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# Barriers to Professional Integration of Educated Ukrainian Immigrants into the Czech Labour Market

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### ABSTRACT

The article aims to answer a research question: "What challenges do educated Ukrainian female immigrants experience in the Czech labour market?". The text defines the local, regional and national legal framework for the integration of immigrants into the labor market in the Czech Republic. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted in two phases as part of a qualitative research strategy. These interviews involved educated Ukrainian female immigrants aiming to re-enter their previous occupations in the Czech labour market. The study focuses on the negative aspects of immigrants' labour integration, as they can play a vital role in the external factors' influence on the three levels of immigrants' integration: individual, local and policy. We categorised the factors into specific areas and subareas based on their origin.

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Immigrants often face challenges when starting a new life in a different environment. One significant issue is employment, as they commonly need help to secure suitable jobs in their host countries. As a result, many are either unemployed or working in positions that do not align with their educational qualifications. The Czech Republic provides a compelling example of international migration driven by factors that push people to leave their home countries and pull factors that attract them to the Czech Republic due to economic disparities (Gheorghiev & Numerato, 2023). The Czech Republic is experiencing a significant shortage of workers,

leading Czech companies to reportedly seek inexpensive labour from foreign workers, mainly from Eastern European countries. This tendency leads to increased economic exploitation (Mezzadra, 2011).

According to Gheorghiev and Numerato's (2023) research, labour market integration barriers for immigrants in the Czech Republic exist at macro, meso, and micro levels. From a macro perspective, the barriers to integration arise from an instrumentalisation of economic immigrants through technocratic and economic discourses that view migration as an opportunity to access cheap labour. This viewpoint is commonly shared among employers and has emerged as part of official policy documents, reproduced by most political parties and some social partners in the Czech Republic (Hoření, 2019). In this article, we present the research results among 30 educated Ukrainian female immigrants trying to re-enter their previous occupations in the Czech labour market. We focused on the following research question: "What challenges do educated Ukrainian female immigrants experience in the Czech labour market?". We focused on the negative aspects of immigrants' labour integration, as they can play a vital role in the external factors' influence on the three immigrant integration levels: individual, local and policy. Ghorashi (2005) note that host country institutions and local actors often misread or ignore the needs of newcomers, and instead of helping, they create dependency or exclusion. While these challenges are well known, there are significant differences between host countries regarding immigrant labour market integration (Brell et al., 2020; Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022). The contribution of this study lies in the comprehensive research aimed at identifying, categorising and explaining the factors that contribute to the negative integration of educated immigrants into the labour market. The following text is structured: theoretical perspective, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion.

## Literature Review

This study used van Riemsdijk's (2022) multi-level framework and Phillimore's (2021) structural opportunities to comprehensively understand educated Ukrainian female immigrants and their experience with re-entry to their previous occupations in the Czech labour market. Theoretically, this framework was a valuable tool for examining educated Ukrainian female immigrants in the Czech workplace from multiple dimensions, going beyond single-level, unidirectional studies.

### **Understanding the Pitfalls of Labour Market Integration at the Individual Level**

By analysing a particular employment scenario, we aimed to understand how immigrants develop their integration strategies to address labour integration challenges. The literature review provided valuable insights into the relationship between individual agency, structural forces, human capital (Becker, 1962) and social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

Traditionally, the human capital theory underscores the pivotal role of individual competencies in facilitating immigrants' integration into the labour market (Gayibor, 2015). According to Irastorza and Bevelander (2017), immigrants use their human capital to secure employment opportunities. The main idea is that a person's level of human capital significantly affects their prospects in the job market. Also, this viewpoint was emphasised by Macaluso (2022), who stresses the importance of immigrants' skills and qualifications in determining

how well they integrate into the labour force of the host country. At the same time, the effectiveness of human capital in facilitating labour market integration is contingent upon the transferability of immigrants' skills and the favorability of their workplace selection. Regarding transferability, the human capital theory posits that the alignment between immigrants' skills, education, and qualifications and the labour market demands of the host country is pivotal for successful integration (Macaluso, 2022). Nonetheless, challenges arise in cases of international migration, where disparities in educational systems and skill requirements between countries hinder seamless skill transfer (Chiswick, 2008), mainly affecting humanitarian immigrants whose credentials may be less adaptable than economic migrants (Hansen, 2008).

Furthermore, this theory suggests that immigrants' selectivity affects their integration into the labour market. When immigrants have desirable attributes, their successful integration is promoted, while negative selectivity hinders it (Macaluso, 2022). As a result, economic immigrants, who often make intentional migration decisions and possess favourable attributes, are expected to integrate more smoothly than humanitarian immigrants. Humanitarian immigrants may encounter more significant challenges in adapting to the labour market dynamics of the host country (Macaluso, 2022).

In the Czech Republic, the communities' involvement in labour market integration reveals several obstacles at the micro level (Gheorghiev & Numerato, 2023). Immigrants typically rely on recruiters within their communities to secure job opportunities, and these informal transactions involving money can prevent any official entities like labour inspectors from intervening in cases of abuse (Gheorghiev & Numerato, 2023). This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the personal experiences of educated Ukrainian female immigrants who want to stay permanently in the Czech Republic and re-enter based on their professional occupations.

### **Understanding the Pitfalls of Labour Market Integration at the Local Level**

At the local level, the analysis was conducted on the roles of society and immigrant-serving organisations (NGOs). The literature review used for examining the national level was also applied here. Based on the narrative, it delves into how public opinion, initiatives, and support can impact integration positively or negatively. In addition, the literature review on social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) was studied to explore social relations within a community or professional networks, which provides valuable information about living and working in a host country and professional networking for immigrants and practical assistance. To follow our examination at this level, we adopted Phillimore's (2021) approach of five domains: discourse, relations, initiatives, and support.

In contrast to the human capital theory, social capital theory underscores the significance of social networks in facilitating immigrants' integration into the labour market. It posits that access to and utilisation of social capital and networks are crucial channels for job information and recruitment (Hansen, 2008). Unlike human capital theory, which primarily emphasises individual skills, this approach highlights the importance of social connections and structures in economic integration (Macaluso, 2022). The reasoning is that individuals with expansive networks are better equipped to gather information, exert influence in the workplace, and enhance their task performance and career prospects (Ortlieb & Knappert, 2023).

Ortlieb and Knappert (2023) further assert that social networks play a pivotal role in ensuring successful labour market integration by facilitating the exchange of information, advice, and experiences among members. This collaborative network formation enhances their job acquisition prospects. Studies underscore the positive impact of social capital on immigrants' labour market integration, suggesting that fostering opportunities to cultivate social capital is instrumental for their successful integration. At the same time, their absence may correlate with unemployment (Gedikli *et al.*, 2023).

Guzi *et al.* (2023) contend that structural factors can significantly influence immigrants' economic integration. Individuals are embedded within social relations and networks, so their success in the labour market is intricately linked to these connections. Despite immigrants being rational actors, their economic choices may be influenced by their social relations, and factors such as norms, values, and class dynamics could either facilitate or impede their economic integration (*ibid*). Therefore, social structures can bolster or hinder an immigrant's economic integration. In essence, the social capital theory argues that social contacts enhance job acquisition prospects, giving individuals with extensive networks an advantage in the labour market.

In the Czech context, immigrants face administrative and bureaucratic obstacles when integrating into the Czech labour market at the meso level of organisations and institutions (Gheorghiev & Numerato, 2023). The public administration has limited funding schemes, and there is a high demand for services that NGOs need help to meet. It hinders their efforts to provide administrative, linguistic, legal, social, and employment counselling. As a result, their counselling is primarily focused on addressing basic needs rather than career advancement. Additionally, recognising complicated and costly skills or degrees, mainly delegated to universities or regional governments, further hinders entry into the labour market (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2022).

### ***Understanding the Pitfalls of Labour Market Integration at the Policy Level***

Public policies play a critical role in integrating migrants. Our approach involves using theoretical concepts such as welfare state ideology to shape integration initiatives at both policy and local levels (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Additionally, we conduct a thorough literature review on labour market segmentation and dual labour market theory to gain insights into how labour market conditions can be shaped for immigrants. This understanding helps guide the development of immigration and labour market policies to facilitate the admission of educated Ukrainian female immigrants, thereby addressing labour integration challenges.

The points mentioned above lead to an analysis of institutional theory. The institutional theory posits that host countries' policies and institutional frameworks influence labour market outcomes significantly (Giotis, 2024). Central to this argument is that various institutional factors within destination countries, including admission status, immigration policies, and integration measures, can impact immigrants' success in the labour market. It is widely acknowledged that the policies of recipient states may either facilitate or hinder labour market integration. Macaluso (2022) explained that the principles, regulations, and conventions governing individuals' mobility and migration between states are crucial determinants of

labour market integration outcomes. Many states have established integration guidelines and principles aimed at assisting immigrants and refugees in adapting to their new societies.

Consequently, these institutional factors are pivotal in shaping immigrants' ability to establish positive labour market connections (Giotis, 2024). For instance, various states have implemented policies encouraging immigrant participation in the labour market. While such policies aim to foster integration, other legal and administrative procedures may pose barriers to labour market integration. The admission criteria and administrative processes, particularly for refugees arriving under diverse circumstances, have been observed to impact their labor market integration (Fóti, 2019).

According to the Fóti (2019), several administrative challenges affect refugees and asylum seekers. Delays in finalising asylum procedures and granting access to the labour market create gaps in employment history, adversely affecting employability. Moreover, asylum seekers often face administrative hurdles such as obtaining work permits and employment licenses, imposing an "administrative burden" that dissuades some employers from hiring them.

In the Czech Republic, from a macro perspective, obstacles to integration stem from the instrumentalisation of economic migrants through technocratic and economic discourses that see migration as an opportunity to access cheap labour (Gheorghiev & Numerato, 2023). Employers commonly share this outlook, which has become part of official policy documents, supported by most political parties and some social partners in the Czech Republic (Hoření, 2019). Meanwhile, the social, personal, and familial needs of migrants are disregarded. Instead, state regulations comply with the principles of routinisation and institutionalisation (Egreteau, 2019) of international labour migration through specific visa regimes that aim to provide businesses with workers quickly. This "managed migration" (Waite, 2009, p. 422) strategy steers migrants to sectors with the most significant workforce shortage, such as manufacturing, where they tend to remain for only a limited period due to the short-term nature of the visas offered.

Furthermore, this routinisation is sustained by recruitment and temporary agencies, which have created a significant market niche and capitalised on immigrant labour (e.g., Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017). We acknowledge that integration challenges often start at the national level. However, based on the previous analysis and findings, we would like to shift our focus to immigrants' experiences to answer their challenges. Our research study focused on understanding the personal experiences of educated Ukrainian female immigrants who wish to settle in the Czech Republic permanently. We aimed to explore their backgrounds and experiences after migrating to the Czech Republic, specifically focusing on their challenges in integrating into the Czech labour market.

## Method

This research is part of a doctoral study entitled "Governance of Migrant Integration: A Study of Czech Labour Market Integration of Educated Ukrainian Female Immigrants". It used inductive strategies to answer the research question: "What challenges do educated Ukrainian female immigrants experience in the Czech labour market?". We employed the interpretative approach for our analysis, emphasising the subjective meaning of actions and institutions in the social world (Harrington et al., 2006). The data were gathered in 2023 via semi-structured interviews. A total of 30 respondents, educated Ukrainian female immigrants, responded. They

were selected using a purposive sampling method (Shaw & Holland, 2014); the selection criteria were respondent's current employment status in the Czech Republic in low-paid jobs, migration year, high education, sex and age, and family status. We want to emphasise that the analysis was done before the Russian war in Ukraine and does not consider any long-term changes in migration policies that may have occurred due to the institutional response to the new wave of Ukrainian refugees. The intentional sampling was designed to interview respondents from various immigrant occupations, including healthcare, education, IT, and finance. This approach aimed to increase the likelihood of capturing various perceived challenges across different occupational areas. To protect the anonymity of the respondents, citations in the text are not linked to any names or identifying information (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Sample of Respondents*

no	Pseudonym	Age	Educational attainment	Labor market status	Migration year	Family status
1	Irina	34	MA	Employed, housekeeper	2020	Single, two children
2	Tanya	40	MA	Unemployed, income support	2020	Married, two children
3	Anastasia	45	BA	Employed, cleaner	2020	Divorced, one child
4	Sasha	46	MA	Employed, shop assistant	2021	Married, two children
5	Vasylina	40	BA	Employed, tour agent	2019	Single, no children
6	Olena	37	BA	Unemployed, income support	2021	Married, no children
7	Viktoria	48	MA	Employed, housekeeper	2020	Married, one child
8	Galyna	36	MA	Employed, cleaner	2021	Single, no children
9	Nataliya	43	BA	Employed, cook in a restaurant	2020	Widowed, two children
10	Ivanna	34	BA	Unemployed, academic	2020	Married, no children
11	Daryna	52	MA	Employed, cleaner	2019	Married, one child
12	Kateryna	39	BA	Employed, hotel receptionist	2021	In a relationship, one child
13	Angelina	42	MA	Employed, shop assistant	2021	Married, one child
14	Alona	34	MA	Unemployed, income support	2020	Married, three children
15	Diana	29	BA	Employed, factory worker	2021	Single, no children
16	Khrystyna	50	MA	Unemployed, income support	2021	Married, one child
17	Inna	49	MA	Unemployed, income support	2020	Married, two children
18	Antonina	32	MA	Employed, IT field	2021	Single, no children
19	Olha	30	BA	Employed, waitress	2019	Single, no children
20	Leyla	32	BA	Employed, barman	2019	Married, no children
21	Alina	46	MA	Employed, cleaner	2021	Married, one child
22	Yana	32	BA	Employed, waitress	2021	Single, no children
23	Lyudmyla	36	MA	Employed, cleaner	2020	Married, one child
24	Halya	50	MA	Employed, factory worker	2021	Married, two children
25	Solomia	46	MA	Unemployed, income support	2021	Divorced, one child
26	Nadiya	34	MA	Unemployed, income support	2020	Engaged
27	Nina	42	MA	Employed, housekeeper	2021	Married, one child
28	Yoroslava	36	MA	Unemployed, income support	2020	Married, one child
29	Klara	48	MA	Employed, factory worker	2020	Married, two children
30	Vira	44	BA	Employed, factory worker	2020	Married, one child

Research participants were informed in advance that the research was anonymous and that they could terminate their participation at any time. At the same time, they had telephone and e-mail contact with the researcher, with whom they could discuss research-related matters at any time. Within the research, great emphasis was placed on adherence to ethical principles. The researcher followed the “MU academic and professional employee code of ethics”. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. The face-to-face interviews lasted between 30 and 100 minutes for each immigrant. All interviews were conducted in either Ukrainian or Russian languages. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically with ATLAS.ti software in four phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006).



This method allowed us to identify, analyse, and describe the topics that emerged from the empirical data. The topics provided significant information about the research question while giving a certain level of structured response or meaning to the collected data. Thematic analyses were conducted according to Braun and Clarke (2006) in the following stages: (1) familiarisation with the data – repeated reading of transcripts and noting beginning reflections; (2) creation of first codes – coding interesting aspects of data; (3) seeking themes – aggregating codes into potential themes, gathering data relevant for a given theme; (4) assessing the themes – revising the themes in relationship to the codes and data sets and creating a “thematic map” of the analysis; (5) naming and defining the specifications of each theme based on the analysis.

## Results and Discussions

During the thematic analysis, we identified three key themes that, according to the participants, are the biggest obstacles to integrating Ukrainian female immigrants into the labour market. The themes were the following: (1) individual-level factors, (2) local-level factors, and (3) policy-level factors. Further exploration of the themes mentioned by respondents identified additional factors that hinder full integration into the labour market, which are also discussed in the findings section.

### Factors at the Individual Level

We examine the barriers to entering the labour market at an individual level. Some of these barriers include not being fluent in the Czech professional language, encountering stereotypes about Ukrainians that limit their professional networking opportunities, and experiencing a sense of division between “us” and “them”, even among Ukrainian refugees and immigrants, due to the new conditions following the full-scale war in Ukraine.

### Lack of Proficient Knowledge of the Czech Language

Respondents frequently emphasised in their answers that their skills and recognised high education were not obstacles to returning to their previous occupation in the Czech Republic. Respondents indicated that language proficiency in the workplace is the most significant barrier to labour market integration, mainly using specific vocabulary and phrases related to their job, such as in the IT, healthcare, or teaching fields. However, they felt confident in communicating daily in the Czech language. To improve their knowledge of the Czech language to the level of their occupation, the respondents face problems such as the possibility of independent learning. For example, respondents often mention working hard daily and needing more time or mood to study extra within their occupation. As one respondent, R3, explained:

*“I have a good level of knowledge of the Czech language daily. However, I do not have enough time and mood after work to self-study. I have retained what I learned, but I need to read articles and books to learn new phrases and words to work within my field in marketing.” (R3)*

Also, self-learning can be confusing as respondents need help knowing where to improve their knowledge and skills. This issue was mentioned very often as a barrier, and respondent R3 was more explicit in explaining it:

*“I am trying to educate myself as much as possible, but it feels like a maze sometimes. There is so much to learn, and I am unsure where to start. It is a process of trial and error.” (R3)*

The primary challenge in integrating into the labour market for Czech language proficiency has been consistently highlighted in prior research (Gheorghiev & Numerato, 2023; Hoření, 2019; Jelínková & Valenta, 2022). Our research also reaffirmed this, but from a different perspective – vocational training. Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs can facilitate the integration of immigrants into the labour market and assist them in securing positions that align with their skills and qualifications. In Germany, for instance, attaining a sufficient level of proficiency in the host country's language, including specialised vocabulary, is essential for learning and working. The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) provides vocational language courses to immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, with high success rates. These courses typically involve advanced vocational language instruction (300 hours) and specialised vocational modules tailored to various occupational fields (300 to 600 hours) (OECD, 2019).

The lack of vocational training depends on the type of visa and residence permit. The focus on labour migration in the Czech Republic is an obstacle to developing specific integration policies for all cohorts of migrants. For example, migrants with short-term residence permits or visas do not receive support for skill and career development, as they are presumed to leave the country if unable to secure employment (Gheorghiev & Numerato, 2023). Although most migrants can access Labor Office services, these services are not consistently beneficial in practice. This is due to the Labor Office's limited understanding of migrants' specific requirements and the absence of services or training programs for foreign individuals with limited language proficiency (Hoření, 2019).

### **Lack of Diversity and Inclusion**

Another pitfall factor of labour market integration of educated Ukrainian female immigrants was stereotypes and unequal job opportunities among Ukrainian immigrants and refugees. Respondents stated that in these conditions, they face several psychological challenges while looking for work. According to respondents, stereotypes about Ukrainians led to discrimination in hiring practices, which is why they limit job opportunities, slow career growth, and make it harder for them to build professional networks due to prejudices within industries or communities. Respondent 9 explained:

*“As an immigrant from Ukraine, I have encountered numerous obstacles that have hindered my access to opportunities that align with my skills and experience. For example, the stringent requirements for practising in the human resources field here in the Czech Republic have been a significant barrier for me. Despite my expertise, I have found breaking into my chosen field incredibly challenging.” (R9)*

Also, the findings of respondents showed disparities in opportunities available to Ukrainian immigrants and refugees based on their residency status, particularly between those holding employee contracts and temporary protection visas. R14 noted that the visa types granted to Ukrainians set restrictions on their employment opportunities in the Czech Republic:

*“Having a temporary protection permit gives Ukrainian refugees flexibility to seek new employment opportunities. However, immigrants with long-term visas face more restrictive conditions, which could hinder their ability to secure stable employment, and we need to take as soon as possible any job offer.” (R14)*



Multiple research studies have demonstrated the existence of gender, ethnicity, and race-based discrimination in labour markets, resulting in disparities in wages and employment opportunities for specific demographic groups. Gary S. Becker's (1957) work, "The Economics of Discrimination", delves into the causes and consequences of discrimination from an economic perspective. He posits that discrimination often arises when a hiring manager prefers to work with individuals like themselves rather than assuming that one group is more productive. This biased behaviour can lead to the efficient allocation of resources, as specific industries may need to pay more attention to qualified candidates from specific demographics. Furthermore, our research indicates that discrimination also affects Ukrainian immigrants and Ukrainian refugees, as some employers demonstrate a preference for hiring Ukrainian refugees due to administrative convenience. This phenomenon can also be understood within a legal context in employment.

The website for foreigners in the Czech Republic ([frs.gov.cz](http://frs.gov.cz)) states that Ukrainian refugees have free access to the labour market. Employment Act No. 435/2004 Sb does not require a work permit, employee card, intra-company employee transfer card, or blue card to work in the Czech Republic. This allows Ukrainian refugees to be employed on equal terms with Czech citizens. Ukrainian immigrants working in the Czech Republic are mainly regulated by Law No. 326/1999 Coll. on the Residence of Aliens in the Territory of the Czech Republic and Law No. 435/2004 Coll. on Employment. When it comes to Ukrainian immigrants who hold a residence permit, they are only permitted to work if they obtain an employment permit from the Labor Office. An employment permit is specific to a particular job with a specific employer and cannot be transferred.

Moreover, it should be noted that our analysis revealed that respondents are experiencing depression, stress, and anxiety as a result of the current situation. This is even though the respondents intend to return to their previous occupation based on their high level of education and work experience. This finding is supported by various researchers, even though they primarily focused on the situations of refugees. For example, Slewa-Younan et al. (2017) found that experiences of discrimination were associated with higher rates of anxiety and depression among refugees. Another study by Ziersch et al. (2011) found that discrimination was a significant predictor of poor mental health outcomes among refugees. Racism and xenophobia can negatively impact the mental health of refugees and also have detrimental social and economic effects. Instances of discrimination were found to be linked to lower levels of social support and reduced opportunities for work and education, as indicated in a study by Siddiqui et al. (2017).

We acknowledge that stereotypes and unequal job opportunities among educated Ukrainian female immigrants and Ukrainian refugees can be related to the local level within the employer relationship. However, we observed that respondents attributed the barriers to themselves, considering their personal and Ukrainian backgrounds. As a result, we have decided to categorise these issues as individual barriers.

### **Factors at the Local Level**

At the local level, we examined the obstacles that respondents faced while searching for opportunities to integrate into the labour market in the Czech Republic. Respondents typically seek opportunities through government and non-governmental institutions to address

integration challenges within the labour market. These services include career counselling and information support. In analysing these barriers, we focused on the ineffective aspects of providing these services.

### **Lack of Implementation of the Information in Practice**

Our respondents mentioned overcoming individual barriers by seeking help from non-governmental organisations offering free job search information services. The most common service these organisations provide is career guidance, which includes educating individuals about recognising foreign education credentials, offering language courses, providing options for further education, and helping migrants identify their competencies, skills, and job opportunities. Career consultants within their services can help individuals create resumes and cover letters if needed. We recruited a job mentor from an NGO for an expert opinion. According to the expert, career consultations are instrumental in guiding individuals through the job search process:

*“As a part of the skill centre, job mentoring offers free career counselling services. We help with the recognition of education from abroad and requalification. We offer referrals to language courses and other education. We offer courses to increase qualification and attractiveness in the labour market. Also, we offer options for further education and self-development. Besides, we discover the potential of our clients within their skills, and we inform them about follow-up services. For example, we can advise on where to search for a job in the Czech Republic, and we offer information on employment and the labour market in the South Moravian region”. (Job mentor from an NGO)*

Our participants provided feedback that their consultations with job mentors were less productive than expected. Specifically, they felt that the need for an action plan slowed the ability of job mentors to guide clients towards their ultimate objectives. For instance, respondent R9 elaborated:

*“While I appreciated the basic advice I received, I felt dissatisfied with the limited assistance in addressing my specific needs. While learning how to write a resume and where to search for jobs is important, there was a gap in serving my background and occupation. I was missing a complex program where, how, what I can, for example, learn the Czech language to the level of my work field.” (R9)*

Secondly, respondents perceive that job mentors are crucial for those who have just started exploring job opportunities in the Czech Republic. However, those with experience in the Czech labour market acknowledge that their personal experience, self-discipline, and motivation can help them overcome obstacles when searching for a job. For example, R10 commented:

*“While career guidance services can be valuable for many individuals, my experience shows that self-directed learning and initiative can also effectively achieve career objectives. Taking ownership of my learning and actively seeking opportunities, I overcame obstacles and succeeded in my chosen field. It is a reminder that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to job search and career development.” (R10)*

Respondents also mentioned that they had experience accessing information services from NGOs related to employment opportunities in the Czech Republic. Educated Ukrainian female immigrants emphasised the critical role of NGOs in providing essential support and guidance, particularly in understanding the job market and positioning oneself for employment

opportunities. Even though there is no need for additional career guidance, respondents later faced difficulties implementing the information they gained in government institutions. According to R15, she followed all information updates sent by NGOs and attended the events. She received valuable information and help, but at the same time, she was unsuccessful in sending her CV to employers and received rejections:

*“I subscribe to email newsletters from an NGO and follow updates on the Czech Republic labour market. I attend events to meet like-minded immigrant workers and exchange information, now in Ukrainian. On the other hand, when I received information about writing a CV, I was sure that after that, I would increase the possibility of finding a job, but it did not work. I got rejected anyway. So, where is the problem: in my CV or anything else?” (R15)*

We can explain the reason why our respondents found it difficult to implement information into practice through the functioning of migration policy in the Czech Republic. The country's migration policy heavily focuses on labour migration, with the government promoting a vision of labour migration as mainly short-term and regulated according to the country's economic needs. This is similar to the guest worker era of the 1960s and 1970s (Gheorghiev & Numerato, 2023). As a result, most immigrants come to the Czech Republic with a specific job in mind, usually in the so-called secondary labour market, which is characterised by labour-intensive, complex, sometimes dangerous, and low-paid jobs (Drbohlav & Janurová, 2019). Furthermore, immigrants are typically employed through agencies rather than directly by the employer, resulting in precariousness (Hoření, 2019). Third-country nationals are subject to labour market testing and can only take up job offers when no applications from Czech or other EU citizens have been made (Drbohlav & Janurová, 2019).

### **Factors at the Policy Level**

At both local and political levels, our respondents face problems with individual approaches by employment offices and unfair employment practices. In addition, it must be recognised that these offices are heavily influenced by the Czech government, affecting their integration's success.

### **Lack of an Individual Approach at the Labour Office**

The respondents often discussed that in their search for information and guidance, they had the same experience with the employment centre as they had with NGOs. They are missing an individual approach to their work history and experience. For example, R29 explained:

*“I consulted with the labour office in Brno, but the information they provided on their website was not helpful. I expected a more personalised approach, but they only directed me to job search websites. However, they contacted potential employers based on my qualifications and goals.” (R29)*

According to our findings, bureaucratic and administrative issues arise from the policy level, particularly when the labour office guides NGOs on how migrants can resolve their issues. However, when the migrants visit the labour office, they receive different instructions. The same respondent continued:

*“I completed my medical education in Ukraine and gained one year of work experience as a massage therapist before moving to the Czech Republic. However, I faced administrative issues in obtaining certification and accreditation for working with people due to the complicated process of collecting documents, diplomas, and proving my experience.” (R29)*

The fact that integration services are not effectively provided by NGOs and the Labour office in the Czech Republic was explained by Hoření (2019). While most migrants have the right to use Labour Office services, these services are not always helpful, as the Labour Office has limited knowledge of the specific needs of migrants and does not offer services or training schemes for foreigners with low language proficiency (Hoření, 2019). A voluntary one-year assistance program for migrant holders, including job counselling, has been running since 1994, called the State Integration Programme. However, the total number of participants remains small compared to most European countries, as the Czech Republic has traditionally not been an asylum country, and the overall number of immigrants is small (Hoření, 2019). Therefore, most immigrants do not use integration services in the Czech Republic.

### **Lack of Unfair Employment Agencies**

As we discussed before, educated Ukrainian female immigrants are experiencing difficulties changing jobs due to the challenges in obtaining a work visa, which is tied to a specific employer. Consequently, they remain in low-paying jobs and are concerned about dishonest agency practices in the Czech market. These practices exploit workers and result in low incomes despite long working hours. Although our respondents have not personally experienced these conditions, they have heard about them from friends and acquaintances. For example, R24 shared:

*“My friend got a job at a [name of a company] warehouse in Brno through an agency while still in Ukraine. Despite the agency helping with her visa and accommodation, she found out she is being paid 100 Czech crowns per hour, half of what her Ukrainian colleagues earn for the same work, indicating the agency takes a 50% cut of her salary.” (R24)*

There are many such cases with unfair employment agencies; our respondents shared that they found information on social media like Facebook. The same respondent also said,

*“Before signing a contract in Ukraine, I researched the company online and found horrifying stories on social media about people working for months without getting paid and extra hours, more than 10. Although I do not remember the details, I feared experiencing the same thing.” (R24)*

Typically, migrants are employed through agencies rather than directly by the employer (Hoření, 2019). Employment agencies often provide workers with transportation, accommodation, and interpreting services, but these come with high fees and conditions, especially regarding housing. However, agency workers are vulnerable due to their limited stay in the Czech Republic and may not be fully aware of their rights. Most employees seek to transition from agency work to direct employment. To stay in the Czech Republic long-term, most employees must transition from agency work to direct employment with an employer. Agency-mediated employment is the first job for many foreign employees after arriving in the Czech Republic<sup>1</sup>.

Considering the complexities of bureaucratic and administrative conditions, starting with the type of visa (refer to the barriers section at the individual level: lack of diversity and inclusion). Employers often prefer to hire immigrants with unrestricted access to the labour market, as it is legally easier for them. It is also important to note that non-governmental organisations and the labour department may be unable to solve each problem, leading to

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<sup>1</sup> Article 8 of the Workers' Freedom of Movement Regulation

persistent issues until the conditions of employment agencies and the protection of migrant rights in the labour market in the Czech Republic are re-evaluated.

## Conclusion

The results of a study conducted among 30 educated Ukrainian female immigrants indicated barriers to their full integration into the Czech labour market. In general, their response emphasises that their problems, both at the individual and local level, depend on political issues such as the lack of problem-solving from an individual standpoint, problems transitioning from one job to another, and dishonest employment agencies. Our empirical findings have limitations that we acknowledge. Researching other resource areas, such as the impact of personal traits, organisational context (including the social work field), and structural factors (such as the social policy system and media portrayal of occupations), would be intriguing. Therefore, we recognise that our research has limitations, such as the lack of a narrow focus on the occupational experiences of educated female Ukrainian immigrants and the relatively small sample of women interviewed within specific professions.

When considering our research implications, we would like to point out that successful labour market integration of experienced immigrants is not based on individual factors but on the policy framework, which also impacts other levels in state and non-state institutions and then on the individual level. For example, van Riemsdijk (2022) bring into the discussion a relational framework that points out that a range of factors related to migrants' access to working life and inclusion are interrelated and intertwined. Previous studies have focused on individual elements such as language abilities (e.g., Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022) or cultural competence. For the migrants, the two principal facilitating factors were their ambition and motivation and the support they got in interpersonal encounters. They also highlighted unsuccessful interpersonal encounters, events that could risk the construction of negative social identities. Meetings with friends, mentors, teachers, study counsellors, employment officers, and employers were either positive or negative and necessary for their journeys. For employment officers, it is not just about offering participation in programmes and other interventions. It is about how the migrants' identities are constructed in the meetings – as competent, trustworthy, and a valuable resource in society, or the opposite. Overall, the quality of the meetings may be necessary for migrants to succeed in regaining their professions. The meso-level is, furthermore, not isolated from the macro level in society. For example, Phillimore (2021) and van Riemsdijk (2022) claim that employers are more willing to hire migrants if media coverage is sympathetic to migration and migrants, which implies that society's attitudes to migration may affect interpersonal encounters on the meso-level, how identities are constructed in these encounters, and the opportunities being offered.

## Declarations

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