



# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OUT OF SIGHT, EXPLOITED AND ALONE**

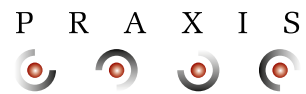
A JOINT BRIEF ON THE SITUATION FOR  
UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN IN BULGARIA,  
THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA, SERBIA AND CROATIA

MARCH 2017



Ulfar, 16, from Afghanistan, was transferred by the Serbian police from Belgrade's barracks to the Reception Centre in Presevo, near the FYROM border, in an attempt to clear the squats in Belgrade. Due to the large number of children who are staying in Presevo for prolonged periods of time, Save the Children started exploring structured educational activities, with the aim of addressing the gap in service provision, in particular refugee and migrant children's education.

Ulfar says, "School is the best place for every human. You can learn everything in school. Your teacher will study with you, and teach you not only things from school, but also what to do in life, how to talk to people, how to build your future."



# THE WORLD IS IN THE MIDST OF A GLOBAL DISPLACEMENT CRISIS,

with 65 million people forced to flee their homes. Since early 2015, over one million fleeing conflict and crisis have transited through Greece or Bulgaria to seek safety and a better future in Europe—nearly 100,000 of them were unaccompanied or separated children (UASC). At least a third<sup>1</sup> of those still arriving to Europe and irregularly traveling through or stranded along the former Balkan Route are children, including UASC. This continued irregular flow is driven by ongoing conflicts, insecurity and poverty in countries of origin, and by insufficient information, uncertain outcomes, delays in the asylum process, and poor reception conditions and services in first reception countries, as well as along the Balkan route.

Every day we see UASC traveling with smugglers, exposed to the risks of physical and sexual abuse or exploitation, crossing many European borders without being registered by the authorities or being incorrectly registered as adults. These children travel thousands of kilometers to reach safety in Europe, and they are slipping through the cracks.

It is estimated that over 1,300 UASC are currently at risk of exploitation, violence and trafficking throughout the region.

This brief is a joint effort by 12 national and international humanitarian agencies to raise awareness about this ongoing but hidden crisis for some of the world's most vulnerable children, specifically focusing on UASC in Bulgaria, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Serbia and Croatia.

**To improve the overall response for these children, all stakeholders must address the:**

- ❑ **Insufficient and unreliable data or information management on UASC within the region;**
- ❑ **Lack of options for safe accommodation and comprehensive services in line with each child's best interests;**
- ❑ **Lack of access to legal pathways and lack of cross-border case management to improve continuity of care and protection; and**
- ❑ **Exposure to exploitation, violence and trafficking, including as a result of smuggling and violent pushbacks.**

Many children along the Balkan route attempt to complete their journey without being formally registered in any of the countries along the way; and many of the measures meant to help identify and protect them are not appropriately implemented. Age assessment procedures do not exist or are inadequate, with nonexistent or limited procedural guidelines, and insufficient and poorly trained staff at times fail to identify children, leading some to be erroneously treated as adults. Information for identified UASC is rarely shared among service providers within country, and almost never across borders. Overall, this lack of reliable data makes planning and establishing measures to support these children incredibly difficult.

In FYROM, Serbia and Croatia, identified UASC are not consistently provided with safe accommodation, and no specialized shelter is available for UASC in Bulgaria. Where specialized accommodation is available, it can often host just a small number of children, is already overcrowded, substandard, without adequate services, and at times lacks age and gender segregation for those over 14. With increased emphasis on border controls, placement of children in detention-like conditions is also documented in FYROM and Bulgaria.

The critical best interest assessments (BIA) and best interest determination (BID) are often carried out in an ad hoc manner, using different criteria, with language barriers when translation is poor or non-existent. And while guardianship procedures exist in Bulgaria, FYROM Serbia and Croatia, it has been observed that they are often implemented so as to merely satisfy formal requirements or not at all. Temporary guardians are not constantly present, and legal guardians are often overwhelmed, not properly trained, not vetted, and do not have appropriate guidance on their role and responsibilities. There is a general lack of case management, along with insufficient provision of individual needs assessments, interpreters, specialized services, and few functional referral pathways. UASC do not often have access to formal or non-formal education, despite some staying in a country for months, and there is a need to strengthen available psychosocial services to mitigate the longer-term impact on the children's development.

Access to international protection is very slow and inefficient. The Dublin process of family reunification, for instance, takes an average of two years, and if started in one EU state, cannot be continued in another. The process from non-EU to EU states is not well-known and also often slow.

The inability to access clear information on legal pathways, and where possible to join their families in the EU in a reasonable timeframe, often compels children to take great risks in traveling with smugglers.

UASC encountered along the route often report violence by police during their journey, and there are frequent reports of unlawful pushbacks, in some cases using violence, by authorities in Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, FYROM and Bulgaria, affecting many children and UASC. Ultimately, cross-country smuggling networks are well established, very lucrative, and thriving. And while countries have intensified efforts to combat smuggling, it is clear that without safe and legal routes to protection in Europe, UASC will continue to take irregular routes, often with smugglers.

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**I NEVER SAY I LIVE  
IN SUCH PLACES.  
THEY WILL GET SAD.**

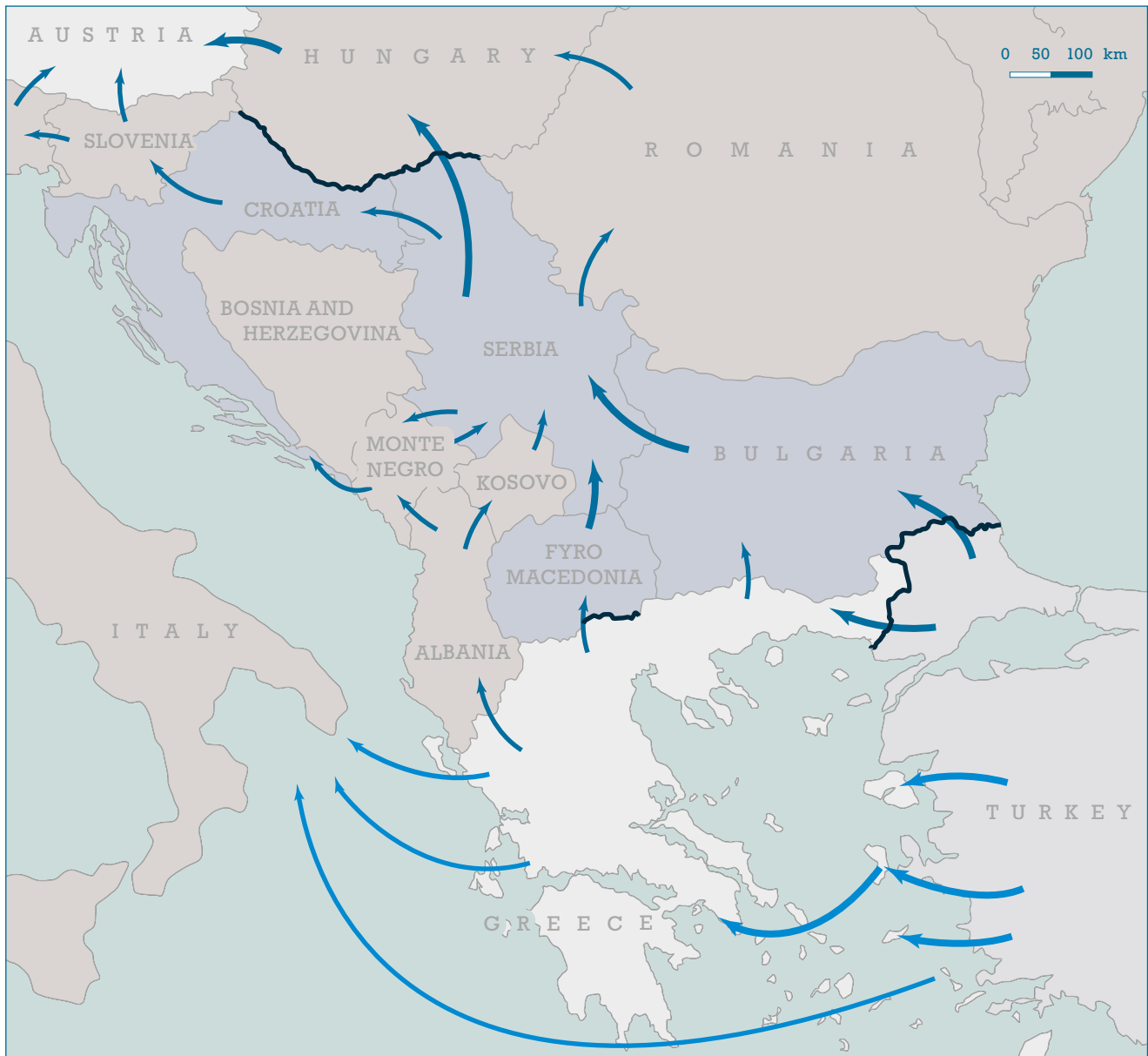
**I TELL THEM WE  
ARE IN A GOOD  
PLACE AND WE  
ARE COMFORTABLE.**

**MY PARENTS ALWAYS  
SAY, 'KEEP GOING  
TO GO TO FRANCE.'**

**ERSHAD, 16, FROM AFGHANISTAN,  
LIVING IN A WAREHOUSE**

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## REFUGEE MOVEMENT THROUGH THE BALKANS



← LAND ARRIVALS      ← SEA ARRIVALS

— FENCES

In the Balkans all international borders are now officially closed to refugees. Some states have also erected physical barriers along certain sections of their frontiers to further frustrate refugees' efforts to move through their territory.

Source: UNHCR, "Desperate Journeys: Refugees and migrants entering and crossing Europe via the Mediterranean and Western Balkans routes" February 2017 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/53994>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

- ❑ Re-prioritize the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance to better support Balkan states in providing comprehensive care to UASC, upholding the Commission's 10 Principles of Integrated Child Protection Systems.
- ❑ Encourage EU member states to employ funding from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund to address shortcomings in reception facilities and provisions for UASC.
- ❑ Introduce a Common Guardianship Strategy as a matter of priority, including the establishment or development of existing networks to meet international guidelines/best practice.
- ❑ Take all available measures to ensure EU member states meet commitments under EU law regarding the transfer of UASC, such as relocation, family reunification and the Dublin Regulation.
- ❑ Prevent and hold to account any human rights and child rights violations in member and candidate states.

Egbal, from Afghanistan, traveled to Belgrade, Serbia, in the company of his best friend Muzafar. They are both 13 years old. The two boys crossed thousands of kilometers, counting only on each other's help and support.

As the numbers of the refugees staying for longer period in Serbia started to increase, Save the Children started supporting local partner InfoPark, delivering 300 freshly prepared, culturally appropriate, warm lunches each day in Belgrade's parks, aiming to cover the needs of the population unable to access existing food distribution zones.

Egbal says, "It's been a month since we are here, in Belgrade. We sleep in the park. It is okay, we don't mind it, and we are not afraid. We stay close to the smugglers, because they are going to take us to Hungary. We already tried to cross four times, but we didn't succeed. Last time we tried, we came across police dogs, and the whole group was badly bitten. I was in such bad shape that I had to go to the hospital in Subotica [in northern Serbia], where I spent 20 days. As soon as I got better, I came back to Belgrade."

## TO EU MEMBER STATES

- ❑ Support enhanced provisions for UASC in ongoing negotiations on the revision of the Common European Asylum System, including on special procedural guarantees, early appointment of guardians and an expanded definition of family members.
- ❑ Redouble efforts to implement and facilitate existing legislation to ensure safe, legal and effective routes to international protection, including expedited family reunification (including from non-EU states), resettlement, humanitarian visas or private sponsorships, prioritizing and including all children with no discrimination.
- ❑ Detention is never in the best interests of the child, even as a last resort. Put an end to the detention of children.





Edrees, 17, was forced to leave his village in Afghanistan. He traveled for 5 months to reach Belgrade, where he had to stop, not being able to cross into Hungary due to the border restrictions.

He sleeps in abandoned buildings and warehouses behind Belgrade's train station; some of the refugees and migrants stuck in Belgrade, mostly single men and boys traveling alone from Afghanistan, choose to do so, being afraid of losing contact with the smugglers, who they see as their only chance of reaching their destination—one of the European Union countries. They also fear deportation from Serbia.

As the number of the refugees and migrants staying for longer periods in Belgrade's open spaces began to increase, Save the Children started supporting their local partner, InfoPark, in delivering warm lunches to Belgrade's parks. Edrees is one of many young boys who stand in line every day to get their meals.

## TO BALKAN HOST GOVERNMENTS

- ❑ Revise existing asylum policies to stipulate mandatory prioritization of processing for UASC and adopt swift mechanisms to facilitate the practical implementation of national policies on UASC.
- ❑ Put an end to the detention of children.
- ❑ Design and disseminate policies, protocols, or SOPs relating to the identification of children and any particular vulnerabilities, and ensure their implementation is monitored and evaluated systematically.
- ❑ Immediately establish measures to ensure all children arriving or stranded are registered/ documented, assigned well-trained guardians, and granted prioritized access to international protection procedures.
- ❑ Carry out individual assessments of each UASC to determine protection needs, possible legal options (e.g., family reunification) and to identify particularly vulnerable individuals.
- ❑ Ensure qualified, adequately trained guardians are appointed upon identification and present at all stages of the international protection procedure and associated to all decisions on child protection measures.
- ❑ Ensure all children have access to informed and participatory BIA and BID.
- ❑ Provide children with regular legal support and access to relevant information in their native language.
- ❑ Establish age and gender appropriate shelter for UASC only, and improve the conditions in existing shelters in line with the Children Protection Minimum Standards<sup>2</sup> as well as the feedback from consultations with UASC.
- ❑ Establish rigorous data collection schemes to capture UASC's access to services and international protection procedures, and consider harmonizing data collection methodologies and tools with neighboring countries.
- ❑ Ensure staff from all agencies caring for/working with UASC receive advanced training on BIA and BID, children's rights, child safeguarding, confidentiality, privacy and holistic age assessment.

## TO NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES

- Ensure better coordination between all humanitarian actors in designing programs, supporting host governments, facilitating cross border cooperation, and generating and disseminating relevant data at national and transnational levels, including on case support.

## TO DONORS

- Make necessary resources available to both host governments and NGOs to appropriately respond to the needs of UASC in each country, including for shelter and alternative care, staffing, and programs to provide an appropriate response, in line with Child Protection Minimum Standards and respecting child rights.

- 1 UNHCR data for arrivals to Greece since 1 January 2016 estimates 37% are children. UNHCR's data (December 2016) for Serbia estimates 46% of new arrivals are children. While disaggregation of arrivals to Bulgaria and FYROM are unavailable, it is estimated that 43% and 45% of those in government reception facilities are children, respectively.
- 2 The Sphere Project, Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action

*Cover and page 5 photographs:*  
Miodrag Ćakić/InfoPark, Belgrade, Winter 2016/17.

*Inside front cover and page 4 case study photographs:*  
Tatjana Ristić/Save the Children, December 2016 and August 2016.

Design by Ros Mac Thóim.

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**Save the Children** works in more than 120 countries. We save children's lives. We fight for their rights. We help them fulfill their potential.

Save the Children works in Greece, Serbia, FYROM and Croatia to ensure support and care for child refugees and child migrants, with a particular focus on unaccompanied and separated children, through child protection activities and system strengthening efforts along the route.

To find out more about our work in the Balkans, see:

<https://www.savethechildren.net/>



**The International Rescue Committee** is a humanitarian aid organization working in 40 countries across the world, and committed to helping people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and gain control of their future.

The IRC leads a consortium of partners providing shelter, protection services, and alternative care solutions for vulnerable children including unaccompanied & separated children and minors who are stranded in Greece, Serbia and other countries along the Balkan route.

More information about the IRC's response in the Balkans at:

<https://www.rescue.org/Serbia>