TRANSNATIONAL
FAMILY DYNAMICS
IN EUROPE

POLICY BRIEF 10/26

Towards more accessible family reunification policies

Recognising transnational families: Towards more accessible family reunification policies

Introduction

In recent years, family reunification has become one of the most contentious areas of immigration policy debate in Europe. As one of the main channels of legal migration to the European Union, it is now tied up with widespread concerns about migrant integration, pressure on housing, strained welfare systems and security. In this context, there has been a trend towards more restrictive family reunification policies across EU Member States, placing greater emphasis on migration control and deterrence than on protecting the right to family life and family unity.

However, respect for family life is a core right recognised in European and international human rights law. Moreover, academic research has highlighted the substantial benefits of family reunification for both transnational families and receiving societies.

This policy brief examines these benefits, identifies the main barriers that keep families apart and the challenges they face after reunification and sets out recommendations for more inclusive and flexible family reunification policies and better support for reunited families

Why family reunification matters: A win-win for families and society

For families separated across borders, prolonged or involuntary separation can have major emotional and social costs. Facilitating reunification is therefore an important objective in its own right, enabling families to live together and enjoy their right to respect for family life.

Beyond this rights-based rationale, academic research shows how reunification can improve family members' wellbeing and support their social and economic inclusion. Individual and societal benefits are closely connected, as the following evidence illustrates.

Mental health and psychological well-being. Family reunification is associated with improvements in individuals' mental health. Longitudinal studies from Germany and Denmark have found improvements in migrants' mental health outcomes following reunification with close family members.[1] In contrast, prolonged family separation is associated with increased psychiatric risks, which may even persist after reunification.[2] Among refugee and migrant children in particular, family

[1] Löbel, L.-M. and Jacobsen, J. (2021) 'Waiting for kin: a longitudinal study of family reunification and refugee mental health in Germany', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 47(13), pp. 2916–2937. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2021.1884538; Hvidtfeldt, C., Petersen, J.H. and Norredam, M. (2022) 'Waiting for family reunification and the risk of mental disorders among refugee fathers: a 24-year longitudinal cohort study from Denmark', Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 57(5), pp. 1061–1072. doi: 10.1007/s00127-021-02170-1.

[2] Hvidtfeldt, C., Petersen, J.H. and Norredam, M. (2022) 'Waiting for family reunification and the risk of mental disorders among refugee fathers: a 24-year longitudinal cohort study from Denmark',

separation is also associated with higher levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms and emotional difficulties.[3]

Children's development and education. OECD evidence shows that migrant children arriving in their destination country at a younger age tend to achieve better educational and language outcomes than those arriving later. Delays in family reunification may therefore have negative consequences for their development.[4] Furthermore, a European meta-analysis found an association between more favourable national family reunification policies and better academic outcomes and reduced psychological distress among migrant children.[5]

Socioeconomic inclusion. Access to timely family reunification can improve the long-term economic prospects of migrants. OECD evidence shows that longer delays in spousal reunification are connected with lower earnings for the sponsors and decreases the probability for the spouses to find employment, particularly women.[6]

Long-term social inclusion and connection across groups. Family reunification contributes to social inclusion by helping reunited families establish local social ties, participate in schools and community activities and engage with local institutions.[7] Thereby they foster trust, belonging and participation in the receiving society and allow a better future for young generations.[8]

Provision of care across generations. Childcare, as well as care to ageing parents and family members who are disabled or ill, requires physical presence. Support from grandparents and other relatives can ease childcare responsibilities, helping parents, especially women, participate in the labour market. At the same time, reunification can enable migrants to provide care for ageing parents and other family members who need support..

Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 57(5), pp. 1061–1072. doi: 10.1007/s00127-021-02170-1.

[3] Spaas, C., Verelst, A., Devlieger, I., Aalto, S., Andersen, A.J., Durbeej, N., Hilden, P.K., Kankaanpää, R., Primdahl, N.L., Opaas, M., Osman, F., Peltonen, K., Sarkadi, A., Skovdal, M., Jervelund, S.S., Soye, E., Watters, C., Derluyn, I., Colpin, H. and De Haene, L. (2022) 'Mental Health of Refugee and Non-refugee Migrant Young People in European Secondary Education: The Role of Family Separation, Daily Material Stress and Perceived Discrimination in Resettlement', Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 51(5), pp. 848–870. doi: 10.1007/s10964-021-01515-y.

[4] OECD (2019) 'Family ties: How family reunification can impact migrant integration', in International Migration Outlook 2019 (43rd edn.). Paris: OECD Publishing, pp. 167–208 . Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/international-migration-outlook-2019_c3e35eec-en/full-report/component-7.html#chapter-d1e36344

[5] Dimitrova, R., Chasiotis, A. and van de Vijver, F. (2016) 'Adjustment Outcomes of Immigrant Children and Youth in Europe: A Meta-Analysis', European Psychologist, 21(2), pp. 150–162

[6] OECD (2019) 'Family ties: How family reunification can impact migrant integration' (Chapter 4), in International Migration Outlook 2019. Paris: OECD Publishing, pp. 167–207. doi: 10.1787/c3e35eec-en.

[7] Baillot, H., Kerlaff, L., Dakessian, A., & Strang, A. (2023). 'Step by step': the role of social connections in reunited refugee families' navigation of statutory systems. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 49(17), 4313-4332.

[8] UNICEF (2018) Family Unity in the Context of Migration. UNICEF Working Paper. https://www.unicef.org/media/58341/file/Family%20unity%20issue%20brief.pdf.

Legal framework

The right to respect for family life is recognised in international and European human rights law. Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) establishes that the family is entitled to protection by society and the state. In Europe, the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter also protect family life and additional safeguards are provided by national legal frameworks.

A critical normative and interpretive role is played by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC/UNCRC). Using the "best interest of the child" approach, it requires states to ensure that a child is not separated from his or her parents against their will. Additionally, it states that applications by a child or his or her parents to enter or leave a state for family reunification reasons must be handled positively and without adverse consequences for the family, and that children whose parents live in different states have the right to maintain regular contact with both. It also requires that the definition of "family" reflects the child's lived dependencies and care relationships. In doing so, it imposes an obligation to handle reunification requests in a child-sensitive way that prioritises the child's best interests.

However, these protections do not establish an unconditional right to family reunification. The core European law is the EU Family Reunification Directive (2003/86/EC), which creates a common minimum framework for the reunification of eligible family members with legally resident third-country nationals. It grants recognised refugees a protective regime, including exemptions from certain material requirements where applications are submitted within three months of obtaining refugee status. At the same time, it gives Member States wide discretion in establishing eligibility, conditions and accessibility of the procedure. Moreover, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are excluded from the Directive's scope and therefore depend on national provisions, which may offer less favourable conditions.

Barriers to family reunification and challenges after arrival

Transnational families face several significant barriers, both before and after family reunification. Although these barriers vary depending on migration status, country of origin of the sponsor and the applicant and a range of other individual circumstances for both parties (e.g. family ties, age, language skills and time since arrival),[9] the following are particularly widespread.

Accessing family reunification

Restrictive financial and material requirements: National governments make the right to family reunification conditional on different criteria like income,

[9] Kofman, E., Buhr, F., & Fonseca, M. L. (2022). Family migration. *Introduction to Migration Studies.– IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham*, 137-149; Bonizzoni, P., & Belloni, M. (2023). Uneven borders: Family reunification regulations and their implications in Europe. *Handbook of transnational families around the world*, 237-250.

accommodation and health insurance, as well as integration requirements such as language and civic integration tests. These measures set thresholds that are often unachievable. Even though recognised refugees benefit from an exemption from these requirements, if the they apply within a specified period, which usually lasts between three and twelve months[10], gathering legalised documents, finding relatives displaced by conflict and securing embassy appointments to submit family reunification applications is often impossible in this short time frame[11]. In addition, application fees, document translation and legalisation, DNA tests and the cost of international travel can make reunification even more unaffordable for all sponsors.

Waiting times and procedural delays: Multiple waiting periods can stack up, extending family separation over time. Embassy appointment waiting lists that sometimes exceed several months, lengthy document verification by immigration authorities and administrative backlog cause stress and uncertainty. [12] Unaccompanied refugee minors risk aging out of eligibility if they turn eighteen during the process due to delays in the process.[13] In some countries, beneficiaries of subsidiary or temporary protection face mandatory waiting periods of up to three years before they can apply for family reunification, which may harm their well-being and integration outcomes, especially when family members are stuck in unsafe areas.[14]

Rigid document and evidence requirements: Obtaining, legalising and translating documents to prove identity and family ties is especially challenging for refugees and other displaced people who may have fled without official documents and risk persecution by contacting authorities in their countries of origin. Although the EU Family Reunification Directive grants legal safeguards for refugees by requiring states to consider alternative evidence,[15] documented cases show that strict demands for official documents still create obstacles to reunification. Even small

[10] This depends on the national regulation in the receiving state. See: European Migration Network (2025) Family reunification of third-country nationals: State of play of law and practice. European Migration Network Study. Brussels: European Commission; Labrosse, C. and Testi, E. (2023) Not there yet: Family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection. AIDA Comparative Report. Brussels: European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE).

[11] Arapiles, S. and Mekonnen, D. (2025) 'Family reunification for "paperless" Eritrean refugees: A pie in the sky or a realisable right?', in Desmet, E., Belloni, M., Vanheule, D., Verhellen, J. and Güdük, A. (eds.) Family Reunification in Europe: Exposing Inequalities. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 209–224; Belloni, M. and Verschraegen, G. (2025) 'Family reunification and administrative citizenship: A transnational perspective', in Desmet, E., Belloni, M., Vanheule, D., Verhellen, J. and Güdük, A. (eds.) Family Reunification in Europe: Exposing Inequalities. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 259–276.

[12] Penna, G., Belloni, M., & Verschraegen, G. (forthcoming). It's all about timing: Understanding family reunification as a problem of synchronisation. In Transnational families in turbulent times: Multiscalar perspectives on mobility and everyday life across borders. Routledge.

[13] Allsopp, J., & Chase, E. (2019). Best interests, durable solutions and belonging: Policy discourses shaping the futures of unaccompanied migrant and refugee minors coming of age in Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *45*(2), 293-311.

[14] Caritas Europa (2026) Family reunification: a right, not a privilege. Policy Paper. Brussels: Caritas Europa; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) Realising the right to family reunification of refugees in Europe . Issue Paper. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

[15] Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 251, 3 October, Art. 11(2).

inconsistencies in names, dates or other information across documents can trigger suspicions of fraud, resulting in additional checks and costs for families.[16]

Narrow definitions of family: Family reunification rules are centred on the nuclear family (spouses and minor children), making it harder for other relatives, such as grandparents, siblings and dependent adult children, to reunite.[17] In some cases even minor siblings are excluded from the definition of the nuclear family.[18] Yet these family members may play an essential role in the families.[19] Even if Member States allow reunification with extended family members, the threshold to prove dependency on the sponsor is very high. Additionally, EU Member States may limit favourable conditions for beneficiaries of international protection to family bonds formed prior to their entry into the host state. This means that individuals who form families after arrival may face stricter requirements.[20]

Obstacles to circular mobility of extended family members: For transnational families, temporary visits are important for supporting relatives during illness and helping with childcare. Families with access to visa-free travel can do so without needing to relocate permanently. For families from countries subject to restrictive visa regimes, transnational care is harder.[21]

Geographical and practical barriers to submitting applications: Family members are often required to visit embassies, consulates or visa centres in person to submit applications, provide fingerprints, attend interviews to verify the validity of their claims[22]. However, these services may not be available in the country of origin. The 2023 Afrin judgment (C-1/23 PPU)[23] by the Court of Justice of the EU provides an important legal basis by requiring Member States to allow families of refugees to

---

[16] Fattorelli, E. (2024). Administrative control mechanisms in the descent-based family reunification of refugees. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 47(12), 2541-2562.

17 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2005) Family Reunification. OHCHR Migration Papers, November 2005.

18 Myria (Federal Centre for Migration), Who can join you and under what conditions?, 2024. Available at: https://www.myria.be/en/fundamental-rights/family-reunification/child-entry/chapter-1 (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

19 Merla, L., Kilkey, M., & Baldassar, L. (2020). Examining transnational care circulation trajectories within immobilizing regimes of migration: Implications for proximate care. Journal of Family Research, 32(3), 514-536. Bolzman, C. (2021). Linked lives, dividing borders: From transnational solidarity to family reunification of an older parent. In Ageing and Migration in a Global Context: Challenges for Welfare States (pp. 97-111). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

20 Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) Realising the right to family reunification of refugees in Europe. Issue Paper. Strasbourg: Council of Europe

21 Evans, R., Mas Giralt, R. et al. (2024) Care, Inequalities and Wellbeing among Transnational Families in Europe: Report of the CareWell comparative, intergenerational study in Spain, France, Sweden and UK. Report. University of Reading and University of Leeds. DOI: https://doi.org/10.48683/1926.00119301; Christ, S., & Etzold, B. (2025). Enforced transnationalism: Refugees' family lives in Germany under conditions of separation and waiting. In Family Reunification in Europe. Taylor & Francis; Mau, S., Gülzau, F., Laube, L., & Zaun, N. (2015). The Global Mobility Divide: How Visa Policies Have Evolved over Time. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 41(8), 1192–1213. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1005007.

22 Alpes, M. J., & Spire, A. (2014). Dealing with law in migration control: The powers of street-level bureaucrats at French consulates. Social & Legal Studies, 23(2), 261-274.

23 Court of Justice of the European Union (2023) Case C-1/23 PPU: X and Others v État belge (Afrin), Judgment of 18 April 2023, ECLI:EU:C:2023:296. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:62023CJ0001 (Accessed: 16 October 2026).

submit applications without appearing in person when doing so is impossible or excessively difficult. However, a lot of families still are forced to travel to other countries[24], which can be dangerous and expensive and may entail long waiting times for appointments or visas to enter the third country.

Inadequate access to support services: Clear and up-to-date information about the application process, especially in foreign languages, is lacking in multiple countries.[25] While some European countries establish dedicated support services for highly skilled migrants (e.g. EU Blue Card holders, researchers, relocated employees),[26] refugees and lower-skilled migrants have to turn overstretched non-governmental organisations for guidance. Access to affordable legal advice is also limited, leaving many families dependent on informal community networks for support.[27] These challenges lead to mistakes and missed deadlines, especially for migrants less familiar with the host country's bureaucracy.

Following family reunification

Legal dependency on the sponsor: Family members who arrive through reunification receive residence permits linked to the sponsor's legal status.[28] They may have to wait up to five years before they are eligible for an independent status.[29] Consequently, separation, divorce or changes in the sponsor's residence status may put their right to remain in the country at risk. This dependency is most concerning in cases of domestic violence, where fear of losing legal status may prevent victims from leaving abusive relationships or seeking help.[30] Legal safeguards to protect family members do exist,[31] but accessing protective permits can remain challenging.[32]

---

[24] Belloni, M., & Verschraegen, G. (2024). 15 Family reunification and administrative citizenship. *Family Reunification in Europe: Exposing Inequalities*.

[25] Labrosse, C. and Testi, E. (2023) Not there yet: Family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection. AIDA Comparative Report. Brussels: European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE).

[26] European Migration Network (2025) Family reunification of third-country nationals: State of play of law and practice. European Migration Network Study. Brussels: European Commission

[27] Debruyne, P. (2025) 'Reassembling the right to family reunification for refugees in Belgium through social work practices of welfare bricolage', in Desmet, E., Belloni, M., Vanheule, D., Verhellen, J. and Güdük, A. (eds.) Family Reunification in Europe: Exposing Inequalities. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 296–314.

[28] Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 251, 3 October, Arts 12(3) and 13(2)

[29] Orsini, G., & Merla, L. (2024). 19 Domestic violence within the securitisation of (family and love) migration. *Family Reunification in Europe: Exposing Inequalities*.

[30] Menjívar, C., & Salcido, O. (2002). Immigrant women and domestic violence: Common experiences in different countries. *Gender & society*, *16*(6), 898-920.

[31] Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification, Official Journal of the European Union, L 251, 3 October, Art. 15(3); Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 11 May 2011, CETS No. 210, Art. 59.

[32] Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) Realising the right to family reunification of refugees in Europe . Issue Paper. Strasbourg: Council of Europe; European Migration Network (2025) Family reunification of third-country nationals: State of play of law and practice. European Migration Network Study. Brussels: European Commission.

Post-arrival inclusion challenges: Language barriers, difficulties in getting foreign qualifications recognised and limited access to childcare can make it hard to find a job in the new country.[33] Families may also struggle to access healthcare, education and other public services because of complex paperwork and limited support. Under-resourced and over-stretched social work organisations, or a shortage of professional interpreters, can make it even harder for families to access the services they need.[34]

Recommendations

Despite the important long-term benefits of family reunification, European countries are increasingly implementing restrictive policies. This prevents relatives from achieving their right to family life and caring for one, while making it harder for migrants to settle and participate in receiving societies. Family unity plays a central role in individual wellbeing, socioeconomic inclusion and social cohesion, with benefits for both families and receiving societies. To realise this win-win situation, this policy brief recommends that EU Member States:

- Reframe family migration as a societal benefit rather than a burden: Instead, recognise its wider societal value and develop evidence-based policies allowing positive contributions to individual and family well-being, socioeconomic inclusion and the provision of care across generations.
- Reduce financial and material barriers: Apply income and housing requirements more flexibly, taking into consideration local job and housing market conditions. Extend strict deadlines for beneficiaries of international protection to benefit from exemptions and reduce or waive application, translation, legalisation and DNA testing costs for families facing financial hardship.
- Shorten waiting periods and reduce procedural delays: Remove mandatory waiting periods and ensure the rapid processing of visa applications. Cases involving children and families in unsafe circumstances in the country of origin should be given priority.
- Allow greater flexibility in documentary evidence: Family relationships should be assessed by paying attention to difficulties accessing civil records in the country of origin. Minor discrepancies in documents should not automatically be treated as evidence of fraud, and DNA testing should be used only when necessary and with appropriate safeguards.
- Adopt more inclusive definitions of family: Facilitate reunification beyond the nuclear family, taking into consideration any strong dependency or caregiving relationships. Ensure that minor siblings are considered formally part of the nuclear family, rather than having them rely on discretionary humanitarian visas that are vulnerable to changes in government policy.

---

[33] Bergset, K., Debruyne, P., Van Acker, K., & Alvestad Reime, M. (2025). On the reconstruction of family life and 'institutional forms of parentification': unaccompanied minors' experiences with family reunification in Belgium and Norway. *European Journal of Social Work*, *28*(5), 1013-1026.

[34] Debruyne, P., Van Acker, K., Geldof, D., & Schrooten, M. (2023). Transnational dynamics of family reunification: reassembling social work with refugees in Belgium. In *Migration and social work* (pp. 95-111). Policy Press.

- Facilitate cross-border family visits: Simplify short-stay and multiple-entry visa procedures for family members with caregiving responsibilities and prioritise applications involving urgent care needs.
- Make application procedures more accessible: Allow applications to be submitted by the sponsor in the host country. Simplify appointment booking and consider alternative travel documents where family members cannot obtain national passports.
- Strengthen information and support services: Ensure that clear and up-to-date information about reunification procedures is available in foreign languages. Provide affordable legal advice and administrative support.
- Facilitate access to independent residence permits: Provide independent residence status to family members joining their sponsor and implement provide confidential legal support to people in abusive households.
- Provide better support for families after reunification: Fund social services providing assistance with integration in the new country, so as to facilitate better and safer access to housing, language learning, employment, recognition of qualifications and childcare

Background of the Policy Brief

TraFaDy is a network based on COST Action 21143 that aims to deepen knowledge of the growing and rapidly changing phenomenon of transnational families and the dynamics within them. It brings together researchers and stakeholders from different disciplines and countries to develop transnational insights and to formulate policy- and practice-oriented recommendations that will have an impact at international, national, sub-local and local levels. TraFaDy closely monitors current trends in migration, technology and politics and engages in intensive dialogue with policy makers and practitioners, thereby helping to deepen and broaden understanding of transnational families.

This policy brief was prepared within the framework of TraFaDy Working Group 6 ((policy and practices). The policy brief is the outcome of meetings and discussions within the TraFaDy networks. A major cornerstone was a workshop on family reunification and transnational families in March 2026 (in cooperation with MITRA) bringing together researchers, practitioners, and policy stakeholders..

Authorship

Contributions: Giovanni Penna, Milena Belloni, Andreas de Boer, Pascal Debruyne, Sven Iversen,

Working Group 6 (policy and practices):

Working Group Leader: Attila Böhm
Co-leaders: Dr Aija Lulle and Andreas de Boer

Contact: WG6@trafady.eu

Imprint

COST Action CA21143 – TraFaDy

c/o Odisee University of Applied Sciences
Warmoesberg 26, 1000 Brussels

Chair: Prof Mieke Schrooten
Vice-Chair: Sven Iversen

Web: https://transnational-families.eu
Email: info@transnational-families.eu

Brussels October 2026

cost
EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Funded by the European Union