Russia's war on Ukraine
The situation of children in and outside Ukraine

SUMMARY

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee the country and seek shelter, mostly in neighbouring EU countries, namely Poland, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia and Moldova. Children and women are bearing the most adverse consequences of the war. According to UNICEF, almost half of those fleeing are minors and in need of enhanced protection, as they run a bigger risk of falling victim to trafficking and exploitation. In response to the plight of Ukraine's civilian population, which is being subjected to shelling and violence, the international humanitarian community has quickly mobilised efforts and resources to provide support. As the humanitarian situation deteriorates, children are particularly vulnerable.

Children are at high risk of falling through the cracks of the system, going missing or being subjected to violence. This includes children in institutions, unaccompanied minors, children nearing the age of transition to adulthood, children from Roma or other minority groups or who are asylum-seekers, refugees or migrants and were residing in Ukraine and were stateless before leaving their countries of origin.

In and outside of Ukraine, children are in urgent need of protection, including access to psychosocial and social support, health, nutrition, education and housing, protection against trafficking, sexual and labour exploitation and abuse. The European Parliament, as well as its Coordinator on Children’s Rights, have been active in defending the rights of the children fleeing the war in Ukraine since its beginning.

This briefing updates and expands on an 'At a glance' note written by Maria Margarita Mentzelopoulou and Micaela Del Monte in March 2022.

IN THIS BRIEFING

- Humanitarian situation: Ukraine’s children in danger
- EU response
- Council of Europe’s response
- European Parliament’s response
- On unaccompanied minors
- The work of the EP Coordinator on Children’s Rights
- Stakeholders’ response
Humanitarian situation: Ukraine's children in danger

As of 11 May, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded 7,256 civilian casualties in Ukraine: 3,496 killed and 3,760 injured. However, OHCHR believes that the actual figures are considerably higher, as there is delay in the transmission of information from some hotbeds of military activity and many reports are still pending corroboration. The General Prosecutor Office in Ukraine reports that as of 6 May, 223 children had been killed and more than 400 wounded. Further reports indicate that 773 educational facilities had been bombed or attacked by artillery and 75 totally destroyed. Since 25 February, a non-profit website has been publishing daily reports on the alleged violations of children’s rights in Ukraine. The same site reports the difficulties of evacuating children with disabilities and the fact that around 300 children in need of palliative medical treatment have had to hide in underground shelters and many are not receiving the medical support they need. Eurochild also reports on a daily basis on relevant alleged violations of children’s rights, including killing and wounding, lack of adequate access to medical care, illegal child trafficking, and lack of access to education.

As of 10 May 2022, the United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency, UNHCR, estimated that more than 5.9 million people, mostly women and children, had fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries – mainly Poland, but also Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Czechia and Slovakia. Another 7.7 million people have been displaced within Ukraine. As the days go by, the conflict is generating an increasing number 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.

In February 2022, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reported that children in conflict zones around the world continue to be subjected to persistent violations of human rights. What are now eight years of conflict in Ukraine have already inflicted profound and lasting harm on the country’s 7.5 million children; according to UNICEF, the war is posing an immediate and growing threat to these children. With growing numbers of attacks on schools, hospitals and other civilian infrastructure, where many people have been sheltering, children are in grave danger and are vulnerable to injury or death, as well as food, clean water, education and health care deprivation. Some 7.1 million people have been internally displaced within the country, including up to 2.8 million children. Additionally, according to a March report by Refugees International, roughly half of the displaced persons are children under the age of 18, many of whom are unaccompanied by guardians. Furthermore, although only 2,300 unaccompanied minors (UAMs) have been registered in EU Member States by now, according to UNICEF estimates the number of UAMs to have fled the war in Ukraine are much higher. In addition, some of the children fleeing Ukraine are not Ukrainian nationals. Some of those children fleeing Ukraine could also be considered stateless (including some children from the Roma community), while others could be unaccompanied children from third countries, who were in Ukraine when the conflict started.

Moreover, as underlined by the UN Child Rights Committee, Ukrainian children are in distress and are suffering from the psychological consequences of the atrocities they are witnessing, ‘the adverse impact of which will be borne by generations of Ukrainians to come’. Equally, the children having fled the country are in need of material support, such as housing, nutrition, education, medical assistance, alongside psychological support.

Children, together with women, are still at higher risk of violence and abuse, including human trafficking, smuggling and illegal adoption. In fact, even before the war, a 2014 analysis reports that Ukrainians were among the most common victims of trafficking into the EU, by criminal networks operating between Ukraine and countries in Europe and central Asia. Due to mass displacement and chaos, the number of missing children is also expected to increase. In fact, since the armed attacks on 24 February, Missing Children Europe’s Ukrainian member, NGO Magnolia, has already received
more than 1,000 cases of children in Ukraine that have been kidnapped, abducted, have forcibly disappeared or are missing, including separated children. At the same time, with civilian targets being bombed regularly, children remaining in Ukraine with their families are at risk of being orphaned and separated from their remaining family, and thereby at risk of institutionalisation, illegal adoption, disappearance or trafficking.

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 unaccompanied minors and women who have been separated from their partners and support networks. Many children are without parental care, because they were either separated from their families or living in institutional care or boarding schools when the Russian invasion started. Furthermore, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has drawn attention to the risk of trafficking and called for increased efforts to counteract it, including through the early detection and prevention of related criminal activity and the identification and protection of victims. UNICEF has also warned that displaced girls are at particular risk of gender-based violence.

**Glossary**

A ‘child’ means any person under the age of 18 unless the applicable (national) law envisages that the age of majority is attained earlier (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, or CRC, Article 1). This means that any instrument governing children in the territory of the state cannot define a child in any way that deviates from the norms determining the age of majority in that state.

‘Unaccompanied children’ (UAC also referred to in this publication as unaccompanied minors, or UAMs) are children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so (International Committee of the Red Cross, Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, Geneva, 2014).

‘Separated children’ are those separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary care-giver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may therefore include children accompanied by other adult family members. In the context of migration to the European Union, an unaccompanied minor, as defined by the Qualification Directive (Directive 2011/95/EU), refers to a minor who arrives on the territory of an EU Member State unaccompanied by an adult responsible for him or her, or who is left unaccompanied after having entered the territory of the Member States.

In the context of migration to the European Union and as defined by the Qualification Directive, a minor is a third-country national or stateless person below the age of 18 years; an unaccompanied minor is a minor who arrives on the territory of an EU Member State unaccompanied by an adult responsible for him or her, or who is left unaccompanied after having entered the territory of the Member States.

Ukraine is the second largest surrogacy hub globally, with the fate of surrogacy babies being born in the past month remaining unclear. In fact, the numerous orphans and children born through surrogate mothers in Ukraine, who have not been picked up by their parents, also face an increased risk of neglect, abduction or forced adoption. Under Ukrainian law, some of these children will have the nationality of the parents who arranged for the surrogacy from birth and should be entitled to acquiring a passport as proof their nationality. However, given the situation, such children are often exposed to the risk of illegal adoption. According to Article 21 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Member States recognising or allowing a system of adoption should always consider the best interest of the child. The same article requires, inter alia, from the States parties to ensure that the adoption is authorised only by competent authorities who determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures and on the basis of all pertinent and reliable
information, that the adoption is permissible’. Articles 283 and 284 of the Family Code of Ukraine set the conditions for the adoption of Ukrainian children by non-Ukrainians.

At the same time, education has been disrupted for more than 5.7 million children in Ukraine, as schools shut down at the start of the war. National online education platforms have been built to help children to follow their schooling programmes, yet the situation remains difficult. Security concerns accompanied by a lack of access to electricity and internet make access to education services a challenge. Some schools have reopened by means of distance-learning programmes. In addition, Ukraine’s neighbouring countries and EU Member States are supporting the integration of Ukrainian children into their national education systems.

Even though there is little information on the current challenges faced by children with disabilities specifically since the war began, they remain particularly vulnerable to physical and mental harm, as well as to challenges regarding access to basic services. At the same time, it is unclear how many have been able to flee. Humanity First speaks of ‘significant numbers of disabled or seriously ill children among those making it through, some of whom have been transferred for ongoing critical care soon after arriving in Poland’. The DEEP Platform mentions that, prior to the conflict, Ukraine had about 164 000 children with disabilities, a large number of whom were residing in institutional care. Thus, such children, especially in key conflict areas, may face a variety of risks, among them abandonment, lack of access to medicines and proper medical assistance, shelter, food and water, all of which can aggravate their health condition as well as making it difficult for them to flee from conflict.

EU response

The EU has immediately stepped in to help civilians affected by the war in Ukraine, for instance, by launching emergency aid programmes that cover some basic needs and ensure assistance at the EU borders, and by activating the Temporary Protection Directive (Directive 2001/55/EC). On 4 March, the Commission issued new guidelines to help EU countries manage arrivals efficiently and assist border guards carrying out checks at the borders with Ukraine, including through the simplification of border controls for vulnerable persons and the establishment of temporary border crossing points. 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 for the establishment of genuine humanitarian corridors to evacuate the most vulnerable. This was further echoed in a declaration by the European ministers in charge of children. Together with international organisations, the Commission has also 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.

On 21 March, the Commission issued operational guidelines to support Member States in applying the directive, including dedicated chapters on children, UAMs and trafficking in human beings, 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 orphaned 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 23 March, the Commission published a communication outlining action taken in response to the humanitarian crisis and encouraging EU Member States again to be ‘particularly vigilant’ about children at risk of trafficking or abduction, highlighting the importance of identification and registration. 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
Russia’s war on Ukraine: The situation of children in and outside Ukraine

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. According to the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), EU Member States and neighbouring countries have particularly 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.

During an extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council on 28 March, a number of key documents were presented. These included a 10-point plan on stronger European coordination on welcoming people fleeing the war against Ukraine. It was accompanied by a plan drawn up jointly by the European Commission and the EUAA for standard operating procedures and uniform guidelines for the reception and support of children, as well as defining specific procedures for the transfer of unaccompanied minors. It also covered a joint anti-trafficking plan to address the risks of trafficking and support potential victims, based on the EU strategy on combating trafficking in human beings (2021-2025). In addition, ministers considered a number of relevant measures, including the creation of a common registration system with the assistance of eu-LISA, the EU Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice.

The EU Anti-trafficking Coordinator has also been active since the beginning of the invasion, in close contact with the network of national anti-trafficking coordinators and Europol. The latter is actively participating in the human trafficking task force created to protect vulnerable Ukrainian refugees from human trafficking networks that are taking advantage of the mass exodus from Ukraine. In addition, Europol has deployed experts and guest officers to support local law enforcement authorities in the EU Member States bordering Ukraine. The European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, has also issued calls to use EU funds to prevent trafficking.

The European Commission has also established a Solidarity Platform for Member States to exchange information about reception capacity and thus identify the needs for support when hosting people fleeing the war. In fact, a section of the Solidarity Platform is dedicated to children. The solidarity platform is in charge of monitoring and implementing a joint action plan, which was presented by the Commission and was developed under the leadership of the EU Anti-trafficking Coordinator with the support of EU agencies and Member States. The action plan contains five objectives and recommendations to EU Member States. In particular, it recommended ‘strengthening awareness raising on the risks of trafficking in human beings and setting up helplines; reinforcing prevention against trafficking in human beings; enhancing the law enforcement and judicial response to trafficking in human beings; improving the early identification, support and protection of victims of trafficking in human beings; and addressing the risks of trafficking in human beings in non-EU countries, especially Ukraine and Moldova’.

Council of Europe's response

The Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) has equally warned of the danger faced by people fleeing Ukraine of falling victim to human trafficking and exploitation. There are already reports of traffickers targeting UAMs fleeing Ukraine; many such children are currently unaccounted for following the hasty evacuation of orphanages and foster homes. Moreover, GRETA published, on Wednesday 4 May, a guidance note listing emergency measures aimed at protecting refugees from Ukraine against trafficking in human beings. In particular, it stresses the need to register all refugees, including those who are undocumented, and to ensure an increased presence of specially trained law enforcement officers at border crossings, railway and bus stations. It also recommends creating official and safe routes and introducing free transport, whether public or run by trusted organisations.
The guidance note further stresses that, in order to avoid the risk of trafficking, it is crucial to proceed with the verification and registration of all volunteers, individuals and private companies offering assistance. It furthermore advises locating accommodation in safe areas while ensuring easy and free access to health care and psychological support for adults and children and to sexual and reproductive health care for victims of sexual violence. With regard to children, GRETA recommends the registration and immediate protection of unaccompanied minors and children travelling with adults from outside the family. It furthermore recommends ensuring the presence of women among border guards and other staff, and the provision of sleeping and sanitary facilities for single women, with or without children.

Furthermore, during a high-level conference organised in Rome on 7-8 April by the Italian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, the Council of Europe decided to add the subject of children’s rights in times of crisis and emergency to the five axes that structure its strategy for the rights of the child (2022-2027). Among the main issues addressed during the conference were registration and the establishment of effective guardianship systems for UAMs; training of professionals in assisting children traumatised by war; prevention of trafficking in persons; and assistance to children who have been victims. On 6 April, on the eve of the conference, six Council of Europe member states (Andorra, Belgium, Luxembourg, Monaco, San Marino and Slovenia) issued a declaration supported by 38 other member states, stating their concerns about the impact of the conflict on millions of Ukrainian children and underlining the central role of the strategy in defending children’s rights throughout the continent.

European Parliament's response

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, women and girls. 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’. Parliament also welcomed the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time since it entered into force in 2001, while on 9 March, MEPs called on the EU to introduce a proper migration system that shares responsibility for refugees.

The European Parliament’s Intergroup on Children’s Rights, during a mission to the Polish border with Ukraine to assess the situation of the displaced people, called for a centralised robust registration system at the border and for the creation of safe passages and humanitarian corridors for children. On 29 March, the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) had an exchange of views with Commissioner Ylva Johansson, on the situation of Ukrainian women and children. During the meeting, MEPs expressed concerns about the humanitarian situation, the risk of human trafficking and sexual abuse, such as the use of rape as a weapon, and called on EU Member States to swiftly identify and prosecute the trafficking networks profiting from sexual exploitation of women refugees. On 4 April, during a joint debate, the Committees on Development (DEVE) and on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) discussed with Commissioners Johansson and Janez Lenarčič the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive and the humanitarian assistance to the displaced population, in particular children.
In the plenary debate of 5 April, Commissioners Šuica and Johansson once again underlined the risk of human trafficking and stressed the need to prioritise efficient registration of all UAMs and separated children with the help of national authorities. The resolution voted on 7 April welcomed the actions already taken by the European Commission, called, inter alia, to include unaccompanied and separated children in national monitoring systems for social and child protection services, and urged EU Member States to provide appropriate information. Moreover, a joint committee meeting of the Legal Affairs (JURI) and Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) committees was held on 21 April to address the risk of illegal adoption of Ukrainian children from institutional care.

The Members of Parliament welcomed the efforts of the EU and other international organisations and stressed the importance of registration to ensure that children are properly identified and that those who were separated from their families would be reunited with them as soon as possible. Members stressed the need to provide children and their families with material and psychological support, in particular considering the atrocities reported by the media. Members asked to what extent the European Border and Cost Guard Agency was supporting the frontline countries. The Commission reported that 282 Frontex agents (198 in Romania, 33 in Slovakia, 23 in Poland and 28 in Moldova) were already deployed, and that according to Frontex, an additional 2 500 could be deployed.

Following the visit of the European Parliament President, Roberta Metsola, to Ukraine, at the Parliament's April 2022 plenary session, MEPs and representatives of the Council and the Commission discussed what the EU can do to protect children inside and outside Ukraine, in particular from trafficking and exploitation. In particular, MEPs stressed the need to ensure the efficient registration of children as they enter the EU, so that law enforcement and child protection agencies can follow up and prevent any attempts at trafficking and exploitation. Members were shocked by the images and news released about the alleged atrocities committed in Bucha and other towns in Ukraine.

The resolution voted on 7 April stressed the need to provide safe passage and assistance for those internally displaced or unable to leave areas under siege in Ukraine, while recalling various measures necessary to protect children and young people fleeing violence and facilitate their integration into host country communities. MEPs recommended that child protection officers be present at the borders to be able to swiftly and accurately identify vulnerable children, record their identity and nationality, as well as their specific needs. In addition to the above, services, such as psychosocial support, maternal health support, protection against gender-based violence, family tracing and support for family reunification should be offered within the national child protection systems along with full access to all basic services and appropriate care.

It is worth recalling that in Parliament, a cross-party Child Rights Intergroup is active in promoting children’s rights and ensuring that children’s rights remain a priority for EU policy-makers. On 20 March, the intergroup led a mission to the border between Poland and Ukraine to check the situation of the children fleeing the conflict and identify their most urgent needs. The intergroup, in cooperation with Save the Children, also travelled to the border between Romania and Ukraine, to visit some reception and accommodation facilities.

In a letter to the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, and the European Council President, Charles Michel, the Socialists & Democrats Group in the European Parliament insisted on the adoption of an EU initiative to protect and assist children coming from Ukraine as well as those still there. Moreover, the letter called for an urgent agreement on an EU-Ukraine child protection package, to be put together jointly with the Ukrainian government, with the aim to protect and assist children in and from Ukraine. During their May I plenary session, MEPs expressed concerns about the increasing number of reports about the risk of human trafficking, sexual violence, exploitation, rape, and abuse for women and children fleeing the war in Ukraine. In the resolution adopted following the debate, MEPs emphasised that the specific needs of women and girls must be addressed in reception centres and that complaints’ mechanisms should immediately be made.
available. They also urged EU Member States to provide safe and coordinated transport between each other and stressed once again the importance of protecting Ukrainian women and girls from violence and exploitation.

On unaccompanied minors

Since 2016, the Parliament has stressed the vulnerable position of children arriving in the EU. In particular, in a resolution of April 2016, MEPs called on Member States to provide unaccompanied minors with access to legal assistance, guardianship, access to healthcare, accommodation, education, and the right to be spoken to in a language they understand and interviewed by properly trained officials, while stressing that EU Member States should not detain children for immigration reasons. Parliament has stressed repeatedly that child protection must be the leading principle when dealing with children.

In the same spirit, a resolution of 3 May 2018 also called on EU Member States to place all children and families with children in non-custodial, community-based accommodation, while their immigration status is processed. Parliament has also stressed the need to host unaccompanied children in separate facilities from adults in order to avoid any risk of violence and sexual abuse. In addition, Parliament called on Member States to improve the situation of children in migration and stressed the importance of child protection as a fundamental principle for the European Union with a resolution of 26 November 2019 on children’s rights. Most recently, in a resolution of 3 March 2021, Parliament stressed that the EU strategy on the rights of the child needed to include measures to improve the situation of children in migration and protect their interests, both within and outside the EU, at every stage of asylum procedures. It underlined that a particular focus was required on access to adequate reception conditions, social and medical care, timely appointment of qualified legal representatives and guardians for unaccompanied minors, and access to child-friendly information.

In the most recent resolution on the subject, of 7 April 2022, MEPs stressed the need to identify vulnerable groups and to swiftly appoint guardians for unaccompanied children, while calling on child protection services in the country of reception to monitor these children continuously for their well-being and whereabouts after their arrival in the EU.

The work of the EP Coordinator on Children’s Rights

Created in 1987 and originally named the Mediator for Children Victims of International Parental Abduction, the remit of the Parliament’s Coordinator on Children’s Rights has broadened over time. The Coordinator, currently Vice-President Ewa Kopacz, now has an important role in resolving cross-border family disputes and in promoting children’s rights more broadly, working with MEPs to ensure that the institution’s work respects and promotes children’s rights.

Since the start of the Ukraine conflict, Vice-President Kopacz has repeatedly stressed the risks faced by children escaping the conflict. On 15 March 2022, on the occasion of the annual exchange of views with the Committee on Legal Affairs (JURI), Vice-President Kopacz addressed the situation of Ukrainian children and focused on a number of key concerns. Vice-President Kopacz highlighted the needs of vulnerable children displaced because of the conflict, in particular children seeking urgent life-saving medical treatments and medicines; unaccompanied and separated children and children coming from institutional care settings. Vice-President Kopacz also stressed the need to promote the implementation of measures to protect the rights and interests of children whilst in the care of EU Member States, such as efficient registration and monitoring of children arriving, to ensure their safety and avoid that they become victims of organised crime.

The following day, together with the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), Vice-President Kopacz addressed a letter to the Home Affairs Commissioner, Ylva Johansson, on the protection of unaccompanied and separated children and children in institutional care fleeing Ukraine to the EU. The letter recalled how ‘children are directly targeted, affected and exposed to
the violence and atrocities of the armed conflict and to both physical and psychological trauma, injury and loss'. It also stressed how, in a situation of conflict, children are even more at ‘risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, including trafficking'. In addition, it invited the Commission, the Member States and international organisations to take immediate action in order to ‘establish a mandatory screening, registration and monitoring system for unaccompanied and separated children and children from institutional care in Ukraine who enter the EU’. Furthermore, the EP coordinator welcomed the 10-point action plan presented by the Commission at the end of March.

Besides being regularly briefed by NGOs, on 31 March, Vice-President Kopacz joined the EU Network on Children’s Rights to discuss the situation of Ukrainian children. During the April 2022 plenary session, the EP coordinator underlined during her intervention that ‘for several days now, the new synonym of Putin's war crime is Bucha. Words cannot be found to describe it. We must be prepared for a marathon of aid, because Ukrainians are entrusting us today with their greatest good: their children’. Finally, following relevant calls by the EP Coordinator, a joint committee meeting between the Legal Affairs (JURI) and Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) committees was held on 21 April to address the risk of illegal adoption of Ukrainian children from institutional care.

**Stakeholder responses**

UNHCR is working with partners and local authorities on the ground to reinforce vulnerability screening and develop referral pathways to ensure unaccompanied and separated children have access to appropriate services. Moreover, UNHCR is also following up with national authorities to ensure local child protection services are able to maintain a presence at border crossings and help points. Meanwhile, UNICEF has 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. Furthermore, stakeholders have repeatedly noted that the large number of single-female-headed households also makes access to childcare a priority.

Therefore, while welcoming the support of individuals offering transport and accommodation, associations working on the ground are calling for coordinated action to inform, register and accompany women and children and vet potential hosts. Regarding the risk of human trafficking and exploitation, local authorities and NGOs active in the field report suspicious activity in border areas, while child advocates have raised the alarm about hundreds of unaccompanied Ukrainian children who are unaccounted for.

Missing Children Europe and Child10, following field visits in EU Member States bordering Ukraine, have identified challenges to the protection of children and published relevant recommendations. They stress that it is key to ensure that children and the persons they are travelling with are properly registered at the borders. In addition, they underline the importance of registering all children upon arrival in the country of destination and suggest making mandatory tests ensuring the feasibility of family reunification procedures. They also recall the importance of linking up the existing registration systems among all EU Member States. Moreover, stakeholders have been calling for the equal treatment of children fleeing the war without any form of discrimination. In fact, these children should be integrated within the mainstream child protection system, provided access to family-based care and a guardian, based on their needs.

Moreover, Save the Children has called for states to support a moratorium on intercountry adoption and emergency surrogacy procedures in relation to Ukraine until the appropriate safeguards can be reinstated. In addition, several NGOs have called for strengthened safeguards for unaccompanied children, including information provision, support and guardianship to be developed, together with guidance for vulnerable groups.
MAIN REFERENCES


*Ukraine Conflict Analysis Brief - The Impact of the Conflict on Children*, Data Friendly Space, April 2022.

*Note on Unaccompanied Children Fleeing From Ukraine*, Kids in Need of Defense and Child Circle, March 2022.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.


Photo credits: © Michele Ursi / Adobe Stock.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

http://epthinktank.eu (blog)