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MAP4Fostercare

WORK PACKAGE 2

RESEARCH

COMMON REPORT



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1. Introduction

The MAP4Fcare project is an EU-funded initiative aimed at improving the foster care system by addressing the needs and experiences of foster parents, children, and other stakeholders involved in the process. The project seeks to enhance support and training provided to foster parents, ensuring better outcomes for foster children across different cultural and institutional contexts within the EU.

The main objectives of the MAP4Fcare project are:

1. To review and assess the current state of foster care systems in participating countries.
2. To identify the needs and challenges faced by foster parents, children, and professionals involved in foster care.
3. To develop and implement improved training programs and support mechanisms for foster parents.
4. To foster collaboration and knowledge exchange among EU countries to enhance the overall quality of foster care services.

Work Package 2 (WP2) is a critical component of the MAP4Fcare project, focusing on the enhancement of adult education through the development of inclusive educational content for foster parents. WP2 aims to align with the overarching objectives of the project, which include creating upskilling pathways and improving accessibility to adult education. This work package seeks to provide qualitative data on foster care practices, contributing to guidelines and training for foster care parents and professionals. Additionally, it aims to enhance current training programs and promote experience exchange among parents.

The key aims of WP2, as outlined in the project indicators, are:

1. To demonstrate qualitative data on the parental aspect of foster care practices
2. To develop and evaluate educational content for foster parents
3. To contribute to adult education
4. To support current training programs.

The insights gained from WP2 will inform the development of tailored training programs and support mechanisms for foster parents, ultimately contributing to the overall objectives of the MAP4Fcare project. By ensuring that the data collection instruments are robust, culturally sensitive, and relevant, WP2 lays the foundation for meaningful and actionable findings that can improve foster care practices across the EU.

2. Foster Care Practices

2.1. Overview of Foster Care Systems

In **Türkiye**, foster care was introduced in 1961, but for many years, institutional care remained dominant due to societal perceptions that foster care was merely a step toward adoption. Efforts to expand foster care intensified after 2011 with the establishment of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, leading to a rise in the number of foster families. By 2021, the country had made significant progress, yet there remains a focus on further professionalizing foster care services with greater involvement from NGOs and the private sector.

In **Romania**, foster care operates under a comprehensive legal framework, primarily governed by Law No. 272/2004, which emphasizes alternative care for children in vulnerable situations. The placement of children into foster care or residential services is strictly regulated, with decisions made by public authorities based on the child's best interests. Both public and private sectors can provide these services, with the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption overseeing the system and ensuring adherence to quality standards.

Croatia defines foster care as a non-institutional and temporary form of accommodation for children and adults. While the system includes clear guidelines and multiple laws, the Croatian Institute for Social Work is key in managing and training foster care providers. Despite its temporary nature, most children remain in foster care until adulthood. Croatia also emphasizes the professionalization and regional coordination of services to improve care quality and foster family support.

The foster care systems in Türkiye, Romania, and Croatia share common goals but differ in their legal frameworks, historical development, and structural organization. All three countries aim to provide alternative care to children in difficult circumstances, prioritizing the child's well-being and development in a family-like environment. However, their approaches differ based on historical contexts and specific legal regulations. For instance, Türkiye faced challenges due to societal perceptions of foster care as a path to adoption and initially saw slow growth until institutional reforms in 2011. In contrast, Romania's system emphasizes a strict regulatory framework under Law No. 272/2004, focusing on various forms of alternative care, such as maternal care, family-type homes, and residential services, all within well-defined minimum quality standards. Croatia's approach stands out with its reliance on a decentralized foster care system, supported by specialized foster care teams in each county, and an emphasis on comprehensive ordinances that regulate training and support for foster parents. While all three countries share the goal of promoting children's rights and protection, the involvement of foster care professionals and the integration of public and private entities vary, reflecting each country's distinct strategies and institutional setups.



2.2. Types of Foster Care

Romania

- 1. Placement with a Person or Family:** This includes placement with extended family members (up to the fourth degree) or individuals from the child's social network, like family friends with whom the child has formed an attachment.
- 2. Placement with a Professional Maternal Assistant:** A temporary protection measure designed to last until the child is reintegrated into their biological family or adopted.
- 3. Placement in Licensed Residential Services:** These are family-type homes or apartments, structured to provide a family-like environment while meeting quality standards.
- 4. Emergency Placement:** A temporary measure for cases of abuse, neglect, abandonment, or other critical situations. This is managed and altered by the court when needed.

Türkiye

- 1. Kinship or Close Environment Foster Care Model:** Involves relatives or individuals from the child's immediate circle, such as family friends, or neighbors, providing care based on pre-existing relationships. Caregivers are encouraged to participate in basic parenting training.
- 2. Long-term Foster Care Model:** Designed for children who cannot return to their biological families in the short term. Caregivers are expected to undergo basic foster care training to support the child.
- 3. Temporary (Emergency) Foster Care Model:** Short-term care provided for children in urgent need, typically lasting up to one month. Caregivers often receive specialized training.
- 4. Specialized Foster Care Model:** Focused on children with special needs or significant challenges. Caregivers in this model typically have higher training or relevant professional qualifications.

Croatia

- 1. Traditional Foster Care:** Provided by individuals or families who meet all the legal requirements and have their own source of income. Traditional foster parents can accommodate up to three children (or two if single)¹.
- 2. Kinship Foster Care:** Provided by immediate family members like grandparents, aunts, uncles, or older siblings. Kinship foster parents receive compensation for the child's living expenses but not for their caregiving work.
- 3. Foster Care as a Profession:**
 - a. Standard Foster Care:** Offers care and accommodation for either children or adults. Caregivers receive financial support and social benefits.

¹ The traditional foster parent also has the right for compensation of the child's living expenses (maintenance allowance), but also the right to compensation for the work of the foster parent.



- b. **Specialized Foster Care:** Offers specific support for children with behavioral issues, disabilities, or severe illnesses. Caregivers are entitled to pension and health system benefits and must provide accommodation for at least three beneficiaries.

The foster care systems in Romania, Türkiye, and Croatia share commonalities, such as the emphasis on ensuring the well-being of children and the provision of various types of care based on individual needs. All three countries recognize the importance of kinship placements, allowing children to stay with relatives or individuals from their social networks, which helps maintain familial ties and support systems. Additionally, they provide specialized foster care options for children with specific needs, highlighting a commitment to tailoring care to each child's circumstances. However, differences emerge in the categorization and implementation of these care types. Romania distinguishes between emergency placements and various residential services, emphasizing legal frameworks for temporary and permanent placements. Türkiye has a broader classification, with distinct models for kinship, long-term, temporary, and specialized foster care, focusing on the caregivers' training and relationship with the child. In contrast, Croatia combines traditional and professional foster care, emphasizing the qualifications of foster parents and allowing for a compensation system for both traditional and kinship caregivers. These differences reflect the unique cultural and legal contexts within each country, shaping their respective foster care systems while striving to protect and nurture vulnerable children.

2.3. Foster Parent Recruitment

Eligibility Criteria

Croatia

To become a foster parent in Croatia, applicants must meet the following criteria:

- Be of legal age and have work capacity.
- Be a Croatian citizen or a citizen of a member state of the European Economic Area or the Swiss Confederation with permanent residency in Croatia. Citizens of third countries may also apply if they meet additional conditions.
- Be younger than 60 years old unless continuing to perform foster care or if fostering as a relative.
- Have completed at least a high school education, unless fostering as a relative.
- Have completed the necessary training to become a foster parent unless fostering as a relative.
- Have no obstacles to performing foster care (e.g., disturbed family relations, health conditions affecting the welfare of the child, or socially unacceptable behavior).
- Meet prescribed housing conditions.
- Obtain written consent from all adult members of the household to perform foster care, unless applying as a single person.

Romania



In Romania, the eligibility criteria for maternal assistants (professional foster parents) include:

- Be at least 21 years old.
- Have completed secondary education.
- Provide moral guarantees for the upbringing, care, and education of children, supported by a psychological evaluation.
- Ensure consent from their spouse and children aged 14 and older living in the same domicile to receive children into the family.
- Reside in a locality with access to educational and medical services for the child.
- Have adequate living conditions that meet the child's needs, including space for rest and homework.
- At least one adult member of the household must have a source of income.
- Hold a certificate of professional maternal assistant.

Exclusion criteria include criminal convictions, mental illness, chronic communicable diseases, and a history of domestic violence.

Türkiye

In Türkiye, prospective foster parents must fulfill the following requirements:

- Hold Turkish citizenship.
- Have permanent residence in Türkiye.
- Be aged between 25 and 65.
- Have at least completed primary school.
- Demonstrate a regular income.
- Not be the biological parents or legal guardians of the child they intend to foster.

Additional documentation required includes:

- Certified copy of educational qualifications.
- Proof of employment and income.
- Criminal record clearance.
- Health report confirming no disabilities or communicable diseases for the applicant and cohabitants.

Foster Parent Training Programs

Croatia

In Croatia, prospective foster parents undergo a basic training program that lasts 40 hours, which includes lectures, workshops, and practical examples. For those caring for children with mental or physical impairments and behavioural disorders, additional training of 6 to 12 hours is required. Annual education is based on the foster parents' assessed needs, with at least 4 hours for kinship foster parents and 8 hours for traditional or professional foster parents.

Romania



In Romania, the training program for maternal assistants includes an initial training course that lasts 80 hours, consisting of 50 hours of theoretical knowledge and 30 hours of practical experience. Maternal assistants must also participate in annual continuing education of at least 32 hours. The training focuses on the conditions of raising and caring for children and is organized by the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection (GDSACP) in collaboration with the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption. Training programs are also available through government initiatives and non-profit organizations.

Türkiye

Türkiye offers a structured training program divided into two levels for prospective and current foster parents. The **First-Level Training Package** covers foundational knowledge about foster care and the psychosocial needs of children in care. The **Second-Level Training Package** focuses on specialized needs for children with complex situations. Although these training programs are organized regularly, many foster parents report challenges in accessing them.

Support for Foster Parents

Croatia

Foster parents in Croatia receive support through teams for foster care and professionals from community service centers. Additionally, various NGOs and civil society organizations offer educational resources tailored to the needs of foster parents. Supervision and annual training are mandated, ensuring ongoing support and professional development.

Romania

In Romania, support for maternal assistants includes financial aid such as foster care allowances, state allowances, and bonuses for special circumstances. The GDSACP provides monitoring and specialized assistance, including social, psychological, and legal support. Maternal assistants are also required to participate in continuing professional training programs to maintain their status.

Türkiye

The Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Services offers various support mechanisms, including:

- Monthly allowances for each foster child, increased for children with special needs.
- Education support at the beginning of the academic year.
- Clothing allowances and healthcare coverage for foster children.
- Vocational training support for children in foster care.
- Extended care for adult foster children pursuing education.
- Social security support for foster parents lacking insurance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Procedure

The methodology for this work package includes a combination of online questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and group discussion interviews ([for a complete list of questions, please refer to the annex](#)). The following outlines the process for each data collection method:

Online Questionnaires

As the leader of the WP2, PUHU prepared a collection of English questions for the primary phase. These questionnaires were reviewed, revised, and adjusted by partners to ensure they were relevant to the target groups, including professionals, volunteers, and foster parents. Partners translated the questionnaires and consent forms into their national languages. They also discussed and implemented necessary cultural and institutional adaptations. After finalizing the questionnaires, partners engaged their associated partners, relevant professionals, and foster parents to collect responses. A pilot test was conducted to ensure the effectiveness of the questionnaires, with a minimum of 15 responses collected for initial testing.

In-depth Interviews

Each partner conducted in-depth interviews with 5 participants, either online or in-person, to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Pilot testing was recommended to evaluate the questionnaires and refine the interview procedure. Interviews were conducted following a structured format to ensure consistency. The focus was on gathering detailed insights into the foster care process from the participants' perspectives.

Group Discussion Interviews

Partners conducted group discussion interviews with a minimum of 3 participants. Ideally, these participants included the same individuals who participated in the in-depth interviews to maintain consistency and depth of understanding. As the WP leader PUHU provided a guideline to ensure the quality and ethical approach essential for ethnographic interviews. These group discussions were audio-recorded to document the process and ensure no significant information was lost. The recordings helped in capturing the nuances of the discussions for a thorough analysis.

3.2. Participant Demographics

Each partner organization distributed online questionnaires to their respective networks, aiming to gather insights relevant to the project. The response rates varied across countries, with Turkey receiving 33 completed questionnaires, Romania collecting 150 responses, and Croatia obtaining 25 answers. In addition to the online surveys, each partner conducted



qualitative data collection through at least five one-on-one interviews and organized focus group discussions to gather deeper insights. These interviews and focus groups provided valuable context and further enriched the findings from the questionnaires.

The data from the online surveys is visually represented in the accompanying graphics for easier comparison. For a more in-depth view of the demographics and a detailed analysis of the responses, please refer to the national reports for each country.

Gender	Croatia	Romania	Türkiye	Total
Male	1	8	3	12
Female	24	142	29	195
Grand Total	25	150	32	207

The table above presents the gender distribution of participants in the online survey conducted across the three partner countries. It highlights the participation of female and male respondents in each country:

- In **Croatia**, 24 female participants and 1 male participant completed the survey.
- In **Romania**, the survey was predominantly completed by females, with 142 female participants and 8 male participants.
- In **Turkey**, 29 female participants and 3 male participants participated in the survey.

Marital Status	Croatia	Romania	Türkiye	Total
Married	18	113	25	156
Single	7	30	7	44
Other	0	7	0	7
Grand Total	25	150	32	207

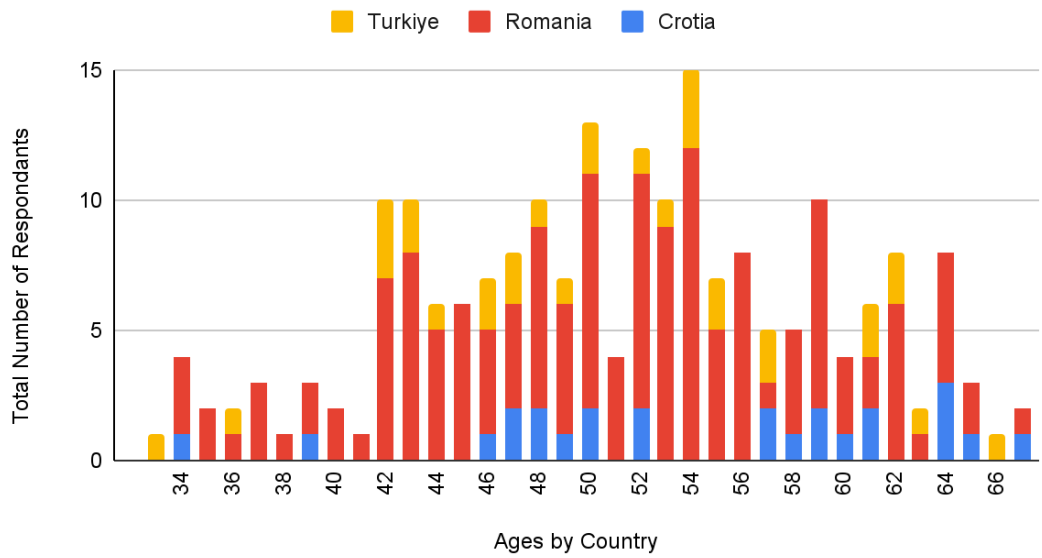
The table above provides an overview of the marital status of participants in the online survey, broken down by country:

- In **Croatia**, 18 participants reported being married, 7 identified as single, and no respondents chose "Other" as their marital status.
- In **Romania**, the majority of participants were married, with 113 respondents. Additionally, 30 participants were single, and 7 selected "Other" as their marital status.
- In **Turkey**, 25 participants were married, 7 were single, and no responses were recorded under the "Other" category.

The grand total column shows the overall distribution across all three countries, with 156 married participants, 7 identifying as "Other," and 44 single participants, totaling 207 respondents.



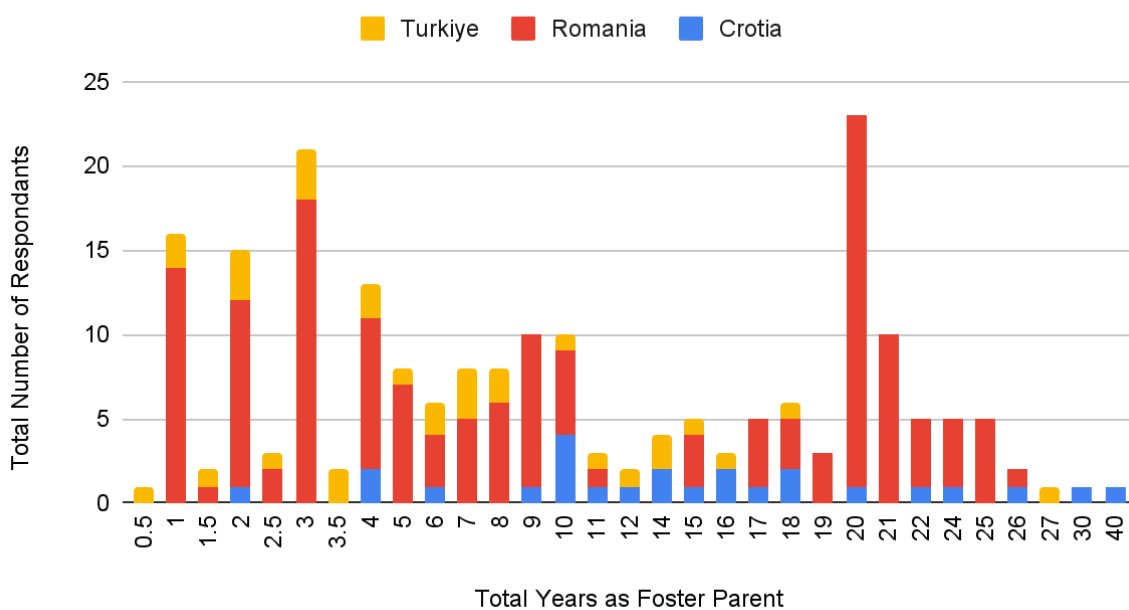
Ages of Foster Parent by Country



Age Distribution of Participants

The graphic displays the age distribution of participants in the online survey across the three countries. It provides insights into the range of ages of individuals who responded to the survey, highlighting any trends or patterns related to age. The data is broken down by country, offering a clearer understanding of the age groups most engaged in the survey.

Total Years as Foster Parent by Country



Years as a Foster Parent

The graphic also illustrates the number of years participants have spent as foster parents. This



data provides valuable context regarding the level of experience and involvement of respondents in fostering. It helps to identify any correlations between the years of experience and other variables in the survey, such as age or marital status, offering a deeper understanding of the fostering experience among participants.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Application Process

4.1.1. Challenges:

Foster Parenting Application and Admission Process

The application and admission processes for foster parenting vary across Türkiye, Romania, and Croatia, reflecting both shared challenges and distinct characteristics. In Türkiye, the process is multifaceted, involving extensive paperwork, psychological assessments, and home visits to ensure suitability. Participants report significant waiting periods, often exacerbated by external factors like the pandemic. In Romania, the application involves engaging with the GDSACP, completing training courses, and undergoing medical assessments before receiving children into care. Long waiting times for open positions are a notable frustration, with one individual reporting a two-year wait. Conversely, the Croatian process is generally described as straightforward and efficient, lasting about 5 to 6 months. Applicants contact the regional office, undergo tests and interviews, and complete necessary check-ups. Many Croatian respondents reported a smooth experience with good professional support, although some noted that the process was previously simpler, lacking the mandatory education now required.

Motivations to Foster

Motivations for fostering are deeply personal and resonate across all three countries. In Türkiye, motivations stem from a commitment to helping children in need and personal experiences, such as childhood instability. Romanian respondents also highlight personal circumstances, including an inability to have children and a desire to impact foster children's lives positively. In Croatia, motivations include a desire to help children without adequate family care, family traditions of fostering, and a sense of purpose.

Challenges Faced

All three reports identify significant challenges faced by foster parents. In Türkiye, emotional crises among children and application delays necessitate resilience and adaptability. Romanian participants noted the emotional and logistical complexities of their roles, including the need for financial and educational support. Croatian respondents, while generally reporting a smoother process, also acknowledge challenges, particularly the emotional burden of fostering.

Support Systems

Support systems are crucial for fostering success across all contexts. In Türkiye, institutional support and community connections, such as the Istanbul Foster Family Association, provide essential resources and encouragement. Romanian respondents emphasize the importance of mentoring and coaching programs. In Croatia, the positive experiences with professional support during the application process indicate that effective support is vital for foster parents.

Training and Preparation Needs

A pressing need for comprehensive training and preparation is evident in all reports. In Türkiye, interviewees call for training on trauma-informed care and communication strategies. Romanian participants emphasize the necessity of educational support, while Croatian respondents highlight the transition to mandatory education as a new requirement. This collective call for improved training resources underscores the shared understanding that effective fostering requires a robust foundation of knowledge and skills to meet the emotional and developmental needs of children.

4.1.2 Support Needs:

Psychological and Emotional Support

In Türkiye, psychological and emotional support was a key area of concern, especially for foster parents dealing with children who have experienced severe trauma. Participants consistently highlighted the need for ongoing psychological assistance, particularly during the early stages of fostering, when emotional challenges were most acute. Many sought help from mental health professionals to manage these difficulties. Similarly, in Romania, there was a strong demand for emotional and psychological counselling for both the foster parents and children. Nearly one-fifth of Romanian maternal assistants reported needing professional psychological support from specialists such as social workers and psychologists. Croatia also echoed these needs, with foster parents underscoring the value of emotional support from social workers and advice from more experienced peers. Across all three countries, the psychological strain of fostering was clear, with a shared emphasis on the importance of professional emotional support.

Operational and Institutional Support

In Türkiye, foster parents voiced frustrations over bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of clear guidance throughout the fostering process. There was a call for more efficient communication and support from social services to alleviate the anxiety surrounding foster care applications and matching processes. Romanian participants expressed similar concerns, describing the fostering application process as lengthy and complicated, requiring continuous support from professionals. Staff support during the payroll procedure and for navigating complex legal and administrative tasks was frequently mentioned. Croatia's findings aligned closely, with foster parents placing significant importance on receiving guidance from social welfare



centers. Despite these shared concerns, Türkiye's report provided a more detailed look into the operational difficulties faced by foster parents, particularly in relation to advocacy and institutional support from social services.

Financial Support and Resources

Financial challenges were a major issue in Türkiye, particularly concerning the costs associated with medical and psychological treatments for foster children. Many foster parents expressed that the financial aid available was insufficient to cover these expenses. In Romania, foster parents similarly reported financial strains, with some noting that they had to bear the costs of medical exams and training fees themselves. There were also requests for reimbursement of these expenses. While Croatia's findings mentioned financial support less frequently, it was clear that foster parents in all three countries faced financial burdens that were often not fully addressed by the available aid. Türkiye's report, however, delved deeper into these financial struggles, especially regarding psychological treatment costs, underscoring the need for increased financial support across all regions.

Training and Preparedness

Training and preparedness emerged as a critical theme in Türkiye, where foster parents highlighted the necessity of comprehensive training programs to better equip them for the challenges of fostering. Specific focus was placed on the need for early training on attachment processes and practical skills, such as infant care. This was mirrored in Romania, where maternal assistants found it difficult to attend training sessions due to childcare responsibilities, pointing to the need for logistical support. In Croatia, although there was less emphasis on formal training, foster parents valued the advice and practical guidance from more experienced foster families. All three countries expressed the need for better training, but Türkiye provided more detailed insights, particularly regarding the practical aspects of child attachment and care.

Community and Networking Support

The importance of community and networking support was emphasized in Türkiye, where foster parents valued connections with others who had similar experiences. Social media and associations played a crucial role in accessing information and sharing support. Romania's findings similarly underscored the role of family and community in supporting foster parents, with many maternal assistants highlighting their reliance on close-knit family support. Croatia also noted the value of peer networks, with foster parents appreciating the advice and solidarity offered by experienced foster families. Across all three countries, the role of community support was vital, with Türkiye's findings offering a broader look into how networking and community involvement, including online platforms, contributed to the success and emotional well-being of foster parents.

4.2. Adjustment Process

4.2.1 Experiences during the adjustment process with the child

The findings from Türkiye, Romania, and Croatia reveal a shared struggle in facilitating smooth adjustments, though the challenges vary in scope and nature depending on the country's context.

Adjustment Challenges and Experiences

In Türkiye, foster parents faced significant challenges during the adjustment process, with many struggling in the initial six months. The online questionnaire findings highlight that while some considered ending the process due to difficulties, positive therapies and support helped them build strong bonds with the children. Past traumas experienced by the children made establishing trust a slow and often painful process. Participants noted that external stressors, such as work-related pressures, further complicated the adjustment. Focus group discussions emphasized that adjusting to young children was generally easier, though habits formed in previous institutional settings, such as eating and sleeping routines, created additional difficulties, especially in managing friendships and social behavior.

In Romania, the adjustment process is framed by the legal standards set forth in Order no. 26/2019, which outlines procedures for the child and the foster family's accommodation. Despite these formal standards, more than half of the professional maternal assistants interviewed reported that there was no preparation or adaptation period with the child they received in foster care. For those who experienced an adaptation phase, this period varied from 2 weeks to 3 months and involved meetings with the child either at home, in a hospital, or in a neutral setting. These experiences highlight the need for a personalized approach, where both the child and foster family can ease into the transition based on their unique circumstances. Many maternal assistants recommended legislative improvements, such as establishing minimum visit requirements and incorporating the child's feedback into the matching process.

In Croatia, the adjustment process also varied significantly depending on the child's age and past experiences. Younger children generally adapted more easily, while older children, particularly those with past traumas or who were Roma, faced language barriers and emotional challenges. A key difficulty was the lack of information provided to foster parents before placement, such as the child's family history and health conditions. Participants stressed the importance of patience, understanding, and open communication to help the child settle into the new environment. In some cases, foster parents found solace in community-organized support groups, although they also expressed frustration over the inconsistent help offered by regional social welfare offices. The process of adjustment was even more challenging when foster parents had no prior support and little guidance from professionals.

Parenting Experiences and Support Needs



Across all three countries, the adjustment phase was complicated by the varied support available to foster parents. In Türkiye, parents often find themselves struggling to manage the emotional and psychological needs of their children, exacerbated by insufficient support from institutions. While some parents, particularly those with experience, were better able to navigate these challenges with external psychological support, others felt abandoned by the system. In Romania, the absence of an adaptation period for many maternal assistants placed additional pressure on them to create a safe and welcoming environment for children, often without adequate guidance. Some assistants emphasized that personal connections with the child, frequent visits, and support from family members were critical for easing the transition.

In Croatia, many foster parents found themselves relying on personal reading and peer advice, particularly in the early years of the foster care system when institutional support was almost non-existent. The interviews revealed that the regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work played a pivotal role in supporting foster parents, although the quality of help varied depending on the knowledge and readiness of individual professionals. For Roma children, the absence of language support compounded the challenges, making the need for culturally aware services such as Roma assistants even more pressing.

Importance of Legal and Educational Support

Legal and educational support proved to be vital yet inconsistent across the countries. In Türkiye, participants identified gaps in both legal and educational frameworks, making the adjustment phase more challenging for parents and children alike. Improvements in these areas could significantly ease the burden on families by providing clear guidance and more robust psychological and emotional support mechanisms. In Romania, legal standards guide the adaptation process, but their inconsistent application across the country led to varied experiences among maternal assistants. Recommendations from these professionals called for clearer criteria in matching children with foster families and a more structured approach to consultation between social workers and families. In Croatia, while legal frameworks were less emphasized, foster parents highlighted the need for better support from social welfare professionals, whose assistance varied widely depending on individual knowledge and commitment.

The adjustment process is a complex and multifaceted experience, influenced by the child's background, the support provided by social services, and the readiness of foster parents. While Türkiye emphasized the emotional and psychological challenges foster parents face, Romania highlighted the legal standards and the need for tailored adaptation periods, and Croatia focused on the role of social welfare institutions in facilitating (or impeding) a smooth transition. In all three contexts, stronger institutional support, clearer legal frameworks, and better communication between foster parents and professionals could improve the overall adjustment experience for both children and families.

4.2.2 Support Issues:

The issue of support, particularly psychological and professional guidance, stands out as a central challenge for foster families across Türkiye, Romania, and Croatia. The findings from these countries reveal both shared struggles and unique obstacles that foster families face

during the adjustment period. Below is a thematic synthesis of these key issues, which highlights the significant psychological and professional needs of foster families.

Psychological Support and Professional Guidance

Across the three countries, psychological support emerges as a critical need for both foster parents and children. In Türkiye, parents reported that emotional and psychological challenges often went unaddressed, with limited access to professional psychological assistance, especially for families with fewer financial resources. The emotional strain was heightened by the need to manage both biological and foster children's psychological issues.

Similarly, in Romania, maternal assistants highlighted the intense psychological demands of caring for children, especially younger ones who often arrived with significant trauma and health issues. The lack of sleep, managing disabilities, and addressing behaviors developed from neglect were frequent stressors. Parents emphasized the importance of psychological counseling and advice, which they found helpful in understanding and responding to the behavioral challenges of foster children.

In Croatia, foster parents also reported a need for professional support in dealing with behavioral problems and managing relationships with biological parents. They expressed frustrations over insufficient guidance from social services, with support often dependent on the specific professionals in their regional offices. While some parents benefited from training and peer support, there was a recognized lack of targeted psychological assistance, particularly during the adjustment period.

Bureaucratic and Institutional Support

Another common issue across countries relates to bureaucratic hurdles and institutional support. In Türkiye, navigating the bureaucratic system, particularly in terms of obtaining information on children's health and education, proved a significant challenge. Parents noted that the lack of clear communication from social services hindered their ability to effectively integrate foster children into their families. The foster parents underscored the need for better institutional coordination, especially when managing children with severe disabilities or behavioral issues. In Croatia, the bureaucratic system presented problems when foster parents had to navigate their relationship with the biological parents of foster children. These complications were compounded by delays and uncertainties surrounding permissions for medical interventions or activities, highlighting the need for clearer guidelines and institutional support.

Community and Peer Support

While professional guidance was essential, the importance of community and peer support was strongly emphasized in all three countries. In Türkiye, many families found solace in community-based support groups, where they could share their experiences and gain emotional support. This sense of solidarity within the community was seen as a key factor in



helping foster parents cope with the emotional and psychological demands of fostering. In Romania, maternal assistants also valued peer networks and shared experiences with other foster families. They expressed a strong desire for structured support groups, which would provide them with a platform to discuss challenges and solutions during the adjustment period. In Croatia, foster parents similarly recognized the benefits of attending meetings with other foster families. These gatherings were seen as more helpful than formal training programs, as they offered a space for foster parents to share practical advice and emotional support. However, not all foster parents had access to such networks, indicating the need for more widespread community support.

Recommendations for Improvement

The findings across the three countries point to several key recommendations for improving support for foster families. First, there is a pressing need for more accessible psychological services, with tailored support for families based on the specific challenges they face. This includes regular counseling for both parents and children, as well as professional guidance on managing behavioral issues. Additionally, improvements in bureaucratic processes and institutional communication are crucial. Foster parents require better access to information on their children's health and education, as well as clearer guidance on navigating relationships with biological parents.

Finally, fostering peer support networks should be a priority, as these provide emotional and practical assistance that is often more impactful than formal training. Governments and NGOs should work to establish and maintain these networks, ensuring that all foster families have access to community-based resources. In summary, while the experiences of foster families in Türkiye, Romania, and Croatia reveal common themes of psychological and bureaucratic challenges, they also underscore the importance of peer support and targeted professional assistance. By addressing these needs, the foster care system can better support families through the critical adjustment period.

4.3. Training and Support Process

4.3.1. Training Details:

Training Content and Structure:

Training for foster parents varies significantly across Türkiye, Romania, and Croatia, highlighting common areas for improvement. In Türkiye, participants noted that training programs often lacked depth in critical areas such as behavioral problems, family dynamics, and health management. Many expressed a desire for training that goes beyond theoretical knowledge, emphasizing the need for practical applications tailored to real-life challenges. In Romania, nearly 60% of maternal assistants reported mandatory training, focusing on general child development, psychosocial aspects, and legislation. While they found the content useful, they also recognized a need for more practical, hands-on training experiences. Conversely, in Croatia, foster parents are required to participate in annual obligatory trainings, with many also attending additional programs organized by NGOs. While



participants generally found these trainings useful, some expressed concerns that the content often did not reflect the complexities of real-life fostering.

Impact of Training

The impact of training on foster parents' preparedness varies among the three countries. In Türkiye, those who underwent training felt better equipped to manage children's psychological needs and trauma. In contrast, Romanian respondents reported that the training helped develop essential skills like communication and crisis management, but there remains a gap in applying these skills effectively in practice. Croatian participants acknowledged that while the initial training is now more comprehensive than in the past, its practical applicability is often limited, with many foster parents realizing the knowledge gaps only when faced with real-life situations involving foster children.

Accessibility and Relevance of Training

Accessibility remains a challenge across all countries. In Türkiye, the optional nature of training limits its reach, with many foster parents missing out on vital opportunities for formal education. Romanian maternal assistants benefitted from mandatory programs but noted variability in the quality and content of trainings provided by different organizations. Croatian foster parents highlighted that the availability of training often depends on local offices' decisions, leading to disparities in the quality of education received. The consensus across the three countries is that training should be made mandatory and tailored to the specific needs of foster parents to ensure all have equal access to essential resources.

Support Systems Beyond Training

Beyond formal training, additional support systems are crucial for foster parents in all three contexts. In Türkiye, participants sought support from associations and peer networks, filling gaps left by formal training programs. Romanian maternal assistants emphasized the value of connecting with peers to share experiences and advice. In Croatia, there is a strong recognition of the need for support and supervision groups, with many foster parents expressing that these groups are even more beneficial than traditional training. They also highlighted the importance of mentorship from experienced foster parents to help newcomers navigate the complexities of fostering, particularly regarding interactions with biological families.

Recommendations for Improvement

Participants across all methods emphasized the need for comprehensive and practical training programs. In Türkiye, there were calls for training that includes more detailed information on trauma management and interactions with biological families. Romanian respondents advocated for continuous and practical training that addresses real-life challenges. Croatian foster parents requested that trainings be organized based on their needs and interests, with a particular focus on improving relationships with biological parents and addressing the unique



challenges faced by foster children. All three countries share a collective desire for more accessible, relevant, and engaging training that supports foster parents in their essential roles.

4.3.2. Community Experiences

The responses from the online questionnaire in Türkiye highlight a diverse range of social interactions among foster parents, with varying degrees of engagement. Many foster parents connect multiple times a year through associations and local events, while others report infrequent meetings, with some not meeting at all. Social media platforms facilitate interactions, allowing for the sharing of experiences despite the rarity of face-to-face gatherings. A similar trend is observed in Romania, where meetings among foster carers do not occur regularly. A significant number of respondents share experiences during training programs or events organized by local authorities, typically held every one to three months. This infrequency is influenced by the proximity of facilities for joint activities. The Romanian foster parents, like their Turkish counterparts, share personal experiences, concerns, and solutions related to child development, echoing the community dynamics found in Türkiye.

In Croatia, community experiences among foster parents also depend on location and existing support networks. Most Croatian foster parents meet once or twice a month in NGOs or community service centers, highlighting the importance of structured gatherings for mutual support. Regular interactions mirror the engagement seen in Türkiye, where associations play a pivotal role in fostering connections. Although some Croatian foster parents participate occasionally in organized gatherings, many maintain ongoing contact with peers, reflecting the significance of informal networks. The insights from interviews reveal that experienced foster parents actively engage in supporting new foster parents, emphasizing a shared commitment to community and mentorship, which aligns with the needs articulated by foster parents in Türkiye for more regular support and structured interactions.

Content of Shared Experiences

Foster parents in Türkiye share a variety of topics during their interactions, with personal experiences and challenges related to child development frequently discussed. Concerns about the conditions under which children return to biological families emerge as a common theme. Similarly, Romanian maternal assistants focus on sharing experiences with behaviors and challenges faced in caring for children, highlighting a commitment to mutual support. In Croatia, exchanges among foster parents encompass a range of topics, including children's progress and guidance on navigating institutional processes. These interactions foster a sense of encouragement and support across all three countries, with an emphasis on sharing practical advice and emotional experiences.

Association and Community Activities

In Türkiye, the establishment and growth of foster parent associations have significantly increased opportunities for collaboration and community engagement. This trend is reflected in Romania, where training programs and events organized by local authorities create platforms for foster carers to connect and share experiences. In Croatia, local NGOs organize



gatherings and trainings based on the needs of foster parents, reinforcing the importance of structured activities for community building. All three countries illustrate the critical role of associations and community events in enhancing the support systems available to foster parents.

Challenges in Social Interactions and Support Systems

While there are opportunities for interaction, challenges persist in all three contexts. In Türkiye, emotional and psychological difficulties hinder active participation, alongside the need for more moral and spiritual support. Romanian respondents express similar sentiments, noting confidentiality concerns and the variability of information sharing among maternal assistants. In Croatia, emotional barriers to participation are also noted, with the need for support and understanding emphasized among foster parents. Addressing these challenges requires tailored solutions that focus on enhancing emotional well-being and facilitating open communication among foster parents.

Recommendations for Improvement

Interview findings across Türkiye, Romania, and Croatia converge on the need for improved training programs that extend beyond basic caregiving skills. Emphasis is placed on trauma-informed care and behavioral management strategies to better address the unique needs of foster children. The establishment of enhanced peer support networks and improved communication channels with government officials is also highlighted as essential for fostering a more supportive environment. The collective desire for more structured support systems reinforces the need for collaboration among associations, institutions, and governmental bodies in all three countries.



5. Additional Insights

In evaluating the adaptation and accessibility of foster care training programs, several key factors emerged across Türkiye, Romania, and Croatia, each country bringing unique insights. Participants emphasized the importance of continuous, flexible training that not only covers foundational principles but also adapts to emerging needs within foster care. In Türkiye and Romania, there was a strong call for standardized resources to promote a unified understanding of core foster care principles and practices. Romanian participants also stressed that structured national guidelines could mitigate inconsistencies, while Croatian participants suggested regionally tailored content, which, by acknowledging local cultural nuances and legal frameworks, can improve inclusivity and foster stronger engagement.

A recurring theme was the critical role of multidisciplinary teams in supporting foster parents. Across all countries, participants highlighted that effective collaboration between foster parents, social workers, and child psychologists creates a holistic support system for foster families. Turkish participants found that training in trauma-informed care, facilitated by these teams, was essential in equipping foster parents with the tools to address complex emotional needs. In Romania, participants recommended that training simulate real-life scenarios to strengthen teamwork and role clarity among foster care professionals. Croatian participants valued the inclusion of firsthand testimonials from experienced foster parents in training, helping new foster parents gain practical, lived insights into the fostering journey.

Concerns over accessibility and affordability were also prevalent. Participants in Türkiye and Croatia, particularly those from rural regions, noted that geographical and financial barriers could prevent many families from fully engaging in training. Proposals included offering online training modules and mobile-friendly resources to accommodate foster parents in remote areas, thereby ensuring equitable access. In Romania, participants emphasized the need for governmental subsidies to alleviate training costs, highlighting that accessible, low-cost training encourages more widespread and sustainable participation.

Lastly, there was a consensus on the need for ongoing research and evaluation mechanisms to keep training relevant and impactful. In Türkiye, participants noted that continuous evaluation enables training to evolve with the shifting socio-cultural landscape, better meeting the needs of foster families and children alike. Romanian and Croatian participants echoed this view, suggesting that regular feedback loops with foster parents could guide adjustments in training content to align with real-life challenges and experiences. Such responsive feedback mechanisms can foster a dynamic training model that grows alongside the fostering community.

6. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the foster care systems in Türkiye, Romania, and Croatia highlights both shared challenges and unique strengths across these national contexts. Each system reveals distinct approaches to fostering, influenced by social, cultural, and legislative frameworks, yet all share the aim of supporting vulnerable children and providing stable environments for their development.

In Türkiye, the evolution of the foster care system, especially post-2011 with the formation of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, underscores a notable increase in foster families and diversified foster care types, including kinship and specialized foster care. Despite these advancements, Türkiye faces challenges related to limited accessibility of training programs for foster parents, financial constraints, and the need for more comprehensive support systems. The feedback from foster parents underscores the necessity of improved training and financial aid, especially for psychological support services, which are often seen as critical yet under-resourced.

Romania's foster care landscape is shaped by clear legislative guidelines, yet there is a call for enhanced training for professional maternal assistants (PMAs). Findings suggest a need for flexible training structures, particularly with online options to alleviate travel burdens for caregivers. Participants in Romania highlighted the importance of mentoring and ongoing professional support, reflecting a need for institutionalized counseling and supervision programs. The recommendations suggest that formalized support mechanisms—ranging from regular supervision to structured counseling—could empower foster parents and improve their ability to manage complex behavioral and emotional challenges in children.

Croatia, facing an aging population of foster parents and a dwindling interest among younger adults, emphasizes the importance of fostering as a respected and supported vocation. Despite some well-organized support in specific regions, there is a significant disparity in services, especially for Roma children who encounter unique linguistic and cultural barriers. Croatian participants also advocate for continuous education, particularly on topics related to trauma, internet safety, and digital literacy, to better support both foster parents and the children they care for. Moreover, the insights from Croatia stress the need for structured mentorship among foster parents and advocate for foster parents to be perceived as collaborative partners within the social welfare system rather than mere beneficiaries.

Across these countries, the findings collectively underscore the necessity for robust, structured support systems that include accessible training, consistent financial aid, and effective professional guidance. Recommendations for all three contexts center around enhancing training accessibility, establishing continuity in support services, and addressing the unique needs of foster children and their caregivers through adaptive, culturally sensitive solutions. By addressing these critical areas, the foster care systems in Türkiye, Romania, and



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Croatia could better fulfill their missions, creating environments where foster families are well-prepared, supported, and able to meet the diverse needs of children under their care.

Annex

Demographic Questions

1. Gender
2. Place of Birth
3. Date of Birth
4. Education
5. What is your job?
6. Work status
7. Marital Status
8. How many children (foster care or biological) do you have?
9. What is your child's age? (for each child)
10. Your Child's Gender? (for each child)
11. Who do you share your home with (except your child)?
12. What kind of foster parent are you?
13. How many years have you been a foster parent?
14. Who are the other people responsible for your child's care?

Questions about the Decision, Application, and Experience Process

15. When did you decide to become a foster parent?
16. What influenced this decision?
17. Who influenced this decision?
18. With whom did you first share this decision? What was their reaction?
19. Can you tell us about the matching process with your child?
20. When did you first meet your child?
21. Can you tell us about your application and admission process as a foster parent?
22. What kind of support did you need during this process?
23. Could you tell us about your experiences during the adjustment process with your child?
24. What were the issues that you needed support for as a parent in this process?
25. Did you receive any training during the adjustment process?



Questions about the Training and Support Process

26. Could you tell us about the training you received? (Are they provided by which institutions? Is it a preference, or is it mandatory for the process? etc.)
27. Could you tell us about the content of these trainings?
28. In which areas/events did these trainings support you?
29. In what other areas would you expect the training provided to support you?
30. What would you like to add, change, and transform in the context of existing training?
31. How would others you interact with (your spouse, family, other children, etc.) be affected when this change and transformation occurred?

Questions about Sharing Experience

32. Where and how often do you meet with other (foster) parents?
33. What do you share with other (foster) parents?
34. On which subjects would you like to receive training in this process?
35. If you were to create educational content to support foster parents, what kind of education would you design? What topics would you include?
36. What knowledge and experiences would you like to share with new foster parents?
37. What do you want to share and add more?



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