

**ALFACA II**

Improving reception and care for unaccompanied children by structurally increasing the quality and quantity of family based care



## **COUNTRY REPORT CROATIA**

**State of the art on family based care  
for unaccompanied children**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Development of a multisectoral and multidisciplinary approach for the protection of unaccompanied children in Croatia started more than 20 years ago. The reception of unaccompanied children between the ages of 15 and 18 is provided by social welfare institutions for children with behavioural problems, and for children under the age of 15, in homes for children without adequate parental care. According to the Family Law, unaccompanied children are provided with support from a special guardian, appointed by the locally competent centre for social welfare. In September 2018, the government of the Republic of Croatia adopted a new protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children, in order to improve the level of interdepartmental coordination and harmonisation of individual services, with the aim of meeting the children's needs as much as possible.

About 30 unaccompanied children are accommodated per month in 12 social welfare institutions located throughout Croatia. Besides the accommodation facilities, this also requires the availability of special guardians and translators, health services, and inclusion in education and other services targeting the integration of children, depending on their legal status. Unaccompanied children over the age of 16 may also be accommodated in reception centres for asylum seekers in Zagreb (the capital of Croatia) and Kutina (about 50 km from Zagreb).

A broad, formal framework has been developed for dealing with unaccompanied children through various regulations. This framework ensures accommodation in social welfare institutions, the appointment of guardians, provision of healthcare, Croatian language lessons, the support of translators, family reunification procedures and communication with the primary family. However, the care system for unaccompanied children is still fragmented and inconsistent, and it is therefore difficult to ensure the availability of all necessary services for these children throughout Croatia. Moreover, the current practice of placement of unaccompanied children in the social welfare institutions for children with behavioral problems is completely inappropriate.

Reception for unaccompanied children in families has not yet been introduced. However, various positive initiatives and resources have been developed recently. A detailed description of good practices and difficulties in the Croatian system of care for unaccompanied children is presented in this report. It is based on a situational analysis which gave a deeper insight into the current state of the art on family based care in Croatia.

In line with the results of this analysis, recommendations are highlighted for the national/policy level as well as at the horizontal level of everyday practice.

Since it is of utmost importance to take action, and to have sufficient resources for the further development of all aspects of the protection of unaccompanied children, especially reception in families, the short-term action plan describes activities which could contribute to further implementation of sustainable family care for unaccompanied children in Croatia.

# DEVELOPMENTS SINCE ALFACA

The Republic of Croatia is an unavoidable country in the migrant/refugee route from several Asian and African countries and their flight toward Western European countries. As it has been for the last 20 years, perception of Croatia as a transit country is still the main characteristic of the Croatian role in the European context.

When it comes to available services for unaccompanied children, a few positive changes have happened during the last three years, mostly in the area of awareness raising and training for professionals working with unaccompanied children. Although this is a good start, it is still not sufficient. It is evident that many more efforts need to be made to implement all the knowledge, skills and good practices in direct work and treatment of unaccompanied children.

The Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy is the competent body for ensuring proper accommodation and guardianship for unaccompanied children. Reception and housing for unaccompanied children is regulated by the Social Welfare Law. According to article 21 of this regulation, an unaccompanied child who is found outside their place of residence without a parent or other adult responsible for their care, and a foreign child who is found in the territory of the Republic of Croatia without a parent or other adult responsible for them, is a beneficiary of social welfare rights and services. Detailed procedures, responsibilities, duties and rules for inter-agency collaboration in the system of care for unaccompanied children were regulated for the first time by a Protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children which was adopted by the Croatian government in July 2013.

According to that document, an unaccompanied child under the age of 14 could be placed in a home for children without adequate parental care. Children who are 14 years and older can be placed in homes for children with behavioural problems, and children 16 years and older who are asylum seekers can be placed either in social welfare homes or in reception centres for asylum seekers (if that is in their best interests). If the unaccompanied child was identified as a victim of trafficking by competent police officers, she/he will be placed in the Shelter for children who are victims of trafficking in human beings.

The Ministry of the Interior is responsible for migrants, border control and international protection procedures related to the whole population of migrants/refugees in Croatia. Accordingly, the Ministry of the Interior runs two types of institutions: a reception centre for asylum seekers (one facility in Zagreb and another in Kutina) and a reception centre for illegal migrants called Ježevo (detention centre). The Ministry's competences are regulated by the Law for International and Temporary Protection and the Immigration Law. According to these regulations, an unaccompanied child might be placed – in exceptional circumstances – in the detention centre, under the care of the Ministry of the Interior.

The accommodation conditions for unaccompanied children has not changed since the ALFACA<sup>1</sup> project. Due to a higher influx of unaccompanied children in September 2016, the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy decided to arrange reception and accommodation of unaccompanied children in 12 social welfare homes located throughout Croatia. This decision was acceptable as an emergency response to the crisis – a temporary intervention rather than a permanent solution. It was evident that it would lead to even greater fragmentation of the child care system and care for unaccompanied children, and would reduce availability of the necessary services and affect the children’s access to their rights.

There is still considerable fluctuation in the numbers of unaccompanied children and many of the children are going missing. According to statistics from the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy regarding the last five years, about 30 unaccompanied children per month are accommodated in the institutions concerned. The number of children varies due to new arrivals and frequent cases of runaways. The reasons why they are running away from the institutions are very complex and related to the fact that Croatia is not their destination, but just one of the countries on their route towards other Western European countries. Issues regarding the quality of their care and appropriate access to their rights are therefore continually raised by experts from different civil society organisations and, more recently, often by professionals from government-run institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Within the ALFACA-project, Nidos (the Netherlands) in cooperation with Minor-Ndako (Belgium), Jugendhilfe Süd-Niedersachsen (Germany), OPU (Czech Republic), the Danish Red Cross and KIJA (Austria) developed training for professionals working with reception families that take care of unaccompanied children. The goal of the project was to further develop and improve the reception of unaccompanied children in families by providing professionals with the tools needed for this and teaching them how to use these tools. The project implementation period was 1 October 2015 to 1 April 2017 and the project was co-funded by the European Commission.

# 1. STATE OF THE ART ON FAMILY BASED CARE IN CROATIA

## 1.1 Current national context

Considering Croatia to be a transit country is a key criterion for analysing all aspects of the reception and treatment of the migrant population. This also applies to the level and quality of the services available, specific ally for unaccompanied and separated children.

It seems that the children's perception corresponds with the professionals' view that Croatia is not a country where unaccompanied children would want to live. The number of interviews conducted with these children in the last three years have resulted in the conclusion that unaccompanied children consider Croatia to be a country without opportunities and proper services for migrants and they do not want to stay here. In too many cases, professionals working with unaccompanied children express the point of view that children will "escape" sooner or later and, thus, only a small number of children are "stuck" in Croatia. This argument forms the main barrier to building a care system for unaccompanied children. It is a commonly held view, but ignores the fact that hundreds of these children arrive in Croatia every year. Therefore, in this position of a "vicious circle", positive initiatives and changes are moving in the dynamics of "baby-steps".

There is still no unique and precise quantitative data on unaccompanied children, and tracking and comparing the data collected by the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth, and Social Policy is a challenge.

The fact that only 29 unaccompanied children were identified in 2015 may seem paradoxical and at the same time constantly opens the question of the correct detection and registration of unaccompanied children. Namely, during 2015, about 650,000 refugees and migrants passed through Croatia. Approximately 30% of this migrant population were children. Most of them were considered to be children accompanied by their parents or relatives, and the police allowed them to continue their journey towards their desired destinations in Western Europe.

According to Ministry of Interior statistics, the total number of illegal border crossings has increased in the last three years (2016-2018) and the number of unaccompanied children shows an ascending trend in that period. Annual Statistical Reports on Beneficiaries and Applied Social Welfare Rights in the Republic of Croatia published by the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy show that 414 unaccompanied children were placed in social welfare homes in 2016, and 583 in 2017. Unaccompanied children in Croatia are mostly coming from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Algeria, Somalia and Palestine. But in 2018 many more children from Kosovo, Turkey, Libya and Morocco were registered.

Even though the statistics are not consistent, all available data indicate an increase in the reception of migrants during 2016 and 2017 who were:

- Illegally crossing the border (4,496 in 2016 and 4,808 in 2017)
- Adult asylum seekers
- Juvenile asylum seekers - children who consider Croatia to be a safe country and are exhausted by a life on the move

The following figures from a Statistical Report from the Ministry of the Interior (October 2018) show the trends in the last four years in the number of unaccompanied children - asylum seekers (Table 1) and the number of children who have been granted asylum (Table 2).

Table 1 - Unaccompanied children - asylum seekers

Gender / Age	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
<b>M</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>251</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>465</b>
0-13	3	15	23	6	47
14-15	1	47	62	12	122
16-17	2	101	166	27	293
<b>F</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>15</b>
0-13		1	4	2	7
14-15			1		1
16-17			5	2	7
<b>Total sum</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>261</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>480</b>

Table 2 - Children who have been granted asylum

Type of protection	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total Sum
<b>Asylum</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>M</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>83</b>
0-13	3	7	33	20	63
14-17		5	4	11	20
<b>F</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>66</b>
0-13	2	15	22	15	54
14-17		1	2	9	12
<b>Subsidiary protection</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>M</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>20</b>
0-13		3	5	4	12
14-17		2	3	3	8
<b>F</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>
0-13	1	1	2	6	10
14-17			4		4

During 2017, police officers recorded 846 unaccompanied children illegally entering or staying in Croatia, compared to 334 recorded by social services, according to the Annual Report published by the Ombudswoman for Children for 2017<sup>2</sup>. The Report highlights the police obligation to inform social services of any treatment of unaccompanied children, and that the numerical data of these two sectors should be consistent.

In addition, changes have taken place in the regional context in the last two years, with regard to migration routes as well as general European and Croatian politics concerning migration. The most visible change is that thousands of migrants/refugees are living in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including several hundred unaccompanied children. Bosnia and Herzegovina share a long border with Croatia (1,011 km). Police have a very strict and restrictive approach to guarding the border, especially from what is called illegal migration. The number of refugees entering Croatia last year did not increase, because access to Croatian territory is very restricted. But there is no data of children of third country nationals which would describe the way they have entered Croatia, and that is an area of special concern.

## 1.2 Foster care in general

Despite a process of deinstitutionalisation with regard to children placed in homes in Croatia that has been ongoing for 10 years, the foster care system is developing too slowly. Around 2,200 children were living in foster care in 2014, slightly more than those who live in institutions. A national campaign to increase the number of foster families (1,531 at the time) was launched in spring 2014. Since then, a very complex political situation has had a huge impact on the continuity of all these activities (three different governmental administrations between September 2015 and October 2016). This was also reflected in the country's demographic flows. According to Eurostat, around 350,000 citizens left Croatia in the last few years. It affected all aspects of living and also the child care system, combined with many other factors that make a very complex political and social situation in Croatia. 2,342 children were living in foster families in 2016, but in 2017 this number decreased to 1,946.

The Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy (until October 2016 the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth) developed a Plan for the improvement of foster care (2016-2017), based on a very detailed analysis conducted in 2015. In line with the priorities set by the government that took office in October 2016, all activities for the promotion of alternative child care have slowed down in the last two years.

There is still no foster care system for unaccompanied children in Croatia. However, various positive initiatives and projects carried out by civil society organisations are gradually changing the position of decision-makers and experts on foster care for unaccompanied children, when compared to the skeptical or even negative attitudes that were dominant three years ago.

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<sup>2</sup> Annual Report published by the Ombudsman for Children for 2017 (available in Croatian) <http://dijete.hr/izvjesca/>

## 1.3 SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved public perception of foster care</li> <li>• Positive changes in mindset among professionals in public institutions</li> <li>• Obligatory assessment and matching of foster families and children</li> <li>• Foster families involved in basic training and various coordination, education and information activities</li> <li>• CMEC has initiated cooperation, communication and networking between the foster community and guardians for unaccompanied children with training and general expert meetings</li> <li>• Coordination For Unaccompanied Children established (enthusiasm of members)</li> <li>• Continuous cooperation with the Forum for Quality Fostering</li> <li>• Several training sessions and awareness-raising activities on the needs of unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Mobile team for unaccompanied children consisting of experts from the Center for Missing and Exploited Children (CMEC) (social worker, social pedagogue and cultural mediator) who provide direct support to unaccompanied children and professionals in social welfare homes all over Croatia</li> <li>• A higher level of awareness of the necessity of child participation (as a principle and regular practice)</li> <li>• Ombudswoman for Children continuously participates and supports the activities and efforts of the CMEC</li> <li>• A result of the ALFACA training was the willingness shown by the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy to incorporate a version of the ALFACA model and tools in a programme for further development of the Croatian foster care system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unequally developed fostering in different parts of Croatia</li> <li>• Fostering in different parts of Croatia done in different ways</li> <li>• Highly fragmented and scattered reception facilities and availability of the services needed</li> <li>• Large fluctuations in numbers of unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Still a great lack of connectivity between professionals from centres for social welfare, guardians, and professionals working with children in reception facilities</li> <li>• Slow administrative procedures for appointing and changing children's guardians</li> <li>• Lack of continuous cooperation between the competent bodies and civil society organisations with experience of working with unaccompanied children, which would help improve processes and the protection and care of this group of children</li> <li>• Further sustainability of results from previous projects is at risk due to the slow process of contracting approved projects (lack of funding)</li> </ul>

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A long tradition in foster care for children</li> <li>• There is a team (psychologist and social worker) responsible for foster care in centres for social welfare</li> <li>• A new protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children has been developed and was adopted by the Croatian government (September 2018)</li> <li>• The new Foster Care Law was adopted by the Croatian government (December 2018)</li> <li>• The law provides for obligatory assessment and matching for foster families and children</li> <li>• The active role of the Ombudswoman for Children in protecting the rights of unaccompanied children, giving recommendations to the relevant ministries and encouraging faster change and more cooperation between governmental bodies and civil society organisations</li> <li>• A result of the ALFACA training was the willingness shown by the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy to incorporate a version of the ALFACA model and tools in a programme for further development of Croatian foster care system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing political atmosphere and agenda at a European and national level regarding migration</li> <li>• Considering Croatia to be a transit country instead of establishing an appropriate system of care for unaccompanied children regardless of their number or time spent in Croatia</li> <li>• Lack of a strategic, systematic and appropriate approach to improving the system of care for unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Lack of precise quantitative data on unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Lack of interdepartmental collaboration</li> <li>• Lack of families</li> <li>• Highly fragmented and scattered reception facilities and the availability of services needed</li> <li>• Large fluctuations in numbers of unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Slowdown in the implementation of the provisions of the Foster Care Law</li> <li>• Systematic preparation of foster families with information about the needs of unaccompanied children to be placed in reception in families still not ensured</li> <li>• Lack of education for professionals and continuous support for foster parents</li> <li>• Methods and procedures for starting foster care for unaccompanied children are non-existent</li> <li>• Incoherent and inconsistent implementation of the new protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Slow administrative procedures for appointing and changing children's guardians</li> <li>• Delayed drafting of the new Family Law that threatens further development of guardianship for unaccompanied children</li> </ul>

## 1.4 Focus points

Since the new Foster Care Act came into force, it has been an incentive for intensifying cooperation between the foster community, guardians and professionals working in public institutions, and for organising preparation and information activities related to the development of reception in families for children. In addition, the positive atmosphere surrounding the development of foster care in general is an excellent basis for continued advocacy for the rights of unaccompanied children, as well as for improved cooperation between relevant stakeholders. It should also help to change the perception of Croatia as a transit country, which is a dominant criterion for the treatment of unaccompanied children.

Continuing to invest in capacity building in the care system for unaccompanied children, and raising awareness of their rights and their extremely vulnerable position, is of utmost importance. No matter how strong, capable, mature or persistent the children are – they are completely alone, unprotected and exposed to various risks and traumas while they are on the move. That is why it is the legal, professional and human obligation of the state authorities, as well as any professional, to offer every unaccompanied child the highest quality support and protection. Every child has this right, regardless of their origin, nationality or their willingness to stay in Croatia for one day or for a lifetime.

## 1.5 Good practices in Croatia

Until 2015, the phenomenon of unaccompanied children was only ‘visible’ to the professional community who had direct responsibility and liability for the way they are treated. But the migrant crisis in 2015 has thrown light on the complexity of the needs of all children involved in migration, particularly unaccompanied children. This attracted the attention of many experts and organisations, and highlighted the necessity for changes in the approach to unaccompanied children that had been applied in the previous 20 years. It was apparent that the competent bodies did not have the capacity to provide the necessary services and support, neither to adults nor to children. So a number of international and civil society organisations are now involved, providing a wide range of services to overcome the gaps and problems.

From August 2016 to June 2017, the Center for Missing and Exploited Children (CMEC), in partnership with Save the Children, implemented the project ‘Refugee and Migrant Children in Croatia’. Part of the project was a needs assessment for a capacity building system for the protection of unaccompanied children, which was conducted in January and February 2017. The main objective of this activity was to gain deeper insight into the experiences and needs of different stakeholders in the system of child care for refugees and migrants in Croatia. A qualitative research approach was, therefore, used and field research, focus groups and interviews were conducted with three groups of participants: decision-makers, professionals and unaccompanied children. This resulted in three different, relevant perspectives of the children’s needs, as well as the need to build and improve the capacity of the system.

Findings suggest improvements in the following areas: housing and foster care; guardianship; communication in the mother tongue; Croatian language lessons; child participation in decision-making; connection with the child’s family; information for the child and access to their rights; healthcare; and a model of care focused on durable solutions, integration and full protection of the rights of unaccompanied children. A detailed description of the findings is enclosed in the final report

'Needs assessment for capacity building in the protection system of unaccompanied children', available in Croatian<sup>3</sup> and English<sup>4</sup>.

A comprehensive training programme was developed using the results of the research and its recommendations. The training was intended for practitioners working in the field of social welfare, home affairs, health, education, justice, and the civil society sector (organisations offering assistance and advocacy for refugees and migrants, and also for foster families). The training programme included the following topics:

- Assessment of previous experience and knowledge of unaccompanied children
- Characteristics of unaccompanied children; international and European documents
- National framework for the legal protection of unaccompanied children
- Case study - specific risks of unaccompanied children (slavery, trafficking in human beings, etc.)
- The specific needs of unaccompanied children: guardianship - legal framework and practical application
- Cultural sensitivity and cultural competence
- Examples of working with unaccompanied children – practices
- The needs assessment of unaccompanied children
- Planning and programming of work with unaccompanied children: from existing regulations to working practices to day-to-day work.

CMEC conducted three two-day training courses for 73 experts from the social welfare system, healthcare system, the police and NGOs, and for eight foster parents. The participation of foster parents in this training was their first encounter with information about unaccompanied children. They expressed their interest and willingness to provide family care for these children, and emphasised the necessity and importance of support from experts. With the aim of further informing and advocating foster care for unaccompanied children, CMEC has continued to cooperate with the organisation Forum for Quality Fostering, and has included foster parents in various education and information activities in the last two years.

The new Protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children was developed by a multidisciplinary working group set up by the Ministry of the Interior which included a CMEC expert. It was adopted by the Croatian government in September 2018, and is currently only available in Croatian<sup>5</sup>. This protocol provides very detailed procedures, responsibilities, duties and rules on inter-agency collaboration and is currently, therefore, the most important tool and guideline for all stakeholders involved in the continuum of care for unaccompanied children. The protocol also stipulates the placement of unaccompanied children in foster families as well as in institutions, which is in accordance with the provisions of the new Foster Care Law.

In April 2018, as part of its partnership with Nidos in the ALFACA II project, CMEC organised a two-day expert meeting in Croatia. Representatives from the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy (MDFYSP), centres for social welfare, UNICEF and the Forum for Quality Fostering, as well as guardians, attended the meeting. The UNICEF office in Croatia, together with MDFYSP and in partnership with the SIRIUS organisation, has now started to develop a comprehensive programme for improving the Croatian child care system. This includes the establishment of foster care for unaccompanied children in Croatia. The same stakeholders were involved in the process of drafting

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<sup>3</sup> [http://djecabezpratnje.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Zavr%C5%A1no-izvjesce\\_Procjena-potreba-2017.pdf](http://djecabezpratnje.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Zavr%C5%A1no-izvjesce_Procjena-potreba-2017.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://djecabezpratnje.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Final-Report-Needs-assessment.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children:

<https://mdomsp.gov.hr/UserDocImages/djeca%20i%20obitelji/Protokol%20o%20postupanju%20prema%20djeci%20bez%20opratnje.pdf>

the new Foster Care Law during the first half of 2018. So the expert meeting was held at the right time, and had a strong impact on the provisions of the new law.

Croatian parliament adopted the new Foster Care Law in December 2018<sup>6</sup>. It was a historic moment, because it was the first time that a law provided the possibility of accommodating an unaccompanied child in a foster family. In addition, as part of this project, CMEC organised a two-day ALFACA training course for 20 participants who were representatives from MDFYSP, centres for social welfare, UNICEF and civil organisations, and also guardians. One of the aims of the ALFACA II project is to use training to improve the knowledge and skills of the staff working with unaccompanied children on family based care, so organising this course was also a very important contribution to the establishment of foster care for unaccompanied children in Croatia.

Above all, it is important to emphasise the active role of the Ombudswoman for Children in protecting the rights of unaccompanied children. The Ombudswoman continuously supports and participates in the activities of the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, giving recommendations to the relevant ministries, and encouraging faster change and more cooperation between governmental bodies and civil society organisations.

## 1.6 Difficulties in relation to the further implementation of reception in families

Adopting the new Foster Care Law is a major step forward in the efforts to ensure better care for unaccompanied children in Croatia. The Law provides an opportunity to establish a high-quality foster care system for unaccompanied children.. In addition, the fact that Croatia still has a relatively small number of unaccompanied children compared to other countries in the region, or across the migrant route, may also help to facilitate the setting up of a comprehensive system.

However, the basic difficulty in achieving that goal might be the lack of a coherent strategy regarding care for unaccompanied children in Croatia. The Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy has published a Work Plan for 2019 on its website<sup>7</sup>. One of the specific goals is "Improving the quality of care for unaccompanied children", which is very promising. But this goal is to be achieved by "Participating (the Ministry) in the preparation and development of projects related to the placement and integration of unaccompanied children" at the request of organisations proposing the projects. The Work Plan does not actually focus on a strategic and integrated approach to improving the care of unaccompanied children.

Following the Protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children, an 'Inter-Agency Commission for Unaccompanied Children' was established. It is foreseen to involve governmental bodies responsible for social welfare, internal affairs, health, education, the Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities, international organizations and, where appropriate, civil organizations involved in the protection of children's rights. The civil society sector is more progressive and flexible, and has more work experience, knowledge and very specific resources when compared to the public sector. In practice, civil society is a significant contributor to the public sector. The possibility left to the competent body to arbitrarily involve civil organisations affects the weaker and discontinuous interdepartmental collaboration. In practice, the protection of unaccompanied children has been

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.zakon.hr/z/485/Zakon-o-udomiteljstvu> (the Foster Care Law is only available in Croatian)

<sup>7</sup> <https://mdomsp.gov.hr/UserDocImages//Vijesti2019//Plan%20rada%20za%202019%20-%20Final.pdf> (in Croatian)

successful due to the significant role of civil society organisations. Therefore, the full inclusion of the civil sector into cooperation is of utmost interest of the further development and quality of interdisciplinary approaches, both at the national and afterward at the transnational level.

Development of a new Family law has been in progress for the last two years. Professionals working for and with unaccompanied children consider the current drafting of family law as a chance to better regulate the guardianship system for children in general, but for unaccompanied children in particular. The first draft of the law two years ago caused profound polarisation and conflict in the political arena – and in society in general. Consequently, in the last two years, there has been no indication as to whether the Ministry will continue drafting the law and when it will be adopted. This calls into question the improvement of guardianship provisions for children and the provision of stronger support for foster families from guardians.

In addition, one of the most important issues is the unequal development of fostering in different parts of Croatia and the lack of families. The number of ethnic families, as well as opportunities for their recruitment and their willingness to provide foster care for unaccompanied children, is also an unexplored area.

In short: the lack of a clear strategic plan and legal provisions (guardianship), insufficient cross-sectoral collaboration, slow development and implementation of training and practical tools/instruments, as well as problems with recruiting new foster families, are key difficulties in relation to the further implementation of reception in families.

## 1.7 Practices to be developed

Care for unaccompanied children is integrated into the national child care system. There is a broad, formal framework for dealing with these children, based on various regulations. This framework ensures accommodation in social welfare institutions, the appointment of guardians, provision of healthcare, Croatian language lessons, the support of translators, family reunification procedures and communication with the primary family. In addition, the protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children is supposed to enable smooth implementation and linking of all procedures at the horizontal level (everyday practice). Despite all formal measures, the system for unaccompanied children is still fragmented, and there is a lack of proper access to rights and services, especially in parts of the country far from the capital. Everyday practices are inconsistent, due to the fact that professionals from different sectors have not been informed about the new protocol and/or have no experience nor knowledge of how to deal with unaccompanied children properly. All this results in inequality and violation of children's rights.

In order to achieve full integration, cohesion, implementation and monitoring of all processes, a clear and transparent strategy/action plan for the capacity building of alternative care for unaccompanied children ought to be developed, with an unambiguous role for the state body responsible for improving the entire child care system.

This plan would address topics such as:

- Systematic preparation and information for the foster community about the specific needs of unaccompanied children
- Strengthening the capacity of experts to provide support to foster families for unaccompanied children

- Guidelines on needs assessments of unaccompanied children for the professionals working with them
- Standards/tools for recruitment, screening, reception, matching and placement of unaccompanied children in foster families
- Plan for the continuing education and specialisation of professionals working with unaccompanied children in reception facilities and centres for social welfare
- Regular workshops for improving inter-agency collaboration and effective implementation of the protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children, including a plan for durable solutions and inclusion of unaccompanied children in communities

At the expert meeting held in April 2018 as part of the ALFACA II project, professionals and foster parents highlighted positive existing resources such as a long tradition of foster care in Croatia and improved public perception. As a basis for further enlarging the system of reception in families, they suggested:

- A clear legal framework
- Establishing standards for education and supervision – resources exist but need to be structured
- The sensitisation of media, the wider public and experts; building a social network of associations and asylum systems dealing with migrants and unaccompanied children
- Establishing networks of mutual support for guardians and for foster families
- Establishing a central location for reception and for the initial needs and risk assessment of unaccompanied children
- Considering other accommodation options (organised housing instead of institutions)
- Establishing specialised and professional foster care
- Recruiting and promoting foster care for unaccompanied children
- Engaging and motivating existing foster families, as well as families who have been living in the country for some time and their ethnic communities
- Educational and continuous support to foster parents (availability of translators, language lessons and psychosocial support)
- Ensuring regular education, extracurricular activities and professional occupations for unaccompanied children

In order to contribute to the quality of measures to be taken for the establishment of reception in families from the perspective of civil society (Center for Missing and Exploited Children), the following activities are planned:

- Continued networking throughout the Coordination for unaccompanied children, which enables continuous collaboration and advocacy for the improvement of the care system
- Continuous collaboration with the Forum for Quality Fostering and encouraging foster families to participate in Coordination For Unaccompanied Children
- Establishing an informal Croatian network of special guardians
- Organising education and information workshops for foster families to provide them with relevant facts on the specific needs and characteristics of unaccompanied children
- Further education to enhance cultural competences, cultural sensitivity and intercultural, child-friendly communication

## 1.8 Child participation as part of the situational analysis

With the consent of their guardians, seven unaccompanied children (boys aged 16- 18) participated in individual interviews and a group discussion on the quality of care provided for them in Croatia. These interviews were led by professionals working at the Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The outcomes of conversations show how much can be learnt from children, and that they should always be involved in the solution when it comes to any matter that concerns them. The children felt that their basic rights (security, food and placement) were respected. But they pointed out that the type of care is completely unacceptable, because they are placed in an institution for children with behavioural problems and they believe that they do not belong there. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the poor content of care, due to the lack of psychosocial support, contact with guardians (in some cases they did not meet their guardian at all), lack of healthcare, communication barriers (translators are hardly available, especially in smaller cities), unavailability of education, insufficient cultural sensitivity and a feeling of inequality between them and Croatian children. Children describe their needs in a simple and clear manner. They just want stability and the normalisation of their lives. Most of them are very proactive and just want a chance to go to school, work and live like other children and young people.

## 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The situational analysis provided a deeper insight into key needs in the system of care for unaccompanied children, and is also the basis for recommendations for further improving the reception of families in Croatia.

Since the recommendations relate to a different kind and hierarchy of needs and changes that need to be harmonised, the following table presents two levels of recommendations: national and horizontal (daily practice).

<b>National level</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a clear strategy (plan) for capacity building of alternative care for unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Ensure <b>optimal</b> functioning of the Inter-Agency Commission for Unaccompanied Children, established by the protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Connect various resources and stakeholders (primarily, create a connection between special guardians and foster families)</li> <li>• Ensure education of professionals working with unaccompanied children to provide support to foster families</li> <li>• Establish a central location for reception and for the initial needs and risk assessment of unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Ensure more structured procedures for informing and including children in all processes that concern them</li> </ul>
<b>Horizontal level</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue networking for professionals from different sectors through Coordination for Unaccompanied Children and other activities</li> <li>• Facilitate the harmonisation of processes and activities in everyday practice (support from the mobile team of experienced professionals, including cultural mediators)</li> <li>• Intervision and peer support for professionals</li> <li>• Continue collaboration with the Forum for Quality Fostering</li> <li>• Include foster families in various motivation and information activities on developing reception in families for unaccompanied children</li> <li>• Further improvement of cultural competences, cultural sensitivity, and intercultural, child-friendly communication</li> </ul>

### 3. ACTION PLAN

	Aim	Activities	Actors	Timeframe
1.	To integrate care for unaccompanied children into the care system	Advocating and proposing the design of a plan for capacity building of alternative care for unaccompanied children, disseminating recommendations from this report	Center for Missing and Exploited Children	April – July 2019
2.	To raise awareness of the needs of unaccompanied children and to enhance the cultural sensitivity of the professional and general community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social media campaign</li> <li>• Regular updates through the online platform “unaccompanied children” <a href="http://djecabezpratnje.org/">http://djecabezpratnje.org/</a></li> </ul>	Center for Missing and Exploited Children by asking for the support of the Ombudswoman for Children	February – September 2019
3.	To improve collaboration between professionals working with children	Support for unaccompanied children and professionals from the mobile team	Center for Missing and Exploited Children	February – June 2019
		Continuing to run Coordination For Unaccompanied Children (CFUC)	Center for Missing and Exploited Children with the support of CFUC members	continuous
4.	To improve connectivity and peer support for special guardians	Advocating the establishment of a Croatian network of special guardians	Center for Missing and Exploited Children by asking for the support of the Ombudswoman for Children	February – September 2019
5.	To initiate and support the establishment of reception in families	Direct communication and collaboration with special guardians, professionals from reception facilities, and team members from centres for social welfare responsible for foster care	Mobile team at the Center for Missing and Exploited Children	February – June 2019

## 4. DISSEMINATION PLAN

The strategic starting point of the Center for Missing and Exploited Children is a contribution to change in the existing model of care for unaccompanied children in Croatia, and the establishment of alternative care for unaccompanied children in line with their specific needs. Following this view, CMEC is committed to a comprehensive, inclusive and integrative approach to capacity building of different parts of the system, as well as to continuous dissemination of relevant information and project outcomes.

Regarding the current state of the art and the situation analysis conducted in this project, CMEC has implemented a number of activities to inform, involve and inspire different stakeholders to actively collaborate in the process of changing and establishing alternative care for unaccompanied children.

Up until now, the Center has carried out the following activities, which are complementary and facilitate achievement of the project aims:

- An active role in the drafting of the new protocol on the treatment of unaccompanied children
- Active participation in and contribution to public consultation on the draft of the Foster Care Law
- The CMEC's mobile team began providing direct support to unaccompanied children placed in seven social welfare homes in different parts of Croatia, and also to professionals, in January 2019
- A social media campaign as part of the national project "Their stories" (financially supported by the US embassy) started in February 2019

The civil organization SIRIUS is developing a comprehensive training program for experts in the field of foster care for children, in partnership with Ministry of demography, family, youth and social policy and UNICEF.. The training is intended for social welfare experts working with foster families. At the end of March 2019, SIRIUS agreed to the participation of a CMEC expert in the development of the training programme. It has also been agreed that CMEC's expert will take responsibility for programme implementation, which will enable further dissemination of all recommendations to the relevant stakeholders in Croatia.

With the aim of promoting dissemination and sustainability of the project's results, CMEC is planning the following continuous activities:

- Regular updates on the online platform "unaccompanied children" <http://djecabezpratnje.org/> (all information on the expert meeting held in April 2019, ALFACA training and the ALFACA manual are available on this website)
- Regular use of electronic mailing lists of participants in CMEC training, workshops, and conferences to send newsletters about further activities, background information, recent news and working practices
- Initiating research, development, training, improvements to standards, and other strategic and substantial issues in the protection and care of unaccompanied children
- Providing direct support for unaccompanied children, foster families and social welfare experts
- Networking and initiatives to improve the quality of intersectoral collaboration
- Collaboration with the media (interviews and appearances on local/national TV and radio programmes)

# APPENDIX

## Alfaca training in Croatia

A two-day ALFACA training programme was held in Croatia in November 2018. This was a very important contribution to further dissemination of the ALFACA model and of tools and good practices. It provided an opportunity to incorporate a version of the ALFACA model and tools in the programme for further development of a Croatian foster care system. Representatives from the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy, centres for social welfare, the UNICEF office in Croatia, and the Forum for Quality Fostering, as well as guardians, attended the training.

The training programme consisted of the following topics:

- **Background information on unaccompanied children:** development of unaccompanied children; psychological well-being; safety risks; basic needs of unaccompanied children after the flight; risk and protective factors for unaccompanied children; promoting resilience of unaccompanied children
- **Communication and working in an intercultural environment:** culturally sensitive communication; cultural context of the unaccompanied child; specific topics related to cultural differences in the situation of an unaccompanied child; specific topics related to cultural differences in the risk of child abuse involving unaccompanied children
- **The need for guidance:** strengthening protective factors for unaccompanied children; guidance for family reunification; self-reliance at 18; guidance on the outcome: return or integration
- **Recruiting families:** how to recruit; which families to recruit: important characteristics for reception families (ethnic or indigenous reception families)
- **Screening families:** who and when to screen; how to screen – screening instruments; the ALFACA screening tool
- **Matching and placement**
- **Instruments and tools:** for providing continuous support to children, foster families, and professionals who work with foster families for unaccompanied children; sustainability of systems and standardised processes of foster care for unaccompanied children

Training participants evaluated the ALFACA manual as excellently structured and informative, and as an excellent guideline for their future work in the field of reception in families for unaccompanied children. They also considered the training to be a very important contribution to further dissemination of the ALFACA model, tools and good practices. It gave them an opportunity to incorporate a version of the ALFACA model and tools in the programme for further development of the Croatian foster care system.

In 2018, the Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy, in partnership with the SIRIUS organisation and with support from the UNICEF office in Croatia, started to develop a comprehensive programme for improving foster care in general and, in particular, the foster care for unaccompanied children. These efforts are strongly supported by the ALFACA tools and the new Foster Care Law. All this has created the right conditions for starting the placement of unaccompanied children in foster families and setting up specific activities to support this type of foster care.