

How much does it cost to have a better life?

Conference in Katowice about the Euro-orphans phenomenon

“Euro-orphan” is a quite new name for a phenomenon which exists for decades. It describes those children, who are left behind because one or both of their parents move to Western-European countries for a better salary, for work, for a dream, or a better life. But families, and especially the children concerned, are paying too high a price for better material conditions – warn field workers and experts who gathered from Poland, Slovakia, Portugal, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Germany, and Austria at Katowice between 17-19 April 2023 to share experiences and raise awareness in this well-known, still underrepresented topic.

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[By definition](#), Euro-orphan or EU orphan is a neologism used metaphorically to describe a "social orphan" in the European Union whose parents have migrated to another member state, typically for economic reasons. The child is left behind, often in the care of older relatives. Such abandoned children may require therapeutic or psychiatric care to cope, still, the impact of this phenomenon on family structures and children's development has not been taken seriously, neither in the West nor in the mother countries.

Although reliable statistics are not available everywhere and the phenomenon is still quite under-represented in public discourse, we know that 3,6 percent of the world population are migrants, in total 28 000 000 people at least. So, it is obvious that numerous children are growing up without parents in Eastern (and to some extent also Southern) Europe. (The international media have dubbed these children “Euro-orphans” so CPCE also uses this term to describe this phenomenon.) NGOs estimate that between 500,000 and one million children are affected by this plight in member states of the EU such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland. Caritas talked of up to nine million “Euro-orphans” in Ukraine, even before the war started there. Of course, the war has also aggravated the situation of the euro orphans.

To address this subject and to raise awareness of it in the CPCE’s member churches, the Council of the CPCE has resolved to support a number of projects in various countries that care for the children and young people affected by this (or related) situation. Together with Gustaw-Adolf-Werk (GAW) and with funds from the Otto per mille programme of the Waldensian church, CPCE supported seven projects - from Portugal, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland, and Ukraine - for a period of three years; some of their representatives came to Katowice to share their experiences and together consider the options for the future.

“A qualitative damage of our European freedom”

„We are here because we invited our partners from several diaconal projects in a couple of European countries. They all work with children who are partly or completely orphans. And one of the reasons why these parents are away is our European mobility. Parents go to work in other European countries and leave their children or family behind. **This is a qualitative damage of our European freedom and the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe wanted to raise awareness on this topic**” – says Oliver Engelhardt, responsible for Church Relations at the CPCE. Enno Haaks, General Secretary of the GAW stresses, “this situation is very difficult for families, where the parent or both parents are working in another country to earn money because of their mother countries' economic situation. Together with CPCE, we are now available to support more projects in this issue. And we are very thankful to do that and trying to continue together to make sense that there is awareness about these issues in our partner churches and in Germany also.”

“Let the little children come to me”

However, the Katowice meeting was less about representative events or impressive speeches, and more about sharing experiences, deepening knowledge, and finding possible solutions in this field. As a guest of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland, we also got impressions about the euro-orphan case through the work of their Diakonia.

The meeting was opened by Bishop Marian Niemiec, who, referring to Jesus' parable of the little children, stressed: the Bible says that we must help the children. Then Wanda Falk, Director of Diakonia Poland, explained how they are present in the affected areas – the whole of Poland is pretty much affected, but Silesia, where our conference took place even more. From here, many people go to Austria for work and the kids who stay in the surrounding villages, have “nice houses and dresses, but they have no fathers”. This leads to depression on both sides, because the children and the wife experience abandonment, while the father can experience depersonalization, as he became only a “money-making machine”, “money bag” or “Santa Claus”. Wanda Falk also emphasized that many children were left behind with mothers, grandmothers, neighbours, or fathers, who struggle with loneliness and a completely new role at the same time.

Since 2010, Diakonia Poland has been running a centre called "Słoneczna Kraina" ("Sunny Land"), which focuses on psychological and legal counselling, addiction treatment, insurance and compensation, domestic violence, and even job applications and CV writing. All these services are free of charge. Here they are in connection with many families concerned by migration and the Euro-orphan phenomenon, and now they are facing a huge number of Ukrainian refugees as well: “800 000 children from Ukraine study in our schools today” - Falk said. The Diakonia Poland is present in many places near to Katowice, including Bytom, which was the centre of the Polish heavy industry until the '90-ies and. On one afternoon of the conference, we had the opportunity to visit this place and learn about the work of a local organisation, the “UNO” street educators’ group.

No money, no future?

As we are walking between the impressive, but abandoned brick-buildings of Bobrek district in Bytom, a teenager boy sits in front of a house, behind a huge pile of wood. The hip-hop he listens to fills the space. “The lyrics are about no matter how hard I am working, I'll never have enough money” - explains our translator, Agnieszka Sababady.

There are many children in this neighbourhood who spend their free time on the streets. UNO coordinators and volunteers work here, with them and among them on the street. "We don't have a centre or a room, we are the guest on their territory" - says Barbara Połuszná, the foundation's coordinator. The children here do not have a good relationship with their parents, and the effects of this can be seen in low self-esteem, poor conflict management and lack of self-confidence. UNO's primary goal is therefore to build relationships with these often stigmatised and marginalised children and to develop their social relationships, self-confidence and independence through activities organised by them.

They also organised a play session for us with local children on the new EU-standard playground behind the houses, surrounded by rubbish. Playing together gives room for lots of laughter, and the locals are happy to answer any questions you may have. This is one way of finding out, for example, that many of the parents of the children here work in Germany and are mostly brought up by their grandparents, but that this is a situation fraught with

conflict and difficulty for all concerned. "They don't really know what their parents are doing abroad, they just know that they'll bring them skates back home," says Barbara Pośluszna.

The price is bigger

The situation of the Euro-orphans is always connected with issues of migration and depends on many other factors, such as the quality of the connection between family members or the time and the distance: how long and how far parents travel for work - says Anna Służewska, child psychologist, our special guest back in our conference in Katowice. The expert emphasized, that this situation has many negative, but also positive consequences for all stakeholders. And this issue is also connected to our imagination about happiness and consumption: "people think if they get more money, they will be happier, so they move abroad for a better salary. But the price is bigger: they are losing their home and became disconnected with their family." The reasons of the leaving are different, but always strong: it can be the hope for better work, salary, following a dream or escaping poverty.

The perspectives of the migrant and the non-migrant family members are different - claims the expert. The positive consequences can be better life standards, better educational possibilities from the kid's perspective, the negative factors are the longing, tough emotions, rejection of the migrant parent, loss of parental control and pedagogical problems. Euro-orphans often have mixed or ambivalent feelings as well: if the migrant parent was abusive, the child may feel safer because of his/her absence and in this case, guilt may be present for not missing the parent – mainly the father.

"Euro-orphans" come to experience parental love as regular transfers into a bank account or packages of brand-name clothes and toys received in the post. But they lack the close company of their parents. Skype images are a poor substitute for kisses and cuddles. It's no exaggeration to describe this experience as traumatising for these children, as it deprives them of the affection that sets them up for later in life. The risk also exists that being "abandoned" this way makes children susceptible to exploitation (sexual abuse, etc.), insufficient medical care and depression, so psychotherapy should be a priority in these cases.

New concept, old problem

"It is an important topic and we, in Slovakia don't talk about it as a real problem. We have learnt from this project a very new perspective. I think that we were not aware, how this 'lifestyle' affects the life of the families, and this project helps us to think and talk more about it in different platforms. Not only church platforms, but also other platforms, which also deal with the well-being of kids and with social projects" – says Marek Ilenin from the Slovakian "Relevant" organization, which is working with children and young adults who were raised in children's homes.

"The concept is new, but the problem is old" – emphasizes Sandra Reis, president of the Presbyterian Church of Portugal. "Migration is in our own history since ever, so this is something very common. Portuguese always travelled abroad to find a better life, to Brazil, to France, to Switzerland, to Luxembourg or to Germany. Until a few years ago, this was something like a normal thing to us. The way, how life happened: if you want to have a better life, you have to go abroad for work. Only the kind of migration is changing. The people are not just going abroad for a few months. Now they go and they never come back. They often start a new family in another country. Children are left behind, escape poverty but totally lose the contact, the relationship with their parents. So, the question is, how much does it cost to have a better life?" - Sandra Reis raises the question.

The participants of the conference, representing the various countries and organisations of the CPCE member churches, enriched the two-day conference with a wealth of experiences. In these joint discussions, the issue of the responsibility of Western countries, the under-representation and elusiveness of the subject, the situation of children who remain in the mother country without an adult carer, alone or with older siblings, were raised. Every situation is different and requires different responses, but one thing is certain: we must continue to pay particular attention to this issue.