

Ukrainian Schoolchildren in Europe: Between Preserving National Identity and European Integration

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The European Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The paper discusses the main problems associated with educating Ukrainian children who were forcibly displaced when the Russian Army invaded Ukraine. The main models of behaviour of Ukrainian parents concerning their children's education, such as enrolment in local schools or (and) continuing education remotely in Ukraine, are highlighted. The risks and difficulties associated with both of these decisions, as well as the ongoing state of uncertainty in the plans of the parents, were analyzed by the author in this paper, and some recommendations were made to eliminate them. The main conclusion that was made was the fact that the Ukrainian education system, despite objective difficulties, managed to survive a year after the outbreak of hostilities. Children, for the most part, have the possibility of continuing their education in one form or another, but the situation requires constant monitoring and flexible decisions.

Keywords: Ukrainian Refugees, Schoolchildren, Education, Welcome Classes

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The International Academic Forum
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Introduction

More than a year has passed since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. About eight million Ukrainians were forced to start their lives from scratch. About 5.5 million have now accepted temporary protection status in European countries (*Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation*, 2023). A year after the start of the war, some of the Ukrainians returned home. However, another significant part of them had already begun to settle in Europe, having experienced the first difficulties of social and psychological adaptation. Many got jobs (*"Intentions to Stay and Employment Prospects of Refugees from Ukraine | Publication | Econpol Europe"*, 2022). The significant number of parents has already enrolled their children in local schools. It seems important and necessary to trace the state of educational adaptation of Ukrainian refugee children a year after the outbreak of the war.

Understanding forced migration is a relatively widely discussed topic in modern science. Various aspects related to refugees are considered in detail and closely (e.g. Hahn et al., 2019). The factors of job search, self-selection of refugees, socio-economic profile, education level, and employment prospects are often the subject of research. Ukrainian refugees, in this sense, are no exception (*OECD*, n.d., *"Intentions to Stay and Employment Prospects of Refugees from Ukraine | Publication | Econpol Europe"* 2022, *"Prospects for Integration of Ukrainian Refugees into the German Labor Market: Results of the Ifo Online Survey,"* n.d., *Publications | CESifo*, n.d.). An equally important topic that requires constant monitoring is the education of refugees, are Ukrainian children or schoolchildren. According to the UN (*OECD*, 2022), half of the Ukrainians who have crossed the border since February 24 were children. The second factor that distinguishes the integration of Ukrainian children from other refugees, is possibility to study remotely on Ukraine. This issue makes the education of Ukrainian refugee children attractive for research and is somehow a phenomenon.

There are a lot of papers that consider the state of education of refugees, in various countries of Europe (Crul et al., 2019, Will at al., 2022). They examine in detail the different patterns of adaptation of children to local schools, the timing of enrolment of children in local schools, the quality of this adaptation, and predictors of the quality of adaptation. The main factors influencing adaptation and subsequent integration are (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019, Montgomery, 1996):

- the speed of granting temporary asylum status,
- the time spent outside school,
- the speed of learning the language of the host country,
- parental involvement in refugee children's education,
- the economic factor, and
- the factor of early selection of children for educational streams

The same factors influence the adaptation of children from Ukraine. Some of them were initially eliminated or mitigated. Ukrainians were immediately given the status of temporary asylum. This status immediately gave them the right to work and the possibility to enrol their children in school (*"The Welcome given to Ukrainian Refugees: Some Challenges and Uncertainties"* 2022). Many countries provide significant financial support by paying for language courses in the host country, providing benefits, and compensating for the cost of renting housing and utilities. So, the economic factors that directly affect the psychological adaptation of parents and their children are significantly mitigated. There are some factors in a student's adaptation that are difficult to avoid, such as a lack of knowledge of the language of the host country, psychological trauma, homesickness, and the breakdown of social ties.

However, there are new factors that have not been observed before. Ukrainian children are as if between two countries - the home country and the host country. For the first time in history, forcibly displaced children have the possibility to continue their education remotely in their own country. The author wants to consider at all the benefits and risks of such a phenomenon.

Research Methods

To conduct the study, the author focused on a vast amount of literature, mainly published on various Internet pages. One year after the start of the war, Ukrainian refugee children are still a topic of discussion in various forums. They're often mentioned in print publications and in various issues. But we do not yet have a real data set for all countries, so our study has some limitations. The author also relies on the results of a survey conducted by the author in October 2022 ("*How Various Adaptation Schemes in the Education Systems of European Countries Affect the Inclusion of Refugee Children from Ukraine in Their Educational System*", 2023). The pilot study included 160 respondents from Poland, Germany and the UK. These countries were chosen because they chose different models for integrating children into their schools (immediate integration into regular classes or prolonged stay in welcome classes) and, accordingly, children had different difficulties in adaptation.

The Ukrainian Education System a Year After the Outbreak of Hostilities

Immediately after the invasion began, the Ukrainian Ministry of Education announced a vacation that lasted about a month. From the end of March, 2022, Ukrainian schools were switched to remote mode, to the best of the abilities that teachers and children had at that time (*Slovo i Dilo*, 2022). Some parts of the Ukrainian territories were under constant shelling, another parts were occupied, and many teachers did not have the technical ability to conduct lessons in synchronous mode, so the assignments were posted on distance learning platforms in an asynchronous format and evaluated by teachers whenever possible ("*Overview of the Current State of Education and Science in Ukraine in Terms of Russian Aggression [as of December 2022]*", 2022). After one and a half to two months, all children who were forcibly displaced within the country or abroad, could register in any Ukrainian school. So that Ukrainian schoolchildren, wherever they were, could finish the school year, and move to the next class. Schoolchildren who left Ukraine and accepted temporary protection status in the host countries were immediately enrolled in local schools and start studying there. In September 2022, a new academic year began—the first year in full-fledged hostilities. By this time, the Ministry of Education had developed the first reasonably clear criteria for teaching Ukrainian schoolchildren. Some Ukrainian schools began to work in the usual format, and some remotely.

Schools in Eastern Ukraine and, to the extent possible, schools located in the occupied territories operate online. In general, the issue of ensuring the basic security of Ukrainian children in the country was left to the mercy of local self-government systems. During air raids, children were required to go down to specially equipped shelters, lessons were conducted in an asynchronous mode, and other measures were taken to ensure safety, including a flexible transition in the event of a deterioration in the situation from full-time to distance learning. In this case, the question arises of how the rights of children abroad and their access to education should be ensured if parents want to maintain just such a format of education for their children. The Ministry of Education stated that it welcomes family and home forms of education, as well as external studies, for displaced children who are abroad

and in the occupied territories. The variant of the Ukrainian school in the remote mode asynchronously was also kept possible, that is, at the pace and in the time zone in which it is possible for students who are abroad. The parents, in permanent uncertainty, continued to keep the Ukrainian school online for their children, and this situation needed to be resolved. According to our research, two-thirds of parents abroad were still teaching their children in Ukrainian schools eight months after the start of the war. It caused an overload of children, who, in the conditions of adaptation to a new school and new conditions, were also forced to follow the program of the Ukrainian school in the evenings. However, in conditions of permanent uncertainty, it could not be otherwise. Eight months after the start of hostilities, two out of five of the interviewed parents were still determining their plans to return to their homeland or stay in the host country ("*Parental Uncertainty in Plans and Education of Ukrainian Refugee Children in European Countries*", 2023). The rest of the parents hesitated and made their return dependent on the possibility of finding a job, the possibility of a husband arriving, the issue of safety in their hometown, the whole house, and so on. Such parents tried to complete all possible educational strategies for their children, striving to help them learn the host country's language as quickly as possible, and more than other groups of parents worried about continuing their studies remotely in Ukrainian schools. The problem of uncertainty is widely studied in the works of authors dealing with the problems of refugee children (e.g. Karaagac, et al., 2022). However, this problem has not been linked to the possibility of remote education for refugee children in their home country.

A year after the outbreak of hostilities, the Ukrainian government declared that there was no need to overload children with two schools simultaneously (Мірошнікова, 2022).

Thus, for children who are abroad, such a scheme is proposed. If a child attends a local school, their grades will be recalculated upon their return to their home country. If the child does not go to a local school, he is recommended to continue to study remotely in a Ukrainian school, synchronously or asynchronously, including through a family form of education or external study (see "Overview of the Current State of Education and Science in Ukraine in Terms of Russian Aggression [as of December 2022]", 2022).

Despite the objective difficulties, incessant shelling, constant blackouts, and lack of communication, the Ukrainian education system is intact and continues to work. After two years of fighting the coronavirus infection, distance learning platforms and distance courses were created, and it was possible to continue learning Ukrainian children in a remote mode.

Ukrainian Schoolchildren Attend European Schools

The issue of security in Ukrainian cities remains critical, where the possibility of shelling, power outages and lack of electricity is a daily occurrence. The winter of 2022-2023 was harsh due to regular shelling of critical infrastructure, lack of water, heat, electricity, and communications. Those Ukrainians who were forced to leave the country, regardless of their plans or desire to remain in their host countries, continue to live there. Thereby they have taken responsibility for educating their children in local schools. European countries have adopted two vectors for integrating children into education systems. The first is direct enrollment in regular classes. This system is often practiced in countries with Slavic language groups. Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Montenegro have such a system. The second is "welcome classes," in which children learn only the language of the host country for a few months (or years) and then are gradually integrated into regular classes. Germany, Austria, France, Spain, Belgium, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and other

countries have followed this way ("How Different Adaptation Schemes in the Education Systems of European Countries Affect the Inclusion of Refugee Children from Ukraine in Their Education System", 20-23). Let us make one more small remark about integration systems. When we talk about the welcome class system, for example, in Germany, we mean that the welcome class system is quite widespread. However, there is evidence that in some cases Ukrainian children were immediately enrolled in regular classes due to the lack of teachers able to teach the language as a foreign language. This policy depends on the availability of land and the ability to organize welcome classes. In addition, there is evidence that in countries where the policy of immediate integration into mainstream classes is widespread, welcome classes are created where children study the language intensively for several months before moving into mainstream classes. In other words, the system of integration one year after the outbreak of war is not something clearly defined, but a dynamically evolving system with some clear trends.

The German education system, which received a significant number of refugees from Pakistan and Syria between 2010 and 2016, was quite prepared to receive refugees from Ukraine, as was the Swedish education system, for example (Crul, 2019). However, the Ukrainian crisis has become an even greater challenge for all education systems, if only because of the unprecedented number of refugees themselves. According to the latest data, as of January 2023, more than 500,000 Ukrainian children were studying abroad. Most of them are now in Poland - about 200 thousand; in the Czech Republic about 80 thousand Ukrainian children are registered in schools; in Germany - about 200 thousand ("Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation", n.d.).

The issue of adaptation and integration of Ukrainian children in European schools taking into account the socio-psychological portrait of Ukrainian refugees was considered in detail in our previous works ("How different models of adaptation in the educational systems of European countries affect the inclusion of refugee children from Ukraine in their educational system", 20-23). In this paper we want to systematize the results of the ongoing migration processes with school-age children one year after the beginning of hostilities. Thus, during the first year school-age children faced the following problems and difficulties:

- Difficulties in psychological adjustment.
- Breakdown of social ties and search for new friends.
- Ignorance or insufficient knowledge of the local language and related problems in understanding educational material, inability to fully communicate with peers and difficulties in finding new friends.
- Homesickness, homesickness for close relatives, homesickness for familiar things.

Children's psychological adjustment is directly related to their parents' adjustment. In turn, refugee parents usually experience the following adjustment difficulties (Morrice, 2021):

- Factor of uncertain future, inability to make long-term plans in the host country.
- The destruction of social ties.
- Deterioration of the material situation due to the loss of jobs and property as a result of the war.
- Ignorance or poor knowledge of the language of the host country, deterioration of career prospects, need to confirm diplomas or acquire a new profession.
- Feelings of loneliness and yearning, isolation from husbands and relatives. In Ukraine, men under the age of 60 are generally not allowed to leave the country.

All these factors affect the children, the speed and quality of their integration into the new environment ("How Different Adaptation Schemes in the Education Systems of European Countries Affect the Inclusion of Refugee Children from Ukraine in Their Education System", 2023). In addition, one of the most critical factors in this case is the factor of uncertainty in the plans of Ukrainian parents. In a situation where it is unclear how long they will have to stay in the host country - neither the timing of the end of hostilities, nor the possibility of returning home, nor the possibility of staying - people experience the maximum level of anxiety, which inevitably is passed on to their children. It can also slow down the integration process. The question of whether to continue studying in the Ukrainian school at a distance, whether to expel a child, how intensively the language should be studied, is quite a concern for parents ("Parental Uncertainty in the Plans and Education of Ukrainian Refugee Children in European Countries," 2023).

It is difficult to answer what percentage of Ukrainian students are already enrolled in local schools, although statistics on this issue are constantly updated ("Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation," n.d.). However, the answer to this question depends on the host country and the obligation to enroll the child in a local school.

In Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and Hungary, a child with temporary protection status is obliged to attend school. In Poland, the Czech Republic (after the age of 15), Montenegro and Bulgaria, the child's parents can choose how the child is educated. For example, there are about 700,000 school-age children in Poland, but only about 200,000 of them attend Polish schools. In addition, parents can choose to educate their child at a distance in a Ukrainian school or in a Polish school, and are not allowed to combine the two options.

Currently, about 80 thousand Ukrainian refugees study in Czech schools ("The Voice of Ukrainians in the Czech Republic: Experiences and Needs of Children and Parents in Czech Education, 2023). Compared to June 2022, the situation has generally improved: 90% of Ukrainian refugee children attend primary school, compared to 56% in June 2022. Among high school students, only half attend local schools. This is where the uncertainty factor comes into play again: "The problem is that parents don't support their children if education is not important to them or if they don't want to stay in the Czech Republic," says Barbora Krzyzkova-Luženska, principal of Vodnany Primary School. - "Some refugee children are not motivated to get an education in the Czech Republic."

Since the last survey of Ukrainian refugees in June 2022, the intensity of Czech language instruction has decreased. Only about 16% of children aged six and older study Czech at school for at least two hours a day, as recommended by experts. The rest of the children spend less time learning Czech or do not attend school at all. "Teaching Czech has no effect if it lasts only one hour a day. However, it is likely that staff capacity does not allow for more intensive teaching, says Kavanova of PAQ Research. Strangely enough, Ukrainian high school students do best with Czech: 37% can already speak the language in everyday situations. At the same time, however, this is a very heterogeneous group. Half of them attend Czech secondary schools and speak Czech better than all children over the age of three. The other half does not attend secondary school and speaks Czech with incredible difficulty.

In Bulgaria, 127,000 refugees have already been granted temporary protection status, and 92% of the refugees are women and children. However, in Bulgaria, parents are extremely reluctant to enroll their children in local schools; there are currently only 545 students

enrolled in local schools (Not Many Ukrainian Refugees Have Stayed in Bulgaria Since the Start of the Invasion - Novinite.com - Sofia News Agency, n.d.).

Polish authorities express concern that quite a large number of children in Poland do not attend Polish schools - and no one can assess whether they study remotely in Ukraine and what is the situation with their education (Wójcik, K., 2023). According to the situation at the end of May 2023 there are ten thousand less Ukrainian students than at the beginning of the school year. According to the Polish authorities, this situation is due to the fact that Ukrainian children have certain difficulties in mastering the Polish language and are also afraid of final exams, especially exams for the eighth grade and matura. These fears are partially confirmed. In fact, this year Ukrainians are still far behind their Polish peers in the eighth grade exams, although they have improved their results compared to last year. The average score of Ukrainian students is 45% in Polish, 37% in mathematics, and 46% in English. Last year the average result of Ukrainian students in Polish language was 22%, in mathematics - 34%, in English - 44%. However, these results still differ significantly from the average results of Polish students, where the average score in mathematics is 53% and in Polish - 66% (Lvov, O.K., 2023). Since the results of the eighth grade exam are used for competitive selection to Polish lyceums and vocational schools, such low results bring additional risks for Ukrainians not to receive quality education and not to fully realize their natural abilities.

Discussion

The unwillingness to send their children to school may be related to specific problems, such as different ages for compulsory schooling. For example, if a child has already received a certificate of secondary education or is completing the final grade in Ukraine, he/she does not need to enter a lyceum or gymnasium in the host country, that also may be difficult due to the lack of knowledge of the local language. Or, on the contrary, a child is six years old and is a first grader in Ukraine, but in a Polish school at that time he or she would be in the "cerówka", i.e. zero grade. The second problem, following the first one, is the school system, which differs from country to country. Due to the lack of knowledge of the language, it is difficult for Ukrainians to enter Czech or Polish universities. Alternatively, parents are going to return home and therefore do not integrate the child into local schools. On the one hand, this approach seems quite reasonable and meets the long-term plans and, most importantly, the interests of the child. The child continues to master the native program, learns the native language and history, does not miss the school year and does not fall behind in academic disciplines, has the opportunity to ask questions to teachers and studying in a language he or she understands, receives a school-leaving certificate and is not overloaded with parallel education in the school of the host country. After all, children do not have to catch up on missed material when they return home. However, there are inherent risks here.

The stay in the country can be prolonged, and children remain isolated from their peers, do not make new friends, and do not participate in daily school life. There are concerns about time spent in school, the quality of education and individual parental responsibility. Due to regular power and communication failures, education in Ukraine can be asynchronous, grading can be purely formal, and there is no control over its quality, which, in effect, becomes the personal responsibility of parents. If we are talking about months of stay, such a variant of education is possible and acceptable. In a situation where the war has been going on for the second year, the possibility of full integration in such a situation of permanent temporariness seems less realistic. It is necessary to conduct mandatory control over the quality of education.

In any integration strategy, children face different difficulties and, consequently, different risks.

As for children who are abroad but do not attend local schools, since, as the author has already noted, the risk of losing the quality of education exists and, in fact, children's education becomes the responsibility of their parents, it is necessary to establish rather strict control over the quality of such distance education, as well as the time spent by children on the computer. In addition, monitoring of the psychological state of these children is necessary. I assume that the following options for controlling the quality of their education are possible: it is necessary to organize several places where Ukrainian children will attend scheduled classes in a distance format under the supervision of a tutor and spend at least the time established by law. It is necessary to oblige parents to timely provide the program of academic disciplines, information about the number of missed classes, the current level of academic performance of the child. It is also necessary to establish compulsory physical education and sports, to organize constant monitoring of the psychological state of children and parents, and possibly some social activities aimed at psychological stabilization and formation of new social ties. In addition, since the hostilities have not ceased, foreign language lessons should be organized on a permanent basis to facilitate the possible subsequent integration of children into local schools.

In the case of the model where the child is directly and immediately integrated into the educational process (Poland, Czech Republic, etc.), the main and major obstacle to a comfortable and quick integration into the educational process is the lack of knowledge of the local language. In this case, in order to improve the quality of adaptation, the author would recommend to avoid immediate enrollment in regular classes, but to practice the first months of education in welcome classes with intensive study of the language of the host country and immediate inclusion in lessons that do not require language load (sports, music, physical education, English, possibly mathematics). Such a stay should not be prolonged, but should mitigate the difficulties of adaptation. In addition, after suffering psychological trauma, enrolling in regular classes with immediate assessment in a foreign language will not help in accelerating adaptation, only adding stress and strain. In this case, organizing welcome classes may be the best way out.

In the case of a model where the child is expected to spend a long time (a year or more) in a welcome class, there are additional risks associated with being cut off from peers in the host country, as well as the loss of the school year. We need to develop some fairly clear criteria for transfer to regular classes (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2022). We also need to continue to monitor some rather important points. First is the psychological state of refugee children and the impact of the psychological state on children's adaptation in schools. It is still an open question up to what point in the schooling the fact that a child is a refugee and does not yet know the language can be discounted. From what exact month of schooling and under what conditions should he/she be assessed on an equal footing with local students? What is the percentage of children who, after one year, have moved from the "hospitable" classes to regular classes, and what is their level of language proficiency? What we see now is a lack of specific criteria for transition from a welcoming class to a regular class and mechanisms for gradual integration. This issue is left to countries, regions, schools and individual teachers. There is no interaction or any consideration of the fact that children study in Ukrainian online schools. In fact, for the entire first year, no one knows or is interested in what subjects in school were his or her favorite, what strengths or weaknesses he or she has, whether the child

is a humanitarian or inclined to exact sciences. The school year is lost, and it is good if it is only one year. All these questions are still waiting to be answered.

The main point to consider in the current state of affairs is that a large percentage of parents (and children) expect to return home after the end of hostilities. Ukrainian schools continue to work in a distance format, and the government has a strong concern for the quality of education for these children, whether it is in a mixed format or only in local schools. It would be very productive to establish high-quality interaction with the Ukrainian Ministry of Education in order to maximize support for the children and their continuation of distance learning in Ukraine where it is in the best interest of the child.

Conclusions

During any hostilities, children are one of the most vulnerable categories of the population suffering from war. The primary task of the state institutions of Ukraine and the host countries is to ensure the right to education and control the possibilities of its provision. Different host countries have adopted different approaches to realizing the right to education of Ukrainian children, including both compulsory admission to local schools and leaving it to parents' discretion. In those countries where parents are allowed to continue their children's education remotely in Ukrainian schools, state institutions need specific, clear rules and opportunities to control the quality of this education, monitor the psychological state of children, monitor the assimilation of the curriculum, maintain steadfast supervision of parents, and develop mechanisms for integrating children into the host country's community.

In countries where welcome classes are the most common model, segregation of children, the quality of their progress in learning the host country's language, and the actual loss of the school year can also be the biggest problems. The longer the child spends in the welcome class, the fewer chances there are for complete social integration. As a result, they have fewer chances for the maximum realization of their natural talents.

Control, monitoring, and assistance to parents by all social institutions will allow maximum control over the quality of education for Ukrainian children.

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