

# TRAVERSING DANGER: CUMULATIVE RISKS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM FOR CHILDREN IN MIGRATION

Routes-based Trends, Experiences,  
Protection Risks and EU Involvement on  
the Sudan - Egypt - Libya - Greece - Balkan Route(s)



Save the Children

In this study, Save the Children examined the protection risks for children on the move along their migratory journeys, with a focus on routes between Sudan and Egypt, Libya and Greece, as well as on the North-Western Balkan route. It draws on interviews with children, their caregivers, and practitioners collected between February and October 2025. The study aims to capture a comprehensive picture of the physical and psychological harm experienced by children on the move and analyses how they are at risk of repeated and sustained exposure to harm. So far, there has been limited research on the impact of these harmful events on children, which emerge at different points, i.e. along the entirety of their journey. This repeated exposure to harm before and during departure, in transit and at the arrival in a destination country, can have compounding adverse effects on the wellbeing, (mental) health, cognitive and emotional development of children.

Following this route-based approach, the study subsequently considered how EU migration policies either sustain, contribute to- or mitigate these protection risks. The EU's external migration actions have a critical role to play - not only in managing irregular movement, but in upholding children's rights and strengthening protection standards and service delivery along migration routes. As shown throughout this study, outsourcing migration control to neighbouring countries has too often meant outsourcing risk and harm, with children's rights and well-being overlooked. Instead of treating these countries as buffer zones, the EU and its Member States must commit to genuine partnerships that put child protection at the center. This means investing in dignified reception, guardianship, and asylum systems, and putting a permanent end to pushbacks, detention and deportations that strip children of their rights.



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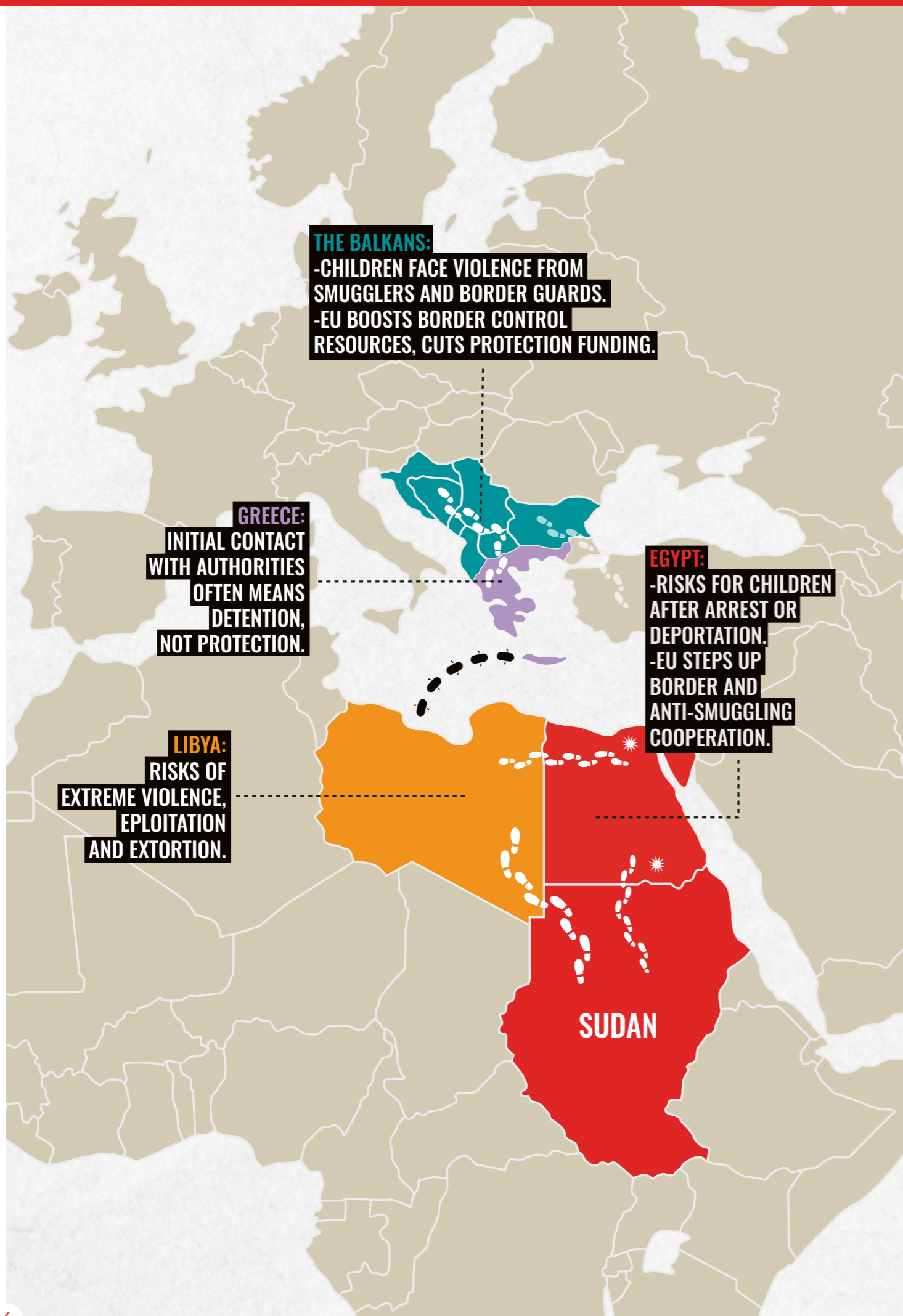
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In this study, Save the Children seeks to examine the protection risks for children on the move along their migration journeys, with a focus on routes between Sudan and Egypt, Libya and Greece, as well as on the Western Balkan route.<sup>1</sup> It draws on interviews with children, their caregivers, and practitioners collected between February and October 2025. The study aims to capture a comprehensive picture of the physical and psychological harm experienced by children on the move and analyses how they are at risk of repeated and sustained exposure to harm during their migratory journey.

As the border between Egypt and Sudan was closed in May 2024, children from Sudan face serious risks along their migratory journey and following their arrival in Egypt. Some children, including unaccompanied children, move onward to Greece via Libya. In response to the significant increase in Sudanese and Egyptian arrivals to Crete in 2025, authorities introduced a three-month suspension of access to asylum procedures, effective from 11 July 2025 and not prolonged beyond its initial duration. New arrivals during this period were detained in closed facilities and received orders for immediate return to their country of origin or departure. For those travelling on the Western Balkan route, a sharp decrease in the protection budget in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2023 and security focused border management have increased the reliance of children on the move on unsafe routes and therefore reduced visibility and access to identification, support, and services.

The compounded exposure to multiple risks along the migration journey can lead to or exacerbate physical and psychological harm, for example through exposure to direct violence or neglect of the needs of children, especially when adequate support structures are lacking. By focusing on the cumulation of harm, the study considers the total impact of various risks over time rather than evaluating them in isolation. This is especially important in the context of forced displacement and migration journeys, which are shaped by layered adversities such as conflict or poverty in origin countries, violence and exploitation during transit, perilous journeys, detention and precarious conditions on arrival.

Among the countries examined for this study, the EU has intensified its cooperation on border management, countering the smuggling of migrants (SOM) and trafficking in persons (TIP). This support in third countries has the potential to mitigate, sustain or aggravate the risks faced by children on the move. Whilst these initiatives have a cross-border nature, necessary child-sensitive protection measures are not always included, or do not incorporate a complete picture of the harm that children might have already endured. Furthermore, increasingly restrictive controls can drive children and families to undertake even more dangerous migration routes. Too often, these policies push migration further underground resulting in making children less visible to authorities and support systems, keeping them away from essential services and increasing significantly their vulnerability to exploitation.

The near-total lack of safe and regular pathways to the EU further compounds these risks, forcing children to rely on smugglers and exposing them to trafficking, exploitation, forced labour, and physical, psychological, and sexual violence. This study outlines how the EU's external migration and border management policies can have a negative impact on children's safety when sufficient child-sensitive protection measures and/or access to asylum are lacking.

## 2 Study Purpose and Scope: Measuring Cumulative Harm for Children Along the Sudan - Egypt - Libya - Greece - Western Balkan Migratory Route(s) and EU Migration Cooperation Involvement

Save the Children recently published the report *Crossing Lines*, examining the situation of children on the move at the EU's external borders.<sup>2</sup> This report, together with other research on protection risks for children on the move,<sup>3</sup> highlighted the increased prioritisation of border security over the protection of children on the move and other vulnerable groups,<sup>4</sup> leading to repeated abuse, detention, exploitation and a lack of protection at the EU's external borders.

Yet, apart from rights violations at EU-borders, many children on the move have already endured harmful events before departure and during transit towards EU-countries.

**So far, there has been limited research on the impact of these harmful events on children, which emerge at different points of their journey, i.e. along the entirety of their journeys.**<sup>5</sup> This repeated exposure to harm before and during departure, in transit and at the arrival in a destination country, can have compounding adverse effects on the wellbeing, (mental) health, cognitive and emotional development of children. Capturing these patterns can help guide trauma-informed practices and policies, as well as multi-sectoral support efforts (health, protection, education) along migration routes.

In this study, such **cumulative harm is defined as:**

*“The effects of multiple adverse or harmful circumstances and events in a child's life. The daily impact of these experiences on the child can be profound and exponential, and diminish a child's sense of safety, stability and wellbeing.”<sup>6</sup>*

There is a need to study not only the experiences and risks of migration journeys, but also the policies that shape and influence them. The EU's external migration actions have a critical role to play - not only in managing irregular movement, but in upholding children's rights and strengthening protection standards and service delivery along migration routes. However, recent reports from Save the Children's teams and partners working directly with (unaccompanied) children on the move, raise **serious concerns over the protection of children in countries where the EU delegated migration control measures or jointly implements these measures with authorities in third countries.** Certain elements of the EU's external migration policy thereby risk exacerbating this harm - particularly for children.

**The main questions guiding this research are the following:**

1. Which protection risks do children encounter during the different stages of their migration journey (country of origin, transit and arrival in EU-countries)?
2. How do these risks evolve and accumulate along migration journeys, and how does this impact children's physical and mental well-being?
3. How do external EU migration policies, smuggling dynamics, access to services and protection frameworks contribute to or mitigate these risks?

Since research and evidence on the protection and support of children during the entirety of their migration journey is still significantly understudied,<sup>7</sup> this research conducts a holistic exploration of the experiences, challenges, and systemic protection risks faced by children at different stages along the Sudan-Egypt-Libya-Greece-Balkan route(s)<sup>8</sup>, with the aim of suggesting recommendations to enable policymakers to mitigate these risks at the earliest stage possible.

The study uses the term 'migration route' to exemplify how children cross multiple (country specific) situations during their migration journey. Although some routes have remained constant in the main geographic characteristics, this study doesn't attempt to establish any predominant fixed routes, as they have the ability to change constantly. Policy should therefore not only be informed by (a) specific route(s), but by the consideration of the cumulative effect of the protection risks for children in broader contexts.





The data collection for this cross-border research was conducted by multiple Save the Children offices, with each office adding specific local expertise along the Sudan - Egypt - Libya - Greece - Balkan migration route(s). **In total, for this research, Save the Children has conducted interviews with 66 children (mostly unaccompanied and/or separated), 19 experts and 11 caregivers.** These interviews are sometimes further substantiated by information retrieved from teams in operations or focus groups with beneficiaries.

Besides new primary data, the analysis also includes several existing reports and incorporates data made available through previous research by Save the Children and/or partner organisations. The most extensive complementary data was provided by the 'Migrant Children on the Sudan-Egypt-Libya Route' assessment by Save the Children in partnership with the Mixed Migration Centre. Additional data sets stem from the 'Migrant children at EU borders: experiences, trends, practices, legal developments, and considerations' report by Save the Children Europe, recent Greece-specific reports from the Greek Council for Refugees and Save the Children<sup>9</sup> and the research conducted by Save the Children North West Balkans initiative, Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub, in the Balkans in 2021-2022 titled 'Wherever we go, someone does us harm.' This Balkan research revealed that every child interviewed recounted being subjected to physical, psychological, sexual, or other types of violence and exploitation along the route, either directly or indirectly.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the context and policy analysis also included primary and secondary sources, such as EU and UN reports and policy documents. These include operational guidelines from EU agencies, project implementation documents from the European Commission and agreements between the EU and third countries. Through this multidimensional methodology, this study examines the impact that EU external migration cooperation has on children, by highlighting that children on the move might experience multiple violations and risks as they move along the migration route.

A more extensive description of the data collection process can be found in the Annex.

### 3.1 Data Analysis

The data was aggregated by gender, age, migration status and context of the route. In the first step, data was analysed inductively, grouping the findings according to five components of cumulative risks:

- Pre-Migration Experiences and Child-Specific Vulnerabilities
- Characteristics of the Migration Route (i.e. duration, borders crossed, use of (ir) regular channels, exposure to violence), including Social and Community factors in transit (such as peer influence/pressure and discrimination)
- Migration and Border Management Policies and Practices
- Smuggling and Trafficking Dynamics, including Risks of Criminalisation (children coerced into roles within smuggling operations - such as steering boats - and subsequently accused of smuggling upon arrival, despite being victims of exploitation)
- Limited access to Protection and (Child-friendly) Services

In the second step, the findings were categorised according to their implications for child rights.

### 3.2 Limitations and Ethics

Save the Children's Ethics and Evidence Generation teams provided ethical clearance of the research. More information on the research design and ethics is available in the Annex.

The findings of the study are not meant to be representative, but to highlight a current trend in child protection and rights on migration routes towards Europe. As the research context is quite dynamic, the research can only provide a time-bound insight of the situation. The study also does not follow the same people along an entire route but highlights the potential cumulative risks that children may experience when travelling on that route.

## 4 EU Obligations to Protect the Rights of Children on the Move

Before providing an overview of the key risks for children identified in the interviews, in this section, we briefly outline which children's rights obligations of both the EU as well as the individual states should in principle guide the policies that potentially affect the wellbeing of children on the move.

### 4.1 Key Principles and Mechanisms Protecting the Rights of Children

Children's rights are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The Convention prioritises recognising children and young people as rights-holders and in need of special protection standards. These rights and obligations equally apply to children in migration and forced displacement contexts, as "children are children first and foremost."<sup>11</sup> All countries examined in this research have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and are therefore responsible for fulfilling the obligations enshrined, such as preventing and responding to maltreatment and exploitation, and providing safe environments where children can play, learn and grow. European children's rights law is largely based on the CRC, and these obligations are enshrined particularly in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (hereafter: the Charter)<sup>12</sup> and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).<sup>13</sup>

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors the implementation of the Convention, has argued that rights violations are not only disproportionately more harmful to children but also structurally more likely to occur. Therefore, policies and operational guidelines require heightened and proactive safeguards.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, under the terms of the Convention, the extent to which migrant and refugee children's developmental needs are unmet constitutes an infringement of their individual rights. For example, to not meet the psychosocial needs of refugee and migrant children can be viewed as a form of psychological maltreatment, in which international institutions share responsibility.<sup>15</sup>

This study focuses on the implications of the EU's migration cooperation policy relating to six key principles and mechanisms within children's rights, which are particularly relevant in the context of migration and forced displacement:

- The **Best Interests of the Child** (Article 3) emphasises that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children, including in migration and asylum procedures. This means that children's best interests should always come first in all things that affect them.
- **Non-Discrimination** (Articles 2, 22) refers to the equal protection of children and their rights regardless of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or migration status.

- **Family Unity** (Article 9) ensures that a child is not separated from their parents against their will, unless such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child (e.g. abuse or neglect). States are also obliged to ensure **family reunification** across borders in a "positive, humane and expeditious manner" (Article 10).
- The principle of **Guardianship and Legal Representation** (Article 18) requires that unaccompanied children must be assigned a guardian or representative to safeguard their rights throughout procedures. Governments also need to make sure that **alternative care systems** (Article 20) are available.
- **Access to Protection** includes protection from violence, exploitation, abuse and trafficking (Articles 11, 19, 32, 35) and measures for the **physical and psychological recovery** of a child victim of any form of such abuse, torture or any other form of cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts (Article 39).
- **Access to Services** covers the rights to education, health care and psychological support (Articles 23, 24, 28) and **Procedural Safeguards**, which includes the need for child-friendly procedures, including age-appropriate interviews and participation in decisions affecting them (Articles 37, 38, 40).

### 4.2 EU Obligations for the Protection of Children's Rights in Migration Cooperation

When it comes to the EU's external relations, the Lisbon Treaty strengthened the EU's capacity to promote children's rights by explicitly recognising the "protection of the rights of the child" as both a general objective of the Union and a key element of its external relations policy.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the European Court of Justice has established that EU fundamental rights obligations can extend beyond EU territory when EU institutions or Member States exercise "effective control" over individuals, even outside EU borders.<sup>17</sup> These obligations are relevant in the context of the EU's external border management and anti-smuggling policies, particularly when EU agencies are involved.<sup>18</sup>

The **EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child** and the **European Child Guarantee** were adopted by the Commission in 2021 to ensure the protection of the rights of all children. A recent (April 2024) recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems emphasises the promotion of child protection as a priority of the EU in its external action.<sup>19</sup>

*“Member States should uphold the rights of the child in their external action, including foreign diplomacy, development cooperation and humanitarian action as established in international human rights and humanitarian law instruments with particular attention to the right to live without violence and the right to protection.”*

The above legal provisions and policy instruments illustrate that **the EU is obliged not only to protect children’s rights in all actions, but also to prioritise child protection in its external action, especially when EU agencies are involved.** Given these legal provisions, children’s rights should be protected throughout their migratory journeys, in countries that the EU cooperates with, in actions of EU agencies (inside and outside the EU), as well as in EU countries themselves.

The next sections will describe the key risks and rights violations that children encounter along their migratory journeys. If these risks are not mitigated, EU-countries risk not fulfilling their legal obligations to protect children’s rights in its external actions.

#### 4.3 EU Agencies: Obligations for Child Protection in Border Management

From the legal obligations outlined above, it follows that the EU and its Member States are obliged to safeguard children’s rights in their (external) migration management activities. In order to outline what these obligations should mean in practice, the below sections look at the operational guidelines and obligations of EU agencies whilst implementing border management policies.

Both the **European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)** and the **European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)** are legally bound to uphold the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and guarantee the protection of fundamental rights in all operations.<sup>20</sup> The regulations establishing the two agencies require that all activities fully respect fundamental rights and specifically mention child rights and the best interests of the child – with the Frontex Regulation requiring specifically to take into account their special needs.<sup>21</sup>

Each agency must maintain an independent Fundamental Rights Officer, with Frontex also deploying Fundamental Rights Monitors, to oversee compliance, investigate complaints, and advise on rights safeguards. Both regulations include the obligation to suspend or terminate operations in case of serious or persistent violation of fundamental rights or international protection obligations.<sup>22</sup>

Together, these provisions establish a clear legal obligation for both agencies towards child rights and their protection, and towards ensuring that EU border and asylum management fully respects and promotes child rights in all contexts and to act when violations occur, including by suspending or adapting operations, reporting incidents, and taking corrective measures.

#### European Border and Coastguard (Frontex)

Frontex has developed operational guidance documents that are called *VEGA Handbooks* and provide guidelines for border guards to identify and protect children, in particular those at risk, during operations at sea, land and air borders.<sup>23</sup> These are intended to translate fundamental rights obligations under the European Border and Coastguard (EBCG) Regulation into operational practice, by integrating child-protection and anti-trafficking safeguards into everyday border controls.<sup>24</sup>

These guidelines reiterate key children’s rights for Frontex to take into account in its work, such as respecting the principles of the best interests of the child, family unity and non-discrimination. Importantly, the Handbook highlights that:

*“All children on the move are entitled to make an asylum application and seek international protection and have their best interests determined, assessed and guaranteed”.*<sup>25</sup>

Importantly, there are guidelines on assessing the best interests of a child at borders, whereby “non-rights”-based arguments, such as those relating to general migration control, cannot override best interests considerations.<sup>26</sup>

*“Regardless if children enter the borders irregularly with or without the support of criminal networks and smugglers, they are entitled to protection and their best interests should be safeguarded. Moreover, the right to asylum and the principle of non-refoulement also apply to smuggled children and trafficked children, who may have international or other protection needs.”*<sup>27</sup>

The handbook also reiterates that children should only be detained in very exceptional cases, always in accordance with applicable national law, for the shortest possible time and as a measure of last resort.<sup>28</sup>

#### European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA)

The EUAA has progressively expanded its engagement in third countries under the framework of the EU’s external migration and asylum cooperation. In line with Articles 35-36 of Regulation (EU) 2021/2303, the Agency may provide capacity-building, technical assistance, and training to non-EU partners to strengthen their asylum and reception systems, ensure respect for international protection standards, and promote alignment with the EU acquis. To operationalise this, the EUAA has developed an External Cooperation Strategy<sup>29</sup> and tailored cooperation frameworks, including country-specific support programmes, training curricula for asylum officials, and deployment of liaison officers.

In the specific case of Egypt, the EUAA has a “Roadmap for Cooperation between the EUAA and Egypt” that states the main objective is to enhance the protection space for asylum seekers and refugees in Egypt, in line with EU standards.<sup>30</sup>

## 5 Protection Risks and Accumulated Harm for Children on their Migratory Journeys: Results

For this study, Save the Children interviewed 66 children who have undertaken migratory journeys. Despite the different (geographical) contexts of the cases examined, similar categories of protection issues emerged, which link to the components of “cumulative harm” as introduced at the beginning of the study. **The findings of these interviews show that protection risks and rights violations are often repetitive in nature, meaning that children experience harm multiple times.** This section summarises the key risks and vulnerabilities to which children are exposed throughout their journeys and describes the impact on their psychological wellbeing.

### 5.1 Key Categories of Repeated Risks and Accumulated Harm



#### RISK 1: PRE-MIGRATION EXPERIENCES AND CHILD-SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES

Children from conflict-ridden countries, such as Sudan, may have already experienced violence and other harmful events before embarking on their journeys. Such experiences include the loss of family members and/or (witnessing) gender-based violence. Gender, age and prior illnesses or disabilities also shape how children experience their migration and displacement.



#### RISK 2: MIGRATION ROUTE

Vulnerabilities are heightened when a lack of safe and legal travel routes forces children to cross deserts, forests, or seas. Along these perilous journeys, they face route-specific risks, including abuse by armed groups, harsh weather conditions, and encounters with dangerous animals. As routes are pushed more underground, this makes them more dangerous. For example, attempts to evade authorities can lead to dangerous situations (such as car accidents in Serbia, children falling off cars in the Sudanese/Egyptian desert, or (near) drowning during sea crossings when attempting to reach Greece).



#### RISK 3: SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING DYNAMICS AND CRIMINALISATION

The promotion of border management over the protection of children leads to a strong dependency on smuggling networks to cross borders. This in turn raises the potential for exploitation and reduces opportunities for reporting abuses. Even after arriving in Europe, particularly unaccompanied children may remain subject to exploitation to repay debts to smugglers, exposing them to ongoing harm and coercion in the country of arrival. Upon arrival, children - particularly unaccompanied - also face a high risk of criminalisation when they have been coerced by smugglers into activities such as driving boats or assisting journeys, leading authorities to treat them as offenders rather than victims of exploitation.



#### RISK 4: MIGRATION AND BORDER MANAGEMENT POLICIES

Children on the examined routes are often exposed to extreme violence, refoulement, deportation and detention. These risks can be repeated in nature if children attempt the journey multiple times. In some contexts, this also manifests in a ‘feeling of entrapment’; when people feel they cannot - or are not allowed to - return to their countries of origin, but at the same time, crossing the EU’s external border seems impossible. After violence and/or deportations, children often become dependent on smugglers again, with even higher risks of exploitation



#### RISK 5: LACK OF ACCESS TO PROTECTION AND ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Children on the move frequently encounter significant gaps in access to protection mechanisms and child-friendly services, both during transit and upon arrival. In many cases, unaccompanied children lack mandated guardians, which delays registration, potential age assessment, asylum procedures, and access to essential services such as healthcare, psychosocial support, education, and legal assistance. Even when services exist, bureaucratic obstacles, high staff turnover, and resource shortages - exacerbated by severe cuts to refugee and asylum seeker protection budgets - often prevent children from receiving timely and adequate support. These barriers can leave children feeling insecure, isolated, and at heightened risk of exploitation or neglect.

## 6 Findings from Interviews: Route-Specific Risks and Cumulative Harm

The previous section described the different “steps” or categories of risks that children encounter along their migratory journeys. The following section aims to give a better picture of the challenges and cumulative harm that children face by describing the stories of children, parents, caregivers and experts that were interviewed for this study.

The findings are arranged along the examined routes and clustered to show how risks and harm can accumulate along the journey. The numbering of the risks does not imply a hierarchy between them but rather illustrates how these risks are compounded and interconnected. Furthermore, not all possible risks are outlined here, but the most predominant ones connected to EU child protection obligations are highlighted. The quotes are extracts from the interviews conducted.

### 6.1 Sudan – Egypt Route

#### KEY RESULTS

- All the children interviewed had already experienced extreme forms of violence and conflict prior to their journeys to Egypt. Over half of the interviewed children had already lost family members during these events.
- One out of five children became separated from their parents whilst fleeing unsafe areas within Sudan and during their travel between Sudan and Egypt.
- Unaccompanied children had different separation points from their families. Some were separated prior to departure, and others during the journey, often as a result of the death of their parent(s) or caregiver(s), or limited resources to fund the journey for all family members.
- The psychological harm of children who faced gender-based violence in Sudan remains largely unaddressed in Egypt because of limited mental health services.
- Once in Egypt, one of the biggest risks for Sudanese refugees (children as well as adults) is arrest and detention at police checkpoints. Since mid-2025, deportations have been carried out regardless of legal and/or registration status.
- The situation in Egypt, as difficult as it is, remains preferable to most Sudanese families when compared to the risks still present in Sudan.
- Due to a general feeling of danger, the lack of livelihood opportunities, access to healthcare and schools, Sudanese children are increasingly leaving Egypt to go to Libya, and fleeing onwards to Greece.

#### CONTEXT

##### Trends, Figures and National Developments

Since the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in April 2023, an estimated 1.5 million people have arrived in Egypt as of January 2025.<sup>31</sup> Of the 1,043,000 individuals registered with UNHCR as of September 2025, 73.6% are women and children.<sup>32</sup> These numbers include 795,000 Sudanese, 123,000 Syrian, 50,000 South Sudanese and 43,000 Eritrean registrations.

Between 2023–2024, Egyptian authorities implemented several policies restricting the entry and regulating the stay of Sudanese refugees, including the requirement to obtain a visa to enter the country and implementing a mandatory residency policy for all foreigners. As a result, more and more Sudanese, including children, have turned to smugglers to cross Egypt’s southern border.<sup>33</sup>

Even though there is a lack of official data on the exact number or percentage of unaccompanied children within Sudanese refugees, in Save the Children’s work within Sudanese communities<sup>34</sup>, they are the most vulnerable category of migrants, undergoing protection risks both along their journey into Egypt as well as in their daily lives within the country. They face violence from both their own as well as their host communities, along with housing instability and exploitation.

In December 2024, Egypt passed Law No. 164 of 2024, by which it adopted its first formal domestic asylum legislation. The bylaws of this legislation that outline the procedures for registration, identification and access to protection services, are still to be developed.<sup>35</sup> While it is still unclear what the full impact of this new asylum law will be on Sudanese refugees, clauses around penalising, those who have entered Egypt irregularly, with a longer waiting time of one year for asylum applications, revoking refugee status and carrying out deportations in the case of refugees not respecting the ‘values and traditions of Egyptian society’, are concerning, especially in light of reports on the risks of deportation and arbitrary detention of refugees within Egypt.

According to experts and humanitarian practitioners, these developments have impacted the ability of Sudanese migrants to regularly cross borders, obtain residency documentation, and navigate life in Egypt, with many struggling to access public education and health services, which leads them to move onward towards other countries.<sup>36</sup> The assessments conducted by Save the Children through focus group discussions with children and returned migrants indicate that economic conditions and the lack of access to decent livelihood opportunities continues to be the main driver behind the outgoing migration of Egyptian children to Europe.

Among the large number of refugee communities residing in Egypt, an increasing number of Egyptian children are leaving the country for migratory purposes, often attempting to reach the EU through countries such as Libya, Greece and Western Balkan countries. Unaccompanied and separated children continue to be a significant proportion of arrivals and movement across all routes.<sup>37</sup>

**CHILDREN FROM CONFLICT ZONES LIKE SUDAN MAY HAVE FACED VIOLENCE, LOST FAMILY MEMBERS, OR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE BEFORE THEIR JOURNEYS.**



## RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS IN EGYPT

The study ‘Migrant Children on the Sudan-Egypt Route: Trends, Risks, Services and Experiences in Aswan’ by Save the Children and the Mixed Migration Centre has examined the experiences of migrant children and their caregivers from Sudan as they leave their country of origin, their interactions with smuggling networks, their experiences while crossing the border into Egypt, and the specific risks they face along their journeys.<sup>38</sup> The following findings are based on this study, **which interviewed 50 Sudanese children and ten key informants** in Egypt.

### 6.1.1 RISK: Pre-Migration Experiences: Conflict, Displacement and Gender Based Violence

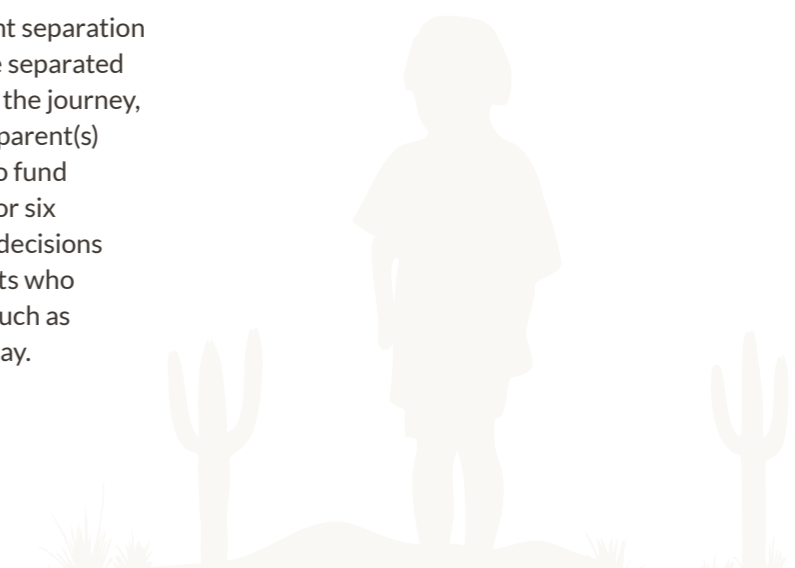
Due to the ongoing war in Sudan children have already experienced internal displacement<sup>39</sup>, violence and conflict **prior to embarking** on their journeys towards Egypt. This means that, when children were interviewed in Egypt, they were still severely affected psychosocially by harmful events, such as the violence in Sudan that displaced them. This was particularly the case for some of the 30 children who had lost family members during these events, either because they ended up being separated from some or all of their family, or because these family members did not survive the violence inflicted on them.

*“When the war started, we all ran away, I managed to escape with my two sisters aged 15 and 17 years old, but my parents and my other two siblings, we couldn’t find them.”*

*- 17 year old girl from Omdurman (Khartoum State)*

**Conflict in Sudan was the major driver of movement for all respondents, regardless of their care status.** In most cases, respondents reported that advancements of armed groups to their locations of origin directly triggered and spurred their movements away from home towards Egypt. This was particularly the case for children and caregivers who lived in Khartoum and Jazira States, which have both been heavily impacted by the war since 2023. Ten children, from the study, became separated from their families while escaping unsafe areas. A total of 16 out of 50 children first became internally displaced, particularly during the initial period of the war, prior to making plans to move towards Egypt. These children and their families first moved internally with hopes of avoiding active fighting and conflict, but once the war further spread internally to these previously safe zones, engaging in cross-border movements became their only viable option.

Unaccompanied children had different separation points from their families. Some were separated prior to departure, and others during the journey, often as a result of the death of their parent(s) or caregiver(s), or limited resources to fund the journey for all family members. For six unaccompanied children, movement decisions along the journey were taken by adults who had taken up temporary caregiving, such as neighbours or adults met along the way.



*"I didn't know we were going to Egypt. When the shootings happened and things started to fall and became unstable, I just went with the neighbours. I was not part of the decision-making process."*

- 15-year-old girl from Khartoum (Khartoum State)

Egypt was the intended destination of most respondents following their departure from places of origin, or from the locations of initial internal displacement. Most noted they (or their parents, siblings and/or relatives) chose Egypt due to its proximity to Sudan, while others also cited cultural ties as being an important factor.

The protracted nature of the conflict in Sudan, ongoing for two and a half years is impacting the prospects of return to Sudan by children and families displaced into Egypt. Following the return of stability to the capital Khartoum, **many families in Egypt decided to send one family member across the borders to inspect the situation.** Considering the near-complete lack of services in the capital, the level of destruction of many homes, and unsafe surrounding areas, many decided to remain in Egypt until the conflict situation improved in Sudan. This was similarly the case for many voluntary returnees who benefited from the free transportation to the borders provided by the Egyptian government, **only to circle back to Egypt via smuggling networks.** The situation in Egypt, as difficult as it is, remains preferable to most Sudanese families when compared to the high risks still present in Sudan.

While they had not directly witnessed such events, some women caregivers noted they had heard stories of girls being taken away by armed groups at these checkpoints, while their parents were held at gunpoint to ensure compliance. These stories were corroborated by key informants representing civil society in Aswan, who stated they had received similar information from families they supported in Aswan regarding armed groups **abducting women and girls who were en route to Egypt.** In Egypt, Sudanese women and girls, many of whom fled high levels of sexual violence in Sudan, continue to face risks of **gender-based violence (GBV).** With limited mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services available in Egypt or on onward journeys, their psychosocial or social problems remain largely unaddressed.<sup>40</sup>

### 6.1.2 RISK: The Migration Route, Smuggling Dynamics and Border Management

Amidst **increased visa and border restrictions**, a majority of respondents had to enter Egypt irregularly. **70% of the children that were interviewed had to rely on smugglers to cross borders.** Smuggling dynamics therefore also had a major influence on the shaping of routes and transit points frequented by Sudanese children and caregivers fleeing the war. In most instances, these routes included passages through the desert to avoid detection, and in some cases involved walking in harsh conditions. Twenty children cited intense fears that they would not reach their destination due to the dangers and uncertainties of the irregular pathways used.



**ALL 50 INTERVIEWED CHILDREN HAD EXPERIENCED EXTREME VIOLENCE BEFORE REACHING EGYPT, AND OVER HALF HAD ALREADY LOST FAMILY MEMBERS.**



**ONE IN FIVE CHILDREN WERE SEPARATED FROM THEIR PARENTS WHILE FLEEING SUDAN AND TRAVELLING TO EGYPT.**

**70%**

**OF THE CHILDREN THAT WERE INTERVIEWED HAD TO RELY ON SMUGGLERS TO CROSS BORDERS.**



**NEARLY HALF OF THE CHILDREN REPORTED HARMFUL AND TRAUMATIC EVENTS DURING THEIR JOURNEYS FROM SUDAN TO EGYPT AFTER ENCOUNTERING THE ARMED GROUPS.**

**CHILDREN BECOME FAR MORE VULNERABLE AS MIGRATION PATHS ARE PUSHED FURTHER UNDERGROUND, FORCING THEM TO CROSS DESERTS, SEAS, AND OTHER HARSH ENVIRONMENTS ALONG INCREASINGLY UNSAFE AND ILLEGAL ROUTES.**



*“This was our first time going to Egypt or any other country outside Sudan. I was afraid the whole time during our journey that we wouldn’t make it to Egypt because it was difficult for people, and someone even died during the journey.”*

*- 16 year old girl from Khartoum (Khartoum State)*

Almost half of the interviewed children recounted particularly harmful and challenging events taking place during their journeys from Sudan to Egypt. These were often linked to passing checkpoints of armed groups along the route. Some respondents described being robbed of their valuables at these checkpoints. Some also recounted directly witnessing exchanges of gunfire between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). **Once in Egypt, one of the biggest risks for Sudanese refugees (children as well as adults) was arrest and detention at police checkpoints.** A key informant revealed that, starting from October 2024, the situation had become more severe with more Sudanese children being deported regardless of their care status in Egypt.

The closing of borders and increased restrictions on access to Egypt visas has led to the **expansion of smuggling networks and the increase of prices for the journey.**<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, as undocumented migrants (i.e. without valid entry visas, residency permits and/or UNHCR refugee cards) in Egypt are frequently detained and deported,<sup>42</sup> many relied on the repeated use of smugglers to enter Egypt after being deported.<sup>43</sup> One 16 year old boy from Khartoum noted that they were intercepted by border officials once they entered Egypt, and subsequently deported. **The deportation did not put a stop to their movement intentions, as the family of six made the crossing a second time, now using a different smuggler.**

*“On the first trip we were caught by the Egyptian army in Argeen, nearby the border crossing. They took us to Abu Simbel and brought buses that took us back to Sudan. Once in Sudan, we went to old Wadi Halfa and on the second day we travelled again to Egypt with a new smuggler by boxi. The moment we were caught was the time I felt most scared.”*

*- 16 year old boy from Khartoum (Khartoum State)*

In general, children and caregivers did not report smugglers demanding additional payments along the journey. This may indicate some level of solidarity between Sudanese smugglers and their co-national clients fleeing the conflict, and/or that **smugglers were perceived more as service providers and less as extortionate criminal gangs as seen in other conflict-affected countries, such as in Libya or Yemen.** As such, the findings do not provide evidence of the conflict transforming smuggling operations in Sudan towards extortionate and criminal practices linked to the human trafficking of Sudanese nationals.<sup>44</sup>

Children and caregiver respondents who were dependent on smugglers for their migratory journeys were subject to dangerous, reckless and in some cases fatal travel conditions. Those travelling on open or semi-open *boxis*<sup>45</sup> described how they were tied down with ropes to prevent them from falling off as the *boxis* were driven at high speed.<sup>46</sup> Five children reported that they witnessed someone fall off while the *boxi* was moving. In these cases, smugglers did not stop, and the individual was abandoned in the desert, with the respondents not knowing what happened to them.

### 6.1.3 RISK: Lack of Access to Protection and Services

In terms of barriers to humanitarian assistance, twenty children and seven caregivers cited a lack of access to education and health services in Aswan. Many also reported difficulties in registering with UNHCR in Cairo, due to lack of funds to make the trip from the south of Egypt or from Alexandria to Cairo for families facing economic difficulties and out of fear of police checkpoints where the risk of detention and deportations remains high.

*“We went to Cairo by train, and we needed to pay for people not to arrest us. We paid 200 Egyptian Pounds per person to four people who were checking the tickets.<sup>14</sup> There were more people that came to take money, but we told them that we don’t have any more. There were some other people who got arrested as they didn’t pay, and I heard that they were deported to Sudan.”*

- 14 year old boy from Omdurman (Khartoum State)

Both high fees and a lack of documentation were significant obstacles for respondents to access public hospitals and schools, since residency permits are required even for those with an asylum seeker or refugee card. As access to assistance remained limited for many, some child respondents engaged in informal work in Aswan.

*“I got bullied while I worked in a bakery. The owner abused me and asked me to carry heavy things. He also scammed me as he paid me 100 Egyptian Pounds for the month.<sup>47</sup> I kept working till I got into a fight with him. I am currently looking for another job to support my sisters as their work isn’t enough for us to pay the bills.”*

- 15 year old boy from Darfur

The enduring lack of access to formal education and of economic opportunities or financial support for the majority of migrants from the Sudanese community disproportionately impacts children. Most children have to reside in sub-standard apartments in very low-income areas, where they are exposed to criminal activity and violence. Children in this context often get exploited in forms of employment where safety risks are extremely high and the financial compensation is lower than average.

Recent findings show that Sudanese migrant children are increasingly leaving Egypt to journey to Libya, and then flee onwards to Greece, due to the lack of access to livelihood opportunities within the formal employment sector in Egypt, and with the exploitative conditions prevalent in the informal sector. Difficulties in legalising their residency status and prevalent social tensions created additional obstacles. Lack of access to education for children also contributes to the overall sense of hopelessness and inability to envision a future within Egypt. The conditions between Egypt and Libya are even more challenging, where smuggling networks engage in exploitative and abusive practices against migrating children.<sup>48</sup>

## 6.2 Libya – Greece Route

### KEY RESULTS

- All the children interviewed experienced severe violence, extortion, (sexual) exploitation and detention in Libya.
- All movements within Libya are controlled by smugglers and armed men, who often kept the children in captivity for months in “containers”.
- Many children remain indebted to smuggling networks. In Libya, children face financial extortion of family members whilst being kept in captivity. Upon arrival, children are often forced to work to repay smugglers or to earn money for their families.
- Children are often violently forced to steer the boats in Libya. After departure, the children encounter high risks of facing charges from Greek government authorities, being accused of being smugglers themselves.
- For many children arriving in Greece, their first point of contact with authorities is not protection but de facto detention, sometimes criminalisation, exposing them to harsh detention conditions and even imprisonment when wrongly identified as an adult.
- Access to psychological care remains limited upon arrival in Greece. Funding cuts and staff shortages have severely reduced the availability of specialised child protection services.

### CONTEXT

#### Trends, Figures and National Developments

According to the latest report of the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), there are currently 894,890 migrants and refugees present within Libya. The top three countries being Sudan (35%), Niger (21%) and Egypt (19%). Between 4-7% of these migrants and refugees are unaccompanied children. Sudanese immigration, in particular, has surged significantly due to the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan, which has forced thousands to seek refuge in Libya, the report notes.<sup>49</sup>

As described in the interviews, within Libya, children face severe risks of detention, exploitation, trafficking and extortion. Armed groups often control their movements and refugees, including children, are often forced to work or steer the boats that attempt to reach EU shores. Between May-July 2025, a total of 5,957 migrants were intercepted in Libya on the Central Mediterranean route. After interception, many children are again at risk of exploitation, or returned to detention centers.

Recently, arrival patterns in Greece have shifted, with most sea arrivals (42%) now reaching Crete via the Libya–Crete route, representing a 350% increase compared to 2024. The majority arrive from Egypt (47%), Sudan (27%), Bangladesh (19%), Eritrea (1%) but also South Sudan and Yemen<sup>50</sup>. Several of these countries are affected by armed conflict, leading Greek authorities to consider their citizens likely to qualify for international protection. Crete lacks reception arrangements, leaving children and families in temporary and unsuitable sites, often without systematic registration or screening, which increases the risk of vulnerabilities going undetected.

Greece remains one of the main entry points to Europe, with arrivals increasing sharply since mid-2023. In 2024, arrivals of children quadrupled compared to 2023, and in 2025, figures have remained close to 2024 levels, with children representing more than one-fifth of all arrivals - 30% of them unaccompanied or separated.<sup>51</sup> Almost one in four arrivals to Greece are unaccompanied children, mainly from Afghanistan, Egypt, Syria, Sudan and Somalia.

On 11 July 2025, the Greek authorities introduced a legislative measure suspending the registration of asylum applications for three months for people arriving from North Africa through Crete, ordering their immediate deportation without registration of asylum claims. This measure clearly violates the fundamental right to seek asylum and protection from refoulement. It also raises serious concerns for children, as in the absence of proper screening, unaccompanied children risk going undetected, being treated as adults, and consequently being placed in detention.<sup>52</sup> The situation is further aggravated by the complete absence of a free legal aid scheme in detention, despite Greece's obligation to provide legal assistance to all detainees.

It remains unclear what the impact of this measure has been for children of different nationalities. According to a confidential circular issued by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum in September 2025, Sudanese and Eritrean nationals, as well as unaccompanied children, were exempted from the suspension and allowed to register their asylum claims at RICs or to be transferred to emergency accommodation or "safe zones" (for UAC).<sup>53</sup> However, the lack of transparency and clear implementation guidelines created initial confusion and unequal treatment among asylum seekers. The ban was not extended beyond its initial three-month period, and no removals are known to have actually taken place, yet the absence of official information on its scope and consequences continues to hinder a full understanding of its impact.

The latest available governmental public information<sup>54</sup> states that in February 2025, a total of 8,156 children were accommodated within Greece's asylum reception system. A total of 3,138 children, most of them under the age of 13, lived in the Control Access Facilities for Temporary Accommodation of Asylum Seekers (CAFTAAS) on the mainland, while 4,416 children were housed in the islands' Closed Controlled Access Centers (CCACs), and 602 children were placed in Reception and Identification Centers (RICs), where they are supposed to stay for a maximum of 25 days to complete identification procedures, undergo initial medical examinations, have their best interests assessed, and submit their asylum application, including family reunification.<sup>55</sup> In practice, however, RICs and CCACs are heavily securitised environments - particularly the so-called "safe areas" within CCACs where unaccompanied children are held - amounting to de facto detention until children's registration are completed. Despite Greece's formal abolition of child detention ("protective custody") in 2020, conditions in these "safe areas" remain so restrictive that four national courts have ruled them to constitute de facto detention<sup>56</sup>.

As highlighted in a recent joint report by Save the Children and Greek Council for Refugees, children in mainland CAFTAAS do not have their fundamental reception rights met, due to a severe lack of child-specific protection and support services. Children have to stay in mass accommodation, barbed-wire facilities, usually far from urban centres. In these centers, access to age-appropriate medical care and specific child protection services is scarce. Moreover, the prolonged (at least nine months) suspension of EU-funded cash/financial assistance<sup>57</sup> since mid-2024 had exacerbated their situation, leaving asylum-seeking children and their families without the means to secure basic necessities such as hygiene items, food, and medical care.<sup>58</sup>

### Criminalisation of minors

In addition, there is a troubling pattern of the criminalisation of children on the move - including unaccompanied children fleeing conflict in Sudan - for alleged involvement in smuggling simply because they have served as "boat pilots" or otherwise participated in travel arrangements beyond their control.<sup>59</sup> This practice has also led to family separations, with parents detained on smuggling charges while their children are placed in shelters or foster care - often without contact for months. Such cases highlight a legal system that disregards both the right to family unity and the best interests of the child, compounding the harm experienced by those seeking protection.<sup>60</sup>

Legal actors, civil society organisations, and media reports have documented cases in which children are prosecuted under Greece's anti-smuggling laws, often with little evidence, without adequate legal representation, and in detention settings. This criminalisation has chilling effects: it risks discouraging reporting of abuses, increasing trauma, and violating international law which protects refugees and asylum seekers from being punished for how they arrive. Child protection mechanisms are undermined when children are treated as criminals rather than persons in need of protection. Moreover, in a landmark case in mid-2025, 10 out of 16 asylum seekers (some of whom were children) charged with smuggling for steering a vessel were acquitted, the court accepting arguments that asylum seekers cannot be penalised for unauthorised entry under the Refugee Convention and Greek Migration Code.<sup>61</sup>

Pushbacks and violence against children at sea and land borders are also continuing in Greece, with 1,400 persons affected in 2023, including at least 158 women and 190 children.<sup>62</sup> This means that families often opt for longer and riskier routes. In 2025, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights reiterated concerns about the persistence of unlawful pushbacks,<sup>63</sup> and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled<sup>64</sup> that Greece's pushback practices are systematic and in violation of international law.

## RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS IN GREECE

### 6.2.1 RISK: Pre-Migration Experiences: Extreme Violence, Exploitation and Detention

The journeys of unaccompanied children fleeing Sudan and/or Egypt and transiting through North Africa are marked by extreme violence, exploitation, and psychological harm. **For many, exposure to violence begins long before departure.** A., a 17 year old boy from Sudan, described being detained and beaten for two months by a paramilitary group **attempting to forcibly recruit him in Sudan.** He was held in various prisons for two months along with other boys in the Al-Fasher area, where they were beaten and given food only once per day. During a prison transfer, he escaped with other boys and decided to leave Sudan working in agricultural labour for nearly a year to save enough money to continue his journey to safety.

M., another 17 year old boy from Sudan, described **leaving Sudan after his parents were killed during bombings in Khartoum.** Together with a friend, he crossed the border on foot and by truck with other Sudanese, including families. Whilst crossing, they were attacked by soldiers at the border. During these shootings, several people were killed, after which he and his cousin were arrested and detained.

Once outside Sudan, most of the interviewed children faced **prolonged and brutal experiences in Libya**. A 17 year old boy recounted being imprisoned for several months in what he described as a warehouse controlled by armed groups, where he was regularly beaten and denied food and hygiene.

*“It was very difficult,  
many things I don’t remember;  
I never washed once during that time”*

F., a 17 year old Sudanese boy, described that in Libya, **he was forced to work for a local employer under threat of deportation or forced labour**. He was confined in a small room with multiple people for around ten days, with insufficient food and frequent beatings when complaints were made. Afterwards, the child was introduced to a local employer by the smuggler, lived in the employer’s home, and did not go outside due to fear of authorities and deportation. The interviewed child was forced to work long hours and eventually received payment, whereas other boys were underpaid or unpaid:

*“If I left the house without papers,  
I could be sent back to Sudan or even enslaved.”*

Another 17 year old boy interviewed in Greece described this period as “very difficult, with many memories missing or unclear” - he believes he spent four to five months in Libya, though it may have been longer. The conditions were extremely poor: food and water were scarce, and “whenever I asked for food, I was beaten.” He was frequently assaulted and denied the ability to wash or change clothes during his entire detention.

As noted by a key informant expert,

*“The stories of these boys are strikingly similar - they all recount the same pattern of violence, exploitation, and imprisonment in Libya. Many arrive in Greece deeply traumatised, with dermatological infections, malnutrition, and severe psychological distress.”*

### 6.2.2 RISK: Smuggling Dynamics, Trafficking and Risks of Criminalisation

All four children reported that smugglers and armed men controlled their movements in Libya, often demanding ransom or labour in exchange for release or onward passage. These accounts align with widespread documentation of torture, extortion, and sexual violence in Libyan detention centres. As one frontline expert in Greece explained:

*“Many children stay there for around six months, sometimes longer, depending on border closures and conditions. Exploitation in Libya is often sexual. We had one Sudanese boy in another project, very traumatised, clearly a victim of trafficking and torture. Boys can be victims of sexual exploitation too.”*





**CHILDREN ON THESE ROUTES FACE EXTREME VIOLENCE, REPEATED DANGER, AND FREQUENT DETENTION. UNABLE TO RETURN HOME OR CROSS BORDERS SAFELY, THIS DRIVES THEM BACK TO SMUGGLERS AND HEIGHTENS THEIR RISK OF EXPLOITATION. THEY FEEL TRAPPED.**

Children who manage to leave Libya do so in extremely unsafe conditions. Most cross the Mediterranean on overcrowded and unseaworthy boats. One 15 year old boy from Egypt witnessed his cousin being shot in the leg by armed men for refusing to drive the boat to Greece. The boy stayed close to his cousin throughout the journey, terrified for their lives. Upon arrival, both were accused of being smugglers and detained in Crete.

In another case, a 17 year old boy from Sudan was arrested and charged with smuggling after steering the boat during rough weather. He explained in court: "If I had not agreed to steer, the people on board would have died."

One of the interviewed experts confirmed that **criminalisation of children on the move who are forced to steer boats** is a growing concern in Greece:

*"We have had several children accused of smuggling, even though they acted under duress or to save lives. They arrive deeply traumatised, with visible signs of malnutrition and skin diseases after days without food, water, or clean clothes."*

Beyond the journey itself, **labour exploitation and debt bondage** are recurrent risks, both in transit and upon arrival in Greece. According to the same expert,

*"Children are often forced to work to repay smugglers or to earn money for their families. This happens not only in Libya or Türkiye but also here in Greece. We have even seen cases where smugglers accompany children to our office pretending to help them, only to ensure the child gets papers and can start working."*

### 6.2.3 RISK: Migration and Border Management Policies: Detention, Criminalisation and 'Unsafe' Living Conditions Upon EU arrival

For many children arriving in Greece, **early interactions with authorities may involve (de facto) detention and even criminalisation** rather than immediate access to protection. Individuals intercepted by the Greek Coast Guard - including unaccompanied children - are often de facto **detained or imprisoned for several days** under harsh conditions, a practice that has intensified under the three-month asylum ban, effectively prioritising deterrence over the protection needs of children.

One 15 year old boy from Egypt reported being held without food and subjected to ill-treatment in detention following his arrival on the island of Gavdos (Crete). Afterward, he was transferred to Malakasa RIC, where he remained for three months. He described dirty facilities, unkind treatment from staff, and insufficient food, saying he *"did not feel safe"* and *"could not leave the camp because of the criminal charges"* pending against him for alleged smuggling.

Several of the Sudanese boys shared similar experiences of **initial detention and confusion about their age and rights**. Two were held at the Amygdaleza pre-removal centre upon arrival; both were advised by other migrants to declare themselves adults to avoid prolonged detention, but their child status was later confirmed through age-assessment procedures supported by the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR). Until this recognition, they were **confined in adult facilities**, with limited access to hygiene, outdoor space, or psychosocial support.

Criminalisation of children for smuggling activities - often performed under duress or to save lives - further compounds these risks. Such charges can restrict children's freedom of movement, keeping them in closed camps or preventing voluntary return. The Egyptian boy requested to go back to his family in Egypt, but authorities denied his request due to the ongoing court case, forcing him to remain in Greece.

According to civil society experts, many unaccompanied children in similar situations face **prolonged uncertainty and fear of detention or deportation**, which severely affects their psychological wellbeing. The absence of consistent legal guardianship and the slow pace of asylum procedures add to these pressures.

Children residing in camps frequently report **not feeling safe**, citing exposure to violence and theft, and fear of leaving their containers. Some request **police presence as a proxy for safety**, despite having previously suffered at the hands of police or border forces. A mental-health professional working with children on the move observed:

*"Accommodation conditions amplify these pressures. In shelters with minimal staff, children lack consistent support. In families under financial or legal stress, parents' anxiety spills into children's lives."*

Family separation and the absence of protective adult figures leave unaccompanied children especially vulnerable to **isolation, sleep disorders, and behavioural difficulties**. Asylum delays, restrictive mobility, and fear of forced return compound feelings of hopelessness, sometimes leading to **crisis episodes, self-harm, or violent outbursts** in shelters.

#### 6.2.4 RISK: Limited Access to Protection: Lack of Psychological Care, Stability and Perspectives for the Future

Children in Greek reception facilities, including "safe areas" within CCACs on the islands and mainland CAFTAAs, face unsafe, at times overcrowded, and restrictive conditions. These environments often amount to de facto detention, lasting until registration and identification are completed - a process frequently delayed by systemic bottlenecks.

As noted by experts and confirmed by the children interviewed, consistent and trustworthy adult support is rare. Systemic gaps - particularly the absence or high turnover of guardians, combined with delays in service provision - undermine children's ability to feel safe and to build trust within the system.



These trust challenges are further reinforced by children's past experiences. As one expert explained:

*"The experience of smuggling and trafficking profoundly affects children's sense of safety and their trust in adults and institutions. Many prefer to rely on compatriots or people from their community, even when these networks are not safe. Some distrust anyone in authority, especially when those figures remind them of officials they met during their journey."*

Parents themselves are frequently under significant stress, making it difficult for them to provide the calm and consistent care children need. As one MHPSS expert explained:

*"But children need calm parents who can give them quality time and emotional support. So, when a family comes here, we often need to start with the parents before we can help the child."*

- MHPSS Expert 2

Beyond these immediate stresses, what weighs even more heavily on children is the profound uncertainty about their future, directly tied to their own or their caregivers' legal status. Children and MHPSS experts in Greece have repeatedly identified this uncertainty as a major source of stress and anxiety:

*"The question of the future is extremely important. The uncertainty about legal status, about whether they will be recognised as refugees or not, strongly affects their mental health. If a child gets their legal status, they can start building a future. But without it, everything is uncertain."*

- MHPSS Expert 1

Therefore, the anxiety children experience is not only rooted in past experiences but is deeply connected to the uncertainty of their present situation and the lack of clear prospects for the future. The absence of predictable pathways for education, legal status, and livelihood opportunities, combined with pressures from families to contribute economically, intensifies this stress:

*"Another big issue is the lack of perspective for the future. If there was a clear system that gave them a future - for example, a stable pathway to education, to jobs - it would help enormously. But the reality is very difficult. There is pressure from families for children to bring in money, because they came here for a better future. But there is no better future in sight."*

- MHPSS Expert 1

Economic pressure is another powerful stressor. Many children arrive owing money to smugglers or relatives who financed their journey, creating pressure to work immediately.

Access to psychological care and education remains limited upon arrival in Greece. Funding cuts and staff shortages have severely reduced the availability of specialised child protection services. Education, where available, plays a key protective role. MHPSS experts underlined that school attendance gives structure, connection, and normalcy, helping children to rebuild trust and stability.

Despite these hardships, children demonstrate remarkable resilience and courage, finding ways to maintain hope:

*“Even though the journey was very hard and many times I thought of going back, I kept going. I gave myself courage and told myself that in the end everything will work out well”.*

- 17 year old boy from Sudan



### 6.3 Greece – Western Balkan Route

#### KEY RESULTS

- Children arriving through the Balkan route face heightened protection risks due to their prior migratory experiences. Many have already endured long and difficult journeys, and their transit through the region is often pushed underground.
- One out of five refugees and migrants who reported being pushed back from one country to another without adequate legal procedures were children. These pushbacks were often accompanied with physical violence and humiliation.
- The increased reliance on smuggling has pushed irregular migration journeys more underground, with severe consequences for the safety of children on the move, such as extortion, kidnapping and exploitation.
- There are increasingly blurred lines between smuggling, trafficking and exploitation as there are less protection measures in place and children become more invisible.
- Appropriate age assessment procedures are absent across the region, and UASC are at risk of being registered as- and accommodated with adults. The complex mix of migration profiles of children and continued arrivals stretch the capacity of the authorities in the Balkans countries to provide adequate protection responses.

## CONTEXT

### Trends, Figures and National Developments

With frequently shifting dynamics, the Balkan route is an integral part of the Eastern Mediterranean Route, connecting arrivals in Greece or Türkiye with EU countries via a difficult journey through the Balkan states. While children and adults often travel to reach Europe through North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo<sup>65</sup> and Montenegro, this research focuses on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as key transit countries on the Balkans route where the majority of arrivals have been recorded. According to UNHCR and IOM data for 2024, around 15% of all arrivals in Serbia and BiH were children, with 5.5% of children travelling with families and 9.5% of children unaccompanied or separated. The majority of children come from Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt and Morocco.

In 2024, Frontex reported that detections of irregular crossings on the route had dropped by 78%. Yet, an in-depth analysis of migration trends in the Western Balkans in 2024 by Save the Children shows that although most official sources report a sharp decline in new arrivals, this only highlights the lack of visibility for children and families on the move.<sup>66</sup> Despite fluctuations in the official arrival figures, children continue to arrive and transit through the region in significant numbers, but their transit is quicker, more organised and facilitated by smuggling networks, making the detection and registration more challenging.<sup>67</sup> It also points to the increasing risk of exploitation, trafficking, and violence (during pushbacks, from smugglers, or from competing smuggling groups) leading to more obstacles for humanitarian organisations to provide protection support.

Over the past years, the reception system and protection budget in Serbia and BiH have witnessed severe cuts. The shift in migration management policies in Serbia included the closure of reception centres, especially in the north. The number of asylum, reception and transit centres was significantly downsized over the past two years, leaving only six facilities operational in mid-2025.<sup>68</sup> In BiH there is a gradual transition of migration management responsibilities from international actors to national authorities. The reduction of arrivals in reception centers (because children remain under the radar and increasingly sleep in squats or private accommodations) and the budgetary constraints, have influenced the recent decision of the authorities in BiH to reduce the number of available reception centres in both Sarajevo and Una Sana Canton. This raises concerns about families, unaccompanied children, and single adult males being accommodated in the same centres without strengthened safeguarding measures and additional support to be able to build sustainable migration management services with adequate protection services integrated.

Restrictive and unlawful border practices, including pushbacks - used to forcibly return refugee and migrant children and adults across borders without individual assessment - persist in Croatia and throughout the Balkan Route despite evidence-based advocacy by human rights organisations, repeated criticism from international bodies, and extensive media coverage. Multiple mechanisms - including the Council of Europe's Special Representative on Migration and Refugees, UN Special Procedures, and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) - have documented evidence of pushbacks from Croatia and called for accountability, and the European Court of Human Rights has issued a ruling condemning this illegal practice.<sup>69</sup>

## RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS IN THE BALKAN

The Balkan route is characterised by particularly harsh conditions in transit, including prevalent pushbacks, and the lack of access to adequate services, or even basic necessities in some cases. Similar to the other two contexts, the risks for children on this route stem from restrictive border policies, dependence on smuggling which happens as a result of the former, and consequently, a lack of access to formal services and documentation.

The findings described below are based on 10 interviews with unaccompanied children, two interviews with accompanied children, nine with adults and five interviews with eight key informants, as well as supplemental information collected by the Save the Children's Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub. In addition, between August 1, 2024, and mid-September 2025, Save the Children's field teams in Bosnia and Herzegovina reached a total of 1,691 individuals who reported experiencing pushbacks from Croatia. This included 258 children, of whom 220 were UASC.

### 6.3.1 RISK: Border Management: Violence and Pushbacks

According to the interviews conducted and reports collected by Save the Children's outreach teams, pushbacks, including violent pushbacks, occurred even though the groups intercepted by border police included children including those unaccompanied. Every fifth person who reported experiencing a pushback was a child. This shows that for many refugees and migrants passing through the region, violent pushbacks and numerous rights violations have become inseparable from their journey.

*"We came by plane from Türkiye. Later, a smuggler took our passports and threw them away. We tried to cross the Croatian border illegally 11 times, but the border police sent us back each time. They treated people inhumanely - took all our belongings, all the money we had, and smashed our phones. We were left with nothing. Some people were stripped and beaten and sent back without clothes or shoes - even in front of children and women."*

- Parent, 41 years old, from Türkiye

A consistent theme in the data collection for this study was the **violent and degrading treatment by border police**, especially Croatian authorities. Families described being beaten, detained, robbed, and pushed back without due process - often with children present. These accounts illustrate a systematic practice of pushbacks without legal safeguards, often accompanied by physical violence and humiliation - a clear violation of international protection standards.

*"We tried to cross the Croatian border and slept in the forest. My mother was hit by a Croatian police car and broke her arm; now she has a cast. The Croatian police were terrible - they beat us, broke our phones, and sent us back. The Bosnian police helped us and took my mother to the doctor"*

- 16 year old boy travelling with family

The respondents noted that **violent pushbacks have intensified again in recent months and that violence is not selective** - it affects pregnant women, children, unaccompanied minors and migrants and refugees with visible disabilities. From the parents and caregivers interviewed for this study, eight out of nine were stopped and pushed back at the Croatian border (often multiple times) and one was pushed back at the Serbian border with BiH. Many interviewees told stories of being detained in vans without water, food or air:

*"They kept us all day in a van without water, food, or air. Then they took us to a place in the forest, showed us the way back, and told us to return to Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was a black van that was driven so roughly and fast that we all got hurt, and the children hit their heads against the windows. It was terrifying. We found ourselves in the middle of the night, deep in the forest, wet and unsure of the way back."*

- 41 year old male from Türkiye, travelling with spouse and children

### 6.3.2 RISK: Smuggling Dynamics and Border Policies: Increased Invisibility of Children and Blurred Lines between Smuggling, Trafficking and Exploitation

The lack of safe migratory routes and decreased protection budgets have resulted in a greater reliance of refugees and migrants on smugglers. This in turn has led to heightened vulnerability, as refugees and migrants are more likely to experience violence, instances of exploitation and extortion by smugglers. **Children reached by civil society organisations frequently report incidents of kidnappings near the border, violence, and sexual abuse.** There are also cases in which children have dared to report their experiences, but an adequate response was lacking - the child would simply be referred to an appropriate accommodation without investigation to verify the claims.

Protection for children outside accommodation centres, as well as for children without registration, remains inadequate. Cases of labour and sexual exploitation, violence, and involvement of children in criminal activities were registered. Children and young people's lack of sufficient knowledge about labour exploitation and their desire to earn money to fund their journey and help their families back home, leave them vulnerable to accepting highly unfavourable and dangerous arrangements that pose serious health risks.

**Certain sections of the route - particularly at border areas - are controlled by organised armed groups, which exploit and threaten refugees and migrants passing through the Balkan route in various ways.** Younger unaccompanied or separated children tend to attach themselves to older individuals within the group (including smugglers), affirming everything they say, and avoiding separation from them at all costs. These children are at an extremely high risk of all forms of exploitation. Older children, in turn, are of significant strategic value to smugglers, who often attempt to involve them in their operations - ranging from translation, recruiting other children by sharing supposedly positive experiences with specific smugglers, negotiating with local actors involved in transportation, to eventually assuming the role of smugglers themselves by organising movement along specific segments of the route.

A smuggling and trafficking expert from Serbia has emphasised that **children frequently report incidents of kidnappings by smugglers near the border and different forms of violence and exploitation, including sexual abuse.**<sup>70</sup> The dependency on smuggling has also pushed irregular migration journeys more underground, with severe consequences for the safety of children on the move. For example, they often do not know which country they are in or have passed through. Especially for Egyptian children, smuggling is organised in a manner that keeps children “underground” and thereby difficult to access for protection services. It is also not uncommon for migrants and refugees to be injured in car accidents, when smugglers are chased by the police.

### 6.3.3 RISK: Lack of Access to Protection and Services

Key informants emphasised that one of the consequences of budget cuts on protection and an increasingly strict border policy has been a **reduced level of contact between organisations providing aid and refugees/migrants.** This diminishes the range and quality of services available to these individuals and reduces their chances of escaping exploitative and violent dynamics associated with smuggling networks.

*“I believe that as INGOs have gradually started withdrawing from the system - something that has been happening over the past several years - children are becoming less visible, less protected, even though, on paper, everything appears well-structured. On paper, all stakeholders are aligned and coordinated. However, in practice, many critical elements of protection are still missing.”*  
- Outreach Social Worker and Legal Guardian from BiH

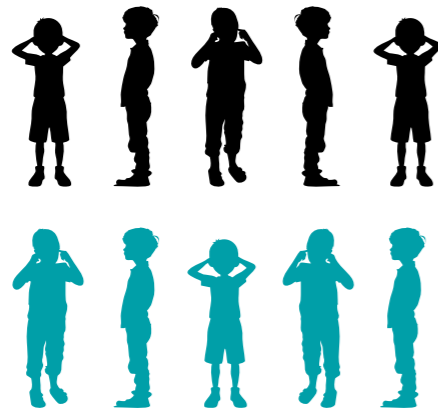
For the unaccompanied children interviewed for this study in BiH, protection and support during their journeys were almost entirely absent. None of the boys had a guardian, case worker, or social worker before arriving in BiH, either while travelling or during extended stays in transit countries. None were offered psychological support.

An increasing number of refugees and migrants transiting through the Balkans use private accommodation, squats or sleep rough. Of the 10 UASC boys interviewed in BiH, half reported not having enough food or clean water during their migration journeys. Only two had access to adequate toilets or places to wash (20%). Healthcare was almost entirely out of reach, with just one boy (10%) saying it was easy to see a doctor when sick. Out of the adults only three said it was easy to access a doctor.

**CHILDREN FACE BUREAUCRATIC OBSTACLES AND RESOURCE SHORTAGES THAT BLOCK TIMELY SUPPORT, AND AS A RESULT THEY ARE LEFT ISOLATED, INSECURE, AND VULNERABLE.**



## LIVING CONDITIONS FOR MIGRANT BOYS ON THE BALKAN ROUTE. 10 UASC BOYS INTERVIEWED.



**50% DID NOT HAVE  
ENOUGH FOOD OR  
CLEAN WATER DURING  
THEIR JOURNEY.**



**ONLY 2 BOYS HAD ACCESS TO  
PROPER TOILETS OR  
WASHING FACILITIES.**



**JUST 1 BOY SAID  
HEALTHCARE WAS EASY  
TO OBTAIN WHEN SICK.**

Only one of the UASC interviewed said that they never had to sleep rough, including in parks, cars or abandoned buildings. Seven did not go to school at all during their journey. These findings illustrate the dire conditions on the route, and the lack of adequate services and protection mechanisms with the focus on restrictive border policies.

**Girls and young women** travelling alone (some of the countries of origin included Burundi and Somalia), face distinct protection risks, including **exposure to gender-based violence and exploitation**. They require access to safe, gender-sensitive accommodation and tailored psychosocial and social support to address their specific needs. However, across the route there is a severe shortage of suitable accommodation for particularly vulnerable groups, including children, while alternative care arrangements - such as family-based or community-based care - remain largely out of reach.

In parallel, closure of the reception centres along the route results in decreased access to registration, resulting in gaps in protection for children. Even when adequate registration and accommodation take place, access to services might remain limited. Increased funding for border management and anti-smuggling operations has not equated to more funding for much-needed protection responses, and, due to the budget constraints many of the civil society organisations and international agency service providers have had to discontinue their interventions, while authorities struggle to ensure continuation of the programmes in the same capacity. Humanitarian presence and resources are shrinking, leaving frontline organisations in the Western Balkans with fewer means to support refugees and migrants.

For example, Save the Children is covering around 110 kilometres of the bordering area to Croatia in BiH and providing protection services for children in vulnerable situations, including those experiencing pushbacks from Croatia. The canton and its border area cover a large geographic territory, and families who are pushed back may be located kilometres away from the nearest shelter. This situation clearly contravenes obligations to ensure the best interests of the child, right to protection and adhere to guidelines on age assessment.

The experiences described above cumulate layers of harm and risk, which can have severe and long-lasting effects on the mental health of children. In order to gain better insights into the psychological impact on children, Save the Children interviewed multiple experts on mental health and psychological social support.

### KEY RESULTS

- The layers of different stressors, from past harmful events to the instability and discrimination that children face along migratory journeys, can lead to complex suffering and cumulative harm.
- These cumulative circumstances have a severe negative impact on children's mental health. Displacement and harmful events increase the risks of post-traumatic stress disorder for many refugee children.
- Children often experience a constant feeling of loneliness, of not belonging, a high risk of self-harm, and negative effects on their memory and concentration. Signs of this harm include refusal to attend school, isolation, destructive behaviour, withdrawal, or aggression.
- Children with disabilities face additional barriers, while those whose caregivers are themselves traumatised may receive inconsistent emotional support, further exacerbating their distress.
- When basic services, registration and protection are out of reach, children may attempt to continue their journeys, exposing them to further accumulation of harm. In the absence of timely protection or MHPSS interventions, the impact on children's long-term development can be significant.
- Overall, these experiences also affect children's sense of safety and trust in the long term, as exploitative experiences erode trust in adults and institutions, and repeated exploitation may normalise coercion and abuse.

### 7.1 Cumulative Harm: Psychological Harm in the Different Contexts

#### **Egypt: Cumulative Risks and Harm: Conflict, Unsafety and Lack of Protection**

During the interviews it became apparent that the children were still highly traumatised by the violence in Sudan that displaced them. Some opted to leave out details while reporting on the situation leading up to their departure, particularly with regards to direct encounters with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), while others who attempted to provide specifics became emotional at which point the interviewer would involve the Save the Children case worker present. This was particularly the case for some of the 30 children who had lost family members during these events, either because they ended up being separated from some or all of their family, or because these family members did not survive the violence inflicted on them.

The impact of severe harmful events (war, violence, loss) is a powerful common threat, leading to a cluster of shared symptoms like fear, anxiety, sleep problems, and social withdrawal. These experiences involved fleeing violence, losing homes and family members, separation, and facing harsh conditions during transit and in refugee settings. Sexual violence and harassment are reported by Sudanese interviewees - girls, boys and women alike. The Sudanese women assessed also reported incidents of rape. Sudanese boys face bullying and physical assault in the street or from residents of their buildings. Bullying also occurs at school. In terms of family structure and support, Sudanese migrants tend to live in crowded conditions or with extended family/roommates, which can lead to conflict, abuse, and a feeling of not belonging.

#### **Greece: Cumulative Risks and Harm: Past Trauma adds to Present Stress**

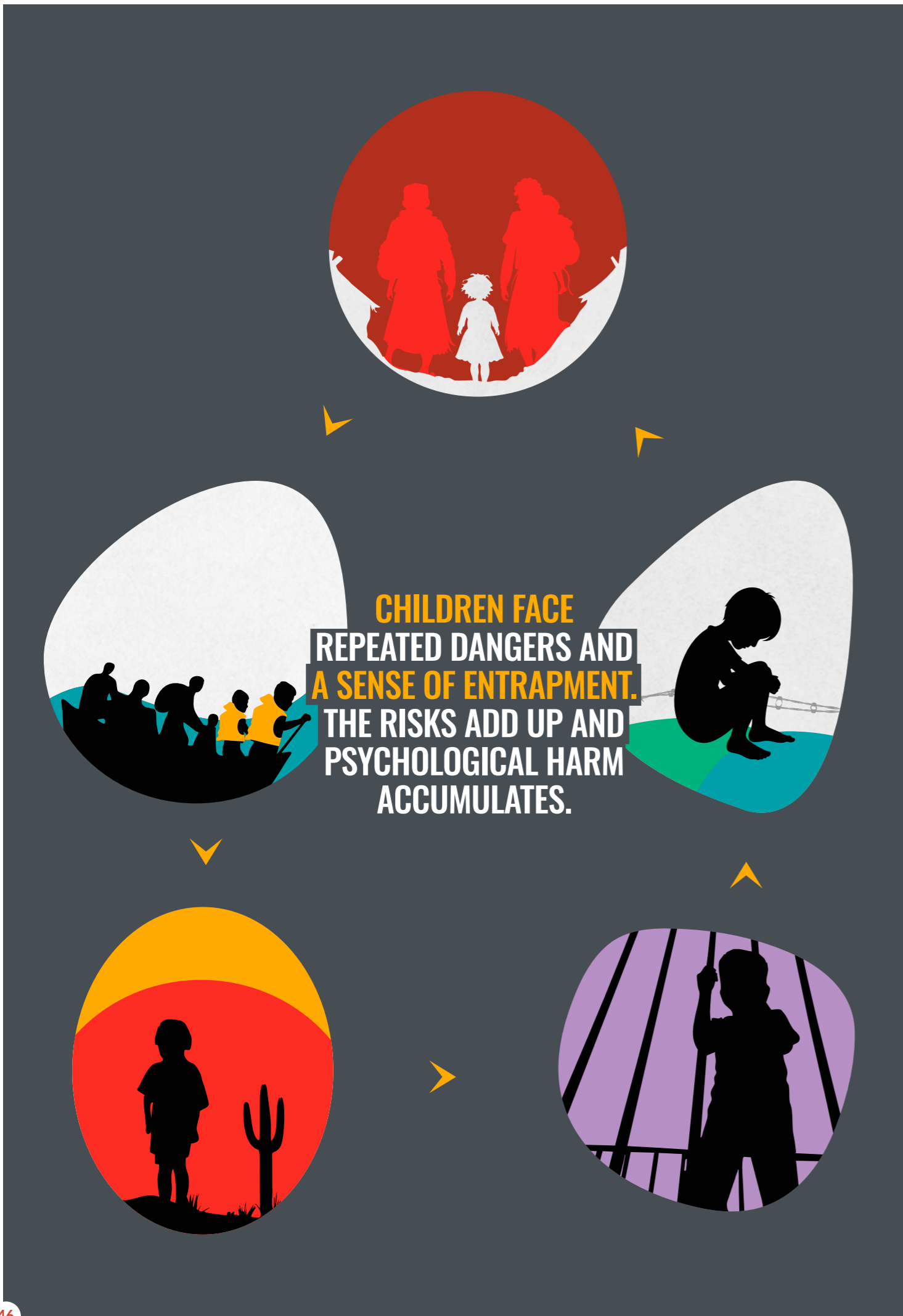
A major challenge for children on the move is adapting to constant mobility - shifting between countries, camps, cities, and schools. Frequent changes in Greek migration and asylum policy further compound their uncertainty and stress. MHPSS Experts in Greece agree that all these stressors compound, from past trauma to the instability and discrimination children face in Greece, leading to complex suffering and cumulative harm. Signs of this harm include refusal to attend school, isolation, destructive behaviour, withdrawal, or aggression.

Experiences during transit or in detention add another layer of psychological impact. Children who have endured smuggling, trafficking, or (de facto) detention at borders often develop coping mechanisms that involve cutting off memories of the journey. Sometimes trauma emerges later, through nightmares, heightened fear of strangers, or phobias that seem disconnected but are rooted in earlier events. These cumulative circumstances have a severe negative impact on children's mental health. According to the interviewed expert, displacement and harmful experiences have led to a significant number of refugee children suffering from severe psychological stress symptoms. However, this often goes unreported and untreated, due to documentation issues and difficulty in assessing emergencies.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, the lack of protection services and the hardening of EU external borders mean that onward movement exposes children to further risks, such as those encountered while crossing the Western Balkans.

#### **Balkan route**

The direct or indirect border violence and pushbacks children witness, or experience, are neither the beginning nor the end of their physical and psychological impact. They have also often experienced labour exploitation, dangerous sea crossings or war and poverty before reaching the EU's external borders. Half of the UASC interviewed in BiH stated that they passed through Greece before continuing via Türkiye or Bulgaria towards the Western Balkans. **This means that the experiences and rights violations children have endured in Greece and other countries of transit continue to 'travel with them'**, shaping how they cope with current stressors. In addition, there is often no proper care available for dealing with potentially harmful events and cumulative stressors.



**CHILDREN FACE  
REPEATED DANGERS AND  
A SENSE OF ENTRAPMENT.  
THE RISKS ADD UP AND  
PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM  
ACCUMULATES.**

On the Balkan route, children experience fear and distress during pushbacks and over the uncertainty for their futures also linked with practices which are intended to intimidate, dehumanise, and deter refugees and migrants from crossing the border.

*“It is often forgotten how physically demanding and exhausting the journey itself is; their bodies are in constant stress, and exposed to long-term poor nutrition and hygiene, sleep deprivation, a high likelihood of infections, attacks by wild animals, risks during river crossings or minefields (especially in BiH). There is a lack of services in the reception centres, and distrust in the police and professionals present. It is easy to observe that displaced children show insecurity, loneliness, abrupt growing-up, lack of ability to express emotions, suppression of emotions, which can lead to developing anxiety or depression. There is a disrupted child routine and socialisation process, which leads to feelings of isolation and apathy”*

- MHPSS Expert BiH

*“Children often show signs of distress resulting from these experiences. This is reflected in their difficulties recalling and describing events in detail, as well as in their disorientation.”*

- Child protection officer on the Save the Children outreach team.

Children travelling with parents are also affected when parents report severe psychological and/or physical harm after border crossings and pushbacks. For instance, the parents interviewed for this study described long-lasting psychological effects, particularly due to repeated violence, threats, and instability. Only two out of nine had access to psychologists.

*“They say there is psychological support here in the camp, but it’s not really enough for what we need. They don’t give us real support”*

- 37 year old female travelling with spouse and children from Türkiye

Education Experts in BiH voiced similar concerns as those in Greece:

*“Parents, who are in survival mode, have a very limited capacity to care for their children beyond fulfilling their basic physical needs. Children are constantly exposed to conversations about violence - stories of what others have endured and what awaits them as they prepare to cross the Croatian border. They have no space to simply be children.”*

- Expert in the education of children in migration contexts

Overall, the findings of this study highlight that the policies to strengthen border protection have not actually led to a significant decrease in the number of people passing through the region, but rather to their reduced visibility, with severe impacts on the physical and psychological well-being of children on the move.

## 8 EU Involvement In and Responsibility for Children's Rights Violations

As described in Chapter 3, the EU should not only to protect children's rights in all actions, but also *prioritise* child protection in its external action. In the following section, we will outline how the EU cooperates with third countries in projects that risk supporting, or even aggravating, the violations of children's rights which were described in Chapter 4.

All of the actions described below should be implemented in line with child rights considerations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the child protection frameworks outlined in previous sections.

### 8.1 EU Migration Cooperation with Countries Along the Migration Route

#### KEY RESULTS:

- The EU's focus on border management and apprehension without sufficient protection and referral mechanisms leads to children becoming more invisible and dependent on smugglers.
- The clear increase in border management and anti-smuggling support for third countries whilst cutting protection and humanitarian budgets lead to more risks of exploitation and harm for children.
- Children's feeling of unsafety, lack of adequate livelihood and the lack of access to crucial health and education services leads to onward movements from third countries towards the EU.
- Projects in the framework of the EU's external migration cooperation sustain, and in some cases even exacerbate, serious violations of children's rights. Children's rights violations, such as de facto detention, deportations, and violent pushbacks, remain insufficiently addressed within EU migration cooperation frameworks. This includes both the EU-Egypt partnership and Frontex Status Agreements with Western Balkan countries.
- EU agencies risk legitimising practices that violate children's rights and becoming directly involved in children's rights violations if they are not sufficiently addressed in the implementation of the projects they assist in.
- The European Commission does not sufficiently address the infringements of children's rights which are systematically undertaken by EU Member States - such as Greece.

Over the past 10 years, the EU has continuously increased its investments into tightening border control mechanisms at its external borders as well as outside of its territory, through partnerships with countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. In addition, it has strengthened operational cooperation with countries in the Western Balkans through the direct deployment of Frontex, and has increased technical assistance and capacity building activities in the EU southern neighbourhood, including through the Frontex-led project 'EU4BorderSecurity', which seeks to "enhance border security in North Africa and the Levant," and involves collaboration with Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.<sup>72</sup> With the extensive external involvement of the EU, comes a bigger responsibility to address possible protection risks. Yet, **Save the Children has witnessed firsthand that violations of children's rights are not sufficiently addressed and, at times, are aggravated or sustained by EU (funded) policies.**

The following section discusses the current migration patterns and policy trends within the context of the case countries relevant for the potential journeys investigated in this study, namely: Sudan-Egypt, Libya-Greece and the Western Balkans. It also outlines the key operational and funding instruments for the EU's engagement in neighbouring countries in North Africa and the Western Balkans, highlighting an intensified focus on counter-smuggling and trafficking actions.

This is not a complete overview of all projects the EU is implementing in its migration cooperation with the examined countries, but rather a case study to show a clear trend towards more integration of EU agencies and authorities in third countries, the EU's involvement in key policies that negatively impact the rights of children on the move and a clear lack of effective accountability mechanisms for the violations of children's rights.

### 8.2 EU Migration Cooperation with Egypt

Egypt has emerged as a key strategic partner for the EU in migration and border management. In March 2024, the EU and the Government of Egypt signed a "Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership" agreement<sup>73</sup> to reduce irregular migration to Europe, increase stability in North Africa, and support Egypt's economy. The agreement includes a support package totalling €7.4 billion, consisting of €5 billion in financial assistance through short-term loans.<sup>74</sup> The package also includes €1.8 billion in additional investment support under the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus, along with €600 million in grants through mechanisms such as the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), of which €200 million is earmarked for migration-related priorities.<sup>75</sup> These commitments were further strengthened at the first EU-Egypt Summit that took place on 22nd October 2025 in Brussels.<sup>76</sup>



The activities on migration management under the agreement are part of the EU Action Plan for the Mediterranean and coordinated through **MOCADDEM** (Operational Coordination Mechanism for the External Dimension of Migration), with NDICI being the main financial instrument for implementing external actions. Of the €200 million earmarked for migration management, only €28 million is granted to the so-called “protection action”, without concrete agreements on necessary steps towards enhanced child protection.<sup>77</sup>

As mentioned in previous chapters, **cooperation between the EU and Egypt takes place in a context where children on the move are at risk of detention, deportation without due process, and challenges to access the asylum system.** This cooperation should avoid reinforcing border security that

pushes children further into irregular and dangerous routes, heightening their exposure to smuggling networks, violence, and exploitation, while providing no independent oversight or accountability mechanisms.<sup>78</sup>

The implications of the EU-Egypt Partnership agreement on the protection of refugee and migrant children are not yet clear. The EU has granted billions of financial assistance without addressing the concerns of rights violations or proposing child rights conditionalities on financial support. Apart from a general mention of respect for international law, concrete references to the rights of refugees and migrants are not sufficiently emphasised, and NGOs have noted the lack of transparent mechanisms within the partnership to assess its impact on the rights of Egyptian and migrant children.<sup>79</sup>

### 8.2.1 Cooperation of EU Agencies with Egypt

The involvement of EU agencies in Egypt has significantly increased over the past years.<sup>80</sup> The **European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)** has been implementing a “Roadmap for cooperation 2021-2023” and has recently adopted a new roadmap for 2024-2026, to strengthen “asylum-related institutional capacity in Egypt” and “access to international protection procedure, including the identification and referral of groups in vulnerable situations with special needs”.<sup>81</sup> Whilst the 2024-2026 roadmap aimed to enhance the protection space for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection in Egypt in line with the CEAS and EU standards, the Egyptian national asylum legislation adopted in December 2024 falls short of such standards.<sup>82</sup> The roadmap involves capacity-building activities to strengthen child-centred approaches, including through best interest assessments. This is a commendable approach; but without more financial and institutional support for access to health and education, protection and livelihoods, the refugee status won’t offer children actual safety and protection. If this remains the case, the cooperation risks legitimising a reality that only offers protection on paper.

**Frontex** is actively supporting the Egyptian authorities in the scope of the “**EU4BorderSecurity regional programme**” funded under the European Neighbourhood Instrument. The overall aim of the project is to contribute to enhancing border security in the Southern Neighbourhood by fostering bilateral and regional cooperation through awareness/capacity building activities and technical exchanges in the Integrated Border Management domain.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, an NDICI-funded regional project aims to “**Support Cross-Border Cooperation and Integrated Border Management in North Africa**”.<sup>84</sup> Frontex is set to contribute by training security agencies according to EU and international standards “to ensure that border controls (checks and surveillance) are conducted in full respect of the rule of law and human rights principles and with a protection-sensitive approach”. The support of Frontex entails training on Integrated Border Management (IBM) and Search and Rescue (SAR) to the authorities in third countries, such as Egypt.<sup>85</sup>

### 8.2.2 Spotlight on Anti-Smuggling and Trafficking Projects

Anti-smuggling and trafficking policies have particularly emerged as a field of intensified cooperation between the EU and North African countries, with various projects implemented in Egypt. The most recent “**Partnership to Counter Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Persons in Egypt**” (**PACSOM**) was adopted in July 2025. Implemented by IOM and UNODC, it aims to strengthen law enforcement capacities to detect, investigate, and disrupt Smuggling of Migrants (SOM) and Trafficking in Persons (TIP) networks. While it states that the project “will continue applying and expanding Human Rights Due Diligence Policy and related good practices”, there is no explicit reference to guidelines that mandate children’s rights protections.<sup>86</sup>

For example, the €10 million NDICI-funded EU-funded project “**Enhancing international police cooperation against migrant smuggling in North Africa**” aims to strengthen law enforcement’s capacity across North Africa to effectively investigate and prosecute organised crime groups engaging in migrant smuggling. It is mainly implemented by Interpol,<sup>87</sup> with Frontex and Europol support. It is foreseen that joint police operations are conducted, involving Interpol, Europol, Frontex and Member States at one or many border crossing points or hotspots.

Anti-smuggling is also one of the aims of the EU-funded project “**Strengthening the operational capacity of the Egyptian Coast Guard and Egyptian Border Guards to manage migration flows through effective border surveillance and search and rescue at land and sea**”. The overall objective of this action is to reduce irregular migration and trafficking in human beings along the Egyptian border.<sup>88</sup> It was adopted in 2022 with €28 million<sup>89</sup> and is implemented by the *International Organisation for Migration* (IOM) and the French organisation *Civipol*. The project has provided a wide range of border management training and equipment, including three new 17-meter search and rescue boats, as well as other (civilian) border surveillance equipment.<sup>90</sup> The project’s objective to enhance surveillance and SAR operations at land and at sea by the Egyptian Coast and Border Guards means that the EU is obliged to ensure national and international human rights standards and protection-centred approaches, such as ensuring the best interests of the child.

If we compare the number of projects, their objectives, actors and funding involved, we see a clear prioritisation of border management (i.e. the interception of migrants and refugees) over their protection needs. For some children, this lack of protection actually drives them to move further onward towards the EU. The clear and persistent violations of children’s rights as described in the interviews, such as detention with adults, push towards more dangerous

routes, deportations and/or exploitation, were often inflicted because there were no safe pathways to protection for children. In conclusion, as long as child-friendly protection systems are not considered as a clear conditionality for cooperation, the EU's increased support for border management and anti-smuggling operations in Egypt will aggravate the risks that children on the move face. In addition, the lack of monitoring and accountability mechanisms of the actual implementation of projects' (often performed by authorities in third countries) risks leaving the respect for international law and the rights of children only on paper.

### 8.3 Libya – Greece: Responsibility of the EU Commission and EU agencies in Greece

Unaccompanied children who have travelled through Libya and arrive in Greece have often faced *de facto* detention, limited access to age-appropriate services, information about their rights or legal assistance and, in some cases, even criminal prosecution.

**In Greece, the European Commission bears a particularly direct responsibility to ensure that the rights of these children are upheld**, given the scale of the EU's involvement and funding in Greece's national reception system. Yet, there appears to be a systematic reluctance to address ongoing violations of children's rights – some of which are so severe that the European Court of Human Rights was compelled to issue interim measures on several occasions (see examples below). The de-facto restriction of children's freedom, the chronic absence of essential services (including psychological care) and the uncertainty surrounding their legal status – are all the more alarming considering the psychological harm and abuse many children have already endured before reaching Greece.

The European Commission and EU Agencies provide significant financial, operational, and technical support to the responsible ministries in Greece to manage migration. The total amount of **financial support under the EU Home Affairs Funds** made available to Greece since 2015 is just over €5 billion. During the 2014-2020 programming period, more than €3.39 billion was made available to Greece to manage migration and borders under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the Internal Security Fund (ISF- Borders and Visa, Police) and the Emergency Support Instrument (ESI). Under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework, so far more than €1.66 billion has been made available under the Home Affairs Funds (AMIF, Border Management and Visa Policy Instrument, ISF) to support the implementation of priorities in the area of migration, border management and internal security.<sup>91</sup>

**Frontex** supports Greece with approximately 460 guest officers, who perform border surveillance, assist in the identification and registration of incoming migrants, as well as provide debriefing, screening and technical equipment. Frontex and Greece also cooperate in other activities, such as training and capacity building. The Frontex Fundamental Rights Officer had already warned in 2023 that persistent violations could jeopardise EU funding and even recommended the termination of Frontex operations in Greece.<sup>92</sup> The **EUAA** provides operational support and technical assistance to Greece to enhance national capacities in the areas of asylum, reception and vulnerable persons, through the deployment of around 450 experts and 100 interpreters.

While the Commission frequently highlights this support as enabling an “ambitious and comprehensive migration management policy”<sup>93</sup>, these allocations come with clear legal obligations. Under EU law, **the Commission must ensure that activities financed with EU migration funds comply with the EU acquis**, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and international human rights obligations. These requirements are enshrined in several regulations governing the implementation of EU funding in the areas of asylum and migration, including the Common Provisions Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, which provides for suspension or recovery of funds in cases of systemic breaches of the rule of law or fundamental rights.<sup>94</sup> Yet, despite the ongoing violations of children's rights described in previous sections, the European Commission has adopted a Communication in April 2025, which claims that migration management in mainland Greece has improved significantly<sup>95</sup>:

*“As a result of this continuous cooperation and support and the significant efforts of the Greek authorities in the last years, migration management in Greece has been significantly improved. Greece has set up functional asylum and reception systems and operational frameworks in key areas of migration management.”*

Reception and asylum systems in Greece are not merely national mechanisms but integral components of the broader EU migration framework. The Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs) represent a direct continuation of the “hotspot approach” and the EU-Turkey Statement, now formalised under the Pact on Migration and Asylum through the introduction of screening and border procedures.<sup>96</sup> According to the EU Funds for Fundamental Rights (FURI) report on Greece, infrastructural works for the operationalisation of the CCACs received a €260 million allocation via AMIF Emergency Assistance, while the provision of on-site services - such as healthcare, food distribution, and reception management - has been heavily reliant on AMIF and other Home Affairs funds.<sup>97</sup>

Reports from 2024–2025<sup>98</sup> indicate that **these facilities have systematically failed to ensure basic standards of protection, with children facing hunger, de facto detention, lack of medical and psychological care** and are inconsistent with the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the EU asylum acquis. The living conditions in these “safe areas” are so restrictive that four recent national court rulings have deemed them a form of de facto detention.<sup>99</sup> In 2025, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) granted interim measures for 45, and later 58, unaccompanied children held in the Samos CCAC, recognising the gravity of their situation.<sup>100</sup> The children - detained de facto for an average of 142 days - reported widespread hunger, lack of access to psychologists, and severe psychological distress. According to documentation by humanitarian organisations, 85% were suffering from untreated skin diseases, some of them serious, and most had limited or no access to medical care.

Meanwhile, in its Communication, the European Commission states that:

*“Overall, reception conditions in mainland reception centres have significantly improved since 2015 and can generally be deemed satisfactory, in terms of facilities, infrastructure, equipment and services provided, including with EU funding support.”*

In 2024–2025, most frontline civil society organisations in Greece described the situation for children on the move as a “children’s emergency”.<sup>101</sup> **Given the high level of financial and policy entanglement in Greece’s migration and asylum systems, the European Commission cannot be seen merely as a funder but as an actor with shared responsibility.** By its continuous refusal to act on infringements of the EU asylum *acquis*, including clear and persistent violations of children’s rights, the European Commission opens the door for derogations to EU standards by other Member States, with severe risks for the psychosocial wellbeing of children on the move throughout the EU. Taken together, these examples illustrate that EU-funded migration management structures in Greece have enabled and sustained systemic violations of fundamental rights, particularly affecting children.

## 8.4 EU Migration Cooperation with the Western Balkans

The EU views the Western Balkans as a key partner in external migration management. Since 2021, the EU has supported the Western Balkans with more than €350 million to improve migration management in the region.<sup>102</sup> In response to rising migration flows through the region in 2022, the EU adopted the Western Balkans Action Plan, which prioritised stronger border control beyond EU territory and to a lesser extent on enhancing the reception and asylum systems in non-EU countries.<sup>103</sup> Migration policy developments since then include an expanded Frontex presence at EU external borders but also in third countries, new restrictions on visa-free travel to and from Western Balkan countries<sup>104</sup>, and a major scale-up of anti-smuggling operations, particularly along the Bulgaria–Türkiye border and in cooperation with Serbia. EU migration priorities in the region have shifted from protection responses towards border management with Pre-accession Assistance funds and a particular focus on anti-smuggling and police cooperation, strengthening capacities and covering key infrastructure and equipment.

### 8.4.1 EU Agency Involvement and Frontex Association Agreements

In June 2025 the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina signed an agreement on operational cooperation in border management with **Frontex**. The agreement allows Frontex to carry out joint operations and deploy their standing corps anywhere on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including its borders with neighbouring non-EU countries, as well as at border crossing points including airports.<sup>105</sup> Similar Frontex status agreements were previously signed with Serbia in June 2024, with Moldova and North Macedonia in 2022, Montenegro in 2023 and Albania in 2023. Frontex currently deploys over 480 officers in the Western Balkans, through joint operations at the Union’s external borders with Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro; this includes 111 officers already deployed in Serbia in an ongoing joint operation, conducted under the previous status agreement with Serbia, at the borders with Hungary and Bulgaria.<sup>106</sup>

These **status agreements** stress that any operational activity within these countries must ensure that all relevant safeguards, as required by the EU and international law, are in place and fundamental rights are respected. The EU is aware of reports of fundamental rights violations and collective expulsions in the region. However, Frontex presence is justified as “an opportunity to ensure that future Frontex deployments will feature robust ‘*transparency and accountability measures*’”.<sup>107</sup> Reports by NGOs and journalists have revealed aggressive pushbacks and “disappearances” of unaccompanied children as regular practices at the Bulgarian border.<sup>108</sup> At the same time, evidence shows that Frontex is unable to guarantee that human rights are upheld in national operations where the agency is involved, and that its presence does not necessarily reduce the risks of migrants and refugees when crossing borders.<sup>109</sup>

The **EUAA** is also active in these countries, with a third Roadmap 2024-2026 implemented in Serbia and a second Roadmap 2025-2027 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>110</sup> The aim is to strengthen the asylum and reception systems in line with the Common European Asylum System and EU standards, but the roadmaps do not specifically mention children’s rights.

### 8.4.2 Spotlight on Anti-Smuggling and Trafficking Projects

With an increased political focus on stricter border management, the EU’s anti-smuggling efforts have intensified over the years in the Western Balkans. Support, training, deployment of border officials and equipment have been delivered to the Western Balkan partners mainly via the **Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)** in coordination with bilateral actions of Member States. More detailed information on the IPA-Funded Migration and Border Management Projects in the Western Balkans that were examined for this report can be found in the Annex.

Especially noteworthy is a regional programme (“EU support to strengthen the fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings in the Western Balkans”) worth €36 million focused on anti-smuggling in the Western Balkans launched in June 2023. It focuses on supporting law enforcement and judicial cooperation against criminal networks and increasing border management capacities.<sup>111</sup> Implemented as the **EU4FAST** Project by a consortium of more than nine organisations and ministries, it focuses on increasing the ability of Western Balkan law enforcement and judicial authorities to combat migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings and the capacity of Western Balkan border authorities to detect and prevent irregular border crossings.

The project aims to deter criminal networks and disrupt their search for potential victims by strengthening integrated border management systems. It includes a small protection component, which aims to improve the ability of relevant Western Balkan authorities and frontline workers to identify and offer protection to victims of trafficking in human beings and refer them to competent state services, with particular attention given “to child trafficking and trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation and forced labour, including through its digital dimension.”<sup>112</sup>

This component is important, but can only be effective if the EU equally invests in protection budgets and respects the rights of children in its implementation. One of the consequences of budget cuts on protection and an increasingly strict border policy has been a reduced level of contact between organisations providing aid and refugees and migrants. This diminishes the range and quality of services available to these individuals and reduces their chances of escaping exploitative and violent dynamics associated with smuggling networks. Violent practices at the EU’s external borders furthermore show that children are not considered to be in need of protection, but part of migration flows that have to be “deterred”, leaving them at heightened risks of exploitation. The focus on anti-smuggling projects without effective protection measures will push movements further underground and exacerbate harm rather than offering protection.

## Nowhere Is Safe, No Protection in Sight

In this study we have examined the experiences of children on migratory journeys on the Sudan-Egypt, Libya-Greece and the Greece-Western Balkan route to identify the multiple protection risks that children may face in different contexts and how these could amount to cumulative harm in the continuation of their journey. Following this route-based approach, the study subsequently considered how EU migration policies either sustain, contribute to- or mitigate these protection risks. Among countless examples of children's rights violations are the deportations from Egypt to Sudan, the exploitation in Libya which was followed by *de facto* detention and criminalisation in Greece and the pushbacks and risks of exploitation in both Greece and the Western Balkans. It has become clear that, considering the extensive financial and policy entanglements of the EU in the portrayed cases, the EU bears a legal responsibility for the violations of children's rights that are sustained by its migration cooperation with third countries.

Whilst studying this responsibility it has become apparent that the EU, in its refusal to act upon children's rights violations that systematically occur in the third countries it intensified cooperation with, has contributed to the increase of protection risks for children. These risks are further exacerbated by a global decrease in protection budgets and a lack of robust protection frameworks for children, whilst border management and anti-smuggling policies are further prioritised. In addition, the analysis of national contexts across the three case studies reveals that the growing emphasis on anti-smuggling interventions often drives migration further underground, rather than making migratory movements more visible.<sup>113</sup> In general, the absence of safe pathways to move across countries seeking for protection exposes children on the move to risks far beyond what any protection projects can mitigate.

## Save the Children: Witnessing effects of migration control policies on the ground

Overall, the findings of this study highlight that the policies to strengthen border protection have

not actually led to a significant decrease in the number of people passing through the region, but rather to their reduced visibility, with severe impacts on the physical and psychological well-being of children on the move. The increase in border control budgets have resulted in smuggling becoming more lucrative and thereby more dangerous for children, including an heightened risk of violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking.

The cases of Egypt, the North-West Balkans and Greece show that upholding international rights standards in asylum- and migration management is a challenge not only in non-EU states but also for the EU itself. Given its extensive financial, operational, and policy involvement, the EU bears a clear responsibility to act decisively when violations occur. Recognizing and embracing this responsibility is not optional - it is a legal and moral imperative. Without embedding robust, child-sensitive protection measures into all migration policies and cooperation frameworks, the EU risks perpetuating harm and undermining the very rights it is bound to protect. This also requires that robust and child-sensitive protection frameworks become a non-negotiable condition for funding and operational support in all migration policies and cooperation agreements.

In addition to this, the lack of access to mental health and psychosocial support services, protection and education for children along the routes can lead to severe psychosocial stress and labour exploitation. Sometimes children are even recruited into the smuggling network itself.<sup>114</sup> Once smugglers are detected by authorities, a lack of sufficient referral mechanisms and/or protection measures leaves these children extremely vulnerable for further exploitation. Besides their vulnerability to smugglers, children are at times also pushed back or deported by authorities themselves, instead of being offered protection.

## Cumulative Harm: a child-sensitive whole route-based approach

Children are not only specifically vulnerable to and disproportionately affected by rights violations, but are also structurally more at risk of experiencing them. At the same time, many EU border management measures, anti-smuggling policies, and cooperation agreements overlook children's specific vulnerabilities and heightened protection needs. The EU's reluctance to effectively address the children's rights violations described in the previous sections combined with the increased protection risks stemming from increased migration control measures along migratory routes portrays an extremely concerning reality of the potential harm for children during migration.

The direct or indirect border violence and pushbacks children witness or experience, are neither the beginning nor the end of their physical and psychological impact. They have also often experienced labour exploitation, dangerous sea crossings or war and poverty before reaching the EU's external borders. This means that the experiences and rights violations that children have endured in Egypt, Libya, Greece and other countries of transit and/or destination continue to 'travel with them', shaping how they cope with current stressors. These adverse experiences and protection risks do not happen in isolation but rather stack on top of one another potentially increasing the damage caused to children's wellbeing, (mental) health and cognitive and emotional development. By ignoring this consequential cumulative harm of the compounding adverse events throughout their whole migration journey, children face an even bigger child protection concern.

## EU policies - the way ahead

The previously mentioned findings underscore the importance of recognising different layers of harm to fully understand the realities of these children. Crucially, they also highlight the obligations of the EU to ensure the protection of children on the move through its (external) migration policies, funding mechanisms and partnerships. Given the current dominant context-specific approach to

child protection during migration, it is even more pertinent to consider previously experienced adverse events when calculating the risk of possible damage for children. Even in cross-border EU initiatives, the whole picture of the harm that children might have already endured is not included, which therefore inherently limits their effectiveness.

Instead, EU policies should employ a child-centered approach in each partner country and along migratory routes, that considers the protection risks stemming from these policies in the context of the cumulative harm of adverse events experienced pre-migration and during the entirety of the migration journey. Subsequently, the EU's responsibility in children's rights violations should be measured in relation to both the individual violations and the additional cumulative harm this causes children throughout their migration journey. Only then can the impact and gravity of each of the children's rights violation(s) that could (potentially) occur during any form of EU involvement in the management of migration be grasped and effectively addressed.

## The migration journey of children: a shared responsibility

The obligation to protect children on the move does not stop at the EU's borders. As shown throughout this study, outsourcing migration control to neighbouring countries - such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, or Egypt - has too often meant outsourcing risk and harm, with children's rights and well-being overlooked. Instead of treating these countries as buffer zones, the EU and its Member States must commit to genuine partnerships that put child protection at the center. This means investing in dignified reception, guardianship, and asylum systems, and putting a permanent end to pushbacks and deportations that strip children of their rights. Real cooperation begins with recognising shared responsibilities based on the universal rights and key principles enshrined in the Child's Rights Convention.

### To ensure better visibility of and reduced safety risks for children and families on the move, it is key for all state and non-state actors to:

- Invest in robust child-specific data collection, migration-trend monitoring, and research to identify evolving (cumulative harm) risks during all stages of migration.
- Adopt child-centered and route-based approaches and ensure shared responsibility between countries of transit and destination for safeguarding children and adults along interconnected routes.
- Incorporate MHPSS efforts and specialised psychosocial support, including access to services for victims of gender-based violence, early on in the migratory journey of children, to ensure that harm does not cumulate over migratory journeys.
- Increase funding for protection services and access to safe pathways to protection to ensure that the needs of children on the move remain visible and risks of exploitation and trafficking can be mitigated.
- Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration, exchange of information and promising practices among child protection, law enforcement, migration, and anti-trafficking actors.
- Support and expand outreach work with child protection expertise and services, ensuring the sustained presence of trained actors in border areas.



### To EU Institutions, Agencies and Member States

- Assess all programmes (directly and indirectly involving the EU), partnerships, regulations and directives concerning children in migration with a child-specific and holistic whole-route approach, that takes in consideration the possible cumulative harm effect of each protection risk.
- End the detention of children and expand child rights compliant and small-scale, community-based care solutions in line with EU law and CRC obligations.
- Stop prioritising migration control policies, such as border management and anti-smuggling operations, over effective systems and sufficient resources for protection.
- In migration management and/or cooperation with third countries, Member States and the European Commission should map and identify protection gaps in protection systems and develop joint action plans to address gaps (e.g. inadequate access to basic services or case management for children on the move). Focus on improved communication and coordination between cross-border stakeholders at all levels, such as policymakers, social workers and border officials, to ensure:
  - harmonised standard operating procedures on child protection and case management between countries of origin, transit and destination
  - child- and gender-sensitive accommodation, with safe, supervised environments and access to specialised psychosocial support services.
  - MHPSS and specialised psychosocial support as early as possible/in all contexts, ensuring cultural and linguistic appropriate modalities.
- Tie all migration funding (inside and outside the EU) to inflexible child-rights benchmarks - with funding automatically suspended if breached.
  - Build measurable child rights benchmarks into all funding agreements with third countries (e.g., no detention of children, verified access to schooling and healthcare, non-refoulement).
  - Create an independent oversight panel - possibly under the EU Fundamental Rights Agency - to publicly verify compliance before fund disbursement.
  - If benchmarks are breached, consider to automatically redirect suspended tranches to neutral child-protection and humanitarian actors on the ground.

- **Ensure open, safe, child-focused pathways.**
  - Set an annual EU target for community sponsorship and humanitarian corridors with child/family quotas.
  - Harmonise case management procedures and information-sharing protocols between countries in order to fast-track family reunification, and reserve emergency places for unaccompanied children from high-risk routes.
  - Fund reception communities for schooling, language and MHPSS services (including specialised services for victims of gender-based violence).
- **Re-tool anti-smuggling responses to a protection-first model.**
  - Apply the non-punishment principle to children that are victims of exploitation and trafficking.
  - Embed child-protection teams in financial-crime and trafficking taskforces; focus enforcement on exploiters while creating safe reporting channels for children.
  - Measure success by reduced exploitation indicators - not interceptions.
- **Make child protection an operational mandate for Frontex and EUAA in all external and internal engagements.**
  - Require child protection officers in all Frontex deployments and EUAA asylum support teams abroad (e.g., Egypt, Niger, Libya, North-Western Balkans).
  - Include a *Child Protection Annex* detailing referral pathways, age-assessment safeguards, and reporting duties in every operational plan.
  - Make risk indicators on child rights part of Frontex’s fundamental rights monitoring and link them to annual operational reviews and budget release.
  - Initiate a working group that actively aims to prevent child rights violations and has immediate response and accountability mechanisms in place when exploitation and maltreatment of children during their migration journey does occur.
- **Support ongoing initiatives to enhance child protection by the Council of Europe and ensure full implementation of its recommendations on:**
  - Guardianship: promoting good practices for the implementation of [CM/Rec\(2019\)11](#)<sup>115</sup> on effective guardianship for unaccompanied and separated children in the context of migration.
  - Age-assessment: supporting Member States in the implementation of Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2022\)22](#)<sup>116</sup> on human rights principles and guidelines on age assessment in the context of migration.

## To Service Providers

- Recognise the specific needs that UASC have, include a holistic route-based approach in programming and tailor them to specifically respond to the needs of children and adolescents traveling alone.
- Provide MHPSS and specialised psychosocial support as early as possible/in all contexts, ensuring cultural and linguistic appropriate modalities.
- Integrate expertise on Gender Based Violence (GBV) in psychosocial support-systems and ensure that sufficient training for case-management workers is available.
- Strengthen protection responses for children in transit, particularly in contexts like the Balkans where services are fragmented. This includes investing in guardianship systems, increasing personnel and financial resources, and expanding expertise in legal protection and child-protection case management.
- Strengthen the capabilities of systems responsible for protecting children who require guardianship by allocating both personnel and financial resources. Develop the necessary expertise in legal protection and capacity building of designated centres for social welfare.
- Child- and gender-sensitive accommodation should be available for children along the route, following the “logic” of the route and the needs of children; e.g. child-appropriate accommodation along main transit areas, integrated within national child-protection systems; being close to the main transit hubs should ensure that these facilities provide much-needed immediate protection and support to children, and serve as an entry point for identification and protection services, as well as referral to durable solutions.



## Methodology of interviews per country

### Egypt

The study implemented a qualitative research design involving the use of in-depth child-friendly interviews and drawing exercises with Sudanese children, and a limited number of focus group discussions (FGDs) with Sudanese caregivers. A total of 50 interviews with children aged 13-17 years old and two FGDs with caregivers were conducted primarily in Aswan, with some interviews conducted in Cairo, in February and April 2025. Most participants had arrived in Egypt in 2024 and early 2025. 10 additional key informant interviews with NGOs, CBOs, United Nations agencies (UN), and Sudanese community leaders were conducted during the same time period in Cairo and Aswan. In-depth interviews and FGDs were conducted in Arabic and then transcribed and translated in English. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, and the findings were validated with Save the Children (SC) programming staff in Egypt and select key informants.

### Greece and Libya

Data collection in Greece was coordinated by Save the Children's partner, the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), for interviews with children, and by Save the Children Europe's Advocacy Advisor for Greece for expert interviews. The child interviews were conducted with unaccompanied children who were all supported by GCR and received legal assistance, including in cases involving smuggling accusations (e.g. being criminalised for steering boats during their journey). Given GCR's existing trust-based relationship with these children, interviews could be carried out safely and ethically within an already established framework of support. A total of four unaccompanied children were interviewed: three Sudanese boys aged 17 and one Egyptian boy aged 15. While the sample size in Greece remained small, the research team made multiple attempts to reach a wider group of participants. However, access proved highly challenging. Guardians often declined participation, citing child protection concerns and a reluctance to involve children in any form of research. In addition, logistical constraints and timeframes for data collection were also restrictive and coincided with limited access conditions in Greece, which added further challenges to recruitment and fieldwork. In addition to the interviews with children, the research included four expert interviews covering different areas of expertise, including asylum procedures, human smuggling, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), education of children on the move, and legal guardianship. These interviews were conducted by Save the Children Europe's Advocacy Advisor and provided essential contextual and technical insights complementing the perspectives of children.

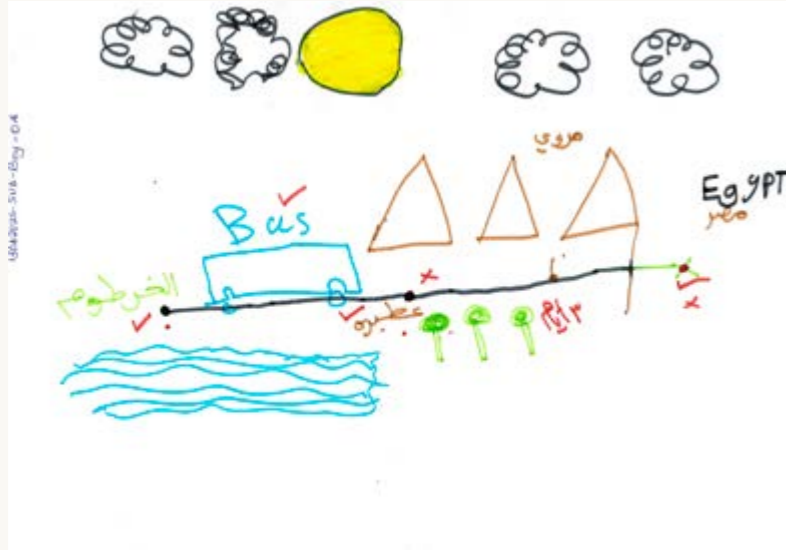
### Balkans

This segment of the research conducted in the Balkans (primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina) was designed as a qualitative study. Save the Children conducted 12 interviews with children aged 14 to 18, including 10 unaccompanied children and nine interviews with adults, including five parents and caregivers. Given the limited sample size, it is not possible to confidently determine the specific ways in which experiences along the route affect different groups of children-for example, girls compared to boys, unaccompanied children, or children with disabilities. However, the sample does provide an illustration of the extent to which support, which is necessary for ensuring the respect of basic human rights, is accessible to refugees and migrants transiting through the Balkans in 2025. In addition to interviews with refugees and migrants, the research also drew on five expert interviews covering various areas (asylum, human smuggling, MHPSS, education of children on the move, and legal guardianship), conducted with professionals with years of experience in direct support of refugees and migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro.

## PA-Funded Migration and Border Management Projects in the Western Balkans examined for this report<sup>117</sup>

Project	Country	Date/ Status	Budget	Implementer(s)	Short description
Regional Support to Protection Sensitive Migration Management (Phase III) <sup>118</sup>	Regional (Western Balkans, WB)	2022-ongoing	€19.2 million	Frontex, EUAA, IOM, UNHCR	Strengthen protection-sensitive reception, registration and referral across WB.
EU support to border & migration management in BiH <sup>119</sup>	BiH	2024-ongoing	€6.4 million	IOM	Technical assistance, equipment and training to strengthen border and migration management.
Individual measure to strengthen response capacity to manage migration flows (BiH)	BiH (with regional linkages)	2022-2025	Not consolidated in public summary	IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNFPA	Build institutional capacity for managing mixed migration and transition to state-led responsibilities.
Frontex-Serbia cooperation (Status Agreement) <sup>120</sup>	Serbia	2024-ongoing	Not disclosed	Frontex and Serbian authorities	Operational cooperation, joint operations, accompanied by IPA technical assistance.
Frontex-BiH cooperation (Status Agreement) <sup>121</sup>	BiH	2025-ongoing	Not disclosed	Frontex and BiH authorities	Technical assistance and deployment frameworks to assist BiH border management.
Individual measure to strengthen border management capacities (Western Balkans) <sup>122</sup>	Regional	2023-ongoing	€54 million	Frontex, EUAA, IOM, UNHCR	Identification, registration and referral at the border, asylum systems and reception capacities, as well as both voluntary and non-voluntary returns.
EU support to strengthen the fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings in the Western Balkans <sup>123</sup> (Implemented as EU4Fast Project) <sup>124</sup>	Western Balkans (includes Serbia & BiH)	June 2023 - 2027	€36 million, of which: - European Commission (DG NEAR): €30 million; - German Government (BMZ): €1,5 million; - Italian Ministry of Interior: €1,375 million; - Kingdom of the Netherlands: €428,000		Financial support and capacity building for law enforcement authorities in the Western Balkans to prevent migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings

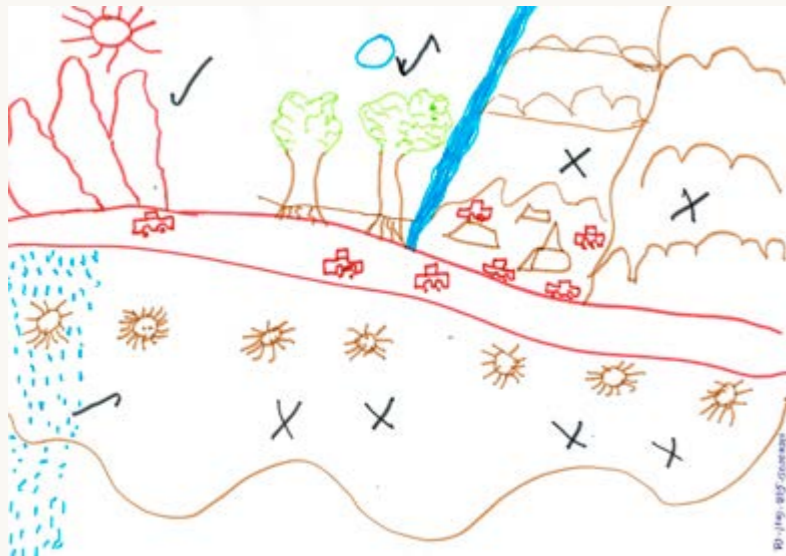
Drawings by Children



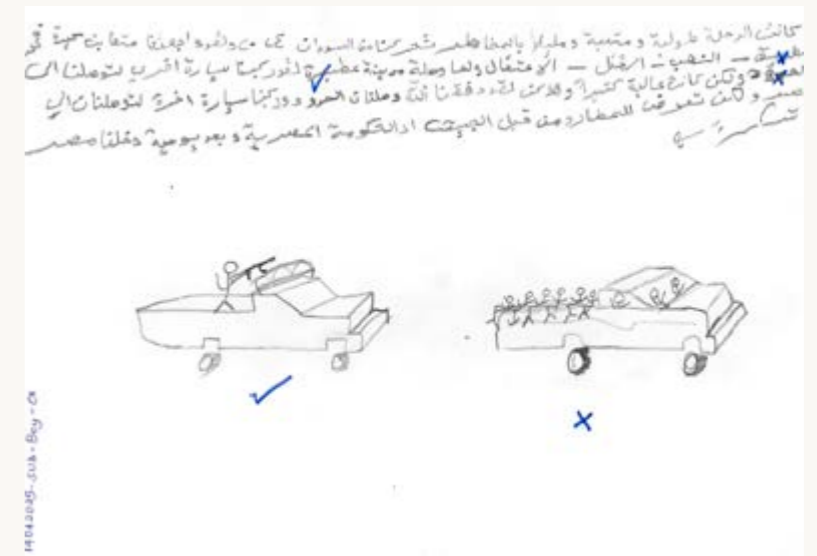
Drawing by a 13-year-old boy from Khartoum Bahri (North) (Khartoum State)



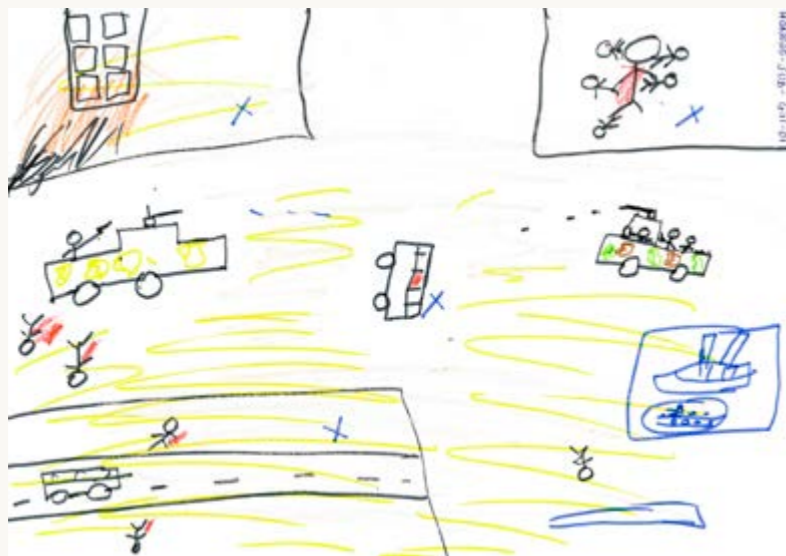
Drawing by a 16-year-old boy from Khartoum (Khartoum State)



Drawing by a 17-year-old girl from Kassala (Kassala State)



Drawing by a 14-year-old boy from Omdurman (Khartoum State)



Drawing by a 14-year-old girl from Khartoum (Khartoum State)



Drawing by a 14-year-old girl from Wad Madani (Jazira State)

## Endnotes

1. This research is a cross-border initiative from Save the Children Netherlands in collaboration with Save the Children Europe, Save the Children Egypt and the Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub from Save the Children North-West Balkans.
2. Save the Children. (2025). Crossing Lines: Realities of migrant children at EU external borders. In Save the Children's Resource Centre. Save the Children Europe. [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Crossing\\_Lines\\_Full\\_Report\\_v2.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Crossing_Lines_Full_Report_v2.pdf)
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5. A review of 89 studies examining initiatives to protect children on the move found that none focused on children in transit (rather than arrival at a destination) ODI Global. (2021, January 22). Six ways to strengthen evidence to protect children on the move.
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8. The study uses the term 'migration route' to exemplify how children cross multiple (country specific) situations during their migration journey. Although some routes have remained constant in the main geographic characteristics, this study doesn't attempt to establish any predominant fixed routes, as they have the ability to constantly change. Policy should therefore not only be informed by (a) specific route(s), but by the consideration of the cumulative effect of the protection risks for children in broader contexts.
9. Save the Children Europe, & Greek Council for Refugees. (2025a). Children on the Move in Greece: January - April 2025. In Save the Children's Resource Centre. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/children-on-the-move-in-greece-january-april-2025> ;  
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Save the Children Europe, & Greek Council for Refugees. (2024). "It does not feel like real life": Children's everyday life in Greek refugee camps. In Save the Children's Resource Centre. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/it-does-not-feel-like-real-life-childrens-everyday-life-in-greek-refugee-camps>; analysing the experiences of children and families in ten mainland refugee camps and the impact of restrictive, remote camp settings on access to education, healthcare, play, and psychosocial support;  
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10. Save the Children International, Save the Children North West Balkans, Wherever we go, Someone does us harm: Violence against refugee and migrant children arriving in Europe through the Balkans, 2022, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/wherever-we-go-someone-does-us-harm-violence-against-refugee-and-migrant-children-arriving-in-europe-through-the-balkans>
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45. "‘Boxi’ was a commonly used term by the Sudanese respondents for a double-cabin pick-up truck mostly employed by smugglers to transport individuals across the sparsely populated desert areas of northern Sudan connecting with the Egyptian border."
46. 'Boxi' was a commonly use term by the Sudanese respondents for a double-cabin pick-up truck mostly employed by smugglers to transport individuals across the sparsely populated desert areas of Northern Sudan connecting with the Egyptian border.
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