

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF SLOVAK LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN INTEGRATING MIGRANTS FROM UKRAINE IN SLOVAKIA

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I. Introduction

Geographically positioned at significant European crossroads, Slovakia has historically experienced emigration rather than immigration.¹ Since gaining independence in 1993, this trend has continued, with Slovakia remaining a less common destination for migrants. Since joining the European Union in 2004, Slovakia has been subject to EU immigration policies and has participated in the Schengen Area.² Currently, the country is working to overcome the challenges of immigration while adapting to shifting geopolitical dynamics and economic changes.³

Slovakia's migration patterns underwent significant transformation since its inception. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, emigration was the main trend.⁴ This trend continued after 1993, with Slovakia remaining a less favored destination for international migrants. The reasons include Slovak nationalism⁵, political uncertainty in

¹ Přívarová, 1084–1093.

² OECD, "International Migration Outlook 2024: Slovak Republic." 2024. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/international-migration-outlook-2024_50b0353e-en/full-report/slovak-republic_09b0120f.html.

³ Migration and Home Affairs, "Migrant Integration in Slovakia." February 28, 2025. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-resettlement-and-integration/integration/eu-migrant-integration-platform/eu-countries-updates-and-facts/migrant-integration-slovakia_en.

⁴ Divinský.

⁵ Mesežnikov, 2000, 55–60.

the 1990s⁶, shifts in the economy and lower income levels in the early years of independence.⁷ New migration patterns emerged in the late 1990s.⁸ Slovakia has become more of a transit country than a final destination for immigrants, along with relatively low immigration rates and a significant number of high-skilled Slovaks emigrating to pursue opportunities abroad.⁹

In recent years (especially after EU accession in 2004), however, the country has witnessed an increase in immigration, including labour migration and refugees seeking asylum.¹⁰ Furthermore, shifts in demographics have structural implications for the nation's economic and social dynamics.¹¹ After thirty-two years of the Slovak Republic's independence, the inflow of foreign immigrants increased gradually, in line with the evolution of migration policies, the country's accession to the European Union, economic development, and its democratic nature.¹² Bargerová further asserts that between 1993 (the year of the Slovak Republic's establishment) and 2004 (the year of its EU accession), the topic of migration was virtually absent from political, public, and media discourse.¹³ A considerable discourse transformation regarding migration in Slovakia occurred during the migrant and refugee crisis in Europe since 2015.¹⁴ The influx of migrants, particularly from the Middle East and North Africa, led to migration becoming a political and debated issue, significantly influencing the 2016 Slovak elections.¹⁵ Security

⁶ Bargerová, 17–36.

⁷ Přívarová.

⁸ Bargerová.

⁹ IOM Slovakia. "Migration in Slovakia." Last modified March 27, 2023. <https://www.iom.sk/en/migration/migration-in-slovakia.html>.

¹⁰ OECD, "International Migration Outlook 2024: Slovak Republic."

¹¹ Migration and Home Affairs, "Migrant Integration in Slovakia."

¹² IOM Slovakia. "Migration in Slovakia."

¹³ Bargerová.

¹⁴ Karolewski, Benedikter, 98–132.

¹⁵ Mesežnikov.

concerns¹⁶ became a vital aspect of the political discourse surrounding migration.¹⁷ More recently, following the military invasion by Russia in February 2022, Slovakia has experienced a continuous influx of people fleeing Ukraine which we will explore further.

This article, designed as a qualitative study, examines the evolving role of Slovak local governments in the process of Ukrainian migrants' integration after the 2022 Russian invasion. We identify the main challenges for local governments including insufficient resources, gaps in legislation, and the lack of effective coordination between central institutions, non-governmental organisations and local authorities. Furthermore, the article draws attention to the most effective strategies currently employed by Slovak sub-national governments in their attempts to facilitate the integration of Ukrainian migrants. The strategies include the provision of linguistic instruction, employment support services for those seeking to enter the labour market, as well as programs and activities for children and young people. Utilising both qualitative and quantitative data, the article investigates the factors that either enhance or hinder the success of these integration measures.

Research emphasises the need for better inter-institutional collaboration, better laws and more flexible access to funding and humanitarian needs. It also underlines the importance of local governments working together to help Ukrainian migrants fit into Slovak society. Our critical approach demonstrates the importance of local governance in crisis response and the need for continued collaboration. To address these challenges, we need stable financial support, better coordination, clear long-term policies for refugees, targeted integration programmes and better governance.

¹⁶ Mihálik, Jankola, 1–25.

¹⁷ Filipec, Mosneaga, Walter.

II. Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic in the 21st Century

The evolution of migration policy in Slovakia has been shifted several times since its independence in 1993. As we mentioned earlier, Slovakia was primarily a country of emigration due to political and economic challenges.¹⁸ However, after its accession to the European Union in 2004, the number of migrants in Slovakia increased. This rise in immigration is driven by factors such as family reunification, marriage, business, and education.¹⁹ Economic reasons also motivate some internal migration within Slovakia, with a significant percentage of respondents in under-developed regions expressing a desire to move for better opportunities.²⁰ After Slovakia's entry into the European Union in 2004, its labor market opened to EU citizens, which increased the immigration resulting mainly in an influx of workers.²¹ On the other hand, Slovakia was required to adopt EU laws related to migration, the protection of migrants' rights and their integration.²² Slovakia joined the Schengen Area in 2007 which helped opening the borders for simplified movement of people within the EU, but also created new challenges for external border protection and the regulation of illegal migration. Despite often being a transit country, Slovakia's international migration patterns were largely shaped by its history, with only few permanently settled migrants.²³ The 2015 migration crisis was also a critical point in Slovakia's migration policy. As Gruszczynski and Friedery argue, Slovakia engaged in a contentious debate with the European Union regarding the distribution of refugees based on established

¹⁸ Divinský.

¹⁹ Štefančík, Stradiotová, Seresová, 965–981.

²⁰ Kahanec, Kureková.

²¹ Přívarová, Rievajová, Galstyan, Gavurová, 305–322.

²² Filipec, Borárosová, 55–71.

²³ Práznovská, 2019, 211–219.

quotas.²⁴ This period gave rise to extensive discourse on the matter of migration policy, with Slovakia adopting a position of opposition to the implementation of mandatory quotas, a stance that aligned with the positions of other Central European countries.²⁵ As illustrated in Table 1, there has been a clear trend in the number of asylum grants from 1993 to 2025.

TABLE 1: Number of Asylum Applications and First Instance Decisions in Years (1993–2023)

Year	Applications Total	Asylum Granted	Subsidiary Protection Granted	Negative Decisions	Cessation of Procedure
1993–2003	33289	459	x	1560	28499
2004	11395	15	x	1592	11782
2005	3549	25	x	827	2930
2006	2849	8	x	861	1940
2007	2642	14	82	1177	1693
2008	909	22	66	416	457
2009	822	14	98	330	460
2010	541	15	57	243	284
2011	491	12	91	120	232
2012	732	32	104	264	340
2013	441	15	34	137	292
2014	331	14	99	99	137
2015	330	8	41	72	128
2016	146	16	12	56	35
2017	166	29	25	34	73
2018	178	5	37	46	69
2019	232	9	19	51	179
2020	282	11	27	40	177

²⁴ Gruszczynski, Friedery, 221–244.

²⁵ Práznovská, 2023, 95–117.

2021	370	29	13	90	212
2022	547	23	48	76	387
2023	416	37	43	77	322
2024	165	41	22	59	58
31.3.2025	66	17	7	12	23
Total	60889	870	925	8239	50709

Source: Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, "Štatistiky," 2025

Building on this historical context, the present study explores the socio-economic challenges currently being experienced by Slovak migration policy, particularly with regard to the labour market and the integration of workers from non-EU countries. Recent economic growth has attracted primarily unskilled workers, but Slovakia is also focused on labour migration, including integration issues, and aims to attract high-skilled experts. Conversely, Slovakia grapples with deficiencies in institutional coordination, an absence of reliable data, and ambiguous objectives within its migration strategy. Brain drain, defined as the emigration of skilled professionals, constitutes a significant challenge for the country.²⁶

The Slovak migration policy reflects both national legislation and EU directives. As an EU member state, it aligns its immigration regulations with broader European frameworks. Stojarová frames the legislation on migration in Slovakia into five stages²⁷:

- Alien Act from 1992 which was adopted during Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (Act no. 123/1992 Coll.)
- Slovak Alien Act (Act no. 73/1995 Coll.) and Refugee Act (Act no. 283/1995) which have been in force until 2002 and replaced by Act no. 48/2002 Coll. on Residence of foreigners

²⁶ Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky, Mиграčná politika Slovenskej republiky s výhľadom do roku 2025 (Bratislava: Ministerstvo vnútra SR, schválené vládou 8. septembra 2021), available at <https://www.minv.sk/?zamer-migracnej-politiky-slovenskej-republiky&subor=419162>.

²⁷ Stojarová, 97–114.

that has replaced the original Alien Act; and Act no. 480/2002 Coll. on Asylum which has replaced the Refugee Act

- Concept of the Migration of the Slovak Republic approved in 2005
- Concept of the Integration of Foreigners in the Slovak Republic from 2009 and the Act on Residence of Aliens (Act no. 404/2011 Coll.)
- Amendments to the Alien Act and the „migration crisis“ since 2011.²⁸

One of the current strategic documents governing migration in Slovakia is the Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2025.²⁹ There is no update yet considering the lifespan of the document.

In the past, strategic documents were focused on the migration and asylum policy of the Slovak Republic:

- *Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic overlooking the year 2020,*
- *Conceptual intentions of the Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic for the period 2011–2015,*
- *The Concept of the Integration of Foreigners in the Slovak Republic 2009–2011,*
- *The Concept of Migration Policy 2005–2010.*³⁰

The above mentioned strategies, concepts and legislation confirm that Slovak migration policies are governed by a comprehensive legislative framework. The Act on Residence of Foreigners (404/2011) and the Act on Asylum (480/2002) form the cornerstone of migration law, addressing the legal aspects of residence and asylum-seeking. Additionally, adherence to EU directives and the Schengen Agreement shapes the country's approach to migration.

²⁸ Mihálik, Garaj.

²⁹ Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky, Migračná politika Slovenskej republiky s výhľadom do roku 2025.

³⁰ Mihálik, Garaj.

No significant migration legislation was adopted before Slovakia joined the EU. The Principles of Migration Policy (adopted through Government Resolution no. 846/1993) marked the start of Slovakia's migration policy after Czechoslovakia's breakup. However, the Slovak government focused on asylum policy rather than the broader migration framework,³¹ and the Principles failed³² to address specific foreign migration challenges.³³

The Challenges of Slovak Migration and Integration Policies

Joining the EU hasn't made Slovakia more liberal on migration, even though it is part of this global movement. The government has hesitantly followed EU policies, but not on matters of mandatory relocation. In 2015 it blocked the relocation of 120,000 asylum seekers. The European Court of Justice later approved the relocation, but this didn't make the EU more generous on migration.³⁴

Slovakia opposed mandatory quotas along with the Visegrad Group states, calling for a voluntary approach in accepting refugees.³⁵ The Slovak government argued about the technical ineffectivity and unfeasibility of the quotas, stressing the importance of protecting national interests and sovereignty in migration matters. Central Europe's migration policy is cautious, with several countries choosing national solutions over European initiatives. This demonstrates the tension between EU membership and national sovereignty, which is important for Slovakia's approach to European migration initiatives.³⁶

³¹ Práznovská, 2019.

³² Bolečeková,.

³³ Divinský.

³⁴ Folk,.

³⁵ Zachová, Zgut, Gabrižová, Zbytniewska, Strzałkowski.

³⁶ Jaroslav Mihálik and Matúš Jankola, "European Migration Crisis: Positions, Polarization and Conflict Management of Slovak Political Parties"

The Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2025 constitutes an ambitious and broadly conceived document aimed at addressing the main challenges associated with migration. It includes measures to support legal migration, prevent illegal migration flows, and integrate migrants. Despite its positive aspects, however, the policy faces criticism from various perspectives, which we elaborate further in this chapter. International migration, according to Castles and Miller, is a phenomenon that requires comprehensive, long-term sustainable, and flexible approaches.³⁷ This reflects an attempt to harmonize Slovak policy with European Union legislation, while maintaining security and human rights. However, the dominance of security aspects may lead to an insufficient consideration of the root causes of migration, such as conflicts, economic inequalities, and climate change.³⁸

The primary objective of Slovak policy is the combatting of illegal migration and the protection of the EU's external borders; a goal which is aligned with the legislation and strategies established by the Union. However, this approach may fail to address the causes of migration, focusing only on security, as argued by Carrera and Lannoo.³⁹ Although the Slovak migration policy highlights the need for integration, its practical implementation lags behind. According to Gallo Kriglerová et al., insufficient systemic measures complicate the involvement of immigrants in society and the labor market.⁴⁰ The policy fails to effectively address language and cultural barriers, which remain significant obstacles to integration.⁴¹

Slovakia faces a significant outflow of skilled professionals, and reintegration programs have proven to be unattractive.⁴² Francelová

³⁷ Castles, Miller.

³⁸ Geddes, Scholten.

³⁹ Carrera, Lannoo.

⁴⁰ Kriglerová, Kadlečíková, Chudžíková, Píšová.

⁴¹ Bolečeková, Olejárová, 225–239.

⁴² Behúňová, Oboňová.

Hrabovská suggests that effective reintegration policies must offer competitive conditions and incentives for the return of professionals, yet such policies are notably absent in the Slovak context, hindering efforts to reverse the brain drain.⁴³ The growing influence of misinformation and negative prejudices against migrants presents a significant challenge.⁴⁴ The authors emphasize that public institutions should provide accurate and balanced communication to combat misinformation, a goal the current policy fails to achieve effectively, thus perpetuating public misconceptions (Ibid).

Finally, issues of climate migration are marginally reflected in Slovak policy. Scissa and Martin warn that climate change will increasingly influence migration flows, making it crucial to integrate this dimension into future policy planning and measures.⁴⁵ However, Slovak policy has yet to adequately consider the potential impact of climate-related migration.

In response to these identified shortcomings, academic research and practical experience suggest several remedial measures to improve Slovakia's migration policy. The introduction of inclusive programs to support the integration of migrants, which would consider their language and cultural needs, is one such measure.⁴⁶ Additionally, strengthening cooperation with countries of origin and transit to mitigate conflicts and economic inequalities is essential.⁴⁷ Another important aspect is the implementation of public campaigns to promote a positive image of migration and combat misinformation.⁴⁸

Slovakia's migration policy represents an important step toward modern and effective migration management. Its success depends on adapting to challenges and implementing recommendations from

⁴³ Hrabovská.

⁴⁴ Komendantova, Erokhin, Albano, 168.

⁴⁵ Scissa, Martin.

⁴⁶ Drozd, Duchovič, Lukačovičová, Paulenová, Tašká.

⁴⁷ Geddes, Scholten.

⁴⁸ Szakács, Bognár.

critical analysis. Managing migration requires a systematic approach considering national and international contexts. The strategy also takes Slovakia's historical experience of significant emigration, due to socioeconomic and political issues such as labour outflow, into account. This shapes Slovakia's current stance on migration, combining caution with pragmatism.

Value frameworks and strategic priorities are central to Slovakia's migration policy, with a focus on pragmatism and security. Migration is viewed as a tool for economic development, but must be strictly controlled to ensure it doesn't threaten security. Three main areas of focus reflect these concerns: border protection, combating illegal migration and development cooperation with third countries. This suggests a preference for addressing migration challenges away from its own territory. On the other hand, the internal dimension highlights the need for an integrated policy towards foreigners, but such integration is conditioned on respecting Slovakia's cultural, linguistic, and legal norms. This creates the impression of an asymmetric integration process, where foreigners are expected to adapt to the majority society, which remains unchanged.

Slovakia must balance its commitments to the EU with its national priorities. It is willing to cooperate with the EU but wants flexibility on obligations like asylum seeker relocation. It must also address demographic issues, an ageing population and labor shortages.⁴⁹

The document also reflects the influence of globalization and geopolitical contexts. Slovakia recognises the growing importance of globalisation in migration. Its strategic position between Eastern and Western Europe affects its geopolitical interests, particularly with the Western Balkans and Ukraine. These countries are important to Slovakia, especially during war conflicts, economic inequalities and climate

⁴⁹ "Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic," Bratislava: Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, 2014.

change. The document also addresses rising xenophobic sentiments and misinformation. The policy is neutral and aims to maintain order. The Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2025 is pragmatic, security-based, and economically focused. Slovakia does not see migration as an opportunity for cultural and societal transformation. Instead, it is controlling, restricting and regulating in migration flows. This may be effective in addressing short-term challenges, but could limit Slovakia's potential to engage with the multicultural discourse within the EU.

Criticism of the migration or integration policies has been voiced by various organizations including the Supreme Audit Office of the Slovak Republic.⁵⁰ The Human Rights League points out the lack of specificity and timeliness in the document. They argue that the proposal is overly general, without a deeper analysis of the situation or an evaluation of previous measures.⁵¹ Furthermore, there was insufficient participation in the creation process, as non-governmental organizations and representatives of migrants were not invited to consultations, which, according to the League, contradicts the principles of open governance (Ibid). Finally, the document overlooks the need for institutional reforms, such as the establishment of a separate immigration office to handle the natural process of integration and naturalization, a step that had previously been considered in the government's program declarations (Ibid).

In conclusion, the migration policy of Slovakia reflects a combination of national security interests, economic priorities, and cautious pragmatism. While it aligns with EU commitments, its focus on restrictive measures may limit its capacity to contribute to a more dynamic and inclusive European migration discourse.

⁵⁰ Supreme Audit Office of the Slovak Republic, "Bez jasného cieľa a merania výsledkov v integrácii cudzincov Slovensko prešľapáva na mieste," 2025.

⁵¹ The Human Rights League, "Pripomienky Ligy za ľudské práva k návrhu Migračnej politiky Slovenskej republiky s výhľadom do roku 2025," 2020

III. Slovak Local Governance Framework and Key Responsibilities

Slovakia is a unitary country with two distinct subnational tiers of self-governing bodies (municipalities and regions/Higher Territorial Units). Municipalities gained autonomous authority in 1991; regional governments were established in 2001. Following the collapse of communism, this dual system of public administration was fully re-established in 1990. Slovakia currently has eight Self-Governing Regions and approximately 2,890 municipalities. The capital city, Bratislava and the eastern metropolis, Košice hold special status.⁵²

In Slovakia's decentralized system of state authority, regional and local governments possess distinct competencies, finances, and administrative structures as shown in the Table 2.

TABLE 2: Key Responsibilities of Slovak Municipalities and Regions

Category	Municipalities (Examples of Responsibilities)	Regions (Examples of Responsibilities)
General Public Services (Administration)	Internal administration; Management of movable property and real estate; Building permits; Registry offices.	Internal administration; International and trans-regional cooperation.
Public Order and Safety	Municipal police; Public order; Fire-fighting; Civil defence (in co-operation with State bodies).	Civil defence (in co-operation with State bodies).
Economic Affairs / Transports	Supervision of economic activities; Consumer protection; Local roads; Local public transport; Tourism.	Transport (roads, railways); Regional economic development.
Environment Protection	Protection of the environment; Sewage; Heating; Refuse collection and disposal.	Protection of the environment.

⁵² There are a total of 2927 municipalities and city parts in Slovakia. This number includes 17 city parts belonging to Bratislava and 22 city parts belonging to Košice. If we consider Bratislava and Košice as single units and exclude their city parts, the total number of municipalities is 2890.

Housing and Community Amenities	Housing and town planning; Cemeteries; Public lighting; Water supply; Parks and open spaces; Urban regeneration; Social housing.	Housing and town planning.
Health	First aid stations and primary medical centers.	Secondary hospitals; Management of non-State healthcare (e.g., psychiatric hospitals, dental services).
Culture and Recreation	Sports facilities; Cultural facilities.	Regional theatres; Libraries; Museums; Galleries; Cultural centers.
Education	Pre-school and primary schools; Kindergarten and nurseries.	Secondary, professional, art and vocational schools; Construction and maintenance of buildings; Payment of teachers (on behalf of the State).
Social Welfare	Social aid for elderly and children.	Homes for children.
Crisis Management / Civil Protection	Develop analysis of possible emergency events; Prepare protection plans; Organize civil protection training; Oversee rescue operations; Plan and execute evacuation; Provide emergency accommodation; Create municipal civil protection units; Keep records of evacuated persons.	Analyze possible emergencies within Regions; Plan and ensure coordination of evacuation; Train people for self-defense; Promote civil defense activities; Provide necessary materials for regional analysis and action plans to District office.

Source: *World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment. Slovak Republic, 2025*

There is a degree of overlap in crisis management responsibilities, with municipalities focusing on local-level planning and immediate response, while regions provide broader coordination and analytical support. The Ministry of Interior plays a central role in coordinating national and regional risk assessments, and municipalities are specifically responsible for preparing local flood plans, which are crucial documents for managing common risks in Slovakia.

IV. Immediate Response and Emergency Measures: The Role of Local Authorities

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was Europe's largest and deadliest conflict since World War II.⁵³ The aggression caused an immediate humanitarian crisis, with 11 million people fleeing within the first eight months.⁵⁴ Slovakia, a neighbour, became a transit and host state for those seeking refuge. Since February 2022, over 840,000 refugees have been registered, and as of February 2024, the temporary protection status was granted to more than 139,000 Ukrainians.⁵⁵ The majority are women, children, and older adults, presenting unique and complex needs (Ibid). The influx caused substantial logistical challenges for Slovak authorities and exacerbated existing internal dynamics.⁵⁶

Beyond the central state authorities, these sub-national entities have been instrumental in addressing the significant influx of individuals fleeing the war in Ukraine. Their crucial contributions include the provision of healthcare, shelter and accommodation, educational enrollment (kindergartens, primary, and secondary schools), consultations, psychological support, child vaccinations, and social care services. As interpreted in the Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan: *"local communities have taken a welcoming stance, with humanitarian actors, civil society, the private sector and community volunteers complementing the governmentled efforts by providing significant support at border reception points and urban areas."*⁵⁷ These efforts led to strengthening the capacities of local institutions providing services both for refugees and local communities *"to streamline the legislative*

⁵³ Bowen.

⁵⁴ Seberíni, Lacová, Gubalová, Svidroňová.

⁵⁵ UNICEF, "Delivering Humanitarian Cash Transfers to Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia," 2024.

⁵⁶ Ogrodnik.

⁵⁷ UNICEF, "UNICEF Emergency Response Office Slovakia," 2023, 8.

framework and create a favourable protection environment to enable refugees' socio-economic inclusion and integration".⁵⁸

In the first months, local authorities were vital frontline responders, providing essential services such as shelter and food, working closely with NGOs and international bodies such as UNICEF and UNHCR. This highlighted the role of civil society in complementing the state. Local governments shifted their focus towards long-term strategic integration. As the crisis evolved from an emergency to a protracted situation,

From the onset of Russia's full-scale military intervention in Ukraine, the Slovak Republic has extended multifaceted support through its state administration at various levels, local government bodies, and the private and civil sectors. Between 2022 and early 2024, this support encompassed:

- At the state administration and main institutional levels (Government of the Slovak Republic, National Council, President of the Slovak Republic, ministries), Slovakia's support for Ukraine has included: dispatching a diplomatic convoy to Kyiv; providing humanitarian and development aid; voting in favor of UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russian aggression; formally receiving the Ukrainian ambassador; advocating for Ukraine's EU membership; planning for involvement in Ukraine's reconstruction; establishing initial reception points; conducting public information campaigns for Ukrainian arrivals; creating a temporary refuge system for displaced individuals; issuing statements strongly condemning Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory; supporting the establishment of an OECD office and analytical unit in Kyiv; sharing refugee stories on public broadcaster RTVS; supplying military equipment; monitoring the situation and collecting relevant statistics; and implementing financial assistance programs for those arriving from Ukraine.

⁵⁸ UNICEF, "UNICEF Emergency Response Office Slovakia," 2023, 16.

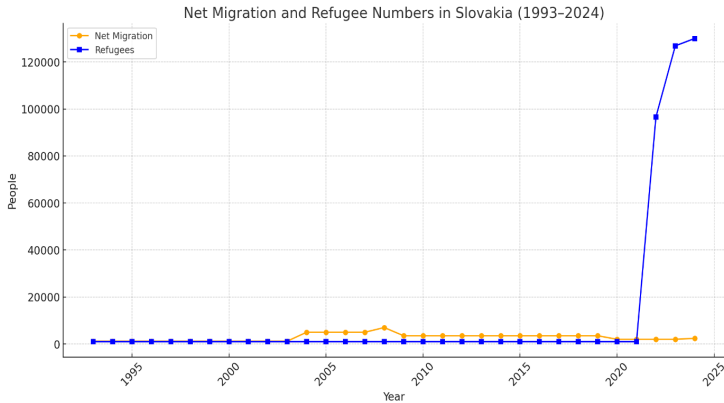
- At the municipal level, support has involved: assisting in the establishment of temporary accommodation facilities; providing aid at border crossings; offering financial and material support; re-establishing cooperative relationships between Slovak and Ukrainian cities; and ongoing monitoring and assistance efforts.
- The private and civil sectors, including municipalities, have contributed through: organizing financial and material aid collections for Ukraine; preparing Slovak businesses for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction; tracking data and monitoring the situation; providing healthcare, psychological support, and social assistance; offering various forms of aid and remote support; arranging temporary housing; providing Slovak language courses; conducting interviews; facilitating accommodation; supporting education and social inclusion; delivering food and medicine; and offering financial aid to individuals arriving from Ukraine.

Since the outbreak of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, Slovakia has experienced an unprecedented number of new arrivals displaced from Ukraine. This is illustrated in Chart 1 below. More than 130 000 such people have applied for temporary protection by 2025, leading to significant pressure on public authorities to adopt various local integration measures. These include, for example, the development of strategic documents for integration at the local level.

One of the most immediate priorities for Slovak authorities was providing emergency accommodation and services. In the Košice Self-governing Region, officials established shelters in hostels and school dormitories, while information stands at transport hubs helped refugees navigate their new environment. A free hotline, available in Slovak and Ukrainian, and free transportation within the region further underscored the commitment to ensuring refugees' safety and mobility.⁵⁹

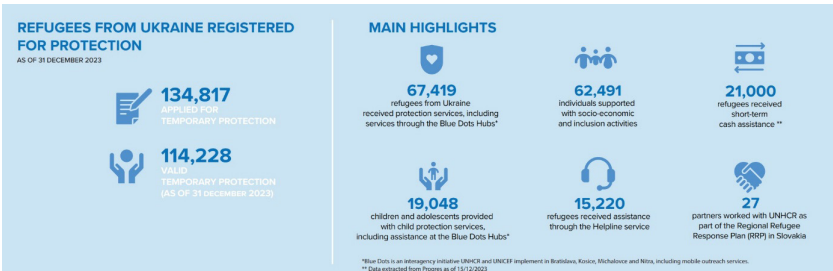
⁵⁹ Košice Regional Authority, "Všetky základné informácie k pomoci Ukrajine," 2022.

CHART 1: Net Migration and Refugee Numbers in Slovakia (1993–2024)



Source: *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UNRWA through UNHCR’s Refugee Data Finder at unhcr.org/refugee-statistics*

CHART 2: Ukraine Assistance Dashboard UNHCR Slovakia – December 2023 Achievements



Source: *Slovakia: UNHCR Achievements Report – December 2023, available online: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/107813>*

Nitra identified integration as a priority. The city adopted a comprehensive Strategy for the Integration of Foreigners, developed with input from the Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture and UNICEF Slovakia.⁶⁰ This strategy aims to integrate foreigners into Nitra

⁶⁰ "Strategy for the integration of foreigners (including refugees and displaced persons) in the city of Nitra with a outlook until 2035," 2024.

and is primarily for those involved in managing migration. It includes a migration and integration situation analysis. The plan outlines pathways to facilitate employment, education, housing and community involvement for refugees, with ambitious integration goals through 2035. Slovakia introduced a funding scheme allocating 12 million euros to municipalities for humanitarian and integration initiatives to support these efforts.

Equally important was ensuring access to healthcare and social services. Local governments worked with the Ministry of Interior and organizations such as UNHCR to provide schooling for refugee children and secure appropriate housing. These efforts aimed to balance immediate needs with the long-term sustainability of refugee support systems.⁶¹ Similar efforts have been introduced by regional authorities, especially in Prešov and Košice regions which are situated at the border with Ukraine. In Prešov the region set up accommodation for refugees in the former school which also includes social and psychological counseling. The temporary shelter has been used here by Ukrainian mothers with children. Trnava Region provided refugees from Ukraine with beds at dormitory. They also provide psychological and material assistance together with all important information. They helped the refugees to handle all administrative matters at the Foreign Police and the Labor Office. Additionally, the regional council of the Trnava Self-Governing Region canceled a memorandum on mutual cooperation with the government of the Leningrad region of the Russian Federation. This symbolical gesture expressed disagreement with the unjust unilateral aggression of Russia against Ukraine, accompanied by numerous civilian victims. At the same time, it has approved several measures allowing the helpful steps of regional self-government against refugees from Ukraine, including EUR 100,000 for humanitar-

⁶¹ UNHCR Slovakia, "Slovakia launches the 2025–2026 Refugee Response Plan for Ukrainian refugees," 2025.

ian purposes. Both Košice and Prešov regions have established free travel for Ukrainian citizens heading for Slovakia.

All regions have also introduced free hotlines for refugees from Ukraine to seek assistance, counselling and established humanitarian aid warehouses. Slovakia mobilized a broad wave of solidarity for a humanitarian response that involved state agencies, municipalities, individuals, and civil society organizations from the outset in a prompt, efficient, and humane manner. The UN agencies, such as UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, and WHO that provided support for Ukraine's refugee crisis response through its current municipal and government structures were warmly welcomed by the Slovak government.⁶²

The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, in cooperation with the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Development of Civil Society have prepared a new funding scheme for regional and local governments' authorities to financially contribute to humanitarian and integration activities and costs associated with such expenses. The primary effort was to focus on several key areas related to the quality of life, and therefore topics such as housing, education, employment, health or social care. These components of life of refugees from Ukraine in Slovakia are the aim of measures to support the integration of refunds at different levels and thus help the state to be most effectively integrated. Previously, the self-governing entities have used their own resources which was in direct opposition to government promise about reimbursing such costs. This funding scheme provided financial support to local governments in order to maintain their activities related to Ukrainian refugees lasting until the end of 2023 but using retroactivity since February 2022.⁶³ The eligibility of the funding scheme was

⁶² UNICEF, "UNICEF Emergency Response Office Slovakia," 2023.

⁶³ European Commission, "Slovakia: New funding scheme for municipalities and self-governments promotes the integration of people displaced from Ukraine," 2023.

granted to municipalities and self-governing regions including entities established or founded by them. The total sum allocated for this call was more than 12 million EUR.⁶⁴

Another call for applications was announced in March 2023 by the Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatisation of the Slovak Republic as a managing body for the Integrated Regional Operational Program. Financial contributions to support operations aimed at addressing migration challenges as a result of military aggression against Ukraine could have been reached by municipalities with a total fund allocation of EUR 126 916 400.⁶⁵

The Shift from Emergency to Long-Term Integration Strategies

As the humanitarian crisis evolved into a protracted displacement situation, Slovak local governments necessarily adapted their approach. Slovak local governments have shifted their approach towards more comprehensive and long-term integration strategies in various sectors. The plan for 2025–2026 is to move from emergency to integration. The Ministry of Interior and UNHCR have identified key priorities: refugee enrolment in schools, access to healthcare, and self-reliance.⁶⁶ The Slovak government reduced asylum seeker waiting times through 2022 legislative amendments and increased access to social services and counselling. Slovakia's approach is multi-pronged: emergency measures addressed urgent needs, while integration strategies (with financial support) ensured long-term assistance. Collaboration between local, international and national authorities was crucial in the establishment of a robust and sustainable framework for refugee as-

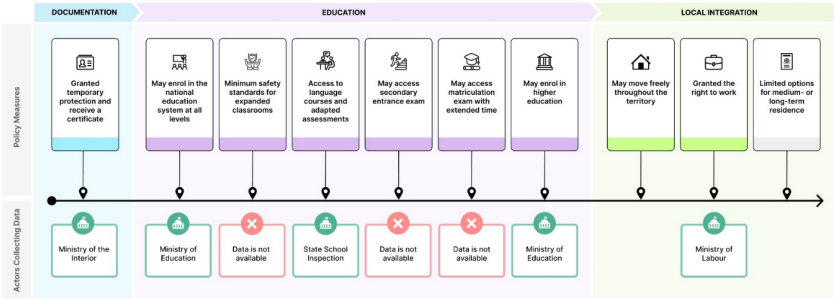
⁶⁴ Implementation Agency of Ministry of Labour, "Solidarita s Ukrajinou," 2023.

⁶⁵ ZMOS, "Výzva pre miestne samosprávy na riešenie migračných výziev v dôsledku vojenskej agresie voči Ukrajine," 2023.

⁶⁶ UNHCR Slovakia, "Slovakia launches the 2025–2026 Refugee Response Plan for Ukrainian refugees," 2025.

sistance (Scheme 1). This comprehensive response demonstrates Slovakia’s solidarity with Ukraine and sets a precedent for EU refugee policy.

SCHEME 1: Policy pathway for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia



Source: <https://www.unesco.org/en/ukraine-war/education/slovakia-support>

Integration Pillars

Local governments prioritized education as a primary focus. The Ministry of Interior has been actively engaged in intensive collaboration with local governments to facilitate the enrollment of refugee children in schools.⁶⁷ The City of Bratislava, for instance, in partnership with UNICEF, has developed a diverse range of support programs, including language courses for children and youth, and providing recreational opportunities through Leisure Centres.⁶⁸ By November 2024, a substantial majority of children aged 6 to 14 (93%) were attending primary schools, and 89.7% of those aged 15 to 17 continued their studies in secondary schools. Despite this high enrollment, language barriers continue to pose a significant obstacle to their full integration into the school environment.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ UNHCR Slovakia, "Slovakia launches the 2025–2026 Refugee Response Plan for Ukrainian refugees," 2025.

⁶⁸ UNICEF, "City of Bratislava, Eurocities and UNICEF call for continued solidarity and support for Ukrainian refugees as war persists," 2023 .

⁶⁹ European Commission, "Slovakia: Progress and challenges in the integration of people displaced from Ukraine," 2025.

Access to Healthcare for Temporary Protection status holders also saw an evolution. Initially, from January 2023, only those under 18 years of age had access to free emergency and primary healthcare, while adults were limited to emergency life-saving services.⁷⁰ However, recognizing the pressing need, the Government of Slovakia announced new legislation in June 2023 to extend social coverage, granting all TP holders, including adults, access to primary healthcare from September 2023. To bridge the gap during this transitional period, the Slovak Red Cross and IFRC implemented an innovative cash-for-health program (Ibid).

In terms of Employment, national policies are designed to eliminate legal obstacles and promote positive actions for integration into the labor market. By December 2023, 39,307 Ukrainian migrants were employed in Slovakia.⁷¹ A November 2024 study indicated that 67% of Ukrainian refugee respondents were engaged in paid work, with nearly two-thirds securing employment corresponding to their qualifications.⁷² Nevertheless, challenges persist, particularly for vulnerable groups such as single mothers, with 22.3% of workers on temporary contracts, leading to lower incomes and job instability. A notable disparity in earnings was also observed, with men earning significantly more than women (Ibid).

Securing decent and stable Housing remains a considerable challenge for many displaced persons. The reduction of financial support for accommodation providers has exacerbated this uncertainty, particularly affecting larger families and single mothers with children.⁷³

⁷⁰ Kuchumov, Šujanská.

⁷¹ Seberíni, Lacová, Gubalová, Svidroňová.

⁷² European Commission, "Slovakia: Progress and challenges in the integration of people displaced from Ukraine," 2025.

⁷³ European Commission, "Slovakia: Progress and challenges in the integration of people displaced from Ukraine," 2025.

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Local governments play key role in coordinating the response to the refugee crisis together with UNICEF, UNHCR and IFRC. These international organisations provide important services, including education, mental health support, and helping people to fit in with society. They are very important in managing cash assistance programmes.⁷⁴ The UNHCR is working on a plan to help refugees called the Refugee Response Plan 2025–2026. The plan is being run with the help of 19 other organisations, and more than half of these are from the countries where the refugees are. These partners are working to provide support to Ukrainian refugees and the communities that are hosting them.⁷⁵ Working together with Ukrainian cities across the border has also been very important. Projects like the one involving the City of Košice, which is working with partners from Slovakia and Norway, have increased cooperation between institutions in Ukraine. These plans look at things like good management, being open about what they are doing, and how they can improve their business. It should be noted that the project adapted to the wartime context by moving activities online and using saved funds to provide humanitarian aid.⁷⁶ In addition, an organisation called the “Ukrainian-Slovak House” was set up to help Kharkiv and Slovakia work together more closely. The Eurocities network has organised important meetings. The City of Bratislava works closely with other European towns and cities and UNICEF to share experiences and develop long-term plans for including refugees. This work always highlights the need for local governments to pro-

⁷⁴ UNICEF, "Delivering Humanitarian Cash Transfers to Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia," 2024.

⁷⁵ UNHCR Slovakia, "Slovakia launches the 2025–2026 Refugee Response Plan for Ukrainian refugees," 2025.

⁷⁶ EFTA, "Cities in the Enlarged European Area: Joint Development of Capacities of Public Institutions by Slovak-Ukrainian Cross-border Cooperation and Improving Integrity in Public Affairs (CEEa)," 2025.

vide ongoing financial support to effectively move from emergency responses to long-term strategies.⁷⁷

The data reveals a significant, often overlooked, economic benefit of refugee integration. The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, granting the right to work, directly enabled this economic contribution.⁷⁸ This challenges the common perception that refugees are solely a financial burden. Local governments, by facilitating access to services like education and healthcare (which enable employment), indirectly contribute to this economic boost. The fact that two-thirds of the direct assistance costs were covered by the EU further amplifies the net positive financial impact for Slovakia's national and, by extension, local budgets.⁷⁹ This supports the argument for investing in refugee integration, especially in employment and education. Viewing refugees as economic contributors, not just recipients of aid, can change policy towards integration measures that yield societal and economic benefits for host nations. Local governments can help by creating an environment that encourages employment and social inclusion.

This policy framework facilitated the observed evolution in local government roles from immediate humanitarian aid coordination to active, strategic integration efforts, demonstrates a critical adaptive capacity within Slovak local governance. Initially, they acted as crucial facilitators and conduits for immediate humanitarian aid, often relying on the rapid mobilization of NGOs and international partners. As the crisis persisted, their role matured into that of strategic integrators, actively shaping and implementing policies for long-term inclusion in education, healthcare, and social life. This evolution showcases their ability to move beyond reactive crisis management to proactive policy development and service delivery, reflecting a deeper understanding of the protracted nature of the displacement.

⁷⁷ UNICEF, "UNICEF Emergency Response Office Slovakia," 2023.

⁷⁸ Seberíni, Lacová, Gubalová, Svidroňová.

⁷⁹ Kulakova.

The following Table 3 details the key measures adopted by Slovak local governments and their crucial collaborations.

TABLE 3: Key Local Government Measures and Collaborations

Response Area	Specific Local Government Measures	Key Collaborating Partners
Humanitarian Aid / Reception	Provision of temporary shelter, food, basic supplies; Free local transport; Initial psychological and social support.	NGOs (Slovak Red Cross, People in Need, Slovak Humanitarian Council, Human Right League, Mareena, SME SPOLU); UN Agencies (UNICEF, UNHCR, IFRC); Volunteers; Central Government (Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Interior).
Crisis Management / Civil Protection	Local emergency planning and execution; Management of rescue operations; Provision of emergency accommodation; Maintenance of records for evacuated persons.	Regional departments of civil protection and crisis management (District offices); Ministry of Interior.
Education	Intensive efforts for school enrollment of refugee children; Provision of language courses for children and youth; Support for children in Leisure Centres.	Ministry of Interior; UNICEF; Eurocities; Local schools.
Healthcare	Coordination with health providers to ensure access; Support for primary health-care access for all TP holders.	Ministry of Interior; Slovak Red Cross; IFRC; Health insurance companies.
Employment Support	Facilitating access to labor markets; Coordination with Central Office of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family; Information provision on job opportunities.	Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family; UNHCR; UNICEF; Private sector.

Housing	Provision of emergency accommodation; Site mapping and monitoring of collective accommodation.	UNHCR; IOM; Accommodation providers.
Financial Assistance	Facilitating access to national Material Needs Benefit program; Partnering for Humanitarian Cash Transfers; Cash-for-shelter programs.	Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family; UNICEF; UNHCR; IFRC; Western Union.
Cross-Border Cooperation	Intensified institutional cooperation with Ukrainian cities (e.g., Košice-Uzhhorod) on good governance, transparency, business infrastructure; Allocation of funds for humanitarian aid to Ukraine; Organization of humanitarian convoys to Ukrainian cities.	Ukrainian cities (Uzhhorod, Kharkiv, etc.); FEMAN Association; Centre for Central European Cooperation.

Source: UNHCR Slovakia, “Slovakia launches the 2025–2026 Refugee Response Plan for Ukrainian refugees,” 2025; Andrea Seberíni, Žaneta Lacová, Jolana Gubalová, and Mária Murray Svidroňová. 2024. “The Challenges of Ukrainian Refugees in Slovakia – Labour Market Integration Aspects with the Help of NGOs,” 2024.

V. Conclusion

Slovakia’s decentralized local government structure, established after 1990, was crucial for a immediate humanitarian response during the initial crisis. Local municipalities and regions had existing laws and the ability to act independently of the central government. This local control allowed for fast and flexible actions on the ground, leading to a more organized initial response. This demonstrates that a strong, decentralized government with clear local responsibilities is key to a country’s ability to handle major crises effectively and build national resilience. The inherent local autonomy, distinct from central government directives, enabled agile actions that would otherwise have been significantly hampered.

Despite the commendable efforts and adaptive capacity demonstrated by Slovak local governments, several significant challenges and limitations continue to impact their ability to sustain and optimize refugee integration efforts.

First, the initial response to the humanitarian crisis highlighted a *“lack of experience, coupled with scarce infrastructure, insufficient legal framework and resourcing, and poor coordination”* among various actors, particularly within the Visegrad Group countries, including Slovakia.⁸⁰ While international and national support has been substantial, local governments continue to face significant financial limits. Although the European Union has funded a considerable portion of refugee assistance, there remains a pressing need for continued and stable financial support at the local level. This support is crucial to enable the transformation of emergency responses into long-term strategic approaches without compromising essential services for refugee children and host communities. The reduction of financial support for accommodation providers, for example, has already introduced uncertainty regarding housing stability for refugees. The sheer volume of displaced individuals (over 139,000 Temporary Protection holders in a country of approximately 5.5 million inhabitants) has inevitably strained human resources and administrative capacities at the local level.

Local government responses are inevitably influenced by broader national political and economic contexts. The situation in Slovakia has been challenging due to its unstable political climate. The central government is struggling to make decisions about important issues because of arguments within the ruling coalition and the need to deal with the pandemic, energy crisis and war in Ukraine.⁸¹ It is challenging to implement effective policies and ensure fair resource distribution when confronted with significant challenges, which places additional pressure on local communities. The Ukrainian refugee crisis exposed

⁸⁰ Seberíni, Lacová, Gubalová, Svidroňová.

⁸¹ Nemec, Flaška, Kološta, Malová, Guasti.

significant flaws in Slovakia's governance system, particularly in its interaction with local administration. It is clear that when there are clear legal rules for local self-government, big problems like political interference, corruption, and making policies without evidence can stop us from responding to a crisis in a strong and lasting way. These challenges can strain the capacity of local administrative entities.

The shifting national stance on aid only adds to this complexity. Despite initial strong diplomatic, humanitarian, and military support for Ukraine, the government under Prime Minister Robert Fico announced a halt to military aid in late 2023. The Prime Minister has also warned that he will stop all humanitarian aid and significantly reduce or completely withdraw benefits for Ukrainian war refugees if certain reciprocal measures with Ukraine are not met. This creates considerable uncertainty and potential challenges for local governments, which are heavily reliant on national policy frameworks and financial support for their integration programs. Local governments are significantly dependent on national policy frameworks and financial support. This means that their commendable efforts in refugee integration are highly vulnerable to shifts in central government political will and priorities. For effective long-term refugee integration, there is a critical need for national policies that are insulated from short-term political fluctuations and are based on evidence (e.g. economic benefits of integration). International partners must explore mechanisms to directly support local governments and civil society. These mechanisms are the key to making sure that essential services continue, especially when people in the country are not as committed. This shows how important local groups like the Association of Towns and Villages of Slovakia (ZMOS) are in explaining what municipalities need and what problems they have.

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