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LANGUAGE LADDER

LEARNING AND NURTURING GROWTH USING ADAPTIVE GUIDANCE AND EDUCATION FOR REFUGEE YOUTH IN ESTONIA AND POLAND

WP2

Context and needs assessment

ESTONIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

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Context and realities of Ukrainian refugee youth in Estonia and Poland

The Language Ladder Pilot operates in two radically different displacement ecosystems. In Estonia, the estimated number of Ukrainian school-age children is estimated at 7,000, while in Poland this number is around 400,000. The difference in scale shapes the entire integration environment, the speed at which belonging can be formed, and the risk profile that young people face within host communities. Estonia is small, more relational, and tightly networked — and this allows integration to happen in smaller circles with lower structural fragmentation. Poland, due to size and volume, generates a very different reality: large systems, overstretched schools, highly diverse caseloads.

We approach this deliverable not as a descriptive situational analysis, but as anthropology-inspired inquiry aimed at understanding what Ukrainian displaced youth experience emotionally, socially, linguistically, identity-wise, and educationally in 2025 — and what this means for integration barrier architecture. We view youth not as passive "beneficiaries", but as persons navigating incomplete identities, disrupted social development trajectories, and reconstruction of agency after forced displacement. For many, adolescence itself is a "grey area" of developmental stage — and displacement multiplies that.

Across both countries, one of the strongest findings in WP2 is that "Ukrainian refugee youth" is not a homogeneous category. Not even close. Within this demographic there are multiple identity-relevant segmentations: year of arrival, region of origin in Ukraine, conversational language background (Russian-speaking vs Ukrainian-speaking), socio-economic baseline of the family, their war exposure intensity and duration, and parental status. The year of arrival is particularly influential. Youth who arrive in 2025 often have limited memory of Ukraine pre-full-scale war; their adolescence is shaped inside prolonged war context, amplified by Pandemic. Youth who arrived in 2022 experienced the rupture, shock, and emergency transition — but then two years of safety and partial continuity. The identity construction process is therefore fundamentally different; one group is building identity under ongoing threat narrative, the other under re-stabilisation.

In Estonia this segmentation is even deeper due to linguistic landscape. Estonia hosts a large Ukrainian youth share from Eastern oblasts which were historically Russian-speaking. This creates a phenomenon where Ukrainian youth in Estonia are fluent Ukrainian speakers formally — but prefer Russian in communication, as it allows them to freely converse, as estimated 30% of Estonian population, particularly in the Eastern part of the country are also Russian-speaking. In Poland, the Ukrainian youth population is much more geographically mixed, which generates more blended Ukrainian cultural references — but also leads to more visible sub-grouping and selective belonging patterns. These linguistic affiliations affect group cohesion, integration speed, and informal power dynamics during activities.

Belonging is emerging as the single strongest integration driver in both countries. Language skills are important, but they are not the foundation — they are a vehicle. Youth integrate when they find belonging in peer groups, not when they passively receive language instruction.

In Estonia, integration is facilitated through smaller networks and repeated interpersonal contact. Youth interact with the same peers more frequently. Integration can therefore happen with lower "input investment" and smaller intervention units can still shift group dynamics meaningfully. Youth repeatedly tell us that "it matters that people know who I am and not only that I am from Ukraine." This signals the critical role of identity recognition rather than classification.

In Poland, belonging requires more structured facilitation. Because of scale, Ukrainian youth often remain within Ukrainian peer clusters — not due to resistance to integration, but due to volume, comfort, similarity, and emotional predictability. The school system hosts large concentrations, which creates artificially parallel communities where young people can survive socially without bridging into Polish peer networks, but cannot thrive long-term academically or psychosocially if they remain socially siloed.

This confirms that integration among youth is not linear — it moves in stages influenced by trust, visibility, permission to self-express, and emotional safety. The "integration turning point" appears only after repeated exposure + shared emotional experiences. In Poland, the summer pilot indicated this usually appears around Week 3 of interactions 4 times/week — this is when visible peer bonding begins, jokes become shared. By Week 3, youth start belonging through self-chosen affiliation, not through refugee status categorisation.

> ***We didn't choose this situation. But everyone treats us as if we did.***

Tne shared cross-country layer is that displacement for youth is not only loss of home — it is loss of agency at a developmental stage where agency should be forming. **The move was decided for them.** The environment was decided for them. The refugee label is assigned to them. And adolescents are naturally in a phase where they want autonomy, self-definition, and active authorship of their place in the world.

This feeling reduces self-esteem, increases avoidance, and increases defensive identity strategies (humour, withdrawal, peer micro-bubbles, silence in group learning environments). When young people are given a space where they can perform competence — any competence — the psychological architecture shifts. Chess skills, music taste recognition, humour resonance, video game mastery, digital skills — these become small but incredibly powerful gateways to self-repair and peer acceptance.

The role of emotionally safe activities (games, outings, informal creative formats) is therefore not supplementary — it is foundational. Traditional language classes activated avoidance behaviours. Psychologist-led activities, cultural outings, and creative play formats activated belonging, curiosity, relational trust, and willingness to engage. This aligns with findings in the Poland pilot where "not another school class" was repeatedly emphasised by youth and confirmed during consortium reflection sessions.

In both contexts, emotional safety is an integration precondition — not a product of integration. It must be built first. **Youth cannot integrate into insecurity. They**

Needs emergining from the study

From this anthropological research, youth needs emerge across four primary dimensions

01

Emotional safety and [some] stability

Before language learning, before skill transfer, before academic catch-up — the central need is psychological safety.

Youth need space where they are not judged, not compared, not labelled, and where uncertainty is not punished but normalised.

02

Identity re-authoring

Youth need opportunities to choose an identity position that is not defined solely by displacement.

They need opportunities to "shine" — where competence, talent or passion becomes the basis of belonging — not nationality or refugee category.

03

Social integration through shared experience

Integration happens through shared emotional experience, not instruction. Outings, co-creation activities, games, humour, cultural exploration — these are not entertainment add-ons, they are belonging infrastructure.

04

Educational reinforcement inside the natural environment

Academic gap bridging is important — but must sit inside the school setting (especially in Poland) and must not replicate school. The intervention must complement, not duplicate, formal structures.

The study confirms that language is not the goal — language is a tool to access identity reconstruction, belonging, competence expression and future mobility.

This is the philosophical foundation for the Language Ladder Pilot moving forward.