

Too few places to feel safe.

A snapshot of Ukrainian youth in Warsaw

NRC Poland



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Owner: NRC Poland

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Young Ukrainians play a popular table football game during the opening day of the “Spoko Café”, a youth centre organized by GPAS Association, Warsaw, Poland, 11th December 2022.

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KEY FINDINGS

As the escalation of the war in Ukraine enters its third year soon, and as school-aged children from Ukraine face the 5th school year of disrupted education, we asked young Ukrainians (aged 14-19) living in Warsaw to tell us what life has been like for them as refugees over the last 18 months.

While many are looking with hope towards the future, the uncertainty of the future makes them feel anxious and powerless.

They tell us about difficulties in communication with parents, language barriers, feelings of alienation, and challenges of finding oneself in a big city like Warsaw. As many of them come from smaller towns and villages, navigating a new life in a capital city comes with its own challenges.

Young Ukrainians in Warsaw talk about their need to meet with peers in real life, not only in online spaces, a need for meaningful interaction with their peers and communities, and group psychosocial support to help them overcome some of the daily challenges.

- **Youth need access to safe spaces and youth centres**

The importance of safe spaces – for example, the youth club “Spoko Café”, is highlighted frequently, however, most young people admitted that there are very few other places where they can really feel safe. They report spending their free time in the parks, walking around the city, doing sports, or just hanging out in the youth club with their peers.

- **Youth need social connections and emotional support**

Access to affordable or free psychosocial support (also for their parents) is highly prioritized by the young Ukrainians as many of them report suffering panic attacks and difficulties in relations and communication with peers and relatives. At the same time, they deal with the lack of acceptance and understanding from parts of Polish society. Youth report cases of bullying and harassment at school and in the workplace, while trying to navigate their own turbulent adolescent emotions in a foreign country.

- **Youth need income now**

As they feel responsible for supporting their families financially, young Ukrainians in Poland often must choose between continuation of their education or work; an impossible choice for many, as they dream of a better future, but the reality of the present day and high costs of living in Poland¹ demand youth to put their educational development goals and career aspirations on hold.

- **Youth need and want to learn Polish language**

Knowledge of the Polish language and access to language courses remains one of the biggest reported barriers for youth integration in day-to-day life, including both social and work contexts.

The youth we spoke to – in particular young Ukrainian girls - report feeling hopeful about the future, showing agency and awareness of their current situation, as well as the steps they need to take to make a change. They tell us that they need to work and study hard to secure a good future for themselves and their loved ones.

Young people report a need and desire to learn and grow and are asking for more leadership and training opportunities for themselves and their peers in Poland.

“What comes next? I do not know what will happen next and that is the problem.... I can no longer imagine myself in Kyiv. Now, I am here, in Warsaw.”

Female respondent from Ukraine

1. Introduction

As the escalation of the war in Ukraine approaches the two-year mark, over one million refugees from Ukraine reside in Poland - half of them are school-aged children and youth.

According to a study by one of NRC's partner organisations in Poland, CEO (Center for Citizenship Education)², nearly 56% of school-age (7-18 years old) refugee children registered in Poland are outside the Polish formal education system. This number is even higher, up to 78%, if we look at the enrolment rate of secondary school-age refugee children (14- 18). Only 7% of the refugee children go to the secondary school (*liceum*), 6% to a vocational secondary school (*technikum*), and 2% to a trade school (15% in total).

The dropout rate is 8% for refugees who arrived since February 2022 and studying in Polish secondary schools. This applies in particular to the students aged between 15-18 years old. At the same time, the number of people in this age group who are registered in Poland for temporary protection (PESEL UKR) remains the same. We can infer from these figures that the drop-out youth remain in Poland.

The next school year, 2023-2024, will mark the 5th school year outside of formal in-person education or with interrupted in-person attendance of the Ukrainian children and youth due to the COVID-19 pandemic and escalation of the war in Ukraine. We are looking at the potentially "lost generation" living with uncertainty about their future due to the unclear length of their temporary protection status and limited access to education.

While most of the available studies are focused on the refugee population in general and the most vulnerable ones like single mothers with children, the elderly and people living with disabilities, few focus on the situation of the refugee youth and their specific experiences.

As the humanitarian sector shifts from meeting the emergency basic needs to increasing the self-reliance and access to durable solutions, we need to ensure the structural inclusion of marginalised subgroups of Ukrainian refugee populations, such as youth in needs assessments, research efforts, and policy debates.

2. Approach

This snapshot assessment was conducted by NRC and GPAS in June-July 2023 to capture the voices of Ukrainian refugee youth in Poland and to better understand their needs, priorities, challenges and future plans.

GPAS is a youth-focused organisation and is one of NRC's partners in Poland. Since late 2022, GPAS has operated the youth club, "Spoko Café"³, in central Warsaw. This safe space receives on average 1200 visits per month from approximately 200 different youth.

The methodology used to conduct this snapshot assessment uses the NRC "Youth Wellbeing Framework" which NRC developed to inform programming activities throughout the humanitarian programme cycle. It consists of three foundational domains that support youth well-being - safety, basic needs, and education, and eight well-being dimensions - social, emotional, self-confidence, economic, community contribution, critical thinking, physical health, and personal values.

Participants

NRC conducted three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) at the "Spoko Café" in Warsaw on 17 June, 1 July and 21 July 2023. There was one mixed group (eight participants with five males and three females, aged between 15 and 18), one group with male participants (eight people, aged between 14-19) and one female group (seven people, aged between 15-18).

The FGDs were facilitated in Ukrainian and Russian language. Eligibility criteria for participation in the FGDs were as follows: respondents were living in Ukraine before February 24, 2022; currently living in Poland; and between 14 and 22 years old.

Research limitations

Youth attending "Spoko Café" do not necessarily represent the situation of youth across Warsaw and the rest of Poland, but it does speak to the experiences of those participating in this work.

3. Situation of Ukrainian refugee youth in Warsaw

3.1 Community. Social life. Education

The young Ukrainians in Warsaw we spoke to like to spend their free time online chatting with friends in Ukraine or hanging out with friends in Warsaw in real life. Preferred locations for meetings mentioned by the young people were sports clubs, library, parks, and the youth club “Spoko Café”.

Their main source of information about events and the situations in Poland and Ukraine are Instagram, Telegram, Snapchat and friends. This is where they seek information. Since arriving to Poland, they have also started to use Twitter and Facebook, the latter for finding a job.

Youth describe their relationships with their peers as difficult. Young people talk about difficulties in communication, uncertain future and that they can't find themselves in the current situation. Many report having observed their peers losing hope and engaging in negative behaviours.

“I'm 19 and my peers are mostly working, some of them drink a lot and some of them communicate very badly.”

Male respondent from Ukraine

“And now I see those who are 17, some petty thing drives them, something wrong at school, they got a bad mark, they couldn't go for a walk, the girl doesn't have a boyfriend... Then they start drinking heavily and get depressed. They just fall into an abyss.”

Male respondent from Ukraine

The participants mentioned that there are workshop and training options at “Spoko Café” and some educational and training opportunities available at the universities and schools, but they also acknowledge the language barrier prevents them from reaching their educational goals and/or hinders their performance at work.

The youth acknowledge that there are workshops and training options supported by Ukrainian speaking staff at “Spoko Café”. Some educational and training opportunities available at the universities and schools, unlike those at “Spoko Café” are hard to access due to the language barrier that is preventing them from reaching education goals or hinders their performance at work.

The female participants acknowledge that access to education in secondary schools (*liceum*) and technical schools is free and that there are many opportunities for creative development provided at the youth club. They also mentioned master classes at the university are free of charge.

For young Ukrainians, in-person communication is very important, not only online. A need to meet their peers face to face was raised several times during the discussions. The youth club “Spoko Café” is a place where they come to just relax, de-stress and connect with friends, or use the services of a psychologist or nutritionist (funded by the Polish Humanitarian Action). They said that this helps them to come to terms with their bodies and the changes in their lives that happened because of the escalation of the war.

Long waiting lists for free Polish language classes and high prices for courses available on commercial market were listed as one of the barriers to better integration with Polish society, better performance in education or accessing better paid jobs. While the youth acknowledges that there are many educational and development opportunities available at the market, they are accessible for those speaking good Polish or English language.

Compared to boys, girls seemed to be more optimistic when asked about access to education and available opportunities. Most of them have a clear idea about the plans and some of them are already being put into action. Young Ukrainian girls go to the English-Speaking Club run by the “Ukraine House”, an NRC partner organisation in Poland, or plan to enter the music school. One of the respondents who wants to continue her career as a pastry chef, says that she can see many opportunities for apprenticeship and employment for herself in Poland. Another girl talked about watching online courses to learn how to become an interior designer in the future.

“There are many job offers. They write that you can start without experience and that they offer apprenticeships for a certain period of time.”

Female respondent from Ukraine

“I've only just arrived here. I've been working as a photographer for a long time. If you're 18, you can work in a photo shop officially, and that's great. There are lots of opportunities to develop, and all sorts of jobs, you just must be willing...”

Female respondent from Ukraine

"I was going to a Polish school and my level of Polish has improved to an intermediate level. I believe it will continue to get better."

Female respondent from Ukraine

Sports play an important role in the lives of the young Ukrainians. They like to spend their free time in the gym or sports centre, playing football, basketball, and tennis. Being on the ground and training together is a way for them to form new friendships and better integrate with Polish society, on equal terms.

3.2 Challenges. Fears. Barriers

Most of the respondents, both male and female, are already working to provide for themselves and their relatives. They feel responsible for supporting the family or are expected to contribute financially. It has been emphasised that it is crucial for them to make sure that their families and parents are doing well. Paid work has been declared as a main source of income for 40% of the respondents in the male focus group discussion. Others rely on financial support from their parents with one person receiving a scholarship to continue education.

"My mum makes me work and that worries me a lot. My mum humiliates me by telling me that I won't achieve anything and that I need to help with money... I understand that if I work in some shop, I won't be able to give time to my studies and I will spend my whole life in the shop."

Female respondent from Ukraine

Youth feel that they must work hard in order to afford life in Poland. While some manage to combine work and education, others are facing a difficult choice between education and work.

"[...] my mum is alone; my dad is absent. She gets 2,000 PLN and you still must pay for the flat and it's very difficult. It crushes me because I don't know what to do."

Female respondent from Ukraine

“To study, you must learn the language, and to learn the language, you have to spend money.”

Male respondent from Ukraine

Asked about responsibilities, on top of education and work, the female participants also mentioned care responsibilities for younger siblings, cooking and cleaning. Some of the boys also mentioned care responsibilities at home but it was mainly the girls who were expected to take care of dependants.

Like their male colleagues, young girls talked about difficulties in communication with their parents. They feel that that parents devalue their achievements and desires, and they are not being understood. They also feel that they do not understand some actions of their parents.

“[...] there are two of us living here. My mum and me. I know how hard it is for her. First, in the financial sense, because I'm a teenager and I want to dress stylishly, but I understand that she gets very tired at work and there is a lot of talk about that. Second, because I'm a teenager and I'm starting to have my opinion. I'm forming a personality and for her I think it's difficult to accept this, to accept that a child will grow up.”

Female respondent from Ukraine

The same keywords and phrases emerged across different discussions when asked about challenges and barriers: money, demotion, difficulty in finding a job at young age, language, actions of Poles, and different curriculum at school.

Bullying came out as a highly disturbing issue with the presentation of several examples of such cases. It is important to note, that young Ukrainians observe cases of bullying at schools against Ukrainian and Polish children and youth. Young people also report facing issues with integration with Polish society and adapting to life in a big city like Warsaw.

Cases of bullying, violence, and harassment shared by the Ukrainian youth point out pre-existing systemic challenges in Polish public schools exacerbated by an increased number of refugee pupils within a very short period. Lack of teachers' intervention, even when they were specifically asked for support contributes to an overall feeling of losing a sense of agency, safety and fear of repercussions. Complicated peer relations between Polish and Ukrainian students and teachers having a low awareness of available support that would help them to respond adequately, add an additional layer to the problem.

In addition to discrimination at school, the Ukrainian youth report discrimination in the workplace. One 18-year-old youth admitted that he does not feel safe anywhere.

“I am feeling upset because the Polish people extended an invitation to the Ukrainians to come to their country, but now it seems that they are dissatisfied.”

Male respondent from Ukraine

3.4 Opportunities and solutions identified by Ukrainian youth

Lack of a predictable future in terms of education, job opportunities and length of stay in Poland contributes to an overall feeling of anxiety. However, most of the participants, in particular young women, feel that they have better opportunities in Poland than in Ukraine.

“It is a bit inappropriate that we are sitting here in Poland, which is where there is no shelling, ... But you must go on living. And you know what they say? When the war starts, it is survived by those who do not wait until it is over but live on.”

Male respondent from Ukraine

Communication was mentioned several times as one of the solutions and opportunities for improved relations with Polish citizens. The youth emphasised need for acceptance of the people from Ukraine in Poland, conversational culture and friendly attitude.

“[...] when I talk to people, Polish people, they often ask: why are you having a hard time? You came here, you have it good here. The country here is very good. I find it very lonely here. Poles just don't understand that you are left alone here. You come back to your flat and understand that this is not your place.”

Female respondent from Ukraine

The importance of a safe space like “Spoko Café” youth club has been emphasised by all participants. They expressed a need for the creation of more similar spaces.

Ukrainian youth also asked to reduce the entry criteria and facilitate access to schools. Access to free Polish language courses and support from cross-cultural assistants in schools repeatedly came out in the discussions as the most burning issues.

Provision of detailed information about education and professional development, employment laws and procedures how to set up a business, as well as access to information about employment or apprenticeship for youth were presented as an enabling factor to become self-sufficient.

Integration activities where Polish and Ukrainian youth can spend time together, i.e., free or affordable sports and art activities would improve relations and help refugee youth learn the language quickly.

4. Conclusion

Almost two years after the escalation of the war in Ukraine, 380,000 young Ukrainians remain registered for the Temporary Protection in Poland. Despite children and youth making 39% of all refugees from Ukraine registered for the PESEL UKR in Poland, their specific needs are often overlooked.

An unclear future given the uncertainty of their temporary protection status in Poland remains a point of anxiety and stress. This is exacerbated by the complicated and often challenging relations with their Ukrainian and Polish peers, systemic challenges with public education system, and their unstable financial situation. All this hinders efforts to realize the full potential of Ukrainian youth that would be beneficial for the economy and society in the long run – whether in Poland or back in Ukraine. As hosting fatigue increases, it is important to continue and expand investment for youth in integration, vocational education, economic inclusion and the acquisition of Polish language skills.

Despite all the challenges, youth remain hopeful and optimistic, but with understandable concerns for the future and for Ukraine. They see a possible future for themselves in Poland whether medium- or long-term, the question remains, will Poland and international donors support them in realizing it?

Endnotes

¹ Read more: [Hidden Hardship: 1 Year Living in Forced Displacement for Refugees from Ukraine](#), NRC February 2023

² Ukrainian refugee students in the Polish education system, CEO, April 2023

³ “Spoko Café” is a space in the centre of Warsaw managed by street workers with more than 20 years of experience, that focuses on integration and provides entertainment, recreation, development and mutual support for people in the age range 14-22, regardless of gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, faith, ability and sexual orientation.