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Violence against children on the Balkans migration route - Solutions through child-led advocacy and participative research

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SVRI Forum



# Save the Children

Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub



# University of Sarajevo

Center for Interdisciplinary Studies



# Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub

- KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT
- ADVOCACY
- PARTNERSHIPS
- CAPACITY BUILDING

# Balkans migration route

- The Balkans migration route remained vibrant in 2021, with **most new arrivals recorded in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia.**
- Statistical data in Greece, Bulgaria and Romania suggest **at least 93,696 arrivals in the region during 2021.**
- The UNHCR reported that 43% fewer people arrived in the Western Balkans in 2021 than in 2020. As opposed to that, IOM and Frontex estimated an increase of new arrivals in the Western Balkans, 45% and 125%, respectively. A possible reason for such a large **data discrepancy** could lie in different methodologies used to count new arrivals.
- Precise demographical characteristics remained largely unavailable, the UNHCR data indicates that 8% of the refugees and migrants who crossed the Balkans Route in 2021 were children.

# Balkans migration route

- The majority of new arrivals in the Western Balkans countries in 2021 were people fleeing **Syria, Pakistan and Afghanistan**.
- The issue of **collective expulsions (or pushbacks) of children and adults** was repeatedly occurring throughout the year, mostly concerning **Greece, Croatia and Hungary**, but other countries as well.
- The **border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina** saw by far the highest rates of collective expulsions in the Western Balkans in 2021.
- Violent pushbacks and denial of asylum in Croatia were likely to have influenced another change in the route. After several years, **Serbia had surpassed Bosnia and Herzegovina as the Western Balkans country with the most refugees and migrants in its territory**.

# Research



**Research Institutions:**

Save the Children North West Balkans,  
University of Sarajevo – Centre for  
Interdisciplinary Studies.

**Principal Investigator:**

Bogdan Krasić (PI).

**CO-PI:**

Dženana Husremović (Co-PI);  
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**Co-investigators:**

Violeta Marković; Nikolina Milić; Anita Burgund  
Isakov; Tatjana Ristić; Alina Trkulja; Eldar Komar.

Period:

**“WHEREVER WE GO, SOMEONE  
DOES US HARM”**

**Violence against refugee and migrant  
children arriving in Europe through the  
Balkans**



**“WHEREVER WE GO,  
SOMEONE DOES US HARM”**

Violence against refugee and migrant children  
arriving in Europe through the Balkans

# Research methodology

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by experienced field Save the Children caseworkers and cultural mediators. The field researchers also completed training on how to conduct such interviews

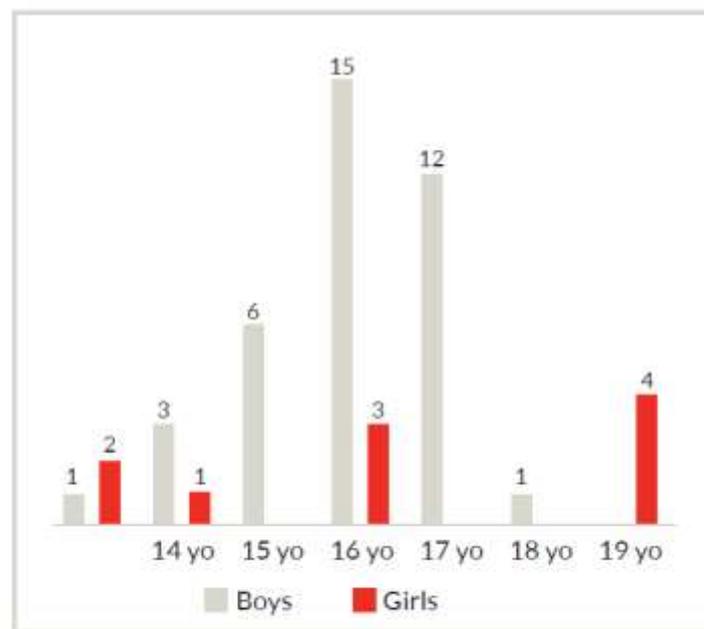
Field research was carried out over a three-month period, from October to December 2021.

Researchers interviewed a total of 48 children and youths, ranging from 13 to 19 years old. The most common age of respondents was 16 years old.

Regarding the children's family status, 30 respondents were unaccompanied children (all boys) and 18 children were travelling with their families or accompanied (including 8 boys and 10 girls).

Field research teams used a private space in the reception centres, educational zones or offices in the centres used by Save the Children North West Balkans. Interviewers equipped the interview rooms so that they would ensure privacy and, so far as possible, create an atmosphere of trust.

Five focus groups were held during December 2021, two in Bosnia and Herzegovina and three in Serbia.



*Respondents by age, disaggregated by sex*

# Risks, challenges, ethics and limitations

Data confidentiality and privacy of children participating in the research were ensured using a specially designed identity encoding system for each of the respondents, so that their identity would be fully protected.

**Referral system** was in place for those requiring psychosocial or legal support.

Council of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Sarajevo provided their **ethical consent** to the implementation of this research.

## Sample limitations:

- Age
- Gender
- Country of origin

# Violence against children – findings

- Police and border guard violence against children
- Sexual abuse and violence
- Psychological abuse
- Economic exploitation and child labour
- Other hardships

# Police and border violence

- Children most commonly reported physical violence **by border police officers** along the entire Balkans route, most often during attempts by children to cross informal border crossings only to be violently expelled in so called pushbacks.
- Interviewed children describe being **stripped naked, forced to stand in the cold, the use of electric shocks and beatings with sticks** which led to serious physical injuries, such as fractures or severe contusions.



*When we were crossing from Turkey to Greece by boat, they caught us. They took off our boots, took all our clothes, everything we had. First they beat us up, then they set their dogs on us and the dogs attacked us, it was a horrible experience.*

Abdurahman, boy, 16

# Sexual abuse and violence

- Although no interviewed child said that they had been a victim of sexual abuse themselves, **almost two thirds listed one or more incidents where they recognised or witnessed sexual abuse of a child in their immediate environment**, including reporting the violent separation of girls and boys that smugglers then abused sexually.
- Interviewed children said **smugglers, in exchange for sexual services, offer them money, privileged position and protection** from other persons traveling with them, a **“free” pass** across the border etc.
- **Unaccompanied girls** often join families on the road, and they try to keep a low profile as they are at a higher risk of sexual abuse. However, even girls traveling with families **are exposed to sexual violence, whether from smugglers who separate them, or through attacks in reception centres. Boys are also exposed to sexual violence**, particularly if they are traveling without their families.



*The girl was yelling, trying to save herself, but that smuggler sexually abused her, we saw it.*

Hasnen, boy, 15

# Psychological abuse

- All interviewed children described being either **threatened, blackmailed, humiliated or insulted by smugglers, police officers and members of the local population.**
- Four out of 48 children said they had been abducted for ransom prior to coming to Greece or Turkey, and several other children witnessed **kidnappings** or know children who had been kidnapped on the migration route.
- In various circumstances on the Balkans route, children have faced **ethnic, religious and other forms of discrimination** that they recognise and perceive to be unjust and degrading.



# Economic exploitation and child labour

- Along the journey, many children of different ages reported that they had to work, especially those older than 10, and most frequently unaccompanied boys.
- Children worked in factories, but also in Greece, where they worked on farms.
- Almost one in three interviewed children witnessed recruitment for activities by smugglers, primarily related to border crossings and, far less frequently, for selling drugs.
- In addition to dangerous work, some children are engaged in other forms of the worst types of child labour. The interviewed children reported on the inclusion of refugee and migrant children in commercial sexual exploitation and begging.



# Help and self help

- **A striking number of children (about 1/3) have developed beliefs that no one and nothing can (or would even like to) help them on their journey, and some even believe they are no longer able to help themselves.**
- **Adults in their immediate environment who have the power to help, e.g., smugglers and police officers, are often those who commit acts of violence against the children. This causes them to lose trust that responsible adults can or want to help them.**
- **Unaccompanied children rely primarily on themselves, other children, and spiritual support far more than they do on adults.**

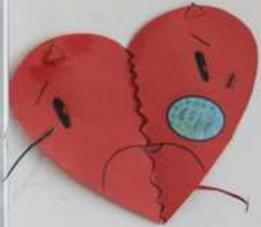


*No one, no one helps us. No one. Until you call someone, some organisation, they will come and help you, otherwise, you are on the road, people will pass by, and they won't help.*

*Mehdia, girl, 13*

# Advocacy

$$10 + 10 = 20$$
$$20 + 20 = 40$$
$$30 +$$



## ADVOCACY LEVELS

- GLOBAL
- EUROPEAN
- REGIONAL
- NATIONAL
  
- CHILD PARTICIPATION

# Recommendations

Towards:

- European Union
- EU member states
- Refugee protection stakeholders
- Researchers

Main advocacy asks

- Legal pathways
- Programme funding
- Investigations



A young child with curly brown hair is sitting at a wooden table. The child is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile and has their right index finger near their mouth. The background is a blurred indoor setting, possibly a classroom or playroom. A white rectangular box is overlaid at the bottom of the image, containing the text "THANK YOU" in large, bold, black capital letters.

**THANK YOU**