




STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE

**UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED
CHILDREN TRAVELLING THE BALKANS ROUTE**



Save the Children



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The Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub (BMDH) has been established in order to ensure visibility and continual support for children on the move in the Balkans. Drawing from the experience gained in responding to the refugee and migrant crisis in 2015 and 2016, BMDH documents good practices, improves learning and knowledge sharing and promotes emergency preparedness. The Hub monitors trends in migrations across the Balkans and conducts research in particular issues related to mixed migrations, issuing regular reports. By developing partnerships and liaising with other stakeholders working with children on the move, BMDH runs and promotes a robust advocacy for children ensuring that their needs are put at the forefront.

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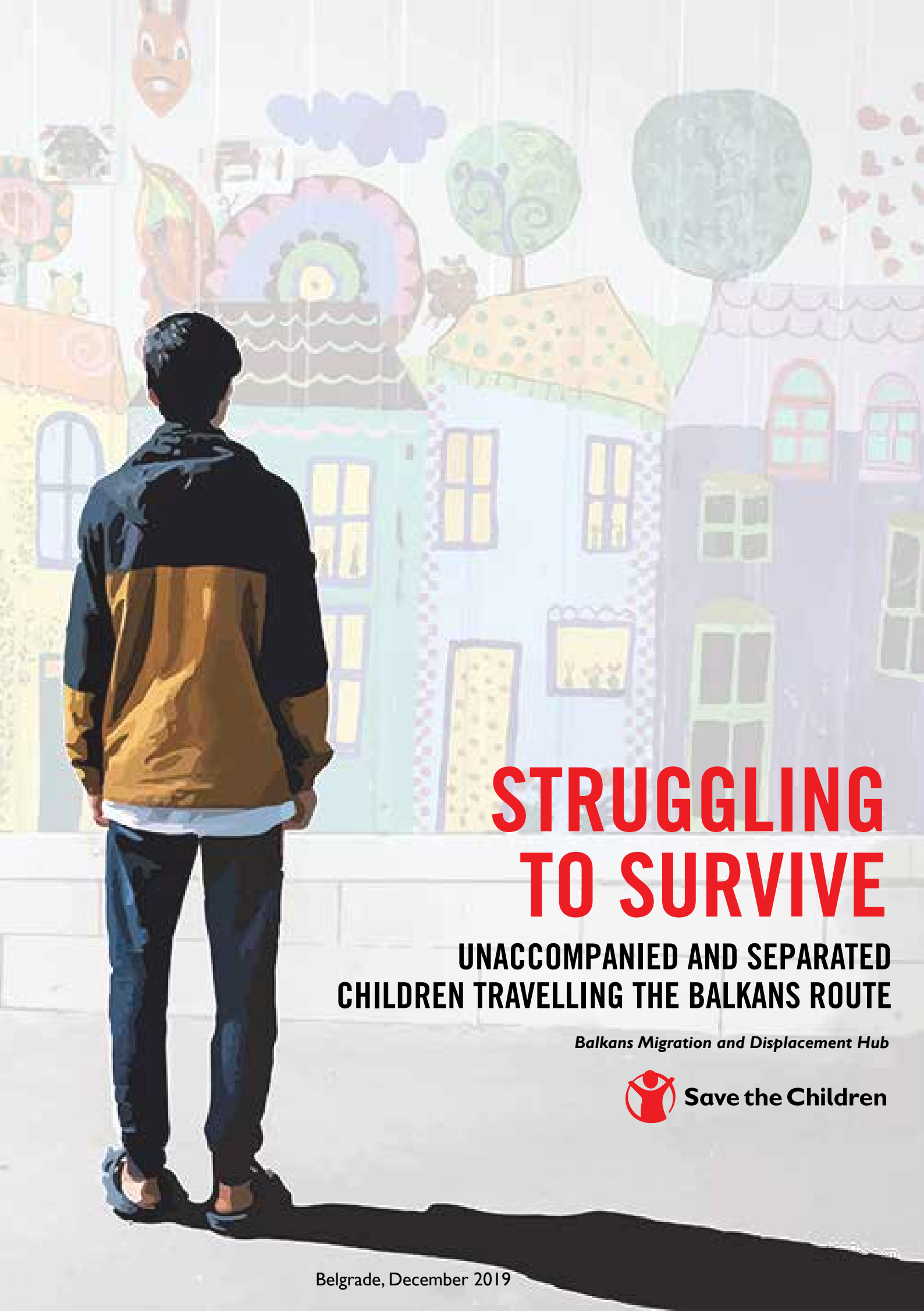
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The illustrations in this publication are based on the photos and products of the psychosocial support workshops (drawings, maps of journey, creative projects...) conducted with children in Save the Children's programmes in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Children in photographs did not participate in the research.

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Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub



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HOME IS NOT
HOME

WITH OUT
MOM

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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GLOSSARY

UASC - Unaccompanied and separated children

Game – a colloquial term used by refugees and migrants, and increasingly by other stakeholders, denoting an attempt to cross international borders irregularly. The English term is used regardless of the language spoken.

FRONTEX - The European Border and Coast Guard Agency

BMDH – Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub, part of Save the Children

Toman – currency used in Iran besides Rial

EUR – the Euro, currency mostly used in European Union countries

KPK – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa one of four administrative provinces in Pakistan



THE KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS STUDY

This study finds that unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) travelling the Balkans route to reach the western European Union countries rely mostly on informal survival practices and informal sources of information, increasing the risks they are exposed to, rather than on the official system of support or non-governmental resources. The children we talked to knew very little about the journey ahead of time and were relying on often inaccurate information from smugglers or fellow travelers. The journey itself was very difficult and traumatic, and the children were both negatively affected but also resilient and proud of having survived such adversities.

We have highlighted some of the key findings from the interviews with children. The text provides more detailed information about the children's experiences, hopes and expectation for the future.

- UASC are often the **eldest male children** in their families who are able to travel and whose parents deemed they were old enough to take the responsibility for their own welfare and that of the entire family.
- Children move due to complex push factors, including violence, persecution, family issues and economic insecurity.
- **Parents** have a strong role in taking decisions about the migration journey, especially for children younger than 15. Young children were often not happy to travel but not willing to oppose or even speak against their family decision. They frequently stated that they would have stayed at home had it been possible to choose.¹
- The children had a very **ambivalent attitude to the migration journey**. Although they reported difficult conditions, fears and hazards, they also talked about the great pride they felt in situations in which they took control and were relying on their own strengths and resourcefulness, including those when they earned money or when they were able to overcome an obstacle, such as surviving in a forest when their group was separated from a smuggler.

- Almost all children emphasized that they had ended their **education** reluctantly. Although they would like to resume their schooling, the pressure to pay for the journey and help the family left behind prevented them from going to school. The children frequently expected they would be able to work in the countries of destination.

- The children **knew very little about the journey ahead of time** or had some generic information about the journey becoming very difficult in certain parts. While on the journey, smugglers provided limited information and most of the information, often inaccurate, came from other refugees and migrants.

- Hoping to provide some **protection** for UASC, families looked for other children or adults from their **community** who would travel together with their children, but in almost all cases the groups were split somewhere along the route.

- The migration journey is arranged in the country of origin through the main **smuggler** (kachakbar), who does not travel while local smuggling agents subsequently take the children through individual countries.

- From interviews it was not entirely clear whether the children were related to the person who arranged the journey, as they alternately used terms that imply kinship (uncle or something similar) and the term “friend”. The decision on the routes the children would take was made together by family elders/those who sponsored the journey and the main smuggler.

- Almost all UASC we talked to passed through **Turkey**, which was seen as a mid-station for resting and finding contacts to continue the journey.

- Local smugglers often used **children as associates in the smuggling process**.

- The children saw the main smugglers as very powerful figures who, they believed, were informed about them throughout the journey. The children did not trust local smugglers who often stole from them, were violent and exploitative. The children believed that any act of disloyalty to smugglers, such as going to the police, would be punished and they would not be able to continue their journey.

- **The amount of money determined the quality** of local smugglers. The children with least money travelled with unreliable smugglers, frequently found themselves in

¹ The cultural environments in the countries of origin have a major effect on the children's agency in making decisions about starting the migration journey. This report is limited to the children from our sample countries, within which there were differences in perceived agency, most notably between younger and older children.

dangerous situations, travelled in poor conditions (hidden in car trunks or overcrowded trucks and buses, crossing long sections of roads on foot), more often suffered violence, experienced forced pushbacks at the borders, or were left behind.

- UASC provided testimonials about **travelling** on foot, using vehicles or taxis, and more rarely travelling by plane. Vehicles transporting migrants were overloaded with passengers and baggage, and traffic accidents occurred due to unadjusted vehicle speed and drivers under the influence of alcohol or opiates.

- The vast majority of the children we interviewed testified about experiencing at least one **pushback** at a border, while about two thirds testified about several pushbacks.

- The smugglers controlled when the children would move, determined the means of transport, allocated time for phone calls, and for toilet breaks, eating or drinking. **Violence**, including sexual violence by smugglers was very common.

- The most **stressful** and uncertain parts of the journey for the children included long stretches of walking in extremely adverse weather, passing through difficult terrain or crossing borders at night.

- The children **communicated** via mobile phone applications, including IMO, Viber or WhatsApp.

- If the families did not have enough money to pay for the entire journey of their children to the EU countries, they only paid for their trip to Turkey. From there the children found jobs or waited for the family to find additional money for them to continue their journey.

- Smugglers **treated children worse** than adults on the move, placing them in car trunks, on the floors below seats as well as in false vehicle floors, not giving them enough liquid and food.

- The children did not carry too many things, some spare clothes, enough food to cross the first section of the road, water, mobile phone, a small amount of money in local currencies. Many times, they did not take their identification documents in order to be able to hide their age and identity if needed. The most important item was **mobile phone**.

- The families provided additional money for the children through local smugglers or through local residents of the transit countries who collect the money, for a certain fee, using a **money transfer service** such as Western Union.

- The children often had **no access to child friendly information** about their rights, and did not understand legal and administrative procedures to be followed. Either because of inadequate translation, or because the content was unadjusted to their age, education and emotional state, the children emphasized that they could not understand what the documents they signed or refused to sign meant.

- Many children **worked** during the journey, mostly in textile factories, in collecting secondary raw materials, or in agriculture, earning less money and under more exploitative conditions than adults.

- The children had very **little expectation** or knowledge about **official institutions, or civil society organizations** as the sources of support during the journey, other than the police. The police were seen as the institution to address in case of emergency but also feared due to instances of violence and corruption.



INTRODUCTION

THE GOAL OF THE STUDY

This study was designed to identify and deepen the understanding of informal practices used and experiences of unaccompanied and separated migrant children during the course of their migration journey in order to promote a better understanding of their needs and make possible an evidence-based recommendation for improving their position through future programming and advocacy interventions. It was focused on collecting the basic information on children's experiences during the journey: organization of the journey, key supporters and facilitators – “the network”, as well as on gaining an insight into different strategies employed by children during their journey. The study aimed to explore the conditions in which informal practices take place, as well as their general influence on the position of refugee and migrant children.

The study reveals the children's perception of the route they travelled and the effects the informal practices had on their position. It elucidates the importance of different social networks for unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), their experiences with formal institutions, child labour experiences during their travel and their contact with violence (on the borders, in contact with official institutions, with smugglers and other migrants).

CONTEXT

According to the UNHCR data, more than a million refugees and migrants, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, have crossed the Mediterranean since 2015, heading for the countries of Western and Northern Europe and passing the so-called “Balkans Route”, or “Western Balkans Route”. Although there is limited data about their profile, it is known that among these migrants² there were many unaccompanied children or children separated from their parents or guardians. The agreement between the EU and Turkey in 2016, stronger border controls and more restrictive asylum and migration policies left thousands stranded in transit countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia. In view of continued conflicts and insecurities in the countries of origin, these policies did not stop new refugees and migrants from starting their journey towards the EU countries. Data collected since the adoption of the EU-Turkey declaration shows that there is still a significant movement of migrants along the Balkans route, including through Bosnia and Herzegovina (a route which became more important just about when data for this study began to be collected).

The data collected by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, FRONTEX, for 2018, indicate that one out of five of around 150,000 migrants who tried to enter the EU was younger than 18, while the official number of detected entries of unaccompanied children was 4,000.³



² In this survey, the terms “migrants” and “refugees” are used interchangeably, since in most cases there was no international protection needs assessment.

³ FRONTEX (European Border and Coast Guard Agency). Risk analysis for 2019. Warsaw 2019. Retrieved from https://fronTEX.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Risk_Analysis/Risk_Analysis_for_2019.pdf

INFORMAL PRACTICES

In the existing literature, the term “informality” refers to tacit rules or hidden practices which simply constitute “ways of doing things”.⁴ It covers various practices and relations not formalized or taking place outside formal contexts. This term covers a broad range of behaviours, from practices like “pulling the strings” to nepotism, corruption, all the way to different forms of survival-driven practices. Although the notion of informality was initially related mainly to the field of economy, more specifically labour⁵, from the early nineties it has been growingly reconsidered in other area of human culture and life.

The major part of migrations takes place outside the formal exchange of services and goods. Very few sources explore informal ways of organizing migration journeys, interaction with other actors and local population, or describe survival strategies, at least when the Balkans route is in question. Although the stakeholders directly working with migrants possess information about the informal practices used, we have found no studies aiming to structure and analyze this information with regards to UASC on the move.

The testimonials of field workers and migrants themselves indicate that refugees and migrants are often forced to rely on “informal practices”, i.e. survival strategies that go beyond the domain of formalized relations. These are non-institutional, every-day actions needed in order to protect themselves from hazards and potential abuse and to meet their needs, organize border-crossing, find accommodation, transport, food, and relevant information.



⁴ Ledeneva, A.V. (2018). *The global encyclopedia of informality (Vol. 1)*. London: UCL Press.

⁵ *Ibid.*

METHODOLOGY

Given that there is not much data on behaviour and experience of unaccompanied children on the Balkans route, this study was conceived as an explorative survey. We have collected:

- **Contextual information on unaccompanied and separated children (origin, motivation to start the journey, demographic properties, ways of communication, etc.);**
- **Organizational aspects of the journey;**
- **Social networks that the unaccompanied youth relied on during their journey – persons who provided social support to children as well as the role of formal and informal organizations in the support context;**
- **Specific strategies used by unaccompanied children in order to overcome challenging and difficult situations during the migration journey;**



DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES AND SAMPLE

The methodological framework of this survey, as well as the selection of adequate data collection techniques were primarily conditioned by the nature of migration, inconsistent availability of respondents, fast changes in the structure of respondents, their readiness to talk about sensitive issues, as well as the available time to establish a good rapport with the respondents. Informal practices, although omnipresent and necessary for survival of unaccompanied migrant children travelling, are at the same time potentially illegal and thus reluctantly reported by migrants.

Bearing in mind that the official sources of information on informal practices used by children for survival are rare and incomplete, that this topic is perceived as delicate by children, as well as the fact that it is an extremely vulnerable population, we opted for an approach which mainly focused on systematic collection of **qualitative data**. These data were collected through **semi-structured in-depth interviews** focused on the conditions of children's travelling the Balkans route as well as their experiences during the journey. With the consent of the children and their guardians, the interviews were recorded (audio records), transcribed and anonymized in order to facilitate the analysis of contents and to additionally protect the identity of our underage respondents.

In August 2018, four **pilot interviews** were conducted in order to check the instruments used in the survey and those interviews were included in the final findings. Two out of four pilot interviews were done with children who declared themselves adults before the institutions in order to be placed in a certain camp, but they said themselves that they were still underage.

In the main part of field survey, 36 full interviews were made with boys from 13 to 17 years of age, coming from different Asian and African countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Ghana and Mali). The findings obtained are fully based (except for the parts clearly marked and the source thereof provided) on data obtained through the interviews with participating children.

These **data have been supplemented with quantitative data** on unaccompanied children that Save the Children and its partner organizations systematically collected in the previous period.

Save the Children's experts organized special training sessions for interviewers and interpreters (cultural facilitators) involved with field work. The goal of the training was

for the interviewers to get acquainted with the specificities of the subject, as well as to ensure the sensitization of the interviewers for interviewing the children. This two-day training included the basics of child safeguarding⁶ in the research context as well as specific interviewing techniques designed for working with children. The interviewers selected for field survey were experienced in working with migrant children, which was expected to add to the quality of collected data and to assure implementation of the highest standards of child protection.

The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs was an important partner to Save the Children in this process primarily by enabling interviews with children. The Ministry's experts were present at the interviews in order to additionally protect the children, thus contributing to better conditions of data collection.

The respondent sample selected for this survey consisted of quotas which are roughly illustrative of the identified structure of the population of unaccompanied children in Serbia by age and by the respondents' country of origin, in the period that preceded the process of data collection itself. Save the Children, through its regular activities, collects structured and consistent data on the basic demographic characteristic of children who are beneficiaries of its services and of their partner organizations.

The data guided the sample⁷ selection with some less represented countries included in order to capture potential differences in children's experiences.

Bearing in mind that, on average, 95% unaccompanied children identified within one month in Serbia were between 12 and 17 years old,⁸ adolescents were this survey's target population. Also, bearing in mind that boys constitute an average of over 95% this population detected in Serbia, they were the respondents in this study.

Girls are very rarely present among the unaccompanied children regularly identified in Serbia. The initial draft research methodology planned to unproportionally boost the share of girls and include them in the research in order to obtain data on this small, but important group. Unfortunately, during the research period, the researchers had the opportunity of interviewing two girls only. Neither of the interviews conducted with the girls were included in the final results – one interview was interrupted in order to protect the girl who had undergone a turbulent emotional reaction to some questions and could not continue the interview, and the other interview was excluded due to the girl's age (the interviewee revealed to her guardians after the interview that she was actually an adult).

The interviews were conducted from 10 October 2018 to 26 December 2018 in Belgrade and Nis.

TABLE I: SAMPLE

		Country of origin						
		Afghanistan	Iraq	Iran	Pakistan	Ghana	Mali	
Age	13	2						2
	14	4			1			5
	15	4		1	2			7
	16	6	2	1	1			10
	17	5	1	3	1	1	1	12
		21	3	5	5	1	1	36

⁶ Child Safeguarding Training was developed within Save the Children in order to enable the implementation of Child Safeguarding Policy. This training contributes to raising awareness of how to prevent intentional and unintentional harm in working with children and how to protect their best interest.

⁷ It should be noted that the migrant population identified in Belgrade consists of migrants present in places accessible to mobile teams collecting demographic data and providing the services of data protection and sharing. There is a grounded suspicion that a certain number of migrants, due to the specificities of journey organisation, do not get covered by these services (they do not stay in the city centre or they reduce their detectability by other practices).

⁸ According to Save the Children's data.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS IN DATA COLLECTION

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

Given that our respondents belong to the population in transit and that they often move irregularly between the borders of different countries, there were some limitations in the availability of respondents and in getting a sample that would accurately represent them. This population often tries to keep the low profile in the countries they travel through, with only some of them accessing the formal institutions or non-governmental organizations and they try to stay as briefly as possible in what they consider to be transit countries (such as Serbia). As a result, only a part of the population was available to researchers. The inability to predict the duration of the children's stay in Serbia presented an additional difficulty for the researchers and affected the rapport with the interlocutors while the children's non-regulated legal status greatly contributed to self-censorship during the interviews.

Random sampling within quotas was not possible at each selection of respondents and the samples included only the respondents available at the time and documented by the institutions in Serbia. The sample did not include the persons whom guardians or interviewers assessed as too vulnerable for interviews (children victims of human trafficking or otherwise traumatized due to the journey experience). It is necessary to highlight that thus the children who could talk about very specific experiences and practices used during their journey were excluded.

INTERVIEWING CONTEXT

The interviews were made in the presence of researchers, guardians, representatives of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, as well as cultural facilitators. When organizing the interviews, the fact that the presence of many adults might have a negative impact on the children's readiness to talk about their experience was taken into account. Nevertheless, due to the specificity of these respondents (the need to interpret and to protect them), a concession potentially detrimental to the data quality was made.

Unaccompanied and separated children have high vulnerability, specific legal status, as well as special needs pertinent to protection and care and this shaped the way the survey was conducted.

Since Save the Children places a special focus on protection of children from vulnerable groups, the **researchers prioritized the care for the children's welfare, protection of their rights as well as the chance to have their voice heard and acknowledged during data collection. In order to ensure the protection of our child respondents, they were not asked to provide data already available from secondary sources or data that could in any way jeopardize them.**

Data were collected with an informed consent, both from the official guardians and from each individual child that took part in the study. Respecting their developmental stage, the children were explained the purpose of the study, expected course of the interview as well as the manner in which the data received would be presented. The respondents were informed in advance, as well as during the course of the interview, that **they could refuse to answer any question at any time**, to interrupt the interview or request that their data be excluded from the final findings upon completion of the interview.

Every child was clearly explained that the **anonymity of their replies would be fully secured and that the data would be presented in aggregated form** without verbatim publishing individual interviews. It was emphasized that any quotes included would be identified only by gender, age and country of origin. Although the interviews were recorded into audio-files in order to record the replies more accurately, **anonymity was additionally supported by the way of collecting and storing the files with original data.** The names of the respondents and the data provided through the interviews were available only to the main researcher who connected them after transcription.

After data collection, and in accordance with their needs assessed during the interviews, the children who were interviewed were provided with additional advice and relevant information. These were related to their rights in the country, institutions and organizations providing various types of assistance and the psychosocial support that could be provided by the mobile teams of Save the Children and partner organizations.

Research conducted during this study was fully in line with the principles of **Save the Children's Child Safeguarding Policy.**



WHO ARE UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN?

In order to better understand UASC moving along the Balkans route it is necessary to understand the context they are coming from, the beliefs they have about themselves, their role in the family and society at large, as well as their plans regarding migration. This study finds that UASC interviewed were predominantly the eldest male children in their respective families who were able to travel and whose parents decided they were old enough to take the responsibility for their own welfare and that of the entire family. The decision on starting the migration journey was in most cases taken by the family elders, with the children's consent. The drivers of migration for UASC were usually complex and included several push factors, including persecution, threats from extremist groups and family/economic reasons. Besides leaving their cultural and familial environment important for their psychosocial development, they also interrupted their education, which could have significant developmental and social repercussions for the children. Most UASC did not know the details of their journey before they started it, nor did they have much knowledge of their destination countries and their possible future in those societies.

During 2018, Save the Children and its partners (Praxis⁹ and Centre for Youth Integration¹⁰) registered 12,977 refugees and migrants who sought different services from these organizations. Of those registered, 27% (3,579) were children out of which 2/3 travelled alone. UASC were mainly boys (98%), coming mostly from Afghanistan (72%) and Pakistan (18%). As a result of visa liberalizations between Serbia and Iran in 2017, there was an increase in the number of children coming from that country in 2018, as compared to previous years.¹¹

Nearly two thirds of children we interviewed for this study came from rural areas, with the exception of Iranian boys who, as a rule, came from bigger urban centres such as Tehran.

They all grew up in multi-member families with at least three children and their families mostly stayed behind in the countries of origin. Almost all of our respondents started their journey with the consent of adult family members, so the decision to start the journey, was a product of their agreement with their parents.

It is important to emphasize that the children's testimonies unequivocally indicate that younger children have a much more passive role in this decision-making than older adolescents do.

In vast majority of cases, these boys were either the eldest male children in their families or the eldest male children capable of travel (some of them have elder brothers who have already reached the countries of Western and Northern Europe or are prevented from travelling for another reason: illness, disability, etc.).

Are you the oldest male child in your family?

The oldest male child

19

Older brother/s already left the country of origin

5

Older brother/s disabled, not alive or missing

2

Not the oldest male child

8

Refused to answer

2

⁹ <http://www.praxis.org.rs>

¹⁰ <http://cim.org.rs>

¹¹ Refugees and Migrants at the Western Balkans Route Regional Overview, BMDH, Save the Children, December 2019, taken from: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/keyword/balkans-migration-and-displacement-hub-bmdh>

The situation with Iranian children was somewhat different – the age or family structure was not uniform. Iranians were not the eldest boys from the family capable of travelling, but children who set off on their journey for various, mostly familial reasons.

The boys we talked to thought that they were sent on this journey because their families had assessed that they were old enough to take the responsibility for their own welfare, but also for the welfare of the entire family. According to their statements, their families would never send their sisters on such a voyage, because that would be too difficult and dangerous for girls, which indirectly tells us how much the boys themselves see their travel as a threatening experience.

“ Girls, they are travelling only with their families, not alone.
A boy of 13, Afghanistan ”

While the older teenagers (above 15) saw this journey partly as a maturity test and a rite of passage, the younger ones perceived it as the decision taken on their behalf by family elders, which seemed contrary to their personal wishes. Younger children seemed to accept that they were treated as someone who did not take decisions - they initially said that the migration decision was jointly taken, but as they loosened up during the interview, they frequently stated that **they would have stayed at home had it been possible to choose.** The decision on starting the journey was most frequently an expression of obedience and loyalty to their family. Younger boys, by default, had a very emotional reaction to the questions regarding their family and the decision to start the journey. It was difficult for them to openly say that their family did something against their will, so instead of verbal replies most of them just nodded. All the boys showed a strong sense of loyalty to their family. The burden of their role in the future survival of the family was very present – the need to earn money and send it to their families or to help other family members get out of the risky and violent environment.

“ [The most important thing to me] To be honest, just to give happiness to my family.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan ”

The older teenagers had **a very ambivalent attitude to the journey itself.** Although they reported very dire conditions in which **they moved towards destination countries,** as well as fears and hazards they faced, they also talked about a great pride they felt for coming so near their destination. To them, the journey was a way to gain a more prestigious position in the social system they came from and a proof that they could manage on their own and even contribute to the benefit of their family. Even for children who said that the decision about the journey was taken partly by their adult family members, it was very important for them to emphasize their independence and participation in the decision-making process.

“ I am proud of my entire journey. Despite my age I came all the way here. I was pushed back many times from Bulgaria and I was beaten.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan ”

It is important to add that in cultures many UASC came from, children of their age are considered to be grown up, or at least old enough to take up some of the duties and rights that belong to adult members of the society – to marry or work for some remuneration. **Depending on the country of origin, our respondents gave us different age range used to differentiate between a child and an adult.** For Pakistani and Afghan children, it is roughly 14-15 years of age, and for Iranian children the average is 17-18. Interestingly, the children were aware that within their own societies there were some differences in the perceived age of adulthood, including belonging to different religious or ethnic groups, living in urban or rural community, or having different financial status as the determinant factors.

“ If you want to work in Iraq, you can. At the age of 10, 8. [...] But you can't live alone. [you can get married] if you want, if you've got the money you can do it at the age of 10, 11...
A boy of 17, Iraq ”

If they are educated, they will not call a 10- or 15-year-old child an adult, but if they are not educated, of course, they will think that a 10-to-15-year-old is an adult.
A boy of 13, Afghanistan ”

Our respondents included Afghans, ethnic Kurds from Iraq, Pakistanis, and Afghans who have fled Afghanistan with their families in the past decade and were also coming from Pakistan, Iranians, and Afghans born or raised in Iran. The children from Sub-Saharan countries were from the majority populations in those countries. While the motives for starting the journey were not much different between Afghans living in Pakistan and their Pakistani peers, for Afghans in Iran, the discrimination that they perceived played a great role in their decision-making process. Afghans from Iran talked about being in a considerably less favourable position than the majority population, not just because they were an ethnic minority but also because they were migrants. In those cases, the reasons for leaving home which they called economic were profoundly connected with their perception of their position in the Iranian society: unequal labour and education opportunities.

As for the reasons to start the journey in the first place, the children’s motivation is usually complex and includes several push factors. About one third of the boys named some form of persecution as the reason why they had to flee their country.

Most often mentioned were threats from different extremist groups (primarily fear of being drafted into various militant formations), but also the fear of blood feud. **Family problems were mentioned by one third of the boys we have interviewed, and one third of the boys mentioned different economic factors.**

Family problems were mostly mentioned by Iranian boys and to a lesser extent by boys from other countries (mostly as secondary or tertiary reason). For Iranian boys the family issues were often accompanied with the general aspiration for a better quality of life. Family reasons were not elaborated in detail – the children mentioned conflicts with a senior family member (uncle, father etc.) or dysfunctional family relations such as divorced parents who didn’t give them equal opportunities to work and study like other children in the family. Their “wish for a better life” included economic reasons, but also having better education, avoiding compulsory military service, avoiding strict ways of living which are controlled by the state, etc.

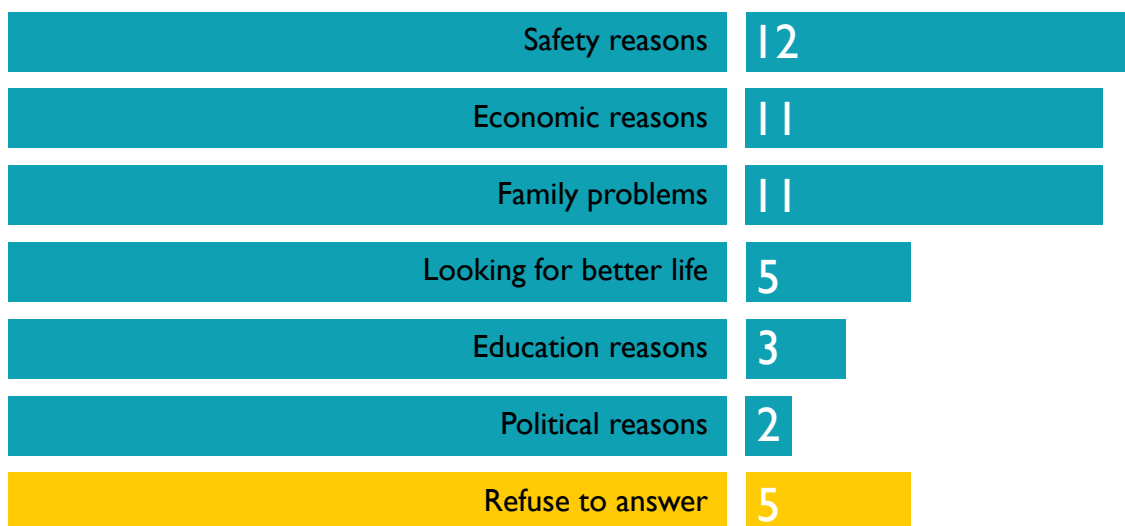
Although the children from this country did not mention security threats as a reason to leave home, they did mention different forms of discrimination they suffered as members of an ethnic or religious minority group (Kurds, Afghans, Sunnis etc.).

“ Before the accident, it was simple..., once we wanted to go to our uncle’s house...and on the way there was a blast and my father lost his legs in that bomb blast.
A boy of 17, Iran

In KPK¹² there were the Taliban and they were forcing those in villages, they were forcing every family to send one member to fight. After those fights started, I left my house and came here.
A boy of 14, Pakistan

”

**Why did you leave home?
(multiple answers)**



¹² Province of Pakistan

“ That’s why I set off, to earn some money, to try for sports... I was deprived of the possibility to make progress in things I need. We were in a very difficult situation, very poor. They made a great pressure and did a great injustice to my family. Just because we are Kurds and Sunnis. My father used to be in conflict with the system and the policy they pursue. He was convicted and he was in prison. He was almost hanged.

A boy, 17, Iran

The main reason was my future, the future of my younger brothers, my family, the fact that anything could happen to them and me. Because the situation is so bad in Afghanistan and it’s getting worse day by day. Mostly, there were only the Taliban before and now it’s DAESH (ISIS,) they are wilder than the Taliban.

A boy of 16, Afghanistan

”

A low number of boys told us that additional reasons for leaving home included a wish to have a better life (which implied a mixture of various factors) and opportunities for better education. These reasons were most often secondary. UASC who mentioned threats from extremist groups as the reason to leave home also mentioned that they could be forcefully taken by armed groups and used for drug trafficking and smuggling. The boys from the African countries mentioned solely economic reasons for migration.

It is very important to say that literally all the children we talked to (except for one boy from Iran) were included in the **formal educational system** in their countries of origin and that their schooling was interrupted either at the moment of their departure or before that (for security or financial reasons).

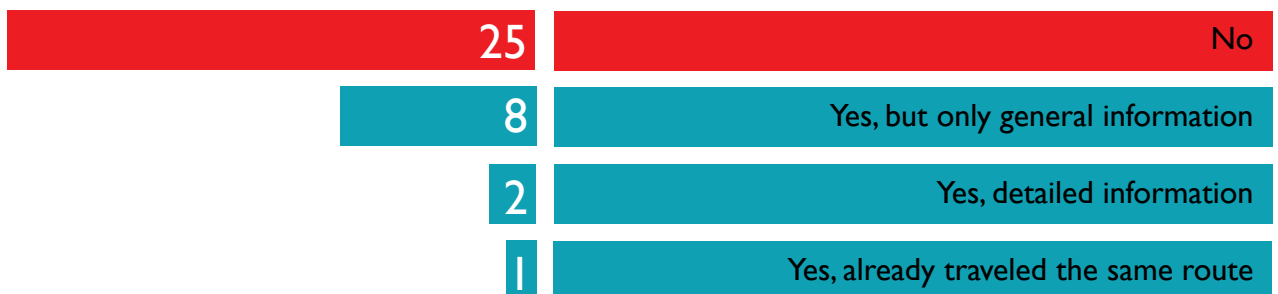
Fifteen-, sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds have on average completed 7 grades of primary school, while younger children completed grades according to their age, and interrupted their education by their migratory travel.

Almost all our respondents emphasized that they had ended their education reluctantly and that they would like to resume it when they get a chance to. Still, the children stated that their priority in the destination country was to get a job which would enable them to support their parents financially. The pressure exerted by smugglers to pay for the journey and the family expectations to contribute to their financial bettering as soon as possible were also the reasons which prevented UASC from getting included in the education systems of transit and destination countries. The data on the education level completed could be used as a basis for developing programs tailored for this specific population and could contribute to support programs and to seeking long-term solutions for children.

The fact that almost all of the boys interviewed stated that they knew very little about the journey ahead of time was quite surprising. Only a few of them got detailed information from their older brothers, but **most of them either had no information** on what the journey would look like (over two thirds of the respondents) or had some generic information about the journey becoming very difficult in certain parts.

It is important to emphasize that the smugglers whom their families contracted for this journey did not provide them with relevant information either. The children who were in touch with their brothers already in an EU member state mentioned that they had received the information that smugglers might possibly hold them up in Turkey. Also, they had heard that police in some countries, like Bulgaria, was more violent than in Greece, and advised them to take the safer way if possible.

Did you have any information about the journey ahead?



Although the researchers assumed that children without first-hand information about the journey would seek the relevant information on the internet or indirectly from members of their community, we were surprised to learn that most of the children didn't look for information in this way. The most common reason they gave us was that they and their families had already made up their minds to leave the country and that they didn't want to get intimidated by the information they might hear. According to our interlocutors, the lack of information did not have a major impact on the decision whether to start the journey or not. However, it is important to add that such lack of knowledge **must contribute to reduced preparedness for various hardships that might happen to them during the journey, and children's poor resilience.**

“ I wish I had had some information about the journey. If I had, I would have stayed at home. I didn't...
A boy of 16, Pakistan ”

The unaccompanied children coming from Iran by plane were not in touch with the smuggling networks before arriving to Serbia. They had less information about the ways to find resources in case they ran out of them and had a relatively superficial contact with other migrants. Some of them hesitated over continuing their journey after they found out how difficult and uncertain the irregular border-crossing was. Their experience of travelling through Serbia was dramatically different from that of UASC coming through inland routes from Afghanistan or Pakistan. They didn't experience forced pushbacks from the borders, walking great distances, violence, hunger, or great fear and a strong sense of uncertainty along the way. The experience of a small part of the Iranian UASC who were moving over land was similar to that of other unaccompanied children we talked to.

Unlike the children from other countries who were not afraid of punishment if they return to their countries of origin, the children from Iran expressed a fear of consequences that their return could generate – refunding the money they got for their tickets or being punished for leaving. Ethnic Afghans from Iran were afraid that the Iranian authorities would return them to Afghanistan.

For a vast majority of the children involved in this study, Serbia was only a transit country. In general, the children were not familiar with the rights they had in Serbia, such as the possibility to get asylum,

access different protection mechanisms, or continue their education.

When asked whether anyone explained to them their rights and duties while in Serbia (or if they made queries themselves) - over 70% of those who replied to this question gave a negative answer¹³. The exception were the boys who had already decided to seek asylum in Serbia and who possessed certain knowledge of their rights and duties in the country.

“ Somebody told me it would not take very long time to get documents here in Serbia. But there is not much work in Serbia. If I find work, that would be enough only for me. I cannot support my family from here. It's better to go further.
A boy of 14, Afghanistan ”

Besides the information about the journey and the country they are currently staying in, it was interesting to find out how the children perceived the countries they intended to immigrate to and what information they had about the life in those countries. In most cases, it was the family that had decided on the destination country for their children. This decision was made mainly on the basis of having a relative already living in that country or how fast the documents could be issued. Sometimes the decision on the destination country got changed along the way, but in most cases the children knew where they wanted to go from the very start. Changes took place in cases when their contacts in destination countries changed their place of residence or when they got additional information about countries of destination. Almost all the children participating in the survey were willing to reveal their desired destination – more than half of them intended to go to France, while one fifth were interested in living in Belgium. Other countries got mentioned only in individual cases: the UK, Germany, Norway and Italy. Three boys expressed a desire to stay in Serbia, to continue their education and get a job. The children from Iran that we talked to rarely had a strategy for further journey – faced with the difficulties of moving further towards the EU countries, they either decided to return to Iran or to stay in Serbia.

When it comes to the perception of the quality of life in the destination countries, it is almost entirely based on the information received from relatives already living in those countries. The children expect their social network (smugglers, relatives, friends, etc.) to help them find a place to stay and employment in those countries. It is important to say that most of our respondents have relatives living in EU member states.

¹³ This question was answered by 80% respondents.

The information about the life quality and their expectations upon arrival to their destination is very scarce. The children mainly mentioned the generalizations about a better life, easier access to employment and the possibility to work and financially support their families without fear of war and violence.

“ My friends told me; life is very good. And we are working and there is no war and we are safe and life is beautiful.

A boy of 16, Afghanistan

I don't know. When I get to France then I will see what happens.

A boy of 13, Afghanistan

The children knew that it was necessary for them to work in order to survive and help the family they'd left behind, but they didn't have precise information on how to ensure employment since they were under age and their labour would be illegal in most destination countries. Although they stated that job-seeking was a priority for them, most boys also mentioned that they would like to continue their education when the conditions were met.

“ Yes, of course I will go to school but first I have to support my family and also to give the money to my cousin who spent it on me.

A boy of 13, Afghanistan

And I am going to Belgium because of the documents. They are issuing documents faster and also they have good jobs there... a job... that's why I've decided to go to Belgium.

A boy of 14, Afghanistan

Although the children reaching Serbia are mainly those who want to get to Western and Northern Europe, one should bear in mind other routes and destination countries. **UASC who participated in this survey told us about other children and adult migrants whose destination countries were often** Iran or Turkey. A subjective estimate of our respondents was that between a third and a half of those starting their journey from Afghanistan and Pakistan remained, at least for a while, in Iran or Turkey. This estimation was based on the dissipation of group members who started the journey with them, as well as on discussions with other children during the journey.

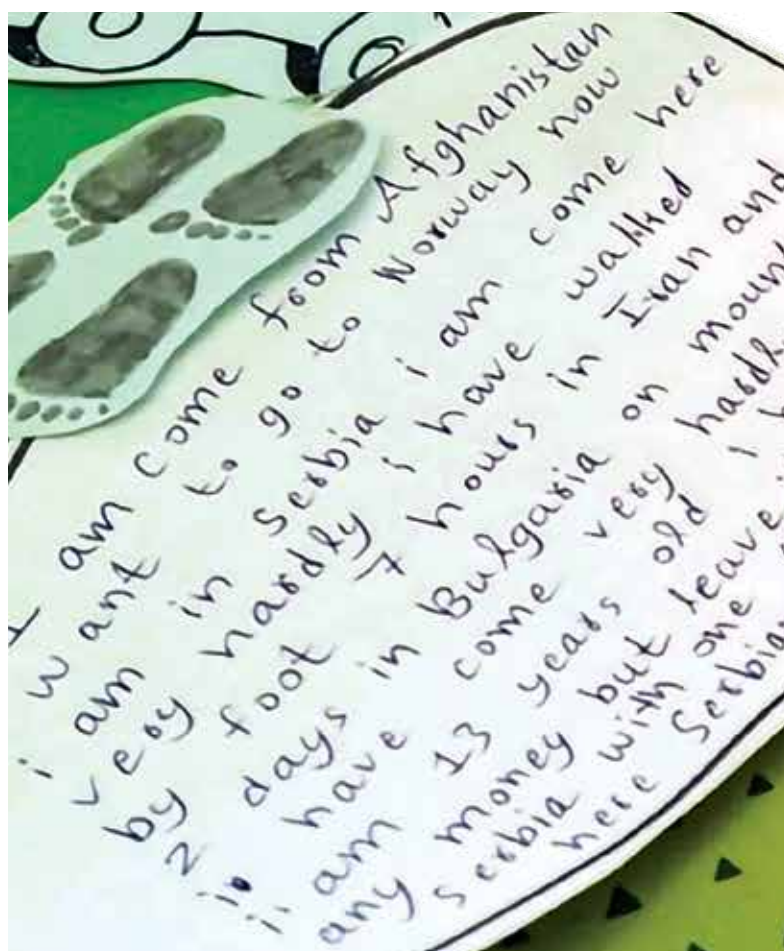
“ From the group I was with in Afghanistan, some of them stayed in Iran, some of them in Turkey and some of them came to Europe.

A boy of 15, Afghanistan

When we were crossing the mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan, there were more than 400 people. Of 400 people, 300 they were just going to Iran. To stay in Iran and work in Iran. And the 100 more went to Turkey.

A boy of 16, Afghanistan

It is also interesting that roughly **half of the boys we talked to had experienced migration even before starting this journey**. Namely, they experienced mostly internal migrations in the countries of origin (between rural and urban areas and between different geographic areas) – triggered by either economic or security reasons. Also, it was reported common for people to migrate between Afghanistan and the neighbouring countries: Pakistan or Iran, where Afghan families of some of our respondents have been living as migrants for a number of years. This information can be very important for understanding one aspect of the decision to send children on such a dangerous and distant journey. Leaving home and familiar cultural context is not new for many of the children, nor is the uncertainty that accompanies it.



SMUGGLERS

The information on smugglers that we received from the children is particularly valuable. Even with some of the details not known to children, the information received shows their perception of smugglers - the perception that greatly affects their experience of the journey. The extent to which the smugglers seem powerful in their eyes, the type of consequences that they anticipate for obedience/disobedience along the journey, as well as the existence of the hierarchy between smugglers and their agents, determines to some extent the level of helplessness or control they feel. The children perceived smugglers as very powerful figures who were informed about migrants throughout the journey, but who should not be trusted. The children frequently mentioned thefts, but also various forms of violence and exploitation by smugglers.

The experience with smugglers depended on the route UASC took to get to Serbia. For almost all children travelling from Afghanistan and Pakistan, the story of organizing the journey was very similar. After the decision to set out on the journey was made within the family, the father or another elderly male member of the family (uncle, cousin, etc.) contacted the main smuggler. In several interviews it was not entirely clear whether the children were related with the person who arranged the journey, as they alternately used terms that imply kinship (uncle or something similar) and the term “friend”. This suggests that there should be a further inquiry into the mechanisms used to organize and finance the journey. In some cases, this involved mediators who, for unknown reasons/interests, financed the children’s journey and/or found appropriate smugglers, while making a number of decisions about how this journey would look like. **When the children said “the smuggler” (kachakbar) they specifically referred to persons who organized the whole trip, not local agents who took them through specific countries.** According to our respondents, these smugglers lived in the children’s countries of origin and did not travel with them. Only in one case, a boy from Pakistan stated that his main smuggler was an Afghan, and therefore he had to initially travel to Afghanistan before starting on the journey to Europe from there.

“ He is not really my uncle. We only call him uncle - he is our neighbour.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan/Iran ”

According to the children, the decision on the routes they would take towards the destination countries was made together by family elders/ those who sponsored the journey and the smuggler. It sometimes happened that there was a deviation from the agreement and the route changed due to various influences – mostly because the organization and permeability of the borders changed, or simply because of high-handedness of local agents.

The way in which the children perceived the smugglers is very important, primarily when it comes to the extent to which this perception affects their behaviour during the journey and their understanding of their own freedom and safety along the route. The children usually did not meet the “main smugglers” in person. The family elders made all arrangements, and they continued contacting them through intermediaries when needed. All of the **children perceived smugglers as very powerful figures who had control over their fate for most of the journey.** They were described as people who could solve their problems with one call, but could also stop their journey or influence the lives of the families they’d left behind. Most of the children we talked to believed that the main smugglers were fully informed about what was happening to their “clients” any time and that there were efficient internal ways of regulating the migrant smuggling system. These involved different ways in which the main smuggler, if needed, could control the behaviour of agents working for them in local countries. Based on the stories of the children and the fact that they themselves said that they had no evidence of the smugglers’ omniscience, the impression is that these children need an idea of the existence of a system in which there are rules and in which any violence against them would be observed and sanctioned.

Apart from being able to greatly affect their fate, smugglers were also described as persons who could affect the fate of their families in the countries of origin. Namely, the families got financially indebted because of the travel expenses, and this was the reason why the children were engaged in work or sometimes refused to stop in a transit country during their journey although they could continue their education there, wait for the cold weather to pass, etc. Throughout the entire route there were **persons from the local community in charge of transporting migrants through each individual country.** These local smugglers did not necessarily have to be from the local population and often they originated from the migrants’ countries. In this way, the main smugglers ensured a smooth communication with migrants. In the next country, they would be taken over by another local agent and this trend would continue throughout the journey.

Experiences of travelling with local agents who were not members of the local population of the country through which they were passing were most often reported by UASC from Afghanistan and their peers from Africa. Namely, there is a widespread network of Afghans in Turkey, and it was often the Afghans, and not the local inhabitants, who led them through this country. **Besides the local agents who were responsible to the main smuggler, there were also migrants actively involved with the smuggling network** in a dual capacity - migrating to their destination, but at the same time helping the local agents control the group they themselves belonged to. Usually it was one or more persons in contact with local agents who were travelling together with other migrants. They disseminated information, received instructions on adequate behaviour along certain sections of the journey, informed local agents about the atmosphere in the group, etc.

“ In Iran, they were Iranians, and in Turkey they were from Iraq. In Greece and Macedonia, they were from Pakistan.

A boy of 16, Pakistan

In Iran smugglers are only Iranians, but in Turkey Afghans. In Bulgaria Bulgarians, in Serbia Serbians. Only in Turkey they are Afghans.

A boy of 16, Pakistan

In Serbia we also have Afghan smugglers. Drivers, they are Serbian.

A boy of 15, Afghanistan

”

Payments for the journey were made in different ways and the structure of intermediaries between migrants and smugglers was generally not so simple. According to the respondents, sometimes the entire sum of money was owed to smugglers¹⁴ and repaid through work that children performed at the end of the journey, at other times the money was paid in portions during the journey. In examples we heard about, if families did not have enough money to pay for the entire journey of their children to the EU countries, in some cases they only paid for their trip to Turkey. From there the children either financed the continuation of the journey themselves by finding jobs or waited for the family to find additional money for them. The main smuggler would successively pay the local agents after they fulfilled the agreed obligations. The children described the main smugglers as “trust-worthy persons” coming from their community and who, for a certain percentage, kept the money until the agreement was fulfilled.

After securing the funds for the continuation of the journey, the children easily found new smugglers in cities like Istanbul. According to children’s testimonials, the search for a new smuggler was simple: each country has points where migrants gather and from them one can easily find out about the contacts and the quality of the smuggling service. If the children could not find a smuggler locally, they found one through the main smuggler.



¹⁴ The difference between smuggling and trafficking in human beings is not always clear and some of the smugglers described in this report are potentially traffickers.”

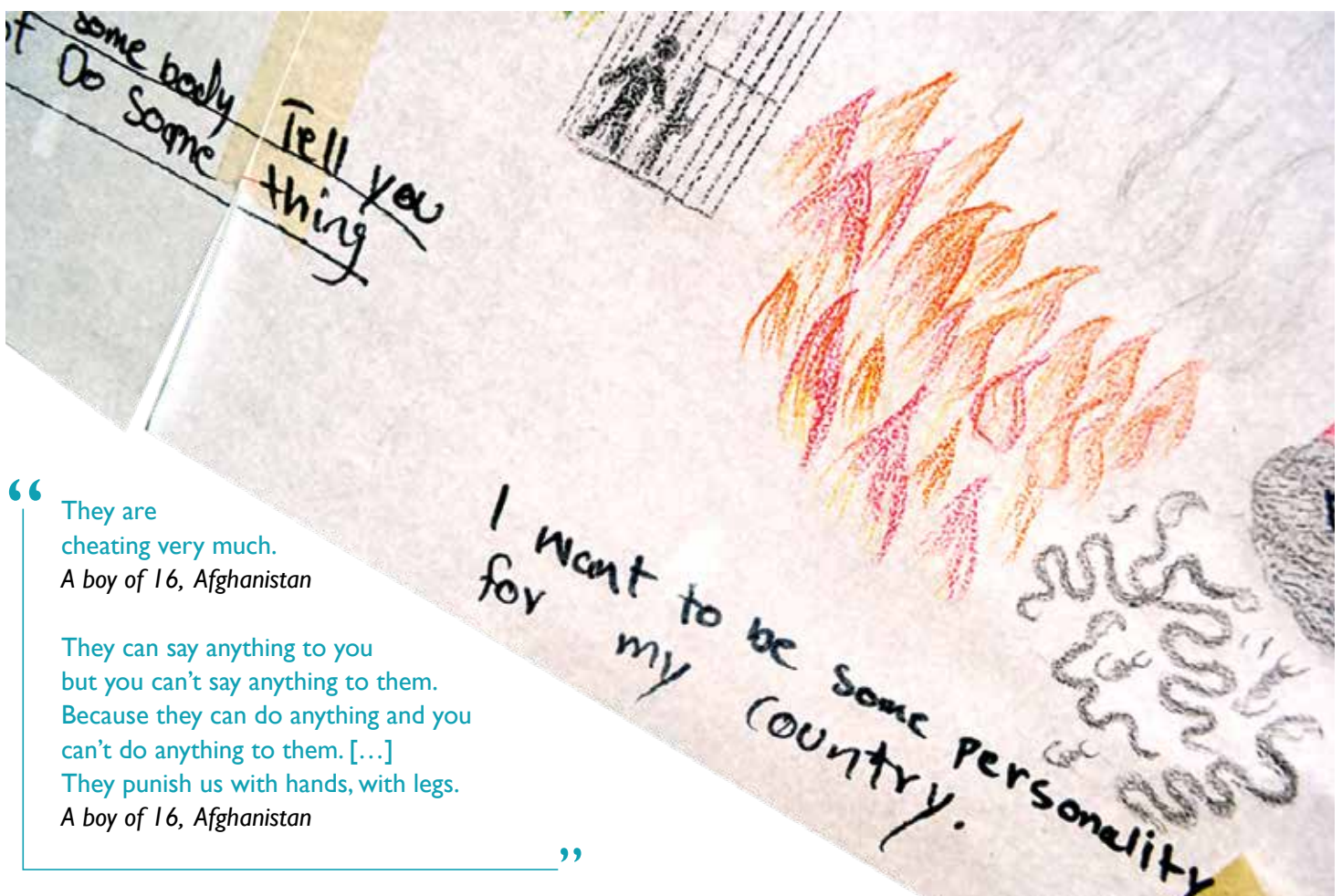
“ I came to Serbia and I’m calling to Afghanistan saying that I am in Serbia, Belgrade, in Afghani Park, which is famous for refugees. My family contacts the original smuggler who is in Afghanistan and he contacts the smuggler in Serbia and then he informs me: “Ok, wait there now, the guy will come and meet you.
A boy of 17, Afghanistan ”

In principle, the children did not trust the information they received from local agents because they often experienced disregard for what was originally agreed, as well as theft, violence and deception by them. **Almost all of the boys we talked to (over 90 percent) explicitly said they did not believe the local smugglers.** Their perception of smugglers as persons of great power, and the fact that they travelled alone, exposed to various risks and very vulnerable, forced them to follow the information and instructions they received from smugglers, while being aware that this information could potentially be incorrect. Four respondents told us that they had an experience in which local criminals in Iran and Turkey kidnapped them, in collusion with smugglers, and demanded extra money from their families to continue the journey. With broken trust but without any other options, these children continued their journey with the same smugglers.

“ There were some thieves that the smugglers knew, and they kidnapped us for 3 days and they asked us to call the families to pay, each of us around 300 dollars, and then we were released, and we were beaten too.
A boy of 17, Afghanistan ”

For example, you have something and he [the smuggler] is like “Can I just see your watch? Just, like, see what it’s like” and he takes it and puts it on his hand. The same happened to me. The smuggler took it from me and then the cars came for us to go and I told him to give me back the thing that he’d taken from me. He said just go, go fast, just go to the car or the car will leave you here.
A boy of 17, Pakistan ”

Local agents used the children as associates in the smuggling process. Two respondents told us that the smugglers forced them to work for them as agents while passing through North Macedonia and Serbia. They insisted that they had done this against their will and that they had stopped doing this job once they arrived in Serbia.





100% SMUGGLER

“ So, we have different smugglers... two kinds of smugglers. One kind is those that don't care if you pass, or if you do not pass and the other is 100 percent smuggler, another kind of smuggler. [...] One hundred percent, you will go, you will cross the border... [...] If you pay good...
A boy of 15, Afghanistan ”

The boys were aware of the difference in the quality of “service” provided by smugglers, depending on how well they were paid. They know that their chances of crossing the borders and having protection on the road depended on how much money they gave to smugglers.

The children who have the least money travelled with unreliable smugglers, frequently found themselves in dangerous situations, travelled in poor conditions (hidden in car trunks or overcrowded trucks and buses, crossing long sections of roads on foot), **more often suffered violence by smugglers and more often experienced forced pushbacks at the borders as well as situations in which smugglers left them behind.** Over 80% of the children we interviewed had such experiences. Unlike the children who travelled with “better” smugglers, they had to deal with finding and buying food along the road, as well as providing extra money their smugglers asked for in order to bribe the army and the police, to sleep in safe and warm places, etc. These fees were often not part of the initial agreement their families had made with smugglers and required finding additional money.

“ They are lying, they don't tell the truth... Some smugglers, they are lying about the route... how far it is, how long we are going to walk... For example, we had to walk for four - five days, and they tell us “oh, it's not a long walk, two hours or four hours” ... They tell us “bring just a little bit of water, a little bit of bread”, or something... But when you start the journey it can be four-five days...
A boy of 14, Afghanistan ”

One of the boys who, by his own words, came from a family without economic difficulties in Afghanistan and who was forced to leave the country because of the threats his family had received from the paramilitary formations, gave a slightly different perspective on travelling the Balkans route. He called his smuggler **“a smuggler providing a 100-percent service” (100% smuggler).**

Namely, these smugglers are better paid than the average ones and in turn offer border crossings without pushbacks and with the minimum risk of police stopping them. Such smugglers do not rob their “clients” and, according to this boy, although they travelled under difficult circumstances their behaviour towards children was strictly controlled by the main smuggler. Those who were with a “100% smuggler” had more freedom to contact their families when they wanted to. The children were aware that the arrangement gave them the right to address the main smuggler or their family in order to control local agents. They perceived their journey as less risky and less threatening than other children.

“ If he is powerful, then you don't have to think about anything: if you are hungry, if you are sick, if you are thirsty, if you are tired, they will take care of you everywhere on the route. But, if that guy, who is in Afghanistan, if he doesn't care about you, that means you must do all that by yourself, you have to survive.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan ”

We were there [the Greek border] one night and in the morning, cars came, and there was a famous smuggler. He came with some jeeps. Brand new jeeps with, how to say, black mirrors. At 8 o'clock, they started and at 2 o'clock they arrived in Thessaloniki, with those jeeps... and they take 1000 euro from each person. From the border to Thessaloniki.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

The children we talked with unanimously stated that there was **no freedom of behaviour while they were with smugglers. The smugglers were the ones to decide when they would move, for how long and under what conditions.** They were the ones who determine the means of transport, when migrants could communicate by telephone, as well as when they could fulfill other needs - go to toilet, eat or drink.

“ Usually, smugglers are two guys in the group. One in the front is using GPS to show the route, which route to go... and, the other one is in the rear. He is watching the group... Not to separate, not to get lost...
A boy of 14, Afghanistan ”

Mostly they tell you “you will have to walk for 1 hour” and “you'll have to walk for 3 or 4 hours”. [...] It's in their hands and if you want to go to a bathroom you can't go, if you feel hungry you can't eat, and if you want water you can't drink.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

“ After we gave money, we stayed there for 3 days. And the smugglers were too strict and they weren't giving us water. There was time for water like from 12 o'clock to 2 o'clock.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

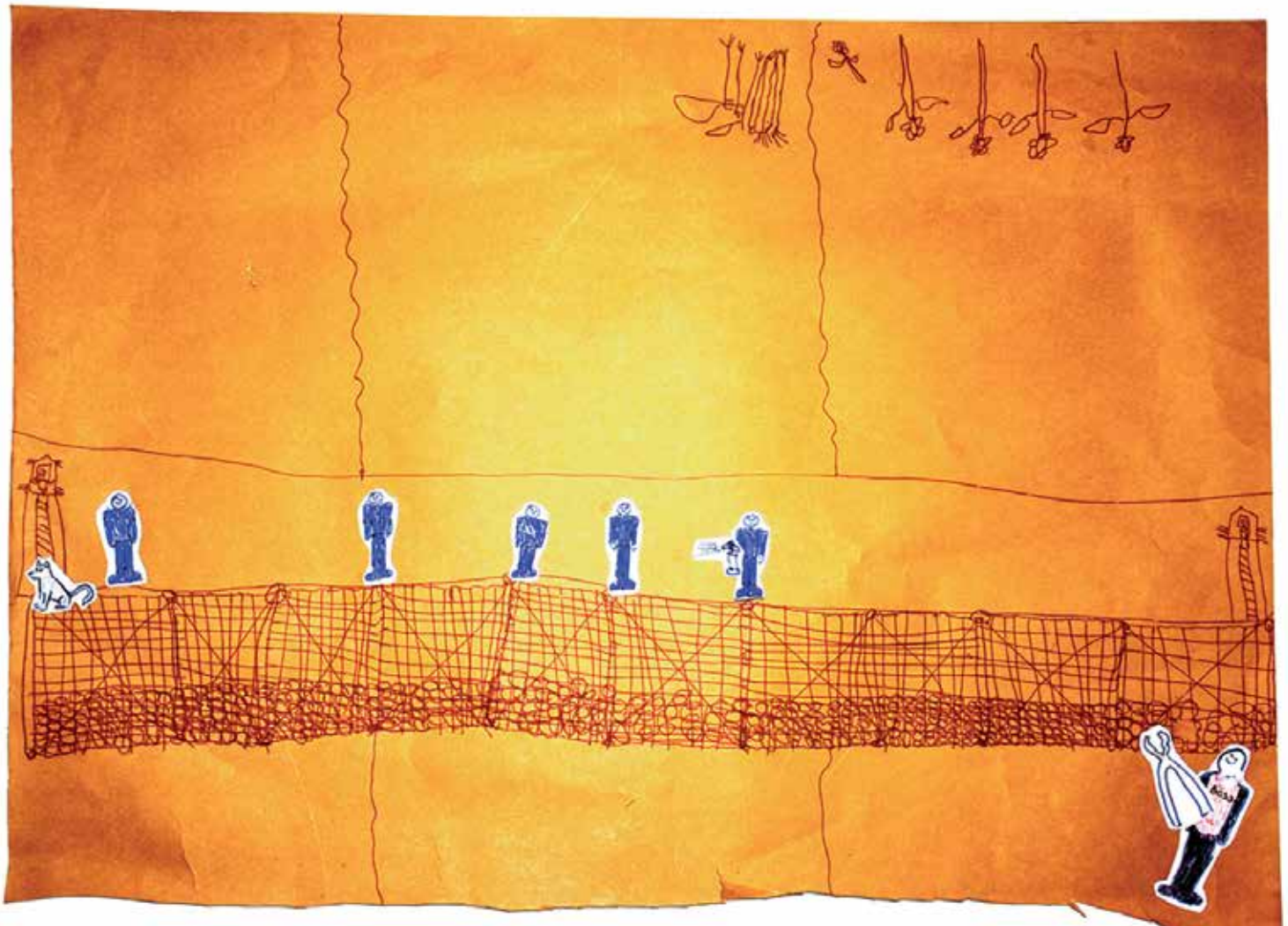
The children got limited information from smugglers – the information received mostly referred to how many hours they were going to walk, when they would reach borders and in which country they were currently located. Therefore, children relied mainly on information received from other migrants.

Local smugglers/agents with whom the children travelled **were often violent and used threats to control the children's behaviour.** Slightly less than half of the interviewed children who experienced violence said that the perpetrators were smugglers. It was most often kicking or slapping children when they were not quiet enough or did not move fast enough.

They demanded full obedience from the migrants they transported, and children who travel alone and who are weaker and less protected than the adults were often those who got the worse transport arrangements. Because they are small, they were often placed in stuffy and small car trunks, on the floor or forced to share seats with other passengers.

“ A smuggler is a decision maker; he decides where and how and in which direction. ..If you listen to them, they are ok, but if you don't listen to them, then they are violent.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

They prohibited us, for example, to talk, or even to cough... Some guys were coughing, and they kicked them...
A boy of 15, Afghanistan ”



“ In Iran I was beaten because of another boy. He had asthma; he couldn't breathe because three guys were in the trunk. When they closed the trunk, he couldn't breathe and when the smuggler stopped the car, the smuggler was angry and the three of us were beaten.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

We received two **testimonies of sexual violence** carried out by smugglers against unaccompanied boys. This topic was not specifically targeted in the interview guide, but it was in both cases spontaneously mentioned by children. Although their testimony on this topic was limited, these boys highlighted the experiences as particularly terrifying and humiliating. The boys who witnessed these scenes were afraid that it could happen to them too. The events of this type are particularly formative both for the children who experience them and those who witness them and may leave deep psychophysical consequences on them. Although it is necessary to conduct a different kind of survey to estimate the frequency of this phenomena, such findings are quite valuable for a more complete understanding of the experiences these children have and for designing more adequate psycho-social support programs.

“ ...They are not good people. I witnessed one case when one kid, a minor, was raped by smugglers. They would beat children if they had good mobiles. If they have money, they are taking it from them. [...] That minor was in my room and some smugglers were also in my room. One night, I woke up and heard that someone is crying. But, when I woke up, I saw that the smuggler was not in his place. The other minor was sleeping in the other bed..... When he took off the blanket, I saw that the smuggler was “busy” at that moment...
A boy of 17, Afghanistan/Iran ”

Apart from suffering direct violence by smugglers, the children often did not get even the basic resources needed for survival. While in rare cases smugglers ensured meals or water for them, children mostly had to buy these supplies on their own. If they got sick, there was no help from the smugglers. Regardless of their state, they were required to respect smugglers' orders and to unobtrusively move through transit countries. In some cases, smugglers left children who were injured or sick at certain points and returned for them when they transferred the rest of the group to the next smuggler. The children mostly found access to health services on their own, often when they were spending time in larger urban communities.

“ They didn't give us medicines or anything...just...how to say, lie down and wait until you get better. Once I got sick in Turkey and they didn't give me a medicine.
A boy of 16, Pakistan ”

The way in which the children perceive smugglers is very important for understanding the relationship they have with the smugglers and the reasons for their behaviour during the journey. They believe that any act of disloyalty to the smugglers, such as snitching to the police, would be punished, if not by that particular smuggler, then by other smugglers associated with him. The penalties that the children expected in these cases ranged from physical punishment to the refusal by all other smugglers to transfer them across other borders, and they never did it.

The children were reluctant to provide information about the prices that their family paid to smugglers. They generally claimed that they did not have this information since the journey was financed by their families. Based on the testimonies of those willing to provide this information, the prices of transferring migrants from the country of origin to the desired destination ranged from EUR 6,000 to over EUR 10,000. For a trip from Turkey to Lesbos, the sums of roughly 500 EUR were mentioned, while the transfer from Iran to Turkey, at least according to the knowledge of our respondents, was charged around 300 EUR. According to our respondents, the journey from Turkey to Serbia usually costs between 2,000 and 3,000 EUR. Those respondents who reported lower prices were at the same time respondents who travelled longer than the average. This can be taken as an indicator showing that the time spent on the route and the amount of money the smugglers take are in a certain correlation. In order to make final conclusions, this link should be confirmed on a larger sample of respondents.

Hiring a smuggler from one's own family or the community in which the children lived was one of the ways for parents to protect the children. In almost a third of the testimonies we collected during the survey, the children stated that the fact that their parents knew the main smugglers was a reason for their relatively decent behaviour. In those cases, the smugglers were relatives or came from the same village/community.

Nevertheless, even those respondents believed that the smugglers should not be trusted, that they did not provide accurate information and generally did not care about the needs of people/children they smuggle.

The “privileged” status they had, thanks to knowing the smugglers, was reflected in getting food or water at times when they did not have any money, the advice not to stay in certain countries due to weather conditions or assistance to get in touch with the family when they did not have mobile phones.

Communication with smugglers was mostly done via mobile phone applications, and not through direct calls. IMO, Viber or WhatsApp were reported as mostly used apps and communication through them mostly took place when making arrangements to go to the „game“¹⁵ or in rare situations the children were separated from the group.



¹⁵ Informal term migrants use to denote an attempt to cross a border in an irregular way

THE JOURNEY EXPERIENCES

The unaccompanied children travelled by combining different means of transport, mostly in very poor conditions. The most stressful and uncertain parts of the journey for them were those when they walked in extremely bad weather, passing through difficult terrain or crossing borders - which usually happened at night. They travelled in groups with other migrants among whom they had at least one person they trusted (a relative, an acquaintance or a new friend). The children often travelled with the nationals of their country of origin, or those who spoke languages similar to theirs.

They were often victims of theft, blackmail, and were worried about their safety. Travel experiences of the children were often country-specific, and the children learned about challenges from other migrants before coming to the next country. The children felt they were being treated worse than the local population and that not only the smugglers, but also the local population in the countries of transit made profit from them. Their behavior, the decisions that the children made during the journey were affected by their first-hand experience in transit countries, but also by what they heard from other migrants. In this way, the children decided which countries would be better for travelling, which countries had friendlier institutions and which countries could endanger their personal safety. During the journey most of them stayed in contact with their families.

Were you robbed during the journey?

YES 16

NO 18

No answer 2



THE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ROUTES

The children from Afghanistan most often travelled through Pakistan, Turkey and then either Bulgaria or Greece and North Macedonia before they entered the territory of Serbia. Pakistanis, Iranians (except those that came by plane directly to Serbia) and UASC from African countries also passed through Turkey. Turkey was seen as a mid-station for resting and finding contacts to continue the journey. At the start of the data collection for this study, the children often expressed the intent to continue the journey through Croatia, but, as the study continued, Bosnia and Herzegovina was increasingly mentioned as the next destination after Serbia.

According to the children's perception, the further they progressed on their journey, the more impenetrable the borders were, and the more often the army and police appeared as the factors that hindered travelling.

The children reported travelling through Pakistan in large groups and relatively fast. Before entering Iran, large groups were broken into smaller groups with different smugglers in charge. The smugglers led their groups in different directions, depending on their intended destination and how much they had paid for the trip. The children considered Iran as one of the most dangerous transit countries due to the attitude of local policemen towards migrants, regardless of their age. There were frequent testimonies of using fire arms at the border with Iran. There were several testimonies of the children being injured or witnessing the injuries/deaths of migrants they travelled with while crossing through Iran's mountainous regions. The most frequent testimonies about criminal groups intercepting vehicles, asking for money and valuables, occurred in Iran. The children did not stay in Iran for more than a few days.

“ From Pakistan we came to Iran and it was the most difficult journey, in Iran. Because it has such a different border, so strict.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan

First of all, I passed Iran, the most dangerous country. Sometimes they shot at us at the border.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan

We were there for 3 days and sometimes there was no water. And the smugglers were, they were too strict and they weren't giving us water sometimes, there was time slot for water like from 12 o'clock to 2 o'clock.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

“ One bread for three persons, in 24 hours.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

TURKEY

Turkey was the country where they stopped for the first time for a longer period of time to rest, earn money needed to continue the journey, change the smugglers they travelled with but also in cases when the children were forcibly detained by smugglers. The children we talked to testified about staying in Turkey from a few weeks to as long as two or three years. The children usually stayed in large urban centers such as Istanbul, typically in private accommodation they found thanks to information they got from smugglers and other migrants. Older children lived in flats on the periphery of the city with other migrants, while the younger ones sometimes stayed with families linked with smugglers.

According to the testimonials, there is a well-organized network of representatives of different Asian nations in Turkey who, already living in Turkey, were able to provide accommodation, jobs, information and other resources to new arrivals. The boys testified that the community support by people from their countries of origin functioned very well in large urban centres. Almost all the children who worked during the journey worked in this country.

“ In Turkey we were free, same as here in Serbia. We didn't have problems.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

Several children testified of being detained by smugglers in Turkey, to get additional money from their families. Other children stated that they knew others who were detained.

“ But in Istanbul, the person would come and they would just kidnap you. Or, if you go to the smuggler to talk with him to send you to Greece. Mostly they take you to their home and they just kidnap you there. They just call your family to send much money.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

When the children registered with the police in Turkey, their data and fingerprints were taken, and they often received documents cancelling their right to stay. If the children did not manage to find a contact to continue their journey, they stayed in Turkey after the expiry of the legally stipulated deadline.

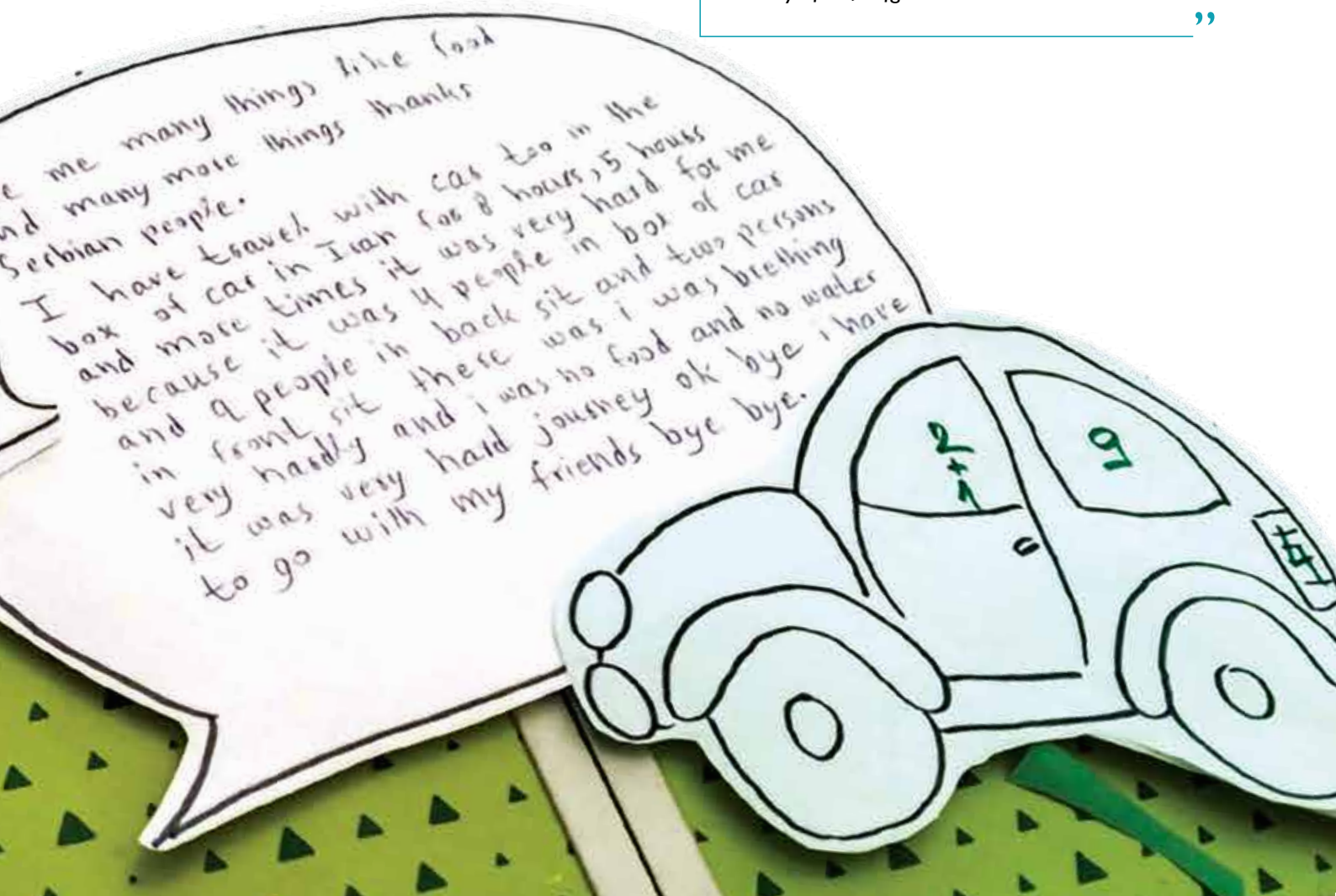
Bulgaria was perceived as the country in which the border police and other law enforcement agencies most often and most intensively used force. Most of the children said that they chose to pass through Greece and not Bulgaria because of fear from the local police and the way they would be treated in camps if caught. The children who passed through Bulgaria stayed there for a short time, trying to avoid the possibility of their fingerprints being taken, which, according to the information they have received, might result in a possible return to Bulgaria in the future.

“ ...and we were afraid of the police, if the police catch you there, in Bulgaria, they have dogs and the dogs can bite you, and the police, they are also beating people...
UASC boy aged 14, Afghanistan ”

MEANS OF TRANSPORT

The unaccompanied and separated children travelled by combining the means of transport - although they crossed the largest distances by buses and cars, certain parts of the journey were crossed on foot (usually when crossing the borders at night). Boats and trains were rarely mentioned as means of transport. **Due to the fact that they were smaller than adult migrants, but also expecting less resistance from children, they were more often placed in car trunks, on the floors below seats as well as in false vehicle floors.** For children, travelling in the smugglers' vehicles was much more uncomfortable and riskier than for adult migrants. The children described these experiences as scary and dangerous saying they travelled in complete darkness, sometimes fighting for air and space, not knowing the exact destination or duration of the journey, and generally not getting enough liquids and food during such stages of the journey.

“ One night we slept there in that house and the next morning, we were loaded in one car, 11 guys. In the trunk, on the front seat and also back seat. But, all together 11 persons. We were loaded in that car.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”



Most testimonials of travelling on foot, were related to crossing the borders and the passage through Iran. For the journey from Turkey all the way to Serbia (including Serbia) there were many testimonials about taxi drivers waiting at borders or in houses serving as rest places to take the children to the next point on the route. Other than the children from Iran who arrived in Serbia by plane, the plane was mentioned in just one additional case - the case of a minor who travelled by plane from Afghanistan to Iran with a forged passport and accompanied by a smuggler. Although they perceived the parts of the journey they crossed on foot as the most dangerous (reporting thefts by local population, having been arrested and held in detention), several children also testified about the dangers that occur during transportation by vehicles. The vehicles transporting the migrants were overloaded with passengers and baggage, traffic accidents occurred due to unadjusted vehicle speed and at times the drivers were under the influence of alcohol or opiates.

“...It was so difficult going back to Istanbul because, and the bus was so far away, we would walk more than 9 hours, sometimes 12 hours, to reach a bus station. And on the way there were some thieves, robbers. They were stealing money, mobile phones. They were Turkish people. So, there were so many thieves on the way there.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan”

Almost half of our respondents reported that they had experienced some form of theft or attempted theft of their personal belongings: money, but also items made of valuable materials (rings, chains, bracelets, etc.) or mobile phones. Almost all the children we talked to tried to protect themselves by carrying as little money and valuables as possible. They also kept valuables close to the body, in underwear or in closed pockets on the inner side of the garments - these separate pockets for money, in most cases, were sewn by their mothers before departure as a part of preparation for the journey. While sleeping, they usually kept valuables under their head.

“ I take a toothpaste and I empty it and I put money there.
A boy of 16, Iran”

The children very rarely travelled completely alone (this was reported only by the children who came to Serbia directly by plane). The children usually travelled in smaller groups of 10 to 15 people. Almost as a rule, these groups consisted of persons who children did not know before the journey. If a separation from a group occurred, it was often due to unforeseen circumstances during night border crossings (the group would split due to shootings, encounters with border guards, smugglers leaving, and similar). Most often, the groups were mixed - they consisted of men, women and included those who travelled alone, families, and other unaccompanied children. As they passed Turkey and got closer to the European countries, the migration groups were transformed into groups with significantly more men. The original groups the children started their journey with, sometimes having over one hundred people, often broke apart after crossing the first border, and new groups were formed. Many of the original travelers already reached their intended destinations. Additionally, the groups were divided by the smugglers and local agents in charge of the group while travelling through different routes. It should be kept in mind that this study was carried out during the autumn and winter months when, according to Save the Children data, the number of women and families on the road usually gets reduced, mainly due to adverse weather conditions.¹⁶

During the journey, or at least for one part of the journey, almost all children had persons in their groups whom they now consider their friends. The families often arranged the journey for their children to coincide with the journey of other children or adults from their community in order to ensure their protection and support along the way. If they travelled alone, in some cases their parents organized a meeting in advance with other children from different communities who were also traveling.

Have you been direct victim of police violence or have you witnessed police violence during your journey?

23

YES

13

NO

¹⁶ Data and trend analysis, Balkan Displacement and Migration Hub, Save the Children, December 2019: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/keyword/balkans-migration-and-displacement-hub-bmdh>

In some cases, we received information that the fathers of UASC got in touch with the parents of other boys who would travel together so that the children could meet before the trip. But even with these precautionary measures, our respondents emphasized that they rarely reached Serbia together with those acquaintances. In addition to receiving information from relatives who had already passed through this route in the past, the hiring of smugglers from the circle of family or friends, this was one of the **few preventive measures aimed at preparing and protecting the children on the move**, recorded during this research.

The most emotional testimonials during the interviews were those of the last day they spent with their families before starting the journey. It was during these parts of the interviews that younger children most often revealed that they started this journey against their will. Older adolescents presented themselves as adult members of society, and considered this journey to be part of their initiation into the world of adults. Still, even they told us that often their mothers had packed them for the journey, and their mothers had decided which clothes and food would be most needed.

Almost all our respondents who did not travel by plane stated that **it was crucial not to carry too many things**, because there were parts of the route that had to be passed on foot. All our respondents **set out on their journey carrying spare clothes, enough food to cross the first section of the road, water, mobile phone and a small amount of money in local currencies**. They reported the agreement for the smugglers to provide food on the road or allow children to buy it, even though these agreements tended to get broken and children were forced to pay local agents additionally for these items. **Although some of the children had ID cards in their countries of origin, during the interviews they claimed they did not carry those documents with them because they had a deal with the smugglers to travel without documents in order to be able to hide their age and identity if needed.**

Almost all of the children we talked to brought with them some intimate item, an object that reminds them of home. It was most often a piece of jewelry (ring, necklace, religious object, etc.) or a piece of fabric hand-embroidered by their mothers. The poorest ones did not have anything of value to take with them, but from the beginning of the journey they had been keeping some object that has a symbolic value for them: a candy given to them by their mother

before starting the journey or a piece of clothing they received from their parents for the occasion, which they carried with them although it was not usable anymore.

Some of the children did not want to reveal what exactly they brought with them, but undoubtedly, the most soul-stirring parts of the interviews with UASC were related to the moment they were asked to share information on whether they had brought with them an intimate object that reminded them of home. Several interviews that were not included in the final report were interrupted precisely at the moment when children shared with the researchers the memories about their last day at home. **Many of those intimate items were seized or stolen by smugglers, often in the first parts of the journey**, and the children shared with us great anger and sorrow about losing them. Several children tried to keep the objects by offering money to thieves and smugglers, most often without success.

“ When we were crossing from Afghanistan to Pakistan, at the border, there were thieves, and I wanted to give them money, just to keep the ring. But they didn't accept this. At that moment, I cried...
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

For the predominant majority of our respondents, the most important item that one needed to have on the road was a mobile phone. It was followed by water and money as per frequency of mentions. Mobile phone enabled communication with smugglers and agents, the ability to seek help from institutions and, most importantly, to maintain contact with the family.

“ I brought one pair of pants, some clothes and some food and water.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan

Water is very important. And not too many clothes. Not a heavy bag. And the mobile is very important on the route.
A boy of 13, Afghanistan ”

A great majority of the children we talked to purchased food and water during the journey using their own funds, and these costs were not included in the original price of the trip. Interestingly, many boys were aware that local residents in some parts of the journey sold food to migrants at much higher

prices than they normally charged, but they had to agree to these prices in order to survive. This experience in transit countries certainly affected the sense of trust that the children developed towards the local population, and affected their openness to the services offered to them as well as understanding of the motives for offering assistance. The children's experiences show that, besides food, migrants were charged more for some other services (such as transport) in most countries they passed through.

“ When we were going to a bus station, they didn't give us a ticket to Istanbul. Then they wanted more money for the ticket. Like, if a ticket to there was 30, they wanted 60 or 50.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

Speaking about the **conditions in camps** in Turkey and Bulgaria, the children most often complained that the quantity of food they received during the day was insufficient.

They had one or two meals a day, with several children saying that they had not received a single meal in a 24-hour period. Also, **most children complained that they did not understand administrative procedures that were, from their perspective, not clearly explained by representatives of official institutions** (insisting that children sign different documents, give fingerprints, request asylum or being discouraged from requesting asylum, etc.). According to our respondents, they often suffered violence by other migrants in the camps, and sometimes by representatives of institutions managing the camps. The violence was mentioned by nearly half of the children who have been accommodated in official centres during the journey and it was one of the reasons why the centres were unpopular among the children.

“ That was one big hall, a room. We were sleeping there, eating and also, we had toilets inside of that room. We didn't have a place to lie down. Sometimes if we spent a long time in toilet, they [police] were beating us with a pipe.
A boy of 14, Afghanistan ”



THE CONTACTS WITH FAMILY

All the boys we talked to had more or less regular contacts with their family members in the countries of origin. However, almost half of them experienced longer periods of time during the journey with no communication with their family. This happened in situations when their mobile phones were seized or stolen or when, for some reason, a smuggler isolated them from the group (usually to extort money from the family). During such periods, they were unable to communicate information about their status – their health situation, where they were currently located and whether they needed help.

The children we interviewed communicated with their families using **online messaging applications. The most commonly used app was IMO, with more than a half of our respondents using it for this purpose.** Direct calls, Viber, WhatsApp and FB Messenger were also used, but to a lesser extent.

In the great majority of cases, the children travelling from Afghanistan and Pakistan were not in contact with their family during the first part of the trip. For boys from Afghanistan, this meant that when they were crossing Pakistan, they could not contact their family until they arrived in Iran.

Although they carried their own mobile devices with them and often bought appropriate SIM cards for the countries through which they passed, the **smugglers decided when and for how long the children could communicate with their families.**

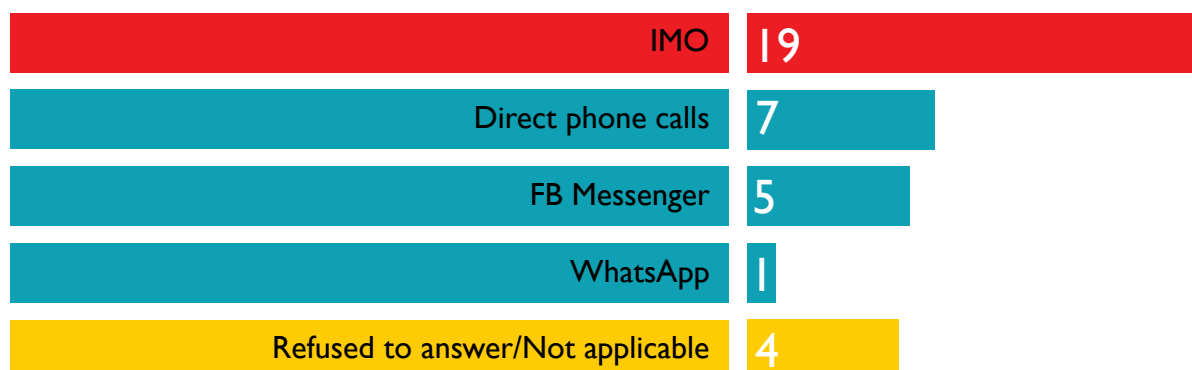
A permission to communicate during the travel was granted after crossing borders or arriving in larger urban centers.

The conversations would last a few minutes and the smugglers were present during the conversations. During the periods when the children were accommodated in cities or camps waiting for the right conditions for further travel, they had much greater freedom to communicate with their families. The children pointed out that during the conversations, they tried not to burden the family with their fears and especially avoided telling the female family members about their experiences on the road.

Interestingly, the boys' **predominant perspective was that the contact with the family was primarily necessary so that the family did not worry about them, and not as a way to protect themselves by informing the family where and how they were.**

These findings also indicate that the children, to some extent, minimized potential danger they were in. This further reinforces the assumption that the needs of the family are very high in the hierarchy of the needs of the children.

How do you mainly communicate with your family?



MONEY

One of the research questions for this study was related to the ways in which children obtain different resources that are difficult to access in transit, including money. An interesting finding is that the children considered **money as a resource that was not particularly difficult to get**. If they started their journey from Afghanistan, their own reserves were generally sufficient for them to travel through Pakistan and Iran. They passed through these two countries rather quickly, making sure that the food and money they carried were sufficient to satisfy their basic needs. The children reported that they initially carried **relatively small amounts of money** - about 100 - 200 EUR on average in local currencies. Some families could not allocate much more money for the trip and the **children considered it risky to carry more money fearing theft by the smugglers, other migrants or the local population**. Later they often received money from their families or from relatives they were trying to join in some of the Western Europe countries. According to the testimonies by children, money was obtained from the family in two main ways.

One option was for the family or the main smuggler to release certain amounts of money and send them to local agents who then provided for the needs of children. The other option was to have an adult local resident of the country through which the children were passing through, collect the money, for a certain fee, using a money transfer service such as Western Union (mentioned as an intermediary by more than half of the respondents who were willing to talk about money transfers). According to our respondents, the fees for such services in Serbia were mostly harmonized and amounted to 10% of the sum a migrant wanted to collect.

“ In that case you contact the family and the family contacts the smuggler in Afghanistan, then he tells the smuggler who is in the country where you are and the smuggler pays you.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan

In Istanbul you do not need Western Union. There is someone who does this. So, those in Kurdistan give money to someone, and they give that money to me in Istanbul.
A boy of 17, Iraq

”

OTHER RESOURCES

The most valuable object that the children had on the journey was a mobile phone, considered crucial for the survival in transit. The predominant majority of children interviewed emphasized that **the mobile phone was so important that it should always be carried**. Mobile phones helped them contact smugglers during the „dormancy“ period in urban environments where they waited for favorable conditions to cross another border. The children also used the phones to inform smugglers where they were if they got lost, to receive information from other migrants in the countries they were in, but also to inform their relatives if they needed money or other help, inform them where they were and how they felt.

Mobile phones were also the objects that the children were most likely to lose during the journey, either due to the conditions of travel (walking in poorly lit areas, through vegetation and hard-to-pass terrain), or due to theft, seizure and destruction of phones by the police at borders if they were caught. The children often said that border police in various countries destroyed mobile phones during border pushbacks, which significantly slowed down their travel, impeded identifying resources needed, and limited their ability to communicate with their families. In the periods when they did not have a telephone, they typically used the phones of other migrants to keep in touch with their families, which further confirms the thesis that fellow travelers represent the most important support network. Also, once they purchased food and water, a mobile phone was the next thing to buy from the money they got from their relatives or by working.

PUSHBACKS AT BORDERS

Pushbacks at borders were among the most stressful experiences for the children. Borders were usually crossed at night, reducing their spatial orientation ability. The children frequently experienced violence. When the children learned that there were many violent returns from certain borders, they often changed their planned journey route. Pushbacks from the borders occurred along the whole route but were much more frequent as children approached the EU borders.

According to the data collected by Save the Children and its partner organization Praxis from January to November 2018, a total of 1,487 cases of pushbacks of children at borders were reported. These included both violent and non-violent pushbacks, and included cases of refugees and migrants caught in the territory of one country and pushed back to another in spite of the expressed desire to seek asylum¹⁷. **More than 2/3 (68%) of pushback cases were reported by UASC themselves (98% of them were boys). Almost half of the cases reported by UASC (47%) involved some form of violence - either they themselves were victims or they witnessed violence.** Although the majority of UASC travelling through Serbia are older and they most often testify about the experiences of returns from the borders, it is important to point out that as many as one quarter of children younger than 13 years of age reported some form of violence during pushbacks.

The vast majority of the children we interviewed for this study testified about experiencing at least one pushback at a border, while about two thirds testified about several pushbacks.

Half of our respondents experienced some form of violence while being pushed back from borders by the border police. The most common experience was being hit with fists and kicked, but also being forced to take off clothes, having their mobile phones and money taken away. Several different testimonies by the children alleged that border guards in certain countries incited their dogs to attack them.

“ But the last boat came to the middle of the river and they pushed us to the river. Some of the guys could not swim... But, thank God, we all survived.
A boy of 17, Afghanistan

First time [at the Bulgarian border] we were not beaten that much, but the police took our jumpers, shoes, mobiles and money also...all the stuff, and we were pushed back. Without shoes... Second time, how to say, we were beaten so badly. They took off all our clothes except underwear. The police told us just to lie down and we were beaten with sticks. After that we told them “We don’t want to go through Bulgaria, we want to go through Greece.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan

We heard several testimonies related to sexual harassment of other migrants, mostly women, by border police in Bulgaria. Children described such experiences as particularly painful and humiliating. The reports were describing male and female migrants being stripped of their clothes and then pushed back to Turkey naked or in underwear. The boys spontaneously pointed out the degrading experiences of women as particularly disturbing and insulting. They have heard of more serious sexual offenses by police officers towards women at some border crossings.

Although these stories are unsubstantiated and our respondents did not personally witness them, they greatly influenced the picture the children have about the countries they passed through, as well as the expectations and fears that form a part of that picture.

“ The other group involved five children who are younger than me, with an Iranian woman. She was also naked. And they were violent towards her. They were touching her and laughing at her. And then they gave her clothes back to her, and she got dressed.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan

¹⁷ Save the Children. (2018.). *Stotine dece izbeglica svedoče o nasilju na granicama. [Hundreds of children report police violence at EU borders]* Retrieved from <https://nwb.savethechildren.net/bs/news/stotine-dece-izbeglica-svedo%C4%8De-o-nasilju-na-granicama>



LABOUR AS INFORMAL PRACTICE

Child labour was a surprisingly frequent informal practice the children told us about using. By working, the children managed to get the resources for the journey, and pay a part of their family's debts to smugglers. The child labour in this context covered unregulated work by minors carried out in challenging conditions that could have affect their psychophysical development. The fact that they were aware of being treated worse than other workers is also important for the development of their identity and could influence their expectations of their future role. The children mostly worked in textile factories or by collecting secondary raw materials. Some children came from communities where child labour was an accepted practice and this made their entry into the labour market easier.

The data collected by Save the Children and its partner organization Praxis in their day-to-day field work independently from this study, shows that a large number of migrant children, had the experience of working during their journey. Namely, out of 254 children interviewed in March 2019, almost one third (30%) worked in one of the transit countries before reaching Belgrade. Almost all of these children (97% of those who worked somewhere) worked in Turkey.

The definition of child labour used by Save the Children is based on the provisions of the United Nations` Convention on the Rights of the Child and represents any form of work that endangers the rights of the child, under Article 32 of the Convention.¹⁸ With refugee and migrant children being at a high risk of labour exploitation, child labour was one of the topics of this study.

The time the children spent on the road seems to be an indicator of whether they have worked in a transit country during their stay. When the children stayed for several months in the same country, it often meant that they have spent certain time doing some kind of work for money or other types of compensation.

Working during the journey was a topic that our respondents did not open spontaneously, and only after building rapport with the researchers they were ready to talk about their experiences. For most children, labour was not a taboo topic, but they reluctantly talked about the details of how they got employed (the social network that helped them to get a job) and the reasons for working. Often, child labour was not unusual in their countries of origin and some boys got used to this kind of obligation earlier.

With the exception of children from Iran arriving by plane, **almost half of the children we interviewed performed some kind of work from the moment they left their homes until the moment they were interviewed in Serbia.** Even if they themselves did not work on their journey, the children said that they knew other children of their age or younger who worked on the route.

“ Yeah, there were many persons from Syria, Iraq, who were much younger than us. And they worked much better than us and faster. They are experienced.
A boy of 17, Afghanistan ”

Our respondents most often mentioned **Turkey** as the country in which they themselves or other children worked. In fewer cases, they mentioned Iran, Greece, Pakistan and Serbia. Although in some of these countries legal work is possible from the age of 15, it should be kept in mind that these children did not have a legal status or guardians who could assess whether this work could be exploitative or harmful for their development.

¹⁸ "States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development." The Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF Belgrade, taken from the website <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/3186/file>, accessed February 9, 2019

Almost all of our respondents, regardless of whether they worked or not, had information about how to find temporary jobs and about the working conditions in different countries. While they considered getting a job in Turkey or Pakistan easy, even though they pointed out that the working conditions were very difficult, finding jobs in countries such as Greece was more difficult. Although several of our respondents testified about their own work or work by other minors in Greece, they emphasized labour inspections and the fact that police punished child labour far more severely than the illegal work of adult migrants. According to the children, mostly jobs in agriculture were available to them in Greece, **while jobs in textile and footwear industry, as well as in collection of secondary raw materials (waste) prevailed in Turkey**. Almost half of the respondents who worked during their journey worked in Turkish textile factories. Jobs in agriculture, hospitality industry and trade were also reported in Turkey, while in Pakistan, work in sales was mentioned as a source of income for the children. There was one report of craft work in Serbia and hairdressing in Bulgaria.

“ Some minors work in shoe factories, for example, and most of the minors work with that stuff, old stuff, that you need to recycle.
A boy of 13, Afghanistan ”

The children found jobs through a network of other migrants who have been in the country for a while and much more rarely through smugglers. According to their own testimonies, the children were forced to work in cases when they needed money for the rest of the trip and when frequent pushbacks prevented them from travelling further for a longer period of time. Arrangements with people who found them the jobs were different - children sometimes paid a percentage to those who found them a job, while in other cases they got a job without having to pay with the help of other migrants.

All the children who worked **reported very poor working conditions**. They stated that they were aware that they had worked under much less favourable conditions than local adult workers employed in the same factories. Namely, working hours at factories were considerably longer for the migrant children (a minimum of 12 hours), while those who wanted to earn money faster and who managed to

make a deal on overtime payment, reported even longer working hours. Jobs they performed in factories included carrying goods, attaching labels and ornaments on clothing and sewing. A few of our respondents testified that they have slept in the factories where they worked. These boys reported that **their salaries were significantly lower than the salaries of adult local workers**, and that sometimes they did not get paid for some of the time they spent working there. Based on their testimonies, the children were not enslaved and were free to change places of employment which they rarely did because for them the conditions in most factories were unfavorable.

“ There are jobs in Turkey, but it is very hard. [...] Turkish people do 8 hours of work and they take more money. But they take refugees because you work 12 hours and you take less money. [...] Most of the people I saw worked for more than 4 months and the boss of the factory didn't give them money. And you can't complain to the police because you don't have ID cards...
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”



“ There are jobs in Turkey, but it is very hard. [...] Turkish people do 8 hours of work and they take more money. But they take refugees because you work 12 hours and you take less money. [...] Most of the people I saw worked for more than 4 months and the boss of the factory didn't give them money. And you can't complain to the police because you don't have ID cards...

A boy of 16, Afghanistan

I was paid less than Turkish people and the overtime that I was doing... I was not paid for that. We were paid like 10 euros from 8 till 8, and for everything I worked after 8, for 5 hours more, overtime, till 12, I was not getting paid for that. I asked the boss “Why aren't you paying me?” and he told me “I give you a room in the factory to sleep and I'm taking that off”.

A boy of 17, Afghanistan

The job was pretty hard. Because the machine was very hard where we worked. And the shift lasts twelve hours... but, I wanted money, that's why I worked overtime. About 18 -20 hours of work... 5 Turkish liras for one hour... and I worked for about 20 hours there. It was a very hard job, sometimes I slept only for 4 hours...

A boy of 17, Pakistan

”

The children who worked in Turkey pointed out that they had never experienced a visit from a state labour inspection, and that they never feared that labour inspectors would come. They were not offered support to continue their education or find a more adequate employment in Turkey.

It is interesting that, despite the great difficulties they experienced working— the feeling of being deprived of their rights, breach of agreements by employers, and difficult working conditions - **a number of children reported finding a job and getting a salary as one of the moments when they were the most proud of themselves during their migration journey.** The children saw the work as practice that helped them not only to earn money but also to get empowered to some extent. In this way they had established some control over the situation they were in. They saw this experience as an indicator of how successfully they would manage on their own in the countries that were their chosen destinations.

Our findings indicate that **most children expect to work in European destination countries.** Only two boys stated they knew they would not have the right to work before adulthood and that they would go to school until that moment. The vast majority of children expected that it would not be difficult to find jobs in the EU countries, regardless of their status of juveniles. They counted on an already established network of their compatriots and relatives would help them earn money they could send to their family.





INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND OTHER SOURCES OF SUPPORT DURING THE JOURNEY

The way in which the children perceive the official institutions is crucial for understanding the children's actions, and the reasons why they utilised (or not) the services available to them. The police were one of the few institutions that almost all the children came in contact with. The children had the ambivalent and occasionally negative attitude towards the police largely based on inconsistent support, and instances of violence and perceived corruption. Except for civil society organizations that were sporadically cited as a source of help, primarily in refugee camps, there were no other institutions that the children mentioned as especially helpful or harmful. The most important source of almost all needed resources for UASC were other migrants, including smugglers whom they did not trust, but whose information were vital for moving along the route.

For almost all the children we talked to, the people they travelled with were the most important resource they had - the most important source of information, protection and support during the journey. Although this group was not a stable social network, it nevertheless constituted the backbone for different types of support they needed. In addition to the smugglers, the persons of support included members of the ethnic group the children belonged to and whom they encountered in the transit countries.

According to our respondents, the children found out from other migrants where safe accommodation was available in each town, whether they should apply for asylum or not, how to get food, how to move through the cities they arrived in, what was the reputation of organizations providing assistance to migrants, where migrants could experience violence by the police, how they could get money or find temporary jobs, etc.

In cases when smugglers left children in a country or if their trip was paid only to Turkey, other migrants played a key role in finding information about smugglers to be hired for further travel.

Other migrants were a source of information about SIM cards which could be used in different countries, places where children could communicate with their family or ways to get to the Internet. Other migrants' means of communication (phones, tablets, etc.) could also be used in cases of emergency. The children often shared food, information and other resources they owned with other migrants from their group.

“ In Afghanistan you must have an Afghan SIM card, and an Iranian SIM in Iran. But in Turkey they have SIM cards which work up to Italy. [...] I've heard from people who needed to buy it before.
A boy of 14, Afghanistan ”

Fellow migrants were a source of valuable information about the journey ahead and the way to survive, but at the same time a **source of much inaccurate information**. Exposure to inaccurate information affected children's perception of their situation (the journey and their expectations from the journey) influencing their everyday decisions.

Other migrants also posed a threat that they could steal the belongings the children carried with them and were competing with children for limited resources during some parts of the journey (food, water, safer and more comfortable places in vehicles, accurate information, etc.). One of the difficulties that the children sometimes mentioned in the context of obtaining the resources needed for travelling was the impression that adult members of the group did not see them as their equals and accordingly did not share resources equally with them.

“ Adult migrants, for example, they're not talking to me. Because they think I am younger, small, and I don't understand anything. Therefore, they don't talk to me.
A Boy Of 15, Afghanistan ”

The police were the official institution the children have had the most experience with. At the same time, this was the institution they feared the most, regardless of whether they had direct experience with the police or not.

There was certain ambivalence towards the police among our respondents travelling unaccompanied on the Balkans route. Although they were often hiding from the police, and about two-thirds of them have experienced or witnessed violence involving police officers, this was the first institution children addressed for help when they lost their smugglers and their group. The police were mentioned as the institution to address in cases of emergency by almost all respondents.

“ If you get lost in a jungle and you want to survive, go to the police. Because in the jungle and in the mountains, there is no one to help you. The only one that can help you is the police.
A Boy Of 13, Afghanistan ”

The children mentioned how the police sometimes prevented them from exercising some of their rights, such as the right to health care or to seek asylum. Several children testified that the police in Bulgaria, without providing adequate translation, forced children to sign documents related to deportation.

“ Then the police caught us and we were there for a week and I was so sick there because the journey in Iran was too difficult. So, then I told the police that I wanted to go to a hospital. They refused because there were so many people who were sick.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

In Bulgaria, when we were detained for 24 hours, we were in a police station, like in a jail. They gave us some papers; the police wanted us to sign them for deportation. There was a translator, but the translator didn't tell us what they were for, why we should sign that. And, we signed it. From that police station, we were sent to a closed camp, and we were in this closed camp around 15 days and they interviewed us. After the interview, we were sent to an open camp, and they said: “You have already signed a paper for deportation, you will be deported”.

A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

“ Hitting you. With sticks. My brother was there in the winter, it was winter in Serbia. So, he told me that whenever the Croatian police caught them, they were pushing them into the snow, they were hitting them. But I think nowadays the Croatian police don't do this.
A boy of 16, Afghanistan ”

The children repeatedly mentioned the police in the context of corruption. These were the situations when the smugglers took extra money from the children to pay the police at border crossings or to allow them to return to large urban centres with a greater range of resources. The children thought that the official security forces could both harm and protect them, sometimes for an adequate amount of money.

“ They sent us back to Turkey. There we met Turkish police, but we paid them money and they sent us by buses to Istanbul.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan ”

He [the smuggler] paid money to the police when the police caught us. He gave money to them in Turkey and also in Iran.
A boy of 15, Pakistan ”



“ They caught us and sent us to one room, for one night. After one night, they said: give us money. And we gave money to the police. They got tickets for all the boys and sent us back to Athens.
A boy of 14, Afghanistan ”

“ When I signed it, they changed my age, because they [Greek police] said that it was the only way if I wanted to go outside [the jail]. For that you have to be, you know, adult. I said it was no problem for me.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan ”

Our respondents very rarely mentioned civil society organizations as an important source of support during the journey. Their assistance was mostly related to the provision of food and water, and only for Greece and Serbia the children mentioned legal aid or other types of protection services as provided by these organizations.

It is particularly important to point out that during the study we encountered different testimonies about the way in which UASC presented themselves before the official institutions. Namely, depending on the information they received from other migrants and the expected rules in different countries, it often happened that the children, in order to move faster through transit countries and ensure better resources or accommodation in those countries, changed their personal data. On several occasions our respondents stated that they were forced to hide their actual age - they decreased or increased it, in order to fit into the current rules conditioned by different legal systems. In some countries, members of certain ethnic groups in migration were treated differently from others, so we heard reports that the children in Turkey presented themselves as Pakistani rather than Afghan because it meant a shorter stay in camps and greater freedom of movement. Other children told us the opposite, presenting themselves as Afghans, to avoid deportation. There were cases when lying about their age helped the children find better resources during the journey, including by registering as adults to reach certain camps in which their acquaintances were or to be released from custody, or lowering their age to get into a particularly privileged age category.

“ The Turkish police caught us and my friend told me: if you say you are Afghani, then they don't let you go for 3 months.... So, when they caught me, I told them I am Pakistani... Then I spent 2 nights in jail, or 3, and they released me and I came back to Istanbul.
A boy of 15, Afghanistan ”

Impressions of the institutions were influenced by the administrative procedures that the children encountered during their journey. We heard from the children that they could not understand the procedures or what the documents they signed or refused to sign meant either because of inadequate translation, or because the contents were unadjusted to their age, education or emotional state. They also did not know what were their rights and opportunities. In order to access different legal procedures, including asylum, they were referred to complicated administrative processes they usually did not understand and often misinterpreted, with potentially detrimental results. Although the children had contact with the representatives of various official institutions and non-governmental organizations who gave them some information, the fact that the children knew so little about their specific rights and obligations illustrates the need for better information sharing.





HOW THEY SEE THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE

Understanding the way in which the children experience the migration journey is very important for understanding their mental state, assessing their coping mechanisms, and the effect on their development.

The unaccompanied and separated children rarely mentioned pleasant experiences from their journey. Their experiences during the journey were much more coloured with a **sense of fear and helplessness**, and this is something they shared with the researchers with no hesitation. Two children told us about positive experiences related to humane acts by local inhabitants towards the children in difficult situations (getting transportation in bad weather, assistance in finding different resources, and similar).

The children told us about moments during the journey when they were particularly **proud of themselves**. These rare moments of pride were related to situations in which they took control and were relying on their own strengths and resourcefulness. The most typical examples were related to the moment when they earned money for the first time or when, despite the great fear, they were able to overcome an obstacle, such as surviving in the forest when the group was separated from the smuggler.

It is important to add that the children were rarely capable or willing to select any specific experience as the most negative one. Although the whole journey was difficult and intimidating, some children emphasized that crossing borders at night was particularly stressful because they moved in a complete darkness, by foot, fearing police, army, wild animals, but also the smugglers who were particularly cruel in such situations towards those who would not listen to their orders or had no physical ability to move in the way demanded by them.

“ I felt like a sheep... How to say, a lot of sheep followed by three wolves. What they tell you to do, you have to do it. There is nothing I could be proud of...

A boy of 16, Afghanistan

Of course, I don't want to lie, I cried because I was alone and I didn't know where to go.

A boy of 15, Afghanistan

Working in Turkey. I was proud of that... If you manage to work it means you are strong.

A boy of 15, Pakistan

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All our respondents described their experiences during the journey as difficult, terrifying and threatening, and it was not surprising that none of the children stated that they would want their younger siblings to go on this or a similar journey. They would only like them to travel legally, by plane, without smugglers. When asked about a message for their friends and peers in the country of origin, their message was: don't go.

“ ...If he doesn't have any problems in Pakistan... like a family problem, or this kind of a problem... if he doesn't have any serious problems in Pakistan... then don't come here, because it's very difficult to do it...

A boy of 17, Pakistan

This is my message to the parents: don't send your children, just keep them safe, because, they can be lost, they can be killed, everything can happen to the children on this route.

A boy of 17, Afghanistan

I will give advice to all, don't come, build your life in Afghanistan. The route is very difficult. I cried in the jungle of Bulgaria and one of my friends couldn't walk so he stayed alone in that jungle and he only came after 10 days... [...] I cannot tell my family that this route is so difficult because my mother is sick and she's got cancer, but if somebody else asks me, I will tell him: don't come.

A boy of 14, Afghanistan

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

In order to identify the most effective programming and advocacy for the protection of unaccompanied and separated children, a more in-depth look into some of the practices that affect them, including trans-national smuggling networks, child labour and exploitation, and border management practices is needed to improve visibility and promote evidence-based activities.

Better protection of unaccompanied and separated children from violence and abuse by smugglers but also at the borders is needed, including by introducing stronger mechanisms for identification and referral at borders to ensure that vulnerable children have immediate access to the services that protect them. More efficient use of the existing and the introduction of new accountability mechanisms to respond to widespread violations of child rights are needed, including by expanding awareness raising, trainings and accountability of police.

Better procedures for cooperation and information sharing between EU and non-EU countries in the struggle against the business model of human smuggling, immediate involvement of child protection authorities at identification, and cross-border coordination on individual cases, is needed to improve protection for children.

UASC should have access to adequate reception and asylum procedures, including shelter, alternative care, medical care and education, but also access to clear and efficient legal procedures, including asylum, family reunification or resettlement.

The children need appropriate psychosocial and psychological support.

The provision of appropriate information to unaccompanied and separated children in a way that they can understand, including on the asylum process, legal pathways, rights they have, risks they might be facing should be prioritized.

Recognising the specific needs UASC have, programming approaches should be specifically tailored to respond to the needs of adolescents traveling alone,

taking into account their specific position of being on the brink of adulthood, and ensuring their full participation in decisions affecting them. Consider developing new approaches for ensuring durable solutions and livelihoods in countries where they are identified.

The best interest of the child should be the primary consideration in all actions and decisions that affect children.

The availability of safe and supportive adults should be prioritized in all protection activities. Innovative ways to cooperate with community networks supporting children on the move should be considered, including to improve access to information.

Consider developing programmes to raise awareness about the availability of support programmes run by institutions and NGOs and programmes to motivate UASC to access these programmes, including in supporting early access to education.

International human rights treaty bodies that monitor implementation of core international human rights treaties, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child, regional human rights bodies, such as the Council of Europe and OSCE should examine the human rights situation at the European borders and access to procedures in countries of transit.

The private sector should exercise due diligence to prevent child labour in its supply chain.

Drivers of migration in the countries of origin should be better understood and appropriate advocacy interventions developed to raise awareness of the dangers children could face travelling alone, as well as stronger programming interventions for children and their families to raise awareness about dangers and risks children are exposed to during the migration journey.

Consider designing new programmes to work with families in the countries of origin, on information provision, family strengthening and awareness raising.



SAVE THE CHILDREN IN NORTH WEST BALKANS

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