

Migration Skill Corridor Brief

Ukraine - Poland

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July 2026

The Ukraine–Poland migration skill corridor is a crisis-shaped mobility system linking humanitarian protection, labour market integration, and Ukraine’s long-term reconstruction needs. This brief highlights the risk of deskilling despite high employment, and argues for better skills recognition, portable rights, and policies supporting both integration and future skills circulation.

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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The Link4Skills project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 101132476

Key Messages

- **The complexity of the Ukrainian-Polish Migration Corridor**
The Ukraine-Poland migration skill corridor combines humanitarian response with labour market needs. It includes different forms of mobility: forced displacement, labour, education, family, and return, it makes it complex but also difficult to manage strategically.
- **High employment does not mean good use of skills**
Poland's 'work-first' model enables rapid labour market integration, but without progression pathways it leads to widespread deskilling and inefficient use of human capital.
- **Structural asymmetry drives uneven outcomes**
Poland benefits from labour supply and demographic support, while Ukraine faces human capital loss and mounting challenges for post-war recovery.
- **Skills circulation, not just return, is key for Ukraine**
Under conditions of uncertainty, policies focused solely on return are insufficient; enabling transnational engagement and skills circulation is essential for Ukraine's reconstruction.
- **Dual intent requires concrete policy design**
Effective governance must go beyond rhetoric by ensuring predictable legal pathways, portability of rights and qualifications, and flexible mobility options – otherwise the corridor risks short-term gains but long-term losses for both countries.

Executive summary

The Ukrainian-Polish migration skill corridor represents one of the most dynamic mobility systems in contemporary Europe, shaped by long-standing labour migration, geographic proximity, and large-scale forced displacement since 2022. It is a mixed migration corridor shaped by the intersection of humanitarian response and labour market demand, encompassing diverse forms of mobility including forced migration, labour, educational, family, return and circular migration.

Today, the corridor functions as a crisis-driven and partially institutionalised system that both addresses labour shortages and accommodates large-scale displacement. Although it has achieved high employment among Ukrainians (78%) and generated measurable macroeconomic gains (with Ukrainian migrants contributing an estimated 2.7% of Poland's GDP in 2024, according to a Deloitte study for UNHCR), this performance conceals a key limitation: the absence of a coherent skills strategy. High labour market participation does not translate into effective skills utilisation. Without targeted policy interventions, the corridor risks entrenching long-term deskilling and the systematic underuse of migrant human capital.

This tension is particularly visible in Poland's labour market model. As the world's 20th largest economy, Poland has successfully absorbed Ukrainian workers through a 'work-first' approach that prioritises rapid employment. However, this model increasingly resembles a structural trap: integration occurs quickly, but upward mobility remains limited. Language barriers, restricted access to childcare, and complex or inaccessible systems of qualification recognition prevent many highly educated migrants from accessing jobs that match their skills. As a result, the

system maximises short-term labour supply while underutilising available competences, leading to inefficiencies in productivity and persistent labour market segmentation.

At the same time, the corridor reflects a broader structural asymmetry between the two countries. Poland benefits from labour market stabilisation and demographic supplementation, while Ukraine faces mounting demographic pressures and the loss of strategically important human capital. In this context, policy approaches focused narrowly on return are insufficient. Under conditions of war and uncertainty, large-scale return is neither immediate nor predictable. Instead, Ukraine's recovery will depend on fostering skills circulation, enabling migrants to contribute economically, socially, and professionally across borders. Transnational engagement and the transfer of skills, knowledge, and resources offer a more realistic bridge between migration and reconstruction.

These dynamics underscore the need to move beyond emergency governance toward a more sustainable and coordinated approach. Migration governance should adopt a genuinely operational dual-intent framework, supporting both integration in Poland and the possibility of return to Ukraine. However, dual intent cannot remain a rhetorical principle; it requires concrete institutional foundations. First, clear and predictable status pathways are needed to allow transitions from temporary protection to longer-term residence without the loss of rights. Second, portability mechanisms must ensure that social rights, qualifications, and work experience can be transferred across borders. Third, flexible mobility options such as circular migration, exploratory visits, and reintegration support should enable migrants to move between countries without incurring excessive risk.

Without such coordination, the corridor risks producing the worst of both worlds. Poland may retain labour but continue to underuse skills, limiting productivity gains and reinforcing segmentation. Ukraine, in turn, may experience sustained population loss without benefiting from the skills and experience migrants acquire abroad. In its current form, the corridor delivers short-term economic gains but generates long-term challenges in human capital distribution.

Overall, the Ukrainian-Polish migration skill corridor illustrates how crisis-driven mobility systems can simultaneously stabilise labour markets and reproduce structural inefficiencies. Its future depends on a strategic shift toward skills-oriented governance that aligns immediate labour market needs with long-term development, mobility, and reconstruction objectives in both countries.

Migration dynamics

Established migration pathway

Migration between Ukraine and Poland is long-standing, dating back to the early 1990s, when post-independence economic transformation in Ukraine led to an intensification of labour migration. Initially, Russia was the dominant destination for Ukrainian labour migrants. However, following the 2014 Euromaidan (*pro-European protest movement in Ukraine*) and subsequent Russian aggression, migration flows shifted markedly towards the European Union, particularly Poland. This shift is reflected in the changing distribution of Ukrainian labour migrants across destination countries. Remarkably, the share of Ukrainian labour migrants working in Poland increased from **8% in 2008 to 42.4% in 2017**, while in Russia it declined from **48.1% to 26.3%**. These figures refer to the proportion of Ukrainian labour migrants working abroad by main country of employment. Importantly, Poland's growing attractiveness was also shaped by its **facilitated access to the labour market**, including the simplified

employer declaration system introduced in 2006, which enabled flexible, short-term, and often circular migration, particularly in seasonal sectors.

Ukraine’s migration before Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022

Even prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion, Poland had already become the primary destination country for Ukrainian migrants. In 2020, approximately 2.2 million migrants resided in Poland, of whom 1.39 million (62%) were Ukrainian citizens (GUS, 2020). At that time, migration was predominantly economic, short-term, and circular in nature, largely composed of individuals of working age (21–40).

Turning point: Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022

The invasion in February 2022 led to the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. By 2024, approximately 6.8 million Ukrainians had left the country, with over 6.2 million residing in Europe. Poland became the first and main receiving country, with more than 1.5 million individuals granted temporary protection by the end of 2022. This figure reflects the scale of protection granted after the invasion and includes primarily newly arrived forced migrants, although some Ukrainians already present in Poland also transitioned into this legal status following repeated border crossings.

Changing trends: decline in numbers in Poland and diversification of destinations

Following the initial sharp increase, the number of Ukrainians in Poland began to decline – to approximately 970,000 in 2024 – primarily due to secondary migration, particularly to Germany. The growing importance of other destination countries reflects migrants’ strategies to seek better and more sustainable opportunities as the war has prolonged. At the same time 1.5 million Ukrainians have already returned home from different EU countries (IOM, 2025). In 2025, approximately 1.55 million Ukrainians migrants held residence permits in Poland in total (USC, 2025).

Feminisation and changing migration profile

Post-2022 migration differs significantly from earlier patterns: it is strongly feminised (78–84% of adult migrants are women), often involves children, and is characterised by a high level of education with approximately two-thirds holding tertiary degrees. Unlike previous migrant cohorts, many individuals had no prior migration experience.

High economic activity but structural inequalities

Ukrainians in Poland demonstrate very high levels of labour market participation, with an overall employment rate of approximately 78% (NBP, 2024). Employment is even higher among pre-war migrants (around 93%), while among refugees who arrived after 2022 it is lower, at approximately 68%. In comparison, the employment rate among Polish citizens (aged 15–89) stood at around 56–57% in 2024. At the same time, significant structural challenges persist, including deskilling, wage inequalities (with women earning approximately 25% less on average), and limited utilisation of qualifications, as only around 14% of Ukrainians are employed in positions matching their education.

Policies and agreements

Simple and evolving legal framework

The migration corridor at the moment is shaped by EU temporary protection (since 2022) and national labour market policies. In Poland, the 2022 ‘special law’ enabled rapid access to work and services. After its expiry in March 2027, a transition towards more standardised residence

permits - such as the **CUKR card for Ukrainian citizens** - is expected, potentially offering more stable but also more selective legal pathways.

Limited coordination between Poland and Ukraine

Despite long-standing mobility, Poland and Ukraine do not have a comprehensive system for managing skilled migration. Existing agreements cover only selected areas (such as diploma recognition, social security, or taxation). In practice, policies are shaped by multiple actors – ministries, local authorities, employers, and NGOs – without strong coordination and are largely driven by immediate labour demand rather than long-term planning. What is distinctive in this corridor is the important role of **informal migration networks**. Many Ukrainians find jobs through friends, relatives, or online communities, which often function faster and more effectively than formal recruitment systems, but also make the process less transparent and harder to regulate.

Uncertainty in return migration intentions

Current policies in Poland enable Ukrainians to work and integrate into the labour market. At the same time, many migrants continue to consider return as a possible future option, depending on security conditions and opportunities in Ukraine. However, there are few concrete policy tools to support this – such as structured circular migration schemes, reintegration programmes, or recognition of skills across borders. As a result, migrants largely have to navigate this balance on their own, while policy remains fragmented.

Under these conditions of uncertainty, many Ukrainians adopt **transnational strategies**, effectively ‘being here and there’ at the same time. They maintain ties, resources, and future options in both Poland and Ukraine, keeping the possibility of return open while pursuing integration abroad. This results in a form of suspended decision-making, where mobility remains fluid and long-term trajectories are deliberately left unresolved.

Good practices

In December 2024, **the Ministry of National Unity of Ukraine was established in Ukraine**. It was a government ministry in Ukraine focused on issues related to reintegration, return and national unity, particularly in the context of the war and the displacement of people. The Ministry of National Unity was working on developing a Unity Hub network for Ukrainians abroad, including in Poland. As a result, Poland hosts ICMPD’s Ukrainian Consultation Centre in Gdansk and a call centre in Warsaw for Ukrainians in Poland and from around the globe. However, on July 21, 2025, the Ministry of National Unity was reorganized as part of a broader government reform, with its social policy functions being absorbed by the Ministry of Social Policy, Family, and Unity. This is a good practice because it shifts Ukraine’s approach from crisis response to **strategic diaspora and migration governance**. Through initiatives like the Unity Hub network, it strengthens **engagement with Ukrainians abroad** and supports **skills circulation** rather than relying solely on return. The later integration into broader social policy further improves coordination, making migration a **core element of long-term recovery and national unity**.

The Special Law Providing Fast and Simplified Access to the Labour Market

The law adopted in March 2022 (“special law”) granted Ukrainian citizens almost immediate access to the Polish labour market without the need to obtain work permits. This regulatory liberalisation contributed to a record-high employment rate among Ukrainian migrants,

especially women, shortly after their arrival. This is a good practice because it enabled rapid labour market integration in a crisis situation. By removing work permit requirements, the “special law” allowed Ukrainian migrants – especially women – to find employment almost immediately, reducing dependency on social assistance and supporting self-sufficiency. At the same time, it benefited the host economy by quickly filling labour shortages, contributing to economic stability. Overall, the measure shows how regulatory flexibility can align humanitarian protection with labour market needs, producing positive outcomes for both migrants and the receiving country.

Policy-relevant takeaways

For Ukraine

Develop a comprehensive strategy for return, skills circulation, and diaspora engagement

Ukraine should move beyond fragmented approaches and develop a coherent migration strategy that integrates return, circular migration, and diaspora engagement. Given the scale and likely persistence of displacement, the focus should not be only on return, but on enabling **skills circulation** – allowing migrants to contribute to Ukraine’s recovery while abroad. This includes creating conditions for transnational engagement, especially in high-skilled sectors, and aligning migration policies with reconstruction priorities and labour market needs.

Design realistic, phased return policies supported by informed decision-making

Return policies should reflect ongoing uncertainty and avoid expectations of rapid, large-scale return. Instead, Ukraine should develop flexible, phased return frameworks linked to security conditions, housing availability, and labour market capacity. At the same time, migrants should be supported in making informed decisions through **exploratory mobility measures**, such as short-term return visits or ‘go-and-see’ programmes, which allow them to assess conditions in Ukraine and plan gradual reintegration.

Align migration policy with reconstruction and workforce development

Migration policy should be closely linked to Ukraine’s reconstruction strategy. Without improvements in infrastructure, public services, and labour market conditions, large-scale return will remain unlikely. At the same time, Ukraine should invest in **targeted upskilling and reskilling programmes** that prepare migrants for employment in key reconstruction sectors such as infrastructure, healthcare, education, and engineering. To make this effective, stronger **skill matching and reintegration mechanisms** are needed. This includes building institutional links between employers, public employment services, and education systems to ensure that returnees can access jobs that match their qualifications and contribute effectively to recovery.

For Poland

Strengthen coordination and develop a long-term integration strategy

Migration governance in Poland remains fragmented across institutions and policy levels. Stronger coordination is needed between labour market institutions, education systems, local authorities, and integration services. At the same time, Poland should move beyond a short-term, work-focused approach and develop a comprehensive long-term integration strategy that combines labour market inclusion with social integration, education, and settlement policies to ensure more sustainable outcomes.

Move beyond ‘work-first’ towards better use of skills and career progression

While rapid employment has been a clear success, it has also led to widespread deskilling. Policies should shift from a narrow focus on job entry towards better use of migrants' qualifications and long-term career development. This requires addressing structural barriers that limit upward mobility, such as restricted access to training, slow recognition of qualifications, and childcare constraints. Particular attention should be paid to highly educated women, who are especially at risk of working below their skill level.

Improve skills recognition and targeted training for better job matching

To make better use of Ukrainian talent, Poland should strengthen and simplify skills recognition while investing in more advanced, job-oriented training. Current recognition procedures are often slow, complex, and limited to specific sectors. They should be standardised, expanded through fast-track options, and better coordinated with Ukrainian institutions and European frameworks – especially in regulated and high-demand professions. At the same time, language and training support should go beyond basic levels. Public programmes should offer advanced, sector-specific language courses, combined with vocational and professional upskilling, and be more closely linked to employers and job-matching systems.

Cross-cutting recommendation: adopt a dual-intent approach

Adopt a dual-intent approach that reflects non-linear migration trajectories

Ukraine and Poland should explicitly adopt a dual-intent approach to migration governance, recognising that migrants often combine labour market integration abroad with the possibility of return (OECD, 2023). Migration decisions are shaped by uncertainty and evolving conditions, therefore policies should move beyond binary assumptions (integration vs. return) and instead accommodate non-linear trajectories, including circular mobility, onward migration, and delayed return.

Enable mobility through flexible legal statuses, portable rights, and policy alignment

To support such trajectories, both countries should introduce more flexible and secure residence statuses that allow migrants to move between countries without losing their legal position. This should be combined with the portability of rights, skills, and qualifications, including mutual recognition mechanisms, transferable social benefits, and interoperable administrative systems. At the same time, integration in Poland and potential return to Ukraine should be better aligned, as these are not competing processes – effective integration can increase migrants' capacity to contribute to reconstruction.

Promote transnational engagement as a core policy objective

Rather than treating emigration as a loss, Ukraine and Poland should actively support **transnational practices** – such as remote work, cross-border entrepreneurship, and knowledge transfer – which allow migrants to contribute to Ukraine's economy while abroad. This approach recognises that development and reconstruction can be supported not only through return, but also through ongoing cross-border engagement.

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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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The Link4Skills project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 101132476