

LIFE TRANSITIONS OF THE UNACCOMPANIED MIGRANT CHILDREN IN SLOVENIA: SUBJECTIVE VIEWS

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ABSTRACT

Life Transitions of the Unaccompanied Migrant children in Slovenia: Subjective Views

The article addresses the issue of unaccompanied migrant children seeking international protection in Slovenia and their perceptions of four different life transitions they experience through their journey: a transition across geographical spaces, institutional transition, transition over time and psychological transition. The implementation of the existing international protection system in Slovenia is seen through their narratives and perceptions of their own best interest, various gaps, constraints and weak points in the procedures. There are no durable solutions for unaccompanied minors in Slovenia who are in search of a better everyday life.

KEY WORDS: unaccompanied migrant children, life transitions, best interest of a child, subjective views

IZVLEČEK

Življenjski prehodi mladoletnih migrantov brez spremstva v Sloveniji: subjektivni pogledi

Članek obravnava mladoletne migrante brez spremstva, ki v Sloveniji iščejo mednarodno zaščito, in njihovo razumevanje štirih različnih življenjskih prehodov, ki so jih izkusili na svoji poti: prehoda v geografskem prostoru, institucionalnega prehoda, prehoda skozi čas in psihološke tranzicije. Njihove pripovedi o lastnih najboljših koristih in pogledih nanje razkrivajo vrzeli, omejitve in šibke točke obstoječih postopkov in implementacije sistema mednarodne zaščite v Sloveniji. Slovenija za mladoletne migrante brez spremstva v iskanju boljšega vsakdanjika namreč nima trajnih rešitev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: mladoletni migranti brez spremstva, življenjski prehodi, najboljša korist otroka, subjektivni vidik

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for the paper stems from Ravi Kohli's (2014) presumptions that children seeking asylum move in three dimensions at the same time: firstly, they make a journey across *geographical spaces*, leaving their country of origin and moving to the host country; secondly, they move *over time*, during the journey and while waiting for the decision regarding their international protection application they actually get older and finally, they move *psychologically* in different directions, adjusting their experiences, "arranging their stories of who they are, what happened to them and how they came to be asking for asylum" (Kohli 2014: 84). Moreover, "[...] in becoming forced migrants and refugees, they experience the death of everyday life" (ibid.).

The transitions mentioned will be analysed through the experiences and views of unaccompanied migrant children involved in the process of seeking international protection in the Republic of Slovenia. In addition to the transitions suggested by Kohli, for the purpose of our analysis we will introduce a fourth transition: the *institutional status transition*, by which we have in mind the transition through the international protection procedures and statuses in which young people on the move are involved.

The empirical data used in the paper were collected within the international project *In Whose Best Interest? Exploring Unaccompanied Minors' Rights through the Lens of Migration and Asylum Processes (MinAs)* which lasted from 2014 to 2015. The general aim of the project which was to collect autobiographical narrations and self-perceptions of unaccompanied minors and thus address the experiences of children themselves. In addition, the two broad objectives of the project were: firstly, to deal with the conceptual aspect of *the best interest of the child*¹ which is embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) including analysis of legal, non-governmental, political, social aspects and unaccompanied minors' views on the best interest of the child and secondly, to identify the practical dimensions of the best interest of the child and *best interest determination procedures* regarding reception, asylum procedures, protection measures and return of unaccompanied minor migrants. An international comparison revealed that both the best interest of the child principle and the best interest determination are undefined and often left open to different interpretation. Moreover, when a more concrete definition of the best interest principle can actually be found in theory, practical application of the principle does not always follow (Sedmak et al. 2015). The situation in Slovenia is similar in this regard.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

The Republic of Slovenia is a small country lying between Italy, Croatia, Hungary and Austria with less than two million inhabitants. Slovenia is ethnically quite homogenous (according to the last Census from 2001) as 83% of the country is made up of ethnic Slovenes.

1 The best interest of the child is one of the underlying principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely Article 3, Paragraph 1, which gives the child the right to have his or her best interests assessed and taken into account as a primary consideration in all actions or decisions that concern him or her, both in the public and private sphere. It is one of the fundamental values of the Convention.

In the past, mostly in the 70s and 80s the vast majority of (economic) migrants coming to Slovenia were inhabitants from other republics of former Yugoslavia. After independence in the 90s and after the war in the territory of former Yugoslavia (Bosnia, Croatia) refugees began to seek protection within the Slovenian state. It is only in the last two decades that Slovenia has dealt with a more ethnically heterogeneous immigration flow with a peak in the year 2015 with the refugee corridor through Slovenia. Slovenia is mostly a transit country and most of the illegal immigrants, either adults or minors, continue their path towards the countries of Northern and Western Europe soon after crossing the border. Consequently, the number of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in Slovenia is relatively low. On average (the year 2004 excluded) there were 38 UAMs per year who applied for asylum in the period from 2002–2016. The highest number was in 2004 when 104 UAMs came to Slovenia. Out of a total of 679 applications in this 15 year long period, subsidiary protection status was granted in only 33 cases (Ministry of the Interior 2016). According to the data obtained by Slovene Philanthropy (2009) and the Ministry of the Interior (2016) the majority of UAMs who have come to Slovenia in the last years are male and coming from areas of crisis (predominantly Afghanistan and Somalia). Some of them remain in Slovenia for longer periods of time, where they are granted international protection status, while many of them continue their journey toward other destinations. In addition, there was an increasing number of unaccompanied minors who were returned to Slovenia from other EU countries on the basis of the Dublin II Regulation (Slovene Philanthropy and PIC 2009) before the Dublin III regulation came into force.

Most UAMs found by the authorities in Slovenia apply for international protection. If they apply for status there are three possible outcomes: 1) They receive subsidiary protection status which is usually temporary; 2) They are assigned a more permanent status of refugee; 3) They are rejected and therefore have to leave the country. Those who do not apply for international protection status upon their arrival are usually placed in the Aliens Centre until they return to their home countries.

Legally, the situation of unaccompanied minors in Slovenia (their rights, obligations, status etc.) is regulated through two main legal acts: the Aliens Act² (AA) and the International Protection Act³ (IPA). The first regulates the entry, departure and residence of aliens and the second regulates the transfer of the international protection system in Slovenia. After signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991, a number of measures aiming to implement children's rights on various levels were adopted, however, there is still no comprehensive and systematic approach to the protection of UAMs in Slovenia. Namely, the issue of UAMs has become a relatively relevant theme for Slovenian policy makers and scholars only in the last decade. The first study to report on unaccompanied minors in Slovenia (Peace Institute 2003; Zavrtnik, Gornik 2007) noted that some special provisions for unaccompanied minors have been acknowledged through legislation, but are often not implemented in practice; there is no suitable accommodation nor is there personnel who deal exclusively with them. According to documents, reports and guidelines published regularly by the most active NGO in this field in Slovenia, Slovene Philanthropy (2009, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2011, 2011a, 2011b, 2013), there have been certain improvements over time, however the basic problems remain largely unchanged.

2 ZTuj-2, Official Gazette of the RS 50/11.

3 ZMZ-UPB2; Official Gazette of the RS 11/11.

An overview of the situation of UAMs in Slovenia highlights the importance of the best interest of the child principle to be identified in each specific case for every UAM, so as to respond to the particular needs of each child. From this perspective, it is of particular importance to analyse the views and experiences of those most involved in the process, the UAMs themselves. This is particularly the case as there is an omnipresent lack of research on UAMs focusing on exploring their own perspectives (Wernesjö 2011).

METHODOLOGY

The presented narratives of unaccompanied minors were obtained during empirical field research carried out in the period between January and April 2015 with the generous assistance of Slovene Philanthropy.⁴ During this period, extensive interviews were conducted with 18 unaccompanied minors,⁵ all boys, who were living in the territory of Slovenia at that time (13 from Afghanistan, 2 Somalians, 1 from Ghana, 1 from Sierra Leone and 1 from Ukraine). When the interview was conducted 2 interviewees were 17 years old, 2 were 18 years old, 4 were 19 years old, 3 were 20 years old, 4 were 21 years old, 2 were 22 and one was 23 years old.⁶ Interviewees had been living in Slovenia from 5 months to 7 years, while upon their arrival in Slovenia they were all minors. All of them had legal status and were not illegal immigrants living on the streets, nor were they waiting for refugee or international protection status.⁷ Some had already been granted subsidiary protection status or refugee status (4) or were waiting for an extension. The interviews were conducted in English, Slovenian and also in Russian. They generally lasted from one hour and half up to two and half hours and were recorded and transcribed. Research topics addressed in the interviews were: *perceptions of daily life* (living conditions, fulfilment of basic needs, access to basic social rights, education/work etc.); *perceptions of well-being as a young persons* (subjective well-being, friends, family, social links, leisure activities, identity, convictions and values); *living conditions and treatment of unaccompanied migrants/asylum seekers* (procedures and status seeking); *the future* (desires, expectations and aspirations).

SUBJECTIVE TRANSITION PERCEPTIONS

What follows are the subjective experiences and presentations of the stories unaccompanied minors with regard to their transitions (1) across geographical spaces, (2) through the international protection procedures, (3) across time and (4) the deeply personal, psychological

4 Slovenian Philanthropy, Association for the Promotion of Volunteering is the NGO and humanitarian organization operating in the public interest since 1992. The staff of Slovenian Philanthropy is often involved with the work with UAMs as their guardians. The interviews were conducted by Marina Uzelac from Slovenian Philanthropy.

5 All interviewed boys were UAMs upon their arrival in Slovenia, and some of them are currently already of age.

6 Upon arrival in Slovenia, they were 14 (2), 15 (3), 16 (8) and 17 (5) years old.

7 The term “asylum seekers” is commonly used in most EU members and in the international context. In Slovenian legislation terminology from 2008 the term “international protection” is used instead. The latest includes refugee status and status of subsidiarity protection.

transition. All these are interrelated and they are a part of building a meaningful world and reconstructing the lives of unaccompanied children on the move.

Journey across geographical spaces

In their geographical transitions children move through different countries – from the country of origin to various transition countries towards the one that will be their country of settlement (see also Kohli 2014; Mougne 2010; Bhabha 2006, Ayotte 2000).

After leaving their country of origin, the unaccompanied minors start a long, exhausting, uncertain and often dangerous journey. According to UAMs staying in Slovenia they had diverse reasons for leaving the countries of origin, such as war and fear of political prosecution, religious prosecution, fear for their lives, forced inclusion in army/war etc. Due to traumatic experiences some of them did not want to talk about the past at all. One boy who left his home country when he was 16 gave the following reason for leaving:

I left my country because of religion. That was the real problem. [...] before it was ok, but when some people, because of religion and changes, they didn't accept the president, when it came to that, everyone moved. They invited me to be with them and that was the reason that my mother sent me away. If I would go with them, I would die [...] they wanted me to work for them or to do whatever they like [...] You will have to kill some or they will kill you.

The act of departure is the attempt to resolve the (critical) situation they are in with one decisive action. From this perspective the departure needs to be seen as the desperate act of (self) protection (Kirkpatrick 1992).

Often the family saved money for the journey. In one case a mother sold their house to pay for her son's journey to Turkey. Only one informant mentioned the concrete expense for illegal border crossing: his uncle paid 16,000 EU. To find a person who helps organise the journey and traveling by various means of transport is usually not problematic, the only thing that matters is money. Most of them passed several borders with the aim to arrive to one of the European countries (e.g. Ghana–Libya–Macedonia–Slovenia; Afghanistan–Pakistan–Iran–Turkey–Greece–Slovenia; Sierra Leone–Greece–Macedonia–Srbia–Hungary–Srbia/deportation–Macedonia/deportation–Greece–Italy–Slovenia). Some of them they actually did not have clear idea about the final destination they just went “towards Europe”. Some of them were traveling and living in different countries illegally for years (Greece, Iran, Pakistan etc.).

Some authors (Kirkpatrick 1992) point to a feeling of guilt on the part of children on the move because in leaving a dangerous situation and being privileged to, they left their families behind.

In fact, none of the interviewees chose Slovenia as a final destination. Some of them had never heard of Slovenia before. They found themselves in Slovenia under different circumstances (usually they were returned to Slovenia while trying to enter other countries or they were left in Slovenia or on the Slovenian border by traffickers who claimed that they were in some other country such as Italy or Germany).

I had information that there are a lot of countries that are part of Europe but are not part of Schengen that you can ask for Asylum home. I thought to go to some country that is European Union of Schengen. Then they brought me here. Police caught me here. (17 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

The journey was difficult, long and exhausting; they travelled by boat, truck, car and on foot. By the time they arrived in Slovenia, many unaccompanied minors had been traveling for at least 6 months and sometimes more, especially if they were moving on foot or had problems crossing borders. In such cases they had previously stayed in other countries for several months or years. As explained by one unaccompanied minor:

We walked for weeks. Like I never did before. It was difficult to sleep in the forest without bed, cold. I also met people going like that also had problems. We talked and we followed the same footsteps. We go, we walked, sometimes there where speedboats. Some could not make it, some died. We walked for weeks, we were tired. (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

[...] then they were left in a truck, or on the border believing they were in Italy or Austria, betrayed.

No, I wanted to go cross Slovenia, to go in Italy, in Austria, in Germany [...] but driver let me here in Slovenia. I did not understand the language and I did not know where I am. [...] I wanted to ask taxi driver to take me in Italy or in Austria. He said to wait for a moment. I was waiting for 15 minutes and then after 15 minutes police came and they took me in Postojna. That it is. (14 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

Traveling through geographical spaces also means changing culture, language of communication, habits, the whole natural and social context. One of the first problems unaccompanied minors have to address is the language obstacle.

After being apprehended by the police and before being taken to Aliens Centre in Postojna, one boy was taken to the police station and was subjected to an interview; in accordance with the standard procedures he was granted an interpreter. His perception of the whole situation is presented below:

Yes, the translator was. [...] You know what, translator was Iranian, look, I am from Afghanistan. The language is similar but there is a big difference. [...] you understand Croatian, but they do not understand you. I also did not understand everything. (14 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

Language and translation problems are also present in further procedures in the process of applying for international protection status. The unaccompanied minors interviewed stated that they could not fully express themselves nor were they always properly understood during the interviews. One significant reason were translators who were poorly prepared, did not speak the language well enough or who did not translate everything that was said.

It was not hard, but it was difficult for me with the interpreter, he did not actually say what I said. He only said the way he understood. That is not the way; you are dealing with a human, what you say is what they take into consideration, so you have to interpret fact by fact, word by word. And

get into the mind of the person whom you talk. And he didn't do that. (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

With issues like this, there is no doubt that the interpreter could not present the voice of a child which is of extreme importance in the procedure. According to the interviewees, there were also intercultural differences (or a lack of competences in this field) which contributed to misunderstandings during the interviews:

I do not know. Living in Slovenia or in Afghanistan is quite different. When we answer a question, they did not believe the response. They did not survive and they have not seen. For them, it was quite hard to understand us. (14 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

At this point, the importance of the formal interview in the final decision regarding international protection must be stressed. Their future depends on a successful interview. Due to poor or shoddy translation and interpretation, intercultural differences and a lack of empathy, unaccompanied children often feel confused, scared and left without enough information.

Transition through the international protection procedures and statuses

Transition through the international protection procedures involves the time UAMs take part in the system. It involves all procedures at the border (and possible return procedures) and the act/process of application for international protection (including the time spent waiting for the application to be either accepted or rejected). Finally, it presents the transition through different statuses – from being statusless and without any legal rights, to receiving temporary status with some of the associated rights, to (ideally) a durable solution with permanent status and all associated rights.

The transition through the international protection procedures clearly shows the absence of a child-friendly approach as well as a lack of respect for the implementation of the best interest of the child principle. There is a lack of information regarding the border and possible return procedures. In Slovenia, this part of the institutionalised procedure has not yet been observed nor systematically researched. There is evidence to suggest that the primary goal of the border police is to return unaccompanied minors either to a neighbouring country or to their country of origin and only if this is not possible does the minor obtain authorisation to stay in Slovenia and apply for status (Sedmak et al. 2015: 53–56). From the point of view of the best interest of the child, it is questionable if an approach which takes this principle into consideration is always taken into account.

The transition through the international protection procedures starts when an unaccompanied minor applies for international protection (at the border, through the border police, social worker or at the Aliens Centre). The application for international protection needs to be submitted within a very short time after being placed in Asylum Home; the submission procedure happens in the presence of at least four people who the unaccompanied minor does not know (legal representative, legal adviser, interpreter, an official). Due to time pressure, unaccompanied minors find the whole process of application for international protection confusing; they do not receive enough information about the entire

procedure nor their rights and options. Moreover, there is most certainly not enough time to properly prepare for the first interview, upon which so much depends. Unaccompanied minors highlight how confused and scared they were during the first interview, as seen by the following statements:

Before the interview nobody explained anything to me, then I gave the interview and they said, ok, now you have finished. (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

[...] You know, you are nervous, you are meeting them for the first time; you don't know what to say. It's hard. [...] And again, you don't know who to trust. You don't know who is a police officer, or who is an immigration officer. (15 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

While the time prior to the first interview and application for international protection status is obviously too short, the time before receiving the decision regarding status is too long. According to the IPA, the whole procedure of status application should be finished within 6 months, giving clear priority to the applications of minors. In reality, unaccompanied minors wait for the final decision for as long as a year or a year and half. Some NGO experts stress that this process is prolonged due to age assessment procedures, the result being that some unaccompanied minors reach the age of 18 before they receive a decision regarding their application, and thus they lose the benefits and rights stemming from their minority status. In the worst cases, they can even be deported from the state.

One must keep in mind the long term uncertainty with which unaccompanied minors live while waiting for the final response. In this intermediary period (which can last as long as a year and half) they cannot properly plan for their future. They theoretically obtain the rights, but in practice they have limited possibilities and rights in the areas of accommodation, schooling, work, health care etc.

While waiting for status, they are usually accommodated in Asylum Home which is primarily intended for adults and therefore not a suitable accommodation for minors. There they have limited autonomy, are often socially isolated and wait for the decision regarding their status. They also have limited information about the process, but also limited possibilities to actively spend their time and essentially find themselves in a state of idleness.

Sometimes I went out with friends, at that time there was nothing to do in Asylum Home. This was very hard. (17 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

The transition through the institutional procedures is apparently only finished by obtaining the "final" decision – subsidiary/refugee status and all the rights associated with this status. At this stage a special guardian is appointed to unaccompanied minors to protect their rights and work in their best interest. However, the status is often limited to a very short period (usually a few years, until they are of age). This means that by obtaining status unaccompanied minors actually do not finish the transition through the system but are subjected to a temporary solution and after turning 18, their insecurities and battle for status continues. After they lose their status, they usually appeal and in the meantime they receive temporary leave to remain, which allows them to live in Slovenia, but basically without other rights.

I did not have the permission to work, to go to school [...] and it says basic healthcare, but this is not true. I went to the doctor, because my teeth hurt, but they said: you don't have the insurance. And you go. And that's it. (14 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

As expressed by many authors, in Slovenia (as in other European countries) there is no durable solution for unaccompanied minors seeking “shelter under the European umbrella”. There is no durable solution which, in accordance with Kanics (2015), is sustainable and which ensures that the child will be able to reach adulthood in an environment which will meet his or her needs. The reality of the situation, as seen by the (former) unaccompanied minors involved in our study unfortunately demonstrates a completely different experience. A 17 year old boy who has been living in Slovenia for 6 years, fears that he will get a negative answer to his request for prolonged subsidiary protection status:

If I get negative answer I don't know what I will do. Maybe I will leave Slovenia. Sometimes one boy says he will kill himself. These are the only two solutions. I don't know what I will do. (14 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

Instead of a durable solution they are subjected to the feeling of having no future.

Before, when I was in Asylum Home, I waited and I thought I would get a status in Slovenia and settle down and everything will be the best [...], that I will get a future. But I only got the status for 1 year. When it ends, there will be a lot of changes for me. I did not have much hope. (15 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

Unaccompanied minors find themselves in a highly insecure position with limited prospects for the future. When the same minor was asked: “At the moment, what do you miss the most?” he answered: “The future and my mother.” Hope for the future is lost, while their past lives are far away, too.

Transition across time

Unaccompanied minors also experience a transition across time. These transitions occur during their journey toward Europe, while waiting for international protection status and hoping for a durable solution which would enable them to have a “simple and ordinary” life. During this period, they become older and turn from children to young adults.

Their chronological age is an important determinant of their rights and it defines the way they are treated as migrants. It is a decisive factor for the outcome of asylum application and therefore their access to certain rights. Since they are usually granted status on the basis of their minority, a range of medical, physical, and psychological assessments may be used to determine their age. Age assessment is used in cases when there is doubt as to whether they are truly underage, however the methods are not prescribed and some which are health-wise or ethically disputable can still be used. While most unaccompanied minors in Slovenia did not experience age assessment procedures as their age was not questioned, one boy had to undergo an x-ray examination:

[How was it at the doctor, how did they check you?] They performed an x-ray on both my hands and my knees. [...] I didn't mind, they told me that I must go to the doctor and I went.

According to the Asylum Procedures Directive (2005/85/EC), medical examination may be used to determine age within the asylum application procedure, however many European paediatricians oppose this procedure on ethical, medical and legal grounds (Sauer et al. 2015).

When discussing the time transition, the sequence of events also plays an important role. Unaccompanied minors have to explain their situation, their reasons for leaving, when they left, how and where they travelled, what the sequence of events was. In order to be credible and convincing, their story needs to be linear, clear and coherent (UNHCR 2013; Kohli 2014). They often have to tell and re-tell their stories over and over again:

All together I had two interviews. First interview was basic questions; you are just telling them every story. In second interview they are taking your answers from the first one, questions from your stories, and asking you again. Those things that they don't believe that they don't trust or didn't understand pretty well. They are taking those sentences and making questions from those words or those things. And she is asking you again. (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

Once they obtain temporary status, or while waiting for status to be renewed, they structure their time and create daily routines, live “normal”, “ordinary lives”, to create a routine and find “normality” in the wider context of insecurity and uncertainty regarding their future.

In the morning I wake up at 7, then I go to school, I have school until 12 or 3. Then I go back home, eat, then I train, I go to the gym. One hour, two hours. Then I go out, in the city centre, I go back, sometimes I go to visit someone, come back. Every day is like this. (17 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

In their transition across time, coming of age is an important milestone for unaccompanied minors as access to formal rights to support are usually reduced or cease once they turn 18, since obtaining subsidiary protection was based on the fact that they were minors.

Then I felt really bad, it was my worst day. The worst day. When I got the negative answer. /.../ Then I asked Aida from Slovenian Philanthropy why did they give me a negative answer. And she said: before you were a minor and now you are of age [...] (17 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

They lose certain benefits, such as for example the right to have a guardian or their access to health care is reduced – they are entitled only to emergency healthcare procedures. They also lose the right to family reunification. Young people are left without support, but above all, they are left without a perspective on what their future lives will look like. Suddenly, they are left on their own.

Yes, in Asylum home they said we will get a guardian. They said they will take care for you until you 18, then you are free. But I don't want to get free! (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

As we will see, the transition is not only chronological but psychological as well – due to the circumstances they were forced to cope with (being without adult supervision, traveling etc.) unaccompanied minors mature earlier than their counterparts. While waiting for international protection status or with status while working occasionally or receiving some support money they often need to care for their family who remain back in their country of origin – sending them (an already scarce amount of) money.

[When you say your family needs help, are you talking about the money your family needs?]

Yes, I am the oldest of the family, I have four brothers and mother. They need money; they are coming from Somalia to Yemen. There are also refugees in Yemen. It is bad. Sometimes they have to pay rent, health, everything. And I am the one to whom they say: "Give us, give us for that!"

[So they expect you to send them money?]

Yes. (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

In the case of unaccompanied minors, the movement across time is inevitably linked to a psychological transition and maturation.

Psychological changes and adjustments

In these 5 years we changed a lot. In home country we were still kids. There was one tension that you would die. But here you need to turn into a man, to think about everything. (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

The first years in a host country are without doubt difficult. Unaccompanied minors miss their families and siblings. They often say they regret leaving their homes and only after being separated from their family of origin do they realise how difficult it is to be alone, without family protection and support. The absurdity of the situation is seen in the paradox articulated by Christiansen and Foighel (1990, Kohli 2014): parents send their children away into the unknown because they love them and may permanently lose contact with them as a result.

According to Kohli (2014) unaccompanied children constantly move between the past and hope for the future. Life circumstances and specific life trajectories force them to mature earlier than they ought to. They must adapt to their new situations alone, often without support.

I lost my hair [...] because of the stress. It is stressful when you are here and your family is in another country. Of course stress will be with you. (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

The constant struggle to establish an ordinary everyday life is difficult and contributes to their being thrust into adulthood.

Actually I want to know more people, to have more contacts, to be social. To be more in touch with people. To have more friends from different cultures, from different societies, to have fun, to have a hobby, to travel with them, to know the world, to know the people. But that is not possible. We don't have documents and we are living in a society where we face so much tensions, stress. Other persons don't even want to be friends with us because they see some much pain and stress in us and could say why should they make themselves sad. We were not born with this stress and painful, hard, sadness faces. We were not born like this but time and situation made us like that. We are also humans, we also have feelings. (17 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

Some unaccompanied minors stay in Slovenia for a significant period of time, but at the end they are left without a solution that would enable them to plan a future.

In two years they should give me the papers or reject me, clean my fingerprints so I can have a better life somewhere else. It's like in a football ground. Everybody is kicking us and we don't know where our goal is. (17 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

The (psychological) situation of unaccompanied minors staying in Slovenia is additionally absurd due to the fact that they are actually trapped in a country they do not see as a future home country. All the interviewees related that they did not plan to come and stay in Slovenia, they were apprehended at the border or within Slovenian territory, or they were returned to Slovenia from some other country in accordance with the Dublin Act. They do not have the possibility to move further, toward their goal of a "dream" country. They are stuck in the moment, stuck physically and psychologically. They have no future, no dream to dream, only unending insecurity which usually ends with the legal decision that they will be returned to their country of origin.

[Your family helped you to get the money to come to Slovenia?]

Not to Slovenia, to another country. I never dreamed of Slovenia. My plan was going to Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Norway, other places. I never heard of Slovenia. (15 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

Significant others, peers and a support network play an important role in the process of psychological adaptation and as a part of survival strategies for the unaccompanied minor. The general disadvantaged position they hold is further worsened by a lack of (psychological) support and friends. They do not have many opportunities to make friends among Slovenians (because of language problems, a lack of money, psychological constraints such as insecurity etc.) and they mostly associate with other unaccompanied minors.

I have. I have friends from Asylum Home, which also come from Ukraine, Muhamed from Syria, we talk and socialise. (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

According to Mai (2010: 78) once they arrive in Europe, unaccompanied minors "[...] fall into places marked by a specific set of opportunities and possibilities, which are al-

ready established places of marginality and irregular/illegal livelihoods in the country of destination”.

Psychological and other kinds of support which are appreciated without exception and there is constant support and help from the representative from Slovene Philanthropy.

She is the best I have ever had because she helps me. If it is good or bad. [...] She is like a mother to me; you know because she is doing everything like a mother, she is really a guardian. (16 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

One of the survival strategies and a source of psychological reassurance is the attempt to obtain a proper education and through this, escape insecurity. One of the boys tried to obtain status by being a top athlete, competing and winning events for Slovenia. However even this was not sufficient:

In one year I brought five medals for this country. That was identified for the country with the club, representing Slovenia. So why they don't give me documents? (17 years old upon arrival in Slovenia)

Unfortunately many unaccompanied minors do not have enough strength to continue the fight and they surrender psychologically – they abandon previous ambitious goals regarding education or job aspirations, lose self-esteem, become apathetic regarding their future etc.

CONCLUSION

In the present article we have attempted to highlight the various life transitions young people on the move go through using the narratives of (former) unaccompanied minors living in Slovenia. These transitions are across geographical spaces, through international protection procedures, across time as well as deeply personal psychological transitions. Some of the transitions are common to all young people, some are specific to unaccompanied minors; however all of them are deeply interrelated and help to reconstruct not only a meaningful world but also the lives of unaccompanied minors (Kholi 2014). Ideally all the transitions should end in a situation where minors could develop into adulthood in an environment which will meet his or her needs, free from persecution or fear of serious harm – in a safe and better life. This is a durable solution for unaccompanied minors as proposed by various authors such as Kanics (2015).

The presented narratives of unaccompanied minors and the analysis of their life transitions, and consequently the Slovenian system of international protection, demonstrate that the best interest of the child principle and durable solution principle as interpreted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) are subject to severe violation at several stages.

The violation of both the best interest and the durable solution principles can be seen at several stages. From the very beginning of the formal procedures applied by the Slovene border police, the emphasis is on returning the unaccompanied children to wherever they came from. Such an approach is manifestly contrary to the directives of the Convention,

wherein the procedures regarding best interest assessment state that the best interest of unaccompanied minors would be a decision to allow access to the territory in order to carry out a more thorough assessment of the child's situation. Finally, international protection status is per se guaranteed only on the basis of being underage and therefore cannot be prolonged when the age of majority is reached, thus eliminating any possibility of extension and finding a durable solution.

It appears that the aim of the Slovenian state policy regarding unaccompanied minors is unclear: is it the aim to give minors permanent shelter or only to allow them to stay in Slovenia until they turn 18? This is a political question lying somewhere between migration control policy and child welfare. Only after explicitly defining goals related to unaccompanied minors can a durable solution be successfully applied and the best interest of the child truly met.

We wish to conclude using the words of unaccompanied minors regarding their future aspirations: their wishes for the future are very modest and simple. When we ask them what their greatest wish for the future is, the usual answer we get is: "A normal life. To live normally. To live here and be with others" (17 years old upon arrival in Slovenia).

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POVZETEK**ŽIVLJENJSKI PREHODI MLADOLETNIH MIGRANTOV BREZ SPREMSTVA
V SLOVENIJI: SUBJEKTIVNI POGLEDI****Mateja SEDMAK, Zorana MEDARIĆ**

Namen članka je položaj mladoletnih migrantov brez spremstva v Sloveniji predstaviti na temelju štirih življenjskih prehodov, skozi katere gredo na svoji poti: prehoda v geografskem prostoru, institucionalnega prehoda, prehoda skozi čas in psihološke tranzicije. Članek temelji na pripovedih in razmišljanjih mladoletnih migrantov brez spremstva, ki živijo v Sloveniji. S pomočjo njihovih zgodb, ki običajno niso predmet raziskovanja, avtorici analizirata obstoječe postopke in način implementacije mednarodne zaščite za mladoletne migrante brez spremstva v Sloveniji. Pri tem ugotavljata, v kolikšni meri dokumenti in postopki upoštevajo načelo najboljše koristi otroka kot eno ključnih načel Konvencije Združenih Narodov o otrokovih pravicah. Kljub zelo majhnemu številu mladoletnih migrantov brez spremstva, ki v Sloveniji zaprosijo za mednarodno zaščito, sistem zanje ni prijazen in ni usklajen z načelom najboljše koristi otroka. Njihove pripovedi razkrivajo številne vrzeli, omejitve in šibke točke obstoječega slovenskega sistema mednarodne zaščite, predvsem pa Slovenija za mladoletne migrante brez spremstva nima dolgoročnih in trajnih rešitev.