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Interpreting in the context of community work: Language and cultural mediation for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia – background and case study

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Abstract

Slovakia has not developed a systematic tradition of public service interpreting (PSI), as it has historically been a country with low levels of immigration. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the need for language mediation in communication between newly arrived refugees and Slovak public institutions increased dramatically. This paper examines how this need was met and presents results of a survey among Slovak institutions providing integration services, focusing on interpreted communication strategies, challenges, and perceived institutional needs. Complementary semi-structured interviews with non-professional interpreters working at border crossings illustrate frontline realities. A case study highlights the experiences of a PSI practitioner who simultaneously works as a community worker, focusing on communication with refugees. The study identifies key challenges in PSI practice in Slovakia and formulates recommendations for the development of accessible PSI services and systematic university-level interpreter training tailored to the Slovak context. By contextualizing these findings within broader European PSI discussions, the paper contributes to knowledge from a country with a previously limited PSI infra-

structure, thereby expanding perspectives from non-traditional immigration contexts.

1. Introduction

Slovakia has long been one of the European countries with the lowest number of foreign residents, and thus public service interpreting (PSI)[1] has not developed institutionally or academically. Interpreter education at Slovak universities focuses primarily on conference interpreting in major international languages, while languages of limited diffusion are very rarely included in interpreting training.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally changed this reality. The arrival of large groups of refugees created immediate and critical communication needs in health care, education, legal systems and social and community services. Responses had to be fast and improvised.

This paper brings together research on emerging PSI practices in Slovakia with insights from practitioners working directly with refugees. It particularly focuses on PSI in social and community work - a domain where communication accuracy and emotional sensitivity directly influence the safety and well-being of vulnerable people, especially children. The research offers insights from a country with no prior PSI system and demonstrates how crisis situations can trigger foundational professional and educational development

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do institutions in Slovakia communicate with migrant clients in the context of language barriers, and what communication strategies do they prefer?
2. Who performs PSI tasks in Slovakia following the refugee influx and what is their educational and professional background?
3. What are the specific challenges of PSI in community and social work settings in Slovakia?
4. How can the findings from practice support the development of systematic PSI training in Slovakia?

2. Migration and Public Service Interpreting in Slovakia

Before joining the EU, Slovakia was largely a country of emigration. Although the number of foreigners gradually increased after 2004, the share of foreign residents remained low compared to other EU states. In 2021, only around 167,500 foreigners legally resided in Slovakia. (Presidium of the Police Corps 2022). After the outbreak of the war in

[1] Except for court (sworn) interpreting in specific contexts.

Ukraine, in March 2022, Slovakia recorded one of Europe's highest per-capita inflows of Ukrainian refugees. In the first year, border crossings from Ukraine exceeded 1.7 million entries, with more than 127,000 people requesting temporary protection. Approximately 80% were women and children, many requiring psychosocial and medical support (UNHCR 2023).

The state lacked established protocols and the capacity to provide language services at such scale. Most interpreting was initially organized and funded by UNHCR and carried out by volunteers in cooperation with municipalities and local NGOs e.g. Slovenská humanitárna rada [Slovak Humanitarian Council], Mareena, Človek v ohrození [People in Need Slovakia], Liga za ľudské práva [Human Rights League]. While the initial influx has stabilized as of today, the security situation in Ukraine leaves open the possibility of another waves of people crossing the border in the future. At the same time, many of the activities have been transferred to community centres, accommodation facilities, municipal and employment offices and other public institutions which deal with the further assistance and integration of migrants into Slovak society (Hodáková and Ukušová 2023).

2.1. Early PSI workforce

Research in this area shows that in the first year after the outbreak of the war, almost exclusively ad hoc interpreters (volunteers) were used for public service interpreting. At the border crossing point immediately after the beginning of the war, these were mostly students of Ukrainian and Slovak origin in their twenties with knowledge of Ukrainian and/or Russian, with no previous experience in interpreting and without any training or education (for a more detailed description of this group of ad hoc interpreters, see Hodáková and Ukušová 2023). Interpreting for various types of state and public institutions across the country was already provided by a more diverse group of non-professional interpreters - students of both Ukrainian and Slovak origin, Ukrainians working in Slovakia, all without previous interpreting training and the vast majority also without language education. However, some interpreters had previous interpreting experience, but rather sporadic or experience in the role of client of interpreting services (for a more detailed description of this group of interpreters, see Štefková and Šveda 2022). It can therefore be stated that almost all interpreters were ad hoc volunteers and only a minority had any prior training in interpreting. Findings confirm similar patterns reported in other emergency PSI responses internationally (Valero-Garcés 2019).

2.2. Alternative communication strategies

Realizing that these interpreting capacities are far from being able to cover the emerging demand for language mediation, we were further interested in what other forms of communication are used by institutions in contact with migrant clients in the situation of a language barrier. To this end, Chlebušová (2023) conducted a survey among institutions and organizations providing services for migrants as part of her thesis[2]. The author approached migrant aid organizations that have been active in the area for a long time (e.g. IOM Slovakia, UNICEF Slovakia, Mareena), or those that have been particularly involved in the current refugee crisis (e.g. local catholic charities close to the Slovak-Ukrainian border)[3]. Her findings suggest that freely available translation applications (e.g. Google translate, DeepL) are most often used in communication with migrants in the context of public services in Slovakia, mainly due to their good accessibility, time efficiency and perceived sufficient quality. Approximately half of the organizations use the services of ad hoc interpreters. The use of foreign language resources, such as brochures, leaflets, etc. is also frequent. Professional interpreters are available only in about a quarter of the organizations. However, the organizations surveyed consider professional interpreters[4] to be the most effective form of communication, but only a minority use them due to their lower availability and administrative barriers (Chlebušová 2023 In Hodáková 2024).

3. The first attempts at systematic training of (future) public service interpreters in Slovakia

The response to the newly emerging situation and demand in the field of translation and interpreting had to be fast, so for obvious reasons ad hoc solutions were often applied and although volunteer interpreters were selflessly trying to help, they often had problems, mainly due to their lack of education, training and lack of experience in interpreting, e.g. with specific terminology in various contexts, with clearly identifying their role as an interpreter, with maintaining neutrality or coping with stressful situations (Hodáková 2024). Therefore, as the pressure at the borders gradually subsides, it is necessary to consider systematic solutions that would improve the situation in the future with regard to the practice of public service interpreting (and translation), as well as the training of future

[2] Supervised by S. Hodáková.
[3] The author presents the complete list of contacted organizations in the thesis.
[4] It was not possible to clearly define what respondents understood by the term "professional interpreter" from their answers.

interpreters (and translators) and the mitigation of administrative barriers in this sphere in Slovakia. The education of future public service interpreters in Slovakia is generally starting to take two directions: extracurricular and university-based. In this section we will present our concept of training future public service interpreters in the framework of university education, but currently there are also activities related to the training of public service interpreters in the form of special crash courses entitled "Certified Community Interpreting Course" focused on ad hoc interpreters who already work in the public sector and members of migrant communities interested in providing interpreting services (Štefková and Šveda 2022; Štefková 2025).

The possibilities of university training in the field of public service interpreting were the subject of a national project entitled *PSI collaborative training in Slovakia: design, implementation and evaluation of courses for public service interpreters* (2022-2024, funded by the Slovak national grant agency KEGA), which aimed, among other things, to prepare and test modules for the education of future public service interpreters in different language combinations and other educational materials. The modules can be included in the university training of future interpreters, either in the form of a complementary specialisation for primarily conference interpreters, or in the form of a complementary specialisation for students of other linguistic study programmes with working languages that are used in the context of public service translation and interpreting (e.g. Ukrainian). To ensure that the training is relevant and responds to the demands of practice, it is essential that it reflects the experience of practising public service interpreters, in addition to rigorously mapping the situation, needs and barriers of the different stakeholders. The training is based on universally proven concepts and procedures[5] (e.g. Angelelli 2017; Kadrić and Pöllabauer 2023; Tiselius and Herring 2023) and competence models (e.g. EMT Competence Framework 2022; Reference framework of competences for democratic culture 2023), but it also includes the specifics of the Slovak context. The collaborative design of the training therefore implies close cooperation between interpreting and translation teachers and practising interpreters, but also cooperation with (institutional and non-institutional) clients of interpreting services in Slovakia. The design of the training itself was preceded by data collection using case studies from individual stakeholders. In the next part of the paper, we provide an example in the form of a case study of different aspects of public service interpreting in the context of community and/or social work in Slovakia.

[5] The exchange of experiences between countries in the WG PSIT & LLD of the EMT network, for example, is particularly valuable and inspiring in this respect.

Continuation of activities in the field of PSI training is currently being implemented within the framework of project 001UKF-4/2025 *Mental Health in the Context of Training Future Interpreters (not only) in Public Service in Slovakia* (2025-2027, funded by the Slovak national grant agency KEGA).

4. Public service interpreting in the context of community or social work: important aspects

One of the areas that are the topic of the above-mentioned training modules, and in which we are currently registering a high demand for interpreting for migrants in Slovakia, is the field of community or social work[6]. For this particular area, we collected information from, among others, an interpreter in the public service who also acts as a community worker as well as from social workers active in the field of services for migrants.

In this case study, we will draw on the specific characteristics named by the interpreter in a series of face-to-face and online interviews, but for the purposes of the training design, we complement the overall picture with the perspective of other interpreters working in this context and social workers. At the same time, it should be said that the experience of the interpreter who is the subject of this individual case study corresponds in many aspects with the experience of other interpreters in the field (cf. Hodáková 2024) and in the interrelation to universal concepts they form a solid basis for the preparation of educational materials in our training modules.

Our further analysis will not describe the above verified universal principles and procedures, but for a better illustration of the specific Slovak context, we will offer the perspective of an interpreter in the public service who works in the field of assistance to Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia. We will focus on (i) the characteristics of the interpreter (her education, previous experience, interpreted topics) and (ii) the specifics of interpreting in the field of community and social work (forms of interpreting, client groups, preparation and the process of interpreting, difficulties and benefits in the interpreting profession).

4.1. The characteristics of the interpreter

The subject in our case study is a Slovak woman working as a public service interpreter. The interpreter graduated from Bachelor's study programme East Slavic Languages and Cultures followed by a Master's

[6] Other modules are Ethical aspects of interpreter work, Interpreting in the healthcare context and Mental hygiene of the interpreter.

degree in Russian Language in Intercultural and Business Communication, which is a programme focusing on Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian language and culture (as mentioned above, there are no educational opportunities in the PSI field in Slovakia). At that time, this study programme had the same hourly allocation of interpreting as the translation and (conference) interpreting programmes, and it was also completed with a state exam in translation and interpreting, although only in the Russian language. Her education in this field, according to her own statement, has provided her with good linguistic and intercultural competence, she is aware of the importance of cultural specifics and other relevant aspects in mediated communication (e.g. the importance of specialized terminology). The subject has also completed her doctoral studies in Slavic Languages and is currently working in a research position at the Slovak Academy of Sciences. This, in her opinion, also helps her to more objectively and comprehensively assess various aspects of her work as an interpreter in the field. She has an active knowledge of Russian and Ukrainian, a passive knowledge of Belarusian and interprets from and into Ukrainian and Russian. She has been working as an interpreter since the outbreak of the war in February 2022 when she volunteered, and later became employed by a migrant aid organization as interpreter and community worker in the social services for migrants. The organization she works for is Mareena, a national non-profit organization whose main goals are:

- to provide opportunities for active integration of foreigners into Slovak society,
- to support the local community of Slovaks and foreigners in establishing relationships and
- to raise public awareness on the topics of diversity, migration and integration (Mareena 2023).

The organization operates, among other things, community centres and facilities for refugees and employs e.g. social and community workers, coordinators, translators, interpreters. For our purposes we will further be primarily interested in the specific areas that the subject of our case study has addressed in her role as public service interpreter (not as a community worker). The *settings and areas* she has most frequently interpreted in include:

- first contact with refugees/migrants when crossing the Ukrainian-Slovak border (practical information on possibilities of stay, transport, accommodation, health care, useful phone numbers; important information - e.g. warning about human trafficking, obligation to microchip an animal),
- legal issues (e.g. temporary shelter, asylum, guardianship of minors, family reunification for third-country nationals),
- crisis communication and psychological support at the border crossing (clients experiencing stress, separation, loss, mental fatigue, panic

attacks triggered by helicopters overhead or armed soldiers at the border, bombing of trains and shelling of cars they arrived in),

- medical treatment at the border (Covid-19, care for newborns, dialysis, shrapnel from sniping in the skull, withdrawal seizures, high blood pressure, patients suffering from psychiatric drug withdrawal),

- social work in a community centre (prevention – e.g., screening, profiling; crisis intervention – e.g., neglect, alcohol in adolescents; clients with special needs – e.g., children with Down syndrome, ADHD, behavioural or learning disabilities; enrolment of children in preschool and school),

- specific counselling (e.g. unplanned pregnancies),

- assistance with communication with authorities, police, courts, employers.

Beyond her education and practical interpreting experience, the interpreter is actively interested in further training and professional development opportunities. Manuals, courses or training materials for public service interpreters or intercultural mediators have not, in her experience, been provided by the organizations she has worked with to date.[7] However, she regularly participates in trainings for social and community workers that also help her in her work as an interpreter. The trainings are organized as a collaboration between the academic sector and UNICEF.

4.2. The specifics of interpreting in the field of community and social work

Based on her experience, the interpreter defines the types of interpreting that are carried out in the public service, the client groups and the process of interpreting itself, as well as the difficulties and positives of this work. Although this is an individual experience in the form of a case study, her claims correspond with data collected from other interpreters in the field (Hodáková and Ukušová 2023).

In her work the interpreter uses the following *types, forms and modes of interpreting*:

- consecutive interpreting with and without notation (e.g. in interrogation by the police, psychological counselling, medical treatment, communication with the authorities, social intervention, official visit to a social service facility),

- combination of interpreting and community work (e.g. creation of a client profile by a community worker, where the questions from the questionnaire in Slovak language are interpreted by the community worker to the client in Ukrainian and then the client's answers in Ukrainian are

[7] In November 2023, they were offered a three-day *Certified Community Interpreting Course* for the first time.

written in the questionnaire in Slovak, while the same community worker not only interprets the questions and answers, but also leads and guides the whole conversation from the position of a community worker; if the client is interested in specific counselling during the creation of the profile, a social worker enters the conversation and the community worker switches to the interpreter mode for the necessary time),

- telephone interpreting (when it is not possible to be physically present at the place of communication),
- interpreting for migrant clients with hearing impairment (by transcribing spoken communication into written text),
- relay interpreting (from/to Ukrainian – through English/Hungarian/Romanian – from/to Slovak).

The areas and topics interpreted are also related to the client groups of interpreting services, whose specificities need to be taken into account in practice and training. In her experience, the interpreter names the following client groups:

- institutional clients (authorities, police, employers, schools, healthcare and psychological support providers, social service providers, journalists, politicians),
- non-institutional clients (refugees – minors, mothers, more rarely fathers, other family members, patients, persons with specific needs).

As for the *preparation for the interpreting*, this varies depending on the context, the communication situation, the client, etc. In general, the interpreter makes use of a briefing with the institutional client if possible, i.e. if the circumstances allow, she communicates in advance with the official or social worker about the topic of the conversation, in which direction they plan to develop the communication, so that she can potentially search for unfamiliar vocabulary (e.g. names of institutions, diagnoses, medical aids, medications, legal terms). She usually uses commonly available internet dictionaries and search engines to prepare, as well as information materials from institutions, brochures, etc.[8] In this context, in addition to thorough preparation, she also stresses the importance of 'openness and honesty with the client', i.e. when she does not understand something in the communication, is not sure of the meaning of a term, etc., she is straightforward and asks the client for clarification, because she is aware of her responsibility for the accuracy of the interpreted information.

Knowledge of the interpreting process itself is also extremely important for the training of future interpreters, as the different phases of the conversation can have specific significance for the effectiveness of the

[8] As part of the projects, a database of multilingual resources and educational materials is also being developed to help interpreters prepare more effectively.

interpreted communication. Prior to the core of the interview or conversation itself, the interpreter in our case study identifies the following *key phases in the beginning of the conversation*:

- introducing the organization (description of its functioning and competences),
- introducing the aim and subject of the conversation,
- introducing the roles and the approximate conversation procedure to be interpreted.

After mastering these steps and getting introduced to the clients, the interpreter considers the choice of language (Ukrainian or Russian) depending on various aspects (clients' region of origin, adult/minor client, attitude towards Russian, etc.).[9]

In addition to the form and content of interpreting, it is also necessary to bear in mind the *personal and interpersonal factors* with which both clients and interpreters are confronted in public service interpreting contexts. These include, according to the interpreter in our case study, in particular:

- difficult emotional state of the client (frustration, anger or resignation from a bad situation that has lasted too long, death of a loved one, husband on the battlefront, recalling distressing memories during the interview, parent's psychological problems as a factor in determining the child's psychological state when creating a profile of the minor),
- the need to manage the emotional involvement of the interpreter and to establish and maintain the limits of their responsibilities,
- client's fear of the legislation of a foreign country – necessary to overcome initial mistrust by explaining in more detail, commenting on each activity or offering assistance with particular tasks (in the interpreter's practice, it is preferable to ask for assistance in dealing with a serious situation from an interpreter/community worker who has worked with clients in the past and is familiar with the case, and likewise, the clients already know and trust the interpreter/community worker. However, there are naturally situations where this is not possible and another interpreter is used.),
- fatigue, exhaustion of the interpreter in crisis situations – for objective and subjective reasons, the interpreter is sometimes unable to limit his/her work to working hours only – (e.g. in case of an incident, a health emergency, a missing child).

However, despite the challenging situations, the work of an interpreter in the public service also brings *positives*. In this context, the interpreter mentions in particular:

[9] These initial steps are also given special emphasis in the training modules, as their handling is particularly important for the success of the whole communication process.

- a feeling of meaningfulness in the profession ('even knowing the language can save and help'),
- a large amount of acquired professional knowledge, skills and habits (e.g. received training and supervision in additional areas; improved improvisation or communication skills, better crisis management),
- professional growth, expanding opportunities for collaboration with other interpreters, with experts in other fields, with researchers etc.

All of these benefits contribute to the interpreter's motivation to stay in the profession and continuously work on her development, as well as to her interest in improving the training of future public service interpreters.

4.3. Representativeness and limits of the case study

The presented case study is not intended to be statistically representative of all public service interpreting practices in Slovakia. Rather, it serves as an analytically informed, illustrative example that captures several recurrent features of PSI work in the Slovak context following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. These include crisis-driven and improvised interpreting arrangements, work with highly vulnerable client groups, limited institutional support, role fluidity, and a high level of emotional and ethical pressure on interpreters. In this sense, many of the challenges described in the case study correspond to patterns identified in interviews with other interpreters and in institutional data collected within the broader research project.

At the same time, the case also displays elements that can be considered exceptional and therefore limit the generalisability of the findings. These include the interpreter’s high level of linguistic and academic qualification, her strong intercultural competence, and her long-term engagement with a single migrant aid organisation, which enabled continuity of practice and the building of trust with clients and institutional actors. These factors may not be typical for all PSI practitioners in Slovakia, particularly ad hoc or volunteer interpreters with limited training. Acknowledging both the representative and the exceptional aspects of the case allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the findings and supports their careful use in informing public service interpreter training and professional development.

5. Conclusion

Based on the empirical data from institutional surveys, interviews with ad hoc and non-professional interpreters, and the presented case study, the study provides answers to the research questions posed in the introduction.

Regarding the first research question, the findings show that Slovak institutions primarily rely on improvised communication strategies when facing language barriers with migrant clients. The most frequently used tools are freely available machine translation applications and multilingual written materials, while ad hoc interpreters are engaged where possible. Although professional interpreters are perceived by institutions as the most effective solution, their use remains limited due to low availability, financial constraints, and administrative barriers. This confirms that communication practices are driven more by accessibility and urgency than by quality assurance considerations.

In relation to the second research question, the study demonstrates that public service interpreting tasks in Slovakia after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine have been performed predominantly by non-professional interpreters and volunteers. These interpreters often possess strong linguistic competences and intercultural awareness, but usually lack formal training in interpreting, professional role awareness, and knowledge of ethical standards. Their backgrounds are diverse, including students, members of migrant communities, and individuals with previous informal interpreting experience, which results in considerable variability in interpreting quality and working practices.

With respect to the third research question, the analysis identifies a set of specific challenges characteristic of public service interpreting in community and social work settings. These include emotionally demanding interactions with vulnerable clients, blurred role boundaries between interpreting and social or community work, limited preparation time, exposure to crisis situations, and the risk of interpreter overload and burnout. At the same time, the findings highlight the importance of trust-building, continuity of interpreter-client relationships, and interpreters' ability to manage both linguistic and psychosocial aspects of mediated communication.

Finally, addressing the fourth research question, the study shows that practice-based insights can directly inform the development of systematic public service interpreter training in Slovakia. The identified challenges underline the need for training programmes that go beyond linguistic skills and include ethics, role clarification, domain-specific terminology, intercultural competence, crisis communication, and mental hygiene. The findings thus support the design of modular, practice-oriented training embedded in university education and complemented by targeted courses for active interpreters, tailored to the specific institutional and social context of Slovakia.

Overall, the study demonstrates that although public service interpreting in Slovakia emerged as a crisis-driven response, it now provides a solid empirical foundation for the gradual professionalisation and institutionalisation of PSI services and training. By linking real-life practice

with educational design, the research contributes to the development of sustainable solutions for linguistically mediated communication in public services in a country with no prior tradition of PSI.

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