

Children in Europe's Asylum System: Protection Gaps, Disappearances, and Human Rights Challenges

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Photo source: Children of Irak in a Refugee Camp, via Flickr, 2026.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Every year, people across the world are forced to leave their homes as a result of conflict, persecution, human rights abuses, political instability, environmental crises, and severe socioeconomic hardship. Many of these individuals turn to Europe in the hope of finding safety and international protection, making the region a key destination for those fleeing challenging circumstances. While the European Union (EU) has developed a comprehensive legal and policy framework to regulate asylum procedures and to safeguard the rights of asylum seekers, significant challenges remain in ensuring consistent protection across Member States. Reception conditions, access to services, guardianship systems, and child protection mechanisms vary considerably, often resulting in unequal experiences and outcomes for children seeking asylum. These disparities are particularly concerning for unaccompanied minors, who face heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking, mental health challenges, and disappearance.

This report examines the current state of asylum and migration in Europe, with a particular focus on children in asylum centres. It explores the legal and policy frameworks governing asylum procedures, the realities of reception conditions, and the vulnerabilities faced by child migrants and refugees. By analysing recent data, legal developments, and documented challenges across Europe, this report seeks to identify existing protection gaps and contribute to ongoing efforts to strengthen child-centred asylum policies.

It is essential not only to recognise the resilience of refugees and asylum seekers but also to reaffirm the responsibility of states and international actors to ensure that every child seeking protection is treated with dignity, safety, and respect for their fundamental rights.

2. ASYLUM IN EUROPE

This section will focus on the general asylum procedure in Europe. At first it will provide information about asylum centers in Europe, thereby addressing the different types of reception facilities. This is followed by an analysis of the general statistics about asylum in Europe, thereby showing a general decrease in asylum applications and protection statuses granted. After this, the most used pathways into Europe are illustrated, including the Western Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean, Western Balkan, Eastern and Western border route. The report will subsequently touch upon the push and pull factors for migration, which will show the main drivers of migration to Europe. Thereafter, this report will touch upon the living conditions in asylum centres, which differ among Member States, despite the EU wishing to have one harmonised approach. Finally this section addresses the disappearances of children in the asylum process by defining missing children within the asylum process and showing the complexities of this issue.

2.1. Understanding Asylum Centers

As stated in the introduction, an asylum seeker is a person that has left their country and is seeking protection from serious human rights violations or persecution in another country. An

asylum seeker is still not fully recognised as a refugee, and is waiting to receive a decision on their claim for asylum (Amnesty International, 2025). The procedure for asylum is often a long process in which asylum seekers can find themselves between uncertainty and hope. While waiting for a decision on their claim, asylum seekers are located in various reception centres in host countries. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2016), reception centres are designed to support asylum seekers in the process by giving them the services they need. The UNHRC (2016) also emphasises the need of establishing reception centres close to the border of the host country. Doing this will make the reception centres more accessible and improve their capacity to provide immediate assistance to asylum seekers. In practice, this is reflected in the so-called ‘hotspots’, located close-by the external border of Europe in countries such as Greece and Italy. These hotspots serve for initial reception, identification and registration of asylum seekers that often arrive into Europe by sea (FRA, n.d.). These are the first steps of the broader asylum procedure in which asylum applications are reviewed. Throughout this process, asylum applicants can be transferred to different asylum centres depending on the stage of the asylum procedure, and located in different host countries in the EU.

European states have not adopted a harmonised approach to the types of reception facilities that should be established within each Member State, leaving every country free to establish its own facilities, often depending on the stage of the procedure and the national willingness to arrange them. Facilities range from the so-called hotspots that are responsible for the initial reception of people (FRA, n.d.), to reception centres that are responsible for making sure that people leave Europe again. Member States of the EU are free to choose how they arrange the housing facilities of asylum seekers, as long as they comply with common EU standards. These include: having access to basic services, prioritising family unification, and taking the specific needs of individuals into account (European Union Agency for Asylum, n.d.-a). Adherence to these standards makes sure that every individual has equal access to asylum and is equally distributed among host states. In practice, housing arrangements differ depending on the stage of the asylum procedure, with asylum seekers being accommodated in various types of facilities, including transit centres, initial reception centres, and special facilitation centres.

This is reflected in the Dutch reception system, where asylum seekers first enter a central reception centre, responsible for their initial registration and the processing of their asylum application (Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers, n.d.). These reception centres are divided in two stations, one for adults and one for unaccompanied minors. At the start of the asylum procedure, the individuals are directed to a process reception centre, again divided between adults and unaccompanied minors (Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers, n.d.). After completing the asylum application, all applicants go to a separate reception centre, that rejected individuals have to leave in 28 days, while unaccompanied minors and persons in need of support go to special reception centres (Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers, n.d.). The Netherlands’ approach illustrates the complexity of claiming asylum, and the dependence on each nations’ efforts to establish different kinds of reception facilities.

The EU's asylum approach has a dual structure: Member States have the primary responsibility to implement asylum procedures and reception facilities, while EU institutions and agencies are there to provide support and guidelines. EU guidelines are included in different legal frameworks and are established with the goal of developing a common policy on how to process asylum seekers in order to protect non-EU nationals and abide by the principle of non-refoulement (European Parliament, n.d.). One of the most prominent EU agencies responsible for enforcing these guidelines is the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), that provides practical, legal, advisory, and operational assistance to all EU Member States (EUAA, n.d.-c). This collective commitment of EU agencies and its Member States seeks to ensure that asylum applications are assessed according to common standards, regardless of where an individual applies for protection, thereby leading to comparable outcomes across the Union (European Commission, 2025). However, whether this objective is reflected in practice remains contested. Van Wollegheem and Sicakkan (2023) argue that governmental preferences and the broader political context within Member States continue to influence asylum recognition rates. This suggests that, in reality, the location in which an application is lodged may affect its outcome, raising concerns about the consistency and fairness of the Common European Asylum System.

2.2 Scale of Asylum and Migration in Europe

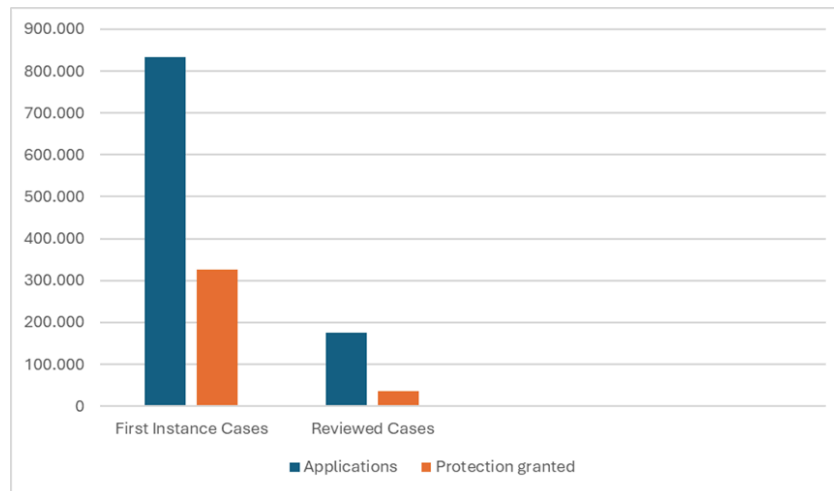
A general down spiralling trend can be spotted within the asylum and migration procedures in Europe, as asylum applications and people gaining protection are decreasing compared to 2024. While Europe still seems to be an important destination for people seeking asylum, Eurostat (2026b) spots a downtrend in the overall numbers of asylum seekers. The trend may be explained by a changing political climate in Europe, an indirect result of the previous refugee crisis. This is emphasised by van der Burg and Hartevelde (2021) who argue that anti-immigration attitudes were adopted on both sides of the political spectrum after the previous refugee crisis.

2.2.1 Key statistics and trends

In 2025, a total of 1,002,535 decisions on asylum applications were issued in the EU; 832,360 were first instance decisions, while 170,175 were cases that were being reviewed again (Eurostat, 2026b).

Figure 1

EU Asylum Applications and protection granted in 2025



Note. Adapted from Eurostat (2026b)

As shown in figure 1, these applications resulted in 325,765 people being granted protection status. Out of the cases that were reviewed, 35,565 people received protection status, this shows a total amount of 361,325 successful applicants (Eurostat, 2026b). Comparing this to the amount of people that received protection status in 2024, there is a decrease by 17,5 percent (Eurostat, 2026b). When looking at non-European citizens applying for asylum, an even greater decrease is apparent. In 2025, 669,365 first-time non-EU individuals applied for international protection, compared to 912,425 in 2024; a reduction of 26,6 percent (Eurostat, 2026a). These decreases in providing international protection status could be explained by the political context across the EU. In recent years, Member States have experienced growing anti-immigration sentiment as a result of perceived large refugee inflows into the EU (van der Burg & Harteveld, 2021). Such political trends led to Member States resuming border regulations. Several Member States imposed border regulations for a short period in 2025-2026 (European Commission, n.d.), through a rule included in the Schengen Borders Code (SBC), allowing temporary border controls in case of a serious threat to the internal security of Member States (European Commission, n.d.). This implies that several Member States see the incoming flow of asylum seekers as a serious threat to their national security, a stance that could have broad consequences for the creation of an unified asylum policy across the EU.

The distribution of asylum seekers with protection status across Europe remains uneven. Germany is at the forefront: out of the total amount of international protection status provided, 28,6 percent were granted from Germany, 21,1 percent from Spain, and 20,2 percent from France (Eurostat, 2026b). These three countries are responsible for approximately 70 percent of the protection statuses given in the EU. When looking at the types of protection statuses that were provided, 51 percent received refugee status, 25,3 percent humanitarian status, and 23,7 percent subsidiary protection (Eurostat, 2026b). An asylum seeker is granted refugee status when an individual is at risk of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a social group

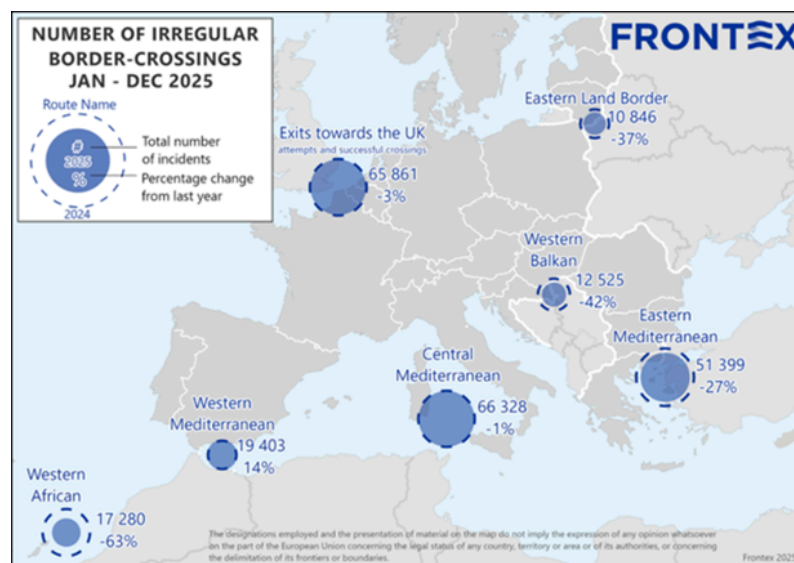
(International Protection Agency, n.d.). Subsidiary protection is granted when individuals do not qualify for refugee status but are still at risk of serious harm in their country of origin (International Protection Agency, n.d.). Humanitarian status is granted when an individual does not qualify for refugee or subsidiary status, and is either; an unaccompanied minor who cannot be returned to country of origin, an individual who is terminally ill or suffers from a life-threatening medical condition, or a person who cannot return due to other humanitarian considerations, for example a disability that affects a person's life (International Protection Agency, n.d.).

2.2.2 Main routes into Europe

The main routes for asylum seekers are the Western Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean, Western Balkan, Eastern and Western border route, as depicted in figure 2. While the majority of these border routes experienced a decline in irregular crossings, the Western Mediterranean route experienced more irregular border crossings in 2025 compared to 2024 (an increase of 14 percent) (Frontex, n.d.). These shifts in the flow of migrations from these routes are due to conflict and social, political, and economic instability (Frontex, n.d.). Travelling on these migration routes is a life threatening process, which exposes individuals to multiple threats.

Figure 2

Main border-crossings into Europe 2025.



Note. Adapted from Frontex (n.d.).

The Mediterranean route is the main one used to arrive in Europe. It is divided into the Western, Central, and Eastern Mediterranean. Out of these three routes, the Central Mediterranean reflects the largest number of arrivals, and includes arrivals to Malta and Italy. The number of arrivals remained stable in 2025 compared to 2024, with 2024 having 66,855 arrivals and 2025 incurring 66,562 arrivals (International Organization for Migration, 2025). The most common provenance is Libya (International Organization for Migration, 2025).

The number of arrivals from the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2025 fell by 30 percent compared to 2024 (International Organization for Migration, 2025). The total number of arrivals was 54,383 in 2025, including arrivals to Greece, Cyprus, and Bulgaria (International Organization for Migration, 2025). Despite the drop, the amount of people arriving from Libya more than tripled (Frontex, n.d.), illustrating how migration flows can be shaped by political, economic, and social instability.

The Western Mediterranean route has the lowest number of people crossing compared to other Mediterranean routes. The Western route includes arrivals to Spain, and has been increasing since 2022 (International Organization for Migration, 2025).

At the same time, the route with the steepest decline was the Western Balkan. In 2025, authorities in the Western Balkan recorded 27,751 arrivals, a 51 percent decrease compared to 2024, with Egyptians, Afghans, Moroccans, Turkish, and Syrians as the main nationalities reported (International Organization for Migration, 2025). Overall, these statistics show that the Central Mediterranean remains the biggest migration path, with most people arriving in Italy and Malta. The general trend shows that the amount of people arriving through pathways is declining, with the Western Mediterranean route as an exception.

2.2.3 Demographic breakdown

Eurostat (2026a) shows that first-time applications for asylum of non-EU citizens are mainly from adults. In total, 510,950 adults applied for protection in 2025, consisting of 346,606 males and 162,650 females. In 2025, 58,400 first-time applications came from children, considered a vulnerable group, consisting of 87,750 boys and 70,585 girls. A particularly vulnerable subgroup are unaccompanied children, which includes children that arrived in Europe without any guardian. More specifically, it includes children who arrive alone, with an underage brother/sister, underage or adult partner, and or any adults that are not responsible for them (EUAA, n.d.-d). These children are particularly at risk of exposure to extreme forms of violence, exploitation, human trafficking, and potential physical, psychological and sexual abuse before or after their arrival in Europe (EUAA, n.d.-e).

2.3.1 Drivers of Migration and Displacement

To gain better insights into the dynamics of migrations and why people want to apply for asylum in Europe, it is essential to look at the so-called push and pull factors. The push factors can be seen as the reasons that people leave the place where they are located. While the pull factors are instead the factors that influence people to move to a certain area. Together, these factors provide a useful framework for gaining insights into the complex social, political, demographic, economic, and environmental drivers of migration. Thereby providing a better understanding of why people are migrating to Europe.

2.3.2 Push factors

Social and political factors are at the forefront of push factors. This is often due to a variety of causes, such as persecution because of one's ethnicity, race, religion, political preferences, or culture (European Parliament, 2024). Situations of armed conflict are among the most

known causes to flee a country: this is for instance seen in the aftermath of the Syrian war which caused a great amount of people seeking protection to flee to Europe. Refugees that leave their country because of armed conflict or human rights violations are categorised as humanitarian refugees. This designation affects their asylum process as some countries have a more liberal approach to humanitarian migrants than others (European Parliament, 2024). Environmental factors also cause people to flee their country, as people try to escape natural disasters. This is likely to be exacerbated in coming years due to the increase in extreme weather events as a result of climate change (European Parliament, 2024). Furthermore, demographic factors are playing a more indirect role in making people leave their country of origin. These factors are, for instance, an economic shrink due to an aging society, resulting in a decrease of economic opportunities (European Parliament, 2024). This is also reflected in people fleeing their country due to severe poverty and poor living conditions (Giménez-Gómez et al., 2019). Overall, push factors show that people flee their country due wide ranging political, social, demographic, environmental, and economic reasons.

2.3.3 Pull factors

The pull factors can have economic, political, social, and environmental dimensions. Economic factors act as important drivers of migration, as greater employment opportunities in certain countries may encourage refugees to relocate (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2025). Such opportunities can enable refugees to improve their financial circumstances and enhance their long-term career prospects. The political factors regard the provision of stability and peace, and the absence of conflict, human rights violations, and persecutions (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2025). Social factors of migration include having an increased social network as a result of migration, and having better educational opportunities (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2025). On the other hand, family reunification is an important social driver, which is oftentimes used as a strategic factor to ensure a safe and inexpensive passage for the rest of the family (Dubow & Kuschminder, 2021). Lastly, environmental factors play a small role, as is for instance seen in ecological safety and better climate conditions (European Parliament, 2024), hence having a smaller chance of experiencing extreme weather events.

2.3.4 Migration journeys and risks

Despite the push and pull factors that motivate people to seek safety or opportunity elsewhere, the journey itself and the significant risks it entails are often overlooked. Every pathway into Europe exposes asylum seekers to multiple forms of harm. Along the Mediterranean paths, individuals are most likely to be exposed to severe risks while crossing the sea, which results in migrants going missing or dying (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). Across the Western Balkan route, individuals report instances of violent behaviour by smugglers, which can include kidnapping, fighting with other groups or robbing migrants (Frontex, n.d.).

2.4 Living Conditions in Asylum Centres

The material conditions within asylum centres vary between each EU Member State. This stands in contrast to the objectives of the EU's asylum approach, which seeks to be coherent so that the outcome of an asylum procedure is not dependent on the country where the application is lodged. However, reception conditions vary significantly across the EU. Housing arrangements range from the spread of asylum seekers to designated areas to complete freedom of movement and reliance on the private sector for housing (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2000). The discrepancy is obvious when considering that in Denmark, individuals get financial assistance when living in asylum centres, while in Sweden individuals get financial assistance if they do not reside in a reception centre (UNHCR, 2000). The difference in approach creates disparities in access to basic needs. Furthermore, asylum seekers might experience harsh conditions in the so-called 'waiting zones'. Waiting zones are areas between the arrival and departure points and passport control, often located close to a station, port, or airport (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, n.d.) These waiting zones are oftentimes overcrowded, which leads to situations where people have to sleep in police stations due to insufficient accommodation at airports (UNHCR, 2000). An example from a waiting zone in the Netherlands also illustrates the severity of the conditions in waiting areas, where insufficient food provision resulted in undernourished and underweight children (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2025e).

In the majority of Member States, asylum seekers have access to basic health care, education, and legal support. Asylum seekers can generally rely on basic emergency healthcare, and in some countries asylum seekers can benefit from the same healthcare as the country's nationals (UNHCR, 2000). Moreover, individuals have access to free psychological services in some Member States (UNHCR, 2000). In Belgium, specialised centres for psychological care have been established (UNHCR, 2000). This support is essential for asylum seekers, who have likely experienced hardships and traumatising situations during their migration routes. Education is generally available to children under the same conditions as nationals, with language classes frequently offered to those who do not speak the national language (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2013), provided by the state or by NGOs. This is also the case for legal advice that asylum seekers can receive. Still, while this support is accessible in the majority of Member States, legal advice differs in its availability, as it might be provided by NGOs or included in the general asylum procedure (UNHCR, 2000). However, access to basic health care, education, and legal support is in reality still very limited, as is seen in asylum centres located in rural areas (UNHCR, 2000).

Similarly, the asylum procedure creates room for grave human rights concerns, most notably in the detention of asylum seekers, where facilities often present visible problems. This was seen in a detention centre in Frankfurt, where only two showers were available for over 200 detainees and asylum seekers were forced to sleep on chairs or on the floor due to limited bedding facilities (UNHCR, 2000). Furthermore, while asylum seekers should enjoy freedom of movement, it may be limited due to detention, policies, and making assistance depending on the centres' locations (UNHCR, 2000). These practices restrict the freedom of movement and autonomy of asylum seekers.

2.5 Disappearances in the Migration Context

There is no universally accepted definition of a missing child in the asylum system or a cohesive methodology for keeping track of the number of them. This report will use the definition drafted by the organisation ‘Missing Children Europe’, which defines missing children as minors who are “registered with state authorities and [then] go missing from the reception/accommodation centres provided for them” (Missing Children Europe, n.d.).

Missing children include both unaccompanied children and children that arrived with their parents in a reception centre. Children may go missing due to a wide variety of reasons, such as poor reception conditions, lack of child-friendly environment, inefficient family reunification, fear of detention or deportation, desires to join family in another country, illegal adaptation, and child trafficking (Mentzelopoulou, 2025). In the 2021-2023 period, 51,433 children were reported missing across Europe, entailing 47 new cases each day (Mentzelopoulou, 2025). The severity of this problem is enhanced by the possibility that many of these children are exposed to exploitation, harassment, sexual abuse, and extreme labour (Mentzelopoulou, 2025). The majority of the children go missing in the initial reception centres, where young people are being received and registered, as reported by Islamaj (2024) and Mentzelopoulou (2025).

A factor that exacerbates this issue is the complexity of data collection and sharing. This is also highlighted by Mentzelopoulou (2025). The fragmentation of data collection and complex regulations around sharing it contribute to not fully capturing the issue’s broader picture. Further problems of data collection are due to the negligence of Member States to report missing persons, or the tendency to register children as adults (Islamaj, 2024). These factors show the need of having a collective database that records all cases of children that have disappeared within the asylum system. To achieve this, it is essential that instances where a child goes missing are reported immediately to the competent authority, thereby giving as much information as possible about the child (UNHCR & The Smile of the Child, 2020).

3. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

This section will focus on the legal and policy frameworks surrounding migration in the EU. At first it will go over the European and International legal frameworks, explaining the role of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), the protection of children under international law, and the primary responsibility of member states. The second part will focus on the implementation gap among Member States, exposing key enforcement challenges that member states face.

3.1 European and International Legal Frameworks

The main legal and policy framework targeting migrants arriving in the EU is the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The last major update within the CEAS was the adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2024 which substantially reformed pre-existing EU policies. While the main role of the CEAS is to ensure a harmonised, fair and effective treatment of migrants throughout EU Member States, a few provisions also focus on preserving the rights of the child. The rights of the child are also protected by international

instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and international bodies such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Under both EU and international law, Member States bear the primary responsibility for protecting migrants and asylum-seeking children on their territory.

3.1.1 European Legal Frameworks

The Common European Asylum System (CEAS) is the main legal and policy framework that guarantees harmonised standards for migrants arriving in the EU. The project started in 1999, when the European Council adopted the Tampere Programme, laying the foundation for a common approach to asylum and migration across all EU Member States. Over the next six years, six legislative instruments established minimum standards for asylum, with various Directives on reception, temporary protection, and asylum procedures among others. By 2013, five of those instruments had been amended, and CEAS shifted from minimum standards to the establishment of a common asylum procedure. After the establishment of the EUAA in 2022, the EU adopted the Pact on Migration and Asylum, reforming the pre-existing EU policies. The legislation entered into application on 12 June 2026 and covers a wide range of areas, including screening, resettlement, and search-and-rescue operations (EUAA, 2021; European Commission, n.d.-a). While clear progress has been made throughout the EU towards the implementation of the pact, it is still too early to make any assessment about its overall implementation (ECRE, 2026).

Today's CEAS role is to ensure that asylum seekers are treated fairly and effectively wherever they apply in the EU. It regulates the asylum procedure and is designed to ensure migrants' rights are respected at every stage. It oversees, among other functions, procedures of screening, reception, and border returns (European Commission, n.d.-a).

A few provisions of the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum focus specifically on children. New important provisions are the multidisciplinary age assessment (Asylum Procedures Regulation, 2024, Art. 25), the appointment of a representative for unaccompanied minors within 15 working days (Reception Conditions Directive, 2024, Art. 27; Asylum Procedures Regulation, 2024, Art. 23), and biometric collection from age six (Eurodac Regulation, 2024, Art. 14). However, several organisations and experts such as UNICEF, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, pointed out weaknesses of the Pact regarding child protection. They specifically warned about the lack of clarity in the Pact's wording, which they argue leaves too much interpretation power to Member States and fails to protect children effectively. They also expressed their concerns over the possibility included in the Pact to detain migrant and asylum-seeking children (PICUM, 2024; UNICEF, 2024; OHCHR, 2024).

3.1.2 International Legal Frameworks

The protection of migrating children in Europe is not only regulated by EU legislation, but by international law as well. The primary binding instrument on child protection in international law is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) that is ratified by all

EU Member States. It contains key protection principles for asylum-seeking children such as non-discrimination regardless of national origin or other status (Art. 2), the right to life, survival and development (Art. 6), the right to express their views and to be heard in administrative or judicial proceedings (Art. 12), specific obligations toward refugee children such as to receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance, to trace one's family members (Art. 22), and the prohibition of torture, with detention as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate time (Art. 37). This document also emphasises, in Art. 3, that “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (United Nations, 1989).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has, over the years, issued authoritative interpretations on various areas, such as unaccompanied and separated children (CRC, 2005, General Comment No. 6) and the obligation to have the child's best interests as a primary consideration (CRC, 2013, General Comment No. 14). It further declared that immigration detention of children is never in their best interest, and that states should therefore immediately cease this practice (CMW & CRC, 2017).

Beyond the UNCRC, other, more general, international instruments often mentioned when dealing with migrating children are the European Convention on Human Rights, the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Finally, the European Court of Human Rights dealt with important cases such as *Tarakhel v. Switzerland*, which concluded that the reception conditions of children should be adapted to their age to avoid stress and anxiety, even when they are accompanied (*Tarakhel v. Switzerland*, 2014).

3.1.3 The responsibilities of Member States

Under both EU and international law, Member States bear the primary responsibility for protecting migrants and asylum-seeking children on their territory. This obligation falls into three categories, namely procedural, substantive, and institutional.

Procedurally, Member States must ensure that children have access to the asylum procedure (Asylum Procedures Regulation, 2024, Art. 8; European Convention on Human Rights, 1950, Art. 13), are appointed a representative if unaccompanied (Asylum Procedures Regulation, 2024, Art. 23), and that their right to express their views and to be heard is protected (Asylum Procedures Regulation, 2024, Arts. 13, 22).

Substantively, Member States must provide, under the Reception Conditions Directive, education within two months (Art. 16), mental and physical healthcare (Art. 22), and appropriate housing (Arts. 13, 26, 27) (Reception Conditions Directive, 2024). The Qualification Regulation also obliges Member States to ensure that unaccompanied minors, once granted international protection, receive guardianship (Qualification Regulation, 2024, Art. 33).

Institutionally, Member States should establish child protection systems, including for migrant children, and cooperate with national child protection authorities throughout the procedure (European Commission, 2024), and establish strong monitoring mechanisms (Screening Regulation, 2024, Art. 27).

3.2 National Implementation and Gaps

While the CEAS aims to create a harmonised framework across all Member States, the de facto transposition and implementation largely differ across countries. The CEAS, before the 2024 Pact, comprised numerous Directives, leaving a significant transposition margin. With the 2024 Pact consisting mainly of Regulations, divergences are likely to narrow but will not disappear (EPRS, 2024). Indeed, several enforcement challenges will come into force.

First, some enforcement challenges emerging from EU structural weaknesses apply evenly in all Member States but might create divergences in the Pact's implementation. The 'implementation gap' is an important structural feature of EU law and even more so asylum law. It outlines the difference between the standards on paper and the practice on the ground caused by the EU's complex structure (EEAS, n.d.; Grundler, 2022). Moreover, monitoring tools are often slow and politically constrained, such as the Commission infringement proceeding (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2012, Arts. 258–260) (European Policy Centre, n.d.; Byrne et al., 2020). This procedure makes it more difficult for the EU to monitor the implementation and application of its Directives. However, we should note that monitoring mechanisms have strengthened under the Pact (European Commission, n.d.-b; FRA, n.d.).

Other enforcement challenges are specific to Member States characteristics and apply unevenly depending on the Member States. A first challenge is the capacity pressure. Reception infrastructure often have a maximum number of places which is often exceeded in some European countries such as Italy or Greece, which receive more flow, often leading to child-specific safeguards being deprioritised (EUAA, 2023; ECRE, 2023). A second challenge depends on the Member State's domestic political debate. Political dynamics and the rise of restrictive migration politics largely vary across countries, sometimes leading to an environment where child protection is disregarded (Garayóva, 2025; Stevens et al., 2024).

Furthermore, fragmentation of responsibility poses a real threat to upholding acceptable standards as inter-agency fragmentation between Member States is starkly apparent. Very few Member States operate truly integrated case-management systems (FRA, 2024). As a result, several important child protection considerations are unequally applied across Member States, such as guardianship systems, with some countries like Italy using mainly volunteer guardians, and others having mainly professional, full-time guardians, as in the Netherlands (FRA, 2022). The guardian-to-child ratio is another point of difference, the legislated maximum varying between 1 to 3 in Slovenia and Italy while Germany states up to 1 to 50 (FRA, 2022). Reception conditions also vary dramatically, with dedicated reception centres for unaccompanied minors in the Netherlands (EUAA, n.d.), and overcrowded first-line centres in Cyprus (ECRE, 2024a).

While the legal provisions clearly state that Member States should be in charge of overseeing the migration process, civil society, and more specifically NGOs, often find themselves forced to "fill the gaps" in many ways. The three main areas where NGOs intervene are service delivery, with NGOs such as the International Rescue Committee offering accommodation to unaccompanied minors (International Rescue Committee, n.d.),

monitoring, as for instance the European Council on Refugees and Exiles managing the Asylum Information Database (ECRE, 2024b), and advocacy, with organisations like Save the Children petitioning against child detention (Save the Children, 2024).

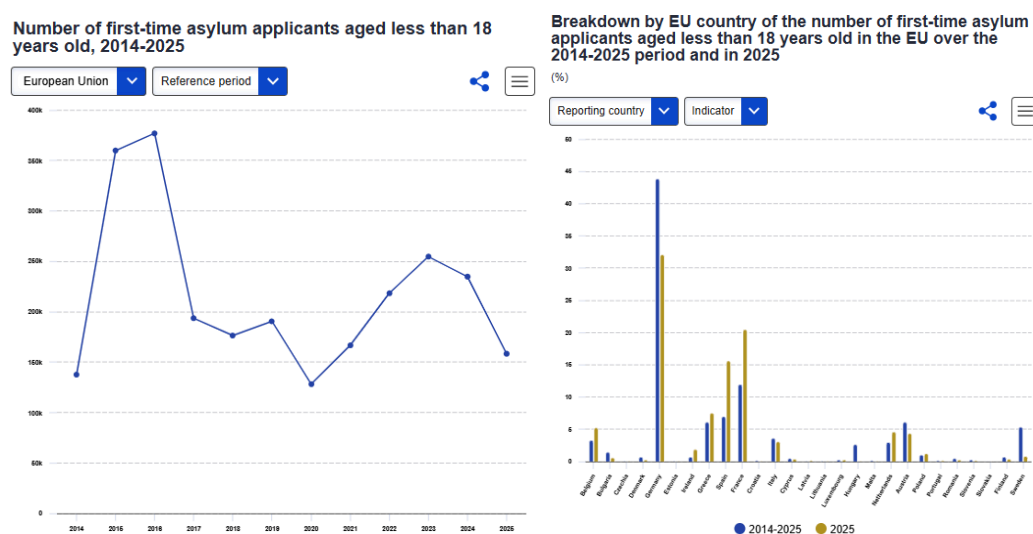
4. CHILDREN IN ASYLUM CENTRES

4.1 Children in Migration: An Overview

Since 2014, approximately 2.6 million underage asylum applicants have arrived in Europe. In 2025 alone, around 158,400 first-time asylum applicants were under 18 years old, around 24 percent of all first-time applicants, i.e., one of the lowest annual totals of the past decade. Around 76 percent were under 14, and 55 percent were male. Over the past decade, we have witnessed two peaks of underage applicants, one between 2015 and 2016 and one around 2023. While we see a decreasing trend since 2023, it is important to note that applicants are not evenly distributed across all European Member States. Between 2014 and 2025, 44 percent went to Germany and 12 percent to France, with smaller shares to Spain, Greece, Sweden, and Austria. Finally, over 40 percent of applicants come from either Afghanistan, Syria, or Venezuela (Eurostat, 2026).

Figure 3

Number of EU first-time applicants aged less than 18 years old (2014-2025), total number and breakdown by EU country



Eurostat (2026c)

Out of the 158,400 underage asylum-seekers in 2025, around 21,125 were unaccompanied (Eurostat, 2026). Article 2 of the Screening Regulation defines unaccompanied minors as “a minor who arrives on the territory of the Member State unaccompanied by an adult responsible for him or her, whether by the law or practice of the Member State concerned, and for as long as he or she is not effectively taken into the care of such a person” (Screening Regulation, 2024). It is important, however, to differentiate between accompanied and unaccompanied minors for two main reasons. First, the statistics have changed, as 35 percent

of them come from Eritrea, Somalia, or Egypt (compared with less than 7 percent of accompanied minors). Moreover, over 9 out of 10 are boys, and the majority is above 14 years old. Beyond the statistical difference, both have very different vulnerability profiles, such as higher rates of trauma, exploitation, and mental illness (Oberg & Sharma, 2023; Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023), and need different legal protection, regarding guardianship or an alternative to detention (see Section 2).

4.2 Children's Vulnerabilities in Asylum Centre Environments

Unfortunately, asylum reception centres in countries with significant migrant flows often are overcrowded camps with poor-quality infrastructure. Children living in such places face higher safety risks.

One of the primary risks is physical safety. Sharing space with adult strangers in overcrowded facilities has proven to increase the risk of violence, abuse, and disappearance (European Commission, 2021). Additionally, the risk of sexual harassment and assault on women and girls has been documented in multiple asylum centres, highlighting the increased risk of gender-based violence. Several reports from NGOs also point out the poor hygiene and sanitary conditions, inadequate heating, or the lack of hot water and ventilation, leading to disease spread (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017). The destruction of the infamous asylum camp, the Moria in Greece, by fire, affecting more than 4,000 children, illustrated the real consequences of inadequate infrastructure (UNICEF, 2020).

While the Pact on Migration and Asylum requires Member States to provide minors access to the education system within two months of their arrival (Reception Conditions Directive, 2024), in practice, access to education is often delayed and of poor quality. Moreover, barriers such as language difficulties, understaffing, an insufficient number of classes, and the frequent relocation of families and children (ECRE, n.d.-a) put minors particularly at risk, especially those in detention or under border procedures, who are de facto excluded from the education system (FRA, 2017), and over-16 years olds who are above the compulsory schooling age and often do not have the right to enter schools (ECRE, n.d.-b). This is especially worrying considering that around two-thirds of unaccompanied minors are between 16 and 17 (EUAA, 2025).

4.3 Mental Health Challenges

Mental health is a recurring issue when looking at child refugees and unaccompanied minors. On top of the increased difficulty in accessing necessary healthcare services (van der Boor & White, 2020), migrants are more at risk of having mental health difficulties than the rest of the population (WHO, 2022). One group particularly at risk is unaccompanied minors. With a considerably increased rate of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems, unaccompanied minors are, for instance, more likely to attempt suicide and self-harm than the host population of the same age (Daniel-Calveras et al., 2022).

Several elements have been identified as either risk or protective factors (Bamford et al., 2021; Oberg & Sharma, 2023):

Figure 4

Risk and protective factors for having mental health difficulties as a child refugee: comparison table

Risk factors	Protective factors
Pre-exposure to trauma	Belonging to a social network
Being unaccompanied	Having a trusted mentor or a family (even if far away)
Being female	Religion
Being older	Resilience

A consistent conclusion throughout multiple studies is the catastrophic correlation between minor detention and mental health deterioration (Priestley et al., 2025). Moreover, longer periods of detention are associated with greater harm to children's mental health, as the longer children remain in detention, the more severe the psychological damage they experience. (Robjant et al., 2009). This finding explains the many calls from organisations, such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child, to cease the detention of child asylum seekers as a whole (CMW & CRC, 2017; UNHCR, 2012). The difficulty in accessing mental healthcare services remains a central point in this debate. Several factors can explain it, such as discrimination, language gaps, and instability of placement (Stevens et al., 2024).

4.4 Children at Risk of Disappearance

Between 2021 and 2023, over 51,000 unaccompanied minors disappeared from European asylum centres, averaging nearly 47 children per day (Lost in Europe, 2023; Termote, 2024). While those numbers are already worrying, they are most likely considerably lower than the actual number, as data collection is not systematic in many countries, and there is no EU definition of a missing child (EPRS, 2025). Children with a higher risk of disappearance share several characteristics, such as being unaccompanied, being without documentation, having experienced exploitation during their migration, and having debts to smugglers (InfoMigrants, n.d.). Children in the initial phase of reception, especially during the first 48 hours, have a much higher risk of disappearing (UK Parliament, n.d.).

The disappearance of children is a consequence of structural deficiencies within the asylum systems. First, poor reception conditions have served as a push factor, making children more likely to leave, either voluntarily or at the urging of a third party. Overcrowding and inadequate conditions relative to their age particularly increase the risk of children going missing (EPRS, 2025). Second, the inefficient guardian-appointment procedures, and therefore the lack of a trusted adult to help children navigate their situation, are another key driver of disappearance. Third, the absence of child-friendly information, the fear of detention and deportation, together with a lack of trust in authorities, drives children to leave reception centres. Fourth, inefficient family reunification procedures for family members within EU Member States push children to seek alternatives to the slow, lengthy process and

to attempt to reach their relatives on their own. Fifth, the lack of systematic data collection and the absence of a pan-European alert system make it much more difficult to trace children between Member States (EMN, n.d.). While the European Parliament discussed creating a European centre for missing persons, the body has not been formally introduced yet (EPRS, 2025).

5. CONSEQUENCES, RISKS AND PROTECTION RESPONSES

5.1 What Happens After Children Disappear?

Once children disappear from asylum centres, it is hard to monitor their safety, living conditions, or whereabouts. In many cases, disappearances are not solved, complicating the determination of what happens to children after they have left, or have been abducted from reception systems. Children, being a very vulnerable group of migrants and asylum seekers, require extra protection against all kinds of dangers they face along their journey (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, 2020). All missing children face dangers of an emotional or physical nature, the individual child's situation differs depending on the circumstances of the disappearance (Brantl et al., 2021). Even though there is increasing awareness towards the vulnerabilities faced by children in asylum centres and in migration settings, thousands of children continue to disappear across Europe (Luyendijk & De Jong, 2024). Often, the disappearance of children in migration is overlooked because it is seen as a voluntary act of the child, with little assessment of the reason as to why the child went missing (Missing Children Europe, 2025). Unaccompanied children are also frequently victims of human trafficking in their journey (Luyendijk & De Jong, 2024).

5.1.1 Human trafficking

Human trafficking is understood as “The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.” (United Nations, 2000). This is the legally adopted definition of the United Nations as part of the Palermo Protocol (2000). The definition of human trafficking focuses on three main elements, i.e., the act, means, and purpose. The act refers to what the trafficker does, such as recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring, or receiving a person. The means refers to how control is gained or maintained over a person, this is often done through force, coercion, deception, abuse of vulnerability, or threats. In the case of child trafficking, however, the means element does not need to be established to classify the offence as trafficking. Any act that is done for the purpose of exploiting a child is considered to be trafficking under international law, regardless of whether coercion, deception, or force was used (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). Lastly, the purpose always refers to the exploitation of an individual for the benefit or profit of others. Even though the child

might appear to have “consented” to being exploited, this is regarded as irrelevant, especially when force, deception, coercion, or abuse of power or vulnerability are being used to control a child (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). What is considered to make children increasingly vulnerable to trafficking, is the lack of stable housing, financial resources, legal protection, or of a trusted adult who can look out for their safety. Once children are outside of a formal reception and protection system, they can become dependent on smugglers and traffickers for transportation, shelter, food, income, and employment. Because of this dependency, children are more easily manipulated or coerced into doing things they might not want to do for money or promises of a better future (ICAT, 2018). Often, children are forced into exploitation while attempting to continue their migration journey to either reunite with other family members in different countries, to survive financially, or to avoid being detected by authorities (Luyendijk & De Jong, 2024).

There are multiple forms of child trafficking, including begging and petty crime, child marriage, children in armed conflict, organ removal, and illegal adoption. Forced labour and sexual exploitation are consistently identified as the two most significant risks faced by children after disappearing from asylum centres in Europe (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.).

5.1.2 Forced labour and exploitation

The ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No.29) has defined forced labour as “all work or service which is extracted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered themselves voluntarily”. This concept is based on three key elements, namely the performance of work or services in any sector, the use of threats, pressure, or penalties to maintain control, and the absence of free and voluntary consent.

Multiple signs indicate potential forced labour, especially for children, as their vulnerabilities are often abused. Due to their vulnerable position, children can lack the education and the knowledge needed to make informed decisions, which may result in short-term survival thinking instead of understanding the long-term consequences of certain situations. They might also become dependent on an employer for housing or food. Another common indicator is deception, which occurs when traffickers fail to deliver on promises regarding wages, working conditions, the nature of jobs, or even access to education. Isolation is what often happens with children, as traffickers keep them in remote locations, confiscate their mobile phones, and retain their identity documents, which prevents them from seeking help or contacting families (ILO, n.d.).

Children are trafficked into various industries, which often involve performing heavy or dangerous manual labour. Children can end up in domestic work, where they are often isolated in private homes, working long hours under physical or psychological abuse. Domestic work includes performing household tasks, taking care of other children, or caring for elderly people. Children can also be forced into begging on the streets for money or food in the guise of religious education or spiritual guidance (UNODC, 2024). Hospitality is also a sector in which children are often exploited. Indeed, in hotels, restaurants, and other hospitality services, they often have to work long hours under poor conditions and for little or

no payment. Another sector is agriculture, where children are forced to perform agricultural work such as harvesting crops, cattle herding, or field labour. Children might also be exploited in factories, brick kilns, mines, or quarrying operations, where they are often exposed to unsafe work and environments, heavy labour, and hazardous materials (International Labour Organization & United Nations Children's Fund, 2025). All these forms of forced labour may be connected to debt bondage, which shall be understood itself as a form of forced labour, where an adult or child is coerced to work against their will to repay a debt to an employer or recruiter. This also occurs when debt is manipulated to force a worker to accept the conditions or work that they would otherwise not do (Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage, 2022).

5.1.3 Sexual exploitation

Migrant children, especially those who are unaccompanied or separated from their families, are particularly vulnerable to being exposed to sexual exploitation. Commercial sexual exploitation is the largest category of children in forced labour. This includes the use, procuring, or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography, or for a pornographic performance (Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage, 2022). The commercial component is about any form of compensation, which can be financial but also in the form of a sexual act, where the child is treated as a commercial object. Child prostitution, for example, can involve monetary payment, but sexual acts can also act as an exchange for shelter and food, commonly referred to as “survival sex” (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2016).

Sexually exploited children might remain in exploitative situations for several reasons. Often feelings of fear, shame, helplessness, and dependency make it more difficult for victims to leave or seek help. This fear can be for traffickers, law enforcement, or immigration authorities, while other children may feel unable to return to their families due to social rejection. Traffickers create emotional dependency through manipulation, altering violence with care or affection, and this can cause victims to develop trauma bonds, which makes them less likely to recognise the exploitative situation they are experiencing. Especially in the case of a disappeared child, a lack of knowledge about legal rights and the available support systems, particularly when information is not provided in a language they understand, can further increase their vulnerability and limit their ability to seek help (Greenbaum, 2020). Sexual exploitation can also occur as a result of forced child marriage, which is sometimes used as a cover for sex trafficking. Girls might be sold as a bride for low payments, and in turn this effectively functions as a transaction for sexual access (ICAT, n.d).

5.1.3 Online exploitation

Recently, an increasing number of online trafficking cases have been reported, including online trafficking of children. This development of increased online trafficking is facilitating human trafficking, as traffickers misuse social media platforms, messaging applications, online advertisements, and digital payment systems to identify, groom, recruit, control, and exploit victims. Technology is used as a tool by traffickers to operate more easily across

borders and to not be easily detected (OSCE, 2024). This is particularly concerning for displaced women and girls, as technology-facilitated gender-based violence is intensified in displacement contexts. Displaced women and girls might have lower digital literacy and face language barriers, insecure legal status, trauma, and social isolation, which can make it harder to recognise online risks or seek help. Perpetrators have used platforms such as Telegram and Facebook to lure young women into exploitation, human trafficking, and gender-based violence through false offers of employment, accommodation, or transportation (Oh & Anand, 2024). Children are also often manipulated online, through fake job offers, deceptive promises of work, education, or financial opportunities. The act of this is often done through social media, where victims are controlled and manipulated. This also happens for commercial sexual exploitation of children (Terre des Hommes Netherlands, n.d.). It can take the form of sexual extortion, when traffickers get a hold of private images through manipulation or coercion, they can demand money from victims to keep the images private. Particularly, the abuse of AI deepfake technology is increasingly becoming an issue, as fake sexual images are being generated with faces of victims (Childlight, 2024). Because of the online character of this exploitation, the invisibility of disappeared children is further increased, as exploitation can continue across borders without physical contact or direct oversight from authorities.

5.2 Gendered Dimensions of Disappearances

As mentioned, all children, especially unaccompanied ones, who disappear from asylum centres, face increased risks of exploitation and abuse. These risks are not experienced equally, as gender influences the forms of exploitation children are exposed to, the likelihood of being identified as victims, and their access to protection and support services, implying different vulnerabilities and challenges for boys and girls following their disappearance.

5.2.1 Gendered Sexual Exploitation

Individuals of all genders may be subjected to sexual exploitation, however girls are the primary targets of this phenomenon, as well as of sexual slavery. Girls also represent the majority of victims in domestic servitude or child marriage (ILO et al., 2022). Migrating children, especially girls, encounter an increased risk of rape, by corrupt border officials, like smugglers, or other unauthorised migration agents, who can demand sex in exchange for onward passage. Research on migration along the Mediterranean route shows that approximately 90 percent of migrant women and girls experienced rape at some point during their journey, illustrating the extreme vulnerabilities female migrants face during migration (Moas, 2024). Irregular migration paths heighten these risks, as girls lack access to protection networks and information, and might fear to report abuse due to the threat of detention or deportation (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2016).

Along with a gendered issue, age also represents a major factor. Girls between 15 and 19 are at the greatest risk of being sexually exploited. This also occurs through forced marriage, as girls are often lured into fraudulent marriage proposals, only to be sold as prostitutes upon reaching a destination, or they are forced into domestic servitude or manual labour within

their new households. The deep-seated gender inequalities and the lower social status of girls make them more likely to be viewed as exploitable or less worthy of protection (Connella et al., 2023).

Girls are the main victims of sexual exploitation. However, these findings might vary depending on the forms of sexual exploitation being studied and the populations included in data collection, potentially influencing the observed gender distribution. Boys are also sexually exploited, even though there is a lack of data on this phenomenon. This lack of data on male sexual exploitation could stem from several social and cultural factors. Boys might want to hide their victimisation because they are ashamed or due to fear of social exclusion, being perceived as weak, or having their sexual orientation questioned (Josenhans et al., 2019). The sexual exploitation of boys often receives less attention in research, policy, and public discourse, contributing to their relative invisibility as victims. Sex trafficking in boys is also often overlooked because of the unique recruitment methods and specific vulnerabilities. Traffickers often exploit specific developmental and situational vulnerabilities to recruit boys. For example, boys with a history of childhood sexual abuse might be particularly vulnerable to recruitment and sexual exploitation. Unaccompanied boys face further risk, as many are approached for paid sex on their first night of homelessness. Traffickers also often exploit boys with disabilities, such as autism or learning disabilities (Greenbaum, 2020).

4.2.2 Gendered Forced Labour

Boys are exploited through forced labour more than girls. However, these forms of exploitation are generally less visible and less frequently reported, which contributes to the underidentification of male victims. (Europol, 2018). Gender stereotypes within protection systems or in social and cultural norms can contribute to boys being perceived as more independent or less vulnerable, resulting in lower rates of identification and support. This results in boys more easily disappearing into informal labour sectors and criminal networks without attracting attention from authorities (Pocock et al., 2016). As boys are often perceived to be physically stronger and more independent, traffickers might specifically target them for physically demanding labour or criminal activities. Moreover, boys are trafficked into forced criminality, by having to commit property crimes such as thefts, robberies, and burglaries, or be part of online scams (Europol, 2018). Research shows that boys involved in criminal activities are frequently treated by the judicial system as offenders instead of victims of trafficking, which can prevent them from accessing protection systems or support services (Jokinen et al., 2026). Furthermore, boys are targeted for hazardous manual labour in sectors such as construction, agriculture, manufacturing, street-based labour, and transportation of illegal goods. These forms of labour often involve long work hours, unsafe environments, physical exhaustion, injuries, and little to no payment.

Boys are often coerced through debt, psychological abuse, physical abuse, such as beatings, and the confiscation of their documents or through threats to them or their families, making their labour exploitation a form of modern slavery (Jones, 2010). The violence, intimidation, and exploitation of the trafficked boys can have psychological consequences, including trauma, anxiety, depression, and social isolation. At the same time, social expectations around

masculinity and strength potentially make boys less likely to report abuse or seek help, contributing to the continued invisibility of male victims within trafficking and protection systems (Pocock et al., 2016).

4.3 Child Protection Systems in Asylum Contexts

To safeguard children, child protection systems play an important role within asylum and migration settings. Unaccompanied children are especially vulnerable because of insecure legal status, lack of family support, and exposure to exploitation and trafficking (UNHCR, 2014). Children who disappear from asylum centres often move outside formal protection structures, making effective child protection systems needed to prevent disappearances, to identify the risks at an early stage, and to ensure that children receive appropriate care and supervision (Missing Children Europe, 2025).

Social services are responsible for protecting the safety of children. Their involvement ranges from executing legal statutory duties to providing emotional support and advocating for human rights within often hostile political environments (Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003). Therefore, it is important that these services take into account different human rights treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights. Often, especially unaccompanied children who are seeking asylum, have complex emotional issues with a personal history of abandonment, loss, or violence, requiring a holistic, child-centred approach (Newbigging & Thomas, 2011).

The guardianship system is widely regarded as an effective method to ensure the safety of unaccompanied children. Guardians are responsible for safeguarding the best interests of the children and ensuring that their rights, well-being, and daily needs are protected throughout the asylum process (FRA, 2022). The Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, specifically Article 3, mandates that the best interest of the child represents a primary consideration, and Article 20 states that children deprived of their family environment are entitled to special protection from the state. The Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No.6 further clarifies that States should assign a guardian as soon as a separated child is identified (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 1989). The best interests need to be assessed by competent authorities, by conducting individual assessments of each child, taking into account factors such as their views, wellbeing, safety, family situation, and development needs, to ensure all decisions prioritise the child's rights and long-term welfare (Arnold et al., 2014). Guardians are independent representatives and advocates who support children throughout the asylum and care procedures. Their role includes representing children during legal and administrative processes, ensuring that children understand asylum procedures, advocating for access to education, healthcare, and housing, and providing psychological support. Guardians also contribute to preventing disappearances and trafficking by monitoring children's safety and well-being, ensuring that children remain visible within protection systems. Strong guardianship systems can reduce the risk of children falling into exploitative situations by providing stable adult support, which limits unnecessary transfer between facilities, and supporting safe family tracing and reunification procedures (Malmström & Kjaerum, 2015).

However, research shows that there are multiple structural and operational challenges regarding guardianship systems for unaccompanied minors. The flaws identified are the lack of consistency, funding sufficiency, monitoring mechanisms, and specialised training (FRA, 2015). This leads to significant differences in the quality of the support children receive. Conflicting interests also occur when authorities responsible for migration control are simultaneously involved in guardianship responsibilities, which can result in potentially placing immigration objectives above the best interests of the child. In addition, high caseloads, unclear responsibilities, and pressure to speed up asylum procedures can weaken trust between the children and their guardians. As guardians often have limited time and space to work with children on a one-to-one basis, they have a limited ability to provide effective long-term protection and support. (Hedlund & Salmonsson, 2018).

4.4 Policy Responses and Best Practices

Building upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is ratified by all EU Member States, several provisions are particularly relevant to the protection of children in migration. Next to Article 3, which includes the concept of the “child’s best interest”, Article 19 describes the right to protection from violence, Article 20 describes the obligation to provide appropriate care for children deprived of their family environment, and finally Article 22, on refugee children, establishes the right to protection in situations of conflict or migration (Coletta, 2026). Moreover, the EU has specific measures aimed at preventing abuse, trafficking, or exploitation of children in asylum centres. The protection of unaccompanied minors is reinforced through multiple legal and human rights frameworks. At the EU-level, the best interest of the child is also a primary consideration in all actions concerning children as stated in Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. The European Convention on Human Rights protects children against abuse, inhumane treatment, and unlawful detention. These principles are integrated into the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which requires Member States to apply asylum procedures in accordance with children’s rights and the best interests principle (EUAA, 2026).

Multiple EU legal instruments specifically address the protection of unaccompanied minors in asylum systems. The Recast Reception Conditions Directive establishes standards regarding housing, care, guardianship, and family tracing for unaccompanied children, while recognising them as applicants with special reception needs (European Union, 2024). Additionally, the Qualification Directive defines who qualifies as a minor or unaccompanied minor and highlights the importance of family unity and protection status (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2011). The new Asylum Procedure Regulation further strengthens safeguarding by requiring representation for unaccompanied children during asylum procedures and limiting the use of border procedures for minors except in special cases (Naturalisation service, 2026). Together, these instruments aim to strengthen procedural safeguards and ensure that the rights, wellbeing, and protection of unaccompanied children are considered throughout asylum processes.

However, while these legal instruments provide an important foundation, their effectiveness depends on how they are implemented in practice. The following recommendations therefore focus on key areas where protection can be strengthened, including data collection, reception conditions, cross-border cooperation, and child- and gender-sensitive approaches.

4.5 Recommendations for Improved Protection

One of the main critiques to legal systems in the protection of children in asylum systems is that migration control and border security are often prioritised over the fundamental rights and best interests of the child. Critics argue that while new frameworks like the Pact acknowledge child rights in theory, the actual mechanisms frequently result in a protection gaps, where children face increased detention, limited legal support, and systemic invisibility.

4.5.1 Strengthening data collection and tracking

Data collection during registration must respect the child's privacy and dignity. Information should only be shared between authorities when it is necessary to protect the child and prevent harm, while respecting the data protection requirements established under Regulation (EU) 2016/679. Critics also note that data should be collected separately for different age groups, as well as by sex and nationality. This will allow for a better understanding of which groups of children are at the most risk for disappearance and trafficking, resulting in targeted protection measures (Europol, 2018).

4.5.2 Improving reception conditions

It is important to improve reception conditions, as this will create environments that can support active child development and emotional security. Detention can have a negative effect on the mental health, wellbeing, and development of children. Children should not be detained for migration-related reasons. Instead, child-friendly alternatives shall be implemented. Unaccompanied children should be placed in family-based or community settings, rather than large institutional facilities. These environments are better designed to meet the children's needs. Next to this, children should not experience several transfers between reception facilities. When there are stable living arrangements, building trust between children and caregivers can reduce the risk of disappearance (EUAA, 2026).

4.5.3 Enhancing cross-border cooperation

To increase cooperation between different actors, such as child protection agencies, asylum authorities, and social services, there should be secure shared digital systems to exchange information. When information is shared more efficiently, it can improve coordination between agencies, reducing gaps in protection and helping to prevent children from disappearing when they move between different services or countries.

This approach should also be adopted for the documentation of best interest assessments. Any assessment of a child's best interest should be formally recorded and included in the case file of that specific child, ensuring that all the professionals who are involved in the care of the child have access to all relevant information, and increasing consistency with the child's

needs and long-term wellbeing. It is also important that family tracing should start as early as possible, however reunification should only happen when it is safe for the child and in their best interests (EUAA, 2026).

4.5.4 Child and gender-sensitive approaches

Protection systems should always prioritise the wellbeing of the child above migration control objectives. Children should be treated first and foremost as such, rather than as migrants or asylum seekers. During decision-making processes, children should be actively involved so their views, wishes, and concerns are heard and taken into account (Newbigging & Thomas, 2011).

Reception and protection systems should recognise that girls and boys may face different risks, such as sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, and labour exploitation (EUAA, 2026). It is also important that specialised training for frontline professionals, such as police officers, border guards, and social workers, is available. They should receive continuous training on the protection of children and on their best interests to improve identification and support at-risk children (Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) et al., 2021).

6. COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

6.1 United Kingdom

6.1.1 Overview asylum situation in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom (UK) is a common destination country for individuals who are seeking asylum and international protection. Amongst those seeking asylum in the UK, there are several unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who require specific protection and support measures because of their age and circumstances. Between January and March 2026, there were 76,714 asylum applications, which relate to 93,525 people. There was a decrease of 9 percent in comparison to the previous 12 months (Refugee Council, n.d.). This decrease, however, does not necessarily indicate that fewer people are seeking asylum. Rather, it should be understood alongside the continued pressure on the UK asylum system, as many applications remain unresolved and large numbers of people are still waiting for an initial decision. Therefore, even when new applications decrease, the existing backlog continues to place pressure on accommodation, reception services, and support structures. This decrease, however, does not necessarily indicate that fewer people are seeking asylum. Rather, it should be understood alongside the continued pressure on the UK asylum system, as many applications remain unresolved and large numbers of people are still waiting for an initial decision. Therefore, even when new applications decrease, the existing backlog continues to place pressure on accommodation, reception services, and support structures (Cuibus, Walsh, & Sumption, 2026). The most common nationalities of people who apply for asylum are the following: Pakistani (10 percent), Eritrean (9 percent), Iranian (8 percent), Afghan (7 percent), and Bangladeshi (6 percent) (Kirk-Wade, 2026).

6.1.2 Structure of the asylum reception system

The asylum reception system in the UK is a multi-tiered framework that is designed for the initial processing, long-term housing, and individuals seeking international protection. Through the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the asylum dispersal system was introduced. Asylum seekers are allocated accommodation across the country on a “no choice basis” (Broadhead, 2025). New arrivals, following their asylum application, are placed in initial accommodation before being moved into dispersal accommodation while their claims are processed. Because of the pressure on the asylum system and accommodation shortage, the UK has also relied on contingency housing, such as hotels and other temporary facilities. Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) are used to detain individuals whose applications have failed or who are waiting for removal. Even though these facilities are meant to be used for those close to removal, they are also often used for individuals in different stages of the asylum process (Jorgensen, 2026).

6.1.3 Disappearances of children in care

Even though the UK asylum system includes a range of reception and accommodation facilities, which are intended to provide support and safe housing, not all individuals remain within these protection structures. This is especially true in the case of children, as significant numbers have been reported on children missing from care and accommodation settings. More than 2,000 children went missing from care in the UK in 2024, of which 37 percent were trafficked children and 13 percent unaccompanied children. These numbers are probably underreported, as not all local authorities have provided relevant data. There is no central government data on the number of trafficked and unaccompanied children who go missing from care centres, which makes identification and protection challenging (Hunter & Durán, 2025).

6.1.4 Family reunification policies

As of September 2025, the UK’s Labour government announced a temporary suspension of the Refugee Family Reunion route. This had previously allowed recognised refugees and people granted humanitarian protection to bring their immediate family members to the UK without meeting income or language requirements (UNHCR, n.d.). This has led to a high number of asylum seekers and sponsoring family members, according to the government, putting a strain on public services. While the government is creating a new and stricter framework on family reunification, refugees need to apply under the standard family migration rules for British citizens and settled residents. This requires the recognised refugees to earn at least 29,000 pounds per year, and the applicants need to have a basic level of English (i.e., A1 level). This makes it almost impossible for family members to come to the UK, as many refugees have a low average income. Data suggest that between 2020 and 2022, 28 percent of adults who had come to the UK to seek asylum, who lived in the country for less than 10 years, were employed, had an annual income of 20,000 pounds for men and 18,000 for women, which is below the established income threshold (Jorgensen, 2025).

6.2 Ireland

6.2.1 Overview asylum situation in Ireland

The asylum procedure in Ireland is a multi-faced process in which individuals have to go through several stages of the process. At first, individuals have to apply for asylum at the International Protection Office (IPO), which can be done at an airport, seaport, or at one of the two offices of the IPO (UNHCR Ireland, n.d.). After this, an individual will have to take part in several interviews, which function to get sufficient information about them (UNHCR Ireland, n.d.). Once the IPO gains enough information about the individual, a decision will be made, in which the individual will either be granted refugee status, subsidiary protection, or will see their application rejected (UNHCR Ireland, n.d.). In total in 2025 there were 13,162 asylum applications in Ireland. The largest shares of applicants were from Somalia (15,4 percent), Nigeria (14,7 percent), and Pakistan (12,8 percent) (International Protection Office, 2025). Data on the number of children that applied for asylum in 2025 has not been published yet. However, in February 2025, there were 7,031 children residing in asylum accommodations (Irish Refugee Council, 2025).

6.2.2 Child Protection within Asylum centres

The main organisation responsible for child protection within asylum centres in Ireland is the Child and Family Agency, called Tusla. Cases where unaccompanied minors are applying for asylum will be referred to Tusla, which will support these minors during their asylum process (IPO, n.d.). Tusla provides children with a wide range of services to prevent the children from going missing and being exposed to harm. Once an unaccompanied child arrives in Ireland, a plan will be established, and if applicable Tusla will make an asylum application on behalf of the child (Tusla, n.d.). Children under the age of 12 will immediately be placed in a foster family, and children over the age of 12 will temporarily be placed in a registered children's home (Tusla, n.d.). Within these homes, children will be repeatedly assessed to have better matchings with foster families in the future (Tusla, n.d.). Through the social assessment process, children may be considered for family reunification or voluntary return to their country of origin, and they are eligible to receive medical screening as well as psychological and educational assessments (Tusla, n.d.). Moreover, individuals are able to report any concerns about the safety of children involved in the asylum process directly towards Tusla (Tusla, n.d.).

6.2.3 Missing Children in Ireland

Despite the efforts of Tusla to protect vulnerable children within the asylum process, there are still cases of missing children. Children are being reported as missing when they are absent from their care placement for more than 15 minutes (Bolton, 2026). The most recent data shows that on May 7th, 2026, 30 children were reported missing, consisting of 23 unaccompanied minors (Bolton, 2026). Out of these 30 children, 22 were reported missing for over 2 weeks (Bolton, 2026). Due to the fact that children are already seen as missing when they are absent for more than 15 minutes, there are some cases in which a child is reported missing on several occasions. This feature is designed with the goal to ensure and

maximise the safety of children by facilitating rapid responses after a child is missing from Tusla's care. A case in Ireland illustrated that a single child was reported missing over 274 times in a single year (Irish Associations of Social Workers, 2025).

6.2.4 Policy responses and challenges

The disappearances of missing children within the asylum process is a significant policy issue in Ireland. Investigations into the cases of missing children show several drawbacks, including negligence of national protocol, poor governance, insufficient data, and lack of social workers (Holland & Byrne, 2025). These drawbacks exacerbate the already existing issue of missing children. However, Tusla already worked to mitigate the consequences of these drawbacks. For instance, Tusla is increasing its staff, enhancing inter-agency collaboration, and implementing more robust governance (Holland & Byrne, 2025). These policy responses will hopefully make sure that children will be less likely to go missing under Tusla's care.

5.3 Italy

5.3.1 Overview of the Current Situation in the Country

Italy remains one of the main entry points for migrants and asylum seekers arriving in the EU via the Mediterranean (Frontex, 2025). Its location makes it a key destination for people travelling from North Africa and the Middle East, placing continued pressure on the country's asylum and reception systems (ECRE, 2025a). The Italian reception framework includes hotspots, first-reception centres, Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS), and the Reception and Integration System (SAI) (ECRE, 2025b). However, access to accommodation and support services varies depending on an individual's legal status and stage of the asylum procedure (ECRE, 2025c).

5.3.2 Central Mediterranean Route and Arrivals

Most migrants arriving in Italy by sea depart from Libya or Tunisia, often after spending months in difficult conditions in transit countries (Høvring, 2024). The route is also one of the deadliest in the world. Migrants frequently travel in overcrowded and dangerous boats, resulting in numerous deaths and disappearances at sea each year (Høvring, 2024). Children are particularly vulnerable during these journeys, especially those travelling alone, as they face heightened risks of violence, exploitation, and trafficking (SOS Mediterranean, 2025). In 2025, more than 12,100 unaccompanied minors arrived in Italy after crossing the Mediterranean Sea, while over 17,500 refugee children and adolescents were residing in reception facilities across the country (ANSA, 2026). Most arrivals by sea are concentrated in southern Italy, particularly in the Sicilian region, specifically on the island of Lampedusa, which are the primary landing points for boats departing from Libya and Tunisia (UNICEF, n.d.). As a result, Sicily hosts a large proportion of newly arrived migrants, including many unaccompanied minors. Smaller numbers of migrants also arrive through coastal areas in Calabria and Sardinia (Agenzia Nova, 2026). In addition to sea arrivals, Italy receives

migrants travelling along the Western Balkan route, with Trieste functioning as a key entry point for those entering the country overland via Slovenia and Croatia (Wallis, 2025). These different routes contribute to the continued pressure on Italy's reception and child protection systems.

5.3.3 Conditions in Reception Centres

Reception conditions for migrant children in Italy vary considerably across the country, despite the existence of a legal framework designed to ensure adequate protection and support. Unaccompanied minors are entitled to accommodation, healthcare, education, legal assistance, and psychological support. However, access to these services often depends on the type of facility and the resources available at the local level. In practice, many children spend prolonged periods in first-reception or temporary centres before being transferred to specialised accommodation intended for minors (ECRE, 2025d).

In some reception facilities, children may remain in environments that are not equipped to address their educational and developmental needs. Concerns have also been raised regarding the uneven quality of care provided across different regions and centres. As a result, the level of protection and support available to unaccompanied minors can vary significantly, potentially affecting both their well-being and their long-term integration prospects (ECRE, 2025e).

5.3.4 Risks Faced by Unaccompanied Minors

Unaccompanied minors are widely recognised as one of the most vulnerable groups within migration flows. Separated from their families and support networks, they often face significant risks both during their journey and after arriving in the host country. Many have experienced violence, exploitation, trafficking, or abuse before reaching Europe, while others remain exposed to these threats throughout the migration process. Their young age, uncertain legal status, and dependence on adults make them particularly susceptible to manipulation and exploitation (EUAA, n.d.)

Italian legislation provides a number of safeguards for unaccompanied minors, including the principle that the best interests of the child should guide all reception measures, access to dedicated accommodation, the appointment of a guardian, healthcare, education, and psychological support. The law also envisages specialised reception facilities and individual assessments aimed at identifying vulnerabilities and ensuring appropriate protection measures. However, significant challenges remain in practice. Due to reduced places in specialised facilities, some minors spend extended periods in temporary centres or are accommodated in facilities intended for adults. Reports have also highlighted overcrowding, delays in transfers, difficulties in age-assessment procedures, and limited access to psychological and legal support. These shortcomings may increase the risk of exploitation, mental health problems, social exclusion, and disappearance from the reception system, particularly among the most vulnerable children (ECRE, 2025f).

5.4 Belgium

5.4.1 Overview of the current situation in the country

In 2025, Belgium registered 34,439 applicants for international protection, a 13 percent decrease from 2024 (CGRS, 2026). Of these, around 8,330 were under 18, accounting for roughly 24 percent of that year's applicants (Eurostat, 2026). The main countries of origin were Afghanistan, Palestine, Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Turkey (CGRS, 2026). Among those who declared themselves unaccompanied, 971 were considered unaccompanied minors after age assessment by the Guardianship Service (CGRS, 2026).

5.4.2 Reception model and NGO involvement

Once in Belgium, minors like adults will be taken to the intake centre, namely the Klein Kasteeltje (Small Castle), where a first screening happens, and staff find them a centre adapted to their needs, though families and minors are given priority for a place, while single men are not (Fedasil, n.d.-a). Minors must then register with the Federal Public Service Interior, which manages the Immigration Office. They then receive support from Fedasil (i.e., the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers), are placed in a reception centre, and attend interviews before receiving a final decision. Unaccompanied minors are assigned a guardian who will help them throughout the procedure and, if the decision is negative, sometimes assist them in appealing (Fedasil, n.d.-a).

There are around 100 asylum centres today in Belgium, run by Fedasil, Caritas, Croix-Rouge, or Rode Kruis (Fedasil, n.d.-b; ECRE, 2025a). In 2022, those centres comprised 41 percent families and almost 10 percent unaccompanied minors; overall, children accounted for 30 percent of the population in those centres (Fournier et al., 2023). The reception model functions today under constant pressure in what NGOs call a “normalised crisis mode,” with succeeding crises (e.g., the ones in Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, Palestine) creating a temporary but high influx of asylum seekers (Fournier et al., 2023). The reception network became saturated (in 2024, 10,191 people with a need for reception could not be given a place), so new facilities open in an emergency and then close when the influx subsides. That same year, 3,796 places were created, but 2,622 were closed (ECRE, 2025b). However, the temporality of centres significantly diminishes the quality of reception and increases the risk that centres are not adapted for children. The asylum and reception policy is often criticised as not adapted to children. The normalised crisis mode has important consequences for children's lives, with guardians and staff changing, moving from one centre or school to another, and centres not being adapted for them (Fournier et al., 2023).

5.4.3 Improvements

While the situation in Belgium is still highly criticised and unadapted to children, the country has also shown some positive changes. In 2024, for example, a national law was passed, banning the detention of children, whether accompanied or alone, in closed detention centres in the context of returns; such families may now be held only in semi-closed "return houses" rather than in closed centres (ECRE, 2025c; IDC, 2024). The measure is contested, however,

and the current minister has indicated it might be revised during this legislative period (ECRE, 2025c).

7. CONCLUSION

The findings of this report demonstrate that, despite extensive legal protections and policy commitments at both the European and international levels, significant challenges continue to affect asylum-seeking children across Europe. While the CEAA and international human rights instruments establish clear obligations regarding child protection, implementation remains uneven among Member States. Differences in reception conditions, access to healthcare and education, guardianship systems, and protection mechanisms continue to create disparities in the experiences of children seeking asylum.

Particularly concerning is the disappearance of children from asylum reception systems. These disappearances are not isolated incidents as they often reflect larger structural issues, including inadequate reception conditions, delays in family reunification, insufficient guardianship, lack of child-friendly information, and fragmented data-sharing mechanisms. Once children disappear, they face heightened risks of trafficking, forced labour, sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse, often becoming invisible to protection systems designed to safeguard them. The report further highlights the importance of viewing asylum-seeking children not solely as beneficiaries of protection but as human rights holders whose best interests must remain a primary consideration in all decisions affecting them. Ensuring safe accommodation, access to education and healthcare, effective guardianship, mental health support, and robust monitoring systems is essential to have a child-centred asylum system.

Protecting refugee and asylum-seeking children requires more than legal commitments. It demands coordinated action, adequate resources, and sustained political will. Strengthening cooperation among European institutions, Member States, international organisations, and civil society is essential to preventing disappearances, combating exploitation, and ensuring that every child seeking refuge in Europe can grow up in safety, dignity, and hope.

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