

Hungary: the importance of mental health and psychosocial support to refugees and displaced people – one mother’s story of a life upended through the Ukraine war



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In normal times, Maria Bilovodska runs a successful fashion brand in Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital. These are not normal times. In the registration centre of Hungary’s Beregsurány border crossing point, Maria looks tired and pale after her long journey. Sitting in a low chair, surrounded by other exhausted-looking families, she is waiting for a bus that will take her and her 2 children, Miron (13) and Maria (8), to Budapest, and then on to France where she has a sister. The children are silent, taking in their new reality.

Speaking with WHO in Hungary, Maria shares her company’s Instagram page. It shows photos of models wearing the glamorous outfits they used to export to Canada and throughout Europe. Over just a few days, the bombardment of her city has forced her to shut up her business and flee her country.

“Here in Hungary, there is no bombing, no noise, and it is much less distressing for the children. It’s so good to feel calm and safe,” she says.

After arrival, when they have rested and eaten, refugees are given information on where to access medical aid, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and COVID-19 tests and vaccination. The registration centre refers refugees to dedicated specialists who can provide adults with psychological first aid, a humane, empathic and practical form of support, and help children come to terms with the distress of having to leave their homes. Those who wish to can

stay for several nights until they move on.

Maria says she is being well cared for and now has all the information she needs to support her family on the next stage of their journey – though she cannot stop thinking about her friends and the rest of her family trapped back in Ukraine.

As she shares videos of the destruction, her composure briefly cracks and she begins to cry. Many of her friends are living in cities currently encircled by the Russian military. “I tell them, please leave, and they say, ‘We can’t – we can’t get safe passage.’”

Collecting herself, Maria talks about her next steps. Though she is heading to France, she wants to return to Ukraine as soon as possible to restart her business.

“We were never in need before. We had a good standard of living, we were earning money, we never planned for any other kind of life. Now we are forced to leave. I really hope we will have a place to return to, our own city.”

WHO has deployed an MHPSS expert to Hungary who is working with local nongovernmental organizations to protect the mental health and psychosocial well-being of refugees and humanitarian workers. WHO is also working hand in hand with the Government of Hungary to offer training and translation of MHPSS international guidelines.

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