



# Well-being and Trauma of Ukrainian Child Refugees in the Context of Czechia

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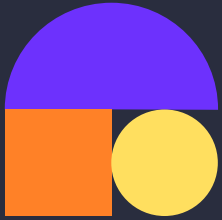
# Background

Czech Republic registered more than 500,000 refugees, about 25% children

Ukrainian children now represent **4% of all Czech primary school pupils.**

Some continue schooling in parallel

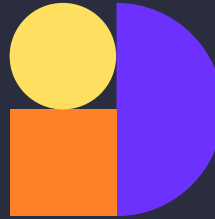
# Research design



**15 in-depth interviews** with Ukrainian holders of temporary protection living in Czechia since early 2022

14 had tertiary education

All of them worked



Narrative analysis of **43 written stories** (ages 7–18)

Collected May–July 2022 in children's clubs (Olomouc & Central Bohemia)

Stories anonymised; ethical standards followed



# War experience for children

Suddenness and disbelief: "I couldn't believe it was true..." (girl, 11)

Fear and trauma: hiding in basements, hearing bombs, separation from fathers

Emotional reactions: fear, injustice, hatred of war, patriotism

Older children aware of national implications: "It is the most difficult test for the nation."

# Children: Exile

24 February 2022 = life rupture: "My world turned upside down."

Often without fathers due to mobilisation law  
Feelings of sadness, longing for home, anxiety for relatives  
Some children forced to grow up quickly, taking responsibility

Adaptation and gratitude alongside resistance  
"I went to school in the Czech Republic... I made friends." (girl, 13)  
"I don't want to learn a foreign language." (boy, 8)

Social networks and family presence crucial for coping

# Hope and return aspirations for children

All children hoped to return to Ukraine; none planned to stay  
"We will see victory and go home." (girl, 15)  
Hope tied to peace, reunion, and national victory

Patriotism:  
Expressions of heroism and pride: "Ukraine must win."

Older teens show political understanding of the war

# Psychological impacts on children

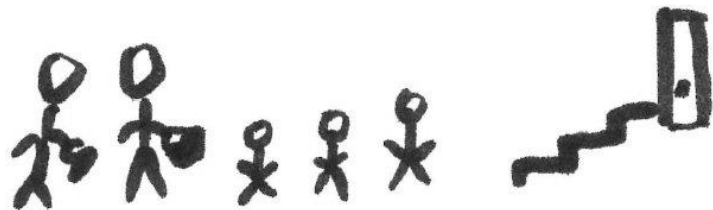
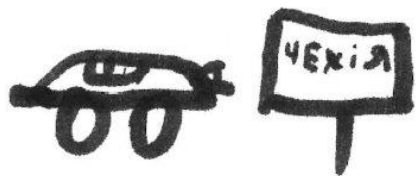
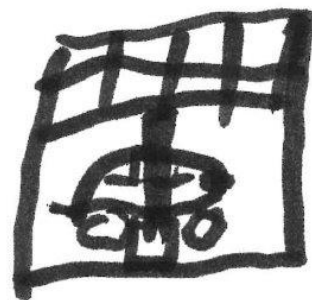
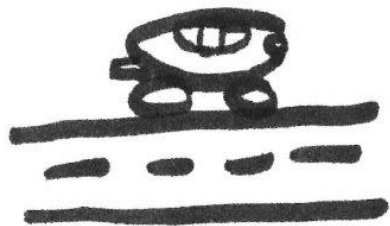
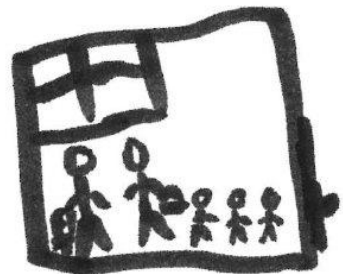
Common emotions: fear, worry, nostalgia

Potential PTSD symptoms: nightmares, anxiety, avoidance

Integration challenges linked to trauma

Education and stability are key to recovery

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# Safety

Across interviews, safety emerged as the top concern—often at the cost of social connection.

Mothers described war-time trauma, terrifying journeys, and early months in Czechia marked by isolation and fear.

“I packed our bags and left because I saw fear in my child’s eyes.” – R13

“We didn’t even go to the store. We were afraid.” – R1





# School as Frontline

School is where children confront their new reality.

But they face language barriers, social exclusion, and pressure to perform academically.

"They sit through all subjects in Czech, and after 3 months must already be graded." – R6

Even talented children often feel overwhelmed.



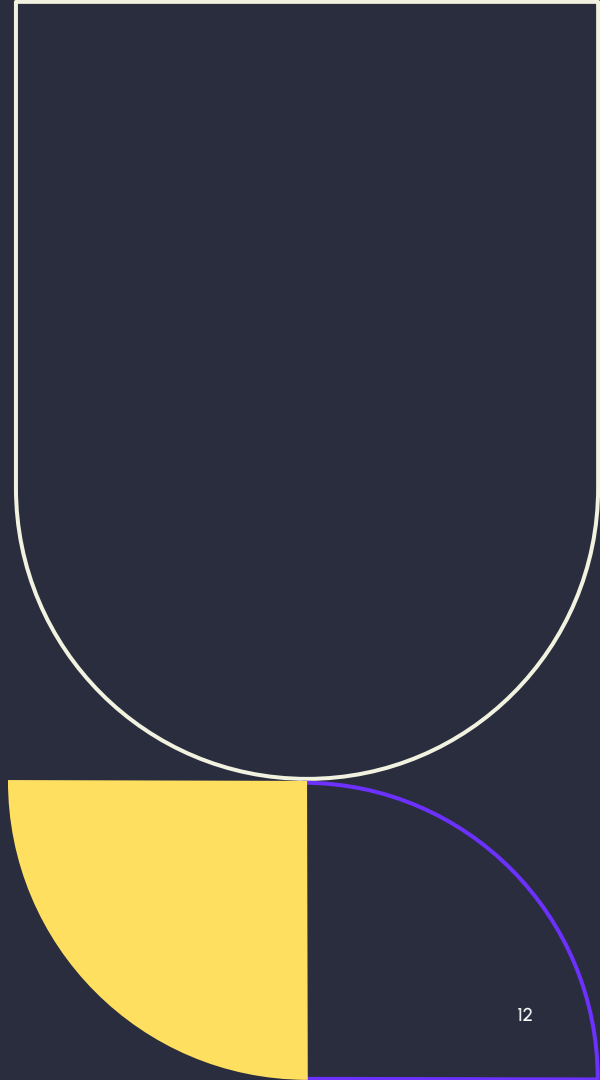
# Language as Gatekeeper

Mastering Czech is not optional—it's survival.

"Priority number one is Czech." – R7

Many invest in tutoring and language preparation. Some mothers even take B1 exams themselves. This will help them interact with school or doctors.

Still, nearly 60% of Ukrainian children are not well-integrated into their peer groups, and 30% have no Czech friends (Kavanová et al., 2023).





# The Power of Peer Bonds

The biggest predictor of successful integration?

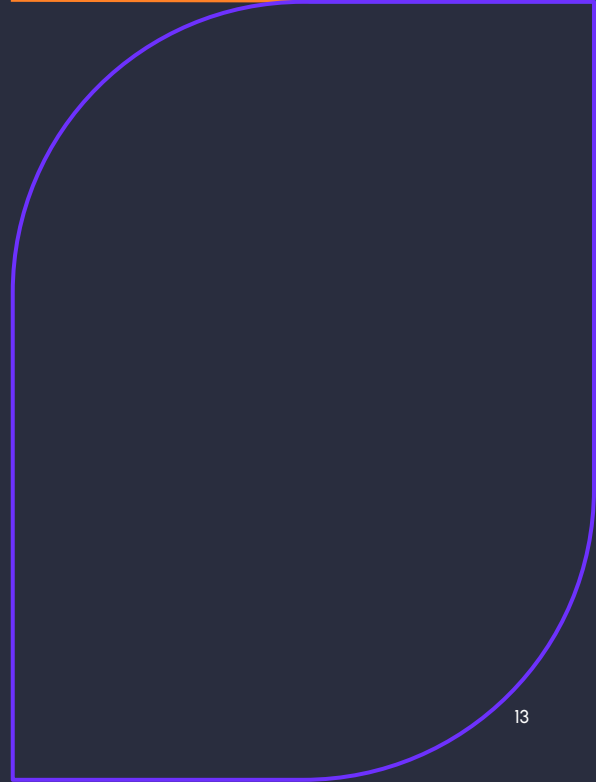
**Friendship.**

"He joined sports from week one and now speaks Czech so fluently, you wouldn't know he's from Ukraine." – R5

X

"He wants to return to Ukraine—he has no friends here." – R11

This highlights the importance of structured social opportunities like clubs and extracurriculars.





# Migration Strategies and School Success

Originally, many planned only temporary exile. But as children settle, learn Czech, and succeed academically, plans shift.

"My son wants to stay 100%. Thanks to him, I see our future here." – R8

Some even start university early:

"My son started university at 16." – R7

Mothers often choose to remain in Czechia to protect children from future conscription or instability in Ukraine.

# Sharing with each other

"It is very important for us that we can share our thoughts and emotions in our native language. We understand each other, we know how difficult it is, how painful it is to leave our parents or even children in Ukraine. [...] It is important that our children do not lose their roots, that they preserve our culture, the origin from which they were torn away" (R6).

# Conclusions

Education is the **anchor** of adaptation—but also a pressure point.

Language skills are vital, but not enough.

**Friendship, teacher support, and a safe space to express identity** matter just as much.

Children's adaptation directly influences **family decisions about the future.**

# Policy implications



Schools need **sustained psychological and linguistic support**. They need to promote **inclusive extracurricular programs**.



Encourage **bilingual environments** and **intercultural sensitivity**.



Recognize that **children's school experience can determine migration outcomes**.

**Thank you for your attention!**

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