

# MIGRATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN UKRAINE BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract.** *The article presents the results of research into migration and demographic changes taking place in Ukraine before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodology of research consisted of primary and secondary sources of information. Primary data was collected for the April – December 2020 period, using semi-structured interviews by phone and the Internet, with Ukrainian labour migrants working in Italy, Spain, Germany, and Poland. The results of the interviews are coded from I\_1 to I\_15. Secondary data was collected from data from IOM Ukraine and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).*

*The article also looks at factors that affected the demographic crisis in the country, as well as categorizing and analyzing labour migrants abroad before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.*

*The results of the article show that Ukrainian labour migrants continue to search for work abroad due to a difficult political and socio-economic situation at home and migration flows did not stop during the Covid-19 pandemic.*

*The main problem is that, due to the demographic crisis in the country, Ukraine continues to lose people of working age making the threat of demographic collapse more likely. To halt this the Government of Ukraine needs to create effective programs for labour migrants returning home, supporting young and large families. At the same time, the government needs to take measures to encourage an increase in the birth rate in the country.*

**Keywords:** Migration, Ukraine, COVID-19, Census, Demographic Collapse.

**JEL classification:** E24, J610, F21, J11, R23.

**Introduction.** Migration flows from Ukraine continue to increase despite the pandemic of 2020-2021 because socio-economic indicators in the country have not improved in recent years. The problem is that Ukraine has faced a demographic collapse for many years and the COVID-19 pandemic only increased this threat. Ukrainians do not know the full extent of this demographic collapse because the last full census was conducted over 20 years ago, in 2001. This is unjustified negligence and deliberate silence about the catastrophic demographic crisis in which the country finds itself. The Covid-19 pandemic only made this catastrophic situation more serious.

At the same time, Ukraine continues to face other negative factors that are having a detrimental effect on the demographic situation in the country. These factors are explored in more detail in the article.

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**Literature review.** Many experts and scientists have studied migration flows during and before the Covid-19 pandemic. The article “COVID-19 and labour migration of need, despair, poverty from Ukraine to Europe” (Koshulko and Dzholos 2021) presents the challenges facing Ukrainian labour migrants, working abroad during the pandemic. A second paper ‘The pandemic of 2020 and Ukrainian Labor Migration to Europe’ (Koshulko 2020a; Koshulko 2018a), presents the results of research into the situation in the country when large numbers of people were forced to work abroad in 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic was very active. They went abroad for seasonal work.

Some international organizations have also explored the issue, in particular, IOM Ukraine. According to IOM Ukraine,

*‘Experts estimate that there are approximately 3 million Ukrainian migrant workers abroad at any given time, the majority in Europe with Poland, Italy, the Czech Republic and, since recently, Baltic states being the main destination countries among the EU Member States. The COVID-19 outbreak and consequent business closures and economic slowdown are likely to cause a surge in returning migrant workers to Ukraine posing several protection concerns and placing further weight on the far-reaching socioeconomic impact of the pandemic’ (IOM 2020).*

However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, migration flows from Ukraine did not reduce but continued throughout.

**Methodology.** The methodology of the research consisted of quality primary and secondary sources of information. Primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian labour migrants who currently work in Poland, Italy, Germany, and Spain. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were collected during the Covid-19 pandemic from April to December 2020 by phone and internet. All the interviews received have been coded from interview 1, as I\_1, to interview 15, as I\_15. All the participants were informed and have agreed to the use of their information for academic purposes.

Secondary data was collected using data from international organizations, such as IOM Ukraine and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).

**Results and discussions.** Demographic changes in Ukraine before and during COVID-19 were significant because of the events in Ukraine in recent years. These changes led to the demographic crisis that Ukraine faces in the 21st century.

*Some factors that impacted the demographic crisis in the country.* One of the most important factors that impacted the demographic crisis in the country was the migration flow from Ukraine. These migrants included people who

were single or married, were labourers, students and intellectuals. (Koshulko 2018b; Koshulko 2020b).

The second most important reason was the demographic collapse that started at the end of the 20th century and becomes deeper every year. This has arisen because the death rate in Ukraine is higher than the birth rate.

The third reason was the occupation of Crimea, Donbas, and the Russian-Ukrainian war which started in 2014 and continues today. Many Ukrainians were killed, captured, or became refugees and asylum seekers, as well as internally and externally displaced persons (Koshulko 2018c; Koshulko 2019a; Koshulko 2019b).

According to data of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre,

*'the current internal displacement situation in Ukraine started in March 2014. Following the annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea by the Russian Federation, non-state armed groups seized parts of the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and declared independence in May that same year. Fighting between Ukrainian government forces and non-state armed groups in the east of the country has triggered mass displacement. No concrete solution to the conflict is in sight, making displacement increasingly protracted. Although clashes have reduced in recent years due to several ceasefire agreements, there were still around 734,000 IDPs at the end of 2020, the majority of whom had been displaced during 2014 and 2015' (IDMC 2020).*

The fourth factor was the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted badly on the demographic crisis in the country. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, many Ukrainians went abroad to work, stay, or study. Labour migration from Ukraine did not stop. On the contrary, it has increased because employers in the rest of Europe need Ukrainian labour migrants despite the pandemic. In the author's previous research several categories of labour migrants abroad before and during the Covid-19 pandemic were characterized (Koshulko and Dzholos 2021):

*'...These categories are defined and combined under the title 'Labor Migration due to Need, Despair, and Poverty.'*

- *The first category of 'need and poverty' consists of those labour migrants pushed to work abroad due to the extreme poverty of their families in Ukraine. These people did not have a job in their native Ukraine, had only minimum savings for survival, and lacked any opportunity to meet basic needs in their home country;*

- *The second category of 'despair' consists of the migrants who sought work abroad to hide from the war and mobilization in Ukraine. This category excludes real refugees and asylum seekers who, as shown in case studies, sometimes survived miraculously during the first stages of occupation and war in Ukraine;*
- *The third category of 'needs' is the category of those migrants, who had a job in Ukraine before but went to work abroad seeking a better job and higher earnings in Poland or other European countries;*
- *The fourth category of 'need' is the migrants who seek not only higher pay in European countries but also want to enrich their lives by traveling in Europe and other interesting places worldwide' (Koshulko and Dzholos 2021).*

*Results of the semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian labour migrants currently working in Poland, Germany, and Spain.*

As mentioned above, primary data was collected from semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian labour migrants currently working in Poland, Germany and Spain. Fifteen of the semi-structured interviews were collected during the Covid-19 pandemic from April to December 2020 by telephone and various internet networks, such as Facebook and Instagram. The interviews have been coded from interview 1, or I\_1, to interview 15, or I\_15. All the participants were fully informed and agreed to the use of their information for academic purposes.

Two of the Ukrainian labour migrants (from I\_1 to I\_2) worked in Spain, two of them (from I\_3 to I\_4) worked in Italy, four of them in Germany (from I\_5 to I\_8), and seven in Poland (from I\_9 to I\_15).

These migrants went abroad to work during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 because they could not find a well-paid job in Ukraine during this difficult time.

In Spain, they worked as carers for the elderly, in Italy as badante (caretakers), in Germany in agriculture and Poland in factories.

The semi-structured interviews with them consisted of several questions about their reasons, motives and final results of their employment abroad.

The results of these semi-structured interviews show that all of them were of working age, the majority of them had worked as labour migrants before but during the Covid-19 pandemic were forced to go abroad again to work due to low wages unemployment at home.

Some of them were from the countryside and did not have a job at home. Others had no well-paid work so could not provide for themselves and their dependents during the pandemic.

During their employment abroad, some of them were deported for overstaying the permitted period. Other labour migrants continued legally in their host countries.

**Conclusions.** The article 'Migration and Demographic Changes in Ukraine before and during COVID-19' aims to analyze the migration and demographic situations in the country at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and the socio-economic situation, resulting in the continuation of migration flows abroad.

The article also analyzes other factors that have harmed the demographic situation in the country, such as the occupation of Crimea and part of Donbas, the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas and the internal and external displacement of Ukrainians and Crimea Tatars.

Due to these factors, Ukraine today faces a demographic collapse and the Covid-19 pandemic can only make it deeper and more critical.

Indeed, it is very difficult to say at this point how deep this demographic collapse will be because the Ukrainian Government has not conducted a census in the country for 20 years. The last census was in 2001. This may be regarded as deliberate concealment of the critical demographic situation which is not just a crisis but threatens actual collapse in the country.

To start recovering from the critical demographic situation in the country the Government needs to consider very seriously how to create attractive programs for returning labour migrants, offering good salaries and new worker places in the depressed rural areas and small towns.

The Government should also think creatively about how to stimulate the birth rate in the country, generating attractive conditions for young parents and large families.

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