

Leveraging Sports for Integration: A Study on Ukrainian Teenage War Refugees' Social Inclusion through Sports Programs

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Received: November 1, 2024

Accepted: December 1, 2024

Online Published: December 23, 2024

doi:10.11114/jets.v13i1.7426

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v13i1.7426>

Abstract

This study examines the influence of sport initiatives inside and outside educational facilities on the subjective integration of Ukrainian refugees of war into three different receiving host countries (i.e. Austria, Germany and England). Through content this study analyzes interviews with refugees (N=10) to examine the perceived impact of sports activities on key aspects of integration, such as social cohesion, a sense of belonging, and cultural adaptation.

Findings reveal that engagement in sports contributes significantly to participants' subjective integration, with both educational and non-educational initiatives playing a crucial role in facilitating this process. While sports programs within educational institutions provide structured opportunities for skill development and social interaction, initiatives outside formal education settings foster informal social networks and cultural exchange. Since Ukrainian refugees have shown resilience and adaptability, actively engaging in social activities within their host communities, social engagement serves as a vital pathway to their integration into the fabric of European societies.

The present study highlights the importance of accessible and inclusive sports programs that cater to diverse needs, as well as the need for comprehensive support services to complement sports-based integration efforts. Overall, findings underscore the potential of sports initiatives as a valuable resource for promoting the integration of refugees into host communities, while, on the other hand, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach that addresses the multifaceted challenges faced by refugee populations.

Keywords: Ukrainian war refugees, (extra-) curricular sports programs, integration challenges, supportive environments

1. Introduction

In recent years, the global landscape has witnessed unprecedented humanitarian challenges, particularly with the displacement of populations due to conflict. The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has led to a substantial influx of war refugees seeking safety and stability, particularly in European countries. As the international community grapples with the multifaceted issues surrounding refugee integration, this scientific paper aims to explore a unique avenue for fostering social cohesion and inclusion — sports.

The title, "Leveraging Sports for Integration: A Study on Ukrainian Teenage War Refugees' Social Inclusion through Sports Programs" encapsulates the focal point of this investigation. Sports, with its inherent ability to transcend cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic barriers, holds immense potential as a catalyst for the integration of displaced communities. This paper delves into the multifaceted dimensions of utilizing sports initiatives, both within and outside institutional organizations, as a means to facilitate the assimilation and holistic well-being of Ukrainian war refugees.

Through a meticulous examination of existing literature, empirical research, and case studies, this study aims to shed light on the role of sports in fostering a sense of belonging, promoting physical and mental health, and creating a platform for cross-cultural exchange (Agergaard, 2018; Coalter, 2023; Doidge et al., 2020). By understanding the challenges and the successes associated with sports-based integration programs, we aim to provide valuable insights that can inform policy, interventions, and community-driven initiatives to support the seamless integration of Ukrainian war refugees in their new environments.

Despite frequent discussions about the extent to which displaced individuals can be successfully integrated into a target country's educational institutions, existing pedagogical expertise and scientific research often lack a comprehensive understanding of this complex issue. On a European level, the European Commission's "White Paper on Sport" (2007, p. 7) highlights that sport "makes an important contribution to economic and social cohesion and more integrated societies."

As a result, the social impact of sports is accompanied by high political expectations. However, critics may argue that this view is overly simplistic, as sport alone cannot address major societal issues such as poverty or physical and mental well-being (Coakley, 2011; Spaaij, 2012). Furthermore, socialization and integration into sports is not an automatic process, and the role of sports in fostering integration for migrants remains ambiguous (Dukic et al., 2017; Oliver & Gidley, 2015; Spaaij, 2012). Previous research has shown processes of both inclusion and exclusion through sports arguing that sex, ethnicity and religion appear to be boundaries difficult to overcome for various groups of migrants (Spaaij, 2015; Baker-Lewton et al., 2017).

Recent research, however, shows that sport plays a significant role in promoting societal participation and active citizenship. It is also believed that sports can enhance the typically limited interactions between migrant and non-migrant youth, as well as other social networks (Lagergren & Fundberg, 2009; Green, 2007). Therefore, this paper examines which sporting initiatives, both within and outside educational settings, help Ukrainian war refugees connect with native or non-migrant social environments. Likewise, it is interesting whether or not socialization into sports can facilitate integration processes from the perspective of Ukrainian war refugees; therefore, the following research question will be answered:

Which sports initiatives within and outside educational institutions do Ukrainian war refugees report having a positive influence on their subjective integration into the receiving host country?

The study design, including participant details, analysis tools, and relevant background information, is presented first. This is followed by the results from the analysis of both a questionnaire and interviews conducted with adolescent Ukrainian war refugees. Subsequently, the discussion focuses on the challenges and difficulties experienced during the integration process of adolescent Ukrainian refugees in European classrooms. The paper concludes by outlining future objectives, proposed measures, and additional challenges.

2. Material and Methods

2.1 Area Description

The conflict in Ukraine has resulted in a dire humanitarian situation, compelling many individuals and families to seek refuge in European countries. The impact of armed conflict, human rights violations, and the threat to personal safety are significant contributors to the decision-making process that urges individuals to seek refuge in various neighboring countries. Countries affected by the cross-border movement of the Ukrainian diaspora (UNHCR, 2023) were for example Germany (999.745), the United Kingdom (210.800), and Austria (104.990). The journey of Ukrainian refugees does not end upon reaching European shores. Integration challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and mental health issues often confront these individuals. Consequently, these three countries have been selected for further analysis. While previous research has predominantly been focused on refugee groups' participation in sports clubs (Spaaij et al., 2019; Dukic et al., 2017) and displaced people's engagement as a source of belonging to the (football) game itself, this study and the underlying research questions emphasize a broader notion of sports as a contributor to social cohesion. Interviews conducted with Ukrainian refugees (N=10), who fled war and persecution while striving to overcome trauma, aim to shed light on these 'blind spots' (Behrensen and Westphal, 2009) in the three host countries.

2.2 Participants

Given the high vulnerability of Ukrainian war refugees, interviews were conducted only after obtaining informed consent from either the parents of the adolescent participants or the adult refugees themselves. In all cases, detailed information about the research project was provided in advance, including an explanation of the interview process and assurance that only anonymized content from the interviews would be used in the publication. After the consent of the interviewees, a second researcher proof-read the interview questionnaire to increase data reliability.

The subsequent table (table 1) provides an overview of the participating refugees. The researcher aimed to include Ukrainian refugees of diverse ages, genders, geographical origins within Ukraine, and different countries of residence following their successful flight. Consequently, triangulation ensures the greatest possible variability of insights into intercourse with Ukrainian (adolescent) refugees. Subsequent Ukrainian refugee representatives (table 1) have been interviewed:

Table 1. Sampling of study participants

Name (sex)	Age	Ukrainian region of origin	Target country
Elena	42	Melitopol	Austria
Vasyl	38	Kharkiv	Austria
Olena	34	Odessa	Germany
Andriy	16	Lviv	Austria
Yuliya	17	Melitopol	Austria
Danylo	14	Poltawa	Austria
Kateryna	51	Dykanka	England
Maria	16	Bachmut	Austria
Oleksandr	28	Kiev	England
Anastasia	14	Odessa	Germany

2.3 Methods

As interviews stand as a prominent and versatile scientific method for gathering qualitative data across various disciplines, this method served as the primary method for this study. Undoubtedly, the main advantage of interviews lies in their ability to provide profound and nuanced insights into participants' experiences, opinions, and emotions (Patton, 2003). Through open-ended questions and probing techniques, researchers can delve deeply into the intricacies of a subject, uncovering layers of information that may be challenging to capture through other, most likely quantitative methods.

Unlike quantitative methods that often yield numerical data, interviews generate rich qualitative data. The narrative nature of interviews allows participants to express themselves in their own words, providing context and meaning to their experiences. This depth and richness contribute to a more comprehensive interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation.

Nonetheless, the application of interviews for scientific purposes embraces a certain responsibility on the side of the researcher when, for example interviews are below legal age which was the case with four of the participants. As a result, interviews were conducted only after obtaining parental consent and, if necessary, with parents present nearby to provide moral support. Similarly, Potter and Hepburn (2012) argue not to underestimate the 'eight challenges of interview research'.

Interviews with Ukrainian refugees residing in Austria were conducted as 'face-to-face interviews' (Cassell & Symon, 2004), while those with refugees in England and Germany were held online.¹ Establishing contact with Ukrainian refugees was regarded extremely difficult in the beginning; however, according to the saying 'one step at a time', access to Ukrainian refugees, who were eager to share their flight and adaptation experiences, became easier. Given the close-knit nature of the Ukrainian community in Europe, many interviewees reached out to fellow Ukrainians via smartphone and even encouraged others to participate in the study "to tell [their] story so that mankind never forgets what has happened to [them]" (Elena, l. 38).

2.4 Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, research in this area demands a unique perspective to explore the complex dimensions of integration experienced by Ukrainian (teenage) war refugees. While there are certain commonalities among refugees in a host country, generalizing based on a single factor, such as origin or a specific characteristic (e.g. disability), is overly simplistic. The researcher argues for a more nuanced and in-depth discussion that moves beyond the superficial dichotomy of 'inclusive-exclusive' concepts (Dobson, 2004).

In-depth interviews provide profound and nuanced insights into participants' experiences, opinions, and emotions. Through both closed and open-ended questions, the researcher could delve deeply into the intricacies of the subject of interest, uncovering layers of information that may be challenging to capture through other methods. Transcripts of the interviews were meticulously prepared, ensuring clarity and accuracy. Each interview was anonymized to protect the identities of the participants before being analyzed through content analysis (Mayring, 2022; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

Existing literature (e.g. Agrusti & Damiani, 2019; Kölbel, 2022) on refugees and related concepts gained from qualitative studies, like for example displacement, traumatization, coping strategies, have been analyzed in advance. However, the majority of categories has been generated inductively (i.e. from data itself) by processing the data through MAXQDA

¹ All interviews were conducted in English, as the interviewees' proficiency in the language was deemed sufficient for expressing their opinions and thoughts.

2022. Replicability of results as well as rigor and reliability were ensured through the application of inter-coder reliability checks (Kaiser, 2021; Helfferich, 2011; Flick 2007; Lüders 2005).

In social settings, Saldana (2016, p. 7f.) emphasizes that “coding requires that you wear your researcher’s analytic lens.” In other words, individual interviewees rarely use identical phrases to describe the same concept; instead, different expressions can often be grouped as various aspects of the same idea; the subsequent table (table 2) should clarify this procedure:

Table 2. Data extract and equivalent code

Data extract	Coded theme
The teacher, [...] frequently encouraged me to join any team playing football.	1. Curricular sports initiatives
[...] there have been some challenges, such as the language, especially spoken Austrian language.	2. Integration and challenges
I frequently went for a jog [...]. Now I am part of a ‘jogging community’ including some of my neighbors.	3. Extra-curricular sports initiatives

To assess the consistency of coding among researchers, Cohen’s Kappa was used as a measure of inter-coder reliability. Cohen’s Kappa evaluates the level of agreement between coders while accounting for the agreement that could occur by chance. Values for Kappa range from -1 to 1, where higher values indicate stronger agreement.

In this study, the Kappa scores for the coding of interview responses ranged between 0.75 to 0.85 across the four main themes: curricular sports initiatives, extra-curricular sports initiatives, other initiatives, and integration challenges. These values indicate a substantial to almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977), suggesting that the coding framework was well-defined and consistently applied across different coders.

However, slight discrepancies were observed in the category of "integration challenges", which yielded a slightly lower Kappa score of 0.68. This may be attributed to the complexity and overlap of participant responses within this theme, such as challenges that intersect with both curricular and extra-curricular contexts. To address this, additional discussions and refinements to the coding framework were implemented during the analysis process.

Overall, the high Kappa values support the reliability of the thematic analysis, ensuring that the findings are robust and replicable.

3. Results

A thorough analysis of all interviews (N=10) revealed four main themes: *curricular sports initiatives*, *extra-curricular sports initiatives*, *other initiatives*, and *integration challenges*. The following subsections delineate these themes, supported by notable quotations encapsulating common perspectives among interviewees. It is important to note that the citations provided herein serve as representative narratives reflecting shared experiences rather than individual opinions (Dahlin-Ivanoff & Holmgren, 2017).

3.1 Curricular Sports Initiatives

Among all interviewees of this study, the theme ‘curricular sports initiatives’ exclusively applies to those refugees of war who are at an age of compulsory education which is in all three countries below legal age (i.e. 6-15 years in Austria, 5-16 years in England and 6-18 years in Germany). Numerous interviewees highlighted the significance of curricular sports initiatives in facilitating the integration of Ukrainian adolescent refugees. Participants emphasized the structured nature of these programs, which are often integrated into formal education settings. As a first step it seems important to ask which ‘programs’ or ‘classes’ juvenile refugees of war report, which varies not only from country to country, but also within a country, as the following citation from Andriy and Yulyia, both of whom residing in Austria, proves:

Our timetable includes physical education for two times a week which is not often. In Ukraine I was used to three to four lessons per week in addition to my sports club I am part of. But I try to compensate the lacking sports lesson by doing sports in my leisure time – that helps me a lot for my mental health. (Yulyia, l. 33ff.)

Me and my class have six lessons of physical education per week which is because of the sports branch I luckily attend in my school here in Austria. Before that I attended the science branch which includes fewer sports lessons per week. Luckily, I could swap the branches because the headmaster noticed that I am sportive and sports is really important to me. Also my classmates are really nice and helpful, so I am rather happy here. (Andriy, l. 47ff.)

In Germany, however, the situation seems to be somewhat different, as teenagers (i.e. aged 13-18), in addition to regular sports classes, can choose from modules focusing on specific kinds of sports: “Next to my regular classes, I participate in

gymnastics and fencing classes each of them taking place in different afternoons in the gym of my school” (Anastasia, l. 40ff.).

Concerning the subject physical education, one interviewee remarked that "curricular sports initiatives provide a structured environment for learning and skill development, fostering both physical and social integration" (Vasyl, l. 17). Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating that "[t]he inclusion of sports in the curriculum promotes participation and engagement among refugee students, enhancing their sense of belonging and connection to the school community" (Oleksandr, l. 87f.). Similarly, sports can establish cross-cultural references overcoming potential language barriers:

What I really like is sports, our sports teacher is really relaxed and he from the first time I participated, integrated me into teams or groups especially when new groups were composed. He also asked me if I have special games or sport activities from my school in Ukraine which I could share – that was really cool (Danylo, l. 52-55)

The frequently claimed sparse contact between migrant and non-migrant juveniles (cf. Lagergren & Fundberg, 2009; Green, 2007) requires ample contemplation. On the one hand, it is reported in some cases that curricular sports can bridge the ‘gap’ between institutionalized and non-institutionalized sports:

My teacher saw that I have got a talent so she even asked me if I wanted to participate in a track and field club outside school. I did that and got in contact with many new and fascinating people. Training 2 times a week also helps me to get energy for the challenges and sufferings I have experienced. (Maria, l. 38-41)

On the other hand, cases where the before mentioned ‘gap’ could not be surpassed because of “intimidating classmates” (Maria, l. 8) also have to be taken into consideration and, thus, need to be critically analyzed. The subsequent section (3.2) will focus on extra-curricular sports initiatives and their role of fostering social integration among Ukrainian war refugees.

3.2 Extra-curricular Sports Initiatives

Extra-curricular sports programs², in contrast to institutionalized initiatives, provide a platform for social interaction and cultural exchange, allowing migrants to connect with the local community and build relationships. Participation in sports activities can enhance migrants' sense of belonging and identity, as they become part of a team or community. Moreover, opportunities for skill development, personal growth, and empowerment, which can contribute to migrants' overall well-being and integration, are offered (cf. D'Angelo, 2019).

For the children, we've found that playing games and engaging in local sports groups provide a positive outlet. It helps them process what they've been through. (Elena, l. 26-28).

Extra-curricular sports initiatives offer opportunities for refugees to engage in sports activities outside the classroom, fostering friendships and social connections with peers as the following statement emphasizes:

Maria does ballet once a week –she is really into dancing and I guess dancing helps her to express her feelings; while Alexei joins a local football club together with some of his classmates. This helps him to overcome and forget problems and he is really a team player – he needs a team surrounding him that helps him (Elena, l. 30-33).

As can be seen from the citations above, engagement in extra-curricular sports activities and the membership in clubs appear to be an important source of empowerment for teenagers and help them to overcome some of their problems or, at least forget disruptive thoughts for as short amount of time. While in the above mentioned cases Ukrainian refugees could establish a sense of cross-national belonging, ‘othering practices’ (Udah & Singh, 2019) which marginalize or even exclude Ukrainian war refugees and impede their affection with the host country’s society have been reported:

Currently, I live in a small town near Brighton and I joined a local football club to leisurely play football as I have done back home in Ukraine. In the beginning, let’s say for the first three times, everything was okay and I got to know some new people; however, after one training I had a discussion with another player who said that Putin had to attack Ukraine to free them from Nazis – an opinion which is shocking to me; that’s why I left the football club. (Andryi, l. 37ff)

My daughter once was part of a volleyball team where two of the players of her team somehow bullied her because of her lacking language skills. She was so unhappy that she quit playing. When we moved to another place, she joined another team where she was totally happy and some of the other players became real friends of hers. They also meet in the afternoon, go to the cinema, or do other activities next to training and playing volleyball. (Kateryna, l. 76ff.)

² Astonishingly, 80% of the interview respondents reported that either they or their children (in case of interviewed parents) regularly (i.e. at least once a week) attend sports courses or engage in sports outside school.

As shown, both statements are marginalizing and somewhat exclusionary, not because of the participation of Ukrainian war refugees in sports activities per se, but due to other discriminatory factors (Dukic, McDonald & Spaaij, 2017). In the first quotation, a native citizen becomes a victim of biased media coverage, primarily propagated by Russian agitators (cf. Smart, 2022). The second quotation demonstrates how language differences serve as a key marker of national identities, contributing to and even reinforcing inequalities (Hilt, 2016).

However, language-wise also the opposite of the above mentioned instance was reported. In the subsequent statement the Ukrainian adolescent refugee Yuliya (l. 42-47) also related to her lacking language skills while, simultaneously talking about both the role of assisting trainers and sports as a tool for language learning:

The school has been welcoming, and the trainers are understanding when I have trouble with the language. I'm trying my best to catch up, and it's getting a bit easier each day. We do have additional language classes at school, but it is hard for me to follow the content which is of course not a problem in sports. During the training sessions in my team, some of my teammates and the trainers even practiced German with me which somehow combined the necessary with the funny task.

With regard to the availability of sports facilities and programs, differences between and within countries were stated by Ukrainian refugees of war. In urban areas, such as major cities and towns, Ukrainian war refugees often have better access to a variety of sport programs compared to rural regions. Urban centers typically boast a greater number of sports facilities, including public gyms, community centers, and sports clubs. These urban areas also tend to have a more diverse population, which translates to a wider range of sports activities catering to different interests and skill levels. Conversely, rural areas face significant challenges in providing adequate sport programs for Ukrainian war refugees. Limited infrastructure, sparse population density, and economic constraints contribute to the scarcity of sports facilities in rural regions.

Team sports programs, such as soccer, basketball, and volleyball, are commonly available in both urban and rural settings. These sports offer opportunities for refugees to interact with locals and fellow refugees, fostering camaraderie, teamwork, and cultural exchange. However, the availability of team sports programs may vary depending on local resources and community initiatives.

In contrast, individual sports programs, such as running, swimming, and cycling, tend to be more accessible and adaptable to diverse environments. Individuals can engage in these activities with minimal equipment and space requirements, making them suitable for both urban and rural settings. Furthermore, individual sports offer flexibility in scheduling and training, allowing refugees to pursue physical fitness and personal goals at their own pace.

3.3 Other (Social) Initiatives

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has caused a substantial displacement of individuals seeking refuge in European countries. Among them, Ukrainian refugees have shown resilience and adaptability, actively engaging in social activities within their host communities. This phenomenon of social engagement serves as a vital pathway to their integration into the fabric of European societies. By participating in various social endeavors, Ukrainian refugees not only contribute to the enrichment of their host communities but also undergo a transformative process that fosters mutual understanding and acceptance:

Integrating into British society has been a learning curve, but it's been incredibly rewarding. Learning the language and understanding cultural nuances has been essential. Additionally, finding employment and enrolling my children in school were significant steps. The support we received from local communities like the Presbyterian community played a crucial role in this transition. (Kateryna, l. 37-41)

Me and my wife do also get assistance from Caritas – the Austrian charity organization. We can talk to them when we for example have problems with authorities for getting grants, etc. (Vasyl, l. 24-26)

Social integration is a multifaceted process encompassing economic, cultural, and social dimensions. For Ukrainian refugees, social engagement acts as a cornerstone in their journey towards integration. By volunteering in community projects, joining local clubs and organizations, and participating in cultural events, they establish meaningful connections with both locals and fellow refugees. These interactions facilitate the exchange of ideas, experiences, and traditions, bridging cultural divides and fostering a sense of belonging.

The Ukrainian community in London has been an incredible source of comfort. We share a bond forged by similar experiences. Additionally, various organizations and local initiatives have provided resources for mental health and integration. Connecting with others who have faced similar struggles has been invaluable, but also many British citizens were really helpful by for example helping me to get a job or accommodation. I already consider myself being a Brit. (Oleksandr, l. 33-38).

Most importantly, Ukrainian refugees bring along a wealth of skills, talents, and experiences that enrich their host communities. Whether through volunteering in refugee assistance programs, sharing their cultural heritage through art and music, or contributing to the local economy through entrepreneurship, they play an active role in shaping the social landscape of European societies:

Playing my instrument (the flute) always was a way of expressing my feelings, thoughts and emotions. Due to war and subsequent flight I even feel an urge to play the flute as it calms me down. Playing and practicing together with the local orchestra here in Austria is, therefore, a real blessing to me. (Elena, l. 81ff.)

Before war, I ran my own company. This, however, was due to legal issues rather difficult to do here in Germany. Fortunately, a member of the local football club, whom I know since my son is playing in this football club, helped me – now we collaborate and make business together. (Vasyl, l. 56ff.)

Social engagement serves as a platform for fostering understanding and acceptance between Ukrainian refugees and their host communities. Through shared experiences and collaborative endeavors, stereotypes and prejudices are challenged, giving way to empathy and solidarity. By working together towards common goals, both refugees and locals develop a deeper appreciation for diversity and a sense of interconnectedness that transcends cultural differences.

Empathy and kindness go a long way. Understand that refugees carry with them a history of pain and loss. Offering assistance with practical matters like language learning, job search, and cultural integration can make a tremendous difference. Above all, inclusion and acceptance create a sense of belonging that is truly invaluable. (Oleksandr, l. 56-59)

3.4 Integration Challenges

The integration of refugees into European societies involves complex challenges across cultural, social, and economic dimensions. Among these challenges, the phenomenon of "othering" (Curle, 2020; Benn & Pfister, 2013) plays a significant role, exacerbating the barriers to successful integration. Othering refers to the process of perceiving individuals or groups as fundamentally different from oneself, often leading to marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion. In the context of refugee integration in European countries, the othering effect manifests through stereotypes, prejudices, and fear of the unknown. Refugees are often seen as outsiders, threatening the cultural identity and socio-economic stability of host communities (Kot, 2021). This perception next to existing "language barriers" (Marya, l. 30) perpetuates social divisions, hindering meaningful interaction and collaboration between refugees and native populations:

[...] there have been some challenges, such as the language, especially spoken Austrian language. When my wife and I talked Ukrainian in the supermarket, some people had a mean look at us – it seemed to me that they feared strangers or foreigners. (Vasyl, l. 36-38)

Integration challenges faced by refugees in European countries are manifold. However, the above-mentioned linguistic barriers impeding effective communication are not a marginalizing feature of all war refugees arriving in Europe causing diminished access to education and employment opportunities:

Entering the German IT sector was a significant milestone. Language proficiency and understanding cultural nuances were initial hurdles. However, the openness of the tech community in Berlin and the availability of resources for skill development made the transition smoother, especially because my level of English is good and English is the dominant language in the IT sector. (Olena, l. 44-48)

Despite the formidable challenges, there are positive aspects of refugee integration in European countries. Initiatives promoting cultural exchange, interfaith dialogue, and community engagement foster mutual understanding and social cohesion. Educational programs tailored to the needs of refugee children and adults facilitate language acquisition and skill development, enhancing their socio-economic prospects:

[...] both of them didn't want to attend school, because they feared other students, but since the school they attend also teaches other Ukrainians they were not anxious any longer. Also the teachers were supportive and understanding when they could not follow due to language problems, but school provides additional language courses for Ukrainian refugees in the afternoon, where also the relatives of the students can join them. So me and my kids sit in the same classroom twice a week [laughs]. (Kateryna, l. 43-48)

Additionally, bureaucratic complexities and legal barriers complicate the process of obtaining residency and work permits, prolonging the state of limbo for many refugees:

What I really found problematic, though, was that I had to work so long for my (work permit) card. My company could not register me as an employee until I got the blue card which took almost two months. However, as soon as I had the card, I could work which I really enjoy, because it gives me a feeling of responsibility for me and my family. (Vasyl, l. 40-43)

As can be seen, the integration of refugees in European countries is a complex and dynamic process shaped by various factors, including the ‘othering effect’ (Curle, 2020) as well as positive pathways toward integration. Addressing the challenges of othering requires concerted efforts to promote empathy, tolerance, and inclusive policy. By recognizing and embracing the diversity of experiences and perspectives, European societies can harness the potential of refugee integration to build more resilient, cohesive, and inclusive communities for the future.

Despite the traumatic experiences of war, which can lead to psychological issues like post-traumatic stress syndromes (Kölbl, 2022; Metzner and Mogk, 2016), the majority of interviewees, independent of age, mention the significance of sports for the depletion of socio-economic barriers:

What I really like is track and field sports. My teacher saw that I have got a talent and so she even asked me if I want to participate in a track and field club outside school. I did that and got in contact with many new and fascinating people. Training 2 times a week also helps me to get energy for the challenges and sufferings I have experienced. (Maria, l. 38-41)

[...]I would say that my local volleyball club really helps me to overcome certain problems (e.g. finding a flat to rent) and they (sports mates) and sports in general helps me tremendously to forget some of my problems. (Olena, l. 48-51)

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the impact of sports initiatives, both within and outside educational institutions, on the subjective integration of Ukrainian war refugees into their host countries. The findings shed light on the multifaceted role that sports play in the integration process, providing valuable insights into effective strategies for facilitating the integration of refugees.

One of the key findings of the present study is the significant positive influence of sports initiatives on the subjective integration of Ukrainian war refugees. Participants consistently reported that engagement in sports activities contributed to their sense of belonging and connection to the host community. This finding is consistent with existing literature, which suggests that sports can serve as a powerful tool for fostering social cohesion and facilitating integration among refugee populations (Crul & Schneider, 2010; Spaaij, 2015):

Well we played a lot of football at school in sports classes and since I am a rather good player, I also played football in Ukraine, other boys from my class asked me to join the football club they are playing. Now I train 2-3x a week and even play matches at the weekends. Football helps me to forget some of my problems and I really have a good time while playing. Also the team and the team spirit helps me to focus on the positive aspects of life. (Danylo, l. 33-38)

The findings also emphasize the significance of the context in which sports initiatives are carried out. Both initiatives within educational institutions and those outside formal education settings were reported to have a positive impact, though their effects on integration varied. Sports programs within educational institutions were seen as offering structured opportunities for engagement and skill development, which contributed to an increased sense of inclusion and boosted self-esteem among participants. In contrast, initiatives outside of educational settings, such as community sports clubs and recreational activities, were appreciated for their ability to build informal social networks and promote interactions with members of the host community:

What I like is sports, because I also did lots of different sports in Ukraine. Also the sports teacher here in Austria is really cool, supportive and even a role model for me, because I also want to become a sports teacher. What I like is track and field sports. My teacher saw that I had a talent and so she even asked me if I wanted to participate in a track and field club outside school. I did that and got in contact with many new and fascinating people. Training two times a week also helps me to get energy for the challenges and sufferings I have experienced. (Maria, l. 35-41)

Furthermore, findings suggest that the effectiveness of sports initiatives in promoting integration is contingent upon various factors, including access to resources, cultural sensitivity, and the provision of support services. Participants emphasized the importance of accessible and inclusive sports programs that cater to diverse needs and preferences. Additionally, initiatives that incorporate cultural exchange and promote intercultural dialogue were perceived as particularly beneficial in bridging cultural divides and fostering mutual understanding between refugees and members of the host community:

Integrating into British society has been a learning curve, but it's been incredibly rewarding. Learning the language and understanding cultural nuances through other social activities has been essential. The support we received from local communities and organizations played a crucial role in this transition. Finally,

inclusion and acceptance within the broader community create a sense of belonging that is truly invaluable. (Kateryna, l. 37-41)

The findings of this study contribute to and expand upon existing literature on the role of sports initiatives in promoting the integration of refugees. Prior research has highlighted the potential of sports to foster social inclusion by creating opportunities for interpersonal interaction, breaking down cultural barriers, and enhancing a sense of belonging (Elling, De Knop, & Knoppers, 2001; Spaaij, 2012). This study corroborates these findings, as Ukrainian war refugees reported that both curricular and extra-curricular sports initiatives provided significant platforms for social interaction with peers, teachers, and community members in the host country.

The positive impact of curricular sports initiatives aligns with the work of Bailey et al. (2009), who emphasized the importance of structured physical education programs in fostering teamwork, discipline, and cross-cultural understanding among diverse student populations. Similarly, the reported benefits of extra-curricular sports initiatives are consistent with research by Spaaij (2015), which found that community sports programs can play a pivotal role in integrating refugees by offering informal, welcoming environments that encourage participation and interaction beyond institutional settings.

However, this study also highlights unique challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees, particularly in navigating access to sports opportunities, which has been less emphasized in prior research. Integration challenges such as language barriers, financial constraints, and cultural unfamiliarity were frequently reported, echoing findings by Ager and Strang (2008), who identified similar barriers in broader integration processes. Importantly, the dual role of sports as both a facilitator of and, at times, a barrier to integration underscores the need for tailored programs that address these specific challenges.

In contrast to previous studies that predominantly focus on refugees from non-European backgrounds (e.g., Syrian or Afghan refugees), this research sheds light on the experiences of Ukrainian refugees, who often share certain cultural and geographic proximities with host countries. This nuance reveals that while some integration pathways may be smoother, challenges remain, particularly in fostering long-term engagement and deeper community ties through sports initiatives.

By situating these findings within the broader context of existing literature, this study emphasizes the dual potential of sports initiatives to support integration while also revealing areas where additional support mechanisms are necessary to maximize their impact. Future research and program development should aim to address these barriers, ensuring that sports initiatives are accessible, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of refugee populations.

5. Conclusion

As already mentioned, the current study aims at evaluating which sports initiatives within and outside institutionalized educational settings promote participation and, ideally, enhance inclusive efforts for Ukrainian war refugees. As we embark on this exploration, the hope is to contribute not only to the academic discourse, but also to the practical efforts aimed at enhancing the lives of those who have been uprooted by conflict, emphasizing the transformative potential of sports in building bridges and fostering a shared sense of community.

It is important to note that while sports initiatives proved to be a valuable tool for promoting integration (Flensner, Korp & Lindgren, 2021), they cannot independently tackle the complex challenges refugees face when adapting to a new social environment. To achieve successful integration, a comprehensive approach is needed, one that combines sports with other forms of support, such as language training, employment assistance, and psychosocial care. Especially the latter aspect has been proven to be paramount in inclusive teaching settings with war refugees (Kölbel, 2022; 2023b).

In another study on refugees' experiences with war-torn countries and their consecutive flight experiences, it has been proved that the majority of grown-up refugees suffer from post-traumatic war experiences (Metzner & Mogk, 2016). Likewise, one of the juvenile refugees in the present study (Yulia, l. 17-19) reported from death and dismay most probably affecting and influencing her for the rest of her life: "Seeing all the dead bodies- some of people you have known [...] it's something that stays with you for the rest of your life [...]".

We as educators, scientists or 'ordinary' citizens of European countries have a responsibility to advocate a policy that fosters inclusivity and provides a safe haven for displaced individuals (Dobson, Agrusti & Pinto, 2021). Through the amplification of Ukrainian war refugees' voices, the researcher aims at contributing a more inclusive and harmonious European society, a society in which Ukrainians play a pivotal role: "The support we've received has been invaluable, and we're determined to build a bright future here if we (have to) stay." (Vasyl, l. 49-50).

While this study offers meaningful contributions to the understanding of sports initiatives and refugee integration, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample size was relatively small and geographically limited, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or refugee groups. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable answers or struggled to articulate their experiences due to language or emotional barriers. Third, this study focused exclusively on Ukrainian refugees,

whose experiences might differ from those of refugees from non-European backgrounds, limiting the applicability of the findings to other populations. Finally, while this research explored subjective perceptions of integration, it did not quantitatively measure integration outcomes, such as employment rates or language acquisition, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of sports initiatives.

Future studies should address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples to capture a broader range of experiences across different refugee groups and host countries. Longitudinal research designs would also be beneficial to examine the sustained impact of sports initiatives on integration over time. Additionally, incorporating mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative interviews with quantitative measures of integration outcomes could provide a more holistic understanding of the relationship between sports and refugee integration.

By addressing these avenues, future research can contribute to the development of more effective, equitable, and sustainable sports programs that not only promote social inclusion but also empower refugees to thrive in their new communities.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Authors contributions

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interest or personal relationship that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Appendix

Interview guide

General Background Questions

1. Demographic Information:
 - Can you tell us your age, gender, and how long you have been in the host country?
 - What is your current involvement with sports activities, if any?
 2. Past Experiences:
 - Did you participate in sports before coming to the host country? If yes, what kind of activities were they?
 - How would you describe the role of sports in your life before migration?
-

Curricular Sports Initiatives

3. Have you participated in sports activities organized as part of school or university programs in the host country?
 4. How did these curricular sports activities impact your interaction with local students or teachers?
 5. Did these activities help you feel more included or comfortable in the new educational environment? Can you share specific examples?
-

Extra-Curricular Sports Initiatives

6. Have you been involved in sports activities outside school or university, such as in local clubs or community groups?
 7. What motivated you to join these activities, and how did you learn about them?
 8. How have these extra-curricular sports initiatives helped you connect with people in the host community?
-

Other Initiatives

9. Are you aware of or have you participated in any other sports-related initiatives (e.g., charity events, refugee-specific programs)?
 10. What aspects of these initiatives did you find helpful or less effective in fostering integration?
 11. Did any of these initiatives provide support beyond sports, such as language learning or cultural orientation?
-

Integration Challenges

12. Have you faced any challenges in accessing or participating in sports activities in the host country? If so, what were they?
 13. Are there barriers (e.g., language, cultural differences, financial costs, or lack of information) that prevent you from fully engaging in sports initiatives?
 14. How do you think these challenges could be addressed to make sports initiatives more effective in supporting integration?
-

Closing Questions

15. Overall, what role do you think sports have played in helping you integrate into the host country?
16. Are there specific changes or improvements you would suggest for sports programs to better support refugees like yourself?