The Absent Ukrainian and the Imagined Migrant: How a Labor Forecast Became a Struggle Over Belonging

Ukraine's labor market already extends far beyond its borders. Before 2022, Ukrainians worked on Polish farms, in German factories, and in Italian households. By the end of 2021, 1.57 million Ukrainian citizens held valid residence permits in the EU, the third-largest group of non-EU nationals. Russia's full-scale invasion turned those familiar circuits of labor migration into a much larger and less predictable displacement. By the Center for Economic Strategy's (CES) estimate for January 2026, 5.6 million refugees from Ukraine remained abroad; two-thirds were of working age, and 56% were under 35. Much of the cohort that reconstruction would normally draw on is now putting down roots elsewhere.

Peace will make return conceivable for many; it will not decide the question for them. In late 2022, roughly three-quarters of refugees said that they planned to return. By early 2026, the share was 43%. Nearly four in five still considering return said they would wait for the war to end. CES models suggest that between 1.3 and 2.2 million people may return after it ends, with 1.6 million in the baseline scenario.

Ukraine cannot yet write a final return policy because it does not know the terms on which the war will end. It can nevertheless begin preparing: maintain ties with citizens abroad, recognize the qualifications and lives they have built elsewhere, and make return a credible option rather than a patriotic demand. In a country where people have been counted in mobilizations, departures, injuries, and deaths, prospective workers cannot be treated as an economic abstraction; any talk of future recruitment is heard against the backdrop of Ukrainians' absence from workplaces and communities.



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Arguments about people who have not yet arrived thus become debates about those who have already left. Foreign labor does not enter Ukraine as a simple adjustment to the labor market. In a country at war, an empty position tends to seem less like a signal from the market and more like a reminder of someone missing – someone at the front, someone who has been displaced, someone who left after losing their home, someone who was killed or injured in the war. The question of filling a vacancy becomes inseparable from a harder one: who has borne the cost of keeping the country going?

This is a moral economy of sacrifice, and it yields a reasonable demand: that the state take return seriously and explain openly how reconstruction will be planned. The radical step comes when this unease hardens into a theory of collective replacement. The prospective worker then becomes an outsider who benefits from Ukrainians' losses; the employer, recruiter, or ministry becomes an accomplice. The political debate then moves from discussing the conditions under which Ukrainians could return to excluding those who might arrive.

An Older Radical Repertoire

The radicalization of that moral economy has a history in Ukraine, but not a uniform one. In the late 2000s, migration marked a contradiction within the radical right. One older nationalist current, represented by *Svoboda*, drew more directly on the political vocabulary and historical memory of Ukrainian nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s. Moscow, rather than migration, was the central enemy, though the party's program also included anti-immigration planks.

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The newer activist milieu around *Patriot of Ukraine*, revived in Kharkiv in the mid-2000s under Andrii Biletskyi, who today commands the Third Army Corps, shared parts of that inheritance but drew more readily on transnational far-right narratives, symbols, and repertoires of street mobilization. It placed migrants at the center of a racialized account of national survival and organized anti-migrant actions in Kharkiv. Even then, "the far right" was not one political language.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its war in the Donbas from 2014 pushed migration to the periphery of nationalist politics. Sovereignty, territorial loss and war became its organizing questions. By 2026, elements of that older repertoire had resurfaced in a society transformed by military sacrifice and mass displacement.

How the Panic Traveled

The anti-migrant rallies of May 2026 were the most visible moment in a story that had been circulating for almost three years. A Texty.org.ua investigation, published in October 2026 and covering Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube material from February 24, 2022 to August 15, 2026, maps a relay, not a single anti-migrant "camp." Pro-Russian platforms, anonymous Ukrainian channels, controversial influencers, military figures, politicians and local officials each played a part in making an imagined migration wave feel like a present political emergency.

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The first trigger came in July 2023, when Ukraine's Ministry of Economy estimated that future recovery might require 4.5 million additional workers over the next ten years. A year later, in July 2024, the ministry repeated the figure as a preliminary estimate of what annual GDP growth of 7% to 2030 would require. In social-media circulation, a conditional forecast about labor demand became an alleged government plan to bring 4.5 million people from Asia and Africa. The claim moved through Facebook content farms and pro-Russian Telegram channels, alongside figures previously associated with the pro-Russian media network of Viktor Medvedchuk, a sanctioned former Ukrainian politician with close Kremlin ties. At this stage, the prospective migrant was almost secondary: Ukrainians were said to be disappearing, and migration became proof that the state had accepted their disappearance.

By 2024, the narrative had acquired the moral language that made it portable. In May 2024, Yuliia Mazur of Dosta, an anti-mobilization organization associated with "living people" pseudo-legal rhetoric, framed it through sacrifice: Ukrainians were fighting and dying while others would be invited to live on their land. The message traveled easily across audiences. Pro-Russian bloggers used it to discredit the state; conspiratorial voices added Soros and "deliberate replacement"; Ukrainian radicals developed it into an explicitly ethnic argument. The far right was neither the sole originator nor a passive recipient. It supplied a vocabulary of nation, race and ownership to a story already moving through the information system.

In January 2025, reports said a furniture company in Zakarpattia was considering recruiting; the company later put the number at about 30, which became another occasion to warn that Ukrainians were being replaced. When border rules during martial law for men aged 18-22 were eased in late August 2025, and employers reported deeper staffing shortages, Telegram channels revived the same formula: young Ukrainians were leaving, and migrants from India or Bangladesh would take their place. On October 4, 2025, Maksym Zhorin, a former Azov commander and deputy commander of the Third Army Corps – an Armed Forces formation built around the 3rd Assault Brigade, which was founded by veterans of the Azov movement, itself rooted in Ukraine's far right – wrote that people from culturally distant countries should not come to earn money while Ukrainians were fighting. Popular media quickly carried it into a new cycle.

In 2026, AI-generated material gave the old script the appearance of proof. In April, Kyrylo Budanov, head of the presidential office, told a business audience that the foreign ministry and the Security Service had been told to review the list of "migration-risk" countries, an administrative question about entry and legalization with possible implications for labor recruitment, which became another trigger. In May, fabricated video and images made the future seem already present. Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communications counted more than 21,600 anti-migrant posts across nearly 14,000 sources between May 1 and May 10, and Texty dates the peak of the campaign to May 11. Popular Telegram channels circulated a fake video of an alleged Indian worker inviting compatriots to Ukraine because Ukrainian men were at the front. They used fake images to claim that migrants were already arriving on salaries of USD 800, circulated fakes about migrants washing clothes in Ukrainian rivers, and warned of exotic diseases. The official record pointed the other way: in 2025, about 9,500 work permits for foreigners were issued or extended.

Members of parliament, including Dmytro Razumkov, Oleksii Honcharenko, Anna Skorokhod and Danylo Hetmantsev, joined the debate, often using

populist arguments. City mayors Ihor Terekhov (Kharkiv), Ruslan Martsinkiv (Ivano-Frankivsk) and Andrii Sadovyi (Lviv) announced that they would not permit a migrant influx into their cities. On May 19, Terekhov, speaking for the Association of Frontline Cities and Communities, appealed to the government and parliament to prevent the "mass" recruitment of migrant workers. The mayors' motives and language did not match those of nationalist activists or pro-Russian propagandists. Yet their interventions ratified the premise that an influx either existed or was imminent enough to require a public defense.

On May 23, several dozen people gathered at anti-migrant rallies in Kyiv, where the far-right groups *Right Youth* (*Prava Molod*) and *Avangard* rallied on Independence Square, and in other cities. Social media presented them as mass demonstrations; in fact, they were small events with visibility far beyond their size. The slogans "Ukraine for Ukrainians" and "For a White Ukraine" made explicit what the wider campaign often left implied. To date, the episode has produced neither a migration decision nor a durable street movement.

Service, Blood and Belonging

The radical argument begins with a seemingly practical question: if Ukraine eventually recruits foreign workers, what would they owe in return? Its most memorable answer came from Zhorin, who argued in an October 2025 post, which circulated again during the May campaign, that migrants should enter Ukraine "only through the front": military service first, employment afterward.

Taken literally, the formula offers a route into membership. In political terms, it makes that route almost unusable. It says that a person who did not share Ukraine's wartime danger cannot share in its postwar life.

Yet another strand of rhetoric from the same broader milieu removes even this conditional opening. A serviceman of the Third Army Corps wrote in May 2026: "Migrant = internal occupier", and defined the Ukrainian nation as belonging "exclusively by blood." Here, service cannot change the basic category. One formulation appears to make membership conditional on sacrifice; the other renders membership unavailable from the start.

The 3rd Assault Brigade has formed an international rifle battalion, reportedly consisting mainly of English-, Spanish-, and Portuguese-speaking volunteers, and continues to recruit foreign citizens. Their presence does not validate the proposition that military service should purchase a place in the nation. But if service is the demanded proof of commitment, what standing does it confer on people who have already served? The radical milieu has not resolved that question because its purpose is not to recognize sacrifice wherever it appears. It is to reserve the political meaning of sacrifice for those presumed to own the nation already.

State Politics, Return and Future Diversity

Ukraine's reaction has a recognizable regional setting. After 2015, parts of Central and Eastern Europe reacted intensely to refugees who were scarcely present: in the year nearly a million people reached Germany, 169 refugees entered Slovakia and only eight asked to stay, as Ivan Krastev pointed out. His useful observation was that the anxiety concerned emigration as much as immigration. Societies depleted by the departure of young people did not see a newcomer merely as a stranger; they saw someone entering a place vacated by a child, neighbor, or co-worker.

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The comparison identifies a condition of receptivity rather than predicting that Ukraine will reproduce its neighbors' politics.

Ukraine cannot yet know how many people will return, when they can, or which labor shortages will remain when the war ends. Its policy problem is therefore an unfinished sequence. People have discussed return preparation, labor scenarios, and any future recruitment policy together, making a forecast sound like a decision.

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The first stage should be a return architecture, rather than a call to come home. Kyiv, host governments and the municipalities that need people could offer families a reversible route: an exploratory return that does not automatically end their status abroad; a pre-arranged package of work, a school place and temporary housing in a chosen town; and recognition of qualifications and insurance periods acquired in Europe. The unit of policy is not the refugee in the aggregate. It is a household deciding whether it can move without asking its children, income and security to absorb all the risk at once.

At the same time, the state should publish demographic and labor models as conditional calculations: what follows if one, two or three million people return; where shortages would remain; and what thresholds, if any, would trigger recruitment from abroad. A labor projection with stated assumptions, a review date and public safeguards is far harder to recast as a hidden plan of replacement.

This will not persuade committed radicals to abandon their worldview. It can make their argument less persuasive to people for whom it gives form to a real loss.

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War has made Ukraine a diasporic society on a European scale. Ukraine asks Europe to see Ukrainians abroad as more than a labor reserve or public burden. That claim requires an act of political imagination at home as well. A person from Bangladesh, India, Colombia or Ethiopia cannot be reduced either to the demographic deficit they are said to fill, or to a threat against which a wounded nation defines itself ■