

Education in exile: Ukrainian refugee students in the schooling system in Poland following the Russian–Ukrainian war

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Abstract

Following the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine since February 2022, Poland adopted institutional solutions and policies to facilitate the inclusion of Ukrainian refugees in the schooling system. We analyse geographical patterns and local determinants of the participation of children and young people from Ukraine in education in Poland. Applying a computer-based geographic information system and statistical analysis to administrative data from schools and municipalities in Poland, we found that about 50% of the Ukrainian refugees at schools in Poland are of primary school age, while the rates for other age groups are significantly lower. Ukrainian refugees are more likely to attend public schools in affluent urban municipalities and places with more developed accommodation infrastructure. Clearly, the role of local resources was of key importance in the territorial distribution of refugee families in Poland during the first year of the war. Another factor that proved to be important in attracting refugees was the presence of pre-war Ukrainian immigrants in schools. Observed patterns differ between spring and autumn 2022, which partly reflects the changes in migration to Poland and then back to Ukraine. We anticipate that much of the Ukrainian

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migration to Poland may outlast the current conflict. This situation creates further challenges for education in Poland—and even more so for Ukraine.

KEYWORDS

Poland, schooling in exile, Ukraine, war refugees

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has caused the largest and fastest displacement of people since World War II, affecting the entire region and beyond. The largest group has moved to Poland. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency and Polish government data, 2.1 million Ukrainian citizens have crossed the Ukrainian–Polish border between February and December 2022 (UNHCR, 2022). Of these, 1.5 million have been officially registered in Poland, and more than a million have received the Polish identification number (PESEL), which allows access to the labour market, social services, and healthcare.

Many refugees from Ukraine are young people, which creates a substantial challenge for the education systems of receiving countries. In Europe, the number of refugee students arriving from Ukraine and institutional responses to the crisis have varied by country (see Eurydice, 2022 for a general overview). In this article, we discuss the approach taken in Poland and analyse the participation patterns of students from Ukraine in schooling in Poland. In particular, we focus on understanding how territorial and school characteristics in the destination country influence the enrolment of migrants. We examine how participation patterns of students from Ukraine in Poland have changed over time with the prolongation of the war.

We concentrate on preschool and school education, leaving aside tertiary and adult education. Our particular focus is on primary education, as this tier of schooling is compulsory in both Ukraine and Poland. This tier also attracted the largest number of refugee students from Ukraine. We believe that understanding how local measures and school-level resources affect the inclusion of young Ukrainians in schooling is crucial for improving education policy toward migrants. This is particularly the case because, in Poland's partially decentralised education system, local authorities not only make key decisions regarding the school network and organisation of the teaching process (Herbst et al., 2009) but also play an important role in allocating resources to assist refugees from Ukraine (Parliament of Poland, 2022). In contrast to other education systems in Europe, schools in Poland have limited experience in educating migrants; thus, substantial innovation and adaptation have been required at the local level. The literature on the integration of migrants in schools emphasises the importance of national institutional arrangements, access to education, the pros and cons of segregated settings, and implementation problems (e.g., Crul et al., 2019; Edele et al., 2021; Erling et al., 2022; Fandrem et al., 2021; Horgan et al., 2022; Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013; Pagel & Edele, 2022; Tajic & Bunar, 2020). Polish experiences offer an additional empirical case that differs in many respects from those of other countries.

The article is structured as follows. First, we summarise the arrangements made by the Polish government to allow students from Ukraine to enrol at schools in Poland. Next, we analyse the dynamics of the flows of Ukrainian refugees to Poland. We examine the geographical patterns and statistics of the participation of Ukrainian children and young people in education in Poland. We use a simple model of the primary education enrolment of students from Ukraine to learn which characteristics of localities and schools increase the chances of attracting refugees to Polish education institutions. In a concluding section, we present a discussion that draws on our analysis and fragmented evidence from additional surveys to articulate recommendations for future policies for better supporting students who have been evacuated from Ukraine to Poland.

2 | INCLUSION OF STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IN POLAND

Poland, following Article 70 of its Constitution, guarantees the right to education to all its residents, including immigrants. Furthermore, all residents who do not have Polish citizenship are nonetheless subject to compulsory education, which covers one year of kindergarten and eight years of primary school. After completing primary education, residents have the right to continue their education in secondary school until graduation or reaching the age of eighteen. Children who have moved to Poland from another country have, between the ages of three and five, a right (but are not obliged) to attend preschool education provided by municipal governments.

The support for migrant students defined in the Education Law consists of free Polish-language education for all children subject to compulsory schooling, support from a school assistant who speaks the student's native language, additional remedial classes in academic subjects, and education in preparatory classes. Additionally, foreign students have the right to learn about their native language and culture. These general provisions are further specified in an ordinance issued by the Minister of National Education (MNE, 2017).

Children arriving to Poland from other countries are assigned to the appropriate grade based on their school certificate from their home country and information provided by their parents. In Poland, there is no national guidance, definitions or instruments for assessing their competencies and needs (for a comparative overview of the situation in Europe see Eurydice, 2022). After receiving an application and additional information from the parent (or another legal guardian), the school head decides which criteria are most important and which grade is the most suitable for the child. Students arriving from outside Poland may be assigned to either regular classes or so-called *preparatory classes*. Admitting students to a regular class assumes that they have sufficient knowledge of Polish (the language of instruction). However, such students are still eligible for an additional two hours of Polish language tuition per week. *Preparatory classes* are meant for students who need additional support to adapt to the education process, learn the language, and make up for differences between the curriculum in Poland and what they have learned before. Preparatory classes are organised across grades within education stages—grouped by grades 1–3 and 4–6—and follow the core curriculum of the grade the child will eventually join. However, setting up the preparatory class in the school is the decision of the supervising body—typically a local government executive.

Initially in February 2022, the education of young Ukrainian evacuees arriving in Poland was subordinated to general regulations. However, on 12 March, 2022, the Parliament of Poland enacted a special law to facilitate, through different measures, the arrival of Ukrainian citizens in Poland after February 24, 2022 (Parliament of Poland, 2022).

Evacuees covered by the Act benefit from temporary protection within the territory of the Republic of Poland—in line with the EU Council Implementing Decision (European Council, 2022). Their legal stay is guaranteed for eighteen months. The Act entitles refugees to free healthcare as well as family and education benefits. It also includes provisions facilitating employment in Poland.

The act defines for children and young people from Ukraine the same right to schooling, scholarships, and school allowances as for students from Poland. Local governments were obliged to ensure the free transport of children to and from education institutions in sparsely populated areas.

The act allowed teachers to limit the curriculum and adapt teaching methods to match the education needs and psychophysical abilities of refugee students. Students in preparatory classes were guaranteed a minimum of three hours per week of Polish language instruction (later increased to six hours). To facilitate the enrolment of Ukrainian students, the caps on class size were increased for school years 2021–2022 and 2022–2023. For example, the cap for preparatory classes was increased to 25, and that for regular classes in grades 1–3 to 29 students—for classes with at least four Ukrainian refugee students.

One key question was how to treat students living in Poland but participating in online education provided by Ukrainian schools. Formally, such students are subject to compulsory education within the Polish system. Article 54 of the Special Act (Parliament of Poland, 2022) states that students who are citizens of Ukraine and

participate in official online education in Ukraine are excluded from the mandatory annual preschool preparation and mandatory primary education in Poland. Their parents may decide whether a child will be educated in the Polish or Ukrainian system. In the latter case, guardians must submit an appropriate statement to their municipal authorities in Poland.

Due to concerns about the available space in schools, the Special Act made it possible to designate new locations for schools. The law waived the requirements of Article 71 of the Construction Law for changing a building or part of it for education purposes. However, the municipal council is still obliged to pass a resolution on the new location and obtain a positive opinion from the education superintendent. Under certain conditions, teaching in the preparatory class may be conducted in an inter-school group or even in groups including children from different municipalities.

To mitigate the problem of an increase in teacher workload, teachers in an early-retirement scheme were allowed to return to work without losing the right to so-called compensatory benefits. The Special Act also lifted, for the school years 2021–2022 and 2022–2023, the limit on teaching hours specified in article 35, section 1, of the Teacher's Charter: school heads are allowed to assign overtime hours to teachers who have already reached the minimum of 1.5 full-time jobs (with the teacher's consent).

The act also allowed the fast-track employment of Ukrainian citizens in teacher assistant positions.¹ Teachers employed in this mode are not required to meet all the formal requirements, and their qualifications are assessed by the school head. Importantly, this allowed schools to employ Ukrainian teachers without a certified knowledge of Polish.

Refugee students from Ukraine enrolled in preparatory classes may be exempt from the annual assessment if their teachers determine that the student does not know, or has insufficient knowledge of, Polish. The examination system has also been modified. In the school year 2021–2022, Ukrainian students admitted to grade 8 and grade 12 (final grades of primary and secondary schooling respectively) of Polish schooling were supposed to take the standardised examinations normally administered when students graduate. The examination commission made allowances, such as translation into Ukrainian and access to dictionaries and interpreters. Ultimately, only 43 Ukrainian students chose to take the final examination for upper secondary education (*Matura*) in early May 2022. Furthermore, 61,000 Ukrainian refugee students took the obligatory grade 8 exam later in the same month.

3 | STUDENTS FROM UKRAINE IN SCHOOLS IN POLAND

In this section, we use data on Ukrainian refugees that have been periodically published by the Polish Prime Minister Chancellery (KPRM) since March 2022. As these data include the number of refugees holding the PESEL ID number by county,² they allow us to analyse the territorial pattern of Ukrainian settlement in Poland. In addition, we use data on the actual number of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools. These numbers were extracted from the System of Information on Education (SIO) used by the Ministry of Education to administer the education system. We used records from April 2022 (two months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine) and from November 2022 (two months after the start of the new school year 2022–2023).

3.1 | Participation patterns of students from Ukraine

As Figure 1 shows, between the end of March and December 2022, the total number of Ukrainian refugee students in Polish schools fluctuated between 150,000 and 200,000, reaching a maximum in mid-May. During this period, Ukrainians accounted for 3.5%–4.5% of all students in Poland. No data are available to show how many Ukrainian students remained in school and how many dropped out (we can only see the raw numbers). However, the instability of enrolment within a single school year suggests that there was substantial rotation. Based on

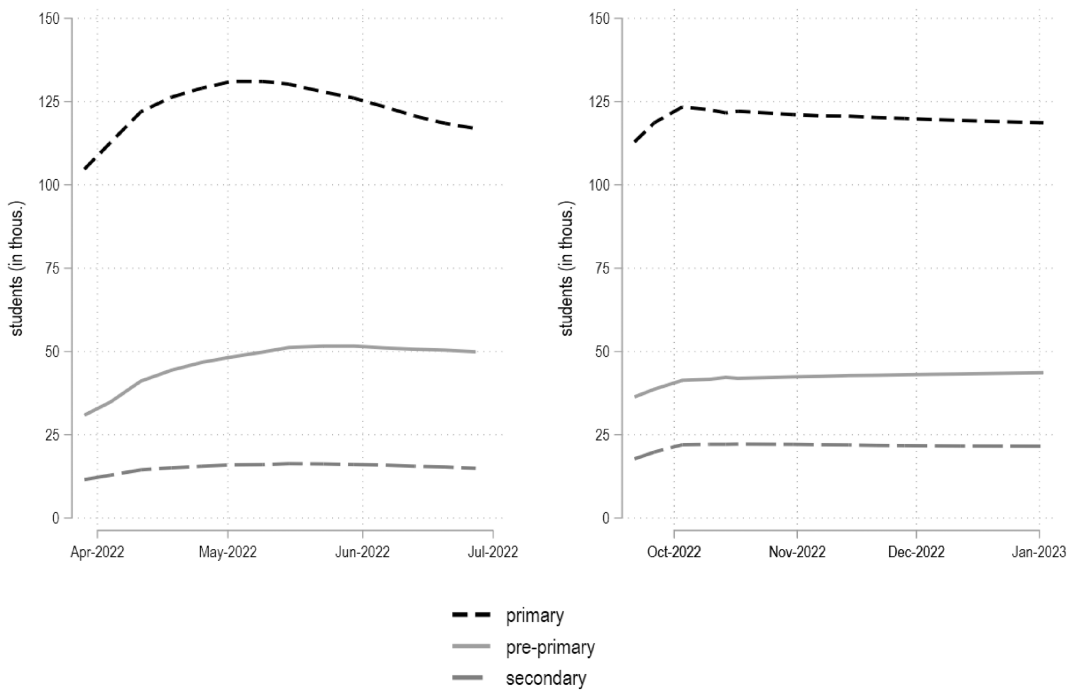


FIGURE 1 Students evacuated from Ukraine in schools and preschools in Poland in 2021–2022 and 2022–2023. Source: Authors.

administrative data that are not publicly available, the Polish Ministry of Education estimated that only 58% of Ukrainian students attending Polish schools by the end of the school year 2021–2022 were still enrolled in the next school year (Otto & Nowosielska, 2022). Similar signals come from the social benefits system.³

The observed fluctuation reflects an unstable situation on the war front and the efforts of the Ukrainian government to sustain the provision of public education even in wartime conditions, as described above. When refugees from Ukraine were asked in April and May about their plans regarding staying longer in Poland, two thirds declared that they were in Poland temporarily, for less than a year (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2022).

As the military conflict shifted toward the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, some of the refugees returned to their homes. In early May, the Polish Border Guards registered more returns to Ukraine than arrivals from Ukraine to Poland. However, as shown by the UNHCR, not all returns were permanent, and people tended to move in and out of the country (UNHCR, 2022). Frequent moves to and from Ukraine affected the school processes. As reported by journalists interviewing school principals, there were substantial fluctuations in student numbers during the spring months and in the new school year that began in the autumn. Some of the students changed their place of residence or left for Ukraine or other countries, and new ones arrived to Poland (Otto & Nowosielska, 2022).

About one third of the first wave of Ukrainian students attended not only standard classes, but also the additional courses in Polish that were organised to help them better integrate in the new school environment. This ratio was undoubtedly a combined result of the capacity of schools to organise such courses at short notice and the demand for them from students. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that, according to the latest available data, the percentage of Ukrainian students attending additional Polish lessons rose to 50% in December 2022 (see Figure 2).

Public statements released by the Ministry of Education recommended preparatory classes to those working with children from Ukraine. The Minister of Education argued that such classes would interfere less with regular

education and be less stressful for migrant children (Bugdalski, 2022). However, many difficulties were encountered in their provision. Schools had very limited experience of organising them, and few teachers were prepared to teach them. Moreover, running preparatory classes proved costly, and thus providing them on a larger scale was in practice not feasible for local governments. For example, the city of Warsaw, hosting the largest number of refugees, planned (as announced in early March) to have at least one preparatory class in each of its eighteen city districts. Other large cities attempted to open preparatory classes in selected schools (Bugdalski, 2022). However, a vast majority of incoming Ukrainian students were enrolled in regular classes and attended them with their Polish peers (see Table 1). In April 2022, only 16% of refugees enrolled in Polish schools were attending preparatory classes, and by the 2022–2023 school year this share had dropped to 8%. It can be assumed, however, that those students who were in preparatory classes in the school year 2021–2022 and stayed in the Polish education system moved to regular classes, so the preparatory classes in autumn 2022 were mostly organised for newly arriving students.

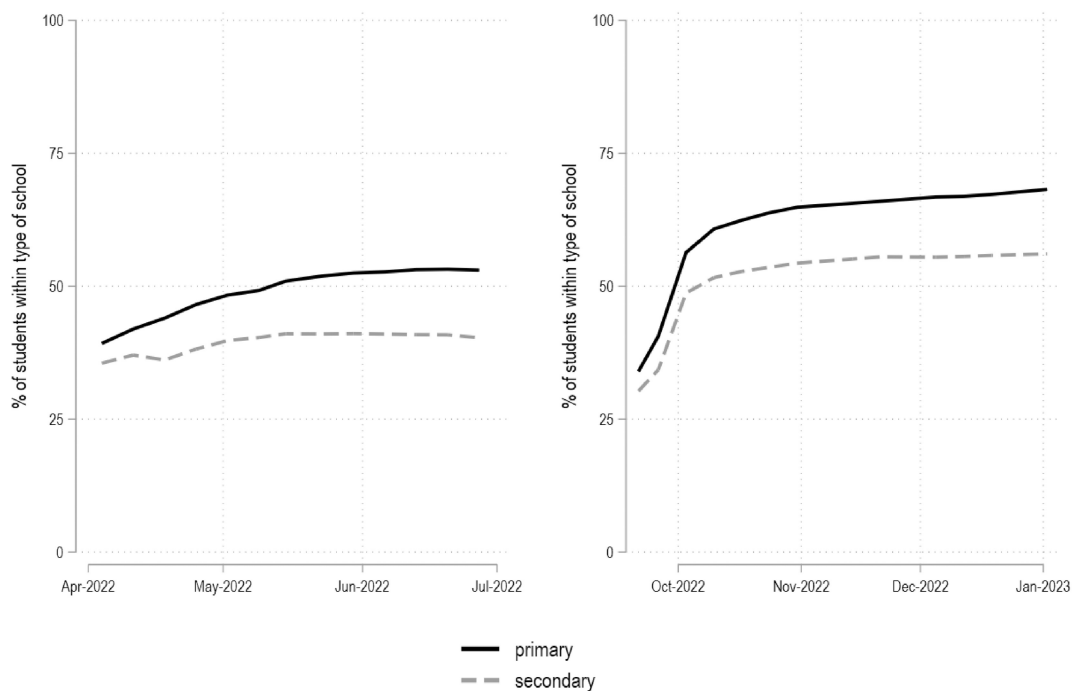


FIGURE 2 Share of students from Ukraine participating in additional Polish language lessons. *Polish language courses for refugee students were provided in primary and secondary schools, but not in preschools. Source: Authors.

TABLE 1 Ukrainian refugee students in regular and preparatory classes across preschool, primary, and secondary education in Poland.

	April 2022		November 2022	
	N	%	N	%
Students in preparatory classes	25,676	16.0%	15,001	8.1%
Students in regular classes	134,641	84.0%	169,871	91.9%
Total	160,317	100%	184,872	100%

Source: Table constructed by authors using data retrieved from dane.gov.pl.

The conclusions from the school audits carried out in Poland before the war in Ukraine were that, with few exceptions, Polish schools are not prepared to effectively teach and support migrant children. In particular, Polish teachers had limited experience of teaching migrant students and lacked the necessary skills to do so (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli—NIK, 2020). Qualitative research conducted in schools showed that strategies for accepting Ukrainian students in Polish schools differed (Tędziągolska et al., 2022). Some of the new students were simply placed in the least crowded classes. In some schools, a more systematic approach was taken, such as conducting diagnoses or by seeking to maintain balanced proportions of students from Poland and other countries in classes. This was particularly the case in larger schools with a higher proportion of refugee students. The same study revealed that neither preparatory nor mixed classes were optimal. Ukrainian students in mixed classes often had problems due to language barriers and were given tasks that were inappropriate for their knowledge and abilities. Teachers faced substantial challenges with mixed classes, including working with multiple curricula, additional workload, and a lack of guidelines for running preparatory classes. They needed to adapt their teaching and teaching materials to a larger number of students as well as to the presence of Ukrainian students who did not speak Polish. In addition, the Polish curriculum was different or of little relevance for students from Ukraine. Preparatory classes were beneficial in this respect, as they provided emotional security and helped students learn Polish, catch up on curriculum differences, and become familiar with Polish education culture. However, they created tension and conflicts due to age differences and reduced opportunities for connecting with Polish students. Forming relatively isolated Ukrainian groups within classes, with large numbers of refugee students, or placing Ukrainian students together in a single class had adverse effects of isolation. Having teachers who spoke the languages of their students was of critical importance. The official statistical data (Central Statistical Office—CSO, 2022) showed that by June 2022, only 401 teachers who were refugees from Ukraine were employed in Polish schools. In practice, support from NGOs that formally employed support staff working in schools was more important. For example, the Polish Center for International Aid Foundation (PCPM), with the financial support of the American CARE foundation, employed 850 Ukrainian teaching assistants to work in schools across Poland (PCPM, 2022).

According to SIO data collected directly from schools, most of the Ukrainian students in the Polish education system attended primary schools (about two thirds of all students) and pre-primary education (about one quarter). Far fewer were in secondary schools (about 8%, mostly in the general education track), and a negligible number attended post-secondary schools.

As already noted, not all school-aged children evacuated to Poland were enrolled in Polish schools. A combination of school data and data from the PESEL system suggests that out of 420,000 minors aged between three and eighteen who had arrived from Ukraine by April 2022, about 41% had joined education institutions in Poland at that time (see Table 2). The remaining majority either participated in Ukrainian online courses or did not attend school at all. The highest scholarisation ratio was observed for Ukrainian children eligible for primary school (aged between seven and fourteen). For these students, the ratio of participation in schooling in Poland reached 52% in April and ultimately increased to 55% by the beginning of the 2022–2023 school year. The ratio of scholarisation

TABLE 2 Scholarisation rates for Ukrainian refugees in Poland.

Tier	April 2022			November 2022		
	Students	% of total	Schol. rate	Students	% of total	Schol. rate
Preschool	34,819	21.7%	34.6%	42,799	23.2%	44.5%
Primary	112,684	70.3%	52.1%	120,608	65.2%	55.3%
Secondary	12,745	8.0%	17.3%	21,417	11.6%	26.2%
Other	69	0.0%	–	48	0.0%	–
Total	160,317	100%	41.0%	184,872	100%	46.1%

Source: Table constructed by authors using data retrieved from dane.gov.pl.

was somewhat lower for younger children (preschool age), but it is worth recalling at this point that education is not compulsory for children under the age of six in either Poland or Ukraine. About two thirds of respondents with children under the age of seven reported that their children did not attend a nursery or kindergarten.

The lowest interest in Polish schooling was observed among young Ukrainians eligible to attend secondary education. The scholarisation ratio of this group was only 17.3% in April 2022 and about 26% at the start of the new school year. Again, however, it should be noted that secondary education is not compulsory in Poland. It also places particular demands on refugee students who do not speak Polish, which may discourage Ukrainian students from enrolling. Differences between the Ukrainian and Polish systems can also matter. In Ukraine, secondary education can be completed at the age of seventeen, while in Poland it lasts two years longer, which makes it more attractive for students to stay in the Ukrainian system. In the first half of 2022, education in Ukraine was conducted online, and many Ukrainian students continued their education in the Ukrainian system. For many students in upper grades this was a rational option, especially those hoping to receive their school certificates from Ukraine. Finally, many potential students may have chosen to work for income instead of studying, to help their families. However, in autumn 2022, interest in attending secondary schools increased. As school principals suggest, this development may be partly due to the decisions made by those who had hoped, in spring, to continue in the Ukrainian system but decided to enrol in Polish schools when it became clear that it remained unsafe to return to Ukraine (Otto & Nowosielska, 2022).

3.2 | The geography of migration and scholarisation of students from Ukraine in Poland

In this section, we describe the geography of the war-fuelled migration to Poland. From the beginning of the conflict, Ukrainian settlement in Poland had a clear territorial pattern. Figure 3 shows this pattern at county level. Map A in Figure 3 is based on data from April 2022, it reveals several clusters of Ukrainian migrants. The first is located very close to the Polish–Ukrainian border in south-eastern Poland. The second covers areas in the proximity of large cities; namely, Warsaw, Krakow, and Lodz. The third includes counties in the very west of Poland, in particular those in the Lubuskie and Dolnoslaskie regions, adjacent to the Polish–German border.

In addition to this pattern, there is a concentration of refugees in some remote counties on the southern and northern outskirts of Poland. Due to their location, respectively in the mountains and at the seaside, these counties are popular tourist destinations. The availability of hotel beds and other types of accommodation typically offered to refugees, free or at a reduced charge, is likely the factor that attracted Ukrainian families to these areas.

Map A also illustrates that there are clusters of evacuees from Ukraine along the main roads leading from the border to Warsaw.

As shown in map B in Figure 3, the territorial pattern of Ukrainian migration to Poland has changed over time. Comparing the data from April and November 2022, shows that areas close to the Poland–Ukraine border have become less attractive to refugees, while central Poland has become more popular. Over time, more refugees have registered in the cities, and fewer have settled in smaller towns and villages.⁴

A common problem encountered in countries receiving migrant students from Ukraine is that a substantial proportion of refugees do not enrol in local schools. In Poland, this gap can be estimated by comparing the figures from the PESEL system and those from the education registers (SIO). According to the most recent data from November 2022, a total of 184,872 Ukrainian refugee students were enrolled in preschools and primary and secondary schools. The number of all eligible refugees registered in Poland at the same period reached 409,989. This means that the joint participation ratio for all tiers of schooling, excluding tertiary education, was about 45%.

Maps C and D in Figure 3 illustrate the participation of children from Ukraine registered in different counties in primary schools in Poland. Strikingly, counties with the highest percentage of refugee students enrolled in schools do not necessarily attract most school-aged Ukrainians. High enrolment rates were observed mainly in the west of Poland and the metropolitan area of Warsaw. Typically, schools in large cities attract not only those Ukrainian

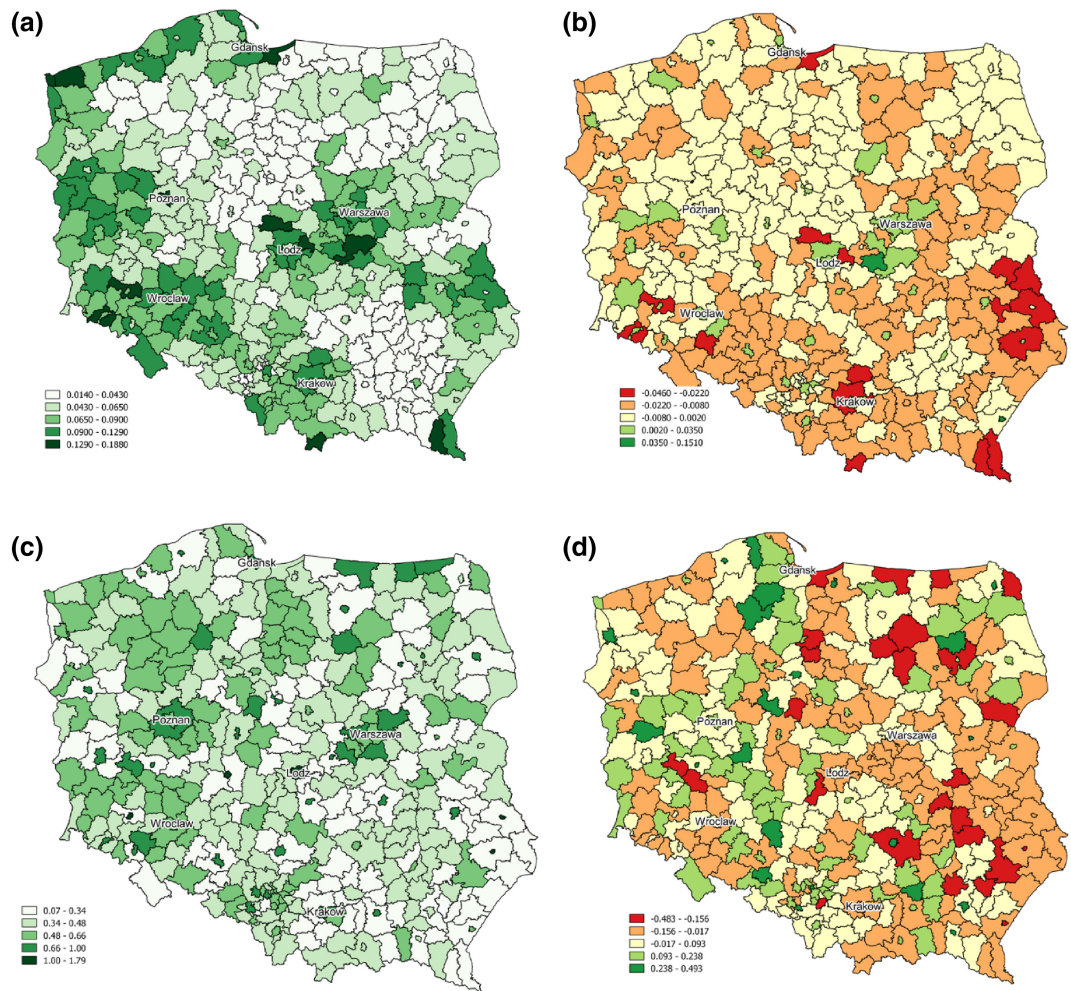


FIGURE 3 Education participation and territorial patterns of the migration of refugees from Ukraine to Poland. (a) Ukrainian refugees aged 3–18 in April 2022 as the proportion of county populations of the same age group in 2021. (b) Change in the proportion shown in A between April and November 2022. (c) Scholarisation ratio of Ukrainian refugees of primary school age (7–14 years), April 2022. (d) Change in the ratio shown in (c) between April and November 2022. *Source:* Authors.

students who are officially registered in those cities but also those from the surrounding rural areas. For this reason, the ratio of scholarisation in some cities exceeds 100%. However, as already noted, registering outside cities might have been a strategy adopted by some refugees to avoid the queues at centrally located administration offices and may not accurately reflect their actual place of residence.

Overall, Ukrainian migration destinations are spread throughout Poland, with particular locations visibly attracting more refugees than others. The patterns of migration have changed dynamically over time. We observe similar patterns for refugee school participation in Poland. It seems that there is a substantial turnover of students from Ukraine. Students enrolled in schools in early 2022 were, at least in part, replaced by newcomers at the beginning of the year 2022–2023. In the next section, we analyse these two periods separately in order to better understand how the preferences of families for education in Poland have changed.

4 | UNDERSTANDING THE PARTICIPATION OF EVACUEES FROM UKRAINE IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN POLAND

For a Ukrainian family arriving in Poland, enrolling a child in a Polish school is a multistage decision process. First, the family needs to decide where to settle. Although the literature on migration shows that the quality of local schooling is itself an important factor in the choice of migratory destination (Marré & Rupasingha, 2020), it is probably less important for those who had to rapidly evacuate due to the outbreak of war. For this group, there are priorities of a higher order, on which we elaborate further in this section.

Once settled in their new location, the family may choose to send their children to Polish school or not. Education in Poland is not compulsory before the age of six, the age for starting primary school. Children between the ages of six and fourteen are required by law to attend and complete a one-year kindergarten course and the eight grades of primary school. However, in accordance with the Special Act (Parliament of Poland, 2022) school aged children from Ukraine have more freedom in that they can either enrol in a Polish institution or attend online courses provided by Ukrainian schools. Choices by families clearly depend to a large extent on family specific characteristics, for example, the child's age and psychological condition after displacement, and the degree of identification with the Ukrainian language and culture. Yet, it also matters how Ukrainian families perceive their local school in Poland in terms of its curriculum, quality of teaching, safety, and friendliness.

Some families from Ukraine, particularly those settling in urban areas, may be able to choose between different schools in their neighbourhoods. Although state preschools and primary schools in Poland do have catchment areas, they are not strictly enforced, and each year many parents successfully enrol their children outside their district (Bajerski, 2021). Therefore, from the perspective of a refugee family, school characteristics may be important not only in terms of choosing between Ukrainian online education and Polish education but also between different options in Poland.

As the above discussion shows, in order to understand the nature of the varying popularity of Polish schools among Ukrainian refugees, it is necessary to consider both the characteristics of the school itself and its location. We understand the following as likely factors behind migration destinations chosen by refugees. A factor frequently referred to in research on this issue is the distance from the homeland. Literature on migration emphasises the adverse effect of distance on migration, which implies that migrants are keen to stay as close as possible to their previous place of residence and any change in this behaviour in the longer term is unlikely (Schwartz, 1973). However, in the circumstances of war and rapid evacuation, the initial decisions may be suboptimal due to a lack of information, and it is easy to imagine that the preferences of refugees might change over time.

Empirical research on migration shows that various regional amenities play significant roles in attracting immigrants to particular locations (Delisle & Shearmur, 2010). One example is housing opportunities (Sá & Florax, 2004). Other potential pull factors include the absorptive capacity of the labour market (Gottlieb & Joseph, 2006), wage opportunities (Di Cintio & Grassi, 2013; Faggian et al., 2007), and the general prosperity of a region (Ishitani, 2011).

An important strand of the literature on migration patterns refers to the existing network of compatriots who have migrated earlier to the same country or region. According to Marinelli, migration is a collective phenomenon (Marinelli, 2011). It relies on social networks, which help to facilitate the process of relocation. Some studies suggest that such networks have a more profound impact on migrants' destination choice than the socioeconomic characteristics of alternative locations (Epstein, 2008; Franco & Haase, 2010; Marinelli, 2011). The effect of social networks is relevant to our research, as a large Ukrainian diaspora predating the Russian invasion exists in Poland. As Poland and Ukraine have had a visa-free policy since 2017, the number of Ukrainian citizens coming to work in Poland has increased substantially in recent years. It is estimated that there were between 1 and 1.4 million Ukrainians living in Poland in 2021. Research on migrants in 2022 showed that the Ukrainian community in Poland was a valuable source of support, including in terms of providing information and contacts: 46% of Ukrainian refugees found accommodation with help from Ukrainian friends in Poland who hosted them or helped them find housing (Pachocka et al., 2022). Survey data suggest that most of the people coming to Poland had no previous

experience or knowledge of the country. However, about 14% had previously worked in Poland or had family members (28%) or acquaintances (12%) with experience of doing so. The migrants were therefore a mixed group, with some refugees having access to the migration networks formed before the war. The survey data show that this picture differs geographically by refugees' region of origin and destinations (i.e., regions or localities) in Poland (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2022).

As noted at the beginning of this section, the characteristics of local schools may also influence Ukrainian families' decisions about whether to participate in Polish education. School quality may be perceived differently, and refugee families certainly differ from local residents in terms of both preferences and access to information about schools. However, academic quality, safety, and friendliness seem to be universal criteria considered by parents everywhere (Alsauidi, 2016; Beuermann et al., 2023; Majkut, 2010).

In terms of academic quality, both primary and secondary education in Poland conclude with standardised examinations. The first of these is known as the eighth-grade exam, while the latter goes under the name of *Matura* ('Maturity test'). The average results of these examinations are publicly known, and they are used by different organisations to prepare rankings of and reports on schools. Although test results are misleading as indicators of school performance (Schneider, 2017), students and parents commonly refer to them when considering which school to enrol in.

School safety is an important issue for families, although opinions on whether a given school is safe are frequently based on anecdotal evidence. Among measurable indicators, those frequently taken into account are the size of the school and class. Large and overcrowded schools, as well as those with high student–teacher ratios, are considered less safe, especially for younger students (Mowen & Freng, 2019; Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2013).

Given that many children had traumatic experiences when fleeing Ukraine, it is very important that their new school be a friendly and supportive environment. Moreover, most of the refugees speak no Polish, even if about one third can understand it (Długosz et al., 2022). Hence, key elements of what one could call the friendliness of the school environment may include the presence of Ukrainian- or Russian-speaking teachers and of other Ukrainian students, for example from families who migrated to Poland before the war.

There were virtually no Ukrainian language teachers in Polish schools at the beginning of 2022. At the time, 8.8% of primary schools taught Russian as a foreign language. Having a teacher who speaks a language understood by Ukrainian children may have facilitated the integration of new students and may also have been appreciated by their parents.

A final feature of schools that may be relevant to the recruitment of Ukrainian pupils is the presence of a psychologist as a permanent member of staff. Although not all Polish schools have this provision, 39.4% of primary schools employed a psychologist at the beginning of 2022.

The above considerations have enabled us to identify regional characteristics that may attract or repel Ukrainian refugees from different locations. In Table 3 we list these factors and operationalise them by assigning them to variables available in Polish public statistics.

We now use these variables to explain the distribution of Ukrainian students among primary schools in Poland. We focus on primary schools as primary education is compulsory in both Poland and Ukraine and because the majority of Ukrainian minors who arrived in Poland in 2022 are aged between seven and 14. Model 1 was used for constructing the dependent variable.

Model 1

$$s_{it} = \frac{nu_{it} / Nu_t}{np_{it} / Np_t}$$

where s_{it} denotes the attractiveness of school i for Ukrainian refugee students. It reflects the proportion of all refugee pupils in Poland who attend school i relative to an equivalent proportion calculated taking into account all pupils, regardless of their status. A $s_{it} > 1$ will therefore indicate schools attended by a disproportionately large number of Ukrainian pupils.⁵ The subscript t in formula (1) denotes the time of observation. We use two sets of school data.

TABLE 3 Explanatory factors, mechanisms, and variables of the enrolment of evacuees from Ukraine in schools in Poland.

Factor	Mechanism	Variables (aggregation level)	Year/source
<i>Location-related factors</i>			
Distance from home	More accessible destinations attract more refugees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Travel time by car to the nearest crossing point at the Poland–Ukraine border (municipality) 	2022/Google Maps
Local financial capacity and labour market opportunities	More affluent territorial units may offer better assistance, better adapt schools to the needs of refugees, and have better job opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Log of own municipal revenues per capita (municipality) Unemployment rate (county) 	2021/Central Statistical Office (GUS)
Availability of accommodation	Tourist destinations may easily arrange temporary accommodation for refugees. Accommodation may be cheaper and easier to find in places with lower real estate prices and more vacant properties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share of vacant apartments (county) Median price per sq. metre (county) Number of hotel/hostel beds per 1000 inhabitants (municipality) 	2021/Central Statistical Office (GUS)
Engagement of the local community	More active communities will be more engaged in helping the refugees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turnover in parliamentary election of 2019 (municipality) 	2019/Poland's Election Committee (PKW)
Accessibility of services, urban amenities	Large cities offer public transport, better health care, and the possibility to choose between schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Log of population (municipality) Metropolitan dummy variable (municipalities of Warsaw, Tricity, Kraków, Poznań, Wrocław, Łódź) Suburban dummy variable (counties adjacent to metropolitan cities) Rural dummy variable (municipality) 	2021/2021/Central Statistical Office (GUS)
<i>School-related factors (all available at school level)</i>			
Academic quality	Parents may want to enrol their children in more competitive schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average score in eighth-grade test in mathematics 	2021/Central Examination Committee (CKE)
Safety and friendliness of school	Parents want their children to feel safe and cared for at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School size Average class size Russian-taught dummy Psychologist at school 	2022/System of Information on Education (SIO)
Ukrainian social network	Parents want their children to have Ukrainian friends at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ukrainian students already at school (dummy) 	2022/System of Information on Education (SIO)
Cost of schooling	Parents try to avoid additional costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State school (dummy) 	2022/System of Information on Education (SIO)

Source: Authors.

The first set represents the situation in April 2022, that is, two months after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and during the 2021/2023 school year. The second set represents the situation in November 2022, nine months after the start of the war and two months after the start of the 2022/2023 school year. Comparing the results for these two observation points allows us to assess how the roles of the different factors changed with the prolongation of the war and exile.

We estimate the parameters of the equation using Model 2.

Model 2

$$s_{irt} = \beta_{0t} + \sum \beta_r x_r + \sum \beta_{it} x_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

The value of the dependent variable for school i in location r and time t is explained by the set of variables characterising the location and the set of school characteristics (as described in Table 3). Note that school-level variables are time-specific: they correspond to the period for which the dependent variable is calculated. In turn, local characteristics are observed only once, and we use the most recent available data, which for the study on which this article reports for much of the data was 2021.

Table 4 includes the results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions presented separately for April and November 2022 (columns 1 and 2, respectively). We take into account that the data on primary schools that we use in the analysis have a nested structure. All public schools in Poland are administered by municipal authorities. Therefore, schools within a single municipality *compete* for the common pool of resources, and they may be considered as an option by the same families. They may also be affected by the same local regulations and local education strategy. To address the potential bias resulting from the nested nature of our data, we cluster standard errors at the level of the municipality.

Two months after the beginning of evacuations from Ukraine to Poland began, enrolment of young refugees in Polish schools did not correlate with the distance between their new place of residence and the Polish–Ukrainian border. This finding is consistent with the patterns we observed earlier in Figure 1. Although there was a cluster of school-aged migrants in the territory close to the border, their participation in schooling in Poland by April 2022 was very low. In November, in turn, the effect of the distance to the border became significant and positive: the further they were from the border, the more likely it was that Ukrainian children would participate in the local school community.

Local residents' civic engagement level, proxied by their participation in the last parliamentary elections, was positively associated with attracting Ukrainian refugees to school in both periods under analysis. Understanding the mechanics of this relationship requires further research. However, it is worth emphasising that efforts to welcome migrant families from Ukraine in Poland were largely based on spontaneous actions coordinated by local volunteers (Bukowski & Duszczuk, 2022). Higher community engagement helps integrate refugees and may affect their participation in public education.

In both April and November 2022, Ukrainian students were overrepresented in large cities: Warsaw, Krakow, Gdansk (Tricity), Łódź, Poznań, and Wrocław. Linking the outcomes of regressions from Table 4 with the territorial patterns observed earlier in Figure 3, we may claim that a preference for metropolitan cities is visible in both the settlement and the educational choices made by Ukrainian migrants. Logically, many refugees would choose to stay in cities that offer access to various services and an absorptive labour market rather than in smaller towns. Indeed, coefficients for the variable *rural* are strongly negative in both specifications.

What differentiates November data from the data in April is that schools in the suburban areas around the largest cities ceased to attract an excess number of Ukrainian students. The effect of the sub-metropolitan localisation of a school on its attractiveness for refugee students was highly positive in the first specification and insignificant in the second. In contrast, the enrolment of refugees was positively correlated with the municipal population, indicating that the schooling of Ukrainian children in Poland is concentrated in urban areas, but not necessarily in the few largest cities.

TABLE 4 Regression results for municipality and school characteristics as explanatory factors of refugee participation in education.

	(1)	(2)	
	April	November	Description
Territorial characteristics			
time_to_UA_border	0.00394 (0.00625)	0.0133** (0.00650)	Distance from home
election_turnover	1.000*** (0.308)	1.221*** (0.322)	Engagement of the local community
log_population	−0.0166 (0.0184)	0.0590*** (0.0182)	Accessibility of services, urban amenities
rural (ref. = urban)	−0.298*** (0.0418)	−0.370*** (0.0382)	
Submetropolitan (ref. = urban)	−0.00946 (0.0547)	−0.194*** (0.0500)	
Metropolitan (ref. = urban)	0.336*** (0.0860)	0.321** (0.129)	
log_local_tax_base	0.272*** (0.0465)	0.247*** (0.0416)	Local financial capacity and labour market opportunities
unemployment_21	−0.000518 (0.00323)	−0.00899*** (0.00284)	
hotel_beds_per_1000	1.295*** (0.456)	0.960*** (0.274)	Availability of accommodation
share_vacant_apart	0.484 (0.528)	−0.119 (0.690)	
log_price_sq_meter	0.190*** (0.0643)	0.129** (0.0576)	
School characteristics			
score_math_21	−0.00917*** (0.00168)	−0.0163*** (0.00251)	Academic quality
log_school_size	−0.279*** (0.0416)	0.0915*** (0.0328)	Safety and friendliness of school
class_size	−0.0107** (0.00456)	−0.0279*** (0.00428)	
Russian_taught	0.0163 (0.0349)	−0.00780 (0.0359)	
psychologist_at_school	0.0234 (0.0220)	0.0184 (0.0176)	
UA_students_dummy	0.682*** (0.0224)	0.354*** (0.0241)	Ukrainian social network

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)	
	April	November	Description
public_school	0.622*** (0.101)	0.657*** (0.101)	Cost of schooling
_cons	-3.124*** (0.633)	-4.256*** (0.604)	
N	9235	9257	
R ²	0.249	0.334	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Authors.

The economic prosperity of a municipality is associated with greater participation of migrants from Ukraine in education. The effect of the local tax base turns out to be positive in both April and November 2022, while the impact of the unemployment level (negative) is only revealed in the second dataset. Again, this association may be a joint outcome of a higher inflow of migrants due to better living opportunities and higher organisational capacity on the part of the authorities when integrating young refugees at local schools. However, the link between the local tax base and the scholarisation ratio of refugees is troubling, as it may indicate a critical role of local capacities and shows that existing support from the central government may not compensate the unequal level of local resources.

One of the urgent needs of most families evacuated from Ukraine in 2022 was finding a place to stay. In Poland, few migrants used shelter halls or community facilities: 38% of those surveyed in the largest cities in April declared that they were staying with Polish citizens—apartments were shared by 20% and 18% occupied vacant premises. The Ukrainian diaspora supported a further 23%, and a similar percentage lived independently in rented apartments. Only 7% were staying in collective accommodation (Pachocka et al., 2022). Not surprisingly, then, the estimation based on data from April shows that a disproportionately large number of Ukrainian students had enrolled in schools in municipalities with better-developed tourist infrastructure, such as hotels, hostels, and guesthouses. Notably, however, the respective coefficient dropped by 40% in November, which shows that the availability of temporary accommodation lost its importance with time. High real estate prices, which we use as a proxy for rental fees, were not discouraging for the refugees from the first migration wave.

In fact, refugee participation in schooling seems higher in municipalities where prices are higher. One possible reason for this is that, at least in the first months after the outbreak of the war, refugees were commonly accommodated in private housing at no or minimal charge (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2022). However, the coefficient dropped by 40% between April and November 2022.

Next, we analyse the correlation between selected school characteristics and the enrolment of Ukrainian students. In line with expectations, refugees were more likely to attend state schools than private ones. This finding is not surprising, as primary education in Poland is predominantly state-provided: 95% students are enrolled in state schools. However, the use of state education by Ukrainian refugees was even more prominent than that by Polish students. Only 2.3% of students from Ukraine were in April, and 2.0% in November, enrolled in private schools.

In both school years, we observe a negative correlation between the academic competitiveness of the school and the enrolment of refugees. It turns out that Ukrainian students are more likely to enrol in schools that have had lower average test scores in the past. We do not know the extent to which this outcome is a consequence of informed choice on the part of parents. It seems likely that it is, rather, a consequence of directing new refugees

to less crowded and less demanding institutions by the representatives of local administrations. However, this observation requires further research before any definitive claims can be made.

Ukrainian students were more likely to enrol in schools with smaller classes in both of the academic years analysed. While the decision to enrol at such schools could be motivated by the desire to provide refugees with the maximum safety and best possible conditions for integration, it was also certainly in the best interest of Polish students and teachers, as learning and teaching in overcrowded groups are difficult.

The effect of school size (total number of students was used as proxy) on the enrolment of Ukrainian refugees was much less stable. It was negative in the spring of 2022, indicating that smaller schools played a disproportionately large role in the education of Ukrainian children. However, in the new school year, the correlation turned positive, although it remained very small in magnitude. This may confirm the assessment made by the Minister of Education (see Otto & Nowosielska, 2022) that a substantial turnover of Ukrainian students in Poland can be expected. Many who attended Polish schools in 2022–2023 had not been enrolled in the previous school year. Moreover, the preferences of families newly arrived in Poland may differ from those of their predecessors. Indeed, our data show that of 8300 primary schools which enrolled Ukrainian students in April 2022, a total of 1400 (17%) had no students from Ukraine in November. In turn, 19% of those with Ukrainian students in the new school year had not enrolled any refugees in April.

We find no evidence that Ukrainian students were deliberately enrolled in schools employing Russian-speaking teachers or psychologists. The respective variables turned out insignificant for both April and November datasets.

Even controlling for all the characteristics of municipalities and schools, as discussed above, we observe a very strong effect of the existing Ukrainian diaspora on the enrolment of Ukrainian refugees in schools. In April 2022, schools that had students from Ukraine predating February 2022 were much more likely to attract refugees. The magnitude of this impact was 0.6 of the standard deviation. Most likely, the network effect worked both through settlement decisions (migrants heading to destinations already inhabited by Ukrainians) and through education choices. The presence of already assimilated Ukrainian students might have helped to integrate the refugees in schools, especially since most newcomers did not speak any Polish. In November, the effect of the diaspora dropped to 0.26 standard deviations, which corroborates our earlier observation that the new wave of migrants is distinct from the early refugees in terms of their settlement and educational strategies. Qualitative research suggests that a school's previous experience with foreign students and the presence of staff members who spoke Ukrainian or Russian and of Ukrainian students predating evacuation were essential factors that helped Ukrainian students acclimatise to Polish schools (Tędziogolska et al., 2022).

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Poland has implemented institutional solutions and policies to facilitate the inclusion of students evacuated from Ukraine in the schooling system. However, the scale of migration has required significant effort from local governments, schools, and teachers. In 2022, there was a sense of uncertainty as migrants arrived a few months before the end of the school year and were unsure of how long they would stay in Poland. Some even made temporary returns to Ukraine. It was unclear how many students would start the school year in the autumn, how long they would stay in the system, and how many new students would arrive. Additionally, there were significant geographic imbalances in the inflows of migrants, and, as we have demonstrated, the geographical patterns of migration gradually changed.

The limited participation of Ukrainian refugees in education is a significant issue. Choices in this matter vary by level of education. The highest participation rates (reaching 50%) were observed in primary education, while the lowest (20%) were in secondary education. Many students continued their education online in Ukraine in the spring of 2022. This was used as a justification for exempting them from compulsory education in Poland.

However, some students did not participate in any form of schooling, which proves that mechanisms for monitoring their participation in education were ineffective.

From the perspective of local education authorities and schools, one of the principal concerns is managing the overall process of integrating Ukrainian students into the school community. The strategies for accepting Ukrainian students in Polish schools have varied, with some schools taking a more systematic approach, such as conducting diagnoses or by maintaining balanced proportions of evacuated students and students from Poland in classes. The government recommendation to establish preparatory classes, or so called welcome classes, was not followed by all local administrations, mainly for practical and financial reasons. Most of the Ukrainian refugee students were enrolled in regular school classes. This outcome offers an interesting contrast to other studies that have presented integration models characterised by top-down policy, rather than a forced choice resulting from the size of migration and organisational constraints (e.g., in Sweden, Tajic & Bunar, 2020; in Germany, Pagel & Edele, 2022). Factors that helped students from Ukraine to integrate included prior experience with students from other countries in the school, staff members who spoke Ukrainian or Russian, and the presence of Ukrainian students predating 2022. The main weakness of the education system was a lack of experience in working with migrant children.

The statistical analyses show that Ukrainian refugees were more likely to attend schools in urban municipalities with relatively high revenues and more developed accommodation infrastructure. This was the case particularly in the first months of war. This shows that local resources were of key importance for the territorial distribution of refugee families in Poland.

Controlling for other factors, Ukrainian students were more likely to enrol in state schools and in those with lower average test scores. This latter outcome, observed in both April and November 2022, may result from the availability of places in less crowded and less demanding schools. However, this issue requires further monitoring in order to prevent discrimination against refugee students when they are assigned to schools.

There was no evidence that Ukrainian students were more likely to be enrolled in schools with Russian-speaking teachers and psychologists. However, the presence of Ukrainian immigrants predating 2022 was an important factor. The magnitude of this *diaspora effect* was about 0.6 of the standard deviation in April and 0.26 in November 2022. The difference between the two points in time illustrates a change in the settlement and education strategies of the early migrants and of the new wave—that is, refugees who had either left Ukraine more recently or changed their place of residence within Poland. The patterns of Ukrainian mobility were very dynamic in 2022. As many as 19% of schools that enrolled Ukrainian students in April did not have students from Ukraine in November, and 17% of schools that had no Ukrainian students in April had enrolled refugees by November.

An open and so far unexplored issue is the future of young Ukrainian people in the Polish education system. At the time of writing this article, the war in Ukraine is ongoing, and it is difficult to predict when it will end. However, even after hostilities end, families may not immediately return to their homeland. First, there will be difficult living conditions in a devastated country. Second, and maybe more importantly, the process of assimilation of Ukrainian families in Poland has already started. It is likely that the mass participation of children from Ukraine in the education system in Poland is a long term phenomenon, regardless of the war's duration. Over time, this poses a challenge for schools in Poland but an even greater one for Ukraine, which may soon experience a shrinking human capital and a severe demographic crisis.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Employing intercultural assistants has been possible in the Polish system since 2010 and is considered to be very effective for working with migrant children. However, due to high costs, this system was not commonly used by local administrations.
- ² County is an intermediate level in Poland's administrative division. The country is divided into 16 provinces, 380 counties, and 2,477 municipalities. The average population of a county in 2021 was 99,970.
- ³ Of 533,000 Ukrainian children supported within two major Polish programmes (500+ and 300+), the right to the benefit was eventually revoked in 123,000 cases because the family left Poland for more than 30 days (Mirowska-Łoskot, 2022).
- ⁴ The number of Ukrainian refugees in smaller settlements may have been inflated in early data, as some refugees chose to register outside large cities due to the long queues in administration offices (Bukowski & Duszczek, 2022).
- ⁵ However, for the purposes of the regression analysis, the dependent variable was standardised to make the results easier to interpret.

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