

Exploring Labour Integration Challenges for Ukrainians in Slovakia

Jana Papcunová  |  jpapcunova@saske.sk

Institute of Social Sciences, CSPA, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovakia

Simona Ďurbisová  |  simona.durbisova@upjs.sk

Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, Slovakia

Anna Mukhina  |  mukhina.anna.2606@gmail.com

Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, Slovakia

Abstract | Employment plays a crucial role in the integration of individuals who have fled the war in Ukraine. From both a financial and psychological standpoint, the opportunity to work is essential in preventing dependence on welfare and fostering a sense of self-realization. Following the conflict in Ukraine, over a million people have crossed the border, with many heading to the region around the capital Bratislava. A large number have also chosen to stay closer to the border, making their way to the second largest city in Slovakia, Košice. There are currently an estimated 6,000 Ukrainians, primarily women, who have found residence in Košice. The aim of this research was to use qualitative methods to explore the needs and barriers in the labour market of those who came to Košice after the outbreak of war (involuntary migrants) and those who have been working in Košice for a longer period (voluntary migrants). Three focus groups were carried out in a sample of 26 respondents (Nfemale= 18, age range = 18-71 years, length of stay in Košice 1 month - 7 years). Language and age barriers, limited job opportunities, discrimination and health difficulties emerged as key themes from the discussions with the involuntary migrants. In general, language proficiency posed a significant challenge, hindering stable employment for the participants. Discrimination and hatred were also reported, along with experiences of exploitation and dismissal. Discussions with the voluntary migrants revealed intense labour market competition, bureaucratic hurdles, discrimination and a lack of information as being the key areas of concern. Enhanced support services at local and national levels, a well-coordinated national system of integration, as well as raising awareness about hate crimes, discrimination and violence against women and girls among foreigners are crucial for facilitating the integration of Ukrainians into society. The arrival of Ukrainian migrants has shed light on pre-existing employment challenges in Košice which not only affect migrants but the local population as well.

Keywords | Ukrainians, the labour integration in Košice, challenges and barriers

Introduction

The war in Ukraine has resulted in a significant influx of people seeking refuge and a safer life elsewhere. Employment plays a crucial role in the integration process for those displaced by the conflict, offering financial stability and a sense of self-realization. Among the various destinations for displaced Ukrainians, Košice has become a temporary home for a considerable number. It has been estimated that between 5,500 and 6,000 displaced individuals, primarily women, currently reside in Košice (Bajžíková et al., 2022).

This surge of displaced individuals has had a socio-economic impact on the region, straining resources and creating both opportunities and challenges for the local community (Bajžíková et al., 2022; UNHCR, 2023). In response, a qualitative research study has been undertaken to explore the multifaceted needs and hurdles encountered by these migrants within the local labour market. This study takes a closer look at two distinct migrant groups: involuntary migrants who arrived after February 2022 and voluntary migrants who have long been part of the region's workforce.

The current research aims to unravel the intricate process of integration faced by Ukrainian migrants, shedding light on the challenges they encounter within the local labour market. A qualitative research approach has been chosen as these challenges require a deeper understanding of the real-life experiences of individuals currently residing in the region. While previous studies have examined labour market integration in the broader context of migration within Slovakia (e.g., Filadelfiová, 2011; Mýtna Kureková & Žilinčíková, 2023), there is a noticeable gap in research that specifically addresses the unique circumstances of Ukrainian migrants.

The use of focus groups and thematic analysis provides a rich understanding of the challenges faced by these migrants and the dynamics of the integration process that quantitative data alone cannot capture. This approach is essential in not only identifying these challenges but also informing the development of targeted interventions, policies and support systems that facilitate smoother integration and foster inclusive employment practices for this vulnerable population.

Theoretical background

Migrants and labour market

The term "migrant" refers to all people who migrate regardless of the circumstances and motivations. A significant portion of people migrate voluntarily, choosing to work, start businesses, study or join relatives who live abroad. In this case, they are referred to as voluntary migrants. Migrants who are forced to migrate (forced migration) are referred to as involuntary migrants – displaced persons or refugees. In addition to the terms migrant and refugee, the term "odídenec" is also utilized in Slovakia. It refers to an individual granted temporary refuge, which represents the most accessible form of protection for those fleeing war (Law No. 480/2002 on Asylum and Amendments to Particular Laws).

There has been extensive research and theoretical inquiry into exploring the integration of migrants into the labour market (Näre et al., 2022; Ortlieb & Knappert, 2023; Williams et al., 2005). Employment is one of the key aspects of integration and it plays a vital role in meeting basic needs, preventing long-term dependence on welfare and fulfilling the need for self-realization (Popper et al., 2006).

The role of work is an opportunity for personal development, self-realization, social interaction and is the foundation of individual and societal progress (Albrecht & Panchenko, 2022; Pahuta, 2019).

However there is a threat of "new poverty" among individuals who are unemployed long-term, those persistently disadvantaged in the labour market and those who have not adapted to new conditions (Gerbery et al., 2004).

The concept of integration

The integration of migrants into the host society is a continuous, long-term and dynamic process of mutual respect and reciprocal recognition of rights and obligations of both groups (Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic, 2014; Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic until 2025, 2021). When integration is successful, it helps to reduce social tension between population groups and mitigates negative attitudes of the population towards foreigners (Hlinčíková et al., 2014).

One theoretical framework that underpins this study is the social integration theory. It believes that successful integration involves the attainment of economic self-sufficiency, social inclusion and cultural adaptation (Ives, 2007; Phillimore et al., 2021). In the context of labour market integration, it suggests that individuals who are able to secure stable employment are more likely to experience positive outcomes in other aspects of their lives such as social relationships, mental health and overall well-being (Godinic et al., 2020). This not only applies to the integration of migrants and refugees in capital cities but also to medium-sized cities and rural areas (Fang et al., 2018; Lahdelma, 2016).

Another relevant theoretical framework is the concept of vulnerability. Vulnerability refers to the susceptibility of individuals or groups to adverse outcomes due to various factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, and physical or mental disabilities (Gilodi et al., 2022; Hovil, 2017). In the context of labour market integration, vulnerable populations often face additional barriers such as prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination (Bannikova, 2022), hindering their access to employment opportunities and exacerbating their marginalization (Helgesson et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the concept of transnationalism provides an insight into the experiences of migrants who maintain connections and engage in activities across borders (Bahna & Sekulová, 2018). Transnational migrants often face unique challenges in the labour market including language barriers, recognition of qualifications and discrimination based on their migrant status (Elo et al., 2020; Hansen, 2023). It is crucial to understand the transnational dimensions of labour market integration in developing comprehensive policies that address the specific needs of migrants.

Situation in Košice

According to data from June 2023, a total of 118,947 Ukrainian refugees have sought temporary protection in Slovakia, with an additional 154 individuals applying for international protection as asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2023; Ministry of the Interior, 2022). These refugees have been met with a strong sense of solidarity from both Slovak institutions and citizens throughout the country (European Commission, 2022).

Slovakia is a country located in Central Europe which shares borders with several other EU member states and non-EU countries. As an EU member, Slovakia is subject to EU laws and regulations including those related to asylum and immigration. Even before the outbreak of war in February 2022, Ukrainians made up the largest foreign minority in Košice (Czikková & Mačáková, 2018). This pre-existing community may have played a role in shaping the local response to the refugee crisis.

Košice has been significantly affected by the ongoing war, resulting in a notable influx of individuals seeking temporary protection in the region. The legal status of those arriving from Ukraine adds complexity, leading to limited clarity regarding available data. However, following an official statement by the Mayor in March 2022[1] expressing concerns about a potential humanitarian catastrophe, the situation has gradually stabilized.

The establishment of the Integration Centre Košice in June 2022 marked a significant step in addressing the needs of Ukrainian individuals. This centre provides a range of support services including legal assistance, employment guidance, psychological counselling and social services. It is worth noting that this integration centre for foreigners represents a new concept in Košice, as the region had not placed a significant emphasis on the integration of foreigners prior to the outbreak of war (Luptáková & Medľová, 2018).

Košice currently has an unemployment rate of 6.07% which is the third highest in Slovakia (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2023). The main economic sectors are industry, construction and agriculture with job vacancies available for IT specialists, service and trade workers, finance professionals, skilled workers, machinery operators and unskilled labourers. The Košice Region is estimated to have the highest demand for labour in the industry sector, as well as in transport, logistics, warehousing, education and healthcare (European Commission, 2021).

In terms of statistics related to the employment of individuals who have left Ukraine, information remains limited and official data from the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family (UPSVAR) is scarce (UPSVAR, 2023). However, online job portals suggest that Ukrainians are predominantly engaged in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food services as well as administrative services.

Research goal and methods

The primary objective of the current study was to investigate the needs of Ukrainians and the challenges they encounter during the process of integrating into the Košice labour market. In particular, it examined whether their needs have been adequately addressed or remain unmet when searching for employment in the region. Additionally, it explored the obstacles they have encountered and the opportunities available to them. The research is focused on understanding the integration process from the perspectives of both the voluntary and involuntary migrants.

The study addresses a number of research questions focused on aspects of the integration process. What are the needs of Ukrainians when looking for a job? What challenges do they face? Have they encountered any manifestation of discrimination or hatred? How do they perceive this whole process? What kind of changes could be made in this process based on their experience and perception?

Method

This pilot study used qualitative research methods to address the research goals and questions. Focus group discussions based on eight specified topics were carried out. The topics included participants' previous and current job positions, reasons for leaving Ukraine and choosing to stay in Slovakia, steps taken to find employment in the Košice region and the challenges encountered during the job application process.

Three focus group sessions took place in December 2022 and March 2023, with each session lasting 90 minutes. The meetings were carefully planned and facilitated by a moderator and a Ukrainian

translator to ensure the participants could freely express themselves in their preferred language. All the discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim before being translated into Slovak/English with full adherence to participant confidentiality. The study received ethics approval from the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The participants' identities were anonymised by assigning participant numbers. A thematic analysis was utilized to examine the collected data. The research questions were deliberately broad to allow for a qualitative, bottom-up and inductively-driven analytic approach. This has been deemed the most appropriate research strategy for under-researched areas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data processing and organization were conducted using Atlas software.

Participants

The participants were recruited from the Ukrainian community residing in the Košice region. This was done in collaboration with the Integration Centre which provides support services to migrants in addition to using social media platforms. A total of 26 individuals (18 women, 8 men), ranging from 18 to 71 years old, expressed interest and willingness to take part in the study. Their duration of stay in the region varied from 1 month to 7 years. In order to facilitate focused discussions, the participants were divided into three distinct focus groups. In all focus groups, the participants were asked identical questions regarding their needs and the challenges they had encountered during the process of labour integration in Košice.

The first group was made up of 8 Ukrainians (average age = 49 years; $SD = 9.64$) who had come to Slovakia after the start of the war in February 2022 and were in the process of finding a job at the time the study was being conducted. The second group consisted of 6 Ukrainians (average age = 24 years; $SD = 2.5$) who had come to Slovakia at least two years prior to the start of the war. These participants came for better job opportunities or to study. All the participants were employed at the time the study was being conducted. The third group was made up of 12 Ukrainians (average age = 50 years; $SD = 12.8$) who had come to Slovakia after the start of the war and were in the process of finding a job at the time the study was being conducted. The topics discussed in this group were broader, focusing on the availability of health and social services in addition to integration into the labour market.

Results

This section presents the findings from the focus group discussions with both the involuntary and voluntary migrants in Košice. The migrants' diverse experiences, ranging from those forced to seek refuge due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine (involuntary migrants) to those who came to Slovakia willingly for study or work (voluntary migrants), provide an insight into the complexities of labour integration in this region.

Focus groups with involuntary migrants

There were two focus groups held with the involuntary migrants, one in December 2022 and the other in March 2023. There were five thematic areas that emerged from the discussions.

1. Language as a barrier to labour integration
2. The role of age in shaping the labour integration experience of Ukrainians
3. The lack of job opportunities
4. Experiences with discrimination
5. Health and mental difficulties

Language as a barrier to labour integration

One of the biggest challenges involuntary migrants face is related to the differences between their native language and the language of the country of their stay. While Ukrainian and Slovak languages share some similarities, the language barrier is still very much present. The participants emphasised the role of language when looking for or performing a job, and not knowing Slovak well enough can greatly limit the opportunities and effectiveness of job performance. Some of them stated:

“... that if your Slovak is not good, you will not be offered a good job.” (Female, 43 years old)

“I have worked as a care worker in a care home for three days, but unfortunately, I was informed that I am unable to continue working there due to my limited language proficiency.” (Female, 65 years old)

The role of age in shaping the labour integration experience of Ukrainians

This focus group consisted of participants aged 45 to 71 years who were unemployed and looking for a job. Most of them were nearing retirement age. During the discussion, it became apparent that this group has faced many obstacles related to their age when looking for a job. Job opportunities for the elderly are generally lacking in the Košice region. This is even more so for Ukrainians who have encountered ageism and perceive their age as a big obstacle.

“I am too old to be a salesperson, so they tell me I can't do this anymore.” (Female, 43 years old)

“I am retired, but I have worked as a caretaker in Martin. There is a social care house for the elderly. But there are 12-hours shifts and that is too difficult for me.” (Female, 65 years old)

“When I had a job interview through Viber to be a salesperson in a patisserie, because I know a little bit of Slovak besides English, Ukrainian and Russian, they told me I am 100% fit for them, but when I said how old I am, they said: “We are sorry, but we won't hire you.” (Female, 43 years old)

The lack of job opportunities

Given the age of the participants in this focus group, it is clear that they have some experience in the form of college degrees or previous work experience. When they came to Slovakia, they looked for the jobs similar to the ones they had done before. However, they quickly learned that there are not many job opportunities that would correspond with 20 years of experience.

“I have finished college and I have been looking for a job for some time now, and I am using the Integration Centre assistance, but it is still very difficult.” (Female, 43 years old)

“My profession does not fit here at all, I have work as an accountant and it is very hard to retrain or relearn...” (Female, 70 years old)

“Although Košice is close to the border, which is beneficial for us, there are not many job opportunities...” (Female, 45 years old)

Experiences with discrimination

The participants spoke nicely about Slovaks. Although most of the participants had only had positive experience with them, they shared some stories about discrimination or even some forms of exploitation they had encountered.

“...During a job interview, I was informed that I would be hired for volunteer work and given a ready contract to start immediately. However, when I arrived at the school, they stated that they didn't require any additional personnel. Upon returning to the Integration Centre, they assured me that the contract was ready, and I could commence working. Unfortunately, I waited for three to four weeks for a response, only to discover that the school was facing financial difficulties and couldn't afford to employ anyone” (Female, 46 years old)

“I have been working in the garden for three months, taking care of the house, and cooking, but they haven't given me a single cent. Not even one cent. I bought everything using my own money, and I even used my pension to cover the expenses for their food.” (Female, 50 years old)

“...they came to my room and noticed I have a flag on the wall, and started asking me why I have the flag, saying that I need to take it down. I told them it was the flag of my country... The owner was so aggressive, and that was the beginning of it. They demanded payment for my children's three-night stay, payment for my wife's stay, and payment for having friends over. When I asked them what I should pay for, they insisted on water, even though my guests didn't use the shower here; they claimed I should pay just for them being around.” (Male, 53 years old)

Health and mental challenges

Since the war began, there has been a rise in the influx of Ukrainians with disabilities or chronic illnesses seeking refuge in Slovakia. These individuals not only carry the physical burdens of their conditions but also endure psychological trauma due to the harsh realities of war. The participants frequently expressed frustration resulting from the prolonged conflict and the difficulties associated with rebuilding their lives. They also experienced feelings of hopelessness and resignation when it came to finding employment. Additionally, they perceived a lack of social support, particularly for families with children facing health challenges. The participants also shared their struggles in accessing essential services.

“I was hired as a person with a disability, but unfortunately, I was terminated without any explanation after completing three months of the probationary period.” (Male, 48 years old)

“Every Ukrainian individual arriving in Slovakia carries the weight of trauma and requires care and support.” (Female, 43 years old)

“I need to address my mental health concerns first before I can actively seek employment opportunities.” (Female, 70 years old)

Focus group with voluntary migrants

This focus group was made up of participants who had come to Slovakia at least two years before the war started, looking for an opportunity to study or work. There were four thematic areas identified in the discussion.

1. Intense competition in the job market.
2. Bureaucratic hurdles in establishing a self-employed (SZČO) entity.
3. Increase in discrimination after February 2022
4. Insufficient information related to integration into the labour market.

Intense competition in the job market

The respondents expressed their perception of employers in the Košice region as being unwilling to hire foreigners. They also noted the challenges posed by the region's already high unemployment rate, further complicating their job search.

"... there are too many of us for such a small labour market." (Male, 26 years old)

"I heard many times that they chose a Slovak for some position only because he/she was a Slovak" (Female, 23 years old)

The only upside is that you can get a job anywhere without the permission of the labour office. However, for employers, it's not the same. In the Košice region, there is a high unemployment rate. According to the rules, employers have 21 days to look for a Slovak employee. Only if they don't find anyone during this period can they then look for a foreigner, whether it's a Ukrainian or someone else." (Male, 26 years old)

Bureaucratic hurdles in establishing a self-employed (SZČO) entity.

Some of the participants had been to university in Slovakia and described their experience of misunderstandings and complicated processes connected to applying and going to university. Other participants had encountered many complications when trying to establish a self-employed entity. They had trouble with understanding the procedural specifications and different responses from various state offices. Some of the participants described instances when the assistance agencies that are supposed to help with this process demanded payment of expensive fees, often taking the payment and not providing the client with the required service.

Because if we were Slovaks, we would have it done in two or three days. However, because we are Ukrainians, it takes a lot longer, and a lot more documents are needed. But the biggest issue is that there is no cooperation. You won't find any help. For example, from my own experience, I was at a foreign police office three times, and each time I received different information. Some people say, 'You need this and also this and also this,' while others tell you that you don't need half of that." (Female, 23 years old)

"I could go to a firm to which I will pay 2000 euros, and I will have it done and be self-employed. But the thing is, there are people who cannot afford it. Also, for example, we are dealing with the fact that people came here after the war, and those who want to find a job or do something don't understand how. This system must be made simpler for those who can't pay for it and could deal with it themselves. " (Female, 23 years old)

Increase in discrimination after February 2022

These participants observed an increase in manifestations of hatred and discrimination after the war started in Ukraine and a larger number of Ukrainians came to Slovakia. Some participants described experience with bullying on school grounds or in the work environment as well as in public. In some instances, there was even destruction of personal property.

"... overall, the situation changed. Slovaks started to perceive us differently... maybe because before there wasn't such a large group (of us)... and perhaps less bullying of us... and then Ukrainians started coming in a lot more... and you can witness all sorts of cases, well, you hear about it at university, and somewhere at work as well... " (Male, 25 years old)

“And my husband and I, we had a lot of experiences like that. For example, one Slovakian spat on our car because it had a Ukrainian license plate. ” (Female, 23 years old)

Insufficient information

Even though the participants in this focus group had been in Slovakia for a couple of years, they did not feel well-informed about the process of integration into the labour market and the possibilities it provides. Most of the information about the work environment and available positions they had found using social media with Facebook being their primary source. The never-ending circle of getting different information about establishing a self-employed entity was mentioned in this context again.

“The biggest problem is that there isn’t any list, for example, of what you need to do in order to deal with some issues like self-employment. You have to look for everything yourself, one thing stems from another, the third thing leads to the fourth and so on. For example, you are not able to do it step by step.... If something like that existed, it would be much easier.” (Female, 23 years old)

Discussion

The integration of migrants into a host community poses numerous challenges, particularly when it comes to finding suitable employment. This is especially true for Ukrainians who have left their homeland due to circumstances such as war. Many Ukrainians have sought refuge, education or work in neighbouring Slovakia, with the goal of eventually returning home. In order to support themselves as well as families and loved ones back in Ukraine, they usually need to integrate into the local labour market.

This study has focused on the labour market integration challenges faced by Ukrainians in the Košice region of Slovakia. Given the limited research in this area, the study aimed to explore the needs, barriers and job opportunities for Ukrainian migrants using focus groups with both voluntary and involuntary migrants. The focus group discussions with the involuntary migrants identified five main thematic areas: language and age barriers, job opportunities, discrimination and health difficulties. Despite some similarities between Ukrainian and Slovak languages, language posed a significant challenge, making it difficult for participants to secure stable job positions. This language barrier is a common challenge for Ukrainians not only in Slovakia but also in Poland and the Czech Republic (GLOBSEC, 2023). Participants expressed frustration with employers who were hesitant to hire them or terminated their employment during the probationary period due to their limited knowledge of Slovak. In order to address this issue and promote equal opportunities and inclusivity, it is crucial to provide high-quality language education and establish an effective system for teaching Slovak as a second language to both children and adults. The first group of participants aged 45 and over shared their experiences with ageism, reporting instances where they had been denied job positions based on their age, regardless of their experience or knowledge of Slovak. Older individuals generally face disadvantages when applying for jobs and this further complicates matters for Ukrainian migrants.

Involuntary migrants noted that they had often encountered discrimination and hostility and shared instances of exploitation, injustice and dismissal. On the one hand, they were frequently denied jobs based on characteristics such as age or nationality, and were not provided the same opportunities as Slovaks. On the other hand however, some were hired but not compensated for their work or required to pay for expenses that others did not have to bear.

Physical and mental health challenges were also of concern for the migrants and involuntary ones in particular. Many migrating Ukrainians, particularly those fleeing war zones, suffer from psychological trauma while others have chronic illnesses or other medical issues. Accessing medical assistance is not straightforward for these individuals and they recognize the need to address these issues in order to integrate into the labour market of a foreign country.

There is a pressing need for enhanced support services at both the local and national levels to enable and facilitate the integration of Ukrainians into society, regardless of their age or physical and mental challenges. It is crucial to establish a well-coordinated national system of integration that involves various stakeholders as also stated in the Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic (2014) and Kadlečíková et al. (2011). In addition, effective data collection also plays a vital role in understanding the situation and needs of Ukrainians by emphasizing the importance of comprehensive information gathering, particularly regarding experiences of hatred or discrimination.

The discussion with the voluntary migrants revealed four main areas: intense labour market competition, bureaucratic hurdles, discrimination and a lack of information. There is intense competition which leads to employers favouring Slovak applicants. Language proficiency is also crucial. Navigating state offices is difficult and a long process for migrants, causing missed opportunities. As such, innovation in information channels and support for the unemployed such as quality courses are needed. A recent UNHCR report on Košice (2023) has noted that hatred and discrimination have escalated, leaving Ukrainians feeling like unwelcome strangers. Indeed, it found that 22% of respondents reported experiencing discrimination based on their nationality. It is important to raise awareness among foreigners living in the Slovak Republic about hate crimes, reasons for discrimination and violence against women and girls. In response, there is a need to strengthen and sustain telephone and email helplines for people from Ukraine. The sustainability of these helplines is not only crucial during the initial stages of integration but also throughout the subsequent stages as individuals encounter various situations related to their integration.

Limits and future directions

The study has several limitations that should be taken into account. Firstly, the sample size was limited which potentially affected the generalizability of the findings to a larger population. Additionally, the geographic scope of the research was focused on Košice, Slovakia which may not fully capture the experiences of Ukrainians in other regions or countries. Language barriers may also restrict the inclusion of participants who face significant language difficulties. Moreover, the study relies on self-reported experiences, introducing the possibility of response bias or inaccuracies in participants' recollections. Cultural and contextual factors including diverse backgrounds and historical contexts, may not have been fully considered. The qualitative method used in the study has its own limitations and should be supplemented with quantitative data in the future. It is important to emphasize that this study is an exploratory qualitative study, primarily aimed at delving into the challenges faced by voluntary and involuntary migrants in the context of labour integration in Košice, Slovakia. Future research efforts should consider the need for a more in-depth exploration of gender and age differences as these factors could significantly influence the experiences and outcomes of migrants in the host society.

Conclusion

Although Slovakia has offered various forms of help to Ukrainian migrants, it has barely scratched the surface of need. The current assistance with labour integration for Ukrainian migrants is

insufficient and systemic imperfections affect both migrants and Slovaks. Many migrants face a mismatch between their skills and the needs of the labour market. This calls for more vocational retraining and strengthening of adult language education as well as recognition of qualifications. This study has pointed out and continues to highlight the problems that the majority of the population has been facing for a long time. These problems have deepened even further with the arrival of people from Ukraine. It is crucial to address the potential negative consequences which have arisen from deteriorating host country conditions, tensions and dissemination of disinformation (GLOBSEC, 2022) as these can contribute to discrimination and hate speech targeting vulnerable groups. The challenges faced by migrants are not only of an individual or institutional nature but are also shaped by the broader social, economic and political contexts of the country (Mýtna Kureková & Žilinčíková, 2023). The way the media presents events shapes our perception of "normal" and influences our solidarity with disadvantaged groups (Novák Bobulová et al., 2023). By addressing these challenges and creating a supportive and inclusive environment, Slovakia can truly facilitate the successful integration of Ukrainian migrants and ensure a positive outcome for both the migrants and the host society.

Acknowledgements

The research was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Center of Social and Psychological Sciences, Slovak Academy of Sciences and was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

The authors did not preregister their analysis plan.

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

The research was supported by an Extraordinary grant: Ambassadors of Social Psychology 2022/2023, the European Association of Social Psychology (EASP).

Because of the sensitive nature of the data collected for this study, requests to access the source data from qualified researchers trained in human subject may be sent to the author.

We would like to thank the participants of the focus group discussions for their time, openness, and willingness to share their stories. We would also like to thank all experts and colleagues who provided feedback and/or helped with the preparation of the materials. Thank you for your valuable input.

CRedit statement

Author 1: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, supervision, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

Author 2: methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

Author 3: conceptualization, formal analysis, writing – review.

All the authors have revised the manuscript, made a substantial contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

[1] <https://www.kosice.sk/clanok/primator-polacek-kosice-su-na-prahu-humanitarnej-katastrofy>

References

- Albrecht, C., & Panchenko, T. (2022). Refugee Flow from Ukraine: Origins, Effects, Scales and Consequences. *CESifo Forum*, 23(04), 8-16.
- Bahna, M., & Sekulová, M. (2018). Crossborder Care in the Long Term: Intersections of Age, Gender, and Circularity. *Crossborder Care*, 89-118. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97028-8_5
- Bajžíková, K., Demchenko Kiforenko, D., & Tkachuk, D. (2022). Situačné analýzy prvého roka pomoci ľuďom z Ukrajiny v slovenských mestách [Situation analysis of the first year of assistance to people from Ukraine in Slovak cities] [PDF document]. Retrieved May 12, 2023, from <https://mareena.sk/ukrajina>
- Bannikova, K. (2022). Ukrainian refugees and the European labor market: socio-cultural markers of interaction. *Revista Amazonia Investiga*, 11(56), 9-17. <https://doi.org/10.34069/ai/2022.56.08.1>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Czikková, L., & Mačáková, S. (Eds.) (2018). Košice City Integration Agenda [Document]. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from https://etp.sk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Kosice-City-Integration-Agenda_EN.pdf.
- Elo, M., Aman, R., & Täube, F. (2020). Female Migrants and Brain Waste - A Conceptual Challenge with Societal Implications. *International Migration*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12783>
- European Commission. (2021). *EURES - Labor market information - Slovakia - Labor market profile*. European Union. Retrieved June 1, 2023, from <https://ec.europa.eu/eures/printLMIText.jsp?lmiLang=en®ionId=SK0&catId=2809>
- European Commission. (2022). *Slovakia: Public opinion in favour of supporting those arriving from Ukraine*. Retrieved March 5, 2023, from <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/slovakia-public-opinion-favour-supporting-those-arriving-ukraine>
- Ives, N. (2007). More than a "Good Back": Looking for Integration in Refugee Resettlement. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 24(2), 54-63. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.21384>
- Fang, T., Sapeha, H., & Neil, K. (2018). Integration and Retention of Refugees in Smaller Communities. *International Migration*, 56(6), 83-99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12517>
- Filadelfiová, J., Gyárfášová, O., Sekulová, M., & Hlinčíková, M. (2011). *Migranti na slovenskom trhu práce: problémy a perspektívy*. Bratislava: Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 136 s.
- Gerbery, M. D., Porubánová, P. S., & Repková, D. P. K. (2004). *Chudoba a sociálna exklúzia/inklúzia: Skupiny najviac ohrozené sociálnou exklúziou a námety na riešenie/prevenciu*. Stredisko pre štúdium práce a rodiny, Bratislava, 114 s.
- Gilodi, A., Albert, I., & Nienaber, B. (2022). Vulnerability in the Context of Migration: a Critical Overview and a New Conceptual Model. *Human Arenas*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-022-00288-5>
- GLOBSEC. (2022). *GLOBSEC Trends 2022: Slovakia*. Retrieved May 22, 2023, from <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2022-slovakia/>

GLOBSEC. (2023). Overcoming the Language Barrier: Ukrainian Refugees. *GLOBSEC*. Retrieved June 14, 2023, from <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/overcoming-language-barrier-ukrainian-refugees>

Godinic, D., Obrenovic, B., & Khudaykulov, A. (2020). Effects of Economic Uncertainty on Mental Health in the COVID-19 Pandemic Context: Social Identity Disturbance, Job Uncertainty and Psychological Well-Being Model. *International Journal of Innovation and Economic Development*, 6 (1), 61-74. <https://doi.org/10.18775/ijied.1849-7551-7020.2015.61.2005>

Hansen, H. (2023). Feelings of being socially excluded: A matter of education, labor market situation, income, deprivation, or other things? *International Journal of Social Welfare*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12594>

Helgesson, M., Wang, M., Niederkrotenthaler, T., Saboonchi, F., & Mittendorfer-Rutz, E. (2019). Labor market marginalisation among refugees from different countries of birth: a prospective cohort study on refugees to Sweden. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 73(5), 407-415. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2018-211177>

Hlinčíková, M., Chudžíková, A., Kriglerová, E. G., & Sekulová, M. (2014). Migranti v meste. *Prítomní a (ne) viditeľní [Migrants in the city. Present and (in) visible]*. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry, Bratislava.

Hovil, L. (2017). *Conflict, Displacement, and Refugees*. Oxford Handbooks Online, 276-287. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199300983.013.22>

International Organization for Migration. (2022). IOM Survey: 59 per cent of those fleeing the war in Ukraine to Slovakia intend to return home once it is safe. Retrieved June 2, 2023, from <https://iom.sk/sk/novinky-a-podujatia/1943-iom-survey-59-per-cent-of-those-fleeing-the-war-in-ukraine-to-slovakia-intend-to-return-home-once-it-is-safe.html>

Kadlečíková, J., Kriglerová, E. G., & Gažovičová, T. (2011). *Integrácia migrantov na lokálnej úrovni*. Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry, Bratislava. 70s. Retrieved June 15, 2023, from <http://cvek.sk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2011-05-integracia-migrantov.pdf>

Mýtna Kureková, L., & Žilinčíková, Z. (2023). Examining labour market hierarchies in Slovakia from the perspective of intra-EU migration and return. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2207338>

Lahdelma, I. (2016). *Sending refugees to rural areas might not be such a bad idea after all*. Retrieved from <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/sending-refugees-to-rural-areas-might-not-be-such-a-bad-idea-after-all/>

Luptáková, Z., & Medľová, K. (2018). *Integrácia cudzincov v Košickom samosprávnom kraji*. Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry, Bratislava. Retrieved May 25, 2023, from <http://cvek.sk/kapacity-integracia-cudzincov-v-kosickom-samospravnom-kraji/>

Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic. (2021). *Migračná politika s výhľadom do roku 2025*. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from <https://www.minv.sk/?zamer-migracnej-politiky-slovenskej-republiky>

Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic. (2022). *Statistics on Asylum and migration*. Retrieved March 17, 2023, from <https://www.minv.sk/?statistiky-20>

Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. (2014). *Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic*. Retrieved March 17, 2023, from <https://www.mpsvr.sk/files/slovensky/uvod/informacie-cudzinci/integration-policy.pdf>

Näre, L, Abdelhady, D and Irastorza, N. 2022. What Can We Learn from the Reception of Ukrainian Refugees? *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 12(3), pp. 255–258. <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.620>

Novák Bobulová, A., Poslon, X. D., & Lášticová, B. (2023). Solidarity with Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia: what motivates those who help? Unpublished work. <https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/bsxht/>

Ortlieb, R., & Knappert, L. (2023). Labor market integration of refugees: An institutional country-comparative perspective. *Journal of International Management*, 29(2). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intman.2023.101016>

Pahuta, M. V. (2019). Professional Education as a Value. *Methodological Culture of an Educator: History and Modernity*, 100–121. Retrieved June 15, 2023, from <https://doi.org/10.36059/978-966-397-130-8/100-121>.

Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Kabe, K., Hashimoto, N., Hassan, S., & Reyes, M. (2021). Economic self-reliance or social relations? What works in refugee integration? Learning from resettlement programmes in Japan and the UK. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00223-7>

Popper, M., Bianchi, G., Lukšík, I., & Szeghy, P. (2006). Potreby migrantov na Slovensku. *Veda et International*.

Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic. (2023). *About Košice Region*. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/themes/regional/kosicky%20kraj>

UNHCR. (2023). *Slovakia: Area based assessment*. Retrieved June 2, 2023, from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/99160>

UNHCR. (2023). *Slovakia: Ukraine Refugee Situation*. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10785>

Williams, A. M., & Baláž, V. (2005). What human capital, which migrants? Returned skilled migration to Slovakia from the UK 1. *International migration review*, 39(2), 439-468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2005.tb00273.x>