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Crossing borders in social work: Ukrainian war-affected children's needs and the social response system in Poland[2]

Summary

This study describes the Polish social response system from the perspective of professionals working with Ukrainian war-affected children who migrated to Poland between 2022 and 2024. The study used a phenomenological approach in which eight NGO professionals from four cities and one rural area, were interviewed. The findings show that the Polish response system has been composed of numerous uncoordinated NGOs, corporates, and public institutions. Although the system managed to meet basic needs of Ukrainian children during the start of the armed conflict, its interventions were no longer effective in addressing pressing needs of Ukrainian children who settled in Poland. The various response systems were poorly addressing the need for specialised trauma intervention, family security, meaningful integration and services' coordination. Such findings call for social work to upscale its involvement with Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland. The diversity of frontliners in Polish NGOs provides a useful starting point in ensuring that professional social work reaches Ukrainian children in Poland through multi-disciplinary and inter-institutional approaches.

Keywords: Ukrainian war-affected children, social work, frontline professionals, war-refugees, NGOs

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Introduction

By 16 May 2024, over 19 million Ukrainian war-refugees had crossed into Poland (UNHCR, 2024) of which, 94.1% were women and children (Baszczak, Kiełczewska, Kukołowicz, & Zyzik, 2022; Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022). Approximately 1.5 million of them applied for temporary protection in Poland whilst others proceeded to other European countries or returned to Ukraine (Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2023; Prusaczyk et al, 2023). Such statistics challenge social work as the chief operator of social response systems, "because the social support system [in Poland] has never had to deal with this type of challenge on such a scale and with people who have such a diverse range of needs" (Necel, 2024, p. 3). This heightens the risk of ineffective social work intervention and vulnerable children falling between different systems (Krawczak, 2012) and raise serious questions on the profession's preparedness to tackle issues affecting different countries (Healy, 2012).

This study investigated the main research question: What does the social response system look like to professionals responding to the needs of Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland? It was supported by three sub-questions:

- What are the elements of the system responding to the needs of Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland?
- Does the response system address the needs of Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland?
- What could be done to enhance the effectiveness of the social response system for Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland?

This empirical article acknowledges diverse geographies of social work (IFSW & IASSW, 2014; Joubett & Webber, 2020), by adopting a methodology that collected and analysed perspectives from different frontline professionals working with Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland. These were treated as key actors in the social response systems.

The context of humanitarian crisis in Polish neighbourhood

Russia's aggression in Ukraine which started with the annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas in 2014 (Pietrusińska & Nowosielski, 2022) and escalated on 24 February 2022 (Grabowska, Jastrzębowska, & Kyliushyk, 2023; Richter, 2022) threatened the safety, wellbeing, and life outcomes of Ukrainian children and their families. It became an awakening call for social work given the profession's commitment to human rights and social justice. But then the war escalated at a time when the world was recovering from COVID-19 (Matusevych, Demeshkant, & Trusz, 2024; Mróz, 2023).

Ukrainian war-affected children who fled from Ukraine were protected by the Refugee Convention of 1951 and the subsequent Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1967 as well as, Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989 among other human rights instruments. The Refugee Convention demands that refugees be accorded the same rights as those accorded to citizens of the host country (Kolińska, Paprocka-Lipińska, & Koliński, 2023). Article 38 of the CRC provides for the protection of children in armed conflicts, Article 22 provides for the protection of refugee children in host countries and Article 39 deals with the rehabilitation of child war victims in the aftermath of an armed conflict (Chaditsa, 2013).

Ukrainian war-affected children crossed into Poland with several unaddressed physical, socio-economic, and psycho-emotional problems (Matusevych, Demeshkant, & Trusz, 2024, UNICEF, Plan International & Save the Children, 2023). Polish social services were overwhelmed by the end of the second month of the escalated conflict (Lee, Khaw, Lindman, & Juszczyk, 2023).

Mental discomfort and neurotic disorders were recorded high among Ukrainian teenagers in Poland (Długosz, 2023). Most Ukrainian women brought to Poland their neighbour's or relatives' children (Kochaniak & Huterska, 2023). As a result, 66.8% of women sought work and opportunities for them to travel back to Ukraine and this explains why they were not willing to register under temporary protection schemes (Andrews et al, 2023). Registering under Polish temporary protection scheme required that one remain in Poland (Andrews et al, 2023; Prusaczyk et al, 2023). Most Ukrainian refugees did not know that the protection scheme allowed them to register and travel back and forth to Ukraine and other EU countries (Legal Portal for People Fleeing Ukraine, 2024).

Another challenge was the language barrier. Learning a new language especially for preschoolers, adjusting to a new culture (Shevchuk-Kliuzheva & Błasiak-Tytuła, 2023), and securing a place for children with disabilities also proved difficult (Krawczak, 2022). Some Ukrainian children were frustrated by the fact that they were enrolled in classes lower than their exact grades (UNICEF, Plan International, & Save the Children, 2023). Consequently, half of Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland continued their education in Ukraine using online platforms (Pacek, 2022; Pietrusińska & Nowosielski, 2022; UNICEF, Plan International, & Save the Children, 2023).

Kolińska, Paprocka-Lipińska, & Koliński (2023) reported that most Ukrainians defaulted on treatments for cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases when they fled Ukraine. Increased exposure to stressful conditions and living in overpopulated shelters in Poland sparked high prevalence rates of viral infections among Ukrainian refugee children (Pluta, Karny, Lipińska, Mańdziuk, Podsiadły, Kuchar, Pokorska-Śpiewak, & Okarska-Napierała, 2024). In fact, Kryst, Zeglen, & Artymiak (2023) discovered that Ukrainian war-affected children in

Kraków were less fit as compared to Polish children of the same age and this might have had a bearing on their health as adults.

Polish responses to Ukrainian refugees

Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj (2022, p.13) observed that, "The quickest and the most effective aid was the one organised on ad hoc basis by individuals, NGOs, business entities, and institutions that normally do not deal with humanitarian aid.". This was aided by the Polish welcome attitude and generous aid towards all Ukrainian war-victims during the start of the war (Baszczak et al, 2022; Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022; Pacek, 2022). However, this support tapered off due to moral exhaustion, and slowly building up tension between Poles and Ukrainians in Poland (Baszczak et al, 2022; Pietrusińska & Nowosielski, 2022). It is also possible that huge war-related financial inflation caused financial difficulties for Poles, though this aspect has not been studied deep enough in current research.

Non-governmental organisations facilitated asylum processes, assisted refugees with required materials, financial, and information needs, and promoted socio-economic inclusion of Ukrainian refugees in Poland (UNHCR, 2023). Nevertheless, Necel (2024, p.10) notes that cooperation between NGOs and social welfare centres was low (at 68.42%), as compared to cooperation between centres and private entrepreneurs (72.39%), informal groups (77.86%), and educational institutions (91.8%).

On 12 March 2022, the government of Poland passed an Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine to provide the legal and policy framework for response (Grabowska, Jastrzębowska, & Kyliushyk, 2023). The Act, also known as "the Special Act," stipulated that unaccompanied children from Ukraine were entitled to a temporary guardian subject to approval by the court for families and minors, qualified Ukrainians for Temporary Protection in Poland and gave Ukrainians access to social assistance through a UKR PESEL[3] number (Baszczak et al, 2022; Legal Portal for People Fleeing Ukraine, 2024).

The Special Act also provided conditional subsidies for children in kindergarten, family benefits (500+) for children below the age of 18 years; Start of School Benefits which amounted to PLN 300 for caregivers to buy school materials; and Family Care Capital to help meet daily family needs (Kochaniak & Huterska, 2023; Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022). It also provided for the employment of Ukrainians residing in Poland such as psychologists for other Ukraini-

[3] ID number assigned to citizen/resident

ans even without prior training and subject to registration, qualified psychologists to practice in special facilities (Legal Portal for People Fleeing, 2024). However, Polish social welfare centres and social workers were not as adequately prepared to handle the emotional crisis as other countries in Europe (Necel, 2024).

Before this inquiry, there were limited studies that unpacked how diverse aspects of the social response systems connected in addressing the above needs of Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland. Municipalities through social welfare centres were given the leeway to provide social support via their own initiatives and subject to the availability of funds (Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022; Magdziarz, 2024). Local authorities were given the obligation to provide services that were more focused on the long-term integration aspects of response (Necel, 2024). Since local administrative units were primarily tapping the needs of Polish families before the Act of 12 March (Magdziarz, 2024), it would have been prudent to evaluate how their capacity strengthened them for effective delivery of the added responsibility. This is also supported by Geha (2019) who, studying social response systems in Lebanon, observed that learning and adaptation was essential for an effective multi-stakeholder social response system. Unfortunately, the only inquiry that was done, showed that Polish welfare centres, where most social workers and pedagogues were employed, were not adequately prepared to deal with large numbers of foreigners (Necel, 2024). A survey done by Baszczak et al. (2022) established three stages of social response systems for refugees that were then applied in making sense of the findings in this study. The survey noted that Poland had undergone a stage of spontaneous response, followed by a partial adaptation stage. It went on to predict the integration stage and that the role of local authorities and central government would increase as the stages progressed (Baszczak et al., 2022).

Methodology and methods used in the study

The study adopted a qualitative design and a phenomenological approach as a way of collecting rich, contextualised data on the subject matter (Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson, & Suárez-Orozco, 2018). The researcher used a qualitative design because of its ability to provide detailed insights of under-studied phenomenon. According to Padgett (2008), qualitative studies are known for explaining topics that are not well documented. The whole study was done under the University of Warsaw, Faculty of Education staff supervision (prof. Agnieszka Naumiuk).

A sample of eight frontline professionals from NGOs in Pilaszków, Warsaw, Wrocław, Nowa Sól and Włodawa participated in the study.