



Recommended response to children from institutions in Ukraine

European Disability Forum
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Introduction

This document provides an initial rapid analysis of the situation for children in institutions in Ukraine. It is based on data provided by the Ukrainian government, as well as input from DPOs and NGOs that work with children in Ukraine, Poland and Moldova.

It is not a comprehensive analysis, but is instead a snapshot of the situation of children in institutions in Ukraine, who are at a heightened risk of severe harm. It provides recommendations to address the particular risks faced by this group of children. It is hoped this will prove a useful tool for advocacy and programming for member organisations.

This document does not focus on adults. A separate document is planned and information is currently being gathered in that regard.

Problem

In the chaos of war, unaccompanied children are amongst the most vulnerable. Although children in institutions are usually accompanied by personnel, they are in a situation of heightened risk. In the Russian invasion in 2014, orphanages were targeted by 'pro-Russian militias.' There is evidence of orphanages being targeted in this war.¹

In the early weeks of the war, evacuation, understandably, happened in an ad hoc and piecemeal way. However, the Ukrainian government has enacted a law to control and coordinate the evacuation of children from institutions.²

It is understood that the Ukrainian government and European Union are now planning a more systematic evacuation of children from institutions, with a prioritisation of those with the greatest support needs.

Current situation

Before the war, an estimated 45,000 children lived in institutions. Over 90% have living parents with whom they have a relationship. 72% have disabilities. The majority (approximately 80%) were living in residential special schools because there was no inclusive education in the community. This means they were not institutionalised because of protection concerns

¹ See for example: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/02/25/7325760/>

² The new regulations on evacuation can be found here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1no5kyvMXCS_AhEEZ5IieXIsEVcUhiVH_/view

in the family. Therefore, many could, in theory, be safely reunited with family – and the Ukrainian government has reunited more than 30,000.

An estimated 10,000 – 15,000 cannot be safely reunited with family members at this time. They require additional protection – and potentially evacuation. Local authorities and civil society have been arranging evacuations of children from institutions to other locations in Ukraine, as well as to other countries. Approximately 3,000 have already left the country. Accurate data is difficult to ascertain.³

Challenges

Before the war, there was a lack of managerial capacity and insufficient data systems in Ukraine to respond to children in institutions. Central government is attempting to coordinate the response and has put in place regulations regarding the evacuation of children from institutions. However, capacity to monitor implementation is limited. There is also insufficient capacity at government level in some receiving countries to monitor and track all the children who have already been evacuated.

There is a lack of capacity in the care systems of some receiving countries to ensure appropriate responses for children, particularly those with disabilities.

Some personnel in institutions in Ukraine have resigned to evacuate with their own families, reducing the number of personnel caring for children to dangerous levels.

Risks

As a result of the war, children from institutions are at risk of:

- Being killed or harmed in institutions under fire in Ukraine
- Being trafficked and abused
- Being adopted inappropriately outside Ukraine
- Being placed in institutions and other unsuitable environments that cannot provide adequate levels of care and support
- Losing their identities and becoming permanently separated from their families
- Suffering complex trauma.

³ Data sources. Numbers of children in institutions collected by the President's Ombudsman's Office and Lumos, accurate as of 2021. Numbers remaining in institutions who may need evacuation are based on data from the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy and extrapolations based on the demographic data on children in institutions. Government statistics can be found at: <https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/21581.html>

Additional risks for children with high support needs

Children may be placed in institutions and other facilities that are not adapted to meet their needs. There is already evidence of large groups of children placed in institutions, hotels and holiday resorts.⁴ The lack of Ukrainian personnel able to travel with children from institutions further increases the risk when they are evacuated.

There is a history of severe neglect of some children with disabilities in institutions in Ukraine. As a result, there is likely to be a significant group of children who: have spent long periods in cots or beds; are severely malnourished (children with eating and drinking difficulties); or have been routinely restrained using straitjackets, shackles or other ties. These children are at a high risk of trauma, potentially resulting in severe harm, if they are moved from the institution without preparation.

It is unlikely that all receiving countries will have sufficient expert capacity to respond with the appropriate, intensive therapeutic support these children will need when they are evacuated.

The lack of sufficient numbers of Ukrainian personnel able to travel with children from institutions further increases the risks they face when evacuated.

Broader risk factors

The resources needed to support evacuated children from institutions and foster family care could increase strain on receiving countries' child protection systems, reducing quality of care and support.

The pressure to place evacuated children – and potentially adults with disabilities – in institutions may reverse commitments made and progress on deinstitutionalisation (DI).

Protective factors

There is a strong commitment across Europe to support Ukrainian refugees and a strong desire to protect children in particular.

The EU has made additional finances available. Some of these funds should be targeted to the actions recommended below.

⁴ Data provided by DPOs and NGOs in Poland and Ukraine.

Most countries in Europe are strongly committed to DI and to ensuring family care, inclusive education and community services for children in institutions.

Recommended actions

1. Monitoring and tracking

There is a need for the rapid establishment of a joined-up international monitoring and tracking programme. This should retrospectively build a database of all evacuated children from institutions and where they have gone.

This should be established in coordination with the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy – National Social Service, as well as appropriate child protection, disability support departments and migration authorities of governments in receiving countries.

2. Strengthening child protection systems

Each receiving country should rapidly analyse the capacity of the child protection system to care for the children it has received and plan to increase capacity to take more children.

This should include establishing a therapeutic team of experts to respond to children with high support needs.

Babies and children with disabilities are at the highest risk of being harmed in an institutional environment. They should be prioritised when attempting to improve care and protection.

Countries should rapidly establish an emergency foster family programme and plan to move children carefully to foster families. These foster families should receive special training in addressing the trauma of war and the effects of institutionalisation.

Additional personnel should be hired to support children who are housed in institutions, hotels, resorts and other temporary accommodation.

Where possible, people in the Ukrainian diaspora and Ukrainian refugees with a background in health, education or social care should be hired and trained to work as carers and foster families.

With the exception of placement with blood relatives, all receiving countries should commit to ensuring that children from Ukraine will not be adopted, but will return to Ukraine when safe and possible.

3. Improving the coordination of evacuation

A mechanism should be established to prioritise, coordinate and plan evacuation from Ukraine. A team should be established on the ground in Ukraine to develop a triage system and improve the sharing of information.

Appropriate coordination partners should be identified in all the receiving countries, to ensure they can prepare appropriate accommodation and placements for children. This will include the provision of expert therapeutic support for children with high support needs who have suffered severe neglect in institutions.

Common standards and approaches for the reception and registration of children from institutions should be developed for all receiving countries. Child protection personnel should be involved in immediate reception at borders to ensure the needs of children from institutions can be met.

A programme should be established for the rapid recruitment and training of carers and foster families (with a preference for appropriately qualified Ukrainians) in the receiving countries.

4. Planning to build back better

As the Ukrainian government, the EU and other donors begin planning for post-war reconstruction, this should include prioritising the safe return of children from institutions who were evacuated.

This planning should, as far as possible, include deinstitutionalising Ukraine's care system. When planning the return of children to Ukraine post-war, the priority should be to strengthen family support, family care systems and inclusive education for the children to return to, rather than institutions.

Document credits

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