

In war, there are no beneficiaries

By Stana Buchowska, Regional Coordinator for Eastern Europe and Central Asia

February / March 2022 - War affects everyone. The fallout is inescapable: the country that has been attacked, struggling to hold ground and protect its citizens; the country that is attacking, with its own people struggling to make sense of the chaos being done in their name; and neighboring countries, struggling with unprecedented number of refugees. Other countries also suffer, as uncertainty and fears become heightened. Regardless of nationality, allegiances and geopolitics, the ones who are truly facing the consequences of these difficult times are the children.

ECPAT has members in Ukraine and in neighboring Poland and Moldova—all reporting of the heightened vulnerability that children across the board are being exposed to.

Citizens of Russia are suffering and will suffer from the unprecedented restrictions. This war, waged in their name, will take them back to a time, many would never envision. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are losing their ability to speak, the little power they had to help. Sadly, it is a rapidly shrinking space and in these fraught times, hardly any remain. Any day now legislation will be imposed, that will classify those receiving any support and grants from international organization and institution, as “foreign agents”. When this happens, not only will subsidies for them be stopped, but these organizations and their operations may even be made illegal.

Who will support children in need? Where will these people, who have dedicated their lives to helping children go? Are they supposed to just sit by and ignore the fact that children need their help? It isn't just within Russia. Russian CSOs, also those working with children, are gradually being rejected from numerous international networks. This issue is widespread. This rapid reaction in the international NGO space needs, at the very least, a second thought. What about their stakeholders? How will the lives of the children that they work with? I am proud that ECPAT did not join these rejections. As I told to our Russian member Stellit's representative: “family is a family, doesn't matter what's going on around”. Despite the turmoil, their first question was: “How is Tatiana in Odessa doing”?

Tatiana is a leader of our member organization “Faith – Hope – Love” based in Odessa. She is a tough woman. As a psychologist she used to work with the police. During our conversation, she kept smiling, but her voice was breaking from time to time. They continue their work, regardless of the conditions, regardless of the chaos, surrounded by the imminent threat and sounds of bomb alarms. They are providing a psychological support to children and their mothers, in bunkers/shelters.

“Do you know what the most important thing is needed in our work now?” Tatiana asked me. “It's a smile! We greet all the children that come to our center, in this bunker with a great big smile. No one is smiling anymore in this war. Children pick up on that. We are also training women how to talk to children about war, how to manage lack of security and fear of bomb alarms. All practical skills. We teach them how to survive a long time underground, often without electricity. Three weeks ago, our supplies of a drinking water, food, baby food, drugs, hygienic items, diapers, etc., shrink rapidly. It's better now since received a humanitarian help.”

During our rare zoom conversation with Tatiana, because of the very limited internet access in Odessa, our excellent Russian-English interpreter Olia from a city of L'viv helped us to talk to Guillaume Landry,

Executive Director of ECPAT International. The conversation was cut short by these words that still ring in my ears, she said: “sorry, guys, I have to run to a shelter. I am hearing sirens. There is a bomb alarm.”

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Volunteer work is always rewarding

By Stana Buchowska

City of Poznan, its main railway station, at 22,40. As every evening, the Przemysł¹ - Szczecin train arrives at the second platform. Several hundred people are pouring out of it. Mostly women with children. Children make up more than half of this crowd. Older women, grandmothers or aunts, I suppose. Faces gray with fatigue. One big question mark in his eyes. Where have we gone? What awaits us here? Is this the end of our journey or will we still have to go further? Children clinging to their mother's jacket. Her hands are busy. She is carrying a suitcase and often the youngest child in her arms. Some children, lethargic with fatigue, walk slowly. Some whimper softly. Some cry quite loudly. Many women and children have transporters with pets in their hands. Cats and dogs peek out from behind the bars. Hamsters, guinea pigs and parakeets. Dozens of volunteers are waiting for them at the station. They help to climb the escalator. A children's corner awaits them. Hundreds of pillows and cuddly toys. Hot tea, sandwiches, snacks. Children food. Hygienic supplies. Diapers for children and for adults. Pet food and bowls of water prepared, too. Volunteers take care of children so that mothers can go to bathrooms or find information about a transfer to the next train. Volunteers also lead war refugees to the registration point, direct them to the main reception point at the Poznań Fair, where they can rest, use medical assistance, find accommodation or obtain information where to go next. In the children's corner, we see them busy with various coloring books and building blocks. Soap bubbles and clowns make children laugh most. Yes, we even have a clown among the volunteers.

It is after a midnight. The station is slowly emptying, some people change to other trains, some go to the Poznań Fair reception centre. Volunteers tidy up the places where they work. The children's corner was also deserted. Only a few pillows and blankets left. Most took women and children for onward travel. It's okay, new ones will be delivered tomorrow.

I am coming home, before I fall asleep, the most beautiful children's smiles from tonight flash before my eyes.

¹ Przemysł is a big border city to the border with Ukraine