

Key recommendations

to uphold the rights of Ukrainian children deprived of family care

Before the escalation of the conflict, close to 100.000 children were confined to nearly 700 institutions across Ukraine. Deprived of a family environment, these children are highly vulnerable during the crisis - a message reiterated by UNICEF and UNHCR in a joint statement¹ published on 7 March 2022. Meanwhile, the mass influx of refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine exposes European countries to a child protection emergency.

One of the most concerning elements of this fast-developing, multi country crisis, is the delay in establishing a centralised, cross-country information management system to keep track of the whereabouts, safety and well-being of the nearly 100.000 children from Ukrainian institutions. Already exposed to the neglect synonymous with institutionalisation, the vulnerability of these children, whether they are still in Ukraine or have crossed borders of neighbouring countries, is increasing by the day. Institutions have been targeted by shells and missiles. Many risk to be cut off from supplies. As fighting intensifies, staff are fleeing and children risk being left to face the dangers of war, alone.

Outside this system, millions more vulnerable families are being torn apart amid the chaos. The number of refugees crossing the border into neighbouring countries is rapidly rising, including children who became separated from their families during the war. In some cases, groups of children from Ukrainian institutions have been evacuated and relocated to other countries, which makes it harder to keep track of their whereabouts. Many of them are travelling with staff from the institutions and therefore are recorded as accompanied by a legal guardian, which can lead to an unclear status with regards to their needs for care and protection. Although often misrepresented as ‘orphans’, the majority of these children have parents in Ukraine who may not have been informed about their relocation. Hundreds face the risk of re-institutionalisation upon arrival. Children are also at risk of exploitation, trafficking and going missing. There have already been reported cases of missing children².

The lack of accurate information about Ukrainian children deprived of family care is, in and of itself, life-threatening. Their rights must be upheld. Centralised, robust child protection mechanisms - including tracking and information management systems - must be established.

The undersigned international non-governmental organisations draw from lessons learnt from the past and current humanitarian efforts, and address the following recommendations to Ukrainian authorities and the wider international community, including United Nations agencies, EU institutions, countries supporting refugees, humanitarian actors, emergency service providers, and other key stakeholders involved in the crisis³:

- **Coordinate for an effective international joint response mechanism building on pre-existing localised response and information systems:** The international community, including humanitarian actors, countries supporting refugees, EU institutions, and United Nations bodies, must work together with national authorities to set up common and cohesive mechanisms for children deprived of family

¹ Find the full Statement [here](#).

² <https://missingchildreurope.eu/ukraine/>.

³ For more practical guidance, please refer to the [factsheet ‘Critical Considerations for Movement of Children during a humanitarian crisis’](#), Changing the Way We Care, 2022.

care. Crucially, this must **strengthen identification and tracking systems and decision-making mechanisms to account for children in/relocated from institutions alongside unaccompanied and separated children.**

- **Champion the rights of children deprived of family care:** A child should never experience war and these traumatic times impact tremendously children who are not cared for in a family environment, in particular the close to 100.000 children growing up in institutions in Ukraine, many of whom have disabilities or complex medical needs requiring specialised care⁴. Their rights, safety and well-being must remain at the helm of the concerns of child protection and care authorities at all levels.
- **Ensure no child is unaccounted for:** An effective inter-agency data management system should be established immediately in partnership with national authorities responsible for child protection to enable the identification and tracing of children who are separated and unaccompanied, including children who were in alternative care prior to and during the conflict. This system could be built on pre-existing initiatives such as the Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS+) and ProGres, and should be operational both across Ukraine and reception countries, to account for children in/from institutions alongside unaccompanied and separated children, **in particular in the case of cross-border relocation.** In addition, timely interdisciplinary best interests assessment and determination procedures that are conducted in a child sensitive manner, by professionals with relevant expertise and take into consideration the views of the child, need to be prioritised to ensure children's rights are respected in placement decisions. This is critical to ensure no child falls through the cracks of the system, to plan adequate interventions, and to assess which children are left behind so that they receive continued care and protection. When children go missing, this must be reported to the European hotline for missing children 116 000⁵.
- **Protect children in institutions in Ukraine:** Crucial considerations to ensure their safety and uphold their rights include: mapping and provision of basic emergency goods/services to institutions; recognition of institutions for children as protected humanitarian spaces; regular assessment of the security risks for children and comprehensive plans for their relocation to safety when advisable; and establishment of demilitarised zones allowing for safe transit of children and their carers. All above measures should be coordinated between local, national and international authorities, humanitarian aid bodies, and emergency services.
- **Support and enable, whenever possible, family strengthening and reunification for refugee families and unaccompanied and separated children:** Where in the best interest of the child, refugee families, and in particular those strained and already at risk of separation, should be supported to be able to remain together in their new location and prevent unnecessary family separation. Strong protection and reporting mechanisms – including screening, signposting to services and referral into national child protection case management systems - must be embedded into the measures to welcome refugee children arriving with their families, to adequately protect them from any form of abuse. Local, national and international authorities must also work hand in hand to ensure the tracking of unaccompanied and separated children's family members in the context of emergency, to ensure

⁴ Hope and Homes for Children (2016) Report [‘The Illusion of Protection: An analytical report on the findings of a comprehensive study of the child protection system in Ukraine’](#).

⁵ <https://missingchildreneurope.eu/ukraine>

where possible their reunification. This should include using existing mechanisms, such as the European hotline for missing children 116 000⁶.

- **Promote family and community-based care over institutionalisation:** Refugee children need more than ever the support and care of trusted adults to help them navigate the traumatic experiences they are going through. Particular attention must be paid to ensuring, when possible, continuity of care for children. This includes enabling, if in the best interest of the child, for the known care worker/service provider to remain with the child. At the same time, authorities must urgently put in place interim care arrangements to ensure the swift relocation of children deprived of family care to safe family-based alternative care settings, with adequately trained foster carers. The separation of siblings must be avoided.
- **Provide refugee children with the same level of care as the children who are nationals of the country of reception:** Children fleeing the war must be treated equally without any form discrimination. While interim measures may be needed to manage high needs during the emergency, there can be no setting-up of parallel child protection and care systems with inferior quality standards for unaccompanied and separated children and children relocated from institutions.
- **Address the immediate and specific needs of all refugee children, including unaccompanied and separated children and children relocated from institutions, upon their arrival to reception hubs:** This should include child protection services, access to psychologists, and staff trained to tend to children's medical needs. Staff should speak the children and their carer's language, or be accompanied by interpretation providers, and be trained to provide targeted support to children with disabilities. In the longer term, specific measures to support the recovery of the child, including mental health and education, must be ensured.
- **Renew commitment to uphold the rights of all vulnerable children, throughout the current crisis and beyond:** The allocation of funding and human, financial, and material resources to the humanitarian effort must be commensurate to the scale of the crisis and strengthen the capacity of front-line agencies, including local authorities. Resources must be drawn from new emergency funds, not diverted from financial streams previously supporting vulnerable children and families.

These key recommendations are endorsed by Hope and Homes for Children, Maestral International, Missing Children Europe, Defence for Children ECPAT Netherlands, All-Ukrainian Foundation for Children's Rights, Better Care Network, Catholic Relief Services, Changing the Way We Care, Lumos, Save the Children (as of 11 March 2022)

*If your organisation would like to join the endorsees to these Recommendations, please contact:
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⁶ <https://missingchildreneurope.eu/ukraine>