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for and with children



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Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU)

4th Plenary Meeting
21 – 23 January 2025, Strasbourg

Summary Note

Executive Summary:

- ✚ The Council of Europe (CoE) Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU) held its 4th Plenary Meeting in-person in Strasbourg on 21-23 January 2025 with the participation of **41 member States' representatives, 15 representatives of relevant international organisations, 7 representatives of relevant national and international civil society organisations, and 5 independent experts.**
- ✚ The **opening of the 3rd Plenary Meeting by the Secretariat** included welcoming words, recalling that the CGU was established as a practical emergency response and has brought together member states, international organisations, and civil society to support better protection of the rights of children of Ukraine. With over half of its first mandate completed, it has proven valuable as a peer-review mechanism, influencing national systems beyond meetings. CGU remains a state-led, multilateral cooperation platform working under Chatham House rules. Its 24-month mandate runs until 31 July 2025, with a likely extension.
- ✚ The first day started by a *tour de table* and updates on national efforts to support children of Ukraine. Discussions focused on implementing findings from the CGU and GRETA report on [Understanding the risks of human trafficking, including for the purpose of sexual and labour exploitation of children of Ukraine](#) and on developing a communication strategy to implement findings from the CGU and CoE Education Department's [Mapping study on children of Ukraine's access to education in Council of Europe member states](#). Spotlight presentations highlighted ongoing projects aimed at supporting children of Ukraine's access to education, including the **Ukrainian component**. A special session focused on **progress and current challenges on the reform of the Ukrainian child protection and alternative care system**, featuring exchanges on best practices to support the country. The day concluded with a **screening of an excerpt of the film: *After the Rain: Putin's Stolen Children Come Home*** followed by a discussion with the movie's director.
- ✚ The second day focused on debriefings from Thematic Dialogue Groups on Transnational Procedures and Guardianship (TPG) and Psychological Support and Trauma-Informed Care. Discussions emphasised key gaps, next steps, and the final review of some deliverables. A spotlight presentation highlighted the trauma experienced by children returning from unlawful deportation and those living in frontline areas. Later, breakout groups collaborated on conceptualising potential future deliverables.

- ✚ On the third day, a Special Thematic Hearing focused on the pre-conditions for the safe return of children of Ukraine from CoE member states took place.

1) Tour de Table

- ✚ CGU members and participants shared updates on national and international efforts to support the children of Ukraine, along with some of the challenges they face. These could be grouped under six categories:

a. Child Protection and Guardianship

- ✚ Some member states shared that they have adopted systems to protect children of Ukraine, ensuring their well-being and access to basic services, including through trans-border collaboration and close cooperation with international partners and in reliance on relevant standards. In this sense, the Hague Conventions on Private International Law set adequate standards for adoption and cross-border child protection, though some complexities remain in practice. Cases were highlighted where parents returned to Ukraine, leaving their children in host states for their safety, and where host states' authorities appointed professional guardians for these children. Some member states stated that financial aid and foster care placements help children of Ukraine find secure living arrangements in the host state.
- ✚ There are still some challenges in clarifying responsibilities for guardianship of Ukraine and host states, and verification of documentations concerning parental responsibilities and guardianship. There are also other initiatives and organisations playing a unique role by uniting NGOs, IGOs, and national governments, ensuring a diverse and holistic approach to cross border child protection.
- ✚ Some member states also underlined the importance of extending the child protection efforts to child victims of human trafficking and reinforced the importance of international cooperation in child welfare.

b. Access to Education

- ✚ Several member states are actively integrating children of Ukraine into their education systems, though challenges remain in maintaining engagement and enrolment. Despite these efforts, one international organisation indicated that a significant number of Ukrainian children remain unenrolled in school according to the latest reports.

c. Psychosocial Support

- ✚ War-related trauma remains a pressing issue, with some member states implementing specialised training programs for mental health professionals. Civil society organisations run community-based support programs, focusing on trauma recovery and resilience-building. These initiatives aim to provide children with stable environments, recognising that mental health is as crucial as education and housing in fostering a sense of security and belonging.

d. Housing, Employment and Social Welfare

- ✚ Ensuring stable housing and employment for Ukrainian families remains a major concern. Some member states underlined the importance of providing a status to Ukrainian families that includes access to employment, education, and pensions to ensuring a degree of stability. Some member states provide daily allowance to Ukrainian families.
- ✚ European institutions support migration policies that address these social welfare challenges, while international civil society organisations work with grassroots organisations to ensure that Ukrainian children and their families receive necessary support.

e. Coordination, Policy Development and International Cooperation

- ✚ Some member states highlighted that their ministries are actively engaged in shaping child protection strategies according to the current needs of children of Ukraine with some good practice examples, such as establishing national focal points to facilitate collaboration across government and civil society.
- ✚ It was emphasised that international organisations play a pivotal role in coordinating these policies and international cooperation for the protection of the rights of children of Ukraine. Civil society organisations also play a crucial role in advocating for the rights of displaced and missing children of Ukraine, providing essential legal and psychosocial support.

f. Repatriation and Safe Return

- ✚ The safe return of evacuated children of Ukraine is an ongoing debate in most member states, with some governments having been actively involved in discussions with Ukraine on repatriation procedures, ensuring that any movement prioritises the child's safety and best interests.

2) Discussions on Possible Follow-up Actions to the Revolving Thematic Topics

a. Risks of Human Trafficking

- ✚ According to the CGU and GRETA report on [Understanding the risks of human trafficking, including for the purpose of sexual and labour exploitation of children of Ukraine](#), children of Ukraine remain highly vulnerable to human trafficking despite emergency measures. Raising awareness is crucial for protection. Governments, CSOs, and international bodies must collaborate, strengthen referral mechanisms, and allocate resources for prevention. Innovation is key, as traffickers exploit digital platforms. Continuous cooperation ensures children's safety across Europe.
- ✚ The CGU highlighted that addressing these challenges requires a transversal approach that includes civil society as key stakeholders rather than mere service providers. The private sector plays a growing role in trafficking networks, particularly through recruitment agencies that exploit vulnerable workers. Efforts to strengthen prevention must focus on family-based care, positive parenting programs, and ensuring that children have access to safe education rather than online alternatives that may increase isolation. Concerns were also raised about exploitative surrogacy networks operating beyond government oversight, necessitating greater awareness and regulatory action.
- ✚ The CGU also underlined that effective dissemination of risks of human trafficking and awareness raising was a recurring theme, with a focus on making information accessible to those at risk. Traffickers continuously adapt their methods, often leveraging digital platforms, making it essential to use child-friendly materials and social media for outreach. Strengthening inter-agency collaboration and ensuring legal protections for victims were also key recommendations. Moving forward, targeted training for guardianship bodies, improved cross-border cooperation, and enhanced support systems for vulnerable youth will be essential in mitigating trafficking risks.

b. Access to Education

- ✚ The meeting provided an overview of ongoing efforts to ensure access to quality education for children of Ukraine featuring spotlight presentations from the World Bank and UNESCO. The **World Bank presented their ongoing project in Ukraine**, highlighted the severe challenges facing Ukraine's education sector (with 15% of school buildings damaged, 25% of children in Ukraine unable to attend school due to safety concerns, 7% students internally displaced, and 10% of students fled the county). Efforts are being made to rebuild the education system, with key reforms aligned with EU accession requirements, budget increases, and an emphasis on quality improvement. The goal is to provide an emergency response while preparing for the long-term

recovery of the education sector, with a focus on in-person learning, institutional strengthening, and modernisation of the curriculum. **UNESCO** presented its ongoing work on the [Ukraine Refugee Regional Education Dashboard](#) with support from the technical hub that brings together several international organisations working on children of Ukraine's access to education, such as the Council of Europe, European Commission, UNHCR, and UNICEF. The initiative aims to consolidate data, providing a comprehensive overview of education support measures and student learning outcomes across different host countries. A demonstration of the dashboard showcased its capacity to track academic performance, policy developments, and integration measures.

✚ The session also included a spotlight presentation from the **Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine** on the Ukrainian Component (core curriculum). This initiative supports students maintaining their connection to Ukrainian language and culture while attending school abroad. It was noted that over 400,000 Ukrainian students and 7,000 teachers remain abroad. Several countries have introduced preparatory classes and language support to facilitate integration. Concerns were raised regarding the dual burden on students engaged in both Ukrainian and host country education systems. The Ukrainian Component is a proposed solution that enables children of Ukraine to attend local schools in person in host states without having to follow two full curriculums simultaneously. This approach ensures they remain connected to the Ukrainian education system while also securing recognition of their grades and diplomas obtained in host countries. The CGU acknowledged challenges such as dual schooling pressures, language barriers, funding, and social integration benefits. Some good practice examples, such as integration of the whole school approach to support children of Ukraine's inclusion in host states' schools have also been showcased.

✚ Discussions further explored the development of a communication strategy to effectively implement the findings of the CGU and Council of Europe Education Department's [Mapping study on children of Ukraine's access to education in Council of Europe member states](#). The CGU encouraged coordinated efforts to address educational challenges, reinforce advocacy, and facilitate the integration of Ukrainian students in host countries while maintaining their cultural ties with Ukraine. Key recommendations included promoting in-person learning, improving awareness among Ukrainian parents regarding available education options, and leveraging local organisations for outreach. Participants emphasised the need for targeted campaigns, utilisation of social media, and collaboration with Ukrainian authorities to ensure effective dissemination. This topic will also be discussed with a broader audience to raise awareness at the Mid-Term Review Conference of the fourth Council of Europe [Strategy for the rights of the Child \(2022-2027\)](#) on 4 April 2025.

3) Special Update on Progress and the current challenges on the reform of the Ukrainian child protection and alternative care system: Ukraine's "Better Care Initiative" supported by the European Commission and UNICEF

✚ The **Roadmap for Strategy Implementation 2024-2028 of the Better Care Initiative** was presented, emphasising the importance of strengthening family-based care to prevent the re-institutionalisation of children. Key objectives include improving support systems for children currently in institutional care, enhancing social support mechanisms, and transforming the childcare system in Ukraine. One of the major achievements in 2024 has been the development of a national database for children, ensuring seamless coordination across different sectors, such as those dealing with health and social protection. Additionally, new social services, including resilience programs, have been introduced, and a Council of Regions was launched to enhance inter-ministerial coordination and reduce overlapping efforts. A significant milestone is the *Bring Kids Back Plan*, which includes a Reintegration Framework aimed at supporting children's transition into family-based care.

- ✚ Remaining challenges are the urgent need for workforce expansion to effectively implement the reform, with 33,290 additional professionals required. International cooperation, particularly with France and Sweden, has provided valuable insights into workforce development, with study visits exploring new models, including specialised foster care for children with disabilities. Following these visits, a pilot project is underway to prepare 85 specialised foster families, with the long-term goal of scaling this initiative nationally. The importance of cross-sector collaboration was also mentioned, particularly in integrating education, healthcare, and social services for children with complex needs. UNICEF-supported home visit programs and multidisciplinary approaches are being piloted to provide comprehensive and community-based support. The meeting concluded with a call to action for stronger partnerships, expert guidance, and resource mobilisation to support Ukraine’s childcare reform.

4) Debrief of the Work of Dialogue Groups

a. Thematic Dialogue Group on Transnational Procedures and Guardianship (TPG)

- ✚ The Co-chairs provided an update on the work of the Thematic Dialogue Group on TPG, particularly in addressing the gaps identified through the gap analysis, based on responses from CGU members to the surveys. Key concerns voiced included the lack of a child-rights-based approach, insufficient intergovernmental and international cooperation, and inadequate monitoring of guardianship arrangements. Discussions also covered issues such as uncertainty about children's futures, challenges in their integration, safety concerns when children move between member states, and the absence of focal points at national level addressing the needs of children of Ukraine. The need for structured consultations with children of different age groups was emphasised to better understand their needs and aspirations. Ensuring that children’s voices are central to making decisions concerning them was highlighted as a priority, alongside the necessity of providing psycho-social support for both children and guardians. The Dialogue Group also heard testimonies from Ukrainian and host state guardians, whose involvement was crucial to better understand their experiences and the difficulties they face.
- ✚ Some member states shared their experiences with dedicated focal points, which have proven effective in coordinating support for children of Ukraine, their guardians, and authorities involved in international cooperation. Some other participants provided insights into challenges such as verification of documentation concerning children of Ukraine’s parental and guardianship arrangements, the role and responsibilities of guardians and foster families on decisions concerning older children, and the complexity of return decisions. A consensus emerged on the need to strengthen cooperation, improve legal clarity, and enhance engagement with guardians to ensure more effective child protection mechanisms.

i. Final review of the Information Note on Adoption During War in Ukraine and Contextual Overview Document

- ✚ The expert drafting the *Information Note and Contextual Overview Document on Adoption During War in Ukraine* presented the latest version of the document, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach, particularly in repatriation scenarios, as existing international adoption standards were not designed with wartime contexts in mind. Most CGU members and participants expressed general support for the document. Ukraine reaffirmed its position that adoption should only occur in exceptional cases and that children of Ukraine remain under Ukraine’s national jurisdiction during wartime. Some concerns were raised about the potential for dilution of the general prohibition on adoption during and immediately after emergencies.
- ✚ The CGU agreed to finalise the document after a final round of written comments to refine clarity and address minor adjustments. Once completed, the final version will be disseminated among CGU members and participants.

ii. Final review of the Compendium on Transnational Procedure and Cooperation

- ✚ The experts drafting the Compendium on Transnational Procedure and Cooperation outlined the document's structure, including its scope, key scenarios, and limitations, emphasising that while comprehensive, the Compendium is not exhaustive in terms of international and regional frameworks. The discussion centred on clarifications regarding legal instruments, particularly the distinction between missing children and parental child abduction cases, with participants suggesting refinements to ensure accuracy. Concerns were also raised about the terminology used, with an agreement reached to replace "settled" with "residing" for clarity. The CGU supported the Compendium as a valuable tool, with a consensus that it would be better to treat it as a living document subject to future updates.
- ✚ Following minor refinements on the spot, the CGU agreed to finalise the Compendium for dissemination.

b. Dialogue Group on Psychological Support and Trauma-informed Care

- ✚ During the debrief session, the Chair of the Dialogue Group on Psychological Support and Trauma-informed Care presented the Gap Analysis conducted by an independent expert. The report, based on a questionnaire and focus group interviews, highlighted key challenges, such as fragmented support systems, language and cultural barriers, shortages of specialists, and the need for multidisciplinary assistance. Recommendations included conducting comprehensive needs assessments, developing long-term strategies, ensuring culturally sensitive and Ukrainian services, and enhancing professional training.
- ✚ The CGU members shared updates on the information provided for the Gap Analysis, and the session also explored potential next steps and deliverables to address identified gaps and enhance coordination efforts.
- ✚ Building on previous discussions, the *Voices of Children* Charitable Foundation delivered a spotlight presentation on the specific trauma experienced by children of Ukraine returning to Council of Europe member states after unlawful deportation. The session explored the psychological impact of forced displacement, including identity crises, behavioural regression, and emotional barriers to reintegration. It emphasised the need for stability, trauma-informed care, and comprehensive reintegration support, covering education, housing, healthcare and psychological services. Key challenges, such as limited governmental resources, reliance on civil society organisations, and the risk of re-traumatisation through media or judicial authorities, were also discussed. The session concluded by underscoring the importance of providing a normal life to returning children where they can enjoy their childhood without any discrimination and the need for community readiness for sustainable, long-term support strategies for returning children.

5) Discussion on possible future deliverables

- ✚ The CGU members and participants worked in breakout groups to refine ideas for future deliverables across four key discussion areas.
- ✚ The first group explored the integration of trauma-informed care for children of Ukraine into Council of Europe member states, emphasising the importance of awareness-raising, training of trainers, and ensuring sufficient resources. Discussions highlighted the need for tailor-made measures to include Ukrainian nationals in research and experience-sharing while also incorporating direct feedback from children who have received support. A key takeaway was the necessity of quality improvement standards and practical tools beyond training. The group also explored effective practices from various Council of Europe member states, including Hungary, where systems are in place to improve access to psycho-social support through clear and inclusive signalling mechanisms.

- ✚ The second group focused on the establishment of a dedicated focal point for coordinating efforts related to children of Ukraine. The group agreed that this focal point must possess subject-matter competence, be adequately resourced, and be well-versed in the complexities of affected structures. A centralised focal point would help streamline communication, prevent duplication of efforts, and ensure more efficient decision-making. The group also discussed the role of the focal point as a key contact between Ukrainian authorities and their state. It was also noted that focal points operate effectively even in decentralised systems, where local authorities actively contribute and play a crucial role in coordination. Examples of good practices were shared from two member states. It was suggested that the CGU gather these good practice examples and distribute them among its members and participants to encourage the establishment of focal points to better protect the children of Ukraine in Council of Europe member states.
- ✚ The third group addressed the involvement of children in decision-making processes. Given the CGU's limited mandate, the group suggested leveraging existing consultation structures within member states and civil society organisations where trust with children has already been established. The discussion emphasised the importance of prioritising children's perspectives, ensuring inclusivity beyond the most visible and outspoken children, and using rights-based methodologies to facilitate meaningful engagement. The group proposed that the CGU should map existing youth consultative bodies in Council of Europe member states to see whether children of Ukraine are involved in them. A suggestion was made to compile recommended tools, and design information resources in a child-friendly and co-produced manner.
- ✚ The fourth group tackled document verification and information accessibility between Ukrainian and host state authorities. The discussion centred on the challenges of recognising and verifying Ukrainian custody documents within different national guardianship systems. Participants underscored the need for efficient communication mechanisms to prevent delays in verification, alongside the creation of a resource detailing the varying legal statuses of Ukrainian children, their parents, family members, and/or guardians across host states. Ensuring access to clear, accurate information for Ukrainian citizens was highlighted as a priority, with consulates and other key institutions identified as potential channels for dissemination. Addressing trust issues related to guardianship measures was also noted as an area requiring further attention.

6) Screening of an excerpt of the film: *After the Rain: Putin's Stolen Children Come Home* followed by a discussion with the Film's Director

- ✚ An excerpt of the film: *After the Rain: Putin's Stolen Children Come Home*, directed by Sarah McCarthy, was screened. The documentary film is about the unlawful deportation of children to Russia and the efforts to reunite them with their families and providing them adequate psychological support after their return. The screening was followed by a discussion with the director.

7) Special Thematic Hearing on Preconditions for the Safe Return of Children of Ukraine from Council of Europe member states

- ✚ The final day of the plenary meeting was dedicated to the CGU Special Thematic Hearing on the Preconditions for the Safe Return of Children of Ukraine from Council of Europe member states. Discussions focused on key international legal standards governing the return of children in emergency situations, including human rights conventions and child protection frameworks. Experts and CGU members explored jurisdictional challenges, best interest assessments, and reintegration strategies, emphasising the importance of children's right to be heard in return decisions. The session also highlighted coordination efforts between Ukraine and host states, the role of social services, and best practices for safe and sustainable returns.

8) Next steps

- ✚ Finalising and disseminating the following documents after the independent experts and the CGU Secretariat have completed their final edits to address the comments raised during the meeting, as well as the written feedback received afterward:
 - Compendium on Transnational Procedure and Cooperation;
 - Information Note on Adoption During War in Ukraine;
 - Contextual Overview Document on Responding to Adoption Initiatives in Emergency Situations.
- ✚ Start working on creation of potential future deliverables discussed in the meeting within the Dialogue Groups, in accordance with the proposed directions.
- ✚ Continue the dialogue and action on the following priority topics, according to the replies received to the feedback survey conducted at the end of the meeting:
 - Alternative care and re-integration (post-return re-integration for children returning to Ukraine, post-temporary protection integration for children remaining in host states);
 - Children’s access to education;
 - Children’s right to participate in decision concerning them;
 - Establishing focal points and developing common action plans for coordinated efforts;
 - Guardianship;
 - Prevention of risks of human trafficking concerning children of Ukraine;
 - Psycho-social support focusing on supporting communities, parents, caregivers and children for self-resilience;
 - Support for the safe return of children (including ensuring pre-conditions of return from host Council of Europe member states are in line with human and children’s rights standards and psycho-social support for children returning from Russia, Belarus, and temporarily controlled or occupied territories);
 - Transnational procedures and cooperation.

Provisional dates for the next Dialogue Group and Plenary Meetings:

Meeting	Date and Time	Location
4th meeting of Dialogue Group on Psychological Support and Trauma-informed care	25 February 2025 from 14:30 to 18:00 (CET)	Online
2nd meeting of Dialogue Group on Transnational Procedures and Guardianship	24 March 2025 from 14:30 to 18:00 (CET)	Online
5th CGU Plenary Meeting	29 April 2025 from 9:30-17:00 (CET)	Online
6th CGU Plenary Meeting	7-9 July 2025 (TBC) Plenary (7-8 July 2025) High-level Stock-taking Conference (9 July 2025)	Strasbourg (in person only)

