REACHMIND

Refugee, Education, And Children Mental health IN Development: Empowering children, parents and teachers in promoting and protecting refugee, migrant and minority children's mental health and well-being in education

Needs Assessment (Children)

Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia

Contents

1. Executive summary

The needs assessment, conducted within CERV 2024 REACHMIND project, explored the experiences and perspectives of children from majority populations as well as those from migrant, refugee, and displaced minority communities regarding inclusion, well-being, and support in schools.

This research focuses on three key population groups: migrants, refugees from Ukraine, and displaced Roma communities from Ukraine.[1] In line with IOM's inclusive approach, the term migrant is used as an umbrella concept encompassing all individuals who have moved away from their place of habitual residence, regardless of legal status, reason for movement, or duration of stay. This includes people who have been forcibly displaced due to conflict, as well as displaced individuals from minority backgrounds who experience compounded vulnerabilities linked to both their displacement and identity. Refugees from Ukraine are persons who have fled Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and who are Temporary Protection (TP) holders in host countries. Displaced Roma from Ukraine represent a minority population disproportionately affected by both displacement and systemic exclusion due to their identity and historical marginalization. By analysing focus group discussions conducted with 100 children from these groups as well as local peers, the assessment explores how children perceive diversity, navigate peer relationships, and engage with psychological and educational support systems. These insights directly inform the development of two complementary tools: one to support mental health and psychosocial wellbeing (MHPSS), and another to strengthen intercultural education. Both tools are grounded in the lived experiences of children and aim to promote inclusive, responsive, and child-centered school environments across the Visegrad region.

Children generally expressed a strong desire to feel safe, welcomed, and treated equally in school. Friendships and peer support emerged as central to their sense of belonging and psychosocial well-being. Many children described peers as their main source of help, particularly when dealing with language barriers or psychosocial difficulties (intrusive thoughts, difficult emotions and feelings). However, not all students found it easy to integrate. Language differences, limited opportunities for interaction, and social exclusion sometimes hindered relationship-building. Experiences of bullying, racism, and cultural misunderstanding were mentioned in several focus groups, contributing to feelings of stress, isolation, or fear.

Support from teachers was described in mixed terms. Some children spoke of caring and attentive teachers who made efforts to include and assist them. Others, however, noted that teachers could be distant, unresponsive, or unaware of the specific needs of students from diverse backgrounds. School-level factors played a significant role in shaping children's experiences. Access to language

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[1] The umbrella-term 'Roma' encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.). EU policy documents and discussions commonly employ this terminology). Source: Roma equality, inclusion and participation in the EU - European Commission

learning support was uneven, and many students reported struggling to understand lessons. Some described falling behind academically or feeling excluded from classroom activities. The lack of effective communication, especially in the early stages of arrival, was a recurring challenge. Children often relied on classmates or digital translation tools to navigate school life. MHPSS support structures, such as school psychologists or counsellors, were rarely mentioned, and in some cases, children were unaware of any available help. Extracurricular opportunities were seen as helpful for making friends and feeling part of the school community, though not all children were able to participate. A few participants expressed a need for more accessible, engaging, and inclusive activities beyond the classroom.

Based on these findings, several key priorities emerge. Schools should invest in early and sustained language and emotional support for newly arrived students and ensure that teachers are equipped with practical strategies for inclusive education. Promoting peer support and creating safe spaces for interaction can strengthen inclusion and well-being. Training for school staff on cultural sensitivity, discrimination, and psychological support is essential. Finally, efforts should be made to ensure equal access to extracurricular activities and mental health and psychosocial support resources, with particular attention to communication barriers and trust-building with students.

2. Migrant children in Education in Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia

The mental health and psychosocial well-being of children is closely linked to their right to inclusive, quality education and a supportive school environment. For refugee, migrant, and minority children, schools are not only places of learning but also critical spaces for fostering psychological resilience, social inclusion, and a sense of belonging. In the Visegrad Four (V4) countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, presenting both opportunities and challenges for children navigating new environments and for the systems that support them. This report presents the findings of the children's needs assessment conducted under the CERV-2024 REACHMIND project. It complements the parallel assessments of teachers and parents by centering the voices of children as key stakeholders in the education system. Through focus group discussions with children from the local community, migrant children and displaced children from Ukraine including refugees and Roma communities, the study explores how they experience inclusion, psychosocial support, peer relationships, and school life more broadly. While many of the challenges children face are shaped by their experiences as migrants or members of a minority group, the findings also reveal broader systemic patterns—such as the importance of peer support, the role of teacher attitudes, and the need for accessible MHPSS resources—that affect all students. Understanding these experiences from the children's perspective is essential to designing inclusive, responsive, and empowering educational environments. The following section provides demographic and policy context for the V4 region, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of children's lived experiences and the implications for inclusive education and mental health and psychosocial support.

Due to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the introduction of border movement restrictions for men, there has been a significant influx of women and children with refugee experience in recent years. This influx has notably altered migration patterns in the countries included in the following studies, with Ukrainians becoming the largest national group among recent arrivals. The shift has had a substantial impact on the educational system in the region, changing the ethnic and national composition of classrooms. In turn, this transformation has brought both new opportunities and challenges to the Visegrad countries.

According to the Eurostat data, as of January 1, 2024, the number of third country nationals in Czechia was 756,065 (6.9 per cent of the total population). Further, at the end of March 2025, Czechia hosted 365,055 individuals who held active temporary protection status (33.5 per 1000 people; 24.2 per cent of which were children),[2] which is the highest number of refugees from Ukraine per capita in the EU since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the 2023/24 school year 19,409 foreign children attended nursery schools (5.4% of all 360,420 migrant pupils), 70,662 were in basic (primary) schools (7.1% of all 1,002,460 migrant pupils) and 17,184 in secondary schools (3.4% of all 503,189 foreign migrant students). Besides Ukrainians the top third-country nationalities in Czech schools include Vietnamese.[3]

As of January 1, 2024, based on Eurostat data, Hungary hosted 66,271 third-country nationals which is 1.7 per cent of the total population. The largest groups among them included nationals from China, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Serbia, and India.[4] As of the end of March 2025, Hungary recorded 39 895 temporary protection holders - refugees from Ukraine (4.2 per 1000 people), of which 34 per cent are children (0–17 years). In the 2024/2025 school year, approximately 2,310 foreign students were enrolled in Hungarian elementary and secondary schools, including children with refugee or subsidiary protection status.[5] Overall, 79 per cent of refugee children aged 3–16 is enrolled in Hungarian schools or kindergartens. Pre-primary enrolment for refugee children aged 3 to 5 remains relatively low at 64 per cent, despite it being mandatory, with the highest enrolment in primary school (83%), lower in secondary (78%) and kindergarten (64%). Simultaneously, many children attend Ukrainian online education (37% in parallel, 16% exclusively).

Eurostat statistics say that as of January 1, 2024, there were 397,823 third country nationals which constitutes 1.1 per cent of the total population in Poland. Further, at the end of March 2025, the country hosted 997,120 beneficiaries of temporary protection which makes 27.2 per 1000 people. In the 2023/24 school year, Poland's public and private education system recorded approximately 5.2 million students including nearly 7 per cent foreign nationals. In 2022/2023, 90 per cent of foreign students were Ukrainian[6] followed by students from Belarus, the Russian Federation, Vietnam, and

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/7870049/21850209/KS-01-25-008-EN-N.pdf/945ba93a-6689-101a-8cea-df2b320c6bf3?version=2.0&t=1752050518841

[3] https://csu.gov.cz/education-of-foreigners?utm_source=chatgpt.com&pocet=10&start=0&podskupiny=294&razeni=-datumVydani

[4] 22.1.1.23. Foreign citizens residing in Hungary by country of citizenship and sex, 1 January

[5] Education GPS - Hungary - Overview of the education system (EAG 2024)

[6] Raport_z_badania_KBnM_PAN_dla_MSWiA.pdf

Bulgaria.[7] Approximately 203,000 Ukrainian students are currently enrolled in Polish schools. From February 2020 to September 2024 over 150,000 students arrived in Poland from Ukraine, an increase of over 20,000 compared to the previous year.[8] This growth is linked to the introduction of compulsory schooling for children under temporary protection and the requirement to enroll in school to access social services.

Based on Eurostat data, at the end of March 2025 Slovakia hosted 132,615 temporary protection beneficiaries (24.5 per 1000 people) while as of January 1, 2024, there were 23,585 third country nationals with permanent residence which makes 0.4 per of the total population. (But in total there are 281,648 third country nationals granted permanent, temporary, or tolerated residence.) The overall number of migrants is comprised of 70 per cent Ukrainian, 6 per cent Serbian, 3,6 per cent Vietnamese, 3.1 per cent Russian, 1.9 per cent Georgian, and 1.6 per cent Indian nationals. An additional 55,492 EU nationals received similar type of residence. By June 2025, 133,290 Ukrainian refugees were granted temporary protection status, including 40,812 children. In the 2024/2025 school year, 19,038 foreign students were enrolled in elementary and high schools.[9]

National policies and ecosystem for inclusion of migrant children

In the countries of the region, the legislative framework guarantees equal access to education for all foreign children residing in the country, ensuring they are entitled to the same educational rights as citizens.   However, the application of compulsory education for Ukrainian children who arrived due to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and are under temporary protection has varied between countries and has changed over the past three years. Schools adopt different approaches for supporting and integrating foreign children in the classrooms. The availability and quality of these support measures depend on national policies, the school's location, and the broader institutional landscape, including the role of non-governmental organizations.

Under Czech law (Section 20 *Vzdělávání cizinců* which is located in Part I – General Provisions of Act 561/2004 Sb[10]) and in line with international obligations, migrant children are entitled to right to equal access to education, regardless of their legal status. Following the onset of thefull-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Czechia significantly expanded its support ecosystem for foreign students, particularly those with refugee backgrounds. The Ministry of Education (MŠMT) introduced special grants enabling schools to employ psychologists and inclusion assistants, offer adaptation groups, and provide trauma-informed care, alongside staff training in cultural sensitivity and stress management. Complementing these government initiatives, international and non-governmental organizations such as UNICEF Czechia, META, People in Need, OPU, Almathea, and Slovo 21 played a pivotal role. They provided teacher training in psychosocial support, funded crisis intervention

[7] https://www.nik.gov.pl/najnowsze-informacje-o-wynikach-kontroli/ksztalcenie-dzieci-cudzoziemcow.html

[8] https://sio.gov.pl/

[9] Annual Statistics, Temporary protection. Ministry of Interior of Slovak republic. Retrieved from: https://www.minv.sk/?docasne-utocisko

[10] Act No. 561/2004 Coll.Act on Pre-School, Primary, Secondary, Higher Vocational and Other Education (Education Act). Source: https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/translation/cs/2004-561?langid=1033&utm_

teams, and facilitated both adaptation sessions and language courses. These organizations also contributed to legal and cultural mediation, anti-discrimination initiatives, social work, and integration assistance. Educational materials, enrolment assistance, and intercultural competences training for schools further enhanced the multifaceted approach, ensuring that foreign students and their families received comprehensive academic and psychosocial support within the Czech educational landscape.

Under Hungary's Public Education Act CXC of 2011, children residing in the country for more than three months are subject to mandatory education. This includes kindergarten from age of three and school education from age of six, ensuring access to all levels of education, including facilities for children with special needs.[11] The support system for foreign students operates through a decentralized model, with individual educational institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) playing a significant role. While Hungarian law mandates compulsory education, there is no overarching national inclusion strategy. As a result, schools —particularly in urban areas like Budapest— often develop their own internal practices to facilitate the inclusion of non-Hungarian speaking students. Support measures include civil society-led Hungarian language classes and tailored assistance within schools. Government funding is available for Ukrainian children under temporary protection, providing five hours per week of individual language instruction. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is often constrained by shortages of qualified teachers specializing in Hungarian as a second language. Consequently, NGOs and volunteer groups often step in to supplement or fully provide essential services, with a particular focus on language development and inclusion for foreign students.

In Poland, compulsory education is governed by the Act of June 13, 2003 on granting protection to foreigners in the territory of the Republic of Poland. As of September 2024, Ukrainian children under temporary protection—including Ukrainian-Roma children—have also become subject to compulsory schooling. Preparatory classes are one of key support mechanisms recommended for Polish schools accommodating foreign students. These students are also entitled to additional Polish language instruction as well as compensatory classes—up to five supplementary lessons per week. Where resources permit, schools make an effort to employ intercultural assistants. In practice, however, due to a lack of systematic resources, most schools either do not implement these support measures or do so only partially. Following the rise of foreign students after 2022, some of these responsibilities and additional support services were provided by international and non-governmental organizations (such as UNHCR, UNICEF, IRC, Save the children, Polish Migration Forum, Polish Center for International Aid, Nomada Foundation, and Roma organizations – Towards Dialogue and Central Roma Council, among others) or funded from the foreign or EU funds. To systematize support, Polish schools will be able to benefit from the government's "Friendly School" program for the 2025-27, aimed at promoting educational equity, in response to growing enrolment of Ukrainian students. Funds allocated to participating institutions may be used to hire supervising

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[11] Aida Asylum Protection Database. Temporary Protection in Hungary. Hugarian Helsinki Committee. Source: https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AIDA-HU_Temporary-Protection_2022.pdf

intercultural assistant and to provide various forms of psychological and pedagogical support for students and parents. Another module considered in the government program focuses on staff development, competency enhancement and individual student support.[12]

In Slovakia the Education Act stipulates that ten years of compulsory school attendance applies to both Slovak children and children of foreigners who have permanent or temporary residence, or are in the process of acquiring asylum status. In 2024, an important amendment to the Slovak School Act introduced the concept of "adaptation classes". These classes are intended to support students who need to improve their Slovak language proficiency or require tailored educational methods and approaches, based on expert recommendations. From September 2025, compulsory school attendance will apply to children from Ukraine (aged 6-16) residing in Slovakia with temporary protection status, as part of the new State Educational Program. Slovakia's "Strategy for an Inclusive Approach in Education until 2030" and its Second Action Plan (2025–2027) places strong emphasis on inclusive education, desegregation, teacher training, and targeted support for migrant and refugee students.[13] The Strategy identifies six key priority areas to support inclusive education. The first priority focuses on developing inclusive education and tailored support measures to address the diverse learning needs of all students. The second area emphasizes strengthening the school counselling system to improve guidance, prevention, and intervention services for students. The third priority aims to actively combat segregation in education and promote diversity within classrooms. Another crucial focus is on removing physical, social, and organizational barriers in school environments to ensure equal access for every student. Additionally, the Strategy underlines the importance of training educators and specialists to enhance their capacity to implement inclusive practices effectively. Finally, priority is given to the destigmatization of special needs, minority status, and diversity, to foster a more accepting and supportive school culture.[14]

Access to mental health and psychosocial support services in schools

The availability of MHPSS in schools—particularly of the support accessible in the languages of foreign students — varies by country in the region and is largely characterized by a heavy reliance on non-governmental organizations, external funding sources and dynamically changing policies.

In Czechia, an amendment to the School Act, passed in May 2025, requires most public elementary schools to employ either a psychologist or a special educator, with funding provided by the national government starting in January 2026. Nonetheless, as of 2024, it was estimated that only around one

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[12] Rusza rządowy program wyrównywania szans edukacyjnych „Przyjazna szkoła" na lata 2025-2027 finansowany ze środków UE. Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej. Source: Rusza rządowy program wyrównywania szans edukacyjnych „Przyjazna szkoła" na lata 2025-2027 finansowany ze środków UE - Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej - Portal Gov.pl

[13] Slovakia: New Action Plan Advances Inclusivity in Education. European Commission. Source: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/slovakia-new-action-plan-advances-inclusivity-education-2025-01-29_en

[14] Stratégia inkluzívneho prístupu vo vzdelávaní. Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic (MINEDU). Source: https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/928/23120.ae7062.pdf.

in five schools in the country offered MHPSS services.[15] A systemic shortage of personnel is also evident in Hungary. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), there were 983 practicing school psychologists nationwide during the 2022/2023 school year. However, this number does not equate to 983 schools with dedicated psychologists, as many professionals serve multiple institutions. In fact, 51.5 per cent of school psychologists work at more than one location, significantly limiting their availability and impact in any single school.[16] Similarly, in Slovakia more than three-quarters of primary schools (77.5%, i.e., 1,596 schools) lacked a school psychologist. In 2023, one psychologist was responsible for an average of 935.3 children (CVA, 2024).[17] In Poland, while the issue is less severe, a shortage of school psychologists still exists: 23.9% of psychologists positions remains unfilled, and 308 municipalities (12,5%) reported having no school psychologist at all.[18] Furthermore, on-site support is rarely available in the appropriate language— prior to the 2024/2025 school year only 1% of schools in Poland reported employing a Ukrainian-speaking psychologist.[19]In the face of these shortages, schools across the region are striving to implement alternative support measures and pilot programs aimed at providing MHPSS. For example, beginning in the 2024/2025 school year, elementary schools in Slovakia can use a methodological guide developed by the Ministry of Education to facilitate "morning circles" as part of broader well-being initiatives.[20] Across the region, this gap is partially filled by non-governmental organizations that provide MHPSS for foreign children and their parents. However, the availability of such services varies greatly across locations and is often subject to irregular funding.

3. Research context & Methodology

This research focuses on three key population groups: migrants, refugees from Ukraine, and displaced Roma communities from Ukraine. In line with IOM's inclusive approach, the term migrant is used as an umbrella concept encompassing all individuals who have moved away from their place of habitual residence, regardless of legal status, reason for movement, or duration of stay. This

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[15] Dva tisíce psychologů do škol. Za tři roky je začne platit stát, chybět ale mohou dál. Aktualne.cz. Source: Dva tisíce psychologů do škol. Za tři roky je začne platit stát, chybět ale mohou dál - Aktuálně.cz

[16] UNICEF Magyarország Országos Óvoda- és Iskolapszichológiai (ÓIP) Módszertani Bázis: Gyakorló óvoda- és iskolapszichológusok komplex felméréséről szóló kutatás összefoglalója. UNICEF Hungary. Source: oip-kutatas.pdf

[17] Koľko máme v školách psychologičiek, špeciálnych pedagógov či pedagogických asistentiek. Centrum vzdelávacích analýz. Source: ☐HYPERLINK "https://www.vzdelavacieanalyzy.sk/kolko-mame-v-skolach-psychologiciek-specialnych-pedagogov-ci-pedagogickych-asistentiek/"https://www.vzdelavacieanalyzy.sk/kolko-mame-v-skolach-psychologiciek-specialnych-pedagogov-ci-pedagogickych-asistentiek/

[18] Wakaty psychologów szkolnych - najnowsze dane. Termedia. Source: https://www.termedia.pl/mz/Wakaty-psychologow-szkolnych-najnowsze-dane-,57645.html

[19] Co dalej z asystentami międzykulturowymi? Tylko 71 samorządów zadeklarowało zatrudnienie takich pracowników. Strefa Edukacji. Source: Nie będzie asystentów międzykulturowych? Zatrudnienie zadeklarowało 71 samorządów | Strefa Edukacji

[20] Nová praktická príručka na ranné kruhy podporuje duševnú pohodu detí v škole. Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth. Source: https://www.minedu.sk/nova-prakticka-prirucka-na-ranne-kruhy-podporuje-dusevnu-pohodu-deti-v-skole/

includes people who have been forcibly displaced due to conflict, as well as displaced individuals from minority backgrounds who experience compounded vulnerabilities linked to both their displacement and identity. Refugees from Ukraine are persons who have fled Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and who are Temporary Protection (TP) holders in host countries. Displaced Roma from Ukraine represent a minority population disproportionately affected by both displacement and systemic exclusion due to their identity and historical marginalization. By analysing focus group discussions conducted with 100 children from these groups as well as local peers, the assessment explores how children perceive diversity, navigate peer relationships, and engage with psychological and educational support systems. These insights directly inform the development of two complementary tools: one to support mental health and psychosocial wellbeing (MHPSS), and another to strengthen intercultural education. Both tools are grounded in the lived experiences of children and aim to promote inclusive, responsive, and child-centered school environments across the Visegrad region

Before the study began, the consortium established five key research questions, shared throughout the study and across all groups:

- What is the state of MHPSS and inclusion in the context of diversifying classrooms?
- What are the cultural and structural barriers and facilitators of inclusion and MHPSS in school settings?
- What existing supports and resources aid the inclusion and MHPSS in schools?
- What coping strategies do migrant, local, and minority children use, and what is missing to help them manage stress and mental health challenges?
- What are the priorities surrounding inclusion and MHPSS according to parents, students, and teachers?

Based on these, specific objectives and related questions for the children's focus group discussions (FGDs) were developed.

Table 1: Semi-structured interview guide for FGDs

Research objectives	Research questions
To understand how children perceive and experience cultural diversity in their classrooms and peer relationships. What factors help or hinder inclusion?	What was the most difficult thing about joining a new class? What was fun or easy?
	What are the positive things about being in a diversified classroom? Is there anything challenging?
	How is it to make friends and integrate in a new school? What helps?
	What can make a new classmate feel that they belong? What makes them feel disoriented, not belonging?

	What can teachers do to help a new person to integrate? What can classmates do?
	Do you feel supported by your teacher or school staff? In what situations can you ask for support? Is there anything they could do better?
To understand if children have experiences with discrimination, bullying, or social exclusion. When it happens, how do they respond and what are they missing to prevent these occurrences?	*Does it happen sometimes that some peers experience some misbehaviour from others because they are new, or they are different in some respects? Can you name some examples of misbehaviour you know from your school or other places?*
	[based on scenario] *As a witness, would you react in any way to bullying or discrimination?* ***What would help you to react when you witness bullying or discrimination?***
	Would you talk to the teacher about the situation? ***How could a teacher help in such a situation?***
	What could the girl from a scenario do to stop this situation? (talk to teachers, talk to parents, ask for help?)
	How does your school or teachers help to prevent and respond to such situations? ***Is there anything that could make your school safe and friendly for all your peers***?
To understand what types of resources would help children feel more supported in managing stress, emotions, and social conflicts. Where do they learn from, and how?	Have you learned any strategies for managing stress or dealing with emotions in school?
	Has this topic ever been raised in school?
	Would you like to learn more about this topic?
	When you feel sad, stressed, or anxious, what do you usually do to feel better?
	Who do you feel more comfortable talking to about your feelings (friends, family, teachers)? How do you communicate with them (on-line? In person? In school? After school?)
	Is it easy to talk about such things? What would make you more comfortable speaking about your problems/ when you're stressed?
	Would you like to know how to help yourself when you are stressed or under big emotions? Is there anything you would need, or would you like to learn to do so?
	How should parents help a person of your age when they are feeling emotionally upset or stressed? What type of support should they offer?

Source: REACHMIND project

Between May and July, FGDs were conducted with children aged 12 to 16 across four countries. The purpose was to gain insights into children's experiences, perceptions, and needs, particularly in the context of migration, inclusion, and education. The methodology was designed to ensure representation from majority populations and migrant, refugee, or displaced minority communities, as well as a mix of urban and rural perspectives. A shared discussion guide was used across all locations to maintain consistency. Some sessions were audio recorded and transcribed, while in others, detailed notes were taken. Discussions were conducted in the languages most familiar to the participants, including national languages, Ukrainian, Russian, Romani, and others as relevant. Each session lasted approximately 90 to 120 minutes.

Recruitment and facilitation: Children were recruited through schools, community centers, shelters, and NGOs. In most cases, local contact persons—such as teachers, youth workers, or community organizers—supported participant selection. Voluntary participation was ensured, and parental consent was obtained in line with ethical research standards. Facilitators and moderators were experienced professionals with backgrounds in education, social work, psychology, or migration research. In some countries, discussions were co-facilitated by specialists in child protection or mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). Participants were typically familiar with one another prior to the discussions, which helped create a safe and open environment for sharing. Sessions took place in schools, youth clubs, or other community spaces familiar to the children.

Ethical considerations: All research activities adhered to child safeguarding and ethical research protocols. Informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, while children were informed about the aims and procedures of the study before the FGD began. Facilitators were trained on child protection principles, referral pathways and handling child protection disclosure, ethical principles and obligations, and working with vulnerable populations. Discussions were designed to be age-appropriate and non-intrusive, with support provided if any participant became distressed. No child protection risk or sensitive information was disclosed or identified during the discussions.

Table 2: FGDs participation by country and children group type

Country	Target	Location	Number of Participants	Number of girls	Number of boys
Czechia	Czech children	Prague	**12**	9	3
	Ukrainian children	Prague	**11**	7	4
	Mixed local and Ukrainian group	Česká Lípa	**9**	7	7
Poland	Ukrainian children	Warsaw	**6**	2	4
	Local Polish children	Warsaw	**5**	0	5
	Ukrainian Roma children	Southern Poland	**8**	5	3
	Local Polish children	Warsaw	**2**	0	2
Hungary	Ukrainian children	Budapest	**8**	4	4

	Non-Ukrainian migrant children	Budapest	**6**	4	2
	Local Hungarian children	Budapest	**7**	3	4
	Transcarpathian Roma children	Budapest	**7**	2	5
Slovakia	Ukrainian children	Bratislava	**8**	5	3
	Non-Ukrainian migrant children	Bratislava	**4**	4	0
	Local Slovak children	Bratislava	**7**	4	3
		TOTAL:	**100**	56	44

Source: REACHMIND project

4. Research findings

Perception of diversity and its impact on peer relationships

Perception about school, class composition and diversity

Children's opinions about studying in a multicultural classroom varied by group and ranged from negative to moderately positive. The most strongly negative impressions were reported in one of the local groups in Poland and in Slovakia, where participants admitted that in the past—or even now—they did not like foreign children in their class. In Slovakia, one participant said that over time they had "gotten used to it," while Polish children stated that the dislike was mutual, resulting in the creation of antagonistic groups in "unruly" classes. At the same time, the children said that anyone can be "cool", but it depends on the person. Some Hungarian children also felt that foreign classmates were treated "with leniency" by teachers, which they considered unfair. Language issues, including misunderstandings and divisions along linguistic lines, were also mentioned in all countries of the region. A sense of "normalcy" or neutrality—summed up in the sentiment "I don't mind"—without particularly seeing the benefits of learning in such a class, was another attitude noted in Poland and Slovakia among local groups. In other groups—especially among migrant and mixed groups—classroom multiculturalism was assessed neutrally or positively in all countries of the region. For example, children in Czechia saw the potential in learning about new cultures, comparing cultural differences, and discovering other teaching methods. Migrant children in Slovakia remarked on the "politeness" found in multicultural classrooms. Children in Hungary found diversity engaging, often enjoying the chance to learn new words, share jokes, or hear about different cultures. Similarly, migrant children in Poland mentioned that discovering new cultures was interesting. Ukrainian Roma children in Poland attended a preparatory class intended exclusively for Roma children. As a result, their experience of learning in a multicultural school was different and limited mainly to

interactions during breaks, contact with Polish teachers, and with a Ukrainian intercultural assistant. Overall opinions about learning in school ranged from excitement to resignation and boredom.

Being "the new" in a class

In the countries studied, many children—including those from the majority local group—had the experience of joining a new class. Majority group children in Poland and Slovakia saw the need to adapt to a new class as "part of life," and making friends and integrating was viewed as something that happens over time. Slovak children gave examples of situations where someone had trouble adjusting, often connected to bad behaviour or reluctance from other children. Polish children also observed, "on the first day, you can tell by appearance whether someone is cool or not."

Table 3: What being new, fitting and belonging means according to migrant children

The experience of being "new"	• Language barrier (all groups in Czechia, , Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) • Cultural barrier despite speaking the same language (Transcarpathian Roma group in Hungary) • Need to familiarize oneself with a new curriculum and catch up on lessons, often in a foreign language (Czechia, Ukrainian Roma group in Poland) • Feeling of alienation, not belonging, ostracism (Hungary, Poland) • They feel "watched," "unnoticed," or "out of place" (Ukrainian Roma group in Poland) • Difficulties at first, but it gets easier over time (Hungary, lovakia) • Cultural differences (Poland, Slovakia) • Forming "trial" friendships that later fall apart due to differences in character or values (Hungary) • Experience of bullying, racism (Hungary, Poland) • Receiving help from other children (Czechia, Hungary) • Feeling lost and stupid (Ukrainian Roma group in Poland) • Positive experiences of other children responding to bullying or discrimination (Hungary) • Difficulty making friends with local children (Czechia) • Sense of relief when a friend is made (Hungary)
Strategies to fit	• Learning the language (Czechia, Slovakia) • Seeking out people who speak the same language (Hungary), Contact with Ukrainian-speaking individuals (peers and school assistants) – often their only communication channel (Ukrainian Roma group in Poland) • Seeking help from new friends, finding allies (Czechia, Hungary)

	• Getting to know with somebody the majority group who helps them with the language, social integration, and sometimes even with schoolwork (Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia) • Getting to know one person to make it easier to make more friends (Czechia, Slovakia) • Participating in school projects, sports and integration activities (all countries) • After-school games (including computer games), because they work across language barriers (Czechia) • Use of translation apps and support from artificial intelligence (like chat GPT) (Poland) • Seeking help from psychologists, assistant teachers, or trusted adults (Poland) • Forming social groups with peers they already knew from outside school (e.g., same residence) (Transcarpathian Roma group in Hungary) • Non-verbal introductory activities (Ukrainian Roma group in Poland) • Observing others and imitating peers (Ukrainian Roma group in Poland)
Sense of belonging	• Having friends (Hungary, Slovakia) • Being defended by the other children (Transcarpathian Roma group in Hungary) • Being invited to after-school socializing (Slovakia) • When local children ask the new child how they're doing and are supportive (Czechia, Hungary, Poland) • When class shows interest in their culture or give them opportunity to showcase something (Czechia, Ukrainian Roma group in Poland) • Being in informal spaces for interactions with assistants who speak their language (Czechia) • Being able to communicate and speak out (Poland) • Sense of being "culturally" understood (Poland, Transcarpathian Roma group in Hungary) • Participating in group activities (Poland, Slovakia) • Being noticed and appreciated by teachers and peers (Ukrainian Roma group in Poland, Transcarpathian Roma group in Hungary)

Source: REACHMIND project

The role of teachers in supporting inclusion in a new classroom

The students' experiences with teachers were individualized and varied, but the students agreed that the teacher's attitude is crucial for inclusion.

As participants in the Czech groups put it, there should be an opportunity for teachers to prepare for the arrival of a newly enrolled student—both beforehand (preparing the class, selecting a buddy, learning about the situation in the child's country of origin) and afterwards

(having a lighter curriculum load and more time dedicated to supporting the group socially and facilitating inclusion).

Empathy or Distance: Roma children in Poland noticed that when the teacher is kind – including giving praise – the motivation to attend school is higher. Small gestures, like greeting a student warmly, were also noted by the students in Hungary. However, the teacher's approach can be quite different. Some teachers are seen as cold, distant, and punitive, which was particularly noted in Poland and Hungary. Ukrainian students in Poland also pointed out that some teachers do not allow them to communicate in Ukrainian during lessons.

Adaptation or Oversight of Needs: In Czechia, children appreciated the teacher's activity and care to ensure that the language of instruction is understandable for everyone. Students observed that "understanding" teachers who adapt the curriculum and speak in simplified language help better understand educational content. In Slovakia, children in the study noted that the teacher can assign tasks to the class while additionally explaining instructions to foreign children. Similarly, Roma children in Poland, often without prior educational experience, fondly remembered the use of visual materials, planning activities that do not require language knowledge, and discussions on various topics (supported by a Ukrainian intercultural assistant). In Hungary, children praised the slower pace when a new student joins and the appointment of a "helper" from among other students.

On the other hand, problems arise when teachers overwhelm students, fail to consider their language barriers or their broader situation, as reported by students in Czechia. Children noted that in schools there are teachers who remain neutral toward new foreign students, expecting the same level of engagement and learning from them as from others, which leads to additional confusion and stress. This is especially noticeable in life sciences subjects that use specific vocabulary.

Proactivity or Educational Minimum: In Slovakia, students pointed out extracurricular activities that can be organized by the teacher/school, which act as bonding and integrative. They can help discover another side of the students. The local group in Poland noted that "teacher's talk" does not work and is not interesting for them.

Reacting to or Overlooking Violence: Children in Hungary and Poland (including Roma groups) shared experiences of reactions and lack of reactions to bullying, jokes, and peer violence. Participants in Hungary noted that in some cases, successful teacher intervention—such as involving the school principal—made a significant difference in reducing discrimination. On the other hand, in both countries, children experienced a lack of reaction to manifestations of peer violence, and in some cases racism, jokes, humiliation, and discriminatory remarks from the teacher themselves (this was also reported in Czechia).

Discrimination, bullying and social exclusion – children's experience and coping mechanisms

Children across all countries shared examples of inappropriate behaviour, bullying, and discrimination they had either witnessed or personally experienced. These incidents involved not only peers—including both local students and other migrant children—but also teachers. Commonly reported forms of violence were predominantly psychological in nature, such as mocking based on language, accent, skin colour, faith, clothing, or cultural practices. While local children came up with examples of general name-calling, children with migrant background and displaced Roma described being subjected to particularly derogatory language related to their culture or country of origin (e.g., "terrorist," "Gypsy," "animal," "Ukrainian"—particularly among Transcarpathian Roma in Hungary), politically charged comments related to war or national identity, and deliberate mispronunciation of countries of origin, especially among students from Asia.

Social exclusion and marginalization were also frequently mentioned across all groups, including being left out of group activities, not invited to socialize, or being ignored. Online behaviours such as posting photos without consent and mocking others—regardless of nationality or ethnicity—were noted, alongside body-shaming, ridicule of neurodivergent peers, homophobic jokes, and judgmental remarks directed at girls based on their appearance.

In general, all children considered such situations inappropriate, yet the prevalence of these behaviours (especially those of low intensity) was somewhat regarded as an inherent feature of the school environment. As noted by foreign students in Slovakia, seemingly harmless jokes often cross the line into hurtful behaviour. Children in Czechia expressed their readiness to stand up for peers who were victims of inappropriate behaviour, including confronting the aggressors directly in larger numbers. Speaking to the perpetrator was also mentioned among Polish (local) children and in Hungary. In some cases, students in Hungary described handling things informally—through humour, confronting the peer directly, or relying on peer solidarity—without involving adults. Other ways of offering help mentioned across the region included supporting the victim (for example, talking to them or leaving the place with them). Interestingly, children in none of the groups said they would know how to react if they witnessed violence towards another student coming from a teacher.

In cases where children became victims of violence, they identified various coping strategies: ignoring and waiting out the situation (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), avoiding perpetrators and activities that might provoke comments or ridicule, including not attending school (Poland), handling matters independently (all countries), or seeking help from adults—parents and teachers—in cases of escalation or recurring incidents (all countries). Ukrainian Roma children in Poland often chose remain inactive and silent during classes or

staying home instead of attending classes. The Transcarpathian Roma group in Hungary also reported that avoiding the aggressor was a common strategy for coping with bullying, and some voices indicated that violence could be met with violence (for example, by getting into a fight or physical self-defence).

Using school resources to cope with such situations depends on various factors. Children in all countries had mixed feelings about seeking help from teachers. In Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, some children indicated that contacting the school psychologist was a helpful resource. In Poland, participants in all groups expressed fear of being drawn into the situation, further escalation, or ostracism by their class. Children also weigh whether the situation is serious enough to report to the teacher (Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia), which indicates that many "everyday" forms of psychological violence may go unnoticed by teachers. On the other hand, participants also expressed the opinion that the teacher might not react at all (Hungary, Poland,Slovakia), and the lack of reaction discourages contact. A few children in Hungary expressed frustration when even serious cases resulted in no real consequences, such as when a teacher only issued a warning or involved authorities without follow-up. Roma children in Poland indicated that they did not know to whom they could report examples of misbehaviour, but also did not believe that reporting could lead to consequences. At the same time, children pointed out that when a teacher takes the issue seriously, the situation can improve. Similarly, Transcarpathian Roma students in Hungary typically did not seek help from teachers or parents, instead managing situations themselves or with the support of peers.

In all countries, children emphasized that the lack of equal and clear rules regarding acceptable behaviour, how to report, and consequences was confusing and discouraging. Additionally, children in Czechia noted the importance of talking about such situations— during discussions moderated by teachers, but also among students and within the student council. Similarly, children in Poland and Hungary pointed out the need to create spaces for peer support and safe zones for calming down. Children indicated that individual contact with a school psychologist or an empathetic adult who speaks their language can help.

Children in countries where inappropriate teacher behaviour was reported also expressed a desire to be able to report such incidents and to feel that teachers would be held accountable for their actions.

Table 4:Children's help-seeking behavior in school: motivators, barriers, and expectations

What makes children ask the teacher for help?	**What prevents children from reporting to the teacher?**
• Seriousness of the situation, actual danger (all countries) • Belief that the teacher will respond appropriately (all countries) • Predictability of how the teacher may react (clear procedures) (Poland) • Awareness of which behaviour**s** are acceptable, and which are not (Czechia, Poland, Hungary) • Perception of the teacher as empathetic (all countries) • Awareness of available forms of support (Poland) • Trust towards a particular teacher (all countries).	• Lack of clear rules (what is acceptable, how to report, what the consequences are) (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) • Fear of social consequences and ostracism (Poland) • No reaction from the teacher when witnessing inappropriate behaviour (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland) • Discrimination from the teacher themselves (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland) • Lack of faith that the teacher will take the report seriously (Poland, Hungary) • Fear that the teacher will be angry or will react impulsively and too strongly (escalation) (Poland, Hungary) • Lack of knowledge about available forms of support (Ukrainian Roma children in Poland)
What kind of reaction do they expect from the teacher?	**What kind of reaction do they fear?**
• Appropriate, predictable reaction (all countries) • Emotional support, including individual conversation, understanding, asking about well-being, listening (Poland, Czechia) • Treating the person reporting bad behaviour and the victim with respect and dignity, as well as maintaining confidentiality (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) • Creating a safe space to discuss the problem (Czechia) • Mediation (Slovakia) • Explaining cultural differences if these are the basis for misunderstandings (all countries)	• Discussing the issue with the whole class without the consent of the affected person, disclosure without consent (Poland, Slovakia) • Unpredictable reactions (Poland), yelling at students (Slovakia) • No reaction or too weak a reaction (all countries) • Embarrassing them when offering help by teachers (Hungary)

Source: REACHMIND project

Resources to manage stress and psychological reactions

Children's awareness of the topic and willingness to learn more about it

Children across the four countries reported having some knowledge related to mental health and wellbeing. In Czechia, schools addressed topics like stress management, breathing techniques, and the importance of physical activity for mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. Children in the migrant group also said they learned by observing others how to behave, what is appropriate in a school environment (similarly to Ukrainian Roma children in Poland). Except for one participant, the children reported that they already know "enough," but would be open to reviewing any new materials. At the same time, there were respondents who stated that they had not acquired practical, applicable tips from school.

In Hungary, children's awareness of mental health and psychosocial wellbeing and the functioning of stress varied, but many expressed a clear interest in learning more about managing their psychological reactions. While only a few had received formal education on stress management—such as during an NGO-led session or a school lesson—most said they would be open to learning more, particularly if it was engaging and relevant to their everyday lives. However, by the end of one discussion, there was a consensus that although it is a useful topic, it is not necessarily something they felt had to be taught in school, suggesting a preference for informal, practical approaches.

In Poland, while some children had some awareness of stress and mental health and psychosocial risks —often through school-based activities or lessons—others said they did not recall such topics being addressed at school. There was some curiosity among these students about learning more about managing psychological reactions, especially if it were integrated into regular lessons. Meanwhile, those who had encountered the topic and could identify techniques (like breathing, grounding, relaxation) indicated that they prefer peer contact or individual support (such as a psychologist) over trying to self-regulate with these techniques alone.

In Slovakia, children indicated that they gained some knowledge about psychosocial wellbeing from "morning circles," which can be a space for conversations about wellbeing, feelings, and relationships. However, the children noted that although they had theoretical knowledge, they did not always succeed in putting it into practice, especially when it came to intense psychological reactions.

Coping mechanisms for managing stress and psychological reactions

Children across different countries described a variety of coping strategies for managing stress and psychological reactions. Common mechanisms mentioned in all countries include listening to music, playing video games, spending time alone at home, engaging in sports, reading, pursuing hobbies, and caring for pets. Among Czech participants, there was
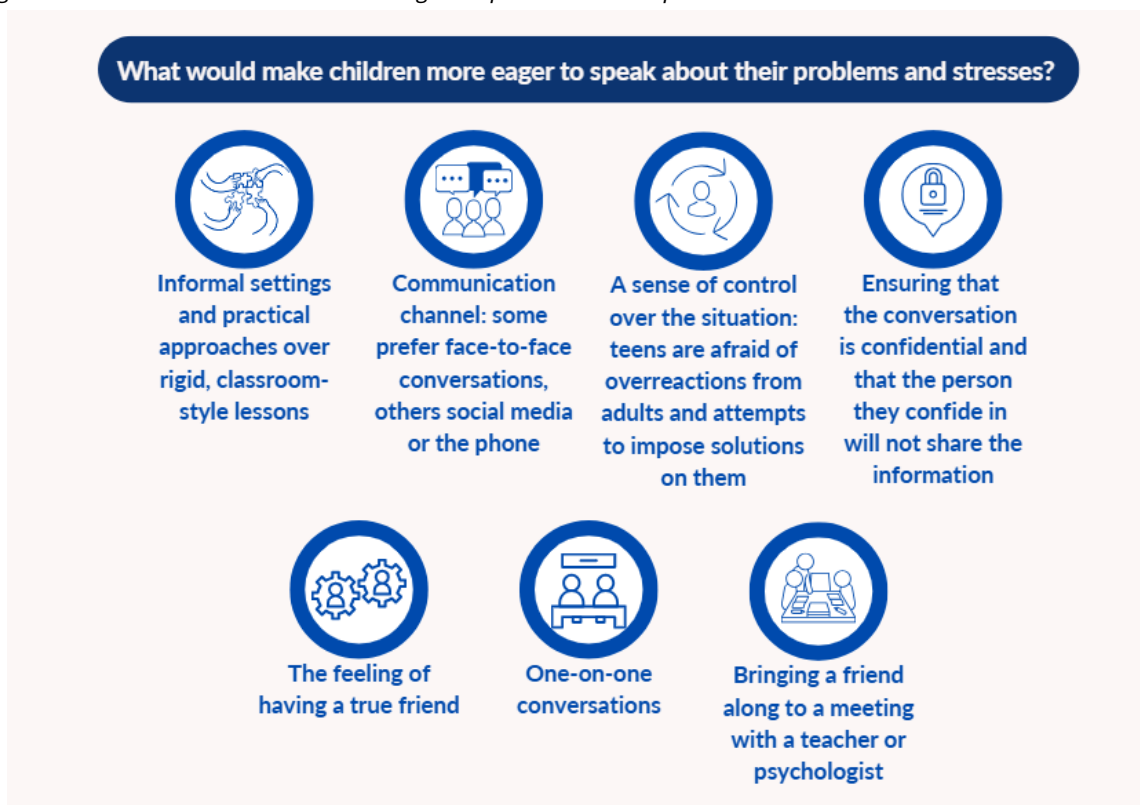
some preference for individual approaches (such as certain sports, reading, hobbies, pets) rather than seeking help from others, while all remaining groups highlighted the importance of talking to friends, family members, teachers, or other trusted adults for support. In Ukrainian children's groups in Poland and Slovakia, digital friendships maintained through online games or social media were also mentioned.

Ukrainian children in Poland additionally shared that they often confide in artificial intelligence and seek advice—one participant from Hungary also mentioned using ChatGPT. Ukrainian children in Slovakia highlighted scrolling through TikTok or watching reels to relax before going to sleep—while someone among Slovak children mentioned digital hygiene and the fatigue that can come from using social media.

In Poland and Slovakia, both Ukrainian and local children pointed to contacts with the school psychologist, a trusted teacher, or an intercultural assistant as sources of support when dealing with difficult emotions. Children in Hungary children also mentioned school psychologists, though not all experiences with them were positive (some children reported feeling that the school psychologist remained unengaged in their case and was reluctant to provide further support). Roma children in Poland most often reported withdrawing and avoiding school to cope with school-related stress.

In the groups organized in Hungary, some participants shared more structured methods, such as breathing techniques learned through external organizations (in most of the cases – NGOs). Across all countries, children also emphasized the importance of distancing themselves from a situation and thinking it through with a "cool head."

Image 1: What would make children more eager to speak about their problems and stresses
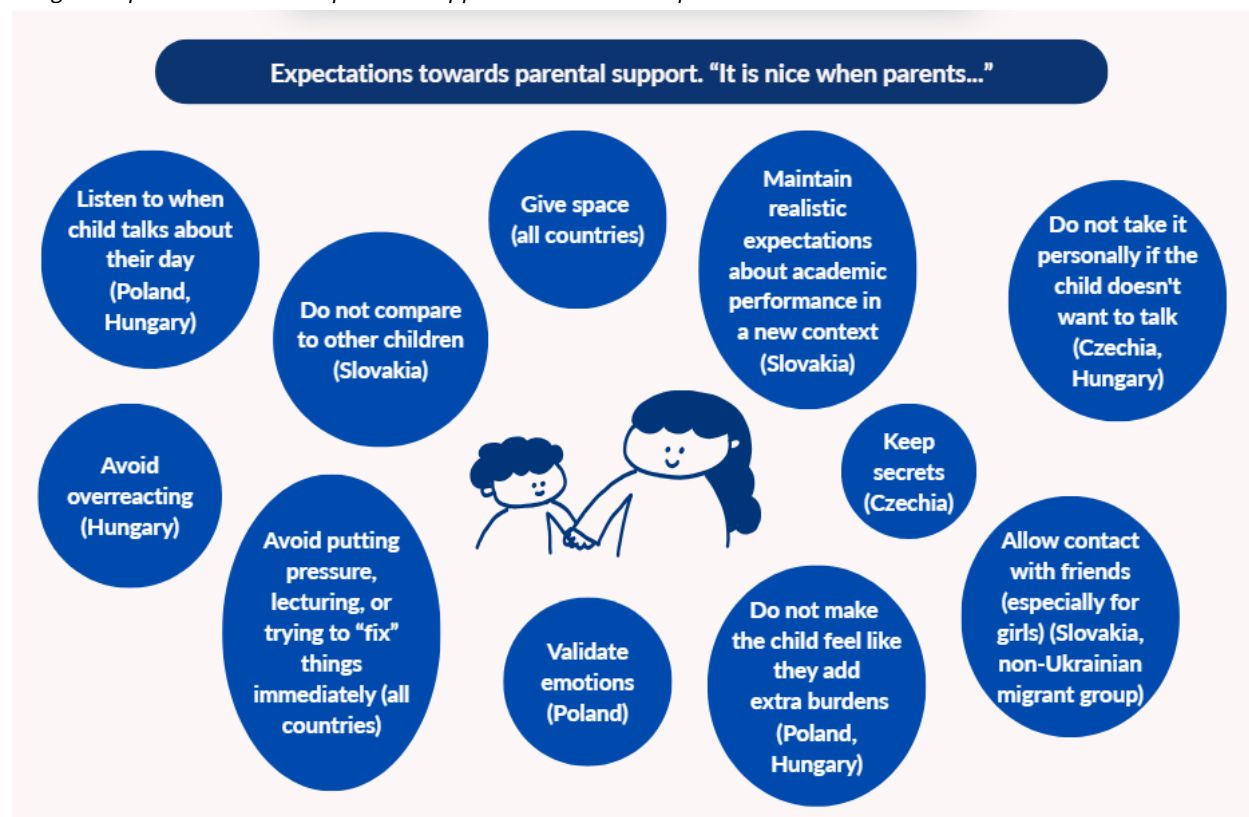

Source: REACHMIND project

Expectations towards parental support on psychological challenges

Turning to family in times of trouble was quite a common coping strategy, specifically among Ukrainian and local children. Children were able to identify, from their own experience, the barriers in communication with close relatives, as well as their expectations regarding support from parents. Despite their young age, children articulated the need to be regarded as individuals in their relationship with their parents, including the desire to be heard, to have their space and decisions respected, and to have their opinions considered. At the same time, children pointed out that it is sometimes difficult for them to deal with both their own psychological states and their parents' expectations, such as feeling overwhelmed, tired, or angry. Importantly, children from migrant groups other than Ukrainian were less likely to ask for help from their parents or reveal their emotions, feelings and thoughts to them out of fear of adding to their burden or due to cultural norms and a desire to handle things on their own (Hungary, Slovakia).

Image 2: Expectations towards parental support. "It is nice when parents…"

Source: REACHMIND project

Gender analysis

Review of existing evidence and regional context

Achieving gender equality remains a critical objective across the European Union. Education systems play a pivotal role in shaping inclusive environments that support both mental health and inclusion, especially for children from diverse backgrounds. In this context, gender mainstreaming within schools is not only a matter of equity, but also of social cohesion and child development. However, progress toward gender equality is uneven across the EU. According to the Gender Equality Index, Czechia (59.6), Hungary (57.3), Poland (56.7), and Slovakia (59.1) have consistently recorded scores below the European Union average of 70.2. The pace of progress in these countries has remained comparatively slow, resulting in a widening gap in gender equality within the EU over time.[21] This trend underscores persistent structural challenges and highlights the need for more targeted policy interventions to address gender disparities in the region. The following subchapters provide a more detailed look at the gender dynamics within the school education systems of these

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[21] European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). (2024). *Gender Equality Index 2024 - Country profiles*. https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024/country

four countries. Each analysis explores how gender inequality intersects with challenges related to integration and mental health and psychosocial support among children.

Czechia

Czech law guarantees migrant children the same right to free education as locals and provides language and cultural support (e.g., free Czech-language classes, inclusion measures.)[22] In practice, however, schools often scramble to respond to large refugee intakes rather than follow a systemic plan. While national curricula now include second-language teaching (with government portals and materials available), gender- and psychosocially-informed, including trauma-informed pedagogy is still far from routine.[23] A recent OECD report notes that Czech girls outperform boys in secondary school yet continue to opt for traditional fields[24] suggesting that gender stereotypes remain unchecked by comprehensive gender mainstreaming in education. Additionally, the report notes that attitudes towards gender roles remain fairly traditional in Czechia.[25]

In classrooms, migrant girls and boys tend to perform differently. Girls often take on extra family roles, such as sibling care or translating, which can isolate them and increase stress. Empirical studies of mixed Czech-Ukrainian classes show strong gender homophily with the tendency to befriend same-gender peers more predominant among Ukrainian than Czech students.[26] The research findings also suggest that girls generally maintain stronger peer networks, while boys are more prone to social exclusion.[27] Gender also shapes education paths, consistently with regional trends, Czech girls (including newcomers) often pursue academic or technical tracks, whereas boys gravitate towards vocational training programs.[28] Unfortunately, there is almost no Czech research explicitly linking these choices to migrant or gender norms, so educators lack clear guidance on how family expectations or economic pressures differ for girls versus boys.

Bullying and peer violence affect a large share of Czech adolescents, but gender patterns are complex. National data suggest boys historically report more overt aggression (e.g., physical fights

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[22] Eurydice. (n.d.). Support measures for learners in early childhood and school education: Czechia. *European Commission/EACEA*. https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/czechia/support-measures-learners-early-childhood-and-school-education#:~:text=For%20the%20foreigners%20in%20nursery,given%20in%20the%20following%20sections

[23] Šeďová, K., Obrovská, J., Hlado, P., Lojdová, K., Machovcová, K., Stupak, O., Fico, M., Lintner, T. (2024). 'They usually look happy.' approaches to the adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Czech schools. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society,* 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2024.2362965

[24] OECD. (2023). *Gender Equality in the Czech Republic: Strengthening Government Capacity for Gender-sensitive and Inclusive Recovery*. OECD Publishing,: Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/c5a3086f-en

[25] OECD. (2023). *Gender Equality in the Czech Republic: Strengthening Government Capacity for Gender-sensitive and Inclusive Recovery*. OECD Publishing: Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/c5a3086f-en

[26] Lintner, T., Diviák, T., Šeďová, K. et al. (2023). Ukrainian refugees struggling to integrate into Czech school social networks. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun 10*, 409. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01880-y

[27] Lintner, T., Diviák, T., Šeďová, K. et al. (2023). Ukrainian refugees struggling to integrate into Czech school social networks. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun 10*, 409. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01880-y

[28] OECD. (2023). *Gender Equality in the Czech Republic: Strengthening Government Capacity for Gender-sensitive and Inclusive Recovery*. OECD Publishing: Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/c5a3086f-en

or bullying) than girls, while girls often suffer more psychological or relational abuse.[29] Although Czech schools employ anti-bullying measures, LGBTIQ+ youth still face high harassment and stigma. Recent Czech research finds vast mental health disparities among sexual and gender minorities: over 50% of gay/lesbian adults met criteria for a current mental disorder (versus 19% of heterosexuals), and roughly one-quarter of gay/bisexual respondents had suicidal thoughts.[30] These outcomes reflect chronic victimization, including in schools, and indicate that LGBTIQ+ youth carry heavy unseen burdens. Peer abuse and traumatic distress are known to be elevated among any children fleeing conflict or discrimination.[31] Official reports acknowledge persistent gender gaps in the schooling system,[32] yet concrete steps to mainstream gender-awareness in schools have lagged.

Hungary

Hungary presents a complex landscape when it comes to gender equality and inclusive education, marked by significant policy gaps. While the country has ratified key international conventions on human rights and gender equality, there is no dedicated gender equality law, and gender mainstreaming in the education sector is absent.[33] This absence is particularly acute for children with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ persons, Roma communities, or those with migratory backgrounds. Educational curricula generally reflect conservative, heteronormative norms, and reinforce traditional gender roles. Since 2010 the ministries responsible for education have actively rolled back gender-sensitive measures by, for example, removing a curriculum amendment requiring teachers to *avoid strengthening gender stereotype.[34]* This framing permeates both textbook content and classroom environments, contributing to the marginalization of students whose identities do not conform to dominant societal norms.[35] [36]

According to reports, it is worth noting is also the fact that Hungary's recent laws and political discourse have explicitly marginalized LGBTIQ+ students. An amendment passed in 2021 bans any

[29] Sarková, M., Sigmundová, D., & Kalman, M. (2017). National Time Trends in Bullying among Adolescents in the Czech Republic from 1994 to 2014. *Central European Journal of Public Health*, *25*(Supplement 1), 32-35. https://doi.org/10.21101/cejph.a5098

[30] Pitoňák, M., Potočár, L., & Formánek, T. (2024). Mental health and help-seeking in Czech sexual minorities: a nationally representative cross-sectional study. *Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences*, *33*, e16. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796024000210

[31] UNICEF. (2023*). Mental health in displaced child and youth populations: A developmental and family systems lens* https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/3741/file/UNICEF-Mental-Health-Displacement-2023.pdf

[32] OECD. (2023). *Gender Equality in the Czech Republic: Strengthening Government Capacity for Gender-sensitive and Inclusive Recovery*. OECD Publishing: Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/c5a3086f-en

[33] European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). (n.d.)*. Hungary - Institutional mechanisms for gender equality and gender mainstreaming*. https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/hungary-institutional-mechanisms-gender-equality-and-gender-mainstreaming

[34] Takács, J., Fobear, K., & Schmitsek, S. (2022). Resisting genderphobia in Hungary. *Politics and Governance, 10*(4), 38–48. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5528

[35] Rédai, D., Turai, R.K. (2021). Post-Socialist Gender Regimes and Controversial Ideas About Gender Equality in Hungarian Schools. In: Tsouroufli, M., Rédai, D. (eds) *Gender Equality and Stereotyping in Secondary Schools.* Palgrave Studies in Gender and Education. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64126-9_5

[36] Takács, J., Fobear, K., & Schmitsek, S. (2022). Resisting genderphobia in Hungary. *Politics and Governance, 10*(4), 38–48. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5528

content promoting or portraying a "deviation from [gender]-identity aligning with sex at birth, gender reassignment or homosexuality" to children under the age of 18.[37] In practice, this means sex-education and school discussions are limited to cis-heteronormative models. Moreover, according to reports, the recent legislative changes also worsened the situation of transgender individuals by intensifying transphobic sentiments among society.[38] As a result, LGBTIQ+ children face exclusion in an educational environment that reinforces heteronormative views.

Moreover, there is a significant data vacuum on how gender intersects with ethnicity, migration status, disability, and sexual or gender identity in schools which underscores the fragility of institutional commitment to evidence-based and inclusive education policy. Policy frameworks in Hungary often lack both gender sensitivity and an intersectional approach, failing to adequately address the layered vulnerabilities.

Poland

While Poland has demonstrated an adaptability in integrating migrant children into its education system, its approach to gender equality remains fragmented and largely un-institutionalized with the education system remaining only partially equipped to address gendered and intersectional inequalities. Gender mainstreaming is largely absent from educational strategies, and systemic approaches to inclusive, trauma-informed pedagogy remain underdeveloped.

Previous research has found that migrant girls and boys face distinct challenges in school settings, shaped both by gender norms and cultural expectations. Girls face higher risk of social isolation, particularly among adolescents, often assuming caretaking responsibilities for siblings or serving as family translators, which affects school participation. They also report higher internalized stress, anxiety, and depression, often unrecognized by teachers. Meanwhile boys are more likely to be targeted with xenophobic bullying, especially if they visibly differ (e.g., skin tone, accent, clothing) and tend to exhibit externalized stress behaviours, such as aggression or disengagement, often misinterpreted as discipline issues rather than trauma responses.[39] Gender also influences the educational trajectories of migrant youth in Poland, particularly noticeable in the choice of secondary education. Boys are more likely to choose vocational training to access the labour market as soon as possible, seeking to earn money to support their families and avoid conscription by remaining in Poland. Girls, on the other hand, tend to choose technical schools. Those choices may not be only reflective of personal preferences but also of the social expectations regarding future gender roles.

A national survey found 57 per cent of children aged 11 to 17 had experienced peer violence. While there were no major gender patterns observed, girls were found to more often experience

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[37] Takács, J., Fobear, K., & Schmitsek, S. (2022). Resisting genderphobia in Hungary. *Politics and Governance, 10*(4), 38–48. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5528

[38] Primecz, Henriett & Pelyhe, Valéria. (2023). Hungary as a precarious context for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. Interviews with transgender people. *Gender, Work & Organization. 31*. 1812-1827.

[39] Makaruk, K. (2022). Przemoc rówieśnicza. W: M. Sajkowska, R. Szredzińska (red*.), Dzieci się liczą 2022. Raport o zagrożeniach bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju dzieci w Polsce (s. 256–273)*. Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę. https://fdds.pl/_Resources/Persistent/2/a/3/8/2a387a124dec62f5efdc76d113029c1c7b337168/Dzieci%20się%20liczą%202022%20-%20Przemoc%20rówieśnicza.pdf

psychological peer abuse.[40] Interestingly, boys report to be more frequently than girls survivors of abuse during a date.[41] [42] LGBTIQ+ youth are especially vulnerable as they commonly face abuse due to their diverse SOGIESC and to suffer from mental health conditions. According to research, about 12 per cent of LGBTA adolescents in Poland expressed desire to emigrate.[43] Migrant or refugee background also adds risk – children from immigrant families or those fleeing war (e.g., Ukrainian refugees) are exposed to higher abuse and traumatic experiences , with many showing psychological distress.[44] [45] The current research on peer violence, school relationships, and the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of youth lacks disaggregated data capturing how gender intersects with migration experience, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation. Without reliable data, policy remains reactive and fragmentary, unable to address systemic exclusions.

Slovakia

In Slovakia, gender equality in education remains unevenly institutionalized, overshadowed by conservative societal norms and limited policy commitments. Although Slovakia is formally aligned with EU standards, its National strategy for Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities (2021–2027) reflects only a basic commitment to reducing stereotypes and addressing violence in schools, with little implementation in curricular content or teacher training and not addressing intersectionality or minority inclusion in a meaningful way.[46] Public discourse emphasizes binary gender norms, while

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[40] Makaruk, K. (2022). Przemoc rówieśnicza. W: M. Sajkowska, R. Szredzińska (red*.), Dzieci się liczą 2022. Raport o zagrożeniach bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju dzieci w Polsce (s. 256–273)*. Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę. https://fdds.pl/_Resources/Persistent/2/a/3/8/2a387a124dec62f5efdc76d113029c1c7b337168/Dzieci%20się%20liczą%202022%20-%20Przemoc%20rówieśnicza.pdf

[41] Makaruk, K. (2022). Przemoc rówieśnicza. W: M. Sajkowska, R. Szredzińska (red*.), Dzieci się liczą 2022. Raport o zagrożeniach bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju dzieci w Polsce (s. 256–273)*. Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę. https://fdds.pl/_Resources/Persistent/2/a/3/8/2a387a124dec62f5efdc76d113029c1c7b337168/Dzieci%20się%20liczą%202022%20-%20Przemoc%20rówieśnicza.pdf

[42] Włodarczyk, J., Wójcik, Sz. (2019). Skala i uwarunkowania przemocy rówieśniczej. Wyniki Ogólnopolskiej diagnozy skali i uwarunkowań krzywdzenia dzieci. Dziecko Krzywdzone*. Teoria, badania, praktyka, 18*(3), 9–35. https://dzieckokrzywdzone.fdds.pl/index.php/DK/article/view/741/592

[43] *Sytuacja społeczna osób LGBTA w Polsce. Raport za lata 2019-2020.* Kampania Przeciw Homofobii i Stowarzyszenie Lambda Warszawa. Warszawa 2021. https://kph.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/raport-maly-2019-2020.pdf

[44] Szredzińska, R. (2022). Zdrowie psychiczne dzieci i młodzieży. W:M. Sajkowska, R. Szredzińska (red.), *Dzieci się liczą 2022. Raport o zagrożeniach bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju dzieci w Polsce* (s. 136–157). Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę. https://fdds.pl/_Resources/Persistent/4/b/2/8/4b284d3df9b1087f1d2d0c9724538c9c6f24bf6e/Dzieci%20się%20liczą%202022%20-%20Zdrowie%20psychiczne%20dzieci%20i%20młodzieży.pdf

[45] Makaruk, K. (2022). Przemoc rówieśnicza. W: M. Sajkowska, R. Szredzińska (red*.), Dzieci się liczą 2022. Raport o zagrożeniach bezpieczeństwa i rozwoju dzieci w Polsce (s. 256–273)*. Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę. https://fdds.pl/_Resources/Persistent/2/a/3/8/2a387a124dec62f5efdc76d113029c1c7b337168/Dzieci%20się%20liczą%202022%20-%20Przemoc%20rówieśnicza.pdf

[46] Výbor pre rodovú rovnosť. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/vybor-pre-rodovu-rovnost/

terminology like *gender ideology* is frequently contested politically, often in connection with LGBTIQ+ rights.[47]

The lack of gender-responsive policy has significant implications for marginalized youth, particularly Roma and migrant students. Roma children continue to face highly segregated schooling environments. More than 60 per cent attend schools that are predominantly Roma, often in substandard facilities with lowered expectations.[48] Teachers' attitudes reinforce stereotypes, with Roma girls repeatedly confronting dual biases of gender and ethnicity. Similarly, Ukrainian refugee students in Slovakia experience ethnically-motivated bullying and social exclusion which are the issues often overlooked in institutional prevention efforts.[49] Moreover, schools have significantly reduced partnerships with LGBTIQ+ NGOs due to ideological resistance, and recent constitutional amendment reinforcing conservative values, including a binary gender definition, threaten further exclusion.[50]

Recent data on bullying, including cyberbullying among adolescents in Slovakia reveals gendered patterns and psychosocial correlations. Girls are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying, often experiencing lower life satisfaction and reduced support from family and friends compared to their peers.[51] They are disproportionately targeted with insults, rumours, inappropriate photos, and sexually inappropriate content, including sexting and cyber-grooming. Girls also face relational aggression, such as exclusion from online groups, which contributes to social isolation. In contrast, boys are more likely to be perpetrators of or involved in bullying, especially when they report low life satisfaction, weak family support, and negative attitudes toward school. Their experiences with cyberbullying often involve threats of physical violence, ridicule, and aggressive taunting.[52] Data from Ukrainian students in Slovak schools echo similar vulnerabilities, with high levels of teasing, exclusion, physical harm, and property damage reported.[53] Despite these risks, most adolescents express willingness to seek help, primarily from parents, followed by teachers and peers. Girls tend to confide more in friends than boys, indicating gendered preferences in coping strategies and

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[47] Zvada, Ľ. (2022). On Gender and Illiberalism: Lessons From Slovak Parliamentary Debates. *Politics and Governance, 10*(4), 108-120. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5536

[48] Education and Training Monitor. (2024). *Slovakia*. https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor/en/country-reports/slovakia.html#:~:text=The%20ICCS%202022%20also%20confirmed,on%20Slovak%20students'%20civic%20knowledge.&text=More%20than%2060%25%20of%20Roma,Roma%20(FRA%2C%202022)

[49] Berinšterová, Marianna. (2023). The experience of Ukrainian students in Slovakia: The mediating role of misleading information between negative emotionality and life satisfaction. *Človek a spoločnosť. 26.* doi.org/10.31577/cas.2023.02.620

[50] *LGBTQI Inclusive Education Report.* (2025). https://www.education.iglyo.org/2025/slovakia

[51] Várnai, D. E., Malinowska-Cieślik, M., Madarasová Gecková, A., Csémy, L., & Horváth, Z. (2022). Do Neighbors Have More Peaceful Students? Youth Violence Profiles among Adolescents in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(13), 7964. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19137964

[52] Velšic, Marián. 2025. Kyberšikana na stredných školách. Inštitút pre verejé otázky (IVO). Accessed June 23, 2025. https://www.ivo.sk/8978/sk/aktuality/kybersikana-na-strednych-skolach-a-iniciativa-slovak-telekom-absolventi-sikany

[53] Štátna školská inšpekcia. (2023). *Stav Vzdelávania Žiakov - Odídencov z Ukrajiny.* https://www.ssi.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/vzdelavanie_ziakov_odidencov_z_Ukrajiny_2_cast.pdf
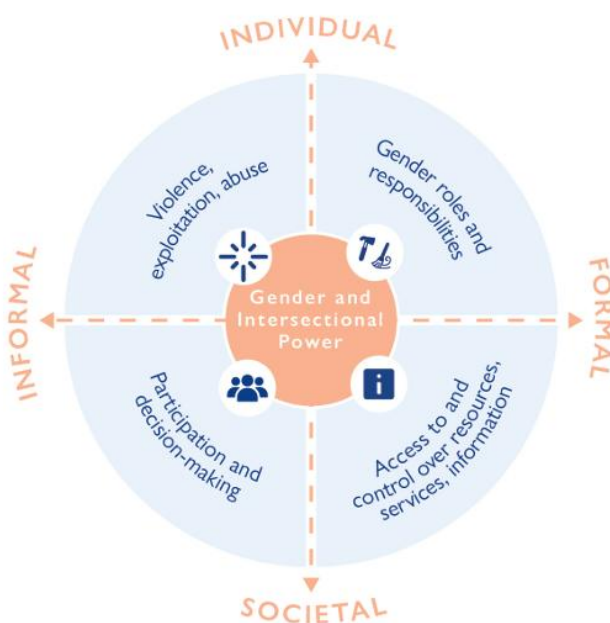
support-seeking behaviour.[54] These findings underscore the importance of gender-sensitive, age-appropriate, and context-aware approaches to bullying prevention and psychosocial support in Slovak educational settings.

Gender-related findings from the FGDs

Participants to the FGDs rarely or never spontaneously raised issues related to gender-based experiences, but when asked directly, they responded that gender does have some influence on classroom behaviour. A certain stereotype—that girls might be more interested in mental health and emotions than boys – emerged from the FGDs. Boys more often described engaging in physical activity as a way to cope with stress. Participants showed varying degrees of engagement in discussion, with the level of participation influenced by personality traits, age (older children were more likely to speak than younger ones), and sometimes gender (as observed in Slovakia).

Gender-related issues that emerged during the FGDs have been organized according to the Analytical Framework included in the IOM Intersectional Gender Analysis Toolkit (2024), as illustrated in the figure below.

Image 3: 1 *IOM Intersectional Gender Analysis Toolkit*

Source: IOM Intersectional Gender Analysis Toolkit (2024).

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[54] Velšic, Marián. 2025. Kyberšikana na stredných školách. Inštitút pre verejé otázky (IVO). Accessed June 23, 2025. https://www.ivo.sk/8978/sk/aktuality/kybersikana-na-strednych-skolach-a-iniciativa-slovak-telekom-absolventi-sikany

Violence, Exploitation, and Abuse

Across different countries, girls are often targets of verbal and appearance-based bullying more than boys, much of it rooted in strict gender norms. For instance, in Poland, girls described being mocked for their clothing, body image, or for not fitting traditional standards of femininity. Verbal abuse frequently reinforced stereotypes, such as being told to "stay in the kitchen." Boys, on the other hand, faced more frequently physical aggression, especially in Hungary, reflecting societal expectations that discourage them from displaying their emotions.

Ethnic and racial bullying affected both genders, but girls tended to internalize the emotional impact more deeply. In the Czechia, some girls noted that relational aggression among girls could be particularly hurtful, sometimes resulting in exclusion or competition within female peer groups.

Gender Roles and Social Integration

Findings reveal that strong gender stereotypes shape children's self-image and influence how they build social connections. In both Poland and Hungary, girls were more likely to express themselves emotionally—through conversation, music, or creative activities—while boys found comfort in physical outlets and humour. In Poland, one participant observed that boys more often experienced teasing that questioned their masculinity. Such behaviours are reinforced by family and cultural expectations.

"Boys do not care where a new boy is from, they take him in the right away. Being new as a girl is difficult as girls create groups and it is hard to figure out which one to join. When we had a new girl one year, the two groups of girls in the class decided that we won't be fighting and that we will help the new classmate find her place. Eventually we didn't even split back up again and stayed together"
(6th grade, Slovak girl)

Girls faced increased scrutiny regarding their appearance and behavior, leading some to suppress their true feelings or withdraw from social situations. In contrast, boys benefited from more relaxed standards, often integrating into peer groups via sports or informal gatherings.

Participation and Decision-Making

Gender differences also emerged in participation and leadership. While some girls took active roles, like a girl serving on the student council, boys typically dominated conversations in mixed-gender groups, requiring facilitators to encourage girls to speak up. This trend was observed in both Slovakia and the Czechia. However, in one Polish group, older girls tended to participate more and showed greater insight and engagement.

Girls generally exhibited higher emotional intelligence and wanted more private, individualized psychosocial support (such as one-on-one counselling). Nevertheless, their group participation or influence on class decisions was often limited by societal pressures or expectations about how girls "should" behave. In Hungary, girls were more involved in sociorelational activities, while boys gravitated toward sports. These patterns suggest that, while both genders are active in school life, they often operate in separate social spheres, affecting inclusivity and collaboration between genders.

Access to Resources, Services, and MHPSS

Across countries, girls were more proactive in seeking MHPSS, especially from psychologists or through digital tools like ChatGPT. However, barriers remained—especially for migrant girls—who feared being judged or misunderstood by teachers, particularly when their language or cultural identity was dismissed (Poland).

Boys were more likely to seek support if they had a personal connection with a trusted teacher or assistant, but most of all within their peer group. Boys' help-seeking behaviors were less visible, likely due to stigma around vulnerability. In one Polish group, however, a boy observed that dividing the class by gender during homeroom lessons to discuss key topics worked well, allowing both groups to speak more openly with the teacher. He noted that in mixed groups, both boys and girls tried to impress the other, and the different styles of expression (girls being more "emotional," boys more aggressive) made it hard to discuss all issues.

Meanwhile, girls emphasized the need for cultural validation, highlighting that services should not only be available but also culturally and psychosocially responsive. In Czechia, girls' willingness to see school psychologists and share their concerns with peers further underscored the importance of safe, gender-sensitive spaces.

5. Priorities & Recommendations for Toolkit Development

Table 5: Priorities and recommendations for Children Toolkit development

Priority	Recommendations	Gender-related recommendations
Ensure language accessibility	Materials available in students' own languages. Inclusion of nonverbal, visual elements that are accessible to students who are still learning to read and write.	Inclusive language and images throughout all content, including representations of diverse genders, bodies, abilities and mental health conditions. Ensure that teaching materials are gender-inclusive and do not rely on the generic masculine.
Prioritize practice-oriented approach and maintain relevance for daily experiences	Resources for managing stress: illustrated guides or short videos to teach breathing techniques, grounding methods, and self-care strategies. Learning through stories: present comics or narratives with diverse characters facing everyday school practical and psychological challenges. Make content accessible to help children understand, resolve, and prevent peer conflict. Inform about the risks and opportunities associated with using social media and artificial intelligence, including for seeking MHPSS.	Address gender-based patterns in bullying: create sections that discuss how girls can be judged for their looks and boys for expressing emotion or deviating from traditional masculine norms. Include various forms of violence experienced by children based on intersectionality of gender identity and orientation (physical, sexual, psychological). Offer information and activities designed to counter gender stereotypes and build self-confidence in all children, regardless of gender identity and orientation.
Adjust format and ensure visual attractiveness	Consider incorporating digital tools such as apps or platforms (including AI chatbots) that offer emotional support, journaling, or options for anonymous reporting. Interactive tools for developing psychological literacy—like games, cards, or apps—can help children	Use inclusive visuals and language to ensure all materials reflect gender diversity and do not reinforce stereotypes. Ensure the content and exercises are available in a variety of formats, allowing children to integrate them

	recognize and express their emotions, feelings and thoughts.	into their routines regardless of how they prefer to spend their time.
	Promote simple and catchy formats (videos, hashtags, illustrations, challenges) that will resonate with children's interests.	
	Encourage group activities.	
Prioritize both individualised and community-based approaches	Normalise using support staff and mechanisms offered by the school.	Safe spaces for expression: encourage expression and validate diverse identities among all children.
	Normalise reaching out for and prioritize MHPSS.	Take into account gender-motivated preferences for different forms of support and encourage children to expand their range of coping strategies.
	Teach practical self-help skills: recognising feelings, breathing techniques, grounding exercises, relaxation methods.	
	Include elements of emotional intelligence and intercultural competence, including the promotion of empathy.	
	Support community-based integration, such as the formation of supportive peer relationships.	
	Promote peer support and mutual care.	
	establish a culture that encourages seeking help from adults, when confronted in difficult situations, and with appropriate safeguards.	
	Increase the number of extracurricular activities and projects that help bridge the gap between children who speak the local language and those who do not.	
	Support young leaders and informal student groups to initiate class meetings, class activities, and student parliaments.	

Source: REACHMIND project

Table 6: Children's recommendations for the Teachers and Parents Toolkits

Children's Recommendations for the Teachers Toolkit

- Promote preparing the class before a new person joins and develop a support protocol for newcomers, including support from students
- Address issues of bullying and discrimination, including preventive measures
- Include elements of positive motivation and appreciation of students
- Recommend group-based and relationship-oriented activities
- Recommend implementing agreements with students regarding acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and their consequences
- Promote an integrated approach to emotional support and learning

Children's Recommendations for the Parents Toolkit

- Clearly outline what helps, what should be avoided, and what might help in certain cases
- Promote practical support without pressure or infantilization of a child
- Include communication guides: how to talk to children about psychological reactions , bullying, and school stress
- Include awareness materials: signs of distress and how to support children through transitions
- Include elements of non-violence communication
  Include training on active listening

Source: REACHMIND project