

Report: ETUCE Solidarity Mission in Poland, Romania, and Moldova

From 3 to 5 and 16 to 19 May 2022 ETUCE under the lead of its President, Larry Flanagan, and the European Director, Susan Flocken, was on mission in Poland, Romania, and Moldova to collaborate with and listen to its member organisations in the respective countries, ministries, schools, and other stakeholders that are working in the frontline to help Ukrainian refugees.

The ongoing war in Ukraine results in growing numbers of refugees and continuously shifts the needs of people on the ground. As mostly women with children are looking for refuge, the demands on the education sector to ensure access to quality education are significant.

The mission underscored the critical role of education trade unions and the monumental efforts teachers, academics and education personnel have demonstrated to provide support.

Poland

Andrej Radzikowski, President of the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ), highlighted that one of the main trade unionist challenges is how to best coordinate activities in Ukraine, Poland and across Eastern Europe. The first priority is to ensure shelter and food for everyone. While the initial wave of refugees was met with great mobilisation by volunteers and solidarity, longer-term solutions to accommodation remain a crucial issue.

Further challenges emerged regarding the employment of teachers and to ensure that they are not exploited but instead properly employed under Polish labour law. The issue is to the challenge of finding employment with matching skills, as most of the jobs available on the labour market are in simple service, while many refugees hold higher education degrees. But generally, attaining a work permit in Poland is much easier compared to other Western countries.

Throughout all measures of aid but especially regarding the integration in the education sector the language barrier is a critical obstacle in Poland. Schools severely need teachers who speak Ukrainian, and while many already try to employ Ukrainian teachers under an assistant-teacher status, the demand is significant and increasing.

The Ministry for Education ruled to provide 6 hours of Polish language courses each week, but teachers are being overwhelmed by this additional strain and unsustainable workload. Exams for some subjects such as Math or English are possible in Ukrainian, but others such as Polish literature will be impossible. In higher education language requirements also deter students from enrolling at university, as they require a B1 level proficiency in Polish although there are no fees for full time studies in the public universities. Dr Karolina Ziolo-Puzuk, Deputy Head of the Senate Chancellery explained: "Another issue is the differences in the Polish and Ukrainian education systems: in Ukraine students finish general secondary education at the age of 17 while in Poland, at the age of 18-19m, thus it might pose further challenges in students' integration."

Class sizes are being increased but the funding to employ more teachers and support staff is not sufficient – an issue stressed by all ETUCE member organisations in Poland. This results in higher workload for teachers and creates additional challenges, they are not equipped to address. "The government does not dedicate enough attention to the education sector" said Ryszard Proksa, Solidarnosc President. For

instance, regarding the psychological support of children traumatised by war, schools need to employ specialized psychologists to properly help the children and to not further burden teachers. The insufficient funding in education is apparent also in the lack of ICT tools and education equipment available.

Slawomir Broniarz, President of the Polish Teachers' Union (ZNP), underscored that even prior to the refugee crisis the education sector has experienced unfavourable conditions due to a lack of governmental support. The general attractiveness of the teaching profession suffers as a result and pre-existing issues are amplified by the new challenges. Teachers in Poland are expecting a pay rise of 4.4 % in May, but considering the inflation rate of 12 %, that is drastically insufficient. The ZNP regrets the lack of social dialogue and selective approach of choosing negotiation stakeholders by the national government. In addition, it warned about the general trend of increasing privatisation of the education sector in Poland and the motion by the Ministry of Education to employ young teachers under precarious 2-year contracts. These developments are severely counterproductive for the security and well-being of teachers and thus for the attractiveness of the profession, especially in times of crisis.

ETUCE called for greater efforts of the European Commission Representation in Poland to support the social dialogue between the Polish government and education trade unions and to verify the potential reallocation of available funds under the Resilience and Recovery plan to further address the critical issues of accommodation and integration of refugees in Poland.

Summer period activities for refugee children remain a critical issue.

Romania

Since the beginning of the war, the education law has been rapidly amended to allow for Ukrainian students' participation in school activities while waiting for recognition of documents and future enrolment into high schools without passing national exams in September 2022 in Romania.

In addition, the provision of Romanian language classes has been modified to allow for more speedy language learning. "At present, Ukrainian refugees can register as audience students, once they learn Romanian language they can study in Romanian schools", explained Mr. Ionel Florian Lixandru, State Secretary of the Ministry of Education, in charge of Ukrainian refugees' situation. The most critical challenges in the integration of refugee children into the education system are linguistic barriers, psychological traumas, loss of documents, differences in education systems as well as the serious situation around unaccompanied children, Ukrainian Roma, orphans, and entire orphanages in need of housing. Despite the exiting relocation mechanism to address the needs of orphans, only six specific centres are spread out across the country.

In general, refugee children are enrolled in schools nearby their accommodation with the help of municipality representatives and school inspectors. Ukrainian children who can speak Romanian (given the historical connections of some parts of Ukraine and Romania) are integrated in mainstream classes, for those refugee children facing linguistic issues, the situation is more complex. Although Romanian public schools do not offer education in Ukrainian nor in Russian, education facilities along with necessary devices have been provided in Bucharest giving refugee children possibility to study with Ukrainian volunteer- teachers or to follow Ukrainian programmes online. For example, Ienachita Vacarescu high school provided facilities and necessary devices for an entire Ukrainian school from Odessa now delivering both online and offline education for Ukrainian refugees from 3 to 6 pm.

At Bucharest municipality level, to address both linguistic and mobility issues, representatives from Ukrainian diasporas were involved along with the creation of operational groups who have organised a Google drive forms to, among other things facilitate Ukrainian refugees' mobility (e.g., usage of public transport).

Regarding the issue of employment of Ukrainian teachers in the Romanian education system, Ukrainian teachers can be employed under a so-called non-certified status which implies not attractive conditions. "Ukrainian teachers can be employed as non-certified teachers though it's more attractive for them to be employed by international organisations or NGOs as volunteer-teachers. We talked about how to change the current legislation at least for a short period of time, however when the numbers of refugees dropped, the talks on the employment issue stopped as well" said, Ms Ligia Deca, Presidential Adviser, Department of Education and Research.

The persisting challenge that can be observed in Romania as well, is the issue around registration and tracking system of refugees. "It's difficult to identify the exact number of both refugee students and teachers who are on the Romanian territory. The perception of Romania being a transit country poses numerous challenges", explained Mr. Lixandru. At present, approximately, about 4 000 out of 40 000 children are enrolled in schools in Romania.

To better map the future needs of refugee children, the summer period is foreseen to ensure the provision of Romanian language courses as well to guarantee further official schooling given the existing uncertainties of future education paths among Ukrainian refugees and flexibility around pursuing Ukrainian programmes virtually. "If the war doesn't end all these students will continue just learning online. There is a big risk of no-schooling or unsupervised schooling if the war continues and children are not studying," said Ms Deca.

At higher education level, there are ongoing talks on the introduction of the Recognition Refugee Passports by the government and representatives of the higher education institutions. Having a long history and an extensive experience in providing support to refugees, Mr. Mihnea Costoiu, Rector of Polytechnic University of Bucharest (UPB) said: "First and foremost, we have been helping students and professors from various backgrounds who studied in Ukraine using our own funds. We had more than 3500 people in the university, but most of Ukrainians stayed in the border towns, mostly in the northern and eastern parts". The university accepts refugee students without documents requiring so far, a specific declaration. Currently 79 Ukrainian students have been enrolled into the university under a flexible programme along with a number of foreign students from other countries who studied in Ukraine and who are allocated with scholarships. Flexible contracts have been provided to approximately 20 Ukrainian professors who remain in Ukraine and provide online lessons. Apart from linguistic, medical, and psychological support, not to mention housing, the university organises kindergarten for Ukrainian children.

The launch of a new TV channel under the umbrella of Euro news, will be organised allowing for the provision of courses in Ukrainian language and direct communication with both Moldova and Ukraine. Talking about European Commission's coordination role and micro-financial assistance and aid to Ukraine and Moldova, along with international donors' participation (e.g, UNHCR, UNICEF) Ms. Mara Roman-Banescu, Deputy Head of the Representation of the European Commission in Romania explained: "The Romanian government is still working on the social support package, which is linked to the EU financial assistance, however the relocation of funds under ongoing MMF can be complex. As a whole, a high inflation rate along with rising energy prices can have a negative impact on the situation around refugees.

Another issue might be linked to the rise of popularity of far-right parties who already succeeded to enter the Parliament on the position towards the COVID-19 and now trying to employ issues of the ongoing war in Ukraine in their propaganda”.

The mission to Bucharest further highlighted the extraordinary work of all ETUCE member organisations - ALMA-MATER, FSLE and SPIRU HARET- in response to the refugee crisis, and their extensive cooperation with various governmental institutions, civil society organisations, NGOs (e.g. Rotary Club of Romania), student organisations and international organisations such as, Red Cross, UNICEF, and others.

Only with adequate pay, equipment and training can teachers provide quality education and their well-being ensured.

Moldova

Since the beginning of the aggression of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, more than 400 000 Ukrainian citizens crossed the border of the Republic Moldova representing about 3-4% of the Moldovan population. More than 110 shelters, amounting to 8000 places, have been put at the disposal of Ukrainian citizens forced to flee their country from day one of the aggression. About 100 000 of refugees - who are primarily mothers, children, and elderly people - are housed in hotels. More than 80 000 refugees are hosted by families.

Without mentioning financial aid provided by UNHCR to refugees directly, the Moldovan government has been expanding a minimum income scheme to cover refugees allowing for two social support packages administrated to both refugees and host families. Only two weeks ago, approximately 35 000 refugees opted for aid, while the number of beneficiaries among host families doesn't reach 10 000. That poses future challenges and financial burden on the country, keeping in mind that hosting families are not economically sustainable, and the country's budget is restrained, not to mention the skyrocketing inflation rate of more than 20 %, deficit in state social insurance and the issue of energy prices. In a meeting with the President of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Mr. Igor Grosu, stressed: “Thanks to the families of our country we resisted the crisis, although we had never before encountered a situation of managing such an important number of refugees while our capacities were limited”.

At present around 8000 Ukrainian citizens have requested for an asylum status. Since the state budget's fraction dedicated to that purpose was initially envisaged only for few hundreds asylum seekers, the Moldovan government has initiated the work around so-called Temporary Protection Mechanism, additionally, given that the state of emergency expires on the 21st of June 2022. The purpose of the Temporary Protection Mechanism is to continue guaranteeing the rights to, e.g., work and education for refugees.

“Until the 21st of June 2022, a refugee from Ukraine has the right to work as any Moldovan citizen. To continue doing so, following the end of the emergency state, however, refugees must apply for asylum”, said Mr. Marcel Spatari, the Minister of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova. Thus, Ukrainian teachers registered in the Moldovan system have the right to pursue their professional activities in Moldovan education institutions once have applied for asylum. Talking about the employment of Ukrainian teachers in Moldovan education institutions, close cooperation between Education Trade Union Chisinau branch and the municipality education department should be noted. The joint mechanism of qualification identifications and available Russian speaking vacancies has been set up involving both

pedagogical and non-pedagogical opportunities in the education sector. So far, out of 24 refugees who addressed the municipality, 5 refugees have been employed. Despite the fact the country's current regulation settings allow for refugees' employment without any specific working permit, demographic issues along with unregulated work represent an ongoing challenge for the Republic of Moldova.

The critical situation of unaccompanied children remains a serious problem, given that Ukraine's law allows 16-year-olds to leave the country without carers in contravention of the Moldovan legislative framework. The state child protection services have been employing individual approach and taking case by case in ensuring social assistance to unaccompanied children, and children with disabilities.

To give fast response to the unprecedented influx of refugees in Moldova, an ad hoc group focusing on education and psychological support has been set up under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education. Necessary steps to adapt the legal framework have been taken rapidly to include refugees in the Moldovan education system ensuring full access to education, from early childhood education to higher education.

Although tracking and registering of refugee children is a critical challenge in Moldova, so far, the earlier mentioned Temporary Protection Mechanism also targets more than 47 000 children and teenagers who are currently living in Moldova: 19 600 are until 6 years old and 27 700 are between 6 and 16 years old. "Only for a year the cost of maintaining all these children amounts to approximately 50 000 000 euros. The legal framework under the Temporary Protection Mechanism consists of, among other things, fast Romanian courses; social services; medical services; administration services (e.g., deliverance of ID cards); accommodation; and last but not least psychological support", explained Mr. Anatolie Topala, Minister of Education, Culture and Research of the Republic of Moldova.

Regular communication has been established between the Ministries of Education in Moldova and Ukraine to ensure the enrolment of refugees in the Ukrainian universities through organising admissions in Moldovan special testing centres. Although, in general education children tend to adapt smoothly and quickly despite of differences in Moldovan and Ukrainian curricula, there is an ongoing work on the provision of distant learning to Ukrainian refugees. It is important to note that, trainings for both school leaders and teachers on how to work with refugee children have been put in place. The Ministry of Education of Ukraine has offered some tools and advice on how to organise the education of refugees. and the dissemination of the information about the access to education on the website of the Ministry of Education of Moldova in Russian, Ukrainian and English have been provided.

As for summer holidays, the set-up of summer camps for refugees and classes to learn Romanian are envisaged allowing for refugee children to start the next school year as from September 2022.

Despite close collaboration and cooperation among social partners in the education sector and the great solidarity mobilisation at both governmental and societal levels, the Moldovan education sector remains heavily impacted by the ongoing critical situation and pre-crisis issues, such as high rate of brain drain at all educational levels, despite of benefits provided to future teachers and academics by the state education institutions.

Unable to fully recover from the health crisis, the ongoing refugee and economic crisis along with negative impact of the war in Ukraine hinder the tremendous work of the Education and Science Trade Union Federation of Moldova (ESTU) in support of Moldovan teachers and refugees coming from Ukraine.

Recently successful monumental work on achieving teacher salary increase of 5.6 % has been watered down by the immense inflation rate. Education trade union's funds to support the maintenance and provision of decent living conditions to refugees in the shelters have been almost exhausted. While still waiting for the state financial support in addressing the needs of refugees, the Moldovan Confederation's Sanatorium Bucuria Sind, has capacities to provide the shelter to refugees until 31 May 2022. "With the upcoming summer, there is a lack of opportunity to equip rooms with refrigerators for refugees hosted in the Technical University of Moldova student dormitory which amounts to approximately 10 000 euros.", said Ghenadie Donos, ESTU President.