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Crossing borders in social work: Ukrainian war-affected children's needs and the social response system in Poland²

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, Kielczewska, 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 (Matuselych, 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, & Juszczuk, 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, Jaszczyńska, & 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 PESEL³ 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 Piłaszków, Warsaw, Wrocław, Nowa Sól and Włodawa participated in the study.

The sample was selected using stratified purposive sampling techniques in which NGOs working with Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland were used as strata. According to Omona (2013, p. 180), “In order to obtain a stratified purposeful sample, the sampling frame is first divided into strata; then a purposeful sample is selected from each stratum.” The researcher then sent an email requesting participation of the identified NGOs. To target respondents with rich and varied experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 1994), study participants were then selected from various frontline departments of organisations that were willing to participate in the research.

The researcher was guided by the principle of saturation in determining the size and representativeness of the sample (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, 2024). The researcher tried sampling frontline professionals in government welfare centres and rural areas. However, none of the engaged welfare centres were available for the study. The researcher analysed the unavailability of social workers for this study as key considerations for research and practice in social response systems.

Data collection, analysis and presentation

Data used in this article were collected between February and June 2024. The researcher used an interview guide to conduct in-depth interviews with respondents. According to Creswell & Creswell (1994, p. 199), in-depth interviews, “involve generally unstructured and generally few open-ended questions and are intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants.” Thematic content analysis was also used to analyse data collected from the interviews. This involved a multi-step, back-and-forth procedure of reading and organising data, deducing themes, and drawing patterns from the viewpoints of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 1994).

Since the researcher followed data saturation in determining sample properties, each of the interviews conducted specifically sought to explore and exhaust themes emerging from the data. As such, the researcher analysed data concurrently with data collection until the 8th interview failed to unlock new themes except for the remaining thematic area that could be addressed by social workers in social welfare centres. This method is supported by Bryman (2012), who argues that researchers concerned with reaching saturation sample the population, collect data, and analyse it concurrently.

Ethical considerations

The researcher ensured that:

- Respondents retained the right to informed consent, voluntary participation, and freedom to withdraw from the study at any time of the interview.

- Participants read, understood, and signed a consent form before the interviews.
- All data about the identity of participants were kept confidential to protect them and their service users.
- Verbatim cited in this article were anonymised.

Limitations of the study

Although this research provides useful insights into the Polish social response system and the pressing needs of Ukrainian children in Poland, the absence of perspectives of professional social workers from public institutions creates room for further research. Social work is a highly specialised practice and this article does not seek to downplay views from public social workers in understanding the Polish social response system. On the contrary, the article provides the other side of social work, that which has not been documented, about professions and disciplines accomplishing social work roles. This stance is particularly important because of its corrective potential to the realisation that social work does not have monopoly over addressing the social needs of service users (Weiss-Gal, 2008) especially that of foreigners in Poland. Secondly, it was necessitated by the lack of cooperation from welfare centres in the process of producing practice related knowledge. Their unavailability for the study was analysed further in this article given its implication to social work and public social response systems.

As discovered in this inquiry, welfare centres, hospitals, and schools play a pivotal role in the implementation of the Act on Assistance for Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of the Country (Special Act). Because of their absence in the current sample, this discovery could not be developed further, from the perspective of government frontline workers. This article's openness on the shortfalls of the methodology used calls for practitioners and researchers to implement the study's recommendations with the full understanding of the process behind such recommendations. It provides a baseline understanding of the response system upon which researchers can test and challenge some of this study's findings.

Research Findings

Elements of the system(s) responding to the needs of Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland

Respondents identified various systems of response consisting of NGOs, public schools, public health care institutions as mediated by the Special Act of 12 March

2022. Each of these systems was underpinned by a number of challenges which rendered them ineffective as the conflict in Ukraine dragged on. The stages of social response processes were not as exclusive as suggested by Baszczak and colleagues (2022). Below are detailed descriptions from the perspectives of frontline workers in NGOs:

Polish NGO response

All respondents indicated that Poland was characterised by numerous, uncoordinated and unstructured refugee response systems. Respondents reported that various NGOs were working independently from one another whilst public institutions also responded without any form of coordination with NGOs. To participants, NGOs provided much of the emergency response services to Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland whilst government provided statutory social protection services as stipulated by the Special Act. One respondent said:

Refugee response system in Poland is a mishmash of different services that are not structured nor coordinated. (Respondent 3)

However, respondents reflected that several NGOs, public institutions and businesses that offered support services during the first months were no longer active during the time of the study. In addition, respondents highlighted that most actors who remained provided non-specialised child support services. Another respondent explained:

We had non-government organisations, public companies, individuals, churches, and all sorts of groups providing support to Ukrainian refugees since February 2022. This changed. But no one is working intensively with Ukrainian children who settled in Poland. (Respondent 2)

Two respondents reported maintaining a referrals directory at their organisation and the rest indicated that they used personal connections to refer Ukrainian children for specialist services. To respondents, such a fluid referral mechanism left some Ukrainian service users confused as to where to get support. Respondents also indicated that NGO frontliners did not have control on ensuring that the cases they referred to public institutions were attended. The following two respondents shed the situation by saying:

Because we do not have a central referral point, many Ukrainians do not know where to obtain support even after two years of living in Poland. (Respondent 2)

As an NGO professional, I do not have the authority to make any official recommendations to public institutions that provide specialised assistance for children. (Respondent 5)

Respondents identified psychologists, case workers, multi-cultural specialists/assistants, translators, integration facilitators, and teachers as professionals working most often with Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland. It emerged that most of these frontliners were volunteering without prior training/experience in working with war-affected children. Respondents also observed that the number of volunteers was on the decline due to shrinking donor funding and burnout. The following respondents explained this as follows:

Teachers, case workers, psychologists, and cultural assistants work more closely with Ukrainian children in Poland. Most of them do it as volunteers in NGOs. (Respondent 6)

At one point we had over 70 volunteers. They would do everything, counselling, documenting Ukrainians, distributing materials, and so forth. As time went by, our volunteers became fewer and fewer due to burnout. (Respondent 3)

Respondents stated that their roles included documenting cases of war-affected children, assisting their caregivers to fill-out important forms and access social services, diverting children's attention from traumatic past, and creating opportunities for Ukrainian children and their caregivers to integrate. Respondents also reported working in various capacities depending on the case they were handling. Three respondents highlighted the following:

My role as a case worker involves listening to experiences of Ukrainian migrants, helping them fill out forms for social benefits, and finding school place for their children. (Respondent 2)

I teach at an integration school. I mainly help Ukrainian children to think of something pleasant, away from their suffering. (Respondent 7)

A big part of my work involves Ukrainian parents who ask me several questions about where they can get something. Others require accompaniment to a Ukrainian speaking doctor, and I accompany them. (Respondent 4)

The Special Act and its effect on public response systems

All respondents highlighted that the Polish government provided support to Ukrainians with a PESEL UKR status through welfare centres, public schools, clinics and hospitals. However, respondents reported that they did not have the updated information on the public social benefits available to Ukrainian children in Poland since government kept on amending the Special Act. To participants, government has been introducing strict policies regarding Ukrainians thereby making it difficult for them to integrate in Poland. Respondents were also concerned that the aftermath of the Special Act's 2-year lifespan was not clear nor predictable for Ukrainian war-affected families who settled in Poland. Two respondents explained that:

The Special Act of 12 March provides temporary protection for all Ukrainians in Poland. It guarantees all rights to social support, health, and education on the same terms with Polish children. (Respondent 1)

It is difficult to recite what is still in the Special Act for Ukrainian war-affected children because the law keeps changing. I know government provides money for schools to employ special tutors who help Ukrainian children to understand the new learning demands and many other things. (Respondent 3)

The following three responses described the precarious situation faced by Ukrainian children in Poland:

Everything looks gloomy and blurry after 30 June 2024. It's said that those who leave for Ukraine after this date will be removed from the status of UKR and will have to take a resident card. But child support will only be given to Ukrainians with UKR status. (Respondent 4)

Since 24 February 2022, Ukrainian children who came to Poland could continue learning in Ukrainian schools remotely. With the new law, from 1 September 2024, all Ukrainian children in Poland must enrol with a Polish school. (Respondent 2)

As of today, the special arrangements for Ukrainians who arrived in Poland due to the outbreak of war in Ukraine have been extended until 30 June 2024. This solution presents the problem of temporariness and having to live out of a suitcase. The children do not have any stability. (Respondent 8)

Respondents further revealed that the Special Act had no binding effect on NGOs' work with Ukrainian war-affected children. As a result, respondents professed that they rarely relate to it. Only one of the respondents indicated that their work was regulated by the Special Act. One respondent stated that:

Accommodation with food is the only obligation incumbent on us as a contracting party in terms of Article 12(10) of the Special Act. (Respondent 8)

The following two responses illustrated the disconnection between the Special Act and NGOs working with Ukrainian children in Poland:

The Special Act does not have any impact on our work as a centre because we are not dependent on government. (Respondent 7)

As a case worker, I do not use the Special Act in my work. I only need to know the Polish context, how different public institutions work, how to access social centres, or schools, and you do not find this in the Special Act. (Respondent 2)

Public schools' reaction

All respondents identified public schools as key implementers of the Special Act. It emerged that the Special Act allows Ukrainian children in Polish public schools on the condition that they attend extra hours learning Polish. Participants also

indicated that the Special Act provides that teachers, multi-cultural assistants and psychologists assist Ukrainian children in schools. However, Polish public schools were reportedly experiencing challenges that reduced children's access to quality education. Among the challenges observed by respondents were shortage of Ukrainian speaking teachers, limited places for Ukrainian children and unrealistic policy targets. A respondent commented:

We have an old educational system which was not designed for large numbers of Ukrainian children. They are coming from the war, and our teachers are not prepared for that. (Respondent 2)

Similarly, another respondent decried:

Where regulations said we should have 20–25 students in class, we had 28–35 children and all of them were Ukrainians. (Respondent 4)

The general view was that the Polish educational system in many aspects was not prepared to accommodate Ukrainian children. Respondents pointed out frustrating enrolment requirements, curriculum differences, and unclear expectations from Polish teachers. For example, in Wroclaw, a respondent observed that for children from occupied Ukrainian cities it took longer to be accepted in Polish schools because they did not have certificates from their schools. Three of the respondents commented on the difficulties they were facing:

There are few places for Ukrainian children in Wroclaw. We only have one school for children with special educational needs and disabilities. Other schools have one or two places in each class, but then it draws the attention of all children. (Respondent 4)

There is a lot of negative feedback from Ukrainian parents regarding how teachers handle their children in schools. Polish teachers do not understand the situation they are working in. (Respondent 1)

It is difficult for Ukrainian children to go to Polish schools or lyceum where they are taught in Polish. (Respondent 6)

It also emerged that government of Poland had introduced a new educational policy which would have made it compulsory for Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland to enrol in Polish schools. According to respondents, the new policy was going to be implemented from 1 September 2024 even though Polish teachers were not ready for such diverse classes. Participants were convinced that government's failure to address systemic and administrative educational challenges (discussed above) before introducing the new policy would further disadvantage Ukrainian children, especially those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Two respondents outlined the following challenges in relation to the new policy:

It is difficult to secure a place for children with disabilities in public schools in Warsaw. Applications open in spring, and one must produce a Certificate of Disability for the child in question. It is expensive to apply for this certificate or pay for official translation of the certificate and other required documents. This might worsen if the new educational policy is implemented. (Respondent 2)

The new educational policy will force children to return to Ukraine after being frustrated by the lack of Ukrainian teachers, books and differences in curriculum. (Respondent 6)

Another respondent went on to a recommendation:

Government should revise the new educational policy because teachers are not yet prepared for diverse classes. Government should hire more Ukrainian teachers by removing obstacles for Ukrainians to teach in Polish schools. (Respondent 3)

Public hospitals and clinics' services

All respondents indicated that public hospitals and clinics play a pivotal role in the implementation of the Special Act. Respondents pointed out that Ukrainian war-affected children were eligible for free health care services in terms of the Special Act. However, six respondents emphasised that waiting lists for consulting public specialists such as children's cardiologists, children's psychologists or children's psychiatrists were too long, even for Poles. To respondents, this made it difficult for Ukrainian children to access specialised health care support given their already disadvantaged position. Respondents further reported that absence of interpreters in public health care institutions in Warsaw, Wrocław, Nowa Sól and Włodawa was a significant hindrance to quality health care services for Ukrainians in Poland. Two respondents described the situation as follows:

It can take up to 5 months on waiting list for you to see a child cardiologist in public institutions. Booking a private child cardiologist is expensive. It is difficult to find a public child specialist who can speak Ukrainian. (Respondent 2)

I once had a service user who repeated the same medical test twice in 6 months and obtained the same results. She was supposed to undergo corrective surgery immediately after the first test but no one at the hospital had explained it to her. None of the hospital staff attending to her could speak Ukrainian. (Respondent 4)

Impact and dynamics of Polish response systems

There was a general consensus among respondents that the support from various response systems had different impact on Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland right from the start of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. However, respondents

could not pinpoint when all the systems started to tapper. It could be deduced that NGO systems started collapsing due to shortage in funding and gradual decline in the number of volunteers as highlighted above.

Participants were still providing material support and information on available social and legal services which Ukrainian war-affected children required upon arrival in Poland. However, respondents believed that these needs long evolved into more complex needs. Respondent 6 explained:

Organisations provide almost everything, information, transport, free accommodation, food, clothes, money. Ukrainian children's needs are now complicated. The situation requires us to work more intensively with Ukrainian children and families who settled here.

Psychological needs

Respondents were of the view that Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland now require specialised trauma support to help them deal with the psychological stress of surviving the war and adapting to a new country. Respondents felt that psychological support was not prioritised during early days of the armed conflict. Consequently, Ukrainian children were reportedly depressed, withdrawn, abusing substances and resorting to violence as they tried to cope with unresolved traumatic experiences. Respondents were also concerned that children's recovery process was further compounded by the scarcity of children's psychologists in Poland and parents who withheld sensitive information about their children during therapy. Only two NGOs reported having qualified psychologists and counsellors who provided professional therapy to Ukrainian children. Respondent 8 shared how their organisation failed an unaccompanied Ukrainian child who lived in their shelter for 2 years, without talking to anyone in the shelter. The child returned to Ukraine without informing anyone. Respondent 7 said:

More psychological support is needed for Ukrainian children, especially those who witnessed bombings and people's remains. No one works with them psychologically. We are trying to, without competence.

Similarly, two respondents shared how professional intervention was undermined by accompanying adults:

Even if a mother brings a child [for therapy], some of them do not say that the child saw her father being killed. (Respondent 4)

We would recommend seeing a psychologist during early days, but most parents would not attend their sessions. Now, most Ukrainian teenagers are withdrawn, they abuse substances and in most cases their mothers are also depressed. (Respondent 1)

Respondents shared that the provision of specialised psychological support was further strained by the difficulties in finding a trauma specialist who can speak Ukrainian. Participants believed that this was caused by the fact that Poland does not recognise Ukrainian diplomas and requirements for a Ukrainian psychologist to practise in Poland were difficult to meet. In addition, respondents observed that Poland had not yet availed facilities for Ukrainians to receive specialised psychological support as stipulated in the Special Act.

Respondent 8 indicated:

There is also a shortage of social workers dedicated to work with Ukrainian refugees in distress, bereavement and traumatic experiences such as caring for the sick and persons with disabilities.

Another respondent added:

Ukrainian psychologists are required to go through a process of diploma certification before practising in Poland. The process is not easy to complete. The Special Act allows Polish Psychologists to work with Ukrainian children in special centres. But there are no such centres yet. (Respondent 5)

The need for security with the family

All respondents believed that Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland longed to live with their families, in private and peace. Respondents reported witnessing a complex feeling of insecurity and trauma among Ukrainian children in shelters and school. Illustrating this trauma-security complexity, respondent 7 recited how Ukrainian children in her centre would hide under the table after hearing a fire alarm, fearing that their centre was being bombed.

Respondent 1 highlighted:

Ukrainian children are now tired of fearing for the lives of their fathers and brothers who stayed behind, fighting. They want to go home.

Similarly, another respondent added:

They need a place where they can live and sleep peacefully. Where I worked before, people lived in big rooms, with beds arranged next to one another, without any possibility for children to be alone, with family. (Respondent 5)

The need for meaningful integration

The need for integration support for Ukrainian war-affected children, their families, and the broader Polish society emerged high. Respondents indicated that promoting cohesion in schools, ending violence between Polish and Ukrainian

children, and introducing a national integration policy would help integrating Ukrainian war-refugees in Poland. Participants reported facilitating extra-curriculum classes and group camping activities with Ukrainian and Polish children in which Ukrainian children remained withdrawn and disinterested. This made respondents believe that enacting a legal framework in Poland would be instrumental in ending divisive information shared by adult Poles about Ukrainians and vice versa.

Two respondents reported:

In class, Ukrainian kids sit with Ukrainian friends since they share the same language and common experiences. This can be resolved with better integration support between Poles and Ukrainians. (Respondent 3)

Poland needs regulated integration, with more extracurricular activities such as sports, supporting talents, creating as many opportunities as possible for the individual development of the child. (Respondent 8)

Only one respondent reported that Poland had accomplished a lot in integrating Ukrainian war-affected children. The respondent highlighted:

A lot has been done and is still being done to actively integrate forced migrants from Ukraine, in particular children, into the Polish society. (Respondent 5)

The need for a coordinating mechanism

Respondents also felt that both government and NGO response systems need to be structured and coordinated. Participants reiterated that coordination would ensure that the needs of Ukrainian children are professionally, ethically and effectively addressed. Respondents believed that the coordinating mechanism should be representative of diverse response providers. Participants believed that such a mechanism would disseminate information on available support services, harmonise response interventions, organise response clusters, concentrate financial and human resources towards critical needs, identify geographical areas and social groups that were under-serviced, and avoid double dipping. A participant recommended that:

Polish NGOs and government institutions need to be structured and coordinated. This will help concentrating funds and expertise on key areas of need. (Respondent 3)

Discussion and Recommendations

The study confirms that response systems go through different phases requiring specific interventions (Baszczak et al., 2022). However, based on the findings,

such categorisation of social response phases is not an easy task, especially for frontline professionals. Data illustrated that before the introduction of the Act on 12 March 2022, response was massive, spontaneous and driven by NGOs and diverse players. Nevertheless, this phase faded into a period when the central government of Poland, local authorities and NGOs took the centre stage in the Polish response system; albeit with loose coordination. This phase comes out clearly as the period when the Special Act was set to expire on 30 September 2024 as opposed to adaptation or integration phase. Similarly, data show that as of June 2024, these actors had been overtaken by a new set of long-term adaptation and integration needs. Baszczak et al. (2022) foretell that during this phase, central government and local authorities should take a lead role in providing social response services. This study established that central government and local authorities need to collaborate with NGOs, which, in their diversity and long experience in supporting Ukrainian war-affected children can enhance the response systems in the future.

Professional social workers are invisible in the Polish response system (Necel, 2024). Most of the NGOs that participated did not have professional social workers. Although the Special Act is administered by welfare centres in different districts, the invisibility of professional social workers advances the neo-liberal thinking that public social services remain a receding goal (Lipsky, 2010) only achievable through private means (Bourdieu, 2002). This reflects critically on social work in Poland given the invisibility of its role, complex needs and programmatic gaps discovered by this study.

Whereas professional social workers in social welfare centres were not available for the study, a few lessons for research and practice can be deduced from the following scenarios:

Scenario 1: Social workers in the welfare centres were not comfortable discussing practice related issues in English. This scenario has a high probability of being true given that most of the potential interviewees that the researcher encountered during data collection preferred being interviewed in Polish, Ukrainian or Russian. This scenario presents an insignificant negative impact on the credibility, authenticity, and confirmability of the study findings since most of the interviews were conducted with the help of translators. It only made the researcher unearth unexplored views of diverse actors in the response system. The most important thing is that the views of NGO frontline workers were not misattributed to the views of social workers in social welfare centres. Rather, the absence of professional social workers' perspectives on welfare centres exposed gaps that can be perceived as institutional borders which Ukrainian children have to cross when they enter the Polish social response system. The knowledge, experience and reflections from

NGO frontline workers can therefore be utilised as a foundation for strengthening seamless collaborations, multi-disciplinary and inter-agency collaborations that transcend the divide between NGOs, welfare centres and other public institutions in Poland. This scenario is supported by pragmatic epistemological beliefs that there are multiple sources of making sense of the world and none of them are superior than the other (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Scenario 2: Professional social workers did not see the value of participating in an academic research about their work with Ukrainian war-affected children. Most social workers are not research-minded and therefore feel threatened by research (Uggerhøj, 2014). It may also be possible that as public institutions, social welfare centres were concerned that they may not have answers regarding the future of the Special Act. They might have been intimidated by the fact that they lacked appropriate tools and competencies for handling cases of Ukrainian children as discovered by Necel (2024). If this scenario is true, its negative impact on the study findings is low, particularly on how social work has been ineffective in addressing the needs of Ukrainian war-affected children identified by NGOs in Poland.

It also implies that there is a great need for social workers in Poland to learn and co-produce tools for working with Ukrainian refugee children, NGOs, schools and health care institutions in Poland. Thus, future studies should focus heavily on practice research as a way of enhancing the participation of social workers and other bureaucrats in public institutions. According to Uggerhøj, Henriksen and Andersen (2018), practice research is an emerging social work strategy to research which builds practice enhancing knowledge using standards of academic research. It is done in a collaborative and negotiated process involving service users, street-level bureaucrats, managers and policy makers (Joubett & Webber, 2020). Reasons for proposing this collaborative knowledge production process include reducing the general disinterest in studies that end up changing little on practice and policy. Thus by adopting such a participatory approach, researchers stand a chance to enhance research utilisation beyond academics. Professional social workers in Poland have a lot to learn from NGO practitioners whom Necel (2024) reported as the most active response workers in promoting integration and community cohesion work. Likewise, as data show, social workers as custodians of the Special Act of 12 March can educate NGO practitioners a lot about the Act and important methods of ethical practice with service users.

Non-social work professionals in NGOs should be applauded for bridging such gaps in the Polish response systems. Their urgency and agency to alleviate suffering, safeguard the rights, dignity, and worthy of Ukrainian war-affected groups

(IFSW & IASSW, 2014) lay a foundation for impactful multidisciplinary approach to the needs of Ukrainian children in Poland. Social work in Poland can capitalise on such numbers and diversity to reach Ukrainian war-affected children who are already working with various NGOs. It is important that the professions in Poland cross the proverbial borders between welfare centres, schools, hospitals and non-governmental organisations. In fact, Article 14 of the General Comments (2017) recommends that multi-disciplinary actors in states receiving child refugees be empowered to make professional judgments, refer cases and act diligently in their work with migrant children.

As shown by data, most response services for war-affected children in Poland are offered by numerous NGOs in a non-coordinated manner (Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022). The spontaneity, flexibility and numerical advantage of response providers helped addressing children's basic needs whilst state welfare institutions pursued social services prescribed by the Special Act (Baszczak, et al, 2022; Bourdieu, 2002; Lipsky, 2010;). Without coordination and supervision from welfare centres, Ukrainian children are prone to receiving sub-standard support or being left out by different response providers. Article 18 of General Comments (Number 23) to Article 22 instructs state parties to promote inter-institutional collaborations for meeting diverse educational, protection, health and justice needs of children and their families in host countries (General Comment, 2017). Promoting partnerships and coordination between different NGOs and public institutions especially hospitals, schools, and welfare centres is pivotal in enhancing the response system in Poland. Further research with Ukrainian children, social workers, teachers and health care workers can also help enhancing their performance.

As observed, Ukrainian war-affected children have equal access to public schools and hospitals in Poland today. This is commendable since Articles 9, 22 and 25 of the General Comments to Article 22 reiterate that state parties should ensure equality between child refugees and native children (General Comment, 2017). Thus, Polish government put into practice Articles 28 and 29 of the CRC which provide for children's right to education and the right to health and healthcare as stipulated in Articles 23 and 24 of the CRC (CRC, 1989). However, as illustrated by data, it is difficult for Ukrainian children to fully enjoy these rights in Poland due to administrative and structural injustices.

Such a mismatch between social policy and actual situations on the ground, as discovered by this study, remains a worrisome hallmark of public social services (Bourdieu, 2002; Lipsky, 2010). It weakens social work's fight against discrimination and inequality (IFSW & IASSW, 2014). This calls for social response systems that provide for subsistence needs of Ukrainian war-affected children whilst agitating

for overhaul of the education, health and welfare systems in Poland. This should be viewed together with the need for social response systems that are flexible enough to attend to individual survival needs, family adaptation and community integration needs all at the same time.

Conclusions

Although this study was based on perspectives from NGO frontline workers, it concluded that the response system in Poland is driven by numerous uncoordinated NGOs that work mostly with non-trained workers to facilitate social work roles. State response systems, on the other hand, implemented mainly by public schools, hospitals and clinics are constantly changing due to changes in the Special Act. Social welfare centres were pitched as institutions that are not easily accessible with NGOs and there is a great need for social welfare centres to reflect and address this.

The study discovered that dominant response systems have since been overtaken by the need for specialised trauma intervention, security with family, meaningful integration and coordination. Whilst data showed a change in social response services over time, it was difficult for respondents to categorise their responses within specific timelines or phases of response. As such, a practice-oriented study with Ukrainian war-affected children, professional social workers and other professionals in public institutions remains pivotal in improving social work's response to Ukrainian war-affected children in Poland. In addition, the data illustrate that greater central government intervention is now more necessary than ever to support integration. Ukrainian war-affected children and their caregivers now struggle with adaptation and long-term social needs as opposed to when they required subsistence support.

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