Integration of migrant children

SUMMARY

In the EU, one in four children are either foreign-born themselves or have foreign-born parents. On 1 January 2022, around 6.6 million children did not have the citizenship of their country of residence in the EU. Almost three out of four of these children lived in Germany, France, Italy or Spain, the countries hosting the largest number of non-national children in absolute terms. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine started on 24 February 2022, millions of people, most of them women and children, sought refuge in EU countries. In September 2022, Member States recorded around 2.25 million Ukrainian minors who needed to attend school.

As children with a migrant background make up a large part of the population, their successful integration also has an impact on the social cohesion of the EU. The EU has a shared competence in the area of migration and integration, meaning that it can shape the policy area by setting common standards, but Member States retain their prerogative to set up and implement their national policies. The 2021-2027 EU action plan on integration and inclusion constitutes the central pillar of EU policy in this area, providing a common policy framework to help Member States develop their national migrant integration policies in line with the freedoms and values laid out in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

All children, regardless of their family or cultural background or gender, have the right to education to further their development. Migrant, especially refugee, children, may have had a break in their education or not been able to go to school at all, and therefore require tailored support to address their particular needs. However, regardless of a series of hurdles that migrant children may face on their education path, a recent OECD report demonstrates that their outcomes have improved. Moreover, young people with migrant parents are catching up in the labour market, and their employment rates are now generally higher and unemployment rates lower than a decade ago.
Introduction

Migration to Europe from third countries has been substantial in recent decades, shaping the demographics of the European Union (EU) Member States. On 1 January 2023, there were 448.4 million people living in the EU, up from 446.7 million a year earlier. In 2022, increased migration into the EU resulted in a population increase, although more deaths than births were recorded. According to Eurostat, the population growth in 2022 can be attributed to increased migration following the pandemic and the influx of displaced persons from Ukraine seeking temporary protection status across the EU following Russia’s invasion in February 2022. Around 5.8 million people from Ukraine have sought temporary protection in the EU as of November 2023, most of them women and children. The EU population had previously decreased in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the EU, one in four children are either foreign-born themselves or have foreign-born parents (12% had two foreign-born parents, 8% were of mixed parentage, and only 4% were foreign-born themselves, as indicated by the statistics of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on 15 June 2023 in its comprehensive comparative report ‘Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In’. Around 6.6 million children aged under 18 did not have the citizenship of their country of residence in the EU, accounting for 8.2% of the total number of children living in the EU and 17.6% of the total number of non-national residents. Germany (27.6%), France (16.6%), Italy (15.8%) and Spain (14.2%) are the main EU countries hosting non-national children in absolute terms—almost three out of four children without the citizenship of their country of residence were residing in one of those four Member States on 1 January 2022.

Moreover, compared to 2021, more and more countries reported an alarming increase in the number of unaccompanied children, making it urgent to offer tailored procedures for reception and integration.

EU policy framework on integration of migrant children

As children who are migrants or who have migrant parents make up a large part of the population in Europe, their successful integration also has an impact on the social cohesion of the EU and the general success of its Member States. Research distinguishes between four essential policy areas of integration that all intersect and influence how children with a migrant background are integrated through the education system. These comprise policies concerning:

- **fundamental rights, equality, and anti-discrimination**;
- **migration and integration**;
- **social inclusion and cohesion**; and
- **policies on education and training**.

This framework has mostly formed the core of EU policies in this area over the last decade. It echoes key policy statements incorporated into the Treaty on European Union, namely that ‘respect for linguistic diversity is a fundamental value of the EU’, as is ‘respect for the person and openness towards other cultures’ (preamble to the Treaty), and that the EU ‘[...] shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity [...]’ (Article 3). Linguistic diversity is also rooted in the legal framework through the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, adopted in 2000, which the Treaty of Lisbon made legally binding. Article 21 prohibits discrimination on grounds of language, while Article 22 mandates the EU to respect linguistic diversity.

It is important to note that the EU has a shared competence in migration and integration, meaning that it can shape the policy area through setting common standards, but Member States retain their prerogative to set up and implement their national policies. Moreover, the EU plays a key role in supporting Member States through funding, including through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (2021-2027), developing guidance and fostering relevant partnerships.
Integration is included in the EU's **New Pact on Migration and Asylum**, which aims to offer a comprehensive approach to strengthen and integrate key EU policies on migration, asylum and border management.

The specific case of **unaccompanied minors** is addressed in the current asylum system in the **Reception Conditions Directive**, in Articles 21-24. In addition, the European Commission presented its **Communication on the Protection of Children in Migration** on 12 April 2017, setting out a range of actions to be taken into account or better implemented by the EU and its Member States to ensure effective protection of all migrant children in all stages of migration. The Commission calls on the Member States to:

- ensure that individual gender- and age-sensitive vulnerability and needs assessments of children are carried out upon arrival and taken into account in all subsequent procedures;
- ensure that all children have timely access to healthcare (including preventive care) and psychosocial support, and to inclusive formal education, regardless of status;
- ensure that a range of alternative care options for unaccompanied children, including foster/family-based care, are provided;
- integrate child protection policies in all reception facilities hosting children, including by appointing a person responsible for child protection;
- ensure that an appropriate and effective monitoring system is in place with regard to reception of children in migration.

Following these calls for action, on 8 June 2017 the Council adopted its **Conclusions on the protection of children in migration** to reaffirm that children in migration have the right to be protected, in line with relevant provisions of EU law, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and with international law on the rights of the child.

The central pillar of EU policy on integration is the **action plan on integration and inclusion**, first presented in 2016, then in 2020. As the Commission explains in its **communication** accompanying the 2016 action plan, it is intended to provide *a common policy framework which should help Member States as they further develop and strengthen their national integration policies for migrants from third countries* in line with the freedoms and values laid out in the **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union**. The action plan underlines that education is one of the most powerful tools for building more inclusive societies and that schools can become hubs of integration and inclusion for migrant children and their families.

The Commission's point of departure for the action plan was the research evidence demonstrating that *‘third-country nationals continue to face barriers in the education system*, on the labour market, and in accessing decent housing’ and that *‘children are exposed to a particularly high risk of poverty’*. This was seen as a ‘massive waste of resources’, concluding that *‘the cost of non-integration will turn out to be higher than the cost of investment in integration policies’*. The action plan puts education at the top of the priority list, while also emphasising that integration should go ‘beyond participation in the labour market and mastering the language of the host country’. Indeed, the Commission observes that the ‘dynamic two-way [integration process] means not only expecting third-country nationals to embrace EU fundamental values and learn the host language, but also offering them meaningful opportunities to participate in the economy and society of the Member State where they settle’.

On its dedicated **European Website on Integration**, the Commission asserts that education and training are among the most powerful tools for integration, and that access to them should be ensured and promoted as early as possible. The Commission further emphasises that the acquisition of basic skills is the foundation for further learning, giving access to employment and social inclusion. **Inclusiveness and social cohesion** are also two of the main priorities included in the **European Education Area strategic framework**, which promotes collaboration between EU Member States and key stakeholders.
To further promote integration of children from different backgrounds, the Commission created the EU Children’s Participation Platform. The platform organised its first General Assembly in June 2023, getting together 60 children aged 7-17 and officials from the Commission, the European Parliament and national governments to discuss topics that concern children and their rights.

Additionally, in 2021 the Council adopted the European Child Guarantee, which provides guidance and tools for Member States to prevent and combat social exclusion among children in the EU, including those with a migrant background. As the first EU instrument devoted to combating social exclusion in childhood, it aims to ensure effective access to a number of services which are key for child development.

**Migrant children in education**

Early childhood education and care are considered fundamental for the integration of families and children from third countries. They have a key role in helping people learn to live together in heterogeneous societies. All children, regardless of their family, cultural background or gender, have the right to education to further their development.

Migrant, especially refugee, children may have had a break in their education or not been able to go to school at all, and therefore require tailored support. At the same time, education and training practitioners need the necessary skills to assist learners with a migrant background and should be supported in their work in increasingly diverse and multilingual classrooms. Supporting teachers and school leaders is also important to prevent early school leaving, underachievement and educational segregation. Since 2016, the European Commission has supported EU Member States in their efforts to integrate migrants in their education systems, starting from early childhood education and care up to higher education.

The above-mentioned OECD report observed the following elements concerning the education of migrant children in the EU:

- 29% of native-born pupils with foreign-born parents lack basic reading skills, against 38% of their peers with immigrant parents and 18% of those with native-born parents.
- Young adults with immigrant parents are less likely than their peers of native-born parentage to be highly educated (32% vs 40%) and more likely to be educated to a low level (21% vs 14%).
- Native-born young people with at least one foreign-born parent are more likely to better their parents’ educational attainment than the offspring of native-born parents.
- The dropout rate in the EU is 11% among native-born pupils with foreign-born parents – higher than their peers of native-born parentage in most EU countries. Rates are generally higher among boys. Dropout rates have fallen over the last eight years, irrespective of parents' country of birth.
- Around 17% of native-born young people with foreign-born parents in the EU are not in employment, education or training (NEET). These rates are higher than among their peers of native-born parentage in almost all EU countries. The employment gaps are the highest in Belgium and Spain.
- Almost a quarter of highly educated young people with foreign-born parents aged 25-34 are formally overqualified for their jobs in the EU. Native-born young people with foreign-born parents are more likely to be overqualified for their job than their peers with native-born parents in most longstanding migration destinations in Europe.
- Native-born people with foreign-born parents are under-represented in the public services in most EU countries.

Regardless of some of the hurdles that migrant children may face on their education path, the OECD report demonstrates that the outcomes of the native-born children of migrants (aged 15-34) reflect
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inter-generational improvement, notably lower gaps in educational attainment levels compared to their peers with native-born parents than their parents have vis-à-vis their peers. Young people with immigrant parents are catching up in the labour market, and despite the COVID-19 crisis, their employment rates are now generally higher and unemployment rates lower than 10 years ago.

Children of migrants have also improved their PISA reading scores in the EU, while those of their peers with native-born parents have stayed relatively stable, thereby closing part of the gap, which is nevertheless still high in most countries in Europe. What is more, participation of children of migrants in pre-school has risen in practice in all OECD countries, narrowing, or even closing the attendance gap with children of native-born people in many countries.

Nevertheless, public perception does not necessarily acknowledge these improvements. In the EU, the perception that the native population has about migrants and their contribution to society is often at odds with available evidence. For example, while there was an increase in the share of highly educated people among non-EU migrants, this was not perceived as such in most countries. Likewise, in most longstanding migration destinations in Europe, while the public suggested that the educational outcomes of children of migrants were declining, these have strongly improved over the last decade.

At the same time, unsurprisingly, there is also the perception of discrimination on the migrants’ side. It has increased in the last 10 years in the EU, particularly among women. Moreover, in most countries, native-born people with foreign-born parents are more likely than foreign-born adults to feel discriminated against based on their ethnicity.

Ukrainian children in focus

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine started on 24 February 2022, millions of people sought refuge in EU countries. Most of them were women and children.

As of September 2022, Member States had recorded around 2.25 million Ukrainian minors who needed to attend school. Before the start of the school year, over 33,000 Ukrainian children participated in learning programmes over the summer.

To facilitate access to education for Ukrainian children, EU national authorities and civil society organisations put forward a number of legislative changes, created new information material and provided special guidance and support to schools and educators. Local authorities quickly included Ukrainians in the existing childcare and education services, and addressed their learning and development needs. Among the challenges were the limited capacities of schools and the number of students in a class, limited municipal budgets, language barriers and the lack of Ukrainian teachers.

Cities quickly mobilised themselves to overcome these challenges – language barriers have been mitigated through hiring Ukrainian teachers, more locations have been opened to counter the lack of facilities, and psychological help has been offered to help overcome trauma resulting from the violent conflict. This has been achieved through flexible cooperation and coordination with NGOs, volunteers, and national institutions.

However, many cities, especially those closer to Ukraine, faced the situation where Ukrainian parents did not want to enrol their children because they hoped to be back in Ukraine shortly. Some of them preferred that their children attend Ukrainian online schooling. For example, 75% of children hosted by Bucharest in 2022 followed the Ukrainian curricula through online schools.

While the overall approach was to allow flexibility and different pathways, cities acknowledged that genuine integration could be fostered through including Ukrainian children in national education systems. This is especially important considering that many refugees are likely to stay in their host countries even after the war, and thus it is important to plan their integration properly.

Sources: European Union Agency for Asylum, Asylum Report 2023, July 2023; Eurocities, Ukrainian children are back to school in EU cities, September 2022.
Stakeholders' views

A recent research paper suggests that there is a gap between the EU's guarantees of the rights of migrant children and Member States' individual practices concerning integration. More specifically, the authors find that the policies promoted by the EU – the rights of the child, children's best interests and child-friendly integration – are not necessarily reflected in national practices. While the Commission has repeatedly emphasised that integration should be seen as a two-way process between migrants and host societies, the authors regret the fact that Member States often shift the responsibility onto newcomers alone. Their task is not made easier by the increased stigma around migrants, including hate speech and discriminatory attitudes towards migrants. The authors also refer to what they call 'language nationalism', explaining that acquiring the language of the host country has become the central element of integration, whereas being bilingual is rarely seen as an enriching asset, which goes against the EU policy recommendations on multilingualism and multiculturalism.

The paper asserts that 'when schools experience an increased number of foreign pupils with different first languages or religions, the public debate often becomes infused with catastrophic projections of parallel societies and threats to national identity. European countries have become especially prone to such discursive shifts since the 2015 "refugee crisis", when the emphasis of government rhetoric overwhelmingly turned to addressing migration as a security risk and the supposed need to enhance the protection of national interests'. It is in this context that the guiding principles of the EU on integration are at odds with policy implementation at national level, and sometimes gaps exist between national policies and implementation in schools at local and regional level. Thus, the paper suggests providing specific government incentives and assistance to help teachers, counsellors, school staff and local communities to recognise the specificities of integrating migrant children in education.

The European Council for Exiles and Refugees (ECRE) observes in its report on 'Access to socio-economic rights for beneficiaries of temporary protection' that, in most countries, education for children is both a right and an obligation. Therefore, children from Ukraine should be enrolled in a national school. While acknowledging the facilitating measures that EU Member States have taken to quickly assess the educational levels, vulnerabilities and language skills of children, several issues persist, one of the most urgent being the limited capacity of schools. As many Ukrainian children also follow Ukrainian curricula online in addition to the national curricula of the host country, this puts an additional burden on these children. As evidenced by reports from Member States, significant administrative and language barriers remain, as well as the need for long commutes to the location of study.

In 2020, ECRE published an opinion on the action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027, finding that it contains some encouraging aspects with regard to the shift from a 'status-based' approach to a 'need-based' approach in the delivery of services. ECRE took the view that the four areas of integration (education, employment, housing and health) cover a variety of commitments in line with recommendations by regional and local authorities and civil society organisations. The multi-stakeholder approach and emphasis on the role of local authorities in building on their experience with integration can help put the focus on the dissemination of best practices. While ECRE acknowledges the commitment of the action plan to improve mechanisms to measure integration, they called for a direct endorsement from the Council as well to 'create a political momentum around integration'.

The Council of Europe Committee Parliamentary Assembly published a motion for resolution in June 2021, noting that, while most Member States continue to focus on integration of migrants, the approaches used and the results achieved vary. At the same time, a worrying phenomenon is the rise of populism in Europe in recent years, which creates further polarisation and division in our societies.
The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) plays a key part in the debate on integration and has created a political platform – Cities and Regions for Integration of Migrants – where European mayors and regional leaders can share their positive examples of integration of migrants, exchange information and promote diversity as an added value to building inclusive cities and regions. Their collected good practices will also be added to the European Commission website on integration. On the topic of integration of migrant children in particular, on 22 November 2023 the Cities and Regions for Integration of Migrants network is holding a seminar on 'World Children’s Day: the role of local authorities in protecting and empowering migrant and refugee children'.

**European Parliament position**

The European Parliament promotes and safeguards the rights of the child both within the EU and in its relations with the outside world. The Parliament has appointed a Coordinator on children’s rights, who actively promotes children’s rights in EU policies and legislation and supports the Parliament in its work to ensure the rights of the child are given all due consideration. The Coordinator works with institutions and organisations involved in EU policy and children’s rights, and with civil society.

In May 2018, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the protection of children in migration. It stresses that all children, irrespective of their migration or refugee status, must enjoy their rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

On integration, Parliament referred to comparative research according to which ‘Member States are integrating child asylum seekers into schools at different speeds, and in some cases after more than three months from the lodging of the asylum application, with older children facing particular problems’. Parliament took the view that the needs and vulnerabilities of each child should be taken into account, considering that their quality of life and well-being depend also on their early integration, a community support system and the possibility to achieve their full potential. Parliament acknowledged the important role of the local and regional authorities who are at the forefront of the reception and integration of migrant children, and called on the Member States to support local and regional authorities with ‘adequate and continued funding’, and ensure their access to European funding.

Specifically concerning Ukrainian children, in another resolution adopted on 7 April 2022 Parliament noted the challenges faced by the Member States in integrating learners in their education systems but nevertheless stressed the importance of swift integration of children of all ages into ‘mainstream formal, informal and non-formal learning structures’ and ensuring specialised educational support for those with additional needs. Parliament acknowledged that linguistic barriers could hamper the performance of Ukrainian children at school and therefore called on the Commission to support Member States in providing free interpretation, language courses and other programmes to recruit Ukrainian teachers and teachers who speak Ukrainian.

On 21 April 2022, the FEMM committee, jointly with the LIBE committee, held a public hearing on the situation of women refugees from Ukraine. Members of the European Parliament again called for full protection of the rights of children coming from Ukraine to be ensured, insisting on the importance of integration into the national child protection, education and healthcare systems.
MAIN REFERENCES

Eurocities, Ukrainian children are back to school in EU cities, September 2022.


Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In, June 2023.

ENDNOTES
