



## Research Article

Daria Kanevskaya\*

# Russian-Speaking Families and Public Preschools in Luxembourg: Cultural Encounters, Challenges, and Possibilities

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**Abstract:** In the twenty-first century, multicultural encounters have become an experience that is familiar even to the youngest. In superdiverse trilingual Luxembourg, over 50% of the population are foreigners, and many of them do not speak the titular language of the country. Multicultural classrooms are studied very closely, but Russian-speaking students, a new but exponentially growing addition to the cultural mix, have not been studied yet in their journey of school integration. There is a gap between the parents and the teachers regarding perception of the content of the studies and family aspirations. Instruction in the Luxembourgish language, usually unfamiliar to Russian families, is not the only obstacle for a child to make good progress at school. The Slavic family group and the Cyrillic alphabet, different holiday calendar and traditions, as well as differences in behavioural patterns and educational models complicate the perception of implicit school rules both for the children and their parents. In this short ethnographic study, based on five in-depth semi-structured interviews with parents, qualitative data were analysed in order to single out the main challenges that Russian-speaking families face while adapting to the public Luxembourgish preschool, the first contact with Luxembourgish language and community life.

**Keywords:** Russian speakers in migrant culture, Luxembourg educational system, multilingualism, superdiverse classroom

## Introduction

Luxembourg is one of the world's smallest and most prosperous countries. With a population of 645,397 people (STATEC 2022) and one of the highest rates of GDP per capita, it is an attractive destination for international workforce, especially the highly qualified professionals. The increasingly diverse demographic landscape of the country includes 47.1% of foreigners from over 150 countries who are not Luxembourgish nationals. The country gives the impression of a cosmopolitan atmosphere. One of its main distinctive features is trilingualism, with Luxembourgish, French, and German being the official languages, which adds to this impression.

Traditionally, immigrants have been coming to Luxembourg from the neighbouring and South European countries. To date, the major part (over 80%) of immigrants have moved from EU-27 countries. A relatively new but exponentially growing addition to the cultural complexity, namely, Russian-speaking families are part of the new-wave migrants that do not come from a Romance or Germanic linguistic background familiar to the Luxembourg society. Although the share of Russian speakers is not significant (6,000 people or 1% of the population according to different sources), they are representative of a growing trend of diversifying

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\* **Corresponding author: Daria Kanevskaya**, Faculty of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg, e-mail: [daria.kanevskaya@gmail.com](mailto:daria.kanevskaya@gmail.com)

migration (Blommaert 10, Chan 561). Significantly for my study, the newcomers increasingly opt for the local public education system.

This short ethnographic research project, based on a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with parents, aims to single out the main challenges facing Russian-speaking families while they are adapting to the public Luxembourgish preschool which all the five participants of the study had chosen for their children. My article is an attempt to illustrate the first stage of schooling of the children from the child-centred families of the new residents of this background, and the possibility for further cohesion of the family in the whole. The analysis lies in the field of a superdiverse classroom, with a special focus on the specifics of Luxembourgish school system and the highly skilled migrant families finding their place in it.

The main research questions of this article are as follows:

- How are social relationships between the Luxembourgish school system and Russian-speaking families of highly qualified professionals built up?
- What are the cultural specifics that get in the way of an easy transition of these types of families into the local educational institutions and Luxembourgish life in general?

The present study is an attempt to locate blind spots and possible grounds for misunderstandings and establish some ways in which this immigrant group could overcome problems related to their own and their children's integration.

## The Luxembourg Context

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg is landlocked and borders Germany, France, and Belgium. It is the EU Member State with one of the highest rates of population growth in Europe and the highest share of non-national residents (Eurostat). Today, 212,229 cross-border workers from Belgium, France, and Germany come to their workplaces in Luxembourg daily.

As a country, Luxembourg is described as a “meeting point of the Romance and Germanic worlds” (Weber 37, 38). The officially multilingual population is indeed a community of polyglots with varying and diverse linguistic repertoires, and the difference in their backgrounds has increased due to globalisation. The “Language Education Policy Report,” published by the Ministry of Education of Luxembourg together with the Council of Europe Language Policy Division, was prepared in 2006. It states that “plurilingualism is perhaps the true mother tongue of Luxembourgers” (p. 11), and it gives the locals linguistic pride in the context of real necessity for the “peace of languages” in the economic interest of the country. In short, the intentional language policy was present in Luxembourg since 1839, after the third partition of the country. It was decided then to keep French as one of the local languages, even though there were no French-speaking territories left within the new borders of the country, only those where German and German dialects were used. French stayed as the language of the upper classes, while German was the language of lower classes. Luxembourgish, earlier considered a dialect of German, is now the language of identification (Horner 154). It was officially added to the mix as an official language and the national language in 1984, completing the creation of the existing official trilingual (German, French, and Luxembourgish) model.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data, trilingual policy is not correlated to the changes that have been taking place in the demographics of Luxembourg (OECD 7). An average Luxembourger speaks 2.2 languages (STATEC 2013); however, the measurements of the “active age” (25–65-year-old) population produce an even more impressive picture: two-thirds of the participants can speak at least four languages (STATEC 99), and while the level of competence varies, “most of them can shift effortlessly from one set of communicative resources to another” (Kalocsányiová 1907) with code-switching being the norm (Eurydice, [eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-46\\_en](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-46_en)). Immigrants and first-generation Luxembourgers tend to add more languages to their repertoires.

What might seem strange is that multilingualism is neither perceived as an achievement nor as a guarantee for a career success. For example, a Luxembourg policeman speaks on average 2.5 languages, while a

finance specialist will make do with 2.3 languages, most likely French and English (Fehlen 50). This shows the hierarchy of languages that favour certain linguistic repertoires. The widespread Portuguese is spoken by around 15% of the population (while the officially recognised German is the first language of 2.5% of Luxembourg residents). Portuguese dominates in low-skilled jobs, while English is the white-collar language (ibid.).

According to the global trend, with the diversification of the population, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define who a Luxembourg citizen is. In the past decade, naturalisation was the biggest trend among the population of Luxembourg immigrants. The enactment of the 2008 Law of double citizenship (“Loi du 23 octobre 2008 sur la nationalité luxembourgeoise”) allowed for double nationality and facilitated the acquisition of the Luxembourg passport. Numbers of newly naturalised Luxembourg citizens were growing exponentially until the past 2 years. While traditionally, Portuguese, Belgian, French, Italian, and German nationals were leading, their share being 75% of approved requests, the familiar picture started changing due to migrants from the former Yugoslavia (STATEC 2015). The share of the “others” has grown by 4.5 times (1,312 people in 2010, and 5,850 in 2019). The total number of new citizens has also increased in the past 10 years, from 4,311 people to 11,876. The visa-free entry rights, as well as EU residency and working permits, offered by the Luxembourg passport<sup>1</sup> are of a special value for “third-country nationals,” including citizens of Russia and Commonwealth of Independent States. One of the main prerequisites for passport acquisition is successful examination in Luxembourgish. Clearly, its role is increasing, too, creating a new language power balance.

## Luxembourgish Educational System

The residents that opt for public education have almost no choice but to embrace the institutional multilingual mode. The educational system of Luxembourg is one of the best funded in the world (OECD 2022), including expenditures per student and the teachers’ salaries. Public schooling in Luxembourg is also one of the most complex mechanisms because of its multiple levels, early orientation, and the use of three languages. Overall, the Luxembourgish educational system is ranked below average by several consequent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluations (OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment, OECD 3); it also has one of the biggest numbers of school dropouts. According to the same study, the disadvantage of newcomers in school performance in Luxembourg is the highest in PISA measurements within 79 countries.

Trilingualism in education means sufficient proficiency in Luxembourgish, French, and German by the time of graduation. The complex system begins with Luxembourgish instruction in pre-school (“*précoce*” and “*Spillschoul*”). In the primary (*primaire*) school, instruction switches over to German, and French is added as a foreign language at this stage. In the secondary (*secondaire*) school, instruction is mostly in French, yet good command of German is required. Thus, the main distinction of the Luxembourgish educational system is that all the three languages are not separate subjects, but proficiency in them serves as a tool for doing well socially (Luxembourgish), academically (most of the subjects are taught in German in the primary school), and advancing well to secondary school (French is the language for many subjects).

In this context, the earlier the child joins school, the deeper is their linguistic immersion. At the same time, home languages play a vital role in the child’s development. The local public school system has been created with the expectation that children enter preschool with Luxembourgish, and graduate with four developed languages – Luxembourgish, French, German, and (most commonly) English as a “foreign” language (Weber 37, 38), but it is not the case for most students anymore. With the number and diversity of both the local and foreign-born residents, discussed earlier, it is clear that not all of them have been similarly exposed to or even have any knowledge of the three obligatory languages that are spread across all the stages of the educational system.

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<sup>1</sup> It is currently rated in the first five positions in the world in several ratings; see Henley index, [henleyglobal.com/passport-index/ranking](https://henleyglobal.com/passport-index/ranking).

Spillschoul, or “play school,” the stage this study focuses on, is presented as a tool of social cohesion, and a steppingstone to entering the state system (MENJE 35). Obligatory from the age of 4, the two years children spend there are supposed to prepare them for the “real,” i.e., the primary school, and develop concentration, fine motor, and social interaction skills. One of the main aims is to make the children acquainted with the Luxembourgish language. The presence of Luxembourgish as the first spoken language has been constantly dropping in the past decades (MENJE): 54.5% of preschool students spoke it as their first language in 2005/2006, and a decade later, their number diminished to 35.1%. Among those students who do not speak Luxembourgish at home, the following languages prevailed: 45.3% students speak Portuguese, 18.2% French, 3.5% Arabic, 3.2% Italian, 3.0% English, 2.5% German, 2.3% Serbian, 2.0% Spanish, and 20.0% another language.

Russian is definitely in the last group, but it has not been singled out yet. As most of the transplants are from neither a German-speaking nor a francophone background, the Russian speakers usually do not have the advantage of school language exposure before starting school and during the studies. Parents still find clubs in Russian for young children – for the comfort of their children, a better level of involvement in sports (a private swimming coach, not a group class for younger children is preferred), or because they want the children to participate in activities that are mostly taught by Russian speakers (gymnastics, ice skating, etc.). Often the first club the children went to were Russian language clubs. In Luxembourg, there is no official education system that caters to Russian-speaking families (except for several Sunday schools). They have to adjust and choose a school according to their current situation and value systems among the existing options.

## Russian Speakers and Their Educational Aspirations

According to some estimates, the number of Russian speakers in Europe could reach six million people: Ryazantsev (159) compares it to the total “number of people living in the territory of Denmark, Finland, or Slovakia” (ibid).<sup>2</sup> Among the former Soviet Republics, it is the Russian Federation and Ukraine that have the most numerous communities abroad, and the numbers keep growing. According to the findings of Eurostat on migrant population statistics, the citizens of the two countries have been in the top ten of non-EU arrivals, as well as permanent residency permit holders and new citizens in 2021 (18,200 Ukrainians, 17,300 Russians, Eurostat). The biggest share of these communities in EU reside in Germany (Ryazantsev 158, gives the number of three million Russian speakers), but Luxembourg is also listed as a popular destination, with quite modest – according to the size of the country – numbers, and a different proportion of Russians and Ukrainians (STATEC 2021). Nevertheless, the upward trend is the same; the number of Ukrainian residents had grown from 427 in 2010 to 980 in 2020; as for the Russian population, it had also nearly doubled: the numbers were 930 in 2010 and 1,857 in 2020.

The *Welcome to Luxembourg* portal, the homepage of the Russian-speaking community (wel2lux.com), claims that the number of Russian speakers residing in Luxembourg exceeds 5,000. According to STATEC, the number of potential Russian speakers as of 01.01.2021 is 3,803 people. Some of the 2,594 citizens of Baltic states (674 from Estonia, 753 from Latvia, and 1,167 from Lithuania) could be added to this group. Exact numbers of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers are hard to estimate for several reasons. The itineraries, or patterns of migration (through other countries, and thus with a different passport) and their timeframes and statuses (some people have been in Luxembourg long enough to have obtained local citizenship), have been increasingly diverse in the past two decades. Each year, the number of people from a post-Soviet origin applying for Luxembourgish nationality is growing too. Only in 2019, 95 citizens of the Russian Federation acquired

<sup>2</sup> The Russian invasion into Ukraine that has brought over six million displaced people to Europe (UN, 2022) is drastically changing the picture. Statistics of June 2022 indicate that 4,175 requests for temporary international protection of Ukrainian refugees were approved by the Ministry of Foreign affairs of Luxembourg alone (Okorodus 2022). It is impossible to say how many of the temporarily displaced persons are going to stay in Luxembourg and on what conditions. At the same time, it is obvious that the new wave of refugees and immigrants is going to change the balance in the schooling of foreign children in Luxembourg and the educational system as a whole.

**Table 1:** Evolution of numbers of Russian and potentially Russian-speaking students in primary education in Luxembourg

	2005/2006	2019/2020
<i>Précoce</i> (3-year olds)	6	28
<i>Spillschoul</i> (4–5)	12	53
Primary (6–12)	55	209
Total	73	290

Luxembourgish citizenship. From 2009 to 2019, there were 492 naturalised Russian citizens registered by STATEC.

There is an increasing presence of Russian and Russian-speaking children in Luxembourg public schools, which can be observed throughout all the cycles (Tables 1 and 2). The Ministry of Education data from 2019/2020 school year show that there are 539 students of this background. The bigger number in primary school, including preschool, is an indication of the future growth of this school population.

The idea of repeating a year, so familiar in Luxembourg (32.2% of 15-year olds had this experience, according to PISA, 2018), is not the case in Russia (1.5% of repeaters for the same age group, *ibid.*). Both the parents and the students perceive this measure as a stigma, and the parents want to know what could be done to avoid it. In the years recorded, from 2005 to 2019, there were 11 Russian-speaking repeaters in *Spillschoul* (preschool), 24 in primary, and 137 in secondary. Another fear of Russian-speaking parents is the early separation into classical and general educational streams, as well as vocational training. In the Russian school, students often stay with the same group throughout their school years, separating for further academic or vocational studies only at the age of 16. In the Luxembourg secondary school, the division is as follows: out of 44,705 high-school students,

- 14,722 attend classical high school;
- 29,163 are in the general stream; and
- 813 are receiving Brevet de Technicien Supérieur (BTS) (higher technical certificate).

For the Russian and Russian-speaking population, the ratio is nearly half as low as follows:

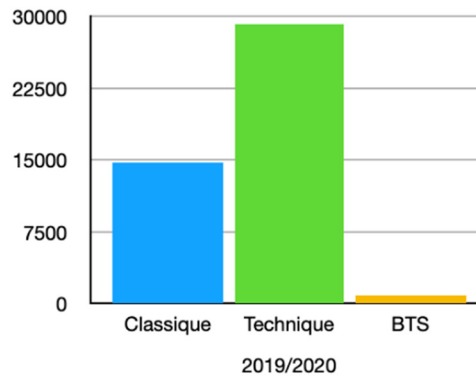
- 122 children go to the general stream;
- 123 joined the classical track; and
- 4 work on their BTS (Charts 1 and 2).

This is quite a successful performance for a foreign demographic. Moreover, the school journey is oriented towards tertiary education: 62.1% of Russians aged 25–34 have a university degree while in OECD the average is 47.1% (OECD). Most parents see matriculation as an obligatory part of the educational journey of their children, and not enrolling into a university is perceived as a failure.

When migrant children enter the educational system, their parents lack the cultural capital of the old-timers needed for helping children navigate successfully; moreover, they have different expectations of what the system should give. Adults tend to compare school administration, curricula, everyday routines, and school customs to their own educational experience and many things puzzle or alarm them. They can find some brief information on the website of the Ministry of Education, on several English-language support pages for expats,

**Table 2:** Evolution of numbers of Russian and potentially Russian-speaking students in secondary education in Luxembourg

	2005/2006	2019/2020
<i>Ecole secondaire classique</i> (gymnasium)	32	123
<i>Ecole secondaire générale</i> (general secondary)	52	122
BTS ( <i>Brevet de Technicien Supérieur</i> ), professional certification	—	4
	84	249

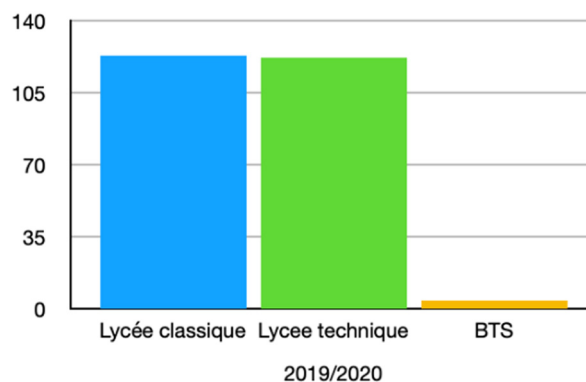


**Chart 1:** Secondary school allotment, all students.

e.g. [www.justarrived.lu](http://www.justarrived.lu) and on the Russian-language site [www.welcome2lux](http://www.welcome2lux). However, these sources are not sufficient to provide outsiders with a deep understanding of the system, its values, and challenges. The cultural capital needed to successfully navigate social life, educational system in particular, is usually acquired “over time by taking part in the system” (Yohani 86).

In the late 1990s, Tudge, an expert in Human Development and Family Studies, did fieldwork for his project “The everyday life of young children” observing 3-year olds around the world and in Russia. He reported that after the collapse of the Soviet Union “people had to find a way to help their children successfully negotiate a very different landscape” (Tudge 120, 272). From the findings, Russian children seem to be in a very homely surrounding before they start primary school. They take long naps, usually until at least the age of 6, go to bed late, and spend a lot of time outside. It is quite common for Russian children to spend their days with grandparents and other family members, and not in an institution. Tudge also noticed a variety of extracurricular activities available for the children of this age in Obninsk, 100 km away from Moscow, and in Tartu, Estonia (an ex-Soviet republic), compared to other countries studied in the framework of the project. He hypothesises that the parents desire “to equip their children with the skills they might need to succeed in uncertain times” (ibid., p. 272).

It is important to emphasise that education is obligatory in Russia (and other former Soviet republics) only from the age of 7. Thus, not all young children are enrolled into educational institutions. Child education takes place in private classes or with private child minders and family members in a more homely atmosphere and often in an academically oriented way. There is a huge selection of affordable private early development classes, even in smaller cities, conducted on a high professional level, including sports, arts, and introduction



**Chart 2:** Secondary school allotment, Russian-speaking students.



to reading and math. Requests for advice regarding good “развивашки,” or early child development programmes, are definitely among the most frequently discussed topics in Russian speakers’ social networks in Luxembourg too.

## Method

This article presents findings of a bigger research project based on five interviews with Russian-speaking mothers from monolingual households who opted to enrol their preschool-aged children into obligatory public Luxembourgish school (*Spillschoul*). The mothers were born between 1977 and 1990, and they grew up in the late Soviet and post-Soviet times in monolingual environments. Four of them have university degrees. At the time of the interviews only one mother was working full time, while the others were planning to launch their own business projects or obtain work permits, which is not easy without a European passport. They were all primary care providers for the children and took most of the school-related decisions. The names were changed to conceal the identities of the respondents.

The defining criteria for participation were the following: 1) family home language: Russian for both parents; and 2) school choice: enrolment of the child into *Spillschoul*, the first obligatory cycle of the Luxembourgish public school system.

All the families speak only Russian at home and have been in Luxembourg for 3–6 years. All the families intended to stay in the country at least for some time; therefore, their decision to sign their children up for a local school is a logical step.

## Findings

### The Sociolinguistic Environment of the Families

Before migrating, one of the things that the future residents find out is that Luxembourg is a multilingual country. However, the extent and the omnipresence of the diversity are impossible to imagine from a distance. Most participants admit that they were not prepared for such a diversity, and the fact that they now have to juggle with at least three languages is overwhelming both emotionally and intellectually. Alina feels as if she were “dumped into a life with so many languages”:

I think, we weren’t yet ready for that number of languages. When we found out, we were actually a little upset, because it’s really a lot. But it is hard to say if it is a disadvantage or an advantage.

The understanding of practical language relevance and their application is a vital part of settling down in the Grand Duchy. While English is seen as the language used for work and communication in the expat circles, French is distinguished as the lingua franca of Luxembourg. Before the beginning of preschool for the children, no participant had had any contact with Luxembourgish. None of them were even aware of its existence prior to the decision to move to Luxembourg. Yet it is the language the children have to acquire for everyday interactions in school. The parents also need it, but later and in a different way. After 5 years of residency and a successful language exam, the Luxembourgish nationality can be acquired. For the group I have interviewed, the intention to stay is so obvious that the phrase “we are learning Luxembourgish” sounds synonymous to “we are applying for the Luxembourgish passport.” The role of the titular language thus is ambiguous: the children need it for daily interaction, while the parents need it to get citizenship.

The number of languages used in the different fields of Luxembourgish life is intimidating for the newcomers brought up in a monolingual environment, who often turn to the comfort zone of their native language plus English. Fluency in English and some basic French (the actual linguistic profile of all of the participants)

enables one to get around but will still set a limit on the amount and scale of interaction in the new country. One of the first items on the to-do list of a recent transplant to Luxembourg is signing up for language classes. The data provided by Institut national des langues ([inll.lu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/statinl\\_siteweb\\_2019.pdf](http://inll.lu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/statinl_siteweb_2019.pdf)) show Russian students being in the top ten of other nationals registered for classes in German (ninth position), French (tenth) and Luxembourgish (sixth). They do not appear among the top ten national groups applying to study English.

Kira's linguistic journey describes the general trajectory of Russian speakers trying to conquer Luxembourgish multilingualism.

**Kira:** Both my husband and I, we studied English in school and at the University and after the University. And when we moved here, it became obvious that just English is not enough. And we started learning French. And we are carrying on with it, and next term we will start learning Luxembourgish.

All participants mention the crucial role of Russian in their everyday lives. Most of their friends in Luxembourg speak Russian. For adults, and especially for non-working adults, the “building” of a new life in a new place seems to be happening in the Russian community. For example, all participants came across other Russian-speaking families in the parks and playgrounds where they brought their children. Since Luxembourg is a small country, the routes for family entertainment are relatively few and easy to determine. Traditionally, taking the children outside for fresh air is a very important part of upbringing in post-Soviet countries. Since four out of five children did not attend nurseries, and the mothers were not employed, they spent a lot of time on the playgrounds. There, the home-raised children who only spoke Russian and their mothers, who felt more comfortable speaking with their native language, made connections – by chance or on purpose – with other Russian speakers, thus allowing for parallel relations between the adults and the children. Four out of five participants remarked that they had made acquaintances with other Russian families in one of the Luxembourg City parks, and they have maintained these friendships to this day.

### ***School Choice: Where Will We Go with Our Child Who Is a Confident Speaker of Luxembourgish?***

The future and the education of the children are often crucial considerations for migrating families, and choosing a school is one of the major steps of the new country exploration. For all the participants, otherwise living in Russian and English-speaking bubbles, the Luxembourgish school system is the first encounter with the Luxembourgish language. In this context, it is presented as a significant part of becoming Luxembourgish citizens, which is the goal of all of the respondents. School choice is a decision based on trust, and going local is often a consequence of the overall trust towards the state and the system.

On the one hand, the parents in this research had a very positive initial attitude towards the local schools. It is well known that the schools in Luxembourg have a substantial budget, are free of charge, and are located in the neighbourhood, helping the children to integrate in the local community. My interviewees see trilingual instruction as the primary benefit of the local school system since it allows for the natural and easy acquisition of the languages. For the parents who grew up in the early post-Soviet period, a language immersion and the possibility of studying languages in a hands-on way seem unique:

**Inna:** I think now the children have more possibilities than their parents had. Because the world has changed a bit, in the sense that knowing a foreign language is the norm. In school, for us, it was a virtual reality, and here it is around you in everyday life, and it is normal for Luxembourgers to know several languages. And the earlier you start, the better. I think, in our age, it is harder for us.

Among the interviewed parents, the view that children soak up languages “like a sponge” was quite common. Another widespread notion is that schools in Luxembourg have all the necessary resources and experience to accept and integrate foreign children:



**Kira:** Their system is extremely well adapted to children exactly like ours: those who come to school without understanding a single word in this language <Luxembourgish, DK>, because there are many children like this, the level of migration is high here, people come and go on a regular basis, and we actually had this trust <in the school> that they know better.

A new language is seen by both the teachers and the parents as the biggest challenge for the children. Moreover, a new school also brings a completely new environment. This was a major concern for all the families, including the mothers of the children who had attended crèches in other languages of instruction. The experience of this group has shown that the children's previous knowledge and exposure to other languages as well as the participation in obligatory plurilingual education<sup>3</sup> have played their role in easier adaptation from the beginning:

**Inna:** I was worried that she <my daughter, DK> would have issues with the language <after three years in a French crèche>, but her teacher, in the beginning, she spoke French and Luxembourgish to her, and they did the same thing in the Maison Relais <the after-school programme>.

Unfortunately, the Russian language does not seem to expand the contact zone in the local school – except with the children speaking the same or another Slavic language. In general, it is not familiar to teachers not only as a language from a different family but also as a phenomenon. Thus, the multilingual identity of children is not formed in school on the basis of their repertoire (Kirsch 2).

There are other sides to the unfamiliarity of this demographic. Darina's daughter, Elvira, started précoce (first non-obligatory school cycle, from the age of three) after 3 years at home, and found herself in a Russian bubble in the local school, too. Darina and her husband think that this hampered Elvira's progress in Luxembourgish. They believe that the management could not have foreseen that children of different nationalities would form a closed group of friends. They also think that once it was discovered, the school should have taken some measures:

**Darina:** In our case, the children had different passports — Latvia, Luxembourg, and Russia, but the children spoke Russian, it was their mother-tongue. So, these children communicate so well <among them, DK>, and we are still friends, and we often see each other, and it is great. But if the goal of this structure is to help the child speak Luxembourgish, when they find out this information, these children had to be separated, however painful that might be. But it would make their future life easier.

According to the parents, the school languages constitute the biggest challenge for their children's success in knowledge acquisition. The parents had doubts about the value of learning Luxembourgish, a language that is only spoken within the country and not even by all the residents. Three out of five parents had been considering enrolling their children in an international school with English as the language of instruction, or in one of the French schools. Their children were not accepted, and no explanation was given. So, parents send their children to the local school torn by uncertainties and mixed feelings.

### **School Realities: *I Think That This Is My Daughter's Native Environment***

Finding themselves within a new system, the parents discover and evaluate its main traits and actors. Quite soon, the parents come to appreciate the individual approach to children on the part of the teachers. While there are complaints about linguistic misunderstandings in expat group communication with the school staff on social networks, my interviewees did not report similar issues. Conversely, three of the five parents said that their children's teachers went out of their way to speak English to them, and to translate the school newsletters and other official announcements, most commonly published in French and Luxembourgish.

<sup>3</sup> In 2017, the state introduced a mandatory program of 20 h of French and Luxembourgish (men.public.lu/fr/enfance/05-plurilingue.html).

**Mila:** Even if she wrote in French, we would understand, but I like the fact that she is taking into account my level of proficiency and my language skills, and it is nice... The letters from school come in French, but they are clear. And I know that if I haven't understood anything, I could always write to the teacher in English, and she would respond.

The parents feel that the teachers do not ignore them when they get responses to their questions. The children's actual level of understanding is harder to assess. Language teaching pedagogies have recently made significant advances in working out effective integration methods for the Romance and Germanic language speakers. There are studies of the use of translanguaging by the child-minders who mix Romance languages, French, Portuguese, or Italian with English, depending on the child's background. This approach allows the children to use words from all of their language repertoire (e.g. Kirsch 2). Such methods cannot be expected to be used with every member of the superdiverse classroom of Luxembourg on a daily basis. My interviewees showed understanding of the challenges confronting the school; they do not expect any special treatment of every child:

**Darina:** There is no way the school can take everyone into account; can you imagine, how many nationalities there are here... One needs to wear a scarf, another one only wants to eat potatoes, and for the third one it is five o'clock tea... How can this be, it is impossible, they need to adapt to the general conditions.

The fixed rules of conduct within the system, very often criticised as excessive in online communities, are not seen as very limiting by the respondents. Unlike in Russia, where you can take a child out of preschool without an explanation, in Luxembourg all absence must be excused, and the holidays need to be taken according to the school calendar, not the parents' availability. Viewed with suspicion and initially perceived as a limitation, the fixed schedule is actually found by most participants to help them adapt to the rhythm of Luxembourg:

**Kira:** I even prefer it this way when you have this fundamental timeframe which shows you what is always a yes, and what is a no.

Adjusting to systematic rules that are respected and observed gives a feeling of security and stability, something not quite familiar to the people with a Soviet or a post-Soviet background, especially when dealing with public institutions. In migration studies, security and stability are often cited among the main reasons for people to leave Russia and other countries in transit (together with better economic opportunities). This factor comes together with the search for political stability and freedom.

One thing that was highlighted by all the participants is the non-transparency of the system. While the daily routine is communicated in detail (e.g., what and when to bring to the swimming pool), the bigger issues such as the curriculum, the day structure, or the major calendar events are not discussed with or announced to the families. These details of school life are considered to be common knowledge, but for migrant parents they are not. The one-to-one parent-teacher meetings reveal the content of work and the issues the child is having only at the end of the trimester. For the parents who grew up with collectivist mentality, this approach is unusual. Moreover, two of the five participants found the level of the curriculum "lacking," as the focus is rather on the soft skills (introduction to socialising without reading or writing and very basic math seemed too "primitive" for school and 5-year olds) than on technical knowledge.

Parents have cited numerous cases of intercultural misunderstandings, with a mother showing up for the Father's Day celebration; another one offering a 100-euro gift card to a teacher when the child was leaving the school; one girl's mother getting on the school bus for children and being perplexed why the driver stared at her with astonishment. None of these anecdotes, however, left an unpleasant aftertaste but are viewed as lessons learned. A bigger challenge for the adults is the self-assessment of the children's proficiency in Luxembourgish and finding teaching resources for autonomous learning. There is hardly any material online, and it is difficult for the parents finding and making sense of information provided in Luxembourgish, if they want to help the child with learning a song or understanding a tradition. Two families received gifts from schools, one a CD, and the other a DVD. However, all family members do everything on the computer and do not own either a DVD or a CD player at home. There are no manuals with texts for children 4–6-year old, as they will only start reading and writing at the next stage, in the primary school, and it is in German that they acquire literacy.

## Future Expectations: *Next Year, They Will Switch to German. This Is Scary!* Evaluation and Re-evaluation of the Linguistic Repertoires and Needs

As time passes and experience of interaction with the school is accumulated, some of the parents become more self-confident. While in the early stages of life in the new country the opinions were primarily shaped on the basis of friends' recommendations and later on teachers' reviews, once the system and the child's response to it become clear, there are more calls for judgement.

**Darina:** <At the meeting with the teacher, DK> they say we don't have to do it <help children with Luxembourgish>. But in the first two years they used to say the same thing, that we shouldn't do anything, but as a result I see the difference, I came to trust myself more, as the responsibility for our child is with us, first of all.

Three out of five interviewees mentioned that they do not believe the "*bilan*" (the detailed trimester performance report) to be an objective representation of their child's potential school career. However, it is clear that evaluation and re-evaluation of the actors and agency in the field of education are inevitable throughout the journey through the school system. Notably, the positive assessments are not trusted blindly. The parents, seeing or imagining gaps in learning, hire tutors and believe that their children need professional support in order to attain academic success, including receiving the coveted assignment to *Lycée classique*.

The much-advertised glamorous image of a child picking up at least two European languages almost effortlessly is shaped before the relocation, but it dissipates when reality shows that multilingualism is not easy to achieve. The awe and hopes for the "easy" and natural acquisition of multiple languages unattainable in Soviet and post-Soviet realities often evolve into realization that the mastery of the languages required by Luxembourgish school is a challenge. For the children, just like the adults, the environment defines the language competency. Inna's daughter had attended a French crèche for 3 years, from one to four. Then, after a year and a half at the Luxembourgish school with hardly any French interaction, her first foreign language seemed to have faded away. So, the parents decided to hire a French tutor to get the language back "before it is completely gone," even though their initial plan was to hire a tutor in German to prepare the child for a new language of instruction, starting in the first year of primary school. The parents are ready to act preventively, but it is not quite clear to them how to act, as the strategy of sticking to one language is not working. Others consider the load too heavy and the results unclear. Arina is trying to evaluate the potential competency in all the languages used and is worried that her daughter will be stressed out by the fourth language in a row (Russian at home, English at the crèche, Luxembourgish now in *Spillshoul*, and German added after that). She would prefer her daughter to "speak fewer languages, but more fluently."

Another sore spot in the school–family interaction was highlighted by all the participants. It is the after-school care, or rather the difficulty in obtaining access to it. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, the school day is divided into two, from 8 am until 12 pm, and from 2 pm until 4 pm. The children not having lunch at the after-school programme need to be brought home and delivered back to school. As mentioned earlier, only one mother, Inna, works full-time, and living outside the busy city districts, where school facilities are often packed to full capacity, had no issues with enrolling her daughter into *Maison Relais*. The two mothers whose children were not admitted to the after-school care programme make four return journeys from school three days a week. Both say that it turns into their main activity on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays throughout the school year. It is not the laziness of the mothers or the children's boredom that makes access to after-school programs a nuance: "one should keep in mind the implicitly dual function of childcare: supporting mothers' employment and child socialisation" (Esping-Andersen 41). The mothers also believe that the access to extra time with schoolmates between classes is of a special value to foreign children, who get more time to practice Luxembourgish.

With the emotional part of making decisions concerning their children's pre-school education behind them, the participating families are relatively happy with local preschools. Yet, they perceive it just as an intermission: from other parents and social networks they know that the next educational steps will bring more languages and more challenges. Three out of five participants said that they were going to reconsider their school choice after the first years in the primary schools and looking for alternative schooling for their children.

## Discussion

Preschool as the earliest obligatory step of schooling is the first encounter with the Luxembourgish language for all the participants, otherwise living in Russian and English-speaking bubbles. In this respect, it is a very revealing period for the construction of the relations between the existing public institutions and the newcomers.

While in Luxembourg there are established facilitators (language teachers, cultural mediators, and psychologists) who help the adaptation of older students, and students with a refugee background, self-initiated expatriates with children of younger age have no guidance in their journey, except for the opinion of their online communities and the Russian-speaking old-timers. Most Russian-speaking students-to-be still come from a fundamentally different cultural background and own a very specific linguistic repertoire. It is noteworthy to mention that none of my interviewees expected any special treatment or assistance in assimilation or navigation of the school system. Members of this relatively privileged group believe it is their own responsibility to navigate the new life in the new country, including the domain of education. The slogan is rather: “We’ll manage ourselves.” “Life is a struggle” is a common motto for Russians who have been through many difficult transformations in the past decades (Tudge 120, 272). For now, this stance might actually be a good thing for the already overloaded system of integrating older and more disadvantaged students. But in the future, it might become the reason for further separation of the system and its participants.

Parental aspirations and values vary too. The educational standards from the Soviet and post-Soviet era include a late start of school (schooling compulsory from the age of 7), a relatively free choice of institutions, and total parental control over school attendance. It is interesting how most of the parents mention that all their family members have had memories about numerous projects and assignments which overloaded their school years. Here, in Luxembourg, there are no tasks imposed on the parents or collecting money for sophisticated presents for the teachers. This is seen by the parents, brought up in a collectivist mentality, as the other extreme; it is hard to say how the potential deeper involvement of the families in the school life would be taken. But one thing is clear: the communal learning, that could be done in a fun and family benefitting way, is hardly taking place. While the parents are teaching their children concepts from their own background and are ready to invest more time and money in extra-curricular activities that are the norm back home, the children are bringing home some of the local notions which are not quite clear to the parents having little contact with Luxembourgish life. The children end up being taught by two separate and non-overlapping sources, the family and the school. As beneficial for the child as it may sound, it might also be confusing and disorienting. Moreover, it does not contribute to the settling of the parents or to the growing understanding of the new communities and their values by the teaching staff and the school as a system. From the conversations, it is obvious that parents with older children, who had already had exposure to the local system, have gotten accustomed to the everyday school practices to some degree. However, the aspirations regarding the curriculum still vary from family to family – some look back to their own experience, while the others want their children to focus on the local standards.

At the same time, back home, as the participants of this study unanimously announced, they would have never enrolled their child in a neighbourhood public school. There is an obvious formation of a new relationship with a new environment. Here, in Luxembourg, the immigrants have initial trust in the democratic system and the observance of human rights; these general expectations and trust in the state are extended to the country’s public institutions. The parents value the respect for the children and their personalities by the school and the general stability and security of everyday life, school life included.

One of the main findings of the study is the juxtaposition of the parents’ and the children’s linguistic repertoires. The “kids’ menu” is Luxembourgish (at school) and Russian (at home). For the adults, it is Russian, English, and some French that build their language repertoire. In this context, for the adults, the titular language, Luxembourgish, is seen as a formality. The presence of Luxembourgish in the linguistic repertoire of Russian speakers is ambiguous: it serves the children to communicate with peers while for the adults, it is often a formal tool for the acquisition of the host country’s passport. German, studied as the main language of instruction in the primary school, makes the children’s repertoire even more diverse and distinct from that of their parents. Within the educational system for the children, French as a foreign language is taught in

primary school, and English appears on the curriculum only in the secondary school after the children turn 12. In this way, the repertoires of preschool and primary students and adults intersect only in Russian, adding to the detached status of the families.

For the most part, the Russian speakers are non-EU citizens, with limitations in their working rights. The gatekeeping approach creates a vicious circle for the mothers of young children. When they do not have a permanent employment contract, their children do not get a place in the after-school program, which means that some days (Tuesday and Thursday), the children are in school for only 4 h a day, while the other days are filled with dropping and picking them up four times a day. This is hardly compatible with further training of the mothers, neither does it improve their employment prospects. It is important to emphasise that learning all the languages that are required for a productive life in Luxembourg is a job of its own for transplants of all ages from monolingual or even bilingual spaces. In addition, since the family prosperity artificially depends on the work of one parent, it creates a power imbalance felt by all the members.

Russian-speaking children, even coming from relatively well-off families, are still disadvantaged in several ways. They often start school after being at home with their mother, or a care provider, with limited experience in socialising. Furthermore, their mother tongue is not part of the linguistic repertoire of most of the school staff. The exact number of Russian-speaking students in Luxembourg school is hard to define, and it is not very significant, compared to other more established migrant groups. But only in this small group of five pre-schoolers discussed, one child is changing her status in the coming months, having received Luxembourgish nationality together with her parents. A second child is expecting his new passport in the next few months, and the third child has a Ukrainian passport. For the school management, it might not be evident that she is a Russian speaker. This complex and dynamic group is a visual illustration of the super-diverse and evolving Luxembourg community. It goes to prove that passports do not define the national identity, and the parents' different backgrounds should not get in the way of the children's progress in school.

## Conclusion

The main stance of this work is to show that the adaptation of pre-schoolers plays an important role not only in preparing the children themselves for the challenges of further education in the complex trilingual public school system, but also in the settling of the whole family in Luxembourg, and the co-construction of a clear and comfortable common living space. Commitment to local schools is seen by researchers as an advantage contributing to intrastate social cohesion. For this to work, the parents need to better understand the system, which is found by the participants of the study to be neither transparent nor flexible. The social relationships between the school and the Russian-speaking parents are currently constructed in a parallel way: their orbits do not touch. The lack of experience in interacting with the unknown educational system that teaches the children in a language, unfamiliar to the families, together with a different communication style, is getting in the way of the parents' understanding and accepting the system. The parents, used to direct instructions from teachers and viewing academic success as a necessary basis for further achievements in life, might be misled by the parents–teachers meetings in more detached Luxembourgish schools. A distorted idea of their child's performance might make the parents miss the moment when they need help.

One of the first steps that could facilitate the integration of the families would be the access of foreign residents to the after-school care programmes. Another helpful solution could be the creation of a pre-school manual, printed or digital, that would prepare and accompany the parents in the first stage of schooling, pre-school with the explanation of the main school actors, rules, events, concepts, calendar dates, vocabulary, songs, and so on. It is also of a vital importance to educate the teachers about the cultural and linguistic background of this group. The local school that has to meet the needs of diverse students would benefit from a better understanding of new populations and a clearer idea of their goals and aspirations, too.

However utopian this might sound, with a more open system and an updated and publicised curriculum, the local school system could help the numerous transplant families from all over the world feel that they understand their environment and their environment wants to understand them. It would be of a special



interest to follow up on the student paths of the children discussed in this article in a longitude project. The creation of a practical guidebook for international families about to enrol their children into the Luxembourgish preschool that would include a basic Luxembourgish manual for kids and parents to explore at home could be another direction of research.

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