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# ECONOMIC CHALLENGES TO UKRAINIAN REFUGEE INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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**Abstract:** *The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has resulted in the displacement of millions of Ukrainians, leading to socio-economic and political challenges for the host countries. The Refugee Response Plan, encompassing heavily affected EU Member States, has been the focus of this study, examining how the issue of refugee integration was addressed, with a specific emphasis on flaws and omissions in the approach. Various demographic and socioeconomic data and strategic national documents related to refugee integration were compared for this analysis. Employment was identified as a key tool for the integration of Ukrainian refugees. The findings revealed a lack of a common refugee integration policy among the surveyed countries despite similar past and current socioeconomic circumstances and security environments, including mixed migration. Ambiguities across these countries, including local population perceptions hindering Ukrainian refugee integration, were observed. Consequently, we assert the necessity for EU harmonized measures, emphasizing their long-term implementation to alleviate the economic burden of the war in Ukraine and provide predictability in the actions of individual governments.*

**Keywords:** *Ukrainian Refugees; Refugee Integration; Ukraine; Central-Eastern Europe Studies; Economic Challenges*

## INTRODUCTION

Since 24 February 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced more than 8.1 million people to flee the country (UNHCR 2023a), marking the largest number of refugees registered in Europe since the end of the Second World War. From today's perspective, the Ukrainian refugee situation can be compared to some extent to the consequences of the so-called Arab Spring, including the collapse of the state in Libya and the civil war in Syria. With regard to this, some similarities can be found when it comes to the lack of a common and agreed approach to refugee integration in EU countries. At the same time, there are also some notable differences. For example, those who have been arriving in the EU from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region over the last decade have been primarily males and from countries with a predominantly Muslim population. Against this background, those coming from Ukraine, where the main religion is Orthodox Christianity and where the mobilization in the country has forced men aged 18-60 to stay, are mainly women and children.

In fact, at the end of April 2023, 71.3% of the beneficiaries of temporary protection in the EU were females and children, with 98% of people benefitting from temporary protection being Ukrainians (Eurostat 2023a).

In other words, very few Ukrainian refugees are men of working age. Simultaneously, some of the women are also mothers and, thus, busy taking care of their children, which can be associated with particular economic challenges for the host countries.

Regardless of when the war in Ukraine will end, a significant part of the Ukrainian refugees will likely not return to their home country for an extended period, as other refugee situations suggest (e.g., Zetter 2016). This is, in fact, one of the reasons why the EU Member States should not approach the current state of affairs in a short-term aspect but instead work on the idea of integrating into the local society those refugees who are willing or forced to stay longer. Also, such a situation can lead to some economic and social opportunities, especially at the local level.

Under such circumstances, the EU Member States that are in close proximity to Ukrainian borders and fall under the current January-December 2023 UNHRC Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for people coming from Ukraine come to the fore. Nonetheless, these countries approach Ukrainian refugees mainly on an individual basis, which ultimately leads to more challenges, especially in the long term. This, in turn, highlights the need to find and promote a common and coordinated approach among them to minimize gaps and enhance the effectiveness of refugee integration. This includes maximizing the benefits for the refugees and host countries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The refugee integration in the EU has been of particular interest to scholars for decades. The Arab Spring and the civil wars that followed in Libya and Syria further intensified this issue, making it a matter of great political and social interest. Bucken-Knapp et al. (2020, 5) describe integration as a process aimed at enabling newcomers to go on an equal footing with the host population in order for the former to function properly in the host society. In fact, as Phillimore (2019, 1953-1954) notes, the local context is crucial when it comes to integration opportunities. According to her, job opportunities, adequate housing, and healthy living conditions are among the most essential integration-related factors. Thus, more attention should be dedicated to understanding how the conditions and resources in the host country shape integration outcomes at the local level.

Still, it should be noted that although refugees are a vulnerable group and the host country is expected to treat them adequately, often their integration somehow remains outside of these efforts.

Hynie (2018, 266) states that the refugee system is usually intended to find short-term solutions and not permanent ones. Because of this, long-term refugee settlement and integration are not a priority since once the given conflict situation is solved, they are expected to return to their country of origin.

In terms of the Ukrainian refugees, the literature on this matter is somewhat limited at the moment as the war is still ongoing, and many questions remain unanswered. Expectedly, some scholars pay attention to the Ukrainian refugees' profile. Bird and Noumon (2022), for example, argue that the higher proportion of women and children among them leads to more spending in host countries on education, childcare, and health services. This is also noted by the International Monetary Fund (2022, 15), according to which managing the significant influx of refugees from Ukraine will remain a challenge as long as the war continues. Therefore, it will require increased

government funding of social services, education, and healthcare, including building the relevant infrastructure in these sectors (International Monetary Fund 2022, 15).

As the economic aspects of refugee inflows are usually perceived as a burden to the host country, at least in the short-term, employment is often regarded as one of the most essential factors of refugee and generally migrant integration. In fact, incorporating refugees into the host economy is widely seen as an effective way to strengthen the economic health of local communities (UNHCR n.d., 3). Furthermore, Phillimore and Goodson (2006, 1719-1720) highlight that employment enables interaction, increases the opportunities to learn the local language, and provides the refugees an opportunity to build a future and restore confidence, as economic independence makes integration into the local society easier. Nonetheless, Bevelander (2016, 3-7) argues that the fact that refugees arrive under different circumstances and are accepted according to alternative criteria seems to have an impact on their integration into the labor market. He also notes that while refugees can obtain permanent residence in some countries, others allow them only a temporary one, which can ultimately have a significant impact on immigrants' labor market behavior and subsequent economic integration (Bevelander 2016, 3-7).

Apart from various measures at the national level, employment prospects among the refugees are closely related to the period of stay and the presence of a diaspora as well. Concerning this, Botelho (2022) notes that most Ukrainian refugees are more likely to initially stay in countries bordering Ukraine, given their geographical proximity, before gradually moving to other countries. A major role in this regard will be the ability of host countries to accept them, as well as the Ukrainian communities in the given countries, which would facilitate refugee integration. For example, the existing Ukrainian diaspora in Poland provides support for finding work among newly arrived Ukrainians (Norwegian Refugee Council in Poland 2022, 7).

Concerning the Ukrainian refugee's impact on local employment, it can be stated that, at this moment, it is still premature to make some general conclusions. On the contrary, some perceptions prevail. Public surveys conducted in the second half of 2022 in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia showed that most of the Czechs and Hungarians did not see the Ukrainian refugees as creating severe difficulties for the employment of the local population (Mishchuk and Vlasenko 2023, 8-11). However, in Poland, that percentage was close to ¼ of the locals, while 46.8% of the Slovaks regarded the refugees as a threat to their employment prospects (Mishchuk and Vlasenko 2023, 8-11).

## METHODOLOGY

This article uses data about nine EU Member States that fall under the January-December 2023 RRP, namely Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, as they are among the most affected by the refugee inflow from Ukraine.

On the other hand, they are financially supported by the international community, including for the purpose of helping Ukrainian refugees to be effectively included in "national systems such as health, education, accommodation, social protection, labor markets and so on, without discrimination and on a par with nationals" (UNHCR 2023b). Also, all of them were part of the Eastern Bloc and the Warsaw Pact (some as part of other state formations) during the Cold War, while nowadays, they are members of the EU and NATO.

The study is based on the comparative analysis of some factors, such as demographic and socioeconomic data, as well as strategic national documents in this field when it comes to the RRP countries' capacity to deal with the current situation. Particular attention is being paid to employment as a critical tool for the successful integration of Ukrainian refugees.

This article deals only with publicly available information, including statistical data from national and international institutions.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section is divided into several sub-sections regarding specific key factors that are considered to influence Ukrainian refugee integration, namely the demographic situation, socioeconomic context, as well as political and legal aspects in the host countries.

### Ukrainian Refugees in the Context of the Host Country's Demography

The temporary protection mechanism activated by the EU on 4 March 2022 and currently granted until 4 March 2024 applies to those who were residing in Ukraine before or on 24 February 2022. Although the numbers in most of the selected countries might not seem impressive per se, the situation changes when they are seen as a percentage of the host country's total population (Table 1).

**Table 1: Ukrainians Benefitting from Temporary Protection as of 31 March 2023**  
(Source: Eurostat 2023b; UNHCR; UN Population Prospects 2022; own calculations)

Country	Total Number of Beneficiaries of EU Temporary Protection			Ukrainian Refugees Recorded in the Country as <i>per</i> UNHCR Data	
	Number	Total Population of the Host Country in 2021	Share of the Total Population	Number	As a % of the Total Population of the Host Country in 2021
Bulgaria	153 545	6 938 000	2.21%	49 826	0.72%
Czech Republic	325 245	10 524 000	3.09%	516 000	4.9%
Estonia	37 020	1 330 000	2.78%	69 616	5.23%
Hungary	30 585	9 731 000	0.32%	35 030	0.36%
Latvia	35 985	1 887 000	1.91%	32 380	1.72%
Lithuania	67 775	2 805 000	2.42%	76 540	2.73%
Poland	999735	38 379 000	2.60%	1 593 860	4.15%
Romania	124 035	19 394 000	0.64%	97 085	0.5%
Slovakia	99 525	5 456 000	1.82%	114 628	2.1%

As shown in Table 1, in 5 out of 9 countries, those registered for temporary protection represent more than 2% of the local population. The situation is similar when it comes to registered refugees in the same countries, with two main differences: in this case, in Bulgaria, refugees from Ukraine are less than 0.8% of the population, and in Estonia, they exceed 5% of the local population.

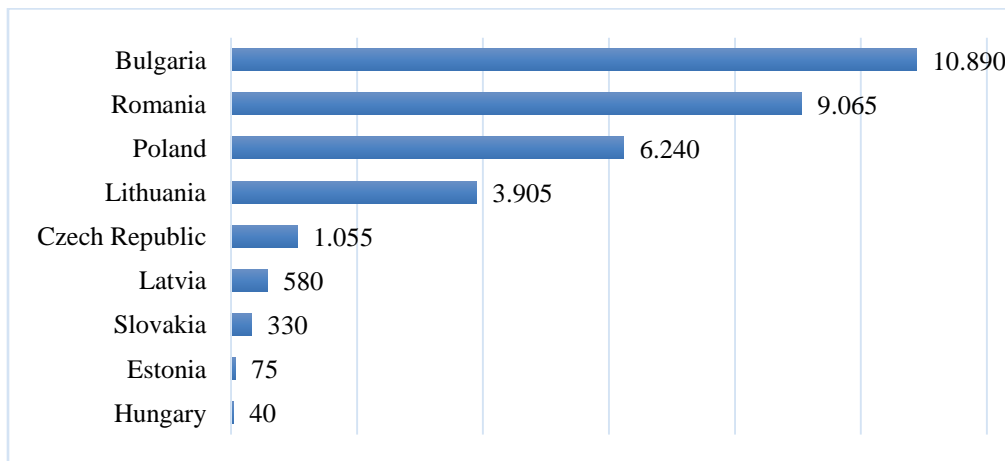
The demographic context is all the more critical because, since 1989, a population decline has been observed in most of the countries surveyed (Table 2). According to UN estimations, the

population of three of them - Bulgaria, Latvia, and Lithuania - is expected to shrink by more than 20% until 2050, which is the largest expected reduction globally (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2022). Therefore, the refugee and migrant inflows can also be seen as an opportunity from a demographic perspective.

**Table 2: Demographic Changes in the RRP Countries between 1989 and 2021**  
(Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division)

Country	1989	2021	
		Total Number	The Net Change in %
Bulgaria	8 821	6 938	-21.35
Czech Republic	10 306	10 524	2.12
Estonia	1 565	1 330	-15.02
Hungary	10 417	9 731	-6.59
Latvia	2 694	1 887	-29.96
Lithuania	3 766	2 805	-25.52
Poland	37 870	38 379	1.34
Romania	22 750	19 394	-14.75
Slovakia	5 236	5 456	4.20

The refugee-related situation in some of the countries surveyed is further complicated by the constant inflow of asylum seekers from other parts of the world (Figure 1) and generally by the mixed migration coming from the MENA region.



**Figure 1: Number of Asylum Applications in the RRP Countries in 2021** (Source: Eurostat 2023c)

The data in Figure 1 reveal that in 2021, among the countries falling under the RRP today, most asylum applications were submitted to Bulgaria, followed by Romania, Poland, and Lithuania. The large number of attempts for illegal border crossings can also be added to those numbers. For example, in Bulgarian, in 2022 alone, more than 166,000 such attempts were prevented (BNR, 2023a).

From today’s perspective, it can be stated that a significant number of Ukrainian refugees in Ukraine has been registered in all countries. At the same time, in some of them, particularly Bulgaria,

there have already been substantial challenges from previous years related to the mixed migration from the MENA region. In other words, prior refugee integration failures can also affect the expectations and attitudes within the host countries.

### Socioeconomic Situation in the Host Countries

As mentioned earlier, the Russian military aggression in Ukraine has caused unprecedented refugee flows towards the EU. Unsurprisingly, most Ukrainians have fled to the nearest countries due to their proximity and the chances of acquaintances, relatives, or family members living there. However, these host countries are also significantly less economically developed than those in Western Europe, as seen in Figure 2.

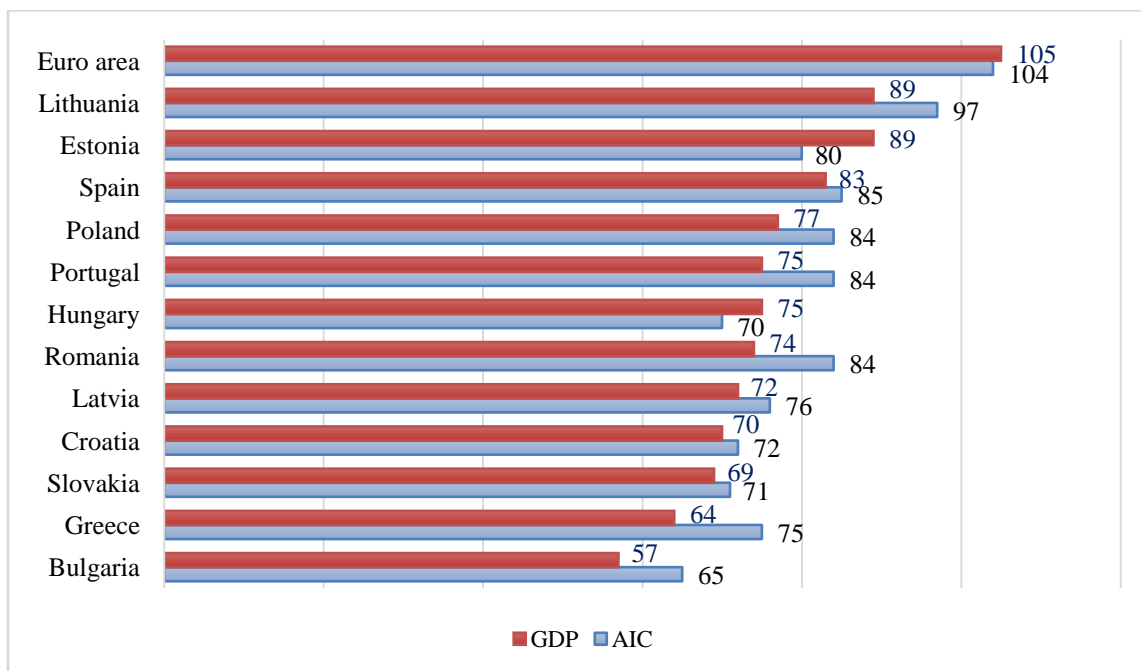


Figure 2: GDP and Actual Individual Consumption Volume (AIC) Indices *per Capita* in the EU in 2021  
(Source: Eurostat 2022a)

In addition to the economic challenges related to the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic also led to economic turmoil, including a high level of unemployment in 2020 (Figure 3), while with the easing of the restrictive measures due to the pandemic, the employment rate started increasing, and in some countries reached even pre-pandemic levels.

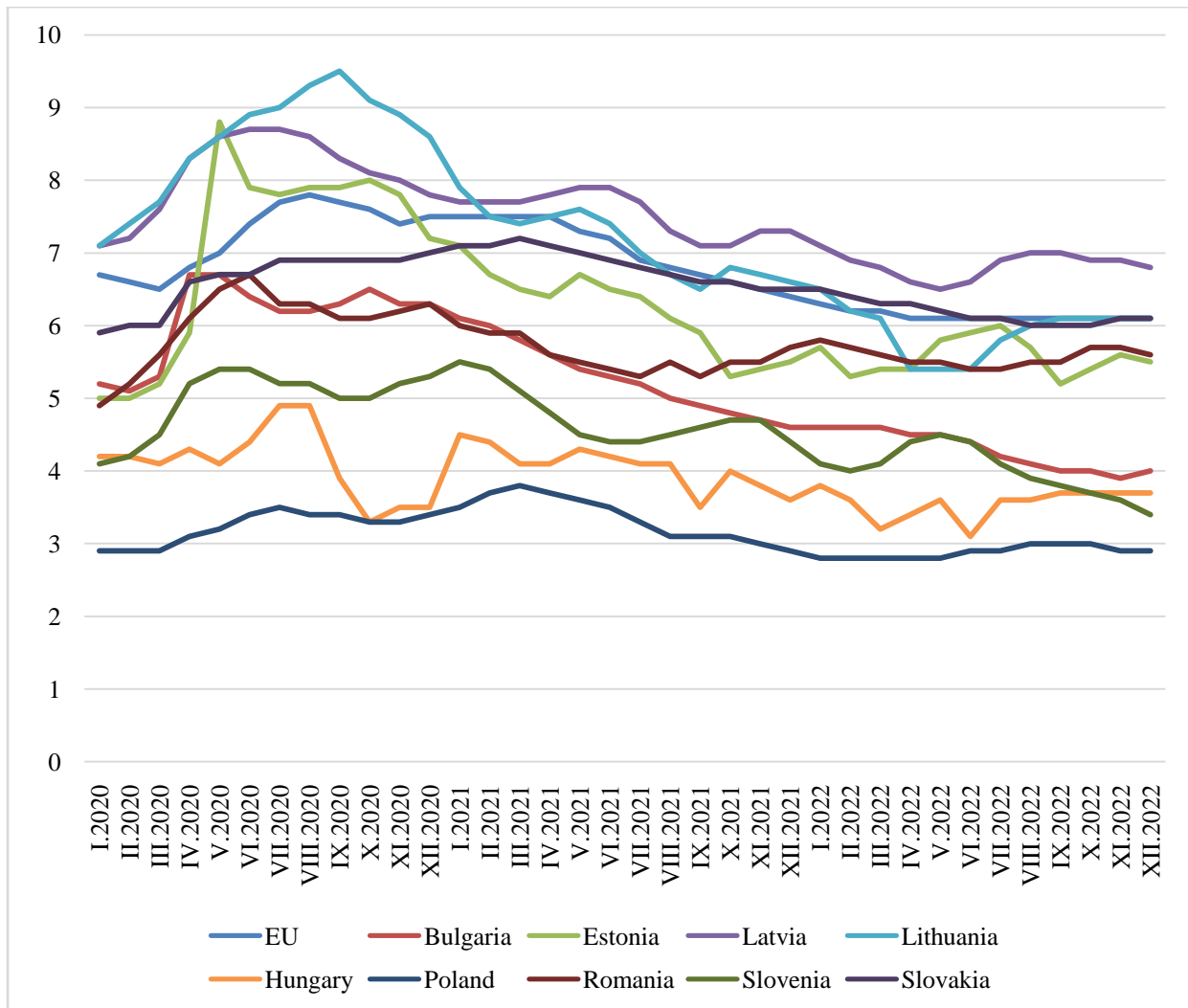


Figure 3: Unemployment Rate as a Percentage of the Population in the Labor Force in 2020-2022 (Source: Eurostat 2023d)

Against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine does not seem to have similar effects. As a matter of fact, an increase in the unemployment rate is registered in Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, and partly in Lithuania and Poland. However, generally, this increase has been much lower compared to the levels related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Taking into account all the above stated, there is one indicator that has particularly affected negatively the socioeconomic conditions in the EU in the 2020-2022 period, namely the inflation rate, as shown in Figure 4.



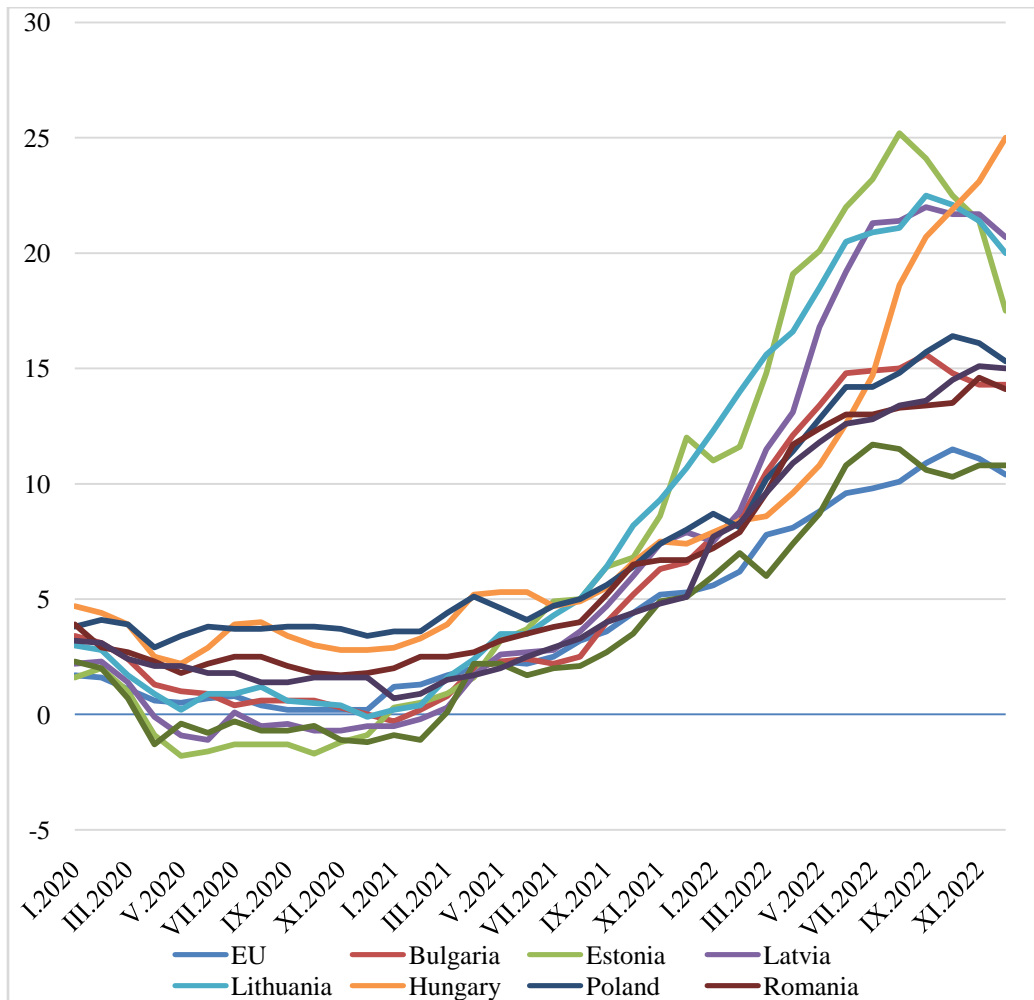


Figure 4: Harmonized Index of Consumer Prices Per Country (Annual Rate of Change)  
(Source: Eurostat 2023e)

The data in Figure 4 shows a steep surge that started in early 2021 in all countries. This was further intensified by the war in Ukraine and the subsequent Russian gas cuts for the EU. As a result, some record inflation rates were registered in the second half of 2022 at the EU and national levels.

In October 2022, the inflation reached 11.5% at the EU level, with the highest value registered in Estonia in August 2022 - 25.2%, and in Hungary in December 2022 - 25% (Clark 2022).

Under such circumstances, host population perceptions towards newcomers also matter. From a historical point of view, unlike some Western countries, the Balkan and Eastern European countries had no colonial territories in Africa or Asia.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the RRP countries, one of the most frequently cited reasons for the local population's reluctance to accept refugees and asylum seekers from the MENA region, for example, is the perceived significant difference in cultural and social aspects. In this line of thinking, the current situation should be seen as an opportunity for Ukrainian refugee integration in the RRP countries economically, socially, and culturally. The latter should be somewhat facilitated due

to the previously mentioned similarities between the Eastern European countries and Ukraine, including the Ukrainian diaspora before the Russian invasion (Table 3).

**Table 3: Ukrainian Citizens with a Valid Residence Permit in the RRP Countries in 2021**  
(Source: Eurostat 2022b)

Country	Total Population	Number of Ukrainians with a Valid Residence Permit	% of the Total Host Population
Bulgaria	6 938 000	9 149	0.13%
Czech Republic	10 524 000	193 547	1.84%
Estonia	1 330 000	14 282	1.07%
Hungary	9 731 000	63 175	0.65%
Latvia	1 887 000	9 087	0.48%
Lithuania	2 805 000	32 884	1.17%
Poland	38 379 000	651 221	1.70%
Romania	19 394 000	2 260	0.01%
Slovakia	5 456 000	54 138	0.99%

As shown in Table 3, the Ukrainian diaspora was highest in numbers and as a percentage of the total population in Poland and the Czech Republic. At the same time, the lowest values were registered in Romania and Bulgaria. Suppose we assume that having a significant diaspora is a factor facilitating the integration of refugees. In that case, the combination of lacking such diaspora and subsequent significant refugee inflow from the same nationality can be interpreted as a serious challenge to integration into the host society.

Indeed, considering the data in Table 1, that difference is five times higher in Bulgaria and Estonia and even 50 times higher in Romania. However, in the case of the latter, this is primarily attributed to the very small number of Ukrainian diaspora members before 2022. Under such circumstances, employment is revealed to be a crucial factor for refugee integration. Focusing on the Ukrainian refugees' unemployment rate in the EU, the data in this regard is quite limited because not all EU Member States have been providing information about it on a regular basis since 24 February 2022.

For instance, in March 2022, 15 countries have submitted data, in April - 21 countries, May - 23 countries, June - 25 countries, July - 24 countries, August - 24 countries, September - 25 countries, October - 22 countries, November - 22 countries, and December - 21 countries (Eurostat 2023). It is also essential to underscore that not all of the countries surveyed began reporting immediately, as this happened for the first time in July 2022.

The war in Ukraine understandably has severely hit the employment rate of the Ukrainians, including those fleeing the country. Figure 5 reveals that the number of registered unemployed Ukrainian refugees in the EU reached its peak in September 2022 and maintained a level close to that until the end of March 2023. It is to be noted that the number of unemployed Ukrainian women is several times higher than that of males and youth aged under 25. All this can be seen as a prerequisite for deepening social and economic hardship in the EU, as many of them practically depend on the national governments and the EU, while the Member States are supporting Ukraine economically and militarily.

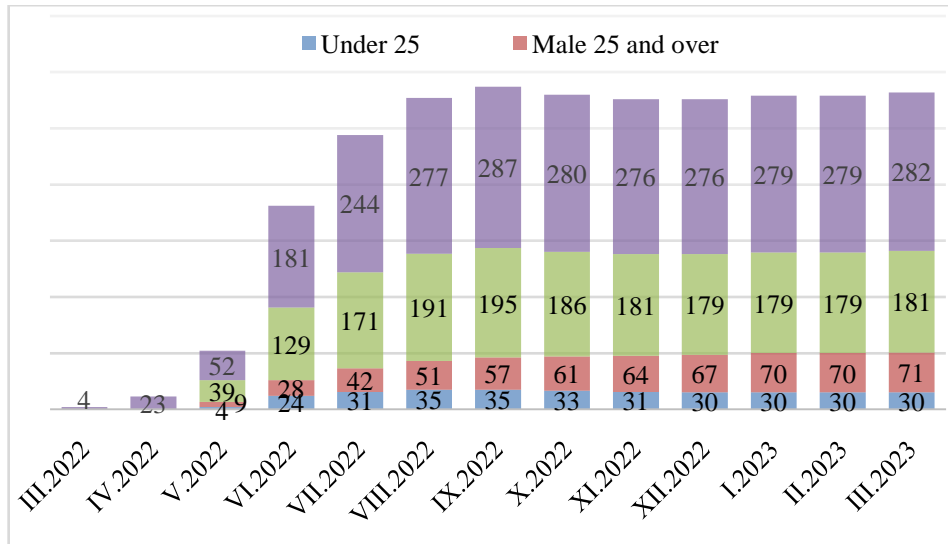


Figure 5: Unemployed Refugees from Ukraine Registered in the EU by Age and Sex (in Thousands)  
(Source: Eurostat 2023d)

Within the EU, the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) is a key tool that provides immediate and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons from third countries who cannot return to their country of origin. In the case of the Ukrainian refugees, it gives them quick access to legal status and, thus, to employment, social services, and benefits. As some data reveal, 40% of the Ukrainian refugees have already started working in the host country (UNHCR 2023c).

Obviously, there are a host of reasons for the unemployment of many Ukrainian refugees. However, it is important to clarify that a number of problems they face in the host countries also exist for the local population. Across the RRP countries, as such, there are low salary levels, poor quality of some social services, and lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Also, as Desiderio and Hooper (2022) suggest, some Ukrainian refugees may have been employed in the informal economy (including providing childcare and elderly care services within the Ukrainian community) or on a more casual basis (including informal self-employment or remote work).

In terms of the Ukrainian refugees' employment and integration, their education becomes of utmost importance, especially since many of them are children. This is due to several reasons. Formal education is seen as a "protective factor" for refugee and displaced children (Kos 2005). Education is also seen as a factor facilitating the integration of newcomers into the host economy and society. In long periods of uncertainty and disruption, it can support integration and language acquisition and, thus, provide the necessary skills for an individual to function in the new context (Morrice 2022, 252).

Simply put, learning the host language will ease Ukrainian refugees' integration into the host society and job market. Although it is generally perceived that refugee women tend to be poorly educated with respect to the host population (Albrecht et al. 2021, 41), this is likely not the case with Ukrainian refugee women. Most data collected on this matter is mainly indicative; still, in 2021 alone, 65% of Ukrainian women aged 30-34 completed tertiary education, in comparison to the average 46% of the EU (Eurostat2023f).

It should be noted that the difficulties arising from the presence of so many children among the refugees are only one side of the coin. They also bring a number of opportunities for the host countries since by including these children in the education system, more teachers, translators, and employees from other related professions will be hired. Also, if access to kinder gardens and schools is not hindered, many Ukrainian females will have more job opportunities. This, in turn, will have a positive impact on the host countries in economic and social terms.

### Economic Dimensions of the Normative and Legal Basis Concerning Refugee Integration

The normative and legal framework at the national level plays an important role when it comes to people seeking protection. For example, the term *integration* might have numerous meanings. Also, as a dynamic, multifaceted, and long-term process, the integration includes as key actors, not only the refugees but the local population as well. In fact, the UNHCR notes that the refugees should be prepared to adapt to the way of living of the host society, while the latter is required to be more willing and responsive to the needs of a diverse population (UNHCR 2002, 12).

Nowadays, some countries still lack a solid legal basis in terms of refugee integration. For instance, in Bulgaria, in the period 2014-2020, there was a National Strategy for the integration of those granted international protection in the country; however, since then, there has not been another similar document to replace it. Currently, the main document related to migration in the country is the National Migration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2025. However, its implementation is accompanied by a number of omissions (e.g., a lack of a concrete plan on how to implement it initially, insufficient attention paid to integration issues, and irregular reporting).

Table 4 sheds some light on some details about the existing strategic documents related to refugee integration in the countries surveyed.

**Table 4: Strategic Documents Related to Refugee Integration in the RRP Countries as of 31 May 2023**  
(Source: European Commission 2023)

Code	Document	Period of Action	Specific Objectives Related To	Measures Related to Economic Integration
BG	National Strategy on Migration of the Republic of Bulgaria	2021-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provision support for migrants;</li> <li>• strengthening the processes of return for foreigners residing in the country without legal grounds;</li> <li>• contribution to the adoption of a common European asylum system;</li> <li>• developing and strengthening partnerships with third countries.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• easier visa rules, faster procedures for application of the permit regime or fewer required documents, etc.);</li> <li>• improved access to information for third-country nationals regarding work opportunities;</li> <li>• preventing illegal employment, including labor exploitation.</li> </ul>
CZ	Czech Immigrant Integration Policy	2000, with updates in 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provision of equal opportunities and non-discrimination environment;</li> <li>• provision of long-term residents with rights similar to those of Czech citizens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• economic and social self-sufficiency (job advisory services and re-qualification courses);</li> <li>• orientation of migrants in society (integration and adaptation courses and socio-cultural courses);</li> </ul>
ES	Cohesive Estonia	2021-2030	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adaptation and integration of newly arrived immigrants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improving the availability and needs-based nature of labor market services for people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds;</li> <li>• support for the recruitment of employees with other native languages in state and local government agencies;</li> <li>• improving the ability of employers to cope</li> </ul>

				with a multicultural and multilingual environment.
LV	Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society	2021-2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development of a cohesive society;</li> <li>• integration of newcomers through learning the Latvian language;</li> <li>• acquiring knowledge of the Latvian history and traditions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provision of the socioeconomic inclusion introductory course program for asylum seekers;</li> <li>• Latvian language courses for citizens of third countries, asylum seekers, and recipients of international protection.</li> </ul>
LT	Strategy for Demography, Migration and Integration	2018-2030	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decent working and living conditions for foreigners;</li> <li>• strong and inclusive local communities;</li> <li>• trust in state institutions;</li> <li>• tolerant receiving society.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• integration and communication in a favorable environment;</li> <li>• Ensure effective integration of the population into the labor market;</li> <li>• ensure competitive wages and a sufficient number of quality jobs.</li> </ul>
HU	Hungary's Migration Strategy	2014-2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• integration of migrant populations into Hungarian society;</li> <li>• outlining migrants' rights and duties in Hungary;</li> <li>• providing support services, legal assistance, and representation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitating the entry of migrants into the labor market with training, retraining, and providing discounts to employers.</li> </ul>
PO	Law on Assistance.	2004 -current	It applies to the refugees and foreigners granted subsidiary protection on the territory of Poland.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• benefits in cash for learning the Polish language;</li> <li>• specialized guidance.</li> </ul>
RO	National Strategy for Immigration	2021-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulation of national policies on workforce admission, residence, and immigration;</li> <li>• Fight against illegal immigration;</li> <li>• Integration of foreigners granted certain types of protection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stimulating employers in hiring third-country nationals who have completed their studies in Romania;</li> <li>• Informing foreigners, employers, and companies in Romania about the Romanian legislation on immigration;</li> <li>• Strengthening the quality control mechanism of the asylum procedure;</li> </ul>
SK	Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic: Perspective until the Year 2025	2021-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring long-term, seamless coexistence of the country's majority and migrant populations;</li> <li>• Avoiding negative social patterns;</li> <li>• Expanding opportunities for migrant integration funding measures.</li> </ul>	

The poor, controversial, or insufficient involvement of governmental bodies in refugee integration is a common practice in most of the countries surveyed. In Hungary, for instance, the role of the authorities is not officially established, and there is no consultative body on integration issues; thus, the integration of foreigners is mainly project-based and carried out by NGOs (Kováts and Soltész 2022, 27). Also, Hungary's migration strategy expired in 2020. At the time of writing, there is no similar document to replace it. The country is known for its rather non-supportive immigration policy when it comes to non-EU nationals and not of Hungarian origin.

It is interesting to note that despite being part of a common union and society, not only now but also during the Cold War, all countries involved have different orientations in the course of their actions related to third-country nationals' arrival and integration. The strategic documents of each state, although expected to be quite similar, have many variations in terms of their period of action, objectives, and target groups. The state authorities that are responsible for issuing and implementing migration and integration plans and strategies also vary. In most cases, the Ministry of Interior or equivalent public structures are those engaged in the process. There are also countries such as Estonia and Latvia, where the Ministry of Culture is one of the key actors.

In addition, it should be highlighted that there is a crucial contrast between the previous refugee inflows to Europe in 2010 and the one caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Led by the expectations that the conflict would not last long, most of the countries decided to grant Ukrainian

refugees temporary protection. Being part of the EU, the countries surveyed are obligated to follow the measures imposed in the 2001 TPD. To clarify the provision of temporary protection to people fleeing the war in Ukraine, on 21 March 2022, the European Commission issued the so-called Operational guidelines. This document helps Ukrainian refugees find an easy answer to issues such as rights, obligations, persons eligible for protection, etc., and it outlines the period of action that all EU Member States must respect (EUR-Lex 2022). However, the ongoing conflict has already required a further extension of the duration of the measures taken. Therefore, the countries need to impose adequate improvements in their integration strategies, especially in terms of refugee employment, that otherwise will provoke specific economic challenges in the host countries.

In this regard, for instance, the Bulgarian Council of Ministers made certain amendments in order to give displaced persons from Ukraine temporary protection in the country for a year, starting from 24 February 2022, which was later prolonged to 4 March 2024, in line with the TPD extension by the European Commission (BNR 2023b). Among the other benefits provided to Ukrainians are vocational training opportunities, free medical assistance in emergencies, free medical care for persons under the age of 18, to name a few.

Similar practices at the national level were followed by most of the EU countries. In fact, the main difference related to the duration of the temporary protection is the automatic prolongation or adoption of specific legislative acts. Latvia, for instance, extended the validity of temporary protection for as long as it was in force in the EU. On the other hand, Slovakia announced an automatic extension of the protection without additional legislative amendments (European Union Agency for Asylum 2023).

All of these actions have been in accordance with the EU's response to the situation. However, in 2022, Poland adopted an individual approach permitting Ukrainians and their family members to stay legally in the country until 24 August 2023 (European Union Agency for Asylum 2022).

It is to be noted that in terms of accommodation, most of the countries' refugee camp capacity is insufficient to meet such large inflows. What is more, the mixing of nationalities and religions could cause conflicts and tensions in such institutions. Concerning this, the EU has activated some funds, such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, and the European Social Fund, to name a few. Nevertheless, the response of each state has been predominantly individualistic and not based on a unified policy on this matter. For instance, upon their arrival in Poland, refugees were requested to cover part of their accommodation costs (between 50% and 70%) in common shelters, depending on the period of stay in the country (International Rescue Committee 2023). In Estonia, accommodation will be provided for as long as there is a need for it, but the place of accommodation may change during the period of assistance (Tallinn 2022). In Bulgaria, the situation has been similar, as initially, the Ukrainian refugees were accommodated in private hotels, then relocated to state-owned holiday bases, and then again to other facilities.

Although the countries surveyed follow similar paths in their geopolitical development, being part of the Eastern Bloc before and members of the EU and NATO nowadays, the analysis shows that each of them has its signature in dealing with newcomers, including refugees.

## CONCLUSION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent refugee inflow came at a moment when the negative economic, political, and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic were still in play. As a result, new economic and political upheavals followed in the EU. Given their geographical location, the nine countries surveyed were called upon to absorb much of the refugee inflow from Ukraine. Indeed, across them, the challenges in that respect vary, but they mainly come from their socioeconomic situation and the different approaches to refugee integration they follow. There is a clear need for more harmonized standards in the EU in the area of refugee reception and integration. For example, within the EU defense field, it is well-known that it is far better to have one common security policy than 27 separate ones. This paper shows that all nine countries surveyed have their strategies with specific socioeconomic goals to achieve. They also cover a wide range of issues, such as work with migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, including their integration. However, that leads to a number of challenges as all of these groups need a different approach when it comes to their integration.

In terms of the latter, several years ago, the then OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría noted that refugee integration is challenging, mainly due to the fact that many refugees are low-skilled, which leads to almost 20 years necessary for them to achieve an employment rate similar to that of other migrants in the host country (Gurría 2016).

Despite the apparent differences between the refugee inflow from the MENA region and the Ukrainian refugees, the integration of the latter should not be treated superficially, which can be dictated by the expectations for their imminent return to Ukraine or their too-quick integration into the local society. Therefore, different approaches and measures can be used for a more successful integration.

Undoubtedly, employment is among them, as through it, refugees receive a chance to restore their dignity and possibly build a new life. Also, many of the countries surveyed in this paper declare a shortage of workers necessary for their economies. Hence, the current situation provides some essential prerequisites for successful refugee integration into the local labor market. Rightfully, a number of accompanying support measures are also needed, such as “taking stock of the existing evidence on the socioeconomic profiles of the new arrivals” (OECD 2023).

It is to be noted that budget constraints in individual countries, especially combined with increased defense spending due to the conflict in Ukraine, make the refugee integration topic even more sensitive among the local population. Therefore, they should agree on national integration policies concerning Ukrainian refugees. On the one hand, this will be a clear signal that a common problem needs a joint answer, including in terms of decision-making.

On the other hand, it will help in terms of predictability in the actions of individual governments, which will also make them more transparent both in the eyes of the refugees themselves and the local population.

In addition, undertaking short-term policies, as is the case with granting temporary protection to Ukrainians, is not a favorable alternative in the long term. Actually, the need for a common regional and EU answer to refugee integration can be seen in the light of the broader issue of migration. As Giordano (2016, 41) notes, the EU Member States are urged to have a more united

and continental vision of migration and population issues, which should not be a short-term one, and by doing so, this will benefit both the host countries and those of origin.

Notably, the substantial presence of Ukrainian refugees in EU countries, combined with Ukraine's expressed desire to join the EU, could significantly impact Ukraine's future integration into the European Union.



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