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## Social Trauma vs Adverse Childhood Experiences of Ukrainian Children of Forced Migrants

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The purpose of the article is to study the key problems that Ukrainian children of forced migrants face and experience events of this nature, which are classified as social trauma. The authors reflect on studies focused on migrant children and emphasize taking into account the conditions under which this migration took place, namely: forced spontaneous migration as a result of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. Considering the scale of forced migration of Ukrainians both in terms of number and prevalence, the increase in the number of social problems caused by migration is an important factor in social transformations in Ukraine and EU countries. The authors emphasize the fact that migrant children go through a unique experience that affects their childhood, provoking the emergence of the “social cryptomnesia” phenomenon and requiring the mobilization of adaptive resources. Aspects of children's application of old social practices in new (sometimes existential) socio-cultural conditions are highlighted separately, which complicates the process of adaptation, integration, and acculturation. The authors analyse the traumatic impact on the socialization of such negative phenomena as stigmatization, cultural shock, and ethnic dissociation. The research results presented in the article confirm the high level of traumatic experiences of children of forced migrants who survived shelling, life in shelters, occupation, filtration camps, poverty, hunger, etc. It is important to study adaptation resources that help children adapt to new living conditions.

**Key words:** migration, forced migrants, migrant children, social sustainability, Russian armed aggression, internally displaced persons.

**Клименко Олена, Сальнікова Світлана, Дембіцький Сергій. Соціальна травма vs несприятливий досвід дитинства українських дітей вимушених мігрантів.** Мета статті – вивчення ключових проблем, із якими стикаються українські діти вимушених мігрантів і переживають події такого характеру, що класифікуються як соціальна травма. Автори рефлексують дослідження, зосереджені на дітях-мігрантах, і наголошують

на врахуванні умов, за яких ця міграція відбулася, а саме: вимушена спонтанна міграція внаслідок військової агресії росії проти України. Ураховуючи масштаби вимушеної міграції українців і за кількістю, і за поширеністю, збільшення чисельності спричинених міграцією соціальних проблем є важливим чинником соціальних трансформацій в Україні та країнах ЄС. Звернено увагу на той факт, що діти переживають унікальний досвід, котрий впливає на їхнє дитинство, провокуючи виникнення феномену «соціальної криптомнезії» й вимагаючи мобілізації адаптаційних ресурсів. Окремо висвітлено аспекти застосування дітьми старих соціальних практик у нових (подекуди екзистенційних) умовах життя, що ускладнює перебіг процесів адаптації, інтеграції та акультурації. Здійснено аналіз травматичного впливу на соціалізацію таких негативних явищ, як стигматизація, культурний шок, етнічна дисоціація. Наведені у статті результати досліджень підтверджують високий рівень травматичного досвіду дітей вимушених мігрантів, які пережили обстріли, життя в сховищах, окупацію, фільтраційні табори, злидні, голод тощо. Важливим є вивчення адаптаційних ресурсів, що допомагають дітям пристосуватися до нових умов життя.

**Ключові слова:** міграція, вимушені мігранти, діти мігрантів, соціальна стійкість, російська військова агресія, внутрішньо переміщені особи.

## INTRODUCTION

With the beginning of the Russian armed aggression, migration processes in Ukraine became global, covering all regions of the country and occupying the space of the European Union, but not limited to it. Migration caused by war has a forced nature. Therefore, it is an important macro-social problem, as a result of which new social groups appear that urgently need adaptation to an unusual environment, and the destruction of basic human needs occurs, in particular, the need for security and a stable picture of the world. Such crisis situations often lead to serious consequences in the life of society, which affect the processes of socialization and form a traumatic experience of social existence, as a result of which the personality is reformatted and new strategies of behaviour are formed.

Therefore, forced migration, both internal and external, appears as a traumatic situation that causes a feeling of alienation from social space; it becomes especially relevant for children who do not have the opportunity to influence the course of events and obey the will of adults. At the beginning of 2024, 4,9 million Internally Displacement Persons (IDPs) were registered in Ukraine (compared to 1,5 million at the end of 2021) (Studennikova, 2024), among whom 21,3 % were children (1 million); among IDPs are:

- ✓ 3,6 million persons who were displaced (or re-displaced) after the start of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine;

- ✓ 2,5 million persons who have been displaced and cannot return to their homes (because the housing is either destroyed or located in the zone of active hostilities or the temporarily occupied territory);

- ✓ 739 thousand are families with children (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2024).

According to estimates by the Institute of Demography and Quality of Life Problems of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, about 6,3 million people left the country during 2022–2023 due to hostilities and the occupation of part of the territory of Ukraine. According to Eurostat, among Ukrainians who were in EU countries (except Hungary) and European Free Trade Association countries (Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, Liechtenstein) at the end of October 2023, 63,2 % were women, and 33,2 % were children (2,1 million) (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, 2024).

Provided by the Ukrainian government portal [childrenofwar.gov.ua](http://childrenofwar.gov.ua) for the period from February 24, 2022 to April 22, 2024 the official information provides disappointing statistics regarding Ukrainian children, of which 545 were killed, 1 300 were wounded, and 2 052 were missing, and 19 546 – forcibly deported and/or forcibly displaced persons (Children of War, 2024). The data is constantly updated.

The study «Children and War» conducted by the charitable organization SOS Children's Towns Ukraine (Shcherban et al., 2023) confirms the high level of traumatic experiences of young Ukrainians, namely:

- ✓ 77 % of displaced children witnessed shelling and bombing;

- ✓ 73 % of children lived in the storage for a long time, one month or more;

- ✓ 30 % of children survived the horrors of the occupation;

- ✓ 4 % of children passed through Russian filtration camps;

- ✓ 8 % of children experienced hunger and lack of access to drinking water (Osadcha, 2023).

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Thus, the problem of mass forced migration of Ukrainians as the many other problems, caused by Russian armed aggression, has deeply pervasive and long-lasting effects Lesschaeve and Glaurdi (2023) on Ukrainian society, especially due to the involvement of children in it, as it creates unique challenges for their development and integration. The high level of traumatic experience recorded in the empirical studies emphasizes the need to develop both special support and rehabilitation and educational programs for Ukrainians who have experienced such an experience. The social consequences of forced migration require attention from both the state and the scientific community to ensure social stability and social sustainability.

The **purpose** of the article is to study the key problems that children of forced migrants face and experience events of this nature, which are classified as social trauma.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

### 1.1. Clarification of Some Concepts

There is a range of types of childhood adversity, which can have negative long-term effects. These types of adversities relative to environment and household, are identified as *Adverse Childhood Experiences* (ACEs), «stressful or traumatic experiences that can greatly impact children and young people throughout their lives» (NHS, 2024). Except for well-known recognised ACEs (abuse, neglect, growing up in a dysfunctional family) displacement, living in a territory with hostilities, etc., also are ACEs.

According to the definition in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the key feature of traumatic events is threats to life, e.g., death, serious injury, or violence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), which is quite relevant to the Russo-Ukrainian war through which Ukrainians are forced to migrate en masse. Researchers have argued that additional approaches should be used to evaluate something that makes an experience traumatic (Bjornsson et al., 2020; Neuner, 2022) and have linked social trauma to increased humanitarian and natural disasters (Tei, & Fujino, 2023). What kind of social experiences or life events Ukrainian adults and children perceive as *social trauma* remains insufficiently studied. Therefore, advancing our understanding of the factors and consequences associated with social trauma in children is crucial.

Ukrainians who moved within and between countries are called internally displaced persons (IDPs) and war refugees, respectively. We will use the “*forced migrants*” term for both groups of moved persons where the problem concerns both groups and the refined terms of IDPs or war refugees where a distinction is needed.

Children are affected by migration when they are left behind by one or both migrating parents, migrating with parents (or born abroad), or migrating alone (Unicef, n.a.). So, in this study, we take into account all Ukrainian children who were forced to migrate (except those born abroad) due to Russia's military aggression, and we will refer to them as *migrant children* or *children of forced migrants* regardless of their parents' status: IDPs or war refugees. Taking into account the status of the parents, we will also use the concept of *forcing refugee children* or *children of forcing refugees*.

### 1.2. Literature Review: Toward Understanding the Issue

The problems of migrant children are the subject of research by many scientists in various fields, including sociology, psychology, education, economics, etc. They focus on different aspects of migrant children's experiences of studying problems, such as *adaptation, integration, acculturation, psychological state, education, and social interaction*. In particular, we can single out several researchers whose scientific work is of the greatest interest.

Most research focuses on the processes of adaptation and integration of migrant children into new socio-cultural environments. This includes studying cultural barriers, social networks, language difficulties, and other factors that affect integration success. Alejandro Portes is one of the leading sociologists who studies the problems of migrant children, in particular their adaptation and integration to new living conditions and changes in social reality (Portes, McLeod, & Parker, 1978). His work includes research on second-generation migrants and their socio-economic situation in host societies. His colleague and co-author of sociological studies of migrant children in the USA within the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) project – Ruben Rumbaut studied the social mobility, education, and cultural identity of migrant children (Portes, & Rumbaut, 2001). The results of these studies require a rethinking relative to the Ukrainian war refugees with children who will remain in the host country for permanent residence. The

longer the war continues, the more such war refugees will continue to adapt and integrate into their host environment.

Canadian social psychologist Berry (1997), known for his research in the field of psychology, in particular the study of acculturation and its impact on migrant children, developed a model of acculturation strategies for migrant children, which includes integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. The scientist also paid attention to the psychological states of migrant children, including issues of trauma, stress, identity, and sense of social belonging.

Ukrainian sociologist Dembitskyi (2018) studied the dynamics of psychological distress severity as an indicator of a person's adaptation to new surroundings among IDPs, the analysis of empirical data confirmed the positive dynamics of both the changes in the adaptability of the displaced people and their social well-being, but the conclusion does not apply to the physical state of those who lived in the zone of hostilities. As you know, the condition of adults affects children, who are also stressed. It is worth noting that the Covid-2019 pandemic created objective prerequisites for the worsening of the psychological well-being of Ukrainians (Dembitskyi et al., 2020); from the quarantine of the pandemic, they went into a state of war, so the impact of stressors increased.

An important aspect is the study of educational opportunities and obstacles for migrant children. Researchers examine the impact of socioeconomic status, school policies, and support programs on the education success of migrant children. So Ensor et al. (2008) focus on issues of education of migrant children, in particular on issues of educational inequality and access to quality education. It explores how education systems can better support migrant children.

Regarding Ukrainian refugee children, host countries have also developed educational policies that have had varying degrees of success or failure. About IDP's migrant children, it is worth noting that they have not had the same conditions for studying at school since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine: the closer to the zone of active hostilities, the more dangerous and stressful it is to study at school, and not only at school. So, this is also the subject of separate research, including in the field of education as a trauma for some children.

Within the framework of the OECD (2015) project, Cecil Wu Huang studied the social adaptation and integration of migrant children in schools too. She examines the impact of socioeconomic status, language barriers, and the school environment on the academic performance of migrant children. The study of the social integration of migrants in Europe, in particular the children of migrants, was carried out by Algan et al. (2012). Her work covers issues of social capital, economic integration, and education.

Special attention should be paid to the scientific works of Ukrainian researchers who paid attention not only to the problem of forced migration of children (Klymenko, 2021), but also highlighted possible migration strategies that emerged as a result of Russian armed aggression (Dolya, & Klymenko, 2023).

In summary, research on the problems of migrant children is multifaceted and includes different aspects that reflect the complexity of their experiences. Scientists make a significant contribution to the understanding of these problems and the development of effective strategies to support migrant children in new socio-cultural conditions.

### **1.3. Empirical Data**

We use secondary data from quantitative sociological research and analytical reviews, including:

– The results of the analytical monitoring study «Changes in the social protection of the population in 2022-2023», conducted by the analysts of the Center of Public Finance and Public Governance at the Kyiv School of Economics, which is based on the analysis of the Ministry of Social Policy's expenses for ensuring the needs of vulnerable categories of the population and payment services (Studennikova, 2024).

– Secondary data analysis of the sociological research «Situation of internally displaced families with children, foster families and family-type children's homes in the conditions of war» carried out by the non-governmental organization SOS Children's Towns in Ukraine. Empirical data were collected from September to November 2022 in Dnipropetrovsk, Poltava, Kharkiv, Lviv, Chernivtsi, and Vinnytsia regions. In the study, 302 parents with IDP status were interviewed, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with parents and 9 with children, and 8 family-type children's homes and 2 foster families were visited, where 22 interviews were conducted. The study included expert interviews and an analysis of the legal framework, identifying key problems and needs of internally displaced families with children, foster families, and

family-type children's homes, which require emergency humanitarian response and assistance (Shcherban, Chernousov, & Prashko, 2023).

## 2. RESEARCH RESULTS

### 2.1. Social Problems of Children of Forced Migrants

A comprehensive analysis of the living conditions of children who have to go through the experience of spontaneous forced displacements allows us to talk about the presence of several problems that require detailed study and coverage:

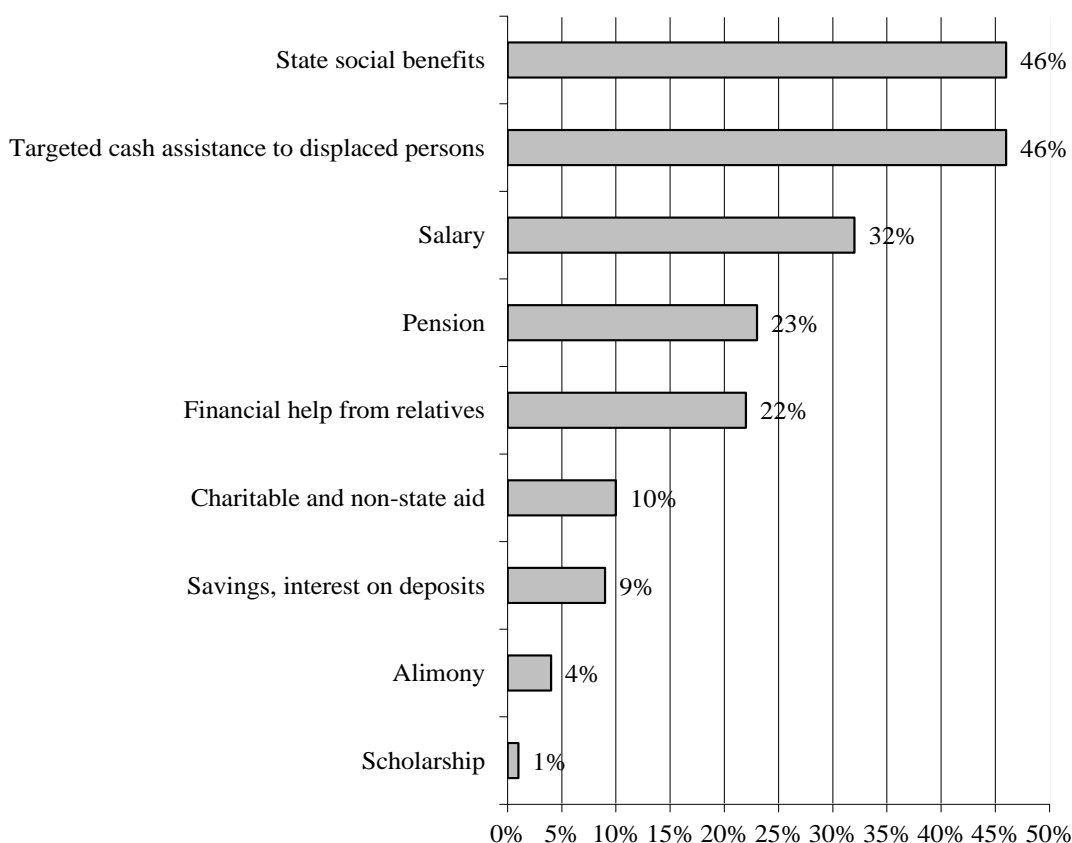
1. Overcoming psychological stress associated with a change of residence and disruption of usual cultural and communication, family, and natural-territorial ties.

2. Ignoring the need to adapt to a new environment and establish communication with its representatives, can lead to alienation, dissatisfaction with life, the emergence of conflicts, and an increase in the level of social tension.

3. Complicated adaptation to new socio-cultural conditions of life due to experiencing a normative crisis associated with a change in the nature of social interaction – ignoring acculturation.

4. Traumatic adaptation to non-standard life practices and overcoming economic difficulties and household problems. According to sociological research, 46 % of the families of internally displaced persons live at the expense of state-targeted cash assistance (fig. 1).

5. The emergence of the “culture shock” phenomenon, provoked by the need to adapt to a new socio-cultural space.



**Fig. 1.** *The Main Sources of Income for IDP Families with Dependent Children*

**Source:** constructed by the authors according to (Shcherban, Chernousov, & Prashko, 2023).

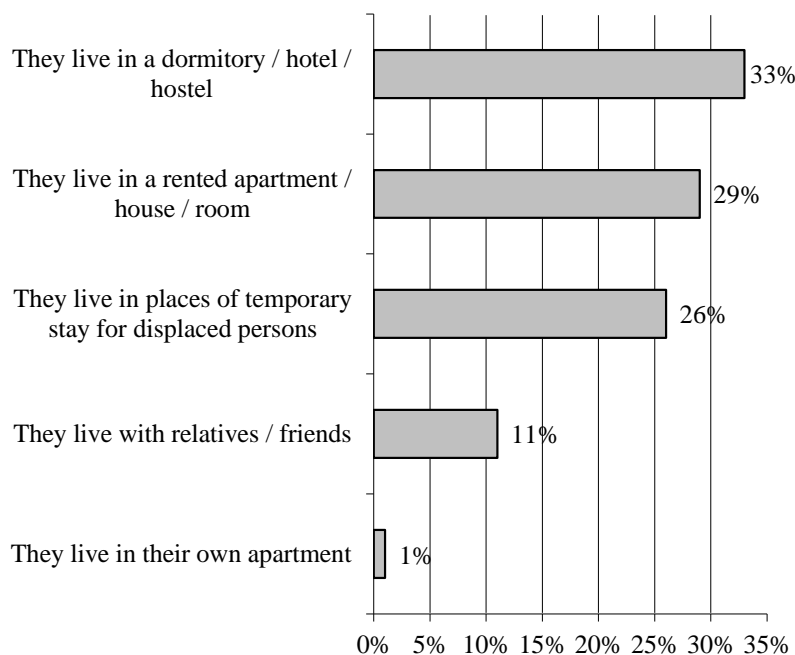
6. Feelings of loss caused by the rejection of the usual way of life, friends, and status – a secondary traumatic effect. According to sociological research, 33 % of families of internally displaced persons live in dormitories, 29 % in rented apartments/houses/rooms, and 26 % in places of temporary residence for IDPs, which has an extremely unfavourable effect on the socialization of their children (fig. 2).

7. Failure in social roles and role expectations.

8. Confusion in value orientations and self-identification.

9. Anxiety caused by awareness of cultural differences.

10. The feeling of atypicality/difference in the new environment and the impossibility of getting used to it.



**Fig. 2.** *Place of Residence of IDP Families Who Have Dependent Children*

**Source:** constructed by the authors according to (Shcherban, Chernousov, & Prashko, 2023).

During this kind of migration, children go through a unique experience that forms an atypical nature of the course of childhood, the so-called adverse childhood experiences, and provokes the emergence of the phenomenon of “*social cryptomnesia*” and requires the mobilization of *adaptive resources* of the individual to adapt to new living conditions and new forms of social interactions. Therefore, there is no doubt that migration provoked by Russian armed aggression has become one of the key factors of social transformations in all regions of Ukraine and EU countries.

The “*social cryptomnesia*” phenomenon occurs during a sudden change in the surrounding environment and can be observed not only in children but also in adults. It is formed under conditions when a person tries to apply old social practices and forms of social interaction in fundamentally new living conditions, which reduces integrative possibilities and makes adaptation impossible. According to Jeffrey S. Alexander, the key resource of a person during living in a traumatic situation and getting used to a new “atypical” reality is resilience to changes in social interaction within the framework of non-traditional socio-cultural space, which depends on the individual level of social adaptability (Alexander, 1990).

Thus, migration caused by Russian armed aggression has become one of the key factors of social transformations both in Ukraine and in EU countries. It especially affects children who go through a unique experience that forms an atypical course of childhood and causes the “*social cryptomnesia*” phenomenon. This phenomenon occurs during a sudden change in the social environment when a person tries to apply old

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social practices in new conditions, which makes adaptation difficult. J. C. Alexander emphasizes that the key resource for overcoming traumatic situations and adapting to a new reality is resilience to changes in social interaction. It depends on the individual level of social adaptability, which determines the individual ability to adapt to new living conditions and social interactions. Thus, for successful adaptation, it is important to mobilize the adaptive resources of the individual, which will allow them to integrate into the new socio-cultural environment and overcome the challenges related to forced migration.

## **2.2. Adaptation Resources for Children of Forced Migrants**

Under *adaptive resources*, we define several social characteristics of an individual, acquired during socialization, which determine the degree of adaptation to specific social conditions (new, non-traditional, atypical, etc.) of life. Also, the adaptation resource includes the following types of adaptation:

- ✓ The socio-cultural adaptation helps the child to integrate into the life of a new socio-cultural space and adapt to non-standard forms of social interaction in everyday problem-solving;
- ✓ The economic adaptation enables the child to adequately perceive changes in living conditions and quality of life, correctly define consumer priorities and accordingly build up leisure practices in accordance changes in the welfare of the family;
- ✓ The psychological adaptation contributes to formation of a set of internal psychological states that affect socialization, including a sense of personal or cultural identity, achieving a state of life satisfaction in a new cultural context, etc.

There are factors influencing the formation of adaptive resources and reaching the level of a child's resilience<sup>1</sup> to social trauma.

1. *Acculturation* has some specificity, which is the basis of such children's characteristics as lack of self-awareness and low ability to reflect, as well as the child's dependence on adults and their social state. However, the acculturation processes of displaced children / migrants in a situation of forced migration differ somewhat from the standard mechanisms of living in a new socio-cultural space due to the high level of "novelty" of the new social environment and the low level of motivation to integrate into it.

2. An important factor in the process of adaptation of migrant children is the social aspect – *stigmatization*. Relocation to a new environment is often accompanied by the loss of the native social environment, friends, relatives, and other significant persons for the child. This can lead to alienation, and social isolation, and insecurity in a new social environment. Migrant children also often face the refusal of others to accept them, as well as negative stereotypes and discrimination; which causes stigmatization.

3. *Culture shock*: the difference in cultural traditions, norms, and values can lead to adaptation difficulties for migrant children. They may feel like strangers in a new environment and face incomprehensible forms of social interaction or rejection of their cultural characteristics.

4. *Ethnic dissociation*: the younger a child is the more successful integration into the cultural environment in which he entered, which can provoke the emerging of several conflict situations in his family. This is explained by the fact that children have not yet formed a stable ethnic repertoire of behavior and acculturation processes are faster than adults. Therefore, the child's rapid adaptation to new socio-cultural living conditions can negatively affect the nature of his interaction with close people (family members), who may be in a state of acculturative conflict or experience culture shock. This can cause family tension and lead to intra-family conflicts and ethnic disunity, especially when there is a large difference between the cultural values of the family and the host community.

5. *Secondary traumatic impact*: the fact of forced displacement can lead to various emotional reactions in adult family members, such as anxiety, fear, depression, upset, etc. Experiencing stress due to the awareness of the loss of the usual way of life, the uncertainty of the future, and lack of confidence

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<sup>1</sup> In social sciences term "resilience" is used in some senses ("to avoid", "to overcome adverse conditions", "to overcome stress and adversity in life", etc.). At the individual level, resilience means an "invulnerable" (or a high degree of adaptability and resistance) child to abrupt shocks (violence, bereavement, disaster and so on). In sociology, at the group level, resilience is used as "the building of "buffering capacity" into society to make it resistant to disaster shocks" (Timmerman, 1981, p. 20), as adaptation capacity of social networks (e.g., to environmental extremes and high hazard), as maintaining and enhancing adaptive capacity of society; some researcher interprets adaptation as a property of resilience, and the other researcher interprets resilience as a part of the capacity to adapt (Klein et al., 2003) "that every society needs during these times of high hazard and climate change" (Alexander, 2013).

(insecurity) in one's social prospects, i.e. the ability to adapt to new conditions, parents experience trauma, the consequences of which affect their children.

Therefore, taking into account these factors is important in the process of developing social support programs for migrant children to facilitate their adaptation to new living conditions. The traumatic experience determines the “social existence” of the child, during which they acquire new personality traits and develop fundamentally new strategies of behaviour (select optimal forms of social interaction for them). Thus, the situation of forced migration for children is a traumatic experience that can have long-term consequences; this indicates their special vulnerability, the level of which depends on the adaptation resource of each child. Therefore, social support programs (first of all training programs) must include resilience, which is inhibited by risk factors caused primarily by forced migration, and promotes protective factors. Resilient youth and children are better able to overcome difficulties, seek and accept support, seek personal control over their lives, set goals, etc. «...Resilience refers to achieving positive outcomes despite challenging or threatening circumstances [...], coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding negative paths linked with risks [...]» (Zolkoski, & Bullock, 2012). Unfortunately, the resilience theory is not sufficiently applicable to the formation of adaptive resources for children of forced migrants.

### CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

A comprehensive analysis of the living conditions of migrant children who underwent spontaneous forced displacement as a result of Russian armed aggression against Ukraine reveals several problems that require detailed study. Changing the place of residence and breaking the usual social ties provoke difficulties in socialization, in particular: adaptation, integration, and acculturation. Ignoring adaptation to a new socio-cultural environment can lead to social isolation. Migrant children face culture shock, ethnic dissociation, and secondary traumatic effects for which neither they nor their parents are prepared. The “social cryptomnesia” phenomenon complicates adaptation, as children try to use old social practices in new conditions, especially in cases where they have problems with socialization.

Based on the analysis of adaptation resources, including sociocultural, economic, and psychological adaptations, it can be concluded that these resources are critically important for the successful adaptation of children of forced migrants to new living conditions. Taking into account such factors as acculturation, stigmatization, culture shock, ethnic dissociation, and secondary traumatic impact is of crucial importance in the development of social support programs by the state for both groups of forced migrants (IDPs and war refugees returning to Ukraine), especially since almost half of IDPs (46 %) live at the expense of the budget targeted cash assistance. These factors provoke the emergence of social trauma in a child too, as they negatively affect his ability to integrate into a new social environment and form new behavioural strategies. The traumatic experience of forced migration has long-term consequences for Ukrainian society, as it increases the vulnerability of children, thus changing the nation's life strategies from a historical perspective.

Of the above, it is necessary to pay attention to the need for further studies of each factor that affects the adaptation of children of forced migrants to understand their interaction and relative importance. Examining the specific strategies used by children and their families to overcome adaptation difficulties, and the effectiveness of these strategies in different contexts, would provide a fundamental basis for analyzing the long-term consequences of forced migration of children. Further research in these directions will help to develop more effective support programs that will take into account individual needs and contribute to the successful integration of children of forced migrants into a new socio-cultural environment.

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