

## CONTRIBUTION OF DISPLACED UKRAINIANS TO ADDRESSING LABOUR SHORTAGES IN LATVIA

Oksana Zabko<sup>1</sup>, Ph.D.

<sup>1</sup>University of Latvia, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology

**Abstract.** As part of a broader international debate on the contribution of labour migrants to national economies, especially with the rapidly growing interest in Ukrainian refugee labour, this article examines to what extent displaced Ukrainians have provided the skills that are in shortage in Latvia. This is achieved through two research methods. First, the article analyses the statistics on the number of registered vacancies and their actual fulfilment in general and those offered to displaced Ukrainians. This allows for an analysis of the demand of displaced Ukrainians in certain sectors and occupations, contrasting them with overall labour demand in the Latvian economy. Second, an assessment of employers' needs and expectations of the migrant and the displaced Ukrainian workforce and its supply is based on 14 in-depth interviews with employers. The data show that although the displaced Ukrainians have supplied labour to sectors experiencing shortages, the employment participation of this migrant group is lower than initially expected. The main reason is the skill sets offered by the displaced Ukrainian labour force that partly mismatch to the Latvian labour market needs. The most important obstacles highlighted by Latvian companies to offer jobs to Ukrainians are their lack of Latvian language skills and knowledge of local context.

**Key words:** migrant workers, skills shortages, Ukrainian refugees, labour market integration.

**JEL code:** J2, J61, J63

### Introduction

For decades, liberal economies have considered labour migrants as a solution to decreasing workforce supply in their internal markets, however, the policies vary significantly even within European Union (EU) (OECD/European Union, 2016). Free movement of labour in the EU's internal labour market has encouraged mobility from East to West European countries (Ciupijus, 2011; Engbersen et al., 2010; Favell, 2008), but policies for hiring of third-country labour migrants largely depend on national considerations and tend to be more selective. This includes following to community preference principle that implies giving advantage to EU labour force over third-country nationals, proof of qualifications and skills, and national language proficiency (OECD/European Union, 2016). While intra-EU migrant workers have freedom to choose between various jobs, although most frequently, they find themselves in less qualified positions or the secondary labour market (Ciupijus, 2011; Engbersen et al., 2010; Zabko et al., 2019), non-EU labour is often tied to a single employer (De Lange & Falkenhain, 2024), which is also the case in Latvia (Saeima, 2002).

Moreover, Latvia is hindering the hiring of non-EU migrant workers, both by using the community preference principle and by requiring migrant pay above the national average (BISS, 2017). This policy has confined employers' opportunities to recruit third-country nationals, especially to deal with low-skilled labour shortages. Although Latvian employers have been calling to introduce more favourable conditions to non-EU labour immigration (RAIT, 2022), the government continuously pursues a restrictive policy. Under these circumstances, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 had led to an influx of a significant number of working-age Ukrainians into Latvia. Initially, Ukrainian refugees were exaggeratedly considered as potential solution to the labour shortage problem (Krievins, 2022). Thus, concerned to facilitate their immediate entry into the labour market, the Latvian government adopted a more flexible requirements for the employment of Ukrainians compared to other third-country migrants and refugees. First, they were not tied to a specific employer, second, had an exception to the Latvian language proficiency requirement, and third, could receive accelerate recognition of their qualifications in certain regulated professions

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<sup>1</sup>E-mail: oksana.zabko@lu.lv

(Zabko, 2023b). However, recent Polish experience shows that pre-war and post-war Ukrainian migrants differ in terms of their socio-demographic profile (Kubiciel-Lodzinska et al., 2024; Van Tubergen et al., 2023), entry patterns into employment and challenges thereof (Duszczuk et al., 2023; Gorny & Van der Zwan, 2024). Freedom to choose employer may contribute to Ukrainians entering undeclared work (Brzozowska, 2023). This allows presuming that integration of displaced Ukrainians into the Latvian labour market might also have different outcomes, as observed in Poland (Gomolka et al., 2023; Gorny & Van der Zwan, 2024).

Since deregulations adopted by the Latvian government allowed Ukrainians to choose their workplace by responding to any job offer, employers were invited to indicate the suitable vacancies. This has created a favourable condition to analyse the capability of Ukrainian workforce to address the labour shortages in Latvia. Moreover, secondary data from employers' interviews collected by the author for her thesis (Zabko, 2023a) allows to identify the obstacles to hire displaced Ukrainian workforce.

The aim of this article is to examine to what extent displaced Ukrainians have provided the skills that are in shortage in Latvia. The analysis is guided by three assumptions: (1) deregulations adopted by the government have made available to the Ukrainian workforce economic sectors and types of companies that have been previously inaccessible to migrants; (2) the largest Ukrainian labour demand was observed in the medium-skilled and low-skilled occupations; and (3) various barriers to Ukrainian employment in the Latvian labour market arise from the organisational culture and operational practices of companies. The study is based on two research methods: (1) statistical analysis of administrative data on labour demand and supply, including, in breakdown by vacancies offered to displaced Ukrainians, collected by the State Employment Agency and (2) qualitative data from employers' interviews. The choice of the scope of the research and methods is based on the argument that previous research on the individual-level experiences of Ukrainian migrants already provides a reasonable evidence base, while employers' perspectives have remained unexplained.

## **Research results and discussion**

### **1. General trends of pre-war and post-war Ukrainian labour supply in Latvia**

Before the outbreak of the war, Ukrainians, as third-country nationals, were subjects of the Latvia's restrictive immigration policy. According to the data of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, at the end of 2021, temporary residence permits in Latvia had 7 075 Ukrainian citizens, including, 4 604 as employees and 16 as high-skilled employees (PMLP, 2021).

Among all third-country nationals, in 2021, Ukrainians were the most important source of migrant labour (PMLP, 2021). However, estimations showed that the number of Ukrainian workers could be even higher, as Latvian employers found opportunities to hire them through Polish companies and, as a result, involve in undeclared work (Varpina & Fredheim, 2022). Pre-war Ukrainian labour mostly consisted of men, aged 25-54, demanded for medium-skilled occupations (BISS, 2017), working in construction and transportation industries. To offer declared work in low-paid occupations for non-EU nationals was generally not profitable due to the high administrative burden of the employment permit issuance procedure (Varpina & Fredheim, 2022).

As for the end of 2023, there were 31 612 Ukrainians with temporary residence permits in Latvia, of which 26 220 persons received permit on humanitarian reasons, 3 275 as employees and 12 as high-skilled employees (PMLP, 2023). Thus, the number of Ukrainians who stayed in Latvia based on work permits, compared to 2021, has decreased by approximately one quarter, while the potential amount of labour force

provided by displaced Ukrainians is comparatively large. Due to various reasons their entry into the labour market may have various obstacles. First, displaced Ukrainians are mostly women with dependents which arrived in Latvia based on non-employment related motives (Varpina & Fredheim, 2022) that causes a higher probability of this skill mismatch to the Latvian labour market needs.

## **2. Methods and data**

The empirical material of this article consists of, first, aggregate administrative data collected by the State Employment Agency (SEA) and second, qualitative data provided by 14 in-depth interviews with Latvian employers located in Riga economic area. The qualitative data was originally collected as a part of empirical material for dissertation of the author (Zabko, 2023a), but the data presented in this article has not previously been discussed.

The administrative data contains the statistics on the number of registered vacancies and their fulfilment to the end of each quarter for the years of 2022 and 2023 in breakdown by availability to displaced Ukrainians. The time frame allows to describe dynamics of labour demand and supply since the beginning of outbreak of the war. The data are collected as follows: (1) all vacancies that shows total labour demand (mainly suitable for Latvian residents) and (2) vacancies also opened to Ukrainian candidates. To analyse provision of skills in more detailed breakdown, the data were further divided by NACE Rev. 2 economic activities (Eurostat, 2008) and nine major occupational groups (ILO, n.d.). In data analysis, 22 original economic sectors of NACE Rev. 2 were consolidated into 10 broader groups as used by Official statistics of Latvia (2024). The number of fulfilled vacancies show actual labour supply for both types of job offer – general and that available for Ukrainians.

Both types of vacancies are not mutually exclusive. Those offered to Ukrainians are also available to the entire labour market which means that they form a part of the total number of vacancies. This indicates some data limitations regarding the real contribution of displaced Ukrainians to the Latvian labour market as the vacancies might be fulfilled by any job seeker, not Ukrainians exclusively. With regard to fulfilment of vacancies, employers are not obliged to report at SEA any details of candidates. Although the data on displaced Ukrainians having declared employment status in Latvia is recorded by the State Revenue Service, that information cannot be compared directly with the labour demand declared at SEA. As both information sources have their own limitations, the author considers the comparison of data on demand and fulfilment of vacancies registered at SEA as a more coherent approach. To overcome the lack of information about the nationality of those who filled the vacancies, the author uses aggregated data on Ukrainians who received a single employment start-up allowance that is a special incentive for facilitating their entry into the Latvian labour market (Zabko, 2023b).

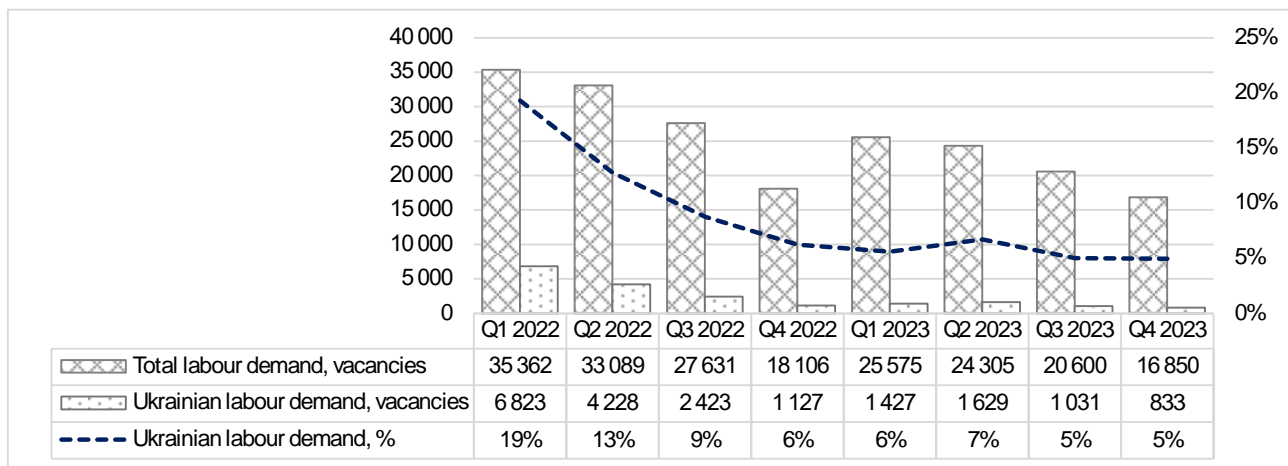
Structured in-depth interviews with Latvian employers characterize employers' needs and expectations regarding migrant labour in general and displaced Ukrainian labour and an assessment of their supply. This issue was a part of broader research interest to collect a variety of labour attraction strategies, especially, if employers are experiencing labour shortages. The data were gathered between January and July 2022, so the initial guidelines that included overarching questions about employers' attitude towards non-EU migrant labour were adjusted by expanding the inquiry of their expectations towards displaced Ukrainians. Consequently, the limitation of these data is the reflection of the short-term trends, as at the time of data collection, Ukrainians have just entered the Latvian labour market. Thus, the data analysed have a shortage to provide an overview of the dynamics of employers' opinions throughout the entire period. However, their value lies in the unique insight into the immediate adjustments made by Latvian employers in anticipation of the influx of Ukrainian labour, less accurately discovered in retrospective interviews. Relevant sections of

interviews were thematically coded by the author, at the second stage, aggregating initial codes into more meaningful groups and usable concepts (Belgrave & Seide, 2019).

### 3. Accumulation of displaced Ukrainians into Latvian labour market

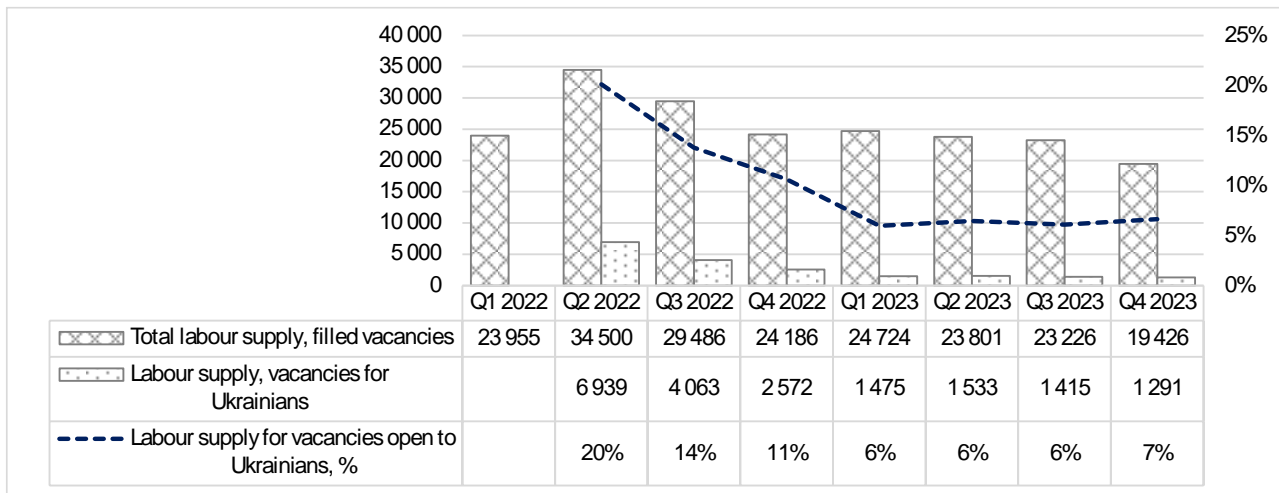
Displaced Ukrainians has increased labour force available in Latvia by 1.0-1.5% (But et al., 2023). According to the SEA, since the outbreak of war, single employment start-up allowance was received by 14 018 persons and single self-employed start-up allowance – by 320 persons. The largest share of employment start-up allowance was received in 2022 (10 303 persons vs 3 715 persons in 2023) indicating that the supply of displaced Ukrainian labour has reached its maximum already in 2022 (also presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2). For self-employment start-up allowance the trend is opposite – the largest share is received in 2023 (79 and 241, respectively) which may suggest that with accumulation knowledge about options available in Latvian labour market, self-employment seems the most attractive.

The following figures show labour demand and supply in various breakdowns as described in methods section. They are organised in the same manner. The left axis shows number of vacancies presented (either labour demand or supply), the right axis shows share of vacancies which relates to Ukrainian labour. In a breakdown by sectors (Figure 3), public administration and education were excluded as had offered Ukrainians an insignificant number of vacancies. In a breakdown by occupational groups (Figure 4), managers were excluded for the same reason. The analysis of the demand or supply for Ukrainian labour is made based on comparison of the total number of vacancies offered in a sector or occupation and the percentage of vacancies attributed to Ukrainians. Important feature of data is the lag in time, which manifests as a higher number of filled vacancies (labour supply) in those reference periods that follow the increase in the number of registered vacancies (labour demand). Due to limitation of the length of the article, all conclusions regarding the data are given in the short for at the end of each data panel.



**Notes:** Total labour demand – number of vacancies registered in the respective period; UA labour demand – number and share of vacancies available for Ukrainians  
**Source:** State Employment Agency; author's calculations

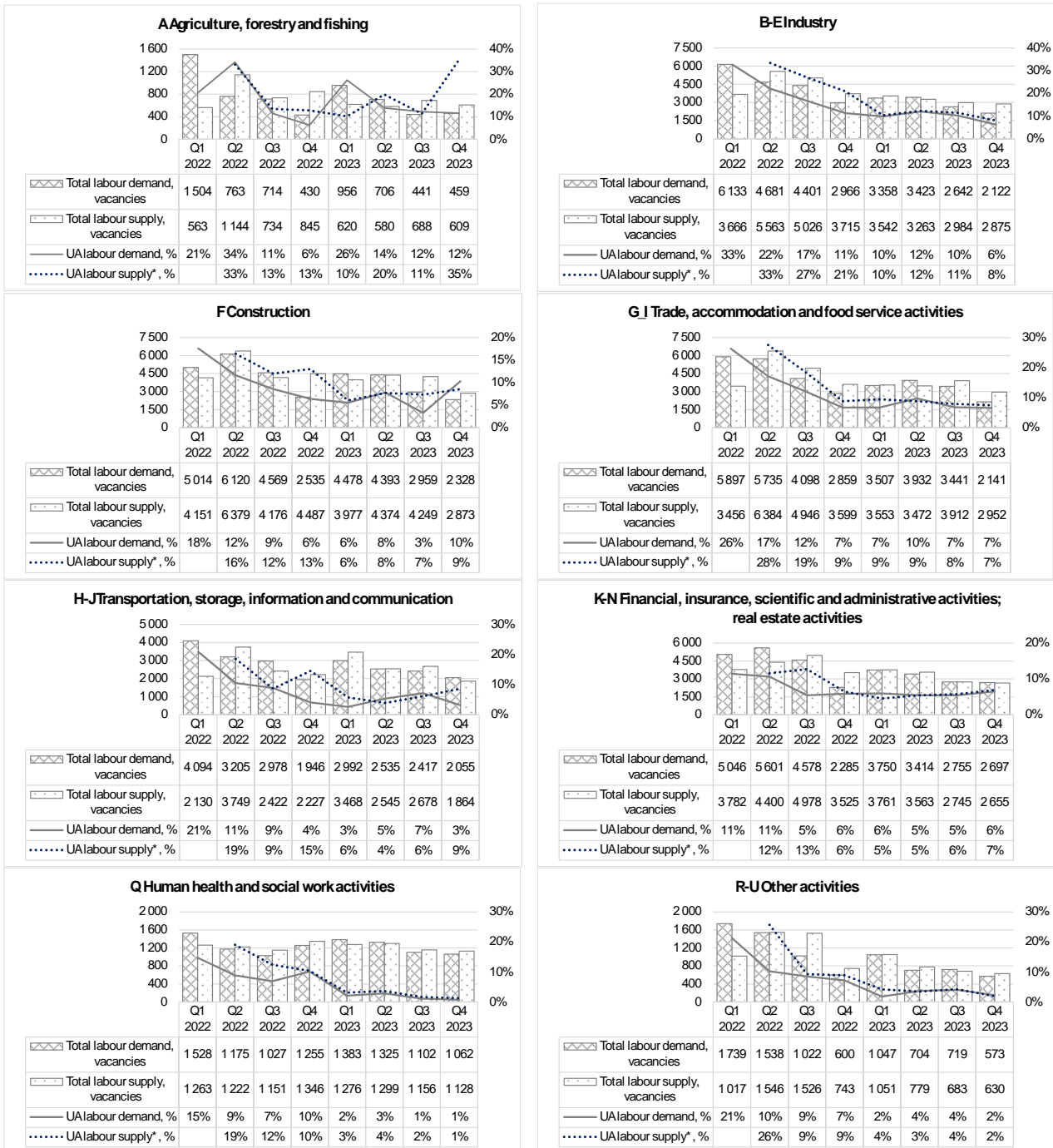
Fig. 1. Total labour demand and Ukrainian labour demand in 2022-2023



**Notes:** Total labour supply – all fulfilled vacancies in the respective period; UA labour supply – number and share of filled vacancies available for Ukrainians, \* indicates that vacancy can be fulfilled by any candidate irrespective nationality

**Source:** State Employment Agency; author's calculations

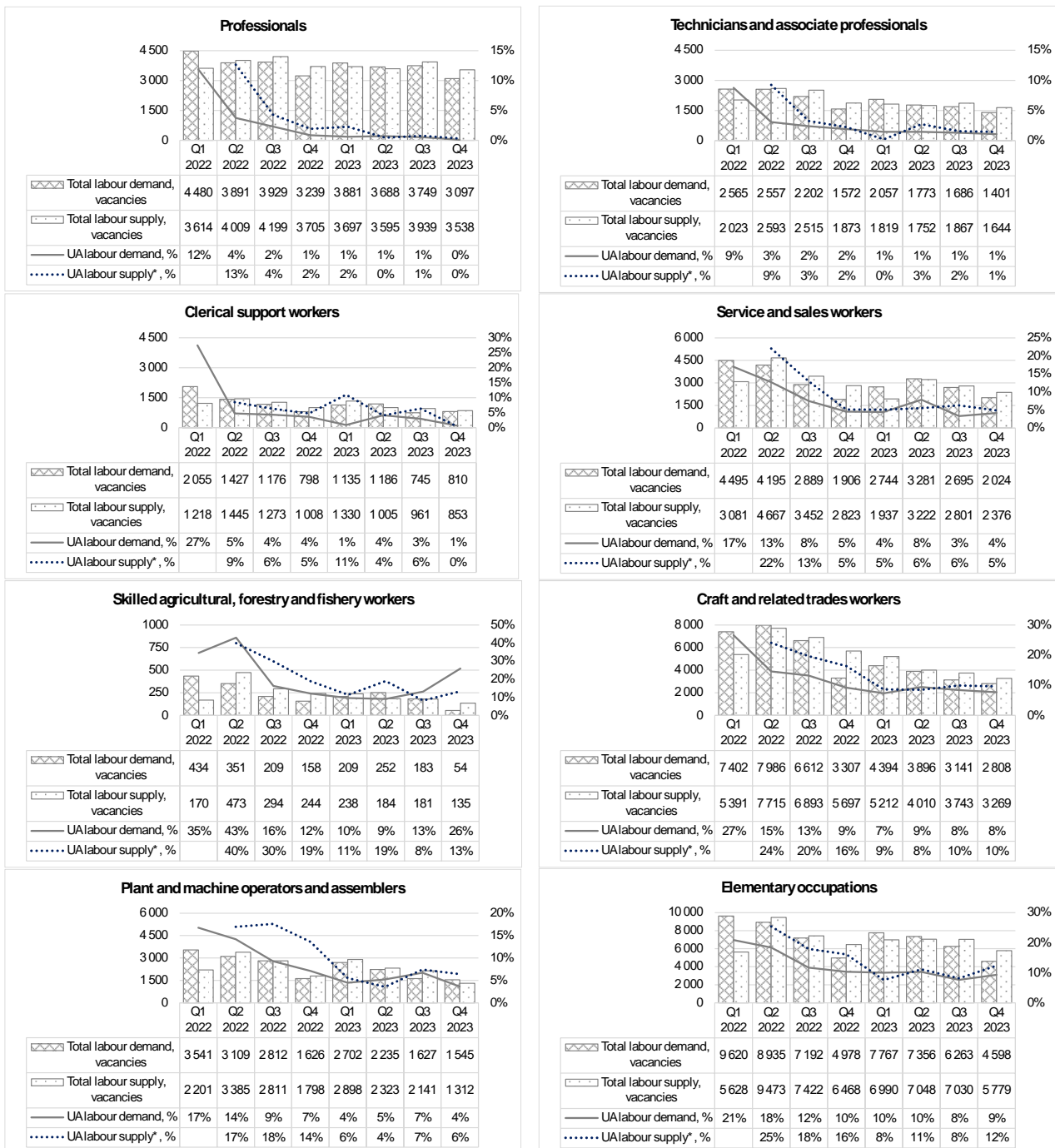
Fig. 2. Total labour supply and labour supply for vacancies open to Ukrainians in 2022-2023



**Notes:** Total labour demand – number of vacancies registered in the respective period; total labour supply – all fulfilled vacancies in the respective period; UA labour demand – share of vacancies available for Ukrainians, UA labour supply\*, % - share of filled vacancies available for Ukrainians considering that it can be fulfilled by any candidate irrespective nationality  
**Source:** State Employment Agency; author's calculations

**Fig. 3. Labour demand and supply in breakdown by economic sectors**

In breakdown by economic sectors (Figure 3), the highest Ukrainian labour demand was observed in industry (mining and manufacturing), trade, accommodation and food service activities and construction. Like in Poland (Gorny & Van der Zwan, 2024), industry and trade, accommodation and food service activities are new sectors for migrant labour in Latvia. However, the data also show that Ukrainian labour was demanded in human health and social work activities that is direct response to government initiatives to decrease a burden for Ukrainian entry into these sectors.



**Notes:** Total labour demand – number of vacancies registered in the respective period; total labour supply – all fulfilled vacancies in the respective period; UA labour demand – share of vacancies available for Ukrainians, UA labour supply, % - share of filled vacancies available for Ukrainians considering that it can be fulfilled by any candidate irrespective nationality  
**Source:** State Employment Agency; author's calculations

Fig. 4. Labour demand and supply in breakdown by major occupational groups

In breakdown by occupations (Figure 4), the highest demand was observed elementary occupations, craft and related trades workers and service and sales workers major groups. However, in 2022, there was also a certain level of demand for Ukrainian labour in high-skilled positions of professionals and technical and associate professionals.

#### **4. Employers' perspectives on the employment of non-EU migrants and displaced Ukrainians**

Estimations calculated in autumn 2022 show that 5% of Latvian companies employed third-country nationals. There was a clear trend that the larger the company, the more likely they had hired non-EU migrants. Most frequently, the companies were hired displaced Ukrainians (41%), followed by the recruitment of other non-EU migrants already residing in Latvia with employment rights (35%), but 24% employers had hired third-country nationals according to the general procedure (RAIT, 2022). The preference for recruitment methods allowing to avoid the complex procedure of inviting non-EU migrant labour is consistent with the results of employers' interviews. They show that the general invitation procedure is perceived as a remarkable administrative burden: *"It is finances and time-consuming. You will never be sure that the person will fully comply with all the requirements of the Office of Migration Affairs."* (Employer\_9) Consequently, prior the influx of Ukrainian refugees, employers assessed whether investments in administrative procedures for employing migrants would give return.

Prior to the adoption of deregulations, public sector enterprises were generally inaccessible to migrant labour for a variety of reasons. Here, arguments of validation of qualifications and language skills proficiency were both important, but the dominant reason against employing migrants was the public good, in which the community preference principle had a significant value.

"We are not a private company, we have to be very careful because we tend to be visited by the control authorities and checked for squander funds. The concern is why we don't take a [Latvian] citizen and bring someone from elsewhere." (Employer\_4)

Government support for the reception and employment of Ukrainian refugees changed the meaning of this value, thus allowing public sector employers that felt a labour shortage to offer their vacancies.

Validation of qualifications and recognition of skills acquired outside the EU also emerges as a major barrier to third-country migrants entering certain high- and even medium-skilled occupations, always in regulated professions.

"Migrants also have problems with the validation of their education documents. [...] Education is definitely different. [...] We have the idea that we have recognised European [diplomas], but third-country diplomas are not recognised anywhere. Diplomas have to be validated and most of candidates have to be examined, for example, doctors, in Latvian [language]." (Employer\_11)

Accordingly, recognition of the qualifications of Ukrainian health workers, teachers and sports coaches under a simplified procedure allowed them to work in their original professions. However, some employers admit that the real skills possessed by Ukrainians in these professions are lower than those needed in Latvia, which have prevented them from hiring displaced Ukrainians.

"We had high hopes for the Ukrainian nurses, but we had few candidates. [...] We did not take them. We have a standard that we have to pass. Some don't know [... how to perform the task] as good as we need. There are communication problems or no experience. I am speaking about skills." (Employer\_11)

In addition, to professional skills and knowledge, certain high-skilled jobs (such as in construction, law, and even IT) also require knowledge of the local Latvian context and legal framework, which the Ukrainian workforce does not possess, but which can be accumulated through additional education and training. There is no evidence that either Latvian employers or displaced Ukrainians have taken any measures to overcome this obstacle, but this issue deserves further examination.

The findings of this study expand prior knowledge and the strong belief thereof that the Ukrainian workforce is able to supply the Latvian labour market with skills that are still needed but no longer attractive

to young people entering the labour market. With regard to displaced Ukrainians, employers indicated that the skills that Ukrainians had normally supplied to Latvia before the war were supplied significantly less since the outbreak of the war, due to the different socio-demographic and skills composition of the inflowed labour. Thus, this article emphasizes that both experiences – addressing labour shortages and skills mismatches – are present in the Latvian labour market since the influx of additional workforce from Ukraine.

The importance of Latvian language proficiency appears both as a rule (fixed in legislation) and as a need determined by the organisational culture of national companies. The last is expressed as: *"In our company, all documentation and instructions are currently only in Latvian. We cannot hire employees who are not instructed in a language they know."* (Employer\_3) and *"Lack of Latvian language skills is a barrier to building a robust company culture."* (Employer\_12)

International companies with English as the main communication tool are less demanding for Latvian language proficiency. However, according to employers, Ukrainian workforce persisting in Latvia also has poor English language skills.

Release the Latvian language requirement for Ukrainians (Zabko, 2023b) made it possible to work them in companies that had previously imposed a probationary period and strict conditions for the migrant workers to learn the national language there while. In the case of displaced Ukrainians, Russian has become the main language of communication in companies.

*"The [national language] requirement is not applied to displaced Ukrainians. Therefore, we currently translate employment contracts and job descriptions into Ukrainian. Most of the Ukrainians who already work for us and have expressed their willingness to work for us understand Russian. It [appears] to be the working language."* (Employer\_10)

Some other aspects of displaced Ukrainian lives, such as limited access to transportation and lack of flexible childcare services, have created barriers to any participation in employment. Although employers seek for the possibilities of how they could support Ukrainians, in choosing these methods, they do not go beyond the set of support mechanisms that already exist in their organizations.

*"Displaced Ukrainians are mostly received accommodation outside Riga, somewhere in the surrounding municipalities, which immediately entails a transport problem. Many of them are families with children, and as soon as there is a smaller child to take care of, they need a nanny, that's another problem. [...] We have hired [Ukrainians], but I certainly couldn't say that it has solved the labour shortage problem. [...] We can be flexible to a certain extent, for example with flexibility of shifts."* (Employer\_13)

At the time when the interviews were conducted, both an influx of Ukrainians and their return was observed in Latvia, thus, employers mentioned uncertainty as another obstacle to their employment. *"Our concern is that we invest in training, but they leave [back] after three months, we can't really rely on them."* (Employer\_11) This finding is consistent with Dustmann et al. (2017). However, it is worth examining how relevant this aspect is now, two years later, as Gorny and Van der Zwan (2024) have observed the changes of attitudes over time in the case of Poland.

### **Conclusions, proposals, recommendations**

- 1) Although displaced Ukrainians has partly provided labour for certain economic sectors experiencing shortages, their contribution is limited and exhausted at the end of 2022.
- 2) The highest Ukrainian labour demand was observed in industry (mining and manufacturing), trade, accommodation and food service activities and construction sectors. This intertwines with the demand of labour in elementary occupations, craft and related trades workers, service and sales workers groups.

This proves the research assumption that displaced Ukrainians have been most demanded into medium- and low-skilled occupations.

3) Deregulations adopted by the government were supportive of the employment of Ukrainians. They were able to solve some, albeit significant, obstacles regarding validation of qualification and requirements to Latvian language proficiency, as far as they created structural constraints. The data show that these decisions opened certain occupations (and therefore economic sectors) to the Ukrainian workforce that are generally unavailable to migrant labour, thus, proving the second research assumption. However, government decisions were not able to impact the requirement for the Latvian language proficiency if it resulted from the operational practices of companies. This proves the third research assumption on barriers to Ukrainian employment driven by the organisational culture.

4) Among the displaced Ukrainians there is a workforce that has not yet integrated into the labour market or which, despite the demand in higher-skilled jobs, is at risk of getting stuck in low-skilled occupations. The overarching reason is the skill sets offered mismatch to the Latvian labour market needs. To facilitate further labour market integration of the displaced Ukrainians, both up- and re-skilling and Latvian language training appears as important precondition.

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