

Access to housing and healthcare under temporary protection: The case of the integration of Ukrainians in Slovakia

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Abstract: *This article examines policy frameworks for integrating Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, using the human rights-based approach, with a focus on housing and health sectors, major pillars of effective refugee integration. It analyses the relevant legal landscape, including Slovakia's transposition of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive, alongside secondary data on policy implementation, to assess rights provision and assistance. The study suggests critical gaps and practical challenges in these processes, and provides evidence-based insights to develop more effective rights-based strategies in Slovakia.*

Keywords: *human rights-based approach; integration policies; temporary protection; Ukrainians in Slovakia*

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1. Introduction

The large-scale displacement of Ukrainians following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine required a rapid and comprehensive policy response across the European Union (EU). Data from the UNHCR (UNHCR 2026) points out that in April 2026, there are more than 5.2 million forced displaced Ukrainians in Europe. In Slovakia, measures, such as the Act No. 55/2022 Coll. on Certain Measures in Connection with the Situation in Ukraine, were taken even a few days before the activation of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) (European Union 2001). The TPD provides a unique legal instrument open way to access a broad range of protection to those fleeing the war. This legislative action established clear legal entitlements, positioning the issue of Ukrainian integration not on the question of status (as in traditional asylum systems), but on the efficacy of implementation and the extent of the rights granted based on national policies. The TPD established the framework to provide access to core rights after granting temporary protection, particularly in access to the labour market, education, healthcare, and social housing.

The provided study addresses the positive obligation of Slovakia as a duty-bearer under TPD, particularly by analysing how Slovakia addresses two core rights under TPD – housing and healthcare, as a precondition to the implementation of other social rights, such as access to the labour market for adult Ukrainians and access to education for children fleeing the war in Ukraine. Access to education is particularly important, as out of 6.5 million displaced people receiving temporary protection in the EU (UNHCR 2024), 40 percent are children (European Parliamentary Research Centre 2025). Even after more than three years of the war in Ukraine, 50 percent of children who left Ukraine because of the war have still to be enrolled in their host countries' education systems. 60 percent of children enrolled take online classes broadcast from Ukraine, in parallel with classes in regular school (Styslavská-Doliwa 2025).

The analysis draws on a systematic review of the EU TPD and Slovakia's legislation on the respective areas. These are complemented by secondary data sources, including policy reports, academic literature, and institutional assessments from organisations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration.

The human rights-based approach (HRBA) serves as the analytical framework, evaluating the extent to which rights obligations, particularly in the housing and health sectors, are translated into accessible and effective entitlements for Ukrainian under TPD. HRBA is underpinned by five key working principles to advance human rights for all. Principles are known as "PANEL" and enshrine participation, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment and legality (ENNHRI n.d.).

HRBA requires putting the human rights of everyone at the centre of their policies and strategies and making them actionable. By applying these principles, HRBA identifies States and their institutions as duty-bearers, those accountable for respecting, protecting, and fulfilling human rights. It also addresses individuals as rights-holders, empowering them to know, claim, and enjoy their rights (European Union 2021).

The study focuses specifically on Slovakia as a case study given its position as a frontline EU member receiving Ukrainians fleeing war especially after 2022. We argue that the access to housing and healthcare is precondition of the effective integration of Ukrainian children into the Slovak educational system and may contribute to mitigating integration barriers, while allowing access to all core rights under the TPD.

2. Integration barriers

The integration of migrants constitutes a complex, two-way, process characterised by mutual adaptation between newcomers and the receiving society. Although integration is commonly conceptualised as participation across key dimensions such as employment, education, and civic engagement (MIPEX 2025), its success fundamentally depends on equitable access to essential public services such as healthcare and education (Gil-González et al. 2015). These services not only facilitate migrants' well-being but also serve as crucial platforms for interaction, socialisation, and development of cultural and social capital necessary for full integration in society.

Extensive research addresses a broad spectrum of challenges that hinder the integration process. Structural and systemic inequalities are prominent, including restrictive legal frameworks that limit migrants' rights and opportunities (Federico and Baglioni 2021), financial burdens associated with accessing services or securing stable employment (Constant and Zimmermann 2011), and intricate bureaucratic procedures that discourage or exclude migrants from resources (Belabas and Gerrits 2017). Moreover, when it comes to health and education, in particular, a recent study has showed that housing quality acts as a central determinant of physical and psychological well-being, particularly for immigrant populations, especially the most vulnerable - refugees. This connection is not merely one-way; the literature highlights a cyclical dynamic where inadequate living conditions degrade health, and compromised health can subsequently lead to further housing instability. Crucially, vulnerable immigrant groups, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, are shown to face a significantly elevated risk of encountering substandard housing situations (Towle and Newbold 2025).

Beyond these institutional barriers, socio-cultural factors play a significant role. Language proficiency remains a critical obstacle, often

interacting with experiences of discrimination and insufficient cultural competency within public institutions, which collectively reduce migrants' ability to navigate and benefit fully from available services (Joppke 2012; Asgary and Segar 2011). Together, these challenges demonstrate that integration is not simply about participation in societal structures but also requires the dismantling of barriers that prevent equitable access and meaningful inclusion.

3. Lack of access to housing for Ukrainians in Slovakia

The central role of housing for accessing other rights and services and for the ability to make use of one's full potential is also reflected in the international human rights framework. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 thus stipulates that all individuals have the right to an adequate standard of living (Kraler et al. 2022). The right to adequate housing is also incorporated in the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), which the Slovak Republic ratified in 1976 (MZVEZ n.d.).

According to Biffl et al. (2016) and Asselin et al. (2006), the housing and settlement of migrants have been identified as an important field of action for integration. One of the topics addressed in research refers to the unequal distribution of newly arrived migrants on the one hand and asylum seekers on the other. While newly arrived migrants tend to settle in urban areas with a large pool of jobs and social infrastructure, asylum seekers tend to be distributed by the nation States according to reception centres at hand, often in rural and less developed regions. Initially, the case of Ukrainians fleeing the war and arriving to Slovakia, this model did not apply. Most of them were provided housing in the cities, due lack of the social housing in Slovakia in general. For example, in the capital city Bratislava, there are only 978 city rental apartments, considering there are approximately another thousand under the management of city districts (Bratislav 2025). Such an approach presented another obstacle: access to education, as Slovakia has limited educational capacities in the urban areas (Jahanpour et al. 2023), underlying the gap in capacities of schools in cities in Slovakia. According to UNESCO, the majority of Ukrainian children in Slovakia were not enrolled in schools, and only 39 percent of Ukrainian refugee children were enrolled in school, while 55 percent used the all-Ukrainian online school platform at the end of 2023. Anchoring compulsory education, full-time and physically (Ministry of Education of the SR 2026), for children fleeing the war in Ukraine from September 2025 promotes their integration into society. The other enablers equally important for the enhanced integration alongside education can be access to housing and healthcare.

The lack of housing capacities in Slovakia led to different support for housing needs, by providing an accommodation allowance. The so-called

“Lex Ukraine” (Slovakia 2022) provides access to an accommodation allowance to all Ukrainians granted temporary protection status. Holders of temporary protection can find accommodation themselves directly through property owners or real estate agencies, through their family or friends, or accommodation can be arranged by staff at assistance centres, non-governmental organisations, any municipal or city office, or specialised websites offering accommodation. All new arrivals from Ukraine who have been granted temporary refuge can apply for accommodation in facilities of the Migration Office of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic; however, the accommodation capacities are limited (Migration Office of the Slovak Republic 2019). According to the law, refugees who are considered vulnerable persons may be accommodated in an asylum facility for a maximum of six months, even repeatedly, based on a written request submitted to the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (Slovakia 2022). In order to ensure the long-term sustainability and targeting of accommodation support for refugees from Ukraine who came to Slovakia as a result of the war, an amendment to Act No. 480/2002 Coll. on asylum and on amendments to certain acts came into force on 1 July 2024. This amendment introduces new conditions for the provision of accommodation allowances, which affect both refugees and accommodation providers. The amendment to the Act was adopted in a shortened legislative procedure. From 1 July 2024, the allowance is only be provided for the accommodation of refugees for 120 days from the first provision of temporary shelter in the territory of the Slovak Republic. After this period, the allowance is only to be provided for the accommodation of vulnerable persons (Slovakia 2024). For refugees, it requires fulfilling several conditions simultaneously, to have either the status of temporary protection, asylum seeker, or refugee, to fulfil one of the conditions defined within the social legislation (Slovakia 2024, Section 36a(2)): being 1) a member of a household that is a recipient of material need assistance; 2) a person with a severe disability who receives a subsidy to support humanitarian assistance for persons with severe disabilities pursuant to a special regulation; 3) a person who has reached the age of 65; 4) a parent caring for a child under five years of age or a natural person who personally cares for a child under five years of age pursuant to a court decision; 5) a child under five years of age.

The highly competitive real estate market, which exists mainly in urban and metropolitan areas, makes it difficult for Ukrainians in Slovakia to enter the private housing market (Aqqad 2022; Pisarevskaya and Scholten 2022). Different studies point to institutional and structural barriers and discriminatory practices by landlords and housing companies that hinder access to housing for refugees; in so doing, their actions affect the movement and settlement of refugees (Pisarevskaya and Scholten 2022). The comparative study by Galera et al. (2018) looked at the role of the location of refugee accommodation for social integration. Accommodations’ availability that are in remote rural areas

or on the periphery of municipalities, with limited accessibility to public transportation, might constrain opportunities for social interaction and integration to the labour market, which are key for social integration (see also Veselková and Hábel 2023).

The urgency for access to housing in Slovakia is imminent, with the length of the war in Ukraine, but also in the geopolitical context. Non-availability of accessible housing in Slovakia for people fleeing the war in Ukraine may lead them to seek a favourable living environment in different countries. That would increase the migration within the EU, when the securitisation of migration is on the increase in Europe (Bello 2022). Geopolitically, it may increase the risk of its abuse as a tool of hybrid war, seen in different EU Member States, particularly before national elections (Ciekanowski et al. 2026).

However, the newly adopted National Strategy of the Slovak Republic for Asylum and Migration Management did not address the need for access to housing for refugees, nor in general, but rather provides for the construction of a multi-purpose facility near the external border (Ministry of Interior 2025). The topic of accommodation and social implications for the effective implementation of other core rights under the TPD or for refugees in general is not addressed at all.

4. Access to healthcare for Ukrainians in Slovakia under TPD and beyond

Access to healthcare is one of the most important aspects for the successful integration of migrants. Unaddressed health issues can significantly impede an individual's ability to integrate into a new society and participate effectively in the labour market (Slootjes 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was a test situation that illuminated this relationship between access to healthcare and integration. The pandemic acted as a magnifying aspect that exposed pre-existing gaps in migrant health policies and deepened health disparities that formed direct barriers to migrant integration, according to Slootjes (2021). Indeed, health problems and labour market participation are mutually reinforcing: poor health prevents migrants from completing integration and language courses, negatively affects wages and working hours, and may prevent some individuals from working altogether. The pandemic also revealed the significant cost of inaction, as research has demonstrated that denying migrants access to primary care leads to delayed treatment, more serious conditions, and substantially higher long-term treatment costs (Slootjes 2021).

Article 13(2) of TPD states that Member States must ensure that individuals benefiting from temporary protection have access to necessary support related to social welfare and basic living needs if they lack adequate resources. Additionally, States must provide medical care, which,

at a *minimum*, includes emergency treatment and essential healthcare. The adoption is upon each particular Member State, but since the triggering of the TPD, in March 2022, the EU has encouraged Member States to grant Ukrainians broad access to healthcare and sick benefits and to create the means for Ukrainians under temporary protection to be integrated into the national healthcare system (European Union 2022).

After the activation of the TPD Slovakia started ensuring that individuals who have obtained the status of temporary protection within its territory are entitled to comprehensive healthcare services.¹ Nowadays, this entitlement guarantees that those under temporary protection receive medical care on equal terms with Slovak citizens, reflecting Slovakia's commitment to providing inclusive support and access to essential health services for displaced persons (IOM 2025). However, this was not a fast and straight forward process.

Slovakia's approach to providing healthcare for temporary protection (TP) holders fleeing the war against Ukraine underwent significant changes. Initially, access was restricted, offering only urgent emergency services, which was later improved to include "necessary" care. This intermediate policy created confusion due to its ambiguous definition, resulting in disparities in how medical services were delivered and paid for across various healthcare entities. Responding to pressure from international and non-governmental organisations, the Government incrementally expanded coverage. First, in January 2023, children under 18 with TP were granted the same health benefits as permanent resident children. Crucially, by September 2023, this near-equivalent level of access was extended to all adult TP holders (excluding specialised spa treatments), with the public insurance company, Všeobecná zdravotná poisťovňa, overseeing a dedicated financial system for this broadened coverage, in accordance with Act No. 577/2004 Coll. on the Scope of Health Care Covered by Public Health Insurance (Ministry of Health 2025; IOM 2025).

According to a recent study conducted in 2025 with over 400 Ukrainians living in Slovakia (IOM 2025), most Ukrainians have access to health care providers – 76 percent of adults are registered at a general doctor, and 90 percent of children are registered. On the other hand, healthcare services appear as the second most pressing need for Ukrainians (32 percent), only behind financial support in general. Among the top three most common challenges faced by Ukrainians in Slovakia when accessing to healthcare system are long queues, language barrier, and perceived costs.

Overall, the trajectory of Slovakia's policy regarding healthcare provision for Ukrainians who are TP holders ultimately demonstrates

¹ In fact, even prior to getting the status, the Ukrainian nationals have access to emergency care for the first thirty days upon entering Slovakia.

a fair fulfilment, and eventual supersession, of the minimum provisions set forth by TPD. The initial phase, characterised by the restriction to emergency care and “necessary” care, highlighted significant friction points between legislative recommendations and practical implementation. In practice, the unclear definition of “necessary” care led to inconsistent decisions among healthcare providers, meaning that access to care varied depending on the region or facility (as reported often by media outlets, see Topky.sk 2022). However, the comprehensive policy shift, culminating in the extension of near-equivalent healthcare entitlements to all TP holders by September 2023, underscores Slovakia’s commitment to the application of the TPD and integration of Ukrainians into the Slovak healthcare system.

Therefore, we can conclude that the only significant access barrier uniquely attributable to the TP population is the linguistic impediment. The other difficulties encountered by Ukrainian who are TP holders when accessing the Slovak healthcare system are largely not unique to the displaced population but rather reflect pre-existing systemic challenges that affect the wider public. Specifically, issues such as extended waiting times or long queues for appointments and specialised care, along with concerns over perceived costs, are common grievances experienced by Slovak citizens (STVR 2025) and by migrants elsewhere (Spencer and Hughes 2015; Timkova et al. 2026) utilizing the public healthcare infrastructure. This indicates that while the legal entitlement to care has been established on an equal basis, the practical delivery of services is constrained by domestic capacity issues within the system.

Moreover, in June 2025, Slovakia adopted the National Strategy for the Governance of Asylum and Migration (2025–2030), whose integration goals for the next five years align closely with the core pillars outlined in the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). According to the strategy, integration measures should foster coordinated and interconnected tools and initiatives that enable foreigners to access the labour market, master the State language, and gain entry to education, healthcare, social services, housing, and participation in civic and political life, ultimately paving the way for the granting of Slovak citizenship (Ministry of Interior 2025).

The Strategy is the framework document to comprehensively and systematically address Ukrainians in Slovakia and to address contemporary challenges, including demographic shifts, labour shortages, irregular migration, the integration of individuals granted international protection, and the consequences of the war in Ukraine. It outlines concrete measures for managing both legal and irregular migration, enhancing asylum procedures, and strengthening border and security mechanisms, with significant emphasis on migrant integration (Ministry of Interior 2025). That outlines particularly Slovakia’s approach to the biggest migration group of Ukrainians fleeing the country due to war and their integration

into society, to which access to integration policies is key alongside safeguarding their human rights.

5. Conclusion

The HRBA emphasises the duty of States and duty-bearers to enhance the ability of rights-holders to understand, claim, and enjoy their rights. Our initial assessment confirmed that one of the core rights under TPD, access to housing, is not structurally addressed nor implied in law and policies in Slovakia regarding Ukrainians fleeing the war. Access to healthcare is fairly fulfilled and even surpasses the minimum provisions set forth by TPD, although not without problems. Additionally, we outline the difference between the legal commitment and positive obligation regarding the implementation of access to healthcare. Our study goes in line with what was suggested by Pisarevskaya and Scholten (2022), who stressed that developing a more sustainable strategy for healthcare integration requires allocating effort and resources not just to regulating healthcare access, but also to improving intercultural competencies and ensuring adequate information provision.

Lack of a HRBA, whose objective is that all interventions, policies, and technical assistance should advance the realisation of human rights, might contribute to low levels of social inclusion of Ukrainians in Slovakia. A more structured approach, focusing on enablers of access to housing, and more effective implementation of provided healthcare can contribute to advancing of other two core rights under TPD in a more holistic manner – access to labour markets and access to education. As provided in the previous studies, the housing environment has a significant impact on our lifestyle and, accordingly, on health (Schneider and Mohnen 2016). Both of them we consider as essential for the long-term solutions and integration in areas of labour market and education.

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