Russia's war on Ukraine: People with disabilities

More than 8 months into Russia’s war on Ukraine, there is no end in sight. The invasion has forced millions of people to flee Ukraine or seek refuge in other parts of the country, causing a European humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions. The chaos created by the conflict has increased the risk of violence and exploitation exponentially, especially for the most vulnerable people, such as those with disabilities. Estimates show that around 2.7 million people with disabilities in Ukraine face a disproportionate risk of violence or death, and lack access to medical support; this number will most likely increase as the conflict goes on. Since the war began, the European Parliament has been drawing attention to the needs of people with disabilities.

The humanitarian situation of people fleeing or being displaced within Ukraine

As of 8 November 2022, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated that over 7.8 million people had fled from Ukraine to neighbouring countries since the start of the conflict; more than 4.6 million of them had registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes in Europe. As of 14 November, 16,631 civilian casualties (6,557 killed and 10,074 injured) were recorded in Ukraine, though the figures could be higher owing to the ongoing hostilities and ensuing difficulties in reporting. The raging conflict keeps increasing the numbers of casualties and the extent of the destruction and displacement within Ukraine, thus causing one of the greatest European humanitarian crises of recent times.

Specific risks facing Ukrainians with disabilities in times of conflict

People with disabilities (PWDs) in Ukraine were already extremely vulnerable prior to the Russian invasion. Taking this into account, the European Commission's 2021-2027 action plan on integration and inclusion mentioned that migrants with disabilities may face discrimination. It stressed the special educational needs of children with disabilities and also pointed to the difficulties migrants with disabilities face in accessing the labour market. During armed conflicts, the needs and vulnerabilities of PWDs are amplified, as is the risk of discrimination towards them. The war in Ukraine is no exception: the mass displacement and chaos triggered by the conflict have raised serious concerns about violations of human rights inside and outside the country, in particular those of vulnerable people, such as women, children, LGBTI people, Roma and PWDs. In April 2022, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) warned that 2.7 million PWDs in Ukraine were at risk of being abandoned in their homes or in residential care, with 'no access to life-sustaining medications, oxygen supplies, food, water, sanitation, support for daily living and other basic facilities'. June 2022 estimates show that more than 143,000 PWDs have been displaced since the outbreak of the war.

Furthermore, the conflict has exposed PWDs to a disproportionate risk of death or injury and hampered their access to emergency information. PWDs often have no way to reach shelters or safe places, and because of mass displacement they have been disconnected from their support networks. The UN 'Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 1 February to 31 July 2022' pointed to a lack of access to bomb shelters, evacuation trains, necessary medication and adequate housing suited to their needs for PWDs. Another UN report stressed that Ukrainian children 'with visual, hearing, developmental or intellectual disabilities' are at higher risk of danger because 'they may not have learned about or understood what was happening' or were removed from or abandoned in their institutions without appropriate support. Non-governmental organisation (NGO) Inclusion Europe reported that before the war, around 261,000 people in Ukraine had disability status due to intellectual and psychosocial disorders. The sirens, explosions and alarms, in addition to the bombing and shelling, have caused them stress, depression and anxiety, in some cases exacerbating their chronic disease. Moreover, Inclusion Europe points to the difficulty such people face in accessing medical services, psychological assistance and psychiatric care, and to the fact that autistic people cannot stay in overcrowded bomb shelters.
Similarly, the World Economic Forum stresses that PWDs are facing a 'crisis within a crisis' not only because civilian infrastructures, including hospitals and residential care facilities, are under shelling but also because people in wheelchairs or who are visually or otherwise impaired are facing unprecedented challenges in trying to escape the hostilities. This is why the NGO Humanity and Inclusion has highlighted the urgent need to ensure that the specific needs of PWDs are identified and taken into account in humanitarian measures. Likewise, UN experts call for urgent action to protect Ukrainian children with disabilities in residential care institutions'. Stakeholders, such as the European Disability Forum and the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), are also closely monitoring the situation of PWDs who are in Ukraine or have fled the country.

International and European Union initiatives
A September 2022 UNCRPD report on the situation of PWDs in Ukraine points to states’ obligations regarding PWDs in the context of armed conflict. It refers to Article 11 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which requires states parties to ensure the inclusion of PWDs when meeting their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian and human rights law. At the time of writing, there were 185 states parties to the convention; it was ratified by both Russia (2012) and Ukraine (2010).

Since the war began, the EU has activated its Temporary Protection Directive, coordinated the largest EU Civil Protection Mechanism operation to date and stepped up its financial assistance to Ukraine (the EU and its Member States have disbursed €1.4 billion in humanitarian aid to Ukraine since 2014). The EU has also arranged for the cohesion funds to be used to help Member States welcome fleeing Ukrainians. In March 2022, a Commission communication on welcoming those fleeing war in Ukraine stressed the need to pay particular attention to vulnerable categories, including children with special needs or disabilities and PWDs in general. It pointed out that the European Social Fund Plus can support community-based services and accommodation, especially for those with special needs or disabilities, and also for children and the elderly.

This year, the Commission, together with the European Disability Forum, is organising the annual conference to mark the European Day of Persons with Disabilities. The conference will focus on: issues faced by young people with disabilities; the international instruments available in support of PWDs; and the escalation of violence in Ukraine, which has affected PWDs particularly badly. In line with EU operational guidance on the inclusion of PWDs in EU humanitarian aid, the needs of PWDs are mainstreamed in EU actions to foster a disability-inclusive humanitarian response. Similarly, EU-funded projects in Ukraine, run by partners such as Humanity and Inclusion and the World Health Organization, target and prioritise PWDs in terms of protection, psychosocial support, hygiene, health and shelter.

The European Parliament’s position
In its resolution of 1 March 2022, Parliament recalled that 'attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure as well as indiscriminate attacks are prohibited under international humanitarian law and therefore constitute war crimes'. It called on the Commission, EU Member States and UN agencies to offer humanitarian assistance to the civilian population. Parliament stressed the needs of 'vulnerable groups, minorities, and women and children, since they are particularly affected in conflict situations and need special protection and support, in particular children in institutional care, unaccompanied children, and children with disabilities and other serious illnesses' and highlighted the need to 'ensure that they continue to receive the necessary care and life-saving treatment and are immediately evacuated to safety'. In its resolution of 19 May 2022, Parliament called for the promotion of mechanisms to relocate refugees among the Member States, including fast coordinated transportation of refugees, in particular unaccompanied children and children with disabilities. Members reiterated their concern about PWDs in a resolution of 19 May 2022, underlining the importance of offering specialised protection and care to PWDs coming from Ukraine, and a resolution of September 2022 calling on Member States to 'address the plight of vulnerable groups, including ... people with disabilities in EU public statements about forcible transfers, and to support activists and NGOs on the ground who are trying to take care of them and facilitate their safe return'.

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