networks play a crucial role in shaping destination choices, alongside factors such as language (English proficiency) and perceived employment opportunities. Existing Ukrainian communities in major Dutch cities have also acted as pull factors.

In addition to migrants under temporary protection, other groups include posted workers, highly skilled migrants, and students, although their numbers remain comparatively small. Posted workers, often entering via other EU countries such as Poland, represent a less visible but important component of labour mobility, particularly in sectors such as agriculture and construction.

The corridor is also characterised by a high degree of gender selectivity, with many migrants being women, and by relatively high levels of education among Ukrainian migrants. Despite this, labour market outcomes do not fully reflect migrants' skill levels.

Overall, migration dynamics are shaped by external shocks (war), rather than labour market demand alone. The result is a corridor with high inflows and strong labour participation, but weak alignment between skills and employment outcomes.

3. Policies and agreements

The Ukraine-Netherlands migration corridor is characterised by a lack of formal bilateral frameworks and a reliance on EU-level instruments and ad hoc governance arrangements. Unlike other migration corridors, there are no dedicated agreements between Ukraine and the Netherlands specifically addressing labour or skilled migration.

The most important policy instrument shaping the corridor is the EU Temporary Protection Directive. This framework grants Ukrainian nationals immediate access to residence, employment, and basic services in EU member states, including the Netherlands. The Directive has been extended until March 2027, reflecting the ongoing conflict. Its key feature is the removal of typical barriers to labour market entry, enabling rapid employment integration.

At the national level, governance involves a range of actors, including the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, municipalities, and the Public Employment Service (UWV). These actors are responsible for facilitating labour market integration, often in cooperation with private recruitment agencies and civil society organisations.

The private sector plays a particularly prominent role, especially employment agencies that match Ukrainian workers with available jobs. This reflects the broader structure of the Dutch labour market, where temporary work agencies are central intermediaries. However, this model also contributes to segmentation, as many Ukrainians are channelled into lower-skilled sectors.

In addition to employment policies, various EU and national initiatives support integration and skill development. These include the EURES Talent Pool pilot for Ukrainians, Horizon-funded projects such as “Seeds of Bravery” supporting Ukrainian entrepreneurs, and sector-specific initiatives in healthcare and technology. Educational institutions also contribute through programmes for displaced students and scholars at risk.

Despite these efforts, governance remains fragmented. The absence of a social security agreement between Ukraine and the Netherlands creates uncertainty regarding pensions and benefits. Furthermore, policy ambiguity regarding the long-term status of Ukrainians discourages both migrants and employers from investing in skill development.

Overall, the policy framework can be described as reactive and temporary, focusing on immediate labour market participation rather than long-term integration and skill utilisation.

4. Good practices

Several practices within the Ukraine-Netherlands corridor illustrate effective approaches to labour market integration under humanitarian conditions.

A key strength is the rapid access to the labour market provided under the Temporary Protection Directive. This has enabled Ukrainians to enter employment quickly, contributing to relatively high employment rates.

Private-sector involvement, particularly through recruitment agencies, plays a crucial role in matching workers with jobs. While this system has limitations, it has proven effective in facilitating rapid labour market entry.

Targeted initiatives also support skill development and integration. Examples include the EURES Talent Pool pilot, which connects Ukrainian job seekers with employers across Europe, and projects such as “Seeds of Bravery,” which support Ukrainian entrepreneurs and start-ups.

Sector-specific programmes, particularly in healthcare, provide training, language support, and pathways to employment for highly skilled professionals. For example, The Ukrainian Healthcare Talent initiative facilitates labour market integration of Ukrainian doctors, dentists, and pharmacists in the Netherlands. Universities also contribute through reducing tuition fees for Ukrainian students and offering specific scholarships and programmes for displaced students and academics.

Finally, strong civil society engagement and migrant self-organisation, such as Ukrainian community hubs, play an important role in facilitating integration, information exchange, and social support.

5. Areas for improvement

Despite relatively successful labour market participation, several structural challenges limit the effectiveness of the corridor.

First, the underutilisation of skills remains a major issue. Many Ukrainians work below their qualification levels due to barriers in qualification recognition, language requirements, and sectoral mismatches. Addressing these issues is essential for improving labour market outcomes.

Second, the “work-first” approach prioritises rapid employment over long-term skill development. While effective in the short term, this approach risks entrenching deskilling and limiting upward mobility. Greater investment in training and career development is needed.

Third, policy uncertainty regarding the duration of stay discourages both migrants and employers from investing in skills. Providing clearer long-term perspectives and pathways to other residence statuses would enhance stability and encourage investment.

Fourth, institutional gaps, such as the absence of a social security agreement, create additional barriers, particularly regarding long-term integration and return.

Finally, housing shortages and limited access to language training constrain integration. Addressing these structural issues is crucial for improving both economic and social outcomes.

A more strategic and long-term approach is therefore required, focusing on skill utilisation, institutional coordination, and sustainable integration.

Sources

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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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