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Influence of Ukrainian Refugees' Mental Health on their Success of Integration on Labour Market in Slovakia

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Abstract

The viewpoint of mental health, in regard to the refugees who suffer from various levels and types of trauma and other threats to their mental and physical health, is crucial for the success of the integration strategy as a whole. Displacement puts significant psychological and social stress on individuals, families and communities. People may have experienced multiple atrocities and adversities prior to or during their escape. Once they reach safety, their current living conditions may also impose significant stress and hardship, often coupled with worries about those left behind and concerns about the future. This leads to increased levels of mental health conditions and psychosocial problems. Interventions from mental health professionals are designed to be culturally sensitive and tailored to the unique needs of refugees, considering their experiences of displacement, trauma, and cultural adjustment. Elimination of stigma and self-stigmatization of people with mental disorders, noticing and being aware of them, about their symptoms and options they have, determines the success of further treatment and increases the likelihood of effective integration. In everyday life, it is important for refugees from Ukraine to integrate into the community in the field of mental health. Thanks to psychologists' extensive competences in the field of identification of psychological needs, as well as support of Ukrainian refugees, there is a possibility to use counseling, clinical and psychotherapeutic procedures to meet them. The need for material and financial security of families often leads to the implementation of less qualified work and the acceptance of work and salary discrimination. Skilled refugees' demotivation and the feeling of helplessness both lead to a passive or avoidant attitude. The earlier mentioned group of people could, otherwise, enter the labour market effectively.

Introduction

The war in Ukraine, which escalated following Russia's large-scale invasion in February 2022, has resulted in a displacement and humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions in the recent decades in Europe. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has caused massive civilian casualties and destruction of the infrastructure, forcing people to flee their home seeking safety, protection, shelter and assistance. Based on data provided by UNHCR, as of 31 December 2023, there are 5.974.800 refugees from Ukraine recorded in Europe and a further 470.000 citizens of Ukraine currently living beyond Europe. According to the statistics provided by the authorities to the UNHCR, a total of 6.444.800 refugees from Ukraine were globally recorded.¹ Most of the refugees do not settle in the country where they crossed the border and they are looking for better opportunities. According to the available data only around 6,21% intend to stay in Slovakia in the future and the rest of it is just crossing the border in this country.²

¹ Ukraine Refugee Situation: Operational Data Portal of the UNHCR [online]. Operational Data Portal, ©2024 [04.02.2024] available online: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

² Ukraine Refugee Situation: Operational Data Portal of the UNHCR [online]. Operational Data Portal, ©2024 [04.02.2024] available online: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

Slovakia, like other countries in the region, saw a rapid influx of persons fleeing hostilities and seeking protection. Given the dynamic situation of refugee movements in 2022 and throughout 2023, as of 30 November 2023, over 1,8 million people have crossed the borders from Ukraine into Slovakia since 24 February 2022. Among them, more than 130.000 individuals had applied for Temporary Protection (TP) in the country and the Ministry of Interior issued more than 115.000 valid TP's according to their data.³ The problems related to the settlement of refugees from Ukraine in Slovakia are mainly the lack of accommodation and employment. Furthermore, there are other difficulties such as the unfavourable social situation of the refugees from Ukraine due to their low income, reaching retirement age, adverse health conditions and severe disabilities they are constantly struggling with. There is a problem with the provision of psychological, special education, mediation, social and supervision services for the refugees, because these services are sometimes hardly reachable even for the Slovak population. Especially when we are talking about the financial aspect of these services. The Slovak government is trying to fund these services and encourage people to apply for them, but sometimes there is not enough opportunity for everyone. In those situations, NGOs and different non-profit organizations pursue to help. What is affecting their well-being mainly is their mental health, which influences all aspects of their lives, including job seeking and overall integration into the Slovak society.

Legal framework

Following the situation of the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, the Government of the Slovak Republic changed the legislation beginning with the Act No. 42/1994 Coll. on Civil Protection of the Population, which implemented "mass influx of foreigners" ⁴ as a term, which enabled the government to declare a state of emergency in case of necessity. Another crucial change was the amendment of the Act. No. 480/2002 Coll. on Asylum and Amendment of Some Acts in order to be able to grant Ukrainian refugees "temporary shelter" and protection⁵ regardless of the decision of the Council of Europe and also clarify the concerned provisions a bit better. The status of temporary shelter was strengthened through the Resolution of the Government No. 185 on the proposal of declaring temporary protection in accordance with Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382, which introduced "temporary protection"⁶ for Ukrainian nationals residing in Ukraine who have been displaced on or after 24 February 2022 as a result of the military invasion by Russian armed forces that began on that date. The reason for the Resolution of the Government No. 185 was to declare the provision of temporary shelter as humanitarian assistance to groups of people from Ukraine due to the ongoing war conflict. The declaration of temporary shelter is the simplest and at the same time the most effective way to protect those fleeing the war, while allowing them the access to the labour market quickly and unrestrictedly.⁷

These initial activities of the state have subsequently resulted in the need of changing the welfare system in order to supplement the assistance provided to foreigners living on the

³ Dočasné útočisko: The Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic [online]. Ministerstvo vnútra SR, ©2024 [04.02.2024] available online: <https://www.minv.sk/?docasne-utocisko>.

⁴ § 3 (2) Act No. 42/1994 Coll. on Civil Protection of the Population

⁵ § 29 Act. No. 480/2002 Coll. on Asylum and Amendment of Some Acts

⁶ Art. (13) Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection

⁷ Proposal for a declaration of declaring temporary protection in accordance with Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382: Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky. [online] Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky, © 2024 [05.02.2024] available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/27034/1>.

territory of the Slovak Republic. In addition, mobilisation of the relevant organisations, state institutions, NGOs and also the population were the main and key steps in order to provide basic assistance and needs to the people of Ukraine for the stabilisation of and the fulfilment of their basic needs. The Slovak government was therefore forced to prepare a bill⁸ in order to change and modify areas concerning social services and welfare (and other areas as well) to ensure the wellbeing of refugees living in Slovakia and to guarantee them certain rights (and also obligations) regarding their future stay in Slovakia.

In several cases minor children passed the border and came to Slovakia either unaccompanied or without their legal representatives, because their fathers stayed in Ukraine for military reasons and their mothers had to take care of elderly family members. The number of these children is not significant, but the various Centres for Families with Children established for this reason were not prepared for the massive influx of children. The government needed to add that the care provided to these children is demanding, because these children are war victims and they need intensive, professional care from professionals, which is orientated to processing traumas. It is particularly difficult to ensure psychological assistance to these children because of the language barrier and depression due to the lack of contact with family members, etc. For this reason, it was necessary to amend the Act No. 305/2005 Coll. on social and legal protection and social guardianship of children and on amendment and supplementation of some acts, as amended regulations and extend the capacities with accredited Centres for Children and Families, which could also take care of unaccompanied minors.⁹ Moreover, it enabled the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family to react with more flexibility in relation to accredited centres for children and families in the event of other unexpected, extraordinary or emergency situations (e.g. pandemics) in the future.

In addition, it was essential to change the Act No. 448/2008 Coll. on Social Services and on amending and supplementing some Act and Act. No. 455/1991 Coll. on Trade Licensing (Trade Licensing Act) as amended with the aim of reacting to the massive influx of refugees to the territory of Slovak Republic and responding to the increased demand for child care services, during the participation of the parent on the labour market. This legislation responded to the current needs of families in reconciling family and professional life. Given the lack of capacity in childcare facilities for children up to three years of age, kindergartens or other facilities and entities providing formalised childcare (generally on weekdays and during working hours) was necessary to create legal conditions to help and promote reconciliation of family and working life through individual in a childcare group with a maximum of four children, with the nature and character of creating home environment.¹⁰ In group of children in their home environment or in environment very close to their home environment an individual (mainly one parent-mainly female) can provide care as a social service in a small group of children (maximum four).¹¹ This person (taking care of the children) does not have to meet some special professional requirements, only fulfil some general conditions in order to be able to provide social services (18 years old, legal capacity, etc.).

The aim of this step was to help parents, who are therefore able to reconcile their personal and professional responsibilities and could work on the territory of Slovak Republic,

⁸ Government bill No. 1022 on certain social measures regarding the situation in Ukraine: Národná Rada Slovenskej republiky. [online] © 2004 - 2024 K NR SR [05.02.2024] available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/cpt&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=8&ID=1022>.

⁹ Explanatory report to the Government bill No. 1022 on certain social measures regarding the situation in Ukraine: Národná Rada Slovenskej republiky. [online] © 2004 - 2024 K NR SR [05.02.2024] available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=511228>.

¹⁰ Explanatory report to the Government bill No. 1022 on certain social measures regarding the situation in Ukraine: Národná Rada Slovenskej republiky. [online] © 2004 - 2024 K NR SR [05.02.2024] available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=511228>.

¹¹ § 32a Act No. 448/2008 Coll. on Social Services and on amending and supplementing some Act.

since it is taken care of their children properly. We have to add that Slovakia is facing the lack of places in kindergartens and difficulties with placing them in other facilities in general. Because of that young mothers do not have opportunities to enter the labour market and they simply cannot reconcile personal and professional life due to the fact that they have to care for their children. Such a legislative measure for the creation and development of work life balance is representing a form of support for the provision of childcare and it will contribute to reducing the risk of poverty and the lack of income caused by a fact that a parent is missing the labour market for a longer period of time. It is necessary to mention state allowances and benefits which are integral part of the assistance and help granted to the refugees from Ukraine. The caretakers from the children's groups (mentioned before) are entitled to childcare allowance and it cannot be considered as regular income so they are also entitled to material need allowance (if they meet all the criteria according to the law), therefore Act No. 417/2013 Coll on Aid in Material Need was amended as well.¹²

We can also mention several other acts, which were amended, but the question of accommodation was one of the most relevant due to the fact that accommodation capacities of Slovakia (given the fact that it's a smaller country, which is not used to a massive influx of refugees) were and are still limited. Despite this, the government decided to create large capacity centres, where a high number of refugees could be accepted and also asked the assistance of the public to create more accommodation. The Act No 55/2022 on certain measures relating to the situation in Ukraine introduced a new type of allowance, called accommodation allowance, provided to registered hotels, guest houses and other natural persons who own a real estate and provide accommodation to refugees from Ukraine for free. The allowance is provided by the Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic to towns and villages with an amount corresponding to the contribution.¹³ Government Regulation No. 218/2022 on the granting of the expatriate's accommodation allowance determines the conditions for granting of the allowance precisely. According to the data of the UNHCR and Slovakia Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 47% of the respondents lived in their own accommodation at the time of the data collection, including rented apartments, houses, guesthouses, etc., 24% of the questioned reported living in collective sites, meaning existing buildings (schools, community centres) that have been repurposed to provide temporary shelter for large numbers of people. Shared accommodation was reported by 18% of the respondents, and the remaining 10% respondents cited hotels or hostels as their current accommodation at the time of the survey.¹⁴

Mental health and the project

Another important area, which needs to be discussed, is health care provided to the refugees from Ukraine. We would like to focus mainly on their mental health problems and services, which are available to them. Military conflict is according to the World Health Organization an emergency situation, which is a disaster that threatens both mental health and general well-being of people, increases the risk of mental disorders, and almost for all those, who are part of this crisis, causes psychological suffering. The most commonly listed stressors are in case of mental health the conflict itself together with the violence in the war zone; but also the abandonment of one's home country, culture and life; stressful incidents during the journey to

¹² § 4 sec. 3 letter v) Act No. 417/2013 Coll on Aid in Material Need.

¹³ § 36a Act No 55/2022 on certain measures relating to the situation in Ukraine.

¹⁴ UNHCR: Ukraine Situation: Slovakia Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, December 2023, Preliminary Findings [online] Reliefweb © 2024 [09.02.2024] available online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/slovakia/ukraine-situation-slovakia-multi-sector-needs-assessment-december-2023-ensk>.

the host country; fragmentation of social support networks; poor living conditions; the bureaucratic burden of residence permits; unemployment; language barrier; fear for loved ones and difficulties during the integration process in the host country.¹⁵

There is no doubt that war conflicts have an impact on the mental health of those affected either directly or indirectly. Psychological support is one of the basic and essential forms of help in coping with the trauma caused by violence. It can help to cope with the process of adaptation to a new host country, culture and environment, provide new strategies to refugees, treat and prevent mental disorders. Studies¹⁶ showed an increased incidence of mental disorders among refugees from Ukraine; particularly depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, increased rates of suicidal ideation and attempts, as well as psychotic disorders. Refugees from Ukraine (like other people living in different countries), are during their life exposed to risk of developing mental disorders. Higher prevalence of mental disorders was recorded in Eastern Ukraine and among internally displaced people. Due to persistent stigmatisation of mentally ill people in Ukraine (and also in other parts of Eastern Europe), it is unfortunately unlikely that Ukrainian refugees will seek psychological or psychiatric help.

These allegations are also supported by the outcome of the project funded by The European Social Fund called *“Prevention of the emergence of crisis situations during an emergency situation due to war events in Ukraine”*. This project was organized under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of Slovak Republic and lasted for 18 months. The ministry is a central bureau of state administration responsible for employment support, social welfare, the functioning of the pension system,¹⁷ social and legal protection of children and coordination of family policy. In the current situation it is not responsible only for Slovak citizens but also for the refugees from Ukraine and for other people living on the territory of the state. The main priority of the national project financed by the European Social Fund under the Human Resources Operational Programme was active inclusion of Ukrainian refugees into Slovak society in order to promote equal opportunities and their active participation and to improve their chances on the labour market.¹⁸

The project had an expert team consisting of different professionals such as psychologists, social workers, supervisors, mediators, and special education teachers. They operated in different regions of Slovakia and dedicated themselves to monitoring, data collection, seeking for cases actively, collecting examples of good practice mentoring and presentations of the project in the regions. Specific objective of the project is to address migration challenges and improve the everyday relationships between the refugees and Slovak people in order to support their integration. The expert team was supervising on a daily basis and actively participated in providing the following services offered for refugees (after they arrived in Slovakia) in large capacity centres:

1. Registration and processing of residence documents (secured by the Alien Police, Migration Office of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic).

¹⁵ BOUCHARD, Jean-Pierre et al., 2023. Psychotraumatology of the war in Ukraine: The question of the psychological care of victims who are refugees or who remain in Ukraine *Annales Médico-psychologiques, revue psychiatrique*. [online] 181(1), p. 12-15. available online: https://repository.uwc.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10566/8702/Bouchard_Psychotraumatology%20of%20the%20war%202023.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

¹⁶ Higher prevalence of psychological disorders among Ukrainian refugees observed by e.g. Chudzicka-Czupak et al., 2023; Abanoub, R. et al., (2022); Bouchard, JP (2022) etc.

¹⁷ Welcome: Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic [online]. Ministerstvo práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny Slovenskej republiky ©2024 [11.02.2024] available online: <https://www.employment.gov.sk/en/>.

¹⁸ Cieľ projektu: Predchádzanie vzniku krízovým situáciám o vzťahu k občanom Ukrajiny na území SR [online]. Ministerstvo práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny Slovenskej republiky ©2024 [11.02.2024] available online: <https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/uvodna-stranka/koronavirus-pracovna-socialna-oblast/predchadzanie-krizovym-situaciam-vo-vztahu-k-obcanom-ukrajiny-uzemi-sr/>.

2. Advice and arrangement of accommodation: temporary, long-term, various forms by various providers (provided by the district office of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic).
3. Financial assistance: provision of benefits in material need, registration in the UPSVaR (Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family) system with comprehensive advice on all forms of financial and non-financial support for refugees.
4. Food and material assistance: provision of food, personal hygiene products, smaller individual financial contributions for displaced persons and transfer refugees in case of another migration wave.
5. Health care: provision of health care through a permanent allocated outpatient clinic of general medicine and pediatrics, or on some days also psychiatry and psychotherapy.
6. Social counseling: Basic counseling - initial needs mapping, provision of basic information, distribution to experts according to specific needs or specialized - social diagnostics, diagnostics of specific needs (children with special needs, disability, addictions, old age, GBV, abuse, victims of human trafficking, sexual abuse, etc.), social counseling process, community work, organization of group activities, community activities, support in communication and public sensitization, tackling linguistic and cultural differences, etc. In case of recommendation, refugees can use a network of accredited providers and/or registered social service providers (operated by municipality or non-profit organization): specialized social counseling, field social work, low-threshold day centre, community centre throughout SK (approx. 300) according to Act 448/2008 Coll. on social services (under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the Slovak Republic).
7. Psychological counseling: The term mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) refers to any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being or prevent or treat mental health conditions.¹⁹ All types of mental health services described in the strategy of the Mental Health and Psychological Support Sub Working Group Slovakia²⁰ should optimally be represented in the large capacity centres and should be available to the refugees. Available MHPSS programs involve a range of interventions, including individual and group counseling, cognitive behavioral therapy, trauma focused therapy, and psychosocial support services provided by TENENET, League for Mental Health, IPCKo, IFRC and other partners.²¹ Access to specialized mental health care services, including more complex psychological support, remains challenging due to financial and language barriers.
8. Legal advice: basic and specific legal advice on respect of fundamental human rights and freedoms, delinquency, criminal offenses, labour law issues. In the case of a recommendation to a displaced person from Ukraine in the field outside the large capacity centres and closer to his place of residence – they can use the network of registered providers of free legal aid (legal aid centre - 15 offices and 44 consulting offices in Slovakia).
9. Supported employment: Job preparation, career counseling and retraining, job search, communication with the employer, counseling in active labour market measures and financial incentives for employers and entrepreneurs for various business innovations, social enterprises (including social housing companies for municipalities), etc. In the

¹⁹ UNHCR: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) [online]. UNHCR © UNHCR 2001-2024 [13.02.2024] available online: <https://emergency.unhcr.org/emergency-assistance/health-and-nutrition/mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-mhpss>.

²⁰ ERDELYIOVA R.: Definition of priority axes: 7.8. Mental Health Psycho-Social Support – MHPSS, WHO.

²¹ WHO: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) activities in countries hosting refugees from Ukraine: implementation of the international minimum standards for MHPSS.

event of a recommendation to a Ukrainian displaced person closer to his/her place of residence to use a network of registered training organizations in work preparation (retraining or education completion), UPSVaRs, non-state employment services providers - supported employment agencies, temporary employment agencies, employers and employer associations (registered according to Act 5/2004 Coll. on employment services), social enterprises (registered according to Act 112/2008 Coll. on social economy) (under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the Slovak Republic).

10. Non-formal education: extracurricular leisure activities, communication in the Slovak language, operation of premises suitable for children (children's corner for the youngest children) dedicated areas for mothers with babies and toddlers, preschool club (pedagogical support for school attendance, development of graphomotor skills and other skills and competences such as mathematics, speech, spatial orientation, right-left orientation, senso-motor, psycho-social, etc.), club for teenagers and young people (self-development, work with emotions, self-knowledge, interpersonal communication, assertive behavior, conflict prevention, work with authorities, peer groups, etc.), sports activities, creative workshops, talent development, etc.

Psychosocial needs of Ukrainian refugees revealed during the project

Since the beginning of the Russian aggression the Ukrainian refugees experienced enormous personal, material and psychosocial losses. They are either directly or indirectly exposed to the trauma of war; on top of that, they have also lost their homes, family members and socio-economic status. Despite the efforts of the assisting countries and the constant help offered, the refugees naturally find themselves in further stressful situations due to material deprivation, fears for their loved ones and the ambiguity of the future. The basic physical and emotional needs of refugees include: survival, safety and security, accommodation, clothing, medical care, stabilisation, orientation, communication (with family, friends, community), social assistance, support, a sense of security, therapeutic help etc.²² The psychological needs of refugees are, of course, very individual and their fulfilment has a positive impact on the mental health of refugees, contributes to increased rates of seeking psychological help and reduces stigmatisation because of mental health issues.²³ The most important phase of their integration is their acceptance and their ability to remain calm and eliminate stressors.

It is essential to reduce the risk of mental health problems and increase the availability of psychological support and treatments for mental disorders by providing maximum assistance in obtaining temporary refugee status, which allows the refugees to obtain medical²⁴, legal and social assistance from the state. The language barrier is a clear problem in these cases, when providing more comprehensive assistance can be solved by an interpreter. The presence of the interpreter during identification of disorders or assessment of psychological status helps to reveal many psychological symptoms. Connecting with close relatives and reuniting with

²² KAUFMAN, Kenneth R. et al., 2022. Mental health responses in countries hosting refugees from Ukraine. *BJPsych Open*. [online]. 8(3). © 2024 Cambridge University Press & Assessment available [13.02.2024] available online: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bjpsych-open/article/mental-health-responses-in-countries-hosting-refugees-from%20ukraine/68426CEAC5FF104BAF6A05972F498A7C>.

²³ REINHARD, Sina et al., 2021. Mental Health in Ukraine. Yale: Institute for Global Health. [online] © 2024 Yale University. Updated 09/28/2022 [13.02.2024] available online: https://medicine.yale.edu/yigh/students/case-competition/2021yighcase_final_407033_46325_v1.pdf.

²⁴ More about medical assistance for temporary refugees available on the site of the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic: <https://health.gov.sk/?urcenie-rozsahu-potrebenej-zdravotnej-starostlivosti>.

families is a key to restore interactions and promote the mental health of refugees. Identification of vulnerable groups, e.g. people with disabilities requiring special care, barrier-free access; children and adolescents with learning disabilities; seniors, is the first step in the process of psychological support. Increasing feelings of control through the involvement of refugees in various forms of assistance can help to eliminate both feelings of helplessness and frustration. The need for motivation for daily activities is often missing. Supporting various activities and education can help to minimize the frustration of the lack of enjoyment in performing various daily activities. Meeting the needs of refugees during the integration process can contribute to the creation of stable communities of refugees and can also motivate them to fully integrate into the Slovak community. According to the results of the mentioned project this can be achieved, if these steps are followed from the side of the refugees:

- Re-visiting Ukraine is an important step for maintaining relations, eliminating uncertainty about loved ones and family members left behind. It is also a preventive measure that will ensure the extension of a network of possible psychological support and assistance in the future.
- Awareness about the rights and options available in the host country, mainly about medical help, which is often inadequate (even for Slovak citizens) and it can result in refusal to provide help or can cause demands for unjustified charges.
- The need for socialization is often underestimated especially among seniors and children, mainly those taking online classes (during the Covid pandemic this was a major problem between Slovak children as well).
- Finding meaning in daily activities and setting positive goals will help to identify the needs of the refugees more accurately and improve their adaptive skills (which they need for integration).²⁵

In the long term in order to achieve effective integration it is necessary to meet psychotherapeutic support aimed at both building resilience and addressing trauma needs. For this reason, it is important to teach persons with difficulties in different areas of functioning to identify, hierarchize and solve their problems. It can help the refugees to increase the feeling of control over events such as employment, interpersonal relationships, upbringing and education. Psychological support for Ukrainian refugees should start with providing basic needs - access to shelter, food, water; reassuring the refugees and ensuring their safety; also providing respect, acceptance, solidarity, kindness. It is essential to inform the refugees about their possibilities of psychological reactions and about the possible forms of help they are entitled to. The main goal is to lead them and assist them while using their own resources to grow new knowledge and skills with the aim to both process the traumatic war events and relieve stress.

The good practice collected during the project revealed that the most of the refugees contacted the Centre for Psychological Help in Bratislava with their problems, where psychologists speak Ukrainian language, also the League for Mental Health, the Archdiocesan Charity in Košice and there are also several organizations offering psychological help e.g. Red Cross, People in Need (non-profit organization), Blue Angel (non-profit organization), TENENET, UNICEF, IOM, WHO, UNHCR, MAREENA etc. They also have online or phone support (helpline) for people in need. During the project the expert team was raising awareness about these phone numbers and available help through regular counseling and fieldwork.

²⁵ BARTOŠ R.: Predchádzanie vzniku krízových situácií počas mimoriadnej situácie v dôsledku vojnových udalostí na Ukrajine, available online: <https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/sk/uvodna-stranka/pomoc-odidencov-z-ukrajiny/predchadzanie-krizovym-situaciam-vo-vztahu-k-obcanom-ukrajiny-uzemi-sr/metodicka-prirucka.pdf>.

Phases of psychological support and forms of support

According to the WHO's recommendations²⁶ and other domestic or international well-known standards and good practices there are different phases of psychological support available for refugees and it is crucial to address immediate health needs and to begin the process of coordinating mental health and psychosocial support as soon as possible.

1. Prevention is one of the most important phases, which can eventually help to avoid later problems. Due to the exposure to multiple stressors subjective well-being, quality of life, and mental health may significantly deteriorate among refugees from Ukraine. Prevention of mental disorders among refugees in Slovakia is provided by governmental, non-governmental, and non-profit organizations.

Good practice: The Slovak Humanitarian Council Kompas offers prevention and mental health support for asylum seekers and members of ethnic groups.²⁷ Preventive intervention can be provided through: personal contact (individual or in group) with trained persons, social workers, psychologists, etc.; self-help techniques (providing leaflets, books, mobile applications, online sources, etc.) or a combination of them.

Good practice: A health centre in Bratislava introduced a system of two available doctors for refugees, one of them always speaks Ukrainian language, therefore reducing the risk of conflicts and increasing the level of cooperation between patients.

Good practice: Civil association “Brána do života” uses informal gatherings of Ukrainian and Slovak mothers during community meetings to eliminate cultural differences and avoid conflicts arising from different upbringing and social background effectively.

2. Initial assessment - in this stage of psychological assistance, it is necessary to assess the actual mental health of refugees through observation and interview. The patients could be divided into different groups according to their current health status:²⁸ refugees exposed to trauma, refugees with accentuated psychological difficulties and persons already diagnosed with psychological difficulties.

According to the results of the expert team if there are no sign of psychopathological symptoms, it is appropriate to educate refugees about the possible reactions to traumatic events together with information on how to understand and process these reactions better, also validation of feelings and destigmatization of the consequences of the impact of stress reactions can be crucial. The expert team was also providing refugees with contacts (to mental health professionals) in the event of symptoms occurring or becoming worse. Initial assessment of suicidal risk is an integral part of psychological intervention.²⁹

3. Mental health screening

The individual psychodiagnostics are used for primary assessment of the current psychological state of refugees, if difficulties were found after the initial assessment on emotional, cognitive, physiological or behavioural terms. Detailed examination should include

²⁶ WHO: WHO promotes action on urgent mental health needs of Ukrainian refugees [online] © 2024 WHO [17.02.2024] available online: <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/10-11-2022-who-promotes-action-on-urgent-mental-health-needs-of-ukrainian-refugees>.

²⁷ GRAJCAROVÁ, Lucia, 2020. Duševné zdravie a verejné financie. Diskusná štúdia. [online] Útvár hodnoty za peniaze. 70 s. © 2024 Ministerstvo financií Slovenskej republiky [17.02.2024] available online: https://www.mfsr.sk/files/archiv/9/Dusevne_zdravie_verejne_financie_UHP.pdf.

²⁸ NIH: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [online] National Institute of Mental Health [17.02.2024] available online: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/sites/default/files/documents/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/20-mh-8124-ptsd.pdf>.

²⁹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2023) [online] Planning for Prevention and Risk Mitigation of Suicide in Refugee Settings. A toolkit for multisectoral action. Field-test version 2023. Geneva, Switzerland [17.02.2024] available online: https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/unhcr-suicide-prevention-toolkit_0.pdf.

information on the onset, frequency, course, severity, extent and degree of functional impairment. There are different types of mental disorders, which can be diagnosed: depression, anxiety, acute stress disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction, suicidal risk, etc.

If psychiatric disorder is identified, the provision of basic (acute), low-threshold, intermediate or highly specialized psychological intervention is appropriate, depending on the level of severity, risk and the needs of the patient.

Forms of support available to refugees

Psychological support is determined by the stage of the integration process of refugees, the level of cooperation and willingness to share personal experiences and difficulties. The expert team working on the project concluded that the most effective ways of support are the following: individual counseling and psychotherapy; group sessions and cooperation with other institutions (offering help). Individual counseling and psychotherapy are provided by almost all outpatient clinics of clinical psychology in Slovakia. During the project the expert team consisting of professionals were providing refugees with individual help in large capacity centres. Most of the interviewed refugees (appr. 80%)³⁰ were women living with minor children. Group sessions were the most common form of support provided by the expert team to the refugees during the project after individual counseling. The advantage of this type of support is sharing information, ability to collaborate, and rely on each other in small groups. During the treatment of mental disorders, it is assumed that school, employment, family or working groups are important factors influencing the development and maintenance of mental problems. In case of refugees the good practice showed us that these sessions could focus on familiarisation with the culture, communication about concerns e.g. in the form of voluntary meetings or community activity. Other important forms of support are psychotherapeutic programs for children and adults (refugees) or workshops with professionals. While the above-mentioned project lasted, the expert team organized several workshops explicitly for refugees, the biggest took place in Nitra, Žilina and Prešov. The main idea was to bring refugees and their “Slovak neighbours” closer, to show the Ukrainian culture and reduce the discrimination towards refugees. Psychologists from the expert team were working with the families and if there was a need they provided them with mental support. Out of all meetings, interventions and cases handled, project team identified the most frequently reported sources of conflict: - Mutual conflicts between Ukrainian refugees arising from ethnic, linguistic and political differences; - Conflicts between Ukrainian refugees and Slovak citizens arising from prejudice or insufficient or distorted information; - Conflicts between Ukrainian refugees and other marginalised groups due to fear of decreasing social support; - Intrapsychic conflicts of Ukrainian refugees due to the trauma they suffered; - lack of education offered to Slovak citizens about the refugees and their overall situation, - Insufficient education of Ukrainian refugees and Slovak institutions on cultural and legal differences etc. Peer programs are programs that support people who have experienced and overcome mental health problems, and then provide counseling and education to others. Peer-to-peer support programs engaging people with mental disorders, or who have experienced violence and/or trauma are still in their infancy in Slovakia in the field of mental health. In modern mental health care systems, self-help peer-to-peer support programs are the most important pillar. ³¹It is a cheap and easy way to engage experienced people in educational

³⁰ BARTOŠ R.: Predchádzanie vzniku krízových situácií počas mimoriadnej situácie v dôsledku vojnových udalostí na Ukrajine, Ministerstvo práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny Slovenskej republiky ©2024 [17.02.2024] available online: <https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/sk/uvodna-stranka/pomoc-odidencov-z-ukrajiny/predchadzanie-krizovym-situaciam-vo-vztahu-k-obcanom-ukrajiny-uzemi-sr/metodicka-prirucka.pdf>

³¹ ERDELYIOVA R.: Definition of priority axes: 7.8. Mental Health Psycho-Social Support – MHPSS, WHO.

and non-professional interventions for others. Personal experience ensures humanity and authenticity and shows a high degree of effectiveness and impact on the environment in the communities of trained peer consultants. Due to the course of trauma treatment, it is optimal to extend this program in the period of at least 6 months after the arrival of the displaced persons. Consequently, however, it has extraordinary potential in the right mix of trained displaced persons and local people with experience of mental disorder or trauma. The expert team of the project used this method as well and supported the training of some refugees by specialized experts in cooperation with non-profit organizations, but this method still needs some progress in the future. Cooperation with other institutions was a crucial part of the work as well. Psychologists from the expert team in cooperation with other institutions dealt with cases of child neglect, non-compliance with psychopharmacological treatment, addiction and uncooperative psychotic patients e.g. psychologists in cooperation with the Slovak Humanitarian Council helped to assess the mental state of patients placed in large capacity centers and assisted in the management of patients or supervised their hospitalization and subsequent aftercare.

All these methods could be used in case of minor mental disorder, because serious signs of mental disorder should be treated with hospitalization of the patient or with other forms of help suggested by professionals.

Conclusion and key for successful integration

Great emphasis must be placed on integration activities, regular activities in collective emergency accommodation facilities, prevention activities that prevent violence, addictions, but also deterioration of mental health.

From the experience gained during the project it is crucial to appeal and motivate the refugees to use retraining courses of Slovak language to overcome the language barrier as a crucial prerequisite for integration successfully. After observing working refugees in large capacity facilities, they appear to be much more satisfied and calmer, therefore, conflicts of problems rarely occur among them.

The challenge for successful integration of refugees is to master the Slovak language and find appropriate employment, because these ensure to avoid passivity and dependence on social help provided by the state. At the same time, it is also an important element of mental hygiene as a prevention of possible psychopathological symptoms, such as depression and conflict situations generated in the society. On the other hand, it is necessary to take care about the unique culture of refugees by creating their own community space to maintain their cultural identity and to help them to cope with stress and pressure which implies from their changed circumstances. According to a questionnaire conducted on refugees they reported a necessity to increase the number of language trainings and create one resource providing all the necessary information to support their integration in Slovakia (about the Slovak law, availability of jobs, healthcare facilities' locations, among others). On the other hand, the host population often reported difficulties in employing refugees due to their diploma not being recognized in Slovakia, notably in the health sector. This implies that refugees must often get Slovak certifications before they can be employed in their sector. According to the key informants in the business sector from Bratislava, the production sector, hotels and restaurants, as well as services were the three main sectors with the better capacity to potentially employ refugees. Yet, a discussion pointed to the fact that Ukrainians looking for jobs were also a source of

tensions. Employers often proposed them lower salaries, which appeared to decrease the average salary of the Slovaks.³²

Suggestions arising from long-time cooperation and assistance of refugees could be summarized in the following way:

- Creation of a comprehensible infrastructure for service integration – by transforming the large registration centres into community day centres focused on integration.
- Support language courses, workshops, informal activities - they help to bring Ukrainian refugees closer to each other, but also to build trust between refugees and providers of support, thus reducing the likelihood of crisis situations and helping to manage them more effectively.
- Using methods of cultural orientation- realized as a group session in presence of refugees and charity workers in order to build bridges (trust) between them. Similar session was carried out by the social services in Michalovce to educate refugees about cultural and legal differences before they even enter and settle down in Slovakia (to avoid further problems).
- Mental resilience trainings- again realized in group sessions with the aim to increase the resilience of refugees.
- Awareness-raising activities, ensuring media attention of the issue, creating opportunities for personal meetings between Ukrainian refugees and citizens of Slovakia, awareness campaigns promoting the integration, diversity and mental health of people regardless of their background or destiny.
- Education of providers of support services on the topic of psychological disorders - special emphasis should be placed on the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Mediation services available in conflict situations also need special educational care to cope with educational differences in mixed classes with students from Ukraine and Slovakia.
- Supervision services- very important both for people working with refugees and for refugees as well.
- Cooperation and networking between NGOs, state institutions and other organisations in the sense of complementarity.
- Use of the possibility of cooperation with Ukrainian-speaking experts - several entities providing services to Ukrainian refugees verbalized more effective cooperation and resolution of conflict or crisis situations in the presence of a Ukrainian expert (psychologist, social worker...) or at least an interpreter. At the same time, it can be assumed that the possibility of regular contact with Ukrainian experts also has a

³²UNHCR: Area Based Assessment Slovakia, Cities of Bratislava - Kosice-Nitra – Zilina, February 2023 [online] © UNHCR/Zsolt BALLA [24.02.2024] available online: <https://microdata.unhcr.org/index.php/home>.

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