

Migration flows during war in Ukraine: Perspectives on the development of regional labor markets through the prism of new socio-economic networks

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Introduction

In recent decades, migratory flows during military conflicts have reached significant scale, affecting the development of regional labor markets and the formation of new socio-economic networks. The war in Ukraine, initiated by Russia's attack in 2014 and escalated by Russia's full-scale military invasion in 2022, has led to the largest migratory flows in Europe since World War II¹. According to the UN Refugee Agency and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as of August 2024, 3.7 million people were internally displaced in Ukraine, and 6.7 million refugees had fled abroad, including 6.2 million to European countries². Despite ongoing early recovery efforts led by the government in Ukraine, millions remain in the status of internally

¹ J. Vierlinger, *UN: Ukraine refugee crisis is Europe's biggest since WWII*, Atlantic Council, 20.04.2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/un-ukraine-refugee-crisis-is-europes-biggest-since-wwii> [accessed: 17.01.2025].

² *Ukraine situation. 2025 situation overview*, UN Refugee Agency, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/ukraine-situation> [accessed: 17.01.2025].

displaced persons or as migrants in other countries due to the unpredictable security situation, deteriorating energy infrastructure, tense economic conditions, and limited livelihood opportunities.

Lee's theory³ of migration has become a fundamental framework for understanding the causes, geography, and consequences of migration flows⁴. In this study, we consider the theoretical possibility of applying it to the end-of-war scenario – migration flows could potentially reverse. The hypothesis is that in a democratic environment without significant administrative barriers, migrants might return if there is stable security and socio-economic networks. They could contribute to the post-war development of Ukraine and to the development of the Ukrainian labor market in their countries of origin with new skills and international experience gained during migration, and create their own positive spillovers.

This scenario could even stimulate migration of EU citizens to Ukraine, as they could effectively apply their skills, technology, and capital to rebuild Ukrainian infrastructure and open new markets in Ukraine. In the context of this research, the theories of Castles⁵, Miller and de Haas⁶ on the adaptation of labor markets to new migration conditions, as well as Massey's⁷ theories on the development of existing and the creation of new socio-economic networks, were also considered. The adaptation of the labor market occurs through interactions between past migrants and the local population, which also facilitates the formation of new socio-economic networks. Sha⁸ views migrant networks as social capital, a perspective shared by scholars such as Muanamoha⁹ and Pathirage¹⁰. They argue that social networks transcend place, location, and territory, and can be seen as spatial conveyors of social capital.

According to Piore¹¹, migration processes often lead to the creation of dual labor markets in which migrants occupy inferior positions. However, modern research,

³ E.S. Lee, *A Theory of Migration*, "Demography" 1966, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 47–57.

⁴ F. Castelli, *Drivers of migration: why do people move?*, "Journal of Travel Medicine" 2018, vol. 25, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/tay040>.

⁵ S. Castles, *Migration, Crisis, and the Global Labour Market*, "Globalizations" 2011, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 311–324, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2011.576847>.

⁶ H. de Haas, S. Castles, M.J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 6th ed., The Guilford Press, New York 2020, pp. 74–89.

⁷ D.S. Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, pp. 111–120.

⁸ H. Sha, *Migrant Networks as Social Capital: The Social Infrastructure of Migration*, MIDEQ, 2021, https://southsouth.contentfiles.net/media/documents/MIDEQ_working_paper-_Migrant_networks_as_social_capital_Heila_Sha.pdf [accessed: 18.01.2025].

⁹ R.C. Muanamoha, B. Maharaj, E. Preston-Whyte, *Social Networks and Undocumented Mozambican Migration to South Africa*, "Geoforum" 2010, vol. 41, no. 6, pp. 885–896, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2010.06.001>.

¹⁰ J. Pathirage, M. Collyer, *Capitalizing Social Networks: Sri Lankan Migration to Italy*, "Ethnography" 2011, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 315–333, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138110362013>.

¹¹ M.J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge – London – New York – Melbourne 1979.

such as Portes' study¹², emphasizes the importance of social networks formed by migrants for economic integration and social adaptation. These networks play a key role in building sustainable socioeconomic structures. Granovetter's¹³ theory of weak ties emphasizes the importance of indirect ties in finding a job and integrating into a new social environment.

This paper aims to explore how migration flows during and after the war may affect regional labor markets through newly formed socioeconomic networks. The importance of this paper lies in its potential to understand how migration processes can contribute to socio-economic recovery and stabilization in post-conflict, post-war scenarios. This paper explores how migration flows during and after war impact regional labor markets through new socioeconomic networks, offering insights into how these processes aid socio-economic recovery in post-conflict scenarios. Aksoy¹⁴ emphasize the crucial intent of displaced Ukrainians to return home when safe, indicating potential for economic revitalization in conflict-affected areas.

This readiness to return suggests a significant backflow of human capital, crucial for regions facing demographic and economic decline due to war. Additionally, research by Adema, Aksoy, Giesing, and Poutvaara¹⁵ provides empirical evidence on how conflict influences refugees' return decisions and their reintegration. These studies highlight the link between migration, socio-economic networks, and recovery in conflict-impacted areas, enhancing understanding of how post-conflict recovery strategies can utilize the potential of returning migrants to drive economic development and stability. These insights are vital for policymakers and development agencies to support effective post-conflict reconstruction and development efforts.

Materials and methods

The study contains information from both primary and secondary sources. This includes statistical data from organizations such as UNHCR, IOM, Eurostat, and the State Statistics Service of Ukraine (Derzhstat) covering the period from January 2022 to January 2025. It also includes data on employment and integration from governmental and independent reports on Ukrainian refugees in key host countries such as

¹² *The Economic Sociology of Immigration, Essays on Networks, Ethnicity and Entrepreneurship*, ed. A. Portes, Russell Sage Foundation, New York 1995, pp. 216–225.

¹³ M.S. Granovetter, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, "American Journal of Sociology" 1973, vol. 78, no. 6, pp. 1360–1380.

¹⁴ C.G. Aksoy, *Most Ukrainians displaced by the war plan to return home when it is safe, research shows*, King's College London, 19.06.2024, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/most-ukrainians-displaced-by-the-war-plan-to-return-home-when-it-is-safe-research-shows> [accessed: 18.01.2025].

¹⁵ J. Adema *et al.* *The Effect of Conflict on Refugees' Return and Integration: Evidence from Ukraine*, "IZA Discussion Paper" 2024, No. 16962, p. 82.

Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic and Italy. It also analyzes policy documents of EU member states, especially those related to refugee support systems, qualification recognition and access to the labor market. The study also highlights the activities of diaspora networks based on local non-governmental organizations (such as AWO and Caritas), as well as enterprises with Ukrainian capital in host countries.

The research employs several methods to examine the multifaceted nature of war-induced migration. The descriptive statistical analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of migration volumes, regional distribution and employment rates of refugees. Comparative analysis focuses on cross-national differences in refugee labor integration strategies and outcomes. Part of the empirical analysis includes data obtained from expert interviews, NGO reports, and migrant community resources to understand how socio-economic networks function in host countries.

Finally, the interpretive analysis, guided by theory, uses key theoretical frameworks: Lee's "push-pull" migration theory assesses the causes and dynamics of war-time migration and the potential for reverse flows in post-conflict settings. The network migration theory (based on Granovetter, Portes and Massey) analyzes the role of social capital in facilitating adaptation and integration in the labor market. Labor market theory (based on Piore) examines the structural segmentation of host labor markets and the positioning of refugees in them.

Geographically, the regions covered in present study are viewed from two opposing perspectives. Ukraine is seen as a country of origin for migration flows and as a potential destination for future return migration and reintegration. Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic and Italy were selected as key receiving countries due to their significant (largest) numbers of Ukrainian refugees and different approaches to integration and labor market participation. This mixed-methods study allows for a multidimensional analysis of how war-induced migration transforms labor markets and creates new socio-economic linkages across borders. The findings should form the basis for long-term planning for post-war recovery.

Results

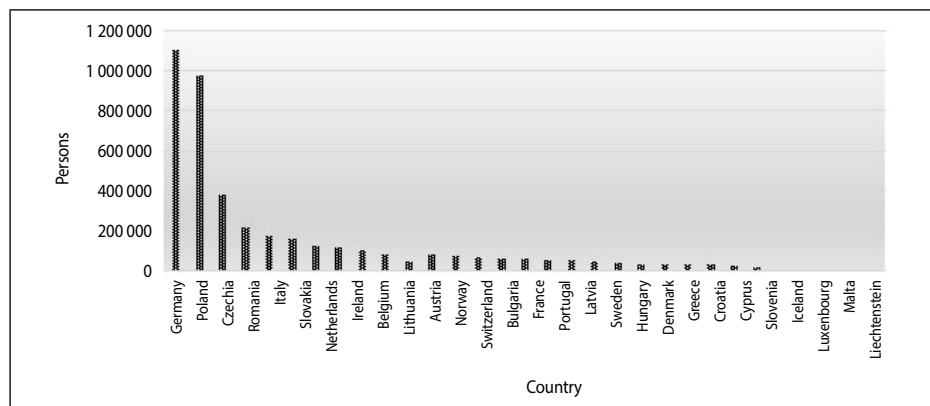
The scale of the migration crisis caused by the war in Ukraine is huge. According to The Operational Data Portal (UNHCR), as of January 16, 2025, the number of refugees from Ukraine in the world was just under 7 million (6,863.4 thousand people)¹⁶. As of January 2025, according to the IOM, some 3.7 million people remain internally displaced in Ukraine. At the beginning of 2022, this figure reached 7.1 million¹⁷.

¹⁶ *Ukraine Refugee Situation*, The Operational Data Portal (UNHCR), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> [accessed: 16.01.2025].

¹⁷ *Displacement due to Conflict in Ukraine*, Displacement Tracking Matrix, IOM, IDMC 2023, <https://dtm.iom.int/ukraine> [accessed: 16.01.2025].

Based on the population of Ukraine as of December 2021 (41.2 million)¹⁸, the percentage of internal and external refugee migrants as a result of the Russian military invasion is about 25 percent. The largest number of refugees reside in Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic (EU)¹⁹, and the United Kingdom²⁰ (figure 1).

Figure 1. Beneficiaries of temporary protection at the end of the month by citizenship (Ukraine), October 2024 (total persons)



Source: author's own elaboration based on: *Beneficiaries of temporary protection at the end of the month by citizenship, age and sex – monthly data*, Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytspm_custom_13123513/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=88e809cf-3f21-4128-b411-462734807565 [accessed: 18.01.2025].

This is explained by Lee's theory, namely that the causes of migration are negative factors that “push” people to leave their place of residence and positive (substitute) factors that “pull” them to a new place. The leading “push” factor in this situation was not economic or social, but political, namely the war and physical persecution by Russians and Russian troops, which threatened the lives of the entire population of Ukraine.

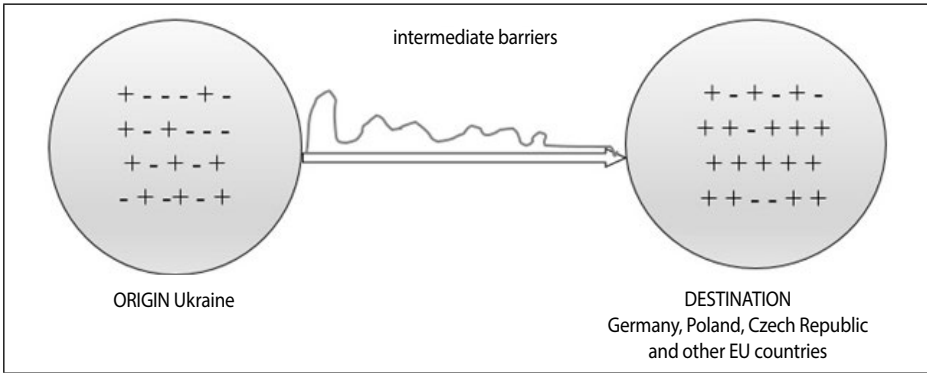
The leading and decisive “pull” factor was political stability and the absence of war in the European Union, the presence of Ukrainian diasporas and humanitarian aid. The geography of the destination countries was chosen based on minimizing obstacles (barriers) (figure 2).

¹⁸ *Demographic situation in 2021*, Derzhstat, 12.6.2023, <https://stat.gov.ua/en/publications/demographic-situation-2021> [accessed: 16.01.2025].

¹⁹ *Beneficiaries of temporary protection at the end of the month by citizenship, age and sex – monthly data*, Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytspm_custom_13123513/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=88e809cf-3f21-4128-b411-462734807565 [accessed: 18.01.2025].

²⁰ *Refugees from Ukraine in Europe. Descending ranking by the number of refugees*, The Operational Data Portal (UNHCR), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/working-group/437?secret=unhcrrestricted&geo=0&sv=65> [accessed: 16.01.2025].

Figure 2. Lee's push-pull migration model in the context of refugee migration from Ukraine to European countries as a result of the Russian military invasion



Source: author's own elaboration based on K. Bilal, M. Urbański, *Approaches to understanding migration: a multi-country analysis of the push and pull migration trend*, "Economics & Sociology" 2021, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 242–267, <https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-789x.2021/14-4/14>.

The push and pull factors that were present in this situation are analyzed.

Push factors:

1. Political pressure and threats to life:
 - war: the primary decisive factor forcing Ukrainians to leave their homes;
 - physical persecution by Russian forces: the immediate threat to life and safety served as a dominant motive for migration.
2. Absence of basic security:
 - bombing, destruction of infrastructure;
 - lack of access to essential services such as food, water, and healthcare further exacerbated the need to flee.

Pull factors:

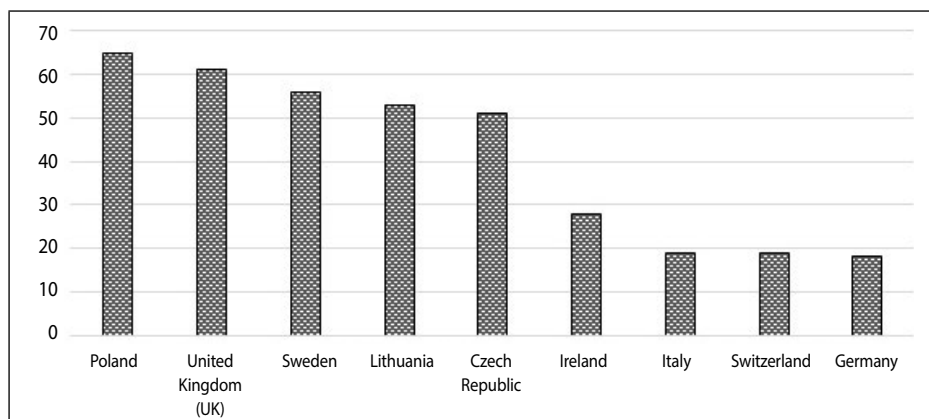
1. Political stability and safety in EU countries:
 - the absence of war.
2. Humanitarian support:
 - provision of temporary protection, social assistance, and accommodation;
 - clearly defined integration programs for refugees (Germany).
3. established Ukrainian diasporas.
4. Geographic accessibility. Neighboring countries were preferred due to minimized physical and logistical barriers.
5. Linguistic affinity.

The determining factors in the selection of countries were the presence of relatives or friends in the country, the complexity (similarity) of the language, the existence of an extensive system of humanitarian assistance and rapid integration of refugees. Thus, the economic and social factors were not the primary and decisive ones;

Ukrainians did not plan to emigrate to these countries in such numbers to improve their economic well-being or social security. And this indirectly explains why they still need to adapt to the new European labor markets. The main reasons are: language skills in accordance with the professional qualifications acquired in Ukraine and confirmation of professional diplomas.

As of January 2024, the largest share of employed Ukrainian refugees, namely 65% (about 900 thousand people), was in Poland²¹, the smallest in Italy, Switzerland and Germany (figure 3). This is due to several factors, the leading ones being the socially loyal system of support for refugees from the authorities (providing full time for language learning in accordance with professional qualifications, the duration of recognition of professional diplomas, and the age composition of refugees). As of November 2024, the percentage of employed Ukrainian refugees in Germany, Switzerland and Italy increased to 30%, 23% and 20%, respectively²².

Figure 3. Share of Ukrainian refugees employed in selected European countries in 2023 (%)



Source: adapted by the author on the basis of *Share of Ukrainian refugees employed in selected European countries in 2023*, Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1456099/share-of-ukrainian-refugees-employed-in-europe> [accessed: 18.01.2025].

Socioeconomic networks play an important role in employment. This study does not refer to digitized networks, but instead to networks that actually exist or are newly created. If we look at the German case study, these include official authorities

²¹ *Share of Ukrainian refugees employed in selected European countries in 2023*, Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1456099/share-of-ukrainian-refugees-employed-in-europe> [accessed: 18.01.2025].

²² Y. Kosyakova et al., *Labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees: An international perspective*, IAB Research Report, Updated on 14.11.2024, <https://doi.org/10.48720/IAB.FB.2416EN> [accessed: 18.01.2025].

operating throughout the country, such as Jobcenters and Bundesagentur für Arbeit, which build a plan for each person according to their situation, volunteer organizations such as Caritas and AWO, diaspora centers, and new economic formations in the form of new Ukrainian businesses or Ukrainian organizations' branches that employ Ukrainian refugees. Among the latter, the most prominent examples are Nova Poshta, IT companies, Baluwana Halya (Multicook), etc.

Lot of assistance is organized for refugees under the auspices of local NGOs and volunteer organizations. One of these organizations is AWO, with a network of branches spread across Germany and beyond. AWO also supports projects addressing the cultural and educational needs of the Ukrainian community in Germany, offering services such as German language training, employment assistance and the recognition of refugees' professional qualifications in Germany. In addition, an important part of the support is the provision of interpreters for necessary visits to government or medical institutions.

The outflow of human capital from Ukraine is compounded by the lack of concerted efforts on the part of Ukraine in the countries of destination to consolidate the Ukrainian emigrant community. This situation underscores the lack of structured community networks that go beyond formal diplomatic institutions such as consulates and embassies to include more accessible, informal Ukrainian organizations that could facilitate community integration and support and serve as bridges for Ukrainian re-immigration without the need for heavy administrative leverage. Thus, there is a serious shortage of organized and geographically comprehensive, non-governmental Ukrainian support structures for Ukrainian migrants in Germany. There are only consulates and embassies, which are official authorities and do not work on ongoing support with their citizens with a view to their potential return home. Such an organization should exist in the form of a non-governmental organization that would not exert administrative pressure, but would help Ukrainian refugees find jobs in joint German-Ukrainian organizations through, for example, chambers of commerce and industry, and unite the Ukrainian community on a cultural and educational basis.

The basis for creating effective socio-economic networks for joining the labor market in Germany is:

- compulsory education of children in German schools;
- language and other integration courses;
- availability of professional consultations in Ukrainian, English and German;
- recognition of professional qualifications, offers to acquire a new profession at state expense, etc.

These conditions are provided by the German government, although the process is burdened by a certain bureaucratic component, but it is permanent and understandable. There are no obstacles for migrants to obtain these opportunities.

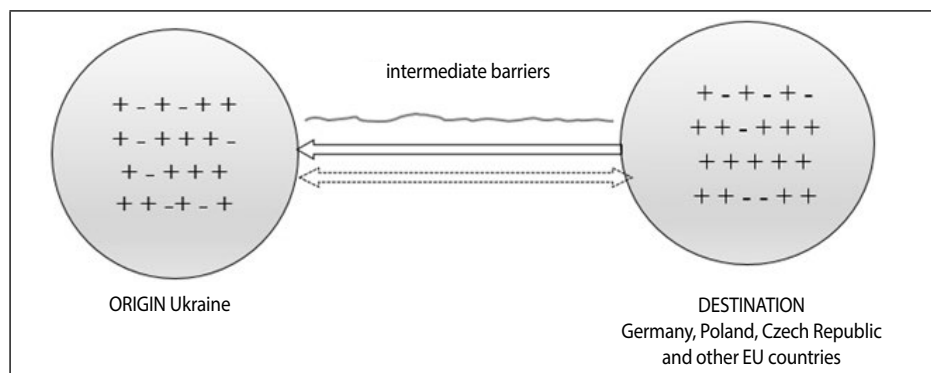
If we consider the risks from Germany in this context, then there are practically none: the economic costs will pay off in the medium term due to new employees on the German labor market, due to taxation and renewed, young human capital. The risks in this context for Ukraine are much higher. Among the main risks, one can single out the gradual weakening of Ukrainian national identity among migrants, the loss of human capital (many migrants may not return home to Ukraine due to lack of housing, social protection, lost social ties).

A key element of Ukraine's strategy to meet post-war needs in the reconstruction and integration of the socio-economic structure is the implementation of public-private partnerships in critical sectors such as construction and logistics to promote sustainable development in the region. European assistance and cooperation are crucial, focusing on improving infrastructure and facilitating the creation of joint ventures in logistics and construction. The Polish-Ukrainian border remains an important transit route, which underlies future logistics efforts that can become the basis for sustainable development initiatives.

The next key point is the creation of a strong network to support Ukraine's long-term interaction with Ukrainian citizens, including IDPs. Such networks would not only help meet immediate logistical and infrastructure needs, but would also strengthen socio-political ties, promoting resilience and continued engagement regardless of people's physical location in Ukraine or abroad.

The proposed concept draws on Lee's "displacement" migration theory, which envisages a reverse migration flow in the post-conflict period, possibly without direct administrative intervention by Ukrainian authorities (figure 4).

Figure 4. Lee's migration model in the context of potential repatriation of Ukrainian refugees from European countries to Ukraine following successful integration strategies and socio-economic network development



Source: author's own elaboration based on K. Bilal, M. Urbański, *Approaches to understanding migration: a multi-country analysis of the push and pull migration trend*, "Economics & Sociology" 2021, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 242–267, <https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-789x.2021/14-4/14>.

Such an approach could be particularly effective in the context of broader European integration, perhaps under the auspices of the European Union and NATO, emphasizing a strategic shift from reactive to proactive management of communities and infrastructure. Such a perspective envisages a multifaceted approach to reconstruction and development, where infrastructure projects are aligned with broader geopolitical and socio-economic strategies to ensure inclusive recovery and sustainable growth in the post-conflict and post-war periods. Such integration strategies can make a significant contribution to the stabilization and revival of Ukraine by creating a favorable environment for repatriation and long-term development.

Conclusions

The dynamics of conflict-related migration of Ukrainian refugees and their integration in European countries are closely intertwined with their adaptation to the labor market in these countries. The application of Lee's migration theory to assess potential return migration in the post-conflict period emphasizes the impact of stable socioeconomic conditions in Ukraine on these patterns.

The large-scale movement of Ukrainians to Europe, driven by the difficult situation at home and attracted by stability and opportunities abroad, puts pressure on both the Ukrainian and European labor markets. For host countries, the integration of refugees means their assimilation into the local economy, which requires effective employment strategies and social integration programs. These strategies are aimed not only at mitigating the direct impact on local labor markets, but also at harnessing the potential contribution of refugees, who bring with them a variety of skills and experiences that can revitalize the local economy.

Ukraine faces the significant risk of losing human capital as its citizens integrate into European labor markets, potentially leading to a brain drain if these individuals do not return. Effective cooperation between Ukraine and its diaspora is crucial to mitigate these risks. This includes fostering relationships with displaced citizens through transnational networks that maintain cultural and economic ties, thereby encouraging repatriation and contributing to Ukraine's recovery post-conflict. The role of transnational networks is essential for mobilizing resources necessary for Ukraine's reconstruction and for facilitating the reintegration of returnees into the Ukrainian labor market. Successful reintegration can be significantly beneficial, as returnees bring back skills and international experience acquired abroad. This infusion of talent can drive innovation and development in Ukraine's labor markets, contributing to broader socio-economic recovery.

It is imperative to examine the long-term impact of integration strategies on both refugees and host labor markets in order to assess their effectiveness and improve these approaches. In addition, examining the role of international cooperation

in facilitating safe and voluntary repatriation will deepen understanding of how global responses can be optimized to manage migration crises democratically and effectively.

Finally, the integration of Ukrainian refugees into European labor markets and the potential for their return create both challenges and opportunities for economic stability and development. Strategic cooperation and research are essential to harness the full potential of this migration in building sustainable labor markets in both Europe and Ukraine.

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Migration flows during war in Ukraine: Perspectives on the development of regional labor markets through the prism of new socio-economic networks

Abstract

The paper examines the dynamics of Ukrainian refugees' migration due to conflict and their integration into European labor markets using Lee's migration theory. It considers the displacement effects and the integration challenges and opportunities presented by such migrations. It highlights the need for Ukraine to engage its displaced citizens and explores the benefits of return migration that includes new skills, aiding Ukraine's socio-economic stability. Furthermore, it discusses how migration flows triggered by war challenge but can also enrich regional labor markets through new socio-economic networks formed by migrants. Integrating these migrants through education, retraining, and entrepreneurial support can stabilize and grow local economies.

Keywords: migration flows, forced migration, socio-economic networks, regional labor markets, Ukrainian refugees, Lee's migration theory, integration strategies, return migration