

EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE LABOUR MARKET SITUATION OF BENEFICIARIES OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION IN HUNGARY

SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF BENEFICIARIES
OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION IN HUNGARY
– NIEM POLICY BRIEFS

BOGLÁRKA BUDAI

3

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Executive summary

Although beneficiaries of international protection can be employed in almost the same way as Hungarian citizens, their integration into the labour market is hampered by several factors. The present study provides a brief overview of the specifics of the employment of beneficiaries of international protection in Hungary and discusses the changes in recent years. Furthermore, the analysis reviews, based on interviews with support workers and persons concerned, the factors that hinder the successful integration of beneficiaries of international protection into the labour market, such as the lack of Hungarian language skills and difficulties in recognising qualifications and skills. The analysis also reflects on the effects of the recent economic recession triggered by COVID-19 on the Hungarian labour market, with particular focus on how the crisis affects the situation of beneficiaries of international protection. The policy brief also aims to use identified problems as a basis for the formulation of policy recommendations that can contribute to a more successful integration of beneficiaries of international protection into the labour market.

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic was an unprecedented shock to the world economy and in just over a year it significantly changed labour market trends. In April 2020, just a few months after the outbreak of the pandemic in Hungary, the Hungarian Central Statistical Office reported that about 73,000 people lost their jobs, and according to the data of the Public Employment Service (PES), the number of registered job seekers increased by 26.5% compared to the previous year.¹ The number of unemployed increased by about 28,000 in May and another 25,000 in June, and the unemployment rate peaked at 4.8% in July 2020, compared to 3.4% at the end of 2019.² The main reasons for this are measures aimed at reducing infection rates, such as the closure of restaurants, shops and services. Restrictions on the movement of people also severely affected the tourism and hospitality industry, but the construction industry and car factories also found themselves in a difficult situation. While the summer brought some easing, the number of cases started to rise sharply again in October 2020, which justified the introduction of further, more stringent restrictions, which further deepened the crisis. As a result, by January 2021, the unemployment rate had reached 5%, and the number of registered job seekers had been steadily increasing from December 2020, when the figure was

¹ [CSO FIRST RELEASES](#) - Employment, 2020. February-April.

² [CSO FIRST RELEASES - Employment](#).

290,694 people, to 303,631, according to the latest data for March.³ Although the unemployment rate in February 2021 showed a decrease of 0.5 percentage points compared to the January data, it would be premature to consider it as an improvement, as new restrictions were introduced on March 8th, 2021, the result of which will only be reflected in the March and April data.

Studies have already been carried out on the labour market situation of third-country migrants living in Hungary⁴ and on the labour market challenges of migrants due to their lack of Hungarian language skills,⁵ however, no research has been conducted specifically on beneficiaries of international protection. There have also been several analyses of how the recession caused by the pandemic affects the labour market situation of the majority society and which sectors are most impacted, but the effects of the crisis on the situation of beneficiaries of international protection in Hungary is not explored. The present study aims to contribute to filling this gap. In addition, the primary goal of the research is to complement the *2019 Evaluation*⁶ that was based on the existing NIEM Indicators ([National Integration Evaluation Mechanism](#), hereinafter: NIEM) with the experiences of support workers and stakeholders. This analysis provides a brief overview of the labour market situation of beneficiaries of international protection and possible changes in recent years and attempts to explore the short- and long-term as well as the direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 on the labour market situation of beneficiaries of international protection. I have primarily explored whether the economic recession caused by the epidemic affects beneficiaries of international protection differently from the majority society, and if so, what could be the reason for this.

3 CSO FIRST RELEASES – [Employment, 2021 January](#); CSO FIRST RELEASES – [Employment, 2021 February](#); [NFSZ Time series data \(national\) March 2021](#).

4 Hárs, Ágnes: A külföldi munkavállalók statisztikai számbavételének kérdéseiről. *Demográfia*, Vol. 46, 2003/2–3, 226–244.; Hárs Ágnes: Dimensions and Effects of Labour Migration to EU Countries: The Case of Hungary. In Galgóczi Béla – Leschke, Janine – Watt, Andrew (eds.): *EU Labour Migration since Enlargement: Trends, Impacts and Policies*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, 229–252.; Hárs Ágnes: Nemzetközi migráció a számok és a statisztika tükrében. *Statisztikai Szemle*, Vol. 87, 2009/7–8, 682–711.; Hárs Ágnes: Migráció és munkaerőpiac Magyarországon – tények, okok, lehetőségek. In Hárs Ágnes – Tóth Judit (szerk.): *Változó migráció, változó környezet*, Budapest, MTA Etnikai-nemzeti Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2010, 15–53.; Juhász Judit – Makara Péter – Makara Eszter: *A munkaerő-piaci integráció kihívásai Magyarországon – A harmadik országbeli bevándorlók beilleszkedésének esélyei és korlátai*. Kutatási zárótanulmány, Budapest, Panta Rhei Társadalomkutató Bt., 2011.

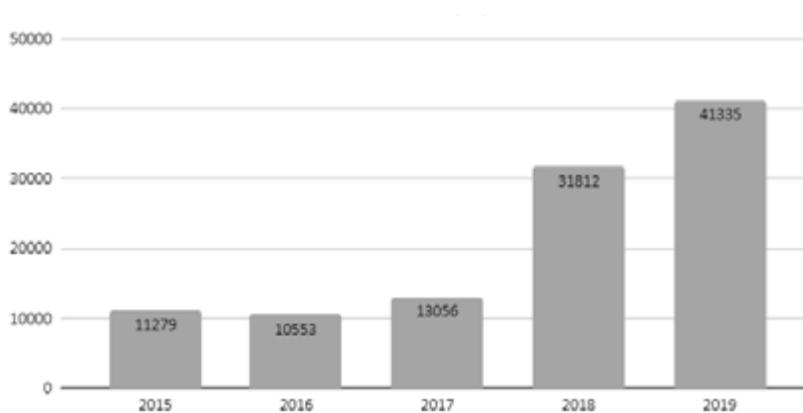
5 Várhalmi, Zoltán: A magyar nyelvtudás integrációs vonatkozásai. In Kováts András (szerk.): *Bevándorlás és Integráció – Magyarországi adatok, európai indikátorok*, Budapest, MTA Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2013, 118–128.

6 Wolffhardt, Alexander – Conte, Carmine – Huddleston, Thomas: *The European Benchmark for Refugee Integration: A Comparative Analysis of the National Evaluation Mechanism in 14 EU Countries. Evaluation 1: Comprehensive Report*. Brussels, Migration Policy Group – Warsaw, Institute of Public Affairs, 2020.

2. Methodology

There are little or no statistical data available on the labour market situation of beneficiaries of international protection. The available statistics of the PES only provide information on the employment of third-country nationals in general and do not give separate data concerning refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. The annual report on *the main features of the employment of foreign nationals in Hungary* provides, on the one hand, details of the work permits issued and, on the other hand, details of foreign nationals declared by employers. Information on permits issued cannot be used for this analysis, as a work permit is not required for the employment of refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. Statistics on declared foreign employees may, on the other hand, provide some guidance, as the employer has a legal obligation to notify the competent government agency concerning the employment of a refugee or a beneficiary of subsidiary protection⁷, thus, the data on declared foreign citizens presumably also contain refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection working in Hungary. Based on this, it can be concluded that the number of third-country nationals declared by employers has been steadily increasing since 2015; in 2019 a total of 41,335 foreign employees were already registered compared to 11,279 in 2015 (**Figure 1**). It is also worth mentioning that in terms of territorial distribution, declared foreign employees are mostly concentrated in the Central Hungary region; 31.6% of them in Budapest.

Figure 1. The number of foreign nationals declared by employers in 2015–2019



Source: PES labour market statistics, analyses, 2015–2019

⁷ Government decree 445/2013. (XI. 28.)

Examining declared workers by citizenship, it can be concluded that in the past five years the largest number of employees came from Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and Serbia (**Table 1**); so, from countries not typically countries of origin for beneficiaries of international protection. Comparing the total number of declared foreign workers per year with the number of foreign nationals most frequently declared, it can be observed that the top 8 citizenship accounts for about 83% of all declared foreign employees. This suggests that refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are likely to account for only a negligible proportion of declared foreign employees.

Table 1. Number of foreign nationals declared by employers by country 2015-2019 (persons), top 8

2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
Romania	5663	Romania	4201	Romania	3889	Ukraine	16412	Ukraine	26411
Slovakia	1435	Slovakia	1167	Ukraine	3246	Romania	4095	Romania	3522
United Kingdom	680	United Kingdom	793	United Kingdom	868	Serbia	3183	Serbia	2749
Italy	361	Ukraine	789	Slovakia	831	United Kingdom	1256	United Kingdom	1635
Germany	356	Germany	358	Serbia	672	Slovakia	1123	Slovakia	885
Poland	293	Italy	356	Italy	363	Italy	558	Germany	507
France	223	Poland	253	Germany	315	Germany	432	Italy	487
Spain	213	France	252	Poland	300	Spain	370	United States	333
Summary	9224		8169				36529		36529

Source: PES labour market statistics, analyses, 2015–2019

According to the data of the National Directorate General of Aliens Policing, in the first half of 2020, most asylum seekers arriving in Hungary were citizens of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.⁸ According to the PES publication on foreign employees, in 2019, 14 Afghan, 15 Iraqi, 41 Pakistani, 43 Iranian and 54 Syrian nationals were declared by employers. However, these data must be looked at with a critical eye as they do not necessarily show a realistic picture of

⁸ [The number of asylum applications by citizenship](#) 2020. I–VI. month

the employment situation of beneficiaries of international protection in Hungary, as employers do not always comply with their reporting obligation. Although some statistics are available on the economic impact of the COVID-19 epidemic, on the other hand, they are snapshots of a recent and on-going trend moreover, the data series do not differentiate between members of the majority society and beneficiaries of international protection, thus, they cannot form the basis of the present analysis. For these reasons, the analysis relies primarily on expert interviews and narrative interviews with refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. In the first phase of the research, interviews were conducted with the support workers of a non-governmental organisation that also has beneficiaries of international protection as clients. In the second phase, beneficiaries of international protection were interviewed about their experiences in the Hungarian labour market to explore whether their own assessment of the situation would confirm or refute the image formed by the expert interviews.

3. Obstacles to the employment of beneficiaries of international protection in Hungary

Employment is a key step in social integration. Beneficiaries of international protection *have the same rights and obligations as Hungarian citizens* under Act LXXX of 2007, therefore, refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection can be employed in the same way as Hungarian citizens without a work permit. However, the exceptions to this are, according to the law, *jobs the performance of which is linked to Hungarian citizenship by law*, thus, beneficiaries of international protection cannot find employment in public administration.

However, the relative equality of rights guaranteed by law does not necessarily imply equal opportunities, as the integration of beneficiaries of international protection into the labour market can be hampered by several factors on the part of both employers and employees. According to the experience of support workers, the main obstacle on the part of employers, despite their general openness to the employment of refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, is that they are unaware of the legal conditions of employment of beneficiaries of international protection and are therefore afraid of perceived administrative burdens. However, organisations dealing with beneficiaries of international protection can provide employers with detailed information on employment conditions, so this obstacle can be easily overcome. According to expert interviews, there are two main obstacles for employees: the lack of Hungarian language skills and the difficulties in recognising qualifications and, especially, skills.

3.1. Lack of Hungarian language skills

Based on interviews with both experts and persons concerned, it can be stated in general that the lack of Hungarian makes it difficult to enter the labour market. Job seekers simply do not understand job advertisements, what qualifications are required, or how to apply for a particular position. It also emerged from the expert interviews that in terms of language skills, a distinction should be made between the less educated and those with higher education.

According to the support worker experts, the problem for the lower-skilled may be that, while obstacles in connection with contacting the employer, application and job interview may be overcome with the help of a social worker or an interpreter, lack of language skills can make communication during training and work extremely difficult, if not impossible. For example, with insufficient language skills, an employee cannot understand the health and safety, and fire safety regulations of a workplace.

In the case of those with a higher level of education, the lack of language skills may force the employee to leave his or her profession. Job seekers who have a qualification (such as teacher) and even find an open position that matches their qualification are unable to get a job due to their lack of language skills. Another common problem for the highly educated is that even if they speak Hungarian on a conversational level, they are not confident in the technical terminology related to their field of expertise. And without the knowledge of the technical language, it becomes impossible for them to work.

At present, persons granted international protection in Hungary do not receive any state support for learning Hungarian. Between 1998 and 2013, beneficiaries of international protection were eligible for support to promote their social integration, for example, a 520-hour Hungarian language course at beginner and intermediate level free of charge, followed by support for obtaining the Hungarian language exam. During this period, however, beneficiaries of international protection were able to spend 6 + 6 months at the reception centres, which was normally sufficient to learn Hungarian at least at a conversational level before they had to provide for themselves. However, in 2014, this system was replaced by integration contracts, which provided a monthly financial support and was not earmarked, so the beneficiary could decide for himself or herself what to spend the money on. As the integration contract reduced the time available to spend at the reception centres to two months, it can be assumed that the beneficiaries spent the amount of the allowance to cover the costs of moving out (rent, deposit, etc.) and not for language courses. In 2016, the integration agreement was discontinued and not replaced by any state

support or measure specifically aimed at integration⁹. After that, beneficiaries of international protection could only use the services of non-governmental and church organisation for learning Hungarian, for example, they can take part in language courses held by the Next Step Hungary Association (formerly MigHelp), the Menedék Association or Kalunba Nonprofit Ltd., and those with a more secure financial background can learn Hungarian in language schools.

3.2. Recognition of qualification and skills

A common problem for beneficiaries of international protection is that they cannot evidence their qualifications with documents because either they remained in their country of nationality or were lost or damaged during their escape. However, under the Act on Asylum, these persons may not contact the authorities of their country of nationality to replace their documents, because, under the law, recognition as a refugee or beneficiary of subsidiary protection must be revoked *if the refugee or beneficiary of subsidiary protection voluntarily re-availed himself/herself of the protection of the country of his/her nationality*.¹⁰As in the case of language proficiency, it is worth discussing those with higher and those with lower level of education separately. According to experts interviewed, those with lower qualifications are less affected by the problem of recognition of diplomas, since in the positions they hold, it is not the evidence of formal qualifications that matters, but the experience acquired in the field. Work experience can be assessed by an employer open to employing third-country nationals on a probationary basis in a day and based on that the decision can be made whether the applicant is suitable for the job. According to a legal advisor with expertise in the subject, the problem for these lower-skilled workers is rather the fact that, in Hungary, there is no system in place for recognising capabilities and skills that cannot be evidenced by documents, which can make it difficult to find work or change jobs later. Furthermore, in the case of the low-skilled, it is also questionable to what extent they can use the expertise in Hungary they acquired in their country of origin. According to one of the interviewed social workers, it also happens that in the country of origin different tools and technologies are used for the same job, so their expertise is not really relevant in the Hungarian labour market.

In line with the Hungarian legislation, the condition for some professions is the recognition of a foreign diploma.¹¹ Thus, for those with higher education, the

⁹ [Szép Árpád: A nemzetközi védelemben részesített személyek integrációjának szabályozása Magyarországon – nemzetbiztonsági szempontból.](#) *Iustum Aequum Salutare*, XIV. 2018/3, 107–131.

¹⁰ Section 11 (2) (a) and Section 18 (2) (a) of the Act on Asylum

¹¹ [Education Office - Recognition of higher education diplomas obtained abroad.](#)

obstacle is that the recognition of diplomas and evidence of formal qualifications is time-consuming and extremely costly (if available at all), and in the case of certain qualifications, the authority may require the applicant to meet additional requirements, such as completing additional training or taking an examination.¹² However, as refugees and beneficiaries of international protection can only spend 30 days at the reception centre after being recognised, they urgently need to make a living after moving out so they want to find work as soon as possible. This, in turn, may force those concerned to give up their original profession to fill positions that do not require qualifications and can be learned quickly.

Similar to the support of Hungarian language learning, prior to 2013, beneficiaries of international protection were entitled to reimbursement of the costs of translating their documents, including the translation of documents proving their qualifications. The 6 + 6 months spent at the reception centre were also sufficient for the authority to carry out the qualification recognition procedure. The integration contract has merged this targeted aid into the integration support, however, since 2016, with the termination of the integration contract, those concerned do not receive any support in this area.

4. Characteristics of employment of beneficiaries of international protection in Hungary

Among beneficiaries of international protection, asylum seekers represent a special group in terms of employability. Unlike refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, their employment is subject to a work permit or they may be employed if their application for recognition decided upon within 9 months from the submission of their application. In addition, their employment is linked to a location: *They can only be employed at the territory of the reception centre, or a place of work specified by the public employer*¹³. According to a social worker who has been working with refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection for four years, asylum-seekers tend not to find employment in Hungary. Therefore, hereinafter, beneficiaries of international protection are defined as persons recognised as refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

¹² Act C of 2001 (Recognition Act)

¹³ Section 5 (1) c) of the Act on Asylum

According to an interviewee who has been working as a social worker for over 10 years, in the past two years, up to the period before COVID, despite the negative image created of refugees and foreigners, they were able to find a job in the Hungarian labour market relatively easily, employers were also open to them. All interviewees named the shortage of labour in Hungary the main reason for this. Labour shortages have been a problem in Hungary since 2015, with the number of vacancies peaking in 2018. According to the data of the Central Statistical Office¹⁴ of all sectors of the economy, the vacancy rate at this time was highest in administrative and service support activities (5,5%), in health and social care (4%), communications (3,6%), construction (3,4%) and manufacturing (3%). The main reasons for this phenomenon are low wages and the migration of Hungarian workers abroad.

Based on the above, regarding the employment of beneficiaries of international protection, it can be assumed that they can work more successfully in sectors with a high number of vacancies. However, based on the expert interviews, it is important to emphasise that in fact, they can find jobs in sectors that do not require special expertise and/or confident Hungarian language skills. Thus, it can be concluded that for example, that the employment of refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection is not typical in service centres (so-called SSCs) or in the field of communication. All interviewees confirmed that beneficiaries of international protection are typically employed in the hospitality, tourism, and construction industries. However, it was also added that another reason for this is that most refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection arriving in Hungary are generally low-skilled. Last year, about two-thirds of the beneficiaries of international protection who turned to the interviewed NGO to seek help were employed in hospitality, and the proportion of people employed in construction was around 10%. According to a social worker, the hospitality industry is also attractive to them because *“you can learn quickly, you can work a lot and you can earn a lot with it.”*

Beneficiaries of international protection tend to hold lower, non-skilled positions in the workplace hierarchy, thus, in hospitality, they are typically employed as kitchen assistants or dishwashers, in tourism as hotel cleaners, and in the construction sector, as semi-skilled workers, but it is also common to find a job as a factory unskilled worker or loader. Self-employment and starting a business are usually typical only of those who have been in Hungary for a long time, speak the language to some extent and are more or less familiar with Hungarian administrative processes.

¹⁴ [CSO: Number and proportion of vacancies](#) (2016–2020)

Taking non-skilled jobs, despite being easily accessible and providing some livelihood for beneficiaries of international protection, is in fact a trap. Those who are forced to take up semi-skilled or unskilled positions and start working, for example, as a kitchen assistant, often take several shifts due to extremely low wages, even in different places, thus they do not have the opportunity to retrain or to learn a profession, and thus have little chance of professional development and advancement. They practically get caught up in these jobs for years.

According to the experience of support workers, casual work and seasonal work are common, and workers are most often not declared with their real hours of work or at minimum wage. According to the experts, refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection with no network of contacts, and no initial support in Hungary, but in urgent need of making a living, often find themselves in the grey economy as their only solution.

The question arises as to whether the employment structures mentioned above are specific to beneficiaries of international protection or to the sectors in general in which they are typically employed. According to the interviewees, employment at minimum wage and employer declaring a lower number of hours is not a refugee-specific phenomenon, but typical of these sectors, so that members of the majority society are presumably affected just as much as those granted international protection. This is also supported by the analysis of the financial magazine *Portfolio*, according to which, in 2018, over 42% of those working in the corporate sector were declared at minimum wage, the most affected sectors being agriculture, construction, hospitality, social work and administrative and service support activities. About 51% of workers in the construction sector, and even more in hospitality, (65%) were declared at minimum wage.¹⁵

With regard to the employment structure, it is important to mention the issue of citizenship, as for those granted international protection who wish to acquire Hungarian citizenship, it is very important to have their employment declared in accordance with reality. When assessing the citizenship application, the authority examines whether the applicant's livelihood is ensured, for which purpose, an income certificate issued by the tax authority concerning the previous three years and an employer's certificate for the previous three months must be submitted.¹⁶ Interviews with people concerned confirmed the views of experts. The interviewees reported that they started their work in

¹⁵ [Hornják Lószef: Sosem látott számok: kiderült, mennyien dolgoznak minimálbérért Magyarországon.](#) *Portfolio*, 2019.

¹⁶ www.kormanyablak.hu/hu/feladatok/14/BAHIV00012

Hungary as kitchen helpers or shop assistants and that they were not declared by employers with their real working hours. Opinions, on the other hand, were divided on the extent to which the lack of knowledge of Hungarian hinders employment. According to one interviewee, it is possible to find work without language skills, as communication can also be done in English and migrants who have lived here help with interpreting. According to another respondent, however, it is practically impossible to get a job without knowledge of Hungarian.

5. Impact of COVID-19 on the labour market in Hungary, with special regard to the employment of beneficiaries of international protection

Hungary, the measures taken to curb the spread of the pandemic (e.g. curfew, travel restrictions) affected tourism, hospitality and other related services the most, but the manufacturing and construction industries also suffered severely. According to CSO data, the number of redundancies in the construction industry almost doubled (from 8,900 to 16,900) in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the last quarter of 2019, while the accommodation services and hospitality sector has seen even greater growth: the number of unemployed who previously worked in this sector rose from 7,600 to 21,600 over the same period. The number of redundancies in the services sector peaked in the second quarter of 2020 and the number of redundancies in the industrial sector peaked in the third quarter of 2020. (Table 2)

Table 2. A Number of unemployed by industry of the previous job, sector, (thousand persons)

Period, quarter	Industry	Out of which		Service sector	Accommodation services, hospitality
		Manufacturing	Construction		
2019. IV.	41,0	30,5	8,9	67,7	7,6
2020. I.	50,5	31,5	15,3	78,4	10,0
2020. II.	58,2	37,4	16,9	114,0	21,6
2020. III.	62,8	41,3	16,0	97,2	14,0
2020.IV.	59,0	40,4	14,1	97,7	18,6

Source: Hungarian Statistical Office

As most beneficiaries of international protection are employed in tourism and hospitality, and they typically have lower positions in the workplace hierarchy, their jobs are less resilient, and they have been severely affected by the wave of redundancies. However, interviewees stressed that it cannot be concluded unequivocally that foreign nationals were fired first or that beneficiaries of international protection had been more severely affected by mass redundancies than the majority society.

As a result of the redundancies, like the members of the majority population, many have found themselves in a housing and existential crisis, even though those granted international protection are also entitled to job seekers' benefits and pandemic assistance provided by various municipalities in their respective place of residence. The situation was worsened by the fact that mass redundancies made it virtually impossible to find work, as many members of the majority society also became job seekers. Due to the novelty of the situation, and the fact that it is still an ongoing process, research results cannot yet be relied upon for identifying new job search trends. However, based on numerous articles it can be stated that the masses of people who applied for advertised positions, were previously laid off primarily from positions in tourism and hospitality. An analysis of an online advertising site found that the most sought-after positions during the epidemic were courier, warehouse keeper, security guard and cleaner¹⁷. A lot of job seekers even applied for jobs that are presumably only attractive to the most vulnerable due to exposure to infection, such as hospital cleaner or bicycle courier positions. According to one of the market-leading food delivery companies, about the same number of people registered as couriers in one month as normally in a whole year.¹⁸ Vacancies were filled practically within hours. Moreover, as the support workers pointed out, many Hungarian citizens working abroad returned home, and despite the subsidence of the pandemic in the summer, they did not go back to work abroad but tried to find jobs at home. This seems to be confirmed by the information published by the CSO, according to which, the number of people working abroad decreased by 23,000 between March and May 2020,¹⁹ and between December 2020 and February 2021, 39,000 fewer workers were registered working abroad than in the previous year.²⁰ According to the experts, the fact that the knowledge of Hungarian or, for example, becoming a sole proprietor is a condition for some jobs, made it even more difficult for the beneficiaries of international protection to find work during the pandemic.

17 [Itt van, milyen munkaerőt keresnek Magyarországon koronavírus-járvány alatt](#), *Portfolio*, 2020.

18 [Blaskó Zsófia: A válság legnépszerűbb melója: futárok a korona idején](#), *Mérce*, 2019.

19 CSO FIRST RELEASES – [Employment, March – May 2020](#).

20 CSO FIRST RELEASES – [Employment, February 2021](#).

According to the social workers interviewed, the pandemic has led to a reshuffle in the employment of beneficiaries of international protection. In their view, during the summer, when epidemiological restrictions were lifted and the economy returned to a relatively normal path, the employment of refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection was almost as difficult as it was five years ago. The number of job vacancy candidates multiplied, and employers presumably usually hired Hungarian citizens for open positions.

One of the presumed long-term and indirect effects of the pandemic may be the rejection of citizenship applications of beneficiaries of international protection. As discussed above, proof of income and employment must be attached to the citizenship application. So, those who lost their job during the pandemic could not apply for citizenship during that period because their livelihood was not guaranteed. And based on expert interviews, it can be concluded that those who have lost their jobs or been forced to work part-time are worried that this could have a negative impact on the assessment of their application. According to the legal adviser interviewed, unfortunately, it will not be possible to establish unequivocally whether this will indeed be the case, either now or in future applications, as a rejection does not need to be justified by the authority.

One interviewee working as a kitchen assistant reported that the restaurant at which he worked had reduced his working hours to two hours a day due to the pandemic. In June, when restrictions were eased and restaurants were allowed to open, he was taken back full-time again, but he has declared at the tax authorities with four hours a day instead of eight. He thought that this would negatively affect his citizenship application, so he resigned and looked for a job where he would be declared full-time. Not long after, he was able to get a job as a car mechanic and was declared as a full-time employee.

6. Summary

In the analysis, the labour market situation of beneficiaries of international protection in Hungary was reviewed, and the impact of the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 epidemic on this group analysed. During the research, the following conclusions were made:

- ▶ beneficiaries of international protection have the same rights in terms of employment as Hungarian citizens, thus, there are no administrative barriers to their employment,
- ▶ According to expert interviews, the main obstacles to the employment of beneficiaries of international protection are insufficient knowledge of the

Hungarian language, as well as cumbersome recognition of qualifications and non-recognition of skills and competencies,

- ▶ since beneficiaries of international protection urgently need to make a living after leaving the reception centre, in the absence of language skills and documents proving the appropriate qualifications, they are often employed in positions that do not require professional qualifications or confident Hungarian language skills,
- ▶ tourism, hospitality and construction are the sectors in which they are most likely be able to find work; semi-skilled and unskilled labour positions are common,
- ▶ Regarding the employment structure, it is common to declare employees at minimum wage or with a number of working hours that do not correspond to reality, which, however, is sector-specific, so it affects members of the majority society the same way,
- ▶ it can be stated that in the past 5 years employers have been open to employing beneficiaries of international protection due to labour shortage, but a reversal can be observed now due to the COVID-19 epidemic,
- ▶ the coronavirus epidemic has hit tourism and hospitality the hardest, with many in these sectors, including the beneficiaries of international protection, losing their jobs. However, we cannot conclude at this point that the beneficiaries of international protection have been hit harder by the economic recession than members of the majority society, or that the employers would have started redundancies with them.

7. Policy recommendations

Recommendations to facilitate the integration of beneficiaries of international protection into the labour market

Based on expert interviews, three areas could generally contribute to more-successful integration of beneficiaries of international protection into the labour market:

- ▶ targeted, state-supported Hungarian language courses
- ▶ providing the opportunity to participate in some form of training or retraining
- ▶ recognition of skills and competencies

Specifically concerning COVID-19 and the economic recession, according to a social worker with over ten years of experience, the solution could be for sup-

port organisations to expand their networks, actively seeking contacts with potential new employers who could be open to the employment of beneficiaries of international protection.

With regard to the general recommendations to promote labour market integration, it is important to emphasise that it is extremely difficult to keep people who need to make a living in any training program, even if it is free of charge. Therefore, the provision of state-funded Hungarian language courses or the opportunity to participate in a training program can only be successful and thus promote labour market integration if the housing and livelihood of the participants are provided or supported in some way during the training period. Previously, up until the closure of the transit zones, the extended period spent there could have been used for the provision of various training courses. However, in the current situation, the maximum of 30 days that can be spent at the reception centre is not sufficient for refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection to acquire any language skills or profession. And after moving out of the reception centre, despite the availability of language learning and other training opportunities provided by NGOs trying to adapt to the migrant's life situation, those concerned may no longer have access to these services, as they must provide for themselves.

According to the legal adviser interviewed, it would also be important not to only recognise formal, qualifications evidenced by documents, but to create an alternative assessment method or simplified procedure, in which beneficiaries of international protection may have their non-documented but existing expertise recognised or obtain a qualification under an accelerated procedure based on that expertise.