



Proceedings of the National Conference of the European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS) Project: Academic Integration, Institutional Support and Intercultural Participation

OVIDIUS UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA, ROMANIA

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PREFACE AND CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

The National Conference of the European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students project, entitled *Academic Integration, Institutional Support, and Intercultural Participation*, represents an important stage in the European academic response to the educational displacement generated by the war in Ukraine. Implemented within the Erasmus+ programme under project number 2023-1-SK01-KA220-HED-000135359, the initiative is structured as a 36-month collaboration between December 2023 and November 2026 and coordinated by Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, in partnership with Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania, and the University of Rzeszów, Poland. The project aims to develop inclusive and sustainable higher education models by combining quantitative and qualitative research, institutional surveys, and the exchange of good practices in supporting Ukrainian students and other vulnerable groups in situations of forced mobility.

The present proceedings bring together contributions developed primarily in Constanța County, Romania, reflecting experiences from both the pre-university and university educational systems. The study conducted by Baciuc-Iacob Magdalena and Pandele Ionuț-Lucian follows the evolution of institutional and community responses to the integration of Ukrainian children, from the creation of emergency support hubs coordinated by civil society organizations to the gradual establishment of legal pathways for enrolment through auditor and later student status. Complementing this perspective, Maria-Alina Carataș proposes a longitudinal institutional framework implemented at Ovidius University of Constanța that integrates language orientation courses, peer mentoring, psychological counselling, and adaptive monitoring of academic participation. Taken together, these analyses illustrate the emergence of collaborative ecosystems that connect schools, universities, public authorities, non-governmental organizations and refugee communities, demonstrating that integration depends not only on access to education but also on the creation of a sense of belonging.

As displacement continues to affect thousands of students across Europe in 2026, the conference consolidates the objectives of the EIUS project by facilitating the exchange of institutional experiences, stabilizing operational procedures, and encouraging intercultural participation within academic environments. The contributions included in this volume highlight the transformation of universities from emergency responders into long-term integration actors and show how higher education institutions can mediate social cohesion during periods of crisis. The organizers express their gratitude to all authors, institutional partners, and the Erasmus+ programme for supporting this collaborative dialogue and for enabling the development of practical and transferable solutions for inclusive education in Europe.

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EUROPEAN INCLUSION OF UKRAINIAN STUDENTS: UNIVERSITIES BETWEEN EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND STRUCTURAL INCLUSION

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Abstract. European universities have become key first responders to the educational disruption caused by the war in Ukraine, rapidly opening access for displaced students through simplified admissions, tuition waivers, language courses and psychosocial support. This paper, developed within the European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS) Erasmus+ partnership in Slovakia, Poland, Romania and Ukraine, examines whether such emergency measures are evolving into sustainable, structurally embedded inclusion frameworks. Using a comparative qualitative design, it combines document analysis, interviews, focus groups and participatory activities with students and university stakeholders to analyze legal and policy frameworks, institutional practices, language and academic integration, and wellbeing support. Findings indicate a shared European pattern: institutions were effective in ensuring rapid access, but many initiatives remained project based, fragmented and dependent on temporary funding, leaving persistent barriers related to legal uncertainty, recognition of qualifications, language proficiency and psychosocial stress. At the same time, strong institutional leadership, peer mentoring, integrated support services and collaboration with NGOs emerge as key enabling factors for moving from short term crisis response toward durable inclusion pathways. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations to help European higher education systems transform emergency solidarity into long term, resilient inclusion strategies.

Key words. European higher education; Ukrainian students; emergency response; structural inclusion; refugee student integration; comparative qualitative research; student participation

Background, Motivation, and Project Framework

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 triggered one of the most significant humanitarian and displacement crises in contemporary Europe. Beyond its immediate geopolitical and humanitarian consequences, the conflict has generated profound disruptions in the educational trajectories of millions of young people, including university students forced to interrupt or abandon their studies. As borders opened and emergency protection mechanisms were activated, European higher education institutions found themselves confronted with an unprecedented challenge: responding rapidly to the academic, social, and psychological needs of displaced Ukrainian students while operating within regulatory frameworks largely designed for stable, predictable mobility.

In this context, universities across Europe emerged as frontline actors, often functioning as first responders alongside humanitarian organizations and public authorities. They offered immediate access to education, waived tuition fees, created ad hoc admission procedures, and mobilized internal resources to support displaced students. These responses were frequently driven by solidarity, institutional autonomy, and moral commitment rather than by pre-existing, comprehensive inclusion policies. While such measures ensured rapid access and short-term academic continuity, they also exposed structural limitations in European higher education systems' capacity to move from emergency accommodation to sustainable inclusion.

The distinction between emergency response and genuine inclusion lies at the core of current debates on the role of universities in times of crisis. Emergency measures prioritize speed, flexibility, and access, often accepting provisional solutions and regulatory exceptions. Inclusion, by contrast, requires long-term planning, institutional coordination, and the integration of academic, linguistic, psychological, and social dimensions into coherent support frameworks. The Ukrainian displacement crisis has therefore functioned as a stress test for European universities, revealing both their adaptive potential and their structural vulnerabilities.

Against this background, the central question guiding the present research emerges clearly: **Are European universities prepared for real inclusion, beyond emergency-driven solidarity?** This question does not challenge the goodwill or commitment of academic institutions, but rather interrogates the sustainability, coherence, and transferability of the measures implemented since 2022. It invites a critical examination of whether current practices can be transformed into durable models capable of addressing not only the Ukrainian case, but future displacement scenarios as well.

European Universities as First Responders

In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, European universities acted with remarkable speed. Admission procedures were simplified, documentation requirements were relaxed, and provisional student

statuses were introduced to allow displaced students to enroll without complete academic records. Language courses were organized rapidly, often relying on volunteer staff and project-based funding. Psychological counseling services were expanded, and peer mentoring initiatives were launched to mitigate social isolation and emotional distress.

These interventions underscore the unique position of universities as semi-autonomous institutions situated at the intersection of public policy, civil society, and international cooperation. Unlike primary and secondary education systems, higher education institutions often possess greater flexibility in admission criteria, curricular design, and support services. This autonomy enabled innovative responses, including hybrid learning arrangements, temporary credit recognition mechanisms, and cross-institutional cooperation.

At the same time, the reliance on institutional autonomy also produced uneven outcomes across countries and institutions. Support measures varied significantly in scope, duration, and intensity, often depending on leadership priorities, financial capacity, and access to external funding. In many cases, inclusion initiatives remained project-based, lacking integration into core institutional strategies. As emergency funding streams approached exhaustion, questions regarding sustainability and long-term responsibility became increasingly salient.

The Need for a European Perspective on Inclusion

While national contexts shaped specific responses, the Ukrainian displacement crisis unfolded within a shared European policy space. Temporary protection mechanisms, recognition of qualifications, and student mobility regulations were influenced by European Union frameworks, yet their implementation remained largely national or institutional. This multi-level governance structure created both opportunities and tensions, particularly in relation to legal certainty, academic recognition, and access to social rights.

The diversity of responses across Europe highlights the need for comparative, evidence-based analysis capable of identifying barriers, good practices, and transferable inclusion models. Such analysis is essential not only for evaluating past responses, but also for informing future policy development at institutional, national, and European levels. It is within this analytical and normative space that the **European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS)** project is situated.

The EIUS Project: Objectives and Partnership Structure

The EIUS project is a three-year Erasmus+ strategic partnership implemented between 2023 and 2026, coordinated by **Matej Bel University**. The project brings together partner institutions from Central and Eastern Europe, including **Uniwersytet Rzeszowski** and **Ovidius University of Constanța**, alongside an associated partner from Ukraine, **Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University**.

The geographical composition of the partnership reflects regions directly affected by Ukrainian student mobility, either as host countries or as countries of origin. This configuration enables a nuanced comparative perspective that captures both incoming and outgoing dimensions of displacement and inclusion. The project's overarching aim is to identify structural barriers to inclusion and to propose evidence-based solutions that can be adapted across diverse higher education contexts.

Research Design and Analytical Orientation

EIUS is grounded in a comparative qualitative research design spanning Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine. The project seeks to analyze how universities and public policies supported Ukrainian students following the onset of the war, focusing on both institutional practices and regulatory environments. By combining document analysis, stakeholder consultations, and participatory academic activities, the project generates a multidimensional understanding of inclusion processes.

The analytical framework of EIUS is structured around four interconnected focus areas. The first concerns legal and institutional frameworks, examining admission procedures, recognition of qualifications, residence status, and access to social rights. The second addresses language and academic integration, including preparatory courses, curricular adaptation, and assessment practices. The third focuses on psychosocial support and well-being, recognizing the profound emotional and psychological impact of forced displacement on students. The fourth area synthesizes findings into institutional and policy recommendations aimed at enhancing long-term inclusion capacity.

Rather than treating inclusion as a singular outcome, EIUS conceptualizes it as a process unfolding over time, shaped by interactions between students, institutions, and policy environments. This process-oriented perspective allows for the identification of critical transition points, such as the shift from provisional to permanent student status, or from emergency support to integrated services.

From Analysis to Action

A distinctive feature of the EIUS project is its commitment to participatory and action-oriented research. ~~Students are not positioned merely as research subjects, but as active contributors to knowledge~~

production and dissemination. Through roundtable discussions, conference participation, and co-authorship of scientific outputs, Ukrainian and host-country students are engaged as partners in the analytical process. This approach reinforces the project's normative commitment to inclusion as both an object of study and a methodological principle.

In this sense, EIUS seeks to bridge the gap between empirical research and policy practice. By grounding recommendations in comparative evidence and lived experience, the project aims to support universities and policymakers in moving beyond ad hoc responses toward structurally embedded inclusion strategies.

Comparative Methodology and Analytical Framework of the EIUS Project

The European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS) project is grounded in a comparative qualitative research design specifically tailored to capture the complexity, variability, and contextual embeddedness of inclusion practices across higher education systems. Given the unprecedented nature of the Ukrainian displacement and the diversity of institutional responses across Europe, a qualitative and comparative approach was deemed essential for identifying not only what measures were implemented, but how and why they functioned differently across contexts.

Rationale for a Comparative Qualitative Design

The choice of a comparative qualitative methodology reflects the project's core assumption that inclusion cannot be meaningfully assessed through standardized indicators alone. While quantitative data provide important information regarding enrollment numbers, participation rates, or mobility flows, they are insufficient for capturing institutional decision-making processes, informal practices, and students' lived experiences. Inclusion, as conceptualized within EIUS, is a relational and processual phenomenon shaped by interactions between regulatory frameworks, institutional cultures, and individual trajectories.

By comparing four national contexts—Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine—the project aims to identify patterns of convergence and divergence in institutional responses. These countries share geographical proximity to Ukraine and experienced similar waves of displacement, yet differ in higher education governance, legal frameworks, funding mechanisms, and historical exposure to international student mobility. This combination of shared pressure and contextual diversity provides a fertile ground for comparative analysis.

Country Selection and Institutional Roles

Each participating country occupies a distinct position within the EIUS analytical framework. **Matej Bel University**, as project coordinator, represents a higher education system characterized by relatively centralized governance and strong alignment between national policy and institutional practice. Slovakia's experience highlights the interaction between emergency national measures and universities' internal capacity to translate them into operational support for students.

Poland, represented by **Uniwersytet Rzeszowski**, offers a contrasting perspective shaped by the scale and intensity of displacement. As one of the primary host countries for Ukrainian refugees, Poland's higher education institutions were confronted with high numbers of incoming students within a short timeframe. This context allows for the examination of capacity constraints, coordination challenges, and the role of regional authorities in mediating inclusion.

Romania, through **Ovidius University of Constanța**, provides insight into hybrid governance arrangements in which universities operate alongside local administrations, school inspectorates, and civil society organizations. The Romanian case is particularly relevant for understanding the interaction between higher education institutions and pre-university systems, as well as the role of non-governmental actors in providing psychosocial and linguistic support.

Ukraine, represented by **Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University** as an associated partner, contributes the perspective of the country of origin. This dimension is essential for understanding interrupted academic trajectories, recognition challenges, and the emotional and institutional consequences of displacement for both students and sending institutions. Including a Ukrainian university enables EIUS to analyze inclusion not only as a host-country process but as a transnational phenomenon affecting interconnected academic systems.

Data Collection Strategies

The EIUS project employs multiple qualitative data collection methods to ensure depth, triangulation, and contextual sensitivity. Primary data sources include institutional documents, policy texts, and internal regulations related to student admission, recognition of qualifications, language support, and counseling services. These documents are analyzed to identify formal frameworks and declared institutional priorities.

In parallel, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions are conducted with key stakeholders, including university administrators, academic staff, student support officers, psychologists, and representatives of non-governmental organizations. These interactions provide insight into implementation dynamics, informal practices, and perceived constraints that may not be visible in official documentation.

Student perspectives are integrated through participatory formats such as roundtables, moderated discussions, and reflective sessions organized within the framework of the project. These activities serve a dual purpose: they generate qualitative data on students' experiences while also functioning as inclusion mechanisms in their own right. By involving students as active contributors, EIUS aligns its methodology with its normative commitment to participatory inclusion.

Analytical Framework and Thematic Axes

Data analysis within EIUS is structured around four interrelated thematic axes that reflect the project's core research questions. The first axis examines legal and institutional frameworks, focusing on admission procedures, residence status, access to social rights, and recognition of prior learning. This axis explores how legal certainty – or the lack thereof – shapes students' willingness and ability to engage fully in academic life.

The second axis addresses language and academic integration. Language proficiency is analyzed not only as a technical skill but as a gateway to participation, assessment, and academic identity formation. The project examines the availability, duration, and pedagogical design of language courses, as well as their integration with disciplinary studies.

The third axis focuses on psychosocial support and well-being. Recognizing that forced displacement entails significant emotional and psychological strain, EIUS analyzes the scope and accessibility of counseling services, peer support initiatives, and community-building activities. Particular attention is paid to the intersection between academic stress and trauma-related experiences.

The fourth axis synthesizes findings into institutional and policy-oriented recommendations. Rather than producing abstract guidelines, EIUS seeks to identify transferable practices that can be adapted to diverse institutional contexts. This axis emphasizes feasibility, sustainability, and alignment with existing governance structures.

Positioning within European Literature on Refugee Student Inclusion

The EIUS project is situated within a growing body of European scholarship addressing the inclusion of refugees and displaced students in higher education. Existing studies highlight the centrality of language barriers, recognition of qualifications, and psychosocial support, while also pointing to the fragmented nature of institutional responses. EIUS contributes to this literature by offering a regionally grounded, comparative perspective that bridges Central and Eastern European contexts often underrepresented in broader European analyses.

Moreover, EIUS extends existing research by foregrounding the distinction between emergency access and structural inclusion. While much of the early literature focused on access mechanisms and rapid response, the project emphasizes the need to assess long-term outcomes, institutional learning, and policy coherence. In doing so, EIUS aligns with calls for a shift from crisis management toward resilience-building in higher education systems.

Methodological Reflexivity and Limitations

The project adopts a reflexive stance toward its own methodological choices, acknowledging that qualitative research is shaped by context, interpretation, and positionality. Differences in institutional cultures, administrative transparency, and stakeholder availability inevitably influence data collection. Additionally, the emotional and ethical dimensions of working with displaced populations require sensitivity and adaptability.

Despite these limitations, the comparative qualitative design of EIUS offers a robust framework for capturing the complexity of inclusion processes. By combining multiple data sources and perspectives, the project enhances the validity and transferability of its findings.

Cross-Country Findings: Inclusion Between Emergency Measures and Structural Constraints

The comparative analysis conducted within the European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS) project reveals a set of convergent patterns across Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine, alongside context-specific variations shaped by national policies, institutional autonomy, and resource availability. Rather than producing radically divergent outcomes, the four country cases illustrate a shared European trajectory characterized by rapid emergency responses followed by increasing difficulties in consolidating long-term inclusion frameworks. These findings are organized along the four analytical axes guiding the project: legal

and policy frameworks, institutional practices, barriers to inclusion, and supporting factors facilitating student integration.

Legal and Policy Frameworks: Rapid Access, Limited Long-Term Coherence

Across all countries involved in the EIUS project, the initial legal and policy response to the arrival of Ukrainian students was marked by speed and flexibility. Emergency regulations, temporary protection mechanisms, and ad hoc administrative decisions enabled displaced students to access higher education without meeting standard documentation or admission requirements. These measures were instrumental in preventing large-scale educational exclusion during the first months following the outbreak of the war.

However, the comparative analysis also highlights a common structural limitation: while emergency measures ensured access, they were not systematically followed by coherent long-term inclusion policies. Legal certainty regarding residence status, continuation of studies, and recognition of qualifications remained uneven across contexts. In several cases, students were admitted under provisional arrangements that did not clearly define their academic rights, assessment pathways, or future progression options.

Recognition of prior learning and qualifications emerged as a particularly sensitive issue. Although simplified procedures were introduced in most contexts, their implementation varied significantly, often depending on institutional interpretation rather than standardized national guidelines. This variability generated uncertainty for students, particularly those considering mobility within Europe or eventual return to Ukraine. The absence of harmonized recognition mechanisms limited the transferability of academic achievements and reinforced perceptions of provisionality.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that European higher education systems were better prepared for short-term access facilitation than for sustained legal integration. Emergency responsiveness compensated for immediate needs, but structural alignment between migration policy, education policy, and institutional governance remained incomplete.

Institutional Practices: Solidarity, Flexibility, and Project-Based Inclusion

At the institutional level, universities across the EIUS partnership demonstrated a high degree of solidarity and organizational flexibility. Admission offices, academic departments, and student support services adapted existing procedures to accommodate displaced students, often working beyond formal mandates or resource allocations. Tuition waivers, fee reductions, and flexible enrollment options were widely implemented, reflecting strong normative commitments to academic inclusion.

Language courses and preparatory programs constituted a central component of institutional responses. Universities organized intensive language training, sometimes prior to enrollment and often in parallel with disciplinary studies. These initiatives played a crucial role in enabling basic academic participation, yet their scope and duration were frequently constrained by project funding cycles rather than integrated into permanent curricular structures.

Psychological counseling and well-being support were also expanded in response to the crisis. In many cases, universities relied on existing counseling services, supplementing them with project-based staff or external partnerships. While these measures addressed immediate emotional needs, their sustainability remained uncertain, particularly as demand increased over time.

A key cross-country finding concerns the role of institutional autonomy. Universities with greater decision-making flexibility were able to innovate more rapidly, tailoring inclusion measures to local needs and student profiles. Conversely, institutions operating within more rigid regulatory environments encountered difficulties in adapting admission rules, assessment practices, or support services. Institutional autonomy thus functioned as a critical enabling factor, but also contributed to uneven inclusion outcomes across and within countries.

Importantly, many inclusion measures remained project-based, dependent on temporary funding streams such as Erasmus+ or national emergency allocations. While projects provided valuable experimentation spaces, their limited duration hindered the institutionalization of successful practices. As a result, inclusion efforts risked remaining peripheral rather than becoming embedded in core university strategies.

Barriers to Inclusion: Persistent Structural and Psychosocial Challenges

Despite the extensive efforts undertaken by universities and public authorities, the EIUS comparative analysis identifies a set of recurring barriers that constrained effective inclusion across all countries studied. Language barriers emerged as the most consistently reported obstacle. Limited proficiency in the host-country language affected not only academic performance, but also social interaction, access to administrative information, and participation in informal university life. Even when language courses were available, their intensity and alignment with disciplinary demands were often insufficient for full academic integration.

Academic adaptation constituted a related challenge. Differences in teaching styles, assessment methods, and academic expectations created additional pressures for students already coping with displacement-related stress. In the absence of tailored academic mentoring, some students experienced difficulties in meeting performance requirements, leading to disengagement or prolonged reliance on provisional student status.

Psychological stress and emotional uncertainty represented another major barrier. Forced displacement, separation from family members, and concerns about the future generated significant emotional strain, affecting concentration, motivation, and well-being. Although counseling services were generally available, stigma, language constraints, and limited capacity reduced their accessibility for some students.

Administrative fragmentation further complicated inclusion efforts. The lack of systematic coordination between ministries, universities, and external support providers resulted in overlapping responsibilities, information gaps, and inconsistent communication. Students often navigated multiple institutional interfaces to address issues related to residence status, enrollment, financial support, and academic recognition. This fragmentation increased cognitive and emotional burden, particularly for newly arrived students unfamiliar with host-country systems.

Taken together, these barriers underscore the limits of emergency-driven inclusion strategies. While access was largely ensured, sustained participation and academic success required more integrated and student-centered approaches.

Supporting Factors: Community, Leadership, and Integrated Support

Alongside persistent barriers, the EIUS project identified several supporting factors that significantly enhanced inclusion outcomes across contexts. Peer mentoring and community-based support emerged as particularly effective mechanisms. Initiatives pairing Ukrainian students with local or international peers facilitated social integration, reduced isolation, and provided informal guidance on academic and administrative matters. These relationships often functioned as low-threshold support systems, complementing formal services.

Proactive institutional leadership also played a decisive role. Universities in which senior management explicitly prioritized inclusion were more likely to allocate resources, coordinate services, and encourage cross-departmental collaboration. Leadership commitment contributed to a shared institutional narrative framing inclusion as a strategic responsibility rather than an optional humanitarian gesture.

Integrated language and well-being programs represented another key enabling factor. When language training was combined with academic mentoring and psychosocial support, students reported higher levels of engagement and confidence. Such integrated approaches mitigated the compartmentalization of support services and addressed students' needs holistically.

Finally, collaboration between ministries, universities, and non-governmental organizations significantly strengthened inclusion capacity. NGOs often provided expertise in psychosocial support, intercultural mediation, and community outreach, complementing universities' academic functions. Where coordination mechanisms existed, these partnerships reduced duplication, improved information flow, and enhanced responsiveness to students' evolving needs.

Synthesis of Cross-Country Findings

The cross-country findings of the EIUS project point to a shared European pattern: universities were effective first responders, capable of rapid adaptation and solidarity-driven action, yet less prepared for the long-term institutionalization of inclusion. Emergency measures succeeded in ensuring access, but structural integration lagged behind, constrained by legal uncertainty, project-based funding, and fragmented governance.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that inclusion is not solely determined by national policy frameworks. Institutional leadership, autonomy, and the capacity to integrate academic, linguistic, and psychosocial support play a decisive role in shaping student experiences. The coexistence of barriers and supporting factors suggests that European universities possess significant inclusion potential, but that this potential remains unevenly realized.

Added Value of the EIUS Project, Student Engagement, and European-Level Dissemination

Beyond its analytical contribution, the European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS) project generates added value through its participatory design, its emphasis on institutional learning, and its commitment to transforming research findings into actionable outputs. This added value operates simultaneously at three interconnected levels: student engagement, institutional development, and European knowledge transfer. Together, these dimensions position EIUS not merely as a research initiative, but as a capacity building process within European higher education.

Student Engagement as a Core Project Dimension

A defining characteristic of the EIUS project is the active involvement of students as contributors rather than passive beneficiaries of inclusion policies. Ukrainian students, alongside students from host institutions, are engaged throughout the project cycle in roles that extend beyond consultation. This participatory approach reflects a deliberate methodological and normative choice: inclusion is not only the object of study, but also a principle guiding the research process itself.

Students participate as organizers and moderators of roundtable discussions, where they facilitate dialogue between peers, academic staff, and institutional representatives. These forums function as structured spaces for reflection, enabling students to articulate experiences, identify challenges, and co-construct interpretations of inclusion practices. Such engagement enhances the relevance and depth of qualitative data, while simultaneously fostering agency, confidence, and a sense of belonging among participants.

In addition, students are involved in conference organization and support roles, contributing to the logistical and intellectual dimensions of academic dissemination. Through these activities, they gain insight into academic knowledge production and develop transferable skills related to communication, coordination, and critical discussion. Participation in students' sections of conferences further amplifies their voices, allowing them to present reflections and preliminary findings within academic settings traditionally dominated by senior researchers.

The inclusion of students as co-authors of scientific publications represents another significant dimension of added value. This practice challenges conventional hierarchies in academic authorship and acknowledges students' experiential knowledge as a legitimate source of insight. By participating in the drafting and review of publications, students engage directly with academic standards, methodologies, and ethical considerations, strengthening their academic integration and professional development.

Finally, students act as ambassadors of the project within and beyond their institutions. Through peer networks, social media engagement, and informal dissemination, they contribute to the visibility of EIUS and to the diffusion of inclusive narratives across university communities. This ambassadorial role reinforces the project's sustainability by embedding its values and findings within everyday academic interactions.

Institutional Learning and Capacity Building

At the institutional level, EIUS functions as a structured learning process that enables universities to reflect critically on their own practices and assumptions. By participating in comparative analysis, partner institutions gain insight into alternative approaches to inclusion and identify gaps within their own frameworks. This reflexive dimension is particularly important given the diversity of legal, cultural, and organizational contexts represented in the project.

EIUS facilitates institutional learning by creating shared analytical tools, common terminology, and comparative benchmarks. Through joint workshops and internal discussions, universities assess the effectiveness of emergency measures and explore pathways toward institutionalization. The project thus contributes to a gradual shift from ad hoc, project-based inclusion initiatives toward more coherent strategies aligned with core institutional missions.

Another aspect of institutional added value lies in the strengthening of cross-sectoral collaboration. EIUS highlights the importance of cooperation between universities, ministries, and non-governmental organizations in addressing complex inclusion challenges. By documenting and comparing such collaborations, the project supports the development of governance models that transcend institutional silos and promote coordinated responses.

Expected Outputs and Knowledge Production (2025–2026)

The outputs planned within the EIUS project for the 2025–2026 period reflect its dual commitment to empirical rigor and practical relevance. Survey-based national reports constitute a first category of outputs, synthesizing qualitative and quantitative insights at country level. These reports provide structured overviews of institutional responses, barriers, and enabling factors, serving as reference documents for policymakers and university leaders.

A second major output is the preparation of a comparative monograph, which integrates findings across all participating countries. This publication aims to articulate a coherent analytical narrative, identifying transferable inclusion models and contextual conditions shaping their effectiveness. By adopting a comparative lens, the monograph contributes to European-level debates on higher education inclusion and displacement.

Policy recommendations represent a further key output, translating research findings into actionable guidance. ~~Rather than proposing uniform solutions, EIUS recommendations emphasize adaptability and~~

contextualization, acknowledging the diversity of higher education systems across Europe. These recommendations are designed to inform both institutional strategies and public policy frameworks.

Best practice guides complement policy recommendations by offering concrete examples of successful inclusion initiatives. These guides focus on feasibility and implementation, highlighting practices that can be adapted with limited resources. In doing so, EIUS seeks to bridge the gap between abstract policy discourse and everyday institutional practice.

Dissemination Strategy and European Outreach

Dissemination constitutes a central pillar of the EIUS project, ensuring that findings and insights extend beyond the immediate partnership. The project webpage serves as a primary dissemination platform, providing access to reports, publications, and updates, while also functioning as a hub for external engagement. Institutional communication channels, including university websites and newsletters, further amplify reach within academic communities.

Articles published in university magazines contribute to public awareness and internal reflection, presenting research findings in accessible formats for non-specialist audiences. These publications reinforce the societal relevance of inclusion efforts and highlight universities' roles as socially responsible institutions.

Scientific publications and conference presentations represent the project's main academic dissemination channels. By contributing to international conferences and peer-reviewed journals, EIUS situates its findings within broader scholarly debates on migration, education, and social inclusion. This academic visibility enhances the project's credibility and supports knowledge transfer across regions.

Importantly, EIUS explicitly welcomes collaboration and future partnerships across Europe. By positioning itself as an open platform rather than a closed consortium, the project invites dialogue with institutions facing similar challenges. This openness reflects an understanding of inclusion as a shared European concern requiring collective learning and cooperation.

Toward an Interim Answer to the Central Question

Taken together, the added value, outputs, and dissemination activities of EIUS contribute to a nuanced response to the guiding question of the project. European universities have demonstrated significant capacity for rapid response, innovation, and solidarity. They have mobilized internal resources, engaged students actively, and collaborated across sectors to address immediate needs.

However, the reliance on project-based initiatives and temporary funding underscores persistent limitations in moving from emergency response to structural inclusion. The added value of EIUS lies precisely in making these tensions visible and in proposing pathways for transformation grounded in comparative evidence.

Conclusion: Are European Universities Ready for Real Inclusion?

The European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS) project was conceived in response to a moment of profound disruption in European higher education. The war in Ukraine confronted universities with an immediate moral and institutional imperative: to ensure continuity of education for displaced students under conditions of uncertainty, trauma, and regulatory complexity. Three years into the project cycle, the evidence generated through EIUS allows for a more measured and critical assessment of the central question that guided this research: **are European universities ready for real inclusion, beyond emergency-driven solidarity?**

The findings of the project suggest that European universities demonstrated a remarkable capacity for rapid response. Across all participating countries, institutions acted decisively to remove immediate barriers to access, simplify admission procedures, waive tuition fees, and mobilize linguistic, academic, and psychosocial support services. These actions were not trivial. They prevented large-scale educational exclusion, preserved academic trajectories, and reaffirmed the role of universities as socially responsible actors within European societies. In this sense, universities proved themselves capable first responders, able to adapt swiftly in the face of crisis.

However, the transition from emergency response to genuine inclusion remains incomplete. EIUS findings consistently show that many support measures were conceived and implemented as temporary solutions, often dependent on project-based funding and exceptional regulatory arrangements. While these mechanisms were effective in the short term, they frequently lacked institutional anchoring and long-term sustainability. Inclusion, understood as stable participation, equal academic rights, and predictable educational pathways, requires more than flexibility and goodwill. It requires structural integration into institutional strategies, governance frameworks, and policy environments.

A central tension identified by the project lies between access and belonging. Emergency measures ensured access to higher education, but did not always guarantee conditions for full academic participation, progression, and recognition. ~~Legal uncertainty regarding residence status, uneven recognition of~~

qualifications, and fragmented administrative coordination limited students' capacity to plan their academic futures with confidence. These constraints affected not only academic outcomes, but also students' psychological well-being and sense of institutional trust.

At the institutional level, EIUS highlights the decisive role of autonomy and leadership. Universities with greater decision-making flexibility and proactive leadership were better positioned to innovate, integrate services, and coordinate responses across departments. Where inclusion was framed as a strategic priority rather than a peripheral humanitarian task, support measures were more coherent and impactful. Conversely, rigid regulatory environments and siloed institutional structures constrained the transformation of emergency practices into durable inclusion models.

The project also underscores the importance of integrated approaches. Language support, academic mentoring, and psychosocial services proved most effective when designed and delivered as interconnected components rather than isolated interventions. Fragmented support systems increased cognitive and emotional burdens on students, while integrated programs facilitated engagement and resilience. These findings reinforce the argument that inclusion must be conceptualized holistically, addressing academic, linguistic, and emotional dimensions simultaneously.

One of the distinctive contributions of EIUS lies in its participatory orientation. By actively engaging students as moderators, contributors, co-authors, and ambassadors, the project demonstrated that inclusion is not only a policy objective but also a methodological stance. Student engagement enhanced the relevance and legitimacy of research findings, while also functioning as an inclusion mechanism in its own right. This participatory dimension challenges traditional top-down models of policy design and points toward more inclusive knowledge production processes within higher education.

From a European perspective, EIUS reveals both the potential and the limits of current governance arrangements. While European frameworks facilitated rapid protection and mobility, the implementation of inclusion measures remained largely national or institutional. This multi-level governance structure enabled flexibility but also generated inconsistency and inequality across contexts. The lack of harmonized approaches to recognition of qualifications and long-term student status continues to undermine the transferability of academic achievements and the coherence of inclusion pathways.

In light of these findings, the answer to the guiding question of the project must be nuanced. **European universities are ready for inclusion in terms of values, commitment, and adaptive capacity, but not yet fully prepared for structural inclusion as a sustained institutional condition.** The gap between emergency solidarity and long-term inclusion is not a failure of intention, but a consequence of systemic limitations, regulatory fragmentation, and reliance on temporary solutions.

The added value of the EIUS project lies precisely in making this gap visible and in offering evidence-based pathways for transformation. By identifying barriers, highlighting enabling factors, and documenting transferable practices, the project contributes to a shift in perspective: from inclusion as an exceptional response to inclusion as a permanent responsibility. This shift is particularly relevant in a European context marked by increasing mobility, geopolitical instability, and overlapping crises.

Looking forward, the lessons of EIUS suggest several strategic directions. Inclusion frameworks must be institutionalized beyond project cycles, embedded in core university policies, and supported by stable funding mechanisms. Legal and academic recognition procedures require greater coherence and predictability to support student agency and long-term planning. Cross-sectoral collaboration between universities, ministries, and civil society must be strengthened and formalized to reduce fragmentation and enhance responsiveness.

Ultimately, the Ukrainian displacement crisis has revealed not only vulnerabilities, but also opportunities for institutional learning. European universities have demonstrated that they can act decisively under pressure. The challenge ahead is to consolidate this capacity into resilient inclusion systems capable of addressing future displacement scenarios without relying exclusively on emergency measures.

In this sense, the EIUS project does not offer a definitive endpoint, but a point of departure. It invites European higher education institutions to reflect critically on their practices, to learn from comparative experience, and to commit to inclusion as a long-term institutional mission. Real inclusion, as the project demonstrates, is not achieved through isolated acts of solidarity, but through sustained, coordinated, and reflective action across the European academic space.

INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNITY-BASED RESPONSES TO THE INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CONSTANȚA COUNTY

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Abstract. The integration of Ukrainian refugee children and youth into Constanța County's educational system evolved from emergency responses to structured strategies between 2022 and the 2024–2025 school year. Initially, NGOs led rapid interventions, providing humanitarian aid, legal support, and mother-tongue educational hubs with Ukrainian teachers, often using Romanian school spaces while families prioritized online Ukrainian schooling. Local authorities, including the Constanța County School Inspectorate, offered free Romanian language courses and consultation services amid legislative adaptations like Emergency Ordinance No. 15/2022 and Ministry of Education orders (e.g., No. 3363/2022, No. 6127/2022).

A key challenge was distinguishing "auditor" (provisional, non-certifiable status for flexibility and aid access) from "student" status (formal enrollment with full rights and equivalence). Multiple equivalence procedures – standard, special for protection beneficiaries, and simplified – addressed documentation gaps but created administrative complexity, delaying transitions. Statistics show auditors peaking at over 2,700 by mid-2024, with growing shifts to student status, especially in preschool/primary levels, reflecting stabilized mobility and trust in Romanian education.

Qualitative insights highlight rapid preschool integration via play-based learning, parental caution evolving to collaboration, and refugee teachers' mediation role. Sustainable integration requires local ecosystems of schools, inspectorates, NGOs (e.g., UNHCR, UNICEF), and communities, with proposals for upper secondary admissions, counseling, peer education, and teacher training.

Key words. educational integration; non-governmental organizations; international protection; local education governance; intercultural mediation

Introduction

The outbreak of the armed conflict in Ukraine generated a sudden and large-scale displacement of population, placing unprecedented pressure on host communities and public institutions across Eastern Europe. In Constanța County, and particularly in the county capital, the response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees was shaped by a combination of urgency, institutional improvisation, and strong involvement from civil society organizations. The initial phase of intervention was characterized less by long-term integration planning and more by immediate humanitarian and educational responses aimed at stabilizing vulnerable populations and ensuring continuity in children's educational trajectories.

In this context, non-governmental organizations played a decisive and often leading role in addressing the most pressing needs of refugees¹. Their interventions were rapid, flexible, and highly adaptive, compensating for the inevitable delays and rigidities of formal administrative systems. Material and legal assistance constituted a primary area of action, ensuring access to basic resources, legal status clarification, and guidance in navigating national protection mechanisms. These forms of support were essential not only for meeting immediate survival needs but also for reducing uncertainty and anxiety among refugee families, particularly those with school-age children.

Education quickly emerged as a central concern, especially for families seeking to preserve a sense of normality and continuity amid displacement. One of the most significant NGO-led initiatives involved the organization of educational activities in the refugees' mother tongue. These initiatives enabled children to continue their Ukrainian curriculum online, within organized physical spaces and under the supervision of Ukrainian volunteer teachers. This model reflected a widespread perception of displacement as a temporary condition, reinforcing a logic of provisional adaptation rather than immediate integration into the Romanian education system. While such arrangements ensured short-term educational continuity, they also introduced structural ambiguities regarding long-term schooling pathways and institutional belonging.

At the same time, socio-economic integration measures began to develop through the involvement of

¹ https://www.unicef.org/romania/media/14011/file/Romania_Factsheet%20half-year%202024_jul024.pdf.pdf

international organizations. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)² mobilized financial resources to support essential services and employment facilitation projects for refugees, primarily through the Regional Refugee Response Plan. These interventions aimed to mitigate dependency, promote self-reliance, and create the conditions for gradual socio-economic stabilization. However, the effectiveness of such measures remained closely linked to the evolving legal framework and to refugees' perceptions regarding the duration of their stay in Romania.

The Role of Local Educational Authorities and Emergency Educational Measures

Parallel to NGO interventions, local public authorities, particularly in the education sector, were compelled to respond rapidly to the arrival of refugee children. The Constanța County School Inspectorate (Inspectoratul Școlar Județean Constanța), in collaboration with local administrations—including the Municipality of Constanța, the Municipality of Năvodari, the Prefecture of Constanța County, and the Municipality of Mangalia—implemented a series of emergency measures aimed at ensuring access to educational activities.

Among the first responses were free Romanian language and social adaptation courses, delivered on a voluntary basis by teachers specialized in teaching Romanian as a foreign language. These courses were designed as initial linguistic and cultural bridges, enabling children to acquire basic communicative skills and to familiarize themselves with elements of Romanian society. The voluntary nature of these initiatives highlighted both the commitment of educational professionals and the lack of a pre-existing institutional framework for large-scale linguistic integration of refugee children.

Another critical measure involved the allocation of school spaces to maintain educational continuity for refugee children. Various facilities were repurposed to host study groups, including the former kindergarten building within School No. 11 “Dr. Constantin Angelescu” in Constanța, as well as classrooms in other educational units. Within these spaces, study groups were organized with the support of NGOs³, relying heavily on Ukrainian refugee teachers and educational specialists. This hybrid model, combining Romanian institutional infrastructure with Ukrainian educational personnel, reflected a pragmatic response to immediate needs while also underscoring the provisional character of early integration efforts.

In addition to instructional activities, consultation services were provided in Russian, facilitating communication between families and institutions and reducing barriers related to language and administrative complexity. These services were particularly important during the initial months of displacement, when families faced simultaneous challenges related to legal status, housing, employment, and education.

Legislative Evolution and the Construction of an Emergency Framework

The rapid mobilization of educational and social responses was accompanied by an equally rapid evolution of the national legislative framework. In order to ensure minimum humanitarian conditions, the Romanian Government adopted Emergency Ordinance No. 15 of 27 February 2022, which regulated the provision of humanitarian assistance and support to foreign citizens and stateless persons originating from the Ukrainian conflict zone. This ordinance, later amended and supplemented by Emergency Ordinance No. 20 of 7 March 2022, introduced the so-called “50/20” support program, which remained in effect until April 2023.

These normative acts established a foundational framework for state intervention, combining financial assistance with access to essential services. However, their emergency character also reinforced the perception of temporariness, both at institutional and individual levels. Educational participation, in particular, was often viewed through a provisional lens, with families prioritizing flexibility and reversibility over long-term integration.

In the education sector, urgent regulatory measures were adopted to manage school enrollment and educational support for refugee children. Order of the Ministry of Education No. 3363 of 10 March 2022 approved procedures for the organization and functioning of county-level coordination commissions responsible for allocating preschoolers and pupils to educational units. These commissions were also tasked with facilitating access to psycho-pedagogical assistance and counseling services, as well as managing the enrollment of minors as auditors in Romanian schools.

Under this framework, parents retained primary responsibility for their children's education, a provision that implicitly acknowledged the provisional nature of many families' decisions. As a result, a significant proportion of parents opted to continue Ukrainian online education, using Romanian school enrollment mainly as a formal requirement to access state financial support. This dynamic had profound

² <https://www.unhcr.org/ro/incluziunea-refugiatorilor>

³ <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/constanta/scoala-pentru-copiii-refugiatorilor-din-ucraina-la-2159062.html>

implications for attendance patterns, educational engagement, and the accuracy of enrollment statistics.

Subsequent regulatory developments sought to address emerging gaps and to provide more structured integration pathways. Order of the Ministry of Education No. 6127 of 24 October 2022 approved a comprehensive methodology for the schooling of minors who had obtained a form of international protection or a right of residence in Romania. This order regulated the organization and delivery of Romanian language initiation courses and established procedures for the development and distribution of curricula and textbooks tailored to this population.

Further refinements were introduced through Order No. 3899 of 28 March 2023, which approved the methodology for organizing accommodation groups aimed at developing basic linguistic, cultural, and civic competencies among students who had not been enrolled in the Romanian education system during the previous two years. These measures signaled a gradual shift from emergency responses toward more structured, medium-term integration strategies, although implementation remained uneven and highly dependent on local capacity.

Status Differentiation and Educational Pathways: From Auditor to Student in the Romanian Pre-University System

One of the most complex and sensitive dimensions of the educational integration of Ukrainian refugee children in Constanța County has been the differentiation of legal and educational status within the Romanian pre-university system. The distinction between *auditor* and *student* status, initially conceived as a flexible and inclusive solution, gradually revealed a series of structural tensions affecting educational continuity, institutional accountability, and long-term integration prospects. As summarized in Table 1, these two statuses differ substantially in terms of legal recognition, educational rights, assessment obligations, and the possibility of formal equivalence of studies, differences that have had a decisive impact on both institutional practices and families’ educational strategies.

Table 1. Educational Status Differentiation between *Auditor* and *Student* in the Romanian Pre-University System

Dimension	Auditor Status	Student Status
Legal and educational nature	Provisional educational status, primarily intended for temporary participation	Permanent educational status within the national education system
Official academic records	Not registered in official school records; presence is reflected only in transfer registers or individual teachers’ gradebooks; learning outcomes and acquired competencies cannot be formally certified	Fully registered in the official school registry and academic records; in the event of leaving Romania, completed studies can be formally recognized and equivalated in other countries
Recognition and equivalence of studies	Studies completed under auditor status cannot be equivalated or officially recognized, either upon return to the country of origin or relocation to another host country	Studies are officially recognized and eligible for equivalence at national and international level
Educational rights and entitlements	Limited educational rights; restricted access to student-specific benefits	Full educational rights, including eligibility for scholarships, free or subsidized transport, and other benefits granted on the basis of student status
Participation requirements	Attendance and participation in educational activities are not mandatory	Mandatory participation in all curricular activities; subject to grading, assessment, and attendance regulations
Language integration support	Access to Romanian language initiation courses	Access to Romanian language initiation courses as part of the formal educational pathway

In the immediate aftermath of displacement, the status of auditor was overwhelmingly preferred by refugee families. This preference reflected a widespread perception of temporariness and uncertainty regarding the duration of stay in Romania. Enrollment as an auditor allowed children to maintain a formal connection with Romanian educational institutions while continuing Ukrainian online education, thereby preserving the option of reintegration into the Ukrainian system at a later stage. At the same time, auditor status functioned as a procedural condition for accessing state-provided financial support, reinforcing its instrumental value regardless of actual school attendance.

This dynamic produced a paradoxical situation in which official enrollment figures increased rapidly, while physical attendance and educational engagement remained limited. Romanian schools issued

enrollment certificates for refugee children, yet many of these children appeared on school rolls without participating consistently in classroom activities. From an institutional perspective, this situation complicated planning processes, resource allocation, and the monitoring of educational outcomes. From the families' perspective, it represented a pragmatic strategy for navigating uncertainty, rather than a deliberate rejection of integration.

As the conflict persisted and displacement became increasingly protracted, the limitations of prolonged auditor status became more evident. The lack of formal assessment, progression, and certification under auditor status constrained children's educational trajectories and limited their access to structured support mechanisms. Gradually, interest in transitioning to full student status increased, particularly among families seeking stability and continuity within the Romanian education system.

Equivalence of Studies Completed Abroad: Institutional Procedures and Practical Challenges

The transition from auditor to student status necessitated the recognition and equivalence of educational periods completed abroad. In Romania, this process is governed by multiple procedural pathways, each reflecting different assumptions regarding documentation availability, legal status, and educational continuity. One of the primary mechanisms is regulated by Article 125 of the Regulation on the Organization and Functioning of Pre-University Education Units, as established through Orders of the Ministry of Education No. 5726/2024 and No. 5368/2020.

Under this procedure, educational documents issued in the country of origin, along with identity documents, must be submitted – translated and legally certified – to the nearest school unit. In cases where such documents are unavailable, parents or legal representatives are required to submit a written request for evaluation or examination, specifying the last year of study completed. This request is forwarded by the school unit to the county school inspectorate, where the Inspector General issues a decision establishing an evaluation commission.

The evaluation commission, composed of teaching staff from the host school and at least one school inspector or methodological teacher, is tasked with assessing the student's competencies across all disciplines included in the national curriculum. Evaluation must be conducted within a maximum of twenty days following the commission's establishment and only after the student has benefited from psycho-pedagogical support activities. The examination process is comprehensive, covering each year of study for which documentation is missing, beginning with the most recent year completed abroad.

While this procedure provides a legally robust mechanism for recognizing prior learning, its implementation poses significant logistical and emotional challenges. The comprehensive nature of evaluation can be overwhelming for children who have experienced displacement, trauma, and educational disruption. Moreover, the administrative burden placed on schools and inspectorates is substantial, particularly during periods of high demand. These factors contributed to hesitation among families and institutions alike, often delaying the transition to full student status.

The Special Methodology for Beneficiaries of International Protection

In response to these challenges, a special methodology for the certification of pre-university studies for foreigners who have obtained international protection was introduced through Order of the Ministry of Education No. 5807/2022⁴. This framework was designed to accommodate the specific circumstances of minors, young adults over eighteen, and adults who had not completed their pre-university education prior to displacement.

According to this methodology, following the acquisition of a Romanian language certificate, an examination commission must be established within ninety days, but no later than the start of the following academic year. The commission evaluates both the courses completed abroad and those attended as an auditor in Romania. Its composition includes teaching staff from curricular areas such as Mathematics and Natural Sciences, as well as Humanities and Social Sciences, excluding Religion. Importantly, the commission must include teachers who have previously taught the candidate during their auditor period, ensuring continuity and contextual understanding.

This special methodology applies to minors and young adults who have obtained international protection in Romania and have not completed pre-university education, as well as to adult beneficiaries of international protection. The certification process is conducted only after individuals have begun attending formal education in Romania and have completed their auditor period. By integrating assessment with prior participation in Romanian educational contexts, this framework seeks to balance rigor with fairness.

Despite its inclusive intent, the methodology also underscores the complexity of managing multiple procedural pathways simultaneously. Schools and inspectorates must navigate overlapping regulations,

⁴ <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocumentAfis/260370>

varying eligibility criteria, and divergent timelines, often with limited administrative capacity. For families, understanding these procedures requires sustained guidance and counseling, without which decision-making can become fragmented and delayed.

Simplified Evaluation Procedures and Access to Formal Schooling

A third pathway for educational recognition is provided through the simplified evaluation procedure regulated by Articles 13 and 14 of Order No. 6127/2022. This procedure allows parents or legal representatives of foreign minors lacking educational documents to opt for a simplified assessment to determine appropriate school placement. Under this option, a general knowledge test in mathematics is administered by a commission appointed by the county school inspector.

The evaluation commission is composed of the school director or deputy director, acting as president, and two mathematics teachers, one of whom must be the teacher of the class in which the student attended as an auditor. For primary education, the commission includes primary education teachers instead of subject-specific mathematics teachers. The simplified procedure replaces other evaluation options, meaning that once selected, alternative pathways under the general regulation or special methodology are no longer applicable.

The appeal of the simplified procedure lies in its accessibility and reduced administrative complexity. For families facing documentation gaps and psychological stress, this option offers a more immediate route to formal schooling. However, its reliance on a single subject assessment raises questions regarding the holistic evaluation of students' competencies and learning needs. While effective as an entry mechanism, the procedure must be complemented by ongoing academic support and monitoring to ensure appropriate placement and progression.

Administrative Implications and Educational Consequences

The coexistence of multiple evaluation and equivalence procedures reflects an institutional effort to balance flexibility with regulatory coherence. However, in practice, this multiplicity has generated ambiguity and uneven implementation. Schools have been required to develop ad hoc expertise in navigating complex regulations, while inspectorates have faced increasing demands for coordination, oversight, and decision-making.

From an educational perspective, prolonged uncertainty regarding status and equivalence has had tangible consequences for students' learning trajectories. Delays in transitioning to student status often resulted in fragmented educational experiences, limited access to assessments, and reduced engagement with curricular activities. Conversely, successful transitions were frequently associated with increased attendance, stronger academic motivation, and deeper integration into school communities.

These dynamics underscore the importance of sustained parental counseling and institutional mediation. Families require clear, consistent information regarding available pathways, potential outcomes, and long-term implications of different status choices. Without such guidance, decisions tend to prioritize short-term flexibility over long-term educational continuity, potentially constraining future opportunities.

Statistical Evolution and Institutional Dynamics of Educational Integration in Constanța County

The quantitative evolution of enrollment requests and educational statuses among Ukrainian refugee children in Constanța County provides critical insight into the changing nature of displacement, mobility, and integration over time. Statistical data collected between March 2022 and the 2024–2025 academic year illustrate a clear transition from provisional educational arrangements toward more stable forms of participation in the Romanian pre-university system. This transition, however, has been neither linear nor uniform, reflecting broader patterns of uncertainty, European mobility, and gradual institutional adaptation.

During the initial phase of the crisis, between March and August 2022, the number of registered auditors increased rapidly, from approximately twenty in March to more than 693 by the end of the summer. This exponential growth must be interpreted cautiously. Enrollment as an auditor did not necessarily correspond to regular school attendance or active participation in educational activities. In practice, enrollment certificates were often requested primarily to fulfill formal conditions required for accessing financial support provided by the Romanian state. Many children remained enrolled in Ukrainian online education, attending Romanian schools sporadically or not at all.

This phenomenon reveals a significant discrepancy between formal enrollment data and actual educational engagement. From an institutional perspective, schools were required to process enrollment requests, issue certificates, and include children in administrative records, even when their presence in classrooms was minimal. As a result, early statistical indicators tended to overestimate the level of integration, masking the provisional and instrumental nature of many enrollment decisions.

The situation began to evolve during the 2023–2024 academic year, when patterns of European mobility stabilized. By this stage, many refugee families had exercised their right to free movement within the European Union, exploring multiple host countries before identifying locations that best matched their social, economic,

and educational needs. As this phase of exploratory mobility diminished, a clearer picture of long-term settlement intentions began to emerge.

Data from the fourth quarter of 2023 indicate a total of 36 new enrollment requests, bringing the cumulative number to 2,333. A similar number of requests was recorded in the first quarter of 2024, reaching a total of 2,369. Notably, this period included the first recorded instances of status transition, such as the conversion of an auditor into a full student in preparatory grade, as well as requests limited exclusively to extracurricular activities. These developments signal a gradual shift in parental strategies, from maintaining maximal flexibility toward seeking structured educational pathways within the Romanian system.

The most significant change occurred during the second quarter of 2024, when 353 new requests were registered, increasing the total number to 2,722. This surge included 38 status reversals from auditor to student and 24 requests for enrollment in preparatory grade for the 2024–2025 academic year. Unlike earlier phases, these requests were increasingly oriented toward long-term schooling rather than provisional affiliation. The data suggest a growing confidence in the Romanian education system and a corresponding decline in expectations of imminent return to Ukraine.

By the 2024–2025 academic year, a qualitative transformation became evident. The majority of preschool-aged children were enrolled in Romanian educational units under the same methodological conditions applied to Romanian citizens. Interest in preparatory grade enrollment increased markedly, followed by a steady rise in the number of primary-level auditors transitioning to full student status. This trend has continued into the current academic year, reinforcing the conclusion that displacement is no longer perceived as a short-term interruption but as a prolonged condition requiring durable integration strategies.

Interpretation of Trends and Structural Implications

The statistical evolution observed in Constanța County reflects a broader transition from emergency response to medium- and long-term integration. In the early stages of the crisis, educational decisions were dominated by uncertainty, provisionality, and risk minimization. Auditor status functioned as a flexible instrument that allowed families to hedge against unpredictable futures while maintaining access to support mechanisms. Over time, however, the limitations of this approach became increasingly apparent.

As displacement persisted, the costs of educational fragmentation began to outweigh the perceived benefits of flexibility. Prolonged reliance on auditor status constrained children's access to assessment, certification, and structured progression, creating risks of educational stagnation and future exclusion. The gradual increase in full student enrollment thus represents not only a numerical shift but also a qualitative reorientation toward stability, predictability, and institutional trust.

From an institutional standpoint, these trends underscore the adaptive capacity of the local education system. Schools and inspectorates were required to respond to fluctuating enrollment patterns, ambiguous attendance, and evolving parental expectations. The gradual normalization of student status among Ukrainian children reflects both increased institutional readiness and improved communication between families and authorities. Counseling efforts, mediation services, and accumulated administrative experience played a crucial role in facilitating informed decision-making and status transitions.

At the same time, the data highlight persistent challenges related to capacity, coordination, and equity. The uneven pace of transition across age groups and educational levels suggests that integration remains more accessible for younger children, particularly in preschool and early primary education. This observation aligns with broader educational research indicating that early childhood education provides more flexible and inclusive integration environments. In contrast, transitions at the lower secondary and upper secondary levels remain more complex, constrained by curriculum alignment, assessment requirements, and limited availability of school places.

Institutional Learning and the Role of Local Ecosystems

The experience of managing large-scale educational integration in Constanța County has generated significant institutional learning. Initial reliance on emergency measures gave way to more structured coordination among schools, inspectorates, local administrations, and civil society actors. The development of partnerships with non-governmental organizations enabled the creation of educational hubs and support structures that complemented formal schooling.

Organizations such as UNICEF Romania, World Vision Romania, and Jesuit Refugee Service Romania contributed expertise, resources, and operational flexibility, particularly in the areas of psychosocial support, educational mediation, and parental engagement. These partnerships reduced institutional isolation and facilitated a more holistic response to complex needs.

The increasing involvement of multiple institutions also contributed to a growing awareness of the long-term implications of integration efforts. What began as a crisis response gradually evolved into a ~~coordinated ecosystem of support, characterized by information sharing, joint planning, and project-based~~

collaboration. This shift is evident in the emergence of activities focused not only on immediate access but also on long-term educational pathways, professional development of teachers, and the development of inclusive pedagogical practices.

Beyond Numbers: Qualitative Insights and Emerging Patterns

While quantitative data provide valuable indicators of change, qualitative observations offer essential context for interpreting these trends. One of the most consistent findings across educational settings is the rapid integration of preschool-aged children. The universal language of play, combined with flexible curricular structures and reduced academic pressure, enabled young children to adapt quickly, often acquiring basic Romanian language skills within months. This pattern reinforces the importance of early educational inclusion as a foundation for long-term integration.

Parental attitudes also evolved over time. Initial caution and reluctance to commit to the Romanian education system gradually gave way to increased willingness to collaborate with schools and support integration efforts. In several cases, parents expressed interest in contributing actively to educational activities, volunteering, or participating in counseling sessions aimed at understanding educational pathways and future opportunities.

Another emerging pattern concerns the utilization of human resources from within the refugee community itself. Ukrainian teachers, educational specialists, and cultural mediators who participated in Romanian language initiation courses or hub activities became valuable assets in facilitating communication, building trust, and supporting integration. Their involvement bridged cultural and linguistic gaps while also reinforcing the dignity and agency of refugee communities.

These qualitative dimensions highlight the importance of moving beyond enrollment statistics to assess integration outcomes. Attendance, engagement, emotional well-being, and perceptions of belonging are equally critical indicators of success. The convergence of quantitative stabilization and qualitative improvement suggests that the integration process in Constanța County is entering a more mature phase, characterized by greater institutional coherence and shared responsibility.

Consolidated Observations, Emerging Opportunities, and Policy-Oriented Proposals for Sustainable Educational Integration

The accumulation of institutional experience, statistical evidence, and qualitative feedback in Constanța County has generated a set of convergent observations that clarify both the strengths and the limitations of current integration efforts. These observations, derived from direct interaction with refugee children, parents, teachers, and institutional actors, reveal patterns of adaptation that are uneven across age groups, educational levels, and family contexts. At the same time, they illuminate a series of opportunities for policy refinement and strategic intervention capable of transforming emergency responses into sustainable integration mechanisms.

One of the most consistent observations concerns the rapid and largely unproblematic integration of preschool-aged children. In early childhood education settings, linguistic barriers are mitigated by the predominance of play-based learning, non-verbal communication, and affective interaction. The socialization mechanisms inherent in preschool environments facilitate spontaneous interaction and peer bonding, allowing refugee children to acquire basic language skills and social routines in a relatively short period. This pattern underscores the importance of early educational inclusion as a protective factor against long-term marginalization and educational discontinuity.

By contrast, integration becomes progressively more complex as children advance through the educational system. At primary and especially lower secondary levels, curricular demands increase, assessment becomes more formalized, and linguistic proficiency becomes a prerequisite for meaningful participation. These structural characteristics amplify the challenges faced by students with interrupted schooling or limited exposure to the host language. The data and observations from Constanța County suggest that without targeted academic and psychosocial support, older students are at greater risk of disengagement or prolonged reliance on provisional educational arrangements.

Parental involvement emerged as another critical factor shaping integration outcomes. Initially, many parents adopted a cautious stance, prioritizing flexibility and reversibility over long-term educational commitments. Over time, however, increased familiarity with the Romanian education system and sustained interaction with schools and support services fostered greater openness to collaboration.

Parents increasingly sought guidance regarding educational pathways, progression opportunities, and the implications of different status options for their children's future. This shift highlights the central role of parental counseling as a mediating mechanism between institutional frameworks and individual decision-making.

A further observation relates to the strategic use of human resources within the refugee community

itself. Ukrainian teachers, educational specialists, and cultural mediators who participated in Romanian language initiation courses or hub-based educational activities proved instrumental in facilitating communication and building trust. Their involvement not only enhanced the effectiveness of educational interventions but also reinforced a sense of agency and dignity among refugee communities. These experiences suggest that integration strategies should move beyond a deficit-oriented approach and actively valorize the competencies and expertise present within displaced populations.

Opportunities for Structural Development and Institutional Synergy

Building on these observations, several opportunities for structural development become apparent. One such opportunity lies in the gradual shift from emergency-driven, fragmented interventions toward coordinated, multi-level strategies that align national policy, local administration, educational institutions, and civil society actors. The experience of Constanța County demonstrates that integration outcomes improve when interventions are synchronized and mutually reinforcing, rather than isolated and reactive.

Another opportunity concerns the professional development of teaching staff. The presence of children affected by trauma, displacement, and cultural dislocation requires pedagogical competencies that extend beyond traditional classroom management and subject instruction. Training programs focused on inclusive education, trauma-informed pedagogy, and intercultural communication have already been initiated by various accredited trainers, often with support from non-governmental organizations. Expanding and institutionalizing such programs would enhance teachers' capacity to respond effectively to diverse learning needs and to design personalized educational pathways for refugee students, similar to those developed for children with learning difficulties.

The development of educational hubs, supported by non-governmental organizations and coordinated with the County School Inspectorate, represents another significant opportunity. These hubs functioned as flexible spaces for learning, counseling, and community engagement, complementing formal schooling and providing a buffer against institutional overload. Their success points to the potential of hybrid models that combine formal education with community-based support structures, particularly in contexts of rapid demographic change.

At a systemic level, the accumulation of data and experience has increased awareness of the long-term nature of displacement and its implications for educational planning. What was initially perceived as a temporary crisis has evolved into a prolonged situation requiring durable solutions. This recognition creates a window of opportunity for policy innovation, moving beyond ad hoc measures toward coherent frameworks that can be adapted to future displacement scenarios.

Policy-Oriented Proposals for Enhanced Educational Integration

In light of these observations and opportunities, several policy-oriented proposals emerge as particularly relevant for strengthening educational integration in the Romanian pre-university system. One such proposal concerns the admission of foreign and Ukrainian students to upper secondary education. As an increasing number of students express the desire to continue their studies at the high school level, the absence of a dedicated admission framework has become a significant constraint. Currently, admission is often limited to places remaining after the completion of standard admission rounds, which severely restricts options and disproportionately channels students toward vocational education.

The adoption of a special order by the Ministry of Education regulating the admission of foreign and refugee students to upper secondary education would address this structural gap. Such an order could establish dedicated admission pathways, transparent criteria, and equitable access to a broader range of educational options, thereby aligning educational opportunities with students' aspirations and competencies.

Another proposal involves the systematic implementation of peer education models. The concept of peer education, operationalized through volunteer contracts or practical training placements, offers a scalable and cost-effective mechanism for supporting integration. Students from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences within Ovidius University of Constanța could be engaged as peer educators, mentors, or facilitators, working alongside teachers and counselors. This approach would not only support refugee students but also provide meaningful practical experience for university students, fostering civic engagement and professional development.

Peer education could be extended to student-to-student models within schools, encouraging collaborative learning and mutual support among pupils. Such initiatives would contribute to inclusive school climates and reduce social distance between refugee and host students.

Parental counseling represents a further area requiring systematic development. Structured counseling programs focused on educational integration would provide parents with clear information regarding schooling options, progression pathways, assessment procedures, and long-term implications. By supporting informed decision-making, such programs would reduce uncertainty and promote alignment between family

strategies and institutional objectives.

The expansion of mentoring and intercultural mediation services also emerges as a priority. In Constanța, partnerships with organizations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service have enabled the deployment of intercultural mediators who provide scheduled support at the County School Inspectorate and intervene in schools upon request. Institutionalizing and expanding this model would enhance accessibility and continuity, ensuring that mediation services are available where and when they are most needed.

Finally, sustained investment in teacher training remains essential. Courses focused on teaching in inclusive, multicultural classrooms, addressing trauma-related behaviors, and designing personalized educational pathways should be integrated into continuous professional development frameworks. Such training would not only benefit refugee students but also strengthen the overall capacity of the education system to respond to diversity and complexity.

Toward a Shared Responsibility Model

Taken together, these proposals reflect a shift toward a shared responsibility model of integration, in which success depends on the coordinated efforts of multiple stakeholders. Educational integration cannot be achieved solely through regulatory adjustments or isolated support measures. It requires sustained collaboration, communication, and networking among institutions, educators, families, and community organizations.

The experience of Constanța County illustrates that when such collaboration is achieved, integration efforts generate tangible positive outcomes. Messages of gratitude from parents and visible signs of well-being among children attest to the human impact of coordinated interventions. These qualitative indicators, while not easily captured in statistics, provide compelling evidence of the value of inclusive, empathetic, and well-structured educational responses.

Conclusion: From Emergency Response to Sustainable Educational Integration

The experience of integrating Ukrainian refugee children and youth into the Romanian pre-university education system in Constanța County illustrates a broader transformation from crisis-driven intervention to emerging models of sustainable inclusion. What initially unfolded as an urgent humanitarian response gradually evolved into a complex institutional process involving legal adaptation, educational restructuring, intersectoral cooperation, and continuous negotiation between provisionality and permanence. This evolution provides valuable insights into the dynamics of educational integration in contexts of prolonged displacement and offers lessons that extend beyond the local setting.

One of the central conclusions of this analysis is that integration cannot be effectively achieved through isolated or short-term measures. Early interventions, while essential for stabilizing vulnerable populations, were largely shaped by assumptions of temporariness and reversibility. Auditor status, emergency enrollment procedures, and parallel educational arrangements in the refugees' mother tongue reflected rational responses to uncertainty but also generated structural ambiguities that limited long-term educational continuity. Over time, the persistence of the conflict challenged these assumptions, necessitating a shift toward more durable institutional solutions.

The gradual increase in transitions from auditor to full student status, particularly at preschool and primary levels, signals a reconfiguration of parental strategies and institutional expectations. As displacement became protracted, families increasingly prioritized stability, predictability, and recognized educational pathways. This shift underscores the importance of institutional trust as a key determinant of integration. Trust is not produced solely through regulatory frameworks but is built through sustained interaction, transparent communication, and the visible capacity of institutions to respond to complex needs.

The Constanța case also highlights the differentiated nature of integration across age groups. Early childhood education emerged as a particularly effective entry point, characterized by rapid adaptation, flexible pedagogies, and reduced linguistic barriers. Conversely, integration challenges intensified at higher educational levels, where curricular rigidity, assessment requirements, and limited access to upper secondary education constrained opportunities. These disparities point to the need for age-sensitive and level-specific integration strategies, rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

Another critical conclusion concerns the role of parents as active agents in the integration process. Initially positioned as cautious decision-makers navigating uncertainty, parents gradually became collaborators seeking guidance and clarity regarding educational trajectories. Structured parental counseling emerged as a decisive factor in facilitating informed choices and aligning family strategies with institutional frameworks. Without such mediation, integration risks remaining fragmented and reactive, shaped more by immediate constraints than by long-term educational interests.

The involvement of non-governmental organizations and international partners proved indispensable throughout all stages of the process. NGOs provided flexibility, expertise, and rapid response capacity that

complemented the regulatory and administrative functions of public institutions. Educational hubs, mediation services, and psychosocial support initiatives bridged gaps between formal schooling and community needs, illustrating the value of hybrid governance models. Importantly, these partnerships also fostered institutional learning, enabling public authorities to refine procedures, develop new competencies, and anticipate future challenges.

A particularly valuable lesson derived from this experience is the importance of recognizing and mobilizing resources within refugee communities themselves. Ukrainian teachers, educational specialists, and mediators played a crucial role in facilitating communication, building trust, and supporting adaptation. Their involvement challenges deficit-oriented narratives of displacement and demonstrates the potential of asset-based integration models that valorize existing competencies and experiences.

From a policy perspective, the analysis reveals both progress and persistent gaps. The evolution of the legislative framework reflects a commendable effort to balance flexibility with coherence, yet the coexistence of multiple procedures for study equivalence and evaluation continues to generate complexity and uneven implementation. The absence of a dedicated admission framework for upper secondary education remains a significant structural limitation, restricting educational aspirations and reinforcing inequalities. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring continuity and equity in educational pathways.

Beyond specific regulatory adjustments, the Constanța experience underscores the need for a shift in conceptual framing. Educational integration should be understood not as a temporary accommodation of exceptional circumstances but as a systemic capacity that education systems must develop in an era of increased mobility, conflict, and environmental disruption. This perspective calls for the institutionalization of integration mechanisms, including continuous teacher training, permanent mediation services, and integrated data monitoring systems.

At the same time, the human dimension of integration must remain central. Quantitative indicators, while necessary for planning and evaluation, cannot fully capture the lived experiences of children, families, and educators. Expressions of gratitude from parents and the observable well-being of children who regain a sense of normalcy serve as powerful reminders that integration is ultimately about restoring dignity, stability, and opportunity. These qualitative outcomes, though less visible in official statistics, are essential indicators of success.

The concluding message of this study aligns with the principle that effective integration is a shared responsibility. It requires collaboration among educational institutions, public authorities, civil society organizations, families, and learners themselves. Communication, networking, resource mapping, and project-based cooperation are not ancillary activities but core components of sustainable integration strategies. The experience of Constanța County demonstrates that when such collaboration is achieved, integration efforts move beyond crisis management toward the construction of inclusive educational environments capable of responding to long-term challenges.

In this sense, the closing affirmation that “together we can do more” acquires a concrete analytical meaning. It encapsulates the empirical finding that no single actor or institution can address the multifaceted demands of educational integration alone. Only through coordinated, reflective, and empathetic action can education systems fulfill their dual role as spaces of learning and as anchors of social cohesion in times of uncertainty.

STRATEGIC PROPOSALS FOR ENHANCING THE INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN STUDENTS AT OVIDIUS UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA

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Abstract. This document proposes a structured, longitudinal framework for integrating Ukrainian students at Ovidius University of Constanța, addressing linguistic, academic, psychological, social, and organizational needs amid displacement challenges. Unlike reactive measures, it emphasizes institutional responsibility through four sequential stages: pre-enrollment orientation with intensive Romanian/English courses (A2/B1 targets) and campus acclimation; social integration via peer mentoring and intercultural workshops; sustained academic/psychological support including tutoring, counseling, and digital resources; and evaluation/adaptation using surveys, interviews, and partnerships with NGOs. The framework, outlined in a strategic table, builds cumulatively for resilience, belonging, and performance, shifting burden from students to proactive governance. Expected outcomes include reduced isolation, improved well-being, academic success, and flexible adaptations based on feedback. It promotes transferable models for higher education, fostering inclusive ecosystems via collaborations (e.g., with UNHCR, UNICEF).

Key words. Ukrainian students; European Inclusion; language orientation; academic tutoring; intercultural workshops; refugee higher education.

Introduction

Integrate Ukrainian students at Ovidius University of Constanța as an ongoing, multi-dimensional process – not isolated administrative steps – but spanning pre-enrollment to full academic trajectory. Effective integration encompasses interconnected linguistic, academic, psychological, social, and organizational dimensions, each of which shapes students' capacity to engage meaningfully with the university environment and to sustain academic performance. In contexts marked by forced displacement, uncertainty, and rapid transition, integration strategies must therefore move beyond reactive accommodation and adopt a structured, longitudinal perspective capable of accompanying students from the pre-enrollment phase through their entire academic trajectory.

The framework proposed in this paper is explicitly designed to operate along a clearly defined temporal horizon, extending from pre-registration and initial orientation to continuous evaluation and adaptive program development. It is grounded in a guiding operational principle that combines facilitated access to institutional resources, systematic monitoring of student progress, and the capacity for rapid institutional adaptation in response to emerging needs. Rather than placing the burden of adjustment primarily on individual students, the framework positions integration as an active institutional responsibility, embedded within governance structures, support services, and academic practices.

To operationalize this approach, the framework is structured around four interdependent strategic axes – language and orientation, mentoring and intercultural engagement, psychological and academic support, and monitoring and adaptation – which are implemented through successive, interconnected stages. Each stage builds cumulatively upon the previous one, reinforcing both individual student resilience and institutional learning capacities. The aim is not merely functional or procedural integration, but the creation of a stable and inclusive academic environment in which Ukrainian students can participate fully, develop a sense of belonging, and establish durable academic and social connections within the university community.

The overall logic, sequencing, and expected outcomes of these implementation stages are synthesized in **Table 1**, which provides an overview of the proposed strategic framework. As summarized in Table 1, the integration process unfolds across four main stages – pre-enrollment and initial orientation, social and intercultural integration, academic and psychological support, and evaluation with adaptive development – each aligned with specific strategic axes, implementation formats, and anticipated results. This synthetic representation serves as a structural reference point for the detailed analytical sections that follow, in which each stage and strategic axis is examined in depth.

Table 1

Implementation Stage	Strategic Axis	Key Actions	Implementation Format	Expected Outcomes
Stage 1: Pre-enrollment and Initial Orientation	Language and Orientation	Intensive Romanian and English language courses (3 months prior to semester); cultural and academic orientation program	Hybrid language courses with interactive modules and periodic assessments; on-campus orientation activities during first academic week	Basic linguistic competence (A2 Romanian / B1 English); reduced cultural shock; faster adaptation to academic environment
	Language and Orientation	Campus and city tours; presentation of academic norms, institutional rules, and digital platforms	Guided experiential activities and practical demonstrations	Increased institutional familiarity; improved confidence in navigating university structures
Stage 2: Social and Intercultural Integration	Mentoring and Interculturality	Peer mentoring program with Romanian student volunteers; regular mentor-mentee meetings	Structured mentoring framework with continuous communication	Reduced social isolation; strengthened sense of belonging; enhanced peer support networks
	Mentoring and Interculturality	Monthly intercultural workshops and team-building activities	Interactive workshops and collaborative exercises in mixed student groups	Improved intercultural competencies; consolidated interpersonal relations; inclusive campus climate
Stage 3: Academic and Psychological Support	Psychological and Academic Support	Individual and group psychological counseling services; continuous access	Permanent counseling services; confidential individual sessions and facilitated group support	Reduced stress and anxiety; improved emotional well-being; increased resilience
	Psychological and Academic Support	Academic tutoring; access to digital learning resources and online libraries	Tutoring sessions; digital repositories; recorded lectures	Improved academic performance; enhanced curricular integration; flexible learning pathways
Stage 4: Evaluation and Adaptive Development	Monitoring and Adaptation	Systematic monitoring through surveys, interviews, and focus groups	Quarterly surveys; semiannual interviews; group discussions	Early identification of challenges; evidence-based program adjustment
	Monitoring and Adaptation	Continuous feedback and adaptive intervention; institutional partnerships	Dedicated implementation team; collaboration with NGOs, universities, and international institutions	Flexible and sustainable integration program; expanded resource base; institutional learning

Stage One: Pre-Enrollment and Initial Orientation as Foundations for Academic Engagement

The pre-enrollment stage represents a critical intervention point in the integration process, as it directly influences students' capacity to navigate academic demands and institutional structures from the outset. Linguistic readiness and institutional familiarity are decisive factors in determining whether students experience the transition into higher education as manageable or overwhelming. Consequently, the proposed strategy prioritizes intensive language training and structured orientation activities before and immediately after enrollment.

Achieve A2 Romanian/B1 English proficiency via 3-month hybrid courses (online sync/async, role-playing, assessments) before semester start. Format: Interactive modules + weekly progress checks. These courses are delivered in a hybrid format that combines synchronous online instruction with asynchronous learning resources, enabling flexible participation while maintaining pedagogical rigor. Interactive teaching methods, such as role-playing academic scenarios, simulated seminar discussions, and task-based learning activities, are employed to ensure that language acquisition is closely aligned with real academic communication needs.

Regular formative assessments are embedded throughout the language training period, allowing instructors to monitor individual progress and adjust instructional strategies accordingly. These assessments also serve to familiarize students with evaluation formats commonly used in higher education, reducing anxiety associated with testing and performance measurement. The explicit learning outcomes of this phase – achieving A2 proficiency in Romanian and B1 proficiency in English – are defined not as abstract benchmarks but as functional thresholds that enable students to understand lectures, participate in discussions, and engage with written academic materials. By reaching these levels prior to the start of the semester, students enter the academic environment with a baseline sense of competence, which significantly enhances confidence and participation.

In parallel with language preparation, the initial orientation program implemented during the first academic week is designed to address the cultural and institutional dimensions of integration. This program combines informational sessions with experiential activities, such as guided tours of the campus and the city, introductions to key administrative units, and demonstrations of digital platforms used for learning management and communication. Rather than presenting information in a purely declarative manner, the orientation emphasizes contextual understanding, helping students grasp not only how institutional systems function but also why they operate in specific ways.

Particular attention is given to explicating academic norms, assessment criteria, and expectations regarding student autonomy and responsibility. These elements are often implicit and culturally embedded, yet they play a decisive role in shaping academic success. By making such norms explicit, the orientation program reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings and supports a smoother transition into academic routines. The anticipated outcomes of this stage include a measurable reduction in cultural shock, faster acclimatization to academic practices, and an increased sense of institutional transparency and accessibility.

Stages Two and Three: Integration and Continuous Support Through Relational and Academic Structures

Following the initial orientation, the integration process enters a sustained phase characterized by continuous support, relational embedding, and academic stabilization. This phase is operationalized through interconnected mechanisms that address social integration, intercultural competence development, psychological well-being, and academic performance. Central to this approach is the recognition that integration is not a one-time adjustment but an ongoing process shaped by evolving challenges and experiences.

The mentoring and personalized counseling system constitutes a cornerstone of this phase. Ukrainian students are paired with Romanian student volunteers who have received basic training in intercultural communication, institutional procedures, and referral mechanisms for support services. These mentors function as accessible points of contact who can provide guidance on both formal academic requirements and informal aspects of student life. Regularly scheduled meetings ensure continuity of interaction, while flexible communication channels allow for timely responses to emergent needs.

Frame mentoring collaboratively: Romanian volunteers guide Ukrainian students on academics/social life, gaining intercultural skills themselves – building reciprocal peer networks via bi-weekly meetings. For Ukrainian students, this arrangement facilitates social integration, reduces feelings of isolation, and contributes to the development of a sense of belonging within the university community. For mentors, the experience offers opportunities for civic engagement, intercultural learning, and personal development. Over time, these relationships contribute to the formation of peer networks that extend beyond the formal mentoring structure, embedding students more deeply within the social fabric of the institution.

Complementing individual mentoring, monthly intercultural workshops and team-building activities provide structured spaces for collective interaction and skill development. These activities are designed to move beyond superficial cultural exchange and focus instead on practical competencies required for collaboration in diverse academic environments. Topics such as conflict management, communication styles, and collaborative problem-solving are addressed through interactive exercises that encourage reflection and dialogue.

By engaging Ukrainian and Romanian students in mixed groups, these workshops create opportunities for meaningful interaction that might not occur spontaneously. The emphasis on shared tasks and cooperative learning fosters mutual understanding and challenges stereotypes, contributing to a more inclusive campus culture. The cumulative effect of these activities is the gradual normalization of diversity within academic and social contexts, reducing the perception of “otherness” and strengthening social cohesion.

Psychological support services play an equally critical role during this phase, addressing the emotional and mental health challenges associated with displacement, uncertainty, and adaptation stress.

The proposed framework ensures permanent access to counseling services, including both individual sessions and group-based support formats. Individual counseling provides confidential spaces for addressing personal concerns, while group sessions facilitate shared reflection and collective coping strategies.

The availability of group support sessions is particularly important in normalizing emotional responses and reducing stigma associated with seeking help. By creating spaces where students can articulate experiences and challenges collectively, the university fosters a culture of care and mutual support. The anticipated outcomes include reduced levels of stress and anxiety, enhanced emotional resilience, and improved capacity to engage with academic demands.

Academic tutoring and facilitated access to digital learning resources further reinforce integration during this stage. Targeted tutoring sessions are organized to support students in preparing for examinations, understanding course content, and developing effective study strategies. These sessions are tailored to address both disciplinary content and academic skills, such as critical reading, academic writing, and time management.

Simultaneously, expanded access to digital resources—including online libraries, repositories of learning materials, and recorded lectures—supports flexible learning and accommodates diverse learning styles and paces. By integrating these resources into a coherent support structure, the university enhances academic performance and promotes equitable participation in curricular activities. Importantly, academic support is coordinated with mentoring and counseling services, ensuring a holistic approach to student well-being and success.

Stage Four: Evaluation, Feedback, and Adaptive Governance

The final stage of the proposed framework focuses on evaluation and adaptation, recognizing that effective integration requires continuous monitoring and institutional learning. Integration is conceptualized not as a static outcome but as a dynamic process that evolves in response to changing needs, contexts, and experiences. Accordingly, the framework incorporates a systematic monitoring system that combines quantitative and qualitative methods.

Conduct quarterly surveys on: language skills, grades, well-being (anxiety scales), and belonging (network size). Follow with semi-annual interviews for qualitative depth. Semiannual interviews offer deeper insights into individual trajectories, capturing nuanced perspectives that may not be evident through survey data alone. Facilitated group discussions further enrich the evaluation process by enabling collective reflection and dialogue.

The data generated through these monitoring activities serve as an early warning system, allowing the identification of emerging issues before they escalate into significant barriers. Regular analysis of feedback enables the implementation team to assess the effectiveness of specific interventions and identify areas requiring adjustment. Importantly, evaluation processes are designed to be transparent and participatory, reinforcing students' sense of agency and trust in institutional support mechanisms.

Continuous feedback and adaptive intervention constitute the operational core of this stage. A dedicated implementation team, comprising academic staff, support service representatives, and student mentors, is responsible for translating evaluation findings into concrete actions. These may include curricular adjustments, the introduction of new support resources, or the expansion of extracurricular activities focused on personal development and community engagement.

The adaptive governance model embedded in this stage ensures that the integration framework remains flexible and responsive. Rather than adhering rigidly to predefined structures, the program evolves in response to evidence and feedback, aligning institutional practices with students' lived experiences. This adaptability enhances the program's relevance and effectiveness, while also contributing to institutional learning and capacity building.

Strategic partnerships and collaborative networks further strengthen the sustainability and scope of the integration framework. Collaboration with non-governmental organizations, other universities, and international institutions expands the pool of available resources and introduces complementary expertise. Such partnerships facilitate access to specialized services, funding opportunities, and best practices, situating the university's efforts within a broader ecosystem of support for displaced students.

Over time, these collaborations contribute to the institutionalization of integration practices, transforming them from ad hoc responses into stable organizational routines. The development of a transferable model of integration, grounded in evidence and experience, positions the university as a proactive actor in addressing challenges associated with international student mobility and forced displacement.

Synthesis of the Longitudinal Integration Logic

Taken as a whole, the proposed framework articulates a coherent, longitudinal approach to integrating Ukrainian students into Ovidius University of Constanța. By aligning pre-enrollment preparation with continuous support and adaptive evaluation, the strategy addresses both immediate adjustment needs and long-term inclusion objectives. The guiding principle of facilitated access, monitored progress, and rapid adaptation ensures that integration remains an active institutional responsibility rather than an individualized burden placed on students.

The emphasis on language readiness, relational mentoring, psychological and academic support, and evidence-based adaptation reflects a holistic understanding of integration as a multidimensional process. Success is measured not solely by academic outcomes but also by indicators of well-being, belonging, and institutional trust. Within this framework, integration becomes a shared endeavor involving students, staff, and institutional partners, fostering a resilient and inclusive academic community.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, PROTECTION, AND INTEGRATION TRAJECTORIES OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN ROMANIA: AN ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE SEIS 2025 PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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Abstract. The war in Ukraine generated one of the largest forced displacement crises in recent European history, significantly affecting host societies and public institutions. Romania became both a transit and destination country for refugees, requiring rapid humanitarian, legal, and socio-economic responses. This paper provides an analytical interpretation of the preliminary results of the 2025 Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS) conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Romania. Rather than presenting raw statistical data, the study examines the relationships between legal protection, socio-economic integration, and access to essential services among Ukrainian refugees.

Using a multi-sectoral perspective, the paper analyzes demographic characteristics, legal status, protection challenges, labour market participation, education, health access, and housing security. The findings suggest that although legal access and basic protection mechanisms have largely stabilized, structural vulnerabilities persist in employment quality, income stability, documentation procedures, and long-term integration pathways. Language barriers, administrative fragmentation, and uncertainty regarding future residence remain central constraints affecting both economic participation and social cohesion.

The study also highlights a dual dynamic: refugees demonstrate significant adaptive capacity, high educational attainment, and relatively high labour participation compared to typical displacement contexts, yet many households rely on coping strategies indicating moderate material insecurity. The Romanian case therefore illustrates a transition from emergency humanitarian response toward conditional socio-economic inclusion, where access exists but stability remains fragile.

The paper concludes that refugee integration should be conceptualized not solely as legal protection or labour market access, but as a multi-dimensional process linking documentation, services, education, and psychosocial well-being. The SEIS findings underline the importance of coordinated policies, accessible information, and long-term integration planning in transforming temporary protection into sustainable inclusion.

Keywords. Ukrainian refugees; Romania; socio-economic integration; protection; UNHCR; SEIS; displacement; social cohesion; labour market; temporary protection

Forced Displacement, Protection, and the Role of UNHCR in the Romanian Context

The armed conflict in Ukraine has generated one of the largest forced displacement movements recorded in Europe since the mid-twentieth century. Beyond immediate humanitarian consequences, displacement has profound social, economic, and institutional implications for host societies. Romania rapidly became a significant host country, both as a transit route and as a place of temporary or medium-term residence. In this context, the protection and integration of refugees required coordinated action between international organizations, national authorities, local institutions, and civil society actors.

A central role in this response has been played by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1950. The organization's mandate is to provide international protection to refugees and to seek durable solutions to displacement. Importantly, contemporary humanitarian practice places affected populations not merely as beneficiaries of aid, but as partners in planning and decision-making processes. This participatory approach recognizes that protection is not limited to legal status, but includes access to services, information, and the capacity to rebuild daily life.

The global scale of forced displacement illustrates the magnitude of the challenge. More than 123 million people worldwide have been forced to leave their homes, including tens of millions of refugees and asylum seekers. Within this broader context, the Ukrainian displacement crisis represents a specific European manifestation of a global phenomenon, yet with distinctive characteristics: high levels of education among refugees, urban settlement patterns, and strong mobility within Europe

In Romania, the refugee population has concentrated primarily in urban areas, especially major cities and regional centers. This pattern has direct implications for service provision, labour market participation, and education. Unlike traditional camp-based humanitarian responses, the Ukrainian refugee situation in Romania is predominantly urban, meaning integration processes unfold within existing social and economic structures rather than isolated humanitarian settings.

Protection, therefore, extends beyond border access and legal recognition. It includes access to territory, documentation, humanitarian assistance, and mechanisms that enable individuals to participate in social and economic life. UNHCR interventions in Romania have combined humanitarian assistance, legal support, and coordination with public institutions. Collaborative networks, academic partnerships, and community-based feedback mechanisms have become important components of this approach, aiming to ensure that assistance corresponds to actual needs rather than administrative assumptions.

Particular attention has been given to refugees with specific vulnerabilities, including persons with disabilities, chronic illness, and families with dependent children. Community-based protection models emphasize information provision, counselling, and participatory mechanisms through which refugees can communicate needs and concerns. Such mechanisms are crucial in large-scale displacement contexts, where lack of information may constitute a barrier as significant as lack of resources.

The socio-economic profile of Ukrainian refugees also shapes protection strategies. A significant proportion of the population consists of women and children, while a notable share of working-age adults possesses higher education qualifications. Consequently, integration policies cannot focus solely on humanitarian relief; they must also address employment, education, and long-term participation in society.

Within this broader framework, the Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS) provides an essential empirical instrument. Conducted periodically in Romania, the survey aims to understand the needs, living conditions, and integration trajectories of refugees across multiple sectors. Rather than measuring a single dimension, SEIS captures interactions between legal protection, economic participation, access to services, and social cohesion. By doing so, it allows the transition from descriptive humanitarian reporting toward evidence-based policy analysis.

Demographic Structure, Legal Status, and Patterns of Vulnerability

The demographic profile of Ukrainian refugees residing in Romania provides the first essential key for interpreting all subsequent socio-economic indicators. Displacement is not a uniform phenomenon affecting an abstract population, but a process shaped by age structure, gender composition, household characteristics, and geographic distribution. The SEIS data reveal that the refugee population in Romania is structurally different from many displacement situations observed globally. Rather than being composed primarily of single young male migrants, the Ukrainian refugee population is dominated by households consisting largely of women and children, while a considerable share of working-age adults possess higher educational qualifications. This demographic configuration influences labour market participation, education patterns, and social protection needs simultaneously.

A significant proportion of the refugee population resides in urban areas, particularly in major cities. The concentration in metropolitan environments indicates that displacement in Romania has taken the form of urban integration rather than camp-based accommodation. Urban settlement allows refugees to access employment opportunities, schools, healthcare, and transportation networks, but it also exposes them to housing costs, competition in the labour market, and administrative complexity. Consequently, urban residence does not automatically imply stability. Instead, it shifts vulnerability from physical safety concerns to socio-economic pressures.

Household composition further clarifies the vulnerability structure. A large share of households include children, and a noticeable proportion include persons with disabilities, chronic illnesses, infants, or pregnant women. Such characteristics influence not only humanitarian assistance needs but also labour market participation. Caring responsibilities reduce the ability of adults, especially women, to engage in full-time employment and limit flexibility in accepting available jobs. In this context, employment indicators cannot be interpreted without considering family responsibilities and caregiving constraints.

Legal protection constitutes a foundational dimension of refugee integration. The majority of surveyed households have been granted temporary protection status. Temporary protection ensures residence rights, access to basic services, and eligibility for assistance. However, its temporary nature introduces an element of uncertainty. A notable proportion of respondents indicate intentions to apply for another form of legal status in the near future, suggesting that many refugees perceive their situation not as short-term transit but as a medium-term residence requiring legal stability.

The process of obtaining or renewing documentation emerges as a critical administrative challenge. Respondents report long waiting times, difficulties accessing interpretation services, and problems related to missing documents. These obstacles have implications that extend beyond bureaucratic inconvenience. Legal

documentation functions as the gateway to employment contracts, social benefits, education enrollment, and housing agreements. When documentation procedures are delayed or complicated, participation in socio-economic life becomes constrained.

Document replacement presents another structural difficulty. Many refugees cannot renew identity papers in the host country because such documents are issued only by authorities in the country of origin. Administrative procedures may require interaction with consular services, which can be affected by security conditions or regulatory changes. Some respondents report inability to afford administrative costs, while others indicate lack of knowledge regarding procedures or difficulty using online services. These barriers illustrate that legal protection is not solely determined by formal status but also by administrative accessibility.

Changes in civil status also create administrative complications. Births, marriages, and other family events require registration with civil authorities, yet refugees encounter language barriers, document shortages, and long waiting times when attempting to formalize such changes. The inability to register civil status events may affect access to benefits, school enrollment for children, and legal clarity regarding family composition.

Despite these challenges, the relationship between refugees and host communities appears generally stable. Many respondents describe relations with local populations as positive or unchanged, and feelings of safety in neighbourhoods remain relatively high. However, a minority report hostile attitudes, which are often attributed to perceived competition for jobs or resources, cultural differences, or language barriers. Social cohesion therefore appears neither fully conflictual nor fully integrated. Rather, it reflects a coexistence characterized by general acceptance but limited interaction.

Patterns of mobility also illuminate the complexity of displacement. Some refugees have returned temporarily to Ukraine, primarily to visit relatives, obtain documents, or access healthcare. Others have not returned due to security concerns, financial constraints, or fear of losing legal status in the host country. These movements demonstrate that displacement is not a linear relocation but a transnational condition in which individuals maintain connections with both origin and host societies.

Child protection indicators reveal additional dimensions of vulnerability. Although many respondents report no serious risks, concerns about psychological and physical violence, particularly online exposure, are present. Reporting mechanisms exist, yet awareness of how to report cases remains uneven. The data therefore suggest that formal protection structures are available but not always fully understood or trusted.

Gender-based violence awareness also varies. Many respondents know about support services, but barriers such as language, stigma, and limited trust in institutions continue to influence service utilization. Such findings indicate that access to services does not automatically translate into effective protection; social and cultural factors shape the willingness to seek help.

Overall, the demographic and legal data portray a population that has achieved relative physical safety but remains administratively and socially precarious. Temporary protection provides a legal foundation, yet administrative barriers, caregiving responsibilities, and uncertainty regarding long-term residence shape daily life. Refugees are neither in an emergency survival situation nor fully integrated. Instead, they occupy an intermediate condition characterized by security of presence but instability of future prospects.

Employment, Income Stability, and Material Vulnerability

Socio-economic integration represents the most demanding phase of refugee inclusion because it marks the transition from legal protection to economic autonomy. While temporary protection provides access to territory and basic services, long-term stability depends on employment opportunities, income security, and the capacity of households to sustain daily living without continuous humanitarian assistance. The preliminary findings of the Socio-Economic Insights Survey conducted in 2025 among refugees from Ukraine living in Romania provide an empirical framework for assessing this process (UNHCR, 2025).

Labour market participation among refugees has reached a significant level. Approximately 61% of working-age refugees are economically active, while 58% possess a bachelor's degree or higher. The overall employment rate reached 51% in 2025, indicating a gradual transition from emergency dependence toward economic participation. These values suggest a relatively strong adaptive capacity of the displaced population, especially when compared to other displacement contexts, where labour participation often remains limited for extended periods.

However, participation does not necessarily translate into economic security. A substantial share of refugees remain outside stable employment, and occupational mismatch is widespread.

Many highly educated individuals accept lower-skilled positions due to language barriers and difficulties in recognition of qualifications. Downward professional mobility therefore becomes a structural feature of integration rather than an exceptional situation.

Employment quality further reflects partial inclusion. Among employed refugees, 69% have formal written employment contracts, while 27% are engaged in informal work arrangements. Informal employment

restricts access to labour rights, pension contributions, and social protection mechanisms, exposing households to financial instability. Consequently, labour market entry provides participation but not full protection.

Language proficiency emerges as the main structural barrier to employment. Limited knowledge of the Romanian language is the most frequently reported obstacle to finding work, followed by the inability to secure adequately paid jobs and limited flexibility in working schedules. Childcare responsibilities also significantly affect labour participation, especially among women, as many households include dependent children and lack access to consistent childcare services. Employment decisions therefore prioritize immediate family needs over long-term professional development.

Financial indicators confirm the fragility of economic integration. Although 90% of refugee households have access to the banking system through bank accounts, 65% report having no savings or savings sufficient for only one month. Furthermore, 40% of households experienced a decrease in income during the previous twelve months. These figures demonstrate that economic activity coexists with financial vulnerability and limited resilience to economic shocks.

Household coping strategies provide additional insight into this vulnerability. Approximately 73% of households reported using at least one coping strategy during the previous month in order to manage financial pressure. These strategies include spending savings, borrowing money, reducing consumption, or postponing necessary expenditures such as healthcare or education. While such measures prevent immediate crisis, they weaken long-term economic stability.

Food security indicators reinforce this interpretation. The reduced Coping Strategy Index score of 9.15 indicates moderate food insecurity among refugee households. Although this represents an improvement compared with the previous year, it still reflects continuous economic pressure. Material deprivation levels are particularly significant: 34% of refugee households experience severe material and social deprivation, compared with 17% in the Romanian population and 6.4% at the European Union level. Labour market participation therefore does not guarantee living standards comparable to those of the host population.

Housing patterns illustrate the same intermediate stage of integration. Most refugees live in private accommodation rather than collective shelters, demonstrating progress beyond the emergency phase. However, many housing arrangements remain temporary or uncertain, and a substantial proportion of households lack long-term guarantees regarding their residence. Housing stability therefore remains conditional rather than secure.

Humanitarian assistance continues to play a complementary role in household survival. Around 45% of households reported receiving aid in the previous three months. Some beneficiaries expressed dissatisfaction, mainly because assistance was insufficient or not aligned with actual needs. This indicates a shift from emergency humanitarian needs toward stabilization needs, such as predictable income, employment continuity, and housing security.

Taken together, the data reveal a paradoxical but coherent pattern. Ukrainian refugees in Romania are economically active and engaged in the labour market, yet their financial position remains fragile. Integration has progressed beyond humanitarian dependence but has not reached full economic consolidation. Participation exists, but stability remains incomplete.

This situation can be described as conditional integration. Refugee households are capable of maintaining daily life under normal circumstances, yet relatively small disruptions – illness, administrative delays, or employment loss – can destabilize their situation. Consequently, integration policies should focus not only on employment access but also on employment quality, language acquisition, childcare availability, and recognition of qualifications.

Access to Education, Health, Housing Security, and Social Cohesion

While labour participation provides an important indicator of economic adaptation, the sustainability of integration depends equally on access to essential services and the capacity of refugees to participate in everyday social life. Education, healthcare, housing stability, and community relations together determine whether refugees remain temporary residents or gradually become socially embedded members of the host society. The SEIS findings show that Ukrainian refugees in Romania have achieved substantial access to services, yet access does not always imply stability or equality of participation.

Education represents the most significant long-term integration mechanism, particularly for families with children. A high proportion of children aged four to eighteen participate in some form of education, either in person or online. This indicates that parents prioritize educational continuity even under displacement conditions. However, participation patterns reveal a dual educational trajectory. Many children are enrolled in the Romanian national education system, while a substantial share remain formally enrolled in Ukrainian schools and attend classes remotely from abroad.

~~This dual enrolment reflects uncertainty regarding the duration of displacement. Families attempt to~~

preserve future options by maintaining links with the Ukrainian education system while simultaneously engaging with local institutions. The arrangement, however, produces complex consequences. Children navigating two curricula may face increased workload and adaptation stress, while language barriers complicate participation in local classrooms. For some families, remote education is chosen precisely because linguistic integration is difficult in the short term.

Language remains the primary obstacle to full educational participation. Even when children attend Romanian schools, communication difficulties affect comprehension, peer interaction, and academic performance. Informal education programs and supplementary learning environments therefore play an important supportive role. The survey also indicates that bullying is not a widespread phenomenon, suggesting that school environments are generally safe, although adaptation challenges remain present.

Healthcare access provides another measure of social inclusion. A majority of respondents needing medical services report successful access to care. This indicates that basic health infrastructure is available to refugees and that legal protection status facilitates entry into the healthcare system. Nevertheless, barriers persist. Language difficulties affect appointment scheduling, communication with medical staff, and understanding of treatment instructions. Financial constraints also influence access, particularly in cases involving clinic fees or specialized services.

Health needs are not limited to physical conditions. Mental health and psychosocial support constitute a major dimension of refugee well-being. A considerable proportion of individuals report a need for mental health and psychosocial support, reflecting the psychological impact of displacement, uncertainty, and separation from family members. Many individuals who accessed support reported improvements in well-being, suggesting that available services are effective when reached. However, barriers remain, including lack of information about where to seek help and communication challenges.

Accommodation stability further illustrates the intermediate stage of integration. Most refugee households live in private housing rather than collective centers, demonstrating progression beyond emergency shelter. Yet many housing arrangements remain uncertain. Some households rely on verbal agreements or short-term rental arrangements, and many are unsure how long they will be able to remain in their current residence. This uncertainty affects planning decisions, employment stability, and children's schooling continuity. Housing insecurity therefore persists not through homelessness but through unpredictability.

Social cohesion indicators offer a more optimistic perspective. Relationships between refugees and host communities are generally perceived as positive or unchanged. Feelings of safety in neighborhoods remain relatively high, and many respondents do not report serious security concerns. Nevertheless, some experiences of hostile attitudes occur, often linked to perceptions of competition for employment or resources, language differences, or cultural misunderstandings. These incidents do not dominate the experience but illustrate the fragility of social acceptance during prolonged displacement.

Information access constitutes a crucial protective factor. Most households report being able to obtain necessary information regarding rights, services, and assistance. The presence of safe reporting channels also indicates institutional openness. Such mechanisms are important because uncertainty and misinformation often exacerbate vulnerability more than material shortage.

The survey also highlights accountability dynamics in humanitarian assistance. Although many households received aid, a portion expressed dissatisfaction, primarily due to insufficient frequency or mismatch between assistance and needs. This does not necessarily indicate program failure but rather a transition in expectations. As displacement becomes prolonged, refugees move from emergency needs toward stabilization needs, such as employment, healthcare continuity, and predictable housing.

Taken together, the findings portray a gradual shift from humanitarian reception to social participation. Refugees are no longer solely recipients of assistance; they interact with schools, hospitals, labour markets, and local communities. However, participation remains conditional. Language barriers, documentation complexity, and housing insecurity continue to shape daily life.

The Romanian case therefore illustrates a form of partial integration. Access to institutions exists, and social conflict remains limited, yet long-term certainty has not been achieved. Refugees can function within society, but their future remains open and dependent on legal and economic developments.

Conclusion: From Temporary Protection to Conditional Integration

The preliminary findings of the Socio-Economic Insights Survey offer a detailed picture of the situation of Ukrainian refugees living in Romania several years after the initial displacement. The data reveal neither a humanitarian emergency scenario nor a fully stabilized integration process. Instead, they describe a transitional condition situated between protection and inclusion, where basic safety has been achieved but long-term stability remains uncertain.

~~Romania has provided effective access to territory, legal residence through temporary protection, and~~

entry into essential public services. Refugees are generally able to access education for children, healthcare services, and housing in the private sector. The relationship with host communities appears largely stable, and widespread conflict or exclusion is not evident. These findings indicate that emergency reception mechanisms functioned successfully and that institutional cooperation between international organizations, national authorities, and local actors has produced a relatively secure environment.

However, protection alone does not ensure durable integration. Administrative barriers related to documentation, language difficulties, and procedural complexity continue to influence daily life. Even when legal status is granted, uncertainty persists regarding long-term residence, employment prospects, and educational pathways. Refugees therefore remain cautious in planning their future, often maintaining connections with the country of origin while adapting to the host society.

Economic participation represents a central achievement but also a central vulnerability. Many refugees have entered the labour market and possess high levels of education, yet employment quality and income stability remain fragile. Occupational mismatch, limited language proficiency, and childcare responsibilities reduce the capacity to obtain stable and adequately paid employment. The widespread use of coping strategies and limited savings demonstrates that households remain exposed to economic shocks. The situation can therefore be described as functional participation without full economic security.

Access to social services further confirms this interpretation. Schools, healthcare systems, and community services are accessible, and many refugees report improvements in well-being after receiving support. Nevertheless, language barriers, housing uncertainty, and limited information sometimes restrict effective participation. Social integration exists, but it depends on continuous support and adaptation from both refugees and institutions.

A significant implication of the findings concerns the nature of temporary protection. Designed as an emergency legal instrument, temporary protection provides immediate safety and service access but does not automatically create predictable long-term trajectories. As displacement becomes prolonged, the gap between temporary legal arrangements and everyday social reality widens. Refugees begin to make medium-term life decisions, such as employment and schooling, while still lacking clarity about future residence conditions.

The survey also highlights the adaptive capacity of refugees themselves. Households actively seek employment, education, and information. Families prioritize schooling for children and engage with local institutions even under uncertainty. This behaviour indicates that integration is not solely an institutional process but also a social process shaped by individual agency and community interaction.

For policymakers, the findings suggest that the next phase of response should shift from emergency assistance toward stabilization policies. Language acquisition, recognition of qualifications, childcare access, and administrative simplification appear particularly important for strengthening integration outcomes. Coordination between humanitarian programs and public services may reduce fragmentation and improve predictability.

For academic and research communities, the survey demonstrates the value of multi-sectoral empirical data. Integration cannot be understood through a single indicator such as employment or legal status. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between documentation, income, education, health, and social relations. Surveys such as SEIS therefore contribute not only to operational planning but also to broader theoretical understanding of displacement in developed societies.

In conclusion, the Romanian case illustrates a pattern of conditional integration. Refugees are protected and socially present, but not yet fully settled. They are able to participate in society while remaining vulnerable to administrative, economic, and linguistic constraints. The transition from temporary protection to durable inclusion will depend on whether institutional frameworks evolve to support long-term stability.

The SEIS findings therefore suggest that the central challenge is no longer access, but continuity. Ensuring predictable legal pathways, stable employment opportunities, and sustained access to services may transform temporary residence into genuine inclusion. Until such continuity is achieved, refugee integration will remain a dynamic and incomplete process shaped by both institutional capacity and individual resilience.

References

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