unicef for every child

Situation analysis
of early childhood education and care
services in support of Ukrainian refugees
across EU Member States

Summary of the Second Synthesis Report

June 2023

About this research

UNICEF commissioned Ecorys to carry out a Situation Analysis of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in support of Ukrainian refugees across 27 EU member states and Moldova. The work is being carried out in close cooperation with the European Education Area Working Group on ECEC and it aims to provide strategic and operational insights to country level responses to the crisis, and to inform ongoing actions regarding access to and quality of ECEC for Ukrainian refugee children.

There were two cycles of research conducted. The first cycle of research, from June to July 2022, provided insights on the steps undertaken by EU Member States and Moldova to secure access to high quality ECEC services for Ukrainian refugee children and their families during the initial months of the crisis[1]. Building on this work, the second cycle of research took place between November 2022 and January 2023. It was timed to allow for a consideration of the impact of the start of the new academic year on enrolments in ECEC, and to identify potential new issues arising with the crisis entering the winter period in Europe.

This executive summary presents the key findings from the second cycle report, which is available online at the following web address:

https://www.ecorys.com/moldova/our-work/monitoring-provision-early-childhood-and-care-ecec-services-ukrainian-refugee

Background

The Russian Federation military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 initiated a refugee crisis of a scale not seen in Europe since the second World War. One year on from the start of the conflict, more than 8 million Ukrainian refugees are recorded across Europe[2], representing almost one fifth of the Ukrainian population[3], while border crossings from Ukraine stand at over 10 million[4]. Of the 2 million Ukrainian refugee children arriving in the EU since the start of the invasion, as many as 20% are estimated to be under the age of 6[5]. This signifies a high number of young children requiring care and early education to support their development and provide emotional and psychosocial support.

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[1] Available at: https://www.ecorys.com/sites/default/files/2023-03/Ecorys%20cycle%201%20synthesis%20report%20-%20ECEC%20situation%20analysis.pdf
[2] Refugees Operational Data Portal by UNHCR
[3] Centre for Research & Analysis of Migration (2023), Current migration flows from Ukraine
[4] UNHCR data. Online: https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine [Viewed: 01.08.22]
[5] ECEC WG - Special meeting for Ukraine –5 April 2022

The Temporary Protection Directive came into effect on 4 March 2022[6], followed by the publication of operational guidelines for EU Member States to consider[7]. At the cycle 1 stage, the research found that both EU and national level policy guidelines were shaping ECEC responses to the crisis. As of December 2022, EU Member States have further committed to the updated Barcelona targets[8] adopted by the European Council to expand access to and strengthen the quality of ECEC services for children from 0-6 years of age, strongly encouraging national and municipal governments to make their ECEC systems agile, affordable, inclusive and responsive to families' needs.

This updated policy landscape has created new opportunities to extend and deepen ECEC system strengthening work carried out in response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, and to provide longer term solutions to safeguard against future emergencies.

Key messages

The first cycle concluded that an impressive range of ECEC programmes, frameworks and tools has been developed across Europe, while noting the accompanying challenges arising from the uneven inclusion of Ukrainian children in ECEC systems between Member States and overall low levels of enrolments in ECEC. Building on this work, and based on EU policy guidelines and frameworks informing ECEC, the research and key messages from the second cycle are framed around two key pillars: Expanding access to quality ECEC, and Support for integration through ECEC.

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[6] Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection: EUR-Lex - 32022D0382 - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022XC0321%2803%29&qid=1647940863274

[7] European Commission (2022) Supporting the inclusion of displaced children from Ukraine in education: considerations, key principles and practices for the school year 2022-2023. https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/publications/practical-manual-on-refugees.htm

[8] The updated Barcelona Targets adopted by the Council in December 2022, require that by 2030: At least 45% of children below the age of three participate in ECEC with specific targets for Member States that have not reached the 2002 goals; and at least 96% of children between the age of three and the starting age of compulsory primary education should participate in ECEC.

1.   EXPANDING ACCESS TO QUALITY ECEC

Although data availability and quality continue to present challenges in Cycle 2[9], enrolment in ECEC seems to be steady but inconsistent across the EU27 and Moldova. Overall, numbers enrolled in ECEC vary widely and do not always correspond to trends in numbers of registered Ukrainian children. While increases in ECEC enrolment were reported in certain countries[10], persistently low rates of enrolment were reported in others[11], while others still reported no increase in ECEC enrolment[12]. Notably, slight decreases in ECEC enrolment numbers of Ukrainian children were observed in Lithuania, where the number of children overall has also been observed to decrease, and in Slovakia, despite an increase in the overall number of Ukrainian child refugees over the same period.

Evolving challenges

The gaps in the provision or supply of ECEC programs seemed to have reduced in some countries compared with the situation that was found at cycle 1. This was evidenced by improved financial mechanisms and better integrated ECEC offers and entitlements. The picture at a country level remains challenging for ECEC services, nonetheless, and especially so where Ukrainian populations are in flux.

Many of the supply and demand-side challenges with ECEC provision reported in Cycle 1 continue to be relevant and may contribute to the persistently low enrolment rates reported in some countries (see box 1 below). In addition to financial efforts, host countries have also opted to increase ECEC enrolment through initiatives aimed at expanding ECEC capacity through the creation of new places and the recruitment of new staff, and by matching Ukrainian children with places that already exist.

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[9] See also Cycle 1 report, pg. 29 - the availability of age-disaggregated data on the number of ECEC-aged Ukrainian children and their enrolment in ECEC also continues to vary significantly across the EU27 and Moldova and continues to be a fundamental challenge to plan, design and adapt ECEC programmes.
[10] Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Latvia, Netherlands, and Romania
[11] Malta, Moldova, and Sweden
[12] Portugal, Poland, Slovenia and Croatia

Table 1: Barriers to accessing quality ECEC

Type of challenge	Specific barriers
Supply-side challenges	• Pre-existing shortages in available ECEC places • Pre-existing shortages in ECEC staff • Lack of adequate psychosocial experts • Language barriers and shortages of Ukrainian language skills among ECEC staff • Legal restrictions preventing the hiring of Ukrainian teachers/staff
Demand-side challenges	• Separation anxiety between parents and children • Lack of trust in "foreign" ECEC services • Uncertainties about returning to Ukraine • Residency, bureaucratic, and vaccination requirements to enroll in ECEC • Lack of accommodation close to ECEC services, accommodation instability • Preference for Ukrainian distance learning • Lack of accessible information on ECEC systems in host country • Cultural differences in the perception of ECEC (fears of losing Ukrainian identity, negative associations with ECEC)

A consolidation phase

With the refugee influx stabilising, there seems to be a degree of corresponding stability in the ECEC responses. Alongside continuing ECEC system-strengthening measures, Cycle 2 has equally seen new initiatives to foster the integration of Ukrainian refugees within ECEC settings, suggesting willingness to implement interventions which go beyond urgent, basic needs. The cycle 2 research further identified steps to put in place new infrastructure – community hubs, play and learning hubs, and investment in building new kindergartens. In many cases, the needs of Ukrainian refugees are now a consideration for longer term planning.

Stakeholder feedback indicates that, as the war continues without resolution, Ukrainian refugees already in host countries may consider their new residence to be 'semi-

permanent' and seek to build more permanent lives outside of Ukraine[13]. As an implication of this shift, it was anticipated that parents may decide to join the labor force, and to take corresponding steps to integrate their children into the mainstream educational system. A number of counties (e.g. Latvia and Denmark) have already noted increases in the share of Ukrainian children shifting from Ukrainian-language ECEC solutions to host-language ECEC services. This creates an opportunity for thinking about longer-lasting and systemic solutions, especially in view of gaps in ECEC systems identified in Member States pre-war.

The role of non-formal provision

A variety of non-formal ECEC initiatives have been identified in the second data collection cycle, including child groups/houses, day care centers, adaptation services, and other services. For these non-formal ECEC opportunities, partnerships between local, municipal authorities and non-governmental/civil society actors appear key to the scale-up, long-term sustainability and continuity of ECEC services that can be affordable, flexible and responsive to families' needs, although the research indicates that wide variations exist between Member states in the in the availability and accessibility of this provision to Ukrainian families.

It was noted that ECEC offers provided by non-governmental organizations are not subject to the same regulations and have thus been able to involve Ukrainian teachers in supporting Ukrainian children and families without encountering similar bureaucratic obstacles. This finding suggests that non-formal ECEC provision can allow for flexibilities that the formal ECEC system cannot, particularly in the case of staff recruitment. At the same time, it underlines the importance of connecting them with mainstream ECEC services to ensure that their practice benefits from robust safeguarding and quality frameworks.

Digital and blended solutions

The use of digital solutions to support Ukrainian refugee children and families featured as a recurring theme in the cycle 2 research. Access to online tools for learning extends beyond the specific context of Ukrainian virtual schooling following a distance learning model, and the cycle 2 research has seen a greater number of online educational resources developed or adapted. This includes:

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[13] This phenomenon was identified in the country data collection in Denmark, Croatia, Hungary and Portugal.

a) the development or repurposing of apps, games and language resources within ECEC settings.

b) widening access to psycho-social support for Ukrainian families, including those with young children, through applications and digital media including both apps[14] and websites.

c) greater responsiveness and personalisation of online information, advice and guidance available to Ukrainian families, including brokerage to ECEC-specific content.

d) scaling-up professional development opportunities, through the provision of online training.

2. SUPPORT FOR INTEGRATION THROUGH ECEC

Supporting inclusion within ECEC settings

ECEC settings are among the first points of contact that Ukrainian families have with host Member States. By providing essential services that benefit both young children and their families, ECEC settings hold immense potential in facilitating Ukrainian families' integration into host societies. Across Europe, efforts to support the integration of Ukrainian children into ECEC settings and services have been approached in different ways. A few countries (Luxembourg, Netherlands, Germany, and France) have made education mandatory for Ukrainian children at ECEC level. Common approaches include designing classes and courses solely for Ukrainian children, or adapting or tailoring extra-curricular activities to enhance young Ukrainian children's integration and interaction with their peers.

Alongside the reception of Ukrainian children into formal education facilities, some countries have supported integration through community programmes. Table 2 provides some illustrative examples.

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[14] For example, UNICEF ECARO has launched a cutting-edge mobile parenting application called Bebbo. This app supports parents and caregivers of children aged 0 to 6 years old by providing them with evidence-based advice and interactive tools to promote children's development and well-being.

Table 2: Supporting integration through community programmes

Type of activity	Examples
a) Coordination of extra-curricular activities with a focus on language learning and peer support	• Poland - summer schools and camps have been organized to enhance Ukrainian children's integration and interaction with their peers as well as learning Polish[15].
b) Allocation of targeted funds to improve the quality and the quantity of integration services	• Austria – support for 67 projects across all federal states to resolve challenges in the integration of refugees and migrants through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.[16]
c) Establishment of community hubs to build community relationships and strengthen wellbeing	• Romania - 11 local authorities from seven communities with high numbers of Ukrainian refugees will benefit from centers of alternative ECEC called PrimoHUB.[17]

Despite a myriad of initiatives, programs, and goodwill, several countries have registered tensions between Ukrainian refugees and other groups of refugees, between refugees and existing populations in host countries, and between groups of Ukrainian refugees themselves. These tensions remain the subject of ongoing review and dialogue at the time of writing and warrant an acceleration of the use ECEC as an essential entry point to foster greater social cohesion within communities.

Addressing the language gap

Language barriers have presented a particular challenge in view of the integration of young Ukrainian children in ECEC settings. To address this, various initiatives have been identified that support ECEC staff in responding to the influx of Ukrainian refugees. Some countries have introduced solutions which increase recruitment of staff, including through easing requirements. Others have opted for employing support staff such as cultural mediators, and involving parents. Assistance for teachers has also consisted of special training and professional development focused on learning host countries' languages of instruction, as well as provisions of information.

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[15] University of Silesia in Katowice (2022), Summer schools of Polish language for Ukrainians
[16] Vindobona (2022), 'Multiple Integration Projects Will Be Promoted in Austria'
[17] Step by Step website: https://www.stepbystep.ro/stire/evenimente/inscriere-in-selectia-de-comunitati-locale-apel-6-2022/

Changing configurations of specialist support

Cycle 1 recognized the need to scale-up resources for children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). The integration of Ukrainian children with SEND into mainstream ECEC systems has remained a major challenge. Cycle 2 research shows that some countries have made systemic efforts to address shortages in this respect. For instance, some governments have opted to focus on equipping their existing teachers with new skills and guidance to address the needs of Ukrainian children with SEND.

The arrival of young children from Ukraine has presented a profound upsurge in need for psychosocial services. Cycle 1 demonstrated that while the high need for psychosocial support was well-recognized, most host countries did not have comprehensive solutions in place for ECEC-aged children or their parents. Research throughout November to January, however, has showed a growth in psychological support mechanisms both for children and for parents, and both within ECEC settings and beyond them.

Recommendations

The cycle 2 report identified a number of recommendations, targeted at key actors and building upon and extending the recommendations in the Cycle 1 report. These are summarised below.

At a national and sub-national level

Table 3: Key recommendations at a national and sub-national level

Recommendation	Cycle 2 dimensions
a) Continue to **deepen the understanding of ECEC gaps, needs and priorities** among displaced Ukrainian young children and their families, by improving monitoring and evaluation tools and approaches.	• Continuously review and respond to changes and new developments in real time, to proactively meet a range of needs: psychosocial support, parenting support programmes, and services for children with disabilities, developmental delays/difficulties and other special needs. • Consider the use of apps and other digital tools to gather real time feedback and testimonials in the Ukrainian language, and as a means of reaching and engaging families.

Recommendation	Cycle 2 dimensions
b) **Develop a cross-sectoral and whole systems approach** for implementing ECEC provision in response to the crisis, ensuring that arrangements for 0-3- and 3–6-year-olds are synchronised	• Develop integrated packages of support to families and young children, including entitlements to ECEC, parenting support, welfare, housing, and employment • Establish service pathways for children with SEND, such as those of early identification and early intervention for children with developmental delays, or those at risk of developing them • Foster cooperation between different ministries and municipalities to support with continuity, transitions, and transparent financing of ECEC services.
c) **Identify, scale and mainstream promising ECEC practices, and build system capacity**, so that the learning from special projects and locally-designed responses is accessible for the collective good.	• Initiate coordinated efforts to boost workforce development and resources, e.g. by delivering training webinars and rapid, in-person professional development for professionals working with Ukrainian children and families, or by developing MOOCs to boost training reach.

Recommendation	Cycle 2 dimensions
d) **Recognise and value non-formal networks of ECEC** support as a viable option for connecting Ukrainian children and families with peer-led networks and services.	• Scope the potential for developing a range of models of non-formal support, from children's groups/houses to day care centres, adaptation services, to play and learning hubs, communication clubs, learning camps, and at home services. • Explore the possibility of creating paid volunteering roles for Ukrainian refugee parents and caregivers in ECEC provision and access to training and qualifications • Ensure non-formal ECEC services have accompanying standards and quality assurance frameworks • Municipalities and local authorities should plan and partner with civil society/NGOs operating non-formal ECEC services to diversify ECEC provision, facilitate transitions into formal systems, and work toward long-term sustainability of ECEC services
e) **Adopt multi-channel and integrated routes to information guidance and support**, ensuring that there is 'no wrong door' to locate information, resources and professional help.	• Ministries should create frameworks, to work closely with NGOs and civil society partners to continuously update and refresh web-based repositories of information and resources for Ukrainian children and families, as well as securing access to telephone, video or in-person professional or volunteer support.

Recommendation	Cycle 2 dimensions
f) **Initiate a long-term strategic planning approach looking beyond emergency arrangements**, to strengthen and diversify national ECEC systems with an emphasis on access, quality, and inclusion.	• Identify opportunities for the scaling or adaptation of resources or infrastructure originally funded on a crisis basis targeting Ukrainian refugee children in mind, to form the basis for a wider community resource, to benefit all young children and their families. • Plan the systemic inclusion of SEND and psychosocial support training in ECEC teacher curricula, to benefit all children, and to strengthen multicultural and intercultural education beyond the immediate crisis context of servicing a specific integration need for Ukrainian children.

At a regional and European level

Table 4: Key recommendations at a regional and European level

Recommendation	Cycle 2 dimensions
a) **Identify, collate and disseminate promising policies and practices** from across Europe	• Facilitate access to good quality research, data, programmatic guidance, tools and frameworks, and facilitate peer learning between countries and organisations • Maintain and strengthen synergies between transnational networks and forums for ECEC, including those that are currently managed by the European Commission, the OECD, and the Council of Europe. • Facilitate cross-country learning and sharing of good practices, to strengthen ECEC systems aligned with the wider goal of meeting the updated Barcelona targets.

Recommendation	Cycle 2 dimensions
b) **Gather further evidence and enable data sharing** among Member States and Moldova to understand the trajectories of Ukrainian refugee children and families, and their engagement with and experiences of ECEC services while on the move	• Initiate further research and timely data sharing between Member States and Moldova to understand the lived experiences of displacement, the agency exercised by Ukrainian families, and host-state responses and data sharing arrangements to target families and young children on the move. • Leverage existing and emerging data collection and sharing arrangements to monitor and assess progress against the updated Barcelona Targets for participation in ECEC by children below the age of three, and by children between the ages of three and the starting age of compulsory primary education.
c) **Map the diverse portfolios of learning completed by displaced young Ukrainian children** within host countries, and prepare for future re-integration to Ukrainian education systems	• Support Member States to ensure that ECEC settings and professionals are equipped with the skills and tools to first support the early learning and development of young Ukrainian children, and to equally document the education that has taken place and to facilitate the transfer of learning and child development records. • Support Member States to in their efforts to ensure that ECEC professionals can facilitate opportunities for learning and development to ensure young children can develop to their full potential.

Next steps

The study will conclude with the drafting a number of outputs for dissemination, drawing on the wealth of material collected through the country research. This will include two policy briefs and a compendium of good practice examples from across the EU27 and Moldova. Publication of these outputs is anticipated in summer 2023.

All publications from the study will be made accessible on the dedicated web page, which can be viewed at the link below:

https://www.ecorys.com/moldova/our-work/monitoring-provision-early-childhood-and-care-ecec-services-ukrainian-refugee

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