



**Eurochild**

Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

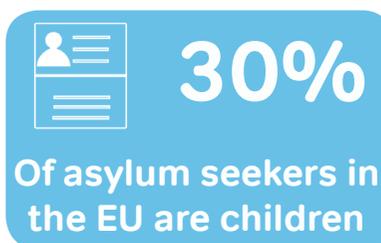
**Turning the tide  
for children  
on the move**

## Introduction:

This paper provides a snapshot of the situation of children on the move in different parts of Europe in both transit and destination countries. It is built on interviews with professionals working with and for children and families. It offers personal perspectives on the challenges on the ground and provides some recommendations at national and EU level to protect the rights of refugee and migrant children.

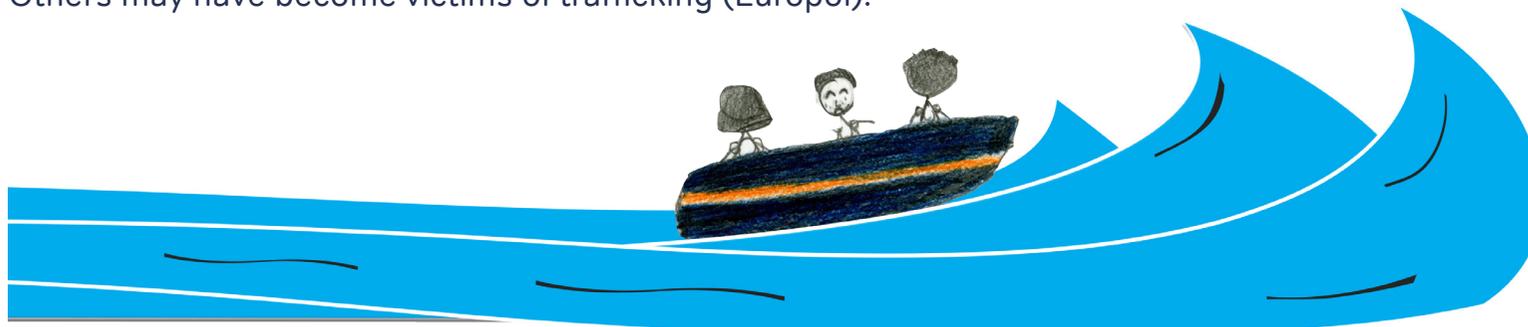
Children reach Europe either accompanied by their parents or carers or unaccompanied, meaning that they have started their journey by themselves, or they may have separated from their parents on their way, making them even more vulnerable. All children are vulnerable but unaccompanied, separated children and girls are the most vulnerable of all. Unaccompanied or separated children (hereafter referred to as unaccompanied children) already abroad should, in principle, enjoy the same level of protection and care as national children in the country concerned (UN Guidelines for the alternative care of children). But this is far from the reality on the ground.

In 2015, approximately 1,2 million people applied for asylum in the EU Member States, of whom 30 percent were children. Out of these approximately 88,300 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in the EU in 2015, which is 4 times more than in 2014. The majority of these unaccompanied children are boys; 13 percent are younger than 14 and half are aged 16-17 coming mainly from Afghanistan and Syria. In some cases, children as young as six have entered the EU unaccompanied by and adult or carer (Eurostat).



Children travel to Europe to escape from war, conflict, persecution, serious harm or extreme poverty. They travel to Europe with the assistance of smugglers, often having to work along the way to earn the necessary money. Children risk, and will continue risking, their lives to get to Europe by taking dangerous, sometimes fatal routes, most of the time crossing the Aegean Sea by boat but also from Northern Africa to Italy. 30% of recorded deaths in the Aegean Sea were children (International Organisation for Migration). Once in Europe children continue their journey to their destination, again relying on smugglers.

Alarmingly, more than 10,000 unaccompanied children are reported as missing in Europe in 2015. Nobody knows the whereabouts of these children. Some may have found their way to their destination and have been reunified with families and friends. Others may have become victims of trafficking (Europol).



Artwork by Electra Sarantinou (11)

Children on the move are often placed in detention centers, in big camps with adults or in overcrowded shelters, having no possibility to grow up in a family environment, to interact with the community, or follow mainstream education. Unaccompanied children feel insecure and threatened and often run away from shelters because they want to get to their destination and family reunification may take up to a year. Adding to this insecurity, children are rarely informed of their rights and face very uncertain futures. The EU and its Member States should ensure that refugee and migrant children's rights are respected and that they are respected alongside the rights of all other children. Whatever legal status a child may hold, he or she is first and foremost a child. All children have the right to grow up in a family environment in the community, free from violence, have access to education, access to healthcare and leisure as they are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. For these reasons children's needs should be examined in an individualised way and children should participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

### About Eurochild:

Eurochild advocates for children's rights and wellbeing to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organizations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.

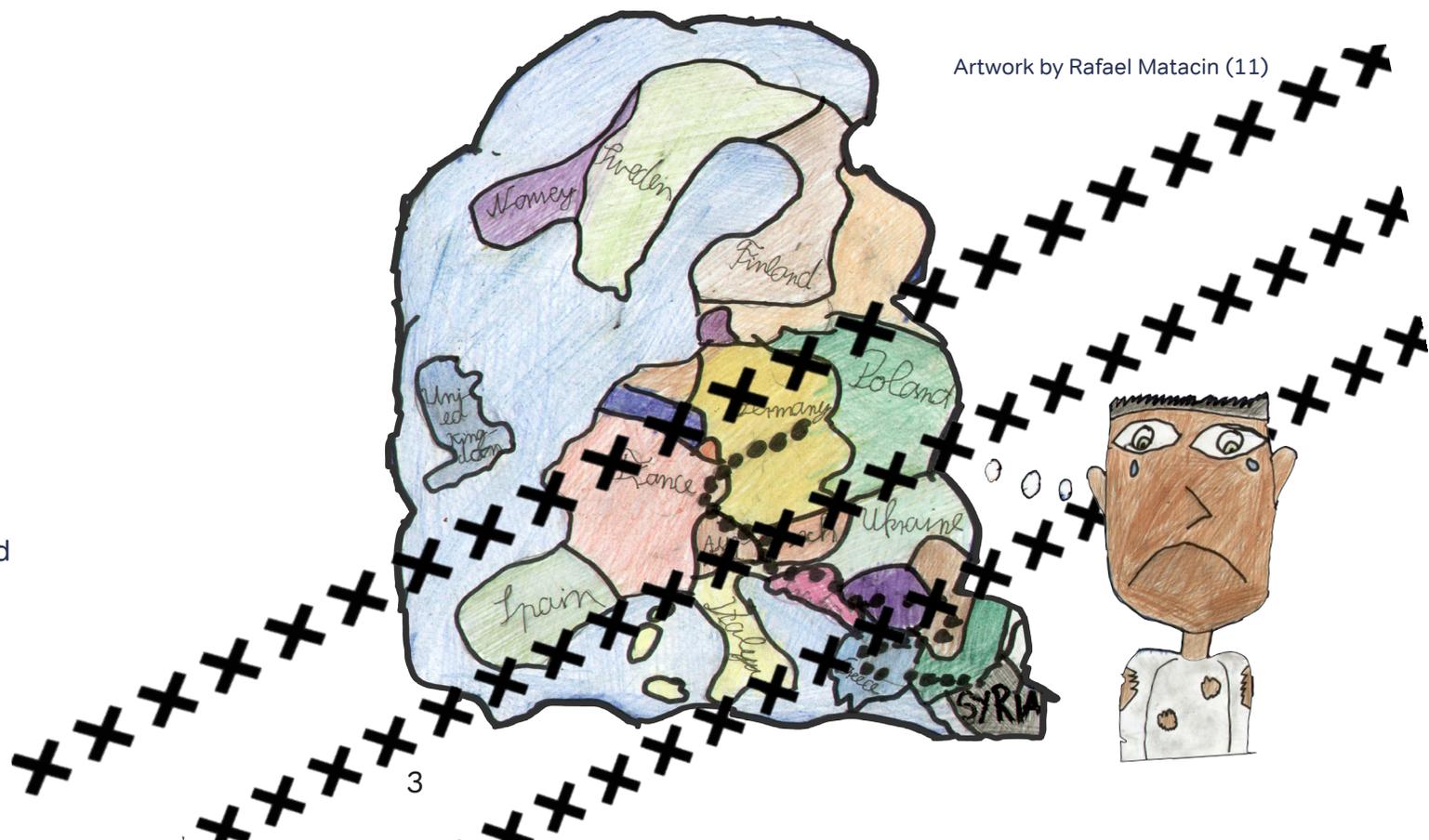
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The artwork in this programme is created by children who entered the "Sketch my rights" contest.



## Voices from the ground

These 9 perspectives from professionals in the field highlight the situation of children in transit and destination countries. Eurochild echoes the voices of its members in Greece, Italy, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, Germany and France and calls on the EU to act in the best interests of refugee and migrant children.



**Athina Kammenou**, Early Childhood Educator, Special educator, Scientific collaborator at The Society for the Development and Creative Occupation of Children (EADAP), Coordinator of the educational program in the shelter “MELLON” (a SOAM program for asylum seekers), Greece, [www.eadap.gr](http://www.eadap.gr)



**Viola Gjoka**, Programs Coordinator, Network for Children’s Rights Greece, [www.ddp.org.gr](http://www.ddp.org.gr)



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**Francesco Salvatore**, “Program Coordinator Children’s Emergency” (Emergenza Minori), Fondazione Albero della Vita, Italy, [www.alberodellavita.org](http://www.alberodellavita.org)



**Tamara Simonović**, Executive Director Group for Children and Youth Indigo, Serbia [www.indigo.org.rs](http://www.indigo.org.rs)



**Maria Herczog**, President, Family Child Youth Association, Hungary [www.csagyi.hu/en](http://www.csagyi.hu/en)



**Stefan Bauer**, Bundesverband Therapeutische Gemeinschaften - Head of a residential care for unaccompanied minors with psychological issues, FICE Austria - Project Manager and board member, ISS Austria -Director, Austria, [www.fice.at](http://www.fice.at)



**Ulrike Wisser**, project coordinator at Service- and Transfer Agency EU Youth Strategy at JUGEND für Europa, Germany, [www.jugendfuereuropa.de](http://www.jugendfuereuropa.de)



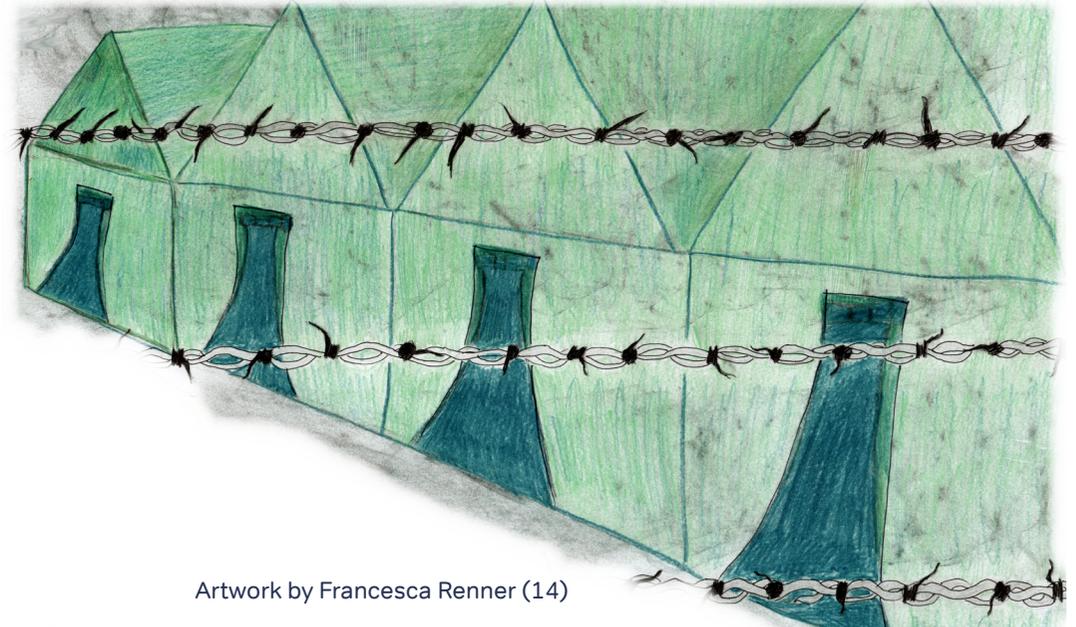
**Roland Biache**, Director General, Solidarité Laïque, France, [www.solidarite-laique.org](http://www.solidarite-laique.org)

**What is the situation of the accommodation of refugee and migrant children in your country? Do children have the possibility to grow up in a family or community based environment?**

**Stefan, Austria:** Unaccompanied children in Austria are discriminated from Austrian children in many ways and certainly the accommodation of these children is one of them. Children rarely get the chance to grow up in foster care families and when they do, these families are not scrutinized in the same way as families in the national foster care system. Children often grow up in large scale institutions. There are 130 institutions for unaccompanied children some of them having capacity of 50 children, when Austrian children deprived of parental care grow up in small group homes with capacity of 8-10 children. State institutions for unaccompanied children are in a very bad state with lack of staff (6 social workers for 100 children and when then number of children decreases the number of social workers also decreases) and with no workers on night shifts. The reception center “Bundesbetreuungsstelle Ost - Flüchtlingslager Traiskirchen” accommodates more than 1000 children with inadequate care. Unaccompanied children are not treated in an individualized way as is the case at the Therapeutical Shelter that I am directing, where 6 unaccompanied children with mental health problems are treated according to their personal needs. However this happens only for 6 children and believe me, in Austria there are thousands traumatized refugee and migrant children that are in need of the same support.

“Six unaccompanied children only receive personalized support for their mental health problems and believe me, in Austria there are thousands traumatized refugee and migrant children that are in need of the same support”, Stefan Bauer.

“In Greece there is no official number of unaccompanied children as children move all the time. So they might stay in the shelter for a few nights or for months”, Athina Kammenou.



Artwork by Francesca Renner (14)

**Athina, Greece:** I am very worried about the accommodation conditions of unaccompanied children in Greece. Sometimes they do stay in specialized shelters for unaccompanied children like the one that I run where we are trying our best to provide them with support according to their personal needs. However, they also stay in large camps often with adults. At the moment there are approximately 22 camps in Greece and the government builds more camps every day since the numbers are high and people need accommodation. So the figures that I give you today may differ tomorrow. Unfortunately many camps have turned to detention centers and sometimes children are also accommodated there. The number of unaccompanied children is not known as they move all the time. When they are accommodated in shelters, it is not sure if or for how long they will stay as these shelters are open and children are not obliged to explain their activities and they can leave whenever they want. So they might stay for a few nights or for months. Foster care, on the other hand, for unaccompanied children does not exist in Greece. The NGO Metadrasis has only recently started a new project to recruit and train prospective foster parents and they have placed a few unaccompanied children in these families. Although this is a very good practice, this is a small scale programme and certainly not a political solution. The number of unaccompanied children is large and we need sustainable solutions for their accommodation and their integration.

**Marzia, Italy:** In Italy unaccompanied children have to stay in initial reception centers up to 90 days and after that they transfer to a second reception (in the families, in structures, or SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) system) but this term is generally not respected and children stay in these shelters for a longer period of time. Furthermore, children often stay in hotspots (in Sicily and Apulia) together with adults for a long period of time. Only 5.7% of unaccompanied children are placed in private homes. The rest of the children are accommodated in state shelters and community settings. Three years ago we launched a call to help unaccompanied children and more than 2000 families in Italy showed their interest. All families were available and prepared to support, receive, and accompany unaccompanied children as emergency foster care families. For us it was, and it is, very important to organize the process with the governmental and local institutions and services. So we asked, and we are still asking from the Italian Governmental Unit, to be sure of transparent, coherent, correct processes. At the moment many Municipalities don't support our training for the families and don't give funds to families. In Sicily we had 9 foster families and 1 mother with children accommodated. In Milan we are managing a structure with 8 unaccompanied minors and 1 center for hosting 9 refugee families (both in cooperation with public institutions).

“In Italy only 5.7% of unaccompanied children are placed in foster care while there are 2,000 trained foster care families available. The rest of the children are accommodated in state shelters and community settings”,  
Marzia Masiello.

“Precarious living conditions, lack of sanitation, the lack of child friendly spaces and accommodation for children only, result in child prostitution, abuse and health problems. The state must react now to ensure that the rights of children are respected”, Roland Biache.

**Roland, France:** Many of the children that get to France want to go to England. Meanwhile, they are accommodated in camps in the north of France, such as the Calais camp. Sanitary conditions in Calais are terrible, for example there is lack of sanitation or access to clean water. Even though France was reviewed in January in Geneva on the implementation of the UNCRC and received recommendations on child refugees, children’s rights are still not respected. Children’s everyday life involves them being in the mud, cold, or playing in unhealthy spaces full of garbage or other objects that are very dangerous to their health. Precarious living conditions, lack of sanitation, the lack of child friendly spaces and accommodation for children, result to in child prostitution, abuse and health problems. This is what children face every day at the Calais camp!

### What kind of dangers do children face?

**Tamara, Serbia:** The challenges and dangers that unaccompanied children face in Serbia are mainly the lack of institutional and coordinated support for their transit or integration and, since the borders are closed, exploitation and abuse by smugglers. Unaccompanied children spend time in the Reception Centres in an unstructured way, with little information about where they are and what will happen to them. They are rarely consulted on their needs and wishes. We have also been informed by some unaccompanied children that they were threatened by the local boys accommodated in the same institution. The boys asked for money or phones and threatened to beat them. Very often, unaccompanied children simply find an opportunity to leave the Reception Centre, without protection, and continue the journey on their own or with the assistance of smugglers. Children simply don’t trust the protection offered by the institutions!

“We need to gain confidence and trust of the unaccompanied children in order to prevent them from going missing”.  
Tamara Simonović.

“A recent study underlined that 23.2% of unaccompanied children registered in Italy are at the moment unreachable”, Francesco Salvatore.

**Francesco Italy:** Unaccompanied children are often left without a point of reference and in absence of adequate support, including psychological assistance and legal protection. They don’t trust the system and they prefer to run away from the shelters and disappear. Under these circumstances children are at risk of getting involved in criminal organisations involved in drug dealing or prostitution. A recent study underlined that 23.2% of unaccompanied children registered in Italy are at the moment unreachable.

**Maria, Hungary:** I would say that one of the biggest challenges that children face is the hate speech targeting migrants, asylum seekers, which is constantly increasing, fuelling tension and prejudice in Hungary. Hódmezővásárhely, a children's residential home, regularly organizes football and other games and activities between Hungarian students and unaccompanied children, and this helps children to get to know each other and to reduce prejudices.

**Athina, Greece:** Unaccompanied children in Greece face many dangers. However the biggest one is their contact with smugglers and traffickers and the fact that we cannot react. Children don't want to seek asylum in Greece. Most of the times they are waiting for family reunification to be completed but they lose hope as it takes as long as a year. Children want to continue their trip to their destination and they will do it by all means. We don't have any authority over these children and children do not trust the system or us. When we suspect a child is in contact with the smuggler we ask him or her how he or she knows that person and either they don't reply to us or they tell us that they are relatives or friends. Smugglers and traffickers hang out outside the shelters and wait for children. Children don't stay at the shelters or camps for a long time. They choose to follow them and we are left in the dark. We are then lucky and of course happy if we hear about a child that finally made it to its destination and is still alive.

“Smugglers and traffickers hang out outside the shelters and wait for children. Children don't stay at the shelters or camps for a long time. They choose to follow them and we are left in the dark”,  
Athina Kammenou.

### What is the situation regarding children's access to education and access to health?

**Viola, Greece:** Although children in Greece are legally entitled to education they don't have access because Greek schools, even the intercultural ones, give lessons only in Greek. Another burden is that both unaccompanied and those children who live with their families in the camps, are totally excluded from the community. This means that even if children would like to, they cannot go to school as these camps are usually far away from the city center. Therefore NGOs such as the Network for Children's Rights or the staff in shelters provide language courses and further activities to children. The Network has an everyday presence in the 2 biggest camps of Athens (Schisto and Elliniko) and we cooperate with Save the Children for the program “Child Friendly Space”. In Schisto there are 1,800 people and at Elliniko 4,000 (adults, children with their families and unaccompanied children). It is foreseen by the Greek Government that in September children will enroll in the Greek mainstream school and the Network for Children's Rights through its programs in the camps and three centers which facilitate this process. Among the pro-

“We work in the two biggest camps of Athens in Schisto and Elliniko by teaching children the “First Greek Alphabet” as well as creative activities and recreational programs. All these programs aim to integrate children into the community”, Viola Gjoka.

grams that the Network runs in the camps for both unaccompanied children and children who live with their families is the “First Greek Alphabet” program which will facilitate their attendance in school and their participation in the community and future life in Greece. The Network also provides creative structured activities by using music, theater and play, recreational programs, educational materials, translation of stories in children’s mother tongue. Children also learn English and the Network is organizing events outside camps so that children living in the camp will participate in common activities with other children from the local community of their age.

**Tamara, Serbia:** Children have rarely accessed the education system in Serbia, primarily because very few children acquired the refugee status or the asylum protection in Serbia. Our education system is not prepared to integrate the refugee children on a larger scale. Regarding health, refugee and migrant children have access to health care but most often, it is the only urgent medical care. There have been cases when refugee and migrant children have received hospital care as well.

**Maria, Hungary:** There are no regulatory requirements for schools to host unaccompanied children and they remain ill-equipped to integrate unaccompanied children and refugees. Hungary lacks a proper educational system for unaccompanied children. Whilst Hungary has compulsory education until 16 years it is very difficult for unaccompanied children because they do not speak the language. Although the residential homes organize language courses, this is not sufficient to be able to learn the Hungarian language. Another problem is that many of them did not attend school in their country of origin so they lag behind the Hungarian students and they are not accustomed to the school routine. Health care is not a problem. Children have access to health care.

“In Hungary, 16 years is the age limit of compulsory education. It is really difficult though for unaccompanied children because they do not speak the language, so it is quite challenging to attend the same class with Hungarian children.” Maria Herczog.

“Behind the right to education and access to school lies the sense of “normality” which has to do with their right to go to school, have friends, play or do activities. Also, this school time protects children from exploitation, trafficking or prostitution. It’s as simple as that!” Roland Biache.

**Stefan, Austria:** In Austrian law, children’s education is compulsory until the age of 14 years. However most of these unaccompanied children are older. Although children over the age of 14 years have the opportunity to go to school, there are such limited number of places, that some have to wait for years to go to school. Healthcare for unaccompanied children in Austria, on the other hand, is accessible and we haven’t faced any problems.

**Roland, France:** We are implementing programs in different reception centers but I would like to focus on the situation in Calais. So, regarding Calais, the state does not fulfill its mission by allowing each child to have access to education. Currently there are 2 options: The “Ecole laïque du chemin des dunes” supported by Solidarite Laïque, unrecognized by the public authorities, but which hosts about thirty children and youth, fulfilling a public service mission. Thirty volunteers are mobilized daily to ensure proper operation of the center. This place allows children and parents to gather to learn, to share and exchange time and social life in a clean space, isolated from the cold, equipped with electricity and educational materials and recreation. However, this is a temporary solution and it is not satisfactory. These children, like all children in France, regardless of their immigration status, have the right to education and must be enrolled in the common system. From mid-May, the Ministry of Education appointed in the temporary reception center (CAP) 2 volunteer teachers to provide lessons to the children. It is too soon to assess its impact. However we fear that given the number of children in the camp, the number of teachers is not sufficient to ensure quality education. For children with families, these existing solutions to Calais (the ELCD and CAP) must only be temporary. School can promote living together and is also the first vehicle for the integration of these children. Some families say “we want to stay in France!” Indeed, behind the right to education and access to school it is the “normality” which has to do with the right to go to school, have friends, play, do activities and participate in community life. It’s the time when children can get back to their childhood and it protects them from exploitation, trafficking or prostitution.

### What is the future of refugee and migrant children in your country?

**Ulrike, Germany:** § 41 of the Act says that children that turn 18 years might be helped if needed, but assistance has been decreased quite a lot, so not a lot has been implemented. However, it offers a way to extend the support for young refugees to the age of 21 years. Young refugees then are offered accommodation, financial support, vocational training, and social pedagogical support so that they will be better integrated in the society and have a better future. A young person up to the age of 21 can apply for residence if he or she has been enrolled in a school for 4 years or can prove a school leaving qualification or completion of training.

**Tamara, Serbia:** We have talked to unaccompanied children who were interested in staying in Serbia and seeking asylum if they got decent accommodation and the opportunity to be educated and to integrate in the society. However, many children chose to leave the asylum centres as they were faced with bad conditions and no opportunities for integration, coupled with a long asylum process. There aren’t any practices regarding the integration of the children, because they are just passing through Serbia in order to reach other European countries. They are passing through because, among other things, there are no attempts or plans from the Serbian government for their integration in Serbia.

**Maria, Hungary:** Many of the unaccompanied children even before they turn 18 they must work to support their families who remained at home, but they cannot attend the school and work at the same time. Since they have low levels of education they only get the worst paying jobs, so they do not have a chance for a better life. Generally unaccompanied children do not have relationships with their Hungarian peers but only with children from their countries or origin. That is one reason why they do not learn the language and they cannot integrate in the society even upon reaching majority.

“Children even before turning 18 start working to support their families who remained at home and since they do not have educational background they only get the worst paying jobs, so they do not have a chance for a better life” Maria Herczog.

**Athina, Greece:** There is no official response from the government for children turning 18 years and for their future integration in Greece. There are a few attempts from NGOs that also run shelters for unaccompanied children for children upon turning 18. However most unaccompanied children do not want to stay in Greece. When they turn 18 they will either move with a family that they know and is of the same origin or they will try to leave Greece by any means. Unaccompanied children welcome English lessons, as being able to communicate in English will help them integrate in Europe.

### What messages you would like to send to the EU?

**Francesco, Italy:** “EU should guarantee that no detention of children takes place due to their status. A European system of reception and protection for refugee and migrant children should be built immediately. I also believe that it’s of great importance the review of the asylum system, passing over Dublin III. I finally think that it would be helpful to create a humanitarian and safe route for children as to tackle smuggling and trafficking of children.”

**Marzia, Italy:** “European countries should promote first and foremost family care or, where necessary, appropriate community based care for unaccompanied children and should create official lists of emergency foster care families for unaccompanied children. **Children should immediately stop staying with adults in the hotspots** and, after the period of the first 90 days from the entrance in the Country, they should be placed in a family environment, within foster families or within community based settings, according to their best interest.”

**Viola, Greece:** “Education and arts is the only key to develop healthy children who by growing up will become independent and free people. Europe will benefit if it supports safe passages for refugee and migrants and help children access education.”

**Athina, Greece:** “We want the EU to respect children’s wishes. We want additional first reception centers to be created for both unaccompanied children and for families with babies and toddlers tailored to their needs. We are also asking for the development of specialised classes inside schools so that children will be able to learn English and Greek and then be able to attend the normal Greek mainstream school.”

**Tamara, Serbia:** “The EU and its members should honor the ratified agreements and Conventions and open the borders for the people that are fleeing their war torn homes. **EU should lead the creation of a European system for the identification and protection of the unaccompanied children.** The failure of the EU to do so often serves as an excuse in the accession countries not to do very much on the protection of the unaccompanied children.”

**Maria, Hungary:** “Hungary will hold a referendum in September or early October whether to accept any future European Union quota system for resettling migrants. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has taken an increasingly anti-immigrant stance since the migration crisis escalated. The referendum will ask Hungarians whether they would accept any permanent quota system. Currently there are giant billboards across Hungary saying: **“Message to Brussels so that they can understand”** (Image 1). There is enormous tension and hate against migrants. In such a political situation, hosting children can be harmful and risky. I fear for their wellbeing.”



Image 1: Hungarian billboard saying “Message to Brussels so that they can understand”.

**Stefan, Austria:** “The most important message to the EU is that children should be treated with an individualized approach. **Unaccompanied children’s rights should be mainstreamed with the rights of all other children meaning that more money should be spent in children’s long term integration.** Investing in those children will help the children and will help the society to live together in a peaceful way.”

**Ulrike, Germany:** “Unaccompanied children need as soon as possible a secure residency status to live their daily lives free of fear of expulsion. They need legal support in asylum and residence procedures as well as assistance and protection. With regards to foster families I would say that **it is of great importance to secure the right of foster families to appropriate qualification and guidance from the beginning;** Ensure that foster families respect all practical and legal conditions on child protection, especially participation and ways for complaint.”

**Roland, France:** “I would like to send two messages to the EU. Firstly to ensure the right to education for all refugee and migrant children and secondly to promote better coordination and cooperation between EU member states to ensure better support for these families and children in order to ensure decent living conditions that respect human rights.”



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