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The European Response to Challenges of the Integration of Ukrainian Migrant Children in EU Countries

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Key words: migrant children, social challenges, adaptation, assimilation, acculturation, migration, migration strategies.

Чермакова Діта, Клименко Олена, Чепурко Гульбаршин. Європейська відповідь на виклики інтеграції українських дітей-мігрантів у країнах ЄС. У статті досліджено виклики та перспективи інтеграції українських дітей-мігрантів в освітні й соціокультурні системи Європейського Союзу в контексті масового

вимушеного переміщення, спричиненого повномасштабним вторгненням росії в Україну у 2022 р. У роботі підкреслено багатовимірний характер проблеми, зосереджено увагу на освітніх, соціокультурних та інституційних аспектах адаптації. Особливо акцентовано на мовних бар'єрах, нестачі кваліфікованих педагогічних кадрів, несумісності навчальних програм, а також психологічних і соціальних наслідках процесів адаптації. На соціокультурному рівні проаналізовано ризики маргіналізації, дискримінації, ксенофобії й культурної ізоляції, а також трансформаційний вплив української міграції на культурні ландшафти приймаючих суспільств. Розкрито проблему інституціоналізації українських дітей у країнах ЄС, зокрема відсутність уніфікованих стратегій визначення правового статусу, доступу до соціального захисту та комплексної інтеграції в освітні й медичні системи. У статті обґрунтовано актуальність дослідження, наголошено на стратегічному значенні інтеграції дітей, як для підвищення стійкості приймаючих громад, так і для майбутнього відновлення України. Аналітика спирається на міждисциплінарні підходи, що поєднують соціологію, педагогіку, міграційні студії та політологію, а також на емпіричні дані європейських дослідницьких центрів і міжнародних організацій.

Ключові слова: діти-мігранти, соціальні виклики, адаптація, асиміляція, акультурація, міграція, міграційні стратегії.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of integrating Ukrainian migrant children into the educational and socio-cultural systems of EU countries is among the most urgent research topics of contemporary migration studies, education policy, and social sciences. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, more than *5 million Ukrainians* have received temporary protection in EU member states, with children comprising nearly *40 %* of this population (Eurostat, 2024). This unprecedented migration flow has placed significant pressure on national education systems, social protection structures, and cultural institutions, exposing systemic vulnerabilities and raising questions about the sustainability of integration policies.

The relevance of this issue is determined by several interrelated factors. First, the long-term presence of Ukrainian children in EU schools creates structural challenges – language acquisition, curriculum compatibility, and teacher shortages – that directly influence their academic success and social mobility. Second, the problem extends beyond education: socio-cultural adaptation, risks of marginalization, discrimination, and cultural isolation significantly affect children's well-being and their future integration into European societies. Third, the lack of unified EU-level strategies, combined with diverse national approaches, results in uneven access to rights and services, which deepens inequalities and increases the risk of creating “parallel societies.” Finally, the question of integration is also relevant to Ukraine's post-war recovery: the experiences of Ukrainian children abroad will shape their reintegration into the national educational and cultural space, as well as their readiness to contribute to rebuilding the country.

Thus, the study of this issue is not only of *theoretical and academic importance*, but also of *practical and political significance*, as it informs the development of inclusive educational and social policies, supports the resilience of both host societies and Ukrainian communities, and contributes to the sustainability of democratic values and intercultural cohesion in Europe.

The aim of the article is to examine the European response to challenges of the integration of Ukrainian migrant children in EU countries.

1. ANALYSIS OF MAIN THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Migration is a complex social process encompassing mobility, displacement, and adaptation. For children, adaptation is particularly critical, as it determines their access to education, social networks, and institutional support. Research emphasizes that integration outcomes are shaped not only by individual and family resources but also by institutional arrangements and policy frameworks in host countries (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014).

Adaptation of migrant children is a multidimensional process involving educational, socio-cultural, and institutional dimensions. Success depends on the ability to navigate linguistic, curricular, and cultural barriers while maintaining connections to family and community resources. Interdisciplinary scholarship highlights that integration is not a linear process of assimilation but a reciprocal interaction between children, families, schools, and society.

A key theoretical framework for understanding these trajectories is the theory of segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Unlike classical assimilation models, which assume uniform

convergence into the mainstream, segmented assimilation recognizes diverse pathways of adaptation, shaped by structural opportunities, family and social capital, and cultural orientations. Three typical outcomes are identified:

1. Upward assimilation, with children achieving academic success and social mobility;
2. Ethnic integration, maintaining cultural identity while drawing support from co-ethnic networks;
3. Downward assimilation, linked to socio-economic marginalization and educational exclusion.

Segmented assimilation highlights the critical role of family and social capital, schools, and public institutions. Educational systems are decisive arenas: inclusive policies and resources facilitate social mobility, whereas fragmented support and insufficient legal safeguards can reinforce marginalization (Dolia & Klymenko, 2023).

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered an unprecedented displacement of children, testing the capacity of European Union and national education systems. EU directives, such as the Temporary Protection Directive, aimed to ensure rapid access to education, social services, and legal protection for displaced Ukrainian children (Council of the European Union, 2022). Member states implemented varying national policies: some introduced accelerated enrolment programs, bilingual education, and psychosocial support, while others faced challenges in curriculum alignment, teacher shortages, and administrative fragmentation.

This context illustrates that integration requires policies aligned with segmented assimilation principles: facilitating access to quality education, supporting linguistic and psychosocial needs (Klymenko et al., 2024), promoting intercultural dialogue, and safeguarding children's rights. Balancing the preservation of cultural identity with participating in educational and social life is essential to foster both individual well-being and social cohesion. By linking theory with policy, this study frames the integration of Ukrainian children as a strategic and multidimensional process. Understanding adaptation trajectories within educational, institutional, and socio-cultural dimensions enables the analysis of how European policies transform integration challenges into opportunities for improving social equity, intercultural cohesion, and the long-term resilience of multicultural societies.

2. METHODOLOGICAL BASIS

The methodology of this article is based on a secondary analysis of two original surveys specifically conducted with Ukrainian respondents in EU countries, namely:

1. Secondary analysis of the panel study “The Impact of War on the Youth of Ukraine”, conducted by the research agency Info Sapiens on the initiative of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine. The study collected data in 2023 (N = 2,064 in Ukraine; N = 405 abroad) and 2024 (N = 2,000 in Ukraine; N = 436 abroad). Its aim was to examine the dynamics of changes in young people's attitudes and to study the situation of vulnerable groups who may face discrimination and higher risks of social, economic, and civil inequalities (Kostyuchenko & Volosevych, 2024).

2. Secondary analysis of the study “The Inclusion of Displaced Children from Ukraine in EU Education Systems 2023–2024”, which surveyed Ukrainian migrant parents (N = 2,500) regarding the integration of displaced children into education across 23 EU countries in the 2023–2024 academic year. The study was designed to respond to the growing need for coordinated efforts to improve access to education and ensure inclusive schooling for displaced children (Publications Office of the European Union, 2024).

Together, these studies provide a robust methodological basis for analyzing the educational, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges of integrating Ukrainian migrant children in Europe, as well as the mechanisms through which they maintain ties with their homeland while adapting to new living conditions.

3. PRESENTATION OF THE BASIC MATERIAL, SUBSTITUTION OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. From Language Barriers to Institutional Burden: Challenges of Migrant Children's Integration in European Education Systems

Challenges for recipient countries, which should not only provide basic social support and welfare services but also integrate children of Ukrainian migrants into the educational, cultural and social life, taking

into account the possible impact of migrant culture on the local socio-cultural space. We have identified two levels of challenges:

- educational challenges – language barriers, lack of teaching staff, incompatibility of curricula;
- socio-cultural challenges – institutional burden, marginalization, discrimination and xenophobia.

3.1.1. The educational challenges for recipient countries in integrating children of Ukrainian migrants are due to the need to quickly integrate large numbers of children into national education systems, taking into account language barriers, lack of qualified teachers, cultural differences and incompatibility of curricula. These challenges require the adaptation of educational policies, the creation of preparatory language courses, the introduction of inclusive approaches to education, and the support of integration strategies that preserve children's cultural identity while facilitating their full participation in the life of the host society (Novosák et al., 2022).

The language barrier is one of the most serious challenges faced by children of Ukrainian migrants in the educational systems of the European Union. Its impact is manifested on several levels – cognitive, emotional and social. For most Ukrainian children, the language environment of the host country was new and unknown, which made it difficult to engage in educational processes, hindered the learning of educational material in educational institutions, and negatively affected communication with peers and teachers. Therefore, in the EU countries, there was an urgent need to create preparatory classes or intensive language learning courses to facilitate the adaptation of Ukrainian migrant children. Because of the scale of Ukrainian migration, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted a decision according to which European countries should prioritize the teaching of Ukrainian to migrant children in educational institutions and introduce the teaching of Ukrainian as a second foreign language. This decision is of strategic importance, as it reduces the risks of marginalization and loss of ethnic and cultural identity; supports bilingualism as a social resource that can later be useful for the EU labor market; and promotes bilateral integration. The policy of creating language “bridges” to improve the integration of Ukrainian students was implemented through the following mechanisms: opening preparatory (adaptation) classes for children from Ukraine (for example, in Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic); introducing intensive courses of learning the state language (especially in Lithuania, Slovakia, and the Netherlands); developing online resources and mobile applications for self-study; and involving Ukrainian-speaking teachers and teaching assistants or translators in the educational process (in particular, in the Czech Republic, Austria, and Germany) (Loudová Stralczyńska et al., 2025).

Lack of Teaching Staff. Education systems in many European countries, including Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Romania, have faced a shortage of teachers, especially those with experience working with migrant children or who speak Ukrainian. All countries hosting a significant number of refugees had already experienced a shortage of teaching staff before the war, especially in regions with a difficult social situation (peripheral cities, villages, post-industrial regions). In Poland, at the beginning of 2022, public schools reportedly Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych, lacked more than 20,000 teachers. In Germany, according to the GEW, a lack of about 200,000 teachers was predicted by 2030. The educational systems of the European Community member states were not prepared for intensive work with children with different languages, traumatic experiences, and different value systems. Pedagogical education and methodologies did not include training for teaching in multicultural classrooms, including for children of war refugees. More than 60 % of EU countries do not have national standards for certification of teachers working with refugee children, according to UNESCO. The Institute of Educational Policy in Poland (2023) notes that in schools with more than 10 % of Ukrainian students, teachers report increased professional burnout due to the workload and emotional complexity of the job. The number of teachers who speak Ukrainian or have at least a basic knowledge of the language is extremely limited. In most cases, schools rely on translators or assistants from among Ukrainian migrants who do not have pedagogical qualifications, which complicates the learning process. The European Migration Network reports that only 3 countries (Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands) have long-term strategies for training teachers for a multicultural environment (European Commission..., 2025).

The Incompatibility between Ukrainian and EU Educational Programs. The education systems in the recipient countries differ significantly from the Ukrainian one, which causes difficulties in integration and, subsequently, in the possible return to the Ukrainian educational system. In addition, children do not

have time to master the educational material in full due to the different structuring of courses (for example, different starting times for algebra, chemistry, and foreign languages). The situation is further complicated by the lack of connection between contexts (e.g., different interpretations of historical events, names of literary classics, system of dates and concepts). If the children of Ukrainian migrants continue their studies at a Ukrainian school (online or externally), they are forced to experience double cognitive and emotional stress, which causes overwork, burnout, and loss of motivation. Due to the non-convertibility of knowledge and certificates, a child may be forced to retake exams or even return to a lower grade, which negatively affects self-esteem and motivation. According to a study by CEPS (Publications Office of the European Union, 2024), only 27 % of children of Ukrainian migrants in the EU have formal academic compatibility between the program in the host country and the Ukrainian system. At the same time, 78 % of teachers in the EU point to existing “gaps in basic training” of Ukrainians compared to local students.

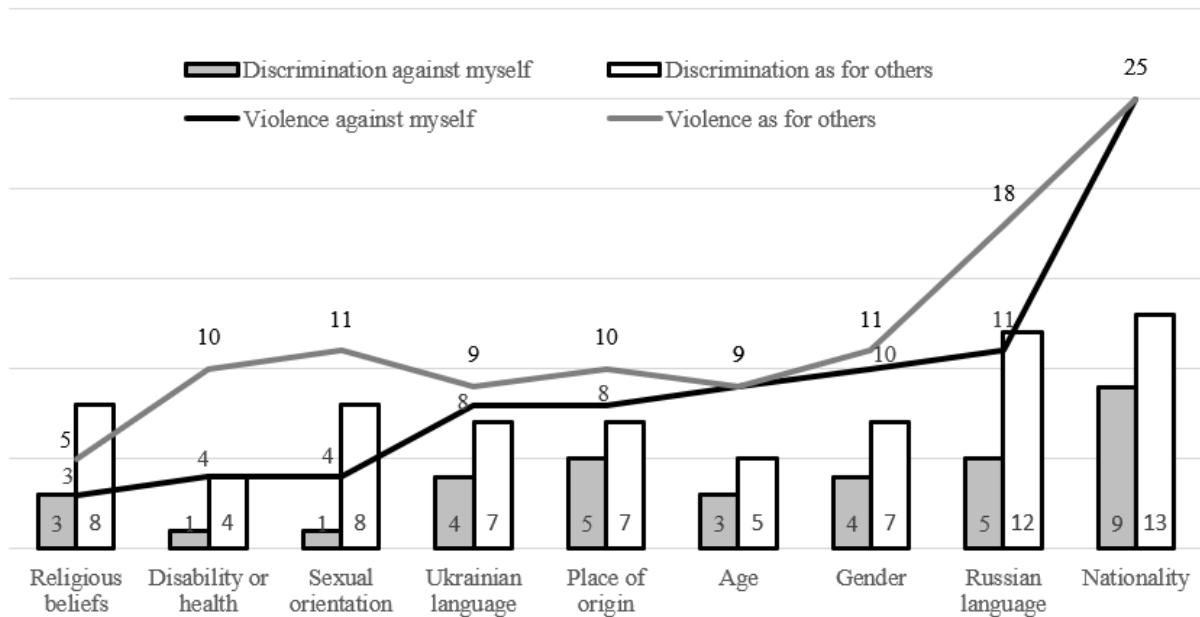
Since teachers also face difficulties related to language barriers and cultural differences, Ciuladiene (2024) believes that providing courses that develop intercultural competence, increasing language lessons, and training for both children and their parents are the most important conditions for the successful integration of migrant children into the education system.

3.1.2. The socio-cultural challenges for the recipient countries are related to the integration of a large number of children who left Ukraine as a result of the hostilities, whose socio-cultural differences can provoke misunderstandings with the local population, causing social isolation, which can result in the formation of closed ethnic micro-environments that limit contact with the local population and impede integration processes. The challenges of institutional adaptation can provoke marginalization and discrimination by exacerbating social inequality, leading to the host society’s refusal to build an inclusive environment. In response to these challenges, countries should develop policies that support intercultural dialogue, inclusive education, and the participation of migrants in community life (Brettell & Hollifield, 2015).

3.2. The problem of institutionalization of children of Ukrainian migrants in the European Union is their inclusion in the formalized institutional systems of the host state: educational institutions (schools, kindergartens, out-of-school care); medical care (access to vaccinations, examinations, rehabilitation); institutions for the protection of children's rights (guardianship, juvenile justice). All of this is a complex multidimensional topic that covers not only aspects of ensuring basic living conditions, but also the inclusion of the child in the host institutional space, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, social protection and culture. For three years of the ongoing war, it has acquired a political, humanitarian and strategic dimension, as Europe lacks a unified strategy for addressing problems of this level (Rivera-Vargas et al., 2021). Each EU country has its approach to the integration of migrants: some countries integrate children into the general system (France, Italy), while others create special parallel structures (Poland, Germany), and there are no unified intergovernmental agreements with Ukraine on the legal status and mechanisms for educational, social, and medical registration of such children. Therefore, there is a high risk that Ukrainian children will remain on the margins of the institutional system, attending special “ghetto schools” or adaptation classes, but will not have full access to the common space, which reproduces isolation rather than integration. For example, Goździak and Popyk (2024) look at education as a bordering practice that excludes migrant children from full integration into Polish schools, and show that schools are important spaces for building social relationships and facilitating integration, but they also become places of exclusion. The status of a Ukrainian child often remains unresolved – refugee, person under temporary protection, displaced person – these statuses do not always clearly correlate with access to public services, and therefore in most cases, there is no mechanism for legal support for a migrant child (lawyer, social worker, and translator).

Consequently, the problem of institutionalization of Ukrainian migrant children in the EU is a systemic challenge that requires a comprehensive response at the level of international law (status determination, guarantees of children’s rights); institutional governance (coordination of children’s affairs, education, and health services); and humanitarian practice (culturally sensitive integration, mental health care, legal aid). Insufficient institutional integration can have long-term consequences for children’s development, ranging from psychological trauma to worsening life prospects. This issue should be a strategic priority for both host countries and Ukraine in the context of post-war reintegration.

3.3. The problem of cultural isolation and marginalization of children of Ukrainian migrants in the European Union, especially in conditions of compact settlement and weak integration with the local population, is one of the key threats to socialization and obstacles to the formation of European identity, which is a serious challenge to the sustainability of intercultural coexistence. Therefore, in the absence of effective integration mechanisms, children of Ukrainian migrants in the EU may find themselves in conditions of cultural isolation, particularly in areas with a high concentration of migrant communities, where contact with the local population is minimized, which can provoke marginalization.



2024: N = 436

Fig. 1. *Distribution of Respondent's Answers to the Question: "Have You Faced any Forms of Discrimination/Violence in the Last 12 Months Due to the Following Characteristics?" (%)*

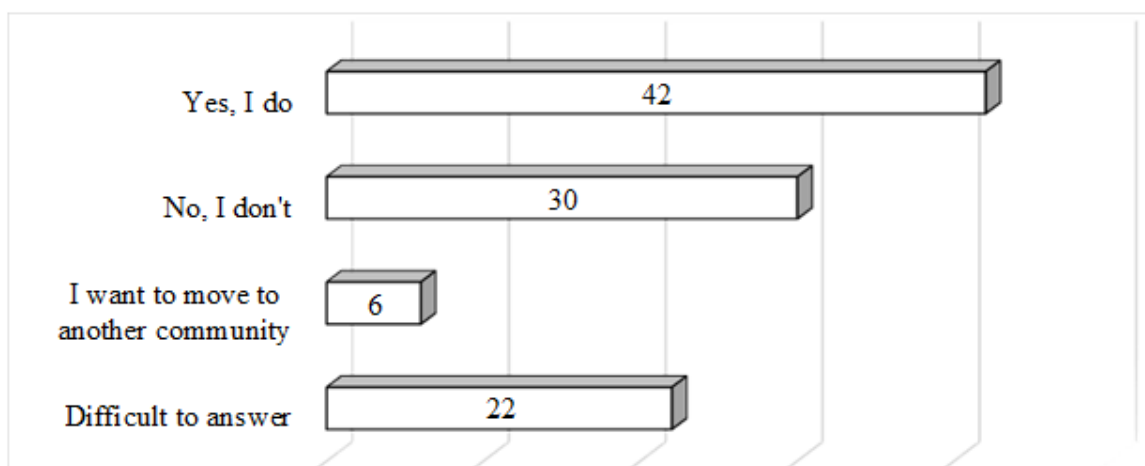
Source: constructed by the authors according to (Kostyuchenko & Volosevych 2024, p. 50).

The results of the research "The inclusion of displaced children from Ukraine in EU education systems 2023–2024" indicate that more than 60 % of Ukrainian children in the EU do not have full access to multidisciplinary services, despite the formal existence of institutional support mechanisms. At the same time, 9 of the 27 EU countries have a significant lack of national coordinators tasked with implementing children's policies, which plays a critical role in the "falling out" of Ukrainian migrant children from the field of view of state institutions and social protection systems. In addition, there are numerous cases of systemic non-security of the rights of Ukrainian children in shelters and foster families, in particular regarding education, nutrition, and mental health.

In some European countries, there are cases of hostile attitudes towards Ukrainian children by peers or individual community members, which can have a lasting impact on the child's psycho-emotional state. Most often, young people abroad report discrimination based on nationality or ethnicity (25 % each for themselves and others). Other reasons for discrimination that are potentially related to ethnicity include: speaking Russian (11 % for themselves and 18 % for others), place of origin (8 % for themselves and 9 % for others), and Ukrainian (8 % for themselves and 9 % for others) (Fig. 1).

Due to the small number of respondents from vulnerable groups, statistically significant indicators of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (11 %) and disability or health status (10 %) are available only in terms of discrimination against others. The recipient countries should find a balance between integrating Ukrainian children into the local culture and respecting their national and cultural identity. The excessive pressure to assimilate can lead to the loss of ethnocultural identity, while ignoring

integration mechanisms leads to the formation of parallel cultural spaces. The massive arrival of Ukrainian migrants is transforming local cultural landscapes. In communities with a large Ukrainian diaspora, new cultural practices, civic initiatives, and educational institutions are emerging, reflecting a dynamic intercultural exchange, but at the same time requiring openness and readiness of local communities for dialogue. At the same time, 42 % of Ukrainian migrants would like to move from their country of residence, which may indicate dissatisfaction with the level of integration into host societies (Fig. 2).



2024: N = 436.

Fig. 2. *Distribution of Respondent's Answers to the Question: "Do You Plan to Return to Ukraine?", %*
Source: constructed by the authors according to (Kostyuchenko & Volosevych 2024, p. 44).

Thus, the integration of Ukrainian migrant children into the systems of recipient countries requires a comprehensive interagency approach that takes into account not only basic educational and social needs, but also the depth of cultural transformations in both migrant and host communities. An important task is to create conditions under which Ukrainian children will be able to preserve their identity, successfully integrate into the new environment, and, in case of return, reintegrate painlessly into their native education system and cultural space.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR RESEARCH

The integration of Ukrainian migrant children into the educational, socio-cultural, and institutional systems of EU recipient countries is a multidimensional challenge that transcends the boundaries of humanitarian aid and enters the strategic domain of European social policy. The analysis demonstrates that the main barriers lie at the intersection of three dimensions: educational, institutional, and socio-cultural. Educationally, language barriers, the incompatibility of curricula, and the shortage of qualified teachers hinder children's access to quality learning and reduce their prospects for social mobility. Institutionally, the lack of unified strategies, fragmented governance, and insufficient legal protection mechanisms create systemic risks of exclusion, with children frequently remaining outside the scope of national policies. Socio-culturally, the risks of marginalization, cultural isolation, and xenophobia may undermine both the integration of Ukrainian youth and the stability of intercultural coexistence within host societies.

At the same time, the Ukrainian case reveals that integration is not a one-dimensional process of assimilation, but a complex phenomenon of intercultural exchange, requiring policies that balance the preservation of cultural identity with participating in the social and institutional life of recipient countries. Successful integration depends on creating "bridges" through bilingual education, inclusive teaching practices, intercultural dialogue, and mechanisms of institutional protection. The resilience of both migrant communities and host societies lies in their ability to transform these challenges into opportunities for mutual enrichment, modernization of educational systems, and strengthening of European democratic values.

Therefore, the integration of Ukrainian migrant children should be understood as a strategic investment into the social future of Europe, directly influencing cohesion, social equity, and the sustainability of multicultural societies in the post-war and long-term perspective.

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