

UKRAINIAN REFUGEE AND MIGRANT WORKERS: SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE (CASE PL3)

1 Introduction

Promotion of effective occupational safety and health (OSH) practices is a key element of safer and healthier workplaces. Improving arrangements and practices for managing OSH across a whole range of industry sectors and firm sizes — large, medium and small — is stimulated, supported and sustained by a range of institutional actors and processes both internal and external to firms. Scientific research highlights, among others, the critical role that state regulators for OSH, such as Labour Inspectorates but also prevention services, can play.¹ This case study is part of a research project² conducted in Poland to provide further insight into this topic.

In response to the imperative for Poland to adapt to the influx of incoming migrants and refugees in 2022, efforts were made to support foreigners in the Polish labour market regarding health and safety at work. The following case example shows an initiative of the Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine (NIOM) in Łódź. It should be noted that other organisations, such as the State Labour Inspection and the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund (Kasa Rolniczego Ubezpieczenia Społecznego), have also taken action to support Ukrainian refugees.

2 Description of the case

The necessity to create a legal framework for accommodating migrants from Ukraine arose before the outbreak of the war, as the earlier COVID-19 pandemic emphasised this need. Legislation passed in 2020-2021 permitted migrants to legally remain in Poland until the pandemic's end. Additionally, the pandemic exacerbated Ukraine's economic conditions in comparison to Poland, prompting more migrants to consider settling permanently in Poland.

The Russian aggression war in Ukraine was the reason for the mass flight of Ukrainians seeking a safe haven outside their country. By November 2023, more than 15.4 million refugees had crossed the Polish border, of whom approximately 1.6 million had registered in Poland with temporary protection status (in accordance with the Temporary Protection Directive). As a result of the amendment of the provisions of the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with Armed Conflict on the Territory of that State,³ the period of stay of Ukrainian citizens on the territory of Poland, considered legal, under the provisions of the above-mentioned Act, were extended until 4 March 2024.

The influx of such a large number of refugees has had a significant impact on the Polish labour market and Polish OSH services. Prevention activities and services were also forced to introduce measures to adapt their work in the new situation.⁴

An employer who wishes to employ a Ukraine worker must remember that all employment-related obligations apply to them as well:

- The remuneration paid to the Ukrainian worker must not be lower than the minimum wage or the minimum hourly rate.

¹ EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Improving compliance with occupational safety and health regulations: an overarching review*, 2021. <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/improving-occupational-safety-and-health-changing-world-work-what-works-and-how>

² The full report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/polands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>

³ European Commission. (2023, 13 April). *Living and economic situation of migrants from Ukraine in Poland: the impact of pandemic and war on the nature of migration*. https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/living-and-economic-situation-migrants-ukraine-poland-impact-pandemic-and-war_en

⁴ Ibid.

- There is a need to conclude a written contract with the Ukrainian citizen, which takes into account the conditions included in the notification submitted to the employment office.⁵
- Provide the employee with a translation of the contract in a language they understand the best.
- The employer must register the employee with the social security and health insurance system within seven days from the day the employee starts work.⁶

Given this, the employer is obliged to secure preventive examinations for Ukrainian employees. Despite the Polish government and citizens extending a welcome to their neighbours, the influx has notably strained the healthcare system, particularly in staffing, driven by heightened service demand. Many Ukrainian medical professionals are ready and willing to contribute. Yet, they encounter substantial hurdles, including the Polish language barrier and discrepancies in the qualification requirements for employment within the Polish healthcare framework. To address these challenges, the World Health Organisation (WHO) collaborates with the Polish Ministry of Health. It offers support and guidance to integrate qualified Ukrainian healthcare workers into the national health system, allowing them to leverage their skills and training.⁷

With financial support from the WHO, NIOM has supported Ukrainian workers' transition to the Polish labour market and safeguarded their OSH rights. The result of these activities is the project 'Ukrainian workers in the Polish labour market. Preventive screenings'.⁸ The decision to take action was based on observation of the situation in doctors' consulting rooms. Doctors conducting preventive medical examinations of workers from Ukraine observed that they frequently encounter treatable health issues. This situation may likely be due to insufficient medical care in their home country and the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has severely limited access to medical services. A significant challenge in administering these preventive examinations is the language barrier. Many newly arrived Ukrainian citizens do not speak Polish, while the medical staff, including doctors, often do not speak Ukrainian. This not only complicates the diagnostic process but also makes it difficult to provide proper medical advice. Ukrainian patients struggle to understand what actions they should take to improve their health and are often unaware that certain illnesses are treatable and that such treatments can prevent disease progression. They are also often unclear about the purpose of the workers' preventive examinations and the reasons behind them. It is also worth noting that occupational medicine specialists are frequently the only medical professionals that Ukrainian immigrants come into contact with.

2.1 Aims

The overarching goal of the initiative is to provide all interested persons, in particular Polish employers, Ukrainian workers, and organisations and units dealing with employee healthcare, with supporting material to facilitate and make more effective the communication with Ukrainian workers. The materials prepared help to familiarise Ukrainian workers with the principles of preventive care for the worker. They are also a tool to support the tasks provided by occupational health physicians.

The initiative is designed to greatly facilitate communication and prevent possible gaps in documentation — most importantly valid medical certificate — due to lack of knowledge or misunderstanding.

2.2 Organisations involved

The initiative was carried out by NIOM with financial support from the WHO demonstrating international support and concern for occupational health in Poland. Additionally, the education materials prepared by NIOM (see section 2.3.1) were developed with linguistic assistance from the Centrum Medyczne Głogowscy s.c.

⁵ When notifying the district labour office of the employment of a Ukrainian citizen, the employer must provide information on the entity entrusting the foreigner with work, the personal data of the foreigner and details about the work performed.

⁶ Serwis informacyjno-usługowy dla przedsiębiorcy. Jak zatrudnić cudzoziemca? <https://www.biznes.gov.pl/pl/portal/00211>

⁷ World Health Organisation, WHO helps Ukrainian health professionals support the Polish health system as they await their return home. <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/03-04-2023-who-helps-ukrainian-health-professionals-support-the-polish-health-system-as-they-await-their-return-home>

⁸ More information: <https://www.imp.lodz.pl/ukrainski-pracownik-na-polskim-ryнку-pracy-badania-profilaktyczne>

2.3 What was done, and how?

2.3.1 Basic structure

According to current legislation in Poland, every employee must undergo initial, periodic and follow-up preventive examinations to ensure safety and health at work. Employers, in turn, cannot allow a person to work without a valid medical certificate confirming that there are no contraindications to work in a given position. In response to the needs of Ukrainian workers, NIOM developed educational materials. They contain information on the principles of preventive care for employees, prevention of civilisation diseases and immunisation.

The project prepared basic information in Ukrainian on preventive care for employees in Poland. The package of materials includes, among other things:

- **Short films** describing the principles of compulsory preventive examinations of employees in the Polish labour market.⁹
 - The videos provide insights into various aspects of employee health checks and visits to occupational doctors. They cover topics such as the purpose of health checks, the process of visiting an occupational doctor and the information obtained during such visits. Each video lasts approximately six minutes. Structured as dialogues between an expert and an interviewer, they offer clear explanations and practical guidance on these important occupational health topics. See Figures 2 and 3 for snapshots of the materials.
- **A brochure describing the principles of compulsory preventive examinations** of employees in the Polish labour market.¹⁰
 - Preventive medical examinations of employees (*Профілактичні медичні огляди працівників*). The brochure provides essential information regarding the mandatory nature and purpose of these examinations in Poland, along with details on their timing, locations, required documentation, scope and the possibility of seeking further consultation.
- **Brochures have also been prepared to prevent the most common civilisation diseases** (hypertension and diabetes) and preventive vaccinations recommended for working people.¹¹
 - Diabetes prevention among workers (*Профілактика цукрового діабету у працюючих людей*).¹² The brochure on diabetes emphasises the importance of diabetes awareness and provides guidance on recognising its symptoms, interpreting laboratory results and seeking medical consultation if necessary. It also offers insights into managing diabetes in the workplace, including recommendations for employees with diabetes and the use of self-control diaries for monitoring.
 - Hypertension prevention among workers (*Профілактика гіпертонії у працюючих людей*).¹³ The brochure on hypertension highlights the importance of blood pressure control and provides guidance on self-checking for hypertension, correct blood pressure measurement techniques and preventive measures. It also addresses managing hypertension in the workplace and includes a self-control diary for monitoring blood pressure.
- In addition, **questionnaires** in Ukrainian were prepared for doctors and their Ukrainian patients to be able to take a reliable medical history, as well as a package of the most common medical recommendations given to patients.¹⁴

⁹ More information: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNTIUk5qbqM&ab_channel=InstytutMedycynyPracyw%C5%81odzi
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxdZFQwk2el&ab_channel=InstytutMedycynyPracyw%C5%81odzi
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mpg2NG7BqhY&ab_channel=InstytutMedycynyPracyw%C5%81odzi

¹⁰ More information: https://www.imp.lodz.pl/pliki/be1e2c51aacc61fded29650a26ea709c32136/zasady_przeprowadzania_badan_profilaktycznych_1603.pdf

¹¹ More information: <https://www.imp.lodz.pl/ua-choroby-cywilizacyjne>

¹² More information: <https://www.imp.lodz.pl/pliki/80517ac83c41aba6d8496179d5e90e2589212/ua-cukrzyca.pdf>

¹³ More information: <https://www.imp.lodz.pl/pliki/16a718ae4478a8050d51cfe150d8f03b46717/ua-nadcisnienie.pdf>

¹⁴ More information: <https://www.imp.lodz.pl/ua-kwestionariusze>

Figure 1: Information about the initiative on NIOM's website



Source: NIOM website¹⁵

2.3.2 Target group

The target group of NIOM's initiative is Ukrainian citizens who take up employment in Poland.

Additionally, NIOM's initiative aims to support occupational health physicians in successful communication with the Ukrainian patient and thus more effective preventive care.

2.3.3 Degree of innovation

The initiative is an example of good practice in managing labour migration and occupational safety, highlighting the need to take cultural and linguistic diversity into account in prevention activities. This approach not only contributes to improving the OSH of workers, but also supports their social integration and contributes to Poland's economic growth.

The innovation of these activities lies in their adaptive approach to communication, education and integration, specifically tailored to the needs and contexts of the target group.

An approach worthy of note is the focus on delivering materials in the languages of the audience group. These innovations represent a shift from a one-size-fits-all approach to more dynamic, interactive and culturally aware strategies, ensuring higher levels of engagement, better understanding and more effective integration of foreign populations into local communities. The innovativeness of the activities described lies primarily in understanding the changing working environment, responding nimbly to unexpected geopolitical events, taking an empathetic approach to their tasks in the information and education area, and focusing on the greatest possible effectiveness and legitimacy of their activities related to the employment of foreign nationals.

3 Results

3.1 What was achieved?

NIOM's project consisted of providing:

- Basic information in Ukrainian on preventive care for employees in Poland. The package of materials includes, among other things, short films and a brochure describing the principles of compulsory preventive examinations of employees in the Polish labour market.
- Brochures have also been prepared on preventing the most common civilisation diseases (hypertension and diabetes) and preventive vaccinations recommended for working people.
- Questionnaires in Ukrainian were prepared for doctors and their Ukrainian patients to be able to take a reliable history, as well as a package of the most common medical recommendations given to patients.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ More information: <https://www.imp.lodz.pl/ukrainski-pracownik-na-polskim-ryнку-pracy-badania-profilaktyczne>

Figure 2: A dedicated web page with materials (in Polish and Ukrainian)

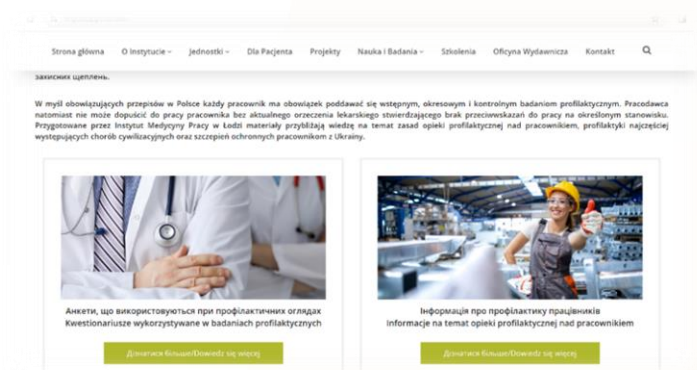
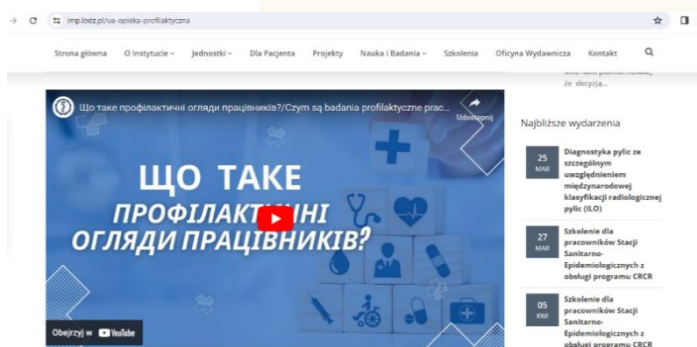


Figure 3: Educational movie (with translation into Ukrainian)



Source: NIOM website¹⁷

In the presented initiative, it is evident that the target audience has easy access to the provided content. The specialisation of NIOM in occupational health ensures continuous dissemination of information on the subject, positioning both institutions as key knowledge hubs for stakeholders. Although the reliance on technology-based media raises concerns about digital accessibility, NIOM ensures outreach beyond dedicated websites through avenues such as telephone consultations and stationary locations during specific timeframes. The initiative consistently delivers information and updates through websites, social media platforms, newsletters and industry meetings. Furthermore, in the field of occupational medicine, practitioners play a central role in imparting knowledge during medical visits and distributing paper-based materials to enhance accessibility and dissemination efforts.

3.2 Success factors and challenges

The project's success is measured by the degree to which the campaign induces behavioural changes among the target audience, aligning with the campaign objectives. Success entails heightened awareness of the campaign's subject matter, enhanced comprehension or knowledge thereof, and increased engagement in desired actions, such as registration, service utilisation or attendance at follow-up events following the campaign. It is also important to determine whether the campaign activities have a long-term impact and incorporate them into ongoing communication strategies. Since the project is ongoing, no evaluation or numerical impact data are available.

The project's success in reaching those objectives lies in its multifaceted approach to education and outreach, which has demonstrated significant improvements across various sectors. By raising awareness, changing behaviour and promoting knowledge of key issues, such initiatives have the potential to address critical topics such as health, safety and social cohesion. For instance, NIOM's health education initiative is able to not only enhance health outcomes by educating foreigners on disease prevention, nutrition, physical activity and mental health support, but also to foster understanding and cultural sensitivity. By bridging gaps between different communities, it contributes to creating a more inclusive and respectful society, ultimately enriching social and intercultural solidarity.

¹⁷ More information: <https://www.imp.lodz.pl/ukraine>

It should be noted that information and education campaigns often face challenges, such as reaching the target audience and ensuring that the campaign stands out among the flood of information. Campaigns, like this one, must also bridge the digital divide to ensure equal access to information and remain flexible to respond to dynamic feedback and changing circumstances.

4 Transferability to other EU Member States

The initiative serves as a commendable model for effectively managing labour migration while prioritising OSH assurance for migrant workers. Recognising and addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in preventive activities underscores the importance of inclusive practices in securing OSH compliance. This approach not only enhances the safety and wellbeing of migrant workers but also fosters their more successful social integration.

This project serves as a model for managing labour migration and enhancing OSH awareness, despite limitations in translating the initiative to other systems due to varying regulations and standards. While different countries have distinct employment laws and occupational medicine regulations, campaigns aimed at overcoming language barriers promote accessibility, social integration and support for universal values like solidarity. By prioritising OSH measures and bridging linguistic divides, initiatives like this contribute to fostering cohesive societies and advancing public health. Unsafe working conditions not only jeopardise the health and safety of individual workers but can also have far-reaching consequences for public health. By prioritising OSH measures, such as preventive care and health education, this project contributes to creating healthier workplaces, reducing the burden on healthcare systems, and ultimately improving the overall health outcomes of the workforce and the broader community of both migrants and hosting population.

References and resources

European Commission. (2023, 13 April). *Living and economic situation of migrants from Ukraine in Poland: the impact of pandemic and war on the nature of migration*. https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/living-and-economic-situation-migrants-ukraine-poland-impact-pandemic-and-war_en

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Authors: Paulina Kaczmarek, Marta Wiszniewska, Joanna Jurewicz, Jolanta Walusiak-Skorupa (Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine – NIOM).

Project management: Lorenzo Munar, Dietmar Elsler - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).

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