



# THE EXPERIENCES AND WELL-BEING OF REFUGEE CHILDREN IN LITHUANIA



Gelbėkit vaikus



Nordic Council of Ministers  
Office in Lithuania



# ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data was gathered between **September and December 2023** in Lithuania.

**1** online survey was completed by **53** refugee children aged 12-18 (58% boys and 42% girls) and **86** caregivers (94% female), mostly from **Ukraine** (97%).

**7** Key Informant Interviews were conducted with Lithuanian teachers working with refugee children, representing **3** schools.

**1** Key Informant Interview was conducted with a refugee family from **Syria**.

**4** Focus Group Discussions were held with **22** refugee children aged 10-17 from **Ethiopia** (1), **Syria** (1), **Iraq** (1), **Gambia** (1), **Russia** (1) and **Ukraine** (17) (55% boys and 45% girls).

**2** Focus Group Discussions were conducted with **14** adult participants – 9 female social workers (8 from **Ukraine** and 1 from Lithuania) working with refugee children, and 5 female refugee caregivers (4 from **Ukraine**, 1 from **Tajikistan**).

This research was implemented as part of the project “Advocacy and Child Protection for Children on the Move”, funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers Office in Lithuania.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

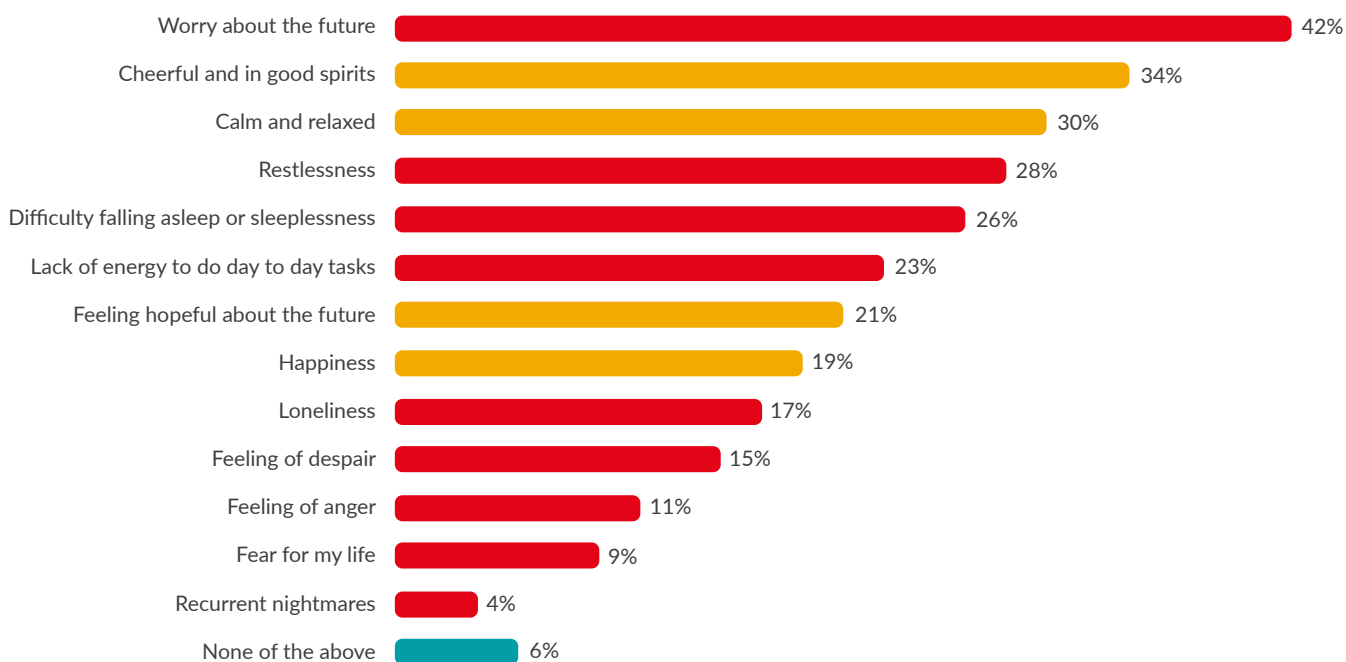
Children’s Well-being .....	4
Children’s Participation in School .....	5
Children’s Sense of Belonging .....	7
Caregivers’ Support Networks & Needs .....	8
Children’s Needs .....	8
Caregiver’s Awareness on Child Support Services .....	10
Children’s Hopes for the Future .....	11
Children’s Experiences en Route .....	12



# CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Refugee children surveyed face various emotional challenges, including **worries about the future (42%)**, **feelings of restlessness (28%)**, and **difficulty falling asleep (26%)**. Only **19%** of children said they **felt happiness** in the last month. On the other hand, children also stated they felt **cheerful and in good spirits (34%)** and **calm and relaxed (30%)**.

## Have you experienced any of the following in the last month?



Confidence levels among children vary, with **38%** indicating an **increase in self-assurance** (feeling confident a little more or a lot more often) and **35%** noting a **decrease** (feeling confident a little less or a lot less often).

**34%** of caregivers surveyed stated that their **children display less sadness** since leaving their home country, whereas **28%** stated their children **display more sadness**, and **19%** - **see no changes**. **39%** said their **children get tense or nervous more often**, **33%** - **less often**, and **18%** - **see no changes**.



During the focus group discussions some children shared their experiences of **disruptions in schooling and housing**, impacting their sense of stability. Most children stated feeling a **sense of safety**, with no fear of bombings. Children from non-European countries who participated in the focus group discussions shared that their **unhappiness**

**stems from movement restrictions** that they have experienced upon arrival in Lithuania.

Caregivers and social workers who participated in the focus group discussions acknowledged satisfactory conditions in Lithuania but expressed a **lack of happiness and concerns about the safety of returning** to their home country.

# CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL

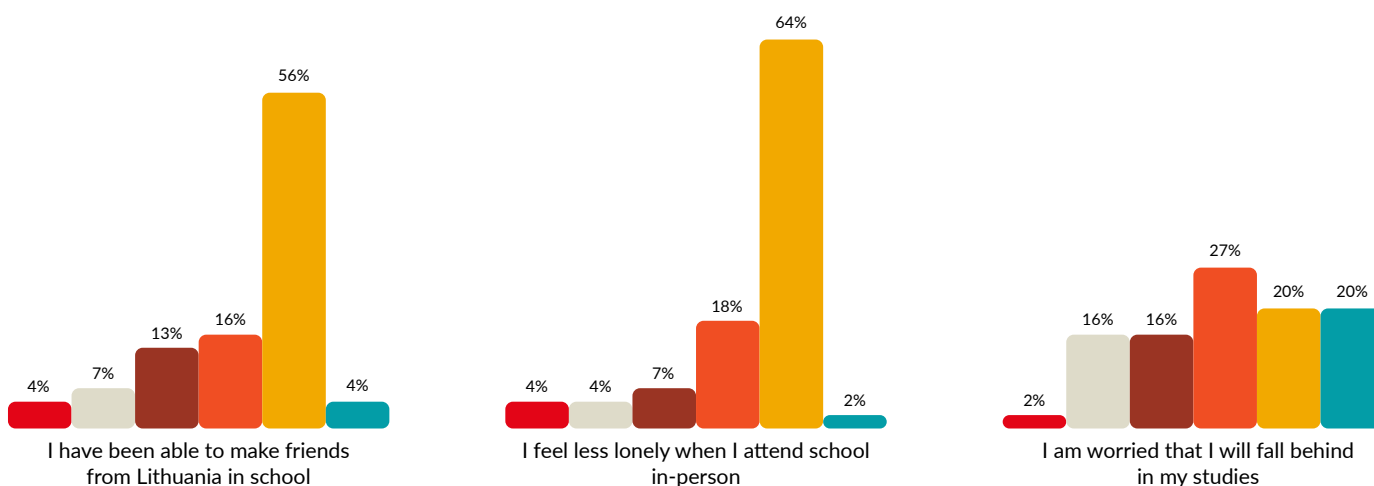
Among the surveyed children, a substantial majority were **attending school regularly in Lithuania (87%)**. 75% are participating in in-person classes, while 9% are combining in-person attendance with online classes. Only 2% reported attending school exclusively online. **91%** expressed a **preference for in-person attendance**.

**82%** of the children believed attending school in person **helps alleviate feelings of loneliness**. **72%** stated that they had successfully formed friendships with Lithuanian peers at school. **47%** expressed **concerns about falling behind in their studies**.

**84%** of the children were able to **access education support in their own language** and **89%** agreed that the **education support is helpful**.

## Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Don't know    Neither agree nor disagree    Slightly disagree    Somewhat agree    Strongly agree    Strongly disagree



**During the focus group discussions** some children from non-European countries who were still not enrolled in school (due to the quite recent arrival in Lithuania) expressed a **lack of motivation** to pursue education because of the **absence of clear information** regarding their options for attending school and the pervasive uncertainty surrounding their future in Lithuania.

Most children during the discussions shared that they find **language learning, including Lithuanian and English, challenging, as well as studying in Lithuanian**. Some children shared to have **experienced discrimination** with some teachers insisting

that children must learn Lithuanian within a certain timeframe, frequently failing to provide explanations in the language that children understand, leaving the children to navigate the learning material on their own. Furthermore, children from Ukraine shared the issue of **disparity between the educational programmes** in their country and in Lithuania. Children find themselves covering the same topics as the previous year and consequently falling behind which causes them distress. Children who attend classes in both countries at the same time (online and in person) experience additional challenges due to the heavy workload.



# CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL

During the focus group discussion caregivers expressed concerns about their children's struggles with language learning and educational pressures, prompting some families to relocate to areas with better support systems.



**"I miss the class teacher, the canteen, and my classmates."**

**"I miss learning in the native language."**

Teachers who participated in the interviews stressed that they often **lack adequate support, resources, and training** to address the diverse needs of refugee children. The Lithuanian language was mentioned as the primary obstacle to the successful integration of refugee children - **more recourses and support should be allocated for refugee children to learn language swiftly**. Most teachers suggested **assigning an educational assistant or mentor** to each refugee child to provide necessary support for their learning. Teachers also noted

that schools lack sufficient extracurricular activities for refugee children.



**"It was hard to make friends, children do not understand the language. Teachers also pushed asking children to learn Lithuanian quickly. Children did not want to go to school, there was moral pressure."**

During an interview with the Syrian family, the frustration was expressed that their **child has not been regularly involved in school** despite being in Lithuania for more than half a year due to the lack of classes available for non-Lithuanian speakers.



# CHILDREN'S SENSE OF BELONGING

40% of children who participated in the survey reported **feeling completely or somewhat included in the community**, while 27% indicated **feeling completely or somewhat excluded**. 33% expressed **uncertainty or held no strong opinion** regarding their sense of inclusion within the host community.

15% disclosed instances of **experiencing discrimination**, with a substantial majority of 77% reporting the opposite. The school environment emerged as the primary setting for reported instances of discrimination.

The caregiver survey yielded comparable results, with 23% confirming **experiences of discrimination** and 62% asserting the absence of such experiences. Caregivers specifically identified the housing search as the most common context for discrimination.



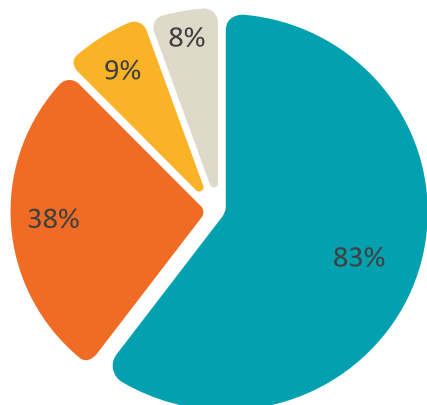
**“To be welcomed and well received, one has to learn the language first to understand each other and communicate.”**

## What would be most helpful to make you feel at home in Lithuania?



## What nationality are your friends?

- From my country
- From Lithuania
- Other nationality
- Prefer not to say



**During interviews with teachers working with non-European refugee children, additional barriers to integration were noted, including poor emotional well-being, lack of motivation, and stress stemming from uncertainty about their future.** According to teachers, these children are unsure whether they will be permitted to remain in the country, contributing to their heightened levels of stress and anxiety.

# CAREGIVERS' SUPPORT NETWORKS & NEEDS

Almost all caregivers (92%) left family members behind in their home country. 60% have left one or more parents behind, while 35% left their grandparents and 21% have separated from their spouses or partners.

Caregivers seek support from various sources, including **friends from their home country** (39%), **civil society organizations**, charities, or other entities working with children (36%) and the **national government** (26%).

Regarding factors contributing to a sense of belonging, caregivers highlighted the **importance of learning the local language** (65%), **securing appropriate accommodation** (39%), and **fostering friendships with individuals from Lithuania** (37%).

Caregivers also reported facing **challenges in paying bills** (63%), **purchasing nutritious food** (61%), and **ensuring an adequate food supply for their family** (59%) over the past six months.

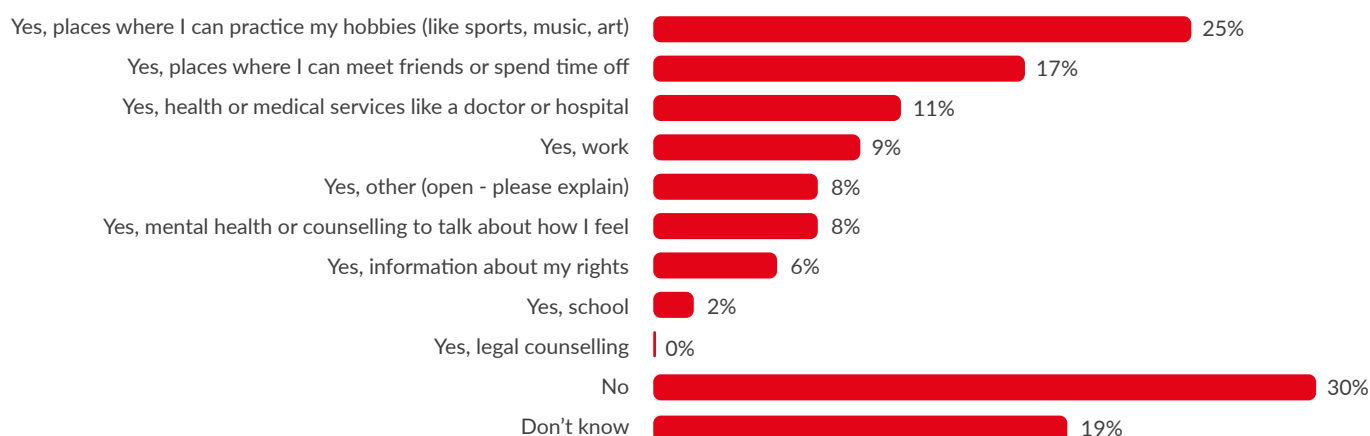


Caregivers who participated in **the focus group discussion** mentioned that they face **challenges in accessing language classes** tailored to their proficiency levels, indicating a need for more inclusive and effective language learning opportunities.

## CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Children express desires for dedicated **spaces for hobbies and socialising**, as well as **access to medical care**, which are currently inaccessible to them. Lack of access to essential services is attributed to high costs, lack of awareness, and unavailability of services in their language. Children highlight the **need for enhanced financial security, suitable accommodation, and the presence of friends** as unmet needs.

**Are there any services that you want or need to access but do not have access to?**

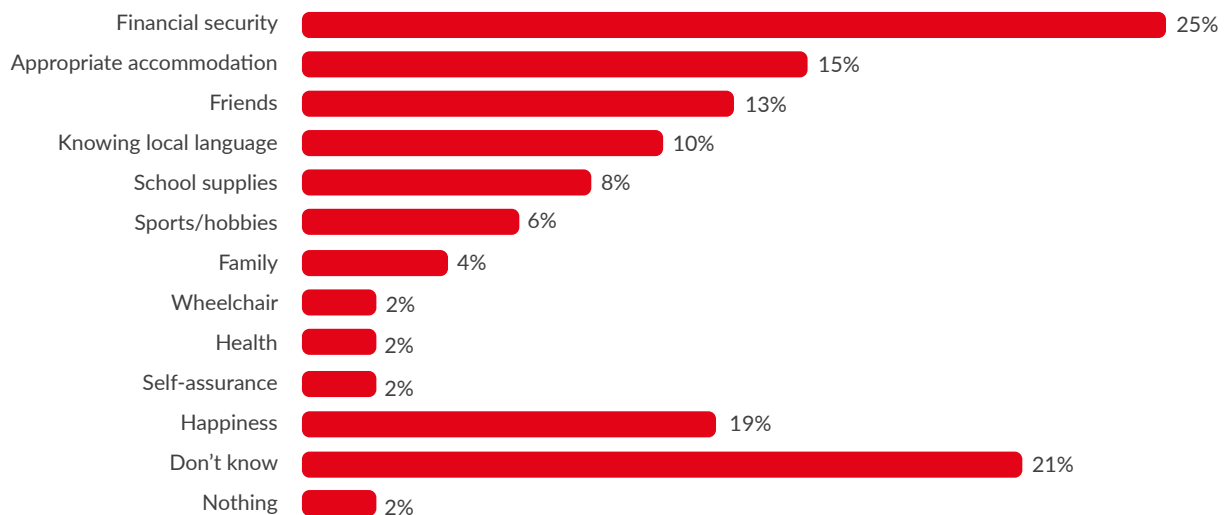






# CHILDREN'S NEEDS

What is the one thing that you would like to have right now?



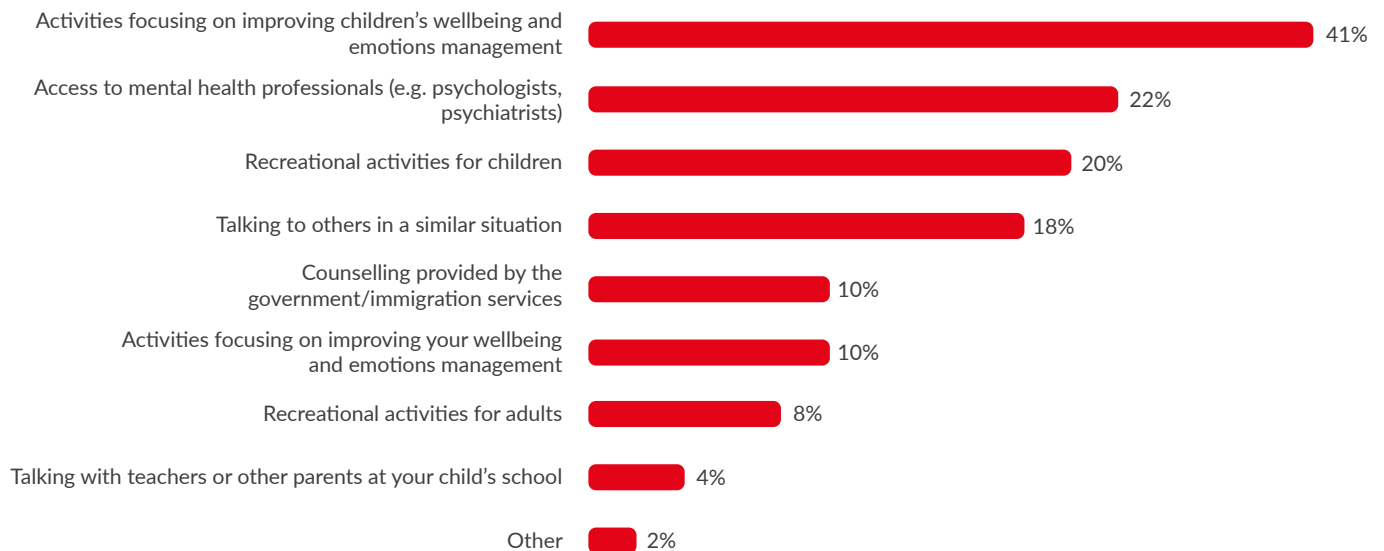
All children who participated in the **focus group discussions** reported having access to all necessary services. However, despite the availability of activities, they expressed a **desire for more interaction with other children**. They specifically mentioned wanting to meet Lithuanian children, engage in activities with them, and integrate into the local community.



# CAREGIVER'S AWARENESS ON CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES

40% of surveyed caregivers are **unaware of available support** options if their child or children display signs of distress, **60% indicated awareness** of such options, among them 41% reported utilizing some services.

## When you think about your future, what do you most wish for?

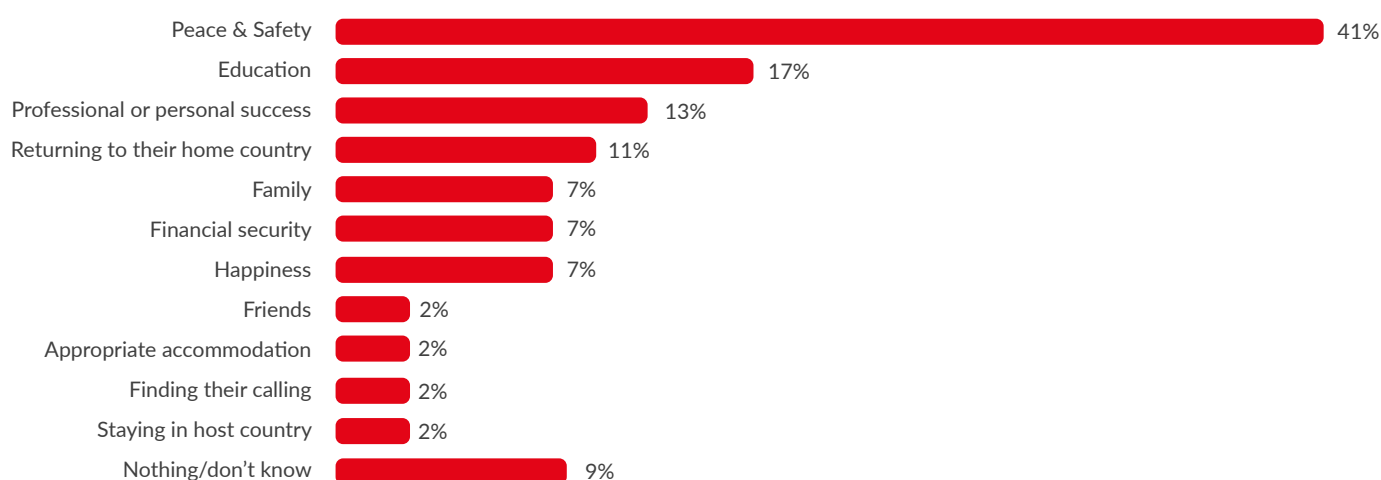


# CHILDREN'S HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

58% of children who participated in the survey expressed a **desire to return to their home country** at some point, while **28% remained uncertain**, and only **11% stated they did not plan to return**. Among the children aspiring to return home, the majority felt **happiness (65%) or excitement (32%)** about the prospect, but also expressed **concerns about their safety (32%)**.

Similarly, **58% of caregivers expressed a hope to return eventually**, **35% remained undecided**, while the remaining **5% expressed no intention of returning**. None of the respondents indicated plans to return within the next six months.

## Children's wishes for the future



All children from non-European countries who participated in **the focus group discussions** shared **worries about their uncertain futures**. They expressed **concerns about the lack of information regarding their legal status and prospects of staying in Lithuania**.



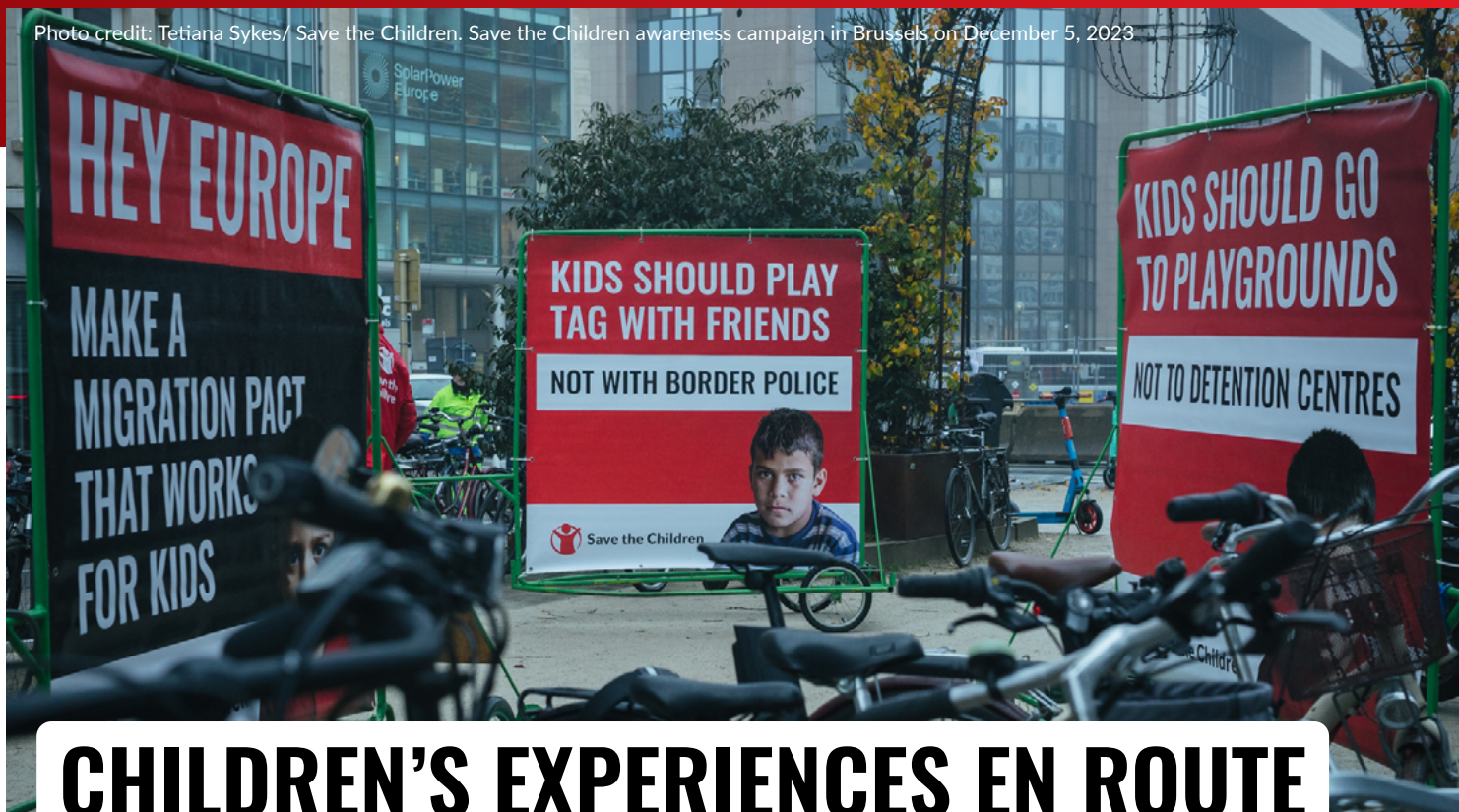
**“I will complete 8th grade. I cannot predict what tomorrow holds. I have no concrete plans, only hope for peace and an end to the war.”**

Children from Ukraine who participated in the focus group discussions expressed a strong **desire to reunite with relatives and friends** and yearn for an **end to the war**.

Many children aim to successfully **complete the school year or graduate**. Children also expressed a desire to **learn the Lithuanian language, achieve academic success, and engage in activities they enjoy**.

Caregivers expressed a collective **desire for peace**, longing for a return to pre-war conditions. However, Ukraine is mostly perceived as **unsafe to return permanently**, yet they continue to visit it regularly. When asked about their plans for the coming year, they expressed **uncertainty**: *‘We live for the moment.’*

The interviewed family from Syria expressed their **desire to remain in the country**. Their goals include **finding employment, reuniting with the rest of their family, and enrolling in school**.



## CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES EN ROUTE

When questioned about their experiences en route from their home country to Lithuania, **66%** of the children reported **feeling no physical danger** from anyone or anything. However, a small number (**9%**) **confirmed the opposite**. Similarly, **68%** of caregivers reported **not experiencing physical danger** from anyone or anything during their journey to Lithuania. **15%** reported the **opposite**. Both children and caregivers stated that the source of danger was either border officers, soldiers, or the hostilities in Ukraine. Notably, one respondent mentioned feeling physical danger from aid workers.

Most caregivers (**90%**) identified **Lithuania as their destination country**, while the remainder (**10%**) chose not to disclose their destination.



All children from non-European countries who participated in **the focus group discussions** recounted a **very challenging journey to Lithuania**, which involved **staying overnight in forests**.

Ukrainian children who arrived in Lithuania via Poland, faced challenges during their journey (cold weather was cited as a particular challenge by the children), but **no safety concerns were named**. They **received a warm welcome** at the border and found necessary provisions readily available.

*Save the Children Lithuania has zero tolerance for any intentional or unintentional harm or risk caused to children and adults participating in its activities or receiving its support. If you have any concerns about the safety of beneficiaries of the organization's services and support, or about the behavior of staff and other representatives, please report them immediately by email to [saugus.vaikas@savethechildren.org](mailto:saugus.vaikas@savethechildren.org) or by phone +370 609 23 776 or by filling in the anonymous reporting form on the organization's website.*