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## Problems and Territorial Disparities of the Labour and Employment in Ukraine: Improving the Long-Term Policy

**Abstract**

The *purpose* of the paper is to identify problems and substantiate priorities for the regulation of employment and territorial labour markets in Ukraine in the conditions of combining a number of socio-economic global, macro-regional (pan-European) and national challenges. *Methodology*. The study summarises and analyses the country-wide and territorial problems of the labour use and reproduction in Ukraine. It then synthesises the approaches to overcoming these problems through improving the employment organisation, regulation and efficiency. The main *results* include: a study of the current methodological foundations for the formation and regulation of the national labour market and its territorial components; identification of deep and urgent problems in the functioning of the employment sector, sectoral and territorial labour markets of Ukraine, as well as in their management; identification of approaches to the modernisation of territorial labour markets, the State Employment Service of Ukraine and its regional offices, consistent with the principles and practices of labour and employment management in developed countries of the European macro-region; substantiation of mechanisms and strategic priorities for a comprehensive solution to the problems of diversifying and balancing territorial economic systems, stimulating productive employment, increasing the labour potential of the population, ensuring decent working conditions, and preventing the outflow of skilled labour from Ukraine. The study's *practical implications* are determined by the development of approaches to formulating a systemic strategy for overcoming the consequences of the martial law period. Such an approach should also modernise the economy and balance the proportions of the economy's territorial proportions, increase the competitiveness of national enterprises and workers, and fulfil Ukraine's European integration aspirations. *Value / Originality*. The study demonstrated the pivotal function of enhancing the efficacy of labour and employment territorial regulation mechanisms in implementing a successive strategy for sustainable economic, innovative and social development of Ukraine. This strategy aims to enhance the quality of the population's labour potential, ensure the replenishment of human capital, and fortify the resilience of national business entities and communities (hromadas).

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**Keywords**

workforce, employment, labour market, territorial organisation of the economy and society, regulatory mechanism, strategy for increasing resilience and sustainable development

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**1 Introduction**

The effectiveness of labour utilisation and reproduction processes is contingent upon the management of a range of employment-related territorial aspects, particularly those pertaining to: the consecutive balancing of labour demand and

supply; the regulation of socio-labour relations in the context of coordinating the positions and interests of employees and employers; the ensuring of productive employment in settlement systems, economic complexes, sectors, inter-industry clusters; the optimisation of factors and processes of the population territorial mobility, constructive through

the prism of priorities for the full satisfaction of national needs in the competitive labour force, the diversification of employment and economic subsystems, and the expansion of beneficial cross-border socio-economic co-operation. It is imperative that a robust, well-researched national strategy is implemented to facilitate the development of employment and labour market territorial subsystems. This strategy must ensure the harmonious functioning of relevant management institutions, specialised business structures and civil society structures. The impact of these activities on key socio-economic indicators, such as the stability of state and local budgets, the continuous growth in wages and the share of the population's labour income, as well as the predictability of the range of guaranteed social protection payments within the framework of mandatory insurance and regional development programmes, must be considered. These programmes also have a significant reverse impact on maintaining and accelerating the socio-economic growth rate.

The methodology and problems of managing employment and territorial labour markets have become the subject of many well-reasoned studies. Consequently, scholars such as V. Kovach (2019), J. Bradbury, A. Davies (2022), M. Abreu, F. Comim, C. Jones (2023), K. Frenken, F. Neffke, A. van Dam (2023), and H. Yang, J. Ma, Y. Pan (2023) have advanced and refined the theoretical and methodological principles of labour market formation, regulation, and forecasting.

The approaches to implementing urgent and strategic tasks of systemic hierarchical activities to manage employment, industry and territorial labour markets in Ukraine and in other countries of the world were developed in the articles of A. Volkivska, G. Osovska, O. Aksonova, O. Osovskiy, S. Nikolaichuk (2021), E. Medeiros, J. Scott, R. Ferreira, P. Boijmans, N. Vershelde, M. Guillermo-Ramirez, O. Gyula, J. Peyrony, A. Soares (2023), P. Kosintseva (2024), A. Podlevskiy, T. Komarenko (2024), J. Deegan, T. Broekel, S. Haus-Reve, R.D. Fitjar (2024), Z. Elekes, G. Toth, R. Eriksson (2024). In addition, O. Borysenko (2019), M. Capriati, V. Cirillo, M. Divella (2024), N. Cortinovic, D. Zhang, R. Boschma (2024) have substantiated ways to modernise the mechanisms of territorial labour markets and the functioning of the State employment service according to the principles and priorities of EU integration, as practised in developed European macro-region countries.

The factors and problems of balancing territorial labour markets, the legal and shadow cross-border labour migration consequences for the national economy and employment, and the trends in forming personnel demand and supply during the martial law period in Ukraine were outlined by O. Dzenis, N. Sharko (2022), S. Bestuzheva, V. Kozub, M. Gorobynskaya (2023), N. Pak, M. Fiulosh (2023), L. Iatsenko (2024).

The analysis of these studies demonstrates the necessity for further study of the labour and employment regulation problems at the territorial level of Ukraine in the context of systematising the priorities and mechanisms for their solving in the long-term strategy of economic, innovative and social development, strengthening the resilience of the national businesses and regional communities (hromadas). The objective of the present study is twofold: firstly, to identify the aforementioned problems, and secondly, to provide a robust foundation for the establishment of long-term and urgent priorities for the regulation of employment and territorial labour markets in Ukraine. This is to be achieved in the context of a combination of a range of global, macro-regional (pan-European) and national socio-economic challenges.

## **2 Principles of Regulation of Territorial Organisation of Labour and Employment**

The establishment and enhancement of the legal framework, mechanisms and tools for the governance of territorial labour markets represent a matter of pressing concern for authorities at various levels (primarily, in accordance with Articles 15–18 of the Law of Ukraine "On Employment of the Population" No. 5067–VI in edition of 15.11.2024, the authorities identified as central for implementing the state employment policy aimed at ensuring full and productive freely chosen employment and the population social protection in the event of unemployment, as well as directions of their close co-operation with other interested institutions (associations of employees and employers of the national, regional, and industry scale, other civil society structures). Concurrently, Article 18 of the Law of Ukraine "On Employment of the Population" stipulates the obligations to identify impediments within the labour market, mobilise extant resources to surmount them, and cultivate prospective employment opportunities within the remit of territorial (including local) bodies and programs for the employment of the population.

The active government employment policy is now officially interpreted as the systemic measures to promote the rapid acquisition of employment or mastery of new professions by the able-bodied population of working age. This approach should be supplemented by a commitment to stimulate market mechanisms for "creating" jobs (Kovach, 2019). When choosing an employment field and job, it is important to consider the level of remuneration, career growth prospects, self-development possibilities, non-conflict management, the employer's strategies and potential in solving the aforementioned and related issues (Borysenko, 2019).

The public demand for effective solutions in the regulation of labour and employment is assessed as high, since in Ukraine, the expectations of the population regarding the improvement of well-being and quality of life are largely connected with the realisation of the right to decent work. Among the mechanisms and instruments for regulating the labour market, those that take into account the objective impact of global trends and are aimed at stimulating innovative employment and entrepreneurial activities of the population, balancing the markets of educational services and labour by increasing the validity of forecasting the relevant indicators of demand and supply volume and structure, improving the competitiveness of employees and applicants, and expanding a range of decent jobs, are considered the most promising (Kovach, 2019; Bradbury, Davies, 2022; Abreu et al., 2023; Frenken et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023).

The necessity for the effective regulation of territorial labour markets is becoming increasingly pressing in the context of Ukraine's European integration aspirations, which the authorities are striving to maintain, even in the context of martial law. The Association Agreement with the EU incorporates a comprehensive array of stipulations aimed at harmonising national labour legislation and employment mechanisms (particularly in domains such as employed social protection, working conditions, and labour mobility) (Medeiros et al., 2023; Deegan et al., 2024; Elekes et al., 2024; Capriati, 2024; Cortinovis, 2024). Moreover, the present priority of these activities is Ukraine's accession to the network of European Employment Services (EURES), which unites national employment offices, private employment agencies and employers of the European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland. EURES implements directives and co-operation between the European Commission, the European Labour Agency, accredited employment services in the aforementioned countries, and national specialised public organisations. The relevant plan of preparatory measures was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on 29.10.2024. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that individuals utilising temporary protection or protection accorded by the national legislation of the aforementioned countries encounter greater success in securing employment within the framework of the EURES scheme. Consequently, this employment mechanism is more effective for finding jobs for the relocated refugees in the countries of the European macro-region than for permanent residents of Ukraine.

In Ukrainian studies, the mechanism for coordinating the goals of the government's employment policy and an average job applicant, and thus the functional practice of the State Employment Service, its territorial divisions and a number of private personnel agencies, has been called the

employment service-oriented model (Borysenko, 2019), the development of which was aimed at overcoming the problems of the inflexibility of the organisational management structure, the bureaucratisation of the labour market institutional layer (Kovach, 2019). According to this model: employment services for competitive citizens are proposed to be transferred from the state employment service to private agencies; the State Employment Service and its territorial units will continue to contact employers (including to analyse their requirements for employees' knowledge and skills, the sectoral prospects of job offers, staff turnover, and reasons for staff dismissal), select vacancies for certain uncompetitive categories of the population, coordinate and systematise information on job offers from various sources, and present to clients those that have been assessed as reliable; regional employment centres will be involved in territorial and production clusters, performing the functions of providing the necessary labour force, training and upgrading the skills of employees, providing information support, and facilitating their movement in accordance with the needs of business entities.

### **3 Trends and Negative Aspects of the Development of Territorial Labour Markets**

For a long time, the development of a wide range of territorial labour markets in Ukraine has been characterised by a number of destructive trends, including the following:

- Outstripping the rate of labour force decline compared to the rate of decline in the resident population; ageing of the pool of highly skilled workers employed in Ukraine on a permanent basis; an increase in the number of both registered unemployed and undeclared workers among the population of rural areas and small towns; and acceleration of illegal (including irreversible cross-border) labour migration.
- Significant structural unemployment caused by the stagnation of the sectoral structure of employment and numerous cases of acute imbalance between the supply of labour and legal demand for it in territorial communities, including those related to the underestimation by employers (monopolists and external stakeholders) of the costs of reproducing a competitive workforce in the current socio-economic environment, and the weak economic feasibility of the jobs offered (especially in regions with a predominant raw materials, agricultural, and agro-processing specialisation). The prevailing characteristics of the pre-war period in Ukraine manifested as follows: a conspicuous surplus of labour supply relative to employer



demand in the market; pervasive instances of territorial imbalances in labour supply and demand, precipitated by disruptions to business relations and contractual obligations within local economic subsystems, as well as by financial constraints stemming from insolvency or liquidity constraints of affiliated enterprises (Kovach, 2019).

- The regions and a number of sectors and industries have experienced high personnel average annual turnover. This is due to a consistent increase in the need for unskilled labour and service workers in the simplest professions. This has been caused by significant changes in Ukraine's specialisation on foreign markets over the past three and a half decades. During this time, the country's focus was on the extraction of natural resources, the primary processing of raw materials (including agricultural), the transit of minerals and energy resources, and the production of semi-finished products and components for foreign and transnational corporations.
- The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the State Labour Service of Ukraine confirm the high rates of undeclared work among people with vocational and general secondary education, low qualifications, representatives of the simplest professions, formally and informally employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, vehicle repair and maintenance, industry, transport, storage, postal and courier activities, temporary accommodation and catering, as well as among rural residents.
- The government strategy for promoting small and medium-sized businesses in Ukraine is characterised by its instability. Furthermore, there is an absence of any guidelines or priorities for their development in regions, sectors and clusters of economic activities (service, extractive, processing, high-tech, transport and logistics).
- Impediments to the activities of small and medium-sized enterprises caused by the socio-economic problems of the last few years (2019-2021 – the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide sanitary and anti-epidemic measures, 2022-2024 – large-scale military actions in Ukraine), which resulted in a shortage of working capital, impoverishment and closure of a wide range of business entities, including individual entrepreneurs, forced dismissal and unemployment of their employees, destruction of established economic and logistical links and specialisation of sectoral and territorial economic subsystems.
- Gradual decrease in the general, professional and qualification level of the youth and the population of working age due to the integrated influence of such factors as the obsolescence of the sectoral structure of the national economy and the

narrowing of its specialisation; the destruction of the mechanism for meeting the needs of the economy for skilled workers and technical personnel; the unsatisfactory quality of specialised programmes for professional training and practice in many higher education institutions; the inability of rural territorial communities to compete on an equal footing with urban ones in the field of general secondary education; the increase in the negative effects of the spread of undeclared work, which provokes subjective and financial limitations on individual strategies for improving the professional and qualification level of the persons involved in it and their family members.

- The ineffectiveness of the programmes and other targeted proposals for training and retraining, employment of the inactive and registered unemployed, offered by the territorial units of the public employment service.
- Along with the mentioned negative trends, significant incentives for a number of destructive processes in the Ukrainian employment sphere include the following:
- The imbalance in the specialists training structure in the higher and vocational education system is characterised by a predominance of humanitarian and technical specialties, oriented towards supplying personnel for the managerial, financial and economic service sectors, over production specialties. This trend has been reinforced for a considerable period, primarily due to the autonomy processes of higher educational institutions, aimed at identifying profitable areas by expanding the specialties list through non-specialized ones according to the university education format.
- There appears to be a contradiction between the preponderance of emphasis on a generalist profile and the necessity of cultivating and enhancing the competitive workforce for the innovative high-tech cluster industries.
- The imperfection of the state migration policy, in particular its unsystematic nature on the issues of preventing the outflow of qualified personnel through measures to motivate and reward productive work, standardise working conditions and decent levels of remuneration, especially in the sectors of national economic specialisation.
- The absence of confidence in state institutions with regard to their capacity to guarantee and promote employment, in conjunction with the corruption of government and local authorities, the overregulation of entrepreneurial activities, and the increasing imposition of unreasonable levels of tax pressure, is a matter of concern. This is particularly salient in the context of rising living costs and lending rates.

A typical feature of the pre-war national labour market was the rather high activity of domestic job applicants, both in Ukraine and abroad (in the last pre-war years, more than 2 million people applied to private online employment services every quarter, and about 400 thousand people submitted their CVs to the state employment service) (Borysenko, 2019). In recent years, Ukraine has consistently been on the list of countries from which the largest number of people have emigrated each year, as well as on the list of countries to which the largest number of migrants have arrived from other countries of the world, both legally and illegally. Since at least 2000, the rate of emigration has consistently exceeded the rate of immigration (Bestuzheva et al., 2023). The main reasons that prompted economically active Ukrainians to move abroad were: unemployment above public expectations (official sources reported unemployment much lower than the real rate – in 2021, the gap was almost 9 times); limited demand and unsatisfactory wage standards by profession (the gap between the average salary in Italy and Ukraine, for example, was 4.9 times, in France – 7.1 times, and in Germany – 7.5 times); relatively low wages in prestigious and in-demand specialities in modern technological conditions (in particular, for IT specialists, healthcare professionals, engineers, researchers in physics and mathematics, and narrowly qualified real sector workers); decline of the production base in a number of industries; unsatisfactory economic level of regions and territorial communities of residence, and the local armed conflict in eastern Ukraine (at that time) (Dzenis, Sharko, 2022; Bestuzheva et al., 2023).

#### 4 Employment under Martial Law

The period of martial law served to exacerbate the existing disparities and destructive trends in the spectrum of territorial labour markets (from the frontline to the central and border western and northwestern regions). These trends manifested themselves, in particular, in the following ways: the collapse, destruction, relocation of the economic entities' material and technical base; losses in the logistics of supplying their resources and products, as well as in the communications with consumers; restrictions on access to resources; uncertainty of the business environment, forced reorientation of economic relations; physical extermination, forced relocation, changes in employment, disqualification, losses of other components of the employees' labour potential; initiation of the processes for terminating employment contracts, providing unpaid leave to personnel, increasing the working day and week length by the administrative decision (as measures to reduce employers' losses from forced downtime, production stoppages, which were normalised by the labour legislation changes); restrictions on

access of enterprises, organisations, their personnel to electricity, water and heat supply, mobile communications.

Assessing the dynamics of the Ukrainian labour market during the martial law period, numerous sectoral and complex studies (in particular: Pak, Fiulosh, 2023; Kosintseva, 2024; Podlevskiy, Komarenko, 2024) draw attention to: the continuation of the trend for its general slowdown in the range of territorial and sectoral segments; the significant losses of the enterprises' human resources; increased shortage of qualified personnel in the context of changes in recruitment and staffing instructions (primarily in the context of availability and verification of military records and mobilisation measures); the initiation of trends for "buying out" staff from enterprises with lower margins; the absence of cardinal changes in the wage offer as a whole, combined with the trend to regularly review and increase the salaries level with a higher frequency than before in industries that produce non-defence products, competitive on the foreign markets (for example, the garment industry); the low prevalence of corporate systems for the personnel adaptation, training and development; the intensification of employers' competition for qualified job applicants, which increasingly stimulates, in particular, the corporate social benefits return (coverage of costs for insurance, education, medical care, physical workouts in gyms, office meals, etc.); the spreading of the practice of retraining personnel, redistributing work responsibilities, restoring the training programs for young specialists; the further workflows' automation; the growing popularity of temporary employment and outsourcing among employers.

It is clear that since the end of February 2022, the structure of reasons for cross-border labour migration from Ukraine has been dominated by military and political ones. Currently, about 78% of the "forced migrants" abroad are people of the most productive age (18-40 years) (Iatsenko, 2024). According to the ILO, almost 5 million jobs have been lost in Ukraine as a result of the war (Pak, Fiulosh, 2023). The level of unemployment has increased significantly, with estimations reaching a high of 17% at the beginning of 2024 (Iatsenko, 2024). Concurrently, compensatory processes were underway. The number of individuals classified as unemployed decreased from 867.6 thousand in 2022 to 483.2 thousand in 2023, as reported by the "Work.ua" data, as of January 2024 in comparison to February 2022, the number of job offers on the labour market recovered by 93%. The regions of Zakarpattia, Ivano-Frankivsk, Khmelnytskyi, Lviv, Vinnytsia, Rivne, and Chernivtsi experienced the most significant surge in vacancies, with increases ranging from 155% to 116% compared to pre-war levels. Notably, the top five regions, namely Kyiv, Lviv,

Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, and Kharkiv, maintained their position in terms of the number of vacancies, accounting for 63% of all vacancies (Iatsenko, 2024). According to the European Business Association, the majority of companies intended to continue operating in their market segments, did not intend to lay off employees and offered them various forms of support (Pak, Fiuolosh, 2023).

## 5 Long-Term Priorities for Regulating Employment and the Labour Market

The priorities of the long-term policy and strategy for increasing the efficiency of regulating territorial labour markets in Ukraine combine:

- Strengthening the systematisation of state employment policy by areas for: integrating the regional economic subsystems; stimulating the diversification of industries that meet the domestic consumer demand; preserving and improving the quality of labour potential reproducing in the national economy's specialisation sectors; promoting productive employment through the mechanisms of the state and regional orders for personnel training, stimulating professional and territorial mobility of the economically active population, using the innovative potential of small and medium businesses in the sectors of semi-finished and finished products, enterprises' services, management digitalisation, logistics, and household services; the extra-administrative preventing of cross-border migration of working-age citizens and their families (through the measures to increase wages and implement a range of guarantees for the working life decent conditions).
- Improving the monitoring of compliance with standards of remuneration (in particular the minimum wage, which plays a leading role in fulfilling the motivational and reproductive functions of wages (Volkivska et al., 2021) and decent working conditions for the employed personnel of economic entities of all forms of ownership, adjusting the relevant legislative norms and standards together with establishing appropriate quantitative and temporal benchmarks of these measures; substantiating the amount of unemployment benefits taking into account the costs of both the physiological and social subsistence minimum (setting it, following the example of Scandinavian countries, at 70% of the average wage (Volkivska et al., 2021).
- The acceleration of joint investment programmes (state, grant, private) in the national scientific and technical sphere is proposed as a mechanism for innovative modernisation and targeted clustering of territorial economic subsystems. The proposed mechanism is intended to be ensured by strengthening and increasing the efficiency of using the R&D material, technical and labour potential.
- Continue to implement the concept of transforming the State Employment Service as an intermediary of social partnership of all labour market participants (including in the aspects of: increasing the relevance, improving the quality of proposed programmes of vocational orientation, education and training of job seekers and unemployed of working age and older; warning of violations of social labour rights of full-time, part-time and temporary workers by enterprises of all forms of ownership; prevention of undeclared work within the framework of available mechanisms of public and private partnership, targeted investments, preferential taxation, fiscal and administrative sanctions).
- Encouraging employers and their associations to develop programmes for the vocational training, further training and retraining of staff without interrupting work, combined with material and career incentives for such training and innovative activities as a mechanism for reducing staff turnover, maintaining and developing the most qualified workforce, implementing social responsibility initiatives by strengthening the economic base of local communities (hromadas).
- Consistent ensuring of legislative and technical compatibility of the Ukrainian and European systems of vocational education standards; conclusion of intergovernmental agreements ensuring mutual recognition of qualifications and social protection of employees.
- Establishment and implementation of the state re-emigration programme (at least for the countries of the European macro-region), which, in its initial stages, is aimed at the return to Ukraine of compatriots working in transnational companies and corporations, as well as entrepreneurs among the working population of retirement age.
- Further simplification of the process of obtaining work permits for immigrants (citizens of other countries, stateless persons) in the context of implementing the EU rules on free mobility of workers, according to which they have free, free access to the labour markets of all EU Member States; introduction of a single residence and work permit in Ukraine, following the EU example.
- Accession to the EURES network, promotion of the domestic segment of labour demand within the framework of these institutional and service interactions as part of the mechanism for increasing the mobility of Ukrainian workers,



ensuring their full competitive access to the national highest-paid vacancies and labour markets of the European macro-region, and integration of our country into the entire array of European employment structures.

## 6 Conclusions

The workforce labour potential, defined as its professional and qualification, creative features, is identified as an integral resource and the criterion for the effective long-term strategy of restoring and increasing the competitiveness of the national economy. This strategy is based on the diversification, innovative modernisation, inter-industry, interregional and cross-border clustering of production relations in the real, service, transport and logistics, R&D sectors.

The summarisation of the problems of employment and labour organisation, as well as the practice of managing and regulating territorial labour markets in Ukraine, has revealed the growing public need for the systematisation of relevant priorities, the improvement of the mechanisms of their implementation in the context of preserving, optimising reproduction and consistently ensuring the productive employment of the national competitive workforce. All these factors together mean for Ukraine that only a balanced long-term

strategy for the regulation of employment and regional labour markets, the implementation of well-founded legislative standards and guidelines for decent wages and quality of working and non-working life can prevent the current rapid processes of destruction of the potential for demographic and professional reproduction of the national labour force with good qualifications and competitive parameters already recognised in the world and European macro-region.

Important areas of activity of both central and local authorities in the field of labour and employment regulation in Ukraine are recognised as: expansion and diversification of the employment sector; promotion of decent wages; legalisation and reduction of undeclared labour; optimisation of social dialogue mechanisms within the framework of tripartite co-operation between institutions; improvement of conditions and efficiency of professional and territorial mobility of the working population; regulation of cross-border labour migration; implementation of long-term national priorities for reproduction and improvement of professional and qualification parameters of the workforce capable of working effectively in modern technological conditions; introduction of a system of levers, tools, factors for optimising the socio-demographic parameters of territorial communities (hromadas) that affect the indicators of staffing and specialisation of the economy

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