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## **Inclusion of Ukrainian Children with Special Educational Needs (from among displaced people) in the Czech Republic**

### **Abstract**

The article presents the results of a study of the peculiarities and difficulties of educational and social inclusion of Ukrainian children with special educational needs who found protection from the war in the Czech Republic. The sample was formed according to the criteria we defined.

The results obtained using a semi-structured interview testify to the social significance of the outlined problem. They can be used to develop ways and resources to increase the effectiveness of including of Ukrainian children with special educational needs and their self-realisation in European society.

**Keywords:** *displaced people, inclusion, disability, special educational needs (SEN)*

### **Introduction**

The full-scale Russian military invasion sharply divided the lives of citizens of sovereign Ukraine into “before” and “after”. Millions of people suffered great losses (psychological, moral, material, etc.) and had to look for a safe place, starting life “from scratch” in the uncertainty of their own future. War and forced displacement endanger not only the health but also the social and psychological well-being of Ukrainian citizens (Burki, 2022). This situation is especially acutely experienced by families in which children with special psychophysical develop-

ment are brought up. They are the least protected. Therefore, they need not only material but also comprehensive social and psychological support.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, successful attempts to generalise the experience of humanitarian and educational intervention in the lives of forcibly displaced people because of war appear in world science (Pugh et al., 2012; OECD, 2016; Bonin, 2017; Cerna, 2019; Orendain & Djalante, 2020). The search for ways to organise a safe, educational process and provide socio-psychological support to its participants in martial law conditions attracted researchers' attention (Nilholm, 2021; Malykhin et al., 2022) and others. The results of studying various aspects of educational and social inclusion of pupils and students with special educational needs (hereinafter: SEN) are presented in works (Ainscow, 2020; Telna et al., 2021; Zaborniak-Sobczak, 2022). Research on the features of optimising the interaction of various participants of the inclusive process (Klopota et al., 2019; Borzucka-Sitkiewicz et al., 2022) and others are important for the coverage of this topic.

In 2018, the countries of the European Union, based on the fact that inclusive education of children with SEN in ordinary schools is becoming the demand of the time, while referral to special educational institutions should become an exceptional option, announced the revitalisation of activities related to the satisfaction of special educational needs (ECSR, 2018). In 2022, at the request of time and based on that, a programme of actions to promote educational inclusion in European educational institutions for Ukrainian students from among displaced people was developed (SWD, 2022).

However, there is a particular shortage of works aimed at highlighting the problems of social and educational inclusion of those forced Ukrainian immigrants who have disabilities. This issue is especially relevant for children with SEN. Firstly, this is because military actions, shelling, occupation, evacuation, etc., have exacerbated the course of existing diseases or developmental disorders. Secondly, it significantly complicated their adaptation to new living conditions in a relatively safe environment, but with the baggage of individual and collective grief of war.

All that determined the focus of our research on identifying factors influencing the effectiveness of including families with children with special psychophysical development. Namely, those who were forced to leave their homes and leave Ukraine as a result of the occupation or destruction of houses, educational and rehabilitation institutions, the destruction of the infrastructure of cities and towns in particular and in search of protection from the war in general, and its consequences, unprecedented in terms of the scale of the negative impact on all spheres of life of Ukrainian society.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Background**

The purpose of our research is to determine the features and problems of educational and social inclusion of Ukrainian children with special educational needs among those who sought temporary protection from the war in the Czech Republic.

The research aimed to obtain answers to the following main questions:

1. How mothers of children with SEN assess the difficulties of accessing educational inclusion outside of Ukraine.
2. What is the mothers' vision of the means of realising their own expectations regarding the optimisation of educational and social inclusion for children with SEN?

### **Instruments and Procedures**

To achieve the research aim, we used a semi-structured interview as a tool. Ukrainian mothers with SEN children who arrived in the Czech Republic after February 24, 2022 in search of temporary protection from the war were invited to participate. The interview was conducted personally with each of them to ensure the greatest sincerity and objectivity of the answers. The interviewer recorded the answers and reasoning of the interviewees.

The use of a semi-structured interview made it possible to add, if necessary, clarifying questions and preserve the order and wording of the questions as a whole. It contributed to greater flexibility and maintaining the focus of attention on the researched topic. Such a research strategy contributes to interpreting social reality and discovering meaning based on the transmitted information, making it possible to create new hypotheses (Disman, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2007). During the interview, the participants answered the questions based only on their own experience. The fact that there were no suggested answer options allowed them to think freely and independently. Their coding and comparison were carried out during the processing and analysis of the received data. It made it possible to conceptualise common themes and combine findings that belong to the same phenomenon.

### **Sample**

During the interview process, 19 Ukrainian mothers who have children with SEN were interviewed. The logic of qualitative research dictates the purpose-

ful selection of information-rich cases for in-depth analysis. Therefore, the sample was formed according to criteria aimed at selecting those respondents who would meet the purpose of our research. So, out of the total number of Ukrainian families who expressed a desire to participate in the study ( $n = 31$ ), a group of respondents who met the established criteria to the greatest extent was formed. Namely:

- 1) Presence of a child aged 7 to 14, whose status was established in Ukraine;
- 2) Leaving Ukraine for the Czech Republic no earlier than February 24, 2022;
- 3) Experience of visiting Ukrainian inclusive educational institutions and, accordingly, interaction with the interdisciplinary team of specialists of the inclusive resource centre;
- 4) Living in occupied or frontline regions, i.e., children with SEN having such a negative experience that significantly worsened their physical and psychological condition.

Among the features of psychophysical development were: disorders of the autistic spectrum; Down syndrome; impaired vision and hearing; delayed mental development; speech disorders; infantile cerebral palsy, and combined disorders.

The homogeneity of the sample was achieved by the fact that, firstly, all respondents selected to participate in the interview were women, and secondly, they were aged from 27 to 40 years old, and thirdly, they came from particularly dangerous regions, which slows down the return to Motherland and encourages the search for ways and means of optimising the process of integration into European society.

## Research Results

The results of our research were summarised and systematised in the following thematic blocks.

*Difficulties during the implementation of educational inclusion of a child with special educational needs.*

I. Difficulties in ensuring the opportunity for a child to study in the inclusive educational space of the Czech Republic. Most of the respondents focused their attention on this aspect to a greater or lesser extent.

“I’m tired of hearing refusals with the motivation “there are not enough places...”. “It is very difficult to find alternative options, because the schools in the nearby villages are small and there are no free places”. “They don’t take us to a comprehensive school, they persuade us to go to a special educational institution”. “My child has problems with speech development, but his intelli-

gence is preserved. In Ukraine, we studied inclusively". "I studied the topic of inclusion of children with mental disorders in Czech social networks, talked to many parents and realised that the option of a special institution prevails".

**II.** Complexities of document circulation, namely non-recognition of Ukrainian disability documents. It is evidenced by the following statements.

"The Ukrainian medical documents are not recognised, creating enormous additional difficulties in our tough life". Why does the conclusion of the Ukrainian Inclusive Resource Centre have no significance? This situation further traumatises the child, who has already suffered so much". "Why are identical documents issued in Ukraine not taken into account for children with disabilities, and the process of issuing new documents is long and complicated (one has to wait several months for each specialist's consultation)". "We have to wait a very long time for the decisions of various instances". "Precious time that could be devoted to timely social and psychological rehabilitation of the child is being lost".

**III.** Differences in ideas about the organisation of activities of educational and social institutions in Ukraine and the Czech Republic. Here are some examples.

"There exist many organisational nuances that we could not know". "The main problem is not knowing in which structures and institutions you can get the necessary help". "It is difficult to consider the differences in the medical system, because the child needs the help of several doctors simultaneously". "It is difficult to deal with many phenomena or processes that are significantly different from domestic ones, which are organised in a completely different way". "We did not expect such disagreements. Apparently, local officials also did not expect that they (disagreements) could exist".

**IV.** The specificity of the language barrier as a result of existing disorders, particularly sensory ones. For example, mothers of children with visual and hearing impairments noted the following.

"Learning the host country's language is undoubtedly important for the child's socialisation. However, in most cases, teachers use many illustrative materials, which a blind child cannot access". "Interactive whiteboards and bright textbooks are, of course, interesting, but inaccessible to a child with profound visual impairments. Courses with alternative language teaching methods are extremely difficult to find". "A student with hearing impairment cannot participate in discussions that often occur when learning the Czech language and at school lessons. Such a situation significantly reduces the child's adaptation and integration capabilities".

*It is worth noting the questions to which it was most difficult to find an answer in social inclusion and adaptation to life in new conditions. So, the most urgent*

problems for Ukrainian families (from among displaced people) raising children with SEN can be systematised in the following directions.

#### I. Lack of information in general.

How to find the necessary information? Where to get professional help? How are rehabilitation and correctional activities for children with SEN carried out? Are there counselling or resource centres where I can get advice on urgent matters? How to find the doctor's or specialist's developmental work? Where can I find a social protection consultant or an interpreter to communicate with specialists? How to get the necessary special technical means? Which public organisations' activities are aimed at protecting the interests of children with special needs?

#### II. The unusualness of the health care system.

Why is it possible to get a doctor's consultation only after a few months, since we are talking about children who have health disorders and need increased attention from doctors? How to behave in a situation when a general practitioner does not want to give a referral to a specialist (allergist, psychologist, speech therapist...)? Why is it necessary to prove the need to receive a referral for tests regularly passed in Ukraine (there are supporting documents)?

#### III. Uncertainty of social and legal status.

How to legalise the status of a child with a disability? How to certify Ukrainian documents (medical certificates, individual development programmes, etc.) or reissue similar documents in the Czech Republic? Where and how can you get the necessary technical means of rehabilitation? What social services can a person with a disability receive? Why is access to many services blocked because such a person does not have a ZTP or ZTP/P card? How to issue a ZTP/P in the Czech Republic? Why do Ukrainians with disabilities not have the same rights as residents of the European Union?

#### IV. Availability of remedial, developmental, and extracurricular classes.

Where to find centres or specialists that conduct corrective and developmental classes? How to organise meaningful leisure time for children with SEN? Where to find clubs, sports sections, art studios, etc., where can the child develop their abilities?

*Respondents' perception of the importance of interaction with specialists whose help is currently most relevant in optimising inclusive processes.*

Firstly, displaced people who raise children with SEN are interested in optimising the ways of receiving narrowly specialised medical care.

The second group of requests concerns the interaction of specialists in the special-pedagogical sphere (a speech therapist, an expert in special psychology, a psychologist, a specialist in sensory integration and behaviour correction, etc.).

The third group can conditionally combine the needs to actualise interaction with specialists who can improve social status and contribute to optimising the socialisation process of children with SEN (a social pedagogue, a social welfare consultant, etc.).

The fourth group includes specialists and institutions that would provide services for organising meaningful leisure time (extracurricular facilities where children with SEN could develop their abilities).

Finally, attention is focused on the importance of communication with public organisations that provide social support and lobby for the interests of families raising children with special educational needs.

## **Conclusions**

Thus, the following conclusions can be drawn in the research on determining the features and problems of educational and social inclusion of Ukrainian children with SEN from among those who sought temporary protection from the war in the Czech Republic using a semi-structured interview.

The peculiarities of life in a new country, which turned out to be unusual and therefore made integration in a new social environment difficult, include: differences in the organisation of the work of various social institutions compared to domestic ones (their presence was unexpected both for Ukrainian families and for officials of the Czech Republic); differences in the understanding of educational and social inclusion by local officials and the difficulty of arguing the family's own position due to the language barrier; lack of understanding the differences by representatives of educational and social institutions between the Ukrainians who moved to the Czech Republic earlier than planned and those migrants who were urgently forced to seek protection from the war – with minimal baggage of things and documents, but with a great burden of pain, suffering and losses caused by the Russian military aggression; failure to take into account the negative impact of the events of the war, which increased the existing problems of children with SEN, led to the appearance of additional disorders, reduced adaptive capabilities; stereotypes of public perception (both regarding people with special needs and Ukrainians in general) that prevent full social interaction.

The needs of Ukrainian displaced people who raise children with SEN are primarily aimed at overcoming communication, information, and socialisation barriers. Ukrainian families' efforts are concentrated on verifying the child's medical and social status; realising their right to education and communicating with their peers "on an equal footing", etc.

Among the differences in the Czech education system, which attracted the most attention from the interviewees is a complex and long process of drawing up documents that regulate the educational and social status of a “child with SEN”; adaptive study groups, which, on the one hand, facilitate educational inclusion, and on the other, represent a closed environment, separated from Czech peers; the specificity of the work of a teacher’s assistant (one person has to help several children from different classes at the same time; the fact that children who studied inclusively in Ukraine, were recommended to study in a special institution, which was perceived as limiting the child’s ability to develop social skills.

We have updated the needs for the services of specialists such as special teachers and doctors (by profile), psychologists, social psychologists, occupational therapists, specialists in psychological rehabilitation, etc. The lack of activity of local public organisations that would defend the interests of the families raising children with SEN was revealed. At the same time, families with children who have complex psychophysical disorders (comorbid conditions) or families in which several children with SEN are raised are in particularly difficult conditions.

Among the possible ways and means of optimising the process of inclusion of Ukrainian displaced people who have children with SEN, we see the following: optimisation of interaction with specialised centres or organisations that provide information and consultation, correctional and developmental and rehabilitation support; increasing the availability of information resources on important aspects of life and services needed by families with children with SEN; adaptation of educational materials in accordance with the individual characteristics of the child, especially when learning a language; implementation of meaningful leisure time, visiting extracurricular or sports facilities (in special or mixed groups); verification of Ukrainian documents regarding the status of “Person with a disability” and the acquisition of the corresponding rights (on par with citizens of European countries) that they had in Ukraine, but are now deprived of; ensuring availability of means of rehabilitation, implementation of the need for specialised technical means; development of special courses for families aimed at mastering the methods and techniques of educational influence, optimisation of interaction with the child in accordance with their individual characteristics, etc.; activation of interaction with public organisations whose activities are aimed at protecting the interests of children with SEN and disabilities; possibility of interaction and integration of efforts of Ukrainian and Czech families with related problems; creation of an advisory resource centre where such families could receive informational, psychological, correctional-rehabilitation, social-legal assistance, etc. Also, such a centre could



provide advisory assistance to teachers who work with Ukrainian children from among displaced people. We consider it expedient to involve university students and scientists in the activities of such a centre, as well as specialists from various social institutions, socially active and competent parents of children with SEN, and representatives of public organisations.

Our study does not cover all relevant issues of inclusion of Ukrainian displaced people with children with SEN. It is necessary to continue studying and comparing these aspects in different European countries. In addition, it is important to carry out further monitoring studies to track the dynamics of inclusive processes in various spheres of life. It will contribute to the formation of an effective strategy for the inclusion of Ukrainian families who raise children with special educational needs and Ukrainian people with disabilities under European values and standards.

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