THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE RUSSIANUKRAINIAN WAR ON CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY BETWEEN SLOVAKIA AND UKRAINE (2020–2023)

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Abstract

This paper examines the profound impact of two consecutive crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian–Ukrainian war – on cross-border mobility at the external border of the European Union (EU) with Ukraine, with a particular focus on Slovakia. During the pandemic (2020–2021), mobility collapsed due to unprecedented border closures and restrictions on movement, leading to a decline of more than 70% in cross-border flows across the EU's eastern frontier. This had severe social and economic consequences for borderland communities that depended on daily mobility for work, trade, and family ties. By contrast, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the same borders witnessed the opposite dynamic: a sudden and massive inflow of refugees, with more than 6 million entries recorded in Poland and over 2.7 million in Slovakia by the end of 2022 (UNHCR, 2023; Eurostat, 2023). Within weeks, borders that had functioned as securitised barriers during the pandemic were redefined as humanitarian gateways, demonstrating the extraordinary flexibility of border regimes under conditions of crisis. The study employs a descriptive comparative analysis drawing on quantitative data from UNHCR, Eurostat, Frontex, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), and national statistical offices. By systematically comparing mobility patterns during the pandemic and the war, the paper highlights how external borders can shift from restrictive to permissive regimes within short periods of time. The Slovak–Ukrainian border is used as a detailed case study due to its dual role as both a transit and destination space, while comparative insights are provided from Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Graphs and tables visualise these shifts, showing both the dramatic collapse of border crossings in 2020–2021 and the unprecedented refugee flows in 2022–2023. The findings demonstrate not only the dual nature of borders under crisis conditions but also their broader governance implications. While pandemic-related restrictions exposed the fragility of free movement within the Schengen Area and revealed tendencies towards "health nationalism," the war revealed both the capacity and limitations of EU solidarity mechanisms, including the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. These experiences underline the importance of local border communities and multi-level governance in managing crises. The paper concludes that understanding the dual transformation of borders – as both spaces of restriction and solidarity – is essential for shaping resilient migration governance, strengthening cross-border cooperation, and safeguarding the principles of European integration in the face of future shocks.

Keywords: Cross-Border Mobility, COVID-19 Pandemic, Russian–Ukrainian War, Refugee Flows, European Union External Borders, Slovakia–Ukraine Border, Migration Governance, Temporary Protection Directive

Introduction

Cross-border mobility represents one of the essential dimensions of European integration, economic development, and people-to-people contact in borderland regions. The unprecedented crises of the past few years – the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – have profoundly disrupted and reshaped mobility patterns across the European Union (EU). While the pandemic brought border closures, strict restrictions, and a collapse of everyday cross-border flows, the war produced the opposite effect: the sudden and massive movement of millions of people seeking safety and protection in the EU (European Court of Auditors, 2022; UNHCR, 2022).

The external EU border with Ukraine became one of the most visible examples of this dual transformation. During the pandemic, border crossings declined by more than 70% across the EU's external frontier, with

many sections closed entirely for passenger traffic (Frontex, 2021). For the Slovak–Ukrainian border, which previously enabled thousands of daily commuters for work and trade, mobility was almost impossible in 2020–2021. However, following the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, this same border recorded over 1.3 million entries by April 2022, with cumulative figures surpassing 2.7 million later in the year (UNHCR, 2023).

Scholarly research has increasingly examined the impact of the pandemic on free movement within the Schengen Area (Tömöri, 2023; ECA, 2022), as well as the unprecedented refugee flows triggered by the war (Duszczyk, 2022). Yet few studies have placed these two crises side by side to analyse how the very meaning of borders shifted from spaces of restriction and securitisation to spaces of solidarity and humanitarian protection. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on the Slovak–Ukrainian border as a case study while providing comparative insights from other neighbouring EU member states (Poland, Hungary, and Romania).

Theoretical debates on European borders have long highlighted their dual role as both integrative and exclusionary institutions. Van Houtum and Bueno-Lacy (2020) argue that crises often accelerate processes of "re-bordering," whereby borders are reconstructed as instruments of control and identity protection. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a clear example of this, as governments justified unprecedented mobility restrictions as necessary to safeguard public health.

The concept of "health nationalism" has emerged as a central theme in the literature on the pandemic. Coman (2021) notes that the emergency measures adopted by EU member states demonstrated a tendency to prioritise national sovereignty over supranational commitments. For the Slovak–Ukrainian border, this meant that the EU's external frontier became a hard line, where health security trumped long-established mobility norms.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been analysed as the largest displacement crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Duszczyk (2022) emphasises that Poland's experience demonstrates both the potential and the limits of state and societal capacity to manage mass inflows. While Poland absorbed the majority of refugees, Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary also played crucial roles, each shaped by their demographic size and administrative structures.

The EU's response to the refugee crisis also represented an institutional milestone. Carrera, Geddes, and Vosyliūtė (2023) underline that the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) was both unprecedented and transformative. For Slovakia, the TPD provided not only a legal framework but also practical support for integrating refugees into its labour market and social systems.

Finally, the broader literature on border regions emphasises the vulnerability of local cross-border cooperation to external shocks. Scott (2022) shows how both the pandemic and the war disrupted long-standing partnerships across European borderlands, often forcing municipalities and NGOs to improvise emergency responses.

The objective of this paper is to analyse how two consecutive crises redefined cross-border mobility on the EU's eastern frontier and to discuss the broader implications for migration governance, border management, and cross-border cooperation in the European Union.

This paper contributes to the existing literature by systematically comparing the dual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian–Ukrainian war on cross-border mobility at the EU's eastern frontier. Unlike most studies, which examine these crises in isolation, it analyses them side by side, demonstrating how borders can shift from securitised barriers to humanitarian entry points within a short timeframe. By using the Slovak–Ukrainian border as a case study and situating it within the wider regional context (Poland, Hungary, Romania), the article offers new insights into the resilience of European integration under crisis conditions.

Objectives and Methodology

The primary objective of this paper is to analyse how two consecutive crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian–Ukrainian war – transformed cross-border mobility at the EU's eastern frontier, with a particular focus on the Slovak–Ukrainian border. Specifically, the study aims to:
- Compare the patterns of cross-border mobility during the pandemic (2020–2021) and the war (2022–2023).
- Examine the role of Slovakia in relation to other neighbouring EU member states (Poland, Hungary, and Romania).
- Assess the broader implications for EU border governance, migration management, and cross-border cooperation.

Methodology

The research employs a descriptive comparative approach based on secondary data. The study draws on multiple reliable sources, including:
- UNHCR Operational Data Portal (2022–2023) for refugee flows across EU–Ukraine borders.
- Eurostat (2021–2023) for statistics on residence permits and migration.

- Frontex Risk Analysis Reports (2021–2022) for border management data during the pandemic.
- European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) situation reports on temporary protection.
- National statistical offices, including the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS, 2022) and the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

Quantitative data were systematically analysed to identify differences between the two crisis periods. Graphs and tables were produced to visualise mobility trends, comparing pandemic restrictions with refugee inflows after February 2022. The Slovak–Ukrainian border was selected as the case study due to the availability of reliable data and its dual role as both a transit and destination space. Comparative references to Poland, Hungary, and Romania provide contextual depth. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how the meaning and function of EU external borders can rapidly change under conditions of crisis.

A limitation of the dataset is that UNHCR statistics refer to border crossings rather than unique individuals, which may lead to double-counting when refugees move repeatedly across borders. Similarly, Eurostat data on residence permits capture only formal registrations, underestimating temporary or informal mobility. Frontex and national statistical offices provide reliable indicators of flows, but their figures are influenced by border enforcement and reporting practices. Acknowledging these limitations is essential to interpreting the findings cautiously while still recognising the broader trends.

Results

Border Mobility Collapse During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted mobility across the EU's external borders. According to Frontex (2021), passenger crossings at the eastern EU frontier dropped by more than 70% in 2020 compared to pre-pandemic levels. At the Slovak–Ukrainian border, which had previously enabled thousands of daily commuters for work and small trade, mobility nearly ceased. The Slovak Statistical Office reported that passenger border crossings fell from more than 1.5 million annually before 2020 to minimal levels in 2020–2021, with exceptions only for freight transport and critical cases.

Fig 1 below illustrates this dramatic decline in mobility at the Slovak–Ukrainian border. In 2019, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of recorded passenger crossings exceeded 1.5 million, reflecting the intensity of cross-border commuting for work, education, small trade, and family visits. With the introduction of border closures in March 2020, this figure dropped sharply to approximately 200,000 crossings for the entire year, representing a decline of nearly 87% compared to 2019 levels (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2022).

In 2021, mobility did not recover and remained at historically low levels, with only 180,000 recorded crossings, as Slovakia and Ukraine maintained strict health-related entry regimes. This prolonged collapse effectively paralysed everyday life in border regions such as Ubľa, Vyšné Nemecké, and Čierna nad Tisou, where local communities traditionally depended on daily cross-border interaction.

The graph therefore not only visualises the numerical decline but also illustrates the deeper transformation of borders during the pandemic: from spaces of openness and functional integration to securitised barriers. Routine activities – such as cross-border shopping, seasonal work, or short-term visits – became practically impossible. This result highlights how the border was redefined as a line of defence against a public health threat, preventing even the most basic forms of mobility.
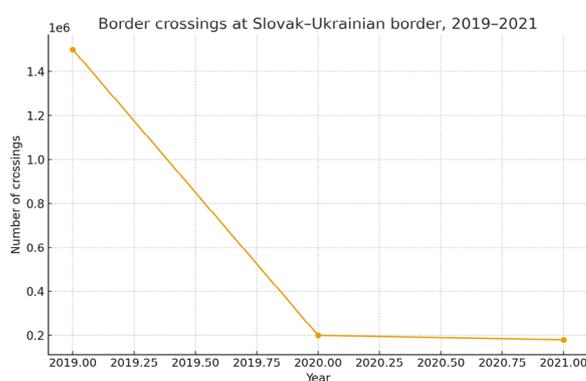

1: Decline of border crossings at the Slovak–Ukrainian border during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2021)
Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2022); Frontex (2021); 2025

Massive Refugee Flows after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The situation changed dramatically following 24 February 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Within weeks, millions of people crossed into neighbouring EU member states. According to UNHCR (2023), by the end of 2022 Poland had registered more than 6 million entries, Slovakia approximately 2.7 million, Romania around 1.7 million, and Hungary over 1 million. This transformation turned borders that had been nearly closed during the pandemic into humanitarian corridors enabling mass displacement.
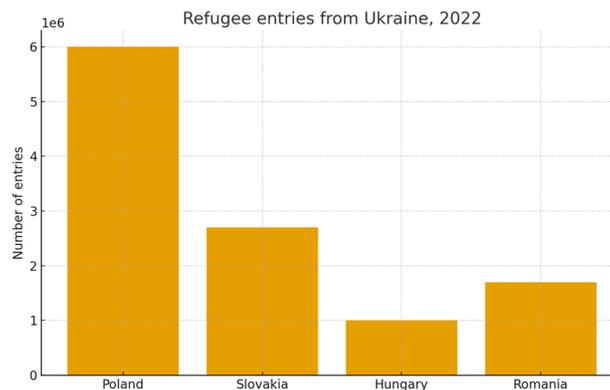
2: Comparative refugee inflows across Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania in 2022. UNHCR (2023)
Source: UNHCR (2023);2025

Fig. 2 provides a comparative overview of entries from Ukraine into Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania in 2022. Poland clearly emerges as the primary destination, receiving nearly 60% of all entries recorded at the EU's eastern frontier (UNHCR, 2023), confirming Duszczyk's (2022) observation that Poland has become the main gateway for Ukrainian refugees in Europe. Slovakia and Romania also experienced unprecedented inflows relative to their population size and administrative capacity, highlighting their strategic role in the first phase of the refugee crisis.

Slovakia, despite its significantly smaller population and more limited administrative capacity, received over 2.7 million entries. When adjusted for population size, Slovakia's relative exposure to refugee flows was among the highest in the EU. Border checkpoints like Vyšné Nemecké–Uzhhorod became key humanitarian corridors, where not only border authorities but also civil society and international organisations coordinated emergency assistance. Romania, with 1.7 million entries, also played a crucial role, particularly through the Siret border crossing in Suceava county, serving as a gateway for refugees from southern and central Ukraine.

Hungary recorded just over 1 million entries, which is lower compared to its neighbours but still significant. Hungary's role was more prominent as a transit country, with many refugees continuing their journey to Austria, Germany, or other western EU states. Despite political tensions regarding migration in previous years, the scale of the crisis necessitated rapid humanitarian adaptation.

The magnitude of these figures demonstrates how, within a matter of days, borders were redefined from barriers of control into humanitarian gateways. What had been nearly impassable lines during the pandemic suddenly transformed into entry points for millions. The comparative perspective underscores both the asymmetry of refugee distribution and the interconnectedness of EU member states in managing the largest displacement crisis in Europe since the Second World War.

Residence Permits and Long-term Migration Trends

The refugee inflows quickly translated into long-term settlement across EU member states. Eurostat (2023) data show that in 2021 Ukrainian citizens already held about 1.57 million valid residence permits in the EU. In 2023 alone, 307,313 first residence permits were issued to Ukrainian citizens, reflecting both humanitarian protection and permanent migration intentions. This trend underlines how border crises reshape not only immediate mobility but also long-term migration governance in the EU.

Fig. 3 illustrates the dynamic increase in the number of residence permits issued to Ukrainian citizens in the European Union between 2019 and 2023. In 2019, before the pandemic and the war, Ukrainians already represented one of the largest groups of third-country nationals legally residing in the EU, holding approximately 1.2 million valid residence permits. This reflected long-standing patterns of labour
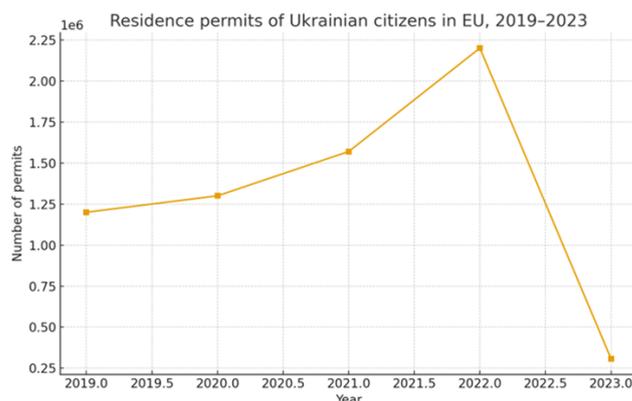
3: *Residence permits issued to Ukrainian citizens in the EU, 2019–2023*
Source: Eurostat (2023); 2025

migration, particularly to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Italy. In 2020, despite the pandemic and strict border restrictions, the stock of permits slightly increased to 1.3 million, as many Ukrainians were already integrated into EU labour markets, especially in essential sectors such as healthcare, construction, and agriculture.

By 2021, the number of valid permits rose further to 1.57 million, underlining the gradual consolidation of Ukrainian labour migration. However, the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 marked a dramatic turning point. The EU responded by activating the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the first time in history, granting immediate legal status, residence rights, and access to services for displaced Ukrainians. As a result, the number of valid permits rose sharply to more than 2.2 million in 2022.

The most significant jump occurred in 2023, when 307,313 first residence permits were issued in a single year. Countries such as Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Spain recorded the largest shares, reflecting both humanitarian needs and labour market absorption. Importantly, these figures suggest that the Ukrainian presence in the EU is not merely temporary: while some refugees returned home during periods of relative stability, many others remained and began processes of integration, such as employment, education, and family reunification.

This trend demonstrates two key findings. First, that border crises reshape not only immediate mobility flows but also longer-term demographic and social structures in host countries. Second, that the EU's legal and institutional frameworks – particularly the TPD and national asylum systems – played a decisive role in turning a sudden emergency into a process of regulated settlement. The sharp rise in residence permits after 2022 therefore underscores the long-lasting impact of the Russian–Ukrainian war on European migration governance.

Discussion

The results highlight the dual transformation of the EU's eastern border with Ukraine under two consecutive crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These two events, while different in nature, demonstrate the ability of borders to radically shift their meaning and function within a very short timeframe. The evidence from Slovakia and its neighbouring states suggests that borders are not static institutions, but dynamic socio-political spaces shaped by external shocks, state policy, and international cooperation.

Pandemic Border Closures and Securitisation

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly reshaped the governance of mobility across Europe. For the first time in the history of the Schengen Area, states reintroduced long-lasting border controls, suspended free movement, and imposed strict public health measures. What had previously been considered unthinkable–comprehensive closure of both internal and external borders–became reality in 2020–2021. The Slovak–Ukrainian border exemplifies this dynamic: cross-border commuting for work, trade, and family contact collapsed almost entirely, undermining local economies and social ties. This securitisation of borders illustrated the vulnerability of European integration to health emergencies. As the European Court of Auditors (2022) and Tömöri (2023) note, the pandemic exposed the fragility of free movement in Europe, demonstrating how quickly national sovereignty can override supranational commitments when existential threats are perceived.

Borders as Humanitarian Gateways during the War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the largest and fastest displacement crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Within weeks, millions of people crossed into the EU through Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, transforming the region's external borders into humanitarian gateways. Poland alone received nearly 60% of all recorded entries, while Slovakia registered more than 2.7 million by the end of the year. These numbers illustrate the magnitude of population movement, but also the extraordinary adaptive capacity of border regimes under emergency conditions. UNHCR (2023) data confirm that these flows dwarfed any previous refugee crisis in modern European history, while Duszczyk (2022) underlines that Poland's central role highlighted both the potential and the strain placed on frontline states. Together, these findings show that the war fundamentally redefined borders as spaces of solidarity and protection, in stark contrast to their securitisation during the pandemic.

Comparative National Experiences

The comparative analysis of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania reveals how national contexts shaped responses to the refugee influx.

Poland emerged as the primary destination, absorbing nearly 60% of all recorded entries. This reflects its extensive border with Ukraine, pre-existing Ukrainian diaspora, and policy of open access. However, the pressure on housing, education, and labour markets has been immense, raising concerns about long-term integration.

Slovakia, despite its smaller size and administrative capacity, received over 2.7 million entries. When measured relative to its population, this made Slovakia one of the most exposed EU member states. Its dual role as both a transit and destination country marked a significant shift from its traditionally limited role in migration flows.

Romania played a vital role in the southern sector of the border, especially through the Siret crossing, which became a major humanitarian hub. Its 1.7 million entries highlighted both the geographical diversity of the refugee flows and the importance of logistical coordination.

Hungary, while receiving lower volumes (just over 1 million), nonetheless served as an essential transit corridor to Austria and Germany. This role contrasts with its restrictive migration policies during the 2015–2016 refugee crisis, underscoring the exceptional nature of the Ukrainian case.

Long-term Implications for Settlement and Integration

The refugee flows did not end at the border; they translated into long-term demographic change. Eurostat (2023) shows that the stock of valid residence permits for Ukrainians increased from 1.57 million in 2021 to over 2.2 million in 2022, with more than 307,000 new permits issued in 2023 alone. This indicates that a substantial proportion of displaced Ukrainians are not merely temporary migrants but are integrating into host societies. This has profound implications. Host countries must adapt their labour markets, housing policies, and education systems to accommodate new residents. For Slovakia, traditionally a country of emigration rather than immigration, this represents a turning point. Integration challenges are likely to grow, but so are opportunities for economic revitalisation, particularly in regions facing demographic decline.

Another dimension that deserves attention is the socio-economic integration of displaced persons, which is increasingly discussed in the literature on migration governance. Kahanec and Zimmermann (2022) stress that the inflow of Ukrainian refugees should not be seen only as a humanitarian challenge, but also as a potential contribution to host country labour markets, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where demographic decline and labour shortages are acute. This resonates with the Slovak case, where the arrival of working-age Ukrainians partially mitigated structural gaps in sectors such as health care, construction, and services. At the same time, integration is not automatic and depends on access to language training, recognition of qualifications, and institutional support.

From a longer-term perspective, Ukrainian migration also illustrates patterns of continuity and change. As Brunarska (2022) shows, Ukrainians had been migrating to the EU since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, but the post-2022 wave was unprecedented both in magnitude and in the speed of legal responses. Unlike earlier periods, when many Ukrainians were temporary or circular migrants, the new wave included a higher proportion of women, children, and vulnerable groups requiring comprehensive support. This fundamentally altered the scope of policies at both the national and EU levels, demanding more holistic approaches to integration.

Moreover, migration governance in times of crisis cannot be understood without considering the local and regional dimension. Scholten and Verbeek (2023) argue that municipalities and local authorities often bear the brunt of emergency responses, as they are directly responsible for housing, schooling, and welfare provision. This was visible at the Slovak–Ukrainian border, where towns such as Košice and Prešov rapidly mobilised resources and civil society actors played a crucial role in service delivery. Such cases highlight that effective responses to migration crises depend on multi-level governance, in which local, national, and EU institutions must coordinate rather than act in isolation.

Lessons for EU Border and Migration Governance

The juxtaposition of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian–Ukrainian war highlights several important lessons for EU border and migration governance, going beyond short-term crisis management and pointing to structural challenges.

First, borders must be understood as highly flexible and adaptive regimes. The Slovak–Ukrainian case illustrates how, within a matter of months, the same border can shift from being a near-total barrier to everyday mobility into a large-scale humanitarian corridor. This flexibility reveals both strengths and weaknesses: while it enables rapid adaptation, it also exposes the vulnerability of cross-border communities who depend on predictable and stable border regimes. For policymakers, this means that resilience planning must incorporate both scenarios of closure and openness to avoid repeating the disruptive effects observed in 2020–2021.

Second, EU solidarity mechanisms are essential but uneven. The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in 2022 was a historical milestone, providing millions of Ukrainians with immediate legal status and access to services. Yet, the distribution of refugees remained highly asymmetrical, with Poland and Slovakia bearing disproportionate responsibility relative to their population size and economic capacity. This asymmetry underscores the need for more robust burden-sharing mechanisms at the EU level, potentially including revised funding models, quotas, or permanent solidarity instruments.

Third, crisis resilience requires a careful balance between security and humanitarian imperatives. During the pandemic, borders were securitised in the name of public health, but this approach undermined fundamental EU principles of free movement. In contrast, the war led to rapid liberalisation of entry rules, but such openness also brought logistical and administrative strains. A future-oriented governance model must integrate both perspectives, ensuring that borders can simultaneously protect public safety and uphold humanitarian commitments.

Fourth, local border communities are not passive recipients but active agents. Evidence from Slovakia shows that municipalities, NGOs, and volunteer networks were indispensable in providing humanitarian assistance in 2022. Similarly, during the pandemic, local authorities were often the first to implement and enforce restrictive measures. These experiences suggest that border governance must be multi-level, with stronger recognition of the role of local actors and cross-border partnerships. EU programmes supporting regional development (e.g. INTERREG) could be better aligned with crisis preparedness strategies.

Finally, both crises highlight the interdependence of EU border and migration policies with other policy areas. The pandemic revealed the vulnerability of supply chains and labour mobility, while the war underlined the links between migration, energy security, and geopolitics. Therefore, border governance cannot be treated as an isolated field but must be integrated into broader EU strategies for health security, foreign policy, and economic resilience.

Taken together, these lessons suggest that the EU needs to move beyond reactive crisis management and towards a comprehensive resilience framework for border governance. Such a framework should anticipate multiple types of shocks–pandemics, wars, environmental disasters–and develop flexible mechanisms that can be rapidly deployed while maintaining core European values of solidarity, human rights, and integration.

Broader Reflection

Ultimately, the Slovak-Ukrainian border provides a clear case study of how global crises reshape local realities and redefine the role of borders in Europe. Within less than three years, this border shifted from being almost completely closed during the pandemic to becoming a critical entry point for millions of people fleeing war. This dual transformation highlights not only the fluidity of border regimes, but also their centrality in shaping political narratives, social experiences, and economic outcomes.

The pandemic demonstrated the fragility of the principle of free movement, which had long been considered one of the cornerstones of European integration. For decades, the EU promoted the idea of "open borders" as a symbol of unity and prosperity. Yet in the face of COVID-19, these same borders became impermeable barriers, even for local residents whose lives were deeply intertwined across both sides of the frontier. This reveals that the achievements of European integration are not irreversible, and that under pressure, governments may prioritise national security concerns over collective commitments.

In contrast, the refugee crisis following the Russian invasion of Ukraine illustrated the transformative power of solidarity. Borders became humanitarian lifelines, supported not only by EU institutions but also by ordinary citizens, NGOs, and municipalities. The rapid mobilisation of assistance demonstrated that borders can also function as spaces of cooperation and compassion, where cross-border ties are strengthened rather than disrupted. Importantly, this solidarity was not limited to short-term emergency aid but extended into long-term integration processes, as seen in the rapid increase of residence permits and access to social services for Ukrainians across the EU.

Another broader implication is the recognition that border crises have long-term structural effects on European societies. The influx of millions of Ukrainian citizens has begun to reshape demographic

trends, labour markets, and education systems in host countries. For example, Poland and Slovakia have witnessed both economic opportunities–through an expanded workforce–and challenges, such as pressure on housing and public services. This suggests that migration management must be framed not merely as a temporary response but as a strategic investment in Europe's future socio-economic development.

Finally, these events underscore that borders are not simply lines on a map; they are dynamic social and political constructs. They can function simultaneously as barriers and bridges, depending on the broader geopolitical, health, or economic context. The dual experience of closure during COVID-19 and openness during the refugee crisis illustrates that European integration is inherently contingent and must be constantly renegotiated. The future of EU border governance will therefore depend on its ability to institutionalise this flexibility while safeguarding the principles of solidarity, human rights, and mutual trust.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined the transformation of the Slovak–Ukrainian border under two consecutive crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Together, these events revealed the dual and often contradictory role of borders in contemporary Europe – as restrictive barriers to mobility and as humanitarian gateways offering protection. By analysing statistical data from Eurostat, UNHCR, Frontex, and the Slovak Statistical Office, combined with comparative evidence from Poland, Hungary, and Romania, three central findings can be highlighted that demonstrate the extraordinary flexibility of border regimes under crisis conditions.

First, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of cross-border mobility as one of the essential dimensions of European integration. Passenger crossings at the Slovak–Ukrainian border declined by nearly 90% between 2019 and 2020, with many checkpoints closed entirely to passenger traffic. What had previously been routine and taken for granted – daily commuting for work, shopping, education, or family visits – suddenly became impossible. The collapse of mobility paralysed local economies, undermined small-scale trade, and disrupted the social fabric of borderland communities that had long relied on intensive people-to-people contact. This experience illustrated how quickly national governments can revert to unilateral action when facing perceived existential threats, confirming assessments by the European Court of Auditors (2022) and Tömöri (2023).

Second, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally redefined the function of borders. Within days, millions of people crossed the EU's eastern frontier, and within weeks, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania were dealing with the largest refugee inflow in Europe since the Second World War. Poland emerged as the primary destination, receiving over six million entries in 2022 alone, while Slovakia registered more than 2.7 million, Romania around 2.3 million, and Hungary approximately 1.7 million. These flows transformed previously restricted frontiers into humanitarian lifelines, as border checkpoints became gateways for displaced persons seeking safety and international protection. UNHCR (2023) data confirm that the scale of this displacement dwarfed all previous refugee crises in modern European history, while Duszczyk (2022) emphasises that Poland's central role placed both enormous strain and responsibility on a single member state.

Third, the immediate refugee inflows of 2022 have already translated into long-term settlement across the EU. The number of valid residence permits held by Ukrainian citizens rose from 1.57 million in 2021 to more than 2.2 million in 2022, and in 2023 alone over 307,000 first permits were issued (Eurostat, 2023). This suggests that a significant proportion of displaced persons are not only remaining in host countries but gradually integrating into labour markets, education systems, and housing structures. As Kahanec and Zimmermann (2022) argue, the arrival of working-age Ukrainians has the potential to mitigate demographic decline and labour shortages in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, Brunarska (2022) highlights that this wave differs significantly from earlier circular migration by involving more vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly, raising new challenges for long-term integration and social cohesion.

Beyond these empirical findings, this study makes a broader contribution to the academic and policy debate on border and migration governance. By juxtaposing the pandemic and the war, it shows that borders are not static demarcations but dynamic socio-political constructs whose meaning shifts depending on how crises are framed by political actors and institutions. During the pandemic, mobility was presented as a public health threat, leading to the securitisation of borders through closures and restrictions. In contrast, during the war, mobility was reframed as a humanitarian necessity, turning the very same borders into gateways of solidarity and protection (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2021; Carrera *et al.*, 2023). This duality highlights both the vulnerability and the resilience of European integration.

The analysis also demonstrates that the consequences of these crises extend beyond border management. At the European level, the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in 2022 represented a historic shift in EU migration governance, offering displaced Ukrainians

immediate rights to residence, education, healthcare, and labour market access. Yet solidarity proved uneven, as Poland and Slovakia absorbed a disproportionate burden compared to other member states (Duszczyk, 2022). This imbalance raises questions about the long-term viability of solidarity mechanisms and underscores the necessity for more permanent, equitable responsibility-sharing frameworks within the EU.

At the national and local levels, the findings highlight the indispensable role of border communities. Evidence from municipalities such as Vyšné Nemecké, Ubľa, and Čierna nad Tisou shows that local governments, NGOs, and volunteer networks acted as first responders during both crises. However, they operated under severe financial and institutional constraints, with inconsistent support from central authorities. Strengthening cross-border cooperation structures – including Euroregions and INTERREG programmes – would help ensure that local actors are better prepared to manage future shocks (Scott, 2022; Scholten and Verbeek, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to debates on the securitisation and desecuritisation of mobility. The pandemic exemplified how borders can be rapidly securitised in the name of protecting national health systems, while the refugee crisis illustrated desecuritisation by reframing mobility as a humanitarian imperative. These contrasting dynamics underline that borders are not merely geographical limits but instruments of governance that evolve in response to changing crises.

Looking ahead, three policy recommendations emerge. First, the EU must strengthen its resilience framework to prepare for diverse types of shocks – pandemics, wars, and climate-induced displacement. Second, solidarity mechanisms should be institutionalised to guarantee fairer responsibility-sharing, including financial transfers, relocation schemes, and enhanced coordination of civil protection resources. Third, integration policies must evolve from short-term emergency assistance to sustainable strategies focusing on housing, education, and labour market participation. In conclusion, the Slovak–Ukrainian border offers a powerful illustration of the paradoxical role of borders in the 21st century. It has shown itself to be fragile enough to close overnight, yet flexible enough to open under unprecedented humanitarian pressure. The lessons from these crises are highly relevant for the future of European integration. They reveal that while free movement cannot be taken for granted, solidarity can still emerge under extreme conditions. The resilience of the European Union will depend on its ability to reconcile these two dimensions: ensuring security while upholding its humanitarian commitments and the principles of integration.

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