

EXPERIENCES OF UKRAINIAN MIGRANTS WITH INTEGRATION IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: People of Ukrainian origin make up the largest group of migrants living in Slovakia. Because of their cultural and linguistic affinities, they should be easily integrated. Although politicians are interested in implementing laws promoting the integration of Ukrainians, they still face many obstacles. A qualitative method in semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 25 Ukrainian migrants was used. The selected migrants arrived in Slovakia before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, i.e. they did not come to Slovakia as war refugees. Two main conclusions related to the integration of Ukrainian migrants emerged: (1) Due to the similar culture, language proficiency, and favourable conditions in the Slovak labour market, Ukrainian migrants are very well integrated into Slovak society. (2) The state is not well prepared for integrating migrants. Migrants are more dependent on themselves in the integration process, the state does not provide much assistance in the integration process.

Keywords: integration, migration, Slovakia, Ukraine, labour market

1 INTRODUCTION

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Slovakia was one of the transit and destination countries for Ukrainian war refugees (Teke Lloyd and Sirkeci, 2022) and the common border, cultural and linguistic affinities predisposed Slovakia to quickly integrate them. During this period, the topic of integration policy appeared in Slovak political discourse for the first time (Štefančík et al., 2023). Although the concept of integration policy was not new, it was criticized in professional circles for its vagueness and generality (Letavajová and Divinský, 2019; Seresová, 2022). These and other weaknesses were revealed during the recent mass immigration. There was a lack of procedures for integrating different groups of migrants – children, people of working age, as well as those of the post-productive age. The shortcomings of the integration policy were also reflected in the lack of proce-

dures for placing migrants in the labour market and the lack of integration courses and projects to support Slovak language instruction. Despite initial attempts to update the integration policy, migration and integration were pushed to the margins of political interest in the context of the parliamentary elections in September 2023. Although the topic of migration has appeared in political discourse, populist politicians have presented migrants as a threat to the cultural and national identity of Slovaks, a danger to the domestic labour market, and even as a potential threat to the health and lives of the domestic population (Klátiková and Kmet', 2023).

Although the securitized approach to migration quickly disappeared from public discourse after the elections, we have noted a significant shift in the language of Prime Minister Robert Fico, initially a great critic of migration. While during the migration situation in 2015 and 2016 Fico presented migrants as a multidimensional threat (Štefančík et al., 2021), in early 2024 his rhetoric began to include an attempt to divide migrants into two categories: legal and illegal migrants: “*I ask the public to distinguish between legal migration and illegal migration*” (Fico, 2024). Although this differentiation is natural in migration concepts, it did not appear so clearly in the rhetoric of the Slovak prime minister until after the 2023 elections. Fico began to talk about the shortage of labour in Slovakia and about the need to look for workers abroad, especially in Ukraine. The prime minister referred to Ukrainians as well-educated people from a culturally-related background. At the same time, he stated that the government would adopt legislation to integrate Ukrainians into Slovak society as quickly as possible.

In the context of these statements, we were interested in the conditions for integration of Ukrainian migrants living in Slovakia for several years. We searched for answers to questions related to the residence of migrants from Ukraine in Slovakia. Ukrainians were the largest group of migrants living in Slovakia before the Russian invasion. However, our research showed that the state did not pay enough attention to the integration issue at that time (Štefančík et al., 2022). This article seeks to identify important areas in integrating migrants living in Slovakia. We were interested in how Ukrainian migrants are integrated into the labour market and society. We used their situation as an example to illustrate the state's approach to integrating migrants into society. We assume that Ukrainian migrants, due to their geographical proximity, religious proximity (Orthodoxy as part of Christianity), language and cultural affinity, and last but not least, their age structure, can integrate easily into Slovak society. However, we also viewed the problem from the other side, the side of the state. If the integration process does not work well and the state does not prioritize the integration policy, the integration of migrants from nearby societies can also create problems.

2 METHODOLOGY

To achieve our research objective, we used qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research is a suitable scientific method for

research on integration, which has been confirmed by many researchers (Lu and Wu, 2017; Karaköse and Yaylacı, 2023). Advocates of qualitative research point out that this type of research can also provide validity, albeit in a different way than quantitative research. This is because qualitative research provides a space for research on social and cultural variables (Kirk and Miller, 1986). The social and cultural variables form the basis of research on migrant integration. According to qualitative research experts, researchers who study a particular group of people's everyday behaviour, life experiences, and life stories should opt for qualitative research (Halfpeny, 1979). Individual interviews are, therefore, one of the most widely used qualitative methods and can provide new insights into respondents' understanding of social life (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006), including migrants.

In qualitative research, it is important to select a sufficient number of participants to provide reliable data to understand a particular phenomenon (Gill, 2020). Our research consisted of semi-structured interviews with 25 Ukrainians. Individual questions were pilot-tested on a sample of five Ukrainians. The pilot testing was intended to evaluate the question headings as relevant to our research and to supplement previously prepared headings and questions with topics that were not included in the pilot testing.

We conducted the interviews from April 2023 to August 2023, during the previous legislative period. All respondents had come to Slovakia before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. An essential criterion in selecting respondents was the length of their stay in Slovakia, namely for at least one year. This criterion was chosen according to the findings of the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019), which defines a migrant as a national of a country other than the country of his/her current residence who has resided in that country for at least twelve months.

The questions touched on all areas of migrant integration, including the labour market, language proficiency in the autochthonous society, acceptance of the culture of the autochthonous society, the provision of accommodation, the migrant's experience of state and public institutions, feelings of safety, and acceptance by citizens of the destination country.

The interviews varied in duration from 50 minutes to 90 minutes. The respondents ranged in age from 21 to 55. The meetings took place in various settings – at the respondents' workplace, in the respondents' homes, or at the university where the research authors are based. They were briefed at the beginning of the interview about the intentions of the research and assured that neither the recordings nor other information would be disclosed to third parties, the police or other state authorities. No identification was requested from the outset of the interview, and the respondents were assured of anonymity during the interviews.

The analysis of the interviews showed that our knowledge of the historical and geopolitical situation of Ukraine helped us to understand the background of the respondents, their native country, the situation which influenced their decision to leave their country of origin, the current situation in Ukraine and, last but not least, the cultural similarities and differences between the two countries. The respondents reacted positively to the research authors' knowledge of their country and culture,

which greatly facilitated the course of the interviews. The authors' knowledge of Russian, which is similar to Ukrainian, was also helpful if the respondents did not understand the questions or had difficulty understanding the context of the issues under study and the related interview questions. Some of the respondents stated that Russian was their native language; some even knew Russian at the level of their native language, which also facilitated communication if their knowledge of Slovak was not sufficient.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The integration of migrants has become a key issue in political discourse, election campaigns, and policy decisions throughout Europe (Joppke, 2017). National governments pay considerable attention to the development of immigration and integration policies because through them, they determine the legal status of migrants and the conditions for entry, stays, health care, education, housing support, as well as the conditions for obtaining various social support (Guzi et al., 2023). Immigration policies affect the legal and social status of migrants as well as the relations between natives and migrants (Beine et al., 2016).

In the past, integration policy research addressed the question of the model of integration that governments were pursuing. In the second half of the 20th century, authors spoke of the French, British and German models. German author Dietrich Thränhardt (2005) distinguished between two basic types of integration policy in the European environment – French (assimilationism) and British (multiculturalism). The German policy was based on minimal contact between migrants and the native population and paid little attention to the issue of integration. In the assimilationist model, migrants were perceived from the outset as equal members of the native society, provided that they accepted the cultural patterns of the host country as their own. Citizenship was granted to everyone born within the country. As Peter Scholten (2011, p. 232) points out, ethnicity, as well as religion, culture and race were considered irrelevant in the context of citizenship. Assimilation as a one-way understanding of migrants' social change was criticized because it was one-way; the assimilation model assumed behavioural change by migrants but not by the majority of society (Yükseker and Çeler, 2024).

Unlike assimilationism, the multicultural model is not based on creating pressure on immigrants to adopt the cultural behaviour patterns of the home society; instead, it recognizes the legitimacy of different cultures and the equality of ethnic minorities. The main goal of the multicultural model is “to achieve a socially cohesive multicultural society that would be strengthened by cultural diversity” (Yükseker and Çeler, 2024, p. 3). Since the mid-1990s, there has been a growing retreat from multiculturalism in Europe and a return to the ideas of nation-building, shared values and identity, and unitary citizenship. In the political discourse of Western European states, there were increasing claims that multiculturalism causes social exclusion and the cultural segregation of migrants (Ossewaarde, 2014). However, as

Schinkel (2018) points out, the UK, Germany and France have never had a common policy on immigrant integration; integration policies in many countries have been different from what they were originally intended to denote. Despite this criticism, other authors (Grip, 2020; von Beyme, 2020) have used the term multiculturalism to refer to integration policies in some countries, although they have pointed to gradual retreats from the concept. Kymlicka (2012) argues that the retreat from multiculturalism was partly due to the indigenous society's fears that the acceptance of diversity had "gone too far" and therefore threatened its way of life. This has led to the increasing acceptance of populist, right-wing political movements featuring anti-immigration rhetoric.

Thus, since the late 1990s, a model of civic integration has been gaining ground in Western Europe. According to Goodman (2010), the policy of civic integration was based on the idea that successful integration into the society of the destination state of migration depended not only on successful labour market integration (economic integration) and civic engagement (political integration) but equally on the individual's relationship to the characteristics that determine national citizenship, namely linguistic competence, as well as liberal and social values. According to Joppke (2017), this model is characterized by three elements. First, migration is seen as a permanent process, thus stopping immigration is no longer the main political objective of national migration policies. The goal of stopping immigration is usually articulated by right-wing populists. Rather than asking how to stop migrants, the question of how to integrate them into society is sought. Integration thus becomes a central theme in the migration discourse. Second, the model of civic integration is seen as a retreat from multiculturalism. This has been characterized by some political leaders as a flawed model of integration, the consequence of which has been the creation of parallel societies. Thus, instead of integration, migrants have been marginalized. The adjective "civic" is meant to signal integration into the mainstream institutions of society, especially the labour market. Thirdly and finally, according to Joppke (2017), this model in its initial phase was mainly aimed at undesirable family migration, mostly from Muslim countries, which constitutes a substantial share of the migration processes in Western Europe. Perhaps the greatest innovation of civic integration is to combine immigrant integration with immigration control, which was previously handled by separate policies.

Given the political conditions that prevented the free movement of labour, there was no debate similar to that in Western Europe in this geographical area before 1989. After all, in some countries, such as Slovakia, the number of immigrants only grew after the country joined the European Union. For this reason, the migration discourse has been influenced more by the debate on immigration and asylum policy than on integration (Stojarová, 2019). In the 1990s, however, positive views on multiculturalism as an integration model appeared sporadically both in Slovakia and, for example, in the Czech Republic. As in Western Europe, multiculturalism was gradually rejected in this part of Europe. Here, integration policy issues also began to emphasise conditions corresponding to a civic integration model. However, the negati-

ve attitudes towards migration of the political elite in the V4 countries (Stojarová, 2018) may be a serious shortcoming of the migration or integration discourse.

Despite the convergence of integration policies, differences in the political discourse on integration can be found throughout Europe. The nature of the public discourse depends on several aspects, including previous experience with integration, political goals, the rhetoric of radical political parties, the socio-cultural structure of migrants, and the performance of the domestic economy. In particular, political rhetoric dominated by attitudes that denigrate migrants can have a negative impact on the integration process (Kontos, 2017). Such discourse has been observed in Slovakia since 2015. Politicians generally present migrants as a security risk (Androvičová, 2015; Štefančík et al., 2021; Dulebová et al., 2024). Only since 2023, when the left-radical populist Robert Fico formed his fourth government in Slovakia, have government politicians started to distinguish between “legal and illegal migrants”. Thus, if the government presents the opinion that illegal migrants can work and stay in Slovakia, the government institutions should also address the question of what model to choose for their successful integration. Based on the above, it can be assumed that the model of civic integration is the most relevant. This means that it is important to focus on teaching the Slovak language, migrants must accept the legal and political system of Slovakia, as well as its cultural traditions.

Well-integrated foreigners represent an important policy objective for national governments. However, the features of successful integration are debatable. Ager and Strang (2008) discuss four key areas of successful integration: integration in the labour market, housing, education, and health; assumptions and practices regarding citizenship and rights; processes of social integration into the local community; and finally, the acquisition of language and cultural practices. Our research was focused on labour market integration and the circumstances of learning the language of the host country.

4 OVERVIEW OF MIGRATION DATA

For many years, Slovakia was not one of the typical immigration countries compared to countries from the western part of Europe (Přívara and Rievajová, 2021); on the contrary, it was considered a country from which people migrated to other countries, primarily to the Czech Republic (Liďák, 2016; Přívara, 2021). For several years after its establishment in 1993, Slovakia did not offer enough economic, social and political pull factors for faster immigration growth. The number of migrants started to grow in 2004 when Slovakia joined the European Union. However, this did not affect the national structure of migrants. Initially, most migrants to Slovakia came from EU Member States. Until 2018, citizens of EU countries living in Slovakia accounted for the majority of total foreign migration to Slovakia. However, in 2018, ten thousand more third-country nationals had residence permits than citizens of EU Member States. At the end of 2023, the difference between foreign nationals from Member States and foreign nationals from third countries had risen to

200,390 persons (255,898 from third countries, 55,508 from European Union states). However, this significant difference compared to 2018 is due to the migration of war refugees from Ukraine. The most numerous nationalities among third-country nationals were Ukrainians (176,522), Serbs (19,045), and Vietnamese (9,082) (BBFP, 2023). The trend shows a year-on-year decrease in citizens of EU origin and increase in third-country nationals. It can be assumed that the number of incoming third-country nationals will continue to rise in the coming years. Significant percentage increases have been recorded for citizens coming from Georgia (from 2,805 in 2022 to 5,217 in 2023) and India (from 1,671 in 2022 to 3,610 in 2023) (BBFP, 2023).

As mentioned above, the largest group of migrants in Slovakia is from Ukraine. Figure 1 shows the increase in the number of migrants from Ukraine after 2017 when Ukraine concluded a visa-free regime with the EU. Since 2018, there has been an increase in the number of Ukrainian migrants with valid residence in Slovakia. This number has been growing significantly since 2022, i.e. after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (BBFP, 2023).

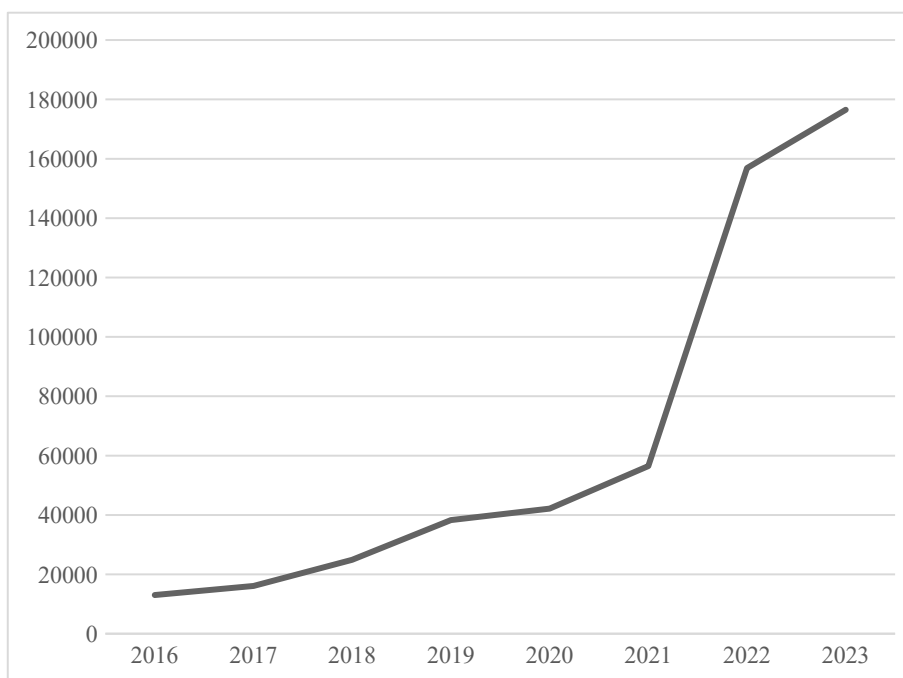


Figure 1 Number of Ukrainians with valid residence in the territory of the Slovak Republic between 2016 and 2023. Source: BBFP, 2023

5 RESEARCH RESULTS

It was not easy to interview Ukrainian migrants about their living situation in Slovakia, as the respondents were often reluctant to share their experiences in detail; they were secretive, and did not feel comfortable sharing negative experiences, especially regarding Slovak authorities, institutions or employers. The older respondents may have had experience with security institutions in the former Soviet Union or in the transformed regime of the now-independent Ukraine, where one may have been afraid to divulge information lest it be used against them. Another factor may be the ongoing war in Ukraine and the pro-Russian part of Slovak society that has reservations about migrants from Ukraine, regardless of whether they are war refugees or those who arrived in Slovakia before the Russian invasion.

During the research, we became aware of the limitations of qualitative research methods. Semi-structured interviews may be a suitable method when researching more nationalities who have no experience with totalitarian regimes, are more open to conversation, more communicative and so on. However, qualitative research methods were beneficial when we wanted to understand the nature of certain issues, especially more sensitive topics. War was such a topic. Although our research was not oriented towards this issue, war is present in the lives of Ukrainians living in Slovakia, and at some point, respondents started to talk about it on their own.

Labour market integration

Immigration significantly impacts the economic situation in the destination country (Prívvara and Rievajová, 2021); therefore, labour market integration forms an important precondition for integration in general (Demirkol, 2024). The authors point out that there are differences in the labour market not only between natives and migrants (Kiner and Štefančík, 2022) but also between different groups of migrants (Guzi et al., 2023). Our research aimed to determine the extent to which migrants from Ukraine are integrated into the Slovak labour market.

Given that Ukrainians came to Slovakia primarily as economic migrants, we were interested in the professions in which they have been able to find employment. Table 1 shows that they most often occupy jobs that do not require a university degree. It also shows that the number of employed Ukrainians in the territory of the Slovak Republic with an information card is significantly higher than the number of employed Ukrainians with an employment permit. Information card holders are not required to have an employment permit. The information card is submitted to the competent labour office in whose territorial district the third-country national will be employed.

Respondents from our qualitative research can be divided into three groups according to their professional qualifications. The first group includes highly skilled persons who work in positions appropriate to their level of education. Foreign firms and companies have employed them due to their university education and knowledge of English and Russian or Ukrainian. A particular subgroup is represented by doctors whose diplomas have been recognized. The second group is comprised of

individuals employed in lower-skilled jobs. It includes persons who have performed skilled work in Ukraine but are employed in Slovakia in lower-paying jobs or jobs without the necessary qualifications. This group also includes persons with a university degree obtained in Ukraine but who have stayed in Slovakia, working in a low-skilled job. The third group consists of low-qualified persons who performed similar work activities in Ukraine but decided to live in Slovakia because of the better salary conditions and living standards.

Table 1 Number of employed Ukrainians in the Slovak Republic by occupation in 2023

Type of profession	with a work permit	with an information card
operators and assemblers of machinery and equipment	6 218	8 818
unskilled auxiliary workers	1 082	8 905
skilled workers and craftsmen	1 283	2 194
specialists	616	2 562
technicians and professional workers	249	938
service and trade workers	273	3 603
skilled agricultural, forestry and fishing workers	138	184
administrative workers	109	1 748
legislators and managers	66	218
members of the armed forces	0	0
unspecified occupation	5	98
total	10 039	29 268

Source: Ústredie práce sociálnych vecí a rodiny (2023), own elaboration

In terms of our research on economic integration, we were interested in whether migrants had to pass specialized exams or undergo additional qualification or re-training courses before being hired. The interviews revealed that migrants interested in working in the field of medicine were required to pass a specialized exam. If an exam or additional certificate was needed for other occupations, the prospective employer helped them financially to obtain it. Most respondents (except for doctors) stated that taking the above-mentioned exams or certificates for employment in Slovakia was unnecessary. Except for medical institutions, most employers did not require officially translated and notarized university or secondary school diplomas.

We categorized the respondents into three groups based on how they found employment in Slovakia. The first group includes people who found employment while still in Ukraine, and came to Slovakia with an already agreed employment contract, which was preceded by a job interview. Social ties helped some persons to migrants who were already living in Slovakia. Others found work through internet portals. The second group includes people who found work only after arriving in Slovakia. Many of them came to Slovakia for family reunification reasons. In this case, finding a job before arriving in Slovakia was not crucial and occurred at different times,

depending on the respondent. This group also included Ukrainians who found jobs through online job portals or social connections in Slovakia. The third group comprised individuals who completed their higher education in Slovakia. As a result, employers usually do not perceive them as citizens of third countries, but as integrated persons with a good knowledge of Slovak. However, there are still obligations associated with employment as a third-country national. For example, students cannot automatically obtain permanent residence after completing five years of studies in Slovakia and are thus subject to all the obligations for granting temporary residence.

As discussed in the theoretical section, integration is a two-way process between the migrant and the autochthonous society (Klarenbeek, 2021). The respondents stated that a friendly, open, non-judgmental working environment also facilitated integration in society in general. Since they spend a large part of their waking hours at work, they also develop social contacts there, which influences the integration process. If a migrant's experience in the workplace is positive, we assume that they will begin to feel accepted in society. This will surely influence their decision to stay in Slovakia or apply for citizenship, which in most cases leads to full settlement.

Respondents working for foreign companies feel accepted in the workplace and do not experience discrimination or negative behaviour from their colleagues. However, those who work in smaller towns, in Slovak institutions, or at lower-skilled positions stated that they do not feel accepted by their Slovak colleagues, which makes integration difficult. However, each of them mentioned that they knew at least one person who has treated them with understanding and acceptance. Otherwise, they feel that most of their neighbours look at them with suspicion. Doctors who work in hospitals in district towns felt the change in the behaviour of a part of Slovak society after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The war is discussed in the workplace, but Ukrainian doctors feel the negative attitude of their colleagues towards their country. They often hear negative comments about the war and Ukraine:

“It is difficult to work in a department where you don't feel accepted and anti-Ukrainian views are present.”

Negative attitudes towards war refugees are shared not only by Slovak colleagues of Ukrainian doctors but also by patients. However, they have also met people who treat them politely. We consider it important to note that during the interviews, all of the respondents spoke in positive terms about Slovakia and stressed the importance of the integration process in becoming part of Slovak society.

Language competence

Having a certain command of the host society's language is an important prerequisite for the integration of migrants (Amireault, 2020). Language acquisition facilitates mobility and helps to develop social networks and social capital in the new environment (McAreavey, 2017). The increase in the number of migrant workers

has a positive impact on the practical aspects of life, affecting not only the cultural aspects but also the economic aspects, especially the labour market (Alba et al., 2002). For this reason, we devoted significant attention to this topic in our research. We designed the questions in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of migrants' attitudes towards language acquisition and how the state regulates this issue. When asked about the state's assistance in language acquisition, most respondents felt that the state has not assisted them in any way in language acquisition. The Foreign Police Department, which is the first point of contact with state institutions for migrants, does not offer Slovak language courses or publish information about courses that are usually organized for migrants by NGOs and language schools.

Our research shows that migrants do not have the support of the state in learning Slovak. Each respondent approached learning Slovak differently, but in most cases, they attended classes in private language schools. Throughout this process, we also identified integration issues. After completing several levels of Slovak language courses, migrants from Ukraine often find the courses insufficient. This is because Ukrainians tend to learn Slovak faster than migrants from non-Slavic countries. Consequently, after completing the basic course, Ukrainian migrants tend to discontinue attending language schools. Some respondents took Slovak language courses in Ukraine or pursued specialized Slovak courses, particularly those in the medical profession. They also mentioned supplementary learning methods such as reading books and magazines in Slovak, watching Slovak TV programs, and, in one specific case, viewing Slovak series, which is especially popular among women. Respondents who formed relationships with individuals from native members of society experienced the most significant and rapid improvement in language proficiency.

The respondents considered knowledge of Slovak as a priority for their integration, for obtaining a qualified job and last but not least, for feeling accepted by the autochthonous society. Ukrainians observed a more welcoming attitude of the Slovak population after improving their Slovak:

“When I knew Slovak well, people were more polite to me in shops, at the post office, but also in the hotel where we were on holiday.”

According to the respondents, knowledge of the Slovak at an advanced level is crucial, especially in contact with the foreign police. After improving their language skills, Ukrainian migrants reflect the improvement of the behaviour of state officials and police officers towards them.

A secondary finding in the language section of the interviews was identifying the difference between Russian and Ukrainian-speaking citizens of Ukraine. Many immigrants from Ukraine consider Russian as their mother tongue. They come from the eastern part of Ukraine, where a significant Russian minority with Ukrainian citizenship also lived before the war. Based on our interviews, we found that Ukrainians whose native language is Ukrainian, typically come from the western part of Ukraine, especially the border areas with Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, and they learn Slovak more quickly. Grammatically and lexically, they are closer to

Slovak than Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Consequently, they acquire vocabulary and fluency faster and with less effort.

Ukrainian migrants perceive Slovak as a language similar to their own and point to the quick acquisition of colloquial language, which is necessary in employment. Slovak employers themselves perceive this language affinity as an advantage when employing third-country nationals, and prefer to hire Ukrainian migrants. No respondent was turned down for a job because of their Slovak language skills. On the contrary, they said that the employers themselves noted the similarity of the languages and assured them that they would learn Slovak during their employment:

“My employer didn't consider it a problem that I didn't speak Slovak. He said that eventually, I would learn it just by working. He paid for my Slovak course, and I slowly started learning the language.”

Our research shows that some jobs require a certain level of language proficiency, especially in writing, such as working with court translators, administrative work in embassies, offices, and government institutions of the Slovak Republic, and education.

Socio-cultural aspects of integration

Academics often address the issue of socio-cultural integration in their texts. According to Ersanilli and Koopmans (2010: 773), “socio-cultural integration is measured by host-country identification, proficiency and use of the host country language, and interethnic social contacts”. This raises the question of the extent to which migrants should adopt the cultural patterns of the host-country society and the extent to which they should retain their own. Too much cultural integration can be detrimental to a migrant's subjective well-being, and in terms of the loss of cultural diversity (from the perspective of host countries) and global connectedness (from the perspective of both host and home countries) (Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

The interviews showed that Ukrainian migrants themselves do not perceive huge cultural differences between Slovak and Ukrainian society:

“If I don't go into details, there are almost no cultural differences, we are very similar nations, with similar behaviour.”

The respondents do not see differences in religion, although the majority identified as Eastern Orthodox (only one respondent identified as Greek Orthodox). They accentuated the similarity with Catholic or Protestant denominations, as despite differences in the celebration of religious holidays, they are based on the same religion. They have not experienced any restriction from the indigenous society in the observance of religious practices, as most of them do not follow Eastern Orthodox practices. Some respondents attend Catholic churches precisely because of their single religion. Respondents whose children attend Slovak schools or kindergartens have gradually adopted Slovak religious practices:

“Our holidays are different, but because of our son we try to celebrate Slovak holidays in the same way, because his classmates also celebrate Slovak Christmas.”

The research shows that the respondents try to preserve cultural (religious) practices, but they also try to adapt to an autochthonous society for the sake of their children.

They often pointed out that they share common values with Slovaks:

“I didn’t notice that much difference. You are very family-oriented, as are we. You go to church – even in the capital – you have similar behaviour, you attend church services and have similar religious traditions. In our big cities, there are no practising believers.”

All of the respondents reported the same perception of the importance of family relationships. They pointed to the closed nature of Slovak society, sensitive to the expansion of their "social circle" and the complexity of finding social ties. When asked about cultural identity, they often perceived Slovak society as European:

“Maybe you are less open and more distant, but that’s not only in Slovakia, but also in Europe.”

They also described the values and behavioural features of Slovak society as European. The interviews revealed that Ukrainians perceived Slovakia as a full-fledged European country, but they did not speak of Ukraine as part of Europe.

6 DISCUSSION

Based on qualitative research, we concluded that Ukrainian migrants have the prerequisites to integrate well into Slovak society. They can integrate rapidly into the labour market, and due to the similarity between the Ukrainian and Slovak languages, they can quickly grasp basic social contexts. Another crucial aspect of Ukrainian integration is the similarity in cultural, behavioural patterns and traditions, especially those associated with the celebration of religious holidays. Thus, employing migrants from Ukraine could alleviate the labour shortage in the market.

However, the integration of migrants is a two-way process. A successful integration process also depends on the attitude of the local population towards migrants in general and towards a particular allochthonous group. This is a problem that can represent a significant obstacle to the integration of migrants in general, and not only of Ukrainian migrants. The Slovak political elite has articulated the issue of migration in an extremely negative manner and has long focused on the negative impacts of migration on host-country societies. The negative attitude of the Slovak political elite towards migrants is also reflected in the public discourse on migration, which is dominated by caution, distrust, criticism, rejection of migrants, or the perception of

migrants as a threat to the population's security (Androvičová, 2015; Štefančík et al., 2021). Although the securitization of migration in Slovak political discourse is primarily associated with migration from African and Middle Eastern countries, security concerns have also been identified in the debate on the migration of war refugees from Ukraine (Mantoğlu and Ůste, 2023).

The results of our research correspond with the findings presented by the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) portal. MIPEX analyses eight areas of integration policy in several countries, including Slovakia: access to the labour market, family reunification, education, political participation, obtaining permanent residence, health, and anti-discrimination. Due to the relevance and rigor of its indicators, MIPEX has been recognized as a quick reference guide across Europe. Policy-makers, NGOs, researchers, and European and international institutions use MIPEX data not only to understand and compare national integration policies but also to improve the integration standards in a particular country.

MIPEX (2020) classifies the Slovak approach to integration as “equality on paper” and points out that immigrants in Slovakia have basic rights and security but not equal opportunities. According to MIPEX, Slovakia needs to devote more attention to its integration policy and improve the government's approach, as its decisions can influence whether integration will be a two-way process or not. MIPEX has observed that statements by Slovak politicians encourage the public perception of immigrants as foreigners rather than as future citizens. They see education, political participation, and access to the labour market as the most neglected areas of integration policy in Slovakia. Our research shows that Ukrainian migrants can quickly enter the labour market, although the government continues to impose many bureaucratic barriers to employing them. Well-integrated Ukrainians are also a prerequisite for good integration of Ukrainian war refugees who arrived in Slovakia after 2022. The experience of other countries shows that an essential prerequisite for successful integration is sufficient opportunities to find suitable accommodation and employment, as well as to ensure school attendance for their children (Haase et al., 2024).

7 CONCLUSION

The main aim of our research was to determine the extent to which migrants from Ukraine have integrated into Slovak society. We focused on the economic and cultural aspects of integration. Based on qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews, we can conclude that migrants from Ukraine are an easily integrated allochthonous migrant group. Due to the proximity of the language and cultural patterns of behaviour, but also based on the current demand for labour, Ukrainians, as the largest group of migrants living in Slovakia, are well integrated.

The economic immigration of Ukrainians is supported by good economic indicators. Although the Slovak economy has problems with public debt, there is a demand for low-skilled labour, where many Ukrainian migrants are employed. The economic integration of migrants from third countries is complicated by bureau-

cratic conditions. In this text, we have drawn attention to the bureaucratic process of reporting vacancies to the Labour Office if an employer is interested in employing a third-country national in this position. However, the respondents included low-skilled workers but also doctors, university teachers, and skilled employees of large international firms. Their position in the labour market is less complicated, but for some jobs the state does not show enough effort in eliminating the accompanying problems. This includes the bureaucratic process associated with the recognition of university diplomas, particularly in the case of doctors.

Migrants from Ukraine are also well integrated in terms of cultural patterns of behaviour. The interviews revealed that they perceive their cultural identity as close to that of Slovaks; many of them observe similar religious customs and traditions, and they describe their values as similar to or the same as Slovak ones.

The ability to speak the language of the indigenous society plays an important role in integration. Migrants from Ukraine consider Ukrainian to be close to Slovak. Many respondents reported that they learn Slovak much faster in private Slovak language courses than migrants from other countries. Ukrainians whose mother tongue is Russian have a more complicated path in acquiring the Slovak language. However, since it is also a Slavic language, language acquisition is faster than it is for migrants from non-Slavic countries.

However, integration is a two-way process; it depends not only on the migrants but also on the approach of the citizens of the destination country as well as state institutions. This has been identified as the weakest point in integrating migrants into Slovak society. Migration discourse in Slovakia is still under the influence of negative emotions presented by Slovak politicians after the 2015/2016 migration wave. Some Slovak politicians have a critical or even negative view of migration; in the case of the discussion on migration agreements at the European Union level, they present a reserved or dismissive approach. Thus, openness towards migrants is still not a feature of migration discourse in Slovakia. However, we have seen some changes. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico is beginning to distinguish between legal and illegal migrants. He believes that legal migration could solve labour shortages in some industries. It cannot, therefore, be ruled out that over time, as the number of migrants with legal residence in Slovakia grows, the state will start to become more intent on integration policy.

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Skúsenosti ukrajinských migrantov s integráciou na Slovensku

Súhrn

Obyvatelia pôvodom z Ukrajiny tvoria najväčšiu skupinu migrantov žijúcich na Slovensku. Pre svoju kultúrnu a jazykovú príbuznosť by mali predstavovať ľahko integrovateľnú skupinu migrantov. Hoci politici prezentujú záujem o implementáciu takých zákonov, ktoré integráciu Ukrajincov budú podporovať, existuje mnoho prekážok v ich integrácii. Naším cieľom je identifikovať dôležité oblasti v procese integrácie migrantov žijúcich na Slovensku. Zaujímá nás, ako sú ukrajinskí migranti integrovaní na trhu práce a do spoločnosti a akým spôsobom reflektujú prístup štátu k začleňovaniu migrantov do spoločnosti na príklade svojej vlastnej situácii. Vychádzame z predpokladu, že ukrajinskí migranti, vzhľadom na geografickú blízkosť, náboženskú blízkosť (pravoslávie ako súčasť kresťanstva), blízkosť jazyka a príbuznosť kultúr a v neposlednom rade vekovú štruktúru predstavujú ľahko integrovateľnú skupinu migrantov. Na získanie dát sme použili kvalitatívnu metódu formou semištruktúrovaných osobných rozhovorov s 25 ukrajinskými migrantmi. Vybratí boli takí migranti, ktorí prišli na Slovensko ešte pred ruskou inváziou na Ukrajinu, to znamená, že neprišli na Slovensko ako vojnoví utečenci. Otázky sme najskôr otestovali v rámci pilotného testovania na vzorke piatich Ukrajincov. Práve pilotné testovanie malo za účel vyhodnotiť okruhy otázok za relevantné pre náš výskum, prípadne doplniť už vopred pripravené okruhy a otázky o témy, ktoré v pilotnom testovaní neboli zahrnuté. Rozhovory sme realizovali v časovom období medzi aprílom 2023 a augustom 2023, teda v predchádzajúcom legislatívnom období. V našom výskume všetci oslovení Ukrajinci prišli na Slovensko ešte pred ruskou inváziou na Ukrajinu. Dôležitým kritériom pri výbere respondenta bola dĺžka obdobia pobytu na Slovensku, a to po dobu minimálne jedného roka. Témy rozhovoru sme koncipovali tak, aby sa dotkli všetkých oblastí integrácie migrantov, vrátane integrácie na trhu práce, ovládanie jazyka autochtónnej spoločnosti, prijatia kultúry autochtónnej spoločnosti, zabezpečenie ubytovania, skúsenosť migrantov so štátnymi, či verejnými inštitúciami, pocit bezpečia v cieľovej krajine, ako aj prijatie migranta domácou spoločnosťou. Na základe realizovaného kvalitatívneho výskumu sme dospeli k záveru, že ukrajinskí migranti sú na Slovensku dobre integrovaní. Dokážu sa

veľmi rýchlo zorientovať na trhu práce, vďaka podobnosti ukrajinského a slovenského jazyka dokážu veľmi rýchlo chápať základné súvislosti. Ekonomickú migráciu Ukrajincov podporujú dobré ekonomické ukazovatele. Hoci Slovensko má problémy s verejným dlhom, existuje dopyt po nízko kvalifikovanej pracovnej sile. Dôležitý aspekt pri integrácii ukrajinských migrantov je príbuznosť kultúrnych vzorcov správania, podobné tradície spojené s oslavou významným náboženských sviatkov. Z rozhovorov vyplynulo, že respondenti vnímajú svoju kultúrnu identitu ako blízku slovenskej, mnohí z nich dodržiavajú podobné náboženské zvyky a tradície ako slovenská spoločnosť, svoje hodnoty označujú ako podobné alebo rovnaké so slovenskými. Integrácia migrantov je však obojstranný proces. To znamená, že za úspešným integračným procesom je aj postoj domáceho obyvateľstva k migrantom vo všeobecnosti, prípadne k určitej alochtónnej skupine. A práve tu identifikujeme problém, ktorý môže pôsobiť ako významná prekážka integrácie nielen ukrajinských migrantov. Slovenská politická elita uchopila otázku migrácie mimoriadne negatívne a dlhé obdobie presviedčala obyvateľov Slovenska v prvom rade o negatívnych dopadoch migrácie na spoločnosti hostiteľských krajín. Otvorenosť k migrantom tak na Slovensku stále nie znakom migračného diskurzu.