



MIGRATION IN POLAND

TRANSITION, PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

ABSTRACT

Poland's migration scene has undergone a significant transition. Within a few years, it has gone from a country of high emigration to a country of immigration, predominantly from Eastern Europe. In particular, Poland has recently become a crucial player in hosting the sudden influx of refugees from Ukraine, although the overall migration trend in the country has origins in various areas. Nonetheless, there is still a lack of comprehensive data to quantify immigration and regional distribution. Most importantly there is no clear information about migrants' needs, and no plans for labour policies or social welfare schemes have been put forward by the national government to allow the immigrants to better integrate into Polish society. The solutions offered by current and previous Polish governments have often been ad hoc and only address immediate crises. Nonetheless, considering current circumstances and in particular Poland's ageing population, migration could provide a solution to the problem that the Polish government has been struggling to adequately address.



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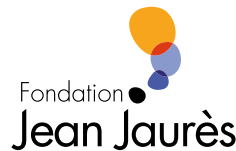
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1 Introduction

Poland's migration scene has undergone a significant transition. At the beginning of the 21st century, Poland primarily had large emigration flows and minimal immigration. However, the immigration picture and circumstances have changed quickly due to the country's economic development, labour shortages, relatively liberal labour market regulation and the inflow of labour migrants, particularly from Ukraine; Poland is now therefore a country of immigration.¹

While the outflow of people has reduced, the inflow of migrants has increased since 2013, following the first Russian invasion of Ukraine, making the migration balance positive.² Ukraine's large emigration potential, smooth integration into Poland due to its liberal admission rules and the strong demand for foreign labour created the perfect conditions for immigration to rise in 2023.³

Moreover, even though Poland has not been directly affected by migration waves coming through the Mediterranean routes, it has played a crucial role in dealing with the humanitarian emergency caused by the war in Ukraine. Nonetheless, there is a lack of a clear migration policy to guide the reception and integration of migrants. Moreover, while the arrival of Ukrainian refugees has captured the attention of public and political discourse, there is an increasing number of migrants from different countries living in Poland. In accordance with the Temporary Protection Directive, Ukrainians have the privilege to move relatively freely among EU member states. However, the absence of border controls within the Schengen area complicates the determination of the whereabouts of individuals crossing Polish borders.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief outlines the available secondary data and key

characteristics of Poland's biggest migrant groups. It illustrates the national approaches to migration and the policies in place, which in the case of Poland, are still a relatively recent development. In particular, this policy brief focuses on the simplified procedure through which foreign workers can be recruited – a major milestone in liberalising Polish migration policy – and outlines the possibilities for migrants to legalise their stay and obtain access to social welfare. Finally, this brief addresses the crucial question of the trade-off between (perceived) economic costs of receiving migrants, and the economic and social contribution that they make to the hosting societies.

2 The available data

The available data on migration in Poland is often scattered and incomplete. While there is no clear and comprehensive database, some available secondary data can help provide fundamental information to paint a picture of Polish immigration. This includes datasets such as Eurostat, ZUS (*Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych* or Social Insurance Institution) and the PESEL registry.⁴ GUS (Polish National Statistics) data is also included. To date, the most comprehensive data on Ukrainian nationals in Poland is based on the nationwide panel survey by the Centre of Migration Research (led by Agata Górny). A comprehensive overview of the circumstances of other minorities is still relatively limited, but some groups – such as Chinese people or Latvians – have received some scholarly attention.⁵

The available evidence suggests that countries such as Poland, having undergone a rapid economic transformation, do not have well-developed economies capable of absorbing and integrating newcomers and – most importantly – have underdeveloped institutions and policies for dealing with immigration.⁶ The latter,

besides the lack of migration and integration policies, also implies limited capacity to record and statistically analyse flows and stocks of migrants. Migration data is also known for its deficiencies and limitations in terms of covering various types of mobility (such as short-term and irregular migration).⁷ This is even more difficult to grasp in a country such as Poland, which is experiencing a massive inflow of immigrants and undergoing a rapid migratory process. Additionally, there is a deficiency in the information exchange mechanism among EU member states concerning war refugees from Ukraine. For instance, the initial release of Eurostat data regarding First Residence Permits did not include data for Poland, and it was only supplemented after further enquiries from researchers.

Contrary to common public perception, Eurostat data reveals that Poland has been issuing the highest number of residence permits to foreigners within the EU since 2016. In 2021 alone, nearly 1 million permits were granted, constituting more than 30% of all permits issued in the EU. Predominantly, these permits were linked to employment and entry into the labour market, underscoring the economically driven nature of migration to Poland. This trend has gained remarkable momentum, especially as increasing numbers of Ukrainian nationals have been arriving in Poland, actively seeking employment opportunities in the Polish labour market.

According to the estimates presented by GUS,⁸ there were 2.1 million foreign citizens in Poland at the end of 2019, including Ukrainians (1.35 million, 64%), Belarusians, Germans, Moldovans, Russians and Indians. According to GUS,⁹ as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the downturn in the Polish economy, the immigrant population fell by 223,000 people (more than 10%). This change, probably due to

geographical proximity, was most pronounced for immigrants from Ukraine (-11.5%) and Belarus (-32.2%). The decrease in the number of foreigners in Poland at the beginning of the Covid-19 epidemic was a temporary effect. Shortly after the resumption of border traffic, the dynamics of immigration to Poland accelerated: the number of foreign citizens registered for social insurance increased from 570,000 in 2018 to 651,000 in 2019, 725,000 in 2020 and 875,000 in 2021. Entry and employment rules have been further liberalised.

The most recent work, by Duszczuk et al.,¹⁰ aimed to compile various registers and survey data in order to evaluate the size and characteristics of the Ukrainian migrant population – the largest minority group in Poland. Their analysis is based on Polish Border Guard data, which is published daily on its Twitter profile account, and Frontex data on border crossing. In addition, based on PESEL numbers and a combination of data from GUS, a general profile of the migrants and refugees in Poland can be drawn.

Prior to the liberalisation of the legal admission conditions, (non-EU) foreigners could arrive and work in Poland based on employers' declarations (*oświadczenie*). Employers could apply for work permits on behalf of employees. It is important to note that employees could be registered by one employer only. Initially, this procedure was allowed for three months, then was extended for six months. It was further extended during the Covid-19 pandemic for up to a year, with the possibility of switching employers or working for more than one employer at a time.

Between 24 February and 31 December 2022, the number of border crossings into Poland from Ukraine surpassed 8.83 million, while there were 7.05 million crossings from Poland to Ukraine. As a result, there was a net balance of 1.78 million border crossings, with 93.5%

involving Ukrainian nationals.¹¹ It is important to note that these figures include multiple crossings by individuals. The Border Guard's publicly available data does not indicate when an individual crosses the border multiple times. Additionally, there are discrepancies between the legal status and rights of those who arrived before the war began and those who came after it.

Furthermore, Poland often serves as a transit country for many Ukrainians. Following a period of stay in Poland, some of these individuals proceed to other European member states or even to countries outside Europe. It is worth highlighting that the crossings on the Poland-Ukraine border for the entire year almost doubled, from 8.7 million in 2021 to 17.3 million in 2022.¹²

The PESEL register documented 1.5 million Ukrainian citizens at the end of 2022.¹³ However, not all these individuals remained in Poland until that time. Periodic validation of the database by the State Development Fund indicated that by the close of December 2022, there were fewer than 950,000 Ukrainian war refugees in Poland holding a PESEL number. This suggests that over 550,000 Ukrainians had departed the country during that period. Moreover, not all refugees who fled the conflict registered with PESEL; some continued their journey elsewhere, while others chose to temporarily return to Ukraine. In both scenarios, individuals were required to request the reactivation of their PESEL number upon their return.

Among other nationalities, according to the 2021 census,¹⁴ the following 11 groups (by country of origin) of migrants were the largest in the country:

- Ukraine (296,452)
- Belarus (29,595)
- Russia (11,077)

- Vietnam (9,574)
- India (7,644)
- Germany (5,841)
- Georgia (4,921)
- Italy (4,696)
- China (4,322)
- Great Britain (3,987)
- Turkey (3,789)

This data, however, should be treated with caution as the results of the census may not be consistent with the number of work and residence permits granted. It means that the situation is more dynamic than the GUS calculations can capture, and the registers are not usually connected.

An additional information source worth considering in the context of the substantial number of Ukrainian children seeking refuge from the war is the data provided by the Social Insurance Institution concerning the distribution of the "500+ CHILD" benefit to Ukrainian children. Between 24 February and November 2022, ZUS processed 430,000 applications for child benefits submitted by Ukrainian nationals, accounting for 98.5% of the total applications. Simultaneously, November 2022 witnessed 388,100 instances of 500+ benefits disbursed to Ukrainian children, constituting nearly 6% of the total expenditure. This suggests that a substantial portion of the children (roughly 150,000) had left Poland by November 2022. Estimating the number of Ukrainian children in Poland whose guardians have not pursued the 500+ benefits is challenging, but their numbers are likely limited.

3 National governmental approaches and policies

The decision to open the Polish-Ukrainian border to all those seeking refuge from the Ukraine war, taken as early as 24 February 2022, along

with the enforcement of the EU Temporary Protection Directive on 4 March 2022, led to an estimated 8 million Ukrainian citizens crossing into Poland by the close of 2022. Owing to Ukraine's ban on the departure of men aged 18 to 60 years, with limited exceptions, the majority of war refugees were women and children. This situation presented numerous challenges for which Poland was unprepared, ranging from a lack of clear bureaucratic procedures to more pragmatic aspects, such as inadequate coordination and reception, limited healthcare capacity and an insufficient number of places at schools.

However, refugees accepted into Poland under the Temporary Protection Directive and the enactment of the Law on Assistance to Ukrainians were granted:

- Permission to stay in Poland for 18 months, with a provision that the interruption in this stay would not exceed one month.
- The option to acquire a PESEL number and a reliable profile, which allows to access social benefits (including healthcare) in Poland.
- Support from local authorities, encompassing accommodation, meals, transportation to lodging sites, and provision of cleaning and personal hygiene items.
- Access to healthcare services.
- Access to benefits on par with those available to Polish citizens.
- A one-time cash allowance of 300 Polish złotych (€70) per individual for essential living expenses, particularly for sustenance, clothing, footwear, personal hygiene products and housing costs.
- Unrestricted legal access to the labour market.

Despite this intense influx, the country lacks clear legislation or a migration doctrine to guide its migration policy.¹⁵ Over the years,

various governments have proposed migration policy initiatives (for example, the Ministry of Interior and Administration in 2012) but many of these were either abandoned or implemented without a clear strategy (such as the Ministry of Investment and Development in 2018). Recent governments have primarily focused on aligning migration policy with labour market and demographic needs, but they have done so by adopting ad hoc policy solutions such as simplified procedures to enter the labour market.

Despite the lack of an explicit policy framework, several regulations have fostered one of the most liberal approaches to foreign labour inflow in Europe. With a robust labour market, most work permit applications are granted, even if a labour market test is conducted beforehand.

4 Simplified procedures

A "simplified procedure" has facilitated the massive inflow of third-country nationals, particularly Ukrainian citizens. Under this procedure, a Polish employer's declaration is sufficient for Ukrainians to enter Poland, and, once in the country, they can switch to working for a different employer. Originally applicable to citizens of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine in 2006, this regulation was extended to include citizens of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova in subsequent years to meet the high demand for workers in the booming Polish economy (particularly in low-skilled jobs). According to the Central Statistical Office, in February 2020, just before the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were more than 1.3 million Ukrainians in Poland, constituting a majority of the total foreign population, estimated at 2.1 million persons.¹⁶ Initially, the regulations permitted work for less than six months in a year, after which a break in employment and a return to the home country were mandatory. Following the Covid-19

lockdowns, the time of stay was extended for up to a year.

Given Poland's growing labour shortages, low unemployment and vacancy rates, along with the deteriorating economic situation in Ukraine since the 2014 Russian aggression in Donbas, the liberal procedures led to a significant influx of foreign workers. Certain sectors of the economy, such as seasonal agriculture and construction, as well as other industries like hospitality, food, transport and IT, became increasingly reliant on foreign (mostly Ukrainian) labour.¹⁷ As a result, employment agencies began to specialise in recruiting foreign workers, not only from Eastern European countries covered by the simplified work permit procedure but also from more remote regions like East Asia (Philippines, Vietnam, Nepal) or Latin America (Mexico or Colombia). Additionally, many labour migrants who initially engaged in temporary work began settling in Poland on long-term contracts (over one year) and on a short-term contracts.

The outbreak of Covid-19 in Poland brought about sudden restrictions on community life, including school closures and mobility restrictions. Foreigners who were already present in Poland had their residence and work permits extended until the end of the state of emergency, and those with valid work permits were allowed to work without additional permits. However, due to the pandemic-related restrictions on mobility, thousands of foreign workers, especially Ukrainians and Belarusians, decided to return to their home countries. This resulted in a temporary decrease in the immigrant population, however, to mitigate the impact on essential sectors like agriculture, the government quickly lifted pandemic-related restrictions on mobility and business operations.

Post-pandemic, immigration to Poland accelerated and the government further

liberalised entry and employment rules. Citizens of Belarus, fearing political repression after social protests, could now legalise their stay with humanitarian visas, which granted them full access to the Polish labour market for up to three years. Additionally, the simplified procedure for immigration on the basis of a Polish employer's declaration allowed employment for up to two years without a break in work contracts, and the labour market test was no longer required. Administrative procedures were streamlined and made free of charge, and visa issuance time was reduced to one month. Furthermore, all Ukrainian citizens who fled the war after the Russian invasion were automatically granted the right to work in Poland.

5 Irregular migration

The attitude of the Polish government towards irregular migrants is somewhat different to its approach to those subject to the simplified procedure. Poland is one of the transit countries for irregular migrants trying to enter the EU from Eastern European and Asian countries, in particular through Belarus. The Belarusian regime supports the influx of immigrants accessing the EU territories, aiming to destabilise the political situation in the Eastern part of the EU.¹⁸ In other words, certain state actors are increasingly facilitating irregular migration as a tool to achieve political goals. Following numerous attempts to cross the border, the Polish government built a fenced wall in order to control the influx of immigrants. The barrier on the border with Belarus, mostly imbued with electronics, has significantly reduced the scale of migration, but has not blocked it completely. Organised criminal groups continue to smuggle people in through Russia and Belarus, and thousands of people spend months living in the forest on the Belarusian side of the wall. In the first half of 2023, more than 10,000 migrants from dozens of countries around the world

have attempted to enter Poland through the border with Belarus. According to Frontex and Border Control data, this is two-thirds of the total number of irregular attempts to cross the border in the previous year. Around 50 people have died at the eastern border, and those who successfully crossed the border have gone as far as Germany, which is the most common destination.

6 Ways to regularly enter the country

Poland can be regularly entered through different visa schemes and humanitarian corridors, each catering to specific circumstances and the different needs of those arriving in the country. The most popular channel to access Polish territory is through visa schemes. Poland, like other European countries, offers various visa schemes that allow individuals to enter the country for specific purposes, including:

- *Tourist visa*: This allows individuals to visit Poland for tourism or leisure. It typically has a limited duration of stay.
- *Business visa*: This is for individuals visiting Poland for business-related activities, such as meetings, conferences or negotiations.
- *Work visa*: This is for those who have a job offer in Poland and wish to work there legally.
- *Student visa*: This visa is for individuals who have been accepted by a Polish educational institution and intend to study in the country.

Although the reliance on humanitarian corridors after the war in Ukraine has been crucial to enabling the safe evacuation of Ukrainians, the Polish government has repeatedly rejected the relocation of asylum seekers from other EU states and has opposed any form of solidarity among EU states when it comes to receiving asylum seekers. Relocations and admittance of asylum seekers continue to be a heavily politicised topic in public discourse as well as

legal debates, and they are the subject of a heavily criticised public referendum scheduled for October 2023.

7 Access to social welfare

Access to social welfare varies depending on migrants' origins and the circumstances under which they arrived in Poland. First, citizens of EU and European Economic Area countries generally have the right to live and work in Poland without a work permit. They usually have access to social welfare benefits on par with Polish citizens, provided they meet the eligibility criteria, such as (un)employment status for employment-based social support. Other entitlements are granted:

- on the basis of a permanent residence permit,
- on the basis of a residence permit for long-term residents of the European Union, and
- in connection with obtaining refugee status or subsidiary protection in the Republic of Poland.

Therefore, foreigners can use social assistance benefits only after completing the procedure to legalise their stay, that is, to obtain refugee status or subsidiary protection.

Foreigners who have obtained refugee status or subsidiary protection in Poland can make use of assistance provided for up to a year as part of the so-called individual integration programme.¹⁹

The assistance is granted in the form of:

- cash benefits to cover costs of living, in particular, food, clothing, footwear, personal hygiene products and housing charges, and to cover costs related to learning Polish;²⁰
- paying a health insurance contribution;
- social work;

- specialist counselling, including legal, psychological and family counselling;
- providing information and support in contact with other institutions; and
- other activities supporting the process of integration of a foreigner.

Furthermore, individuals granted refugee status or subsidiary protection may be eligible for a temporary allowance, especially if they are experiencing long-term illness, disability or unemployment, or have the potential to secure or qualify for benefits from other social security programmes. Other forms of support, such as food aid and access to foreigners' integration centres, are also part of the programme. It is noteworthy that such entitlements apply only to those who obtain refugee status and are not available to, for instance, economic migrants.

Moreover, many social welfare benefits in Poland are tied to employment, such as health insurance, pensions and unemployment benefits. Migrants, regardless of their origin, may be eligible for these benefits if they are employed and contributing to the Polish social security system.

8 Could migration be considered an economic resource?

The current state of the Polish job market remains favourable for job seekers due to a scarcity of workers. As indicated by Eurostat, the unemployment rate in Poland in November 2022 stood at just 3%, marking a mere 0.2 percentage point increase since the onset of the war.²¹ This rate remains among the lowest recorded in the past 32 years of Poland's free market economy. The surge in demand for labour, coupled with a significant volume of job openings at the beginning of 2022, facilitated the rapid integration of arriving refugees into the workforce.

Despite the positive migration flow, Poland is still struggling with a demographic crisis. Fewer children are being born in Poland. Based on data from 2022, the annual total number of births has fallen below 300,000 for the first time in the country's history. This is the result of the declining fertility rate of Polish women, their higher activity in the labour market, as well as limited social schemes available to support families.²² In 2023, the fertility rate will be less than 1.3, which is one of the lowest in the EU context and globally. The progressive ageing of the population has a number of negative consequences. The old-age dependency ratio in Poland was 39% in 2022 and is expected to rise to 44.1% in just ten years. These problems can be mitigated by attracting migrants on a larger scale.

One challenge is that not all war refugees are presently able to secure employment. This is especially applicable to mothers with young children, individuals lacking sufficient professional qualifications – including a basic grasp of the Polish language – and those struggling with war-related trauma or other health concerns. Consequently, while acknowledging the potential benefits that the increased presence of Ukrainians offers Poland, steps must be taken to enhance the likelihood of realising these benefits.

First, it is imperative to establish diverse forms of childcare to enable mothers to actively pursue and engage in employment opportunities. Second, intensive Polish language courses, potentially integrated into a support network for migrants and refugees, are crucial, as are courses to acquire qualifications that align with the demands of the Polish job market. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the State Labour Inspectorate must be bolstered to prevent the exploitation of immigrants and to ensure that their employment adheres to legal standards.

Beyond these key points, the Polish healthcare system also needs to adapt. The already overrun system needs to address the substantial number of new service users. Apart from general health conditions, they may have to handle mental health issues as well. However, the influx of a qualified workforce also creates an opportunity for the Polish healthcare system, as it can guarantee jobs for those who are suitably qualified.

9 Policy recommendations

- Devise integration policy measures focusing especially on teaching Polish and on labour market inclusion.
 - Create a long-term immigration policy based on the needs of the labour market, demographic needs and the comprehensive integration model. The integration opportunities should first and foremost allow migrants to independently live in Poland and function in the labour market. Beyond the economic aspect of integration, other spheres such as cultural awareness and the societal openness of Poles should be addressed, and the relevant public services (such as schools and healthcare) should be modernised. Thus, the social aspect of integration should
- be given just as much importance as the economic.
- Increase cooperation within the European Union to create a coherent policy on refugees and asylum seekers. So far, the Polish government's attitude towards refugees and asylum seekers has been highly negative, and it has continuously opposed the elements of the New Migration Pact (in particular in relation to the admission and relocation policies). In order to block European agreements, the Polish government is going to conduct a referendum that will address topics such as relocation and admitting asylum seekers. Such moves isolate Polish policy solutions and go against European principles, rather than creating unity.
 - Abide by obligations stemming from the Geneva Convention and other regulations concerning human rights and asylum seekers, in particular in relation to the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border.
 - Establish a reliable and comprehensive system of data collection regarding immigration and emigration that can properly inform research and policy making.

Endnotes

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- **Debate and dialogue:** Information and analysis, as well as networking and interaction, are important prerequisites for a results-oriented debate and international dialogue between Germany and Italy conducted from a European perspective. Through conferences, seminars, dialogue programmes and paper presentations, FES Italy facilitates understanding of the countries' respective stands with the aim of developing common positions in core policy areas.

About Fondation Jean Jaurès

Fondation Jean Jaurès is a leading French political foundation, which not only works as a think tank but also as a grassroots actor and a historical memory centre at the service of all those who defend progress and democracy in the world. The foundation, widely recognised for its public utility, pursues the objective of promoting society's general interest.

About Centro Politiche Europee

Launched in 2020, Centro Politiche Europee (CEP/Roma) is the Italian branch of the Centres for European Policy Network, a group of think tanks based in Germany (Freiburg and Berlin), France (Paris) and Italy (Rome). The CEP network aims to develop in-depth analyses of European economic policies and regulations, bringing together different national perspectives to boost the understanding of common challenges among European decision-makers, private organisations, civil society and relevant stakeholders.

About Università per Stranieri di Perugia

The University for Foreigners of Perugia (Unistrapg) was founded in the early 1920s with the aim of promoting Italian culture and heritage abroad. A highly internationalised institution relying on a broad network of student and faculty exchange partners, Unistrapg attracts students from all over the world. Research and teaching at Unistrapg today focus on a number of different disciplines, such as communication, international relations, development cooperation, translation and interpretation, and food and hospitality.