

ADAPTATION STRATEGIES OF MIGRANTS FROM BELARUS AND UKRAINE

in the European Union's
Labour Market

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The low transferability of migrants' human capital leads to professional losses, particularly among women.



Structural barriers hinder the full potential of migrants, negatively impacting the economies of host countries.



Migrants require support, including access to education, financial aid, and assistance from diaspora networks and multinational corporations.

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INTRODUCTION

The central question of this analytical note is: How do migrants with high but not always easily convertible skills adapt to new labour markets? This question is particularly relevant for Belarusian and Ukrainian refugees entering the European Union (EU), where the applicability of domestically accumulated human capital may be seriously limited. Understanding this adaptation process is crucial as it has far-reaching implications for both sending (origin) and receiving (host) countries, and for the migrants themselves¹.

Successful integration into the labour market has dual benefits. For host countries, it can address critical skill shortages, increase productivity, and contribute to economic growth [1,2,3,4]. Conversely, unsuccessful adaptation can result in underemployment, loss of potential, and economic inefficiency. For the migrants' origin countries, successful integration can stimulate remittances, encourage the subsequent return of migrants with new experiences, and strengthen economic ties. However, poor adaptation can lead to an uncompensated "brain drain" effect [5,6,7,8,9]. For forced migrants, each year of non-use of their previously accumulated skills leads to their partial loss, potentially resulting in a permanent drop in wages even if they return home after several years [10].

Although migration has existed for as long as mankind itself, this phenomenon has only recently gained the attention of social researchers. The formation of modern nation states has made migration processes more complex, raising important questions: Who are these people seeking to cross our borders? What motivates them to migrate? How will they contribute to our economy, and what resources, such as social benefits, can they claim? Will they integrate into our society, or will they remain in closed ethnic communities?

Currently, most migrants fall into one of two categories — voluntary migrants and forced migrants with low levels of human capital. The former assess their prospects in the new labour market in advance and often possess highly convertible human capital. This group includes IT specialists, scientists who can teach in foreign universities, as well as labourers and drivers — all those who can easily continue their careers in a new country. Low-skilled professions are almost always highly convertible. However, professions requiring long training and a high level of human capital are often "non-convertible" [11]. Examples include lawyers, officials, teachers — that is, people whose human capital is specific to a particular country.

This paper focuses on the potential loss of human capital due to inadequate convertibility of skills among Ukrainian and Belarusian migrants in Poland and Lithuania. The analysis is based on unique survey data collected in summer 2024 from a sample of 392 Ukrainian and 173 Belarusian migrants who moved to Poland or Lithuania after 2022 and 2020, respectively. While this sample may not be representative due to a general lack of data on the Ukrainian and Belarusian migrant population, it is large enough to provide valuable insights into the groups in question.

Although many of these migrants have high levels of education and professional qualifications, structural barriers such as non-recognition of degrees, lack of language proficiency, and a mismatch between their skills and labour market demand, often prevent them from fully integrating into the host countries' workforce.

Skill mismatches have significant consequences. For example, highly educated professionals from Ukraine or Belarus may find themselves in low-paying and unskilled jobs, unable to utilise their knowledge. This not only restricts their professional growth, but also deprives host countries of valuable skills and potential contributions to economic development.

¹ The literature usually distinguishes voluntary migrants and refugees — people who are forced to leave their country of permanent residence, but in our case, it is not possible to separate voluntary from involuntary migrants. Accordingly, the assumption in this paper is that all Belarusians who left their homeland after 2020 and all Ukrainians who left their country after the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion did so involuntarily. Therefore, the terms "migrants", "forced migrants" and "refugees" in this paper are contextual synonyms.

1

BACKGROUND

Political instability in Belarus, starting with the rigged 2020 presidential election, has led to mass repression and ultimately to significant forced migration. The situation worsened when the Belarusian government participated in Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as co-aggressor. As a result, around 500,000 Belarusians have found asylum in the EU, which is significant considering the country only has a population of just over 9 million; and this wave of migration is even more noteworthy considering that the working-age population of Belarus, from which most migrants originate, is only about 4 million.

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including not only intensified fighting in regions bordering Russia but also attacks on the Ukrainian capital from Belarus, triggered the largest wave of migration in the country's modern history. In the first months of the conflict, more than 6 million Ukrainian refugees left for the EU. To put this in perspective, Ukraine's population before the invasion was estimated at around 44 million. Up to 90% of the initial wave of refugees were women and children because of the mobilisation law signed by President Zelenskyy in the early days of the war, which prohibited most men aged 18 to 60 from leaving the country.

The Ukrainian wave of migration differs from the Belarusian one in several important aspects. Initially, Ukrainian migration was mostly female and child-dominated due to restrictions on men's departure. This disproportion was partly reduced when more men were able to leave Ukraine, and some women returned home to reunite with their families. In contrast, Belarusian migrants show a more balanced gender distribution. In our sample, Belarusians are almost evenly represented by both genders (53% are women), whereas women make up 59% of Ukrainian migrants.

Another important difference concerns family separation. The mobilisation law in Ukraine caused significant geographical separation of families, with many Ukrainian women fleeing alone or with children, while their husbands remained in the country. In our sample, 91% of married Belarusians live in the same country as their spouses, compared to only 76% of Ukrainians.

Furthermore, most respondents in the survey exhibit a relatively high level of human capital formed thanks to considerable professional experience and education. 94% of Belarusian migrants worked for more than five years prior to migration, indicating significant career development before moving. Similarly, 79% of Ukrainian respondents worked for more than five years before leaving Ukraine. In terms of educational attainment, the survey shows a high proportion of formal education in both groups. 60% of Ukrainians in the sample have higher education or more, while among Belarusian migrants this indicator is even higher (89%).

2

MIGRANTS' PLANS TO RETURN

The choice of careers in the host country and the distribution of potential benefits between sending and receiving countries are influenced by the desire or possibility to return home. For Ukrainians, this possibility exists but is associated with serious risks from the ongoing war and the threat of Russian missile attacks. Despite these serious dangers, about 30% of the initial Ukrainian refugees have returned to Ukraine since 2022. According to the European Commission, some 4.1 million Ukrainian refugees who fled the country due to the Russian invasion continue to reside in the EU in 2024.

For Belarusian migrants, the situation is markedly different. While returning to Belarus presents minimal physical safety risks, the political environment poses significant dangers. Many Belarusians who left the country due to repression could face imprisonment upon return, especially those who opposed President Lukashenko's regime or took part in protests after the disputed 2020 elections. The threat of persecution ranges from substantial to almost absolute for many Belarusian migrants, making return a less realistic option for them compared to Ukrainians, albeit for different reasons. There is no reliable data on the number of Belarusians who have opted to return, but the number is probably negligible. The Belarusian authorities created a special "commission on return" and reported several dozen cases of people deciding to return home and applying to this commission. There were also media reports that returning Belarusians soon found themselves in prison.

These differences in return prospects play a crucial role in shaping migrants' long-term career decisions. Ukrainians, who may consider returning home after the conflict ends, are less inclined to invest in building a new life in the host country. Belarusians, facing long-term emigration due to the political situation, are more likely to embed themselves in the host country's labour market in the foreseeable future, given the minimal chances of a safe return. These dynamics have implications not just for individual career paths, but also for the broader economic and social connections between sending and receiving countries, including remittances, return migration, and long-term integration into the host society.

We asked our respondents whether they plan to return to their home country, offering answer options "yes", "no" or

"undecided". A survey revealed that 38% of Ukrainians planned to return home, 19% did not plan to return, and the remaining respondents were undecided. While there were no significant gender differences among those who planned to return home, men were more likely to report no plans of returning (25% vs 15% of women).

The likelihood of return varied significantly depending on respondents' professional background. Those who previously worked in state-owned enterprises were the most likely to return, with 54% indicating plans to do so, compared to 12% having no such plans. In contrast, private entrepreneurs were the least likely to return, with only 25% expressing a desire to return, compared to 50% who would rather stay abroad. Unemployed Ukrainians also showed a strong inclination to return, with 50% planning to do so, and only 12% having no such plans. This is probably explained by their expectations of improved labour market opportunities in Ukraine after the war.

Family dynamics also influence return decisions. Among those who lived with their spouse, 35% expressed a desire to return, while 23% preferred to stay in the host country. In contrast, those who were geographically separated from their spouses expressed a much stronger desire to return, with 46% intending to do so and only 9% opposing the idea.

We also examined factors that could affect Ukrainians' decisions to return home. As expected, economic improvement and a better labour market in Ukraine did not significantly influence respondents' potential choice. However, if active fighting ended, 46% of respondents expressed a desire to return, compared to 12% who remained opposed.

Additionally, NATO membership slightly increased respondents' confidence in returning. The most significant factor was a change in the Russian government and its foreign policy, with 52% of respondents stating that they would return under this scenario, compared to only 10% who opposed the return. These findings indicate that geopolitical stability and security play a crucial role in the decision-making of Ukrainian migrants who consider returning home.

As for Belarusians, 35% planned to return to their homeland without any additional specifications or conditions, 38% had

no such plans, and the rest were undecided. Similarly to the Ukrainians, there were no significant gender differences among Belarusians who planned to return home and those who planned to stay abroad.

Among the Belarusians, employees of small businesses and individuals working in the education sector were the most inclined to return. On the other hand, less educated Belarusians were much more likely to stay in the host country, with only 22% of those who had not finished university planning to return, and 61% of this group with no desire to return. The survey also found that Belarusians with higher education were almost equally divided between the two options, while those with a master's or doctoral degree showed a stronger desire to go home.

As expected, living together or separately from a spouse had no significant influence on Belarusians' decisions, as this choice is less exogenous for them compared to Ukrainians. Political circumstances in Belarus, such as the threat of repression, play a more crucial role in whether Belarusians can reunite with their families, making the cohabitation factor less relevant to the decision-making.

As for the conditions we presented to Belarusians for possible changes in their decision to return, the end of political repressions and a change in the country's leadership had only a moderate impact: 39–40% said they would return, while 33–34% would remain abroad. Surprisingly, the prospect of Belarus joining NATO or the EU had a negative effect on their willingness to return — only 20% of Belarusians would do so under such a scenario, while 61% indicated that they would not return.

The data on the migrants' potential desire to return home or stay in the host country highlights the importance of preserving the human capital of refugees during forced migration for both sending and receiving countries.

3

LOSS OF HUMAN CAPITAL

The distribution of respondents in terms of skills obtained in their original countries of residence is shown in Table 1. Construction, IT, manufacturing and other services can be considered as highly convertible. Overall, 68% of Belarusians have accumulated human capital in these spheres, compared to 51% of Ukrainians. This difference may suggest a less selective nature of migration among the latter. Table 1 also shows that most respondents who initially had a highly convertible profession retained it in the new labour market. At the same time, many respondents

who accumulated their human capital in advertising and design, education, financial services, healthcare and trade had to part with their original professions.

Overall, 44% of Belarusians fully retained their previous careers, 8% downgraded but remained in the same professional sphere, 19% started working in a related field, and 29% started their careers from scratch. The share of Ukrainians who managed to fully retain their careers was significantly lower (25%), while 12% stayed in the same

Table 1.
Distribution of respondents by areas of competencies obtained in the countries of initial residence

	Belarusians at home	Belarusians in the EU	Ukrainians at home	Ukrainians in the EU
Advertising / Design / Marketing	13%	5%	5%	1%
Architecture and Engineering	1%	3%	3%	2%
Construction	3%	1%	10%	10%
Consulting (HR, Law, Management, Tax, etc.)	6%	6%	4%	1%
Education	20%	9%	13%	5%
Financial Services (Banks, Insurance, Investments, Real Estate)	9%	2%	8%	1%
Healthcare and Social Service	5%	3%	1%	5%
Information and Communication Technologies (IT and Coding)	42%	37%	11%	7%
Manufacturing	13%	5%	21%	22%
Tourism, Beauty and Leisure	5%	4%	8%	4%
Trade (wholesale and retail)	17%	6%	26%	8%
Other Services (Transport)	10%	11%	14%	12%
Other	18%	26%	25%	31%
N	172	172	392	392

field but downgraded, 13% found themselves in a related field, and 50% completely lost their previous career and started over.

Among Belarusians, men were much more likely to fully retain their careers (55% vs 31% among women), while women were more than twice as likely to start their careers from scratch (43% vs 17% among men). Other factors that contributed to the complete loss of a career included recent migration, short or excessively long work experience (45% of those whose experience was less than 5 or more than 20 years had to change their professional sphere), employment in small businesses (40%), previous employment in state bodies or the education system, and having only secondary technical or specialised education. Therefore, most Belarusians with high human capital managed either to keep their previous careers or to apply their previously accumulated experience at least partially. From the standpoint of preserving the human capital of Belarusians, the main problem is gender inequality, which results in Belarusian women being much less successful in adapting to the new labour market by the totality of factors.

The situation with preserving human capital of Ukrainian migrants is much more complicated. Just as among Belarusians, the share of Ukrainian women forced to start a career from scratch exceeded the share among men (57% vs 40%). The likelihood of starting a new career turned out to be high for Ukrainians irrespective of their previous work experience. Hired labourers were also affected, irrespective of whether they worked in the private or public sector, in small or large companies. The only significant difference from the Belarusian case was that only 10% of Ukrainian educators changed their profession, while others could find a job in their speciality in Europe. The largest share of Ukrainians who lost their profession was found among people with higher and incomplete higher education (55% and 69% respectively).

This picture of the human capital of Ukrainians can be partly explained by the less selective nature of migration from Ukraine, but nevertheless indicates a large loss of human capital for both Ukraine and the receiving countries.

4

LABOUR MARKET

Table 2 shows the methods used by the migrants surveyed when searching for jobs in a new country. The study found that Belarusian and Ukrainian citizens had similar job search strategies, with a couple of significant differences. Ukrainians more than twice as often used a formal approach by applying to the employment service (30% vs 13%), while Belarusians were much more likely to use diaspora connections (21% vs 3%). Also, Belarusians had more opportunities to move with the help of their initial employer. These two factors likely contributed to the greater success of Belarusians in maintaining their careers and human capital. Searching for jobs through diaspora connections

Table 2
Ways of job search used by migrants

	Belarusians	Ukrainians
I applied to the employment service	13%	30%
I scanned job ads	55%	50%
I looked for a job through friends and acquaintances	44%	43%
I looked for a job through relatives	6%	8%
I looked for a job through diaspora connections	21%	3%
I placed my CV on job boards	33%	21%
I was initially invited to another country by my employer	28%	13%
I attended job fairs / special events	11%	12%
I looked for a job through study in a new country / a project done during my studies	5%	2%
I looked for a job through a volunteer project / offered my goods and services for free	4%	4%
I looked for the job through membership of an NGO / club	5%	2%
Other (specify)	12%	8%
N	172	392

apparently reflects a more nuanced approach to individual needs compared to the official employment service. As for moving at the invitation of an employer, such migration is by far the safest option from the viewpoint of career preservation. This highlights the important but often overlooked role of transnational corporations in facilitating job changes across countries without changing occupations.

Finally, respondents were asked about measures that would help them adapt to the new labour market more successfully and quickly (Table 3). The most popular options included payment for education/additional courses, financial assistance during the job search, and recommendations to the employer. The first two types of assistance are in fact standard for modern social states and coincide with the policy of supporting their own unemployed citizens. But the third popular option, although unrealistic, reveals another important feature of human capital attachment to the country – loss of business reputation.

Table 3
Measures of assistance in adaptation in the labor market

	Belarusians	Ukrainians
Payment for education in the field of my choice(s)	22%	34%
Guidance in choosing my career goals and priorities	26%	18%
Financial assistance during my job search	29%	32%
Me being recommended to an employer	38%	25%
Other (specify)	9%	5%
I do not need any additional help	28%	30%
N	172	392

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

War and political repression affect all spheres of human existence, threatening both life itself and its socio-economic aspects. This paper attempted to shed light on another area of loss, namely the loss of human capital among those forced to move to another country. The peculiarity of this aspect is that it can be both a loss and a potential point of growth, both for sending and receiving countries and, obviously, for the migrants themselves.

Our research highlighted the often-overlooked aspect of gender inequality, with women suffering more from human capital loss due to emigration.

Several measures have proven effective in addressing this issue, including the presence of established diasporas and transnational corporations that aid in the adaptation to new labour markets. Furthermore, migrants themselves emphasise the importance of extending unemployment assistance programmes to them in host countries.

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