



Child Protection

Snapshot of Plan International's Impact
in East and Central Europe (2022-2025)

About Plan International's Ukraine Humanitarian Refugee Crisis Response

Plan International initiated its Ukraine Humanitarian Refugee Crisis Response immediately following the escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 by setting up operations in Poland, Moldova, and Romania. The organisation established a presence within Ukraine in August 2022 and has since been amplifying civil society partners' integrated humanitarian programming in East and Central Europe (ECE).

Plan International and partners' humanitarian response aims to reduce the vulnerabilities and risks faced by refugees, displaced and conflict-affected people inside Ukraine and host countries. Whilst providing direct life-saving humanitarian assistance, Plan International's objective is also to address structural inequalities and promote social, gender, and economic justice across ECE by increasing the resilience, well-being, and agency of girls, young people, as well as minority or non-dominant groups.

By consistently maintaining partner spending above 70%, Plan International's localised and partner-led approach has ensured faster, more contextual and sustainable delivery of assistance, whilst strengthening the long-term capacity of local civil society actors in ECE. From 2022 to 2025, this approach has allowed Plan International to reach more than 1.7 million people across 65 partners and 87 projects in four countries.

Plan International's reach by country in ECE



Key insights

Plan International and partners' child protection work across ECE has focused on strengthening systems, empowering local actors, and ensuring vulnerable children receive tailored support. In Ukraine and host countries, interventions have thus been designed to create safer and more inclusive environments for children, adolescents, and youth (CAY):

- The referral of CAY to support services, capacity strengthening for key protection specialists, and family-level protection approaches have enabled Plan International and partners to create a protec-

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people reached by Plan International and partners' **child protection programming** in ECE.

tive and emotionally healthy environment for CAY in ECE.

- Child protection interventions also supported the integration and well-being of refugee CAY, including children with disabilities.

Impact of Child Protection Interventions¹

Plan International and partners' child protection interventions have enabled the referral of CAY to support services. In **Ukraine**, partners played a pivotal role in enhancing case management and referral mechanisms. These systems have enabled state services and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to identify and support at-risk children, including those displaced, living with disabilities, or in foster care, through continuous and individualised assistance. As this support ensured children's specific needs were identified and addressed, it reduced protection risks and supported their well-being and social inclusion.

In host countries, Plan International also strengthened case management and referral mechanisms. In **Moldova**, for instance, Plan International supported the rollout of the national database, Primero+, through its local partner. This enabled the systematic registration and case management for at-risk children, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, children with damaged documents, those with disabilities or with caregivers with disabilities, and those removed from their families as a protective measure.

Similarly, in **Poland**, Plan International partnered with leading child protection organisations to support overwhelmed systems. Services were delivered through recreational centres, institutions, and helplines, including Ukrainian-language support, with multicultural programming and case management addressing both immediate and long-term needs. Additionally, in **Romania**, whilst Plan International's partners directly addressed the unmet needs of the most vulnerable children and caregivers, they also collaborated with authorities by bringing cases of child protection to their attention.

Capacity strengthening for key protection specialists has also enabled the creation of a protective environment for CAY. Evidence from a project implemented in **Ukraine** until mid-2024 suggests that training delivered on Child Protection Minimum Standards and Plan International's **Adolescent Life Skills and Parenting (PALS)** programme increased the awareness of specialists working in educational institutions, social services, public associations, and government authorities in Donetsk Oblast. The training enhanced specialists' knowledge of key protection concepts in the context of the humanitarian crisis in

¹ Plan International has been using an integrated approach in its humanitarian response, working across multiple programmatic areas in projects. Whilst Plan International's entire strategy and project portfolio in ECE is humanitarian, interventions including protection and education work are humanitarian and often life-saving too.



Father plays with his son at an event to mark the first International day of Play © Plan International

Ukraine, whilst supporting the development of skills to foster their professional resilience. To strengthen cooperation in the field of child protection in Ukraine, this approach was complemented by meetings and round tables with local authorities. In the last year, Plan International and partners also conducted various capacity-building programmes, including training for social workers on case management in conflict settings.

About Plan International's PALS programme

Plan International's global PALS programme supports adolescents and their caregivers in emergency and protracted crisis settings. It aims to equip adolescents aged 10 to 19 years and their caregivers with essential information, skills and resources to support adolescent health, safety and well-being in times of crisis.¹

In host countries, training delivered by Plan International and partners to specialists has also strengthened

human and institutional capacity to respond more effectively to the protection needs of refugees from Ukraine. In Moldova, training through partners addressed capacity gaps, particularly given the rapid expansion of Moldova's child protection workforce in 2023 and 2024. Partners supported newly appointed specialists with case management and inter-institutional coordination, whilst helping them gain the procedural clarity required for daily decision-making. Plan International's partners also supported the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Moldova to implement the Restart Social Assistance System Reform in 2023. This included extensive capacity-building activities for child protection and social workers at different levels. Finally, training on the Child-Friendly Feedback Mechanism has also strengthened the capacity of organisations working with refugees from Ukraine and vulnerable communities in Moldova.

In Poland too, Plan International's translation and rollout of the Child-Friendly Feedback Mechanism manual have been key to localising global standards and enhancing shared ownership to improve national-level safeguarding practice. Plan International's partner also implemented activities focused on embedding child protection and safeguarding standards in hospitals and sports clubs, aligning closely with

national priorities under the 2024 Kamilek Act, which enhanced child protection standards across organisations working with minors. This intervention directly responded to institutional gaps in implementing these legal requirements. By training more than 900 health-care professionals and 98 sports clubs, the project strengthened institutional readiness and offered practical tools to comply with new standards.

Family-level protection approaches for host and refugee communities have also been instrumental in developing emotionally healthy environments for CAY. Across interventions delivered by partners in Romania and Moldova, training, including PALS sessions for caregivers, enhanced relationships of both host and refugee families. The development of social-emotional skills during the sessions improved the psychosocial well-being of caregivers. Networks created through activities also evolved into sustainable peer-support systems to exchange advice, share cultural experiences, and provide emotional reassurance. In both countries, the community hubs where sessions were delivered thus became informal gathering points for host and refugee families and enabled the creation of new support networks.

Therefore, beyond systems and training, child protection intervention by Plan International and partners supported integration and well-being through non-formal education and livelihood initiatives. In Romania, for instance, evidence suggests that activities that fostered leadership, life skills, and social cohesion empowered youth from refugee and host communities. The establishment of adolescent-friendly spaces provided them with safe environments for learning and interaction, which increased young people's self-confidence, communication abilities, and social integration. Similarly, integrated child protection interventions in Poland demonstrated the value of integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices within the Polish education system. Whilst this approach contributed to creating a more cohesive environment for both Ukrainian and Polish adolescents, it improved their well-being and emotional and social resilience.

Critically, child protection interventions also supported the integration of children with disabilities in their new communities.

² Until April 2024, Plan International's Spynkas project in Poland has provided critical safe spaces to support refugee children with disabilities from Ukraine. Spynkas combined childcare and access to specialist care in the Ukrainian language to address the needs of all children, regardless of disability or diagnosis.

Responding to the specific needs of CAY with integrated programming

Whilst Plan International's child protection approach supports referrals and direct service delivery, interventions often integrate education or MHPSS components to respond to the needs of CAY from Ukraine. For instance, key activities include supporting CAY in staying in school, attending online education activities, and integrating SEL or language classes into their curriculum. Psychosocial support and life skills sessions are also incorporated to provide them with resources to enhance their psychological well-being.

In Ukraine, for example, partners endorsed the creation of inclusive resource centres to meet the needs of children with special needs and foster a more inclusive approach to social service provision. The centres supported both the children and their caregivers, providing essential financial assistance for medical check-ups, educational materials, and specialised services, including speech therapy. Interventions also funded social workers to provide services directly at home, thereby significantly improving the quality of life for households.

Similarly, in Poland, partners contributed to creating inclusive environments for refugee children from Ukraine living with disabilities. By adapting to the needs of children through safe spaces called Spynkas, children with disabilities from Ukraine found a sense of normality by socialising amongst other Ukrainian children.² Other interventions in Poland developed a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach to enable personalised care for children from Ukraine and Poland living with disabilities. Whilst collaboration amongst specialists led to improvements in both communication and motor skills, family assistants also played a crucial role in reducing the isolation of refugee children by supporting their integration into Polish schools.



What are the key child protection needs and challenges in ECE?

Selected findings from Plan International's research

The escalation of the war in Ukraine has impacted the sense of safety and protection of adolescent girls, boys, and their caregivers. However, as Plan International's research suggestsⁱⁱ, child protection concerns differ for those residing in Ukraine and those in host countries.

Key protection risks in Ukraine

In **Ukraine**, the primary concern is the threat to personal safety from bombs and violence directly connected to the war. Whilst the dangers from bombs affect adolescents' physical and psychological health, the insecurity caused by the escalation of the war has greatly limited their freedom of movement. As demonstrated by Plan International's research, adolescents' sense of safety in Ukraine is also threatened by the increased burdens on their caregivers, especially single female parents. In some cases, caregivers may need to prioritise providing for adolescents' basic needs over supervising them. Reduced adult supervision heightens the risk of accidents and exposes adolescents to dangers they may not be able to handle on their own.

Child protection risks are worse for vulnerable groups in ECE

Plan International's research in ECE also highlights that certain groups, including unaccompanied minors, adolescents with disabilities, and girls from ethnic minorities such as Roma, face increased protection risks. As the war worsens existing vulnerabilities, these adolescents encounter multiple risks, including the breakdown of their support systems and exposure to different types of violence.

In **Ukraine**, **adolescents with disabilities** face significant protection challenges due to the war, such as difficulties accessing safe accommodation and participating in evacuations necessary for their safety. In **Poland**, refugee children with disabilities and their families encounter double stigma. Whilst behaviours associated with their condition can sometimes be seen as complex or problematic, many also face discrimination because of their refugee status, which makes it harder for caregivers to manage their children's needs and care.


In addition, Plan International's findings demonstrate that the escalation of the war has exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of **LGBTQI+ community members in Ukraine**. Where individuals may feel hesitant to reveal their gender identity or sexual orientation out of fear of stigma and discrimination, they can also encounter difficulties in finding shelter as well as accessing basic necessities and inclusive services.

Young people's agency


Adolescents are typically not involved in the **decision-making process**, including decisions to relocate due to the crisis, and therefore feel disconnected from family decisions. Because of the pressure, stress, and anxiety caused by war, families reported that caregivers often need to make quick decisions for their family's welfare. This can result in key decisions being made without consulting adolescents. Despite their reduced agency and decision-making power, Plan International's consultation with young people demonstrates that they want to be actively involved in their country's **reconstruction and recovery**. Young people have clear opinions to contribute to the discussion about rebuilding Ukraine's economy, energy infrastructure, hospitals, homes, workplaces, and schools.

Interested to learn more about child protection needs and challenges in ECE?


See the following reports:





[Young People on the War in Ukraine \(June 2023\)](#)



[Adolescent Girls in Crisis – Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania \(June 2024\)](#)



[Building Bridges: Towards Inclusion for Refugee Children living with Disabilities in Poland \(October 2024\)](#)

References

- i Plan International (2021) PALS: Adolescent Life Skills and Parenting in Humanitarian Settings. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2025/07/ANNEX-F-PALS-Programme-Brief.pdf>.
- ii Plan International (2023) Young People on the War in Ukraine. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/publications/young-people-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>; Plan International (2024) Adolescent Girls in Crisis – Voices from Ukraine, Poland and Romania. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/publications/girls-in-crisis-ukraine/>; Plan International (2024) Building Bridges: Towards Inclusion for Refugee Children living with Disabilities in Poland. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/poland-en/publications/research-needs-children-living-with-disabilities/>.



About

Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.




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