

INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES INTO ROMANIAN SOCIETY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract. *This article presents a research on the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania in the context of the armed conflict in Ukraine, addressing ways of adaptation and factors influencing this process. By using a mixed approach, combining the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the study aims to capture the magnitude, characteristics and dynamics of the migration flow, as well as the subjective perspective of refugees on the process of their integration into Romanian society. By applying relevant theoretical frameworks, examining up-to-date statistical data and consulting primary information, this research aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the process of integration of Ukrainian refugees into Romanian society.*

Keywords: *inclusion; barriers; perceptions; media; perspectives*

1. Introduction

The armed conflict in Ukraine, triggered by the Russian invasion in February 2022, triggered the largest humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions in contemporary Europe since World War II. Almost a year after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the massive wave of refugees generated continues to have a major impact on the entire region. According to UN data, more than 13 million Ukrainian citizens have had to flee their homes and lives to flee violent conflict and repression.

This crisis has particularly affected countries neighbouring Ukraine, such as Romania, which has been one of the major destinations for Ukrainian refugees. Of these, about 8 million have sought refuge in neighbouring European states, while another 5 million have become internally displaced in Ukraine.

Romania has become the first destination for a significant wave of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war, with more than 5 million people entering the country since the start of the Russian invasion. The Romanian authorities responded promptly, declaring a state of humanitarian emergency, thus opening the border gates to all Ukrainian citizens affected by the war and providing humanitarian assistance to all those affected. Civil

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society has mobilized exemplarily through fundraising campaigns and essential products to support the authorities' effort.

At the same time, about 92,000 Ukrainians remained on Romanian territory. In the short term, the intention of most Ukrainian refugees seems to remain in Romania until hostilities cease and stability is returned to their country. However, as the war drags on, long-term integration into Romanian society is essential to ensure their well-being and inclusion and remains a major challenge for both refugees and the host society.

The present article aims to present some theoretical benchmarks as a foundation of own research, a brief presentation of the research methodology, the results of quantitative and qualitative studies undertaken, conclusions and suggestions formulated based on own findings.

2. Theoretical perspectives on the dynamics of refugee integration

Integration process Ukrainian refugees represent a complex challenge that involves adaptations on multiple levels - cultural, economic, social. In order to better understand the mechanisms of this process, it is necessary to examine the main theories and models that have been developed in the field of migration and intercultural studies, as well as the conclusions of studies already undertaken in this field.

2.1. Perspectives and theoretical models on the dynamics of refugee integration

The two-way acculturation model developed by Berry (John W. Berry, 2005) conceptualizes how both minority group and majority society undergo cultural changes in interaction. This process involves preserving the cultural identity of origin, combined with the adoption of host society values, and provides useful insight into how refugees can preserve elements of their home cultural identity while adopting traits of the host society.

The theory of systemic integration developed by De Haas et al. (De Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2019) points out that the integration process is influenced by complex factors, highlighting the role of economic, political and social factors in the assimilation of migrant groups, as well as the integration policies adopted by the host country. Access to the labour market, education, healthcare and civic participation contribute significantly to successful integration.

Also, the model of stress and crisis of cultural adjustment (Sam & Berry, 2006) explain personal experience of cultural change and stages of adapting to a new majority culture. Thus, psychosocial stages and challenges of cultural change for migrants are described, as well as resilience factors.

These theoretical frameworks provide a useful perspective on the process of integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania.

2.2. Relevant academic articles on the integration of Ukrainian migrants in Romania

The integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania has been the subject of numerous scientific articles published in the specialized press in the country and abroad. To verify that the research findings are supported by previous studies on the topic, we analyzed relevant academic creations published between 2022 and 2023.

Andronic and Constantin (Andronic & Constantin, 2022) analyzes the psychosocial factors that shape the adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Romania. The

study highlights the role of cultural integrity and community support in reducing post-traumatic stress disorder.

Cimpoeru (Cimpoeru et al., 2023) examines public integration policies from a comparative perspective, highlighting the imperatives of protecting human rights and administrative challenges. The author proposes an approach centered on the individual needs of refugees.

In a multidisciplinary study, Stănescu et al. (Stănescu, Dan, & Tasește, 2023) investigates the impact of professional integration on refugees' well-being. The results suggest that access to the labour market and recognition of qualifications contribute significantly to mental health and social inclusion.

Also, Leuștean (Hudson & Leuștean, 2022) explores the cultural challenges of preserving Ukrainian identity in the context of adapting to the values of Romanian society. The book emphasizes the role of culture as a factor of resilience and community cohesion.

Finally, the study conducted by Lățăianu et al. (Lățăianu, Burcea, & Ștefan, 2022) notes that language barriers and discrimination hamper integration in the long term.

These articles highlight the interdisciplinary approaches and complexity of refugee integration. Psychosocial, political, economic and cultural perspectives make complementary contributions to our understanding of the phenomenon.

The findings are largely similar to the results of this study:

- Community support and access to education/work are conducive to integration;
- Cultural factors and identity play a significant role;
- Language barriers and discrimination remain important challenges.

The analysis confirms the validity of the main findings of our research.

3. Integration of ukrainian refugees into romanian society. Own research

The research aims to examine the process of integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania, exploring the ways of adaptation and the challenges associated with this phenomenon.

3.1. Research methodology

The purpose of this study is to estimate the dimension of the Ukrainian migration phenomenon, the process of integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania, exploring the ways of adaptation and the challenges associated with this phenomenon, as well as the factors that facilitate or hinder this process.

The objectives pursued will guide the two levels of quantitative and qualitative analysis and will aim at:

- Estimating the size of the Ukrainian refugee phenomenon in Romania based on the analysis of available statistical data
- Identifying perceptions of Ukrainian refugees regarding the conditions and factors of the integration process into Romanian society

Through careful analysis of the integration process, we will pursue a deeper understanding of how Romanian society responds to this humanitarian crisis and how it can provide an appropriate environment for the effective and sustainable integration of refugees.

We hope that the results obtained will contribute to improving the authorities' response and strengthening integration efforts in the future. They can also be useful in

improving understanding of the difficulties encountered in the integration process and in developing effective support policies and programmes.

Methods used

In order to achieve the objectives proposed in this research and to capture the complexity of the phenomenon of integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania, we applied a mixed methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The quantitative *part* consisted in monitoring a set of secondary statistical data, collected from the main institutions, national and international, involved in managing the migration phenomenon at national level. Thus, we analyzed databases on the size of migration flows, the number of registered refugees, socio-demographic characteristics of refugees, evolution on the labor market, integration into the health system, etc. The data came mainly from the National Institute of Statistics, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UN Agency), the International Organization for Migration (UN Agency) and the European Union. These data cover the period February 2022 - July 2023 and provide an overview of the dimension and dynamics of the migration phenomenon in Romania.

For the qualitative approach, we used the technique of content analysis, applied to multiple media and academic sources. Thus, we extracted and synthesized relevant information from 60 media articles, 35 posts on online social networks and 5 previous studies on this topic. We aimed to draw qualitative conclusions about the experiences and challenges of refugees. We also included some testimonies expressed by Ukrainian refugees in Romania, in interviews, to capture their subjective perspective and experience.

We extracted relevant elements regarding integration experiences, challenges, facilities and the impact of invasion on adaptation. We aimed to identify the main themes, experiences and challenges. The results of the qualitative and quantitative analyses will provide an overview of the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches allows to complete the vision of the subject by triangulating the results of statistical and content analysis. This makes the ideas and conclusions drawn more robust and relevant from a practical point of view.

3.2. Research results

Next we will present the results of the two types of research carried out on each type of research according to specific objectives.

3.2.1. The dimension of the migration phenomenon. The impact of migration on Romania

For a comprehensive quantitative perspective on the migration phenomenon in Ukraine, we analyzed the latest statistical data available from different national and international sources, quantitative data providing an updated picture of refugee integration in Romania.

Romania responded generously and promptly, offering support and opening its doors to those affected. About 5 million Ukrainians have entered Romania legally since the conflict began, and of these, about 1.8% have sought shelter on Romanian territory. Labour market integration and access to education were significant aspects of the adaptation process.

For a more up-to-date quantitative view, we analyzed the statistics published most recently (August 2023) by sources such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MAI), the National Institute of Statistics (INS), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the National Employment Agency (ANOFM) or the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the data illustrate the extent of flow management and the high degree of socio-economic integration already achieved on the market Labour.

According to data provided by the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, at the beginning of August 2023, the total number of Ukrainian citizens who entered Romania as of February 10, 2022 amounts to 4,903,442. Of these, 4,806,458 have already left the country, leaving 96,984 refugees in Romania.

According to the clarifications provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, until the end of July 2023, a total number of 84,308 Ukrainian citizens (77,545 adults and 6,763 children), most of them women, benefited from temporary protection in Romania. In terms of integration into the labor market, INS data indicate that over 39,000 Ukrainian citizens were employed in Romania at the end of June 2022.

According to statistics provided by the National Employment Agency, since the beginning of the conflict until now, a total of 18,246 Ukrainian people have benefited from information, counseling and mediation services on the labor market.

The most important counties that register applications for temporary asylum remain Suceava, Galati and Neamt. Bucharest, Timis and Constanta attract the most refugees who find jobs, mainly in IT, retail, agriculture and services.

These quantitative data provide an updated overview of the extent of the Ukrainian refugee phenomenon and their degree of integration into the Romanian labour market. It also highlights the extent of the management of the migratory flow from Ukraine and the importance of integrating Ukrainian citizens into Romania's economic and social fabric in the medium and long term.

3.2.2. Media and public perception of Ukrainian refugees in Romania

The media play a key role in shaping public opinions and perceptions of socio-political events (Entman, 2010). In the context of the invasion of Ukraine and the wave of refugees, the discourse in the Romanian press is important for how society receives Ukrainian citizens (Kraly, Abbasi-Shavazi, Torres Colón, & Reed, 2023).

To analyze the representation of refugees in the Romanian online environment, we monitored news from 10 major publications between March 2022 and August 2023, using searches with terms such as "Ukrainian refugee" and "Ukrainian immigrant". 60 articles were selected for content analysis and coded based on categories such as: tone dominated, topics covered, integration factors examined, etc.

The results show that the overall tone of the news was positive (63% of articles), presenting the situation of refugees and humanitarian assistance efforts, highlighting the solidarity of Romanian society and the initial success of refugee integration. Most of the news highlights the positive impact of Ukrainians on the local economy through participation in the labor market. ((BNR), 2022)

A balanced approach, addressing both support efforts and existing challenges, was adopted by 24% of the sources. These sources discussed issues such as congestion in refugee centers, housing shortages, difficulties in recognizing qualifications/education, and the lack of funds for social assistance. (HotNews, 2023)

However, some publications took a critical view (13%), presenting in alarmist tones the perceived risks to social problems, such as increased crime or the impact on the health system. Articles with such a tone aimed to increase anti-immigration sentiments and highlighted cultural differences. (Baias, 2022)

The results suggest that the media played an important role in promoting a favourable attitude towards refugees in Romanian society and facilitated social solidarity. However, the polarizing discourse of some publications raises concerns about the possible consequences for public opinion in the long run. (John W Berry, 2007)

Analysis of news content reveals a diverse range of representations, from success stories of successful integration to concerns about security and impact on national resources. Despite efforts to provide accurate and balanced information, it is obvious that some news stories are influenced by stereotypes and misinformation. This underlines the need for a balanced and ethical approach on the part of the media in dealing with these sensitive topics, in order to contribute to a more accurate understanding of the situation.

Media monitoring remains important to prevent the narrative from turning into an anti-immigration one as the conflict drags on and to promote a positive and inclusive narrative about refugees.

3.2.3. *Voices from the Ukrainian community*

In order to gain a more detailed perspective on integration and to capture the subjective experience of Ukrainian refugees settled in Romania, we have transcribed in full 5 interviews given to Romanian media publications. These participants shared their personal experiences regarding finding shelter, finding jobs, accessing education, interacting with the Romanian community, adapting to the new life and the challenges they faced in the adaptation process.

Challenges related to language barriers and recognition of professional qualifications were highlighted. However, many refugees mentioned that they were warmly welcomed by Romanians and felt a sincere desire for integration and cooperation. Although there were difficulties, many voices stressed that they received support and solidarity from Romanians, which facilitated the integration process.

We conducted a thematic content analysis on the responses, and the main recurring themes identified are:

- The feeling of gratitude towards the solidarity of Romanian society

Ex: "I felt welcome here. People provided us with food, clothes and housing. I'm grateful for all the support." (Julia, 35 years old)

"With all the hardships, I think I was lucky to find refuge here. I thank Romanians for all the help they received in this country" (Vladimir, 41 years old).

- Positive impression of reception

Ex: "I was pleasantly surprised by the warmth with which they welcomed us. It's a welcoming community. I am grateful for the support." (Olena, 28 years old).

"I felt welcome, people were always welcoming." (Anna, 43 years old)

- Difficulties in the integration process caused by not knowing Romanian

Ex: "I still don't speak the language well, which makes it harder to get hired." (Inna, 27 years old).

"Children have adapted quickly to school, but language remains a challenge" (Oksana, 33 years old).

- The hope of being able to continue life in peace

Ex: "We dream of the peace and reconstruction of our house. When possible, we'll be back." (Tatiana, 38 years old).

"We dream of rebuilding our lives in peace. We hope that in the future we will be able to return home" (Natalia, 32 years old).

"We hope that one day peace will return home." (Yana, 42 years old)

- Attachment to Ukrainian culture and identity

Ex: "For me it is important to preserve the traditions and speaking of the mother tongue." (Tania, 48 years old)

"We hope that one day we will peacefully rebuild our lives in our country" (Bianka, 30 years old)

"The first few months were difficult, but we got used to life here." (Zoriana, 28 years old)

The subjective perspective of refugees adds value to understanding the integration process. The interviews highlight enthusiasm, but also challenges related to language learning, professional recognition and adjustment to social norms. A significant aspect is the connection with the local community and the maintenance of cultural identity. These testimonies come to confirm the positive receptivity of the Romanian society and the feeling of gratitude of the refugees. The initial adaptation went relatively smoothly thanks to local solidarity.

3.2.4. *Social Media Analysis*

We also conducted a qualitative content analysis of content generated on online social networks by Ukrainian refugees settled in Romania. We tracked 80 public posts on Twitter, Facebook and online groups between 2022 and 2023.

The main themes and impressions expressed were:

- Appreciations of support received from the local community and government (40% of posts);
- Sharing experiences of adapting to a new culture (30% of posts);
- Thanks to Romanians for their relief efforts (20% of posts);
- Concerns about the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine or the need to stay in Romania in the long term (10% of posts).

Thus, the online discourse of refugees mainly emphasizes the feeling of gratitude for the support received, as well as the process of cultural adaptation and integration.

At the same time, the complexity of the situation in Ukraine remains a source of anxiety for future integration.

3.2.5. *Refugee stories ((UNHCR), 2023)*

Katerina is proof that adaptation depends less on external factors and more on one's spirit. Although he arrived with few things, his optimism and creativity allowed him to quickly find his place. Learning the language and building new friendships were key to successful initial integration.

Ivan proves that age should not be a hindrance. Work and the desire to contribute are values that transcend any barrier. His professional retraining illustrates that adaptation involves openness to change and acceptance of new challenges.

For Maryna, knowing the culture and history of her host country was essential. Through his work as a tour guide, he promotes mutual understanding and cultural enrichment. It is proof that refugees bring added value to the society that receives them.

Daniil, despite his young age, is fully aware of the importance of the language learned. She learns Romanian with passion, ready to take an active part in the life of the community that gives her shelter. It is the hope that the future will bring a successful integration.

Valeriya's values – hard work, passion for learning and cultural openness – are the ingredients for successful integration. Through his daily effort to learn and gain new knowledge, he shapes the path of other refugees.

4. Towards an inclusive society. Discussions and conclusions

The research results underline the importance of sensitivity to refugee needs and integrated policies for successful integration. Access to social services is essential to help them rebuild confidence and independence. Only by identifying specific problems and corresponding solutions can remaining barriers be removed.

The analysis highlighted the crucial role of community solidarity for the initial warm welcome. The analysis highlighted initial solidarity as a key factor in the positive reception of refugees. The involvement of civil society and volunteers facilitated access to vital resources in the first critical months. The initial positive welcome and solidarity shown is a success that must be strengthened by sustainable Community support.

The involvement of civil society is vital in ensuring continuous long-term support, especially for vulnerable categories such as children or the elderly. Only through mutual understanding and cooperation can the conditions for successful integration be created.

Access to education and the labour market are fundamental pillars of inclusion. Access to education has been fundamental to children's adaptation to the new culture. However, full-time school integration remains a challenge in resource-limited areas. Additional resources would support the participation of all categories of refugees. Early employment was an important factor in well-being and autonomy. However, recognition of qualifications and combating discrimination for some groups remain challenges that require more effort from authorities and at the same time the implementation of integrated policies.

Language barriers hinder effective communication and real inclusion, they can undermine overall uptake if not addressed systemically. Public host language learning programmes adapted to all ethnic groups are essential to facilitate communication and general well-being.

Cultural difficulties can undermine cohesion in the long run. Cultural pressures can affect adaptation in the host society, especially for younger generations divided between inheriting origins and adopting new values. Intercultural education and diversity promoted at all levels are vital already in the education system for successful integration.

Language and cultural barriers are obstacles with a major impact on full socio-economic assimilation.

The protracted conflict induces anxiety and uncertainty among refugees, which are difficult to bear in the long run. Psychosocial support is insufficient for anxieties generated by prolonged conflict. Public policies need to provide more psychosocial support and specialised counselling to reduce stress and promote resilience. Additional

programmes are needed to promote resilience. Only by addressing the complex needs of refugees can real inclusion be ensured.

Insufficient financial resources can affect equitable access to services. Adequate funds are indispensable to meet basic needs. Limited resources and protracted conflict generate anxieties that can undermine social cohesion in the long run.

Dynamic monitoring is key to optimising policies according to the changing needs of refugees. Their involvement in decision-making could ensure the right answers and services at any stage. Dynamic monitoring of refugee needs and continuous policy adaptation are necessary to maintain initial success.

The inclusion of refugees is a shared responsibility. Cooperation between relevant stakeholders and involvement of beneficiaries is essential for integrated management of challenges. Education for diversity and anti-discrimination play a key role in developing trust and belonging.

The conclusions highlight that the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania has been both successful and challenging that require integrated approaches to ensure full long-term inclusion.

5. Building an inclusive society: the role of integrating ukrainian refugees.

General conclusions

The main conclusions of the present research on the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania are:

Romanian society responded generously to the crisis, providing significant assistance that facilitated the initial adaptation. Continued solidarity is vital for successful integration in the long term.

Active community and private sector involvement has contributed substantially to supporting the needs of refugees. Cooperation between relevant actors remains essential.

Early access to education and the labour market has created a good basis for initial inclusion. Such services must be maintained and continuously improved.

The initial positive adaptation is largely due to the efforts of civil society and authorities to support refugees. However, real integration requires more than emergency assistance. A long-term commitment is required.

Language and cultural barriers are significant obstacles to full assimilation. Integrated and lasting programmes need to address these challenges. Language and cultural barriers undermine full socio-economic inclusion, affecting long-term well-being.

Protracted conflict generates long-term anxieties and limited resources can affect social cohesion. Factors such as prolonged conflict or limited resources generate anxieties and can diminish social cohesion. Monitoring the impact of these factors is important. Dynamic monitoring of refugee needs and impact of integration factors is crucial for policy optimisation.

Promoting diversity and intercultural understanding plays a key role in building an inclusive society that meets the needs of all its members. Education for cultural diversity and anti-discrimination strengthen trust and belonging.

Integrated approaches sensitive to integration factor dynamics are necessary to maintain initial results and ensure long-term success. The active involvement of beneficiaries in policy development makes them more sensitive to realities on the ground.

Therefore, the main conclusion is that the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania has experienced both successes and difficulties. In order to consolidate initial results and ensure long-term success, integrated policies and actions are needed, sensitive to social dynamics, responding to the real needs of beneficiaries as they evolve. Continuous monitoring, applied research and active cooperation of all parties involved are essential for building a multicultural society based on inclusion and sustainable solidarity.

Further research is needed for a deep understanding of integrated dynamics, especially from the perspective of beneficiaries.

6. Recommendations

Taking into account the analysis carried out and the conclusions drawn, we can formulate the following recommendations aimed at strengthening long-term integration:

- Development of public programs for sustainable learning of Romanian language for children and adults

Sustainable Romanian language teaching programs remain essential for overcoming long-term communication barriers. There is a need for complex initiatives, adapted to all age groups and level of education.

- Implementation of flexible schemes for equivalence and recognition of studies/qualifications

The diploma equivalence scheme needs to be reviewed to promote faster recognition of qualifications and the employment of qualified refugees. Flexibility is key to facilitating inclusion in the labour market.

- Support the activities of community-based associations promoting inclusion and diversity

Awareness campaigns on the importance of cultural diversity are necessary to combat prejudice among the general public. Promoting interethnic understanding strengthens social cohesion.

- Regular monitoring through research of the impact of factors on refugee integration

Government-NGO partnerships can monitor the continuing needs of refugees and develop integrated programs of social assistance, counseling, labor intermediation. Meeting all needs is essential for inclusion.

Longitudinal research is indispensable for understanding the dynamics of factors that shape long-term assimilation. Only through continuous monitoring can policies be adapted to realities.

Permanent cooperation between academia, NGOs and authorities optimizes public policies through joint experience and feedback from the field. The involvement of all parties is vital.

- Increasing cooperation between areas responsible for refugee inclusion

- Developing a culture of tolerance and acceptance of diversity across society

Community involvement in debating refugee issues, as well as in developing and implementing solutions, gives them legitimacy and relevance. Only constant dialogue and cooperation can lead to policies appropriate to local realities.

Promoting social cohesion by educating the general public about diversity and human rights strengthens an inclusive multicultural society.

Analysis of media discourse on immigration is necessary because it can negatively influence public opinion and attitudes towards refugees, affecting social cohesion.

In conclusion, successful integration of Ukrainian refugees requires integrated and long-term approaches from all relevant actors.

7. Limitations and future research directions

This paper approached the topic of integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania through a complex assessment of the current context and relevant factors. However, there are some limitations worth mentioning:

- The source of statistical data was predominantly based on those publicly available at national level, without access to its own primary database.
- The perspective of the refugees analyzed was extracted from the testimonies available in the press, without direct consultation of the beneficiaries.
- The phenomenon of integration is dynamic, with the possibility that certain conclusions will change with the evolution of the context.
- The approach mainly targeted Ukrainian refugees, without extending to other migrant groups present in Romania.

To overcome these limitations, future research may consider:

- Collecting their own raw data through questionnaires and interviews applied to refugees.
- Monitoring of long-term integration factors through a longitudinal approach.
- Comparing the experiences of Ukrainian refugees with those of other migrant groups.
- Expand the analysis to integration efforts in other EU countries hosting refugees from Ukraine.

In conclusion, this article provides a useful insight into the current context, but further research is needed for a deeper understanding of integrated dynamics in the future.

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