Ukrainians’ Inclusion into the Czech Labor Market: Perceptions and Challenges

# Introduction

The 2022 invasion of Russia to Ukraine had a big impact on families, businesses, and the workforce. Many Ukrainians left the country in order to find a peaceful place to live, including the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic is an appealing country for many Ukrainians because they might have some relatives in the country, it is a familiar country to them, Czech is a Slavic language not very difficult for Ukrainians to learn, and both countries have some cultural proximity and similarity.

The migration of Ukrainians to the Czech Republic has had different implications for the government and society, not only in terms of migratory status, but also regarding their integration to the workforce and education. To promote a better integration and inclusion of Ukrainians, the Czech integration centers had to adapt their tools and activities to assist the new migrants and help them in settling down in the country. However, the efforts, programs, and aid have not been enough to integrate Ukrainians into the Czech workforce. Many Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic still do not live in satisfying financial conditions and are employed in low-skilled and low-paid jobs, which might be a result of insufficient adaptation (Klimešová et al., 2022). A study from PAQ Research (a research organization in the Czech Republic) reveals that only two-thirds of the Ukrainian refugees have stayed in the Czech Republic, but their participation in society has not increased, with only 21% of Czechs reporting they know personally someone from Ukraine, and only one-third of Ukrainians can cope with the Czech language in daily basis (PAQ Research, 2023). Another study reports that Ukrainian migrants feel overall satisfied with their own fluency in the Czech language but they prefer to use their personal contacts, friends, or intermediaries when losing their job rather than using the different options provided by the Czech government such as the Employment Office, representing a potential weakness (Vacková & Prokešová, 2017).

Furthermore, the role of integration centers as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to integrate immigrants to the Czech Republic has been significant in the Czech society for many years, not only as service providers but also as policy advocates for immigration and integration (Zogata-Kusz, 2022). However, because of political divisions regarding the work of NGOs in the Czech Republic whereby, after the fall of communism, NGOs’ work was an important element of democracy as promoted by President Václav Havel, but minimized by President Klaus, so the discourse of both presidents had an influence in the public, stigmatizing NGOs as pejoratively “welcomers” (Zogata-Kusz, 2022). Thus, politics, the immigration policy, and the society’s acceptance of immigrants has influenced the adaptation and integration of immigrants, not only Ukrainian refugees’ product of the Russian invasion of 2022.

# Research significance and purpose

Among the Ukrainian migrants, there are many young people, teenagers, and children who represent great potential to the Czech Republic’s economy because they may create a future skilled workforce, but such migrants need to be included and integrated better in the Czech society. After the invasion of Russia to Ukraine, there have been studies about the political and economic implications of this war on Ukraine. For example, Koroutchev (2023) reported the major border crossings of Ukrainians were to the neighboring countries (Poland, Romania, Moldova, and Slovakia) during the first year of the war from the end of February 2022 to March 2023, but after a year this trend slowed down. Also, this migration was supported by the temporary protection measures granted by the European Union, placing the Czech Republic as the third country with the most of registered for temporary protection Ukrainian refugees by March 2023 (Koroutchev, 2023). Another recent study analyzes the school social networks of Ukrainian refugees that came to the Czech Republic after the invasion of Russia to Ukraine in 2022, finding out that Ukrainian students’ inclusion tends to be neglected in schools (Lintner et al., 2023).

Some research addresses the main areas of integration in the Czech Republic. For example, Vacková & Prokešová (2017) evaluated how the integration of Ukrainians, Vietnamese, Poles, and Russians is affected by three basic aspects, including social support to prevent exclusion from society, active participation in the labor market, and fluency in the Czech language in written and spoken form. In terms of workload and nationality, Ukrainians reported that they work from nine to ten hours per day, they mainly had primary education, and had poor health, and these characteristics were evaluated as a weakness in the integration process (Vacková & Prokešová, 2017). Another study emphasized the most relevant areas of integration including knowledge of the Czech language, education, and access to health care (Macakova, 2013). These studies shed light on the integration requirements to the Czech Republic, but were previous to the wave of immigration caused by the Russian invasion to Ukraine and new immigrants perhaps have some other levels of education and communication skills.

Nevertheless, little research about how Ukrainians affected by the Russian invasion of 2022 have been integrated into the Czech society has been done. Therefore, this article fills the gap in the literature about Ukrainian migrants into the Czech workforce, their perceptions, and their challenges of adapting to the Czech society and labor market. The aim of this paper is to explore first what the Czech government has implemented to aid the integration of Ukrainian immigrant and refugees, what the role of integration centers is and the type of work towards the integration of Ukrainian migrants into the Czech society and the workforce, and lastly analyze the perceptions of young Ukrainians towards the Czech Republic’s integration process. This research will elucidate the tools and perspectives available for the integration of Ukrainians into the Czech life and workforce.

# Methodology

Our research is qualitative. We employed a documentary analysis and in-depth interviews to find out first the Czech government’s activities; second, the perceptions and tools that integration centers have adapted; and the perceptions of young people about their integration to the Czech Republic. For this study, two representatives from two different integration centers located in Prague were interviewed, and three young Ukrainians who are already inserted in the work life in the Czech Republic were also interviewed to know their perceptions about their integration to the workplace. In order to keep the participants anonymous, we coded their names according to integration centers or young Ukrainians integrated in the Czech workforce.

# Findings and implications

*The government’s work*

The Czech Republic's acknowledgment of an immigration and integration policy dates back to the end of communism. The Czech government has allocated resources for the integration of refugees since 2000 with a policy of 100 hours of individual training in Czech language skills or 150 hours per group over a span of ten months, but the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport in 2008 amended the policy to increase the individual training up to 400 hours and 600 hours of group training for free (Burnett, 2015). However, for the implementation of these courses, their management, and staffing, this Ministry outsources the services to NGOs (Burnett, 2015). The government has implemented different activities. For example, the Czech government, via the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, offers employment assistance consisting of retraining programs on technical knowledge, computer skills, and counseling services (Burnett, 2015).

In 2022, the Czech government enacted a new law that allows the employment of Ukrainian teachers in Czech schools without the knowledge of the Czech language, which can help both the teacher and the students to adapt and interact (PAQ Research, 2023). This new law also helps in expanding the capacity of schools and removes barriers to access to preschool and high school education (PAQ Research, 2023). Additionally, foreign pupils in Czech schools are eligible for up to 200 hours of Czech language class, and some schools offer their refugee pupils to eat at the school canteen for free (PAQ Research, 2023).

As a tool to integrate not only Ukrainian migrants, but all other migrants who hold a permanent residence or a long-term residence permit to the Czech Republic, the government implemented an official adaptation and integration course called *Vítejte v ČR* which has become an obligation for foreign residents staying in the Czech Republic since January 2021 (SUZ, n.d.). The course consists of four hours of instruction, during which foreigners are explained the values of Czech society, their obligations and rights, the health care system, education, work, and where to find help (SUZ, n.d.). For this course, foreigners pay 1,500 CZK or 800 CZK if the course is organized by the foreigners’ Czech employer in cooperation with the state (SUZ, n.d.). This could result a challenge for Ukrainian refugees who do not have extensive resources and have numerous families as they would have to pay for all the members of the families who are adults.

*The integration centers’ work and their perceptions*

Since the end of the 1990s, NGOs have become supporters of the Czech government policies by offering a wide range of services including Czech language courses, legal and social counselling, opportunities to meet other migrants, and raising awareness of integration of migrants into society (Zogata-Kusz, 2022). There are integration centers in many regions of the country that are financed through the state budget (SUZ, n.d.). These integration centers get guidance by the Ministry of the Interior and offer services such as translation services, Czech language courses, libraries, internet access zones, and legal, social, and psychological consultations (SUZ, n.d.). With the new wave of Ukrainian migrants, these centers reached full capacity for services such as Czech language courses and legal consultations, making it a challenge to fulfill the needs of not only Ukrainians, but other immigrants to the Czech Republic.

Some work that the integration centers have implemented to assist Ukrainians are the following: Young Caritas built a whole community for Ukrainians with events for children, parents, and grandparents, and they also promote Czech language courses, which are currently fully booked (Young Caritas, 2024). The Integration Center Prague assists with answering questions about residence permits, labor office, and health insurance, and it also organizes cultural events where Czechs and Ukrainians can mingle, exchange experiences, and make friends (Integration Center Prague, 2023).

From our interviews, we have observed that the integration centers have successfully integrated Ukrainian migrants from some time ago. For example, both interviewees from the integration centers are Ukrainians living long in the country (around 15 years) and speak the Czech language very well. Interviewee IC1 from the Integration Centre Prague emphasized that the center offers a three-month course where professionals from diverse fields, such as Ministry of Finance officers, lawyers, psychologists, translators, or labor office assistants participate to facilitate the integration of Ukrainians. During these sessions, Ukrainians receive relevant information and have the opportunity to ask additional questions. Additionally, the Czech language courses offered by the Center provide an important value for the integration of Ukrainians as participants learn the language in the classroom and make visits to different venues where they experience the Czech environment. The Center also allocates representatives to accompany refugees to the Labor Office to assist with translation. Furthermore, IC1 mentioned that the key elements for a successful integration of these Ukrainians who migrated because of the Russian invasion are to learn the language, find employment, and willingness to succeed. Similarly, interviewee IC2 emphasizes that the key factor to aid in the integration to a new country is to provide language courses and cultural orientation programs, including workplace etiquette. However, the disadvantage of Ukrainians they stick to the Ukrainian community and thus build a barrier from the Czech society (IC2). As a result, the focus of integration should be on the Ukrainians refugees' wellbeing first, and then successful integration can start. Usually, Ukrainians face some challenges such as no recognition of foreign qualifications, language barriers, and even discrimination (ICS).

*Young Ukrainians perceptions*

Interviewee U1, acknowledges that her Czech colleagues are less open compared to Ukrainians in the workplace, take time to share personal information, but it is normal to socialize in the pub with a beer after work or even during the weekend in some social activities, contrary to Ukrainians. U1 considers she has a good knowledge of Czech but still does not have enough Czech friends so she is more in contact with the Russian community. Interviewee U2 reported more difficulties to find a job because of language barriers and no experience in the field, but she also acknowledges she was not familiar with the job search process in the Czech Republic thus it minimizes her chances to get a job. Interviewee U3 is fluent in other languages such as English and Russian, but she acknowledges these are not demanded in the Czech work market. Furthermore, she knew about a ‘buddy program’ offered by the university she enrolled when moved to Prague, but unfortunately this program never worked as the local buddies never responded.

# Conclusions

The integration of Ukrainians in the Czech market after the Russian invasion to Ukraine has presented challenges for the Czech government, the integration centers, and the Ukrainians coming to the country. The work of the government has included more legislation and more support for courses of integration and Czech languages. In the case of the integration centers, they have implemented more Czech language courses, legal and psychological counselling, and social activities. For the Ukrainians, despite of all these resources, they still find ease in mingling with the Ukrainian community because their Czech colleagues take time to share their personal sphere. Also, some Ukrainians have found some programs not working and had to learn to navigate the job search by their own. Therefore, for a successful integration of Ukrainians in the marketplace not only the allocation of resources from the Czech government and the integration centers is necessary, but also the willingness of Ukrainians to stay in the country and learn the language are key, taking advantage of the present resources and participating in the Czech social life.

# References

Burnett, K. (2015). Policy Vs. Practice: The Effectiveness of Refugee Integration Policies in the Czech Republic. *European Spatial Research and Policy*, *22*(1), 121–133. https://doi.org/10.1515/esrp-2015-0020

Integration Center Prague. (2023). *Assistance center for refugees from Ukraine - Integrační centrum Praha*. https://icpraha.com/en/assistance-center-for-refugees-from-ukraine/

Klimešová, M., Šatava, J., & Ondruška, M. (2022). *The situation of refugees from Ukraine*. https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/situation-refugees-ukraine\_en

Koroutchev, R. (2023). Ukrainian Migration During the First Year After the Beginning of The Russian Armed Conflict in 2022. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, *9*(2), 164–177. https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2392191k

Lintner, T., Diviák, T., Šeďová, K., & Hlado, P. (2023). Ukrainian refugees struggling to integrate into Czech school social networks. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01880-y

Macakova, L. (2013). Selected Problems of Integration of Foreigners in the Czech Republic. *Equilibrium*, *8*(1), 109–124. https://doi.org/10.12775/EQUIL.2013.007

PAQ Research. (2023). *Ukrainian refugee integration: one year on*. https://www.paqresearch.cz/post/integrace-ukrajinskych-uprchliku-rok-pote/

SUZ. (n.d.). *Správa Uprchlických Zařízení Mv*. Retrieved March 17, 2024, from https://www.integracnicentra.cz/?lang=en

Vacková, J., & Prokešová, R. (2017). Selected areas of immigrant integration in the Czech Republic. *Kontakt*, *19*(4), e237–e247. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.kontakt.2017.09.002

Young Caritas. (2024). *Young Caritas Praha*. https://www.youngcaritas.cz/kde-pusobime/praha/

Zogata-Kusz, A. (2022). Policy Advocacy and NGOs Assisting Immigrants: Legitimacy, Accountability and the Perceived Attitude of the Majority. *Social Sciences*, *11*(2). https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11020077