

Navigating Ukrainians' Integration in Slovakia: Identification of its barriers and facilitators

1. Introduction

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), as EU countries with a shorter immigration history, lag behind the rest of the EU in terms of state-level management of migration and integration (Pędziwiatr and Magdziarz 2023). This is a critical gap: As CEE countries shift from transiting to new immigration destinations (NID), they face new challenges, such as pressures on policy-making, changes in the country's demography and labour market, and institutional management of migration, all of which impact both the *destination countries' citizens and immigrants* (Coşciug 2018).

The large and rapid mobility of Ukrainians in the last two years has exacerbated these new challenges, making the CEE region an important global region to study immigration. Slovakia is one of the least studied of the CEE countries, Ukraine's neighbour, with a long history of accepting Ukrainian labour immigrants (Teke Lloyd and Sirkeci 2022), and one of the EU countries with *the highest rate* of Ukrainian migrants per capita, which has not previously experienced immigration of such a large population. All these characteristics make Slovakia an exceptional case study to examine the integration of Ukrainians and their experience of integration in an NID.

This paper aims to answer two overarching research questions: "*What are the living conditions of Ukrainians in Slovakia in 2026?*" and "*What individual and contextual factors are influencing integration of Ukrainians in Slovakia?*" to map the Ukrainian population in Slovakia from demographic, economic, and sociological perspectives and related dimensions of their integration. Specifically, using the first wave of the new longitudinal panel data collection of the Ukrainian migrant population in Slovakia, we aim to research individual immigrants' aspirations related to demographic processes of migration and fertility, their labour and educational integration, social and cultural integration, and ability to access services related to healthcare, education, and accommodation.

This paper stems from both academic and policy-related needs. Academically, our research responds to a knowledge gap and limited research efforts in the field of migration studies in this geographical area. Our findings will substantially contribute to research within the fields of migration studies, especially migration in new immigration destinations, demography, and sociology. From the policy perspective, accurate knowledge about the immigration population in EU countries is important for national and international immigration and integration policies [\[1\]](#).

1. Theoretical focus

Immigration in Central and Eastern Europe and the War on Ukraine

CEE, historically an emigration region, has become an NID in recent years. CEE's migration history differs significantly from that of established destinations, for example, due to the historical and cultural differences, which implies the limited possibility of learning from existing research. Despite this, most migration research continues to study the region (with the exception of Poland) from an emigration perspective (Kusek 2024). Moreover, to properly understand and predict global immigration trends, we have to research and understand new and emerging

destinations like CEE (Winders 2014). The war on Ukraine, the fastest-growing and largest displacement crisis in Europe since World War II, has emphasised integration and migration management issues experienced by CEE countries (Pędziwiatr and Magdziarz 2023). The third year of the ongoing war and immigration influx requires measures focusing on *long-term integration* and *socioeconomic inclusion* of Ukrainians (UNHCR 2024). An analysis of a survey conducted among Ukrainian refugees in 2024 shows that one out of three is determined or inclined to stay abroad (EUAA 2024), which is in line with previous findings (Constant et al. 2021). The cornerstone of designing measures UNHCR promotes is to understand the situation of immigrants beyond their immediate needs post-migration, through subjective measures, such as their aspiration and (success of) their integration, and from objective perspectives, such as the economic and demographic situation in Slovakia, political, security (M. Khylyk and Tytarchuk 2016), and social situation in Ukraine (M. Khylyk and O. Khylyk 2022), and policy and political context of the EU. This paper aims to contribute to this understanding and *thus* responds to the need to research the CEE and the lives of Ukrainian immigrants using the case study of Slovakia, focusing on the subjective measures of integration and understanding Ukrainian immigrants' perspectives on various dimensions of said integration.

We aim to understand the integration process(es) in the context of individuals' circumstances and life trajectories, as well as the national and international contexts that shape their experience. For this purpose, we will also rely on the intertwining perspectives of immigration and integration policy and foreign policy.

Case study of Slovakia

Slovakia's immigration has increased tenfold in the last 20 years. Since 2022, 130,000 Ukrainians have received European Temporary Protection (ETP)^[2] there (UNHCR 2024), and the overall Ukrainian population in Slovakia, which was already the largest group of immigrants, has grown to approximately 150,000. Unlike its neighbours, such as Austria and Czechia, Slovakia has no long-term comprehensive immigration and integration policy (Gallo Krieglervá et al. 2021; Ministerstvo práce 2021). The current legal document defining migration and integration management, the *Migration Policy of Slovak Republic until 2025* defines integration as “a continuous, long-term and dynamic reciprocal process of mutual respect and reciprocal recognition of the rights and obligations of all inhabitants”, without articulating responsibilities and responsible stakeholders, defining tools, or giving time frames for this process (Stefancik et al. 2022). The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), which measures integration policies across countries and in eight policy dimensions: education, labour market mobility, family reunion, health, political participation, permanent residence, anti-discrimination, and access to citizenship (Solano and Huddleston 2020), reports Slovakia to have “equality on paper” in integration legislation, but ranks below average in opportunities or results of the integration. However, MIPEX's last update was done in 2020, further increasing the relevance of conducting research in Slovakia, as there is no large-scale data and research on the integration of migrants available at the moment. Data shows that Slovakia does not offer training or language courses, public discussion of integration is missing, and legislation leans towards securitisation (Tabosa 2020). A considerable part of Slovak political elites (Kazharski and Tabosa 2018) and population have anti-immigrant (Findor et al. 2021) and pro-Russian sentiments (Klobucký and Mrva 2024), which might negatively impact the immigrant population (Šedovič 2023, 2024), and specifically Ukrainians. However, there are more inclusive areas in the country, suggesting that integration policies in Slovakia are decentralised and involve different governmental levels. For example,

the largest share of Ukrainians (app. 49,000) is based in Bratislava municipality (app. 480,000 inhabitants), which takes a more proactive approach to Ukrainians' integration compared to other regions. Thus, allowing an intra-national comparison of integration in various regional contexts.

Existing research on Ukrainians' migration to Slovakia is predominantly qualitative and mixed-methods (Wilsch 2024), narrowly defining Ukrainians' migration through the prism of social work (Balogová 2024), studies of integration through a limited lenses of employment and family and care (Bahna et al., 2025) or focused on the destination population, e.g., on the impact of the Ukrainian migration on Slovaks' migration attitudes. The latest published comprehensive research on immigrants' integration uses data from 2021 and is focused on cultural and political integration (Gallo Krieglerová et al. 2021; Šedovič 2024) while research on topics covered in this paper (e.g., demographic measures, aspirations, subjective assessment of integration, focus on a specific population of immigrants) is mostly absent. This has a substantive negative impact on potential regional collaborations on the cross-border management of migration and, therefore, has an impact beyond the single country. Unlike in the other countries in the region (Górny and van der Zwan 2024; Šafářová et al. 2024, White, 2024), there is very little research on Ukrainians' experiences in Slovakia. In neighbouring countries, both centralised and independent projects exist to monitor the management of migration and integration and carry out data collections for continuous research, including comparative research. For instance, Kohlenberger et al. (2023) compare immigrants in Poland and Austria. Data collection in Slovakia has been, until recently, limited to that done by authorities and international bodies (e.g., Foreign police, UNHCR), with the exception of Bahna and colleagues (2025), which informs our questionnaire and on which we built. With limited existing research on this population, our paper, for the first time, comprehensively studies the Ukrainian population's integration from multiple perspectives, including demographic and social integration, compares individuals within the population (e.g., based on their mother tongue, or region of settlement), and focuses on their long-term integration.

1. Data and sample

This paper is the first in a series of papers employing a longitudinal survey from a sample of the Ukrainian population living in Slovakia (3 data collections 1 year apart on the same sample), using the first wave of data collection (to be collected in April 2026). Using existing administrative data, we are designing a sampling strategy (quota sample on age, sex, and place of settlement, place of origin)[\[3\]](#) to collect representative[\[4\]](#) survey data on the Ukrainian population (above age 18) living in Slovakia. We will recruit panel members online using social networks (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger Telegram) combined with an in-person recruiting using gatekeepers, employers, charities, and available probability sampling methods. We will collect data using CAWI (computer-assisted web interviewing) and aim to collect 2000 responses in the first round. The data collection using CAWI, combined online and in-person recruitment, combined sampling, and data weighting is sound, feasible, and cost-effective, and while novel in Slovakia in terms of data collection on the migrant population, it is in line with methods used across other contexts.

We focus on the whole population of Ukrainians in Slovakia to allow comparisons between people arriving at different times (pre-2014, between 2014 and 02/2022, post 02/2022), for different reasons, and with different permits. This population includes immigrants and ETP holders. Under immigrants, we include those who came before 02/ 2022 and have a permit to be

in the country or after 02/2022 and did not apply for ETP. We include those ETP holders who have since applied for asylum or another type of permit.

We are designing a theory-driven and interdisciplinary questionnaire, including questions on sociodemographic and economic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, current and past economic activity), region of origin in Ukraine, mother tongue, individual's success in integration (educational, social indicators), wellbeing, experience with destination populations, institutions, short-term aspirations (including settling in Slovakia, migration, fertility intention), and migration-related variables (e.g., year of arrival to Slovakia, place of settlement). We will pilot the questionnaire with purposely selected Ukrainians to co-produce questions that are relevant to them and might not have been asked before.

1. Methodology

As our paper is the first of its kind, our methods are descriptive statistical methods and regression analysis examining associations among individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender, minority status, mother tongue, ethnicity, education, fluency in Slovak) and between individual characteristics and contextual factors (e.g., region of settlement in Slovakia, access to services).

1. Expected Findings and Contribution

Our aim in this paper is to conduct an analysis of the population of Ukrainians living in Slovakia and comprehensively describe its complexity and variation within. Building on this knowledge we will examine the relationship between individuals' characteristics and 1) their aspirations (migration plans, family reunification plans, fertility intentions), 2) integration patterns and also 3) the subjectively assessed success of their integration efforts. We will examine integration through an intersectional lens to explain the trends and disparities in Ukrainians' integration (or its lack) in Slovakia and how they depend on the current developments in Ukraine and broader Europe. Finally, considering these will be the first results of this kind from Slovakia, we will discuss similarities and differences in integration compared to findings from neighbouring and other countries with similar rates of Ukrainians per capita (Poland, Austria, Czechia, Germany).

Contribution

Academically, our findings will directly contribute to the emerging body of empirical research on Ukrainians' mobility and the impact of (forced) migration and displacement in the CEE and in Europe. We will contribute with findings on subjective measures of integration, migrants' aspirations and planning in uncertain times, and the female-dominated migrant population, which is particularly important given that most existing integration research is conducted on disproportionately male populations. We will fill a gap caused by the lack of research and data availability in one of the leading Ukrainian migrant-receiving countries in the EU. The findings will be transferable to other current or future NIDs with similar characteristics, both within and outside CEE.

From the policy perspective, for example, the study of demographic aspirations will bring important findings for policy planning regarding accommodating demographic changes linked to fulfilling immigrants' aspirations – future immigration for family reunion, potential emigration of ETP holders who are now part of the labour force, capacity management of family, education, and health services, etc.

From the data perspective, we are collecting the first longitudinal data collection on the migrant population in Slovakia. Our methodology, using combined probability and non-probability sampling, is examining the possibilities of collecting representative data in a country context with constraints on the sampling information. Our paper will provide detailed information about our data collection and our data will enhance migration research locally and in the European context, as our dataset will allow comparative research to include Slovakia.

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[1]Immigration policies refer to "the management of cross-border flow" (Freeman, 2007, p. 28) of people, while integration policies refer to the management of and conditions provided to immigrants once they are already in the host country (Freeman, 2007).

[2]EU-wide directive offering temporary protection to displaced persons. Ukrainian passport holders can stay in Slovakia for up to 90 days, so without the ETP, they would not technically become refugees. The difference between ETP holders and refugees is that ETP holders have access to the labour market, freedom of movement within the country of destination and keep their ID documents.

[3] Non-probability data collections is not possible in this case due to the limited information about the population. Quota sampling is the best non-probability method to collect data close to representative and cost-effective.

[4] It is challenging to collect representative data on a migrant population with the high mobility we see among Ukrainians, and the administrative data we can access, which we know has quality issues. However, our approach is the best for collecting as representative data as possible under the circumstances. Thanks to oversampling, we can and will use weights to adjust the sampling.