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Employment barriers and labour market integration of Ukrainian migrants in the European Union

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Abstract

This article examines the labour market integration of Ukrainian migrants in EU member states as a consequence of forced displacement following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Unlike most existing studies, which document employment status as a binary outcome, this paper focuses on the quality of integration. The empirical basis comprises data from an original online survey of 256 Ukrainians residing in EU countries between May and October 2025. An Integration Index (I_{int}) was developed, combining a binary employment indicator with a multi-dimensional quality assessment across three dimensions: formal-legal, professional-economic, and socio-psychological. The overall employment rate was 76.2%; however, 42.58% of employed respondents were over-qualified for their positions, revealing a gap between quantitative and qualitative integration outcomes. A regression model ($R^2 = 0.813$; $F = 106.48$; $p < 0.001$) identified satisfaction with the benefits package ($b = 0.136$) and job–qualification match ($b = 0.1068$) as the primary predictors, while the legality of employment was statistically non-significant. K-means clustering identified three integration groups: low (34.6%), medium (36.8%), and high (28.6%). Age was a significant predictor ($F = 5.691$; $p < 0.001$), with integration peaking in the 30–40-year cohort; educational attainment and length of residence had no significant effect. Receipt of social transfers was associated with substantially lower I_{int} (0.458 vs. 1.065; $d = 0.952$). An inverse relationship between integration level and return intentions was confirmed ($F = 4.662$; $p < 0.05$). Integration also varied by country of destination ($F = 9.19$; $p < 0.001$), with the lowest levels in Germany and Austria and the highest in Central Europe, the Baltic states, and the Nordic countries. The findings underscore the importance of prioritising qualification recognition, language support, and anti-discrimination measures in EU integration policy.

Keywords Migration, Forced migration, Labour market, Migrant integration, Employment, Economic adaptation, Ukrainian migrants

1 Introduction

The large-scale forced displacement of Ukrainians following the onset of full-scale war in February 2022 has substantially altered migration dynamics [25] and placed new demands on integration mechanisms in receiving countries. Despite an established



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theoretical framework on the economic, social, and security determinants of migration [15], the economic and labour market integration of Ukrainian migrants under present-day conditions remains insufficiently studied. The rapid growth in the Ukrainian population across EU member states makes it essential to analyse barriers to and opportunities for employment, the degree of economic integration, access to the labour market, and the effects of institutional context on employment quality.

Labour market integration is arguably the most consequential dimension of adaptation: it determines migrants' material self-sufficiency, their participation in public life, and ultimately their long-term residential intentions. It encompasses at least three levels: the formal-legal (legality and stability of employment), the professional-economic (job–qualification match, remuneration), and the socio-psychological (workplace adaptation, absence of discrimination, subjective satisfaction with job content and conditions)—each captured by its own set of indicators [2, 43]. Despite a notable increase in publications on migrant adaptation in the EU [13, 22, 52], comprehensive empirical studies of the *quality* of labour market integration, rather than its mere fact, remain scarce.

The aim of this paper is a comprehensive analysis of the labour market integration of Ukrainian migrants in EU countries, encompassing: a characterisation of employment and economic circumstances; identification of employment barriers and adaptation factors; determination of the integration determinants; typological classification of migrants by integration level; and analysis of sociodemographic predictors and return intentions. To operationalise these objectives, an Integration Index (I_{int}) was developed, combining a binary employment indicator with a multi-dimensional quality assessment.

Five research hypotheses were formulated based on these objectives and the theoretical framework. H1: despite formally high employment rates, a substantial share of migrants are over-qualified for the positions they hold—that is, effective integration is qualitatively inferior to reported integration. H2: socio-psychological factors (satisfaction with the benefits package, absence of discrimination) are stronger predictors of quality integration than formal-legal indicators. H3: migrants form at least three statistically distinct clusters by integration level, corresponding to different adaptation trajectories. H4: receipt of social transfers and income from Ukraine are negatively associated with labour market integration. H5: higher integration levels correlate with lower propensity to return to Ukraine.

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Migration as a consequence of global instability

Scholarly engagement with the phenomenon of war-driven migration from Ukraine began almost simultaneously with the mass displacement itself. Libanova introduced the term “war migration” to designate the compelled departure that followed 24 February 2022, emphasising a fundamental distinction from earlier waves: forced displacement, rather than rational economic calculation, is the dominant driver [30].

The push–pull model remains the standard analytical framework for studying migratory drivers [35, 48], although forced migration substantially distorts its logic: the rational selection of a destination is subordinated to the imperative of personal safety. Among push factors for Ukrainian migrants, armed conflict, destruction of economic infrastructure, and the collapse of production chains are dominant [39, 49]. On the pull side, legal protection in the form of temporary protection status (Directive 2001/55/EC) granted

immediate access to the labour market without the standard refugee-status determination procedure, complemented by the well-developed social infrastructure of receiving countries and the diaspora networks formed in the context of the Association Agreement [53]. The qualitative profile of this migrant cohort differs fundamentally from that of voluntary migrants: the disproportionate share of women and university-educated individuals reflects exit restrictions on men of conscription age and the relatively higher mobility of highly skilled groups [6, 54].

Research on the employment trajectories of Ukrainians in the EU before 2022, when labour migration became a mass phenomenon, identified a persistent pattern of initial qualification downgrading [29, 37]. Górny and van der Zwan [22] identified several clusters of employment trajectories, among which a pattern of initial below-qualification employment followed by gradual recovery over two to three years was prominent. Salariis and Tedesco documented the concentration of Ukrainian women in Italy's home-care sector, where a significant proportion held university degrees, constituting a direct manifestation of systemic non-recognition of qualifications [46].

2.2 Conceptual approaches to migrant integration

Scholarly discourse on migrant integration has not produced a single consensual definition [20, 32, 42], and this conceptual ambiguity carries methodological implications. Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas [43] treat integration as the process by which migrants acquire the standing of accepted members of a host society. Ager and Strang [2], Bommes [8], and Phillimore [44] instead emphasise the bilateral character of this process—the mutual adaptation of migrants and receiving society. Sadova et al. synthesise both approaches, treating integration simultaneously as both a process and a form of social coexistence [45].

For the present study, the analytically productive approach is one that distinguishes integration dimensions. Heckmann and Schnapper [23], elaborating Esser's framework [17], distinguish structural, cultural, social, and identificational components. Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas identify legal/political, socioeconomic, and cultural-religious dimensions [43]. Labour market integration occupies a central position within the socio-economic dimension: Hooper et al. qualify it as a decisive condition for successful integration into local communities more broadly [24].

The theoretical debate on integration trajectories, which are non-linear and reversible [47], has centred on two competing models. The first, U-shaped, posits initial qualification downgrading followed by gradual recovery as destination-specific capital accumulates [22]. The second describes a “survival job trap” from which a significant share of migrants do not escape due to structural barriers [33]. Brell et al. [12] specify that forced migrants enter the labour market in worse starting conditions than economic migrants, while Adda et al. [1] model the mechanism by which uncertainty about the duration of stay reduces the incentive to invest in language skills and qualification upgrading.

2.3 Barriers and facilitating factors in labour market integration

Comparative studies across different national contexts reveal a relatively stable set of barriers that are structurally reproduced irrespective of the specific national labour market context. Hooper et al. group these by the actor on whose side they originate: barriers attributable to migrants themselves (language deficits, non-recognition of qualifications,

narrow social networks), employer-side barriers (discriminatory attitudes, lack of incentives to hire foreign nationals), intermediary institutional barriers (complex legalisation procedures, information asymmetry), and contextual factors (labour market competition, cultural specifics) [24]. What Bevelander [7] observes in Sweden, Lange et al. [28] in the Netherlands, and Ortlieb et al. [41] in Austria broadly confirm this four-component structure.

Early access to language training and employment services significantly increases the probability of employment [14, 21]. Job–qualification match constitutes a prerequisite for long-term stability [5], while initial settlement conditions—notably the unemployment rate in the region of arrival—shape trajectories for years ahead [9, 10]. Kogan demonstrated that the character of integration policies substantially affects migrant employment outcomes across European countries [27].

Over-qualification is the most extensively documented manifestation of qualitative mismatch between human capital and actual employment. According to the European Commission and the OECD, approximately 60% of employed refugees with tertiary education in EU countries perform work below their level of qualification, a rate twice that of the native-born population [19]. For Ukrainian migrants, this problem is compounded by three specific circumstances beyond the general synergy of economic and humanitarian factors [40]: the demographic composition of the cohort (a preponderance of women and highly qualified individuals); uncertainty about the duration of stay, which reduces the propensity to invest in qualification recognition; and the temporary protection legal status, which, despite its advantages for labour market access, does not encourage employers to make long-term staffing commitments [51, 52].

2.4 Unresolved questions in research on the labour market integration of Ukrainian migrants

Research on the integration of Ukrainian migrants since 2022 has grown rapidly but unevenly: certain questions have been addressed in detail, while others remain almost entirely neglected.

First, existing studies [13, 51, 52] cover predominantly the early period—2022–2023—and do not track adaptation dynamics over time. The question of whether migrants are transitioning to stable quality employment along a U-shaped trajectory, or whether the majority remain trapped in a “survival” pattern [33], remains empirically open.

Second, the qualitative characteristics of employment—job–qualification match, subjective satisfaction, and access to social benefits have been almost entirely neglected for the new wave. Available studies report employment status or wages [22, 34], while the quality of employment remains unexamined.

Third, research lacks a validated, standardised instrument for measuring integration levels among forced migrants. Kaczmarczyk et al. [26] note the conceptual fragmentation in the definition of “economic integration”. Most available indicators are either too aggregated or omit the socio-psychological dimension, which the present study’s data identify as a key predictor.

Fourth, the effect of social transfers on integration behaviour remains contested. Some researchers advocate a “welfare trap” mechanism, while others point to the stabilising function of transfers during transitional periods [7, 14]. For Ukrainian migrants, the

problem is compounded by the uncertain duration of residence and the nature of temporary protection status, which provides no clear planning horizon.

Fifth, the mechanism governing the transformation of return intentions under conditions of protracted conflict remains unclear. The UNHCR [51] reports that the majority of migrants defer decisions until the security situation changes. Adda et al. [1] developed a dynamic model linking return decisions to human capital investments, yet the conceptualisation of the transition from “conditional return” to “permanent settlement” and its relationship to labour-market integration levels require further study.

Sixth, the sociodemographic determinants of integration have been studied only partially. The effects of age, educational attainment, and length of residence have received little attention.

These gaps define the research focus of the present paper: the qualitative parameters of labour market integration among the new wave of Ukrainian migrants, the factors differentiating across social groups, and the medium-term adaptation trajectory.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Empirical basis, research design, and sample

The empirical basis of the study comprises data from an original online survey of 256 Ukrainians residing in EU countries between May and October 2025. Data were collected via Google Forms; this instrument permitted simultaneous coverage of respondents across several countries and ensured a relatively short data-collection cycle—an important consideration when studying highly dynamic migration processes.

The sample was selected through self-selection, a method widely used in research on hard-to-reach populations [13]. The approach does not claim statistical representativeness in the strict sense: digitally mobile and more active migrants may be over-represented. Nevertheless, this sampling method permits cross-country coverage and enables analysis of within-cohort variation.

The research programme encompasses six tasks: (1) measurement of the level and quality of labour market integration; (2) identification of employment barriers and adaptation difficulties; (3) assessment of satisfaction with working conditions and social benefits; (4) determination of the predictors of integration through correlation and regression analysis; (5) typological classification of migrants through cluster analysis; and (6) analysis of sociodemographic determinants and return intentions.

The sociodemographic profile of the sample reflects key features of the recent wave of forced migration from Ukraine. Women constitute 86.3% of the respondents, which is broadly consistent with the gender structure of this migration cohort. According to Eurostat and OECD estimates, women make up approximately 70% of adult beneficiaries of temporary protection across host countries, and around 73% of the working-age (18–64) cohort once the predominantly male population of minors is excluded [18, 38]. But the sample share exceeds these benchmarks, most probably because women are more likely to participate in voluntary online surveys. The sample should therefore be read as over-representing women relative to the underlying population.

Educational attainment among respondents is high: 57.4% hold a Master’s degree, and 19.1% hold a postgraduate degree. This pattern is consistent with the broader educational profile of Ukrainian refugees: according to OECD data, around 71% self-declare tertiary education, with many holding a Master’s degree or higher [38]. At the same

time, the online survey format may have introduced a modest upward bias in the sample's educational profile.

The primary age group is 30–49 years (60.2% of the sample). The sample spans 20 EU states; the largest contingents are Germany (34.8%) and Poland (13.7%), mirroring the official distribution of beneficiaries [18], with the remainder across Estonia, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Belgium, Austria, and other host countries. In all, 60.6% departed within the first six months following 24 February 2022.

3.2 Questionnaire design, piloting, and ethical principles

The questionnaire comprised four thematic sections. The first contained closed questions on employment status and form, legality of employment relations, job–qualification match, wage level, access to a benefits package, working conditions, incidents of discrimination, adaptation difficulties, workplace atmosphere, and career development prospects. The second section used scaled questions to measure subjective satisfaction with work, wages, and social benefits. The third used multiple-choice questions on barriers encountered when seeking employment and sources of adaptation difficulties. The fourth was a sociodemographic section covering gender, age, educational level, region of origin, country of residence, length of stay abroad, household composition, and presence of dependent children.

Before launching the main fieldwork phase, the questionnaire was piloted with a sample of $n = 15$. Based on the results, several questions were revised, terminological ambiguities were eliminated, and the logic of the transitions between sections was verified. Piloting ensured the content and procedural validity of the instrument.

Participation in the study was based on the principle of voluntary informed consent: respondents were informed of the research purpose, their right to decline or withdraw at any stage without explanation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Data were processed exclusively in aggregated form; identification of individuals is precluded.

3.3 Operationalisation of integration and index construction

The authorial Integration Index (I_{int}) follows a two-stage logic. The first stage is binary: employed in the country of residence or not. For non-integrated respondents, $I_{\text{int}} = 0$. In the second stage, a quality component of the index was computed for the 155 respondents employed under an employment contract in their country of residence. Respondents engaged in entrepreneurial or independent professional activity were excluded from the second stage owing to the small size of this subgroup.

The second-stage indicators were grouped into three dimensions. Group A (formal-legal): presence of employment (Q1), legality of employment (Q2), form of working time arrangement (Q3), duration of contract (Q4). Group B (professional-economic): job–qualification match (Q5), correspondence of wages to local rates (Q6), access to a benefits package (Q7), working conditions (Q8), career advancement prospects (Q9). Group C (socio-psychological): ease of workplace adaptation (Q10), satisfaction with wages (Q11), satisfaction with benefits package (Q12), overall job satisfaction (Q13), workplace relations (Q14), absence of discrimination (Q15).

Each indicator is coded on a binary scale (0–2); Q14 uses a three-level scale (0–1–2). Sub-indices and the overall I_{int} are computed as simple arithmetic means within the

respective dimension; values range from 0 to 2. Statistical analysis was conducted on a dataset of $N = 234$ valid observations.

3.4 Quantitative analytical methods

Hypothesis testing relied on a combination of six methods. Descriptive statistics were used to characterise the distribution of I_{int} and the sample structure (mean, median, mode, standard deviation, kurtosis, skewness). A t-test of significance was used to rank predictors of integration. Multiple ordinary-least-squares linear regression was used to construct a predictive model and estimate the relative contribution of each factor. K-means clustering was used to classify migrants by integration level. Comparisons between clusters and sociodemographic groups were conducted through one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), with pairwise comparisons via Welch's t-test for independent samples. Gender analysis was not conducted owing to the marked asymmetry of the sample (86.3% women).

In operationalising the effect of training participation, the study partially adopts Kogan's [27] approach, which examined the effects of integration policies on migrant employment outcomes. In this study, the training effect is estimated through a t-test adjusted for potential self-selection—a less rigorous but acceptable solution given the cross-sectional design. Methodological limitations include the online format and self-selection sampling, which may bias results toward better-adapted and digitally included migrants; gender asymmetry, which limits sex-disaggregated analysis; and the restriction of the index's quality component to the sub-sample of wage employees. The regression model was estimated on 154 observations (respondents employed under an employment contract in the country of residence), as one valid observation was removed due to missing values.

3.5 Ethics approval

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of International Economics at Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman and conducted in accordance with the Ethical Code of Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman. The study involved an anonymous online survey of adult volunteers. No personally identifiable information was collected or retained. All participants provided voluntary informed consent prior to participation.

4 Employment and economic well-being of migrants

4.1 Legal status and employment rate

Almost all respondents obtained temporary protection status, and 95.7% of them encountered no bureaucratic obstacles during the legalisation process—a result that points to the effectiveness of the accelerated protection mechanism established by Directive 2001/55/EC. This stands in marked contrast to conventional refugee cohorts, who may wait months or years for status determinations [12], and explains the relatively rapid labour-market access observed in this group.

Among respondents, 76.2% were currently employed; 69.1% (177 individuals) were employed directly in the country of residence. A further 21.88% retained income sources in Ukraine, primarily through remote work (48.21% within this sub-group). While 28.91% of respondents received social transfers in the receiving country, only 13.51%

Table 1 Subjective assessment of migrants' economic well-being.(Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of survey data)

Response option	<i>n</i>	%
Can afford everything needed and save money	70	27.34
Can afford everything needed, but cannot save money	82	32.03
Can afford food, clothing, and footwear, but needs to save or borrow for more expensive items	68	26.56
Can afford food, but needs to save or borrow for clothing and footwear	23	8.98
Cutting back on food	13	5.08
Total	256	100

Table 2 Employment characteristics among wage employees (*n* = 155).(Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of survey data)

Characteristic	%
Full-time employment	72.26
Permanent employment contract	65.81
On-site/office-based work	63.23
Hybrid work arrangement	30.32
Job matches qualifications	52.90
Job below qualification level (over-qualification)	42.58
Job above qualification level	4.52

considered them sufficient to meet their needs. The majority (72.27%) paid rent independently—an indicator of financial autonomy that simultaneously implies heightened vulnerability to income instability. Respondents' subjective assessments of their economic well-being are presented in Table 1.

4.2 Job search barriers and training participation

Among those who had sought employment in their country of residence, 46.89% rated the process as difficult. The primary obstacles were language barriers, a shortage of suitable vacancies, employers' reluctance to hire foreign nationals, and difficulties in obtaining recognition of qualifications. This barrier profile is broadly consistent with those documented by Hooper et al. [24], Lange et al. [28], and Bevelander [7] across different national EU contexts.

In all, 44.14% of migrants had undertaken additional training in order to overcome these barriers. Language courses were taken by 87.6% of this group, job-search courses by 31.86%, retraining programmes by 19.47%, and training in their existing qualification by 21.24%. By contrast, formal recognition of existing diplomas and certificates was pursued by only 4.42%—figures that reflect the systemic nature of the problem of foreign qualification recognition, which the European Commission and OECD identify as one of the most acute barriers to quality integration [19].

5 Employment quality and adaptation

5.1 Nature of employment relations and over-qualification

Among the 177 respondents employed in their country of residence, 97.7% were legally employed, and 87.6% held employment contracts. Detailed characteristics of employment quality for the wage-employee sub-sample (*n* = 155) are presented in Table 2.

The over-qualification rate (42.6%) is somewhat lower than the 60% reported by the European Commission and OECD [19]. However, that benchmark applies specifically to tertiary-educated refugees, whereas the rate reported here covers all wage employees. If

recalculated only for tertiary-educated respondents, who account for 76.5% of the sub-sample, the figure would likely be higher and more directly comparable. This interpretation is also consistent with the pattern of initial qualification downgrading identified across several clusters of migrant employment trajectories [22]. A small share (4.52%) holds positions requiring higher qualifications than they possess. Combined with the proportion employed in positions that match their qualifications (52.90%), this indicates that, even under formally satisfactory employment conditions, almost half of migrants are not fully deploying their qualification potential.

5.2 Workplace adaptation, satisfaction, and discrimination

The majority of employed respondents (61.3%) encountered adaptation difficulties. The leading source was the language barrier (77.89%), followed by cultural differences (52.63%), psychological and emotional overload (35.79%), and deficits in specific knowledge or skills (21.05%). This hierarchy is consistent with the findings of Lange et al. [28] for the Netherlands and confirms the priority of language support documented by Udayar et al. [50].

Assessments of remuneration were polarised: 61.3% considered their wages in line with local rates, yet only 39.35% expressed satisfaction with them, while 32.9% expressed dissatisfaction. This divergence between objective and subjective assessments most likely reflects the persistence of income expectations formed prior to migration. A benefits package was available to 60.65% of employed respondents, of whom 57.45% were satisfied with it. Employer-provided psychological support was a rare exception, available to only 14.2% of employees.

The workplace atmosphere was rated predominantly positively: 49.03% described it as positive, and a further 27.10% as rather positive. Nevertheless, 21.29% reported incidents of workplace discrimination—a figure that substantially affects the quality integration index and warrants separate attention in the Discussion. Career advancement prospects were rated positively by only 43.23%; one-third expected no advancement whatsoever.

6 Integration index, key drivers, and clustering

6.1 Key drivers and the regression model

Correlation analysis of 14 employment quality indicators with the composite I_{int} confirmed statistical significance for all variables except legality of employment (Q2, $p=0.705$). The non-significance of Q2 is methodologically expected: since 97.7% of employed respondents are in legal employment, this indicator does not, in fact, differentiate the cohort. The six strongest correlations are presented in Table 3.

On the basis of these drivers, the following multiple linear regression equation was estimated:

Table 3 Key integration drivers (top 6 by correlation with I_{int}). (Source: calculated by the authors)

Indicator	r with I_{int}	t-statistic	p-value
Q9. Career/professional advancement prospects	0.626	9.929	< 0.001
Q11. Satisfaction with wages	0.617	9.688	< 0.001
Q12. Satisfaction with benefits package	0.594	9.142	< 0.001
Q13. Overall job satisfaction	0.594	9.122	< 0.001
Q15. Absence of workplace discrimination	0.559	8.328	< 0.001
Q5. Job–qualification match	0.550	8.146	< 0.001

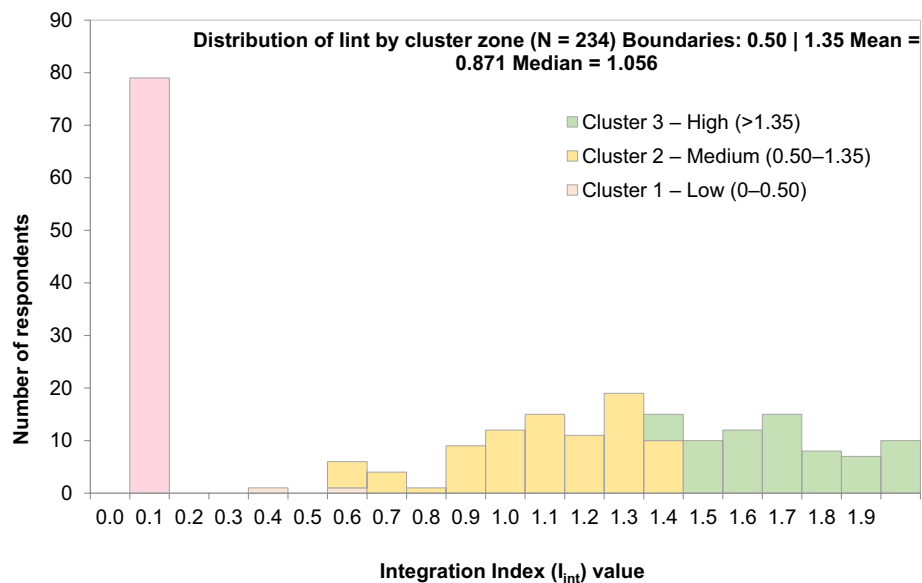


Fig. 1 Distribution of the Integration Index (I_{int}) with cluster zones ($N=234$).Source: calculated by the authors on the basis of survey data

Table 4 Characteristics of migrant integration clusters.Source: calculated by the authors.

Cluster	I_{int} range	n (%)	Description
1—Low level	0–0.5	81 (34.6%)	Predominantly non-integrated; absent or unstable employment; high economic vulnerability
2—Medium level	0.55–1.35	86 (36.8%)	Employed but frequently below qualification level; partial satisfaction; incomplete integration trajectory
3—High level	1.36–2.00	67 (28.6%)	Stable, qualification-appropriate employment; positive work environment; access to benefits; advancement prospects

$$I_{int} = 0.8108 + 0.0917 \cdot Q_9 + 0.0834 \cdot Q_{11} + 0.1358 \cdot Q_{12} + 0.0162 \cdot Q_{13} + 0.0954 \cdot Q_{15} + 0.1068 \cdot Q_5$$

The model yields $R^2 = 0.813$ (adjusted $R^2 = 0.805$) and a standard error of 0.165; the ANOVA F-statistic of 106.48 ($p < 0.001$) confirms the model's overall significance. Q_{13} (overall job satisfaction) proved non-significant ($p = 0.356$), indicating its derivative rather than independent character. It was nevertheless retained in the model to avoid omitted-variable bias: as a theoretically motivated composite of subjective well-being, its exclusion would risk absorbing its shared variance into the remaining coefficients and distorting their estimates. The strongest predictor is satisfaction with the benefits package ($b = 0.136$), consistent with Hooper et al.'s [24] conclusion regarding the critical role of working conditions and social guarantees in the long-term retention of migrants in the labour market.

6.2 Descriptive statistics and cluster analysis

The distribution of I_{int} ($N = 234$) has a mean of 0.871, a median of 1.056, and a mode of 0. Negative kurtosis (-1.45) combined with high variance (0.483) indicates a bimodal structure: a substantial share of the cohort is concentrated at either the lower or the upper end of the scale, rather than in the centre. This polarisation justifies the use of cluster analysis as a typological instrument (Fig. 1).

K-means clustering identified three statistically distinct groups (Table 4; Fig. 2).

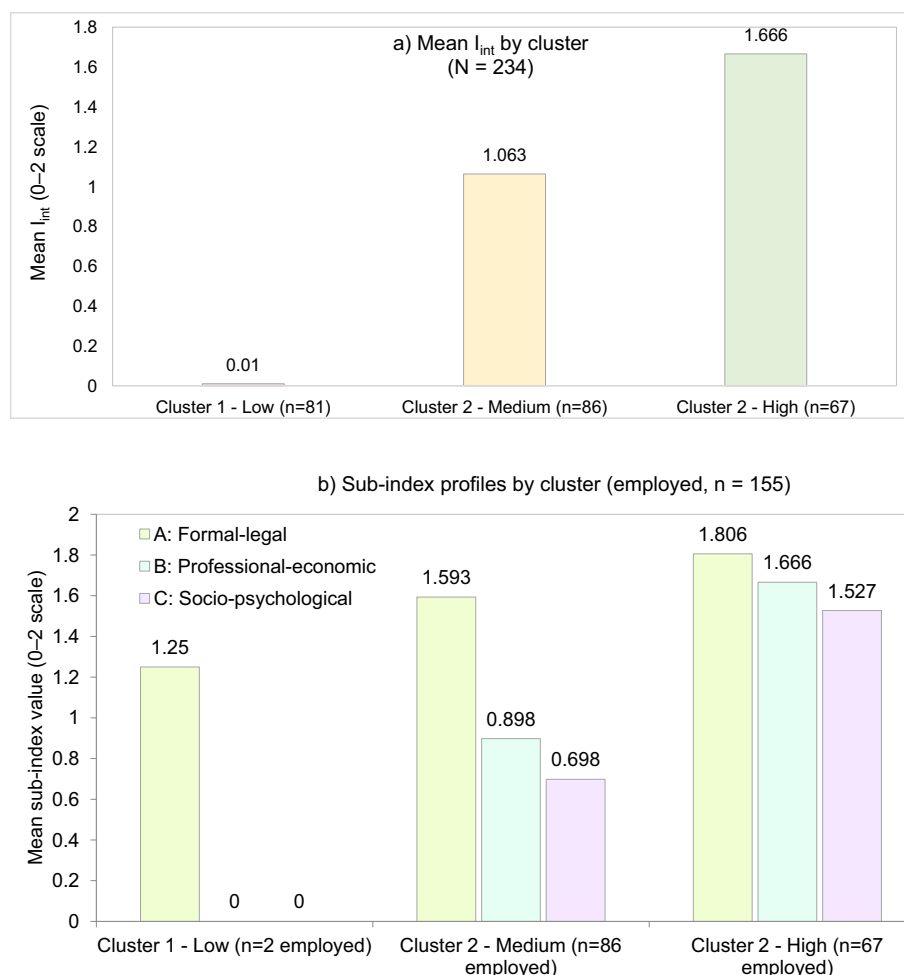


Fig. 2 Cluster structure of the Ukrainian migrants' integration level (Source: calculated by the authors on the basis of survey data)

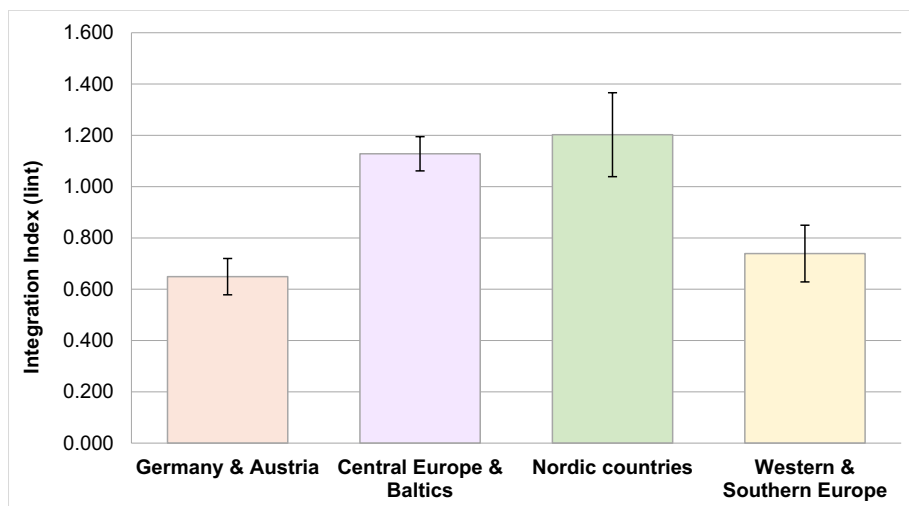
6.3 Integration and country of destination

The institutional and labour-market context of the receiving country is a well-established determinant of migrant integration outcomes [27]. The present sample spans 20 EU host countries, but the number of respondents in most individual countries is too small to support country-level inference. To exploit the geographical variation while retaining adequate cell sizes, respondents were grouped into four destination-country clusters reflecting broad institutional and regional similarities: (A) Germany and Austria; (B) Central Europe and the Baltic states (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia); (C) the Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark); and (D) Western and Southern Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Ireland, Luxembourg). The mean Integration Index for each cluster is reported in Table 5; Fig. 3.

An ANOVA confirms that the differences between clusters are statistically significant ($F(3, 225) = 9.19$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.11$). The country of destination thus accounts for a non-trivial share of the variation in integration. The clearest contrast is between cluster A (Germany and Austria; mean $I_{int} = 0.649$) and cluster B (Central Europe and the Baltic states; mean $I_{int} = 1.128$), a difference that is both statistically significant and large in magnitude (Welch $t = -4.92$; $p < 0.001$; Cohen's $d = 0.75$). This finding shows that

Table 5 Integration Index by destination-country cluster.(Source: calculated by the authors)

Destination-country cluster	<i>n</i>	Mean I_{int}	Median	SD
A. Germany and Austria	94	0.649	0.456	0.683
B. Central Europe and Baltic states	72	1.128	1.139	0.562
C. Nordic countries	18	1.202	1.394	0.675
D. Western and Southern Europe	45	0.739	0.667	0.733

**Fig. 3** Integration Index (I_{int}) by destination-country cluster (error bars: ± 1 SE; jittered points: individual respondents)(Source: calculated by the authors on the basis of survey data)

integration outcomes differ across destination-country clusters and supports the argument that integration is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by the receiving country's institutional context.

7 Sociodemographic determinants and migration intentions

7.1 Age, educational attainment, and length of residence

ANOVA confirmed statistically significant differences in I_{int} across age groups ($F = 5.691$; $p < 0.001$): the highest integration level characterises the 30–40-year cohort ($I_{int} = 1.086$), and the lowest that of respondents aged 50+ ($I_{int} = 0.605$). This age gradient is consistent with the findings of Bratu et al. [9] and may be explained by several concurrent mechanisms: greater willingness among younger migrants to retrain, better language acquisition capacity, and weaker incentives among pre-retirement-age individuals to pursue active market adaptation.

Educational attainment ($F = 1.161$; $p = 0.329$) and length of residence abroad ($F = 1.886$; $p = 0.114$) were not statistically significant predictors of I_{int} . This result is counterintuitive from the standpoint of classical human capital theory, yet it follows logically from a situation in which the primary barrier is the non-recognition of foreign qualifications rather than an absence of knowledge: in these circumstances, a higher level of education does not confer a meaningful advantage in the eyes of employers [16, 28].

7.2 Social transfers and income from Ukraine

Recipients of social transfers had substantially lower I_{int} compared with non-recipients (0.458 vs. 1.065; $t = -6.63$; $p < 0.001$; $d = 0.952$ —a large effect by Cohen's criteria). An

analogous pattern holds for migrants with income sources in Ukraine: I_{int} of 0.532 vs. 1.005 for those without such income ($t = 4.566$; $p < 0.001$).

Causal interpretation of these results must be approached with caution. At least three mechanisms may operate simultaneously: first, a selection effect—transfers are received by those who already face greater barriers to employment; second, a behavioural effect—stable financial support reduces the intensity of job search; third, the retention of an economic anchor in Ukraine slows reorientation towards the labour market of the receiving country. The negative association between training participation and I_{int} ($t = -2.191$; $p = 0.029$) likewise reflects the self-selection effect documented by Kogan [27] in a comparative analysis.

7.3 Integration level, economic circumstances, and return intentions

ANOVA confirmed a significant association between integration cluster and subjective assessment of economic circumstances ($F = 10.186$; $p < 0.001$): the mean assessment in cluster 3 was 3.16 out of 4, and in cluster 1 it was 2.38. This difference indicates that labour market integration is not merely a source of income but a determinant of broader socioeconomic stability—a conclusion consistent with those of Hooper et al. [24] and Sadova et al. [45].

The inverse relationship between integration level and return intentions was confirmed (ANOVA, $F = 4.662$; $p < 0.05$): cluster 3 is characterised by a predominance of intentions to remain, cluster 1 by uncertainty. Overall, 42.58% intend to remain in the EU, while only 3.52% express unconditional willingness to return. Among the conditions cited for return, security-related factors are dominant: cessation of hostilities (92.45%) and security guarantees (88.68%).

8 Discussion

Situating the present findings within the comparative literature allows Ukrainian migrants of the 2022–2025 period to be contextualised within the broader framework of humanitarian migrant labour integration, revealing both typical patterns and specific deviations that warrant independent explanation.

8.1 Employment level and quality of integration

The overall employment rate of 76.2%—with 69.1% employed directly in the country of residence—appears relatively high. Bevelander [7] documents that refugees in Sweden exhibit substantially lower employment rates than labour migrants, and that even five years after arrival, their employment rates remain markedly below those of the native-born population. Brell et al. [12], drawing on a broad international sample, demonstrate that the employment gap with respect to the native-born population persists throughout the first decade. The comparatively high employment rate among Ukrainians is attributable, above all, to the composition of the cohort: high educational attainment, immediate labour market access through temporary protection status, and a significant proportion with pre-2022 labour migration experience [31]—these three factors in combination facilitated faster labour market entry than is typical for humanitarian migrant cohorts.

Employment itself, however, does not imply quality integration—and it is precisely here that the picture is less optimistic. The over-qualification rate of 42.58% is lower than the rates reported by the European Commission and the OECD [19] for refugees in EU

countries generally (approximately 60% among tertiary-educated individuals. Note that this benchmark applies to tertiary-educated refugees specifically, whereas the present 42.58% covers all wage employees—a recalculation restricted to the 76.5% of respondents with tertiary education would yield a higher and more directly comparable figure). Brell et al. [12] interpret this phenomenon as a structural consequence of the “devaluation” of foreign credentials and the opacity of hiring signals. High employment within the Ukrainian migrant cohort is thus, to a considerable degree, employment below qualification level, and this fact governs the subsequent logic of the discussion.

8.2 Integration drivers: the socio-psychological dimension

The regression model identifies the dominance of satisfaction with the benefits package ($b = 0.136$) and absence of discrimination ($b = 0.095$) over formal-legal indicators. The non-significance of the legality of employment ($p = 0.705$) is not paradoxical: since 97.7% of employed respondents are in legal employment, the indicator *de facto* introduces no variance. Substantively, this result indicates that legal status as such is a necessary but insufficient condition for quality integration.

The primacy of satisfaction with the benefits package is consistent with the conclusion of Hooper et al. [24] concerning the critical role of working conditions and social security in the long-term retention of migrants in the labour market. At the same time, compared with Swedish [21] and Danish [11] evidence, where language competence and qualification match are the key predictors, the present results appear distinctive. The most plausible explanation is chronological: data were collected three years after the onset of forced migration, when initial adaptation is still incomplete and social security functions as an “anchor”, whereas the Scandinavian studies address a 5–10-year horizon.

Workplace discrimination was reported by 21.3% of migrants and, according to the model, is a statistically significant predictor of I_{int} . The findings of Aksoy et al. [3] for Germany and Müller et al. [36] for Switzerland confirm that unequal local integration conditions are associated with a widening gap between formal and effective integration. The present data do not permit direct causal inference regarding migrants’ subsequent motivation to invest in integration.

8.3 Cluster structure and the survival job trap

The first cluster ($I_{\text{int}} \in [0; 0.5]$; 34.6% of the cohort) corresponds closely in its characteristics to the group described by Lumley-Sapanski [33] as trapped in a “survival job trap”: unstable or absent employment, chronic economic vulnerability, and practical exclusion from professional and career advancement channels. The fact that one-third of the cohort remains in this state three years after arrival is a significant concern—although compared with the first cohorts of Syrian refugees in Sweden and Germany, where comparable rates at the same horizon were even lower [33], the result is somewhat more favourable.

The association between cluster and subjective economic circumstances (ANOVA, $p < 0.001$; difference between clusters 1 and 3 of 0.78 points on a 4-point scale) corroborates the argument of Bakker et al. [4] that what matters is not merely the presence of employment but its quality. A migrant in cluster 1, even if employed, occupies a fundamentally different socioeconomic position from a migrant in cluster 3—and this structural inequality must be the subject of targeted integration policy.

8.4 Social transfers: welfare trap or stabiliser?

The integration gap between recipients of social transfers ($I_{\text{int}} = 0.458$) and non-recipients ($I_{\text{int}} = 1.065$) is statistically and practically significant, with an effect size of $d = 0.952$. However, interpreting these data as confirmation of the “welfare trap” hypothesis [11] is premature: the study cannot separate the behavioural effect from the selection effect. Recipients are likely, in the first instance, those who already face greater structural barriers—limited language proficiency, the presence of dependent young children, health problems—meaning that the direction of causation may be reversed.

The key lesson from Scandinavian randomised studies [7, 14] is different: it is not the receipt of transfers per se, but their combination—or lack thereof—with active support programmes that determines subsequent trajectories. Migrants who receive transfers without simultaneous access to language programmes and employment services may face an elevated risk of prolonged labour market exclusion; but the combination of financial support with activation measures yields better outcomes than either strategy in isolation. Longitudinal data are needed to test this mechanism for Ukrainian migrants.

8.5 Age, education, and the limits of human capital

The non-significance of educational attainment ($p = 0.329$) as a predictor of I_{int} directly contradicts classical human capital theory, yet fits well within Eggenhofer-Rehart et al.’s [16] framework of career capital depreciation under forced migration. Formally accumulated human capital loses its convertibility not because it ceases to exist, but because it is devalued upon displacement into an unfamiliar institutional sphere. A diploma obtained in Ukraine must undergo a recognition procedure, and such procedures were uncommon among respondents in this study.

The age asymmetry ($F = 5.691$; $p < 0.001$; integration peak in the 30–40 cohort, minimum in those over 50) reproduces the pattern identified by Bratu et al. [9] and is explained by the combination of three factors: younger migrants’ superior language acquisition capacity, broader access to digital job-search tools, and a lower threshold of readiness for horizontal occupational mobility. For individuals over 50, the return horizon on investments in new qualifications is sufficiently compressed that a rational response may be to forgo retraining—a logic that should inform the design of age-specific integration programmes.

8.6 Return intentions and study limitations

The inverse relationship between integration level and return propensity (ANOVA, $p < 0.05$) is consistent with the theoretical model of Adda et al. [1]: a migrant who has accumulated destination-specific capital—language competence, local social ties, qualification recognition—progressively revises their assessment of their own prospects in the country of origin relative to their current situation. At the same time, the dominance of “conditional return” (92.45% of those who intend to return link this decision to the cessation of hostilities) and the substantial share of undecided respondents indicate that intentions are acutely sensitive to external security conditions: any shift in the front-line situation could sharply alter these dispositions in either direction.

The study has four principal limitations. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference precisely where it is most needed—notably regarding the effect of social transfers. Self-selection sampling, while standard practice for hard-to-reach populations,

likely biases results towards more active and digitally included migrants. The gender asymmetry (86.3% women), driven by the cohort's structural composition, limits sex-disaggregated analysis. Finally, the authorial I_{int} has not been independently validated on a representative sample—an objective for future research, together with longitudinal tracking of this cohort and gender-differentiated analysis.

9 Conclusions

Drawing on an original survey of 256 Ukrainian migrants in EU countries (May–October 2025), this study yields the following results.

All five hypotheses were confirmed: four fully, one partially. H1 was confirmed: 42.58% of employed respondents are over-qualified for their positions, a rate that exceeds the native-born benchmark. H2 was confirmed: the regression model ($R^2 = 0.813$) demonstrates the dominance of socio-psychological predictors—satisfaction with the benefits package ($b = 0.136$) and absence of discrimination ($b = 0.095$)—over formal-legal indicators; legality of employment is statistically non-significant ($p = 0.705$). H3 was confirmed: k-means clustering identified three statistically distinct groups with low (34.6%), medium (36.8%), and high (28.6%) integration levels. H4 was confirmed: recipients of social transfers have $I_{\text{int}} = 0.458$ vs. 1.065 for non-recipients ($t = -6.63$; $p < 0.001$; $d = 0.952$); retention of income from Ukraine is also associated with a lower index (0.532 vs. 1.005; $p < 0.001$). H5 was partially confirmed: ANOVA recorded an inverse relationship between integration level and return propensity ($F = 4.662$; $p < 0.05$), but cluster 1 is characterised by indecision rather than a formed intention to return.

The first conclusion concerns employment. The 76.2% rate is comparatively high for a forced migrant cohort, and temporary protection status proved an effective legal mechanism for labour market access. However, a substantial share of the employed hold positions below their qualification level—meaning that the quantitative employment indicator substantially overstates the real quality of integration.

The second conclusion concerns barriers. Language deficits, inability to obtain qualification recognition, and employer discrimination remain the three central obstacles, while migrants' adaptation strategies are predominantly short-term: 87.6% of those who undertook training chose language courses, and only 4.42% sought formal recognition of existing qualifications. The structural barrier of qualification recognition thus remains effectively unresolved.

The third and fourth conclusions describe the cohort's internal structure. The regression model reveals that integration proceeds primarily through social welfare and inclusion rather than through formal indicators. Cluster analysis documents the unevenness of this process: one-third of migrants remain effectively outside quality employment three years after arrival, while almost 29% have achieved stable, qualification-appropriate employment.

The fifth conclusion concerns determinants. Age is a significant predictor of integration ($p < 0.001$), with a clear peak in the 30–40 cohort, while educational attainment and length of residence bear no statistically significant relationship to I_{int} . This result indicates that human capital is not in itself a sufficient resource for integration—its realisation depends on institutional conditions, above all the functioning of qualification recognition mechanisms.

Interpreted through the theoretical framework presented in Sect. 2, these results clarify the mechanisms of labour market integration among Ukrainian forced migrants. The coexistence of high employment and widespread over-qualification supports the view that integration often begins with employment below the level of prior qualifications rather than with immediate skill-matched placement [22]. Whether migrants in the low-integration cluster subsequently move towards more stable, qualification-appropriate employment or remain in a “survival job” pattern can only be established through longitudinal research [33]. The non-significance of educational attainment further shows that formal qualifications do not automatically translate into better integration outcomes under forced displacement. Their value depends on the extent to which receiving-country institutions enable recognition, transferability, and practical use of migrants’ prior education and professional experience [16]. The systematic variation in integration by country of destination also confirms that labour market integration forms part of the socioeconomic dimension of multidimensional integration [23, 43] and reflects a two-sided process involving both migrants and the receiving society [2, 8, 44]. Finally, the inverse relationship between integration and return propensity is consistent with dynamic approaches to return migration [1], while the dominance of security-related conditions indicates that forced migrants’ intentions cannot be explained by labour market factors alone.

From a policy standpoint, the following measures warrant prioritisation within EU integration policy: the acceleration and simplification of foreign qualification recognition procedures; the intensification of language programmes within the first months of arrival, with particular attention to individuals over 40; systematic anti-discrimination measures in the labour market, including employer monitoring and accountability mechanisms; the introduction of targeted, comprehensive programmes for cluster 1 migrants that combine financial support with active employment assistance; and the development of dedicated psychological support measures, given that this factor proved significant in the regression model yet coverage remains minimal (14.2%).

Author contributions

Svitlana Tsymbaliuk: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing—Original Draft, Writing—Review and Editing, Supervision. Nataliya Moskaliuk: Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing—Original Draft. Danylo Tsymbaliuk: Software, Validation, Visualisation, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft.

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Data availability

The dataset generated and analysed during this study is not publicly available in order to ensure the confidentiality of survey participants. The anonymised dataset is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Department of International Economics, Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman, prior to the commencement of data collection. The study protocol was approved in accordance with the Ethical Code of Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman and the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision). All procedures performed in this study complied with the approved ethical protocol and applicable institutional regulations governing research involving human participants. The study involved an anonymous online survey of adult volunteers; no clinical interventions were performed, and no personally identifiable information was collected. Informed consent to participate in this study was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and all participants were 18 years of age or older. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Consent for publication

All participants gave their consent to the publication of the study's results in aggregated form. No identifying personal information is included in this manuscript, and participants' anonymity and confidentiality have been fully protected.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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