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Migration processes and determinants: the case of the Slovak Republic

Abstract

While the Slovak Republic is not one of the traditional immigration destinations, in recent years, the situation has changed. The current paper aims to analyse the migration processes in the Slovak Republic and identify the determinants for immigration.

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The results show that during the last three decades, the accession to the EU and Schengen area affected the migration patterns in Slovakia the most. One of the crucial determinants causing labour migration to the country is the domestic labour demand and labour shortage due to emigration flows. While the COVID-19 pandemic did not significantly influence the migration processes in the country, the restrictive measures are affecting the employment of foreigners.

On the other hand, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has caused unprecedented immigration flows to the country. The latter calls for a modernisation of immigration and integration policies that will lead to a more efficient labour market and sustainable economic growth in the Slovak Republic. Creating an Immigration and Naturalisation Office, with the aim of bringing together all migration processing and provision of related services is a necessary step forward in migration policy management. This article focuses on the migration developments shaping the migration policy in Slovakia in the near future and provides policy recommendations.

Keywords: migration, determinants, labour, migration policy, Covid-19

Introduction

International migration is a phenomenon that emerging economies face in the modern world. During the last decades, the issues of international migration, particularly, immigration and migrant integration problems in host countries, “brain drain” in donor countries, came to the forefront in the Member States of the EU and are shaping the immigration policies in all European countries. Social and demographic influences of the migration processes in both donor and host countries are at the centre of the attention of corresponding authorities.

Besides its social and demographic effects, the migration processes also impact the economy of host and donor countries. The influence of immigration on economic development and the labour market is frequently discussed in economic and political circles. While the economic impact of migration processes is highly significant, there is no agreement on its nature. Various studies concluded that several factors were affecting the economic impact of immigration, such as the migration and integration policies in the host countries, social protection policy, labour market conditions and macroeconomic indicators (Damette & Fromentin, 2013; AboElsoud et al., 2020; Okamoto, 2021; Přívara, 2021, 2022a).

The migration processes and determinants within the EU should be considered at the European level. However, individual countries have their own attitudes concerning immigration policies and can be described by a different set of determinants. There are some common pull factors attracting human capital to the EU, including the availability of high-quality services, better socio-economic conditions, higher wages and income level, as well as political stability within the Union. However, the economic development and prosperity differences among various EU Member States create grounds for asymmetric migration flows. The latter is also accelerated by immigration and integration policy differences across the Member States.

In the framework of the current study, under the immigration policy, we understand the set of policy instruments and regulations for entry and residence in the given country. The immigration policy also includes the migrant integration policy. The latter implies management instruments to offer immigrants the opportunity to successfully integrate into the host country's professional, social and cultural environment (Štefančík et al., 2021).

From the point of view of the evaluation of migration processes and determinants, the case of the Slovak Republic is of high interest. While the Slovak Republic is not one of the traditional immigration destinations, the situation has changed recently. The accession of the Slovak Republic to the EU and later to the Schengen area significantly altered the migration patterns, as evidenced by statistics. The Eurostat statistics on the foreign-born population in the Slovak Republic show a considerable increase from 1.19% in 2010 to 3.7% in 2021.

In general, the primary motivation of immigrants influx to the V4 countries include better employment conditions, quality of education and family reunification (Mihi-Ramirez et al., 2017; Přívara et al., 2018; Přívara, 2019a). Currently, labour migration accounts for the largest segment of regular immigration in the V4 countries, including the Slovak Republic. However, in a rapidly evolving world and considering the COVID-19 pandemic (Bhowmik et al., 2021; Přívara & Rievajová, 2021; Vorobeva & Dana, 2021) and military conflict in Ukraine, it is essential to monitor and reflect on the shifts in migration processes and immigration policies in the Slovak Republic as the latter becomes a more attractive destination for immigration.

Considering the facts mentioned above, the current paper aims to analyse the migration processes in the Slovak Republic and identify the determinants for immigration. The structure of the article includes several sections starting with an introduction to present the concept of the issue under discussion and the research goal. The second section consists of a literature review on the migration processes and determinants in the EU in general and in the V4 countries in particular. The third section gives a deep analysis of the evaluation of the migration policy in the Slovak Republic. The following section presents a statistical and logical analysis of migration processes and determinants in the Slovak Republic, drawing corresponding conclusions presented in the last section of the research paper.

Literature review

The literature considers migration a somewhat complex concept that includes various ways of human mobility. In the context of the current study, we will explore the determinants of international migration that presumes crossing borders. The main types of human movements that are referred to as migration include economic, seasonal, return, and non-economic migration. Economic migration or work (labour) migration (UN, 1990; Ahmad-Yar & Bircan, 2021; Alvarez & Royuela, 2022) is a phenomenon that includes people seeking a higher income and a better standard of living in another region or country in the case of international migration, considering the insufficient labour opportunities in the country or region of origin. Seasonal migration (Bregiannis,

2021; Martin et al., 2018) is very similar to work migration as it occurs due to the seasonal nature of labour demand for specific professions. Return migration (Lagakos et al., 2020; Elmallakh & Wahba, 2022) is the return of migrants to their countries of origin on a voluntary or forced basis. Non-economic migration (Müller & Tai, 2020; Rokitowska-Malcher, 2020) can happen under the influence of such factors as a family reunion, climate, education, military conflict, civil war, political repressions, etc.

The current article focuses on the economic determinants of international migration. Particularly, the positive and negative demographic changes in the EU Member States brought to the forefront the debates about labour migration and the investigation of its determinants (Jakovljevic et al., 2018; Farkas & Dövényi, 2018; Přívara et al., 2020; Marois et al., 2020; Sahoo & Pradhan, 2021; Ghio et al., 2022; Přívara, 2022b).

Considering the various natures of migration processes, in general, we can divide the migration factors into two large groups: economic determinants (Cimpoeru, 2020; Hrysenko & Pryiatelchuk, 2020; Schwabe, 2021; Hakim et al., 2022) and non-economic determinants (Arif, 2020; Winter, 2020; Jończy et al., 2021). The non-economic factors include political factors (Bhimji, 2018; Branton et al., 2022; Malo, 2022), personal factors (Martínez & García, 2018; Rashid, 2019; Hoffmann et al., 2019) and dyadic factors (Winter, 2020; Přívara, 2019b). The economic and political factors are characteristic of the country at the macro-level analysis. However, on the micro-level analysis, we can also distinguish personal factors for migration, such as family reunification (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019; Mascia, 2021; Činčalová et al., 2021). Finally, dyadic factors are characteristic of country pairs, and the determinant underlying this factor is generally geographic (Abel et al., 2019; Larotta Silva, 2019). The economic factors include unemployment (Harding & Neamțu, 2018; Kilic et al., 2019; Basile et al., 2019), income level (Nguyen, 2020; Laskienė et al., 2020; Slettebak, 2021), economic growth and development (Tolmacheva, 2020; Lyulyov et al., 2021; Rennó Santos et al., 2022), poverty (Kluge et al., 2019; Nowak-Lehmann et al., 2021; Diallo, 2022), the tax system (Lamantia & Pezzino, 2018; Guerreiro et al., 2020; Dai & Tian, 2021), economic freedom (Aarhus & Jakobsen, 2019; Gignarta et al., 2020; Arif et al., 2020). So, we can state that considering the main migration factors, it is evident that people leave their countries of origin to find better living conditions in foreign countries and to escape unfavourable environments.

On the other hand, another branch of literature distinguishes between pull and push factors leading to immigration and emigration in a given country (Mohamed & Abdul-Talib, 2020; Unguren et al., 2021; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2021; Piras, 2021; Khalid & Urbański, 2021). The push factors leading to high emigration rates from a country are mainly corruption (Matallah, 2020; Arif, 2022), unemployment (Baumann et al., 2015; Cimpoeru, 2020; Espinosa & Díaz-Emparanza, 2021), unstable political environment (Mourão et al., 2018; Agadjanian & Gorina, 2019; Žižka & Pelloneova, 2019; Grumstrup et al., 2021; Kang, 2021), military instability (Habchak & Dubis, 2019; Veebel, 2020), climate changes (Barassi et al., 2018; Schutte et al., 2021; Reichman, 2022), low wages and income (Fischer & Pfaffermayr, 2018; Delogu et al., 2018), low or negative economic growth (Tolmacheva, 2020; Lupak et al., 2022; Gavurová et al. 2017). The pull factors leading to high immigration rates to a country are high wages and income (Laajimi & Le Gallo, 2022), low level of poverty (Hager, 2021; Urbański, 2022),

high standard of living (Hager, 2021), high economic growth (Schwabe, 2021), immigration and integration policy (Beverelli, 2022), welfare (Cebolla-Boado & Miyar-Busto, 2020; Ferwerda & Gest, 2021), immigrant networks (Kaplan et al. 2016; Kabir, 2021).

Usually, empirical studies examine income differences and unemployment together. The findings show that the countries with a lower level of wages generally have higher unemployment rates. On the other hand, the regions that offer higher wages attract high-skilled labour migrants. It leads to a phenomenon known as “brain drain” in the countries of origin. Moreover, it is argued that income differences are the basis of the decision-making stimulating economic migration from poorer regions. Usually, people see migration as the only way to escape poverty; hence, poverty is another crucial factor motivating people to migrate.

The business environment is a highly important factor for the skilled labour force (Žižka et al. 2019; Stichhauerova et al. 2020; Tucek & Hrbackova, 2019). Countries offering a more favourable business environment attract not only foreign investments, but also foreign human capital (Simionescu, 2021, 2022; Tucek et al. 2020). So, countries with a higher level of corruption usually have a less favourable business environment leading to emigration from the country to destinations with lower corruption levels.

Considering the impact of migration processes on the socio-economic indicators and the negative demographic trends, most countries began paying more attention to efficient migration governance. In the case of effective management, migration can bring many benefits to the donor and recipient countries. Examining the Slovak Republic, Grenčíková & Španková (2016) argue that if previously mainly economic factors, such as wage level, welfare, and social benefits, were influencing people’s decisions to emigrate, nowadays, the political situation in the region plays a significant role.

Migration policy in the Slovak Republic

The migration policy in the Slovak Republic has gone through several phases (Stojarová, 2019; Lidák & Štefančík, 2020). In the framework of the current study, we have distinguished five main stages of evolution of the migration policy in the Slovak Republic. The first stage was from 1990 to 1994, during which there was no comprehensive concept of immigration management. We can characterise the first stage as the period of liberal migration policy. During the post-communist years, the migration policy was not the priority, and it allowed anyone to immigrate to the country and get a permanent residence allowance. The period from 1995 to 2002 was the phase of the institutionalisation of migration governance. During these years, the Slovak Republic developed the primary migration legislation, introducing such terms as “asylum seeker” and “refugee”. The migration policy was highly restrictive then, allowing immigration mostly for family reunification. Special immigration conditions were created for the Czech Republic and Ukraine. The consolidating era followed in the years preceding and succeeding the EU accession. The harmonisation of the national migration law with EU laws lasted until 2005.

The Czech Republic and Slovak Republic underwent similar historical changes, including the transition to a market economy from a centrally planned economy,

the accession to the EU leading to opening their boards for the citizens of EU Member States. Hence, mutual labour migration between these countries historically recorded relatively high numbers. Since accessing the Schengen area in 2008, there have been no formal barriers to international migration between these two countries.

The Slovak Republic did not have a clear migration policy characterised until 2011, as after the EU accession Slovakia allowed unrestricted immigration from EU member states. Immigration entered the political debates already in 2011, and the Slovak Government started implementing restrictive migration policies. As a result, the Slovak Republic developed a new legislative document for migration governance, namely, “Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic: perspective until the year 2020” (Slk. *Migračná politika Slovenskej republiky s výhľadom do roku 2020*), approved on August 31, 2011 by Government Resolution no. 574. It became the primary legislative document for migration policy.

The resolution introduced such terms as “controlled economic migration”, “integration policy”, and “migration of qualified labour force” (Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, 2011). The Slovak government identified that the country is in need of human capital inflow due to negative demographic tendencies. Thus, the Slovak Republic began a step-by-step implementation of preferential migration and integration policies to promote the immigration of a qualified labour force to the country. The critical criterion for receiving and integrating economic migrants was their usefulness for economic development in Slovakia. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family of the Slovak Republic was determined as the responsible institution for implementing the integration policy in compliance with the Concept of Foreigner Integration in the Slovak Republic. In January 2014, the Slovak Government approved another essential document – the Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic (Slk. *Integračná politika Slovenskej republiky*) developed by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family. Since then, the migration policy of the country did not go through any significant change.

Since the summer of 2022, the Slovak Republic has been in need of immediate reforming of migration policy due to a new wave of the refugee crisis and illegal migration. Several EU Member States, including the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Austria decided to introduce border checks on the border with the Slovak Republic to prevent illegal migration to their countries.

Migration processes and determinants

The Slovak Republic is not a traditional immigration destination. Moreover, the political environment was not very welcoming to potential immigration. However, the general attitude towards immigrants has changed over the recent years, considering the negative demographic trends. Currently, the country has a specific migration policy targeting the high-skilled labour migrants and facilitating their integration into the labour market and society.

If we look at the statistics of immigration and emigration in the V4 countries, it is evident that the immigration flows have intensified since 2016 (Figure 1), while emigration is characterised by high volatility (Figure 2). In the case of Czechia, there

are three high periods of immigration – 2007–2008 (1%), 2016 (0.6%) and 2019 (0.99%). The period from 2009 to 2015 is characterised with relatively lower immigration rates (around 0.2% to population). Such a decrease in the immigration flows was due to the economic crisis in 2009 causing a decline in the GDP by 4.7%. The crisis was followed by a stagnation until 2015, and the recovery growth started in 2016 bringing a new wave of immigration to the country. We can see that the general trend of immigration to Czechia has been positive since 2016, and the strict travel restrictions can explain the lower number in 2020 due to the pandemic. Also, there is another interesting fact that we should highlight, the first two periods of high immigration are the post-crisis years of the global financial crisis and the one related to the decrease in oil prices. Over the last 12 years, more than 625 thousand people migrated to Czechia, accounting for 6% of the population.

On the other hand, the immigration flows to Hungary can be described with steady growth rates reaching 0.9% in 2019 against 0.25% in 2010. The decrease in 2020 is again related to strict travel restrictions. Over the last 12 years, more than 635 thousand people migrated to Hungary, accounting for 6.3% of the population.

In the case of Poland, the immigration rates were steady over the last eight years, varying around 0.6%. Poland hosted the highest absolute number of migrants among all four countries – more than 2.45 million during the previous 11 years (6.4% of the population).

Slovakia has the lowest immigration rates among V4 countries. The immigration flows have been steady in the last decade, varying around 0.1%. A total of 75 thousand people have migrated to the Slovak Republic during the previous 12 years accounting for 0.14% of the population. The reason for such low rates can be the absence of a clear integration policy of immigrants for a long period, which created a significant barrier for immigration. On the other hand, another barrier can be the hostility against immigrants that is seen in the political discussions.

Therefore, the V4 countries have not been traditional immigration destinations and were primarily described by emigration flows in the past. However, the EU accession and accession to the Schengen area drastically changed the situation in these countries, including the Slovak Republic.

Currently, all four countries have positive net migration. The emigration rates have been the highest in Poland from 2011 to 2017. Poland is the only country with a negative net migration until 2015. The Slovak Republic is described by the lowest emigration numbers, varying around 0.07%. The emigration numbers in Hungary are steadily increasing but with a lower rate compared to immigration. Czechia is characterised by high volatility of emigration flows. The relatively high emigration rate in Czechia from 2009 to 2012 is the result of the economic crisis in 2009 and the followed economic stagnation, that were accompanied with an increase in unemployment.

Considering the significant inflow of migrants to the V4 countries, the foreign-born population's share has steadily increased during the last decade (Figure 3). Hungary and Czech Republic have the highest foreign-born population percentage with the highest growth rate in the previous 11 years. As of 2021, the share of the foreign-born population in Hungary accounts for 6.14%, Czechia – 5.33%, Slovakia – 3.7%, and Poland – 2.38%.

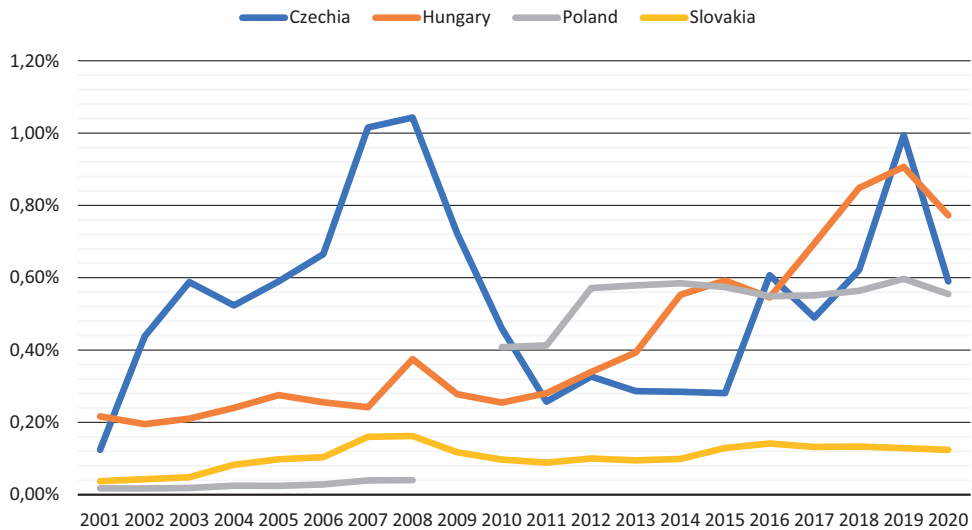


Figure 1. Immigrants to population ratio in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic in 2009–2020

Source: Eurostat

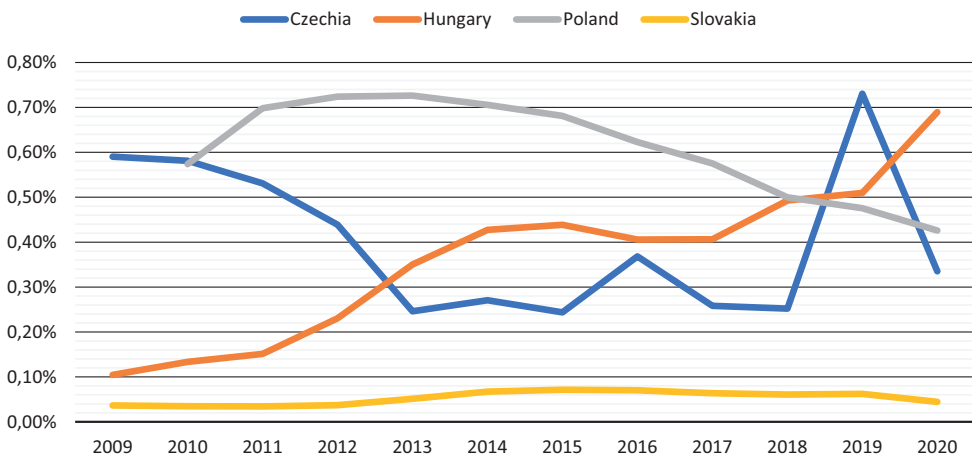


Figure 2. Emigrants to population ratio in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic in 2009–2020

Source: Eurostat

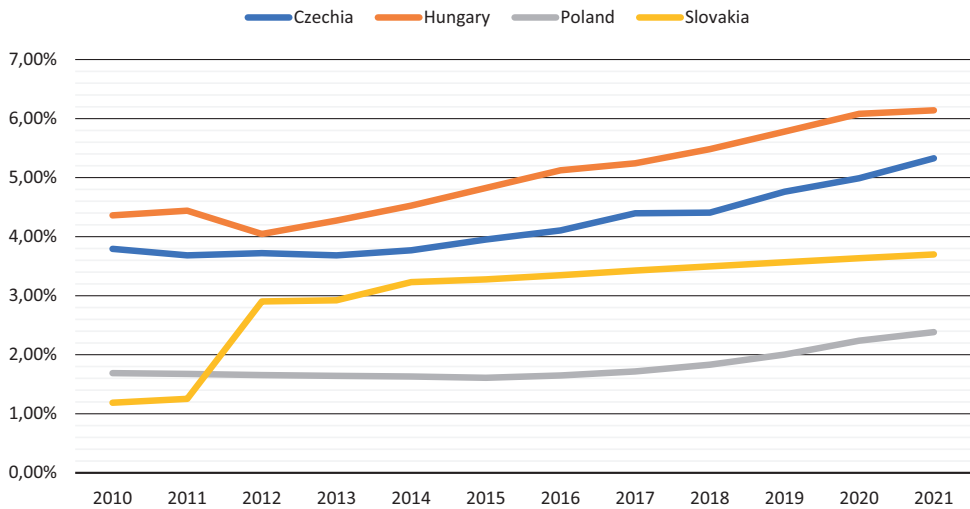


Figure 3. Foreign-born population share in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic in 2010–2021

Source: Eurostat

The structure of the immigration to the Slovak Republic by country of previous residence (Figure 4) shows that the top donor countries are Czechia (average of 35%), United Kingdom (average of 20%), Austria (average of 12%), Hungary (average of 10%), Germany (average of 9%), Romania (average of 7%) and Ukraine (average of 7%). The geographical structure of the immigration lets us make assumptions on the determinants of choosing the Slovak Republic as their next place of residence. The first determinant is the lower living conditions in the countries of previous residence (Romania, Ukraine, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, etc.). For example, the GDP per capita by PPP (purchasing power parity) has been lower in Hungary and Poland than in Slovakia from 2005 to 2016. We should notice that the immigration flows from these countries to the Slovak Republic were higher during this period. Another determinant is the reallocation of the labour force to a less competitive labour environment due to the labour shortage in Slovakia.

On the other hand, on average, 33–35% of immigrants are from non-EU countries. In this case, given the geographical structure of donor countries, we can state that the main determinants are lower standard of living, unstable political and military situation and the perspective to get residence in an EU Member State. The final factor is the geographical (Ukraine, Austria) and cultural (Czechia) proximity of the country.

Considering the already considerable immigration flows to V4 countries, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has not been significant in the region. On the other hand, recent reports show that the new migration wave due to the military conflict in Ukraine causes high immigration rates to the Slovak Republic. Considering that effective migration management can positively impact the economy of the country, Slovak Republic needs to reconsider its migration and integration policies to address the recent migration

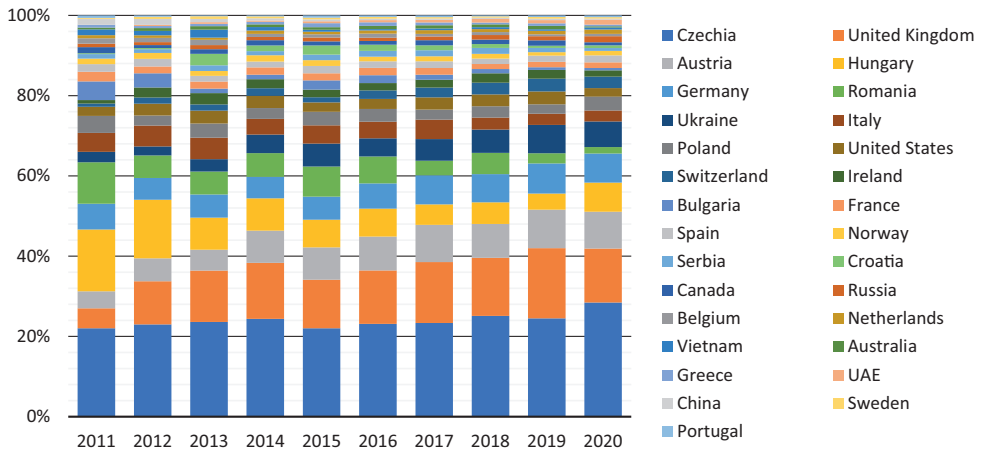


Figure 4. The immigration to the Slovak Republic by country of previous residence, 2011–2020

Source: Eurostat

wave of Ukrainians. In the case of efficient migration governance during the migrant crisis, the Slovakian economy can receive high benefits. The latter calls for a modernisation of immigration and integration policies that will lead to a more efficient labour market and sustainable economic growth in the Slovak Republic. Creating an Immigration and Naturalisation Office aiming to bring together all migration processing and provision of related services is a necessary step forward in migration policy management.

Conclusions

The current study aimed to analyse the migration processes in the Slovak Republic and identify the determinants for immigration. The migration policy in the Slovak Republic was initially developed following the international treaties of the United Nations, European Council and International Labour Organisation. The policy has been changed repeatedly during the last three decades. The first fundamental changes were related to the EU accession and entering the Schengen area. The next wave of crucial changes was related to the migration crisis in Europe.

We can state that while the Slovak Republic is not one of the traditional immigration destinations, over the recent years, the situation has changed. The results show that during the last three decades, the accession to the EU and Schengen area affected the migration patterns in Slovakia the most. One of the crucial determinants causing labour migration to the country is the domestic labour demand and labour shortage due to emigration flows. Among other determinants we can highlight the geographical and cultural proximity, lower standard of living, political and military instability in the donor countries.

While the COVID-19 pandemic did not significantly influence the migration processes in the country, the restrictive measures are affecting the employment of foreigners. On the other hand, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has caused unprecedented immigration flows to the country. The latter calls for a modernisation of immigration and integration policies that will lead to a more efficient labour market and sustainable economic growth in the Slovak Republic. Creating an Immigration and Naturalisation Office aiming to bring together all migration processing and provision of related services is a necessary step forward in migration policy management.

Acknowledgment

This research was funded by VEGA research project no. 1/0037/20 “New challenges and solutions for employment growth in changing socio-economic conditions”.

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