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## Ukrainian forced migrants and the (in)equalities of the Polish educational system

What went wrong, what went right in the Polish education system, as hundreds of thousands of young Ukrainians arrived in Poland? Marta Jadwiga Pietrusińska and Michał Nowosielski look at the events of the last school year and attempt to predict what will happen in the new one in September, when the number of Ukrainian students in Polish schools may more than double.



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# Ukrainian forced migrants and the (in)equalities of the Polish educational system

Marta Jadwiga Pietrusińska, Michał Nowosielski

## Introduction

After the second Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, a massive influx of forced migrants to Poland was observed. As of the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 2022, as many as 4.7 mln border crossings from Ukraine were reported (with 2.7 mln border crossings from Poland). Based on the number of registered forced migrants, one can estimate the number of people from Ukraine who actually stayed in Poland at 1.2 mln ([UNHCR 2022](#)).

Such a rapid inflow of people meant that the Polish state faced an enormous and multidimensional challenge. Accepting many forced migrants required special measures and adaptation in various areas, such as housing, health care, and social assistance ([Łukasiewicz et al. 2022](#); [Jaroszewicz et al. 2022](#)). One crucial area that presents a particular challenge is education, which is essential for Ukrainians who want to continue their education in peaceful conditions. It is also vital for the inclusion into Polish society of those among

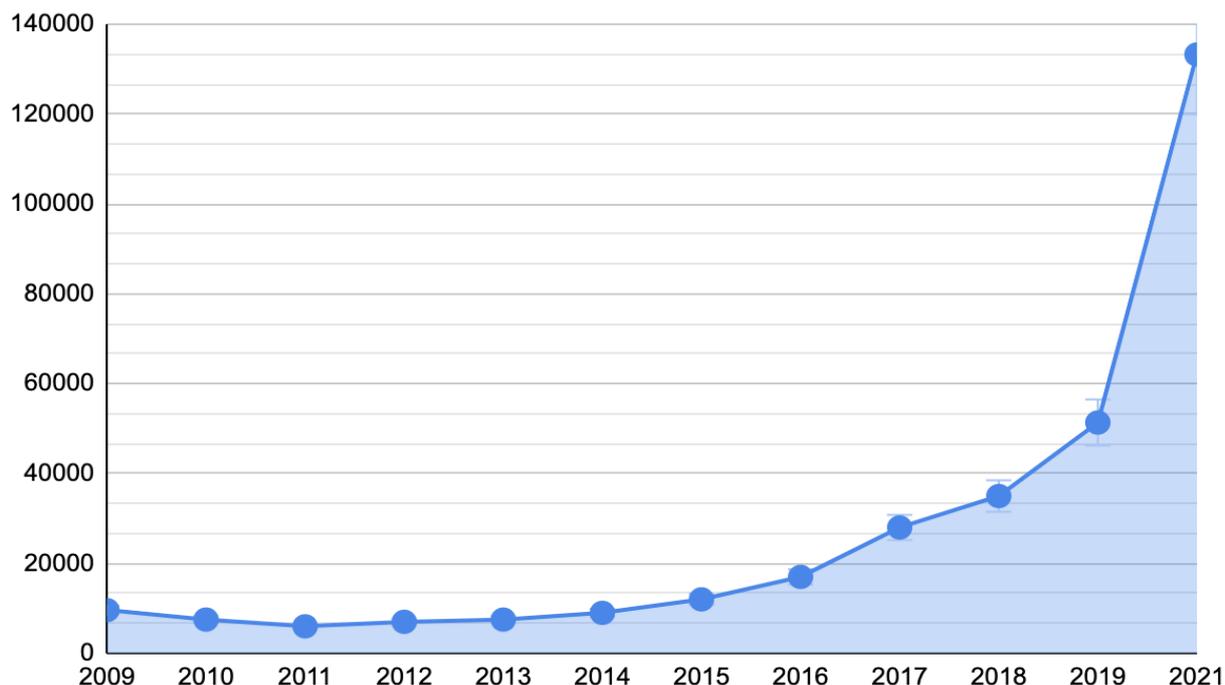
the forced migrants who decide to stay here for longer.

## K-12 EDUCATION

### The landscape before the 24th of February

In the beginning of the 2021/2022 school year, there were [133,281](#) foreign students in Polish compulsory education (K-12 schools). Firstly, the number of pupils had started to grow from 2014 – after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas. Secondly, the number of foreign children significantly increased after the fraud election in Belarus in 2020 and massive forced migration from this direction to Poland. Other most numerous groups of pupils in Polish schools had Russian (mainly Chechen) and Vietnamese origins.

This rapid increase in the number of foreign students was a challenge for the Polish education system. There were multiple systemic constraints (which have only deepened due to the new flow of migrants in 2022) that we will describe in detail below.



Graph 1.  
Foreign students in Polish K-12 schools  
Source: [NIK](#)

### Rapid change of the schools' reality

Due to the second Russian invasion of Ukraine, since February 2022 the number of foreign children in Polish schools rapidly increased. While in the school year 2019/2020 there were [30,777](#) Ukrainian students in primary and secondary schools (among 51,363 foreign students in total), in June 2022 there were around [200 000](#) Ukrainian children in the Polish educational system ([40,000 in kindergarten](#) [140,000 in primary schools](#) and [20,000 in the secondary schools](#)). Since most of the forced migrants from Ukraine who migrated to Poland decided to settle down in the big cities, [metropolises](#) were the places that above all experienced an enormous influx of new, foreign students.

City	Number of Ukrainian students
Warszawa	14,743
Wrocław	5,743
Kraków	5,643
Łódź	4,736
Poznań	4,200
Gdańsk	3,117
Szczecin	2,132
Lublin	1,922
Katowice	1,880
Bydgoszcz	1,779

Table 1.  
Number of Ukrainian students in Polish K-12 schools  
(data from April 2022)  
Source: [Konkret24](#)

The Polish Ministry of Education and Science estimates that in the new school year of 2022/2023 there will be approximately [400,000 Ukrainian children](#) in the Polish education system. This number provided by Minister Przemysław Czarnek in April 2022 led to the question where the rest of around [800,000 Ukrainian](#) minors who have arrived in Poland after 24th February 2022 would be.

### **Where are the children?**

As we believe, the education of some of them has [been put on hold, because their parents were not sure whether they would stay in Poland, return to Ukraine or be relocated to another EU country](#). Some parents were also afraid that their children would experience another stress if they were placed in a totally new social and linguistic environment, where discrimination from Polish peers might be possible. Due to these uncertainties, many parents are going to wait until the new school year to enroll their children in a school or kindergarten. Furthermore, a numerous group of forced migrants from Ukraine have already fled to other EU countries. For instance, data from April 2022 indicate that there were only [519,567](#) minors who obtained a Polish national identification number ([Duszczuk, Kaczmarczyk, 2022](#)) (meaning that probably these people would rather stay in Poland). This was around [71% of all Ukrainian children](#) who probably were in Poland at that time. Moreover, according to Vira Rohova, Ukrainian vice-minister of education and science, a big part –

approximately [540,000](#) – of underage forced Ukrainian migrants in Poland study online in Ukraine-based schools. There are also some Ukrainian teenagers who attend schools based in Poland that follow the [Ukrainian curriculum and teach in Ukrainian](#). Mainly students of 9th grade enrolled in such school, because according to the [Ukrainian educational system](#), they have not completed primary education, which would allow them to enter upper secondary education. Thus, they are not allowed to attend the 1st grade of a Polish secondary school.

### **Was the Polish school system prepared for the crisis?**

These four educational paths (in Polish schools, online Ukrainian education, stationary Ukrainian education, or not attending school at all) were implemented bottom-up and afterwards, legislation was slightly adjusted to the reality. Since the first decade of the 21st century, there has been slow but visible progress in working with foreign pupils in Polish schools. Education for foreign minors from 7 to 18 years of age was compulsory and free of charge, same as for their Polish peers. Before February 2022, due to the [Act of December 14, 2016, Law on Education](#), foreign students could be admitted into regular classes with Polish children. However, in case of a large number of foreign pupils, they could be placed in [preparatory departments](#). In such a department, besides following the regular curriculum, they would have extra Polish language classes. In such a unit, there could be no more than 15 students and they could

attend such preparatory units no longer than 12 months. Even though the law allowed schools to open preparatory classes, it was a rarely used integrational tool. For instance, in Warsaw – the city with the highest number of foreign pupils before the re-intensification of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – there were only 13 preparatory units, [in Wrocław 17](#), [in Gdańsk 4](#), [in Poznań 14](#). All foreign students had the right to at least 2 hours of additional Polish language classes. What is more, a school could hire a [multicultural assistant](#) – a person who doesn't have to have pedagogical training, but speaks the language of the foreign students fluently. The main tasks of a multicultural assistant are: supporting a foreign student in the integration process, assistance in translating from Polish into the mother tongue and vice versa during classes, meetings with teachers, psychologist, school counselors, facilitating contacts between the school and the parents or legal guardians of children, and mediation in the situation of cultural, national, racial, ethnic or religious conflicts. Although there were some legislative measures to address the presence of foreign students, there were also many drawbacks due to the lack of funds and specialized teaching staff. In addition, in many cases the implemented solutions would not be enough to provide deep, long term adaptation and integration, understood as a two-way process between migrants and host community ([Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, 2017](#); [Gmaj, 2021](#)).

All these solutions have been maintained after February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, with [slight](#)

[changes](#) in the [Act of March 12, 2022, on assistance to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the armed conflict in the territory of that country](#) (and the [Act of April 8, 2022, on amending the Act of March 12, 2022, and certain other laws](#)). In preparatory classes, the allowed number of children increased to 25 per unit, and pupils can now attend such units for up to 24 months, instead of only 12. The number of Polish language classes also increased from at least 2 to 6 hours weekly (but only for some Ukrainian children from preparatory units). Ukrainian teachers who could become multicultural assistants gained an easier path to employment in schools. Schools also gained additional funds to hire such teachers.

It has to be emphasized that such changes were needed, but they were highly insufficient and ad hoc. The rapid rise of the number of Ukrainian children in the Polish schools required a deeper and more complex adjustment to this critical situation. The Ministry of Education and Science passed this responsibility to local councils, which are working together with international organizations, NGOs and Ukrainian teachers to overcome the crisis. Thus, until now there hasn't been any national, coherent, complex strategy to: 1) introduce Ukrainian children to the new educational environment in a less stressful way; 2) support schools as a system to cope with a sudden high influx of foreign pupils; 3) prepare teachers and other school staff to work in a multicultural surrounding and with traumatized minors; 4) not neglect Polish

students but at the same time teach them how to function in a diverse community.

### **What failed, what worked?**

We are aware that the first phase of reception of Ukrainian forced migrants required rapid and ad hoc decisions and actions. Of course, in the time of crisis, not all measures could be implemented immediately and without mistakes. Nevertheless, it seems to us that in these chaotic first months, the Polish government neglected many aspects related to the education of young Ukrainians and made many mistakes which, in our opinion, may deepen and intensify problems in the long-term perspective. Some of the problems described below should be resolved immediately and some could be dealt with gradually.

We believe that the education system should be decentralized, and schools should have broad autonomy in teaching and integrating Ukrainian students. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education and Science should provide a financial and substantial framework for their actions. Unfortunately, the Ministry introduced minimal and barely consulted changes in the law, and provided insufficient financial support for the local authorities, instead of applying to the EU for extra funds for education of Ukrainian minors, launching national training for teachers and preparing guidebooks, textbooks, and other tools that could help teachers to prepare themselves to work in totally new conditions. Most of such actions and material were prepared by

local authorities in cooperation with NGOs and Ukrainian teachers who fled to Poland.

What is more, due to the lack of regulations related to annual student classification in regular classes, teachers have no recommendations about grading students who just enter the school from another educational system in the last 3 or 2 months of the school year. What was even more striking, that Ukrainian 8th graders were forced to write final exams that are compulsory to graduate from primary school and apply to a secondary one. Only [7,000 Ukrainian students decided to write these exams](#) and have a chance to recruit to the secondary schools. The rest of the 8th graders decided that they will repeat the 8th grade and take the exam next year.

The increased number of hours of Polish language classes to 6 per week for 12 months was a good step. But this measure has serious limitations. Among foreign pupils, [only Ukrainian children who have come to Poland after the 24th of February 2022 are entitled](#) to this increased number of hours. However, many [specialists indicate that this number is way too low to](#) prepare a student to be able to fully participate in lessons held in Polish. Moreover, in the case of migrant pupils, the Polish language should be taught as a foreign language by [glottodidactics](#). This is impossible on a large scale, as there is not a sufficient number of such teachers. Also, summer holidays could be a time for intensive Polish language courses for Ukrainian children. Yet, the Ministry has not secured any funds for this purpose nor introduced any regulations.

Some local authorities with the support of NGOs (like [Warsaw together with UNICEF](#)) are providing Polish language courses and other extracurricular activities during the summer for young Ukrainians.

Although Polish and Ukrainian Ministries of Education agreed that the vast majority of Ukrainian students will fulfill the educational obligation online in the Ukrainian system, the Polish central authorities didn't provide any spaces, access to the internet nor equipment (like tablets or laptops) to enable this form of learning. Again, it was local authorities, NGOs and [private companies](#) which arranged the environment for online learning.

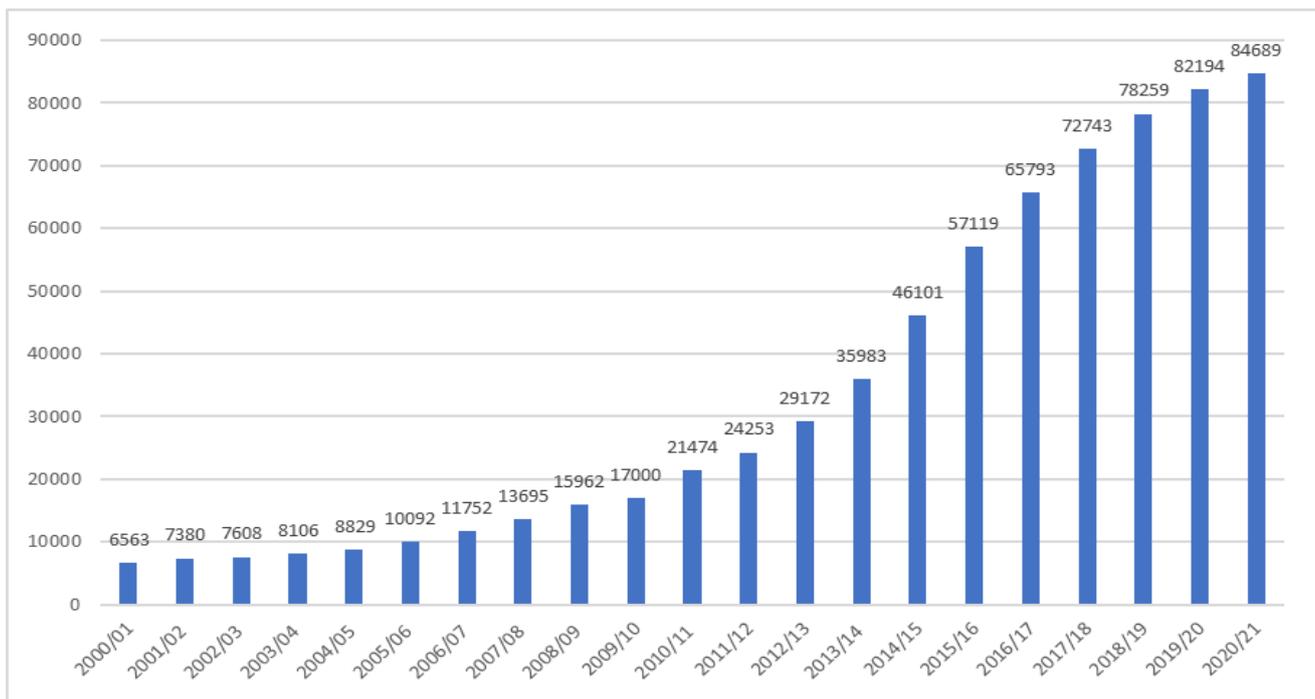
These are only the most significant neglected issues and problems that appeared in the Polish educational system after February 2022. Nonetheless, we need to mention a forthcoming, but great issue that slowly appears in the schools. After a 'festival of empathy', when everybody was engaged in helping Ukrainian forced migrants, tensions between Poles and Ukrainians started to appear due to the challenges mentioned above. We strongly believe that in the following school year, the schools will be a battleground of integration vs. discrimination. We can slowly observe rising hostility between Ukrainian and Polish peers. On one hand, Polish students grasp negative stereotypes about Ukrainian from their families. Some are the old ones related to [historical issues and 'stealing the jobs'](#) discourse. New issues are emerging as a result of the current social and economic problems (e.g. rising inflation or limited

access to health services) in Poland, which gradually are associated with the high influx of Ukrainian forced migrants. Moreover, in many schools, the teachers, who were put in a totally new situation, focused on providing support to Ukrainian children but neglected their Polish pupils' needs. On the other hand, Ukrainian students also are not so eager to integrate, because they would rather be in their home country, carrying out their regular life. Many of them also experienced trauma related to warfare and engaging in new relations and learning a new language is extremely hard for them. Thus, they prefer to stay in Ukrainian groups. We fear that without hiring multicultural assistants on a massive scale and adequate training of Polish teachers in the context of multicultural education and work with traumatized children, these problems are only going to increase.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **International students at Polish universities**

Although the internationalisation of Polish universities – understood as an increase in the number of international students – is relatively low compared to other countries (in 2019, Poland was 29th in this respect in the world ([OECD 2021](#))), there has been progress in recent years. While in the academic year 2000/2001, there were only 6.6 thousand international students at Polish universities, by 2022/2021, their number increased to almost 85,000 ([Perspektywy 2021](#)). In the years 2016-2018, the percentage of foreigners admitted to study in Poland was, on average, 3.7% ([NIK](#)



Graph 2.

The number of international students at Polish universities in the years 2000-2021

Source: [Perspektywy 2021](#)

[2020](#)); in 2021, it is already 6.95% ([Perspektywy 2021](#)).

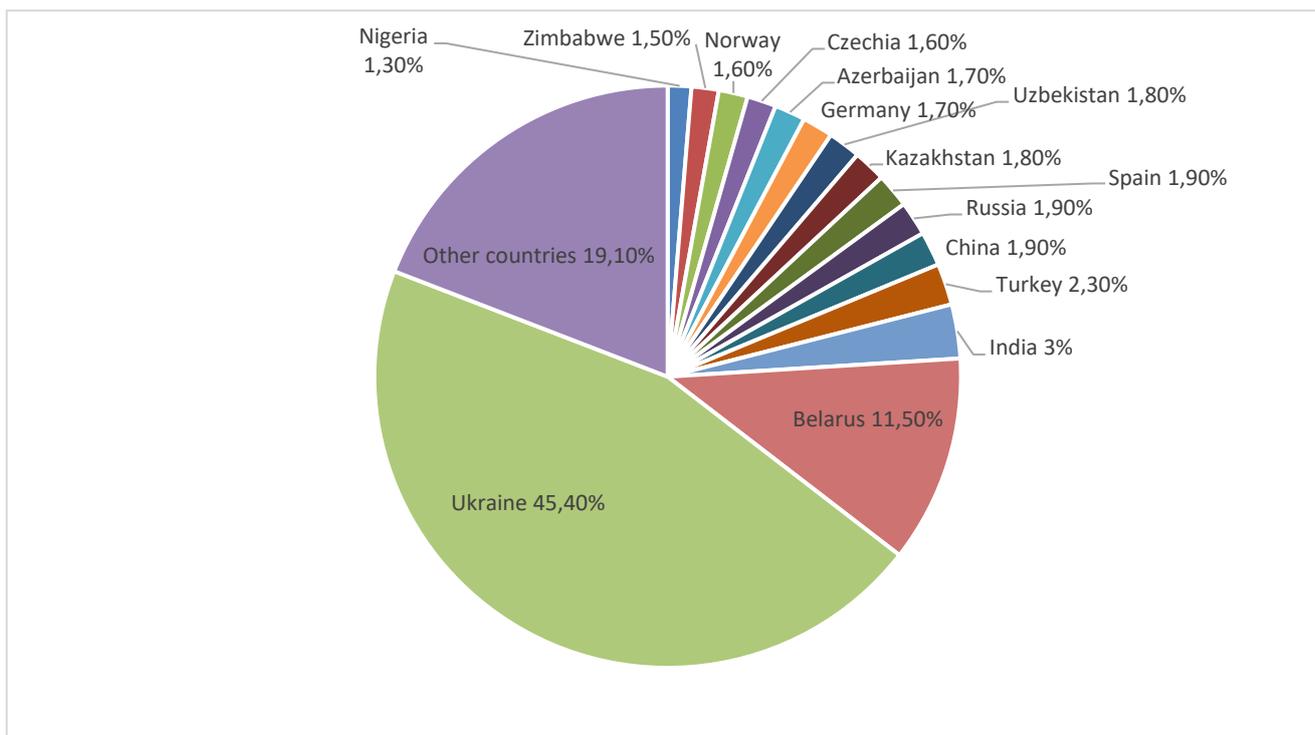
When analysing the structure of the countries of origin of international students choosing Polish universities, clear patterns can be noticed. Almost half of them were students from Ukraine and slightly more than 10% from Belarus. Other countries appear relatively rarely.

### **International students in the Polish system of higher education**

[The Act of July 20, 2018, Law on Higher Education and Science](#), provides that foreigners may, after obtaining appropriate consent, undertake and pursue studies,

education in doctoral schools, postgraduate studies, and other forms of education. As a rule, public universities (free for Polish citizens) have the right to charge tuition fees to foreigners. However, they are exempt if they meet certain conditions, e.g., they are EU citizens, have a permanent residence permit, are in the possession of the Pole's Card, or are granted international protection. They can also apply for social scholarships.

It should be emphasised that the Polish state actively stimulates the admission of foreign students – internationalisation is one of the strategic development goals of Polish higher



Graph 3.  
Countries of origin of international students choosing Polish universities  
Source: [Perspektywy 2021](#)

education. Various programs, e.g., scholarships for foreigners, are introduced to attract international students. They are financed by the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2017, the [National Agency for Academic Exchange](#) (NAWA) was established. One of its main goals is to stimulate the inflow of international students to Polish universities. To further strengthen the efforts of universities to attract foreign students, the Ministry introduced the so-called 'internationalisation component' that rewards universities that educate foreigners in the entire cycle of studies.

The universities themselves also see internationalisation as an important goal and challenge. Therefore, the Conference of

Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland, together with the Perspektywy Educational Foundation, implemented a long-term program promoting Polish higher education worldwide under the name '[Study in Poland](#)'.

Interestingly, the issues concerning international students in Poland take place primarily in the context of the liberal discourse on the development of higher education and the Polish state, where international students are seen as a stimulator of growth. Relatively little space is devoted to issues related to the adaptation or integration of students. Also, the [report of the Supreme Audit Office of 2020](#) sees this issue as 'an opportunity for universities in Poland to change education

qualitatively, and on the other hand, it is a challenge that requires adaptation processes of universities in the conditions of the emerging more active state policy in this area'. Matters related to students' admission and adaptation to the new environment appear only anecdotally in the report.

Just as there is no migration and integration policy, there is also no single approach to the issue of adaptation and integration of international students. The Ministry of Education and Science has not developed any regulations on these issues. Sometimes, attempts are made to create recommendations (e.g., [Guide for universities. How to prepare for the admission of international students?](#)), but usually, universities independently shape their activities based on their own experience or possibly their foreign partners, e.g. the University of Warsaw offers international students activities and provides information as part of the [Welcome Point](#) website. Among the methods of support that appear at Polish universities, one can mention adaptation days, buddies support, psychological and legal support, etc. ([Kozula 2018](#); [Mucha, Pędziwiatr 2019](#); [Sikorska, Pietraszek 2020](#)).

### **Students from Ukraine after the outbreak of the war**

It is difficult to determine how much the war in Ukraine will affect the number of students from Ukraine in the new academic year 2022/2023. There are no statistics on the current or new students who want to enroll at Polish universities. However, we are

expecting data from universities after completion of the enrollment for studies.

Several solutions for Ukrainian citizens were introduced by the Acts of March 12 and April 8:

- Adjustment of intra-university regulations allowing for changes to be made to facilitate the admission of students from Ukrainian universities to Polish universities and for the adaptation of the organisation of classes to the existing situation;
- Enabling Polish universities to admit students continuing their degree – Polish and Ukrainian citizens who were enrolled in a university in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, also in a situation when they do not have documents confirming their education so far;
- The possibility for universities to make changes to the enrollment resolutions already adopted in the academic year 2021/2022, study regulations, and organisation of the academic year 2021/2022;
- Ukrainian citizens who are students of public universities will not be charged fees for full-time education in Poland;
- Ukrainian citizens covered by the law can apply for social scholarships, student loans, rector's scholarships, scholarships for disabled persons and allowances.

Apart from the law changes, some Polish higher education institutions developed initiatives targeted at Ukrainian student forced migrants. NAWA has organised the

government program 'Solidarity with Ukraine', thanks to which Ukrainian forced migrants: students and PhD students will have the opportunity to study in Poland, conduct work related to the preparation of a doctoral dissertation or participate in other forms of education (language or preparatory courses) in the period from March until September 2022. The Agency secured funds for tuition fees and scholarships for around 1300 persons.

The Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland launched a [website](#) for students, doctoral students and university employees interested in transferring to Polish universities. Also, the Students' Parliament extended its [Comfort Zone](#) program to people who are forced migrants from Ukraine.

In the case of Ukrainian citizens applying for admission to studies or to continue their studies, who do not have a sufficient level of knowledge of the Polish language, it is possible to refer them to one-semester or one-year courses in Polish as a foreign language to start studies from the new academic year.

Also, Polish universities reacted to the crisis in Ukraine and forced migration that was triggered by the war. Below, we present examples of activities from three universities.

### **The University of Warsaw**

– a public university with 40,3 thousand students, including 3,8 thousand international students (710 from Ukraine).

- In the first phase of the war and crisis, the university undertook several initiatives targeted at a broad group of forced migrants – mainly in the form of collections of money and items.
- Later on, the actions concentrated on the Ukrainian academic community (approx. 600 people), which involved actions organised by various units of the university and the student government:
  - ✓ Organizing intervention jobs;
  - ✓ Providing social and living assistance for students and their families;
  - ✓ Granting special allowances for students from Ukraine (300);
  - ✓ Legal and psychological assistance offered;
  - ✓ Organizing events aimed at the Ukrainian community.
- Initially, there was much interest among forced migrants from Ukraine in continuing studies, but before the regulations were changed in May 2022, it significantly decreased probably because of their outflow.
- In the new recruitment for 2022/2023, a pool of places guaranteed for Ukrainian citizens is foreseen.

### **The University of Wrocław**

– a public university with 25 thousand students, including 1,5 thousand international students (approx. 1000 from Ukraine).

- In the first phase of the war and crisis, the University provided support for forced migrants in Wrocław – donations collections, volunteering, psychological and legal help, and accommodation.
- Diverse actions also concentrated on the academic community:
  - ✓ Accommodation in dormitories for students' families, organisation of a kindergarten;
  - ✓ Language courses financed by the University and NAWA funds.
- The university prepared an offer for people willing to continue their studies, including language courses and evaluation tests; however, enrolment will be possible from the new academic year.
- Recruitment for 2022/23 is open to citizens of Ukraine, although no special treatment is foreseen, apart from providing information in Ukrainian.

### **The WSB University in Gdańsk**

– a private university with 17 thousand students, including 370 from Ukraine.

- Humanitarian activities to a limited extent – mainly collections of goods and support for several organisations, including one operating in Lviv.
- Several actions target the Ukrainian students:
  - ✓ Financial concessions as well as allowances;
  - ✓ Psychological and legal support;
  - ✓ Running day-care for children of students – forced migrants from Ukraine;
  - ✓ Polish language course.
- Together with the student government, a group on Telegram was started – 'Help for Ukraine'.
- At the time of war, the University suspended any marketing activities in Ukraine, regardless of the considerable interest in recruitment by Ukrainian citizens.
- Taking into consideration the situation, special facilitations for candidates for studies who have problems documenting their education are foreseen.
- In the case of people who want to continue their education – an initial semester of learning the Polish language, in the absence of documents – a verification committee – to assign them to the appropriate semester is planned.

## **Conclusions – Educational (in)equalities in the Polish educational system**

In the last few months, the Polish education system has been exposed to extreme challenges related to the extraordinary inflow of forced migrants from Ukraine. Schools, colleges and universities had to rapidly adjust to the high influx of Ukrainian students and absorb Ukrainian teaching staff. Since the support at the government level was not considerable and practically limited to the legislative changes, local authorities, NGOs and some universities took the burden of the changes. Not only did they have to invent and implement precise measures, they also were [responsible for providing vast amounts of funds to cover the costs](#). As in the case of other measures related [to the Polish migration and integration policy](#), this led to a lack of cohesion and large inequalities in ensuring access to educational resources in different municipalities and towns.

These educational inequalities have not only a spatial scope but also one related to the origins and time of the migrants' arrival. Foreign students – other than Ukrainian – became less visible to the institutions and particularly the teaching staff. Moreover, also Ukrainians who came to Poland before the 24th of February 2022 are not eligible for some forms of support. For instance, in the K-12 educational system, only Ukrainian students who migrated to Poland after the new Russian invasion are entitled to the 6 hours of Polish language classes per week. Thus, there is a schizophrenic system where in the same preparatory unit there can be

pupils who have 2 hours of Polish language weekly and those who are allowed to have up to 6 hours. Needless to say, this is only one example of multiple structural discriminations introduced by the [Act of March 12](#). Due to some autonomy, universities were able to reduce the structural discrimination resulting from central policies. However, also at this level educational inequalities related to the students' origins appeared. The high influx of Ukrainian candidates and willingness to accept them in the first place, reduced the access to higher education institutions for students of other nationalities, as the number of places for international students is relatively low. Moreover, some Russian and Belarusian students were frightened that due to the sanctions they might be relegated from the universities, or their scholarships could be suspended.

As we demonstrated, Polish educational institutions were not prepared sufficiently to absorb such a high influx of Ukrainian pupils and students. Many decisions were made ad hoc. Nevertheless, there is also a positive side of such difficult situations. Integration policy in Poland started to be discussed. There were large, multisectoral consultations between local authorities, NGOs, academics, the private sector and representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora (however, without the active presence of governmental actors) that resulted in the preparation of [broad recommendations](#). Similar consultations, but on different scales, took place in different bodies. What is important, they were conducted in Polish

– Ukrainian cooperation, where Ukrainians were treated as equal partners. For instance, the issue of [brain drain](#) was addressed during many consultations. However, these positive aspects should not overshadow the challenges that lie ahead in the new school and academic year. The following months will reveal whether the Polish educational system will cope with such an extraordinary situation.



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