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Ties that help carry on: family and school friendships in supporting Ukrainian refugees

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the social networks of Ukrainian refugee families in Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania approximately two years after the commencement of the Russian invasion. Using egocentric social network analysis (SNA) and semi-structured interviews, it explores how family and school-based connections facilitate integration and everyday support. The findings reveal that families maintained stronger ties with other Ukrainians, both locally and transnationally, than with members of host communities. Language barriers, adjusting to different school systems, and the "double school" phenomenon shaped children's and families' experiences of belonging, while the erosion of previous ties added to social vulnerability. The study shows that schools play a vital role not only in education but also in rebuilding stability, adding to trust, and social participation. However, pedagogical efforts alone are insufficient; strengthening the social and relational dimensions of schooling is crucial to support refugee families' integration in their host societies.

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Introduction

Societal integration is expected to create social cohesion, decrease social conflicts, increase cross-cultural understanding, and improve the economy. Short-term integration focuses on meeting basic needs and providing initial support, whereas medium- and long-term integration are intended to help migrants become more self-sufficient, including the provision of housing, healthcare, and education as well as labour market inclusion (Omic & Strien, 2022). Social and educational outcomes are of great importance for future life trajectories. In addition to achieving academic goals, in school, pupils can experience well-being and develop motivational goals that encourage them to continue striving. Schools and daycare centres can also be noteworthy gateways to social integration, feelings of belongingness, and support networks for migrant and refugee families because they help create new daily routines, possibilities for friendship, and hopes for the future (OECD, 2017; Petäjäniemi et al., 2024; Tajic & Lund, 2023).

Ukrainian refugees who left Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 are strongly connected with schools. They are a somewhat atypical group of migrants in Europe,

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consisting mainly of a vulnerable group of children and young people with their female guardians, as Ukrainian men between the ages of 18 and 65 were banned from leaving the country due to the ongoing war. Our study was carried out in Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania about two years after the full-scale Russian invasion. In Finland, approximately 50,000 refugees have arrived, of which every third individual is a child (Finnish Integration Service, 2023). The number of Ukrainian refugees who have fled to Estonia has exceeded 40,000 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024), and in Lithuania, 44,000 Ukrainians had valid residence permits based on temporary protection in May 2023 (IOM Lithuania, 2023). Ukrainian children were relatively quickly integrated into the local school system in all three countries (European Commission, 2024). In Estonia and Lithuania, Ukrainian schools were opened for refugee children and teachers in autumn 2022. In these, teaching follows both Ukraine's and the host country's curriculums, but there are many Ukrainian children in these two countries attending regular local schools. In Finland, integration classes were created at schools that accepted Ukrainian children to prepare them for their new linguistic and educational environment.

Recent studies have examined the experiences of Ukrainian refugee children in schools across Eastern Europe. In Lithuania and Estonia, municipalities have implemented models for psychological, material, and linguistic support, with the recruitment of Ukrainian teachers helping to resolve integration challenges (Birman & Zabrodskaja, 2024; Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė, 2023). Estonian research highlights refugee children's struggles with adaptation, including language barriers and socialisation difficulties, emphasising the need for tailored support services and mental health interventions (Kravchenko & Strömpl, 2024; Toros et al., 2024). Language courses and building connections with fellow refugees serve as key coping strategies for Ukrainian refugees across Europe (Kölbel, 2023).

In this paper, we use social network analysis and semi-structured interviews to identify the social ties among Ukrainian refugee families. We spoke to several family members and mapped the types and importance of the social relationships in their everyday life after migration, thus trying to understand whether the social ties each family member has could counteract the various uncertainties in their lives and support refugees' integration. We start by presenting our theoretical framework, along with examples from previous studies.

Social ties as channels for resource exchange

In social network literature, social ties are often identified based on whether these are strong ties (i.e., more intimate and resource consuming) or less resource-loaded weak ties, which may be more easily created but are less dependable in terms of asking for help (Amelina et al., 2012). Family and friendship ties can be seen as strong ties, whereas most other contacts are likely weak ones. In the well-cited studies Mark Granovetter (1973) talked about "strength of weak ties," highlighting the role of the more distant weak ties – acquaintances and casual contacts – and their value for accessing novel information and new opportunities. According to Granovetter (1973, 1983) weak ties contributed to connecting with different social circles and were useful for example in job-seeking, while strong ties were a source of redundant information. In migration and integration studies, weak ties have given considerable insights (Liu, 2013; Ryan, 2011). Wellman and Wortley (1990) emphasise the importance of a mix of various kinds of ties, with each meeting unique needs. According to Thoits (2011), strong ties particularly provide emotional sustenance and active coping assistance, which are reached through significant others and people with similar and relevant experiences. Strong ties thus contribute to wellbeing and feelings of safety, comfort, and support, and they help increase productivity and efficiency (Kadushin, 2012). From the opposite perspective, we should not forget that social relationships are not only sources of support but also sources of stress (Rook & Charles, 2017).

In our attempt to understand the integration experience of refugees and the role of their changing social networks, the role of strong ties becomes interesting. Kinship ties may be of more value

for newly resettled refugees than other types of ties because of their longer histories and deeper sense of attachment (e.g., Greene, 2019; Monsutti, 2004). A previous study on single male refugees indicates that very low levels of contact with family, local friends, and local services hamper establishing trust and, therefore, lead to fewer opportunities for reciprocal relationships (Strang & Quinn, 2021). This connects our study to the idea of close ties, which are characterised by strong, frequent interactions; psychological proximity; and shared values (Amelina et al., 2012). Having a few high-trust ties can be beneficial, and these are often built within cultural communities. They have been shown to have a physical effect on the well-being of individuals (Boujija et al., 2022).

Social relationships bring us under a more general concept of social capital. Social capital can be understood as an investment in social relations with expected returns, along with varying resources, such as information, influence and social credentials (Lin, 1999). Social capital refers often to social ties within local or more widespread community, but it can also be seen as a resource of individuals, similarly to other forms of capital such as cultural capital (Erel, 2010). For example, it may bring access to new information available through social contacts, which in turn may influence one's goals and aspirations (Lőrincz & Németh, 2022). However, the assumption that migrants can access dense networks within close-knit local communities simplifies the experiences of newly arrived migrants, underestimating difficulties they may face in accessing support (Ryan et al., 2008).

Our focus is laid on family networks and education, and the research perspective is sociocultural by its nature. In education, sociocultural theory stems from the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Rogoff (1991), who emphasised that human learning and development occur in socially and culturally shaped contexts. More potential may come true with the support that happens under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers, as a part of guided participation. Thus, sociocultural theory focuses not only on relationships between human beings but also human beings and the context, which is a relevant perspective for education in the context of migration (Norozi, 2021). In this paper we look at schools that provide context and resources for children's and their families social networks. Particularly, children's social ties are at risk in the uncertainties of war. In the next section we present the research questions followed by our methodological approach.

Research questions

Via this study, we intend to understand how families' supportive social ties, i.e., the ties that help people to carry on after migration, are being created, upheld, and changed for Ukrainian refugees in Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania during the Russian invasion. We want to know how families are coping with the challenges and analyse whether social ties could help to counteract the uncertainties and enhance their integration. We have two main research questions:

1. How can the social ties of Ukrainian refugee families be characterised in Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania?
   (a) How many social ties do adults and children report, and how much variation is there?
   (b) Who are the closest people to these families (i.e., the most important contacts or strong ties in the family networks)?
2. How do the social ties created in schools and daycare centres contribute to the Ukrainian refugees' integration, and future aspirations?

Methods

Social network analysis

SNA has previously shown potential for use in biographical research, for example, investigating empirical examples of migrants' personal networks. Personal network analysis, also called ego-centric network analysis, focuses on one individual and his or her relationships with other individuals

(i.e., it explains to whom a person is connected and with what consequences; Wellman, 2007). In SNA, every individual within a person's network is referred to as an alter. One premise of SNA is the assumption that actors' embeddedness in social circles is as important as their personal attributes (Viry & Herz, 2021). Major and radical life events, such as crises and geographical mobility, may be highlighted by SNA. The support received via social ties reflects the idea of resource exchanges between the participants and their significant others. SNA techniques and open questions focusing on integration can be employed to capture the articulation of social circles. Information on social ties can thus help identify the resources and changes in the networks (Bidart et al., 2018).

A key tool for collecting data about network composition and distribution using surveys is called "name generator" (Marsden, 1987) for which past research has though indicated some measurement errors, stemming for example from individuals' satisficing behaviour and interviewers' inconsistent adherence to survey instructions (Marsden & Hollstein, 2023). This might lead to an underestimation of network size or to the misconception that respondents are socially isolated (Fischer, 2009). A mixed-mode approach has yet shown promises in avoiding biases even if it can escalate costs in data gathering phase (González et al., 2024). In past research, face-to-face interviews have yielded more cooperation and higher-quality data than in surveys but produced fewer names, perhaps due to interviewer differences. Taking this all together, we decided to conduct an interview-based data collection procedure for social network analysis, designed to participant-aided sociograms. The aim was to collect information about the people known by a respondent and thus reduce problems with data integrity and respondent burden of the participants. This procedure is an extension of traditional name generators. There are many kinds of software planned for data collecting. We have used low technology, i.e., paper and pen, and based our decision on both practical and methodological reasons for "keeping high technology in the lab and low technology in the field" (Hogan et al., 2007). Visualisations made from interview data have been created later, as a part of the analyses process.

Participants

The data were collected from November 2023 to May 2024 in Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland. Participating families were recruited via social media announcements, researchers' professional networks, and a snowballing approach. All Ukrainian families who arrived in their host countries after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine and had temporary protection status (Council of the European Union, 2022) were welcome to take part in the study. We aimed to recruit families with at least one adult (parent) participant and one child participant. However, some interviews were conducted with other family groups (e.g., four teenagers who arrived in the host country without guardians and adult children with elderly parents), and the results for these are reported when applicable.

Ethical permission was requested and received from each participating university. The participants received information letters before the interview began. Informed consent forms were signed according to each university's requirements. Participation was voluntary and could be terminated at any point by the participants. According to ethical procedure, only limited information is given at the individual and family levels in this article. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

The sample includes seven families in Lithuania, eight families in Finland, and eleven families in Estonia. Aggregated descriptive information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Interview procedure

The interviews were conducted by the second and third authors and a research assistant. They met with each family separately. First, the researcher introduced the study and answered interviewees' questions about the study before consent forms were signed. The interviews lasted 1 to 2 h and were

Table 1. Descriptive information about the participating families.

Host country	N of families	N of adults	N of children	Adults' age range	Children's school level	Home region in Ukraine
Lithuania	7	7	12	30–69	Students from pre-primary to high school and three university students	Kyiv city, Kyiv region, Vinnytsia
Finland	8	8	9	30–49	Students from pre-primary to high school	Kyiv city, Kharkiv region, Zhytomyr, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia region
Estonia	11	17	8	30–69	Students from pre-primary to high school	Kyiv city, Zakarpattia region, Kherson, Poltava, Kyiv region, Zaporizhzhia region, Donetsk, Donetsk region

audiotaped. The interviews were conducted in the Ukrainian language. Each member of the family drew an individual social network map. Templates with concentric circles were provided to the participants to draw the map on, and an example map was shown to ensure their understanding of the task. The interview guide is presented in Appendix 1.

On the map template, the concentric circles represent the closeness of the relationship with an alter, and participants were instructed to place their alters on the various circles depending on their degree of perceived closeness. In addition, participants were asked to comment on the origin or type of the contact, such as personal contacts, work contacts, organisational, education related, or others that the participants identified themselves. Finally, they were asked to mark, using various colours, the geographical locations and nationalities of their alters. Name generation techniques and open questions focusing on integration were employed to capture the articulation of the social circles of the families.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using three strategies: (1) the descriptive quantification of each network connection was performed based on closeness and type of relationship, (2) selected cases were analysed using visual representations of social networks, and (3) interview responses were transcribed and analysed with thematic analysis to identify themes related to the families' social ties and their connections to education.

The interviews produced rich and versatile data based on the responses of the adults and children in the families. Based on RQ1, to capture the volume and characteristics of the participants' social network ties, we quantified their alters at the individual level in relation to tie closeness and type of relationship. Additionally, one case from each country was selected for an in-depth description with social network visualisation. The social network maps drawn during the interviews were digitalised using VennMaker software (Gamper et al., 2012). The number and types of alters on the maps were quantified, and participants' answers to the semi-structured interview questions were transcribed for qualitative analysis. The transcription and translation of the interviews were conducted manually (by the second and the third author and a research assistant). No AI tools were used in the process. Participants' answers to the semi-structured interview questions were analysed inductively, guided by the research question rather than following a coding scheme (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This part of the analysis was mainly guided by RQ2, which focuses on how schools and other educational institutes contributed to families' social ties. Following the thematic analyses procedure, the qualitative data were first segmented into excerpts and coded inductively to capture the main idea of each excerpt. Then, the codes were reviewed and organised into categories. The latter were collated and organised into overarching themes. This allowed participants' perspectives and experiences to shape the themes, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the data, while highlighting the underlying meanings and relationships present within the qualitative data. Some examples from the coding and from original expressions for theme "Mix of languages and communication" are presented in Appendix 2.

Findings

RQ1: How can the social ties of Ukrainian refugee families be characterised in Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania?

The quantitative descriptions of the SNA data (see Table 2) provide a snapshot of how Ukrainian refugee families are socially positioned in the three host countries included in our study. The quantitative descriptions showed that the number of social connections varied between individuals within a family and between families.

Adults had higher values as compared to children as well as more variance, particularly regarding the maximum number of alters. On average, adults had more social connections than children. Parents' social ties were related mostly to work and volunteer organisations in Estonia and Lithuania as well as refugee centres and local Ukrainian communities in Finland. Regarding children, the most frequent ties included family members in the host country and Ukraine, classmates and friends in both countries, and a few online friends from third countries. Thus, adults have reported connections from different life domains, including weak ties in terms of acquaintances, while children's networks, by contrast, are more confined to the closest circle.

The mean number of adults' alters was similar across all three host countries with some variation, as adults reported social circles ranging from several to dozens of alters. Such variations in network size and diversity reflect different degrees of social integration: a person with larger and more diverse networks is more likely to feel socially included whereas a person with few homogeneous ties may experience social isolation or dependence on one small circle.

In some interviews, the respondents reported ties to groups of people, instead of individuals. These are shown in Table 2 in a separate column. The groups included Ukrainian communities, work-related or voluntary social networks in Ukraine, and contacts from schools or summer camps for children. In this article, our emphasis is on individual-level information.

When comparing the closest circles on the ego maps, the differences are relatively minor. The closest ties (i.e., the inner circles in the maps) of adults and children were comprised mostly of family members and friendships established in Ukraine. For adults, these may include close colleagues.

Social network maps

In the following, descriptions of three family cases are presented. These examples derived from different countries for illustration purposes should not be viewed as representative of any refugee population in the host countries. The social networks are presented in Figures 1–3. The concentric circles represent the significance of the ties (close, middle, and distant). Sectors define the type of relationship, such as family-related contacts; personal contacts, which include friends, acquaintances, and neighbours; and work- or school-based contacts. The colouring of the dots identifies the nationality and the geographical location of an alter: Ukrainians in the host country, Ukrainians in Ukraine, locals in the host country, and alters in third countries.

Table 2. Descriptive information about the social ties of adults and children in the three countries.

			N of alters total			N of groups	N of alters in close circle
	Country	*N**	Min.	Max.	*M* (SD)	*M* (SD)	*M* (SD)
Adults	Lithuania	7	8	63	20.86 (20.34)	6.86 (3.72)	8.43 (5.88)
	Finland	8	12	54	27.89 (17.17)	1.13 (1.26)	8.50 (6.07)
	Estonia	15	3	75	16.93 (18.13)	5.33 (4.58)	6.33 (8.50)
Children	Lithuania	8	3	21	10.5 (6.41)	3.38 (3.29)	4.63 (3.25)
	Finland	7	7	37	15.43 (10.42)	0.29 (0.76)	6.43 (3.31)
	Estonia	7	4	24	12.43 (8.22)	1 (1.91)	7.29 (4.31)

*Two adults and one child from the Estonian data were excluded from the quantitative description due to the format of the data provided.

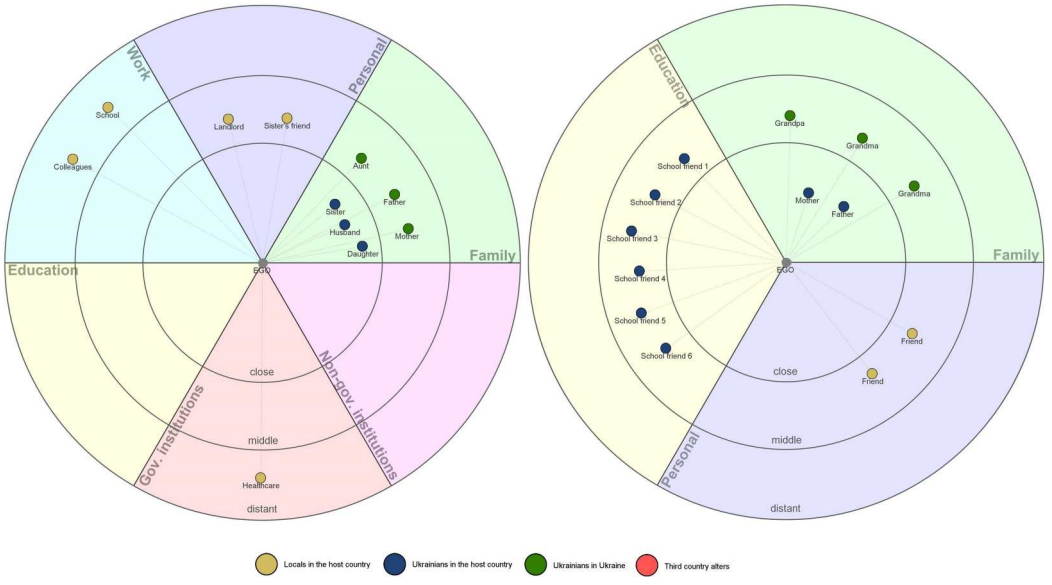

Figure 1. Case with medium-sized social networks: mother Maryna (left) and daughter Anastasia, 11 years (right) in Lithuania.

The case presented in Figure 1 is an example of a family with both a parent and a child reporting rather medium-sized social network. This family arrived in Lithuania in March 2022. The mother, Maryna, works as a teacher at one of the Ukrainian schools. Her daughter, Anastasiia, who is 11 years old, attends this school. Anastasiia reported several school friends and relatives in Ukraine with whom she communicates online. She is learning the local language and enjoys communicating with her host country friends. Despite attending a Ukrainian school in Lithuania and her classmates being Ukrainians, she reported having Lithuanian friends.

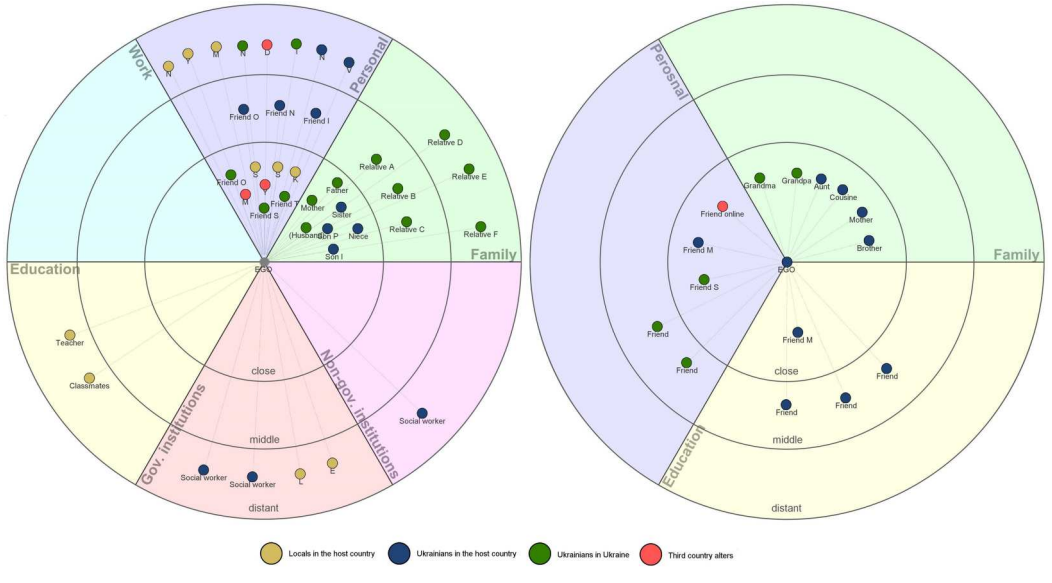

Figure 2. Case with developed family networks: mother Lesya (left) and son Petro, 10 years (right), in Finland.

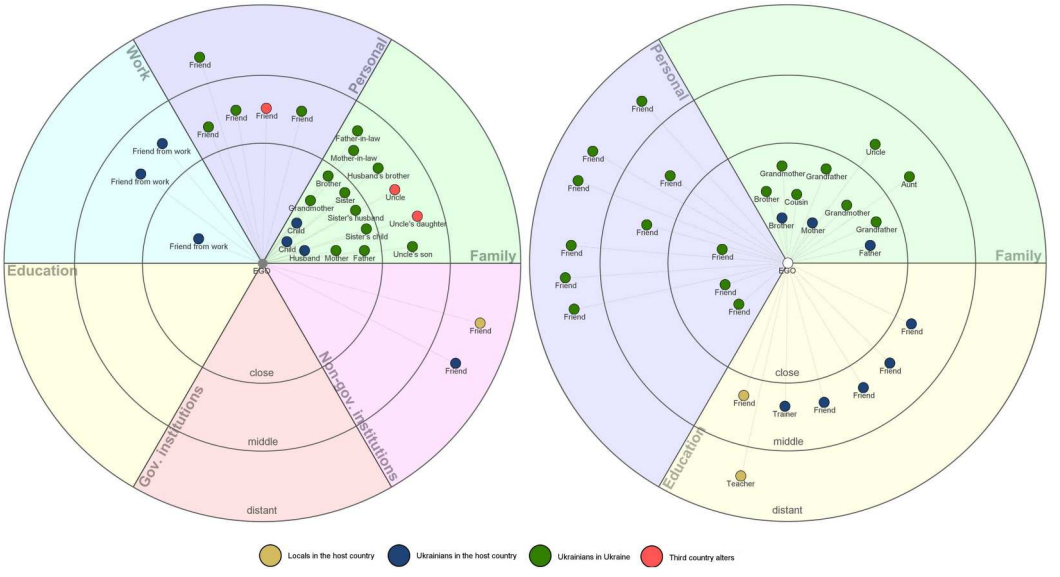

Figure 3. Case with developed family networks: mother Diana and daughter Elina, 12 years, in Estonia.

The case depicted in Figure 2 is an example of a family in Finland: a mother, Lesya, and one of her sons, Petro, who is 10 years old and attends a primary school. Lesya's network is relatively rich, with ties to those within her family, personal contacts, and institutions. In addition, she has a high number of local ties (nine individual ties and one group tie). In Petro's closest circle, in addition to his family, there are three Ukrainian friends in Finland, one friend in Ukraine, and an online friend from a third country. Additionally, Petro's network highlights the importance of school connections, as he referred to his classmates as friends. In the interview, Petro reported that although he learned Finnish quickly, he still prioritised friendships with other Ukrainian children from his integration class.

Figure 3 depicts a case involving the extended social networks of a family in Estonia that included a mother, Diana, and her daughter, Elina (12 years). This family also had other members in Estonia. More than half of the mother's network are family members, in Estonia, Ukraine, and other countries, but she also has a close Ukrainian contact from her workplace and other local but Ukrainian contacts, only one Estonian contact. Her daughter, Elina, reported an above average number of contacts in total (29), including family members, school friends, and non-school friends. She reported a high number of friends in Ukraine (8), and local Ukrainians, with exception of one friend and a teacher from Estonia. This family has many close Ukrainian contacts, both old and new, but very little contact with Estonians. In sum, the selected cases showcase the diverse social ties both within and between families. They also emphasise that family members and fellow Ukrainians play a central role in these networks.

RQ2: How do the social ties in schools and daycare centers contribute to Ukrainian refugees' integration and future aspirations?

The analysis of the interviews identified four main themes related to education and schools (Table 3), which are described in detail as follows.

1. Mix of languages and communication

Embracing the linguistic variety

Language plays a central role in shaping social ties among refugee children in schools and daycare centres. The linguistic landscape is diverse, encompassing the home languages, the host countries'

Table 3. Overview of themes and subthemes of the interviews.

Theme	Subtheme
1. Mix of languages and communication	- Embracing linguistic variety - Coping with negative experiences
2. Perceptions of differences in curriculum and school system	- Differences in the school system and curriculum - Resourcing of schools
3. Double school phenomenon – to stay or not to stay in the host country	- School as a link to the homeland - Workload at school - Children's education to counter future uncertainty
4. Friendships gained and erosion in social contacts	- Schools as hubs for social ties - Distance as a strain on relationships - Forming new ties - Transnational friendships

languages, and other languages taught at schools or spoken by peers from various language backgrounds. This diversity can facilitate or complicate the formation of friendships. For many children, initial language barriers were significant. For example, Nazar (11 years) ironically expressed his gratitude for technological aids:

> I want to express my deep gratitude to Google and its translator service, which saved me a lot of grades. And I gained a lot of knowledge with its help … Well, at first, it was even very difficult, to be honest. I didn't understand anyone at all. I couldn't understand anyone. I couldn't communicate with anyone. I had a very small vocabulary, at most labas laba diena, viso gero, gerai. (EN: hello, good day, bye) (Lt3)

Friendship building often requires creative language solutions. Some children found common ground in partially shared languages. Ihor (12 years) described how he connected with a Polish classmate:

> We met, and she understood some Ukrainian, and I understood some Polish, and she talks to me in Polish. I talk to her in Ukrainian, we understand each other, and we communicate like that. Then, she introduced me to her friends, and we have, now, a small community. (Fi2)

However, language differences sometimes posed challenges. Russian, a home language for some Ukrainian families, was a complex factor. While it occasionally served as a bridge between children, it was also avoided due to historical and political sensitivities. In Estonia, Ukrainian children were pressured to use Russian despite not having mastered it or preferring not to:

> The children have three languages they need to study: Russian, because teachers sometimes use it to explain things; Estonian; and English, which they did not have before. There is, though, a Ukrainian teacher at school, also a refugee, who helps the children adapt. (Est2)

For others, the linguistic diversity in the host schools was part of the adjustment process, with students navigating multiple transitions within short timeframes.

Coping with negative experiences

The language barrier also contributed to misunderstandings and instances of bullying. Several participants across the host countries reported such instances. Ihor (12 years) said, "Finnish children … [they] treated me not very well. They liked to prank me, and it was not so good" (Fi2). To resolve bullying situations, some parents had to contact their children's schools and intervene: "[My daughter] got bullied a bit at first, but we talked to the teacher, and it all stopped, and now, she has normal relations in the class" (Fi1). Alternatively, children could rely on school support systems. For example, in Finland, the fight against bullying was reported to involve a "students' court," a student body that could act against student behaviours. Ihor (12 years) was able to stop bullying in this way, with assistance of his friend:

"She [the friend] translated [for me]. There were papers there that one needs to sign personally. So, there, we solved everything, it all ended well, and no one bothered me after that" (Fi2).

Unfortunately, some children encountered offensive behaviour on the part of teachers related to their language proficiency. Berislav (12 years) did not understand what was going on and what the assignment was when the teacher began groupwork and all the other children had already formed their groups without including him:

> It was terrible, really terrible. I could not even use my phone or any translation program to translate to myself. The teacher only tells me: "Listen, listen, sit and listen." Does he really think that this way, I will learn Estonian or anything about the subject? (Est1)

Despite these challenges, many children worked hard to adapt linguistically and socially. Some children formed friendships within language groups, while others reached beyond these boundaries. Marko (9 years) and his aunt Lidiya's conversation illustrated this effort:

> Marko: I try to more or less communicate with Finns – No, not classmates, but Finnish people who study at the same school with me. I try to establish contact with everyone.
> Lidiya: Marko is soon starting the Finnish class, so he will speak Finnish soon.
> Marko: I try. I speak in Finnish or one word in Finnish, one in English. (Fi5)

While language differences can create challenges, many children demonstrated resilience and creativity in overcoming these obstacles, building connections, and integrating themselves into their new environments. At the same time, many surrounded themselves mainly with Ukrainian and Russian speakers.

2. Perceptions of differences in curricula and school systems between Ukraine and the host countries

Differences in school systems and curricula

Refugee families observed differences between the Ukrainian school system and those in the host countries, including variations in curricula, daily habits, school culture, and transition practices. These differences shaped the experiences of both children and parents as they adapted to their new environments. In Lithuania, the transition from preschool to primary school was organised differently than in Ukraine. For example, preparatory classes were physically held within school buildings, helping children acclimate to the school environment. One parent explained as follows:

> [The daycare center] is like a preparatory year for the school. Physically, it takes place at the school. … We thought it would be better for her [to be] at school, to get used to the large premises, and just to see how it is to be [in] a proper school. Additionally, not to hear the air raid alert and not to be hiding in the cellar, just to be learning at school like all [the other] kids. (Lt1)

However, placement practices varied. In Finland, some schools grouped children by language proficiency rather than age, leading to mixed-age classrooms, particularly for older students: "At school, all [those] older than 13–14 were put in one class. So, if you were 17, 16, 15, you were in the same class, starting from the 7th grade" (Fi8). Teenagers sometimes struggled with mismatches in age-based school placement, further complicating their adaptation.

At the same time, navigating the host country's curriculum, particularly language-intensive subjects, proved stressful for many. They had to take additional time to translate the learning material or even study the topics in advance to understand what the teacher would explain or ask in the lesson: "I have to prepare in advance. So, I do the homework, read the chapter in the book about what we learned, and then I read about what is coming to know what the teacher will tell us" (Veronika, 14 years, Fi4).

Parents often face hard decisions when selecting schools and attempting to balancing academic rigour, language challenges, and cultural adaptation. Disparities in terms of curriculum content and difficulty level were noted.

Resourcing of schools

Despite challenges, many families appreciated their host countries' education systems, including free resources, facilities, and extracurricular opportunities. Marko (9 years) contrasted the canteen experience in Finland with that in Ukraine:

> In Ukraine, the canteen was scary! Here, it is comfortable – you take the tray, the plate, take whatever you want. But in Ukraine, they just drop food on your plate, sometimes a whole pile or not much at all. (Fi5)

Parents also valued the cost-free nature of schooling in Finland:

> What I like in Finland is that everything is free of charge at schools. For example, last Thursday, they visited Helsinki as a class trip, and it was all free. They come to school, and they have the copybooks, pens, tablets. Everything is provided by the school. (Fi2)

Others highlighted the availability of vocational education and its role in language learning and career preparation. One mother and her teenage son decided to switch to vocational education to reduce the challenges faced in the Finnish secondary school. Hopefully, they reported, the son will be able to learn the language quickly and adapt to life by acquiring a profession.

Overall, the families reported a wide range of differences in school culture and practices between Ukraine and the host countries. While challenges such as curriculum adjustments and age mismatches were common, many families also appreciated the opportunities and resources provided in the host education systems. These experiences highlight the complexity of integrating into a new school environment, which is shaped by both systemic factors and individual resilience.

3. Double school phenomenon: to stay in the host country or not

School as a link to the homeland

The phenomenon of attending schools in both the host country and Ukraine – commonly referred to as "double school" – was a recurring theme in interviews. Ukrainian children often balanced education with online schooling from Ukraine to maintain connections to their home culture and curriculum. Kamila, the mother of a 6-year-old, shared the following: "This year, Maksym will go to the Ukrainian school remotely for the first grade. […] We want him to learn his native language too" (Fi7).

In some host countries, Ukrainian schools opened specifically for refugees, providing children the opportunity to learn both curricula while remaining adaptable to future changes. In Estonia and Lithuania, some of the interviewed families benefited from this opportunity:

> This school where I now study is half Ukrainian, half Estonian. We study in Ukrainian, and some subjects are in Estonian. All the students here are Ukrainian. We have five parallel groups in the 11th grade. Half of the teachers are Ukrainians, and half are Estonians. Among the Estonian teachers, many can explain in Russian, but we also use English and Estonian. (Est10)

The double school phenomenon extended to higher education as well. For example, Yulia, a first-year bachelor's programme student in Lithuania said that she studied at a Ukrainian university online every Saturday. Beyond academics, online schooling provided a way to remain connected to friends in Ukraine.

Workload at school

Despite its benefits, the double school approach puts pressure on children. Studying at both the host country school and remotely in Ukraine often resulted in overwhelming schedules and gaps in learning. One student who had already partly moved back to Ukraine explained as follows:

> Studying at both schools ended up [being] pretty bad because I didn't do anything in the Estonian school and I missed a lot in the Ukrainian school. It was online, but it wasn't very often, because there were problems with electricity in Ukraine. Now, I only study in the Ukrainian school and travel between Estonia, where my mother lives, and Ukraine, where my father is. (Est1)

Considering the additional pressure placed on children, some parents had to decide whether to continue double schooling or remain in only one system. For example, in Finland, Sofia, the mother of Veronika (14 years), decided that her daughter would quit school in Ukraine. She explained as follows:

> It was my conscious decision [to leave the Ukrainian school] not to traumatise her or force her. In Ukraine, she attended a very strong school with a focus on mathematics, like for engineers and university students. To combine that program with [her Finnish school] would have been too much. (Fi4)

Another solution was to allow children to study with private teachers in selected subjects, such as Ukrainian language. Several families reported hiring private tutors, especially remote tutors from Ukraine, to focus on subjects such as mathematics, Ukrainian, and English.

Children's education to counter future uncertainty

For many families, maintaining both schools provided a hedge against uncertainty. Parents often sought European degrees for their children while ensuring they remained connected to their native language and culture. Although many parents saw the future as uncertain, they found hope in the education of their children. Leonid noted that his family would adjust in the future if their son adapted to the educational system in Lithuania:

> We are adjusting to him [our son]. If he can receive an education in Lithuanian and study here normally, we are ready to build our future life here until he graduates from the 9th grade. (Lt3)

Similarly, Ivanna, who arrived at Finland with a teenage daughter, based her plans on her daughter's education:

> [I plan to stay] at least till my daughter gets some kind of education. I would like her to enter university, to receive [a] European education. […] And then, she will decide. (Fi1)

Overall, the double school phenomenon underscores the complexities of displacement and the resilience of Ukrainian families. Moreover, education in general was seen by the parents as key to the future of the children and the entire family.

4. New friendships gained and the erosion of social contacts

School as hubs for social ties

A notable factor was the involvement of Ukrainian teachers who joined schools in the host countries in various roles. Teachers, translators, and other staff, such as psychologists, were part of supporting refugee students and fostering connections. One interviewee described her role as a teacher as follows:

> My first work was in [anonymised school]. I was a teacher of non-formal education, teaching Ukrainian language to Lithuanian kids in primary school. I helped them understand the Ukrainian children better and build a common language. (Lt5)

Ukrainian translators were also frequently mentioned as a vital resource. Especially in Finland, Ukrainians from the diaspora joined schools, associations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to help the newly arrived refugees to communicate with public institutions. Ukrainian-speaking teacher assistants helped as translators as well.

Forming new ties at school and beyond

The school helped parents to meet other parents via the friendships the children had created. However, among the examples presented in our interviews, these connections were only made with other Ukrainian parents. The importance of peer connections among young refugees was highlighted, especially during the early stages of displacement. In one group interview with four

Ukrainian teenagers who arrived at Lithuania together and lived in summer camp facilities, friendships with Ukrainian peers, Lithuanian volunteers, and caretakers became essential.

> Maybe the closest people to me at the moment are friends, the ones that I came here with. We were not close when we arrived, but gradually, we got to know each other […] Camp leaders are different. There are good ones and angry ones and even some substitute mothers, so to say. (Yulia, 18 years, Lt2)

In Finland, providing help for refugees has long roots. Even cultural events, sport activities, and training are organised. One participant described them as follows: "We are many here, a large diaspora. We have a help center here, even several ones. […] So, these help centers are like 'centers of happiness', indeed" (Fi4). In Estonia and Lithuania, many refugees made close contacts with NGOs and voluntary workers.

Distance as a strain on relationships

Remaining away from one's home country places a strain on some relationships. Although families could communicate daily with their loved ones back in Ukraine, this scarcely substituted for their previous daily lives together. Tetiana, who came to Lithuania with a toddler, said the following: "Communication with my husband falls out. We talk for half an hour on Viber in the evenings. My socialisation here is fine, but it diminishes in the family relations" (Lt1). Maintaining prior ties was a common challenge, one exacerbated by disagreements over leaving Ukraine. Adults and children alike described the erosion of friendships due to physical distance and differing circumstances. The loss of friendships became particularly evident during the drawing of network maps during the interviews. It was sometimes difficult to grasp the changes that occurred in the friendships, as illustrated by this dialogic excerpt between Lisa (10 years) and her mother:

> Lisa: It's a pity my friend Kasia from Ukraine doesn't talk to me.
> Mother: She's in Poland.
> Lisa: How do you know?
> Mother: Her mom wrote to me.
> Lisa: Send greetings to Kasia!
> Mother: No, I'm not texting her regularly.
> Lisa: She doesn't call me. Maybe, there's something wrong with her phone.
> Mother: Sweetie, it's been 2 years already. (Fi7)

Disagreements about leaving Ukraine also affected family relationships. Some interviewees described becoming estranged from relatives: "Regarding Ukraine, I talk only to my parents and, very, very rarely, with my relatives. My parents didn't want me to go to Lithuania, so we had a small quarrel. We've grown more distant" (Yulia, 18 years, Lt2).

Participants noted a shift in relationships, as some connections grew stronger due to shared experiences, but others noted that relationships could shift or fade:

> As the war started, some people became closer, and warmer relationships formed, but others grew apart. That's how life is. I tell this to the kids, too. [My son] misses his friends from school in Ukraine, but I say, "This is life. You make friends at school, then new ones at university, and later at work." (Fi2)

Transnational friendships

Many of the interviewed children spoke positively about their friends, including those who stayed in Ukraine and those who went to other corners of Europe. Some reported visiting one another if this was possible. Online communication helped children remain in touch with their peers. Some of the refugees have, however, managed to visit Ukraine during school holidays and create new friendships there. Elina (12 years) was visiting relatives in the Zakarpattia region and attending a summer camp there:

> I did not meet many of my old friends, because many of them do not live there anymore. But I attended a camp and got to know some new people who I still communicate with now quite often via phone. They feel closer to me than my old friends in Ukraine. (Est2)

Also, for parents, some long-term friendships could withstand distance, although they became less intense. As Tetiana (Lt1) shared, she calls her Ukrainian friend, now in Portugal, to "complain to each other" from time to time. Generally, adapting to life in the host country involved forming new connections while maintaining ties to Ukraine, although in different ways. The findings reveal challenges and opportunities that shape the experiences of Ukrainian refugee families in relation to schools. In the following discussion, we reflect on these dynamics, examining their implications for policy and practice.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate how social and language barriers shape Ukrainian refugees' integration processes, particularly through family connections, school-based friendships, and social support. As is typical for SNA studies, our results indicate high variability in the number of alters and the composition of the participants' social networks (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Adults show a higher average number of ties as compared to children, as well as more variance. However, when focusing on the innermost social network circles, ties which are crucial for emotional support, wellbeing, and practical assistance, the differences between adults and children diminished, as maintaining these core relationships requires effort (Rook & Charles, 2017). Another similarity to SNA studies is that the closest ties were established based on kinship (Greene, 2019; Monsutti, 2004). Family networks emerged as an essential foundation for refugees' initial sense of safety and continuity. These close networks provided emotional support and practical help, echoing Granovetter's (1973, 1983) distinction between strong and weak ties. While our findings identified also several key themes regarding how schools impacted the establishing of new social ties and facilitated the integration of Ukrainian refugee families. We will locate these themes next within a broader frame.

The role of language in shaping social ties was prominent, as expected. Language emerged as a particularly salient dimension of integration. In the early stages, multilingualism served as a valuable resource that enabled communication and inclusion across linguistic boundaries (like in Fridrikh et al., 2025). The ability to use multiple languages helped children and families establish contact, access information, and develop trust with teachers and peers. Over time, however, interviewed participants recognised the importance of learning the host country language in the long term to improve educational, health, and employment outcomes (see also: Foged et al., 2024). Related to the language learning and like other studies conducted in Estonia where immigration is relatively new phenomena (Birman & Zabrodskaja, 2024; Toros et al., 2024), Ukrainian refugee children reported initial difficulties when beginning school in the host country and a need for additional support.

Our study revealed that Ukrainian refugees had only weak links to the majority population and were primarily connected with other Ukrainians. In addition to leaving their country, participants had also left familiar school environments and friendships. Kinship connections were the strongest among participants, providing crucial emotional and practical support. At the same time, we observed both an erosion of previous social contacts and the emergence of new, meaningful relationships formed through schools and community spaces. Many participants, particularly children, reported a loss of old friendships, while maintaining ties with friends and family in Ukraine proved challenging due to disrupted communication or conflicts over the decision to leave. At this stage, family relationships remained central to daily comfort, even as peer interactions and the contributions of host-country staff, Ukrainian teachers, translators, and psychologists facilitated integration and fostered trust (Strang & Quinn, 2021).

Social relationships are a foundation for social capital, which may take the form of bonding, bridging, or linking capital – reflecting connections within and between communities and the degree of openness in these networks (Lőrincz & Németh, 2022; Norozi, 2021). The erosion of social ties thus implies a reduction in social capital and, consequently, in opportunities for emotional support and participation. Children's position appears particularly vulnerable in this respect, as their social worlds are largely dependent on family and school connections. Ukrainian refugees form a

distinctive group in Europe, arriving often as family units with a high proportion of children and strong expectations placed on education.

The "double school" phenomenon identified in this study – where children navigate both local and Ukrainian online education – illustrates the dual role of schools in supporting integration while allowing families to preserve cultural and linguistic continuity. This dynamic echoes Wellman and Wortley's (1990) and Kadushin's (2012) arguments that social ties meet diverse needs, ranging from practical assistance to emotional belonging. It also reflects the tension between maintaining close kinship ties and building new supportive relationships in the host country, a dynamic noted in previous research on refugee integration (Greene, 2019; Monsutti, 2004). Families' efforts to balance new and old social connections align with findings that close ties, whether kinship- or friendship-based, are essential for wellbeing and resilience (Boujija et al., 2022). At the same time, these tensions highlight the need for schools to support families as they navigate complex and often conflicting priorities. Recognising the importance of social integration alongside pedagogical support is therefore crucial (Amelina et al., 2012; Skovdal & Campbell, 2015).

Studies conducted from a school-based perspective in host countries schools can act as hubs for social ties and sources of daily stability, although this role is not without challenges for both students and teachers (Birman & Zabrodskaja, 2024; Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė, 2023; Petäjäniemi et al., 2024). In the present study, schools' integrational role extended mainly to children, as social connections for guardians were less frequently reported. Nonetheless, parents emphasised the importance of their children's school attendance, not only for academic development but also for socialisation and linguistic integration. While host-country school systems have implemented various support measures for Ukrainian students (European Commission, 2024), schools could further enhance their role in facilitating the integration of entire families (Petäjäniemi et al., 2024). Following Skovdal and Campbell (2015), we acknowledge that this expectation places significant demands on school staff, who are often under-resourced yet remain central in providing protection and stability in crisis settings.

Following Thoits (2011), social support can be understood as both emotional and instrumental: empathy, understanding, and care on one hand, and practical assistance and guidance on the other. The findings illustrate how these two forms of support were intertwined in everyday interactions. Teachers' encouragement, peers' companionship, and the caring atmosphere of schools provided emotional reassurance and reduced stress. At the same time, instrumental support, such as help with translation or information, enabled participation in social and educational life. These relational forms of support strengthened refugees' confidence and sense of agency.

Together, these results emphasise the relational nature of integration. It is not only an individual process of adaptation but also a collective process of inclusion, shaped by networks of care, communication, and participation. Granovetter's (1973, 1983) and Ryan et al.'s (2008) perspectives help explain how different types of ties sustain both emotional stability and social mobility, while Thoits (2011) clarifies the protective role of social support for wellbeing. Vygotsky's (1978), Wertsch (1998) and Norozi's (2021) sociocultural frameworks further show that learning and belonging develop through participation in socially meaningful contexts, where interaction is both the medium and the outcome of integration.

Policy implications

The study highlights schools' central role in supporting refugee children's adjustment and integration. By providing structure, stability, and access to resources, schools help children and families rebuild daily routines and social connections. They also serve as key settings for peer interaction and friendship formation – both for Ukrainians meeting locals but even other Ukrainians. To strengthen these roles, unnecessary school transitions should be avoided, as frequent moves disrupt both learning and social relationships.

The "double school" phenomenon, where Ukrainian children attend both host-country and Ukrainian online schools, requires further investigation. While it allows continuity of culture

and curriculum, it may also increase stress and limit opportunities for local integration. Tailored solutions, such as flexible individual learning plans, can ease movement between school systems.

Our findings suggest a list of the policy measures that should be prioritised: (1) Language and cultural integration through interactive learning, such as language-pair programmes, and school events celebrating diversity. (2) Support for teachers and staff, including training in intercultural competence and the inclusion of Ukrainian educators, translators, and counsellors. (3) Mental health and conflict resolution services in schools, ensuring that children and families have access to counselling and culturally sensitive peer-support mechanisms. (4) Community-building initiatives that connect refugee and local families through joint school activities.

Finally, the diverse practices already implemented across countries create valuable opportunities for comparative and follow-up research on long-term integration outcomes.

Conclusion

This study examined the social networks of Ukrainian refugee families in Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania to understand how social connections, particularly those linked to schools, facilitate integration and social support. Using egocentric social network analysis and qualitative interviews, the study revealed that refugees maintained stronger ties with other Ukrainians, both locally and transnationally, than with members of the host populations. The findings also highlighted the importance of language proficiency, differences between school systems, the "double school" phenomenon, and the erosion of previous social ties.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small and self-selected sample limits the generalisability of the results. There is also a risk of self-selection bias, as participation may have been more appealing to families in relatively stable circumstances. Further research could target specific subgroups of refugees and explore long-term outcomes, particularly how evolving social ties influence children's sense of belonging and aspirations as they grow and adapt to new environments. Further, the study's focus on strong ties may have overlooked the potential role of weak ties in accessing new opportunities. Future research might therefore explore weak ties from another angle, perhaps through extended family or school-related connections, to complement current understandings of immigrants' social networks.

In conclusion, the study suggests that successful integration depends on the interplay between strong and weak social ties, emotional and practical support, and the use of language as a tool for participation. Family networks and educational settings play complementary roles: the former providing safety and continuity, and the latter enabling access to new communities and resources. Understanding integration through a sociocultural lens therefore allows us to see it not simply as adaptation to a new environment, but as a process of co-construction – where learning, language, and relationships together create the conditions for belonging.

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Data availability statement

The datasets produced and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due sensitive personal data.

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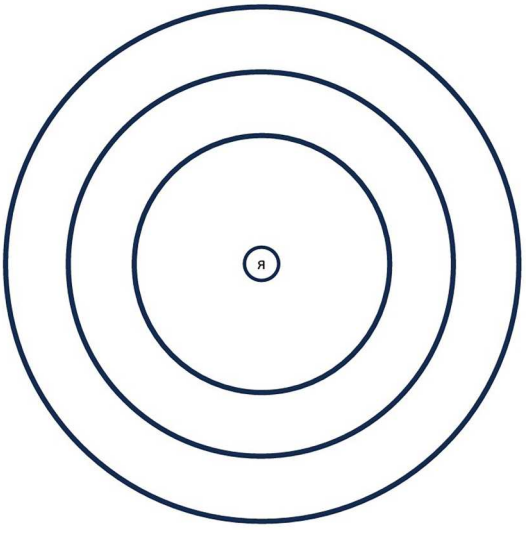
Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview guide and the template for mapping social connections



Introduction

Which city in Ukraine are you coming from?
When have you arrived in [host country]? Do you live here with your family?
How have you decided to come to [host country]?

Personal connections

Which people are your main contacts in Lithuania? Please draw on the circle and tell about them. We will use nicknames.
[family, friends, neighbours, work, school, volunteers]

Instrumental connections

How were you received when you just arrived to [host country]?
What kind of help have you received from the state or other organizations or people in Lithuania? Could you please draw these organizations/people on the circle?
How important was their help for you?
What was working well, what was not so well?

Support
How do these relationships help you to cope? Who do you turn for advice regarding important issues related your daily life, such as information, financial problems, administrative issues?
Who do you go to get social support?

Language
What language(s) do you usually use for your daily communication?
[family, friends, neighbours, work, school, institutions: Sodra, social department, hospital, public sphere: stores, libraries etc.]

Other countries
Do you have important connections in Ukraine, other countries? Let's add them to the circle.

Importance of connections
Please mark the most important connections for you here.

Aspirations
What are your plans and ideas for the future? Where would you like to live when the war is over?
Do you like living here and are you satisfied with your situation here?
What do you think might should be better organized different?
Anything you would like to add?

Appendix 2. Examples from coding: original expressions for theme "mix of languages and communication"

Sub theme	Code	Examples of original expressions
Embracing linguistic variety	Using a variety of languages	"He comes home and, on the Internet, he communicates with Ukrainian-speaking people, with Russian-speaking people, with whom friends who are on the Internet, with whom he plays." (Li3)
		"Therefore, he takes paid Lithuanian courses two more times a week, which he doesn't like, naturally, because in addition he also studies English, Ukrainian," (Li3)
	Combining languages	"Sometimes they still ask not to take out phones. She (daughter) has a couple of lessons per week, when she was helped to learn, but the teacher was Russian-speaking." (Fi7)
		"We met, and she understood some Ukrainian, and I understood some Polish, and she talks to me in Polish. I talk to her in Ukrainian, we understand each other, and we communicate like that. Then, she introduced me to her friends, and we have, now, a small community." (Fi2)
	Learning the host country language quickly	"I have already learned a lot of Lithuanian, because in that school (the first) I had an entire class of Ukrainians, that very group of Ukrainians, six people, they were sent to the second teacher, that is, we had two groups Lithuanian - the first, for Ukrainians, and the second – for Lithuanians. All the other Lithuanians studied there, but we began to study only some forms and cases. We started to study somehow, and then things went well, and now I'm also studying at (the second school), and I even learned a little Lithuanian there, one might say." (Li3_Child)
		"She (a 14 year old girl) is making progress, can understand much, very fast. On the whole, it is not as hard as we thought in the beginning." (Fi4)
	Having to use a particular language	"And they were getting less and less attention, they [the school] communicated in Russian there, very broken Russian, and that was all … " (Li5)
		"When Lithuanians say 'no, we do not understand', then we talk in Lithuanian, and when there is a possibility to … . Well, we are shy maybe to talk. I understand a lot, I took a lot of courses here, and I think, it will be soon that everyone will be like that to us: 'tik lietuviškai' [only Lithuanian]." (Li5)

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Sub theme	Code	Examples of original expressions
Coping with negative experiences	Struggling with the languages	"we also have a language barrier. That is, for example, I want to imagine a situation, go with Tomas to play on some server in Minecraft, that is, go online to play, we go in, but he doesn't know the terms, I ask him to say something in cyber language, I don't know what to call it. So firstly, I don't know how it will be in Lithuanian, and secondly, he won't understand, and it turns out that we simply can't play." (Li3_Child)
		"I did not understand anything, I just sat there." (Li5_child)
	Overcoming bullying	"[My daughter] got bullied a bit at first, but we talked to the teacher, and it all stopped, and now, she has normal relations in the class" (Fi1).
	Using technical supports for the language	"When I (a girl 10 years) don't understand something, I ask the teacher, if I can use translation ion my phone, teacher said yes, because how else can I understand." (Fi7_Child)
	Looking for educational and social opportunities	" … it was very difficult for me with the language, I was feeling this barrier of not understanding, it was going too fast, the teaching was only in spoken language. So I decided to focus more on the language, I went to school, 'Työväenopisto', it is a school for adults. So now I am learning Finnish to go back to the institute to continue my studies in my field." (Fi4)
		"we immediately sent him to a Lithuanian school. Because we say, Nazar - we are here in Lithuania, in the EU, we will live only if you are able to speak the language of the country you came to, plus English, without this today it is impossible to live in the world in which you are starting to live. If you can't handle this, then we will return to Ukraine, my dear." (Li3)