

Podcast Series: Forced Labor and Migration



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People with disabilities as labor migrants

Good afternoon! First of all, I am very grateful that you found the opportunity to share your experience on the topic of people with disabilities as labor migrants. Can I ask you to tell us about the Right to Choose rehabilitation center and how, after the events of February 24, 2022, you were able to evacuate so many people living with disabilities abroad?

- Thank you! For 20 years in a row, there has been a lot of work, and there are a lot of partners, so at the beginning of the war, and for us it began exactly on February 24, because we are from Kharkov, and there were shelling from the very beginning. We heard explosions and did not even believe that it had begun. There were a lot of talks before, it will be - it won't be, they will attack - they won't attack. Incredible. Although partners from other countries warned that the war. But we didn't believe, we said no, it's impossible. For Kharkov and the people, these were very terrible days, because it was not clear what to do, there was panic in the city. There were very long queues in supermarkets, pharmacies, shops did not work, they stopped accepting payments because of cards, they took money only in cash, there were a lot of people at the stations. People with disabilities could not get on the train to leave the city.

And therefore, already on the first day of the war, the board of the organization met, and we began to decide what to do. The board decided that we would create a humanitarian aid headquarters and look for what we can do, because it is very difficult for a blind person in such a situation. There are so many lonely people who have vision loss, they didn't know what to do.

Before the war, we had a press escort service. Our organization, through the Department of Social Policy, carried out these works as public works. We accompanied people with disabilities, the blind. We had a database of almost all the people we helped and we tried to connect. In the early days, it was impossible for the dispatchers to answer everyone, because it was such a lava of phone calls, what to do.

- We posted information on Facebook, and a volunteer international organization contacted us. It was on the third day of the war. They were in England and it was an international team. They offered us their help and immediately said that people needed to be evacuated.
- Unfortunately, we did not have such an experience, we did not believe that the war would continue. We said that there was no need for evacuation, that everything would be over soon. Now we need to help people, and everything will settle down, the politicians will understand, or they will find some common language there. But when we got near the school for the blind in Kharkov, and there were a lot of people there, and the children who were not picked up by their parents, the transport was already not working as it should, then we realized that we would have to evacuate people.
- The first buses that we organized in order to take out with the help of our partners, an international organization. We are very lucky in that we have been working for almost 10 years already with our Polish partners. This fund immediately came to the rescue, because their buses were already waiting at the border of people. They were helped to place them in Poland or go further to their destination in order to look for places.
- We had partners in Lvov who helped us give rest to people, because some buses traveled three days to Lvov, with stops. It was very difficult to move forward. I had to wait. It so happened that our partner network helped, and our situation differed from many others in that we did not take people into the unknown. We already had clear places of refuge, where they were expected, where they were helped, and they could move from what they had experienced and understand something, where they were being taken, what awaited them.
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- The evacuation route was very difficult, it is even very difficult to imagine. Thank you very much for sharing your experience. Tell me, please, and after the evacuation, perhaps you know whether there are difficulties in other countries for people with disabilities, including regarding their employment?
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- The whole problem is that even healthy people find it very difficult to find a place to work, especially people with disabilities. The first problem is the language barrier. People do not know a foreign language. Even English is at a very low level. And most people were evacuated to European countries, where other languages are German, Polish, Dutch. Until a person masters the language, it is impossible to get a job. For example, in Germany, blind people need to take courses. And the course is not less than six months. They must take language courses. But there are people who came to Germany in March 2022 and still cannot receive integrated courses adapted specifically for people with visual impairments. I only know a few students. These are units. And such courses give the lowest level of language proficiency, that is, knowledge at the household level, to go to the store, to the hospital. This is not enough for employment.
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- We understand that we were not expected and were not ready to receive so many people from Ukraine and so many people with disabilities. Potential employees among people with disabilities, they are very dependent, they do not know how to navigate in space, they have an almost zero level of mobility, they cannot leave on their own, and this is understandable. They ended up in a foreign country, they do not know the space, they do not know the infrastructure, transport, they do not know the language to address those who are nearby, where to go, how to get to this or that place.

- - The fact is that in Ukraine, unfortunately, there are very few mobility trainings, schools for the blind do not train them to move independently, there is no such system. This question was raised before the war.
- - It is important to prepare the blind for independent use and already independent mobility. In Berlin, when I met with one leader of the German Society for the Visually Impaired, he complained to me that your people were not independent. I really see that in Germany they walk by themselves, they walk with dogs, no one accompanies them. All in wheelchairs on their own in trains. It was very strange for me at first. Now I see that the entire infrastructure has been adapted, trams, buses, trains have been adapted. Ramps descend, people travel.
- - I said yes, indeed, they are not independent. But we need to solve problems, let's help. And in September, we held large mobility trainings for 40 people. We invited about 10 trainers from Poland, people who develop the ability to use mobile applications on mobile phones that help to navigate at stations.
- - But this is not enough, although it helped people a lot.
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- - - Thank you for the problems identified and for what you are doing. What else do you think can be done to counter these problems or alleviate the situation?
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- - - We will now try to make online German courses for our refugees who recently evacuated, because we evacuated the last two days ago. This is a small group.
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- - Language courses are very hard to get. In different lands, everything is different, they take different places. Some are distributed to the countryside, where there are no special workers, where there are no interpreters, and this is a very difficult problem. You know, when I was in Germany before the war, it was so rose-colored for me that everything was much better. than ours. But, unfortunately, Germany has a lot of problems with people with disabilities, its Germans, and here we are.
- - There are more than 10 million people with disabilities in Germany and 7.5 million with severe disabilities. Despite the fact that the state has a law, enterprises must, if they have more than 20 employees, employ people with disabilities, this is not being done. They didn't get that five percent. They don't have many vacancies.
- - A lot of problems with the confirmation of disability.
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- - - What do you think, can something, for example, the state do to mitigate these listed effects?
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- - Unfortunately, we have not received any help from the state, from the consulate of Ukraine.