

Balkan Insight

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Refugee Children Caught in Bulgarian Limbo

While the number of refugees in Bulgaria has fallen significantly, some refugee children still have little or no access to adequate care.

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Refugees in a reception center in Bulgaria. Photo: Friends of the Refugees/Facebook

Out of the 1,639 asylum seekers currently being housed in Bulgarian refugee centres, 605 are children, according to the State Agency of Refugees, and NGOs warn that a large proportion of the child refugees have no access to social and educational services, with the problem particularly pronounced among unaccompanied minors.

Only 23 refugee children go to school, and just one attends Bulgarian classes, according to the agency.

Ivanka Angelkova, Program Officer on Refugee and Migrant Children with UNICEF, told BIRN that “[unaccompanied children] are facing a huge risk of violence and abuse, including sexual.”

At present, 101 children travelling alone under the age of 17 live in the refugee centres run by the State Agency for the Refugees. Their number has dropped significantly compared to last year. For example, in August 2016, 416 unaccompanied children were accommodated in Bulgaria’s refugee facilities.

However, efforts to ensure their protection and integration have been limited. According to Angelkova, authorities face difficulties identifying unaccompanied children, who usually travel without documents.

These children are often detained in closed detention facilities run by the interior ministry’s migration directorate, along with other unrelated adults. There are no separate accommodation spaces for them there, which exposes the children to various risks and conditions are “horrible,” she said.

Additionally, changes to the legal framework have made it even more restrictive. With the adoption of amendments to the law on foreigners, which came into force on January 1, 2017, the temporary detention of children, including unaccompanied and separated children was legalised, contrary to international human rights standards.

When children apply for asylum, they are moved to the open refugee centres, where again there are no safe spaces designated for them and they live in the same rooms as adults. “There are no personnel working 24/7 to guarantee the security of these children”, Angelkova said.

While the children are at risk of abuse, they also suffer from a lack of social services, experts note.

“There is no real mechanism for these children to receive social services according to their needs. In reality, the Child Protection Act does not cover them,” Teodora Nikolova, a psychologist working for the International Organization for Migration, IOM, said.

She added that the childcare institutions in charge of Bulgarian orphans, often return unaccompanied refugees “from their doorstep.”

“We live in Catch 22”, she said.

All non-governmental organizations which work with unaccompanied minors in Bulgaria have recommended opening specialised reception centers for this particularly vulnerable group, where their safety and access to essential social services would be guaranteed.

Radoslav Stamenkov, the head of IOM’s Bulgarian office, told BIRN that his organization is in the early stages of opening such a facility, but its location and construction are still being agreed on with the state.

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