

The Impact of Immigration in the Intermarium Region

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Abstract

Because of its declining population, Europe is facing a multitude of social and economic changes. Decreasing birth rates and increasing life expectancy lead to an uncertain future in many member states of the European Union. The Intermarium region, on the other hand, is an extremely important area in discussions about demographic changes and their effects. Intermarium is an area of predominantly ex-communist countries that, in addition to declining birth rates and increasing life expectancy, have also faced mass emigration since joining the EU. We analysed specialised literature and national and international databases to provide a diversified perspective for this article. Findings show that there is no great impact on the labour market during periods of high immigration in this area of the world. This article's novelty lies in its analysis of the labor market's resilience to immigration in a post-communist region that has historically experienced mass emigration. This paper aims to demonstrate that mass immigration does not have a major impact on the developing economy of a post-communist region. The practical implications laid out in this article have inherent value for future research on immigration in post-communist countries and future policy on this subject.

Keywords

Migration, demographic trends, wage, migration policy, labour market.

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Introduction

The demographics of a population and migration movements are interconnected elements that exert a significant influence on socio-economic changes in a region. Demographics, through its age structure, geographic distribution, and fertility trends, provide an essential framework for understanding social and economic dynamics. In parallel, migration adds a complex dimension, shaping demographic composition and bringing along diverse human and cultural resources. The link between demography and the number of migrants becomes evident in the context of social changes because migrant workers substitute low-skilled workers and complement high-skilled ones, fueling reluctance towards both policymakers and business elites (Simionescu et al, 2019 cited in Bite, Konczos Szombathelyi and Vasa, 2020). A growing population may imply an abundant workforce, stimulating economic potential but also generating challenges related to ensuring social services and preventing overcrowding. On the other hand, declining or ageing demographics can lead to labour shortages and pressures on the pension and healthcare systems. This article aims to analyse statistical data from the European Union member states of this region in order to determine the potential impact of migration on national labour markets. This migration will include both that caused by the war in Ukraine and that caused by the economic degradation of certain countries. Another main goal of this article is to justify careful monitoring of the labour market to avoid potential declines in the standard of living. Monitoring facilitates the emergence of proactive demographic policies to remedy the generational economic imbalance (Toplicianu and Tanase, 2019) caused by natural population decline as well as the decline in living standards due to the influence of immigration and emigration on unemployment and annual wages (Prívarová, Masárová, and Tupá, 2023).

1. Review of the scientific literature

Many of the studies published in recent years aimed to understand the socio-economic factors that emerged with the mass migration of the Ukrainian population at the onset of the war. These have changed the way the European Union views a population that migrates en masse. This is a positive development for the entire Union. In his work "Anti-immigrant backlash: the Democratic Dilemma for immigration policy," Kapelner (2024) discusses the danger a democracy faces when it does not try to change its anti-immigration sentiments, as this democracy is deprived of both the economic benefits of immigration and the morality that warrants its existence. Studies (Stoetzer, Kroh & Dasey, 2024) show that this rhetoric regarding the negative effects of immigration is primarily brought up by people with materialist-survival values, arguing that immigration poses both cultural and economic dangers through changes in the labour market. Thus, the changing rhetoric about immigrants is an important milestone in European history because conflict over immigration is widely considered to contribute to the erosion of public political trust (Geese, 2024). The loss of public political trust is even more dangerous in the context of the Intermarium countries, as they have the lowest trust in the European Union and the most scepticism regarding European democracy (Lenik, 2024). According to researchers from the University of Warsaw and the Polish Economic Institute, never in the history of the EU has there been such a large amount of aid offered to war refugees (Duszczek et al., 2023). In addition to the socio-economic implications of the enormous aid provided to immigrants, studies also emphasise the preparation of immigrants from these countries. Many employers, especially those in small businesses, prefer to seek an immigrant who already has the necessary qualifications to fill a position rather than fund young apprentices (Simionescu et al., 2016). This offers a double advantage to immigrants. In general, literature that focuses on the research subject of immigration's impact on the labour market often reaches mixed results that tend to lean towards the fact that immigration does not have a negative impact. However, these studies are often conducted in economically well-developed countries such as the USA or Western Europe, and for this reason, their results cannot be directly translated to the Eastern European context..

2. Research methodology

To demonstrate the effects of immigration on the economy and the labour market, both a long-term and short-term approach are necessary. In the long term, analysing population projections alongside immigration data will provide an idea of the economy's health, given its close relationship with population size. If the data show that immigration cannot halt population decline, forecasts related to declining economic capacities (Bussolo, Koettl, and Sinnott, 2017) remain valid. If immigration can halt population decline, its long-term effects can be analyzed. Regarding the short-term economic effects of immigration, the main anti-immigration arguments revolve around wage decreases, reduced living standards, and increased unemployment rates for the native population. To determine if these fears are grounded in reality, a quantitative analysis method is used, focusing on minimum wage data, unemployment rates, and purchasing power during periods of migration waves. If wages and purchasing power have increased while the unemployment rate has decreased or remained stable, the economic arguments against immigration are not built on a solid foundation. The Intermarium is a region that encompasses countries from Central, Northern, and Eastern Europe; for this reason, the countries chosen for this study must reflect this reality. Thus, Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Romania have been selected as the best examples of the region. The study was conducted based on data analysis, literature review, and case studies from countries such as Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Romania. Data collection was carried out using both international databases like Eurostat and national ones such as the National Institute of Statistics (Institutul Național de Statistică), Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny), Czech Statistical Office (Český statistický úřad), and Statistics Estonia (Statistikaamet). The literature review mainly included reports and research on the European Union.

3. Results and discussion

To understand the results brought by migration in local markets, we first need to understand what causes a population to migrate. The best explanation can be found in the book "The Laws of Migration," in which Ravenstein (1889; pp.286) explains the general conclusion he reached regarding the reasons why people decide to migrate: "Bad or oppressive laws, heavy taxation, an unattractive climate, uncongenial social surroundings, and even compulsion, all have produced and are still producing currents of migration, but none of these currents can compare in volume with that which arises from the desire inherent in most men to better themselves in material respects." Thus, starting from the premise that migration primarily aims to improve the material well-being of migrants, this phenomenon becomes closely linked to the economy.

Studies based on the relationship between immigrants and socio-economic changes in recent years have led to mixed results, both related to how the labour market is impacted and the cause of the impact. In some cases, immigration has led to a decrease in wages in places with high immigrant density relative to the density of the native population (Dustmann, Frattini and Preston, 2023). However, in his research, Anthony Edo (2015) concludes that only short-term workers' wages decrease due to immigrants, but the average wage remains the same. On the other hand, Godøy (2017) argues that the impact on wages is positive or negative depending on the local labour market. Therefore, the absorption of a new number of migrants into a market with a large number of employed migrants leads to an average salary increase of 22%, but in a labour market with a small number of immigrant employees, it leads to an 18% decrease in wages. Borjas (1994, pp 1667-1717) in "The Economics of Immigration" concludes that there is very little evidence of the negative impact of immigrants on the employment opportunities of the native population, and the contribution of immigrants to the economy is optimistic. Therefore, the first set of data that needs to be analysed is the number of immigrants in the region..

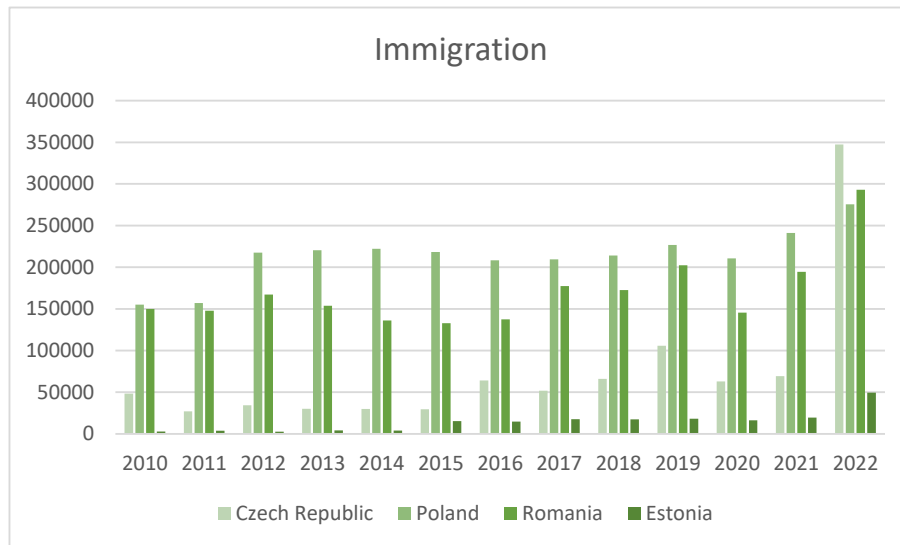


Figure no. 1. Immigration
Source: Eurostat, 2024

According to Eurostat data (Figure no.1), overall immigration has been increasing since 2010, with the exception of some "shocks" in socio-economic terms such as the Migrant Crisis from 2014-2017, caused by numerous conflicts at that time in Syria, Libya, and Iraq, leading to a much stronger anti-immigration policy. Another important moment was the Covid-19 pandemic, with numerous restrictions due to quarantine measures slowing down the number of immigrants. However, the most significant shock occurred in 2022, when a wave of Ukrainian immigrants hit this region due to the resurgence of the Ukrainian conflict. The result of this conflict is visible in the number of asylum applicants (Figure no.2).

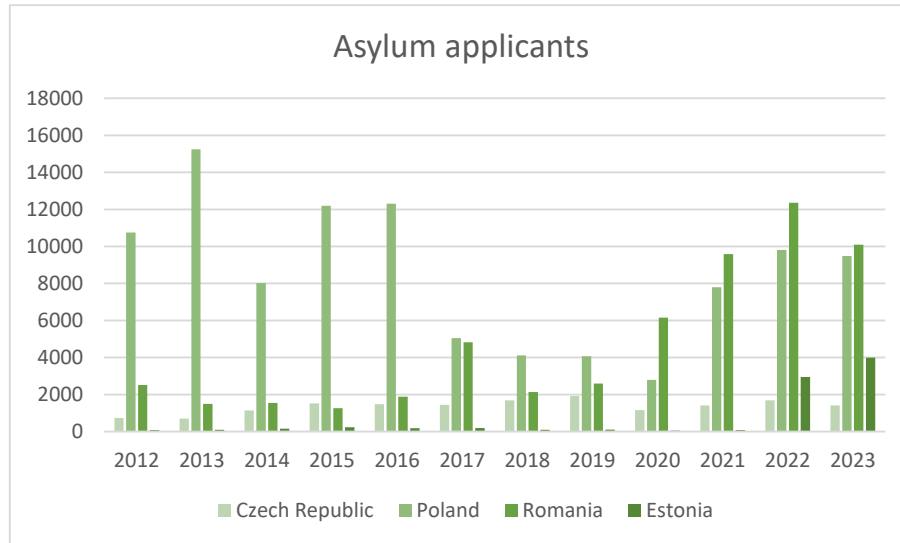


Figure no. 2. Asylum applicants

Source: Eurostat, 2024

The asylum demand has been increasing since 2019 but experienced a substantial rise following the invasion of Ukraine. According to data provided by the Council of Europe (2023), approximately 4.2 million Ukrainians benefit from the European refugee protection mechanism, with Romania hosting 140,585 individuals, Estonia 35,820, the Czech Republic 357,960, and Poland 958,655. The number of "conventional" immigrants, along with those seeking political asylum and Ukrainian refugees, has led to a massive influx of the population into a region that is not yet at the socio-economic development level of Western European countries. Thus, the question arises, "Are the economies in the Intermarium region strong enough to assimilate the large number of immigrants without jeopardizing the quality of life of the native population?"

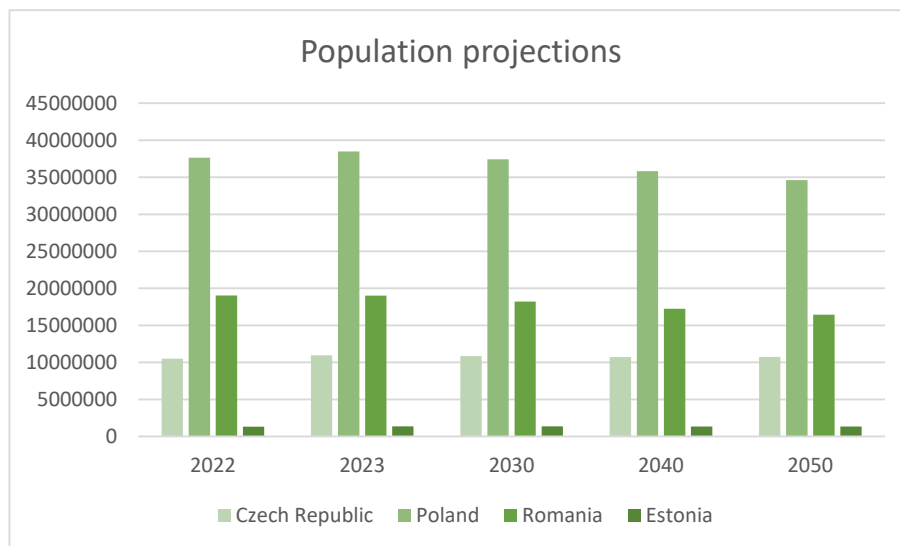


Figure no. 3. Population projections

Source: Eurostat, 2024

We can start by analysing population projections (Figure no.3). The data indicates that the influx from the Ukraine crisis will not significantly alter the typical European demographic trends in the long run. Therefore, in the long term, these states will continue to experience a decrease in the workforce, accompanied by numerous economic problems such as pressure on the pension system, increased dependency ratios, higher healthcare costs, reduced consumer spending, and many others. The economic discrepancy between skilled and unskilled workers also increases as the population ages. According to the

analysis conducted by Bussolo, Koettl and Sinnott (2017), older workers, becoming more and more numerous in an ageing society, could be polarised into two groups: one with high skills and higher incomes and one with low skills and modest incomes. This trend could affect pension benefits, as these become more closely linked to contributions and earlier wages or to private saving schemes. Moreover, the analysis also predicts that households with highly educated earners experiencing substantial wage growth over time can amass significant wealth and pass it down through inheritance, thus perpetuating inequality. Therefore, if the demographic trend is not changed by the influx of immigrants, the predictions of the World Bank (Bussolo, Koettl and Sinnott, 2017) regarding the increase in poverty and inequality as the population ages will remain valid. From this perspective, we should consider the short and medium-term impacts of migration on the quality of life in this region, given their limited ability to bring about significant long-term changes. Therefore, to understand the short and medium-term socio-economic changes caused by immigrants, datasets aimed at analysing the economic well-being of citizens need to be verified. First and foremost, we need to understand the annual purchasing power of a full-time employee without children earning a median wage, and determine if this purchasing power has decreased with the increase of foreign workers in the local labour market. Purchasing power is important because it directly influences an individual's or a population's ability to buy goods and services. It is a key indicator of economic well-being and standard of living. Higher purchasing power allows people to afford a wider range of products and services, access better quality goods, and enjoy a higher standard of living. It also contributes to economic growth as increased consumer spending stimulates demand, encourages investment, and supports businesses.

Table no. 1. Annual net earnings of a full-time single worker without children earning an average wage

<i>Country</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>
<i>Czech Republic</i>	13522.92	13969.92	14547.24	15257.74	15624.34	16385.34	17319.42
<i>Poland</i>	14257.98	14762.91	15326.51	16131.30	16974.87	17536.36	18700.53
<i>Romania</i>	9307.83	10196.15	11090.88	12013.20	12920.53	13828.56	14924.84
<i>Estonia</i>	13684.72	14461.07	15283.12	15999.86	16653.96	17127.46	17825.79

Source: Eurostat, 2024

According to data collected by Eurostat (Table no.1), purchasing power is continuously increasing. Given that purchasing power is on the rise, the population of these countries can provide better access to quality housing, nutritious food, healthcare services, and reliable transportation options through higher earnings. Moreover, increased earnings enable a better standard of living, granting access to amenities, recreational pursuits, and cultural engagements that enhance overall well-being and life satisfaction. Additionally, the unemployment rate has significantly declined from 2012 to the current period. The two events that marked a slight increase in the unemployment rate were the COVID-19 pandemic, a natural occurrence given its effects on the global economy (Table no.2)

Table no. 2. Total unemployment rate

<i>Country</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>
<i>Czech Republic</i>	7,0	7,0	6,1	5,1	4,0	2,9	2,2	2,0	2,6	2,8	2,2	2,6
<i>Poland</i>	10,4	10,6	9,2	7,7	6,3	5,0	3,9	3,3	3,2	3,4	2,9	2,8
<i>Romania</i>	8,7	9,0	8,6	8,4	7,2	6,1	5,3	4,9	6,1	5,6	5,6	5,6
<i>Estonia</i>	9,9	8,6	7,3	6,4	6,8	5,8	5,4	4,5	6,9	6,2	5,6	6,4

Source: Eurostat, 2024; World Bank, 2024.

Increases in the unemployment rate were also recorded in 2022–2023. Therefore, the high number of migrants did not excessively contribute to unemployment among the native populations of this region. Additionally, the data shows that the minimum wage is increasing in each of the four countries (Table no.3). This is consistent with the research of Andersson, Eriksson and Scocco (2019), where they demonstrated that there is no direct correlation between the number of refugees and unemployment.

Table no. 3. Minimum wages (Euro)

<i>Country</i>	<i>2019-S1</i>	<i>2020-S1</i>	<i>2021-S1</i>	<i>2022-S1</i>	<i>2023-S1</i>	<i>2024-S1</i>
<i>Czech Republic</i>	518,97	574,62	579,22	651,70	717,37	764,44
<i>Estonia</i>	540,00	584,00	584,00	654,00	725,00	820,00
<i>Poland</i>	523,09	610,79	614,08	654,79	745,60	977,53
<i>Romania</i>	446,02	466,23	458,07	515,26	606,12	663,24

Source: Eurostat, 2024; ILOSTAT, 2023

Wage decreases in low-wage sectors have been observed, but experts argue that there is still an effect caused by refugees on the increase in low-wage jobs, primarily due to the reduced necessity for local language proficiency. Another factor influencing low-level wages in this migration wave is presented in the paper "Comparing pre-war and forced Ukrainian migrants in Poland: Challenges for the labour market and prospects for integration" (Kubiciel–Lodzińska et al., 2024), where researchers conclude that this migration wave mainly consists of highly educated women with children. Therefore, a high number of highly educated and skilled individuals is unlikely to influence low-wage sectors. The same is supported by But, Pulina and Joukl (2023) in their research "The Influence of the labor potential of Ukrainian population's migration to the EU countries during the war." They contend that women with education and children make up a significant portion of the migration to the EU resulting from the war in Ukraine. They continue to present the migration wave as a unique opportunity for the European Union, given the intellectual competence that could accelerate the EU's transition to a green and digital economy. Consequently, there would be a significant boost in sectors leading to a climate-neutral economy, such as construction, energy, manufacturing, and transport (But, Pulina and Joukl, 2023). However, Bannikova (2022) argues that the qualification structure of migrants determines their employability. Therefore, professional retraining is necessary to help migrants integrate into the labour market. This would also prevent any form of exploitation that vulnerable social categories of migrants might face..

Conclusions

This paper provides a socio-economic overview of the visible effects of immigrants on the labor market. Even though some policymakers consider these increases in the number of voluntarily or forcibly immigrated individuals in the Intermarium region to be negative and jeopardizing the native population's quality of life, data provided by Eurostat and national statistical institutions indicate otherwise. The countries in the Intermarium region are economically strong enough to withstand the migration wave, and this offers them a real opportunity for development. These countries still focus their migration policy on migrants seeking asylum or refuge. In these countries, politicians should also consider better oversight of employer-driven searches for migrants via private recruitment agencies. Private recruitment agencies often act as intermediaries between migrants and employers (Biffi, 2014), thus becoming an important factor to take into account in deciding future migration policies in the area. Without a significant shift in the political landscape and the public's perception of migration, achieving substantial progress remains uncertain. In places like the Czech Republic, there has been a growing tendency towards selectiveness in migration policy (Stojanov et al., 2022). This kind of policymaking might start to take root in other countries like Poland and Romania, which generally have a liberal approach to migration. Ultimately, these countries need to think carefully about the way forward in tackling migration. The most important thing is for every government to understand that the people who cross the border to work are first and foremost people, not as cheap labour and not as strains on the welfare system in the case of migrants who are not compatible with the local labour market. First of all, policymakers need to prioritise the professional training of migrants to better integrate them into their respective economies. A good way to do that is to specialise

migrants in jobs that have an ageing workforce. The second thing they must do is facilitate language courses for every migrant; faster language learning means faster hiring, which leads to faster participation in native society. The third way to ease the process of integrating migrants into the workforce and society is through better regulation of private recruitment agencies. This measure aims to recruit only skilled migrants through agencies, allowing low-skilled migrants who are already present to negotiate with employers without fear of bringing strikebreakers into the country or having their visas revoked. Fourth, individual states need to help migrants choose labour markets with high migrant absorption. This way, migrants will actually boost the quality of life in those areas instead of dragging them down, as explained by Anna Godøy (2017). Fifth, the state needs to limit short-term contracts employers offer to migrant workforces. This measure aims to safeguard native workers, who suffer a significant decline in revenue due to the availability of cheap labour, while also encouraging migrants to prioritize long-term employment. Long-term employment will enhance migrants' participation in the state's socio-economic life and provide them with the stability required for faster naturalization. Sixth, the state needs to offer a streamlined and efficient application process for naturalization. This reduces the administrative burdens for immigrants. This can include simplifying paperwork, providing online application options, and ensuring clear guidelines for eligibility criteria. In conclusion, it's imperative to recognise that the absorption of migrants into the local labour market is not only vital for economic prosperity and social harmony but also does not impede wage growth. Migrants contribute to the labor force by filling gaps in industries with shortages, bringing diverse skills and perspectives, and often complementing rather than competing with native workers. With inclusive policies and support mechanisms, migrants can be valuable contributors to the economy, driving innovation, productivity, and growth while fostering a more dynamic and inclusive labour market for all, thus ameliorating the effects of natural population decline and an ageing workforce.

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