



'I just want to go home, is what I need' – Voices of Ukrainian refugee children living in Estonia after fleeing the war

Karmen Toros^{a,1,*}, Olena Kozmenko^{a,1}, Asgeir Falch-Eriksen^{b,2}

^a Tallinn University, Estonia

^b Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Refugee children
Ukraine
Estonia
Well-being
Adaptation

ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 with a focus on their daily functioning, challenges, and resilience. Three main themes emerged from interviews carried out from October through December 2022 with 11 refugee children aged 10 to 16. First, the adaptation process was related to various challenges including living environment, language, participation in two different types of schooling, and homesickness. Children highlighted their struggles with socialisation and a fear of rejection. Second, the schooling experiences of these children unfolded in two phases: initially, they engaged in passive observation and limited interaction with Estonian classmates, after which active participation enabled them to express optimism but also fear of not meeting language proficiency requirements. Third, the children emphasised a strong need for psychological support to address trauma and stress resulting from the war and displacement. They outlined the importance of family, peer support, engagement in leisure activities, and a connection to nature in facilitating their adaptation. The findings underline the significance of tailored support services, language acquisition programmes, mental health services, and culturally sensitive interventions for Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia. The implications include reforms in education, integration, and long-term monitoring to facilitate the well-being and successful integration into the new environment of this group.

1. Introduction

During war and migration to safety, child refugees experience significant trauma due to violence and loss causing anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression (Cai et al., 2022). Although war affects people of all ages, children are particularly vulnerable (Elvevåg & DeLisi, 2022) as the context of displacement affects all parts of their lives (Dangmann et al., 2022, p. 1). After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, more than 5 million refugees fled to neighbouring countries within a couple of months (Bellizzi et al., 2022), the vast majority of whom were women, children, and the elderly (Kumar et al., 2022; Lewtak et al., 2022). It is estimated that more than 60 % of Ukrainian children had to leave their homes, including through internal displacement (Kruszewska & Lavrenova, 2022). Javanbakht (2022) emphasises that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to one of the largest refugee crises in recent history.

The trauma of war is seriously detrimental to children's development

and well-being (Awuah et al., 2022) including physical and mental health (Chaaya et al., 2022) and education (Children..., 2022). Scholars indicate that the damage to mental health is the most concerning aspect of wars/armed conflicts (Cai et al., 2022; Elvevåg & DeLisi, 2022; Gewirtz et al., 2022; Javanbakht, 2022; Johnson et al., 2022; Holt, 2022; Kruszewska & Lavrenova, 2022; Shoib et al., 2022). Lava et al. (2022) elaborate on other extensive consequences, such as stigmatisation, poverty, and lack of education, that influence children's life trajectories. Nevertheless, studies indicate that war-affected families can repair, grow, and pass down their adaptive capacities to the next generation, which makes psychosocial support especially crucial for war-affected children to strengthen their resilience (Denov et al., 2019). Similarly, several scholars discuss the resilience of refugee children to their adverse experiences (Dangmann et al., 2022; Hodes, 2022). In this context, Denov et al. (2019) highlight the need to acknowledge protective factors and socioecological systems.

Kumar et al. (2022) state that, with regard to health, there is a need

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: karmen.lai@tlu.ee (K. Toros), olena.kozmenko@ukr.net (O. Kozmenko), asgeir.falch-eriksen@nova.hioa.no (A. Falch-Eriksen).

¹ Address: Tallinn University, Narva mnt 25 10120 Tallinn, Estonia.

² Address: Stensberggaten 26, 0170 Oslo, Norway.

to constantly assess the situation, identify priorities for health, and provide guidance regarding how these needs could be addressed, including as concerns the general well-being and daily coping of refugees. *Ociepa-Kicińska and Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj (2022)* elaborate that systemic support for refugee children is needed, nevertheless, they argue that social welfare is not permanently available to refugees in most developing countries. Findings from the authors' previous research on the COVID-19 crisis indicate that the organisational design of child protective services is unprepared for crises (Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2020; Toros et al., 2022). Specifically, there was a general lack of ability to act upon referrals and knowledge of how to deal with protective practices and conduct decision-making during crises (Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2020). When the war started in Ukraine in February 2022, child protective services faced another crisis, namely, the need to support refugees without a specific crisis plan. The basis for facilitating child and family well-being is a well-functioning child protection system that takes account of the needs of the vulnerable population. Therefore, the authors found it essential to understand refugee children's daily functioning, challenges, and resilience after fleeing to Estonia to facilitate their well-being and guide policymakers and practitioners to give better support and provide needs-led interventions.

Based on statistics issued by the *Social Insurance Board (2023a)*, in total, 121,464 Ukrainian refugees have entered Estonia, of whom 55,322 have transited to other countries and 66,142 have remained (based on statistics published on 19.01.2023). Of the total number, 28,235 (23.2 %) were minors. Furthermore, 36,676 refugees contacted information checkpoints for advice, of whom 70.1 % were female and 29.9 % were male. Statistics on children show that 41.2 % (15,099) were children (aged 0–17), 65 % of whom were girls and 35 % boys. Upon arrival in Estonia, information checkpoints and refugee centres help refugees with the initial procedures (primary assistance needs and advice on social assistance issues) while further assistance is organised by the state and local governments (*Social Insurance Board, 2023b*).

2. Method

The present study contributes to listening to refugee children's experiences of daily functioning, challenges, and resilience, which enables improvements to service delivery that, in turn, will contribute to strengthening the well-being of refugee children. There are limited empirical data regarding Ukrainian refugee children in this context internationally, including in Estonia. *Javanbakht (2022)* indicates that children are generally forgotten in refugee research. *Glazer (2022)* highlights the importance of refugee children having a voice and feeling empowered. Enabling children to have a voice about matters that directly affect their lives is one of the essential values of the social work profession (*Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010*); moreover, children have the right to participate in matters affecting their lives. Furthermore, learning from children's experiences fosters a more effective understanding of their needs (*Bouma et al., 2018; Schoch et al., 2020*). This article presents findings from an ongoing study with child protective workers and Ukrainian refugee families, including children and parents, to improve the system for child protective services, specifically, how child protective workers can better support Ukrainian refugee families' well-being. The findings reported in this article focus solely on children's experiences. The Research Ethics Committee of the Tallinn University (no 23/2022) approved the study.

2.1. Interview design and data collection

Children's experiences were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews. A qualitative interview guide was developed covering the four main domains, namely, experience with schooling, family and social relationships, challenges, and strengths/resources in daily functioning after fleeing to Estonia. Sample questions included 'What do you like to do in your free time?', 'Tell me about your time at school here',

and 'What has been helpful to settle in?'

Demographic information (child's age and gender) was collected at the beginning of each interview. The first part of the interview focused on the child's general interests (e.g., hobbies and summer holidays). The focus of the interview was on children's experiences, and they were asked to reflect, describe, and give examples. Interviews with children were carried out from October through December 2022. Based on the children's preferences, interviews were mostly held at their homes with no third party present.

As the participants were children, it was crucial that the persons interviewing them had experience conducting research with children. One of the interviewers/researchers has experience in carrying out studies including supporting recovery and sustainable solutions for internally displaced persons and the conflict-affected population in Ukraine. Another interviewer/researcher (the second author) has experience working at the Centre for Social Services for Youth in Ukraine. Both have the skills to collect the data from the sample population. Furthermore, as participants were refugee children, it was crucial to ensure they felt safe and comfortable. Therefore, two Ukrainian refugee researchers interviewed the children. Thus, on the one hand, the children could speak the language they are most comfortable with (Russian or Ukrainian), giving them a sense of 'familiarity', and, on the other, the researcher and child shared a similar experience (fleeing their home due to war), giving them familiarity with the context and increasing the possibility of understanding the child's lived experiences. In addition, as Ukrainian researchers conducted the interviews, they knew how to approach the sample population in a culturally sensitive manner.

Prior to and during the interviews, a seminar was held to discuss the interview framework and process and research ethics. The interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed by the researcher who carried them out. After the transcription of the data, the recorded files were deleted. The average length of interviews was 46 min.

2.2. Participants

The participants were children who fled Ukraine due to the war that started in February 2022 and are living in the capital of Estonia (Tallinn). This location was chosen because it has the highest number of Ukrainian refugees in the country. A snowball method was used to recruit participants for the study. The selection criteria for the children was that they should be aged between 10 and 17.

Overall, two Ukrainian interviewers/researchers contacted 13 families with children to ask the permission of a parent and the child for the child to participate in the study (a convenience sample), of whom 11 families agreed to participate. Despite employing a convenience sampling, saturation was achieved by the ninth participant. At the time consent was given, an appropriate time for the interview was set. None of the children cancelled the interview. Thus, 11 children (6 girls and 5

Table 1
Characteristics of children.

Child (pseudonyms)	Sex	Age	Month of arrival	Family members with whom they live in Estonia
Maria	Girl	13	March	Mother and younger sister
Anna	Girl	16	March	Mother and little brother
Sofia	Girl	13	March	Mother
Mark	Boy	13	March	Mother
Ivan	Boy	14	March	Mother, grandmother, younger sister
Artem	Boy	13	February	Mother, father and twin sister
Inna	Girl	12	April	Mother and younger brother
Alla	Girl	11	February	Mother
Anastasia	Girl	12	March	Mother
Mykola	Boy	12	February	Mother and father
Maksym	Boy	12	August	Mother, father, and younger brother

boys) aged 11–16 years of age (mean age: 12.8 years) were interviewed (see Table 1).

2.3. Data analysis

To gain an overview of the findings, a thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Clarke and Braun (2013), thematic analysis aligns well with people's experiences or understandings and construction of phenomena in particular contexts. To enhance the reliability of the data analysis, two authors (the first and second author) conducted the data analysis. Interviews were first transcribed and anonymised in the language children spoke (Russian and Ukrainian), followed by translation of these transcripts into English for the data analysis by the second author. To become familiar with the data, the authors read the interviews multiple times independently to gain a profound understanding of the texts and then generated initial codes from the data via open coding. As the number of participants was small, the transcripts were manually coded using word-processing software. After the initial codes were compiled, the authors met to discuss the findings and form the list of codes. Subsequently, the process of pattern formation and identification led them to construct themes first independently and then together by comparing and refining themes. Consistency in common labels and themes was achieved through consensus. Themes were further shaped and clarified by revisiting the texts to define and name themes, as shown in Table 2. The main themes are introduced in the following section, including data extracts to illustrate the connections between the raw data and the conclusions drawn.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Written consent to interview the children was sought from both the parents and the children. Consent forms included the aim of the study, interview process, data analysis, and confidentiality and anonymity regarding records and study participants. The language in the children's consent form was simple and child-friendly. Informed consent was verbally explained and signed before the interview. Children were clearly informed that their participation in the research process was voluntary and that they could terminate the agreement to participate at any stage without any explanation or consequence. Furthermore, children were reminded throughout the interview that they could stop at any time and did not have to answer any or some of the questions. They were assured that the information shared during the interviews would be kept anonymous. None of the children terminated the interview in the middle of the process. Children were given the contact number of the researcher who conducted the interview in case they had further questions or concerns about the study. Furthermore, although mental health services are provided for Ukrainians at the state and local level, families

Table 2

Children's daily functioning, challenges, and resilience: main themes and labels.

Adaptation process
<i>Challenges: living environment (weather, living space, unfamiliar language); language barrier (lack of information, misunderstandings, fear of rejection); negative attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees: Russian-speaking locals; participation in two different schools: Estonian and Ukrainian; homesickness: home, personal belongings, friends, family members (sadness, anxiety)</i>
<i>Strengths: family and other Ukrainian refugees; local families; nature, leisure activities (music, dancing, painting, journaling, playing computer games)</i>
Schooling
<i>Phase I: 'adaptation to Estonian society': passive observing (special Ukrainian refugee classes with Ukrainian teachers, ordinary classes with Estonian teachers)</i>
<i>Phase II: 'the real schooling': new opportunities, fear of failure</i>
Requirements to enable better coping
<i>Psychological counselling; learning to control emotions (for calmness); learning to communicate (to make friends); remaining calm and optimistic</i>

Themes are in bold.

were asked to contact the researcher if they needed extra psychological counselling. The researchers ensured that the children were comfortable during the interviews and that they were not distressed at the end of the interview.

3. Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data analysis: adaptation process, schooling, and requirements to enable better coping. Each theme is described in the following sections.

3.1. Adaptation process

This theme can be discussed in terms of challenges and strengths supporting the process of adaptation. The hardest challenges children reflected on were related to the *living environment*, mainly the *weather, living space, and unfamiliar language*. Children shared their stories of the cold and windy weather they experienced on first arriving in Estonia, which increased their discomfort and the feeling of wanting to go back home, as quotes from Anna and Sofia outlined: 'When I came here, I was cold and it was cold until almost the beginning of summer, it was cold for me' (Anna); '...bad weather, winds, my head always hurt, it hurt often. As I came here, I realised that it was not comfortable here and I wanted to go home. The country [Estonia] seemed uncomfortable for me in general' (Sofia). Artem elaborated on the reason it was difficult to get used to the environment, namely, that everything was different from home [Ukraine], and everything was new (country, school, living space) and unfamiliar.

Over half of the children believed their living conditions were worse in Estonia than in their lives in Ukraine, especially the lack of space, poor condition of the living space, and sharing a flat with strangers. According to the children, small living spaces caused conflicts among family members. Some children used the phrases 'affected relationships in the family' and 'increased stress' when describing their living situations. Apart from the weather and living space, the subject most often brought up was the Estonian language, which differs greatly from Ukrainian. The inability to understand people and signs on the streets and in the shops increased the feeling of discomfort, and some children mentioned anxiety. Mark described how not knowing the language made him feel distressed:

... Completely different people who speak an incomprehensible language. When I first went to the store, I didn't even know what to do, or talk, I just silently went in, bought what I wanted and that's it. I didn't say a single word at all. It was very difficult for me to adapt to Estonia. I didn't understand anything.

It was not only not speaking the language that distressed children, but the *lack of information and misunderstandings* caused by the *language barrier*: 'The most difficult thing was, probably, that I didn't know the language. I didn't understand anything, this was the most difficult thing' (Anastasia); 'The most difficult here was learning the language ... to have some kind of communication ...' (Alla). Ivan elaborated on the struggle with socialisation due to the inability to speak the language, leading to the *fear of rejection*:

It [the Estonian language] is different, very different ... The most difficult thing for me was to socialise, I just stayed at home and that's it. Well, I even didn't know how the transport system works, or how to use it ... well, in principle, there was nothing to do, I just didn't know what to do ... if I can't speak their language, I can't understand them, I can't be part of them ... Estonians are so closed, it means that, for them, we can't become natives.

Ivan discussed the fear of rejection in the context of peers, being worried about not fitting in and not being accepted. During the interview, he concluded that, when they cannot speak the language, Ukrainian children can only communicate with other Ukrainian children or

Russian children, but not with Estonian children. His thoughts on communication with Russian children were not expressed positively; for example, he said ‘... well, Russians show a bad attitude towards Ukrainians’. Other children, similarly, expressed their views related to the *negative attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees from Russian-speaking locals* and illustrated them with examples of negative situations with Russian-speaking children after they had arrived in Estonia. For example, Alla shared several moments where Russian-speaking children shouted Russian-supporting words, such as ‘Glory to ...!’ Maria described an unpleasant situation in the yard of her friend’s house:

My peers bullied me and my friend as well, they were Russian-speaking Estonians. We were walking with a friend and sitting on the playground, swinging. Two boys came up to us, and well, they started asking something in Estonian first. They realised that we didn’t understand, we were not locals, and began to speak to Russian with well, bad words, for absolutely no reason ... They demanded we leave that playground

Although the interviewers avoided Russian-related topics, including speaking Russian in Estonia as one way of communicating, the children themselves brought up this theme and expressed fear of being bullied by Russian-speaking locals as one of the challenges of adapting to the community. The way children dealt with such ‘conflict situations’ was to remove themselves from these situations, not respond, and go around in small groups, not alone.

One of the challenges for children that affected their mental state and the process of adaptation was *participation in two different schools*, namely, attending an *Estonian school* physically and a *Ukrainian school* remotely. Due to the uncertainty of the situation, not knowing when and whether they can return to Ukraine, children were faced with the need to study in two schools at the same time, which was tiresome, as Ivan explained: ‘If it is possible, I do some Ukrainian homework, but I come home from school late and there is no time left at all, only at weekends at most’.

Homesickness was another difficulty seen as an obstacle to adaptation, specifically missing the *home* and their *personal belongings, friends, and family members* who had stayed behind for various reasons, as Alla and Mark shared: ‘I’m so worried, I have relatives in Ukraine, I’m worried about them’ (Alla); ‘I miss my family, relatives there [in Ukraine] ...’ (Mark). Most of the children mentioned homesickness as the main factor influencing their lives in Estonia. Homesickness brought up sadness and anxiety, which, in turn, made it harder for them to adapt to daily lives in a new country; for example, as Artem explained:

I want to go home. I miss my home. I just want to go home it is what I need. I want to go home because everything is native there. Well, I’m unhappy, I’m sad. It’s like saying nothing. Well, it’s like, each person is happy in their own place.

The challenges children reflected on were still occurring to some extent at the time of the interviews (for most children, nine to ten months after arriving in Estonia) and were difficult to endure. Most of the children wanted to return home and were anticipating doing so, as quotes also indicate: ‘I really want to go home and I’m sure we’ll be back in Ukraine’ (Maria); ‘Everything was fine at home. If we compare my life before and after February 24, it has worsened. It is hard here in terms of psychological state, moral state ... I don’t really like to be here’ (Ivan). Only Mark was not sure whether he wanted to return to Ukraine. Having lived in Estonia for almost nine months, he had started to adapt and questioned what he would do if he had a choice: ‘It is better to return everything to how it was before the war, but having lived here and learned what is here and how, it is already difficult to say whether I want to go back or to stay here’.

Despite the challenges, children reflected on positive aspects, that is, on the strengths supporting the adaptation process. The *family and other Ukrainian refugees* were most mentioned by the children: for some children, the family and other Ukrainians combined and for some children,

family only. Artem expressed the importance of family and other Ukrainians: ‘My parents helped me to cope with this new situation [fleeing to Estonia] ... Ukrainian friends were supportive, we walked together, played football ...’. By Ukrainian friends, he meant other Ukrainians in a similar situation who had fled Ukraine due to the war. The children explained it was helpful to talk to others with the same experience and to exchange experiences, as Alla pointed out, and to spend time together. Mark elaborated on the feeling of not being alone anymore:

... I was no longer alone, after all, when I already managed to make friends who have been here in Estonia longer than I have. Thanks to them, they explained some things to me and it became easier ... to communicate with someone and ... it became easier.

Unlike these experiences, Ivan only found comfort and support in his family: ‘... the family, there was nothing externally ...’.

Furthermore, it was explained that *local families* have an important role in the adaptation process, especially those who provided housing for the refugees with their own families: ‘... mum and staying for the first month with the Estonian family with children was helpful, very helpful ...’ (Anastasia). The help was related to getting to know the local customs, getting information about what was needed to do as refugees to ‘settle down’, and getting by daily without focusing on the situation in Ukraine. Inna valued not only the local family but also the general generosity of local people.

The children discussed *nature* and its importance a great deal about arriving in Estonia and during the adaptation to the living situation in the new country. ‘Beautiful’ was the most commonly used word to describe scenery, lakes, rivers, and fields. Maksym described his first memory of arrival as follows:

I think when I had just crossed the border, I saw these castles there, in Narva [the eastern point of Estonia], and there were castles. A lot of everything was new. There was a sea, a lake, or a river, something like that. I liked it. Yes, it was beautiful ...

He further elaborated on the importance of nature in the context of adaptation by using the word ‘calming’. For other children, nature was similarly associated with a calming effect, as Anna, for example, shared:

It helped me that my mother always tried to take me and my little brother, when it is possible, to different beautiful places, all kinds of excursions. She also registered him and me in different camps to see beautiful places, visit interesting places ... Beautiful places I visited made me feel relaxed, it helped so much to adapt here.

Equally importantly, the children outlined *leisure activities* as a crucial part of adjusting/coping with the ‘new situation’ – music, dancing, painting, journaling, and playing computer games were most commonly referred to. These activities were not only engaged in at home but ‘professionally’, meaning children went to a music school and dance studio, as Sofia pointed out: ‘I have the chance to attend a very good music school here [in Estonia]. I also went to the music school in Ukraine ...’. She clarified that music is helpful for relaxation. Maksym focused on painting and noted that ‘painting gives him the strength to cope with the situation, to develop a sense of purpose’. On the other hand, Inna shared her way of coping with emotions and finding strengths with the help of journaling: ‘Again, my friends help me, or I need a little time to spend by myself with all emotions and write in a journal ...’. Entertainment was also mentioned by half of the children about playing computer games – ‘It can help to take the mind off things a little’, as Mykola reflected.

3.2. Schooling

The schooling theme can be divided into two sub-themes: phase I and phase II. Phase I indicates the ‘*adaptation to Estonian society*’: *passive observing*. Eight children shared their experiences of going to school in

spring 2022. Four of the children attended a *special class* created in Estonian schools for Ukrainian refugee children. These special classes aimed to support the socialisation of refugee children in Estonian schools. In general, children were dissatisfied with this way of organising studies for two reasons. First, there was no traditional learning and the traditional subjects (mathematics, science, arts, etc.) were not taught, which children had expected. By traditional learning they explained conventional methods of education that involve lectures, textbooks, and other traditional educational resources, asking questions by teachers instead of working in groups, engaging in discussions with classmates. Second, there were children of all ages in these classes, which was deemed uncomfortable, as this quote reflects: ‘... all the Ukrainian schoolchildren were together, which was very inconvenient. We learned Estonian and English. Well, there wasn’t normal education there, so it was like wasting time ... we didn’t even study mathematics in the spring’ (Alla). Ivan emphasised the boredom felt due to the difference in the children’s ages and from not doing much:

I was in the special Ukrainians’ class, there were all children. They were of different ages. Well, it was kind of boring. I didn’t particularly like it. Everything was designed for younger children. Well, I was, well, not the target audience. We were just together. And we didn’t really do anything there except learn the Estonian language.

Four other children attended *ordinary classes in Estonian schools*. Children described these experiences positively, using good words about the school, their peers, and the teachers, except for the inability to communicate and understand the context of the class, as Mark reflected: ‘... communication with Estonian classmates ... I practically did not communicate with them. It means, I just sat and listened [without understanding what was said] to the teachers and others ...’ Sofia elaborated that they were not asked to actively participate nor given homework:

I didn’t communicate with many people there, only with those who were Ukrainian. Well, we were not asked anything, we were not given any homework, and we just sat in the class, and didn’t do anything. We didn’t study there, we just sat in the classes and that was all.

In contrast to this experience, the children expressed the wish to be actively involved in their studies, not passive observers. Furthermore, they wished to be able to communicate and understand their surroundings.

Phase II refers to ‘the real schooling’ with new opportunities and the fear of failure. From 1 September 2022, all 11 children started to attend Estonian schools. Children shared mainly optimistic thoughts on the *new opportunities* the new school year provided for them, including the subjects they could choose from based on their academic interests (‘There are a lot of opportunities, like, for example, new subjects that you could choose for yourself, what subject you would like to study’, Anna) and equal opportunities (‘... I study like everyone else’, Artem). Although all the children were satisfied with ‘the real schooling’, one struggle remained – studying in Estonian and passing the Estonian B1 language level at the end-of-year examination. Children expressed the *fear of failure* in this regard. Inna discussed the anxiety related to not understanding and being understood:

You just come to an Estonian school where you don’t understand anything. That is, they do not understand you, but you do not understand them. ... And then you find yourself in this condition, where you are concerned, distressed that there will be no one with you, or you will not be able to explain what you want, or you will not understand what they want from you.

For the children, studying was not difficult, but studying in Estonian caused incomprehension or misunderstandings.

3.3. Requirements to enable better coping

Throughout the interviews, children expressed the need for *psychological counselling* or psychological help, as they called it. Anna explained the need for a psychologist because of trauma, which is long-lasting, and believed that in such circumstances [war], psychological counselling is generally a must: ‘... because the situation is difficult, almost everyone needs a psychologist, some, after circumstances, a psychotherapist ... because troubles with the head can happen due to the fact that everything happened abruptly ... it remains, the trauma for life’. Some children had received counselling; for example, Alla was taken to a psychologist because of her depression and her constant crying for the family she had left behind in Ukraine: ‘I was taken to a psychologist because it was the time when I cried constantly, I was so worried. I have relatives in Ukraine, I was worried about them’.

Inna, on the other hand, reflected on the importance of *learning to control one’s emotions*, as this would help calm her. Furthermore, another child, Ivan, voiced the desire to *learn to communicate to make friends*: ‘Well, it would be perfect if someone explained to me how to meet new friends or teams or how to learn to communicate with someone’.

Almost all children indicated the need to **remain calm and optimistic** and to have a positive outlook on the future to keep going. Maria emphasised the aspect of gratitude in this context: ‘I realised that you need to appreciate what you have. Well, you need to appreciate it, because if you don’t appreciate it, it can get worse the next day and you lose even more’. She elaborated that appreciation is connected with being calmer.

4. Discussion and concluding thoughts

This study discusses Ukrainian refugee children’s daily functioning, challenges, and resilience in Estonia. As indicated in the literature section, the impacts of war on mental and physical well-being, as well as the educational prospects of children, have been well-documented (see Chaaya et al., 2022). The importance of comprehensive psychosocial support, community engagement, family support, and access to education cannot be overstated (Bellizi et al., 2022; Hodes, 2022).

One of the findings of this study is the need for psychological counselling or support for Ukrainian refugee children to address the profound trauma and emotional distress inflicted by war and displacement. This finding aligns with previous research advocating the provision of mental health services to refugee populations (Awuah et al., 2022). Additionally, the children expressed a desire to acquire skills in emotional regulation and communication, recognising the pivotal role of these abilities in building relationships and navigating the challenges of their new lives. These skills are not only essential for their immediate well-being but also for their successful integration into Estonian society. A pivotal finding of this study pertains to the nuanced phases of school adjustment experienced by children within the local Estonian school system. In the I phase (first experiences with attending the school), the children attending special classes, which were created specifically for the Ukrainian refugee children for more efficient adaptation, expressed dissatisfaction due to the language barrier, the absence of traditional learning methods and the mixing of children of various ages, highlighting challenges within the system created specifically for the children. Moving into phase II, after attending the school for months, a substantial challenge remained — the language barrier, particularly in achieving proficiency in Estonian, creating anxiety and fear of failure in language examinations and the inability to effectively communicate with locals and comprehend essential information. This underscores the significance of language as a barrier to integration, a concern that has been illuminated by prior studies (Gewirtz et al., 2022). Within the context of schooling, the language barrier remained a significant impediment to active participation, underscoring the need for tailored language support programmes for refugee children. Furthermore, the children’s experiences revealed their struggles with socialisation as the

language barrier often hindered their ability to communicate with their Estonian peers. Javanbakt (2022) similarly highlights this sense of exclusion and the fear of rejection.

Nevertheless, studies have highlighted the remarkable resilience exhibited by war-affected children and their families even amidst adversity (see Denov et al., 2019). It is imperative to acknowledge the protective factors and socioecological systems that enable this resilience to thrive (Dangmann et al., 2022; Hodes, 2022). In this study, children's families played a central role in providing emotional support and a sense of belonging, aligning with previous studies highlighting the protective role of family in refugee contexts (Denov et al., 2019). Moreover, leisure activities, such as music, dance, painting, journaling, and computer games, played a crucial role in helping the children cope with their emotions and stress. These activities not only served as an outlet for their emotions but also offered a sense of purpose and distraction from their difficulties. Additionally, the children's expressed desire to acquire skills in emotional regulation and communication underscores their resilience and adaptability. They recognise the importance of being able to control their emotions, which is vital not only for practical reasons but also for connecting with others and overcoming feelings of isolation.

In conclusion, this study presents a unique perspective on the experiences of Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia, offering valuable insights into their adaptation process, challenges, and resilience. It underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to support their well-being and integration. Specifically, tailored language acquisition programmes in Estonian schools, culturally sensitive mental health services, and community-based initiatives can play a pivotal role in facilitating their successful adaptation. It is essential for educators, policymakers, and practitioners to heed the voices of these children and translate their experiences into actionable strategies. Future research should continue to explore the experiences and needs of refugee children, aiming to inform evidence-based interventions and policies that promote their long-term well-being and integration.

4.1. Limitations

It is important to outline the limitations of the research design. The study focused on a specific group of Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia, and the sample size is limited. A larger and more diverse sample could provide a broader perspective on the experiences of refugee children. Furthermore, experiences can vary significantly based on the specific context and circumstances of displacement; therefore, the findings of this study may have limited generalisability to other refugee populations or countries. The study was conducted over a specific timeframe, approximately nine to ten months after the children arrived in Estonia. The long-term adaptation experiences of these children beyond this timeframe are not fully captured, as this study examines children's experiences at a specific point in time. Longitudinal data would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of their adaptation and coping processes over time. These limitations can guide future research to address these gaps and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia.

4.2. Implications

Based on the findings, the following recommendations can be outlined: First, the study underscores the importance of providing tailored support services for Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia. This includes language assistance programmes, mental health services, and educational support that address their unique needs and challenges. Second, given the significant role of language barriers in the adaptation process, policymakers and educators should prioritise language acquisition programmes that help refugee children learn Estonian effectively and are designed to facilitate communication and integration. Third, recognising the importance of family support, strengthening family bonds and providing resources for parents to cope with the challenges of

displacement can contribute to the well-being of the entire family unit. Fourth, the opportunity to exchange experiences with other refugees offered a sense of support for the children. This kind of support network within the refugee community can serve as a vital resource for fostering resilience, as acknowledged by the children. Fifth, educational policies should be reformed to better accommodate the needs of refugee children. This includes providing flexible educational pathways that consider the disruption caused by displacement as well as ensuring that curriculum and teaching methods are inclusive and supportive. Sixth, integration programmes should focus on fostering positive relationships between refugee children and the local community. Promoting cultural exchange and reducing intergroup tensions can create a more inclusive and supportive environment. Seventh, due to the potential long-term effects of displacement, it is crucial to implement long-term monitoring and support mechanisms for Ukrainian refugee children, that is, regular assessments of their well-being and adaptation to identify evolving needs. Eighth, establishing peer support programmes within schools and communities can help refugee children connect more effectively with their peers who have shared experiences. Such programmes can promote socialisation, reduce feelings of isolation, and enhance resilience. These implications can guide policymakers, educators, and local governments to develop comprehensive strategies to support Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia.

Ethical approval

The Ethics Committee at Tallinn University approved the study (No 23/2022).

Funding

This work was supported by the Estonian Research Council under Grant PSG305.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Karmen Toros: Conceptualization, Methodology. **Olena Kozmenko:** Conceptualization, Methodology. **Asgeir Falch-Eriksen:** Conceptualization, Methodology.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant (PSG305).

References

- Awuah, W. A., Ng, J. C., Mehta, A., Yarlagadda, R., Khor, K. S., Abdul-Rahman, T., et al. (2022). Vulnerable in silence: Paediatric health in the Ukrainian crisis. *Annals of Medicine and Surgery*, 82, Article 104369. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amsu.2022.104369>
- Bellizzi, S., Panu Napodano, C. M., Pichierrri, G., & Nivoli, A. (2022). Mirroring Syria: The need to prioritise mental health support for displaced individuals during the Ukraine crisis. *Public Health*, 209, e5–e6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2022.05.009>
- Bouma, H., López López, M., Knorth, E. J., & Grietens, H. (2018). Meaningful participation for children in the Dutch child protection system: A critical analysis of relevant provisions in policy documents. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 79, 279–292. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.016>
- Cai, H., Bai, W., Zheng, Y., Cheung, T., Su, Z., Jackson, T., et al. (2022). International collaboration for addressing mental health crisis among child and adolescent refugees during the Russia-Ukraine war. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 72, Article 103109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2022.103109>
- Chaaya, C., Thambi, V. D., Sabuncu, Ö., Abedi, R., Osman, A. O. A., Uwishema, O., et al. (2022). Ukraine – Russia crisis and its impacts on the mental health of Ukrainian

- young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Annals of Medicine and Surgery*, 79, Article 104033. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amsu.2022.104033>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The Psychologist*, 26(2), 120–123.
- Dangmann, C., Dybdahl, R., & Solberg, Ø. (2022). Mental health in refugee children. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 48, Article 101460. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101460>
- Denov, M., Fennig, M., Rabiau, M. A., & Shevell, M. C. (2019). Intergenerational resilience in families affected by war, displacement, and migration: "It runs in the family". *Journal of Family Social Work*, 22(1), 17–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2019.1546810>
- Children: Innocent victims of war in Ukraine. (2022). Editorial. *The Lancet: Child & Adolescent Health*, 6(5), P279. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(22\)00102-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(22)00102-X)
- Elvevåg, B., & DeLisi, L. E. (2022). The mental health consequences on children of the war in Ukraine: A commentary. *Psychiatry Research*, 317, Article 114798. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2022.114798>
- Gewirtz, A. H., Muldrew, L., & Sigmarsdóttir, M. (2022). Mental health, risk and resilience among refugee families in Europe. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 47, Article 101428. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101428>
- Glazer, D. (2022). An experience beyond words: Trauma-informed ideas for Child and Adolescent services supporting Ukrainian refugees. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591045221133770>
- Hodes, M. (2022). Thinking about young refugees' mental health following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591045221125639>
- Holt, E. (2022). Growing concern over Ukrainian refugee health. World report. *Lancet*, 399(10331), 1213–1214. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)00568-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)00568-2)
- Javanbakht, A. (2022). Addressing war trauma in Ukrainian refugees before it is too late. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 13, 2104009. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2008066.2022.2104009>
- Johnson, R. J., Antonaccio, O., Botchkovar, E., & Hobfoll, S. E. (2022). War trauma and PTSD in Ukraine's civilian population: Comparing urban-dwelling to internally displaced persons. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 57, 1807–1816. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-021-02176-9>
- Kruszewska, A., & Lavrenova, M. (2022). The educational opportunities of Ukrainian children at the time of the Russian invasion: Perspectives from teachers. *Education*, 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2083211>
- Kumar, B. N., James, R., Hargreaves, S., Bozorgmehr, K., Mosca, D., Hosseinalipour, S. M., et al. (2022). Meeting the health needs of displaced people fleeing Ukraine: Drawing on existing technical guidance and evidence. *The Lancet*, 17, Article 100403. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2022.100403>
- Lava, S. A. G., de Luca, D., Milani, G. P., Leroy, P., Rotz, N., & de Winter, P. (2022). Please stop the Russian-Ukrainian war – children will be more than grateful. *European Journal of Pediatrics*, 181, 2183–2185. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00431-022-04444-5>
- Lewtak, K., Kanecki, K., Tyszko, P., Goryński, P., Bogdan, M., & Nitsch-Osuch, A. (2022). Ukraine war refugees - threats and new challenges for healthcare in Poland. *Journal of Hospital Infection*, 125, 37–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhin.2022.04.006>
- Ociepa-Kicińska, E., & Gorzalczyńska-Koczkodaj, M. (2022). Forms of aid provided to refugees of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war: The case of Poland. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(12), 7085. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19127085>
- Schoch, A., Aeby, G., Müller, B., Cottier, M., Seglias, L., Biesel, K., et al. (2020). Participation of children and parents in the Swiss child protection system in the past and present: An interdisciplinary perspective. *Social Sciences*, 9(8), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9080148>
- Shoib, S., Zharkova, A., Pal, A., Jain, N., Saleem, S. M., & Kolesnyk, P. (2022). Refugees and Mental health crisis in Ukraine. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 74, Article 103169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2022.103169>
- Social Insurance Board. (2023a). Statistics on Ukrainian refugees. <https://www.sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/et/asutus-kontaktid/statistika-ja-aruandlus#ua-stat> (19.01.2023).
- Social Insurance Board. (2023b). Ukrainian war refugees: Staying in Estonia. <https://kriis.ee/en/security-situation-europe/ukrainian-war-refugees/staying-estonia> (19.01.2023).
- Strolin-Goltzman, J., Kollar, S., & Trinkle, J. (2010). Listening to the voices of children in foster care: Youths speak out about child welfare workforce turnover and selection. *Social Work*, 55(1), 47–53. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/55.1.47>