

# Newsletter

Centre of Migration Studies  
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*Dear Readers,*

we invite you to read the new issue of the Newsletter of the Center of Migration Studies, where Marian Lopata (Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, Ukraine) discusses the issue of attending Polish schools by Ukrainian refugee pupils during the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The publication was issued thanks to the financial support of the Visegrad Fund (project no 52310377).

The Newsletter is a publishing space for the latest analyzes, research reports and comments on current migration issues in Poland and beyond. If you are interested in contributing to the Newsletter, please contact us: [csm@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:csm@uni.lodz.pl)



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*Marian Lopata*

## **Particularities of attending the Polish schools by Ukrainian refugee pupils during the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2022, has led to a mass migration of the Ukrainian population to Poland. One important aspect of this migration is the education of Ukrainian children and youth, including attending the schools in the Polish educational system.

The relevance of this study is related to the changes taking place in the Polish educational system that impact Ukrainian children who are not embraced by Polish education. Due to the second Russian invasion of Ukraine, the number of foreign children in Polish schools rapidly increased since February 2022. In the school year 2019/2020, there were just 30,777 Ukrainian students in primary and secondary schools (among 51,363 foreign students in total) (Pietrusińska, Nowosielski 2022). As of September 1, 2024, all Ukrainian children who reside in Poland because of the war will have to attend local schools (Ignaciuk 2024). According to the Polish Ministry of Education, it is already in the final stages of drafting a relevant bill. Deputy Minister of Education Joanna Mucha noted that 60,000-80,000 Ukrainian children were not covered by the Polish education system. This figure is much lower than previously reported by NGOs, which estimated that the number of such children could be even 150,000 (Garbicz 2024b). Additional Ukrainian language lessons for Ukrainian children will be introduced in Polish schools, according to officials of the Ministry of Education of Poland (*Lekcje ukraińskiego...* 2024). Teachers from Ukraine will be also hired for this purpose and will be offered

a simplified procedure for recognition of their diplomas. Furthermore, Ukrainian children will be taught about European integration (Garbicz 2024a). The Ministry of Education believes that they will need this knowledge considering Ukraine's expected accession to the European Union. Moreover, an amendment to the Law on Aid to Citizens of Ukraine, which the Polish Parliament passed on May 15, 2024, introduces compulsory schooling for Ukrainian children (it will be combined with the 800 plus benefit; if a child does not attend school, benefits will be withheld from the 2025/2026 school year) (Garbicz 2024b).

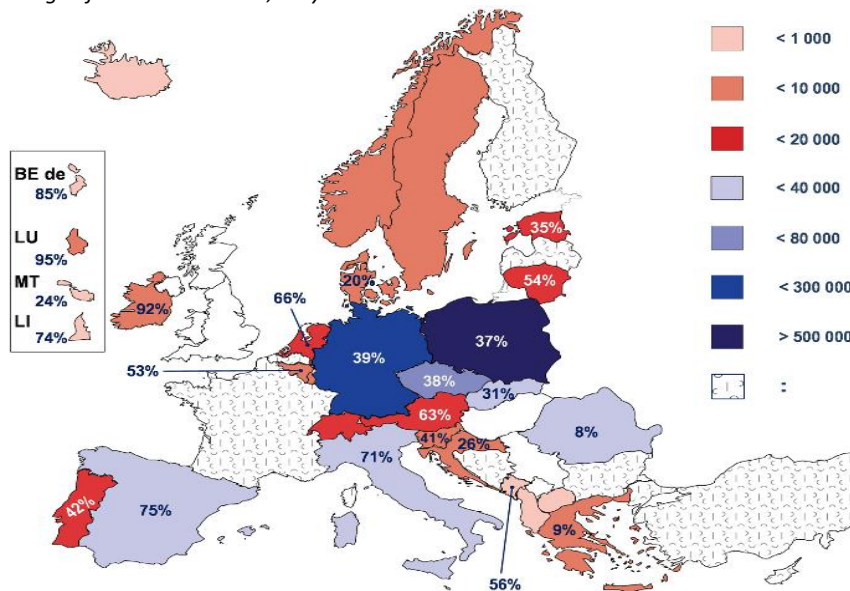
Until now, Poland was the only country in the European Union where refugee children from Ukraine were not required to attend local schools. They were, however, allowed to fulfil compulsory education by studying online in Ukrainian schools. In February 2024, Deputy Minister Mucha said that all Ukrainian children should have been guaranteed the right to education. Lack of education could result for these individuals not being able to function in Polish or Ukrainian society in the future, if they return home (ibidem).

But in order to take into account the details of the adoption of such a decision, it is necessary to examine why these changes were made. Of course, the first clue would be that the war between Russia and Ukraine is prolonged and the decision on Ukrainian pupils, which was appropriate in 2022, can no longer be implemented in 2024, taking into account the diminishing number of Ukrainian pupils

residing in Poland. But even now not all of Ukrainian refugee pupils are encompassed by the Polish educational system.

In Poland, in May 2022, the number of Ukrainian children and youth of school age and registered in Polish schools was 194,000, or 37 percent of overall Ukrainian youth moved to Poland after the commencement of the Russian invasion in 2022. Among European countries, this is a comparable average indicator. The situation was very similar to that in Germany and the Czech Republic as the main countries accepting Ukrainian refugees. The highest percentage of Ukrainian pupils was enrolled in schools in Ireland and Benelux countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2022) (see Figure 1). However, the particularity of those countries is based on a relatively low number of refugees from Ukraine, and those countries were not the main target of the refugee influx. Many Ukrainian pupils also continued their learning online in their schools in Ukraine (Chrostowska 2024 c).

Figure 1. Number of Ukrainian refugee children and youth in European countries and percentage of school enrolment, May 2022.



Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2022: 9)

Poland has introduced special legislation to facilitate the employment of Ukrainian teachers as support teachers. As part of the Act of March 12, 2022, on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict in Ukraine (the so-called “Special Act”), simplified hiring procedures have been

introduced for Ukrainian citizens who have the ability to speak and write Polish at a level that allows them to assist pupils who do not speak Polish (ISAP 2022).

To further clarify the current state of education of Ukrainian pupils in Poland after the Russian invasion, I will refer to the report compiled by Paulina Chrostowska “Refugee Pupils from Ukraine in the Polish Education System” (Chrostowska 2023b).

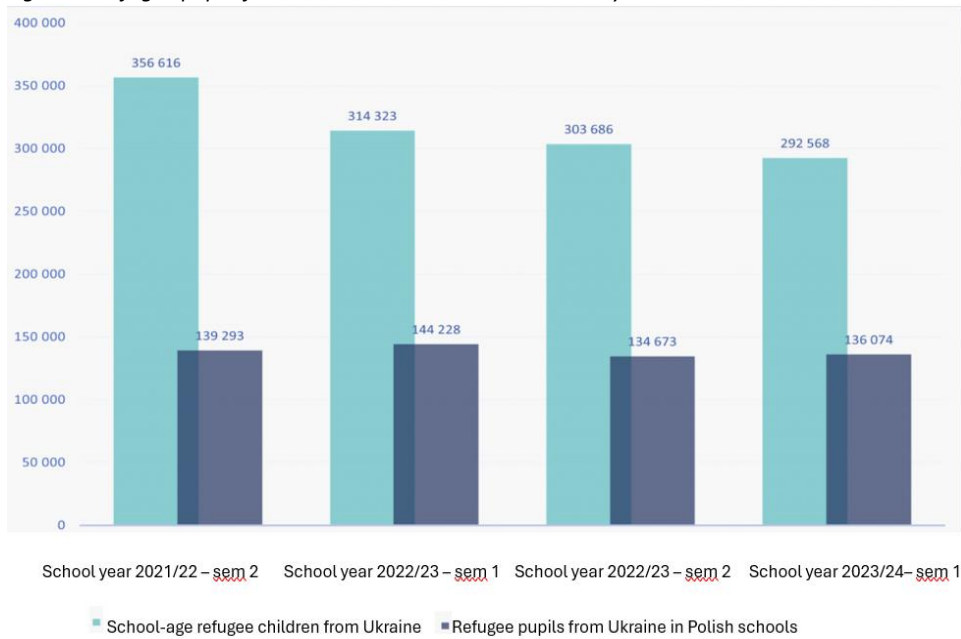
At the end of the 2021/2022 school year, i.e. four months after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, there were at least 356,000 school-aged children and youth in Poland. At that time, only 37 percent of them were included in the Polish education system (see Figure 1). By October 2023, that percentage has risen to 47 percent. However, this increase is not related, as it might seem, to a general increase of the interest of Ukrainian migrants in education in Polish schools. The number of refugee pupils in elementary schools, high schools, and vocational schools has remained at a similar level for the past year and a half, oscillating

between 134,000 and 144,000. On the other hand, the number of children registered in Poland is falling. In the beginning of 2024, there were 298,000 of them, i.e. 64,000 fewer than in June 2022 (Chrostowska 2024) (see Figure 2).

Despite these changes, more than half of young Ukrainian citizens residing in Poland are still outside the Polish education system. Formally, this group is pursuing compulsory schooling through Ukrainian remote education. This means that for many of the Ukrainian pupils it could be their fourth year of online education, i.e. with limited

contact with their peers. In addition, this group is less likely to learn the Polish language and integrate with their Polish peers. There is also a real concern that some of these children have dropped out of any education system at all. However, there is still no data

Figure 2. Refugee pupils from Ukraine in the Polish education system 2022-2023



Source: Chrostowska (2024: 6)

to estimate the scale of this phenomenon (Chrostowska 2023b).

Izabela Czerniejewska, who works as a President of the Migrant Info Point Foundation in Poznań, during the interview on Ukrainian pupils said: *“there are not very precise school statistics, because it is not known whether a student who moved to a particular school is a refugee or came to Poland before the war. Schools treat such students as Ukrainian citizens, and it’s hard to distinguish how many of them have temporary protection as refugees. Ukrainian students regarding knowledge of the Polish language speak differently, and that’s why their knowledge of the Polish language varies a lot, because either it turns out that they speak brilliantly and have only some deficiencies, or they speak very poorly. And you don’t know whether a particular student has previously attended a Polish school or not. That’s why there are no very precise statistics, and we are waiting for reliable statistical surveys to turn out. Obtaining correct statistics is hampered by the migration of many Ukrainian families within Poland, as they change cities of residence and even change schools. It happens that Ukrainian families and Ukrainian youth move from one place to another quite often. In that case, it is more convenient for the refugee family to move their*

*children to a school that is closer than the one in the locality where the refugees previously resided”* (interview with Izabela Czerniejewska 2024).

There were more than 50,000 pupils of Ukrainian labour migrants in elementary schools, high schools, technical schools, and specialized schools of the first degree. Together with refugee pupils, this gives over 186,000 young Ukrainian citizens in Polish educational institutions. If all Ukrainian children living in

Poland would go to local schools, there could potentially be 343,000 of them (Chrostowska 2024c).

As in the previous 2022-2023 school year, the presence of Ukrainian pupils in Polish secondary schools was higher. There were almost 39 percent more of them than at the end of last school year 2023/2024, and more than 78 percent in the first months after the war broke out. The increase, however, is mainly due to children who graduated from Polish elementary schools in previous years going into the first grades.

The report “Refugee students from Ukraine in the Polish Education System” indicates that despite a steady decline in the numbers of school-age refugee children, the number of refugee pupils in Polish schools has remained stable. At the same time, a large number of refugee children still do not participate in the Polish education system. Problems with the continuation of secondary schooling may result from leaving Poland, not being promoted to the next grade, or deciding not to continue their education (Chrostowska 2023b). As it was indicated by the scholars from the University of Warsaw in the mid-2022, the education of some of Ukrainian refugee children has been put on hold, because their parents

were not sure whether they would stay in Poland, return to Ukraine or be relocated to another EU country. Some parents were also afraid that their children would face another stress if they were placed in a totally new social and linguistic environment. Due to these uncertainties, many parents were going to wait until the new school year to enrol their children in a school or kindergarten. Moreover, a numerous group of forced migrants from Ukraine have already fled to other EU countries (Pietrusińska, Nowosielski 2022).

According to the newest data, 180,000 refugees from Ukraine studying in various types of institutions were registered in the Educational Information System of Poland in April 2024. Pupils-refugees from Ukraine account for nearly 3 percent of all pupils in Polish schools. In every 4th class in Poland, male and female pupils study with at least one person from Ukraine with refugee experience. In addition to the 134,000 pupils-refugees from Ukraine, Polish schools have about 50,000 pupils-immigrants from Ukraine who arrived in Poland before the new phase of the continuing from 2014 war between Russia and Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022. All Ukrainian pupils both refugees and migrants make up nearly 4 percent of all students in Polish schools. Preparatory classes are now marginal, with only 3 percent of Ukrainian pupils studying in them. In Polish schools, only 288 preparatory classes have been set up for Ukrainian pupils. In these preparatory classes the learning is conducted in Ukrainian, which allows better integration and adaptation of the Ukrainian pupils (Chrostowska 2024c).

Izabela Czerniejewska stated that *“mainly Ukrainian citizens are hired as intercultural assistants to help Polish teachers teach Ukrainian students. To become a teacher in Poland while being a Ukrainian citizen, it is a need to recognize the diploma, and prepare a lot of documentation and very few teachers from Ukraine succeed in becoming a teacher in Poland. Assistants only need to know the language of the student, i.e. Ukrainian or Russian and communicatively Polish. School administration checks the certificates of high education of such intercultural*

*assistants, but it is not even prescribed. As a rule, the administrative officers are hiring such persons, and these people work as administrative staff. They facilitate contact with parents and teachers. They also do a lot of integration initiatives for Polish and Ukrainian children. Also, intercultural assistants are already becoming more and more appreciated in schools and education administration. Moreover, to facilitate the learning and integration of the Ukrainian pupils, in Poland, such intercultural assistants are usually people who themselves have experience of migration from Ukraine or held before arrival to Poland Ukrainian citizenship, and thus have a good understanding of the needs of children and their families and can respond to them. They act as translators and interpreters and help Ukrainian children learn, support children in adapting to the school environment, act as intermediaries between the school and the children's parents or legal guardians, help understand cultural differences and resolve resulting misunderstandings or conflicts, and develop an attitude of respect for social diversity at school”* (interview with Izabela Czerniejewska 2024).

According to the report “Out of School” Ukrainian teachers face challenges in confirming their credentials in Poland, especially those who do not have original documentation, limiting their ability to work and the availability of culturally specific support for Ukrainian youth. The Polish Ombudsman's office has made it possible for those with refugee or protected status to obtain certification using the European Refugee Qualification Passport, but questions remain about compliance with the broader European system, lengthening the process and raising the cost of transferring Ukrainian qualification documents to Poland. This comes against the backdrop of a system that already records lower-than-standard wages for Polish teachers and inadequate supplies, which has recently sparked teacher protests. Many Ukrainian teachers find that the need for immediate income for their families outweighs dealing with the complicated bureaucracy to ensure that their qualifications are recognized (Raport POZA SZKOŁĄ 2024).



There is already at least one refugee student from Ukraine in 64,000 classes in Poland (i.e. one in four). This number will increase if we add Ukrainian pupils who arrived in Poland earlier. It has been estimated that up to 75 percent of teachers may teach at least one class with Ukrainian pupils (Chrostowska, 2024c).

There is also a problem regarding learning of Ukrainian language in Poland. Due to the large number of Ukrainian pupils, there was a need to introduce Ukrainian language instruction in Polish schools. Here are the main activities and challenges related to this process according to the report "Refugee Pupils from Ukraine in the Polish Education System" (*Uczniowie uchodźczy z Ukrainy... 2023*) teaching Ukrainian in Poland faces a number of challenges, including:

- lack of sufficient teachers: many regions of Poland lack teachers qualified to teach Ukrainian;
- adaptation of curricula: the need to adapt the Polish curriculum to the needs of Ukrainian pupils, which requires additional resources and organizational efforts;
- cultural integration: despite support, the process of integrating Ukrainian pupils with their Polish peers can sometimes be difficult, due to cultural and linguistic differences (Chrostowska 2023a).

The Ministry of Education of Poland has introduced several key regulations to facilitate the integration and learning of Ukrainian children in the Polish school system:

- Compulsory education: As of September 2024, all Ukrainian pupils residing in Poland have compulsory education in Polish educational system. This decision is the result of consultations with Ukrainian authorities, who have expressed interest in cooperating on this issue (Garbicz 2024a).
- Preparatory classes: Although they are currently of marginal importance, the Ministry of Education recommends a return to their widespread use.

These classes help pupils to adapt and learn the Polish language, which is crucial for their further education (Ibidem).

- Financial support: Funding and support for schools receiving Ukrainian pupils is a key factor affecting integration. Increased investment in the education sector and decentralization of resources are aimed at ensuring that schools are able to meet the new challenges (Chrostowska 2023a; Konczal 2024).

We could state that Poland's education legislation and policies aim to fully integrate refugee pupils from Ukraine. However, this requires coordinated action, increased funding, and support for teachers and pupils. The long-term goal is to create an inclusive and supportive educational environment that allows all pupils to achieve academic and social success. According to estimates of the Centre of Citizen Education of Poland, if all Ukrainian refugee pupils were placed in schools, they would make up as much as 7 percent of pupils in Polish schools, resulting in even greater changes in the Polish educational system. However, current figures show that Ukrainian pupils consist of just 4 percent of total pupils (Chrostowska 2023b). Also, teaching the Ukrainian language in Poland during the Russian invasion is an important element of support for Ukrainian pupils. Actions taken by the Polish education system, such as the creation of preparatory classes, psychosocial support, provision of educational resources, and teacher training, could be crucial for the successful integration and adaptation of Ukrainian pupils in Polish society. However, still Ukrainian teachers face challenges in having their credentials recognized by the Polish system of education and often take other jobs to provide care for their families.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a significant influx of Ukrainian pupils into the Polish educational system, creating a multifaceted situation with distinct perspectives of Ukrainian refugee pupils from Ukraine, Poland, and Polish society. From Kyiv's perspective, the phenomenon raises concerns about brain drain. The migration of young, talented individuals to Poland could result in a long-term loss of human capital for Ukraine.

Ukrainians are aware that these pupils may integrate into Polish society and contribute to its economy, potentially diminishing Ukraine's future prospects for reconstruction and post-war development.

Poland could perceive this situation through the lens of integration and the potential acquisition of a young, skilled migrant resource from culturally resemble society. The Polish state could view the opportunity to bolster its demographic and economic landscape by integrating Ukrainian pupils and their families into Polish society. This overview could be motivated by the potential long-term benefits of adding a diverse and dynamic young population to the country's workforce and society.

The perspective of Polish society is more complex. It should be noted that pro-Russian politicians and propagandist bloggers are disseminating among Polish society the narrative of the creation of the "Ukropolin". The key narratives that are also disseminated among Polish society on Ukrainian issues are: *Ukraine colonizes Poland*, *Ukraine Ukrainizes Poland*; *Ukrainians create „Ukropol” in Poland*; *Ukrainian refugees receive benefits and services in Poland that Poles do not have* (Dytkowski 2023). While there was an initial wave of solidarity and openness towards Ukrainian refugees, prolonged challenges and increased numbers of Ukrainian migrants might strain resources and test the limits of this welcoming attitude. Some segments of Polish society may experience concerns about competition for jobs, cultural integration, and the impact on public services, potentially leading to a less welcoming stance over time.

Nevertheless, the changes within the Polish educational system and recent amendments made by the Polish legislature reveal the current intentions of the Polish government to integrate Ukrainian pupils into Polish society and to make available more comprehensive learning to facilitate such integration. For young Ukrainians, it is essential to continue their education in peaceful conditions and obtain European education. The inclusion into Polish society through entering the Polish educational system is crucial for

those young Ukrainians and their relatives/fiduciaries who decide to stay here for longer.

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