



**EUROPE
MUST
ACT.**

LOVE AND FAMILY ACROSS BORDERS



**Topic of the
Month Europe
Must Act
2025**



Index

<u>A note from the Research Team</u>	3
<u>Introduction</u>	4
<u>Childhood interrupted: the rights of children on the move in Europe</u>	5
<u>Locked in, pushed back, put down. Children at the gates of Europe</u>	7
<u>Family Reunification</u>	9
<u>Latest Development: Family Reunification in the Dutch Asylum System</u>	10
<u>Family reunification and the Irish housing crisis</u>	11
<u>The UK's Suspension of Refugee Family Reunification</u>	12
• <i>What was refugee family reunification in the UK?</i>	12
• <i>Debunking the justification</i>	13
<u>The Positives of Family Reunification</u>	13
<u>Hope, Love and Family</u>	14
• <i>Migrant Families Fleeing Violence in Ballymena, Northern Ireland</i>	14
• <i>Pride as a Message of Solidarity</i>	14
• <i>Finding Sanctuary in Faith</i>	15
• <i>Stories of Reunification in 2025</i>	15
<u>Love Is Not Defined By Law</u>	16

A note from the research team

We've found that, when it comes to migration, love, family and relationships, a universal thread appears.

Across our migrant communities, we discuss the joys of time differences and video calls, describe the different states of anxious loved ones, wonder what languages make sense to teach our children, and try to collectively figure out which visa implications and complicated procedures will likely be involved in our relationships or occasional brief family visits.

These conversations console and bring us together despite our different passports and statuses. We realise that people are complicated and can simultaneously hold the emotions of joy for the lives we've built here and the buried hint of mourning for those we miss.

The right to family life is a human right for a reason. It is a universal thread across everyone's experience, and that's why at Europe Must Act, we argue that the recent European policies are degrading this right, our connection to family and thus constituting an attack on all of us.

We therefore ask you to read our report and stand with us against the creation of family separation, particularly for those who can't return home.



Image sourced from Unsplash

Introduction

Love and family are words that carry deep personal meaning, shaped by culture, experience, and circumstance. Yet, in the context of migration and asylum, these concepts are often narrowed by legal definitions that fail to reflect the complexity of real human relationships. When laws determine who counts as “family”, traditionally consisting of a married couple and dependent children, many forms of love and care are left outside their boundaries. As noted in the Introduction to Migration Studies, “The study of migrant families therefore cuts across the available legal definitions of family and brings to light emerging forms of living together, gender roles, sexualities, kinship ties, and caregiving practices.” [1]

This month’s topic explores **Love & Family** through the lens of forced migration to Europe. We examine refugee family reunification, defining what it means under EU law. We also take a look at children’s rights, exploring the fundamental support that family life gives to children, which ensures safe and healthy development, and discussing how institutional care and detention continue to obstruct their right to travel across Europe. We highlight alarming cases of child detention and abuse at Europe’s borders, casting a spotlight on the human cost of restrictive migration policies.

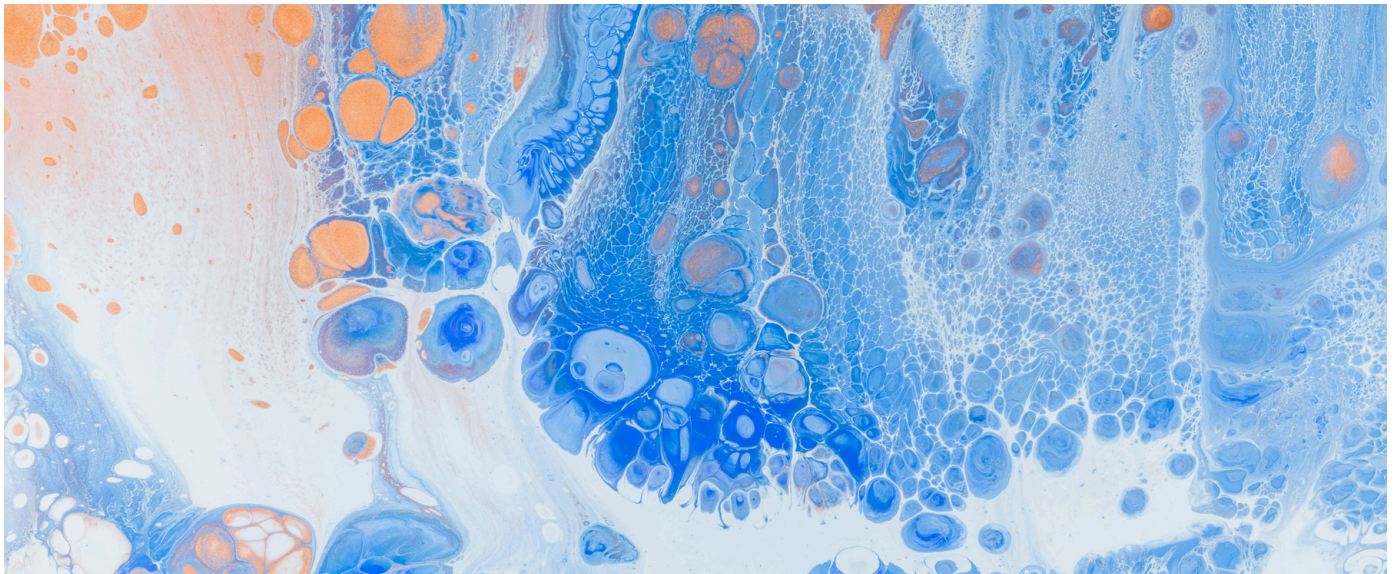


Image sourced from [Unsplash](#)

We also take a snapshot look at the situation around family reunification in different European countries, discussing recent legislative changes in the Netherlands that could drastically limit family reunification, and examining how Ireland’s housing crisis is undermining the process for many people trying to reunite with their family members. We analyse the UK’s suspension of its refugee family reunification scheme, a move that removes one of the few safe routes for refugees and contradicts expert evidence on integration and well-being. Yet, amid tightening rules, stories of reunion from across Europe remind us of what is at stake: the power of family to restore hope, belonging, and stability after displacement.

[1] Scholten, P. (A c. Di). (2022). *Introduction to Migration Studies: An Interactive Guide to the Literatures on Migration and Diversity*. Springer Nature. P.137-138

Childhood interrupted: the rights of children on the move in Europe

Across Europe, thousands of children on the move find their fundamental rights—enshrined in international and European law—interrupted by systems that too often prioritise control and procedure over protection, family unity, and healthy development

Children should enjoy all the fundamental rights we want for adults; at the same time, children are especially vulnerable, have specific needs associated with their state of development (e.g., playing, socialising) and are essentially dependent. In whatever cultural form, families are a universal feature in the human species (and other superior animals) with the basic function of protecting children, satisfying their needs and supporting their development. No other institution can replace families in providing love, guidance and support to a child on a regular, consistent basis, with stable attachment figures playing a central role [2]. As such, children's access to fundamental rights must be adapted to their level of development and provided within a healthy family environment.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognises every child's right to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment and protects children from neglect, abuse, and exploitation. The CRC protects children's right to life, survival, development, privacy, health, education, leisure and recreational activities, and to a certain standard of living.

It also places certain obligations on the State, including to protect children from physical and mental violence and neglect or abuse, to protect them from illicit drug use and sexual abuse, and to ensure that they live free from inhuman and degrading treatment. The CRC specifically considers the uniquely vulnerable position of children seeking asylum, and, like most laws concerning children, mandates the State to act with the best interests of the child in mind.

[2] See, e.g., Kagitcibasi, C. (2017), *Family, Self, and Human Development Across Cultures*, Routledge; Parke, R.D. & Ladd, G. W. (eds.) (2016), *Family-Peer Relationships*, Routledge.

European Union (EU) law reinforces the rights laid out in international law and adds further protections to children on the move. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR) grants similar protections to international law, including the right to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment, the right to liberty, the right to an effective remedy for former damage, and access to protection and care as necessary for children's well-being.

The Reception Conditions Directive prescribes that the best interests of the child should always be a primary consideration for any action involving children. It further creates a set of obligations for Member States to immediately place Unaccompanied Children (UACs) with either adult relatives, a foster family, or in accommodation appropriate for children. Art. 8 of the Dublin III regulation stipulates that the Member State responsible for an unaccompanied minor's application is the one where a family member is legally present.

In this respect, we should highlight the potential risk and actual damage involved in the consideration of "accommodation appropriate for children" outside family environments. In contradiction with contemporary developmental psychology research [3], the Directive does not recognise families as fundamental environments for healthy child development and quality of life. This omission leads to the institutional treatment of minors in residential centres, often deprived of fundamental freedoms, effectively obstructing children's right to a safe, healthy family environment, for months or years of their childhood.

In fact, EU law, and international law generally, prohibit States from detaining UACs, except for the case of extraordinary circumstances [4]. Although the European Commission of Human Rights (ECHR) does not explicitly address the detention of children, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has repeatedly stated that detention is not in a minor's best interest [5]. Where detention is absolutely necessary, it must be for as short a period as possible and guarantee children the procedural and substantive rights that broadly govern immigration detention in Europe [6].

International and European regulations on the status of childhood provide a reference base to respect the special rights of children. Yet, the extended reliance on residential institutions for UACs contributes to obstructing these rights by virtue of two features:

- The practice of systematic detention and the separation of children from their families. (Reunification and relocation are reasonable alternatives to eliminate these obstacles).
- The fundamental right to education for all children recognised in European law is often denied to children under State protection or living in camps on the basis of various practical, institutional or local impediments.

[3] Ibid.

[4] See Art. 11(3) Directive 2013/33/EU; Art. 52, L. 4939/2022.

[5] See e.g., ECtHR, Judgment of 05/04/2011, No. 8687/08 – Rahimi, para 108-110.

[6] See e.g., Art. 11(3) Directive 2013/33/EU.

In short, international and European regulations highlight special rights for children which qualify and add to their human rights. At the same time, the institutional processing of children coming to Europe is undermining children's rights through policies that obstruct family unification and that keep children in residential detention.

Locked in, pushed back, put down. Children at the gates of Europe

Studies have demonstrated that detention affects children's developmental and cognitive skills, increases their risk of depression and anxiety, and exposes them to violence, neglect, and abuse. Still, many European States include provisions for Unaccompanied Children which involve residential detention.

In Greece, "Safe Areas" have been established in special sections of Closed/Controlled Access Centres (CCACs) and other reception facilities to host UACs in detention. By 2024, thousands of children were detained in such centres. These areas are not designed for long-term accommodation, lack basic amenities, and force children to endure shockingly poor conditions while separated from family, civil society, and legal actors. Children are kept in these conditions for months while waiting to complete certain administrative procedures essential for their protection.



Image sourced from [Unsplash](#)

A recent report by [Equal Rights Beyond Borders](#) details the policies, practices, and conditions experienced by children in the 'Safe Areas' of the Kos and Leros CCACs. Although these children are not considered detained under Greek law, they are placed in the Safe Areas and not permitted to leave these sections, let alone the camp, for long periods. This constitutes detention.

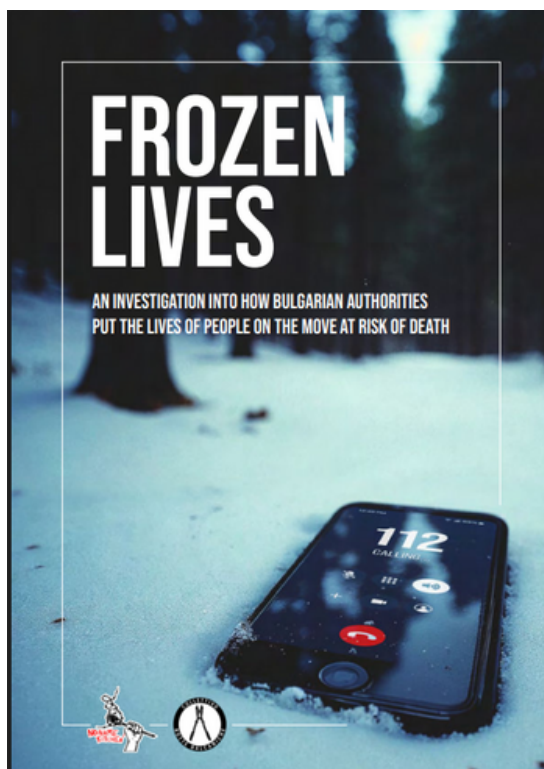
This is not the only example of children being detained. A recent report by the grassroots international organisation [No Name Kitchen](#) documented the physical and psychological violence at the border and in detention centres in Bulgaria, bringing light to a number of cases affecting children:

"One respondent, an unaccompanied minor from Syria, was taken to the Harmanli police station and interviewed for 5 hours, during which he reported that the translator repeatedly cursed at him. He was then taken to Lyubimets detention centre, where he was detained for 24 days. He requested to be reunited with his sister in Sweden, but the police threatened to keep him in detention for 6 months and to deport him to Syria if he did not claim asylum in Bulgaria, even though it was not his intention to remain in the country."

This respondent's detention in Bulgaria violates several international and regional human rights standards, including the principle of the best interest of the child (expressed in the UN's CRC) and Article. 6 of the Dublin III Regulation. It also violates the child's right to family life and reunification (Arts. 9 and 10 of the CRC).



Image sourced from [Unsplash](#)



Screenshot of the cover page of NNK's report Frozen Lives

The harm being done to children has reached devastating levels. In late December 2024, three Egyptian minors were left to die in the Bulgarian forest, despite human rights defenders repeatedly alerting the authorities to the children's presence. Through the course of three days, authorities not only ignored distress calls but also actively obstructed rescue efforts. Evidence found at one of the death sites suggests border guards were present while one child was still alive. This event was documented in a detailed report from the international organisation No Name Kitchen.

Since July 2023, search and rescue teams responding to calls for help from people on the move have found nine people already dead - including the aforementioned three Egyptian boys. Five of those killed were children. However, it is estimated that these cases are only a fraction of the actual number of casualties at the border.

The institutional processing of children coming to Europe continues to undermine their rights through policies that obstruct family unification and rely on detention. Yet across the continent, grassroots networks are quietly working to repair these fractures in protection. In Greece, for instance, where reports of domestic violence have doubled in just one year and the closure of key service providers left thousands of refugee women without support, the Action for Women's LEILA hotline was created to fill the gap. Operating through a coded WhatsApp system, LEILA provides multilingual legal, medical, and emotional assistance to women—and by extension, safeguards the well-being of the children who depend on them.

[7] World Economic Forum. *The Global Risks Report 2024: Insight Report*. Geneva: World Economic Forum; 2024.

Family Reunification

Family reunification refers to the entry and residence of family members within a Member State. Over the past two decades, it has represented one of the primary channels of immigration into the European Union [8].

The principle of family reunification in Europe is grounded in fundamental human rights instruments. Article 8 of the **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)** and Articles 7 and 24 of the **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFREU)** recognise the right to respect for private and family life, and the protection of the family as a fundamental social unit. Nevertheless, these rights are not absolute: in the context of immigration, they may be restricted on grounds such as national security, public safety, or the economic well-being of the country. The **EU Qualification Directive (recast)**, in Article 23(1), further mandates that Member States ensure the maintenance of family unity for beneficiaries of international protection.

The **Family Reunification Directive (Directive 2003/86/EC)** provides the common legal framework regulating the admission of family members. However, its implementation varies significantly across Member States. In particular, some countries apply different rules to refugees and to beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, often granting the latter a more limited set of rights [9].

Eligible family members for reunification with an adult beneficiary of international protection generally include:

- spouses, reunification with unmarried partners (registered or cohabiting) is encouraged but not enforced in every European State, and the rights of same-sex couples are not mentioned.
- the minor unmarried children of the sponsor and/or the spouse are also entitled to reunification, possibility to include adult dependents (parents, dependent adult children)
- Parents (in some countries, this includes legal guardians or another member of the family) of an unaccompanied minor.

[8] Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Implementation of Directive 2003/86/EC on the Right to Family Reunification (2019). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52019DC0162>

[9] ECRE (2023). Not there yet: Family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection

Latest Development: Family Reunification in the Dutch Asylum System

In July, the Dutch House of Representatives approved two asylum bills proposed by former Minister Faber of the Party for Freedom (PVV): the **Asylum Emergency Measures Act** and the **Introduction of a Two-Status System Act**. The Dutch Senate will vote on them after the elections on the 29th October.

The Asylum Emergency Measures Act would impose stricter rules on asylum seekers and refugees, particularly around family reunification. Only children under 18 would still be eligible to join their parents, while unmarried partners and children over 18 would no longer qualify [10]. No transition period has been provided, which means the law could apply retroactively to applications already submitted, though family members already in the Netherlands would not be affected.

The Two-Status System Act would also change how protection is granted. It would distinguish between those fleeing direct persecution on grounds such as religion or sexual orientation, and those escaping war or large-scale violence. This system is designed to shorten residence permits and tighten post-entry family reunification rules for all refugees and asylum seekers, which could make it significantly harder for many refugees to bring family members to the Netherlands.

Alongside legislative changes, Dutch policy and case law on family reunification have also evolved. In July 2024, a stricter regime was introduced for adult children. Applications filed on or after 16 July require proof that the adult child is genuinely dependent on their parent, in line with Article 10(2) of the Family Reunification Directive. This means the sponsor must actually provide the child's material support, or be the most suitable family member to do so.

In November 2024, the Council of State ruled that a 'broken family tie' between a parent and child may be restored, criticising the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) for its restrictive interpretation [11]. This ruling brings Dutch practice closer to EU law, which places strong emphasis on the preservation of real family life.



Image sourced from [Unsplash](#)

At the same time, the IND continues to face severe delays in processing applications. Some requests submitted in late 2024 are not expected to be handled until February 2027. In response, the IND has sought to increase transparency by publishing new instructions on how family reunification applications are assessed [12]. These include guidance on late submissions, clarifying that small delays, such as less than two weeks, or exceptional circumstances, may be considered excusable.

Looking ahead, the coming months will be decisive for family reunification rights in the Netherlands. If the Senate passes the Faber bills, the scope for family members to join recognised refugees will be significantly reduced, particularly for unmarried partners and adult children.

[10] Refugee Help (2025). House of Representatives Agrees to Stricter Laws on Asylum: Now the Senate Must Decide

[11] ECRE (2022). judgment in case C-279/20 XC, of 1 August 2022

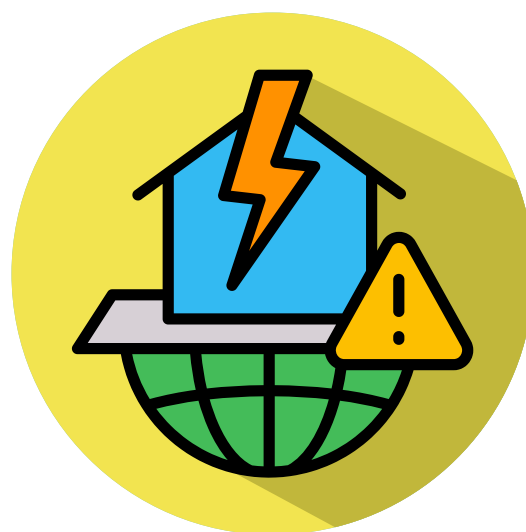
[12] ECRE(2025). Overview of the Main Changes since the Previous Report Update – Asylum Information Database

At the same time, courts and EU law continue to set limits on how restrictive national policies can be, ensuring that the principle of family life remains protected. For families affected, this creates a complex legal environment marked by stricter national rules, long waiting times, and important judicial safeguards. The debate over family reunification is therefore far from over.

Family reunification and the Irish housing crisis

As highlighted in a previous EMA topic of the month, the Europe-wide housing crisis is having a particularly severe impact on people seeking protection. One of the groups most vulnerable to this are those arriving through family reunification. This section looks at a snapshot of the current situation in Ireland.

Several NGOs working in Ireland have documented how the lack of affordable housing is undermining the family reunification process and negatively affecting applicants. Administrative requirements mean that family members cannot be fully registered in Ireland until after their arrival (e.g. obtaining a Personal Public Service (PPS) number). Without this, they are unable to access welfare, housing support, or employment. The responsibility for supporting them falls on the sponsor already living in Ireland. However, given the extreme shortage of affordable rental accommodation, many sponsors struggle to secure housing even for themselves.



Since family members arriving through reunification are not entitled to stay in International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) centres, they are at risk of immediate homelessness. In addition, registering as a resident in Ireland can take several weeks, which creates further barriers to accessing homeless supports.

The timeframe allowed for family reunification adds additional strain. Sponsors must apply within twelve months of receiving refugee status or subsidiary protection, and if successful, family members must arrive by a date set by the Minister. This often leaves sponsors little time to become established or to secure adequate housing before their family's arrival.

Research from NGOs has highlighted the harsh realities faced by many families:

HOUSING
is a
HUMAN
RIGHT

Nasc's report documented cases where, due to the urgency of arranging travel, accommodation was not secured in time, leading to situations such as a family of four living in a one-person studio for several months. In another case, a service provider described a refugee sponsor who, unable to find housing, resorted to "sneaking [family members] into the [IPAS accommodation] room at night" (p.67).

Crosscare's report has similarly reported on families forced into unsafe or precarious situations. For example, they document the experience of one man who paid rent, without availing of the housing assistance payment, for a substandard property with no heating or functioning plumbing. He later received an illegal eviction notice and, after harassment from the landlord, was forced to seek emergency homeless support for his family (p.8).



In many cases, as noted above, even accessing homeless services is impossible without the necessary paperwork. Nasc reported that families without PPS numbers are generally excluded from regular homeless accommodation and may only access "night-by-night" emergency shelters (p.72).

This prolonged insecurity places families under enormous strain, with serious knock-on effects: hampered integration, long-term marginalisation, and negative impacts on mental health. With Ireland's housing crisis showing no signs of improvement, such uncertainty continues to define the experiences of many reunified families.

As of February 2025, 5,400 people who had already been granted status or permission to remain in Ireland were still residing in international protection accommodation, unable to find affordable housing in the private rental market.

Questions remain for those hoping to reunite with family members – how can they prepare for their loved ones' arrival within the required timeframe, when they cannot secure accommodation for them to stay?

The UK's Suspension of Refugee Family Reunification

In September 2025, the UK government announced that they were temporarily suspending the refugee family reunification scheme. There has been widespread disagreement with this measure, as it has been highlighted that the suspension of the scheme removes one of the few safe routes to the UK and ignores the importance of family reunification for refugee mental health and ability to integrate. In this section, we'll look at exactly what this suspension is, the potential impacts it might have and the ways in which this measure goes against expert organisations and research findings.

What was refugee family reunification in the UK?

The refugee family reunification scheme was a system where those granted refugee status in the UK could apply to bring their immediate family* [13] to the UK without having to meet some of the usual family visa requirements, for example, having to prove a minimum income of £29,000 per year, paying the £1,321 application fee per family member or having to demonstrate a basic level of English.

[13] Immediate family in the context of refugee family reunification was largely limited to spouses and unmarried children. Parents or siblings or further family would only be considered in exceptional circumstances. This definition has been described as reflecting a euro-centric definition and understanding of family that creates difficulties for some families – for more reading see here: [RefugeeSolidarityNetwork](#), [The UN](#) and ["Refugee family reunification and mental health in resettlement appears"](#)

Some key points and figures to highlight:

- This was therefore one of the few available safe routes to the UK that allowed immediate family members (predominantly children (56% of recipients) and women (18.36% of recipients) to arrive in the UK and join their loved one/s.
- Although it isn't possible to see how many refugees sponsor family members, as the Home Office doesn't link applicants and sponsors, the Oxford Migration Observatory estimates that it is roughly 1 in 5 people who sponsor a family member.
- According to the Home Office, 87% of family reunification visa applications were successful at the initial decision stage in the first half of 2025.

The temporary suspension was announced in September 2025, with the government declaring that it will introduce new rules in Spring 2026. In the meantime, refugees who want to reunite with their families will have to comply with the following family visa requirements, ignoring, amongst other important issues, the fact that refugees do not arrive in the UK under the same circumstances as others, as they are, by definition, fleeing conflict and persecution.

Debunking the justification

According to the BBC, Yvette Cooper and the UK government have justified these new measures by stating a few reasons that the UK's suspended refugee family reunification scheme is creating problems or isn't fit for purpose. However, under the slightest amount of inspection, you can see that these reasons and criticisms of the refugee family reunification scheme aren't accurate. For example, the claim that the UK can't cope with the rise in applications appears to be misleading. Refugee Legal Support highlight that the rise in family reunification numbers is temporarily inflated for technical reasons as the Home Office has been working to clear a backlog of asylum applications. Therefore, it doesn't reflect a rise in applications but rather a sudden and temporary bureaucratic flow.

The Positives of Family Reunification

“ And after so many years I would relate my sense of home mostly to my family. I have a feeling that my family is my home wherever that may be [14] ”

[14] Ibričević, A., (2024). Chapter 5: Losing, Creating and Re-creating Home and Belonging. In *Decided Return Migration, IMISCOE Research Series*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58347-6_5#DOI. p174



Currently, family reunification routes are one of the few safe routes available to people on the move who are seeking international protection. As there are so few safe routes and many people on the move experience highly dangerous situations, many families choose not to migrate together. Thus demonstrating a good reason for providing refugees with access to family reunification, to make it easier for families to come together and to disincentivise vulnerable groups from having to make the journey.

On top of this, the restriction of family reunification is counterproductive when it comes to refugee mental health and resettlement outcomes. As a 2014 study in New Zealand found, having the support of family not only improves mental health but also provides financial and emotional support as individuals have access to a networks that help them to overcome difficulties and solve obstacles [15].

Ultimately, this shows that refugee family reunification schemes are needed and beneficial for the entire community.

Hope, Love and Family

Migrant Families Fleeing Violence in Ballymena, Northern Ireland

In Ballymena, the climate of hostility towards migrants has recently escalated into open violence, forcing families to abandon their homes. A Filipino family and couple who shared a house fled in fear after unrest broke out. Local Filipino residents have even resorted to placing stickers with British and Filipino flags on their doors, accompanied by messages reading 'Filipino lives here' in an attempt to distinguish themselves from other migrant groups and ward off attacks [16].

The sense of fear extends beyond the Filipino community. Many Romanian and Bulgarian Roma families who fled during the riots have yet to return, while those who remain live cautiously, seldom seen on the streets and careful to stay out of view. In Clonavon Terrace and neighbouring streets, former Roma homes still stand gutted and boarded up after being set ablaze. Community sources estimate that of the roughly 1,200 Roma residents who lived in Ballymena before the unrest, as many as two-thirds have since departed [17].

Although Northern Ireland has generally been welcoming to newcomers, this tolerance has been severely tested in recent months. The unrest in Ballymena reflects how such tensions continue to place migrant families in vulnerable and precarious situations.

Pride as a Message of Solidarity

Amid the fear and uncertainty caused by recent racially motivated attacks in the aforementioned Ballymena Riots. The town hosted its first ever Mid and East Antrim Pride on Saturday, 28 June, with organisers emphasising that the event was for everyone, regardless of nationality, culture, religion, or belief [18].

[15] Choumanivong, C. Poole, GE. & Cooper, A. (2014). Refugee family reunification and mental health in resettlement, Kotuitui. New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online. 9:2, 89-100. DOI: 10.1080/1177083X.2014.944917. p92

[16] Ferguson, Amanda, and Clodagh Kilcoyne. (2025) "Filipino Families Flee Northern Irish Home after Night of Anti-Immigrant Violence." Reuters.

[17] Carroll, Rory (2025). "Ballymena Weighs up Impact of Anti-Migrant Riots." The Guardian.

[18] Robinson, Mark (2025). "Organisers of Ballymena's First Pride to Stand with Local Migrant Community and Say "Show Must Go On" ahead of Upcoming 1 4 Parade." The Irish News.

They have voiced strong support for migrant communities, acknowledging that many may feel especially vulnerable in the current climate, particularly those who are also members of the LGBTQ+ community. To help foster a sense of safety and inclusion, organisers have even invited migrants to contact them privately if they would prefer to attend the ticketed after-event free of charge. For many, Pride represents not only a celebration of identity but also a powerful statement of unity at a time when divisions in the town have deepened.

Finding Sanctuary in Faith

In the Netherlands, a Dutch congregation is currently offering sanctuary to the Babayants family of five from Uzbekistan, who were facing deportation. The family were due to be deported last autumn but found refuge in the Open Hof Church.

Under an ancient Dutch convention that prevents police from entering a church while a service is taking place, the congregation has been holding an unbroken religious service for 192 days to protect the family. This extraordinary act of solidarity has transformed faith into a literal shield of continuous prayer of hope, love, and humanity.

This is not the first time Dutch churches have opened their doors to those in need of sanctuary. In 2018, Bethel Church in The Hague took a similar stand to protect the Tamrazyan family, an Armenian family who had lived in the Netherlands for nine years. After their asylum request was denied, the church community began a round-the-clock service, ensuring that police could not lawfully enter while worship was ongoing.

Both stories remind us that in times of hardship, compassion and solidarity can transcend borders. When families face the challenges of migration, we should stand together and support one another in every way we can.

Stories of Reunification in 2025

Nilofaar's Story of Family Reunification

Fleeing war and insecurity, Nilofaar's family sought safety, education, and a peaceful life. But, in 2012, they were separated at the Iranian-Turkish border, leaving Nilofaar's parents and youngest sibling detained on one side of the border, while Nilofaar and her siblings were stuck on the other side of the border. Alone and vulnerable, they faced poverty, abuse, uncertainty and deportation.

After 5 years of separation and maintaining family contact only through phone calls, Nilofaar's parents were granted asylum in Germany. This meant that Nilofaar's younger sister, who was under 18, was able to receive a German visa through refugee family reunification, but Nilofaar and her brother had to find another way to join their family again. Left with no other option, they made the difficult journey through Turkey and on to Greece:

"In Greece, things got better for us, even though our parents could only visit us and all attempts to cross the border again failed. Eventually, complete despair filled my whole being, the more we tried to reach our family, the less success we had. Eight years of separation from our family were truly hard for us. I wished for just one single time to sit again with my family at the dining table, to talk and laugh together."

Nilofaar told herself that she must be strong, that she must survive and that she must be reunited with her family. She began taking German classes and obtained 3 sewing certificates, giving her hope. Finally:

"After ten years, eight months, and nineteen days, I sat on an airplane, my destination was Germany, where my family was waiting for me. On that date, I was reborn. The reunion with my family makes me very happy even now, as I write or speak about it. I am learning German and attending the ninth grade, I have my own home, and on weekends the whole family comes together, cheerful, happy, laughing. It took more than ten years to see those smiles again and to feel this joy."

Love Is Not Defined By Law

In this report, we explored how love and family become constrained when filtered through the rigid frameworks of migration and asylum law. Across Europe, the legal definition of "family" continues to lag behind the diverse realities of human connection, excluding many forms of care, kinship, and belonging that sustain people on the move.

Our findings show that the ability to live together as a family is not simply an emotional aspiration but a fundamental human right. From the obstacles to refugee family reunification in Ireland and the Netherlands, to the temporary suspension of refugee family reunification in the UK, restrictive policies continue to separate loved ones and deny the basic right to build a life together. For children, these separations are especially harmful—undermining their sense of safety, identity, and development.

At the same time, countless stories of reunion across Europe remind us that love endures despite borders. When families are allowed to reunite, communities grow stronger, integration deepens, and recovery after displacement becomes possible.

Ultimately, protecting family life in migration policy is not just about compassion—it is about justice. Europe Must Act to expand its legal understanding of family, end practices that keep children and parents apart, and ensure that love, in all its forms, is recognised as a legitimate foundation for protection and belonging.



Image sourced from [Unsplash](#)

It is time to reimagine migration systems that honour the simple truth at the heart of this report: love is not defined by law, but law can and must protect the right to love and to family life.



**EUROPE
MUST
ACT.**

***We're volunteers and asylum and migration is a complex topic. This means we try to include a variety of opinions and approaches to a topic. We do our best to research and use our expertise accurately however, we also believe it's vital to encourage healthy discussion and stop misinformation. Therefore we encourage any feedback or constructive criticism of our work.**

SUPPORT OUR WORK
[WWW.EUPEMUSTACT.ORG/MORE-](http://WWW.EUPEMUSTACT.ORG/MORE-ACTION)
[ACTION](http://WWW.EUPEMUSTACT.ORG/MORE-ACTION)

FOR MORE, VISIT:
WWW.EUPEMUSTACT.ORG

Europe Must Act (EMA) is a growing grassroots movement, bringing together volunteers and NGOs to campaign for the humane and dignified reception of refugees in Europe.



**Europe Must
Act
2025**