

SAFETY AND PROTECTION OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN FLEEING FROM WAR IN UKRAINE (CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA)

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Summary

The article presents an analysis of the actions taken by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova to ensure the safety and protection of unaccompanied children and children taken by third parties from Ukraine as a result of the war. It is based on assessing existing services in Moldova for refugee children from Ukraine and highlighting the strengths and weaknesses in ensuring their protection. The research program included: (i) desk analysis of statistical data and recent reports regarding the situation of people displaced from Ukraine in the Republic of Moldova, with an emphasis on knowing the situation of unaccompanied children and those accompanied by third parties; (ii) carrying out eight in-depth individual interviews with representatives of international organizations, different social service providers, representatives of central and local authorities. The research data presents the involvement of government authorities in the development of the legal framework for the protection of unaccompanied or accompanied children by third parties in Ukraine, following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, along with the contribution of central and local authorities, international organizations and civil society to the development of services for children-refugees at border crossing points, in refugee placement centers and communities.

Keywords: unaccompanied children, separated children, children accompanied by third parties, safety, protection

Sommaire

L'article présente une analyse des mesures prises par les autorités de la République de Moldova pour assurer la sécurité et la protection des enfants non accompagnés et des enfants emportés par des tiers depuis l'Ukraine à la suite de la guerre. Il est basé sur l'évaluation des services existants en Moldavie pour les enfants réfugiés d'Ukraine et sur la mise en évidence des forces et des faiblesses pour assurer leur protection. Le programme de recherche fourni : (i) une analyse documentaire des données statistiques et des rapports récents concernant la situation des personnes déplacées d'Ukraine en République de Moldova, en mettant l'accent sur la connaissance de la situation des enfants non

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accompagnés et de ceux accompagnés par des tiers ; (ii) la réalisation de huit entretiens individuels approfondis avec des représentants d'organisations internationales, différents prestataires de services sociaux, des représentants des autorités centrales et locales. Les données de recherche montrent l'implication des autorités gouvernementales dans l'élaboration d'un cadre juridique pour la protection des enfants non accompagnés ou accompagnés par des tiers en Ukraine, conformément à la Convention des Nations Unies relative aux droits de l'enfant, ainsi que la contribution des autorités centrales et locales, des organisations internationales et de la société civile au développement de services pour les enfants réfugiés aux points de passage frontaliers, dans les centres de placement de réfugiés et dans les communautés.

Mots clés: enfants non accompagnés, enfants séparés, enfants accompagnés de tiers, sécurité, protection.

Rezumat

Articolul prezintă analiza acțiunilor întreprinse de autoritățile din Republica Moldova pentru asigurarea siguranței și protecției copiilor neînsoțiți și însoțiți de persoane terțe din Ucraina în rezultatul războiului. Acesta se bazează pe evaluarea serviciilor existente în Moldova pentru copiii refugiați din Ucraina, precum și evidențierea punctelor forte și a celor slabe în asigurarea protecției acestora. Programul de cercetare a inclus: (i) analiza de birou a datelor statistice și a rapoartelor recente, privind situația persoanelor strămutate din Ucraina în Republica Moldova, cu accent pe cunoașterea situației copiilor neînsoțiți și a celor însoțiți de persoane terțe; (ii) realizarea a 8 interviuri individuale aprofundate cu reprezentanții organizațiilor internaționale, diferiți prestatori de servicii sociale, reprezentanți ai autorităților centrale și locale. Datele cercetării prezintă implicarea autorităților guvernamentale în dezvoltarea cadrului legal pentru protecția copiilor neînsoțiți sau însoțiți de persoane terțe din Ucraina, în conformitate cu Convenția ONU privind Drepturile Copilului, alături de contribuția autorităților centrale și locale, organizațiilor internaționale și a societății civile la dezvoltarea serviciilor pentru copiii-refugiați la punctele de trecere a frontierei, în centrele de plasament pentru refugiați și în comunități.

Cuvinte cheie: copii neînsoțiți, copii separați, copii însoțiți de persoane terțe, siguranță, protecție

1. Introduction

The war in Ukraine has caused a high level of forced displacement of the civil population in Europe, with a significant impact on neighboring countries in particular. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, November 2022), around 7.8 million people were displaced. Children make up an essential part of all refugees from the war in Ukraine, according to EuroChild, Child Circle, and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, May 2022).

Since February 24, 2022, until now, the borders of the Republic of Moldova have been crossed by more than 650 thousand displaced people (90% Ukrainian citizens and 10% third-country nationals). The large majority of displaced people were transiting the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The flow of displaced people varied in intensity. Within February-March, about 10-15 thousand daily

entries and exits have been recorded; in April – about 5 thousand, while within May-August – 3 thousand, September –December – around 2.5 thousand.

More than 98 500 people have remained in Moldova. The *Gender-Based Violence Safety Audit Report* (UNHCR and others, August 2022) reveals that the Republic of Moldova hosts the highest displaced people per capita. Women (64% of the total number of adult refugees from Ukraine) and children (49% of the total number of refugees) represent the large majority of displaced people (UNHCR, November 2022). Among refugee children from Ukraine, there are also unaccompanied children and those accompanied by third parties.

Moldovan authorities have immediately responded to challenges triggered by the war in Ukraine, creating a Single Crisis Management Center to coordinate the assistance and protection provided by various stakeholders (government and private). More than 90 external development partners supported the Republic of Moldova authorities: UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, OIM, UN Women, OHCHR, USAID, UNAIDS, OSCE, World Vision, Terre des Hommes, ACTED, ADRA, Caritas, CLEAR Global, Keystone, Palladium, Help Age, OXFAM, Medical Corps, etc.

The purpose of the paper is to analyze how the Republic of Moldova authorities responded to the needs of unaccompanied and separated children fleeing Ukraine and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the services provided.

2. Research framework

According to General Comment nr.6 (UN, 2005) of the Committee of the Rights of the Child, the **unaccompanied children** (also so called **unaccompanied minors**) are children, as defined in article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, *who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so*. This definition was taken as a basis in art. 2 (f) of the Temporary Protection Directive 2001/55 of the European Union Council. European Union law does not contain a legal definition of **separated children**, but the notion is also defined in General Comment nr.6 (2005). *Separated children are children, as defined in article 1 of the Convention, who have been separated from both parents or their previous legal or customary primary caregiver but not necessarily from other relatives*. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members. In this paper, the term 'unaccompanied children' was used, as defined by General Comment nr.6 and Temporary Protection Directive 2001/55. However, by separated child, we will understand a child who arrives on the territory of the Republic of Moldova accompanied by relatives, known (non-related) adults, or other adults (third parties).

The **research methodology** of the paper was focused on the analysis of the existing services for displaced people from Ukraine, especially unaccompanied and separated children, as well as on the experience of representatives from various public institutions, civil society organizations (CSOs), and international agencies engaged in the protection and assistance of displaced people, especially of children.

The research plan comprised: (i) a desk review of statistics and recent reports about the situation of displaced people from Ukraine in the Republic of Moldova, focusing on the situation of unaccompanied and separated children; (ii) the conduction of 8 individual in-depth interviews (III) with representatives of the international organization, social service providers, representatives of central and local authorities (district). Field data collection was carried out between 20.11.2022-30.11.2022. The reference moment for the data presented is 30.11.2022.

3. Stages and peculiarities of the response of Moldovan authorities to the needs of displaced people from Ukraine

Managing refugee flows from Ukraine in the Republic of Moldova is essential to differentiate three stages. First stage „*chaotic*”, when the authorities were trying to find ways to meet the urgent needs of displaced people from Ukraine, establish a refugee crisis management system, identify and remove specific gaps in this process, to establish partnerships with international agencies and CSOs. The massive flow of displaced people characterizes this stage, most of the refugees being in transit on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The displaced persons, at this stage, were women with children and men „*wealthy, with very expensive cars not requiring support from Moldovan authorities,*” also children accompanied by relatives or other adults. The period refers to February-April 2022.

In the second stage, the refugees’ management system became more functional, but the flow of displaced people decreased. Many of those who crossed the state border were staying in the Republic of Moldova. At this stage, the flow of displaced people had a high level of vulnerability „*people who have nothing... really in need, especially women and children, we did not see men anymore.*” Mainly, the most vulnerable people have remained in the Republic of Moldova: mothers with small children, older people, including those with serious health issues unable to travel or travel with difficulty, people without ID, people that do not speak other foreign languages (except Russian), people who have left behind close relatives in Ukraine (spouses, parents) and those who wanted to turn back home as soon as possible. The period refers to May-September 2022.

The third stage is the „*autumn-winter period.*” At this stage, the flow of displaced people could increase due to weather conditions and damage to Ukraine's energy system. In the 3ed stage, the flow of displaced people „*calmed down,*” and people crossing the border are more informed and come with an established destination: relatives, acquaintances, temporary placement centers for refugees, and other placement centers.

Refugees who are staying in the Republic of Moldova are: (i) people that have relatives/kinship with Moldovan citizens, (ii) people who do not speak foreign languages, (iii) people with limited financial resources, (iv) elderly people or with many children, (v) Roma people or other categories of Ukrainians, without identity documents, (vi) unaccompanied and separated children etc.

4. The protection provided to displaced people from Ukraine

Moldovan authorities have responded promptly to challenges caused by the war in Ukraine, creating a Single Crisis Management Center. The dopomoga.gov.md site was created to meet the information needs of displaced people as well as a *Green line* (0 800 800 11), and the *Helpline* of the Bureau of Migration and Asylum (BMA) (0 800 015 27), were established to provide information support 24/7 on all issues.

Measures taken by Moldovan authorities in providing protection to displaced people from Ukraine were supported by development partners (UN agencies in Moldova, international organizations, etc.). All the activities carried out by the UN agencies in Moldova comply with objectives set by Moldovan authorities, while certain agencies also have separate memorandums with several structures. Working groups were created, including representatives of public authorities, international organizations, and CSOs, with the support of development partners to ensure the effective coordination of activities. CSOs have also been included in providing services to displaced people alongside the international stakeholders: International Center „La Strada”, Tdh Moldova, Diaconia, Casmed, Caritas Moldova, Help Age Moldova, Keystone Moldova, Women's Law Center, Child, Community, Family PA, Home Care, National Center for Preventing Child Abuse, Association for Child and Family Empowerment „AVE Copiii” etc. A special role in providing social services at the local level is played by Social Assistance Territorial Structures (SATS). Engagement of SATS by international and local organizations streamlined assistance to displaced people, avoidance of conflict situations, disappointment, etc.

National legislation regulates in detail the entry, stay, and exit of foreigners on/from the territory of the Republic of Moldova, granting and prolonging the right of residence, etc. Following the international obligations, Moldova established four forms of protection for foreigners, according to *Law on asylum*, no.270/2008: (i) *refugee status*; (ii) *humanitarian protection*; (iii) *temporary protection*; (iv) *political asylum*. Taking into account the massive flow of refugees from Ukraine, Moldovan authorities have established for them a **special visa-free regime**. Consequently, the displaced citizens of Ukraine can enter and remain legally on the territory of the Republic of Moldova with different types of documents (birth certificates, delegated authority documents, electronic documents, expired documents, etc.). Protection for displaced persons from Ukraine, used in the Republic of Moldova under the state emergency, goes beyond what can provide temporary protection.

The BMA has registered 11430 asylum applications since the beginning of the armed conflict in Ukraine. Men fleeing war from Ukraine, especially those who crossed the state border illegally, apply for asylum more often. Claiming asylum allows them to avoid punishment for illegal entry or stay on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. However, of the 11430 asylum applications, only 3626 are

active. In other cases, the examination of the asylum request was stopped because the refugees have left or later refused this form of protection.²

The needs of displaced women from Ukraine, including children, are diverse. However, the most important refer to accommodation, medical aid, psychological support and assistance, inclusion of children in pre-school and school systems, vocational training and employment, etc. Moldovan authorities have met the needs for accommodation services of refugees in a record time. Besides housing provided by volunteers, the authorities have made the activity of existing places more efficient by setting up new spaces (dormitories that were not used, former residential institutions, etc.). Certain placement centers and student dormitories were closed but reopened to accommodate displaced people from Ukraine, making the necessary renovation and adjustments quickly. Several summer camps, monasteries, and military units have also provided support during the massive flow of displaced people. 132 temporary placement centers for refugees were authorized by National Social Assistance Agency (NSAA)³ to provide housing to displaced people beginning on February 24, 2022.

5. Challenges related to the protection of unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine

A challenge faced by Moldovan authorities was that a parent/legal representative accompanied not all children from Ukraine. The flows of refugees also included: (i) unaccompanied children; (ii) children accompanied by third parties, including foreign nationals (Table 1). These circumstances prompted representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP)⁴ and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) to take immediate action to develop the legal framework for the protection of unaccompanied children or accompanied by third parties, from Ukraine, following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore, the *Regulations establishing the intersectoral cooperation mechanism for identifying, assisting and monitoring children at risk coming from Ukraine during the state of war in Ukraine (Intersectoral mechanism)* were developed and approved by Commission for Emergency Situations (CES) Decision no. 14 of 14.04.2022. In this way, Intersectoral cooperation mechanism was established for the identification, evaluation, assistance, referral, and monitoring of children at risk, coming from

² In-depth individual interview with the head of BMA (III_2).

³ NSAA is the administrative authority subordinated to the MLSP empowered to improve the quality of social assistance provided to people by implementing field-related policies, and among the duties are the management of financial resources to subsidize social welfare programs and the minimum package of social services. In the context of the refugee crisis in Ukraine, NSAA is responsible for issuing orders regarding the creation of temporary placement centers for refugees and their monitoring.

⁴ MLSP is the specialized body of central public administration responsible for developing policies related to child protection and families with children, policies to ensure equal opportunities between women and men, and policies for developing social services etc. in collaboration with the National Social Assistance Agency.

Ukraine during the war in Ukraine and establishing conditions for their return to Ukraine. According to this document, the following categories of children at risk from Ukraine were delimited as requiring the immediate intervention of guardianship authorities: (i) unaccompanied children, (ii) children accompanied by unauthorized people, (iii) children accompanied by legal representatives who raise suspicion regarding their identity (both, children and legal representatives), (iv) children declared at risk or the presumption of imminent danger, (v) children without identity documents, expired or damaged documents, (vi) other categories of children at risk.

Table 1. Information about unaccompanied children and children accompanied by third parties

Category of children	Number of children
Unaccompanied children	591
Children accompanied by third parties	1152
Authorizations to cross the border of the Republic of Moldova for children (exit)	461

Source: Data presented by the head of the Department for protection policies on child rights and families with children, within 24.02.2022-02.12.2022. In-depth individual interview (III_1).

The regulations established the key stakeholders to be engaged in the identification, referral and assistance of children from Ukraine, as well as their responsibilities. Control was established at the Republic of Moldova borders due to the development and approval of the Intersectoral mechanism in order to prevent potential risk situations in children's refugees from Ukraine, including child trafficking. If a child was identified in a risk situation at the Republic of Moldova border by the border guard/other specialists, the child protection specialist from SATS was called ensuring child's transportation and establishment of form of child protection „*our colleagues, development partners, helped us a lot in taking the children to placement centers or host families*” (III_1).

Moldovan authorities tried not to limit the rights of Ukrainian children to free movement, including children aged 16-18 who, according to Ukrainian laws, have the right to freedom of movement without being accompanied by an adult. On the other hand, they did not intend to institutionalize children in placement centers when, outside the Republic of Moldova borders, extended family members and relatives wanted to take care of these children. Therefore, MIA and MLSP via the joint Order no. 169/34 of 22.04.2022, have established certain implementation measures of the Decision no. 14 of 14.02.2022 of the CES from the Republic of Moldova, regarding the approval of the form of the document authorizing the crossing of the state border of the Republic of Moldova, on the exit direction, of unaccompanied children or accompanied by unauthorized people. Subsequently, by the MLSP Order no.36 of 05.05.2022, *The form of the document of rapid assessment of the best interests of the child at risk coming from Ukraine during the declaration of the state of war in Ukraine and The sheet for observing the behavior, actions, statements and condition of the child and the adult accompanying the child.* This additional order established two additional methods of control: (i) authorization to

cross the state border of the Republic of Moldova, the exit direction, of unaccompanied children or accompanied by an unauthorized person (ii) assessment of children's interests taking into account child's desire to continue the journey with that person without being influenced from outside and signs to call attention to „we focused on preventing any risk situation, via questions to which everyone who identifies the child at risk has to answer before taking the decision” (III_1).

In this way, the Intersectoral mechanism and the additional documents contributed significantly to preventing risks, including trafficking and exploitation of unaccompanied and separated children accompanied by third parties. The representative of the Department for protection policies on child rights and families with children of the MLSP pointed out that there were cases when they issued the decision to separate the child from the accompanying person „there were many cases when the children were very young, up to a year old. Consequently, it was impossible to ask the child where he/she was from, and there was no document proving who is the person accompanying the child. We could not risk allowing them to cross because this child could have been stolen from Ukraine and then sold abroad” (III_1).

6. Services provided to displaced people, especially unaccompanied and separated children

Children from Ukraine are treated the same as children from the Republic of Moldova. It was agreed that they should benefit from all forms of protection and all services that are designed to children from the Republic of Moldova (except the allowances and payments). Thus, the child protection legal framework in Moldova ensures child protection without discrimination.

The unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine are entitled to the following forms of protection existing on the territory of the Republic of Moldova: guardianship/trusteeship, custody. These forms of protection were established on relatives (aunt, uncle, elder brother/sister, etc.). For example, on 30.11.2022, 45 unaccompanied children were living in custody; five were living with relatives that have been given guardianship of these children. Reporting on these forms of protection is done regularly to the MLSP.

Unaccompanied and separated children also benefit from the support of local guardianship authorities (Box 1). Meantime, Moldovan authorities take efforts to develop new services: safe places for pre-teens and teenagers and professional parental assistance focused on refugees. Not least important are the information campaigns carried out for parents/caregivers fleeing the war from Ukraine about services provided in the Republic of Moldova: (i) available medical aid and service access, (ii) available educational services (formal and non-formal) and service access, (iii) available social services and service access, (iv) rehabilitation services for children with disabilities, etc. In this way, the child's parent//caregiver is informed about services in the Republic of Moldova for children.

Box 1. Support provided by guardianship authorities to unaccompanied and separated children

- Immediate best interests assessment of the child,
- Providing placement,
- Providing assistance according to the Law no. 140/2013,
- Assistance in getting identity documents,
- Assistance in applying for asylum,
- Representation of child's interests and rights,
- Use of child support tools (report forms, initial assessment, visiting the child, etc.);
- Assistance in issuing the documents for the authorization to cross the state border of the Republic of Moldova, on the exit,
- Providing information to children/caregivers appointed by territorial guardianship authorities about the international protection terms,
- Providing information to children/caregivers appointed by territorial guardianship authorities about the Child Helpline to report presumed cases of violence, neglect, exploitation, and trafficking (VNET),
- Providing basic family support,
- Monitoring the child's situation until getting to the destination.

Among the temporary placement centers for refugees open and authorized by NSAA, one was open for unaccompanied and separated children fleeing war from Ukraine (in Carpineni, Hincesti) with a capacity of 150 places. The number of children in this center is very low (one child). Assuming the right of every child to a family and the observance of his best interest, but also taking into account the deinstitutionalization reform from the Republic of Moldova, alternative solutions have been identified for unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine: services of professional parental assistance and Family-Type Children's Home „*at the moment we are ready to open, during the year, 20-30 professional parental assistance services where we could place about 100 children*” (III_1). Still, the demand for such services is deficient. Seven children were placed in the Family-Type Children's Home and one child in professional parental assistance at 02.12.2022.

In providing protection and support to refugee children from Ukraine, the Moldovan authorities received significant support from UNICEF. The intervention of UNICEF in Moldova during the refugee crisis is focused on two directions: (i) strengthening the child protection system to meet the needs of more than 42 thousand children's refugees, including unaccompanied and separated children, (ii) providing services to children. UNICEF's work is focused on coordinating services provided by BlueDots centers near the border, representing the first emergency response to the needs of displaced people from Ukraine (in collaboration with UNHCR and CSOs). Due to the collaboration with authorities, the child protection specialists from the local guardianship authorities have been delegated to work within BlueDots, enabling the documentation and quick intervention in situations when there are unaccompanied children or children separated from their parents. UNICEF is trying to extend the activities of BlueDots, through mobile teams

consisting of entertainers, psychologists, and social workers, who travel to localities and carry out activities with children and their parents.

UNICEF, together with local partner organizations, in October 2022, started to pilot the *open-source software platform PRIMERO*, which will ensure more effective monitoring so that refugee children can receive the protection and services required. PRIMERO is an electronic system of case management that also enables the early identification of potential situations of VNET, as well as taking all necessary measures to ensure and protect children's rights. Identification and registration of children are carried out only on the basis of consent. After the initial evaluation and assessment of the risk level, each child is referred to institutions that can provide the necessary services. UNICEF intends that all information collected in PRIMERO be transmitted to the central authorities of the Republic of Moldova and be included in the national electronic system.

Amongst the most important strengths in providing services to children from Ukraine, mentioned by the interviewed specialists, are:

- Development and approval of the *Intersectoral mechanism*, enabling the Border Police representatives, but also other specialists, to notify the representatives of guardianship authorities if there is any suspicion regarding the child's situation. Afterward, they assess the child's situation.
- Approval of the Order 169/34, Order 36, which provide for the rapid assessment of the best interests of the child at risk and the issue, if necessary, of the document authorizing the crossing of the border of the Republic of Moldova, on the exit, of unaccompanied children or children accompanied by an unauthorized person „*I think it is a drastic but necessary measure. We are obliged to provide child protection and guarantee the quality and well-being of the child*” (III_1).
- Engagement of child protection specialists from the district level (II level), sometimes for twenty-four hours, seven days a week (24/7).
- A form of protection for unaccompanied children or accompanied by third parties: guardianship/trusteeship, custody, etc. „*All children hosted in our center have been appointed legal representatives as their aunt, and siblings. They all have supporting documents. We collaborate with SATS in cases of expired power of attorney*” (III_4).
- Certain services have been developed in the context of the refugee crisis (*mobile teams for children and youth*), while others have diversified their target groups, including refugee children (Youth Centers, creative centers, public libraries, summer camps, etc.).
- Creation of safe places for activities within the temporary placement centers for refugees and other special centers.
- Children's integration into kindergarten or school at parent/caregiver's request, including school supplies „*we provided school bags for children who have to go to school*” (III_5).
- Engagement of CSOs psychologists to provide counseling for children, including therapy for war trauma.

- Establishment of the program of activities and services for children hosted in the temporary placement centers for refugees and other special centers with their managers but also parents/caregivers „*parents are acquainted with activities we are going to implement next week, and those who are interested are coming and sometimes have their own suggestions*” (III_6).
- Gift cards for children (500 lei) at LIBRARIUS bookstore were given to children refugees and some children from vulnerable families from the Republic of Moldova.
- Organization of various recreational activities: holidays, concerts, quilting bees, trips all over the Republic of Moldova.

The main gap identified in Moldova regarding children was the lack of a legal framework to protect the child's best interests in cases of unaccompanied children or accompanied by unauthorized people. This gap was removed due to the development and approval on 14.04.2022 of the *Intersectoral mechanism* and Orders 169/34 and 36. The war in Ukraine allowed the identification of the lack of specific services for children, which encouraged Moldovan authorities to develop the current protection system and services for all children, including children refugees.

As weaknesses of the services offered to refugee children in Ukraine:

- Lack of child protection specialists at the community level (I level). The lack of specialists has increased the workload of community social workers and their overload, leading to professional burnout and high staff turnover.
- The small number of pre-school children enrolled in educational institutions, and the small number of children enrolled in the educational system „*only 1766 are integrated into our educational system*” (III_8). The lack of monitoring children studying online was also mentioned „*how can we check if the child is sitting in front of the computer and not on the street, at risk. We are responsible for their well-being because they are on the territory of our country*” (III_4).
- Lack of specialized services for specific categories of children (children victims/witnesses of crimes) and rehabilitation services for children.
- It is sometimes unclear how the documents should be compiled so children can benefit from services in the Republic of Moldova. For example, disabled children refugees are entitled to personal assistance services, but SATS employees do not know how to compile the file (what documents, what diagnosis, etc.). „*The ministry should issue a directive with explanations*” (III_5).
- Lack of data regarding the distribution of displaced children by administrative-territorial units „*we do not have any information about the number of children and their geographical distribution to be able to create services where they are needed*” (III_7). Dissimilarity in the data, about the number of children, provided by central authorities and data collected by CSOs „*Data given by MIA shows that more than 40 thousand children are in the country. Our partner, which collaborates with SATS from the 25 districts via social workers, identifies the children-refugees, and said that the latter*

had identified about 3 thousand children in the 25 districts. Where are the other 37 thousand?" (III_7).

7. Vulnerability of unaccompanied children and separated children and risk of trafficking and exploitation

Research data reveal the following categories of displaced children **vulnerable to child trafficking**:

- Unaccompanied and separated children, including children aged 16-18 years, *„are naive and believe what it is told or written,”* children accompanied by third parties and groups of children, primarily until the approval of the Intersectoral mechanism. A few respondents underlined that at the beginning, *„it was not clear what a green corridor means or if the groups of children are accompanied or not, who are they, where are they going, whom they are going with”* (III_7).
- Roma children *„not all are registered”*. There were situations when the first documentation of the child was done when the child was 14-15 years old, based on a document certifying the birth.

The representative of the Department for protection policies on child rights and families with children of the MLSP mentioned that until 14.04.2022, he was regularly receiving calls on various supposed cases of child trafficking, however, after the approval of the *Intersectoral mechanism* and Orders 169/34 and 36, the number of these cases decreased *„there were suspicious cases until we introduced that filter. I was the contact person for all the border checkpoints, for all border guards, 24/7”* (III_1). A few interviewees have also pointed out a gap in protection, including preventing and combating child trafficking, from February 24, 2022 to April 14, 2022. Consequently, the assumption that cases of child trafficking were possible until the signing of the Intersectoral mechanism and Orders no. 169/34 and 36 is proper. Certain unauthorized persons could have used the Republic of Moldova as a transit country, but there is no empirical data to confirm this hypothesis.

Now, the Republic of Moldova has different filters to identify suspicious cases of children accompanied by third parties when crossing the border: (i) Border Police representatives; (ii) child protection specialists from BlueDots centers; (iii) social workers from communities and specialists from temporary placement centers for refugees. Even if they managed to pass through the first filter, if the specialists from BlueDots, communities and refugees placement centers find the relationship between a child and an adult suspicious, they take action using tools developed to guarantee the child's best interests. The new documents developed and approved, together with Border Police and other specialists training, prevented the exit from the territory of the Republic of Moldova of children unaccompanied or accompanied by third parties from Ukraine without the assessment and authorization of guardianship authorities *„there are no such cases anymore”*.

The research data shows that after the amendment of the legal framework of the Republic of Moldova to ensure the best interests of the child from Ukraine, there were only a few cases of supposed risk identified most often at the border by specialists who notified competent authorities that coped with them immediately. However, none of the reported cases has been confirmed.

8. Conclusions

Children from Ukraine are treated the same as children from the Republic of Moldova. They benefit from all forms of protection and all services designed for children from the Republic of Moldova (except the allowances and payments). The unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine are entitled to the following forms of protection existing on the territory of the Republic of Moldova: guardianship/trusteeship and custody. These forms of protection were established on relatives (aunt, uncle, elder brother/sister, etc.).

The research data attests that the Moldovan authorities developed the legal framework for the protection of unaccompanied children or accompanied by third parties from Ukraine to provide safety and protection in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The *Intersectoral cooperation mechanism* was established for identifying, evaluating, assisting, referring, and monitoring children at risk, coming from Ukraine during the war in Ukraine and establishing conditions for their return to Ukraine. Also, the authorities developed regulations regarding the approval of the form of the document authorizing the crossing of the state border of the Republic of Moldova, on the exit direction, of unaccompanied children or accompanied by unauthorized people.

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Regulamentul privind instituirea mecanismului intersectorial de cooperare pentru identificarea, asistența și monitorizarea copiilor în situații de risc, veniți de pe teritoriul Ucrainei, în perioada declarării stării de război în Ucraina (Regulations regarding the establishment of the intersectoral cooperation mechanism for the identification, assistance and monitoring of children at risk from Ukraine during the state of war in Ukraine), approved by CES Decision no. 14 of 14.04.2022.

Măsuri de implementare a Dispoziției CSE a RM nr. 14 din 14.04.2022 (Measures to implement the Decision of CES of RM no. 14 of 14.04.2022) approved by Joint Order no. 169/34 of 22.04.2022 of MIA and MLSP.

Modelul actului de evaluare rapidă a interesului superior al copilului aflat în situație de risc, venit de pe teritoriul Ucrainei în perioada declarării stării de război în Ucraina (The model of the rapid assessment of the best interests of the child at risk from Ukraine during the declaration of the state of war in Ukraine), approved by Order no.36 of 05.05.2022 of MLSP.