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POLICYBRIEF

JUSTMIG

Temporary Labour Migration in the Wake of the Ukraine War: Building Long-Term Resilience Through Inclusive Labour and Social Policies

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has catalyzed large-scale displacement of people internally and transnationally, creating a new category of temporary labour migrants across Europe. This is not only due to the changed demographic profile of the people fleeing the war but also due to the EU's policy response to their displacement. Our research reveals that while many countries have introduced the temporary protection directive (TPD) that allowed for swift labour market access for Ukrainian refugees, it often failed to secure decent working conditions or long-term labour market integration beyond immediate labour needs. As the war continues and intensifies, the further discussion of the TPD after its expiration date or in case of the end of the war remains largely ignored in the EU. Moreover, these frameworks often fail to guarantee long-term inclusion into

social welfare structures or address the status of previous labour migrants (particularly men) or those who can no longer work (e.g. elderly labour migrants). We suggest balancing rapid labour market entry with decent work policies, enhancing institutional coordination and collaboration, and promotion of sustainable inclusion for new and old temporary labour migrants from Ukraine. By institutionalising long-term representation, improving working conditions and monitoring in sectors and industries with high migrants' employment levels and cross-country cooperations with the Ukrainian government, national EU governments can better balance rapid access to jobs with the protection of migrant rights and the promotion of decent work.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the flow of people from Ukraine in 2022, most EU countries activated some version of the TPD status, that among other provisions, gave Ukrainians a collective right to stay, work, and access to various social provisions. This created a special situation, in which 4.2 million (in 2025) refugees from Ukraine have created a new migration flow: one that is temporary and protection-based but also increasingly shaped by the labour market dynamics of the hosting countries.

Although Ukraine had a long history of outward labour migration to the EU since its independence in 1991, the 2022 migration differed drastically in the demographic profile, conditions of mobility, purpose, goals and the resources of the people on the move. The demographic and social profile of women fleeing war varies from that of previous labour migrants, particularly due to traumatic experiences of fleeing and presence of children and other dependents (including elderly family members, or people with disabilities), different education and professional profile of the previously occupied jobs. Their labour inclusion seem to be marked with limited employment opportunities and the path dependency on already existing labour migration patterns that trap many of them in low-wage sectors (Fedyuk et al., 2024).

The brief is based on research conducted within the lens of the JUSTMIG project, reflecting and analysing desk research materials on key issues and challenges faced by workers in relation to the labour markets in Ukraine and in the EU and on transnational migration. This brief is intended for:

- National and EU-level policymakers in six EU countries and three candidate countries
- Institutions involved in migration, labour, and social welfare policy
- Social partners (trade unions, employer organisations)

CONTEXT

Studies indicate that those who left Ukraine right after the start of the full invasion in 2022, often had a higher socio-economic status compared to those who remained. They are also more likely to come from urban areas (nine in ten respondents in the Razumkov Center, 2022 study and have higher education (86% have either completed or were in the process of obtaining higher education). The study of the impact of emigration on the post-war reconstruction in Ukraine argues that the EU increasingly sees migration as “an instrument for EU's long-term growth”

(Razumkov center 2022) and therefore, extension of TPD is directly in its interest. The study sums up that: “The right to employment is readily enjoyed by many Ukrainian migrants, as most of them are women of working age.” (Ibid: 21). This however raises an uneasy question about the future return, as “emigration from Ukraine has a direct impact on national security, especially its economic and social components, as it raises the question of «who will rebuild the country after the war»” (Ibid: 21).

A UNHCR survey of 34,145 Ukrainian war migrants found that 12% of them had relatives in receiving countries and that 56% already managed to find private housing for rent. They were more likely to have private vehicles (so could leave the country in the first days of the war), some prior contacts in receiving countries - either personal or professional, knowledge of at least one foreign language, higher education, etc. And yet, it looks like most newly arrived Ukrainians get trapped in similar low-wage jobs like the previous migrants (Eurofound 2023). The most common challenges in the working conditions were: being underpaid, working without a contract or a contract not covering all working hours; and very long working hours.

Countries responded differently to the challenge of labour market integration of Ukrainian citizens due to divergent institutional legacies, national and local labour market demands, variations in working conditions in specific sectors with high labour demand. Closer neighbours, like Poland and Czechia rapidly expanded access to jobs for Ukrainian refugees, reflecting pre-existing ties and economic needs. Within the JUSTMIG triadic research design (Ukraine-Estonia-Finland), Finland and Estonia focused on both employment and basic services, leveraging existing integration infrastructure but still struggling with coordination across sectors. Yet these policies often reinforce temporariness and may limit pathways to integration.

Additionally, in all countries of the EU access to labour markets is characterised by regional disparity of resources and infrastructures, to which women traveling as solo carers of their children are particularly sensitive. Despite generally high level of education and previous professional experience, Ukrainian refugees often enter into low-wage sectors, temporary, flexible contracts, and even irregular work (Duszczyk et al. 2023; Eurofound 2023). This reinforced intersections of vulnerabilities and led to more long-term barriers to their social integration.

ANALYSIS / DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of JUSTMIG research, three main areas stand out as potential areas for improvement.

1. Labour Market Integration: Fast but Fragmented

While many countries have facilitated quick entry into the labour market, this was often achieved by the insertion into low-skilled, low-paid sectors with limited prospects for upward mobility. Among the common challenges towards a better labour market integration are:

- Language barriers and limited or prolonged and cumbersome way to recognition of qualifications

- Gendered labour market segmentation, with many women entering care and service sectors and other sectors characterised by fragmented, temporary and informal employment arrangements. In most places Ukrainian post-2022 migrants are employed on temporary and seasonal contracts in low wage sectors, where labour migrants from Ukraine were overrepresented before 2022 (Fedyuk et al. 2023).
- While the TPD gave a much-needed quick access to mobility in the EU in 2022, it raises pressing questions as to the temporality of Ukrainians abroad, the future of their residency status and how it affects temporal or seasonal work or settlement prospects.
- Lack of long-term employment support or job-matching services (at the stages of recruitment, contracting and monitoring of the working conditions).

2. Limited Role of Social Partners and Representation

While the reception of Ukrainians fleeing the war was carried out with the effort of many civil organizations and solidarity networks, the involvement of trade unions and employers' organisations in shaping responses to Ukrainian labour migration remains modest and non-systematic. Where engagement occurs, it is often ad hoc or project based. Social partners have a crucial role to play in:

- Advocating for decent work conditions in sectors that often employ migrant workers
- Supporting long-term integration policies with consideration for social and care needs
- Bridging the gap between emergency responses and systemic solutions to employment, social integration and most importantly, housing.

3. Policy Gaps and Institutional Fragmentation

Most countries still lack coherent frameworks that integrate temporary protection with broader migration, labour, and social policies. This creates challenges such as:

- Fragmented coordination between employment services, migration authorities, and social welfare institutions, as well as institutions implementing these policies or monitor their implementation
- Tensions between temporary protection and longer-term residence or citizenship pathways
- Difficulty in transitioning from humanitarian to integration-focused approaches in social policies and labour market strategies.

CONSIDERATIONS

To design effective and inclusive policies, governments and social partners should consider:

- **Stability, predictability and guarantees of legal status:** As war continues EU countries increasingly hesitate as to the length and scope of protection granted by the TPD. Policies must clearly address alternatives to the TPD, clear legal mechanisms of transitioning between different forms of residence permits, and offer paths for long-term inclusion for those who seek it.

- **Diversity of Migrant Experiences:** Ukrainian refugees include professionals, skilled workers, those with care responsibilities. Policies must be tailored, intersectional, and avoid one-size-fits-all approaches.
- **Institutional Capacity:** Many receiving countries need to strengthen coordination mechanisms between ministries, municipalities, employers, and civil society to avoid duplication and gaps.
- **Data and Monitoring:** There is a lack of real-time, disaggregated data on employment outcomes, skills, and integration trajectories. Better data is essential for understanding further policy responses and allocation of resources.
- **Cross-Border Dimensions:** Migration from Ukraine is increasingly circular. Policies should acknowledge transnational lives and the possibility of return, while still offering inclusive support structures. There should be a better dialogue with the Ukrainian government, for better clarity and alignment with any possible return policies developed by Ukraine and clear legislative mechanisms regulating the tax residency.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Activation of TPD presents both challenges and opportunities for rethinking migration governance in Europe. It is clear that European policies must go beyond emergency responses to build systems that support long-term inclusion, social cohesion, and decent work.

1. Bridge Humanitarian and Labour Market Policies

- Develop coherent frameworks that integrate protection, employment, and social policies.
- Ensure clear and easy transition pathways from temporary protection to longer-term residence and employment rights.

2. Strengthen the Role of Social Partners

- Institutionalise the involvement of trade unions and employer organisations in migration policymaking.
- Support capacity-building initiatives for social partners to engage in integration and representation.

3. Promote Decent Work and Skills Matching

- Create accessible upskilling and reskilling programs tailored to migrant backgrounds.
- Invest in recognition of foreign qualifications and language training.
- To improve working conditions of Ukrainian migrants in certain sectors one must improve working conditions in those sectors in general. Very often the problem in employment arises not so much from the migrant status but from the substandard labour conditions in certain sectors.

4. Support Targeted and Inclusive Integration Programs

- Move beyond general employment services to offer tailored support for vulnerable groups (e.g., single mothers, elderly migrants, people with disabilities and care responsibilities).
- Establish clear and transparent mechanisms of accountability and control for employers and migration and employment intermediaries.

5. Foster Coordination and Data Sharing

- Improve data collection, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms to inform responsive policy.

6. Balance Flexibility with Stability

- Avoid reinforcing permanent temporariness. Support policies that offer both rapid labour access and stable integration options for those who seek it.

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