War in Ukraine and public service interpreting in Slovakia: Initial impressions and implications

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Abstract

On February 24 2022, Russia started a war in Ukraine and in the first hours and days following the attack, a massive wave of refugees swept the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Slovakia, historically more adjusted to emigration than immigration (Tužinská 2019, Štefková 2020), had to adapt quickly and cope with unprecedented numbers of refugees and displaced persons. Given the inadequate processing capacities and lack of community interpreters, improvised and ad-hoc community interpreting schemes emerged (KCI 2022). In the situation of non-existent formal schemes for the training and recognition of PSIT in Slovakia, alternative, non-governmental schemes had to be designed to compensate for a missing institutional framework partially.

This article describes the chronology of the migration from Ukraine to Slovakia, briefly introduces the context of community interpreting in Slovakia and outlines a crash course designed for a mixed group of public service interpreters catering to the needs of a growing community of Ukrainian citizens in Slovakia. In order to understand the needs of the ad-hoc interpreters, a survey among the ad-hoc interpreters was carried out online to map the demographic, language profile and motivation of the volunteer interpreters for whom the training was to be designed. Similar schemes can serve as a basis for the development of future, more formal and institutionalised schemes of training and support. We believe that the current wave of refugees from Ukraine is an opportunity for countries in Central and Eastern Europe to develop institutionalised training schemes for PSIT. This paper discusses the possibilities and limits of such an endeavour.

1. Introduction

The night of February 24 2022, will be remembered worldwide as the beginning of the most recent large-scale armed conflict that Russia unilaterally started to wage against Ukraine. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), this conflict is perceived with much higher emotions and degree of anxiety due to the close proximity of the war and also given the shared experience with Russian (Soviet) military aggression and imperial ambitions during the 20th Century (see Globsec 2022). As Russian troops crossed the borders of Ukraine and launched a full-scale war, a massive wave of refugees and IDPs (internally displaced persons) started to move from the Eastern parts of Ukraine to the west.

One month after the beginning of the invasion, the UNHCR reported that 4 million people left Ukraine in search of protection and refuge, while the total number of IDPs was estimated at 6.5 million people. The total number impacted by the war was estimated to be 12.65 million people (UNHCR 2022a). Following the initial spike in numbers, the situation has stabilised and especially after the successful defence of the capital, Kyiv, the number of refugees began to stabilise. Five months into the war, UNHCR reported 5.1 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe, noting the rising number of border crossing from European countries back to Ukraine, marking a reverse trend (UNHCR 2022b).

Looking at the distribution of refugees in neighbouring countries (UNHCR 2022b), the largest community has consistently been present in Poland, with 1.1 million refugees registered for temporary protection. As of June 16 2022, Slovakia has recorded over 510.000 border crossings from Ukraine (UNHCR 2022c). Between February 24 and June 23, a total of 82 799 persons requested temporary protection in Slovakia, and 190 applied for asylum (IOMa 2022). When looking at the demographics of this group, it is notable that it is composed predominantly of women. At the same time, third-country nationals constitute 7% of all individuals coming from Ukraine (IOMa 2022).

For Slovakia, the wave of refugees and IDPs fleeing the war in Ukraine was the most significant humanitarian challenge since the country gained independence in 1993. According to a report from Eurostat, Slovakia granted temporary protection to the third largest community of Ukrainians in Europe (Eurostat 2022). Previous waves of refugees were negligible from Slovakia and its authorities in light of the Ukrainian crisis. The total number of refugees who applied for asylum in Slovakia during the period of 25 years between 1993 and 2018 was 58 664 (Migration office 2018), which is less than the number of Ukrainians who registered for temporary protection in five months since the beginning of war in 2022.

In light of these statistics, it is perhaps fair to claim that Slovakia was unprepared for a humanitarian challenge of this magnitude. Indeed, previous waves of refugees (most notably from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan) included at the highest point 1228 people (Migration office 2018), despite the disproportionate coverage in the media. The capacities for processing such vast numbers of people were limited, and governmental agencies were unprepared for what came on February 24 (Denník N 2022).

The capacities of existing infrastructure in Slovakia were inadequate to handle such a major humanitarian crisis. As an example, the detention centre in Humenné, which is closest to the Ukrainian border, had a capacity of only 524 beds (Migration office 2018). Similarly, other centres could hardly cater to the unexpected numbers of displaced persons, and other, improvised forms of accommodation were set up in the aftermath of the invasion. Similarly to physical infrastructure, also the processing capacities were limited and insufficient. The inadequate processing capacities are a reflection of a broader conceptual issue which characterises the attitude towards foreigners and immigrants in many Central European countries, Šveda and Tužinská (2021) have highlighted how the perception of "otherness" and citizenship regimes influence the languages policies in these countries. NGOs, local municipalities, and private entities quickly supplied what was missing in the governmental capacities. Indeed, as some reports observed (e.g. Euractiv 2022) NGOs from many different areas of work reacted to the humanitarian crises much faster than the central state administration and quickly provided volunteers and improvised facilities. Organisations like Scouting Slovakia, People in Need, Ligue for Human Rights and many others supplied critical services on all three border crossings with Ukraine and organised help centres and information points all over the country. One problem was immediately quite apparent: the lack of interpreters for both Russian and Ukrainian languages.

In the first days following the invasion, Slovak universities were among the first responders in the provision of community interpreters. Most notably, the Matej Bel University, Constantine the Philosopher University, Prešov University and Comenius University organised community interpreters from the ranks of their students, provided limited ad-hoc training and mediated the provision of interpreting services.

Based on the above-mentioned facts and experiences, in the following sections of this paper we first map the state of interpreting provision in the public service sector for refugees and the so-called new minorities[1] (see

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[1] We use the term new minorities in accordance with the definition of Gabriel González Núñez (2016). As he states, access to PSIT is a way of helping people interact with public institutions and bringing closer elements of society that would otherwise not interact, or at least, not very successfully. Therefore

González Núñez 2016) in Slovakia and then present two forms of interpreter training in PSIT that the authors of this paper are implementing. One is aimed at the students of the translation and interpreting studies at Comenius University in Bratislava. The second focuses on ad-hoc interpreters at the large capacity centre run by Human Rights League. Both aim to improve the quality of interpreting in the current refugee crisis and could be an inspiration for similar crash courses elsewhere.

2. Public Service Interpreting in Slovakia

The public service interpreting and translation (PSIT) encompasses the provision of interpreting (and/or translation) in different sectors (e.g. education, health care, law or administration) where third-country nationals and speakers of foreign languages come into contact with representatives of state administration, public administration, local government and their services. As observed in our earlier research (e. g. Štefková 2018, 2020; Bossaert 2018; Štefková and Bossaert 2019, 2021), Slovakia has a very limited system for training community interpreters or for providing public service interpreting. The only domain where public service interpreting is somewhat organised and provided by the state is the domain of judicial proceedings, police investigations and asylum proceedings, where the parties are entitled to interpreting services on the basis of Act 382/2004 on Experts, Interpreters and Translators. So-called court (or sworn) translators and interpreters are subject to certification, are provided with training with a certification requirement and have a certain status in society. The legal sector enjoys a "privileged" position compared to the social, health and education sectors. However, even in the legal sector, translators and interpreters are mostly inaccessible to those who form the so-called new minorities. Ad-hoc interpreters are quite often invited to legal proceedings. Users of these exotic languages often do not know the host country's language to a sufficient level, are unable to provide translation and interpreting services or are unaware of the need for training in these.[2] As Tužinská (2011, 2020) reported in her thorough analysis of public service interpreting and translation services (PSIT) in the context of Slovak asylum proceedings, the system often relies on

Núñez advocates for an inclusive model for translation policy. The interaction with public institutions is important for the integration. Without language access, these individuals are excluded from the benefits provided by the institutions.

[2] A comparable state of community interpreting provision is also noted by authors who have mapped the state of PSIT provision in Central Europe. Compare e.g. Pöllabauer (2020).

untrained, ad-hoc interpreters, and doesn't regulate the ethical aspects of this service and may lead to critical implications for asylum seekers.

NGOs and non-profit organisations mainly provide community interpreting in the context of PSIT through volunteers or lay interpreters (Tužinská 2020). They create their own lists of interpreters with whom they work but who do not have adequate training, language skills or certification. Therefore, even these lists do not guarantee the provision of quality interpreting services. As Prunč (2011) notes, based on an analysis of the state of PSIT in Austria, there is a certain "professional snobbery" on the part of professionals towards people outside the profession in communication between professional and lay interpreters, which hinders the exchange of experience and the inclusion of lay interpreters in professional organisations.

Research by Homola (2021) has shown that in Slovakia, patients are not entitled to use an interpreter in healthcare based on legislation or other internal regulations of healthcare institutions. Due to the lack of state support for healthcare interpreters, healthcare providers often rely on their employees who do not have interpreting or translation training. Patients often have to provide their own interpreter. This is most often the case with family members. Translation of medical records is not provided to patients at all. The responsibility for funding interpreting in social services and for foreign language learners in education lies with schools or families. Ad hoc interpreters are most often used for communication in schools.

3. First steps in training PSI in Slovakia

As Ertl and Pöllabauer (2010, 168-170) note, training in PSIT is affected by limited funding sources, mostly from short-term projects. This also determines the organisational limitations and possibilities of such training; courses have a limited duration, are organised on the job, often in the afternoons and evenings, and the pool of participants tends to be heterogeneous, with a degree of fluctuation. Among the frequently cited advantages of such PSIT training is the possibility of covering a wider range of languages, greater flexibility in recruiting candidates, the possibility of accepting a higher number of applicants, the focus on practical skills, and the possibility of completing the course alongside employment. The problem with these types of training, if they are not sufficiently institutionalised, is mainly one of funding and, therefore, long-term sustainability, given that many of the applicants for PSIT provision come from low-income backgrounds. Examples of good practice outside university-based PSIT training can be found, for example, in the system for the provision of so-called social interpreting and translation in Belgium, where social interpreters and translators are trained and certified through state-organised courses, while

the needs of PSIT are partly covered by a network of simply trained volunteer interpreters. Similar courses were provided during the so-called "refugee crises" in the period 2015 – 2018 by universities in Austria (Pöchhacker 2021) and Hungary (Horváth 2021).

PSIT research pioneer Sandra Hale (2007) points to the difficulty of covering interpretation from and into under-represented languages, as speakers of these exotic languages often do not have a sufficient level of proficiency in the language of the receiving country or do not have the motivation to provide translation and interpreting services, or are unaware of the need for PSIT training. Hale therefore stresses the need to generate interest in this type of translation and interpreting services among translation and interpreting students. She sees motivating students to take a deeper interest in the specifics of this type of translation and interpreting and to develop appropriate linguistic and intercultural competencies as an important challenge. As Hale notes, students who have the necessary linguistic and bicultural knowledge and skills are often not attracted to PSIT because of the low financial remuneration, the need for specialisation, the difficult working conditions in a legislatively poorly defined environment, and the necessity of flexible working hours (Hale 2007, 169).

In line with the above-mentioned vision of Hale[3], it is important to generate interest in community interpreting among students of languages needed in de PSI sector in Slovakia. At Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, students were encouraged to participate in PSIT training as part of the Erasmus+ project PACI[4]. The PSI course is one of the four training modules of the PACI PSIT training. In the beginning, the course provides insight into the basic concepts of interpreting in public service. The course leads students to understand the interpreter's role and the practical implementation of interpreting services in this sector. Therefore, it focuses attention on the interpreting techniques and contexts encountered by the interpreter in PSI. It pays particular attention to the theory and practical exercises of note-taking. It contains three case studies focusing on the three thematic areas of PSI – education, health and police. The student is introduced

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[3] See also Hale (2012, 2015).

[4] The project was carried out between 2018-2021 with the goal to desig an additional training for the students of languages with limmited diffusion, see more in the monograph edited by Štefková, Kerremens, Bossaert (2020) and the didactic handbook af the training course - Štefková, M., Kerremans, K., & Bossaert, B. (Eds.) (2020). Framework structure PACI – Professional and Accessible Community Interpreting: a Gateway to Migrant´s Integration. Handbook for users of the training model. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave.

to the most important characteristics of PSI, he/she is able to use various interpreting techniques in public service interpreting, becomes familiar with the theory and practice of note-taking, learns how to work with available terminological tools and dictionaries, and acquires strategies for critically evaluating his/her interpreting performance. The course is supplemented with relevant resources and literature to broaden the understanding of the topics covered.

The four modules of the PSIT training developed in the PACI project (PST, PSI, Terminology and language technology in PSIT and Ethical and Institutional aspects of PSIT) are available free of charge to the general public after registration. We propose to offer it as supplementary study material within the elective courses of the philology curriculum or to integrate it into the translation and interpreting seminars in Master's courses. An essential component of this training model is intensive on-the-job training. For the purpose of terminological training for these sectors, the trainees have at their disposal a terminology database processed on the free online platform Terminoloque.

4. Training community interpreters in the Ukrainian and Russian languages in Slovakia

Let us now return to the Slovak context, following the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the resulting wave of refugees to countries bordering Ukraine. The case of the Ukrainian language in PSI in Slovakia stands out. Despite having the shortest border from Slovakia, Ukraine is the largest neighbour and the source of migrant workforce, which, even before the war, was the largest in Slovakia (IOM 2022b). Yet, the official registry of court (sworn) interpreters (according to the beforementioned act) includes 29 interpreters with the Ukrainian language, most of them based in Eastern Slovakia (Ministry of Justice 2022). The same holds true for translation services with 32 sworn translators (ibid.). To put these numbers into perspective of other neighbouring languages, there are 101 court interpreters and 92 court translators with the Hungarian language and 30 interpreters with 28 translators in the Polish language. When we look at the educational landscape, out of four universities offering full interpreter training programmes in Slovakia, only Prešov University offers study programmes in combination with the Ukrainian language.

We might speculate about the reasons behind such significant underrepresentation of Ukrainian in the Slovak market with language services. One of the reasons could be the proximity of Slovak and Ukrainian languages, where Ukrainians often pick up basic Slovak vocabulary quickly. On the other hand, Polish, which is also a Slavic language of close proximity is much better

covered with several philological university study programmes. Another reason may lie in the fact that the Ukrainian language was prosecuted during communism (Shapoval and Olynuk 2017), and as a result, there were no teachers and academics to develop a training programme for interpreters (or translators) in neighbouring post-communist countries. The third possible explanation may be the fact that before the war, many Ukrainians or routinely used both Ukrainian and Russian and chose to speak Russian when talking to foreigners (Bowring 2014).

Yet, the humanitarian crisis of 2022 fully exposed the insufficient capacities of not only processing capacities and infrastructure but, in the context of PSI, a lack of trained interpreters and missing structures to support them. In an attempt to compensate for the lack of trained or officially recognised interpreters, NGOs and universities organised volunteers, especially from ranks of Ukrainian students, to provide interpretation on many different occasions. Most importantly, in large capacity service centres, at information points, in medical facilities etc. These activities were spontaneous, often chaotic and overlapping, but in the end, managed to mobilise volunteer interpreters, who in some cases also provided over-the-phone interpreting, which is still a rather underdeveloped and under-researched domain of PSI interpreting in Slovakia.

Following the first days and weeks after the outbreak of the war, the first large-capacity centres for Ukrainian displaced persons were created in the regional capitals of Slovakia, and a more coordinated system of community interpreting started to take shape. The need for a training module for inexperienced and ad-hoc interpreters quickly emerged as a result of this partial systematisation of refugee processing.

5. The Ukrainian Ad-hoc Interpreters in Slovakia

Given the previous experience of the authors of the present paper in community interpreting and community interpreter training and also based on their contacts in the non-governmental sector, they were asked by one of the most active NGOs in Slovakia (League for Human Rights) to develop a course for the interpreters who serviced one of the largest service centres in the capital, Bratislava. In the initial step, before the first training, we asked the possible participants, i.e. those on the mailing list of volunteer interpreters for the NGO, to fill in an online questionnaire to better understand their experience, education, language background and also motivation. The online questionnaire was distributed to all in the NGO's mailing list of interpreters for Ukrainian refugees. The group of ad-hoc interpreters was composed of Ukrainians who were already staying in Slovakia for a longer period of time,

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students of Ukrainian origin, Slovak students and other volunteers who spoke Slovak, Ukrainian or Russian.

Out of 72 responses received in the period of May 4 – 7, 2022, the vast majority were women (77.78%), and the average age of respondents was 34 years (the range was 18 to 67 years). 79.2% of volunteer interpreters had completed university education, and 20.8% completed secondary education. When asked about their mother tongue, 41.7% indicated Ukrainian, 31.9% Russian and 22.2% Slovak languages. Answering the question of what other languages they can actively communicate, 84.7% indicated the Russian language, 65.3% Slovak language, 63.9% English language and 44.4% Ukrainian language.

Looking at their previous education and training, only 10% studied or were studying translation and interpreting, 8.6% studied language teaching training programmes, and 14.3% studied other linguistic programmes. When asked about their previous experience with interpreting, 45.8% responded that they had interpreted a few times already, 29.2% interpreted regularly, and 8.3% stated that they listened to interpreting as a client. Another question surveyed their personal motivation toward interpreting. Out of multiple possible options, 53.3% responded that they consider interpreting a necessary service for a limited time only, 31% wanted to provide interpreting on a long-term basis, 29.6% wanted to try out interpreting and see whether they like it, and 11.3% stated that they consider interpreting as an economic activity.

Based on the findings from the questionnaire, we have decided to create a 12-week course targeting key areas and competencies of community interpreting/PSI and deliver it in the period of May-August 2022.

6. Design of the crash course

The course on interpreting in public services is didactically focused on acquiring basic theoretical knowledge about interpreting, which is essential for the subsequent development of practical interpreting skills. The scope of the course is 12 training sessions of 90 minutes duration, partly online (4 theoretical sessions) and partly on-site (8 practical sessions).

Two introductory theoretical training sessions in the online environment of ZOOM are focused on the introduction of basic concepts of interpreting in public services, the introduction of basic interpreting techniques (consecutive interpreting, dialogue interpreting, sight translation, chuchotage), the knowledge of the basic terminological areas, the so-called domains of interpreting in public services. The theoretical training aims to provide the course participants with practical tips on how to prepare for interpreting before the interpreting session, the techniques of interpreting, the development of essential competencies and skills (e.g. handling of cognitive load, working with

short-term and long-term memory, terminological preparation, ethical principles), and the processing of emotions and experiences after the session. An important part of the theoretical training is understanding the ethical principles of interpreting in public services, developing emotional and psychological resilience and highlighting opportunities for lifelong learning and individual development.

The three following physical training sessions focus on practical training in concentration, memory and interpreting note-taking. Through memory exercises, practicing interpreting note-taking on short texts saturated with information and terminology in the form of initial interviews, participants practice the receptive and productive phases of interpreting, become practically familiar with note-taking techniques, and begin to create their own list of symbols and abbreviations. At the same time, they are becoming familiar with the technique of sight translation examples of texts with basic information for the refugees and IDPs, short consecutive speeches without note-taking and with note-taking, dialogue interpreting and chuchotage in multiple role-play exercises.

After this initial training phase, participants are given the task of summarising their experiences of applying the above-mentioned techniques in practice. Special attention is also paid to ethical dilemmas in the performance of interpreting, and problematic terms from practical interpreting sessions are collected and jointly analysed. At the same time, in an online environment, participants can jointly create an inventory of useful symbols, abbreviations and supporting texts for terminology training, which will serve as a knowledge bank of information for further self-study after the course. To this end, we recommended to the organiser of the course to create an online environment for participants, which will store all the supporting materials from the training sessions, presentations, lectures, practice speeches and texts, links to terminology training resources, etc.

In the upcoming part of the course (not implemented yet), we will focus on interpreting and terminology training for individual domains of interpreting in public services, such as employment, social and health care, police and asylum procedures, which, in addition to terminology training, will focus on practical training in the specifics of interpreting in the given domains and will further develop interpreting skills in the application of individual interpreting techniques.

We will conclude the course with summative training in an online environment, which will focus on opportunities for lifelong learning, self-study and individual training, and will also present a textbook on interpreting in the public services, which will be developed on the basis of this course.

7. Some conclusions

The research outlined in this paper provides only a limited insight into a more complex problem of PSIT infrastructure in Slovakia. At the same time, it is only a limited probe into the structure, motivation, and language profile of the ad-hoc interpreter community in one of the large-capacity centres for Ukrainian displaced persons in one of the smallest countries bordering Ukraine. As we have emphasised, this research should be considered only as the initial mapping of opportunities and needs; after completing the crash course, a more thorough assessment will be necessary, also focusing on the development of permanent structures and mechanisms. Yet, we believe that at least some preliminary conclusions can be drawn in this phase already, which may serve as an inspiration.

The way PSIT services are provided to national government institutions, and other public bodies and the opportunities for professionalisation, training, and social recognition of translators and interpreters differ substantially compared to conference interpreting. The same holds true, albeit to a lesser degree, for institutional translation in the public sector. Based on our experience and (probably not only) in the Slovak context, there is a significant gap between the standards of quality set by theory and the reality of practice. In the end, "the status of interpreters working in the public service settings is to a certain degree a reflection of each society's commitment to plurilingualism" (Šveda and Tužinská 2021, 37).

The first impetus for a systematic approach to PSIT comes in Slovakia from NGOs, which often recognise the poor quality of interpreting services in asylum proceedings. As they are in the Slovak context, frequently those who follow the fate and progress of individual cases of asylum seekers, it is often in their interest (and in the interest of their clients) to cooperate with interpreter training institutes towards the development of more or less systematic small-scale training of public service interpreters. Most of these initiatives are ad hoc and, due to a lack of interest on the part of state institutions, cannot guarantee sustainability.

It is clear that fundamental change in this area cannot be achieved bottom-up by translators and interpreters in the PSIT sector. The experience of countries with a well-developed PSIT system, such as Belgium[5], shows that fundamental change has to come from the top by means of setting up an effective translational policy model in this sector, professional and remunerative recognition of interpreters engaged in such activities and systematic support of training, certification and support for interpreters of all languages. Let us believe that the current, unprecedented wave of refugees

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[5] See Štefková and Bossaert (2019).

in Central and Eastern Europe will be an opportunity to develop formal, institutionalised schemes to provide PSIT to all new minorities.

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