

# Refugees in Romania: A New Paradigm in Romanian Language Education

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the transformative role of Romanian language education in the context of the recent influx of refugees into Romania. Focusing on the integration of Ukrainian refugees, the study delves into the necessity of adapting Romanian language education to meet the unique needs of this population. It underscores the pivotal role of culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed pedagogies, and community engagement strategies in facilitating refugee integration. The analysis is segmented into key areas: defining the refugee experience, examining Romania's response to the refugee crisis, and proposing innovative reforms in Romanian language teacher preparation programs. The paper advocates for the incorporation of multicultural education principles and a comprehensive, empathetic approach to language teaching. It highlights the potential long-term societal benefits of effectively integrating refugees through language education, including cultural enrichment and social cohesion. The study concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for educational reforms in Romania and suggests directions for future research to evaluate the impact of these changes.

**Keywords:** Romania; Romanian language education; Ukrainian refugees; refugee integration.

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## 1. Introduction

On September 1st, 2022, I was honored with a Fulbright Specialist project titled *Support Program for Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language*. This project, which was led by the University of Bucharest in concert with the Romanian-American Foundation, had two primary goals: (1) to provide professional development for Romanian educators supporting Ukrainian refugees, and (2) to develop materials that Romanian teachers could use to teach Romanian as a new language to Ukrainian refugees. By the end of our project in February 2023, we accomplished both goals – a week-long professional development workshop was executed, and select attendees were thereafter enlisted in a pioneering textbook compendium (see Pentón Herrera, 2023). This textbook, along with another one that is currently being finalized (Pentón Herrera & Geană, forthcoming), is unprecedented in its focus on imparting Romanian as a new language to adolescent refugees within the nation's borders. I begin with this preamble to provide background information about my experience with and motivation for writing this piece.

In this article, I ruminate on the insights gleaned throughout the Fulbright Specialist project, illuminating the indispensable role of Romanian language education programs – including pre- and in-service professional development for teachers – to include courses focusing on teaching Romanian to refugee students. Thus, I divide the manuscript into five sections following this introduction. The first section, *Who are Refugees?*, briefly defines refugees and explains the challenges they pose for host nations. The second section, *The First R: Romania*, offers a synopsis of Romania's current refugee demographics. The third section, *The Second R: Romanian*, commences with an appraisal of Romanian language pedagogy preparation, culminating in a thoughtful proposition for the incorporation of refugee-centric curricula. The fourth section, *The Third R: Refugees*, highlights the myriad advantages of facilitating the learning of Romanian as a new language for K-12 refugee students and families, as well as the long-term effect of language learning and societal integration. In the fifth section, *Final Thoughts*, I conclude with a reflective epilogue, encapsulating the core arguments and advocating for an avant-garde paradigm in Romanian language education, attuned to our interconnected globe.

## 2. Who are Refugees?

Before delving into Romania's current situation with refugees and the role of Romanian language education in refugee integration, it is crucial to delineate who refugees are and how they differ from other groups, such as migrants. Refugees are individuals who flee their countries due to a well-founded fear of persecution,

conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and require international protection (UNHCR, 2019). Unlike migrants, who may relocate for economic reasons, education, or to reunite with family, refugees are compelled to leave to ensure their safety and survival. This distinction is pivotal as it underscores the unique challenges refugees face, such as trauma, loss, and a pressing need for stability and security in their host countries (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Addressing these specific needs, especially through language education, is therefore fundamental to their successful integration into new societies. In the case of Romania, understanding these differences is essential for developing targeted educational approaches that are sensitive to the distinct experiences of refugees, as compared to other (im)migrant groups (Birman & Tran, 2017; Pentón Herrera & Byndas, 2023).

As the number of refugees continues to increase with every passing year, Romania and other countries hosting refugees face unprecedented challenges, prompting them to develop new and creative solutions (Ahmed, 2023). These adversities extend beyond immediate humanitarian aid and encompass long-term integration strategies, particularly in the realms of education, employment, and social services. Host countries are tasked with providing safety and stability, thereby facilitating the assimilation of refugees into their new communities. This process requires a layered approach, addressing the complex and diverse needs of the refugee population. Educational systems in these countries play a crucial role in this integration process, offering a pathway for refugees to gain essential language skills, understand societal norms, and ultimately contribute to their new communities. The effectiveness of these educational initiatives is pivotal in shaping both the refugees' future and the cultural mosaic of the host society.

### **3. The First R: Romania**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 precipitated a humanitarian emergency of a magnitude not witnessed in Europe since the Second World War (Pentón Herrera & Byndas, 2023). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported an exodus nearing 6.4 million Ukrainians, a diaspora spread across neighboring countries and beyond (UNHCR, 2023a). In this upheaval, Romania emerged as one of the principal sanctuaries, with over 3 million displaced Ukrainians crossing its frontiers since the conflict's inception (UNHCR, 2023a). The Romanian government, alongside non-governmental organizations, swiftly enacted measures to grant 142,624 Ukrainian refugees temporary protection, a testament to the nation's capacity for compassion and resilience (UNHCR, 2023b; European Union Civil Protection, 2022). This rapid influx of refugees necessitated an agile and multifaceted response, particularly in

the realms of social services and education, which saw an unprecedented mobilization of resources and support (UNICEF, 2023).

Historically a country of emigration, Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 marked the beginning of a shift, altering its trajectory towards becoming a destination for migrants and refugees (Horváth & Anghel, 2009; OECD, 2019). This transition has been magnified by the recent crisis, propelling the nation from a predominantly emigration-focused country to one that provides refuge and shelter (OECD, 2023). The Romanian government, civil society, and educational institutions have united in a display of solidarity, striving to transform the country's approach to migration and integration. The present challenge, however, is the absence of structured educational programs for refugees in K-12 institutions, a gap that poses risks to individual potential and societal cohesion, with implications ranging from school retention issues to broader social divides (Fundatia Terre des hommes, n.d.; Niță et al., 2023). As Romania stands at this historical juncture, it is poised to redefine its national identity and policy direction, shaping a future that is inclusive and responsive to the needs of all its residents.

Research in other sanctuary countries welcoming Ukrainian refugees, such as Poland (Pentón Herrera & Byndas, 2023), the Czech Republic (Lintner et al., 2023), and Hungary (Ercse, 2023), report that educational initiatives have contributed to refugees' well-being and feelings of integration in the host nation. These reports align with long-established works in the field of refugee studies emphasizing the need for robust teacher preparation and school programs that are attuned to and actively address the unique educational, psychological, and socio-emotional needs of refugee students (Sengupta & Blessinger, 2019; Stewart, 2017). Thus, the solution to the challenges presented by the recent influx of refugees into Romania lies in the establishment of comprehensive educational programs that are integrated within schools and communities. These programs are pivotal not just for the acquisition of the Romanian language but also for the successful integration of refugees and (im)migrants into Romanian society. By fostering language proficiency, Romania will be poised to pave the way for newcomers to gain access to broader educational and employment opportunities, thereby contributing to the socio-economic fabric of the country.

Crafting such programs, however, requires going beyond language instruction – it involves culturally responsive teaching approaches, social-emotional learning (SEL), trauma-informed pedagogies, and community engagement strategies that address the holistic needs of refugee students and their families. These practices are essential in refugee education as they recognize the importance of including students' life experiences and circumstances in all aspects of learning (Gay, 2018; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). Incorporating trauma-informed pedagogies in schools is particularly critical, as many refugee children have likely experienced significant trauma, which can profoundly impact their learning and behavior

(Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Equally important in crafting refugee-supportive educational programs is the involvement of local communities, which creates a more inclusive environment and fosters mutual understanding and respect between newcomers and host populations. This approach to community engagement not only supports refugees but also enriches the host community, facilitating successful integration (Birman & Tran, 2017). These educational initiatives must be designed to be adaptive and flexible, meeting the varied learning needs and backgrounds of the refugee population.

As we contemplate these educational imperatives, it is essential to consider the current infrastructure within Romanian language education. In the subsequent section, *The Second R: Romanian*, I will delve into the existing models of teacher preparation programs in Romania, assessing their capacity to accommodate and support the educational needs of refugees. I will also outline a modest proposal for the integration of specific courses aimed at equipping educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to teach Romanian to refugee students effectively. This proposal acknowledges the critical role that teachers play in shaping the educational experiences of refugees and underscores the importance of targeted professional development in creating an inclusive educational landscape.

#### **4. The Second R: Romanian**

Romanian language education, especially in the context of teacher preparation programs, has historically focused on equipping educators with skills to teach Romanian as a first language and, to a lesser extent, as a foreign language (Geană 2012). Traditional models of teacher education in Romania have emphasized linguistic proficiency and pedagogical skills in conventional classroom settings (Măță, 2014; Velea & Istrate, 2011). However, the recent influx of refugees has illuminated the need for these programs to adapt and expand their scope. The current curriculum in most Romanian teacher preparation programs consists of courses in language and literature, pedagogy, and didactics, with usually one or two psychology courses (Prodan & Nițulescu, 2022). While these courses provide the required foundation for language instruction, they fall short of addressing the specific needs of refugees and migrants. The linguistic challenges faced by refugees, especially those from non-Romance language backgrounds, such as Ukrainian refugees, are significantly different from the challenges faced by native speakers or non-refugees (e.g., international students) learning Romanian as a new language. Furthermore, the existing teacher preparation programs largely overlook the socio-emotional and cultural aspects that are critical when teaching language to refugee students (Geană, 2023).

Language teachers welcoming refugee and migrant populations are in a privileged position to significantly influence their students' adaptation and integration processes. Thus, it is especially crucial for Romanian language teacher preparation programs to educate teachers about the realities of their students; that is, refugee students are individuals who have arrived in Romania as a result of war, violence, and/or persecution. These students were *forcibly* displaced, which means that they had no choice but to leave their country. The experiences surrounding the forceful migration of refugee students carry a history of trauma, which students bring with them into the classroom. It is vital for Romanian language teacher preparation programs to equip Romanian language teachers supporting these students with the necessary social-emotional skills and strategies to, above all, establish human connections with their students and to be empathetic toward their realities and needs – everything else must come second (Pentón Herrera, 2023).

At the same time, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of trauma, how it manifests in refugee students and families, in the classroom, and how it may affect us (teachers) in what is known as secondary trauma (Montero & Al Zouhour, 2022). Each student's experiences of trauma are different. However, some of the most common ways children and young people respond to trauma are:

- Repeatedly thinking about the experience of violence
- Feeling afraid and restless (e.g., body trembling, very sensitive to loud noises, etc.)
- Feeling sad (e.g., negative statements, body language, inattention)
- Physical symptoms, including lack of energy, lack of appetite, heart palpitations, headaches, stomach aches, etc.
- Difficulty sleeping
- Lack of concentration and interest
- Getting angry or frustrated easily
- Not trusting others
- Lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem

All of these elements, individually and combined, may affect Romanian language teaching and learning and, more specifically, refugees' integration into Romanian society. Refugee students and families are not at fault, and they need and deserve support, understanding, patience, and empathy from educators and those in their communities. Information about refugee students, families, and how the refugee experience affects language teaching and learning, as well as social integration, remains widely unaddressed in Romanian language teacher preparation programs. The lack of teacher preparation in this affective area of language learning not only hinders the potential for successful integration but also contributes to the perpetuation of educational and societal disparities. This gap

underscores the urgent need for a reevaluation and enhancement of current educational curricula to include refugee-focused training.

In response to these challenges, I propose a modest proposal to integrate refugee-focused courses within the existing framework of Romanian language teacher preparation programs. These courses should encompass strategies for teaching Romanian as a new/additional language, with a strong emphasis on cultural responsiveness and understanding the unique socio-emotional needs of refugee students. Incorporating insights from global best practices in refugee education and language instruction, such as those outlined by experts in the field (e.g., Sengupta & Blessinger, 2019), these courses aim to equip future Romanian language teachers with the necessary skills and understanding to effectively support this new student demographic. Importantly, adapting Romanian language teacher preparation programs to include refugee-focused education should not be thought of as merely an academic exercise; it is a vital step towards ensuring that Romania's educational system remains responsive and inclusive in the face of global challenges.

Important considerations I am proposing to improve Romanian language teachers' capacity, as well as the potential of language teacher programs, include:

- **Expanding the objective of Romanian language teacher preparation programs to include social, cultural, emotional, and academic dimensions of teaching Romanian as a new language.** Current language teacher preparation programs in the country primarily focus on academic dimensions and concerns of language teaching and learning, ignoring other equally important elements affecting students inside and outside learning spaces (OECD, 2020). Scholars agree that Romanian language teacher preparation programs require improvement to increase teachers' success and knowledge (Suciu & Măță, 2014), and to help them meet the demands of the present world. It is necessary for Romanian language teacher preparation programs to (1) equip Romanian language teachers with skills and knowledge to effectively teach refugees, particularly those from non-Romance language backgrounds; (2) to enhance the cultural responsiveness and socio-emotional understanding of educators; and (3) to facilitate the integration and well-being of refugee students in Romania.
- **In the reformation of Romanian language education, particularly within teacher preparation programs, the integration of multicultural education stands as a transformative element.** Multicultural education extends beyond the mere inclusion of diverse cultural content; it fundamentally reshapes the pedagogical approach, making it more inclusive, responsive, and reflective of the diverse tapestry of learners' backgrounds (Banks & McGee Banks, 2020). In Romania, where the

influx of refugees presents both challenges and opportunities, the adoption of multicultural education principles can catalyze a significant shift in societal dynamics. It fosters empathy, enhances intercultural understanding, and prepares students – both Romanians and refugees – for active participation in an increasingly global society (Gay, 2018). Moreover, by incorporating multicultural education into language teaching, educators can create a more engaging and relevant learning experience that resonates with all students, encouraging deeper connections with the material and each other (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This pedagogical shift not only aids in the successful integration of refugees but also enriches the educational landscape, preparing Romanian students to navigate a multicultural world with competence and sensitivity.

- **Including specific courses in teacher preparation programs that introduce theories and practical strategies for teaching Romanian as a new language to refugee and migrant populations.** These new courses should include information about cultural responsiveness in language education to help teachers understand and incorporate cultural nuances and differences in their teaching. Further, they should explicitly address the unique emotional and psychological needs of refugee students, including trauma-informed teaching practices and the effects of trauma on language teachers and students (see Darragh & Petrie, 2019). Lastly, these new courses should prioritize student-centered instruction, and provide strategies for fostering a supportive learning environment that encourages community involvement and multicultural understanding.
- **Ongoing teacher professional development.** To ensure the effectiveness of these new courses, current and future educators need to be equipped with the necessary professional development opportunities. This can be achieved through a series of workshops, seminars, and continuous professional development courses provided by either the university or the school country where in-service teachers currently work. These initiatives should focus on the practical application of theories and strategies in real classroom settings, allowing teachers to experience and reflect on the new methodologies firsthand. Additionally, it is crucial to establish a culture of ongoing learning and adaptation among teachers, encouraging them to stay informed about the latest developments in refugee education and Romanian language instruction.
- **Evaluation and research should be embedded into language teacher preparation programs and curricula.** Regular assessment and evaluation of the implemented courses about refugee education are critical to



ensuring their effectiveness and relevance. This could involve gathering feedback from students, teachers, and other stakeholders, as well as analyzing academic outcomes, social integration metrics, and overall student and teacher well-being. Additionally, research initiatives should be encouraged to continually update and improve the teaching methodologies. These research efforts could explore various aspects of refugee education, including Romanian language acquisition, cultural integration, and socio-emotional support, providing valuable insights for future improvements.

- **Collaboration with other stakeholders.** Collaborating with non-governmental organizations, cultural associations, and refugee communities is paramount in enriching the educational experience of teachers and students alike. During the Ukrainian refugee crisis, many community organizations and associations banded together to provide (or complement) services and support offered by the government. These past events have shown that partnerships are essential to care for and support refugees and their families while also providing teachers and students with real-world insights and opportunities for community engagement. Embedding such types of collaboration in language teacher preparation programs can facilitate mutual understanding and respect between the refugee population and the host community, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for all.
- **Resources and funding.** Implementing these proposals will require collaboration between curriculum developers, university faculties, and experts in refugee and language education, ensuring that the new components are aligned with current educational standards and objectives. In addition, making this proposal a reality will require adequate resources, including financial, human, and material. Thus, identifying potential funding sources, such as government grants, educational foundations, and international partnerships, will be crucial. Additionally, allocating the necessary human resources, such as skilled educators and support staff, as well as the appropriate educational materials and infrastructure, is essential for the success of these initiatives. A detailed resource and funding plan will ensure that these vital components are effectively managed and sustained.

## **5. The Third R: Refugees**

Romanian society stands today at a crossroads, where the integration of refugees through Romanian language education emerges as a crucial step for societal

cohesion and enrichment. Contemporary research underscores the transformative impact of language education on refugee integration, emphasizing its role in facilitating access to social services, employment, and cultural harmonization (Morrice et al., 2021; Pentón Herrera & Byndas, 2023). A robust model for teaching Romanian to K-12 students and their families not only serves the immediate linguistic needs of refugees but also carries long-term implications for their adaptation into Romanian society. Proficiency in the Romanian language is a gateway to various social, educational, and economic opportunities, allowing refugees to navigate and contribute to society more effectively. Linguistic competency in the host country is pivotal for integration, significantly affecting refugees' access to crucial societal elements and networks (Sengupta & Blessinger, 2019). Therefore, the capacity of Romanian language programs to cater to the diverse needs of refugees is a determinant of their future role and place within the Romanian community.

By fostering welcoming and inclusive language learning environments, Romania can significantly augment the prestige and number of speakers of its language, both nationally and internationally. The integration of the Romanian language by refugees contributes significantly to the nation's cultural and linguistic diversity. As refugees integrate, they bring with them a mosaic of cultural experiences, enriching the Romanian social fabric. This exchange not only enhances cultural understanding within the community but also projects Romanian culture onto a global stage. Refugees, as they learn and use Romanian, become cultural ambassadors, extending the reach of the Romanian language and traditions. Such an expansion is more than a linguistic achievement; it represents a bridge between Romania and the wider world, fostering economic growth and cultural exchanges. The linguistic diversity brought about by refugee integration thus has the potential to transform the Romanian cultural landscape, making it more vibrant and globally connected.

Mastering Romanian is a critical factor in the societal integration of refugees, transcending the boundaries of mere communication. Language learning in this context involves acquiring proficiency in Romanian and understanding the societal norms, values, and expectations that shape life in Romania. This comprehensive approach to language education is crucial for refugees to develop a sense of belonging and identity within their new community. In addition, as refugees become proficient in Romanian, they gain the ability to engage more fully in various aspects of daily life, from educational pursuits to civic participation. This engagement fosters a sense of belonging and identity within the Romanian context, which is crucial for psychological well-being and social incorporation (Stewart, 2017). Moreover, when refugee students learn alongside their Romanian peers, it fosters an environment of mutual learning and cultural

exchange. Such interactions are instrumental in breaking down biases and barriers, promoting unity, and building a more inclusive society.

Educational initiatives that target the linguistic needs of refugees lay the groundwork for their long-term integration into society. A well-rounded language education program provides refugees with the necessary tools to pursue higher education, secure employment, and participate actively in their communities. Research has shown that it is only through options that lead to long-term integration, such as language courses and apprenticeships, that refugees can become successful in their host nation, while also reducing the crime rate in arriving communities (Knight, 2018). For this reason, integration programs must be meaningfully tailored to meet the unique challenges that refugees face, such as cultural adaptation, varying educational backgrounds, and the psychological impact of past traumas. By addressing these issues, language education, as a long-term integration tool, can play a significant role in facilitating a smoother transition for refugees into Romanian society. The success of such initiatives is crucial not only for the personal development of refugees but also for the overall growth and prosperity of Romanian society.

The inclusion of refugee perspectives in Romanian language education is a powerful opportunity to foster multicultural understanding and respect within the society. As refugees learn and share their own cultures and experiences, they enrich the educational experiences of all students (Birman & Tran, 2017). This cultural exchange is key to developing empathy and respect for diversity among Romanian students, equipping them to navigate an increasingly interconnected world. Furthermore, incorporating diverse perspectives in language education can lead to innovative teaching practices, benefiting all learners. Such a multicultural approach, which is the preferred approach to education in today's global society, not only aids refugees in their journey toward integration but also strengthens the social fabric of Romania, contributing to a more inclusive and harmonious society. As Romania evolves in its role as a host nation, the success of these educational initiatives will be instrumental in shaping a cohesive, diverse, and vibrant society.

## **6. Final Thoughts**

This article navigates through the complex landscape of Romanian language education amidst the recent surge in refugee arrivals. At this critical moment in history, it is evident that the conventional paradigms of language education must evolve to meet the demands of an interconnected and globalized world. Integrating refugees through education, especially language education, extends beyond addressing immediate needs; it signifies an investment in a more unified and harmonious future. The challenges facing refugee students and families –

ranging from trauma and cultural dissonance to adaptation difficulties – pose risks not only to their personal growth and school retention but also to societal cohesion and safety. If these issues remain unaddressed, they could lead to long-term negative societal impacts, such as social exclusion and increased crime rates.

Romania's continued role as a haven for refugees necessitates a shift from providing emergency humanitarian aid to promoting refugees' integration (Cone, 2022). I encourage the academic community, particularly in Romania, to explore the long-term outcomes of these educational reforms. In addition, future research should be directed toward understanding the long-term impacts of educational reforms for refugees. This research should encompass the efficacy of multicultural pedagogical approaches, the psychological and social outcomes for refugee students, and the broader societal effects of successful integration strategies. Additionally, exploring how these educational models can be adapted and applied in other contexts facing similar challenges is crucial. Research should also investigate the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches in multicultural settings, providing insights that could further refine and enhance educational practices.

I would like to conclude by stating that the time is ripe for Romanian language education to align with the needs of a globalized society. By adopting a comprehensive, inclusive, and empathetic approach, Romanian language education can ensure that the education system not only meets the needs of refugee students but also contributes to the creation of a harmonious, multicultural society. This is a call for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to collaboratively forge a path toward a more inclusive and empathetic future in Romanian language education.

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