

**Beyond the language barrier:** How do refugees act in the host country, and why? A new study takes a closer look at the schooling of children.

Attending school in Germany is considered the gold standard for the integration of refugee children. Here they learn the language. Here they learn social norms. Compulsory education guarantees this right on behalf of the state.

But how do the parents feel about it? Do they believe that cross-disciplinary teaching in a foreign language makes learning more difficult? And might digitalization offer alternatives to the German classroom?

These are the questions explored by Prof. Dr. Céline Teney, a macrosociologist at Freie Universität Berlin, and her research team. The researchers interviewed Ukrainian mothers and fathers who are living as refugees in Berlin and Warsaw. The first interviews took place a few months after the Russian invasion in 2022, followed by two additional rounds in 2023 and 2024.

The results of their study, *“Educational Strategies of Displaced Ukrainians in Berlin and Warsaw: The Role of Transnational Opportunity Structure,”* have just been published in the academic journal *Population, Space & Place* and are available online at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/psp.70032>

### **Opportunities Across Borders**

“We came across a phenomenon that can be described as a transnational opportunity structure,” says Céline Teney. The macrosociologist researches, among other topics, the social conflict potential of globalization. She emphasizes: “Thanks to digitalization, new digital relational spaces have opened up. This means that refugees can largely live their lives beyond the boundaries of nation-states.” Theoretically, this also applies to schoolchildren. Many countries—including Ukraine—built up infrastructure for distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In practice, however, refugee parents in Germany face only three options:

- to burden their school-age children with additional online lessons in their native language on top of in-person classes,
- to return home despite all the risks, so that their children can continue education in their native language and under the national curriculum, or
- to rely entirely on education in a German school.

### **Hoping to Return and Integrating**

In 2022, significantly more respondents opted for double schooling than in 2023. Many parents initially believed the invasion would end soon. By 2023 and 2024, fewer and fewer parents were imposing this double workload on their children. That means they either returned to Ukraine or gave up native-language teaching altogether. “The majority now rely on exclusive schooling in the host country,” summarizes Céline Teney. “That confirms what other studies have already shown: the desire of most migrants to integrate.

## **Concerns about Learning Success**

However, many mothers and fathers who decided to stay in Germany also expressed unease. They fear their children might receive lower grades than their potential due to the language barrier. A 17-year-old student from Mariupol sums it up: “I can only achieve my dream career with top grades. That will be very difficult in German.” She believes it’s more realistic to apply for jobs in Germany with a strong Ukrainian diploma than with an average German Abitur.

The welcome classes set up by the state of Berlin, among others, are also met with skepticism. These classes aim to prepare children for regular education through intensive German language classes. Many parents consider this as wasted time, especially if they plan to return home in the future. “The certificate is worthless in Ukraine. In a welcome class, children don’t learn anything that a ten-year-old needs to prove,” said a 32-year-old woman from Kyiv. Some respondents even fear long-term disadvantages when their children later readjust to life in Ukraine. “In fact, it’s hard to deny that people who cannot speak and write their mother tongue idiomatically are stigmatized,” notes Céline Teney.

## **Debates about alternatives**

Based on these findings, the research team expects future waves of displacement to spark debates about how children should be educated. ‘Compulsory schooling itself is an indispensable means of integration,’ says Professor Teney. ‘However, a policy that insists on German as the sole language of instruction will have to be justified.’ In alternative scenarios, the native language of the refugees will play a greater role. This would also include a mixture of face-to-face and online teaching.

## **National ambition also in Poland**

Poland initially followed this path, before reversing course. Germany's neighbors initially allowed parents to have their children taught online in Ukrainian. This made attending a Polish school unnecessary, and many refugees were happy to take advantage of this option. In September 2024, Warsaw then ordered on-site teaching. The government justified this step with the desire for greater assimilation. There was also talk of encouraging return migration to Ukraine.

## **Conclusion**

“The obligation to provide education under a nation’s rules is part of the legitimate toolkit for integrating refugee children,” concludes Professor Teney. “On the other hand, a transnational opportunity structure can help smooth the biographical ruptures caused by displacement and make it easier for children to restart their lives back home. It is within this tension that many future debates about education and integration policy will unfold.”

## **About the Study**

On behalf of Professor Dr. Céline Teney, Ukrainian research assistants conducted semi-structured interviews in summer 2022 with 82 displaced parents of school-age children living in Berlin or Warsaw. Follow-up interviews were held in spring 2023 with 60 of these

individuals, and in spring 2024 with 44. About one-third of the participants returned to Ukraine between the first and third rounds of interviews.