

Therapeutic care for foster families
with unaccompanied minors

Policy recommendations



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Policy recommendations

for the EU-Project
Therapeutic foster care for unaccompanied minors and their foster families (FORM)

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U N I K A S S E L
V E R S I T A ' T



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- 1. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING UNACCOMPANIED MINOR REFUGEES (UMRS) IN FOSTER CARE: AN INTRODUCTION 4**
 - 1.1. Setting the Scene..... 4
 - 1.2. Key European Policies on the inclusion and integration of unaccompanied minor refugees and their foster families..... 5
 - 1.3. Addressing the needs of UMR through selected recommendations..... 8
 - 1.4. General conclusions 10

- 2. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING UNACCOMPANIED MINOR REFUGEES (UMRS) IN FOSTER CARE: A HOLISTIC AND THEMATIC OVERVIEW 12**
 - 2.1. A global and holistic, rights-based approach 12
 - 2.2. Promotion of inclusion and integration 13
 - 2.3. Guardianship 14
 - 2.4. Training..... 14
 - 2.5. Education..... 15
 - 2.6. An efficient and child-friendly asylum system 15
 - 2.7. Trauma-sensitive and culture-sensitive mental health services 16
 - 2.8. Building a community 16
 - 2.9. Evidence-based therapeutic foster care..... 17
 - 2.10. Long-term Support and Transition Planning 17

1. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING UNACCOMPANIED MINOR REFUGEES (UMRS) IN FOSTER CARE: AN INTRODUCTION

1.1. Setting the Scene

Europe is currently facing an unprecedented asylum crisis, with increasing numbers of refugees—including adults, families with children, and unaccompanied minor refugees (UMRs)—seeking protection and better opportunities. Among these, unaccompanied minors represent one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. These children and adolescents, who arrive in Europe without the care or protection of a parent or guardian, face immense challenges as they try to navigate an unfamiliar world alone. National authorities are tasked with ensuring that UMRs receive the care and protection they are entitled to, in line with international standards for children's rights and child welfare.

While UMRs have traditionally been cared for in institutional settings such as residential care homes or buddy programs, there is, to increase empowerment and the quality care of minors, a growing trend in Europe towards integrating UMRs into foster family systems. This shift represents an effort to provide a more family-centered approach, which is based on the recognition that emotional stability, safety, and a sense of belonging are essential for the healthy development of minors, particularly those who have experienced trauma.

However, while this new approach offers clear advantages, it also introduces a set of complex challenges that require specialized strategies and interventions. The realities of fostering UMRs often involve addressing trauma-related issues, such as the emotional scars left by war, violence, and displacement. Moreover, there are significant cultural barriers and identity-related struggles that can arise when a child is separated from their family and culture of origin, and placed in a foreign environment. For instance, the breakdown of attachment bonds with primary caregivers, the psychological impact of multiple disruptions in care, and the challenges of building trust with new foster families can severely hinder the child's emotional recovery and integration.

In this context, therapeutic foster care has emerged as a critical approach for supporting both the emotional healing and developmental needs of unaccompanied minors. Therapeutic foster care is a holistic, multidisciplinary model designed to address the trauma, identity crises, and emotional challenges faced by UMRs. It involves a deeper, therapeutic level of care that goes beyond

meeting basic needs to support the minor's psychosocial development, foster attachment, and guide them through complex emotional and cultural transitions. The goal is not only to offer immediate shelter and safety but also to provide long-term care and resources that will enable these children to heal, adapt, and ultimately thrive in their new environment.

Across Europe, foster care services are facing an increasing demand for therapeutic care and have identified key gaps in the support system for UMRs. While fostering in general has demonstrated positive outcomes in terms of emotional attachment and community integration, the specific needs of unaccompanied minors often require more specialized, evidence-based interventions. Some of the most pressing challenges include: Trauma-Informed Care, Cultural and Identity Sensitivity: Developmental and Emotional Support: Training and Support for Foster Families: Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing.

1.2. Key European Policies on the inclusion and integration of unaccompanied minor refugees and their foster families

Protecting unaccompanied minors seeking asylum or refugee status is a critical priority in both European and international legal frameworks. Various European policies, programs, and initiatives have been designed to safeguard the rights and well-being of these vulnerable children. Below is an overview of some key frameworks and initiatives that promote their protection, inclusion, and integration, with particular attention to the role of foster families in this process.

1.1.1. European Union Legal Framework

The protection and integration of unaccompanied minors is a shared global responsibility, with both European and international frameworks offering vital support. By aligning EU policies with global frameworks, a stronger, unified approach is created.

THE EUROPEAN UNION CHARTER OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights enshrines the protection of children's rights, including those of unaccompanied minors. Article 24 of the Charter emphasizes that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children, and it guarantees the right to protection and care for children in need.

THE NEW PACT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM (2020)

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, proposed by the European Commission in September 2020, aims to reform the EU's migration and asylum system to create a more cohesive, efficient,

and humane approach. It specifically addresses the needs of vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied minors.

Key Provisions Relevant to Unaccompanied Minors:

- **Reception Conditions:** The Pact prioritizes dignified reception conditions for all asylum seekers, with a special focus on unaccompanied minors. This includes adequate shelter, healthcare, education, and legal assistance.
- **Family Reunification:** The Pact emphasizes the importance of family reunification for unaccompanied minors, underscoring that the best interests of the child should guide asylum decisions.
- **The guardianship system:** The New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020) adopted by the European Commission does touch on the guardianship system particularly as it relates to the protection of unaccompanied minors (UMRs). While the Pact doesn't go into extensive detail specifically on the guardianship system, it acknowledges the need for a more comprehensive and protective framework for unaccompanied minors and highlights key issues around their care, safety, and rights.

Opportunities for Integration:

- The Pact's focus on comprehensive reception standards creates a strong foundation for the inclusion of unaccompanied minors, ensuring access to essential services like education, healthcare, and psychological support.
- The solidarity mechanism fosters better resource distribution among Member States, enhancing the ability to support unaccompanied minors and their foster families with specialized services.
- The Pact's commitment to family reunification strengthens emotional and psychological well-being by facilitating minors' reunification with their families.

1.1.2. The European Child Guarantee (2021)

The European Child Guarantee is a key EU initiative aimed at combating child poverty and social exclusion. Specifically, it seeks to ensure that all children, including unaccompanied minors, have access to essential services and opportunities that guarantee their well-being and integration into society.

Key Provisions Relevant to Unaccompanied Minors:

- **Access to Quality Services:** The Guarantee seeks to ensure unaccompanied minors have access to quality healthcare, education, adequate housing, and nutrition. This is essential for their social inclusion and integration.
- **Support for Foster Families:** The Guarantee also includes provisions for strengthening the support systems for foster families, ensuring that unaccompanied minors are placed in safe and supportive environments where their developmental needs are met.

Opportunities for Integration:

- The Child Guarantee promotes access to quality education, healthcare, and social services, which are vital for the successful integration of unaccompanied minors into society.
- It also supports family-based care, where foster families play a central role in providing stability and a nurturing environment for the minors.

1.1.3. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), provides a global framework for addressing key challenges, such as poverty, inequality, and the protection of vulnerable groups like unaccompanied minors. Several SDGs are particularly relevant to their inclusion and integration.

Key Provisions Relevant to Unaccompanied Minors:

- **SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities):** This goal stresses the need to reduce inequalities, particularly for marginalized groups such as migrants and refugees. It advocates for greater protection and inclusion of unaccompanied minors.
- **SDG 4 (Quality Education):** This goal emphasizes the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education. It ensures that unaccompanied minors have access to education, a critical aspect of their integration.
- **SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions):** This goal underscores the importance of strong institutions that protect and provide justice for vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied minors.

Opportunities for Integration:

- The SDGs provide a universal framework for the protection and inclusion of unaccompanied minors, emphasizing their access to education, healthcare, and legal services.
- SDG 10 encourages countries to address the specific vulnerabilities of unaccompanied minors, ensuring they have equal access to resources and opportunities.
- SDG 4 supports the educational integration of unaccompanied minors, helping them build the skills they need for future employment and active participation in society, which in turn supports their integration into foster families and the wider community.

1.1.4. Council of Europe’s Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027)

The Council of Europe has a recent and updated framework addressing the rights and protection of unaccompanied minors. Following the 2017-2021 Action Plan on Protecting Refugee and Migrant Children, the Council of Europe’s Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) takes a more comprehensive and forward-looking approach, building on previous work to enhance the protection and inclusion of children, particularly those in migration.

Conclusion: The European Union’s legal framework, the European Child Guarantee, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Council of Europe Strategy collectively provide a comprehensive approach to the inclusion and integration of unaccompanied minors. These policies ensure that the rights of unaccompanied minors are protected, that they have access to essential services, and that their well-being is prioritized. The emphasis on family reunification, guardianship, education, healthcare, and foster family support plays a critical role in helping unaccompanied minors integrate successfully into their new environments, promoting a more inclusive and supportive society.

1.3. Addressing the needs of UMR through selected recommendations

The growing trend towards foster family care for unaccompanied minors presents an opportunity to provide a more family-centered, trauma-informed, and emotionally supportive environment for these vulnerable children.

However, the complexities of fostering UMRs—especially in relation to trauma, cultural differences, and identity crises—require specialized knowledge, resources, and support.

By developing a therapeutic foster care model and formulating policy recommendations to guide its implementation, this project seeks to address these challenges and improve the care and integration of unaccompanied minors across Europe. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that UMRs receive the support, security, and stability they need to heal from their past experiences and build a brighter future in their new homes and communities.

Given these challenges, there is a clear need to formalize and standardize therapeutic foster care practices across Europe to ensure that all unaccompanied minors receive the highest level of care and support. The following policy recommendations are designed to address the specific needs of unaccompanied minor refugees (UMRs) across Europe, with the goal of improving their protection, integration, and well-being. These recommendations cover several key areas, including rights-based approaches, guardianship, education, mental health services, foster care, and community building, with an emphasis on collaboration and best practices. The aim is to guide national governments, foster care providers, and social workers in addressing these gaps and improving the quality of care for UMRs.

The role of the project

In response to these challenges, the FORM project—led by partners in Belgium (Odisee University of Applied Sciences, Brussels; Foster Care East Flanders, Ghent), Germany (University of Kassel), Italy (Salesiani Per Il Sociale, Rome; ENSA European Network for Social Authorities, Veneto/Brussels), and Cyprus (Hope For Children, CRC Policy Center)—is offering a comprehensive therapeutic foster care model tailored specifically for unaccompanied minors (UMRs) and their foster families. This model is grounded in research findings and best practices from across Europe, and focuses on practical, evidence-based strategies to address the complex emotional, psychological, and developmental needs of unaccompanied minors.

The recommendations that emerge from this project will seek to:

- 1) **Standardize Therapeutic Foster Care:** Develop a comprehensive framework that provides clear, evidence-based guidelines for therapeutic foster care for UMRs. This will include strategies for addressing trauma, identity crises, cultural adaptation, and the emotional needs of UMRs in foster families.
- 2) **Improve Training and Support for Foster Families and Professionals:** Design and deliver specialized training programs for foster families and professionals, ensuring they are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to provide high-quality, trauma-informed care. This will also include ongoing support mechanisms for foster parents and social workers to help them navigate the complexities of fostering UMRs.

- 3) **Enhance Cross-Border Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing:** Create a platform for sharing knowledge and best practices across European countries, allowing foster care services, social workers, and policymakers to collaborate more effectively. This platform will also serve as a repository of research, case studies, and evidence-based tools for supporting UMRs.
- 4) **Provide Policy Recommendations for Improved Integration:** Develop policy recommendations to help EU Member States improve the legal, financial, and operational aspects of therapeutic foster care. These recommendations will address funding, training, standards of care, and the integration of unaccompanied minors into their new communities.

1.4. General conclusions

The conclusion highlights several key gaps in the current foster care system for unaccompanied minor refugees (UMRs) that justify the recommendations put forward by the FORM Project:

- 1) **Complex Needs of UMRs:** UMRs face multifaceted challenges, including trauma, cultural dislocation, and a lack of adequate emotional and psychological support. The existing systems often fail to address these complex needs in a comprehensive way, creating a gap in providing the necessary care for their long-term recovery and integration.
- 2) **Lack of Specialized and Coordinated Care:** There is a need for a more coordinated and specialized approach to the care of UMRs, which is currently lacking in many foster care systems. The FORM Project advocates for trauma-informed and culturally sensitive care that is tailored to the unique experiences of UMRs, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to address both their emotional and physical well-being.
- 3) **Insufficient Professional Training:** Many professionals working with UMRs do not have the specialized training required to support these children effectively. The FORM Project's training model aims to fill this gap by providing evidence-based strategies to foster families, social workers, and policymakers, enhancing their ability to support UMRs in a therapeutic and trauma-sensitive manner.
- 4) **Fragmented Cross-Border Support:** UMRs often experience fragmented support systems due to differing national policies and practices across Europe. The FORM Project promotes cross-border cooperation and the exchange of best practices to ensure a more cohesive and integrated approach to UMR care and integration across European countries.
- 5) **Lack of Inclusive and Compassionate Systems:** Existing foster care systems are not always inclusive or compassionate enough to meet the specific needs of UMRs, particularly when it comes to understanding their cultural backgrounds and the trauma they have

experienced. The project advocates for a more inclusive approach that is aligned with EU frameworks and international standards, ensuring that UMRs are supported in a way that respects their rights and dignity.

- 6) **Urgency for Action:** The project emphasizes that the gaps in care for UMRs must be addressed urgently. Without coordinated action, UMRs may continue to face significant barriers to successful integration, limiting their potential to heal, thrive, and contribute to society.

The FORM Project's recommendations are positioned as practical solutions to fill these gaps, offering a pathway toward improving the foster care system and ensuring the well-being and successful integration of UMRs into their new communities. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can help bridge the existing gaps and create a more supportive, inclusive, and effective system of care for these vulnerable children.

We are grateful to the European Commission for the opportunity provided through the Erasmus+ program, that is providing vital support to projects like ours. Its ability to foster collaboration, innovation, and the exchange of best practices across Europe plays a crucial role in addressing pressing social challenges, including the needs of unaccompanied minor refugees. We are proud to be part of its positive impact.

2. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING UNACCOMPANIED MINOR REFUGEES (UMRS) IN FOSTER CARE: A HOLISTIC AND THEMATIC OVERVIEW

2.1. A global and holistic, rights-based approach

Spreading awareness

- Increase research initiatives and public awareness campaigns to better understand and support the position of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in Belgian and European society. These efforts should aim to foster positive and supportive environments for these vulnerable groups.

Spreading information about rights of Unaccompanied minors

Service Centers for UAMs

- Establish dedicated service centers in each European country to provide accurate information and comprehensive support to unaccompanied minors with a background of exile throughout their migration process.

Centralized Information Portal

- Develop a centralized website (at the European or national level) that consolidates all relevant information on rights, obligations, procedures, and available (mental) health care assistance for UAMs. This platform should be easily accessible and regularly updated.

Legal representation

- Ensure that all minors have access to legal representation for immigration and asylum procedures.

Reinforcing access to rights and promote best practices

Strengthened European Coordination

- Promote stronger coordination among European countries to address the needs of unaccompanied minors consistently across borders. This includes sharing best practices and harmonizing procedures.

Standardized Protocols

- Promote the adoption of standardized protocols across regions and organizations at least at national-level to ensure consistent care and support.

2.2. Promotion of inclusion and integration

Flexible Civic Integration Programs and strengthened support for Civic Integration

- Implement flexibility within civic integration programs to address the specific needs of young unaccompanied minors, considering the psychological impact of forced migration and cultural change. Additionally, programs should be adaptable to individual circumstances.
- Provide intensified support for civic integration programs, recognizing the vulnerable position of UAMs. This includes ensuring that integration processes are robust, well-funded, and inclusive.

Increased Funding for Social Integration Initiatives

- Provide additional funding to non-profit organizations, sports clubs, and leisure facilities that specifically aim to engage and integrate unaccompanied minors into the community.

Promotion of Empowerment and Social and Cultural Integration

- Educate minors about their legal rights and responsibilities in the host country.
- Encourage extracurricular activities within the community to promote a sense of belonging and minors' soft skills. Guide young people towards integrated pathways
- Facilitate the empowerment of unaccompanied minors developing opportunities for them and their foster families to engage in cultural exchange social and labour inclusion activities including internships, job placement and economic empowerment, strengthening their integration into the community.
- [Enhance recognition of the unaccompanied minors delicate situation, as well as build their own resilience to assist them to change their self-perception and support their agency](#) (See NExT To You project)

2.3. Guardianship

Increase in guardianship supply

- Expand the availability of guardians for unaccompanied minors to ensure each child receives the necessary legal and personal support throughout the migration process. The presence of a guardian is a key aspect in support for the foster care placement.

Improve the quality of the training for guardians

- Provide and intensify the training and the support for guardians.

2.4. Training

Mandatory training for social/foster care workers

- Introduce compulsory, specialized training for social / foster care workers who assist unaccompanied minors. This training should enhance their knowledge and skills, enabling them to focus on prevention rather than crisis management.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive training program for social workers, focusing on integration services, cultural sensitivity, and child or adolescent-friendly approaches for unaccompanied minors and kinship foster families.
- Cultural-sensitivity, exile-related trauma-sensitivity should be included as mandatory skills in universities, or higher education programmes for all potential professionals who could come into contact with unaccompanied minors.

Continuous Professional Development

- Promote ongoing training opportunities for professionals working with unaccompanied minors to build capacity, enhance knowledge, and improve the quality of care and support provided.
- Develop and implement regular intervision and supervision moments for foster care workers as obligatory part of the working schedule.

Accessible training for foster parents

- Develop and distribute online training modules in multiple languages for foster parents, focusing on prevention, child safeguarding, and cultural sensitivity. Include evaluation mechanisms (f.e.: questionnaires or interviews on the changes in perspective and attitude after the training) to assess the effectiveness of these trainings.
- Create shared moments to encourage exchange between foster parents and guardians in order to promote synergy between these different roles.
- Develop and make accessible parental exchanges, guided by a mediator.

2.5. Education

Improved school registration and education pathways

- Streamline the school registration process for unaccompanied minors. Additionally, create specialized educational programs for those with limited or interrupted schooling in their home countries, with a focus on tailored content and expectations.

Educational background assessments

- Implement individualized assessment procedures to evaluate the educational background and needs of each unaccompanied minor, ensuring that educational interventions are appropriately tailored.

Enhanced reception education and Follow-Up

- Extend reception education programs as a necessary preparatory form of education and provide intensive guidance and follow-up for students transitioning from reception education classes to integration classes and regular school systems.

2.6. An efficient and child-friendly asylum system

Simplification of asylum procedures

- Simplify the asylum process for unaccompanied minors and reduce waiting times to mitigate the psychological stress associated with prolonged uncertainty. Prioritize faster processing for this vulnerable group.

Comprehensive Screening and Assessment

- Implement standardized procedures to assess the physical and psychological health of minors upon arrival and conduct an individual needs assessment comprehensive of detailed evaluations of each child's background, including trauma history to tailor support services effectively.

Alternative reception options

- Ensure sufficient alternative reception options for UAMs outside of traditional reception centres, such as community groups and foster families, to promote more personalized and supportive care environments.

2.7. Trauma-sensitive and culture-sensitive mental health services

Expansion of specialized psychological care

- Increase the availability of specialized psychological care for unaccompanied minors, including those who have received negative asylum decisions. This support should be tailored to the unique needs of young refugees. Individual and group approaches should be further developed.

Monitoring of minors well-being

- Provide trauma-informed care, regular mental and physical health screenings to monitor the well-being of the minors.
- Organize focus groups among young people and mixed groups of young people and foster parents.
- **Prevention of human trafficking: improve the minors' identification process** upon their arrival in Europe by strengthening the capacity of local and national authorities, social services, migration professionals, foster families and guardians, reception centres' employees, lawyers, prosecutors, and judges.

Effective mourning and grief support

- Ensure that unaccompanied minors have access to psychological support during the asylum process, recognizing that mourning of lost attachment relationships and the working through of exile-related trauma of dehumanization cannot fully begin until there is clarity on their status. Support should be available both during and after the procedure.

2.8. Building a community

Networking and Community Building

- Encourage the development of networks around unaccompanied minors, involving foster families, professionals, and community members, to provide a robust support system. Learn from practices in other countries to strengthen these networks.
- Promote the development of a network of supportive families and peer mentoring practices among families.

Mentorship Programs

- Pair minors with mentors from similar cultural backgrounds to facilitate smoother cultural adaptation.

Cultural and Language Mediation

- Increase the availability of translators and cultural mediators to facilitate communication between unaccompanied minors, foster families, professionals, and government authorities. Promote the use of online translation tools as supplementary aids.
- Provide training modules for translators and cultural mediators regarding cultural-sensitivity, trauma-sensitivity, exile-related sensitivity.
- Provide training for foster care workers in 10 modules, on (a) cultural sensitivity, (b) exile-related trauma, (c) adolescent-specific dynamics, (d) kinship foster family dynamics, (e) development of attachment and the consequences of loyalty to interrupted attachment relationships, (f) complex relational trauma, (g) epistemic trust and mentalization, (h) working with interpreters, (i) leading a network of professionals around a foster family, while mediating within the foster family, (j) therapeutic foster care models before and nowadays.
- Set up regularly training sessions for foster care workers, so that they can become the trainers for their colleagues within the foster care system (help to develop a system of training the trainers).

2.9. Evidence-based therapeutic foster care

Collaborative Research and Development

- Encourage collaborations between universities, governmental authorities, and NGOs to develop tailored tools, conduct research, and create training programs that meet the specific needs of professionals working with UAMs.

Effective Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

- Strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems for foster care interventions, ensuring that the focus is on the quality of services provided, not just on meeting quantitative targets.

Feedback Mechanisms

- Create channels for minors and foster families to provide feedback on their experiences, helping to identify areas for improvement.

2.10. Long-term Support and Transition Planning

Independent Living Preparation

- Offer programs to prepare minors for independent living as they approach adulthood, including life skills training and employment assistance.

Post-care Support

- Ensure that minors who age out of the foster care system have access to ongoing support services, such as housing and education.



U N I K A S S E L
V E R S I T ' A ' T



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