Lost Capital: Labour Integration of Ukrainian Refugee Women in Slovakia

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Abstract

The study examines the labour market integration of Ukrainian refugee women who arrived in Slovakia following the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022. It analyses their life trajectories and migration strategies, with a particular focus on the obstacles and challenges they are facing on the Slovak labour market. We study their social and cultural capital that these refugees bring to the labour market. We are interested in the employment rate of Ukrainian refugee women in Slovakia and how their employment status changes over time. We examine the importance of work in their lives and their job satisfaction in the context of complex integration and acculturation processes, as well as, their future aspirations. The text is based on qualitative research through semi-structured interviews with female refugees in the eastern Slovak city of Košice. We identify numerous limitations, subjective and objective factors that determine their possibilities to finding work, access to job positions and which cause downward or upward job mobility.

Keywords: *Ukrainian refugee women, integration, labour market, barriers, capital*

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. Millions of Ukrainians were forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring countries. This unprecedented exodus represented a major challenge for Europe, but also an important opportunity to demonstrate solidarity. As a neighbouring country, Slovakia found itself on the front lines of the refugee crisis. Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the number of foreigners in the country increased dramatically. This significantly altered Slovakia's position on the international stage, moving it from being a transit country to becoming one of the most important host countries.

A notable proportion of the Ukrainian refugees are women, mothers, and university-educated individuals. This is of fundamental importance for both host countries and Ukrainian communities.

The present study focuses on the integration of a specific group – women with temporary protection status. Its main objective is to characterise the integration of Ukrainian refugee women into the Slovak labour market and to analyse the factors that determine it. For the purposes of the research, we have formulated the following research questions:

Q1: What cultural and social capital have refugee women acquired in their country of origin or in Slovakia, and how they use it when entering the Slovak labour market? How do they make use of this capital?

Q2: Do the jobs they obtain in Slovakia correspond to their education and skills?

Q3: What are the main motivations of Ukrainian women to seek employment? What significance do they attribute to work?

Q4: How do their job position change over time? What strategies in relation to work do they prioritise?

Q5: What are the main barriers preventing them from adequate labour market participation?

Q6: How are their work aspirations influenced by the war?

Q7: What are the refugee women's future plans in relation to work?

The primary analytical instrument employed in this study will be a triad of theoretical approaches: we will define and explain the success and dimensions of migration through the concept of multidimensional integration of migrants. The phenomenon of barriers, unequal status, and downsizing of highly qualified labour migrants will be clarified through the theory of the social field and capital. A typology of pathways and return intentions will categorize the dynamics of labour integration and the impact of future plans. We aim to pursue these objectives through empirical research among Ukrainian refugee women in the Slovak city of Košice, a city that has been significantly affected by the influx of refugees. We will use the techniques of semi-structured interviews.

Study Context: Ukrainian Refugees in European Countries and Slovakia

Until 2022, Ukrainian migration to European countries, including Slovakia, was predominantly voluntary in nature. Its primary triggers were economic stagnation in the country of origin, wage differences, and labour shortages in EU member states (Vávrová, 2016, p. 8). At the end of 2020, 1.35 million Ukrainians with residence permits were living in the EU, making them the third largest group of third-country nationals (Eurostat, 2022). The main actors in this migration were men with an average age of under 35 years (Pedziwiatr et al., 2024, p. 51).

As for the situation in Slovakia, Between 2004 and 2021, the share of the foreign population grew almost eightfold. The Ukrainian population contributed significantly to these figures (Letavajová & Divinský, 2019). As of 31 December 2021, Ukrainians, numbering

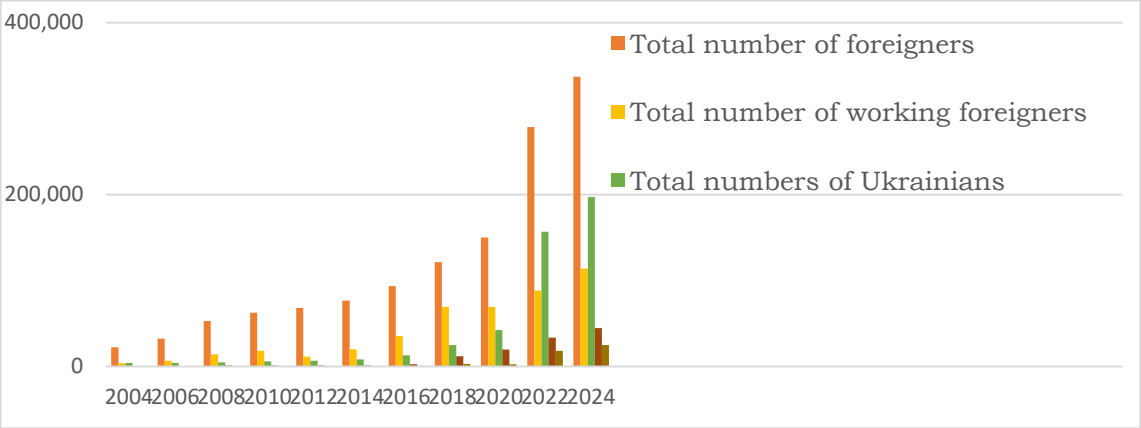
56,480 persons, constituted the largest foreign community (33.7%) (Prezídium policajného zboru, Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície [PZ ÚHaCP], 2021). Seresová and Štefančík (2024) state that these Ukrainian migrants are very well integrated. The state, however, is not well prepared for their integration. In the integration process, it provides little support, leaving migrants largely to manage on their own.

The situation changed radically after the Russian Federation's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The European Commission responded to the mass migration of Ukrainians seeking protection in European countries by activating the Directive on Temporary Protection (European Commission, 2022). By mid-July 2022, approximately 3.7 million Ukrainians had obtained this status in EU member states, most of them in Poland (1.2 million), Germany (670,000), Czech Republic (396,000), and Italy (143,000). (Dobiášová, 2004) In terms of the number of Ukrainian refugees per 1,000 inhabitants, Estonia and the Czech Republic ranked among the leading host countries (41.1 each), followed by Poland (36.1), Lithuania (23.2), Latvia (20.2) and Slovakia (17.2). (Dumont & Lauren, 2022) By 14 March 2024, the number of Ukrainian refugees in Europe had risen to 5.9 million, of whom 86% were women and children, and 13% older than 60 years. The number of men aged 18 to 60 was limited by the ban on leaving the war-torn country. Approximately 70% of the refugees had completed tertiary education with a bachelor's degree or higher, while women achieved higher education (The UN Refugee Agency [UNHCR], 2024).

In Slovakia, during the first year of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 110,114 Ukrainian citizens registered for temporary protection. (PPZ ÚHaCP, 2022) By the end of 2022, the total number of Ukrainian nationals had increased to 156,881, marking a nearly 280% increase in just one year. According to the latest data, as of 30 June 2025, a total of 201,116 Ukrainians were registered in Slovakia. (PPZ ÚHaCP, 2025) As of 24 August 2025, a total of 134,814 foreigners, mostly Ukrainians, were granted temporary protection status. Most of these people

are of working age or under 17. The number of women is 1.7 times higher than the number of men. Ukrainian migrants currently make up around 38.8% of all foreign nationals in Slovakia. (Migračný úrad Ministerstva vnútra Slovenskej republiky [MÚ MV SR], 2025; PPZ ÚHaCP, 2025)

Chart 1. Development of the number of foreigners, employed foreigners, Ukrainians, employed Ukrainians and employed Ukrainian women in Slovakia from 2004 to 2024



Sources: Own processing according to the Úrad práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny [ÚPSVaR], 2004 – 2024; MÚ MV SR, 2024)

The Temporary Protection Directive, currently extended until 4 March 2027, facilitates integration processes in several areas. It grants refugees the right to a residence permit, housing, medical care and social assistance, education for children and adolescents, and access to the labour market.

The influx of Ukrainian refugees has also had a considerable effect on the labour markets of the receiving countries. The most significant increases in the labour force were observed in three countries: the Czech Republic (2.2%), Poland (2.1%), and Estonia (1.9%). The most significant role in this process is played by Poland, where 65% of all Ukrainian refugees of working age have found work since the beginning of the war until 2023 (in

Germany, approximately one fifth of refugees). (Kamyshnykova, 2024, pp. 74–75; The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023)

Several data suggest that refugees are in a worse position in the labour market than other groups of migrants, particularly those who come primarily for work reasons and tend to find employment in lower-level positions. According to information of OECD in 2016, the employment rate of refugees was 23% lower than that of labour migrants. (Bevelander, 2020; OECD, 2016) Similar information has also been recorded for Ukrainian refugees. Despite the Directive allowing for relatively rapid entry into the labour market, Ukrainian refugees' employment patterns do not reflect their actual educational and skills profiles. This is particularly evident in their initial employment, where jobs are often inconsistent with their qualifications. (OECD, 2023)

This situation has been documented in several European countries. For instance, around half of Ukrainian refugees in Poland were employed in basic occupations in the first half of 2022, compared to around 40% in Latvia. In July 2022, more than two out of five Ukrainians in the Czech Republic were employed in positions less qualified than those they had held in Ukraine. Similar initial evidence emerged from Germany and Flanders, indicating that a significant proportion of refugees anticipate working in positions with a lower level of formal qualifications than they possess. (OECD 2023, p. 11).

As for the employment rate (the share of employed people in the working-age population – 18 to 64 years) of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, a year after the start of the war it was approximately 34.2%. (Veselková & Hábel, 2024, p. 10)

In July 2025, a total of 129,171 foreigners were employed in Slovakia, including 49,369 Ukrainians, of whom 27,400 were women. They found employment mainly in three main professions: auxiliary and unskilled workers, operators and assemblers of machines and equipment, and finally, workers in services and trade. (ÚPSVaR, 2025)

Several centres have been established to meet the needs of the refugees, but also of migrants in general. A large-capacity assistance centre was opened in Bratislava. Integration Centre of the Košice Region was established in Košice in June 2022. (Papcunova et al., 2023, p. 4) Support centres called Bluedots have been launched in Bratislava, Košice, Michalovce and Nitra. (UNHCR, 2025) The Tabačka Kulturfabrik cultural centre has been operating in Košice for several years. (Luptáková & Medľová, 2018, p. 19). A Leisure centre is also located there and was transformed into a Support centre for foreigners in 2025. Košice city council itself is aware of the need to address the issue of foreigners, and in December 2024 it approved the Strategy for the Integration of Foreigners in the City of Košice and The Action Plan for the Integration of Foreigners ("Stratégia", 2024).

Theoretical Framework

We consider integration to be a complex and multidimensional process. We rely on the definition of Bargerová and Divinský (2008, p. 14), who understand migrant integration as "a long-term, multidimensional and dynamic, two-way process based on mutual respect for the rights and responsibilities of immigrants and the host society ". The primary goal of integration is to enable immigrants to become self-sufficient and to give them access to all public institutions, facilities and rights of the majority population.

The three main components or dimensions of integration are typically considered to be economic, social, and political. (Heath & Schneider, 2021). Ager and Strang (2008, p. 170) expand this conceptual framework to ten key areas, identifying employment, housing, education and health as markers and means. They also include areas they refer to as "social connections ": social bridges between migrants and the host community; ties with family or ethnic groups; and relations between individuals and state structures. Language, culture and knowledge are referred to as "facilitators" and are linked to political measures and the

removal of barriers to inclusion and of exclusion. Finally, they refer to law and citizenship as a foundation related to identity and values.

Findings of Heřmanová and Andrle (2022) based on research on refugees in the Czech Republic showed that refugees themselves consider three interconnected components to be the basic pillars of integration: housing, work, and community.

Several authors point to the importance of work that goes beyond financial self-sufficiency and covering basic needs. In the Slovak context, we will draw on the work of Popper et al. (2006), Kazmyrchuk (2023), Papcunová, Ďurbisová and Mukhina (2023), also Bahna et al. (2025) focus on the employment, economic activities, as well barriers to the effective integration of Ukrainian migrants in the Slovak labour market.

The work strategies employed by Ukrainian refugee women, their migrant status, and the phenomenon of de-skilling can be conceptualized through the frameworks of social field and capital. Bourdieu (1998) understood society as a space in which there is a constant symbolic struggle for advantageous positions. He viewed social fields (e.g. political, media, religious, academic) as components of this space. These fields are autonomous entities with their own rules and hierarchies. Capital can be anything that has an effect in a given social field, causes inequality of recognition and power, or through which power, prestige, and recognition can be obtained. Bourdieu distinguishes three main forms of capital: economic (property and finance); social (e.g. networks of contacts); and cultural (knowledge and skills). The academic field, for example, recognises educational capital, which is usually mediated by formal education and a diploma.

Sokol (2024) analysed the social fields that arise as a result of migration process, as well as the types of capital belonging to Ukrainians and EU citizens. The author observed how interaction occurs between them and the forms of resources they use to improve their position. She considered cultural resources acquired in the homeland or created during life in

the host country to be particularly important, such as education and language skills. She states that many educated Ukrainians are disadvantaged in European countries. This is not due to a low level of knowledge, but rather due to problems with confirming qualifications or the nostrification of diplomas obtained in their home country. In the struggle for positions in the social field (labour market), they lose out to the domestic population.

In this context, Veselková and Hábel (2024) point out that certain types of capital may not be transferable across national borders. Migrants may lack capital specific to the host country, such as an academic degree or professional qualification, knowledge of the local language or labour regulations.

A secondary theoretical model will be delineated, which categorizes the work pathways of migrants, with a particular emphasis on highly qualified migrants. The influence of return intentions (i.e., the intention to return to the country of origin) on integration strategies will be taken into consideration. Liversage (Šūpule, 2021, p. 112) provides a classification of pathways that reflect the different types of integration of highly skilled migrants into the host country. The five pathways are as follows: 1. Re-entry (performing the same occupation as in the country of origin); 2. Upward (promotion from a less skilled job); 3. Re-education (acquiring new qualifications); 4. Re-emigration (returning to the home country to continue their career); 5. Marginalisation (remaining unemployed or in a low-level position).

Vianello (2014) developed a similar theoretical concept in her study of Ukrainian migrant women working in Italian households. According to her, “the migration experience is a process in which ambivalent and complex forms of social devaluation and valorisation of the individual coexist“ (2014, p. 85). Vianello calls the decrease or increase in financial status in the country of emigration “downward“ and “upward“ mobility. According to her research,

migrant women primarily cope with this humiliating experience by viewing it as a temporary setback in their lives aimed at improving their family's living conditions.

Successes and failures on the labour market are explained in the professional literature through the so-called return intentions. This theory may also be applied to Ukrainian refugees. The intention to return can be pivotal for them, significantly influencing their integration processes. The primary conclusion of Snel et al. (2015), who conducted a study on the return intentions of labour migrants in the Netherlands, is that economic prosperity or the duration of stay in the host country does not directly correlate with the intentions to return. It is asserted that some migrants return even after successful migration, while others return after failure. However, less pronounced return intentions are recorded among migrants who have strong ties and identification with the host society, who have strong social contacts with the local population, who participate in the social institutions of the host country and who have command of the language.

Methodology and Reasearch Sample

We obtained key information based on empirical research conducted using the technique of semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian refugees who came to Slovakia after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. We focused on women - refugees, who constitute a significant majority among all Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia and in European countries. The interviews were conducted in December 2024 in Košice, in cooperation with the staff of Integration Centre of the Košice Region and Leisure Centre of the City of Košice. We conducted 28 interviews with Ukrainian refugee women, which we supplemented with interviews with 6 staff members from both centres (three of whom came from Ukraine).

Due to their position in the environment of another culture, power imbalance, traumatic experiences and other circumstances, we perceive the refugees, and foreigners in

general as a particularly vulnerable group of respondents. When selecting respondents, we used the help of employees of the aforementioned institutions, who acted as mediators in the context of recruitment and conducting interviews. Respondents were able to enrol for the interviews on the basis of calls issued by centre staff on their internal social networks. This recruitment method was supplemented by personal invitations to participate in the research and the so-called snowball method, i.e. recommendations from refugees who had already registered. Interviews took place in the centres themeselves, which are familiar to the refugees as most of them have already visited them to receive help and services from the staff. The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian or Slovak, according to the respondents' preferences and language skills. The study was guided by the key principles of voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. An essential part of the research was obtaining informed consent in Ukrainian and Slovak. We anonymised the names of the respondents and the people mentioned in the interviews by using nicknames. The vulnerability of the respondents was evident in their own thematisation of the narratives, as well as during the interviews. Several interviews were very emotional and respondents often focused on topics such as war, loss of relatives and home. Possible limitations include the potential stylisation of respondents in relation to the power position of the researchers.

The interviews were conducted on the basis of a questionnaire, with incomplete or problematic questions being eliminated on the basis of preliminary testing. The respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and their consent to record the interviews was obtained. The interviews were then transcribed and translated into Slovak. The total duration of the recordings was 22.6 hours, with an average interview duration of 40 minutes.

The method of reflexive thematic analysis was used in the analysis of the interviews. In accordance with the methodological concept of Braun and Clark (2006), following a thorough examination of the text, initial codes were generated, recurring themes and patterns

were identified, and typifying models were found that characterised the integration strategies of the refugees. The text also includes direct accounts from the female respondents, adding authenticity and depth.

Using multiple recruitment techniques, we obtained a diverse sample of respondents, reflecting the varied social characteristics of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia and the integration processes they face. The mean age was 44, which is the midpoint of the productive age range. The youngest was 24 and the oldest 64. The average stay in Slovakia was 21 months. Eleven participants arrived right after the war broke out (Feb–Apr 2022), while three had arrived in Slovakia only 1–3 months before the interviews. This shows that participants are at different stages of integration, including employment. Most came from southern and eastern Ukraine, mainly from conflict or occupied regions: Kharkiv (10), Donbas (3), Zaporizhia (3), but also Kyiv (4). The main reason for migration was escape from war. The sample included women with varied life and family situations. All but one were mothers: 17 with one child, 6 with two, and 1 with four children. The children live with their mothers in Slovakia, except for the two oldest women whose adult children remain in Ukraine. Thirteen respondents live with their husbands in Slovakia, while eight families are split because the husbands are in Ukraine. Seven women are divorced or undergoing divorce proceedings, two single mothers. Eight participants mentioned other relatives living in Slovakia, usually in separate households. Except for one respondent residing in the city of Michalovce, all live in Košice or nearby. The findings therefore reflect mainly local contexts and show the opportunities and limits of work integration of the refugees in the Košice region.

FINDINGS

In this section, the research findings are presented and interpreted in relation to the previously established theoretical frameworks. To do so, we will rely on the interviews with the refugee women themselves, as well as with the staff of both Košice institutions.

Cultural and social capital, employment status, barriers

The cultural and social capital of Ukrainian female migrants was identified through an analysis of factors including education, professional experience, language skills and social networks.

Firstly, we examined the capital acquired by respondents in their country of origin and in the host country. We were interested in which elements of this capital they considered essential for their application to the Slovak labour market, and to what extent they relied on the capital of their close people for work integration.

From an educational perspective, the respondents can be characterised as highly educated. Of the 28 respondents, 24 obtained a university education. The most common fields were economics (9) and pedagogy (9), followed by management (2), languages (2), medicine (1) and physiotherapy (1). Four women completed secondary school. These characteristics correspond with the accounts of employees at the Košice centres, who say that they are mainly approached by women with an economic education (e.g. accountants), managers, and teachers. In terms of language skills, in addition to Ukrainian and Russian, 13 women reported having some knowledge of English.

In most cases, the job positions they held before the outbreak of the war matched their level of education. As the women are middle-aged, they had worked in at least one, and often several, job positions by 2022. The most common positions were management and top management, which twelve of the respondents had held at some point in their careers. The second job was teaching, which eight of the respondents carried out at various levels of

education. The Ukrainian refugees were also employed as accountants or administrative workers. One of them worked as a humanitarian worker in Donbas after the war broke out. It is also important to consider their business experience: six of them had owned a business in Ukraine for some time. In all cases, their job corresponded to their level of education. Their stories demonstrate that they had jobs adequate to their education and experience.

Respondents are currently at different stages of work integration. Fourteen of them are currently employed. Half of these perform low-skilled jobs such as cleaner, waitress, assistant cook, production operator and salesperson. Those who have been in Slovakia since 2022 have particularly had several jobs during their working career. In most cases, these were also low-skilled jobs. Some regularly or sporadically find part-time work alongside their main job. The other half of the refugee women are employed in positions requiring higher education, such as teacher, assistant teacher, physiotherapist, administrative assistant and social worker.

These women mainly perform work in which they can use their previous cultural capital or they got the job after undergoing retraining. Their work is more stable and they do not change jobs as frequently. Some of them were able to find a job immediately after arriving in Slovakia. Only six respondents working in higher-skilled positions use Ukrainian, Russian or English in their work. They use them to communicate with Ukrainian students, colleagues, and clients in the context of international and domestic organisations. Women in lower positions rarely use this capital. They have to adapt their cultural capital to meet the expectations of employers, who require knowledge of Slovak.

One of the key components of social capital is networks, in the case of refugees, the networks between their country of origin and host country. These contacts are perceived as resources that can be utilised in the integration process, including for employment. The refugee women rely on multiple sources of contacts and there are no typical patterns of

behaviour in these strategies, regardless of whether they arrived immediately after the outbreak of war or later. In most cases, these are networks acquired only after arrival in the host country. When looking for work, they mainly used contacts from internet groups for Ukrainians in Košice, help from relatives and friends (especially their children who had come to Slovakia before them to study), help from integration centre staff, information from other refugees (e.g. during language courses) and help from Slovak acquaintances (made in Slovakia or through earlier professional contacts in Ukraine). In many cases, they relied solely on their own efforts, looking for work through employment agencies or web job portals, or by approaching potential employers directly:

> *On the first day, I was walking around the lake and I saw the Ukrainian flag (note: on a building). I came there saying I needed a job. They gave me a glass of water and said, 'Okay, come at five.' There we were looking.*

Refugees woman who worked in higher-skilled positions more often obtained their jobs through professional contacts they had before arriving in Slovakia or made after arriving, for example through volunteering, or via professional internet portals.

Among employed women, we identified two factors which facilitated finding jobs matching their experience and education: 1. the opportunity to continue in their previous profession (for example teaching Ukrainian children from Ukraine and other European countries online or teaching Ukrainian children in Slovakia in person) and 2. involvement in humanitarian organisations helping Ukrainians after the war's outbreak (obtaining contacts, recommendations, and subsequently work). The most common reasons given by the respondents for not currently working were caring for small or sick children (4 cases) and

their own poor health (long-term or short-term illnesses) (4 cases). The others were job-seeking, except for one woman.

According to the female respondents, the main barrier to work in Slovakia, especially in positions matching their qualifications, was proficiency in Slovak. Women who arrived after the outbreak of the war could attend free courses, but both respondents and centre staff noted that only basic levels (A1, A2) were offered. The highly educated refugees in specific professions needed specialised language. Many could not attend courses because of work commitments, and older persons faced difficulties in learning. A significant number of the refugees were also afraid of seeking work or interacting with the majority population because they lacked full command of the language:

> *Here, you need to know the language perfectly. And not everyone feels like they know the language perfectly. You're always afraid that you'll misunderstand something, say something wrong.*

Another declared barrier was caring for children or other family members. The respondents mentioned difficulties in finding a job that could be reconciled with kindergarden or school hours, or an employer who would tolerate absences due to children's illnesses.

Their narratives often referred to problems of discrimination against Ukrainians and their disadvantage compared to the local population. Such discrimination occurred in both low- and higher-skilled positions, even when the Ukrainian met or exceeded the requirements for the job, including knowledge of Slovak. According to the respondents, employers justify this action with concerns that Ukrainians will later return home and, therefore, are not promising for them, or simply stating that they preferred a Slovak:

Teacher? Yes, I understand that, because you need the language there. But a waitress or a cleaner? I was surprised because anyone can do such jobs. But there were a lot of notes (note: in the job advertisement) that the job is not suitable for Ukrainians.

The Ukrainian refugees also encountered ageism when seeking employment. Other declared barriers included a lack of experience and problems with diploma nostrification. Interviews with Ukrainian migrants reveal a range of strategies, often characterised by contradiction and inconsistency. Six of the women interviewed have already had their diplomas nostrificated, or are in the process of doing so. Another five are considering the possibility of having their diplomas nostrificated. It is interesting that women are for or against the nostrification of diplomas, regardless of whether they intend to remain in Slovakia in the future or return to Ukraine. This is indicative of their uncertainty about the future. Therefore, they only partially use the diploma as part of their cultural capital in their professional activities. It is widely acknowledged that the transfer of this type of capital across borders can be inefficient.

The final obstacle to be noted concerns psychological traumas caused by the war, separation from relatives, and life in a foreign country. Some women sought employment only after a period of time due to psychological distress, or took breaks from their work activities.

Integration as a multidimensional process, the meaning and value of work

In the narratives of respondents, work is primarily associated with earning money, achieving financial independence, and covering living expenses for themselves and their families. They see getting a job as a prerequisite for remaining in Slovakia. They consider housing costs to be the most significant item in their budget:

You have to work. If you want to live in Slovakia, you have to work because there are no other options. I want to, I don't want to, I have no choice.

The most important thing is to have a job. It's hard financially here. Renting an apartment, having to buy food, pay for school and clothes for the children... For me, the most important thing is the safety of my children.

However, two other concepts are also present in the narratives. These demonstrate that refugees perceive work not only as an economic activity, but also as a social and cultural phenomenon. The first of these is related to interpersonal relationships and communication. They view work as a means of making friends and building relationships that enable mutual support and improve their Slovak language skills:

This job completely changed my life. I met lots of people, many of whom I still keep in touch with. As for the workplace, my boss was very kind. She helped me a lot.

I want a job. Everything will be fine once I have a job. You 'll make friends then...the people around you. You ´ll solve problems together, talk, think with them. When you have a job, it´ll be different. You need a job.

The second dimension is psychological in nature and relates to the refugee situation, the trauma caused by war, and the necessity of leaving home. The respondents view work as an escape from sadness, fear, and uncertainty:

It's hard for me here. I have to work a lot. At the same time, it helps me because when I'm at home, I overthink and then I cry.

Some respondents blamed their occupational downgrading on a system or social atmosphere that does not encourage the employment of qualified foreigners. They claimed that Slovakia is neither ready nor willing to assist in the integration of qualified Ukrainians. The labour market only offers low-skilled manual positions to Ukrainians, even if they already speak Slovak. Some respondents said that employers and Slovaks in general perceive Ukrainians as 'other' and 'lower class'. In one of the stories, Ukrainians were compared to the Roma in this context. These experiences evoke feelings of helplessness and resignation. They also refer to stories of other Ukrainians who have been forced by this situation to leave Slovakia and move to another European country.

Work pathways and return intentions

Our findings indicate that Ukrainian migrants tended to have a few jobs during their working careers in Slovakia. In the vast majority of cases, these were also low-skilled jobs. A comparative analysis of the employment status in their countries of origin and their first employment in Slovakia reveals a lack of significant career progression for the majority. There is evidence of a decline or stagnation in their professional positions. Changes mainly occurred in the nature of the work. Over time, for example, women found less physically demanding manual work with better financial compensation, more suitable working hours and more convenient locations.

Several thematic frameworks appear in the stories about job positions in this context. Many female refugees perceived the fact that their employment did not reflect their previous education and experience as a consequence of not yet being fluent in the host country's

language. They accepted their employment status humbly, viewing it as a natural process with the potential to improve. They viewed taking on low-skilled work as a necessity to ensure their livelihood:

I didn't care what kind of job it would be. I just wanted to get paid for doing something and be able to do this and that. It was a step-by-step process. You can't expect to have everything in the first step like you had a while ago (note: in Ukraine). You can't.

Reports of problems with the shift to low-skilled, mainly manual, work unfamiliar to them were relatively common:

The work was very difficult. To stand behind the work line. Me, as an accountant. Behind the work line. It was very difficult for me. I couldn't do any other job. Because Slovak.

According to staff at integration centres, the high workload caused excessive physical and mental fatigue. They witnessed people changing under the influence of such strenuous work over a long period of time, making mistakes in their employment and experiencing negative effects in their private lives (e.g. conflicts with children, divorce). In this context, the respondents often spoke about the state of 'beginning' or 'zero', which they used to describe their lives in Slovakia. Older women in particular viewed this new beginning with concern and fear:

Each of us here is zero. At home 50-60% of us have already achieved something since the beginning of our lives. Each of us will come here and be zero again. And everyone starts from the beginning, completely continuing in small steps.

In conclusion, the respondents were asked to describe their future plans. It was clear from their stories that their future is mainly shaped by the situation in Ukraine. We identified the following motives in their responses:

1. They cannot express themselves and are waiting to see what the future will bring. This model was quite common. One of the centre workers described this as a 'waiting mode'. In this case, the respondents' strategies focus on the present: trying to live each day and secure the means to survive financially in the current time. Over time, however, they may reconsider their decisions. These changes are mainly determined by events in the country of origin, but also by the degree to which they have adapted and are satisfied in the host country:

> *I would like to go back. I have an apartment there and a job. But if this war lasts another year or two, maybe not because of my son. Maybe the point of view is a little different. For example, two years ago I said yes, I would go back. Now it's 50/50. In two years, no one will go anywhere.*

2. Desire or belief that they will stay in Slovakia and continue their work integration here. These are mainly refugees who lost their homes or relatives in Ukraine, or who have adapted adequately in Slovakia and feel good here:

> Even if the war ended, we would only go there as guests, for Christmas or on holiday. My daughter and son both said they would not go to Ukraine. My daughter wants to have a career. My son has already gone to university. My other son went to a Slovak school, so he can no longer read Russian or Ukrainian.

3. Determination to return home once conditions in Ukraine allow. Their stay in Slovakia is often perceived as temporary. Strong return motives may weaken or slow down their labour market integration:

No, we're not going to stay here. When the war is over, we're going home. Definitely.

When the researcher asked if she wanted her diploma recognised so she could get a better job, the respondent replied:

I'm not planning to stay here. Today, I need to survive and earn money. As they say, there's no time to learn slow dances.

4. "Here or home." Despite the mentioned barriers, none of the respondents stated that they planned to move to another European country. This decision is explained primarily by fatigue, unwillingness to learn another language, and the need to start over. They often make this choice even in the face of prospects for more adequate employment and higher income.

5. Postponing decisions to a later period. This strategy is marked by concentrating on children's lives and welfare. Choices about staying in Slovakia or returning home are postponed until the children are secure, finish schooling, or become adults, after which decisions will be made regardless of them.

The research findings show that there are no clear models or consistent strategies in this area. Expectations and plans are marked by uncertainty, variability, and sometimes inconsistency. Even within a single narrative, several possible paths appear. These paths are not directly determined by employment in Slovakia, the chance to use existing capital, the presence of a husband or relatives in Ukraine, or whether the women come from eastern

regions where they lost their homes or from areas relatively spared by conflict. The only common factor is concern for children and their needs. Respondents clearly link their future in Slovakia with work. Depending on their stage of labour market integration, they either seek any job, aim to keep their current one, or strive to improve their status by learning Slovak, taking specialised courses, gaining experience, retraining, or having Ukrainian diplomas recognised. None expressed interest in entrepreneurship.

Discussions and Conclussions

Almost 90% of the respondents from the ranks of Ukrainian refugee women who have Temporary Protection status are university-educated, with many having held managerial or teaching positions in Ukraine. However, in Slovakia they faced a massive degradation of qualifications and their cultural capital remains unused. They are primarily employed in low-paid jobs involving manual and unskilled labour. The most notable barrier to achieving adequate employment within the Slovak labour market is the limited knowledge of the Slovak language. The reduced portability of the educational and cultural capital of Ukrainian migrants across borders is likely attributable to the fact that, in their country of origin, they engaged in professions and domains that necessitate proficiency in the local language or a global language. As indicated by the workers at integration centres, there are a number of examples of this type. Other serious challenges include issues related to the nostrification of diplomas, the necessity for reconciliation between professional obligations and familial responsibilities, and instances of discrimination by employers.

The phenomenon of discrimination is also explained by hostile social attitudes towards them. In the context of Sokol theory (2024), this research finding can be applied as empirical evidence of social field mechanisms by which emigrants “lose” the fight for positions on the labour market to the native population. These findings align with the OECD report (2023),

according to which the decline in their employment status is primarily driven by a high proportion of mothers with children, a lack of childcare care services, labour market competition, and a lack of familiarity with the local environment.

According to Veselková and Hábel (2024: 25), Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia are primarily employed as machine operators and assemblers (38.4%), in elementary occupations (37.6%), and in service and sales roles (7.27%), while managers account for merely 0.3%. The overeducation rate in their first job reaches 46.2%, being higher among women.

Similar conclusions were reached by Papcunová, Ďurbisová, and Mukhina (2023), who identified language, age, lack of opportunities, discrimination, and health issues as the main barriers for refugees; for labor migrants, competition, bureaucracy, and insufficient information predominated.

Conversely, a study by Bahna et al. (2025) on a sample of predominantly secondary-educated Ukrainians showed high economic activity (particularly in services and trade) and the fact that up to two-thirds found employment corresponding to their qualifications. Compared to the university-educated female refugees examined in our study, secondary-educated Ukrainians achieve better utilization of their cultural capital, which may be linked to smoother diploma recognition and lower demands for specialization.

Our findings are supported by OECD studies [2016; 2023] on the barriers of forced migration. Refugees routinely lack educational documentation as they fled under pressure and without prior linguistic preparation. They arrive without pre-existing ties to the host country while facing severe physical and psychological trauma stemming from war.

Key to securing employment, according to our research, were social networks, which Bourdieu (1998) conceptualizes as a component of social capital. Women who secured higher-skilled positions primarily leveraged new professional contacts established in Slovakia (e.g., through volunteering) or online job portals. Conversely, refugees experiencing

downward occupational mobility or unemployment relied on various networks for job placement, including ethnic networks.

In the context of Liversage's [2009, as cited in Šūpule 2021: 112] typology of career trajectories, the trajectory of marginalization predominated among the respondents, where a highly qualified migrant works in a low-skilled position or remains unemployed. Pathways of re-education or re-entry into the original profession were rare. Thus, in line with Vianello (2014), the research confirms prevailing downward labor mobility.

For respondents, work holds a fundamental multidimensional significance extending beyond financial independence to include psychological adaptation, social integration, language acquisition, and trauma recovery. Popper et al. (2006) similarly emphasize its role in fulfilling basic needs, preventing welfare dependency, and enabling self-realization. Additionally, Kazmyrchuk (2023) highlights that employment fosters social ties, mental health, cultural adaptation, and interaction with the host population.

Work integration is also affected by return strategies. Refugees' future plans are marked by deep uncertainty, dominated by a "waiting mode." Decisions regarding return or settlement are primarily driven by the well-being of their children and a reluctance to restart their lives elsewhere. Snel, Faber, and Engbersen (2015) state that motives for return weaken with increasing integration, social contacts, and language proficiency. In our research, however, this direct correlation was not confirmed, and respondents' plans were not unequivocally determined by these factors.

In conclusion, the labor market integration of Ukrainian female refugees in Slovakia presents a complex challenge. A persistent gap remains between their legal right to work and systemic barriers, leading to an inefficient utilization of their high level of education. Employment in low-skilled positions results in personal frustration and health issues for the

women themselves, while Slovakia loses valuable human capital that could address existing labor shortages and risks their long-term social isolation.

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