

THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE: WHAT THE HOMELESS SECTOR CAN LEARN FROM THE DISABILITY SECTOR

People with disabilities in Ukraine were already facing many difficulties before the Russian invasion. Now, discrimination against them has only been amplified as their needs and vulnerabilities in this humanitarian crisis are often forgotten about. Milan Šveřepa from Inclusion Europe shares lessons they have learnt from the conflict that can be important for the homeless sector.



By **Milan Šveřepa**, Director, Inclusion Europe

THE SITUATION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN UKRAINE

There are over 2.7 million people with disabilities in Ukraine, of which some 260,000 are people with intellectual disabilities.¹ They often experience severe discrimination and a restriction of their autonomy, frequently facing institutionalisation when their families can no longer provide care for them. Some local governments promote social inclusion, but they are the exception. It is estimated that at least 82,000 children with disabilities are segregated from society in “care home” institutions, with thousands of adults with disabilities also living in institutions. Before the war, about 41,000 people with disabilities had been declared legally incompetent, stripping them of their basic human rights, including the right to vote, work or marry, as well as the possibility to make autonomous decisions.²

In short, the lives of Ukrainian people with intellectual disabilities and their families were very difficult even before Russia launched this phase of its war on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. And the war made everything much, much worse. Now, people with disabilities face a variety of new challenges. They cannot use shelters because they are inaccessible or too crowded. They lack daily supplies, including food and medicine. Despite these obstacles, many people with disabilities have fled their homes, becoming refugees in Ukraine and outside of it.

1 [“Weeks of horror. And we cannot possibly leave.” - Inclusion Europe \(inclusion-europe.eu\)](https://inclusion-europe.eu/weeks-of-horror-and-we-cannot-possibly-leave/)

2 [100 days: Ukrainians with intellectual disabilities and their families surviving the war - Inclusion Europe \(inclusion-europe.eu\)](https://inclusion-europe.eu/100-days-ukrainians-with-intellectual-disabilities-and-their-families-surviving-the-war/)

Crisis makes existing neglect and discrimination more pronounced, acute, and just many times worse. If you are being overlooked in normal times, it is unlikely that anyone will take you into account during a crisis. We saw that with the war in Ukraine: the lack of accessibility, information, and consideration when designing support was now not “only” affecting everyday life, but rather was making it almost impossible for people with disabilities to receive support in a war zone.³

Many disability activists have been dismayed by the lack of preparedness and action from major humanitarian actors.⁴ We have seen the refusal to evacuate people with disabilities and no effort to reach out to disability organisations or families to distribute help. Even most of the support to refugees with disabilities has been provided by local disability organisations and NGOs. All the “disability inclusion” promotion that we so often see online in no way resembled reality. Things have improved in recent weeks,⁵ but much more could be done. Disability organisations in Ukraine are still not receiving enough support for their work from the major actors.

WHAT HELPED US MAKE PROGRESS

However, being “last in line for everything” teaches you some things – resilience and solidarity, for example. Although many big actors have disappointed, the disability sector and private persons have shown an

3 [Neglect and discrimination. Multiplied - How Covid-19 affected the rights of people with intellectual disabilities and their families \(inclusion-europe.eu\)](https://inclusion-europe.eu/neglect-and-discrimination-multiplied-how-covid-19-affected-the-rights-of-people-with-intellectual-disabilities-and-their-families/)

4 [War in Ukraine: What support do people with disabilities need? | TV News | Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/02/24/ukraine-what-support-do-people-with-disabilities-need/)

5 [Виховуєте дитину з труднощами розвитку чи інвалідністю і потребуєте кризової підтримки в час війни? | UNICEF](https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/stories/vykhovuyete-dytynu-z-trudnozhchami-rozvytku-chi-invalidnistyu-i-potrebuyete-krizovoi-pidtrimki-v-chas-voiny)

impressive effort to help; this includes Inclusion Europe members, self-advocacy groups, organisations supporting people with intellectual disabilities, people with personal connection to people with intellectual disabilities, or simply some kids who just wanted to help.⁶ The generosity and speed of contributions to help people with intellectual disabilities and families in Ukraine has been impressive and humbling. By June 2022, the fundraiser for Ukraine collected € 600,000, an amount we did not even discuss as we prepared to function as a “facilitator” for help to those who could not flee the war zone. This money – and all the other ways in which people and organisations are helping – represents solidarity and empathy among those who mostly rely on themselves to get things done.

Clarity, speed, and direct involvement of our friends and colleagues in Ukraine were essential in getting media attention to the issue. It really helps to get the message across when journalists from CNN, Time Magazine, or the New York Times can speak directly to people with disabilities and their families in Ukraine. Collaboration with the European Disability Forum (EDF) and the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) was crucial at this stage too, as we pooled resources and the media’s attention to one joint event.

Our members as well as other organisations played an essential part in less visible ways too, most importantly by talking to national governments about what needs to be done. It was to a large extent a matter of pooling resources and dividing labour so that everyone could focus on their own strengths instead of having to deal with all of the same obstacles. For that reason, EDF’s experience in humanitarian

⁶ [‘I just wanted to help’: Students at Whole Children raise money for Ukrainians in need \(gazettenet.com\)](https://www.gazettenet.com)

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and development affairs allowed them to carry these messages to relevant UN and EU bodies, while we focused on facilitating – collecting people’s testimonies, letting them describe their situation in their own words and making these stories available for many people to see.⁷

All of this was possible thanks to our incredible friends and colleagues in Ukraine. The VGO Coalition, an all-Ukrainian NGO coalition for persons with intellectual disabilities, became an Inclusion Europe member in 2019. They consist of 118 local organisations and represent some 14,000 families of people with intellectual disabilities. We were aware of the situation people with intellectual disabilities face in the country, and we had contacts to build on. Right after Russia launched the invasion, we started working with the VGO Coalition to see what needs to be done. We also hired Ukrainian and Russian speakers to

⁷ [One month of the Russian war on Ukraine in the words of families of people with intellectual disabilities - Inclusion Europe \(inclusion-europe.eu\)](https://inclusion-europe.eu)

contact local branches of the VGO Coalition and to establish direct communication with them.

It is incredible what the women – as they are mostly women – in the VGO Coalition and their local branches have done. They were able to distribute the money we collected to individual families while under bombardment and having to provide 24/7 support for their own family members with disabilities. They gave interviews to global media and attended numerous webinars about their situation and needs while sitting in a basement with bad internet connection, rockets literally hitting neighbouring houses.

Similarly, another Ukrainian disability organisation arranged the evacuation of hundreds of people with disabilities when the global agencies responsible for this would not.⁸ Furthermore, many local disability organisations or NGOs in neighbouring countries stepped up without hesitation to provide support to refugees with disabilities when governments and agencies in EU countries barely acknowledged their existence.

WHAT WE NEED TO CONSIDER FOR THE FUTURE

While Russia continues to kill people in Ukraine, destroy entire cities as well as houses and infrastructure all over the country, Ukrainians are already looking to rebuild their country. It will be an enormous task.

⁸ [The Disabled Ukrainians Doing What the UN Can't \(or Won't?\) | LSE International Development](#)

In the Kyiv region alone, 4,835 private houses and 161 high-rise buildings were completely destroyed, with 13,292 partially damaged. At the moment, 11,319 families need housing.⁹ Over 400,000 people lived in Mariupol before the war. Now the city is no more – with tens of thousands likely dead, and hundreds of thousands with no housing. And this is not the only such city in Eastern Ukraine.

In this humanitarian crisis that is so closely linked to homelessness, there is an acute risk of many people with intellectual disabilities being left without care or being forced to go into “care homes” because they lost relatives and have nowhere to go. Alongside this, there will be huge psychological impact on people who faced unimaginable suffering and trauma. It will impact all aspects of their daily lives, including finding and keeping suitable housing or employment.

All of this needs to be considered by everyone involved in the reconstruction of Ukraine. To avoid further damage to people who suffered too much already, rebuilding and relevant policies must be disability-inclusive, creating a better future for Ukrainian people with intellectual disabilities. This includes providing accessible housing, preventing segregation in “care homes”, as well as eventual homelessness.

One of the most important lessons we have learnt time and again is that advocacy on these issues cannot start early enough. We cannot count on relevant agencies to act responsibly and take people with intellectual disabilities (or people who are homeless) into account of their own accord. We can see every day that that is not how they operate.

⁹ [UkraineWorld on Twitter](#)