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INTEGRATION DYNAMICS OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN SECONDARY CITIES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE. THE CASE STUDY OF KOŠICE, SLOVAKIA

This pilot study explores the integration challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees in Košice, Slovakia, based on two focus group discussions. Key barriers include vulnerabilities among older adults, single mothers, and individuals with disabilities, as well as labor market discrimination and social stigmatization. Despite these challenges, refugees demonstrate resilience through coping strategies such as maintaining cultural connections and addressing mental health needs. Indicators of successful integration include strong social connections, stability in housing and employment, cultural acceptance, and employment matching refugees' qualifications. The findings highlight the need for comprehensive support systems that address both material and psychological needs to ensure successful integration. This research serves as a foundation for future study on refugee integration in Uzhhorod and other secondary cities in Central and Eastern Europe, exploring regional differences, the challenges of internally displaced individuals, and providing insights for targeted policy recommendations.

Keywords: *Ukrainian refugees, secondary cities, Košice, integration challenges.*

Це пілотне дослідження висвітлює проблеми інтеграції, з якими стикаються українські біженці в Кошице, Словаччина, на основі двох фокус-групових дискусій. Основні бар'єри охоплюють вразливість людей похилого віку, одиноких матерів та осіб з інвалідністю, а також дискримінацію на ринку праці та соціальну стигматизацію. Незважаючи на ці виклики, біженці демонструють стійкість завдяки таким стратегіям подолання, як підтримка культурних зв'язків і задоволення потреб у сфері психічного здоров'я. Показниками успішної інтеграції є міцні соціальні зв'язки, стабільність житла та зайнятості, культурне сприйняття та працевлаштування, що відповідає кваліфікації біженців. Результати дослідження підкреслюють необхідність створення комплексних систем підтримки, які б задовольняли як матеріальні, так і психологічні потреби для забезпечення успішної інтеграції. Це дослідження слугує основою для майбутніх досліджень інтеграції біженців в Ужгороді та інших середніх містах Центральної та Східної Європи, аналізуючи регіональні відмінності, проблеми внутрішньо переміщених осіб та надаючи інформацію для розробки цільових політичних рекомендацій.

Ключові слова: *українські біженці, середні міста, Кошице, виклики інтеграції.*

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Introduction

The ongoing war in Ukraine has triggered one of the largest refugee crises in recent history, with millions displaced both within and outside the country (UNHCR, 2025)¹. While capital cities in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) served as primary destinations for refugees, secondary cities have emerged as significant hubs for refugee settlement. These urban centers face unique challenges due to underdeveloped institutional frameworks and limited resources (Bielewska, et al., 2024 & Papcunová et al. 2023). This paper explores the dynamics of refugee integration in secondary cities of the region, emphasizing the need for inclusive and sustainable policies.

Migration studies have traditionally focused on large metropolitan areas as primary sites of integration and policy development (Pisarevskaya & Scholten, 2022). However, secondary cities — characterized by smaller populations and fewer resources — are playing an increasingly significant role in migration research. In the CEE region, cities such as Košice, Miskolc, Poznań, Kraków, and Brno have become important destinations for refugees, while Uzhhorod has played a crucial role in accommodating internally displaced persons. Despite their growing significance, these cities face distinct challenges due to underdeveloped institutional frameworks for migrant integration.

This paper investigates the integration challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees in Košice, Slovakia as a pilot study for further research on secondary cities across Central and Eastern Europe following the war in Ukraine. The terms «refugees» or «forced migrants» refer to individuals holding «temporary protection» status or classified as «internally displaced persons.»

Integration dynamics in CEE region

The integration of refugees is a dynamic and multifaceted two-way process, requiring efforts from all parties concerned (Fang et. al, 2018). This involves a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forgo their own cultural identity, and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population. The process of integration is complex and gradual, comprising distinct but interrelated legal, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, all of which are important for refugees' ability to integrate successfully as fully included members of the host society (UNHCR, 2014; Penninx, 2005).

¹ UNHCR. 2023. Operational Data Portal. Accessed 4 February 2025.

The integration process can be influenced by a variety of factors, including the nature of the refugee experience, the policies of the receiving country, the public's perception of refugees, and the available resources and services to support them (Ashura, 2021; Hynie, 2018; Ortlieb & Knappert, 2023). Integration is not a one-size-fits-all process, as it varies based on the specific context and the individual needs of refugees. While refugees face common challenges in all host countries — such as securing employment, navigating legal systems, and accessing healthcare — different regions may experience unique challenges based on their socio-political history, economic conditions, and public attitudes toward migration.

In the context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), these dynamics are shaped by both historical and contemporary factors, such as varying levels of public awareness, the extent of social cohesion in the region, and the capacity of local institutions to support integration processes (Kerusauskaite, 2023). Historically, CEE countries have had relatively low rates of refugee resettlement and migration, which has sometimes led to a lack of preparedness in dealing with a more diverse population. This contrasts with Western European countries, which have a longer history of immigration and a more established framework for integration.

The socio-political environment in CEE presents challenges (IVO, 2022; Jelínková, 2024), including resistance to diversity in some areas, but also opportunities for fostering more inclusive societies through tailored policies and community engagement initiatives. Despite some resistance, there is also growing recognition of the importance of supporting refugees in order to build stronger, more resilient communities (Kerusauskaite, 2023). National governments, local authorities, and civil society organizations are increasingly collaborating to develop programs aimed at promoting social cohesion and inclusion, while addressing challenges such as discrimination, language barriers, and access to housing and education.

These integration dynamics are further influenced by the varying levels of political will and institutional capacity in different CEE countries. While some countries or their cities have implemented more progressive policies for refugee integration²³, others have faced difficulties in aligning policies with available resources, leading to uneven outcomes across the region.

The Situation in Košice after February 2022

Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, over a million people crossed the border into Slovakia, with many moving toward the capital region around Bratislava. A significant number⁴, however, remained closer to the border, making their way to Košice, Slovakia's second-largest city. This influx of displaced individuals has had a socio-economic impact on the region, straining resources while simultaneously creating both opportunities and challenges for the local community (Bajžíková et al., 2022; UNHCR, 2024).

Even before the war, Ukrainians constituted the largest foreign minority in Košice (Czikková & Mačáková, 2018). This pre-existing community likely influenced the city's response to the refugee crisis, facilitating both informal support networks and institutional adaptation.

² https://www.krakow.pl/krakow_open_city/instcbi/244859,inst,118781,2582,instcbi.html

³ https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/index.php/library-document/strategy-integration-foreign-nationals-city-brno-2020-2026_en

⁴ According to the City Council, an estimated 5,000 Ukrainians, primarily women, have found residence in Košice.

The ongoing war has brought significant changes to Košice, with a growing number of individuals seeking temporary protection in the region. The legal status of these arrivals adds complexity, making it difficult to obtain clear and comprehensive data on their situation.

However, in March 2022, the Mayor of Košice issued an official statement⁵ expressing concerns about a potential humanitarian crisis. Since then, the situation has gradually stabilized.

A key development in addressing the needs of Ukrainian refugees was the establishment of two integration centers:

1) Integration Centre Košice, launched under the auspices of the Košice Self-Governing Region in June 2022.

2) BLUE DOT Integration Centre, established under the auspices of the City of Košice in July 2022.

These centers provided and continue to provide a variety of support services, including legal assistance, employment guidance, psychological counseling, and social services. Notably, the introduction of an integration center for foreigners represents a new initiative in Košice, as the region had not previously placed significant emphasis on the integration of foreign nationals (Luptáková & Medľová, 2018). Additionally, the City of Košice appointed a Plenipotentiary for Humanitarian Aid to Refugees from Ukraine⁶, effective March 1, 2022, to oversee and coordinate support initiatives (Košice City, 2022).

Despite the challenges and the lack of a prior integration policy in Košice, local authorities, NGOs, and volunteers made significant efforts to provide support and create a welcoming environment for refugees. Their response, while evolving, demonstrated adaptability and a commitment to addressing the immediate and long-term needs of those displaced by the war. Recognizing the continued growth of its foreign population, Košice has recently adopted a Strategy for Foreigner Integration⁷, which aims to enhance support structures for its nearly 22,000 foreign residents. The plan includes the establishment of a Support Centre for Foreigners within City Hall by early 2025 and the development of a centralized data system to enhance the tracking of residency status, socio-economic contributions, and evolving needs.

This study provides a crucial foundation for understanding how Ukrainian refugees experience integration in Košice, highlighting their perspectives, challenges, and key factors shaping their sense of belonging. As more displaced individuals settle in secondary cities, this research aims to amplify their voices in academic discourse and inform policies that address their specific needs. Furthermore, it serves as a starting point for studies in Poznań, Kraków, Miskolc, and Brno, as well as in Uzhhorod, where the focus is on the experiences of internally displaced individuals. The following sections outline the research methodology, key findings, and their implications for integration policies and practices.

Research Objectives:

This pilot study aims to provide a foundational understanding of the integration dynamics of Ukrainian refugees in Košice, a secondary city in Slovakia, as part of a broader

⁵ <https://www.kosice.sk/clanok/primator-polacek-kosice-su-na-prahu-humanitarnej-katastrofy>

⁶ <https://www.kosice.sk/clanok/kosice-maju-splnomocnenca-pre-pomoc-vojnovym-utecencom>

⁷ <https://spectator.sme.sk/politics-and-society/c/kosice-takes-first-steps-towards-integration-as-foreign-population-grows>

project on refugee integration in Central and Eastern Europe. The objectives of this pilot project are as follows:

1) To explore the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugees in Košice with regard to their integration processes, focusing on social, economic, and cultural dimensions. This objective will capture how refugees adapt to life in Košice, including how they navigate their new environment, the challenges they face in forming social connections, and their economic activities. This will provide insights into the day-to-day realities of integration in a smaller, non-metropolitan context.

2) To assess the indicators of successful integration as perceived by the refugees themselves, considering the factors that contribute to their sense of well-being, security, and belonging in Košice. The pilot project will investigate how refugees define successful integration, including access to stable housing, employment that matches their skills, social cohesion, and cultural acceptance. These indicators will serve as benchmarks for future research and help shape integration policies and practices.

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing two focus groups which were conducted in Košice, Slovakia, in March 2023 and October 2024. A qualitative approach is most suitable for understanding the complex social, cultural, and economic dynamics of refugee integration, allowing for an in-depth examination of individual and collective experiences. By focusing on lived experiences, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities refugees encounter.

Participants were Ukrainian refugees aged 18 and older who moved to Košice after February 2022. Recruitment was facilitated through social media and refugee support centers. The focus groups facilitated open discussions on various aspects of integration, including access to services, employment opportunities, social connections, language barriers, and experiences of discrimination or support. This method was chosen to encourage interaction among participants, allowing them to share their perspectives, compare experiences, and co-construct meanings related to their integration journey.

All focus group discussions were conducted in either the Ukrainians or Slovak language, depending on the participant's preferences and with their consent. They were transcribed verbatim and translated into English with full adherence to participant confidentiality. Our research questions were deliberately broad in order to allow for a qualitative, bottom-up and inductively-driven thematic analysis approach (Clarke et al., 2006).

This approach enabled the identification of recurring themes and patterns that illustrate the broader integration experiences of Ukrainian refugees in Košice. The qualitative data gathered provides rich insights into the lived realities of the participants and contributes to a deeper understanding of the social and institutional factors influencing their integration.

Participants

We recruited participants from the Ukrainian community residing in the Košice region by collaborating with the Integration Centre, which provides support services to migrants, and by utilizing social media platforms. A total of 18 individuals (10 women, 8 men), aged 18 to 71, expressed interest in participating.

The first focus group consisted of 12 Ukrainians (average age = 50 years; SD = 12.8) and explored their lived experiences of integration in Košice, focusing on social connections, economic activities, and cultural adaptation in a non-metropolitan setting.

The second focus group included six Ukrainians (average age = 30,3 years ; SD = 12,97) who came to Slovakia for study or work. Discussions centered on their perceptions of successful integration, including housing, employment, social cohesion, and cultural acceptance.

Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to ethical research standards to ensure the safety and confidentiality of participants. Participants received detailed information about the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights before agreeing to participate. The permission to conduct the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences at the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which facilitates the identification of patterns and key themes within qualitative data. A systematic, iterative coding process was conducted to generate initial codes and identify overarching themes related to experiences with social integration, economic challenges, and cultural adaptation.

Findings

Challenges Faced by Refugees:

The findings from the first focus group highlighted challenges based on the participants' socio-economic and demographic profiles.

1) Vulnerabilities

Older adults, single mothers, and individuals with disabilities were identified as particularly vulnerable groups, as they have additional needs in terms of healthcare, social support, and access to housing and employment. These groups are at risk of further marginalization due to the limited availability of specialized services in smaller cities. Many refugees reported difficulty accessing necessary medical care, with some individuals stating, «*I need a specialist for my health problem, but when I went to the hospital, I was told that they only accept Slovak patients.*» In addition, some participants also mentioned age-related problems with employment. In many cases, age was an obstacle to employment. «*When I had an interview via Viber for a saleswoman in a pastry shop, because I already know a little Slovak, besides I know English, Ukrainian and Russian, they said I was 100% suitable, but when I told them how old I was, they said, sorry, but we won't take you.*»

2) Labor Market Discrimination

One of the most significant barriers to successful integration identified by participants is labor market discrimination. Many refugees reported difficulties in finding employment that matches their qualifications and previous experience. This often results in underemployment, with refugees taking low-wage, low-skilled jobs that do not reflect their educational backgrounds or professional skills. One participant, an older refugee, shared, «*I am*

nearly a pensioner, but I need to find a job. It is nearly impossible at my age, however, I will keep trying to find at least a part-time job.» A disabled refugee also noted, *«I am a disabled person, but keen to work. This is nearly impossible with even Slovaks not having opportunities to have decent jobs.»* The lack of suitable employment leads to economic insecurity and affects refugees' sense of dignity and their ability to contribute meaningfully to society.

3) Misinformation and Prejudice

Refugees sometimes encounter negative attitudes and stereotypes in the local community. Misinformation about refugees' access to benefits and their perceived impact on local resources exacerbates these tensions. Harmful narratives, such as the belief that refugees receive disproportionate financial support, contribute to the social stigmatization of refugees and can lead to tensions with host communities. Common statements reflecting these prejudices include:

«Ukrainians are to blame for the war and therefore also for raising prices. They should surrender so that everything will be fine.»

«Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia receive high allowances and benefits at the expense of Slovak citizens.»

«Ukrainians abuse the social system.»

«Taxpayer fees go to help refugees.»

«Ukrainians are cheap labor.»

«People leave Ukraine because they are poor and not because of war. They are economic migrants and not war refugees.»

Misleading or harmful messaging is prevalent in Slovakia, reflecting the nation's diverse stances towards Russia, the EU, and Ukraine (Globsec, 2024). Such rhetoric negatively impacts social cohesion and fosters discrimination.

4) Coping Strategies and Resilience

Despite these challenges, Ukrainian refugees demonstrate resilience in their efforts to navigate life in Slovakia. Some leverage the geographical proximity to Ukraine as a coping mechanism, with one participant stating, *«I live in Košice because it is close to the borders, so I can travel back and forth to Ukraine to buy some medicine for me.»* Others emphasize the importance of addressing mental health concerns before focusing on integration efforts, as one participant noted, *«I need to address my mental health concerns first before I can actively seek employment opportunities.»* These experiences highlight the importance of tailored support systems that consider both material and psychological needs for successful refugee integration.

Indicators of Successful Integration:

The findings from the second focus group highlight key factors influencing the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Košice, particularly in relation to social connections, stability and security, cultural acceptance, and employment alignment.

1) Social Connections

Social networks played a crucial role in refugees' sense of belonging and emotional well-being. Participants emphasized the importance of having a strong community, both among fellow Ukrainians and with local residents. These connections provided emotional support, practical assistance with bureaucracy, and opportunities for engagement in local

life. As one participant expressed, *«At the beginning, I was very scared, but then I adapted.»* This statement illustrates the role of time and social adaptation in overcoming initial fears. Another participant noted, *«There are a lot of Ukrainians here. Kherson has been relocated,»* highlighting how forming a community with fellow refugees helped reduce feelings of isolation. Over time, many participants acknowledged an improvement in their integration experience, with one stating, *«In general, after about six months, you get used to it and realize that it's comfortable and quite nice here.»*

2) Stability and Security

The stability of housing, employment, and legal documentation emerged as foundational elements for refugees' sense of security and well-being. Many participants noted that having a steady income and secure housing allowed them to focus on long-term goals such as education and language acquisition. One participant reflected on their employment situation: *«I just came back from work, so I am still looking for something. I mean, I can go back to the job I had before leaving for abroad. But I want to find something new, so I am still learning. And I want to find something better.»* This quote underscores the importance of job stability and career growth in the integration process.

For some, safety was the primary reason for relocation: *«I came to Slovakia after finishing the 11th grade because it was a safe place. I have been here with my friends for two years.»* While Slovakia provided safety, adapting to a new environment presented its challenges. As one participant noted, *«For me, it is unusual because of the mountains. I lived where there was the sea and steppe, and here there are mountains.»*

3) Cultural Acceptance

Feeling culturally accepted was a significant indicator of successful integration. Refugees who felt respected by the local community and had the freedom to practice their cultural traditions reported higher levels of satisfaction with their lives in Slovakia. One participant contrasted the social atmosphere in Slovakia with their home city: *«My first impression is that it is calm here. People are very reserved, they are not in a rush, they seem very peaceful. In Odessa, everything is very fast, life moves quickly. Here, everything is somehow calm, measured, and people hold hands, while in Odessa, people do not hold hands.»* This illustrates the challenge of adjusting to a different cultural rhythm and social interactions.

Another participant shared mixed emotions about cultural adjustment: *«At first, it was amazing because I had only been abroad in Turkey before. So, this was my first time in Europe, and my first impression was great. But then I started seeing that it wasn't so great after all. I think Ukraine is still better.»* This reflects the dual experience of excitement and nostalgia, where initial enthusiasm may be tempered by a longing for familiar cultural contexts.

4) Employment Alignment

Employment opportunities that matched refugees' qualifications were crucial for their sense of inclusion and contribution to society. Those who secured stable jobs reported increased confidence and a sense of normalcy. As one participant simply stated, *«I am just working right now,»* emphasizing how securing employment becomes a key focus in the integration process. Another participant, reflecting on their job stability, noted, *«I have been working for a year already,»* illustrating how long-term employment contributes to a greater sense of security and belonging.

Summary:

The findings highlight the multifaceted challenges and factors contributing to the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Košice, as also emphasized by Bajžíková (2022). Vulnerable groups such as older adults, single mothers, and individuals with disabilities face particular hardships due to limited access to healthcare, social services, and employment opportunities. Labor market discrimination remains a significant barrier, with refugees often unable to find jobs that align with their qualifications. Misinformation and prejudice also contribute to social stigmatization and tensions between refugees and host communities (Kerusauskaite, 2023; Globsec, 2024). Despite these obstacles, refugees demonstrate resilience through coping strategies like maintaining connections with their home country or focusing on mental health before seeking employment. Key indicators of successful integration include the formation of strong social networks, stability in housing and employment, cultural acceptance, and job-market alignment. Refugees who establish these factors report higher satisfaction and greater sense of belonging, while those who face cultural adaptation and employment mismatches encounter more challenges.

Conclusion:

The pilot project in Košice provides valuable insights into the integration experiences of Ukrainian refugees, offering a foundation for future research and policy development. The findings underscore the importance of social connections, stability, cultural acceptance, and employment opportunities in shaping successful integration. While challenges such as labor market discrimination and cultural adjustment persist, the study highlights areas where targeted interventions can make a significant difference. As the study expands to other secondary cities in Central and Eastern Europe, these results will guide the development of effective strategies to support refugee integration in communities with fewer resources than larger cities.

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Резюме:

Результати дослідження висвітлюють багатогранні виклики та фактори, що сприяють інтеграції українських біженців у Кошице, на чому також наголошує Bajžíková (2022). Вразливі групи, такі як люди похилого віку, одинокі матері та особи з інвалідністю, стикаються з особливими труднощами через обмежений доступ до охорони здоров'я, соціальних послуг та можливостей працевлаштування. Дискримінація на ринку праці залишається значним бар'єром, оскільки біженці часто не можуть знайти роботу, яка відповідає їхній кваліфікації. Дезінформація та упередження також сприяють соціальній стигматизації та напруженості у відносинах між біженцями та приймаючими громадами (Kerusauskaite, 2023; Globsec, 2024). Незважаючи на ці перешкоди, біженці демонструють стійкість завдяки таким стратегіям подолання, як підтримка зв'язків з рідною країною або зосередження уваги на психічному здоров'ї перед пошуком роботи. Ключовими показниками успішної інтеграції є формування міцних соціальних мереж, стабільність житла та зайнятості, культурне прийняття та відповідність ринку праці. Біженці, які врахували ці фактори, повідомляють про більшу задоволеність і відчуття приналежності, тоді як ті, хто стикається з проблемами культурної адаптації та працевлаштування, переживають більші труднощі.

Отже, пілотний проект у Кошице надає цінну інформацію про досвід інтеграції українських біженців, пропонуючи основу для майбутніх досліджень і розробки політики. Отримані дані підкреслюють важливість соціальних зв'язків, стабільності, культурного прийняття та можливостей працевлаштування для успішної інтеграції. Хоча такі проблеми, як дискримінація на ринку праці та культурна адаптація, залишаються, дослідження висвітлює сфери, де цілеспрямовані втручання можуть суттєво змінити ситуацію. Оскільки дослідження поширюється на інші вторинні міста Центральної та Східної Європи, його результати допоможуть розробити ефективні стратегії підтримки інтеграції біженців у громадах з меншими ресурсами, ніж у великих містах.