Przegląd Europejski – European Studies Quarterly, **ISSN: 1641-2478**
vol. 2024, no. 2

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31338/1641-2478pe.2.24.5

History taking its turn – international labour migration in V4 countries after World War II[1]

Michał Schwabe, *SGH Warsaw School of Economics (Warsaw, Poland)*
E-mail: michal.schwabe@sgh.waw.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1016-7256

Abstract
This article reflects on the V4 countries' international migration, with reference to their economic performance and common history. The aim of the article is to demonstrate how the transformation of the V4 countries and their accession to the EU influenced their transition from net emigration to net immigration countries. It also presents the consequences of the situation in Ukraine for the V4 economies and societies. Finally, the author pays attention to attitudes towards migrants in these countries. The study is divided into three periods: the post-war period (1945–2003), the years following EU accession (2004–2021), and the years of high migration from Ukraine (2022–2023).
Keywords: Visegrad Group (V4), accession to the EU, immigration, emigration, net migration, refugees

Historia zmienia się nieubłaganie – międzynarodowe migracje zarobkowe w krajach V4 po II wojnie światowej

Streszczenie
W artykule podjęto temat udziału państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej w procesach migracji międzynarodowych, z uwzględnieniem wspólnej historii i kondycji gospodarczej tych państw na przestrzeni lat. Celem badania było ukazanie zależności pomiędzy transformacją gospodarczą krajów V4 i ich akcesją do UE, a osiągnięciem dodatniego salda migracji międzynarodowych. W badaniu zwrócono również uwagę na nastroje wobec migrantów w krajach Grupy Wyszehradzkiej, w szczególności

[1] Publication co-financed by Collegium of World Economy, SGH Warsaw School of Economics.

w kontekście masowej imigracji uchodźców z Ukrainy. Badanie podzielono na trzy okresy: okres powojenny (1945–2003), lata po przystąpieniu do UE (2004–2021) oraz lata gwałtownego napływu uchodźców z Ukrainy (2022–2023).
Słowa kluczowe: Grupa Wyszehradzka (V4), akcesja do UE, imigracja, emigracja, migracja netto, uchodźcy

In 2022, the Visegrad Group (V4) countries were thrust into the spotlight due to the situation in Ukraine and mass immigration that was a relatively new phenomenon for these countries. As a result, some refugee-related problems had to be solved on ongoing basis.

To explain the lack of experience in solving such problems, it is necessary to analyse the V4 countries' common history. For many years after World War II, these countries remained under Soviet influence and were perceived as emigration countries (Gödri et al. 2014; Horáková 2000; Iglicka-Okólska 1997; Drbohlav 1994). However, even emigration to the West during that time was hampered by communist governments (Stola 2001). To fulfill their emigration dreams, Visegrad citizens often had to resort to indirect methods or non-work visas (Schwabe 2021).

After the political changes at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, emigration from V4 countries shifted to predominantly short-term economic migration. The main motivation during these years was to invest the money earned abroad upon returning home, taking advantage of the depreciation of their home currencies *vis-a-vis* the foreign currency earned. However, most labour migration involved illegal work, because the majority of V4 citizens did not have legal access to Western labour markets.

This situation changed after EU accession in 2004, when EU-15 countries gradually opened their labour markets to workers from 10 EU Member States (Drbohlav 2006; Grenčíková, Španková 2016). Following accession, due to the unfavorable conditions of the V4 economies, these countries faced large-scale emigration, with the majority of migrants choosing the UK as their destination (Schwabe 2023a; Okólski 2007; Duszczyk, Wiśniewski 2007). At that time, the V4 economies began to grow, generating a demand for additional labour, and over time, all Visegrad countries recorded a positive net migration balance.

The ultimate test of V4 immigration capacity (especially for the countries bordering Ukraine) came with the large-scale Ukrainian refugee migration of 2022, which posed numerous economic and social challenges resulting from unprecedented immigration (Duszczyk, Kaczmarzyk 2022; Zyzik et al. 2023; Veselková, Habel 2024; Schwabe 2023b).

The **research questions** that this article attempts to answer are the following:

- what is the economic impact of migration on V4 countries?
- whether the economies of the V4 are able to cope with increased immigration from the East in the nearest future?

Hence, **the aim of this article** is to present the transformation of the V4 countries from net emigration to net immigration countries, highlighting the determinants of economic

nature that shaped their migration flows. While analysing the data, special attention has been paid to the similarities and differences between the V4 countries in terms of labour migration with regard to their economic performance.

Understanding these relationships provides insight into how economic growth itself influences migration patterns. For instance, robust economic growth in a country can attract migrants seeking better employment opportunities and living conditions, thereby impacting population demographics and labour force composition. However, economic downturns or centrally planned economy can lead to increased emigration, because people seek better prospects abroad. Analysing these bidirectional effects is key to developing comprehensive policies that address both the economic drivers of migration and its consequences on global and regional economic stability. Ultimately, such research provides valuable insights that can lead to more informed and effective economic and social policies.

The history of V4 migration is presented in three periods in this article. The first period covers the years between World War II and EU accession. The second period encompasses the years following EU accession in 2004. The third period (2022–2023), though the shortest, is considered crucial from a migration standpoint, because it marks the first time in their history that the labour markets of the V4 countries were forced to cope with mass immigration over a short period**.**

Literature review

In the past decades, many researchers focused on migration to Visegrad countries. However, the majority of studies were performed for individual V4 countries and concerned the period following their accession to the European Union. For Poland – see e.g. Okólski and Salt (2014), Kaczmarczyk (2010); for Slovakia – Grenčíková and Španková (2016); for Czech Republic – Drbohlav et al. (2009); and for Hungary – e.g. Gödri et al. (2014).

As for the period 1945–2004, there are significant data gaps, because official emigration statistics were not collected until the early 1990s. Hence, most of the publications were focused on certain timeframes, with data derived from destination countries' immigration statistics or estimates based on non-official sources (see, e.g., Stola 2001; Iglicka-Okólska 1997; Drbohlav 1994; Okólski 1994; Rosset 1975).

There is also a dynamically growing number of post-2022 publications, which can prove useful in analysing the refugee stock in V4 countries: e.g. Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk (2022), Zyzik et al. (2023) – for Poland; Veselková and Habel (2024) – for Slovakia; IOM (2024) – for Hungary; and Lintner et al. (2023) – for Czech Republic. Despite the fact that the majority of migration research is performed at the country level, there are also papers concerning migration-related topics for the entire Visegrad Group.[2]

[2] See e.g. Engbersen and Snel (2013) – for post-accession migration; Mischuk and Vlasenko (2023), EWL (2023) – for the Ukrainian refugee inflow; Wike et al. (2019) – with regard to social attitudes towards migrants.

However, according to the best knowledge of the author of this article, there are no papers analysing V4 migration through the prism of economic performance. An existing publication of such nature has been prepared earlier by the author of this article (Schwabe 2021), but that paper was primarily based on the correlation between macro-indicators and migration flows. Moreover, it did not cover the phenomenon of post-2022 Ukrainian migration and its impact on V4 labour markets. This article intends to fill this gap.

Materials and methods

The predominant research method applied in this article is the critical review of Polish and foreign research literature on migration in Visegrad Group countries. This intends to shed light on similarities and differences between the V4 countries with regard to international migration, as well as the main migrant groups inhabiting these countries in the selected time periods. Special emphasis will also be placed on data related to the attitudes towards foreigners in V4 societies.

Apart from the critical review of available literature, the essence of this article is the analysis of raw data. Data sources used in this article include statistics published by the statistical offices of the V4 countries (i.e., Statistics Poland, Czech Statistical Office, Hungarian Central Statistical Office, and the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic), as well as by renowned international institutions (e.g., World Bank, Eurostat, UNHCR, IMF, IOM, OECD). Nonetheless, it must be taken into account that official migration data for the period 1945–1990 do not exist, and hence the available data must be perceived as estimates.

Moreover, as with most labour migration analyses, it is important to discuss the relevance and quality of the used datasets. Similar to other studies describing labour migration trends in V4 countries (see e.g., Drbohlav 2006; Duszczyk, Wiśniewski 2007; Grenčíková, Španková 2016), it is necessary to acknowledge the limited reliability of labour migration data. In many cases, these datasets tend to underestimate migration volumes and fail to provide a comprehensive picture of labour migration flows.

Sharing common history

Leaving aside the European refugee movements directly following World War II, examining international migration trends in the Visegrad Group countries presents significant methodological challenges. From 1945 to 1990, there was a conspicuous absence of data collection on international migration within these nations, primarily because it was politically incorrect to admit that citizens of the Eastern Bloc might opt to migrate to Western countries (Iglicka 2007). Soviet demographers further perpetuated this narrative by asserting that international migration under socialist regimes was nonexistent, arguing that there were no incentives for citizens to leave socialist states (Rosset 1975; Kaczmarczyk 2005). For instance, in Poland, the official

records for 1954 demonstrate that only 52 emigration permits were issued for capitalist countries (Stola 2001).

Despite the lack of official statistics, historical estimates suggest that from 1945 to 1990, approximately one million Polish citizens left Poland, nearly half a million Czechs and Slovaks emigrated from Czechoslovakia (Drbohlav et al. 2009) and over 430,000 Hungarians departed from Hungary (Gödri et. al. 2014). This substantial outflow of V4 citizens to the West likely would have been even higher if not for the stringent emigration bans and numerous obstacles to foreign travel imposed by state authorities during that period. Countries of the Eastern bloc at that time were an exemplary case of implementing emigration barriers, contrary to well developed countries, which imposed immigration barriers to protect their labour markets.

The emigration control measures enforced by socialist regimes included rigorous exit controls, surveillance, and a complex bureaucracy designed to dissuade and prevent citizens from emigrating. These measures not only restricted freedom of movement, but also fostered an atmosphere of fear and repression, effectively silencing those who might consider leaving. Consequently, while the official number of emigrants was minimised and underreported, the actual desire to emigrate among the population was substantial, driven by the search for better economic opportunities, political freedom, and personal safety. The disparity between official records and estimated figures highlights the complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors that shaped migration patterns during the Cold War era in the V4 countries.

The emigration barriers imposed by V4 countries' governments during the mid-20th century largely achieved their intended purpose, as evidenced by official data. In 1951, for example, fewer than 2,000 trips from Poland to Western countries were recorded, with the majority being undertaken by ruling party officials. The issuance of permits for private trips was minimal: in 1954 only 52 Poles obtained permits for private travel to the West, and the total number of emigration permits was less than 50 (Stola 2001). However, official data are very different from the estimates. As for the Czechoslovakia it is estimated that only between 1948 and 1949, approximately 246,000 people fled the country, primarily due to political changes following the communist takeover, while estimates for Hungary reveal that during the period 1945–1953 between 100,000 and 110,000 people left for the West (Lénárt 2012). The exception with regard to official migration data was the bilateral agreements with other countries – e.g., Poland's bilateral agreement with Germany, which facilitated family reunifications. During the 1950s, this agreement enabled over 250,000 Poles to emigrate to Germany. Additionally, a significant wave of Jewish emigration to Israel occurred in this period, covering approximately 50,000 Jews (Iglicka-Okólska 1997).

In the 1960s, Germany, the USA, and Canada emerged as the most popular destinations for Polish migrants, being final destinations for over 190,000 Poles. By 1960, these three countries accounted for nearly 80% of all Polish emigration. Some of this migration was illegal, with emigrants reaching their destinations via other countries or using tourist or sports visas. In case of Czechoslovakia, the scale of legal emigration between 1961 and 1970, was

estimated at about 164,500 individuals. The peak occurred in 1967, with about 14,000 people leaving the country. The anticipated democratisation in 1968 slowed the emigration process, reducing the number of legal emigrants to 10,500 in 1968, and 9,000 in 1969 (Horáková 2000). However, the subsequent period triggered a new wave of emigration, with the figures for illegal emigration likely being much higher. The primary European destinations for legal emigrants from Czechoslovakia included Austria, Germany, Greece, as well as Poland, and – just like in case of the other V4 countries – the United States and Canada (Drbohlav 2006).

For Hungary, the peak of the emigration occurred earlier than in Czechoslovakia, i.e. in 1957, and was a result of events on Hungarian political scene: the exodus of people from Hungary followed the social unrest and the suppression of an uprising against Soviet influence by the Red Army. During this time, approximately 200,000 people left the country, with the main destination being the United States. At that time the U.S. reported admitting around 40,000 Hungarian immigrants as Cold War refugees. Additionally, the popular destinations for Hungarian migrants of that time were Canada, Australia, West Germany, Great Britain, and Switzerland (Lénárt 2012).

The 1970s saw a continuation of bilateral agreements regarding to emigration. In case of Poland, it meant maintaining the pace of migration to Germany, due to the availability of immigrant visas for those people who could prove German nationality, and the ongoing family reunification policy (Bobrowska 2013). According to Stola (2001), the Polish passport policy from 1960 to 1980 remained consistent, with legal emigration to the West averaging between 10,000 and 25,000 people annually. As mentioned, Germany was the primary destination for Poles, attracting 66% of migrants, followed by the United States, which received 15% of Polish emigrants. During this period a significant illegal emigration was taking place, with political and economic motives often intertwined, as people sought countries with higher standards of living. The research outcomes for Czechoslovakia indicate that most of approx. 51,000 emigrants were young, healthy individuals, often traveling with their families. They were typically economically active people, their average age was 35, and they worked as predominantly skilled or semi-skilled "blue-collar" workers (Drbohlav 1994).

The 1980s witnessed a further intensification of emigration from Poland, with estimates suggesting that over two million people left the country during this decade (Okólski 1994). However, the intensification was not the case in Czechoslovakia, because the respective emigration figure for that country during this period equaled to 53,700. As for Hungary, there are no specific data sets, allowing for reliable estimations of migration in 1980s, but according to Lénárt (2012), after the large-scale post-1956 migration, another 140,000 people emigrated from that country until 1989.

The political changes in 1989 marked a turning point, as the rate of emigration from V4 countries decreased, and its nature evolved. After 1989, many emigrants viewed their migration as temporary, driven by the desire to maximise income rather than escape the communist regime or the centrally planned economy. According to Statistics Poland, only around 216,000 people emigrated from Poland for permanent residence during the 1990s (Statistics Poland 2023). The similar decreasing emigration trends were observed in Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia (Schwabe 2021).

This shift in post-1989 migration patterns reflects broader socio-economic changes and the opening of Visegrad countries' borders. The liberalisation of travel and the emergence of new economic opportunities (both domestically and abroad) transformed the motivations and demographics of V4 emigrants. Temporary labour migration became a more common phenomenon, reflecting a new era of mobility and economic integration within a globalised context. The history of Visegrad countries' emigration, therefore, offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between political policies, economic conditions, and individual aspirations over several decades.

Although the labour migration to V4 countries in the post-war period was negligible, one thing worth mentioning in this context is that it was to some extent enabled for labour from other communist countries. As an example, collaboration between Czechoslovakia and Poland in the employment sector has been longstanding since the early 1960s, particularly in border regions. Due to domestic labour shortages in these areas, Polish workers were notably prevalent in various industries, such as the textile and glass sectors in northern Bohemia, as well as metallurgy and mining in North Moravia. The peak number of Polish citizens working long-term in the Czech territory was recorded in 1974, reaching 20,825 individuals (Drbohlav et al. 2009). In the mid-1970s, to address the issue of labour shortages, Czechoslovak Parliament allowed importation of temporary workers and trainees from other socialist countries. Under intergovernmental agreements, migrants were primarily lured from Poland, but also Hungary, Yugoslavia, Cuba, Mongolia, Angola, and North Korea (Bouškova 1998). The Czech Republic emerged as a regional leader at the beginning of the 21st century, hosting up to 150,000 migrant workers or foreign entrepreneurs, predominantly from Slovakia, Ukraine, and Vietnam. Alongside the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia (and to a lesser extent, Poland and Russia) also served as significant migration hubs in the region. Nearly all countries experienced substantial inflows of asylum seekers. For instance, between 1996 and 2005, the Czech Republic recorded 73,000 asylum seekers, Poland – 51,000, Hungary – 49,000, and Slovakia – 48,000 (Okólski 2007).

The complex migration dynamics of the Visegrad Group countries during the Cold War era highlight significant methodological challenges due to the absence of official data and stringent emigration control. Despite this fact, historical estimates reveal substantial outflows from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, driven by the search for better economic opportunities, political freedom, and personal safety. The political changes in 1989 marked a turning point, with a decrease in emigration rates and a shift towards temporary labour migration, reflecting broader socio-economic transformations and the opening of borders. This shift laid the groundwork for the next significant phase in V4 migration history: the accession of Visegrad Group countries to the European Union.

The EU membership and beyond

Despite their common history, the pre-accession economic conditions of the V4 countries were quite different. The labour market suffered the most in Poland and the

Slovak Republic, both of which noted similar, very high unemployment rates (approximately 20%). The transition to a market economy came at a high cost — it forced enterprises to boost labour productivity and enhance competitiveness by reducing labour hoarding and adopting labour-intensive technologies, all while cutting public sector employment for budgetary reasons. Additionally, informal sector employment significantly contributed to the persistently high unemployment rates (Nesporova 2002).

In Poland, mass layoffs resulted from restructuring processes in the heavy industry sector, as well as social reforms in healthcare, education, and public administration. In Slovakia, the accession to the OECD at the end of 2000 came after a period of sluggish economic growth, primarily due to macroeconomic stabilisation measures adopted to counteract the effects of previous unsustainable policies (OECD 2002). Additionally, Slovakia faced the issue of the Roma population, whose participation in labour market was lower than that of other ethnic groups (Machlica et al. 2014).

Among the V4 countries, the unemployment levels were notably lower in Czech Republic and Hungary (equaling 5–7% in the period directly preceding the accession). The pre-accession unemployment rates of 10 countries that joined the European Union in 2004 (especially those of Poland and Slovakia) sparked fears among the leaders of the 15 EU Member States related to the threat of mass immigration following the accession. It was feared that the EU-15 labour markets would not be able to absorb the quantity of estimated labour migrants from the new Member States, which was forecasted at up to 1,180,000 annually (World Bank 2006).

As a result, the EU-15 countries negotiated transitional arrangements, allowing them to delay opening their labour markets to workers from 10 new EU Member States. Ultimately, only three of the EU-15 Member States – the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Sweden—chose not to exercise their right to implement transitional periods and opened their borders to workers from the new Member States immediately following the accession. Among those three, the United Kingdom was the primary target country for workers from the new Member States, including the V4 countries (Schwabe 2023a).

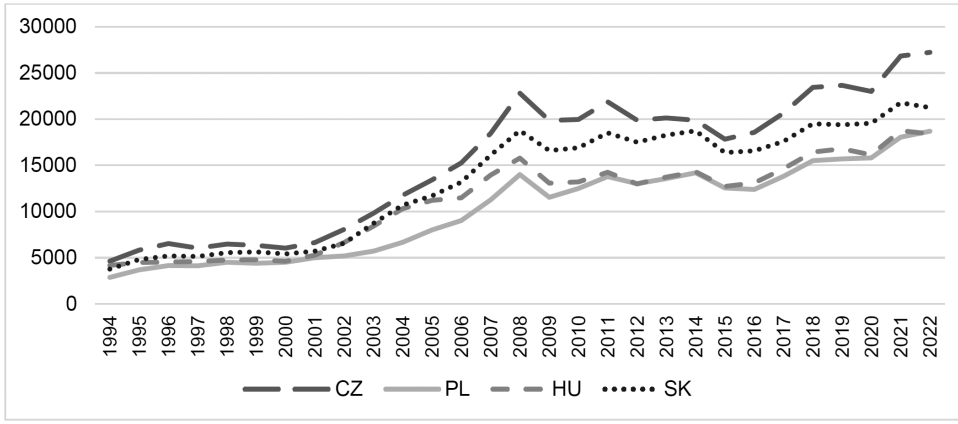
An analysis conducted four years after the accession revealed that the highest number of workers migrated to the UK from the two countries with the highest unemployment rates: Poland (over 614,000 workers), and Slovakia (over 97,000 workers), the V4 leader in terms of the share of emigrants in the country's population (1.6%). Migration to the UK from other two countries was slightly lower, with over 41,000 people from Czech Republic, and over 36,000 people from Hungary. The largest group of workers registered with the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) has been classified in general occupations, with 28% identified as process operatives, other factory workers (Home Office 2008). According to the *Accession Monitoring Report* from the ECAS Home Office, Polish migrants also constituted the largest group of post-accession migrants in Ireland (55% in 2005) and Sweden (60%), with Slovakia being the second among the V4 countries in both these cases (Home Office 2008).

All in all, according to IMF estimates, between 2004 and the end of 2006, over 1.2 million workers emigrated from Poland (approx. 3,2% of Poland's total population),

225,000 workers – from Slovakia (4,5%), over 54,000 workers – from Czech Republic (0,5%), and over 25,000 workers – from Hungary (0,25%) (IMF 2007). This post-accession mass emigration primarily involved young, single males (with a median age below 30) performing low-skilled jobs in their countries of immigration (Schwabe 2023b). These migrants did not have precise plans regarding the duration of their migration, claiming they would return to their country of origin at some point, hence the term "liquid migration" appeared (Engbersen, Snel 2013).

The effect of post-accession emigration on the sending countries' economies was negligible, yet – to some extent – it contributed to easing the tension on V4 labour markets in the short run. In the following years, the economies of the V4 countries began to grow dynamically compared to previous years, which translated in the growing wealth of V4 societies (see: *Figure 1*).

Figure 1: GDP per capita growth in V4 countries, 1994–2022 (current USD)

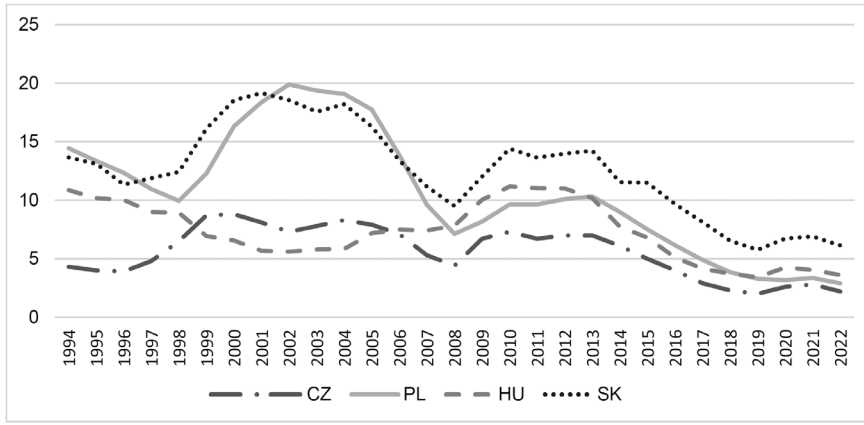


Source: author's own elaboration based on World Bank data (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD)

This growth resulted not only from conducting necessary reforms, but also from large-scale transfers from the EU budget. It is estimated that the impact of the EU Cohesion policy on V4's GDPs was quite significant, reaching up to 6% in 2014. The total economic benefits in the 2007–2013 Programming Period were equal to EUR 96.6 billion for Poland, EUR 51.1 billion for Czech Republic, EUR 16.2 billion for Hungary, and EUR 8.4 billion for Slovakia (Bartkiewicz et al. 2024).

The growing economies translated into a growing demand for labour in V4 countries, which resulted not only in gradually reducing high pre-accession unemployment levels (see: *Figure 2*), but also in a growing demand for foreign workers. It is worth noting that in 2022, Poland and Czech Republic were two EU countries with the lowest unemployment rates, and in 2017 Poland had the highest temporary migrant stock globally.

Figure 2: Unemployment rate in V4 countries, 1994–2022 (% of total labour force)

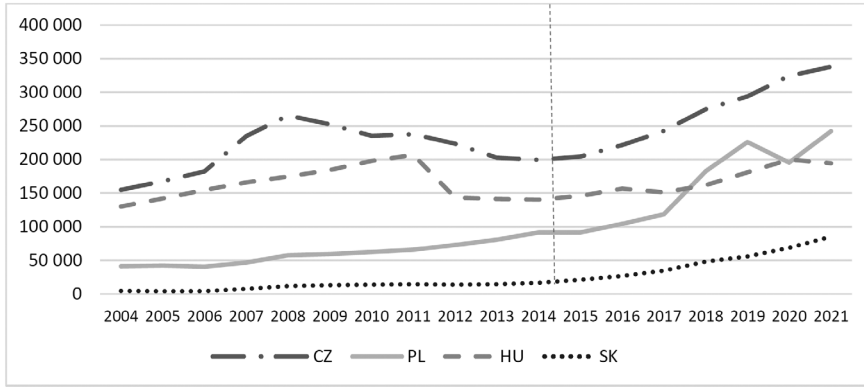


Source: author's own elaboration based on World Bank data (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS)

Overall, although not simultaneously, all the V4 countries became net immigration countries after joining the EU. Czech Republic, with the highest migrant stock, has been a net immigration country since 2004 (except for 2013). Hungary and Slovakia also became net immigration countries after joining the EU, although the positive net migration values in these countries were quite negligible. The last country to reach a positive net migration balance was Poland, which became a net immigration country in 2016 (Statistics Poland 2023).

As far as temporary migration is concerned, the steady growth of immigration volumes could be observed in all the V4 countries after 2014 (see: *Figure 3*).

Figure 3: Temporary immigrant stock in the V4 countries

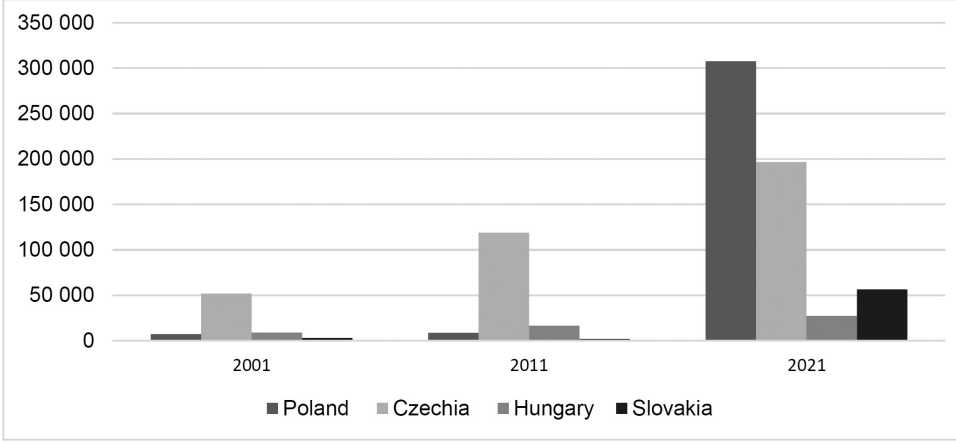


Source: author's own elaboration based on data retrieved from statistical offices of the V4 countries: *Czech Demographic Handbook* 2022; *Foreign citizens residing in Hungary...* 2023; *Štatistický prehľad...* 2021; *Rocznik Demograficzny* 2022.

The growing immigrant stock was interrelated with the V4 countries economic performance. According to the research results, higher GDP growth and lower unemployment rates triggered increased immigration in Poland, whereas an increase in FDI inflows in Slovakia resulted in lower emigration in the subsequent period (Schwabe 2021).

However, it should be noted that growing immigration in this period can be attributed not only to the robust economies in all the V4 countries, but also to the steadily growing immigration from Ukraine since 2014 (see: *Figure 4*). Also, the impact of Great Recession on return migrations cannot be underestimated. In the UK, one of the primary destinations for V4 migrants, the economy shrank by about 4.2%, marking one of the worst downturns since World War II, and the unemployment rate rose sharply, peaking at around 8% in 2011. Economic crisis led to an increase in the return of migrants, contributing to growing immigration rates in V4 countries.

Figure 4: Immigrants from Ukraine in V4 countries as of 2001, 2011 and 2021

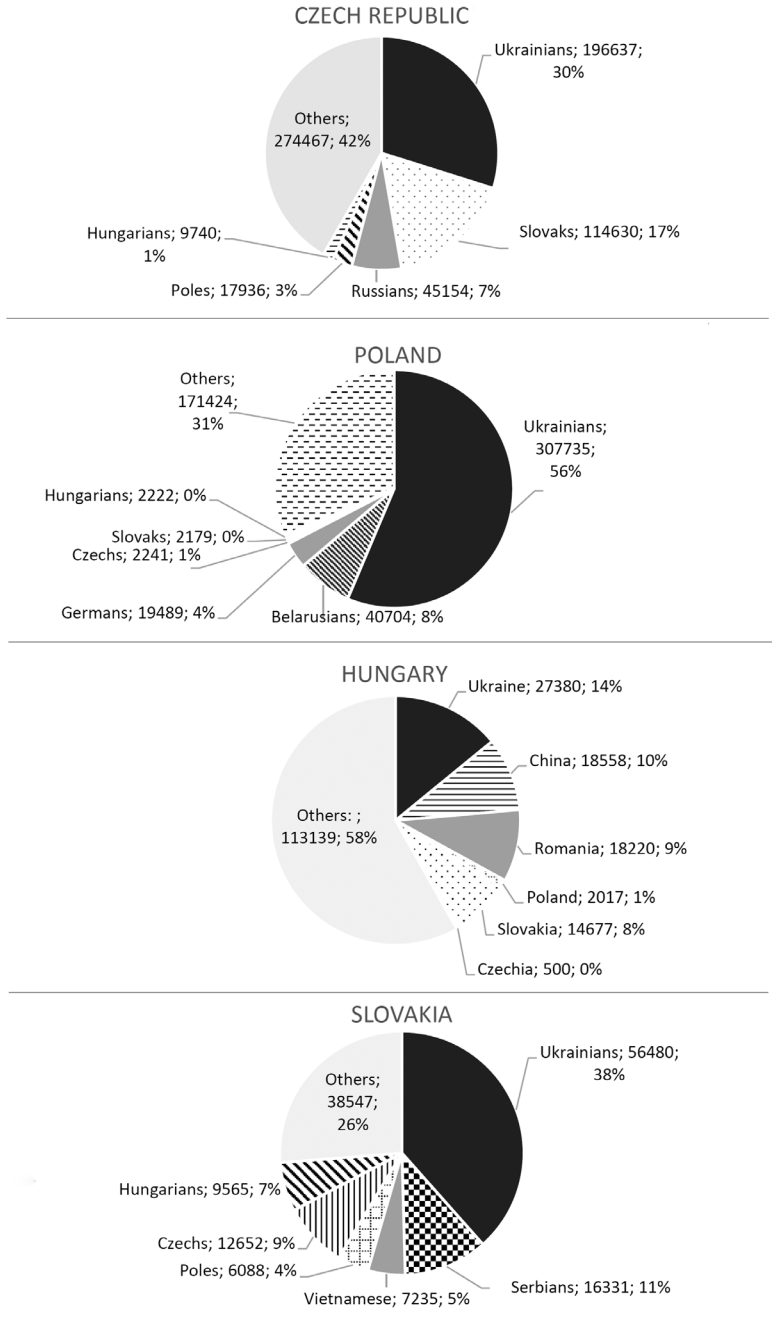


Source: author's own elaboration based on data retrieved from statistical offices of the V4 countries: *Czech Demographic Handbook* 2022; *Foreign citizens residing in Hungary...* 2023; *Štatistický prehľad...* 2021; *Rocznik Demograficzny* 2022.

By the end of 2021, even before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainians had become the predominant immigrant group in all of the V4 countries, with their share in the overall immigrant population equal to 56% (307,735 people) in Poland, 38% (56,480 people) in Slovakia, 30% (196,637 people) in Czech Republic, and 14% (27,380 people) in Hungary (see: *Figure 5*).

Another reason for the rapid growth in Ukrainian migration rate was that V4 governments introduced incentives for migrants from other European countries (e.g., fast-track immigration in Czech Republic or the Pole's Card before its extension in 2019) to meet the growing demand for labour, while avoiding the acceptance of migrants of non-European descent (Schwabe 2023b; Lopatka 2018).

Figure 5: Major immigrant groups and intra-V4 migrants in the Visegrad Group countries as of 2021



Source: author's own elaboration based on data retrieved from statistical offices of the V4 countries.

As demonstrated on *Figure 5*, apart from Ukrainians, the major immigrant groups in V4 countries were:

- In Czech Republic: Slovaks (17%; 114,630 people) and Russians (7%; 45,154 people)
- In Poland: Belarusians (8%; 40,704 people) and Germans (4%; 19,489 people)
- In Hungary: Chinese (10%; 18,558 people) and Romanians (9%; 18,220 people)
- In Slovakia: Serbians (11%; 16,331 people) and Czechs (9%; 12,652 people)

It is worth noting that the migrant population from these countries is likely to grow, because the existing diaspora serves as a pull factor for future migrants.

As data demonstrates, the intra-V4 migration volumes in the 21st century were insignificant — with the obvious exception of Slovaks in Czech Republic and Czechs in Slovakia. There was also a notable Slovak migrant stock in Hungary and vice versa (7-8%), and 3-4% of Polish migrants in both Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Despite these migration patterns, it is also worth noting that in all the V4 countries, there were strong political forces that were not fond of immigration and placed anti-immigrant policy at the centre of their electoral campaigns, resulting in anti-immigration sentiments in V4 societies. Although the public attitude towards foreigners was relatively positive until 2015, the situation began to change since that year.

In Czech Republic, a survey conducted between September 2015 and February 2017 revealed that over half of the respondents were unwilling to accept refugees in Czech Republic under any circumstances. The main arguments were cultural mismatch, safety concerns, the high cost of immigrant integration in Czech society, and refugees' perceived inability to integrate (Brožová et al. 2018). This negative attitude appeared to stem "from the overall negative image of refugees in government-controlled Czech media", which served as the primary source of information about refugees and related topics for Czech citizens, because "majority of them had no personal encounters with refugees" (Schwabe 2021: p. 492).

In Hungary, according to a report by the Pew Research Center (Wike et al. 2019), the society exhibited an overall negative attitude towards allowing more immigrants into the country. Among the countries included in the study, Hungary had the second highest share of opponents to increased immigration (72%), surpassed only by Greece (82%). Additionally, Hungarian respondents were the most fearful of terrorism related to immigrants, with 66% expressing concern. These results can be largely attributed to the Hungarian government's propaganda, which has amplified fears of immigrants, particularly Muslims, by portraying the influx of refugees as a fundamental threat for Hungarian safety. In line with this narrative, the ruling party implemented anti-immigration policies, including severe penalties (up to imprisonment) for illegal border crossings. The government also established a special task force, known as "border hunter squads", to bolster border surveillance (Goździak 2019).

Similarly, in Slovakia, a series of public opinion polls conducted in 2015 demonstrated that 70% of Slovak respondents identified immigration as the most important issue in the EU, and 84% disagreed that immigrants could contribute to Slovakia's development. In another 2016 survey, 85% of respondents stated that they would not accept a Muslim

refugee as their neighbour. Given the actual number of immigrants in Slovakia, these strong anti-immigrant attitudes might seem surprising. However, like in other V4 countries, the majority of Slovak respondents reported that their opinions on immigrants were influenced by media broadcasts (including social media), where right-wing politicians conducted strong anti-immigration campaigns (Bolečeková, Androvičová 2015).

In Poland, the right-wing politicians vehemently opposed the idea of Poland accepting even a small number of refugees coming to Europe, making this issue a central topic in the campaign leading up to the parliamentary elections in autumn 2015. Consequently, public approval for accepting refugees in Poland gradually decreased. By August 2015, support for accepting refugees from countries affected by armed conflicts had dropped to 50% (down from 58% in May), while opposition had risen to 38% (up from 21% in May). Following the terrorist attacks in Paris in December 2015, for the first time, a majority of respondents of the CBOS's survey opposed accepting refugees (53% opposed vs. 37% in favour). By the fall of 2017, a record 63% of Poles expressed opposition to accepting refugees, while only 29% were in favor of helping them (Schwabe 2023b).

In 2018, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were among five United Nations member states that voted against adopting the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration* (GCM), ratified by the UN on 19 December 2018. Slovakia was among 24 countries that abstained from the vote. This stance suggested that at that time, V4 countries might have neglected the impact of their aging populations on their labour markets. However, demographic data indicated that Visegrad countries were likely to be significantly affected by ongoing demographic changes and all the challenges of aging population (Schwabe 2021; Fihel, Okólski 2019).

The mass migration from Ukraine

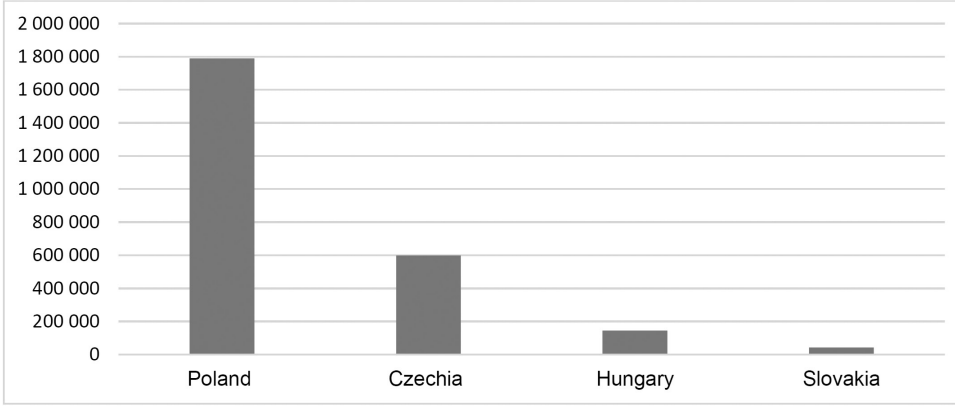
In February 2022, V4 countries faced a massive influx of refugees from Ukraine. This was the first time the European Commission activated the Temporary Protection Directive (see: Council Directive 2001/55/EC), providing displaced persons from non-EU countries the right to reside legally in EU Member States and access employment and public services such as healthcare, education, and social welfare.

The main challenge with this wave of immigration was its sheer scale over a short period. It is estimated that in the first months after the outbreak of the war, approximately 3.5 million people fled Ukraine across the Polish border (Duszczyk, Kaczmarczyk 2022), over 1 million through the Hungarian border, and around 355,000 through the Slovakian border. For Czech Republic, despite being the only V4 country not bordering Ukraine, the respective number was also high, amounting to over 500,000 people.[3] However, the Ukrainian forced migrants did not necessarily stay in the V4 countries—most of them continued their journey further west, with major determinant of destination choice being migrant networks (EWL 2022).

[3] UNHCR WWW, data as of 12.05.2022.

According to UNHCR data as of May 2024, as demonstrated on *Figure 6*, the highest number of Ukrainians who applied for asylum, temporary protection, or other national protection schemes in V4 countries, was registered in Poland (1,789,895 people), followed by Czech Republic (599,355 people), Slovakia (144,730 people), and Hungary (43,230 people).[4]

Figure 6: Ukrainians who applied for asylum, temporary protection, or other national protection schemes in V4 countries as of May 2024.



Source: UNHCR (WWW), https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine (data as of 17.05.2024).

This mass immigration required great mobilisation not only from governments and municipalities, but also from the third sector as well as the entire V4 societies. Survey results published by GLOBSEC (see: Mishchuk, Vlasenko 2023) revealed that individuals were substantially involved in helping the Ukrainian refugees, especially in the first months after the outbreak of the war: 46% of individuals in Slovakia, 67% in Poland, 58% in Hungary, and 54% in Czech Republic donated money or volunteered to help Ukrainian refugees. However, the attitudes of V4 societies towards hosting Ukrainian refugees in their countries were varied. According to the quoted study, while 73% of respondents supported hosting Ukrainians in Czech Republic, 82% in Hungary, and 85% in Poland, the corresponding percentage for Slovakia was much lower – 41.5% (Mishchuk, Vlasenko 2023).

Labour market participation of the Ukrainian refugees in the destination countries was also varied. It is estimated that in Poland, approximately 2/3 of the Ukrainian refugee population found jobs, yet nearly half of them worked below their skill or education level. Over half of the Ukrainian refugees managed to find employment in Czech Republic (Zyzik et al. 2023), 34% – in Slovakia (Veselková, Hábel 2024), and over 60% – in Hungary (IOM 2024).

However, in all cases, employment according to skills was below 50% of the total working refugee population. The major barriers to skill-based employment were a lack

[4] UNHCR WWW, data as of 17.05.2024.

of proficiency in the destination country's language and a relatively small number of part-time employment offers. These part-time positions were in high demand as Ukrainian refugees had to look after their dependents and, in some cases, travel regularly to Ukraine to take care of their relatives (Schwabe 2023b).

Overall, despite initial concerns, the inflow of Ukrainian refugees did not destabilise the V4 labour markets. Instead, it might have helped to prevent high, double-digit inflation from further increasing by expanding the available labour pool across the V4 and Europe in general.

Conclusions

Despite the differences, it seems that the common V4 history is also reflected in similar economic performance and common migration patterns. Between 1945 and 1990, when the countries remained under the Soviet sphere of influence, the major factor that shaped labour migration volumes were the administrative barriers imposed to hamper emigration from Visegrad countries to the West. Despite these barriers, it is estimated that emigration from the Visegrad countries during that period exceeded 2 million, with a large share of these migrations being illegal and based on non-work visas.

Following the systemic transformation at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the role of administrative barriers remained visible. This time, however, it was the immigration barriers of Western countries that prevented large-scale migration from the V4, whose economies suffered painful consequences of the transition to a market economy. The Visegrad countries joined the European Union with high hopes and unemployment rates ranging from nearly 6% to almost 20% – in case of Poland and Slovakia. Hence, after the EU accession in 2004, when Western EU countries gradually lifted the barriers protecting their labour markets from intra-EU migrants, many V4 citizens took the opportunity and emigrated to the West. At that time, large-scale emigration from the V4 took place, with the predominant destination being the UK — one of three EU-15 countries that did not delay granting access to their labour markets for citizens of the new Member States.

However, following EU accession, the V4 economies grew and generated an increased demand for labour, which, over time, translated into increased immigration and caused all the V4 countries to become net immigration countries. Despite differences in the ethnic composition of the V4 migrant population, at the end of 2021, Ukrainians constituted the largest immigrant group in each of these countries, with a total population of nearly 590,000. This increase was due to an increased migration from Ukraine since 2014, as well as certain facilitating measures taken by the V4 countries to attract labour migrants of similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Since February 2022, the immigration capacity of the V4 countries faced the greatest challenge in their post-war history. In several months, millions of refugees crossed the Polish, Slovakian, and Hungarian borders (often continuing through Czech Republic), of which 2.4 million deciding to stay in those countries. Refugees made their decisions on

final destination based on networking, which explains the scale of immigration taking into account previous Ukrainian migrant populations in the V4.

Despite the large-scale migration from Ukraine, the mass immigration of Ukrainian refugees did not destabilise the V4 labour markets. On the contrary, at the end of 2023, Poland and Czech Republic were two of the three European economies with the lowest unemployment rates (2.7% and 2.8%, respectively). Moreover, the additional Ukrainian workforce counteracted the high inflationary pressure felt by the V4 countries since 2022.

On the flip side, the integration of Ukrainian refugees in V4 countries was hampered by a lack of experience in dealing with mass immigration. Although labour market integration of the refugees looked fairly good in numbers (more than half of the refugees found employment in Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary), less than half of them worked according to their skills. The major barrier to quality employment was poor proficiency in the destination country's language. The significantly lower share of employed Ukrainians in Slovakia (34%) also reflects the lowest level of support for accepting Ukrainian refugees among the V4 countries (41% vs. 73-85% in other V4 countries).

All in all, considering the economic performance of the V4 countries along with an increasing immigrant stock, it can be assumed that they will continue to be attractive migrant destinations in the coming years. This is likely to be especially true for the Ukrainian population.

However, since Poland and Hungary voted against the entire EU's new *Pact on Migration and Asylum* in 2024, and Slovakia and the Czech Republic abstained on most votes, it is likely that immigration will continue to be a sensitive issue, remaining central to political and public debate in all the Visegrad Group countries.

Michał Schwabe – Ph.D., D.Sc., Professor at the SGH Warsaw School of Economics. His main areas of scientific interests include the determinants, barriers, and consequences of labour migration, as well as institutional and ethical aspects of digital transformation. He was a guest lecturer at leading European universities. As an expert representing *Accenture*, he participated in the creation of the strategy for the international coalition for the employment of refugees.

Michał Schwabe – dr hab., prof. Szkoły Głównej Handlowej w Warszawie. Do głównych obszarów zainteresowań naukowych zalicza determinanty, bariery oraz konsekwencje migracji zarobkowych, a także instytucjonalne i etyczne aspekty transformacji cyfrowej. Wykładowca gościnny na wiodących europejskich uczelniach. Jako ekspert z ramienia *Accenture* brał udział w tworzeniu strategii międzynarodowej koalicji na rzecz zatrudniania uchodźców.

References:

BARTKIEWICZ Piotr, MATEJCZUK Anna, KALINOWSKI Henryk, OŚKA Magdalena, REGULSKI Andrzej, ZAWISTOWSKI Julian (2024), *How Do EU-15 Member States Benefit from the Cohesion Policy in the V4?*, Warszawa. https://www.dotaceeu.cz/getmedia/fdc8a04e-590d-47ac-9213-760d4ac76f75/v4_eu15_manazerske-shrnuti.pdf?ext=.pdf (15.04.2024).

BOBROWSKA Anita (2013), *Migracje Polaków po przystąpieniu do Unii Europejskiej*, „Colloquium Wydziału Nauk Humanistycznych i Społecznych AMW", no. 2.

BOLEČEKOVÁ Martina, ANDROVIČOVÁ Jarmila (2015), *The Slovak Attitudes Towards Immigrants in the Context of the Current Refugee and Migration Crisis*, "Chorzowskie Studia Polityczne", no. 10.

BOUŠKOVÁ Petra (1998), *Pracovní migrace cizinců v České republice v 70. až 90. letech*, in: *Národní diskuse u kulatého stolu na téma vztahů mezi komunitami*, Praha.

BROŽOVÁ, Kristýna, JUREČKOVÁ Adéla, PACOVSKÁ Anna (2018), *The Wages of Fear: Attitudes Towards Refugees and Migrants in Czech Republic*, Warsaw, https://www.britishcouncil.pl/sites/default/files/czech_pop.pdf (31.07.2018).

DRBOHLAV Dušan (1994), *International Migration in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and the Outlook for East Central Europe*, "Czech Sociological Review", vol. 2, no. 1. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41133107

DRBOHLAV Dušan (2006), *Immigration and the Czech Republic (with Special Respect to the Foreign Labour Force*, "International Migration Review", vol. 37, no. 1.

COUNCIL DIRECTIVE 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof, OJ L 212, 07.08.2001.

CZECH DEMOGRAPHIC HANDBOOK – 2022 (2023), Czech Statistical Office, https://csu.gov.cz/produkty/czech-demographic-handbook-2022 (23.11.2023).

DRBOHLAV, Dušan, LACHMANOVÁ-MEDOVÁ Lenka, ČERMÁK Zdeněk, JANSKÁ Eva, ČERMÁKOVÁ Dita, DZÚROVÁ Dagmara (2009), *The Czech Republic: on its way from emigration to immigration country*, "IDEA Working Papers", no. 11, May 2009, http://old.adapt.it/adapt-indice-a-z/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/idea_the_czech_republic_2009.pdf (31.08.2014)

DUSZCZYK Maciej, KACZMARCZYK Paweł (2022), *The War in Ukraine and Migration to Poland: Outlook and Challenges*, "Intereconomics", vol. 57, no. 3.

DUSZCZYK Maciej, WIŚNIEWSKI Jakub (2007), *Analiza społeczno-demograficzna migracji zarobkowej Polaków do państw EOG po 1 maja 2004 roku,* Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa.

ENGBERSEN Godfried, SNEL Erik (2013), *Liquid Migration. Dynamic and Fluid Patterns of Post-Accession Migration Flows*, in: Birgit Glorius, Izabela Grabowska-Lusinka, Aimee Kuvik (eds), *Mobility in Transition. Migration Patterns after EU Enlargement*, Amsterdam.

EWL (2022), *Raport Specjalny: Uchodźcy z Ukrainy w Polsce, Czechach i Rumunii*, Fundacja EWL, Warszawa, https://ewl.com.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/RAPORT_EWL_INT_POL.pdf (07.07.2022).

FIHEL Agnieszka, OKÓLSKI Marek (2019), *Population Decline in the Post-Communist Countries of the European Union*, "Population & Societies", no. 567.

FOREIGN CITIZENS RESIDING IN HUNGARY by country of citizenship and sex, 1 January (2023), Hungarian Central Statistical Office, https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/en/nep0023.html (31.01.2023).

GÖDRI Irén, SOLTÉSZ Béla, BODACZ-NAGY Boróka (2014), *Immigration or emigration country? Migration trends and their socio-economic background in Hungary: A longer-term historical perspective,* "Working Papers on Population, Family and Welfare", no.19, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute, Budapest.

GOŹDZIAK Elżbieta M. (2019), *Using Fear of the 'Other,' Orbán Reshapes Migration Policy in a Hungary Built on Cultural Diversity*, "Migration Information Source", https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/orban-reshapes-migration-policy-hungary (10.10.2019).

GRENČÍKOVÁ Adriana, ŠPANKOVÁ Jana (2016), *Labour Migration Trends in the Slovak Republic*, "Economics and Sociology", vol. 9, no. 2.

HOME OFFICE (2008), *Accession Monitoring Report May 2004 – September 2008*, London, https://ecas.issuelab.org/resources/19096/19096.pdf (22.04.2010).

HORÁKOVÁ Milada (2000), *Legal and illegal labour migration in the Czech Republic: Background and current trends*, "International Migration Papers", no. 32, International Migration Branch, International Labour Office, Geneva.

IGLICKA-OKÓLSKA Krystyna (1997), *Społeczne, ekonomiczne i polityczne uwarunkowania emigracji z Polski 1945–1990*, in: Jan E. Zamojski (ed.), *Migracje i Społeczeństwo. Zbiór Studiów*, t. 2, Warszawa.

IGLICKA Krystyna (2007), *A note on rebirth of migration research in Poland after 1989*, in: Anna Kicinger, Agnieszka Weinar (eds), *State of the Art of the Migration Research in Poland*, "CMR Working Papers", no. 26/84, November 2007, Centre of Migration Research, Warsaw.

IMF (2007), *Migration in EU8 countries*, IMF Regional Office in Warsaw, https://www.imf.org/external/CEE/2007/080107.pdf (31.07.2007).

IOM (2024), *DTM Hungary: Labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees – 2023 Annual Report*, International Organization for Migration, https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/details/107211 (20.05.2024).

KACZMARCZYK Paweł (2005), *Migracje zarobkowe Polaków w dobie przemian*, Warszawa.

KACZMARCZYK Paweł (2010), *Poakcesyjne migracje Polaków – próba bilansu*, „Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny", zeszyt 4.

LÉNÁRT András (2012), *Emigration from Hungary in 1956 and the Emigrants as Tourists to Hungary*, "Hungarian Historical Review", vol. 1, no. 3-4.

LINTNER Tomáš, DIVIÁK Tomáš, ŠEĎOVÁ Klára, HLADO Petr (2023), *Ukrainian refugees struggling to integrate into Czech school social networks*, "Humanities and Social Sciences Communications", vol. 10. DOI: 10.1057/s41599-023-01880-y

LOPATKA Jan (2018), *Czech government raises quota for fast-lane work permits for Ukrainians*, "Reuters", https://www.reuters.com/article/us-czech-ukraine-workers/czech-government-raises-quota-for-fast-lane-work-permits-for-ukrainians-idUSKBN1FK2G6 (31.01.2018).

MACHLICA Gabriel, ŽÚDEL Branislav, HIDAS Slavomir (2014), *Unemployment in Slovakia*, https://www.mfsr.sk/files/archiv/priloha-stranky/19979/96/2014_30_Trh_prace.pdf (17.11.2014).

MISHCHUK Zoriana, VLASENKO Roman (2023), *Ukrainian Refugees in Visegrad Countries: Societal Attitudes and Challenges of Accommodating People Fleeing the War*, "Globsec", https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/ukrainian-refugees-visegrad-countries-societal-attitudes-and-challenges (13.01.2023).

NESPOROVA Alena (2002), *Why unemployment remains so high in Central and Eastern Europe*, Employment Paper 2002/43, International Labour Office, Geneva, https://www.ilo.org/media/305646/download (01.10.2002).

OECD (2002), *OECD Economic Surveys: Slovak Republic*, vol. 2002/11 – June, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. DOI: 10.1787/eco_surveys-svk-2002-en

OKÓLSKI Marek (1994), *Migracje zagraniczne w Polsce w latach 1980-1989. Zarys problematyki badawczej*, "Studia Demograficzne", no. 3.

OKÓLSKI Marek (2007), *Europe in Movement: Migration from/to Central and Eastern Europe*, "CMR Working Papers", no. 22/80, August 2007, Centre of Migration Research, Warsaw.

OKÓLSKI Marek, SALT John (2014), *Polish Emigration to the UK after 2004; Why Did So Many Come?*, "Central and Eastern European Migration Review", vol. 3, no. 2.

ROCZNIK DEMOGRAFICZNY (2022), Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warszawa, https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/roczniki-statystyczne/roczniki-statystyczne/rocznik-demograficzny-2022,3,16.html (22.12.2022).

ROSSET Edward (1975), *Demografia Polski*, Warszawa.

SCHWABE Michał (2021), *GDP Growth and Unsaturated Demand on Labour Markets: Is the Visegrad Group Ready for An Increased Immigration?*, "Ekonomista", no. 4.

SCHWABE Michał (2023a), *Czynniki migracji zarobkowych w Świetle emigracji Polaków do Wielkiej Brytanii po akcesji Polski do UE*, Warszawa.

SCHWABE Michał (2023b), N*ew Challenges in Turbulent Times – Immigration to Poland during the Years 2020–2022*, in: Adam A. Ambroziak (ed.), *Poland in the European Union. Report 2023*, Warszawa.

STATISTICS POLAND (2023), *Główne kierunki emigracji i imigracji na pobyt stały w latach 1966-2022*, https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/migracje-zagraniczne-ludnosci/glowne-kierunki-emigracji-i-imigracji-na-pobyt-staly-w-latach-1966-2022,4,2.html (19.07.2023)

STOLA Dariusz (2001), *Międzynarodowa mobilność zarobkowa w PRL*, in: Ewa Jaźwińska, Marek Okólski (eds), *Ludzie na huśtawce. Migracje między peryferiami Polski i Zachodu*, Warszawa.

ŠTATISTICKÝ PREHĽAD legálnej a nelegálnej migrácie cudzincov na Slovensku (2021), Prezídium Policajného zboru, Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície, https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/policia/hranicna_a_cudzinecka_policia/rocenky/rok_2021/2021-rocenka-UHCP-SK.pdf (27.01.2022).

UNHCR (WWW), *Ukraine Refugee Situation*, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine (12.05.2022 and 17.05.2024).

VESELKOVÁ Marcela, HÁBEL Branislav (2024), *Refugees and labor migrants from Ukraine in Slovakia*, February 2024, Social Policy Institute, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/isp-dokumenty/veselkova-habel_2023_ukrainian_refugees_final.pdf (28.02.2024).

WIKE Richard, FETTEROLF Janell, FAGAN Moira (2019), *Europeans Credit EU With Promoting Peace and Prosperity, but Say Brussels Is Out of Touch With Its Citizens*, Rew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/03/19/europeans-credit-eu-with-promoting-peace-and-prosperity-but-say-brussels-is-out-of-touch-with-its-citizens/ (19.03.2019).

WORLD BANK (2006), *Labor Migration from the New EU Member States*, World Bank EU8 Quarterly Economic Report, PART II: Special Topic, September 2006, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/zh/852411468160493312/pdf/384980v20EU8QE1pecialTopic01PUBLIC1.pdf (30.09.2006).

ZYZIK Radosław, BASZCZAK Łukasz, ROZBICKA Iga, WIELECHOWSKI Michał (2023), *Uchodźcy z Ukrainy na polskim rynku pracy: możliwości i przeszkody*, Warszawa.

Received: 04.06.2024. Accepted: 25.07.2024.