



**SPECIALISED FOSTER CARE
FOR UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN
IN SERBIA**



Save the Children

Case Study



Photo: Pedro Armestre, Save the Children, 2017

“After Ahmed arrived to our house and finally felt safe, he slept for days. His shoes were completely ruined. Ahmed had previously slept outside, burning rubbish to keep himself warm, and running around when it was too cold for him to sit or sleep. He told us about his journey to Serbia and explained all the adversities he experienced. He told us everything using his hands and some English words; nevertheless, we had no problems understanding him”*

Foster mother of UASC

Title of Project	Appropriate care and protection for unaccompanied refugee and migrant children (UASC): Building capacities for specialised fostering of UASC in Serbia
Project Duration	20 October 2016 – 30 June 2017
Donor	Department for International Development (DFID), UK
Organizations	Save the Children International, Refugee Response in Serbia Center for Foster Care and Adoption Belgrade, Serbia Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs International Rescue Committee (IRC)
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Country	Serbia
Target population	Professionals from social welfare system Foster families UASC
Number of beneficiaries reached	58 professionals from social welfare system 50 foster families

*All names were changed for privacy reasons

1. Introduction

The European Refugee and Migration Crisis went from very high numbers of daily arrivals and quick transit through the Balkans in 2015 to significantly reduced, but ongoing, arrivals and longer stays in Balkans countries in 2016 and 2017. After the EU–Turkey deal came into place in March 2016, over 18,000 children (more than 40% of all arrivals) from Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria have transited through the Balkans, making it the second most travelled migration route to Europe. Closed borders and limited legal options reinforced “irregular routes”, facilitated by smugglers and traffickers, creating the largest “hidden population” of migrants and refugees in Europe.

In the first half of 2017, there were between 7,000 and 9,000 refugees and migrants accommodated in Serbia, of whom 40–50% were children, and around 25% of children were unaccompanied and separated. UASC are extremely vulnerable and at risk of exploitation, neglect, violence and abuse. They are often invisible, hard to identify and reach with traditional services. The existing child protection systems in Serbia are not able to adequately respond to the complex needs of children passing through or staying in Serbia. Prolonged stay of refugee and migrant population in Serbia requires longer–term and sustainable solutions. The existing accommodation options for UASC are inadequate: capacities are limited, and children are placed in accommodation units not appropriate for UASC, often with other adults and without qualified and trained staff to support them.

2. Alternative Care for UASC in Serbia

The scale of the migration crisis affected the ability of the authorities in Serbia to provide appropriate care for refugee and migrant children, and for UASC in particular. There were few available specialized places for UASC, and even where they existed, the conformity with international standards was in question. Children and UASC were often accommodated in reception centres with other adults.

Save the Children in Serbia strongly advocated for alternative care options for UASC and commissioned an analysis of the implementation of the UN Guidelines on the Alternative Care of Children in Serbia, which identified many system–wide obstacles to providing appropriate alternative care for UASC and emphasized that the current reception and asylum centres were inadequate for children’s longer–term accommodation. The study identified a wide range of recommendations on how to improve the care of UASC and recommended strengthening different forms of foster care and looking into other forms of alternative care, such as supervised independent living arrangements, or small housing units.

Save the Children response in Serbia focused on ensuring dignity, protection and humanitarian assistance of the most vulnerable refugee and migrant children and their families through child protection services, education activities, capacity building of government actors and civil society organisations, and advocacy for refugee and migrant children’s rights.

In its operations, Save the Children strongly advocated for family–based care as the most appropriate option for children in line with their best interest, instead of placement in institutional / residential care. Family–based care is of utmost importance for child’s growth, well–being and protection. In the past decade, Save the Children played a key role in deinstitutionalisation programs and social policy reform that led to establishment of foster care system in Serbia.

Together with IRC, Save the Children established a strong partnership with the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, and a local partner organization Center for Foster Care and Adoption to promote foster care for UASC. This case study aims to briefly describe the process of developing specialised training package for foster care of UASC, its key components and main lessons learned from the process.

Prior to the migration crisis, the foster care system in Serbia was well developed, with strong support by the institutions in charge, including the social welfare institutions and the Centre for Foster Care and Adoption. In 2015 and 2016, several UASC have been placed with foster families in Serbia with excellent results. Aiming to promote alternative care in Serbia, Save the Children worked in close coordination with IRC and local authorities to prepare a project on foster care for UASC. The preparations included an assessment of previous foster care placements and identification of steps required for better organized foster care placements of UASC. The assessment showed that effective foster care for UASC would require improved cultural sensitivity, additional support and training for professionals and foster families to be able to adequately support the complex needs of UASC.

IRC took the lead on the awareness raising campaign, and distributed care packages for new foster parents who support UASC.

Save the Children commissioned the development of a specialised foster care training package for professionals from social welfare system and foster families interested to provide care for UASC. In partnership with Save the Children, the Centre for Foster Care and Adoption conducted an assessment of needs, developed a specialised training package, and carried out trainings.

In June 2017, together with the IRC, Save the Children organised a conference “Good Practices and Challenges in Supporting Children in Migration” to present the results of foster care programs, and the results of the alternative care study. The conference gathered 75 professionals involved in supporting children in migration, and migratory policies decision makers, to discuss challenges and opportunities in ensuring adequate alternative care for UASC.

2.1. Foster Care for UASC

In order to support the development of a specialized training package for foster care for UASC in Serbia, Save the Children had to take into account the following factors and needs:

- **Refugee and migrant children most often do not wish to stay in Serbia.** Serbia is not their desired destination and their prolonged stay in Serbia is a cause of additional stress. Despite risks, UASC often try to cross borders irregularly to continue their journey towards Western Europe. They frequently feel responsible to fulfil a mission for their family – to arrive to their final destination, start earning to financially help their family, or pay off the costs of their journey.
- **Parents of these children have not relinquished their parental rights, or lost them due to inadequate care of children.** UASC and their parents are affected by conflicts, insecurity and poverty in their own countries. Some parents have sent their children on a journey to save their lives and ensure a better future for them.
- **Placement in families, similar in culture, national origin, language, or religion to UASC, is almost impossible in Serbia.** In many destination countries, placement of UASC with families from a similar cultural milieu, was recognized as a good practice. The number of families from Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan settled in Serbia is negligible. For foster care, children need to be placed with families speaking a different language, practicing a different religion, having different cultural patterns, different dietary habits and family organization.
- **Stereotypes and prejudices against the migrant population** hinder the process of finding adequate foster families for UASC. Adolescent UASC boys are often identified as “criminals”, “economic migrants”, “single men” or “dangerous”. These kinds of attitudes are rooted in the fear of the unknown fuelled by the negative image of migrants and refugees presented in the media.
- **Large number of stakeholders** are involved. Foster parents and professionals supporting UASC need to work with a greater number of stakeholders than when providing foster care to Serbian nationals. Stakeholders include the Commissariat for Refugees, asylum officials, and relevant NGOs. Foster parents need be informed of support networks available, and of procedures and responsibilities in the system of protection of UASC.
- **Contact and cooperation with parents of the children involved, if possible, can be a great asset.** If available, and if in the best interest of the child, parents represent the source of necessary information on the child and, remotely, may significantly influence the child’s behaviour. Parents can give children “permission” and encourage them to go to foster family, but they can also make children sad or worried, and discourage foster care as a possible solution.
- **Education can be a challenge.** Integrating refugee and migrant children in the educational system is a special area of concern for both foster families and professionals from the system of social protection. This requires cooperation with educational authorities and schools, as well as other stakeholders providing support to refugee and migrant children’s education.
- **Children may have been exposed to traumatic experiences.** On their journey, many UASC have been through traumatic experiences that may affect their psychosocial wellbeing. Foster parents and professionals working with them need to be able to recognize trauma, provide basic psychosocial support, and refer children to other relevant experts when necessary.
- **Respecting and preserving cultural identity of UASC** helps their integration. Working with UASC requires cultural sensitivity, curiosity and respect for different cultures. Foster families need to know about the culture the child belonged to, to help the child preserve his/her identity.

3. Developing a training package for specialised foster care of UASC

Training package for foster care of UASC was based on the existing mechanisms for foster care in Serbia and it was developed jointly with key state stakeholders from Serbian social welfare system, including the Centre for Foster Care and Adoption. One of the goals of this project was to **ensure the ownership by the key stakeholders** over the training development by their active involvement in defining trainings aims, drafting content of the training, and designing the package while taking into account the existing system of foster care, basic foster training in place, and best practices.

The stakeholders worked together on **the research**, which included:

- Desk review of training packages for specialized foster care of UASC, including those of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), Dutch guardianship institution for unaccompanied minor refugees asylum seekers and undocumented migrants – Nidos Foundation, and resources for foster families developed by Save the Children UK. Save the Children UK materials served as a valuable source of information for the topics that needed to be covered and for the overall framework of the training.
- Overview of the foster care system in Serbia and areas for its improvement.
- Assessment of specific needs of UASC in Serbia.

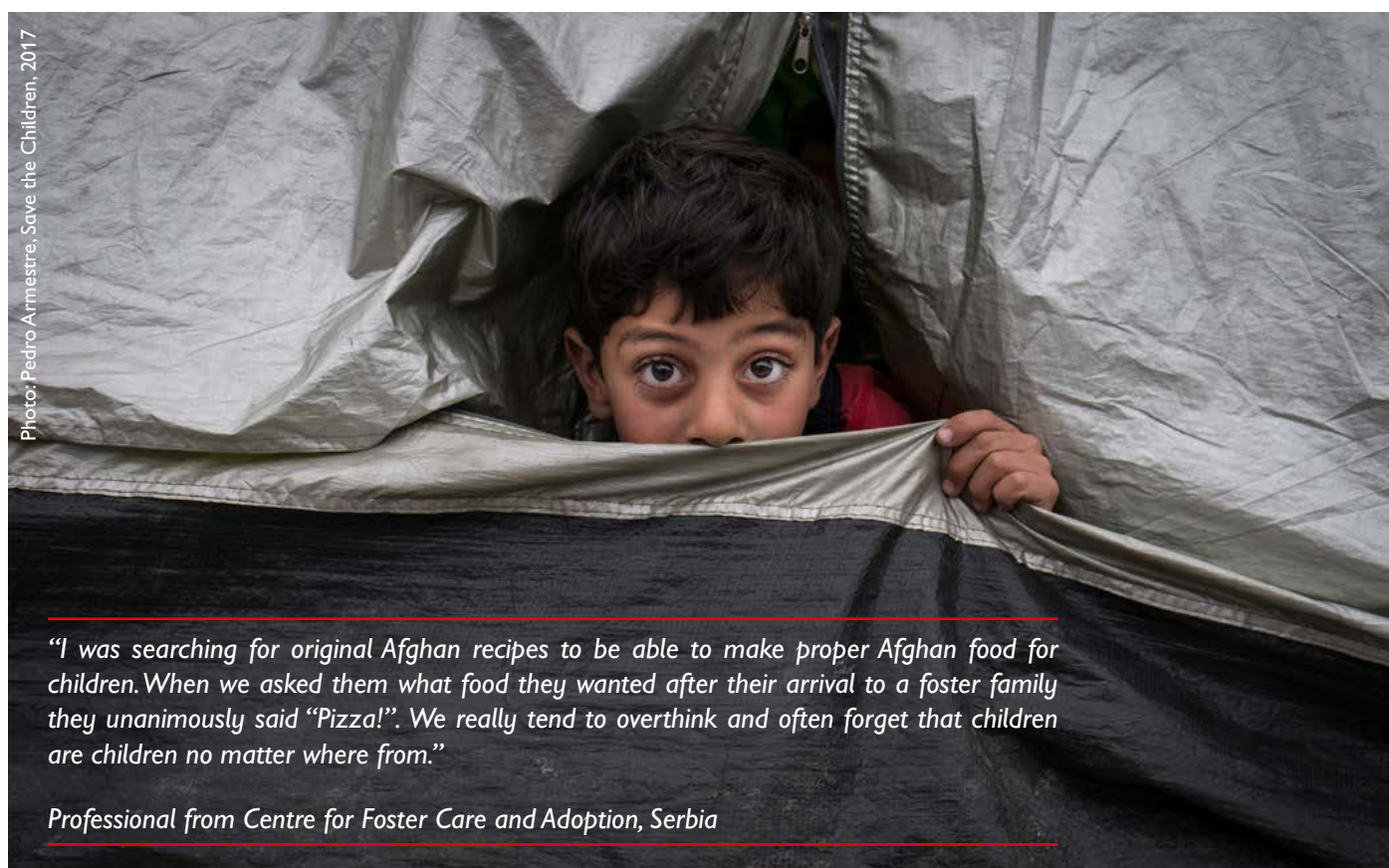
We also carried out a **field assessment** which included:

- Consultations with professionals from the social welfare system:
 - Interviews and focus groups with decision makers and practitioners, particularly centers for social welfare that supported cases of UASC placed in foster care during this migration crisis.
 - Meetings with representatives of relevant international and national organizations.
- Consultations with beneficiaries, more precisely:
 - Foster parents who have previously fostered UASC: in order to gather information on best practices, lessons learned, challenges and most acute needs.
 - Refugee and migrant parents: in order to gather information about daily routines for children in their home countries.
 - Consultations with children: through workshops asking about their preferences for long-term solutions, their needs and wishes for their care.

“When we asked migrant children what would be important for them to have in a foster family, one of them pointed to the long skirt I was wearing that day - it reminded him of his mom. Small things will make a big difference for them.”

Professional from Centre for Foster Care and Adoption, Serbia

Photo: Pedro Armestre, Save the Children, 2017



“I was searching for original Afghan recipes to be able to make proper Afghan food for children. When we asked them what food they wanted after their arrival to a foster family they unanimously said “Pizza!”. We really tend to overthink and often forget that children are children no matter where from.”

Professional from Centre for Foster Care and Adoption, Serbia

The final phase of the process was **writing and testing of the training package**. The content of the training was designed and organised by relevant topics. The training was tested with a group of professionals from the social welfare system and foster families. On the basis of their feedback, training materials were finalised and the training package submitted for accreditation to the

Republic Institute of Social Welfare of Serbia. A series of trainings were later organized around Serbia, for 58 professionals from social welfare system and for 50 foster parents increasing interest by foster families to provide foster care for refugee and migrant children, and leading to placement of additional children to foster care.

Ensuring ownership of stakeholders

- Strong partnership with relevant government authorities and other stakeholders
- Agreement on the training concept, which builds on the existing system of foster care in Serbia, basic training for foster parents, and best practices

Conducting the assessment

Desk review

- Existing training packages for specialised fostering (BAAF, SCI, Nidos)
- Overview of the foster system in Serbia and possibilities for improvement
- Overview of the specific needs of UASC in Serbia

Field data collection

- Consultations with professionals (practitioners and decision makers)
- Consultations with beneficiaries (children, refugee / migrant parents, and foster families)

Development & Testing

- Developing training content
- Testing training with the target group
- Integrating feedback
- Finalising materials
- Submitting for accreditation

4. Overview of the training package

The training **aims** to achieve the following goals:

- Motivate foster families to provide foster care for UASC.
- Build capacities of foster families and professionals from social welfare system to adequately support UASC.
- Link foster parents and professionals into a support network focused on the child's well-being.

The training aims to build capacities of professionals from the social welfare system and of foster families who have already undergone the basic foster training in order to promote effective foster care placements for UASC. It is designed to build on the obligatory basic foster training, which families require to become certified foster parents in Serbia. It strengthens their knowledge and skills to be able to respond to specific needs UASC have, understand their circumstances and potential consequences that may arise from their experiences, be able to focus on their resiliencies and strengths, and overcome barriers from cultural differences or personal prejudices.

The training content is designed to help participants develop empathy for children and youth in migration, better understand their strengths and specific needs, and develop skills to create an environment for children that provides feelings of safety, enables recovery and encourages integration into a new social environment.

The training covers the following **topics**¹:

- Features and standards of foster care for UASC in Serbia
- Migration context and specific characteristics of UASC
- Legal framework for protection of UASC in Serbia
- Multiculturalism
- Stereotypes – Prejudices – Discrimination
- Characteristics of cultures of UASC present in Serbia
- Hardships UASC face (trauma, stress) and their resiliencies
- Role of foster parents
 - Developing resilience and promoting recovery of children exposed to traumatic experiences
 - Daily routines and cultural patterns as a basis for feelings of safety
 - Strategies for working with children who have been through traumatic experiences
 - Creating a safe environment while accepting cultural specificities
 - Supporting integration into the social environment

¹ Full synopsis and content of individual workshops is available as a separate document.

Participants are given the chance to understand the complex situation of UASC and why they need family-based care. To counter prejudices and stereotypes, participants also examine and challenge their own attitudes towards migrant population. Participants are introduced to practical techniques which the foster parents may apply in everyday life to strengthen

competencies for dealing with children who have been through difficult experiences, and to be able to create a family environment conducive to feelings of safety, which focuses on children's resiliencies and strengths and leads to recovery. Finally, foster parents are taught how to actively support UASC in their integration into the new social environment.

Introduction: Foster care and UASC in Serbia

- Understanding the need for the programme
- Overview of standards of foster care in Serbia and how they apply to UASC
- Overview of legal framework for protection of UASC in Serbia
- Wider picture: understanding the Balkans route and the migration flows
- Main characteristics of UASC in Serbia: who they are, where they come from, why they left their homes, what they have been through during the journey

Multiculturalism

- Understanding what defines cultural identity
- Prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination
- Decentration and empathy – practical techniques for overcoming prejudices

Cultural characteristics

- Intercultural communication and behavior
- Language barriers
- Importance of non-verbal communication
- Specific cultural habits

Strategies for working with children who have been exposed to traumatic experiences

- Difficult experiences – traumatic stress, types and development of trauma, uncomplicated and traumatic grief
- Traumatic experience of UASC
- Resiliencies and their development

Role of foster parent in development of resiliencies and recovery of UASC from difficult experiences

- Structuring a day of an UASC in a foster family
- Every day communication – sending the message of security
- Establishing rules, setting boundaries
- Resilience mechanisms - their recognition and support for their further development

Creating safe environment along with cultural specificities and specific experiences of a child

- Daily routines (nutrition and sleeping), habits and cultural patterns in countries of origin of UASC as a basis for security
- Physical comfort zone in countries of origin
- Supporting UASC in coping with trauma triggers

Supporting UASC to integrate into a social environment

- How a child / young person perceives and experiences discrimination
- Fostering UASC: How foster parents can cope with pressure from the social environmental
- Vicarious trauma of care-givers
- Inclusion of UASC in the education system in Serbia

The **training program lasts** the total of 16 hours, organised into two days of training. It is implemented through a combination of presentations, demonstrations through practical examples, discussions, workshops, exercises and simulations (role–plays). The **optimal number of participants** in one session ranges from 20 to 25 to allow all participants to take active part, share

their views and experiences. The group of this size is also large enough to showcase different experiences, and can be split to smaller groups for exercises and simulations. By improving the knowledge, skills and motivation of families, the desired practical effect is achieved – families are strengthened to *make an informed decision on whether they have the capacities needed to adequately care for UASC*.

4.1. Selected sessions at a quick glance

Features and Standards of Foster Care for UASC in Serbia

All standards in regard to foster care listed in Serbian legislation also apply to UASC. Specific elements relevant for UASC include:

1. Identification and recruitment of new foster families – special campaign

- Cooperation with embassies and cultural centers
- Invitation for families who have a similar national / linguistic / religious origin or experience of life in relevant countries
- Open-door days in the Center for Foster Care and Adoption for foster families potentially interested in caring for UASC
- Information package with more information on refugee and migrant children.

2. Suitability Criteria for Foster families

- Assessment of general suitability for becoming a foster parent (compliance check–up, interviews with foster parents and members of family living in the same household, continuous assessment during the Preparation Program by the Centre for Foster Care and Adoption)
- Successful completion of Preparation Program (11 weeks) provided by the Centre for Foster Care and Adoption
- Willingness to cooperate with a large number of stakeholders
- Willingness to communicate with the biological family, inform them of all changes in regard to the child in care
- Readiness to participate in additional trainings in regard to migrant and refugee children in Serbia
- Cultural sensitivity, an interest in learning about particular cultural characteristics of UASC and willingness to support preservation of their cultural identity
- Willingness to develop specific skills for providing care to a child who has been exposed to traumatic events

3. Foster Family Home:

- Located close to the migrant route or close to collective centers;
- In possession of equipment to enable communication with the child’s parents – internet, cell phone, tablet, lap top;
- Resources to support child’s integration in the environment, including into the local school;

An excerpt from the session “Features and Standards of Foster Care for UASC in Serbia”

Could I take care of a child who comes from...?

As a foster parent, you have been asked to provide care of a child from a small country with:

- 33,000 juvenile delinquents
- 18,700 reported cases of domestic violence
- Prostitution on the rise
- Recent experience with airstrikes and conflicts

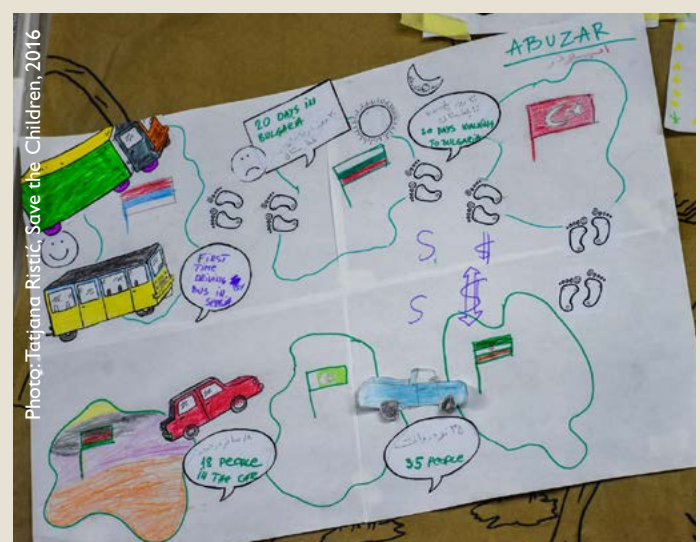
Would you be a foster parent for a child from that country?

Would you have any worries about care? Which ones?

Participants are asked to reflect by themselves, as well as to discuss with the others, if they would choose to care for a child from such a country and what would worry them the most about such child.

The trainer summarises key worries on a flip chart paper and afterwards reveals that the given data, taken out of context, refers to their country - Serbia. This activity serves to raise awareness about prejudices, and stereotypes. The trainer uses this exercise to improve the empathy for UASC, pointing to similarities of experiences when facing a crisis. Deconstruction of prejudices opens the door to empathy and to considering a child to be a child.

An example of exercise from the session “Stereotypes - Prejudice - Discrimination”





Daily routines and cultural patterns as a basis for ensuring security

The goal of this session is to raise awareness among participants about the importance of daily routines (dietary habits, sleep, hygiene, private space) taking into account cultural patterns and potential traumatic experiences. Through a PowerPoint presentation, participants are familiarized with certain cultural patterns in daily schedules in countries of origin of UASC.

The role play encourages brainstorming and coming up with practical solutions for challenging situations foster parents might face when providing care for UASC.

Example of role play – Dining

Foster parents have prepared a luncheon to welcome a refugee child who just arrived in their family. They carefully chose food, paying special attention to its preparation, respecting habits from the home country of the child. They invite a child to sit at the table and help himself with food, but the child refuses. After some time, the child hesitantly approaches table, picks up the food and sits on the floor to eat its meal.

Example of role play – Sleeping

Foster parents have equipped a beautiful bedroom for an 8-year-old girl from Afghanistan who they would be caring for in the upcoming period. They paid attention to the smallest details, carefully choosing toys, bedclothes with her favourite cartoon characters and a carpet similar to those being made in Afghanistan. It is bedtime and foster parents accompany the girl to her new room, but when she sees her bed, the girl looks confused and refuses to sleep in bed. Finally, the girl timidly starts pulling the mattress to the floor.

An excerpt from the session “Daily routines and cultural patterns as a basis for ensuring security”

5. Key outcomes

Trainings helped establish a **network of professionals and foster families** in Serbia, motivated and able to provide foster care for UASC. Specific responsibilities of both professionals and foster families have been clearly defined to promote effective cooperation and the ability to provide adequate support in the process.

20 families have been selected as ready to provide **urgent foster care of UASC**, if the need occurs. These families are ready to provide urgent, mostly short-term, foster care to refugee and migrant children upon a request by the Centre for Social Welfare.

To date, there have been over **20 UASC placed in foster families** in four towns across Serbia. They included both boys and girls whose age varies from newborns to older adolescents. Some have been in care for a **short time** (a week or shorter) while the others stayed **longer** (for over 6 months) while waiting for family reunification or resettlement. Children have been placed in care when unaccompanied but also when they have been separated from parents or when their parents were not able to continue taking care of them (e.g. temporarily hospitalised) or have been deprived of parental rights. It is the policy of the social welfare authorities in Serbia that all children under three, in need of care, including refugee and migrant children, are placed in foster care or other family-based care.

“I wouldn’t have survived if I stayed in the asylum center while waiting for family reunification”

Ahmed (17), 7 months in foster care

An important aspect of this project was its **awareness raising** component, which was realized in partnership with IRC and local authorities, including through targeted campaign, participation in conferences, round tables and media events. This allowed us to reach a wider audience, promote foster care in general and the care for UASC, but also to sensitise the public in Serbia to the plight of migrants and refugees, particularly children.



6. What have we learned and the way forward

Foster care is the excellent solution for some children but it might not be right or in best interest of every child. It is also relatively limited in reach because of complicated procedures.

One of the questions for the training and support programme development was whether we should target a specific **age group** of refugee and migrant children for recommending placement to foster care. The principle that younger children, as more vulnerable, should have a priority during the placement was emphasized during the training. At the same time, a large number of vulnerable adolescent UASC present in Serbia might benefit from foster care but are often considered too old for such a placement, it is more difficult to find interested carers, or to interest the children themselves in such a care. The foster care for adolescents who were exposed to traumatic experiences and whose mental health has deteriorated, would require additional training and individual support to foster families and children.

Foster families and children require continuous support to be able to deal with the **difficult experiences** children have been through, or are still facing in Serbia, and to support their path to recovery. Knowing some characteristic elements of what children might have been through, and understanding cultural patterns for reacting to such events, are valuable tools to be able to recognize the need for support and help children in the most appropriate way to garner their acceptance. It is also necessary to have the skills to gradually enable the child, through daily care, to regain trust in him/herself and the world in which he/she lives.

The **network** of professionals and foster families should be **further strengthened** to become more effective in timely coordination, monitoring, referrals and support, including timely identification of UASC in need of foster care, selecting foster families, conducting best interest assessments, preparing, monitoring and supporting children and foster families. Furthermore, **peer to peer support** between professionals and foster families from different areas should be established to improve the support through the exchange of experiences, lessons learned and best practices.

Clear protocol on children prioritized for foster care, although drafted, is yet to be fully implemented in practice.

Improving existing foster care and adoption **data management system** with data for refugee and migrant children, including on accommodation needs, available foster families, and case information on children in care, would facilitate faster link between adequate service providers and beneficiaries.

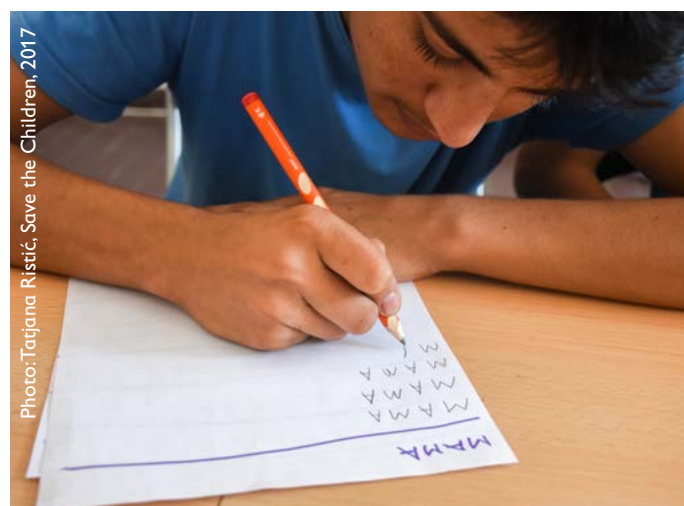
Role of NGOs in the foster care process should be further strengthened. Many NGOs provide direct support to refugee and migrant children in reception centres and institutions and they could be a valuable source of information on a specific child, identification of children who would be most suited for foster care, and in creation and implementation of individual support plans. As persons of trust, field NGO representatives could be instrumental in the process of preparing the child for placement in a foster family. Development of a **slightly adjusted training programme for NGOs** could further contribute to their involvement.

Explaining foster care to UASC is crucial for their acceptance of placement. UASC, particularly the older ones, are often unfamiliar with and sceptical towards the concept of foster care. They are concerned about being separated from the rest of refugee and migrant population and placed in a family that does not share the same ethnic, religious or cultural background. Peer to peer exchanges between UASC from reception centres and those in foster care, in addition to psychosocial support activities would help UASC understand the benefits of family-based care.

Specialised foster care of UASC in Serbia is a pioneering endeavour which, despite all the difficulties, gave positive results to UASC and foster families. The developed model could be **replicated** in the countries of the region (FYROM, Croatia) and, with some modifications, in other contexts to promote alternative care solutions for UASC.

“This training helped break down the prejudices. People shouldn’t think that providing care for refugee children must be challenging, complicated, or risky. There are institutions that support the needs of us as foster families and our task is to support children.”

Foster mother, participant of the training



7. Personal impact story of Sayd* (12)

I was born in Pakistan, as the only child in my family. From this point of view, my life in Pakistan seems like a dream that I dreamt such a long time ago. I remember school, my friends, but also the difficult life and everyday struggles for something better. My parents agreed that we need to use our chance while the borders were open and try to reach Europe. The plan was for me to go first with my uncle, and my parents would join me when they collect enough money for their journey. It seemed this could be our chance. But it wasn't. The journey to Serbia was exhausting. But at least we were travelling fast.

When police separated me from my uncle they did not give me any explanation, nor told me where they were taking me.

When I came to the Institute for Unaccompanied Minors, I was completely lost. I thought I was put in prison. I was not alone when I came, there was another boy from Pakistan, Akif*. He was a few years older than me and spoke a bit of English. I didn't understand anything. Everything was strange and new for me. Teachers, children from Serbia, food, language...

Days went by. Akif left, but other boys came. Some of them became my friends – Ahmad*, Ali Reza*, Mustafa*. Some of them stayed shorter, some longer, but no one stayed as long as me.

Some of them disliked me, but I also disliked many of them. I learned to stand up for myself. Time was passing slowly, but it was passing. On some days I didn't want to get out of the bed, but still there were days when I wanted to move on, leave that place. But I couldn't. I didn't have money and there was no one who could send it to me. My parents got stranded in Turkey and, in the meantime, they got a new baby, my brother Ali*. I felt strange about the new baby. Some time needed to pass before I adjusted to it and accepted the fact I actually have a brother now. And that my brother lives with my parents.

A few months ago, I was transferred to a Serbian family. It was completely different than staying in the Institute, in a good way. Now I really like that this happened. I met a lot of good people in the Institute, but that was not a place for me, at least not for that long.

Now, I live in a small town near Belgrade. I have a "father" and "mother", and a "younger sister" Ana*. They make me feel good and take good care of me. I can do so many things I could not do before coming to the family.

My day looks completely different now. I get up, prepare for school. I rest a bit after I come back from school, and then do my homework and play football in the backyard.

I found some new friends here, but I'm also keeping in touch with the old ones. I keep in touch with my family as well. They are still in Turkey. There are days when I really like Skyping them and seeing my brother, whom I never met, becoming a boy and not a baby anymore. But then, there are days, when it is way too difficult to talk to them. I know that my father would keep asking why I don't move forward and my mother would promise me we would be together soon. But, it has been over a year and a half of empty promises now...

My new family supports me on good and bad days and we have nice and fun time together. I like to hang out with my younger sister. She is always asking questions and wants to know everything. When she starts bothering me with tons of questions and I want to tease her I just respond with "I don't know". Or even better, I pretend I didn't understand her. Ana pays me back by tickling me and I tickle her back.

Ana is also very funny when she helps me with my Serbian. The other day she was explaining to me what "reka" (river) means in Serbian. She told me it was like a moving sea with no "pesak" (sand) in it. Only if I knew what "pesak" means in Serbian!

During the summer, we went to a swimming pool together with friends of my foster family. I don't know how to swim, but I like to jump into the water. I am not scared. I also like chasing my father and Ana around the swimming pool and pushing them into the water when they don't expect it. My father then tries to chase me back, but he doesn't stand a chance against me!

I really don't know what I want from future. Will I stay in Serbia or try to go somewhere else is something that I don't know at this moment. What I know is that I want to keep my head on my shoulders.

And my head is sometimes very difficult to carry. If I could open it, a lot of things would get out. But for now, they stay locked under the key that I keep hidden. Sometimes even from myself. That's for the best.



Photo: Ratko Petrović,
Save the Children, 2016

8. Personal impact story: a foster parent

Ahmed* (17) was separated from his family in Turkey, when they hurriedly boarded different buses. The family continued the journey to Germany, and he was left alone. He spent days at a train station in Serbia, in extremely low temperature, waiting to cross to Croatia. After he arrived to our house and he felt safe, he slept for days. His shoes were completely ruined. He told us about his journey and all the adversities he experienced. Before coming to us, Ahmed slept outside, burning rubbish to keep himself warm, and running around when it was too cold for him to sit or sleep. He told us everything using his hands and some English words; nevertheless, we had no problems understanding him.

He has an older brother and a sister who is married. He likes hip-hop. He composes his own music and videos. While he stayed with us, he filmed himself in different outfits, spending most of his time on music and videos. He spent 7 months with us. One of my biological sons was born on the same day he was, on December 25th, so we were joking how they must be twins. On their birthday, Ahmed created a photo montage of the two of them, posing together like they were brothers.

Ahmed called me “my Serbian mom”. Every time he was going out he asked me if he looked good.

Ahmed became a part of our family. On one occasion, my son took him to his friend’s wedding, so he could experience Serbian traditional wedding. He told us a lot about the life in his country, and it was all so captivating. He made friends with the three foster boys who were also staying with us. The youngest of these three boys has curly hair like Ahmed, so we used to say that the two of them were also brothers.

In the beginning, he spent a lot of time in his room and he gained weight. We found a gym where he could exercise. For Ahmed, time passed slowly, and he spent many hours

thinking about his future. While he waited for the family reunification, he sometimes feared how it just would not happen. He imagined that he would have to go back to Iran. That made me sad. I tried to encourage him. I told him that he needed to be patient, because his family was waiting for him. I repeated the same words so many times that he learned these words in Serbian – “čekaj, čekaj” (wait, wait) – and he was saying that to himself over and over again.

When he left, I was so sad. Ahmed was sad as well, but also happy, because he didn’t hug his mom for months. He promised me that we will stay friends forever, and that he will come to visit us as soon as he has the opportunity to do so. Even though we do not speak the same language, we still have Skype calls every Sunday afternoon and talk for an hour.

I have a feeling that I did a good job looking after him. Ahmed told me that he would have had difficulties persevering, were he somewhere else without our support. I motivated him to go out, to find friends. I introduced him to people from our village, and introduced him to a girl from the neighbourhood – she was the same age as him – who was teaching him Serbian. He helped us with chores around the house: he planted vegetables in the garden with me, he mowed the lawn – he did some things he never did before. We cooked together, using his recipes, using spices I have never used before.

Being in a position to help someone makes me happy and fulfilled. I would advise everyone who is able to care for UASC to do so. I had a wonderful experience. I would gladly support more refugee and migrant children, especially now, after going through this training. I even know many words in their languages. I would miss learning so many interesting new things if I didn’t accept this opportunity.

9. Contact details

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