



I-CLAIM

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe

Migrant labour in the Polish agriculture sector

Sector report

Kamil Matuszczyk

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Executive Summary

This report sheds light on the understudied yet vital topic in Poland, due to its scale and significance, of working and living conditions experienced by migrants employed in seasonal fruit and vegetable harvesting. Our study is based on a literature review, interviews with 20 migrant farm workers (actual or with recent experience) and seven interviews with sector-related stakeholders, as well as ethnographic fieldwork, including 22 days of participant observation. All participants were Ukrainian migrants, representing a group that is vastly predominant in the researched agricultural settings. The dominance of females reflects a demographic pattern reinforced by the specificity of the studied jobs, farmers' preferences, and restrictions concerning male mobility from Ukraine. The gendered aspect of vulnerabilities can be linked to less paid and simpler tasks, as well as less formalised and established positions of Ukrainian women.

The research demonstrated that migrant employment suffers from different forms of irregularity, mostly linked to work without written or registered contracts or actual employment differing from contractual arrangements (e.g., with some undeclared work), as well as residence statuses based on visa-free stays for non-work reasons. The employment irregularity in seasonal agriculture has become widely accepted and normalised due to its long-standing occurrence, the character of farming in Poland, with a dominance of small family farms, low levels of workforce, and profitability in this sector, which coexists with its high essentiality and ideological and political importance. Practically no access to health and social security systems accompanied the described work precarity.

Despite the revealed precarity, the migrant participants did not complain about their working and living conditions in agriculture in Poland. This can be explained by the acceptance of existing conditions due to low expectations, the limited awareness of legal aspects concerning residence, employment, and workers' rights, accompanied by the lack of support from state or civic society organisations, and vulnerabilities related to temporariness and peripherality. Not complaining about working and living conditions can also be, to some extent, related to the specificity of employer-employee relations (the interviewed migrants worked and lived on small family farms with direct contact and possible co-work with their employers) and recently improving arrangements in agriculture in Poland. The severe shortage of seasonal farm workers has prompted farmers to improve the living conditions and support provided, such as offering better accommodation, transport opportunities, free food, or assistance in the case of accidents or health problems. This may also contribute to the fact that the migrant participants tended to voice more critical remarks about other Ukrainian workers (e.g. harsh ethnic supervisors) rather than their employers or Polish workers (usually performing supervising roles). However, the signs of ethnic stereotyping and paternalism, as well as the difference in the treatment of the war refugees and other Ukrainians, have been found.

It should be highlighted that the aforementioned adaptations have not addressed major issues related to informal and uncertain employment (e.g. work being stopped and not paid due to bad weather), exploitative remuneration based on a piecework system, the employment of children accompanying adult workers and difficult working conditions due to the character of agricultural work.

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1. Introduction

This report aims to explain the complexity of irregularity in agriculture, mainly from the perspective of migrant workers in Poland. As a new immigrant destination and with an underdeveloped migration infrastructure, the Polish case study illustrates exceptional migration of workers from one neighbouring country which is illustrative in agricultural migration studies. We argue that this irregularity has various dimensions and significantly affects the working and living conditions of migrants in the host country. To do this, in-depth qualitative research was conducted in the Grójec district (50 km from Warsaw). The research consists of three components: participant observation, interviews with 20 Ukrainian agricultural workers, and seven expert interviews (described later).

The research revealed that irregularities in agriculture are mainly related to the form of employment and everyday industrial relations in this sector. They also concern the lack of valid residence permits or documents. In the context of the dominant channel of seasonal migration from Ukraine to Poland, migrant workers commonly perform simple agricultural work without any written form of employment. Only the most trusted and settled migrant workers can be offered one of the forms of civil law contracts. Surprisingly, migrants themselves argue that they prefer irregular employment because they do not want to be tied to a specific employer and seek to maximise their profits by not paying taxes. The research also uncovered the widespread acceptance and normalisation of the practices of informal employment in agriculture.

2. Context

2.1. Agricultural production and employment

The mid-2010s constituted the turning point in migration processes in Poland and ensuing political, policy and discursive processes, including the politicisation of migration in Poland (Matuszczyk, Grzymała-Kazłowska and Homel, 2024). Since that time, immigration to Poland has begun to substantially increase after decades of predominant short-term, circular, or transit migration following the systemic transition of 1989. The changes in Poland's migration profile from emigration to immigration can be linked to the impacts of the so-called migration crises following the Arab Spring, the outbreak of the Russian expansion in Ukraine, growing migration pressure at the Polish-Belarusian border and recently opened channels for student and work migration from outside Europe (including new Asian and South American countries). The crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border started in mid-2021, and the migration caused by the full-scale war in Ukraine dominated political and media discourse (Homel and Grzymała-Kazłowska 2025), accompanied by the reception and support of displaced migrants from Ukraine and a growingly restrictive and selective migration policy towards non-European migrants (Fedyuk et al., 2023). However, these developments do not seem to considerably impact the characteristics and conditions of migrants in agriculture, apart from the lower number of male migrants from Ukraine.

Agriculture in Poland remains one of the strategic sectors of the economy and a source of employment for a significant part of the economically active population. The share of agriculture in Poland's GDP in 2022 was 2.2%, and although it has been steadily declining in recent years, the interests of farmers and the Polish countryside are often treated as a priority in social and political perception (Wiśniewski and Rudnicki, 2016). This is due, among other things, to the acknowledgement of food security and the essentiality of this type of work, which is based on agricultural and food production in Poland and self-sufficiency in this area, reinforced by the historical role of agriculture in Poland. According to the results of the General Agricultural

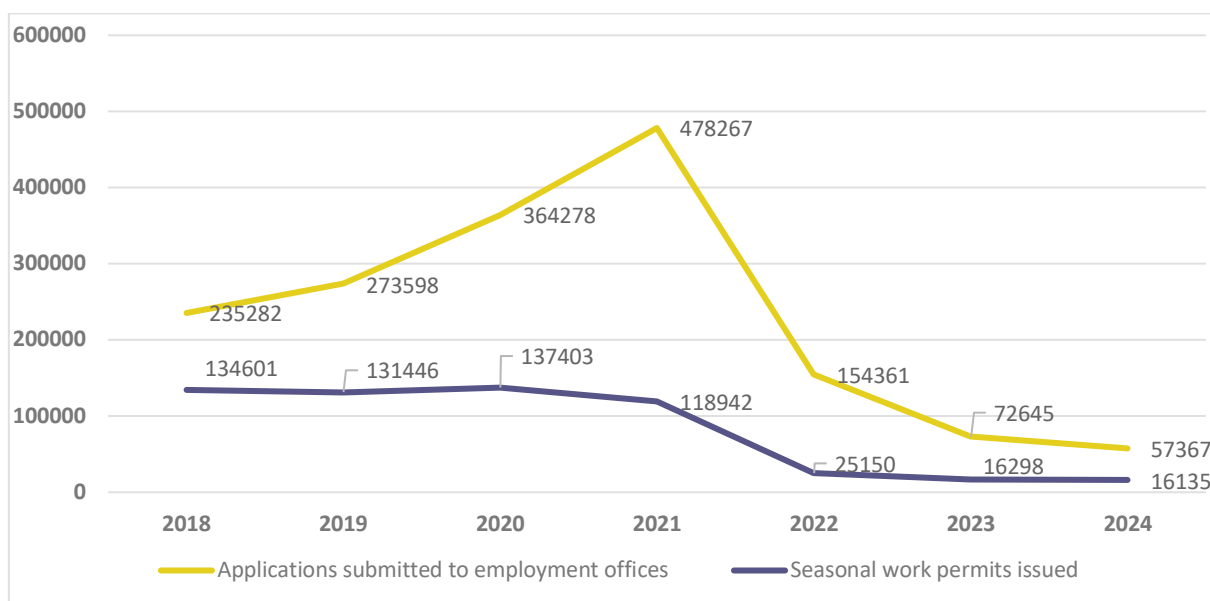
Census in 2020, the total number of agricultural holdings was still as high as approximately 1.3 million, even though it decreased by nearly 13% in comparison to 2010. The small area of agricultural holdings in Poland and their relatively low level of mechanisation mean that farmers have to rely on hiring additional labour. The research by Górny et al. (2017) showed that, on average, a farmer employs 7–9 seasonal workers per year.

Moreover, despite profound changes in the economy, agriculture still accounts for a large share of employment. Previous studies seem to confirm the still popular strategy of farmers relying on family members as workers, particularly in small farms (Bilewicz and Bukraba-Rylska 2021). However, in recent years, thanks to EU structural funds and changes in awareness in rural areas, farmers' activities have become more professional and specialised (Gorlach 2022). This also applies to the employment of workers and the handling of related documentation.

2.2. Seasonal migration in Poland: the scale, profile, and trends

The term “migrantization” has been employed to denote the phenomenon of foreign labour becoming increasingly integral to the agricultural sector in the last twenty years (Górny and Kaczmarczyk, 2020; Fiałkowska and Matuszczyk, 2021). Even though it is difficult to provide a precise total figure, there are available partial statistics, such as the data on the number of employer declarations of intent to employ workers in agriculture (see below for further details on this labour market policy instrument) from 2006 to 2017. In 2008, the number of documents issued exceeded 77,000, while in 2017, it was over 306,000 (Figure 1). Since 2018, a new type of seasonal work permit has been in force, replacing the previously widely used simplified procedure. In 2018, the number of applications received exceeded 235,000, yet the number of permits issued was 134,600, revealing a discrepancy of 100,000. Since 2022, there has been a drastic decline in the number of seasonal work permits issued, which is mainly explained by the consequences of Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine.

Figure 1. Seasonal work permits 2018-2024



Source: own elaboration based on data from Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy.

The vast majority of foreign workers in the agricultural sector are from Ukraine. The primary factors contributing to this phenomenon have been the geographical proximity of the two countries, the advanced transport infrastructure and network of intermediaries, and most significantly, the challenging economic circumstances in Ukraine. In 2018, the vast majority of seasonal work permits, approximately 99%, were issued to Ukrainian citizens. It is important to note that this trend underwent a gradual shift over the course of several years. In 2024, the proportion of seasonal work permits issued to Ukrainians was 67%. The subsequent largest national groups were Colombians (2,355), Filipinos (416) and Kazakhs (403). However, Ukrainian migrants still overwhelmingly dominate in farming, with other migrants more visible in agri-food production and processing.

A number of studies, predominantly qualitative, have indicated that the demographic profile of foreign workers in the agricultural sector exhibits significant heterogeneity (Bieniecki and Pawlak, 2010; Frelak, 2011; Fiałkowska et al., 2022). It is a commonly held view that women dominate in the field of fruit harvesting (Iglicka and Gmaj 2013). The age range of these workers is broad, from minors accompanying their parents at work to those in the retirement age, with workers between 35 and 44 constituting the predominant proportion of the workforce (Fiałkowska and Matuszczyk 2021; Matuszczyk 2024). It is noteworthy that in 2024, half of workers engaged in seasonal employment for 31–90 days (Public Employment Services 2025).

2.3. Regulatory dimension of employment

In Poland, there are several legal pathways through which one may enter the country for the purpose of employment in agriculture. The solution that was the most significant and widely used since 2006 was the so-called simplified procedure, which was terminated in 2018. In instances where employers encountered a shortage of workers, they could submit a declaration to the district labour office indicating the intention to employ a foreign worker. The instrument was originally dedicated to workers from Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, but in subsequent years, it was extended to encompass citizens of Armenia, Moldova, and Georgia (Plewa, 2007; Bieniecki and Pawlak, 2010). Employees were permitted to undertake legal employment without undergoing a labour market test or acquiring work permits, which was time-consuming and costly, first only for three months, then for six months. This approach was swiftly adopted by numerous OECD countries, thus establishing one of the most progressive temporary employment policies among the member nations (Szelewa and Polakowski, 2023). The introduction of this instrument in 2006 was the result of both quiet and vocal lobbying by farmers (particularly from the Grójec area), who sought to facilitate the hiring of migrant workers and legalise their work (Plewa, 2007; Matuszczyk 2024).

A secondary pathway to legal employment in the agricultural sector is through the acquisition of a work permit. This instrument is intended for employers who intend to offer long-term employment, but it is not used in practice for typical seasonal jobs such as picking soft fruits. Following the implementation of the 2014 Seasonal Directive, a new type of permit has been introduced in Poland since 2018, the seasonal work permit. As a result, since 2018, agricultural workers can no longer be employed under the simplified procedure. This means that employers applying for seasonal work permits can recruit workers from almost all third-party countries (for 9 months).

The third and most recent solution (from March 2022) has been the employer's declaration of intention to employ a Ukrainian citizen. This instrument has been introduced in response to the arrival of war migrants from Ukraine in Poland. The fast-track procedure stipulates that employers hiring Ukrainians under temporary protection must only report this fact within seven days to the relevant district labour office.

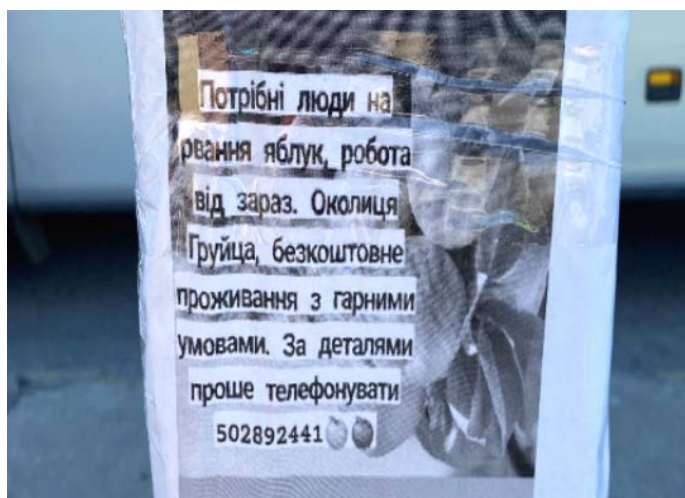
An additional route for entering Poland and starting work that is not entirely legal is migration under the visa-free regime for non-work reasons in effect for Ukrainians since 2017. According to the regulations governing the use of biometric passports, holders of such documents are permitted to remain within the Schengen Area for a maximum period of 90 days within any given 180-day period.

Employers wishing to legally hire workers in agriculture have several options available to them. Primarily, they can provide an employment contract that guarantees comprehensive social security coverage, remunerated leave, adequate health and safety in the workplace, and other employee benefits. The present study posits that the dearth of flexibility in this particular type of contract renders it virtually non-existent in the context of agricultural employment. Civil law contracts, encompassing contracts for specific tasks and the contract of mandate, have gained popularity. The latter type of contract encompasses mandatory social insurance and minimum wages, while permitting flexibility in employment. A specific category of civil contract that pertains to seasonal employment in the agricultural sector is the harvest assistance contract, introduced in 2018 for fruit and vegetable harvesting. Irrespective of their country of origin, employees are permitted to work on such a contract for a period not exceeding 180 days. It is important to note that the legislation does not stipulate minimum wages for such employees, and coverage only applies to accident, sickness, maternity, and health insurance. What is also important is that these employees are guaranteed free accommodation.

2.4. Role of employers in seasonal labour migration

To date, studies have paid little attention to farmers' strategies or attitudes towards foreign workers or, more broadly, irregularity in agriculture in Poland. However, it is noteworthy that experts in the field universally identify this sector as being characterised by the prevalence of undeclared employment and high levels of temporary employment (Frelak 2010; Matuszczyk 2024). It has been demonstrated that while the overall magnitude of such employment experienced a substantial decline between 2017 and 2022, this level remained virtually unaltered within the agricultural sector. In 2022, 15% of informal employment was declared in horticultural and agricultural work (GUS 2023). However, the actual extent to which foreign nationals are employed in the agricultural grey economy remains unknown.

Photo 1. A seasonal job advertisement in Ukrainian, bus station in Grójec 2025



Source: photo taken by the author, 2025.

A significant challenge confronting contemporary employers pertains to the persistent issue of workforce deficiency, particularly during periods of heightened demand, such as peak season. According to representative surveys conducted on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, in 2023, 12% of farmers reported problems with finding workers (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development 2024). This percentage was marginally higher than in the previous year, when farmers' concerns regarding the recruitment of workers in the context of the war in Ukraine were more pronounced. In 2020, 25.1% of farmers surveyed reported experiencing challenges in recruiting external labour for their farms (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development 2021). To address these issues, respondents are increasingly turning to family involvement (47.8%), seeking workers from abroad or other regions of Poland (38.6%), and offering higher wages (31.7%). Despite the emergence of employment agencies in rural areas (based on data from the National Register of Employment Agencies, KRAZ), the exact extent to which farmers rely on workers provided by intermediaries is unknown (Matuszczyk 2024).

2.5. Infrastructure of labour migration into agriculture

It is evident that employers and their associations continue to be the key actors shaping the infrastructure and facilitating seasonal migration in Poland. Notwithstanding the fragmentation and diverse interests that characterise the sector, fruit and vegetable producers are one of the better organised business/sector groups in Poland. A considerable number of organisations have been established to represent the interests of growers of specific fruits. For instance, there are organisations that represent only blueberry or strawberry growers. The primary function of such organisations is to represent the interests of their members, to provide training for fruit growers, and to assist them in obtaining special certificates confirming the quality of their crops but do not address the employment conditions of workers. Concurrently, there is the absence of trade unions and other non-governmental organisations specialising in the rights of seasonal migrants and supporting migrants working in agriculture (Fedyuk et al., 2023). The majority of civil society actors are in large cities and lack resources to offer advocacy or other support to workers in rural areas. It is important to note that the complex situation of workers in this sector is also affected by the limited control exercised by the state labour inspectorate. Most farms are not typical businesses, and they employ workers on the basis of civil law contracts, which are not controlled as other business organisations.

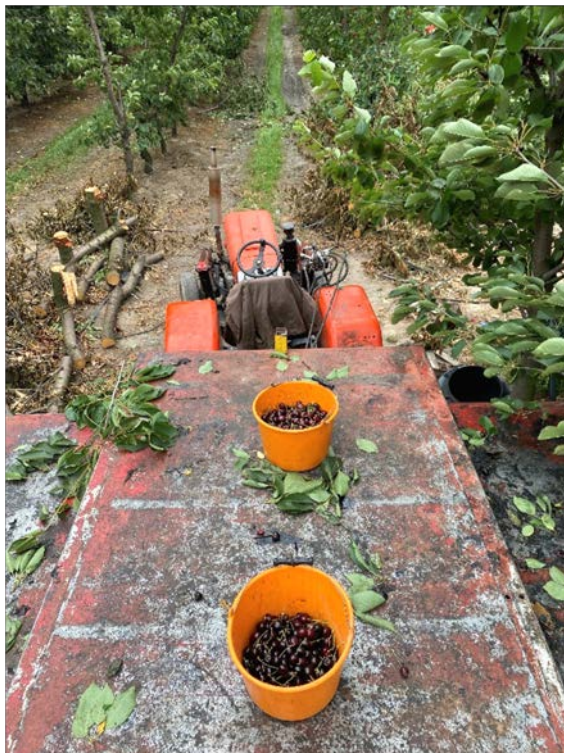
The most significant factor underlying the seasonal migration infrastructure is the developed network of migration intermediaries (Frelak, 2011; Iglicka and Gmaj, 2013). It is noteworthy that the origins of employer-initiated recruitment processes were concomitant with practices that bore resemblance to quasi-modern slavery, a phenomenon that was observed in the Mazovia region (Frelak 2011; Wieczorek 2017). During the 2000s and 2010s, informal "job marketplace" saw a surge in popularity. These were in areas distant from the city centre, where workers seeking temporary employment congregated daily. Employers arriving at the site sought one-day workers and reached a verbal agreement on the terms and nature of employment for a specific day. As demonstrated in the research undertaken by Wieczorek (2017), there is ample evidence to suggest that farmers frequently utilised such marketplaces. However, in the contemporary era, these intermediaries have become redundant, superseded by the emergence of informal Ukrainian brokers who have established close working relationships with farmers. For a considerable duration, the provision of transportation services from Ukraine to Poland has been predominantly undertaken by private bus drivers. These entities specialise in facilitating the journey of workers from their place of residence to their respective destinations. The scope of their role extends beyond mere transportation; they are primarily responsible for identifying and arranging employment for specific individuals. Furthermore, they furnish pivotal assistance to employed individuals who approach their respective employers in instances of difficulties or emergencies (Frelak, 2011; Matuszczyk 2024).

3. Methodology

The present report is based on field research conducted in the agricultural sector in Poland in the period 2024-2025. A case study of the Grójec County (the Masovian Province) has been undertaken, a region which is renowned for its significant fruit-growing industry, particularly regarding the large-scale production of apples, pears, and strawberries (Matuszczyk 2024). The region is located approximately 45 kilometres from Warsaw and continues to serve as the primary employment sector for foreign workers in the possession of seasonal work permits.

The data collated during the research process comprises three primary components. The first entailed participant observation, which was conducted by the researcher on five farms. The research on irregularity within the I-CLAIM project has constituted the continuation of multi-site ethnographic research on the working conditions of migrants from Ukraine started in 2019. During the period spanning from May 2024 to March 2025, the author engaged in 22 days of participant observation, including seasonal harvesting tasks. This strategy facilitated the recruitment of interviewees for in-depth interviews, but most significantly, it provided a unique opportunity to observe the everyday strategies of workers and employers in their natural context.

Photo 2. Working conditions for cherry pickers, Grójec 2024



Source: photo taken by the author, 2024.

The second component, which is pivotal for this analysis, consists of 20 in-depth interviews with 20 agricultural migrant workers and 5 object-based interviews with the same few interlocutors (see Appendix). The data collection process was supported by a community researcher associated with the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw. She is an experienced Ukrainian researcher who fled Ukraine due

to war, conducting migration research in Poland. This approach resulted in a substantial enhancement and refinement of the insights obtained from the interviewed migrants who worked in the agricultural sector.

Most interviews were conducted during the winter period, which consequently resulted in the conversations mainly occurring online. The interviews lasted for an average one hour, with the shortest interview taking 30 minutes and the longest nearly two hours. All interviewees were offered a financial incentive in the form of 50 PLN gift cards for a popular grocery store chain in Poland to compensate for the time of the interviewees. Two individuals declined to accept the cards and requested that the equivalent amount be donated to charitable organisations.

The sample was deliberately selected to include individuals from a range of socio-demographic backgrounds, with varying lengths of residence in Poland and duration of employment in agriculture. The selection criterion was that candidates, if they had previously worked in agriculture, had not done so before 2021. Furthermore, it was expected that all individuals would experience some kind of irregularity. Due to the focus on employees picking soft fruit, the sample comprised three men and 17 women. All of them were Ukrainians with various legal statuses. Most of the participants were seasonal workers who had been coming to Poland for several years. Only a few of them were migrants who arrived in Poland for the first time after February 2022 due to the war. The youngest interviewee was just under 19 years old, and the oldest was in their 60s. Significantly, the study included individuals with over two decades of experience in circular migration to agriculture in Poland, along with Ukrainian war migrants who arrived in Poland for the first time following February 2022. At the time of the field research, most of those interviewed had children who were mainly staying in Ukraine under the care of other relatives. Only five agricultural workers said that their children were staying with them in Poland. Only two research participants worked and lived on the farm sites together with their children.

The third component consists of seven expert interviews conducted with three employers, an informal intermediary (a bus driver), a doctor, and labour market experts. The experts' perspective provides a valuable addition to the collected material, allowing for a broader view of the dimensions of irregularity in the employment of migrant workers. Except for two, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The research approach and its components were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Warsaw. In practice, this involved ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, as well as creating safe conditions for conducting interviews. It was also crucial to ask informed and balanced questions about the experience of irregular residence and employment in Poland, not to scare the interviewees with challenging questions.

4. Main Findings from Ethnography

4.1. Irregularity related to residence status

The majority of foreign workers interviewed asserted that they possessed a legal basis for their stay in Poland. However, our participants frequently were not able to specify the character of their documentation. Individuals with an extensive experience of working in Poland attested to previously receiving what is termed an "invitation" from prospective employers. Most of our participants remained in Poland on the basis of visa-free travel. Our field observation demonstrated that a number of individuals had no valid documentation from their employer, allowing for legalising their employment status in Poland for 90 days.

In the aftermath of the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine, the migration situation of men from that country has undergone a significant deterioration. The emigration ban on men aged 18–60 has resulted in a decline in the number of males employed in the agricultural sector in Poland. This situation has also had consequences for their residence status, as demonstrated by the case of one of the men interviewed. His residence card expired in 2023. Due to concerns regarding a possibility to return to Poland, he has chosen not to travel to Ukraine to deal with the formalities. This worker became aware of the complexity of his legal situation when his employer planned to take him on a business trip to Italy (as an additional driver). Minors, for whom the decision to migrate to Poland is driven by the desire to evade compulsory military service, find themselves in a similar situation. One of the fruit growers interviewed corroborated the strategy of remaining despite the expiration of their documentation, stating that he does not inquire about their residence permits.

Thanks to our diverse research sample, it was possible to capture an interesting example of the economic mobility of Ukrainians within the Schengen area. At the time of the study, three workers had experience in agriculture in Austria, mainly in greenhouses, encompassing the harvesting of fruit and vegetables. Unlike in Poland, the employment of these three women was entirely lawful in Austria. They declared that they had the appropriate permits to stay in Austria, as well as an employment contract and paid taxes. While not working in Austria, these mobile workers engaged in unregistered employment in Poland or returned to Ukraine. Our other participant shared her experience of undertaking illegal work in Germany (as a cook) using the opportunity of visa-free travel.

4.2. Irregularity related to employment contract

Irregularity in agriculture mainly concerns employment, industrial relations and everyday relations in the workplace. The most prevalent issue is the absence of a formal written contract between the employee and the employer. A few interviewed employees revealed that they currently possessed or had previously held such a contract. These were typically contracts of mandate or harvesting contracts. It has been confirmed that employment within the agricultural sector is predominantly characterised by the absence of contractual agreements, rather than their prevalence. The employers interviewed attempt to explain this primarily by reference to the uncertainty surrounding the length of time that a given employee is expected to work for. It can be implied from this that settled and trusted workers were more likely to be offered a written contract. There is the narrow category of trusted employees who return to the same employer each harvesting season and get a written contract (e.g. civil law contract). Some of our participants underlined that they had been the recipients of preferential treatment and larger responsibility from their employer.

Our data highlighted the long-standing irregularity in the employment of both Polish and foreign workers. The findings are consistent with the conclusions from our WP3 report (Matuszczyk, Grzymala-Kazłowska and Homel, 2024), where experts indicated that agriculture remains the sector with the largest grey economy and informal practices used by both workers and employers. In response to direct questioning, an expert from the studied region stated that they had not yet encountered a situation in which a farmer had employed a foreign worker in accordance with all legal requirements:

“Today, I think it is impossible.”

When asked about the context and reasons for this, she primarily pointed to the problem of fruit picking and the quality of the harvest.

“Concluding a contract that does not cover the entire strawberry harvest period would definitely be a violation of the law. The harvest begins and ends at the start and end of the month respectively. This means that at the end of the month, there will definitely be no insurance or notification to the authorities. Harvesting blueberries also takes a long time. However, according to farmers, if they have blueberries and want to hire foreign workers, they will only work if the berries are small or large. Then, there are the September ones: if they earn some money, they do not want to continue working and quit.” [EXP01_AGR_PL]

The employers explained this by the tendency of foreign workers to prioritise the pursuit of maximum earnings and ability to remit a portion of their earnings to their families back in Ukraine, often resulting in the absence of contractual expectations. It is noteworthy that one farmer even expressed surprise at the question of signing contracts with seasonal workers who pick fruit on a piecework basis.

In the case that employees had a contractual agreement, our research showed that the stipulated provisions pertaining to working conditions were not aligned with the actual situation, mainly in terms of working hours and remuneration. Despite the contractual stipulation of an hourly wage, the remuneration of some workers was in fact calculated on a piecework basis. A further aspect of the irregularity of foreign workers' employment in agriculture is the offering of inappropriate types of contracts by employers. For instance, certain employers, motivated by a desire to reduce the financial burden associated with the recruitment process, may propose a contractual agreement delineating specific tasks to be performed (e.g. picking 150 baskets of strawberries per day). It is important to note that in the majority of cases, seasonal workers are not acquainted with the Polish legal system and are unable to differentiate between the various documents provided to them by employers.

Another situation that has been highlighted by our experts and employers, and which has been confirmed through participant observation, is the signing of a contract with an employee without registering it with the relevant authorities. This practice of non-registration, which scale is difficult to assess, as elucidated by our interviewed employer, is believed to function as a prospective safeguard for employers in circumstances such as unanticipated inspections.

4.3. The impact of irregularity on the working and living conditions of migrant workers

Irregularity has become the permanent feature of seasonal employment in agriculture. Our ethnographic research demonstrated that both employers and workers expressed reasons for opting for irregular work. However, our research also revealed a trend suggesting the growing agency and bargaining power of Ukrainian agricultural workers.

According to the interviewed seasonal workers, the irregularity they experience does not have a major impact on their daily lives. Above all, there is a widespread belief among them that it is normal to work in agriculture without formalities. The high level of normalisation of irregularity leads to the situation that our participants seemed not afraid to move freely outside their place of employment. Most of them declared that they went shopping in the city, sometimes even sightseeing on weekends. Only one person mentioned that their previous employer asked all employees without a contract not to leave the farm-site. The employees also did not look much concerned about possible checks by the Border Guard or labour inspectorate. It was only experienced differently during the COVID-19 pandemic when several of them were subject to a quarantine during which employees could perform their normal work but were not allowed to leave their workplace. At that time, checks were carried out by the police, but according to the interviewees,

they were only asked to confirm that were staying at the address provided and no authorities verified the living conditions or the legality of the employment of such workers.

According to the interviewed migrants, working without a signed contract allows them to move more freely between Ukraine and Poland. A significant proportion of these workers have families in Ukraine, mainly children who need to be cared for. Therefore, many workers return to Ukraine in August and September before the beginning of the school year, which in turn causes problems for fruit growers in replacing the workers who left. The ability to move between countries is also strategically important for migrant workers who have small farms in Ukraine. It turns out that many seasonal workers in Poland are also farmers whose difficult financial situation forces them to emigrate and take up jobs in agriculture, which they are familiar with from Ukraine. What is more, several interviewees pointed out that this irregularity may be a “defence strategy” in situations of exploitation by employers. Without a written contract, workers can leave immediately in situations such as non-payment of wages (e.g. weekly), mistreatment, discrimination, or other forms of fraud.

As the dominant motivation for taking up seasonal work in Poland is economic hardship, migrants tended to maximise profits abroad to transfer their earnings to Ukraine. To them, legal employment (with a signed contract) means a significantly lower net salary. Irregular employment is also more beneficial for employers. The employers interviewed argued that assigning work to employees without completing the formalities saves them time and money, especially in the context of a contingent workforce, where they are not sure that employees will not quickly leave for another employer. What is more, in the event of downtime at the employers' premises, they can allow foreign workers interested in maintaining their earning capacity to occasional work at other farms. This so-called “employee lending” is a common strategy among employers in agriculture, who, thanks to family or neighbour relations, can temporarily solve the problem of labour shortages. In spite of the legal obligation to register such a temporary change of employer with the relevant employment office, it was not practiced by the interviewed farmers. They explained such a solution as benefiting employees, who can work every day instead of having breaks as a result of bad weather or unripe fruits. This shows the broader problem of income instability due both to the prevailing piecework system and to the unpredictability of weather conditions and the risks associated with them.

The complex legal system in Poland, particularly the legal situation of foreign workers in agriculture significantly affects their access to social security and other social services. None of our Ukrainian participants were able to indicate during the interview whether and to what extent they were covered by the social security system or exactly what type of insurance they had. Most of them only had tourist insurance, which they were required to cross the Ukrainian-Polish border. According to the migrant workers, this does not entitle them to any benefits, such as health care or payment of funds in the case of an accident. Therefore, migrants excluded from public health care while working in Poland, may need to cover the cost of treatment themselves. However, our field research also demonstrated the involvement of some employers in providing migrants to healthcare and covering the related costs. One of our participants, working for one employer for many years, could count on his employer's help after a serious accident at work. The employer covered the medical expenses and attempted to legalise the employment of the mentioned migrant. Also, the doctor interviewed by us running a private medical practice mentioned examples of employers supporting migrants after accidents or illness by farmers.

Photo 3. An old caravan as temporary accommodation for seasonal workers, Grójec 2024.



Source: photo taken by author, 2024.

Migrants from Ukraine can additionally be offered various forms of material and nonmaterial gratification or other additional support by their employers interested in binding and retaining their employees wanting to be perceived as “good employers” (Matuszczyk, 2024). Our participants reported: being provided free food, transport once a week to go shopping or to train stations in Warsaw, being offered rewards for their hard work, and improving the accommodation. Most of the interviewed employees live on the fruit farms where they work. In practice, this also means being under the control of the employer and their family. On the other hand, as pointed out by the employees with longer experience in agriculture, it also means the possibility of receiving support in emergency situations. For example, one of the participants mentioned the medicines she received from her employer’s wife when she was ill. Some of the interviewed migrant workers indicated that they were provided free vegetables or bread by their employers. Interestingly, when asked about their overall assessment of accommodation conditions, the participants rated them rather positively, arguing that they come for a short time and the most important thing for them is to have their own bed, bathroom and kitchen.

Some employees also emphasised the possibility of negotiating daily working conditions. The following excerpt from an interview with a migrant who arrived in Poland after 2022 reflects this:

The hours weren't standardised — they depended on us. In fact, we regulated them ourselves. He [the employer] asked us how long we wanted to work for. We could work for 8, 10–12 hours, but it was usually 10 hours. If the entire crop had to be harvested, it could take up to 12 hours. He didn't force us — he said it was necessary, but it was up to us. Everyone wanted to earn money, so we tried our best. I mean, 12 hours was a lot, but we managed. We just got used to it.
[MIGO5_AGR_PL]

However, this situation should be treated as a rule. Typically, employees work seven days a week during the soft fruit peak season, averaging ten hours a day. According to the migrants interviewed, this constant physical labour leaves them too tired to contact their families in Ukraine by phone. One worker highlighted this problem, mentioning that although he tries to call his elderly parents and daughter in Ukraine at the weekend, he sometimes does not have the strength to make such a call due to being overworked. Interestingly, this interviewee lives with his employer, his employer's wife, and their two young children (aged three and eight). He said that his employer agreed to take his wife in when the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. Having visited this household several times, I noticed that the children do not attend Polish or Ukrainian schools and help their parents with work during the fruit harvest. Other workers interviewed also mentioned employing children in agriculture. One woman, who arrived in Poland in 2022, said that she had picked blueberries on a farm where a 16-year-old boy was working every day.

4.4. Gender, 'race', and ethnicity

Taking a closer look at seasonal work in Poland reveals that it is a highly feminised and racialised sector. The research has confirmed that fruit and vegetable picking is mainly carried out by women. The employers emphasised that they prefer to entrust the work to experienced women who are highly motivated to work hard in physically demanding jobs. Interestingly, the age of the workers is not particularly important to employers, as evidenced by the practice of employing both minors and people of retirement age. The farmers tend to view male workers as those who can be entrusted with more responsible agricultural tasks (e.g. transporting workers to the workplace or spraying crops). Consequently, men typically earn a higher hourly wage than women.

As emphasised earlier, scholars use the term "Ukrainisation" to describe the operation of agriculture in Poland. This concept reflects the trend whereby the vast majority of agricultural workers in Poland have come from Ukraine for over two decades. The employers also confirm this narrative, normalising the widespread presence of workers from the neighbouring country. While working together on the researched farm sites, farmers said that 'Ukrainians are best suited to fruit picking'. The signs of ethnic stereotyping and paternalism, as well as the difference in how war refugees are treated when compared to other Ukrainians, have been found. However, the employers emphasised that they could not imagine employing migrants from Africa or Asia. Paradoxically, the same employers claimed that they were aware that, in the future, they would be forced to recruit people from countries such as Nepal or India. During discussions about the preference towards Ukrainian seasonal migrants, the cultural proximity between Poles and Ukrainians, the lack of communication barriers in everyday work, and the strong financial motivation to work in precarious conditions were repeatedly raised.

The field research provided insight into the relations between Ukrainian and Polish employees. It should be emphasised that the majority of Ukrainians interviewed had experience of working in Polish-Ukrainian teams. Notably, the Polish employees typically held supervisory roles. This led to tension as illustrated by the case of a Polish woman in her 60s who was known to treat the employees she supervised poorly. While picking blueberries together, it became apparent that, as a forewoman responsible for logistics and work allocation, she would shout at and insult her employees. In an interview, she admitted that was frustrated because, despite her additional responsibilities, she received the same piecework rate as the Ukrainian employees. However, this seemed the exceptional example while Ukrainian workers generally reported neutral or friendly relations with Poles. Generally, our interviewed workers did not raise the issue of discrimination on the basis of nationality. Surprisingly, the participants complained instead about other

Ukrainians with whom they worked in agriculture. The interviews and participant observation confirmed the occasional occurrence of envy, mutual dislike and a lack of cooperation among Ukrainian workers. Such attitudes were evident during piecework scheme, for example, when some employees wanted to be as productive as possible and began competing with each other for the best place to pick fruit. One Ukrainian woman who was employed permanently on a farm indicated that she was poorly perceived by Ukrainian seasonal workers because her employer had made her a forewoman responsible for instructing and preparing new employees for work.

5. Concluding Remarks

This report aimed to explore the various aspects of irregular employment in agriculture experienced by foreign workers. Although Poland is one of the most important countries for attracting seasonal migrants, research on this topic is limited. This study is one of the first reports to shed light on the practices observed during the fruit and vegetable harvesting season in Poland. Notably, no other European country has developed such a pronounced seasonal migration pattern between neighbouring states (Matuszczyk, 2023).

Thanks to the diverse empirical data, it was possible to establish that the main causes of irregularity in this sector are related to the legality of employment and living conditions. It was observed that irregular residence is not widespread due to the relatively privileged position of Ukrainian workers in Poland, which includes temporary protection for individuals since 2022. The issue of the irregular employment of migrants appears to be much more complex. The research has revealed that agricultural workers rarely had a written, registered contract. Over the past two decades, during which time there has been intense mobility of seasonal workers to Poland, farmers have developed various strategies for assigning work not complying with the law. Those building migration infrastructure in Poland also seemed to normalise the widespread acceptance of undeclared work in agriculture.

Although the situation of the Ukrainian workers may look extremely precarious, none of the participants complained about their working conditions in Poland during the interviews. This may be explained by the low expectations of the workers and acceptance of the existing conditions. The awareness of legal aspects concerning residence and employment so as workers' rights was very low, accompanied by lack of support from any state or civic society organisations and vulnerabilities related to temporariness and peripherality. Not complaining about working and living conditions can be also related to the situation in agriculture in Poland improving. The severe shortage of fruit and vegetable harvesters in recent years has led to far-reaching changes in employers' behaviour. This is reflected in various measures, such as providing transport for employees (e.g. for shopping), improving accommodation standards, offering free food, and building mutual trust through everyday contacts and collaborative work. An important factor behind the latter is the family nature of Polish farms and the relatively frequent direct contact between employers and Ukrainian workers. However, this positive shift towards becoming a "good employer" does not eliminate the long-standing legal non-compliance observed in agriculture, such as informal employment, employing minors, a lack of income security and stability for workers, and difficult working conditions related to the nature of the agricultural work.

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APPENDIX

Table I. The key characteristics of the migrant participants

Code	Gender	Age	First arrival to Poland	Legal status	Family context in Poland	Follow-up
MIG01_AGR_PL	Female	30s	2011	Residence permit	Alone	no
MIG02_AGR_PL	Male	40s	2009	Overstaying	Wife, 3 children	yes
MIG03_AGR_PL	Female	30s	2022	Temporary protection	Husband, 2 children	yes
MIG04_AGR_PL	Female	20s	2022	Visa free	Father, 2 daughters	no
MIG05_AGR_PL	Female	40s	2022	Temporary protection	Daughter, husband	yes
MIG06_AGR_PL	Male	50s	2006	Overstaying	Wife	no
MIG07_AGR_PL	Female	40s	2022	Temporary protection	Son	yes
MIG08_AGR_PL	Female	under 20s (adult)	2022	Visa free	Mother, siblings	no
MIG09_AGR_PL	Male	50s	1998	Residence permit	Wife	no
MIG10_AGR_PL	Female	30s	2022	Visa free	Daughter	no
MIG11_AGR_PL	Female	40	2018	Residence permits	Son, daughter	yes
MIG12_AGR_PL	Female	50s	2002	Visa free	Alone	no
MIG13_AGR_PL	Female	40	2008	Visa free	Alone	no
MIG14_AGR_PL	Female	50s	2008	Poles' Chart	Alone	no
MIG15_AGR_PL	Female	30s	2010s	Visa free	Husband, 4 children	no
MIG16_AGR_PL	Female	40s	2023	Temporary protection	Alone	no
MIG17_AGR_PL	Female	20s	2022	Temporary protection	Alone	no
MIG18_AGR_PL	Female	70s	2023	Temporary protection	Alone	no
MIG19_AGR_PL	Female	30s	2015	Visa free	Sister	no
MIG20_AGR_PL	Female	40s	2023	Temporary protection (invalid)	Alone	no

Table 2. The stakeholders interviewed

Code	Expertise area
EXPo1_AGR_PL	Local labour market expert
EXPo2_AGR_PL	Employer of family-run farm site
EXPo3_AGR_PL	Employer of family-run farm site
EXPo4_AGR_PL	Employer of family-run farm site
EXPo5_AGR_PL	Doctor, general practitioner
EXPo6_AGR_PL	Informal intermediary (bus driver)
EXPo7_AGR_PL	Case workers, local social assistance

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Contact info

icclaim@uu.nl

For press inquiries:

I-CLAIM Communications Manager

miriam.mir@ceps.eu

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