

Russia's war on Ukraine: The situation of Ukraine's children

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women and children, to flee the country and seek shelter in neighbouring countries. Ukraine's civilian population is being subjected to shelling and violence, while outside Ukraine's borders, the international humanitarian community has quickly mobilised to provide support. As the humanitarian situation deteriorates, children are particularly vulnerable.

Humanitarian situation: Ukraine's children in danger

As of 16 March 2022, the United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency, UNHCR, [estimated](#) that more than 3.4 million people, mostly women and children, had fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries – mainly to Poland but also to Hungary, Moldova, Romania and Slovakia. As the days go by, the conflict is generating increasing numbers of casualties, destruction and displacement within and outside Ukraine's borders, causing one of the [greatest](#) European humanitarian crises of recent times. The crisis has triggered the 'biggest show of [European mobilisation](#) in recent years', but the situation is [disastrous](#), and the [human cost](#) already too high.

According to the UN Children's Fund ([Unicef](#)), the war is posing an immediate and growing threat to Ukraine's 7.5 million children. Since 24 February, [1.5 million](#) children have fled the country, but there are still up to [6 million](#) children trapped in Ukraine. With growing numbers of attacks on schools, hospitals and other civilian infrastructure, where many people have been sheltering, these children are in grave danger and are vulnerable to injury or death, as well as being deprived of food, clean water, education and health care. According to the United Nations (UN), as of 18 March at least 59 children had been killed as a result of the war, while [media reports](#) suggest that the number may have reached at least 100.

Children, together with [women](#), are at extreme [risk](#) of violence and abuse, including [human trafficking](#), smuggling and illegal adoption. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has [warned](#) of the high risk of human trafficking and sexual exploitation of the population in distress, but also of the financial insecurity suffered by certain unaccompanied children and many women who have been separated from partners and support networks. Many children are without parental care, either because, amid the chaos, they were separated from their families or because they were living in [residential care](#) or boarding schools when the Russian invasion started. Among the latter category, of 100 000 children, it is estimated that half have disabilities and need special attention and care. [Save the Children](#) reports that Ukraine probably has among the highest rates of institutional care for children in Europe, 'with about 1.3 % of all children living in some form of residential care facility'. Ukraine is also an international surrogacy hub, and infants born to surrogate mothers are currently stranded in shelters, as their parents cannot travel to collect them.

International and EU response

[UNHCR](#) is working with partners and local organisations on the ground to reinforce vulnerability screening and referrals for people with specific needs, while improving monitoring of unaccompanied and separated children, and referral to specialised services. Unicef has meanwhile published [advice](#) for the relevant authorities, aid workers and volunteers on protecting displaced and refugee children in and outside Ukraine. The guidance states that children could be at risk of human trafficking, child labour, sexual exploitation, illegal adoption and aggravated smuggling, and that [displaced girls](#) are at particular risk of gender-based violence. The Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings ([GRETA](#)) has also warned of the [danger](#) faced by people fleeing the armed conflict in Ukraine of falling victim to human trafficking and exploitation. There are already reports of traffickers targeting unaccompanied children fleeing Ukraine; many such children are currently unaccounted for, following the hasty evacuation of orphanages and foster homes. In some countries, specialised anti-trafficking non-governmental organisations are disseminating leaflets to refugees, warning them of the risks of accepting

transport and accommodation from strangers, and informing them of how to seek help and report suspicious cases to the existing national helplines for trafficking victims.

The EU has stepped in to help civilians affected by the war in Ukraine, for instance with [emergency aid](#) programmes that will cover some basic needs, assistance at the [EU borders](#), and [activation](#) of the [Temporary Protection Directive](#) (Directive [2001/55/EC](#)). On 21 March, the Commission issued [operational guidelines](#), establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine, in line with the [2017 communication on the protection of children in migration](#). The guidelines stress that the '**protection of migrant children arriving from Ukraine is a top priority for the EU**', and that provision must be made for children's specific needs and rights, including physical and mental healthcare, and education. They further clarify that unaccompanied, separated and orphan children (covered by Article 16 of the Temporary Protection Directive) deserve particular attention, and that decisions must always consider the best interests of the child. On 10 March, the Commission published a [statement](#) calling for the protection of children in Ukraine following the bombardment of the children's and maternity hospital in Mariupol, and called for the establishment of genuine humanitarian corridors to evacuate the most vulnerable. This was echoed in a [declaration](#) by the European ministers in charge of children.

Together with international organisations, the Commission has called repeatedly for an end to the war, stressing the need to stop attacks in civilian areas and on [civilian infrastructure](#). One such [attack](#) on 16 March 2022 destroyed a theatre and a swimming pool in the city of Mariupol, where some 1 000 civilians, including children, were reportedly sheltering. According to the [European Union Agency for Asylum](#), EU and neighbouring countries have focused their efforts on ensuring that children can access education, by simplifying the relevant procedures, waiving childcare fees, and providing for smooth integration into the school curriculum and language learning.

Finally, on 23 March, the Commission published a [communication](#) outlining action taken in response to the humanitarian crisis. The measures address the **protection of children and their rights** and include guidance for the registration of children upon arrival. Under the [European Child Guarantee](#), national coordinators have a key role to play here and there is a specific focus on children from institutions and children at risk of trafficking and abduction. The Commission is also preparing dedicated standard operating procedures for **transfers of unaccompanied minors**. It will bring together Member States to pool experience and identify the educational needs of displaced children, while establishing a 'school education gateway' – a one-stop shop to link to educational material from Ukraine.

European Parliament's position

[Parliament](#) has come up with a series of proposals in recent years, stressing the need for special protection for vulnerable groups – such as [unaccompanied children](#) and [women and girls](#). Prioritising unaccompanied and separated children, Parliament has stressed that [child protection](#) must be the leading principle when dealing with children. In its [resolution](#) of 1 March, the European Parliament strongly condemned 'the Russian Federation's illegal, unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against and invasion of Ukraine' and recalled that 'attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure as well as indiscriminate attacks are prohibited under international humanitarian law and therefore constitute war crimes'. It also called on the Commission, the Member States and UN agencies to offer the civilian population **humanitarian assistance**. Parliament referred to the numerous reports of 'violations of international humanitarian law committed by Russian troops, including **indiscriminate shelling of living areas, hospitals and kindergartens**', and pointed out that, since 2014, more than 14 000 people have died in a 'conflict fomented by the Russian Federation in eastern Ukraine'. In addition, Parliament stressed the need to pay attention to vulnerable groups, 'in particular **children in institutional care, unaccompanied children, and children with disabilities** and other serious illnesses, including childhood cancers'.

In a [letter](#) to European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, and European Council President, Charles Michel, the Socialists & Democrats Group in the European Parliament have called for an EU initiative to protect and assist children coming from Ukraine as well as those still there. The letter calls for an urgent agreement on an EU-Ukraine child protection package, to be set up jointly with the Ukrainian government, to protect and assist children in and from Ukraine. The group intends to raise this issue for debate during Parliament's April plenary session.

