Policy brief: Responding to the influx of Ukrainian refugee students in Lesser Poland Voivodeship's education system

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Abstract
This brief explores how Poland's education system has responded to the influx of Ukrainian refugee students since the start of the Ukraine-Russia War. In Poland, only 40% of Ukrainian refugee students are enrolled in schools, and the content taught in Polish classrooms can lack inclusivity. To combat this, Poland is offering segregated and immersive schooling options. Both approaches strive to enhance student learning and wellbeing. This brief recommends maintaining the option of both schooling approaches and supports Ukrainian refugee teachers being redeployed as multicultural assistants who can help engage parents and students in Polish schools and overcome the language barrier.

Keywords: Ukraine, Poland, refugee, school, education

Context

Since 24 February 2022, 6.5 million Ukrainians have fled Ukraine in response to Russian aggression (European Commission, 2022a). To coordinate a cohesive response to the crisis, the European Council issued a directive on 4 March 2022 (Article 5 Directive 2001/55/EC) stating that all European Union (EU) member states should provide education to those under 18 displaced by conflict and afford them the same education opportunities as citizens (UNESCO, 2023). This directive stems from the European Education Area's focus on "Improving Quality" which includes inclusivity of migrants and refugees into EU member states education systems (European Commission, 2023).

As of June 2023, Poland had granted 1.6 million Ukrainian refugees temporary protection status (UNESCO, 2023). Approximately half are school-aged (European Commission, 2022a). Following the European Council's directive, the Polish President signed the *Act of 12 March 2022 on assistance to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of the country*. This Act outlined the domestic measures for implementing the directive (UNESCO, 2023).

While Poland has been widely praised for accommodating the mass influx of Ukrainian refugees (Bochkar et al., 2022; Schmid, 2022; UNESCO, 2023), the education system is facing an array of challenges, including pre-existing problems that have been amplified through the refugee crisis. These challenges include, a teacher shortage (Camarena, 2022), a lack of resources (Goniewicz, 2022) and discrepancies in learner proficiency (e.g., Ukrainians are typically behind Poland in learning competencies like math, reading and science (Bochkar et al., 2022)). Whilst these issues are interlinked, this brief focuses on two main challenges. The first challenge is that the enrolment of

Ukrainian refugee students is low (European Commission, 2022b; UNICEF, 2023). The second challenge is that the schooling options and content taught can lack inclusivity (The Economist, 2022; Mazzini, 2022). These challenges are intrinsically intertwined and, as such, are being addressed in tandem.

Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to advise the Director for Education, Dariusz Styrna, in Lesser Poland Voivodeship, on how the European Council's directive, and the ratification of it at the national level, translates to the local context and the policy pathways that could be pursued to increase enrolment and inclusivity.

Facts

Poland has experienced a mass influx of Ukrainian refugees into their school system. This has amplified pre-existing problems and created new challenges for the education system to overcome. As a result, only 40% of school-aged Ukrainian refugees are enrolled in Polish schools (UNICEF, 2023). Schools play a pivotal role in establishing routine and normalcy and improving mental and social wellbeing, as such, barriers to school enrolment must be addressed (Pietrusińska & Nowosielski, 2022; Pherali, 2016).

Currently there are two schooling approaches offered to Ukrainian refugee students. First is segregated schooling, which takes the form of preparatory classes designated to Ukrainian refugee students (Schmid, 2022). Approximately 40% of schools offer preparatory classes (Pyżalski et al., 2022). Segregated schooling also takes the form of online distance learning and Ukrainian schools set up in Poland (Alla, 2022). Both these approaches follow the Ukrainian curriculum. The second option is full immersion, in which Ukrainian students join Polish mainstream classes straight away. This has been a more popular and widespread approach with 90% of schools reporting they have Ukrainian students enrolled in mainstream classes (Pyżalski et al., 2022).

Noting the importance of schooling, to create best practice and share learnings, the EU formed the EU Education Solidarity Group for Ukraine. According to the EU Education Solidarity Group for Ukraine, Valencia in Spain, Czechia and Sweden have been successful in increasing school enrolment (European Commission, 2022a). In Valencia, all Ukrainian refugee students are assigned a peer to help them settle into school. In addition, they connect with families by offering immersion courses in Spanish for Ukrainian refugee students and their families (European Commission, 2022a). Czechia and Sweden have both bolstered their communication channels to ensure information is clearly dispersed and easy to understand. In Czechia, they have created a user-friendly webpage with clear instructions on how to enrol in schools. Additionally, the webpage reassures parents that Czechia's education system is engaged with Ukrainian pedagogical staff to ensure elements of continuity with the Ukrainian curriculum and gain an understanding of grade equivalency (European Commission, 2022a). In Sweden, they have run a targeted social media campaign, via Instagram, to increase communication and parent engagement with schools (European Commission, 2022a). The EU Education Solidarity Group for Ukraine also praised Lublin in Poland for their use of Ukrainian textbooks and library resources and the redeployment of Ukrainian teachers into Polish schools (European Commission,

2022a). These case studies highlight the importance of clear and accessible information and parent partnership in overcoming obstacles and barriers to school enrolment. These approaches also seek to address concerns over inclusion and belonging to amplify confidence in schools, and in turn, increase Ukrainian refugee enrolment.

Critical analysis

During times of crisis education plays a pivotal role in establishing normalcy, routine, and connection. To Pherali (2016) and UNICEF (2023), school enrolment is crucial to the success of refugee resettlement as it allows students a chance to connect with children from the host country and grow understanding, respect, and tolerance which are essential elements for creating sustained social cohesion. Additionally, schools often assist with linking refugees to services such as health care, social welfare, and psychology services (European Commission, 2022a). Whilst collectively Poland has received praise for how they have welcomed Ukrainian refugees (European Commission, 2022b), the approach within Poland has not been uniform (Bochkar et al., 2022). Lesser Poland Voivodeship should look to other regions within Poland and the lessons from the EU Education Solidarity Group for Ukraine to adopt best practice to enhance enrolment and ensure inclusive education is offered.

Whilst the benefits of education for refugees are widely agreed upon (European Commission, 2022b; Pherali, 2016; UNICEF, 2023), the form in which it is delivered is highly contested (Alla, 2022; Dermish, 2022). The tension lies between segregated forms of learning and immersion into mainstream Polish schools. Both approaches are driven by wanting to enhance refugee student wellbeing and ensure positive learning outcomes (Alla, 2022).

Segregated learning takes the form of preparatory classes, the emergence of Ukrainian schools in Poland and distance learning. These approaches attempt to reduce stress through consistency. Schmid (2022) argues that many parents are concerned about potential discrimination their children will face in Polish schools and the stress of learning a new language and curriculum. Additionally, Camarena (2022) highlights that following the Ukrainian curriculum is important to those who want to maintain a strong connection to Ukraine. Moreover, Pyżalski et al. (2022) posit that the uncertainty over the length of the war in Ukraine and/or where they will resettle has meant that many students have continued the Ukrainian curriculum via distance learning. These factors drive Ukrainian families to seek out forms of segregated schooling. While Alla (2022) recognises that in the short-term segregated learning can reduce stress, she argues that Ukrainian schools that have opened in Poland since the Ukraine-Russia war and the preparatory classes often combine grade levels resulting in large class sizes, which negatively impacts learning outcomes. In addition, Schmid (2022) highlights that distance learning, though consistent, means that students miss out on the social interactions in-person school provides that is important to children's social development. Furthermore, Alla (2022) highlights that segregation can have negative impacts on refugee students' sense of belonging and mental health as language problems persist outside of school. An 'us' and 'them' mentality can arise if friendships and positive interactions between refugees and the host country are limited (Alla, 2022). It is clear from the literature that in the long-term a segregated approach to education is problematic as it hinders social interactions, learning outcomes and establishing a sense of belonging.

Immersion into mainstream classes aims to integrate Ukrainian refugee students quickly into Polish schools. Dermish (2022) argues that language skills are acquired quickly through immersion in mainstream classes, noting that arts, sports, and drama classes are often easiest for refugees to initially participate in as they build their language skills. Moreover, Alla (2022) argues that immersion into social and cultural life at school has positive impact on wellbeing, that language is acquired quicker and that teachers can provide targeted support. However, she notes that the language barrier, initially, can cause emotional distress, dissociation, and difficulty in focusing on class (Alla, 2022). Furthermore, Bobryk and Kochan (2022) argue there is a fine line between assimilation, in which the host country culture is adopted at the expense of one's own culture, and integration, in which the host country culture is adopted, and one's culture is preserved, and suggest that Poland's approach to immersive schooling borders on assimilation. However, interviews with Ukrainian refugee parents Bobryk and Kochan (2022) found parents wanted their children to attend Polish schools as soon as possible to forge friendships and establish routine but relied on and looked to the Ukrainian refugee community in Poland to maintain their Ukrainian identity and culture.

Concern over assimilation in mainstream polish schools is further amplified by large differences in understandings of historic events (Mazzini, 2022; Pyżalski et al., 2022). Whilst Poland has been praised for welcoming the most Ukrainian refugees, they have not always had an amicable relationship. Brewing and Lehnstaedt (2023) and Wojnar (2021) argue that post World War 2 a massacre occurred on the Ukraine-Poland border which Ukraine has struggled to take accountability for. Moreover, the Ukrainians celebrate and idolise figures like Cossack leader, Bogdan Khmelnitsky who led an uprising against Poland and Russia in the 17th century. However, Poles see Khmelnitsky as a brute and associate him with the Cossack's massacre of Poles and Jews (Glaser, 2014). This tension over which historic events are remembered and how they are remembered is present in classrooms that contain both Ukrainian and Polish students. For example, 15-year-old Yeva Lysyk, a Ukrainian refugee student, enrolled in Polish mainstream classes stated, "My history teacher said Lviv [the biggest city in western Ukraine] should have been a Polish city" (The Economist, 2022). Mazzini (2022) and Pyżalski et al. (2022) argue the discrepancy in memory is a large barrier to the inclusion of Ukrainian refugees, especially as Poland's national curriculum has been described as patriotic and nationalistic.

A potential solution to some of these tensions is the redeployment of Ukrainian refugee teachers into Polish schools. Currently, the Polish Government has reduced requirements for Ukrainian teachers to enter Polish schools as multicultural assistants. The University of Gdansk and the Centre for Education Development in Warsaw are offering courses that run over 4 months and are comprised of lessons on educational law, Polish language, and Polish curriculum (Jakubowski, 2022). Pietrusińska and Nowosielski (2022) suggest that the main role of multicultural assistants is to support Ukrainian students to integrate by helping translate, meet with teachers and school counsellors, and facilitate contact between parents and the school. Translation is particularly helpful as 88% of Polish teachers reported having little to no Ukrainian language skills which creates a large language barrier (Pyżalski et al., 2022). It is also hoped that having multicultural assistants can help mitigate any cultural, racial, religious, or ethnic conflict (Pietrusińska & Nowosielski, 2022). So far, there are 50 multicultural assistants working in Lublin, 200 in Warsaw and 150 in Krakow (Dimitrova, 2022). These programs are being funded through aid donors (Dimitrova,

2022). In Turkey, when they experienced an influx of Syrian refugees, thousands of Syrian refugee teachers were redeployed across Turkey after being given language training and pedagogical guidance (Cerna, 2019). Having Syrian teachers in Turkish schools had a positive impact on Syrian refugee students grades and sense of belonging; it also saw a decrease in absenteeism and the rate of grade repetition (Cerna, 2019).

Recommendations

To enhance enrolment and inclusivity, the following recommendations should be enacted by Mr Styrna in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship:

- Bolster the hiring of Ukrainian refugee teachers as multicultural assistants in schools.
  - o Whilst a small trial is already underway, this program should be pursued as it has the potential to increase enrolment and inclusivity by alleviating the language and cultural barriers to attending a foreign school and by forming parent/school partnerships.
- Continue to offer choice over schooling options.
  - o Both segregated and mainstream classes serve to benefit Ukrainian refugees. However, the options must be clearly communicated and made accessible.
- Continue to monitor social and learning outcomes from different schooling options and share the findings back to EU Education Solidarity Group for Ukraine to build best practise across the EU.

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