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EXPLOITATION OF LABOR MIGRANTS AS A FACTOR OF COMPETITIVENESS IN THE GLOBAL LABOR MARKET

ЕКСПЛУАТАЦІЯ ТРУДОВИХ МІГРАНТІВ ЯК ФАКТОР КОНКУРЕНТОСПРОМОЖНОСТІ НА ГЛОБАЛЬНОМУ РИНКУ ПРАЦІ

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Abstract: *The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the exploitation of labor migrants as a systemic factor shaping competitiveness in the global labor market. The relevance of the study stems from the rapid growth of international labor mobility, the intensification of socio-professional segmentation of employment, and the spread of forced and semi-forced labor practices that enable businesses to artificially reduce costs while simultaneously deepening structural socio-economic imbalances.*

The methodological framework of the research integrates general scientific and specialized methods, including analysis and synthesis, statistical and comparative analysis, as well as an institutional approach that made it possible to assess the impact of regulatory mechanisms on the situation of labor migrants across countries. The empirical base relies on data from leading international organizations, such as the ILO, OECD, IOM, and UNHCR, as well as specialized analytical reports on global labor market trends.

The findings demonstrate that labor migrants are predominantly concentrated in low-paid, unstable, and high-risk sectors of the economy, where they experience substantial wage gaps compared to local workers. The study identifies manifestations of "double discrimination" against migrant women and reveals key exploitation mechanisms - tied visas, restricted access to information, and confiscation of documents - which generate pronounced power asymmetries between employers and workers. The analysis shows that exploitative practices may reduce labor costs by up to 40% and generate significant illicit profits. Special attention is devoted to emerging forms of exploitation in the digital economy and the gig sector, as well as to the specific vulnerabilities of Ukrainian labor migrants in the context of war.

The article concludes that the exploitation of labor migrants provides only short-term competitive advantages while undermining the sustainability of economic development and reinforcing global inequality. A promising alternative is a shift toward a model focused on human capital development, inclusive migrant integration, and productivity growth, which can prevent a

"race to the bottom" and support a more balanced functioning of the global labor market.
Key words: *labor migration; labor exploitation; global labor market; forced labor; labor market segmentation; gig economy; human capital; migration-related discrimination*

Анотація. *У статті здійснено комплексний аналіз експлуатації трудових мігрантів як системного чинника, що впливає на формування конкурентоспроможності в умовах глобалізованого ринку праці. Актуальність дослідження обумовлена стрімким зростанням міжнародної мобільності робочої сили, посиленням соціально-професійної сегментації зайнятості та поширенням практик примусової або напівпримусової праці, які дають змогу бізнесу штучно скорочувати витрати, водночас поглиблюючи структурні соціально-економічні дисбаланси.*

Методологічну основу роботи становлять загальнонаукові та спеціальні методи дослідження, зокрема аналіз і синтез, статистичний та порівняльний аналіз, а також інституційний підхід, що дозволив оцінити вплив регуляторних механізмів на становище трудових мігрантів у різних країнах. Емпіричну базу сформовано на основі даних провідних міжнародних організацій, включно з ILO, OECD, IOM та UNHCR, а також спеціалізованих аналітичних звітів щодо тенденцій світового ринку праці.

У результаті доведено, що трудові мігранти зосереджені переважно у низькооплачуваних, нестабільних і високоризикових секторах економіки, де вони стикаються з істотним розривом в оплаті праці порівняно з місцевими працівниками. Виявлено прояви «подвійної дискримінації» щодо жінок-мігранток, а також ключові механізми експлуатації – залежні візи, обмежений доступ до інформації, вилучення документів, що створюють асиметрію влади між роботодавцем і працівником. Показано, що використання експлуатаційних практик може зменшувати собівартість праці до 40% і формувати значні тіньові прибутки. Окремо проаналізовано нові форми експлуатації, характерні для цифрової економіки та гіг-сектору, а також специфічні вразливості українських трудових мігрантів у період війни.

Зроблено висновок, що експлуатація трудових мігрантів забезпечує лише короткострокові конкурентні переваги, водночас підриваючи стійкість економічного розвитку та поглиблюючи глобальну нерівність. Перспективним напрямом визначено перехід до моделі, орієнтованої на розвиток людського капіталу, інклюзивну інтеграцію мігрантів і зростання продуктивності праці, що дозволить уникнути «перегонів на дно» та забезпечити більш збалансоване функціонування світового ринку праці.
Ключові слова: *трудова міграція; експлуатація праці; глобальний ринок праці; примусова праця; сегментація ринку праці; гіг-економіка; людський капітал; міграційна дискримінація*

Introduction. The contemporary stage of global economic development is characterized by intensive labor mobility, accompanied by a steady increase in the number of international labor migrants and their significant contribution to the formation of global added value. According to estimates by the International Labour Organization, the number of labor migrants worldwide exceeds 167 million people, accounting for approximately 4.7% of the global labor force (ILO, 2024). Their contribution to labor-intensive sectors of the economy is disproportionately high, particularly in the context of population ageing and labor shortages in high-income countries (OECD, 2025).

At the same time, the integration of migrants into national labor markets remains uneven and is often associated with their concentration in the secondary segment of employment, which is characterized by low wages, unstable working conditions, and limited opportunities for social mobility. Such labor market segmentation aligns with the theoretical propositions of the dual labor market model, according to which migrants serve as a source of "flexible" labor, filling low-paid and low-prestige jobs (Doeringer & Piore, 1971; ILO, 2024). Empirical studies likewise confirm the existence of a systemic wage gap between migrants and native workers, which on average exceeds 13% and may reach significantly higher levels depending on the country (World Inequality Lab, 2026).

The issue of labor migrant exploitation acquires particular urgency, functioning not only as a social phenomenon but also as an economic category directly linked to the formation of business competitiveness. As highlighted in the report *"Profits and Poverty: The Economics of Forced Labour,"* forced labor generates approximately USD 236 billion in illicit profits annually, demonstrating its systemic integration into global production networks (ILO, 2024). Employers' use of migrants' institutional vulnerability–through mobility restrictions, informational isolation, and dependence on a single employer–enables significant reductions in labor costs and compliance expenditures related to workplace standards (OECD, 2026).

In the current context of economic digitalization, the problem of exploitation is acquiring new forms, extending to the gig economy and the data annotation sector for artificial intelligence systems, where workers, including migrants, are engaged in low-paid and unstable forms of employment (ILO, 2026). Simultaneously, the vulnerability of certain groups of migrants is increasing, particularly among individuals affected by armed conflict. According to the International Organization for Migration, a substantial share of Ukrainian migrants face various forms of labor exploitation, including informal employment, excessive working hours, and violations of wage payment conditions (IOM, 2024).

The purpose of the article. The aim of this study is to analyze the exploitation of labor migrants as a factor shaping competitiveness in the global labor market and to identify the key mechanisms, forms, and consequences of this phenomenon. To achieve this aim, the study addresses several tasks: examining the role of labor migrants within the global labor market structure; identifying the main mechanisms of their exploitation and the conditions that facilitate its persistence; assessing the economic benefits employers derive from the use of vulnerable labor; analyzing emerging forms of exploitation driven by digitalization and the expansion of the gig economy; and characterizing the specific risks and employment conditions faced by Ukrainian labor migrants in the current geopolitical context. This approach enables a comprehensive assessment of the structural drivers of exploitation and its implications for the functioning of the global labor market.

Literature review. Labor migration has become a central focus of contemporary economic research, as migrant workers play a significant role in sustaining global production and addressing structural labor shortages in host economies (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2025). At the same time, numerous studies emphasize that migrants are disproportionately concentrated in the secondary segment of the labor market, where employment is characterized by instability, low wages, and limited prospects for advancement (Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Piore, 1979). This structural positioning renders migrant labor a flexible resource for employers and creates conditions conducive to systemic exploitation. A substantial body of economic literature also investigates the broader macroeconomic effects of migration. G. Borjas (1989) demonstrates that immigration has a positive impact on GDP growth in receiving countries, although it may simultaneously intensify income inequality. Conversely, T. Hassan's (2024) research highlights the crucial contributions of highly skilled migrants to innovation, technological development, and investment attraction. Further studies by A. Gharas et al. (2017) and P. Sgrignoli et al. (2013) emphasize the important role of migrant networks in facilitating international trade and foreign direct investment by strengthening cross-border economic linkages. Meanwhile, investigations by C. Ara-Figueros (2018) and A. Lopatinas (2017) suggest that labor mobility also enhances regional innovation capacity, as the circulation of skilled workers promotes knowledge transfer and supports the formation of innovation-driven regional ecosystems.

The economic incentives behind such exploitation are well documented. Firms frequently rely on migrants' legal and institutional vulnerabilities to reduce labor costs and gain competitive advantages, practices that are deeply embedded in global value chains (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2026). According to international assessments, forced labor alone generates approximately $236 billion in illegal profits each year, illustrating the scale of these exploitative mechanisms. Wage inequality remains a persistent issue, with studies confirming a migrant wage penalty and a compounded disadvantage affecting migrant women due to intersecting forms of discrimination (World Inequality Lab, 2026; ILO, 2026).

Digital transformation has further expanded the geography of exploitation. Migrants are increasingly engaged in platform-based and invisible digital labor–such as content moderation and data annotation for AI systems–often without adequate pay or social protections (Berg et al., 2018; ILO, 2026). This reinforces existing power asymmetries and shifts exploitation from traditional sectors into new technological domains. Additionally, migration driven by crises, including armed conflicts, heightens vulnerability to labor abuses. Evidence shows that displaced workers, such as Ukrainian migrants in Europe, face elevated risks of informal employment, excessive working hours, and wage violations due to insecure legal status and limited access to formal labor markets (IOM, 2024; UNHCR, 2026).

In Ukrainian scholarship, labor migration and its demographic and economic implications have been actively analyzed by Shepel, Reznikova, Bulatova, Krykun, and Grydasova (2025a; 2025b; 2025c). Their works conceptualize migration as both a developmental opportunity and a structural challenge, emphasizing the role of international regulatory frameworks in managing labor mobility and mitigating regional disparities. These findings resonate with global analyses of the "race to the bottom," in which competitive pressures incentivize states and firms to lower labor standards. Despite extensive literature on migration, inequality, and labor rights, the specific link between migrant exploitation and competitive advantage formation in global labor markets remains insufficiently integrated into a unified analytical framework. Existing studies tend to examine these issues separately, while a systematic exploration of how exploitation mechanisms translate into economic competitiveness is still emerging.

Main results of the research. The number of international labour migrants stands at over 167.7 million, representing around 4.7% of the total global workforce *(ILO, 2024)*. However, this figure significantly underestimates their actual contribution to the GDP of several regions. The concentration of migrants in labour-intensive sectors results in the disproportionately high contribution to value added, particularly given the imbalances in national labour markets.

Migrants demonstrate significantly higher economic activity compared to the local population. Table 1 shows that the employment rate among them stands around 66%, which is six percentage points higher than the corresponding figure for non-migrants. This is clearly evident in high-income countries, where migrants fill niches genuinely arising from demographic ageing, as well as the unwillingness of the local population to take on 'unprestigious' or low-paid jobs.

In such a context, the segmentation of the labour market takes on particular significance, with migrants largely concentrated in the secondary sector of employment, where unstable employment conditions, lower wages and limited social opportunities for social mobility are often observed. It is precisely this that enables employers to minimize production costs, thereby creating a dependency of certain sectors on foreign labour.

Table 1

A comparison of labour force participation among migrants and non-migrants

Indicators of labour activity	Migrants	Local citizens
Labour force participation rate, %	65.8	60.1
Employment to population ratio, %	60.9	57
Unemployment rate, %	7.2	5.2

Source: ILO 2024

The analysis demonstrates that migrants do not merely supplement the labour market, but form its structural basis, particularly in the agriculture, construction, services, and logistics sectors. In the countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, for example, there has been a steady increase in the inflow of foreign workers. In 2023 the UK admitted 283,000 migrant workers, which is 48% more than the previous year. Canada welcomed 145,000 people (a 7% increase), and Germany admitted 93,000 (a 4% increase). However, these impressive figures often mask the poor working conditions faced by migrants, where employers achieve labour flexibility by depriving them of their wages and basic rights *(ILO, 2024)*.

In particular, it is important to highlight the wage gap. The top 10% of the highest-paid workers account for over 50% of total income, while the 50% of the lowest-paid (among whom migrants frequently make up the majority) account for less than 8% of the global earnings. This results in the top 10% of high-earners earning more than the remaining 90% combined. Migrants, on average, earn 13% less than local workers. In some countries, the gap reaches 30-40%. In Italy, for example, it this figure stands at 30%, and in Cyprus, 42% *(World Inequality Lab, ILO, 2026)*.

Meanwhile, women earn 21% less than men. It points not only to a ‘migrant wage penalty’ but also to a ‘double penalty’, under which female migrants face double discrimination – on the basis of gender and origin. This causes dissatisfaction among women, yet they, like other migrants, are often unable to defend their own rights.

The service sector consistently accounts for the vast majority of the workforce. In 2024, 68.4% of all migrant workers were employed in the tertiary sector. However, among women this figure is higher and reaches 81% of female migrants, who are employed, to a large extent, in the care and domestic work sectors *(ILO, 2024)*. This creates specific risks, as such work is often informal. This practically makes it impossible for them to receive social protection and leaves them invisible to state labour inspectorates.

Labour migrants face constant risk. This risk comes from institutional barriers, they are shown in the Table 2. One key example is the system of tied visas. A clear case is Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). Under this system, migrants lose legal status if they lose their job. This also creates a risk of deportation. In such conditions, workers often have no real choice, consequently they are forced to accept unsafe working conditions and may work unpaid overtime. In practice, they have very limited ability to protect their rights.

The next barrier is social and informational isolation. Migrants often do not know the local language or the specifics of the law, which makes them easy prey for dishonest employers. Research *(ILO, 2026)* highlights that women and children are the most vulnerable, since women are more likely to become victims of sexual exploitation and forced domestic labour. Young people are often exploited in low-paid sectors of the gig economy.

The confiscation of documents is a clear sign of exploitation and modern-day slavery. This creates a closed trap, as the migrants will be unable to move around the country or leave it legally. They will also be completely dependent on the employer, which would result in an imbalance of power. By taking away their documents, the employer keeps the worker ‘tied’ to them and leaves them with no choice but to accept lower wages and poor working conditions. Nowadays around twenty-eight million people are in a state of forced labour, one of the main indicators of which is the confiscation of documents *(ILO, 2026)*.

Table 2

Benefits to employers from the exploitation of migrants

Vulnerability factor	The mechanism of influence on a migrant	Economic benefit for the employer
Tied visas	Fear of deportation in the event of complaints or dismissal	The ability to dictate any working conditions
Information isolation	Migrant’s ignorance of local laws and language	Saving on legal support and employee safety
Confiscation of documents	Complete physical and legal dependence	The establishment of conditions that resemble modern-day slavery

Source: ILO

The report *“Profits and Poverty: The Economics of Forced Labour” (ILO, 2024)* demonstrates that forced labour generates about 236 billion in illegal profits each year. In practice, this money is taken directly from the employees’ pockets since employers charge high fees for housing and food. They may also refuse to pay wages. The highest illicit profits are recorded in Europe and Central Asia, as shown in Table 3. They reach about 3,943 dollars per year per victim. In Arab countries, the losses can be much higher, in some cases reaching up to 15,000 dollars per person.

The largest profits come from the domestic work in the service sector. Construction and manufacturing also bring high returns. In most cases, migrants earn much less than local citizens. Their wages are often 13-40% lower, or they are not paid at all.

Table 3

Profits from forced labour

Region	Annual illicit profits (billion dollars)	Profit per victim (dollars)
Europe and Central Asia	84	3,943
Asian-Pacific	62	1,510

America	52	5,554
Africa	20	1,123
Arab countries	18	15,000

Source: ILO 2024

In particular, exploitation of migrants allows businesses to save up to 40% of the labour costs, personal safety equipment, and safety systems. A link has been found between the forced labour and illegal trade in counterfeit goods *(EUIPO-OECD, 2026).* For every additional percentage point of forced labour, the trade in counterfeit goods increases by over thirty-five million dollars. It undermines the legal business forced to compete with '21st-century slaves'.

The utilization of the migrants' work in order to minimize the costs is, to a great extent, based on the concept of 'race to the bottom' where the competitive advantage is achieved through the conscious lowering of social standards. This results in the deterioration of working conditions and ecology and leads to the decline in tax revenue. However, it annually generates the staggering sum of the aforementioned 236 billion dollars. The key idea of this concept is based on the fact that states willing to attract foreign direct investment usually loosen the labour inspection and limit the rights to collective bargaining, which leads to the decreasing of wages. Thus, one company receives the advantage from exploitation and others, in order not to lose the market share, start decreasing their own security standards. In 2026 the investment funds began calling for the adoption of mandatory international conventions that could preclude a collapse in labour standards, which, in turn, carries significant risks for the stability of the global economy as a whole *(ICCR, 2026).*

With the development of artificial intelligence, the exploitation of migrants has extended far beyond the confines of physical factories. Migrants now form the backbone of the 'invisible' workforce. This happens because modern AI systems rely solely on the workers who are forced to manually filter toxic content and train algorithms. In other words, companies talk about the extraordinary algorithms' efficiency, whilst hiding the fact that behind this lies the labour of migrants, who are paid just 1.30-2 dollars an hour.

Migrants also make up a significant share of the courier and taxi sectors. Companies exploit them by not recognizing themselves as employers. It is suggested that employees are treated as 'partners' rather than 'workers' in order to avoid liability. Another violation is, in particular, the swift termination of an employees' accounts if they complain or attempt to report a violation of their rights. It is also migrants who are, for the most part, encouraged to work in difficult and hazardous conditions (for example, in severe weather) in exchange for small bonuses. Consequently, the worker becomes a slave, deprived of any interaction with management, and their income depends entirely on the willingness to work to the limits of their physical capacity.

The level of exploitation among the population affected by the war is critical. 54% of the respondents reported having faced at least one of the potential signs of the labour exploitation during the first 12 months of employment *(ILO 2024).* Table 4 demonstrates the violations of the individual rights, which Ukrainians have faced. The most widespread among them were, for example:

- Forty-two percent of the employees reported the long working hours.
- Twenty-two percent – the absence of the official contract.
- Eleven percent – the non-payment or underpayment of wages.

The most alarming of those is the figure of 22%, which practically means that one fifth of the Ukrainian migrants surveyed works informally and does not have a clearly defined employment contract. More severe forms of exploitation are also recorded, including threats and violence (3%), and the lack of basic necessities such as food, water and sanitary facilities (2%). According to the International Labour Organisation terminology, this meets the criteria for forced labour. The report also shows that up to 76% of young people (aged 18-24) among internally displaced persons have been exploited, as the lower bargaining power, the higher the probability of the exploitation *(IOM, 2024).*

The Russian war against Ukraine has led to more than 6.9 million Ukrainians forced to live abroad becoming one of the largest and, at the same time, most vulnerable segments of the European labour marker. Due to the lack of resources, Ukrainians have no other choice but accept the risky job offers. In 2025 17% of respondents reported the willingness to accept the job without a formal contract or under questionable conditions. 13% are ready to work in closed conditions (in isolation), 2% are even willing to give all their personal belongings to the employer.

Table 4
Forms of exploitation of Ukrainians

Type of violation	The percentage of Ukrainians, %
Overworking/long working hours	42
Absence of appropriate official contract	22
Non-payment of wages	11
Lack of personal safety equipment	4
Threats or violence in the workplace	3

Source: IOM

Although more than half of the Ukrainian refugees in Europe (57%) are employed, their level of income is significantly lower than local citizens', by an average of 22%. The main reason for this lies in 'de-skilling', which implies the loss from non-utilizing professional skills. Around 60% of Ukrainians are forced to work on the positions that do not match their real qualification. Refugees with higher education five times more often than local citizens have to occupy low-skilled jobs. In the event of improved migrant integration, the EU countries could gain an additional 0.7% of GDP annually *(UNHCR, 2026).*

The vast majority of Ukrainians work in the 'black' or 'grey' labour market, which leaves them with less protection. The workers may not receive their wages, lose their jobs without any explanation or work under hazardous conditions. The 'black' labour market implies fully unofficial employment without a contract and legal protection, while 'grey' market stands for only partial legalization (unofficial wages or hiding the real income level). In some cases, the employers cut their costs by hiring Ukrainians at lower wages, however, this creates pressure on the overall wage levels. The construction and agricultural sectors feel this pressure particularly strongly. This is especially noticed in Poland, Germany and Czech Republic.

Given the global risks from systematic exploitation, the international community is moving towards to more stringent regulatory methods. The key instrument is the European Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CS3D), the provisions of which were revised as part of the Omnibus I package (February 2026). It provides for the simplification of requirements and narrowing of the range of companies to which it's applied. The Directive provides for the civil liability of companies for human rights violations in supply chains and penalties up to 5% of the turnover and complete exclusion from the EU market. Furthermore, since 2025, coordination between the US and the EU has been strengthened regarding a complete ban on the import of goods produced using forced labour.

However, the future of the global economy lies not in the exploitation economy (a reduction in relative labour costs). The modern paradigm of global economic development is increasingly shifting towards the accumulation of human capital, innovation and increased labour productivity. In this context, the utilization of migrant labour as the cheap resource is considered as a sign of technological lag rather than a competitive advantage. The competitive advantage in medium and long term will belong to economies that are able to integrate new migrants by making effective use of their skills and creating conditions for professional development (Mario Draghi, 2026). This approach will prevent a 'race to the bottom' and ensure the stable growth of the global economy. In many countries, namely the United Kingdom, Belgium, South Korea, Greece etc., trade unions are now starting to recruit migrant workers to use them as a tool in the fight against wage dumping, whilst human rights organisations are putting pressure on brands and forcing them to check their supply chains to ensure that no forced labour has been used.

Conclusions. The findings of the study demonstrate that the exploitation of labor migrants constitutes a significant yet fundamentally detrimental component of the contemporary global economic model. While such practices may generate short-term competitive advantages for firms by reducing labor costs, they simultaneously reinforce a broader "race to the bottom," eroding social standards, weakening institutional protections, and undermining the long-term stability of labor markets.

The growing scale of forced labor and its deepening integration into global value chains further highlight the urgency of strengthening international regulatory frameworks and enhancing monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with fundamental labor rights. In this context, newly developed policy instruments aimed at increasing corporate accountability–particularly within multinational supply chains–play a crucial role in preventing exploitative practices and promoting responsible business conduct.

At the same time, the future trajectory of the global economy increasingly depends on a transition away from exploitation-based competitive strategies toward a model grounded in the effective development and utilization of human capital, innovation, and productivity growth. The meaningful integration of migrants into labor markets–based on their skills, qualifications, and access to decent working conditions–is emerging as a key determinant of sustainable competitiveness in both advanced and developing economies.

Thus, addressing the exploitation of labor migrants should be understood not only as an ethical imperative, but also as an economic necessity for ensuring the long-term resilience and balanced development of the global labor market. Counteracting exploitative structures is essential for building a more inclusive, productive, and socially sustainable international economic order.

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