



**Missing  
Children  
Europe**

**CHILD10**

25 March 2022

## **JOINT RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Protect children (at risk of) going missing, violence and exploitation due to the Russian war in Ukraine**

The Russian war on Ukraine has contributed to growing internal displacement and cross-border movement. Initial reports indicate children comprise a particularly significant portion of those fleeing. According to the United Nations, almost one child per second in Ukraine is becoming a refugee of the war<sup>2</sup>.

Since the armed attacks on 24 February, Missing Children Europe's Ukrainian member, NGO Magnolia, has already received more than 1000 cases of children going missing in Ukraine, including separated children and families with children. To date, MCE has received reports of 8 children from Ukraine presumed missing in the EU, 1 of which has been resolved thanks to cooperation between the network and the police in Ukraine and the border countries.

In this statement, Missing Children Europe and Child10, based on their field visits to Poland and Romania 19-22 March, aim to provide an overview of the key challenges faced by children from Ukraine since the war broke on 24 February and share their recommendations to protect and support children (at risk of) going missing, from violence and exploitation.

It is imperative that EU institutions, national, regional and local authorities put in place the necessary measures to ensure all children fleeing Ukraine, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, legal status, age, disability, are protected. A robust, coordinated and multi-stakeholder response is essential in order to prevent and respond to children (at risk of) going missing, violence and exploitation.

#### **Key challenges**

Based on our observations, and our exchanges with members and stakeholders on the ground we have identified the following challenges in child protection during this crisis:

- **Registering cases of children going missing in Ukraine**

The nature of the conflict leads to many children at risk of missing (see below under background) and a great number of challenges in recording children going missing, particularly within Ukraine. There are physical obstacles to reporting, communication and investigation. Police capacity has been diverted to protecting civilians in the conflict, and cooperation with NGOs has become essential to ensure follow-up of missing cases.

- **Registration of children crossing the borders and entering the EU**

The EU Temporary Protection Directive gave people fleeing Ukraine access to the rights they need at short notice, which was imperative, but it also means they may travel visa-free through the





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Schengen zone. People with Temporary Protection fall outside the scope of existing data systems at EU level<sup>1</sup> for monitoring unaccompanied minor refugees.

As a result, there are only two points of registration for children: 1. Border registration in neighbouring member states where they first cross the border 2. Registration of temporary residence in the country of destination. In between, there are no other data points.

If national border registration systems where first registration takes place are not required to include biometric data, this may hinder the identification of child victims of trafficking at a later stage. If national border registration systems fail to a child at first entry, it risks becoming invisible.

The unprecedented situation at the border, unfortunately, means that not all children are registered upon leaving Ukraine and entering the EU through Poland, Romania, Slovakia or Hungary. We have received reports that, at least in the first week(s), those crossing borders using public transport may have had their IDs checked without being entered into the border registration system. Children travelling into the EU with private citizens' initiatives may also have bypassed registration systems. These gaps in border registration are deeply concerning as a child that's not known to be in the EU cannot be traced for protection purposes.

Where registration is undertaken, this does not regularly include an individual screening of vulnerabilities or the involvement of staff with specialized knowledge and skills to address the needs of vulnerable children.

Until now, due to the overwhelming numbers of people fleeing Ukraine, many of them without papers, only minimal screening could be carried out with regard to any extended family member or friend that children were travelling with, creating opportunities for traffickers to pose as such in taking children across the border. The lack of screening capacity and individual risk assessments at the borders and further on means missed opportunities to identify this large number of children in need of protection.

Another challenge in the context of registration is the lack of child-friendly, age-appropriate communication in their own language during the registration procedures. Early, frequent and child-friendly information on children's rights and their situations is necessary to encourage trust and engagement with authorities, an important element of the prevention of both disappearances and trafficking.

- **Registration, identification and responses responding to cross-border cases of children going missing in the EU**

In the EU there exist 27 different national residence application systems and child protection systems. So, while the EU's unified numbers for emergency services, 112, and for reporting missing children, 116000 are set up to make reporting fairly easy, at the same time, the complex system of registration renders identification and responses to cross-border cases of children going missing in the EU quite difficult.

At this moment, the Schengen Information System is unable to adequately respond to the current challenges. Future functionalities of the Schengen Information System that are being developed,

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<sup>1</sup> Border registrations are not covered in the [Schengen Information System](#) that allows Member States to register security and missing alerts. The [EURODAC system](#) covers only asylum applications and migration management.<sup>1</sup> The EU temporary protection provided to Ukrainian people<sup>1</sup> means that Eurodac is not involved since people are not required to register for asylum.





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will allow competent authorities to enter preventive alerts in the system to protect certain categories of vulnerable persons (missing persons, children at risk of abduction or potential victims of trafficking in human beings or gender-based violence). However, these new functionalities are not yet implemented. Moreover, police in Ukraine, where most cross-border cases have currently been reported from, do not have access to this system.

The diversity of stakeholders involved in each Member State, often combining national child protection systems with systems focusing on children in migration, further complicates the identification of cases of missing children. This requires an expansion of stakeholders included in awareness-raising, guidance and coordinated communication regarding vulnerable and missing children. Existing challenges in cross-border collaboration are amplified by the fact that some countries are in and out of the EU, in and out of the Schengen zone.

Missing Children Europe has asked all 116 000 hotline members to record each missing child fleeing Ukraine reported to the 116000 network in a central database and is in the process of putting the legal checks in place for it to be consultable by all members.

- **Risk of children being separated from their families, falling victims of trafficking and going missing**

While reported cases of children going missing are currently low, the current circumstances are putting children at high risk of being separated from their families, falling victims of trafficking and going missing. This is particularly the case at the border crossings, train and bus stations, etc. Factors placing children at risk include:

- Lack of safe, coordinated transit to destination Member States,
- Lack of access to information (age-appropriate, in their own language) for children
- Lack of coordination between public and private actors within members states,
- High involvement of private actors without adequate screening, training, supervision and support,
- Lack of training of border guards and police on vulnerability assessments and how to prevent trafficking.

- **Children in – or coming from – residential care institutions<sup>2</sup>**

As highlighted in a [statement](#) signed by 14 civil society organisations, a key issue for the relocation of the more than 91000 children in Ukraine's state-owned institutions, that is currently managed by the Ukrainian government, is the lack of a centralized cross-country information management system to keep track of the whereabouts, safety and well-being of the children these in institutions.

Another risk specific to this group is their separation from each other, the separation of siblings and family members, and illegal adoption. Although placement in family settings is in the best interest of the child, special care is required in finding accommodation for children who have established important social relationships with caregivers and other children in institutions, to prevent further

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<sup>2</sup> Before the outbreak of the war, an estimated 100,000 children and young people currently reside in various forms of institutions across Ukraine, including in baby homes (children 0-3 years old). 92% of children brought up residential institutions in Ukraine actually have parents.





uncertainty and trauma in addition to evacuations. Specialized care may be required for children with disabilities or other vulnerabilities. Finally, maintaining relationships between siblings, parents and other family members are of utmost importance.

No member state at the border will have the capacity to provide appropriate care for all of these children in the longer term and solidarity and further relocations will need to be coordinated with other member states ensuring established relationships are not severed.

- **Access to protection and care for unaccompanied minors**

Unaccompanied minors registering at the border of EU member states should be placed under the care of child protection and are normally required to remain in the country of first entry. In time, some of these children will likely relocate to the other Member States. It must be noted that, prior to the Ukraine crisis, the protection and care in place for unaccompanied minors was already inadequate. For example, in many countries, including some of the border member states, guardianship services simply do not have enough guardians to deal with the current influx

- **Access to protection for all children**

The EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) grants immediate protection in the EU to Ukrainian nationals and those who had international protection in Ukraine prior to 24 February 2022. Unfortunately, current rules may place certain children at risk of unclear legal status<sup>3</sup>, which may further contribute to children going missing.

Children travelling unaccompanied, and children travelling with parents, family members or friends may also have difficulties understanding the rights and protections afforded to them if they are not provided with the information in a language they or their carers can understand.

- **Human and financial capacity of civil society organisations in bordering EU member states, including 116 000 hotlines**

Across the bordering countries to Ukraine, civil society organisations, including MCE members, have stepped up their efforts to respond to the needs of refugees arriving from Ukraine, including by providing basic necessities. However, their capacity, both financial and human, is very limited and a significant challenge is the provision of support in Ukrainian and Russian.

## **Recommendations**

In order to better respond to the challenges to protect, prevent and respond to children going missing, Missing Children Europe and Child10 have the following recommendations for the European Commission and the Member States:

- **Registration and screening at the border.** It is essential to ensure proper registration of children at the borders and of the persons, they are travelling with. The registration of children should include basic identifying information, including name, date of birth, destination country, contact information for parents (even where not travelling together) and identification of the relationship to the adults they are travelling with. Member States should consider including biometric information in their border registration systems, particularly for children travelling alone, without documentation or when the relationship with the person they are travelling with

<sup>3</sup> European Network on Statelessness (2022) [Briefing: Stateless people and people at risk of statelessness forcibly displaced from Ukraine](#)





cannot be established without doubt. This should always be done in full respect of the child's rights and in a child friendly way, but is key to allowing for identification and family reunification at a later stage. While children should never be separated from their family, it is important to interview children separately from the adults they are travelling with, in a child-friendly way, if travelling without documents, with extended family members or friends, to screen for potential trafficking situations.

- **Registration and child protection in the country of destination.** Upon arrival in the country of destination, it is essential that all children are registered. Authorities should make every effort to make it known that and how children should be registered in the country of residence. At the point of registration, it should be mandatory to check if family reunification is a possibility, and in their interest, for children travelling alone or with extended family members and friends as well as to compare registrations with existing records of children reported as missing across the EU. It is also important to keep in mind that the country of destination may become a country of transit and that the child should be re-registered if relocated to a third country. Child protection authorities should regularly continue to follow up on all unaccompanied minors, as well as children travelling with extended family members and friends to screen for potential trafficking and to work towards family reunification.
- **Linking up registration systems in the EU.** To facilitate child protection services to follow-up on all children at risk, it is essential for the EU and the Member States to link up the different registration systems for border registration, registration of temporary residence, child protection, and missing, with respect for fundamental rights. The EU should fast-track the implementation of the new functionalities of the SIS system on vulnerable persons to allow for, for example, preventive alerts.
- **Reporting missing children.** It is essential to ensure that parents remaining in Ukraine, as well as people fleeing Ukraine and entering the EU are provided with clear and simple information on how to report a missing child.
- **Providing access to information and preventing misinformation.** Children are entitled to child-friendly information about their situation (age-appropriate, language they understand). Early and frequent information about their situation, rights, trafficking and other forms of exploitation and available resources should be provided. Trafficking prevention information for adults should include special sections on trafficking in children to alert caregivers and facilitate tailored support. It is also important to inform people seeking the refuge of the risks of human trafficking, including "too good to be true" transportation, housing and job offer along migration routes as well as in the vicinity of the reception facilities and online. At the same time, it is essential for information sharing platforms to be monitored (both online and printed) for misleading or deceptive information on housing and employment opportunities to prevent trafficking in human beings and fraud.
- **Training frontline agencies and actors.** Training should be provided to all professionals working at the borders (including border guards, police), volunteers and citizens in vulnerability assessments and spotting the signs of human trafficking to help prevent human trafficking and support victims and survivors. Training should include tips on child-specific communication, information provision, child-friendly interviews, registration and screening, recognizing signs of child trafficking. Training should encourage police and border guards to involve child-





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protection actors in their work and provide child-specific resources (helplines, NGOs, etc.). Interpreters of all relevant languages, including Russian, Roma-Sinti, and sign language, should also be trained.

- **Access to child protection for unaccompanied and separated children.** Children fleeing the war must be treated equally without any form of discrimination. They should be integrated within the mainstream child protection system, provided access to family-based care and a guardian, based on their needs. Guardianship and foster care systems should therefore be given the resources to significantly increase their capacity.
- **Family reunification.** Where in the best interest of the child, all efforts should be made on a continuing basis, to reunite children separated from their families. As mentioned, this should include ensuring that authorities regularly check existing data systems including those that collect information on missing children. Where physical reunification is not immediately possible, contact should be maintained or re-established as soon as possible, including with siblings or extended family. 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. 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 an emergency, to ensure where possible their reunification. This should include using existing mechanisms, such as the European hotline for missing children 116 000.

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## **BACKGROUND**

### **1. About Missing Children Europe and Child10**

[Missing Children Europe](#) is the European federation for missing and sexually exploited children, representing 31 member organisations from 26 European countries. Missing Children Europe coordinates the network of 116 000 hotlines for missing children, a dedicated service for children (at risk of) going missing and their families; and the cross-border family mediators' (CBFM) network that prevents and resolves parental abductions. We provide the link between research, policies and organisations on the ground to protect children from any kind of violence, abuse or neglect that is caused by or results from them going missing.

[Child10](#)'s mission is to end child trafficking through a holistic approach focusing on prevention, protection and prosecution of perpetrators as well as minimizing demand. We work cross-sectoral to strengthen national and international coordination and collaboration in the field with a child rights-based approach. Together with grassroots organizations and other leading experts we develop and advocate for powerful and durable solutions to end child trafficking and sexual exploitation.

### **2. Key figures and trends**

- **Numbers on missing children from Ukraine**

Since the armed attacks on 24 February, Missing Children Europe's Ukrainian member, NGO Magnolia, has already received more than 1000 cases of children going missing in Ukraine, including separated children and families with children. To date, MCE has received reports of 8 children from Ukraine presumed missing in the EU, 1 of which has been resolved thanks to cooperation between the network and the police in Ukraine and the border countries.

- **Vulnerable children in Ukraine**

- i. IOM reports that over 6.5 million people<sup>4</sup>, at least half of which are children, are displaced inside Ukraine, leading to a risk of separation, missing and trafficking.
- ii. Ukraine is the second-largest hub for surrogacy, with the fate of surrogacy babies being born in the past month remaining unclear, and at high risk of neglect and trafficking.
- iii. Finally, with civilian targets being bombed regularly, children remaining in Ukraine with their families, are at risk of being orphaned and separated from remaining family, and thereby at risk of institutionalisation, illegal adoption, and missing and trafficking.

- **Types of children leaving Ukraine**

Overall, there are three roughly defined categories of children leaving Ukraine:

- i. children travelling with family, extended family members or friends make up the majority
- ii. children fleeing alone (unaccompanied minors)
- iii. children from institutions being relocated to EU Member States.

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<sup>4</sup> IOM (21 March 2022) [Almost 6.5 Million People Internally Displaced in Ukraine: IOM](#)





While their circumstances and needs differ, children from all these three groups are at risk of going missing if appropriate measures are not put in place. Accompanied children, in particular, should not be presumed safe from trafficking, violence or exploitation, and the adults travelling with them appropriately screened. Even if they are travelling with their mothers, children are not safe from trafficking as reports have been made of risks of trafficking for young mothers with their small children.

- **Reasons why children might go missing**

In the context of the war in Ukraine, Missing Children Europe has identified the following drivers of children going missing:

- Losing contact with family members due to chaos and damage to communication infrastructure
- Difficulties entering data in central registration systems in Ukraine
- Delays in uploading registration data to central data systems in Ukraine and border countries
- Children or their family members becoming casualties of the Russian attacks in Ukraine,
- Unaccompanied minors fall prey to traffickers while travelling the border alone.
- Parental abductions, that is children being taken away by one parent against the will of the other, in the context of a significant segment of the population fleeing Ukraine

- **Particularly vulnerable groups**

Certain groups of children are at higher risk of falling through the cracks of the system and going missing. This includes: children in institutions, children nearing the age of transition to adulthood, Roma and other minoritized groups, asylum-seekers, refugees, and migrants (and their children) who were residing in Ukraine and were stateless before leaving their countries of origin.

### **3. How MCE is responding**

Missing Children Europe has mobilised its efforts to respond to missing children in Ukraine by:

- **Launching a central web page on missing children from Ukraine**

The website, available [here](#) in English, Ukrainian and Russian, provides information on how to report a missing child from Ukraine across Europe. It also contains publicity appeals on children from Ukraine currently reported missing in the EU as well as resources to support missing children and their families fleeing Ukraine.

- **Setting up a Ukraine 116000 helpdesk**

At the request of the Ukrainian 116000 hotline, NGO Magnolia, Missing Children Europe has set up tools to help manage the case volume they are currently dealing with. This includes, among others, an online reporting form in English Ukrainian and Russian for children fleeing Ukraine missing in the EU, a central database on cross border cases that can be consulted by the 116000 hotline operators in different countries and linking this database to an application producing publicity appeals on the missing children from Ukraine website and other relevant tools for dissemination.







An English, Ukrainian, and Russian speaking staff member will be recruited in the coming weeks to provide translation for the membership and to all those calling the 116000.

- **Supporting our national hotlines at Ukraine's borders**

Exploring how the hotlines can be strengthened with extra staff capacity to deal with the expected caseload as well as Ukrainian and Russian language skills.

- **Lack of 116 000 hotline in Moldova**

Setting up a 116000 hotline in Moldova where the number is not yet active.

#### **4. Other initiatives to register missing children**

- Red Cross Family Links will deploy a team to the conflict zone where families can report their missing. However, their database cannot be consulted by individuals outside their organisation and families face significant physical obstacles and security risks when required to report in person at their office.
- International Commission for Missing Persons, at the request of Ukraine, is expected to start working in Ukraine in the near future. Their work depends on the voluntary sharing of the DNA of the missing person and family members, which the organization compares with unidentified remains. They also work on the identification of unaccompanied minors who are not able to identify themselves. They offer data-sharing agreements with organisations working under shared principles.

#### **5. Additional useful resources**

- Changing the way we care (2022) [Critical considerations for movement of children during a humanitarian crisis](#)
- Defense for Children Greece, [Emergency Child Protection Response Checklist to First line professionals](#)
- FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University (2017) [Emergency within an Emergency: The Growing Epidemic of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Children in Greece](#)
- KIND and ChildCircle (2022) [Note on Unaccompanied Children Fleeing From Ukraine](#)
- UNHCR (2019) [Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#)
- UNICEF (2020) [Core commitments for children humanitarian action](#)
- International Social Service (2022) [Ukraine Crisis & International Standards](#)
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2022) [Recommendations of the OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings on the need to enhance anti-trafficking prevention amid mass migration flows](#)
- Save the Children (2022) [Universal Call for a Moratorium on intercountry adoption and new surrogacy procedures in response to the conflict in Ukraine](#)

