

Integration of Ukrainian Refugees into the Romanian Labor Market

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the situation of Ukrainian refugees regarding their integration into the labor market in Romania, analyzing the current statistical data and the social measures taken by the central public institutions after the start of the war in Ukraine. Given that integration is a complex process, many significant challenges are encountered both among Ukrainian citizens and at the institutional level. A series of difficulties were highlighted both in the recognition of diplomas, professional certificates, the equivalence of studies, enrollment in professional training programs, as well as in information regarding the identification of jobs, labor legislation in Romania, various aspects of employment. Moreover, the language barrier, bureaucratic procedures, and the legislative differences between the two countries are among the main impediments to the integration process. Therefore, it is necessary to implement social support measures and develop coherent policies that promote the social inclusion of Ukrainian refugees, both for their benefit and for the Romanian community through their contribution to the economy and the elimination of the labor force deficit. Solid partnerships, the promotion of good practices between institutions and organizations, as well as the involvement of all social actors in the community are necessary conditions for the effective development of support programs that offer quality social services.

KEYWORDS: integration, labor market, equivalence of studies, professional training, inclusion policies, social integration measures, work mediation

Introduction

Integration is a long-term and complex process that requires efforts from both the society and the refugees. Integration is of significant importance in ensuring human rights (Rotaru 2023a, 825-874) on which the quality of life of refugees depends. Their fundamental rights (Rotaru 2023b, 205-221), such as the right to life, liberty (Rotaru 2019, 214-215) and security, must be protected through international and national legislation. Central and local public institutions and non-governmental organizations (Rotaru 2017, 57-76) have an essential role to play in ensuring protection and providing social services to support refugees in their integration in the host country. Developing social policies, taking specific measures and promoting good practices (Rotaru 2016, 29-43) support the inclusion of refugees in Romanian communities.

The integration of refugees is a dynamic, multifaceted, and bidirectional process that requires efforts from all stakeholders, including a certain level of preparedness on the part of the refugees to adapt to the host society without having to give up their own cultural identity, as well as appropriate preparation of the host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse community, according with UNCHR report for Romania. Although in the beginning, due to the wave of emotion created by the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, the Romanian society had a wide openness for Ukrainian refugees through social measures and intense support activities, over time the attention and interest for refugees has decreased considerably. Currently, their integration into the Romanian labor market faces various significant challenges (Expert Forum 2023). Therefore, an appropriate social approach is needed in order to find the most suitable integration solutions (Devon and Panayotatos 2022).

Although refugees can constitute a significant resource on the labour market, they often face difficulties in having their studies (Bulgaru 2005, 96-98), qualifications and professional

experience recognized, as well as in obtaining jobs. The benefits of employing Ukrainian citizens could be: an increase in gross domestic product, taxes paid by Ukrainians integrated into the labor force, alleviation of the problem of labor shortage, increase in cultural diversity and diversity of views in the labor market, and tax relief for employers.

Statistical data on labor market integration

The Romanian Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity (MMSS) maintains its goal of integrating Ukrainian refugees into the Romanian labor market, both by supporting Romanian employers who have a shortage of skilled workers and by supporting citizens who have left the conflict zone. According to the assessment reports, Romania needs over 100,000 additional workers each year to keep the economy functioning and growing. (International Organization for Migration 2023).

From February 24, 2022, to February 29, 2024, 7,397,495 Ukrainian citizens entered the territory of Romania, of which: 4,473 persons applied for asylum, 177 persons were granted a form of international protection and 148,844 persons were granted temporary protection. Out of the total number of beneficiaries of temporary protection, 63.1% are persons between 19 and 64 years of age, who are old enough to integrate into the labor market. Most of them are educated and a large proportion of them have university degrees. "Of them, between 25% and 30% are working remotely at their previous jobs and around 16% are integrated into the Romanian labor market", said Pablo Zapata, UNHCR representative in Romania.

On February 29, 2024, 21,513 Ukrainian citizens were registered nationwide in the records of the territorial agencies under the National Agency for Employment (ANOFM) for the purpose of employment, benefiting from information, professional counseling and labor mediation services. 301 persons registered in February 2024 (Romanian Government 2024). Since the beginning of the war, around 7,000 Ukrainian citizens have been employed in Romania, with 6,604 active employment contracts registered, including 552 contracts established in February 2024. A total of 2,858 Ukrainian citizens have been employed in the labor market as a result of the employment services provided by the ANOFM. Around 629 Romanian employers have shown their willingness to employ Ukrainians, declaring over 5,000 job vacancies available (Romanian Government 2024).

The fields of activity for the job vacancies reported by employers are: restaurants; retail trade in non-specialized stores, selling predominantly food, beverages and tobacco; hotels and similar accommodation facilities; hairdressing and other beauty activities; bread, cake and fresh pastry making; construction work for residential and non-residential buildings; furniture manufacturing n.e.c.; transportation of goods by road; service activities incidental to water transportation; manufacture of other wearing apparel; plumbing, heating and air-conditioning installation; activities of other organizations n.e.c.; bars and drinking places etc. In this context, most jobs offered by employers are for positions such as: unskilled laborers for assembling fitting parts, manual packers, goods handlers, cooks, unskilled laborers for building demolition, masonry lining and mosaic tiles, unskilled laborers for breaking and cutting building materials, hotel maids, kitchen helpers, waiter's assistants, unskilled solid and semi-solid packaging workers, kitchen workers (washer for large dishes), textile assemblers, cleaning staff, commercial workers, unskilled workers in the garment industry, mechanical locksmiths, welders, and waiters, among others. (ANOFM 2023).

During the period from February 24, 2022, to February 29, 2024, the highest number of active employment contracts were registered in Bucharest (2,710), Timiș (372), Maramureș (363), Bistrița-Năsăud (302), Arad (255), Cluj (276), Constanța (267), Brașov (255), Ilfov (213) and Sibiu (195). The fields of activity with the most registered employment contracts were: manufacturing (1,290), construction (1,146), commerce (756), hotels and restaurants (742), information and communication (509), administrative and support services (468) (Romanian Government 2024). In addition to employment contracts concluded after the start of the war in

Ukraine, there were another 1,125 employment contracts in the MMSS database as of August 2023 that were signed before February 24, 2022.

Social support measures at institutional level

Implementing supportive social measures and developing coherent policies contribute to a safer and more secure environment for refugees, allowing them to better adapt to new life situations and to the possibility of their social inclusion in the Romanian community. In response to the ongoing crisis, the Romanian Government has launched "National Plan of Measures for the Protection and Integration of Displaced Persons from Ukraine." According to Law 292/2011, Art. 6, social protection is defined on the basis of "the principles, values and traditions governing the social relations between individuals, groups, communities and institutions in the states of the European Union and represents a set of measures and actions aimed at ensuring a certain level of well-being and social security for the entire population and in particular for certain social groups." On March 7, 2022, the Government approved a series of measures for Ukrainians who have come to Romania, measures which include facilitating the access of Ukrainian citizens to the labor market:

- employment on Romanian territory based on a self-declaration, given to the Romanian employer, a declaration by which the citizen assumes the fulfillment of all the conditions necessary for the occupation of the corresponding position;
- the possibility to enter the labor market without the need for a work residence visa.

In Romania, Ukrainian refugees have:

- ✓ the possibility to get a job without a work permit;
- ✓ the possibility to get a job without the permit required by the possibility to get a job without the permit required by Government Ordinance no. 25/2014 on the employment and secondment of foreigners on the territory of Romania and for the amendment and completion of certain normative acts regarding the regime of foreigners in Romania;
- ✓ the possibility to get a job even in the absence of documents proving professional skills, on the basis of an affidavit submitted to the employer (valid for non-regulated professions);
- ✓ can benefit from measures to stimulate employment, as well as protection under the unemployment insurance system, under the conditions provided by law for Romanian citizens, provided they are registered with the county employment agencies, respectively, the Bucharest municipality.

The ANOFM has made available free services for Ukrainian citizens, providing both information on the contact details of the employment agencies and information on job vacancies. It also provides free access to:

- vocational information and counseling;
- vocational training;
- job mediation (by connecting employers with job seekers);
- recognition and assessment of professional skills obtained in formal and informal contexts;
- EURES support services (for people looking for a job in the European Union). (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2023).

On March 1, 2022, the legislative proposal no. B98/2002 for the completion of some normative acts regarding the status of foreigners in Romania and the employment of foreigners in Romania entered the Senate debate. This introduced the possibility of obtaining a long-stay visa, without presenting a copy of the employment permit, for foreigners who know Romanian, for a maximum period of 9 months of the year. For citizens coming from Ukraine, this visa could also be obtained online without presenting proof of means of subsistence. Ukrainian citizens were exempted from the fees related to the issuance of documents allowing residence in Romania.

From March 15 to July 15, 2022, employers who hired Ukrainian citizens for at least 6 months on a full-time basis, received 50% of the employee's salary per month for each person employed in this category, but not more than 2,500 RON per month for a period of 6 months. If the employers terminated, on their own initiative, the employment contracts of these persons earlier than 6 months after their employment, they were obliged to return all funds received. There are currently no tax breaks for employers who hire Ukrainian refugees (Romanian Government, 2024 *Report on the Integration of Ukrainian Refugees in Romania*).

Difficulties in integrating Ukrainians into the Romanian labor market

Language barrier

The primary challenge for the integration of refugees into the labor market is the language barrier, which is manifested both among Ukrainians and among specialists in public institutions who find it difficult to provide adequate social services. Translators are needed in these institutions to mediate interaction between people. A significant problem in the access to employment is influenced, among other factors, by the time needed to learn Romanian.

Lack of professional documents, diplomas, and certificates

The lack of civil documents, but especially of educational diplomas and certificates attesting to professional training is one of the main problems encountered in the process of vocational training and in the process of settlement. The issuing of documents by institutions in Ukraine is hampered by the rigid situation due to the war, with many public services either no longer functioning in certain areas or facing numerous obstacles.

Difficulties in recognition of professional qualifications from Ukraine and in equivalence of studies

Ukrainian refugees have reported misunderstandings and difficulties in having their diplomas and professional qualifications recognized by Romanian state institutions due to bureaucratic issues or legislative differences between the two countries.

Refugee mobility

Some refugees seek flexible employment because they are not sure how long they will stay in the host country, turning to low-skilled jobs or seasonal work. Employers may thus hesitate to hire them without any certainty about the length of their stay in Romania, expressing concern that they may stay for short periods of time.

Demographics of Refugees

Reports by various organizations have shown that women are the majority of the Ukrainian refugee population. Many women have qualifications but have no work experience in Ukraine because they have given up their careers. A significant barrier to employment is women's responsibility for caring for children, the elderly, or people with disabilities. Lack of access to care services for dependent persons limits employability. Lack of childcare options is a major obstacle. As a large proportion of Ukrainian children remain at home following online courses in Ukraine, parental support and supervision become a requirement in this situation. So, women are turning to flexible, part-time jobs. People caring for children with disabilities face additional barriers. The absence of men from the family due to their enlistment in the war is changing the household dynamics, with women having to take on multiple additional activities that limit their time for information, learning, following courses or finding work. All these aspects increase women's vulnerability in their integration into the labor market (UN Women 2023).

Difficulties in identifying jobs

The large number of information sources is often confusing and overwhelming for refugees.

Many people use the internet as a source of information, especially social networking sites, but they present many risks in obtaining reliable information. Available information can be incorrect, especially from those who try to take advantage of people's vulnerability. Due to the lack of information, refugees may be limited to a narrow range of informal and low-paid, low-skilled and no-contract or low-skilled jobs which in several instances have been directly reported as labor exploitation (Institute for Social Partnership Bucovina Association 2023).

Lack of information on labor legislation in Romania

Lack of access to important information in Ukrainian increases the vulnerability of these people, exposing them to additional risks. Employment contracts are not translated into Ukrainian, which can lead to labor exploitation by some employers. In Romania there have been reports of people being paid less or working longer hours than the agreed hours. Due to language barriers, labor inspectors have difficulties in identifying and reporting abuses.

Labor market aspects in Romania

„Refugees from Ukraine are currently employed at a level below their level of education and skills, according to a survey by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2023). In many fields of activity, the salaries offered by employers in Romania are low and do not cover the needs of families.

Lack of employment facilitation measures

There are currently no tax breaks for employers who hire Ukrainian refugees.

The psychological condition of refugees

Refugees face multiple negative psychological effects, on one hand, as a result of the impact of war and the losses they have suffered, and on the other hand, due to the demands and difficulties in adapting to a new society and accepting a new way of life.

High costs for translating documents needed for employment

Translating and legalizing numerous documents requires an extra budget for refugee families.

Recognition of diplomas, professional qualifications and equivalence of studies

The Romanian Government has allowed refugees from Ukraine who wish to work in unregulated professions and who do not have documents proving their professional qualifications and work experience to be hired on the basis of a self-declaration submitted to the employer. This affidavit certifies that the person meets the necessary professional requirements and has not committed any criminal offenses which would make him/her incompatible with the exercise of this activity. For the regulated professions explicitly specified in OG 25/2014 the affidavit is not accepted and appropriate educational diplomas or other necessary documents confirming the professional qualification, verified as valid in Ukraine or an alternative equivalent are required.

The institution that regulates educational documents is the National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (CNRED). This specialized structure within the Ministry of Education has continuously developed its regulatory and operational framework to support refugees, nevertheless, Ukrainians have reported numerous difficulties in recognizing diplomas, specifying various bureaucratic issues as well as high costs for translation and legalization of documents.

There are people who have fulfilled various professional roles in Ukraine in which they have acquired a wide range of knowledge and experience, but who have no official certification for the skills and capacities developed. Skills recognition is becoming an important requirement in the process of labor market integration. The EU has issued recommendations to facilitate employability and created an online EU Talent Pool for Ukrainian displaced persons to match

skills with job vacancies. Recognizing skills will facilitate the transition to sustainable employment that ensures people's financial independence.

European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (Ministry of Education Romania n.d.):

At the invitation of the Council of Europe, representatives from the National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (CNRED) and higher education institutions in Romania participated in 2023 in an information and training session dedicated to qualifications from Ukraine as part of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) project. They joined other national recognition centers and universities from Europe, the USA, and Australia.

Romania, through the National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (ENIC-NARIC Centre), became a member of the EQPR project alongside Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Serbia, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The project was launched in 2017 to facilitate the integration of refugees, is implemented by the Council of Europe, and is also supported by the UN Refugee Agency.

The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees provides information about academic training, professional experience, and language skills. This information can be relevant if a refugee wishes to seek employment, pursue an internship, enroll in a qualification course, or apply to a university. The information is accepted in any European country. The document is issued following an evaluation process by specialists from the partner states in the EQPR project, based on the documents held by the refugee and an interview, and does not represent an official recognition of studies.

The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees is issued to refugees who have completed their studies, starting from the upper secondary school level, for whom there are not enough documents or they cannot be proven with documents issued by educational institutions. The EQPR is not a certificate/decision of recognition of studies, a substitute for identity or educational documents, or a guarantee of enrollment in studies or employment. The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees is valid for 5 years from the date of issue, offering refugees a temporary solution to integrating into their host countries.

Conclusions

Integration involves professional training or retraining to adapt to the requirements of the Romanian labor market. Difficulties often arise related to the legal framework for organizing courses. Some individuals cannot be accepted by training program providers due to the lack of documents proving a minimum level of education and the insufficient number of participants required to form a training group, both of which are mandatory conditions.

Free online courses can increase accessibility for those who have caregiving responsibilities for dependents (children, people with disabilities, the elderly) or for those living in rural areas who cannot attend in-person courses. These digital solutions encompass a wide range of learning methods, particularly language training, which has become a priority for integration into the host country's community. The development of online training platforms represents an important and effective approach. An example is the 'Jobs for Ukraine' platform, which offered refugees the opportunity to learn digital and technical skills online, for free, and at their own pace, in preparation for employment.

Analyzing these barriers and identifying courses of action can lead to the development of appropriate policies and programs through which public institutions, national and international non-governmental organizations, as well as other key actors in the private sector, can carry out support activities and offer integrative social and community services. These support programs should include a wide range of **integration measures and actions:**

- ✓ Facilitating refugees' access to employment opportunities (Negru 2022, 48-50);
- ✓ Improving employment mediation services;

- ✓ Providing linguistic assistance for employment purposes;
- ✓ Promoting intensive Romanian language courses;
- ✓ Promoting distance learning courses for those who have caregiving responsibilities or are living in rural areas;
- ✓ Using digital applications for information and learning;
- ✓ Improving digital skills for women;
- ✓ Improving and making accessible the procedures for the equivalence of studies and the recognition of diplomas and professional certificates;
- ✓ Providing subsidies for the translation and legalization of documents;
- ✓ Offering information in Ukrainian regarding labor legislation in Romania;
- ✓ Ensuring legal frameworks that support part-time employment;
- ✓ Access to childcare services in after-school programs;
- ✓ Providing subsidies for employers who hire Ukrainian refugees;
- ✓ Conducting informational activities among employers;
- ✓ Organizing job fairs for Ukrainian refugees;
- ✓ Expanding access to apprenticeship, internship, and mentoring opportunities;
- ✓ Providing psychological support services to remove emotional barriers in the integration process into the labor market, increasing their motivation and productivity;
- ✓ Providing subsidies for transportation to the workplace;
- ✓ Support measures for vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, people of Roma ethnicity, etc.).

Integration policies and actions can only be effective if they are based on strong partnerships among all social actors, with the conscious involvement of the entire local community. They must be founded on systems and structures that allow for ongoing dialogue among stakeholders involved in refugee integration (Radu 2006, 34) and ensure efficient coordination of activities.

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