

ANALYSIS BY BØRNS VILKÅR • FEBRUARY 2026

# ARE UKRAINIAN STUDENTS THRIVING?

Linguistic Barriers, Fragile Communities, and  
Loneliness in Danish Schools

## FOREWORD

It has been four years since the war in Ukraine began, and soon four years since the Special Act on Temporary Residence for Persons Displaced from Ukraine was passed. Today, thousands of Ukrainian children and young people live in Denmark. They are part of our society, our schools and communities, but without the opportunity to participate on an equal footing. Many struggle with language barriers and a sense of being excluded. This makes them vulnerable, and it means that some Ukrainian children and young people are not doing well. At the same time, their future is uncertain, as the Special Act only applies for one year at a time. No one knows how long they can stay in Denmark.

This report examines the current situation of Ukrainian students in the final years of municipal primary and lower-secondary school and continuation school. It looks at how they experience the transition from reception classes to mainstream classes, how they are doing academically and socially, and how teachers and municipalities can address the task. The study provides insight into the significant and challenging task faced by municipalities and schools in including Ukrainian students, and that many Ukrainian children and young people are being let down. The study is based on interviews with 24 Ukrainian final-year students, 18 teachers, and 9 municipal employees, as well as register data from Statistics Denmark and interviews from BørneTelefonen (the Children's Helpline) in Ukrainian.

The results are concerning: Significantly more Ukrainian students are struggling compared to other students, and almost half have high levels of school absence. Many Ukrainian students experience loneliness and bullying, and the transition to mainstream classes is a vulnerable process for many without sufficient support. The Ukrainian students want to be part of school communities, but the conditions make it difficult.

We hope that the report can contribute to a more systematic effort for Ukrainian children and young people in Denmark. It requires language support, safe communities, and clear guidelines for reception and transition into mainstream classes. Otherwise, we risk losing them along the way and ending up with a marginalised group, which can lead to long-term poor well-being, a lack of connection to education and employment, and the absence of meaningful communities. This can have significant consequences for both the individual and society.

The report's findings and conclusions can also hopefully inspire effective models for the reception of the many young Ukrainians who arrived in Denmark in 2025. Good integration is a prerequisite for Ukrainians and Denmark to gain the greatest possible benefit and the fewest possible problems in this situation.

The uncertainty about the future in Ukraine also means that we, as a society, should prepare for new waves of refugees. The report can provide crucial input on how we can improve the reception of children and young people.

A big thank you to the young Ukrainians who have shared their stories, and to the teachers, municipal employees, and researchers who have contributed knowledge and perspectives. Thanks also to the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (SIRI), which has supported the work and believes that together we can create better conditions for Ukrainian children and young people in Denmark.

Yours sincerely,



**Rasmus Kjeldahl**  
CEO, Børns Vilkår

## THANK YOU

This report draws on various data sources on children and young people displaced from Ukraine, but it particularly relies on qualitative interviews with Ukrainian final-year students and teachers from municipal primary and lower-secondary schools and continuation schools, as well as with municipal employees across the country.

We would like to thank everyone who participated in the study. A special thanks to the 24 young Ukrainians who have shared their experiences with us. Thank you for opening up and sharing your knowledge of what it is like to be a young Ukrainian in the Danish school system.

We would also like to extend a special thanks to Line Krogager Andersen, PhD and researcher at the Department of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University, and Gro Hellesdatter Jacobsen, PhD and associate professor at the Centre for Educational Research at Aalborg University, for providing valuable input to the analysis and for enhancing the content of the report, including contributing expert quotes.

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## Summary

# MANY UKRAINIAN STUDENTS ARE ISOLATED AND LONELY IN DANISH SCHOOLS

Thousands of Ukrainian children and young people live in Denmark today. They participate in sports, attend school, and worry about the future. When the war broke out, the Danish Parliament passed a Special Act to urgently help Ukrainian refugees by giving them access to Danish society and the opportunity for rapid integration. Four years later, they are still living under a temporary solution. The study by Børns Vilkår of Ukrainian final-year students shows that many today struggle with language barriers and feel excluded. Far too many have not become part of Danish communities. Almost one in four express that they are not doing well.

The study by Børns Vilkår is based on interviews with 24 Ukrainian final-year students, 18 teachers, and 9 municipal employees, as well as register data from Statistics Denmark. The analysis of register data shows that 23% of Ukrainian final-year students have low school well-being, compared to 15% among other students. Loneliness and bullying are widespread, and almost half of the students have high levels of school absence. These are serious indicators of poor well-being, and a pattern also reflected in the interviews.

## The difficult transition – the transition into mainstream classes

Many Ukrainian students begin their school life in Denmark in a reception class. There is significant variation across municipalities in how long Ukrainian students spend in a reception class. However, when they are integrated into mainstream classes, they often have limited Danish language skills and lack the necessary support. The transition can be overwhelming:

“ [...] the student I had experienced it as almost a shock [...] to enter [a mainstream class] and then realise how far there is to go to match what your peers can do.”

Mette, teacher in a mainstream Grade 8 class

Reception classes are equipped to support students learning Danish as a second language. However, the teachers in mainstream classes are not always equipped to do so, and even if they are, there are 24 other students to attend to. The study by Børns Vilkår shows that Ukrainian students are too often left to fend for themselves, with few or no opportunities to participate in the class community..

## Language is the biggest barrier

Inadequate Danish skills make it difficult to participate in lessons and form relationships. Although they try, many are left to learn Danish on their own

when they do not receive sufficient support. One listens to Danish podcasts, another snatches time with their mother's Danish textbook, and some, like Platon, say:

“ There are so many difficult words in Danish, they all sound the same. [...] It's hard, very hard. I also practise at home, but it's really difficult.”

Platon, 16 years old

It can be shameful not to know the language; many feel foolish, and that their Danish classmates look down on them.

## Loneliness takes its toll on Ukrainian students

“ When I sat in the Danish class, it felt as if I was sitting alone in an empty room all day. No one talked to me, no one approached me.”

Nadia, 16 years old

Nadia's experience is not unique. Several of the students we have interviewed have spoken about loneliness at school, and the register analysis shows that 17% of Ukrainian final-year students experienced loneliness in the 2023/2024 school year. Some Ukrainian students go to school, day after day, without having any social contact with their peers. This can lead to a sense of meaninglessness, which affects both their social and academic well-being.

## Communities are hard to access

Many Ukrainian students are outside the Danish class communities. They often find comfort in small groups with other multilingual students, but these communities are fragile. If someone is ill or changes school, they can suddenly feel completely alone. However, it is easier to connect with other multilingual students, Kateryna says:

“ Non-Danes understand me, they know how it feels. But the Danes don't understand it at all.”

Kateryna, 14 years old

Not only do some Ukrainian students feel misunderstood by the Danish students, but some are also excluded and bullied:

“ Not only do some Ukrainian students feel misunderstood by the Danish students, but some are also excluded and bullied.”

Iryna, 16 years old

## Good relationships with the Danish teachers, but lacking academic well-being

Ukrainian students encounter a completely new school system in Denmark, with different teaching methods and forms. They are also at a disadvantage linguistically. This means it is very difficult for Ukrainian final-year students to keep up academically. If they are to succeed, it would require significant support from the teachers, but they are unable to undertake this task. Teachers in municipal primary and lower-secondary schools do not have sufficient competencies in Danish as a second language or enough time to differentiate their teaching for each individual student. However, many teachers still find time to help socially/personally, and the Ukrainian students greatly appreciate this. They generally find teachers more accommodating and accepting than those in Ukraine.

## Complex problems – tangible measures

Creating a community across national backgrounds with language barriers is difficult. There are no easy solutions. Nevertheless, Børns Vilkår survey points to some specific improvements that could make a huge difference for Ukrainian students in Denmark today.

# BØRNS VILKÅR RECOMMENDS

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICIANS AND MUNICIPALITIES

The Special Act on Temporary Residence for Persons Displaced from Ukraine was passed as a temporary solution in an extraordinary situation. Four years later, thousands of Ukrainian children and young people continue to live in Denmark under this arrangement. They attend Danish schools, participate in Danish communities, and have their daily lives here, but within frameworks that are not adapted for a longer stay.

The study by Børns Vilkår shows that many Ukrainian children and young people are struggling, feel excluded, and face difficult conditions for participating academically and socially in school. This indicates a need for both targeted efforts and a political prioritisation of how the framework can best support the well-being of Ukrainian children and young people in practice.



# 1

**THE GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENT MUST ESTABLISH A NATIONAL, MULTI-YEAR INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE THE WELL-BEING, PARTICIPATION, AND INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE.**

The initiative should be based on the fact that many Ukrainian children and young people have now spent large parts of their childhood in Denmark, and must ensure that:

- Municipalities receive earmarked funds for work on well-being, participation, and building bridges to communities
- The target group gains better access to qualified language support
- Support does not end after the reception phase; it continues to follow children and young people into their school and leisure lives. This calls for longer-term and cohesive efforts for children and young people
- The collaboration among schools, leisure life, and civil society regarding children and young people is strengthened.

# 2

**Municipalities must ensure that schools have the resources and competencies to support community-building and well-being-promoting work in everyday life, including targeted efforts to address bullying and social isolation.**

# 3

**Municipalities must ensure that schools have the necessary resources and competencies to include Ukrainian students in mainstream classes, for example, by providing schools with funds for training programmes in inclusion, trauma awareness and multilingual pedagogy/didactics.**

# 4

**Municipalities must take responsibility for creating a secure and professionally supported transition from reception class to mainstream class, for example, by supporting schools in prioritising the time for the necessary professional discussions about the transition.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

At Børns Vilkår, we work to ensure that all children thrive, develop, and feel safe, regardless of their background and life situation. Children and young people who have experienced war, flight, and separation from their homeland have a particular need to feel part of a positive community and to belong. We know that secure and positive communities can be a healing and protective factor, reducing the risk of loneliness, distress, and school absenteeism.

The study shows that the Danish language is one of the biggest barriers to young Ukrainians' participation in school communities. Students often gain minimal academic benefit from mainstream education and may feel exposed and burdened in mainstream classes. They wish to be part of the Danish class communities, but many do not feel they receive the support they need to participate academically and socially. Here, teachers and pedagogues play a crucial role.

### 5

**The school's management must ensure that teachers and pedagogues have the time and skills to work systematically and professionally with relationship building and communities as a core part of pedagogical and didactic practice.**

Many young Ukrainians blame themselves when they are struggling and outside their school's communities. They feel it is their own responsibility to adapt so they can find a place in the Danish class community. Therefore, it is important that the responsibility is shifted away from the individual. The school's management must create the necessary frameworks and conditions for community-oriented, well-being-focused work, so that all students – both Danish and Ukrainian – have access to inclusive and safe communities where they experience belonging and meaningful participation.

### 6

**The school management must prioritise skills development in understanding trauma for teachers and pedagogues who are in contact with Ukrainian students.**

Children and young people displaced from Ukraine need to be met with empathy and understanding for their background of flight and the potential traumatic experiences they carry with them. Therefore, the school must ensure that teachers and pedagogues have knowledge of trauma, how traumatic experiences can manifest in behaviour and relationships, and the skills and tools to work in a trauma-informed way, including, among other things, epistemic trust, emotional safety, and relationship building.

### 7

**The school's management must ensure that teachers in mainstream classes have the necessary resources and competencies to include multilingual students in mainstream education.**

Students who have Danish as a second language need language support and consistent scaffolding to participate in lessons on an equal footing with other students. It is the responsibility of the regular class teachers to support the multilingual students' acquisition of a second language as part of general education. However, it is the school's responsibility to ensure that teachers have the time and skills to provide the necessary language support. Therefore, the school management must prioritise skills development in multilingual didactics and resources for, for example, two-teacher sessions, where the teacher can work closely with a Danish as a second language advisor to plan and conduct subject teaching that considers the students' need for language support, and where the teacher can get help to incorporate specific tools for language support.

### 8

**School professionals must create a supportive environment for the class community so that everyone feels safe to contribute.**

Building relationships and communities should be an integral part of teachers' and pedagogues' daily pedagogical practice and teaching. As a teacher, you can promote a secure class community by, for example:

- Organising non-verbal activities such as movement, games, music, visual arts, and cooking, where everyone can participate and contribute differently, despite language barriers. This can bridge gaps and create shared experiences that strengthen cohesion.
- Creating a safe environment for group work and social activities: Do not let students choose their own groups if it results in the exclusion of certain students. Instead, form groups with awareness of students' relationships, and place them with others they feel comfortable with and where they can contribute.
- Allowing students who have not yet established relationships with others in the class to start in smaller groups and partnerships, where it may be easier to get to know each other. Gradually build up to larger groups with new partners through step-by-step participation.
- Being curious and investigative if a student begins to withdraw from the class or does not attend: Recognise social withdrawal as a sign of insecurity rather than a lack of motivation, and include the student's perspectives to understand what lies behind it and what is needed to enhance the student's opportunities for participation.

## 9

**School professionals must provide Ukrainian students with safe and meaningful opportunities to participate in mainstream education.**

As a teacher, you can offer Ukrainian students good opportunities to participate in lessons by, for example:

- Working across languages and using multiple languages in teaching: Allow the student to use their mother tongue in activities, text production, and conversations, and show interest in the student's background and experiences so that they feel they can participate and contribute meaningfully in lessons.
- Adapting teaching to the student's linguistic and academic starting point: Provide the student with differentiated tasks with thorough explanations and visual support, making it clear what the task involves and what you want the student to do.
- Giving the student control over their participation in plenary sessions and avoiding unprepared situations that may cause insecurity: Create predictability before oral activities and give the student the opportunity to prepare before speaking in front of the whole class. Avoid unprepared questions in lessons unless the student indicates they would like to answer.
- Involving the student in decisions about tasks, working methods, and partners: Engage the student in assessing what helps them to participate actively in lessons.



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