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# The Challenges of Integrating Ukrainian Economic Migrants and Refugees in Poland

In a relatively brief timeframe, Poland has witnessed a substantial increase in immigration, transitioning from predominantly an emigration country to one characterised by both emigration and immigration. Undoubtedly, with the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the need to implement integration measures has become even more critical. However, the problem is that there is no system of coherent migration and integration policy at the national level, so the effort to integrate foreigners, including refugees, is undertaken by individual Polish cities and regions. One of them is the Opolskie Voivodeship, a region with a high number of emigrants and therefore deep demographic problems and labour market shortages. The article presents the most important conclusions and recommendations for regional policy on integrating foreigners.

The scale of immigration in Poland has increased significantly in a fairly short time, transforming it from an emigration country to an emigration-immigration country (Solga and Kubiciel-Lodzińska, 2017). For several years, Poland has issued more first residence permits for third-country nationals than any other European Union member state. In 2021, more than 790,000 permits were issued, accounting for 27% of all permits released in the EU during this period. By February 2022, there were an estimated 2 million foreigners in Poland, the majority of whom, 1.35 million, were people from Ukraine (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022). By July 2023 there were approximately 970,000 Ukrainian refugees in Poland (Eurostat, 2023). Due to the rapid transformation of the country's migration status, public administration, the education system, healthcare and Polish society were not prepared for this change. The rhetoric of the policy implemented so far at the national level referred to a situation in which Poland, first slightly, and then quite widely, opened its doors to foreigners ready to work in

Poland. The official message was that workers were welcome, but not necessarily potential residents. Today, it is already clear that some of the workers have also become residents. For this reason, the importance of economic and socio-cultural integration measures for foreigners has increased significantly.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further changed the nature of the migration situation in Poland. Almost overnight, more than 1.4 million people fleeing war were given shelter in Poland, according to the PESEL<sup>1</sup> register (Solga and Kubiciel-Lodzińska, 2022). This is a completely new reality that Polish society has not known on such a scale until now. There is no doubt that with the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the influx of refugees, the need to implement integration measures has become even more important. Access to housing, inclusion of children in the education system, access to the labour market, ensuring access to health care and providing social support have become huge challenges.

In the longer term, broadly defined integration measures should address both pre-war migrants, some of whom have been in Poland for many years, and refugees. However, the problem is that the creation of a system of coherent migration and integration policy at the national level has been neglected, so the effort to integrate foreigners, including refugees, has been undertaken by Polish cities and regions. One of them is the Opolskie Voivodeship (NUTS 2 level), which has so far been the region with the

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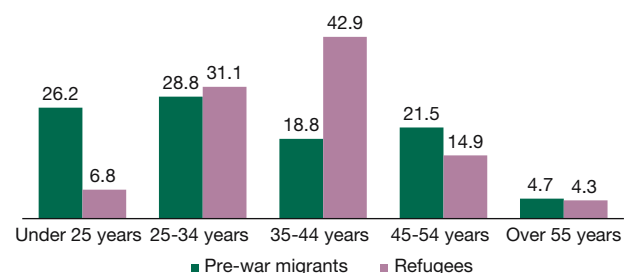
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<sup>1</sup> PESEL is a Polish acronym for Universal Electronic System for Registration of the Population.

**Figure 1**  
**Age of survey respondents from sample group of Ukrainian migrants in Poland**  
in %



Source: Own elaboration based on the study conducted by the Opole University of Technology, December 2022.

largest number of emigrants in the country and which is facing deep demographic problems and labour market shortages (Heffner et al., 2019).

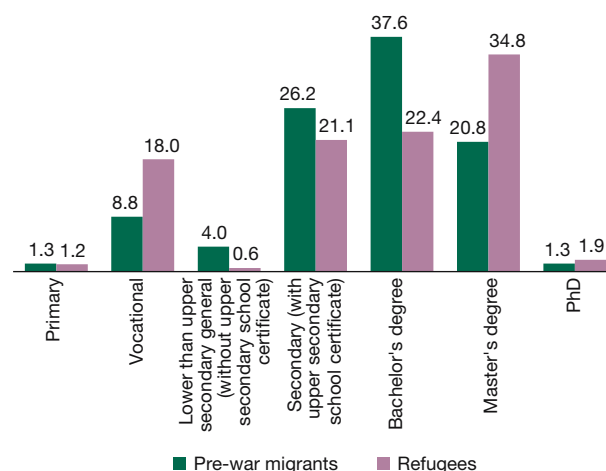
This article presents the study conducted by the Opole University of Technology in December 2022 on a sample of 311 immigrants from Ukraine, including 150 pre-war migrants and 161 refugees living in the Opolskie Voivodeship. It was carried out using computer-assisted web interviews (CAWI) with the help of a research panel. Respondents were selected purposefully: the aim was to obtain two comparable groups differing mainly in the character of their stay in order to gain information on the needs and expectations of people coming from Ukraine towards public administration, education and health services. The literature shows that migrants and refugees behave differently in the labour market (Cortes, 2004; Fasani et al., 2021; Ortensi and Ambrosetti, 2022). The purpose of this article is to determine whether the two groups of migrants from Ukraine differ in their integration needs.

### Characteristics of economic migrants and refugees

Among refugees, there is a clear majority of women (93.8%). In the group of pre-war migrants, women are also in the majority, which confirms the observed general trend of an increase in the share of women in labour migration from Ukraine to Poland and is visible in the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) data on the number of foreigners reported to the social security system.

The greater participation of women is also explained by the purpose of the study. On the one hand, women are key actors in the integration process, as they are usually responsible for the education of children, transmitting the traditions of their countries of origin and participating more actively in society. On the other hand, it is women who are more exposed to discriminatory actions, hence

**Figure 2**  
**Educational level of survey respondents from sample group of Ukrainian migrants in Poland**  
in %



Source: Own elaboration based the study conducted by the Opole University of Technology, December 2022.

the economic integration of female immigrants becomes a particular challenge (Kontos, 2011).

The age structure of pre-war migrants is relatively proportionally represented by all age groups, except for the oldest (55 years and over), who are the least represented (4.7%), as shown in Figure 1. The proportion of other age groups ranges from 18.8% (35-44 years) to 28.8% (25-34 years). In contrast, the age structure of refugees is more diverse. The 35-44 age group is by far the largest (42.9%), followed by the 25-34 age group (31.1%). The proportion of other groups is much lower, with 6.8% under 25, 14.9% between 45 and 54, and 4.3% are 55 and over. This means that the population of pre-war respondents is slightly younger, as it is dominated by 20- and 30-year-olds (55% of under-25-year-olds and 25-34-year-olds). In contrast, the refugee population is heavily dominated by 30- and 40-year-olds (74% of those aged 25-34 and 35-44).

As shown in Figure 2, among respondents with vocational education, the proportion of refugees is higher than that of pre-war migrants (18.0% and 8.8% respectively). Among individuals with a general education background, a larger proportion are pre-war migrants (30.2%) compared to refugees (21.7%). Differences can also be seen in the level of university education. Among pre-war migrants, 37.6% had a bachelor's degree and 22.4% had a master's degree. Among refugees, nearly 35% declared to have a master's degree and 20.8% a bachelor's degree.

Another key characteristic relevant from the perspective of immigrant integration efforts is the number of children

residing with migrants in Poland. More than 60% of pre-war migrants have no children in Poland. In comparison, about 80% of refugees came with children.

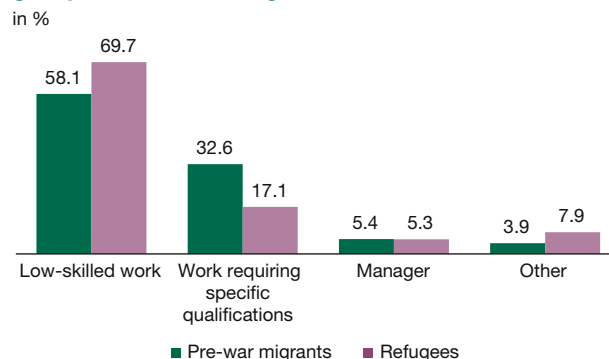
## Integration of immigrants in Poland

### Labour market

Immigrants from Ukraine are characterised by high labour market activity. Over 66% of respondents work in various capacities. For 46.9% of respondents, this is permanent work; for 13.2%, it is casual work; 4.2% work remotely for a company based abroad; and 1.9% are self-employed. A further 22.8% are not working but are looking for work and are ready to take up employment. This means that almost 90% of respondents are economically active. It is important to note the high labour force participation of refugees. A total of 84.6% of respondents coming from this group have already taken up employment or are looking for a job and are willing to start immediately. Of course, the economic activity of pre-war migrants is higher, but we have to remember that for this group of people the key reason for coming to Poland, especially for men, was to seek employment. The study group lacks significant representation of individuals who run their own businesses (1.9%). Professional activity is an important element of the economic integration of migrants – the higher it is, the more effective the integration process. Continuing measures to support this activity is essential, involving both entrepreneurs and labour market institutions. Entrepreneurs, in particular, face the challenge of attracting and retaining migrant workers in companies where the problem of labour shortages is set to grow dynamically. However, our research shows that labour force participation is also high here. It is also worth noting, that in Poland, the employment rate of refugees from Ukraine is 65% – the highest in Europe (OECD, 2023, 54). It is therefore a question of creating the right conditions for professional activation of this group of immigrants as well. At the same time, keep in mind that people with high qualifications needed in the region are more numerous among refugees than among pre-war migrants.

These conclusions are confirmed by further research results. It turns out that the majority of respondents perform simple work (62.4%), but at the same time quite a large group of people – 32.6% pre-war migrants and 17% refugees – declare that they perform work requiring specialist qualifications (Figure 3). This situation is a significant challenge from the perspective of integrating these people into the labour market. This is because, on the one hand, the influx of highly educated immigrants provides an opportunity to fill staff shortages in some sectors (for example in health care); but on the other

**Figure 3**  
**Work performed by survey respondents from sample group of Ukrainian migrants in Poland**



Source: Own elaboration based on the study conducted by the Opole University of Technology, December 2022.

hand, given the nature of the Opole labour market and the lack of high-quality jobs, there is a likelihood of depreciation of their qualifications. This phenomenon is already observed in Poland (Kubiciel-Lodzińska and Maj, 2021). The difficulty of making use of refugees' high qualifications, with the consequence of "brain waste", is also shown by the experience of other hosting countries. This process is observed among refugees in Turkey (Ünlütürk-Ulutaş and Akbaş, 2020) and in the Netherlands (de Lange et al., 2021). Refugees are inadequately prepared to enter the host country's labour market, often lack language skills, and consequently have very limited opportunities to use their qualifications (Brell et al., 2020; Lumley-Sapanski, 2021).

Transfer of qualifications is not always possible. A certain solution to this challenge would be to give refugees the opportunity to obtain other qualifications, enabling them to take up employment in an occupation from the primary labour market. For some refugees, it could be helpful to participate in vocational courses and training, which are an important element of economic integration. In the present study, the majority of people who are working have not yet participated in vocational training. This situation applies to almost half of all respondents, including, of course, most refugees. Of those who have participated in the training, the vast majority rate it well. Thus, both the organisation of training and vocational courses for foreign workers and support for those intending to start a business are important elements of the process of the economic integration of foreigners in the region. The opportunities for financing this type of support provided for in programmes implemented at the regional level (especially the European Funds for Opole 2021-2027 and the National Training Fund) should be used to the fullest extent possible. At the same time, it is worth noting those industries

in the region that can develop with a high proportion of migrants, such as senior care.

Survey results show that interpersonal relations in the workplace in the broadest sense are good. The majority of respondents rate the atmosphere at work as “well” (82.4%), and only 1.5% rate it “bad”. It is interesting to note, however, that 10.7% are unable to make this assessment, and these are mainly pre-war migrants (14.7%), who have much more work experience. At the same time, the migrants’ assessment of their relationship with their immediate supervisor is good. Relations with Poles at work are even better. Almost 90% of respondents (89.8%) rate them “well” and, at the same time, not a single person rated these relationships as “bad” or “rather bad”. Similarly, relations with Ukrainians at work are rated as “good”. This situation creates a solid basis for easier integration of foreigners in the workplace. The challenge, however, is to effectively manage diversity in companies, to implement programmes by entrepreneurs to support consensus-building in nationally diverse groups, and to move towards employing more immigrants in mixed crews (Maj, 2020), which will create more opportunities not only in economic but also social integration.

### Language

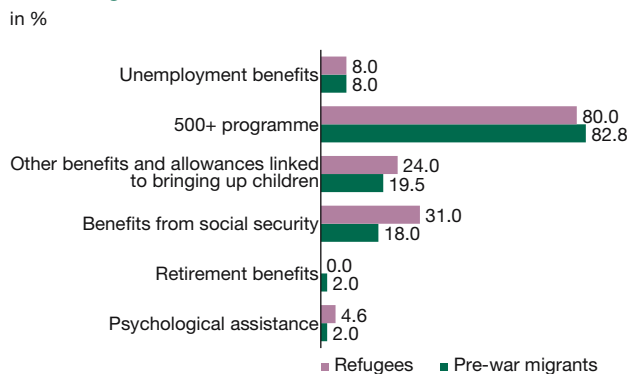
Our research shows that pre-war migrants most often declare their knowledge of spoken Polish at a good level, and refugees at an intermediate level. In the context of utilising refugees’ qualifications and building up their position in the labour market, knowledge of the language of the host country is of primary importance (Kosyakova et al., 2022). Knowledge of other foreign languages varies among Ukrainian migrants. Respondents declare knowledge of Russian at the highest level, English at the medium level and German at the lowest level. Around 6.4% declare knowledge of other languages – Hungarian, Spanish, Czech, Belarusian and others.

Despite a relatively broad knowledge of Polish, at least spoken, the vast majority of Ukrainian immigrants are interested in participating in free Polish language courses. Almost three-quarters of them (70.4%) are willing to do so, and more often refugees than pre-war migrants.

### Social assistance and health care

More than half of refugees and just over one-third of pre-war migrants benefit from social assistance. The scale of social support for Ukrainian refugees may become a source of future social tension. It is important to communicate clearly about the actual amount of this assistance. Most often, in more than 80% of cases, migrants (both

**Figure 4**  
**Benefits and allowances used by pre-war migrants and refugees in Poland**



Note: More than one answer was possible. The 500+ programme allows families with dependent children to receive a parenting benefit of PLN 500 per child until the age of 18, irrespective of the family's income.

Source: Own elaboration based on the study conducted by the Opole University of Technology, December 2022.

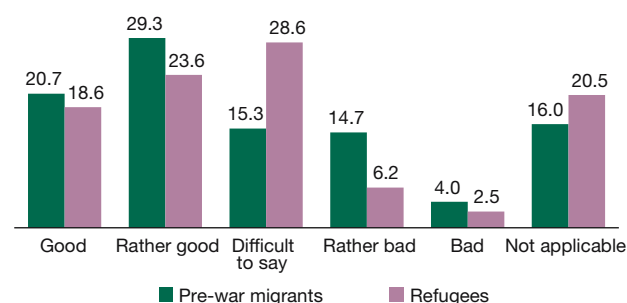
pre-war and refugees) benefit from the 500+ programme, while social benefits are used much less frequently (31% of refugees and 18% of pre-war migrants), as shown in Figure 4. This means that migrants from Ukraine do not base their stay on the use of social benefits. Indeed, as indicated, migrants from Ukraine are characterised by high labour force participation and all indications point to the fact that access to social benefits is complementary in this case. However, in the long term, in the context of transparency about the use of social benefits, it is necessary, inter alia, to cooperate with organisations supporting migrants to carry out integration activities.

It is also worth informing migrants about the possibility of obtaining not only unemployment benefits but also the status of a jobseeker (for those who do not have the right to receive unemployment benefits), as they can benefit from job placement, vocational counselling, training in the Polish language and apply for financial assistance with the costs of the nostrification procedure. Supporting the professional development of migrants is an activity that benefits society as a whole in the long term. Specific initiatives in this regard include (i) assessing the skills and experience of migrants and identifying their strengths and areas for improvement in order to form the basis for developing vocational training programmes that are tailored to their needs; (ii) developing and offering vocational training programmes for migrants; (iii) providing career counselling to help them make informed decisions about their vocational training and future careers; (iv) developing cooperation with local companies and professional organisations to provide

Figure 5

### Assessment of institutional support in formal matters in Poland by Ukrainian migrants

in %



Source: Own elaboration based on the study conducted by the Opole University of Technology, December 2022.

job and internship opportunities for migrants who have completed vocational training.

According to the survey, nearly 65% of pre-war migrants had health insurance with the National Health Fund; in the refugee group, just under 48% of respondents did, and as many as one-third said they did not have it at all. This is an important finding showing that a certain group of migrants remains outside the health care system, which in case of emergencies can be very problematic. It is therefore necessary to intensify efforts to ensure that migrants who are not insured with the National Health Service take out private insurance. This may not be easy, as the vast majority of refugees (85%) and more than 60% of pre-war migrants do not have private health insurance.

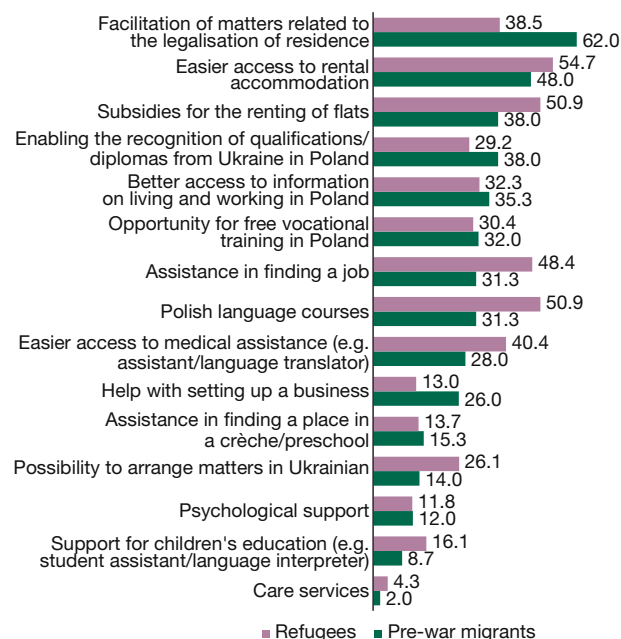
### Formal matters

More than 50% of pre-war migrants and about 42% of refugees rated institutional support in the area of formal matters as “good” or “rather good” (Figure 5). Nearly one-third of refugees (and 15% of pre-war migrants) had no opinion on this. A relatively large number, nearly one-fifth of pre-war migrants rated access to information as “bad” or “rather bad”. Among refugees, this figure was lower, 8.7%. The results relating to negative opinions are very worrying, as many as 40% of pre-war migrants rated the time taken to deal with formal matters as “bad”. Far fewer refugees, only 6.2%, share this opinion. This concerns, among other things, residence formalities. This means that, despite the simplification in recent years of many procedures related to establishing residence and taking

Figure 6

### Changes proposed by Ukrainian migrants to make it easier to stay and live in Poland

in %



Source: Own elaboration based on the study conducted by the Opole University of Technology, December 2022.

up employment for foreigners from Ukraine, as well as the full-time support and providing the officials serving immigrants in voivodeship structures, these measures are still insufficient given the persistently large inflow of immigrants.

To the extent possible and necessary, employment policy in organisational structures should take into account the presence of persons with migrant and refugee experience, so that the composition of the staff reflects the diverse population (taking into account, of course, the legal provisions for persons without Polish citizenship acting as clerks/employees of the local government).

One of the objectives of the survey was to obtain information on changes expected by migrants that would make it easier for them to stay and work in Poland. Respondents could choose an answer from a catalogue in the survey (15 proposals) and/or indicate their own. They had the opportunity to select a maximum of three important elements from their point of view (Figure 6).

For pre-war migrants, the most important issue was the facilitation of matters related to the legalisation of residence, as indicated by more than 62% of respondents.



The second and third most frequent answers were easier access to rental housing (48%) and the possibility to obtain subsidies for rental housing (38%). Attention was also drawn to the need to facilitate the recognition of qualifications obtained in Ukraine and the recognition of Ukrainian diplomas. More than 35% of surveyed Ukrainians who were already in the region before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine expected information on working and staying in the region to be more accessible, preferably in one place (e.g. online platform, guidebook). Another important finding is that for one-third of the pre-war migrants, it is also important to have vocational courses, Polish language courses and assistance in finding employment. Thus, it appears that the development of the professional counselling sphere in Poland addressed to migrants is most needed. More than a quarter of the respondents expect assistance in setting up a business. Other changes were indicated less frequently, such as help in finding childcare (15.3%), the possibility of doing business in the Ukrainian language (14%) and psychological support (12%). Less than 9% expect support for children's education (assistant/translator), and 2% mentioned care services.

For more than half of the refugees, housing issues, including easier access to rent and financing, were most important. It is worth noting that more than half of the respondents believe that Polish language courses and assistance in finding a job would be helpful to them (48%). More than 40% of refugees would like the assistance of a translator during medical appointments. In their opinion, they also need easier procedures for legalising their stay (38.5%). For about one-third of the respondents, it is important to have better access to a wide range of information on residence and work, which would be available in one place, to recognise Ukrainian diplomas, and to receive free professional training. Approximately 26% of respondents mentioned the possibility of dealing with matters in Ukrainian. Slightly less frequently mentioned was support for children's education (16.1% – almost twice as often as in the group of pre-war migrants), assistance in finding childcare (13.7%) and assistance in setting up a business (13%). Only 11% of respondents expect psychological support (in the group of pre-war migrants it was 12%), and just over 4% said they need support with care services.

## Conclusion

Specific initiatives for the economic and socio-cultural integration of foreigners should be multidimensional and take into account the diverse nature of immigrant groups.

Economic immigrants who arrived in the Opolskie province before the war in Ukraine are mostly men, relatively

well educated, and have a specific professional background. There are numerous branches of the economy, for example construction, industry and services, that traditionally employ foreigners (Górny and Kaczmarczyk, 2020). Despite performing work that is often incompatible with their qualifications, Ukrainians are mostly satisfied with their work. However, they rate job satisfaction and remuneration as average, which may mean that they have higher expectations regarding the nature of employment and especially higher compensation. Work that is below their skill level is a downgrade and may result in a reluctance to settle permanently, which is certainly not conducive to the transformation of temporary migration into settlement and family reunification.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine has brought refugees to Poland who appear to be a specific group. They are mainly young women and most have children, many of them under the age of six. The refugees are well educated and highly skilled. Other studies also confirm the high proportion of refugees with tertiary education (Raport Mobilności, 2023). The professions they represent on the Opolskie province's labour market are in short supply, with a particular focus on the medical and health-related professions. Although a large part of the Ukrainian refugees plan to return to Ukraine, they are characterised by a relatively high level of professional activity.

The diverse nature of migrant groups requires different integration measures for them. While the facilitation of residence legalisation matters for pre-war migrants is important, the priority is to keep them in the labour market, which is important if we think about their stay in the region permanently. It is therefore crucial to develop career counselling, mentoring programmes and vocational courses so that immigrants can complete or change their professional qualifications if needed. It is also important to implement a system of support for the development of entrepreneurship among immigrants and to facilitate the recognition of qualifications obtained in Ukraine and the recognition of Ukrainian diplomas. Arrival and stay in the region would also be facilitated by better availability of information on work and residence, e.g. on an internet platform or a guidebook. Entrepreneurs should get involved in the process of integrating migrant workers. Their employment may have a positive impact on the competitive advantage of enterprises – as the diversity of the workforce translates into greater flexibility of the company, a greater number of proposed solutions, and, as a result, greater effectiveness of decision-making processes. However, to achieve this, it is necessary to implement effective diversity management preceded by raising the competence of employees and employers and their knowledge of diversity.

Actions towards refugees, especially in the short term, are slightly different. For refugees from Ukraine, it is crucial to be able to become independent quickly and therefore to be able to rent housing and have it subsidised. This can be difficult due to the low number of vacant flats and their high rental prices. In the refugee group in 2023, housing is still an issue. It is therefore worth considering the indicated possibilities of co-housing or modular settlements while avoiding locating migrants in one building or housing estate. Due to their much weaker knowledge of the Polish language, it is important for refugees to have access to language courses. It would be optimal to have the assistance of a translator when dealing with various matters, especially during medical appointments and when dealing with formal matters. To a much greater extent than for pre-war migrants, support in finding a place in a kindergarten for refugee children is also important. Ultimately, if the process of family reunification develops, the inclusion of migrants' children in the school system and specific measures in this regard (e.g. integration support for Ukrainian children, psychological and pedagogical counselling) will also be important for pre-war migrants.

In the case of both groups of migrants, given their high qualifications, it might be worth considering institutional support to help the careers of highly educated migrants. This is because formal barriers often lead to their knowledge and qualifications not being used and, consequently, to the loss of employees with the qualifications desired in the labour market. Both groups have difficult access to full and reliable institutional information and lacking legal knowledge. Perhaps, therefore, the creation of an integrated information system for immigrants would in part help them to overcome certain institutional barriers.

However, to utilise the knowledge and skills of immigrants, particularly specialists sought after in the Polish labour market, ad hoc measures (e.g. language courses and vocational training) are not sufficient. What is needed is a strategic approach to utilising this potential, implemented both at the national level (e.g. a complete reform of the process of recognising foreign professional qualifications) and at the regional level (e.g. systemic professional activation programmes, an integrated platform linking migrants with job and training offers, a fast-track career path offered by companies, full recognition, monitoring and forecasting of the situation of migrants in the labour market and thus proposing solutions that would benefit foreigners and the region, as well as public information campaigns on the benefits of refugee integration). Through this type of action, the region will become more competitive for migrants who will be more inclined to envisage their futures there.

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