SECURING THE UKRAINIAN CHILDREN'S REFUGEES´ RIGHT TO EDUCATION: MAIN BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT. *The full-scale invasion of Ukraine forced many children to flee their country and look for a safe harbour abroad. Once a safe shelter was found, the Ukrainian families looked for ways to secure their children's right to education. Although many efforts have been made to facilitate their access to this right, many barriers and challenges persist. On one side, the host countries' barriers, along with the Ukrainian family's decision to enrol in Ukrainian online learning platforms, jeopardise the children´s right to education and the quality of educational provision. Due to this, we argue that online education needs specific premises to be effective, and that is difficult to achieve in the conditions of Ukrainian refugee children and families, therefore, it should be combined with onsite education because the children's inclusion in educational systems offers more benefits, protection and gives them the knowledge and skills to live a productive, fulfilling and independent life in the future. We propose a holistic approach that combines both online and onsite schooling, along with targeted support and interventions, that can be most effective in meeting the diverse needs of refugee children and ensuring their access to quality education.*

Keywords: *refugees' children, online learning, right to education, Ukrainian refugees.*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2023. This same year, the thirtieth anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action [1] happened. The last reiterated the principle of "First Call for Children" and it underlined the importance of promoting respect for the child's rights to survival, protection, development, and participation, as well as the duty of states to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms, among which the right to education. In the same year (2023), the War in Ukraine marked one year since the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion, during which over 5.9 million refugees have crossed into neighbouring countries, in addition to those displaced inside the country [2]. This has presented European countries with particular refugee protection needs, including the inclusion of unprecedented numbers of children and youth into the national education systems of host countries.

Around nine out of ten refugees from Ukraine are women and children [2]. The displacement of children during the war in Ukraine amounted to more than 2 million Ukrainian children fleeing the country and displaced more than 1 million children inside Ukraine [3]. Currently, the largest populations of refugee children

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from Ukraine are in Poland, Germany and Czech Republic. Still, large numbers are also present in geographically further removed countries such as Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom[4]. The Czech Republic is under particular strain as it hosts one of the largest refugee populations from Ukraine in proportion to its overall population. Republic of Moldova hosts a proportionally similar refugee population but has far fewer resources to address the significant challenges. This major displacement of children in Europe was addressed by many governmental responses aimed to ensure that every refugee and internally displaced child could keep studying, stay healthy and develop to their full potential, and in this way, safeguarding the children's fundamental rights. Nevertheless, securing the educational rights of Ukrainian children refugees faces numerous barriers and challenges.

First, there are barriers to access to formal education in the host countries. Here, many factors, such as limited school capacity and administrative hurdles, impede Ukrainian children's refugee enrollment. Secondly, language barriers are a significant impediment to accessing education, while cultural adjustment issues also affect children's ability to engage effectively in the educational environment.

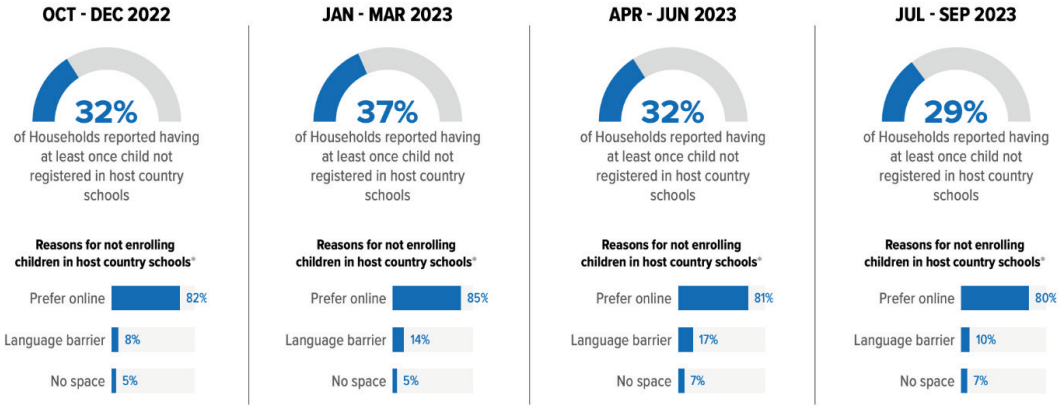
Secondly, both the COVID crisis and the following invasion of Ukraine disrupted the continuity of education of Ukrainian children, leading to gaps in their learning and educational attainment, which made their enrolment and performance in schools challenging.

Thirdly, the lack of documentation or recognition of their educational credentials from Ukraine, together with the traumas experienced due to conflict, displacement, and loss, is another barrier to education in many host countries. As UNHCR reports show, some Ukrainian refugee children have specific educational needs, such as trauma support, language learning assistance, or special education services. However, host countries lack the specialised support services to adequately address these needs, which once again jeopardises their right to education.

Addressing these barriers and challenges requires a comprehensive approach that involves governments, humanitarian organisations, educators, and communities working together to ensure the educational rights and well-being of Ukrainian children's refugees are upheld.

The governmental responses to comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Refugee Convention and the proper realisation of the right to education for refugees' children encounter many challenges in many countries. Some reports from international organisations support the accuracy of this statement. For example, the last UNHCR report [5], exploring the trends related to refugees' access to rights in four countries (Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia), showcases many problems and, as a result, a low rate of refugee children´s schooling. The report argues that the share of households reporting at least one child of school age not enrolled in host country schools remained within the 29-37% range (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Access to education



Source: *UNHCR. 2023. Displacement patterns, protection risks and needs of refugees from Ukraine. Regional Protection Analysis #3. Trends analysis: Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.p.15.*

At the country level, at the end of 2023, according to the Ministry of Education from Romania, nearly 72 per cent of children holding temporary protection were registered with Romanian schools in early years education and care services. However, only 28 per cent of school-aged children had acquired full pupil status, while the rest remained mainly with the transitioning status of audients, per Romanian legislation. Only 40 per cent of school-aged refugee children report attending Romanian schools[6]. However, Romania witnessed a sharp decline in the percentage of households that reported having children not enrolled in local schools. During the third quarter of 2023, 39 per cent of households in Romania reported having at least one child not registered in local schools, a marked decline from 70 per cent recorded in quarter four of 2022. This decline may be associated with the new government assistance program, which made enrolling children in Romanian schools one of the eligibility criteria for receiving assistance [5].

In Moldova, to facilitate access to education, the school enrollment procedures were simplified by the Ministry of Education and Research (MER). Revised instructions on enrolment procedures clarified that Ukrainian children, as well as other children from war-torn countries, can enrol in Moldovan schools regardless of their legal status. Similar to Romania, and despite ongoing efforts to increase school enrollment, the rate of Ukrainian children enrolled in Moldovan schools still needs to be improved (currently being just 5 per cent in total). Primary reasons for this include parental preference for the Ukrainian online curriculum and language barriers. Although many children are engaged in online learning, there needs to be a system to track their attendance or learning outcomes [6], which raises many questions about the quality of education.

The low rates of enrolment of refugee children characterise Slovakia as well. Here, advocacy and communication efforts were implemented to foster the inclusion

of refugee children in the national education programmes, resulting in over 12,000 children being enrolled in formal education. In comparison, some 20,000 children were supported in participating in non-formal education programmes. At the same time, the insufficient number of schools and kindergartens affects school enrollment, which consequently affects the ability of parents to work because they cannot leave their children unattended. In particular, youth programming is an area that needs to be addressed by stakeholders, which is crucial to social cohesion and shifting attitudes towards refugees [5].

The Multi-Sectorial Needs Assessment in Poland [7] revealed that 82 per cent of households reported unmet needs. Many refugee children still need to attend Polish schools, with low enrollment persisting in 2023, likely due to participation in online classes in Ukraine. A September 2023 report from Save the Children and IMPACT [8] initiatives emphasised children's need for better access to extracurricular activities, especially sports, and increased leisure time. While psychosocial concerns negatively affected both children and caregivers, only a few stakeholders sought mental health and psychosocial services in Poland [6].

Therefore, according to the UNHCR[5] report, in all countries and across all reporting periods, there are low schooling rates for Ukrainian refugee children. The primary reason for not registering children in host country schools is the preference to continue online learning through the Ukrainian curriculum (80 per cent during the third quarter of 2023) most probably considering the possibility of return, and using the All-Ukrainian Online School [9], or other remote learning tools made available by teachers and schools [10].

This considerable number of refugees studying online raises essential questions about the quality of education and the effects of online education on children's development and well-being. Some of them come already from complicated backgrounds, combining internal displacement since 2014, the COVID pandemic lockdown, internal displacement and fleeing Ukraine since February 2022, and that has exposed many of them to severe, complex and multi-layered risks related to their education[2]. These multiple traumas are challenging to address in online environments, due to which both mental health and psychological services and in-person activities are necessary for the hosting countries to address them. In addition, Ukrainian teachers might be displaced or refugees themselves, thus needing assistance, which could affect their teaching performance and education quality.

Apart from the personal psychological well-being of both learner and teacher, for a child to effectively engage in online education and benefit from it, several prerequisites must be put in place to ensure a qualitative learning experience, such as:

Access to Technology: Children need a reliable internet connection and appropriate devices to participate in online education. The devices should meet minimum technical requirements to run the educational software and access digital learning materials.

Skills: Children should possess *basic digital* literacy skills to navigate online platforms, use digital tools, and interact with educational content effectively. Children must develop *time management* skills to organise their schedules, allocate time for different learning activities, and balance online learning with other responsibilities and activities. Children should be *motivated and self-disciplined* to stay focused, engaged, and proactive in their online learning journey. They need to understand the value of education, set their goals, and take responsibility for their learning progress and success. *Effective communication* skills are essential for children to interact with teachers, peers, and other stakeholders in the online learning environment. Children should possess critical *reading and writing* skills to comprehend instructional materials, follow written instructions, complete assignments, and communicate effectively in written form.

Support and Supervision: Parental support and supervision are crucial in facilitating children's online education. Parents should actively guide, monitor, and support their children's learning activities, especially for younger learners or those who require assistance.

Learning Environment: Children should have access to a conducive learning environment to focus, concentrate, and engage in learning activities without distractions.

Tools: Children should have access to and feel comfortable using online learning tools and platforms to access educational content, participate in interactive activities, and communicate with teachers and peers.

Educational Resources: Schools and institutions should provide adequate support, resources, and infrastructure to facilitate children's online education. This may include access to learning management systems, digital libraries, educational software, and technical support services.

By meeting all these prerequisites, children can engage in online education and benefit best from the learning opportunities provided. Nevertheless, more information is needed about children's schooling experiences in online learning through the Ukrainian curriculum and if and how many of the above prerequisites are in place. There are probably shortages and access problems; teaching in wartime and under constant stress might have a substantial mark on the quality of education provided, which, taken altogether, will have a long-term negative impact on the child.

Specifically, because of this, the learning through the Ukrainian curriculum needs to be combined with the host countries´ in-person schooling. Overall, both online and onsite schooling can benefit refugee children, and the effectiveness of each approach depends on various factors such as access to resources, support services, cultural sensitivity, and the quality of education provided. However, considering the current situation of Ukrainian refugee children, we propose a holistic approach that combines both online (in case Ukrainian parents wish their children to continue with their home education system) and onsite schooling, along with targeted support and

interventions, that can be most effective in meeting the diverse needs of refugee children and ensuring their access to quality education.

The host country's schooling can positively address the main pitfalls of online education, such as:

- Barriers related to the digital divide, including limited access to technology, internet connectivity, and digital literacy skills;
- Social isolation and lack of opportunities for social interaction, peer collaboration, and cultural exchange;
- The quality of online education and refugee children's access to high-quality instructional materials, qualified teachers, or adequate support services;
- Heavy parental involvement and support to navigate online schooling places additional burdens on already overstretched refugee families.

In addition to the pitfalls, the onsite education for refugee children is important because it brings many benefits, such as:

Socialisation and Integration: Onsite schooling provides Ukrainian refugee children opportunities for socialisation, peer interaction, and cultural integration, helping them develop friendships, language skills, and a sense of belonging in their new communities.

Structured Learning Environment: Onsite schooling offers a structured learning environment with face-to-face interaction between teachers and students, providing opportunities for real-time feedback, support, and guidance.

Cultural Exchange and Diversity: Onsite schooling fosters cultural exchange, diversity, and mutual understanding among refugee children and their local peers, enriching the learning experience and promoting intercultural dialogue and cooperation.

Access to Support Services: Onsite schools can offer support services such as counselling, language support, special education, and healthcare, which can address the diverse needs and challenges faced by refugee children and their families.

Community Engagement: Onsite schooling can facilitate engagement with the local community, including participation in extracurricular activities, community service projects, and cultural events, which can promote social inclusion and civic participation among refugee children.

Thus, we can conclude that it is paramount to address the access barriers and challenges refugees face and secure the children´s right to education. Face-to-face classes can address this and can help refugee children properly integrate into host societies and build stronger bonds with locals.

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