

HOPE
AND
HOMES
FOR
CHILDREN



REPORT

ENHANCING CHILD PROTECTION AND CARE REFORM IN MOLDOVA THROUGH EU ACCESSION

Round Table

25 June 2025

hopeandhomes.org

*The Enache Family supported to stay together, Moldova.
Hope and Homes for Children*



CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Opening Remarks - Keynote Speakers.....	5
Victor Negrescu, Vice President of the European Parliament and Host.....	5
Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director for Social Rights and Inclusion, DG EMPL, EC	6
Daniela Morari, Ambassador, Head of Mission of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union	6
Vasile Cușcă, State Secretary of the Republic of Moldova	7
Pete Garratt, Director of Programmes, Hope and Homes for Children.....	8
Perspective and Vision for Care-Reform in Moldova	9
Miranda Dawkins, Counsellor, Trade, Sustainability and Markets, UK Mission to the EU..	9
Laura Bretea, Team Leader Moldova, DG ENEST, European Commission	10
Rima Pusic, Self-advocate, CCF Moldova	10
Pavel Gheletchi, Self-advocate, Lumos and Co-founder of the NGO “Youth and Experience”	11
Daniela Mamaliga, Director, Partnerships for Every Child / President, Board of the Child Rights NGOs Alliance — APSCF	13
Gabriela Alexandrescu, Executive President, Save the Children Romania	14
Maha Damaj, UNICEF Representative in the Republic of Moldova.....	15
Dr. Liliana Rotaru, Director, CCF Moldova.....	16
Marcel Straton, Director, Lumos Moldova.....	18
Closing Remarks	20
Contact.....	20



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Moldovan authorities have undertaken an ambitious reform of the care system that resulted in a sharp decrease in the country's institutional rate. According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection Statistic Report (CER-103)¹ at the beginning of 2024, there were 617 children in residential care, of which 316 children (51%) were girls and 301 children (49%) were boys. Of all children in residential care, 267 (43%) were from urban areas and 350 (57%) from rural areas.

A rapid assessment conducted in May 2024, presented that almost 300 children cumulatively might need placement in foster care, some of them in specialist foster care, as 112 children have disabilities. This number includes children with the foster care recommendation, with cleared adoption status and with placement in small group home recommendation. The Report stresses that **the foster care workforce is insufficient both in terms of number and preparedness to look after most vulnerable groups of children.**

¹ <https://social.gov.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Raport-statistic-anual-nr.-103-%E2%80%93-Copii-aflati-in-situatie-de-risc-si-copii-separati-de-parinti-in-anul-2023.pdf>

The impact of the war in Ukraine and subsequent refugee crisis on the country's economy and social cohesion is also threatening the resilience of the social protection system, including its ability to provide the adequate services and care to vulnerable children. In addition, an increasing number of families are becoming at risk of poverty and social exclusion, which is a leading factor for institutionalisation of children. The poverty rate of children in rural area is at 40% high.

A recent assessment of 184 children in six residential institutions conducted within the Changing the way we care global initiative in 2021, concluded that most children in residential care are either children with severe disabilities and complex emotional needs or children aged 0-6. The 2022-2026 National Child Protection Programme and Action Plan provide the necessary base for completing the care reform of children. The main reason for this not happening is the lack of sufficient funding.

The European Commission's positive Opinion on Moldova's application for membership of the European Union acknowledges that *"the process of de-institutionalisation of children has much advanced over recent years"* but also that *"the number of babies and children with disabilities in institutional care facilities is a concern."* Furthermore, the EC 2024 **Moldova Enlargement Report**, the acknowledges that *'significant gaps remain in the child welfare system'*. Further on it highlights that *'children with disabilities remain exposed to higher protection risks, including gender-based violence as well as family separation'* and concludes that *'Moldova must take measures to tackle the systemic problem of children with intellectual disabilities being placed in psychiatric institutions.'*

The start of negotiations for EU accession with Moldova and the recent European Commission proposal for a Reform **and Growth Facility for Moldova** bring an opportunity for Moldova to complete its care reform for children, thus becoming **the first EU candidate country to have completed its care reform for children prior to its EU accession**. This could serve as a **compelling example of the transformative power of EU accession to foster alignment with its values and human rights standards**. It would reinforce the shared commitment to fundamental rights and principles and set an example for other candidate countries.

The **Round Table** *"Enhancing child protection and care reform in Moldova through EU accession"*, co-organised by Hope and Homes for Children and the European Parliament Vice-President Victor Negrescu who also hosted the event, took place on the 25th June 2025. It provided a platform for discussing the significant advancement of and necessary conditions to complete care reform for children in Moldova.

In this report, we are sharing the key messages and commitments coming from it.

OPENING REMARKS - KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Victor Negrescu, Vice President of the European Parliament and Host

- ♥ Today, Moldova is home to fewer than half a million children under the age of 17, accounting for just 20.7% of the total population, according to the National Bureau of Statistics as of January 1, 2025. This demographic reality underscores the importance of investing in child protection and inclusive services, recognizing the unique value and needs of each child.
- ♥ Moldova now has a historic opportunity to become the first EU candidate country to complete its child-care reform before accession. This would be not only an achievement but a powerful example of how EU integration can drive meaningful and values-based change.
- ♥ Reform is not just about closing institutions. It is about preventing unnecessary family separation, supporting children with complex disabilities to remain with their families, and ensuring all children have access to inclusive education within their communities.
- ♥ That's why I call on the EU to provide all necessary support—technical, political and financial—to help Moldova finish this reform. And I call on the Moldovan authorities to ring-fence part of the Moldova Facility for this very purpose, including to implement the European Child Guarantee, which must now become a pillar of Moldova's EU integration strategy. **Because child protection is not just a policy priority—it is a matter of dignity, of rights, and of the kind of Europe we want to build together.**



Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director for Social Rights and Inclusion, DG EMPL, EC

- ♥ EU policy of deinstitutionalisation is very important for you and you need to start working on it from day zero. Yesterday was already too late, two weeks ago was too late.
- ♥ Vasile Cusca, the State Secretary of Moldovan Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, will be the Country Coordinator for the European Child Guarantee in Moldova.
- ♥ Bring all the stakeholders around the table, that's the key. And don't forget the Ministry of Finance, they are the crucial element. And do not hesitate to ask, do not hesitate to reflect
- ♥ We from DG EMPL hope for a strong social window in the next Multiannual Financial Framework.



Daniela Morari, Ambassador, Head of Mission of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union

- ♥ The key of success is to have an inclusive discussion.
- ♥ It is important to keep the focus and be inclusive
- ♥ After the screening we need to look at what we need to do next
- ♥ Our intention is for the European Child Guarantee to be fully implemented in our legal framework.



Vasile Cușcă, State Secretary of the Republic of Moldova

Mr Cusca mentioned the significant progress Moldova has achieved in its child-care reform process. New legislation has been introduced, new services structures and new roles to support the reform efforts.

“The remaining priorities are related to strengthening the existing mechanisms and structures for which we call on the EU institutions to intensify their political, technical and financial presence in Moldova, thus supporting Moldova’s ambition to achieve the objective of ‘zero children in residential care,’ Mr Cusca said.



Future priorities:

- ♥ Implementation of the European Child Guarantee (National EU Accession Plan, Action 33, Annex A, Chapter 19), through extension of the 2022–2026 Child Protection Program;
- ♥ Deinstitutionalization and development of new and existing family-type social services (National EU Accession Plan, Action 60, Annex B, Chapter 23; Roadmap, Chapter 23, Action 9.3);
- ♥ Hiring local child protection specialists (National EU Accession Plan, Action 58, Annex B, Chapter 23), aiming for 200 community-based specialists by 2027;
- ♥ Development of Barnahus-type Centres (National EU Accession Plan, Action 61, Annex B, Chapter 23; Roadmap, Chapter 23, Action 9.1), including construction in the southern region;
- ♥ Development and implementation of initial and continuous training programs for child rights protection professionals (National EU Accession Plan, Actions 3 and 59, Annex B, Chapter 23; Roadmap, Chapter 23, Action 9.5), ensuring that staff possess the necessary skills to respond promptly and effectively to children's needs.

Pete Garratt, Director of Programmes, Hope and Homes for Children

Three highlights from the past 20 years:

1. We together celebrate ten old Soviet era style large institutions closed and transformed with a further three under process.
2. We celebrate the pilot and extension of foster care and other family support services
3. We celebrate the training and mentoring of state workforce including in case management for children in crisis.

♥ We appreciate the EU's commitment to children's care reform of the past 20 years – evidenced by Romania's journey from 100,000 children in institutions pre-accession to less than 700 today with the end in sight in the next year, with the necessary funding regulations and policies in place to protect children's rights. Please, European Commission, keep monitoring and assisting the progress being made by the candidate countries.

♥ In Moldova the journey is not yet complete – let's travel the last mile:

- strengthening family support services – especially for children with disabilities and complex needs
- enforce a moratorium on children aged 0-6 being admitted to residential institutions; and increase the provision of trained and supported foster carers – without whom it is not possible to have a functioning care system
- this investment is critical. Get this right and the payback is not just in the lives of individual children and families today, but in the releasing of untapped potential for the future of Moldova being the country you dream of.

♥ We must keep our eyes on the prize of Moldova being the first EU candidate country to complete care reform for children prior to EU accession – knowing that we have a huge opportunity to do what's right for the children of Moldova, for their families and for the future of Moldova.



PERSPECTIVE AND VISION FOR CARE-REFORM IN MOLDOVA

Miranda Dawkins, Counsellor, Trade, Sustainability and Markets, UK Mission to the EU

The UK is delighted to have launched the first ever global campaign on care reform for children in January, under the leadership of our Foreign Secretary, David Lammy.



The campaign has the overarching objectives:

1. To drive institutional awareness by establishing a World Global Alliance, of which Moldova is a key founding member
2. To launch and drive the implementation of a new global charter
3. To tackle the exploitative orphanages globally

♥ As we work towards launching a new Global Charter on care reform for Children at the UN General Assembly this September, we seek to galvanise commitment to urgent, decisive and coordinated action towards ensuring a safe, loving and nurturing home for every child – leaving no one behind.

♥ We are asking everyone who signs up to our Charter to make ambitious pledges, which aren't linked just to funding.



Laura Bretea, Team Leader Moldova, DG ENEST, European Commission

- ♥ The topic of child protection will be part of the roadmap on enlargement
- ♥ Child protection is also addressed in the Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova
- ♥ This will be monitored
- ♥ Clearly, MD has made deinstitutionalisation a national priority and has committed to close all the institutions by the end of 2026
- ♥ The implementation will be more difficult, there are still children with disabilities in residential care but we know you are working on this
- ♥ The Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova can be used to support child protection and care reform
- ♥ The European Commissions supports the government in terms of technical assistance and the CSOs with regular calls for proposals.

Rima Pusic, Self-advocate, CGF Moldova

- ♥ The specialists are coming way too late when the children already have traumas
- ♥ Child participation: the child has to be a main actor in their life, be respected, and listened to
- ♥ Financial education: from young age children need to be understand how to manage budget
- ♥ I hope together we can build Europe where all the children can have a choice





Pavel Gheletchi, Self-advocate, Lumos and Co-founder of the NGO “Youth and Experience”

- ♥ I spent most of my childhood, up to the age of 13, in an institution. After that, I went through alternative care services such as Professional Foster Care and a Community Home.
- ♥ Even though our country has made great strides in implementing the Reform, there is still much to be done. Currently, the majority of children in institutions are those with complex and sensory disabilities, as well as children under the age of 6. Unfortunately, the lack of services for children with disabilities is directly contributing to the stagnation of the Reform's implementation.
- ♥ Children must be supported from the very first days of life, and we should not postpone working with them for a time when there will be more resources, time, or engagement. We must act now. In Moldova, services for children with disabilities have been developed, which have produced positive results and brought significant changes in the lives of many children and their families.
- ♥ To ensure children's right to education, every preschool and general education institution must be inclusive - children with severe disabilities still face barriers in accessing education.

♥ Another challenge is the lack of family-type services for children at risk, including those with disabilities. Although professional foster care and other family-type services exist in our country, they do not even meet half of the actual needs. To change this, we need:

- Strong promotion of the development of these services
 - Encouragement of families to care for children, including those with disabilities
 - Provision of a package of benefits—both financial and non-financial—for families who care for children, so that they are motivated to contribute to their growth and development
 - Continuous monitoring and support from specialists to help these families face the challenges that may arise
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♥ In order to become independent adults after leaving the protection system, young people need to be prepared for life's challenges while they are still in care. This preparation must begin from the very first day they are placed in care services, by:

- Involving children in self-development activities—they need to learn that there are different environments, other examples, and that there are often more than one option in life
 - Providing clear, transparent information about opportunities, benefits, and possible obstacles after leaving care
 - Facilitating their participation in decision-making processes, because only a person who can make decisions can adapt and act as an independent adult
 - Motivating and empowering them not to see themselves as victims, but to develop and apply the potential they have
 - Helping them take responsibility for their own lives
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♥ I hope that in a few years, this issue will belong to the past and that all children will enjoy a family environment and a happy childhood—just as they deserve.



Daniela Mamaliga, Director, Partnerships for Every Child / President, Board of the Child Rights NGOs Alliance — APSCF

- ♥ **Residential care in Moldova has significantly decreased, most institutions have closed, and family-based services have expanded.** This transformation didn't happen overnight—it is the result of sustained, collaborative effort marked by commitment and courage.
- ♥ **Civil society, including many organisations present here today, played a critical role for this progress**
- ♥ **But our work is far from done.** Recent and ongoing crises, along with rising poverty, have increased vulnerability and placed additional pressure on families and essential services. Today, the children left in care are the most vulnerable: babies, children with disabilities, and those with complex emotional needs.
- ♥ **We continue to face serious challenges:** Many regions still lack essential preventive and specialized services, the workforce lacks sufficient capacity to respond effectively; and NGOs operate without stable funding mechanism—despite their proven role in the reform.
- ♥ **To make reform irreversible, Moldova must act with urgency:**
 - Ensure preventive and family support services are available in every region;
 - Stop new admissions to residential care, especially for children under 3;
 - Develop family based specialised services for children with disabilities and complex needs;

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- Provide proper support for care leavers;
 - Invest in the social service workforce and interagency coordination;
 - And above all— ensure that children are heard—from the beginning, not after decisions are made.
-

♥ **Moldova has a unique opportunity to lead by example.** And the European Union can help us make this vision a reality.

♥ **We call on the EU to:**

- Allocate dedicated funding for care reform, social service development, and workforce capacity building—through the Growth Facility Plan and other available instruments. These transitional costs are essential to ensure the long-term sustainability of the reform.
 - Engage and support civil society as a strategic partner—ensuring that deinstitutionalisation and child well-being are reflected in EU monitoring and accession frameworks.
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♥ **With your continued support,** we can finish what we started— not just to meet policy goals, but to truly change lives. To ensure that the stories we heard from young people today become the exception, not the norm. So that every child in Moldova grows up feeling loved, supported, and never left behind.

Gabriela Alexandrescu, Executive President, Save the Children Romania

♥ The reform in Romania was quick and not very well planned. The development of alternatives before closing the institutions is essential.



Maha Damaj, UNICEF Representative in the Republic of Moldova



- ♥ Moldova has already shown strong commitment to child rights through a series of reforms. Notably, over the past two decades, the country has reduced its reliance on institutional care by 94%. The Ministry of Education has also fully deinstitutionalized children from boarding schools under its authority—a remarkable achievement.
- ♥ However, a number of children with complex needs continue to live in residential settings. The European Commission's 2022 Opinion on Moldova's EU application highlighted this as an ongoing concern—especially in relation to young children and children with disabilities.
- ♥ In response to these continuing gaps, the current National Programme for Child Protection (2022–2026) was developed. More than just a policy milestone, it represents a shift in mindset—from **reactive protection** to **proactive prevention**. The Programme is anchored around three critical key pillars: **deinstitutionalization and alternative care**; **strengthened governance**; and the **prevention and response to all forms of violence against children**.
- ♥ The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children emphasize that residential care should be limited and avoided altogether for children under the age of three - we know that the first years of a child's life are critical for their development. This is especially true for children with disabilities, who face an even greater risk of being institutionalized early in life.
- ♥ And, children who are left behind by migrant parents should not be left behind by policy. Migration should not create invisible orphans: children whose families are alive, but systems haven't adapted to the care vacuum they live in.
- ♥ Child care reform must go beyond closing institutions; it must redefine the very foundation of how a society understands and delivers care.
- ♥ As Moldova moves forward on its path toward eventual EU membership, aligning national policies with the principles of the European Child Guarantee is foundational.

♥ Five priority actions:

1. Invest in family resilience through targeted support, especially the "cash + care" model, to address the roots of poverty and exclusion.
 2. **Reinforce the national framework to prevent family separation.**
 3. **Accelerate the shift to family- and community-based care.**
 4. **Advance children's participation** by institutionalizing feedback and accountability mechanisms.
 5. **Implement child-responsive budgeting** to ensure resources are allocated equitably.
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♥ We count on the European Union to stand alongside the Moldovan government in prioritizing child protection. Moldova made clear its aspirations for accession.

Dr. Liliana Rotaru, Director, CCF Moldova

One of the reform's great successes has been the mobilisation of civil society around child-care reform. Civil society remains a cornerstone of Moldova's child-care reform.

Despite the impressive progress, critical challenges remain, and addressing them must become our priority in the coming years. Let me highlight a few:

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- ♥ The social services system is unevenly developed across the country and often fails to flexibly meet the needs of individual children and families. The most disadvantaged groups—children aged 0–6, children with disabilities, and adolescents with complex emotional needs—remain underserved;



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- ♥ Prevention services and family-type alternatives remain insufficient, particularly for children under 6, children with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. A recent assessment of 28 children aged 0–6 in residential care found that 25 were placed before the age of 3, and the majority were still infants at the time of placement. It represents almost 90% of all placements;
 - ♥ Although the 2022–2026 National Child Protection Programme includes a gradual ban on institutionalisation, because of the lack of services the moratorium can't be enforced;
 - ♥ Risk factors that lead to family separation require targeted, cross-sectoral interventions, but inter-agency cooperation remains weak, especially at the local level. Collaboration between sectors must be strengthened and better coordinated.
-

We call on the Moldovan Government and EU institutions to:

1. Prioritise the transition from institutional to family and community-based care as a key reform area within Moldova's accession process, under the Fundamental Rights chapter, and to develop a detailed action plan with an allocated budget.
2. Ensure adequate EU funding is directed to support the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the child protection reform.
3. Develop, diversify and extend the social services network to ensure prevention of separation, assistance to children with disabilities and their families as well as the access to and quality of family-type alternative services
4. Introduce a moratorium on new admissions to residential care institutions, especially for children aged 0–6.
5. Invest in strengthening the child protection workforce, including hiring specialist foster carers, additional staff in foster care services and community-based child protection professionals.
6. Enhance coordination and consultation with civil society stakeholders to ensure their active involvement in shaping child care reform policies and priorities.
7. Improve inter-agency coordination to ensure effective, timely responses and access to support for vulnerable children and families.
8. Provide a stronger support, both technical and financial
9. Ringfence funding from the new Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova specifically for child protection and care reform.

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- ♥ **The EU accession process offers Moldova a historic chance to complete its child protection and care reform—becoming the first EU candidate country to fully end institutionalisation of children before joining the European Union.**
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Marcel Straton, Director, Lumos Moldova

Despite all the efforts and great achievements mentioned today, there are still a lot of things to be done in the sector. Among them I'd like to mention:

- ♥ **There is slow progress in reorganising large-scale residential institutions**, hindered by the lack of appropriate services for children with severe disabilities and limited access to community-based support and rehabilitation. *Despite zero children in residential institutions by 2026 being one of the objectives of the National Child Protection Program, 18 months from that deadline we do not see clear signs for this to be achieved.*
- ♥ **Inclusive education services**, though formally available in all districts, are often inaccessible or inadequate. *The existing IE services can only provide limited assistance to children with mild special education needs whereas those with complex disabilities are, practically, non-included.*
- ♥ **No continuum of care for young people leaving alternative care** - whether from foster care, residential institutions, or family-type homes - including those with disabilities. These young people face significant challenges in their transition to adulthood. Without a family safety net, many struggle with housing, employment, mental health, and social and labour market integration
- ♥ **Securing the quality of the data collection process** has been a challenge. Clearly, lack of sufficient data affects evidence-based programming, policy, and advocacy. Therefore, it is essential that precise data collection mechanisms in the area of social protection and child care reform are put in place.

The EU accession is equally a challenge, but also a huge opportunity for the Republic of Moldova. We have the chance **to become the first country to have no children in residential institutions by the time of joining the Union**. For this to happen, though, we need both the Government of the Republic of Moldova and EU institutions to:

1. Introduce and enforce a moratorium on new admissions to residential care institutions, especially of children between 0 and 6 years of age
2. Prioritise the deinstitutionalisation of children 0-3 years old and with disabilities, currently staying in residential care institutions with parallel transformation / reorganisation of these institutions and their full closure.
3. Ensure sufficient resources – financial, human – are invested into the development and strengthening of community based alternative care services, including specialised foster care for babies and children with disabilities, respite care, personal assistance, early intervention, early inclusive education (covering preschoolers) and general inclusive education.
4. Focus on the creation and development of leaving care services for children with complex needs, ensuring they can easily transit into the adulthood and become self-sustainable.
5. Encourage genuine participation of children and young people in the process of decision making when those concern them and make sure their voices are heard.
6. Although it might be a little late, but please, find possibilities to ringfence funding under the new Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova for the priorities voiced during this round table.

CLOSING REMARKS

“If we can save one child, we are saving the world,”

concluded the VP Negrescu.



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ABOUT HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN

5.4 million children around the world are unnecessarily confined to residential institutions, separated from family and at risk of serious emotional and physical harm, abuse and neglect.

Orphanages and institutions cannot provide children with the quality of care they need - children's care needs reform, family care needs strengthening.

We work to increase local skills and commitment, supporting partners to provide sustainable family-based solutions for all children, and to reform care systems away from institutional care and **Back to Family**.



BACK TO FAMILY

** Names changed to protect identities*

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