



Bogdan Stańkowski

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2803-3085>
Ignatianum University in Cracow, Poland
bogdan.stankowski@ignatianum.edu.pl

The Salesians' contribution to the education of underage Ukrainian refugees after the outbreak of the war in 2022

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Abstract

Research objectives and problems: This article addresses the problem of the education of Ukrainian migrant minors in Salesian schools in Poland after the outbreak of the war in 2022. Based on the available literature and the content of Salesian websites, the article aims to show the Polish Salesians' contribution to the education and upbringing of underage Ukrainian students.

Research methods: The theoretical part was developed using an analytical approach to the literature on the subject. The second part of the article presents the author's own qualitative empirical research. The method used in the above-mentioned research is document analysis.

Process of argumentation: The line of reasoning consists of two essential elements. In the first part of the article, the author discusses the legal problems related to the residence of foreign minors in Poland and points to statistical data on the presence of these Ukrainian minors in Polish schools. Further theoretical considerations concern the pupil and the teacher in a multicultural context and address the integration of minors in a pluralistic Polish society.

Research findings: *Educational problems in daily practice:* pupil turnover hinders educational work; the stress and trauma of fleeing the war, and the resulting cultural shock, hinder educational work and teaching; crisis situations become a priority for teachers; and teachers must apparently be sensitive to the needs of foreign pupils. *Organisational, management, legal and didactic problems:* incompatibility in terms of curricula raises organisational and didactic problems; school principals pay great

attention to the creation of preparatory classes; there is a need for teachers specialised in working with migrant children with special needs; school principals and teachers are willing to cooperate with parents and guardians of migrant children; and teachers are aware of the need for further training on the issue of working in a multicultural context. *Integration of pupils at the schools in question*: factors favouring integration include mixed classes and extracurricular activities; and intercultural assistants play a significant role in the integration process of foreign pupils.

Recommendations: New research tools should be used to carry out further research on Ukrainian children in Polish schools. There is a need to carry out further inquiries into the obstacles that may accompany the integration of underage migrants in Polish schools. It would also be important from a cognitive point of view to carry out comparative research: the education of underage refugees in state schools and in schools run by religious congregations.

Introduction

The armed conflict in Ukraine initiated by Russia in 2022 affected not only Ukrainian society but also, above all, mothers and children, who, forced to flee, went to Poland and other European countries in great numbers (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024). The voice of the Catholic Church and the Salesians on the presence and acceptance of migrants in European countries is very clear (Salezjanie Don Bosco, n.d.). Helping one's neighbour, especially war refugees, is part of the logic of mercy promoted not only by John Paul II and Benedict XVI but also by Pope Francis in recent years (vatican.va, 2019). This article seeks to penetrate this new reality, aiming to show, on the basis of the available literature and the content of Salesian websites, the Salesians' contribution to the education of Ukrainian minors attending Salesian schools in Poland. The work combines the author's own qualitative empirical research with document analysis.

Ukrainian children in Poland: Legal aspects and statistics

The admission of foreign students to Poland is regulated by law. According to Polish law, compulsory education in Poland covers every child from the age of 7 to 18. Foreigners are required to have a temporary

residence permit or other permits, such as a permanent residence permit, a residence permit for a long-term resident of the European Union, a residence permit for humanitarian reasons, or a residence permit to obtain refugee status or subsidiary protection.

School-age children and young people from Ukraine are admitted to public schools and are subject to compulsory education and schooling under the conditions applicable to Polish citizens. They are entitled to language support, the opportunity to participate in additional remedial classes in various school subjects, and psychological and pedagogical assistance related to their refugee experience. As far as language issues are concerned, foreigners who do not speak Polish to a level that would allow them to benefit from learning at school can participate in additional Polish language classes (2 hours a week). The classes can be conducted individually or in groups.

Children and young people from Ukraine also have the opportunity to participate in preparatory classes in which the teaching process is adapted to students' needs and educational opportunities. Provision is also made for the assistance of a person who does not necessarily have pedagogical qualifications but who speaks the language of the country of origin and who may be employed as a teacher's assistant (intercultural assistants).

According to the Parliamentary Law on Assistance for Ukrainian Citizens, schools may also open a preparatory branch and an inter-school or inter-communal preparatory branch for Ukrainian pupils. These are special classes for foreign pupils, with an emphasis on Polish language learning (at least 6 hours per week) and adaptation, and they may forego the annual and mid-year classification of students. A child is referred to the preparatory unit until the end of the school year, with the possibility of extension for the following year. Ukrainian pupils may also benefit from remedial classes in the subjects of study organised by the school authority, but for no longer than 12 months.

A special form of assistance to Ukrainian refugee minors is psychological and pedagogical assistance consisting in the recognition and satisfaction of individual developmental and educational needs, as well as the recognition of individual psychophysical capabilities and environmental

factors influencing their functioning (Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji, 2024). The inclusion of new students also takes their educational and preventive needs into account, as provided for in the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science of March 21, 2022.

In addition to these organisational and didactic aspects, in the present context, it is also important to trace the quantitative aspect of Ukrainian pupils in Poland (Kowalski, 2023). The statistical data on Ukrainian children and young people in Polish schools show ongoing transformations, including changes in the number of students due to fluctuations in the number of children (arrivals, returns of families and minors to Ukraine, or their onward travel to other European or non-European countries).

Thus, at the beginning of December 2022, according to the Educational Information System (System Informacji Oświatowej, SIO), 191,045 pupils and students who had arrived from Ukraine after the outbreak of the war had enrolled in Polish educational institutions (Rzymkowski, 2024). According to the statistical data cited by Starzyńska-Rosiecka (2024), the number of children and young people in Polish schools and kindergartens decreased slightly over the course of several months (in mid-February 2023, there were 187,900 pupils). Another source from the same period states that around 43,800 Ukrainian children had arrived in kindergartens since the outbreak of the war, around 116,800 in primary schools, and 27,200 in secondary schools (Serwis Samorządowy PAP, 2023). Information obtained from the Ministry of Education and Science (Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki, MEiN) in November 2023 by *Rzeczpospolita* shows that 183,461 pupils from Ukraine had arrived in Poland after the Russian invasion and had war refugee status.

Students and teachers in a multicultural context: Cultural pluralism and integration of foreign minors in the Polish school

In the Polish context, the protection of the child's welfare is a cornerstone of family law, the foundations of which are in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (Article 72). The "welfare of the child" is understood

as a set of tangible and intangible values that are necessary to ensure the proper physical and spiritual development of the child (Łukasiewicz, 2019, pp. 64–68).

In the current Polish legal system, the obligation to guarantee respect for children's rights is carried out either in the family or in an institutional form. As far as the situation of foreign minors residing in Poland is concerned, their status depends on whether the stay of such a minor is considered legal. In the context of juvenile migration, it is important to pay attention to children's cultural, national, and ethnic identities, understood as maintaining traditions, religious customs, and dialects. Research shows that a lack of rootedness in one's own culture fosters barriers and negatively affects the integration process of young people (Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 1998, pp. 155–183).

An analysis of the literature on the subject shows that the acculturation of migrant children in a new socio-cultural environment depends on many factors, including parents' motivation to change their place of residence, cultural and religious similarities, reason for leaving the country, etc. In many cases, migrant children experience a kind of trauma related to the necessity to change their environment, which can take the form of anxiety, anger, sadness, helplessness, apathy, a kind of closure to others, and a lack of activity (Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 1998, pp. 72–73). All this is accompanied by the culture shock of starting school in Poland (Halik et al., 2006, pp. 66–68). Nikitorowicz notes that any disturbance (negative perceptions based on stereotypes and prejudices) can result in the emergence of conflicts and antagonism in the child (2005, p. 105).

Organising the education of children who mostly do not speak Polish has proven to be a great challenge, not only in terms of didactics but also in terms of organisation and finances (Śliwerski, 2022, p. 40). In the Polish context, Młynarczyk-Sokołowska and Szostak-Król emphasise the differentiated course of foreign children's education and integration, which is determined by their parents' motivations for entering Poland (for income purposes, as political refugees, as war refugees, etc.) (2016, p. 152). There are also manifestations of moderate xenophobia and racist behaviour (stereotypes, ethnic prejudice, etc.) towards foreign students

in Polish schools. Often, foreign children's reluctance to integrate stems from the attitudes of Polish pupils. For this reason, their process of integration into the school environment may be slower (Błęszyńska, 2010, pp. 65–66). The Children's Ombudsman Research Report (June 2023) shows that Polish students rarely have the opportunity to interact with Ukrainian students. Overall, however, a positive attitude of Polish students towards children and young people from Ukraine was noted (Pawlak, 2024).

Włodarczyk and Wójcik point out that two solutions are used in Polish schools to address organisational issues: grouping foreign children (all foreign children together) and placing foreign children with Polish children, which may foster better integration. This reflects a kind of balanced compromise between the two aforementioned strategies in the approach to pupils (Włodarczyk & Wójcik, 2014, pp. 184–185). Similar solutions are adopted in European schools (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019). Other researchers in educational issues in the context of school, where an increasing number of foreign students are observed, postulate that the paradigm of value inclusion, the inclusion of the "other", the "alien", should be applied in the sphere of value reference (Stańkowski, 2014, pp. 831–845). Nikitorowicz emphasises that it is the task of the school to appreciate dialogue and cooperation with representatives of other cultures (2002, p. 264). The school environment is the environment *par excellence* for cultural exchange and learning about the world and all that we call humanity (Dobrowolska, 2010, p. 61). In the context of intercultural education, researchers emphasise the importance of encountering the "otherness" and the "other" (Lewowicki et al., 2015). After all, upbringing at school, with a significant presence of foreign children, is not only about imparting knowledge but also (and perhaps above all) about instilling codes of conduct and references to culture, tradition, and values.

After 1989, the end of the period of communism, the Polish school had to face new challenges outlined by intercultural and international pedagogy (Śliwerski, 2022, p. 45). Despite several decades passing since Poland opened up to multiculturalism, in general, in the eyes of researchers, Polish schools appear to be poorly prepared to meet the challenges related

to the presence of foreign students. Teachers often have a sense of helplessness and incompetence regarding multicultural issues. Some researchers argue that teachers' work with foreign students is unsatisfactory due to their insufficient preparation for working in multicultural conditions (poor knowledge of foreign languages, lack of broader orientation in migration issues, poor skills of cooperation with parents) (Butarewicz-Głowacka, 2015, pp. 103–104). Januszewska expresses the opinion that a necessary condition for integrating foreign students into the new school and cultural environment is an appropriate emphasis on the preparation of teachers and teaching staff (2017, pp. 138–139). Nevertheless, despite these many shortcomings, the Polish school appears to be a place of dialogue and meeting of cultures. Some authors have reported the successful acculturation of children and young people from Ukraine into the school environment in Poland (e.g., Kyrc, 2019).

Methodological aspects

The empirical research was conducted in Salesian primary and secondary schools across all four Polish provinces that have been working with Ukrainian migrant minors since the outbreak of the war in 2022. The study employed a document analysis of materials available on the websites of Salesian schools in Poland, covering the period from February 2022 to December 2023. Document analysis was treated as a qualitative, non-reactive research strategy. Following Rubacha, documents are understood as pre-existing sources that require interpretation, taking into account the context of their production and their function in educational practice (2016, pp. 157–164). This approach aligns with Bowen's (2009) view, which treats document analysis as a systematic procedure for analysing qualitative data, comparable in methodological rigour to interviews or observation.

Based on the collected data, this section provides a descriptive account of educational practices, psychological support, and integration activities directed at Ukrainian students. The descriptive and exploratory

approach enabled the identification of both specific solutions implemented in individual schools and general trends observed across the study period. This strategy ensured the full preservation of research findings while avoiding potential methodological criticisms associated with the limitations of content analysis for publicly accessible websites. To collect relevant information, keywords in Polish, English, and Italian were used, such as “Salesian school,” “Salesian oratory,” “Ukrainian children in Poland,” “underage refugees from Ukraine,” and “Salesian aid to children from Ukraine.”

The main objective of the research was to examine how Salesian schools in Poland responded educationally and socially to the arrival of Ukrainian students following the outbreak of the war. Five specific research questions were also posed:

1. How are Ukrainian students integrated into the educational system of Salesian schools, and what adaptive solutions are implemented?
2. What forms of linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical support are provided?
3. How do Salesian schools foster social and cultural integration between Ukrainian and Polish students, including through extracurricular and oratory activities that support adaptation and development?
4. What challenges do Salesian schools encounter in working with Ukrainian students, and how are these addressed?
5. What role do parents, local authorities, and other institutions play in supporting education and integration?

The research analysed the websites of Salesian schools located in the following towns and cities: Zabrze, Świętochłowice, Oświęcim, Polana, Kraków, Wrocław, Toruń, Tarnowskie Góry, Szczecin, Różanystok, Piła, Poznań, Bydgoszcz, Legionowo, Lubin, Leszno, Lutomiersk, Mińsk Mazowiecki, Ostróda, Przemyśl, Rumia, Sokołów Podlaski, and Łódź.

Research findings

The document analysis approach made it possible to obtain a comprehensive overview of Salesian educational activities for Ukrainian students in Poland. The adopted research framework highlights key areas of action, challenges faced by schools, and examples of best practice, providing a valuable reference for further research on migrant education in faith-based institutions. The research results are presented below:

- 1) **Access to education:** Since the beginning of the war, Salesian schools in Poland have welcomed children and adolescents aged 7–18. Most students were incorporated almost automatically into existing classes, following the Polish core curriculum. The number of students admitted to individual schools ranged from a few to several dozen. In some schools, preparatory classes were also established, which facilitated better adaptation to the Polish educational system. During the first months of their stay, teachers acted intuitively, focusing on responding to crisis situations, such as students' emotional and psychological needs.
- 2) **Preparatory and linguistic support:** For students who did not speak Polish, additional language classes and remedial lessons in various subjects were organised. In some schools, teachers applied individualisation in the teaching process, adjusting materials to the abilities and needs of Ukrainian students. Teachers gradually learned about students' needs and intellectual and educational capacities, but their limited knowledge of the Ukrainian education system was a significant obstacle. In many schools, preparatory classes for non-Polish students were established to eliminate communication problems, support adaptation, and foster empathy and tolerance among young people. Many schools also employed additional specialists, preferably fluent in Ukrainian, to enable a more individualised teaching and educational support process.
- 3) **Psychological and pedagogical support:** Salesian schools provided psychological and pedagogical support, taking into account the

traumatic experiences related to the war. Teachers and educators aimed to address students' emotional needs and ensure their sense of security and support during their first months in Poland. Students, suddenly uprooted from their natural educational and cultural environment, experienced cultural shock, often leading to loneliness, stress, alienation, apathy, and learning difficulties. Initially, achieving educational and pedagogical goals was hampered by language barriers, a lack of appropriate teaching materials, and insufficient psychological and pedagogical support. Teachers were aware of the need to quickly enhance their competencies in working with foreign children, including conducting lessons for students who had difficulties using the Polish language.

- 4) **Staff competencies:** Some schools employed teachers and cultural assistants who spoke Ukrainian or Russian, facilitating communication and the adaptation process. School staff had to reflect on the need to apply inclusive methods to ensure all students had access to education. Teachers often applied individualised approaches, adjusting educational materials to the needs of individual students or small groups of Ukrainian students.
- 5) **Oratory and extracurricular activities:** Materials analysis showed that activities organised in oratories and through sports, artistic, and recreational programmes played a key role in student integration. They enabled students to connect with peers, develop interests, and achieve success outside formal education. Artistic, musical, and sports activities offered by oratories and the SALOS Sports Association promoted relationship building, cooperation, and shared successes among students.
- 6) **Social integration:** Salesian schools implemented activities to support the integration of Polish and Ukrainian students, including joint outings, school events, group activities, and volunteer initiatives. Factors facilitating integration included mixed classroom groups, extracurricular activities, and the presence of Polish peers, which eased the acculturation process (Crolla, 2003, pp. 49–50). Polish students attempted to establish peer relationships with new Ukrainian stu-

dents in their first months in the country, forming the basis for so-called peer education that strengthened trust and group identification among young people.

- 7) **Institutional cooperation:** School activities were carried out in collaboration with local authorities, NGOs, and other institutions supporting the education and care of Ukrainian students. Cooperation included both organisational aspects and substantive student support. Schools and teachers also collaborated with Ukrainian parents, creating interaction spaces through class meetings, communication apps, and electronic registers, which allowed a better understanding of students' needs and their cultural and religious contexts. In practice, many Salesian schools employed coordinators for foreign students fluent in both Ukrainian and Polish to support their adaptation process.
- 8) **Limitations and challenges:** The analysis also identified several challenges:
 - a) high mobility of students and their families, which complicated the continuity of learning,
 - b) differences in the Polish and Ukrainian education systems, e.g., regarding curriculum and assessment,
 - c) initial language difficulties and a lack of suitable teaching materials,
 - d) the need to quickly adapt teaching methods and school organisation to new needs,
 - e) organisational challenges related to the creation of preparatory classes, requiring additional planning of student numbers, lesson hours, and teaching staff, and
 - f) the need to respond quickly to students' diverse educational needs and implement individualised teaching approaches.

Recommendations

Further research on the education of Ukrainian students in Polish schools should include additional research tools, such as interviews with students. Furthermore, it is suggested that the problem of obstacles to the integration of migrant minors be explored in future research. It would also be important from a cognitive point of view to conduct comparative research: the education of underage refugees in state schools and in schools run by religious congregations.

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