UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN IN HUNGARY

Participatory Assessment Report

March – April 2025

Acknowledgements

This report presents the findings of a Participatory Assessment conducted by UNHCR in Hungary between March and April 2024, focusing on the educational experiences of refugee students from Ukraine.

UNHCR extends its sincere appreciation to its partners, schools, and civil society organizations across various cities of Hungary for their invaluable support in the completion of this report. Most importantly, UNHCR acknowledges the remarkable resilience and strength of forcibly displaced individuals in Hungary and remains committed to supporting them in rebuilding their lives, integrating into society, and pursuing opportunities within their communities.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH:
Tutoring class run by Unity Association, Hungary
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Executive Summary

This Participatory Assessment, conducted by UNHCR Hungary between March and April 2025, explores the experiences of refugee children from Ukraine within Hungary's public education system. Insights were gathered from eight focus group discussions and two key informant interviews across Budapest as well as Eastern and Western Hungary. A total of 51 participants contributed to the assessment, including 15 children, 25 caregivers, and 12 teachers. Only families with children enrolled full-time in Hungarian schools were included. This is relevant in view of the popularity of the Ukrainian online education or dual learning models. Teachers selected for participation had direct experience teaching refugee students.

The aim of this report is to highlight barriers, challenges, and recommendations related to the integration process, as seen through the perspectives of children, their caregivers, and teaching staff. The assessment included nine children in the lower grades of primary school (ages 6–10), and six in the upper grades (ages 11–14). Participants either held temporary protection status in Hungary or were Hungarian-Ukrainian nationals who had fled Ukraine on or after February 2022.

	Children	Parents	Teachers
Female	7	25	9
Male	8	0	3
Total	15	25	12

Key findings

- **Caregivers' Choices Regarding Public Education:** Caregivers' decision to enroll their children in Hungary's public education system were influenced by the mandatory in person schooling requirement, as well as the perceived benefits of in-person learning. Those who opted instead for Ukrainian online learning only cited concerns over language barriers affecting their child's well-being, as well as negative perceptions of the quality of education in Hungarian public schools.

These concerns were especially prevalent among caregivers of children enrolled in upper primary grades with little to no Hungarian language proficiency.

- **Access and Enrolment:** Children in lower primary grades were generally enrolled successfully by their caregivers. In some cases, NGOs and local authorities helped overcome linguistic and procedural barriers, while others relied on paid interpreters to navigate the Hungarian-only enrolment process. In contrast, children in upper primary grades reportedly faced language-related rejections from several schools, leading some families to choose full-time online Ukrainian education. Additionally, at one of the locations, Hungarian-speaking Ukrainian Roma families reported being placed in part-time school programs, while other refugee students were enrolled into regular mainstream classes. These parents expressed concerns about limited academic engagement and reduced attention from teachers.
- **Adapting to School Life:** Within the public school system, children's experiences with language acquisition, emotional well-being, and social integration varied depending on age and personality. Bullying and social isolation were reported, particularly among older children. Teachers noted that language challenges hindered classroom participation and identified the lack of structured language programs and teaching resources as major barriers to integration.
- **Support Systems:** All participating schools accessed state-funded individual development support for the integration of Ukraine children, including free meals and textbooks. While some schools benefitted from NGO partnerships offering extracurricular activities, systemic gaps remain in psychosocial support and in terms of guidance on Hungarian-as-a-second-language instruction and on catch-up classes. Teachers often relied on improvisation. Providing improved learning materials and methodological guidance for teachers could enhance the effectiveness of these efforts.
- **Stakeholder Recommendations:** Stakeholders recommended the introduction of preparatory Hungarian language classes, the hiring of Ukrainian-speaking staff, simplified entry exams for secondary and higher education, targeted psychosocial support, and improved identification and support for children with special needs.
- **Conclusion:** Support for refugee students in Hungary is inconsistent and largely dependent on the individual capacities of schools and teachers. To address the identified gaps and implement the recommendations voiced by participants, the report calls for coordinated institutional support, inclusive education policies, and increased staffing and resources at the school level.

Perception on access and school enrolment

Factors Influencing the Choice of Education Modalities

In Hungary and across the region, there has been steady progress in the enrolment of Ukrainian refugee children in formal education. Data from **UNHCR's Socio-Economic Insight Survey (SEIS**)[1] and the **Ukrainian Refugee Regional Education Dashboard**[2] show a gradual decline in the number of out-of-school children and a reduced reliance on online education. Nevertheless, a portion of Ukrainian children continue to follow either a dual model, combining in-person and online education, or exclusively, the Ukrainian online curriculum.

Caregivers expressed varied opinions about school choice and the value of in-person education. Those who enrolled their children in the Hungarian schools independently often strongly believed in the importance of in-person learning. In one case, local child welfare services informed a caregiver that Hungarian law requires children to be enrolled in school from the age of three and until the age of 16. In two locations, civil society organizations played a key role in informing families about mandatory schooling and supported them through the enrolment process.

"I am the grandmother of the children; We were accommodated by the municipality. Employees from the municipality came to check on the children and informed me that the younger one has to be enrolled to kindergarten. They shared contacts of the kindergarten with me. I provided all the documents (scanned copies were sent from Ukraine) that was necessary for the enrolment and he started kindergarten the next day." – Ukrainian grandmother, Budapest

[1] *Hungary : UNHCR's Socio-Economic Insight Survey, available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/112070 [accessed September 2025].*

[2] *UNESCO, Rebuilding the foundations of peace in Ukraine, available at: https://www.unesco.org/en/ukraine-war/education [accessed September 2025].*

Out of the 25 families interviewed, a few caregivers expressed a preference for online schooling, especially for younger children. In two cases, despite kindergarten attendance, caregivers hesitated to enroll their children in Hungarian primary schools due to language barriers, opting instead for Ukrainian online education:

"We didn't choose a local school because we were scared—it's a new school, a new country. Our child doesn't speak Hungarian. We decided to go with a Ukrainian online school. We don't know how long we'll stay in Hungary; we might return home soon." – Ukrainian mother, Eastern Hungary

Teenagers, particularly those aged 16 and older or in the final years of secondary school were more likely to continue with Ukrainian online education. In many cases, this reflected the child's own preference. However, parents voiced concerns about social isolation and the lack of friendships in Hungary. In two instances, teenagers were formally enrolled in Hungarian schools but rarely attended, continuing instead with Ukrainian online education, which both parents and students viewed as more beneficial at this stage.

"My eldest child completed the 11th grade online in Ukraine and has already started applying to a Hungarian university. She was not accepted into a Hungarian secondary school due to her limited Hungarian language skills and because she's in the final years of secondary education." –- Ukrainian mother, Budapest

In 17 out of the 25 cases where parents were consulted, children attended part-time programs in Hungarian schools. These programs were organized exclusively for them, with the aim of helping students catch up academically and learn the Hungarian language. However, these classes replaced the regular full-time curriculum and meant that they were learning separately from the Hungarian children. In one location, children participated in afternoon sessions only based on an agreement between the parents and the school; in another, attendance was limited to mornings. These children were placed in mixed-age classes focused mainly on drawing and basic Hungarian vocabulary. Some parents expressed concern that older children found these programs unengaging and might eventually stop attending altogether. There was also uncertainty about whether these programs would be officially recognized. Hungarian-speaking Ukrainian Roma parents, noted that in another school in the same city, Ukrainian-speaking non-Roma

children were integrated into mainstream classrooms, raising concerns about possible class segregation.

"My daughter is 15 years old and attends the local school. She is in a class with other Ukrainian children, many of whom are much younger than her. She says the classes are very boring—they mostly draw or watch cartoons. She often prefers to stay home because she's bored." – Hungarian-speaking mother, Eastern Hungary

Access and Enrolment

Parents reported smooth enrolment experiences for younger children (ages 6-10 years old) in lower primary grades. They generally expressed satisfaction with the school and kindergarten staff, who were described as open and supportive.

If any, the language barrier was identified as the main obstacle of the process. It was mainly resolved by parents turning to NGOs, volunteers for support or paid for interpretation and translation. Lack of Ukrainian language enrolment forms and support in filling them was also problematic which had to be solved by parents on their own. In the navigation of the administrative process, civil organizations were supporting the families, or the school provided some information about the required documents.

"The enrolment process with the school went well. I applied for the necessary documents and booked an interpreter for IOM. I submitted the documents without a problem; I had everything they needed. The vaccination documents I only had to submit in September not in April during the enrolment period." – Ukrainian parent, Budapest

For older children, language barriers were a more significant obstacle. One mother described how her older son, an 8th grader, was rejected by a school due to his lack of Hungarian language skills, while her younger son was enrolled within half an hour.

"We had very different experiences with enrolling them in schools here. My younger son was enrolled in a school within half an hour of applying. The older one was refused admission to the 8th grade, as it is the last grade, and he does not speak the language. The refusal to enrol the elder son in

a state school was received through the post office." – Ukrainian mother, Budapest

Additionally, Hungarian schools often place refugee children in lower grades they have already completed in Ukraine, aiming to give them time to learn Hungarian and adapt**.** While many caregivers accepted this approach, but they noted that not all children learn the language sufficiently within a year and may have to repeat the same grade again. Some parents were understanding:

"Every child needs time to adapt to a new language. My daughter attended afternoon catch-up classes for two years, which helped her tremendously. Although she had to repeat the first year in Hungary, she is now in 7th grade and speaks Hungarian well, has good average grades, and feels comfortable in her classroom. – Ukrainian mother, Budapest

Others were more critical, especially given the limited support for language learning which is discussed in the following section.

Adapting to the School Environment: Social, Emotional, Cultural and Learning challenges faced by refugee children

Support Measures for School Integration: Learning Challenges

In March 2022, the Hungarian government introduced school integration support providing HUF 130,000 per month per Ukrainian refugee student to public educational institutions.[3] This applies to students with temporary protection status or Hungarian-Ukrainian nationals who fled the war.[4] The funding is intended to cover a minimum of five hours of individual support per week, such as language or catch-up classes, in addition to regular education. Students are also entitled to free textbooks and school meals for the first six months with possible extensions. Most participating children report receiving Hungarian language instruction as part of their school curriculum, though the quality and frequency varied. Typically, students attended three to five extra Hungarian classes per week. Some also benefited from support provided by NGOs or Ukrainian-speaking

[3] *See Government Decree no. 299/2022 (VIII. 9.) on the financial support needed for the development, education – training of students eligible for temporary protection in the public education and vocational institutions, available in Hungarian at: https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a2200299.kor*

[4] *Dual Hungarian / Ukrainian nationals fleeing the war are also included based on Section 8 (1) of Government Decree no. 86/2022 (III. 7.) on the state of danger regulations for those eligible for temporary protection and of the different implementation of the Act CVI of 2011 on public labor and on other, related amended laws, available in Hungarian at: https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a2200086.kor*

volunteers either within schools or civil society organizations. Many children proudly shared that after 2–3 years in Hungarian schools, they could communicate in Hungarian.

"To help us integrate, there should be teachers in the school who speak Ukrainian. Teachers here don't speak Ukrainian nor English. Not necessarily as a class teacher but more like someone who can help us separately, in addition to classes." – Primary school student, Budapest.

Teachers consistently identified language barriers as the greatest challenge to educational integration. Children's progress in Hungarian varied depending on their age, language ability and length of stay. Teachers noted that younger children adapted more quickly, while older students struggled, especially when preparing for secondary school entrance exams or the secondary school final exam ("érettségi"), required for university admission in Hungary.

"The most painful thing to see is that these kids are very talented and smart. He (a Ukrainian boy) is really interested in mathematics and languages. It's hard to think about all the things he would be able to achieve if he was in an environment where he speaks the language." – Teacher, Budapest

Schools reported using the state-provided funding for catch-up and language classes but lacked professional guidance and capacity to address integration challenges effectively. The quality of support varied widely. In some schools, children were given tasks suited for much younger students due to the lack of appropriate teaching methods for Hungarian as a foreign language. Others offered more structured and effective language instruction.

Teachers also noted that while beginner-level Hungarian textbooks are provided for free, higher-level materials are unavailable or costly. As a result, many relied on ad hoc materials and peer-developed techniques. They recommended the development of state-funded textbooks and curricula for Hungarian as a foreign language, along with a preparatory program for language learning.

Another challenge is the additional workload for children who continue participating in Ukrainian online education, which can lead to overburdening and stress.

Techers also highlighted difficulties in identifying and supporting children with special education needs. Language barriers often obscure developmental challenges, delaying referrals and evaluations.

"It is hard to identify how much of their studying difficulties come from the language barrier and how much from developmental challenges. We can't really send them to the special pedagogical service until some time goes by and we get to know the children and understand their competencies." – Teacher, Budapest

Social, Emotional and Cultural Challenges

Several parents reported having positive relationships with teachers, describing them as helpful, attentive, open and dedicated. This created a relaxed and supportive atmosphere for children –often in contrast to their previous experiences in Ukraine. Parents used tools like Google translator, Facebook groups or English to communicate with teachers and regularly attended parent-teacher meetings. Some parents also shared that they are supported by local parents, mainly with in-kind donations.

Children's adaptation to the school environment varied widely, influenced by their age, school environment, family background, and personal characteristics. Despite language barriers, younger children were generally more open to connecting with peers, making inclusion and language learning easier.

"We went for the open day of the school. That was difficult for my daughter because it was the first experience where she didn't understand the language, but the teachers were very kind. When school started it was very challenging for her because she is very communicative. Now she speaks and communicates more and has good relations with both the teachers and classmates." - Ukrainian mother, Budapest

In contrast, older children often struggled more with peer relationships due to age-specific social dynamics, compounded by language barriers, and disrupted schooling - first due to the COVID-19 pandemic and later the war. Some parents reported that their children face bullying and exclusion.

"There were big problems. Children did not accept my daughter for some reason; one girl did not like my child very much .... she told my child to go to Ukraine... I did not bring my child from the war to be insulted here." **–** *Ukrainian mother, Budapest*

While children described positive interactions with teachers, many also shared experiences of alienation and hostility – from both peers and, at times, teachers. Some Hungarian students reportedly mocked or excluded refugee children, assuming they couldn't understand Hungarian. As a result, refugee children often formed friendships primarily with other Ukrainian-speaking peers both within and across classes.

A notable divide may also emerge between Ukrainian and Russian students in the same classroom, potentially affecting peer relationships and classroom dynamics due to underlying political tensions.

"In general, I like this school, but I have a Russian classmate who offended me, and I don't like it. He says he will beat me up. We have fought three times already. I told the teachers, and my parents talked to them as well, but nothing happened." – Primary school student, Budapest.

Recommendations

The integration of Ukrainian refugee children into Hungary's public education system remains a complex and evolving process. While many children and families have found supportive environments, significant challenges persist – particularly in the areas of language acquisition, psychosocial well-being, and institutional preparedness.

Support for refugee students varies widely, depending on the individual capacities of both the teachers and schools. Parents reported mixed experiences regarding their children's learning progress- some praised the support received in classrooms, while others expressed concern over ungraded extra-curricular programs that separate refugee students from their peers. Teachers voiced particular concern about students' ability to meet the requirements of secondary school final exams and university entrance exams, which are conducted in Hungarian. They also highlighted the need for pedagogical support, trauma-informed teaching materials, and state-funded Hungarian language resources at multiple proficiency levels.

Across consultations, children, parents, and teachers consistently called for a more coordinated and systemic approach to education—one that recognizes trauma, cultural diversity, and language barriers.

Key recommendations for relevant stakeholders include:

- Hungarian Language Preparation: Implement intensive preparatory Hungarian language programs before placing refugee children in mainstream classes. Provide all schools with the necessary resources, and standardized guidelines and teaching capacities to deliver intensive language programs.
- Pedagogical Support: Hire Ukrainian-speaking pedagogical assistants to support in the classroom.
- Mental Health Services: Employ Ukrainian-speaking psychologists in schools to provide direct support without the need for interpretation.
- Exam Accessibility: Simplify secondary school final exams for refugee and immigrant students with limited Hungarian proficiency.
- Parental Support: Offer psychosocial support for parents, particularly those facing financial and mental health challenges.
- Learning Materials: Provide state-funded textbooks and curricula for Hungarian as a foreign language, including materials for intermediate and advanced learners.

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