

# War in Ukraine: Putting Children First

**STATEMENT**



**Eurochild**  
Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

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## About Eurochild



Eurochild advocates for children’s rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of over 190 organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.

## About this Statement

Since the invasion of Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022, Eurochild shifted its work to understand needs on the ground and to support the strengthening of systems for the ‘best interest of the child’.

- We set up ‘Open Spaces for Solidarity’ sessions to share information between members in Ukraine and across Europe.
- We shared members’ experiences and demands with decision-makers in the EU institutions, and created a [Solidarity Hub](#) with useful information and resources.
- We joined UNICEF to carry out a mapping of the legal and policy frameworks in [13 countries](#) regarding unaccompanied and separated children fleeing Ukraine and collaborated with Child Circle on a new [Discussion Paper for unaccompanied and separated children fleeing Ukraine and arriving in the European Union](#).

This statement is based on our collective engagement with members and allies.

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## All children of Ukraine need support

War is never compatible with childhood. Eurochild's vision is that every child grows up happy, healthy, confident, and respected as an individual in their own right.

For the 7.5 million children of Ukraine, such a vision feels out of reach right now. Many are at immediate risk of physical harm, losing a family member, going missing, being trafficked or being exploited. Children with physical and mental disabilities living in institutions are even more vulnerable to abandonment and harm.

All children are facing high risks of trauma and mental health issues in the long term. Our members in Ukraine continue to support children as best they can while documenting [violations of children's rights](#). From them we understand there is an urgent need for psychological first-aid for children and families remaining in Ukraine, but not only them.

Some 4.3 million children have been displaced. Eurochild members in neighbouring countries, supporting children and families fleeing Ukraine, have raised concerns about children not getting adequate access to care and psychosocial support. The activation of the [Temporary Protection Directive](#) gives Ukrainian children and families access to housing and social services in EU countries, but governments are also asked to invest in these services.

Seeing the urgent need for a cross-border tracking system to prevent children from going missing, Eurochild joined UNICEF to address care arrangements and custodial responsibilities for unaccompanied and separated children fleeing Ukraine and arriving in the European Union. This joint work is outlined in the [discussion paper written by Child Circle](#), a centre of expertise on EU child rights and child protection policy.

## The best interest of the child

Before the war, there were still 100,000 children living in institutional care. Bordering countries are helping to evacuate these children via bilateral agreements with Ukraine, and Eurochild members are providing care and services on the ground. An issue remains with hosting large numbers of children together, as requested by Ukrainian authorities.

Most EU Member States have undergone a long deinstitutionalisation process and closed big institutions. Rather than reinstating harmful institutionalisation, children of Ukraine should be placed in family and community-based care following individual assessment of each child's needs with a rigorous registration process, so all children are accounted for.

Our Polish member [Happy Kids Foundation](#) facilitated the evacuation of 1,500 children from institutions in Ukraine. To support deinstitutionalisation efforts, in cooperation with Ukrainian and Polish institutions, guided by 20 years of experience in family-based care, our member will train pre-screened new caregivers in line with European standards.

At a European level, together with UNICEF, Eurochild has carried out an urgent mapping and analysis of the legal and policy frameworks in [13 countries](#) for children deprived of parental care and unaccompanied children as a result of the invasion of Ukraine. This information will

support governments, INGO, and civil society organisations to ensure the best interests of these children when decisions are made.

### **Children's mental health is jeopardised**

Members across Europe highlight the lack of childcare and child psychologists to support Ukrainian children dealing with trauma. As a result, children, young children, in particular, are at high risk of being re-traumatised even after reaching physical safety in host countries.

At Eurochild we have supported the printing of the [Heroes Cry Too](#), a colouring book for the young Ukrainian children to help with the trauma through storytelling. Our member [ICAM has developed resources](#) for primary and secondary schools across Europe to support Ukrainian children and begin to repair the social and emotional damage caused by war and displacement.

Through our [First Years First Priority](#) campaign with our partner ISSA we inform the EU's efforts to best coordinate support for young Ukrainian children. It has never been more pressing for Europe to prioritise early childhood development. Children, young children in particular, and their families need integrated support to deal with the trauma of war and access to early childhood education and care, housing and healthcare.

### **Children's rights to access essential services**

Social and emotional learning in schools and access to Ukrainian language materials are key to supporting Ukrainian children during this transition. Our members are concerned that some governments are struggling to meet their needs.

In Bulgaria, our member, the [National Network for Children](#), highlights the problem of insufficient kindergartens in the cities and is working to support the government towards a solution. The same issue was raised by the [Ombudsperson for Children in Croatia](#), in combination with lack of family doctors and psychologists.

Our member, the [Polish Foster Care Coalition](#), reports that more than 100,000 Ukrainian children have been enrolled in Poland, but schools lack experience with multi-language education and psychological support for children dealing with trauma.

The [European Child Guarantee](#) was an important milestone to guarantee all children have access to essential services, and these rights should apply to Ukrainian children in host countries. In the new context of the Ukrainian crisis, it is critical to allocate additional and adequate funding to cover the needs of children and families fleeing the war.

## **Civil society in solidarity with children**

Children's rights are non-negotiable and Eurochild members have stepped in to protect the rights of Ukrainian children. The [FONPC - The Romanian Federation of NGOs for Children](#), [NNC – Bulgarian National Network for Children](#), and [Terre Des Hommes](#) are helping to coordinate national relief efforts in Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Hungary. Our member in Spain, [Plataforma de Infancia](#), is providing a national platform for sharing information and resources.

Eurochild's online open space sessions on Ukraine are enabling members to meet and share experiences. Our Ukrainian members have shared their lived experiences, providing invaluable first-hand information and heightening the sense of solidarity across the network. Concerns from these open spaces are published on our [Solidarity Hub](#) and communicated with decision-makers in Brussels.

## **Building long term resilience**

Europe is experiencing a child protection emergency. The war in Ukraine is testing the EU's resolve to implement the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#) and the [European Child Guarantee](#) and allocate resources where they are most needed.

At Eurochild, we see this as a momentum to further strengthen and harmonise child protection systems in Europe. The EU holds statutory responsibility to push for better standards on border registrations, access to services, and early childhood development. The access should be granted to all children fleeing conflict, regardless of their origin.

Our members have stepped up and stepped in to support children and families of Ukraine. To ensure long-term resilience and support, it is now crucial to strengthen the civil society to deliver on increasing responsibilities.

## **A child's right to a happy childhood**

Every Ukrainian child is affected by this war. The war is also affecting all children in Europe and runs the risk of monopolizing their hopes and dreams. It has never been more pressing to invest in programmes that cultivate openness and understanding among children, leaving no space for narratives of hate, at European and national level.

At Eurochild, we stand against the invasion of Ukraine, and we continue our work to defend the right of every child, no matter their country of birth, to a safe, happy, and healthy childhood.