



PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations

Decision-making of African migrants in Slovakia: the role of institutions and policies

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PACES Task 5.2. Report – August 2026

Suggested citation

Kováčová, L., Kureková, L.M., Papcunová, J., & Zemeníková, T. (2026). Decision-making of African migrants in Slovakia: The role of institutions and policies. PACES Task 5.2 Report. Bratislava: Institute for Forecasting, Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences, Slovak Academy of Sciences.

PACES (Making migration and migration policy decisions amidst societal transformation) is a 40-month research project (2023-2026) that examines decisions to stay and migrate over time and space, researches the politics of knowledge in migration policy and seeks to use its insights to inform future migration policies and governance. PACES is carried out by a consortium of 14 partners in Europe, Africa and the USA.

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History of change

Version	Date	Changes	Authors
1	14/8/2026	Original version	Lucia Kováčová, Lucia Mýtna Kureková, Jana Papcunová, Terézia Zemeníková



The PACES project has received funding under the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme, grant agreement N 101094279.



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Executive Summary

Aims and objectives: The aim of the report is to examine the decision-making of African migrants in Slovakia based on their lived experiences. It examines how migrants' decisions change over time and along the journey, and at which stages migration and non-migration policies influence decision-making. It also investigates the role of family preferences, social norms and personal factors. The research focuses specifically on *en route* migrants – defined within the research design as those who have resided in Slovakia for between 3 months and 5 years – and examines what drives their decisions to stay, move onward, or return home. The research focused on interrogating i) migration history, ii) quality of life in the place of current residence and place of origin, with a focus on access to social services; iii) life aspirations and values in the community of the current residence; and iv) future migration aspirations and decisions (aspirations to stay, return or move forward).

African population in Slovakia: The African nationals account for roughly 1% of all third-country nationals (TCNs) in Slovakia, but their numbers have grown by 60% since 2022, reaching 2,495 residence permit holders in 2025. Currently, the largest national groups are Egyptians (23%), Nigerians (13%), and Zimbabweans (12%). The African population in Slovakia is highly educated: 40% of African migrants hold a university degree, compared to 20% of all third-country nationals. In 2024/2025, 202 African students were enrolled at Slovak universities. In a context where overall international student numbers studying in Slovakia have nearly tripled since 2010, the number of African students is also increasing.

Methodology: The report combines primary data from 34 semi-structured interviews conducted between September 2024 and March 2025 with secondary data and analyses qualitative data against a conceptual framework that treats migrants as active decision-makers considering a range of structural, institutional, and personal factors. Participants were recruited through cooperation with the Mareena Foundation, social media, universities, and snowball sampling. They come from 11 African countries: Nigeria (35%), Kenya (24%), Ghana (12%), and Cameroon (9%) were the most represented. Median length of stay in Slovakia was 3 years; average age was 33; men outnumbered the women (68% male vs 32%), reflecting the gender structure of the whole population (80% vs 20%). About 71% have a tertiary education; 50% are students; 68% are employed. The African migrants are concentrated in the Bratislava region (65%) and Košice (26%).

Policy framework: African migrants have no dedicated or preferential pathway into the Slovak labour market and must rely on the general instruments open to all third-country nationals. They come to Slovakia for work or study purposes, with limited opportunities for family reunification. The asylum and subsidiary protection granted to African nationals in Slovakia remains small.

Prevailing motivations to move to Slovakia: The primary motivations are affordable university education leading to EU-recognised qualifications, job offers from multinational companies, and a reputation for safety and low levels of corruption. Lower financial requirements for visa approval compared to Western Europe also play a role. Most participants had little prior knowledge of Slovakia and made their decision based on internet research and recommendations from diaspora contacts.

Life in Slovakia: Participants mostly value safety, infrastructure, and good working and educational opportunities in Slovakia. Slovakia is generally viewed as a relatively prosperous country with good future prospects regarding quality of life.

Barriers to integration: Social integration in the local communities is experienced very differently across participants. Language emerges as the single most decisive barrier – Slovak language support is almost entirely NGO-dependent and widely described as insufficient. Bureaucracy and legal unpredictability surrounding residence permits create persistent uncertainty, particularly for those with temporary status that requires annual renewal.

Access to (public) social services: Access to healthcare, housing, and integration services is highly uneven and strongly shaped by legal status, employment status, or personal networks. When accessing housing and health care services, participants struggle due to language or financial barriers; as a result, they cannot reach the services or rely on commercial services, which increases the cost of living. It shows that awareness of social entitlements is relatively low – many participants navigate the system through informal migrant networks rather than official channels. Educational services are assessed as rather accessible, except for the language training.

Future migration intentions: 47% of the participants indicated a (strong) preference to stay in Slovakia, while 29% wish to move onward (primarily to Western Europe or North America) in the medium-term future; 6% wish to return home; 20% remain undecided. Permanent residence status is a pivotal factor: it reduces uncertainty about the future, and enables long-term planning conducive to settlement. Although Slovakia can attract highly educated African migrants through affordable education, safety and employment opportunities, its fragmented integration environment and prolonged dependence on temporary legal statuses reduce the likelihood of long-term settlement. Further drivers of onward migration include barriers to family reunification, limited healthcare access, housing insecurity, and desire for a more diverse or religiously compatible environment in Slovakia. Those who intend to migrate onward also reported seeking more favourable employment opportunities in Western Europe and North America.

Research contribution and policy engagement: Along with broader findings of PACES research, migration decision-making is best interpreted as a dynamic, multi-level process where individual agency engages with policy frameworks and institutional conditions. The findings indicate that policies do more than regulate movement: they actively shape migrants' daily realities and long-term prospects. Closing the gap between formal policy design and on-the-ground implementation is essential to shift Slovakia's role from a mere transit corridor toward a sustainable destination that supports longer-term migrant settlement.

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Introduction

This report presents research conducted in the framework of PACES – a 40-month Horizon Europe-funded research project. The project addresses the overarching research question of how changes in society, individual life experiences, and migration policy shape decisions to stay or migrate over time and across space, and it seeks to use these insights to inform more forward-looking migration policies and governance. Methodologically, PACES relies on the Temporal Multilevel Analysis (TMA) framework (Vezzoli et al., 2024), which brings together the macro-level social transformation approach with the micro-level life course approach to examine how people’s perceptions of societal and personal change, their values, and their expectations for the future shape decisions to stay, move onward, or return. PACES’ empirical work focuses on the African-European corridor; this report provides a perspective from Slovakia, a European transit and destination country that is not typically reached by African migrants. It applies the same PACES conceptual framework used across the project’s other country cases to the experiences of African migrants residing in Slovakia, thereby contributing empirical evidence on how migration, social welfare, and integration policies shape migrants’ decisions to stay, move onward, or return, feeding into PACES’ broader cross-country analysis of migration decision-making (see e.g. Cabezón-Fernández et al. 2026).

The key objective of this report is to present findings from primary data collected among African migrants in Slovakia. The report seeks to understand migrants’ decision-making processes and the factors that influence their decisions throughout their migration trajectory, presented through the lens of research participants. A key assumption of this work is that migrants *en route* (on the journey) make decisions similar to those leaving their countries of origin for the first time and thus consider a range of structural, policy, and personal factors. Given that the migrants have already decided to leave, a specific focus will be on understanding how the potential transit country, destination country, and community factors interact with personal and life-course circumstances to determine why some migrants stay and others move (home or to another country). A specific focus is given to the role of migration and integration policies, in particular the social policies; this reflects one of the key findings of PACES research: migration and non-migration policies gain in importance along the journey and in the country of destination, and in important ways shape the possibilities and constraints of staying and leaving (Vezzoli et al. 2026b; Goldfarb & Slootjes, 2026).

In line with the PACES Glossary and PACES conceptual framework (Vezzoli et al., 2024; Natter & Vezzoli, 2024), we define migrants as individuals who have left their place of long-term residence, irrespective of their migration status or reasons for leaving. Migrants *en route* are those who have been *in situ* at least 3 months and not more than 5 years. We use the terms *transit migrants* and migrants *en route* interchangeably. These migrants may already have decided to settle in their current country, may be considering onward migration or return to their country of origin. While the study aims to include participants representing each of these three possible trajectories, individuals inclined to stay permanently may no longer perceive themselves as being in *transit* but rather as migrants settled in the host country. The operationalisation of transit migrants, defined by duration of stay (3 months – 5 years), was adopted at the outset of the project to enable us to identify a narrower group of research participants and to be able to study migrants in the immediate years following their move,

but we reflect critically on the value of this operationalisation and its limitations (Vezzoli et al. 2026a). The actual Slovak sample includes a limited number of respondents with longer residence histories. The African population is relatively small in Slovakia and a hard-to-reach group, which led to the relaxation of criteria and subsequent changes in the sample composition.

Within the set of contextual factors, the research was designed to gain a deeper understanding of how migration and non-migration policies and social services in the European (potentially transit) country influence migrants' decisions to stay, return home, or continue their migration journey to another country. By moving from Africa to a European country, services have changed and, in some cases, may have improved. Thus, while the research in part focuses on understanding individual life experience, the core focus is to understand how the context of the European country interacts with these experiences, and results in decisions about moving on or possibly settling in what originally might have been perceived as a transit country, or, to the contrary, moving onwards from what originally was planned to be a destination country.

The report is structured as follows: the first section specifies the methodology for data collection, including the main themes of the questionnaire, the method, the sample of the interviewees, and recruitment strategies. The second section provides information on recent migration trends to Slovakia, with a focus on African migration, and elucidates the legislative and regulatory framework governing migration and integration policies in Slovakia *vis-à-vis* third-country nationals. The third section presents the findings derived from the empirical data, starting with a detailed description of the research sample, then presenting research participants' experiences during migration journeys, their experiences accessing key social and integration services, and their subsequent migration aspirations. The fourth section presents reflections on the findings and concludes.

Methodology

The research presented here utilises (1) primary data based on semi-structured interviews with African immigrants and (2) secondary data that comprises academic articles, shadow reports, and statistical data. The primary data were collected through 34 semi-structured interviews with immigrants from selected African countries who were living in Slovakia at the time of the fieldwork, or who had lived in Slovakia in the past but had since moved to another country. The questionnaire consisted of 73 questions covering four main sections: i) questions about demographic characteristics, migration history, lifeline and family relations; ii) questions about quality of life in the place of current residence and place of origin with a focus on access to social services; iii) life aspirations and values in the community of the current residence; iv) questions about migration aspirations and decisions (aspirations to stay, return or move forward); v) additional questions about migration policies, such as advertisements about, e.g., dangers of migration, and formal documents related to migration.

The interviews were conducted solely in English by the research team of the Institute for Forecasting in Bratislava and the Institute of Social Sciences in Košice, in cooperation with the Mareena Foundation team between September 2024 and March 2025. The interviews were conducted in person at the institutional premises, in public spaces, or online via Zoom or MS Teams. Before interviews, the

participants were provided with information about the PACES project and personal data protection clauses and were asked to sign the Informed Consent Form. To collect the data, researchers used the KoboCollect app, which allows users to fill in the online questionnaire. The interviews were recorded by both the app (for open-ended questions) and a separate recorder to avoid potential data loss or corruption. After finishing the interview, the data from the KoboCollect app was sent to KoboToolBox, where they were further stored, cleaned and organised.

The selection of the interview participants was based on two main criteria. Interview participants were those immigrants who were (1) potential transit migrants, thus residing in Slovakia for at least 3 months but not more than 5 years; (2) originally from Nigeria or another African country. Since the number of African immigrants in Slovakia is relatively low compared with the overall immigrant population, and they were considered a hard-to-reach target group, we relaxed the criteria to include participants who have resided in Slovakia for more than 5 years and are from any African English-speaking country. Interviewing migrants who had resided in the country longer was helpful when studying integration experiences, as their experience was more extensive.

Several recruitment strategies were employed to identify and approach the participants. First, the Mareena team used their social networks to identify potential participants; these were individuals who attended social events or other services provided by the organisation in Bratislava and Košice, including community events such as the Language Café organised at Tabačka Kulturfabrik in Košice. Second, the research team identified potential participants via social media platforms, mainly Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. Potential participants were identified through Facebook groups on housing advertisements, which immigrants in Slovakia are members of, or groups that gather immigrants living in Slovakia, including those from African communities. Third, since a relevant portion of immigrants are university students, the research team browsed websites of universities and the Slovak Academy of Sciences to identify potential participants among PhD students; in the case of the University of Economics in Bratislava, personal contacts with lecturers were used to approach students from African countries (after having their approval that they could be approached). Fourth, the research team employed a snowball sampling method; interview participants were asked to provide additional contacts for potential participants after the interview ended.

Non-EU migration to Slovakia: trends and characteristics

Recently, Slovakia has been experiencing substantial demographic changes due to an ageing population on one hand and rising immigration from EU and non-EU countries on the other hand (Hwang & Roehn, 2022; Pécsyová, 2026). These inflows have been driven mainly by economic factors, such as available job vacancies and labour shortages, as well as by educational opportunities and social networks (Kováčová et al., 2026; Pécsyová, 2026). A significant number of non-EU migrants came to Slovakia from Ukraine in the aftermath of Russian aggression in 2022 (Bahna et al., 2025). Although Slovakia continues to record one of the lowest proportions of foreign-born residents within the

European Union, the number of foreigners living in the country has increased substantially over the past two decades, with exponential growth in recent years.

While African migration currently accounts for only 1 per cent of the total migrant population in Slovakia, the trend is gradually rising, following the general pattern of growing non-EU migration to Slovakia. Interestingly, the African immigrants living in Slovakia seem distinct from the country's overall migrant population: a majority are highly skilled, and a substantial share pursue higher education or already come as highly educated, including in scientific and professional fields. We provide more details about their main characteristics and developments over time below.

Residence and work permits

In the last five years, the number of residence permits issued to third-country nationals in Slovakia has almost tripled: while in 2021 the number of all residence permits was around 111,000, the figure reached 305,000 in 2025 (Figure 1). A substantial increase occurred in 2022, when the number of persons granted temporary protection under the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) following the arrival of Ukrainian refugees surged. However, increasing migration inflows have also been evident among other nationalities coming to Slovakia as labour migrants. The number of temporary residence permits increased from about 85,000 to 120,000, while permanent permits almost doubled from 26,000 to 46,000.

Figure 1: The number of residence permits of third-country nationals in Slovakia (2021-2025)

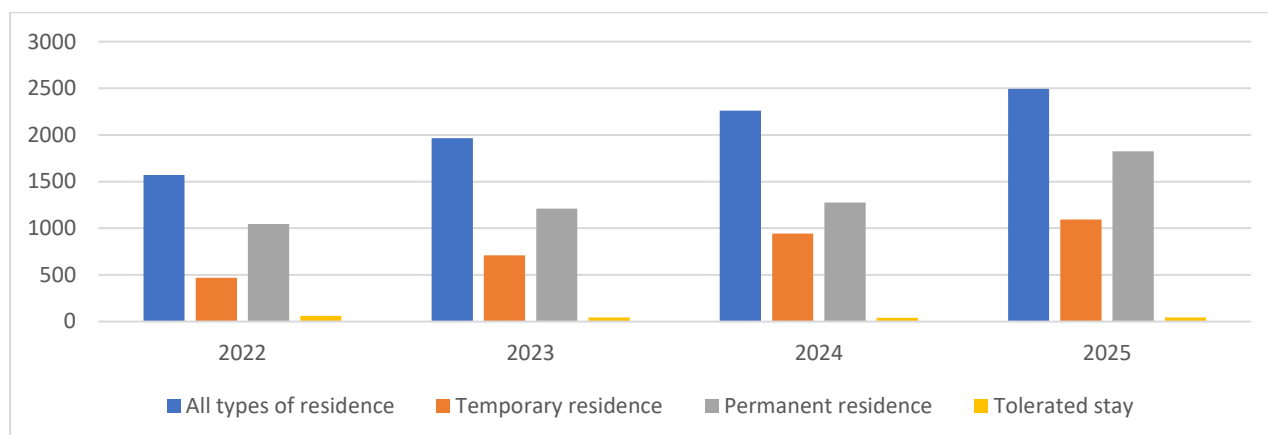


Source: Statistics of Foreign Police for 2021-2025.

Migration from African countries follows the overall migration trends in Slovakia; since 2022, the number of residence permits has increased by 60%, from 1,571 to 2,495 African nationals in 2025 (Figure 2). Immigrants from African countries make up merely 1% of all TCNs (across all residence permits), and 4% of those with permanent residence permits. In 2025, the most prevalent countries

of origin of TCNs on the African continent are Egypt (23% of all the residence permits), Nigeria (13%), Zimbabwe (12%), Tunisia (9%), Libya (6%), Algeria and Kenya (each 5%).

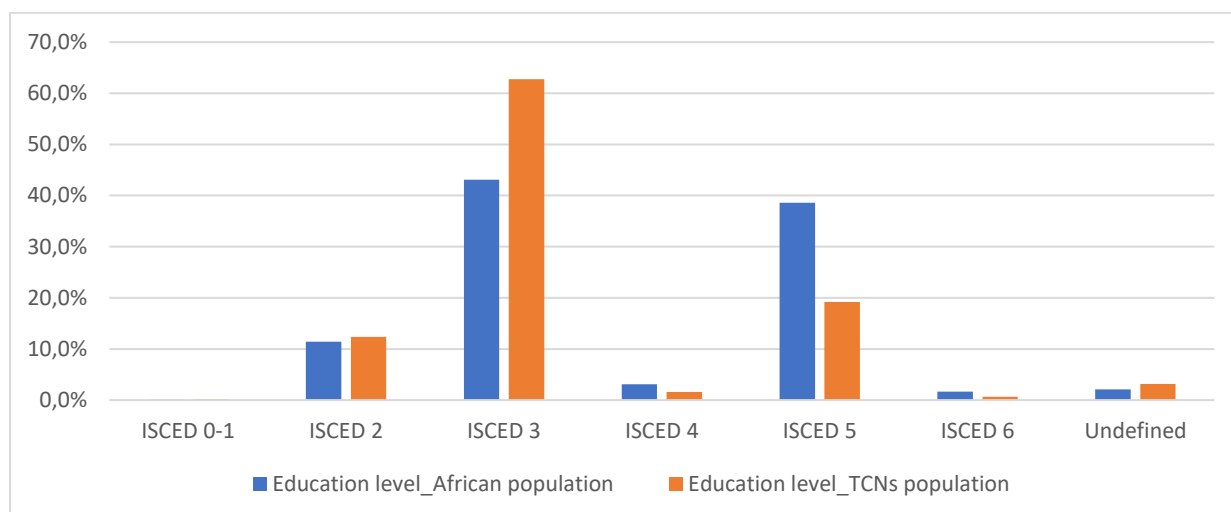
Figure 2: Migration trends of TCNs from African countries to Slovakia (2022-2025)



Source: Statistics of Foreign Police for 2022-2025.

According to data from the Central Labour Office for May 2025, a total of 1,255 African immigrants were employed in Slovakia (including those with a residence permit for work and those with an information card without a work permit), accounting for almost 1.4% of all TCNs. The number of African immigrants working has increased by 44% since May 2024. Most of them hold citizenship of Zimbabwe (26%), Egypt (23%), Tunisia (9%), Kenya (8%), Nigeria (8%), Ghana (4%) and Algeria (3%).

Figure 3: The level of education for the African migrant and overall TCN population in Slovakia (%)



Source: Central Labour Office, May 2025.

The African migrant population in Slovakia is characterised by comparatively higher levels of education: around 40% of African immigrants in Slovakia hold a university degree (at least a bachelor's

degree or equivalent, ISCED 5-6), compared to 20% of the overall TCN population (Figure 3). Upper secondary education (ISCED 3) is more prevalent in the overall TCN population than in the African population (63% vs 43% respectively). The lower secondary education (ISCED 2) is at a similar level for the overall TCN and the African population, with both oscillating around 12% and 11%, respectively.

African migration to Slovakia is gender-biased: around 17% of the African migrants working in Slovakia in 2025 were women. Most of them hold citizenship of Kenya (18%), Zimbabwe (14%), Egypt and Nigeria (11% for each), and Ghana (9%). The African women in Slovakia are even more educated than their African male counterparts; more than 55% hold higher education degrees (at least a bachelor's degree, ISCED 5-6), and 27% have completed upper secondary education (ISCED 3).

Noticeable differences can be observed among women and men in the African community in Slovakia, not only in the educational level attained, as outlined above, but also in their professions. Approximately 56% of the African female migrants work as specialists (56%), 10% as administrative workers, 9% as workers in services and retail and 13% as low-qualified and auxiliary workers. One third of the male workers are machine and equipment operators and assemblers (37%), followed by specialists (24%), low-skilled and auxiliary workers (14%), and workers in services and commerce (12%).

African nationals in higher education in Slovakia

The total number of international students studying in Slovakia reached about 25,815 in the academic year 2024/2025, nearly tripling the number in 2010/2011 (CVTI SR, n.d.). While EU/EEA students represented the dominant share of international students for most of the 2010s (with numbers oscillating between roughly 6,000 and 8,000 between 2011 and 2025), their share had fallen to approximately one quarter (26.4%) by 2024/2025. Non-EU (third-country) nationals now account for nearly three-quarters of all foreign students in Slovakia. The largest group by far is Ukrainian students, whose numbers rose sharply following the February 2022 invasion, reaching 13,843 in the academic year 2024/2025, about half (53.6%) of all international students in Slovakia (Kureková et al., 2026).

According to CVTI SR, 202 African students were enrolled at Slovak universities (all degree levels) in the academic year 2024/2025 (CVTI SR, n.d.), about 1% of the total of 19,509 third-country nationals (other continents, including non-EU Europeans and Ukrainians) studying in Slovakia during that academic year. Slovakia is becoming more attractive to international students due to factors such as EU-wide diploma recognition, higher-quality education than in their home countries, and affordable tuition fees. For some, studying abroad is part of an experience they want to gain during young adulthood. Foreign students report barriers to integration into society, problems with access to healthcare, and complicated bureaucracy related to their stay in the country (Skřivánková & Turnerová, 2024; Kureková et al., 2026).

Research about non-EU migration population in Slovakia

Research about incoming migration to Slovakia is rather scarce, which reflects that Slovakia was, until fairly recently a net-sending country, with migrant outflows significantly exceeding inflows (Kahanec & Kureková, 2016; Přívarová et al. 2022). The relevant stream of literature on immigration in Slovakia

explores the vulnerable position of third-country nationals (TCNs), including the barriers they face in accessing public services and in their integration. TCNs are particularly vulnerable in the labour market due to language barriers, limited social capital, and low trust in the Slovak public authorities. Research shows that immigrant groups lack access to integration support at the municipal level and opportunities to integrate into local communities due to reasons such as insufficient data and poor institutional responses to the increasing number of foreigners in Slovakia (Kriglerová et al., 2020). Research on the integration of Ukrainian temporary protection status holders emphasises that accessing health care, social support, childcare services, and well-tailored integration support within the Slovak school system presents challenges for migrant families (Bahna et al., 2025; Seresová & Štefančík, 2024). As a result, Ukrainian families are seeking access to information and certain social services through their own social networks. Another study reveals poor institutional responses by public enforcement agencies to victims of labour exploitation (Bargerová et al., 2014; Andrijasevic & Novitz, 2020; Chudžíková & Bargerová, 2018).

Policy framework towards non-EU migrants

It is important to contextualise migrant decision-making and experiences within the specific migration (policy) context in Slovakia. In very recent years, the country has transformed from a predominantly migrant-sending state into a migrant-receiving society (Letavajová et al., 2024). These dramatic shifts in migration trends have been reflected in the growing political salience of migration, reinvigorated by the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe and the influx of refugees from Ukraine since 2022 (Kucharczyk & Mesežnikov, 2018; Letavajová et al., 2024). Despite the increasing importance of migration, observers highlight structural barriers that complicate migrants' inclusion in society. This is evidenced by the MIPEX index, which ranks Slovakia among the worst-performing countries in Europe consistently over the past 20 years, with little overall improvement in immigrant integration (Yavçan & Gorgerino, 2025; Solano & Huddleston, 2020). The migration framework has been subject to frequent changes, the most recent ones dated to 2025 and the adaption of the EU Asylum and Migration Pact. This section presents key features of the migration and integration policy framework and discusses implications for African migrants, where relevant.

Migration policies

Entry, residence, and employment of TCNs in Slovakia are governed primarily by Act No. 404/2011 Coll.¹ on the Residence of Foreigners (*Zákon č. 404/2011 Z. z. o pobyte cudzincov*). The Act defines types of residence permits, the conditions for their issuance and renewal, and the rights attached to each status. Administrative responsibility for processing applications lies with the Bureau of Border and Foreign Police (*Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície*) under the Ministry of Interior.

Third-country nationals, including African migrants, may enter and reside in Slovakia through several legal pathways: (i) a combined residence and work permit for labour migrants; (ii) the EU Blue Card for highly qualified workers; (iii) family reunification permits; (iv) national (D-type) long-stay visas for

¹ Collection of Laws (*Zbierka zákonov*). In Slovak:

stays up to one year; (v) long-term residence after five years of continuous legal stay, and (vi) asylum or subsidiary protection for those fleeing persecution (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, n.d.-b). In practice, the majority of African nationals rely on standard EU single-permit or residence-of-foreigners procedures, as Slovakia maintains no preferential bilateral labour (see bilateral agreements), and few scholarship agreements with African countries; access to special labour and study schemes remains very limited.

The primary route through which TCNs, including African migrants, enter Slovakia is for labour migration (OECD, 2024a). For employment purposes, the primary document is the combined **residence and work permit** (*povolenie na pobyt a zamestnanie*) (International Organization for Migration, 2025e). To obtain this type of residence, an applicant must have a job offer from a Slovak employer, while the employer is obliged to register the vacancy with the local Labour Office (*miestny úrad práce*) (Act No. 5/2004 Coll. on Employment services).

Before hiring a non-EU/EEA worker, the employer must register the vacancy with the local Labour Office, where the position is advertised for at least 15–30 days to test the domestic labour market and give priority to Slovak or EU-national jobseekers. If no suitable local candidate² is found, the employer can proceed with the permit application, and the entire process of clearance, review, and issuance typically takes around 20–60 working days. This framework governs the main entry path for labour migrants, while asylum seekers follow a separate track, with initial decisions usually issued within 30 days of the interview, after which granted asylum allows legally regulated access to the labour market (European Commission, n.d.-a.; IOM, 2024; IOM, 2025c; Kriglerová et al., 2020). In June 2022, changes to asylum law linked to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees included financial assistance, counselling and accelerated entry to the labour market (OECD, 2024b). Effectively, Ukrainian refugees are offered facilitated access to the labour market, as evidenced by their strong attachment to it (Veselková & Hábel, 2023; Péscyová, 2026). On the other hand, this creates multiple categories of foreigners with different rights and obligations.

Highly qualified workers may enter through the **EU Blue Card scheme** (Act No. 5/2004 Coll. on Employment services), which requires a valid employment contract, recognised higher education qualifications, and a salary at least 1.2 times the average Slovak gross wage (IOM, 2025b). In practice, uptake of the Blue Card among African nationals has been limited, as credential recognition requirements, particularly for qualifications obtained outside the EU, and the salary threshold, create practical barriers. In general, the Blue Card has been strikingly underused in Slovakia; between 2021 and 2023 only 62 individuals used the EU Blue Card, compared to nearly 7,000 in Lithuania and 2,000 in Czechia (Supreme Audit Office of the Slovak Republic, 2025).

Other residence pathways include **family reunification permits** (for dependants of legally resident migrants), long-term residence (available after five years of continuous legal stay), and permanent

²In this context, local candidate means a jobseeker who is already registered as a jobseeker in SR (registered in the Labour Office's register), resident in Slovakia and is eligible to work without a separate work-permit or residence-for-employment requirement. This could be Slovak citizens, EU/EEA citizens legally residing in Slovakia, or also third-country nationals already residing and working in SR. The Labour Office is obliged to give them priority.

residence (Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, n.d.-b). Asylum and subsidiary protection are administered by the Migration Office (Migračný úrad) of the Ministry of Interior (Act No. 480/2002 Coll. on Asylum). The number of African nationals obtaining protection status in Slovakia remains small, as most protection has been granted to Ukrainian citizens in recent years.

National visas (known as D-type)/long stay visas are considered an important migration policy instrument. They represent a key tool for liberalising and accelerating the entry of non-EU labour migrants into Slovakia (European Commission, 2024). Implemented since 2022, National visa are designed for stays exceeding 90 days (from July 15 2026 120 days), but not exceeding 1 year, and serve primarily as an entry mechanism for third-country nationals to travel to Slovakia for the purpose of work, study, or family reunification, and subsequently apply for a temporary residence permit (Act No. 404/2011 Coll., on Residence of Foreigners and on the Amendment and Supplementation to Certain Acts; Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, n.d.-a).

A 2023 amendment introduced a National Visa for workers in shortage occupations, especially in the transport and industrial sectors. For shortage-linked visas, quotas are in place and eligibility remains restricted to nationals of 17 specifically listed countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Philippines, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Nepal, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan), explicitly excluding African nationalities (Regulation of the Government of the Slovak Republic No. 383/2023 Coll.). The scale of this shortage-occupation scheme has expanded quickly: the annual quota, initially capped at 2,000 national visas for 2023, was raised to 10,000 per calendar year by amendment No. 35/2024 Coll., effective 6 March 2024 (Regulation of the Government of the Slovak Republic No. 35/2024 Coll.). Following the introduction of this instrument, the number of Central Asian and Asian nationals has risen significantly. A national visa can also be issued to highly skilled professionals, such as graduates of prestigious universities and researchers, for whom no nationalities or quotas are specified. Within the National visa programme, African nationals find limited opportunities and are more likely to rely on standard EU single-permit or residence-of-a-foreigner procedures.

Bilateral labour agreements

Regarding labour mobility instruments, Slovakia does not engage in bilateral cooperation on labour mobility and mutual employment, even as other nations increasingly use such agreements to manage migratory flows. For instance, a deal reached with the Russian Federation regarding the employment of its people is no longer in effect. When it comes to TCNs, ties are limited to five working holiday arrangements for youth with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Korea, and Taiwan (Migration Partnership Facility, 2024; IOM Slovakia, 2021).

Bilateral agreements for students

In the field of education, Slovakia's bilateral scholarship program (administered by the Ministry of Education) covers short-term exchanges with about 20 partner third countries, including Egypt (the only African exception), China, Ukraine, and several non-EU countries. (GreatYop, n.d.). African students (except those from Egypt) cannot access those bilateral scholarships and apply through standard university admissions or programs such as the National Scholarship Programme (open to all)

(Slovak Academic Information Agency (SAIA), n.d.-b). Slovakia also participates in broader multilateral educational exchange frameworks such as CEEPUS and the International Visegrad Fund, however, both are structurally limited to Central and Eastern European member and partner states, without any African country as a direct partner in these programs (SAIA, n.d.-a). A recent unilateral development for 2026/2027 offers five fully funded scholarships exclusively for Kenyan students to study in Slovakia (covering tuition, living costs, and a Slovak language course) under the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, Kenya, 2026). Overall, university-level exchanges occur sporadically and lack government backing in most third countries, reinforcing reliance on standard EU student visas.

In sum, general labour entry for Africans and most non-EU nationals relies on standard EU single permits, the Blue Card scheme and National visa for highly skilled professionals. African migrants have no dedicated or preferential pathway into the Slovak labour market and rely on general instruments open to all third-country nationals. For students, national scholarship programme offers a few dedicated places to Kenyan students.

Integration policies

In 2025, Slovakia adopted a new Strategy for Governance of Asylum and Migration, which builds on the previous policy documents specifying migrant integration (European Commission, 2025). *The National Strategy for the Management of Asylum and Migration* (approved by the Government Resolution No. 300/2025) outlines key integration areas, including language and skill training, labour market integration assistance, job search support, and school integration for migrant children (Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, 2025). The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, along with the Ministry of Interior, play key roles in policymaking and coordination, with local authorities increasingly involved in integration initiatives. Many integration efforts are funded through national sources, EU funds (such as AMIF), and extra-budgetary resources.

Even though integration policies are guided by the aforementioned strategic documents, implementation has thus far lagged behind (Bargerová, 2023). Migrant integration support is fragmented between governance levels, without a clear institutional ownership of migration management agenda (Kováčová et al., 2024, Cortinovis, 2024). Moreover, Slovak legislation does not explicitly regulate the competences or obligations of higher territorial administrative units or municipalities relating to the integration of foreigners, with NGOs stepping in where local authorities lack capacity (Bargerová, 2023; Supreme Audit Office of the Slovak Republic, 2025; European Commission, 2026). This results into the fact that coverage and intensity of support tends to vary significantly across municipalities but the overall delivery is constrained by the fact that municipalities do not receive a dedicated budget for immigrant integration (Poliakova et al., 2026). An integration gap is also evident in the MIPEX evaluation, which consistently ranks Slovakia among the worst performers, particularly in barriers to immigrant labour market integration (Pécsyová, 2026).

Language and Skills Training

Language courses are formally considered a central integration tool, but the overall provision of Slovak-language training for immigrants remains scarce and fragmented; furthermore, it insufficiently

reflects foreigners' needs and is dependent on non- state actors rather than a well-established, sustainable, and state-funded system (Letavajová & Divinský, 2019; Kriglerová et al., 2020). Educational activities for migrants are mostly run by NGOs (such as the Mareena Foundation, IOM Slovakia Migration Information Centre), organised in larger cities, and thus hard to access for those living in smaller municipalities. Private options remain costly and very limited. In addition, the quality is often insufficient, particularly for people with international protection and non-European language backgrounds; advanced language training or intensive learning options are also very limited (Letavajová & Divinský, 2019).

Labour market integration policies

Labour market assistance is primarily coordinated by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, with the front-line delivery through regional UPSVaR (Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family) offices. They are responsible for the register of unemployed job seekers, vacancies, education and preparation for the labour market, and counselling services, while local Labour Offices issue work permits (ÚPSVaR, n.d.). Migrants in Slovakia primarily search for jobs via job portals, social media, personal networks, and employment agencies, as per IOM survey data, with limited use of formal public employment services. The IOM Migration Information Centre (MIC) provides targeted support for non-EU nationals, including free CV preparation, interview coaching, job counselling, and a multilingual guide (IOM, 2026b).

The two most significant policy instruments framing labour market integration are *the Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic* (Antimonopoly Office of the Slovak Republic, 2022) and *Strategy for Labour Mobility of Foreigners until 2020, with an Outlook to 2030* (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, n.d.-d). The Strategy for Labour Mobility of Foreigners was adopted by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in October 2018 and covers the integration of economic migrants, including measures to facilitate the recognition of their education, the increased importance of local-level integration, and updates to both the Migration Policy and the Integration Policy. Slovakia's Recovery and Resilience Plan propose specific measures, including simplifications to temporary residence and family reunification, and aims to attract more highly qualified migrant workers.

Moreover, the attraction and retention of global talent has been a part of several strategic national policy documents since 2020 (Skřivánková & Turnerová, 2024). The most comprehensive policy instrument is the Resilience and Recovery Plan (RRP) Component 10 (Prilákanie a udržanie talentov/Attracting and Retaining Talent), which sets the objective to double the share of highly qualified foreign workers in the Slovak workforce from 0.5% to 1%, and to balance the outflow and inflow of students at Slovak universities. This ambition is also reflected in the Higher Education Internationalisation Strategy 2030 (*Stratégia internacionalizácie vysokého školstva do roku 2030*), effective since 2021 (MŠVVŠ SR, 2021). The Strategy is the first dedicated framework that treats the attraction and retention of international students and researchers as a structural response to Slovakia's demographic and skill challenge. The core commitments include expanding English-language programmes, reducing administrative barriers for foreign applicants, and developing

targeted recruitment in priority countries. However, specific tools to support the integration and study-to-work transitions of the growing number of foreign students are yet to be scaled up. African and other foreign students in Slovakia face various institutional barriers that make settlement a viable option only to some (Kureková, et al., 2026).

Social welfare policies and immigrant social rights

In PACES, we conceptualise social rights as enablers of integration, since education, health, and housing are prerequisites for economic and social participation (Phillimore, Morrice & Strang, 2024). They directly shape migrants' lived experiences, whether from an individual perspective or that of migrant families. In Slovakia, broader social welfare policies affecting migrants generally address access to housing, education, health care, and social benefits, but with notable limitations compared with those available to nationals (Koning & Kureková, 2026). We briefly review the respective social welfare policy areas related to immigrant access and, in the empirical section, present research participants' experiences accessing these policies.

Housing

Slovakia's social rental housing system is substantially underdeveloped, leaving migrants largely dependent on the private rental market with limited public support mechanisms. Research also points to significant uncertainty regarding housing support and changing eligibility criteria, which may undermine migrants' long-term stability and integration prospects (Bahna et al., 2025; Kriglerová et al., 2020).

Officially, the State Housing Policy Concept to 2020 (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, n.d.-c) was the state's main framework in the area of housing. The state's primary role is to foster a stable market environment that enables households to secure housing suited to their income levels. As part of state support measures, foreigners and migrants may be eligible for municipal social housing (based on Act No. 443/2010 Coll. on subsidies for housing development and on social housing; Act No. 150/2013 Coll. on the State Housing Development Fund). The requirements include permanent or temporary residence in Slovakia, and the income must be high enough to cover the rent, while not exceeding the household's subsistence minimum eight times³ (Nájomné bývanie, n.d.). The State Housing Development Fund enables TCNs to obtain a soft loan for the acquisition of a dwelling when requirements stipulated by law are met (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, n.d.-a).

Temporary protection holders: Persons granted temporary protection who legally reside in Slovakia may arrange accommodation independently, or seek assistance from assistance centres, NGOs, or municipal offices in securing accommodation (IOM, 2026a). For Ukrainians under temporary protection, a state housing subsidy scheme was in place- but was significantly tightened in July 2024: from July 2024, housing compensation for accommodation providers is payable only during the first 120 days after a person is granted temporary protection status, with exceptions retained only for

³ When calculating the regulated rent, various types of income of the working members of the household are taken into account. This is net income, i.e. income after deducting insurance premiums and tax advances.

vulnerable groups such as children under five, persons with disabilities, and people over 65. Since March 2025, the subsidy is provided for the initial 60 days (IOM, 2017).

Third country nationals (except Ukrainians): There is no equivalent housing subsidy at the national level, and access to social housing is subject to the same general means-tested framework as Slovak citizens, within which migrants, particularly those without permanent residency, are poorly positioned (IOM, 2017). Asylum seekers and foreigners granted asylum in Slovakia may apply for social housing flats in selected towns, while asylum seekers may also arrange their own accommodation according to their resources and preferences (IOM, 2017). Municipal rental and social housing are generally available only to permanent residents and are further limited by low capacity and long waiting periods. Foreigners also face discrimination in the private rental market, including reluctance from landlords and higher rental prices (Kriglerová et al., 2020; Kriglerová et al., 2021).

Standard housing allowance is available only to persons in material need, who are eligible also for the housing allowance (Act No. 417/2013 Coll., on Assistance in Material Need) (including certain family members) who meet the legal conditions set under social-support legislation (most importantly- long-term/permanent residence).

Education

According to the School Act, children of foreigners with a valid residence permit can access public education for free. Under the Act, foreign children have the same rights to education, meals, and accommodation in the primary and secondary schools as Slovak citizens. Since September 2025, mandatory education applies to all refugee children aged 5-16, including those with temporary protection, as a response to Ukrainian children living in Slovakia while not being enrolled in the school system (Act No. 245/2008 Coll., on Upbringing and Education; UNHCR Slovakia, n.d.). However, there are no clear integration programs for children of TCN immigrants; policies are still more focused on Ukrainian children's integration and are mostly led by NGOs. Organisations such as SME SPOLU, the Slovak Humanitarian Council, the Centre for Inclusive Education (Inklucentrum) or Caritas organise children integration activities.

Municipalities often lack clear information about the availability and use of educational services for foreign children. The most accessible services are kindergartens and leisure centres, while support measures such as teaching assistants remain limited and conditional. Overall, municipalities show insufficient awareness of their responsibilities regarding the integration of foreign children (Kriglerová et al., 2020). Furthermore, formal access to education alone is insufficient for meaningful integration without systematic language support, psychosocial assistance, intercultural mediation, and effective coordination among schools, municipalities, and support organisations (UNICEF, 2024).

University education

The 2020 Strategy for the Internationalisation of Higher Education until 2030 aims to increase accessibility of Slovak universities for foreign students, teachers, researchers, and artists (MŠVVŠ SR, 2021). This includes expanding international scholarship programs, improving university support services, and facilitating credential recognition to promote inflows of migrants for study and research purposes. TCNs with valid temporary or permanent residence may study at Slovak universities on the

same formal conditions as Slovak/ EU citizens, if they meet admission criteria (a recognised school leaving certificate, and fulfilment of specific programme requirements) (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2024). If the applicant is not yet a resident of Slovakia and is coming to Slovakia solely for study, they must first apply for a temporary residence permit for study purposes⁴. Those permits are granted for the expected duration of the studies, with a maximum of 6 years (extendable), or, in some cases, Type D visas are granted. Despite increasing internationalisation efforts, foreign students may still face administrative, linguistic, and integration-related barriers when accessing higher education and university support services in Slovakia (UNICEF, 2024; Kriglerová et al., 2026; Kureková, et al., 2026).

Health care

All foreign nationals staying in Slovakia must be covered by health insurance (IOM, 2023). Migrants legally residing in Slovakia generally have access to emergency and primary health care in the same way that Slovak citizens do, as they are insured under the general public insurance scheme (Act No. 580/2004 Coll., on Public Health Insurance). For labour migrants on standard temporary residence permits, access to healthcare is tied to employment-based insurance contributions, meaning those in irregular or informal work arrangements may lack effective coverage. Foreigners who are not publicly insured, have access to private insurance, or can get a reimbursement, if they are insured in another member state, subsidiary protection holders, tolerated residence holders, temporary refugees, asylum seekers (or ones applying for asylum in SR, etc.) (Act No. 580/2004 Coll., on Public Health Insurance). They receive care funded directly by the state via the Ministry of Health, which creates additional administrative tasks for private providers and can discourage them from treating such patients. Since 2023, the Slovak government has extended healthcare coverage for adult temporary protection holders (Ukraine only) from emergency-only to full healthcare coverage (this was already in place for refugee children) (Union Health Insurance Company, n.d.).

Social benefits

Slovakia's basic social protection network includes sickness benefits, maternity benefits, disability care, old-age care, unemployment support, and minimum income guarantees, with social assistance organised through regional state administration offices, local self-government, and NGOs. Social benefits are granted based on income levels, legal residence and employment status. Employees and self-employed persons (including TCNs) meeting the income conditions are mandatorily insured (this automatically covers sickness, pensions, accident, unemployment, and guarantee insurance) (SAIA, n.d.-c). Migrants holding permanent or long-term residence permits, as well as persons granted temporary protection (primarily refugees from Ukraine), may also qualify for selected means-tested social assistance benefits (*dávky v hmotnej núdzi*), including housing supplements, family benefits, and other social support payments. In addition to legal residence status, applicants' income must fall

⁴ This (and any other documents required) may be submitted at the SR embassy accredited for the country of which the applicant is a citizen, or in the country in which the applicant has his/her residence, or at the Foreign Police competent according to the applicant's place of residence., then applicant have to participate in a personal interview assessment.

below the subsistence minimum (*životné minimum*), which amounts to EUR 284.13 per month. (IOM, 2025a).

Third-country nationals (not employed), or students receive minimal or no support for their specific social needs, mostly only parental or child allowance, as those are not contributory-based (SAIA, n.d.-c). However, if a student works part-time, obligations depend on the contract type. Under a student work agreement, both parties pay contributions, and the employer registers the student, but the student can waive social contributions for one contract with written notice (EURAXESS Slovakia, n.d.).

African highly skilled migrants in Slovakia: analysis of research findings

Description of the sample

Below we present the main socio-demographic characteristics of research participants (Tables 1-3). The interviewed sample comes from diverse countries of origin in Africa, it is highly educated and came to Slovakia via legal channels for the purpose of work or study.

Over a third of research participants are from Nigeria, followed by those from Kenya, who make up about a quarter of the sample (Table 1). Within Nigeria, most of them (5) are from Lagos, while half of those from Kenya (4) come from the capital Nairobi. Participants from Ghana make up 12% of the sample, while those from Cameroon represent 9%. Other participants came from other parts of the African continent, namely Tanzania, Angola, South Africa, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Egypt (born in Kuwait).

Table 1: Country of birth

Country of birth	No. of interview participants	Share of interview participants (%)
Nigeria	12	35%
Kenya	8	24%
Ghana	4	12%
Cameroon	3	9%
Tanzania	1	3%
Angola	1	3%
South Africa	1	3%
Sudan	1	3%

South Sudan

Zimbabwe

Kuwait

1	3%
1	3%
1	3%

Source: Own data. [1_birthcountry]. N=34.

Note: The country of birth was the same as the country of citizenship for most of the participants. The country of reference was different from the country of birth for five participants; in the case of two, they referred to both their country of birth and another country they had lived before migrating to Slovakia.

Migrant status varies among participants, with about one-third holding student visas (13), whose expiration dates correspond to their graduation dates. After graduation, graduates have 9 months to find a job and obtain a work permit/temporary residence in Slovakia. There are 8 participants with temporary residence/work permit, 6 with permanent residence, and 2 international protection holders. The remaining participants hold Blue Card (1), diplomatic visa (1), and visa type D (1).

The median length of stay in Slovakia for our sample is 3 years, while the average length is 4.7 years. Six participants resided in the country for 8 years or more. The number of men in the sample significantly exceeds that of women (68% vs 32%), which reflects the demographic structure of the African immigrant community in Slovakia. The average age of the sample is 33, a relatively young group, which is associated with a high proportion of students among the participants (50%) (Table 2). Participants with higher education dominated the group, with 71% reporting having completed tertiary education (ISCED 5 and above), while 24% reported having completed upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED 3-4). Only 6% reported having completed primary or lower secondary education (ISCED 1-2) (Table 2).

Table 2: Demographic characteristics

Median/Average no. of years living in Slovakia	Male : female ratio (%)	Average age	Low-medium-high education (%)	Worker vs student status (%)
3/3.3*	68:32	33	6-24-71	50:50

Source: Own data. [duration_stay; 4_gender; 3_age; 8_education_level; 11_workstatus]. N=34.

*Notes: *The longest duration of stay was 20 years. When excluding outliers (8+ years of stay), the average duration of stay is 3.3 years.*

Almost half of the participants (47%) live alone in Slovakia, 26% of them live with a spouse, 3% with relatives, 9% with friends (15% reported “other” category) (Table 3). This also shows that 41%

participants were single, 53% were in a relationship or married, and 6% were divorced. Of this sample, only 35% participants living in Slovakia have relatives living in Slovakia as well. Approximately one-third of the participants have children, but only half of those live with their children in Slovakia (Table 3).

Table 3: Family status

Living status (alone: with husband/wife/partner: with relatives: with friends: other) (%)	Relationship status (single: relationship/married: divorced) (%)	With children	Living in the same household (out of those with children)
47:26:3:9:15	41:53:6	32%	50%

Source: Own data. [7_livingstatus; 5_relationshipstatus; 6_children_0; 6_children_1]. N=34.

Half of the participants are employed (17), and 38% (13) are students (out of which 9 have a part-time job). Four participants do not currently have a job (one is registered as unemployed, two are building own businesses, and one was expected to start a job after his paperwork is finalised). Seven participants have experienced school-to-work transition during their stay, graduating from the university in Slovakia (Table 4).

Generally, African migrants coming to Slovakia are highly educated. As indicated earlier, around 70% of the participants have achieved a university education degree (23) (10 master's, 12 bachelor's, 1 PhD). Six participants have obtained secondary education, and four have obtained primary/upper primary education. One participant has obtained a postgraduate diploma after their bachelor's (Figure 4).

Around 38.2% (13) currently hold student status; it includes 5 PhD students, 4 master's students, 4 bachelor's students studying various fields of study, including economics and business (7), mathematical science (3), medicine (dentistry) (2) and computer science (1), and other fields not specified.

Table 4: Work and student status

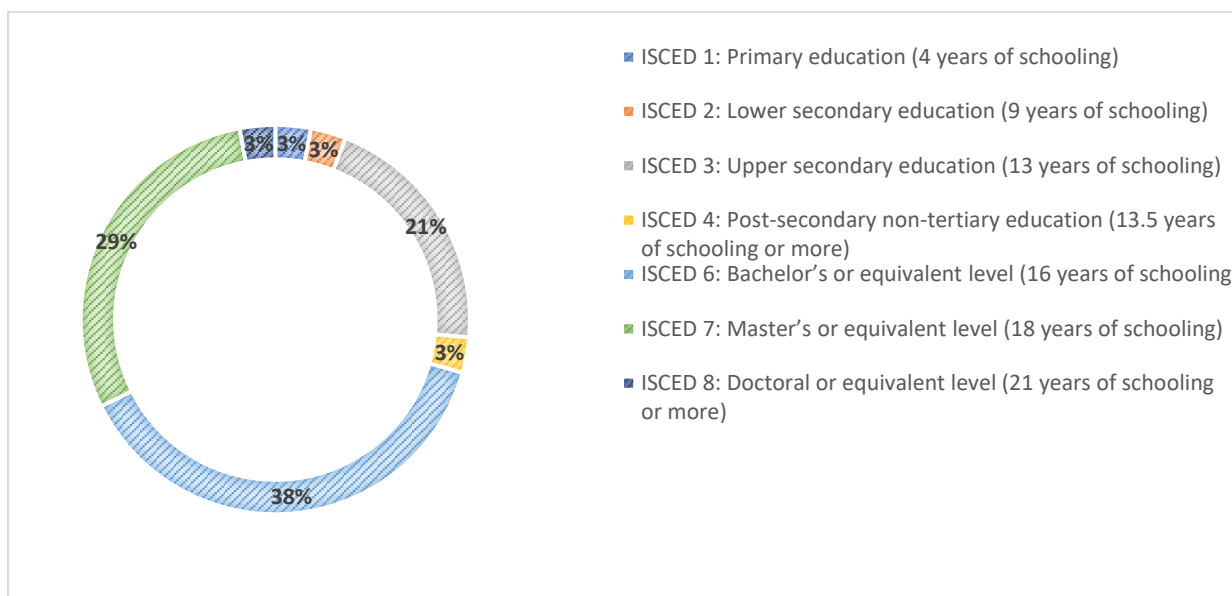
Work status⁵	Current Student status	The prevailing field of completed education	School-to-work transition
50%	38.2%	Business, administration and law (34%), Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics (28%), Information and Communication Technologies (13%), Health and welfare (9%)	21%

⁵ Only those who work and did not report holding a student status are included in this figure.

Source: Own data. [11_workstatus; 11_2_studentstatus; 10_education_field; 11_4_workschooltransition]. N=34.

Note: Of all 34 participants; the seven transitions counted here are already included within "in labour force".

Figure 4: The highest level of education obtained among the research participants (%)



Source: Own data. [8_education_level]. N=34.

Note: ISCED: Short-cycle tertiary education (13.5 years of schooling or more), as the highest level of education, was not reported by any participant.

Bratislava and Košice are cities of the current residence of the interview participants (65% and 26% respectively). The two largest cities in Slovakia are important regional economic and cultural centres, with low unemployment rates (2.7% and 3.3% respectively for 2025) and a range of study opportunities at public and private higher education institutions. While Bratislava, as the capital city with a population of about 480,000 citizens, is located in Western Slovakia, Košice, with a population of almost 230,000 citizens, is located in Eastern Slovakia.

Migration experience

Main motives for migrating to Slovakia are manifold and could be categorised as follows: (1) pursuing higher education (mostly university studies); (2) seeking a job opportunity in the international or European labour markets; and (3) family reunion reasons; (4) violence occurring in the countries of origin or other struggles of political nature. Only a few participants came to Slovakia to seek asylum (SK_20; SK_21; SK_32), due to political reasons or violence occurring in their communities of origin.

Those who decided to pursue university studies in Slovakia were motivated by comparatively low tuition fees and living costs relative to those in Western European countries. As reported by a participant from Nigeria (SK_01), who completed his university studies in Slovakia, the primary reason

was the affordability of the studies, combined with the quality of education: *“It was cheaper than any other school in the European Union. That was the main determinant for me, and I saw that, I read the structure of the program, and I liked it. I applied, and luckily, they gave me admission.”* Some of the participants even received financial aid for studying in Slovakia; three participants from Kenya (SK_22; SK_24; SK_33) have been beneficiaries of the Slovak Government Stipend Program. Being a beneficiary of the programme also eases the relocation process, which includes faster visa issuance procedures, participation in a language course prior to the start of studies, and health insurance coverage. Other university students in the sample were self-sponsored; they mostly received financial aid from their families or communities, or earned money themselves before starting their studies.

Interestingly, some of the participants were driven by the pursuit of a scientific career track; a few applied to the doctoral programme in Slovakia because they found scholars there with expertise in their research field of interest (SK_12). The doctoral stipend, determined by Slovak legislation and guaranteed for the entire duration of studies at public universities, was also viewed positively by some participants and played a key role in their decision to relocate to Slovakia.

Most of those who migrated for job opportunities were not seeking employment directly in Slovakia; rather, they were seeking jobs in the international or European job market and encountered a suitable offer in (mainly) multinational companies in Slovakia. One participant from Nigeria lost his job at his previous place of residence (SK_01), prompting him to look for opportunities abroad. Two participants (both of them from Nigeria) were football players and were offered employment contracts by the local football club. One of the participants from Kenya had a connection to missionary health-care-related work in their country of origin (SK_28). While the participants usually received assistance from the employer to navigate the visa processes, in some cases (SK_10; SK_18; SK_24), they used the services of an agency or legal consultants specialised in providing paid assistance with relocating to the country for work purposes.

Research participants (SK_20; SK_21; SK_32) from Cameroon and Sudan came to Slovakia to escape violence and economic hardship in their home countries. Two participants studied at universities in Ukraine. After the full-scale war erupted in 2022, they applied for asylum in Slovakia and decided to continue their university studies. In some cases, participants noted that a combination of factors influenced their decision to move to Slovakia. One participant found a spouse in their home country and relocated to Slovakia to build a life together, while acknowledging that the increasing level of violence and seeking a stable job opportunity were also part of his migrant decision (SK_25). Some participants found it hard to have a suitable job in their home country or region, even after obtaining higher education (SK_01; SK_02). These motivations intersected with other reported aspirations, such as to acquire further work or travel experiences and to utilise better their skills on the job market (SK_02; SK_34).

The vast majority of the participants went through visa issuance procedures at embassies in one of the African countries. Several of them reported that the visa-related processes were time-consuming and relatively costly. The Slovak Republic's visa-administering embassies operate only in a few African countries; as a result, in many cases, participants had to incur additional expenses to travel to other countries or even stay for several days. The lengthy process involved a waiting period for a visa and compiling all the paperwork required for a visa application. The administrative burden was reinforced

by an overly bureaucratic process and by inefficient local public authorities that issued the required documents in their country of origin (such as clearance-related documents) (SK_18). . In some cases, initial visa application was unsuccessful, and the person had to reapply.

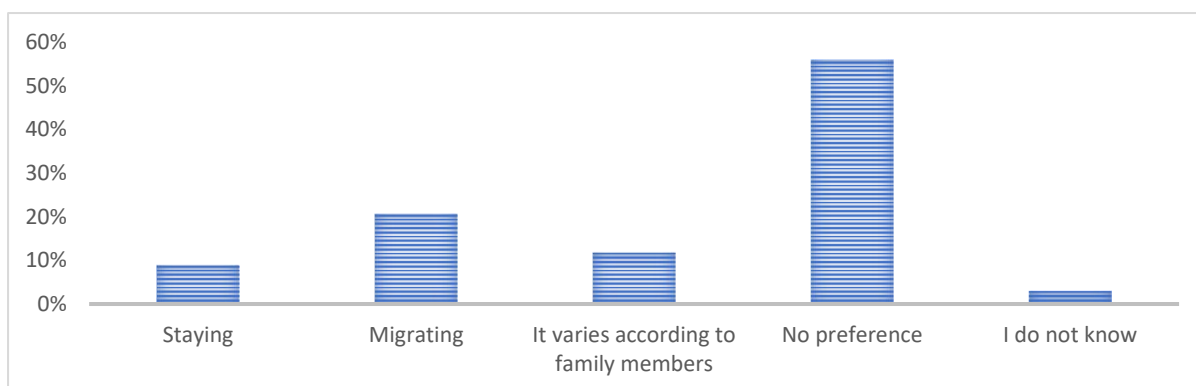
On the other hand, some participants reported that the administrative requirements for visa procedures in Slovakia were more endurable than those in other European countries (SK_02; SK_05; SK_23), and this was a factor in deciding which country to migrate to. These requirements relate mainly to proof of financial means; while in Slovakia a lower amount in the bank account (about 4,000 EUR) was required to be declared, in some other Western European countries, around 10,000 EUR or more was required to obtain a visa. Some of the participants were guided by their relatives living in Slovakia about the visa-related paperwork and processes.

Some of the participants, before relocating to Slovakia, used their social capital (even outside Slovakia, e.g. in their home countries) to learn about the country (SK_12; SK_13; SK_15; SK_19; SK_28; SK_29; SK_32; SK_33), or, in some cases (SK_04), already had a relative living in Slovakia. Nevertheless, most participants had little to no knowledge of Slovakia and learned about it shortly before they applied for a visa. The most common sources of information before moving to Slovakia were, thus, the Internet and word of mouth: *“We learned about Czechoslovakia, but I did not know about Slovakia. It is a very small country. So, I googled something, and I asked some Africans on Facebook, [in] some groups, how it is here, if it is safe, etc. But I did not know much. I knew it was in the European Union.”* (SK_10)

An appealing factor in deciding to move to Slovakia was its reputation for being peaceful (SK_01; SK_02; SK_29). *“For the crimes, I didn't really check because all I know is that it's a peaceful country. It's not always about the economy; it's also about peace. If you have that, you can build, no matter how small or big it is.”* (SK_02)

Interestingly, merely four participants claimed that their families have strong social norms regarding migration that would shape their migration decision. More than half of the participants (56%) claimed that there is no preference (for migrating or staying) in their family, while 21% indicated a preference towards migrating to another country. Four participants (12%) reported that their preferences vary by family member, while three participants (9%) claimed that their families preferred them to stay in their countries of origin (Figure 5). For one participant (SK_33), there is a rule that the children go to study abroad, but they are also expected to return. One participant acknowledged that the practice in their family was to send a member abroad (SK_08).

Figure 5: Preference towards migration in the family (%)



Source: Own data. [21_familypreferences]. N=34.

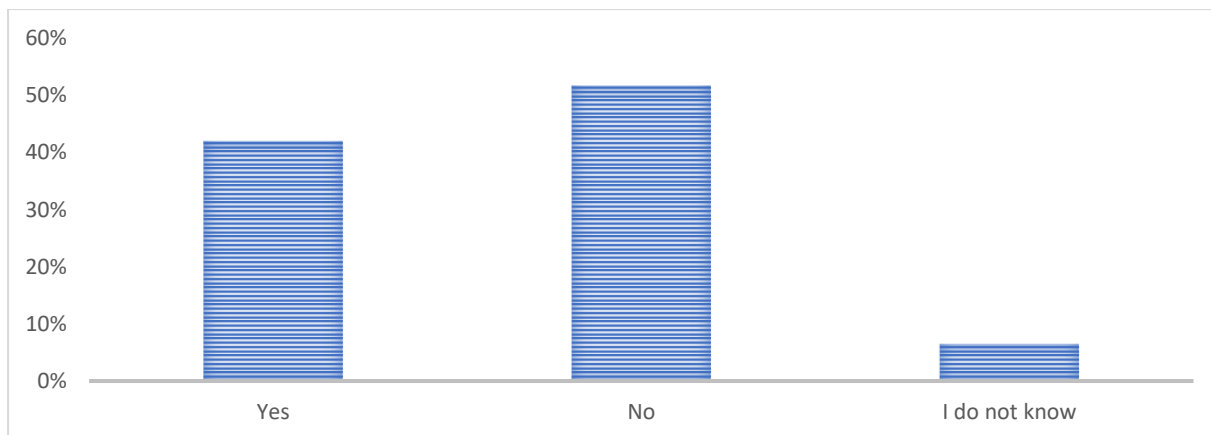
Note: Q21: Overall, would you say that in your family there is a preference towards...

About 76% of the interview participants (26 out of 34) have relatives who live abroad, while 21% (7 participants) responded that none of their relatives lives abroad. Of those whose relatives live abroad, 77% reported regular contact, while 23% reported no regular contact (N=26). Half of those who are in contact with their relatives, communicate every week (10 participants), 20% on a yearly basis (4), while 15% daily and monthly (N=20).

Some participants claimed that migration was often discussed within the family. Some family members have already migrated abroad (SK_01; SK_18; SK_31; SK_26; SK_23) or have experienced family migration in the past (SK_27; SK_17). Migration was also discussed in the context of work opportunities or worsening economic situation in the previous place of residence (SK_01; SK_10; SK_20), safety situation in their home country or community (mainly in Cameroon, South Africa, and Sudan) (SK_18; SK_20; SK_32) or a way of acquiring new life experiences (SK_28) and pursuing university studies (SK_09). Some families began discussing migration after taking initial steps, such as securing a scholarship abroad (SK_33). One participant (SK_29) indicated that the parents did not initially accept moving to Slovakia, preferring other Western countries or not moving at all (SK_19). One participant from Cameroon stated that the family did not discuss it, as migration was a response to the safety situation in their country (SK_21). Some families also discussed safety issues in the destination country (SK_03; SK_06; SK_07; SK_28), particularly following the 2015 migration crisis.

As shown in Figure 6, 42% of participants reported encountering advertisements about the dangers of migration or difficulties in destination countries; these included billboards (SK_28), banners or posters advertised by international organisations (SK_14), or government campaigns (SK_04). Some of the participants reported encountering news and information in Facebook groups about those who migrated to Europe irregularly and experienced hardship during their journeys due to various dangers (SK_18; SK_24; SK_26; SK_33). Most of them do not report that these advertisements discouraged them from migrating, since they were already informed about legal pathways (SK_24) or the information was about the selected countries known for labour exploitation treatment of the African immigrants, such as the Gulf states, as reported by the participants from Kenya and Ghana (SK_26; SK_33).

Figure 6: Having encountered experience with advertisements about dangers or difficulties related to migration (%)

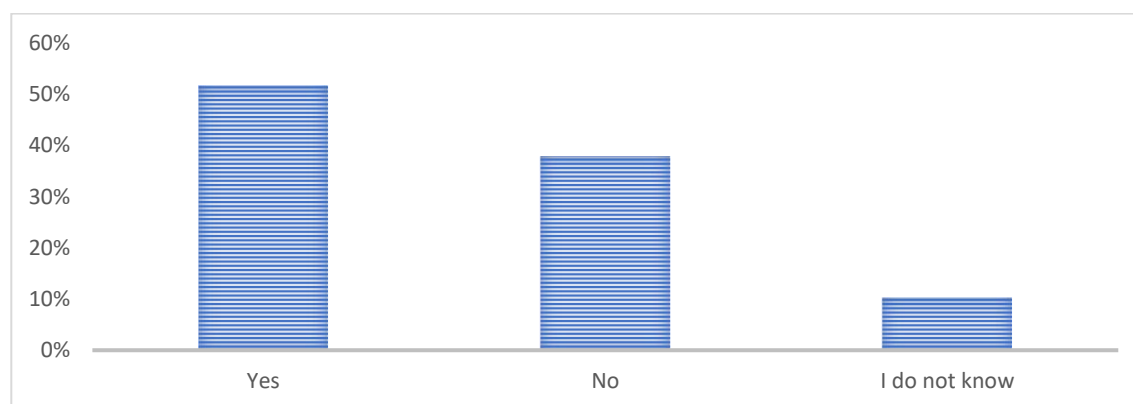


Source: Own data. [99_migrationads]. N=31.

Note: Q99: In your community of origin or along your journey, have you noticed any advertisements that inform about the dangers of migration or the difficulties in destination countries (information campaigns)?

Approximately half of the participants encountered people who were sent back to their countries of origin from Europe (mostly from Western Europe or US) (Figure 7), such as those who were not granted asylum (SK_05) or those who worked illegally or whose visa had expired (SK_04). For most, this knowledge did not affect the participants' decisions to migrate to Europe. One participant from Zimbabwe claimed that this information made him more aware of the potential dangers of complying with the rules (regarding travel documents and permits) and of potential fraudulent practices related to migration or work permits (SK_14). Some of them reported that this information fuelled their worries about being deported if they lose a job or under other circumstances (SK_04; SK_32).

Figure 7: Having encountered experience with people who were sent back to their origin countries from Europe (%)



Source: Own data. [100_irregularmigration]. N=29.

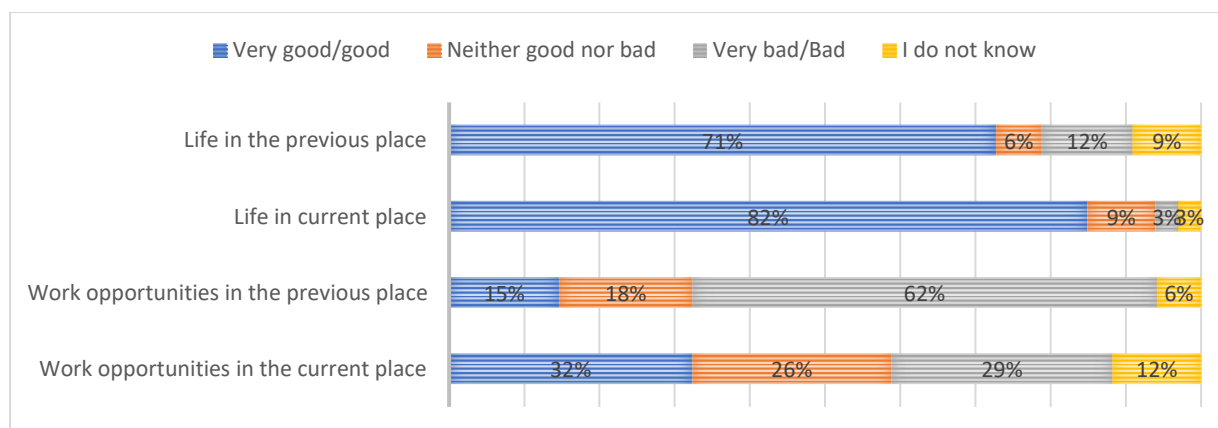
Note: Q100: In your place of origin or along your journey, did you encounter people who were sent back to their origin countries from Europe because they were there irregularly (return policies)?

About 39% of the interview participants responded that, compared to the initial migration plan, their journey was similar, while 61% reported the opposite. Participants claimed that their actual migration journey deviated from initial plans due to manifold factors: some of the participants initially considered or even made first steps (e.g., applying for a student visa) for migrating to other countries (usually Western European or North America) before they made their decision to relocate to Slovakia (SK_10; SK_22; SK_23; SK_24; SK_26; SK_28). Two participants planned to remain in their previous communities (SK_27; SK_34); however, due to a lack of opportunities in their profession (in both cases, science), they moved to Europe.

Reflecting on integration experiences and future in Slovakia

Participants' reflections on life in Slovakia reveal a clear tension between material stability and limited social belonging. This broader pattern is also reflected in participants' assessments of quality of life and work opportunities in Slovakia compared with their previous places of residence (Figure 8). While living conditions in Slovakia were generally evaluated more positively, assessments of employment opportunities were more ambivalent, particularly regarding migrants' long-term prospects and opportunities for advancement. While many describe their everyday lives as functional and predictable, deeper integration into Slovak society remains uneven and strongly shaped by host-country structures rather than by their backgrounds or countries of origin.

Figure 8: Assessment of life and work opportunities in the current and previous place of residence (%)



Source: Own data. [28_lifequality_current; 29_lifequality_previous; 30_workopportunities_current; 31_workopportunities_previous]. N=34.

Note: Q28. Would you say that your life in this place of residence today is...; Q29. How was your life in the previous place of residence in which you lived?; Q30. Would you say that today in this place of residence, the work opportunities for people are... Q31. And how were the work opportunities in your previous place of residence?

In terms of opportunities, participants frequently emphasise the importance of employment and basic security. Having a job is described as the foundation of stability and self-reliance: "I got a job, and that was an important start. I got a salary, I could rent a place to stay." (SK_10) Access to healthcare, public transport, and safety are also evaluated positively, particularly in comparison with countries of origin or previous host countries. One participant noted that simply observing how public transport

functioned was *“incredible,”* highlighting the perceived efficiency and reliability of everyday infrastructure in Slovakia (SK_25).

At the same time, participants identified persistent difficulties and barriers, most notably related to language. Slovak language proficiency is repeatedly described as central to integration, yet difficult to acquire under current conditions. Several participants noted that limited language skills did not prevent everyday functioning, which in turn reduced the urgency of learning Slovak: *“I feel like it’s not affecting any part of my life, so it’s not a priority.”* (SK_05)

However, language was also described as the decisive factor for deeper integration: *“The only issue with integration is language. “If you’re able to solve the issue of language, you can integrate much better in the other community.”* (SK_02) The participants frequently contrasted Slovakia with previous host countries, where language learning had been more institutionally supported and embedded in everyday interactions. In Slovakia, opportunities to practice Slovak were described as limited, even in social relationships: *“Even the Slovak friends that you have, they want to learn English with you, so they don’t speak Slovak with you.”* (SK_02) This reliance on English was seen as enabling daily life while simultaneously constraining social participation.

Another major barrier identified by participants concerns bureaucracy and legal uncertainty, which they experience as stressful and exclusionary. Navigating residence permits, foreign police procedures, and administrative requirements is described as demanding specialised knowledge. As one participant explained, *“It’s not easy to actually navigate through Slovak bureaucracy, you need someone who actually understands the system.”* (SK_05) Frequent changes to rules and insufficient communication were described as creating uncertainty and vulnerability, particularly for those without strong support networks.

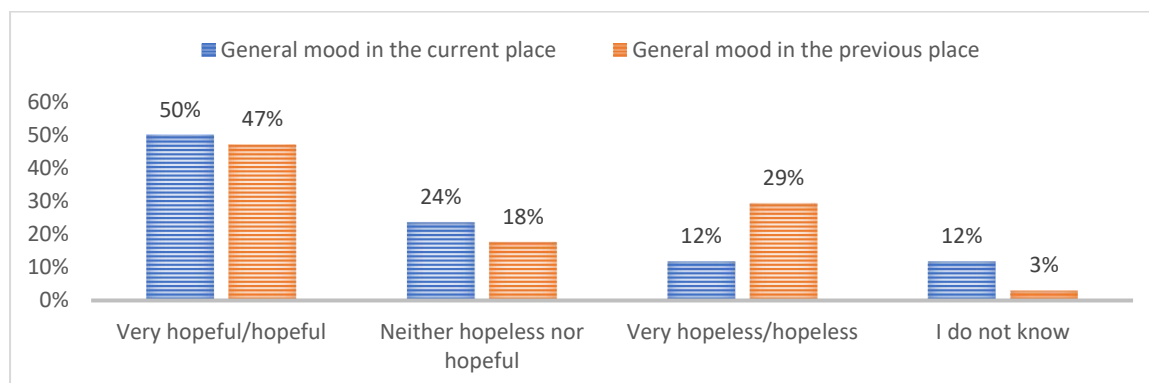
Experiences of othering and racialization further shape general impressions of life in Slovakia. Several participants described being constantly reminded of their foreignness in everyday interactions. One participant summarised this experience succinctly: *“Every corner tries to remind you that you’re a foreigner.”* (SK_30) Such experiences contribute to emotional strain and, for some, a retreat from broader social engagement.

Self-assessments of integration reflect these mixed experiences. Some participants describe themselves as integrated in functional terms, emphasising employment, housing, and self-sufficiency: *“I feel integrated. I have a job, I have a place.”* (SK_10) However, they also differentiate between functional inclusion and social integration, noting limited interaction with local people: *“If you ask if I am interacting with the local people, then I say I am not integrated.”* (SK_10) Language proficiency again emerges as central to feeling part of society, with one participant stating: *“When I learned more Slovak, I started to feel part of the society.”* (SK_30)

Participants’ statements suggest that opportunities and constraints in everyday life are primarily shaped by host-country factors, such as the availability of work, accessibility of services, language support, and administrative practices. While Slovakia is often described as a place where a stable life is possible, full social integration is experienced as uneven and conditional, strongly dependent on language acquisition, institutional accessibility, and the openness of the social environment. Migrants in Slovakia presented a mixed picture of their perceptions of the country’s general mood (Figure 9),

with half seeing the atmosphere as hopeful and the other half much less optimistic. Participants' narratives suggest that perceptions of the general mood were shaped not only by safety and predictability, but also by experiences of social distance, political polarization, and feelings of exclusion.

Figure 9: Assessment of the general mood in the current and previous place of residence (%)



Source: Own data. [36_generalmood_current; 37_generalmood_previous]. N=34.

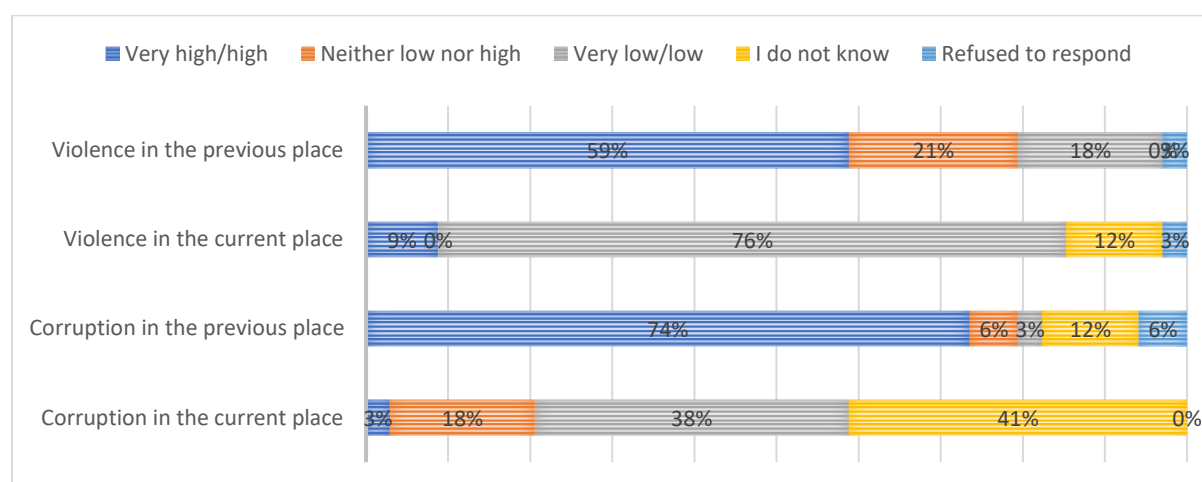
Note: Q36. What do you perceive is the general mood/atmosphere in this place of residence?; Q37. And how was the mood in your previous place of residence?

Across interviews, participants' future perspectives in Slovakia are cautiously pragmatic rather than aspirational. Slovakia is primarily framed as a place of stability, safety, and temporary opportunity, not necessarily a final destination. While many describe their present life as "good" or "very good," this assessment is strongly tied to immediate stability rather than long-term belonging. Slovakia is often framed as a place where life can be temporarily organised, income secured, or recovery from past instability achieved, rather than as a definitive future home. This is clearly reflected in statements such as: "My plan right now, just stay in Slovakia one more year or two years maximum. Then if I don't move somewhere in Europe, I will be back home, of course." (SK_29) Future perspectives are often contingent on structural factors such as employment opportunities, financial security, and legal status, as participants noted that their lives are "not there yet" due to unresolved financial and social challenges (SK_32).

When comparing Slovakia with previous places of residence, participants consistently emphasise differences in basic security, infrastructure, and predictability of everyday life. Slovakia is described as a context where access to electricity, water, heating, transport, and public services can largely be taken for granted. One participant explicitly contrasted this with South Africa: "In Slovakia I never had to worry about heat, water, electricity... I could take the bus every day to work." (SK_18) In previous places of residence, in Africa, everyday life was often marked by infrastructural breakdowns and constant uncertainty, including power outages, lack of water, and unsafe public spaces. These experiences significantly shaped participants' appreciation of stability in Slovakia, even when other aspects of life there were perceived as difficult.

A second major contrast concerns violence and corruption. Across interviews, Slovakia is overwhelmingly perceived as a low-violence, low-corruption environment, particularly when compared with countries of origin or other previous places of residence, such as Kenya, South Africa, Sudan, or Nigeria (Figure 10). The participants repeatedly stressed that in Slovakia they did not need to pay bribes to access documents or basic services, unlike in their countries of origin: *"In Slovakia, I never had to pay something to get my document processed. In [country of origin] ... I had to pay for that."* (SK_33) Violence in previous places of residence is described as widespread or structurally embedded, sometimes even deliberately used to maintain control, as in Sudan (SK_32). While some participants acknowledge experiences of racism or verbal hostility in Slovakia, these are generally framed as isolated or recent developments rather than as defining features of everyday life.

Figure 10: Assessment of the level of corruption and violence in the current and previous place of residence (%)



Source: Own data. [32_corruption_current; 33_corruption_previous; 34_violence_current; 35_violence_previous]. N=34.

Note: Q32. How would you rate the level of corruption in this place of residence? Q33. And how was corruption in your previous place of residence? Q34. How would you rate the levels of violence and insecurity in this place of residence? Q35. And how were violence and insecurity in your previous place of residence?

Work opportunities represent a more ambivalent dimension of comparison. Slovakia is often perceived as offering greater opportunities than countries of origin, yet at the same time as structurally limited, particularly for non-EU migrants. The participants frequently emphasise bureaucratic obstacles, work permit restrictions, and relatively low wages. This tension is captured in a participant's assessment that employment opportunities are generally *"challenging"* for migrants. Others explicitly stated that job opportunities in Slovakia are *"not good"* for foreigners, even if they are still perceived as better than those available in previous places of residence (SK_26). In contrast, work opportunities in countries of origin are often described as economically non-viable or insufficient for sustaining a basic standard of living, as illustrated by the statement: *"You can get employment, but you will not live on this."* (SK_25)

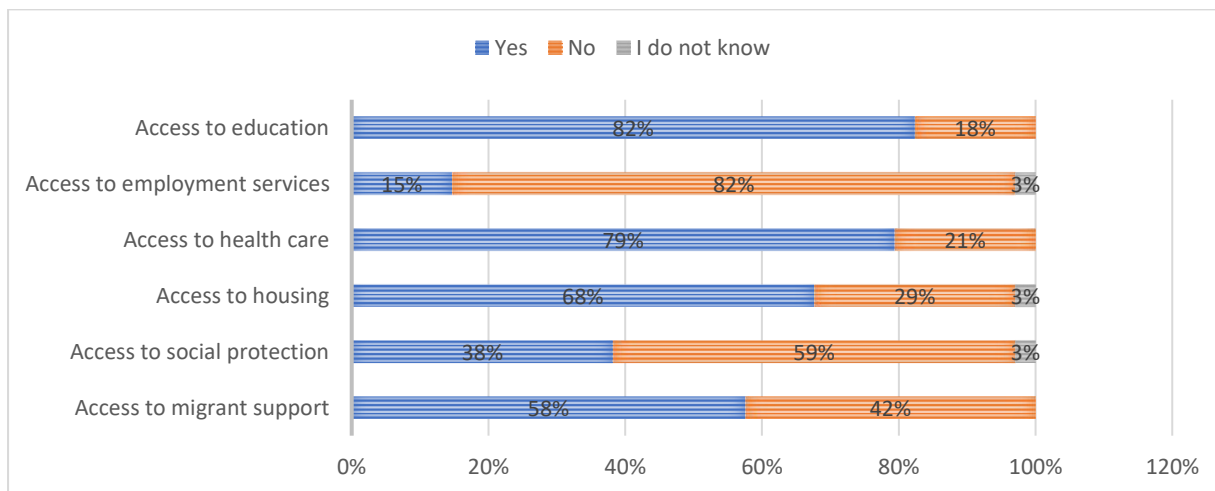
Looking toward the future, many participants expressed optimism about Slovakia's development, often referring to visible change and progress. One participant stated confidently: *"Very good. People are moving now and a lot of development is going on."* (SK_02) However, this optimism was frequently tempered by political concerns, with one participant cautioning: *"I think it will be good development, but not unless the political situation changes, because I feel currently Slovakia is very polarized."* (SK_22) Expectations about Slovakia's future were also closely tied to broader regional uncertainty, particularly the war in Ukraine. As one participant noted, it is difficult to predict developments because *"there is war close by, in Ukraine,"* creating uncertainty about economic and political stability in the region (SK_12).

The findings indicate that Slovakia is perceived as a safe, functional, and stabilising environment, particularly compared with previous places of residence. At the same time, it is rarely imagined as a final destination. Migrants' future orientations are shaped by a European comparative horizon and by broader political and geopolitical uncertainties, within which Slovakia occupies an intermediate position: significantly better than countries of origin, yet less attractive than Western Europe. This helps explain why future perspectives are often temporary, strategic, and conditional, grounded in mobility considerations rather than in long-term settlement plans.

Access to social welfare and public services

Access to social welfare and public services can facilitate the integration of foreigners. Here we map how African migrants access these services and evaluate their availability. Figure 11 provides an overview of participants' experiences with access to key social services in Slovakia, including education, healthcare, housing, employment, social protection, and migrant support services. The findings suggest that access to services was highly uneven and strongly dependent on migrants' legal status, employment situation, language skills, and access to institutional or informal support networks. While some participants described relatively smooth access to selected services, particularly through universities, employment, or NGO assistance, others reported significant barriers related to bureaucracy, language, limited information, and institutional inaccessibility.

Figure 11: Experience with the use of public services (by participant or by their family) in Slovakia from participants' perspective (%)



Source: Own data. [38_eduaccess_current; 39_healthaccess_current; 40_housingaccess_current; 41_employaccess_current; 42_socialaccess_current; 43_migrantsupportaccess_current]. N=34.

Note: Q38-43: While living here, have you or your relatives been able to access [particular public service]?

Figure 12 presents participants' assessments of the availability of **healthcare services** in Slovakia compared to their previous places of residence. Only half of the participants rated access to health care as good or very good, indicating many barriers to obtaining basic and specialised care in Slovakia. While healthcare services in Slovakia were often perceived as more accessible and institutionally reliable, participants' experiences also reveal significant inequalities related to insurance status, language barriers, administrative procedures, and the availability of healthcare providers. Some reported smooth access and positive experiences: "I was admitted for like five days. I didn't have to pay anything" (SK_01); "For me it's easy... most of the places I've been to the doctors they speak English and also my personal doctor also speaks good English." (SK_13) Others emphasised that coverage through employment or scholarship facilitated access: "We were assigned a general practitioner" (SK_22); "Because I'm working... they pay for my insurance." (SK_02) In some cases, participants described healthcare as "the best" and stated that they were "treated well" despite language barriers (SK_22).

Figure 12: Assessment of availability of health care services (%)



Source: Own data. [49_healthavailability_current; 50_healthavailability_previous]. N=32.

Note: Q49. Would you say that today in this place of residence the availability of health services is...

Q50. And how were health services in your previous place of residence?

At the same time, several participants reported serious structural and practical barriers, particularly related to insurance eligibility, language, and finding a general practitioner. One participant explained: “You actually cannot get the insurance... there is no doctor in Slovakia who accept the commercial insurance” (SK_22), adding, “I was charged €2600 for three weeks” of hospitalisation (SK_22). Others described difficulty registering with a GP: “To get a GP, it’s difficult now... I have emailed so many doctors and didn’t get a positive response.” (SK_15); “I cannot find a doctor because I cannot speak the language.” (SK_04). Language barriers were repeatedly highlighted: “It is accessible, but the limitation is the language barrier.” (SK_03); “The public health care in Slovakia is not easy to access... the dates they give me are too long.” (SK_31). Some participants reported not knowing how to navigate the system at all: “I wasn’t able to register for a doctor yet... I don’t know how to use it.” (SK_32) Overall, the participants’ statements indicate that while healthcare can be accessible and positively experienced, access is highly uneven and often constrained by insurance conditions, administrative requirements, waiting times, and language barriers.

Figure 13 presents participants’ assessments of housing availability in Slovakia compared with their previous places of residence. While the question was framed to inquire about public housing, the housing market is highly marketised, with very limited public options available in general. Responses, in most cases, focused on the general availability of affordable housing and on foreigners’ access to it. Although Slovakia was often perceived as offering greater stability and predictability in housing conditions, participants also described significant challenges related to affordability, limited public support, and difficulties accessing private rental accommodation as foreigners.

Figure 13: Assessment of availability of housing (%)



Source: Own data. [52_housingavailability_current; 53_housingavailability_previous]. N=32.

Note: Q52. Would you say that today in this place of residence the availability of housing is...

Q53. And how was housing in your previous place of residence?

Access to **housing** was described as one of the most significant structural challenges, particularly for individuals granted international protection. One participant explained that after immigration, housing became *“the biggest pain point,”* noting that although *“the government pays an allowance for six months,”* this support was insufficient to ensure stable accommodation (SK_32). The participant emphasised that integration depends on having a home: *“If I want to settle... I need a home, and if the government does not provide the home, then I will have to find one by myself”* (SK_32). Due to the lack of housing provision, the financial allowance was quickly spent, while rental costs remained high. The participants described the situation as uncertain and unstable, with *“chance 50–50 that I will find or not find due to finances, or due to the prices.”* (SK_32), stressing that housing is *“strongly connected to the success of the integration”* (SK_32).

For students, dormitory housing represented the main form of semi-subsidised accommodation. Several participants reported automatic or facilitated access during their studies: *“Foreigners were actually automatically qualified for the dorms”* (SK_33); *“It is provided by the school... they are fair in their distribution of the accommodation.”* (SK_15) Experiences in dormitories were generally described as acceptable: *“It was okay. It was fine”* (SK_03); *“Its general conditions are good... it’s good. It’s not bad.”* (SK_26)

However, access was not always guaranteed. One participant noted missing the application deadline and having to consider private housing, which was described as expensive and *“not that easy”* (SK_12). Once moving beyond dormitory housing, several participants emphasised that finding private rental accommodation became *“very difficult”* (SK_29). Difficulties were linked to being a foreigner, as landlords sometimes changed conditions or refused applicants: *“Once they realize you’re a foreigner, either the prices are changed or the terms of the contract change, or you’re just refused like we don’t accept foreigners.”* (SK_30)

Figure 14 illustrates participants’ assessments of the availability of **educational services** in Slovakia compared to their previous places of residence. While education in Slovakia was generally perceived as formally accessible, participants’ narratives reveal that actual access and educational experience were strongly shaped by language barriers, institutional support, and broader conditions for integration.

Figure 14: Assessment of availability of educational services (%)



Source: Own data. [46_eduavailability_current; 47_eduavailability_previous]. N=32.

Note: Q46. *Would you say that today in this place of residence the availability of educational services is...*

Q47. *How were educational services in your previous place of residence?*

Across interviews, participants frequently described formal access to education as generally available, particularly for those entering higher education or already enrolled. Several participants stated simply that access existed if one chose to pursue it: *"If we want the opportunity, we will get it... people are actually in schools, they have access to education without stress."* (SK_05) Similarly, university access was often framed as procedurally straightforward and merit-based, relying on application and qualifications rather than discretionary barriers: *"It is by application and qualification... I qualified, and I had the minimum requirement to enrol."* (SK_26) For some, this also extended to a broader perception that education in Slovakia is accessible in principle: *"The experience that I'm getting from the community is that education is accessible."* (SK_28)

Despite availability, language emerged as the most significant barrier shaping real access and educational quality. The participants repeatedly emphasised that studying in Slovak after a short adaptation period was demanding and exclusionary: *"Studying in a foreign language, after learning it for like a year, it's a challenge."* (SK_28) Language courses were widely reported but described as short-term, unstable, and NGO-dependent rather than state-coordinated. One participant noted that *"the IOM option is just for two weeks... I don't think you can learn the whole vocabulary within two weeks. It's not possible."* (SK_05); while another reflected on the limited outcomes of such courses: *"I have not been able to achieve much in that language class... because the language is very tough."* (SK_31)

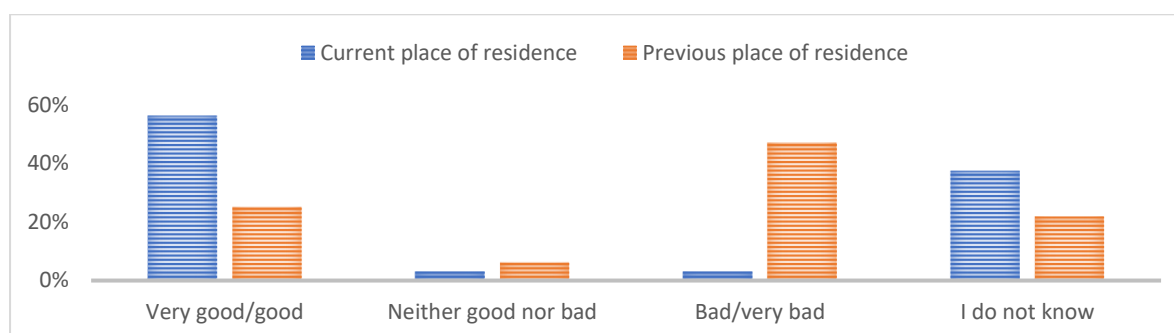
For African migrants, access to education was shaped not only by language barriers but also by racialised visibility linked to skin colour. The participants described prolonged educational trajectories requiring full proficiency in Slovak. One participant recalled passing university entrance exams in Slovak— *"I really worked hard to pass... In Slovak, yes."* (SK_19), while also facing heightened attention in academic spaces, reflected in reactions such as *"He's a black person speaking Slovak."* (SK_19)

Similar patterns emerged in the schooling of migrants' children. Parents often chose Slovak public schools because *"It's better, it's free and it's affordable."* (SK_20), yet highlighted language barriers

and early experiences of exclusion linked to skin colour. As one participant noted, children initially faced *“a very difficult situation at the beginning”*, although *“now it is a little better.”* (SK_20)

Figure 15 illustrates participants’ assessments of the availability of **social protection services** in Slovakia compared to their previous places of residence. While some participants described access to social protection as relatively stable, particularly through employment-linked insurance and family-related benefits, others highlighted difficulties stemming from limited information, administrative complexity, and reliance on informal support networks.

Figure 15: Assessment of availability of social protection services (%)



Source: Own data. [55_socialprotectavailability_current; 56_socialprotectavailability_previous]. N=32.

Note: Q55. Would you say that today in this place of residence the availability of social protection is... Q56. And how was social protection in your previous place of residence?

Access to social protection was described by participants primarily in relation to employment, social insurance contributions, illness, and family-related benefits. One participant explained their situation through work-related insurance contributions: *“Every month I pay my insurance myself... I’m not on any benefits because I have a registered insurance.”* (SK_31) Use of sickness benefits during COVID-19 was described as follows: *“I was not working for about two months. It was just social insurance that paid for my stuff during that period.”* (SK_05) Family-related support was also mentioned, including parental and child benefits: *“We receive child care and this thing without any complication in the process.”* (SK_34)

The participants also highlighted difficulties related to information and awareness when accessing social protection services. One participant stated: *“The biggest problem with getting this kind of services... is information. No one gives you the correct information.”* (SK_30) Another described learning about benefits only after personal experience: *“When I was ill, I didn’t know about the sickness benefit.”* (SK_28) Informal support from other migrants was mentioned as crucial in navigating the system: *“Another foreigner helped me.”* (SK_30) Overall, participants’ statements indicate that social protection benefits were accessed through employment-linked insurance and family benefits, while information gaps and reliance on informal advice shaped how and when these services were used. More than half of the participants (58%) reported having received some form of **migrant integration support** in Slovakia. However, the use of broader public services appeared

relatively limited. Only 9 of 34 participants reported using other public services, most commonly public transportation and Euraxess⁶ support structures.

Across interviews, experiences with migrant integration support were highly uneven and largely dependent on individual knowledge, initiative, and access to NGO networks rather than systematic state provision. Some participants reported substantial support upon arrival through organisations such as Mareena, IOM, and the Slovak Humanitarian Council: *“Personally, I got all that in support... I always knew where to get the support from.”* (SK_28) However, even these participants stressed that such access was exceptional and not representative of the broader African migrant community, noting that *“this is not the case with the rest of my community”* (SK_28). For many others, IOM was the only identifiable source of assistance, primarily offering legal information and guidance when approached directly: *“Apart from IOM, I don’t think there is any other support out there.”* (SK_05) Several participants explicitly stated that they received no integration support at all or were unaware of its existence: *“I am not even aware of the existence. I don’t think that it exists at all.”* (SK_25); *“No, nothing happens.”* (SK_24)

Language courses constituted the most common form of integration support, yet were widely perceived as insufficient, fragmented, and poorly adapted to migrants’ everyday realities. While some participants attended courses offered by IOM, Mareena, universities, or humanitarian organisations, these were often short-term or inaccessible due to work and family obligations: *“They fix the classes in between the hours when I am still at work... the challenge is timing.”* (SK_31) Beyond language instruction and basic legal advice, broader forms of support—such as psychological assistance, employment integration, or structured navigation of public services—were largely absent. As one participant summarised: *“No, just finances and the language classes. I don’t have any psychological support.”* (SK_31) Consequently, many migrants relied on informal community networks (e.g. WhatsApp groups), churches, or fellow Africans for practical help and emotional support, highlighting the fragmented and NGO-dependent nature of migrant integration in practice.

The role and importance of social and welfare policies varied depending on migrants’ legal status, employment situation, family composition, and length of stay in Slovakia. Participants who were employed or enrolled in higher education generally described more stable access to healthcare, accommodation, and administrative support, largely because these services were linked to employment contracts, university enrolment, or scholarship schemes. In contrast, migrants outside institutional structures or with insecure residence situations often experienced greater uncertainty and dependence on NGOs, informal networks, or support from other migrants.

Students appeared to benefit from relatively more structured forms of support, particularly regarding accommodation through university dormitories, access to health insurance, and institutional guidance. However, they still faced significant language barriers and uncertainty regarding long-term prospects after graduation. Migrants with children placed stronger emphasis on access to schools,

⁶ Euraxess is a pan-European initiative supported by the EU that supports the mobility of researchers, career development, and scientific collaboration across Member States. The Euraxess provides a vacancy portal, a support network, and personalised support (via local services centres).

healthcare, stable housing, and family-related support, while single migrants more frequently highlighted employment opportunities, financial stability, and legal security.

Differences also emerged by duration of residence in Slovakia. Participants who had lived in the country for several years generally demonstrated greater familiarity with institutions, stronger informal support networks, and better Slovak language skills, which facilitated access to services and increased feelings of stability. Newly arrived migrants more frequently reported confusion about administrative procedures, a lack of information, and dependence on NGOs or other migrants when navigating everyday life.

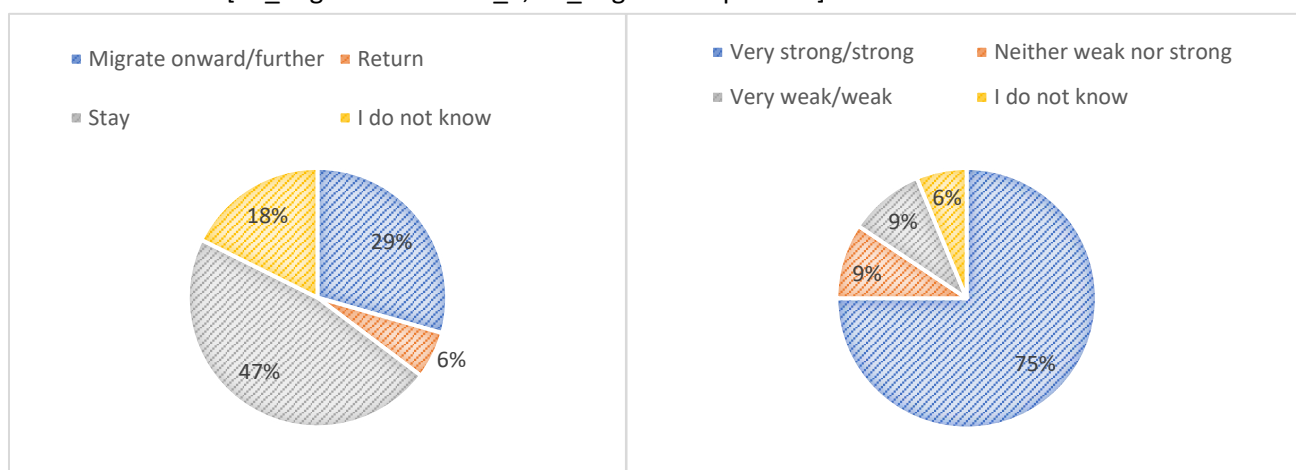
Access to services emerged as an important factor shaping migrants' experiences and future decisions, although usually not as the sole determinant. Employment opportunities, access to healthcare, housing availability, legal stability, and language support all influenced perceptions of whether life in Slovakia was sustainable in the long term. Stable employment and legal security appeared particularly important for decisions to remain, while bureaucratic complexity, limited language support, housing insecurity, and restricted opportunities for long-term integration often contributed to uncertainty and onward migration aspirations.

Migration aspirations in the near and medium-term future

A key question from the perspective of the PACES objective is the one about further migration plans, and the underlying factors shaping the decision to stay, move onward or return. Despite the prevailing focus on functional rather than deeper social integration, nearly half of the participants said that, if given the opportunity, over a five-year horizon they would prefer to stay in Slovakia, while 29% said they would move to another country. Only two participants (6%) prefer to return to their country of origin. Notably, one-fifth of the participants remained undecided. About 75% of the participants claimed that their migration aspiration is very strong or strong, while merely 9% of them stated they are very weak or weak (Figure 16). The drivers behind these reported aspirations varied, while the reasons were usually manifold and non-exclusive.

Figure 16: Preferences regarding the decision to migrate onward/return/stay and strength of aspiration (%)

Source: Own data. [77_migrationdecision_0; 98_migrationaspiration]. N=34 and N=32.



Note: Q77. Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to go somewhere else to live or work during the next five years, return to your country of origin or would you prefer to stay here?; Q98. Where do you stand right now in your aspiration to stay or migrate? Would you say that your migration/stay/return aspirations today are...

Aspirations to move onward

Most of those who aspire to move to another country are considering Western Europe or North America. While they reported a variety of reasons, as specified below, economic reasons and quality of life prevail. As stipulated by the Kenyan female participant working in a multinational company: *"Because they [in Switzerland or Iceland where the participant plans to move] pay you much better. They pay there, and the quality of life, I think it's much better. I think from what I see, the average life span is much higher. Those countries seem to be a lot more peaceful. And because they have a lot of Asian population, the demand of workers is high."* (SK_04)

Another female participant working in the healthcare sector plans to move to neighbouring Austria after she finishes her professional certification. She justifies this intention by better work opportunities while considering advantages of the proximity of new place and, eventually, a low cost associated with relocation: *"Austria is better because it's close. I already migrated to Slovakia, started life from zero. I don't want to move elsewhere, so I don't have to start life again from zero with integrating everything. As well as Slovakia is how it is, it is a second home for me. And Austria is just across the border. So, I don't have to move a lot moving there. And moving there is more of a financial position in my job, and economic."* (SK_33)

The participants' responses suggest that migrants' decisions depend on multiple intersecting factors, including family life (incl. spouses' migration preferences), economic and career opportunities, and access to public services for themselves and their family members. At the same time, their preferences seem fluid, and the participants acknowledge that they might change over time depending on a range of factors related to labour market or education opportunities, family life, and other circumstances across different stages in their life cycles.

One participant, completing university education in Slovakia, wants to move to another Western country to be in a culturally diverse environment: *"That's my motivation as well, and also to have a racially diverse environment around me."* (SK_33) Another participant with children, originally coming from Egypt, but migrating from Kuwait, stated: *"Let's say maybe because of religion [I want to move onward]. Also, anyway, I'm going to take my family, I'm going to another country in Europe. But I mean, for example, in Austria or the Netherlands, there is like a bigger community for my religion. So that's why."* (SK_29)

For some participants, a decisive reason to migrate is that their spouses could not move to Slovakia to establish a life with them. One male participant was enrolled in the doctoral program at the Slovak university, while his spouse's application for the family reunification visa was denied: *"In a way, it is also a factor because I found it strange that they said my program is coming to an end soon. And as such I cannot take care of my family. So, and that was the major reason for the denial of the visa. So yeah, but in a broader view, even before that I had a plan of going somewhere else."* (SK_15)

Four persons reported that they had already made some plans or preparations to undertake this step. These preparations, for instance, include learning the language of the preferred destination country (mainly German) (SK_22; SK_33), or trying to find a job in a country of migration preference (SK_11). Completing a qualification was also a part of their migration plans: one participant planned first to finish her specialisation in the health care sector (SK_33), and another participant (SK_14) is doing an online course in transport and logistics that is recognised and relevant for a potential work opportunity in the US. Some of those who did not make any concrete plans claimed that they were restricted financially or declared that they lack time and capacities to make these steps (SK_14; SK_29). Some of the participants plan to move with their partner (SK_33) or with the family (SK_14), while for others the decision is conditional on (future) partner's consent to move (SK_06; SK_15; SK_29). *"Right now, I'm very stable here. And if there's no major changes... Maybe things might change if I get married. Maybe my spouse really wants to live elsewhere. It's something I'm open to. But if it's totally up to my decision, I'm happy here. I'll stay here."* (SK_01) However, some plans are volatile: *"Well, it depends on the factors. If I see there's stability and good economy and people are living happily and freely, probably I might go back. But if it's not, then since I am comfortable here and I have something doing and I'm building on myself, I'll probably stay."* (SK_02)

Most reported that they had already considered the need for documents, visas, permits, diplomas, and other migration-related decisions. One person had not, and one person did not know. Some of the participants who acquired their degree at the Slovak university claimed that the fact that they have an EU-recognised diploma eased the process of relocation to another country (SK_33). Some of them who prefer to move to another EU country acknowledge the bureaucratic processes, but they do not consider them as expensive or challenging (SK_29). One participant from Kenya acknowledges costs and difficulties related to obtaining a visa and a work permit to relocate to another country (SK_04).

Another participant declares that a factor in the bureaucratic visa process plays a decisive role in his decision to bring his spouse to Slovakia, comparing the same process and costs for potentially moving to the US: *"Yes, it's also a factor. Because for the reason they denied my wife's visa, going back again to apply involves a whole lot of money. Because she has to go to Kenya, start the whole process again, which in this one I spend more than €4,000. So, it's also spent money. So, but if, for instance, the U.S. Embassy is in Nigeria, you don't need to travel anywhere. Even if they deny you a visa, you can still apply again, then you take a chance."* (SK_15)

One of the drivers to move onward is the possibility to travel within the EU single market. That also impacts the selection of the next destination country: *"[...] if I move to any other European country apart from UK I need a visa to go to UK for other countries I wouldn't need any visa because I have already like um ID card like here for Slovak and I am going to another country like Netherlands, for example, I would just buy the flight ticket and go there the problem is like the place where I will be and what to do there."* (SK_11)

Another important policy factor behind moving to another country is access to health care. Female participant moved from Slovakia to the Netherlands due to limited access to health care services she encountered while working part-time in Slovakia and needing to pay out-of-pocket money for the services: *"I had a lot of frustration, and it was really tough. I think also my immune system was*

struggling and when I went to that doctor for the first time, she was really nice. But again, it cost me a lot of money [...] A few months and then I had a bit of a breakdown because of work things, and then I realized that I need to for my own health, make a change. And that's when I moved" [to the Netherlands]. (SK_18)

Another male student, suffering from mental health issues, also found accessing health care troublesome since the commercial insurance did not cover his mental health needs: *"I'm trying to get insurance since 2020, when I lost my scholarship. I got a commercial insurance last year. . [...] I was told you treat your teeth, you pay this amount of EUR and then you give receipt, you take commercial insurance, they pay you your money. Also, like me, a person who has been followed up for that mental challenge. I went to commercial insurance and they said we don't insure pre-existing conditions."* (SK_22)

Three persons reported having access to an agency or a broker that supported this migration step (SK_04); one respondent actively used a recruitment agency abroad but got scammed (SK_14); six persons had not had such access. Some participants do not consider using these services mainly because they rely on their own search (SK_29) or they work in specific professions where they do not expect to need any assistance (SK_15).

For one female university student, moving to another country, is a way to gain independence: *I want to have my own freedom. Because here, I feel like when I'm living here with my uncle, he is still controlling me, he is controlling my life. And I want to be somewhere where nobody is controlling me. I want to be free to have my own freedom like that.* (SK_04)

Aspiration to return

Merely two persons expressed their preference to return to their country of origin and both had made a plan or preparation for undertaking this step. A key factor behind their decision is being close to their families, who provide a safety net. As indicated in the quote below from the Kenyan man, the decision to stay close to the family is also shaped by visa policies in Slovakia, not easily allowing other family members to visit and provide any support.

[...] "That's what I'm saying, my long-term goal is to go back home and have this close family and everything, because also knowing I'm close to family, if anything goes wrong, the family is there to take care of it, than living in a foreign place. Because my family can't even come here. They will struggle to even get a visa, it's easier for me to visit them than for them to visit me, so it's just much easier if I go back and be close to them because if anything happens, I'm not sure even if they're able to come here within six months, and that is already stressing just thinking of it. ...You know you start thinking like this I'm like it's better when I am more closer at home, they can reach me in case something happens." (SK_30)

Aspiration to stay in Slovakia

For those whose preference is to stay in Slovakia, manifold reasons can be observed: (i) family life and marriage (SK_01; SK_02); (ii) work or business opportunities (SK_12; SK_13; SK_28); (iii) opportunities for professional growth such as acquiring skills (SK_01); (iv) safety and peace (SK_02; SK_05; SK_18;

SK_20); (v) access to the public services (SK_02); (vi) low cost of living (SK_13); (vii) community and friends (SK_21; SK_25).

A few participants listed very specific qualities of living in Slovakia, such as the fact that Slovakia is not crowded and a fairly quiet place (SK_03; SK_25), which contrasts with the previous experiences in cities with high population density. For another participant the broader environment plays an important role in his decision to stay in Slovakia: *“I have become not quite a creature of habit, but I am somehow more used to certain things. Like I am used to knowing that I can go to Železná or Kamzík [places for leisure time activities in Bratislava], just at the drop of a hat, I can go to the river anytime. So there is this environment that I am used to and I don't want to lose it. [...] That is a big factor as well. And also I feel like, of course, I mentioned that I miss the food from home, but I have to say I have been to a few other European countries. Non-Slavic countries. Food-wise, I would never want to live in any other country.”* (SK_25)

Although many participants reported struggling to interact with local communities, one participant noted that learning a language opened opportunities to make social connections within their communities, including with locals (SK_25). The participants conditioned their decision to stay in Slovakia on the possibility of bringing their parent to the country (SK_06) or their ability to learn the Slovak language (SK_20) or, in case of students, finding a job after they graduate from the university (SK_12).

Being granted permanent residence appears to play a key role in the decision to stay in Slovakia (SK_01; SK_05; SK_28). One participant, who completed his studies in Slovakia and works in a multinational company, pointed out that obtaining a permanent residence permit allowed him to better follow his career options: *“But before then, the kind of permit I had was tied to my employer. I would say it was hindering my career aspirations. I didn't just change for any other job. I have to consider that I have to go through the Foreign Police, immigration stress. And I didn't want to go through that, so I just stayed with my employer.”* (SK_01) For this participant, the permanent residence permit also played a role in settling down in Western Slovakia and purchasing property.

Another participant from Kenya emphasised that extending the temporary residence permit presented a stressful moment in his stay in Slovakia: *“At the moment I have permanent residence in Slovakia, which has made my life much easier with my residence and also my travels too. [...]. That's what I can say and it has changed my perspective. Maybe if I would have a different residence - it was called temporary - and that one was very hectic because I had to do it each year. If I had it today maybe, maybe I would not be happy about the place.”* (SK_28) This experience was confirmed also by an asylum holder from Cameroon (SK_21).

Some participants claimed that compiling the paperwork required to obtain visas or residence permits (including extending the permits) was feasible and that it played a positive role in their decision to stay in Slovakia (SK_02; SK_08). Some of the participants said that the process was demanding mainly before arriving to Slovakia, while the paperwork that needs to be done here is quite feasible (SK_05). On the contrary, another participant found the residence permit issuance process (specifically making an appointment with the Foreign Police) challenging (SK_03). For one participant (SK_20), the path to

citizenship status seems quite discouraging. Being granted a residence permit and citizenship is also important so the participants can travel back home to visit their families.

Among those who expressed their preference to stay in Slovakia, some would consider moving back to their home country if the economic situation improved (SK_01; SK_02) referring mainly to Nigeria and Ghana, if the economic situation in Slovakia deteriorates (SK_12; SK_18; SK_25, SK_28) but also if the migration policies towards the foreigners changed (SK_01; SK_02), or political circumstances such as war conflict (SK_3; SK_12; SK_18; SK_05; SK_08; SK_32) or hostility towards the foreigners would increase (SK_28), potentially finding a spouse and starting a family in Slovakia (SK_21).

Summary and conclusions

This report has examined the decision-making processes of African migrants in Slovakia by combining an analysis of the policy and institutional framework with migrants' lived experiences. The findings demonstrate that decisions to stay, move onward, or return are shaped by a dynamic interplay between individual aspirations, family circumstances, and the opportunities and constraints embedded in migration, integration, and social policies. A central contribution of this research is to show how migrants navigate complex institutional environments and how the intersection of different factors shapes their decisions. This research speaks to a growing literature in migration studies that calls for a more nuanced understanding of migration that recognises complexity and volatility as central realities in individuals' decision-making and the non-trivial role that migration and non-migration policies play in these processes.

While Slovakia has become an increasingly attractive destination due to relatively accessible entry conditions, affordable higher education, and perceptions of safety and stability, it is most often positioned as an intermediate rather than final destination within broader migration trajectories. The analysis of the policy framework reveals a system that formally provides multiple legal pathways for migration—through work, study, and family reunification—but remains fragmented, administratively demanding, and uneven in its accessibility. In practice, migrants' experiences with this framework are characterised by bureaucratic complexity and legal uncertainty, and frequent dependence. Migration policies are complex and it takes considerable effort to navigate in the existing migration framework; aspiring migrants have to invest considerable financial and time resources to fund their visa, and to legalize their stay in a European destination for study or work purposes. While entry procedures are often costly and time-consuming, post-arrival processes, particularly related to residence permits, create ongoing uncertainty. The distinction between temporary and permanent residence is especially critical: while temporary permits are associated with instability and limited planning capacity, obtaining permanent residence significantly enhances migrants' ability to invest in long-term settlement and integration. Taken together, these findings point to a structural inequity within Slovakia's migration framework: even where preferential legal pathways exist, African nationals are systematically excluded from them, leaving standard procedures as the main route into the country.

A key finding is that policy design and implementation frequently diverge. Although integration strategies exist at the national level, their implementation is underdeveloped, underfunded, and highly dependent on non-state actors. Migrants' accounts consistently point to a reliance on NGOs

and informal support networks rather than state-led systems, particularly in areas such as language training, information provision, and integration services. This results in uneven access to support, often conditioned by the type of migration status, location, individual initiative, or social capital.

Migrants' experiences with social welfare and public services further illustrate how the policy framework translates into everyday life. Access to healthcare, housing, education, and social protection is formally available but strongly stratified by legal status, employment situation, and access to information. For example, employment-based insurance facilitates access to healthcare, yet those outside stable employment face significant barriers, including high out-of-pocket costs and limited service availability. Similarly, housing remains largely market-based, with minimal public support, creating affordability challenges and exposure to discriminatory practices. These structural constraints contribute to a situation in which even highly skilled and educated migrants face vulnerabilities in accessing essential services.

Language emerges as a particularly critical dimension where policy gaps and lived experience intersect. Although formally recognised as a key integration tool, language training remains insufficient, fragmented, and largely NGO-driven. As a result, migrants are often able to function in everyday life using English but remain excluded from deeper social integration, reinforcing a divide between functional inclusion and broader societal participation.

These policy-related experiences play a decisive role in shaping migration aspirations. The findings demonstrate that migrants' future plans are highly conditional and responsive to institutional contexts. While a significant proportion of participants express a willingness to stay in Slovakia, this preference is often contingent upon improvements in legal stability, access to services, and long-term opportunities. At the same time, a substantial share considers onward migration, most often to Western Europe or North America, where they perceive more favourable labour market conditions and more inclusive social environments. Decisions to return to countries of origin remain limited and are primarily driven by family considerations. Our findings emphasise shortcomings in state- or municipality-level capacities to implement integration policies that could holistically address the needs of migrants that are situated in different (and changing) life situations and legal statuses.

Overall, Slovakia emerges as a country that provides basic stability, safety, and entry opportunities, but where structural limitations in integration policies and service provision constrain long-term settlement. The policy framework, while functional in enabling entry, is less effective in supporting sustained inclusion and retention of migrants. This contributes to the perception of Slovakia as a temporary or transitional space rather than a destination for long-term belonging.

The findings highlight several important implications. Strengthening policy coherence and implementation—particularly in language training, access to healthcare, affordable housing, and integration services—would be essential to improving migrants' experiences and reducing barriers to settlement. Simplifying administrative procedures and enhancing the predictability of residence pathways, especially the transition to permanent residence, could significantly increase migrants' capacity to plan their lives in the country. Obtaining permanent residence emerges as a key institutional factor shaping decisions to remain in Slovakia. Moreover, reducing reliance on

fragmented NGO provision and moving toward a more institutionalised system of integration support would help address current inequalities in access.

In conclusion, migration decision-making in the Slovak context is best understood as a dynamic and multi-level process, in which individual agency interacts with policy frameworks and institutional conditions. The study demonstrates that policies do not merely regulate migration but actively shape migrants' lived experiences and future trajectories. Addressing the gaps between formal policy design and practical implementation will be crucial for transforming Slovakia from a transit space into a more sustainable destination for migrant settlement.

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