



Migration Trends in Slovakia: An Analysis of Post-EU Enlargement

Mariam Jikia

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ABSTRACT

While migration is not a new phenomenon, it remains a key issue on the global policy agenda due to its economic, social, and cultural implications for both sending and receiving countries. Since 2014, the large influx of migrants and asylum seekers from third countries into the EU has contributed to the migration crisis, which is now closely tied to the broader political crisis within the EU. However, the understanding and application of shared values, particularly solidarity, still vary among EU Member States.

This article examines migration trends in Slovakia following its 2004 accession to the European Union, focusing on key determinants and implications for the country's social-economic landscape. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, the research analyzes various types of migration, including labor migration, educational migration, and family reunification.

The research findings reveal significant inflows and outflows of migrants, shaped by economic factors such as wage differences and job availability, alongside social factors like educational opportunities and community ties. While Slovakia benefits from a diverse and dynamic labor force, challenges remain in integration and public attitudes toward migrants. The article concludes with policy recommendations to deepen the understanding of migration in Slovakia, offering insights for policymakers in navigating the complexities of the evolving migration landscape.

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¹ Georgian Technical University, Tbilisi, Georgia.

1. Introduction

Slovakia, located in the heart of the Central Europe, has experienced considerable change since becoming a member of the European Union in 2004. This enlargement marked a crucial milestone not only for Slovakia, but also for the EU, as it expanded its borders to include 10 Eastern European countries that had previously been under different political, economic, and social constraints (Kajane, 2022). EU membership brought Slovakia numerous opportunities, together with challenges, particularly regarding migration pressures. Migration plays a key role in shaping labor markets, economic growth and social dynamics within a country.

This research aims to provide a focused and detailed analysis of migration dynamics in Slovakia, in particular exploring how migration trends have evolved, what the main factors contributing to these trends are, and the challenges faced by migrants and Slovak society as a result. The study highlights the unique aspects of Slovakia's experience, including EU policies, their impact on local migration, and the integration of diverse migrant populations.

To achieve the research objectives, the following research questions will be addressed:

- What are the primary migration trends in Slovakia following EU Accession?
- What economic conditions have influenced migration patterns?
- What challenges do migrants face during the integration process?

- How do societal attitudes shape government policies towards migration?

The research employs both qualitative and quantitative research methods to offer a comprehensive analysis of migration trends in Slovakia. By examining both forms of data, the study identifies detailed complexities of migration patterns, their social-economic aspects, and the underlying determinants shaping these trends. The quantitative research involves the analysis of statistical data drawn from national and international databases. Key indicators, such as migration inflows and outflows, demographic changes, and labor market statistics, are examined to identify patterns over the past two decades. The qualitative methods are used to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of migrants in Slovakia. This includes semi-structured interviews with migrants and representatives from NGOs involved in integration efforts.

2. Historical Background

Under the communist regime (1948-1989), emigration was strictly controlled, as it was seen as a threat to state security and ideology. Individuals wishing to leave the country faced significant barriers, including bureaucratic hurdles, surveillance, and severe penalties for attempting to escape the regime (Kurekova, 2016).

The communist government promoted a stable workforce and propagated socialist indoctrination, which led to a controlled internal migration system. Like other communist

countries, the population was allocated to specific industries or regions, limiting personal freedom of movement (Kurekova, 2016).

Following the Velvet Revolution in 1989, Czechoslovakia transitioned from communism to democracy, which opened the door to new opportunities. The subsequent split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, resulting in the establishment of Slovakia as an independent nation, led to significant changes not only in migration patterns, but also for the market economy. Slovak citizens began to look for better opportunities abroad, particularly in Western Europe, while the newly formed Slovakia became an attractive destination for nationals looking to capitalize on emerging economic opportunities (Martin&Teitelbaum, 2005).

After gaining independence, Slovakia implemented several reforms, including establishing relations with the EU. The lengthy and difficult process culminated in Slovakia joining the European Union on May 1, 2004, together with nine other states of Eastern and Central Europe. EU membership granted Slovaks the freedom to live and work in other member states, significantly increasing emigration, as many sought higher wages and better living conditions in wealthier EU countries. The United Kingdom, Germany, and Austria became prominent destinations, where Slovaks contributed to various sectors, such as construction, healthcare, and services (Czaika&de Haas, 2014).

Slovakia's EU membership also made the country more attractive to foreign nationals, particularly those from non-EU neighboring

countries and beyond. This led to a diversification of Slovakia's demographic profile, as each new wave of migrants brought a variety of skills, cultures, and perspectives.

Despite many opportunities, the post-EU environment also brought challenges. The rapid influx of migrants raised concerns about integration, public services, and societal cohesion (Czaika&de Haas, 2014). It became clear that migration was not just about numbers, but rather that societal change itself demanded sensible policies and inclusive approaches to ensure the successful integration of diverse populations into Slovak life (Castles *et al.*, 2014).

3. Analysis of Recent Migration Patterns

In recent years, Slovakia has experienced remarkable changes in migration trends, driven by both large inflows and outflows of migrants. Some of these trends have been influenced by local labor market demands and opportunities, as well as by wider regional trends within all aspects of European integration.

3.1. Labor Migration

Labor migration has been a dominant factor in Slovakia's demographic landscape. As the Slovak economy has continued to grow, particularly in automotive manufacturing, technology, and services, there has been a substantial demand for both skilled and unskilled labor. Many Slovaks emigrating to western European countries like Germany, Austria, and the United Kingdom, seek better

wages and improved living conditions (Martinkovic&Kral, 2020). This trend has raised concerns about the potential long-term impact of a “brain drain” on the domestic labor market (Boonstra, 2020).

At the same time, Slovakia has attracted foreign labor, particularly from neighboring countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine. Foreign workers often fill labor shortages in critical sectors, contributing to the local economy and addressing gaps in the workforce (Tejchman&Veselsky, 2018). This inflow is supported by the EU’s free movement policies, which facilitate the entry of workers from other member states. However, challenges remain in terms of recognition of foreign qualifications and efficient integration into the labor market (OECD, 2020).

3.2. Education-Related Migration

Educational migration also plays a key role in shaping current migration patterns in Slovakia. The country is home to several reputable higher education institutions that attract international students from various regions, including Europe, Asia, and Africa. As an EU member state, Slovakia benefits from partnerships and exchange programs that encourage educational exchanges with other countries. The flow of students not only enhances cultural diversity on university campuses, but also encourages some international students to remain in Slovakia after their studies, looking for long-term employment (Boonstra, 2020). This contributes to cultural exchange within Slovakia and helps to address labor shortages in various

fields. However, the transition from student to working professional often involves challenges, among which are bureaucratic work permit processes and managing cultural integration.

3.3. Family Reunification

Family reunification is another critical migration dynamic in Slovakia. Slovaks who migrate abroad often want to take their families with them, contributing to increased migration outflows. While family reunification in other EU member states does not pose particular difficulties, the process has implications for social structures and family dynamics within Slovakia (Bútorová&Gajdoš, 2016).

Similarly, migrants settling in Slovakia also desire to bring their families, as it helps them adapt to the new environment and strengthen community ties. Family reunification policies in Slovakia allow for spouses and dependent children to join migrants, promoting family unity and stability, but the process can be bureaucratically complex, leading to delays and uncertainty (Volkova, 2015).

3.4. Asylum Seekers

Over the years, Slovakia has received asylum seekers, yet it is not typically considered a destination country for migrants heading towards Western Europe. Like other EU member states, Slovakia has participated in various EU initiatives related to the reception and integration of refugees, particularly during crises such as the Syrian refugee crisis (Pavlíny, 2019), and the forced migration from Ukraine.

In 2015, Slovakia, along with the other V4 countries, initially opposed the EU's mandatory relocation quotas for refugees from Greece and Italy, but unlike Hungary and Poland, Slovakia did not pursue legal action against the EU (Kajaneč, 2022).

Despite this, Slovakia has implemented measures to provide humanitarian assistance and support for asylum seekers. Many of the challenges asylum seekers face are specifically related to integration into Slovak society, including limited resources for language training, cultural orientation, and employment support. Public attitudes toward refugees can also significantly impact the integration process (Grmelová & Pavalj, 2017).

In recent years, debates about the immigration policy and humanitarian responsibilities have become more prominent within the EU, particularly concerning the pressure on member states to share the responsibility of refugee resettlement (Štefánik, 2019). These dynamics changed dramatically after the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis. Slovakia, along with other V4 countries, received a large number of Ukrainian refugees, demonstrating a very different response than to the 2015 migrant crisis. This highlights the significant difference in public and political response to refugees from Ukraine, compared to those from other regions (Kajaneč, 2022).

4. Statistical Overview of Migrant Demographics

When comparing the demographic characteristics of migrants in Slovakia, several im-

portant trends emerge based on age, gender, and nationality:

- **Age:** Migrants in Slovakia span a wide age range, with a significant proportion of young adults aged 20 to 35. This group primarily consists of students and young professionals arriving in Slovakia for education or work opportunities. Additionally, there is a remarkable number of older migrants, especially those joining family members or seeking employment (Grmelová & Pavalj, 2017).
- **Gender:** The gender distribution in Slovakia is relatively balanced, but varies depending on migration type. In labor migration, male migrants dominate, especially in the construction and manufacturing sectors. In contrast, family reunification tends to involve more women migrating to join their families. The educational sector shows a more balanced gender representation (Martinkovic & Kral, 2020).
- **Nationality:** The nationalities of migrants in Slovakia reflect both regional and global trends. A significant portion of the migrant population comes from neighboring countries, especially Poland, Ukraine, and Hungary, but there has been an increasing influx of migrants from Asia and Africa. According to the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, foreign nationals make up about 4% of the total population, highlighting the growing significance of migration to Slovakia's social-economic development (Slovak Statistical Office, 2023).

As noted, Slovakia's current migratory flows are shaped by an intricate combination

of labor migration, educational migration and family reunification. These trends reflect dramatic demographic changes. Understanding these trends is essential for policymakers when developing inclusive strategies to address the challenges and opportunities presented by migration.

5. Determinants of Migration in Slovakia

Migration in Slovakia is a complex phenomenon influenced by a variety of interrelated determinants. Understanding these factors is important for explaining patterns of migration to and from the country, as well as for developing effective policies to manage these movements. The determinants can be classified as economic, social, and political factors.

Economic Factors refer to the financial and labor market conditions that motivate individuals to move, including wage differentials, job availability, and overall economic stability. Social Factors refers to the role of community and family dynamics that can influence the decision to migrate, including educational opportunities, family connections, and cultural perceptions. Political Factors include governmental policies and geopolitical circumstances, mostly related to immigration laws and asylum policies. Political stability and the perception of safety also play significant roles in influencing an individual's decision to migrate.

5.1. Economic Factors

The most important economic reason for migration is the difference in wage levels be-

tween Slovakia and western European countries (Kahanec&Kurekova, 2016). Many high-skilled Slovaks are driven to cross the borders for better salaries, which means higher living standards. This has resulted in significant outflows of talent from areas like health care, IT and engineering, creating fears of a potential "brain drain".

Job availability is another critical economic factor influencing migration patterns. Slovakia is a rapidly growing economy, particularly in areas like automotive manufacturing and technology, where it faces labor shortages due to the country's ongoing economic expansion. This then creates demand for more labor than is locally available, which in turn presents opportunities for migrant workers, especially those from neighboring countries. The presence of multinational companies in Slovakia further drives the need for a versatile workforce, attracting both local and foreign talent to meet specific skills requirements (Muster& Poledna, 2018).

Broader Economic factors, like economic stability, growth forecasts, and employment rates, can influence an individual's decision to migrate. Slovakia's positive economic situation has motivated many to pursue opportunities within the country; however, regional disparities and slower economic recovery in certain areas have prompted some individuals to seek opportunities elsewhere (Baldwin-Edwards&Kraler, 2015).

5.2. Social Factors

One of the main determinants increasing inflows to Slovakia is opportunities for a

European education and qualifications. This mobility can lead to long-term migration, as graduates from international backgrounds might choose to remain in Slovakia after graduating, thus contributing to the local economy (Jankowski, 2018).

Strong community ties and family members deeply affect migratory decisions. Slovaks living abroad tend to bring along their family members (Lindstrom&Hernández, 2017). Similarly, individuals from foreign countries may migrate to Slovakia to reunite with family members already there. The alignment of these social networks not only provides crucial solidarity but also establishes potential for future integration into existing migration streams by establishing new access points (Záliš, 2017).

How migrants are viewed both culturally and societally is a large factor in determining how these dynamics play out. Public perceptions in Slovakia can be mixed, with portions of society resisting immigration, and others appreciating that foreign labor is needed to support the economy. Unlike the limitations posed by resources, these cultural factors influence the decision-making process of potential migrants as they weigh the contrast between a different culture and their expectations of a more stable life (Muntean&Schulz, 2020).

5.3. *Political Factors*

As a member of the European Union, Slovakia is bound by EU regulations regarding

migration, including the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which sets out rules and procedures concerning the processing of applications for asylum, as well as the rights of applicants. Slovakia has recently been involved in a number of EU-wide initiatives to harmonize and raise standards for asylum across the bloc. Slovakia's stance on a number of key EU directives, particularly concerning compulsory relocation quotas for asylum seekers, has sometimes posed challenges (Migrationsverket, 2017). For example, during the 2015 migrant crisis, Slovakia opposed EU quotas, exercising its right to control its borders and determine who enters the country. This position reflects political concerns where national sovereignty is prioritized over compliance with EU mandates.

Slovak legislation regarding migration has evolved under both internal and external pressure. The development seeks to streamline EU policies with national regulations concerning immigration, and recognizes specific economic requirements in individual European states. While intentions to create a positive legislative framework for migrants and asylum seekers have also been expressed, bureaucratic obstacles do exist. This can result in a greater processing time for applications, and problems accessing essential services for migrants and refugees (Jankowski, 2020).

Political discourse and contentious media reporting help structure public attitudes toward migration in general, but also in the case of asylum seekers. In Slovakia, opinions are often influenced by political parties with

pro-immigration or anti-immigration attributes (Čavoj, 2015). Politicians there have used migration-related issues to drum up public backing by representing immigration in terms of economic need, or as a threat. This type of framing can contribute to stigmatization and cause communities and society at large to be less willing to tolerate higher numbers of asylum seekers or migrants (IOM, 2021).

Slovakia is another example where the presence of far-right political parties has made it less migrant-friendly. Those parties are typically oriented toward more stringent immigration controls, and take a skeptical view of EU integration, claiming it subverts Slovak sovereignty. The government is unwilling to adopt a more inclusive migration policy, which also influences wider discussions on approaches to integration (Rincon&Paniagua, 2019). As a result, public discourse can become focused on fears of cultural dilution or economic competition, overshadowing the contributions that migrants make to society.

The migration context of Slovakia is also molded by regional and global geopolitical configurations. Ongoing conflicts in neighboring regions, such as the war in Ukraine, have led to increased numbers of refugees entering Slovakia. The Slovak government's response to these crises can shape both immediate policy changes and long-term migration trends. In recent years, Slovakia has taken steps to accommodate refugees and asylum seekers from conflict zones, reflecting a humanitarian commitment in times of crisis. Yet this can be qualified by the general

public's perception on immigration. Asylum seeker policies are subjected to political debate, as government responses must balance humanitarian obligations with concerns over domestic political stability and public opinion. This balancing act poses significant challenges in developing cohesive and effective migration policies that address immediate needs, while planning for sustainable integration (Rincon&Paniagua, 2019).

Conclusion

Based on theoretical, practical and statistical data analyzed during the research study, the migration in Slovakia is determined by three main factors – economic, social and political. At the same time, the free movement of individuals for labor, education, and family reunification has significantly influenced the demographic landscape, leading to both opportunities and challenges for Slovak society.

According to the findings, Slovakia benefits from cheap foreign labor and a diverse student population and, at the same time, the country struggles with integration challenges and potential labor shortages due to outbound migration.

For policymakers, the mentioned findings underline the need for effective strategies, in particular:

- Developing inclusive integration policies – Slovakia should develop and implement full-fledged integration policies for migrants, including language-acquisition programs or other cultural-orientation opportunities, with access to essential social services.

- Access to the Labor Market – Policies that address recognition of foreign qualifications and skills in order for migrants to be productive contributors to the Slovak economy.
- Promotion of Targeted Recruitment Initiatives – The Slovak government can introduce targeted recruitment campaigns to bring in foreign workers for sectors where skill shortages exist (healthcare, IT and technical fields).
- Family Reunification Policies – Simplifying family reunification will not only provide social protection and security among migrant households, but will also build on successful integration, which broadens local community ties.
- Awareness Raising Campaigns – It is important to conduct public awareness campaigns that promote a more informed understanding of migration, which could help overcome a number of negative perceptions and biases. Campaigns that point to the many contributions of migrants in Slovak society and for its economy can make a real difference.
- Collaboration with the EU – Certain aspects of migration can only be addressed collaboratively. This includes utilizing EU financial resources to implement integration policies and taking a leading role in developing comprehensive, pan-continental migration strategies, rather than relying on fragmented, short-term solutions.

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