UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Slovakia

Summary Analysis of Focus Group Discussions with Refugees on Education

Bratislava, Slovakia
March 2024

Cover photo: Bratislava, Slovakia. DAFI scholar at Bratislava's National Gallery, participating in educational activities, acknowledging the role of art in fostering cultural enrichment, critical thinking, and creativity. This visit aligns with the mission of UNHCR's DAFI programme to empower refugee students on their academic journey.
© UNHCR/Martina Matejova

Introduction

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with refugees constitute an essential tool for shaping UNHCR and partners' protection and inclusion programmes, as well as the advocacy work with national institutions. FGDs allow for a direct dialogue between protection actors and refugees. By shedding light on refugees' perspectives through FGDs, UNHCR promotes an environment of trust and accountability. With this engagement, UNHCR not only elevates the efficiency of its assistance and support programmes, but also ensures a greater resonance with refugees themselves.

As part of UNHCR's country-wide efforts to enhance local integration, assist the Government in crisis management, and engage people forced to flee in a meaningful way in all processes and decisions that affect them, UNHCR together with partners conducted a series of FGDs throughout Slovakia in 2022 and 2023.

Their main objectives were:

- To gain an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the situation of the people forced to flee who received protection in Slovakia;
- To ensure the involvement of people forced to flee and mainstream their needs, priorities and recommendations into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programmes and activities;
- To identify protection risks and challenges to assist persons in vulnerable situations.

This analysis aims at harnessing the power of collaborative dialogue and at ensuring the intentions, needs and challenges of refugee families related to school enrolment and access to educational opportunities in Slovakia inform interventions and advocacy work in the field of education.

Context

Between 24 February 2022 and 29 February 2024, over 2,1 million people crossed the border from Ukraine to Slovakia. As of 29 February 2024, a total of 139,633 individuals fleeing Ukraine had applied for Temporary Protection (TP) in Slovakia, with children (aged 0 to 17 years) representing around one third of the population. As TP beneficiaries, refugees from Ukraine have been able to access healthcare, food, education, accommodation, as well as the Slovak labour market.

A signatory State to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol in February 1993, Slovakia responded with generosity and solidarity to its largest-ever refugee arrival. As of March 2022, the Government had opened five large-capacity reception and transit centers, where police was registering Ukrainian refugees for TP status and where the state and NGOs were providing basic services. Ukrainian refugees were referred to and hosted in collective or private accommodations. In various locations, local authorities, communities as well as humanitarian organizations opened several community centers where Ukrainian refugees could reach out for information and humanitarian aid.

UNHCR responded to the emergency and established a National Office in Bratislava and a Field Office in Košice. UNHCR introduced the Refugee Coordination Model, and actively engaged with the Slovak Government in coordinating humanitarian actors via the Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF) for the humanitarian response and issues related to integration. UNHCR and its partners have been providing information on available rights and services to Ukrainian refugees and have been working to support refugees in accessing their rights and identifying those with vulnerabilities for referral to specialized services. The initial emergency situation in 2022 has evolved in 2023 toward a situation characterized by the importance of inclusion of refugees in the national public services and their socioeconomic inclusion into the host society.

Slovak authorities responded quickly to address the educational needs of refugee children from Ukraine. The Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth (MoE) issued guidance to school heads and local authorities to enable Ukrainian children to attend school. During the academic year 2022/2023, around 10,500 refugee children from Ukraine were enrolled in Slovak schools, while between 5,000 and 8,000 were estimated to be out of the Slovak school system. As of December 2023, the number of enrolled children had increased to over 11,800.[1] In line with UNHCR's global education strategy, Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education (Refugee Education 2030), UNHCR advocates for the equitable and sustainable inclusion of refugee children into the Slovak education system, and for the introduction of legislative changes that will make school attendance in Slovakia explicitly compulsory for all refugee children, including TP beneficiaries.[2]

[1] See official data from the Slovak MoE: https://ukrajina.minedu.sk/vseobecne-informacie/

[2] School attendance in Slovakia is governed by Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Training (School Act), which stipulates that children of foreigners with a residence permit in the territory of the Slovak Republic and asylum-seeking children are entitled to education under the same conditions as citizens of the Slovak Republic, for whom school attendance is compulsory between the age of 6 and 16 years. While all refugee children are legally entitled to equal rights in access to education, the current interpretation of the law by the MoE considers that children who are TP beneficiaries are not subject to compulsory school attendance, which has strongly impacted their enrolment. UNHCR advocates for the introduction of legislative changes that will make school attendance explicitly compulsory for all refugee children, including TP beneficiaries, which will help resolve inconsistencies in the interpretation. The Slovak MoE has announced that upcoming legislative changes would make school attendance for children under TP status compulsory from the academic year 2024/2025 onwards.

Methodology

This report summarizes education-related findings from 22 FGDs that were conducted with 179 Ukrainian refugees (77 males and 102 females), with children aged 5 to 17 years being included in half of the sessions. The FGDs also included persons with disabilities, as well as older persons aged 65 to 73 years. Sessions took place between March 2022 and October 2023 in various regions across Slovakia (Banská Bystrica, Bratislava, Košice, Nitra, Prešov, Trenčín, Trnava).

Throughout the discussions, participants made several proactive proposals to identify solutions to many of the challenges and difficulties raised. The suggestions made by participants have informed the recommendations that have been included at the end of this report.

The main education-related topics discussed during the FGDs were the following:

	• In-presence vs. online schooling
	• Slovak language barrier
	• Financial difficulties
	• School capacities
	• Access to information on educational options
	• Extracurricular activities

Bratislava, Slovakia. A chess tournament is organized as part of educational activities for Ukrainian refugee children by UNHCR-funded partner SME SPOLU in their community center in Bratislava. ©UNHCR/Zsolt Balla

Limitations

During the FGDs, opinions were expressed in both a subjective and objective manner. Personally identifiable information was either removed or anonymized to protect the privacy of the participants.

The qualitative nature of the information collected through FGDs means that they may not provide statistically representative data for the entire Ukrainian refugee population. It also appears that some issues that have been recognized as major education-related protection issues (e.g. school bullying) were not explicitly raised by the participants of the FGDs from which information was extracted for this report. It is thus crucial to keep in mind that while FGDs provide in-depth and unique opportunities for dialogue between refugees and protection actors, they should be complemented with other methodologies to ensure a comprehensive analysis and understanding of the issues discussed, and the recommendations made.

Main findings

The below education-related findings are based on the information that was shared by refugees who participated in the FGDs.

In-presence vs. online schooling

While a significant number of parents reported that they had enrolled their children in Slovak schools, others stated that they preferred their children to follow only online lessons through the tools developed by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education, mainly because they viewed their stay abroad as temporary and did not see the need to enroll their children in the Slovak education system. In some cases, children were attending both in-presence learning in a Slovak school and Ukrainian online lessons, as their parents opted for in-person schooling to allow their children to socialize and integrate in the Slovak society, while also wanting to prepare for a return to Ukraine should conditions improve.

Families with children attending Ukrainian online education pointed out the lack of appropriate infrastructure to follow the online classes in the accommodation facilities in which they were residing. Combining both in-person and online schooling often appeared to be challenging and stressful for both children and parents. For children, having to juggle between Slovak and Ukrainian schooling and the related workloads had a negative impact on their mental health and physical well-being, as they were having limited time for social interaction, leisure time and rest. Some parents shared that they had decided that their children would stop attending Ukrainian online classes during the academic year 2023/2024 and would attend only in-person Slovak classes.

Slovak language barrier

The language barrier was mentioned by FGD participants as the main obstacle in accessing educational opportunities in Slovakia. Refugee parents frequently experienced difficulties related to the language barrier when trying to enroll their children in Slovak kindergartens and schools. Students also faced language-related difficulties when enrolling in universities, with some of them pointing out that they had to take entry examinations in Slovak, which proved very challenging.

Many parents declared that they had been hesitant to enroll their children in a Slovak school, as they were hoping to return to Ukraine soon, thus not deeming it necessary to enroll their children in a school in a different country, with a different language and education system. Some parents shared that they did not enroll their children because they feared the language barrier would be too challenging and would make it very difficult for their children to follow lessons and interact with their peers. Some children mentioned that they did not want to learn Slovak and expressed their wish to return to Ukraine.

A number of parents reported that once enrolled in school, their children made rapid progress in language acquisition and managed to adapt relatively quickly thanks to language classes, as well as the support they received from teachers and classmates.

Adult refugees who expressed interest in learning Slovak often reported having encountered difficulties due to the Slovak Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family's policy providing access to Slovak language courses only to those who were unemployed. Many participants declared that they were not aware of vocational and digital skills training opportunities.

Financial difficulties

Throughout the discussions that took place, it appeared that rising inflation and financial difficulties often forced parents to prioritize access to food, healthcare, accommodation, employment or material assistance over the enrolment of their children in a Slovak school. Some parents highlighted that they were not able to cover education-related costs (transportation, school supplies, sport items, etc.). Parents also frequently mentioned that they could not afford to enroll their children in extracurricular activities.

A significant number of parents pointed out the high cost of private nurseries (for children up to the age of three), leading to many of them, especially single mothers, not being able to enroll their children, which negatively impacted their ability to work and pursue livelihood opportunities. Some parents and guardians nevertheless shared that they managed to create a rotating system to be able to take care of each other's children while parents were working.

School capacities

Capacity constraints, especially in nurseries and kindergartens, were mentioned in some cases as a major barrier that had prevented parents from enrolling their children, especially in Bratislava. Moreover, it was often mentioned that kindergartens were closing during the summer months, adding an additional burden on working parents, especially single mothers, and affecting their ability to support their families financially throughout the year.

While in urban areas physical access to schools was generally not mentioned as an issue, in some remote locations, especially in Banská Bystrica and Trenčín regions, physical access to available schools was highlighted as a challenge, and children had to commute very long distances. In some cases, parents shared that there were no public transportation options available to go to school.

Parents of children with disabilities mentioned major difficulties in finding appropriate or inclusive schools, which impacted both the children's well-being and their parents' ability to work or attend professional training, as they were unable to leave their children alone.

Bratislava, Slovakia. A refugee girl from Ukraine participates in a creative workshop as part of artistic activities for children organized by UNHCR-funded partner SME SPOLU in their community center in Bratislava. © UNHCR/Zsolt Balla

Access to information on educational options

Parents pointed out the lack of available information about educational options, especially at secondary and tertiary education levels. FGD participants indicated that information was often available in a scattered manner and not well disseminated within their communities. High school graduates highlighted the fact that the lack of comprehensive information about higher education options and complex online systems were hindering their ability to make informed choices about their future, thus having a negative impact on their career prospects.

Extra-curricular activities

Some parents shared that their children were attending extra-curricular activities, which were being organized in schools, public facilities or community centres, and highlighted how important these activities were for the well-being of their children and their integration into the host community. Some of the children who participated in the FGDs also expressed their joy about participating in leisure activities with other Ukrainian children.

Other parents mentioned that they could not afford enrolling their children in after-school activities, as most proposed activities were costly, thus limiting children's opportunities to pursue personal interests, develop additional skills and socialize with their peers. Some parents also pointed out that there were not enough activities available for all age groups, and not enough safe play spaces and playgrounds, leading to some children and youth, especially those aged between 13 and 17 years, becoming more and more idle and dependent on digital devices.

Conclusion

While there seemed to be an understanding among FGD participants that they would likely stay in Slovakia longer than they had initially planned, many of them seemed to experience difficulties in adjusting and integrating in their host community. Parents often seemed rather reserved towards the integration of their children in national schools and shared their hesitancy to enroll their children in the Slovak education system. The expectation to be able to return to Ukraine soon, language barriers, financial difficulties, capacity constraints in schools, and a lack of information about enrolment procedures and educational options, were among the most commonly mentioned factors that affected parents' decisions.

For many refugee children, postponing enrolment in the national school system will likely diminish their prospects for inclusion and integration in the long term.

Sustained periods in online education may also lead to increased social isolation, mental health issues and learning difficulties, as school attendance frequently fulfills vital social and emotional needs that contribute to the overall well-being of children. For primary school-age children, being out of school or remaining in lower-quality forms of online education for extended periods of time will likely lead to significant learning losses and, eventually, lower enrolment in secondary and higher education. Children and youth not attending school are also more likely to be exposed to exploitation, gender-based violence, harmful coping mechanisms and other risks associated with being out of school.

Effective solutions need to be put in place in order to strengthen the national education system towards the highest degree possible of inclusion of refugee children and youth.

Implemented measures should not only aim at increasing school capacities, but also at addressing the specific needs of refugee learners, allowing them to adapt to the new school environment, catch up on missed schooling, and succeed in their education. Non-formal and community-based education programmes and initiatives, including those led by refugee-led organizations, need to be supported, in order to enhance the quality of education for refugee learners, and, whenever possible, help them access the national education system.

During the FGDs, refugee participants shared various proposals on how access to, and quality of, education for Ukrainian children and youth in Slovakia could be improved. Strengthened cooperation between key stakeholders, including the Slovak MoE, authorities at national, regional and local levels, schools and educational institutions, UN agencies, NGOs and community-based organizations, private companies, Slovak host community members, as well as Ukrainian refugees themselves, appears as one of the key elements in the design and implementation of effective and sustainable solutions. The suggestions shared by FGD participants have informed the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Increase **school capacities** to be able to guarantee places for all refugee children in their areas of residence, and, if necessary, provide additional **transportation options** for children to commute to school;

Increase **nursery and kindergarten capacities** to accommodate more refugee children, thus allowing parents, especially single mothers, to find employment;

Improve **infrastructure in schools** to accommodate additional children, for example by making available additional classrooms and teaching materials, as well as improving internet connectivity and access to digital devices;

Implement **support measures to decrease the financial burden** of education-related costs on the most vulnerable refugee families, for example through cash assistance programmes or provision of school supplies;

Implement **programmes that specifically target the needs of refugee learners**, help them adapt to the new school environment and catch up on missed schooling, for example through preparatory classes, bridging programmes and homework support classes;

Advocate for the implementation of **support measures by higher education institutions** aiming at facilitating the enrolment of refugee students, for example through fee waivers or preparatory programmes;

Reinforce **age-appropriate language support programmes in all schools and universities** with refugee learners;

Reinforce **language support programmes for adults** so that parents can contribute to boost their children's language acquisition and development;

Strengthen **anti-discrimination and anti-bullying programmes** in schools and universities;

Implement **concrete measures aiming at addressing the challenges faced by refugee learners with special needs**, and at facilitating their enrolment in schools, for example through individualized support provided by a teaching assistant and access to appropriate learning materials;

Support **non-formal and community-based initiatives** aiming at providing educational opportunities to refugee learners and/or at facilitating their inclusion in national schools;

Strengthen **psychosocial support services** and **peer support programmes** in schools and universities;

Recruit **additional teachers and teaching assistants**, including from the refugee community, to be able to provide targeted support to refugee learners in schools;

Organize **trainings and capacity-building initiatives for educational staff** on issues related to the practical inclusion of refugee learners in national schools;

Ensure **updated information about enrolment and educational options** is available and disseminated widely among refugee parents, children and youth;

Organize **awareness-raising campaigns** aiming at encouraging refugee families to enroll their children in national schools.

UNHCR National Office in Slovakia
Palisády 29/A
811 06 Bratislava, Slovakia

www.unhcr.org/sk/
Telegram channel: t.me/unhcr_slovakia
Facebook: @UNHCRSlovensko
Twitter: @RefugeesCE
Help page: help.unhcr.org/slovakia/

Contact

Executive Office:
svkbr@unhcr.org

Protection team:
svkbrprot@unhcr.org