

**ZOiS**

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# ZOiS REPORT

## **EDUCATION AND DISPLACEMENT: UKRAINIAN FAMILIES IN GERMANY**

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## Summary

The escalation of Russia’s war against Ukraine since February 2022 has prompted one of the most significant displacements of people in post-1945 Europe. Of the more than eight million people currently staying outside of Ukraine, most are women and one-third are children. This report focuses on the question of education in the context of displacement, looking specifically at the challenges and conditions that emerge in the very first months after arrival. The educational situation of children is of utmost importance for the social integration of both parents and children and, alongside the labour market integration of parents, a crucial factor in understanding how Ukrainians think about their future.

We draw on an original online survey conducted among displaced Ukrainian parents in Germany in the summer of 2022 as well as numerous qualitative interviews with both parents and pupils. The findings show the extent to which pursuing their education in parallel in Germany and Ukraine is placing a double burden on young Ukrainians. At the same time, the research sheds light on the reasons for educational choices and how families navigate this new situation. These are the key findings:

- In the summer of 2022 and in the following months, in particular secondary school-aged children continued with their Ukrainian education, even

if they were enrolled in German schools. This was facilitated by previous investment by the Ukrainian state in the digitisation of educational materials during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- The reasons for continuing Ukrainian education frequently relate to a desire to preserve one’s Ukrainian identity and language, but also to a fear that without a Ukrainian education, a child’s future prospects would be jeopardised. For the Ukrainian state, it is crucial to keep children involved in the national curriculum in order to increase the likelihood of their possible return.
- The prospect of return is a determining factor in families’ educational choices. Those who plan to leave Germany as soon as possible are less motivated to send their children to a German school. At the same time, the daunting reality of the ongoing war has implications for the personal well-being of these respondents, and those who desire a quick return to Ukraine are the most likely to report feelings of lethargy. Conversely, those who intend to stay in Germany for the foreseeable future are more deeply involved in their local German communities.
- The age of the child matters greatly in the educational choices parents make. Especially for teenagers, the transition into the German educational system is more difficult due to language barriers but also different expectations and cultures of education. Pupils approaching the end of their secondary schooling, moreover, face the challenge of transitioning from the school system into vocational training or university, which is particularly difficult without proficiency in German and recognised diplomas.
- There is a correlation between a parent’s financial and social status and the extent to which they are involved in their children’s education. Those with a higher financial and social status are significantly more invested in their child’s education and articulate higher expectations for their child’s education in Germany. They also tend to want their child to be included in regular rather than integration classes. Socio-economic inequalities in the country of origin are therefore reproduced in displacement.
- Educational systems and norms are vastly different in Germany and Ukraine. Some Ukrainian families express frustration about what they see as the poor quality of teaching in German schools and worry about the implications of this for an anticipated return. Another set of families, however, appreciates the child-centred education they have encountered, the respectful treatment of young people, and the sensitive ways in which German authorities deal with children fleeing war.
- The German education system was already at its limits prior to the arrival of Ukrainian children. Nevertheless, thanks to goodwill on the local level and a sense of pragmatism, virtually all of them have been integrated into local schools.

## Introduction

Of the eight million Ukrainians scattered across Europe as a result of the escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022, about one million people have come to Germany.<sup>1</sup> Since men have generally not been allowed to leave the country, women account for about 80% of the adults who have fled here.<sup>2</sup> About one-third of those displaced from Ukraine are children and teenagers, with over 200,000 Ukrainian children now enrolled in German primary and secondary schools.<sup>3</sup> This report analyses these families' expectations, decisions, experiences, and perceptions regarding their children's education since their displacement.

Involvement in education is one of the key factors for the social integration of Ukrainian families in Germany. Alongside the development of the war, the integration of parents into the labour market, and the possibility of family reunification, conditions in local schools seem crucial for the choices Ukrainian families will make regarding a possible return—or not—to their country of origin. Education in displacement is therefore an issue of utmost political and public relevance for Germany and Ukraine. As probably the first large group to find itself in this situation, Ukrainian children are simultaneously exposed to two parallel educational requirements: both the state of origin and the host state expect that the respective national curriculum is followed.

In Germany, local school attendance is compulsory for all minors, as it is considered essential for future social integration. Many decision-makers fear segregation and a lack of career opportunities if Ukrainian young people do not attend German schools. They want to avoid a repetition of the 1960s and 1970s, when many regions did not make schooling compulsory for foreign pupils and the children of immigrants were kept separate from German-speaking pupils in the expectation that they would return to their countries of origin.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, German policymakers today aim to integrate Ukrainian pupils.

At the same time, Ukrainian education policymakers insist that schooling continues according to their national curriculum. In September 2022, the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine, Serhij Shkarlet, claimed that about 500,000 Ukrainian pupils were abroad,<sup>5</sup> while the Ombudsman for

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- 1 UNHCR, 'Ukraine Refugee Situation', 17 February 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.
  - 2 Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung et al., 'Kurzstudie: Geflüchtete aus der Ukraine in Deutschland', December 2022, <https://www.BAMF.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Forschung/kurzstudie-ukr-gefluechtete.html?nn=282772>.
  - 3 Kultusminister Konferenz, 'Geflüchtete Kinder/Jugendliche Aus Der Ukraine', accessed on 16 March 2023, <https://www.kmk.org/dokumentation-statistik/statistik/schulstatistik/gefluechtete-kinderjugendliche-aus-der-ukraine.html>.
  - 4 Una Röhr-Sendmeier, 'Der Schulunterricht Für Migranten in Deutschland – Maßnahmen Und Bildungspolitische Konzepte von 1950 bis 1990', in *Bildungs- Und Erziehungsgeschichte Im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1992), 297 – 321.
  - 5 Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 'Over 4 thousand Ukrainian children of school age have returned to Ukraine over the past 11 days - Serhij Shkarlet', 12 September 2022, <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/ponad-4-tis-ukrayinskih-ditej-shkilnogo-viku-povernulisya-v-ukrayinu-za-ostanni-11-dniv-sergij-shkarlet>.

Education of Ukraine suggested that the numbers were even higher.<sup>6</sup> Based on the assumption that children who remain integrated in the Ukrainian system are more likely to return, the continued involvement of Ukrainian youth in the national education system has taken on a major significance. Education is seen as a tool to minimise the risk of losing a sizeable share of the younger generation.

This exposure to two educational settings is a feature of the intense transnational reality in which many families currently live after having had to leave remaining family members, homes, and jobs back in Ukraine. In a survey conducted by the Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung and other German state institutions in autumn 2022, about one-third of displaced Ukrainians indicated that they planned to stay in Germany until the end of the war, more than a third wanted to stay in Germany forever or for several years, and less than a third was unsure.<sup>7</sup>

Contact with the local education administration and schools is one of the first and often challenging encounters Ukrainian families have with the German state. Conducted in summer 2022, our survey captures their first experiences and struggles to access education in a situation of extreme uncertainty. This critical moment has a bearing on young people's future plans and opportunities in the long term, but it also shapes perceptions of the German state. We see how the significant differences between the two educational systems and their expectations become a source of irritation. Given how sensitive the topic of education is for most parents and youth, the tensions that emerge in this area can be particularly acute.

For the German education authorities, the sudden arrival of 200,000 pupils from Ukraine was a major challenge because German schools were already stretched to their limits before 2022. The arrival of newcomers in such numbers was also not unprecedented. In 2016, 260,000 children arrived primarily from Syria.<sup>8</sup> That experience, combined with the commitment to help among teachers, headmasters, and local officials, strong political will, and an accompanying crisis budget have made German state institutions more flexible and pragmatic when it comes to enrolling Ukrainian pupils in local schools.

**For Ukrainian policy makers, education is a tool to minimise the risk of losing a sizeable share of the younger generation.**

## Methodology: Online survey and in-depth interviews

A ZOiS online survey circulated among parents of Ukrainian pupils (6–18 years) who were displaced to Germany in 2022. It was advertised from early June to early August 2022 via Telegram groups for Ukrainians in Germany

6 Ombudsman for Education of Ukraine, 'Will children who study abroad return to Ukraine?', 7 October 2022, <https://eo.gov.ua/chy-povernutsia-v-ukrainu-dity-iaki-navchajutsia-za-kor-donom/2022/10/07/>.

7 Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung et al., 'Kurzstudie'.

8 UNICEF, 'Geflüchtete Und Migrierte Kinder in Deutschland. Ein Überblick Über Die Trends Seit 2015', December 2020, [https://www.unicef.de/\\_cae/resource/blob/178376/af4894387fd3ca4e-c6259919eefdde2d/gefluechtete-und-migrierte-kinder-in-deutschland-2015-2018-data.pdf](https://www.unicef.de/_cae/resource/blob/178376/af4894387fd3ca4e-c6259919eefdde2d/gefluechtete-und-migrierte-kinder-in-deutschland-2015-2018-data.pdf).

and via a Facebook campaign. The survey includes several questions on the encounter with the German educational system, including its administrative aspects, on the children's recent online and offline schooling experience, and on the educational, socio-economic and cultural background of the respondents.

A total of 3,504 respondents started the survey. We then undertook extensive quality checks to systematically remove individuals who rushed through the questionnaire, gave nonsensical answers, stopped too early, or did not answer enough questions to convey meaningful information. This left us with a total of 2,152 respondents, 98% of whom were women. Thus the percentage of female respondents was disproportionately high, even considering that they make up 80% of the total number of displaced adults from Ukraine. This self-selection reflects a typical gender imbalance in care work and the widespread perception that children's education is a female domain.

We developed three main dimensions to characterise our respondents' backgrounds with respect to their financial, socio-cultural, and international position. In the *financial* dimension we included variables related to the respondents' and their partners' employment (level of seniority, income), whether they could afford a private school in Ukraine, or the frequency with which they paid for private tuition in addition to schooling.<sup>9</sup> In *socio-cultural* background we included information on the level of education of the children's parents and grandparents, the educational situation of the child back in Ukraine, and whether the child played a musical instrument. Those who indicated that they went to theatres and museums in Germany also received additional points. In *international* background, we gauged the international orientation of the respondent's family, combining information related to the parents' knowledge of foreign languages, their international travel in pre-pandemic times, whether they had plans to emigrate before February 2022, whether their child went to an international school or attended a foreign-language-focused class in Ukraine, and whether several languages were spoken at home.

These three dimensions express our respondents' position relative to the sample rather than compared to the Ukrainian population overall. Geographically, survey participants are spread across Germany, with higher numbers in the more populated regions of North Rhine-Westphalia, Bavaria, and Baden-Württemberg.

The qualitative analysis draws on two types of sources. First, respondents to the survey could explain their choices throughout the questionnaire in a range of free text fields, an option that several hundred used. Second, between May and November 2022, we conducted semi-structured interviews and more informal conversations with 16 teenagers (12–18) as well as 53 mothers and 4 fathers. To reflect the diversity of social and educational profiles, the interviewees were recruited via diverse channels, including our personal German and Ukrainian networks, messages posted in Telegram

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9 Some of the variables such as the respondent's income and their profession convey more information about a respondent's financial means and we therefore gave greater weight to these variables.

and Facebook groups, a question to this effect in the survey, organisations supporting displaced Ukrainians in Germany, in-person gatherings of displaced Ukrainians, and the multi-test exam held in Berlin.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, interviews took place in diverse settings, online and in-person. The language of communication was usually Ukrainian or Russian, and in a few cases English when interviewees felt very confident speaking it. To gain a better understanding of the context, we also conducted interviews with members of the German school administration and teachers.

## Ukrainian education in Germany

Ukraine's education policies are geared to keeping Ukrainian youth abroad involved in the national education system. The Ukrainian state has offered families different models for obtaining their school reports while living abroad, including synchronous study via video calls and asynchronous home schooling, where pupils study autonomously and submit homework and tests. Families, teachers, and national structures adapted to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, in wartime, synchronous study with the usual teacher requires the class in the Ukrainian home town to function remotely. Whether teaching takes place online or offline has often changed since February 2022 and depends on the region, the school, and the teacher. To allow for autonomous study in the 18 core school subjects, the Ukrainian state offers the resources of the All-Ukrainian Timetable (Vseukrayinskyy rozklad—grades 1 to 11) and the All-Ukrainian online school (Vseukrayinska shkola onlayn—grades 5 to 11), centralised state platforms containing videos, texts, exercises, and tests.

Of those respondents whose children continued following the Ukrainian curriculum in summer 2022, 11% indicated that their child did so with a Ukrainian teacher in a physical classroom in Germany. Around 80% indicated that their child followed the curriculum always or often online. Meanwhile, 90% always or often pursued online schooling with their former home school; and nearly 50% used at least one of the centralised online education resources.

When asked whether their child studied according to the Ukrainian curriculum in May 2022, around half of the survey respondents mentioned that their child had continued with their Ukrainian education in addition to German schooling, while around one in five indicated that their child was exclusively engaged in Ukrainian schooling. Both of these shares decreased over time: by autumn 2022, children in less than a quarter of the families were following the Ukrainian curriculum online, with only 3% focusing exclusively on Ukrainian schooling.<sup>11</sup> In our survey, slightly less than a third of the respondents explained that the reason why their children were pursuing their Ukrainian education alongside attendance at a German school

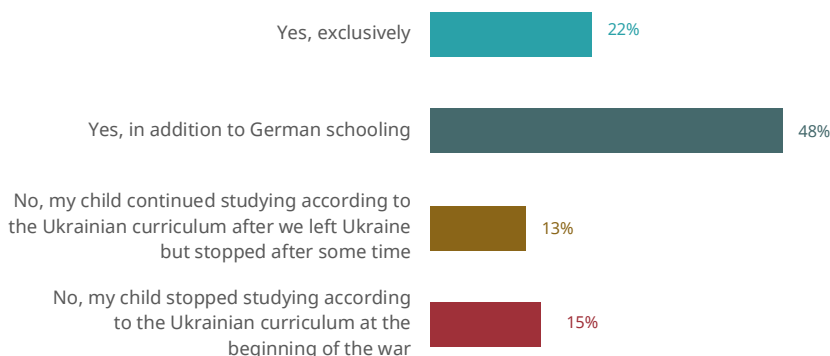
**Around half of the respondents said that in May 2022 their child had continued with their Ukrainian education in addition to German schooling.**

<sup>10</sup> Many thanks to Anna Guryanova and Sophie Shields for their excellent research assistance.

<sup>11</sup> Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung et al., 'Kurzstudie'. However, an EU survey conducted among displaced Ukrainians in 10 EU countries in September 2022 found that two-thirds of children studied remotely according to the Ukrainian curriculum. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 'Fleeing Ukraine: Displaced People's Experiences in the EU', 28 February 2023, 37, <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/ukraine-survey>.

FIGURE 1

**In the second half of May 2022 did your child study according to the Ukrainian curriculum?**



Source: ZOiS Survey 2022

was that they hoped to return soon and wanted to avoid a difficult readjustment to the Ukrainian school. The decrease in the share of those engaged in Ukrainian schooling between summer and autumn 2022 may be the result of dwindling hopes of return or an excessive workload. Moreover, some of the families who were keen on returning soon did so during the summer. Since the autumn and the Russian destruction of Ukrainian infrastructure, online schooling has also been hampered by interruptions to the internet and the electricity supply (► FIGURE 1).

Nearly one-third of parents indicated that patriotism was a factor in the decision to continue with Ukrainian schooling; they saw a need to preserve the child's Ukrainian identity and show faith in the future of Ukraine. For about 25% of parents, the fact that schooling in the Ukrainian or Russian language was easier for the child was a decisive factor.

### **Mothers, family background and continuing with Ukrainian education**

Respondents with a relatively high social and financial status<sup>12</sup> in our sample were more likely to indicate that their child was continuing their Ukrainian schooling in addition to attending a German school. Families need to value the continuity of Ukrainian education to put their child under this double burden. Around one-third of respondents stated that their educational choice was strongly influenced by their belief that the Ukrainian

12 People from Ukraine who fled abroad tend to have a higher level of education and a higher socio-economic status than the average population in Ukraine. Anastasiya Riabchuk, 'Who Will Stay and Who Will Return? Divergent Trajectories of Ukrainian War Refugees in the EU' (Commons, 16 January 2023), <https://commons.com.ua/en/hto-zalishitsya-i-hto-povernetsya-trayektoriyi-ukrayinskih-bizhenciv-v-yes/> Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung et al., 'Kurzstudie'.



education system is better than the German one. Having sufficient financial means also makes it easier to continue with Ukrainian education, for instance via additional private tutors. Moreover, parents with a higher social and educational status were more likely to indicate that they assisted their child in following the Ukrainian curriculum.

In displacement, the demands on mothers have risen substantially. Many have gotten involved in the education of their children to compensate for the perceived weaknesses of the new educational setting and support their child's online or self-study according to the Ukrainian curriculum, German language learning, and catching up with the German school programme. Moreover, the vast majority of mothers in our survey were already the primary caretakers before leaving Ukraine, but in Germany they have usually lost the everyday support of fathers or grandparents. In addition to the need to secure accommodation and deal with paperwork, this puts the mothers under extreme pressure.

‘Online schooling is really hard. It takes a lot of my time. Mums have to be teachers. But I have to do lots of administrative things.’

*(Interview, June 2022, mother of an 11- and a 7-year-old, from the Zaporizhzhya region, now in Berlin).*

‘Every evening I have to decide whether to study German or Ukrainian with him. I try to do both with him.’

*(Interview, May 2022, mother of an 8- and a 12-year-old, former English and German teacher from Zaporizhzhya, now in Berlin).*

### More Ukrainian remote education for older pupils

Those parents who mentioned that their child exclusively pursued their Ukrainian schooling in May 2022 tend to have children in the later years of secondary school when pupils approach the critical Ukrainian school exams. Older children are more likely to continue their schooling by themselves. They also spend much more time per week on the Ukrainian education system than younger pupils—often more than 20 hours per week.

These pupils often study remotely early in the morning before German school starts or later in the afternoon and evening. This corresponds to a finding from August 2022 by the Ombudsman for Education of Ukraine: ‘27% (2,140 out of 7,921) of respondents indicated that a child received a double load due to studying at a Ukrainian and foreign educational institution.’<sup>13</sup>

**Yana**,<sup>14</sup> 16 years old, moved from the Kyiv region to a small town in Baden-Württemberg with her mother, who works for a large German company and was relocated to Germany in March 2022. At first, she

<sup>13</sup> Ombudsman for Education of Ukraine, ‘How do foreign schools differ from Ukrainian ones? Results of a survey among parents whose children are abroad’, 23 August 2022, <https://eo.gov.ua/chym-zakordonni-shkoly-vidrizniaiutsia-vid-ukrainskykh-rezultaty-opytuvannia-batkiv-chyidity-znakhodiatsia-za-kordonom/2022/08/23/>.

<sup>14</sup> All the names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

»It feels a bit like I am postponing my life.«

joined an integration class but, since she had started learning German while still in Ukraine, was soon bored. After negotiating with teachers and passing tests, she was transferred to a regular class at the Gymnasium—albeit grade 9, one grade lower than where she would normally have been in Ukraine. She appreciates that at the beginning of the school year teachers asked the pupils what they were interested in learning. She attends the local school primarily to learn German but is planning to return to her home town in Ukraine in a few weeks. This is why she has focused on her Ukrainian remote education—obtaining material and handing in homework and tests so as to get the annual school report. She has more homework to do for her Ukrainian schooling than for her German school. *‘My first class at the German school starts at 7:40 a.m. [...] on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday it ends at 1p.m. I go and eat something. Then I prepare some presentations or summaries [for the Ukrainian school]. This takes almost the whole day. [...] Here I feel I just want to do my stuff, study, study so that I have a routine every day. It feels a bit like I am postponing my life because I don’t have close friends here with whom I could talk or spend time.’*

*(Interview, October 2022).*

In summer 2022, Ukrainian education policymakers organised a simplified format for the ‘External Independent Evaluation’ (ZNO) to facilitate admission to Ukrainian universities for pupils in the context of war—including those living abroad. In interviews, parents and teenagers stressed the importance of gaining Ukrainian diplomas (after 9 and 11 school years, respectively). For older teenagers, the transition into the German school system is particularly unappealing. In contrast to the Ukrainian education system, where diplomas are obtained within a short period of time, families do not relish the prospect of prolonging the time spent at secondary school beyond the age of 17. This contributes to a more generalised feeling of a loss of social status and the capacity to control their future.

**Anna**, 16 years old, fled with her mother and her younger sister in early March 2022 from Lviv to a town in North Rhine-Westphalia. In Ukraine she had attended a secondary school with a focus on foreign languages and she speaks English fluently and German at B1 level. Before 2022, she had participated in various international programmes and had considered studying abroad on an English-language degree programme. She has just finished her Ukrainian school and is preparing for the entrance exam to Ukrainian universities (ZNO).

The German Gymnasien that she contacted rejected her as a non-German-speaking pupil over the age of 15. Instead, she was redirected to an evening school with a focus on German language learning. Her group is exclusively composed of Ukrainian pupils with whom she has become friends. Yet, she regrets that she has not found any German-speaking friends who could help her learn the language and ‘integrate’ faster.

Disappointed that she cannot access German universities with her Ukrainian diploma, she is uncertain about her further education

plans. She feels that she and her Ukrainian friends are *‘at the borders of two worlds. [...] in Ukraine it’s not clear what to do, and here it’s not clear what to do. It’s all a bit confused.’* She has different options for accessing German universities, all of which would require several years of preparation. She could improve her German, then be admitted to an Oberstufenzentrum and spend another two to three years preparing for the German Abitur. Alternatively, she could spend another year improving her German to reach B2 level, then study for a year at a Studienkolleg to reach C1 level and finally hope to be admitted to a German university. Even though she does not rule out the latter, she is reluctant to invest so much time in the German education system, while she is unsure if she wants to stay and if she will be allowed to stay beyond the two years foreseen by her temporary protection status. For the coming year, she is considering enrolling remotely at a Ukrainian university and continuing to learn German in parallel. She might then either return to Ukraine or try to get her first year at the Ukrainian university recognised in order to transfer to a first-year course at a German university.

*(Interview, July 2022)*

**She feels that she and her Ukrainian friends are ‘at the borders of two worlds.’**

### Less Ukrainian remote education for younger children

By contrast, parents with younger children—around 15% of the sample—more frequently mentioned in the survey that their child had stopped their schooling in the Ukrainian system straight away in February 2022. Understandably, it is harder to motivate younger children to participate in remote education, and the demands on parents are considerably higher. Indeed, younger children, if they do study remotely, are more likely to do so with support from their parents. They are also further away from the crucial Ukrainian diplomas, which slightly eases the pressure. Moreover, children at primary school age tend to struggle less with language barriers.

‘The younger one is in first grade in a regular German school without knowing German or English. She likes it very much, she integrates quickly, she is already starting to read in German. She has German-speaking friends and learns the language much faster than in the integration class.’

*(Survey respondent, mother of a 9- and a 6-year-old, from Bucha, lecturer in higher education, now in a city in Baden-Württemberg).*

Nevertheless, mothers of younger children worry about them missing out on a Ukrainian education. To quote one of them:

‘My other child is in the first grade and did not have normal online classes in a Ukrainian school; [instead,] she studied in other educational projects (online in groups according to the Ukrainian programme) and asynchronously on tasks. The bigger problem is with preserving Ukrainian identity and language in general (reading, writing must be preserved at all costs).’

*(Survey respondent, mother of a 6- and a 9-year-old, from Kyiv, middle management in the IT industry, now in a village in Brandenburg).*

## Going to school in Germany

Already before 2022, German schools suffered in many places from a lack of equipment, space, and personnel. The arrival of Ukrainian pupils exacerbated these difficulties. In a moment of crisis, policymakers swiftly allocated large funds to respond to the most immediate needs and hire short-term teaching staff. However, a shortage of qualified teachers to fill the new vacancies and the lack of adequate rooms have obstructed the efforts made by school administrations.

Members of school administrations argued that they coped better with a large influx of new pupils in 2022 than in 2016. Thanks to reforms and a steep learning curve, they consider themselves more organised and more flexible in their adaptation to the new situation. For instance, in Berlin, certain institutional structures, such as officials who match newly arrived pupils with schools, were set up around 2016 and have been maintained since then. Nevertheless, officials explained that in 2016 the educational system was less stretched and therefore had more capacity to accommodate the new pupils.

In spring 2022, policymakers and the media discussed whether hiring displaced teachers from Ukraine might be a solution. However, by November 2022 only about 3,000 had been hired, much less than hoped for, and they were often employed as assistants rather than fully recognised teachers.<sup>15</sup> This is, firstly, because education authorities in many regions continue to require potential teachers to have strong German language skills (C1). Secondly, in the first few months after the full-scale Russian invasion, several German regions envisaged hiring teachers from Ukraine to teach different subjects in Ukrainian and according to the Ukrainian curriculum. In many cases, this idea was subsequently dropped and teachers from Ukraine are now usually hired as teachers of German as a foreign language, limiting the pool of candidates to those with a high German language proficiency.

### Experiences of enrolling at a local school

The vast majority of Ukrainian children in Germany attends German schools. A representative survey conducted by several German state institutions between August and October 2022 found that in 91 % of families with children of school-going age, at least one child was attending a local school. In early 2023 slightly more than 200,000 Ukrainians attend German school (► FIGURE 2).<sup>16</sup>

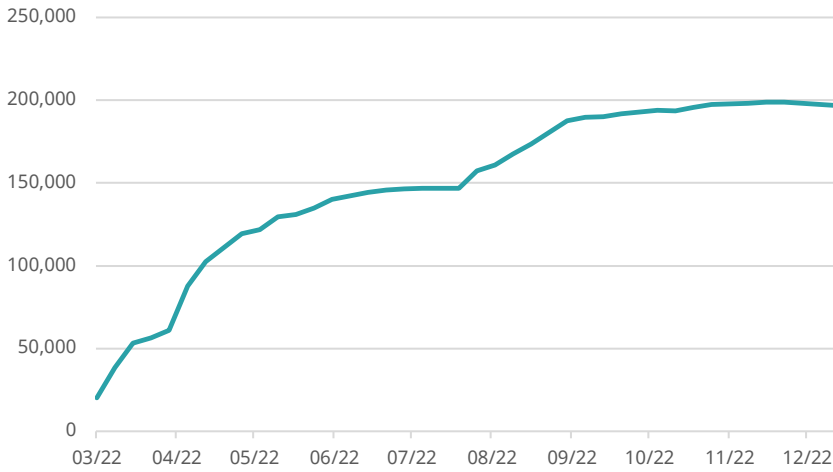
Given the federalist structure of the German educational system, diverging policies for integrating the newly arrived pupils emerged across the different regions (Bundesländer). For instance, school attendance became compulsory at different moments in different Bundesländer, ranging from an immediate obligation in Berlin to six months after arrival in Baden-Württemberg (in 2022). The share of students from Ukraine differs across the country (► FIGURE 3).

<sup>15</sup> Mediendienst Integration, 'Ukrainische Flüchtlinge. Zahlen Und Fakten', accessed 17 February 2023, <https://mediendienst-integration.de/migration/flucht-asyl/ukrainische-fluechtlinge.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung et al., 'Kurzstudie'.

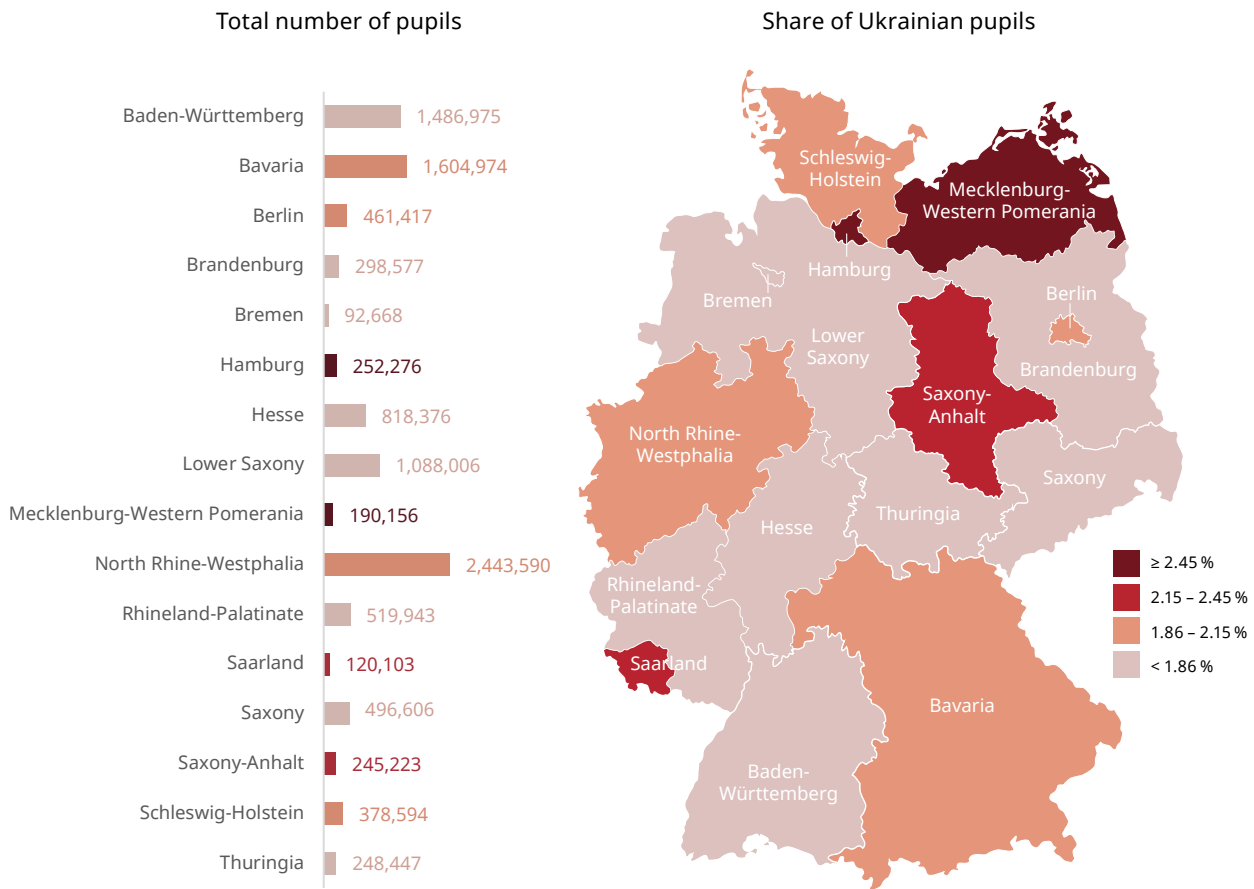
Members of school administrations argued that they coped better with a large influx of new pupils in 2022 than in 2016.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Number of Ukrainian Pupils in German Schools, 2022**



Source: Kultusminister Konferenz, 'Geflüchtete Kinder / Jugendliche aus der Ukraine', accessed 17 February 2023, <https://www.kmk.org/dokumentation-statistik/statistik/schulstatistik/gefuechtete-kinderjugendliche-aus-der-ukraine.html>.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Share of Ukrainian pupils per federal district in Germany as of February 2023**



Source: Kultusminister Konferenz, 'Geflüchtete Kinder / Jugendliche aus der Ukraine', accessed 17 February 2023, <https://www.kmk.org/dokumentation-statistik/statistik/schulstatistik/gefuechtete-kinderjugendliche-aus-der-ukraine.html>, Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland – GENESIS-Online: Ergebnis 21121-0010-DLAND (destatis.de), Map Designed by Freepik

In summer 2022, some mothers perceived the compulsory school attendance as a nuisance.

In the period up to the summer holidays of 2022, school authorities further diverged in terms of the pressure they put on Ukrainian parents to send their children to a German school. In many cases, school authorities were sympathetic and afforded some leeway to Ukrainian pupils to study online according to the Ukrainian curriculum and get partial or full exemption from school attendance. However, in June 2022, the Federal Minister of Education, Bettina Stark-Watzinger (FDP), announced that school attendance would be systematically enforced after the summer holidays. Still, practices tend to vary between schools even within the same region, and exceptions to the rule continue to be made as some local school administrations encourage headmasters to remain somewhat open to compromises (including partial school exemption) for Ukrainian pupils who want to pursue their Ukrainian education. Headmasters and teachers can exercise their discretion when it comes to the question of whether and how to accommodate Ukrainian families' wishes. For example, schools sometimes agree to exempt certain pupils for a day per week or arrange for a room in which they can attend online classes during school hours. Ukrainian families' encounters with the German education system are therefore extremely varied.

Questioned in the first few months after their arrival in Germany, at a time when they were hoping to return soon, some of our survey respondents felt pressurised by the German authorities to get their children enrolled at German schools. Indeed, around 50% only did so because they believed they had no other choice. In summer 2022, some mothers perceived the compulsory school attendance as a nuisance as it prevented their children from studying according to the Ukrainian curriculum and made them lose valuable time. In the free text fields of our survey, several mothers made emotional comments, making their frustration clear with multiple exclamation marks or unhappy emoticons:

*'We are forced to attend. Although there is little point in doing so. And we won't be able to study online in our Ukrainian one as classes also take place in the morning(((((((17'*

*(Survey respondent, mother of a 10-year-old boy from Kirovohrad region, now in Berlin).*

On the other hand, many Ukrainian parents were eager to enrol their children as soon as possible in German schools. Experiences of registering with the German education system vary among respondents, although a clear majority of more than two-thirds report that they did not find it hard to register their child at school. Many of those who had a positive registration experience explained that the process went smoothly thanks to the support of their personal network or the friendly staff at the respective school.

A sixth of the respondents found registration very hard. They were more frequently based in Berlin than elsewhere, had a high social and educational status and, in many cases, considerable international experience. This finding points to a certain clash of expectations among families with a high status back in Ukraine. Conversely, respondents with little or no international experience were more likely to state that they had no problems registering their children.

17 ( is an unhappy emoticon in Ukrainian messengers and social media, equivalent to :( or :-(.

Parents of older children more often reported that registering their child was a struggle. The interviews reveal how families encountered particular difficulties when trying to get their child into a ‘good’ school or class instead of the school or class assigned to them. For example, the parents of pupils who already have German language skills often try to get them into regular rather than integration classes. Problems also arise at the moment of the transition from primary to secondary school, when pupils are separated into different school types. More highly educated parents try to get their child enrolled at a Gymnasium, the more selective type of secondary school, or sometimes even at a specific Gymnasium. However, Gymnasien tend to insist on their admission requirements (for instance, multiple foreign languages) or may request extensive proof of the Ukrainian pupils’ academic level in Ukraine and in Germany. As a result, mothers often voice their frustration about the difficulty of getting their child enrolled and complain about the lack of freedom they have to select a school and shape their child’s education.

Parents of older children more often reported that registering their child was a struggle.

**Kateryna** from Lviv, mother of two sons, has six years of higher education and worked in higher education in Ukraine. The entire family, the child’s father and all four grandparents, have higher education diplomas. The family spoke Ukrainian and English at home and travelled abroad once a year before the Covid-19 pandemic. Her 16-year-old son always had a private tutor and learned English as a first and German as a second foreign language.

Kateryna and her two sons now live in Karlsruhe; the father and grandparents are still in Ukraine. She is unsure whether she wants to return to Ukraine, stay in Germany or move on to another country. Her older son has been pursuing online study according to the Ukrainian curriculum with his home school. In addition, Kateryna immediately tried to get him enrolled at a German school. After a month of ‘*very difficult*’ struggle, she only managed to enrol him in a German preparatory course in May 2022. He now has 2.5 hours of German lessons per day, taught by a Ukrainian teacher and in a group of only Ukrainian pupils. His mother is frustrated about the course:

*‘We have a very negative experience with schools that refuse to enrol my son as a student, as he does not have a B1/B2 level in German. Despite the fact that my son learned German for 6 years in a Ukrainian school, nobody checked his level of German and he was enrolled in a preparatory course with A1 language level. My appeals and requests to allow him to attend mathematics, computer science, physics, English (my son speaks English fluently) are ignored by the school administration.’*

*(survey)*

### The different situations of Ukrainian pupils in German Schools

The conditions under which pupils from Ukraine go to school in Germany strongly diverge, depending on the children’s age, prior education including their level of German, their parents’ background and involvement, as well as the particular school and region.

To simplify, the youngest, who attend the first grades of primary school, are usually included directly in regular classes for most of the time. In some places, they leave the class occasionally to join special groups for additional German lessons.

Schooling of pupils at secondary school (depending on the region, from age 10 or 12 upwards) hinges primarily on their knowledge of German. Pupils with a level of A2/B1 or above tend to join regular classes in German. For those with little or no prior German language skills, the situation varies considerably. Many of them attend regular classes, while a third of all Ukrainian pupils attend special integration classes for non-German-speaking pupils, where the focus is on learning German, with limited attention paid to other subjects.<sup>18</sup> Ukrainian pupils are more likely to be in special integration classes in the south-western regions of Germany and in Saxony. Family background also matters: pupils from wealthier families are more likely to join regular classes. Indeed, many Ukrainian parents have become convinced, often influenced by discussions on Ukrainian social media, that attending regular classes would be better for their children's education.

Integration classes can either be composed solely of Ukrainian pupils or can include a mix of nationalities. According to our survey, similar shares of Ukrainian pupils attend both types of integration class, but exclusively Ukrainian groups are more common in Eastern Germany, especially in Saxony. In interviews, mothers and children voice diverging opinions on this set-up. While some appreciate the reassuring company of classmates from Ukraine who speak their language, others would prefer to meet more German-speaking pupils.

Usually, the teacher of an integration class speaks neither Russian nor Ukrainian, but in about 19% of cases, particularly in Eastern Germany, teachers communicate with Ukrainian pupils often or always in Ukrainian or Russian.<sup>19</sup> One explanation for this is the more widespread Russian language skills among teachers from the former GDR. Another reason lies in the policies of certain eastern regions like Saxony to hire Ukrainian teachers and offer special education in Ukrainian (or Russian) to Ukrainian pupils, at least in the first few months after their arrival in Germany. While some of the interviewed mothers and children think it is an advantage when a teacher has some Ukrainian or Russian, others are uneasy about or even outraged by the use of the Russian language or the presence of teachers of Russian origin.

In all other regions, teachers of integration classes usually speak German. In the north-west, it is more likely that teachers will also use English. Families with a higher social status are more likely to indicate in the survey that the teacher of their child's integration class uses German or English.

### **Different educational systems and expectations between Ukraine and Germany**

<sup>18</sup> Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung et al., 'Kurzstudie'.

<sup>19</sup> The survey in 10 EU countries came to a similar conclusion: 'Most children (71 %) who go to school in their host country were not taught any subject in school in the language they mainly spoke at home.' European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 'Fleeing Ukraine', 37.

**In about 19% of cases, particularly in Eastern Germany, teachers communicate with Ukrainian pupils often or always in Ukrainian or Russian.**



In interviews, Ukrainian parents express their worries that their child is not learning enough—for both the Ukrainian and the German school system. In fact, only 16% of the respondents to our survey state that their school choice was based on their opinion that education in Germany is better than in Ukraine. Schooling in Ukraine focuses on the acquisition of large amounts of knowledge and relies more on hierarchy, pressure and didactics than on interactive teaching methods.

This is why parents worry that German schooling is too relaxed (citing, for example, the lack of homework) and that the German curriculum is not intensive enough (when comparing the school programmes for maths, many parents found that what their child was learning in the German school had been covered by the Ukrainian school one to two years earlier). In addition to the general differences between the German and Ukrainian education systems, the gap is further widened by the fact that Ukrainian pupils have often joined integration classes. In many integration classes, pupils have only very few subjects: sometimes only German language and sports, sometimes a few more like maths, English, music, and art. This makes Ukrainian mothers nervous about the general standard of education. Teachers of integration classes also explain that the rhythm of teaching is slower in integration classes to ease pupils into the German education system, including those with more limited prior schooling and those traumatised by war or displacement. On the other hand, some Ukrainian children who joined regular classes directly without any prior knowledge of German complain about sitting in class without understanding anything.

Parents worry that German schooling is too relaxed and that the curriculum is not intensive enough.

**Andriy**, 17 years old, is living with his mother and his brother in a town in Brandenburg and was enrolled directly in a regular 11th-grade class at a Gymnasium despite the fact that he had no prior knowledge of German. In the four months since he joined the school, he has been sitting in class trying to listen, but understanding very little in most subjects except for maths, physics, and sports. He says that the teachers at his German school are friendlier than those in Ukraine, but the relationships with his classmates in Ukraine were warmer. Without any German language tuition at school, he learns German autonomously via applications on his phone. In case he decides to go back to Ukraine, he has been keeping up to some extent with his Ukrainian education, but only spends around 20% of his study time on it.

*(Interview, September 2022)*

In their answers to the open question on what they appreciated about their child's German school, respondents very frequently remarked that teachers behaved in a friendly and respectful way towards children and exerted little pressure on them, with the result that their children felt more relaxed in German schools than in Ukrainian ones and enjoyed attending them.

‘The organisation of the educational process, where a child does not perceive learning as an uninteresting duty, but learns new things through play. lack of stress caused by evaluation of actions and results. teachers’ friendliness and understanding.’

*(Survey respondent, mother of a 9-year-old girl from Poltava, doctor and director of a hospital, now in Saarland).*

‘I like that my child has become cheerful and sociable, has a lot of physical activity and communication with peers. He learns by playing. My son likes the fact that there is much less homework, that he is constantly conducting various experiments. The fact that he is allowed to play outside even when the weather is bad or dirty. There is a language barrier, but it stimulates the brain to work, not to focus on the current situation in Ukraine.’

*(Survey respondent, doctor, mother of an 8- and a 2-year-old, from the region Volyn, now in Lower Saxony).*

These views correspond to a finding of the survey conducted by the Ombudsman for Education of Ukraine among parents abroad: in their host countries, displaced families have discovered a humane type of school that is respectful towards their children.<sup>20</sup>

In our survey, parents mentioned that German teachers give little or no homework and no marks to their children. School days are shorter and their children have more self-organised time outside of school. Parents were ambivalent about these aspects of schooling. They often remarked that their children appreciated the low requirements and the absence of pressure, but that they worried as parents.

‘He likes that he doesn’t have to do anything... they sing songs, play football, draw... But as the mother, I don’t like it very much. My son is studying in a Montessori class. There was no choice...’

*(Survey respondent, mother of an 8- and a 5-year-old, from Rivne, now in Baden-Württemberg).*

Parents also acknowledged that children at German schools enjoyed more freedom, for instance to choose subjects or activities they are interested in and that schools are geared to fostering the pupils’ independence. They also valued the attention given to physical health, the obligation to spend breaks outside in the schoolyard, and the regular excursions.

Parents acknowledged that children at German schools enjoyed more freedom.

**Daria**, the mother of a 13-year-old, worked in the middle management of a retail business in Kharkiv, her husband in the construction sector. They were internally displaced in Ukraine and part of a national minority. They do not speak English or German and did not travel abroad in the past. Their son does not pursue Ukrainian online education as their home school does not offer any. All three fled to a medium-sized town in Lower Saxony. She found her son’s enrolment in school easy as they were offered a place quickly. While she notes that children in Ukrainian schools work harder and learn more than in German schools, she is euphoric about her son’s new local school:

*“Lessons are held in the schoolyard, not constantly indoors, children in math solve problems with visual geometric shapes that they have made themselves, in chemistry they do various experiments. [...] Children do not sit at school almost all day. At 13.30–14.00 my seventh grader is at home. [...] Language lessons are taught exclusively in the language of*

<sup>20</sup> Ombudsman for Education of Ukraine, ‘Will children who study abroad return to Ukraine?’

*instruction!!! This is extraordinary, i.e. German in German, French in French. This way students begin to understand it faster. [...] There are many sports clubs at school; in the afternoon almost all children are engaged in sports!!!”*

(survey)

Parents also mentioned that children enjoyed the social interactions with other children and appreciated the friendliness of teachers and fellow pupils and their willingness to help. Indeed, when asked about the reasons for their chosen educational set-up, two-thirds of respondents underlined the need for children to have social contacts and pursue physical activities, especially those with younger children. A few respondents were also impressed by the tolerance and the absence of racism and homophobia in schools.

### **Transnationalism: Actively participating in two societies or stuck in limbo**

Ukrainian families in Germany find themselves in an everyday transnational reality like no other group before them. Teachers and school administrators observe that children displaced from Ukraine differ significantly from other non-German-speaking pupils in terms of the uncertainty of their stay in Germany and the extent to which they are torn between the countries. Unlike most other non-German-speaking pupils, Ukrainians hope to return to their country of origin soon, travel there despite the risks, and are exposed to a country of origin that is maintaining educational services and requirements. While some Ukrainians draw support and a sense of continuity from their ties to Ukraine and Ukrainians, others feel torn and struggle to ‘arrive’ at the place they physically inhabit. As illustrated by Anna’s accounts above, this uncertainty and the feeling of being torn between Ukraine and Germany makes it difficult for them decide on what to prioritise in their educational endeavours.

The extent to which families project themselves into a future in the society of origin or the new host society relates closely to a set of behaviours and attitudes in Germany. Overall, the respondents’ financial and social status, as well as their international experience, is of little consequence for these return perspectives.

A first group of respondents who stated that they do not want to return to Ukraine at all (less than 5%) were much more likely to play an active role in their integration into German society—in particular by learning German. These individuals were also less likely to express feelings of lethargy and disorientation.<sup>21</sup>

**Unlike most other non-German-speaking pupils, Ukrainians hope to return to their country of origin soon.**

<sup>21</sup> The aforementioned survey confirmed this finding: Life satisfaction among adults from Ukraine is higher the better their knowledge of German language, the more time they spend with Germans, and the more they felt welcome upon their arrival. Displaced people who want to stay forever in Germany are more satisfied than the others. Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung et al., ‘Kurzstudie’.

A second group comprised those who indicated an intention to return in the more distant future, with plans to stay in Germany for several months (around 25%) or a few years or decades (around 40%). Like the first group, they were more likely to be involved in their local German community, learning German, dealing with administrative matters, and interacting with locals. At the same time, they were more likely to maintain their involvement in Ukrainian society, in particular by following news reporting about the war.

A third group made up of those with a desire to return to Ukraine as soon as possible or within the next weeks (less than 5%) more frequently maintained their job in Ukraine and stayed in touch with their contacts in Ukraine more regularly. Respondents who were keen to leave Germany quickly were also significantly less involved in activities in Germany, learning less German, dealing less with administrative matters, and working less in local jobs. They were more likely to state that they had not yet enrolled their children in local schools. The same respondents were also more likely to feel disoriented and lethargic. In other words, those who suffered the most from the prolonged war and forced exile had the strongest desire to return and participated least in activities in their localities. Teachers at German schools reported in interviews that pupils from Ukraine who told them they would be returning soon were often less motivated to study in class, to learn German, and to socialise with their German-speaking peers. Teachers also expressed their concern that some of their pupils from Ukraine seemed to live in an online bubble and were in their own minds in Ukraine.

It is important to add that one-third of respondents mentioned they did not know if and when they would like to return, reflecting the disorientation felt by many of those displaced by the war. However, these respondents were still more likely to get involved in German society by learning German, dealing with administrative matters, and getting their children enrolled in German schools.

**Mariya** fled in early March with her three children (8, 14, and 20) from Mykolayiv in southern Ukraine to Berlin. She was divorced, had experienced persistent financial difficulties in Ukraine, and had considered emigrating to Germany in the last few years. Back in Ukraine she learned German herself and got her youngest son enrolled in a school where he learned some German. Yet, she is now uncertain about whether to stay, to return to Ukraine or to move on to the US or Canada. While she gratefully acknowledges the support provided by many Germans, she is *'burned out'* from living in Germany and having to cope with German bureaucracy. Professionally, *'I'm lost, even more than my children.'* To improve her situation, she would need to get her diploma as a physiotherapist recognised by the German authorities and was offered a job below her qualifications in the meantime. Now working as a masseuse, she is frustrated with a situation she finds *'psychologically, physically, and emotionally difficult'*.

She harshly criticises the Ukrainian education system—*'they still have totalitarian principles'*—and Ukrainian parents' attitudes towards education as too focused on cramming knowledge into their children's

brains. She appreciates the more liberal German education methods. Nevertheless, organising schooling for her children has not been easy. Her 8-year-old son tried attending online classes in Ukraine but found the sound of air raids during the video calls so disturbing that he stopped. He was assigned to a local primary school that was infamous for high levels of drug abuse and violence, and his mother decided not to send him there. Shortly before our interview, he had started attending an integration class in a more average primary school.

Her middle daughter struggled with remote schooling and suffered from depression.<sup>22</sup> *'She didn't do anything for a while, and then the online school in Ukraine started [...] she almost didn't go to those lessons. [...] She was just lying there, eating something, watching TV, not wanting to do anything.'* Thanks to one of her mother's new German friends, her daughter got enrolled in grade 8 of a private German school (paid for by the German state), where she studies according to the Ukrainian curriculum. *'My daughter, for example, was not very eager to learn, but she actually liked it here for two months, and I was happy that she went to this school because the teachers somehow encouraged them to learn, and they accepted it well. And the most important thing for me at that time was that I took her to that school, I took her there so that she could find someone to communicate with, because she had no one here [...] and there she found new friends, who are also displaced Ukrainians, and psychologically, she has reached almost the same level as before the war, and this was extremely important for me at this time, not so much that she would not miss something in math, but that the child would feel psychologically comfortable. This is what the school gave us.'*

Her oldest daughter is studying remotely at a Ukrainian university and lives only online, *'She is very active, in terms of being online all the time'*, but she has *'almost no in-person communication here'*. *'She doesn't want to socialise here, she doesn't want to go out, she doesn't want to do anything.'* Her friends are in Ukraine and she only wants to return, but her mother refuses to let her as she considers it too dangerous.

*(Interview, May 2022)*

Transnational connections also matter when people take decisions about the educational setting. The child's father was the person respondents to the survey most frequently consulted regarding their educational choices—in nearly 40% of all cases. Around 10% of respondents indicated that they had discussed their decision with the child's former teacher in Ukraine. Given the need to rapidly adapt to their new educational setting, the Ukrainians' German host families very often served as important points of contact. More than 20% of respondents indicated that they consulted with them, reflecting the important role played by such hosts in translating official letters, providing guidance on local schools, supporting their guests, and interpreting for them in their interactions with the school administration.

22 The survey conducted by German state institutions found that the psychological well-being of displaced children from Ukraine was lower than that of other children living in Germany. Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung et al., 'Kurzstudie'.

## Conclusion

Ukrainian children are arguably the group that has suffered the most as a result of the escalation of war in their country. Those who find themselves in Germany, usually with their mothers and sometimes other relatives, are required to integrate into the German education system while the Ukrainian state continues to seek their involvement in education back home. For the Ukrainian state, the integration of children in national schooling is a vital concern, as the younger generation's educational choices are inextricably linked to the country's future prospects. The return of a group of young people who are intimately acquainted with realities in Ukraine and Germany could be a potential asset for Ukraine's future and the country's links to EU countries.

For the moment, however, the potential loss of children and its demographic and related consequences are a major concern for the Ukrainian state. While Ukrainian policymakers initially tried to negotiate an exemption from compulsory schooling for displaced Ukrainian children in various European host states, these efforts have decreased over time. With the notable exception of Poland, most host states' education systems enforce compulsory schooling for Ukrainian pupils staying for longer. Referring to his communications with his counterparts in host states, the Ukrainian minister of education recognised the right of these states to autonomously define their education policies on their territory and instead encouraged Ukrainian families to return.<sup>23</sup>

For the children and their families, the decision on schooling is closely linked to the temporal horizon they operate with in Germany. For those who expect a quick return to Ukraine, it does not make sense to disrupt the child's learning; instead, they seek continuity in the Ukrainian education system. Conversely, those who expect to stay in Germany for long are more likely to want their child to integrate into the German school system. The time horizon is itself, however, closely related to the evolving situation on the battlefield and the question of whether a return to the home region in Ukraine seems safe.

What emerged clearly from the study is the extent to which social differences in the country of origin are reproduced in displacement. To some degree, people flee with their financial, social, and international capital—or lack thereof. This shapes the families' educational decisions. School choices in the host country require knowledge of the host country's rules and the way they are applied. Foreign language skills and the capacity to mobilise a wider network of knowledgeable acquaintances are also helpful in that regard. Families with more limited financial, social, and international capital therefore tend to go with the flow, whereas more privileged families navigate actively and fight for what they perceive as the best educational set-up for their children. The parents' pre-existing financial and educational resources also shape their willingness and capacity to continue their children's Ukrainian education abroad.

23 Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 'Minister of Education and Science: »There are currently no restrictions on the recognition of the results of a child's studies abroad«, 27 October 2022, <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/ministr-osviti-i-nauki-zhodnih-obmezhen-shodo-viznannya-rezultativ-navchannya-ditini-za-kordonom-na-sogodni-ne-isnyue>.

For the Ukrainian state, keeping the children integrated in national schooling is a vital concern.

Over time and especially in summer 2022, some of the families who had focused on Ukrainian remote education with a view to returning soon put this plan into action. Our survey was conducted in summer 2022, before the massive Russian attacks on infrastructure which have had a drastic impact on living conditions in Ukraine, and made synchronous online education more difficult. This is likely to have affected both considerations of return and remote education among those currently living in Germany. Furthermore, since summer 2022, German state institutions have put more pressure on Ukrainian families to enrol their children in local schools. Maintaining Ukrainian education has increasingly become an additional burden. We can therefore expect the share of pupils who actively pursue Ukrainian remote education to gradually decrease.

People flee with their financial, social, and international capital — or lack thereof.

At the time of this research, families' lives were transnational. However, transnational ties are bound to change over time, and the social and educational integration of children will prove a key factor in the decisions about staying or returning. Returning to Ukraine will also lead to new tensions upon return, as children have experienced fundamentally different approaches to teaching, which they will bring back with them.

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