

The main problems of social adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in the Slovak Republic: One year apart

DOI: 10.31577/EtnoRozpra.2023.30.1.04

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Abstract

Almost a year has passed since the start of the large-scale Russian invasion into Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Millions of Ukrainian refugees were forced to leave their country. They were received by neighbouring states as a gesture of solidarity. Many refugees were granted status, housing and other opportunities in the Slovak Republic. Now it is time to sum up the results of the social adaptation of Ukrainians in the country, because the first stress of acculturation has passed. This issue is important now both for Ukrainian refugees and for Slovak citizens, especially for volunteers and officials. Despite its timeliness, the topic has not been a subject of a special study neither in Slovakia nor abroad. Therefore, the aim of the article is to determine the main barriers which obstruct processes of intercultural communication and social adaptation of Ukrainian refugees. The research is based on the results of interviews with Ukrainian refugees and analysis of questionnaires combining with the author's personal experience in this field. The types of adaptation problems and barriers for Ukrainian refugees, such as economic, socio-cultural and legal, have been identified. The detailed analysis of them may help to improve the social adaptation of refugees, to intensify intercultural dialogue and to reduce the social tension.

Keywords

Ukrainian refugees, the Slovak Republic, social adaptation, intercultural dialogue

Kľúčové slová

Ukrajinskí utečenci, Slovenská republika, sociálna adaptácia, medzikultúrny dialóg

Acknowledgment

This publication was supported by the Recovery and Resilience Facility under Contract No. 1121/2022.

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Ako citovať / How to cite

Kazmyrchuk, M. (2023). The main problems of social adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in the Slovak Republic: One year apart. *Etnologické rozpravy*, 30(1), 55-65. <https://doi.org/10.31577/EtnoRozpra.2023.30.1.04>

Introduction

Almost one year has passed since the beginning of the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The lives of millions of people have radically changed during this time. Many of them were forced to leave their homes and seek shelter abroad. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there were 8 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe on January 31, 2023 (UNHCR, 2022). Slovakia is a neighbouring country to Ukraine. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Slovak Republic has stated that from February 24, 2022, to January 03, 2023 the number of Ukrainians who arrived to Slovakia was 1 094 380 and 878 968 of them returned. There were 104 959 of Ukrainian citizens who got a subsidiary protection status in Slovakia on January 03, 2023 (Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky, 2023a). Because we do not know when the war in Ukraine will end, it is very important to study how the refugees adapt to the new environment and new culture, how they interact with local inhabitants and what barriers hamper the cultural adaptation of the Ukrainian refugees.

Processes of refugees' social adaptation are studied by many scholars from various angles. Val Colic-Peisker, for example, investigated the labour market integration of Bosnian refugees in Australia (Colic-Peisker, 2003). Turkish sociologists and psychologists examined socio-cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees taking into consideration their level of satisfaction by quality of life and the communication with the receiving party as well as their plans for the future (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu, Kunuroglu, Yağmur, 2021). Many studies consider the adaptation and integration of refugees in the Czech Republic, including an experience of Ukrainian newcomers (e. g., Heřmanová, Andrlé, 2022). Y. Giesing, T. Panchenko and P. Poutvaara focus on adaptation and integration strategies of refugees from Ukraine in German labour market (Giesing, Panchenko, Poutvaara, 2022; Panchenko, 2022;). However, the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia has not yet come to attention.

The aim of my article is to overview the primary data obtained by a survey in December 2022–January 2023 and to recognize types of barriers which hamper the intercultural communication and social adaptation of Ukrainian refugees.

Theoretical approach and research methods

In this study, I will apply the model of acculturation used in the studies of Syrian refugees in Turkey by J. Arends-Toth, F. J. R van de Vijver, J. W. Berry, R. Redfield, R. Linton, M. Herskovits, and others. The acculturation is defined as “the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other”. The acculturation framework includes three main categories: 1) acculturation conditions; 2) acculturation orientations; and 3) acculturation outcomes. Acculturation outcomes consist of psychological outcomes, which explain internal adaptation, and socio-cultural outcomes, which refer to external adaptation. Personal satisfaction and mental health may be defined as indicators of the first type of adaptation and the second type of adaptation may be elaborated by the ability of immigrants to participate in the host society, to successfully deal with everyday situations, etc. (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu, Kunuroglu, Yağmur, 2021: 100).

In this paper, I analyse the external or socio-cultural adaptation of Ukrainian refugees, to reveal barriers which hamper this process. I apply both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Six semi-structured interviews were recorded from January 2023 to February 2023. The conversations were one to two hours long; my respondents could focus on problems which they considered important. I am a refugee myself and it helped me to have an honest talk and to avoid misunderstanding caused by cultural and language differences between interviewer and respondents. I did not use the snowball sampling; all participants were found separately, to prevent a similarity effect. The language of the interview was Ukrainian.

All respondents were Ukrainian women between 25 and 48 years of age who obtained a subsidiary protection status in Slovakia, staying in the country longer than 6 months at the time of the interviews. They had various educational levels and marriage status. I consider the sampling as relevant because most of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia are women with children, and it is comparable with the data obtained by researchers on Ukrainian refugees in other countries, for instance, in Germany (Giesing, Panchenko, Poutvaara, 2022: 9).

I conducted seven online surveys in December of 2022. The questionnaires contained open-ended questions and the respondents might express their opinion on different topics including the adaptation problems. All respondents were women (28–47 years old) who obtained a subsidiary protection status. They were married and had one or more university degrees. They have stayed in Slovakia between 8 to 11 months at the time of surveys.

The interviews and surveys with open-ended questions were supplemented by the data obtained from an online survey in social media made in January 2023, in which I applied quantitative methods. 351 applications were collected in total. This poll included not only answers from Ukrainian refugees who came to Slovakia after the February 24 (68% of them obtained a subsidiary protection status), but also other Ukrainian migrants (30% had a residence permit, 2% had no status or were citizens of the Slovak Republic). All these respondents were over 18 years old and 69.3% of them were between 30 and

49 years old. 88.3% of the respondents were females and 11.7% of respondents were males. Most of them had a university degree, and 12% just left school early.

Respondents involved in both interviews and surveys came from all major regions of Ukraine, such as Eastern, Western, Southern, Northern and Central Ukraine. They were persons with different gender, age, and marital status. All interviews and surveys were anonymous. Some names of respondents have been changed on their requests.

Professional occupation, necessary formalities, and skills

According to the data obtained from interviews and surveys, most of the participants are well-educated people who had a well-paid and stable job before the war. 82.3% of the respondents of the on-line survey without open-ended questions had a stable life before the large-scale Russian invasion, and 17.1% of them own living property in Ukraine and can return there. The prevalence of such people with higher education in the samples may be explained by the fact that I found them via social media. Less educated Ukrainian refugees probably did not pay attention to the call, or they had concerns about such research. Thus, my conclusions apply to active, employable persons who had financial and property independence, but found themselves in new conditions and needed to adapt to this situation.

A feeling of full involvement in the Slovakia economy is very important for the social adaptation of Ukrainian refugees. Employment has a significant importance as a way for integration of refugees into the receiving society and their economic adaptation. It is related to financial independence and hence to the ability to get a comfortable accommodation, high-quality education for children and oneself, to obtain better healthcare, etc.

The survey data imply that 53.1% of the respondents work or are going to work in Slovakia. 18.2% of them are ready to work in a different profession, 8.2% want to work by their obtained profession only, 7.4% have no possibility to work, 5.1% are still looking for a job, 4.6% assess their chances on the labour market as low, and 3.4% are not interested in finding a job.

All interviewees and respondents of the survey with open-ended questions work in the Slovak Republic now. According to their reports, it was not hard for them to find a job, but rather they had difficulties with finding a desirable work corresponding to their education. Many respondents could not get a job in the same field as they had worked in Ukraine. For example, Daryna (38 years old, Hlohovec) states:

I got the job I hadn't been working for more than 10 years. But I could not find a job to work as cosmetologist.

Financial self-sufficiency is typical for all interviewees. They are active workers who have a salary, as well as more than half of on-line respondents. But these people emphasize that their incomes in Slovakia are very modest. And half of them consider that their work is not paid enough:

No, of course, I would want more but using an agency it is impossible to get a lot of money (Kateryna, 36 years old, Bratislava).

Majority of respondents are not self-employed. Some Ukrainian refugees get a job using agencies nicknamed *agentura*. Conflicts in this process are frequent, due to the necessity to sign a contract where the terms are written in Slovak which leads to misunderstanding.

The obtained data suggest that a level of wages of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia does not depend on age or gender but rather on their status of work. According to the survey without open-ended questions, 17.7% of the respondents had expectations of better work and higher salary when they moved to Slovakia, and 13.4% of the respondents just had a hope for employment in the new country. Some respondents have several jobs to earn more money. Sometimes refugees retain a position in Ukraine, even they do not get salary there. This situation allows Ukrainians to feel their connection to the homeland. Anna (39 years old, Martin) says:

I have a job in Ukraine. I am still employed but have a downtime status. In other words, after my return to Ukraine I hope to do the same as I was doing before.

Based on the respondents' statements, Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia can find work. Many of them look for it without assistance:

I had no help in searching for job. I was just walking in the city. And it was unbelievable, but I was just asking, 'Do you need an employee?' going from one establishment to another. And I have found a job this way (Iryna, 25 years old, Levice).

Many respondents complain about lack of time regarding family, as they have no assistance in childcare. It is an obstacle for female refugees to combine their work with home duties:

I work more and have less time for children (Yanina, 47 years old, Bratislava).

Despite the circumstances, enterprise is considered to be a national feature of Ukrainians (Nebrat, Suprun, Horin et al., 2019). Information from social media used by Ukrainians in Slovakia points out that a lot of people owned a small business before moving abroad, but in the EU they faced hard bureaucratic restrictions to obtain permissions:

I owned a business; I was a businesswoman... But it is impossible to confirm your professionalism if you do not know the language. That is why I am a cleaning woman for the present; but I will try to change this situation! (Kateryna, 36 years old, Bratislava)

The social and economic status of many respondents has deteriorated, which might be caused by bureaucratic formalities as well as differences in professional standards between both countries. Based on the interviewees' statements, social and financial difficulties faced by Ukrainians in Slovakia have not caused weakness or resignation to fate but create stimulus to look for better solutions and more accurate goal setting. Respondents of the on-line survey and interviewees expressed their readiness to overcome financial hardship in the receiving country, but despite this, the situation hampers the social adaptation of the refugees. Refugees reported that low-paid work which takes

a lot of time complicated expression and satisfaction of their social needs, and this led to the alienation from both the receiving society and their own social group.

The received data confirm that university graduated Ukrainians have more chances to obtain a higher professional status and to earn higher income, unlike people with lesser educational degree or non-educated persons. 80.6% of Ukrainians who participated in the survey without open-ended questions have a university degree and 18.8% are qualified workers. However, approval of a professional qualification and nostrification of a diploma may be barriers for getting a desirable job, and for the social and economic adaptation of the refugees in general, not only in Slovakia. My respondents reported that the process of nostrification is too bureaucratized and there are differences between the Ukrainian and Slovak educational systems as well as between labour markets in both countries. People cannot prove their qualification because of lack of time and need to earn money for surviving. Thus, Ukrainians with university degrees are forced to work at low-paid and low-prestige jobs. This results in a situation where Ukrainian refugees cannot find a job based on their profession for a long time which leads to demoralization and difficulty in social adaptation.

11.7% of participants of the survey without open-ended questions noted that they have troubles with nostrification of their diploma and problems with recognition of professional qualifications. Some of them mentioned that the nostrification process is hard, expensive, and wastes a lot of time:

My specialisation cannot be confirmed in Slovakia. I have the diploma as a production engineer in the food industry. But Slovaks understand my qualification as a cook. It seems that technologist profession is something unknown for them. Here all this work is done by a cook, everything is simpler, and the profession is identified as a cook (Iryna, 25 years old, Levice).

The nostrification procedure is well organized but has a few disadvantages. There is no easily accessible information about this process because officers involved in the work with foreigners speak Slovak or some of them English. As respondents said, the procedure takes a lot of time and demands money:

You must have documents according to certain standards, or in other words, you have to nostrificate your qualification documents to work by your profession in the Slovak Republic. It may be done at the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic. You must translate your university diploma with all appendixes using a professional translator. I spent 90 or 100 EUR on this. Then I certified it paying 30 or 40 EUR that time and, finally, I paid 100 EUR for the nostrification at the post-office... These 250 EUR are big money. But I was able to pay because I started to work after one month stay in Slovakia. But there are people who arrived without any money... And I think that this is too expensive and there is no discount system (Olena, 38 years old, Bratislava).

To speak Slovak is important for social and cultural adaptation of Ukrainian refugees. Language skill is an advantage to acquire a better job and higher salary, to carry on negotiation and for everyday communication with the receiving community. Based on the

respondents' opinion, it is necessary to speak Slovak at the intermediate level or higher to communicate with locals.

They [employers] pay attention to your language at first. I had a situation when at the place where I work now I was proposed to work as a waitress. I had been working for one day... But the owners started to fear that I would not be able, or it would be some troubles (Anna, 39 years old, Martin).

21.9% of respondents of the survey do not speak Slovak, 47% speak at the beginner level (A1–A2), 23.4% speak at the intermediate level (B1–B2), and 7.7% speak fluently (C1).

Despite perfect conditions for learning the Slovak language provided by authorities for Ukrainian refugees and employers' demands on the language skills, some of the respondents noted that they had no time for language courses because of work and tried to learn Slovak by themselves. Only a few interviewees had sufficient language skills to occasionally use Slovak words during our conversations.

Some respondents reported that they knew Ukrainian migrants who did not speak Slovak, living for a long time in the country and having no problems.

I once met a Ukrainian. He was around 60 years old, and he said that he was living in the capital of Slovakia for eight years. And he did not learn Slovak and did not know the language. By his opinion, he is fine without this (Mariia, 39 years old, Bratislava).

Interaction with locals: expectation and reality

The necessity in temporary exile from Ukraine impacts the social adaptation of Ukrainian refugees. Efforts to find a job and to learn Slovak depend on this expectation. There is a difference between the adaptive behaviour of refugees who have decided to stay in the country for a long time and people who stay temporarily. According to the interviewees, refugees who wait to return to Ukraine did not worry about learning Slovak and had limited contacts with local people even though they eventually had stayed in the country.

The forced migration of Ukrainian refugees was unexpected and sudden, which is why there were so many expectations to return home as soon as possible. However, almost one year has passed and the discrepancy between the duration of the stay which was expected by Ukrainian refugees and the current situation leads to demoralization, confusion, and disappointment. This mood hinders Ukrainian refugees' ability to plan, to define long-term aims, and to take practical steps to make their life in Slovakia better. It may be recognized as another barrier for the social adaptation.

It is especially difficult to do for people who left their homes twice because of the warfare. Ukrainians from the eastern regions who were forced to escape in 2014 are not sure that they will stay there for a long-time:

It is hard [to bear] twice in my life (Anna, 39 years old, Martin).

Not only do Ukrainian refugees dream for a quick end to the war, but Slovaks wait for it as well.

Slovaks' understanding for Ukrainian refugees has changed because of the world economic crisis, and it increases the tendency of Ukrainians to withdraw into their community:

There were conflicts in my first job. One [local] man told me that Ukrainians are worse than Gypsies. But there was a special situation as it was explained to me. This man has two children, and one kid has a Down syndrome. And he thinks that we Ukrainians have a lot of money which are given by the state. Why has he decided this? Because having the kid with the disorder he was spending a lot of time in medical clinics. And he said that, for example, Ukrainians received something without any queues, but he must wait with his kid (Anna, 39 years old, Martin).

Moreover, the topic of the war is misused, helping to spread hate and supporting propaganda (Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky, 2023b). Another reason why local people have changed their attitude to the refugees is a growing increase in their amount and the prolonging of their stay, combined with the deterioration of the economic situation and long-term social and political tensions. "They are tired of us," many Ukrainian refugees often say. As Anna (39 years old, Martin) notices:

there are a lot of people here who have a different opinion. I understand because we do not know in Ukraine what reaction we would have on this amount of people... especially when small Slovakia takes so many people. Of course, they can hate us. They are waiting for a surgery for half a year but when a sick Ukrainian comes it will be given him much faster. And there are lot of people who think that this situation is because of us. Ukraine made the war; sanctions were established against Russia and Slovaks suffer. If Ukrainians had not provoked and had given peace to Putin this would not have happened. There are lot of such thoughts.

When defining the level of the social and cultural adaptation of Ukrainian refugees it is necessary to evaluate their perception of personal life experience in Slovakia. Based on the refugees' stories, the level of their social and cultural adaptation may be recognized as moderate, which is caused by the intermediate quality of social life and interaction with local people and refugees' communities as well as a strong desire to return to Ukraine. The survey shows that respondents defined their experience as neutral or positive despite having no certainty in future because the war is far from over. They are satisfied enough which may correspond to the moderate level of social adaptation in Slovakia. 42.5% of 351 respondents defined their opportunities in the receiving country as a little bit higher than satisfactory, 32.5% marked them as good, and 11.7% thought that they are perfect.

Community, which is a cultural, ethnic or professional environment, is very important for the social adaptation of Ukrainian refugees. Stable contacts were severed due to changes, and they must be rebuilt. There are now lots of requests in social media about a circle of acquaintances where understanding, acceptance and support are present, traditions and cultural outlook are shared:

In Žilina, when you walk it seems that there are only Ukrainians. I was at the cafe and there were many Ukrainian speaking people. And they have their communities. And support is better there (Anna, 39 years old, Martin).

It is important to note that there are significant regional and cultural differences among Ukrainians coming from different regions, cities and villages that may lead to religious and political disagreements:

It was very easy to adapt [to life in Slovakia] after five months of living out of my home, which does not exist now, out of my town, being received by unfamiliar people on the opposite side of Ukraine. They were very different from us and that is why Slovakia was our salvation (Kateryna, 36 years old, Bratislava).

It was recognized that support from a family, friends, and a local community facilitates the social adaptation of Ukrainian refugees. According to the data from the surveys, Ukrainians make friends easily and easily accept the lifestyle of Slovaks because they do not see principal differences between Slovak and Ukrainian environments. 43.9% of the respondents chose Slovakia to stay because of friends or relatives there:

I did not choose [Slovakia]. I planned to go to Poland but there were huge queues at checkpoints. We had an acquaintance near Trnava and went there to rest, planning to move to Vienna. But we stayed there (Survey).

I have a friend here [in Slovakia] and he proposed me to come promising to help, to find an accommodation for stay there for some time (Anna, 39 years old, Martin).

More than half of the interviewees reported that they had friends among Slovaks. The most common way to make new contacts is a group of co-workers and neighbours. Among communication barriers the respondents mentioned lack of time, absence of common interests and poor language skills.

I have good relations with my co-workers, true, they are Slovaks. There is only one Ukrainian in the team and it's me. My first impression was... a little bit... honestly, I was afraid of how the team would accept me as a Ukrainian. Because we know that there are different opinions on this situation. But they received me very friendly that means I did not see any hostile attitude to me. I did not expect such a good acceptance (Iryna, 25 years old).

However, many Ukrainians are still closed for communication and almost do not participate in social life of Slovakia.

I had contacts in Ukraine because people knew me from my childhood. I came here as an alien and a person unknown to all and it is not customary to interest in problems of somebody or a personal story as we do. [Neighbours] greet and wish a good day. We wish this in answer. But there is no communication on somebody or something. We have greeted neighbours, they have answered to us and that is all communication (Iryna, 25 years old, Levice).

I do not go often outside and do not communicate... There is a feeling that this is

something temporal and I must wait. I do not live here, rather, I wait, and I do not want to take roots here (Anna, 39 years old, Martin).

Based on the survey, 39.9% of respondents chose Slovakia because of the joint border with Ukraine, and 35.6% of them did it because of the similarity of cultures and languages. In other words, the geographical, cultural and language commonalities facilitate the adaptation but the differences between the two cultures in time become more noticeable and start to fracture the adaptation process.

Conclusion

Almost one year has passed since the beginning of the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, so the topic on the social and cultural adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia is still acute but unstudied yet. In my article, I presented the relevant data obtained from six interviews, the survey with open-ended questions (6 applicants), and the survey where quantitative methods were used (351 respondents). I have to note that there might be a certain distortion in the evaluation of the situation at the beginning of the invasion, because almost one year has passed since that time, and time affects the respondents' memories. Some of them avoided mentioning of their negative experience because they wanted to be respectful for any help during this hard time despite everything. That is why a part of the respondents tried to focus on positive aspects of their experience.

I identified the following types of barriers hindering the social and cultural adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia: cultural (different language), managerial (bureaucratic formalities which hamper acquiring a desirable job or starting their own business), mental (refugees' expectation for a quick return to Ukraine decreases their motivation to learn language and solve formalities) and social (bias of some Slovaks against Ukrainians provoke a tension which has an impact on the refugees).

Language is an important barrier slowing down the adaptation process of Ukrainian refugees. Some of them have no time to participate in language courses because they spend a lot of time at work. Furthermore, economic troubles play a significant role in adapting to social life in Slovakia. A lot of educated Ukrainians have good chances to get well-paid, desirable jobs corresponding to their specialisations, but they have faced obstacles. First of all, they have to nostrificate their diplomas which demands time and money. Not all Ukrainian professional specialisations have equivalents in Slovakia. Many Ukrainians used to have their own business but have been confronted with bureaucratic barriers in the receiving country.

The refugees' motivation to search for a job, to solve bureaucratic formalities and to learn Slovak language is often hindered by their expectation to return to Ukraine soon and thus by perception of their stay in Slovakia as something temporal. The attitude of the receiving society also has an impact on the adaptation. The economic difficulties as well as misunderstanding leads to a bias provoking social isolation of newcomers and even their discrimination. This limits the refugees' contact with local communities, decreasing the level of their adaptation.

These are the primary results of my study, which will be further complemented by the data from new interviews and surveys. I intend to compare them with the research re-

sults on Ukrainian refugees' adaptation in other European countries. However, even now it is possible to give some recommendation to make the adaptation process easier. First of all, it is necessary to start a campaign to inform refugees in detail how to solve some bureaucratic issues, such as the nostrification of a diploma, agreements between an agency and employee, formalities related to starting a business, filling the tax declaration, formalities to get the subvention for an accommodation, insurance, etc.

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