

## **Study visit report to Bucharest on MIGRAEDU Project (9-12.12.2024)**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

As part of the realization of the project: "Understanding Migrant Realities: Research-led Teaching about Migrations in Diversifying Societies" (MIGRAEDU), financed by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange under the Strategic Partnerships Programme (NAWA), we took part in a study visit to Bucharest, that took place between 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2024.

The visit's aim was to explore the current situation of Ukrainian refugees with special needs in Romania. The project, conducted in collaboration with The Research Institute for Quality of Life (ICCV) of the Romanian Academy and Collegium Civitas in Warsaw, seeks to investigate the challenges faced by refugees, particularly those with disabilities, and develop innovative e-learning materials for training professionals in refugee assistance, humanitarian aid, and research methodologies. The current project is a follow-up for previous research done on the Ukrainian refugee crisis from the point of view of the NGOs.

During the study visit we met with the representatives of the following organizations:

ICCV – prof. Bogdan Voicu and dr Alexandra Deliu. The ICCV (The Research Institute for Quality of Life) is a renowned research institute located in Bucharest, specializing in quality of life and social policy. Their work focuses on two main areas: quality of life and social policy, with an emphasis on key topics such as health, education, employment and working conditions, housing, family dynamics, poverty and living standards, public services, social development, and the social economy. We met with prof. dr hab. Bogdan Voicu and dr Alexandra Deliu.

CNRR - The Romanian National Council for Refugees (CNRR) Foundation is a non-governmental organization. CNRR's mission is to promote and protect human rights, with a particular focus on the rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Through its specialized departments, CNRR provides social assistance and legal consultancy services. This NGO is composed of volunteers that maintain direct contact with immigrants.

IOM - The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been active in Romania since 1992, focusing on migrant integration, voluntary return and reintegration, refugee relocation and resettlement, and inclusion into Romanian society, including support for Ukrainian refugees. This NGO is a larger organization compared to the CNRR that instead of direct contact coordinates aid on a broader scale.

Our expectations regarding the study visit were to gain a general understanding of how the project is going to look like, to understand how NGOs were helping immigrants during the peak period of emergency assistance and afterwards. Additionally, we were looking forward to learning more about the quality of the help that was and is being provided to disabled Ukrainian refugees. We

wanted to gain insight on how Romanian organizations were dealing with this vulnerable group's needs.

### **The visit to ICCV:**

Our meeting with the Romanian team at the ICCV (Research Institute for the Quality of Life) centered around the ongoing project and the development of educational materials for those working with refugees.

During the meeting, we also reviewed our findings from an FGI we conducted in Warsaw in November. One of the aspects that was particularly emphasized was the cultural differences between the Ukraine and the receiving countries. A notable challenge is the cultural gap in healthcare expectations, particularly the norm of bribery in Ukraine's medical system, which contrasts sharply with EU standards. The question regarding how to manage cultural differences should be answered in the educational part of the project. Additionally, Ukrainian refugees have expressed a strong belief that conditions and opportunities in Germany are superior to those in Poland, which may not always align with the reality of the situation. The group agreed on the importance of exploring these social constructs in the educational component of the project.

The conversation also touched on the ethical concerns faced by researchers, particularly in addressing reports of abuse by NGOs. The discussion led to the conclusion that we should guide the conversation to check the veracity of the information and reach adequate authority if needed.

We gained valuable knowledge about Romanian shelters. They were described as disparate - some provided good living conditions; they had fully functioning kitchens, elevators and private rooms, while others were the complete opposite. In some cases, the buildings had originally been scheduled for demolition or renovation. These facilities lacked doors (which were replaced with curtains), kitchens, internet access and reliable running water sources. These differences showed how refugees' opinions about the help they received varied drastically depending on the shelter they were assigned to.

Lastly, the team recognized the need to include caregivers of people with disabilities as a distinct category in future FGIs, to better address their specific challenges and needs.

### **The visit to CNRR**

During the visit to CNRR we had a chance to talk to the NGO's representative – Advocacy Coordinator Bogdan Preda, who introduced us to the organization's mission of helping the beneficiaries understand and navigate life in Romania. Migrants often require assistance with applying for asylum, clarifications on temporary protection status, and pathways to citizenship or long-term residence. Staff members note how complex the process often is. One major issue is the citizenship exam, which consists of tests on Romanian language, history, geography, and even

constitutional knowledge. While the law demands that all applicants pass these exams, they offer few exceptions for individuals with disabilities, the elderly, or those with cognitive impairments like dementia or Alzheimer's, which creates obstacles for people that are already at a disadvantage. The only exception mentioned in Romanian law refers to deaf individuals, who may be granted a sign language interpreter for the duration of the exam; which is, unfortunately, not always the case as the final decision on this matter belongs to the examination committee. The organization is unable to create study guides to help refugees with the learning process, as authorities believe it could hinder the examination procedure, by discouraging examinees from preparing for the test through their own research.

At the onset of the war, CNRR's call centers primarily handled simple queries, such as how to receive temporary protection or where to find schools. However, as the situation evolved over the past two years and conditions have somewhat stabilized, the nature of the inquiries has shifted. Today, refugees are seeking assistance with more complex issues, including car registration, property disputes, and employment matters. As conditions have stabilized since the initial surge of displaced individuals, temporary shelters and reception centers have begun to empty out. Yet, the complexity of legal, social, and personal issues for those who remain in Romania persists. The call centers, therefore, continue to receive a steady flow of inquiries, although the focus has shifted toward more complicated and deeply personal concerns.

The organization currently does not have a distinct approach dedicated to refugees with disabilities, although they are being considered as a vulnerable group and have special attention paid to them. The CNRR refers the disabled beneficiaries to the external organizations that specialize in that matter.

Furthermore, we were introduced to the specific circumstances of certain refugee populations. Some arrive with USSR documents that are not recognized by Ukraine nor the Russian Federation, leaving them effectively stateless. The organization's counselors discuss how such individuals sometimes have no choice but to apply for asylum to regulate their status. For those under temporary protection—especially Ukrainians fleeing the ongoing conflict—the scenario is equally complex. While they can quickly obtain protective status and basic rights (including work permits), converting this temporary protection into a more stable form of residency or a long-term residence permit is not straightforward. Laws currently do not allow time spent under temporary protection to count towards the residency requirements for long-term status or citizenship. Employers and refugees themselves find the uncertainty disconcerting, it is unclear what will happen if temporary protection directives end. Without legislative changes, many could be left in a precarious position. During the conversation Bogdan was asked about the prospects for the individuals under temporary protection after the war ends. Unfortunately, he was unable to provide an answer on that topic, as there are currently no propositions on that matter from the government. It was also explained how many immigrants hesitated to call emergency hotlines due to fears of consequences related to border crossing, such as being sent back or physically harmed (though this is not true, it is a fear they hold).

Bogdan expressed that the next challenge might be providing greater empowerment to refugees in the public consultations process, especially if they are staying in Romania in the long-term. He said that although they do evaluate their work with the beneficiaries, they do not do enough in this regard and assume that they know better how to manage within the system and cater for their needs.

### **Visit to the IOM**

Our final visit was to the IOM (International Organization for Migration), where we discussed the organization's role in the refugee crisis, especially in the initial response to the outbreak of war in Ukraine. It mainly focused on providing safe transportation from the Ukrainian border to Romania. The initiative for safe evacuation - "the green corridor" (between Palanca, Republic of Moldova and Husi, Romania) transferred around 20 000 Ukrainians. The disabled refugees' cases were managed through inter-organizational communication, after the Moldovan side noticed a vulnerable person, they would notify the Romanian team so that they could prepare themselves for receiving individuals with special needs.

We discussed the transition from emergency, urgent responses immediately after the war started, to now, two years into the conflict, when the ways of providing help to the migrants has changed. IOM representatives were consistently referring to a shift towards the integration phase. The organization's activity is not limited to catering to the basic needs of refugees, but also to helping them integrate into Romanian society through language courses, career counselling and schooling. Moreover, there are two separate funds, one for the urgent response and another for the developmental response, which is spread out over the span of a couple of years.

One thing that clearly aligned with the data we gathered during the visit at the CNRR was that there is a shift in the topics of inquiries made by the refugees. Formerly they were centered around urgent needs - financial aid, how and where to receive it. Today, they are more linked to the integration process - to what rights they are entitled to, questions about bureaucratic issues, such as documentation requirements for long-term residency.

The biggest need mentioned by the representatives was the demand for information. They acknowledged that different cohorts have to be contacted through different means of communication, however, they said it is difficult to reach everyone. Word of mouth was depicted as the most efficient source of information; Telegram was mentioned as an especially powerful tool for the Ukrainians, as they used it to further spread the information they received.

IOM's role also involves close collaboration with both governmental organizations and local NGOs, each of which has clearly defined roles in the refugee assistance process. A shared database ensures that resources are allocated efficiently and that there are no duplicate financial aid payments.

### **Conclusions:**

The study visit was an interesting experience, but we left with mixed feelings. While we learned a lot about how different NGOs operate and the general challenges immigrants face, we didn't manage to gain as much information about refugees with disabilities as we had hoped we would. It seems that this specific group is not always the focus of aid responses, even though disabled individuals' needs are unique and likely more urgent in some ways.

We believe that to truly understand the situation of immigrants with disabilities, a more targeted research approach is needed. Visiting refugee shelters and speaking directly with NGOs that specialize in this type of aid could provide us with a clearer picture. Overall, this visit was a good starting point, but it also highlighted how much more there is to uncover and understand.

### **Recommendations:**

- Conducting online ethnography of Telegram groups to access authentic online discussions about needs of Ukrainian refugees with disabilities.
- Focusing on caregivers as a distinct group whose needs and expectations in these conditions have not been researched yet
- Meet with NGOs specializing in assisting immigrants with disabilities to gain a deeper understanding of how they were treated.
- Visit shelters in both Poland and Romania to observe the living conditions firsthand.