International migration of Ukrainian citizens to Central Europe before the Russo–Ukrainian wars

Katalin Lipták
Institute of World and Regional Economics, University of Miskolc, Hungary
E-mail: liptak.katalin@uni-miskolc.hu

Áron Kincses
Institute of World and Regional Economics, University of Miskolc, Hungary
E-mail: aron.kincses@ksh.hu

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The Russo–Ukrainian war has resulted in a continuous and large-scale forced migration from Ukraine to Central and Western Europe. The movement patterns and the distribution of destinations differ significantly from the 2015 refugee crisis. The aim of our study is to present the characteristics of Ukrainian international migration in the period before the Russo–Ukrainian war, to contextualize these movements demographically and economically and to draw attention to the crucial role of Hungary and the Visegrád countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) in Ukrainian migration.

Introduction

In our study, we not only describe Ukrainian migration before 2022 but also seek to explore the deeper context of this phenomenon. The more exhaustive aim of our study is to explore the objective and subjective social, economic, geopolitical and demographic forces that are responsible for and shape the development of migration patterns (Massey 2004, Sirkeci 2009).

The emigration of Ukrainians did not commence with the Russo–Ukrainian war of 2022. The war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 directed the spotlight on Ukraine, but the exodus had started earlier (Borbély 2015).

Ukraine had already become the largest labor emitter on the European continent before 2014, with 1.2 million people working abroad in 2012 (Sushko et al. 2016). With regard to the migration of Ukrainian citizens, most people point out that it is mainly not a definitive move but one of regular return migration. Circulation is also associated with multiple residences and, where appropriate, citizenship and possibly multiple identities (Illés–Kincses 2009).

The emergence of large numbers of Ukrainian citizens is more a Central European phenomenon than a Western European one (Levytska 2022, Górny–Sleszynski 2019).

The current refugee flow is not independent of past migration patterns. The core concept of migration network theory is that personal contacts and the associated network of relationships play an important role in migration processes (Haug 2008). Potential migrants and migrant groups are more likely to choose destinations where they have more and reliable information (Gurak–Caces 1992). These links reduce the costs and risks of migration and increase the likelihood of getting a job (Carrington et al. 1996). Thus, the network can also help adapt to a new environment. The "paved way" of the emigration process is to maintain contact with those who have already emigrated, which can have a significant impact on subsequent migration decisions (Massey et al. 1993).

In the first part of this study, we review the general framework and changing factors of emigration from Ukraine in light of changes in the economic and political situation. In the second part, we aim to describe the Ukraine-born population living in Hungary. The data used in this study are official statistical data from Eurostat, the migration database of the United Nations (UN) and the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO).

The situation before the Russo–Ukrainian war

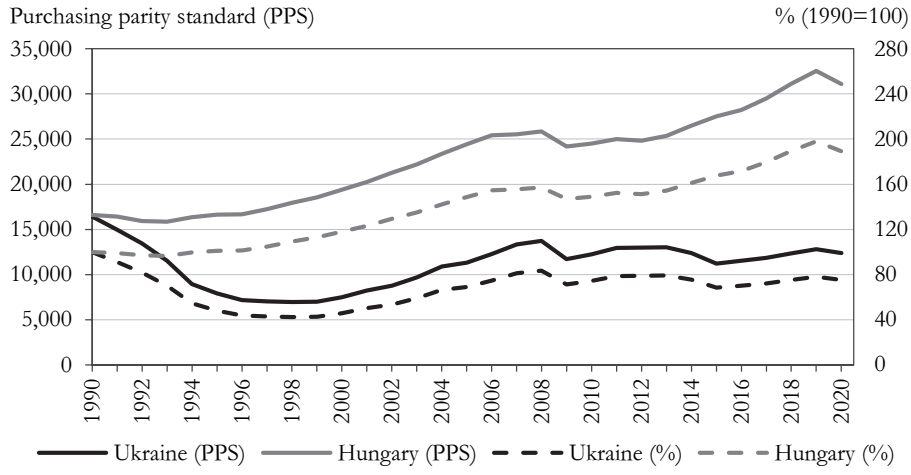
Socio-economic situation

In 1990, Hungary and Ukraine had almost the same economic performance at the time of the collapse of the Soviet and the COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) markets, but by 2020, Hungary's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was approximately two and a half times that of Ukraine. As the only country in the postsocialist region, Ukraine's GDP has still not reached its 1990 level (*even before the first Russo–Ukrainian war in 2014*), stagnating at approximately 70-75 percent of its 1990 level. In terms of GDP per capita, it is now the poorest country on the continent after Moldova.

Ukraine's crisis in economic terms did not start in 2014 (Erőss et al. 2016) (Figure 1). The Ukrainian economy has actually been in depression since 1990. Two main factors explain the dramatic fall in GDP. The Ukrainian economy was oversized before 1991 because of its substantial heavy and military industry at the level of the whole Soviet Union (Mrinska 2004), which was unnecessary to maintain at that size after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. On the other hand, even at the macro level, after 1991, the Ukrainian state had only weak control over the postsocialist economy that was developing in the country, dominated by oligarchs (Kuzio 2005, Bassa 2006). In other words, a significant share of economic output remained invisible to the state and was not directly reflected in GDP.

Figure 1

Trends in GDP per capita



Source: [1].

The poor economic situation in Ukraine is also closely linked to the country's regional diversity. In contrast to Belarus, which has followed a completely different path, Ukraine is not a monocentric country, i.e., it does not have only one dominant political-economic center (Karácsonyi 2019). However, this regional diversity is not reflected in any respect in the Ukrainian constitution adopted in 1996 (Fedinec 2013). In fact, the Ukrainian state also considers regionalization and linguistic diversity reflecting regional heterogeneity as an obstacle to nation-state consolidation (Fedinec 2018, Fedinec–Chernichko 2017, Karácsonyi–Kincses 2010, 2021).

The permanent economic crisis and growing social inequalities have led to discontent and ultimately to a huge population loss. Ukraine lost 12.8% of its total population, with only Georgia, the Baltic States, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armenia and Bulgaria losing more between 1992 and 2013 (Karácsonyi 2018). before the first Russo–Ukrainian conflict broke out. The dramatic increase in gas prices, soaring inflation and devaluation of the hryvnia were then strongly reflected in the rise in emigration (Erőss et al. 2018, Kovály et al. 2017).

The devaluation of the hryvnia against the currencies of the Visegrád countries has played a significant role in the increasing employment of Ukrainians in the West (Jaroszewicz 2015). The value of the Polish zloty and the Hungarian forint against the hryvnia increased by approximately 40% after the 2008 crisis, but by 2015, the value of these currencies in hryvnia had increased by more than 3.5 times compared to the 2007 exchange rate. For the Czech koruna and the euro, the same difference was more than 4.5 times in 2015. At the same time, the value of the Russian rouble in hryvnias increased by only 25% after 2008 and by only 75% over the whole period.[1]

[1] Calculated based on data from [2].

In other words, working in Russia has become increasingly less economically competitive compared to working in the Visegrád countries since 2008 and in particular since 2014. This is reflected in the declining role of Russia, previously a major host of migrant workers, and the increasing role of Poland in the employment of Ukrainian nationals (Pikulicka-Wilczewska–Uehling 2017).

Kin-state policy and geopolitical situation

For Ukraine as a whole, the escalation of geopolitical tensions into military conflict after 2014 was a new development, but direct armed clashes at that time "only" triggered a wave of internal refugees (Åslund 2018) and a refugee flow toward Russia. Sushko et al. (2016: p. 37) point out that the number of cases of people fleeing from the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine to an EU country was still very rare. The 2014 conflict in eastern Ukraine directly served as a temporary catalyst for the acceleration of legal migration flows (Drbohlav–Siedlova 2016).

The Visegrád countries have strengthened their national policy, humanitarian and recruitment presence in Ukraine since 2014, but their activities started long before 2014 (Levytska 2022, Erőss et al. 2016). Poland's role as a destination had already increased significantly between 2008 and 2012 (i.e., before the first war), while Russia's had decreased (Sushko et al. 2016, Jaroszewicz 2015, 2018). Migration links between today's Western Ukraine and the Czech Republic date back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Drbohlav–Siedlova 2016) and were particularly strong between the two world wars, when Carpathia was part of Czechoslovakia (Kovály–Čermáková 2016). The Czech Republic was the first among the Visegrád countries to regulate immigration in detail since the 2000s (Drbohlav–Siedlova 2016).

One of the first examples of the expanding administrative and material benefits was the Hungarian identity card, introduced in 2002 (Fedinec 2015), and in 2008, the karta polaka, or Polish identity card (Górny–Sleszynski 2019, Levytska 2022). As a consequence, the Visegrád countries have become a priority migration destination for Ukrainian citizens (Hormel–Southworth 2006). Since the summer of 2017, Ukrainian citizens can now travel visa-free to all Schengen Area countries. Since 2011, Hungary has also offered people of Hungarian ancestry from Ukraine the opportunity to obtain EU (Hungarian) citizenship through simplified naturalization and thus the right to work in the EU. In 2014, the Czech Republic not only introduced a work card (*zaměstnanecká karta*) to facilitate employment but also recognized dual citizenship, which in practice means that since 2014, the acquisition of Czech citizenship is no longer a precondition for officially renouncing one's previous citizenship (e.g., Ukrainian). Ukrainian citizens are also the largest foreign population group in Slovakia.

Western Ukraine is thus a major emitter of population to the Visegrád countries, not only for its geographical proximity and historical ties but also because of its relatively more favorable natural population flows compared to the rest of Ukraine, facilitated by its seasonal labor traditions. Jaroszewicz (2015) and Tátrai et al. (2018)

also emphasize that seasonal, long-distance commuting has a much stronger tradition in the western part of Ukraine than in the eastern part of the country.

Major migration destinations for Ukrainian citizens

According to the UN database, the migration of Ukrainian citizens by destination countries is typically to the more developed countries of the European Union (Table 1), but they have also resettled in countries outside Europe. In 2010, there were 5,433,315 Ukrainian citizens living outside their home country, 5,813,288 in 2015 and an estimated 6,062,426 in 2020, based on 2019 data. The most popular European destinations are Italy, Germany and Belarus. Poland was the most popular country among the Visegrád coutries, with 221,776 Ukrainian citizens settled there in 2020, representing 3.66% of the total Ukrainian migrant population. The Czech Republic received 111,118 persons (1.85%), Hungary 95,957 persons (1.58%) and Slovakia 10,991 persons (0.18%) in 2020. In 2020, 35% of Ukrainian migrants living in the EU-27 were in Visegrád countries. In comparison, 3.67% of the total migrant population living in the EU-27 was in the Visegrád countries, i.e., Ukrainian citizens were overrepresented in the Visegrád countries mostly due to the previously mentioned reasons.

Table 1

Total Ukrainian migrant population at mid-year by country of destination

Countries	2005	2010	2015	2020[a)]
Italy	117,957	213,559	222,938	249,814
Germany	186,103	211,279	220,141	244,864
Belarus	230,971	227,722	225,734	226,036
Poland	263,473	214,193	206,519	221,776
Czech Republic	73,905	124,172	100,664	111,881
Hungary	24,540	29,212	41,990	95,957
Spain	61,162	79,843	81,618	95,437
Portugal	28,315	41,047	46,533	47,985
Republic of Moldova	76,649	55,935	43,223	43,143
Latvia	47,145	39,933	34,080	31,577
United Kingdom	15,544	16,374	20,939	24,111
Estonia	24,004	23,350	21,770	22,759
Greece	18,198	20,687	19,416	19,227
Romania	13,131	14,032	11,900	18,602
Other	69,901	81,260	96,712	77,720
Europe (without Russia)	1,250,998	1,392,598	1,394,177	1,530,889

a) Data for 2020 estimated on the basis of 2019 data (assuming 1.4% growth based on average growth over the previous 5 years) exception: for Hungary, data from the HCSO were used.

Source: [3].

Analyzing data by gender (Akbash et al. 2019), the proportion of women migrants was higher than that of men in all periods. In 2005, 54% of migrant Ukrainian citizens were women; since 2010, 55% of migrants have been women in every period. The "feminization" of migration causes significant problems for the sending country, with gaps in Ukrainian eldercare resulting from the departure of women who would otherwise be caring for their aging parents (Tolstokorova 2010). The emerging financial crisis had a negative impact on migrants' expectations and income levels, but mass returns to Ukraine have still not been observed.

Ukrainian-born population in Hungary

Central European countries witnessed the emergence of larger foreign populations after the transition in the 1990s as a result of economic catch-up and European integration. This phenomenon created a completely new situation in Hungary and its neighboring countries, which had previously been characterized by emigration. After 1990, accession to the European Union gave a new impetus to this phenomenon (Dabasi Halász–Hegyi-Kéri 2015). Hungary's international migration landscape is constantly expanding, and global migration trends are also evident in Hungary (Hatton–Williamson 2005): foreign nationals currently living in the country originate from 159 different countries. The proportion of foreigners from Europe is steadily decreasing; while in 1995, 89% of foreigners came from our continent, this proportion had fallen to 65% by 2020.

At the same time, Hungary is not a significant host country in global terms (Hatton–Williamson 2005, Tóth et al. 2014). The volume of migration and its ratio to the resident population are significantly lower than in large host countries (Table 1). Hungary is still a destination for Europeans, including Hungarian nationals, albeit at a decreasing rate, and is characterized by short-distance international migration.

Before looking in more detail at migration trends, it is important to clarify who exactly is considered to be involved in international migration. International migrants are often considered in a simplified way compared to foreign nationals. However, the group of international migrants in Hungary is larger and its structure more nuanced, as immigrants may also acquire Hungarian citizenship over time through naturalization. Therefore, in examining the impact and scale of immigration, we cannot forget the impact of naturalization.

In Hungary, the number of naturalized citizens significantly exceeds the number of non-Hungarians in the total foreign-bound population (Table 2). Comparing the two groups, the number of non-Hungarians living in Hungary increased by 41% between 2011 and 2022, while the number of naturalized citizens living in Hungary increased by 69%. However, the values calculated for the total foreign-bound population are quite different for neighboring and nonneighboring countries, as the majority of the naturalized population comes from neighboring countries, most of

them of Hungarian nationality. These are Hungarians from abroad who have either moved to Hungary or have a registered address there or have Hungarian ancestors and have taken advantage of the simplified naturalization procedure, i.e., the possibility of acquiring Hungarian citizenship. It is important to note that the starting date of our analysis is the notional date of 1 January 2011, which was also the date of entry into force of the simplified naturalization.

Table 2

Foreign-born Hungarian citizens and foreign citizens by major countries

Country of nationality/place of birth	1 January 2011 (Population census 1 October 2011)			1 January 2022+		
	foreign citizen	foreign-born Hungarians	total foreign-bound population	foreign citizen	foreign-born Hungarians	total foreign-bound population
Romania	38,574	139,093	177,667	16,601	190,937	207,538
Germany	16,987	7,294	24,281	19,747	24,574	44,321
Slovakia	8,246	25,195	33,441	16,040	12,793	28,833
Austria	3,936	2,897	6,833	4,637	10,197	14,834
United Kingdom	2,602	1,184	3,786	3,323	16,345	19,668
France	2,201	1,123	3,324	2,754	2,556	5,310
Netherlands	2,058	461	2,519	3,299	1,997	5,296
Europe of 28	***85,414***	***183,761***	***269,175***	***82,264***	***276,009***	***358,273***
Ukraine	11,820	23,953	35,773	30,707	61,836	92,543
Serbia	7,752	21,306	29,058	3,522	37,039	40,561
Other Europe	7,536	8,764	16,300	14,952	18,092	33,044
Total Europe	**112,522**	**237,784**	**350,306**	**131,445**	**392,976**	**524,421**
China	8,852	939	9,791	17,685	507	18,192
Vietnam	2,358	728	3,086	6,376	1,160	7,536
Iran	1,523	163	1,686	3,129	314	3,443
Other Asia	9,571	2,930	12,501	27,854	5,476	33,330
Total Asia	**22,304**	**4,760**	**27,064**	**55,044**	**7,457**	**62,501**
United States	3,022	1,924	4,946	3,051	6,444	9,495
Canada	484	807	1,291	553	2,654	3,207
Other America	1,237	1,054	2,291	3,850	2,651	6,501
Total America	**4,743**	**3,785**	**8,528**	**7,454**	**11,749**	**19,203**
Nigeria	1,015	105	1,120	1,410	225	1,635
Egypt	472	176	648	1,658	1,229	2,887
Other Africa	1,366	909	2,275	4,989	1,880	6,869
Total Africa	**2,853**	**1,190**	**4,043**	**8,057**	**3,334**	**11,391**
Australia and Oceania	**775**	**360**	**1,135**	**620**	**3,714**	**4,334**
Total	**143,197**	**247,869**	**391,066**	**202,620**	**419,230**	**621,850**

+ Preliminary data.
Source: [4].

Between 2011 and 2022, the increase in the population in Hungary linked to non-EU Ukraine is particularly impressive. However, the rate of migration from Ukraine to Hungary is lower than that of Poland or the Czech Republic (Fedyuk–Kindler 2016). On 1 January 2022, there were 92,543 people with Ukrainian roots (Ukrainian citizens or Hungarian citizens born in Ukraine) living in Hungary, an increase of two and a half times over the years under analysis, which means a total of 57,000 more people. In 2011, 8.3% of the foreign-bound population in Hungary came from Ukraine, rising to 15.2% in 2022. Thus, they already represent almost 1% of the resident population.

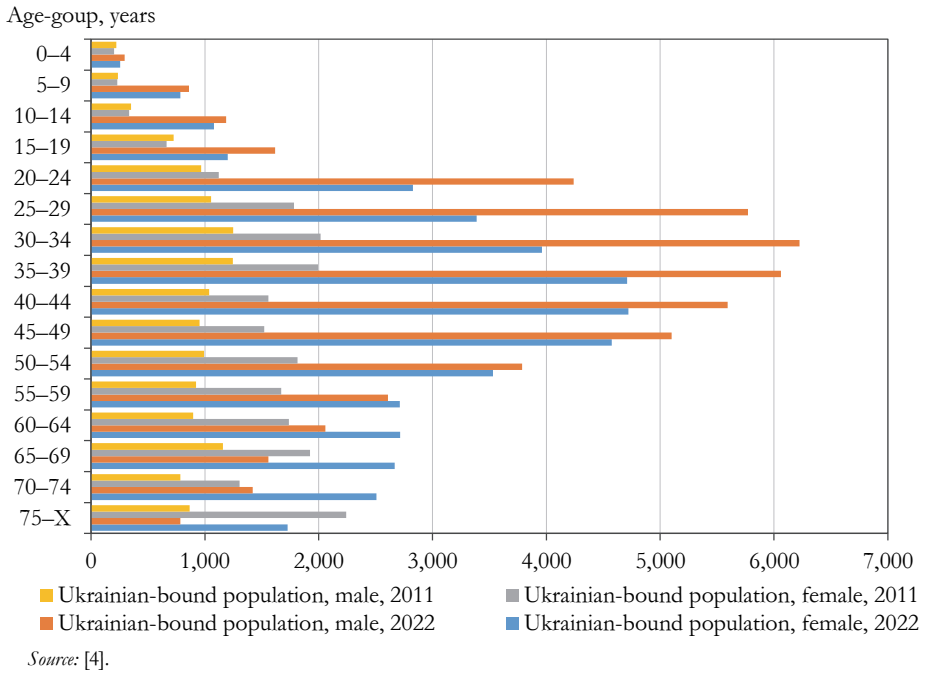
Characteristics of the Ukrainian-bound population in Hungary by age group and occupation

Age structure

Most studies point out that the foreign population in Hungary is younger than the autochthonous population (Péti et al. 2017), so migration has a rejuvenating effect on the overall population. This statement is mainly true for foreign nationals and, among them, mainly for women.

Figure 2

Ukrainian-bound population by age group in Hungary



Source: [4].

Overall, the average age of the foreign-bound population in 2011 (46.7 years) was still 5.4 years older than the resident population, while by 2022 (41.1 years), it had become 1.67 years younger than the autochthonous population. This phenomenon is explained by the mortality of older immigrants and the increasing weight of younger newcomers.

A similar trend prevails for those arriving from Ukraine, with the average age decreasing by more than 5 years between 2011 and 2022. However, the female surplus that dominated 2011 has been replaced by a male predominance. The proportion of young people among the Ukrainian-bound population is lower (only 5% under 14, compared to 15% of the resident population and 13% of the total foreign-bound population), but 84% of the working age population is aged 15–64 (in comparison, 65% of the resident population and 72% of the foreign-bound population belong to this age group). Young adults are the main emigrants from Transcarpathia.

Employment

International migrants have had a high employment rate in Hungary since the transition in 1990. In 2011, 58% of the resident population aged 15–64 were employed; this rate was 65% for the foreign-bound population. By 2022, there was an approximate 15 percentage point increase in both the Hungarian and foreign-bound populations. The rate for the Ukrainian-bound population follows the migrant average.

The distribution of the total foreign-bound population by occupation is not significantly different from that of the resident population, indicating that market needs have become dominant in Hungary in recent periods, to which the labor supply is adapting. The individual skills of migrants become determinant (Borjas 1996).

However, in terms of current and past occupations and jobs, there have been significant changes in the Ukrainian-bound population between 2011 and 2022. While in 2011 they were overrepresented in *occupations requiring the independent use of tertiary education* compared to the resident population (22.8% worked in this category), by 2022 only 12.5% were employed in such jobs. Most of them were primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, nursery nurses, information technology (IT) specialists and doctors. On the other hand, there was a significant increase in the number of *machine operators, assemblers and drivers* (22.9%) and in the number of people *employed in elementary (unskilled) occupations* (33.7%). In other words, the increase in the number of migrants has led to a more diversified occupational structure and an overall shift toward elementary occupations.

Table 3

Distribution of the analyzed migrant groups by main occupational groups (people aged 15–64) in Hungary

(%)

Breakdown by major occupational groups	2011			2022+		
	Ukrainian-bound population	foreign-bound population	population	Ukrainian-bound population	foreign-bound population	population
Managers	4.5	4.9	5.1	4.9	9.0	3.7
Professionals	22.8	19.6	15.9	12.5	19.3	19.4
Technicians and associate professionals	17.1	16.3	17.2	8.9	14.4	15.7
Clerical support workers	7.2	6.9	6.6	4.5	7.2	6.8
Service and sales workers	17.4	18.2	16.1	5.8	9.8	14.6
Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	1.6	2.1	2.8	0.2	0.6	2.7
Craft and related trades workers	9.6	12.5	14.0	6.4	7.3	14.5
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	8.6	8.7	12.1	22.9	11.1	13.2
Elementary occupations	11.1	10.5	9.7	33.7	21.0	8.9
Armed forces occupations	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.1	0.3	0.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

+ Preliminary data.
Source: [4].

Spatial characteristics

In general, the spatial distribution of foreigners is characterized by the overrepresentation of metropolitan areas (Rédei 2007). The primary destinations for international migration in the world are the capital cities and metropolitan centers (Samers 2002), where cultural and ethnic diversity is present and a wide spectrum of job opportunities is available. In Hungary, a similar trend partly prevails.

In 2011, 17.4% of the resident population lived in the capital, and the proportion of the foreign-bound population was 33.1%. For the resident population, the rate did not change significantly between 2011 and 2022, while for those from Ukraine, the share of the population living in the capital fell from 29.9% to 22.6%. For the other settlement types, the foreign-bound population is overall underrepresented compared to the resident population.

In the case of domestic migration, social groups with more favorable labor market positions tend to move to larger settlements with better economic indicators and a better image, higher up in the settlement hierarchy (Bálint–Obádovics 2017). These findings are only partially valid for international migration. In addition to income

opportunities, the geographical location of destinations and the natural environment (e.g., the attractiveness of Lake Balaton for retired Western Europe people) also play an important role (Dövényi 2011). In addition, there are also significant differences in the spatial distribution of the foreign-bound population in Hungary by citizenship and country of birth.

Table 4

Distribution of the analyzed groups by the status of the Hungarian municipalities

(%)

Legal status	2011			2022+		
	Ukrainian-bound population	foreign-bound population	population	Ukrainian-bound population	foreign-bound population	population
Budapest	29.9	33.1	17.4	22.6	31.4	17.6
City with county rights	20.5	18.9	20.4	17.1	18.4	19.7
Other cities	27.4	26.0	32.6	31.2	25.9	32.7
Municipality	22.2	21.9	29.6	29.1	24.3	30.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

+ Preliminary data.
Source: [4].

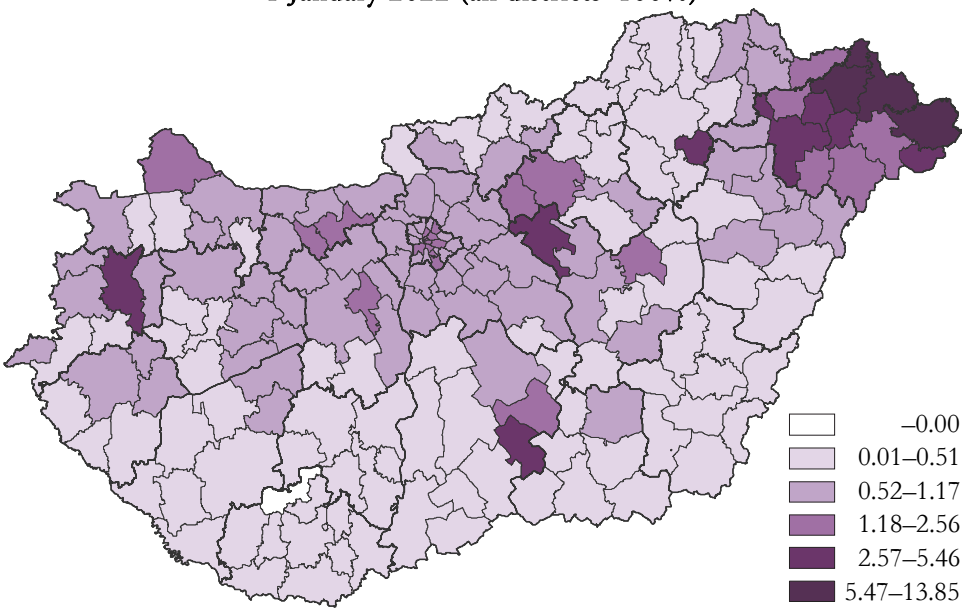
From the migration perspective, we can highlight two regions where Ukrainian migrant groups are generally and permanently present in greater numbers and proportions in Hungary: Central Hungary and, in particular, the border districts.

The phenomenon can also be observed in the country of origin: Ukrainian migrants from the border area are more likely to settle near the border, while those from the central regions tend to live around Budapest. In 2021, 80% of the Ukrainian-bound population living in Hungary came from Transcarpathia.

Border regions have traditionally been considered a less favored area in location theory because of customs barriers or potential military threats (Anderson–O'Down 1999). Border regions have increasingly been transformed into active contact zones (Nemes Nagy 1998, Nijkamp 1998), attractive areas for migrants. This means that emigration areas play a decisive role in the selection of new destinations; contact with relatives and friends staying in the mother country as well as the proximity of the home country are also relevant explanatory factors for short-distance international migration, particularly among older people.

Figure 3

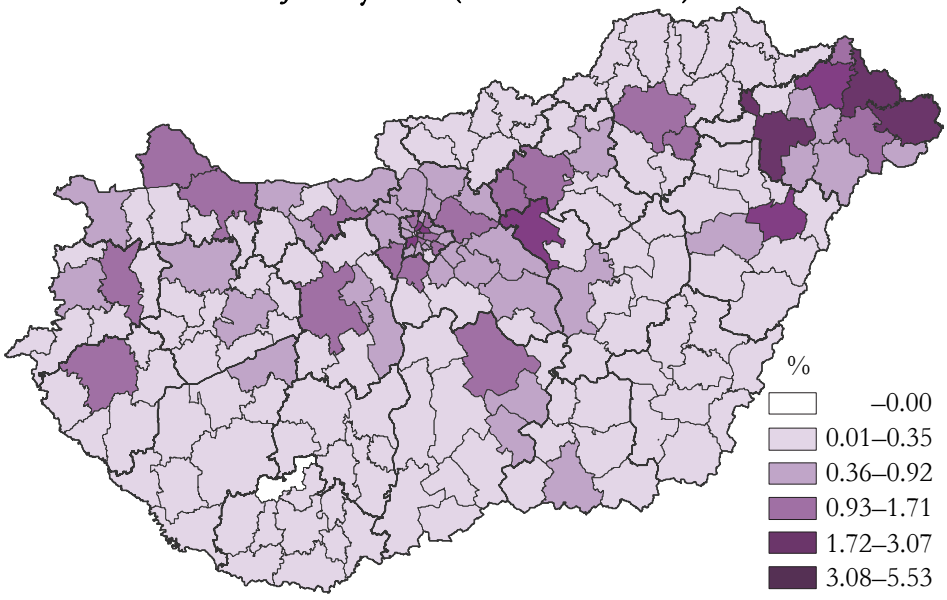
Ukrainian-bound population per 100 inhabitants by Hungarian district, 1 January 2022 (all districts=100%)



Source: [4].

Figure 4

Distribution of the Ukrainian-bound population by Hungarian district, 1 January 2022 (all districts=100%)



Source: [4].

Conclusions

The war in eastern Ukraine broke out in 2014 and shifted the focus to Ukraine, but the accelerating emigration of Ukrainians had started earlier. Ukraine had already become the largest labor emitter on the European continent before 2014. For Ukraine as a whole, the devaluation of the Russian rouble against the zloty after 2015 has "reversed" a large number of Ukrainian commuters and circular workers from the East to the West. The emergence of large numbers of Ukrainian citizens is more a Central European phenomenon than a Western European one. With 3.67% of the total migrant population in the EU-27 and 35% of those born in Ukraine living in the Visegrád countries, Ukrainian citizens are significantly overrepresented in the Visegrád countries.

Even before 2014, the Visegrád countries had already become a major destination for Ukrainian migrants. This is due to the relative proximity of the Visegrád countries to the motherland, the high proportion of Ukrainian migrants choosing closer receiving countries and the fact that they can easily find work in these countries.

On 1 January 2022, there were 92,543 people with Ukrainian roots (Ukrainian citizens or Hungarian citizens born in Ukraine) living in Hungary, an increase of two and a half times in ten years; thus, 1% of the Hungarian population was born in Ukraine.

From the migration perspective, two regions can be highlighted in Hungary where Ukrainian migrant groups are generally and constantly present in greater numbers and proportions: Central Hungary and, in particular, the border districts. This means that, in addition to economic centers, border areas also play an important role in the choice of new residence.

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