

Czech immigration and integration policy before and after the war in Ukraine

 Kateřina Ženková Rudincová^a ,  Lukáš Vomlela^b

^a University of Ostrava, Czechia; ^b Silesian University in Opava, Czechia

Abstract


The aim of the paper is to evaluate current Czech immigration and also integration policies with the reflection of the most influential actors such as the Czech Ministry of Interior and their response to the influx of refugees from Ukraine after the Russian invasion in 2022. Special attention is paid to the role of the Regional Assistance Centers for Help (KACPUs), established in response to the general need to coordinate assistance provided to larger numbers of refugees. The text is a single-case study based on the document analysis complemented by expert interviews. The main finding of the paper is that the response to the influx of refugees from Ukraine was exceptional and contextual. The integration of refugees from Ukraine was possible only thanks to the flexible reaction of various institutional actors at the beginning of the war.

Keywords: immigration policy, integration policy, Ukraine, refugees, Czech Republic

Introduction

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Czechia had to deal with a massive influx of refugees, similar to other states in the region. It had to adjust its immigration and integration policies to absorb such a high number of refugees, most of them being women or children. Even though Czechia has not been a typical country of immigration, it has been a target country for work migration from Ukraine even before the war. Despite numerous economic immigrants, Czechia had one of the lowest shares of migrants in total population among the EU states (Bureš & Stojanov, 2022, p. 2). The situation completely changed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As of 30 November 2023, Czechia hosts around 371,325 refugees from Ukraine including third country nationals (TCNs) registered for temporary protection (IOM, 2023). They are generally well-integrated, Ukrainian children attend schools with their Czech counterparts, and around 100,000 Ukrainians found jobs in Czechia ('Ukrainian Refugees in the Czech Republic', 2023).

The massive influx of refugees from Ukraine meant that strategies and activities on various levels, including the regional and local levels had to be

 Kateřina Ženková Rudincová, Assistant professor, Department of Human Geography and Regional Development, University of Ostrava, Czechia; e-mail: bczepl@uni.opole.pl.

coordinated and enhanced (Jelínková et al., 2023) to accommodate a huge number of children and women, especially. Since the Czech migration policies are generally perceived as restrictive (Kušniráková & Čížinský, 2011) and are formulated and applied rather on the central level, it is, therefore, necessary to re-evaluate the role of different institutional actors in the context of assistance provided to refugees from Ukraine on various levels. Further, there are possible lessons that could be learned from this experience on various institutional levels and possibilities of adjusting the immigration and integration policies to be identified to serve the needs of both immigrant and host-country populations better.

The paper builds on recent debates on the migration policies of post-socialist states (Barnickel & Beichelt, 2013; Matei et al., 2020; Mołęda-Zdziech et al., 2021) and seeks to contribute to the recent discussions on Czech immigration and integration policies (Kušniráková, 2014; Stojarová, 2019; Zogata-Kusz, 2020). It is contextualized within the literature on the migration of Ukrainians to Czechia (Drbohlav et al., 2010; Drbohlav & Seidlová, 2016; Sushko et al., 2016). Given that the presented topic focuses on current events, there is emerging literature reflecting the reception and possible integration of refugees from Ukraine after the Russian invasion in February 2022 (Jelínková et al., 2023; Pędziwiatr & Magdziarz, 2023; Shmidt & Jaworsky, 2022; Zogata-Kusz et al., 2023). While complementing especially the paper by Jelínková et al. (2023) we aim to contribute to this debate mainly in its focus on local-scale implications of immigration and integration policies as evidenced in the case of the Regional Assistance Center for Help to Ukraine (KACPU) based in Ostrava (Moravian-Silesian Region of Czechia) which is an object of this particular study.

In this respect, the paper aims to evaluate Czech immigration and integration policies and the role of the most important institutional actors - with special focus on KACPU based in Ostrava - played during the first phases of the war (in 2022-2023) when it was necessary to accommodate hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. It also reflects the role of the Czech Ministry of Interior (MoI) in the first phases of the war. The paper seeks to answer the following questions: is the approach to refugees adopted during the first phases of war applicable to other refugee crises Czechia may have to deal with in the future? And what are the lessons learned from the adopted strategies of the most important institutional actors that may be applied further to make immigration and integration policies more flexible?

The paper is structured as follows: after the short methodological chapter and theoretical introduction on migration and integration policies, the development of Czech immigration and integration policies are explained in the context of the Czech accession to the EU and the European migration crisis in 2015. The next part of the paper discusses the Ukrainian migration to Czechia in a wider historical and social context. The final part evaluates the Czech institutional actors' reactions and strategies to accommodate refugees from Ukraine after the Russian invasion in

February 2022. It discusses the lessons learned and the possibilities to adjust migration and integration policies in the future.

1. Methodology and data

From a methodological point of view, the text is a single-case study based on the analysis of documents complemented by expert interviews. We analysed the official documents released by the Czech government, the MoI, and other written sources including media news and literature concerning immigration and integration policies using qualitative content analysis. We used these documents to identify the potential specificities of the Czech approach to immigration and the integration of immigrants and strategies and conceptual framework for the integration of refugees from Ukraine in 2022 and 2023.

The semi-structured interviews with the experts from the MoI were conducted in February 2024; therefore, they reflect the current state of the Czech immigration and integration policies. At the same time, the respondents could evaluate the actors' role in assisting refugees in the first phases of war (esp. 2022) with a greater time gap. We used a purposive sampling approach to identify prospective interviewees. All four selected experts represent officials, serving at the MoI for five to ten years. They represent different offices at the Department for Asylum and Migration Policy (DAMP) and were also directly involved in migration policy issues in various ways before holding their position at the ministry with the agenda of the office they belong to. All of them were directly involved in coordinating the MoI's activities in KACPU in Ostrava. Another criterion for the interviewer's selection was their willingness to cooperate with the authors.

The interviews were semi-structured, so we prepared the questions arising from the literature and the need to fill the knowledge gap in the current state of immigration and integration policies concerning assistance to refugees from Ukraine in Czechia. The interviews were divided into two parts. In the first part, we asked questions about respondents' positions within the MoI and their general evaluation of the Czech immigration policy. The second set of questions was designed to gather information that would help us achieve the goal of our paper. We focused on specifying the coordination of various actors during the first phases of the War in Ukraine. We also targeted the immigration and integration policies intending to reveal respondents' opinions on the replicability of Czech response to the influx of refugees from Ukraine and possible adjustments of Czech immigration and integration policies as a result of lessons learned from the recent experience with refugees from Ukraine. Finally, the respondents were asked to add themes or information they thought were important but omitted during interviews.

The interviews were recorded, then coded and analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive methods. We used descriptive coding which helped us to identify pre-given concepts from the literature set up in the research questions. Then,

we complemented them with concepts and ideas identified in the interview using an inductive approach during which we analysed the additional information set up by respondents.

Interview information was then organized using the thematic analysis approach (cf. e.g. Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2015) to thematic sections based on the interview questions. The interviews' data were anonymized and are properly referenced in the text. Using the expert interviews with the assurance of anonymity of respondents, it was possible to gain information and data that would not be otherwise provided due to formal official procedures at the MoI.

2. Migration and integration policies – a conceptual introduction

Migration policies have two components: immigration policy and integration policy. Following Kušniráková and Čížinský (2011, p. 499), as the integration policy, we understand “*measures oriented towards the possibilities of settlement and already settled immigrants, their incorporation into the majority society, socio-economic and civil system*”. The immigration policy indicates the “*regulation and control of admission and entry/exit to/from the territory*”. Concerning the relations between immigration and integration policies, Zogata-Kusz (2020, p. 192) argues that the Czech integration policy predominantly aligns with immigration policy rather than directly influencing it. Migration, even though often politicized and polarizing, can benefit migrants and destination societies, especially economically for developed countries with low birth rates (Bloemraad et al., 2023). While immigration and citizenship laws have generally become more inclusive since the twentieth century (Bloemraad et al., 2023; Graeber, 2020; Helbling & Kalkum, 2018), public opinion, particularly in V4 countries, remains dismissive. The 2015 migration crisis further heightened the politicization and securitization of immigration (Bureš & Stojanov, 2022).

Several approaches to integration according to their aim may be identified. According to Bloemraad et al. (2023, p. 4), the success of integration policies is limited by the “*boundary-making work of people and institutions in the destination society, and how this “boundary work” affects the opportunities and barriers that different immigrant groups face.*” These boundaries are socially constructed and their existence is being justified by cultural differences in particular. Strang and Ager (2010, p. 594) identify the “degrees of unwantedness” reflected in various approaches to immigrant groups and their integration. They argue that successful integration requires a strong connection with the pre-existing community, creating “social bridges” and “bonds” to prevent the separation and disconnection of immigrant communities (Strang & Ager, 2010, p. 598). As for the different approaches in integration policies, in the last 150 years, various forms of assimilation have been dominant perspectives (for discussion on assimilation policies see Alba & Nee, 1997). The current “new” assimilation framework emphasizes the socio-

economic over socio-cultural integration of immigrants (Brubaker, 2001). While it still assumes integration requires eliminating differences, it does not place the burden of cultural change solely on migrants (Alba & Nee, 1997; Bloemraad et al., 2023). Instead, the bi-dimensional acculturation process suggests a mutual cultural change for immigrants and host societies (Berry, 2005; Bourhis et al., 1997).

Maintaining integration relies on policies and their implementation by institutional actors at municipal, regional, and national levels. Civic integration policies stress language proficiency and passing citizenship tests to be considered integrated and to acquire citizenship in a host country. This emphasis on civic integration often coincides with a decline in public discourse on multiculturalism, as evidenced by Bloemraad and Wright (2014).

3. Czech migration policy in the historical context

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and the consequent creation of the independent Czech Republic in 1993, Czechia became a country of immigration with an increasing number of immigrants. Nowadays, the migration patterns of Czechia are influenced by its geographical position (Czechia is a landlocked country without an external Schengen border) and its historical experience of being a socialist country with rather restrictive migration policies (Bauerová, 2018, p. 398). The majority of immigrants have been coming from Ukraine, Slovakia, Vietnam, and Russia in particular. The primary purposes of immigration to Czechia have been employment (mainly in low-paid and low-skilled jobs), education, and family reunification (Stojarová, 2019, p. 99).

Even though the number of immigrants to Czechia has been constantly rising, the country has never been an important target country for asylum seekers, except for refugees from the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s and also due to a change of immigration policy in 2001 which increased asylum applications enabling migrants to stay in Czechia until their application is decided (Seidlová, 2020). In the 1990s, the largest number of applications for international protection came from citizens of Bulgaria, Romania, and Armenia (European Parliament, 1999). In the following decades, the political crisis in Belarus and Turkey, and the war in Afghanistan led to an increase in the number of refugees and asylum seekers from these countries. The low numbers of applications for international protection are caused mainly by a very restrictive policy in terms of granting asylum or international protection in Czechia.

The development of Czech migration policy can be generally categorized into six stages based on both external forces influencing it and strategies adopted by the Czech government. This periodization of Czech immigration policy was first created by Baršová and Barša (2005) and then developed further (Bauerová, 2018; Drbohlav et al., 2010; Stojarová, 2019; Zogata-Kusz, 2020). It is based on distinguishing between liberal and restrictive phases (Kušniráková & Čížinský, 2011, p. 498):

1. Between 1990 and 1996, the migration policy was not among Czechia's priorities. The first, back then, Czechoslovak migration law was adopted in 1992 as an Act no. 123/1992 Coll. The law granted anyone the right to settle in Czechoslovakia and apply for long-term visas and permanent residence permits there; the integration system of immigrants was not developed at that time.
2. Between 1996 and 1999 the new Aliens Act (no. 326/1999 Coll.) was adopted and migration policy was institutionalized in its restrictive form in reaction to irregular migration (Bauerová, 2018). The Principles of Foreigners Integration Concept in the Territory of the Czech Republic (*Zásady koncepce integrace cizinců na území České republiky*), was adopted by the Czech government in 1999 (Jelínková & Valenta, 2022; Vláda České republiky, 1999). The document included the timeframe of the procedure, the organization of preparation, and the implementation of the concept of integration of foreigners in Czechia.
3. Between 2000 and 2004 Czechia institutionalized its policy and converged it with the EU immigration laws and supported the regulated work migration with a project enhancing the immigration of qualified workers from Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, and Croatia. The Foreigners Integration Concept (FIC, *Koncepce integrace cizinců*) was adopted in 2000. It focused on the civic integration of individuals and concretized the goals and necessary measures and tasks for individual ministries (Zogata-Kusz, 2020, pp. 174–175). The document has been updated several times, and the latest version was released in 2016 with the subtitle “In a mutual respect” (available at Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, 2024a).
4. During the neoliberal period between 2005 and 2007 (Stojarová, 2019, p. 101), the Czech immigration policy was determined by Czechia's accession to the EU and economic rise in the whole of Europe. However, Czechia adopted a differentiated approach, restricting third-country nationals (TCNs) from accessing the labor market, unlike immigrants from EU countries.
5. The global economic crisis after 2008 started the so-called neo-restrictive period (Stojarová, 2019, p. 101) during which the Czech immigration policy was securitized and a new, more restrictive migration law including a strict integration component was adopted.
6. During the so-called European migration crisis in 2015, the Asylum and Migration Law (no. 314/2015 Coll.) was adopted in its more restrictive form. The entry and stay of migrants to Czechia are currently regulated by the Foreigners Act (no. 326/1999), last amended in 2019 (Stojarov et al., 2022). The Czech government adopted the Strategy on Migration Policy of the Czech Republic which combined policies in terms of immigration control and integration issues (Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, 2015; Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, 2015). Since 2018, Czechia promoted circular migration as a tool for solving labour market problems and not burdening the Czech social system (Zogata-Kusz, 2020, p. 188).

Concerning the Czech integration policy, Czechia adheres to the Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU, which is a set of 11 principles adopted by the Justice and Home Affairs Council in November 2004 to develop a common EU immigration policy (Council of the European Union, 2004; Zogata-Kusz et al., 2023, p. 177).

In its integration policy, Czechia differentiates between two main groups of immigrants: 1) EU citizens and citizens of the United Kingdom residing in Czechia before 31. 12. 2020 (Act no 329/1999 Coll.) and 2), third-country nationals, who are granted their rights according to the type of residence they acquire – either long-term or permanent (Kušniráková, 2014, p. 738). The main feature of the Czech migration and integration policies is the focus on economic migration and the perception of migration as a “*phenomenon that could and should be driven and economic migrants as a tool for fulfilling Czech labor-market needs*” (Zogata-Kusz, 2020, p. 179).

During the so-called migration crisis in 2015, Czechia was among the most active anti-immigrant countries within the EU, refusing to accept refugees. The Visegrad Four countries (V4; Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary) rejected any attempts by the EU to introduce mandatory quotas on the acceptance of migrants (Strnad, 2018) which resulted in a lawsuit by the European Commission against the V4 countries for violating the EU law (Rankin, 2022; Stojanov et al., 2022, p. 2). Czechia was one of just five countries in the world voting against the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration in December 2018 (Bureš & Stojanov, 2022, p. 1). Czechia has also been among the countries having the lowest naturalization rates in Europe (acquisition of citizenship per 100 resident foreigners) and has been only “*halfway favourable for migrants*” who have to deal with issues in education and political participation in particular (MIPEX, 2020; Stojarová, 2019, pp. 105–106). As for the public opinion on migrants, Czechia is among the bottom 10 countries in the Migrant Acceptance Index (Dodevska, 2021; Esipova et al., 2017).

4. Institutional context

The main institutional actor responsible for articulating the asylum and immigration policy in Czechia is the Ministry of Interior (MoI). The Department for Asylum and Migration Policy (DAMP) is responsible for the implementation of these policies. Between 2009 and 2011, it gained more power in activities of a non-police nature and administrative tasks delegated by the Police of the Czech Republic. Starting this year, DAMP also took temporary residencies under its agenda. The most important activities of the department include refugee protection, residence or entry of foreigners, and coordination of their involvement in everyday life. It also cooperates at the EU level on asylum and migration, border protection, return policy, and Schengen cooperation. DAMP also manages the other organizational units, such

as refugee facilities and other detention facilities for foreigners (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, n.d.a).

Beyond those activities given by particular laws and other norms, the department is also an important actor in the legislative process dealing with different issues connected to DAMP professional performance. The role of the DAMP is crucial in providing feedback on draft laws and proposals for changes to various sub-legislative norms issued by the MoI and other state agencies. The DAMP has a significant position during the so-called commenting process. All comments, prepared by DAMP personnel, are collected by the senior DAMP officials. They prepare final comments with further recommendations regarding expected outcomes and impacts. Although this process is a key tool for the MoI's ability to influence migration policy legislation, the final decision is made by officials with a political responsibility. The MoI itself as an important part of the state administration is perceived as a holder of professional competencies carrying out the professional activities.

The DAMP has a Central Office, with different parts in Prague and most of the regional offices (for the description of the DAMP's structure, see Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, n.d.a). The main task of the Central Office is primarily connected with the overall concept of Czech asylum and immigration policy. Within its structure, there are specialized units, responsible for many different tasks such as e. g. international cooperation with other states and international organizations, security matters, analytics, statistics, preparation of concepts, legislature, etc. In each Czech region, there was established at least one regional centre, subordinated to the central office (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, n.d.a; Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 4).

Border protection management is coordinated by the Analytic Centre for Border Protection and Migration (ANACEN); its activities are managed through the Coordination Body for Managing the Protection of State Borders and Migration. The Refugee Facilities Administration of the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for the reception, accommodation of migrants, and management of asylum facilities. (SUZ MV, 2017).

Besides the MoI, there are other actors responsible for tasks related to migration policy, such as the State Security Council of the Czech Republic, the Directorate of the Foreign Police Service, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, other ministries, the National Central Unit for Combating Organised Crime, Regional Security Councils and Local Security Councils (in some municipalities), Crises Staffs at different levels of public administration, international organizations such as IOM or UNHCR, and UNICEF.

After the accession to the EU, selected competencies regarding the integration of foreigners were transferred from the MoI to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, suggesting that the integration policies were not only matters of internal security as before (Kušniráková & Čížinský, 2011, p. 511). The Ministry of Industry and Trade (MPO) has been a traditional opponent of the restrictive immigration

policies of the MoI. It has defended the interests of particular entrepreneurs who have recruited a labour force among migrants, including citizens of Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries (Kušniráková & Čížinský, 2011, p. 501).

There was only limited involvement of municipalities in integration programs for foreigners before the Russian invasion. Instead, cooperation between governmental and regional levels of policy implementation took place. On the regional level, the Centres for the Integration of Foreigners were established between 2009 and 2019 and provided foreigners with basic assistance including language courses, for instance. However, the coordination of their activities with regional governments and with smaller municipalities was only limited. The municipalities themselves do not have any strategies or policies on how to provide support or assistance to migrants and foreigners and their role in the implementation of integration policies remained limited and driven by ad-hoc needs (Jelínková et al., 2023, p. 7). According to Bauerová (2018, p. 399), the hierarchical structure, where the activities to integrate immigrants are prepared and realized at the central level and local NGOs only follow directives and programs prepared by central institutions, is the main obstacle to the successful integration of foreigners. Generally speaking, Czechia does not have a migration conception or strategy that would enable quick and flexible reactions to unforeseen migration influxes. Instead, the Czech immigration policy is rather reactive and ad hoc. The lack of coordination of activities between individual institutions and actors of the Czech immigration policy (Kušniráková, 2014; Stojanov et al., 2022, p. 10) also limits the flexibility and ability of immigration policies to react to unforeseen events. Generally, there are two aims in the effort to adjust integration policies in Czechia: 1) systemic, leading to a change of legislature for the integration of immigrants; and 2) aimed at particular and concrete interventions (Jelínková & Valenta, 2022). Another limiting issue in the implementation of integration policies is the unequal distribution of foreigners in Czechia with their largest concentration in Prague and the Central Bohemian region. Therefore, the activities of NGOs working with foreigners are not equally distributed across the country (Bauerová, 2018).

5. Ukrainians in Czechia before and after the war

The number of migrants with permanent residence has been increasing in Czechia for a long time, indicating a longer and more secure stay in the country (Jelínková & Valenta, 2022, pp. 78–79). As of 31 December 2021, 660,849 foreigners (4.7% of the population) resided legally in the territory of Czechia (ČSÚ, 2021). Among them, the highest share of people with citizenship of Ukraine (1.4%), Slovakia (0.9%) and Vietnam (0.5%) were represented in the population. Citizens of these three countries made up a total of 57% of foreigners with a residence permit (or with a permitted or registered residence) in Czechia in 2021 (ČSÚ, 2021).

Residents with foreign citizenship from EU countries made up 1.6% of the population and from outside the EU 3.2% of the population (Státní občanství, 2021).

Even though Ukrainians constituted one of the biggest migrant groups in Czechia even before the Russian invasion, they were only rarely asylum seekers. The majority of them used the pathways of voluntary, economic migration (Pędziwiatr & Magdziarz, 2023, p. 346). After the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Donbas, the number of Ukrainians applying for international protection increased significantly, but the economic reasons still prevailed. In 2021 there were 196,637 foreigners from Ukraine in Czechia, 194,334 of them with a Residence for 12+ months (ČSÚ, 2022).

In 2016, Sushko et al. (2016) identified typical patterns of migration trends in Ukraine: 1) a high level of outgoing labour migration; 2) a tendency to transform temporary labour migration to a permanent one; 3) the appearance of new migration patterns in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea; 4) a decrease of immigrants in Ukraine and a low level of integration of foreigners in Ukraine.

Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Czechia became a target country of Ukrainian refugees. The majority of Ukrainian war immigrants (80%) arrived in Czechia before April 15, while the largest number (more than 93 thousand) arrived during the second half of March (Adunts et al., 2022). Czechia has become one of the main destination countries for fleeing persons. By the end of 2022, 473,216 persons received temporary protection on its territory, and in a relative comparison (number of refugees per 100,000 inhabitants) it has become the most important recipient of refugees from Ukraine in the EU (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, 2021).

As of 31 August 2023, there were registered a total of 97,171 Ukrainian migrants with a permanent stay in Czechia and another 469,348 with a temporary stay (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, 2024b). The incoming population's structure significantly differed from the former Ukrainian minority in Czechia. Before the war, men represented 57.1% of the Ukrainian minority. On the contrary, only 37.2% of the new arrivals were men, including underage boys arriving with their mothers (Münich & Protivínský, 2023). As for the age structure of Ukrainian refugees in Czechia, 68% of them are of working age, of which 65% are women and 35% are men. Currently, 28% of temporal protection holders are children and 4% are senior citizens (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, n.d.b).

The newly incoming refugees from Ukraine settled either in Prague or in cities with already largest Ukrainian minorities such as Brno and Pilsen. Regarding the share of the number of inhabitants, the largest number of persons with temporary protection are located in the districts of Tachov, Plzeň-město, and Cheb. Roughly one-third of the total number of granted temporary protections has lapsed. In most cases, these were persons who had returned to Ukraine. Others ended temporary protection at their request (5%) or went to another EU state (1.5%) (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, n.d.b).

6. Institutional actors' reaction to the influx of Ukrainian refugees

The main institutional actor responsible for the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees was the MoI. At first, the influx of refugees caught the government off guard; however, the MoI soon accepted its coordinating role. However, as Jelínková et al. (2023) claim, serious shortcomings in the Ministry's ability to act were identified, consisting of "limited ability (and perhaps willingness) to engage other actors in the integration agenda, limited cooperation with experts, little ability to work with data, and little vision" (Jelínková et al., 2023, p. 12). The first phases of the massive influx pointed out the limits of the Czech migration policy which would enable quick and flexible reactions in sudden and unexpected situations.

The EU adopted the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) through the Council Directive 2001/55/EC on 4 March 2022. Based on the TPD, the refugees from Ukraine were offered temporary residence and work permits in any EU country for one year, with the possibility of being granted an extension of two additional years. The TPD granted children access to education and healthcare (Elinder et al., 2023, p. 592) and refugees from Ukraine free move within the EU countries and access to services and assistance guaranteed by the TPD on the all-EU level (European Commission, 2023).

Based on the Council Directive 2001/55/EC, Czechia opened its borders for displaced persons and established an easy pathway to obtain a formalized status through temporary protection. The legal framework to accommodate refugees from Ukraine was introduced on 17 March 2022, with three government bills under the name "Lex Ukraine 1" which was amended by new legal provisions "Lex Ukraine 2" in June 2022. Eligible for EU Temporary Protection are Ukrainian nationals residing in Ukraine before 24 February 2022; Ukrainian nationals who entered Czechia legally without a visa or with a short-stay visa before 24 February 2022 and still legally residing there; Non-Ukrainian third-country nationals and stateless persons enjoying international protection in Ukraine before 24 February 2022; family members of the categories mentioned above; Non-Ukrainian third-country nationals legally staying (e.g. with visa) in Ukraine before 24 February 2022 and who can prove that their return to their country of origin is not possible due to threat of imminent danger. Based on the adopted legal provisions, refugees from Ukraine were guaranteed access to the labour market, education, healthcare, and social housing (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022; Pędziwiatr & Magdziarz, 2023, p. 360).

Czechia provided Ukrainian refugees with a humanitarian allowance of CZK 5,000 for up to five months. Later, based on Lex Ukraine 2, the guarantee of the humanitarian allowance was prolonged for another five months. This allowance, however, was provided only to people not granted free accommodation, alimentation, and basic hygiene products. Ukrainian refugees were granted free access to social benefits available to Czech citizens, based on their individual social and health situation. Besides that, the Czech government provided a "solidarity allowance for

hosts” (3,000 CZK per accommodated person, 12,000 CZK maximum) which could be claimed by those who provided free accommodation to Ukrainian refugees. These benefits were granted to Ukrainian refugees through the system provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The implementation Ministry’s agenda was negatively influenced by bureaucratic obstacles, a low level of digitalization, and a lack of staff capacity as identified by Jelínková et al. (2023, p. 13).

The fundamental changes in guaranteed assistance for Ukrainian refugees were brought in the fifth amendment to Lex Ukraine which came into effect on 1st April 2023. It limited the provided assistance to 1) free emergency accommodation only to 150 days, except for vulnerable individuals; 2) discontinued the allowances for housing the refugees in private properties and compensation of housing costs were newly provided directly to refugees; 3) restricted the humanitarian benefit at the Living Minimum (4,860 CZK) for the first 150 days after granting temporary protection; 4) after this period, the benefit was about to be tied to the Subsistence Minimum (3,130 CZK), except for vulnerable refugees (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, 2023; UNHCR, 2023).

Currently, the Sixth Amendment to the Lex Ukraine is in force, bringing changes in the health insurance system for refugees from Ukraine and providing education to Ukrainian children. The amendment also provides possibilities for extending temporary protection until 31 March 2025.

The large number of children among refugees from Ukraine created pressure on the Czech educational system. As of 31 March 2023, there were 51,281 refugee children from Ukraine enrolled in Czech schools which made up 2,8% of all school children. The highest share of Ukrainian refugee children was enrolled in preparatory classes (7% of all children in preparatory classes) and 3,9% of all children in elementary schools (MŠMT ČR, 2023a, 2023b). Since the new system for migrant education at primary schools was already adopted in 2021, the Ministry of Education was prepared for the influx of refugees from Ukraine in 2022 (Jelínková et al., 2023). Several partner programs have cooperated with the Czech Ministry of Education and NGOs or UNICEF provided Ukrainian refugee children with Czech language courses, children’s groups, and other learning activities supporting school participation (UNHCR, 2023). The lack of knowledge of the Czech language at the beginning created a barrier to the proper integration of Ukrainian children into the education system. The unavailability of places in pre-schools and elementary schools (iROZHLAS, 2023) created an additional barrier to Ukrainian women’s access to the labour market.

Regional and local institutions’ reactions

The most active institutional actors in providing direct assistance to refugees from Ukraine have been the regional governments that had almost non-existent previous experience with accommodating immigrants (Jelínková et al., 2023, pp. 1-

2). The refugees from Ukraine, after they came to Czechia, were registered at the KACPUs that were established in all 14 Czech regions. The basic assistance to Ukrainian refugees in the form of accommodation, food, and basic material needs was provided by the centers for the support of foreigners in all regions of Czechia, the existence of which was supported by European funds of the MoI and which had different operators (Jelínková & Valenta, 2022). KACPUs provided the registration of citizens of Ukraine with the Foreign Police; arrangement of temporary protection; and assistance in dealing with a further stay in Czechia. The operation of the centers was also supported by the active participation of the firefighters in the form of providing transportation and later also registration of Ukrainians in Czech municipalities (Jelínková et al., 2023). For example, in the Moravian-Silesian region, around 33,000 Ukrainians have passed through the KACPU since the start of the refugee crisis. In 2023, the number of Ukrainians dropped significantly with only 6,407 registered Ukrainian refugees in contrast to 26,345 registered Ukrainians in 2022 (ČTK, 2024).

During the first phases of immigration from Ukraine at the beginning of 2022, the activities to accommodate refugees were coordinated on the level of working groups consisting of the workers of the Foreign Police, DAMP, Czech Fire Brigade, Office of Labour, workers of the state health insurance company, and the Czech Red Cross. The activities were coordinated and financially supported by the regional offices of international organizations such as three UN agencies in Czechia - the IOM, UNHCR, and UNICEF. UNICEF, for instance, provided financial and technical support to the Municipality of Prague in establishing the Center for Follow-up Support for Ukrainian Refugees (CNPUU) in October 2022. Its activities follow the Prague Municipality's Strategic Framework for Supporting Ukrainian Refugees and wider Strategic Priorities of the Government of the Czech Republic (UNICEF, 2022).

On the municipalities level, the reaction to the influx of refugees from Ukraine was quick and municipalities offered Ukrainians free accommodation and other forms of assistance, both financial and administrative, even though the coordination of assistance with the higher levels of Czech administration was complicated at the beginning.

Generally speaking, the assistance provided to Ukrainian refugees after February 2022 was extraordinary in the level and conditions of material aid and forms of accommodation provided to them. The level of public support for their acceptance and provision of various types of assistance was also much higher than in the case of other refugees, especially in comparison with the refugees from Africa or the Middle East (Plevák, 2023). The support for Ukrainian refugees is also visible in the approach of various institutional actors dealing with refugees and migrants in Czechia, contrasting with the restrictive position towards possible acceptance of Syrian refugees, for instance (Lidovky.cz, 2014). There is also a distinctive methodology and integration strategy for Ukrainian refugees in Czechia. Their integration is addressed in a separate Strategy for the Adaptation and Integration of

Refugees from Ukraine. Since they are beneficiaries of temporary protection, assistance is not provided according to the State Integration Programme for refugees (Jeřínková et al., 2023).

7. Lessons learned or possible adjustments of Czech immigration and integration policies

As it comes from the experience with the refugee flow from Ukraine in the first months after the Russian invasion, the Czech immigration policy may be flexible in terms that Czechia can incorporate and accommodate a huge number of immigrants. The first migration wave was also a challenge in terms of complete adaptation to changing terms of the everyday working basis of the MoI. All four respondents in the interviews admitted that the first several weeks of the migration wave were extremely difficult because of the large numbers of asylum seekers (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 4). One of the respondents admitted: “At first, no one was ready. Some [refugees from Ukraine] had relatives in the territory, others had a greater need [of assistance]” (Interview 1).

One of the immediate effects of the Russian aggression against Ukraine was the decision to immediately stop the citizens of the Russian Federation from applying for visas. Their applications were rejected and visas were not granted. At the same moment, all Ukrainian citizens were allowed to apply for subsidiary protection. Their larger numbers also demanded a change of approach to provide assistance and secure their legal status in Czechia (Interview 1). The most difficult task seemed to be the data verification of the larger group of migrants, which required coordination with other Czech institutions and also with the other Schengen member states (Interview 3). If someone had any kind of legal stay in any of the other EU member states, he or she could not apply for legal protection in Czechia. Such an application had to be rejected from the legal point of view. The cooperation with several different EU states was also problematic (Interview 3). According to some experts whom the interviews were made with, the most difficult cooperation was with Hungary (Interview 1, Interview 3).

During the first weeks, the different branches of the MoI developed new forms of cooperation with non-state actors. Such cooperation was primarily based on the personal ties between particular officials, rather than resulting from systemic measures (Interview 4). According to the respondent in Interview 1: “Initially, communication was very smooth, it was built on informal communication and the relationships of our heads of departments” (Interview 1). NGOs have been the most active actors at local level in the provision of assistance to Ukrainian refugees. They provided not only material support, but also legal and social advice and were even proactive in articulating refugees’ needs. This effort met with demands for better cooperation and stronger coordination of the activities of particular institutions at the state level. Such needs resulted in the creation of KACPU, which were present in

all Czech regions and were the most important centers from where all the activities were coordinated to solve the situation of the migrants. One of the negative effects was connected with the lack of experience of all participating officials, whose daily agenda differed from KACPU activities. They were assigned to KACPU according to the actual needs rather than their professional specialization and their everyday agenda (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 4). The officers had to deal with the language barrier as well, as “the vast majority of officials do not speak Russian or Ukrainian and the vast majority of refugees do not speak English” (Interview 3).

With the stagnation of the inflow of new migrants, all actors participating in KACPU decided on professionalization of the centers. Currently, all KACPU employees are specialized in specific agendas and the situation has been improved in the professionalization of KACPU. All of respondents also agreed on the sustainability of the model, although it was adopted during a chaotic period (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 4).

Other issues are connected to the general evaluation of the Czech migration policy and its possible flexibility. Also, they admitted that the Czech immigration policy can be understood as rigid and restrictive, and the general changes might be understood as sensitive issues. The rather reserved and negative attitude to possible changes in Czech migration policy may be illustrated by a statement by the respondent from Interview 4: “In my opinion, this is not acceptable, this process is currently set correctly, as it should be, and it’s working”. The reaction of the government and other institutional actors in the case of refugees from Ukraine is then understood as exceptional. It was possible due to political decisions by the Czech government, which was one of the most critical of the Russian aggression towards Ukraine. Czechia belonged to the states that strongly condemned the aggression and were willing to provide support for Ukrainians. This political agenda was also crucial for DAMP’s everyday tasks. These political decisions together with the necessary adjustments of laws made by the Czech government and parliament enabled DAMP more flexibility in dealing with the massive influx of Ukrainians. As the respondent from Interview 1 claims: “At the moment, a government decree allows for the extension of stay based on a government decision. At this point, we cannot look for more flexibility from the government, because this situation was essentially so much of a crisis because the standard criteria for applications were not addressed, they were just registered. In my point of view, the system was flexible enough. The question is now how to maintain it in terms of the legality of the stay of immigrants - in terms of their residence. It is a question of how to make it work efficiently.” The decisive role of the political players in Czechia has been a crucial factor influencing migration policy. However, any possible changes demand not only the will of the Czech political representation but also consensus among Schengen countries (Interview 1, Interview 3, Interview 4). As one of the respondents stressed: “Migration policy needs to be dealt with in a complex framework, we are members

of the Schengen area, the Czech migration policy cannot be taken out of this complex - we need to cooperate with other members and have a similar policy, which is sometimes difficult due to individual problems of particular EU member states.” (Interview 1). Similarly, the respondent from Interview 3 pointed out: “There is a need to coordinate a unified procedure between the Police and DAMP for assessing and evaluating applications for temporary protection. Better and more effective cooperation at the transnational level would be beneficial, e. g. the European database of temporary protection holders was only established during the summer of 2022, until then there was no possibility to check whether a refugee had already obtained protection and related benefits in another country, unless he/she admitted it himself/herself, which led to quite frequent abuse of this assistance.” (Interview 3). Within the Czech context, the coordination of migration procedures among different institutions is also problematic. Additionally, one of the respondents stressed the lack of personnel as a limiting factor in enhancing the flexibility of the Czech migration policy: “If there are very few people, the vetting process is very protracted and there is a very long wait for the application to be processed” (Interview 2).

As for the lessons learned and the possible applicability of the approaches adopted during the first phases of the war in Ukraine to other refugee crises Czechia may have to deal with in the future, the respondents agreed that the situation in early 2022 was exceptional. They stressed the context each refugee influx has to be dealt with: “I don’t think it’s applicable from that point of view because quite a lot of things have been dealt with on the fly and the next wave of migration may be very different.” (Interview 2). Another respondent similarly claimed, that “the strategies adopted were so specifically aimed at refugees from Ukraine that it would be difficult to apply them to everyday practice. The adopted strategies were essentially “truncated” and simplified normal DAMP procedures to be as efficient and quick as possible, which raised some risks, such as partial, if not complete, resignation to internal security and state order.” (Interview 3).

However, respondents evaluated positively the reaction of Czech institutions and acknowledged possible lessons learned from this experience: “Since it was impossible to prepare for such a situation in advance, it was managed well within the limits of what was possible. Of course, there were some organizational shortcomings, but these were resolved relatively soon. If another crisis were to break out, we would certainly act better and more efficiently based on this experience.” (Interview 3). The reaction of Czech institutions was evaluated positively by another respondent who also added that ever since 2022 and 2023, there were some lessons learned and certain mechanisms adjusted: “From the beginning, it was possible to cope with these influxes of people and in overtime, there have been continuous improvements based on new experiences” (Interview 4). They admitted that the infrastructure created originally for accommodating refugees from Ukraine (such as KACPU) could function well in perspective similar situations in the future, especially because of educated specialized personnel: “There is a person who

understands the issue and there are not ad hoc people who are not very specialized in this area and mistakes can be made. It is much better in that respect at the moment.” (Interview 2).

The difficulties of an early period connected with the migration wave of Ukrainian refugees and many different obstacles were not, however, successful in convincing the MoI to create a more specific and coherent methodology on how to integrate refugees in various regions and municipalities (Jelínková et al., 2023, p. 7). This fact was also evaluated as a problematic one by all respondents. The respondent in Interview 2 stressed the lack of funding allocated to strategy development. At the same time, he admitted that “it is necessary to create a well-thought-out general strategy, but in the conditions of the Czech state administration this is rather unrealistic and everything will rather be solved ad hoc again.” (Interview 2). The lack of strategy in the case of immigration policies, rather ad hoc reactions of institutions and lack of coordination between various institutions and actors in Czech immigration policy was also stressed earlier by Kušniráková (2014) and Stojanov et al. (2022, p. 10). Similarly, to our respondents, they also identify these factors as limiting the flexibility and ability of immigration policies to react to unforeseen events. At the same time, these factors determined the first period of the massive influx of Ukrainians to Czechia in the early stages of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. One of the most important limits influencing the everyday agenda of responsible departments of the MoI is also a lack of officials specializing in methodological assistance which is badly needed due to the existence of different and complex cases they are dealing with (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 4). Despite those problems, the general outcomes in connection with migration were evaluated rather positively by them, in comparison with other EU countries, as well. In comparison to refugees from other countries and also with economic migrants, the beneficiaries of temporary protection were granted better conditions for their stay in Czechia including both material assistance and administrative relief.

Conclusions

The Czech immigration and integration policies were evaluated by several authors (Bauerová, 2018; Jelínková et al., 2023; Jelínková & Valenta, 2022; Stojanov et al., 2022) as restrictive and preferring the economic interests of Czechia as a recipient country before 2022, which was caused by several crucial factors. First of all, the migration policy is influenced by geographical position. Czechia is a landlocked country without external borders with non-Schengen countries. During its socialist era, Czechia inherited rather restrictive migration policies but the situation was gradually changing during the early 1990s. The first larger groups of asylum seekers came to the Czech Republic in the early 1990s as one of the consequences of the Yugoslav wars. Despite this group, the primary purposes of

immigration remained employment, education, and often family reunification. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainians belonged to the largest group of immigrants coming to Czechia after 1989. The general number of immigrants has been constantly rising since the collapse of communism, but Czechia has never been the most important target country for asylum and international protection seekers. However, the situation changed after the Russian invasion in February 2022. The massive influx of Ukrainian refugees meant an unprecedented experience for various institutional actors in Central Europe including Czechia. The regions, municipalities and the government had to react quickly and provide refugees with accommodation, basic materials, and administrative assistance.

Therefore, the main aim of the paper was to evaluate the reaction of various institutional actors to the influx of refugees from Ukraine in 2022 and 2023. We focused especially on the function of KACPU based in Ostrava (Moravian-Silesian Region of Czechia). There are several limitations of this study arising especially from the selected case study and methodology. Our study covers a single case, which means that it focuses on the activities and mechanisms in the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees in the Moravian-Silesian Region. Even though the policies are created and released on the central level, our study focused on their incorporation only on the local level. Therefore, further ambitions for generalization are beyond the scope of this study. This fact is also reflected in the methodology of the paper which is based on expert interviews. These experts were selected using purposive sampling; however, they represent only one segment of institutional actors responsible for assisting the refugees from Ukraine. While using the expert interviews we have also been aware that even though our respondents are holders of partial professional competencies that arise from the day-to-day agenda they manage, they have to adhere to the code of ethics of their institutions.

As can be seen from the data obtained in the interviews conducted, KACPU played the most important role in addressing all the possible issues connected with the specific needs of refugees coming from Ukraine. The centers were successful in coordinating activities of many different actors at the state or regional levels together with NGOs but at the same time, it was also limited by the situation where all the employees from many different institutions were ad-hoc selected and their activities were not connected with their specialization within their institution and their every-day work agenda. During the first phases of the war, when it was necessary to accommodate hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, the cooperation with actors representing different institutions and non-state actors was often based on informal contacts. In later phases, the cooperation was slowly professionalizing and the interactions among different institutions were formalized.

The successful integration of refugees from Ukraine was possible only thanks to the flexible reaction of various institutional actors at the beginning of the war. The processes adopted in the case of refugees from Ukraine may be applied to other possible refugee crises, although it is difficult to predict the possible form, intensity,

or impact on Czech society. However, the approach to refugees from Ukraine can be considered exceptional compared to long-term immigration and integration strategies that are perceived as being rather restrictive. The attitude of the most important institutions responsible for migration policies is still rather sceptical towards the liberalization of migration policy toward citizens of non-EU countries. It is also necessary to note that the Czech migration policy has to be understood in the context of the EU. Therefore, possible liberalization or other shifts in migration policies have to be prepared in synergy with other EU member states.

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