

DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: THE FOCUS ON UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

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I. Introduction

Diversity management has been resonating among the Czech society now more than before. With the influx of Ukrainian refugees, the country had to adopt many new measures and policies in order to manage the situation that emerged almost immediately after the Russian invasion in Ukraine in February 2022. Having Ukrainian children enrolled into Czech schools has been one of many issues related to this topic, which has been brought into the public discussion. Yet, the case of the Czech Republic and its experience is important as it shows the engagement of actors at the governmental, regional and municipal levels.

The main source of understanding the status and rights of Ukrainians within the Czech Republic can be found in the law. So-called “Lex Ukraine” was the first established law at the institutional level that became effective on 21st March 2022. It is important because it sets conditions for the temporary protection of the refugee (in accordance with the EU law) and also divides competencies among three levels of the state actors when it comes to the accommodation and access to health care.¹ On June 12, 2024, the government approved the amendment to the law Lex Ukraine 7, which was prepared by the Ministry of the Interior. The amendment will enable Ukrainian refugees who

¹ Filipec, Macková, Medová, 1–24.

are economically self-sufficient and independent of the benefit system to obtain regular residence status. Instead of temporary protection, they will now be able to obtain long-term residence under the Act on Residence of Foreigners. This will enable the Ukrainians who are economically independent, do not receive any benefits and who want to live in the Czech Republic for a long time, to stay and get a long-term residence.² However, the income threshold is limited to a majority of refugees and many of them will continue to stay in the Czech Republic under the framework of temporary protection.

The temporary protection enables Ukrainians to participate in the labour market and while its application varies across EU countries, it is an important tool which gives certain benefits to its holders. However, all EU states set their own rules about application of the directive. Temporary protection is a legal mechanism designed to offer immediate and short-term refuge to individuals fleeing conflict, generalized violence, or humanitarian crises.³ Unlike refugee status determined under the 1951 Refugee Convention, temporary protection is typically granted on a group basis and often involves fewer procedural safeguards.⁴ It is characterized by expedited access to shelter, residency rights, and often basic social services, while remaining limited in duration and scope.

The European Union activated its Temporary Protection Directive in 2022 (after having been first drafted in 2001) to respond to the large-scale displacement caused by the war in Ukraine, granting displaced persons immediate access to residence, education, and employ-

² Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. (2024). Vláda schválila Lex Ukrajina 7. Ekonomicky soběstační uprchlíci z Ukrajiny budou moci získat dlouhodobý pobyt. [The government approved Lex Ukraine 7. Economically self-sufficient refugees from Ukraine will be able to obtain long-term residence.] <https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/vlada-schvalila-lex-ukrajina-7-ekonomicky-sobestacni-uprchlici-z-ukrajiny-budou-moci-ziskat-dlouhodoby-pobyt.aspx>

³ UNHCR. (2014). Guidelines on Temporary Protection or Stay Arrangements.

⁴ Foster, Lambert.

ment without the need for individual asylum claims.⁵ Similarly to the EU, temporary protection works in other geographical contexts such as in the United States or Latin American countries. While temporary protection schemes provide urgent humanitarian relief, scholars have raised concerns over their ambiguity and the potential for extended temporariness without durable solutions.⁶

This study aims to explore the evolving perception of Ukrainian migration to the Czech Republic and the corresponding institutional and societal responses, with particular emphasis on the role of education in the integration of Ukrainian students. This chapter will now turn to discussing the concept of diversity management and the background of migration policies in the Czech Republic. It will then delve into the methodology of this study and its findings. Finally, conclusion and policy implications follow.

II. Understanding the concept of diversity management

Before diving into the specifics of the Czech Republic, it is important to clarify how to define and explain diversity management and other related terms. The first among them is *diversity*, which is a noticeable heterogeneity referring to identities among people existing in social surroundings. *Heterogeneity* is the quality of being diverse and not comparable in kind. Another term worth explaining is a *diversity of workplace* that includes the differences relating to human beings such as ethnic heritage, race, sexual orientation, mental/physical abilities and characteristics, age and gender that are not changeable within the company staff.⁷ *Diversity management*, originated in the US, was later introduced to Europe in the 1990s. Although, in practice, this type

⁵ European Commission. (2022). EU Temporary Protection Directive: Ukraine crisis response.

⁶ Gammeltoft-Hansen, Tan, 28–56.

⁷ Danullis, Dehling, Pralica.

of management has started to develop and to be implemented just recently within the European companies.⁸ The basis of diversity management concept can be seen in the natural substance of diversity existing in the human society.⁹ It refers to organizational strategies and practices aimed at creating a more inclusive work environment where differences such as ethnicity, gender, age, religion, and other aspects are valued and respected.

It is also important to emphasize why diversity management is crucial for business success, innovation, and social cohesion. It often includes fight against stereotypes, prejudice and all kind of discrimination due to the individual perceptions and assumptions. The aim of diversity management is to focus on the benefits and avoid different approaches from people within a company.¹⁰ Within the concept of diversity management, there are many components that should be considered (e.g., ethnicity, nationality, cultures, demography, competencies, organizational functions and processes, network...). These can be seen as a limitation.

European diversity management reflects a more complex context shaped by multiple countries with different histories of immigration, minority relations, and legal frameworks.¹¹ While anti-discrimination laws exist broadly across the EU,¹² many European countries emphasize integration and social cohesion over explicit affirmative action.¹³ The focus is often on managing diversity related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, and recently migration status, with particular sensitivity to historical memories of conflict, nationalism, and social welfare con-

⁸ Ivancevich, Gilbert, 75–92.

⁹ Eger et al.

¹⁰ Danullis, Dehling, Pralica.

¹¹ Eger et al.

¹² European Commission. (2024). Governance of migrant integration in Czechia. https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/country-governance/governance-migrant-integration-czechia_en

¹³ Schmid et al., 149–164.

siderations.¹⁴ European diversity management practices frequently prioritize intercultural dialogue, inclusion policies embedded within broader social policies, and legal protections without necessarily using explicit quotas.¹⁵

Another difference lies in its scope: The US primarily uses the term *diversity management* with a strong HR focus, whereas Europe often refers to intercultural management or integration policies involving public institutions and social actors rather than the workplace.¹⁶ Additionally, the European approach tends to balance individual rights with group rights and collective integration, while the US model emphasizes individual identity and empowerment.¹⁷

In the Czech Republic, the concept of diversity management has become important especially after the country joined European Union in 2004 as it opened up and had easier and better access to international workers.¹⁸ The period after 2000 has also led to the implementation of more restrictive migration policies in the Czech Republic, reflecting broader regional trends in securitizing migration and prioritizing state control. After the EU accession in 2004 and increasing integration into the Schengen Area, the Czech Republic restructured its migration governance framework to align with EU standards, but this alignment was accompanied by tighter visa regimes, stricter border controls, and more selective admission criteria.¹⁹ These changes were particularly evident in the treatment of non-EU migrants and asylum seekers, with policy shifts emphasizing temporary labour migration over long-term integration.²⁰

¹⁴ Vertovec, Wessendorf.

¹⁵ Eger et al.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kymlicka.

¹⁸ Eger et al.

¹⁹ Drbohlav, 389–409.

²⁰ Baršová, Barša.

III. Historical and socio-political background of the Czech Republic

Until the 1990s, the Czech Republic primarily served as a transit country for migrants. According to the European Commission, the number of migrants residing in the Czech Republic today is fourteen times higher than in 1989. Historically there has always been a large number of ex-Soviet citizens seeking international protection as well as increased labour migration due to a significant economic growth the country experienced in the late 2000s.²¹ While transit migration had existed earlier, it became significantly more prominent during the 2015–2016 European refugee crisis. Following the 2015–2016 European refugee crisis, Czech migration policy became more restrictive, emphasizing border security and limiting refugee intake, reflecting widespread public scepticism towards large-scale asylum migration. At the same time, policies supporting integration – particularly in education, labour market access, and social services – were developed but often remained fragmented. Recent years have seen legislative adjustments, such as the Lex Ukraine acts, aimed at providing temporary protection and facilitating the integration of Ukrainian refugees following the 2022 Russian invasion.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered unprecedented migration flows, when its neighbouring countries, regions and cities were significantly affected. The Czech Republic has been a country hosting the largest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita among the EU countries.²² In total, over 530,000 Ukrainians were granted Temporary Protection status in the country. Currently, there are around 360,000 refugees with an active status.²³ Since the people

²¹ European Commission. (2024). Governance of migrant integration in Czechia. https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/country-governance/governance-migrant-integration-czechia_en

²² Klimešová, Šatava, Ondruška.

²³ Eurostat. (2024). Temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine – monthly

fled their country of origin in a relatively short time, authorities in other states did not have enough time to prepare all necessary tools to receive such numbers of refugees. Also, the reactions of the locals have been changing over time.

With all these changes – including the shift from being a transit country to a destination country and the impact of broader migration trends – the total number of foreigners residing in the Czech Republic has risen sharply. Between 2010 and 2022, the foreign population increased by nearly 70%, surpassing one million in 2022.²⁴ This growth reflects not only the position of the Czech Republic but also broader EU mobility patterns that have made the Czech Republic an increasingly attractive destination. As a result, various types of migration – including labour, family, and humanitarian – are now present in the country.

IV. Methodology

This study employs a document analysis to examine the situation of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic between 2022 and 2024. Document analysis was chosen as the primary method due to its suitability for exploring public attitudes and institutional responses over time. This approach allows for a systematic review and interpretation of texts to identify themes relevant to the experiences of displaced Ukrainians in the Czech Republic.

The paper has focused on the surveys of public opinions to illustrate the shifts in public perceptions of Ukrainian refugees. We have also included further publicly available documents produced between February 2022 and April 2024. Sources are comprised mainly of surveys of the Center for Public Opinion Research, which document the chang-

statistics. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics

²⁴ European Commission. (2024). Governance of migrant integration in Czechia. https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/country-governance/governance-migrant-integration-czechia_en

es in the public perception towards Ukrainian refugees. Government reports and legislative documents from the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic and other relevant state agencies were used as supporting sources. This research also draws on other documents from international organizations (e.g., UNHCR and the European Commission) and reports from Czech NGOs involved in refugee support.

Documents were retrieved through official websites. Inclusion criteria focused on relevance to Ukrainian refugee arrivals, public perception of refugee integration measures, and inclusion of Ukrainian students in the school system.

Documents were analysed thematically using an inductive approach. Special attention was given to attitude shifts over time, particularly comparing early responses in 2022 with developments in 2023–2024, allowing for an assessment of societal changes. The analysis was also sensitive to the ways different types of documents (e.g., official vs. civil society) presented and framed refugee-related issues.

V. Changing perspectives

During the period prior to the main refugee influx in 2022, Czech people looked at Ukrainians from different perspectives. Some saw them as immigrants who take jobs meant for Czechs, others perceived them as hard workers improving their life thanks to difficult jobs in construction companies. The fact that prevails even until nowadays is that Ukrainians accept jobs that local people are unwilling to take anymore. Unlike around 2018–2019, when most of the Czechs were indifferent towards Ukrainians, current surveys show different and changing results.²⁵

In a survey conducted from late May to mid-July 2023, the Centre for Public Opinion Research explored the attitudes of the Czech society towards accepting Ukrainian refugees. Respondents shared their views

²⁵ Kobzová.

on allowing refugees to settle permanently in the Czech Republic and whether they believe Ukrainian refugees are successfully integrating into society. The survey also examined public interest in the ongoing developments related to the refugee situation. Over two-fifths (43%) of Czech citizens expressed an interest in the state of Ukrainian refugees; 9% of respondents were in favour of the possibility of Ukrainian refugees' permanent residency and around 64% preferred their temporary stay and return to their home country. Almost half of the citizens (43%) think that Ukrainian refugees were integrated into a Czech society and approximately the same number thought the opposite.²⁶

About half a year later, between late January and early March 2024, the Centre for Public Opinion Research conducted another survey on the attitudes of Czech citizens toward Ukrainian refugees. The survey also assessed public interest in current issues related to the refugee situation. The results were as follows: around 40% of Czech citizens showed interest in the situation of the refugees from Ukraine. Approximately 11% of citizens were in favour of the possibility of permanent residency of Ukrainian refugees, while another 60% of people preferred only temporary stay followed by return to Ukraine. Another opinion of 59% of the respondents is that the Czech Republic has accepted more refugees than the country is able to handle.²⁷

When comparing the results from both surveys, the proportion of people opining that the Czech Republic is doing well in integrating the refugees increased to 55%. The vast majority of Czechs (87%) stated that they most often encounter refugees from Ukraine in public places. Around a fifth of the population have refugees among their

²⁶ Červenka (2023). Attitude of Czech Public to Accepting of Refugees from Ukraine – June/July 2023. Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění. <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/en/press-releases/political/international-relations/5715-attitude-of-czech-public-to-accepting-of-refugees-from-ukraine-summer-2023>

²⁷ Kyselá (2024). Attitude of Czech Public to Accepting of Refugees from Ukraine – February 2024. Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění. <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/en/press-releases/political/international-relations/5818-attitude-of-czech-public-to-accepting-of-refugees-from-ukraine-february-2024>

colleagues, friends or children's classmates. Around half of the citizens (52%) view refugees from Ukraine as a problem in the context of the country as a whole. But if focusing on the place of residence alone, only a quarter (24%) of the population considers refugees problematic there.²⁸ This shows the discrepancy between the discursive sphere and the lived experience of people in the Czech Republic.

Another survey was conducted from the end of January to the beginning of March 2024. This one focused on the public opinion about the conflict in Ukraine and support to refugees. The research sought to determine whether people are interested in the development of the situation in Ukraine and whether they consider Ukrainians to be a security threat to the Czech Republic, Europe and world peace, how citizens feel about the government's actions in support of Ukraine and how they assess possible measures by the international community. More than two-fifths of the citizens (43%) agree with the government's actions to support Ukraine, the overwhelming majority (54%) disagree with them. Two fifths (40%) of Czech citizens think that the Czech government supports Ukraine adequately, and only a small portion of the respondents stated that there is a lack of support (3%); more than half (54%) think they support Ukraine too much.²⁹ When compared with the last comparable survey from June and July 2023, it is possible to see that interest in the situation in Ukraine has not changed significantly.

While there was strong initial support for Ukrainian refugees, public sentiment has gradually declined, leading to increased polarization within Czech society. This shift indicates that while there is broad backing for temporary protection, there remains notable reluctance toward permanent settlement. As a result, the prevailing focus is on short-term, return-oriented solutions. At the same time, the Czech economy bene-

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Čadová, Červenka (2024). Citizens on the situation in Ukraine – February 2024. Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění. <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/en/press-releases/political/international-relations/5816-citizens-on-the-situation-in-ukraine-february-2024>

fits significantly from the contributions of Ukrainian workers, creating a tension between economic reliance and societal hesitation. Integration efforts appear to function effectively at the local level; however, at the national level, concerns over housing, education, and resource allocation continue to fuel uncertainty. In the following section, the paper will examine the role of education as a key area of diversity management in the Czech Republic.

VI. Inclusion of Ukrainian students in the school system

The Czech education system – across all levels – has faced considerable pressure in response to the influx of Ukrainian refugees, particularly in certain regions. The number of Ukrainian children fleeing the war and entering Czech schools rose sharply in the spring of 2022 and has continued to fluctuate since. According to the Czech School Inspectorate, although the overall number of nursery schools is gradually increasing, approximately one-fifth still experienced capacity issues when enrolling Ukrainian children. The refugee wave has significantly impacted school capacities, resulting in regional disparities – some areas, especially large urban centres, face shortages in nursery school placements, while others report a surplus.³⁰

Since 2010, the number of children in elementary schools has generally been rising, with the influx of around 68,983 Ukrainian children, aged 6–14, further increasing pressure on Czech primary schools by May 2022. Over 28,000 of these children enrolled in primary schools, especially in large cities like Prague (also Brno, Ostrava and others). Czech upper secondary education has also faced capacity issues, with a 13% rise in applicants in 2023, partly due to Ukrainian pupils. Tertiary education saw a decline since 2010 but has slightly increased recently.

³⁰ European Commission. (2023). Czechia. Eurydice. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/czechia/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions>

In response to the Ukraine conflict, the Czech Ministry of Education has implemented legislative changes, financial support, and guidelines to help schools include Ukrainian students, as detailed on their website. By March 2023, schools reported having 51,281 Ukrainian refugee children enrolled, with a rise of nearly 1,000 since September 2022, and 2,090 Ukrainian staff members on board. Ukrainian pupils are concentrated in preparatory and basic schools, with a slight decrease in upper secondary school.³¹

However, there are differences in the school attendance among Ukrainian children. Ukrainian refugee children currently make up 4% of all pupils in Czech primary schools, forming the largest group of foreign nationals in the Czech education system. There is strong interest in education among Ukrainian refugees, particularly at the primary level. Data from 2023 show that 66% of Ukrainian children aged 3–5 are enrolled in Czech nursery schools, 92% of those aged 6–14 attend Czech primary schools, and 43% of Ukrainian adolescents aged 15–17 are enrolled in Czech secondary schools. Some students also continue their Ukrainian education in parallel, typically through online schooling: up to one-third of Ukrainian primary-age children and about one-tenth of adolescents follow both the Czech and Ukrainian curricula simultaneously.³²

Many NGOs were of help to Ukrainian families, trying to work with the directors of individual schools. There were voices saying that acceptance of a Ukrainian child to the educational system does not depend only on the capacity of the school but also on a pro-active approach of individual directors or teachers. Also, some websites for support of Ukrainian children in the Czech educational system were made (for example: <https://www.edu.cz/ukrajina/>).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kavanová, Ostrý, Prokop, (2023). Hlas Ukrajinců, Vzdělávání dětí uprchlíků v Česku [Voice of Ukrainians, Education of refugee children in the Czech Republic]. https://www.paqresearch.cz/content/files/2023/07/PAQ_HlasUkrajincu_Vzdelavani_2023.pdf

Recent reports highlight both significant efforts and notable challenges in educating Ukrainian refugee children in the Czech Republic. UNICEF, in partnership with Czech NGOs such as META and the Consortium of Migrants Assisting NGOs, has launched campaigns like *Starting Together at School* to promote inclusion, establish Ukrainian teaching assistant positions, and foster interschool collaboration to support language and social integration.³³ However, UNICEF also cautions against segregated enrolment practices introduced under the Lex Ukraine VII legislation, arguing that separate intake systems could stigmatize refugee children and negatively affect their right to education.³⁴ Moreover, a study involving peer-network analysis found that Ukrainian students frequently form separate friendship circles, suggesting social segregation that hinders wider social integration.³⁵ In response, NGOs and UNICEF have pushed for increased placement of teaching assistants, psychologists, and intercultural workers in schools, as well as accessible multilingual support systems to better facilitate full inclusion for Ukrainian pupils.³⁶

Despite the Czech Republic's prompt institutional response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugee children, several systemic gaps still persist. Regional disparities in school capacity remain pronounced, particularly in urban areas where demand for nursery and primary education outpaces availability. While primary school enrolment rates among Ukrainian children are high, attendance declines notably at the secondary level, indicating challenges in sustaining educational participation as children age. The dual enrolment of many students in both

³³ Consortium of Migrants Assisting NGOs. (2023). *Starting together at school: Supporting the inclusion of Ukrainian children in Czech education*. <https://www.migracnikonsorcium.cz>

³⁴ UNICEF. (2023). *UNICEF in Czech Republic: Response to Ukrainian refugee children's needs*. <https://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/unicef-czech-republic-ukrainian-refugee-response>

³⁵ SYRI (2024). *Peer-network analysis of Ukrainian students in Czech schools*. [Report].

³⁶ Consortium of Migrants Assisting NGOs. (2023).

Czech and Ukrainian systems suggests uncertainty around long-term settlement and poses integration barriers. This is also one of the key barriers of diversity management in the Czech Republic. Social integration is further hindered by limited peer interaction between Ukrainian and Czech students, pointing to the need for more comprehensive and inclusive education policies. The role of the Czech language remains key to successful integration.

VII. Policy implications and conclusions

Migration to the Czech Republic has significantly increased since the 1990s, when the country transitioned from being a transit zone to becoming a destination for migrants. In 2024, the number of migrants was fourteen times higher than in 1989, largely driven by labour migration and the influx of people fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Currently, the Czech Republic hosts around 360,000 Ukrainian refugees, making it the EU country with the highest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita. This situation has contributed to a 70% rise in the foreign population, which surpassed one million in 2022. The Czech society's opinion on Ukrainian refugees has evolved over time, with mixed perspectives emerging about their integration and the level of support they should receive. Surveys from 2023 and 2024 indicate that many Czechs support temporary stays rather than permanent settlement, expressing concerns about the country's capacity to manage the refugee influx. One of the most visible areas of pressure has been the education system, where many schools have struggled with overcrowding due to the arrival of Ukrainian students. Nevertheless, various forms of legislative and financial assistance have been introduced to support their inclusion, complemented by initiatives from NGOs and school leaders.

To address current challenges associated with the migration, a range of measures could be considered. First, expanding school capacity is essential. The significant strain on the Czech education sys-

tem – especially in major cities like Prague, Brno, and Ostrava – requires long-term investment in infrastructure. This could involve constructing new schools, enlarging existing classes, or using modular classrooms as a temporary solution. Second, it is important to provide more support for teachers and the educational staff. Additional training to prepare Czech teachers for working with Ukrainian students, along with the hiring of Ukrainian professionals with educational backgrounds, could help overcome language and cultural barriers. Increased funding for professional development would also empower teachers to better manage diverse classrooms.

Another important step is to enhance integration programs tailored to the needs of Ukrainian refugees. These programs might include Czech language courses, cultural orientation, and employment assistance not only for students but also for their parents. Speeding up the recognition of Ukrainian qualifications would further facilitate access to the labour market for adults. Public awareness campaigns could also play a role in reshaping attitudes. By highlighting the contributions of refugees and promoting empathy, such campaigns could address public concerns and help mitigate rising polarization. Emphasizing the positive economic and social impact of migration might help shift public sentiment.

Moreover, decentralizing refugee settlements could ease the burden on overcrowded urban areas. By encouraging resettlement in less populated regions – where school capacity and job opportunities may be more available – migration could be distributed more evenly. However, this approach comes with challenges, as refugees often prefer larger cities due to better access to jobs, housing, healthcare, language courses, and other essential services. Finally, given that most Czechs support the temporary protection of Ukrainian refugees, a long-term strategy that prepares for the potential return of refugees while ensuring their meaningful integration in the meantime could help balance

societal expectations with humanitarian obligations. This intention is reflected in the evolution of relevant legislation, such as the most recent version of Lex Ukraine, which came into effect in July 2024.

By addressing both the educational and broader societal challenges through these interlinked measures, the Czech Republic could establish a more inclusive migration response system grounded in effective diversity management. Strengthening school infrastructure and teacher support not only ensures access to quality education for refugee children but also creates opportunities for intercultural learning and inclusive classroom practices. This supports broader efforts to manage diversity constructively within public institutions. At the same time, public engagement strategies and tailored integration programs can help dispel misconceptions among the host population, fostering mutual understanding and reducing social tensions. A strong commitment to diversity management requires continued collaboration between governmental bodies, local authorities, and NGOs to provide culturally sensitive and equitable support services. Strategic regional planning and a realistic approach to both long-term settlement and potential return pathways can further align humanitarian efforts with public expectations. Collectively, these actions strengthen national capacity to manage migration in a way that upholds social cohesion, promotes the well-being of those seeking refuge, and embraces the opportunities that diversity can bring to Czech society.

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