



**HOPE AND HARM**

**CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES  
OF SEEKING SAFETY IN EUROPE**



Save the Children





**Cover:** Asylum-seeking children from Burundi attending Serbian language classes in a child-friendly space run by Save the Children and partnering organisation Centre for Youth Integration in an asylum centre in Belgrade, Serbia.

Nemanja Stojanovic / Save the Children

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**In the last two years, over 2 million children have fled their countries of origin to European countries. They have fled alone, or with their families, predominately from the devastating conflict in Ukraine, as well as conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere, or from poverty and the impacts of climate change in other countries. All these children have faced significant challenges, and many still do.**

While European governments have an obligation to respect all rights of every child on the move, they are only achieving this partially at best. The European Union (EU) and other European countries, such as the UK, have shown an unprecedented level of solidarity in responding to the millions of children who have fled the devastating conflict in Ukraine. At the same time, they have adopted increasingly draconian and sometimes deadly measures to discourage refugees and migrants from other countries from coming to Europe. In addition, the levels of services provided to refugee and migrant children differs from country to country. Countries that are primarily transit countries, such as those in the Balkans, have underdeveloped asylum systems and limited protection services for children on the move. Several European countries face significant challenges in ensuring refugee and migrant children are in school.

This report explores how children have experienced coming to European countries and the impact these different policy approaches have on their wellbeing. It draws on 18 focus group discussions with children, 52 interviews with teachers and other educational staff, and responses to a detailed questionnaire from over 222 children and 279 caregivers, across 11 countries in total.

While the data gathered is not representative of all children on the move across Europe, the views and perspectives of these children, their caregivers and professionals offer valuable insights into their wellbeing and experiences. When analysed in conjunction with other research and assessments by Save the Children and other organisations and institutions, they also shed much-needed light on key trends, problematic policies and best practices of the EU and European governments.

## Key findings

The children on the move and their caregivers who participated in this research face **significant challenges to their mental health and wellbeing**. Of the child respondents to Save the Children's questionnaire, 38% report feeling less happy since leaving their home country, and over three-quarters describe experiencing difficult emotions and challenges. Common difficulties include worry about the future (45%), restlessness (32%), and difficulty sleeping (31%). Interviews and focus group discussions further illustrate the emotional challenges faced by children seeking safety in Europe. As one child interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina said, "I feel closed in my dark thoughts, and I do not know what to do with my life".

Nine in ten of the children who responded talk to someone when in need, often turning to parents, friends from their country of origin, and peers in their host country as confidants. However, less than one in five sought assistance from government services, highlighting the need for governments to **make mental health and psychosocial support services** more easily available and appropriate for this vulnerable group.

The proportion of children from Ukraine who reported increased sadness or tension was notably higher than that of those from other countries who had fled to Europe. This may, in part, be explained by the sense of accomplishment in overcoming difficulties to arrive to Europe, as children from countries such as Afghanistan raised in focus group discussions.

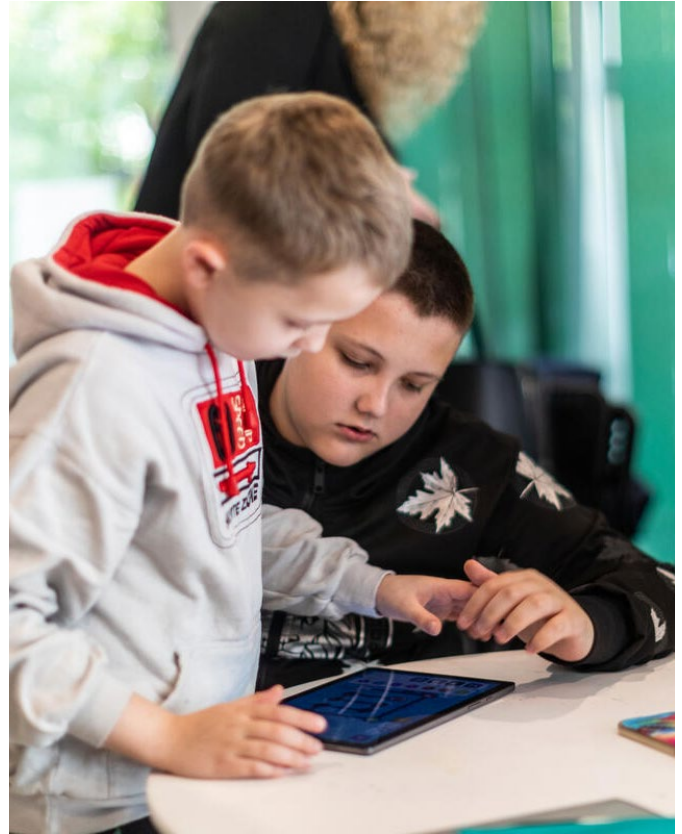
Children from Asia, the Middle East and Africa in particular face challenges including violence, discrimination, and a lack of legal protections. Overall, while one quarter of all caregivers who responded to the questionnaire reported feeling physically endangered during their journey to the host country, responses to questionnaires by children and caregivers, along with discussions in focus groups, indicate that children from countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, Ethiopia and elsewhere face more **significant violations and violence on their journey**.

56% of children from these countries said they felt in danger on their journey (compared to 18% of children from Ukraine), with three quarters reporting to have felt this danger because of police (65%) and border officials (50%), and a further 6 in 10 saying they felt in danger because of smugglers. In contrast, none of the children from Ukraine who responded said they felt in danger from the police or smugglers, and only 12% reported feeling endangered by border officers. In focus group discussions, children from countries such as Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Syria recounted experiencing violence at borders, including being beaten and threatened by police with firearms, sleeping in forests and mountains, and having to walk for days on end. One child in Greece said, “I was beaten hard on my arm by the Greek police. They took all my clothes and sent us back to Türkiye.”

Other notable challenges include:

- Children from Ukraine consistently mentioned **separation from their fathers**, who are unable to leave the country under martial law. In total, 30% of caregivers reported having to leave immediate family members in their country of origin.
- In focus group discussions in Lithuania and Greece, children from countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East expressed concerns about **establishing legal stay**, an issue also highlighted in key informant interviews in the Balkans. A lack of documents exposes children to exploitation and hinders their access to protection and education.
- 86% of caregivers who answered the questionnaire had **economic difficulties**, reporting struggles to pay bills, buy nutritious food, or secure enough food for the family.

**Participation in school** was highlighted by key informants as a main way in which child refugees and migrants can thrive, saying that schools are safe havens and crucial to their integration in their host countries. One emphasised that “children feel genuinely happy, they integrate into the school community and are confident”.



Claire Thomas / Save the Children

Despite many countries in Europe having significant issues ensuring refugee and migrant children receive a quality education, most of the children who answered Save the Children’s questionnaire are in school, with a clear majority expressing a preference for in-person schooling over online education. Focus group discussions and interviews with teachers confirmed that attending school in-person provides social advantages, reduces feelings of loneliness, and facilitates friendship with local peers.

Online schooling, more common among Ukrainian refugee children, poses particular challenges for those attending national schools as well, who feel increased pressure and tiredness, struggling to keep up with both programmes. Children who had not yet reached their destination country were less likely to be in any form of education.

Participants in this research stressed the need for better access to **extra-curricular activities**. As one teacher in Bosnia and Herzegovina put it, “only enrolling them in school is not enough.” Language barriers, distance from schools, limited transportation and a lack of financial means hinder children’s participation in these activities.

## Conclusion and key recommendations

Importantly, over a third of the children who answered Save the Children's questionnaire expressed increased happiness since leaving their country of origin. During focus group discussions, children said they felt safer and free from threats, with one child stating, there are "no bombs, no rockets". Positive experiences with support services and professionals were also highlighted by children in focus group discussions, as were the opportunities they will have in their future and the contributions they can make in their new societies.

This shows that Europe is a haven for some children and has the potential to be for all those seeking safety. There are also areas of best practice – from offering children from Ukraine protection under the Temporary Protection Directive, to providing good quality education and child protection services – that can be built on.

Instead, European countries are currently making consequential decisions, including reforming European and national migration and asylum systems through the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which double down on policies that lead to the inhumane treatment, rights violations and inadequate services children who participated in this research have experienced.

Save the Children's view is that every single child on the move must be treated with dignity, have their needs met and their rights respected, and calls on European governments and the EU to:

- Address asylum claim backlogs, and simplify residence permit procedures
  - Promptly appoint guardians for unaccompanied and separated children and prioritise family-based care over residential care.
  - Reverse policies and practices, such as pushbacks, that lead to child rights violations, and ensure compliance with human rights laws at borders by establishing an independent border monitoring mechanism.
  - Prioritise family unity, by allowing refugee children to join their closest family members.
  - End all child migration detention and allow freedom of movement, including by excluding children from border and accelerated procedures
  - Ensure access to quality education for all refugee and migrant children, and provide supportive classes and extracurricular activities to improve their wellbeing and integration.
- Expand and make mental health services more accessible for refugee and migrant children
  - Establish safe and legal migration pathways, including quotas for work, private sponsorships, study permits, and humanitarian visas.
  - Provide access to protection and long-term EU resident permits to refugees from Ukraine who have claimed protection under the Temporary Protection Directive, or that flee the country for the first time, for as long as the hostilities are ongoing.



Marija Piroški / Save the Children

# NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

**This report seeks to triangulate different sources to identify trends and reach conclusions about the wellbeing and experiences of refugee and migrant children in Europe, the policies that affect their wellbeing and what European governments and institutions can do to improve the situation.**

Between September and November 2023 Save the Children conducted 18 focus groups involving 95 children across seven countries, interviewed 52 teachers in 11 countries, and gathered responses to a detailed questionnaire by over 222 children and 279 caregivers in 10 countries.

Focus group participants were from Afghanistan, Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Iraq, Morocco, Syria and Ukraine. Respondents to the questionnaire were from Algeria, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Ukraine. Of children who responded to the questionnaire, 64% were boys and 36% girls. All children who participated in the research were over 12 years of age.

The report also draws on other Save the Children research and assessments across European countries where the organisation operates,<sup>1</sup> as well as other existing literature and sources.

The lack of comparable data across multiple European countries on the themes covered in this report is broadly recognised, in part due to the variety of indicators and definitions used in various databases and sources.<sup>2</sup> As with general data on refugee and migrant children across Europe, the focus group discussions, interviews and questionnaires conducted for the purpose of this report have limitations and should not be generalised to all refugees in host countries in Europe.

For instance, most of the children and caregivers who filled out Save the Children's questionnaire are refugees from Ukraine (86% of caregivers and 68% of children), as are most of the focus group discussions, (12) compared to children from other countries (6).

Children and caregivers from Ukraine who responded were primarily in Lithuania, Romania and Poland, and the focus group discussions were conducted in Denmark, Netherlands, Lithuania, Romania and Poland. Most children and caregivers from countries other than Ukraine who responded to the questionnaire were in UK, Greece, Serbia and Romania, and the focus group discussions conducted with these children were in Greece, Lithuania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The data was gathered across 11 countries in total<sup>3</sup>, both EU Member States and countries outside the EU. It is important to interpret this country distribution cautiously, as the number of children reached at each Save the Children participant office varied, and the country distribution reflects the differing outreach efforts and connections with refugees in each Save the Children office or partner organisation rather than the actual distribution or demographic profile of refugees and migrants across Europe. It is therefore not a representative sample or survey. Children in focus group discussions had also been in their host or transit countries for varying lengths of time.

Ukrainian children and those from other countries who responded to the questionnaire<sup>4</sup> have different profiles and live in different circumstances. Ukrainian children who responded are more likely to be female (49% vs. 15%), younger (79% under 16 vs. 24%), live with family in apartment or houses (83% vs. 25%). Children from Ukraine were less likely to live unaccompanied in reception centres (0% vs. 49%), be in-transit (5% vs. 40%) and be an unaccompanied or separated child (3% vs. 68%).

**Figure 1**  
**Countries where data was gathered**

- Focus group discussions, questionnaires and key informant interviews
- Questionnaire and key informant interviews
- Key informant interviews only





## 1

# CHILDREN'S WELLBEING SINCE ARRIVING TO EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

**A global review of existing literature and data found that “refugee and asylum-seeking children have high rates of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], depression, and anxiety”.<sup>5</sup> Refugee and migrant children also commonly have considerable physical health needs on arrival in destination countries.<sup>6</sup>**

This is true for refugee children and their families who have fled to Europe. In a report on the mental health of refugees from Ukraine in Denmark, 42.5% were found to have experienced acts of war or combat, and 38.9% had lost family members or close friends as a result of the war, with nearly 30% showing symptoms of PTSD.<sup>7</sup> Another study by the Norwegian Refugee Council meanwhile found that “across [Poland, Romania and Moldova], most respondents (68%) reported being preoccupied with (traumatising) events in Ukraine as the main reason for not feeling safe”.<sup>8</sup>

Of the 222 children that responded to Save the Children’s questionnaire, 38% stated they feel less happy (either a little less or a lot less) since leaving their country of origin. When asked whether they had experienced either positive or negative emotions in the past month, three quarters (75%) reported experiencing a negative emotion.

This was similar amongst children regardless of age or gender, with children from Ukraine in particular reporting a decrease in happiness and experiencing negative emotions.

These negative emotions manifested most commonly as feeling worried about the future (45%), restlessness (32%), difficulty falling asleep or sleepless (30%), lack of energy to do day-to-day tasks (30%), loneliness (28%). Children also report feelings of anger (20%), despair (17%), fear for their lives (15%), and having recurrent nightmares (12%). An even higher number of caregivers, over 9 in 10, reported having experienced negative emotions.

In addition, nearly half of the caregivers (48%) reported that their children displayed sadness or acted tense or nervous more often since leaving their home country. Children of Ukrainian caregivers were more adversely affected: 53% in Ukrainians compared to 16% for children from other countries<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, nearly one third (31%) answered that the confidence of their children had declined (a little or a lot less often). Higher levels of confidence were reported by older children and those who had arrived from countries other than Ukraine.



These emotional challenges were also reflected in interviews and focus group discussions. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a child in a focus group discussion said, “I feel closed in my dark thoughts, and I do not know what to do with my life”. In the UK, one teacher noted challenges refugee children face: “they are homesick, anxious, it is difficult for them to be in a new place, the culture, how things are – an ‘alien planet’ one child described to me”. It is similar to other Save the Children research on the challenges children face on arrival to Europe via the Balkans similarly found that “children were clearly straining their personal capacities to integrate their emotional experiences.”<sup>10</sup>

A study by Save the Children in 2022 found broadly similar levels of unhappiness (57% either a lot or a little less happy) and lower levels of confidence (44%) amongst Ukrainian children surveyed.<sup>11</sup> Also, Ukrainian caregivers recently surveyed by Save the Children across 24 countries reported that children were most negatively affected by worries about the future, not having enough friends around them, not knowing the local language, and missing friends and family in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

## Support options available to children

*“Refugee and migrant children have been through a lot, and many have experienced trauma...They need to feel secure to show all their talents and skills.”*

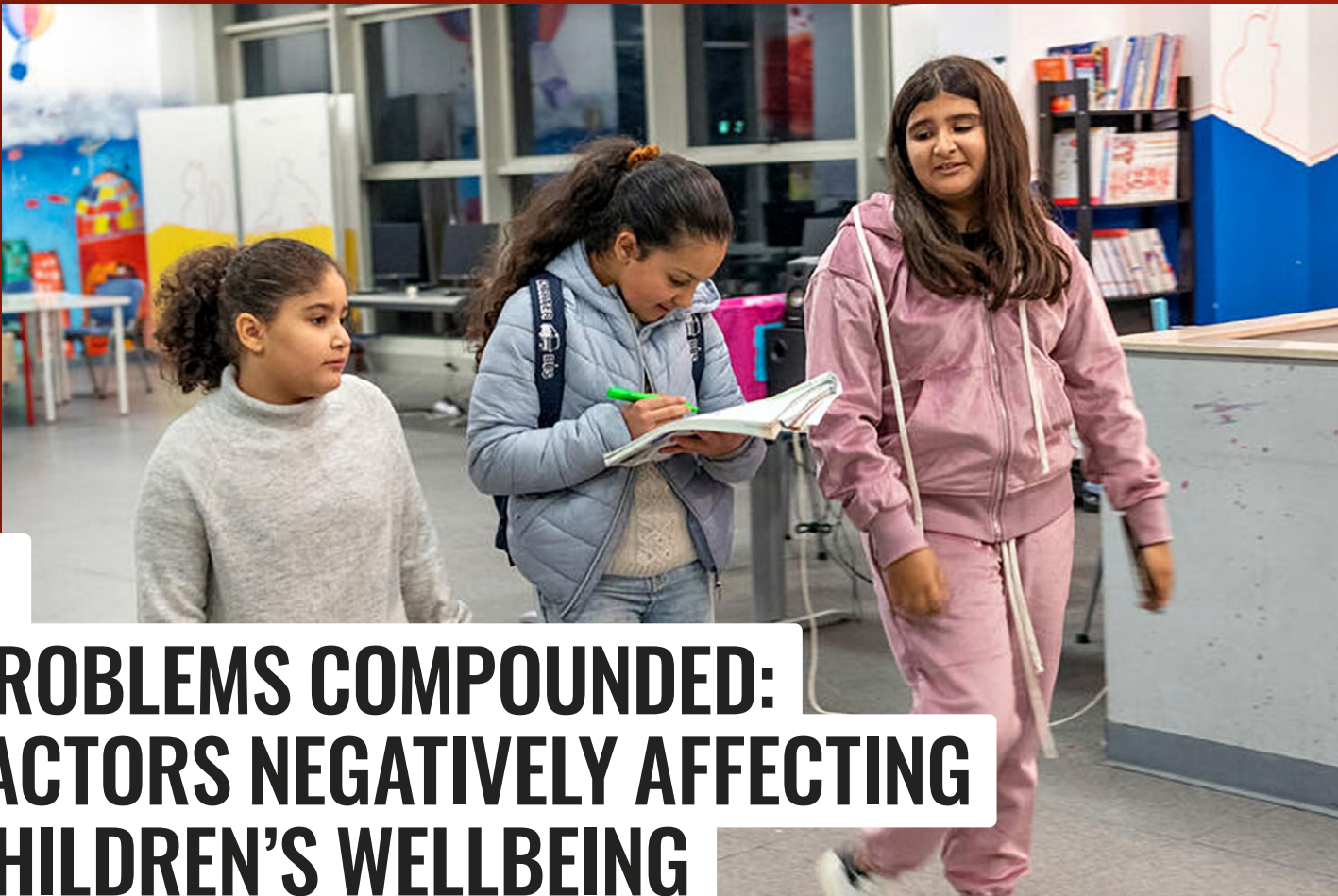
**Teacher**  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

For children who have been through difficult experiences, and exposed to traumatic events, a key factor in their resilience is “adequate social and emotional support and responsive care from constant caregivers.”<sup>13</sup> Encouragingly, 89% of interviewed children stated that they talk to someone when they need help. Children reported speaking mostly to parents, friends from their country of origin, and friends from the host country. When they need help, girls tend to talk more than boys, younger children more so than older ones, and Ukrainian children more so than children from other countries.<sup>14</sup>

However, children were much less likely to speak to reception workers or government employees, such as teachers or social workers (19%). When caregivers were asked if they were aware of support options for their children showing signs of distress, 61% responded that they were. However, less than two thirds (61%) of these caregivers who showed awareness sought support. Those who did seek help found that recreational activities for children were helpful, as well as activities focusing on improving children’s wellbeing and emotions management.

This is similar to other studies, suggesting a need for governments to expand the availability of mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) to refugee and migrant children and their families. Research on refugee children from Ukraine published by Save the Children this year found that, despite the prevalence of psycho-social concerns “only a few children and caregivers sought out access to MHPSS services. Particularly adolescent girls explained they wanted to talk to a psychologist, but that they did not know how to contact one, or that their parents disapproved.”<sup>15</sup> Consultations with children in Poland found that “half of the [100] participants from Ukraine said they would like to talk to someone professional about their mental health”, with some children emphasising that they would like this to be with a professional from Ukraine, who could speak to them in their own language and better understand their experiences.<sup>16</sup>

This support is not only important as an immediate request of many of these children, but also because in the absence of “early support to promote mental health...a high proportion of refugee children are at risk for educational disadvantage and poor social integration in host communities, potentially affecting their life course”.<sup>17</sup>



## 2

## PROBLEMS COMPOUNDED: FACTORS NEGATIVELY AFFECTING CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

**While psychological problems are understandably common in children forced to flee, follow-up studies have shown that the magnitude of these issues can be reduced over time, particularly with adequate support and assistance, and when they are able to attend school and participate socially.**

However, the challenges faced by many children arriving to Europe extend beyond the initial flight from their home country and encompass the experiences related to their journey.

This is particularly the case for those subjected to violence, and is compounded by the fact that "prolonged asylum procedures, temporary residence permits, delayed family reunifications, many school-moves and xenophobic attitudes" can counteract "healthy development".<sup>18</sup>

Save the Children has documented how European governments' efforts to restrict the ability of children to seek asylum in the EU, to contain those who have arrived, and deter others from coming, has led to serious violations of their rights at borders and once upon arrival in Europe.<sup>19</sup>

Questionnaire respondents, focus group discussions and key informant interviews provide further evidence as to how these policies and practices to restrict migration negatively impact children and their families. They also highlight some specific challenges faced by children from Ukraine.

### Violence and danger on routes to European countries

Fleeing violence and seeking refuge in a new country is an often-arduous experience. Of the caregivers who responded to the questionnaire, one quarter reported feeling in physical danger during their journey to the host country. The person or situation that made them feel in danger was most commonly the police, border officers or soldiers, followed by harsh weather, smugglers, other travellers, sea crossings, and having to walk long distances.

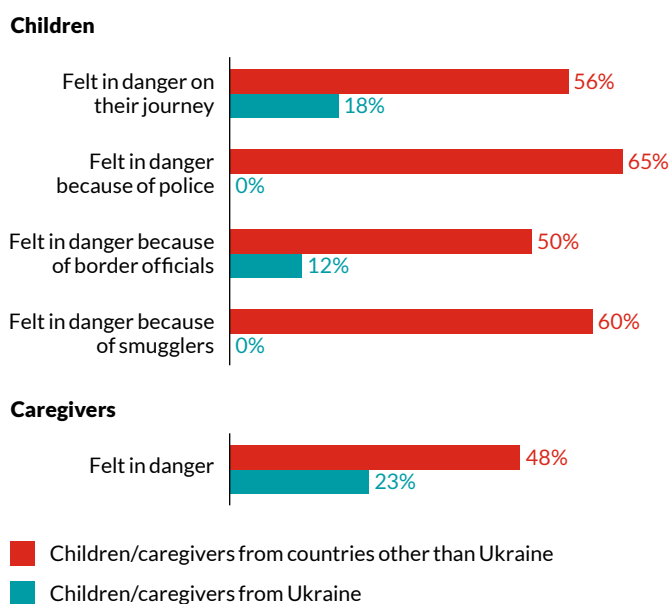
In focus group discussions in Poland, children from Ukraine highlighted their bad memories of the journey from their country, including having to wait at borders, walking long distances, passing checkpoints, feeling cold, and using overloaded means of transportation. In Lithuania, children from Ukraine also mentioned hardships on the journey. One child said, “The journey was very hard ... the most difficult thing was that it was very cold.”

Children from other countries, including Afghanistan and Syria, highlighted more profound challenges and serious violations as part of their journey, including the violence they face at Europe's borders. In general, of the children who answered Save the Children's questionnaire, older children, boys, and children from countries other than Ukraine were more vulnerable. A larger proportion of these children travelled with non-family members or alone, are separated or unaccompanied, live in reception centres without their families, and are in transit.<sup>20</sup>

56% of children from countries other than Ukraine said they felt in danger on their journey (compared to 18% of children from Ukraine) with a high proportion reporting to have felt this danger because of police (65%) and border officials (50%), and a further 6 in 10 saying they felt in danger because of smugglers. No children from Ukraine who responded said they felt in danger from the police or smugglers, and a far smaller percentage (12%) reported feeling endangered by border officers. This can be explained by Ukrainian nationals being able to travel visa-free into European countries – with no need to be smuggled across borders – whereas children from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan who participated must often cross irregularly to be able to claim protection, at borders where authorities have been illegally and violently pushing them back. A similarly higher proportion of caregivers who originated in countries other than Ukraine (48%) reported having felt in danger compared to Ukrainian caregivers (23%).

In Lithuania, children who arrived in the country via Belarus emphasised that they had to spend several days in forests at the border and the difficulties they had in getting to the country. One child said “It was a tough journey, not safe...I spent 3 days in the forest. The situation was very hard.”

**Figure 2**  
Children and caregiver's sense of danger



In focus group discussions in Greece, children had painful memories and had lived through traumatic experiences. One child stated that “I was exhausted by the trip, 15 days I was walking.” Another child added “I was hungry, cold and wet hiding in the woods.” Regarding the treatment at the border by authorities a child stated that “the Greek police hit me at the borders. They gave me to another group of Pakistanis and Afghans, which was like a gang, and they brought me to Türkiye.” Another added “I was beaten hard on my arm by the Greek police. They took all my clothes and sent us back to Türkiye.”

Children in focus group discussions in Bosnia and Herzegovina had similar experiences. One child talking about his journey said, “My journey was very difficult, we walked nights and days, all the time. We slept in the mountains, and it was very cold. Police pushed us back and they have weapons, they fired into the air. I was very scared.”

Children also faced danger and violence earlier in their journey, prior to reaching Europe. A child in Greece stated that “at the borders of Pakistan, in Balochistan, the army was shooting on us. I was thinking that I was going to die, and nobody would find me. The mountains were high and dangerous, after three days we were in the desert under the sun. In the borders of Iran, on the mountains, a kid 13 years old fell from a cliff and we could not save him.”

## The EU Migration and Asylum Pact, and the Temporary Protection Directive

The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (EU) are finalising a reform of EU legislation on asylum and migration management in a package known as the “Pact on Migration and Asylum”. On 20 December, they reached an agreement on the core elements of the laws under discussion, that stands to have far reaching negative implications for the rights of children on the move in Europe, and beyond, if it is finally validated in spring 2024.<sup>21</sup>

Core propositions for both asylum procedures and screening lack adequate safeguards and procedures to ensure respect for human rights, including the rights of the child.<sup>22</sup>

Agreed procedures at borders risk leading to systematic detention of children and restrictions on freedom of movement, impacting access to proper care, education, and health services. These could lead to families with children being detained for more than seven months.

In the December agreement, previous proposals which could have been improvements on the *status quo*, including those to establish a new system of solidarity and responsibility sharing between Member States and more efficient and fair procedures for family reunion, were substantially watered down.

Refugees from Ukraine are not part of the normal asylum systems of EU countries. Following the dramatic escalation of conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, the EU authorised the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), an EU measure designed to provide immediate and temporary protection in cases of large numbers of displaced people arriving from non-EU countries. Under the TPD, refugees from Ukraine have the right to a residence permit, access to education, free movement, medical care, access to the labour market and accommodation.



Claire Thomas / Save the Children

Ensuring refugees from Ukraine can enjoy these rights in practice has proved a significant challenge for EU Member States.<sup>23</sup> It has nevertheless been crucial for the nearly 6 million refugees across Europe recorded by UNHCR, including millions of children.<sup>24</sup> Partial data from the EU shows that more refugees from Ukraine have claimed protection in 2023,<sup>25</sup> when arrivals were perceived to have dropped off, than all arrivals combined on Mediterranean routes this year so far.

The TPD has been renewed<sup>26</sup> for its maximum duration and will expire on 5 March 2025. If refugees from Ukraine are then required to enter regular asylum and migration systems of Member States it could cause significant problems, with some estimates that even if only a quarter of those benefiting from temporary protection were to do so it would “stretch national asylum or migration procedural capacities well beyond their limits – especially in those countries that host large relative shares of people.”<sup>27</sup>

The experience of the children in these focus group discussions corresponds with Save the Children's recent research on children who have taken the "Balkans route" to Europe (see text box 2), in which children reported experiencing all types of violence. At borders, violence included being subjected to cold conditions, electric shocks, and severe beatings, resulting in serious physical injuries like fractures and contusions, with the main perpetrators being police or border guards and smugglers.<sup>28</sup> It is also similar to Save the Children research this year, which found that one in three girl migrants interviewed in North Africa, experienced or witnessed sexual abuse or other forms of gender-based violence while fleeing their home countries to find safety in Europe, and that this had profound impacts on their mental health.<sup>29</sup> Recent research collated by UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM on children migrating to Europe also showed that almost one in five have suffered physical violence during their journeys.<sup>30</sup>

## Discrimination

Over a quarter of children who responded to the questionnaire reported that someone was unkind, rude or made them feel excluded over the last month. Children reported that this happened to them on the street or in their neighbourhood (37%), while going to school (22%), crossing the border (15%) visiting a store or a restaurant (8.3%), and when interacting with the police (8%).

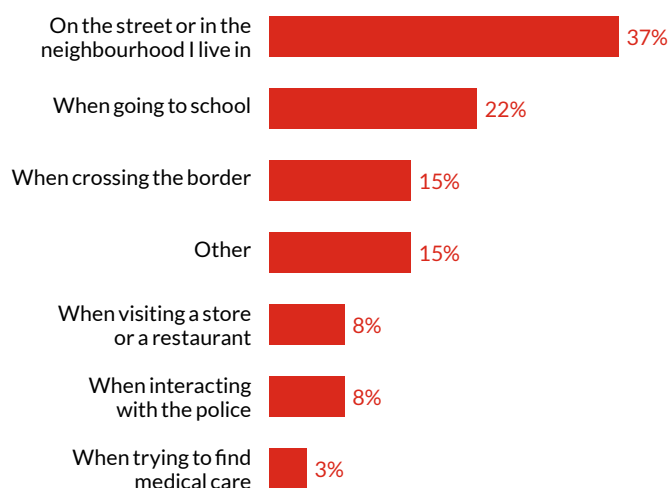
Caregivers also suffer from discrimination. Since leaving their home country, 29% of caregivers reported having experienced discrimination of some sort. They have encountered this discrimination as being prevented from doing certain activities, being hassled, or made to feel inferior because of their situation. In addition to the incidences referenced by children, caregivers answered that they experienced discrimination when trying to find housing, work, or medical care, and when trying to enrol their children in school. A smaller number mentioned experiencing discrimination when crossing the border, and when interacting with the police.<sup>31</sup>

Bullying is also an issue for refugee and migrant children. One teacher interviewed in the UK said, "We had one child from Iraq who was a victim of bullying. They mocked him for being a refugee, not having his own house, and not knowing the language. A boy from his class helped [him]."

In a focus group discussion with children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this feeling of discrimination and not being accepted contributed to loneliness and negative thoughts amongst the children. One child mentioned, "I cannot go to city because I feel bad. People are looking at me and I am not comfortable." Another added, "I don't feel accepted because this is not my country."

Other studies have shown that many refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children are subject to negative stereotypes, negative attitudes, or other forms of abuse.<sup>32</sup> Save the Children's recent research on children from Ukraine found they experienced xenophobic remarks and bullying in their host location.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 3**  
Situations, over the last month, in which anyone has been unkind or rude or made children feel sad or excluded because of their situation





Alina Smutko / Save the Children

## Save the Children's work with children on the move, in Europe and worldwide

Save the Children supports migrant and refugee children across Europe. For example, in Spain we support children such as 16-year-old Zaid\* and 14-year-old Zidan\*, who are homeless, to connect them to government services, provide legal assistance and day-to-day support such as language courses and social activities. We support migrant and refugee families' integration through information that support day-to-day integration, activities that facilitate contacts and provide exposure to host country culture and language. In Italy, we provide a free helpline for children who arrive in the country alone, offering legal advice, psychosocial support, and referral to authorities for support. In 2020 the hotline received 1,276 calls allowing us to assist 703 people.

In 2022, Save the Children rapidly scaled up our programmes in response to the war in Ukraine, providing food and water, cash transfers, psychosocial support, and safe spaces to 1,095,323 children and families across Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Lithuania. We helped over 300,000 people who were forced to flee their homes to Europe, including 177,589 children in neighbouring countries, and supported children and families from Ukraine in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK.

We also help children across the world affected by conflict, violence, poverty, and climate change that drive many children and families to move against their will. In Yemen our health programmes helped Fatima\* to find advice and support after she was forcibly married when she was 14, and in Syria our support to Abboud's\* family enabled him to stop working in an oil field and return to school.

Save the Children supports children on the move in transit countries too, helping them avoid the dangers of smuggling, trafficking, and other violence. We provide psychosocial and protection services, information and places for children and families to rest and feel safe. In Egypt, our programme helped 17-year-old Nasser\* process his distressing experiences of being forcibly conscripted to an armed group in Somalia. Our programmes also provide children with education, skills training, and other support, including integration in the community where they are when possible.

\*Children's names changed to protect their identities

## Lack of legal status

Children in focus group discussions highlighted challenges to establishing their legal stay as a major worry for them: “I do not have papers. The procedure is getting too long. First time in my life, I am in a situation where I have no legal documents”, one child in Greece said. Most unaccompanied children in Greece rely on the asylum system to regularise their stay, although this procedure is unfit for children and most of them are rejected. Unaccompanied children often end up without official documents which prove the legality of their stay – the result of “non-uniform application of the age assessment procedure, a non-functioning guardianship system, denial of asylum claims, limited scope for administrative appeal following denial, and judicial appeals inaccessible to most children”.<sup>34</sup> This lack of documentation exposes children to exploitation and hinders their access to protection, health benefits or education.<sup>35</sup> These children often live in fear and distress and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Children in Lithuania who had crossed the border from Belarus also highlighted this as an issue, including that it affected their desire to enrol in school. “I want to figure out my legal situation here, and later I would like to start a school in Lithuania”, and another child said, “I would like to become a legal person here in the next 12 months.” Key informants in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia also highlighted that refugee families and refugee children face administrative obstacles to provide needed documents to enrol children in schools, have access to the job market, open a bank account or travel.

Other organisations have documented the negative psychosocial/mental health implications of being undocumented in Europe. A study by PICUM highlighted that undocumented children “realise they will not have the same chances or future as their citizen classmates and friends” and that this “becomes a central aspect of their life and identity.”<sup>36</sup> Migrant children who have not applied for asylum or lack legal documents are the most at risk of staying out of school.<sup>37</sup>

## Separation from family members

Thirty percent of caregivers who responded to questionnaires left immediate family members in their home country. Although a higher proportion of Ukrainian children who answered the questionnaire live with their families in their host countries, all of them express missing their fathers during focus group discussions.

Recent research by Save the Children and Impact Initiatives on children who have fled from Ukraine to European countries found that children in Poland and Romania said that they were most worried about missing their family, friends or pets left behind in Ukraine. As one girl from Ukraine in Romania put it, “I am worried whether we will be able to return to Ukraine to my dad and my kitten.”<sup>38</sup> This can be explained by the fact that, under martial law declared by the government of Ukraine following the dramatic escalation of the war in February 2022, men of military age are forbidden to leave the country. The vast majority of refugees who have fled the war in Ukraine are women and children, with a sizeable number being separated from fathers who remain in the country, along with other male family members between the age of 18 and 60.

Children in focus group discussions in Greece, some of whom are unaccompanied, stressed that their principal preoccupations were either trying to join family members in other European countries, or for family left in their home countries to join them. In one focus group discussion in Lithuania a child described being separated from an adult sibling who was housed in separate centre as they did not have documentation to prove their family relation, asking the focus group moderator to “please connect me to my brother”.<sup>39</sup>

## Balkans route

A significant number of children on the move in Europe take the “Balkans route” – part of the Eastern Mediterranean route towards Europe intersected by the EU’s external borders. Refugees and migrants first enter the territory of Greece or Bulgaria, then travel across Western Balkans countries – North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina – to face the EU’s external borders again when entering Hungary, Croatia, or Romania. The fact that Western Balkan countries are surrounded by EU borders means this region is directly impacted by the EU’s asylum and migration management policies.

Boys and girls, especially those travelling alone on this route, are directly exposed to physical violence, particularly when they encounter border police as violent, illegal pushbacks regularly occur along the route, including at the borders of EU countries. Children travelling along the route are denied access to a fair asylum process and any best-interest procedures that would address their protection risks and needs.



Michael Jesurun / Save the Children

The violence, humiliation, and systematic disregard for the human rights of people on the move, along with the total absence of safe and legal routes has led to increased market for people-smuggling networks in the region, who also threaten and violate the rights of children on the move.

Children on the Balkans route are victims of sexual abuse and violence, child marriage, psychological violence, economic exploitation, and child labour.

Some of the countries on the route are candidates for membership of the EU. Rather than focus on the expansion of human rights standards, however, the EU approach to these countries has prioritised border management, action against smugglers, fostering readmission and return, and achieving alignment of visa policies to discourage migration.

Non-EU Balkan countries’ national asylum and refugee protection systems are also underdeveloped and are dependent on aid, mostly from the EU. They have largely failed to create a legal framework that would protect children and encourage them to report the rights violations they face. Instead, the systems remained limited to providing basic assistance such as food and shelter for refugees and migrants who are transiting, and unsuitable conditions and insufficient support for those who consider staying.

## Accommodation and restrictions on movement

Children’s wellbeing is related to where they live and under what conditions. A 2022 research paper on psychological distress in child and adolescent migrants in Germany found elevated emotional and behavioural problems,<sup>40</sup> and that these problems may be exacerbated by the fact that an increasing number of children and adolescents are accommodated with their families in large collective housing facilities.



Health care and psychosocial support for young refugees in these facilities are worryingly inadequate. Reasons for this include a severe shortage of personnel, related staff overload, and a lack of procedures to identify the specific needs of stressed children.<sup>41</sup>

The mental health impact on children is more pronounced in restricted centres or when they are detained. In Lithuania, children who had recently arrived by crossing the border with Belarus are housed in a Refugee Reception Centre, which they have limited ability or opportunity to move outside of in the first days or weeks following arrival, until their claims are evaluated. They stated that they are unclear regarding attending school in Lithuania. One child mentioned that, “I simply don’t have a mood to start school.”

At Avnstrup Deportation Centre in Denmark, healthcare professionals report concerning signs in very young children, such as diminished eye contact, lack of facial expressions, and sleep and eating disorders. Daycare educators note anxiety and insecurity in children, with many showing emotional, attention, and hyperactivity difficulties.<sup>42</sup>

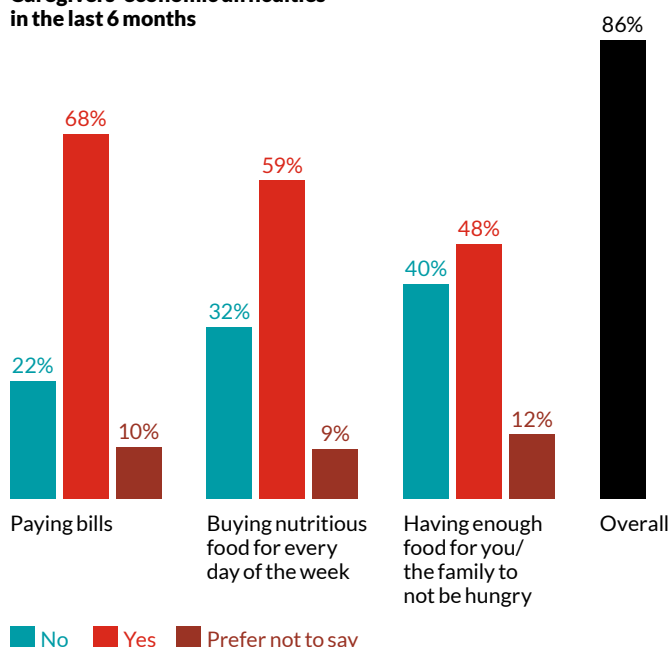
In Greece, the restrictions on movement that have led to children and adults being kept in over-crowded, underserved camps such as the notorious Moria camp on Lesbos, and more recently in prison-like “Closed Control Access Centres” is of long-standing concern, including for the impact this has on children’s mental health.<sup>43</sup> In the last year, the government of Greece has been converting asylum-seekers’ reception centres into closed controlled centres, prompting some of the government’s own Refugee Education Coordinators to publicly liken them to “open air prisons” and highlight that “these conditions create serious concerns for the psychosocial and learning development of the children we support.”<sup>44</sup>

## Economic challenges

Economic difficulties experienced by caregivers also may have contributed to their emotional distress. 86% of the caregivers who responded to the questionnaire faced economic difficulties in the last 6 months such as struggling to pay bills (68%), buying nutritious food for every day (59%) or securing enough food for the family (48%). Other studies have found that children from higher and middle socio-economic groups feel more positive about their future, and have a more satisfactory experience of migration, than those who are less well off.<sup>45</sup>

Economic challenges also affect children

**Figure 4**  
Caregivers’ economic difficulties  
in the last 6 months



participating in school, according to key informant interviews with teachers and other professionals supporting education of migrant children. One interviewee in Serbia stated “one of the teenage boys didn’t want to go to school because he had only one pair of jeans and one pair of trainers. He was shy because he felt he was so different from the local children.” A teacher in Romania said the main reason refugee children who are attending Romanian language schools drop out is economic, citing in particular “money delays, from the governmental support programme for people from Ukraine”.



## 3

## CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL

*“They are amazing students, resilient students, so motivated and determined.”*

**UK Teacher**

on refugee and migrant children in school

**Many unaccompanied children leaving their home countries to come to Europe cite education as an important factor in their decision.**

38% of children interviewed in a UNICEF-REACH survey conducted in Italy in 2017, for example, said education was their most important motivating factor,<sup>46</sup> and a recent Save the Children study found that “desire to pursue education was a major factor in girls’ decisions to migrate.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, for refugee children schools are not only places for them to learn in class, but can be “a safe space where children are protected” and where their “mental health and psychosocial support needs can be met, and they can learn skills to keep them safe, play with peers, thrive and build their own futures.”<sup>48</sup>

For children seeking asylum, EU Member States should not postpone access to education for more than three months from the date on which children have lodged their asylum claim.<sup>49</sup> In practice it can take longer, and alternative classes in accommodation centres do not usually teach the full curriculum or meet the same teaching standards as local schools. EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has reported additional restrictions in some specific parts and regions in Germany, Greece (the Reception and Identification Centres) and Hungary.<sup>50</sup> Children from Ukraine who have claimed protection under the TPD have the right to access education although it is not compulsory (in some national jurisdictions, attendance of all children – including those who have temporary protection – is mandatory). In countries hosting the largest numbers of refugees from Ukraine, such as Germany which is hosting over 1 million refugees from Ukraine, there are critical capacity gaps and shortage of staff. In Poland, Romania, and Moldova, approximately two thirds of school age children from Ukraine are not consistently accessing or actively participating in in-person schooling potentially available to them.<sup>51</sup>

## Backsliding on child rights – UK anti-refugee measures

In recent years, the UK has been backsliding on its commitment to uphold the rights of asylum-seeking and refugee children. Legislation passed by the UK Parliament, although not fully enforced, is leading to a situation where children are treated differently solely because of their nationality and mode of arrival in the country.<sup>52</sup>

A record high backlog of initial decisions on asylum claims means thousands of people have to wait years for an outcome and are left in limbo, unable to plan for their futures. At the end of June of the 175,457 people awaiting a decision, 80% have been waiting for more than 6 months.<sup>53</sup> Many children with outstanding claims reach 18 years old before their claim is determined and, on average, children wait longer for determination of their claim than adults,<sup>54</sup> placing them under significant strain and stress.

At the same time, the UK has **limited the number of regular pathways** for most children needing refugee protection, and the government has prioritised efforts to “stop the boats” – irregular migration by sea across the English Channel.<sup>55</sup> The principal exception is people fleeing war in Ukraine, where specific provisions were put in place to allow children and adults to enter the UK legally and seek safety.

There is an increased **risk of detention** and removal for children seeking asylum in the UK. The Illegal Migration Act created provisions that in most cases would allow for the detention of children for 28 days without an opportunity to apply for bail, which would reverse established policy and practice in this area.<sup>56</sup>

Despite having developed a relatively good practice in assessing age when the process is led by qualified social workers, Border Force officials also conduct **age assessments** upon arrival in the UK, based on a visual assessment of a child's appearance and demeanour and a short interview, contributing to an increasing number of children incorrectly deemed to be over 18 years old.

In the hope of improving this process, the UK Home Office decided to introduce widely discredited biological method to assess age.<sup>57</sup>

The UK is an outlier amongst European states because the law does not allow child refugees to sponsor close family members to join them.

Unaccompanied children are entitled to support from local authorities who must meet their needs in a way a reasonable parent would. The Children Act 1989 protects all children in the UK regardless of their nationality or immigration status, and a child who arrives separated and claims asylum in the UK should be considered a child in need and placed in the care of social services. However, in the past two years, under a parallel system developed by the UK Home Office, children, sometimes as young as 13 years old, have been placed in unsuitable and unsafe accommodation. 400 children went missing from these placements in less than two years, with many yet to be found.



Paul Wu / DEC

### **Nine in ten of the children who responded to Save the Children's questionnaire are attending school,** regardless of their country of origin.

Child respondents averaged 14.7 years of age with over 7 years of education. On average Ukrainian children had more years of education (7.5 years compared to 6.5 years), even though Ukrainians responding tended to be younger.

Among children from countries other than Ukraine who responded, nearly one quarter (23%) do not attend school. A smaller number of Ukrainian children do not attend school at all (5%) but are far more likely to attend school online (18% online only, 11% attending in person and online). Over one third of children who responded that they had not arrived at their destination country indicated they were not in school.

Teachers interviewed highlighted how children can thrive and benefit from participation in school. One interviewed in the Netherlands stated that schools serve as safe havens where children find solace and build confidence. According to an interviewee, "You see children getting smarter and more confident; they help each other with translating." In Lithuania too, a teacher highlighted that over time, many children adapt well, feeling safe and integrating into the school community "children feel genuinely happy, they integrate into the school community and are confident."

In Greece, Refugee Education Coordinators, government employees tasked with liaising with refugees to ensure their children are in school, also highlighted that children's participation in lessons led to a positive transformation, as observed: "They seem more open, sociable, confident after participating in lessons."

However, more than half of all students, regardless of their schooling method, are worried about falling behind their studies.

## **Children prefer in-person schooling**

Among the children who attend school in person or both in person and online, 87% expressed a preference for in-person education over online. This preference may highlight the social advantages of in-person schooling, as it appears to be associated with reduced feelings of loneliness and was raised in both focus group discussions and in responses to the questionnaire. 72% of the children attending in person or both expressed agreement with the sentiment of feeling less lonely when attending school in person, and 60% expressed agreement with the statement of being able to make friends from the host country in an in-person school setting. This mirrors Save the Children research in 2022 that found "a direct relationship between school attendance and children's reported sense of wellbeing and belonging" amongst those surveyed.<sup>58</sup>

Online schooling presents challenges for Ukrainian refugee children who both attend the national school system and follow the Ukrainian curriculum online. Those participating in focus groups in Denmark are attending formal education with Ukrainian teaching assistants for support and some of them are also enrolled in a Ukrainian online education system. One child said: "I attend this Danish school and then I attend online school, and then every 6 months I do a test for my school in Ukraine".

In Romania and Poland in particular, teachers reported challenges to maintaining online schooling as well as participating fully in national school systems. One teacher in Romania said that Ukrainian children who are attending the Ukrainian online system are under more pressure and feel tired. In Poland a teacher said that "It is very difficult for the child to keep up with the two programmes."

This challenge is confirmed by other studies conducted by Save the Children. Consultations with children attending Polish national schools and continuing Ukrainian curriculum online found that children were "tired, busy throughout the week with next to no free time, and confused about the possible outcomes of their studies."<sup>59</sup>

## The language barrier

Refugee children in Greece indicated those who don't understand Greek are practically excluded from the educational system, as they struggle to comprehend the subjects despite the good will of the teachers. One child stated "We go every day. But we do not learn because we do not understand a thing. There is no Greek lesson for the moment." Another added "I have the hope that I will learn something because I am very bored being in the room all day." This also affects their ability to integrate into their host communities and make friends with Greek peers: "we stay separate from other children, because we do not yet speak the language."

Language barriers were also highlighted as a problem for refugees from Ukraine. In Denmark, one child said, "In the beginning it was difficult because it was a new country, I didn't understand anything, and the language was difficult." These difficulties are not only academic but affect children's ability to interact socially in school and in their free time.

Importantly, the language barrier often exists for parents too, both in terms of interaction with schools and teachers and limiting their ability to help their children with their schoolwork. A Save the Children study in Denmark highlighted how newcomer parents who are learning Danish, struggle to help their children with homework, stressing the need for refugee and migrant children to have access to extra homework assistance.<sup>60</sup>

Difficulties with language compound broader challenges refugee and migrant children face, such as psychological stress and uncertainty, and situations where family separation or changes in family dynamics impacted the children's experiences. A teacher from Lithuania highlights that "the language barrier is the main obstacle to children's learning. Also, the psychological state of children. Lack of motivation, uncertainty about the future..."



Claire Thomas / Save the Children

Where there is support for children to learn the host language, the timing and organisation of language classes is important. In Greece, refugee children said that intensive Greek language courses started in January, which is not in line with the formal education starting date in September. Save the Children has consistently raised the problem of the timing of reception classes and transportation to school for refugee and migrant children in Greece.<sup>61</sup>

Encouragingly, 60% of those who responded to Save the Children's questionnaire and attending school in-person or both can access education support in their own language, and most find this always or sometimes helpful (86%). When it comes to accessing education support in their own language, however, only one quarter of children from countries other than Ukraine who responded (25%) had this help, compared with over three quarters (78.7%) of their Ukrainian peers.

## Support for teachers and schools

*"Children need to be included and not feel left out. Confirm differences, be curious and make them feel part".*

**Teacher**  
Sweden

Key informant interviews with teachers across the ten countries consistently raised the need for additional financial and technical support for teachers and schools with refugee and migrant children attending.

In Lithuania, which prior to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine had limited experience of integrating refugee and migrant children, educators stressed the need for more tools, methodologies, and funding to effectively teach Lithuanian and cater to the diverse needs of refugee students. One participant stressed, “The Ministry of Education does not allocate sufficient funding for schools to teach Lithuanian to children of refugee families.”

In Poland, the number of refugees arriving in the last years has challenged teachers who have no experience of teaching refugee children. One teacher stated, “There is a lack of awareness among Polish teachers because the Polish educational system was not ready to accept so many refugees, and sometimes Polish teachers have the impression that if a child is already studying Polish language for one year, they already need to understand everything.”

In other instances, even when government support and funding is available, schools and teachers do not have capacity to use it. In the UK one teacher said, “it’s there but the school doesn’t know how to access the money and what to do with it.” Another in the UK stated “when schools are allocated refugees, there should be a setup package provided by the government that comes with taking them on,” and suggested establishing teachers support groups where peer teachers can share good practices, and the hiring of additional teacher’s assistants for refugee children.

Other significant challenges relate to schools’ ability to support refugee and migrant children who have been exposed to trauma. In Denmark, for example, cross-sector collaboration and strong leadership support have helped municipalities receiving Ukrainian refugee children and families. However, addressing trauma in children remains a challenge due to lacking expertise and resources in both municipalities and schools.<sup>62</sup> In Germany, in addition to the need to expand capacity and support the complex transition from Ukrainian to the German educational system, as there is a need to expand the number of trained psychological personnel, according to one recent study.<sup>63</sup>

The wellbeing of teachers and educational staff themselves is another matter of concern. One interviewee in Bosnia and Herzegovina said, “Teachers would benefit from support to maintain their mental health, as they are under [so] much stress”. Another in Poland elaborated that “children share all their emotions with us. For example, one boy told me: “I no longer have a friend, because yesterday he was killed. He died yesterday.” So, it’s hard for us to, for me as a teacher, to listen to this kind of story.... That’s why I believe psychological support is very important for teachers and there isn’t this kind of support in Polish public schools.”

## Extracurricular activities

In recent research by Save the Children, children commonly highlighted the need for better access to extracurricular activities, especially sport,<sup>64</sup> as key to both their wellbeing and their integration in their host communities.

Three quarters of the children who responded to the questionnaire stated that there are services they want or need but do not have access to, regardless of their country of origin, age or gender. Of those services they need but do not have access to, most common are places to practice hobbies (like sports, music, art), places to meet friends or spend leisure time, followed by health or medical services like a doctor or hospital.

As one teacher in Bosnia interviewed for this report said “We have noticed that children get better involved in the community when they get involved in extracurricular activities. Only enrolling them in school is not enough.”

In Sweden too, teachers interviewed said the sense of confidence and belonging of refugee and migrant children increase as they built more friendships with Swedish children, and that refugee children who participate in after school activities demonstrate a greater sense of belonging and wellbeing. Most of the caregivers who answered the questionnaire (69%) said this was the help they sought out for their children.

In the UK, one barrier is that schools are sometimes far from where they are accommodated and there is limited school transport, hindering refugee children from doing extra activities and building friendships with other children. As stated by one teacher “For refugee children it’s a long journey, and that means they are not integrating into the community around the school also means that they don’t get to attend after school clubs, and we don’t see the parents come to parents evening. So yeah, the distance they are away from where they live impacts on their ability to integrate into our community.”

Economic challenges are also an issue for refugee and migrant children to engage in these activities. As one interviewee in Bosnia and Herzegovina said: “they need help getting sports equipment. We had children refugees coming to sports activities in slippers. So, the first step to ensure they are included in sports classes is to provide trainers and sportswear.”

## Differences by age

Teachers interviewed in Poland and Denmark said it is much easier for children from Ukraine of primary school age to integrate than older children. As one teacher in Poland said, teenagers and older children “already had their life and friends in Ukraine, they had their hobbies and activities, and now everything is vanishing and disappearing, so it is very difficult for them to adapt.”

Younger children can learn new languages more quickly and can integrate into the host communities socially. In addition, access to upper-secondary education and early years/childhood education and care are usually not part of the compulsory education recognised by national law, meaning a child’s age can impact whether they are targeted by national educational integration strategies.<sup>65</sup> Other studies of migrant children’s perceptions of their integration in Europe showed that younger children (9–14) claimed to enjoy school more and feel better and safer at school than older children (15–19).<sup>66</sup>

## Temporariness affecting Ukrainian refugee children

In Lithuania, one teacher interviewed said that “Attendance is irregular for both girls and boys. Compared to last year, Ukrainians are not attending regularly. They stop attending lessons because they leave the country.” Similarly, in the Netherlands, according to one interviewee, “Not all Ukrainian parents [feel that] Dutch education will be necessary,” as they might return to Ukraine or move to another country. In Romania a teacher told SC that refugees from Ukraine see Romania as a transit country and think it is a waste of time to invest in public school education.

In Denmark, teachers highlighted how this sense of temporariness affects family life and the daily lives of the Ukrainian children, and contributes to their decision to focus on engaging in online Ukrainian education rather than in the Danish school system, with older children in particular skipping classes.<sup>67</sup> This uncertainty impacts their motivation, unlike children and families who have arrived to Europe from other countries, and view learning the language as key to them settling in and integrating.

On the other hand, in the Netherlands, a teacher interviewed by Save the Children highlighted that integration efforts differ between Ukrainian and other refugees due to their different refugee status. “Ukrainians have more access to services and participation in local society,” enabling activities like music, sports, and societal involvement, compared to children from other backgrounds.



# 4

## SENSE OF SAFETY, BELONGING AND HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

*“I will learn my profession until I am 16, then I will go to university. I want to choose my future. I want people to know about me, I want to be visible.”*

**Child**

in a focus group discussion, Poland

**Many children who responded to Save the Children’s questionnaire and participated in focus groups felt happier since leaving their country of origin.**

A notable proportion of children who responded to the questionnaire, 34%, reported feeling happier either a little or a lot more often after displacement.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, children from countries other than Ukraine (49%) reported increased happiness more than their Ukrainians (29%) counterparts, respectively.

A consistent theme in focus group discussions with children is that they don’t face the threats they did in their home countries. Refugee children in Denmark stated that they are happy since they feel safe. There are “no bombs, no rockets” one child said. “There is no war here, and no sirens and alarms” another child added. A third child stated, “I don’t have to hide in the basement.”

Refugee children in Greece similarly stated that they are happy since they feel safe. “I am not in Taliban’s hands” one child said. “I found peace, safety, opportunity to go to school” another child added. For a third child he stated, “there is peace, so we can go out.”

In addition, refugee children in focus group discussions in Greece said there is a vast difference between children’s living conditions in Europe and the countries they came from. One child mentioned that “In Afghanistan, you must work since you are a young child to have food. Also, you know you will never find a job.” These children also felt a sense of accomplishment at arriving to Europe, overcoming the difficulties, violence and attempts to keep them out, which may also explain the increased happiness reported in questionnaires.



Some of the children – both Ukrainians and those from other countries – highlighted positive experiences of services and professionals assisting them. In Greece, one child said that “When I first arrived, the employees of the shelter helped me a lot. With love, positive attitude, and politeness.” Another added “we found the humanity we never had in Afghanistan.” In Bosnia and Herzegovina, children felt happy due to the support services they had been provided with (e.g., schooling) which is giving them the opportunity to change their lives. Refugee children from Ukraine in Romania mentioned a mixture of these factors in a focus group discussion: meeting friends, doing activities with NGOs, and feeling safe are what made them feel happy.

Even positive experiences were tempered by sense of loss and homesickness, however, or ambivalence caused by some of the hardships children have faced. One child in Lithuania, for example, said that “it is very beautiful here; I have found new friends. Also, there is a sea. But in Ukraine, I also have many friends, there is my school, and my father and other relatives.” This ambivalence was echoed in other focus groups. In Poland, a child said that “I want to stay, and I don’t want to stay. My family’s there, my dad”. In Bosnia a child said, “I feel happy and supported in this country, but I also feel very lonely and sad when I think about my life.”

## Mixed feelings about returning home, with younger and Ukrainians being more hopeful

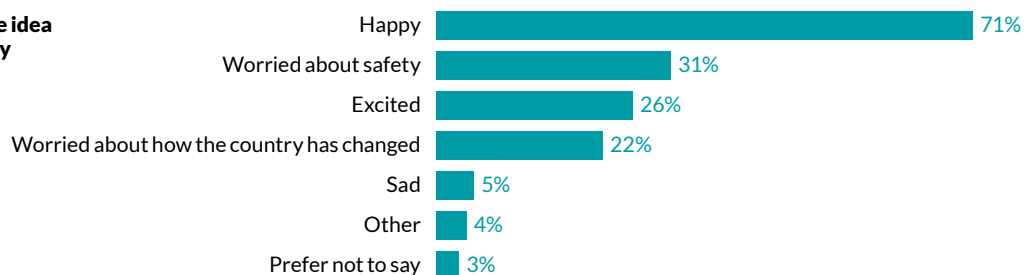
When asked if they hope to go back to live in their country one day, half of the children answered affirmatively, and the rest either do not or are unsure. Younger children and Ukrainians are more hopeful about going back home. While only 38% of older children and 25% of children from countries other than Ukraine reported hoping to go back, over half of younger children (58%) and 63% of Ukrainians reported so.

When asked about the reasons for not wanting to return, the children reported being worried about safety (70%), wanting to stay in the host country (45%), having bad memories (36%), thinking they won’t have access to education (36%) and their home having been destroyed (19%). For the children who reported hoping to go back to their country, they reported feeling happy (71%) and excited about the idea of returning (26%). However, they also feel worried about safety (31%) and about how the country has changed (22%).

**Figure 5**  
Why children do not want to go back to live in their country



**Figure 6**  
How children feel about the idea of returning to their country



## Refugees welcome?

A recent study of solidarity with migrants found that Europeans are more willing to provide protection to women and children, and to non-Muslim refugees.<sup>69</sup> They also show a preference for refugees from Eastern Europe (e.g., Ukraine or Moldova) over refugees from Africa or the Middle East. The reason for displacement also plays a role; the study shows a greater support for people who are fleeing a war, in comparison with people who are moving for economic reasons. These findings could explain the generally more positive attitudes towards the persons displaced from Ukraine. They may also reflect the discourse of political leaders and how different refugee groups are presented in the media, as “negative portrayals of immigrants in the mass media increase prejudice.”<sup>70</sup> Human Rights Watch has noted the increase of “racist violence and xenophobia against refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, particularly throughout Europe, sometimes with the complicit involvement, or tacit approval, of law enforcement agents.”<sup>71</sup>

In other recent research by Save the Children “refugee children and caregivers from Ukraine feel generally safe in their host countries and enjoy, for the most part, access to a range of services.”<sup>72</sup> Some of the children in focus group discussions reflected on this. One child in Denmark stated, “I cannot wish for more.”

While Ukrainian refugees generally felt welcome, some highlighted that this has changed over time. In Poland, one child stated “If you go on the street speaking Ukrainian or Russian, they can pick on you. We have bad words written about Ukraine near our school.”

The fact that the welcome shown to refugees from Ukraine is not necessarily uniform, nor deep, has been highlighted in other studies. In a recent report by the Norwegian Refugee Council respondents to a survey only felt welcome “to a certain extent” citing “language barriers, financial difficulties, and negative attitudes from local residents.”<sup>73</sup>

Similar mixed reasons and feelings are also reflected in the focus group discussions. As noted, Ukrainian children, even though they are living with their family members, express a desire to go back, especially those whose fathers are not with them. As one child in Denmark said, “I want to go back to Ukraine because it is my homeland, and I have my dad.” In Romania, Ukrainian children who do not wish to stay also cite the language barrier as a main reason.

Ukrainian children in Denmark who would like to stay highlighted the good education system and future opportunities. One child stated, “Here in Denmark, I have better opportunities than in Ukraine. If I go to university, I understand I have a good future here in Denmark.” A refugee child from Afghanistan in Greece said “Kids in Greece are supported by their family and go to school, later to the university. Your parents admire you. You have your family. I have known since the age of six that I have to work to support the family.”

Caregivers show more uncertainty than children on returning home, and only few plan to do so in the near future. While over half of caregivers reported hoping to go back to live in their country one day, only one in twenty plan to do so in the next 6 months.



Claire Thomas/Save the Children

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Children seek to come to Europe for many reasons, and from diverse countries across the world. Some come by land routes and others by sea, some come alone and others with families. The children arriving are of different ages. All these factors impact the experience of children on the move in Europe, and their wellbeing.

Importantly, the children involved in this research highlight achieving safety as an important part of their experience of coming to Europe – the absence of bombing, repression and fear associated should not be underestimated. These children show that Europe can and should be a haven for children fleeing their home countries.

The research also illustrates that policies of European governments can have a significant positive impact on the mental health, wellbeing, and integration of children on the move. That so many children, including those who participated in this research, are instead denied their basic rights, facing violence at borders, discrimination, inhumane conditions, and inadequate services is a scandal that must be brought to an end.

Every single child on the move must be treated with dignity and have their essential needs met, and Save the Children calls on European governments and the EU to:

## 1 Expand the availability of mental health and psychosocial support services for migrant and refugee children and their families

- Services should be scaled up in reception centres, and in areas and municipalities hosting larger numbers of refugees and migrants, including in schools. Services should, where possible, be offered in children's own languages.
- Recruit and/or train additional mental health and psychosocial support professionals, including professionals who share language and culture with refugee and migrant children.



Paul Wu/DEC

## 2 Provide protection for children seeking safety in Europe

- Reduce backlogs of people waiting for a decision on their asylum claim;
- Exempt all children, their families and vulnerable applicants from border procedures and accelerated procedures;
- Only carry out age determinations when there is significant reason to doubt a person's age, and apply the benefit of the doubt principle, treating all individuals undergoing age assessments as children until the process is concluded;
- Simplify procedures to obtain residence permits and international protection for eligible asylum seekers, in particular children and families;
- Provide refugee and migrant children and their families with access to safe, regular, and legal migration pathways. This should include access quotas for work, private sponsorships, study permits, and humanitarian visas
- For refugees from Ukraine specifically:
  - Provide access to protection and long-term EU resident permits to refugees from Ukraine who have claimed protection under the Temporary Protection Directive, or that flee the country for the first time, for as long as the hostilities are ongoing and until it is safe to return. Non-EU European countries should provide similar protections.



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### 3 End the violence at Europe's borders

- Reverse policies and halt practices that are leading to violations of children's rights, including unlawful pushbacks, restrictions on access to asylum, and reliance on third countries to outsource refugee hosting;
- Ensure all border policies and operations are compliant with human rights law, including the specific protections afforded to children, and the principle of non-*refoulement*;
- Establish an effective and truly independent border monitoring mechanism, and ensure that child refugees and migrants who have been victims of violence and torture or other ill-treatment committed by the border police or other state officials have access to justice.

### 4 Prioritise family unity

- Make it easier for families separated by war and violence to reunite, including by letting separated refugee children be joined by their closest family members;
- Allow children with family members present in the EU, including siblings, to be reunited if this is in their best interest, and improve processes of family reunion.

### 5 Better protect unaccompanied and separated children

- Ensure unaccompanied and separated children have an unequivocal right to legal stay, for instance through adopting a special residence permit;
- Promptly appoint a guardian for any unaccompanied and separated children. This should be an interested and caring adult who is able to protect their rights and best interests.
- Only use residential care as a last resort and for the shortest time possible and strengthen family-based care for unaccompanied and separated children. This may include strengthening a family-based foster care system through identification, training, and support of families, especially for fostering children with complex requirements.

### 6 Never detain children and allow freedom of movement

- Prohibit the detention of children in migration, as detention is never in the child's best interest;
- Abandon the criteria designating the country of first entry as responsible for asylum claims;
- Allow freedom of movement for children on the move, both within national territories and across the EU. Ensure there are no sanctions or punishments if children or their families engage in so-called "secondary movements";
- Exempt all children, their families and vulnerable applicants from border procedures and accelerated procedures that are currently being negotiated as part of the EU Migration and Asylum Pact.

## 7 Ensure all children are in school and receiving a quality education

- Provide training for teachers and school staff and assist teachers at classroom level on how to mainstream mental health and psychosocial support, teaching refugee children with limited language experience, and provide information about children's cultures and backgrounds;
- Hire additional trained teachers for schools which have large numbers of refugee children and to ensure there are trained cross-cultural teaching assistants in place;
- Take into consideration the individual needs and vulnerabilities of each refugee and migrant child, needs which could include language support, educational or economic support, transportation, stationery, and personal items such as clothes and shoes;
- Provide clear information to children and their parents/guardians, in a language they understand, about the procedures they must follow, the school environment, and the education system;
- Increase the involvement of refugee and migrant parents in their children's school attendance and education;
- Ministries of Education should revise school policies to support preventive measures against bullying, racism and discrimination, and create platforms to support school-based social cohesion efforts;
- More specifically for children from Ukraine, the EU and European governments should, with the Ministry of Education in Ukraine:
  - Agree on recognition of learning completed outside Ukraine if re-joining the Ukrainian system;
  - Provide time during the school week for children attending national schools to take classes in the Ukrainian curriculum online, with a focus on core subjects that are not covered in the national curriculum of the host country.

## 8 Provide reception classes and extra-curricular activities to improve the wellbeing of children, the quality of education they receive and help them to integrate in their host societies

- Establish and support adequate activities during summer to prepare new children to enrol in schools, including through language acquisition and language bridging programmes, catch-up support and MHPSS provision, and to support already enrolled children to remain in education.
- Create opportunities for social cohesion with children host communities through extracurricular school activities and organised school trips, and provide funding informal activities (arts and crafts, sports, public spaces). Involve children in the design of such initiatives.
- Work with community, sports and volunteer associations to offer leisure activities and hobbies for migrant and refugee children
- Enhance the dissemination of information about available initiatives and services, such as free sports or cultural activities, to refugee and migrant children and their families.



# ENDNOTES

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- 2 For example, a joint report by UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM highlights that the best available comparable data on migrant children in national education systems across Europe is found in the 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA) database, which allows for comparison between three categories – native-born children, first-generation migrants, and second-generation migrants. See *Access to education for refugee and migrant children in Europe*, UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM, 2019 <https://www.unhcr.org/neu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/09/Access-to-education-europe-19.pdf>
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