

## Article

# Ukrainian Migrants in Poland and the Role of an Employer as the Channel of Information during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** This paper examines communication processes between state institutions and migrants under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to determine where migrants obtain their information on specific legal regulations and restrictions on rules of conduct in the public space and professional environment. This issue is examined through the example of Ukrainian labour immigration in Poland. Referring to the results of our survey research, it is established that in a crisis, when the importance of information in the public sphere increases and, at the same time, direct social contacts are restricted, the special role of the employer is revealed. The employer is perceived not only as an entity offering work, but also as an important channel of information about state policy, regulations and rules of conduct applicable in a crisis. These findings are an indication, on the one hand, for state institutions to take this role of employers into account in migration policy and, on the other hand, for employers themselves to be aware of their social role towards migrants and play it responsibly. We believe that the study, conducted in the first two months of the pandemic, has become very timely with the outbreak of the Ukrainian–Russian war.

**Keywords:** the functioning of society in the COVID-19 pandemic; employer; migrants from Ukraine; migration policy; Poland; information policy; functioning of public and private enterprises; SDG



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## 1. Introduction

Economic and political crises have significant impacts on the situation of foreigners in their host country. Some of these impacts of such crises can be predicted, while others appear unexpectedly. Particularly challenging are those characterised by extreme unusualness and the absence of warning signs that suggest the possibility of their occurrence. Nassim Nicholas Taleb [1] (p. 17) calls such a phenomenon a “black swan”, noting that it stems from simplifications of reality and a failure to understand the likelihood of an unexpected event occurring.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic indeed came as a big surprise to the political and economic world, revealing a number of deficits in the preparedness of public institutions (international, state, and business) to manage a crisis. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic was such an unpredictable *black swan*, for which it was impossible to prepare in advance. It is worth noting that this phenomenon was not listed among the most critical world threats by the authors of The Global Risk Report 2020. A year later, climate change and risks associated with environmental degradation were still at the top of the list of probable long-term risks. The pandemic has led infectious disease to be recognised as the most significant hazard in the modern world only for the shorter term (10 years) [2] (p. 7).

The phenomena surrounding the pandemic have had an impact on migration processes. The closure of borders and travel restrictions changed the dynamics of migration flows, especially in the first few months. These actions also resulted in changes to foreigners' entry and residence rules in many countries. In turn, restrictions to the ways of functioning of economies, including lockdowns of selected service industries, have significantly affected the professional and living situations of migrants [3]. It must also be borne in mind that, for migrants, the uncertainty about the further development of the pandemic situation and the related legal, economic and social consequences have overlapped with already existing social problems resulting from insufficient knowledge of the language of the host country, cultural difference and social distance, as well as marginalisation and social exclusion [4].

Information processes become crucial in a situation of risk, and concomitant uncertainty and social fears attending is essential. Access to official yet comprehensible messages (e.g., about the actual pandemic situation, pandemic policies or restrictions in public spaces) has been crucial for everyone, including migrants. This is important because during the pandemic, the phenomenon of misinformation has increased [5], reinforcing a general sense of information chaos.

Therefore, the new situation has highlighted the importance of information processes in migration policy. The pandemic has revealed the importance of access to reliable information in the context of aim 8.8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8). The protection of workers' rights and promotion of a safe working environment are areas in which employers have a special role. The awareness of the importance of quality relations between employers and employees has been developed in practices such as employer branding, corporate social responsibility or sustainable organization. The experiences and solutions that were adopted during the pandemic can play key roles in subsequent emergencies that affect the dynamics of migratory movements.

The analysis is pursued through the observation of Ukrainian migrants in Poland, who are the largest group of work migrants in the country. Labour immigration to Poland used to be distinguished by its short-term character (including seasonal) and high level of legality of stay. With the outbreak of war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, many labour market solutions are being re-evaluated, if only due to the fact that migration is dominated by refugee women with children. The need for information support concerns not only existing Ukrainian labour migrants, but especially female war refugees who have to organize their lives and their families from scratch. Less than a month after the outbreak of war, we see how important it is for employers to get involved in building an equitable labour market for those already in it and those about to enter it.

These issues prompted us to look at top-down, one-way communication processes between central state institutions (responsible for creating and implementing migration policy) and migrants under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this kind of transmission process, the recipient's adoption of a message that is at least close to the sender's intention is conditioned both socially (by the social structure) and culturally (by cognitive, expressive and value orientations and expectations) [6] (p. 66). When the cultural conditions of the sender (the state institutions in the host country) and the recipient (the immigrant) are different, intermediaries play an important role. By removing or minimising socio-cultural barriers in mass communication processes, they become important information channels, providing, translating and explaining to migrants the messages that are important from the point of view of their residence and work in the host country. In the network gatekeeping theory terms [7], such actors can act as gatekeepers who select information, letting some items pass and keeping others [8]. The gatekeeper conducts these activities using formal communication (e.g., within an employment relationship) and informal communication (in everyday interaction).

In this paper, we ask about how migrants from Ukraine obtained information on new legal regulations or restrictions on behaviour in the public space and professional environment during the pandemic. We hypothesise that in a crisis when the importance of information in the public sphere increases and, at the same time, direct social contacts are

limited, the role of employers as an information channel becomes apparent. Employers become a transmitter of information about state policy, regulations, and rules of conduct for migrants. To verify the adopted hypothesis, we formulate several detailed research questions, which we try to answer in the following parts of the paper: What are the characteristics of the Ukrainian migrant population in Poland? How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the level of employment of Ukrainian workers in Poland? What, if any, changes has Polish migration policy undergone during the pandemic? How has the government's information policy been conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially towards migrants? Through which information channels have Ukrainian migrants learned about the state policy towards the pandemic and the introduced sanitary requirements? In our view, the analysis of these questions adds value to the current state of knowledge on migrants' information channels in a crisis. Our results also have broader cognitive implications, revealing migrants' need for information during a crisis.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Methods

The matters in the paper are considered on the grounds of political studies on migration policy in the receiving country and refer to the social network theory of migrants. Political studies on migration policy cover a wide spectrum of issues [9]. These include the multi-threaded subject of the influence of state policy [10] and other actors (e.g., political parties [11] on migration processes, as well as comparative analyses in the field of objectives, instruments and effects of migration policies [12–14]. The analyses included in this study are situated in the research stream encompassing studies on the formation of migration policies [15]. However, in our research, we decided to go beyond analysing the content of Polish migration policy (and its changes during the pandemic) towards capturing the communication processes applied by state institutions. The pandemic has shown the need for reliable information, the lack of which becomes a factor of social and professional exclusion, and hence we consider the question of informing migrants about the pandemic, who can support the state in carrying out the information function.

This issue has an indirect impact on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, in which migrants who generate profits for the economy are treated as subjects and their social interest is taken into account. In turn, referring to social network theory as applied to migration studies, we assume that migrant networks “are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and nonmigrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origin” [16] (p. 448). What is crucial for us is both the informality of the micro-social ties produced in the network and the fact that the actors involved are those making the decision to migrate or experiencing migration and non-migrants. Such actors as friends, work acquaintances, employers, and neighbours interact with migrants and contribute specific resources (e.g., knowledge) to their social networks, increasing their ability to cope with the migration situation or—in the long term—the process of settlement. Using the theory of migrant networks in our analyses, we focus on the perspective of personal networks, leaving aside the study of networks as separate, internally complex wholes. Using this type of temporal research on the networks of Ukrainian migrants in Poland, we consider to be important the observed significant role of networks for their acquisition of information regarding educational and professional needs, living conditions in their city, or legalisation of residence [17]. For our analysis, it is crucial to establish that significant actors in migrants' social networks can include employers. If a bond is formed between them and migrants, employers can be a source of information about labour market opportunities and even be actively involved in arranging new employment for migrants (by recommending a person to another employer). Moreover, employers provide important support, especially for foreign workers in the domestic work and construction sectors, in legalising their stay and employment.

Our research found that the analysis of the communication processes between state institutions and migrants required both the examination of the message formulated by the sender and the disclosure of the channels through which these messages reached the

recipient. For the messages formulated by decisionmakers, the subject of our considerations is the institutional and legal settlements within Polish migration policy before and during the pandemic (e.g., changes in residence and employment procedures).

These issues are analysed using the content analysis method, which reveals the content of messages concerning specific provisions in the area of rules of entry, stay, or condition of work by foreigners, and the decision-making method, which was applied in identifying key migration policy decisions of the Polish authorities during the pandemic period.

To find out which migrants used information channels in terms of acquiring knowledge about introduced restrictions and sanitary requirements concerning behaviour in the public space and professional environment, we conducted our survey. This was carried out on a sample of Ukrainian economic migrants residing in Poland. It was non-representative and conducted with a non-random selection of participants. This was done in the period from May to June 2020, when legal, economic and social changes concerning migrants had already taken place. The adopted research technique was a quantitative questionnaire, carried out with the Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) technique using the Google Forms platform. The rationale for choosing the research technique was the situation of total lockdown in Poland, which meant that it was the only possible solution to provide access to the respondents while ensuring their anonymity and voluntary participation. The survey was available in three language versions: Polish, Ukrainian and Russian. It was distributed through social media (Facebook accounts of migrant organisations, and foundations supporting migrants). Another dissemination channel was through members of the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland (e.g., Association of Ukrainians in Poland, and Ukrainian House). Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents had the right to refuse or withdraw from participation at any time during the survey. An important factor affecting the validity and reliability of the data obtained is trust in the researchers and the institutions they represent. Non-governmental organizations permanently cooperating with migrants from Ukraine strengthened the credibility of the research team, which fostered the respondents' sense of security. Thus, a low percentage of incomplete responses was obtained—only 62 questionnaires were rejected due to selective filling. The survey in the native language not only increased the effectiveness of dissemination in migrant circles, but also strengthened the reliability of the researchers.

### 3. Features of Immigration to Poland

In the last decade, Poland has undergone the transformation from an emigration state to an immigration state. Compared to the rest of Europe, immigration in Poland is distinguished by three features: (1) definite domination of migrants from non-EU neighbouring countries, including, first of all, citizens of Ukraine; (2) a persistent predominance of temporary immigration, taking the form of short-term (up to 6 months) and seasonal (up to 9 months); and (3) the superiority of economic motivation among other reasons for immigration, which translates into a high percentage of employed persons in the total population of migrants in Poland.

Migrants to Poland are mainly citizens of neighbouring countries (Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia). There are also Indians, Georgians, Vietnamese and Turks. They are attracted by the Polish labour market, including obtaining far higher wages. Other advantages for migrants from neighbouring states include geographical proximity and cultural and language similarities. Also of significance are the liberalised rules of access for citizens of these countries to the Polish labour market, which have been in place for over a decade (introduction of a simplified employment procedure, including seasonal work). This is facilitated by the Schengen Borders Code concerning the conditions of entry of selected categories of citizens of neighbouring countries to Poland under the Local Border Traffic (Since July 2009, the Agreement on Local Border Traffic between Poland and Ukraine has been in force. Based on this agreement, Ukrainian nationals residing in the border zone—the area extending 30 km from the border—do not need visas, but only local border traffic permits entitling them to multiple crossings of the Polish border. Poland signed

similar agreements with the Russian Federation and Belarus. Still, the agreement with Belarus never entered into force, and the agreement with the Russian Federation was suspended in 2016.) and the *Karta Polaka* (Pole's Card). Equally important is abolishing the visa requirement for Ukrainian citizens holding biometric passports (in 2017).

These push-and-pull factors have caused the foreign population in Poland to be dominated by migrants from Ukraine. The scale of the influx of citizens of this country has been systematically increasing since 2014 (the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict). According to estimates of Statistics Poland, at the end of 2015, there were 283,700 Ukrainians aged 18 and over in Poland; a year later, this population already increased to 455,000 [18]. By the end of December 2019, their number had reached 1,351,418, thus constituting 64.2% of all migrants [19].

The second feature of immigration in Poland is its temporariness. Data from 2016 indicate that the vast majority (71%) of foreigners stayed in Poland for less than a year (3–12 months). About 29% stayed for longer [18]. This was also true of Ukrainian migrants, who in 2020 accounted for 94% of all applications for legalisation of stay in Poland [20]. However, not all of them applied for a temporary (or permanent) residence permit. Indeed, data from the Office for Foreigners and the Statistics Poland show that at the end of 2019, about 16% of this community had a residence permit. This situation is related to the fact that Ukrainian immigration is temporary and almost entirely labour immigration. Migrants from Ukraine can reside for this purpose without applying for a temporary residence permit. They can either stay for less than three months at a time or use solutions, such as residence in connection with seasonal work.

A general feature of immigration to Poland is the predominance of arrivals for work purposes that do not require high skills and belong to the so-called secondary sector of the labour market. At the end of 2016, more than 473,000 foreigners held work permits [18]. Apart from them, some persons were exempted from the need to have a permit (This group includes EU citizens, persons under international protection, persons holding a permanent residence permit or a long-term resident's EU residence permit issued in the Republic of Poland, the Card of the Pole, students and graduates of full-time studies in Poland and some persons arriving under family reunification. In 2020, this group was expanded to include, among others, foreigners staying in Poland on the basis of humanitarian visas and visas with the annotation 'Poland. Business Harbour', and doctors, nurses, and paramedics, all with the right to practise their profession in Poland.) or were illegally employed. In subsequent years, the figures trended upward, mainly due to Ukrainians, who in 2019 accounted for 74.4% (335,540 persons) of all foreigners working on the basis of a permit [21] (p. 8). They also predominated among migrants employed under a statement on entrusting work to a foreigner registered in the register: in 2020, 90% of permits issued went to them (p. 12). In addition, Ukrainians dominated the group of people with seasonal work permits, obtaining about 99% (c. 130,000) of all permits of this type issued in 2020 (p. 14). These trends are referred to as the 'Ukrainisation' of labour immigration to Poland [22] (p. 222).

#### 4. The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Employment of Ukrainians in Poland

The state of epidemic threat, introduced in Poland in March 2020, and then the epidemic itself, were accompanied by decisions of state authorities directly related to migration flows (e.g., a sanitary cordon at the border) and the formal and legal situation of migrants residing and working in Poland. These actions, combined with health concerns and the growing uncertainty about the further development of the epidemic situation in Poland and its social and professional consequences, clearly influenced the decisions of Ukrainians to come to Poland and whether to remain. However, it appears that as the pandemic went on (irrespective of the incidence rates of COVID-19 in Poland at any given time), its impact on the migration decisions of Ukrainians diminished.

Statistics on crossings of the Polish–Ukrainian border show a 63% fall in 2020 compared to 2019. In 2020, there were 3,769,682 entries from Ukraine into Poland, compared with 10,416,844 in 2019 [23]. Particularly high numbers of departures of Ukrainian nationals

from Poland occurred in the first two months of the pandemic; that is, March and April 2020. It is estimated that approximately 160,000 Ukrainian migrants left; approximately 11.5% of the population resided in Poland at that time [19] (p. 2).

In the following months, both the dynamics of passenger traffic on the border with Ukraine and the number of Ukrainians coming to Poland fell even further, compared to the pre-pandemic period. In the first half of 2021, the Polish Border Guard recorded over 2.6 times fewer entries of Ukrainian citizens into Poland and nearly 2.7 times fewer crossings of the Polish–Ukrainian border by foreigners than in the same period of 2019 [24,25].

On the other hand, the balance of immigration of Ukrainians to Poland had started to increase. In the first three months of 2021, 896,883 entries into Poland were recorded at the Polish–Ukrainian border, which was admittedly only 40% of the number of entries in the same period in 2020, just before the outbreak of the pandemic. However, importantly, during this period, as many as 300,293 more people entered Poland than left, whereas in the first quarter of 2020, the balance was 176,000 people [26].

The greater ratio of the number of registered entries of Ukrainian citizens into Poland to the number of departures may be connected to the persistent, structural demand for foreign workers in the Polish labour market. According to the ministry's assessment in charge of the labour market in Poland, despite the ongoing pandemic, "the demand of employers for foreign workers remained virtually unchanged" [23] (p. 2). Already from the end of May 2020—the start of the period of intensive seasonal work in agriculture and horticulture—a renewed increase in demand for foreign labour could be observed. Before the pandemic, sectors of seasonal work that employed many Ukrainians also included tourist and catering services. However, due to pandemic constraints, these sectors did not generate foreign workers' labour demand in the 2020 summer period on the same scale as in previous years.

It should be emphasised, though, that from May 2020, an increase could be observed not only in the number of applications and permits issued for seasonal work for foreigners, but also in the number of applications for granting a work permit for a foreigner and the number of declarations on entrusting work to a foreigner [23] (pp. 4–9). The activity of migrants in the Polish labour market is also confirmed by the data on applications by foreigners for social insurance in 2020. While the first months of the pandemic saw a decrease in the number of insured foreigners, the numbers started to rise from the second half of 2020. The Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) reported that December 2020 set a record for the number of persons registered for insurance. In the following months, the number continued to grow. At the end of April 2021, it amounted to over 780,000 foreigners. Ukrainian citizens constituted the largest group (75%); their numbers increased in the following months (the increase in April 2021 compared to March was 10,300) [27].

In 2020, foreign workers, among whom the citizens of Ukraine predominated, were employed primarily in manufacturing, construction, transport and storage, and administrative and support services. The pandemic did not change the positions in which foreigners were employed, regardless of whether they had a work permit or worked based on a statement. In 2020, foreigners were most frequently employed as employees performing simple works, industrial workers and craftsmen, and operators and assemblers of machines and devices. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in professions committed by migrants in Poland, the pandemic has posed particular challenges. Due to the nature of the tasks performed, whether in the construction sector, agriculture, transport services or industry, there was no possibility to switch to remote work, which increased the risk of virus infection [28]). This situation also applied to jobs in low-skilled occupations; at the same time, migrants (mainly women) were positioned as so-called key workers 'indispensable' for the functioning of European economies [29].

In conclusion, the pandemic has not significantly reduced the scale of immigration to Poland or the demand for foreign workers in the long term. In February 2021, the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology reported that the demand for their labour is at a level comparable to before the pandemic [23] (p. 2).

## 5. Immigration Policy and the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Polish authorities introduced special legislation to regulate migrants' residence and work. On this basis, legal residence and employment (in the form of a work permit, seasonal work or a statement on entrusting work to a foreigner) were extended for the entire duration of the epidemic emergency or epidemic state and 30 days after its cessation [30]. This applied to migrants who arrived in Poland before 14 March 2020; that is, before the date on which the epidemic emergency was declared [31]. However, the extension of residence permits did not allow travel between countries. A foreigner could leave Poland, but they could not re-enter after leaving. The law provisions allow a foreigner to perform work under conditions other than those specified in the documents authorising legal employment and stay, provided that the entity commissioning the work to a foreigner made use of the anti-crisis-shield solutions concerning the modification of employment conditions. Foreign workers employed on the basis of a seasonal permit and a statement on entrustment of work were also subject to special regulations if their documents were valid for a minimum of one day in the period after 14 March 2020. In this case, migrants could take up employment without needing to apply for a new document and provide work until the 30th day following the date of cancellation of the epidemiological emergency or pandemic state. Additionally, foreigners legally residing in Poland were granted a one-time standstill benefit (art. 15zq sec. 2 item 3). This support concerned persons working on the basis of civil law contracts concluded before 1 April 2020 or running non-agricultural businesses.

Moreover, the deadline for providing social assistance and medical care to foreigners under international protection in Poland was extended. This concerned persons whose period of entitlement to such aid expired during an epidemiological emergency or pandemic (art. 15z<sup>8</sup>). The deadline for foreigners to leave the territory of Poland was extended if it fell during the epidemic emergency or pandemic until the expiry of the 30th day following the cancellation of these states (art. 15zzza). The above solutions also applied to the extension of the deadline for the voluntary return of the foreigner (art. 15zzzb). The introduction of a state of epidemic threat or epidemic in Poland did not cause any changes in the residence law for citizens of European Union member states, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) or the Swiss Confederation, or their family members residing with them.

The period of the epidemic state coincided with a time when Polish migration policy was being developed. It is characterised by ad-hocness and a lack of long-term vision. It also shows the characteristics of a selective approach: that is, one aimed at accepting a specific group of migrants selected on the basis of their skills and origin. Thus, in Poland, the second cycle of migration policymaking, its formulation, is dominant [32] (p. 17).

The first document providing assumptions and guidelines for policy in this area was *Migration Policy of—Current State and Postulated Actions*, adopted in 2012 and cancelled after five years. While it was in force, a plan for its implementation was adopted, which was also withdrawn (in 2016). A year later, in the *Strategy for Responsible Development*, the Council of Ministers decided to develop a new migration policy in the form of a comprehensive document [33]. Its preparation was entrusted to the Migration Team of the Minister of Interior and Administration (MSWiA), which presented a draft of the new migration policy of Poland on 10 June 2019. This act still has the status of a draft. In December 2020, another document was made public: *Migration Policy of Poland—Diagnosis of the Initial State*. This was a description of the migration situation, supplemented by challenges and risks in this area. It was the basis for preparing the implementing document for 2021; the Ministry of the Interior and Administration had recognised that migration policy would be implemented based on annual plans [34]. The document, entitled *Migration Policy of Poland—Directions of Activities 2021–2022*, was adopted in July 2021. It exceptionally covered two years 'due to difficulties related to the presence of a pandemic' [35] (p. 2).

The abovementioned documents devote little space to information issues addressed to participants in migration processes. The 2012 Act deserves mention in this regard due to its implementation plan. It includes a separate item entitled *Public Information*, in which

information policy is considered an important dimension of Polish migration policy. It was proposed to create a single database covering such issues, as the information foreigners sought was dispersed, difficult to access, and did not consider the language barrier [36] (p. 128). Apart from this fragment, references to information policy concerned the possibility to study in Poland, openness and tolerance measures, reintegration periods of migrants and legal work and stay in Poland.

The implementation plan for the document *Migration Policy of Poland—Current State and Postulated Actions* did not change the scope of information activities aimed at migrants [37]. It proposed (1) the development of information materials (leaflets) on the possibility to take up short-term work in Poland, and translating them into the languages of the countries whose citizens can perform work in connection with a registered statement; (2) analysing the transfer of information to foreigners and employers on the rules and conditions of employment of foreign workers in Poland; and (3) maintaining Internet portals and developing information materials and brochures on the rights of foreigners, including on legal employment.

The June 2019 draft document *Migration Policy of Poland* was very poor in terms of conducting an active information policy among migrants. The issue was only referred to in the context of opportunities to study in Poland and the dissemination of information in migrants' countries of origin about legal immigration opportunities pointing out the consequences of violating immigration laws [38] (pp. 16, 18). The theme of dissemination of legal knowledge was continued in the next act, being a diagnosis of the initial state for the new migration policy [39]. This stated that work was underway to translate information into English on the rights and obligations of foreigners and employers (in the EU) in the field of social security (pension rights) (p. 42). The Chief Labour Inspectorate has also launched a helpline for foreigners (in Ukrainian and Russian) on the principles of legal performance of work in Poland, publications in paper and electronic form, and an information and education campaign 'I work legally', aimed at raising legal awareness among employers and foreign workers (pp. 51, 52).

The analysis of the above documents shows that information policy addressed to migrants has not been a widespread issue. When it is referred to, it is mainly in the context of the legal employment of foreigners. There has been no mention of channels of information flow from various institutions implementing migration policy to migrants. The need to create a knowledge base for incoming foreigners and the receiving society should be considered. There is also a need for documents addressed to migrants to be written in languages they can understand.

## 6. Government Information Policy during COVID-19

Epidemics are crises accompanied by chaos and uncertainty. Therefore, it is essential to provide reliable information at such times, which explains the problematic situation to reduce the phenomenon of so-called fake news. Communication channels are also important, as messages will be effective if they reach as many people as possible. Such effectiveness will impact the fight against the epidemic and the level of public confidence. Another element is the content of the message, which should be easy to understand, straightforward and factually correct. As noted by the World Health Organisation, this is important because the pandemic was accompanied by *infodemia*: a wave of disinformation consisting of the dissemination of distorted information, which made it difficult for people to find reliable sources, resulting in anxiety [40].

The information policy of state bodies on COVID-19 was mainly based on organising press conferences, giving interviews, and communicating news via social media, websites of government institutions or a special website, [www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus](http://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus) (accessed on 25 June 2021) (three foreign-language versions: English, Ukrainian and Russian). Communication activities were mostly undertaken by the Ministry of Health and the Prime Minister's Office. The government established a monopoly on information about the development of the pandemic. Epidemiologists and representatives of hospitals subordinate to

the Ministry of Health were forbidden to speak in the media about the situation in their institutions. This appalled the medical community [41].

Limits to direct interpersonal contacts and people being kept in their homes resulted in greater popularity of Internet sources of information, television and radio broadcasts at the expense of the printed press. The dynamic course of the pandemic introduced information chaos, which was disadvantageous for Polish citizens, but even more so for migrants. The language barrier was often the reason for their lack of information. This phenomenon was accompanied by information uncertainty related to the source of news and unconfirmed data. Indeed, migrants most often based their migration decisions on knowledge from the migration network: a combination of information from state institutions, NGOs and migrants' experiences [42] (p. 2). Their channel of communication was social media.

During the pandemic period, foreigners could obtain information from official government messages and the websites of various institutions. Among them were the Office for Foreigners and the Chief Labour Inspectorate. This mainly concerned the issue of legal residence and employment. In March 2020, information chaos crept in, due to the suspension of direct services by the Office for Foreigners, except for 'absolutely necessary' matters (from 16 March) and the closure of the Polish–Ukrainian border. The latter resulted from the closure of the state border announced on 26 March 2020 by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and the suspension of passenger traffic (after 27 March). This caused panic among Ukrainians staying in Poland who were deciding to return home. Crowds of people appeared at border crossings—on one day, 27 March, about 18,000 Ukrainians left [43]. Zelensky's inaccurate information was corrected at 4 PM that day by Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's foreign minister, who said that the border would remain open to citizens and could be crossed on foot or by car [44].

Voivodeship offices were another channel of information for foreigners. They published news in Polish, English, Ukrainian and Russian, mainly on the legalisation of stay (issuing residence cards, submitting applications for extending visas or granting temporary residence permits). Particular information pages were also dedicated to the issues of transport, education or medical assistance. NGOs were also involved in providing information, as well.

## 7. Survey Results—Information Channels Used by Migrants

To determine the channels through which Ukrainian migrants acquired information about the state's activities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sanitary requirements being introduced, a survey was implemented on a non-random sample of economic migrants from Ukraine [45]. A total of 617 people participated in the survey, including 440 women (71.31%) and 177 men (28.69%). The largest group of respondents were people staying in Poland for one year and over (481 people, 77.96%), with 251 (40.68%) staying between 2 and 5 years (including breaks), 127 (20.58%) for between 1 and 2 years and 103 (16.69%) for over 5 years. Only 113 respondents (18.31%) were staying for between 4 and 12 months and only 23 (3.73%) for less than 4 months. This means that most of the collected opinions came from long-term migrants. The sample was dominated by people settled in the receiving country, with an established network of contacts with the migrant diaspora and Polish acquaintances.

The majority of respondents were living in large cities (100,000–500,000 inhabitants—211/34.20%; over 500,000 inhabitants—169/27.39%). Respondents living in medium-sized cities (10,000–100,000 inhabitants) numbered 116 (18.80%), while only 52 (8.43%) resided in small towns (under 10,000 inhabitants). Only a few (69 persons/11.18%) had decided to live in rural areas or near urban agglomerations (57 persons/9.24%). The scope of the survey covered the whole of Poland. However, the highest percentage of answers was obtained from the following provinces in Zachodniopomorskie (203 persons), Mazowieckie (101), Pomorskie (72), Wielkopolskie (55), Małopolskie (34), Śląskie (32) and Dolnośląskie (27). The fewest responses were received from Eastern Poland in Świętokrzyskie (1 respondent),

Podlaskie (2), Podkarpackie (4) and Warmińsko-Mazurskie (5). The research was conducted among people of working age.

Respondents' sources for information about the pandemic (Table 1) included employers (15.91%), social media (15.32%), circles of friends (15.17%), Polish acquaintances (13.33%) and information leaflets (13.18%). Secondary importance was attributed to messages from mass media—that is, radio, TV, press (7.81%); family members (6.48%); other migrants (4.64%) and NGOs (3.98%). Only a few respondents mentioned Ukrainian minority organisations (1.84%), neighbours (1.69%) or clergy or religious communities (0.66%). The results obtained did not differ significantly by gender.

**Table 1.** Respondents' answers to the question on where they got information about measures introduced during the pandemic, by gender and irrespective of the length of stay.

Row Labels	Sex				Overall	
	Female		Male		N	%
	N	%F *	N	%M *	N	%
From conversations with the employer	142	15.4%	74	16.82%	216	15.91%
From the page on FB	147	16.0%	61	13.86%	208	15.32%
From conversations with colleagues	134	14.6%	72	16.36%	206	15.17%
From conversations with Polish friends	117	12.7%	64	14.55%	181	13.33%
From information leaflets	122	13.2%	57	12.95%	179	13.18%
Other sources (mainly media)	77	8.39%	29	6.59%	106	7.81%
From talking to family members	66	7.19%	22	5.00%	88	6.48%
From conversations with migrant friends	42	4.58%	21	4.77%	63	4.64%
From NGO information	37	4.03%	17	3.86%	54	3.98%
From information from the Ukrainian minority organisation	12	1.31%	13	2.95%	25	1.84%
From conversations with neighbours	16	1.74%	7	1.59%	23	1.69%
From conversations with priests/clergy	6	0.65%	3	0.68%	9	0.66%

Note: Respondents could choose up to 6 sources of information, %F/M\*—percentage.

When choosing information channels, respondents could indicate 6 out of 12 without gradation. As noted earlier, almost 16% chose their employer. This may come as a surprise, as previous research on migrants' social networks has attributed a dominant role to social media [46]. Responses indicating the employer did not differ significantly by gender, length of stay in Poland or number of persons in the household. However, a seemingly statistically significant relationship was found between the age of migrants and the frequency of indicating the employer as the transmitter of information. Respondents aged between 19 and 29 indicated this information channel less frequently than those aged 50–59. On the other hand, people under 29 mentioned social media more often than those over 50. In the course of the analysis of the data in Table 2, a significant relationship was found between the consequences that the pandemic had had on the lives of the migrants surveyed and whether they had used an employer as a relay of information about the restrictions

associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The differences in the groups citing and not citing an employer were small but statistically significant. Respondents who did not mention an employer as a source of information were more likely to be looking for work, dependent on family/relatives, be redundant or on unpaid leave.

**Table 2.** Cross-tabulation of the migrant’s labour market situation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic with the employer as the information channel.

How Has the Pandemic Affected Your Labour Market Situation?		Pointing to the Employer as a Channel of Information on Pandemic Measures	
		Yes	Not
I am looking for a job	N	9	47
	%	4.23%	11.63%
I am not looking for a job	N	204	357
	%	9.77%	88.37%
Total (columns)	N	213	404
	%	100.00%	100.00%
I am on compulsory unpaid leave	N	3	17
	%	1.41%	4.21%
I am not on compulsory unpaid leave	N	210	387
	%	98.59%	95.79%
Total (columns)	N	213	404
	%	100.00%	100.00%
I was dismissed due to pandemic	N	16	48
	%	7.51%	11.88%
I was not dismissed due to pandemic	N	197	356
	%	92.49%	88.12%
Total (columns)	N	213	404
	%	100.00%	100.00%
I am now dependent on family	N	0	56
	%	0.00%	13.86%
I am now not dependent on family	N	213	348
	%	100.00%	86.14%
Total (columns)	N	213	404
	%	100.00%	100.00%

Note: N = 617.

In addition, the survey also asked about the employer–employee relationship during the pandemic, which could relate to the employer’s role as an information channel. Table 3 shows that the vast majority of surveyed migrants believed that the COVID-19 pandemic did not change their employer’s attitude towards them (87.44%). Over half of the surveyed migrants thought that they had a good relationship with their employer, which manifested itself in the fact that they could always count on their help (56.4%). A third of migrants declared that their employer was not supportive, and that the pandemic situation had not changed this (33.44%). Only 6.48% of the responses indicated that the employer’s relationship with the employee had deteriorated, and 5.67% that it had improved. Migrants to whom their employer had provided information during the pandemic were slightly more likely to indicate a good relationship with the employer before the crisis (64.32%). Those whose employer was not supportive were less likely to indicate the employer as providing information during the pandemic. Most respondents believed that Poles had been friendly towards them before the pandemic, and this relationship had not changed (69.50%). Only 19.10% believed that these relations were negative before the pandemic and remained unchanged during the examined period. Deterioration of relations was noted by 9.20% of respondents, while improvement was indicated by only 2.10%. This means that the pandemic has not significantly impacted the attitudes of employers and the host society towards migrants from Ukraine.

**Table 3.** Cross-tabulation of indications of the employer as a channel of information versus opinion on whether the pandemic has affected employer–employee relations.

Identifying the Employer as a Channel of Information on Pandemic Measures		How The Pandemic Has Affected Employer–Employee Relations?				Total
		The Employer’s Attitude towards Me Has Improved	The Employer’s Attitude towards Me Has Not Changed—The Employer Has Always Helped Me	The Employer’s Attitude Towards Me Has Not Changed—The Employer Has Not Helped Me Before	The Employer’s Attitude towards Me Worsened	
Yes	Number of	12	137	54	10	213
	% (rows)	5.63%	64.32%	25.35%	4.69%	100.00%
No (no indication of employer)	Number of	23	211	140	30	404
	% (rows)	5.69%	52.23%	34.65%	7.43%	100.00%
Total	Number of	35	348	194	40	617
	% (rows)	5.67%	56.40%	31.44%	6.48%	100.00%

Note:  $N = 617$ .

One other possible factor in the importance of the employer for the migrant’s information support network was the extent to which strictures and special individual and collective pandemic protection measures were introduced in workplaces. Rules such as #DDMAW (Distance Disinfection Mask #stopCovid Application Airing) are largely applied to the workplace as well as other everyday situations. It should be noted that the study was carried out at the beginning of the pandemic when epidemic procedures and regulations were introduced for the first time in history, and administrative actions at various levels were implemented ad hoc, regardless of whether they were addressed to Polish citizens or foreigners.

## 8. Discussion and Conclusions

The pandemic as an emergency situation entailing restrictions on mobility between countries did not significantly affect the migration decisions of Ukrainians. Disregarding the difficult epidemiological situation, they continued to make decisions on immigration to Poland, guided by individual profit and loss calculations. Others remained in Poland to wait out the crisis.

The pandemic has exposed the dependence of the Polish economy on migrant labour and has also shown the deficiencies in migration policy. The primary deficit we have highlighted was the Polish government’s information policy on the pandemic. We focused on the recipients (i.e., migrants from Ukraine) and the channels of transmitting information to them. We showed that the discussed policy was implemented in the form of press conferences by the Minister of Health; only the Office for Foreigners, a few NGOs and authorities of some cities provided information in a language other than Polish on their websites.

From the survey used in this study, it can be concluded that during the pandemic, a social network with an information support function for Ukrainians residing in Poland has become apparent. This includes employers, social media, circles of friends and Polish acquaintances. Mass media, family members, other migrants and NGOs have played lesser roles in providing information. Organisations of the Ukrainian minority, neighbours or clergymen and religious communities have been of marginal importance as information channels. It should be noted that up to now, employers have not been taken into account in migration policy as a direct channel of information for migrants.

From the analyses in the paper, it can be seen that in migrants’ social networks, the employer has acted as a channel of information about sanitary restrictions. Several conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, the role of an information channel that employers have played, consciously or unconsciously, leads us to see this group not only from

a strictly economic position, but also in terms of their social role. In other words, we note the expansion of the employer's role from a mere provider of labour (economic) to a transmitter of information (social). However, this new function of employers in the social networks of migrants has to be seen in light of two important factors that may influence how employers provide informational support. The first is the specificity of the employer–employee relationship, which has the character of a superior–subordinate relationship. The placing of the migrant (employee) in a position of dependence on the employer may strengthen the perception of employers as trustworthy. At the same time, this relationship gives the employer additional opportunities to manipulate information. In this sense, the employer behaves like a gatekeeper who selects information in the context of the business and disseminates it to employees. The second factor is the fact that employers are a specific interest group. Regardless of how migrants perceive them and what additional social functions they ascribe to them, the essential function of employers remains that of job providers. This results in migrants being perceived by employers as a resource: a factor of production. This role may also influence the content of the messages from employers to migrants.

Secondly, the assignment of an information function to the employer in a crisis such as a pandemic, when the importance of access to reliable information increases, testifies to the migrants' perception of employers being an important channel of information. Employers become the 'interpreters' of the complex social reality of the host country [47]. The fact that migrants attribute this function to employers may indicate to state institutions that they too should consider this broader social role of employers in their migration policies. It is equally essential to recommend measures to make employers aware of their social role towards migrants. Such actions would aim to strengthen the sense of responsibility of employers for the messages they provide to migrants.

It should also be noted that up to now, the representatives of employers have acted in the processes of shaping migration policy as entities representing the labour market and have played an important role in creating policy solutions regarding the rules and conditions of employing migrants. However, as the results of the survey show, they can also fulfil social functions. Their advantage is their daily and direct contact with the migrant.

Our study, conducted in the first two months of the pandemic, has become very timely with the outbreak of the Ukrainian–Russian war. The information chaos and uncertainty of migrants is recurring, proving once again how important reliable information is. After a few weeks, refugees in the host country are already looking for employment and information about their rights on the labour market. We can predict that for new refugee workers, the employer will also become an important element of the information network.

In light of labour market segmentation theory, labour market barriers against certain groups of people are created to advance capitalist interests, and the institutions and prejudices of employers foster these boundaries. From the employers' perspective, the preference criteria of migrants competing for jobs in the secondary labour market depend on the anticipated investment needed to prepare the worker for work, as well as their anticipated time working for them and the risk of taking alternative social roles other than work [48]. In this view, Ukrainian refugee women have a less desirable worker profile than Ukrainian labour migrants. The willingness of a war refugee to enter into a long-term contract of service towards an employer is probably lower than that of a labour migrant. It is possible that a sub-segment of the secondary labour market will emerge in the Polish labour market in sectors where Ukrainian labour migrants have most frequently been employed as a result of negative selection: pre-war labour migrants and post-war war refugees. However, this does not change the fact that employers will continue to play the role of transmitters of information for migrants and refugees about the changing successive legal conditions of their status in Poland. It is also valuable to explore new theoretical concepts that explain the determinants of households' strategic decisions, such as NELM [49]. This will allow us to look at the process of affecting the information available on migrants' rational decisions to

leave or stay, especially as changes on the Polish labour market together with the situation of refugees will require constant monitoring.

If the promotion of stable, sustainable and inclusive human development is close to our hearts, then the experience of the pandemic may be appropriate to the challenge posed by the Ukraine–Russia war. The problem of migrant livelihood in the host country requires not only a proper migration policy of the host country, but also taking into account the information policy for the protection of workers' rights and the promotion of a safe working environment for all, including migrant workers and especially refugee women. The presence of migrants in European societies is recognized as an important factor of sustainable development, not only because they generate income, are taxpayers, establish companies, generate jobs, are consumers, etc., but because they reformulate state policies in the direction of social inclusion. In light of the Polish Act of 12 March 2022 on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine, any employer entrusting work to a Ukrainian citizen is obliged to inform the district labour office within 14 days. Such an application must contain data that the migrant must obtain in advance (e.g., PESEL). The PESEL number is an identification number given to every Polish citizen when they are born and registered in Poland. In this context, the employer can act as an information intermediary, so to speak, setting a path for the legalisation of the migrant's stay. It is possible because that legal act, in fact, has equalised access to the labour market for war refugees.

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