
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61825/rl.2025.v51.18>

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RECOGNITION OF IMMIGRANTS' DIPLOMAS IN SLOVAKIA: FACTORS – BARRIERS – DIRECTIONS FOR CHANGE

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FACTORS – BARRIERS – DIRECTIONS FOR CHANGE

Keywords: immigrants; nostrification; legal frameworks for the recognition of qualifications; practical examples.

This paper is theoretical and comparative in nature, and its aim is to identify the problems faced by immigrants in Slovakia in relation to the recognition of their education. The purpose of the study is to analyze the processes and measures taken at the national level regarding incoming immigrants. These procedures often involve administrative barriers, administrative complexity, language difficulties, and differences in educational criteria between countries. Through a historical overview and a discussion of the legal conditions for nostrification, the article focuses on practical examples and concludes with recommendations for solving the most pressing issues.

UZNAWANIE DYPLMÓW IMIGRANTÓW NA SŁOWACJI: UWA-
RUNKOWANIA – BARIERY – KIERUNKI ZMIAN

Słowa kluczowe: imigranci, nostryfikacja, ramy prawne uznawania kwalifikacji, przykłady praktyczne.

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Artykuł ma charakter teoretyczno-porównawczy i jego celem jest identyfikacja problemów, z jakimi mierzą się imigranci na Słowacji w związku z nostryfikacją wykształcenia. Celem opracowania jest analiza procesów oraz rozwiązań stosowanych na poziomie krajowym wobec przybywających imigrantów. Procedury te często wiążą się z barierami administracyjnymi, złożonością formalną, trudnościami językowymi oraz różnicami w kryteriach edukacyjnych pomiędzy państwami. Poprzez zarys historyczny oraz omówienie warunkowań prawnych nostryfikacji artykuł koncentruje się na przykładach praktycznych, a w konkluzji formułuje rekomendacje dotyczące rozwiązywania najistotniejszych problemów.

Introduction

In the international context, education is regarded as a fundamental human right. Paulo Freire perceived education as a process of emancipation, which enables individuals to liberate themselves from socio-economic oppression (Freire 2022, p. 91). The non-recognition of education can have a significant psychological impact on individuals striving to apply their academic qualifications abroad. For those whose education is not recognized, this can lead to feelings that their professional skills are undervalued or ignored (Bhugra, Becker 2005, pp. 18-24). Such individuals may feel excluded from professional and social circles to which they would otherwise belong, further hindering their social integration and community engagement (Andersson 2021). The recognition of immigrants' education, known as the nostrification process, represents a crucial step that allows individuals to obtain the right to practice their profession or continue their studies. This process is essential for integration into the labor market and society, while also supporting the use of foreign qualifications, which is vital for the country's economic growth.

Historical Context

The Slovak Republic is often referred to as a multiethnic country, as it is home to the Slovak nation alongside several other nationalities. It is thus not only multiethnic, but also multilingual. The process of recognizing education in Slovakia is deeply rooted in historical events. In the political and economic context, Slovakia has traditionally had high emigration rates. Before World War I, thousands of Slovaks emigrated to the United States, Canada, and South America in search of work (Divinský 2005, p. 45-51). During this period, foreign workers did not constitute a significant social or economic group in Slovakia.

During the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (1867-1918), education and qualifications were not harmonized among the member states of the monarchy, complicating the mobility of skilled labor. This issue was less significant in Slovakia, as its inhabitants predominantly sought employment abroad (Rychlík 2024, p. 255).

Following the establishment of the Czechoslovak state in 1918, the situation began to change and efforts to create a unified education system and expand industrial production began. Although most jobs were held by local residents, foreign workers – primarily from neighboring countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine – gradually began to play a role again (Kováč 2024). However, the recognition of foreign workers' education was not a priority, as migration remained minimal.

After World War II and the establishment of the communist regime in 1948, worker mobility was significantly restricted. Slovakia participated in international cooperation programs with Eastern Bloc countries and some Third World nations. In the 1970s and 1980s, foreign workers from Vietnam, Cuba, Angola, and other countries worked in Slovakia. They were usually employed in industrial sectors facing labor shortages or participated in vocational training programs. The recognition of foreign qualifications was addressed through bilateral agreements between socialist countries. Nevertheless, these workers generally performed lower-skilled jobs, suggesting that their qualifications were not fully integrated (Kováč 2024).

Political and economic changes after 1989 significantly influenced migration in Slovakia. The opening of borders and the transformation of the economy led foreign workers to play a more prominent role, particularly in construction, the automotive industry, and services (Horváth, Páleník 2005). Following its economic transformation, Slovakia became a member of international organizations such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, thereby committing to adopt measures to facilitate the recognition of foreign educational qualifications. In 2002, the Act on the Recognition of Educational Documents was adopted, establishing rules for the nostrification of foreign diplomas (MoE 2002).

With the progression of globalization and Slovakia's accession to the European Union in 2004, the recognition of educational qualifications became more streamlined, particularly for EU member states. However, foreign workers from third countries continued to face bureaucratic obstacles, which slowed their integration into the labor market. Currently, Slovakia is becoming an attractive destination for foreign workers, with the

majority coming from Serbia, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria (MLSAF SR 2021).

Slovak industry, particularly the automotive and electronics sectors, has become reliant on this workforce. Immigrants from Ukraine constitute one of the largest groups of foreign workers in Slovakia. Migration to Slovakia has gradually intensified since 2014, influenced by global migration trends, economic factors, and geopolitical changes.

According to data from the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (2023) and the Bureau of Border and Foreign Police, migration to Slovakia has shown a steady increase. In 2014, approximately 80,000 foreigners lived in Slovakia. This trend was primarily influenced by migration from non-European Union countries, which accounted for more than 90,000 individuals in 2020 (HRL 2020). Between 2014 and 2023, the number of foreigners in Slovakia increased from 80,000 to over 150,000 (HRL 2020, MoI SR 2023). The integration of immigrants remains a challenge, particularly with respect to language barriers and cultural differences (Lukáč 2018).

Legal Framework

Currently, the recognition of immigrants' education in Slovakia is carried out in accordance with the directives of the European Union and international agreements. For individuals from non-EU countries, the process depends on formal applications that require document verification and, in some cases, additional state exams (MESRS SR 2023).

Educational documents issued by a recognized university or other educational institution in an EU member state, a country within the European Higher Education Area, the Swiss Confederation, or a non-member state (third country) may be recognized as equivalent to documents issued by a university in Slovakia. As part of the process of recognizing foreign educational documents, compliance with the conditions for issuing a recognition decision is assessed. If those conditions are met, the university will decide whether to recognize the foreign educational document as equivalent to one issued in Slovakia.

The Slovak Republic has signed an international agreement on the mutual recognition of the equivalence of educational documents with the Czech Republic, the Republic of Croatia, Hungary, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Republic of Poland, Romania, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China.

Table 1
Immigrants to Slovakia in 2023

	Total	Gender		Age				Education					
		Male	Female	0-14	15-44	45-64	65+	With Out	Basic	SecNG	SecGC	High	Unsp
Total immigrants	5 923	3 162	2 761	2 959	1 939	834	191	2 959	256	433	1 170	788	317
Temporary residence	55	28	27	17	35	2	1	17	3	5	9	16	5
Permanent residence	299	154	145	121	83	55	40	121	10	15	69	66	18
Tolerated residence	51	28	23	21	13	13	4	21	1	0	13	16	0
International protection	422	222	200	85	265	67	5	85	21	63	96	89	68
Other types of residence	5 096	2 730	2 366	2 715	1 543	697	141	2 715	221	350	983	601	226

SecNG – Secondary education without graduation exam, SecGC – Secondary with graduation certificate, HighE – Higher education, UnspE – Unspecified education.

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (SO SR 2024).

Between the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Austria, a Memorandum of Understanding has been signed setting out recommendations for the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications; however, it does not have the status of an international agreement.

The recognition of diplomas in Slovakia is governed by Act No. 422/2015 Coll. on the recognition of educational documents, as amended. This law sets the rules and conditions for the recognition of education for the purpose of continuing studies at Slovak schools and for practicing regulated professions (e.g., healthcare professionals, teachers, engineers), as well as other professional purposes. The recognition process includes several key steps and requirements for the applicant.

The applicant for recognition (nostrification) must submit a written request for the recognition of foreign education to the relevant authority – typically, the education department of the local government office for primary and secondary education and the relevant university or higher education institution for higher education. The application must include documents proving the completion of studies abroad, such as diplomas, certificates, transcripts, and a list of subjects with the corresponding results. If the documents are from countries that do not have bilateral agreements with Slovakia on the recognition of education, they must be authenticated (super-legalized or apostilled). This requirement primarily applies to documents from non-European countries. All submitted documents must be translated into Slovak by a certified translator if they are in a language other than Slovak or Czech.

The relevant authority or school assesses the foreign education is equivalent to the Slovak education system. When making this assessment, the authority considers the duration of the studies as well as their content, scope, and the qualification obtained. In some cases, when there are significant differences between the foreign and Slovak education programs, the applicant may be required to take “differentiation exams” to demonstrate the required level of knowledge. These verification exams typically apply to the recognition of secondary education and may also be required for certain professional or specialized occupations. After reviewing all documents and passing any required differentiation exams, the relevant authority issues a decision on the recognition of the education, which allows the migrant to use their qualifications in Slovakia. Based on this decision, the migrant gains access to employment in qualified professions or the opportunity to continue studying at a higher level.

The recognition of educational documents issued by foreign universities is decided by the relevant ministry: the Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport of the Slovak Republic, the Center for the Recognition of Educational Documents, the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic (if the educational document was issued by a military university), the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (if the educational document was issued by a police academy), or a recognized university in Slovakia that offers study programs in the field(s) listed on the submitted educational documents. When comparing foreign educational systems with the Slovak system, differences may arise that require further verification or additional exams. Nostrification applies to all levels of education, from primary and secondary to higher education.

Recognition of education in Slovakia: Specific challenges for migrants

The recognition (nostrification) process can be complicated and time-consuming, which may pose challenges for migrants who do not have a good command of the Slovak language or who are not familiar with Slovak legislation and administrative procedures. Similarly, nostrification fees, official translations, and document verification can be financially burdensome. Below are typical situations migrants may face during the nostrification process:

- Healthcare sector: A migrant from Ukraine with a medical degree submitted a nostrification application to work as a doctor in Slovakia. The issue was that the process required a professional exam which included terminology different from what the migrant had learned during their studies. This problem extended the nostrification process by more than a year and prevented immediate employment in the profession (Novák 2020).
- Education: A teacher from Vietnam with a master's degree in pedagogy had to complete a Slovak language course and pedagogical training. The process was time-consuming and financially demanding, and there was no institutional support. In addition, preparatory courses were only available in larger cities (MESRS SR 2023).
- IT sector: A programmer from India with a degree in computer science had to prove that his education met Slovak standards. A key complication was the insufficient recognition of the practical experience he gained during his internship, which prolonged the nostrification process (MESRS SR 2023).

- Construction sector: A worker from Moldova took a test on building regulations, which differed from his previous experience. The main obstacle was the language barrier, which made it difficult for him to understand Slovak regulations and created a need for additional courses, further extending the nostrification process (Novák 2020).
- Pharmacy: A pharmacist from Egypt who obtained a university degree in his home country had to complete several specialized courses and demonstrate knowledge of medications commonly used in Slovakia. The process was time-consuming and required regular consultations with professional chambers (Novák 2020).
- Music Arts: A musician from South Korea with a conservatory diploma had to take an exam on Slovak music history, which slowed down his integration into Slovakia's artistic environment (MESRS SR 2023).
- Fashion Design: A designer from Italy submitted a portfolio, but Slovak committees required additional certificates. The main challenge was the bureaucracy involved in obtaining documents from abroad (Novák 2020).
- Public Administration: A civil servant from Slovenia seeking work in regional development faced a requirement to complete a course in Slovak administrative law (MESRS SR 2023).
- Social Work: A social worker from Georgia faced language barriers that prevented him from obtaining the necessary certification to work in social service homes (Novák 2020).
- Mechanical Engineering: A mechanical engineer from Ukraine submitted his diploma, but Slovak chambers required practical experience in a domestic company, which extended the nostrification process by an additional year (MESRS SR 2023).
- International Relations: A diplomat from Morocco who wanted to work for the Slovak embassy had to pass an exam on Slovak history and legislation (Novák 2020).
- Sports Science: A coach from China faced requirements to obtain Slovak coaching certificates, which were only available in Slovak (MESRS SR 2023).
- Cultural Heritage: A historian from Croatia had to complete a course on the protection of Slovak cultural heritage, which was required for museum work (Novák 2020).
- Journalism: A journalist from the United States with a degree in media studies had to demonstrate knowledge of Slovak media laws

and practices, which delayed his entry into employment (Horváth, Páleník 2005).

Many organizations provide assistance and counseling to immigrants in Slovakia regarding the nostrification of their education. These include organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2023) and Centers for the Support of Foreigners' Integration, which provide information about the nostrification process and help address administrative and practical issues.

According to the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (MESRS SR 2023), the number of nostrification applications has gradually increased over the past ten years. The main groups of applicants are citizens from third countries, most often from Ukraine, Serbia, Vietnam, and countries in the Middle East.

1. Years 2014-2020: During this period, the average annual number of applications was approximately 1,200. Most applications were in medicine, engineering, and pedagogy (HRL 2020).
2. Years 2021-2023: After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the number of applications from Ukraine increased significantly. In 2022, more than 2,000 nostrification applications were submitted, representing a 60% increase over the previous year (MoI SR 2023).

This process is lengthy and often requires additional education or language certification (Lukáč 2018). The large influx of families has led to a substantial increase in the number of Ukrainian children in the Slovak education system, which has had to adapt quickly to meet their needs. The number of Ukrainian children arriving in Slovakia as a result of the war in Ukraine increased sharply after 2022. This large-scale movement has intensified demands on educational capacity, including the need for qualified educators who can address the specific needs of Ukrainian children. In this context, Ukrainian teachers are emerging as key actors who could support the integration of these students into the Slovak education system.

Ukrainian children often face challenges in adapting to Slovak cultural norms and educational practices. Differences in teaching methods and curricula add to the complexity of the integration process. Moreover, relationships with peers can be affected by cultural misunderstandings or prejudice. The rapid increase in the number of Ukrainian children has put pressure on Slovak schools, especially in urban areas. Many schools struggle with shortages of teachers, space, and teaching materials.

Ukrainian teachers who have arrived in Slovakia represent a valuable resource of professional knowledge and cultural understanding. Their presence in schools can have several benefits:

- Overcoming language barriers: Ukrainian teachers can assist with teaching and provide support in Ukrainian, which can accelerate children’s adaptation.
- Cultural mediation: As members of the same culture, they can help Slovak teachers and schools understand key aspects of Ukrainian culture and education.
- Improving the quality of education: Their professional background enables them not to teach Ukrainian children but also contribute to overall quality of education across various subjects.

However, qualification recognition issues affect their ability to work as teachers, which can be frustrating, as this profession requires high expertise and specific training. The nostrification process is a crucial step in their integration into the Slovak education system and enables the full use of their teaching expertise (MESRS SR 2023).

Those with a teaching degree who wish to continue their profession in Slovakia face specific challenges in the nostrification of their education, as the educational systems in Ukraine and Slovakia differ significantly:

- A mathematics teacher from Ukraine had to complete a language course and pass an exam on Slovak curricula. The main issue was the difference in curriculum structure: the Ukrainian system places more emphasis on algebraic methods, while the Slovak system requires more practical applications. This difference required additional preparation, which prolonged the nostrification process by several months. The language barrier also complicated understanding of technical terms during the exams (MESRS SR 2023).
- A Ukrainian history teacher was required to supplement his knowledge of Slovak history and culture. The main obstacle was that Slovak institutions demanded detailed knowledge of regional history, which was not part of his original education. This difference necessitated an additional semester of study, during which he had to finance his education without the possibility of working in his specialized field (Novák, 2020).
- A Ukrainian English teacher encountered difficulties when her qualifications were not automatically recognized, despite having high language proficiency and experience. Slovak institutions required her

to pass additional exams in didactics, which differed from those she had prepared for. Another issue was the lack of support from institutions in terms of professional preparation for these exams (MESRS SR 2023).

- A physical education teacher was required to complete a first aid course, which was mandatory under Slovak regulations. This course was not part of his education in Ukraine, which prolonged the process of recognition by several months. Additionally, he had to pass an exam on rules for Slovak sports disciplines, which differed from those in Ukraine (Novák 2020).
- A literature teacher had to take supplementary exams in the didactics of the Slovak language and literature. The challenge was that Slovak literature was not part of his original education, requiring an additional semester of preparation for the exams (MESRS SR 2023).
- A physics teacher had to submit detailed descriptions of his university courses, which were not available in Ukrainian archives. Slovak institutions thus required additional documentation, which slowed down the entire process (Novák 2020).
- A geography teacher had to take exams on Slovak regional geography, which was not part of his Ukrainian education. He also had to adapt to different teaching methods (MESRS SR 2023).

Ukrainian teachers in Slovakia have extremely high potential, but realizing it fully requires systematic support and collaboration between the government, schools, and communities. Addressing existing obstacles could not only improve the quality of education for Ukrainian children but also enrich the Slovak education system by bringing in multicultural perspectives.

Research on nostrification

Research on the recognition of education and qualifications primarily focuses on the challenges, solutions, and policies that facilitate migrant mobility and integration. Different countries have varying procedures and legislation, but most studies highlight similar problems and trends. UNESCO and the European Commission (EU) have conducted several studies and published guidelines aimed at harmonizing qualification recognition, particularly within Europe. UNESCO created the *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region* (the Lisbon Convention), which establishes principles and guidelines for the mutual recognition of qualifications (UNESCO 1997). The European

Union, through programs like Erasmus+, supports the harmonization of educational processes among member states, facilitating the mobility of students and workers (EU 2021).

Canadian research institutions, such as the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), have studied the effectiveness of qualification recognition and the creation of bridges between foreign education and the Canadian labor market. The research found that the lack of access to recognition processes often leads highly qualified migrants to work in unskilled professions (CMEC 2019).

In Germany, research focuses on migrants' experiences with qualification recognition and on improving access to information about recognition processes. A centralized approach and publicly funded advisory services have been identified as effective (IAB 2020). In Australia, studies have examined the barriers faced by healthcare professionals with foreign qualifications. The research showed that recognition in healthcare is particularly complex because of differences in national standards and the requirements for local training (AHPRA 2020). Similar studies in the United States highlight the role of mentoring and preparatory programs in supporting migrants in obtaining the necessary certifications (NCSBN 2019).

Studies from Sweden, Finland, and Norway have shown that migrants whose qualifications are not recognized face a higher risk of unemployment or employment in positions that do not require their qualifications. This phenomenon, known as "brain waste," has harmful economic and social consequences (OECD 2020a).

The European Union, through the Europass program, provides a digital platform that helps standardize the presentation of skills and qualifications, making the assessment of foreign education easier. Studies suggest that this platform is a positive step toward greater transparency and efficiency of recognition processes (EU 2021). Comparative OECD research on recognition systems in member countries indicates that centralized recognition systems improve access to information and simplify processes for migrants (OECD 2020a).

Research and publications on the recognition of foreign qualifications in Slovakia primarily address issues related to the integration of migrants and the recognition of qualifications in various professions, with particular attention to education, healthcare, and technical fields. Lukáč (2018) analyzed the nostrification process as a key factor for migrant integration into the labor market. He found that the lack of information and procedural inconsistencies contribute to frustration among migrants and often result

in economic losses due to their underutilization. Novák (2020) emphasizes the need to digitalize and simplify nostrification procedures. The author identifies language barriers and high nostrification fees as the main obstacles for migrants, especially those from third countries. The Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport of the Slovak Republic (MESRS SR 2023), in a government report, analyzed nostrification statistics in Slovakia and identified significant differences between procedures for applicants from EU member states and from third countries. The report recommends introducing a unified electronic system for processing applications.

Conclusion

Practice and research indicate that nostrification is a key aspect of migrant integration, but its success depends on legislative frameworks, transparent procedures, availability of financial support, and effective advisory services. Countries with long-standing immigration traditions, such as Canada and Germany, lead in this area and offer best practices, while international organizations like UNESCO and the OECD continue to emphasize the importance of standardization and digitalization in the process of recognizing foreign qualifications.

Based on the available studies and recommendations, we propose the following improvements to the nostrification process for migrants in Slovakia:

- Simplifying administration: Introduction of an electronic system for submitting and processing documents. Simplifying and accelerating the nostrification process, (or providing a more flexible approach for refugees or individuals from conflict-affected areas), would help many migrants obtain the necessary recognition of their qualifications.
- Shortening the nostrification process: Streamlining the assessment of qualifications, especially for subjects with clear equivalents in both education systems. Support from schools: Providing mentoring and professional workshops for Ukrainian teachers would facilitate their integration into the Slovak education system. Creating assistant teacher positions for Ukrainian educators would allow gradual adaptation to the Slovak school environment. Schools could also offer mentorships or internships to Ukrainian teachers during their nostrification process (Novák, 2020).
- Language courses and integration support: Providing free language courses for migrants.

- Increasing awareness: Creating online portals and guides with detailed instructions for the nostrification process. For example, Hungary introduced a centralized online portal that reduced the application processing times by 40% (OECD 2020b).
- Support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and integration centers: Organizations such as the IOM or Centers for the Support of Immigrant Integration provide assistance with nostrification and help migrants navigate legislation, communicate with authorities, and handle translations or document verification.
- Scholarships and financial support: Some organizations provide financial assistance to cover nostrification-related costs, which can be helpful in cases where the costs are too high for migrants.
- Stronger cooperation with countries of origin: The exchange of information about educational systems between Slovakia and countries such as Ukraine and Serbia could improve the understanding of differences in educational systems and streamline the nostrification process (MŠVVŠ SR 2023).
- Psychological support and assistance: Providing free psychological services and peer support groups for individuals whose education has not been recognized can help alleviate stress and boost their self-confidence.

The struggle for diploma recognition in Slovakia highlights the need to reform existing procedures that could support better integration of migrants and the effective use of their skills. Transparency, digitalization, and improved international cooperation are key steps toward addressing these challenges.

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