



Protective ties for integration: Schools as support hubs for Ukrainian refugee families

HVL-Policy brief: 1(6)-2024

Tuire Palonen (University of Turku, Finland)

Kateryna Horlenko (Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania)

Mari Nuga (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Summary

This study investigates the social ties of Ukrainian refugee families in Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania approximately two years since the start of the 2022 Russian invasion. With focus on social connections made via schools, we aim to better understand the Ukrainians' integration, wellbeing, and support that these ties offer amidst ongoing challenges. Using egocentric social network analysis (SNA) and semi-structured interviews carried out in three countries, the research maps the connections of each interviewed family member and explores the roles of local and transnational networks in helping families to cope with displacement. The results show that schools play an important role in facilitating connections among families, providing stability, and offering access to resources which are essential for the emotional wellbeing of children and young people. Schools also facilitate peer interaction. However, the children in our study typically needed to change schools several times which influenced friendships between school mates. The online presence of old friends and double schooling also played an important role in providing support, while erosion of social ties connecting the respondents to their previous contacts in Ukraine was reported as well. This erosion can lead to increased psychological distress, particularly among children.

Main points

- Ukrainian refugees interviewed in Finland, Lithuania, and Estonia primarily maintain strong ties with family members, which appears crucial for emotional support and practical assistance.
- The social ties often extend to educational institutions that serve as vital hubs for social integration and routine establishment, as schools facilitate peer interaction, provide stability and offer access to various kinds of resources.
- Families reported both erosion of old ties and gaining new contacts in the host country. These new contacts at schools were often formed together with other Ukrainians refugees, but also with local children and parents.

Schools for integration and wellbeing and Ukrainians refugees

Schools and day care centres help children succeed in life. These institutions support families, offer routines, create a sense of safety and belonging (Petäjaniemi et al., 2024), and are the main place for children to make friends. Schools are often expected to protect and support students in extreme situations, but they often lack the resources to do so (Skovdal & Campbell, 2015). Developing relationships with the majority group or long-term residents is crucial for the well-being of newly arrived students and their sense of “being ordinary”, symbolizing their belonging in the school and the broader society (Tajic & Lund, 2022). This is especially important for children affected by wars. In addition to leaving their country they also left their familiar school environment. In refugee resettlements, social networks change a lot. Therefore, recognizing the importance of social integration alongside pedagogical support is crucial (Amelina et al., 2012; Skovdal & Campbell, 2015).

Our study investigates the social ties of Ukrainian refugee families in the Baltics and Finland, emphasizing their integration, wellbeing, and the support these ties provide amidst challenges. In Finland ca. 50000 refugees have arrived out of which every third is a child (Finnish Integration Service, 2023). The number of Ukrainian refugees that have fled to Estonia has exceeded 40,000 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024) and in Lithuania 44000 Ukrainians had valid residence permits based on temporary protection in May 2003 (IOM Lithuania, 2023).

Ukrainian children were relatively quickly integrated into the local school system in all three countries. In Estonia and Lithuania, Ukrainian schools were opened for refugee children and teachers in autumn 2022. In these, teaching followed both Ukrainian and the host country’s curriculums. Still, there are many Ukrainians attending regular local schools. In Finland, integration classes were open at schools to prepare Ukrainian children to the new linguistic and educational environment.

Methods

The study employs egocentric social network analysis (SNA) to study how interpersonal relationships and networks influence the experiences of Ukrainian refugee families. The method allows for an examination of social structures and personal networks, focusing on the connections individuals maintain and their implications during crises. The approach combines quantitative analyses with qualitative insights, acknowledging that social relations are culturally constituted and shape individual experiences.

Data collection took place from November 2023 to May 2024 in Estonia, Lithuania, and Finland. The families were recruited through social media, professional networks, and a snowball sampling method. Inclusion criteria were Ukrainian families with temporary protection status, involving at least one adult and one child. A total of 26 families participated in the interviews (7 in Lithuania, 8 in Finland, and 11 in Estonia), with a diverse range of ages and educational levels among children. In Lithuania and Finland, the interviews were conducted by the same researcher in Ukrainian. In Estonia the interviews were conducted in Ukrainian with the assistance of an interpreter. The conversations lasted 1 to 3 hours and were later all transcribed in English. All names mentioned during the data gathering were pseudonymised. Participants were asked to create individual social network maps using templates with concentric circles to represent relationship closeness, while categorizing contacts into sectors (e.g., personal, work). This visual representation helped capture the structure of their networks (Viry & Herz, 2021). Follow-up questions were asked about the characteristics of social relationships as well as the respondents’ everyday life and wellbeing in general.

Data were analysed following three strategies:

1. Quantification of each network connection based on closeness, type of relationship, and geographical location.
2. Selected cases were analysed using visual representations of social networks.
3. Interview responses were transcribed and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis to identify themes related to the families' social ties and their connections to education.

Findings

The quantitative descriptions of the SNA data showed that the number of social connections varied between families, and the individuals within a family. Among adults, the participants reported from 7 to 54 social contacts in Finland, 3 to 75 in Estonia, and 8 to 59 in Lithuania. On average, adults had more social connections than children. Furthermore, both adults and children as groups had connections in Ukraine and in other countries in addition to Ukrainians and locals in the host countries. Parents reported having on average 10 Ukrainian contacts in Finland, 5 in Estonia, and 9 in Lithuania, as well as 9, 7 and 4 locals in each host country, respectively. Parents' social ties related mostly to work and voluntary organizations in Estonia and Lithuania, and refugee centres, voluntary organizations and local Ukrainian communities in Finland. As for children, the most frequent ties included family members in the host country and in Ukraine, classmates, and friends in the host country, as well as online friends based in Ukraine and, rather rarely, abroad.

As an example, the social networks of one family in Finland is provided in Figure 1. On the left, the figure shows an egocentric social network of a mother, Lesya, in her 40s, a refugee in Finland. On the right, there is a network map of one of Lesya's sons, Petro, who is 10 years old and attends a primary school. Among his closest circle, apart from his family members, there are three Ukrainian friends in Finland, one friend in Ukraine, and an online friend from another country. Furthermore, Petro's network illustrates how school contacts build an essential part of his network, as he referred to his school mates as friends. In the interview, Petro noted being fast in learning the Finnish language and doing the schoolwork. However, he made friends with other Ukrainian children while attending the integration class at his school, and then kept those connections rather than making new friends when he joined the mainstream class at a Finnish school.

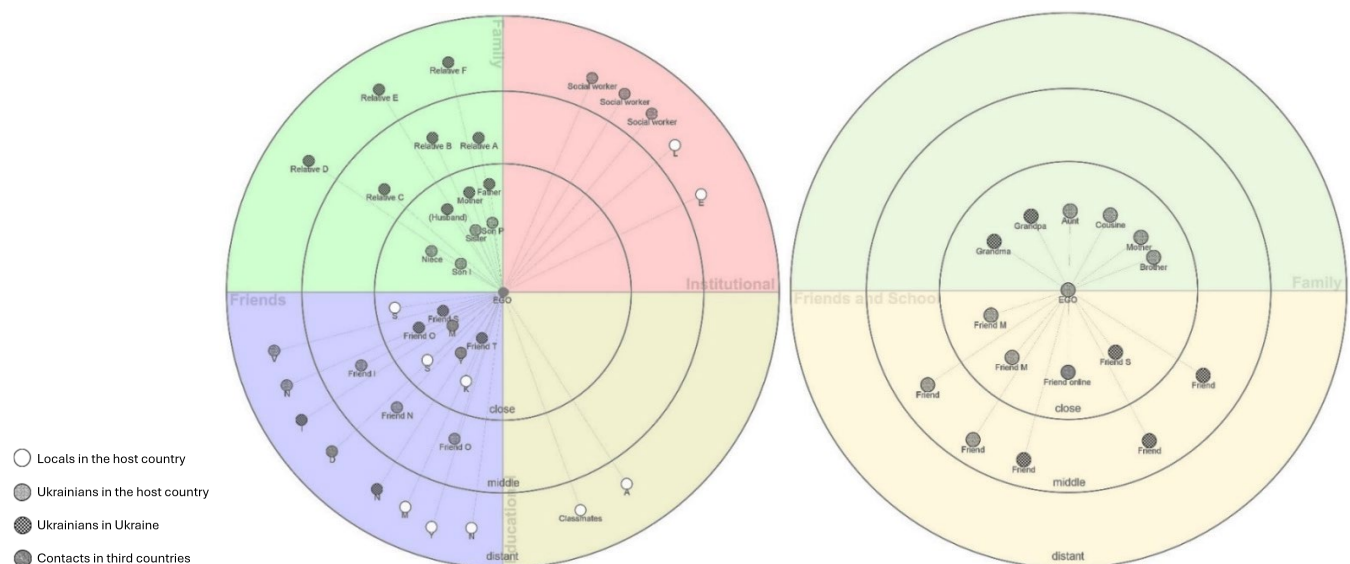


Figure 1. Examples of social network visualizations: Vennmaker figure, by Lesya (left) and son Petro, 10 years old primary school student (right) in Finland. Differently coloured sectors represent relationship types identified by participants.

Our analysis of the interviews distinguished five main themes related to education and schools. These are:

1. **Influence of languages and communication on social ties.** A variety of languages are used at schools, with Ukrainian children having to adapt to learning the local language, English, and even Russian, which many had not mastered previously. This posed a challenge to making friends in the new school.
2. **Perceptions of differences in curriculum and school system.** When comparing school in Ukraine with schools in Finland, Lithuania and Estonia, the participants perceived several differences regarding curriculum, daily habits, school culture and atmosphere.

3. **Double school phenomenon - to stay in the host country or not.** One way Ukrainian students stayed connected with their home culture and country was by attending online Ukrainian school while also being enrolled to a local school. The aim was to keep both the Ukrainian and the host country's educational tracks open and transnational relations alive while not knowing whether to stay in the new country or not.
4. **School as hubs for social ties.** It is notable that the children were not the only ones that actively engaged in local schools. In many interviews, teachers, including Ukrainian educators, were identified as crucial new connections. Additionally, Ukrainian translators and interpreters, and other school personnel, such as psychologists, were recognized as valuable resources for students and their families. Furthermore, many activities were organized for families through schools.
5. **Friendships gained and erosion in social contacts.** In most interviews, the issue of maintaining earlier ties was identified as a challenge and sometimes even an impossible task. In addition to physical distance, the reasons were also related to political and personal disagreements.

These themes characterize the challenges Ukrainian families face when attending the new educational contexts. Many families maintain connections to Ukraine via social media and education and at the same time adapt to the new educational system in the host country.

Conclusions

The protective ties of Ukrainian refugee families significantly contribute to their integration and wellbeing, underscoring the importance of strong familial and community connections. Educational institutions emerge as key players in fostering these ties, and the research calls for policies that strengthen these networks to better support refugee families. The key takeaway is recognizing the importance of social ties and how schools and pre-schools can contribute here.

A mix of various languages may overburden children. Channels for protection and friendships are often built on the foundation of shared language groups. Getting protection in one's own language is important, as is getting access to the host country's language. Grouping students who share the same first language, may isolate Ukrainian students from everyday interactions with their host country peers, fostering a sense of social exclusion rather than inclusion. While pedagogical support is valuable, the significance of friendship between newly arrived students and the majority group cannot be overstated. Policies may prioritize pedagogical support over social support, even though strengthening the social dimensions could, in fact, enhance the language acquisition (see also Tajic & Lund, 2023).

Policy recommendations

Our findings support many of the policy solutions and activities, of which some are already being utilized in the participating countries:

- **Language programs, workshops and practices are needed.** One way to do so might be that students who speak different languages work in pairs so that they can learn from each other and make friends, moving slowly from students' native language toward the host country's language. Events that celebrate different cultures and languages in school may also be helpful.
- **Training for teachers and staff, including teachers from the country the refugees are from.** Teachers and staff should learn how to help students with language, cultural, and social issues. It is good to hire Ukrainian teachers, translators, interpreters, and support staff for schools to help with language and cultural integration. These people can help refugees and local students communicate, learn language and enhance cultural integration or social help.
- **Provide a variety of learning possibilities that can suit students' needs.** For example, individual learning plans make it easier to move between curriculums.
- **There is a need to be prepared for possible personal conflicts and crises that may manifest in the future.** Particularly, getting access to mental health resources is important, including counselling. Peer-led conflict resolution initiatives seem to be functional, focusing on linguistic and cultural sensitivity.
- **Organizing various kinds of activities in schools** where students and their families can meet other Ukrainians and residents are valuable.

Acknowledgements

NordForsk funding from projects TEAMS (Teaching that matters for migrate students) and INFLUX (Influx of migrants following Russia's invasion of Ukraine: Integration and Governance Dynamics in Nordic and Baltic States) supported this study. We also acknowledge the help of our participants that agreed to be interviewed and opened up about their everyday life and thoughts.

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General contact information

The recommendations in this Policy Brief is based on results from the research project INFLUX, with funds from NordForsk (ref.no 161678). Collaborators in INFLUX are shown in the bottom line.

Contact info Influx:

Project Leader: Professor Liv Osland, liv.osland@hvl.no

Project Co-Leader: Senior Researcher, Cathrine Talleraas, cathrine.talleras@cmi.no

Project websites: <https://www.hvl.no/en/research/prosjekt/influx/>
<https://www.cmi.no/projects/2953-influx>

Correct citation of this brief: Palonen, Tuire, Horlenko, Kateryna and Nuga, Mari (2024). Protective ties for integration: Schools as support hubs for Ukrainian refugee families. *INFLUX Policy Brief*, 1(6)-2024, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Haugesund, Norway.

First published online on the 25.11.2024.

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