

What happened to Ukrainian children in care who fled to Poland?

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1,400 children and orphans fled Ukraine with the help of a Polish charity. This is their story

Help for Ukrainian refugees comes in many shapes in Poland. Right now, two young women are filling out dozens of forms for dental care for some of the 1,400 children that Happy Kids, a Polish charity, helped evacuate from care homes in Ukraine. The charity coordinated the evacuation with the Ukrainian government and collected frightened kids from the border.

Standards of care in Ukrainian institutions are so low that many of these children had never seen a dentist before. Of the 40 children evacuated to Łódź and housed in two ex-orphanages, every single one needed dental fillings - 258 cavities in total.

Before the war, Ukraine had the highest number of children (three-to 18-year-olds) in residential care institutions such as boarding schools and orphanages in Europe: more than 90,000. Nearly half of them have physical and/or mental disabilities, according to UNICEF Ukraine.

As orphans or in care due to parental illness, neglect or abuse, these children are vulnerable. Some display alarming signs of underdevelopment, looking many years younger than their actual age.

Ukraine's orphanage and care system is reportedly disciplinarian and underfunded, with children living in large groups of up to 120, of mixed ages. Corporal punishment is still common.

The Polish care system, on the other hand, has gone through major reforms in the past decade, abolishing large institutions and implementing a kinder, more child-centred approach, with strict limits of 12 children per group.

“It’s much better for me here - I want to stay in Poland”

- Sofia, 13

UNICEF wants to see these steps implemented worldwide. UNICEF Ukraine told openDemocracy that “no child, at any age, should be in a large institution” and that “there is overwhelming scientific evidence that placing children under three years of age in any form of institution is harmful for their development”.

Regarding dental care, UNICEF Ukraine said that while it is theoretically available in Ukrainian childcare institutions, after inspections they conducted “it became evident that some institutions require improved access and better quality of medical care”.

More resources, training and trips

One of the women filling out the dental care forms is Tatiana Fomenko, a Ukrainian child psychologist.

“On an official level there is little difference between institutions in Poland and Ukraine, but in practice you have an old-fashioned system [in Ukraine]. They work with a strong hand,” she said.

Fomenko was glad the children had left Ukraine: “Even though it’s because of a war, I’m happy the children have come here.”

Many of the children feel the same way, and want to stay in Poland. But some are only in care temporarily; they are still in contact with family members and hope to be reunited with them as soon as possible.

Łódź’s towering orphanage buildings, with iron bars on the windows and rusty swings in the garden, had been abandoned as a relic of a bygone era until Russia’s war against Ukraine brought them new life. Almost all the children staying in them come from an institution outside Kyiv that they call simply “the centre”, which had to be evacuated when the Russian started dropping missiles.

“It’s much better for me here - I want to stay here,” says 13-year-old Sofia, “I didn’t like being in the centre - it wasn’t like a home at all. I like the place here; even the school is better than in Ukraine.” Svetlana, 16, agrees. “In the centre, they didn’t show love, like they show here. In Ukraine, we were always being watched by the carers,” she said.

“We have more time for leisure and learning. When we want to go out, we just tell someone, sign the book and go out”

What’s remarkable is that, though the quality of care seems to be much higher in Poland, many of the caregivers are the same as before - they came with the children from Ukraine.

Many of the problems in Ukrainian institutions were caused by sheer lack of resources - one carer might have to look after 20 children aged between three and 16, an impossible task.

Now they have more resources and new training, thanks to Tomasz Polkowski, a pedagogue who runs the two care homes in Łódź and who helped lead reforms in the Polish care system. Polkowski had just moved from Warsaw to the coast and was in semi-retirement when a director of Happy Kids asked for his help in getting the children settled.

“When they arrived, the Ukrainian caregivers were like guards, soldiers, you know - the typical old Soviet approach, a lot of shouting,” said Polkowski.

Now the carers talk to the children one-to-one, praising them and asking for their opinions. For many of the children, this new-found respect was a welcome surprise. The carers also hold weekly meetings to discuss the needs of the children - they didn’t have time for this in Ukraine. Sitting in a circle, they name-check one girl for her kindness to others, then mention another child who has been having difficulties and plan the best way to work with them.

Valentina, a carer for the group with disabilities, praises the extra support she has received in the form of developmental aids and toys. She’s already seen a difference in the children’s behaviour. “They are doing what they couldn’t do in Ukraine. They couldn’t wash the dishes there, and they would just leave their dirty clothes on the floor rather than washing them themselves.”

Polkowski and the carers go to extraordinary lengths to make the children feel welcome and stimulated, helped by the goodwill and generosity of Polish society towards their neighbours.

As well as a four-hour round trip to Warsaw to take the children to a concert by Ukrainian musicians, and other outings to zoos and football tournaments, they granted one girl a very special request. While her classmates say they want to be bakers or army generals, she had always dreamed of making sausages. Polkowski organised a visit to the local catering college, where she was taught to make Polish kielbasa sausages. She made 300, which were taken back to the care homes and devoured by the children.

Svetlana relishes her new-found freedom and being with her own age group. "We are separated from the small ones and it's good, because we can use our time for ourselves. We have more time for leisure and learning. When we want to go out, we just tell someone, sign the book and go out."

Controversy over children's rights

But the separation of Ukrainian children in care into age groups hasn't happened everywhere in Poland, or other countries. In fact, the Ukrainian government has tried to stop it with a 'Memorandum of Understanding' (MOU) that prevents the groups of children from being split up.

On the one hand, this makes sense. Large numbers of vulnerable children fleeing war could be a target for human traffickers, and keeping the children together is a strategy to prevent this. But it also keeps children in large groups of mixed ages, which could be a recipe for abuse.

And the MOU could mean that children who want to stay in Poland, can't.

Anna Krawczak, a researcher from Polish charity Coalition for Family Foster Care, which has helped settle Ukrainian orphans with foster families, sees this as a violation of children's rights. "More than half said they don't want to go back to Ukraine if the war ends," she said.

She points to the [UN convention](#) on children's rights, which governs UNICEF's work. The convention, Krawczak says, suggests that "we should listen to children's needs, consider their ideas and act in accordance with that, if they are reasonable".

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Krawczak said that for the children it would be eminently "reasonable" to stay somewhere they get a better quality of care. Some of the developmental changes seen in the children have been dramatic. One boy reportedly put on eight kilos in the three months since arriving, and is now eight centimetres taller.

Krawczak also sees it as a priority that children under ten are not kept in institutions at all, but placed in foster families - as is mandatory under normal circumstances in Poland. "We have Polish foster parents who are keen to host Ukrainian children, but they aren't allowed to, so we have to put two-year-olds in institutions," she said.

UNICEF Ukraine, which assisted with drawing up the MOU, said the document is designed to monitor childcare and childcare protection, given the risks of family separation, abuse and exploitation.

"The aim is to ensure that the best interests of the child are respected and that the rights of all children in alternative childcare are protected," said a UNICEF Ukraine spokesperson.

UNICEF Ukraine said it was partnering with municipalities in Poland to support the development of alternative care options, which would allow it to make best interest decisions for children, including

placing the evacuated children into smaller, family-type facilities.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy did not respond to our request for comment.

Note: the author received permission to interview children under the age of 18 from their carers.

James Jackson

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