

Problemy edukacji dorosłych w Polsce i na świecie

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Learning communities in Germany as catalysts for Ukrainian refugee integration and civic engagement

Wspólnota ucząca się w Niemczech jako katalizator integracji ukraińskich uchodźców i zaangażowania obywatelskiego

Słowa kluczowe: Integracja, społeczności uczące się, uchodźcy z Ukrainy, aktywne obywatelstwo, zaangażowanie obywatelskie, nieformalne uczenie się.

Streszczenie: W artykule zbadano rolę oddolnych społeczności uczących się w Niemczech jako katalizatorów integracji i zaangażowania obywatelskiego ukraińskich uchodźców po inwazji Rosji w 2022 r. Korzystając z jakościowego podejścia opartego na studium przypadku, badanie analizuje dziesięć stowarzyszeń dobrowolnych i społeczności obywatelskich. Identyfikuje trzy główne typy społeczności uczących się w oparciu o strukturę przywództwa i doświadczenie. Opierając się na ramach integracyjnych Agera i Stranga oraz teoriach aktywnego obywatelstwa, autor pokazuje, w jaki sposób nieformalne działania edukacyjne, takie jak kursy językowe, wydarzenia kulturalne, spotkania peer-to-peer i inicjatywy obywatelskie, wzmacniają więzi społeczne, wartości demokratyczne i pozycję uchodźców. Wyniki ujawniają, że społeczności uczące się ułatwiają nie tylko przyswajanie języka i adaptację kulturową, ale także aktywne obywatelstwo i udział w demokracji poprzez zaangażowanie społeczności i działania obywatelskie. Artykuł podkreśla potrzebę polityk wspierających i dalszych badań w celu utrzymania i zwiększenia wpływu tych społeczności uczących się na integrację uchodźców i spójność społeczną w Niemczech.

Key words: Integration, learning communities, Ukrainian refugees, active citizenship, civic engagement, informal learning.

Abstract: This article examines the role of grassroots learning communities in Germany as catalysts for the integration and civic engagement of Ukrainian refugees after the Russian invasion of 2022. Using a qualitative, multiple-case study approach, the research analyzes ten voluntary associations and civic communities. It identifies three main types of learning communities based on leadership structure and experience. Drawing on Ager and Strang's integration framework and theories of active citizenship, the research explores how informal learning activities, such as language courses, cultural events, peer-to-peer meetings, and civic initiatives, foster social connections, democratic values, and empowerment among refugees. The findings reveal that learning communities facilitate not only language acquisition and cultural adaptation, but also

active citizenship and democratic participation through community involvement and civic actions. The article emphasizes the need for supportive policies and further research to sustain and enhance the impact of these learning communities on refugee integration and social cohesion in Germany.

Introduction

Migration has long shaped European societies, but the scale of displacement resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 is unprecedented in recent decades, with over 5.8 million Ukrainians seeking refuge across Europe, including more than one million in Germany (Statista, 2023a; 2023b). Effective integration initiatives are crucial for both refugees and host societies, promoting knowledge, well-being, social participation, and active citizenship (European Commission, 2020). This study investigates how learning communities in Germany support the integration and civic engagement of Ukrainian refugees.

Theoretical framework

In the current study, volunteer associations and civic communities are considered learning communities that have emerged in a "grassroots" manner and seek to respond flexibly to the various learning needs of Ukrainian refugees. The study focuses on how these learning communities provide adult education and learning for refugee integration and stimulate active citizenship and democratic living.

To analyze integration processes, this study adopts the conceptual framework by Ager and Strang (2008), which identifies ten domains of successful integration, ranging from foundational rights and citizenship to employment, housing, education, and health. Social connections – bridges, links, and bonds – are pivotal, as are language acquisition and cultural adaptation. This framework is complemented by recent research on democratic learning in voluntary associations (Hoggan et al., 2023) and theories of active citizenship through community participation (Johnston, 2003; Finger et al., 2000; Putnam, 2000; Lister, 2007). For this study, it is important that the idea of active citizenship and education be linked to the learning of civic values and democratic practices in everyday life. Active citizenship is sourced from the practice of community life, participation, and building relationships with others (Johnston, 2003).

Research design and methods

This study employs a qualitative multiple case study approach to examine the role of learning communities in refugee integration. Data were collected from publicly available online resources, organizational websites, and social media channels of voluntary associations supporting Ukrainian refugees in Germany. To ensure

breadth, ten associations from different regions and organizational backgrounds were selected. Data collection focused on the types of learning activities offered, organizational structures, and engagement in civic initiatives.

Following voluntary associations and civic communities were studied:

- Förderverein Flüchtlingshilfe Nettetal e.V. (Nettetal, North Rhine-Westphalia).
- Förderverein Flüchtlingshilfe Sprockhövel e.V. (Sprockhövel, North Rhine-Westphalia).
- Flüchtlingshilfe "Willkommen in Bad Vilbel" e.V. (Bad Vilbel, Hesse).
- Verein der Deutsch-Ukrainischen Zusammenarbeit e.V. (Hamburg).
- Deutsch-Ukrainischer Hilfeverein e.V. (Munich, Bavaria), Deutsch-Ukrainische Vereinigung "Gemeinsam" e.V. (Rosenheim, Bavaria), Deutsch-Ukrainische Gesellschaft Bielefeld e.V. (Bielefeld, North Rhine-Westphalia), Deutsch-Ukrainischer Dialog e.V. (Augsburg, Bavaria), and the Ukrainische Verein in Niedersachsen e.V. (Hannover, Lower Saxony).

The analysis followed a thematic coding procedure, drawing on the integration domains of Ager and Strang (2008) and the typology of learning activities in adult education (UNESCO, 2022). Where possible, findings were triangulated with secondary literature and organizational reports.

Integration: a multidimensional process

Integration is a central but often contested concept in migration and refugee studies. As Ager and Strang (2008) note, "integration" is a chaotic concept: a word used by many but understood differently by most." Despite the lack of a universally accepted definition, integration remains a key policy goal and a critical outcome for refugee support initiatives.

Ager and Strang (2008) propose a framework identifying ten core domains of integration, grouped under four overarching themes:

- *Markers and Means*: Employment, housing, education, and health.
- *Social Connections*: Social bonds (within groups), social bridges (between groups), and social links (with institutions).
- *Facilitators*: Language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability.
- *Foundation*: Rights and citizenship.

These domains are interlinked and reflect both the achievements and the processes that support successful integration. The framework demonstrates that integration is not a linear process but a complex interplay of access, rights, social relationships, and structural facilitators/barriers. The inclusion of direct voices from refugees and practitioners ensures that the framework remains grounded in real-world experience, making it useful for policymakers, service providers, and researchers.

The role of informal learning in promoting democratic values among refugees

Informal learning opportunities play a crucial role in fostering democratic values and competencies among refugees. These settings provide experiential spaces where democratic principles such as equality, freedom of expression, respect, and participation are not only taught theoretically but are actively practiced and lived in everyday contexts.

Projects like "Empowered by Democracy" demonstrate that extracurricular, voluntary, and dialogic formats – such as workshops, seminars, community events, or peer-to-peer projects – enable young refugees to recognize their rights to social participation and to engage actively in democratic processes. In these environments, refugees are encouraged to design their own political education initiatives and act as multipliers within their communities. This creates low-threshold spaces where democracy is experienced as a form of governance, society, and daily life, and where the diversity brought by migration is embraced as an asset.

Value formation is particularly effective when it is participatory, dialogical, and closely connected to everyday life. Intercultural encounters and exchanges in respectful atmospheres help reduce prejudices, increase acceptance of diversity, and foster mutual understanding. Informal learning settings are well-suited for this purpose because they adapt flexibly to participants' life realities and reach individuals who might be less accessible through formal education programs.

Empirical evidence shows that refugees gain not only knowledge about political systems and civic participation through informal learning but also develop self-efficacy and motivation for active engagement. This contributes significantly to democratic participation and strengthens social cohesion (BAP, 2018; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018).

Theories of active citizenship through participation in community

Active citizenship is increasingly recognized as a vital outcome of successful integration, especially in the context of refugee resettlement. Theories of active citizenship emphasize that meaningful participation in community life is both a pathway to, and an expression of, democratic engagement and social inclusion (Johnston, 2003; Finger et al., 2000).

Participation in community enables refugees to move from being passive recipients of support to active contributors within their new societies. Engagement in voluntary associations, grassroots initiatives, and learning communities provides opportunities to:

- Develop civic skills and knowledge: Through collaborative activities, refugees learn about democratic processes, rights, and responsibilities, as well as practical skills such as communication and leadership.

- Build social capital: Participation fosters trust, reciprocity, and supportive networks, which are essential for integration and for the functioning of democracy (Putnam, 2000).
- Experience empowerment and agency: By taking part in local decision-making and organizing community projects, refugees gain a sense of ownership and self-efficacy – core elements of active citizenship (Lister, 2007).

The role of learning communities

Learning communities, as highlighted in this article, serve as essential arenas for the development of active citizenship. They provide safe, participatory spaces for dialogue, intercultural exchange, and collaborative problem-solving. As Hoggan, Hoggan-Kloubert, and Owen (2023) argue, such communities “enable the practical exercise of democratic values and the co-construction of social norms, making citizenship a lived and shared experience.”

Research demonstrates that refugees who engage in community-based learning and voluntary initiatives are more likely to participate in civic activities, such as advocacy, volunteering, and even local decision-making (European Commission, 2020). This sense of reciprocity and agency is a hallmark of active citizenship and is often catalyzed through informal and non-formal learning settings.

Fostering active citizenship through community participation requires supportive policies that recognize and resource grassroots initiatives, facilitate access to civic spaces, and remove barriers for marginalized groups. Crucially, it also means recognizing refugees as active agents in their own integration, not merely as beneficiaries of support.

Types of learning communities engaged with Ukrainian refugees

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the German government has made great efforts to help Ukrainians integrate into society, including societal interaction and sociocultural and civic participation. As a result, a wave of voluntary initiatives has emerged throughout Germany. Volunteering is common in Germany — approximately 50 percent of Germans aged 14 and older participate in volunteer associations or civic communities (Krimmer, 2018). In emergency situations, these civic organizations often provide quick, flexible, and unbureaucratic assistance.

These communities were the first to greet the refugees and provide them with information, translation services, charity, and other assistance on a volunteer and charitable basis. Later, as the flow of refugees decreased, these communities evolved into spaces where Ukrainians could share experiences and learn about various aspects of cultural, political, economic, and social life in their host country alongside local citizens.

Three main types of learning communities were identified (see Table 1): those run by German volunteers only (civic and church communities), those run by volunteers of Ukrainian origin together with Germans (civic communities), and those run by volunteers of Ukrainian origin only (civic communities). The associations run by only Germans were founded long ago and have experience working with refugees from other countries, so their learning activities include multicultural aspects. Those run by volunteers of Ukrainian origin together with Germans started introducing Ukrainian culture in Germany long ago but did not have experience engaging with refugees. Those run by volunteers of Ukrainian origin were organized in response to the war and influx of refugees, as described in the paper “Living Democracy: Social Structures that Promote Civic Learning” (Hoggan et al., 2023).

Table 1. Learning communities in Germany engaged with Ukrainian refugees

Type	Leadership	Characteristics	Experience
Type 1	German volunteers	Civic/church-based, long-standing, multicultural focus	Extensive experience with refugees
Type 2	Mixed German-Ukrainian	Civic, cultural exchange, pre-existing Ukrainian ties	Limited prior refugee engagement
Type 3	Ukrainian volunteers	Grassroots, formed post-2022, rapid response	New organizations, focus on needs of Ukrainian refugee

Common non-formal and informal learning activities in all communities include German language courses, speaking clubs, informational meetings (about education, employment, and culture), peer-to-peer meetings, regional trips, concerts, exhibitions, women’s sports groups, and crafting and cooking events. These activities provide refugees with language and cultural knowledge, a sense of safety and belonging, and the ability to live in a multicultural society.

Additionally, it has been discovered that voluntary associations run by Ukrainian volunteers engage refugees in civic education through social actions such as demonstrations, petition signing, fundraising, promoting Ukrainian culture and history, providing relief supplies to Ukraine, and running voluntary projects for refugees. These are all forms of civic engagement that promote active citizenship and living democracy.

Learning communities perform important functions for the successful integration of refugees and active citizenship through informal and non-formal learning. These functions include providing safety and stability by offering informative meetings on education, social inclusion, and employment; providing language courses, speaking clubs, translation services, and regional trips; organizing cultural events; promoting

peer-to-peer interaction and joint activities; and engaging in demonstrations, fundraising, Ukrainian culture promotion, running voluntary projects for refugees, collecting relief supplies for Ukraine, and organizing lectures and excursions on civic topics.

Empirical findings

The analysis reveals that:

- *Type 1 communities* leverage their experience to offer structured multicultural programs, benefiting from established networks and resources.
- *Type 2 communities* bridge cultural gaps and facilitate mutual understanding, but face challenges in adapting to the needs of newly arrived refugees.
- *Type 3 communities* provide rapid, targeted support and foster strong community bonds, but may lack institutional stability.

All communities offer a spectrum of non-formal and informal learning activities, including:

- *Language courses and speaking clubs*: Facilitating German language acquisition and intercultural communication.
- *Information sessions*: Covering education, employment, health, and legal rights.
- *Peer-to-peer meetings and support groups*: Fostering social bonds and emotional support.
- *Cultural and recreational events*: Promoting cultural knowledge, belonging, and well-being.
- *Civic engagement activities*: Organizing demonstrations, petitions, fundraising, and cultural promotion.

These activities map onto several integration domains: language and cultural knowledge, social connections, safety and stability, and active participation in civic life.

Civic engagement is particularly pronounced in associations led by Ukrainian volunteers, who organize demonstrations, fundraising, and advocacy for Ukraine. These activities not only support integration but also foster active citizenship and democratic participation.

Discussion

The findings align with existing literature on the importance of grassroots initiatives and informal learning in refugee integration (Hoggan et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Learning communities serve as flexible, adaptive platforms for meeting diverse needs, promoting social cohesion, and empowering refugees as active citizens. However, challenges remain in ensuring sustainability, resource allocation, and the inclusion of marginalized subgroups.

Comparison with other European contexts suggests that Germany's strong tradition of civic engagement and volunteerism provides a unique environment for such initiatives, though further comparative research is needed.

Conclusion

Learning communities in Germany play a vital role in the integration and civic engagement of Ukrainian refugees, offering diverse educational and participatory opportunities. By fostering language skills, social bonds, democratic values, and active citizenship, these communities contribute to both individual well-being and societal cohesion. Ongoing support and research are needed to sustain and enhance their impact.

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