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# Out of School

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Assessment on barriers to school enrolment  
for Ukrainian refugee adolescents in Poland

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The education context for Ukrainian refugees in Poland has been characterized by both commendable efforts on the part of governmental, nongovernmental, and international actors and significant challenges for service providers and Ukrainians alike. Following the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, as of November 2023 an estimated 957,305 Ukrainians have been displaced in Poland, the majority of whom are women, children and the elderly.<sup>2</sup> More than half of Ukraine's children are believed to have been displaced by the war.<sup>3</sup> In Poland, the parliament passed the "Act on Assistance," on 12 March 2022 which granted legal stay for Ukrainians and afforded Ukrainian children the right to access Polish education, and codified international standards for compulsory education. For Ukrainian adolescents in Poland, education<sup>4</sup> options include Polish schools, continuing Ukrainian curriculum online, or attending the few Ukrainian schools established in Poland. Despite efforts made to ensure access to Polish education, a substantial number of adolescents do not enrol or drop out.

This study was commissioned to better understand what impacts Ukrainian adolescents' participation in the Polish school system, including barriers to entering Polish schools, push-pull factors that may inhibit enrolment, what support or coping mechanisms are

used when children and adolescents don't attend school in person, as well as what strategies might support enrolment in Polish education and resilience of Ukrainian children and adolescents.

The study incorporated a detailed literature review, direct input from 28 Key Informants (including Polish and Ukrainian educators, NGO staff and service providers, and government officials), 17 Focus Group Discussions (involving Ukrainian adolescents aged 10-18 and caregivers), and 25 In-Depth Interviews (involving a cross-section of vulnerable adolescents and caregivers, including those with disabilities). This qualitative information was supplemented by a quantitative survey involving 619 older Ukrainian adolescents and caregivers. Information was collected with protection and safeguarding principles at the forefront, and analysed along lines of gender, disability, and geographic location, with analysis incorporating feedback throughout the process.

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2 UNHCR, 'Multi-Sector Needs Assessment – 2022', <https://microdata.unhcr.org/index.php/catalog/826> (accessed 8.06.2023)

3 UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-unesco-mobilizes-support-learning-continuity>.

4 "The Act on Assistance for Ukrainian Citizens." *Interwencja Prawna.pl*, <https://ukraina.interwencjaprawna.pl/the-act-on-assistance-for-ukrainian-citizens/>.

# KEY FINDINGS

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## *BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN THE POLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM*

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- Limited data is available on out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents to analyse, follow-up on, and inform decision-making. This inhibits action by educators and school administration, local authorities, and the Polish government.
- Older Ukrainian adolescents largely choose to participate in online Ukrainian education over Polish schools, hoping to continue education in Ukraine. The challenges associated with transferring Ukrainian diploma certifications for appropriate placements in the Polish education system also significantly contribute to preference for online Ukrainian education.
- Caregiver well-being and influence play a significant role in whether and how adolescents access various forms of education, as caregivers deal with multiple responsibilities, not least recovering from the stresses of war and displacement and pursuing employment in Poland.
- Admittance to Polish schools is complicated by increased crowding in schools, timing of arrival and enrolment applications per the school year and understanding of the enrolment procedures.
- Cultural and language barriers are key reasons Ukrainian adolescents drop out, or choose not to attend Polish schools, with limited availability of cultural assistants in schools to support them another factor linked to concerns about enrolling in or remaining in schools.
- Ukrainian educators face challenges in transferring their accreditation to the Polish system, and often take other jobs to take care of their families.
- Online Ukrainian education does not provide certificates to prove online course completion, while transferring previous Ukrainian school credits is also challenging.





## *COPING MECHANISMS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL UKRAINIAN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS*

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- Out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents do not engage much with Polish adolescents and experience heightened isolation, which impacts their psychosocial well-being.
- Community and NGO services are beneficial, yet there is a lack of adequate service provision to ensure greater incentivization and accommodation for those in both online and in-school classes, which could be better supported by the Polish government.
- Culturally specific psychosocial support services are insufficient to meet the needs of Ukrainian adolescents recovering from conflict, displacement, and social isolation.
- NGOs play a prominent role in providing services and information for Ukrainian refugees around educational tracks, though with limited ability to directly engage in schools.
- While some Polish teachers proactively create information and engagement services for students, such actions are not systemic and stem from the individual actions of educators.
- Intercultural activities that bring Polish and Ukrainian youth together and that promote solidarity and cross-cultural understanding are a key support system which remains insufficiently provided.



## *SUPPORTING RESILIENCE AND ENROLMENT OR RE-ENROLMENT OF UKRAINIAN ADOLESCENTS IN POLISH EDUCATION*

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- Low levels of resourcing and support from the Polish authorities are a major factor in Ukrainian families' willingness to send adolescents to Polish schools.
- While adolescents and caregivers recognize the importance of Polish schools for language learning and integration, the irregular availability of cultural assistants and language learning continues to impede integration.
- The presence of critical resources, such as psychosocial support, is needed to better facilitate Ukrainian adolescents' successful transition into Polish schools and into the broader cultural environment.
- The shrinking financial resources for education and integrations projects available to NGOs will have further negative impact on access to these services.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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The following recommendations outline overarching proposals aimed at informing strategic policy, decision-making, and activities related to improving access to education, as well as the corresponding protective environment for adolescent Ukrainian refugees in Poland.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**1.** The Polish government should substantively increase its central-level investment in the education sector and decentralize resources to ensure schools can accommodate incoming Ukrainian adolescents. This includes efforts to:

**A.** Increase educational staff remuneration and incentivizing teacher recruitment, including better conditions to enable Ukrainian teacher employment.

**B.** Evaluate and reallocate resources to ensure local municipalities can accommodate Ukrainian students to promote high quality and culturally relevant service provision.

**C.** Emphasize investment in long-term engagement in reinforcing the Polish public school system and avoid short-term project-based initiatives in order to facilitate long-term sustainable education for all children in Poland

**2.** The Polish government should introduce and resource a comprehensive and collaborative tracking and accountability mechanism for out-of-school Ukrainian adolescents. This includes:

**A.** More systematic methods of information sharing (at local and central levels) alongside localized coordination with Ukrainian caregivers to determine MHPSS and cultural support needs of Ukrainian children and adolescents.

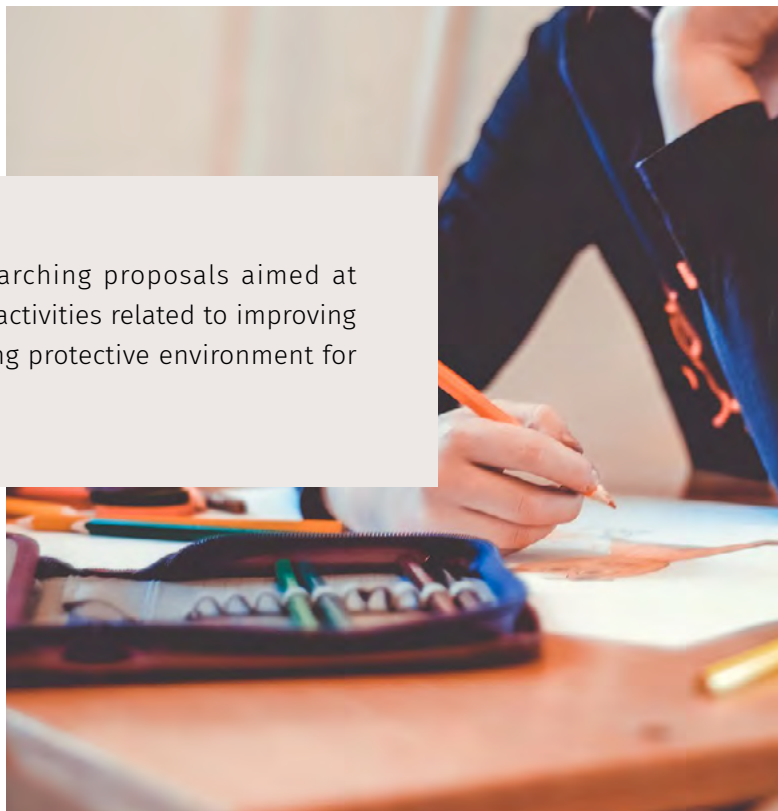
**B.** Structured and supported follow-up on school absences for better understanding of push-pull factors and mitigation of protection risks for those outside the Polish education system.

**C.** Integrated consultation with NGOs and civil society in information sharing, with an eye towards the provision of services that holistically address the needs of Ukrainian families, and sustainable outcomes across the Polish education system.

**3.** Public and private actors should jointly commission further research to better understand the situation of, and invest in meeting the needs of more vulnerable and marginalized populations, especially unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), the Roma community, children with disabilities, and evacuated children living in shelters. This includes:

**A.** Family tracing and reunification with dedicated attention and support to ensure accountability to UASC. Very sparse information is available around the educational needs of children evacuated from Ukrainian institutions, particularly those with disabilities.

**B.** A targeted study is needed on gender disparities regarding access to education and protection outcomes for Ukrainian refugees, specifically noting the safety risks of young women and girls in contexts of schooling, caregiving, and being out of school.





**C.** More wide-reaching consultation with Roma communities to better understand barriers to access to education and actively include their input in devising solutions in a participatory and inclusive manner.

**4.** The Polish government, institutional and private donors should amplify support to and collaboration with NGO and civil society programming targeting Ukrainian adolescents' education, social support, and protection. This includes:

**A.** Long-term investment in consistently available psychosocial, recreational, socio-emotional develop-

mental, and informational services across rural and urban areas to ensure successful integration of Ukrainian adolescents,

**B.** Making long-term funding sources available for localized and scalable joint pilot projects around effective models for providing holistic support for Ukrainian and minority inclusion and positive psychosocial and integration outcomes.

## TECHNICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

**1.** Polish government, NGOs, and civil society should expand linguistic and cultural assistance programs in schools to ensure regular and consistent service coverage across the country targeting Ukrainian adolescents. This includes:

**A.** Provision of sufficient and equitable linguistic and preparatory courses for Ukrainian children and adolescents.

**B.** Ensuring there are intercultural services and activities that help Polish students better understand and accept Ukrainians, as well as ensure peer-to-peer engagement.

**C.** Supervisory mechanisms to ensure quality and accountability to implementing personnel, alongside culturally appropriate training of teachers.

**D.** Involvement of NGOs and civil society in planning and implementing cross-cultural interventions, with resources to ensure capacity building of educational personnel.

**2.** The Polish government, private and institutional donors should devote additional resources to expand provision of culturally relevant mental health and psychosocial support services in schools, particularly personnel, to ensure equitable and consistent support to Ukrainian adolescents. This includes:

**A.** Specific subsidies earmarked for local authorities to ensure targeted MHPSS assistance is made available in schools.

**B.** Facilitating employment of Ukrainian personnel to ensure MHPSS services are responsive to the needs of Ukrainian adolescents.

**3.** The Polish government should review and evaluate existing protocols for accreditation of Ukrainian educators alongside diploma recognition for students participating in Ukrainian education (both in-person and online). This includes:

**A.** Adapt more streamlined procedures for Ukrainian teacher certification and appropriately communicate these to enable better availability of Ukrainian teachers.

**B.** Analyse, and where appropriate adapt, Polish protocols for acceptance of Ukrainian diplomas to ensure the participation in and completion of online Ukrainian curricula.

**4.** The Polish government, private and institutional donors and civil society actors should intentionally direct more resources to ensuring adequate support to and preparation of Polish educators to engage with Ukrainian adolescents. This includes:

**A.** Capacity building of Polish (and where possible Ukrainian) educators to better facilitate integration of Ukrainian students in Polish schools with focus on non-discrimination.

**B.** Provision of adequate and accessible academic materials to enable Ukrainian students to have resources in their language.

**C.** Facilitation of cross-cultural activities that enable Ukrainian students to integrate in Polish culture while helping Polish adolescents understand Ukrainian culture.



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**5.** The Polish government should re-invest in preparatory courses targeting Ukrainian adolescents to ensure wider availability, considering the potential for such opportunities to become compulsory, adequately resourced, and conducted in parallel with the regular Polish curriculum. This includes:

**A.** Provision of affordable, widely available, and safe modalities for preparatory classes that enable students to participate in preparatory work alongside regular schoolwork.

**B.** Flexible approaches to start date vis-à-vis academic year to ensure options are available to enrol in preparatory classes based on Ukrainian student arrival.

**6.** The Polish government should consider the possibility of transitioning all refugee children present in the country into the Polish education

system in order to bolster educational outcomes and alleviate protection concerns. This will include:

**A.** Investing in flexible education pathways to transition all refugee children (Ukrainian and otherwise) into in-person school settings, and eventually into the Polish education system.

**B.** Establishing a baseline for minimum competencies and protection frameworks to ensure schools can remain safe and inclusive learning environments. In this respect, bridge curricula should be explored in more detail.

**C.** Developing realistic capacity building scenarios to understand how to accommodate the current stock of out-of-school refugee children, while also preparing for any fluctuations in refugee numbers caused by any escalation in the conflict in Ukraine.