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Integration Policy of Immigrants With Particular Emphasis on Ukrainian Children in Poland

Abstract

Migrations have accompanied humankind for hundreds of years. The journeys made to “pursue bread” as the Polish put it, have been ingrained in historical and social processes taking place on both regional and global scales. Decisions to relocate are frequently underpinned by economic reasons, but political, religious, social or climatic reasons can also be factors. These decisions are taken by adults, but their scope and effects also extend to children. The challenges that these children face come in the form of problems with adaptation, education, and the priority of values, oftentimes – loneliness, a lack of close relations, and a reduced sense of security during their stay in foreign environments. The refugee situation is a specific case and a challenge for children. The aim of this article is to highlight the problem of the integration/assimilation of Ukrainian children in Poland who have arrived here as a result of their parents’ informed migration decisions, as well as those who have ended up here as a consequence of the war that Russia has been waging against Ukraine since 24th February 2022.

Keywords: Migrations, Ukraine, Integration of Children, Assimilation, Ukrainian Refugees

Introduction

The demographic situation in EU countries is, frankly, dreadful. The fertility rate fluctuates at around 1.53 (Eurostat, 2022) while the threshold for generational renewal is 2.1. Europe has two ways out of this demographic trap:

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a/ enacting a pro-family policy, which requires several years to see its effect and involves significant financial outlay. The governments of European countries are reluctant to implement this solution, since the results are not immediate and leave them with nothing to brag about in their subsequent election campaigns. What is more, the family model, dominated nowadays by 2+0, and naturally influenced by a number of factors including that of the economic, social, and mental, would have to be addressed and changed.

b/ migrations, which can play the role of a “lifebuoy”, but only under the condition of a well-prepared adaptation policy of host countries in order to avoid social tensions as a result of the influx of “aliens” in frequently homogeneous societies.

Migrations are a common phenomenon today and their tendency is rising. It is estimated that currently over 200 million people – 3% of the world’s population – live in a country other than where they were born (Zintegrowana, 2022). Should this pace of growth continue, there will exist approximately 400 million migrants in 2050. In addition to purely economic reasons, migrations will occasion due to extreme climate changes (such as droughts, floods, and typhoons) as well as wars and ethnic conflicts.

Regardless of the push and pull factors, children are among migrants changing their place of residence every single day. And irrespective of whether they are the children of migrants or refugees, they are treated as objects and not as subjects of the events and processes. Their life situation changes through the decisions of adult guardians and children have to live with those decisions’ consequences. Naturally, while considering decisions to migrate, there is room to prepare children for change, to familiarise them with what is to come. The situation is much more complicated when choosing to leave a safe place in the event of a war, persecution or a natural disaster.

Another possible and indeed frequent case is when a child is left in a country under the guardianship of one parent or relatives (usually grandparents). We can then observe the phenomenon of what is known as Euro-orphanhood (Informacje, 2008), which has been broadly covered specialised literature. (Walczak, 2008; Winnicka, 2007; Kozak, 2010). In the context of the social and emotional development of a child, this solution is undesirable since it can cause a number of negative effects such as emotional disorders, longing, loneliness, fear, and, in the long term – dropping-out of school, running away from home, health problems, psychosomatic ailments, aggressive behaviour, committing misdemeanours or, in extreme situations, even felonies.

The adaptation of children in a host society has been analysed in the following article.

Children as Passive Ukrainian Emigrants

The decision to migrate is frequently made by an entire family or a family member in advance after having analysed the advantages and disadvantages of a destination country, taking into account the inherent benefits and losses. If a child takes part in emigration, a responsible parent will try to prepare them for the inevitable change. But the confrontation with the “new” occurs after the arrival. Parental decisions to relocate affect children at different stages of those children’s development and emotional maturity, and sometimes such choices come as an absolute surprise and destroy their safe-haven. They end up in a foreign country, a different society and peers, and have to adapt to these new conditions. Their “adaptation path” will depend to a large extent on the attitude of the host society towards foreigners, the country’s integration policy, the scale of cultural differences or the “migration potential” of a child.

Poland is a country with limited migration experiences. For years, Polish society was considered homogeneous. In the 2011 National Census, 97.09% of the respondents declared Polish nationality (the results for 2021’s census are yet to be released).

Taking into account the needs of the labour market, it is easier to accept in such a society “strangers” with relative cultural affinity. Ukrainians or Belarusians are good examples in Poland’s case.

Pursuant to data from the Office for Foreigners, in December 2021, the number of Ukrainian citizens with valid residence permits in Poland exceeded 300,000. People (Urząd, 2021). The foregoing data does not encompass persons staying in Poland temporarily under visa-free travel or on a visa basis. Data collected from mobile networks in terms of login locations and the language used claimed that over 1.5 million Ukrainian citizens were staying in Poland before the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war (Selectivv, 2021). A significant group of these migrants are children.

Prior to the Russian aggression on Ukraine (24th February 2022), over 100,000 Ukrainian children were studying in Polish schools.

The right to education in a host country is regulated by various legal regulations, both Polish and international (Klaus, 2008).

At the international level, the most important of these regulations are: the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as of 20th March 1952 (Convention, 1952), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as of 19th December 1966 (UN General Assembly, 1966), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child as of 20th November 1989 (UN General Assembly, 1989).

The right to education is also outlined in strictly European documents: the Council Directive of the European Communities on the education of the children of migrant workers adopted on 15th July 1977 (Council Directive, 1977), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union as of 14th December 2007 (Charter of Fundamental Rights, 2007), the European Parliament Resolution on educating the children of migrants as of 2nd April 2009 (European Parliament Resolution, 2009), the Council Conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background as of 26th November 2009 (Council Conclusions on the education, 2009) and the Green Paper of the European Commission “Migration and Mobility: Challenges and Opportunities for EU Community Education Systems” of 3rd July 2008 (Green Paper, 2008).

Polish law, similarly to the legislation of other countries, also regulates access to education for the children of foreigners. This is stated in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland as of 2nd April 1997 (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997) and the Act of 14th December 2016 – Education Law (Ustawa, 2016) and the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 23rd August 2017 on the education of persons who are not Polish citizens and persons who are Polish citizens, who were educated in schools operating in the education systems of other countries (Rozporządzenie, 2017).

The inclusion of a young person in the Polish education system is not, however, without barriers. Factors such as different former education systems, changing schools, attending schools in different countries, coming from a different cultural or religious background with a different system of values, feeling lonely or insecure in a new society, being misunderstood or simply unable to speak the language should be taken into account. A gradual, consistent overcoming of these barriers may only lead to potential integration success.

There are two models of integration policy in terms of the education of immigrant children in EU Member States. These are, namely, the integration model and the separation model. In line with the first model, children go to school together with children from their host country and are enrolled in classes according to their age or attend lower grades. They take part in additional language classes in order to overcome language barriers. This model applies, *inter alia*, in Ireland, Italy, and Sweden. The separation model involves teaching immigrant children in separate classes until their host country language skills are sufficient enough to enable them to attend lessons in “normal” classes. This model is present, *inter alia*, in Germany, Romania, and the Netherlands (Todorovska-Sokolovska, 2009). There is also a third model considered by researchers to be the optimal model. Pur-

suant to that model, foreign children learn the language of the host country in separate classes, while lessons in which no subject knowledge is required, e.g. physical education, technical or artistic classes, take place together with the students of the host country. This allows for contact with peers from a given country and eliminates integration barriers more quickly.

The selection of the model including migrant children in a host country's education system depends on the migration experience of the country, its developed migration policy and strategy, the readiness of the society and preparation of teaching personnel to the presence and collaboration with "strangers", and, finally, the financial capabilities of the state.

Due to the fact that Poland lacks a migration policy, the existence of one coordinating centre and the migration experiences of Polish society, the tasks related to the adaptation of migrant children rest mainly with non-governmental organisations and local communities.

Cooperation with the environment of migrant children, including their families, is extremely important in the adaptation process. The family, in turn, is in a terribly difficult situation, because it has to re-define its role and authority in a host society. The child naturally feels and experiences the stress of the people who have brought stability and a sense of security to their life and supported them. The question arises; who is to undertake this kind of work and cooperation? The simplest answer that comes to mind is teachers – with their professional knowledge, pedagogical preparation, and empathy for young people whom they are to co-educate.

In order to provide tangible help to a migrant child, the teacher should try to obtain any necessary information about the student, i.e.: – where they come from, what their family situation is, and how long the family wants to stay in Poland. The teacher should also prepare Polish students in the classroom for the presence of a new, possibly slightly "different" member of the school community, showing the advantages of this difference and the need for tolerance. In the educational process, the teacher should not discourage the student by overly criticising their achievements, but should rather appreciate the effort made and, at the same time, try not to alienate Polish students by being too lenient towards their Ukrainian counterparts. First and foremost, the teacher should provide linguistic support to such students so that they can take full advantage of the educational offer as soon as possible. Parents of a foreign student should also be involved in the adaptation process, be engaged in school life and work on their sense of belonging to the school community. What is also important is to involve parents of Polish students in this process – to tame their fears of the foreigners' "otherness", and to prepare them for conversations and discussions with their own children.

The inclusion and integration of foreign children into the Polish school system require financial support. The system of financing education in Poland without the “burden” of migrant children already shows serious shortcomings. Finding funds for additional language classes and remedial classes ensures the encounter of serious difficulties, both at the ministerial and local levels. Such deficiencies are frequently “patched up” with support from EU projects but these, however, are characterised by temporality and changing priorities, which, as a consequence, leads to the discontinuity of undertaken actions. This is the case, for example, with the engagement of cultural assistants to help foreign children. The problem, however, is that a school that applies for and obtains financial support for the employment of such assistants (because not all schools requiring such support receive it) may benefit from the programme itself for a year or two, until the end of the said project. But the problem of migrant students’ presence does not disappear after this time, so we face a lack of continuity in the adaptation process. The same applies to assistance provided to Polish language teaching or other integration activities.

Assistance, both linguistic and integrative, provided by Polish educational authorities or state structures is extremely limited. It rests principally on NGO’s and local government institutions.

Refugee Children From Ukraine Following Russia’s Aggression on 24 February 2022

Pursuant to data from the Border Guard, over 3.2 million refugees from Ukraine, mainly women and children, have crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border since 24th February, the day of the commencement of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine (Rzeczpospolita, 2022). The number of children without guardianship or under the guardianship of “not parents” (e.g. siblings) is relatively high. The threat of war has forced entire orphanages with their guardians to be evacuated from Ukraine.

According to UNICEF Spokesperson James Elder, 55 children *a minute* have fled their country since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. This means that one child becomes a refugee almost every second. Over 1.5 million of Ukraine’s youngest people have fled the country. In other words, in Ukraine, on average, more than 75,000 children have become refugees every day since the outbreak of the war (Malinowski, 2022).

The Deputy Director General of UNICEF Poland, Renata Bem, calculates that children constitute more than half of the Ukrainian refugees in Poland. In the official registers, however, maintained by the government, there are about 900,000 of them (Bem, 2022).

The Minister of Education and Science, Przemysław Czarnek, during a meeting in a school on 25th April 2022, provided the number of 190,000 Ukrainian children he said were included in the Polish education system (Lemaniak, 2022). This number, however, in the context of the data presented above, means that the majority of Ukrainian children still remain outside the Polish education system.

The situation of refugee children is, in some respects, similar to that of migrant children discussed above, but there are a number of issues that require the situation to be analysed separately.

The significant difference is the uncertainty regarding how long Ukrainian children will be included in the Polish education system. Some families have already stated that they definitely want to return to their homes in Ukraine once the war is over (but how long will the war last?), some are looking for residence in other EU countries or Canada, where there is a large Ukrainian diaspora, and some have declared their intention to stay in Poland. Nowadays, it can be perceived in terms of the social and financial burden, but when we account for the demographic situation in Poland, it can be seen as an opportunity to tap into the constantly growing labour market in the future – after all, it is mainly young women with children who arrive.

The most important task is, following the time that should be given to a child to “overcome” the experiences of fleeing war, to include them in the world of their peers and create the foundations of normality.

Parents/family are extremely important in the life of refugee children. They create their immediate environment and a sense of security and it is they who should be the starting point for building a new world for such children by engaging them in school life, decision-making processes, as well as social activities, and not only approaching them in crisis situations. After all, they are the ones who know their children best; their potential, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as ways of reaching them.

Similarly to migrant children, the model of educational adaptation of refugee children is of significant importance. Such children may be included in the Polish education system - but this requires an expansion of schools and the employment of more teachers, as discussed in the subsequent part of the article, or they should remain in the Ukrainian education system, e.g., in the form of distanced learning – which also requires some assistance, namely technical and in the form of accommodation and the supply of equipment.

Their inclusion in the Polish education system, promoted by Polish Minister of Education and Science Przemysław Czarnek, may occasion in the form of “normal” or “preparatory” classes. An individual education

programme, as practiced in some countries, is undoubtedly characterised by a more intense learning of the language of the host country, but also involves a lengthy separation of these children (usually 12–24 months) from their local peers. Therefore, an adequate assessment of the transition moment to joint classes seems indispensable as well as defining “bridges” connecting these children with the rest of the school during the transition period in order to prevent such isolation.

According to preliminary estimates, about 90% of enrolled Ukrainian students ended up in classes with Polish students, with the remaining 10% ending up in preparatory classes. Preparatory classes are where students follow the Polish core curriculum, but also learn Polish. Until recently, there could be up to 15 students in such classes. This number has lately increased to 25 persons.

Contrary to what Minister Czarnek says, Ukrainian students enrolled in Polish classes do not speak Polish. These are Ukrainian and Russian-speaking students, which constitutes a great challenge for the teachers conducting classes. How is one to communicate with a student who does not speak Polish? How does one work with a child who often does not want to be here? The former Minister of Education, Anna Zalewska, assured her audience in one of her interviews that approximately 12 thousand teachers already know Ukrainian or Russian. However, according to data from Statistics Poland (GUS), there are over half a million teachers in Poland. 4.5 million Polish students are covered by the education system. If you want to add even half of the 700,000-900,000 Ukrainian children to the system, these 12 thousand teachers would merely be sufficient for a large city, not the entire education system.

According to expert estimates, if 10,000 new children arrive in a city, 10 new schools and 500 new teachers should materialise so as to accommodate them.

According to a Union of Polish Metropolises (UMP) report, the following number of children have arrived in the following Polish metropolises:

Having analysed these numbers, the question arises regarding possible solutions to the problem. It is impossible to include a significant number of children in the existing school system, with a specific housing infrastructure and teaching staff, without increasing the size of the classes. In public discussions, however, claims as regards the deterioration of education quality for Polish children emerged. The leading voice belongs to the Minister of Education and Science, Przemysław Czarnek: “Multiplying challenges for the education system (...) is, to say the least, an irresponsible action. It will cause harm not only to Polish citizens who

Table 1. The Number of Children That Have Arrived in Polish Cities (Status as of 1st April 2022)

City	Number of Ukrainian children
Gdańsk	38,122
Katowice	18,998
Kraków	42,701
Lublin	16,866
Poznań	14,158
Rzeszów	30,802
Warsaw	63,259
Wrocław	42,090

Source: Report on Ukrainian refugees in Polish cities, Union of Polish Metropolises (UMP), <https://metropolie.pl/arttykul/raport-miejska-goscinnosc-wielki-wzrost-wyzwania-i-szansy>, status as on 1 April 2022.

have the right to quality education and refugee children faced with unfulfilled challenges, but also to the image of Poland as a country helping refugees fleeing a humanitarian catastrophe” (Paciewicz, 2022). The words of the former Minister of Education, Anna Zalewska, reverberate similarly: “Polish parents would not forgive us if we destroyed their children’s education system” (Suchecka, 2022). These voices in Polish society with xenophobic tendencies may intensify with time and with the increase of financial expenditures related to helping refugees.

As has already been highlighted hereinabove, one solution to the conundrum of educating Ukrainian children who have arrived in Poland since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine is their remote participation in classes conducted at first by schools in their country, then centrally by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education. The Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science launched a special platform on 14th March which enabled Ukrainian students to continue their education, participate in real-time lessons and use digital textbooks, films, and educational materials. This will allow a number of students to complete their education in line with their home education system in this academic year. To facilitate that, however, Poland is required to provide equipment, infrastructure, and technical support. In situations where education takes place only from home, it means no contact with peers, staying in accommodation of varying quality, and sometimes results in the inadvertent immersing of oneself in the war-related trauma of one’s homeland. Due to the circumstances, the majority of the refugee children have been forced to make use of remote education this school year in accordance with the Ukrainian curriculum (according to the Ministry of Education and Science estimates, this in-

volves as many as up to 500,000 children). It is vital that such solutions are only temporary and that the perspective for the future is brighter and well prepared.

Conclusions

Countries wherein large groups of refugees, including children, arrive face a number of challenges to avoid situations of conflict, aggression, and social exclusion in the future. The event that gives rise to a refugee exodus usually happens all of a sudden and finds governments mostly unprepared and which struggle to cope with it. It is therefore crucial to effectively consult local governments, schools, parents and, without doubt, non-governmental organisations involved in helping and protecting human rights even in non-crisis conditions. Their activities, however, cannot be based solely on project funding, because, as emphasised before, this does not allow for the continuity of the undertaken integration activities, and thus significantly reduces their effectiveness. It is also in the interest of the educational authorities of host countries to establish educational paths that meet the individual needs of students and to support the teachers who encounter these “alien” students first.

What seems to be extremely important in the integration process of refugee children, and especially in their adapting to the new reality, even for a limited period of time, is to prevent long breaks in the educational process. Leaving home, interacting with peers, focusing attention on something other than the traumatic past left behind can play a vital role in a child’s life. It is difficult to learn, say, maths when, for instance, two weeks ago you were sitting in a Kharkiv shelter during the shelling of the city.

It would be by all means extremely desirable to provide children with psychological counselling, but the situation in Poland in this respect is alarming even for Polish children, and the isolation caused by COVID-19 has significantly exacerbated it in recent years. Nowadays, the problem is even greater since several hundred thousand people with traumatic experiences have come to Poland. War trauma may lead to isolation, withdrawal, apathy, along with frustration and aggressive behaviour. The Ministry of Education and Science strongly emphasises that psychological and pedagogical help should be provided, but these are merely declarations. Without actioned financial and professional support, it will never take a tangible form.

In crisis situations, just like the one in Poland following the influx of a large number of refugees, it is vital to work with society. People who have

direct contact with refugees (officials, teachers, schoolchildren, and local communities) should receive particular support and accelerated training in multicultural education and tolerance for “aliens”. This problem was neglected in the social consciousness, because there were allegedly no “aliens” in Poland and we did not want there to be. The media can play a crucial role here, provided that the channels and content of the message are set up correctly.

The challenges related to the influx of refugees raise questions regarding the need for systemic solutions, since no one is capable of assessing the course of future events.

Is there a lack of a top-down regulatory system in terms of education? It seems that what is actually missing is the exact opposite. Now it is time for the Ministry of Education and Science (MEiN) to withdraw from any attempts to centrally control and counteract various problems. What is required is a clear and precise legal framework and financial support established in collaboration with experts. The best help is when it is provided quickly and on the ground there and then. It is also cheaper to do something at the rural or county level than to manage a crisis centrally.

No temporary measures should be taken in terms of education (similarly to areas such as housing or health care), because such makeshift solutions last the longest and are difficult to eradicate. Additionally, some refugee children and their parents will stay in Poland and will therefore remain in public systems.

The inclusion of migrants/refugees in the decision-making and advisory processes related to them is essential and extremely helpful in the integration processes. This allows for a better and more prompt diagnosis of problems, their comprehension, and the minimising of their negative consequences. This is especially pertinent in a situation when a city’s population increases by over a dozen percent. It will inevitably affect the labour market, apartment rental prices, and the quality and availability of services (public transport, care, educational and medical services). And this may cause aversion to newcomers and instigate social protests, even in Polish society that is extremely amicable, benevolent, and open today.

The head of the Ministry of Education, Przemysław Czarnek, says that he “is a born optimist” and believes that children from Ukraine will soon return to their homes. But faith will not solve all the problems. The MEiN is responsible for 4.5 million young Poles, and now it will have to extend this responsibility to an additional 700,000–900,000 Ukrainian children. According to the MEiN, 47 students from Ukraine have declared their willingness to take the Polish secondary school-leaving examination (the so-called “matura” exam), and 9,000 young people in Poland will take the

Ukrainian secondary school-leaving examination this summer. The exam will take place at six universities indicated by MEiN, and the Polish government co-finances its organisation. It is an unprecedented event in the history of Polish education, but it also addresses the needs of Ukrainian students. Seven thousand Ukrainian students have declared their willingness to take the eighth-grade exam (taken at the end of primary school) in Poland. They were provided with some benefits, including mathematics tasks translated into Ukrainian and extended time to complete the Polish language exam, which, however, sounds rather odd.

Conversations with our Ukrainian friends frequently revolve around a question whether we want to Polishise Ukrainian children, which echo historical Polish-Ukrainian animosities. One would demand/request that no burden is transferred to children and no demons are awoken, especially for the purpose of building political capital of dubious quality. Let us not create a fiction of parallel education, segregation, aversion, of pretence. Children of Polish migrants in Germany or Great Britain are included in the local education systems, provided with support when needed and are able to adapt to new conditions, provided we, as adults, do not complicate it and treat it as natural. It is crucial to ensure that Ukrainian children do not lose their cultural and national identity since it is their identity that will constitute their strength and create positive social attitudes also in the host society. Such institutions as Saturday schools, established by embassies, friendship societies, NGO's or churches should play a supporting role here. Integration is not assimilation.

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