

SKILLS AND LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN LITHUANIA: SKILL MATCHING, EMPLOYMENT AND SKILL FORMATION PATTERNS

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores patterns of skill formation and labour market integration of the war refugees from Ukraine in Lithuania by looking into how the matching of the skills and competences acquired in Ukraine with the skills needs in the labour market of Lithuania facilitates smooth employment of refugees and how refugees themselves navigate the processes of their integration in the labour market and skill formation system. A mixed-methods research methodology that includes surveys of refugees from Ukraine, as well as semi-structured interviews with them and with representatives of employers. There are also personal strategies of refugees in the areas of employment and skill development, paying particular attention to their future plans and related opportunities to use the human capital acquired in Lithuania for potential employment and career development in Ukraine.

Keywords: *Skill formation, labour market integration, war refugees from Ukraine, skill matching*

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper explores patterns of skill formation and labour market integration of the war refugees from Ukraine in Lithuania by referring to the findings of the Horizon Europe research project SKILL PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE AND JUST MIGRATION PATTERNS (SKILLS4JUSTICE) HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-03 No. 101132435. The following research questions are discussed: 1) To what extent and how does the matching of the skills and competences acquired in Ukraine with the skills needs in the labour market of Lithuania facilitate the smooth employment of refugees? 2) How do refugees themselves navigate the processes of their integration, particularly, what concerns of matching their skills with labour market needs? [1].

A mixed-methods research methodology that includes surveys of refugees from Ukraine, as well as semi-structured interviews with them and with representatives of employers.

First, we examine the implications of skill matching for the labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees and their enrolment in the skill formation system. Afterwards, personal strategies of refugees in the area of employment and skill development are explored, with particular attention to their plans and related opportunities to use the human capital acquired in Lithuania for potential employment and career development in Ukraine.

2. INTEGRATION CONTEXT

The Russian aggression against Ukraine launched in February 2022 also increased the number of job search applications from abroad – in 2022 the number of job searchers increased by 18,3 percent compared to 2021, when 20 thousand war refugees from Ukraine were registered as job searchers in the National Employment Service (Employment Service under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania 2023) [2]. Official statistics reveal a highly effective and successful integration of Ukrainian refugees of both sexes and across different age groups into Lithuania's labour market. The share of refugees registered as job seekers at the National Employment service has been rather low (Fig.1). The volume of employed refugees has been rather steadily increasing (Fig. 2). This can be explained by the high acceptance of these refugees by society, employers and labour market governance system, important shortages of skilled workforce and reciprocal generally positive experiences of employment of Ukrainian nationals for both employers and migrant workers from the previous years before the war [3].



Figure 1. Share of the Ukrainian refugees registered as unemployed at the National Employment Service (Employment Service under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania 2024).

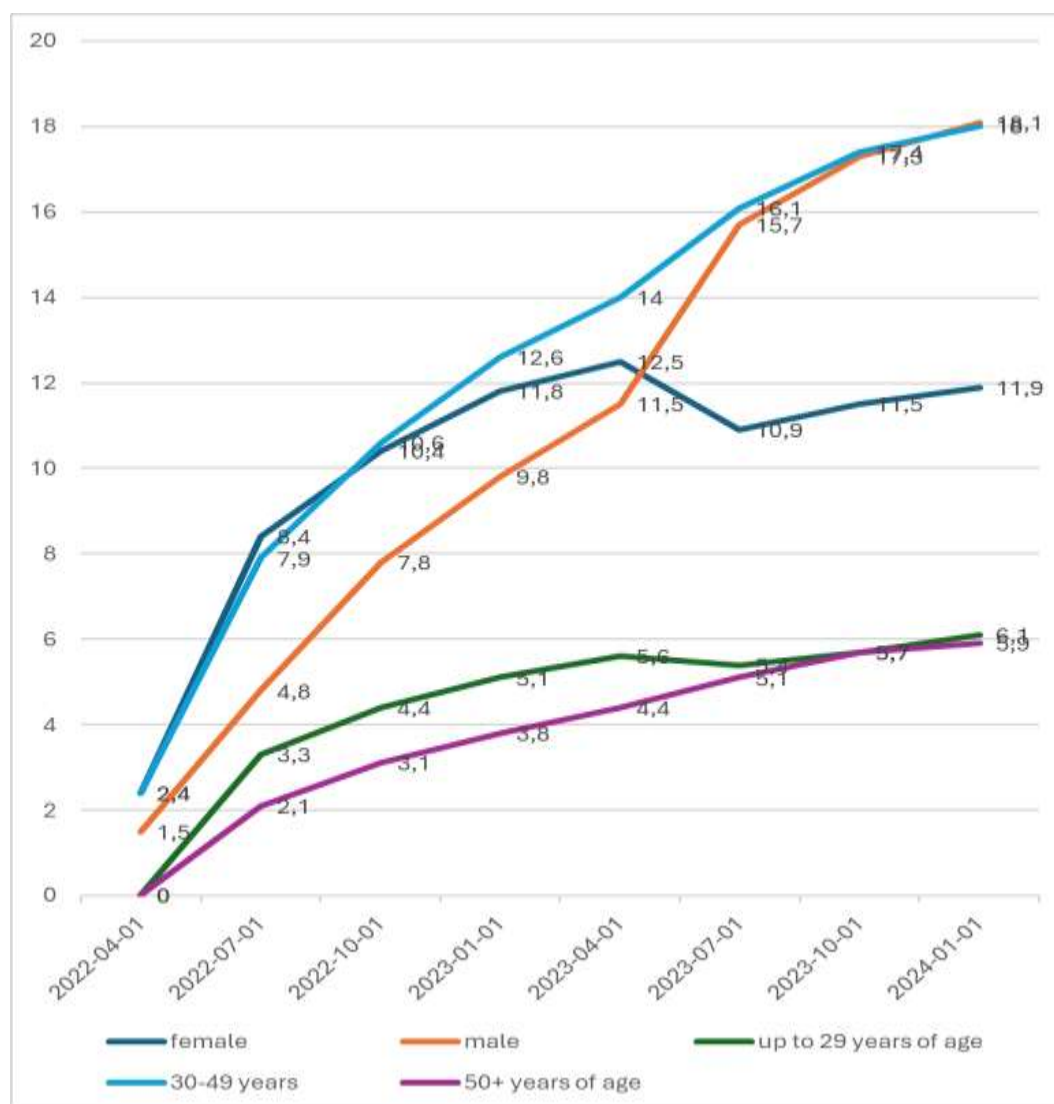


Figure 2. The volume of employed Ukrainian refugees by sex (above) and age group. Source: Employment Service under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024

Three quarters (20,8 thousand, or 75,7 per cent) of the Ukrainian war refugees were employed in skilled positions as skilled workers, machinery operators, drivers of road transport, and service and sales sector workers. 2,1 thousand Ukrainian refugees were employed in high-skilled jobs – managers, healthcare specialists, engineers, IT specialists (Employment Service under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania 2024).

3. INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN THE LABOR MARKET: SECTORAL PERSPECTIVE

Road freight transport sector. Trucking companies used to employ drivers from Ukraine quite intensively before the war, mainly because of their high level of competence. The beginning of the war in February 2022 was accompanied by a significant decrease in the number of Ukrainian drivers, as many returned to military service. The resulting driver shortage was addressed by hiring third-country nationals from Central and South Asia and other regions.

Construction. A similar situation has developed in the transport sector: before the war, Ukrainians, together with Belarusians, formed the backbone of the employed workforce from third countries; after the war, their employment decreased significantly. Construction sector organisations note that Ukrainian workers, as well as Belarusians, are adapting and improving their qualifications in the workplace to meet EU requirements for the quality of work.

Metalworking and mechanical engineering. Before the war, expectations for wages of workers and operators from Ukraine had increased significantly, even exceeding those for local workers. The reduction in the employment of workers from Ukraine and Belarus after the outbreak of the war significantly reduced the share of third-country workers in the sector's enterprises. The employment of Ukrainian refugees is seen, above all, as a manifestation of solidarity and civic responsibility. Enterprises are open to employing Ukrainian refugees, value their work, and try to attract workers from Ukraine by offering housing and helping their families to transport them to Lithuania. Businesses also employ unskilled and low-skilled refugees, providing them with on-the-job training and further employment. Employers also offer Lithuanian language courses to refugees. Despite simplified immigration and employment procedures for Ukrainian refugees, these procedures remain overly bureaucratic and time-consuming for industrial enterprises compared to those in neighbouring countries, forcing many enterprises to hire Ukrainian workers through Polish intermediary agencies, thereby increasing employment and integration costs.

Healthcare. Ukrainian refugees with healthcare qualifications face obstacles to the recognition of their qualifications in Ukraine and to obtaining a license to work in regulated professions such as nursing, mainly due to a lack of knowledge of the Lithuanian language. To address this issue, Ukrainian refugees start working as assistants and support staff and obtain licenses for their professional qualifications in nursing and healthcare after acquiring language skills and passing exams. One of the key challenges that healthcare providers face when hiring specialists from Ukraine is communication, as a significant portion of patients do not speak Russian.

4. INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES INTO VOCATIONAL AND HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Ukrainian youth who arrived after February 2022 were successfully integrated into vocational and higher education programs across various fields and disciplines, including healthcare, education, engineering, construction, business, and public services.

In many cases, their motivation to participate in education and training focused not only on employment in Lithuania but also on acquiring human capital that would be useful upon returning to their homeland after the war.

The focus on short-term integration into the Lithuanian labour market may also explain the high popularity of short-term advanced training programs that lead to new qualifications among Ukrainian refugees.

Nevertheless, Ukrainian refugees often face difficulties in having their diplomas and qualifications recognised, especially in regulated professions. Another major challenge is communication and language issues, as well as the creation of groups of Ukrainian students in higher education institutions. Lithuanian educational institutions and service providers cooperate with Ukrainian educational institutions, for example, by assisting them in training paramedics and in training students from Ukraine in this field.

Hospitals also employ Ukrainian specialists in professional positions that do not require patient contact, such as ultrasound and laboratory work. However, employing Ukrainian specialists requires hospitals to ensure adequate support and guidance from local staff, especially in reporting and completing documentation. Creating conditions for teamwork between local specialists and Ukrainians is a key solution. Sometimes the employment of specialists from Ukraine requires redistributing work within teams, with Lithuanian specialists assigned responsibility for preparing and completing documentation, while specialists from Ukraine perform patient procedures.

In some cases, additional training is provided in areas where the requirements for the qualification of medical professionals in Lithuania are stricter compared to Ukraine, or in areas of competence deficit, for example, compliance with hygiene standards in accordance with national and European standards. The technological progress of medical services in Lithuania compared to Ukraine is another obstacle faced by Ukrainian specialists, as some of them lack the competencies necessary to work with modern equipment, technologies, and hospital work organisation. Medical professionals do not see the employment of specialists from Ukraine as a sustainable solution to the acute shortage of qualified specialists in the health sector, recognising that most of these specialists will return to their country after the war.

Explored integration cases with skills matching illustrate very smooth and effective integration, overall satisfaction with working and living conditions, wages and career prospects (interviews with a carpenter in the woodworking industry, 8 welders in a machine-building company, a specialist in road freight logistics, a specialist in sewing machines in the textile industry, 4 meat processing operators working in the meat processing industry).

Arrival in Lithuania is accompanied by a change of profession, which very often leads to overqualification in job search (a financial/insurance specialist works as a beautician and realises his potential in his own business in the confectionery industry). In these cases, the interviewed refugees appreciate the companies' support throughout the employment process and note that they mostly develop their skills in the workplace. So far, they do not notice a significant contribution of working in Lithuania to their human capital or personal development.

Overqualification is mainly caused by the lack of recognition of higher education and professional qualifications obtained in Ukraine.

Refugees themselves admit that the procedures for recognising qualifications are sometimes difficult to understand, lengthy, and overly bureaucratic.

Refugees also face difficulties gaining access to Lithuanian language instruction, especially in small towns. The workload, long distance to educational institutions, family responsibilities and fatigue after work also challenge language learning.

The main expectation and condition for return to Ukraine is the end of the war and related hostilities. There is a fear of return associated with unsafe living conditions after the war (threat of weapons proliferation, destroyed houses and living quarters, concerns about the possibilities of finding a livelihood, especially work). In case of successful integration into the Lithuanian labour market, especially in combination with higher education obtained in Lithuania, there are doubts about the prospects of reintegration into the Ukrainian labour market, including concerns about the demand for and recognition of higher-level qualifications (for example, in the field of logistics).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The relatively successful integration of Ukrainian refugees into the Lithuanian labour market was largely determined by the alignment of their human capital with the labour market's needs, prior positive experience with labour immigration to Lithuania, and support from politicians and civil society.

Ukrainian refugees with additional vulnerable groups (people with special needs) often face the same difficulties in integrating into the labour market and the education system as local disadvantaged groups—for example, the lack of a positive cultural attitude among businesses towards employing people with special needs.

Insufficient access to learning Lithuanian remains one of the main problems in the integration of immigrants and refugees into the labour market, especially in the public and service sectors.

Among employers, there is a fairly strong understanding and positive attitude towards the potential return of Ukrainian refugees to their homeland after the war.

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