

briefing

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ROMA WOMEN FUND
CHIRICLI



Monitoring discrimination against Roma with disabilities during the conflict in Ukraine

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has led to massive violations of human rights, with many casualties and millions of people displaced. While Ukrainian journalists and activists have been risking their lives to document the impact of the conflict on the country's civilian population, less has been written or spoken about its most marginalized communities. In order to fill this gap, the International Charitable Organization Roma Women's Fund Chiricli engaged Roma mediators to conduct research in the months following the Russian invasion. Their focus was on the situation regarding human rights violations and discrimination against Roma with disabilities in Ukraine. Chiricli's mediators are Roma who have been trained to improve communication between their communities, their non-Roma neighbours and local authorities, and to promote and facilitate the greater inclusion of Roma in Ukraine.

Publication of this report has unfortunately been delayed due to the present circumstances. Chiricli and Minority Rights Group (MRG) nevertheless believe that the data it contains reflects the many issues currently facing Roma with disabilities in wartime. In truth, the situation has undoubtedly worsened since the research was carried out.

Roma mediators interviewed Roma people with disabilities in communities in the following regions in the east, central, south, west and south-east of Ukraine respectively: Lugansk (in the town of Kreminna), Kirovogradskiy (in the city of Kropivniskiy), Odessa (in the city of Odessa), Zakarpattya (in the city of Uzhgorod) and Zaporizhskiy (in the city of Zaporizhya). The interviews took place between 22 April and 20 May 2022 and were carried out by Michail Mikolaenko, Lyudmila Dorohina, Maksim Dgum, Darina Gorvat and Aleksey Padchenko. Some interviews were also conducted

with Ukrainian Roma refugees in other countries. The mediators completed questionnaires with 72 Roma people with disabilities from the five regions listed above. The age categories of the interviewees – all Roma with disabilities – were as follows: 20 years old – 3.3%; 29 years old – 3.3%; 33–38 years old – 3.9%; 42–45 years old – 4.9%; 49–56 years old – 3.3%; 57–76 years old – 1.6%; the other interviewees did not give their age.

Discrimination against Roma people in time of war between Russia and Ukraine

As a result of this research, the mediators found evidence that Cabinet of Ministers' Decree N°. 335,¹ 'About the Statement of Changes to the State Standard of Care at Home', adopted by Ukraine on 16 June 2021, is often being violated. Specifically, paragraph 1 of Part I specifies that the state administration must provide social care services at home for the following groups of people:

The elderly, including those with cognitive disorders; persons with disabilities, including mental and behavioural disorders (except for persons suffering from mental disorders and committing socially dangerous acts and receiving compulsory outpatient psychiatric care by court order); children with disabilities aged 3 to 18; persons with severe forms of disease (before the disability has been recognized), who are not able (partially incapable) to care for themselves and need constant outside help (hereinafter – the elderly and people with disabilities).

Representatives of the social services department of the state administration must visit the houses of people with disabilities, including children. After an evaluation, service provision must be implemented by the state administration. Moreover, state representatives² must ensure the ongoing monitoring of the condition of people with disabilities and that services are provided for them at home. This provision is included in paragraph 1.4 of Part I of Decree N°. 355. Despite these provisions, services are not reliably provided to people with disabilities in their homes, and there is no monitoring of their condition or any of the services that are provided. The following incidents occurred during the months following the Russian invasion in February 2022 and prior to when the interviews took place.

A 20-year-old Roma woman stated that she had given a birth to child two months before the invasion of Ukraine. When the war began, she went to Poland with her baby while her husband stayed in Ukraine. In early May 2022, the woman returned to Ukraine with her child. However, the child was not registered either in Poland or in Ukraine. The young parents are in despair because they do not know how to prove that the baby is their child and has not been stolen from other people in Ukraine. The state administration will not provide services to this family, discriminating against her identity.³

A blind elderly person from the city of Alexandrovka in Kirovograd region stated that he was trying to register his disability officially at the state level, but a doctor had sent him back to the Medical Commission, which provides the necessary documentation, many times. In his words: 'A lot of money is needed [as a bribe] to apply for disability, but I do not have it. However, as a first step, a social worker is needed who can help with all the tasks of a blind old man.'⁴

A 58-year-old Roma woman was suffering from hypertension. Due to high blood pressure, she felt very ill and could not work. The doctor referred her to a hospital. The doctor also stated that: 'Only after a thorough examination can we talk about registering as disabled.' As she has not reached retirement age, she cannot claim a pension nor any social security payment. She cannot get help to buy the medicines she needs.

An 8-year-old Roma boy overturned a pot of boiling water and scalded himself. The burns have healed, and now the boy needs skin grafts on his face and neck. In the city of Aleksandrovka, it was recommended he should go to the regional medical centre. At that time, the boy's father was injured in an accident, and all the money [the family has] was spent on his treatment. As the boy is not registered as disabled, the family cannot access social security benefits for him. The local social services department does not visit this family, ignoring this problem.

A Roma woman, 36 years old, has severe mental impairment. She is also illiterate and has no ID documents. She lives with a Roma family, helping with housework in exchange for shelter. Her disability is not registered. She does not claim any state social benefits. State representatives of the social services do not visit this house, nor have they registered the woman as a person with disability.

A 63-year-old Roma woman has constant pain in her joints, so severe that sometimes she is unable to stand up. She has seen doctors, but their prescriptions do not help. Now she is using self-treatment (herbal therapy). Her disability is not registered, and she receives no state social benefits. State representatives of the social services department do not visit her.

A Roma man, 75 years old, suffers from varicose veins and needs surgery to remove a blood clot. He is not registered as disabled and receives no state social benefits. He cannot be given treatment, because doctors have refused to see him.

Also in the city of Kropivniskiy is a Roma man who has very bad hearing. His hearing has gradually deteriorated, and now he needs a hearing aid. His disability is not registered, and he receives no state social benefits. State representatives ignore this person and do not visit his house.

A large Roma family has a child with a disability. His disability has been registered but he does not receive state social benefits. The reason for this has not been explained to the family.

In Kreminna, in the Lugansk region, [Russian] soldiers entered a Roma house and searched it, without explaining why. They only stated loudly that: 'You Roma worked with a Ukrainian organization, and we saw photos of your activities on Facebook. Moreover, you were wearing Ukrainian 'vyshyvanka'⁵ shirts on a Roma holiday, and we saw that on Facebook, too. If we find anything in your house, we will arrest you.'

In Poland, in Kraków, 30 Ukrainian Roma refugees⁶ faced direct discrimination which was based on their ethnicity. These Roma women with their children were refused access to housing.⁷ These families had come back to Ukraine. Also, one Roma woman, who was registered in Germany for European financial support, was complaining that the authorities there refused her access to the support she was entitled to.⁸ The reason was explained – that the woman had received some money on a Ukrainian bank card from her friends. That was why the German immigration service refused her in getting of European financial support.

Five Ukrainian Roma families could not cross the border into Poland because the bus drivers refused to take Roma families. They said: 'Oh, gypsies, no, I will not drive you anywhere.'

In Germany, in Stuttgart, in April 2022, 25 Ukrainian Roma, including children, were put into a German shelter. The administration at this shelter discriminated against the Roma, upsetting them and shouting because the Roma children were energetic and played with other children making a lot of noise. All the time, the administration shouted: 'We will kick you all out of our shelter. Your children are idiots. They are very noisy and too active.'¹⁰ In Stuttgart, one social centre in the city invited Chiricli representatives to meetings to help solve the issues regarding temporarily displaced Ukrainian Roma jointly and work out how to overcome the language barrier.

In Oslo, in Norway, a Roma family from Ukraine (with three children) was put in a state hostel with very poor living conditions. The only toilet was outside. It was used by everyone; the doors were dirty and there was only one lavatory. It was very cold and dirty inside.¹¹

In France, in Schiltigheim, in April 2022, two Ukrainian Roma families were sent to a hostel where living conditions were very dirty and poor. The windows were very dirty, the carpets were torn, and the bedding was also not clean. There was no cleaning service for the corridors and rooms. There was only one toilet, the sort where you squat over a hole on the floor. Roma faced problems in communication as they spoke neither French nor English. These families went back to Ukraine. One Ukrainian Roma woman with a child was sent to a French family because the state hostel did not offer appropriate living conditions. Representatives of Chiricli supported this woman with food and hygienic products.

Basic data and statistical information

In relation to gender balance, 43 women and 29 men who had disabilities were interviewed by mediators. Regarding marital status, 18% of Roma with disabilities were not married, 11.5% were divorced, 16.4% were widowed and 54.1% were married. Regarding the question 'What is your education?', 50.8% of Roma with a disability answered: 'No education', 44.3% had secondary education and 4.9% had special university education.

Concerning the question 'Do you work as a professional?', 63.9% of Roma with a disability answered 'No'; 27.9% said: 'I cannot work'; 8.2% said 'Yes'. Asked whether they were looking for a job, 55.7% of Roma with disabilities said 'No'. Mediators said Roma people were very stressed because of the war, and 27.9% of Roma with a disability said, 'It is impossible to look for a job because of the war in Ukraine.' Besides, only 16.4% of young Roma people with disabilities can work, because of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Roma who are retired and have disabilities are especially vulnerable. There are 57.4% of Roma who are retired now; 42.6% of Roma with disabilities do not receive a pension; 77% of Roma with disabilities have poor health currently. Most Roma with disabilities cannot afford to buy medicines and appropriate assistive equipment. Mediators stated that Roma who cannot walk need to buy strollers on wheels which are extremely expensive. Roma who cannot walk cannot afford strollers and stay inside their houses all the time.

As for medical help, 76.2% of Roma with a disability told the mediators that they needed medical help and only 23.8% said they did not. Most Ukrainian Roma people do not trust psychologists, and only 25.4% of Roma with a disability reported needing the help of a psychologist.

The following needs of Roma people were identified as the most urgent in interviews:

- medical help
- help with employment
- health service and medicines
- help with registration to receive a disability allowance
- adult nappies
- sanatorium treatment
- rehabilitation
- food and medicines
- medical treatment and food for children, and
- financial help.

Difficulties with health

Mediators identified certain health issues among Roma people with a disability.

In Kropivniskiy city in Kirovograd region, a woman who was 31 years old stated that after suffering from otitis [ear infection] in childhood, she could hardly hear. Because of her deafness, she was unable to study at a comprehensive school. Therefore, she is illiterate. She speaks with difficulty now. Her disability is not registered. This woman does not receive any state social benefits.

A Roma man, 19 years old, agreed to an interview with mediator Lyudmila Dorohina. He told her that he was from a big Roma family. It just happened that he was in a hospital and doctors informed his mother that he had AIDS. After that, the young man had constant illnesses, and his health deteriorated. His disability was not registered. He does not receive social benefits. Doctors ignore his illnesses and refuse to treat him, because he has AIDS.

A woman who was 41 years old and her four children were temporarily displaced persons within Ukraine. This family came from the Donetsk region. They were placed together with other migrants in a kindergarten in Kropivniskiy. The administration provided them with food and humanitarian aid, but the children needed to see a psychologist. Because of the rocket attacks on the Donetsk region, the children were stressed and had nightmares. They were afraid to sleep, as they were alert and waiting for the rocket attacks.

With regard to the mediators' interviews with Roma people with disabilities, to the question 'Do you have difficulty seeing even if you are wearing glasses?', 15.3% answered: 'Yes, a lot of difficulties'; 66.7% said: 'No, no difficulty'; 16.7% said: 'some difficulties'; and 1.4% said: 'I can't see at all'.

Regarding the question 'Do you have a problem walking or going up steps?', 38.9% of the interviewees replied: 'Yes, we have some difficulties'; 18.1% answered: 'Yes, a lot of difficulties'; 37.5% said: 'No, no difficulties'; and 5.6% said: 'I can't do this at all.' In relation to difficulty remembering or concentrating: 41.7% of those interviewed said that they had some difficulties; 9.7% said they had a lot of difficulties; 2.8% said they could not do it at all; and 45.8% said they had no difficulty.

Concerning the question of difficulties with self-care, such as washing all over or dressing, 19.4% of the interviewees (14 persons) answered: 'Yes, some difficulties'; 2.8% (2 persons) said: 'Yes, a lot of difficulties'; 70.8% (51 persons) said: 'No, no difficulty'; and 6.9% (5 persons) answered: 'I can't do it at all.'

The mediators asked whether in using their usual language in daily life, the Roma interviewed have difficulties in communication: 15.3% (11 persons) responded that they have some difficulties, 2.8% (2 persons) said they had a lot of difficulties; 77.8% (56 persons) said they had no difficulty in communication; and 4.2% (3 persons) answered that they cannot do it at all.

To the question 'Are you registered with a disability identity card in Ukraine?', 44.4% of the interviewees (32 persons) answered: 'Yes', but 44.6% of Roma (40 persons) answered: 'No'. With regard to children among the Roma families who were interviewed, the Chiricli mediators found that 70.8% (51 persons) had children. The ages of the children were: 1 year old, 7–9 years old; 11–18 years old and 21–30 years old. Three families had ten children each, ranging in age from 1 to 37 years old; children older than 15 lived separately. There were 29.9% of Roma (21 persons) who did not have children.

Access to money through pension cards

With regard to receiving money through their state pension card, 41.7% of those interviewed (30 persons) said that they could not access it at all, and 45.8% (33 persons) said they receive money with no difficulty. A further 6.9% (5 persons) receive money with some difficulty, and 5.6% (4 persons) said they received money but faced many difficulties. In response to the question about using the card generally, only 36.1% of interviewees (26 persons) are able to use their card without difficulty; 12.5% (9 persons) said they can use a card with some difficulty; and 1.4% can use the pension card but with a lot of difficulties. A further 5.6% (4 persons) said they could not use a card at all. In addition, 44.4% of Roma people (32 persons) do not have pension card at all.

State social assistance

Mediators also asked Roma with disabilities whether they had been receiving any forms of state social assistance before the war in Ukraine. Of the interviewees, 4.2 % said that they had access to social assistance but with a lot of difficulties; 40.3% said they did not have access to social assistance at all; and 40.3% people said they had access to social assistance with no difficulty. The reasons given for not gaining access to state social assistance were:

- They were not registered for a pension.
- ‘Volunteers help us, but this help is not enough.’
- Answer of one Roma man: ‘I am under medical investigation for the getting of disability group’ (i.e. to be recognized as having a disability and therefore qualifying for assistance).
- ‘I need to register a disability again’.
- Payment delay.

To the question: ‘What other important difficulties do you have today?’, the interviewees responded: ‘financial reason, unemployment and financial difficulties’; ‘treatment and registration of disability’; ‘safety for myself and my family’; ‘medicines and food’; and ‘problems with renting a house’.

Discrimination

Concerning the discrimination faced by many Roma people, the mediators identified that 52.4% of those interviewed encounter discrimination based on ethnicity. As Roma explained, they face discrimination at every level of their lives. Some interviewees said it was very hard to realize their aims if ‘non-Roma understand [or recognize] our ethnicity’. Others said: ‘we had prejudice at work,

prejudice at school and work’. One Roma woman said she was humiliated in the state office of social protection and other places, because she is illiterate. Also, one Roma woman said she had been discriminated against in the health service.

On the question: ‘Do you face discrimination based on any other identity, for example, on gender, health, disability?’, 54.2% of interviewees answered ‘Yes’ and 45.8% answered ‘No’. Those who answered ‘Yes’ said:

‘Doctors have bad attitudes towards me because of my ethnicity.’

‘[I experience] neglect.’

‘It’s hard for me to walk.’

‘Doctors don’t look me in the eye, but I feel dislike, unwillingness to help with something.’

‘My helplessness is very humiliating.’

‘Nobody needs me.’

‘I do not have a registered disability, it is difficult for me to get to the doctor because of my deafness.’

‘I am not literate. I cannot protect myself.’

‘People are reluctant to hire people with disabilities.’

‘Doctors refuse to see me.’

‘[There is] not a good attitude to people with disability.’

'Discrimination is based on financial ability rather than ethnicity.'

'There are frequent refusals which come from the administration.'

'Doctors neglect my problems.'

'I was not hired because of my ethnicity.'

'I am from Kharkiv, and I arrived at the railway station in the city of Uzhgorod because of war. All Ukrainians already were registered and set. State representatives told me to wait for Roma NGOs representatives only. Only they can help you.'

'I cannot see well, and people laugh at me.'

'Doctors do not pay enough attention.'

'I face disrespect, because I am illiterate.'

'Funds are needed for the examination, but the "diagnosis" sounds like "a gypsy", and no one wants to go on.'

'Bad attitude of medical staff.'

'I face discrimination which is based on my sex.'

'I feel bad attitude towards me.'

Conclusions

Generally speaking, in the regions of Lugansk (in the town of Kreminna), Kirovogradskiy (in the city of Kropivniskiy), Odessa (in the city of Odessa), Zakarpattya (in the city of Uzhgorod) and Zaporizhskiy (in the city of Zaporizhya) discrimination against Roma with disabilities is explicit.

Chiricli's mediators were able to record the different challenges facing those Roma with disabilities who kindly participated in the interviews. The local state administrations in Ukrainian, German and Polish cities are open to communication and to dealing with the problems Roma face, but only when Roma and non-Roma mediators are there to defend the rights of Roma communities and Roma with disabilities. Mediators can raise the problems Roma face, drawing on legislation and international human rights standards in order to find the necessary solutions.

Notes

- 1 Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, Order 06/16/2021 No. 335, available at: <<https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z1100-21#top>>
- 2 These comprise of multidisciplinary teams – namely groups of professionals who directly perform activities that constitute social services for home care. Decree N°. 355, paragraph 1.4, Part I.
- 3 This is what the family explained during an interview carried out by mediator Lyudmila Dorohina, in the city of Kropivniskiy in the Kirovograd region in Ukraine. Both the woman and the child have disabilities.
- 4 Interview by mediator Lyudmila Dorohina, in Kropivniskiy, Kirovograd region.
- 5 The embroidered shirt in Ukrainian and Belarusian traditional dress.
- 6 Roma women from Uzhgorod, Charkiv and Zaporizhya. Interviews carried out via telephone.
- 7 Interview with Roma women in Kraków, Poland.
- 8 Phone interview.
- 9 Interview with Roma women in Uzhgorod.
- 10 Interview with women in a shelter in Stuttgart in Germany.
- 11 Phone interview. Complaint of a Roma woman who was sent to the hostel.

working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

Minority Rights Group



Minority Rights Group

Minority Rights Group (MRG) is the leading international human rights organization working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, and indigenous peoples, and to promote understanding between communities. We are guided by the needs expressed by our worldwide network of over 300 partner organizations in more than 60 countries. Together, we challenge power structures that exclude and silence those who are different. We understand how age, class, gender, sexuality and disability can have multiplying impacts on discrimination for minorities.

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Chiricli

International Charitable Organization Roma Women's Fund Chiricli works in the field of protection of the rights of Roma people, in particular those who suffered as a result of the Russian invasion and became refugees and internally displaced persons. The Foundation also protects the educational rights of the Roma community and works on the involvement and visibility of Roma in all spheres of life and activism.

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