

Navigating forced migration in the EU: challenges for families with disabled children affected by the Russo-Ukrainian war

 Olha Stoliaryk ^a ,  Tetyana Semigina ^b

^a Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine; ^b National Qualifications Agency, Ukraine

Abstract

This paper examines the challenges faced by migrant families raising children with disabilities during the Russo-Ukrainian War and subsequent mass migration to European Union countries. Drawing on critical refugee studies, critical disability studies, and resilience theory, the study explores the intersecting factors influencing their experiences. Findings from interviews with 30 respondents relocated to 6 countries (the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, and Poland) reveal significant barriers to accessing essential services, navigating bureaucratic processes, and adapting to new environments. Despite these challenges, families exhibit remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. Recommendations include enhancing support systems, promoting dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, and defining mechanisms for responsibility sharing among EU countries. The study underscores the urgent need for inclusive policies and robust support structures to address the unique needs of migrant families raising children with disabilities in forced migration contexts.

Keywords: forced migration, Ukrainian refugees, children with disabilities, inclusive policies, support systems.

Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, its territorial occupation, and incidents of extremist violence perpetrated by Russian aggressors have led to a mass exodus of Ukrainian citizens to European countries, driven by the immediate threat to the lives and safety of Ukrainians. As of November 2023, the number of Ukrainian refugees had reached nearly 3.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within their own borders and approximately 6.3 million who migrated abroad (with 5.94 million heading to Europe alone) (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023).

European Union (EU) countries, which initially received the first wave of Ukrainian refugees, were unprepared for the spontaneous mass migration and encountered numerous challenges. Consequently, shortly after the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion, recognizing the shortcomings in migration regulation, the EU

 Olha Stoliaryk, Associate Professor, Department of Social Pedagogy and Social Work, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv Ukraine; e-mail: olgastolarik4@gmail.com

Commission activated the temporary protection directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC), an EU emergency scheme used in exceptional circumstances of a mass influx to provide immediate and collective protection to displaced persons and to reduce pressure on the national asylum systems of EU countries. The directive aims to mitigate the risks that EU asylum systems will be unable to provide timely support to all migrants, thereby affecting the effectiveness of national processes in upholding the rights of those seeking international protection. It outlines the obligations of member states regarding the reception and residence conditions of individuals benefiting from temporary protection during mass migration, emphasizing their fairness and international human rights, while avoiding instances of discrimination. Temporary protection does not preclude recognition of refugee status under the Geneva Convention. According to the Directive, Ukrainian citizens, as well as stateless persons legally residing in Ukraine and displaced due to the Russian-Ukrainian war, are entitled to protection throughout the European Union.

Consequently, the documents provide a streamlined entry procedure into the destination country, flexibility at border crossings, access to humanitarian aid and crisis services, rights to residence, access to the labor market, social and medical assistance, means of subsistence, and availability of education for children. The directive also delineates the boundaries of solidarity and the distribution of responsibility zones to balance efforts among EU member states in accommodating displaced persons from Ukraine. In particular, the “Solidarity Platform” (European Commission, 2020) has been established, allowing member states to exchange information on their capacity to jointly receive refugees with the EU Asylum Agency, Europol, UNHCR, IOM, and other stakeholders. Through collaborative efforts, the EU has developed a Migration and Crisis Preparedness Plan, encompassing measures to enhance the readiness of refugee protection systems in EU countries, manage them effectively, and respond promptly to challenges associated with mass migration (Guild & Groenendijk, 2023).

A separate section of the directive is dedicated to protecting the rights of child refugees, ensuring that children are guaranteed prompt access to their rights, including the provision of necessary psychosocial support, medical and educational services. It identifies children with disabilities and functional health limitations as a category requiring special attention and support. It is worth noting that addressing this issue is of concern to the Council of Europe. This is also confirmed by one of the new priorities of the Council of Europe (2022), which emphasizes the need to ensure the guarantee and protection of children’s rights in crisis and emergency situations, including climate change and natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Alongside existing studies demonstrating the imperfections of the refugee social protection system, particularly for vulnerable categories (Duszczuk et al., 2023; Meyers et al., 2023), it is crucial to examine the migration and adaptation experiences in EU countries of migrants raising children with disabilities or health

impairments, and the associated risks. This examination is essential for several reasons.

Firstly, by scrutinizing the experiences of migrant families with disabled children, we can identify the specific vulnerabilities they face in the migration process and during their integration into host communities. Understanding these vulnerabilities is critical for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to address the unique needs of this population.

Secondly, insights gained from studying the challenges and successes of these families can inform the development of more inclusive and effective policies and support mechanisms for migrants with disabilities in EU countries. By understanding the barriers, they encounter and the strategies they employ to overcome them, policymakers can design interventions that promote social inclusion and facilitate access to essential services and opportunities.

Moreover, understanding the unique experiences and needs of migrant families with disabled children can contribute to fostering greater social inclusion and equity within host communities. By raising awareness of the challenges faced by these families and promoting empathy and understanding among local populations, we can work towards creating more supportive and inclusive environments for all members of society.

The hypothesis of this study is that migrant families raising children with disabilities who have been forced to relocate to European countries due to the Russo-Ukrainian war demonstrate varying degrees of resilience in coping with the challenges of displacement, integration, and cultural adaptation. This resilience is influenced by factors such as social support networks, access to resources, and individual and familial coping strategies.

The paper is structured as follows. The theoretical framework section provides an overview of Critical Refugee Studies, Critical Disability Studies, and Resilience Theory used to analyse the experiences of migrant families raising children with disabilities in the context of forced migration to the EU. The methodology section outlines the research approach, data collection methods, and analytical techniques used to investigate the experiences of migrant families. Research findings are presented across three main themes: challenges of escaping to the EU, adaption of families and children to a new environment and the resilience exposed amidst migration challenges. Finally, the discussion section interprets the research findings in relation to existing literature, addressing the implications for policy and practice.

1. Theoretical frameworks for understanding forced migration and disability

To examine the experiences of migrant families raising children with disabilities amidst the Russo-Ukrainian war, it is worth applying critical inquiry that illuminates the complex interplay of political conflict, forced migration, and disability within this context. By synthesizing insights from critical refugee studies,

critical disability studies, and resilience theory, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges and resilience strategies employed by these Ukrainian families in navigating adversity.

Critical refugee studies provide a lens to analyse forced migration from Ukraine to EU countries within broader geopolitical contexts, focusing on the structural inequalities, human rights violations, and power dynamics that shape refugee experiences. Works by Antwi-Boateng and Braihma (2020), as well as Cubas et al. (2015), on international migration in an era of neoliberal social transformation, contribute valuable perspectives to understanding the complexities of refugee experiences and forced migration dynamics. Research by Guler et al. (2024) and Kraly et al. (2023) aids in the exploration of challenges faced by displaced families with disabled children, shedding light on the political and social factors of displacement and adaptation of refugees.

Additionally, studies such as those by Blomqvist and Mickelsson (2023), Mäenpää (2022) highlight differences in perception towards migrants from Ukraine compared to other countries. These works underscore the importance of understanding the reception of Ukrainian refugees and the presence or absence of supportive policies in host countries. This insight is crucial for examining the unique experiences of Ukrainian families raising children with disabilities amidst forced migration, as it influences their access to resources, social support networks, and opportunities for integration within host communities.

Critical disability studies examine disability as a social construct shaped by political, cultural, and economic factors (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Schalk, 2017). For our research it was important to look on the issues of intersectionality pointed out by Duda-Mikulín et al. (2020), Egilson et al. (2020), Grech and Pisani (2022) who delve into the intricate relations between childhood disability and migration, unveiling the intricate power dynamics and pervasive marginalization experienced by disabled individuals within the complex milieu of forced migration contexts.

These studies illuminate the stigma faced by refugee children with severe disabilities and the disparities in available services for them, as discussed by Bešić and Hochgatterer (2020). At the same time, the researchers paid attention to exploring their social network and support needs of refugee families with children with disabilities.

This perspective is crucial for understanding the challenges faced by children with disabilities in a new environment. It also sheds light on the differing attitudes experienced by parents of disabled children in EU countries, highlighting the need for comprehensive policy interventions and structural reforms to address the systemic inequities and barriers hindering the full inclusion and participation of disabled migrant children within host societies.

Resilience theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals and families navigate adversity and maintain positive functioning,

particularly in the context of forced migration and disability. This theory explores the processes through which migrant children with disabilities and their families overcome challenges and thrive despite difficult circumstances (Marley & Mauki, 2019; Pieloch et al., 2016).

Contrary to viewing migrants, especially those with children, as passive recipients of external aid, resilience theory emphasizes their agency and resourcefulness in addressing complex situations. King et al. (2013), as well as Lenette et al. (2013) highlight the proactive strategies employed by these families to overcome obstacles, emphasizing their ability to leverage both internal and external resources to foster resilience and adaptability.

Research by Paoletti et al. (2023) sheds light on the challenges and resources available to Ukrainian parents in Italy, offering insights into the strategies employed by migrant families to navigate the complexities of resettlement and integration. Similarly, the work of Sandhya (2024) delves into the experiences of displaced refugees, exploring the trauma they face and the processes of integration within host nations.

By examining the factors that contribute to resilience in migrant families raising children with disabilities, including coping strategies, social support networks, and cultural strengths, resilience theory offers a comprehensive understanding of how these families navigate and overcome adversity in their journey of forced migration.

Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a holistic understanding of the experiences of Ukrainian families raising children with disabilities amidst forced migration to EU countries.

2. Research methodology

The research methodology employed in this study aimed to delve into the experiences of migrant families raising children with disabilities who were compelled to relocate to European countries due to the threat of Russian aggression.

The study was conducted from August to September 2023 at the transit shelter for refugees 'Arena-Lviv' (Ukraine). The shelter was established in the early months of the full-scale Russian invasion as a crisis center for temporary stay (from several hours to several weeks) for refugees of the Russo-Ukrainian war before their further relocation to European Union (EU) countries. From February 2022 to August 2023, social workers and volunteers at the shelter provided services to approximately 3,700 refugees from various regions of Ukraine, including about 460 parents raising children with functional health limitations. The shelter operated from March 2022 to June 2023 and covered such areas of work as registration of individuals preparing for migration to EU countries, assistance in restoration and preparation of documents for transit to receiving countries, escorting to the border during relocation, and interaction with the receiving party.

For the study, 30 respondents were selected using simple random sampling from the database of the temporary shelter. The selection criteria for respondents were: a) displacement (migration) due to the Russo-Ukrainian war between February 2022 and May 2023 to European countries; b) having a child with developmental disorders or functional health limitations; c) willingness to participate in the study.

The sample includes both male and female respondents, with 9 males and 21 females. These participants originate from various regions within Ukraine, including the Kyiv (n=2), Lviv (n=6), Zaporizhzhia (n=5), Kherson (n=9), and Donetsk (n=8) regions.

Their journey of forced migration has led them to seek refuge in several European countries, such as Poland (n=8), the Czech Republic (n=5), Hungary (n=3), Germany (n=5), Italy (n=4), and France (n=5). The duration of their migration ranges from 18 months to less than 6 months, occurring between February 2022 and July 2023.

The respondents in the sample are raising children with disabilities of the following ages: up to 1 year (n=4); 1-3 years (n=5); 4-7 years (n=7); 8-12 years (n=7); 13-18 years (n=7).

The diagnoses of the children are distributed as follows: musculoskeletal disorders (n=4); intellectual developmental disorders (n=8); neurological disorders (n=5); autoimmune diseases (n=1); visual impairments (n=3); hearing impairments (n=2); oncological diseases (n=2); endocrine disorders (n=4).

This study employs semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of these families, with a focus on three main themes: (1) the challenges encountered during displacement, including issues related to transportation and border crossings; (2) the adaptation process in the host countries; and (3) the resilience and strength demonstrated by the participants in the face of adversity. The interview guide comprised 12 questions.

The interviews, conducted using telecommunication tools, lasted an average of 40 minutes. Although formal ethical approval is not required in Ukraine, the researchers adhered to established ethical principles throughout the study. All respondents were fully informed of the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Oral consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained, and data was handled with the utmost care to ensure privacy.

Thematic analysis of the interview data illuminates key patterns and insights, providing valuable insights into the complex realities faced by migrant families raising children with disabilities in the context of forced migration.

3. Research results

This section unveils the research findings, meticulously categorized into three overarching themes. Firstly, it delves into the perilous journey undertaken by families escaping to the EU amidst the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Secondly, it explores the multifaceted process of adapting to unfamiliar environments and integrating into host communities upon arrival. Lastly, it sheds light on the resilience displayed by these families, portraying stories of strength and adaptability in the face of migration challenges. Together, these themes offer a comprehensive understanding of the experiences encountered by families raising children with disabilities amid forced migration.

3.1. Journey through peril: escaping to the EU

The full-scale invasion by Russia has led to complex consequences for children with health limitations or developmental disorders and the parents who care for them. Respondents indicated that the *decision to leave their place of residence* was made urgently due to the immediate threat to the lives and health of their children and family members:

“...we waited until the last moment, even when the invaders had already entered the city. Firstly, leaving the city was dangerous even for an adult – the evacuation corridors were perilous and regularly shelled by Russian forces. Secondly, it was difficult to imagine how I, alone with a child who cannot be left unattended even for an hour, could overcome this journey. After the invaders began to roam freely through the apartments, confiscating communal property, the decision to evacuate was made...” (female, from Zaporizhzhia region, residing in the Czech Republic, raising a child with intellectual developmental disorder).

So, the evacuation process for many families was marked by harrowing experiences, with decisions made under imminent threat to their safety and well-being. The narratives vividly illustrate the urgency and peril involved in fleeing their homes amidst the conflict, highlighting the immense challenges faced by parents in ensuring the safety of their children.

Respondents noted that among the reasons for migration were the occupation of the community and the lawlessness of the occupiers, regular shelling of civilian infrastructure, loss of housing, and the unavailability of essential services for adults and children with disabilities.

“In the first days, we thought everything would be fine: many people stayed in the city - there were cars in the yards. Around March 5-6, the civil defense

started going around the apartments and notifying about the need for evacuation within 1.5 hours at assembly points near the drama theater, Illichivets Sports Complex, and the philharmonic. Civilian cars were shot at on the road, so my wife and I decided to leave the car near the drama theater and walk to the evacuation bus - it seemed safer that way... The child was fussy, constantly trying to run away on the road..." (male, from Donetsk region, residing in France, raising a child with autism).

Conditions of evacuation and border crossing posed significant challenges, influenced by various factors experienced by the respondents:

1. Difficult and dangerous evacuation routes: families encountered perilous evacuation corridors, often under fire, making the journey fraught with fear and uncertainty.
2. Lack of organized transportation: specifically for families with disabled children, the absence of coordinated transportation groups led to stressful travel experiences.
3. Inadequate transportation for the child's needs: families struggled with insufficient accommodations for their children's disabilities during transit, including overcrowded and ill-equipped vehicles. A woman from Kyiv region said: *"...the bus was crowded and hot, no wheelchair restraints or special seat belts...we secured the strollers with tape to each other and to the seat handrails, and tied the children with winter clothes and scarves to the seats..."*.
4. Limited access to resources: essential resources such as specialized diets, medications, assistive devices, and supplies were often unavailable or scarce, exacerbating the challenges of caring for disabled children during migration.
5. Unsuitable temporary accommodation: shelter facilities were frequently ill-suited to the needs of disabled children, lacking appropriate amenities and contributing to discomfort and distress.
6. The need for regular supervision: parents faced the challenge of providing continuous care and supervision for their children, impacting their own well-being and adding to the complexity of travel logistics. A respondent mentioned, *"...we had to make regular stops at sanitation areas for the child's toilet, medication...I couldn't even go to the toilet properly myself..."*.
7. Border crossing issues: legal complications, including long queues and document verification processes, prolonged border crossings, causing additional stress and delays for families.
8. Stigma and social isolation. Families encountered social stigma and isolation, particularly regarding the care of disabled children in public spaces, further complicating their journey and exacerbating feelings of vulnerability. A woman moving from Lviv region to Poland with an autistic child, expressed, *"...the child wears diapers (no toilet control), we had to change them right on the bus. Since*

my son is already 9 years old, passengers looked at me disapprovingly, and one woman told me to do it in the sanitation area at the stops next time...”.

The findings of the study reveal that the majority of respondents opted for their *destination countries* from among those suggested by international organizations, charitable foundations, social services, and volunteers.

For instance, a woman, hailing from Donetsk region, recounted her experience:

“...In Lviv, chaos reigned at the train station: throngs of people and children, with a shortage of volunteers. We stood by the registration counter, waiting to be assigned somewhere. It felt like a situation of hopelessness and helplessness. Most shelters were hesitant to take on the responsibility of housing a child with cancer, and medical facilities had virtually no vacancies. We were left in a shelter for a day, after which volunteers proposed a two-day transit through Italy with a group of other parents of children with cancer, offering accommodations at an oncological center in Rome. There was no time to weigh options; a decision had to be made, and perhaps I was hoping someone else would make it for me...”.

Some respondents indicated that they migrated to countries with similar social systems due to the presence of other family members, relatives, or close friends.

Others relied on recommendations from third parties, online reviews, and personal considerations when selecting their destination. A woman from Lviv, explained:

“...When the situation intensified in Lviv, and one of the shelling incidents occurred near our home, I promptly started searching for a new place to live. My criteria included convenient transportation, developed infrastructure, and available services. After reading reviews on social media, I settled on Germany...”.

Thus, the journey of displacement, evacuation, and border crossing for migrant families raising children with disabilities was marked by a multitude of challenges. From navigating dangerous evacuation routes to facing legal hurdles at border crossings, these families encountered significant obstacles at every turn. The absence of organized transportation for individuals with disabilities, coupled with inadequate resources and unsuitable temporary accommodations, further compounded their difficulties. Despite these hardships, these families demonstrated resilience and determination as they sought safety and security for their loved ones amidst the turmoil of forced migration. The study underscores the diverse factors influencing migrant families’ decisions on destination countries, ranging from

recommendations by international entities and personal networks to online reviews and individual considerations.

3.2. Adapting to a new environment and integrating into host communities

To a greater extent, respondents highlight numerous challenges encountered upon arrival in the destination country, which are associated with *difficulties in obtaining refugee status* and necessary social protection guarantees, searching for long-term shelter and housing, and accessing social, medical, and educational services. For instance, one respondent shared their experience:

“...we arrived in Germany in March 2022 from Bucha. We stood for several days near the registration desk for Ukrainian refugees in Berlin to apply for assistance and insurance...in major cities like Berlin, there were virtually no places left for refugee shelter. If you don't have temporary housing, social services refuse to register refugees, which means losing hope for assistance and food for the child. It's easier to find shelter in small towns, but the infrastructure there is underdeveloped, making service accessibility difficult...” (female, from Kyiv region, residing in Germany, raising a child with musculoskeletal disorders).

Additionally, refugees face challenges in having *their child's disability recognized abroad*, complicating the process of accessing specific services:

“...If you don't have Ukrainian documents establishing your child's disability, it's very difficult to obtain them in France. The so-called education assistance for a disabled child, which grants admission to a special school, transportation to educational institutions, and funds to cover these expenses, can only be obtained with translated and notarized Ukrainian documents establishing disability. Since we only had a conclusion from an inclusive resource center, we had to go through a bureaucratic ordeal to obtain a conclusion from a special medical-pedagogical commission that grants admission to a special education institution...This process took about eight months...” (a male, from Donetsk region, residing in France, raising a child with autism).

“In Germany, health insurance is included in the aid package. To get an appointment with a doctor, you have to wait for months due to long queues. Medications are free, but you don't receive them immediately. In the case of a complex illness like ours and the need for regular medication control, this poses a threat to the child's life and health...” (a female, from Donetsk region, residing in Germany, raising a child with cystic fibrosis).

Respondents underscore the significant challenges stemming from the *inadequate financial support* available to individuals responsible for caring for children with disabilities, which often falls short of meeting their essential needs.

Marina, who relocated to Germany, recounts her experience:

“During our time in the refugee camp in Germany, the financial assistance provided amounted to approximately 120 euros per adult and around 100 euros per child. However, at that point, we had yet to receive any disability benefits. As we transitioned to renting our own accommodation, the level of assistance increased to approximately 350 euros per adult and 220 euros per disabled child. Fortunately, the government covered the cost of rent, utilities, and health insurance. While this financial support was essential for our survival, it primarily catered to our basic necessities, leaving little room for additional expenses”.

There is evidence indicating that the temporary shelter provided infringed upon the rights of the child to proper rest, leisure, and education: respondents faced constant chaotic relocations between different shelters within the host community:

“... In Brno, we were initially accommodated in a hotel complex, but after three months, we were informed that the hotel could no longer host Ukrainian refugees. Consequently, social services relocated us all to the school gymnasium, where children with disabilities slept, ate, spent their leisure time, and studied on the floor for two months...” (a female relocated to the Czech Republic and raising a child with autism).

The study participants illuminate the *pervasive stigmas confronting Ukrainian refugees*, exacerbated by media narratives portraying them as threats to national security and stability. One respondent, who cares for a child with diabetes, sheds light on this issue:

“Hungarian citizens often hold negative views towards refugees, influenced partly by media depictions suggesting that Ukrainians migrate to Europe primarily for personal gain. There’s a perception that some may exploit their child’s disability to gain access to greater benefits.”

A respondent, hailing from Zaporizhzhia region and currently residing in the Czech Republic while caring for a child with intellectual disabilities, recounts their journey:

“Moving to the Karlovy Vary region, a popular tourist spot often visited by Russians, coincided with a decline in tourist numbers due to EU sanctions.

This economic downturn posed challenges in securing long-term housing for us. Despite our self-sufficiency upon arrival, some locals rejected us, with one elderly Czech woman bluntly stating, 'You've overstayed your welcome! Bringing your children here was unnecessary! Go back home!'

Additionally, the uneven distribution of resources between locals and incoming migrants can worsen ethnic and cultural tensions within host communities. Some respondents note the discernible impact of the Ukrainian refugee influx on the national identity of host countries. A woman raising a visually impaired child in Poland shares her perspective:

"In Poland, the Ukrainian language is prevalent – heard in shops, buses, and medical facilities. While there are demonstrations supporting Ukrainians, there's also a sentiment among some Poles that many Ukrainians exhibit arrogant behavior, leading to friction."

This intricate interplay between refugees and host communities can significantly shape national sentiments and potentially fuel xenophobic attitudes. However, respondents highlight a divergent experience in European nations, where infrastructure is more accommodating and *societal attitudes towards children with disabilities are notably inclusive*.

For instance, a respondent originally from the Zaporizhzhia region, now in Poland, caring for a visually impaired child, notes the favourable conditions in Warsaw, including accessible infrastructure with tactile features and Braille signage. Another respondent, raising a child with autism in France, emphasizes the welcoming approach of French society towards autism, evident in the absence of judgmental attitudes and extensive autism awareness campaigns.

Furthermore, respondents observe a shift in perceptions when accompanying individuals have disabilities, as illustrated by a refugee's account in Germany, caring for a child with cerebral palsy. In her experience, the local community demonstrates heightened empathy and support towards her and her daughter, signalling a positive change in attitudes towards refugee parents within the host society.

These examples underscore the importance of fostering empathy, understanding, and cooperation in addressing the complex dynamics of migration and integration.

The findings of the study revealed several challenges faced by Ukrainian refugee families in *adapting their children to the new environment* of the host country:

1. *Language barrier*: respondents frequently cited the language barrier as a significant challenge for both adults and children with disabilities. For example, a respondent now living in Poland described difficulties in understanding spoken language despite her son attending a special class in a regular school. While

educational materials are available in Braille, effective communication remains predominantly one-sided.

2. *Cultural and behavioural differences*: respondents highlighted disparities in traditional values, culture, and behaviour between their home country and the host nation. A woman, who relocated from Donetsk region to Germany, noted the meticulousness of Germans regarding time and responsibility zones, contrasting it with the flexibility often observed in Ukrainian contexts.
3. *Interpersonal interaction and communication*: the study emphasized variations in interpersonal interaction and communication styles, exemplified by the tactile and expressive nature of Italians. For instance, a respondent now residing in Italy recounted the warmth of interactions in the oncological center where her daughter receives treatment, emphasizing the Italian tradition of “morning hugs” extended not only to children but also to their parents.
4. *Differences in daily routines*: refugee families also encountered differences in daily routines, including schedules, meals, taste preferences, celebrations, and rituals, further complicating the adjustment process.

These findings underscore the importance of tailored support systems and cultural sensitivity initiatives to facilitate the successful integration of refugee children into their new communities.

The study findings also revealed a mix of supportive and challenging aspects experienced by migrants in their host countries. While respondents appreciated the presence of a developed support system, including language and cultural assistance, as well as social integration services, they also identified *areas needing improvement*.

For example, a respondent now living in the Czech Republic with her child diagnosed with intellectual disability praised local authorities for introducing them to the community and offering language support. However, there were instances where cultural events needed better adaptation to avoid discomfort among Ukrainian citizens, as recounted by a man who moved to Poland with his child suffering from diabetes.

Additionally, the study underscored the importance of additional support, particularly concerning professional guidance and employment opportunities. A respondent who relocated to France with his child diagnosed with autism emphasized the need for assistance in job searches to ease the adaptation process for migrant parents. This highlights the significant role of employment in mitigating relocation challenges and fostering better integration.

The findings indicate that adaptation challenges significantly impact the psychological well-being of both parents and children with disabilities.

Participants expressed *feelings of depression* stemming from their separation from their homeland. For example, Oleg, who relocated to Poland while caring for a child with diabetes, highlighted the emotional toll of being away from home, stating, “...you’re not at home, and children feel it even more sensitively because they lose their closest connections - friends, classmates, relatives.”

Some respondents faced prolonged stress due to uncertainty about the future, as described by Yana, who moved to Italy with her child with hearing impairment, noting, “...you’re constantly in a state of anticipation - waiting for the war to end or for the situation to become safer, so you don’t make any plans, trying to see everything around you as temporary.”

Furthermore, negative self-perception was linked to local political and media rhetoric, as a respondent, now residing in the Czech Republic, emphasized, “...constant reminders in the media about the burden Ukrainian refugees, who receive disability-related assistance, place on the national economy and political stability, foster a sense of being unnecessary, useless.”

These findings underscore the myriad challenges encountered by Ukrainian refugee families as they navigate the complexities of adapting to unfamiliar environments and assimilating into host communities. Language barriers, cultural disparities, and insufficient support structures collectively contribute to the considerable strain experienced by both parents and children with disabilities. However, amidst these challenges, there are also instances of resilience, empathy, and positive experiences, particularly in nations where infrastructure is accommodating and societal attitudes are inclusive.

3.3. Resilience amidst migration challenges: voices of strength and adaptability

The study’s findings reveal evidence of resilience and strengths among Ukrainian refugee families, which contribute to their adaptation and integration into host countries. Despite facing numerous challenges, respondents highlighted opportunities that migration presents for both migrants and the host society.

Among the identified strengths is the *demand for professional expertise*. For instance, a respondent, formerly from Kyiv region and now residing in Poland, shared her experience of finding employment as a speech therapist in a Polish kindergarten after relocating. This highlights the value placed on specific skills and the opportunities available for refugees to contribute positively to their new communities.

Furthermore, respondents emphasized the importance of engagement in meaningful activities related to caregiving and assistance. A woman, who moved to Hungary, spoke about volunteering at a humanitarian aid center for Ukrainian refugees. This not only provides practical support but also fosters a sense of purpose and belonging for refugees, facilitating their integration process.

Participants in the study recognized the *cultural enrichment* that accompanied their migration journey, despite the intercultural disparities they faced. Immersing themselves in the history, traditions, and cultural assets of the host country not only served as a welcome distraction from their anxieties but also broadened their perspectives. For example, one respondent, now living in Germany and caring for a child with cystic fibrosis, described a daily routine filled with language courses, cultural center activities, and online exploration of German culture. This holistic

approach not only eased their transition but also sparked a newfound curiosity and appreciation for their host nation.

The resilience of respondents is bolstered by their connections with other Ukrainian refugees who are raising children with developmental disabilities. For instance, one respondent, now residing in Italy and caring for a child with cancer, found support through a Facebook group for parents of children with oncological diseases. Through this platform, they connected with other Ukrainian families temporarily staying in Turin, forming what they humorously refer to as the “Ukrainian National Oncological Society of Migrants” over the course of twelve months. Together, they organize weekends, attend cultural events, and celebrate Ukrainian traditional holidays.

Participants noted that their *resilience* in the face of migration challenges was heightened by their experiences of living in life-threatening conditions.

A man residing in France, raising a child with autism, shared, “*We survived an evacuation corridor that could have cost us our lives, so complaining about trivial matters now seems irrelevant... In Ukraine, there are millions of people facing much greater hardships than us.*”

Respondents emphasized that the adaptability of their disabled children serves as a source of inspiration to persevere. For instance, a mother in Poland, raising a visually impaired son, reflected, “*my blind son left everything at home: his favorite toys, friends, classmates, beloved pets, and his father. Instead, he is open to the world and the people around him, finding reasons for daily joy – whether it’s walks in the park or enjoying ice cream while watching his favorite cartoon... Do I have the right to be weak in the face of his strength?*”

Some respondents highlighted that intercultural barriers, compounded by stigma, only fuelled their determination for autonomy and facilitated employment opportunities.

All in all, the study findings illuminate the remarkable resilience and strength displayed by Ukrainian refugee families amidst the challenges of migration. Despite facing adversity, these individuals have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt and thrive in their new environments. Their pursuit of employment opportunities, engagement in meaningful activities, and embrace of cultural enrichment underscore their determination to build fulfilling lives for themselves and their children. Moreover, their interconnectedness with other Ukrainian refugees fosters a sense of community and support, further enhancing their resilience. Ultimately, these narratives of strength serve as powerful reminders of the human spirit’s ability to endure and overcome, even in the most trying circumstances.

4. Discussions

The extensive invasion by Russia in February 2022, alongside extremist actions, such as the shelling and bombing of civilian infrastructure and the occupation of cities and towns, compelled millions of Ukrainian citizens to seek refuge in European Union countries. Migration, as evidenced by research findings, occurred spontaneously and often under conditions directly threatening life and health. Parents raising children with disabilities were forced to make decisions in situations where remaining in their homeland was not viable. The relocation process unfolded under tense conditions: perilous evacuation routes amid Russian military bombardment, inadequate transportation, frequent transfers, and nights spent in temporary overcrowded shelters ill-suited to the needs of children with disabilities, all impacting their well-being.

The European Union has demonstrated solidarity with Ukraine by adopting relevant political decisions aimed at supporting Ukrainian migrants. Scholars (Blomqvist & Mickelsson, 2023; Mäenpää, 2022), however, note that the attitude towards Ukrainian refugees significantly differs from the predominantly hostile approach towards migrants from other countries, which was evident prior to 2022.

Yet, the question of whether refugees from Ukraine are truly treated in the EU countries better than in others remains unresolved. Our study's findings, along with those of others (Koroutchev, 2023; Mikheieva & Kuznetsova, 2023; Zogata-Kusz et al., 2023), highlight the significant challenges faced by Ukrainian migrant families raising children with disabilities, affecting both the children and their families profoundly. Disrupted routines, unfamiliar environments, and limited access to essential services adversely affected the physical and emotional well-being of children. Moreover, difficulties in accessing specialized education services due to language barriers, insufficient infrastructure, and bureaucratic delays significantly impeded their educational progress. Social isolation stemming from communication barriers, restricted access to familiar activities, and potential stigma also hindered their social development.

Additionally, families faced increased burdens, with parents grappling with heightened pressure as they managed the complexities of providing continuous care and navigating bureaucratic challenges, often without adequate support systems. The ongoing uncertainty about the future, financial constraints, and language barriers contributed to heightened stress and anxiety among family members. Furthermore, the migration process and its associated challenges had the potential to disrupt established family dynamics and intensify tensions within households.

Our and other recent studies (Brücker et al., 2023; Letki et al., 2024; Moise et al., 2024) have confirmed that mass migration has revealed gaps in the readiness of European Union countries for such a large number of refugees: civil infrastructure, service systems, and social security were overloaded, complicating the implementation and ensuring the rights of migrants and compliance with

mechanisms of socio-legal protection. Ukrainian refugees raising children with disabilities encountered instances of prejudice, stigma, and discrimination. Some respondents reported negative attitudes from the local population towards them, associated with the belief that migrants pose a threat to national interests, economy, security, and stability, which is exacerbated by pro-Russian narratives in the media and populist movements within the host community. Moreover, the respondents themselves agree that the presence of a large number of Ukrainian migrants in receiving countries may influence the national identity of citizens. Uneven distribution of resources leads to conflicts. Under such conditions, there is a risk of spreading xenophobia towards Ukrainians among the local population, so it is advisable to create platforms for dialogue and cooperation between citizens of the host country and refugees, which will contribute to mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence.

In addition, our research corroborates existing literature (Kimhi et al., 2023; Migliorini et al., 2023; Oviedo et al., 2022) indicating the resilience of Ukrainian refugees when confronted with migration challenges, the utilization of their strengths, and their adeptness in overcoming displacement-related difficulties.

Based on the research findings and employed critical perspective we may suggest the following *recommendations for structural changes in EU policy and practice* regarding refugee families raising children with disabilities may include:

1. Implement a unified identification card system for refugee children with disabilities, recognized across all EU countries, to ensure consistent access to essential services and support.
2. Develop holistic integration strategies that address the intersectional needs of refugee families raising children with disabilities, including housing stability, employment opportunities, social inclusion, and mental health support. Establish dedicated social assistance programs tailored to the needs of refugee families raising children with disabilities, providing personalized support and advocacy to address their specific challenges.
3. Strengthen collaboration and information-sharing mechanisms between EU member states to facilitate the seamless coordination of care and assistance for refugee children with disabilities across borders.
4. Enhance training programs for healthcare professionals, educators, and social workers to improve their cultural competence and understanding of the unique needs of refugee children with disabilities.
5. Adopt family-centered approaches to service delivery that prioritize the voices and preferences of refugee families, empowering them to actively participate in decision-making processes and access support that aligns with their unique needs and circumstances.
6. Develop inclusive educational policies and practices within EU countries to ensure equal access to quality education for refugee children with disabilities, including specialized support services and accommodations.

7. Allocate sufficient resources and funding to support the integration and inclusion of refugee children with disabilities in mainstream social services and community programs.
8. Foster community engagement and dialogue initiatives to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between host communities and refugee families raising children with disabilities.
9. Monitor and evaluate the implementation of policies and programs aimed at supporting refugee children with disabilities, with a focus on identifying gaps and areas for improvement in order to ensure effective and sustainable support systems.
10. Implement measures to combat xenophobia and discrimination against Ukrainian refugees, including legislative protections, anti-discrimination policies, and initiatives to promote tolerance and diversity within society. This could involve working with civil society organizations, human rights advocates, and grassroots movements to raise awareness and advocate for inclusive policies and practices.

Conclusions

The study underscores the unpreparedness of both the Ukrainian state and European Union countries for the mass migration of refugees seeking shelter and protection due to armed conflict. This issue is particularly sensitive for vulnerable population groups, such as individuals raising children with developmental disorders or health impairments.

Throughout the Russo-Ukrainian War, families raising children with disabilities have faced immense challenges during their displacement journey. Despite these obstacles, they have demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in navigating complex bureaucratic processes, adapting to new environments, and ensuring the well-being of their children.

Continued support and advocacy are crucial to ensure these families have access to the resources and opportunities needed to thrive in the face of adversity. By acknowledging the challenges they face and implementing robust support systems, we can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for all, especially the most vulnerable populations like children with disabilities during forced migration.

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