



## STUDY REPORT

# TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH ON EDUCATION QUALITY BARRIERS FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN POLAND, MOLDOVA, AND ROMANIA

Date: January 2025

Location: Poland, Moldova, Romania



**Save the Children**

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



**TRIANGLE**  
POLICY | RESEARCH | IMPACT

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## 1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## 2.ACRONYMS

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EU – European Union

FGD – Focus group discussion

ICA – Inter-Cultural Assistant

IDI – In-depth interview

I/NGOs – International/Non-Governmental Organizations

KII – Key informant interview

MHPSS – Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support

PLN – Polish Złoty

STC – Save the Children

QLF – Quality of Learning Framework

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

### 3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report explores the multifaceted barriers to quality education for Ukrainian refugee children aged 10–14 in Poland, Moldova, and Romania. Since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, millions of families have sought refuge across Europe, placing unprecedented demands on host nations' social and educational systems. Despite these challenges, the response has been extraordinary. Governments, civil society, and communities have collaborated to provide legal protections, housing, and educational access to displaced children, enabling many to continue their studies amidst upheaval.

Yet, three years after the full-scale invasion, tensions have surfaced. While online schooling connects children to Ukraine and maintains cultural ties, it isolates them from peers and limits their psychosocial development. In-person schooling, on the other hand, offers richer learning and socialization opportunities but is often hindered by language barriers, resource constraints, and logistical challenges. Refugee children and their caregivers are caught between these two modalities, grappling with impermanence and longing to return, while navigating complex educational systems.

#### KEY FINDINGS

This study reveals a complex interplay of systemic, structural, and social barriers that have shaped the educational experiences of Ukrainian refugee children.

At the **macro level**, the governments of Poland, Moldova, and Romania have made commendable efforts to create inclusive policies supporting refugee education. However, these policies often falter in implementation. Many educators and administrators lack the necessary training to address the needs of refugee children, and the dissemination of policy updates is frequently inconsistent, leaving schools and caregivers uncertain about available resources and processes. Resource shortages, particularly in rural areas, exacerbate these challenges, while language barriers and the scarcity of inter-cultural assistants hinder both educational access and social integration.

At the **meso level**, caregivers express a strong preference for in-person schooling, which they perceive as offering superior educational and social benefits. In fact, the survey results revealed that 21% of respondents were dissatisfied with the quality of in-person education compared to 39% who expressed dissatisfaction with online learning. Similar results came about when caregivers were asked about the quality of education in online learning compared to in-person schools, to which 59% either had a neutral opinion or thought that online learning provided less quality education than in-person.

However, barriers including inadequate transportation, disparities in school resources, and the persistent language challenges contributed to forcing children into online or dual modalities. These modalities, while offering continuity with the Ukrainian curriculum, contribute to a sense of impermanence and isolate children from their peers. Efforts to foster cultural integration, such as inter-cultural events and community activities, are unevenly implemented, limiting opportunities for Ukrainian children to build relationships and gain acceptance in their host communities. Shortages in MHPSS for Ukrainian refugee children persist, shown by how 9% and 3% of caregivers, respectively, responded that they did not know how to access such support or that the support was inaccessible.

At the **micro level**, the emotional and psychological toll of displacement presents significant hurdles for refugee children, particularly adolescents. These children often feel caught between adapting to their host environments and maintaining connections to Ukraine. The dual modality reinforces this tension, as families grapple

with the uncertainty of their long-term plans. Stigma surrounding mental health services further complicates efforts to provide the necessary psychosocial support, leaving many children without the resources they need to cope with their circumstances.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these barriers, this report advocates for a coordinated and comprehensive response from national and international governments, civil society, and international organizations and donors. The recommendations are both pan-national, corresponding to the shared barriers to quality education across Moldova, Romania, and Poland, and where relevant, country-specific, reflecting contextual nuances and specificities. Policy implementation must be strengthened by ensuring that educators and administrators receive clear guidance and training. Centralized data systems are needed to track refugee children's educational needs and enrolment status, enabling more effective resource allocation.

Language support is a critical area of focus. Expanding access to language classes, bilingual learning materials, and inter-cultural assistants (ICAs) will help bridge gaps in understanding and integration, particularly in rural areas. Teachers must also be equipped with trauma-informed and inclusive teaching strategies to better support refugee students in overcoming the challenges they face.

Efforts to foster social integration and well-being must be scaled up. Cultural exchange activities and extracurricular programs should be prioritized to create spaces for interaction and community building. Mental health and psychosocial support services must be made more accessible, with a focus on cultural and linguistic appropriateness to ensure that children and their caregivers can fully benefit from these resources.

The disparities between urban and rural areas demand urgent attention. Rural schools require targeted investments in infrastructure, transportation, and partnerships with NGOs to close the gap in educational opportunities. Moreover, guidance should be provided to families on transitioning between educational modalities, as well as on pathways to vocational training and higher education, to help children envision a stable and fulfilling future.

International donors and governments can contribute to preparing the local school systems in Moldova, Romania, and Poland for the transition of Ukrainian refugee children from online to in-person schooling. From a funding perspective, major gaps include ICA positions in schools, bi-lingual textbooks, and free language classes, data and information systems which are streamlined and enable communication between all stakeholders, and the provision of inter-cultural and extra-curricular activities for Ukrainian children aged 10 - 14. From a policy perspective, these actors could use their leverage to support the governments of Moldova, Romania, and Poland in institutionalising assessments of Ukrainian children's educational level upon enrolment, to ensure appropriate classroom placements, integrating socio-emotional learning into school curriculums, in Romania, removing the auditor status to enhance the classroom inclusion of Ukrainian children.

## CONCLUSION

Ensuring quality education is accorded to all Ukrainian refugees and their host community peers is a complex challenge that requires sensitivity and collective commitment. No one can predict the course of the war in Ukraine, but what is clear is that every child deserves to learn, thrive, and belong. As stakeholders work together to overcome these barriers, they must act with urgency and empathy, recognizing that education is not only a right but a lifeline for children enduring displacement.

## 4. BACKGROUND

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Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, over six million Ukrainian refugees fled the country with many seeking protection in neighbouring countries, including Poland, Moldova, and Romania, constituting Europe's fastest-growing refugee crisis since World War Two.<sup>1</sup> Women and children make up around 90% of the displaced,<sup>2</sup> with most Ukrainian men staying behind in Ukraine to fight in the war. Poland, hosting the greatest number of Ukrainian refugees of all other countries, has over 1.5 million Ukrainians registered for temporary protection<sup>3</sup>, whereas Moldova, currently hosting more Ukrainian refugees per capita than any other country receiving Ukrainian refugees, has around 110,000 registered refugees.<sup>4</sup> Romania on the other hand hosts approximately 78,400 Ukrainian refugees as of January 2024.<sup>5</sup>

The support provided to Ukrainian refugee children and families by the governments of Poland, Moldova, and Romania has been both considerable and commendable. Namely, the governments of Poland and Romania granted temporary protection status to refugees in accordance with the Council of the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive activated in March 2022. This Directive, in theory, ensures that EU member states grant Ukrainian refugee children "access to the education system under the same conditions as nationals of the host Member State."<sup>6</sup> In line with the EU's Directive, Moldova adopted parallel legislation and a temporary protection scheme for Ukrainian refugees. Despite such legislative and regulatory protection, many Ukrainian refugee children still struggle to access education, or receive quality education, in their host countries due to various challenges.

Indeed, (in)access to education plays a key role in influencing whether Ukrainian children can continue their learning and ensure mental health and physical well-being. It remains a relevant point of concern considering that by the end of 2022/2023 academic year, only 56% (Poland), 4% (Moldova) and 10% (Romania) of Ukrainian children were enrolled in local schools in their respective host countries.<sup>7</sup> Ukrainian children have already faced disruption in their education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by displacement caused by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. In addition, the ongoing violence stemming from the Russian full-scale invasion, now over two and a half years long, impacts Ukrainian refugee children's ability to access high-quality education in a safe and supportive learning environment. After all, Ukrainian refugee children have been exposed to conflict, displacement, and social isolation. These experiences put significant strain on their mental health and safety, making it difficult for them to integrate into their new school environments and meaningfully engage in learning.<sup>8</sup>

In Poland, Moldova, and Romania, there are two main modalities used by Ukrainian children to access education. The first is online studies, conducted from Ukraine and which uses the Ukrainian school curriculum, and the second is children's enrolment in the national education system of the host nation, taught according to the national

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1 ReliefWeb. "NGOs Mark One Year of the Activation of the Temporary Protection Directive and Call for Continued Support for Refugees from Ukraine." ReliefWeb. Published March 7, 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/ngos-mark-one-year-activation-temporary-protection-directive-and-call-continued-support-refugees-ukraine>

2 UNESCO. "Poland's Support for the Education of Ukrainian Refugees." UNESCO. Accessed August 21, 2024. <https://www.unesco.org/en/ukraine-war/education/poland-support>

3 Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców (Office for Foreigners), Raport na temat obywateli Ukrainy" (as of July 31, 2024). <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/2afdb375-d952-478f-8288-73ab3fe32b83>

4 UNHCR. "Moldova." Operational Data Portal: Refugee Situations. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/MDA>

5 UNHCR. "Romania: Ukraine Refugee Situation Update - Weekly Update #82 (5 February 2024)." ReliefWeb. Published February 5, 2024. <https://reliefweb.int/report/romania/unhcr-romania-ukraine-refugee-situation-update-weekly-update-82-5-february-2024>

6 ReliefWeb. "Prioritizing School Enrolments for Ukraine Refugee Children in Moldova, Poland, and Romania (September 2023)." ReliefWeb. Published September 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/prioritizing-school-enrolments-ukraine-refugee-children-moldova-poland-and-romania-september-2023>

7 ReliefWeb. "Prioritizing School Enrolments for Ukraine Refugee Children in Moldova, Poland, and Romania (September 2023)." ReliefWeb. Published September 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/prioritizing-school-enrolments-ukraine-refugee-children-moldova-poland-and-romania-september-2023>

8 UNICEF. The Impact of the War in Ukraine on Children. UNICEF Report, 2022.

curriculum and in the local language. Many children in each country follow both online and in-person modalities, the “dual modality”. Nonetheless, limited availability of data which sheds light on the percentage of Ukrainian refugee children enrolled in each modality, including those who are not enrolled in any form of education at all, is a wide-spread problem across the three countries. This problem is made worse by the lack of accurate tracking or monitoring systems, thereby impeding effective policy making.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the above, each country has unique modalities: in Romania, Ukrainian children can also be enrolled in the education system as auditors, until they pass a Romanian language course; in Poland, a small number of educational hubs or Ukrainian schools have been established; and in Moldova, Russian and Ukrainian-speaking schools, which are available within the national schooling system for refugees, are more common than in Poland or Romania. Both within each country and between the three countries, Ukrainian refugee children, therefore, have highly heterogeneous learning experiences and levels of exposure to interactive and social activities with peers, teachers, inter-cultural assistants, and other educational professionals. Further, and will be explored in this research, differences in cultural, political, institutional, and socio-economic contexts across the three countries inevitably influence the learning experiences and outcomes of Ukrainian refugee children in unique and diverse ways. Overall, the wide spectrum of experiences and factors underpinning quality of education complicates the task of devising harmonized multi-country and national policies to enhance Ukrainian refugee children’s attainment of quality education and safeguard their well-being.

## THE RESPONSE OF SAVE THE CHILDREN TO THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Save the Children (STC) has been at the forefront of responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis by providing life-saving assistance and longer-term aid to children and families affected by displacement and war. Working with its partners, by end-2023, STC had reached over 870,000 children in Ukraine and 297,000 children across Romania, Moldova, Poland, and Lithuania.<sup>10</sup> In terms of direct education support and mental and physical well-being, Save the Children has provided educational materials and assistance to help integrate Ukrainian children into national schools, distributed immediate relief through food, hygiene products, and cash, and offered language classes and activities designed to support mental health and emotional well-being.

One year on from the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, STC had reached around 125,200 Ukrainian refugee children in Romania.<sup>11</sup> Concerning education and welfare for children displaced to Romania, STC has offered social, recreational, and educational services through Child Friendly Spaces and Mother and Baby Areas, coupled with cash and vouchers assistance to facilitate children in accessing distance education.<sup>12</sup> In 2022, STC worked across eight Counselling Hubs, 10 border crossings, and eight accommodation centres and camps in Romania.<sup>13</sup> Up to date, in Poland, STC had reached around 122,622 Ukrainian displaced children. The support provided in Poland included cash and voucher assistance and cash for shelter provided to 4,111 children; support for 98,151 children to access safe, quality, and inclusive education, and the establishment of Child Friendly Spaces,

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<sup>9</sup> UNESCO. “Poland’s Support for the Education of Ukrainian Refugees.” UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/ukraine-war/education/poland-support> ; Refugees International. “Preparing for the Unpredictable: Ensuring the Protection and Inclusion of Refugees from Ukraine in Romania and Moldova.” Refugees International. Published May 2023. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/preparing-for-the-unpredictable-ensuring-the-protection-and-inclusion-of-refugees-from-ukraine-in-romania-and-moldova/>

<sup>10</sup> Save the Children. “Children in Ukraine: Two Years into War.” Save the Children. Published February 22, 2024. <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2024/children-in-ukraine-two-years-into-war>.

<sup>11</sup> Save the Children. Donor Impact Report: Ukraine Response One Year On, February 2023. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Donor-Impact-Report-Ukraine-Response-One-Year-On-February-2023.pdf/>

<sup>12</sup> Save the Children, Ukraine Crisis: 6 Months of Impact on Children (Norway: Save the Children, 2021), [https://www.reddbarna.no/content/uploads/2021/01/Ukraine-Crisis-6-months\\_Annakontakt.pdf](https://www.reddbarna.no/content/uploads/2021/01/Ukraine-Crisis-6-months_Annakontakt.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Save the Children. Donor Impact Report: Ukraine Response One Year On, February 2023. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Donor-Impact-Report-Ukraine-Response-One-Year-On-February-2023.pdf/>

reaching 20,360 children across Poland.<sup>14</sup> In Moldova, STC, operating with and through its in-country partners, has set up child-friendly spaces where children can receive psychological and emotional support, helping them recover from the trauma of conflict. These spaces also serve as environments where children can engage in play, learning, and socialization, offering a sense of normalcy amidst the upheaval. STC and its partners in Moldova also maintained operational medical clinics and counselling services for vulnerable or at-risk people (aged 10 – 24 years old), such as mothers, pregnant women, and Ukrainian refugees.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

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Recognising the complex array of factors influencing children’s ability to effectively learn and thrive, this research sought to go beyond identifying access barriers to education for Ukrainian refugee children. As such, this study explored additional dimensions of ‘quality’ education, including mental health, psychosocial, and structural barriers, for children aged 10-14 in Poland, Moldova, and Romania. This was achieved by incorporating the perspectives and experiences of Ukrainian refugee children and their caregivers, teachers, and other professionals, as well as considering the role of in-person and online schooling, communities, governments, and other actors in shaping their educational and well-being environments.

The purpose of conducting this research is three-fold:

- 1. To assess the quality of education and learning of Ukrainian refugee children aged 10-14 in Poland, Moldova, and Romania**
- 2. To identify education access and quality barriers for marginalized groups**
- 3. To develop and recommend strategies to enhance support systems and educational policies for improving the learning environment and outcomes of Ukrainian refugee children.**

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three overarching research questions pertaining to this research are as follows, with the related sub-questions enclosed in the Annex:

- 1. To assess the quality of, and access to education and learning of Ukrainian children aged 10-14.**
- 2. To understand the well-being of Ukrainian children, and if their safety, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and child protection needs are met.**
- 3. To understand education access and quality for marginalized groups.**

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<sup>14</sup> Save the Children. Donor Impact Report: Ukraine Response One Year On, February 2023. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Donor-Impact-Report-Ukraine-Response-One-Year-On-February-2023.pdf/>

<sup>15</sup> Moldova Save the Children

## 6. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

### 6.1. Conceptual framework

In response to the complex educational barriers faced by Ukrainian refugees due to protracted conflict and displacement, a holistic and comprehensive approach to assessing ‘quality education’ has guided this research. Accordingly, Save the Children’s Quality of Learning (QLF) Framework is applied. This framework goes beyond access barriers to education by also incorporating perspectives on the learning and psychosocial needs of displaced children in Poland, Moldova, and Romania across five enabling factors: Inclusion, Access, Coordination, Systems, and Policy:



The framework’s comprehensive approach addresses the multifaceted nature of refugee education, which includes fluctuating access to physical schools, the integration of online learning, and the need for psychosocial support. As such, the QLF encompasses elements related to emotional and psychosocial protection, physical protection, teaching and learning, parents and community engagement, and school leadership and management. By focusing on both immediate and long-term educational needs, the framework supports a preventative strategy against the escalation of mental health issues while ensuring the quality of education remains high.

In the regional context of Poland, Moldova, and Romania, the QLF's emphasis on inclusive policies and community engagement is particularly relevant. Each country presents unique challenges and opportunities in the educational integration of refugee children, necessitating tailored approaches that are sensitive to local conditions yet underpinned by the QLF principles.

The five pillars of the QLF informed the systematic mapping out of the core and sub-research questions, providing a structured template for the analysis and recommendations.

## 6.2. METHODOLOGY\*

By applying the Quality Learning Framework, this research has adopted a participatory and inclusive approach, employing mixed methods to engage research subjects and generate data for analysis and reporting. The research process was conducted along four overlapping phases: Inception, data collection, findings presentation, and analysis and reporting.

The mixed methodological approach consisted of qualitative and quantitative data. An in-depth literature review was conducted, providing secondary data from existing reports and studies, on enrolment, access barriers, and where relevant, legislative changes in each country. The secondary data has informed and verified the primary data.

All research tools were developed drawing on insights from the literature review. The research team designed semi-structured questionnaires to prioritise key information for gathering perspectives from adolescents and caregivers. These questionnaires, along with other tools, were submitted to and approved by Save the Children's ethics committee before deployment. The quantitative survey was designed to complement qualitative data collection by triangulating findings from key informant interviews (KIIs), in-depth interviews (IDIs), and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Over the course of the research, 44 KIIs, 7 IDIs, and 15 FGDs were conducted, followed by a quantitative survey with 570 caregivers. The detailed disaggregation is enclosed in Annex A.

### QUALITATIVE METHODS:

#### Key Informant Interviews (KII)

Semi-structured KIIs were conducted with key individuals knowledgeable in the education, protection and mental health sectors in Moldova, Romania, and Poland. These included educators, psychologists, government officials, and non-governmental response actors, providing critical insights into the broader systemic and policy-related aspects of the situation.

#### Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

FGDs were conducted with Ukrainian caregivers and children aged 10-14 to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with the local and online education, protection and mental health support systems. For discussions involving children, child-friendly approaches and methods were employed to create a safe and supportive environment, ensuring meaningful participation.

#### In-depth interviews (IDIs)

IDIs were conducted to safely and comprehensively engage vulnerable groups, focusing on children living in institutions or care settings, as well as out-of-school children or those with limited access to education.

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\* The field work was conducted between September and December 2024.

These interviews aimed to capture nuanced insights into their experiences and challenges, ensuring their voices were represented in the research findings.

## QUANTITATIVE METHODS:

**Survey:** The survey was conducted with caregivers of Ukrainian refugee children to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences with education, protection, and mental health services for their children. It aimed to identify the challenges they faced in accessing these services, as well as their perceptions of the support systems available to Ukrainian refugee families. Due to sampling limitations, the data is not representative at the individual country level. As a result, the analysis combines findings from all three countries to provide a unified perspective, complementing the qualitative insights gathered through other research methods.

Those caregivers of Ukrainian children who pursue the dual modality were asked two separate sets of questions - one related to the in-person school and the other about their online education. For this reason, answers from caregivers of children studying the dual modality are represented twice, as shown in the corresponding figures.

## 6.3. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Throughout the research process, certain limitations were identified which need to be taken into account when considering both the findings and recommendations. The main limitations and mitigation measures of this project include:

**Access constraints:** Accessing certain vulnerable groups, such as children staying in remote facilities, children with significant disabilities or families on the move, was challenging and not always possible. To address this, interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations working closely with these groups when direct access was unattainable. While this provided valuable insights, it may not fully reflect the lived experiences of the groups themselves.

**Representation in quantitative data:** While the survey achieved strong representation at a global level across three countries, it was less representative at the national level due to sampling limitations. Therefore, data analysis combined findings from all three countries to present a unified perspective, ensuring meaningful interpretation of the results.

**Potential social desirability bias:** Topics related to accessing education, protection, and mental health services can be sensitive, leading to potential social desirability bias in participants' responses. To mitigate this, the survey was conducted anonymously, encouraging participants to provide more honest and candid feedback, while findings were triangulated between methods to ensure credibility.

**Scoping and age group focus:** The research specifically targeted children aged 10–14. However, caregivers participating in the study often discussed their experiences with children outside the target age range or generalised their perspectives. Facilitators were trained to re-direct conversations toward the target group to maintain focus, but some level of generalisation may still be reflected in the data.

**Scope of the research:** The assessment of curricula was not included in the original design of this research, as it would have significantly broadened the scope and required a separate, dedicated study. However, where participants voluntarily reported observations or experiences related to curricula during the interviews and discussions, these insights were documented and included in the analysis to provide additional context to the findings.

## 6.4. ETHICS AND SAFEGUARDING PROCEDURES

Given the sensitive nature of the research, which involved working with individuals (including minors) with refugee experiences, a multi-layered approach was adopted to ensure high ethical standards throughout the research process and prioritise the best interests and safety of all participants. This included:

**Ethical oversight:** The research received approval from Save the Children’s ethics committee, ensuring adherence to global standards for research ethics, particularly when working with vulnerable groups.

**Partner safeguarding protocols:** In addition to Save the Children’s procedures, Triangle employed its own safeguarding policies, further reinforcing ethical practices at every stage of the project.

**Comprehensive training for field staff:** All field staff, including enumerators and facilitators, received extensive training on ethics and safeguarding principles. This training covered topics such as child protection, conflict sensitivity, informed consent, referral pathways, and Do-No-Harm principles, equipping the team to handle sensitive situations with care and professionalism.

All safeguarding protocols were designed to mitigate risks and ensure the protection and dignity of participants, particularly children and other vulnerable groups.

## 7. MAIN FINDINGS

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The systems-focused approach of the Quality of Learning conceptual framework has informed the structure of this main findings section. Accordingly, this section examines the barriers and opportunities for Ukrainian refugee children in accessing quality education in Poland, Moldova, and Romania. Using a systems-focused approach, the findings are structured across three interconnected levels—macro, meso, and micro—to highlight the broader systemic factors, community-level dynamics, and individual experiences shaping the educational landscape for these children.

### **Macro Level: Policies and Structural Barriers**

The macro level explores the policy frameworks, legislation, and systemic mechanisms implemented by host governments to facilitate the inclusion of Ukrainian refugee children in local education systems. This section focuses on themes such as policy design versus implementation gaps, resource allocation, and the role of institutional actors like schools and NGOs. It addresses challenges such as inconsistent information dissemination, inadequate training for educators, and language barriers, as well as the impact of resource disparities between urban and rural settings. The macro findings reveal how these structural elements influence access to education and integration efforts on a broad scale.

### **Meso Level: Community and School Dynamics**

The meso level delves into the interactions and dynamics at the district and community levels, including schools, local authorities, and families. It examines how decisions made within these settings—such as enrolment practices, language support programs, and extracurricular activities—affect the experiences of Ukrainian children. Key themes include satisfaction with learning modalities (in-person, online, and dual), disparities in resources and opportunities between rural and urban schools, and the effectiveness of cultural integration initiatives. This section also highlights the pivotal role of schools and community actors in addressing barriers and fostering inclusion through targeted programs and activities.

### Micro Level: Individual and Household Perspectives

The micro level focuses on the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugee children and their caregivers. It provides insights into how displacement, trauma, and uncertainty impact children's ability to learn, adapt, and integrate. Themes include the psychosocial challenges faced by children, such as feelings of isolation, stigma around mental health, and the stress of navigating dual education modalities. This section also considers the influence of family dynamics, cultural ties to Ukraine, and individual aspirations on educational outcomes. The findings underscore the importance of tailored support to address the unique needs of children at this level.

Together, these levels offer a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to quality education for Ukrainian refugee children while highlighting opportunities for systemic improvements and targeted interventions.

## 7.1. MACRO LEVEL

**The governments of Moldova, Romania and Poland have adopted cross-cutting legislation and policies that seek to provide free education and housing, legal protection, and social security to Ukrainian refugee families. Nonetheless, in some respects, there is a disconnect between the legislation and the practical implementation, creating access and inclusion barriers for Ukrainian refugee children.**

In Moldova, the 2023 legislation,<sup>16</sup> on the one hand, simplified the requirements for temporary protection, facilitating Ukrainian children's automatic access to housing, healthcare, and education. The legislation also removed the "auditor"<sup>17</sup> status previously assigned to Ukrainian children in in-person schools, promoting their classroom inclusion by enabling them to fully participate in class and access the same resources and programs as Moldovan students without distinction. On the other hand, under Moldovan law Ukrainian families' social protection rights depend on proving their place of residence, excluding many who are often 'on the move'.<sup>18</sup>

Ukrainian refugee children based in Romania are initially enrolled as "auditors" in the national school system, unless they already have a strong command of Romanian language in which case they will be enrolled directly as students. In this study, it was found that, compared to local children, the auditor status restricts Ukrainian children's access to certain resources, including scholarships, school supplies, and the "Bread and Milk" program.<sup>19</sup> Access barriers arose in Poland following the legislation that came into force in September 2024, which conditioned the 800 PLN/ child/ month on Ukrainian refugee children's enrolment in local schools, leading to their influx into the Polish school system. A mismatch between demand for and supply of school spaces following this legislation change came about. According to STC, this mismatch was particularly acute in rural-based schools as more accommodation centers for refugees are located outside the towns or cities, resulting in a higher number of children accessing a limited number of schools in rural areas. Primarily, these barriers arose because schools lacked preparation and accurate data on Ukrainian student numbers and geographical distribution, impeding their ability to make in-advanced preparations.

**Information dissemination and guidance on policy changes were not always clear or effective, contributing to access and inclusion barriers.** According to numerous I/NGOs, ICAs, and educational authorities across the three countries, this so-called information gap compounds enrolment barriers, the poor implementation of policies, and confusion among Ukrainian caregivers and children regarding how to access available

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<sup>16</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/ukraine-situation-republic-moldova-operations-update-september-2023>

<sup>17</sup> Auditor status enables children to observe the classroom teachings but not participate nor sit exams.

<sup>18</sup> 'On the move' refers to those Ukrainian families who frequently travel between host countries, between host countries and Ukraine, or internally within a host country. According to UNHCR 2022 data, around 10% of Ukrainian refugees in Moldova chose to remain, highlighting the particularly high mobility of Ukrainian families who seek refuge in Moldova. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/MDA>

<sup>19</sup> A state-funded program that provides free milk and bread to pupils.

services. In Moldova, while qualitative data highlighted numerous positive experiences with information dissemination by the Ministry of Education to local educational authorities, schools, and caregivers,<sup>20</sup> gaps remain. For instance, UNHCR data revealed that as of June 2024, only 2,325 Ukrainian children were enrolled in Moldovan schools, constituting only 16% of school-age children granted temporary protection and only 4% of all Ukrainian children reportedly present in the country.<sup>21</sup> While UNESCO identified language barriers and the intention of many Ukrainian families to return home as key factors contributing to the low enrolment rate, this study also found that uneven distribution of information regarding enrolment processes and available school support, such as assistance with exams, underpins this pattern. Additionally, limited clarity or guidance for caregivers on the options available for their children to join online or in-person schooling was identified as a further contributor to the low in-person school enrolment rate. This finding is further supported by this study's qualitative data, with some teachers and school staff reporting they had to independently navigate and interpret policy changes due to perceived inadequate guidance from authorities.

***“The fact that online schooling remains an available option can contribute to the confusion of caregivers on what education system to choose, and this impacts the low enrolment in in-person schooling.”***

***KII high-level INGO, Moldova***

Government policies and support mechanisms in Romania are primarily communicated through County School Inspectorates. However, school staff and directors reported in this study that this information is often unclear, insufficient, or informally conveyed, creating ambiguities for schools, teachers, parents, and service providers. Limited coordination with the inspectorates leaves school principals struggling to support Ukrainian students, particularly in transitioning them from auditor to pupil status. This lack of clear guidance results in inconsistencies in the duration Ukrainian children remain auditors, causing them to miss critical learning and participation opportunities.

***“We need to know exactly what the situation is with Ukrainian children, are they auditors or not, what rights they have, what responsibilities they have, that is to say, we need to have a clearer understanding of these policies.”***

***KII Local School Teacher, Romania***

Policy guidance and information sharing from the Polish authorities can be poorly translated and lack contextual relevance. This may leave Ukrainian caregivers struggling to comprehend unfamiliar terms or instructions, as was the case following the 2024 legislative change. According to an INGO, caregivers were confused regarding their rights and children's school enrolment processes, despite enrolment being suddenly mandatory. Similarly, some school staff reported that were left to independently seek updates on policy changes, such as examination requirements for Ukrainian students, due to the absence of a systemized approach to sharing information. These shortcomings created further access and inclusion barriers. Lastly, some school inspectors reported being unaware of the option or process to apply for critical school resources such as ICAs. As a result, they did not apply, citing a lack of official instruction or guidance from the authorities.

Despite these challenges, I/NGOs played a pivotal role in addressing communication gaps in all three countries, often acting as intermediaries between authorities and schools and facilitating policy implementation.

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20 Numerous high-level KIIs reported how after the significant policy change in September 2023, the Ministry of Education, supported by I/NGOs, distributed provisions and circulars via social media networks to schools and organised training sessions of workshops with experts to familiarise teachers with implementing new documents or policies.

21 UNHCR. Moldova: Refugee Response Plan 2023–2024. October 26, 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/112267>

**Disparities in statutory training for professionals working with Ukrainian refugee children hamper their ability to provide effective emotional support and deliver quality education.** In Moldova, Romania, and Poland, statutory training for school staff and professionals which specialise in trauma-sensitive education, inter-cultural communication, and effective language support for non-native speakers were rarely provided. This, combined with insufficient numbers of assistant teachers or inter-cultural assistants (ICAs), often left teachers ill-equipped to effectively support Ukrainian and local children alike. Specifically, teachers struggled to consistently provide quality education, address cultural tensions between Ukrainian children and local students, and offer the emotional support needed for integration. For example, in Romania, while teachers reported having experience observing and identifying emotional instability or distress in children, they lack formal training to respond appropriately to such situations.

*“Teachers who work with refugee children - they learned as they went along, nobody gave them any instructions, nobody trained them in this.”*

*KII Educational Local Authority, Moldova*

**In parallel with minimal statutory training, nationwide guidance on safety measures and safeguarding are not institutionalised in schools.** National authorities across Moldova, Romania, and Poland provide guidance on safeguarding, and schools have safeguarding regulations in place. However, the extent to which a system to monitor, report, and respond to safeguarding concerns is institutionalised and operational remains unclear. Qualitative data from Moldova indicates that while robust case management of child protection cases is being increasingly implemented across schools, a safeguarding mechanism within the education system is often addressed on a case-by-case basis, sometimes with support from external NGOs. Another identified gap was the lack of refresher trainings and updated courses for teachers on safeguarding, psychosocial teaching, and first aid, hindering school staff’s ability to manage any difficult circumstance or situation with children. Nonetheless, in Romania, the data implied that nationwide child protection guidance outlines clear responsibilities and procedures for addressing incidents at the school level. This year, the national plan for preventing violence in schools was updated, incorporating improved case management. Each school has a dedicated commission for prevention, and the government has established a specialized police department to ensure school safety.

**The provision of resources required to overcome the language barrier, namely ICAs, free language classes, and bilingual learning materials, were often in short supply.** Classroom-present ICAs were deemed critical by teachers, school directors, and psychologists for Ukrainian children’s school integration and mental health well-being, ability to ‘catch up’, and overall attainment of quality education at the children’s appropriate educational levels. However, funding for ICA positions is limited across Romania, Poland and Moldova, especially in rural areas. In fact, rural schools frequently lack ICAs or resources dedicated to supporting non-native speakers, which adds to the burden on general educators or teachers who are likely to lack specialized training to teach to non-native speakers. While in Poland it was recommended by school ICAs and teachers to have one ICA per classroom, there were examples of one ICA position catering for 60 to 100 Ukrainian children and their caregivers.

**Free language classes in each of Moldova, Romania and Poland for Ukrainian children and their caregivers varied in accessibility.** In Moldova, such classes, and especially Romanian language classes, provided officially by schools and teachers were reported to be insufficient both in terms of availability and the number of hours offered. This reflects the limited capacity of schools and teachers to be able to provide such support.<sup>22</sup> For the 2023-2024 school year in Poland, the availability of statutory-provided Polish language classes was reduced from six hours to four hours per week for Ukrainian refugees compared to the previous school year. In addition, these classes are available only to children enrolled in schools. On the one hand, this

22 UNESCO, “Education in the Republic of Moldova in Support of Ukrainian Refugees,” accessed December 11, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/ukraine-war/education/republic-moldova-support>.

change was considered less favourable for students with the time and capacity to attend longer Polish classes, particularly those studying exclusively in in-person schools. On the other hand, the reduction in Polish language hours had little impact on students in dual or online modalities, as these classes were often non-obligatory, and they lacked the time to participate.

*“It would be helpful if my child had access to more resources for learning the local language.”*  
*FGD Participant – Caregiver, Rural Moldova*

**Bilingual textbooks and translations were considered pivotal by teachers, educational experts, and caregivers for helping Ukrainian children follow learnings and participate in the classroom. Despite this, these resources were often absent from classrooms.** For instance, while easier to access in Bucharest in Romania than rural areas, bilingual learning materials remained largely unavailable.

## 7.2. MESO LEVEL

**Each of the three learning modalities - in-person schooling, online Ukrainian schooling, and dual modality - carry distinct barriers to quality education for Ukrainian refugee children.** These distinctions are reflected in variation among caregiver satisfaction and perceptions, as well as the experiences and opinions from the different educators, MHPSS professionals, and children themselves.

**Overall, survey results showed that caregivers were more satisfied with the quality of education their children receive in in-person schools compared to in online classes.** A total of 21% of respondents were dissatisfied with the quality of in-person education compared to 39% who expressed dissatisfaction with online learning.

Similar results came about when caregivers were asked about the quality of education in online learning compared to in-person schools, to which 59% either had a neutral opinion or thought that online learning provided less quality education than in-person.

*“Children have lost essential cognitive skills and the ability to concentrate due to online learning, disrupting their overall educational progress.”*  
*KII School Director, Moldova*

**Psychologists and (educational) professionals across the three countries caution that exclusive participation in online courses may have several long-term effects on children’s educational outcomes, socialization, and psychosocial development.** Specifically, these professionals acknowledged that knowledge and cognitive development are hindered, as children struggle with concentration, attention, and overall engagement in learning, leading to declines in academic performance and social skills. Moreover, the lack of in-person interactions with peers led to social isolation, depriving Ukrainian refugee children of opportunities to build relationships and practice essential social skills. This isolation hindered their ability to adapt to new environments, communicate their feelings about displacement or other hardships, and develop coping mechanisms for permanent change. In addition, online learners, especially children who are poorly integrated within their community, are more vulnerable to protection risks in the absence of trusted adults, like school staff, to whom they could otherwise report concerns or incidents. By extension, protection concerns, such as abuse at home, may go undetected due to the lack of adults who can oversee the child.

*“Online learning excludes Ukrainian children from contacts with their Polish peers, which makes them speak the language less; they have fewer contacts, which effects their isolation.”*  
*KII NGO, Poland*

## SPOTLIGHT:

### Ukrainian refugee children with disabilities in Moldova, Romania, and Poland

Ukrainian refugee children with disabilities in Poland, Romania, and Moldova face significant structural and bureaucratic barriers to accessing appropriate education and disability support and being integrated into mainstream education, where possible.

While two educational options are available for children with disabilities in Poland—enrolment in public schools or separate institutions for children with disabilities,—many caregivers remain unaware of these options. According to the qualitative data, this lack of awareness can result in missed enrolment deadlines for the separate institutions, which may, however, be more appropriate for children with severe disabilities. Local schools are sometimes unaware of the option to apply for extra funding, resources, and specialised teachers for children with disabilities enrolled for the upcoming school year. Without these essential inputs, the school system faces resource gaps, placing additional strain on local schools and disadvantaging children’s access to quality education. However, in Poland, children must present a specific diagnosis certificate to be eligible for enrolment in dedicated schools for children with disabilities. Obtaining this official documentation – essential for accessing extra resources and support - is challenging due to long waiting times and high fees for private psychiatric consultations, consuming a significant portion of the financial benefits received by caregivers. Many Ukrainian children also lack the necessary specialist certificates from Ukraine, creating additional bottlenecks in securing support in Poland. Similarly, in Moldova and Romania, documentation mismatches between the Romanian and Ukrainian systems make it difficult for children to prove their eligibility for disability-related services.\*<sup>1</sup>

The processes to obtain such are also lengthy and complicated too. These issues highlight a need for enhanced coordination between the different systems and authorities.

Beyond bureaucratic hurdles, inadequate school resources and infrastructure further limit access. Schools often lack wheelchair accessibility, trained support staff, and essential health or psychiatric services. In Moldova, while efforts to support children with disabilities exist, such as teaching assistants and well-equipped resource centers, significant challenges in school adjustment and inclusion strategies remain. This is particularly acute for children with severe disabilities, due to inadequate school preparation and resources like specialised and on-site assistants, leading to their often exclusion from mainstream classes and limited to resource or sensory rooms.

While some Romanian schools offer individualized support, specialized services are limited and unevenly distributed throughout the country, leading to exclusion from mainstream education for many children. Children with severe disabilities face particular challenges, as services such as psychiatric support are often unavailable or prioritized for Romanian children. The severe lack of appropriate resources in schools for children with disabilities led many caregivers to choose online schooling for their children.

Overall, there is a critical need for more resources, specialized staff, and better preparation in schools to support Ukrainian children with disabilities in Moldova, Romania, and Poland. For children with less severe disabilities, in order to integrate them in the regular education, teachers need to be supported to be able to ensure an inclusive learning environment.

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\* A KII with an INGO nonetheless explained that there has been significant progress in Moldova with trying to mitigate the bureaucratic hurdles of obtaining the required documentation from Ukraine.

According to the surveyed caregivers, the top three disadvantages of studying in the dual modality for Ukrainian children, in descending order, are: **overload and stress, the lack of time for extracurricular activities, and difficulty in balancing commitments.** While closely tied to the broader learning and educational environment, these identified top three disadvantages of studying in the dual modality, shown in the Figure 3 below, emphasize the psychosocial and well-being aspects of learning. Evidently, the dual modality poses barriers to achieving overall quality of education due to the demanding schedule, which makes it challenging for Ukrainian refugee children to be fully engaged in both systems simultaneously. This not only caused children to feel fatigued and confused, but also reduced the time available for socialising and doing extracurricular activities – activities considered essential by both children and caregivers, according to FGD participants. Moreover, psychologists and teachers observed that this dual system negatively affected Ukrainian children’s mental well-being by fostering a sense of impermanence. Being engaged in two distinct education systems with contrasting curriculums and schedules reinforced the perception that the Ukrainian children’s stay in their host community is temporary. According to the previously-mentioned professionals, this hindered the children’s ability to adjust to and integrate into their new local school environments.

**Language barriers hinder Ukrainian refugee children’s access to quality education and strongly influence the learning modalities they enrol in.** Across Moldova, Romania, and Poland, Ukrainian children struggle to fully engage with learning processes and teaching methods in local schools, primarily due to the language barrier. Language barriers limit children’s ability to ask questions, complete homework, interact with peers, and engage with learning materials, negatively impacting their self-confidence and communication skills. Although iterative teaching methods, buddy systems between Ukrainian children and local students, the use of visual aid and diagrams, and catch-up classes provided by NGOs help mitigate the language barrier, the limited provision of ICAs, bilingual learning materials, and language classes, explained in the above 6.1 section, hamper Ukrainian children’s access to quality education.

Figure 1 – How would you rate the quality of education your child/children are receiving in the host country/online?

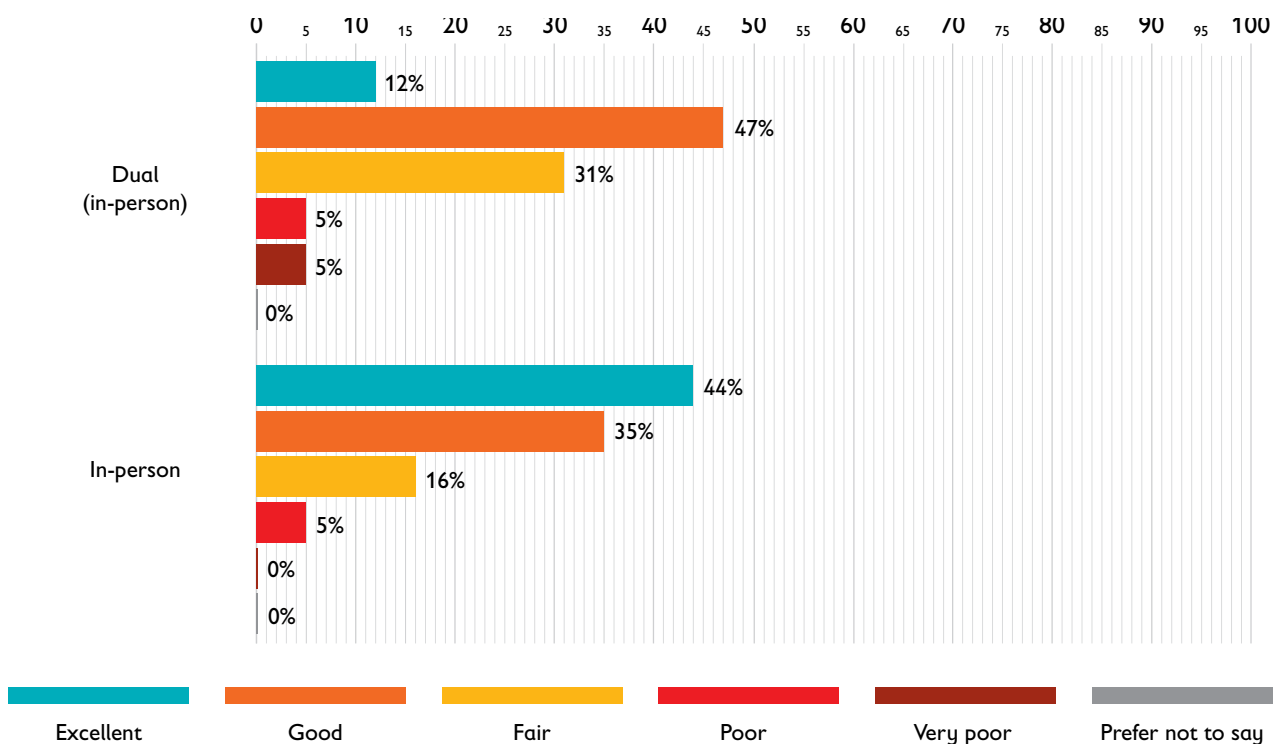
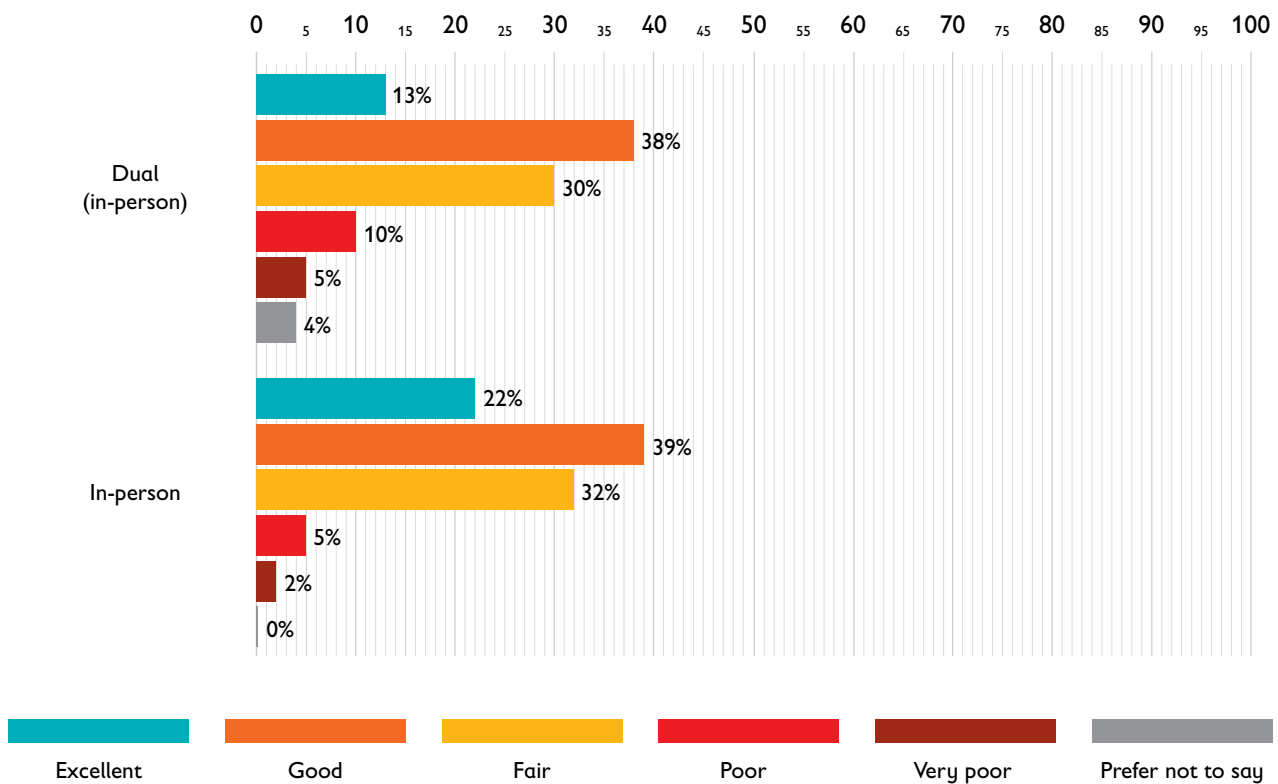


Figure 1 – cont'd



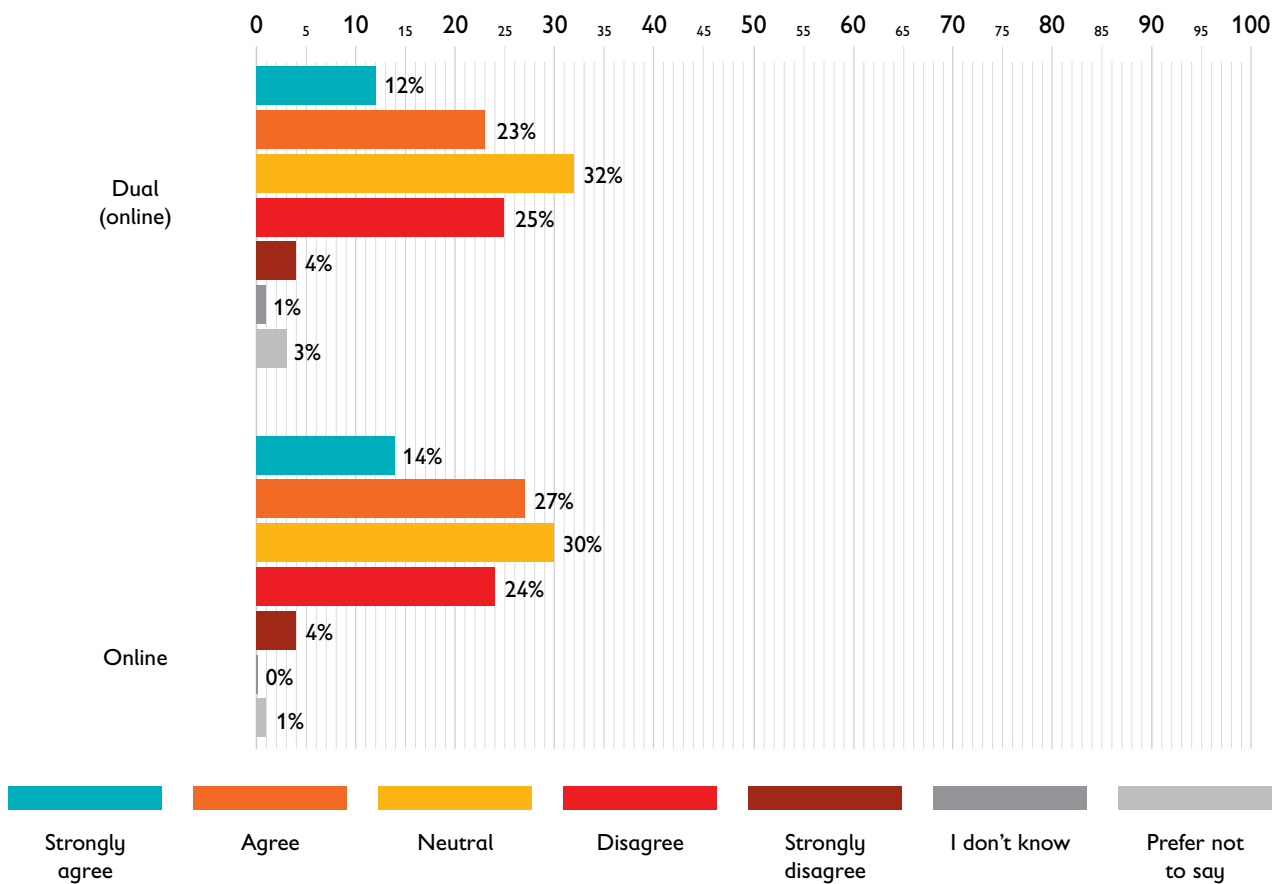
Such language barriers were found to influence whether Ukrainian children and their caregivers opted for online or in-person schooling. Further, as shown in Figure 4 below, for children not attending any form of education, 73% of caregivers identified language barriers as the top reason for their child/ren’s exclusion:

**”The biggest barrier is still the language barrier - Teachers don’t pay much attention to the Ukrainian children because they don’t understand the class.”**  
**KII NGO, Romania**

In Moldova, an INGO observed that many Ukrainian children prefer to enroll in Russian-speaking schools, particularly in urban areas, as their strong command of Russian - at least compared to Romanian - reduces language barriers and facilitates integration. However, rural schools predominantly teach in Romanian, increasing the reliance of children based in these areas on online learning, which according to caregivers’ perceptions in the survey (shown in Figure 2 above), provides lower quality education than in-person schooling. Rural areas, often with cheaper rent and living costs than urban areas, attract lower income families who may prefer to remain there. As a result, participants in this study, namely educational authorities and teachers, perceived that many families in these areas opt for online classes, which, as confirmed by Figures 1 and 2 above, hinder learning quality and well-being compared to in-person classes. This dynamic further entrenches educational divides along economic and social class lines.

Language barriers were also raised as being significant for caregivers of Ukrainian children, impeding their integration and involvement in their children’s in-person schooling. In Moldova, while I/NGOs provide significant help, caregivers reported the need for extra support in helping to translate and understand school documents, officials’ communications with school, and school regulations.

Figure 2 - “Online learning provides the same quality of education as in-person classes do/would.”



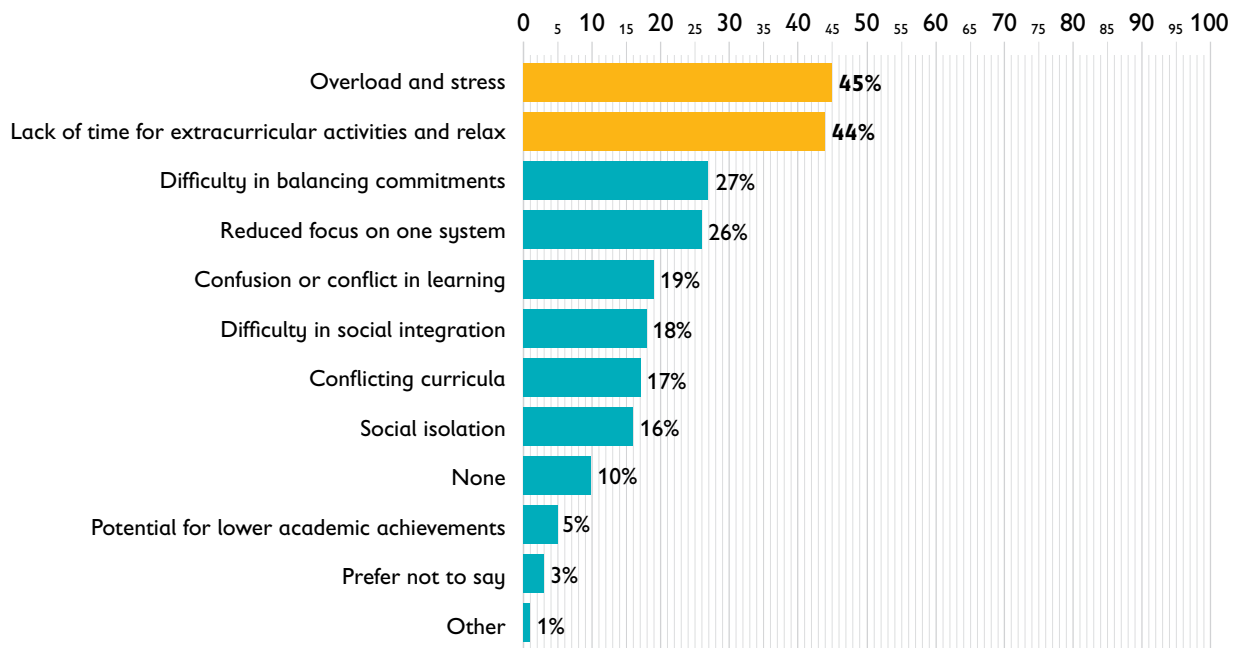
**Language barriers, combined with inconsistencies between Ukraine’s education and examination structures and those of Moldova, Romania, and Poland, resulted in Ukrainian children being placed in classrooms misaligned with their educational or assessment levels.** Ukrainian children are often placed in age-appropriate classes without regard for their prior education, hindering their integration and attainment of appropriate level of education. In fact, the survey results, demonstrated in Figures 5 and 6 below, showed that 20% of caregivers reported the school curriculum is inappropriate for their child/children’s needs in in-person schools, compared with 36% in the dual modality.

In Moldova, the Code No. 152 (the Education Code, 2014), stipulates that students aged 9–10 must take a transition exam to move from primary to lower secondary school, while those aged 14–15 are required to sit for an exam to advance from lower to upper secondary education. However, in Moldovan schools, Ukrainian children are expected to take these exams under the same conditions as Moldovan students, without tailored support. Measures such as translation of exam materials or additional time, which could provide equitable opportunities for Ukrainian children, are notably absent, placing these children at a disadvantage and possibly preventing their transition to the next educational level.<sup>23</sup>

Qualitative data from Moldova suggests that part of the instruction from the Ministry of Education issued in September 2023 included guidance to facilitate the placement of Ukrainian students in the appropriate grade. In

<sup>23</sup> UNESCO, “Education in the Republic of Moldova in Support of Ukrainian Refugees,” accessed December 11, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/ukraine-war/education/republic-moldova-support>.

Figure 3 - How would you describe the potential disadvantages of attending both in-person and online schools? [multiple-choice question]

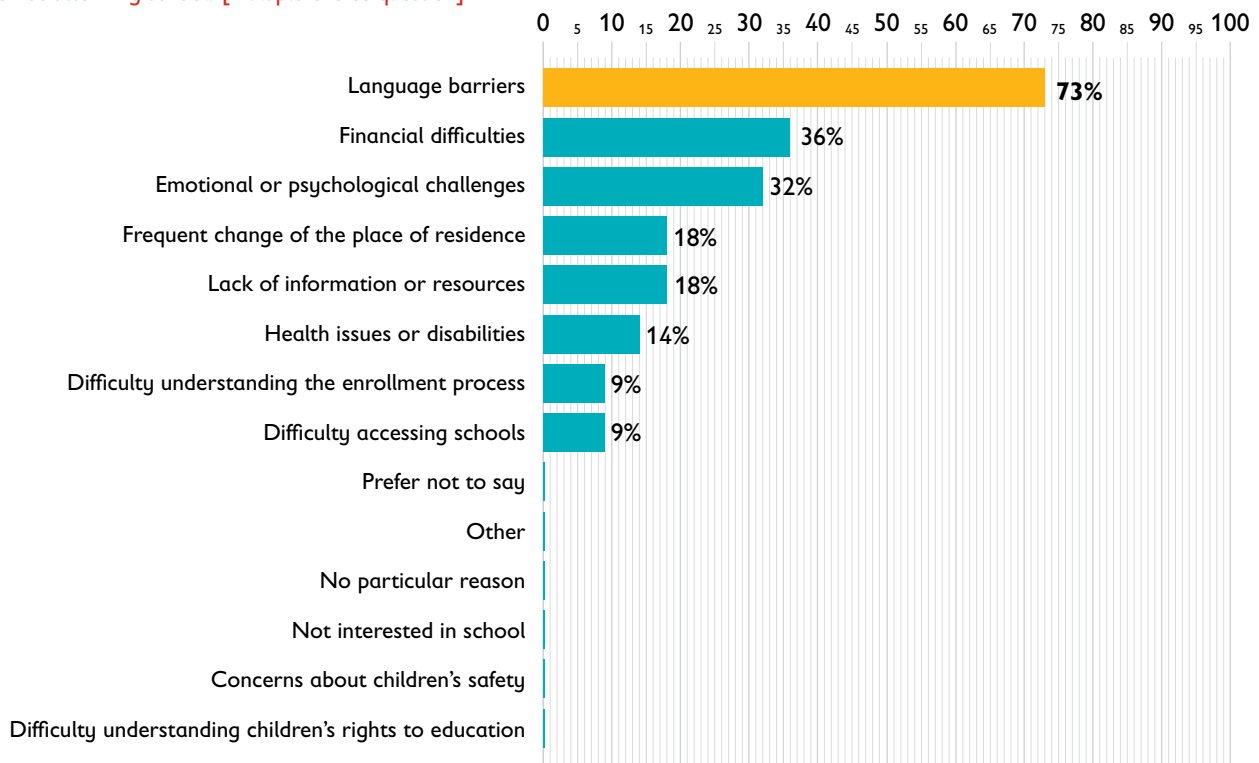


case families do not have the required documentation to demonstrate the child/ren’s Ukrainian grade level, the instruction set up a system whereby schools designate a small committee to assess the child’s knowledge level, allowing for their correct grade placement.

Similar to Moldova, in Romania, Ukrainian refugee children also face barriers to being placed in the correct level in schools, linked to the auditor status. A common trend among caregivers is choosing online classes for their children, as they are unwilling to have them miss a year of education by being enrolled as “auditors.” As auditors, Ukrainian children do not take exams or fully participate in class. They are limited to being ‘listeners’, with minimal interaction and support from teachers. This limited interaction and teacher support was compounded by overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teacher training, and reduced participation in school activities compared to their Romanian peers. Furthermore, this study found that some Ukrainian children might be required to repeat a grade still as an auditor if they fail to meet the Romanian language proficiency requirement to transition from auditor to student status. This requirement underscores the inconsistencies in policy implementation of the auditor status duration, explained above in section 6.1, further impeding the children’s educational experience.

Ukrainian children in Poland face similar curriculum and grade placement barriers as Moldova and Romania. They often faced mismatched grade placements, leaving them behind academically and unmotivated to learn. The different structures of the Polish and Ukrainian education systems exacerbate these challenges. In Poland, primary school spans eight grades, with high school admission based on final exams, including Polish language and literature—an obstacle for Ukrainian children. Ukraine’s shorter, three-tiered system means older adolescents struggle to align with Polish grade levels. According to a school ICA and psychologist, there were cases of 10 – 11-year-olds being placed in grades well below their educational level due to grade mismatches. Missing grades within the Polish system often leads to enrolment denial, while those admitted are typically older than their classmates, adding to their demotivation to learn.

Figure 4 – What are the main reasons why your child/children is/ are not attending school? [multiple-choice question]



*“We would like these children to have assignments appropriate to their abilities. But when lately when my daughter went to school in the 5th grade, she said, ‘I’m so tired of these coloring books, we finished them in kindergarten – for how much longer do I have to do it?’”*  
**KII Ukrainian Psychologist, Poland**

In all three countries, while schools and NGOs provide supplementary classes in core subjects like Math, English, as well as Romanian or Polish, these are often optional and inconsistently attended, particularly as some Ukrainian children are too busy and overloaded with work to attend if they are enrolled in the dual or online modalities.

**Schools that adopt creative and less evaluative approaches to learning have been effective in helping Ukrainian refugee children overcome learning, communication, and language barriers.** For children aged 10 - 14, especially when there is a language barrier, ICAs and NGOs to integrate non-verbal activities like sport, movement, art, and music into classroom teaching, so that the children can explore other ways to communicate and socialize with peers and feel comfortable in their school setting. Integrating such activities in Moldova had a positive knock-on effect for Ukrainian children’s learning, as well as developing their emotional intelligence and ability to work with other children.

**Effective monitoring of progress and educational outcomes in online classes is less achievable than in in-person schools.** In online schools, teachers providing instruction from afar are less able to ensure children are actively engaged in the learning process. Distractions like mobile phones and browsing the internet were often cited as contributing factors to this dynamic. Further, caregivers across all three countries reported having limited capacity to be able to help monitor their children’s attendance or engagement with online classes, frequently citing their work obligations. These factors meant that they had less time present in the house during their children’s online classes. In online classes, there was also less individual attention given to learning needs, and equitable opportunities for children with disabilities or learning difficulties were minimal.

Figure 5 - "The school curriculum is appropriate for my child/children's needs."

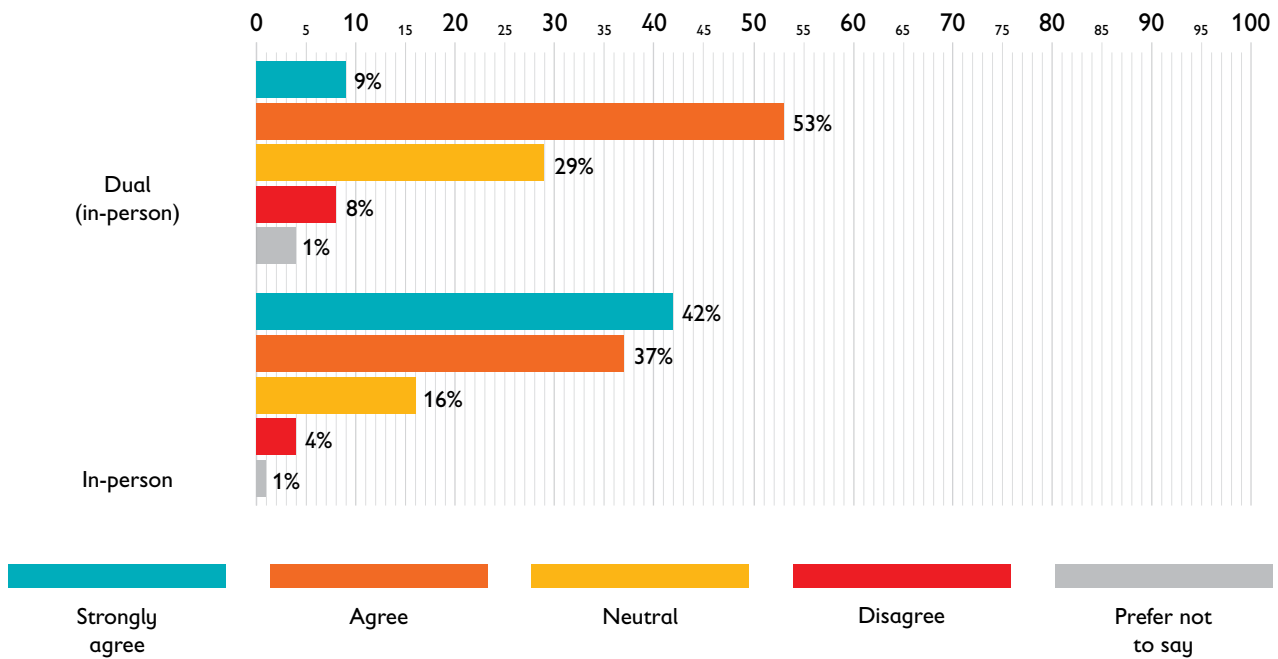
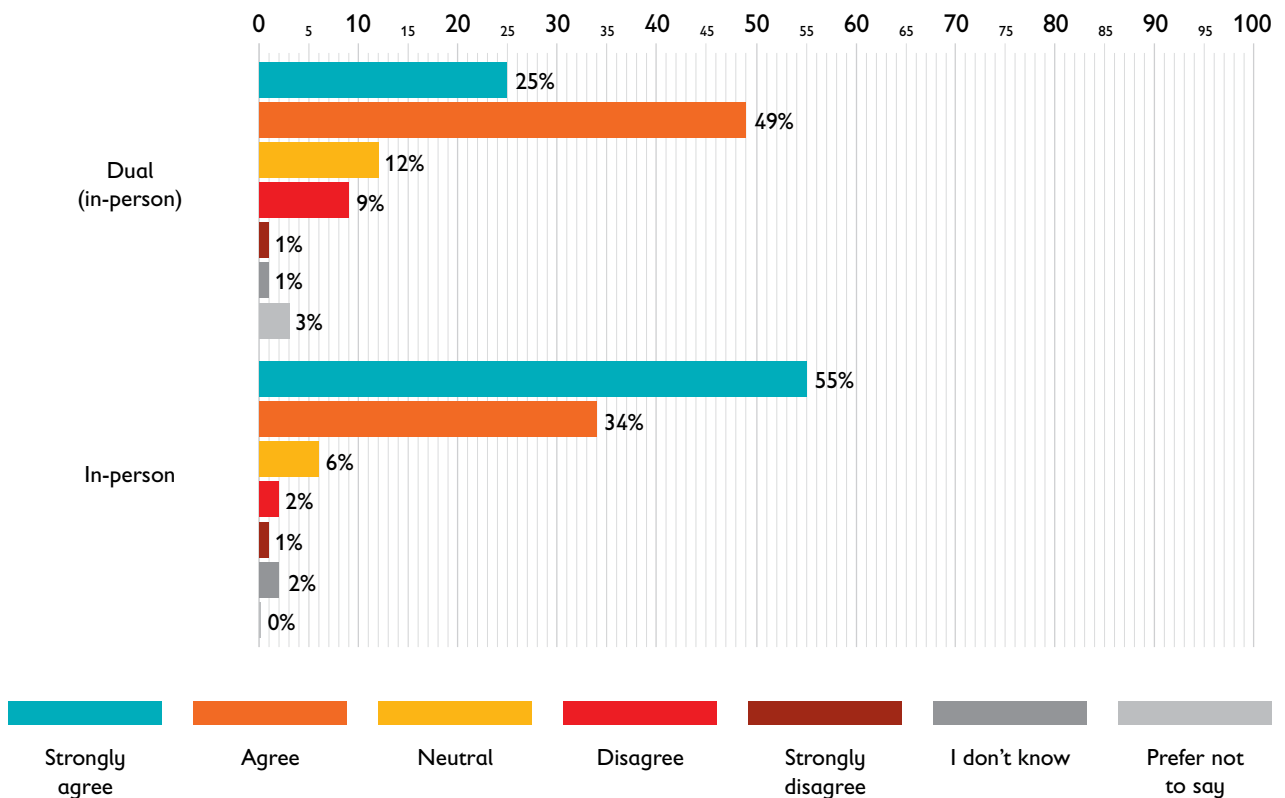


Figure 6 - "My child/children is/are learning at the appropriate grade levels."



**In-person schools also have challenges in monitoring progress and outcomes of Ukrainian children.**

First, the high mobility of Ukrainian children complicates tracking and continuous progress effectively. Systems to monitor progress in Moldova and Romania are rarely implemented, while in Poland, digital platforms like Librus and Vulcan are used by teachers and school staff to track attendance of children. However, Ukrainian caregivers reported their inability to use these platforms due to not having received training or support on how they can be utilized.

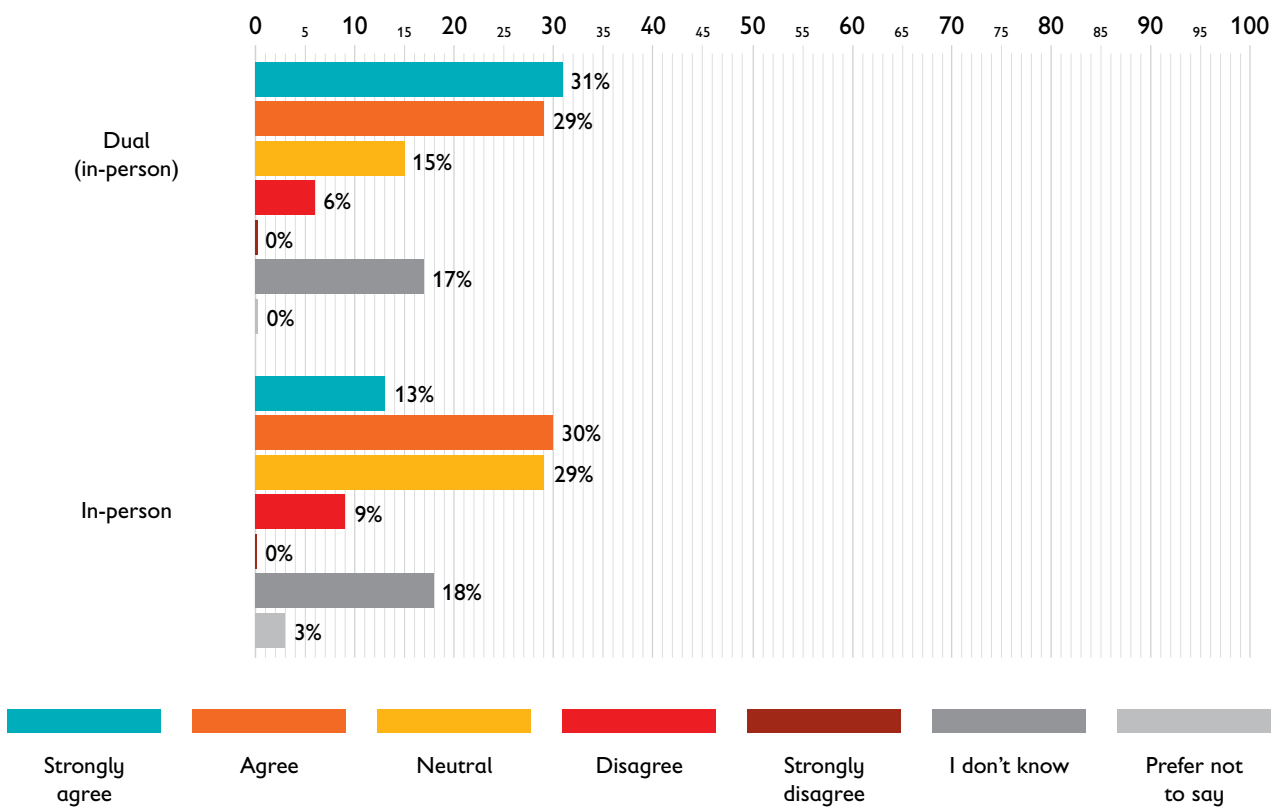
*“I start online classes and play on my phone – it’s my play time.”*  
*FGD participant child, Romania*

**Rural schools face more severe resource shortages compared to urban schools, presenting disproportionate barriers for rurally based Ukrainian children.**

These resource shortages include limited state support and funding for educational resources, less developed infrastructure, and restricted NGO services or extracurricular activities. These rural-urban inequalities were reflected in the survey: 22% of caregivers of children studying in-person either disagreed or were neutral about children in rural areas having the same opportunities as those in cities; while 38% of caregivers of children in the dual modality shared the same view:

*“In big cities, it is easier to find a safe environment which allows Ukrainian children to open up, but in rural areas & small towns, they are often the only one in a school or of their same age, unable to find a social circle at all [...]”*  
*KII NGO representative, Poland*

Figure 7 – “Children in rural areas have the same opportunities as those in cities.”



**Transportation availability in rural areas hinders Ukrainian refugee children's access to in-person school, further exacerbating rural-urban inequalities.** In all three countries, Ukrainian refugee children in rural areas do not always have easy access to free or subsidized school transportation. In Moldova, 90% of Ukrainian refugees are in urban areas, and there exists an acute disparity between rural-urban areas in many regards including access to schools and opportunities.<sup>24</sup> In Romania, although all school children have the right to either free or subsidized transport to school, there were reports where Ukrainian refugee children lacked the required documents to be able to request transport discounts. The inability to prove eligibility for transport discounts acted as a barrier to some Ukrainian children's access to school in rural areas, as infrastructure is less established there. Consequently, transportation issues led to frequent school changes by Ukrainian families, creating disruptions to the children's learning. In Poland, school transportation in rural areas may be organized after the school term begins, as the relevant authority waits for the confirmed number of Ukrainian children in the school catchment area. As a result, there were reported delays among Ukrainian children in accessing school from the beginning of term, highlighting the need for accurate data of the dispersion and concentration of Ukrainian refugee children in advance.

**Barriers to school and community integration can be mitigated through targeted inclusion, cultural, and integration strategies.** Events and activities which celebrate Ukrainian culture and include cross-cultural events between host communities and Ukrainian refugee families ensured better integration and acceptance of Ukrainian children by peers, teachers, and the wider community. In Moldova, there were cases reported on by KILs of state sponsored cultural exchange event, special classes, and activities, organized by schools, to help integrate Ukrainian refugee children and foster positive interactions. While in Romania, state-organized cultural activities are minimal, NGO-organized events or activities are more frequent, although less available in rural areas. Cultural tensions in Polish schools towards Ukrainian refugee children may have intensified over the course of the war. NGO representatives and ICAs indicated that cultural events and targeted strategies to help Ukrainian refugee children integrate in their school environment tend to lack in Poland; and overall, Ukrainian culture is underrepresented in schools. Several interviewees reported that there were cases of schools prohibiting Ukrainian children from speaking in Ukrainian among themselves during school hours. As observed by several NGOs and ICAs supporting Ukrainian refugee children in Polish schools, the absence of targeted inclusion, cultural and integration strategies, combined with how teachers have struggled with limited resources and overburdened workloads, hindered teachers' ability to help Ukrainian children integrate or be supported.

**Similarly, extracurricular activities aid Ukrainian refugee children in meeting and socialising with other children their age. By extension, these activities also help children in overcoming general learning barriers and creating a safer school environment.** Extra-curricular activities like sports, camping, and music were considered essential for the well-being, mental health, and socialization of adolescent Ukrainian refugee children. Both the interviewed children and professionals, including teachers, psychologists, and NGOs, highlighted their importance for learning as well. In each of Moldova, Romania, and Poland, NGO organized extra-curricular activities were most common, although funding restrictions threatened their continuation and ability to meet the demand of the Ukrainian refugee children.

**While the majority of caregivers (57%) reported no safety concerns at school for their children or themselves, 12% reported bullying or harassment, 5% an unsafe school environment, 7% a lack of supervision, and 16% emotional distress across the three countries, as shown in Figure 8 below.** Safety concerns, such as lack of supervision, unsafe school environments, and emotional distress, were often tied to teachers being overburdened, inadequately supported, and lacking training to teach Ukrainian refugee children. This strain limited their ability to supervise, provide emotional support, and effectively assist Ukrainian children in their learning. Similarly, bullying and harassment may have stemmed from insufficient availability of inter-cultural assistants

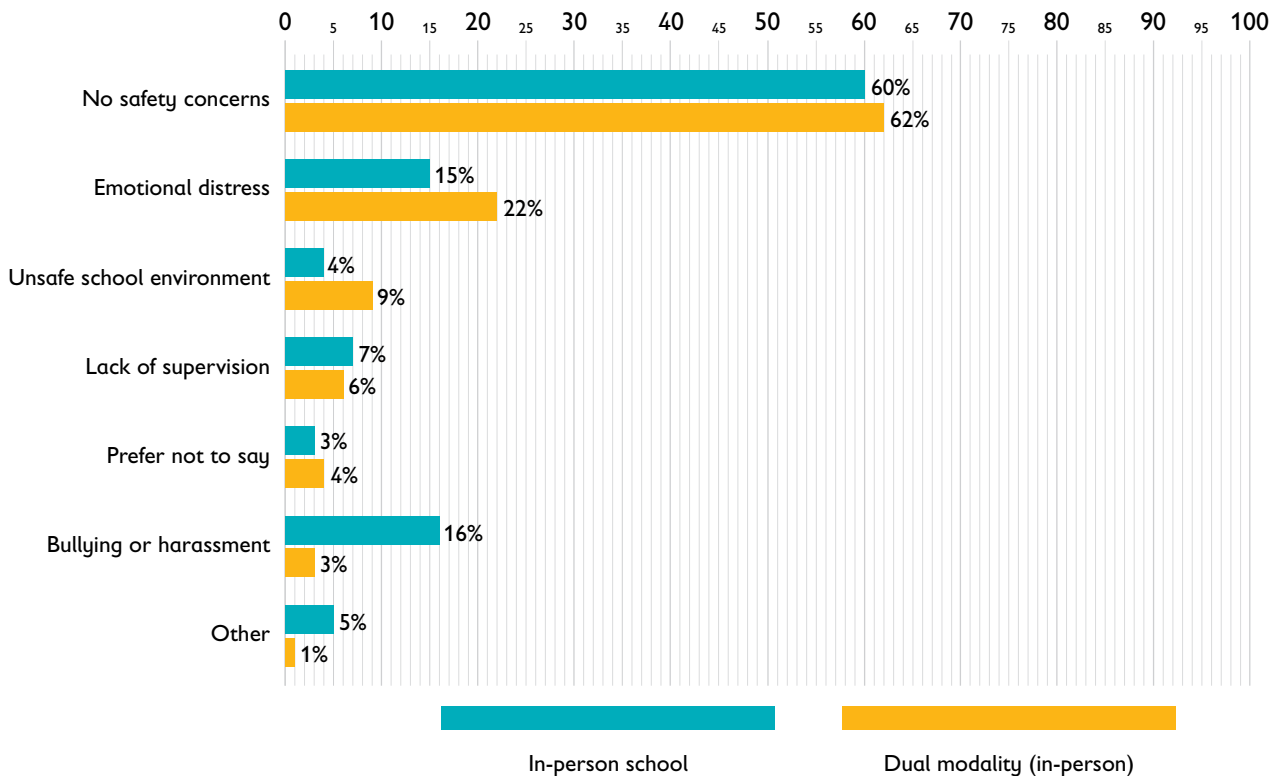
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<sup>24</sup> World Bank, Lebanon: Economic and Financial Recovery Plan, December 2023, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099525012052229032/pdf/P1793630ba1d24070b9930e27d56978abe.pdf>.

and activities, critical for breaking down social stigma and fostering integration. Safeguarding concerns directed at Ukrainian children reported by school directors, teachers, NGOs and psychologists ranged from bullying, verbal harassment and discrimination. One interviewed organisation working with Ukrainian refugee children in Moldova was informed by several children of their experiences with sexual harassment by teachers which, in the absence of an implemented safeguarding mechanism, had gone unreported and undetected within their school. While it was not in this report’s scope to quantify how widespread such an example is, interviewed INGOs in Poland and Moldova expressed concerns on the limited availability of training provided to teachers in safeguarding, and a general limited awareness of the importance of integrating social-emotional learning into the curriculum.

**Gaps in the availability of formal mental health and psychosocial support, or child protection services, persist across the three countries.** As shown in Figure 9 below, the survey revealed that 9% and 3% of caregivers, respectively, responded that they did not know how to access such support or that the support was inaccessible. However, country disparities were significant. Across the three countries, there was the greatest accessibility to health-related services for Ukrainian refugee children in Moldova. This is evident in how those who accessed MHPSS in Moldova (37%) was over three times as high as in Romania (11%) and almost twice as high as in Poland (20%). As an example of the accessibility of health care services for Ukrainian children aged 10 – 14 in Moldova is the Youth Clinic (YK) mobile services, designed for teenagers and young people to receive multi-disciplinary health services. Between November 2022 and December 2023, the YK service provided 1,061 Ukrainian refugees with health consultations and informational activities,<sup>25</sup> and 86% of the total number of beneficiaries of YK within this same period were aged 10 – 24 years old. The YK service, since January 2024 supported by UNICEF Moldova, is accessible for Ukrainian children by having Russian and Romanian speaking professionals.

Figure 8 – Have you or your child/children encountered any safety concerns at school? [multiple-choice question]



25 Youth Clinic Moldova, accessed December 11, 2024, <https://yk.md/en>.

On the other hand, Ukrainian-speaking mental health specialists in Moldova are rare. As a result, a psychologist and education authority figure observed that many Ukrainian children do not know the language of instruction well enough to express themselves comfortably and openly, which can make it difficult to communicate during counselling sessions. This can create confusion and frustration, preventing them from fully engaging in the therapeutic process.

In Romania, the lack of official support, along with financial and informational barriers to accessing MHPSS, was noted. Reportedly, addressing and supporting the mental and psychosocial well-being of children within the education system is a new area of focus in Romania. While NGOs provide most MHPSS to Ukrainian children, there is a need for more accessible, MHPSS focused support within schools. Currently, MHPSS in schools is largely limited to the presence of a psychologist, which is insufficient in terms of capacity and not feasible in every school. The support provided by psychologists varies by school, with some lacking experience in offering mental health support to children, particularly refugees. Additionally, there is no training or support for teachers to integrate psychosocial considerations into the classroom setting.

Similar to Moldova, the language barrier prevents Ukrainian children in being able to comfortably access MHPSS in Poland. The scarcity of Ukrainian-speaking psychologists and specialists services in Poland is in part linked to how their Ukrainian qualifications are only temporarily recognized in the country. This highlights a structural barrier to Ukrainian children in being able to access MHPSS, rooted in the lack of coordination between Ukraine and Poland systems.

*“It’s [mental health and well being] a new subject of discussion for us [...] I don’t think that schools are thinking too much about well-being.”*  
*KII NGO, Romania*

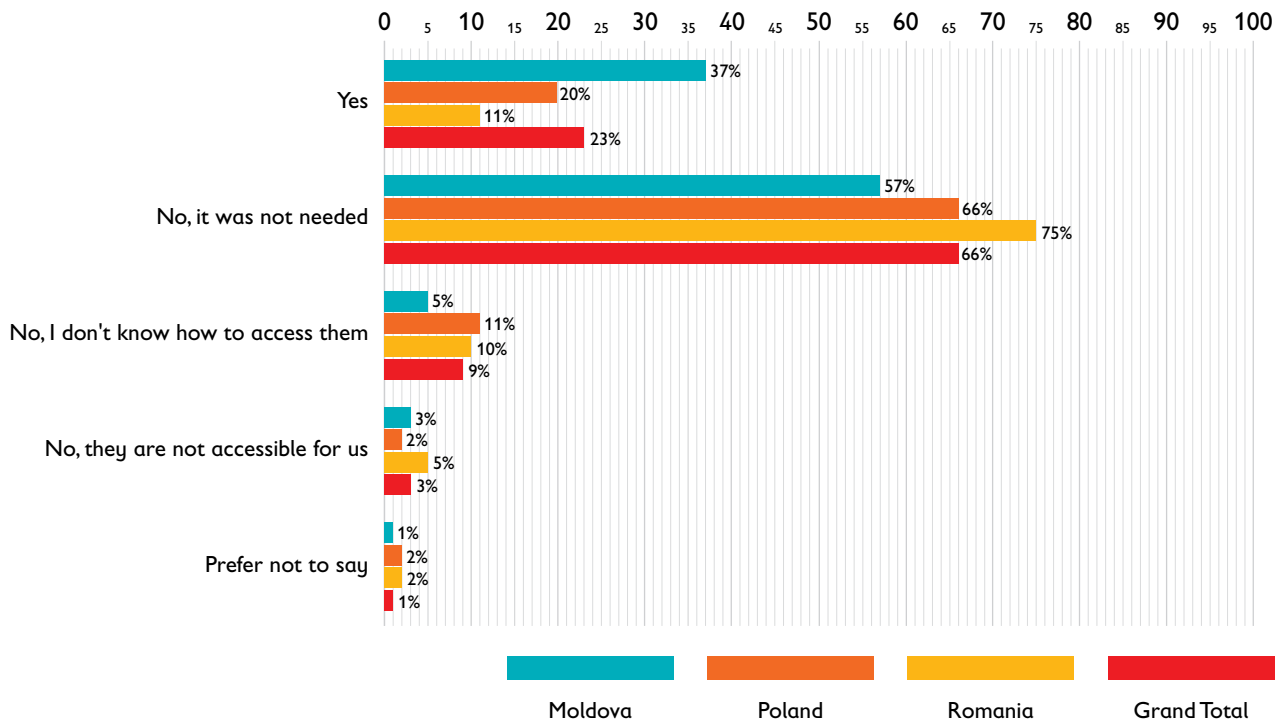
### 7.3. MICRO LEVEL

**The prolonged war has created a sense of impermanence, disrupting Ukrainian children’s education, hindering their integration, and affecting their mental health. Particularly acute for children aged 10 – 14 due to their ability to well-remember their life in Ukraine, forced displacement has also created significant stress and difficulties adjusting to new learning and social environments.** Numerous NGOs, psychologists, teachers, and education authorities across the three countries observed how the uncertainty surrounding the children’s future educational options and in general locations makes it difficult for them to integrate. Ukrainian families commonly feel discouraged from engaging with local education systems, learning the language, or settling in one place. As shown in Figure 10 below, caregivers identified the top advantage of the dual modality as helping their children maintain connection with Ukrainian culture and the school system. This result highlights the challenge of addressing language and integration barriers, as the uncertainty around, and the desire to return to Ukraine, is intricately connected with the choice architecture of refugee households as to whether or not to send children to in-person schooling. In turn, the decision not to send children to in-person schooling, or to keep them in both online and in-person schooling adversely affects Ukrainian children’s ability to access quality education, learn, and integrate into the host country.

Refugee children who have lost family members, come from conflict zones, or witnessed violence are especially vulnerable and struggle with integration. Displaced Ukrainian children face major changes in language, curriculum, living situations, and social circles. While younger children tend to adapt more easily through play and forget past challenges, those aged 10-14 often face struggle more with mental and emotional barriers, impacting their focus on learning. Children’s distress, rooted in displacement, affects their ability to cope and thrive in school.

*“Learning Polish depends on the decisions in the family - whether they stay here or just wait for the war to end.”*  
*KII NGO, Poland*

Figure 9 – Have you accessed any formal mental health support or child protection services for your child/children in the host country’s school? [multiple-choice question]



**Considering these common emotional barriers, Ukrainian online classes can have positive effects on Ukrainian refugee children’s well-being.** Online classes allow the children to connect with old peers and teachers, feel connected to Ukraine, and speak in their mother tongue, having positive impacts on their psychological and psycho-emotional wellbeing, and therefore ability to learn. The sense of familiarity online classes can offer is important for Ukrainian children’s wellbeing and mental state. Speaking with their Ukrainian ex-classmates via online classes can help to boost their motivation as they could speak about what they have learnt in their new environments.

**Mental health and well-being of Ukrainian refugee children can be low and impacted by difficulties in making friends.** Especially for adolescents, having a social circle and interacting with children of the same age is important. However, there were noted difficulties to overcome: linked to cultural and language backgrounds. In rural areas, extracurricular activities were less common, making it harder for them to find a social circle in these areas.

**Across all three countries, there is considerable stigma among Ukrainian families towards accessing mental health and psychological support services, presenting a barrier to Ukrainian children in accessing appropriate support.** For example, in Poland, Ukrainian children requiring assessments of their learning needs face challenges due to parental fears of stigmatisation and inadequate state resources required to access these assessments, and ongoing support if required.

## SPOTLIGHT

### Ukrainian Roma Children

Ukrainian refugee children of Roma ethnicity face significant barriers to education across Moldova, Romania, and Poland, shaped by structural, socio-economic factors, and self-marginalization. Historically marginalized, Roma communities contend with derogatory stereotypes that contribute to their exclusion from education and related services.

In Moldova, many Ukrainian Roma children do not attend local schools and instead rely on online education, limiting integration and complicating efforts to track their academic progress, especially due to high internal mobility. The widespread scarcity of accurate data on the Ukrainian Roma population further hinders efforts to assess their needs and provide tailored support. These combined factors exacerbated instability for this group, creating access barriers to consistent education.

However, qualitative data shows there have been successes in enrolling Roma children in the Moldovan education system as a joint effort by the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders. These stakeholders actively reached out to Roma communities to understand their concerns and to share information. Actions were taken to lift the barriers, which sometimes were practical. The Ministry of Education also engaged with schools to ensure a welcoming attitude towards Roma students. These combined efforts have seen an improvement in the school enrolment rate of Ukrainian Roma children.

Similar to Moldova, the high mobility of Ukrainian Roma families within Poland or between Poland and Ukraine also disrupted educational continuity and progress tracking of Ukrainian Roma children. The absence of accurate data on Roma refugees in Poland, too, complicated efforts to provide effective support in accessing or remaining in education.

Despite the September 2024 legislative change in Poland, which increased Roma refugee enrolment in schools, the system remained ill-prepared, reinforcing barriers to access and inclusion. Roma children aged 10-14 often face rejection from primary schools or preparatory classes due to age restrictions, and those with little to no prior education struggle to integrate into higher-level classes. This leaves them with limited educational opportunities. Additionally, families and caregivers, unfamiliar with the school system, may struggle to prepare their children for school, and teachers face challenges when children arrive unprepared with insufficient materials.

Cultural barriers between Roma children and host communities also hindered integration in all three countries. There were cases of local parents in Poland having petitioned to prevent Roma children from attending mainstream schools, perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Furthermore, there are risks of parentification among Roma children, where young children are tasked with caring for one another, often at the expense of their education.

The educational and support systems of Moldova, Romania, and Poland is overall ill-prepared to effectively respond to the complex needs of Ukrainian refugee children of Roma background. The complexities require much more robust and tailored responses to ensure that the structural and socio-economic barriers are mitigated.

## SPOTLIGHT

### Children in institutions in Poland

Children in institutions disproportionately face societal isolation. The only opportunities to engage with Polish peers or other children are at school. Children with pre-existing trauma or developmental issues risk long-term negative impacts due to insufficient psychological care. Accessibility to extracurricular and social activities – organized by Save the Children and other NGOs – were very important for the children. However, funding inconsistencies means that sometimes organisations which help the children access swimming pools or other activities are temperamental; despite being advised by health professionals.

*“The problems we had were with parents of Ukrainian children and their perceptions towards the psychologist – it is very difficult for them to accept this help, even very difficult to overcome.”*  
*IDI Psychologist, Romania*

**Distinct societal and environmental pressures impact boys and girls in being able to access and integrate in their new educational environments and communities.**

For boys aged 10 – 14 years old, there were reported pressures on boys to become the “bread winner”, in the often absence of a father figure in the family and the family’s financial pressures with mothers working. These factors may have caused teenaged boys at the upper end of the 10-14 spectrum to feel less motivated to learn or drop out of school. Some data in this study suggests that girls tend to be more sociable and communicative than boys, which has eased their integration into their new schools and social environments. Girls’ easier integration could be linked to how, in Moldova at least, there are more NGO targeted support and programs for girls compared to boys. The disparity in service availability for girls compared to boys was evident even before the war, with a stronger focus on girl-specific services, such as dignity kits and gynecological care. In contrast, support for boys remains limited.

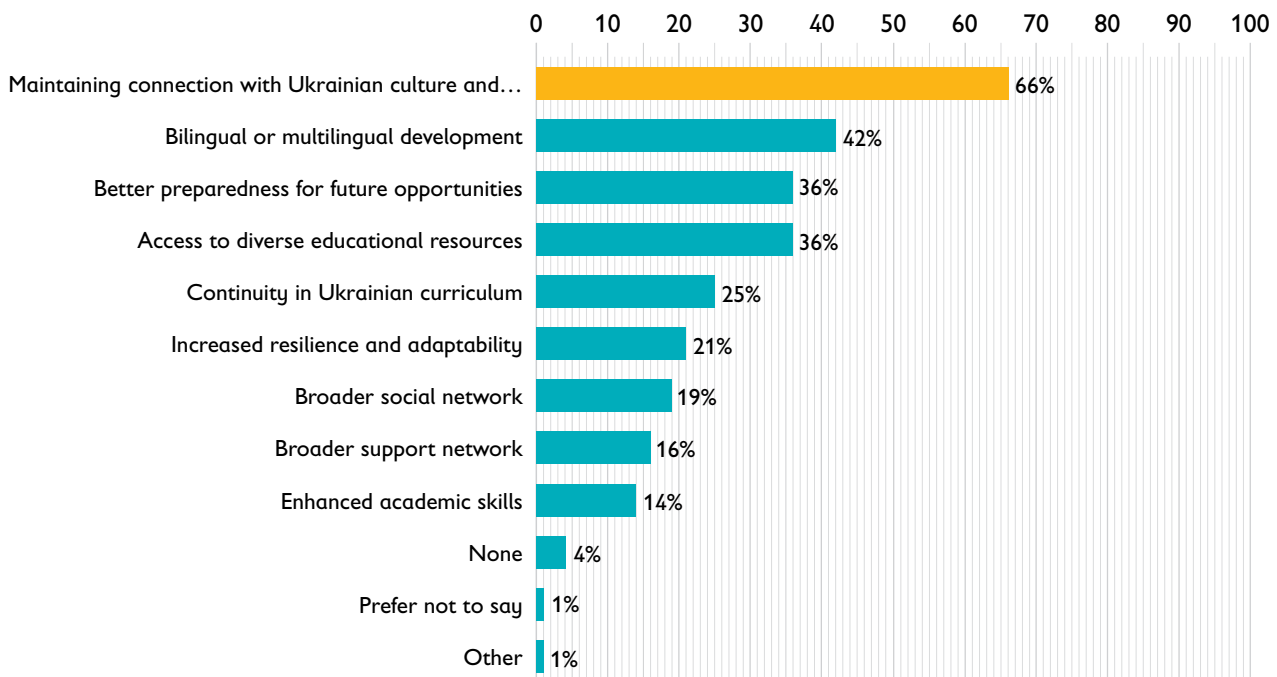
*“The girls have adapted a little more easily, they are more sociable, the boys a little more difficult because they are not so communicable, they don’t really discuss what is on their minds, what hurts them, what fears they have.”*  
*KII Psychologist, Moldova*

## 6. CONCLUSION

The journey to provide quality education for Ukrainian refugee children in Poland, Moldova, and Romania is marked by immense challenges but also profound resilience and cooperation. The efforts of governments, schools, NGOs, and local communities have been remarkable, opening doors to education and social services for children displaced by war. Yet, as the conflict endures, these efforts remain insufficient to address the complex and evolving needs of these children.

This report underscores the continuum of challenges spanning policy frameworks, community dynamics, and individual experiences. At the systemic level, inclusive policies have laid a foundation for access to education, but gaps in implementation and uneven resource distribution have created significant barriers. Schools and communities are working to support integration, but limited training, inconsistent guidance, and rural-urban disparities hinder their effectiveness. For individual children and families, the strain of displacement, compounded by emotional and psychological stress, undermines their ability to thrive in host education systems.

Figure 10 How would you describe the potential advantages of attending both in-person and online schools? [multiple-choice question]



The tension between online and in-person schooling encapsulates the broader struggle of balancing impermanence with the need for stability. Online learning has allowed children to maintain ties to Ukraine and its curriculum, preserving cultural identity amidst displacement. However, it has also isolated children socially and limited their psychosocial development. Conversely, in-person schooling fosters better educational outcomes, peer connections, and psychosocial benefits but often falls short due to language barriers, resource shortages, and logistical hurdles. Families remain caught in this duality, uncertain of their futures and struggling to reconcile the immediate needs of their children with the desire to maintain a connection to home.

Despite these barriers, the findings of this research point to a shared recognition among stakeholders that education is not merely a right but a critical lifeline for these children. The classroom offers more than academic instruction; it provides a sense of normalcy, community, and hope for a better future. Prioritizing in-person schooling, while addressing the systemic and individual barriers to access, is essential to ensuring children can benefit fully from these opportunities.

The path forward requires collective action, sensitivity, and long-term commitment. Stakeholders must work together to close the gaps between policy and practice, strengthen systems of support, and foster environments where children can learn, grow, and belong. This is not a challenge that can be addressed piecemeal—it requires holistic, sustained efforts to ensure that no child is left behind.

The war's trajectory remains uncertain, but one truth is clear: every child deserves the chance to thrive. Education is not only a means to that end but also a symbol of hope, resilience, and the possibility of rebuilding lives. The choices made today will define the opportunities available to these children tomorrow. By acting with urgency and compassion, we can ensure that Ukrainian refugee children find not only a place in the classroom but also the foundation for a brighter future.



## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

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### 8.1. MACRO LEVEL

**To mitigate inclusion and enrollment barriers, the governments of Moldova, Romania, and Poland should coordinate with I/NGOs and other relevant actors to establish a more robust data collection system on the geographical dispersion and educational needs of Ukrainian refugee children, as well as further reflect on making in-person education obligatory.**

- Pair with NGOs, schools, cross-departmental authorities, and other relevant actors to enhance the availability of accurate data on Ukrainian children. Data on Ukrainian children's geographical dispersion and individual educational needs, including learning difficulties or disabilities, would help provide better tailored educational and social services to meet the needs of refugee children. This is also highly applicable for Ukrainian refugee children of Roma background and those children who are 'on the move', who require tailored responses to support their access to and inclusion in education. This data should be placed in a centralized database - highly protected by safeguarding and child protection principals.
- The governments of Moldova, Romania and Poland in coordination with I/NGOs need to further discuss at what moment education will be obligatory, and plan for the systems to be in place to enable this transition.

**The gap between policy frameworks and implementation should be addressed by the relevant authorities to mitigate barriers facing Ukrainian refugee children in accessing education or associated rights, fostering inclusion and creating a safer school environment.**

- Make efforts to ensure the inclusion of all Ukrainian children in the local educational systems and access to rights by targeting children who are currently not in any form of education.
- The Romanian government should consider the feasibility of removing the auditor status, which should have an overall positive impact on Ukrainian children's enrollment rate and ability to integrate into their school environments.
- The Polish government should use data on the geographical dispersion and individual educational needs of Ukrainian refugee children to better prepare the national school system for the influx of Ukrainian refugee children into local schools. This would ensure access and inclusion barriers, such as those caused by the mismatches in demand for and supply of school spaces and transportation, are mitigated.

**Policy makers and educational authorities should enhance information sharing and guidance to schools, NGOs, and caregivers of Ukrainian refugee children to bridge the gap between the legislation and practical implementation of policies, overcoming structural and communication barriers.**

- The Moldovan and Romanian governments should create user-friendly digital platforms that provides accurately translated instructions for caregivers on school updates or policy matters, also providing a communication channel with schools, helping to regulate attendance and progress of their children; in Poland, the relevant authorities should organize training for caregivers on how to use Vulcan and Librus platforms.
- Provide in-person trainings, workshops, and written material to schools, NGOs, and educational institutions on new policy changes to ensure effective and consistent implementation.

- Distribute accurately translated and user-friendly materials, tailored to Ukrainian families' circumstances, on important education-related updates and policies and coordinate with I/NGOs to help disseminate the information to caregivers and children.

**The relevant educational departments in each of Moldova, Romania, and Poland should advocate to and coordinate with Ukrainian counterparts to overcome structural and bureaucratic barriers to Ukrainian children being able to access services.**

- Use this research and coordinate with specialized I/NGOs to shed light on the structural barriers facing Ukrainian children with disabilities in being able to prove their disabilities due to documentation mismatches.
- In Poland, solve the problem where Ukrainian psychologists' qualifications are not recognized, impeding their ability to work with Ukrainian refugee children.
- Address state-level gaps in special needs education resources and assessments by facilitating a system to share documentation and data from Ukraine.

**Educational authorities in each country should develop and institutionalize specialized training and support programs for professionals working with Ukrainian refugee children.**

- Training should focus on the realities and needs of children affected by war and migration, equipping teachers, ICAs, and school mental health professionals on trauma-informed teaching strategies.
- Establish specific training programs to equip teachers with the skills to teach Romanian or Polish as a second language and help overcome language barriers in educational settings
- Provide additional training and support programs to provide teachers and ICAs with the skills and knowledge on self-care, to recognize signs of stress within themselves and each other, and have strategies to cope with stressful or challenging situations.
- Provide training to teachers and school staff to develop skills and competences to recognized signees of distress of children who have been exposed to an adverse event.

**Educational authorities to allocate more resources to educational institutions to overcome the language barriers facing Ukrainian children, namely ICAs, free language classes, and bilingual learning materials.**

Advocate to donors to secure financial resources dedicated to strengthening core school resources, including language classes and bilingual learning materials.

- Ensure that ICAs are ideally allocated one per class that includes Ukrainian children to provide targeted support and promote cultural integration.
- Ensure that the distribution of bilingual learning materials, and ICAs, are evenly distributed between urban and rural areas to mitigate socio-economic divisions within education from deepening.
- Assess the feasibility of introducing Ukrainian-taught subjects alongside the primary language of instructions (e.g. Polish, Romanian, Russian), to ease the transition for Ukrainian children, diminish the language barrier and foster an inclusive education environment.

### **Institutionalise and standardize safeguarding policy, procedures and practices within the school system, and diversify the MHPSS approach.**

- Develop a policy with a monitoring, reporting and response mechanism to keep children safe within the education system.
- Train all school staff on the policy, procedures and practices.

Provide workshops and guidance to children and caregivers on what is accepted and not accepted behaviour, including safe social media usage, and where to report any concerns or incidents of harm and abuse.

Raise awareness of teachers on the importance of social-emotional development of children, and support teachers to enable psychosocial considerations in the classroom setting.

Include (group based) MHPSS interventions and opportunities for social emotional learning which can be facilitated by trained (non-clinical) professionals to move away from relying solely on one psychologist.

### **Strategically fund critical educational gaps and advocate for systemic reforms, through targeted flexible funding and the promotion of long-term policy changes that enhance inclusion, mental health support, and educational quality.**

- Donors should provide long-term, flexible funding and focus on the following key funding gaps to contribute to the transition of Ukrainian refugee children from online to in-person schooling in Moldova, Romania, and Poland:
  - o ICA positions in schools, bi-lingual textbooks, and free language classes are required in a greater volume across the three countries to help mitigate the language barrier to learning;
  - o Enhanced data and information systems are required to improve and streamline communication between policy makers, local educational authorities, schools, and caregivers of Ukrainian children. Specifically, the launching of digital platforms – paired with training for caregivers and teachers on how to effectively use these - and the provision of informative workshops and written materials to schools, NGOs, and caregivers would help clarify policies and procedures, ultimately fostering inclusion of Ukrainian children and quality education.
  - o Inter-cultural and extra-curricular activities are essential for fostering inclusion and a safe learning environment for both host and refugee communities, as well as improving mental health wellbeing.
  - o Statutory training provided to teachers, ICAs, and mental health professionals working with Ukrainian refugee children is required across the three countries to better prepare them for working with these children to enhance the quality of education or support they are providing, be trained in how to respond to difficult situations children may face, and to create a safe learning environment.

- Neighbouring governments, international organisations and institutional donors should advocate for and support important policy decisions which include:
  - Institutionalisation of assessments on Ukrainian refugee children's educational level and local language knowledge upon enrolment to ensure appropriate placements in classrooms and exam support.
  - Raising the importance of the socio-emotional learning aspect and to work towards integrating this into the school curriculum, giving attention to, for example, how children can regulate and identify emotions and interact with one another.
  - The removal of the auditor status in Romania, to facilitate Ukrainian children's equal access to school resources and educational opportunities as host children, taking the Moldova case study, with the recent removal of the auditor status, as an example.

## 9.2. MESO LEVEL

**School principals and education authorities should collaborate with Ukrainian counterparts to establish systems that inform refugee children and their caregivers about the different learning modalities.**

- Provide a more tailored support package to individual circumstances, ensuring that decisions taken by caregivers and children on educational pathways are made based on an informed understanding of individual learning styles and needs.

**Schools and I/NGOs should coordinate with the authorities to provide tailored support for Ukrainian children to bridge gaps in language and curriculum knowledge.**

This includes:

- Assess students' academic and language skills upon enrolment to tailor support services, including tutoring and extracurricular classes
- Translating exam materials, providing extra time, and ensuring access to translators during assessments to ensure Ukrainian children have equitable opportunities to progress to the next level of the local educational system
- Incorporating iterative and creative teaching strategies, such as visual aids and subjects that rely less on verbal communication
- Placing children in classrooms that align with their educational attainment rather than solely their age group.
- Offering catch-up classes, especially for those balancing dual modalities, ensuring flexibility in scheduling to accommodate their commitments.

**I/NGOs, schools, and the wider community should prioritize organizing inter-cultural events to foster Ukrainian children's social integration, as well as extra-curricular activities.**

- Encourage joint projects and interactions between Polish and Ukrainian students to ease social integration.
- Promote cultural exchange activities that respect and preserve Ukrainian identity.
- Organize accessible extra-curricular activities for Ukrainian refugee children to participate in

- Design programs with participatory methods that address the specific needs of refugee children and their families. Collaboration with local communities ensures that interventions are culturally and contextually relevant.
- Leverage volunteers and community actors to build a supportive ecosystem that engages caregivers in their children's educational journey and facilitates a sense of belonging within host communities.
- Strengthen efforts by I/NGOs to bridge the gap between caregivers and school or community environments. This includes involving caregivers in educational activities and creating support networks to foster integration and empowerment.

### 9.3. MICRO-LEVEL

**I/NGOs and specialists working with children should provide advice to Ukrainian refugee children before they are required to transition to vocational schools/ higher education institutions in their host country. Such professional advice should help Ukrainian children make informed decisions about subjects they wish to study and to feel more certain about their future education options.**

- Provide age-appropriate 'career' advice to children on their educational options, exploring the pros and cons of learning the local language and integrating into the local educational system.



Oksana Parafeniuk/Save the Children

**I/NGOs and the school environment should provide child friendly workshops and awareness building sessions on the importance of maintaining mental health and psychosocial well being and what professional services are available. Such programs should also be made available for caregivers.**

- Raise awareness among caregivers and children on mental health and psychosocial well-being. To identify and normalise MHPSS needs, and understand where to access services.

END OF REPORT

## 10. ANNEX A: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

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### 10.1. MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SUB-RESEARCH QUESTIONS

▪ **To assess the quality of, and access to education and learning of Ukrainian children aged 10-14.**

- a. Are children able to fully participate in local schools? What is the official policy and its implementation in practice?
- b. How are teachers prepared and supported to include Ukrainian children in their classrooms?
- c. What support structures are available for children to support full participation and enrolment?
- d. How is teacher wellbeing ensured considering additional responsibility and undertaking to support Ukrainian children in the classrooms?
- e. Is online learning equivalent to in-person learning? What are the gaps and support through online learning?
- f. Are children learning at appropriate grade levels? What factors contribute to their (non) achievement?
- g. To what extent are teaching and learning practices child-centred, using appropriate materials and languages?

▪ **To understand the well-being of Ukrainian children, and if their safety, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and child protection needs are met.**

- a. What access do Ukrainian children in school have to the formal Child Protection system?
- b. What support structures exist to support the wellbeing of Ukrainian children?
- c. Are schools safe for Ukrainian children?
- d. How are the emotional and psychosocial needs of Ukrainian refugee children addressed?

▪ **To understand education access and quality for marginalized groups.**

- a. What are the specific barriers faced by marginalized groups?
- b. How do these barriers affect their education and wellbeing?
- c. How do we track these barriers, and can we identify them?

## 10.2. INCEPTION PHASE FINDINGS

During the inception phase, Triangle’s researchers conducted interviews with programmatic focal points at each of Save the Children’s country teams involved in supporting Ukrainian refugee children in Poland, Moldova, and Romania. The main objectives of conducting these interviews were to gain a country-specific comprehensive understanding of the different profiles of at-risk and marginalized Ukrainian refugee children, and where appropriate their caregivers, as well as key contextual factors underpinning educational experiences. These interviews informed the research’s sampling stratification, methodology and analysis in accordance with three main considerations:

**1. At-risk profiles and policy prescription:** The inception interviews highlighted how different at-risk and vulnerable groups of Ukrainian refugee children may be disproportionately disadvantaged in accessing quality education, educational support, and mental health and psychosocial services. Profiles of refugee children that were highlighted as being particularly disadvantaged were children with disabilities, including those in institutions (who were previously in institutional care in Ukraine), children living in rural settings, children with mental health needs, children of Roma ethnic background, and unaccompanied and separated children. The programmatic representatives of Save the Children also expressed how refugee boys and girls experience different challenges in accessing quality education, linked to cultural norms, with boys facing heightened vulnerability to child militancy and return to Ukraine. A final group of children who were identified in these interviews are those who move are ‘on the move’ between Ukraine and neighbouring countries more than once, or within the country to which they are displaced, who as a result are anticipated to face major disruptions to their education.

**2. Caregiver and home circumstances:** Save the Children’s focal points highlighted how the well-being of Ukrainian refugee children, and therefore children’s ability to learn and engage with their education, is highly shaped by their home environments. The role of the children’s caregiver is critical in influencing how children can engage with their studies and school life in any context, but this is heightened for Ukrainian refugee children who often live in unstable and transient settings. Access to government support and benefits, the ability of their caregivers to find employment, and whether or not children’s accommodation arrangements are stable, all play important roles in influencing how attainable quality education is for refugee children.

In this research, consideration was also attributed to the issue of “parentification”, where a child takes on caregiving or household responsibilities at an inappropriate age, often occurring when a refugee child’s adult caregiver is at work. Parentification can have a detrimental impact on the cognitive, mental and emotional development of young children, thereby impacting their ability to receive a quality education.

**3. Addressing discrepancies in awareness and perceptions of available information and systems:** Initial interviews revealed that misinformation or lack of information significantly impacts refugee children’s ability to enrol in local schools, access MHPSS support, and engage in social or professional services. This issue affects different groups of children and families, such as those living in rural settings or children with disabilities, to varying degrees. As such, the so-called “information gap” and structural barriers within the educational ecosystem in each country were accordingly explored.

## 10.3. FIELD STAFF TRAINING AND PILOT PHASE

The research team was fully cognisant of the risks involved in conducting research with children and vulnerable persons. Following the approval of the inception report, Save the Children provided comprehensive training to the enumerators and facilitators. This training ensured quality control and child safeguarding before field deployment and covered critical topics such as data protection policies, research ethics, soft skills, conflict sensitivity, safe identification, referral pathways, and child safeguarding principles.

Participants were interviewed based on informed and prior consent. Caregivers consistently provided informed consent alongside child research subjects, and all participants retained the right to withdraw their consent to be interviewed at any point until the publication of research materials.

Before the first wave of deployment, the field research team conducted site scoping and pilot testing of all research tools in Poland. This ensured that the tools were well-adapted to the local context and the research subjects, and that ethical research standards were upheld.

## 10.4. DATA COLLECTION

The main data collection phase took place over nine weeks (September–October 2024). Data collection was phased and consisted of a wave of qualitative research followed by a wave of quantitative research. This phased approach facilitated greater contextualisation of tools by framing emerging results from the first wave of qualitative data collection against subsequent waves of quantitative data collection. The initial wave of qualitative research allowed researchers to identify key contextual barriers to accessing quality education, which informed the tailoring of the subsequent wave. To maximise efficiency, data collection and data analysis were conducted concurrently.

Sampling for the qualitative data collection was purposeful and complemented by snowball sampling, relying on respondents' willingness to share their contacts. Participation in all interviews and research activities remained voluntary throughout the entire data collection phase.

Given the hard-to-reach nature of the study's target group, some participants were accessed through Save the Children partners. Triangle also utilised contact information gathered through its networks and partners in Moldova, Poland and Romania, employing snowball sampling as necessary to reach the target goal. Based on participants' accessibility, a combination of probability sampling (random selection of participants from an entire population) and non-probability sampling was used to select a subset of the population. Careful consideration was given to the selection parameters, as identifying a suitable sample frame was critical to the validity and reliability of the results. The suggested sampling was adapted as necessary during the study, depending on feasibility.

Specific and informed consent was requested for recording and transcribing interviews and discussions. All recordings and notes taken during the process were stored in a highly confidential manner and were destroyed after transcription. Children were not recorded to protect them from potential harm and to safeguard their best interests. Additionally, personal data, such as names, was anonymised using codes or pseudonyms to prevent participant identification.

## SEMI-STRUCTURED KIIS

The purpose of conducting key-informant interviews (KIIs) was to gather in-depth information from individuals who had specialised knowledge or experiences relevant to the research topic. The KIIs helped to gain a broader understanding of context and country-specific factors underpinning quality of education, namely the different structural, institutional, environmental, and socio-economic enablers or impediments to children accessing quality education. The KIIs have also proved instrumental in being able to inform policy recommendations, program design, or other interventions by providing practical, experience-based suggestions.

Table 1: Conducted KIIs

Country	Poland	Moldova	Romania	Total
Educators from local schools (teachers, directors, inter-cultural assistants)	4	7	5	16
Ukrainian teachers involved in online education	3	-	2	5
Psychologists / Counsellors	2	2	2	6
NGOs / iNGOs	3	3	5	11
Governmental authorities	1	3	2	6
Total number:	13	12	14	44

The following amendments were made by Triangle’s research team to the KII sampling stratification for each country:

- 1. Interview Format Change:** Caregivers of Ukrainian children were not interviewed under the In-depth interview (IDI) format, as it is better suited to caregivers’ circumstances compared to the KII format.
- 2. Inclusion of Government Authorities:** Based on advice from STC focal points, government authorities were included in the KII sample. This change enabled insight into government policies impacting the living and educational experiences of Ukrainian refugee children and their caregivers; as well as the dissemination of information to educational authorities, caregivers, and relevant NGOs.
- 3. Addition of Psychologists and NGOs:** The sample was adjusted to include psychologists and local NGOs or international NGOs involved in education, protection or MHPSS activities for Ukrainian refugee children. This amendment addressed the previously insufficient coverage of MHPSS aspects within the Quality of Learning framework.

## IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

In-depth interviews (IDI) were a valuable research method for obtaining detailed and nuanced information, particularly in sensitive settings, such as when working with at-risk child or refugee populations. These interviews created a safe and confidential space for participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. The presence of a skilled interviewer, particularly one with professional experience working with children, was crucial in establishing trust and ensuring the confidentiality of participants.

IDIs empowered participants by giving them a voice and allowing them to shape research and interventions that directly impact their lives. They enabled Triangle to explore complex issues and gain a comprehensive understanding of the unique circumstances faced by at-risk children and caregivers. The flexibility and adaptability of IDIs accommodated the diverse needs and capacities of participants.

By conducting in-depth interviews, Triangle delved into the contextual factors that influenced the learning experiences, psychosocial and mental health, and community and systemic challenges facing at-risk children, refugees,

and (female) caregivers in Poland, Moldova, and Romania. This comprehensive understanding informs the development of interventions, policies, and advocacy efforts that support the well-being and protection of at-risk children.

### IDI children at-risk profile

Based on findings from inception interviews, desk reviews, and field research, specific at-risk groups of marginalized Ukrainian children were identified in each research context. However, significant access limitations shaped the data collection process and the resulting insights.

In Poland, children currently living in separate institutions and those previously institutionalised in Ukraine were identified as particularly at-risk due to challenges in accessing education and specialized support structures necessary for meaningful engagement in learning and well-being services. However, access to children in institutions was limited due to the sensitive nature of this group and the spectrum of disabilities many of these children face. To complement the information gathered from caregivers, an in-depth interview (IDI) was conducted with an NGO working directly with this group. Additionally, through KIIs and IDIs with organizations working with Roma communities, valuable information was obtained about Ukrainian Roma families facing exclusion and discrimination.

In Moldova, efforts to conduct IDIs with children “on the move” were hindered by access constraints and a lack of willingness to participate. Nevertheless, KIIs and the desk review provided important insights into the Ukrainian Roma population, which is considered highly mobile and faces unique challenges in accessing education, protection, and other essential services.

In Romania, children in institutions were a key focus group, and the research successfully gathered quality information about this population. However, access to out-of-school children, another identified at-risk group, was not possible during the data collection phase.

Given these access constraints, the research adapted its methodology to rely on alternative sources of information, such as KIIs with organizations working closely with these vulnerable groups. Furthermore, gender and disability remained cross-cutting themes throughout the study, ensuring that the unique challenges faced by these children were addressed and their voices represented wherever possible.

Table 2: Conducted IDIs

Risk profile	Interviewee profile	Poland	Moldova	Romania	Total
Children in institutions	Children	-	-	1	1
	Caregivers	1	-	1	2
	Organisation	1	-	2	3
Ukrainian Roma (children on the move / out of school)	Children	-	-	-	-
	Caregivers	-	-	-	-
	Organisation	1	-	-	1
Total number:		3	-	4	7

## FOCUS-GROUP DISCUSSIONS

FGDs were used to gather profile-level data from groups. However, the disaggregation was modified to maintain geographical representation across rural and urban settings considering that, according to the inception interviews and desk review, Ukrainian refugee children living in rural settings experience different challenges in accessing education or MHPSS services, linked to transportation options and availability of extra curriculum and social activities, compared to their counterparts living in urban settings.

The FGDs conducted with caregivers were mixed gender because caregivers of refugee children in these three countries were most commonly, if not exclusively, women, meaning that the proposed sampling stratification naturally ensured appropriate representation of female caregivers. For the FGDs conducted with children, the mixed gender characteristic sought to ensure equal representation and inclusivity of children of all abilities and genders. Questions which embodied gender as a cross-cutting theme were included to ensure identification of different challenges in accessing quality education for boys and girls of school-age.

Special FGD formats were designed for children aged 10-14, which included more play and child engagement and child friendly ice breakers, rather than structured questioning and facilitation.

Table 3: Conducted FGDs

Strata	Participant profile	Poland	Moldova	Romania	Total
Local in-person schools	Children (urban)	1	1	1	3
	Caregivers (urban)	1	-	1	2
	Caregivers (rural)	-	1	1	2
Online schools	Children (urban)	-	1	-	1
	Caregivers (urban)	-	1	1	1
	Children (rural)	-	-	1	1
Dual modality (enrolled in both in-person and online schools)	Children (urban)	-	1	1	2
	Caregivers (rural)	-	1	1	2
Total number:		2	6	7	15

## SURVEY

In Triangle’s quantitative data collection for this study, which used **KoBo**, we were committed to ensuring a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the educational and psychosocial landscapes these children navigate.

Given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, our approach acknowledged the disproportionate impact on female refugees, who often assume primary caregiving roles amid crisis. As such, a larger proportion of our respondents were female, aiming to accurately represent their unique perspectives and needs. This methodological choice was essential to fully understand the support structures and educational opportunities available to them, as well as the specific barriers they encounter.

Table 4: Survey

Country	Poland	Moldova	Romania	Total
Number of eligible survey submission	173	188	209	570

## 10.5. DATA ANALYSIS AND CLEANING

The analysis team cleaned and analysed all qualitative and quantitative data in real time.

All qualitative data was entered into an analysis framework that accommodated for filtering of findings according to disaggregation metrics and a coding index informed by the process of preliminary findings. Qualitative findings were subsequently cross-referenced and triangulated with quantitative data to produce emerging findings for validation and use in the development of this final report.

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