

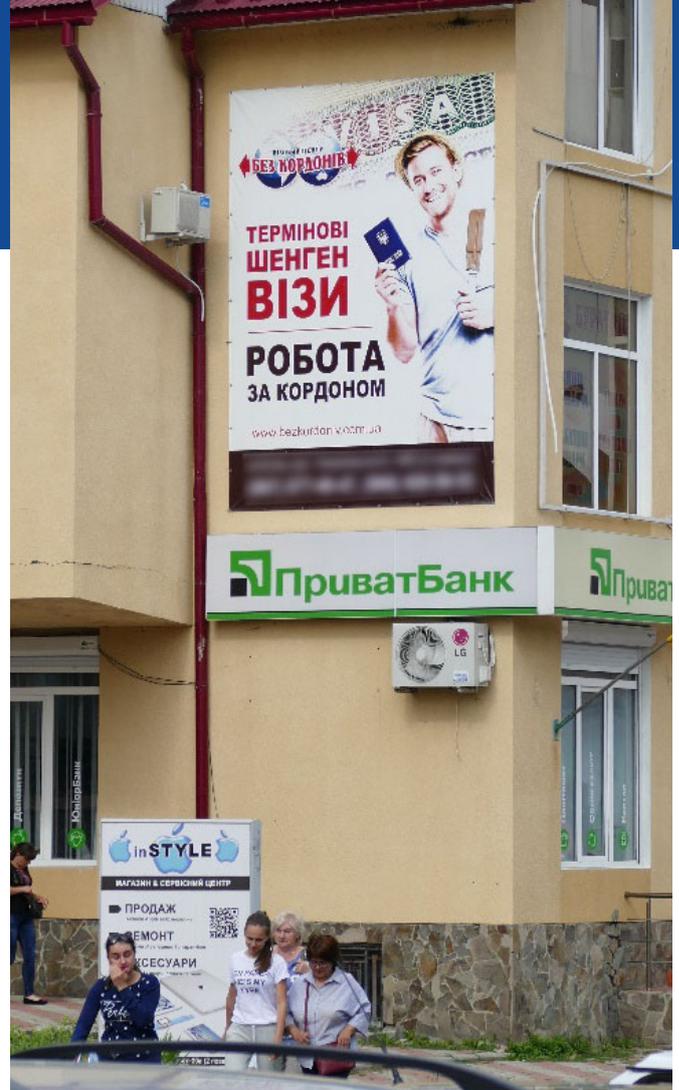
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION SUPPORTS SAFE AND WELL-MANAGED MOBILITY OF MIGRANT WORKERS ACROSS BORDERS

Context

On 12 March 2020, the Government of Ukraine (GoU) began to enforce a series of quarantine measures to control the spread of the novel coronavirus infection (hereinafter COVID-19).¹ Temporary closure of international border crossing points came into effect on 16 March, with the total suspension of operations at 122 border crossing points (BCPs) and restricted foot crossing at 19 BCPs² with entry permitted only to citizens.³ Intracountry travel was restricted on 18 March, with all intercity and interregion passenger transportation halted.⁴ On 24 March, all passenger flights (except for Kyiv “Boryspil” airport) were halted.⁵ Foot traffic across the 19 operational BCP’s was revised on 7 April to only allow private vehicle crossings, with an additional land BCP with Poland being added on 8 May for private passenger vehicles. On 29 May, 66 BCPs were reopened on the Ukrainian side of the border with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Moldova, although access was not reciprocated at all points.

From the start of the pandemic, the IOM-supported National Toll-Free Counter-Trafficking and Migrant Advice Hotline 527 has been receiving an increasing number of queries in relation to COVID-19 and navigating personal impact of quarantine restrictions. Over a third of the 9,500 calls received between March–May were directly related to COVID-19 quarantine bottlenecks encoun-

- 1 [CoM: resolution No. 211 “On prevention of the spread of COVID-19 acute respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in Ukraine”](#)
- 2 [CoM: resolution No. 288-p “On temporary closure of some state border crossing points and checkpoints as well as termination of foot crossing through them”](#)
- 3 [CoM: resolution No. 287-p “On temporary restriction of crossing the state border, aimed at preventing the spread of acute respiratory disease COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in Ukraine”](#)
- 4 [CoM: resolution to ban passenger traffic and limit the number of participants of mass gathering to 10 persons](#)
- 5 [CoM: resolution on air transportation](#)



Advertisement of an intermediary for employment abroad in a central street of Kosiv, western Ukraine

tered by migrants and their families in relation to access to information, permit renewal and travel.

Who is affected and why?

IOM estimates the total number of migrant workers who returned to Ukraine following the announcement of quarantine at 350,000–400,000 persons.⁶ Almost half returned from Poland where they were employed in mostly non-seasonal sectors including construction, hospitality industry, production and services. According to the Polish Central Statistical Office, the number of Ukrainian citizens in Poland decreased by 11.5 per cent, or 160,000 persons, by the end of April.⁷ IOM interviews with returnees and migration experts indicate that the primary push factor for this unseasonal return was the direct and known impact of COVID-19. The largest proportion of migrants reportedly returned due to news of imminent Ukrainian border closures and limited time

6 Analysis of SGBS data and supported by interviews with several national migration expert interviews

7 [The population of foreigners in Poland during COVID-19](#)

remaining on their work permits.⁸ Other predominant reasons cited included irregular migration status and fear of legal consequences, loss of employment due to COVID-19, and inability to finance their continued stay abroad to search for new employment. Migrants who chose to stay abroad beyond Ukrainian border closure announcements, reportedly did so as they held valid work authorisations and secure employment. Despite the security of a work permit, many migrants who remained in destination countries did report challenges due to employment loss as quarantine progressed, complications related to extension of work and residence permits, as well as inability to access social services due to inaccessible information.⁹

Ukrainian seasonal migrant workers were also severely impacted by the introduction of quarantine measures as mid-April marks the beginning of the agricultural season abroad. Annual border crossing statistics demonstrate that the numbers of outbound crossings tend to start increasing soon after the Orthodox Easter and continue increasing throughout May. This year, the inability of a large share of seasonal workers to migrate as part of the early agricultural season will substantially impact their annual earnings, severely affecting their ability to weather further shocks. IOM estimates the number of seasonal workers who failed to return to their jobs abroad at about 300,000–350,000 persons.

What about the communities of return?

Labour migration can relieve pressure on unemployment in countries of origin,¹⁰ thus the inability of Ukrainian migrants to take up their traditional jobs places an additional burden on the already affected domestic labour market. The number of unemployed persons registered with the State Employment Centre as of 4 May has increased by 47 per cent compared to the same period in 2019 or by 21 per cent compared to the prequarantine period (end of February 2020), and

currently constitutes more than 456,750 persons.¹¹ Additionally, since the announcement of quarantine, the number of new advertised vacancies has been cut by half, attesting to a growing demand for employment¹² which cannot be fulfilled.

In terms of geographical distribution, Ukraine's western regions host the majority of returnees and prospective seasonal migrant workers unable to depart. IOM's 2016 study, "Migration as an Enabler of Development in Ukraine" confirmed that these regions play a key role in the labour migration profile of Ukraine, being most exposed to the costs and benefits of migration.¹³ The same study suggested that as a percentage of the total population by region, migrant workers are more likely to originate from the western region of Ukraine than from all other regions. This makes the western region particularly vulnerable to negative effects of COVID-19 on migration. These vulnerabilities are however cross-country with Ukrainian migrants from conflict-affected Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as other eastern regions, unable to access the labour market in the Russian Federation following the decision of the Russian Government to close the country's borders to foreigners as of 18 March.¹⁴ Although the number of Ukrainian migrant workers travelling to the Russian Federation has declined drastically since the beginning of the conflict, Russia still absorbed approximately 100,000 Ukrainian migrant workers in 2019 (not accounting for crossings from non-government controlled part of the Eastern Conflict Area and Crimea). Migrant workers unable to access their usual host countries face additional constraints when attempting to seek employment opportunities in Ukraine; inability to migrate internally due to the cessation of interregional transportation and the subsequent halting of local transportation, disadvantaging those who normally rely on public transport to commute. This has forced migrant and local workers to resort to car pooling where possible, as well as to informal transportation systems, reportedly substantially more expensive and therefore inaccessible to many.

In addition to employment challenges, several protection concerns could affect returnees from a socio-economic and broader well-being perspective. Aside from the more tangible economic insecurities mi-

8 Unfortunately a majority returned prior to the Polish Government's decision to extend existing work and residence permits 30 days beyond the end of the imposed quarantine [GoP: Act of 16 April 2020 on specific support instruments in connection with the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus](#)

9 [Prague Process: The Impact of COVID-19 on Ukrainian Labour Migrants in Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Italy](#)

10 [IOM and Labour Migration](#)

11 [SES: registration procedure and receipt of unemployment benefits have been simplified for the quarantine period](#)

12 [NBU: Weekly Economic Review, 8 May 2020](#)

13 [IOM: Migration as an Enabler of Development in Ukraine](#)

14 [Mikhail Mishustin held telephone conversations with Prime Ministers of several foreign countries](#)

grants will face from losing employment opportunities and corresponding vulnerabilities, there is a risk of stigmatisation for returnees by local communities.¹⁵ Anecdotal evidence from interviews with key informants indicated that returnees are likely to be blamed for increased competition in a progressively weakening domestic labour market.

What is next?

In interviews with migration experts and returnees confirm that the majority of the returnees were willing to re-migrate shortly after their return to Ukraine but were unable to exercise their right to do so primarily for two reasons – (i) inability to access consulates to renew necessary permits and (ii) intra-/intercountry logistical difficulties. In turn, the GoU declared their intention to retain returnees by leveraging their potential within the domestic labour market. However, currently, knowledge of the returnees' profile including skills, needs, interests and geography of return, is too limited to effectively implement reintegration programmes. This information gap needs to be properly explored to understand the capacity of the Ukrainian labour market to absorb returnees as well as to facilitate the development of a holistic strategy for their reintegration.

IOM's interviews further indicated that there may not be much will on the part of the returnees to stay within the domestic labour market. For the small proportion that reportedly would consider staying in Ukraine, all belong to the most economically vulnerable group consisting of individuals who have insufficient savings and cannot afford remigrating to their host countries. These individuals do not have the means to pay intermediary recruitment services to facilitate their return, do not have a regular employer to sponsor them and are unable to meet the costs of two weeks of unpaid self-isolation mandatory in most host countries. Returnees interviewed by IOM estimated the approximate cost of two weeks self isolation in the host county at about USD 550. To avoid self-isolation, the migrants are required to possess a negative PCR test, valid for 48 hours with a general cost of USD 100. However, this acts as a barrier to migration as many are unable to afford the costs of PCR tests.

15 IOM interview with a key informant

Story of Oleksii, a migrant worker*

"I worked in Vienna on a private construction site. I was promised a monthly salary of EUR 2,000, but after four weeks of work it turned out my contract was not valid, and I was told by the police that I had to leave the country. I was paid only EUR 50 per week, and I could not afford the return ticket, so my employer gave me EUR 150 and promised to send over the remaining money later, which never happened. The cheapest way to return was by train, and I had three layovers during my two-day way back. I returned to Ukraine on 10 March and expected to find a new job in Hungary soon, but in a few days the border was closed, and I got stuck here with no money, no job and no prospects. In theory, I could migrate again, but I need money to do it. I need to have an invitation from an employer, but I cannot find any free vacancies online and I cannot afford the recruitment services. Now I live with other returnees in Uzhhorod and I have only five hryvnias in my pocket. I need at least UAH 2,500 to pay for the COVID-19 test which is valid for two days only, and it might not be enough as the border crossing is unpredictable these days. I would also need at least EUR 50 to pay for a seat in a private van to Hungary, which is the cheapest destination from Uzhhorod. As there is no public transport, travelling to Germany or Austria can cost up to EUR 250. There is no well-paid work here, and I am not sure how I can collect this money."

*The name has been changed to protect privacy

What is the effect on the economy?

The imposed movement restrictions are expected to result in a substantial decline in remittances compared to previous years coupled with increasing welfare expenses. According to the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU), the amount of remittances transferred by the Ukrainian migrant workers to Ukraine in 2019 was

USD 12 billion, which accounted for 7.8 per cent of the nation's GDP.¹⁶ The Inflation Report issued by the NBU in April 2020 suggests that a forecasted 20 per cent decrease in the number of migrant workers and the decline in host countries' economic activity will result in USD 2 billion reduction in the total remittance value in 2020.¹⁷ Although the NBU predicts that this reduction will be more than offset by Ukrainians spending more in their local economy due to movement restriction and boosting the internal travel industry, the loss of seasonal remittances profit will be irrevocably missed. According to the World Bank, the decline in remittances might be even more acute: a recent projection suggests a 20 per cent decrease in remittance flows globally but a 27.5 per cent decline in Europe and Central Asia in 2020.¹⁸ The World Bank analysis highlights that even with the decline, remittance flows are expected to become even more important as a source of external financing for low and middle-income countries (LMICs) as the fall in foreign direct investment is expected to be larger (more than 35 per cent). In 2019, remittance flows to LMICs became larger than FDI, an important milestone for monitoring resource flows to developing countries.

Finally, while recognising the importance of remittances at a country and regional level, and the broader economic impact COVID-19 has had due to movement restrictions, IOM is concerned about the immediate effect on migrant households who are deprived of their primary income and the lasting impact for the remainder of 2020. This is particularly concerning for seasonal migrants who risk losing a substantial part of their annual income having missed the spring agricultural season which may also impact their ability to re-enter the seasonal labour market.

Ways forward

- ✓ IOM calls on the Government of Ukraine to consider proactive and timely facilitation of travel for migrant workers to host countries and to avoid any unnecessary regulations of this process while adhering to national health regulations and recommendations of the World Health Organization.
- ✓ IOM encourages strengthened coordination of all government bodies responsible for border crossing, employment, social protection and migrant health. Specifically, IOM's analysis of the level of the Government's response to the existing labour migration issues suggests that there is a well-articulated need for the establishment of a strong and effective inter-agency coordination mechanism, corresponding to the complexity of the migration process and supported by relevant international and civil society organizations to ensure safety and prosperity of migrants.
- ✓ IOM suggests to the Government to undertake systematic collection and dissemination of data on the situation of Ukrainian migrant workers to develop evidence-based policy and programmatic responses that will address returnees' needs as well as those of communities of return.
- ✓ To address the information needs identified by IOM and its national partners regarding the profile of returnees IOM recommends further research which will establish a baseline for future interventions in this arena. In light of the findings presented in this paper and to support the need for appropriate interventions, IOM has developed advocacy messages and required interventions to assist the Government of Ukraine and other stakeholders' efforts to address labour mobility and protection issues in the current and future crises.

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16 [NBU: Remittances in 2019](#)

17 [NBU: Inflation Report, April 2020](#)

18 [World Bank Predicts Sharpest Decline of Remittances in Recent History](#)

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