

Born in Ukraine, refugees in Romania

Perception, difficulties and expectations of adolescent girls

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I. Context

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, a significant number of people have been forced to leave their homes, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, including Romania. According to the data updated up to June 10, 2024 on the UNHCR website¹, Romania has registered 4,669,132 border crossings from Ukraine since February 2022, plus refugees who transited the Republic of Moldova before entering Romania. According to data provided by the Romanian Government, 7,198,213 Ukrainian citizens entered Romania by January 31, 2024. Out of those who came to Romania following the outbreak of the conflict, 169,644 benefit from temporary protection or other forms of international protection or protection provided by the Romanian state. Of these, approximately 21% are children aged between 7 and 18. There are currently some 77,902 refugees registered in Romania, 70% of whom are women and children.

The identified proportion of refugee children also includes adolescents - an age group with specific challenges, needs and desires, different from those of adults and younger children. The project *Gender-based violence mitigation activities targeting refugee women and adolescent refugees and host communities (boys and girls) from Ukraine currently living in Bucharest and Ifov* implemented by ANAIS Association in partnership with UNICEF Romania, was designed to target adolescents through activities that raise awareness on the possible risks they are exposed to and the ways in which they can increase their level of safety in the host community.

The context of the protracted conflict in Ukraine has caused the needs of refugee children and adolescents to evolve and diversify. Initially, the main focus was on immediate needs for security, food and shelter. However, as the conflict continued, the needs of these children diversified to include issues of social and educational

integration, mental health and protection from violence and abuse.

Refugee adolescent girls face unique challenges from both a gender and age perspective that require special attention and an intersectional approach. They are vulnerable to specific risks such as gender-based violence, discrimination, limited access to education and difficulties in adapting to a society with a different cultural model. This is why the partners considered it essential to understand and respond to these specific needs through well-founded interventions.

Therefore, the project implemented by the ANAIS Association with the support of UNICEF was designed to include an analysis of the situation of refugee adolescent girls in order to document their urgent and priority needs. To this end, two rounds of consultations were organized with refugee girls, inviting them to express their specific problems, concerns and needs, as well as their ideas on possible solutions.



By capitalizing on the results of these consultations, ANAIS and UNICEF are ensuring that future interventions will continue to be solidly grounded and effectively targeted towards supporting the most vulnerable categories of refugees, thus contributing to their deeper integration and improving their quality of life in Romania.

II. Ethical and deontological coordinates of the sociological research

a) Standards of human subjects research

In recent years the set of rules adopted nationally and internationally has caused notable changes with regard to human subjects research. The frequently stipulated principles mainly refer to human dignity, equality and justice. By appropriating this *corpus*² of conventions and regulations, we have outlined the rules designed to ensure respect for the rights and freedoms of respondents and the fundamental provisions of scientific research:

- The Researcher³ obeys all scientific rules set forth in the specialised methodology (objectives and hypothesis, investigated population, tools and data collection, interpretation of results and drafting of the Consulting Report).
- The researcher gives increased attention to the interaction with the respondents and protects them from any possible risks associated with the participation to this study; s/he informs the respondents about the purpose of the study, the possibility to withdraw at any moment, the scientific and social benefits of their participation, the limits of their confidentiality and the people they may turn to with additional questions about the study.
- A person's or a social group's participation to this study is entirely optional and based on this principle the researcher does not use any means of pressure or coercion. When asking for their informed consent, the researcher adopts a language that is understood by the possible participants to the study in order to eliminate the risk of getting a non- or partially informed consent.
- During the study, the researcher ensures the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents' personal data. This responsibility is valid for all the members of the research team and constitutes a fundamental premise for access to the obtained results.
- The following are deviations from the rules of good conduct during the research: promising certain rewards to a potential study participant, if there is no firm intention and actual possibility of honouring such a commitment (the rewards must not violate the rules); falsifying results and presenting them as data obtained by own field research or calculations of data from international, national or regional institutions; distortion or falsification of data collected in the field; hindering or sabotaging the research work of other persons within the organization by damaging or destroying computer technology, documents, computer programs, electronic data necessary for the conduct or completion of research activities.
- The following constitute deviations from the rules of good conduct in the dissemination of research results, including reporting: plagiarism, self-plagiarism, inclusion as co-authors in the list of authors of the report of one or more persons who have not contributed significantly to the publication, respectively the exclusion of co-authors who have contributed significantly to it; inclusion in the list of authors of the publication without receiving prior consent.

2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); The Ethics Code of the International Sociology Association (2001); Law no. 206 from 27 May 2004 on good conduct in scientific research, technological development and innovation; The European Charter for Researchers (2005); The Statute of the Romanian Academy (2009).

3. This category includes all experts involved in the research (external sociologist expert, members of the project team involved in the research).

b) Rules about research carried out on vulnerable groups

Research involving vulnerable or at-risk people requires the observance of a number of professional and ethical conditions that guide the conduct of researchers, the study design and the interpretation of the results. Principles such as these apply equally to all respondents; however, in the case of vulnerable groups such as migrants or refugees, particular attention needs to be paid to ethical and legal issues specific to their situation. More specifically, any environment in which potential respondents do not function in a fully autonomous way requires a high degree of attention to ensure their voluntary participation and general well-being (psychological, social, medical, etc.).

With this in mind, the research was conducted according to the following principles and standards:

- **Adaptability and veracity** – in a dynamic group which is also regulated by a set of rules, reality can often be distorted and (re)constructed, a situation in which the researcher has to adapt in the specific work carried out. He/she also has a responsibility to ensure the accuracy of the information obtained through the application of working methods and tools. The researcher records only the observed facts, not his/her own assumptions, avoiding a possible 'anticipation' effect.
- **Accountability and honesty** – having access to only part of the respondents' daily lives, the researcher must interpret the results collected with care and responsibility; therefore, s/he will specify in his/her report all the limitations of the research. At the same time, the researcher is obliged to present the raw data obtained, noting both the form of the answers and the language used by the respondents, as it reflects their norms, customs and lifestyle.
- **Autonomy, integrity and transparency** – within UNICEF Romania and ANAIS Association and implicitly in the present research, freedom of research, independence from ideologies, religions and political doctrines, transparency and public accountability are respected. It is therefore the researcher's obligation to avoid any prejudice to his/her independence and to ensure that he/she does not neglect professional ethics/professional deontology out of a desire to create a comfortable situation for direct beneficiaries or third parties. The researcher shall ensure freedom of expression of the respondents by presenting and using the full responses in the interpretation of the data collected.
- **Reducing psychological pressure** – the researcher has a duty to nuance and depersonalize the questions so that respondents do not feel they are being evaluated or judged. Questions worded indirectly help the researcher to avoid situations that place respondents in a vulnerable position where they feel emotionally and psychologically pressured.
- **Professional skills and scientific rigor** – as respondents are questioning on sensitive issues that generate a high level of interest and stress, the representation of reality may become inherently linked to their own experiences and interests. Therefore, the researcher constructs the study design to the highest level of scientific rigor, both theoretically and empirically, and does not deviate from it, regardless of possible external stimuli.
- **Non-maleficence** – if the researcher believes that continuing with the study jeopardizes the overall well-being of the respondents, s/he is obliged to discontinue the study. This avoids possible moral, psychological or physical harm to the respondents, especially as they are minors.
- **Social utility and responsibility** – the researcher is aware of the responsibility of his/her work. Depending on the type and limitations of the study carried out, s/he generalizes the obtained data indiscriminately, taking into account their theoretical and practical usefulness. More specifically, social intervention is based on a systemic approach, focusing equally on the individual and the environment, i.e. on a holistic process, properly documented scientifically.

c) Principles stipulated in UNICEF studies

This research applies the UNICEF principles (2021) on ethical standards in research, evaluation, data collection and analysis:

- **Respect** - - involves engaging all stakeholders in a way that honors their dignity and well-being. Respect requires responsiveness to gender, age, language, country of origin, ethnicity, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) status, cultural, economic and physical abilities and backgrounds.
 - including those of children and their carers
 - are prioritized by those who process the output.
- **Integrity** - requires active adherence to moral values and professional standards, which are essential to all coordinated or undertaken research.
- **Benefit** - means striving to do good for people and the planet while minimizing harm caused by the research. Data collected must be purpose-oriented (directly informed by the activity or benefit) and proportionate (collect only what is necessary).
- **Accountability** - is the obligation to be accountable for all decisions made and actions taken and to be responsible for honouring commitments, without exception, and to report potential or actual harm observed.
- **Justice** - requires consideration of who benefits and who is responsible for the project. The work should be 'people-centred' - ensuring that people's needs, interests and expectations

Building on UNICEF's principles and goals (2022), the research provides for the necessary measures to promote gender equality and inclusion of disadvantaged people:

- Avoiding stereotypical assumptions about the roles and aspirations of girls, boys and those with other gender identities.
- Encouraging adolescents to reflect on power relations, privilege and the distribution of gender roles.
- Providing adolescent girls with access to safe spaces where they can share their experiences and ideas, with training and adult mentors.
- Informing parents or other legal guardians about minors' participation in various activities.
- Where gender-segregated activities are organized, there should be sensitivity and responsiveness to the feelings, opinions and suggestions of transgender people.
- Promoting non-discrimination and equitable participation opportunities for adolescents who are LGBTQI, including those with fluid gender identities.



III. Description of sociological research



The premise of the study is that in order to contribute to improving the quality of life of Ukrainian adolescent girls who are refugees in Romania, it is necessary to know their perceptions, living conditions, needs and expectations. As a consequence, the results obtained may facilitate the development of measures and tools aimed at supporting the young people included in the research and others in similar situations.

The aim of the research is to assess the impact of living in Romania for Ukrainian refugee adolescent girls in the context of the current armed conflict.

The objectives set are:

- To increase relevant information about the social integration of Ukrainian refugee adolescent girls currently living in Romania.
- To know the ways in which Romanian institutions and organizations respond to the needs and expectations of the girls included in the study.
- To identify measures that can contribute to increasing the level of social integration and the quality of life of Ukrainian adolescent girls currently living in Romania.

The research **hypothesis** are:

- The level of adaptation of Ukrainian adolescent girls is linked directly to their experiences with the national education system, health, labor market and social services.
- The participants in the study feel the need for increased attendance in youth-specific activities (educational, socio-cultural, artistic).
- The support needed by adolescent girls in Ukraine requires a holistic, systematized and scientifically sound intervention.

The respondents are 31 young women from Ukraine, currently living in Romania. Their identification and selection was based on the collaboration with youth foundations, community centers and high schools where several Ukrainian students are enrolled. The selection was made in a way that allowed the following criteria to be met:

- It represents the interests and needs of young people from different economic, social and sub-ethnic backgrounds;
- It gives a voice to vulnerable minorities at risk of intersectional discrimination;
- It covers the needs of different age sub-groups;
- Participants can give free and informed consent to be involved in the activity and to express their opinion;
- It brings together people who have been beneficiaries of other projects as well as people who have not previously participated in similar activities.

Two specific methods were selected and used for this sociological research:

Document analysis:

In the sociological sense, the term document is frequently used to describe a text or any other material that provides certain information, images of human groups or target areas, data about different areas of society. It should be noted that documents are marked both by the specificity (historical particularities) of the epoch in which they were elaborated and by the personality (subjectivity) of their authors (Miftode, 2003; Chelcea, 2009). By its nature and complexity, document analysis aims to and at the same time ensures a diversification of information and allows the elaboration of explanatory models of the social phenomena studied.

In this case, the focus was placed on documenting relevant aspects of Ukrainian refugees' life in the literature (studies assessing the quality of life, supportive social policies, reports of humanitarian organizations). The information obtained on the basis of the document analysis is reflected in the guide for conducting focus groups and in the research report.

Focus group:

Focus group means an interview with a constructed group, focused on a specific topic and a specific category of subjects. It is conducted (...) by a trained [skilled] interviewer. The discussion is comfortable and often even enjoyable for the participants as they share ideas and perceptions with each other (Chelcea, 2009; Walters, 2023). This research method is used for various purposes, such as collecting information about people's experiences, beliefs, attitudes; obtaining data on observable behaviours; developing and refining the instruments to be used in the research: identifying domains, obtaining natural vocabulary in order to construct a questionnaire; at the end of a research: to enrich or clarify some interpretations about the results, particularly when they are contradictory (Chelcea, 2009). The instrument used is the focus group guide, which is similar to the semi-structured or structured qualitative interview guide and contains a number of questions or issues that are addressed in a predetermined order. The group of respondents should be as homogeneous as possible in order to avoid interaction difficulties. The main topics addressed in the organized focus groups are:

- basic services for young women and their families in Romania;
- living in Romania compared to living in Ukraine;
- young girls' needs in terms of culture, education, health and leisure;
- positive and negative factors that play a role in the social integration of adolescent girls;
- Romanians' perception of Ukrainian refugees;
- interactions between female participants and young people in Romania;
- adolescent girls' messages to people from Ukraine (relatives, decision makers);
- future plans of young girls.

The first focus group was held on 17.05.2024, at *The Mihai Viteazul National High School* in Bucharest. The second focus group was held on 14.06.2024, at *The Uruguay Secondary School* in Bucharest.

The following administrative and sociological instruments were used in the research activity:

- **Focus group attendance list** – filled in with information about the activity (location, date) and participants' identification data (name, surname, country of origin, status, phone number/email), signature;
- **GDPR form for adults / minors** – in order for the beneficiaries participating in the focus groups to give their consent to the processing of personal data;
- **Focus group leading guide.**

In conducting the study, recording and processing the information, the researcher adhered to all the principles and standards of the profession. S/he took into account that the way in which s/he interacts with the adolescent girls as well as his/her general appearance may determine their acceptance or refusal to participate in the study. During the application of the instrument, the researcher established a trusting relationship with the young women, so that they were willing to answer the questions as fully and honestly as possible. At the same time, the researcher conveyed to the respondents that s/he was actively listening (through mimicry and gestures, expressions denoting interest). S/he managed the course of the discussion responsibly, avoiding deviations from the central themes as much as possible. The focus group discussions were aimed at providing an overview of the adolescents' current life experience, exploring their perceptions about education, socio-cultural activities, interpersonal relationships, difficulties, expectations and integration into Romanian society. As the respondents agreed, the discussions were audio recorded. The non-verbal language elements were retained and reproduced as accurately as possible in order to be later associated with the results obtained. After the completion of each focus

group, the responses were transcribed and translated by a Ukrainian interpreter who spoke Romanian.

In order to interpret the results, the most relevant answers were corroborated with the literature. Also, as an example, respondents' opinions were inserted in the research report.



Regarding **the limitations of the research**, it should be noted that the qualitative data obtained are only indicative; they are not statistically representative of the experiences and needs of all Ukrainian refugee adolescent girls currently living in Romania. The language barrier adds to this limitation as the focus groups used an interpreter to ask the questions in Romanian on behalf of the researcher; thus, some meanings of words may not have been accurately understood. Furthermore, in focus groups respondents may be influenced by the other participants, which may have caused some people to be more reticent or to have similar ideas to those previously presented. As a precautionary measure, project team members were encouraged to establish a trusting relationship with the young people so that they would answer the questions as honestly as possible. At the same time, they were encouraged to convey to the respondents that they were actively listening (by mimicry and gestures, expressions of interest); to carefully manage the course of the discussion, avoiding deviations from the topic as far as possible (using maximum tact).

IV. Analysis and interpretation of results

This research report is based on field data collection and literature review. It should be noted that we submit to public attention a research report that explores the situation of 31 young women from Ukraine, currently refugees in Romania. This endeavor does not have the scope of a proper academic research, which involves additional methodological rigors and requires more resources, both human and time-related. The research report

presents interpretations of the adolescent girls' responses and reproduces opinions that are frequently recorded or considered to be illustrative in their entirety. The intention for the analysis of the responses and the formulation of the conclusions is to match the research aims, objectives and hypotheses. The literature has been used in order to help achieve the most accurate interpretation of the data obtained from the focus groups



The social-demographic profile of respondents and reasons why they migrated to Romania

The qualitative focus group research was conducted on 31 respondents of Ukrainian nationality living in Romania. The respondents were female and aged 12-18 years (see Table 1). The respondents unanimously mentioned that their religious orientation was Christian Orthodox.

All participants in the study fled to Romania in the context of the armed conflict in Ukraine. Beyond the need for safety, reasons such as health problems of some family members, limited access to basic services (e.g. health) or utilities (e.g. drinking water) were mentioned as subsidiary reasons. Broadly speaking, the motivations of the young women consulted and the family members with whom they currently live correspond to the experiences and considerations of other social groups that have chosen to migrate (Spörlein et al., 2020; Díaz-Sánchez et al., 2021). Attachment to people already in the country, resources needed for relocation and geographical proximity - compared to other countries - also play an important role in the decision of adolescents and their families to migrate to Romania.

Table 1. Age of respondents

YEARS	NUMBER
12 years old	9
13 years old	12
14 years old	2
15 years old	4
16 years old	2
17 years old	1
18 years old	1



Living conditions in Romania compared to Ukraine

Over half (N: 25) of the young women have a positive perception of living in Romania. They are grateful for the help they receive, the 'pleasant' interactions and the way their age-specific needs are respected.



Romania is a very nice country. There are many similarities with Ukraine: common traditions and customs, but Ukraine remains my home, where I feel best. In Romania, I sometimes meet people who are against Ukrainians, but in spite of that, I like it here. – F. U., 12 years old

However the negative effects of leaving their homeland are visible for the whole group, including the teenagers who have adapted to the Romanian society. For example, 14 girls mention that they miss the freedom to communicate in their mother tongue. Others feel that they are not safe in Romania or that there are not enough socio-educational activities organized for young people. Certainly, many of them (N: 20), feel the absence of family members and friends. Refugees' perceptions, vulnerabilities and expectations generally differ according to age, gender, level of education and other personal characteristics. As the results indicate, the girls associate Ukraine with strong emotional ties, well-being and adequate conditions for psychosocial, educational, cultural development. Such visions of the society in which they were born and spent the first part of their lives reflect the difficulties they face in the process of settling in a new state.



Here there is not so much variety in terms of sports, dancing, socializing. – S. T., 13 years old



It's good here in Romania, but there's still a feeling of uncertainty, because sometimes you don't know what will happen next, especially now, when nothing is clear. In Ukraine it was safer, but I like it here very much. People are nice and I feel good. – D. R., 15 years old



I miss my Ukrainian friends and my family. – G. J., 13 years old

Further on, the adolescents emphasize the language barrier, which makes communication and life in Romania much more difficult than in Ukraine. Language skills are essential for the integration of teenagers into a new culture, all the more so as their mother tongue is very different from Romanian, thus not allowing intuitive associations in communication. Beyond this aspect, there are a number of obstacles encountered in relation to social environments that are important for their age, such as school or peer groups.

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Romania is a very good country, but sometimes I get homesick, because in Ukraine I speak my mother tongue, and here I don't know the language very well and that makes it difficult to communicate. – D. R., 15 years old

In terms of education - fundamental for this stage of life - there are people who appreciate the Romanian education system more than the one in Ukraine.

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Teachers in Romania are good, nice, I like school and I feel very good studying here. At the beginning all the teachers supported me and the children tried to help me too. In Ukraine everything was fine, but not all students were treated equally. Sometimes teachers were not very friendly with everyone, they made differences between students. – S. S., 15 years old

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By comparison, school systems in Ukraine and Romania differ in the way children are treated. In Romania, teachers have a friendlier attitude towards pupils, respecting each other. By contrast, in Ukraine, the teacher is often seen as the supreme authority and the relationship does not seem so equal. – S. H., 13 years old

Such perceptions are a protective factor and at the same time favourable to increasing the level of integration into society. In the medium and long term, it is likely that the way in which young girls evolve in the education system will become an element in the parents' decisions on whether or not to stay in Romania.



Support services provided by institutions, organizations and the civil society of Romania

Discussions about support services in Romania for respondents and their families show that experiences are diverse. More specifically, there are teenagers who are very satisfied with the support they receive, but at the other end of the spectrum, a quarter of them consider that the Romanian state institutions make certain administrative processes very difficult.



In order to get help, you have to fill in a lot of paperwork, stand in long queues and because of these queues many people simply don't get help. – S. M., 16 years old

Hostility or low levels of engagement, existing in various governmental agencies, are aspects considered "harmful and detrimental" for the social integration of migrants or refugees (Bäärnhielm et. al., 2017). The situation of the latter becomes all the more complex as they depend on basic services, on the basis of which they secure their daily needs for survival, health care, housing and education. Beyond these issues, research carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized that, at least at the European level, many child protection systems - for example - are not prepared to cope successfully with different socio-economic, medical or other crises (Toros and Falch-Eriksen, 2020; Toros et al., 2022). Starting from the premise that Romania is in such a situation, comprehensive studies can be conducted to better determine the needs of Ukrainian refugees and the appropriate ways of intervention. Such approaches have the potential to improve both systems practices and the quality of life of the community concerned.

According to most young women (N: 24), international as well as national humanitarian organizations have made significant efforts to help them overcome the obstacles they face and to contribute to their social integration. In this respect, the following are frequently mentioned:

- AIDRom
- Angel Appeal
- Crucea Roșie
- Salvați Copiii
- UNICEF
- World Vision

These organizations have focused on specific needs of young women, such as access to an educational institution or socio-cultural activities. When asked about the support they received to meet basic needs (food, shelter, health and safety), teenage girls indicate that the most involved organizations are:

- Angel Appeal
- UNICEF
- World Vision



The organisation ANGEL APPEL gives more psychological help to Ukrainians, everything is free of charge and organized in such a way that you feel comfortable in the company of Ukrainians who can share their problems. – O.P., 14 years old

There have been cases where the support provided has included, among other things, housing or employment for parents.

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UNICEF helped with housing as soon as I arrived here [AN: Romania]. I also know that they helped with my admission to Romanian language classes and with finding a job for my mother. – G. T., 13 years old

In this section of the focus group guide we discussed in detail the interpersonal experiences that adolescent girls or their families have had so far with representatives of Romanian institutions and organizations, as well as with members of civil society.

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For me, the unforgettable moments were when me, my mom and my sister, who is 8 months old, received support. The Romanians helped us with food and everything we needed. – D. L., 15 years old

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We had some good times in the Zi de Bine organisation. We had guitar lessons there, art therapy, snacks and different activities. The staff was wonderful. – H. L., 13 years old

In terms of less pleasant interactions, a few respondents (N: 4) refer to the medical system, i.e. medical professional.

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When we visit medical centers, we face a lot of procedures and obstacles - filling out various forms. This creates inconveniences and forces us to start all over again if something is wrong. In addition, finding a specialist who is willing to communicate in English is very difficult, not to mention the possibility of communicating in Ukrainian or Russian. – S. M., 16 years old

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There were difficulties with visiting the dentist. I was offered help but availability was limited. I was often refused or messages were not answered. – S. L., 12 years old

Social integration is a multidimensional process, which definitely includes the health system. From this point of view, it is recommended to facilitate access to all medical services for Ukrainian refugees currently in Romania. The argument is all the stronger as the medical measures addressed to young people, beyond their direct purpose, indirectly influence their sense of belonging, socio-cultural adaptation and, ultimately, their whole life.

Out of the whole group, 17 girls recall unpleasant moments in their daily life, when interacting with Romanians.

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One of the most unpleasant experiences is being harassed by Romanians. These are insults that my acquaintances have had to endure when they were beaten up just because they are Ukrainian. It causes a feeling of insecurity and despair when faced with rejection and misunderstanding. In such situations, you feel ignored, humiliated and insecure. – F. T., 12 years old

At the end of this section, the debates were directed towards issues aimed at integrating teenage girls into Romanian society, taking into account their age-specific needs, such as education or socio-cultural development.

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This school [AN: The Mihai Viteazul National High School] where we study and which was organized with the support of Romanians, gave us knowledge. One of the most memorable events was a camping trip to the mountains, also organized by the Romanian side. We went to a picturesque place for several days, where we participated in various competitions and activities. The nature was amazing and every day was full of interesting experiences. This trip left me with a lot of good memories that I will keep in my mind for a very long time. – F. B., 13 years old

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What I liked the most at this school [AN: The Mihai Viteazul National High School] were the trips organized by different teenage hubs, where I had a great time with my classmates. I really enjoyed the trips to the mountains and the sea: to Constanța, Brasov and Transalpina. – D. L., 15 years old

The opinions expressed emphasize the need for adolescent girls to participate in various activities designed to contribute to their human, socio-educational and cultural development. As the literature confirms, these are fundamental premises for increasing the level of social integration of young people, particularly in a society different from the one in which they lived previously (Tyrer and Fazel, 2014; Koehler and Schneider, 2019). In other words, the girls in the study group expect their rights to be respected and thus they can develop as balanced and as fully as possible in this period of their lives.



Problems encountered at this moment and types of services requested

For 20 of the respondents, the language barrier is the most pressing issue as it significantly affects their access to education and the quality of their social life.



When I arrived, the biggest problem was the language barrier. Nobody in my family knew the language, I didn't understand anything either. But to solve this problem, I was accepted to a good school without any problems. In high school I interacted with my classmates and other children, and gradually I learned to speak Romanian. – A. N., 13 years old



To solve this problem, many girls think it would be good to get organised and attend as many teen events as possible. – D. V., 12 years old

Beyond the major challenges inherent to living in a new country, the inability to communicate with other members of society is a factor hindering development, particularly for children and young people (De Haene et al., 2020; Hodes, 2022). There are situations in which respondents are forced to learn a foreign language, attend specialized courses at a difficult time under all spheres of life, or manage belonging to a social group without communicating with it. As a consequence, they are exposed to social exclusion, stigmatization and increased learning effort, as reiterated in the focus groups.

In terms of housing, the respondents can sense the difficulties experienced by their parents in relation to various services and institutions of the Romanian state.



There are problems with the housing payments. It seems that the Romanian authorities are very slow. They seem to deliberately delay payments and are very slow in processing documents. I think they should improve their public systems to make their work more efficient. – S. F., 17 years old



There are problems with housing payments, as many people are denied help. Many single mothers or large families need this help because their salaries are not enough to cover all expenses, including rent and utility bills. Payment support would help some people, but it is either not paid on time or is now denied to many people. – D. T., 14 years old

Administrative or institutional problems are also reported, affecting the safety of refugee families and the maintenance of a good standard of living.

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We have problems getting social vouchers because they are not given out often, sometimes only every 3, 4 or 5 months. For example, my family waited for these vouchers for almost six months. In my opinion, this is not normal, and this problem could be solved by increasing the number of distribution points so that everyone can receive them. After all, many people do not receive anything, while others receive them several times in a row. – G. J., 16 years old

”

I am not aware of all the issues that parents are discussing, but from what I have heard, our protection status [AN: residence permit] might end soon and we will have to leave Romania. Personally, I like it here. We have our own place and I have friends here. But if the protection status ends, we will probably have to move to another country. – D. V., 12 years old

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Here it is difficult to find a doctor who can help you with an eye check-up. For example, I have problems with my eyesight and have been looking for a doctor for more than half a year. Many refused because we were Ukrainian or charged very high prices for an eye test. Some asked for a lot of documents, which created a lot of problems. – E. A., 13 years old

The difficulties encountered in relation to state institutions with responsibilities in assisting migrants or refugees have been noted in several European countries (Hernes et al., 2022). In this regard, various refugee groups from countries in the north of the continent have recommended that all information should be pooled and procedures for migrants or refugees should be placed in a single institution, possibly operating predominantly online. In addition, authorities and other bodies with responsibilities in this area should provide multi-site support programs, based on which all categories of needs, from physical and material needs to those associated with language learning or community psychological interventions, can be addressed in a structured way (Bürgin et al., 2022; Kaufman and Killen, 2022).

Young people and their families need more support services for the most important areas of life. There is a particular need to facilitate access to health services and simplify administrative procedures.

In corroboration, psychological counseling is requested:

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My parents work, so we don't lack anything important. However, we need more emotional support and psychological counselling. – R. S., 12 years old

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Psychological help is also very important; many children suffer not only because of the war, but also because of the stress of their parents, who are also worried. Children suffer because of moving, because of difficulties in society, because of bullying and so on, which, unfortunately, is becoming quite a popular topic. – S. M., 16 years old

A few respondents (N: 6) believe that more jobs for parents are needed.

”

My mom also needs a job, because the school she has been working at for more than half a year is going to close this month, unless something happens and they find sponsors or something. I personally need Romanian language classes. I would like to organize more events to learn the language. – U. R., 12 years old

”

Right now our family is mainly busy with financial problems because my father was fired from the university where he teaches. Now he is actively looking for a new job. – F. I., 13 years old

When organizing psychological counseling and psychotherapy programs for refugees in Romania, it is suggested to focus primarily on children and adolescents. Although an armed conflict affects people of all ages, children are particularly vulnerable (Elvevåg and DeLisi, 2022), and the persistence of emotional imbalances can negatively influence their entire life trajectory. Therefore, it should be taken into account that these groups of people experience significant trauma from violence and loss, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Cai et al., 2022).

There is a need for human, financial and time investment for housing and increasing the level of labor market integration of Ukrainian refugees. In addition to their professional development, a stable job contributes to the social integration of the community in question and to Romania's economic development. Therefore, the policies and measures implemented to support refugees should be built, inter alia, on two priority axes, namely housing and the professional conversion / retraining of Ukrainian adults currently living in Romania. Socio-educational activities for young people are considered essential services.

”

I would also like to see more sports opportunities just for Ukrainians. Any sport is either completely in the local language or very far away where someone speaks English. I would like people to at least be able to speak English, so it's safe to do what you like. – U. R., 12 years old

”

I would like to see more events where you can make new friends and socialize. – T. I., 18 years old

”

I like events where Ukrainians meet each other, make new acquaintances. – D. N., 12 years old



Opinions and behaviours of Romanians towards Ukrainian refugees

The attitude of Romanians towards refugees from Ukraine is perceived differently across the group of respondents. Only two people vehemently stated that Ukrainian refugees are treated "inadequately" or "inhumanely" by Romanians. From these answers, we can deduce a low level of knowledge of the Ukrainian community, or of understanding of the unfavorable socio-political context, which calls for solidarity.

Beyond the personal choices of Romanians or the attitudes of Ukrainian refugees, interactions are greatly influenced by the language barrier.

”

When I was singing in Ukrainian, an old lady came and told me that I was taking all her pension money and so on. I replied in Romanian that I didn't understand what she was saying. She wanted to annoy me, to provoke me. – I. V., 13 years old

”

There have been cases where they have shouted words like "Ukraine shut up" in English, but I have also heard bad words in Romanian, I understand a bit of what they say. As for the language, I try to communicate more in Romanian, but I speak English. – I. V., 13 years old

”

I am often criticized for speaking with an accent, when I defend myself, they say: 'If you don't like it, you can go back to Ukraine' – R. S., 12 years old

Also as far as interactions with young people from Romania are concerned, the majority of the respondents (N: 18) state that they had rather unpleasant experiences. One can observe reluctance or even rejection on the part of some Romanian teenagers, attitudes probably determined by preconceptions about refugees or people from other cultures, regardless of the reasons for migration. Of course, there is the possibility that Romanian adolescents may experience feelings of violation of their rights and freedoms as members of the majority community. Beyond such possible causes, their age, which is close to that of the respondents, and therefore their limited ability to understand complex social situations, should be taken into account.

”

For example, on the sports field where we used to play soccer, we were simply chased away. They said it was not our place and that we should leave. – J. N., 12 years old

”

Many Romanians avoid us and generally treat us negatively. They often laugh at us and insult us. – L. S., 13 years old

”

At school I had cases of insults and bullying in English, but also in Romanian, whoever understood translated for me. I was treated badly at school. – J. N., 12 years old

Such experiences point to the manifestation of structural violence, which creates and maintains inequalities within and between social groups, including on the basis of gender, ethnicity and immigration status (Montesanti, 2015; Ozcurumez and Hoxha, 2020). At the level of Romanian society, there is a possibility that this form of violence is driven, if only partially, by the inability of certain institutions and organizations to respond to the needs of refugees and reduce the level of discrimination to which they are exposed.

Interpersonal experiences perceived as undeniably positive are also identified within the group of respondents.

”

I have very good Romanian friends. There are girls in my backyard who are very supportive. They tell me that everything will be fine, that I'm a good friend and in class everyone supports me. – R. S., 12 years old

”

When I interacted with other teenagers and took the initiative to establish contacts or when they started to speak to me and found out that I spoke Ukrainian, they were always friendly and interested to communicate. They showed openness and willingness to get to know me better, because it was unusual and interesting for them. Although I have heard that others have had negative experiences with Romanians, this was not the case for me, so I can't say anything bad. – S. M., 16 years old

”

I feel good in their company, especially in the school where I study and where there are only Romanians. They are all friendly, active and there are very few narrow-minded children. – F. T., 12 years old

As expected, some interactions are depicted as both positive and negative at times.

”

My experience was split about 50/50. For example, when I went to camp with children from another city in Romania, they were very kind, understanding and interesting. But here, at school, we met some very unruly children who caused us a lot of problems, so it depends a lot on the environment you are in. You can't generalize people, children are very different. – C. F., 17 years old

On the one hand, the consulted teenagers felt the willingness of young people in Romania to get to know them better and to relate to them, while on the other hand, they felt the indifference or even discriminatory attitudes of the latter. A few participants explain the negative perceptions of themselves and their co-nationals in general by the demands they have from various institutions and organizations in Romania.

”

I have friends from the Republic of Moldova who communicate with Romanians and they told me that some of them considered us ordinary people who came here because of the war in our country and that we could not live there yet. On the other hand, some Romanians consider us to be too naughty, being against us. I agree that some Ukrainians are asking too much; they have been helped so much financially and with assistance, but some of them are still not satisfied and ask too much from Romanians. That is why Romanians can have such an opinion about us. – G. J., 13 years old

From the recorded answers, it can be seen that the respondents do not have very high or unfounded expectations, but are generally concerned that there should be goodwill and that young people in Romania should be willing to communicate. The tension between the two groups is probably also driven by some adults' perceptions of the resources invested in the influx of refugees from Ukraine. From this perspective, more information and awareness-raising programmes are useful, through which members of the majority community gain a deeper understanding of the multiple difficulties faced by Ukrainian refugees, at individual, family and social levels. As a consequence, it is possible to increase the level of flexibility so that the general population can adapt to the social and cultural needs of refugees.



Adolescents' proposals to support other Ukrainian refugees

When asked about how they'd like to help other Ukrainian teens who took refuge in Romania, respondents mainly refer to specially dedicated events for teenagers, financial aid and increasing the level of safety.



Events should be organized in schools to explain the situation to children and teenagers, because they have no way of finding out this information. All they hear from their parents is that 'the Ukrainians have come and taken our money' and then they pass these ideas on to each other, which leads to bullying. If there were organized measures in schools to clarify these things, it would be much better. – D. R., 15 years old



I would improve financial support and also increase medical and psychological support. I would provide more housing support and increase the number of schools and educational programs. I would include more Ukrainians in these organizations than Romanians, to give more support and understanding to those in need. – I. L., 17 years old

Once again the important role of psychological counseling and personal development is highlighted. Moreover, the emotional difficulties and traumas that have arisen in the context of the armed conflict are aspects that the young people reiterate in all the topics covered.



Probably, first of all, financial help. Secondly, psychological support, especially for young children who find it difficult to move from one place to another. Hobby groups such as dancing and drawing are also important. When I was in Constanta, there were many drawing circles for Ukrainians, but there are none here. – C. F., 17 years old



I would help to organize language and communication courses, because the people who come here often have adjustment and psychological health problems because of their experiences. I would probably help them. – F. U., 12 years old

The adaptation process that the respondents go through is similar to that of other children and adolescents who acquired refugee status in the context of the armed conflict in Ukraine. For example, in Estonia, it was found that young people were initially affected by fear of rejection and preferred to engage in limited actions with classmates. Subsequently, their active participation in various school events allowed them to express their optimism, but also their fear of not meeting the language proficiency requirements. In a final stage assessed in the studies, they emphasized the strong need for psychological support in order to reduce the trauma caused by all the experiences associated with armed conflict (Dangmann et al., 2022; Hodes, 2022; Toros et al., 2024).

Safety is felt as a pressing need, both in relation to living in Ukraine and Romania. Such feelings are most likely influenced by the marked experiences that family members or friends, still living in Ukraine, have gone through and are still going through.

”

I have this strong urge to help everyone to move here to be safe, to protect them as much as possible from everything that happens there. I want to help everyone, to give them support with housing and money, to bring their loved ones to a safer place.

– S. D., 13 years old

From a psychosociological point of view, the need support the community to which a person belongs is a natural cognitive-emotional process. At the same time, the sense of belonging becomes more intense in difficult situations and the connection with one's close ones stronger. From this perspective, we can observe the need for some respondents to help family members, friends and acquaintances in order to contribute to their safety and well-being.

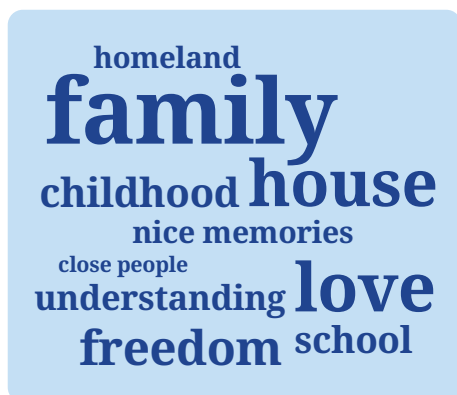


Words that represent Ukraine and Romania

The first words with which a person describes - in this case a society - are relevant for knowing how they relate to it. Some of the responses of the participants in the study indicate feelings of sadness and grief, which

arose as a result of leaving their country. At the same time, they associate Romanian society with constructive and pleasant elements for everyday life, suggesting feelings of belonging, gratitude and hope.

POSITIVE words
representative for Ukraine



POSITIVE words
representative for Romania



NEGATIVE words
representative for Ukraine



NEGATIVE words
representative for Romania



An armed conflict is an event that provokes feelings of chaos and uncertainty; it affects both the emotional sphere and everyday life (Karakiewicz-Krawczyk et al., 2022). Considering the answers given by the

respondents about Ukraine, an accumulation of contradictory and extremely strong emotions and feelings is observed, especially in the context of age. Basically, they are faced with extreme situations, in which they have

to accept being removed from their family environment, overcome significant moments for them or their loved ones, and at the same time face new difficulties and experiences, due to their relocation to Romania. The

positive aspects are due to perceptions of the society in which they currently live. The fact that they associate Romania with 'help' and 'hope' contributes to their well-being and is a stepping-stone for social integration.



Messages to family members and friends in Ukraine

The research instrument included a section for respondents to express messages to family members, friends and decision makers in Ukraine. In terms of emotional involvement, it can be said that the discussions on this topic had a major impact. The whole group showed a desire to convey certain thoughts and ideas, to try to emphasize the negative consequences of the current armed conflict in Ukraine.



I don't want them to die. – S. S., 15 years old



I want them to be safe. – O. P., 14 years old



I would tell my relatives to be strong and not ignore the alarms, because of this one of our relatives died, she didn't even have time to go down to the basement, because it all happened too fast. – S. M., 16 years old



I think for me, the people who stayed there in Ukraine are very brave to stay there every day. I wish them courage and patience in the future. In my future, frankly speaking, I do not see my life in Ukraine, because I personally have nowhere to go and I intend to live in Europe, but not in Romania.
– G. J., 13 years old



I would like to tell my friends to come here to us. I am even ready to help them with accommodation, with anything, just to be safe.
– I. L., 17 years old

The messages conveyed to decision-makers in Ukraine reveal strong feelings of frustration, mistrust and lack of security. All the teenage girls in the study reiterated their hope that the armed conflict would end and many of them hoped to return to their homeland.

”

I want the people who stayed in Ukraine to be completely safe, in a safer place, especially those in the most dangerous places. I want the war to end. I wish that my grandparents, who are in Luhansk and Donetsk and who cannot leave there for certain reasons, I wish that they would come to us in Ukraine, that we would all be together there. – F. U., 12 years old

”

Some people don't realize that this is not just a game, but a reality in which innocent people die. We don't know who started the war, some say it was planned by other countries. Was it really planned? What for? Ukraine was trying to set itself free. This is a waste of human lives. But for some people it all seems incomprehensible, everyone asks: you are a patriot, you should die for your country, but for whom should you give your life? – C. F., 17 years old

”

*Politicians should go and fight themselves and not force ordinary people to fight.
– S. M., 16 years old*

”

I would like to tell politicians to take better care of the military and give them better protective gear. – F. T., 12 years old

Although the initiation of an armed conflict is an adult decision, the harmful effects extend to children and adolescents. Challenges arise and persist in the form of adjustment, education and prioritization of values. Loneliness, lack of close relationships and decreased sense of security are often observed (Karakiewicz-Krawczyk et al., 2022). The opinions of the young women consulted denote, on the one hand, an age-specific emotional sensitivity and, on the other hand, forced growing up. It seems that many of them have lost some of the innocence of adolescence and are living really shocking experiences that replace the joy of developing harmoniously, on the basis of their own choices and, ultimately, of human rights.

”

*I have a 2 year old puppy. He has seen and heard a lot during the war, these two years and now he is permanently scared. He is very scared when he hears explosions, sirens and strong noises. Sometimes my dad calls me as these things happen and I can hear my puppy crying. My dad even installed a camera so I can see him, but it is very painful for me to see this. What harm have pets done to them?
– J. N., 12 years old*



Desires and future plans of adolescent girls

For a few of the teenage girls, future plans are quite clear, but for most of them (N: 21), life after the end of the armed conflict in Ukraine seems to be just a wish. The most important and frequently expressed wish is to return "home". Out of the whole group, 7 young women say with certainty that they want to stay in Romania.



Buy myself a horse and ride every day. – I. V., 13 years old



Become a famous painter. – L. S., 13 years old



I want the war to end and for us to go back home [AN: in Ukraine]. – C.F., 17 years old



Stay here [AN: in Romania]. – G. J., 13 years old



I wish for all the bad things to end and for us to go back to our house.
– D.R., 15 years old



Most likely I'd go further because of my studies. Even if the war ends, it will take a long time to rebuild everything, so it would be best to go to another country. – O.P., 14 years old

Despite the large number of migrants and refugees worldwide, there are still many unexplored aspects of their lives. If we consider young people, priority should be given to areas on which their psychosocial and cultural development depends (e.g. education), which is already greatly affected by everything that involves relocating to a country other than their country of birth.



Conclusions and recommendations

Each murder is one too many. – Jürgen Habermas

The experiences described by the 31 girls interviewed capture only part of the life stories of those who have taken refuge in Romania following the armed conflict in Ukraine. For these girls, and probably for those close to them, living in Romania has both positive and negative connotations.

In terms of basic services, international and national humanitarian organizations have an important contribution to make, particularly in terms of socio-educational activities, psychological counselling and social integration. Romanian state institutions and agencies provide support for refugee families, but at the same time create situations which are perceived as 'inadequate', 'difficult' and sometimes 'discriminatory'. In this respect, there is a need to develop more active collaborative relationships between the relevant organizations. Another measure could be to promote cross-border relations with embassies and consulates, civil society offices and groups. In the same vein, training of staff in public institutions is recommended; specialists working with refugees need to be trained to understand their real situation (e.g. socio-cultural norms, reasons for refugee status). Measures adopted need to promote human rights, social inclusion, gender equality and social justice.

When comparing Ukraine with Romania, there is a pressing need for communication in the mother tongue or learning Romanian. The language barrier is the most frequently mentioned problem in all sections of the focus group guide. Second is the need for psychological counseling for girls and their families. Perceptions about human interactions between Ukrainian refugees and various categories of Romanians differ, most likely according to the lived experiences of each girl. From a global perspective, both social contacts with adults (e.g. teachers) and with adolescents (e.g.

schoolmates) are positive. However, when such interactions become 'unpleasant', they express stigmatization, low levels of solidarity, preconceptions and lack of real knowledge of the problems faced by the group in question. In this respect, raising the awareness and sensitivity of authorities and other professionals (e.g. doctors); publicizing relevant information about basic services for refugees; non-formal learning, development and cultural integration programs seem appropriate. Messages should be communicated clearly and concisely in languages known by refugees.

The needs and expectations of adolescent girls are centered on age-specific elements such as integration in a circle of friends, educational development, active participation in socio-cultural and leisure activities. It should be noted that beyond such priorities, adolescent girls experience shortcomings in terms of housing, income and access to basic services (e.g. health). In order to support Ukrainian refugees, it is suggested to systematically collect, analyze and publish data on public services, including information on their integration needs, using linked electronic databases, in compliance with human rights and the personal data protection legislation. In other words, the digitization of information obtained and recorded at all stages of the reception and integration process is a necessity (Voicu et al., 2018).

The messages that adolescent girls want to convey to their loved ones and decision-makers in Ukraine indicate a forced growing-up with major repercussions on their psychosocial development. At this stage of life, young girls learn to manage very strong emotions, feelings and experiences, such as taking distance or estrangement from family members.

Overall, there is a need to re-evaluate and synchronize legislation and public policies in line with European and international standards. Romania needs to develop its capacity to support all categories of refugees and to provide them not only with the minimum services, but also with those

necessary for their well-being (e.g. well-paid and secure jobs, psychological counselling). Refugees from Ukraine also need and have the right to make their situation known, i.e. to ask for support without taking various risks (e.g. protection status).



The aforementioned conclusions and recommendations are briefly summarized below:

- Refugee adolescent girls have mixed experiences in Romania, with both positive and negative aspects related to living in the new country.
- Romanian state institutions and agencies provide essential support to refugee families, but there are negative perceptions related to inadequacies, difficulties, and, in some cases, discrimination encountered in accessing these services, highlighting the need for improved support and communication with refugees.
- Communication in their native language or learning Romanian is a pressing need, being the most frequently mentioned problem. Learning Romanian directly influences educational and social integration.
- The young women experience forced maturity, with a significant impact on their psychosocial development, as they have to manage strong emotions and experiences.
- The young women and their families need psychological counselling to cope with the trauma and stress caused by war and displacement. Psychological support is crucial for the adaptation and well-being of refugees.
- Perceptions of interactions with Romanian citizens vary but are generally positive. Instances of unpleasant interactions indicate stigmatization and preconceived notions, underscoring the need for public awareness and education.
- The young women need integration into a circle of friends, educational advancement, and participation in socio-cultural activities. However, they also experience shortcomings in housing, income, and access to basic services.
- Systematic digitization and publication of data related to public services and how they can be accessed are essential for supporting refugees.
- Romanian legislation and public policies need to be synchronized with European standards to provide refugees not only with minimal services but also with those necessary for well-being. Additionally, they need support to make their situation known and seek help without risks.

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