

# Ukrainian Children from orphanages – another test for child protection systems in Poland

*Eurochild position paper on the developments for children  
in alternative care in Europe*

**POSITION PAPER**



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

October 2022

## About Eurochild



Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of 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.

### **Eurochild AISBL**

Avenue des Arts 7/8, 1210 Brussels  
Tel. +32 (0)2 511 70 83 Fax +32 (0)2 511 72 98  
[info@eurochild.org](mailto:info@eurochild.org) – [www.eurochild.org](http://www.eurochild.org)

### **For more information, contact:**

Zuzana Konradova

Thematic Coordinator Children in Alternative Care, Eurochild

[Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org](mailto:Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org)



Funded by the  
European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, millions of people, mostly women and children, fled the country to find safe refuge in European Union Member States, thanks to the prompt adoption of the Temporary Protection Directive by the EU. Almost 7 million people have left Ukraine so far, 89% of which are women and children, according to the latest UNHCR data<sup>1</sup>.

Among them, there was also a very vulnerable group – orphans and children deprived of parental care. Before the conflict, there were more than 160,000 children in out-of-home care in Ukraine<sup>2</sup>. Almost 50% are children with disabilities. Poverty and lack of community-based services and inclusive education are among the reasons why children are separated from their families and placed in alternative care in Ukraine<sup>3</sup>. According to the latest information, 4,500 orphans and children deprived of parental care<sup>4</sup> were evacuated abroad.

Many children from Ukrainian care institutions arrived in Poland thanks to good cooperation and mutual relations. Currently, there are approximately **2,100 Ukrainian children from out-of-home care** living in Poland, the majority 2,059 live along with their caregivers in premises such as hotels. Most of these evacuations were organised by NGOs or church organisations that secure their living in Poland. Furthermore, there are 306 Ukrainian children who have been placed in Polish alternative care system of which 236 children have stayed in residential care, and 70 children have joined foster families<sup>5</sup>.

Further evacuations were planned but currently suspended due to the implications of the Political Declaration between the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy and the Polish Ministry of Family and Social Policy<sup>6</sup> on the social protection of children affected by hostilities and armed conflict. Other European Union Member States have signed similar agreements with Ukraine to prevent children from going missing and to enable their return. To this end, this political agreement intends “*to preserve the close contact of groups of children from one institution*”. This means that in practice children from one institution should not be separated from each other when evacuated abroad.

---

<sup>1</sup> [UNHCR: Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees from Ukraine #2.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Millions of children in Ukraine risk growing up without the care they need - SOS Children's Villages International \(sos-childrensvillages.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Ukraine - SOS Children's Villages International \(sos-childrensvillages.org\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> Sources: Support to Ukraine's Reforms for Governance Project (SURGe); Partnership 4 Every Child; UNICEF (24-hour care); [Tens of thousands of children in Ukraine's orphanages displaced by war \(reuters.com\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1233509%2Cukrainskie-dzieci-z-domow-dziecka-ucza-sie-zyc-w-polsce-ale-tesknia-za>

<sup>6</sup> [PL 🇺🇦... - Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej | Facebook](#)

Such agreements are problematic for two reasons. Firstly, keeping children transferred together with their peers is creating a huge logistical challenge to secure suitable accommodation for large groups of children (at times upwards of 100 children with their carers). Even more worrying, this agreement is leading to the 're-institutionalisation' of children in countries like Poland, a country that has invested national and EU funding to move away from keeping children in large and impersonal residential care settings that we know are harmful to their healthy development. Finally, these agreements risk creating parallel child protection systems, which will be costly and inefficient to sustain in the long-term.

Following the EU Temporary Protection Directive, Poland introduced new legislation that includes important provisions for children, the *Act on Assistance for Ukrainian Citizens in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of the country* (March 2022).

Furthermore, a registration hub in Stalowa Wola in Podkarpackie Province for Ukrainian children, who were previously placed in alternative care, was established in March 2022. In addition, an online internal registration system was launched. However, according to civil society professionals in the child protection sector, many children were left uncounted for - especially during the first weeks of the refugees' influx.

### **How civil society is responding to help Ukrainian children in Poland**

As Eurochild member Aleksander Kartasinski from [Happy Kids Foundation](#) explained:

*"Our foundation helped evacuate 1,200 children from 40 institutions from Ukraine. Some of these children's homes accommodated hundreds of children in one residential setting. In Poland, we no longer have institutions for such big groups of children. Therefore, we struggled to find an adequate place. We could not also comply with Memorandum on child protection signed in June therefore we suspended further evacuations."*

The needs of these children needed to be addressed, and Happy Kids Foundation managed to get health insurance for all children. Paediatricians in the local private practices stepped in to provide health care. Happy Kids also secured dentist treatment thanks to the partnership with a private sponsor who provided a 'dentobus' – a mobile dentist facility. As these children were fleeing war, mental-health and psychosocial support were essential to help the children in their care feel safe and secure. Therefore, Happy Kids set up individual assistance programmes delivered by specialists from Ukraine or local Polish experts. As a result, children have started settling down and feeling better. Happy Kids Foundation has been providing all these services thanks to private donations and support from the municipality of Lodz and other municipalities.

Other civil society organization such as [Polish Foster Care Coalition](#) and its members have also stepped up for Ukrainian children. Polish Foster Care Coalition has become a platform, that enables networking and booster support offered by its members. SOS Children's Villages Poland, a member organization accommodated 200 children with their carers (and carers' children) since the beginning of the war<sup>7</sup>. Polish Foster Care Coalition together with its four member organizations have just started a new project supported by UNICEF that aims to develop a programme for Ukrainian foster families and Ukrainian children placed in alternative care in Poland.

In Poland civil society organisations and individual volunteers have reacted with tremendous enthusiasm and support, but this is not a sustainable solution. In line with the 10 principles of integrated child protection systems<sup>8</sup>, **all children have access to and benefit from national child protection systems and mainstream services on an equal basis.**

### **Developments and challenges for the Polish alternative care system**

The child protection system has undergone several reforms and achieved several successes over the past ten years in Poland. In line with the UN Guidelines on Children in Alternative Care and in the best interest of the child, family-based care is prioritized. As a result, there is a greater number of children in **family-based care rather than residential care** for children deprived of parental care in Poland. However, more than 43,000 children continue to live in different types of residential care<sup>9</sup>.

The *Act on family strengthening and alternative care system* (2011) set a maximum limit of 14 children per small group home, reducing the number of children residing in larger residential settings. However, these limits were relaxed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the arrival of large numbers of Ukrainian children from orphanages it is challenging to maintain this limit. Another important achievement was to end the institutionalisation of young children, stipulated by the same act. Family-based care is the preferred option for children younger than 10 years. However, due to the shortage of foster carers, only Ukrainian children younger than 3 years have been prioritised and placed in foster families.

---

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, SOS Children's Villages Poland supports other NGO's in helping Ukrainian refugees by cash-voucher system and dedicated financial and in kind support. Other members of PFFC: the One Heart Association for Family Foster Care and The Lower-Silesian Foundation for Foster Care "Przystanek Rodzina" support UA foster families (altogether more than 210 people, 136 foster children and foster parents cared by One Heart and 75 foster children and foster parents cared by Przystanek Rodzina). Those member organizations provide accommodation, financial and medical support, legal counselling. Raising competence workshops as well as summer holidays were offered.

<sup>8</sup> [10 principles for integrated child protection systems\\_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Poland.pdf \(eurochild.org\)](#)

The current situation has also revealed shortages in personnel capacities of social workers, foster parents and others. To fill the staffing gaps and comply with Temporary Protection regarding the employment of the Ukrainian workforce, a speedy process was launched to recognise the qualifications of Ukrainian carers. According to Beata Kulig from [Polish Foster Care Coalition](#), *“two standards were introduced for Polish and Ukrainian foster parents. There must be an efficient system of assessment and training for all prospective foster carers and not to lower our standards. All children deserve high-quality care”*.

To address some of these challenges, Happy Kids Foundation has developed a ‘**Euro-house project**’ to provide a solution for Ukrainian children evacuated from orphanages to Poland. The project involves training Ukrainian professionals because they lack skills and knowledge concerning fostering. Furthermore, they emphasise the need for EU standards of foster care to be respected. The project also plans to run a campaign for Ukrainian people to become foster carers. In addition, they plan to expand the training on foster care to three oblasts (regions) in Ukraine: Zakarpattia, Ivano-Frankivska and Chernivetska.

In response to the refugee crisis, **national child protection systems** must be **strengthened** to provide good quality services, tackling long-standing deficiencies and **ultimately building long-term sustainability**. A guide [Responding to Children’s Care in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis](#), Key Considerations and Recommendations, provides further measures on how to strengthen care and protection systems in host countries and respond appropriately to the needs of refugee children<sup>10</sup>.

Furthermore, as emphasised by professionals, the trainings and awareness raising on cultural differences and explanation of Polish child protection system’s functioning are needed.

As this paper demonstrates, civil society organisations, such as Eurochild members Happy Kids Foundation and members of the Polish Foster Care Coalition, have provided inspiring practices. They should continue to be involved as key stakeholders in Poland’s national response to provide quality care for all refugee children in Poland. Their efforts must be accompanied by sustainable measures from national authorities to ensure that all children receive the care they are entitled to, including nutrition, access to health-care, housing, free and accessible early childhood education and care, and education. The **European Child Guarantee**<sup>11</sup> focuses on the most vulnerable children and provides a national and EU-wide policy and funding framework to address these challenges.

---

<sup>10</sup> [Responding-to-Childrens-Care-in-the-Context-of-the-Ukraine-Crisis.pdf \(eurochild.org\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> [European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

Moving from the theory to practice through donations you can support action on the ground. **Happy Kids Foundation**, is an NGO that creates and runs childcare centres of family type. The Foundation commits to build relations with the biological families. It aims at raising the quality standard of foster care in Poland and the awareness on this issue through social events, conferences and seminars. [Find out more about Happy Kids Foundation's work for Ukrainian children](#) and see how to support.

**Polish Foster Care Coalition**, established in 2010, is an advocacy umbrella organisation that gathers NGOs focused on child rights based on UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, especially the child's right to grow up in a family environment. Their efforts are focused on deinstitutionalisation of alternative care for children. PFFC represents 17 NGOs in Poland. Its members include SOS Children's Villages Poland, Polki Moga Wszystko Foundation, and Dialog Foundation among others. [Find out more about Polish Foster Care Coalition's work for Ukrainian children](#) and see how to support.