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### At school, online, in a vacuum? Where are the young refugees?<sup>1</sup>

**Over a year ago, thousands of Polish schools welcomed the first students from Ukraine. Guaranteeing access to education to children fleeing war, whilst preserving consistent quality of teaching to all students has become one of the biggest challenges of the Polish education system and society as a whole. On one hand, we should look after the nearly 135.000 students who are in Polish schools, but on the other hand, we also need to keep in mind the 170.000 students who are living in Poland, but are learning online in Ukrainian schools.**

According to Polish law, all children under 18 residing in our country, have a right to education, or actually they are even required to learn. The legal solutions that were in place in this regard proved effective in 2022. Children of adults fleeing Ukraine were automatically granted the right to attend Polish schools. This was further affirmed many times through the assurances of the educational authorities, including those made by the minister of education. School communities widely manifested their support and welcomed new students with open arms.

The existing legal and financial framework, which had been designed with a small number of foreign students in mind, was put to a difficult test – the scale of the demand for foreign student education increased several fold in a short period of time. In response to the requests of the Ukrainian government and the expressed wishes of the refugees themselves, in March 2022 the Polish government decided to acknowledge that participation in online Ukrainian education actually satisfies the Polish schooling requirement. This solution also reduced pressure on the schools, particularly in large cities, as they would not have enough room for the new students otherwise.

At the same time, in thousands of elementary and secondary schools in Poland, teachers started working with children who often didn't know Polish, who were experiencing the trauma of war or a culture shock, suspended between missing their home in Ukraine and not knowing when it'll be safe

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to return. The response to these special educational needs of the new students will determine the success or failure of the Ukrainian community's integration in Poland.

### **Unprecedented scale of (two) challenges**

Ukrainian migration to Poland in 2022 is unique in its character – around half of the over one million people staying in Poland at the moment are minors. Over 300 thousand are school-age children. Only half of them – 135 thousand, attend Polish schools. A vast majority of this group are in elementary schools – 115 thousand. Students from Ukraine are disproportionately spread across the country, with largest numbers in the biggest cities, with their parents registering them in overcrowded schools. At present, Ukrainian students constitute 4% of all students in Polish schools, but if all young Ukrainians living in Poland were to start attending their local Polish schools, this share would increase to 9%.

Still, contrary to the expectations, the number of Ukrainian students within the Polish education system is not increasing. More than half of the students are fulfilling the schooling requirement within the Ukrainian education system, by participating in classes online. Or at least this is the theory, as in practice we do not know who is using this form of remote education and who stopped learning altogether. This is a serious matter which could concern as many as 170 or 200 thousand young people.

Therefore, the issue of refugee education actually presents with its itself two parallel, related challenges. The first one is educational integration of students who attend Polish schools, thus making sure that they (much like other children) can achieve educational success in these schools that is in line with their aspirations and capabilities. The second challenge is to guarantee support to children and youths that are outside of the Polish system, participating in Ukrainian education online.

### **Schools don't have it easy**

Teachers, school administrators and parents themselves are talking about the needs and challenges that schools admitting new students are facing. However, it doesn't seem like any help is on the way – many schools are left to fend for themselves. As a result, some are managing these challenges better, some worse. Educational authorities have formulated several general guidelines, among others recommending the admission of new students to preparatory classes (special classes created for foreigner children, where they can learn Polish and prepare for moving to regular classes). A good indication of the lack of a coherent policy in this area is for example the fact that only 11% students are currently attending such preparatory classes (vs. 20% in the previous school year). In some cities

(Rzeszów, Częstochowa, Kalisz), the share of students in preparatory classes exceeds 25%, whereas in others (Olsztyn, Zabrze, Elbląg), not even a single such preparatory class was created.

Studies of the Center for Civic Education in schools admitting refugees revealed three significant problems connected to the integration of new students. The first problem is the language barrier. Polish and Ukrainian are similar and new students are able to communicate with their peers rather quickly, but the process of getting to know the so-called language of education takes much longer. There is a huge difference when we compare colloquial language skills – useful i.e. when talking about our pastimes, with proficient use of the language of education, i.e. when we are learning about photosynthesis, grammar, the elements... The process of achieving such language proficiency can take even 2-3 years. Many teachers with no past experience of working with foreign-language children, fail to see this phenomenon, or they don't know how to work in such a situation. This in turn significantly reduces the capacity for learning.

The second issue is the lack of access to Ukrainian-language psychological support for children struggling with the trauma of war and culture shock. The shortage of psychologists and pedagogues is of course affecting all students, but becomes particularly apparent in this case. As a result, many of the psycho-social problems of new students (anxiety caused by being uprooted from their familiar environment, shaken sense of security as they are separated from some of their family, stress of creating new peer relations and functioning in a different school culture) remain unnoticed.

A third significant issue are the cross-cultural and national tensions and conflicts arising between the students. These tensions are often caused by such trivial things as mobile phone usage rules in school (rules are often different for Ukrainian students, as they are using their translation apps), or grading criteria (the age-old question of whether it's fair to apply the same measuring criteria to all). Without cross-cultural education, without developing a technique of conflict solving and without a strategy for managing cultural differences in school, these tensions are bound to only get worse.

### **Need for educational integration**

In this new situation, we need an inventive way of thinking about educational integration. The integration should not focus attention on Ukrainian students at the expense of Polish ones (this is a concern expressed by many Polish parents), but will also not treat young refugees as guests, whom we only offer the same support that we used to offer our students. It is worth keeping in mind that according to law, when a new child is admitted to a school, that child is eligible to the same rights as

all the other students, regardless of their citizenship – this includes the right to education that is suited to their special needs, including those resulting from the language and cultural differences.

Therefore, the school should equally support educational success of all students, regardless of their nationality and their different needs – this is the definition of educational integration as developed by the Centre for Civic Education in collaboration with the Norwegian Refugee Council. The authors of this model emphasize that for educational integration to be possible, it is essential to address three groups of student needs – emotional needs, social needs and learning needs. However, we know that even before their arrival in Poland, the Ukrainian education system was not catering to these needs of the Ukrainian students in a satisfying degree, in particular the emotional needs.

However, facing these new challenges exceeds the capabilities of the schools themselves. Especially in a situation when Polish schools remain underfunded and understaffed, and the system itself is still struggling with the consequences of the pandemic. The level of mental and physical wellbeing of young people is far from what is desired and the overloaded curriculum and rigid external exam system further amplifies the issue. For the moment, mainly NGOs and local teacher education centers are coming forward to help schools with this issue, but the scale of this support is insufficient. The support often reaches only the people interested in the subject, but the scale of presence of Ukrainian students in the system means that nearly all Polish teachers should acquire some new competences. However, convincing the teachers is proving difficult. Supporting schools in the area of educational integration should be one of the priorities of the state's educational policy in the coming years – the ministry of education should develop recommendations regarding integration, should support the schools in fulfilling them, should offer teachers and administrators trainings and consulting, should guarantee resources for covering the extra costs and should ensure the possibility to hire cross-cultural assistants, psychologists and pedagogues in schools (this includes Ukrainian speakers, including former teachers from Ukrainian schools). Otherwise, we will be heading towards an educational crisis, which will soon result in the reduction of the teaching quality in Polish schools.

### **Online or in a vacuum**

The problem of the other group of young people from Ukraine, those who are outside the Polish school system, is much more complex. At best, they have been learning remotely for four years in a row (before they fled Ukraine, the pandemic was blocking education in physical schools). At worst, they are not learning anymore at all. We do not know if this group (mostly made up of teenagers, because only one in four people who should be attending a secondary school is doing so in Poland), have any access to psychological support, if they have access to education, if they are learning Polish or

interacting with their peers. We do not know any of these things and unfortunately, it seems that nobody is interested in finding out. The Polish government assumes that by virtually participating in the Ukrainian education system, the students are under the care of the Ukrainian government. However, we know that Kyiv's capabilities in supporting youths who are physically in Poland are minimal at best.

As a society, we need to take responsibility for this group of children and youths and we need to offer them the support they need. Over the past year, the students themselves, the parents and politicians declared that the situation is temporary. However, the experience of other, similar migration crises shows clearly that "temporary" can extend across many years. If we do not tackle this challenge, we could be dealing with nearly 200 thousand teenagers and young adults in Poland, who fell out of the education system, who don't know Polish, who have trouble finding employment and who have serious problems with socialization. Therefore, we need to examine closely the situation of this group of children and youths, to verify if they are definitely using the education system in Ukraine, to see how effective that education is, and what other needs they may have (for example in such areas as learning language, integration, emotional support) and to offer them the necessary support.

### **The solutions we need**

The authors of the WISE Europa report: "Hospitable Poland 2022+" point out the conditions that educational support for student-refugees should meet: effectively mastering the content required under the curriculum, recognition of education level acquired in both countries, opportunity to learn Polish to a degree that enables integration with the Polish society, opportunity to connect and integrate with Polish peers and preservation of one's own national identity. Providing students with the essential psycho-social support should also be included as another condition.

On account of the scale of migration to Poland, one needs to recognize that the formal Polish education system is the best tool to guarantee the above. The Ukrainian schools that were created in the past year in the largest Polish cities, despite being excellent in providing for their students, are unable to admit so many children. Therefore, it is in the long-term best interest of the society (its Polish majority and Ukrainian minority) to gradually include Ukrainian students in Polish schools and to support these schools in addressing special needs of children fleeing war. Educational integration, when done right, may enrich inclusive education practices, enhance the preventive-pedagogical activity of schools, teaching students to function in culturally diverse environments, and enhance preparation for admitting migrants from more distant cultures. All children in Poland can benefit from such changes.

## Too much flexibility?

Enabling Ukrainian students to continue their education online in their country's system and respecting the decision of Ukrainian parents, who, planning to return to Ukraine soon, did not want to send their children to Polish schools, worked well in the first year of the crisis. In practice however, this meant relaxing the schooling requirement for some children and youths. Some of the European states require refugees residing within their territories to satisfy the schooling requirement within the local system. In present-day Poland, it is worrying that school administrators, required by law to monitor the realization of the schooling requirement, in practice have no resources or tools to do so. Therefore, the schooling requirement becomes theoretical for some of the youths.

If we assume that only the formal education system can guarantee to such a large group of young refugees the level of education that suits their needs, then we should open a discussion about the gradual rolling back of the regulations passed in March 2022 that allowed bypassing the Polish system easily (based on one declaration of the parent). We needed flexibility in that first moment, but extending crisis solutions across a time that should already have become a period of stability, may (much like we could have seen in many other countries that managed migration crises) reflect negatively on the opportunities and aspirations of young refugees.

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