

# From vulnerabilities to opportunities

A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR UKRAINIAN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Report

# Summary

In this report the Advisory Council on Migration highlights the specific situation of Ukrainian children and young people in the Netherlands. At the end of 2023 more than 100,000 displaced people from Ukraine were living in the Netherlands. Nearly 21,000 of them were aged between 4 and 18. Many of them have been living in temporary reception centers for more than two years. All of them are uncertain about their future.

This uncertainty is affecting three key areas of their life. In terms of **reception and living conditions**, many children and young people grow up in large-scale, temporary reception centers with little privacy and limited space to play or interact. The fact that they regularly move house causes disruption to their school attendance, social contacts and access to care.

In terms of **education**, Ukrainian young people experience problems due to language delays, a lack of motivation and limited opportunities for progression. International transition classes (*Internationale Schakelklassen*, ISK) only last for a maximum of two years and, for many young people, this is proving to be too short for them to learn Dutch to a satisfactory level. Furthermore, the high costs and the lack of study financing for college and university are an additional barrier.

There are also serious concerns in relation to **mental health and well-being**. The prolonged uncertainty about their residence status and worries about family members left behind lead to stress, anxiety and gloom. Specific, culturally sensitive youth services are scarce and mental health issues are not always recognized on time.

The Advisory Council therefore wishes to make four recommendations.

## 1. Provide clarity on the right to remain

The ongoing uncertainty about the residence status of displaced people from Ukraine is having a paralyzing effect on children, young people and their parents. The Advisory Council is calling on the central government to provide clarity on the future right of residence of this group in the short term, for example through a national fallback option if a European solution is not forthcoming. There also needs to be a specific focus on the interests of children and young people, as required by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## 2. Create more stable and more child-friendly reception and living conditions

It is essential that children and young people move house as little as possible because that will give them the peace of mind, security and space they need. Municipalities are urged to design reception centers which meet the needs of growing children more effectively by providing sufficient privacy, accessible play areas and social activities that contribute to their well-being.

## 3. Provide educational opportunities and access to (affordable) further education

Education is crucial for the future of young people, whether in the Netherlands or Ukraine. The Advisory Council recommends that steps be taken to safeguard educational continuity by being more flexible when it comes to the duration of international transition class pathways and by

removing barriers to further education (senior secondary vocational education (MBO), higher professional education (HBO) and university education (WO)). Among other things this means ensuring equal access to affordable education and financial support which is similar to that provided to other young people in the Netherlands.

#### **4. Enhance the level of culturally sensitive mental support**

Ukrainian children and young people are exposed to considerable psychological pressure. We therefore have to invest in accessible, culturally sensitive youth services. This means that the qualifications of Ukrainian healthcare professionals need to be accredited more quickly and the number of Ukrainian and Russian-speaking youth care providers needs to be actively increased.

It is important to invest in this group not only for their well-being and future prospects, but also for Dutch society and the reconstruction of Ukraine. The Netherlands has a clear responsibility in this respect under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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Anastasia

## Chapter 1

# Invest in future prospects

## 1.1 Children and young people on the run

Children and young people make up a significant portion of the total number of asylum applications in the Netherlands. Every year, ten to fifteen thousand children flee to the Netherlands with their parents in search of protection. In addition, several thousand children arrive in the Netherlands alone each year (who are also referred to as 'unaccompanied minors' (*alleenstaande minderjarige vreemdelingen*, amv's)). Over the past five years one in four people was a minor at the time of the initial asylum application, and no fewer than half of family reunification applicants were under 18.<sup>1</sup> Childhood and adolescence is a vulnerable stage in life. A young person's experiences during this phase form the basis for their further development. A healthy start in a safe environment is therefore key to becoming a resilient adult. This applies not only to these children and young people themselves, but is also important for society as a whole, now and in the future.

This report focuses on a specific group who have fled to the Netherlands, namely Ukrainian children and young people. At the end of 2023 almost 100,000 displaced people from Ukraine were resident in the Netherlands, of whom nearly 21,000 were aged between 4 and 18.<sup>2</sup> These children and young people are in the process of developing into adulthood while also carrying with them their experiences of war and trauma. In addition to that they are also facing uncertainty in various different aspects of their life in the Netherlands.

The Advisory Council on Migration first highlights the importance of child-friendly living conditions, stable housing and appropriate education for the healthy development and future prospects of these children and young people. Additional attention also needs to be paid to the welfare and well-being of this group because these may be affected by their experiences and the uncertainty surrounding their future. In this report the insights from the (limited) existing research literature are supplemented with information from experts in the fields of children's rights, education, psychosocial support, Ukrainian diaspora, and migration and participation.<sup>3</sup> The Advisory Council wishes to stress the importance of structural solutions that protect this group's rights and development opportunities. This includes improvements which can be achieved in the short term, such as extending language pathways in education (international transition classes) and the provision of culturally sensitive mental support. Such measures can directly contribute to the well-being and future prospects of these young people. The Advisory Council wants this report to highlight the position of Ukrainian children and young people,

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Netherlands (CBS) StatLine (2025). <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/cijfers/detail/82045NED>.

<sup>2</sup> CBS (2024). [Well over 1 in 3 young Ukrainians who have fled to the Netherlands are attending education](https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/85369NED/table?ts=1748514407798). In this report the Advisory Council on Migration focuses on children of 4 to 18 years of age. See explanation under heading 1.2.

<sup>3</sup> Information on the organizations that participated in the expert meeting on April 4, 2025 can be found in Annex 1.

from both the perspective of their vulnerabilities and the opportunities open to them.

## 1.2 The vulnerable position of Ukrainian children and young people in the Netherlands

Since Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, more than 3.5 million people have been displaced within Ukraine itself, and more than six million have fled to surrounding countries.<sup>4</sup> Of these, more than 123,000 were living in the Netherlands at the beginning of June 2025.<sup>5</sup>

Ukrainians who have fled to EU countries are covered by the European Temporary Protection Directive,<sup>6</sup> which the European Council of Ministers activated for the first time in March 2022. The idea was to prevent the asylum systems in EU Member States from becoming bogged down by a large volume of asylum applications.<sup>7</sup> This group therefore has a special legal status as 'displaced persons'. This means that – unlike (other) asylum seekers – they are immediately allowed to work, that the municipalities rather than the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (*Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers*, COA) are responsible for their reception, that they do not have to report weekly, are free to travel back and forth to Ukraine and receive a higher financial allowance.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the group's displacement status means that their future in the Netherlands is shrouded in uncertainty. Although the term of the Temporary Protection Directive was, in principle, one year and provided for a maximum protection total period of three years, it has since been extended until March 2026.<sup>9</sup> It is unclear what is going to happen after that. However, what is clear is that the war is continuing, the position of displaced people from Ukraine remains uncertain and, for several years now, they have had no prospect of a longer term stay in the Netherlands. In our [first report](#) (September 2022) we highlighted the need for a long-term vision for the asylum support offered to, and legal status of, displaced people from Ukraine, given the ongoing uncertainty about how long the war was going to last.

In our [second report](#) (July 2023) we highlighted the risks facing displaced people from Ukraine who are in a long-term temporary situation, such as psychological pressure, lack of perspective and legal vulnerability. These risks particularly affect children and young adults because of the crucial developmental stage they are in.

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<sup>4</sup> UNHCR (2025). [Ukraine: three years of war](#).

<sup>5</sup> Central government (n.d.), [Figures on the number of Ukrainians residing in the Netherlands](#).

<sup>6</sup> EU Directive 2001/55/EC.

<sup>7</sup> Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of March 4, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed explanation, please refer to Advisory Council on Migration (2023), [De prijs van tijdelijkheid. Perspectief voor Oekraïense ontheemden in Nederland \(The price of a temporary situation. Future prospects for displaced people from Ukraine in the Netherlands\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> On June 4, 2025 the European Commission proposed extending the Temporary Protection Directive until March 2027 and European Justice and Interior ministers have agreed. [Voorstel verlenging Richtlijn tijdelijke bescherming tot en met 4 maart 2027 voor vluchtelingen uit Oekraïne \(Proposal to extend the Temporary Protection Directive until March 4, 2027 for refugees from Ukraine\) | News item | Rijksoverheid.nl](#).

Just like refugee children of other nationalities, Ukrainian children and young people are in a vulnerable and insecure position. The Advisory Council deliberately focuses on the specific situation of Ukrainian children and young people in this report, which follows on from the two previous reports we published on displaced people from Ukraine.

Ukrainian children and young people are in a precarious position for a number of reasons:

### **1. Temporary protection and an uncertain future**

The Temporary Protection Directive is repeatedly being extended, with no clear end point or perspective. Such an uncertain temporary situation has major implications for young people, who are in a crucial phase of their lives. For them it means delaying choices, frustration in the context of education and being overlooked in policy. What began as an emergency arrangement is threatening to grow into a system in which young people become trapped. While the protection of their rights seems solid on paper, in practice the risk of becoming disadvantaged is growing, from a social, psychological and legal perspective.

### **2. The majority of children live in single-parent households**

The children and young people we are focusing on in this report live primarily with their mothers.<sup>10</sup> This is because they came to the Netherlands with their mothers, while their fathers stayed behind in Ukraine. On top of that, a large number of these mothers are working. Because the Dutch school system offers relatively few contact hours and many Ukrainian children and young people do not (yet) participate in social activities and sports outside the school environment, they are generally left to their own devices.

### **3. The conflict in Ukraine is geographically and emotionally 'close by'**

Unlike many other conflict situations, displaced people from Ukraine are allowed to travel back and forth to their country of origin. Moreover, young people attend online classes via their schools in Ukraine, in parallel with the education they are receiving in the Netherlands. The result is that they have one foot in the Netherlands and the other in Ukraine. For teenage boys, that connection can be complex. If they travel to Ukraine and turn 18, they will not be allowed to leave the country.<sup>11</sup> From the age of 17 they are required to register for military service and, in practice, it is then difficult to leave. As a result of this, large numbers of boys leave Ukraine as early as at sixteen years old. However, in order to continue their further education they have to be physically present in Ukraine to take the exams, while girls have the option of taking them remotely. Consequently, the war continues to pervade the lives of Ukrainian young people even in the Netherlands,

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<sup>10</sup> Research and Data Centre (WODC) 2024. [Memorandum 2024-1: Tijdelijk thuis? De positie van Oekraïense vluchtelingen in Nederland](#). The Hague: WODC.

<sup>11</sup> From the age of 25, the young people in question run the risk of being called up for military service.

not only via the news, family and social media, but also through the education system.<sup>12</sup>

This report deals with both children of elementary school age (ages 4 to 12) and young people of high school age (ages 12 to 18). The Advisory Council on Migration chose to focus on underage children because it is precisely this stage in life which is so crucial, including for opportunities in later life in all kinds of areas. Education, parents, friends and social networks determine how these young people are shaped and what their future prospects look like, particularly in the phase of their lives before they reach the age of 18. Investing in this phase of life means investing in the future and laying a solid foundation for it. This applies to all children and young people, but is also important for the group we are currently focusing on here, regardless of where they will be in their adult lives, be that in the Netherlands, Ukraine or elsewhere. Investing in these young people is important for them as individuals, their families and Dutch society. Although some will remain in the Netherlands, others will eventually return to Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> They will play an important role in rebuilding their country. The Netherlands has an interest in a safe, stable, democratic and prosperous Ukraine and therefore in investing in its future teachers, construction workers, nurses, journalists, engineers and government leaders. Investing in these groups will also help to foster good relations between the two countries, which will be positive for (future) international relations.

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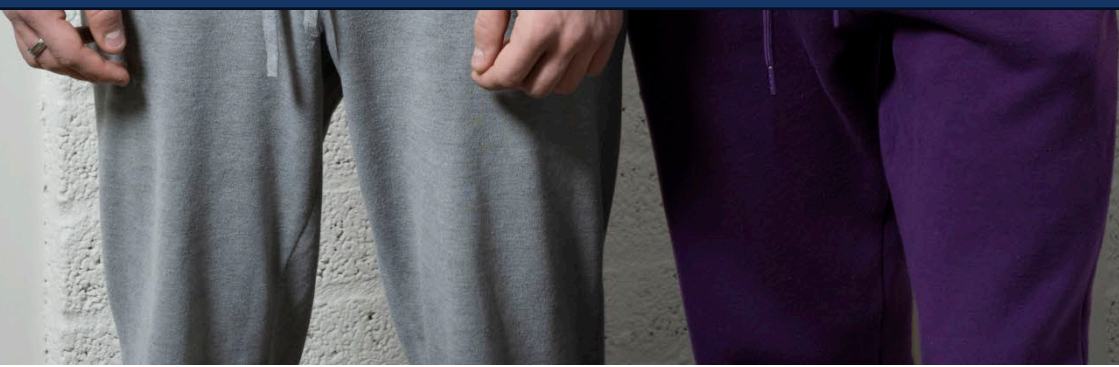
<sup>12</sup> Information from the Center for Psychosocial Help for Displaced Ukrainians (*Loket Ontheemden Oekraïne Psychosociale hulp*, LOOP) shows that many young people, especially boys, regularly view images from the front via social media. This is detrimental to their mental well-being.

<sup>13</sup> Research on the return intentions of Ukrainian women in eight different countries hosting displaced people from Ukraine shows that the intention to return was lowest in the Netherlands and Germany, while return intentions were highest in Romania and Moldova. The countries surveyed were Poland, Germany, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Italy, Romania, Hungary and Moldova. Van Tubergen, F., Wachter, G.G., Kosyakova, Y. & Kogan, I. (2024). [Return intentions among Ukrainian refugees in Europe: A Cross-National Study](#). *International Migration* 62: 181–198.



## Chapter 2

# Vulnerabilities during life and the transition to adulthood



Ukrainian children and young people experience problems in various areas, for example housing, education and welfare. These problems are not isolated issues, but instead have a mutually exacerbating effect. An unstable living situation can make it difficult for them to relax or perform well in school. Mental stresses caused by loss, trauma, or prolonged uncertainty about how long they can stay can affect their motivation and ability to learn. Conversely, frustration with the education system, for example because the recommendation regarding the choice of secondary school places them at a lower level of education than they would actually be able to achieve if they were given the chance to fulfill their true potential, language delays, or a lack of prospects for further education, can put pressure on the psychological well-being of children and young people.

These vulnerabilities arise at a stage when young people (regardless of origin) actually need stability and support to progress into adulthood.<sup>14</sup> This reality also takes place within a legal framework that offers insufficient protection, given that although the Temporary Protection Directive offers children and young people reception and basic rights in the here and now, it does not guarantee a stable future.

#### **Sofiia (18)<sup>15</sup> - Resilient, but tired of waiting**

Sofiia fled Kyiv soon after the invasion, along with her mother and younger brother. After a period of time spent at an asylum hotel, she now lives in a reception center in a suburb of The Hague. Although she generally perceives the Netherlands as safe, the uncertainty of her situation bothers her. The lack of her own space – she shares a room with her mother – sometimes makes her feel trapped, especially as she gets older and wants more autonomy. Sofiia works full-time in a factory and is also trying to learn Dutch through a tutor. At one point she started attending international transition classes\*, but became demotivated due to the lack of connection with her previous school level in Ukraine.

She would like to do a course at senior secondary vocational education (MBO) level, but her language proficiency is not yet up to the required standard. In addition to this, she sometimes feels lost in the system. There is no clear pathway for young people who have finished compulsory education, but then cannot gain automatic access to further education. From a psychological perspective she often feels tired. She calls it a kind of 'bored depression' – the feeling that she wants to build her future, but does not know how to. Conversations with friends, hiking and listening to music help her cope with

<sup>14</sup> Carr, D. (2019). [Early-Life Influences on Later Life Well-Being: Innovations and Explorations](#). *J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci*. 74(5):829-831. Arpino, B., Gumà, J., & Julià, A. (2018). [Early-life conditions and health at older ages: The mediating role of educational attainment, family and employment trajectories](#). *PLoS one*, 13(4); Parvin, M. R., Johra, F. T., Akter, F., Wahiduzzaman, M., Akter, K., Das, M., Mondal, S., Debnath, M., Ullah, M., & Rony, M. K. K. (2024). [The long-term effects of childhood circumstances on older individuals: A systematic review](#). *Aging medicine (Milton (N.S.W))*, 7(2), 239–251.; Liefbroer, A.C., Zoutewelle-Terovan, M. (2021). [Social Background and Adult Socio-Demographic Outcomes in a Cross-National Comparative Perspective: An Introduction](#). In: Liefbroer, A.C., Zoutewelle-Terovan, M. (eds) *Social Background and the Demographic Life Course: Cross-National Comparisons*. Springer, Cham.; Simsek, M., Costa, R., De Valk, H.A.G. (2021). [Childhood residential mobility and health outcomes: A meta-analysis](#). *Health and Place* 71(102650): 1-12.

<sup>15</sup> The case descriptions are based on research by Schuddebeurs and Rusinovic (2025) of Ukrainian young people in The Hague (The Hague University of Applied Sciences in collaboration with the municipality of The Hague).

those feelings. She would like to get psychological assistance, especially for her overburdened mother, but access to it is difficult and fragmented.

What typifies Sofiia is her resilience, given that she is continuing to work, helps around the house and is socially active. The problem is that she is running out of steam and the lack of anything permanent is really starting to bother her. She feels young, but circumstances have quickly turned her into an adult. Her greatest wish is to have a room of her own, a clear study pathway ahead of her and someone to help her take the right steps.

*\* Most newcomers aged 12 to 18 who come to the Netherlands initially receive lessons in international transition classes (Internationale Schakelklassen or ISK's) where the focus is on helping them to learn Dutch.*

## 2.1 Living in emergency accommodation

Of the more than 123,000 displaced people from Ukraine in the Netherlands, more than 95,000 live in municipal reception centers.<sup>16</sup> The people who live there typically have little privacy and, in some cases, no cooking and laundry facilities of their own. On top of that most of these were, in recent years, temporary reception centers because municipalities were unable to conclude longer-term real estate contracts. The reason for this is that central government funding for housing is always linked to the term of temporary protection. One consequence of this is that large numbers of displaced people from Ukraine have had to move regularly in recent years.<sup>17</sup> Being forced to relocate not only causes a lot of stress and turmoil, but also interrupts the provision of education, care and assistance. The Health and Youth Care Inspectorate (2025) highlighted the fact that the continuity of supervision and support is being compromised as a result.<sup>18</sup>

Children growing up in precarious or temporary living conditions experience additional stress which can have long-lasting effects, particularly if they have to relocate frequently and find themselves in vulnerable circumstances in various areas for a long period of time.<sup>19</sup> This directly affects their well-being and ability to concentrate in school, or establish social relationships, and can also have a negative effect on their social and emotional development.

*"The accommodation provided is emergency accommodation. It meets some minimum requirements, but certainly not when it comes to privacy and sometimes security as well, nor as a place for people to relax. There's a mismatch between wishes of parents and children. (...) This creates friction."*

<sup>16</sup> Central government (n.d.), [Cijfers opvang vluchtelingen uit Oekraïne in Nederland. \(Figures on the number of Ukrainians residing in the Netherlands\).](#)

<sup>17</sup> Advisory Council On Migration (2023). [De prijs van tijdelijkheid. Perspectief voor Oekraïense ontheemden in Nederland \(The price of a temporary situation. Future prospects for displaced people from Ukraine in the Netherlands\).](#)

<sup>18</sup> Health and Youth Care Inspectorate (2025). [Uitkomsten toezicht asielopvang 2024. Het risico op blijvende gezondheidsschade vereist nu verbetering voor de meest kwetsbare asielzoekers. \(Outcomes of the survey of asylum support 2024. The risk of permanent damage to people's health now requires improvements for the most vulnerable asylum seekers\).](#)

<sup>19</sup> De Valk, H. (2024). [De invloed van verhuizen op jonge kinderen. \(The impact of moving house on young children.\) Demos 40\(10\).](#)

- LOOP Project Lead<sup>20</sup>

Although municipalities generally try to set up reception centers in a child-friendly way with, for example, a child-friendly space, this does not always prove to be enough in practice.<sup>21</sup>

*"The spaces where children play are sometimes secured with double locks, with no one being allowed access unless an adult is present. The set up is extremely restrictive. Although there are a lot of centers where things are going well, the right facilities are often not provided as a matter of course."*

- LOOP Project Lead

*"Just because a child-friendly space is available does not mean a center is child-friendly. For example, I have noticed that some child friendly spaces are only open on Saturday afternoons."*

- UNICEF children's rights specialist

Moreover, the reception set-up does not take adequate account of the specific needs of children and young people. They are often approached from a policy perspective as being part of an adult asylum population, meaning that insufficient attention is paid to their rights and needs. For example, young people are often unaware of complaints procedures, or these procedures cannot be used by children.<sup>22</sup> Another problem is that many reception centers have no confidential advisor or child support officer. Whether children are protected depends on the individual efforts of municipalities or implementing bodies, so there is no guarantee. Organizations such as Defence for Children note that at many reception centers there are no established contact people who are experts in child safety or youth participation.<sup>23</sup> This makes it difficult to intervene promptly and appropriately when there are concerns about well-being or safety, especially when it comes to young people who do not want to report anything of their own accord.

There is therefore an urgent need for policy to be implemented in a child-friendly way within the asylum reception system, so that there is space for participation,

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<sup>20</sup> The Center for Psychosocial Help for Displaced Ukrainians (*Loket Ontheemden Oekraïne Psychosociale hulp, LOOP*) is a sparring partner for anyone working with and for displaced persons from Ukraine that helps identify, prevent and/or resolve psychosocial problems.

<sup>21</sup> Research on children's favorite places in family reception centers has revealed that children prefer places where there is room to play together, in an aesthetically pleasing, protected and happy atmosphere, where there is a sense of safety and security. The specific needs of children are often not taken into account when designing family reception centers. Peters, E., Teerds, H., Van Den Bogerd, N. (2025) *Understanding shelters as children's places: an analysis of the favourite places of 4–12 year olds*.

<sup>22</sup> In his [letter](#) of April 2025 to the municipalities, the National Ombudsman reported seeing a sharp increase in complaints from residents of Ukraine reception centers. The complaints procedure appears to be unclear to residents and they fear they would suffer repercussions if they were to complain. The municipal authorities sometimes do not know how to deal with complaints. The ombudsman has therefore provided municipalities with a [guide](#) with tips on how to deal with complaints properly.

<sup>23</sup> Defence for Children (2022). *Oekraïense kinderen, zijn ze in beeld? (Ukrainian children, are they in the picture?)*. Another study into the quality of the reception centers was carried out by AEF (2024). *Onderzoek naar de kwaliteit van gemeentelijke opvang voor ontheemden uit Oekraïne. (Study on the quality of municipal asylum support for displaced persons from Ukraine)*.

customization, play (together), free time and protection.<sup>24</sup> Material facilities, stable and long-term accommodation and psychological support help to improve mental health outcomes among refugee(s) (children).<sup>25</sup>

## 2.2 The lack of suitable education opportunities

A good education is important for all young people and affects the entire course of their lives.<sup>26</sup> Ukrainian students in the Netherlands initially attended international transition classes or regular education, and in some cases temporary educational facilities (*tijdelijke onderwijsvoorzieningen*, TOV's). These temporary educational facilities allowed schools to apply educational rules and regulations more flexibly. For example, they were allowed to employ teachers who were not fully qualified and offer classes in Ukrainian and remote lessons. These measures ensured that the majority of Ukrainian children in the Netherlands had access to education.<sup>27</sup>

Since the temporary educational facilities were discontinued at the end of the 2023-2024 school year, education professionals and support organizations such as the National Support Network for Newcomers (*Landelijk Ondersteuningsnetwerk voor Nieuwkomers*, LOWAN)<sup>28</sup> have identified several bottlenecks relating to the linking and progression of Ukrainian students to other forms of education. A substantial group still appears to have an insufficient command of Dutch to participate in regular education that matches their learning potential. This can lead to a secondary school being recommended to them which places them at a lower level of education than they would actually be able to achieve if they were given the chance to fulfill their true potential, as well as excessive time spent in the international transition classes.

*"We are now in our third year with the Ukrainian group and we are paying for it ourselves. Almost all of the students who remain feel they are undervalued. [...] But I notice in my contacts with other international transition classes that they are struggling with the same things and there's nothing we can do. [...] The Ukrainian group is intelligent. They've had a good education. But one way or another they can't get down to learning. [...] They exhibit some extreme behavior, there are frequent arguments, problems relating to motivation, depression, a lack of any suitable further education opportunities and children who refuse to learn Dutch. In the case of this particular group of children, we no longer have any idea how to help them progress. The ones who are almost 18 are actually deregistering and disappearing from view. That's what two of them did just yesterday."*

- Teacher and counsellor at the Pontem College for International Transition Education (international transition classes)

<sup>24</sup> Peters, E., Teerds, H., Van Den Bogerd, N. (2025) [Understanding shelters as children's places: an analysis of the favourite places of 4-12 year olds](#).

<sup>25</sup> Porter, M. and Haslam, N. (2005). [Predisplacement and Postdisplacement Factors Associated with Mental Health of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: A Meta-Analysis](#). *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 294, 602-612.

<sup>26</sup> Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that children have the right to education.

<sup>27</sup> SEO Amsterdam Economics, CAOP/Sardes, Pharos, HOBEON (2024). [Een goede start voor Oekraïners? \(A good start for Ukrainians?\)](#) Commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (*Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap*, OCW)

<sup>28</sup> LOWAN (2024). [Doorstroom Oekraïense leerlingen. \(Progression of Ukrainian students to other forms of education.\)](#)

In principle, children are only supposed to attend international transition education for a maximum of two years.<sup>29</sup> As the above quote shows, schools sometimes self-fund an extra year of international transition classes, even though the education provided is not designed for this in terms of content and organization. It would appear that the reported motivation-related problems can be partly explained by uncertainty about the future or the expectation of being able to return to Ukraine. In such cases young people question what the point is of learning Dutch or adapting to an education system that they may (soon) leave anyway. This attitude is strikingly different from other newcomer groups.<sup>30</sup>

*"Many students think: we're going back to Ukraine or another country to study anyway so what's the point?"*

- Teacher and counsellor at the Pontem College for International Transition Education

Numerous young people attend (online) education in Ukraine. The result is that they have one foot in the Netherlands and the other in Ukraine.<sup>31</sup>

There are also problems relating to students progressing to further education. Higher education (at a university (of applied sciences)) is beyond the reach of most Ukrainian young people because they are not entitled to study financing and have to pay the institutional tuition fees charged to non-EU students. That amount is significantly higher than regular tuition fees, often amounting to more than 10,000 euros per year.<sup>32</sup> For some of the students, studying a secondary vocational education (mbo) course at a regional training center (*regionaal opleidingscentrum, roc*) is an attractive alternative to studying at a university (of applied sciences college) because of its affordability. However, secondary vocational education institutions also have language proficiency requirements. Earlier on in this document we described the level of complexity, especially for boys, that is involved in pursuing further education at a Ukrainian school. This situation causes a great deal of stress among young people.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Those who cannot read or write attend for three years.

<sup>30</sup> Expert meeting 4 April 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Expert meeting 4 April 2025.

<sup>32</sup> The statutory tuition fee in the 2024-2025 academic year is € 2,530. Displaced people from Ukraine IDPs fall into the category of non-EEA students and have to pay institutional tuition fees. The exact amount varies depending on the institution, but it is usually at least €10,000 per year.

<sup>33</sup> Expert meeting 4 April 2025. The expectation is that the National Fallback Option will partially address this inequality problem. The Temporary Protection Directive has been extended to March 2026 and is [expected to be](#) extended until March 2027. The government does not expect the conflict to end in the near future. The Netherlands is committed to a harmonized European approach to returns and residence after the Temporary Protection Directive has come to an end. A national fallback option is being developed because the government is assuming a scenario whereby the temporary protection is not extended, or no decision is taken at EU level regarding an alternative solution.

### **Maksym (16) - ambitious, but trapped in a system that is failing to keep up with him**

Maksym came to the Netherlands with his mother and sister from the Denipro area when he was aged fourteen. After having to relocate several times, he now lives in a municipal reception center. Maksym is an exceptionally bright student who is completing his Ukrainian education online as well as attending classes at a Dutch secondary school. Despite this, he says he is bored to death. Dutch education is too slow for him, and his command of Dutch is improving rapidly – faster than the system can handle. He wants to continue his education but feels stuck. It is impossible to speed up the process and, if he wants to go to university, he will have to pay the substantial international tuition fees. His mother does not have that kind of money, despite working long hours as a cleaner.

What frustrates him most is that, despite working and being highly motivated, his family is unable to acquire their own home. They want to rent, but landlords constantly reject them. “Although we are allowed to stay here, we’re not allowed to make something of our lives,” he explains. The uncertainty about their residence status hangs over the family like a dark cloud. Despite that, Maksym continues to dream about studying at university and contributing to society. His biggest concern is that he will have to abandon his ambitions, not because of a lack of ability, but because he is being held back by the system.

## **2.3 Living with mental health issues**

Large numbers of children and young people are experiencing psychological stress due to the prolonged uncertainty surrounding how long they are able to stay in the Netherlands and the fate of their relatives in Ukraine. This stress may manifest itself as problems with sleeping, decreased concentration, feelings of gloom, anxiety or panic, alcohol and (soft) drug consumption and a disturbed self-image.

Although there is little specific research on the mental well-being of Ukrainian children, a report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2023), which is based on a sample of Ukrainian children between the ages of 12 and 15 in 10 European countries, paints a worrying picture.<sup>34</sup> Half of the young people reported that they have difficulty sleeping, experience concentration problems, lack self-confidence, or feel vulnerable. Four out of ten young people said they suffer from depression, anxiety, or panic attacks. Only a quarter claimed not to experience any problems at all. These findings are consistent with studies showing that war refugees are at increased long-term risk of developing depression and anxiety disorders.<sup>35</sup>

Research by the Research and Data Centre (WODC) (2024) shows that 45% of displaced people from Ukraine who are in the Netherlands report experiencing

<sup>34</sup> EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2023). [Fleeing Ukraine. Displaced people's experiences in the EU](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. This study was conducted in countries that border Ukraine (Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia), host the largest numbers of displaced people from Ukraine (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, Italy), or host the largest number of displaced people from Ukraine relative to their own population (Estonia).

<sup>35</sup> Bogic, M., Njoku, A. & Priebe, S. (2015). [Long-term mental health of war-refugees: a systematic literature review](#). BMC Int Health Hum Rights 15, 29 (2015).

mental health issues, compared to 14% of the general Dutch population and 39% of Syrian refugees. The proximity of Ukraine, both geographically and emotionally, may play a role because displaced people from Ukraine are allowed to travel back and forth to their country of origin, for example to see their partner or father for a while. This ability to travel backwards and forwards presents an additional difficulty for teenage boys because they are not officially allowed to leave Ukraine from the age of eighteen, and therefore often leave the country for good when aged sixteen.<sup>36</sup>

*"We see that children who do travel back to Ukraine are often re-traumatized, especially when exposed to intense bombing. Visiting their father may exacerbate existing mental health issues or cause new ones. As a consequence we see a marked increase in requests for help after the summer vacations, often after they have visited Ukraine to see their fathers. In other conflict situations, people usually do not return to the conflict area and that makes this situation quite unique."*

- Opora Foundation Director<sup>37</sup>

These findings underscore the importance of providing adequate psychological support to Ukrainian children and young people before it is too late, in order to prevent any exacerbation of symptoms and limit long-term effects. The problem is that access to appropriate, culturally sensitive mental healthcare in the Netherlands is limited in general and consequently also for Ukrainian children and young people.

*"With regard to mental health it is difficult to access youth care or Youth and Family Centers because of language and cultural barriers. We need Ukrainian professionals who can help us with this. Not just an interpreter but someone who knows what social work, youth care and youth psychology mean."*

- LOOP Project Manager

There is a shortage of Ukrainian or Russian-speaking psychologists, therapists and social workers. As a result, traumas regularly go unrecognized and/or are treated inadequately. This leads to misunderstood behavior, escalating emotions and psychological distress among young people. Tensions can also rise within families as a result of long-term separation from family members. Fathers tend to stay behind in Ukraine, while mothers often work long hours in the Netherlands. Mothers have unintentionally become single-parent families and this is putting pressure on the family structure.<sup>38</sup> Parents do not use child care enough, partly because they distrust official bodies and partly because of the waiting lists. In some cases children are left on their own at reception centers while their parents are at work.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See clarification in section 1.2.

<sup>37</sup> The [Opora Foundation](#) was established in 2022 by academics and consultants in response to the arrival of displaced people from Ukraine in the Netherlands. Their mission is to promote science-based structural solutions to complex problems.

<sup>38</sup> Expert meeting 4 April 2025.

<sup>39</sup> Information from Het LOOP.

*"At school we know that mothers work a lot and that fathers are fighting or have been killed. The influence of us – myself as a counselor, teacher, a sort of substitute father, benevolent uncle – is important, but we lack father figures to close the net. Mothers are solely responsible for financial stability and sometimes work in factories until late at night."* - Teacher and counsellor at the Pontem College for International Transition Education

Problems are also caused by parents sometimes being unable to connect with or get through to their children. Disagreements arise about staying in the Netherlands and the future, as well as clashes due to differences in Dutch and Ukrainian parenting cultures. Parents make only limited use of the (culturally sensitive) parenting support on offer.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Information from Het LOOP. According to [research](#) by the WODC (2024), approximately 10% of displaced people from Ukraine in municipal reception centers receive support with raising and/or caring for their children.



Karolina en David

### Chapter 3

# Offer prospects for the future, stability and continuity

### 3.1 The obligations towards children and young people from Ukraine

The ongoing uncertainty about their residence status, the instability of reception and educational facilities and the limited access to mental healthcare together represent a systematic threat to the well-being of Ukraine's children and young people. The effects can continue well into adulthood. Children and young people who do not have a solid foundation in life are more likely to drop out of education and this, in turn, increases the risks of an unsuccessful transition to work, as well as health problems and poor social inclusion.<sup>41</sup>

The Dutch authorities at national and local level have offered a warm welcome to displaced people from Ukraine. However, as long as their legal status remains temporary and uncertain, the situation will be at odds with the rights and obligations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).<sup>42</sup> This convention, which is also binding for the Netherlands, establishes a number of children's rights. What is important in this context are the rights of children to education, development, an adequate standard of living, the highest attainable standard of health and access to a place where they can relax and engage in leisure pursuits.<sup>43</sup> These rights apply to all children under Dutch jurisdiction.<sup>44</sup> In practice, however, problems exist in all these areas. Moreover, under the UNCRC, the Netherlands has a duty to help children who are victims of armed conflict, neglect, abuse or exploitation to recover and reintegrate.<sup>45</sup> Ukrainian children and young people – as people who have been displaced due to war – explicitly belong to this category. The reported lack of (accessibility to) structural psychosocial support is therefore in violation of this obligation. Article 3 of the UNCRC states 'In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration'. That means not only protecting against acute danger, but also creating conditions for healthy, dignified growth and development.

<sup>41</sup> Henkens, J. H. D. (2025). *It moves you: The relationship between adolescent residential mobility and wellbeing*. PhD thesis University of Groningen; Liefbroer, A.C., Zoutewelle-Terovan, M. (2021). *Social Background and Adult Socio-Demographic Outcomes in a Cross-National Comparative Perspective: An Introduction*. In: Liefbroer, A.C., Zoutewelle-Terovan, M. (eds) *Social Background and the Demographic Life Course: Cross-National Comparisons*. Springer, Cham.; Kuyvenhoven, J. (2024). *When moving matters: Unpacking patterns and consequences of childhood residential mobility*. PhD thesis University of Groningen.

<sup>42</sup> Reference is made to Articles 28, 6, 27, 24, 39 and 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, also known as the UNCRC.

<sup>43</sup> Reference is made to Articles 28, 6, 27, 24 and 31 of the UNCRC.

<sup>44</sup> The rights of the child are also included in Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union which states 'Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being. They may express their views freely. Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity.' and 'In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration.' The Charter becomes legally binding as soon as EU Member States implement EU law, such as the Temporary Protection Directive.

<sup>45</sup> This right is enshrined in Article 39 of the UNCRC.

A continuing situation in which thousands of children grow up in temporary care without any prospects for the future, or structural support in crucial areas of life, is highly undesirable for these children and young people themselves. Not only that, it is also legally problematic and unwise from a social point of view. It is essential for Dutch society to invest in this group of children and young people and to invest in the first phase of their lives so that they can grow up to be healthy and resilient adults. Even if they eventually return to Ukraine, this investment is still essential, given the importance of a successful reconstruction of Ukraine and good future relations between the two countries.

## 3.2 Recommendations

As the Advisory Council on Migration already noted in its 2023 report, displaced people from Ukraine are paying a high price for the temporary nature of the situation.<sup>46</sup> That is why they need prospects for the future and clarity rather than temporality. It is important that displaced people know where they stand after the temporary protection arrangement expires in March 2026 so they can continue to make plans.

In order to offer Ukrainian children and young people in the Netherlands some hope for the future – both during their time in the Netherlands and in the event that they return to Ukraine – it is essential that more attention is paid to their development, well-being and rights, despite the temporary nature of their legal residence status, which should not be a reason to limit their rights or opportunities. The Advisory Council on Migration therefore wishes to make the following recommendations in order to offer hope for the future and to improve the position of Ukrainian children and young people:

### 1. Provide clarity on the right to remain

It is important that **the State** pushes ahead with the national fallback option, or the measures that are going to apply for a longer period of time once the Temporary Protection Directive has expired. It is preferable and it is also the commitment of the Netherlands to coordinate measures in a European context, in order to prevent secondary migration wherever possible. However, various Member States are already drawing up plans for national schemes.<sup>47</sup> It is therefore advisable to take these plans into account when developing national regulations.

The Advisory Council on Migration is therefore in favor of the national fallback option explicitly including information on the implications for children and young people of the Temporary Protection Directive being discontinued. Every decision must visibly and demonstrably take account of the best interests of the child, as enshrined in Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>48</sup> This means that the impact of residence insecurity on their development, school career and

<sup>46</sup> Advisory Council On Migration (2023). [De prijs van tijdelijkheid. Perspectief voor Oekraïense ontheemden in Nederland \(The price of a temporary situation. Future prospects for displaced people from Ukraine in the Netherlands.\)](#)

<sup>47</sup> Joint letter on reception facilities for displaced people from Ukrainian, November 2024.

<sup>48</sup> The [children's rights review](#) by the Children's Ombudsman can provide guidance in this regard.

well-being must be carefully considered in the decision-making process in response to the ending of the Temporary Protection Directive. In addition, the information provided to children and young people must be clear and accessible (in their own language) so that they know what their rights and options are. If a clear, child-friendly scheme is in place when the temporary protection ends, this will prevent young people being left in limbo or out of the picture. If the State takes this recommendation on board it will not only be fulfilling its international obligations, but also investing in a generation that must be able to create a future for themselves, either in the Netherlands or in Ukraine.

## 2. Create more stable and more child-friendly reception and living conditions

A stable, child-friendly (living) environment is crucial for the development of children and adolescents. Setting up child-friendly reception centers, reducing the number of times they have to move house and improving access to sports, games and social activities will help them relax, build relationships and develop.

The **Ministry of Asylum and Migration** ought to create a situation in which the implementing parties do not have to keep moving children and young people from one reception center to another.<sup>49</sup> **Municipalities** should ensure that reception centers are child-oriented, with child-friendly spaces that have extended opening hours and can be guided in this endeavor by the Unicef checklist on how to provide child-friendly and safe support to Ukrainians.<sup>50</sup> When it comes to ensuring the safety of children and young people, **municipalities** should provide a confidential advisor who is specifically available to them and make sure that they know that this person exists.

## 3. Provide educational opportunities and access to (affordable) further education

In order to prevent young people from dropping out unnecessarily, or performing below their normal level, it is important that the education offered aligns more effectively with their needs. To achieve this, the international transition class (ISK) pathways need to be extended. The standard two-year period is sufficient for many children to move on to regular education. However, some of them need an additional year. Currently, the schools that provide this additional year do not receive any compensation. The **Ministry of Education, Culture and Science** should take this flexible cost item into account when budgeting so that schools can provide continuity of education.

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<sup>49</sup> See also the recommendation of the Health and Youth Care Inspectorate (2025). [Uitkomsten toezicht asielopvang 2024. Het risico op blijvende gezondheidsschade vereist nu verbetering voor de meest kwetsbare asielzoekers \(Outcomes of the survey of asylum support 2024. The risk of permanent damage to people's health now requires improvements for the most vulnerable asylum seekers.\)](#)

<sup>50</sup> See also the recommendations in the Defence for Children Quick Scan (2022). [Oekraïense kinderen, zijn ze in beeld? \(Ukrainian children, are they in the picture?\)](#) The UNICEF Netherlands [checklist](#) and these [guiding principles](#) provided by the Children in Working Group Child in AZC (*Werkgroep Kind in AZC*).

The **Ministry of Education, Culture and Science** should also provide access to affordable further education by subsidizing tuition fees, just as it does for people with asylum status or Dutch nationality. Currently, students have to pay the same amounts as for non-EU students.

These measures will promote educational achievement and are also expected to have a positive impact on young people's self-confidence.

#### **4. Enhance the level of culturally sensitive mental support**

There is an urgent need for Ukrainian-speaking social workers and more accessible, preventive mental health services, both for young people and families.

The **Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport** should make appropriate, culturally sensitive mental health services accessible to Ukrainian children and young people. When doing so it is essential that Ukrainian or Russian speaking psychologists, therapists and social workers are actively supported during the process of having their Ukrainian qualifications accredited. This will enable them to start working more quickly. Consideration could also be given to allowing these professionals to start work, possibly with some supervision in place, while their Ukrainian qualifications are being accredited. Furthermore, the possibilities of online assistance by Ukrainian professionals could be explored in more detail and facilitated by **Youth and Family Centers. Schools** (which offer international transition and regular education) should also have specific knowledge about recognizing and dealing with trauma. **Municipalities and employers** could offer guidance to people who have worked in the care sector in Ukraine when it comes to having their qualifications accredited, paying for additional training and finding suitable employment. At the same time it is important that **municipalities and healthcare and welfare institutions** hire Ukrainian-speaking health professionals who have the expertise to provide Ukrainian children and young people with the assistance they require. It is also important to introduce a national interpreting scheme for professionals who are able to provide mental health support to young people and children.



# Annexes

## **Annex 1. Participating organizations to the expert meeting April 4, 2025**

Defence for Children

The Hague University of Applied Sciences

Children's ombudsman/national ombudsman/veterans ombudsman

The Center for Psychosocial Help for Displaced Ukrainians (*Loket Ontheemden Oekraïne Psychosociale hulp, Het LOOP*)

The Ukrainian House in Rotterdam (*Oekraïens Huis Rotterdam*)

Opora Foundation

Pontem College for International Transition Education

UNICEF

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## **The Advisory Council on Migration**

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