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Public Library Services for Ukrainian Refugees in Hungary and Poland

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Introduction

This study investigates how public libraries in Hungary and Poland are responding to the influx of Ukrainian refugees. Both countries had a very limited intake of refugees during the humanitarian crisis in 2015-2016. However, because of the Ukraine-Russia war, and due to their shared borders with Ukraine, Hungary and Poland have become initial host countries for large numbers of Ukrainian refugees (UNHCR 2022). Most of the refugees from the Ukraine are women and children and many are likely to stay in the countries for the foreseeable future (UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe 2022). As public information and cultural institutions, how are libraries responding to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in their communities? An emerging body of research indicates that public libraries can play important roles in the integration of refugees (Grossman et al. 2021; Johnston 2019; Johnston and Audunson 2019; Koscieljew 2019; Lloyd 2017; Pilerot 2018; Vårheim 2014, 2017; Witteveen 2016). Hungarian and Polish libraries with little refugee service experience have suddenly had to respond to an influx of users with very different needs from the domestic public. Insights from the field indicate that libraries in the two countries are rapidly developing their services to meet the urgent needs of the refugees and of their local communities as they grapple with the dramatic changes and resulting challenges. How do they grapple with this situation?

Research Questions

Drawing upon a theoretical and conceptual framework social sustainability, this study elicits the overarching investigation through the following research questions:

- What roles are libraries playing in the broader response?
- What specific types of programs and information services are they developing and what types of partnerships are libraries forming, if any?
- What are the implications for library management and staff and their professional responsibilities and/or competencies?

This research will provide insights into how libraries' work relates to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 10 Reduce Inequalities and target 10.7 that focuses on the facilitation of orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people; SDG 11 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, especially in

relation to Target 11.7 and the provision of safe and inclusive public spaces for, amongst others, women and children; and SDG 16 Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations n.d.).

Methodology

This study employs an inductive, mixed-method approach. Previously unanalyzed results from a 2018 questionnaire sent to library professionals provide a starting point for the study. The questionnaire was part of *The ALM-Field, Digitalization and the Public Sphere (ALMPUB)* project that was financed by the Norwegian Research Council's KULMEDIA Program. As will be discussed, the results show that library services to immigrants and refugees have been minimal in the two countries, yet – as previously stated - insights from the field indicate that this is an area under rapid development. In order to gain an insight into how these services are being developed and the role that libraries are playing in the overall response, interviews will be conducted during October and November of 2022 with library professionals in both countries. Interviews will be conducted with four public library staff or managers with direct responsibility for providing services to refugees, a regional library leader, and a library leader at the national level.

The findings from the study will be relevant to library management and staff internationally who are working with services to immigrants and refugees as well as immigration workers and policy makers.

Research Results and Discussion

As this is research in progress, only the findings from the 2018 questionnaire will be presented in this extended abstract.

The total number of questionnaire respondents was 1448 with 639 from Poland and 809 from Hungary. The overwhelming majority of respondents were female (91.4%) with an educational background in LIS (79.3%). Nearly all of the respondents (95%) indicated that they do not have an immigrant background.

Librarians were given a list of 15 professional responsibilities and asked to indicate on a scale from 0 (not important) to 10 (very important) the importance or centrality of each responsibility to their daily work. The majority of Polish librarians (53.9%) and vast majority of Hungarian librarians (69.3%) scored *professional responsibility for services to immigrants and/or refugees* as zero, or not important (Figure 1)

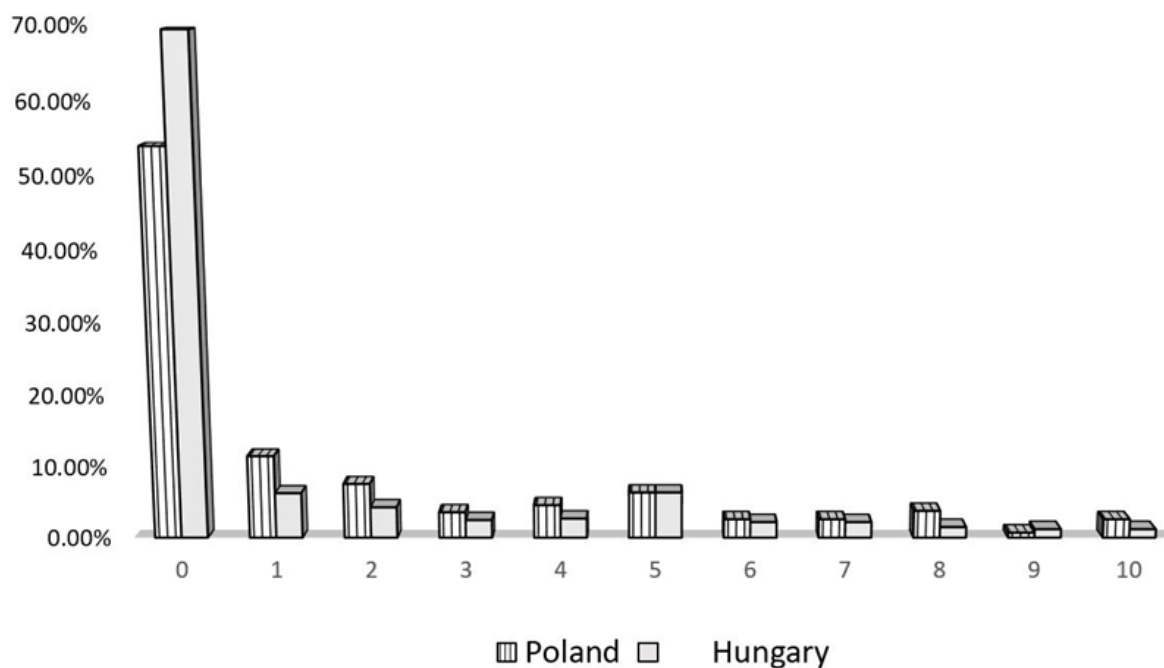


Figure 1. Services to immigrants and refugees by Country (in percentages)

Librarians were then asked how they perceive their role as professionals in their local community in relation to those of related professions. They were given a list of 25 roles and asked to indicate on a scale from 0 (very little) to 5 (very high) the degree to which each of the roles corresponded to their work. *Integration consultant* was the main role of the 25 that related to services to immigrants and refugees. The mean score for *integration consultant* in Hungary was 2, making it the third lowest ranking role of the 25, and in Poland was 2.4, tying it with archivist and interior architect/decorator as the seventh lowest ranking role.

There is some geographical variation in the results concerning how librarians scored *professional responsibility for services to immigrants and/or refugees* and the role of *integration consultant* (Figure 2). The findings from Poland indicate that *professional responsibilities for services to immigrants* scores slightly higher amongst respondents in larger communities. In Hungary, respondents' scoring of these *responsibilities* is relatively low across all community sizes; however, in contrast to Poland, they are scored slightly higher by respondents in smaller communities than by those in larger communities.

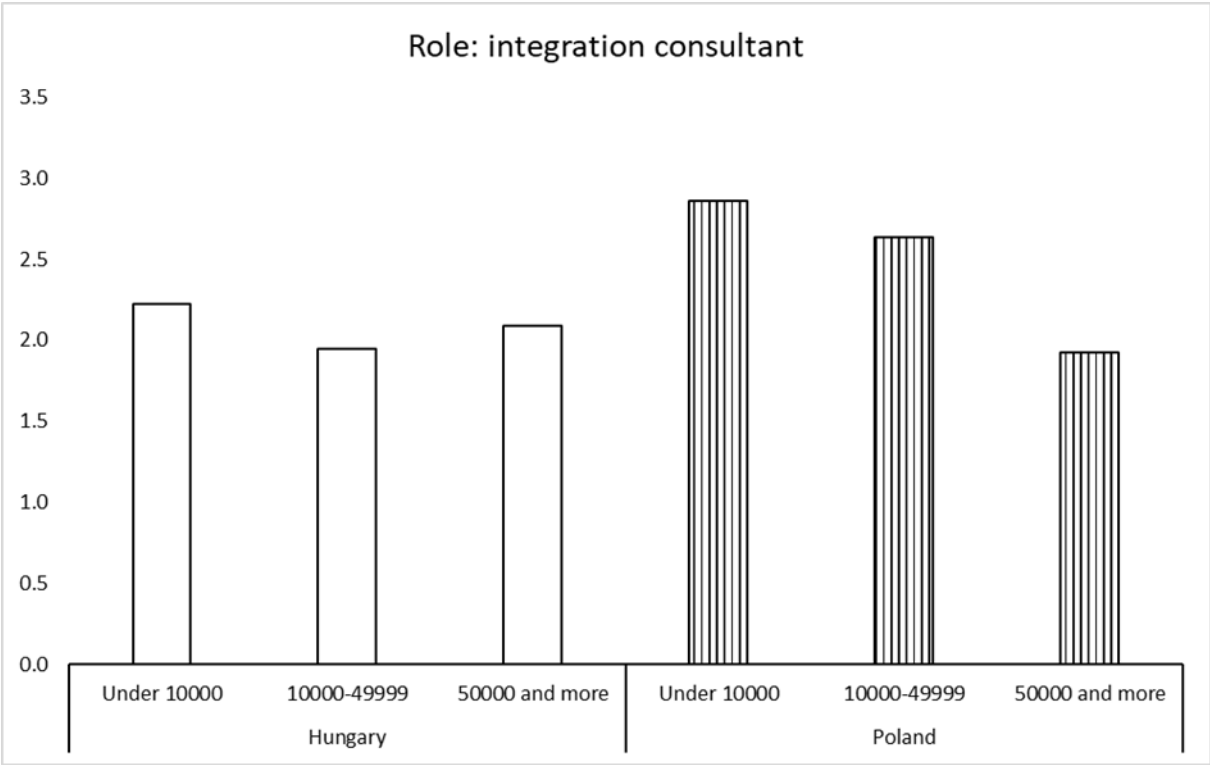
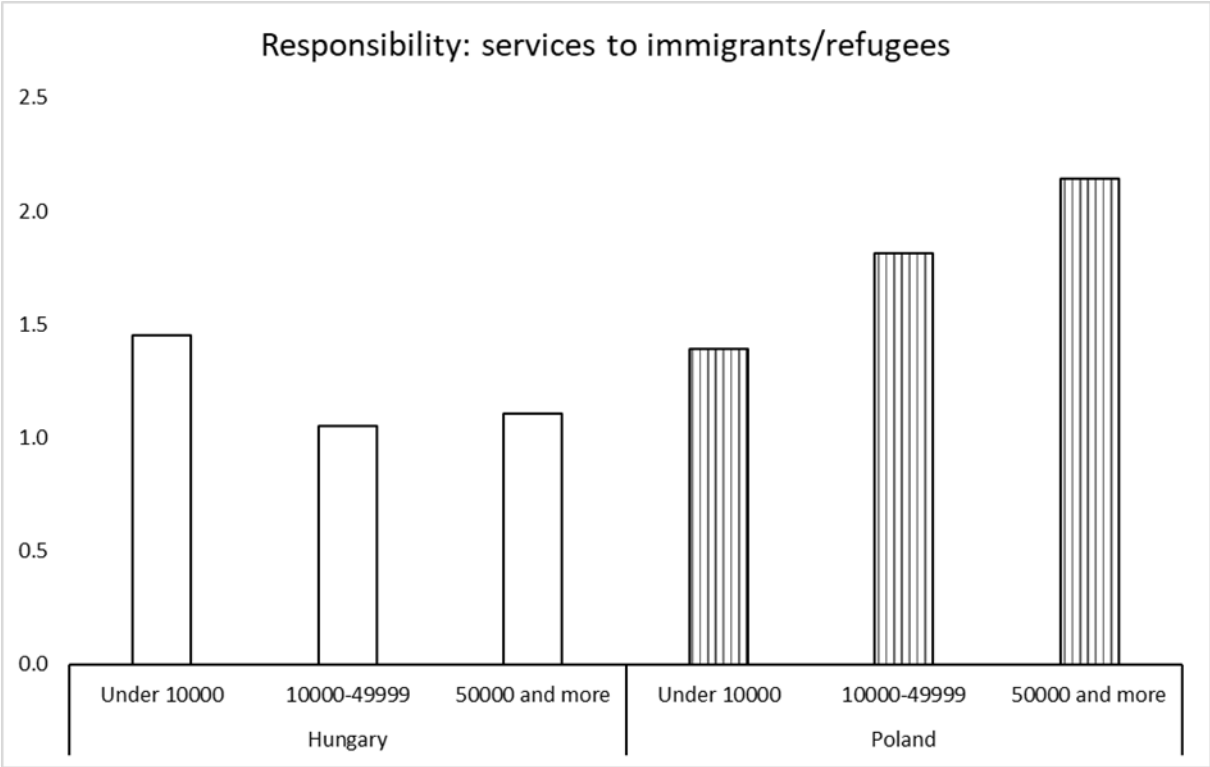


Figure 2. Professional Responsibility for Services to Immigrants and Refugees and Role of Integration Consultant according to community size (Mean scores)

In Hungary, the role of *integration consultant* scores moderately across all community sizes, whereas, in Poland, the role scores higher as the community size decreases. The findings from Hungary related to the role of *integration consultant* should be considered with some caution as integration policies in the country are generally focused on socially excluded groups,

minorities such as the Roma, rather than on international immigrants (Lulius Rostas & Adrienn Kovacs, 2021).

Interestingly, librarians in larger Polish communities indicate to a greater degree that library services to immigrants and refugees is an important part of their professional responsibilities whereas librarians in smaller communities indicate to a greater degree that their role is similar to that of an *integration consultant*. This suggests that libraries in larger communities have developed more formal services in this area while in the smaller communities the staff work more informally.

Lastly, the librarians were asked if certain services related to libraries serving as public spaces are offered by their libraries and if these services play an important or marginal role within the library’s service portfolio. The service most closely related to the integration and support for immigrants and refugees was conversational-based programs, such as language cafes (cite).

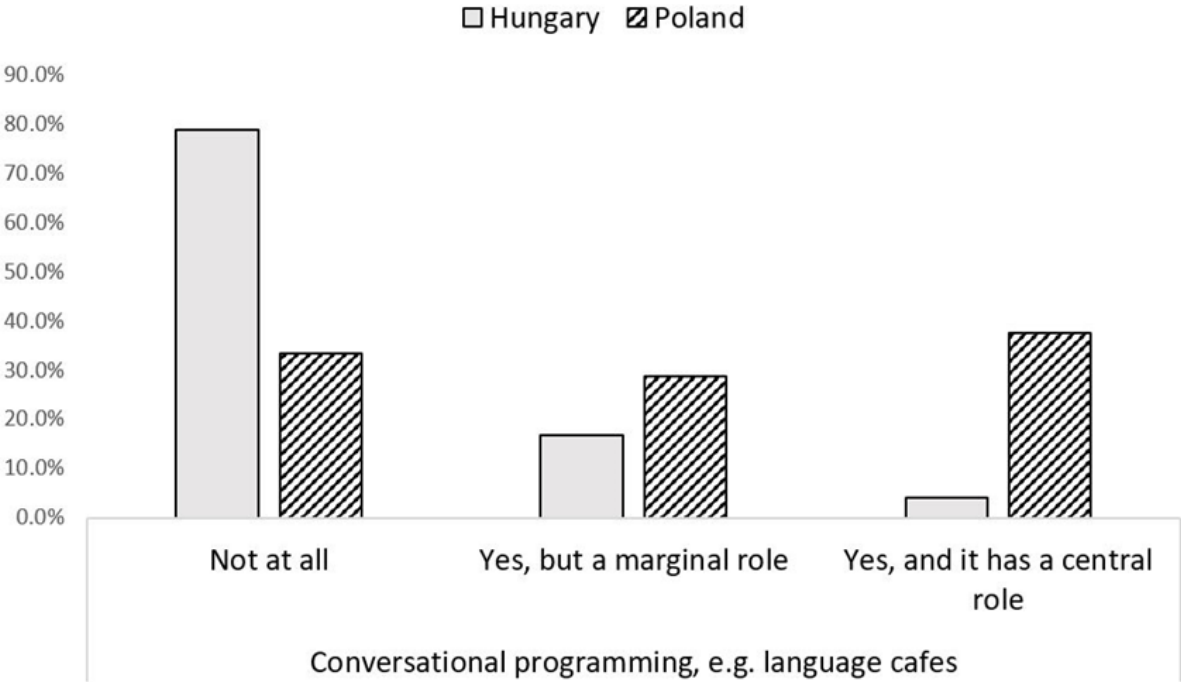


Figure 3. The importance of conversational programming among investigated countries (in percentages)

Altogether, less than a fourth of the respondents’ libraries in Hungary offer these types of programs and they only play a marginal role in the majority of cases. A little over a third of respondents in Poland indicated that these programs play an important role in the library’s service portfolio and a little under a third indicated that they play a marginal role.

Conclusion

The findings based on quantitative data indicate that services to immigrants and refugees have been minimal in Hungarian libraries, whereas work in these areas has occurred to a somewhat greater degree in Polish libraries, though still relatively moderate. Upcoming interviews will provide insights into the ways that these services are developing and the roles that libraries are playing in the overall response to the humanitarian crisis occurring in the region. It is also anticipated that insights will be gained concerning service provision to the diverse groups making up the refugee population.

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