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Article

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Piotr Lewandowski

Occupational Downgrading, Job Tasks, and the Return Intentions of the Ukrainian Refugees in Poland

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Poland swiftly welcomed over a million Ukrainian refugees, providing them with immediate access to the labor market and social safety nets. With only a Polish ID number required, many refugees could integrate into the workforce quickly, thanks partly to Poland's strong economic performance and labor shortages. However, Poland provided minimal integration services and no dedicated benefits. In 2024, the employment rate of Ukrainian refugees in Poland remains high, in the range of 55–65 percent, notably exceeding rates seen in Western European countries like Germany and Austria. However, most refugees are employed in low-skilled, elementary occupations, with around 40 percent reporting feeling overskilled for their jobs. Key issues that arise are the extent of occupational downgrading and task degradation compared to the work they did in Ukraine, what factors drive these trends, and how these conditions influence their plans to stay in Poland or return to Ukraine.

In our paper (Lewandowski et al. 2025), we examine the occupational trajectories of Ukrainian refugees, quantify changes in the routine task intensity (RTI) of their jobs before and after forced migration, and explore how these changes relate to their intentions to return to Ukraine. Our analysis is based on a custom survey conducted online in February and March 2023, a collaboration between the Institute for Structural Research (IBS) and the Centre of Migration Research (OBM) at Warsaw University. The survey sampled 1,360 individuals, including 1,034 Ukrainian war refugees, 994 of whom were of working age (18–65 years).

Using a survey instrument modeled on the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), we quantified job tasks and constructed a worker-level measure of RTI by applying a method from Lewandowski et al. (2022). RTI rises with the importance of routine tasks – whether manual or cognitive – that are structured, repetitive, and prone to automation, while it falls with the relevance of non-routine tasks that require creativity, analytical thinking, management, education, interpersonal interaction, and spatial awareness. This task-based framework, often used by economists to study occupational developments (Acemoglu and Autor 2011), has shown that more routine intensive work, meaning higher RTI, is generally linked to lower productivity and lower wages (Autor and Handel 2013; de la Rica et al. 2020).

KEY MESSAGES

- **Ukrainian refugees in Poland have a high employment rate (55–65 percent), but most work in low-skilled jobs, with around 40 percent feeling overskilled compared to their qualifications**
- **Refugees face a marked increase in routine task intensity (RTI) in Poland, performing more repetitive, less skill-intensive work than in Ukraine (“task degradation”). This is particularly true for those with tertiary education or poor Polish language skills**
- **Task degradation has influenced many refugees to reconsider staying in Poland. By 2023, 20 percent of refugees who initially planned to stay in 2022 expressed intentions to return to Ukraine – the stronger the task degradation, the more likely this change in plans**
- **Poland's limited integration policies and weak support for skill alignment have hindered refugees' ability to secure jobs matching their qualifications. This poses long-term risks for both refugees and Poland's labor market**
- **Addressing skill mismatches, improving language training, and providing pathways to skilled jobs could enhance refugees' contributions to Poland and prepare them for meaningful roles upon returning to Ukraine**

By comparing job tasks performed in refugees' current jobs in Poland with those from their last job in Ukraine, we can assess occupational downgrading and how the composition of tasks in refugees' post-migration jobs differs from the nature of work they did before the war.

Our study has three key findings. First, a notable 20 percent of employed Ukrainian refugees – equivalent to 14 percent of working-age refugees – continue working in the same jobs they held in Ukraine (Figure 1). This share is significantly higher than in Western European countries, and possibly unprecedented. Our multinomial logit regressions indicate that refugees with tertiary education, those with some Polish

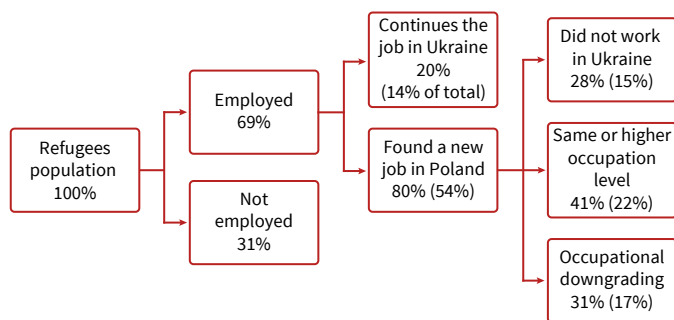


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Figure 1

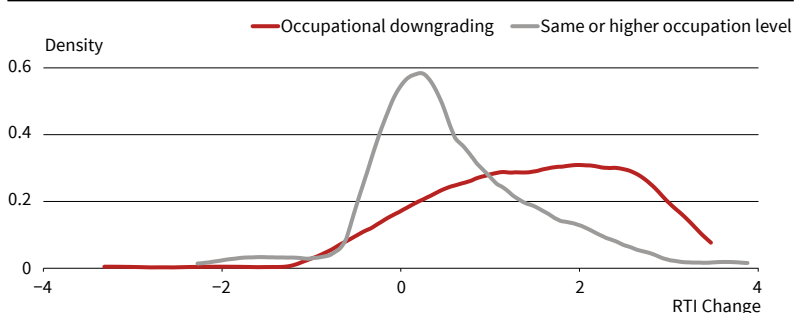
Occupational Trajectories of Ukrainian War Refugees in Poland



Source: Lewandowski et al. (2025).

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Figure 2

Task Degradation Among Refugees¹

¹ The difference between routine task intensity (RTI) of a job found in Poland and the last job performed in Ukraine before fleeing to Poland.

Source: Lewandowski et al. (2025).

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language skills, and those from more affluent regions of Ukraine are more likely to retain their previous jobs. These individuals may benefit from the normalization of remote work, which became more widespread during the Covid-19 pandemic, allowing them to maintain their professional status and networks. Additionally, they can take advantage of Poland's lower living costs compared to most Western European countries.

Second, occupational downgrading and task degradation are widespread among Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Many refugees who previously held jobs in Ukraine have found employment in less skill-intensive roles in Poland (Figure 1). This downgrading is especially common among those who worked in managerial, professional, or technical positions in Ukraine, with 50 percent moving into lower-skilled occupations in Poland. Older refugees and those with limited Polish language skills are more likely to experience this downward shift.

Third, task degradation is closely linked to a growing willingness among Ukrainian refugees to return to Ukraine, particularly among those who initially intended to stay in Poland. Drawing on data from our 2022 survey, we analyzed changes in refugees' intentions to either remain in Poland or return home. In 2022, around 60 percent of refugees planned to stay in Poland. However, by 2023, about 20 percent of these "stayers" (13 percent of all refugees) had reconsidered and expressed a desire to return to Ukraine. Our findings suggest task degradation plays a key role in

this shift: the more routine-intensive a refugee's job in Poland is compared to their job in Ukraine, the more likely they are to change their plans and seek a return by 2023 (Table 1). This effect remains statistically significant even when controlling for earnings (which are negatively correlated with changing return plans) and occupational downgrading (which is positively correlated). This indicates that deeper task degradation – marked by underutilization of skills and reduced job autonomy – can influence decisions about settling in a new country, independent of income considerations.

As Poland is a relatively new immigrant destination, it offers easy access to the labor market but lacks strong labor market policies or an integration framework (Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2019). This weak policy environment may result in an opportunity lost, as many refugees are not acquiring new skills that could be valuable upon their return to Ukraine after the war. However, the concentration of migrants in low-skilled jobs and underutilization of their skills is a more general challenge of the Polish migration framework.

For decades, Poland was an emigration country, particularly after its 2004 EU accession triggered massive emigration to Western Europe. In the early 2010s, about 2.5 million Poles resided abroad while – according to the 2011 census – only 110,000 foreigners lived in Poland (Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2019). Immigration to Poland accelerated after the 2014 war in Eastern Ukraine (Donbas) and soon became large-scale thanks to Poland's strong economic growth, gaping labour shortages, and the government's liberal approach to the inflow of migrant workers from the post-Soviet countries. In the late 2010s, Poland became the OECD country with the largest annual inflow of temporary labor migrants, with Ukrainians being a dominant group (OECD 2021). The majority of these migrant workers performed rather simple jobs in agriculture, construction, services, and manufacturing, despite gradually increasing shares of tertiary educated workers. (Kowalik et al. 2024) estimated that about 40 percent of Ukrainian gig workers in taxi or delivery services have at least a bachelor's degree. While the background of increasingly numerous migrants from Central Asia, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh is much less understood, the work permit data show their strong concentration in elementary occupations. As these groups face larger language barriers in Poland than Ukrainians, occupational upgrading is likely even more challenging for them.

It is worth noting that overeducation, underutilization of skills, and occupational mismatch affect migrants across Europe. Immigrants in the EU, particularly those from non-EU countries, are significantly more likely to be overeducated than natives (Dalmonte et al. 2024), more often work in fields that do not correspond to their education, and tend to have lower job quality (Lange et al. 2024). Still, these challenges are particularly acute in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries with underdeveloped integration systems.

POLICY CONCLUSIONS

Ukrainian refugees in Poland have faced significant occupational downgrading and many of them report subjective overskilling, meaning many are working in jobs below their nominal qualifications. Even when they find employment in similar occupations to those they held in Ukraine, the jobs are often more routine-intensive. This task degradation has been associated with a decline in the refugees' willingness to stay in Poland, particularly among those who initially wanted to remain in the country after arriving in 2022. Occupational downgrading of migrants is common in most destinations as migrants may lack human capital due, among other things, to lower schooling quality in home countries, language barriers, or obstacles to formal recognition of qualifications. Still, our findings suggest that performing less advanced tasks after migration may feel like a deprivation that goes beyond occupational downgrading. The Ukrainian refugees who are discouraged by it from staying in Poland may put less effort into integration.

In the 1990s, Germany granted temporary protection to 700,000 refugees from the war in the former Yugoslavia. By the 2000s, many returning refugees helped strengthen economic ties between their home countries and Germany, bringing mutual benefits. Those who worked in high-skilled occupations that facilitated the transfer of knowledge, technology, and best practices were key drivers of this positive change (Bahar et al. 2022).

Unfortunately, the current employment patterns of Ukrainian refugees in Poland are unlikely to produce similar long-term benefits. To unlock such potential, public policy should focus on addressing skill mismatches, supporting language learning, and helping refugees find jobs that align with their qualifications and education. In Poland, this would require serious effort and funding to increase public employment services' ability to support migrants, speed the recognition of education, and create institutional support for societal integration, especially since Poland had not built integration infrastructure before the full-scale Russian invasion.

The multifaceted challenges of refugee integration demand close collaboration among central and regional administrations as well as civil society. However, the draft migration strategy recently unveiled by the Polish government has largely framed migration issues in terms of "regaining control and ensuring security" and was introduced without public consultation. Highlighting Poland's national sovereignty and drawing strong cultural boundaries has long dominated Polish governments' narrative on migration (Drewski and Gerhards 2024). Still, doubling down on this approach in the current context does not bode well for the future of a more proactive approach to the labor market integration of migrants in Poland. The challenges of integrating Ukrainian refugees

Table 1

Average Marginal Effects for RTI Change between the Job in Poland and the Last Job in Ukraine

Return intentions in 2022/2023	dy/dx	std. err.	P> z
Did not want to return in 2022 and 2023	-0.055	0.033	0.098
Did not want to return in 2022,wants to return in 2023	0.035*	0.014	0.015
Wanted to return in 2022, do not want to return in 2023	0.007	0.021	0.748
Wanted to return in 2022 and 2023	0.013	0.032	0.690

Note: * p<0.05.

Source: Lewandowski et al. (2025).

into the labor market observed in Poland, such as occupational downgrading and skill underutilization, highlight the risks of uneven integration frameworks across EU member states. Coordinated EU policies could address these disparities by facilitating the recognition of qualifications, supporting skill-aligned job placements, and standardizing access to integration services like language training.

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