



Research Article

Migration and challenges arising from the Russian armed conflict in 2022: The case of Zakarpattia

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Abstract

The current study delves into the contemporary challenges within the Zakarpattia region of Western Ukraine. It accomplishes this by examining the circumstances of the local populace and the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) hailing from Eastern Ukraine who arrived following the onset of the armed conflict in February 2022. Official statistics were employed to scrutinize the social and economic characteristics of the IDPs, as well as their influence on local development in Zakarpattia. These findings were then compared to the on-site research conducted by the author in the region during August 2023. The primary conclusions drawn from this research affirm the amelioration of the local economic status and job prospects in Zakarpattia as well as the adaptation of the IDPs to the new life in the region.

Key words: Internally displaced persons, local development, migration, Ukraine

1. Introduction

Millions of Ukrainians found themselves displaced from their homes following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24th, 2022. This originated a humanitarian catastrophe similar to that from the conflict in the Western Balkans, both being the major crisis after WWII. The situation by the end of November 2023 showed that there were more than 5,905,000 Ukrainian refugees recorded in Europe and 6,308,600 recorded globally. Several countries showed an important presence of Ukrainian refugees such as Germany (1,123,640), Poland (954,600), Romania (83,405), Moldova (112,810), Slovakia (112,350) and Hungary (61,445). Poland was one of the most demanded countries for the Ukrainian refugees due to its geographic and cultural closeness to Ukraine with 1,640,510 people registered for temporary protection by the end of November 2023 (UNHCR EU-UA 2023).

The border between Zakarpattia and the European Union has become a vital gateway for refugees seeking escape from the turmoil wrought by Russia. Situated in the southwestern part of Ukraine, Zakarpattia encompasses the western section of the Ukrainian Carpathians and the Transcarpathian Lowland. To the south, it shares a border with Romania, to the southwest with Hungary, to the west with Slovakia, and to the northwest with Poland (Fig. 1). Being the far-



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thetst from both Russia and Belarus region, Zakarpattia offers a relatively normal life hundreds of kilometres away from the front lines. Consequently, tens of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have sought sanctuary in Zakarpattia, finding comfortable shelter in private residences and communal centers (Reliefweb 2023).

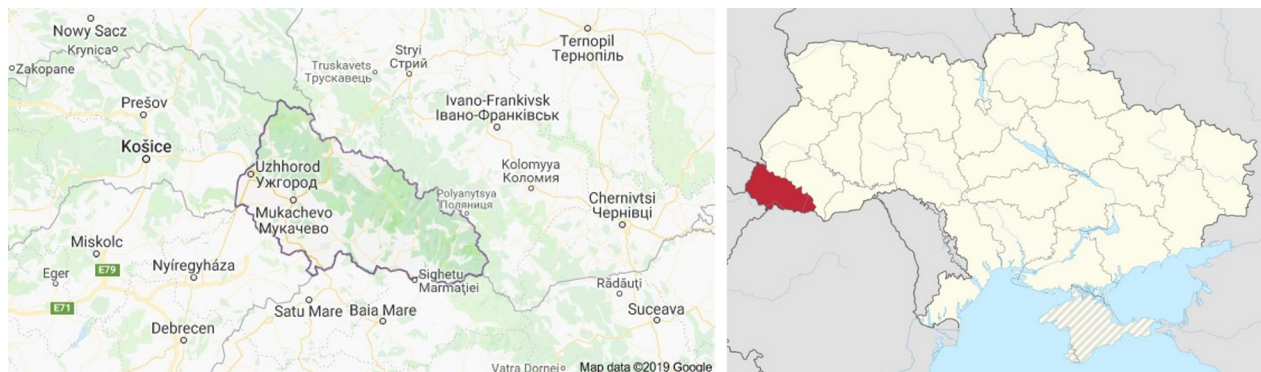


Figure 1. Map of Zakarpattia (left) and its situation within Ukraine (right). Source: Google Maps.

Zakarpattia has historically been a region marked by significant emigration. Even during the Soviet Union era, its residents sought employment in various parts of the Former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic or other republics within the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. Prior to 1914, approximately 100,000 Ukrainians from Zakarpattia had immigrated to the United States. Between the years 1920 and 1938, the emigrant count reached around 40,000, reflecting an emigration rate higher than that observed in any other Ukrainian region. By 1988, there were approximately 450,000 individuals of Zakarpattian descent in the United States, constituting roughly 30% of all Zakarpattian Ukrainians or 45% of the total western Zakarpattia Ukrainian population (Encyclopedia Ukraine 1993).

Before February 24th 2022, the emigration trend was even higher, but mostly towards European Union countries in central Europe. High migration flows have been especially observed towards the Czech and Slovak Republics, Poland and Hungary, due to their geographical situation and proximity, as well as to their ethnic and historical evolution (Igllicka and Weinar 2008; Drbohlay and Jaroszewicz 2016; Eröss et al. 2016; Fedyuk and Kindler 2016; Jaroszewicz 2018; Koroutchev 2020; Koroutchev and Novotný 2020). The migration from Ukraine to Hungary shows special characteristics influenced by the ethnic composition in Zakarpattia as around 70% of the migrants have Hungarian origin (Eröss et al. 2016). In 2016, the biggest proportion of remittances came from Russia, Czech Republic and Slovakia, thus representing about 66% of all remittances sent by Zakarpattian emigrants (Strielkowski and Šperková 2016).

The situation after 24th February 2022 changed the migration pattern, converting Zakarpattia from emissary to receiver of migrants. Following the results about the IDPs by March 2022, published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) across different Ukrainian macro regions, most IDPs come from the eastern (37%) and northern (19%) parts of Ukraine and from the Kyiv region (30%). The current location was predominantly in western Ukraine (40%),

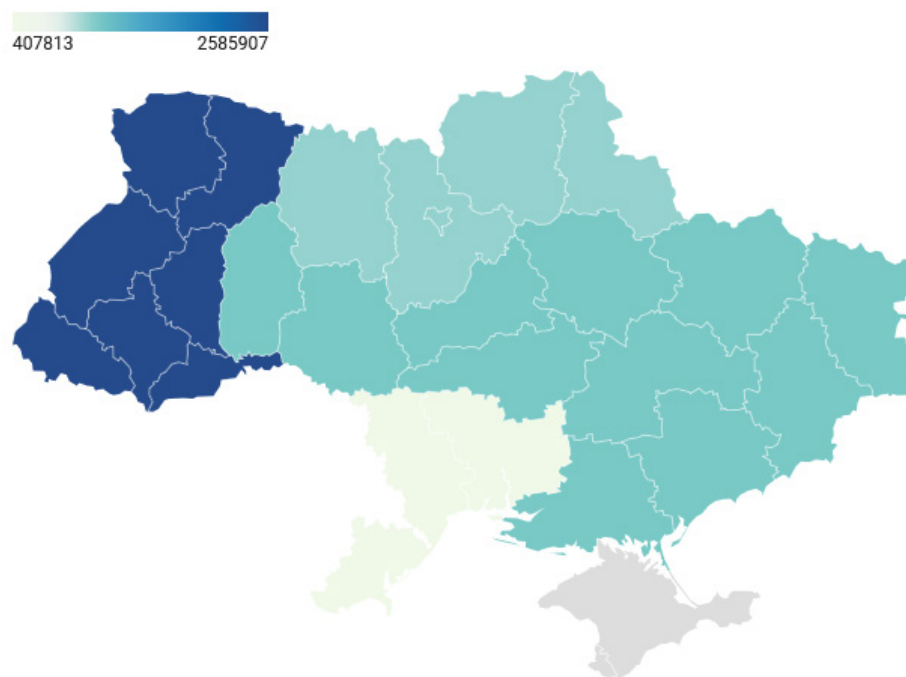


Figure 2. Location of IDPs in macroregions in Ukraine (North, West, East and South), March 16th, 2022. Own elaboration by Datawrapper software. Source: UIDR. <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/WzF3s/1>

including Zakarpattia, where there is practically no armed conflict (Fig. 2) (UIDR 2022).

Numerous studies have delved into the analysis of events following the beginning of the armed conflict on February 24th, 2022. These investigations explore a range of topics, including historical perspectives (Bauer and Selee 2022), the conflict's onset (Welfens 2022), and protective mechanisms (Benton and Selee 2022), repercussions for African nations (Duho et al. 2022) as well as implications for the Arab World (Tárik 2022), among others. A special emphasis has been paid to the economic costs of the Russia-Ukraine war (Liadze et al. 2022), the effect on Europe's energy supply (Aitken and Ersoy 2022) and the global trade (Orhan 2022) or on the global financial markets (Izzeldin et al. 2023). Recent studies have specifically examined the migration of Ukrainian refugees to neighbouring countries, shedding light on their influence on the economies and societies of the host countries (Koroutchev 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

Extensive studies have been also performed concerning the IDPs and the forced migration in general and beyond the Russian-Ukrainian war. International observers and scholars widely characterize internal displacement as one of the most urgent humanitarian challenges in our contemporary era. Following the conclusion of the Cold War, conflicts between diverse communities, religious fractions, and social groups have escalated at an alarming pace (Hampton 2002). At the end of 2022, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reported that 71.1 million individuals experienced internal displacement due to conflict, violence, and disasters (UNHCR 2023). The global figure for displaced individuals reached 108.4 million by the same time, accounting for 52% from just three countries: Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan (European Civil Protection 2023). The surge in internal displacement can be ascribed to a rise in the quan-

tity, duration, and severity of armed conflicts globally over the last decade. Additionally, there has been a doubling of climate-related disasters over the past two decades compared to the preceding two, contributing to this trend (Cheung and Einsiedel 2020; Cardwell 2022). Over the past two decades since their initiation, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement have proven beneficial to numerous states in addressing internal displacement. They have been integrated into a multitude of national and regional policies and laws, contributing to their effectiveness in guiding responses to this complex issue (Maslarska 2019; Couldrey and Peebles 2023).

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the recent changes in Zakarpattia, due to the Russian armed conflict and the massive arrival of IDPs. By citing some results of recent surveys with IDPs as well the results of own interviews and observations during the field work in Zakarpattia during August 2023, the real effects of the war have been analysed. Finally, some future plans for the development of Zakarpattia have been briefly discussed.

2. Methodology

Assessing the internal migration of Ukrainian refugees, quantitative and qualitative methodologies have been used, based on statistics gathered from various official sources. To achieve this objective, data on internal displacements, released by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as well as publications from the UNHCR, concerning contemporary migration were used. The IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix tools in Zakarpattia have been instrumental in accessing information on internal displacement and mobility flows, as well as identifying local needs and areas with elevated humanitarian risk. Leveraging these tools provided insights into the magnitude and extent of the migration crisis. Furthermore, the Datawrapper software was employed to enhance the visualization of the obtained results.

To analyse the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in relation to their adaptation to the Zakarpattian labour market, 30 interviews have been performed in face to face in Ukrainian language. Ten have been performed in the Uzhgorod and the rest in the Khust region. Half of the interviewed were locals and the other one from the IDPs. The last group was represented by people of working age. There were also some families, who decided to move to Zakarpattia as well as some IDPs from Eastern Ukraine who migrated to neighbouring Zakarpattia regions (Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk). All participants possessed a strong educational background and had diverse work experience across various sectors with employment histories in administration, industry, and the tourism sector. The interviews encompassed a range of questions covering participants' age, family status, education, prior work experience, the process of securing their current positions, the extent of their expectations, and their future plans, discussing as well the difficulties they faced in adapting to the host region. The first group of local people were selected mainly from the private sector including the tourist and the production ones and directly engaged with the IDP's arrivals and their adaptation to the local market. All interviewed agreed to be cited under the request for anonymity and the introduction of fictitious names. Finally, significant findings and conclusions were drawn from the conducted interviews and analysis.

3. Zakarpattia after February 24th 2022

In November 2022, an extensive survey with IDPs in Zakarpattia has been performed by the IOM in close cooperation with the Zakarpatska Regional Charitable Organization and the National Institute for Strategic Studies covering a sample of 4340 participants by analysing different aspects including demography, employment, household economy and so on (IOM Zakarpattia 2023).

The analysis of the demographic profile of these IDPs, obtained on the base of the above survey, stated that the proportion of females was higher (56%) compared to males, while the proportion of the population aged 18–55 years old was slightly greater among the IDPs population (58%) compared with the local population (53%). The self-identified ethnic groups were Ukrainian (93.4%), Hungarian (3.8%), Russian (2.4%), Ukrainian/Russian (2.3%) and Ukrainian/Jewish (0.8%).

The main home areas of the IDPs reached Zakarpattia were Kharkiv (23%), Donetsk (17%), Zaporizhzhia (11%) and Kyiv (8%). Their arrivals were mainly before the end of April 2022, after which the numbers of arrivals decreased (Fig. 3). These eastern and southern parts correspond mainly to the areas most affected by the current armed conflict. After April 2022, the arrivals started decreasing due to the fact that the majority of the people from these regions, who wanted or had to flee, have already done so.

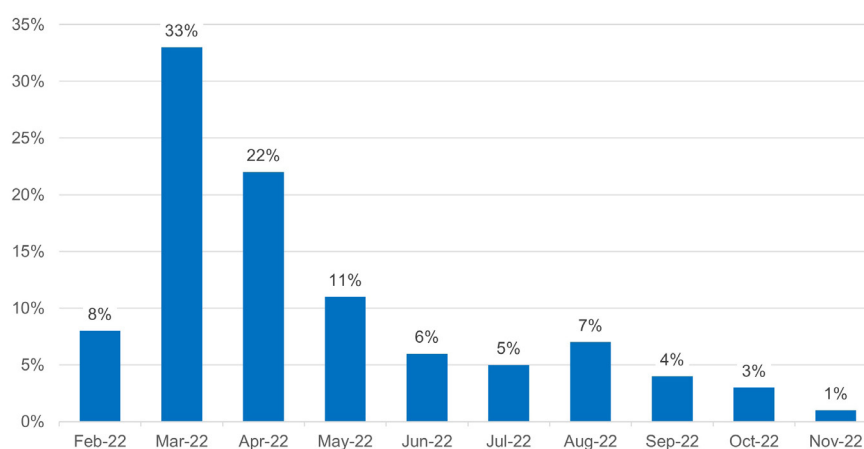


Figure 3. Evolution of the arrived IDPs during the period 24.02.2022–30.11.2022 (IOM Zakarpattia 2023).

Most registered IDPs (41%) lived in rented accommodations, while this proportion between the non-registered was 27%. 26% of non-registered IDPs resided in homes of families and friends, 9% in collective centers, 6% in hotels and hostels, while 5% in their own dwelling. These statistics differ in the different parts of Zakarpattia. For example, the proportion of IDPs accommodated in collective centers was 12% in Uzhgorod and only 1% in Khust. The biggest proportion belongs to rented accommodation in all the six biggest cities in Zakarpattia, where the IDPs usually preferred to stay (52% in Uzhgorod and 46% in Mukachevo).

Referring to employment, the IDPs come predominantly from the service and trade sectors, with a notable portion having expertise in IT/telecommunications, healthcare, and business. In contrast, the local population is primarily engaged in trade, services, education, and public administration sectors. In various other sectors, the distribution of employment is relatively similar between IDPs and the local population. IDPs employed in the fields of IT/telecommunications and arts/entertainment come mainly from Kyiv or Kherson while those engaged in heavy industry come predominantly from Donetsk and Kharkiv.

The employment of the interviewed IDPs in Zakarpattia showed an interesting pattern on the base of the above observation: 14% worked remotely, 18% in person, 9% temporarily were not working. The unemployment situation stated that 19% were looking for a job, 15% were not looking for a similar opportunity. Finally, 15% were retired, 2% were students and 1% were on maternity leave. In total, 32% of IDPs were engaged in either full-time or part-time employment, through remote work or other means. This contrasts with the local population, where 60% were employed in a similar way.

For 80% of the local population and 60% of IDPs, the state employment service emerges as an important point in their quest for employment job search. IDPs seeking employment opportunities primarily focused on various sectors such as trade (25%), services (17%), transportation (12%), manufacturing (11%), education (11%), and construction (10%). There was a notable interest among IDPs in securing employment opportunities in the fields of IT/telecommunications and heavy industry. When considering training courses to enhance their employability, IDPs expressed a preference for courses in foreign languages, IT skills, and business skills. Additionally, 13% of IDPs indicated a preference for owning their own business or working for themselves, compared to the 22% of the local population with similar preferences.

When comparing the percentage of the job offers after and before the war, it can be observed that Zakarpattia has gained around 104% of them compared to the eastern and southern regions, which have lost more than 80% of the job offers (Vinokurov 2023). This destruction in the eastern and southern regions and the creation of job offers in the western regions, especially Zakarpattia has benefited the region and has created a basis for further economic development (Fig. 4).

Regarding the household economy, before the onset of the war, residents of Zakarpattia reported a relatively low average income. However, there has been a significant decline in the household income levels among the IDPs population, contrasting with a relatively modest decrease among the local residents. Zakarpattia, much like the entire country, is currently experiencing a period of economic recession. In 2022, trade experienced a boost due to the presence of IDPs. However, in 2023 income has witnessed a significant decline. The combination of inflation has further exacerbated the challenges faced.

The evolution of the income prior to the war and after March 2022 until the end of November 2022 for IDPs and local population is represented in Fig. 5. It can be observed that the percentage of people of high income before February 24th 2022 is reduced drastically, meanwhile the percentage of people of lower income has increased. In contrast, the medium and lower income of the locals has importantly increased and the percentage of people of high income has slightly changed (IOM Zakarpattia 2023).

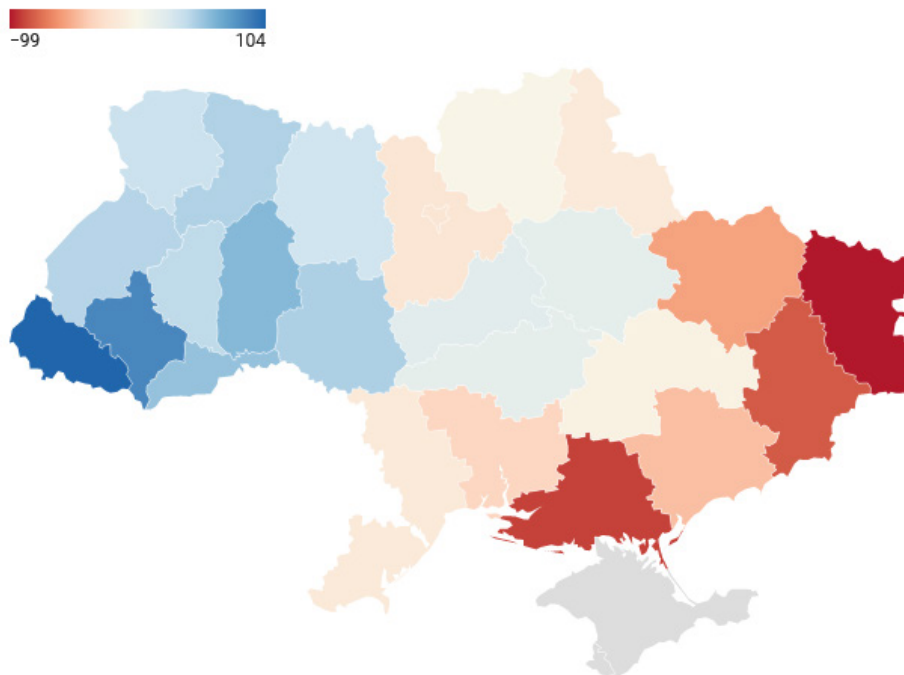


Figure 4. Change of the job offers after and prior to 24.02.2022 (WORK 2023). Own elaboration by using Datawrapper software: <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/J8nED/1/>

Regarding the source of income, approximately 63% of registered IDPs households considered their monthly living allowance as their main source of income. About 24% relied on social benefits, and 31% depended on pension payments. Additionally, 28% mentioned that their salary served as a primary source of income. In general, non-registered IDPs appear to exhibit greater economic independence and relying more on financial support from friends and relatives within Ukraine and abroad. A noteworthy percentage of unregistered

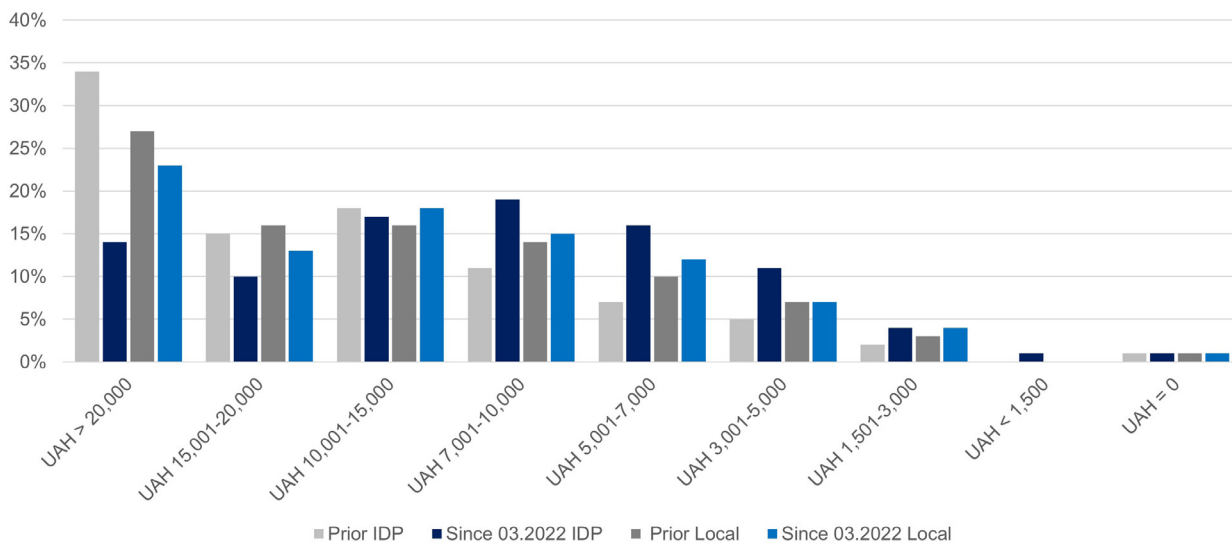


Figure 5. IDP's and locals income prior to the war and since 03.2022 in Ukraininan currency (IOM Zakarpattia 2023).

IDPs also identified income from owned property and profits from private entrepreneurship as primary sources of income.

Finally, the mobility intentions showed that the primary preference for the majority of IDPs was to ultimately return to their habitual place of residence, with 58% expressing this desire. Among the IDPs surveyed, 10% expressed their intention to integrate into their current location, 2%—to settle elsewhere within Zakarpattia, and 4% to relocate to a different region. These numbers differ between the different settlements. For example, the percentage of local integration in Uzhgorod was 13.5%, in Mukachevo—12.1%, while in Khust and Rakhiv they were 6% and 0.8% respectively (IOM Zakarpattia 2023).

As a conclusion of the survey, it can be said that there is an important change of the pattern represented by the IDPs in Zakarpattia. These are seen in several aspects referring mainly to their economic and social parts: the local population has improved in terms of income and new job opportunities as well as from the arrival of well-formed IDPs from the rest of the country. From their side, the IDPs in Zakarpattia have faced new challenges concerning the job adaptation and the community inclusion in a region away from the war hostilities.

4. Results of the field work in Zakarpattia during August 2023

The aforementioned observations regarding the enhancement of the local population's economic well-being and job prospects in Zakarpattia have been substantiated through the author's fieldwork in August 2023. In fact, significant developments in terms of infrastructure, including roads and Internet connectivity, were evident in Zakarpattia when compared to the author's previous visit in 2019. Supermarkets exhibited improved product quality, with no shortages and stable prices, distinguishing the region from the price hikes witnessed across the rest of Europe. The consistent liberal tax regime persisted, fostering entrepreneurship, reducing unemployment, and stimulating economic growth; however, it remained unable to provide support to the elderly and socially excluded individuals. The tourism sector flourished, primarily driven by visitors from western Ukraine, notably from Lviv. Regrettably, due to the ongoing war and associated uncertainties, foreign tourists were very scarce in Zakarpattia, despite the region's relative safety.

As has been anticipated in the Methodology section, 30 interviews have been performed face to face in Ukrainian language. 10 have been performed in the Uzhgorod and the rest in the Khust region. Half of the interviewed were locals and the other one from the IDPs. The last group was represented by people of working age. There were also some families, who decided to move to Zakarpattia as well as some IDPs from Eastern Ukraine who migrated to neighbouring Zakarpattia regions. The first group was represented by local people mainly involved in the private sector and directly engaged in the IDPs arrivals and their adaptation to the local market.

Bohdana (woman, 50 years old): *"After the beginning of the war, several enterprises from Eastern Ukraine have moved to Zakarpattia due to safety reasons. Thus additional job opportunities appeared, which triggered an increase of the local people's income."*

Tetyana (woman, 48 years old): *"Our guest house was full of IDPs in the first few months after February 2022. There were people from Kharkiv, Kyiv and Do-*

netsk. We tried to help every one of them. Now the situation has changed as many of them have returned to their homes. We only have some tourists during the weekend and they are mainly from Lviv or Ivano-Frankivsk. Only few people come now from Kyiv”.

A considerable number of businesses have relocated from Ukraine to the Budapest region. Many prominent enterprises extend their support to territorial defence forces and the military. Some campaigns revolve around the principle of “an eye for an eye” or “tooth for tooth”. Remarkably, even young children engage in selling homemade products and donate the gains to the armed forces.

On the other side, numerous enterprises have encountered challenges in recruiting workers, primarily due to a significant outflow of people from the country. Furthermore, certain professions tend to draw immediate attention from mobilization officers, leading to an increased prevalence of unofficial employment and self-employment. In contrast to employees, self-employed individuals are not required to disclose their occupation to the military, thus reducing the likelihood of being mobilized. This author’s impression is also confirmed in (Karpets 2023).

Dmitro (man, 42 years old): *“I have a small company for wooden products. For the moment I have only a few women working there, but I also need some professional mechanics and this is very difficult to find as many have been mobilized or have emigrated”.*

Regarding the sentiment towards the ongoing war, the Ukrainian nation currently displays a remarkable unity, embodied by their motto “together we will win”. The predominant discourse revolves around achieving victory rather than pursuing a peace deal. Everyday conversations are predominantly focused on the armed conflict and underscore a strong aversion and animosity towards anything associated with Russia. The Russian language is no longer commonly spoken, and while people may understand it, there is a substantial likelihood that even a foreigner attempting to communicate in Russian could face indifference. This inclination is evident in the conversations and behaviour of individuals, including young children and teenagers. Furthermore, a considerable number of people are actively contributing to support the military in any way possible.

Olena (woman, 48 years old): *“I appreciate a lot when a foreigner tries to speak our Ukrainian language and not in Russian. I will help him with everything that he needs.”*

A visit to a factory where internally displaced individuals were engaged in the production of uniforms and other essential equipment for soldiers on the front lines revealed the manager’s strong commitment to maximizing output. The factory was functioning in two shifts as the demand was very high. This production created job opportunities for the IDPs as well as for the local population and has been stimulated by the army itself.

Yurii (man, 40 years old): *“Our aim is to produce as many uniforms as possible and not to pay much attention to their aesthetic. Our soldiers need them to be comfortable and warm.”*

It is evident that a significant portion of the male population has either served on the front lines or volunteered in roles like transporting vehicles and supplies to the front. Furthermore, a notable element was the presence of a memorial cemetery dedicated to those who had lost their lives in the ongoing war.

Regrettably, there were designated areas for new graves yet to be prepared, underscoring the ongoing challenges and sacrifices endured.

In terms of the social aspect of these changes, during the period immediately following February 2022 a significant influx of IDPs had arrived. While a number of them returned to their home regions, a proportion chose to establish roots in Zakarpattia. Among those who arrived, there were men below 60 years old who tried to go abroad by crossing the border illegally in order to escape from being drafted into the army.

Igor (man, 55 years old): *“During the first three months there were many people from Eastern Ukraine coming to Zakarpattia. Meantime, many of the people from Zakarpattia went abroad although many people (men) below 60 years old were not allowed to go abroad. I have heard that border control is very strict when approaching the border for exiting the country, in order to stop men of military age for leaving the country.”*

Numerous contacts with IDPs in the Khust and Uzhgorod regions revealed that a portion of them made the decision to establish their lives there and embark on a new chapter, seeking refuge from the hostilities and destruction in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. This is supported by the relatively peaceful atmosphere, the good geographic environment, the closeness to the neighbouring countries as well as the job opportunities in Zakarpattia.

Alessia (woman, 42 years old): *“I arrived with my family in March to join our relatives and to escape the horror we lived in Kharkiv. At the beginning my husband started a job in a small factory and then I found a modest job in a store. Together with our two children we are happy to have succeeded to move here. Probably we will go back to our home once the war has finished, but we will also be glad to continue our life in Zakarpattia.”*

Irina (woman, 65 years old): *“Last winter, when we arrived in Zakarpattia, it was very difficult due to the shortage of electricity. We tried to heat our homes with generators and wood from the forest, but not everyone could do it. I hope that we will be better prepared for the next winter. I also hope that we will be able to go back to our homes once the war finishes.”*

5. Government development plans for Zakarpattia

The Carpathian Euro region represents a form of cross-border cooperation, specifically serving as an interregional association comprising the border regions of Ukraine, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. Benefiting from a strategically advantageous geographic location, it offers opportunities for the development of efficient infrastructure in the border areas. The key economic focus within the Carpathian Euro region is tourism. Implementing measures such as organizing online exhibitions, fairs, and virtual tours of historical sites can significantly enhance the region's tourism offerings. Supporting ongoing international projects in the economic sphere, including initiatives like “Small Carpathian Circle”, TACIS, INTERREG, and other regional EU projects, is crucial for regional development (Khusainov et al. 2023). These lines of actuation determine the basic trends of Ukraine's participation in cross-border cooperation through the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement with Slovakia, Poland, Romania and Hungary in terms of socio-economic development, public administration and

legislation, as well as migration and social interaction, among others, and are coherent with the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development (Lačný 2021).

Zakarpattia is considered to play a significant role for Ukraine's economic and social progress. The relocation of businesses and the creation of new job opportunities in various communities within the region constitute a crucial point for the governmental efforts. Numerous initiatives are in progress to foster economic development in Zakarpattia. Examples of them are the salt deposit development (Future plans 2023) as well as the creation of investment passports in the region by providing expert assistance to Bativska community for enhancing the development of a logistics hub (Rubryka 2023).

6. Conclusions

This article explores the current situation in Zakarpattia region in Western Ukraine by analysing the effect of the Internally Displaced People, who arrived there after the beginning of the armed conflict on February 24th, 2022. Official data from a large survey with a large sample of IDPs and covering different aspects such as demographic, economic and social ones have revealed the important changes in the Zakarpattian's society, which are mainly reflected on improvement of the economic situation as a whole and a relatively good adaptation of the IDPs to their new life. Actually Zakarpattia has gained around 104% of the new jobs offers compared to the eastern and southern regions and has shown an important change of the income pattern in a way that the medium and lower incomes of the local population have increased. On the other hand, an important change of the IDPs pattern in Zakarpattia concerns mainly the economic and social parts of their adaptation to the new reality.

A field trip, performed by the author in this region during August 2023, revealed some details about the attitude of the local people towards the armed conflict, the shortage of specific working forces as well as the challenges of this region in a longer-term perspective. It has been discussed that the liberal tax regime persisted, fostering entrepreneurship, reducing unemployment, and stimulating economic growth. On the other hand, numerous enterprises have encountered difficulties in recruiting workers, primarily due to the current armed conflict and the significant outflow of people from the country. Concerning the situation of the IDPs in Khust and Uzhgorod regions revealed that an important percentage of them made the decision to settle in the region. Such decisions are based on some future governmental plans for economic development of the region including the relocation of businesses and the creation of new job opportunities adapted to the geographic peculiarities of the region.

As a general conclusion it can be said that the economic well-being and employment opportunities of the local residents in Zakarpattia has improved due to the creation of new jobs and the arrival of well-formed IDPs from the rest of the country. Moreover, Zakarpattia offers a good quality of life for the IDPs and new perspectives for future development of the region.

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Additional information

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was declared.

Ethical statement

No ethical statement was reported.

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Data availability

All of the data that support the findings of this study are available in the main text or Supplementary Information.