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Education Needs Assessment for Refugee Children and Children with Special Educational Needs in the Transnistrian Region of the Republic of Moldova.

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Abstract

This qualitative assessment, undertaken by UNICEF Moldova and Speranta 87 Moldova, investigates the educational needs of Ukrainian refugee children and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the Transnistrian Region (hereinafter "the region"). Amidst limited regional data, this study fills an information gap regarding educational access and service quality for these vulnerable groups. The analysis is based on the qualitative data collected through interviews with teachers, parents, specialists, and refugee adolescents (overall sixty respondents) to capture a holistic understanding of their experiences and challenges.

The study confirms the accessibility of educational institutions in the region to Ukrainian refugees but identifies impediments to their holistic development. Language barriers, even limited, compounded by the psychological impact of displacement and financial strain, put hurdles in academic progress and restrict access to crucial resources. Single-mother refugee families are disproportionately exposed to these challenges, struggling with low incomes and diminished support networks. Social integration among peers in the region has been a positive experience for Ukrainian refugee adolescents.

Children with SEN encounter systemic challenges. The current educational approach for children with disabilities is less focused on inclusion, as children with SEN are often placed in separate special schools with limited interaction with children without SEN.

The preparedness of the educational institutions is uneven towards different SEN. Physical and sensory disabilities are reasonably well-attended despite an identified lack of adequate resources, but cognitive disabilities like Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are often misdiagnosed or come late due to limited local expertise and societal stigma. There is also a parental denial of SEN related to cognitive disabilities diagnosis, which further exacerbates the difficulties these children face. Furthermore, the special education faces challenges with underqualified staff, limited resources, and insufficient individualized educational approaches, particularly for children with ASD. Additionally, the lack of sports clubs accommodating children with ASD hinders their ability to release energy. Limited vocational training opportunities and societal biases further restrict prospects for future independence and integration in society.

The study highlights the need for accessible ICT equipment, enhanced English language teaching, and expanding extracurricular activities for Ukrainian refugee children. Critical recommendations for children with SEN include public awareness campaigns to combat stigma, building robust support networks for parents, and providing educators with specialized training. Furthermore, children with SEN and their families lack a unified advocacy voice.

The* Education Needs Assessment for Refugee Children and Children with Special Educational Needs in the Transnistrian Region of the Republic of Moldova *was developed by UNICEF in partnership with Speranta 87 Moldova, with the financial support from the European Union through ECHO.

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1.Introduction

a. Scope of the Study:

Since the start of the war in Ukraine in early 2022, Moldova, including the Transnistrian Region, has been experiencing a high influx of refugees. As reported by the General Inspectorate for Migration of Moldova (IGM), 73,069 Ukrainian refugees had been granted Temporary Protection (TP)[1] in Moldova as of May 2025. Over 5,600 refugees[1] (or more according to several sources) have obtained Permanent Residency in the Transnistrian Region.

Historically, the region has grappled with economic challenges and limited access to social services, which are now further strained by the growing refugee population. Many of these refugees are children who face a unique set of challenges, from adapting to a new environment to coping with the psychological impacts of displacement. Access to education is crucial for these children—not only for their intellectual development but also for providing stability and fostering well-being.

The educational landscape in the Transnistrian Region presents significant obstacles for refugee children. Schools often lack the resources, infrastructure, and trained personnel needed to address the specific needs of these children. The situation is even more challenging for children with special educational needs, who require tailored support and specialized resources to succeed. Many of the Transnistrian schools currently have limited capacity to provide the necessary accommodation, leading to gaps in inclusion and accessibility.

Currently, there are limited assessments available to provide a clear understanding of children's access to and the quality of services in the region, particularly regarding education. To address this information gap and identify specific needs, UNICEF Moldova, in collaboration with Speranta 87 Moldova, conducted a qualitative assessment of the educational needs of refugee children and children with SEN in the region. The findings will guide UNICEF and its partners in designing targeted interventions to promote the inclusion and well-being of these children within education. At the same time, it was essential to understand how a child interacts with the school/education institution and the external family and social factors affecting children's education. For this purpose, the team conducted interviews with parents and teachers of these children, as well as with experts and social workers.

b. Methodology:

The study methodology is based on the Terms of Reference and comprises three main phases:

1. Preparatory Phase – desk research and development of interview guides.

2. Interview and Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) Phase – recruitment of interviewees and conducting the interviews and FGDs.

3. Analysis Phase – transcription and analysis of interview data.

1. Preparatory Phase

[1] Source: Republic of Moldova: Population Trends

The preparatory phase aimed to collect all available information regarding access to education for Ukrainian refugee children and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) residing in the region. Desk research conducted during this phase enabled the formulation of key hypotheses, which were further explored in the interview phase. Interest was in the study of demographics and policies that are implemented by various actors towards the target groups of the study.

Sources consulted included:

- Reports by international organizations such as IOM and UNHCR.
- Documentation from the Ministry of Education and Research in the Republic of Moldova.
- Administrative documents issued by the de facto authorities on the Left Bank of the Nistru River.
- Relevant press articles.

Based on the insights from this desk research and the hypothesis that were elaborated, the project team developed 10 interview guides (attached to the report) tailored to 10 distinct target groups (described below). These guides were initially drafted by Speranța 87 and then reviewed, enriched, and approved by UNICEF.

Before starting the data collection, UNICEF also provided specialized training on ethical standards, with particular emphasis on interviews involving adolescents. For all interviews with Ukrainian adolescents, informed consent was obtained in accordance with UNICEF ethical protocols.

- **Interview and FGDs breakdown (total 60, including 59 recorded):**

2. FGDs and Interviews Phase (February – March 2025)

Children with Special Educational Needs – 30 interviews

1. Specialists (representatives of de-facto structures from the Left Bank of the Nistru River) – 4
2. Parents of children with SEN – 14
3. Teachers from general and special schools – 12

Ukrainian refugee children – 30 interviews

1. Experts (Representatives of NGO working with refugees and Representatives of de-facto structures from the Left Bank of the Nistru River) – 6
2. Parents of Ukrainian children enrolled in schools – 11[2]
3. Teachers who have Ukrainian refugees in their classes – 9
4. Ukrainian adolescents attending schools – 4

A total of 60 face-to-face interviews and FGDs were conducted, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Of these, 30 interviews focused on access to education for children with SEN, while the remaining 30 addressed the experiences of Ukrainian refugee children living on the Left Bank of the Nistru River.

Special attention was given to the FGDs conducted with Ukrainian adolescents (two girls and two boys, age between 14 and 17 years old). The FGDs were designed as open conversations to allow participants to express themselves freely and to uncover insights that may not have been anticipated during the development of the guides.

[2] One of the interviewed Ukrainian parents has a child with SEN

Interviewees were selected to provide a comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of the issues. The following groups were consulted:

- Parents and children, to capture personal stories and experiences related not only to education but also to other factors affecting educational outcomes.
- Specialists, such as representatives of de facto structures from the left bank of the Nistru River and NGO representatives working with Ukrainian refugees, as well as psychologists and professionals engaged with children with SEN. They provided more insights into the organization of the educational process for the target groups, and the main associated challenges.
- Teachers, from both general and special schools, provide insights into inclusive education practices and hands-on experience of working with refugee children or children with SEN.

The holistic picture that the team could gather by approaching various interviewees groups allowed to get a multi-dimensional understanding of the issue. At the end of the data collection, some conclusions were shared with the interviewees to allow them to see the diversity of opinions of different groups on the same topic.

Interview Conditions

All interviews were conducted in Russian and took place across various parts of the region to ensure representation from all districts (Tiraspol and Bender municipalities, Grigoriopol, Dubasari, Camenca, Ribnita and Slobozia districts). For each of the target groups the interviewers recruited people from different educational institutions or de facto official organizations to reflect a general picture of what is taking place in the region, and not to have a narrow sample concentrated only in one district. The interviews followed a single-blind format; interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, conducted by UNICEF. Confidentiality was ensured and no personal data disclosed.

Analysis Phase

All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. This process enabled each team member to access and analyze interviews beyond those in which they had personally participated. The transcripts also facilitated the extraction of direct quotes to support the qualitative analysis presented in the report. The conclusions for the analysis were based on the data obtained from all the interviews and FGDs.

Both the interim and final reports were submitted to the UNICEF for review, refinement, and validation. In June 2025, key results of the study were presented to UNICEF, Refugee Education Working Group partners and shared with interviewees for feedback.

- **Main challenges faced during the assessment:**

The interviews were conducted with individuals undergoing significant stress, requiring interviewers to maintain an empathetic and non-judgmental demeanor. Additionally, organizing and conducting the interviews posed significant challenges; since the interviews were voluntary (no incentives applied to boost response rate), the team faced numerous cancellations and rescheduling, contributing to delays in finalizing the assessment. Furthermore, the political situation and the energy crisis during the roll-out of the assessment in the region greatly affected people's willingness and availability to participate,

particularly among teachers and representatives of de facto structures from the Left Bank of the Nistru River.

c. Key Findings – Ukrainian Children:

- ***General overview***
  - 631 Ukrainian children under 18 years old are enrolled in educational institutions in the region. In the region, according to the regulations of local de facto authorities, all 158 schools accept children of Ukrainian citizens. Interviews showed that the refugees attend schools in the districts/localities where they reside, with an estimation that 60% are concentrated in the Bender and Tiraspol municipalities[3]. For example, in the Ukrainian lyceum of Tiraspol alone, about one-third of the students are refugees (50 children), which is roughly 8% of the total Ukrainian children studying in the region.
- ***Psychological and emotional state of refugee children and parents***
  - The psychological condition of Ukrainian refugees tends to stabilize over time, transitioning from initial sadness and anxiety to acceptance of their new reality.
  - Children generally integrate well into the local society, feeling welcomed by their peers and adapting easily to their new environment.
  - Many mothers are single-handedly managing family needs while actively engaging in their children's education, despite facing financial hardships and emotional challenges. However, most do not seek psychological help.
- ***Social support, employment possibilities, the financial situation of Ukrainian refugees, and the impact on the education of children***
  - Social and humanitarian assistance for Ukrainian refugees in the region tends to shrink over time.
  - Ukrainian refugees have the right to work in the region, and some are employed. However, salaries are low and barely cover additional expenses such as rent, especially since most husbands remain in Ukraine.
  - These financial limitations of the Ukrainian refugee parents adversely affect their ability to invest in their children's education and related activities.
- ***Access to education***
  - When enrolling their children, parents prioritize proximity of schools to their places of residence and, for some, opportunities to maintain education in the Ukrainian language in the region schools.

[3] Similar order of magnitude was observed in a qualitative study performed by IOM in 2023.

- There are no barriers to enrollment for Ukrainian refugee children in local schools; only basic documentation is required (ID, any certificate from a Ukrainian school, refugee registration status).
- Integration into local educational institutions is generally smooth, facilitated by Russian as the language of instruction, a similar mentality, and similarities with Ukrainian curricula.
- Ukrainian children residing in the region attend local schools in person. The study did not find any cases of 100% online education.
- Children prefer online education in Ukrainian schools in their final years (upper grades) of school education; this is done mainly to get an internationally recognized school diploma, which is not the case for the region.
- Ukrainian children in lower grades usually go only to in-person schools, as online schools constitute an additional burden.
- Ukrainian children enrolled in region's schools get the same educational materials as their local peers.

- ***Education process:***
  - By and large, Ukrainian refugee children did not face any significant issues with integration and feel welcomed by their peers in the region.
  - Ukrainian children face some difficulties at the beginning with the education in the Russian language, as, even if they can speak it, they may not be familiar with its grammar; these difficulties attenuate over time.
  - Ad-hoc catch-up classes are offered within the schools free of charge by the teachers to both local and Ukrainian children on par.
  - Region's schools offer poor teaching of the English language, a topic often raised by the Ukrainian refugees.
  - Due to families' poor financial conditions in the region, Ukrainian children may lack computers, hindering their potential for study, including online or hybrid education in Ukrainian schools.
- ***Extracurricular Activities:***
  - Access to public extracurricular programs is available on the same conditions to Ukrainian children as to the local children; however, financial constraints limit participation in additional activities that are not provided free of charge by the region's de facto public institutions.
- ***Future Outlook:***
  - The interviews showed that refugees wanted to return home to Ukraine but fear they will not have a home to return to.

- There is a strong desire for children to receive higher education at recognized institutions, with potential plans for enrollment in universities in the European Union and Russia.

d. Key findings - children with SEN:

Diagnosis of SEN:

- Early detection of physical and sensory disabilities, such as hearing and visual impairments, is adequately managed in the region. However, cognitive developmental delays, including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), are frequently overlooked due to a lack of awareness and training among local specialists and parents.
- The denial of parents when confronted with the diagnosis of a disability is also influenced by societal stereotypes against children with SEN, particularly those with cognitive impairments like ASD, who are often perceived as poorly educated due to challenging behaviors.
- Parents often experience denial regarding their child's condition, which further hampers advocacy for support and integration. Conversely, children with physical disabilities are more likely to receive solidarity and empathy from the community.

▪ *Organization of the educational process for children with SEN*

- There are nine special schools and kindergartens, and three centers for social and psychological rehabilitation for children with SEN in the region. The schools and kindergartens are present in every major city, covering the whole territory.
- These institutions offer boarding and catering for children with various disabilities and have transportation facilities, mainly used for specific occasions such as recreational field trips. Daily transportation to schools is limited, often leading families to prefer homeschooling to avoid using public transport with their children.

▪ *Enrollment for children with SEN*

- While a specialized commission provides recommendations regarding placement in special schools, the ultimate decision rests with the parents, who can choose between special, general, or homeschooling options.
- Homeschooling is considered when parents feel that special school does not meet their child's needs or if daily commuting is too challenging. In such cases, educators visit children at home three times a week, with medical specialists attending two times weekly, depending on the type of SEN.
- Enrollment in general schools for children with SEN is rare and depends on disability; the general schools are usually not equipped with the necessary

materials and equipment, and the teachers do not have the necessary skills to work with such children.

- ***Education process***
  - Teachers in special schools are trained primarily to work with children with physical disabilities, but there is a notable shortage of specialists for ASD and cognitive impairments. Some teachers pursue online training courses in Russia to improve their skills in supporting children with ASD, though these efforts are limited.
  - In principle, the curricula in special education schools are similar to those in general schools. Children with SEN assimilate in 10 years of school what children without SEN assimilate in 9 years. Specifically for children with cognitive impairments, each teacher further adapts the program to fit each child's abilities to assimilate information.
  - Extracurricular activities are generally offered in special schools and include physical and creative pursuits. However, children in homeschooling, particularly those with ASD, face difficulties accessing extracurricular activities due to a shortage of specialized coaches and art teachers in the region.
- ***Main needs overview for children with SEN***
  - The assessment identifies urgent needs for further qualifications of teachers working with children with SEN, especially for those dealing with ASD, vocational training for children with ASD, expert educational support, and devoted efforts for social behavioral changes for societal acceptance of children with SEN, especially with cognitive disabilities.
  - There is a need for material support in the form of adapted equipment for children with all types of SEN in schools to alleviate the disability of children in the educational process.
  - Parents express a desire for training on managing their children's unique needs. The establishment of sexual education programs tailored to children with ASD and cognitive delays and disabilities is also important.

2. Insights on the access to educational process for Ukrainian refugee children residing in the region:

a. Brief statistical overview:

According to administrative data there are 631 Ukrainian children under 18 years old residing in the region, out of which 453 Ukrainian children are enrolled in general educational institutions, and 178 children attend kindergartens. There is no exact data of Ukrainian refugees residing in the region, as there is a continuous movement back and forth of Ukrainians (to and from the region), which does not

allow for any precise numbers. The only information available states that 353,400 people have been registered at the border of the region from February 2022 to the present[4].

> *"Many refugees travel back and forth; they have simply obtained their status here. These are "nomadic" families. They acquired this status to be eligible for financial assistance provided to the entire family, which is why the children are also registered here and receive that status."*
>
> ***Director, NGO working with Ukrainian refugees***

The number of Ukrainians who have been residing in the region for at least a year and a half is around 8,000, with some sources indicating up to 11,000.

> *"The only official figures you can look at in the region are those who have received temporary protection status. Approximately 8,000, according to the estimates from our organization by the end of last (2024) year"*
>
> ***Director, NGO working with Ukrainian refugees.***

> *"Based on different indicators, it is possible to have an approximate number of refugees in the region. In my view, based on our daily activities with them, we consider that there are 10,000 to 11,000 individuals residing in the region who arrived after 2022."*
>
> ***Director, NGO working with Ukrainian refugees***

For a vast majority of Ukrainians (over 90%) entering the region is a transit location. That is, Ukrainian citizens did not plan to stay in the region but to travel to other countries (in the European Union, and to the USA or Canada), where better living conditions and assistance can be expected.

Ukrainian refugees who settled in the region mainly came from the Odessa region (70% according to the interviews), because of their family ties and because of the proximity with their home country. The other Ukrainians arrived from Kharkiv, Mariupol, Donetsk, and Kyiv.

Ukrainians chose the region because there is no language barrier, so they do not have to learn a new language. Russian is the native or near-native language for most, especially the adults. Only the children attending schools in the region have some difficulty transitioning from Ukrainian to Russian instruction in schools. In addition, interviewed refugees mentioned the mentality of the region's people as being similar to their own, which further facilitates the integration process.

The unrecognized status of this Administrative Territorial Unit of the Republic of Moldova results in more complicated conditions for Ukrainian citizens who seek support. Respondents stated that during the first two weeks of the war in Ukraine, there was no assistance whatsoever in the region, not even humanitarian aid. Many respondents noted difficulties obtaining financial assistance and that support was lower overall than what was available on the Right Bank of the Nistru River. In the region, Ukrainian citizens could receive humanitarian and psychosocial support through local NGOs. The frequently mentioned organizations included the "Women's Initiatives" non-profit Partnership Center for Social

[4]Source: Representatives of defacto structures from the Left Bank of the Nistru River.

and Psychological Innovations, "Resonance" NGO, "Interaction" NGO, the "Red Cross Society" (Bender branch), and the Charitable Foundation "Volunteer Movement *'We are Close'*."

b. Psychological and emotional state of refugee children and parents

▪ *The emotional burden of single motherhood*

Most refugee women and children in the region are without their husbands (fathers), and the women effectively find themselves in a single-mother status, juggling multiple social roles. Considering the emotional and psychological burden caused by the war, the forced displacement from their homes, and anxiety about their husbands, these women are in a challenging situation.

> *"The emotional state is something to reckon with. I'm thankful that I have relatives here; it's a breath of fresh air, as they say, to have someone to talk to. I have my cousin sister here, and we see each other almost every day. But there are times, periodically, when I feel overwhelmed. It isn't easy because my husband is out there (in Ukraine). "*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

> *"The difficulty is that we left our home. The difficulty is that my husband remained there. I crossed the border with my two children and three of our relatives. And all of this has fallen on my shoulders. The children found it emotionally and physically hard to adapt at the beginning. For about six months, it was very difficult for all of us. Now it's better"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

The interviews suggest that despite their difficult emotional situation, mothers actively engage in their children's school life: they attend parents' meetings, help children with their homework, and are interested in their further development.

The emotional and psychological state of the interviewed Ukrainian parents has shifted from active anxiety and a sense of waiting for the war to end to apathy. There is also the acknowledgement that even after the war, many will have nowhere to return to because their homes are destroyed. This understanding leads Ukrainians (especially the adults) into a state of frustration and confusion about what to do next and how to live. Despite this, the interviewed refugees do not ask for free psychological support and may believe that psychologists cannot help them.

> *"I didn't want psychological help; at that moment, I had a small child who was 10 months old, and my elder one was also still adapting. I understood that they needed help more than I did. We were surviving on our own,"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

> *"I didn't seek psychological help because I don't need it, although maybe I do, but I can't acknowledge it…,"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

- ***Emotional state of the children***

The interviews suggest that the children have better overcome the displacement and adapt to the new place than their parents. The state of the interviewed children upon arrival somehow varied between some sort of *sadness* or *feeling of being lost* for those who had never been to the region prior to the war, and *somehow difficult* for those who had relatives in the region and who had already travelled to the region prior to the war. None had received professional psychological help upon arrival and relied primarily on reassurances from relatives and parents. For three of the four interviewed adolescents, the social integration among peers in the region has greatly contributed to the improvement of their psychological state.

> *"Maybe it's sadness because I left my home country. That's probably it. Now I feel here like home, I have many friends in Bender, I like it here"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent living in the region***

> *"When I came here, I felt a bit lost, because moving from your own country is difficult. But in Ukraine, I had a social circle that was not good for me, so coming here was a relief to a certain extent as well. Now everything is good. My family and I are ok"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent living in the region***

> *"I felt very sad when we left Ukraine, I was ok there. Now, it's a neutral joy. I've got friends here"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent living in the region***

c. Social Support, employment possibilities, and financial situation of the parents, and impact of the education of children

Interviews showed concern that the financial support would further decrease, as it has been a substantial aid for the refugees.

> *"When we arrived here, we learned that payments were available for the refugees. The 2,200 MDL paid upon registration on the Right Bank of the Nistru River. I don't think there were any allowances in the region initially. After six months, they started distributing 200 euros. But we were deprived of 2,200 MDL in May 2024"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

> *"…we received financial assistance from the UN, and the medical-social programs helped with 200 Euros for the winter period… And they also offered additional 4,500 MDL for the winter period. Well, that's all. They helped with money twice for the winter period"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

Seven out of ten refugee respondents of the study are employed in the public sector. However, the salaries can barely cover their living expenses.

> *"Currently, I work at a music school. My salary is now a thousand rubles (70 USD), this is insufficient to cover all the expenses, let alone extra-curricular educational expenses for my child"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

The limited financial resources available to Ukrainian parents living in the region, combined from salaries and any humanitarian and social assistance, are insufficient to invest in any out-of-pocket expenses associated with the education process. While the wages of the Ukrainians employed in region are likely comparable to those of the local employees, the Ukrainians face extra costs such as rent, which the locals do not necessarily bear. Moreover, most Ukrainian households in the region are led by single mothers, meaning they rely on a single income. In contrast, families with two sources of income have a greater capacity to invest in education.

Ukrainians report that due to their financial difficulties, they struggle to acquire basic ICT equipment (such as computers and printers) necessary for the educational process and often cannot afford certain extracurricular activities (like English lessons, IT classes), when they must pay for out of pocket.

> *"I would like my child to attend some computer classes; after all, IT is modern, and everything is advancing. My child also attended robotics, and he really liked it, but honestly, it's quite expensive here. We couldn't afford it"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

Ukrainian refugee parents reported that as they cannot afford to buy a computer for their children, so they have to study using mobile phones, which is inconvenient and harmful for their eyesight. In some families, even if they have a laptop, it is a very basic model, which is also not always sufficient for efficient homework. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that many Ukrainian schoolchildren simultaneously study in Ukrainian schools online, which leads to excessive screen time on mobile phones that can adversely affect their health.

> *"Of course. He needs a computer. The child is growing and wants to watch something more educational. He has a phone, but it's old and works intermittently. He can't even check his homework in the electronic diary"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

Hence, the financial limitations facing the Ukrainian parents have a direct impact on their children's educational development and their ability to fully achieve their education potential.

d. Access to education:

▪ *Choice of schools*

When choosing schools in the region, the Ukrainian refugees primarily focus on their physical proximity, i.e. the school must be located as close as possible to their place of residence. This is what has mainly driven the choice for those enrolled in local schools.

> *"He (the child) is in a school with Russian as the language of instruction. We didn't send him to a Ukrainian lyceum because this (Russian language) school is closer to where we live. It would have been difficult for me to take him anywhere far to another school"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

There are no specific refugee-only classes in schools.

> *"There are no special classes for the refugees; everyone is enrolled in regular classes. They are integrated into regular classes in the schools"*
>
> ***Director, NGO working with Ukrainian refugees***

For some of the interviewed Ukrainian parents, an important reason for choosing the school is to preserve the Ukrainian language, but also because the previous teaching language was Ukrainian. These families plan to return to Ukraine after the war ends. Even if the Russian language was widely spoken, writing and reading proved to be more difficult for some of the children. This is why three of the interviewed parents chose, when they can and live nearby, the Republican Ukrainian Theoretical Lyceum-Complex (Tiraspol) and Ukrainian Gymnasium No. 3 named after A.P. Kotlyarevsky (Bender). These institutions teach in Ukrainian. Based on the interviews conducted at Ukrainian Gymnasium No. 3 named after A.P. Kotlyarevsky (Bender), around 45–50 Ukrainian refugees study in this school, which is one third of all students at this school.

> *"First of all, the language of instruction in our gymnasium is Ukrainian, their mother tongue. Some parents do not want their children to forget this language; they want them to continue their education in Ukrainian. Perhaps, often due to the expectation that sooner or later they will return to Ukraine, so they want to ensure that the language is preserved"*
>
> ***teacher, Ukrainian Gymnasium in Bender***

> *"We may return to Ukraine once the war is over, and we might even finish our education there. That's why, since we can study in Ukrainian here, we choose to do so"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

▪ *Barriers to accessing educational institutions*

The educational institutions in the Transnistrian Region Ukrainian children to be enrolled on similar conditions as the local students, and education is free in all public institutions. In the early days of the war in Ukraine, the de facto authorities announced that all services would be available for incoming Ukrainian refugees, just as they are for the de facto citizens of the region. Therefore, **Ukrainians faced no barriers when enrolling** in local education institutions. This is confirmed by all respondents' answers. All interviewed respondents noted that to enroll a refugee, the school administrations only requested identification documents and, when possible, children's files and school reports (transcripts) from Ukrainian schools. However, even when no such reports were available, the local schools would enroll Ukrainian students anyway.

> *"…enrolling in the school wasn't difficult. Only a passport and a migration certificate were required. When we first arrived, we registered with the village council as refugees. They provided us with a certificate from the village council. That was all, and we then submitted that certificate from the (de facto) state administration to the school. Later, when enrolling*

> *the younger child in kindergarten, the package of documents was the same. Nothing complicated, nothing additional was required"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

> *"I have been transferred to Bender school recently; I was initially studying in Kitzkani. There were no problems with enrollment in either school; the attitude is good"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent***

Regarding enrollment, only one respondent (an adolescent) stated that she had to take some level exams[5]; the others said the admission was done based on an interview and a discussion with a school director.

> *"Yes, there was an entrance exam in mathematics. The tests were of average difficulty; they made me think'*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent***

One teacher said that in his school there were questions asked to the children in mathematics to understand the child's level of knowledge. However, these questions were not conceived as an entrance exam, but rather as a test.

> *"In elementary school, they usually assess knowledge in mathematics to understand the child's level of knowledge"*
>
> ***a teacher with Ukrainian refugee children in class***

▪ *Integration in schools and language environment*

The integration of Ukrainian children in local schools occurred quite rapidly. Almost all respondents noted that the educational programs of the Transnistrian Region and Ukraine are similar; there are differences, but they are not significant and are overcome during the school year.

Even if for most of the refugees' the Russian language is fluent, there had been some adaptation time for switching from education in Ukrainian to Russian (for those who do not study in Ukrainian lyceums).

> *"Probably the first six months were difficult because here everything is in Russian, meaning some textbooks are in Russian, and there are subjects in the Russian language. But I only used Russian in spoken form, so most of the terms that were used where I studied and in everyday life were in Ukrainian. Here, everything is mainly in Russian So, I had to adapt"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent***

Teachers and parents mentioned minor issues regarding Russian grammar for children in the initial stages of schooling in the local schools; children sometimes mixed-up letters in Russian language classes, and they did not always manage to be proficient in those lessons. However, parents said that this had been resolved over time.

[5] This adolescent might have taken the general questions she was asked as an examination, as she is the only one to have mentioned this point.

> *"It was a bit tough with Russian language, …, she struggled with the writing rules. Grammar, specifically, but it improved over time."*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

> *"At the beginning, we had issues with the Russian language. It took my son a while to stop mixing up Ukrainian and Russian letters and adapt to the written Russian"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

In society, children primarily interact using the Russian language, which facilitates communication with the locals.

According to the interviews, the adaptation of Ukrainian children to their local peers also happened quickly, as local children were welcoming and did not express any form of aggression by and large.

> *"Overall, it's good; I didn't even expect it to be this welcoming. So, when I first entered the classroom, everyone greeted me. They really accept everyone well. There's no attitude of 'who are you?"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent***

Only two respondents mentioned difficulties with their children's social integration. One respondent's daughter experienced bullying from her classmates, while another respondent's son faced harassment. These incidents were attributed more to the children's developmental issues and psychological state rather than their national origins.

> *"My two children had different experiences here (in the region). My elder one had no issues, the younger one is a bit more asocial. Even back in Ukraine, she had issues with integration, so she was facing some rejection. The fact that we moved probably affected her even more, so she is even more isolated. However, it has nothing to do with her origins"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

The interviewed teachers reported that nationally motivated bullying (based on the country of origin) does not occur in the schools where they work, not only due to their close monitoring and disciplinary measures against such behavior, but primarily because the local students have readily accepted the Ukrainian refugees. While they acknowledge that bullying may occur in general, it is not targeted at the Ukrainian refugees based on their origins.

▪ *Online education in Ukrainian schools*

The interviews did not document any cases where parents chose online education in Ukrainian schools for their children as the one and only option. One parent mentioned that their children learnt online during their first months upon arrival in the region (March-June 2022), until they enrolled in a school in September 2022. Ukrainian parents may opt for a dual educational pathway – attending both Ukrainian (online) and local schools (in-person).

The respondents, in general, consider online education in Ukrainian schools as an option primarily relevant for high school students. The goal is to obtain a Ukrainian certificate, offering their children better educational opportunities when applying to universities outside the region (in Ukraine and in the European countries). Refugee parent respondents expressed concerns about educational

documents issued in the region. The recognition of education documents is a critical issue for majority of parents of school graduates (nearly 90%). This concern stems from the necessity to determine their children's further educational and career paths.

> *"I don't mind if he graduates here and even acquires a higher education. I'm supportive, but I worry about whether this diploma will be valid. We don't know where we'll find ourselves and under whose jurisdiction we will be. We need a diploma that will be recognized, so that he doesn't study in vain. This is why we need a Ukrainian education certificate"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

For elementary school students, this question is less pressing.

> *"Sometimes I think about education here in the region, but I haven't delved into it yet. There are situations where certain documents are unrecognized in other countries, and I haven't fully engaged with that aspect yet. But that's a long way off, and we'll see as we go along"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

Another reason to continue online studies, as stated by the respondents, is that it allows them to keep their places in schools in case the war ends, and they return home.

> *"He finished the first grade online. In the second grade, we studied online for the first quarter, and only in the second quarter of the second grade, we enrolled him in a local school as well… Throughout the year, we continued online learning in Ukraine, even now. To ensure he doesn't lose his place there (in Ukraine) in case we can return"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian Refugee parent***

In an online education setting, children receive assignments and complete them independently in their spare time, then submit them to teachers for grading. However, the **education received** by Ukrainian refugee children enrolled in schools **in the region remains the principal one**.

A few respondents felt that this dual education, with both local and Ukrainian schools, puts significant pressure on children. This is why several interviewed parents decided to stop online education and choose solely in-person learning in the region's schools.

> *"We studied online and in-person at two schools; we spent the entire year learning online until the end of the school year, and also here at this school. It was challenging. My son would come home, do his homework, and then I would do the homework with him for the Ukrainian school too. We would submit the homework… That was tiresome, so we decided to continue only with in-person education in the region"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian Refugee parent***

Finally, in the early months of their stay in the region, some parents noted the preference for online education in Ukraine only as they hoped for a swift resolution of the war and a return home. Once it became clear that this was unlikely to happen soon, they enrolled their children in local schools.

- ***Education on the Right Bank of the Nistru River while residing in the region***

The interviews did not document any case of a child studying on the Right Bank of the Nistru River. Moreover, none of the experts interviewed would know of any such case.

"I have never heard in my work about any refugee who would reside in the region and study on the Right Bank"

expert, Director of an NGO working with Ukrainian refugees

▪ *Material support in schools*

Ukrainian students, on par with their local peers, are provided with textbooks (manuals) issued by the school. Additionally, Ukrainian children are supplied with workbooks (for mathematics, nature studies, writing), if such are included in the educational program.

"When you enrolled in school in the region, did you receive textbooks and the general educational supplies from the school?"

Interviewer

"Yes, absolutely, we have got everything"

a Ukrainian refugee parent

Stationery (pens, notebooks, calculators, …) is also supplied to children, although in limited quantities and variety, leaving some of it for parents to buy on their own. Ukrainian children continue to receive hot meals at school free of charge (in the first two years of the war, breakfasts were also included in the free meals).

In terms of technical support, schools in the region are under-equipped. They generally lack computers, interactive boards, and projectors among others. The ability of Ukrainian families to purchase computers or other ITC devices is limited. Some families managed to bring computers from their homes in Ukraine, while others were able to buy something locally, but not of a very high quality. Most interviewed families though remain without computers and other educational devices, which makes it nearly impossible to navigate the educational process effectively in today's world.

" We lack a laptop and a printer because we really love to draw, and you can't buy enough coloring books. It would be easier to print them out, but I don't have a laptop, so if I have to do any work, it's from my phone. And using the phone isn't very convenient either. Right now, we use the phone to show and explain things, like children's questions, such as how a leaf works, how a tree blooms, and why a dandelion blows away, but this is really not ideal"

a Ukrainian refugee parent

e. Educational process:

▪ *Availability of support, additional classes for better integration*

All respondents agreed that the current efforts by the school administration and teachers to integrate the refugees in educational institutions are adequate and require no additional assistance. Teachers indicated that they conduct extra classes with children, if necessary, on an ad-hoc basis. As already mentioned, the most common demand was to improve children's written Russian language skills. Even though spoken Russian is the mother tongue of most Ukrainian refugees, they still need to "catch up" on grammar and written Russian. The teachers and parents say that the initial gaps in Russian grammar do not constitute a barrier to integration. There are also classes for all the students to catch up with the program. These classes are free and are organized by schools on their own initiative.

> *"If a child has difficulty understanding something, they can stay after classes. We have special hours for individual development and catch-up. Recently, for example, I dedicated those hours to a girl (Ukrainian refugee) who needed extra help to with Russian grammar"*
>
> ***a teacher with Ukrainian children enrolled in class***

- ***Choice of school – level***

Reportedly, education in Ukraine and the Transnistrian Region are similar. It means that there is no need to repeat a year for refugee children when they enroll in the local schools. For example, if a child studied in the 5th grade in Ukraine, they are also enrolled in the 5th grade in a school in the region. The only difference is that Ukrainian children start school at the age of 6, while in the region, children are typically enrolled in the first grade at the age of 6.5 (7 years old, effectively). There are also some discrepancies about when they start learning subjects such as chemistry and physics, but these are not significant, and children adapt quickly to such differences. No respondents stated that they had to repeat a year because of the move to the region.

- ***Most difficult subjects to study***

Parents and children did not mention difficulties related to studying any specific subjects. Most of the difficulties relate to individual children's abilities rather than discrepancies in the curricula.

In some cases, difficulties were observed in studying Russian history in the region, because back in their country Ukrainian refugee children were studying the history of Ukraine. However, according to the interviewed teachers, parents and experts, these discrepancies tended to be resolved over time.

- ***Additional support required in accessing the education process***

Mostly, parents expressed that what is currently available in terms of access to education is enough. However, they did mention a need for computer classes and additional English language lessons of a better quality.

Comparing the level of English language teaching in Ukrainian schools to the one in the local schools, the latter noticeably lags in quality. Ukrainian refugee children are more confident in their command of English than their local peers. In the region, they lack the quality of English classes they had in Ukraine.

> *"For additional classes… I'd need maximum English (additional classes), because, well, I don't know it well myself, but it's very much needed, and we don't really get it here in school…"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian adolescent refugee***

> *"I take additional English lessons with a tutor. It's for a fee, but the level at the local school is mediocre"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian adolescent refugee***

The problem of the English level taught in the local schools is acknowledged by the local teachers as well.

> *"I know that much attention is paid to learning the English language there (in Ukraine). Some children attend additional private English lessons or study online. The quality level here is not sufficient for them"*

a teacher with Ukrainian refugee children enrolled in the class

Additionally, parents mentioned that schools, being under-equipped with computers, do not provide the necessary opportunities for their students to learn IT.

f. Children's access to leisure activities

In the region, extracurricular education is funded by the de facto authorities, with activities either completely free of charge or at very affordable prices. For example, the monthly fee for music school attendance is 101 Transnistrian rubles (5-6 USD) or even free in some cases. All sports activities (wrestling, gymnastics, chess, chess, checkers, cycling) can also be provided free of charge by the de facto authorities. Ukrainian children can access these services on equal terms with the local children.

> *"My son initially attended handball, and then guitar lessons. Now he only goes to guitar, so he has been taking guitar lessons for the third year since we've been here. All classes provided by the (de facto) public authorities for refugees are free"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

> *"In school, I attend basketball practice, and I play for the school team. It's free,"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent***

> *"My son went to the music school, took an exam; they just checked how he plays, noted that he completed the first-grade program, and enrolled him in the second grade. We don't pay for music school"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

School clubs are also well developed: dance classes, team sports, and artistic programs are developed within the schools. All school clubs are free and are mainly led by the teachers from those schools.

> *"Our school conducts extracurricular activities as part of the planned events. We involve refugee children, and no separate events are held for them. For example, in elementary school, this can include celebration of Maslenitsa (Pancake Week), March 8, February 23, New Year, and New Year's performances. Children from Ukraine are very actively involved, on par with their local peers"*
>
> ***a teacher with Ukrainian children enrolled in their class***

In the region, extracurricular education is widely implemented. It aims at personal development, contributing to individual cultural and intellectual growth, career guidance in accordance with additional general education programs, and the acquisition of new knowledge.

However, as previously stated, due to financial issues Ukrainian children's parents cannot afford clubs and activities that are outside the list of free services offered by the de facto public authorities. This may prevent children from practicing different activities, developing new skills (already mentioned English classes and IT education) and meeting new peers.

Finally, during vacation periods, Ukrainian refugee children may lack access to activities, especially adolescents, for whom local de facto authorities traditionally offer fewer summer camp opportunities compared to younger children.

g. Plans for the future

Interviewed refugees, although not all, expressed a desire to return home, but they are unsure if their houses are intact. Another segment has mentioned that even once the war ends, years will be needed to restore infrastructure, and they see no possibility for rebuilding their lives, and especially raising, nurturing, and educating their children in Ukraine. A further group noted that they have fully adapted here, as have their children, and they would like to stay in the region. The interviewed children mentioned that it is probable that they will return to their homes when the war is over, as they have property there, as well as a big part of their families.

> *"There (in Ukraine) we have an apartment, we have parents, so of course, once the war is over, we will come back"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent***

However, some respondents mentioned that they currently have nowhere to return to, as their homes have been destroyed.

> *"I don't know how it will be, but I want to tell you, I want to go home. But there is no school, there is no hospital, there is no store. Everything is destroyed. And I am more than sure that there is no home either. … Our village was bombed heavily. It suffered a lot. It's not there anymore I think…"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

Most parent respondents indicated that they would prefer their children to receive higher education outside Ukraine. Two adolescents shared the same sentiment. They aim for universities in the European Union and Russia.

> *"I don't know where it's better for him; I don't understand where it's better. I don't understand whether it's better in Europe or Russia. Not in Ukraine, that's for sure. But if we talk about the Transnistrian Region let's be honest, there aren't many prospects for children; they can receive education here and even find some jobs, but moving anywhere further is difficult for them, and it's unclear what will happen with the recognition of their diplomas."*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee parent***

> *"We also want to get the Ukrainian diploma from the Ukrainian school and apply somewhere abroad with this diploma. After obtaining the Ukrainian diploma, I think I will go abroad to study, probably in Poland or Slovakia, and I will study to become a sailor, like my father"*
>
> ***a Ukrainian refugee adolescent***

3. Insights on the access to educational process for children with Special Education Needs (SEN) residing in the region

a. Types of SEN

- ***The identification of SEN***

The diagnosis of special educational needs for a child comes at an early age, depending on developmental delays, disability type, and/or other factors. Disability such as physical, visual, and

hearing impairments, or others, are easily identified/determined by medical professionals, and the subsequent education needs are taken care of in specialized educational institutions.

However, there is an issue with the identification of cognitive developmental delays, especially ASD. This condition is not very well known in the region by the local specialists. It is often overlooked or denied at the beginning by the parents and/or educational staff. Interviewed parents stated that even if they see the first sign of cognitive delays at the very young age (i.e. the child does not communicate with peers, shows delays in the development of speech or motricity abilities), they will still enroll their children in the general education hoping that the child would eventually "outgrow" the condition. They also mentioned that the ongoing symptoms displayed in kindergarten and school would trigger the education personnel to raise the alarm and ask parents to perform the necessary assessments. In one case, a suspicion of a potential ASD case was raised in the case of a boy in the general education when he was 7 years old.

The refugees with SEN get their disability diagnosis recognized in the region if it was established in Ukraine. In that case, the child would benefit from the same services as the local peers with established disability[6].

The identification of cognitive disability is an issue for parents, as very often it causes many backs and forth, putting additional stress on the children.

> *"As usual, everything requires gathering many documents and running around. When it deals with a new case for the first time, the medical expert committee grants disability to a child for two years only. After that, you must go through the standard procedure again, seeing all the doctors and everything else. Because it is believed that maybe the child will recover from the ASD over time, or, at least, that seems to be the logic of the doctors, I suppose. As for my elder child, last year, they granted a disability for five years"*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

Since the diagnosis of ASD is difficult because of lack of specialists in the region parents go to Chisinau to get it. Medical documents produced on the Right Bank of Nistru River are usually accepted on the Left Bank. The final diagnosis can be done in Chisinau, and the de facto authorities in the region accept the diagnosis in that case to attribute a disability status to the children accordingly.

> *"…They told us about delayed speech development, encephalopathy… At 7 years old, with progressing symptoms, we were sent back to Chisinau to the 'Voinicel' center. Until the age of 7, the doctors mentioned that there were elements of ASD, but they couldn't say for sure that it was ASD. So we were sent to Chisinau, and there, at that center, they officially diagnosed us"*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

[6] During the interviews, the case of a Ukrainian child with ASD was identified. The child did not have an official diagnosis but given the symptoms he presented, he was admitted in the special education process. The child is on home-education, but he would come to the special school to eat and attend some limited number of classes (the rest of the program being taught at home).

▪ *Difficulties with diagnosis acceptance by the parents*

The interviews showed that parents themselves may get stuck in denial about their children's cognitive impairments, believing that the child may outgrow this disorder, and everything will work out on its own.

> *"Educational organizations face difficulties because parents are not always ready to acknowledge that their child has special needs and that such a child requires professional assistance, and that it is better for such a child to be educated in a special kindergarten or a special school. Often, parents perceive it as an insult when they are informed that their child has special educational needs, especially concerning corgnitive disabilities and ASD"*

Specialist in education of children with special needs

> *"…the primary issue is that the parent does not wish to obtain disability for their children. This is the biggest problem. There are no issues in obtaining the disability itself"*

Specialist in children psychology, Association of Psychologists, Transnistrian region

Interviews showed that parents also acknowledge the problem of their denial concerning their child disability problem.

> *"The first reaction was denial. We tried to think that our son would outgrow it, that it was just a quirk, a character trait, that we needed to behave differently in some situations. But it turned out that it was all serious"*

a parent of a child with ADHD

> *"The diagnosis was psychologically difficult to accept. Because, as you know, if someone is labeled as a person with a disability, it feels like everything is over, and you wear that burden forever"*

a parent of a child with ASD

▪ *Social perceptions of children with SEN*

There is a special school network, but which have a poor reputation and is a social marker for those attending them. Parents of children with cognitive disabilities, including ASD, may often consider that putting their child into a special education facility is admitting a problem that is still considered a social stigma.

Interviewed parents state that their own social interactions decreased since the acknowledgement of their child's disability status.

> *"…I was a good stylist, well-known. It was hard to lose it all because we were ashamed. In society, people don't understand and accept ASD. It's not just a family issue; it goes beyond the family as well. Of course, our society is not quite ready for such children; in recent years, it has calmed down a bit, but when we understood the diagnosis of my child we were not welcomed in our community, and we were practically isolated from our friends. It was hard"*

a parent of a child with ASD

"I believe that parents primarily need help to accept this diagnosis, so we don't feel ashamed to talk about it, because as soon as I started openly saying that my child has ASD, it became easier for me. When I kept it to myself, I felt that it was something shameful, as if I were somehow not right. The perspective of a special school was making the sentiment even worse"

a parent of a child with ASD

b. Organization of education for children with SEN

There are 9 special schools and kindergartens offering education to children with SEN in the region (*see Annex 1*). Additionally, for children with severe developmental disorders, there are three rehabilitation centers[7] for day care in the region:

- The Public Unitary "Republican Rehabilitation Center for Children with Disabilities" in Bender.
- The Municipal Institution "Rehabilitation Center for Children with Special Living Needs" in Dubasari – the biggest center in the region.
- The Municipal Institution "Day Care Center for Children with Limited Living Abilities" in Ciobruci, Slobozia district.

The rehabilitation centers do not usually provide education, although teachers would visit children there following the home education model.

Special educational institutions currently enroll 1,502 children (an increase of 65 from 2024), of which 492 are preschool age and 1,010 are school-age children. In all these facilities, instruction is conducted in Russian. The exception is the Municipal Educational Institution "Dubasari Special School of VIII type," where classes are run in both the Russian and Romanian languages. The number of students learning in Russian amounted to 958, while 52 are taught in Romanian.

In addition to special educational organizations, some children with SEN, although rarely, are educated in integrated educational settings:

- In general education organizations of the region, compensatory learning classes operate for children experiencing difficulties in mastering general educational programs.

[7] A special case represents the Rehabilitation Centers, the biggest one being the Center for Socio-Psychological Rehabilitation in Dubasari. There is no education unit per sé, but teachers visit the children who reside in the center, following the home education model. The Center serves children with SEN from the whole region, providing several weeks of intensive rehabilitation. Children attending this center receive free boarding for those who live on campus. The center consists of six main areas. It includes classrooms for children with special needs, a hydrotherapy facility, a gym, a room for therapeutic physical education, a massage therapy office, a computer lab, rooms for social adaptation and art therapy, a modern kitchen, and an assembly hall. The center also features an inpatient rehabilitation unit, designed to aid in the socialization of children. To facilitate this, there are rooms for occupational therapy specifically for boys and girls, as well as a social adaptation room. The resource center employs a team that includes a psychologist, speech therapist, specialists in developmental disorders and a physical therapy instructor, currently consisting of 18 staff members. The overall staff of the Center for Socio-Psychological Rehabilitation in Dubasari is 56 people.

- The Municipal Educational Institution "Ribnita Russian Primary General Educational Boarding School" has special classes for children with cognitive disabilities.

In combined-type preschool educational organizations, special groups operate for children with speech, vision, cognitive disabilities, and delays in mental development.

The special education is meant to provide children with disabilities with the opportunity to receive an education that matches their abilities and needs, within a suitable learning environment that accommodates their health conditions. However, the special schools do not allow for the inclusion of children with SEN, keeping them apart from their peers without SEN.

In society, certain stereotypes exist regarding special schools and many parents believe that once a child integrates with such school, the child will suffer from a social stigma. This prevents parents, sometimes, enrolling their children in these facilities, to the big frustration of some teachers from the special schools.

> *"I wish parents would respond more actively, without ignoring education in our (special) school, because some parents don't send their child to our school out of fear of social stigma. Meanwhile, the child systematically falls behind, doesn't understand the program, and simply sits somewhere in a general school, forgotten, or sometimes a victim of bullying"*
>
> ***a teacher from a special school***

> *"I told the mother to think carefully because it will be hard for her child to adapt to a mainstream (general education) school. The program there is different; it's much more complicated. It's not that the child is bad. But there are situations where parents don't want to send their child to a special school with an adapted program. Although I say, by the sixth or fifth grade, it may be too late, and the child is already very far behind in the education process"*
>
> ***a teacher from a special school***

Special schools provide children with textbooks and necessary materials free of charge. The most vulnerable categories are also provided with free stationery supplies.

▪ *Boarding and transportation*

Boarding at these schools is available primarily for orphans and children with SEN from challenging family situations. Additionally, boarding may be offered to children who live far from schools. In such cases, children may stay during the five school days and return to their families on weekends. However, this arrangement is subject to room availability. A team of special educators oversees these children outside school hours.

Special schools offer transportation services, whether through a mini-bus owned by the institution or by requesting transportation from de facto local authorities on an as-needed basis (usually, via Education Departments). These services transport children who live far from school or organize recreational field trips as part of the educational program. **However, transportation is usually not available for children residing in cities where the institution is located.** Interviews indicate that this lack of transportation may be a factor prompting some parents to choose home education, as relying on public transportation can be a significant challenge.

> *"Transportion was an issue. My child would make strange noises on the public buses, people stare at us with fear and distrust. This was one of the reasons I decided not to send the child to the special school anymore and chose home education"*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

▪ *The education process in special schools*

Special schools in the region are classified by the type of disability: visual, auditory, musculoskeletal, and cognitive disabilities. However, as the number of children with cognitive impairments is increasing, they may study in special schools originally intended for other types of impairments and sometimes use their methodology. For example, one educator said that he uses books meant for children with hearing impairments for children with ASD.

> *"…the program designed for hearing-impaired children is effective for children with ASD. These children have speech impairments. They lack the formation of grammatical structure in their speech and cannot articulate properly. Therefore, we use textbooks for hearing-impaired children. The books are fantastic, and, you know, they help a lot. The children gradually start to speak, and the grammatical structure in their speech substantially improves. The parents are satisfied, and there is a positive effect"*
>
> ***a teacher at a special school***

Classes are organized mainly by the children's age groups, not by the degree of their disability. This may complicate their socialization, especially in cases of different degrees of cognitive impairment, and hinder the individualization of the approaches.

The essence of work in special schools is to maintain a balance between children acquiring knowledge and social-living skills. Interviewed educators assert that when children have developmental challenges, they must be taught self-care skills overall.

c. Enrollment of children with SEN

▪ *Enrollment process in special schools*

A decision of the Psychological Medical Pedagogical Commission (PMPC) is required as a prerequisite for enrollment in a special school. The Commission consists of a psychologist, a psychiatrist, specialists in special education - a speech therapist, a SEN teacher and a secretary. Additionally, and depending on the case, the Commission is seconded by specialists such as neurologists, trauma orthopedists, otolaryngologists, ophthalmologists, pediatricians (therapists, general practitioners); a lawyer and others are invited as consultants as needed. Representatives of the relevant education management bodies, health organizations, and social protection also participate in the Commission's work. If this commission issues a referral and recommendations for studying in a special school, then, upon parental consent, the child can study there. Despite this referral and recommendation, the final decision in which type of school to enroll their children always belongs to the parents. Often, the referral is given based on the child's place of residence, but there are cases where it depends more on the assigned diagnosis.

In the region, children with ASD have their disability status established at the age of 5, which must be confirmed every 2-3 years (depending on severity). The late establishment of the disability status

prevents the families from receiving social support at an earlier stage. At the same time, children require special support as early as possible. Children with hearing, vision, or locomotor impairments have their disability established several months after birth or when problems are detected. Thus, children with physical disabilities do not face issues obtaining early access to specialized care and education, unlike those with cognitive disabilities, especially with ASD.

Interviews showed that the special schools in the region are not prepared for the influx of children with ASD that was observed in recent years. There is a significant lack of qualified personnel. The de facto authorities do not provide any holistic training to the existing educational personnel in the special facilities to be able to address the educational needs determined by the ASD and other cognitive developmental delays. Finally, the interviews showed that the work in these facilities is low-paid and socially not valued, making it difficult to attract new teachers.

▪ *Choice of homeschooling*

Interviews highlighted that homeschooling is preferred for children with ASD (especially the most severe ones) and other cognitive development problems. This is primarily due to the lack of specialists working with these children in the special education institutions. Parents fear that educators at special schools do not have the necessary qualifications, knowledge, abilities, and skills to work with children with ASD. Interviewed parents have expressed the phrase *"if you know one person with ASD, you only know ONE person with ASD,"* indicating that each child with the diagnosis requires an individual educational approach, often unavailable. Parents also choose to homeschool because they hoped that children would get more attention if they were taken care of alone and because they believed that special schools would not be helpful for them.

> *"…homeschooling was my decision. I had to take my son out of school. He had emotional outbursts, he hit himself on the head, and he did not talk after school. The slightest conflict at school would send my son backwards. Teachers were out of solutions. That's why I decided it would be better to have my child homeschooled. At home, under my supervision, it is easier to build a dedicated education program for her, or so I thought"*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

> *"We didn't try going to a special school because I thought for a while that school wasn't for us at all, since it didn't work out with special kindergarten, and she was reluctant to go outside. My daughter stayed home for months. We didn't even go for walks or visit places. I realized that homeschooling was the perfect solution for us. I was determined to put her in homeschooling"*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

As already mentioned, the unavailability of means of transportation is also a cause for homeschooling over enrollment in special schools.

▪ *SEN in general education*

As stated, all children in the region have the right to access general kindergartens and schools. Some children with SEN are enrolled in general education schools, when these are adapted to host them. However, in most cases, children with physical, hearing, and visual impairments are usually directly enrolled in special schools where special education methods and materials are available.

Children with cognitive development delays may start in general kindergartens and schools, and only there, their disability noted through observed asocial behavior. Once impairment is established, the enrollment of children in the general schools or their further studying there is subject to the availability of individualized support, which is lacking in the local schools according to the interviews. Interviewees stated that children with cognitive disabilities may face discrimination in general schools on behalf of their peers and peers' parents and negative judgment of their supposed inappropriate behavior.

> *"When we went to the general education school, serious difficulties began, including bullying. There were episodes of aggression, pushing, and altercations. Moreover, the intervention from the teachers was minimal; they tried to deny the bullying and were unwilling to investigate the problem. I think they have no idea how to behave in such a situation. They have no clue. In the end, we decided to leave that school and seek a special school…"*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ADHD***

> *"We tried going to the general education school for two weeks. I wanted to give it a shot so I wouldn't regret it for the rest of my life. I sat at the desk with her; I was allowed to. I'm very glad I went through that stage; I convinced myself that my daughter doesn't belong there. First grade, small children, seven years old. There was cruelty, mockery, and teasing. Teachers were clueless, they really do not know what ASD is. I understood that a specialized school would be better for her"*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

The staff of the general educational institutions usually recommend the parents of children with potential cognitive disabilities to go through a series of medical tests to identify behavioral problems, which is the trigger to the withdrawal from the general education.

It is up to the parents' decision to choose which school to enroll their children in, and they have the right to transfer their child to a regular general education school if they believe it appropriate for their child. Even if a general education school cannot officially refuse to enroll a child with SEN, the absence of specialists capable of working with such children, especially with ASD and cognitive impairments, leads parents to prefer to send their children to special schools or to opt for home education. Interviews showed that educators from general education schools acknowledge that their facilities are unprepared to accommodate such children. Schools have psychologists, but they do not possess the skills to work with children with SEN. Moreover, these schools have no guiding materials and educational infrastructure to support the inclusion of children with SEN, and teachers do not receive methodological training on inclusion.

> *"The teacher in the general education school is not a specialist in working with children with special educational needs (SEN). These children require an individualized approach. The teacher does not have time during the lesson. He/She must deliver the general material to the entire class, to every student, all at once. There should be a tutor sitting next to these children who need special attention, whom we do not have. …"*
>
> ***a teacher from a general school who had a child with SEN in class***

> *"…children with cognitive developmental difficulties are usually isolated in general schools because their peer group does not accept them. Not all teachers accept such children. Let's*

> *be honest; we have a shortage of staff, even more so for children with SEN. It is not always the case that those working as teachers have a true calling for teaching. Many teachers use old and strict ways of teaching; they are accustomed to discipline and believe that children should behave well. It's difficult for them to readjust because of their age and mentality. Therefore, they would need to push themselves hard to change their attitude towards teaching children with special educational needs in the classroom…"*
>
> ***a teacher from a general school who had a child with SEN in class***

While there are examples of successful inclusion of children with SEN in general education, these are exceptions and concern mostly children with physical disabilities (mostly with motricity problems according to the interviews). In that case, interviews show that peers show empathy and volunteer to help with the mobility across the school and the school authorities arrange for the classes to take place on the ground floor (as schools are not equipped with elevators).

d. Educational process

▪ *Staff of special schools*

In addition to teaching staff, special schools should have psychologists, speech therapists, and specialists in developmental disorders for individual and group work. Despite the desire of special school principals to have complete staffing, this is not always possible due to the shortage of specialists in the region. There is a significant shortage of professionals in the field of ASD, primarily those specialized in developmental disorders and neuropsychologists, even though these specialists are most effective in improving educational outcomes of children with ASD.

> *"…There are very few specialists; there is a shortage everywhere"*
>
> ***a specialist at a rehabilitation center***

> *"The main problems faced by special schools include methodological under-equipping (teachers often have to search and print methodological materials themselves); overcrowded classrooms; and a lack of educational staff: the complex profile of the students is compounded by the fact that administrators often do not value teachers, attempting to restrict them and overload them with paperwork"*
>
> ***Specialist in the education of children with special needs***

> *"The biggest problem lies in the scarce funding of special schools, which leads to other issues: a severe shortage of staff, overcrowded groups and classes, and a lack of materials and specialized equipment"*
>
> ***Specialist in children psychology, Association of Psychologists, Transnistrian region***

The lack of specialists is one of the key reasons why many parents with children with ASD opt for homeschooling.

▪ *Staff training and qualifications*

All educators at special schools have higher degrees in educational science; some have backgrounds in education for SEN. Many educators noted that the Shevchenko University in Tiraspol does not prepare teachers with the required qualifications for modern realities, especially for children with cognitive disabilities, including ASD. In the region, advanced training in this field is offered rarely,

despite the increasing number of children with cognitive developmental challenges each year. Educators already engaged in work with SEN try to find courses, training, and webinars on their own and at their own cost, although there is a widespread consensus about the need for a systematic approach with regular training sessions. Most teachers who want to learn new ways of working with children with SEN do so through online education on Russian platforms. One teacher said that he underwent online courses and is experimenting with different methods of working with SEN related to cognitive disabilities very often outside any official guidelines.

> *"I took courses remotely in Russia. After receiving the documents, they needed to be verified by the (de facto) Ministry of Education, and only then were they considered valid here. But not all my colleagues do it and therefore do not have access to newest working methodologies"*
>
> ***a teacher at a special school***

> *"I try to find and take more courses on Russian platforms. We pick up something new for ourselves in these webinars; we see something interesting and can then apply it in practice. Since we have very few schools like ours, we have to search this way. I pay for these courses out of pocket, but very few of my colleagues do the same"*
>
> ***a teacher at a special school***

▪ *Education program*

Educational programs in special schools are similar to general educational programs in terms of content and subjects, with further simplifications depending on the SEN. For children with physical disabilities, the program lasts 10 years, allowing students to get a general educational certificate, which typically developing children learn in 9 years at a general school. At the end of their schooling, they take a certification test in the form of an exam and receive a certificate of completion from the secondary special educational school. If a child does not pass the exam, they do not receive the certificate but a statement confirming their school attendance. The only subject not taught in the special schools compared to the general schools is the foreign language.

> *"For children with visual or hearing impairments, they often need an additional year to complete their education. For example, they might take ten years to finish the nine-year program. Also, they have special classes to help them, and the number of those classes is set by the basic education plan. The only thing we do not teach is English"*
>
> ***a teacher at a special school***

The situation is very different for children with cognitive development delays. The pedagogical team adapts education programs individually based on the abilities including learning of each child (although individualization is more applicable to homeschooling than in special school settings). The focus is put on repeating every day and over a long period of time the basics of verbal expressions, mathematics and social (behavioral) skills. Such an approach takes time and may not allow to go through the entire education program and many other subjects are usually skipped because of time limits and difficulty getting the child's attention. Through the constant repetition of the same concepts, the interviewed teachers and parents who have their children enrolled in special schools said that they can see progress of their children.

> *"Sometimes there are challenges with certain tasks for children with SEN related to cognitive disabilities, especially ASD. There are times when a child struggles to complete an assignment, and I need to explain it several times over a long period for them to understand. Over time, they develop the skills to grasp these concepts"*
>
> ***a teacher at a special school***

> *"These (ASD) students don't learn steadily. They might do well for a while, and then suddenly it seems like they haven't learned anything at all. They learn in waves; they understand some subjects well but have trouble with others. Math is usually the hardest subject for them. However, their writing skills can be really good. This kind of learning doesn't happen quickly; it can take three months, six months, a year, or even two years to fully integrate one educational concept"*
>
> ***a teacher at a special school***

For homeschooled children classes are conducted three times a week in core subjects—reading, writing, and mathematics—by a teacher from a special school. Two times a week a development therapist comes home depending on the needs of each child and each SEN.

> *"We have homeschooling three times a week. A teacher comes to teach the basic subjects: reading, writing, and math. Once a week, a speech therapist comes, and once a specialist in psychomotor development. And there is one day off. "*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

Some parents reported a low degree of individualization in the approach to their children, and the results of these academic efforts greatly depend on the moral, ethical, and professional qualities of the educator.

> *"I did not see any progress, really. The teacher who visits us does not seem interested in teaching my child. Maybe there is some progress, but it's limited"*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

At the same time, other parents mention that educators in the homeschool setting show excellent results in their work with children.

> *"…one teacher visits us. He teaches math, writing, and reading. My daughter reads; she loves math. She really enjoys numbers and writes well. We are very impressed with our teacher because she has learned a lot."*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

> *"I like the educators who currently work with my child. It's clear that everything is very individual. Some may be happy with this teacher, while others may not. It's not because the teacher is bad; it's just no match. It happens…"*
>
> ***a parent of a child with ASD***

Finally, parents may take education into their hands and do not rely on school education.

> *"… the results we have achieved over two years—when all the parents ask me how I managed to achieve such results, that my child writes in Russian without mistakes, in English, and that he has started to speak, even though he was a non-verbal child. I invested a lot in*

my own education. I spent a huge amount of time, something that is impossible in schools, given how overcrowded these schools are. That is what helped me achieve these results with my child"

a parent of a child with ASD

- ***Extracurricular activities***

Special schools develop extracurricular activities. Children have access to singing and dancing classes, but also to some physical activities. For instance, at Bender special school, team sports are well developed, and children often go to the gym during breaks to play a bit between lessons.

"We have a physical education teacher who prepares them (activities) so well, and she inspires them by setting an example, so they spend all their breaks in the gym. They play volleyball, chess, table tennis, checkers, darts, etc.. And here, within the school, all the children are involved, both those who come every day and those residing here under public guardianship. They are constantly communicating in lively ways. And because we don't have many of them, they simply mix. You can already see girls from one class befriending girls from another class. There are even love stories between different classes that start during these extracurricular activities"

a teacher at a special school

It is noteworthy that these children remain among themselves and have very little interaction with the other children without SEN from general facilities.

In the Special School in Dubasari, there are two types of extracurricular activities that focus on skills development for the children. The girls learn to sew from a young age, while boys are engaged in woodworking, and as they get older, they start learning shoe repair workshops.

Children who are **homeschooled do not have access** to extracurricular activities, especially children with ASD. This results in social isolation, with only a few families able to afford additional individual classes outside home education, and even then, they often engage in one-on-one guidance, leading to further isolation. Parents surveyed have also expressed that there is a lack of sport clubs accepting children with ASD, which significantly adds to their frustration and prevents them from burning their energy, leading to aggressive behaviors at home. Parents must activate their personal network, when they have any, to make their child enroll in clubs or find a coach willing to work with such a child.

"Extracurricular activities, this is a big pain for us. My son finds it difficult to complete tasks. he distracts himself very quickly and distracts others. Coaches do not know how to work with him; they lack skills and time"

a parent of a child with ASD

"I wanted to enroll my child in swimming because water helps with relaxation. For about seven years, I have been trying to gain access to our local pool, in vain. Our child would not be allowed. Finally, I reached an agreement with a coach, and we started going twice a week. It is important for children, especially those with special needs and speech impairments, to develop their hands physically. Working with their hands improves blood flow to the brain,

leading to better circulation and enhanced speech. He started writing better; he has different handwriting every day. When we engage the hands more, it significantly improves his handwriting. But it took me years to find such a coach"

a parent of a child with ASD

"No, there are no extracurricular activities, sports, art schools, clubs… we don't go anywhere. There's nothing for our children"

a parent of a child with ASD

There have been some private efforts to offer extracurricular activities to children with cognitive disabilities, notably ASD; however, parents report that these initiatives often fail to persist due to a lack of understanding and proper methodologies for effectively engaging with and supporting these children's learning.

"A year ago, a woman tried to organize a kind of theater club for the kids. But it all quickly faded away. She runs a club for children with disabilities. She wanted to try organizing a small performance with children with disabilities, but specifically with physical disabilities, not mental ones. And she was successful in that. Then she tried opening these activities to our children (with ASD), but our kids are different. Some scream, some have ADHD. She decided that she just couldn't manage it, she did not know how to work with our children. So, she stopped the initiative"

a parent of a child with ASD

e. Main needs overview for children with SEN

▪ *Educational Needs*

In the region, there is a significant shortage of educational resources and opportunities for children with developmental disabilities, particularly those with ASD. Parents are seeking more adapted learning materials and the presence of qualified professionals, such as psychologists and speech therapists, who can provide essential support. The need for training sessions is critical, as parents desire to learn effective ways to engage with their children, who are experiencing difficulties with unreliable online information. It also concerns specific topics of a person's societal development. An example that came up during the interviews was sexual education, as parents and educators need specialized guidance to address early sexual maturation in children with ASD.

"Undoubtedly, sexual education is critical. Individuals with ASD often have heightened sexual needs. A mother I know told me that her son walks around the city, he likes the female body, and he may approach and touch a girl's backside. So, I understand that my son might face something like this later. And this is something I fear. There are no specialists who could help us with this"

a parent of a child with ASD

"They are 15 years old, in puberty. They go out into society, and their hormones are surging. How do you explain that you want this girl, but you can't?... They don't understand the social relations. This education should also take place. These children finish the 9th grade at 15-16

years old; then they have to join society. They need to understand the rules of society, the rules of upbringing"

a parent of a child with ASD

The persistent shortage of specialists in schools limits access to individualized teaching strategies, and many current educators lack sufficient training and specialized skills. Hence, teachers also expressed the need for additional training in methodologies concerning the work with SEN, especially cognitive delays and ASD. As already shown, some teachers take out-of-the pocket classes to learn working with children with ASD, but they ask for more holistic training on this topic.

Often, children with ASD, despite their talents, are overlooked by teachers who are unprepared to recognize and nurture their strengths, instead focusing on their weaknesses. This situation arises primarily due to a lack of awareness of ASD in the region. Educators lack the training and resources to effectively support these children's unique needs and abilities, leading to missed opportunities for their development.

"In the music school, he gets all A's and has won international awards and competitions. He studies piano and already knows solfeggio at a level comparable to that of university students. Although he is in the fourth grade, he participates in solfeggio competitions everywhere, and it is never noted that he is a SEN child; he competes on equal terms. However, at our special school, the director says that there is nothing to do for my son in terms of education, which I obviously disagree with..."

a parent of a refugee child with SEN (ASD and optic nerve atrophy)

- ***Other identified needs beyond education***

Families with children with special needs face numerous challenges beyond the educational sphere. There is a need for equipment and materials to work with children with SEN and training in how to use those. Given the low standard of living in the region, very few can afford to pay even for small devices that alleviate difficulties linked to SEN. Many parents must rely on costly private specialists due to insufficient public support, a burden that is especially heavy for single mothers who often live below the poverty line. Transportation and access to affordable assistive devices also emerge as implicit needs, as families navigate the logistical aspects of securing care and resources for their children.

- ***Support for families***

The social isolation experienced by families, particularly those with children with ASD, is profound. There is an enduring societal stigma against developmental disabilities, exacerbated by misconceptions about ASD being merely a behavioral issue. The lack of acceptance drives increased isolation and frustration, especially for single mothers who frequently face judgment and undue scrutiny. Community initiatives like "Autogalaxy" and the "Parents with Particularities" Facebook group provide emotional support and networking opportunities, allowing parents to share resources and foster hope. While these community efforts offer some support, the overall need for a societal shift towards empathy and understanding remains vital to alleviating the burdens shouldered by these families.

"There are significant issues with finding qualified specialists, such as locating a child psychiatrist. In our area, there seems to be no child psychiatrist at all. The shortage of professionals is a primary concern, more important than financial assistance. Why? Because

> *it is difficult to measure how financial assistance will ultimately benefit the child. Initially, I believe more attention should be paid to the training of specialists. Of course, no one is against receiving financial support, but, in my view, it's less effective. I think the main problem for parents facing these challenges is that they don't know where to go or what steps to take. So, they just isolate themselves. Having access to specialists would be a good solution, in my opinion"*
>
> ***a parent with a child with cognitive impairment***

Parents themselves stated that they needed psychological support to raise their children, but none is offered free of charge or at an affordable price.

> *"I believe psychological assistance and consultations are needed. A mother needs to attend psychological sessions once a week, but this is unaffordable for us, and there are none free of charge"*
>
> ***several parents of children with SEN***

Furthermore, SEN may desegregate families. Several respondents mentioned divorces, and while the SEN of the child is not mentioned as the reason, the outcome always puts additional pressure on the mother. The mothers mentioned that they had to revise their career plans and quit their job. And when they are divorced, they often lack resources and go into the spiral of poverty.

> *"My youngest son has been prescribed with 'Risperidone'—a sedative that costs 500 rubles (30 USD) per bottle. How can I afford this? I am an unemployed mother with no husband. How can I help my child? We attempted to engage with a specialist for private sessions, but it costs 150 rubles per session, three times a week, which is very burdensome for me"*
>
> ***a parent of children with SEN (two children—one with cerebral paralysis and with a mental disorder)***

> *"Everything changed immediately after the doctor diagnosed my child. I couldn't work at all, but I didn't have a formal job either. At that time, my husband and I were running a business, and I had free time. I could take my child to the doctors. I had to radically change my place of residence and move to another city. I returned to my mother's house. I separated from my husband, my financial situation degraded"*
>
> ***a Mother of a child with ASD***

> *"…a person will encounter the fact that a child will require time, care, and energy, and at the same time, the mother will have to earn a living. In such cases, support is very much needed. We have a complete family and can distribute these roles; we can cope with this because we have two adults. But in situations when the mother is single, it's tough"*
>
> ***a Mother of a child with ADHD***

- ***Educational assistive devices support***

Material support exists but does not always meet the children's needs. For example, a mother of two girls with hearing impairments, stated that additional hearing assistive devices are necessary for her daughters. Those were provided (one hearing aid for each child), but they are not adapted to the severity of hearing loss that require a different set. The family cannot afford to buy them at their own

expense, as such devices cost around 5 thousand USD. Additionally, this mother described the special schools as really lagging behind the current standards of care and development.

> *"For the development of hearing, we practically have nothing even in the special school. We would like small tape recorders with sounds from the surrounding world so the children could learn. There are now many different teaching aids and videos on the computer. It's hard for children with hearing impairment; they don't understand verbs, for example. Everything needs to be shown to them. They need to see actions like walking, jumping, running, swimming, bathing, washing up, these are everyday activities. But how do you explain to a child that something is flying in space? These abstract concepts are very difficult for children with hearing impairment to understand. I have two children, and they need four hearing aids. But we were only given two. When I asked why we only received two when the children needed four, the doctor said, 'Just be thankful for what you have…'. Besides, these are not adapted to the need of my children."*
>
> ***a parent of two children with hearing impairment***

The same can be said about children with other physical impairments. The schools and the de facto authorities are lacking resources to acquire equipment adapted to the child's needs. One respondent mentioned the need for adaptive glasses, given that her son's vision deteriorated, but none was available.

> *"My son received glasses two years ago, but since he has detached optic nerves, his vision is deteriorating. He will gradually lose his sight. He needs to change his glasses every year. When I applied for a second time, they told me that I had already received help and that it was enough. But how can he continue studying if he does not have the equipment to see?"*
>
> ***a Parent of a Ukrainian child with vision impairments and ASD***

f. Professional opportunities for children with SEN

The vocational training opportunities for children with SEN are quite limited, and even when they do exist, few people are aware of them (for instance, during the interviews no parent of a child with ASD surveyed could provide specifics about any existing courses). The region offers post-school education for children with SEN, with courses aimed at acquiring professions such as cook, seamstress, shoemaker, plasterer, and tractor driver. However, these do not always correspond to the potential of every child, and it is practically impossible for such young people to find employment due to the social stigma associated with disability especially cognitive. At best, youth may engage in manual, low-skilled labor (such as janitors, cleaners, factory seamstresses, or unskilled workers). Often, these young individuals will accept any job offered to them.

> *'After the age of 18, these children are just sitting at home. There's nothing for them beyond that. We need some centers. I have seen that in Russia, there are places for working with adults, including those with Down syndrome and ASD. They make crafts and other items to sell. There are cafés where they work as waiters and help with cleaning. They are employed, have activities to do, and can socialize. Unfortunately, there is nothing like that for individuals with ASD. They need specialists to train them daily. Training, as harsh as it may sound for such children, is the most effective approach. They need to be told and shown what to do so they can repeat tasks, even in daily life, like carrying a plate or bringing something back"*

a parent with two children with ASD

Surveyed parents noted that their children with ASD may exhibit remarkable performance in areas in which children show a particular interest. However, few have the means to engage teachers in those areas since public educators typically do not want to work with such children, and private teaching services are expensive. Personal initiatives can positively impact these children's lives; one respondent mentioned that a child with ASD, thanks to their family members, learned computer skills and became a successful computer technician.

4. Conclusion

While the project focused on studying the access to education for two vulnerable population groups: refugee children and children with special educational needs, the interviews revealed that education problems go far beyond just access. Rather, they represent a complex set of issues that should be analyzed holistically. Although, in theory, access to education is guaranteed for both groups in the region, the reality shows significant gaps that prevent these target groups from reaching their full potential. These gaps relate to family issues, administrative challenges, scarcity of financial and material resources, and shortage of trained education specialists. Even if the de facto authorities try to provide the best possible access conditions to education for these groups, the inherent weaknesses—such as low investment, poor training in new teaching methodologies, and underfinanced social security systems—negatively impact the learning process for both refugee children and children with SEN.

For Ukrainian refugees, the region's education institutions are accessible, and efforts have been made to ensure that Ukrainian children are treated similarly to local children. To some extent, this has been successful, as refugee children have been enrolled in schools and have access to the same extracurricular activities as their local peers. They also receive material support. Despite initial challenges, particularly related to language barriers in some cases (the switch from Ukrainian to Russian) and the psychological trauma associated with displacement, Ukrainian children have managed to overcome them and be successfully integrated in education.

However, most refugees are women and children, with their fathers often remaining in Ukraine. The women staying in the region face significant financial challenges due to increased expenses, such as rent, magnified by the absence of a second income. Even when they are employed, salaries in the region are low and barely sufficient to cover costs. Additionally, the lack of family support means that children receive less attention from their parents than they would have back in Ukraine, which also impacts their education process. Furthermore, financial constraints prevent families from taking additional classes in subjects like English, and the region's education institutions lack qualified teachers in this area. Ukrainian refugees have expressed that English is essential for their children's future careers, but adequate courses are unavailable in schools. Furthermore, interviews suggest that the refugees, by and large, would be unable to finance extracurricular activities other than those offered by the de facto local authorities. If Ukrainians had access for additional extracurricular activities free of charge, their children could develop additional skills and meet new peers, thus improving their further integration.

They are also concerned about the lack of recognition for the region's school certificates. As a result, they opt for online education in Ukraine in addition to attending schools in-person in the region, which adds pressure on children with double homework. Families also reported lacking proper ICT equipment, such as laptops, to follow online courses, relying instead on mobile phones, which is suboptimal as it leads to eye strain and loss of concentration. This is also mainly due to the financial problems that many refugees are facing in the region and which, as interviews suggest, negatively impact the educational process of Ukrainian children.

The situation for **children with SEN in the region** is even more complex. The educational institutions are not articulated for the inclusion of SEN. Special schools separates children with SEN from the general education, leaving children with disabilities to evolve separately their peers. This leads to their further social isolation.

For children with **physical SEN** (such as hearing impairment, visual impairment, and locomotor issues), the education and social systems lack the appropriate resources tailored to the needs of each child. However, from a methodological standpoint, education for these children is somewhat supported. Teachers know how to work with these students, and basic materials are available in special schools. Moreover, the interviews showed a societal consensus on the importance of showing solidarity and empathy towards these children. Most of them are enrolled in the special education but can also attend general schools where peers without SEN assist them. Different extracurricular activities, including sports, are also available for them.

The situation is quite different for children with SEN related to **cognitive disabilities**, particularly those with ASD. This topic is less known in the region, often misunderstood or misdiagnosed, and frequently confused with behavioral problems linked to poor family education. Parents of children with cognitive disabilities report that even within their own families, there is an attitude of expecting the child to outgrow their difficulties eventually. Single households led by women are notably prevalent among the interviewed families with children who have cognitive impairments. Mothers who lose support from their partners often abandon their careers to care for their children, exposing themselves to a higher risk of vulnerability. With no help or hope for adequate support from educational institutions, mothers often resort to home education, which limits their time for other activities, including work. The interviews highlighted that these families face precarious financial, educational, and emotional distress situations. Beyond the educational aspect, ASD becomes a matter of **gender equality**, as mothers typically bear a heavier burden than fathers when raising a child with ASD. All parents of children with SEN need psychological support, even if many of them would deny it, often because they see no hope in any action.

School equipment remains a major barrier to integrating children with SEN, both in general and in special schools. In addition to incomplete or lacking basic equipment, schools lack transportation services, which could otherwise facilitate attendance. Interviews with parents of children with ASD revealed that many opt for homeschooling instead of enrolling in a special school due to the difficulties children face using public transportation.

Educational institutions, including special schools, are not adequately equipped to include children with SEN in a proper educational process. Teachers do not receive training on how to work with children with ASD, and there are no policies in place to develop training modules or official guidelines. Before the start of the war in Ukraine, specialists from other countries came to work with children with

ASD, but that is no longer the case. Due to behavioral particularities, children with ASD are often excluded from extracurricular activities, as there is a lack of knowledge on how to engage with them; consequently, children with ASD risk growing up isolated, which can further hinder their social skills. Sexual education for these children is also crucial during adolescence, as inappropriate sexual behavior linked to a lack of social skills was identified as a concern during the interviews.

There is also an urgent need for vocational training opportunities for children with SEN in general and those with ASD in particular to promote their employability and independence. Parents have expressed fear about their children becoming entirely dependent on them for financial support and unable to sustain themselves.

Finally, the children with SEN and their parents lack a united voice in the region that could raise public awareness of this problem, talk to the de facto authorities, and provide support. Interviews showed that many parents feel very lonely when their children are diagnosed with SEN, and do not know where to go, with whom to talk to, or where to seek help and guidance. This reinforces their social isolation, which in turn may negatively impact their children's education process.

5. Recommendations

General Consideration: The situation in the region makes it challenging for international organizations to work with local NGOs. Obtaining the necessary permits from the de facto structures from the Left Bank of the Nistru River can be time-consuming and uncertain, lack of specialized local NGOs working in education and related sectors adds other layer of complexity. Therefore, most activities aimed at the target populations - children with SEN and Ukrainian refugee children - could be focused on delivering services on the Right Bank of the Nistru River to the extent possible. For example, training activities for parents and teachers, or summer camp programs for students, could be organized on the Right Bank of the Nistru River. In this case, beneficiaries from the Left Bank could be transported there and accommodated for the duration of the activities. Additionally, some material aid could be distributed during these events. In that case, the obtention of the permits to operate on the Left Bank can be avoided. At the same time, efforts should focus on strengthening the capacities of NGOs on the Left Bank of the Nistru River, enabling them to deliver services locally. This can be achieved through capacity-building projects for NGOs from the Left Bank, aimed at enhancing their ability to implement and sustain such initiatives.

Ukrainian Refugees

1. **Issue / Unmet Need: Absence of Access to ICT Equipment.** Limited access to ICT equipment (desktops, laptops, tablets) significantly hinders the continuity of education, especially for online classes. Without adequate devices, students cannot fully participate in virtual learning, affecting their academic progress and overall learning experience and outcomes.

   Priority: High.

   Recommendations: Ensure the procurement and distribution of ICT equipment to support online education for the most vulnerable Ukrainian refugee children. Beneficiary targeting should consider factors such as housing conditions, length of stay in the region, income level,

household size and composition, presence of dependents, and disability status of children. This can be achieved through either:

- Direct distribution of ICT equipment by NGOs, or partners.
- Cash for Education support via vouchers for purchasing ICT devices and stationery, enabling families to choose the most suitable items based on their needs.

2. **Issue / Unmet Need: Lack of Appropriate English Language Classes.** Ukrainian refugees face challenges in accessing adequate English language instruction, hindering future opportunities. The quality of English education in local schools often falls short of the standards the Ukrainians had back in their country, while private courses remain unaffordable for many refugee families.

   Priority: High.

   Recommendations: Ensure the English classes are free and customized to various skill levels and age groups, aiming to bridge the language proficiency gap and ensure continuity of education. This could be:

   - Financed by international organizations and implemented by local NGOs.
   - Incorporated into organized summer camps for Ukrainian children.

3. **Issue / Unmet Need: Need for Additional Extracurricular Activities.** Limited access to extracurricular activities due to financial constraints restricts the overall development of Ukrainian refugee children. While some free or affordable options exist, there is a specific need for IT skills classes and additional Ukrainian language classes, which are generally unaffordable.

   Priority: Medium.

   Recommendations: Provide additional extracurricular activities, like IT Skills courses for Ukrainian refugee children and vulnerable children from the region or Ukrainian language classes for children enrolled in Russian language schools. These extracurricular activities could be financed by international organizations and implemented by local NGOs.

4. **Issue / Unmet Need: Lack of Activities for Summer Break.** Many Ukrainian refugee children are stuck at home during the vacation period because families cannot afford extracurricular activities.

   Priority: Medium.

   Recommendations: Organize summer camps during vacation periods for Ukrainian refugee children or invite Ukrainian children residing in the region to camps organized on the Right Bank of the Nistru River. These camps will promote integration and social cohesion by allowing Ukrainian refugee children to socialize and connect even more with local peers who are participating in the same activities.

Children with cognitive impairment

1. **Issue / Unmet Need: Lack of Capacity for Working with Cognitive Impairments (SEN):** Local teachers and parents lack methodological knowledge to effectively support children with cognitive impairments, especially ASD. This is compounded by a lack of sexual education resources tailored to this population.

   Priority: Very High.

   Recommendations: Organize consecutive-day training sessions for teachers from special and general schools, and for parents, focusing on methodologies tailored to support children with cognitive impairments, especially ASD. The sessions should:
   - Emphasize individualization of methodologies to meet each child's needs.
   - Share existing knowledge and best practices developed in Moldova, including those by UNICEF.
   - Offer camp activities that reinforce the methodologies taught.
   - Develop and implement modules on sexual education of children with SEN for both parents and educators.

2. **Issue / Unmet Need: Low Societal Acceptance and Awareness of Cognitive Impairment Topics.** Limited awareness about cognitive SEN contributes to rejection, misconceptions, exclusion, bullying, and potential harm, hindering social integration.

   Priority: Very High.

   Recommendations: Organize public awareness campaigns, including through social media. The campaigns should focus on:

   - Understanding cognitive impairments and debunking common myths.
   - Promoting inclusion and acceptance in education and broader society.
   - Emphasizing the importance of early diagnosis.
   - Presenting ways the public can contribute to fostering inclusion.

3. **Issue / Unmet Need: Absence of Leisure and Physical Activities.** Children with cognitive impairments, especially those who are homeschooled, lack access to leisure activities and opportunities for socialization.

   Priority: Very High

   Recommendations: Develop and implement inclusive leisure and physical activity programs tailored to the needs of children with cognitive impairments. This should involve:

   - Capacity Building: Provide capacity-building sessions for parents and physical educators to adapt activities to meet each child's individual capabilities.
   - Activity Adaptation Training: Focus on adapting physical and outdoor activities to suit varying abilities and sensory sensitivities.
   - Behavior Management Strategies: Offer guidance on managing excess energy and channeling behavior effectively through activities like sports.
   - Socialization Opportunities: Create structured opportunities for children with and without SEN to interact and build relationships in supportive environments.

4. **Issue / Unmet Need: Children with SEN Falling Behind in Education.** Children with SEN, specifically with cognitive disabilities and in homeschooling, frequently lack access to support provided by educators trained in effective teaching methodologies, leading to academic deficits.

   Priority: High.

   Recommendations: Organize catch-up classes in subjects such as verbal development and mathematics. Additional lessons in other subjects should be provided based on individual needs. These activities could be conducted in parallel with training sessions for parents and teachers on inclusive innovative teaching approaches, utilizing methodologies developed in Moldova with support from UNICEF.

5. **Issue / Unmet Need: Lack of a Well-Structured Parents' Association.** The absence of a strong and effective parents' association for children with cognitive impairments hinders advocacy efforts, limiting their access to necessary resources and support.

   Priority: High.

   Recommendations: Assist in strengthening the capacity of local associations composed of parents of children with cognitive impairments. This associations would focus on raising public and educational institutions awareness about SEN and cognitive disabilities, advocating for the rights and interests of these children with de facto authorities in the region for holistic education services.

All Children with SEN (Cognitive and Physical)

1. **Issue / Unmet Need: Ineffective Inclusive Practices.** The education institutions in the region do not effectively promote the inclusion of children with SEN, limiting opportunities for equitable access and participation in the education process.

   Priority: Very High.

   Recommendations: A comprehensive inclusion strategy must be developed for the region, tailored to its specific realities. This strategy should include:
   - Reorganizing the general schools to enable higher enrollment of children with SEN.
   - Strengthening their capacity to support inclusion.
   - Providing professional development resources for teachers to effectively support students with SEN.
   - Increasing extracurricular activities where children with SEN can interact and develop alongside their peers.

2. **Issue / Unmet Need: Lack of Psychological and Financial Support for Parents.** There is a significant lack of psychological and financial support for parents of children with SEN, particularly for those with cognitive impairments, leading to social isolation.

   Priority: Very High.

Recommendations: Develop a comprehensive policy for supporting the parents of children with SEN, which could include:

- Training programs for parents on positive parenting, inclusive practices, and fostering acceptance of their child's SEN.
- Access to psychological support, especially at the time of diagnosis.
- Additional financial assistance, including in-kind support.
- Work schedule accommodations policies.

3. **Issue / Unmet Need: Limited Employment Opportunities.** Adolescents with SEN face significant barriers to employment when becoming adults due to limited access to professional training and societal biases.

   Priority: High.

   Recommendations: Provide adolescents with SEN access to vocational training opportunities for their professional development and integrate these programs into the school curricula of or through the support of a local NGOs. Additionally, develop policies to incentivize employers to train and hire adolescents and young adults with disabilities.

4. **Issue / Unmet Need: Lack of Adapted Equipment.** There is a lack of adapted equipment necessary for the effective inclusion of children in the educational process.

   Priority: High.

   Recommendations: Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment at the individual level to identify the specific assistive devices and adapted learning materials required to support the inclusive education of children with disabilities. This assessment should cover both general education institutions and specialized settings across all regions, including the Transnistrian region, where access and availability are particularly limited.
   In parallel, design a mechanism for the procurement, equitable distribution, and maintenance of such equipment. This mechanism should consider administrative constraints and access limitations in the Transnistrian Region, possibly through coordination with NGOs operating either in the Left Bank or the Right one.
   The intervention should also include structured training for teachers and, where applicable, parents and caregivers on the effective use of assistive technologies and adapted materials. Additionally, introduce a basic monitoring framework to track the utilization, functionality, and impact of the equipment on learning outcomes, ensuring sustained support and accountability.

5. **Issue / Unmet Need: Transportation Barriers.** The lack of specialized transportation services forces some parents to homeschool their children, especially those with cognitive impairments, reducing opportunities for social interaction, which leads to their social isolation. This negatively impacts development and education prospectives.

Priority: Medium.

Recommendations: Provide daily transportation services for children with SEN to facilitate their attendance at special schools, encouraging greater participation and reducing social isolation.

6. Annex

Annex 1 : Special Schools for Children with SEN in the Region

Tiraspol

- Public Educational Institution "Special General Education Boarding School of I-II, V Types." This institution specializes in educating children with hearing and speech impairments. It includes both a kindergarten and a school.
- Municipal Educational Institution "Special General Education Boarding School of VIII Type." This school provides education and upbringing for children with cognitive disabilities, including those with ASD. The institution has no kindergarten.
- Municipal (Combined) Educational Institution "School-Kindergarten No. 2." A general educational school-kindergarten for children with musculoskeletal disorders. This institution has both a kindergarten and a school.
- Municipal (Combined) Educational Institution "School-Kindergarten No. 44." A special educational institution for children with visual impairments. This institution also has both a kindergarten and a school.

Bender

- Municipal Educational Institution "Bender Special General Education Boarding School of VIII Type." Educating children with cognitive disabilities. The institution has no kindergarten.
- Public Educational Institution "Bender Special General Education Boarding School of III, IV, VII Types" (interviews were conducted here). Educating children with visual impairments and cognitive disabilities. One minibus for 17 passengers is provided for transporting children to school. There are 118 children enrolled in the school, and it includes kindergarten.

Slobozia

- Public Educational Institution "Glinoya Special General Education Boarding School for Orphans and Children without Parental Care, VIII Type." This school provides education for children with cognitive development delays, including those with autistic spectrum disorders. The institution has no kindergarten.

Dubasari

- Municipal Educational Institution "Special General Education Boarding School of VIII Type." There is no kindergarten. It educates and nurtures children with delays and impairments in cognitive development (interviews were conducted here). The school does not have its own

transport, but transportation can be requested from the Department of Education if children cannot arrive independently. The school has 108 students.

Ribnita

- Municipal Educational Institution "Ribnița Special General Education School-Kindergarten." A general educational school-kindergarten for children with musculoskeletal disorders.

ANNEX 2: Consent forms used for interviews with FGD's

CONSENT FORM – Children
Young person's name and surname: _____ Age of young person:_____ Contact info: _____ Phone number: _____ Email address: _____ Date: / / 2025 Town/Village: _____
I, _____ [name of young person], being a young person aged _____, do hereby grant my consent to participate in the online/offline consultation on _____ The preparatory work and the consultation will take place during the months of _____ Is there anything we should be aware of about you that might impact your participation in this consultation? Do you have any concerns we should be mindful of? (If NO, please circle this statement) (If YES, please specify): _____ _____ _____ Please let us know your emergency contact in the event of an accident or medical emergency.

Emergency contact name and surname:_____

Emergency contact phone number:_____

I understand that UNICEF is planning an online/offline consultation to generate insights that _____all the details about the aim of this exercise_____

I understand and agree that any input I provide during the consultation will be anonymized. Meeting notes and notes for the consultation will be taken and anonymized, and the participant list will not be shared externally. Participants will be allowed to use information shared during the consultation and preparatory meetings but not reveal the identity of the speaker or any other participant. Images, audio, or video recording captured during online consultations will be used for UNICEF internal purposes and record-keeping only. The recordings will be kept by one individual managing the consultations in UNICEF Headquarters, in a password-protected electronic storage. Recording by other participants will not be permitted.

For any further information, do not hesitate to contact us through this phone number _____

_____

Young person's signature

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Participant name and surname: _____

Age of participant: _____

Phone number of participant: _____

Parent/legal guardian name and surname: _____

Parent/legal guardian contact info: _____

Phone number of parent/legal guardian: _____

Email address: _____

Date: _____/_____ / 2025 Town/Village: _____

I, _____ [name of parent, guardian], being the parent or legal guardian of _____ with ID/Passport number _____, do hereby grant full

consent for my minor child to participate in the online/offline consultation on _____

The preparatory work and the consultation will take place during the months of XXXXXXX 2025.

Is there anything we should be aware of about your child that might impact on their participation in this consultation?

(If NO, please circle this statement)

(If YES, please specify): _____

Please let us know your child's emergency contact in the event of an accident or medical emergency.

Emergency contact name and surname: _____

Emergency contact phone number: _____

I understand that UNICEF/ partner organisation is planning an online consultation to generate insights that can guide practical recommendations and strengthen UNICEF's capacity to promote children's right_____ All the details about the aim of the consultation, how the results will be used.

I understand and agree that any input provided by children and young people during the consultations will be anonymized. Meeting notes and notes for the consultation will be taken and anonymized, and the participant list will not be shared externally. Participants will be allowed to use information shared at a meeting but not reveal the identity of the speaker or any other participant. Images, audio or video recording captured during online consultations will be used for UNICEF internal purposes and record keeping only. The recordings will be kept by one individual managing the consultations in UNICEF Headquarters, in a password-protected electronic storage. Recording by other participants will not be permitted.

For any further information, do not hesitate to contact us through this phone number: _____ [CO to enter contact information] or

_____

Adolescent name and signature

_____

Parent/legal guardian signature