

Non-salary employment conditions as a factor shaping migration decision-making: an example of workers from Ukraine in Poland

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Abstract

The paper studies non-salary employment conditions as a factor affecting labour migrants' choice the host country and a particular employer. It argues that the extant literature, focusing mainly on wage levels offered by employers, is insufficient to understand the decisions taken by migrants, especially if there is persistently low unemployment and high demand for foreign labour in a given market. A secondary analysis of the results of two empirical studies conducted in Poland in the period 2017–2019, focusing on various categories of Ukrainian workers, was used to shed a light on the role of non-salary employment conditions in the migration decision-making process. At that time, Poland encountered both low levels of unemployment and persistent demand for foreign workers, as well as liberal immigration regulations for labour immigration from selected Eastern European countries. Therefore, it met the conditions of the so-called migration laboratory.

Keywords: Migration; decision-making; non-salary conditions; Poland; Ukrainians

Introduction

Shortages of workers in labour markets and the persistent demand for them translate into a rise in their expectations, especially in terms of wages. This also applies to foreign workers, for whom the difference in wages between the country of origin and the host country is a major factor driving decisions to emigrate (Lee, 1966; Carling & Collins, 1997; Portes, 2019). At the same time, in a situation of persistent workforce shortages, manifested by low unemployment levels and persistent demand for paid labour, workers, be they foreign or not, increasingly take into account non-salary employment conditions. Their expectations go beyond remuneration. The non-salary conditions include long-term contracts protecting against dismissal, the right to paid leave, protection of health and safety at work, and access to training to improve qualifications (Casale, 2011). While the issue of salaries has already been thoroughly studied elsewhere (e.g., Landesmann et al., 2015; Jancewicz et al., 2020), the question of the impact of the non-salary employment conditions on migration decisions has not yet been given due attention. In particular, it is not clear whether (and how) non-salary employment conditions exert an impact on migrants' strategies as regards the choice of host

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country and specific employer, and whether they influence decisions on the change of employer.

Poland is a new immigration country, characterized by a low level of unemployment, not exceeding 5% (Eurostat, 2021a), and a shortage of workers. For example, at the end of the first quarter of 2021, the number of vacancies was 30.6% greater than at the end of Q4, 2020 and 12.4% higher than in the corresponding period of the previous year. Shortages of workers were encountered mainly in the branches of industrial processing and construction (GUS, 2021). This situation triggered the search for foreign workers who could fill the gap in the local labour market. The increase in the number of foreigners employed is facilitated by liberal immigration regulations applying to citizens of six countries (Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia).

Our aim in this paper is to examine the potential impact of non-salary employment conditions on the choice of Poland and choice of a particular employer by Ukrainian migrants. To clarify these two aspects, we ask the following research questions:

1. To what extent are non-salary employment conditions relevant to selecting the host country?
2. What role do these factors play in the decision of economic migrants to choose, remain with, or change their employer?

To answer these questions, we analyse data from two studies conducted in 2017–2018 and 2019 among various categories of Ukrainian workers in the Polish labour market.

Non-salary employment conditions

The salary level is one of the primary criteria of choice of an employer and a job offer. At the same time, according to the International Labour Organization's classification, the following additional categories comprise the full set of employment conditions: the possibility of signing a contract of employment, working time, safety and hygiene at work, the duration of holiday leave, and the possibility of combining work with family obligations (Casale, 2011). Eurofund (2011) offers a broader definition. It includes working conditions: "the organization of work and work activities; training, skills, and employability; health, safety, and well-being; and working time and work-life balance" (Eurofund, 2011). Numerous studies have shown that job satisfaction depends to a large extent on ensuring the quality of non-salary employment conditions and that difficult employment conditions harm the health of workers, including their mental health (Goudswaard & Andries, 2002; Adams et al., 2003). The issues of employment conditions and their dimensions were addressed, among others, by Collins (2006), Standing (2014), Marx (2014), and Polkowska and Filipek (2020), who concluded that a contract of employment and improved working conditions resulted in the employee leaving the so-called precarious employment. Therefore, non-salary employment conditions should not be overlooked in the analysis of workers' perceptions of their situation in the labour market, regardless of a worker's origin. Various migration studies show that immigrants disproportionately take up employment within the so-called second segment of the labour market, with relatively low levels of both subjective and objective employment security and wages (Piore, 1970; Polkowska & Filipek, 2020). Foreign workers often work longer hours than the statutory working time and do not have access to vocational training (Fialkowska &



Matuszczyk, 2021). As a result, employing foreigners has most of the characteristics of the so-called precarious employment. For instance, Kindler's (2011) study of Ukrainian workers in Warsaw demonstrates that in periods of high unemployment and competition in the labour market, migrants tend to accept a lack of social security and worse employment conditions than local workers. This is because their main objective is to maximize income and transfer it to their country of origin.

The literature typically studies non-salary employment conditions in the context of the broader concept of labour market security (Standing, 2014; Duszczyk & Matuszczyk, 2019). It consists of job security (the ability to maintain a particular job), income security (receiving a salary to support the worker and possibly his/her family), and employment security (the possibility to change jobs without having to remain unemployed for a long time). Non-salary working conditions fall under the category of employment security as a key element of it. This means that a given employee may decide to change employment not only in order to increase the amount of remuneration, but also to obtain more attractive working conditions (e.g., proper workplace equipment, training, and holiday leave). In the context of low unemployment and high demand for workers, the importance of employment security is increasingly compared to other security issues in the labour market (Lowe, 2018). A worker, having been guaranteed the job and income security, puts greater weight on the remaining employment security. Recent migration studies confirm that the attitude of foreigners to the issue of employment security (and therefore of non-salary employment conditions) changes with the length of stay (Muñoz-Comet & Arcarons, 2022). For example, Grzymala-Kazłowska's research (2018) shows that, having stayed in the United Kingdom for a prolonged time, Polish post-accession emigrants tend to attach greater importance to employment security than they did upon arrival. The lack of opportunities to develop and pursue a professional career, due to limited access to training, and "forcing" people to work more than is the case for nationals, was a reason for leaving the country and looking for a place where working conditions would be better (Creese et al., 2008; Friberg, 2012).

Labour immigration to Poland

For 20 years since the 1989 fall of socialism in Poland, immigration was at a very moderate level. Throughout that period, Poland had an unambiguous status as a country of emigration (Okólski, 2021). According to the National Census data, carried out in 2011, there were only about 56 thousand foreigners in Poland. The situation began to change dynamically in 2014, with Ukrainian citizens coming to Poland in large numbers in search of employment in the Polish labour market (Levytska 2022). Since 2016, Poland has been issuing the EU's largest annual numbers of first residence permits for third-country nationals (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of first residence permits for third-country nationals in Poland 2016–2020

Year	No. of permits
2016	585,969
2017	688,912
2018	648,169
2019	724,416
2020	598,047

Source: Eurostat (2021b).

However, the most dynamic growth concerned the issuing of various types of work permits. Summarizing the various statistics and verifying them (to exclude the employment permits granted which were not ultimately used), it can be concluded that in the middle of 2020 there were about 1.6-1.7 million foreigners in the Polish labour market, constituting approximately 10% of the entire labour force in Poland. These were permits issued based on the employers' declarations of intention to entrust employment to a foreigner (1,519,599), work permits (406,496) and seasonal work permits (293,611) (Ministerstwo... 2021). Over 80% of the foreigners employed in Poland came from Ukraine. This process can be called the "Ukrainization" of the Polish labour market, especially in certain sectors of the economy, mainly simple services in agriculture, construction, and industry (Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2020). The data for the first half of 2021 do not change the picture of foreign employment in Poland. Due to the dynamic influx of temporary and seasonal migrants, it was relatively quickly time that Poland became a "New Country of Immigration" (White, 2020).

At the same time, it should be noted that such a dynamic increase in the employment of foreigners in the Polish labour market does not translate into an unemployment rate increase (Duszczuk & Matuszczyk, 2018). Macroeconomic analyses covering the years 2013-2018 reveal that the arrival of Ukrainian workers to Poland increased effective labour supply by 0.8% per annum (Strzelecki et al., 2022). Moreover, quantitative research reveals that employment terms and conditions are systematically improving and approaching those offered to native-born workers in Poland (Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2020).

Research methodology

To answer our research questions, we rely on the results of two empirical studies conducted among economic immigrants from Ukraine working in Poland. Although their context and research methods varied, these studies covered issues related to the participants' employment conditions, expectations towards them, as well as factors determining whether to change or stay with an employer.

The first study was conducted in 2017–2018 and was both quantitative and qualitative. It covered 80 surveys (PAPI) with Ukrainian employees who stayed in Poland for at least 12 months. In addition, eight in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) were conducted to enhance the data from the questionnaire survey. On average, each lasted 40 minutes, and covered issues such as the main reasons for coming to Poland, employment conditions, intention to return to Ukraine, or traveling to another country. The research was carried out in Warsaw and Lublin, centres with a long history of attracting various categories of immigrants (labour, educational).

The second study was an exploratory one and focused on the situation of seasonal workers from Ukraine, employed in harvesting fruit and vegetables. It consisted mainly of the involvement of one of the authors in a participant observation, the main purpose of which was to get a thorough understanding of everyday practices and behaviours occurring in fruit farms employing immigrants. A direct inspiration for this field study was provided by the results of the first project, demonstrating the importance of relations with employers or workplace safety. The research was conducted between May and October 2019 on five different family-run farms located in Grójec county (50-km from Warsaw). The researcher performed all the work along workers from Poland and Ukraine. In total, the empirical



material covered nearly 30 days spent in the field. Comprehensive notes of daily conversations and insights were taken. In addition, 20 in-depth interviews with employees (including 3 with Poles) and 5 interviews with their employers were conducted.

While in the studies carried out in 2017 and 2018, the respondents were Ukrainians staying in Poland for at least 12 months, the second study included mainly seasonal workers with an extensive experience of the Polish labour market, i.e., employed several times, mainly on Polish farms.

Research results

In the course of both quantitative and qualitative studies, respondents were asked about diverse issues related to their labour market situation, including reasons for coming to Poland and plans for the future. Questions also referred to working conditions and their relevance to decision-making, in the context of both the decisions to come to Poland and reasons to work in the host country. One of the main components were questions about non-salary factors and their role in deciding whether to choose a given employer and whether to stay in Poland.

- *The factors determining the choice of Poland as a country for labour immigration*

As was expected, in the case of permanent labour immigrants, the main reason for coming to Poland was a salary higher than the respondent could earn in Ukraine, given by over 80% of respondents. At the same time, the majority (53%) of respondents admitted that they expected better and more secure employment conditions in Poland than in Ukraine. This mainly concerned legal conditions, such as an employment contract, which would protect them from a layoff without prior notice, and compliance by Polish employers with occupational health and safety regulations. The lack of security in the domestic (Ukrainian) labour market was therefore a push factor for the respondents, and the higher level of labour market security in the immigration country a pull factor. Ukrainians expected greater security from the Polish labour market, including a secure income, safe working conditions and the ease of changing employers (be it lawful or illegal).

Importantly, workers from Ukraine cited the ability to control their working hours as one of the factors attracting them to employment in Poland. If they wanted a higher salary, they could work overtime, even over 10 hours a day. At the same time, they could declare that on a given day or week they would work per a prior agreement (written or oral). However, some respondents stressed that there were cases of employers expecting workers not to refuse overtime work.

Similar results were obtained in the study among seasonal workers. Respondents confirmed that the main reason for coming to Poland was to obtain additional income to improve the quality of life in Ukraine. Despite the difficulties of physical work in fruit harvesting, earnings from piecework are even higher than those in other sectors in Poland. Because of the geographical proximity, developed migration networks and knowledge of the Polish language, many workers decide to come to Poland for a few weeks during the summer holidays and work particularly hard (i.e., piece work model). At the same time, “temporary” employment conditions were an important pull factor. Although agricultural work is exploitative, routine, and requires significant physical strength, it is nonetheless attractive compared to employment in Ukraine. The lack of interest among local workers and the unrelenting demand mean that

immigrants easily find attractive job offers and are able to pursue their migration strategies (e.g., work in strawberry picking for only 2 weeks).

- *Non-salary employment conditions as a stabilizing factor for labour immigrants*

In the studies focused on permanent labour immigrants, issues directly related to non-salary employment conditions were raised. Most often, the respondents mentioned the employment contract (57% of respondents considered an employment contract a key element of employment security) and various types of insurance: health, accident, and social. In construction, protection of health and safety at work, understood as providing personal protection measures and adequate protection of workplaces, was also quoted as an element of such employment security. This was due to the awareness that Ukrainians often suffered accidents at work, facing very negative consequences. In individual interviews, opinions were expressed that in case of a high work accident risk, it is preferable not to take up the particular employment.

In the research carried out among temporary labour immigrants, the majority of interviewees emphasized the advantages of legal employment opportunities, directly related to changes in the Polish law, and the increasing care for employees by employers.

The vast majority of those employed in the farms signed contracts.. These were mostly civil code or farm aid contracts. These were therefore not standard labour code contracts, offering greater legal protection. It should be noted, however, that this is a new situation compared to a few years ago when signing of any contracts by foreigners was infrequent. Currently, the possibility of signing a contract legalizing employment is becoming an increasingly frequent condition for taking up employment with a given employer. Importantly, the respondents tend to emphasize that such a solution is increasingly encouraged by the employers themselves, seeking a guarantee that a given employee will not leave the farm overnight, especially at the peak of the season.

Agricultural work was perceived by respondents as safe and not requiring special preparation or personal protection measures, especially in comparison with employment in construction or processing industries. Several interviewees confirmed they had changed jobs precisely because of the safety considerations. Paradoxically, during the participant observation it was possible to observe that migrants from Ukraine did not pay much attention to occupational health and safety. They expressed the opinion that nothing bad could happen to them during fruit picking.

Selection of employer by labour immigrants

All respondents perceived their security as affected by the relationship with their employer. They indicated that they could count on the help and support of their employer if they suffered an accident while working. They were aware that the host for whom they had worked on the farm would not have left them alone in a difficult situation (e.g., emergency). This was one of the factors behind choosing this specific employer. At the same time, some of the workers with longer experience of working in Poland mentioned that several years earlier they had experienced exploitation by farmers: among others, longer working hours and work in conditions that put their health at risk.



In recent years, there were many more cases of people leaving their jobs if workers felt abused and mistreated by employers. Until a few years ago, workers were repeatedly not paid or paid much less than the agreed rates. Unaware of their rights, especially due to fears about the consequences of taking a job without signing a contract, they would give up and return to Ukraine with no money. Nowadays, with more vacancies than people willing to work, one of the most frequent reasons for workers to leave is the temporary stoppage of the fruit harvest at a particular farm. Aware of the possibility of finding a job overnight (i.e., high employment security), seasonal workers are willing to leave when their income security is threatened (mainly due to fruit ripening or insufficient fruit).

Workers from Ukraine were rather satisfied and gave a positive assessment of the conditions offered by employers. In case of one of the farms where they worked a year earlier, they praised the host for the new building where they lived. They pointed out that because of the efforts (e.g., new beds, bathroom inside the house, more furniture) of this employer they were interested in coming to him the following year. The host himself also emphasized that by systematically raising the standard of housing, he wanted to attract and retain workers for the duration of agricultural work. Generally, people who have been coming to Poland for several years notice the improving conditions, even if they indicate that there is still much to improve. A particularly important condition highlighted by employers is free Wi-Fi access, which is a prerequisite for willingness to work for a farmer.

The vast majority of interviewees intend to return to the same worksite the following year. Praising their current employer, they added that they would like to come back to the same place. Employers also want the same people to come to work every year. They explain that a permanent workforce knows the farm's rules, has been tried and tested, and can be relied on. The interviews with the respondents show that they want to find an employer who they would be willing to work for in the following years. As already observed, it is essential to obtain income security in the form of remuneration and its regular payment, but also to ensure adequate working conditions in the form of housing, working time, leisure opportunities, or the provision of support in emergencies, such as a work accident or illness.

Summarizing the results of both studies, it can be concluded that non-salary employment conditions are secondary in the decision to emigrate or in choosing the host country. Their role grows with the length of stay in Poland. Workers from Ukraine, aware of the Polish economy's reliance on their labour, expect not only adequate remuneration and timely payment, but also attach increasing importance to non-salary working conditions.

Clearly, Ukrainians are becoming increasingly conscious that the direction in which the Polish labour market evolves puts them in an advantaged position vis-à-vis the employers. Contracts regulating employment, including farm work, are increasingly being signed, a rare event only a few years ago. On top of the salary, employers increasingly tend to offer fringe benefits and support (e.g., transport to shops or churches, free Wi-Fi). While employers are still looking for 'good' workers (i.e., hard-working, loyal, with good attitudes), they themselves must strive to be 'good' employers, respecting the workers' fundamental rights and offering decent employment and living conditions.

Moreover, an important finding of the study is Ukrainian workers' and Polish employers' emerging preference for long-term employee-employer relations. Both sides are concerned with the stability of employment, be it maintaining employment for permanent workers

residing in Poland or securing multi-year employment with the same employer for seasonal workers.

Summary and conclusions

The results of the studies conducted in 2017–2018 and 2019 largely corroborate the hypothesis that non-salary employment conditions are increasingly important for migrants' decisions, both in terms of undertaking work abroad and choosing an employer upon arrival in the host country. However, this is only the case in the context of persistent labour force shortages and high demand for foreign workers, especially in certain sectors. The importance of non-salary employment conditions increases with the period of residence in the host country. Signing an employment contract is key for taking up and maintaining employment. At the same time, its form (civil law or labour law contract) is of secondary importance. Furthermore, research on seasonal workers revealed the importance of other elements determining the quality of employment, such as housing conditions and the day-to-day treatment of workers by employers. The quality of employment relationships is becoming increasingly significant and foreign workers, aware of their opportunities in the labour market, tend to see no reason to accept abuse attempts by employers in a situation when they can quickly change jobs.

We should be aware that employees' favourable position in the Polish labour market, manifesting itself in low unemployment rates, structural shortages of workers in certain (labour-intensive) sectors, and rising salaries, has been continuing for several years. However, it should be assumed that the demand for workers from Ukraine will also grow in other Central and Western European countries. For example, in 2021 Germany liberalized its policy towards immigrants from Ukraine, albeit – mainly due to the requirement of a command of the German language when taking up employment – this has not yet translated into an outflow of workers from Poland to this country (Duszczyk, 2021). Obviously, the situation may change in the future. This means that the foreign (Ukrainian) workers' expectations in terms of salaries and other employment conditions will continue to grow. The competitiveness of the Polish economy is largely dependent on a labour force with low expectations regarding earnings and working conditions, compared to other countries of the European Union (Kowalski and Weresa, 2020). Growing shortages are thus far being effectively reduced by employing foreigners. Nonetheless, this development model seems to be dwindling, mainly due to the growing expectations of domestic and foreign workers, and the related growth of labour costs.

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