

Immigration and Shortage of Labour Force Challenges and Opportunities in the Slovak Labour Market¹

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Abstract

The Slovak Republic has long struggled with high unemployment. For twenty-five years, the unemployment rate was the highest in the region and this situation persisted even when economic growth was very high. Since the first decade of the third millennium, the situation has started to change and the number of foreign workforce has increased rapidly. As in neighbouring states, labour shortages have emerged in Slovakia too. Primarily these are people from neighbouring countries and are mainly employed in the manufacture of machinery and transport equipment. The aim of this study is to analyse the origin of foreign labours and their area of application.

Key words

Slovakia, Unemployment, Labour Shortage, Foreign Workforce.

JEL Classification: J21

Introduction

Free movement of persons is one among the four fundamental achievements of the European Union. It was established by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. There are currently 26 full Schengen members: 22 EU Member States plus Norway, Iceland, Switzerland and Liechtenstein (which have associate status). The law is based on the Schengen agreements which was signed on 19 June 1990 and entered into force on 26 March 1995. The free movement of citizens of European Union's member state is not only a fundamental human right, but also significant contribution to economic growth, equalization and reduction of regional differences and to social development (www.europarl.europa.eu)

The reasons for migration in Western Europe until the 1950s were primarily political. The founding members wanted to rebuild the European economy after the Second World War and also to reduce mutual mistrust between the former belligerent nations. The rebuilding process required more workforces over time. From the mid 1950's until 1973 the northern industrialized countries hired labour force from southern Europe. Later European countries were ready to accept foreign workforce out from the EEC, northern Africa, Turkey and Yugoslavia (Stalker, 1994), citizens from former colonies and other non communist European states. From the late 1980 the background

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of the immigrants began to change. More and more immigrants have arrived who have left their home countries because of their circumstances, they wanted a better standard of living or they were subject of political and religious persecution. The next wave of immigrations was related to fall of iron curtain. Great number of citizens from the former communist states migrated to newly united European Union (Stalker, 2002). Finally lot of labour force appeared in western European countries after the accession of the central European countries to European Union. These people were also citizens of former communist state, but their social status was different: they were mainly young people with skills who primarily looked for challenge.

1 Theoretical background

The European Union is a community of states, peoples and cultures, created to bring European countries closer together. In the EU any citizen of a member state can live and work in any other member state without any restrictions. The European Union also welcomes people from third countries, who can enter the EU with certain restrictions. The most common reason for people coming from outside the Union is to work.

The collapse of socialism brought another wave of immigration to the European Union. „Central and Eastern European countries emerged as important new source regions of migrants for Western and Southern Europe and some became transit and immigration countries in their own right. Europe's southern and western peripheries firmly established themselves as destination countries.“ (de Haas, 2018, 9). This process was not continuous. In 2004 ten, in 2007 another two Eastern European countries became members of the European Union. However, workers from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia received full labour rights in Luxembourg and the Netherlands in 2007, in France in 2008, in Denmark in 2009 and in Austria and Germany in 2011 (de Haas et al., 2018).

Today, immigration to the European Union is growing in importance. For many countries, immigrants are not just a source of one factor of production, but much more. It remains the case that developed Western European countries need cheap labour. They continue to be happy to employ foreign labour in sectors where general knowledge is not required, often no knowledge of the local language is necessary and the wage level is low. Seasonal and agricultural jobs, for example, are similar (Siudek and Zawojcka, 2016). Furthermore, migrants are welcome in social services. In these sectors, knowledge of the home language is already necessary. While the previous positions are usually filled by candidates whose main objective in coming to a foreign country is to earn a higher income than in their home country, in this case it is also a question of acquiring knowledge (Ferrera 2016). Another reason for the arrival of immigrants is their special knowledge respectively when is the lack of employees with such knowledge. In this case the immigrants are highly skilled people. Their wage levels, working conditions, etc. are no different from those received by native workers (Mahroum, 2001): Young people should also be mentioned. They can belong to all the groups listed above. Apart from the factors mentioned, their aim is to have fun or get to know the world. As a rule, such employees come to a predetermined area (Tassinopoulos et al., 1998).

Another positive impact of immigration is for demographic reasons. Population ageing is a social problem that characterises almost every Western European society. In this case, the benefit to the country is not only the new workforce, but helping to sustain the pension system. Immigrants are generally of working age and are therefore net contributors to social funds. Given their age, their presence in the country also has a positive impact on natality (Olejárová and Čajka, 2016).

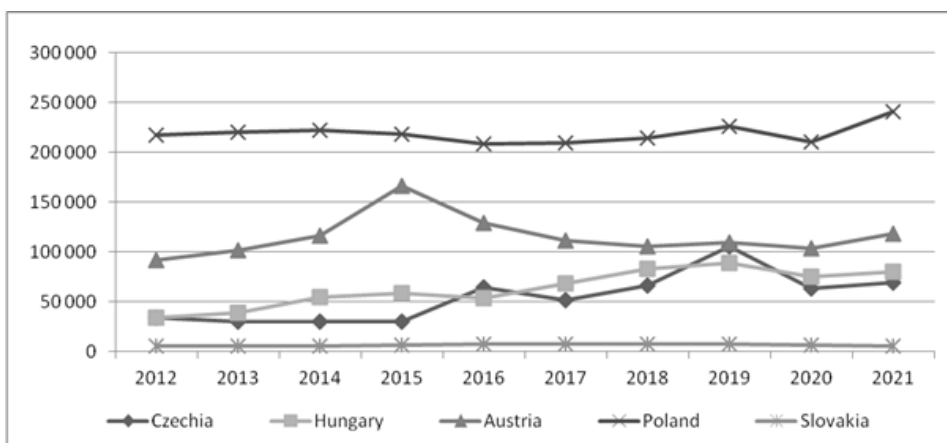
Finally, it should be mentioned that nowadays advanced societies are changing. Multiculturalism also enriches not only the corporate culture and not only increases the efficiency of business operations, but also the whole society.

Below, we show the proportion of foreigners in the Visegrad group of countries, and add the highest and lowest proportions of foreigners in each EU Member State. It can be seen that in 2021, the largest number of persons of foreign origin lived in Luxembourg. Looking at the V4 countries, the number of foreigners living there is already higher than the EU average in three countries and the country with the lowest rate is Slovakia. Migrants per 1000 inhabitants in 2021 (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>):

- European Union – 5
- Luxemburg – 39,6 – maximum
- Hungary – 8,3
- Czechia – 6,6
- Poland – 6,4
- Slovakia – 1,1 – minimum

The following Graph 1 shows how the proportion of foreigners living in the Visegrad countries and Austria has changed in absolute terms over the past decade.

Graph 1 Immigration by age, sex and group of citizenship



Source: by the author according to data by Eurostat (2023)

It is visible that most of immigrants live in Poland. It is the largest country in the region, with as many inhabitants as the other four countries together. In second place is Austria, the far richest state in the region, which has received the most immigrants in terms of population. The figures for Hungary and the Czech Republic are similar, with both countries showing a rising trend. Slovakia has the lowest number of people of foreign origin. As one of the most developed countries in the EU, Austria obviously needs a lot of labour force. It is also one of the most open countries in the EU with a liberal migrant policy.

2 Results and discussion

Contours of the Slovak economy

In Slovakia the development of the market economy started later than in other countries in the region. There were several reasons for this. During the 1990s' the internal policy of the country was full of problems and scandals, the process of integration into European Union got stuck too. The period of political and economic transformation began from 1998. In the early 2000s Slovakia's economy had the worst macroeconomic indicators among the V4 countries. Real convergence has stalled (Marcinčin, 2002). Slovakia's economic situation began to change from the late 2000's. The new government realized several structural reforms. The liberal coalition stabilized the public finances, implemented tax reform, labour market reform, pension reform, public finance management reform and also made significant reforms in the field of health, justice and education (Zachar, 2005, 18). The coalition consisted of liberal and right wing parties had a friendly attitude towards foreign investors and successfully joined with the European Union and NATO. Thanks to these reforms, Slovakia's economy started to grow rapidly, at around 10 % between 2000 and 2008 (www.statistics.sk). The close up to the group of other Central European countries as well as affiliation to the European Union has been a fundamental success.

Despite of these reforms, the unemployment remained high, some years exceeded twice the unemployment rate of neighbouring states. The economic successes became visible after two decades from 1990. The improving situation was stopped by the global financial crisis in 2008. The collapse of the subprime bond market hit the whole western world and semiperipheral countries too. The level of unemployment rose again, however its rate was significantly lower. The situations started to improve after five years.

After ten years of the accession the economic results became visible, the process of convergence to EU has deepened. This process of course is not continuous however its tempo slowed down in the second half of the 2010s (Habrman, 2018).

The employment, respectively the unemployment situation has begun to change from the late 2010'. During the 2010 the economic situation was improved in whole central European region. The economic output grew in every country, and the unemployment rate in Slovakia became lower than the EU. A new phenomenon appeared – the labour force shortage. What caused this fact?

The good performance of the Slovak economy can be traced back to several factors and the most notable of these is the production of passenger cars. By the early 2000s, car manufacturing had become the leading economic sector in Slovakia. It is the sector that laid the foundation for the country's rapid economic recovery from the 1990' and

helped to catch up with the other Visegrad countries. „The Slovak economic development is intertwined with the development of the automotive industry“ (PWC 2013). Four big international car manufacturers have production capacities in Slovakia. Three of them are also belong among the country's largest companies. In addition to employment, these companies are also the employees in the country. The growth of employment is also boosted by a wide network of car manufacture suppliers.

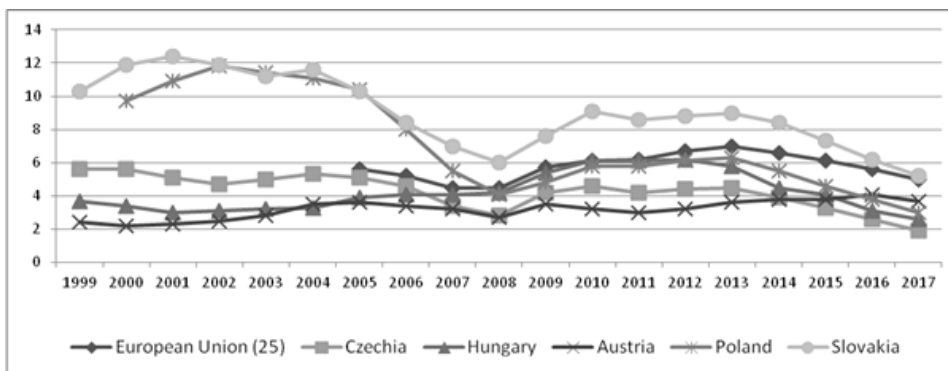
The automotive and engineering sector accounts for 12.48 % of total employment in Slovakia, making it one of the largest sectors. In national terms, the share of people in the total number of persons employed in the sector is approximately 71 %. Regionally, the sector has the highest share of total employment in the Trenčín Region, at 18.7 % of the total number of employees in this region. Despite the high absolute number of employees in the automotive and mechanical engineering sector in the Bratislava Region, the sector has the lowest relative share of regional employment in this region, at only 9 % (www.sustavapovolani.sk).

This one-sided economic structure has its downsides. Passenger car manufacturing is a cyclical sector and several Central European countries also have large production capacities. The negative effects can manifest themselves in case of a global crisis.

Labour market in Slovakia

Slovakia's labour market had been characterised by high unemployment rate for long. The unemployment rate was far above of the neighbouring states.

Graph 2 Long term unemployment rate in Visegrad countries, Austria and European Union [%]



Source: by the author according to data by Eurostat (2023)

An analysts (Nagy, 2016) explain the reasons of the persistently high unemployment rate in Slovakia by the negative structure of the industry – the high exposition of the weapon production which after the fall of the iron curtain collapsed; with the disintegration of Czechoslovakia; by the heritage of conflicting internal policy during 1990' and by the incompetence the create a competitive of o technical and administrative background. The other analyst (Pongrácz, 2018) behind the

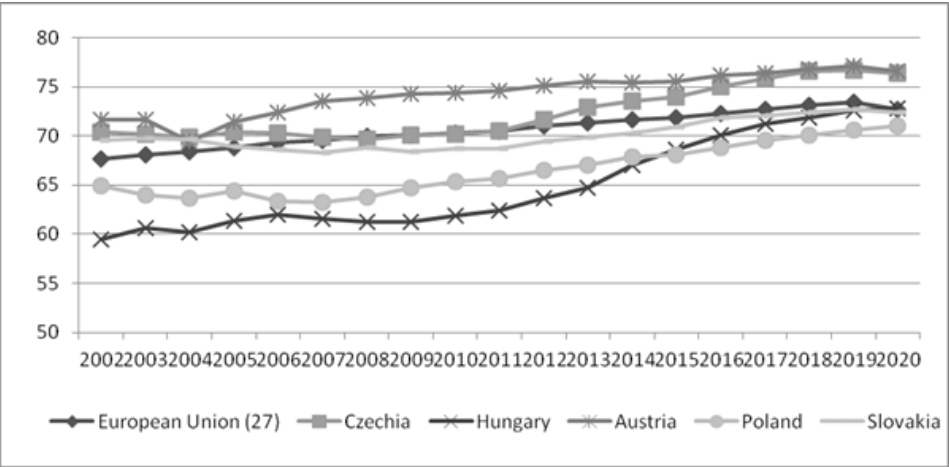
underdevelopment sees the following factors: large regional disparities in unemployment; high youth unemployment; high rates of long-term unemployment; the high number of low-skilled workers; lack of opportunities to employ skilled labour force; high unemployment among the Roma minority. The study of another analyst (Kureková, 2010) highlights that in Slovakia are significant regional disparities; high unemployment persisted during the times of economic expansion; joblessness affected mostly low-skilled and young people; the share of public employment rose significantly during crises; the share of other forms of employment was very low; there were lots of bureaucratic obstacles to hire new workers; the labour mobility was low; there were a lack of analyses how to make effective the process of job creation; and finally the labour system was unable to attract marginalised groups into the labour market.

Perhaps the biggest problems in the field of employment are the regional disparities. This problem belongs among the most visible for everyone and has significant impact on regional economies. The negative effect of the long-lasting unemployment on living standard, social life or mental health of the unemployed person is well-known. Regional disparities in Slovakia have been studied widely (Workie and Štefánik 2014; Michálek and Podolák 2014; Švecová and Rajčáková 2014).

After joining the EU, the Slovak labour market also changed, lots of Slovaks moved to European Union (Košta and Šujanová, 2002; Rievajová and Přívara, 2013). As the issue has many components, the number of people working abroad cannot be accurately determined. The statistics do not capture all forms of work abroad, which can be from one-day cross-border commuting to long-term stays abroad, when the citizen only leaves the citizenship of the home country. Based on long-term trends, Slovak citizens most prefer the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria. In 2001, approximately 80,000 Slovaks worked in these four countries and approximately 20,000 more in the others. The numbers grew gradually, reaching 150,000 in 2006, 200,000 the following year and the figure of 250,000 was surpassed in 2012 (Baláž and Karasová, 2016).

The situation on the Slovak labour market began to change rapidly during the 2010s. A new phenomenon emerged – labour shortage. This situation characterises not only Slovakia, but also other countries in the region (Poór et al., 2020). Thanks to these developments, all labour market indicators have started to improve. The activity rate in Slovakia has also reached the EU average and is ahead of two of its neighbours.

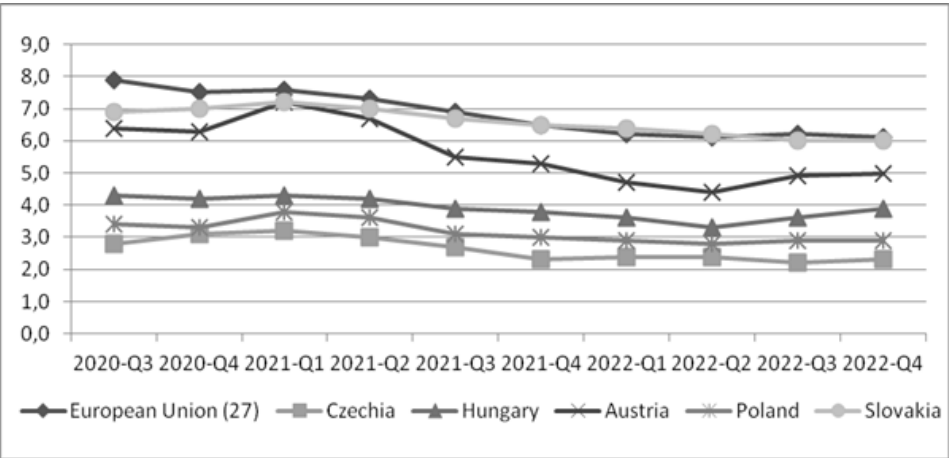
Graph 3 Activity rate in Visegrad countries, Austria and European Union [%]



Source: by the author according to data by Eurostat (2023)

Graph 3 shows that this indicator is steadily improving. This also means that Slovakia's labour market is becoming more efficient. By the end of the second decade of the third millennium, Slovakia's domestic labour resources had been exhausted.

Graph 4 Unemployment rate in Visegrad countries, Austria and European Union currently [%]



Source: by the author according to data by Eurostat (2023)

Currently, the level of unemployment in Slovakia is fundamentally different. As in other Visegrad 4 countries unemployment is negligible. The best situation is in Czechia, where this index is well below the EU level and even significantly better than in Austria. Hungary's labour market is in a similar condition. In Poland and Slovakia the situation is only slightly worse. In these countries unemployment is higher than in Austria, but still

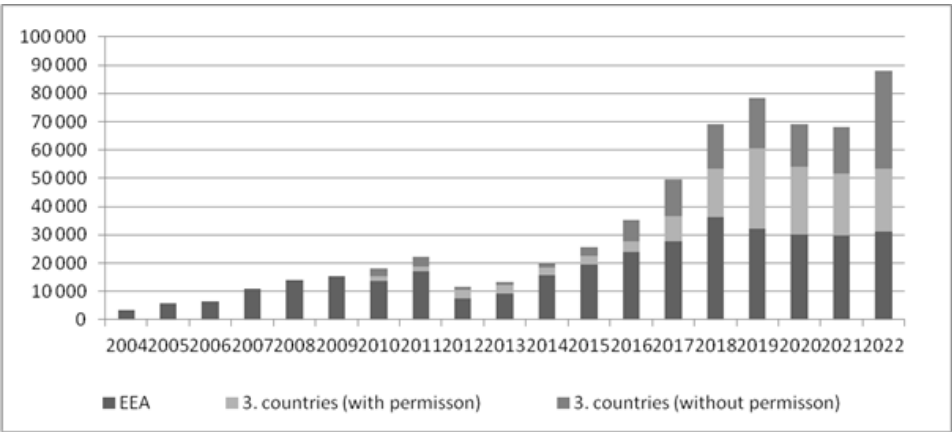
below the EU level. Interestingly, the labour market of the V4 countries has successfully weathered both the crisis triggered with the pandemic COVID-19 and the inflation shock. As Graph 4 shows unemployment not only did not increase but even has fell further.

Foreign labour force in Slovakia

Slovakia has always had a large source of skilled labour force. A capital-poor country that relies heavily on foreign investment could offer mainly workforce. The reality is slowly changing. In Slovakia the labour shortages started to emerge in late 2010´s. According to Jaroslava Rezlerová from recruitment company ManpowerGroup, the primary reasons for the labour shortage are demographic: fewer young people entering the labour market. Fewer employees increase bigger pressure on wages and also on training and employee development. New people need to be outsourced, recruitment needs to be done in abroad. Anna Ričányová (Grafton Slovakia) stated that the creation of 100,000 new jobs is possible if the government supports the recreation of defunct craft fields of study, secondary vocational schools and apprenticeships as well as dual education. According to Luboš Sirota, head of the McRoy Group, the most acute problem with labour shortages is in the automotive and engineering industries, as well as in IT and telecommunications (www.istp.sk, 2017).

As Table 4 shows, the foreign labour force in the Slovak labour market grew gradually. Based on the available data, until 2009, people came only from the countries of the European Economic Area, so often people who came as managers and specialists of foreign companies. The time came that the foreign company no longer had sufficient manpower. This was the case of Audi Győr Hungary, who sent their workers to Volkswagen in Bratislava during the years 2016 – 2018 (<https://index.sme.sk/>, 2016). The age of labour shortage in Slovakia has begun. The process started gradually and accelerated during 2016 – 2017. Its progress is shown in the Graph 5 below.

Graph 5 Foreign labour force in Slovakia [person]



Source: by the author according to data by Eurostat (2023)

It can be seen – Graph 5 – that the growth that started in 2016 – 2017 was largely due to an increase in the share of employees from third countries. They are mainly employed in industry.

The following tables show how the number of foreign workers has evolved over the last ten years by country. First, we will examine some countries from the European Union and other countries of the European Economic Area, respectively. The selection includes those countries whose citizens are in the Slovak labour market in the largest numbers. As Table 1 shows, the numbers are varying whether it is a particular country or a particular year. The other countries are not shown in the table because very few people have come to Slovakia.

The general trend is that the numbers are rising. Another interesting fact is that the order of countries does not change over time. The countries from which a relatively large number of people arrived in 2012 also had more people arriving in 2022 than from other countries. It can be seen that most foreigners have come from neighbouring states. There were also large numbers of guest workers from Romania and Bulgaria. Average wages in these two countries are significantly lower than in Slovakia, and Slovakia is several hundred kilometres closer to Romania and Bulgaria than the Western European countries. To these two countries later joined Croatia. It is interesting to note that the number of arrivals from Western European countries has been relatively stable. It is also interesting to note that Italy is the country with the highest number of foreign workers from developed countries.

Table 1 Employment of third-country nationals with a work permit in the Slovak Republic by nationality 2012 – 2022

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Bulgaria	352	466	638	837	1111	1527	2381	2300	2390	2498	2515
Czechia	1314	1354	2524	3195	4134	4635	6062	5979	5917	6006	6514
France	127	146	241	275	336	391	594	608	459	453	497
Greece	39	35	67	90	147	174	361	402	395	391	363
Croatia	0	188	377	593	962	1284	2053	1317	1255	1276	1293
Hungary	1022	1230	2070	2773	3696	4786	5933	4402	4878	5105	5574
Germany	184	202	477	474	624	688	829	601	617	634	746
Poland	982	1429	3023	3048	3204	2667	2539	2539	24442	5105	5574
Austria	99	118	225	241	295	326	453	384	431	427	454
Rumania	2533	3140	4729	6261	7394	8692	11072	8664	7392	7016	7025
United Kingdom*	134	132	243	278	311	381	599	678	633	0	0
Italy	194	270	450	519	753	943	1417	1264	1244	1271	1320

* the country was classified as a third country from 2021

Source: by the author according to data by upsvr.gov.sk (2023)

Nowadays, as many countries in the European Union, Slovakia is also struggling with labour shortages. It means that Slovakia has to look for foreign labour in third

countries, out from the EU – Table 2. Slovakia's first step was to address Slovaks living across the borders. Among the first to arrive in Slovakia, were workers from Serbia. Ukraine is currently in first place. The reason for this is geographical proximity and similarity of language.

Table 2 Employment of selected nationals of non European Economic Area countries with information on the territory of the Slovak Republic by nationality 2012 – 2022

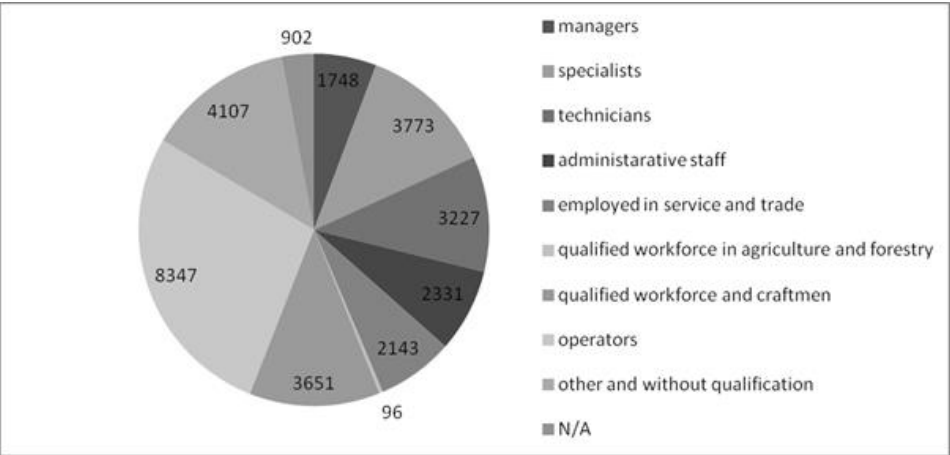
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
India	144	140	100	110	106	112	268	297	316	302	852
Korean Republic	586	567	401	436	394	380	136	346	288	263	276
Macedonia	97	110	86	85	102	179	369	537	397	341	555
Russia	165	197	166	181	167	163	348	207	250	221	262
Serbia	115	109	213	340	490	3267	4415	5837	4435	3749	3826
Thailand	155	164	125	160	197	230	268	304	298	284	341
Ukraine	615	661	634	921	1388	2879	8473	16998	14361	13556	11045
Vietnam	287	179	76	50	71	627	841	1128	940	533	460
Bosnia and Herzegovina	39	19	11	17	25	140	508	618	514	485	583
Georgia	15	7	6	8	8	9	268	622	497	507	1092
Kyrgyzstan	3	2	1	1	0	43	36	78	141	327	610
Other	1089	1005	729	724	737	908	728	1606	1732	1616	2206
Total	3310	3160	2548	3033	3685	8937	1706 4	28578	24169	22184	22108

Source: by the author according to data by upsvr.gov.sk (2023)

The next area of our analysis is examination on the jobs performed by employees coming from the European Economic Area.

Despite the fact that the group of countries in the European Economic Area includes developed countries, most people coming to Slovakia to do technically demanding, but still manual work – they perform the role of an operator and assembler of machinery and equipment. Only 7 % has found job in services and almost nobody – 0,32 – in agriculture. This fact is related to the fact that workers in Slovakia come primarily from neighbouring countries, i. e. Romania, Bulgaria or Croatia, from countries where the average wage is clearly lower than in the home country, but the cost of living in Slovakia is still lower than in Western European countries. It is interesting that Slovakia still needs unskilled labour and the source of such labour is abroad. Their share is 13.5 %. Other skilled workers coming from abroad make up 12 %. Another important group is made up of various specialists – their share is also above 12 %, and also technicians – 10 %. Less than 8 % percent of foreigners perform an administrative role. Finally, mention should be made of managerial staff. There are 1,748 of them in Slovakia, which is 7.5 % of the employed people coming from developed Western European countries.

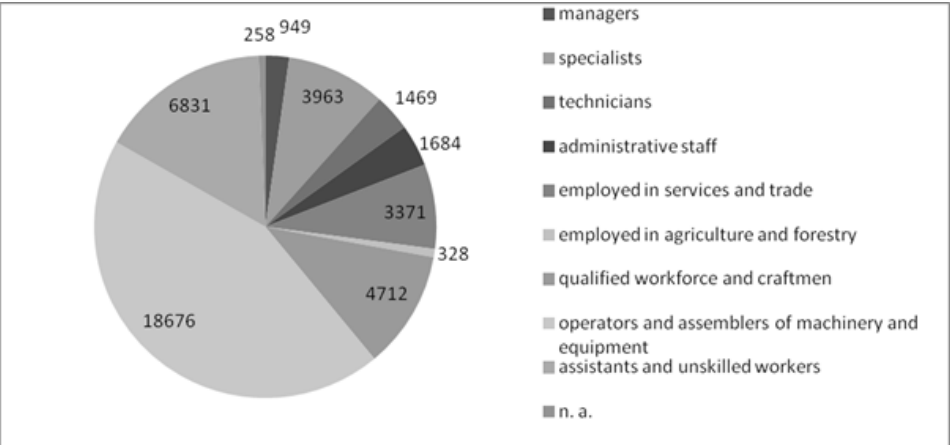
Graph 6 Activity of foreign workers coming from non EEA, 1Q 2023



Source: by the author according to data by upsvr.gov.sk (2023)

The next part of the study is devoted to the analysis of the activities of people coming to Slovakia from third countries. People from third countries mostly work as operators and assemblers of machinery and equipment. This occupation shows that these workers are primarily employed in the engineering industry. It is interesting to note that the second most common occupation is that of ancillary and unskilled workers. Skilled workers follow only after them in the list of the most common positions. Approximately 8 % of the workforce found employment in the third sector. In the director's position, 2.25 % of people come from non-EEA countries. The relatively large number – almost a thousand people – is because great Asian companies such as Samsung or Kia are established in Slovakia.

Graph 7 Activity of foreign workers coming from non EEA, 1Q 2023



Source: by the author according to data by upsvr.gov.sk (2023)

Conclusion

Labour market issues are one of the fundamental issue in every economy. In Central and Eastern Europe, the problem became important after 1989, when unemployment suddenly appeared. As a negative side of the market economy, it significantly affects not only the performance of the economy but the whole society. Unemployment generally threatens the most vulnerable groups in society, such as teenagers, people close to retirement, people living in rural areas and individuals suffering from chronic illness. High unemployment has been typical of Slovakia for almost two and a half decades. As a negative side of the market economy, it significantly affects not only the performance of the economy but the whole society. Unemployment generally threatens the most vulnerable groups in society, such as teenagers, people close to retirement, people living in rural areas and individuals suffering from chronic illness. High unemployment has been typical of Slovakia for almost two and a half decades.

Situation began to change abruptly in the 2010s. People come to Slovakia mainly from neighbouring countries, resp. from nearby countries of South-Eastern Europe. Labour shortages characterise the entire labour market, but foreign labour is finding employment in the manufacture of machinery and equipment. This fact shows that Slovakia's economy is still based on the second sector, Slovakia is still the workshop of Europe.

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