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## Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU)

### 6<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting, 7 – 9 July 2025 / Strasbourg

#### Summary Note

##### Executive Summary:

- ✚ The Council of Europe (CoE) Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU) held its 6<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting in-person in Strasbourg on 7-8 July 2025 (with the participation of **31 member states representatives, 7 representatives of relevant international organisations, 8 representatives of relevant national and international civil society organisations, and 9 independent experts**).
- ✚ The opening of the 6<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting by the Secretariat included welcoming words, recalling the unique and **state-led, non-political and technical-level working methodology** of the CGU and the topics already covered during the CGU's first mandate. It was officially announced that the CGU mandate will be renewed (1 August 2025 - December 2026).
- ✚ The first day started with a tour de table with important **updates on efforts to support children of Ukraine**. Discussions focused first on the debriefing of the work of the **Thematic Dialogue Group on Transnational Procedures and Guardianship (TPG)** and of the **Dialogue Group on Psychological Support and Trauma-informed Care**. Spotlight presentations allowed to highlight GRETA's findings regarding how to **prevent trafficking and online exploitation of displaced children of Ukraine**. The second presentation dove into **access to education, information campaign packages for parents and Unity Hubs**. This was followed by a **special update on Ukraine's Better Care Reform** and a workshop on **ethical and trauma-informed journalism**. The day concluded with a **screening of the short film *Return Date: Unknown***, by Tymur Tsapliienko, followed by an insightful discussion with the movie's young director.
- ✚ The second day focused on the follow-up action to the CGU's special hearing on **preconditions for safe return of children of Ukraine from CoE member states** and updates on the idea of developing a process to strengthen direct bilateral cooperation between relevant interlocutors in return decisions. In the afternoon, the **Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the CoE on the situation of the children of Ukraine** presented her mandate and first fact-finding mission to Ukraine. The day concluded with a **working session** to take stock of the work of the CGU for its first mandate and to discuss ways to improve during the second mandate.
- ✚ On the third day, the CGU held a conference with a **High-level Stock-taking Session on the Council of Europe's actions concerning children of Ukraine**, followed by a **Special Thematic Hearing on the impact of war on children of Ukraine with disabilities (add sub-title please)**. A Mapping Study on the impact of war on children of Ukraine with Disabilities and a separate summary note on the high-level segment will be published on the outcomes of this conference.

## 1) Tour de Table

- ✚ It was noted that most CoE member states continue to receive new arrivals from Ukraine, mainly women and children. 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 five categories:

### *a. Child Protection and Guardianship*

- ✚ Most member states shared that their child protection system is accessible to all children within their territories, regardless of their status or origin. Some have also adopted additional protection measures for children at heightened risk of human trafficking or abuse, such as more frequent monitoring for children benefiting from humanitarian support programmes. To address the specific needs of children of Ukraine, some member states have developed tailored initiatives, such as helplines and family centres aimed at facilitating their reception, supervision, and integration.
- ✚ Some member states and international organisations mentioned improvements in the waiting time for unaccompanied children of Ukraine to be appointed a guardian, thus increasing protection for these children. Conducting individual needs and best interests' assessments before the appointment helps increase the likelihood that the guardian is accepted by the child and builds trust in the child protection systems.
- ✚ Efforts to move children of Ukraine from institutions to family-based care continues both in Ukraine and host states.
- ✚ There are still some challenges in clarifying responsibilities for guardianship between Ukraine and host states, and verification of documentation concerning parental responsibilities and guardianship. There are also other initiatives and organisations playing a unique role by uniting NGOs, INGOs, and national governments, ensuring a diverse and holistic approach to cross border child protection.

### *b. Access to Education, Children's Participation and Integration*

- ✚ Several member states are actively integrating children of Ukraine into their education systems, though challenges remain in maintaining engagement and enrolment. Some member states are opening special schools that provide education in Ukrainian or include a Ukrainian component.
- ✚ Despite these efforts, several international organisations indicated that a significant number of Ukrainian children remain unenrolled in the schools of host states. Challenges to integrating these children into the education system were noted, including language barriers, differences in curricula, and issues with recognition of academic achievements or diplomas.
- ✚ The importance of combating disinformation and hate speech, as well as promoting peer-to-peer support within educational settings, was also emphasised.
- ✚ A member state mentioned that it supports young Ukrainians to take part in youth forums implementing projects of inclusion, gives access to information centres and supports young people in establishing their own projects and organisations.

### *c. Psycho-social Support*

- ✚ The prolonged displacement of children of Ukraine continues to pose serious mental health challenges, with high levels of stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression reported across host countries. In response, several states have developed national strategies, expanded psycho-social support services, and introduced tools to help clinicians support children in crisis situations.
- ✚ Despite these efforts, emotional and psychological support remains a significant challenge, particularly given the uncertainty and ongoing nature of the war and displacement.

- ✚ To strengthen ongoing efforts, the CGU has launched a new manual for professionals, designed to support children's mental health in crisis and emergency situations.<sup>1</sup>

#### ***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 another status than the temporary protection status to Ukrainian families that includes access to employment, education, and pensions so as to ensure a degree of stability. They mentioned the need to anticipate a transition to a new status after the end of the European Union's (EU) Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which is currently being discussed and planned at the EU level.<sup>2</sup>
- ✚ European institutions support migration policies that address these social welfare challenges, while international civil society organisations work with grassroots organisations to ensure that children of Ukraine and their families receive the necessary support.

#### ***e. Repatriation and Safe Return***

- ✚ The safe return of children of Ukraine remains a priority topic across most member states. While both Ukraine and host states are willing to actively coordinate to ensure that any return procedure prioritises the child's safety and best interests, challenges persist, particularly in data exchange and coordination among multiple authorities.

### **2) Debrief of the work of the Thematic Dialogue Group on Transnational Procedures and Guardianship (TPG)**

- ✚ The 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Dialogue Group on TPG addressed ongoing legal, procedural, and protection challenges concerning the children of Ukraine, focusing on four key areas: legal documentation, travel and cross-border movement, loss of family and reunification, and long-term child protection. While existing frameworks like the 1996 Hague Convention and Brussels IIb Regulation offer guidance, practical gaps remain, particularly in recognising Ukrainian adoption decisions and verifying notary-issued documents.
- ✚ Members of the Dialogue Group also expressed concerns with movement of Ukrainian children in the EU and Ukraine without the knowledge of their guardians. Even though they do enjoy freedom of movement, these movements might increase risks of human trafficking and exploitation.
- ✚ Moreover, the CGU considered the transition into adulthood as a key issue, thinking of potential solutions, such as improved guidance on documentation and recommending that communication with Central authorities of Ukraine be strengthened to continue support of children who are ageing out. Two relevant recommendations were mentioned in this regard.<sup>3</sup>
- ✚ Proposed solutions include developing standard travel consent forms and extending support for young people coming out of child protection systems (up to age of 24).

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<sup>1</sup> [Council of Europe launches new manual for professionals to support children's mental health in crisis and emergency situations - Children's Rights](#)

<sup>2</sup> [A predictable and common European way forward for Ukrainians in the EU](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec\(2019\)4 on Supporting Young Refugees in Transition to Adulthood](#) and [Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec\(2007\)9 on Life Projects for Unaccompanied Migrant Minors](#).

### **3) Debrief of the work of the Dialogue Group on psychological support and trauma-informed care**

- ✚ The outcome of the Dialogue Group's 5<sup>th</sup> meeting highlighted challenges in addressing psychosocial needs of unlawfully deported children to Russia, Belarus, and temporarily occupied territories, and the complexities of their reintegration upon return. Participants noted that the trauma experienced by these children often manifests itself in subtle and complex ways, requiring specialised and sustained support.
- ✚ Concerns were also raised about reports of plans of Russia to deport 50,000 more children from temporarily occupied territories into military camps, echoing similar movements seen in 2020. While efforts to ensure the return of these children are ongoing, the number of successful returns remains limited.
- ✚ The CGU was invited to provide support in training of child protection services, helping to build accessible and specialised support systems and promoting long term reintegration pathways. Emphasis was also placed on expanding access to psychological support and embedding it within broader legal and social processes to ensure a holistic, child-centred response.

### **4) Spotlight presentation: Preventing Trafficking and online Exploitation of displaced Children of Ukraine**

- ✚ The presentation focused on GRETA's report on Ukraine, sharing official data on child trafficking. A major concern was the low recognition of child trafficking victims – only 72 children have been granted the status of child trafficking victims between 2018 and 2024 – which hinders the proper and accurate recognition of abnormal situations. This under-identification is attributed to limited human and financial resources, as well as insufficient utilisation of technological tools. Concerns were also raised as to the increase of grooming practices leading to human trafficking since 2020.
- ✚ The main goal expressed by the GRETA and supported by the CGU is to achieve online safety for children. They encouraged members and participants to promote the visibility and accessibility of prevention guidelines for local authorities, schools, parents and other stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>
- ✚ The difficulty remains also in ensuring proper care for these children after they have exited trafficking situations, as many of them may no longer trust the existing systems and exhibit complex forms of trauma.

### **5) Spotlight Presentation: Access to Education, information Campaign packages for Parents and Unity Hubs**

- ✚ The presentation by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MoES) outlined its strategy to support over 2 million children of Ukraine who have fled abroad. Key challenges include mismatched curricula, grading disparities, and the burden of double schooling. The MoES promotes a flexible, multi-solution approach to preserve children's ties to Ukraine while accommodating children's integration to the host country's education system.
- ✚ Central to this is the Ukrainian Studies component, offering 5–8 hours weekly in language, history, and geography, supported by legal frameworks for recognising learning outcomes abroad. While in-person education within host country systems and following Ukrainian Studies component or Saturday/Sunday schools remains the primary goal, fully online options are available for exceptional circumstances. Continued enrolment in Ukrainian schools is also supported to maintain educational continuity.

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<sup>4</sup> [Guidance Note on addressing the risks of trafficking in human beings related to the war in Ukraine and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, GRETA\(2022\)09.](#)

- ✚ The MoES called for support in raising awareness, improving school verification processes, and integrating Ukrainian Studies into host country curricula. Member states confirmed they would convey the information to their relevant Ministries. The documents provided by the MoES will be shared together with this meeting report.

## **6) Special Update on Ukraine's Better Care Reform supported by the European Commission and UNICEF**

- ✚ The update outlined the data gathered around Ukraine's 2024–2028 strategy to ensure every child grows up in a family environment. With 38 indicators aligned to six strategic objectives, the system tracks annual progress through data collection, analysis, and reporting.
- ✚ As of end-2024, five regions have achieved the 95% family-based care target. Institutional care has declined by 7% overall, and by 34% for children under age 3. However, over 25,000 children remain institutionalised although most of them have living parents. It was noted that initiatives like inclusive education (51% uptake), patronage care (available in 21% of communities), and mentorship programs, are expanding.
- ✚ Key challenges include service accessibility, support for children with disabilities, and family reintegration. Ukraine seeks international collaboration to enhance foster care, monitoring systems, and psycho-social reintegration for children affected by war and institutionalisation.
- ✚ CGU members and participants continue to support the reform by sharing good practice examples with the Ukrainian authorities. In response to a 3<sup>rd</sup> call focused on specialised foster care for children with disabilities, 12 member states and one international CSO contributed.

## **7) Workshop: Ethical and Trauma-informed Journalism: Recognising Harm, Human-rights based responses and Action Steps**

- ✚ During the workshop, members and participants reflected on the fundamental importance of children's rights in the context of ethical and trauma-informed journalism, particularly when reporting on children affected by the war in Ukraine. The session aimed to raise awareness and outline accountability mechanisms that can help uphold these rights, including engagement with the journalistic ethics committees, ombudspersons' offices in Ukraine and host countries, relevant domestic laws, and international human rights mechanisms, such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
- ✚ It was emphasised that persons conducting interviews with children must always prioritise their dignity, safety, and best interests. Consent from both the child and their legal representative(s) must be genuine, not merely a procedural formality. Crucially, journalists must clearly explain to children the purpose of the interview and what, if anything, it may realistically change. Children may wrongly believe that media exposure will solve their problems; this misunderstanding can lead to disappointment or harm. Therefore, it is essential to manage expectations and ensure transparency.
- ✚ The discussion also highlighted the risk of traumatising and potential negative consequences, including online harassment, underscoring the need for empathy, accountability, and child-centred practices in all forms of media engagement or the use of children's stories in communication plans.

## **8) Screening of the short film: *RETURN DATE: UNKNOWN*, by Tymur Tsapliienko**

- ✚ The documentary film is about 17-year-old Tymur's views on the cost of the war and the price of the world's dependence on fossil fuels. Along the way, he interviews family members and other children of Ukraine. Each conversation helps him understand the conflict and his own feelings toward it better. Despite the devastating realities portrayed, the film leaves space for hope; hope rooted in human connection, resilience, and the unwavering belief that even in the face of war, healing and learning are possible.

- ✚ The screening was followed by an insightful discussion with the young director.

## 9) Follow-up action to the CGU's Special Hearing on Preconditions for Safe Return of Children of Ukraine from CoE Member States

- ✚ The CGU's work in this area was reaffirmed as ensuring full respect for the rights of children of Ukraine, including the best interests of the child and their right to participate in decisions concerning them, whilst addressing the legitimate interest of Ukraine to return children hosted in Europe. It was also recalled that both Ukrainian and host state authorities share responsibility for ensuring the safety of these children.
- ✚ This follow-up action has been designed with two main goals to support both Ukraine and host States: first, to enhance the clarity, transparency, and efficiency of international and intergovernmental communication in return procedures; and second, to promote respect for children's rights and states' responsibilities under international human rights and children's rights frameworks.

### i. Updates on the Idea of developing a Process to strengthen Direct Bilateral Cooperation in Return Decisions and Outline of the Work

- ✚ A draft "***Return Coordination Information Form***" was developed in focus group meetings held with interested CGU member states who agreed to pilot the project together with Ukraine. The first draft was presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> CGU Plenary Meeting. This document focuses exclusively on evacuated children of Ukraine and aims to foster collaboration and transparency in return procedures.
- ✚ Member states expressed their enthusiasm for this draft and noted once again the need for greater clarity and the added support this document could provide.
- ✚ Further discussions will explore how this document can complement other existing materials and the idea of testing its implementation with pilot countries while finalising the draft.

### ii. Final review of Checklist for Host States

- ✚ The final draft of the "***Checklist for Host States***" was developed by incorporating written comments collected by the CGU into the document. The aim of the checklist is to outline the substantive law and international and European minimum standards that a host state should meet when accommodating the return of children of Ukraine from their territories. Together with the "***Return Coordination Information Form***", it also seeks to prevent duplication of efforts by Ukrainian and host country authorities, clarify shared responsibilities, and ensure the promptness and safety of return procedures.
- ✚ Nine areas of responsibilities are listed and further elaborated in the annex, encompassing: the best interests assessment, child participation and consent, legal documentation, family tracing and reunification, alternative care arrangements, risk assessment, support services, follow-up and documentation and reporting. Key stages and the timeline are defined, offering flexibility to ensure that every stage is adequately prepared and implemented.
- ✚ The expert developing the document underlined that the return is not a one-time event but a process requiring vigilance and a child-centred response across borders.
- ✚ Final comments were collected during the meeting and will be addressed prior to publication.

## **10) Presentation of the Mapping Study on the Practice of Establishing Focal Points coordinating all Actions and Decisions concerning Children of Ukraine**

- ✚ Independent experts conducting the Mapping Study highlighted the diversity of coordination structures across CGU member states, with many services provided at the regional or municipal level and involving variety of authorities, NGOs, and civil society actors.
- ✚ In general, unaccompanied, separated, and accompanied children are covered by the existing child protection systems, but communication gaps remain as a persistent challenge. Experts recommended a child rights-based approach (CRBA), emphasising the need for clearly defined responsibilities for all relevant stakeholders, high-level coordination, and improved information sharing. They also emphasised the crucial need for a comprehensive understanding of children's rights across sectors.
- ✚ During the discussion, some member states shared good practice examples already in place. Others called for more exchange on different state practices and requested the CGU to support the establishment of national focal points to ensure consolidation and dissemination of the CGU's work and implementation of the deliverables.

## **11) Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the CoE on the situation of the children of Ukraine: presentation of her mandate and her first fact-finding mission to Ukraine**

- ✚ The discussion centred on increasing dialogue and cooperation between CGU and the Special Envoy, Thórdís Kolbrún Reykjavík Gylfadóttir. She began by debriefing the CGU members on her first fact-finding mission to Ukraine, sharing key insights and observations from the field. She expressed her goal to make her coordination with the CGU proactive in addressing emerging issues, with provision of trauma-informed care remaining a common goal, which is fundamental for ongoing recovery and reconstruction efforts.
- ✚ The Special Envoy's role includes coordination with different CoE bodies, most notably the CGU and the Register of Damage for Ukraine and cooperation with international partners. She will sensitise relevant stakeholders to the plight of children of Ukraine, and advocate for increased support, where relevant.

## **12) Stock-Taking of the Work of the CGU**

- ✚ The CGU members and participants worked in breakout groups to discuss the achievements and explore opportunities for improvement during the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase.
- ✚ The breakout groups highlighted several key achievements of the CGU, including its role as a safe and inclusive platform for dialogue, its ongoing efforts to develop practice-oriented tools, and its mission to raise awareness about the rights of children of Ukraine.
- ✚ Looking ahead to the second mandate, participants identified several opportunities for growth, such as increasing the sharing of tools and good practices within the forum and enhancing communication around outcomes. Members also expressed interest in more regular exchanges with the Special Envoy and in jointly identifying or revisiting thematic priorities for the next phase of the CGU's work.
- ✚ On the last day of Plenary, after the **High-level Stock-taking Session on the Council of Europe's actions concerning children of Ukraine**, a Senior Evaluator at the Directorate of Internal Oversight of the Council of Europe presented a summary of the findings from the Evaluation of the Implementation of the Reykjavik Declaration, focusing on the actions taken regarding children of Ukraine:
  - ◆ The Council of Europe's response to the situation of children of Ukraine was assessed as both relevant and effective, with strengthened engagement by other institutions.

- ◆ The evaluation incorporated a public sentiment analysis demonstrating widespread public concern for the plight of children of Ukraine. This reinforces the urgency of the Council of Europe’s work in this area and underscores the importance of aligning institutional action with expectations of the public.
  - ◆ The CGU was recognised as a concrete outcome of the Reykjavik Declaration, praised for its flexibility, innovative approach, and operational efficiency. It was also noted for its effective internal coordination and inclusive collaboration with external partners, making it a central actor in advancing and protecting children’s rights amid the ongoing crisis.
- ✚ Since the CGU concludes its first mandate on 31 July 2025 and enters a second phase thereafter, the Secretariat commissioned independent experts to carry out a rapid assessment of the CGU’s work since its creation.
- ◆ The evaluation highlights the CGU as a flexible, trust-based platform that has enabled inclusive dialogue, strengthened cooperation among diverse stakeholders, and supported responses to the needs of children affected by the war.
  - ◆ Its multidisciplinary approach, practical outputs, and ability to navigate sensitive issues were noted as key strengths.
  - ◆ Moving forward, the assessment recommends clearer objectives, more visibility (where this does not harm the CGU’s methodology), and broader engagement, including with children themselves.

### 13) Final remarks

- ✚ The need for sustained dialogue between host states and Ukraine was underscored as central to CGU’s work, with noted improvements in the quality of exchanges having already contributed significantly to addressing difficult and sensitive issues.
- ✚ It was also highlighted that front-line workers must be consistently included in information-sharing processes to ensure that tools and resources developed are practical, relevant, and effectively implemented.

#### Provisional dates for next meetings

- **Kick-off Meeting CGU 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase (half day, online): September 2025 *(Survey to follow)***
- **CGU 7<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting (in Strasbourg): October/November 2025 *(Survey to follow)***