

# Lost in Definition – Differences and Similarities Between War Refugees and Pre-2022 Immigrants from Ukraine in Poland

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## Abstract:

The outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 has led to a situation where two populations of immigrants from Ukraine live on Polish territory at the same time. The paper aims to present the differences and similarities between war refugees who came to Poland from Ukraine after February 2022 and earlier immigrants who mainly followed economic reasons in their decision to migrate.

This paper uses the data from the Polish public system of registration of war refugees (PESEL-UKR) and the survey data from the National Bank of Poland. The surveys were carried out in 2020 (before COVID-19 and full-scale war, n=2981), May 2022 (war refugees, n=3165) and November 2022 (pre-war immigrants and war refugees, n=3791). The comparison of the earlier immigrants to war refugees from Ukraine shows that war refugees in May 2022 were mainly well-educated women, frequently with children and without previous experiences with the migration to Poland. Almost half of the war refugees initially declared they did not speak Polish. Despite their difficult situation, most war refugees from Ukraine sought to become economically independent and actively searched for work: their employment rate in May amounted to 28%, while 65% in November 2022. Pre-war migrants and refugees differ in plans to return to their home country. The war turned temporary pre-war migrants into persons who frequently declared the plan to stay in Poland permanently (55%). War refugees remained mainly undecided (49%) or declared will to return to Ukraine shortly.

**Keywords:** war refugees, immigrants, labour market integration, a survey among immigrants, immigration policy, Ukraine, Poland

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## Introduction

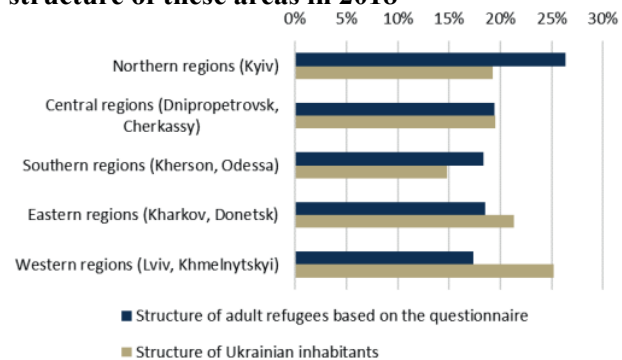
The inflow of Ukrainian immigrants to Poland is a relatively new phenomenon. Before 2014, the migration was relatively small and mainly connected with seasonal work in the agriculture sector. Russian aggression in the Eastern parts of Ukraine in 2014 caused a deep economic crisis in Ukraine, which was a reason for the substantial increase in the inflow of immigrants from Ukraine to Poland. Only about 80% of immigrants who came to Poland in this emigration wave claimed that the decision was due to unemployment or low wages (Chmielewska, Dobroczek, i Puzyńkiewicz 2016). The number of labour immigrants (mainly temporary) increased to about 1.4 million in 2019. Then, it decreased by about 10% during the pandemic and, in 2021, again raised to the pre-pandemic levels. The situation dramatically changed on 24 February 2022 with a full-scale Russian invasion. Civilians have felt the war throughout Ukraine because of the armed clashes, war crimes, regular bombings of cities, and even being placed far away from the war front. It created an enormous outflow of war refugees from Ukraine who moved to bordering countries, mainly through the Polish border, until April 2023 (Figure 1). According to OECD estimates (OECD 2023), until June 2022, about 4.7 million Ukrainian war refugees/displaced people came to OECD countries. The number of refugees in Poland in mid-2022 was estimated to be about 1.5 (Duszczuk i Kaczmarczyk 2022). According to estimates based on the official database, PESEL-UKR in Poland, nearly one million refugees remained in Poland at the end of 2022.

**Figure 1. The traffic on the border with Ukraine (daily in thousands)**



Source: Chmielewska-Kalińska, Dudek & Strzelecki (2022)

**Figure 2. Regions of Ukraine where refugees lived before coming to Poland and the population structure of these areas in 2018**



The inflow of immigrants from Ukraine to Poland was over-proportional to the population of Ukraine, especially from the regions directly affected by war in 2022 (Figure 2). The war refugees came mainly from the regions around Kyiv and the southern parts (Kherson, Odesa). Due to military conscription in Ukraine, about 90% of war refugees were women, frequently with children.

The outbreak of the full-scale war in their homeland was also challenging for immigrants from Ukraine who came before 2022. Most of them were in Poland temporarily, providing financial help for their families in their home country. That is why the difference between the definition of war refugees and labour immigrants seems to be fuzzy in the case of Poland. This paper aims to compare the two groups of immigrants in Poland to identify the similarities and differences.

This kind of comparison can contribute to answering research and policy-relevant groups of questions, such as:

- 1) What policies can ease the labour market integration of persons displaced from their home country by the war? Why the labour force participation of the war refugees from Ukraine in the host country was relatively high in comparison to the cases of other armed conflicts?
- 2) What can be the potential motivations for war refugees to return to their home country when the war ends? What are the family compositions of members in the host country (Poland) and home country (Ukraine)?

3) What can be the role of the large diaspora of immigrants from Ukraine in supporting the rebuilding of their home country? Are there signs that remittances decay with time, or transferring money from immigrants is stable?

## Data and statistical methods

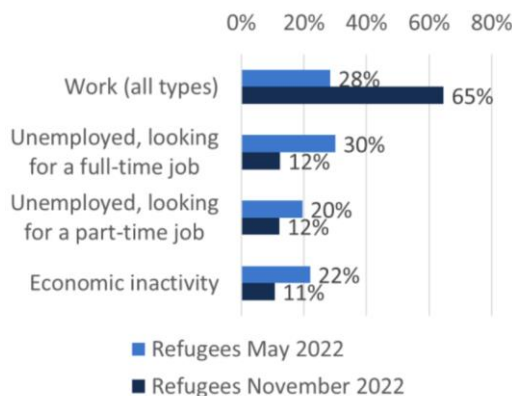
In this paper, we utilise the data from the extensive sample surveys carried out by the National Bank of Poland among immigrants from Ukraine in Poland between 2019 and 2020 (before COVID-19 and full-scale war, n=2981), May 2022 (war refugees, n=3165) and November 2022 (pre-war immigrants and war refugees, n=3791). The surveys were conducted in all major regions of Poland using the standard PAPI technique using questionnaires in three languages: Ukrainian, Russian and Polish.

The results of the surveys, together with different types of regression models, will be used to determine the factors influencing the labour market participation of immigrants, their declarations of return to their home country and sending remittances. In addition, the cluster analysis indicates the groups of migrants with different attachment levels to the country of origin.

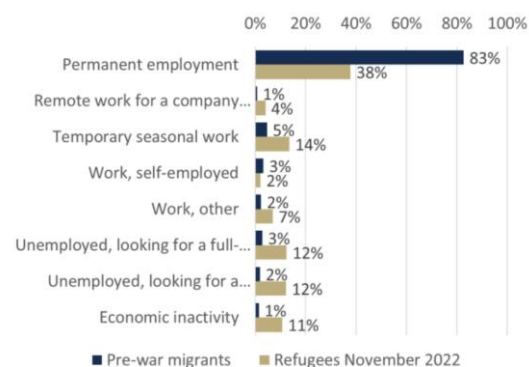
## Selected initial results

Despite their difficult situation, war refugees who entered Poland in the first months after the outbreak of the full-scale war had a remarkably high employment rate. In May 2022, it amounted to 28% (Figure 3). Even more important is that it increased to 65% in November 2022 due to a reduction of initially very high unemployment and lower inactivity. However, it is still noticeable that the labour market integration of pre-2022 immigrants was significantly better in terms of lower unemployment and stability of employment (Figure 4).

**Figure 3. Comparison of the labour force status of refugees in May 2022 and November 2022.**



**Figure 4. Comparison of the labour force status of the war refugees in November 2022 and pre-war immigrants in the same time.**

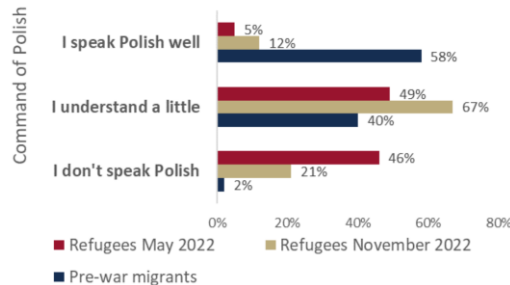


Source: Chmielewska- Kalińska, Beata Dudek & Paweł Strzelecki (2023)

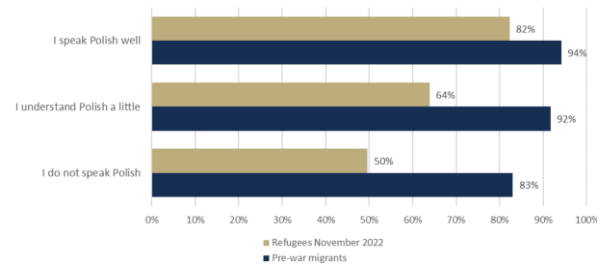
The majority of the war refugees were in Poland for the first time in their lives. In May 2022, 46% of the survey respondents declared that they didn't speak or understand Polish (Figure 5), and about half had some knowledge of Polish language. This situation has changed with time. In November, the percentage of war refugees without knowledge of the Polish language dropped to about 20%, but the percentage of persons who spoke Polish well was still relatively low (12%). It contrasts pre-war migrants, among whom almost 60% declared good knowledge of the Polish language. A good knowledge of the host country's language is frequently mentioned in the literature as one of the key determinants of the integration of the labour market. It is also confirmed in the Polish labour market (Figure 6). There is a systematic difference between the employment rates of immigrants with different knowledge of the Polish language. The differences between employment rates of pre-war immigrants without any knowledge (83%) and well-speaking persons (94%) is lower than in the case of refugees,

among which in November it amounted to 50% among refugees without knowledge of Polish language and 82% among persons who speak Polish well.

**Figure 5. The level of knowledge of the Polish language among immigrants**



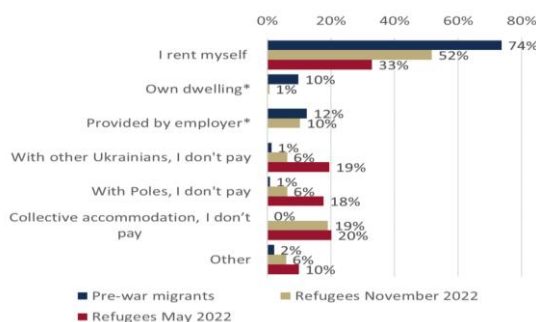
**Figure 6. Employment rates and the knowledge of the Polish language**



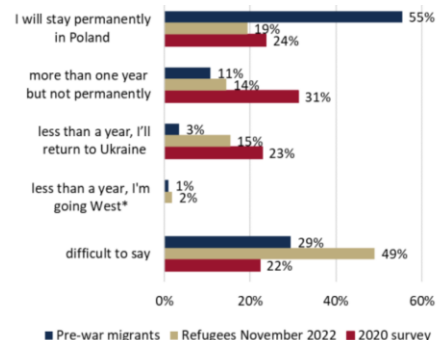
Source: Chmielewska- Kalińska, Beata Dudek & Paweł Strzelecki (2023)

Most war refugees who came to Poland after the Russian aggression did their best to become economically independent relatively fast (Figure 7). Initially, they required help from different sources regarding accommodation in Poland. However, even in May 2022, about one-third could pay for their accommodation. In November 2022, this percentage increased to over 50%, but about 20% used collective forms of accommodation provided by the central and local government.

**Figure 7. Accommodation of Ukrainian immigrants in Poland**



**Figure 8. Declarations of immigrants regarding their plans to stay in Poland**



Source: Chmielewska- Kalińska, Beata Dudek & Paweł Strzelecki (2023)

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine changed the attitude towards staying in Poland of pre-war immigrants from circular migration to settlement migration (Figure 8). In contrast, half of the war refugees did not have the answer to this question, and only 19% declared that they would probably stay in Poland permanently.

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