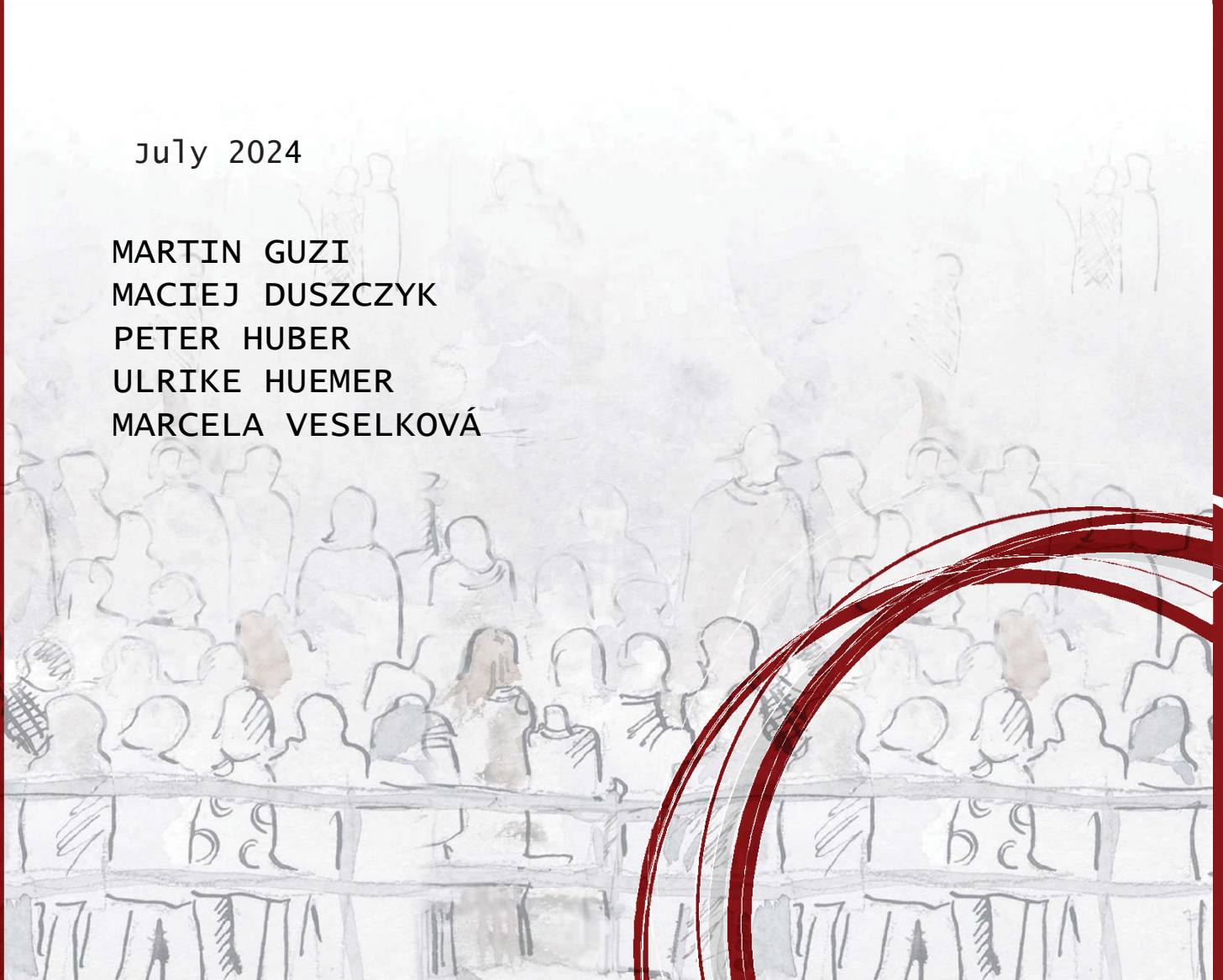


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# Pathways to Inclusion: Labour Market Perspectives on Ukrainian Refugees

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# Pathways to Inclusion: Labour Market Perspectives on Ukrainian Refugees\*

## ABSTRACT

The paper provides an overview of the situation of Ukrainian refugees in the labour markets of Austria, Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, emphasizing the initiatives aimed at facilitating their integration. Refugees face challenges in securing employment adequate to their skills due to language barriers, limited capacity in childcare services, strict entry conditions for skilled occupations, and uncertainty surrounding their refugee status. The chapter concludes with recommendations for enhancing the labour market integration of refugees.

**JEL Classification:** E24, F22, J41

**Keywords:** Ukrainian refugees, labour market, integration

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# 1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the situation of Ukrainian refugees in the labour markets of Central and Eastern European economies. The situation is presented through the window of four main destination countries: Austria, Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, which collectively received over two million refugees in 2022.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has elicited a huge wave of sympathy in many countries. Numerous initiatives have been launched to provide support to displaced individuals arriving from Ukraine. Platforms dedicated to the integration of foreigners have been established to streamline the registration process for refugees. Public institutions have set up hotlines and websites containing valuable information to assist them. Non-governmental organizations have played a vital role by offering counselling services and actively searching for suitable accommodation and employment opportunities. Special attention has been given to children, ensuring their access to education, while families have been granted access to various social benefits and services. Notably, in the initial days after crossing the border, refugees were able to utilize train transportation free of charge. Additionally, several cities also provided free public transportation. Universities have shown support by creating temporary academic positions for researchers and establishing funding programs specifically for Ph.D. students arriving from Ukraine. These collective efforts reflect a widespread commitment to providing comprehensive assistance and support to those affected by the conflict.

Ukrainians with temporary protection, in accordance with the Temporary Protection Directive, are not restricted regarding housing, social benefits, health insurance, or entry into the labour market or educational system. Many countries have taken measures to facilitate the entry and stay of Ukrainian refugees, such as the provision of language courses and childcare services.

This chapter outlines the migration context of receiving countries, examines the acceptance of refugees through opinion polls, discusses the demographic profile of arriving refugees, explores their access to social assistance upon arrival, and analyses the employment patterns and barriers encountered by refugees. It concludes by offering recommendations for enhancing the labour market integration of refugees.

## 2 Arrival of Ukrainian Refugees

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe have had different experience with migration. Over the last two decades, Poland and Slovakia have seen more extensive emigration, while Austria and the Czech Republic are traditionally immigration countries. Austria experienced a large inflow of refugees during the 2015–2016 refugee migration. The

presence of a large Ukrainian community in the Czech Republic and Poland facilitated the arrival of war refugees in 2022–2023. In contrast, the Ukrainian communities in Austria and Slovakia before 2022 were relatively small.

## 2.1 Austria

Austria has recent experience with large refugee inflows. Between 2014 and 2016, during the Syrian war, Austria witnessed one of the highest refugee arrivals per capita in the European Union (EU). The Ukrainian migrant community in Austria was relatively small. According to official statistics, in 2021, only 12,673 Ukrainians resided in Austria, constituting approximately 0.1% of the total Austrian population. This percentage contrasted with the overall foreign national population of 1.6 million, making up 17.6% of the resident population.

The large surge in refugee numbers from Ukraine came as a surprise. By March 2022, 14,500 Ukrainians had already registered in Austria, and throughout 2022, the official migration statistics reported a total of 78,439 Ukrainians moving to Austria. Of these, approximately 11,086 refugees later moved to other countries, resulting in a net increase in migration from Ukraine of over 67,000 individuals. According to UNHCR (2024), the total number of registrations in 2022 exceeded 111,000. This figure, however, includes double applications as well as persons who have returned or moved on since their registration. Geographically, nearly half of the Ukrainian nationals (43%) reside in Vienna, with an additional fifth in Lower Austria (18%), followed by Upper Austria (11%). On the other hand, the Ukrainians are less concentrated in Burgenland (3%) and Vorarlberg (3%, OIF, 2023).

The relatively large number of Ukrainians arriving in Austria may be attributed to the fact that, before 2022, many seasonal workers in agriculture came from Ukraine. Many of these workers were students, engaging in summer employment to finance their studies. Consequently, as some Ukrainians had previous work experiences in Austria, it was easier for them to arrive in Austria. However, this hypothesis was not confirmed, as Bock-Schappelwein and Huber (2022) discovered that only around 3% of the displaced Ukrainians registered in 2022 had previously been in employment in Austria before the outbreak of war.

## 2.2 Czech Republic

Over the last two decades, the Czech Republic has become a favourite destination for immigrants. The inflow of immigrants largely accelerated in economically successful years preceding the Great Recession in 2009. The number of immigrants residing in the country

decreased temporarily after 2009 and increased again in 2015. At the end of 2021, the number of legally residing immigrants reached a historic high of 660,849 representing 6.3% of the Czech population. The immigrants are attracted to the Czech Republic because of favourable economic conditions, a shortage of skilled workers in the labour market, and a pro-labour immigration policy. Most immigrants originate from countries outside the EU, and the top five source countries in 2021 included Ukraine, Vietnam, Russia, Mongolia and the United States. The migration motives are primarily work-related (Guzi, Macková, & Čech Valentová, 2021).

In contrast to the labour immigration policy, granting asylum or international protection is highly restrictive. Over the last two decades less than 3% of the applicants for international protection were approved asylum. Most immigrants residing in the Czech Republic are of working age (15-64 years old) and their employment rates are higher than those of native-born Czechs. Migrants mostly work in manual, low-paid, low-quality positions that are less attractive to the Czech labour force. The Czech population is ageing, and the participation of older people in the labour market is rather limited. The inflow of the migrant workforce is therefore supported by employers to at least partly alleviate the acute shortage of workers.

Before the outbreak of the war, the Ukrainian community numbered almost 200,000 people, making it the largest migrant community in the Czech Republic. In 2022, the country accepted 433,071 Ukrainian refugees (MVCR, 2024). The majority of these refugees chose to settle in the Central Bohemia region, particularly near Prague. However, the high concentration of refugees in certain areas posed challenges, particularly in finding suitable housing and securing school placements for children.

In the Czech Republic, temporary protection for refugees was initially provided for a period of one year until 31 March 2023. Ukrainians had to prolong their temporary protection by registering at the website of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, otherwise the residence rights could be lost. The compulsory electronic registration showed that roughly a third of refugees left the Czech Republic and did not extend the temporary protection. After registration, temporary protection was prolonged by one additional year (i.e., until 31 March 2024). The protection could also be prolonged by applying for the single work permit, EU Blue Card, seasonal worker and family reunification.

## 2.3 Poland

Poland has traditionally been known as an emigration country. The EU enlargement in 2004 triggered a substantial emigration wave, with over one million people leaving Poland between 2004 and 2010 (CSO, 2021). The inflow of migrants to Poland began to rise in 2008 when the liberalization of immigrants' access to the Polish labour market was

introduced. The year 2014 marked the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea and significant parts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, further escalating the flow of Ukrainians to Poland. According to estimates by the Central Statistical Office, the number of immigrants in Poland increased from around 100,000 in 2011 to over two million in 2019 (CSO, 2020). Before the war in 2022, the number of Ukrainians residing in Poland was estimated at one million. In 2022, the country transformed into both a destination and a transit country for war refugees from Ukraine.

Poland decided to open its border crossings with Ukraine immediately upon learning of the entry of Russian troops into Ukraine. The war in Ukraine triggered an unprecedented influx of refugees. In two months, over three million people crossed the Polish border, with over 95% being Ukrainian citizens. After the initial surge in the first three weeks, the migration movement stabilized (Duszczyk, Górny, Kaczmarczyk, & Kubisiak, 2023). Approximately two million refugees stayed in Poland for at least a few weeks. Since 5 April 2022, displaced persons from Ukraine have had the opportunity to obtain special identification numbers (PESEL), analogous to Polish citizens and foreigners, with the only difference being that the number has the extension 'UKR'. The number of refugees in Poland reached the highest level of 1.4 million in July 2022 (based on the number of active PESEL UKR). The PESEL UKR database serves as the most reliable source of information on war refugees from Ukraine residing in Poland. Two years after the outbreak of the war, there are 952,000 active registrations (as of February 2024). The total number of Ukrainian citizens (including refugees) staying in Poland for more than 12 months is estimated at about two million, constituting the largest Ukrainian community in the EU.

Refugees from Ukraine are concentrated in large cities, with the Warsaw agglomeration being of particular importance. Initially, after the outbreak of the war, a relatively large number of Ukrainians remained in regions near the border with Ukraine. Over time, they began to move inland, especially to regions with favourable labour market conditions.

## 2.4 Slovakia

Historically, Slovakia has been a country whose residents used to migrate abroad for work. Emigration of young and highly educated Slovaks intensified after Slovakia joined the EU ("Did Post-Enlargement Labor Mobility Help the EU to Adjust During the Great Recession? The Case of Slovakia", n.d.). It is estimated that approximately 300,000 individuals (5.5% of the population) left Slovakia between 2002 and 2012 (Haluš, Hlaváč, Harvan, & Hidas, 2017). Slovakia is not a typical destination for immigrants, largely due to its cumbersome immigration policy. The country remained largely unaffected by humanitarian migration flows in 2015 and 2016. The number of granted asylums has remained low, typically not exceeding ten per year. The inflow of the foreign population to Slovakia accelerated only

in economically successful years shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, driven by the shortage of low-skilled workers in some sectors. According to statistics collected from the Bureau of Border and Foreign Police, the number of foreign citizens with valid residence permits doubled from 71,649 in 2013 to 143,075 in 2019 (Guzi & Fabo, 2021).

Slovakia allowed all persons fleeing the war in Ukraine to enter the country. Before 2022, Slovakia had limited experience with managing the large inflow of migrants also because the country hosted the lowest number of migrants in the EU. In 2021, there were 167,519 individuals with foreign citizenship in Slovakia, constituting 3% of the population. About two-thirds of foreigners were from outside the EU and Ukrainians were the largest group, accounting for up to 50% of third-country nationals. However, by the end of 2022, the number of foreigners in Slovakia had surged to 278,595. Almost half of the refugees reside in the capital district of Bratislava and nearby regions.

The unprecedented mass migration of refugees from Ukraine presented a unique challenge for Slovak institutions, as it was the first time they had to manage such a situation. Within the first month following the onset of the conflict, over 269,111 refugees crossed the Slovak border, and the total number of displaced people passing through Slovakia surpassed one million in 2022. It is noteworthy that 90% of Ukrainian refugees subsequently moved on to other countries. In 2022, a total of 104,704 refugees were registered in Slovakia, of which a third were children. Most registrations (70%) occurred within the first two months after the conflict began. Veselková and Hábel (2024) estimate that a third of refugees who were granted temporary refuge had returned back home by the end of 2022. In Slovakia, the temporary protection was initially valid for one year until 4 March 2023, and then it was automatically extended.

### 3 Acceptance of Refugees Measured by Public Opinion Polls

Many citizens in Central and Eastern European countries have personally contributed to helping Ukrainian refugees. For example, numerous households have offered shared housing or provided material support. While Austria had recent experience in assisting Syrian refugees, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia showed solidarity with refugees for the first time.

Public opinion polls provide insights into attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine. For example, the majority of Czech society initially supported the short-term acceptance of a smaller number of Ukrainian refugees (79% of respondents agreed to accept up to 150,000 refugees). Additionally, over half of the Czech public agreed to accept a larger number of war refugees (52% agreed with the short-term acceptance of 300 to 500 thousand



refugees). The high acceptance of Ukrainian refugees is significant, considering that the Czech Republic received one of the highest numbers of refugees relative to its population by the end of 2022. Specifically, the Czech Republic accepted 45 refugees per thousand inhabitants in 2022, while Poland had 41, Slovakia had 20, and Austria had 10 (see also Figure 2.13). However, by the end of November 2022, the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees in Czech society had declined by approximately one-quarter or 15 percentage points (Münich & Protivínský, 2023).

At the end of 2022, GLOBSEC, a non-governmental organisation based in Bratislava, conducted a representative survey (including 1,000 respondents in each country) to measure opinions about refugees (Szicherle & Kazaz, 2022). The survey covered Visegrad countries but not Austria. Overall the acceptance of refugees was high, with nearly 90% of citizens holding a favourable view of Ukrainian refugees. However in Slovakia acceptance was lower at 65% (Figure 1). Similarly, the support for the presence of Ukrainian refugees is strong, apart from Slovakia, where the majority had negative feelings about hosting refugees (60%).

The level of agreement varies among countries regarding whether displaced people should receive support. While the majority of Poles opposed reducing benefits for Ukrainian refugees, Czechs (46%) and Slovaks (68%) leaned towards decreasing social assistance provided to Ukrainians. Furthermore, the majority of Slovaks expressed the opinion that refugees should not be granted access to free healthcare.

Respondents also reported how their lives had been affected by the influx of refugees. Slovaks were most likely to indicate negative impacts on their lives. Conversely, Czechs reported the highest incidence of experiencing inappropriate behaviour from Ukrainian refugees.

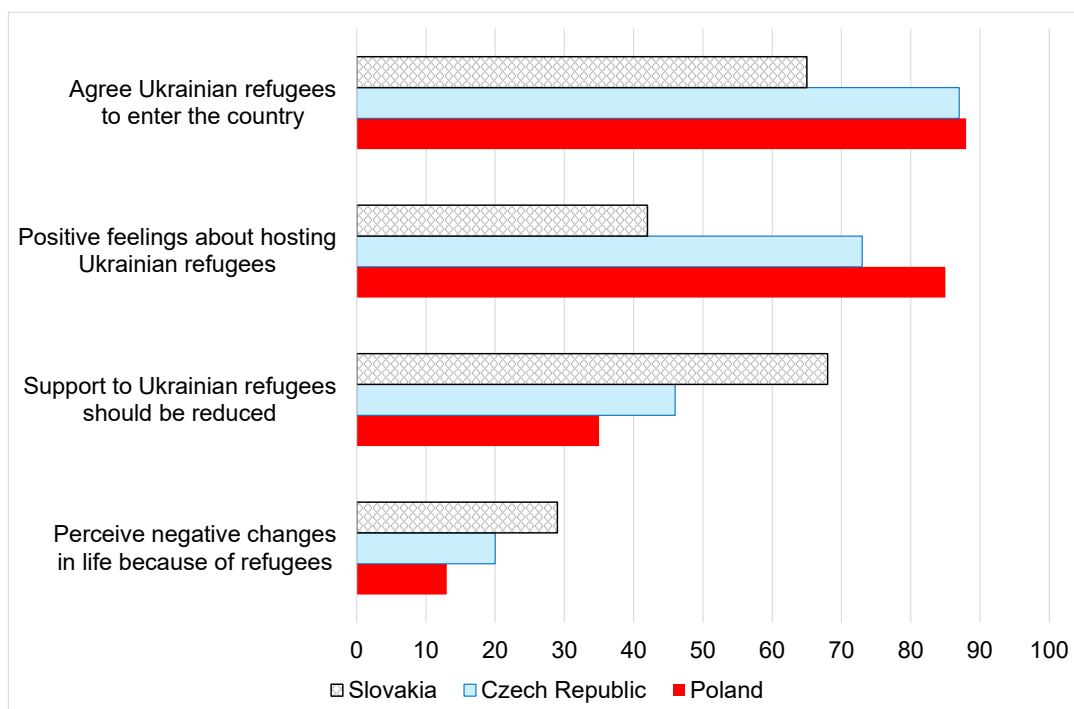
Income level influences perceptions of Ukrainian refugees. Respondents from average and lower-income households show less support for providing welfare to refugees and express more negative views towards them. Notably, individuals who rely on social media as their main source of news are more likely to hold negative views on refugees. Additionally, perceptions and experiences are shaped by anti-migrant narratives promoted by political party leaders favoured by respondents.

## 4 Demographic Characteristics of Ukrainian Refugees

### 4.1 Gender and Age Structure of Refugees

The incoming population of displaced persons from Ukraine was significantly different from the previous Ukrainian minority residing abroad in terms of its demographic structure.

Figure 1: Opinions on Ukrainian refugees at the end of 2022



Source: Szicherle and Kazaz (2022)

Note: Questions asked: “Would you agree to allow Ukrainians to enter (the country)?”, “How do you feel about your country hosting Ukrainian refugees?”, “Have there been any changes to your life because of Ukrainian refugees coming to (country)? If yes, is this change positive or negative?”, “Support for reducing benefits to Ukrainian refugees”. The proportion of respondents answering ‘strongly agree’/‘agree’ and ‘very’/‘rather’ positive are presented.

This is because men aged 18–60 were prohibited from leaving Ukraine. However some Ukrainian men in economically productive age may want to join their families in the future. In Poland, there were 505,000 refugees over the age of 18 (adults) and 387,000 children, of whom 288,000 were of school age (Table 1). Half of the refugees were of working age, while pensioners accounted for 6%. The vast majority of refugees were women (63%), but gender differences among children were minimal. A similar gender structure of Ukrainian refugees is observed in other countries as well.

The arriving refugees could be compared to the Ukrainian community residing in the country since before 2022. In Austria, the Ukrainian community comprised a high number of women (70%) mostly between 15 and 44 years old, and 10% of Ukrainians were children younger than 15. In 2022 around two-thirds of the Ukrainians who moved to Austria were women, and 28% were children. Most women refugees arriving in Austria were 30 to 44 years-old. Kohlenberger et al. (2023) illustrate that displaced Ukrainians were in their majority married or cohabiting women with a spouse who remained in Ukraine (58% in

Vienna, 70% in Warsaw) and that most immigrants moved with children (61% in Vienna, 71% in Warsaw).

In contrast, the Ukrainian community before the war in the Czech Republic was dominated by men (57%). Among the newly arrived, only 37% were men but only 24% were adult men older than 15 years. In the Czech Republic, a third of refugees were children, and half of refugees were adult women (Klimešová, Šatava, & Ondruška, 2022). Almost half of adult women in the Czech Republic were younger than 35 years. It is therefore not surprising that the most common households were a mother with one child (21%) and a mother with two children (13%). Around 14% of households with a single adult have three children, and households with more children constitute less than 5%. A significant proportion of households (43%) have children under the age of 5. Many of them thus require assistance in finding daycare for their children.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of Ukrainian refugees in hosting countries

	Austria	Czechia	Poland	Slovakia
Refugee (people)	78,439	433,049	952,000	110,114
Refugee (%)				
Children 0-18 years	28	26	41	29
Adults 18-64	59	70	53	62
Pensioners 65+	12	4	6	9
Refugee males (%)				
Children 0-18 years	14	13	21	14
Adults 18-64	15	23	15	16
Pensioners 65+	4	1	1	3
Refugee females (%)				
Children 0-18 years	14	13	20	14
Adults 18-64	44	47	38	46
Pensioners 65+	9	3	5	6

Source: Own elaboration

Note: Figures refer to the number of registrations in Austria, Czechia, and Slovakia at the end of 2022 and to the number of active refugees (UKR PESEL) in Poland on 13 February 2024. Age brackets are 0-14, 15-29 and 60+ for Austria.

## 4.2 Education Structure of Refugees

The incoming displaced persons typically have education above the Ukrainian average. In the Czech Republic, a third of incoming refugees have tertiary education (Klimešová et

al., 2022). Hence, among refugees, university graduates represent twice as many as in the Czech population. In general, the education level of the population in Ukraine is high also because university education includes a two-year professional junior bachelor's degree that does not exist in the Czech Republic.

In Austria, arriving Ukrainian refugees are better educated than residing migrants. Over 80% of refugees had completed tertiary education, 15% spoke German, and 62% spoke at least some English. Interestingly relative to displaced Ukrainians in Warsaw those moving to Vienna are more highly educated and more often speak German and English. The favourable educational structure and language proficiency of displaced Ukrainians will facilitate their labour market integration.

In Poland, half of the refugees had a university education (Dudek, Panuciak, & Strzelecki, 2023) and the same result is confirmed by Chmielewska-Kalińska, Dudek, and Strzelecki (2023). The study by the Centre for Migration Research shows a higher percentage of refugees with higher education of 55% (Górny & van der Zwan, 2024).

## 5 Social Assistance and Access to Social Benefits

### 5.1 Austria

Ukrainian refugees are entitled to housing, food, clothing, cost for transportation, long-term care, medical treatment, and mandatory health insurance. Displaced persons in Austria are included in the subsistence scheme *Grundversorgung* that temporarily supports foreigners who need help and protection. Typically, it is paid during an asylum procedure and up to four months after asylum is granted. In contrast to asylum seekers, displaced Ukrainians have no access to procedures that lead to a residence permit. Their legal presence in the country depends on the EU mass-influx directive when they want to prolong their stay in Austria. This adds to the uncertainty relating to the length of stay of displaced Ukrainians in Austria and may represent an obstacle to labour market integration.

In Austria, Ukrainian refugees are entitled to a daily fee of EUR 25 to cover residence and food costs (usually paid to the providing institution) and monthly 'pocket money' of EUR 40 in case they reside in officially organized accommodation. Any income from employment that exceeds the income threshold (EUR 110 per month, plus EUR 80 for each family member) results in a deduction from the financial support granted under the subsistence scheme for asylum seekers. The income from employment that exceeds the social security minimum (EUR 486 in 2022) results in a complete loss of this support, including housing support (ELA, 2023). In 2023, the subsistence scheme changed in six out of nine federal states (not in Carinthia, Salzburg, and Lower Austria) and for every euro

earned above the allowance of EUR 110, the benefit is reduced proportionately. The new system turns out to be complicated for displaced persons to understand how much they can earn without losing access to income support.

## 5.2 Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, persons with temporary protection who are employed or residing in the country are entitled to social welfare benefits under the same conditions as nationals. Children who are granted temporary protection or asylum can attend schools according to their level of education. People with temporary protection status are entitled to full health care just like local citizens.

In the Czech Republic, Ukrainian refugees were eligible for the *humanitarian benefit* of CZK 5,000 (EUR 200) paid on a regular monthly basis. The benefit was means-tested paid to persons whose income, social and material situation does not allow them to cover their basic living needs. After six months, the amount of benefit was decreased to CZK 4,620 (EUR 185) for adults and CZK 3,320 (EUR 130) for children under 18 years of age. Full coverage by the public health insurance system was granted free to Ukrainian refugees for 150 days. After this period, it remained free for children and the elderly (older than 65 years) and the working-age population had to cover health insurance themselves.

In the Czech Republic, refugees found accommodation in shared households (44%), in rental accommodation (commercial rentals or council housing, 24%) or stayed in non-residential housing (hostels or hotels). The government introduced the *solidary household benefit* that was paid to local households who were hosting Ukrainian refugees. Over 70% of hosting households were Czech, and 28% were Ukrainian. Housing benefits helped half of the refugees who have accommodation provided entirely for free. Some refugees paid partial costs of accommodation, and about a third of refugees paid their housing costs fully (Klimešová et al., 2022). The housing benefit was paid directly to owners and the amount was tied to the size of the hosting family (CZK 5,000 for one person and up to CZK 12,000 for three people). It may occur that housing conditions for some families were substandard also because Ukrainian families were larger but 75% of refugees report to be satisfied with their housing conditions and the highest satisfaction was reported by refugees living in hosting households (Klimešová et al., 2022). It can be concluded that access to housing was successfully managed in 2022. The close contact of refugees with Czech households was beneficial to the language and school integration of children and the labour market participation of Ukrainian families.

In July 2023, the Czech government imposed restrictions on social benefits, impacting approximately 70% of refugees. Own income earned by displaced Ukrainians deducted from the financial support provided. This means that for every euro earned, the allowance

is decreased by one euro. This setup could discourage refugees from earning legal income, potentially leading to an increase in informal payments. Consequently, the state may experience a loss in tax collections and social contributions. Additionally, as of July 2023, the solidarity housing benefit was discontinued, requiring refugees to pay for rented accommodation. Only the most vulnerable groups, including children, individuals caring for a child up to the age of six and seniors aged 65 and above (23,662 people in July 2023), can continue living in subsidized housing.

Ukrainian refugees experience material hardship, although their circumstances have improved over time. As of June 2023, seven out of ten refugees still faced material deprivation, a decrease from 85% in August 2022. Additionally, approximately half of the refugees have incurred debts as they had to borrow money to flee their country. Consequently, refugees struggle to save money. Seven out of ten refugees have enough resources to cover their expenses for one month without income. By comparison, about 30% of the Czech population finds themselves in similar circumstances (PAQ Research, 2023).

### 5.3 Slovakia

Similarly, in Slovakia the government introduced a compensation scheme to local households who provide accommodation free of charge to displaced persons. Owners were compensated EUR 10 for an adult and EUR 5 for a child younger than 15 years per night of accommodation. The maximum allowance amount depended on the number of habitable rooms provided (maximum allowance EUR 710 per month for one room, EUR 1,080 for two rooms, EUR 1,430 for three rooms). The provision of allowances was granted until 31 March 2024.

### 5.4 Poland

According to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine, war refugees are entitled to social benefits under the same terms as Polish citizens. The most common family benefits available to Ukrainian citizens included:

- *Child benefit 800+* is available for parents and guardians of children younger than 18. The amount of PLN 800 (EUR 186) is paid monthly (tax-free) for each child, regardless of family income. The family programme was launched in 2016 as “500+ Family”. Starting from January 1, 2024 the benefit was increased from PLN 500 to PLN 800.

- Benefit *Good Start*, EUR 70 benefit granted to children at the beginning of each school year, regardless of their parents' income.
- *Family Care Capital* is granted for the second and subsequent children between 12 and 36 months. The monthly amount is chosen by the parent, i.e., it may be either PLN 500 per month for two years or PLN 1,000 per month for one year. The benefit is paid regardless of family income.
- *Nursing benefit* is paid to people looking after a child up to the age of three.
- *Family allowance* is granted to families or individuals who are studying and whose income per capita is below a certain threshold.

The most popular and costly benefit is the 800+ family benefit. At the end of 2023, almost 210,000 children of war refugees from Ukraine were receiving it, at a cost of almost PLN 1.5 billion (approximately EUR 310 million, based on our own calculation). The other child benefits were less popular and consequently less costly.

Table 2: Number of Ukrainian children supported and estimated related costs in 2023

Type of benefit	Number of children	Amount in EUR
Child benefit 800+	209,682	338,421,947
Good start	124,626	8,694,421
Family Care Capital	3,132	13,299,765
Nursing benefit	967	1,181,293
Family allowance	39,422	54,021,364
<b>Total</b>		415,618,790

Source: own calculations based on data from Social Insurance Institution (ZUS)

In addition, war refugees are entitled to benefits specifically dedicated to them. One-off financial support is a benefit of EUR 70, which can be used to cover living expenses, particularly expenditure on food, clothing, footwear, personal hygiene products, and housing fees. Financing or subsidising accommodation and meals in private residences (EUR 9 per person per day) or in collective accommodation (up to EUR 16 per person per day). Refugees have the right to free access to healthcare and enrolment of their children in the Polish school system.

## 6 Employment of Ukrainian Refugees

All displaced persons from Ukraine gain access to the labour market upon registration for temporary protection. Their population is specific as it includes mainly female working-age individuals with tertiary level education and with high integration prospects in the labour market. These are more likely to learn the language and find a job quickly in their destinations, provided, they receive adequate childcare services and access to public schools

### 6.1 Poland

Poland liberalised access of Ukrainians to the Polish labour market to a very large extent after the first aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Before the outbreak of full-scale war in 2022, approximately 1.3 million Ukrainians were residing in Poland, more than 90% of whom were active in the labour market. The study by Deloitte (2022) estimates that Ukrainians contributed an annual increase of 0.5 percentage points to the GDP growth of the Polish economy from 2013 to 2018. The well-established Ukrainian diaspora helped war refugees find employment. In addition, a favourable economic situation and low unemployment (remaining below 5% in large cities) indicated good labour market prospects for refugees. The estimated potential increase in Poland's GDP associated with the refugees inflow is positive and ranges from 0.2% to 3.5% (Deloitte, 2022).

Polish employers have to submit a notification on the work assignment to a Ukrainian citizen that allows monitoring their economic activities. The notification is submitted within 14 days of the foreigner taking up employment. It entitles a refugee to work without the requirement of a work permit or declaration. In 2022, more than 786,000 permits were registered with labour offices, and the number of registrations in 2023 was even higher (1,080 million permits).

The economic activity of refugees was exceptionally high, reaching 65% by the end of 2022 (Zyzik, Baszczak, Rozbicka, & Wielechowski, 2024). The latest data confirm that economic activity remained high throughout 2023. Notably, this represents the highest level of economic activity among Ukrainian refugees in the OECD countries (OECD, 2023). The Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) records also confirm the high economic activity of refugees. In February 2024, there were 1,124 million foreigners employed, including 755,000 Ukrainians. Although some employed foreigners may not be registered in the ZUS database, Ukrainians' high professional activity can be well-documented.

Several studies have documented the characteristics of Ukrainian refugees in the Polish labour market (Górny & van der Zwan, 2024; Duszczuk et al., 2023; Kaczmarczyk, 2023). Approximately 50% of refugees in Poland are employed in positions that align



with their acquired qualifications. The employment chances are higher for refugees with a good command of the Polish language. The employment rate for refugees with proficient language skills was 82%, while for those without good language skills it was only 50%. A high share of refugees (around 45%) engage in simple jobs, while approximately 25% of refugees hold positions requiring high qualifications, such as lawyers, doctors, or teachers.

The labour market integration of refugees can be contrasted with that of Ukrainian migrants who arrived before 2022. Fewer refugees have full-time employment than Ukrainian migrants (40% vs. 80%). Male refugees are less likely to be employed in professions requiring manual skills than Ukrainian male migrants (20% vs. 40%). Less than 10% of refugees have part-time employment, and another 10% take on occasional work. Around 20% of refugees are neither employed nor seeking work, primarily due to childcare responsibilities. Another 20% of refugees actively seek employment while temporarily unemployed. Some refugees telework as they continue their work for Ukrainian employers. The International Centre for Migration Policy Development results indicate that 24% of those registered at labour offices work remotely for Ukrainian companies (Katsiaficas, Segeš Frelak, & Castelanelli, 2023).

In 2023, nearly two-thirds of Ukrainian citizens (including war refugees) worked with civil-law contracts, and around one-third with employment contracts. They are mostly employed in manufacturing, transport and storage, administrative and support services (including temporary work agencies), and construction. Based on officially declared amounts, the average salary of employed Ukrainian citizens is slightly above the minimum wage.

Many Ukrainian refugees have ventured into entrepreneurship in Poland. Data from the Central Register and Information on Economic Activity reveals that between 2022 and 2023, nearly 45,000 businesses were established with Ukrainian citizens as their founders (Dębowska, Kłosiewicz-Górecka, Szymańska, Wejt-Knyżewska, & Zybertowicz, 2022). This implies that one in ten businesses established in Poland during these two years was founded by Ukrainians.

Under Polish legislation, Ukrainian citizens can register at a labour office as unemployed or job seekers on equal terms with Polish citizens. The number of registrations of Ukrainian citizens at labour offices peaked during the first months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, reaching its highest point in April 2022 when 15,700 people, mostly war refugees, were registered. 128,700 Ukrainian citizens registered from February 24, 2022, until the end of January 2024.

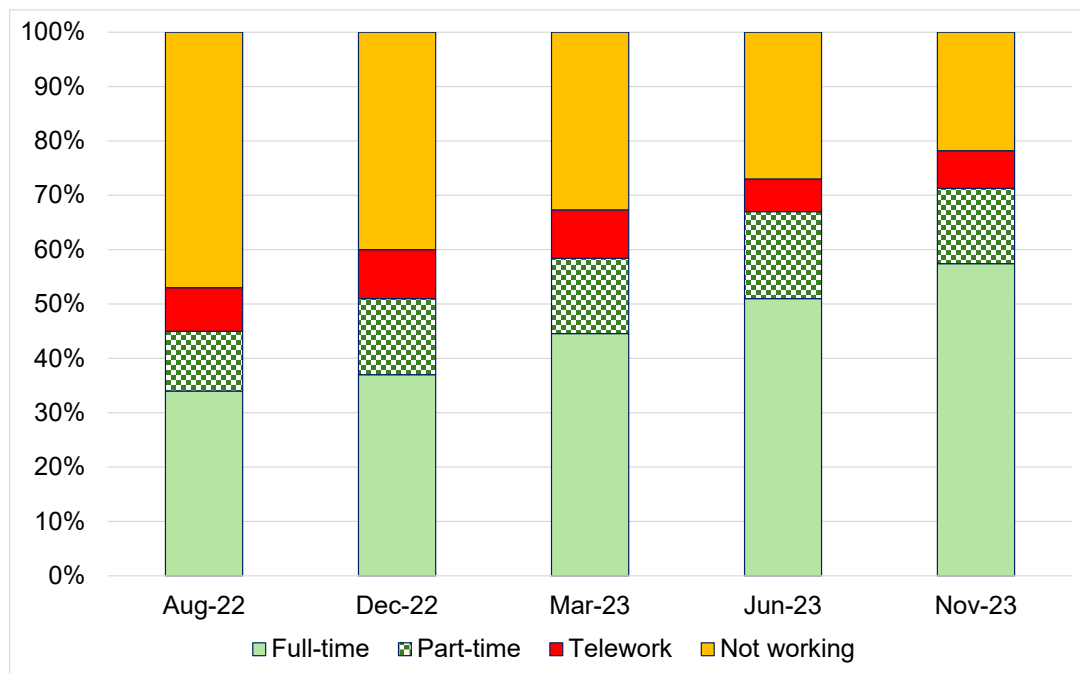
Individuals registered at labour offices as unemployed or job seekers can participate in training courses. Around 43,000 foreigners, the majority being war refugees from Ukraine, have benefited from various assistance measures organized by Polish labour

offices. In 2022, language courses were introduced for unemployed and job-seeking foreigners to facilitate their entry into employment. From 2022 to February 2024, almost 6,700 Ukrainian citizens (5,378 persons in 2022 and 1,302 persons in 2023) benefited from training courses, primarily in the Polish language. The cost of language training for Ukrainian citizens specializing in the medical profession was supported by the Labour Fund. Between 2022 and 2023, 20 agreements were signed with district chambers of doctors and district chambers of nurses and midwives, covering the training costs for 704 participants.

## 6.2 Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, half of the refugees were economically active in the summer of 2022, and this figure increased to 72% of refugees by the end of 2023 (Figure 2). Around 7-9% of Ukrainians kept their employment in Ukraine and teleworked (mostly those with more specialized jobs). Economists predict that the economic activity of refugees could increase to 85% (PAQ Research, 2023).

Figure 2: Employment of refugees in the Czech Republic between August 2022 and November 2023



Source: PAQ Research

Research studies show that the major difference between refugees who are employed and those who are not lies in the knowledge of the Czech language. The participation rate in families with children depended largely on the children's enrolment in the school system.

Interestingly, Ukrainians residing in Prague worked less, possibly because they could rely more on the support of the Ukrainian diaspora, but also due to worse access to kindergarten in large cities. The families staying in standard-quality housing were more likely to work. It is estimated that around 40% of refugees face barriers that prevent them from finding a job in the long term.

The many refugees who are working in the Czech Republic have unstable employment. Some refugees take occasional jobs and one-time work contracts. The survey shows that every third refugee who was employed either changed jobs (24%) or lost their job (10%) between December 2022 and March 2023 (PAQ Research, 2023).

The majority of refugees (80%) are employed in low-skilled professions, and they mostly work for large employers with more than 200 employees. Although most refugees work in specialized, technical, or managerial positions in Ukraine, they are often in unqualified positions (two-thirds of workers). Half of those employed perform manual and low-skilled work. Overqualification is more common among women, older individuals, and those who do not speak Czech.

The wages of Ukrainian workers are generally lower than those of Czech workers in most occupations. More than a third (35%) of refugees earn less than CZK 100 (EUR 4) net per hour, while only 11% earn above CZK 200 (EUR 8) net per hour. Approximately one-fifth of Ukrainian refugees have found employment through a work agency or informal intermediary, which typically offer low-paying jobs (PAQ Research, 2022).

### 6.3 Austria

Ukrainian refugees, despite being highly qualified, have been slow to integrate into the Austrian labour market. Administrative records from December 2023 indicate that about 44% were economically active (i.e., employed or unemployed), with 3% participating in active labour market policy measures. The majority (about 56%) were neither employed nor unemployed. The employment rate stood at 30%, which is one of the lowest among EU countries (Arbeitsmarktdatenbank, 2024).

Limited integration could be attributed to administrative obstacles in obtaining residence and work permits. Thränhardt (2023) shows that refugees had greater success in entering the labour market in European countries where access was streamlined as a ‘one-stop shop’. In contrast, countries like Austria maintain a separate system for residence and work permits for third-country nationals. Despite Ukrainians having free access to the labour market in Austria, many displaced persons are not registered with the Austrian public employment service, and the reasons for this lack of registration remain unclear.

Analysing Austrian social security records, Bock-Schappelwein and Huber (2022) show that Ukrainians entering the labour market after 2022 worked fewer days and

received lower wages than those who arrived before 2022 during their first year of stay. Similarly, Thränhardt (2023) finds significant variations in the employment rates of displaced Ukrainians across several European countries. Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland all had employment rates for Ukrainian displaced persons below 30%. This contrasts with the high employment levels of Ukrainians who arrived in Austria before 2022. Current Ukrainian refugees are more concentrated in low-skill segments of the labour market, mainly working in low-paid temporary jobs. The average monthly wage of employed Ukrainians was EUR 948, largely below the nationwide average of EUR 2,900 (Bock-Schappelwein & Huber, 2022).

As of January 2024, over 50% of Ukrainian employees were concentrated in three sectors: 1) accommodation and food service activities, 2) wholesale and retail trade, and 3) manufacturing. The particularly high employment rates of Ukrainians in accommodation and food service activities are surprising. Traditionally, this sector has served as a low-skilled 'port of entry' for many migrant groups in Austria, providing low-skilled temporary (seasonal) employment to migrant workers. This sector is experiencing a severe labour shortage in the post-Covid boom of 2023, which may have additionally fostered employment opportunities for Ukrainian displaced persons.

## 6.4 Slovakia

Ukrainian refugees entered Slovakia during the post-Covid boom when the labour market was suffering from a shortage of workers. There were 25,638 refugees who were employed during the first year, and 28,464 refugees were employed during the second year after the outbreak of war. During the first year of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, 110,114 refugees from Ukraine registered for temporary protection in Slovakia.

The calculation of employment rates is complicated because the exact number of working-age refugees is not recorded in the official statistics. It is estimated that the employment rate was between 22% and 37% (Veselková & Hábel, 2024). Characteristics of employed refugees could be observed. Over 70% of employed were women, and half of the employed were refugees younger than 40 years. In contrast to other countries, the population of refugees in Slovakia included relatively more older persons and a lower proportion of tertiary-educated refugees. A quarter of employed refugees have a university education, but a third have found employment in elementary occupations that require only primary education.

Ukrainian refugees can be compared to Ukrainian labour migrants who entered Slovakia in 2021, i.e., one year before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Veselková and Hábel (2024) compare 4,373 Ukrainian labour migrants and 24,295 refugees in the labour market during 2022. The findings reveal that refugees face greater challenges in the Slovak labour market

compared to Ukrainian labour migrants. They are often overeducated for their initial jobs and more likely to be employed in elementary occupations. Both groups struggle to advance their careers within the first year of arrival, leading to underutilization of human capital and reduced economic contribution. Urgent policy interventions are required to facilitate the integration of migrants and refugees into the labour market in Slovakia.

## 7 Barriers to Employment

Migrants often lack specific skills relevant to their host country, such as language proficiency and knowledge of local labour regulations. Consequently, they may end up accepting jobs that require lower levels of education than they possess, leading to overqualification (Guzi & Kahanec, 2015; Guzi, Kahanec, & Kureková, 2021; Guzi, Kahanec, & Mýtina Kureková, 2023). This risk is particularly considerable for highly educated migrants, as many professions demand additional certifications. Employers often prioritize proficiency in the host country's language over other qualifications, making it challenging for migrants to secure jobs that match their education or experience.

The labour market prospects of refugees are generally disadvantageous. Refugees tend to have lower employment rates and are more likely to experience occupational downgrading compared to other migrants. While a 'work-first' policy may accelerate entry into the job market, the jobs available are often precarious with limited hours. Additionally, refugees who begin working immediately upon arrival may invest less in language learning and skill acquisition, which may hinder their long-term employment prospects. This pattern is evident in the recent influx of Ukrainian refugees, who have been permitted to seek employment promptly but are often employed in low-skilled positions.

In many countries, the arriving displaced persons are not obligated to participate in language courses before entering the job market. The insufficient proficiency in the local language forces refugees to accept non-qualified and low-skilled positions with lower wages. As of February 2023, only 31% of refugees attended Czech language courses, while 55% pursued individual language study, and 13% did not engage in language learning at all. The primary barriers to attending language courses include job priority (50%), the costs associated with language courses (41%), and childcare responsibilities (24%) (PAQ Research, 2023). According to several studies, refugees primarily need assistance with learning the local language. Strong language proficiency is particularly requested by employers seeking highly qualified workers. In the Czech Republic, the Czech and English language competencies of refugees in 2022 were generally low, although almost one-third of refugees had some command of Czech (Klimešová et al., 2022). It is likely that in Slavic countries refugees have improved their language proficiency quickly over time. In June

2023, nearly half of the Ukrainian refugees reported that they could communicate in Czech in daily situations.

The survey of 621 employers who have experience with employing Ukrainian refugees was organized in the summer of 2022 in the Czech Republic to understand the major limitations to the employment of refugees (Coufalová, Fumarco, & Mikula, 2022). Employers report the knowledge of the Czech language as the major barrier to employment, especially for qualified positions. Language proficiency is considered more important for high-skilled than for low-skilled positions.

Another limitation for highly qualified refugees is the lack of work experience acquired in the Czech Republic and recognition of their qualifications. The process of acquiring and recognizing qualifications for foreign workers is known to be administratively demanding in the Czech Republic. Employers state that employer testing must be accepted as a sufficient demonstration of qualifications for both medium- and highly skilled professions.

Employers consider the potential return of refugees to Ukraine a risk factor when employing them in more qualified positions. These positions require greater investment in employee training. Such investments are lost when refugees decide to return home. Moreover, return migration is difficult for employers to foresee, so they may prefer to avoid hiring refugees for qualified positions. On the other hand, the health risks and administration burden related to the employment of refugees are rarely reported by employers as a barrier to refugee employment.

Since most refugee families have children, the active participation of children in the education system is crucial for their families' employment prospects, as it contributes to higher overall refugee employment rates. In the Czech Republic, 57% of Ukrainian refugee children attended Czech primary and secondary school in 2022. The reasons of low enrolment include a rejection by schools due to capacity limits as well as a lack of information about where and how to enrol children (PAQ Research, 2023).

## 8 Conclusion and Suggestions for the Successful Integration of Refugees

After the outbreak of the war, Ukrainians were granted temporary protection, including humanitarian assistance, housing, social and health insurance, and unrestricted access to the labour market and all educational levels. They have received broad acceptance from the public, regional authorities, and non-governmental organizations. Nevertheless, despite these provisions, they continue to face challenges in their daily lives in both the Czech Republic and Germany, primarily due to less effective integration policies. Frequently, they

find employment in low-skilled positions due to limited language proficiency impeding their overall adaptation. Consequently, many of them end up in precarious situations.

Language proficiency is an important factor in the integration of refugees into the labour market. The government will increase the availability of language courses and support refugees to learn the language. Germany primarily focuses on teaching the German language and ensuring high-quality integration before involving Ukrainians in the labour market. In March 2023, 65% of adult Ukrainians attended German language courses, and an additional 10% had already completed the courses. This is significantly higher than in the Czech Republic, where only a third of the refugees attend Czech language courses. In Germany, attending a language course is free up to level B2, and it is a requirement to receive financial support if the refugee is not working or caring for a family member (PAQ Research, 2023).

The demographic structure of refugees is important. Among those of working age, there is a prevalence of single women with children whose spouses have stayed in Ukraine. Refugee women encounter various challenges, as they must secure employment and affordable housing and often arrange for childcare or school placement. The accessibility of childcare facilities presents a particular difficulty, often incurring additional costs.

At the outset, most refugees anticipated a short war and expressed intentions to return to Ukraine promptly once the conflict was over. Especially married Ukrainian women were anticipated to return home to their families after the war's conclusion. However, survey data indicate a shift in intentions. In Austria, one-third of working-age Ukrainian women expressed the intention to return home in 2022, but by April 2023, the return intentions had decreased to 13% (Mazal, Dörfler-Bolt, & Kaindl, 2023). Refugees' current residence is temporary and depends on the extension of temporary protection. It therefore diminishes their likelihood of accepting long-term job offers. Employers, in turn, perceive the uncertainty associated with refugee status as a major limitation. Clearly defining the rules regarding the long-term status of Ukrainian refugees with temporary protection would greatly benefit their situation. Refugees need a clear perspective on the possibility of obtaining permanent residency in host countries. This would (a) enable them to maintain their current status in the job market, (b) incentivize refugees to invest in integration efforts, such as language learning, and (c) reduce the risk of return to Ukraine, which may discourage employers from hiring refugees for skilled positions that typically require expensive training.

Entry conditions for some occupations are excessively stringent. Governments could simplify the qualification recognition system, facilitating refugees' access to the necessary qualifications for positions in high demand. Poland, for instance, has relaxed entry qualification requirements for Ukrainians seeking employment in education, healthcare,

veterinary services, and social work. Consequently, Ukrainians with the requisite qualifications have successfully secured employment in these sectors.

The ‘inactivity trap’ can potentially emerge in the welfare systems of the Czech Republic and Austria. In this scenario, refugees integrated into the subsistence scheme may face a complete reduction (100%) of their benefit allowance when they earn income, resulting in the loss of their benefits. Such a system can potentially discourage refugees from seeking legal employment, possibly leading to a rise in informal payments.

The large inflow of Ukrainian refugees in Central and Eastern European economies offers an opportunity for researchers to study the role of structural characteristics and institutional regulations on pathways to inclusion. Further research should uncover the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder the successful integration of refugees, paving the way for more informed and effective policy interventions in the future.

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