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WHERE DO CHILDREN GO AFTER RESIDENTIAL CARE? KAZAKHSTAN AND FOUR OTHER POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES, 2016–2024

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Abstract: This article uses UNICEF's TransMonEE data to compare, for 2016–2024, how many children live in formal residential care in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Georgia and Moldova, and where children go when they leave it. The number of children in residential care per 100,000 children fell in all five countries; in Kazakhstan it fell from 449 in 2016 to 196 in 2024. In 2024, 33.1% of the children who left residential care in Kazakhstan returned to their families, compared with 55.4% in Moldova (where exits include transfers between institutions) and 4.1% in Kyrgyzstan (public institutions only), where half of the children who left started independent life. Kazakhstan's rate rose from 165 in 2023 to 196 in 2024, while the reported number of children with disabilities in residential care more than tripled, from 2,150 to 6,862, far more than the 1,499 children recorded as entering care in 2024; the data do not show whether this reflects unrecorded placements or a change in what was counted. The comparison of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan shows that the size of a difference between countries depends on the measure and on which institutions each country counts.

Keywords: residential care, children without parental care, family reunification, deinstitutionalization, children with disabilities, TransMonEE, Kazakhstan, Central Asia

1. Introduction

The United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children state that the removal of a child from the care of the family "should be seen as a measure of last resort and should, whenever possible, be temporary and for the shortest possible duration" [1, para. 14]. They add that financial and material poverty "should never be the only justification" for such a removal [1, para. 15]. Where large residential care facilities remain, the Guidelines ask that alternatives "should be developed in the context of an overall deinstitutionalization strategy, with precise goals and objectives, which will allow for their progressive elimination" [1, para. 23]. Two numbers give a partial picture of how a country follows these principles: how many children live in residential institutions, and where children go when they leave them.

Earlier work points in the same direction. A review of research and policy in The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health recommends family-based care instead of institutions, the progressive elimination of institutions and support for the reintegration of children into their families where this is appropriate, and it names disability as a risk factor for separation from the family and placement in an institution [2]. UNICEF's regional report on alternative care in Europe and Central Asia finds that the rates of children in formal alternative care have fallen since 2010, although in many countries they have changed little since 2015; it links the shift from residential to family-based care

to deinstitutionalization policies, but warns that historical data need revision to be sure that the falls do not result from changes in definitions or in the way children are counted [3, p. 9–10]. The same report finds that children with disabilities are over-represented in residential care, and that their number is underestimated in countries where boarding schools or other services for children with disabilities are not included in the data [3, p. 11–12]. It also finds that family reunification was the main destination after residential care in 14 of 21 countries with data, which may mean short stays while families receive support, but may also mean that children were placed in care unnecessarily, or that children stayed in care until the age of 18 and were then returned to families that were not prepared for their return [3, p. 84]. For Kazakhstan, Human Rights Watch reported in 2019 that, according to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, the country had 19 state institutions for children with mental health conditions and developmental disabilities; more than 2,000 children lived in them, though many had at least one living parent [4]. This article adds a comparison of Kazakhstan with four other post-Soviet countries up to 2024, the latest year with data.

The author chose this topic for a personal reason. In his own words (translated from Russian): "I choose the first option because this topic is interesting to me. I am very interested because I have had my own experience with this topic, and I really want to bring it to the attention of more people." For two years the author helped a children's home in his city with its budget and with grant applications.

Before seeing the data on where children go when they leave care, the author wrote down what he expected (translated from Russian): "Based on my own experience, it seems to me that relatives appear who can take the children. Because most children in children's homes are not orphans but children from low-income families who give up their own child at an early age. When the child grows up to an age when he can act on his own and does not need constant supervision (10–14 years, as I feel it), he is taken back." The data used here cannot test every part of this view: they do not say how many children in care are orphans, and they do not give the reasons for leaving by age. They can show how often a return to the family is the way a child leaves residential care.

The article compares Kazakhstan with four other countries that were part of the Soviet Union: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Georgia and Moldova. It asks three questions. How did the number of children in residential care change in 2016–2024, and where does Kazakhstan stand among post-Soviet countries? Where do children go when they leave residential care, and how many return to their families? And what lies behind the rise in the number of children in residential care in Kazakhstan in 2024?

2. Materials and methods

All data come from TransMonEE, UNICEF's database on children in Europe and Central Asia, downloaded through UNICEF's public data service (dataflow ECARO:TRANSMONEE, version 1.0) on 23 November 2026 [5]. For all five countries the values come from the release "TransMonEE Data Collection: 2025 Publication"; for the Russian Federation and Tajikistan, which appear only in Table 1, the newest values are for 2023 and come from the 2024 publication. The definitions of the indicators were read from the description of the same dataflow [6].

The article uses these indicators for children aged 0–17: the rate of children in formal residential care at the end of the year per 100,000 children; the number of children in formal residential care at the end of the year; the number of children with disabilities among them and their percentage; the number and rate per 100,000 children of children who entered formal residential care during the year; and the number of children who left formal residential care during the year, in total and by reason. The reasons are family reunification, placement in formal family-based care (such as guardianship or foster care), the start of independent life before the age of 18, adoption, death and other reasons. In every country and year used here the reasons add up exactly to the total. For Kazakhstan the reasons are available only from 2020.

The shares of children who left by each reason, the number of children who left per 100 children in care at the start of the year, and the number of children without disabilities (all children in residential care minus children with disabilities) were calculated for this article from UNICEF's numbers; they are not UNICEF indicators. To express the number of children without disabilities

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per 100,000 children, the child population was taken as UNICEF's number of children in residential care divided by UNICEF's rate; in 2024 this gives 6.90 million children in Kazakhstan, 2.72 million in Kyrgyzstan and 13.29 million in Uzbekistan. For each country and year, the number in care at the end of the previous year plus the entries minus the exits was also compared with the published number at the end of the year. All numbers were calculated in Python from the downloaded files.

The countries do not count the same institutions, and UNICEF's notes to the data say so [5]. In Kazakhstan, the data have been recalculated since 2016 to include institutions for children from large and low-income families, orphans and children left without parental care, correctional and sanatorium institutions and institutions for children with deviant behaviour, and the reason "other" includes children who left because they reached 18. In Kyrgyzstan, children with disabilities are counted by type of institution, as the children in boarding schools for children with disabilities and in boarding homes for disabled people; the reasons for leaving refer to public residential care only, and UNICEF marks both the numbers of children who entered and the numbers who left as partial data. In Uzbekistan, the entries and the reasons for leaving do not include sanatorium-type boarding schools and boarding schools for children with physical or mental developmental disabilities, and UNICEF marks the numbers of children who left as partial data. In Georgia, the data before 2017 also include a few persons aged 18 and over, the numbers of children who left include transfers to other institutions and persons over 18 for 2015–2019, and a new data source with a different coverage is used from 2020. In Moldova, entries and exits include children transferred between institutions, UNICEF marks the numbers of children who left as following a different definition, and the reason "other" includes reaching 18 and enrolment in vocational schools. These differences limit what can be compared, and the article returns to them where they matter.

3. Results

3.1. How many children live in residential care

Table 1 shows the rate of children in residential care in the 14 post-Soviet countries that have recent values of this indicator in TransMonEE.

Table 1. Children aged 0–17 in formal residential care at the end of the year, per 100,000 children, post-Soviet countries with data [5]

Country	2016	Latest year	Latest value	Change, %
Ukraine	803.7	2024	864.8	+7.6
Azerbaijan	415.5	2024	533.4	+28.4
Latvia	626.9	2024	388.6	−38.0
Belarus	435.0	2024	270.6	−37.8
Lithuania	595.5	2024	222.5	−62.6
Kazakhstan	448.7	2024	196.1	−56.3
Kyrgyzstan	221.2	2024	191.2	−13.6
Uzbekistan	274.2	2024	169.4	−38.2
Turkmenistan	164.9	2024	161.8	−1.9
Tajikistan	301.8	2023	150.7	−50.1
Moldova	290.8	2024	110.7	−61.9
Russian Federation	125.7	2023	100.6	−20.0
Armenia	195.2	2024	84.4	−56.8
Georgia	112.0	2024	34.3	−69.4

Note: countries are ordered by the latest value. Estonia has no values for this indicator after 2012. Armenia: partial data; from 2020 a new source that UNICEF says is not directly comparable with earlier years. Belarus: before 2023 includes persons aged 18 and over; from 2017 excludes special general education and auxiliary boarding schools. Azerbaijan: partial data. Georgia: the value for 2016 also includes a few persons aged 18 and over; new data source with a different coverage from 2020. For Armenia, Belarus and Georgia the change since 2016 crosses a break in the series. Coverage differs between countries (see Section 2 and UNICEF's notes to the data), so the order is approximate. Change: latest value compared with 2016, calculated from TransMonEE data.

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The rate fell in 12 of the 14 countries and rose in Ukraine and Azerbaijan; for Armenia, Belarus and Georgia part of the fall reflects changes in coverage noted by UNICEF [5]. In Kazakhstan it fell from 448.7 per 100,000 children in 2016 to 196.1 in 2024, by 56.3%. In 2016 Kazakhstan had the fourth highest rate of the 14 countries; in the latest year it had the sixth highest, close to Kyrgyzstan (191.2) and Uzbekistan (169.4).

Figure 1 shows the five countries compared in this article. Kazakhstan's rate fell most between 2019 and 2020, from 388.0 to 245.9. The number of children in residential care fell by 8,226 that year, while only 1,003 children were recorded as leaving and 974 as entering, so part of this fall may reflect a change in counting rather than in placements. The rate reached its lowest value, 164.9, in 2023, and in 2024 it rose for the first time since 2018, to 196.1. Georgia had the lowest rate in every year; its fall from 120.5 in 2019 to 56.3 in 2020 coincides with the change of data source noted by UNICEF [5]. Moldova's rate fell from 290.8 to 110.7. Kyrgyzstan's fell least, from 221.2 to 191.2, and from 2023 it was above Uzbekistan's, which had been higher in every year from 2016 to 2022.

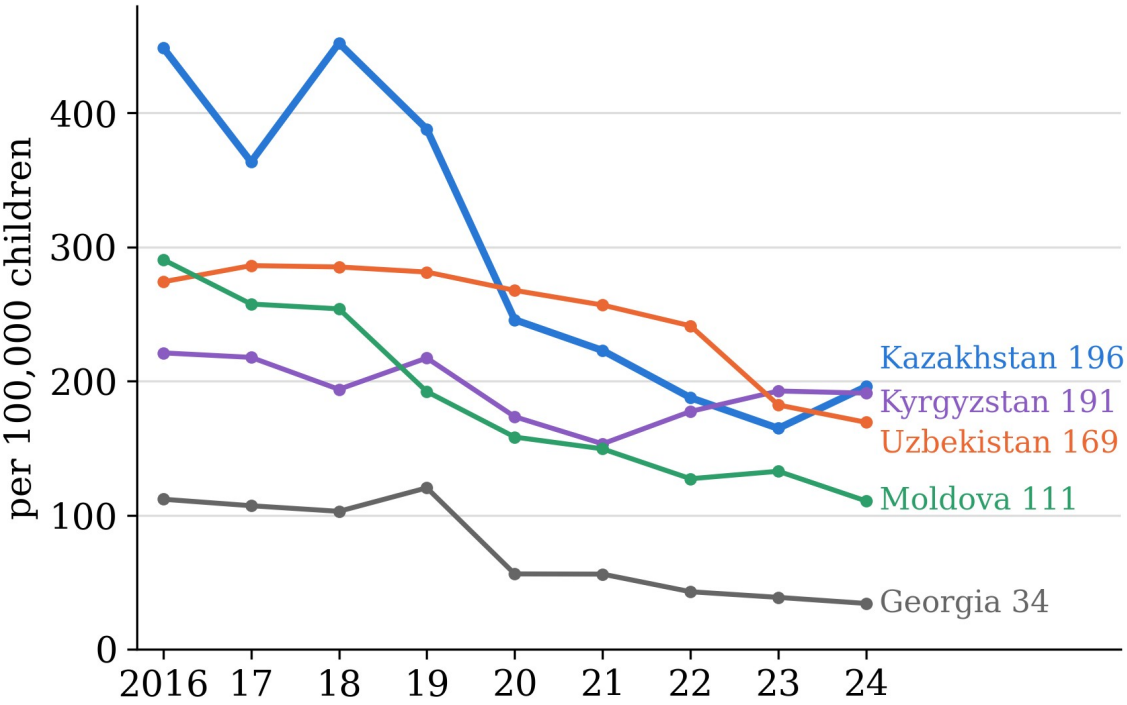

Figure 1. Children aged 0–17 in formal residential care at the end of the year, per 100,000 children, 2016–2024. Source: UNICEF TransMonEE [5]

3.2. Where children go when they leave residential care

Table 2 and Figure 2 show how many children left residential care in 2024 and for which reason, as recorded by UNICEF.

Table 2. Children who left formal residential care in 2024, by reason, % of all who left [5]

Country	Left in 2024	Left per 100 children in care	Returned to family, %	Family-based care, %	Independent life, %	Other reasons, %
Kazakhstan	1,882	16.7	33.1	31.8	13.4	21.6
Kyrgyzstan	714	13.8	4.1	3.9	50.3	41.7
Uzbekistan	214	0.9	23.8	24.3	21.5	30.4
Georgia	65	19.9	33.8	23.1	0.0	43.1
Moldova	812	120.1	55.4	33.1	–	11.5

Note: left per 100 children in care: children who left during 2024 per 100 children in residential care at the end of 2023. Other reasons include adoption and death. "–": not reported.

Kyrgyzstan: public residential care only. Uzbekistan: partial data, without sanatorium-type boarding schools and boarding schools for children with disabilities. Georgia: 65 children, so one child changes a share by 1.5 points. Moldova: includes transfers to other institutions. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan: children who left cover only some institutions, while children in care cover all of them, so "left per 100" is too low for these two countries. Shares calculated from TransMonEE data.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan had similar rates of children in residential care in 2024 (169–196 per 100,000 children), but very different shares of children who returned to their families: 33.1%, 4.1% and 23.8% of all who left. In Moldova more than half of the children who left in 2024 returned to their families (55.4%) and a third (33.1%) moved to family-based care. Moldova's exits include transfers between institutions, which may partly explain why more children left during the year (812) than were in care at its start (676); 739 children also entered during the year. In Georgia, as in Kazakhstan, about a third of the children who left returned to their families (33.8%, or 22 of 65 children). In Kyrgyzstan only 4.1% of the children who left public residential care returned to their families, and half (50.3%) started independent life before the age of 18. In Uzbekistan only 214 children left the institutions covered by the data. This is 0.9 per 100 of all children in residential care, but the institutions not covered held most of those children, so the figure understates how often children leave.

In Kazakhstan the number of children who returned to their families fell from 345 in 2020 to 250 in 2021 and then grew every year: 357 in 2022, 527 in 2023 and 623 in 2024. The 623 returns in 2024 equal 5.5 per 100 children in residential care at the start of the year. The share of returns among all children who left was 34.4% in 2020, 20.5% in 2021, 16.2% in 2022, 26.3% in 2023 and 33.1% in 2024. These shares are not fully comparable between years, because Kazakhstan reported no children leaving for independent life in 2020 and 2021 and 355 in 2022. The number who moved to family-based care was 488, 650, 626, 689 and 599 in the same years, so 2024 was the first year since 2020, when these data begin, in which more children returned to their families than moved to family-based care.

In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan the number of returns to the family fell. In Kyrgyzstan it was 365 in 2020, 283 in 2021, 71 in 2022, 57 in 2023 and 29 in 2024. In Uzbekistan it was 646 in 2020 and 51 in 2024, while the total number of children who left the institutions covered fell from 1,467 to 214.

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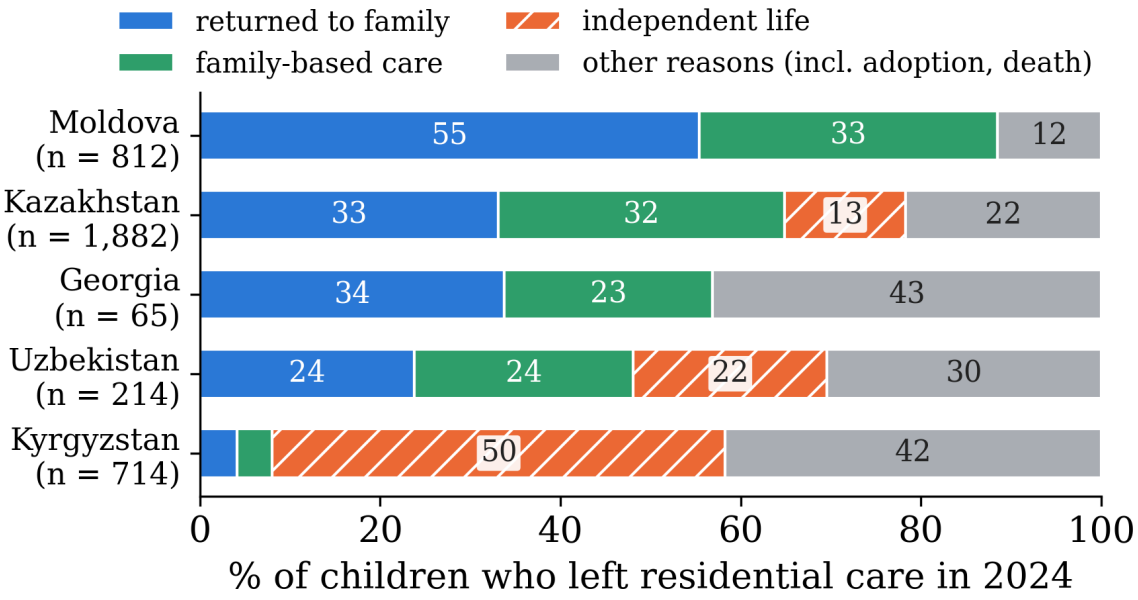

Figure 2. Children who left formal residential care in 2024, by reason, % of all who left. Numbers inside the bars are rounded; shares below 7% are not labelled. Moldova does not report independent life as a separate reason. Source: calculated from UNICEF TransMonEE data [5]

3.3. Kazakhstan in 2024

From 2023 to 2024 the number of children in residential care in Kazakhstan rose from 11,281 to 13,532, by 2,251. In the same year the reported number of children with disabilities in residential care more than tripled, from 2,150 to 6,862 (by 4,712), and their share of all children in residential care rose from 19.1% to 50.7% [5]. The number of children without disabilities fell from 9,131 to 6,670, or from 133.5 to 96.6 per 100,000 children (Figure 3). So the whole rise in 2024 is in the reported number of children with disabilities.

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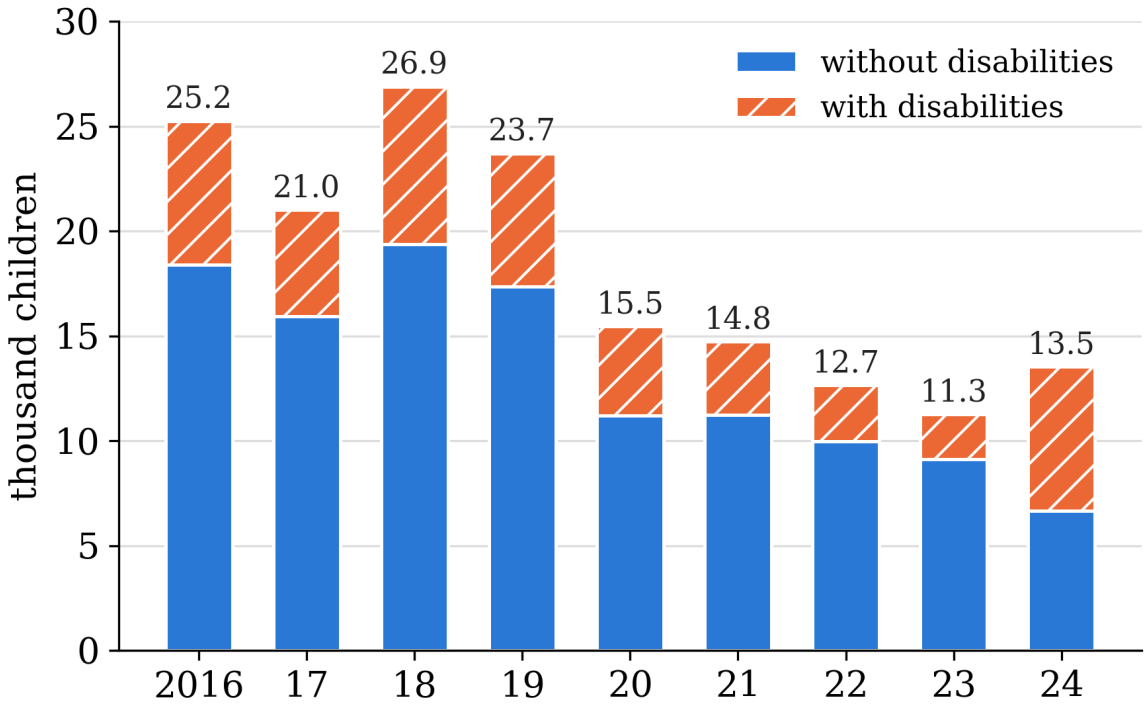

Figure 3. Children in formal residential care in Kazakhstan at the end of the year, with and without disabilities, 2016–2024, thousand children. Numbers above the bars: all children. Source: calculated from UNICEF TransMonEE data [5]

The number of children with disabilities in residential care in Kazakhstan was 6,845 in 2016 and fell almost every year to 2,150 in 2023; the value for 2024, 6,862, is almost the same as in 2016. The number of children without disabilities fell from 18,390 in 2016 to 6,670 in 2024, with rises only in 2018 and 2021. The flows do not explain the jump. In 2024 fewer children entered residential care (1,499) than in 2023 (1,567), and 1,882 left. The number at the end of 2023 plus the entries minus the exits gives 11,281 + 1,499 − 1,882 = 10,898 children, while the published number at the end of 2024 is 13,532, or 2,634 more. UNICEF's notes to the data for Kazakhstan do not mention a change in 2024 [5]. Even if every child who entered in 2024 had a disability, the 1,499 recorded entries would explain less than a third of the rise of 4,712, so recorded new placements cannot explain most of the jump. The data do not show whether the rest reflects placements that were not recorded as entries or institutions that were counted for the first time in 2024.

A similar but smaller shift happened in Kyrgyzstan in 2024: children with disabilities in residential care rose from 3,180 to 3,993, while other children fell from 2,009 to 1,197. In Kyrgyzstan, children with disabilities are counted by type of institution (Section 2), so this shift may also reflect where children were placed or counted.

4. Discussion

4.1. Do children return to their families?

The author expected that relatives often take children back from children's homes. In Kazakhstan, Georgia and Moldova a return to the family was indeed one of the two most common ways of leaving residential care in 2024, and in Kazakhstan the number of such returns grew every year from 2021 to 2024. This partly agrees with the first part of his view. TransMonEE counts a formal placement with relatives (kinship care) as family-based care, not as a return to the family, so some of the 31.8% of children in Kazakhstan who moved to family-based care in 2024 may also have gone to relatives; the data do not show how many. In Kyrgyzstan, however, a return to the family was rare, and most children who left public residential care started independent life. The other parts of his view, that most children in children's homes are not orphans and that children are taken back at the age of 10–14, cannot be checked with these data, because TransMonEE does not give the reasons for leaving by age or the number of orphans among children in care.

The share of returns also does not say how long children stayed in care, or whether a return was the right decision for the child. The UN Guidelines ask that a removal from the family be temporary whenever possible [1, para. 14], and UNICEF's regional report notes that a high share of returns may mean short stays with support for the family, placements that were not needed, or long stays that end with a return to an unprepared family at the age of 18 [3, p. 84]. The data show how often children do go back, not which of these is the case, and since they give no ages they cannot separate the first two readings from the third.

4.2. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

After seeing the first numbers, the author noted one comparison that surprised him (translated from Russian): "I was surprised that the statistics differ a lot between neighbouring countries. For example, I was really surprised when I saw that in Kyrgyzstan many more children go into children's homes than in Uzbekistan, even though Uzbekistan is several times larger by population." Table 3 compares the two countries on several measures.

Table 3. Children in residential care in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, 2016 and 2024 [5]

Measure	Kyrgyzstan, 2016	Uzbekistan, 2016	Kyrgyzstan, 2024	Uzbekistan, 2024
Children in residential care, per 100,000 children	221.2	274.2	191.2	169.4
Children in residential care, number	5,102	29,353	5,190	22,511
Of which with disabilities, %	51.7	69.5	76.9	95.7
Children without disabilities in residential care, per 100,000 children	106.8	83.5	44.1	7.2
Children who entered residential care during the year, per 100,000 children	14.2	14.2	10.4	0.6

Note: children without disabilities: calculated from TransMonEE data (see Section 2). Kyrgyzstan: children with disabilities are the children in boarding schools for children with disabilities and boarding homes for disabled people; entries are partial data. Uzbekistan: entries without sanatorium-type boarding schools and boarding schools for children with disabilities.

Because the rates are per 100,000 children, they already take into account that Uzbekistan has about 4.9 times as many children as Kyrgyzstan. On UNICEF's main indicator the difference is small: Kyrgyzstan's rate in 2024 was 13% higher than Uzbekistan's (191.2 against 169.4), and in 2016 it was lower (221.2 against 274.2). In absolute numbers Uzbekistan still had more than four times as many children in residential care as Kyrgyzstan.

The difference looks much larger for children without disabilities (44.1 against 7.2 per 100,000 in 2024) and for children who entered residential care (10.4 against 0.6). But these measures do not cover the same institutions in the two countries, so they cannot be compared directly. Uzbekistan's data on entries and exits leave out sanatorium-type boarding schools and boarding schools for children with disabilities, while almost all of the 22,511 children in residential care in Uzbekistan in 2024 (95.7%) were children with disabilities. The number of children without disabilities in residential care there fell from 6,212 in 2022 to 868 in 2023, and the data do not explain this fall; UNICEF notes a change of observation method in Uzbekistan in 2023 for the data on family-based care, but gives no such note for residential care [5]. In Kyrgyzstan, children with disabilities are counted by type of institution, and the entries are marked as partial data. So, on the main indicator, the data do not show many more children in residential care in Kyrgyzstan than in Uzbekistan; large differences appear only on measures that the two countries count in different ways. These data do not show why the two countries differ.

4.3. What should be reported for Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's main indicator fell by more than half from 2016 to 2024, but half of the children in residential care in 2024 were children with disabilities, and their reported number more than tripled in one year. If this jump is real, a large share of the remaining task of deinstitutionalization in Kazakhstan concerns children with disabilities, the group that UNICEF's regional report also finds over-represented in residential care [3, p. 11–12]. If it is a change in what

is counted, the rates for 2024 and 2023 cannot be compared directly. The same question applies to the fall between 2019 and 2020, which was much larger than the number of children recorded as leaving. Reporting the number of children in residential care with and without disabilities separately, together with entries, exits and any change in which institutions are counted, would show how much of the fall is real.

5. Limitations

The article uses UNICEF's published numbers and simple shares; it does not use data about individual children. The countries count different institutions (Section 2), so comparisons between countries are approximate, and the numbers of children who left and entered do not cover all the institutions included in the number of children in care, especially in Uzbekistan. In most years the published numbers of children who entered and left do not add up to the change in the number of children in care; in Kazakhstan the gap was largest in 2018 (8,246 more children than the flows give), 2020 (8,197 fewer) and 2024 (2,634 more), so the flows cannot be used to explain changes in the number of children in care. Georgia's numbers of children who left are small, so its shares change by several points from one or two children. The causes of the jump in children with disabilities in Kazakhstan in 2024, of the fall in Uzbekistan in 2023 and of the fall in returns to the family in Kyrgyzstan after 2021 are not known. The reasons for leaving are available for Kazakhstan only from 2020. The data do not give the reasons for leaving by age, so the age at which children return to their families could not be studied. The child population used to calculate rates for children without disabilities was derived from UNICEF's own numbers, not taken from a population census.

6. Conclusion

From 2016 to 2024 the number of children in formal residential care per 100,000 children fell in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Georgia and Moldova, and in 12 of the 14 post-Soviet countries with data. In Kazakhstan a third of the children who left residential care in 2024 returned to their families, and the number of such returns fell in 2021 and then grew every year to 2024; in Kyrgyzstan returns to the family were rare and most children left for independent life. The whole rise in Kazakhstan's number of children in residential care in 2024 is in the reported number of children with disabilities, which more than tripled in one year for reasons the data do not show. Comparisons between countries, such as the one between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, depend on the measure and on which institutions each country counts, so they should be read together with UNICEF's notes to the data.

Data availability

The TransMonEE data are public and can be downloaded through UNICEF's data service [5]. The files as downloaded on 23 November 2026 and the analysis script are available on request from the author's scientific supervisor, G. Tursyn.

Author contributions and use of AI tools

The author's scientific supervisor, G. Tursyn, who is his mentor at ADMIT, offered five possible research directions; the author chose this one and explained his choice in his own words, quoted in the Introduction. Before seeing the full data he wrote down his expectation (Section 1), and after seeing the first numbers he wrote down what surprised him (Section 4.2); both were written in Russian and are quoted in English translation. The supervisor showed him the first UNICEF figures for Kazakhstan. The author found in the TransMonEE database the rate of children in residential care and the number of children who left residential care in 2016 and 2024 for Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Georgia and Uzbekistan; all 16 numbers match the downloaded UNICEF data. The supervisor downloaded the full data. An AI assistant (Claude, Anthropic), used by the supervisor, wrote and ran the Python code that calculated all other numbers and drew the figures, made the tables, drafted the English text, translated the author's quotations from Russian, and was used to check the draft against the data and the sources. The author read the whole text, checked that he can explain every number in it and approved it. No data, results or citations were generated by AI: all numbers come from the UNICEF files, and all quotations were checked against saved

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copies of the sources. The AI assistant is not an author; the author and his supervisor take full responsibility for the content.

Funding and conflicts of interest

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