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Caring for unaccompanied minors in transit in Serbia

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Abstract

Unaccompanied minors (UAMs) have received significant attention in scholarly debates related to transit migration, child migration and social work. However, less consideration has been given to the social work practice with UAMs during their transit phase. Drawing on qualitative interviews with field practitioners in Belgrade, I explore the interactions between social workers and UAM transit migrants on their way to Western Europe but stopped in Serbia. I analyse the complexity of social work practice with distressed adolescents 'on the move'. I examine practitioners' perceptions about UAMs' trajectories and how UAMs' agency is understood by those caring for them. In doing so, I demonstrate that field practitioners become actors of the transit stage, navigating in their practice between a 'caring' and a 'mobile' approach.

Keywords

unaccompanied minors, social work practice, transit migrants, agency, best interest determination

** I am very grateful to those social workers who gave their time generously and have accepted to be interviewed during my field work. I am also appreciative of the collaboration and interest from refugee organisations and local authorities who have supported this work.*

Contents

1. Introduction

On the 14th of October 2019, a 17-year-old Iraqi refugee was found dead on Touquet beach, North of France.[1] The personal story of this adolescent is unknown. He is part of the increasing number of young people around the world identified as unaccompanied minors[2] (UAMs) and broadly defined, in line with UNCHR guidelines,[3] as children under the age of 18, who are outside their country of origin and who are unaccompanied by their parents or legal guardians.

Usually, UAMs have crossed several borders or seas, endangering their lives to reach their destination. Some of them do not want to stay where they are and wish to pursue their journey. Present in number of countries including France, Italy, Spain or Belgium, these UAMs are part of a group identified as 'transit migrants', which refers to 'those irregular migrants who have left their home, travelled without documents or means of legal entry, but have not yet arrived in a place where they will settle. They live in an ongoing state of non-arrival'.[4]

The existence of UAMs challenges the traditional meaning of protection, as during their journey, UAMs find themselves under the legal responsibility of states where they do not necessarily intend to stay.[5] It is the case at European Union (EU)'s borders, but also at its heart, where they live very precarious existences.[6] It illustrates the fundamental dichotomy between migrants' agency and their vulnerability. This dichotomy is accentuated in the case of child migration, as the aspirations of a growing number of child migrants appear in contradiction with their best interests as children.[7]

In this paper, taking the case of Serbia, at the edge of the EU and defining itself as a transit country,[8] I intend to elucidate UAMs' experiences in transit in Serbia by exploring the social practices meant to protect them. To what extent do these practices consider UAMs' agency?

Since 2016, different reports have documented UAMs' presence in Serbia and their extreme vulnerabilities.[9] Painted as 'out of sight, exploited and alone', reports have focused on recommendations to improve UAMs' protection.[10] However, little has been written about what UAMs concretely experience and the strategies which they deploy, while being in transit in Serbia - one exception being a study published in December 2019.[11] For instance, no information is available about the average duration of their stay. In 2015 and 2016, UAMs typically spent a few days in Belgrade, before heading north toward Budapest. But since April 2016, and the official closure of the Hungary border, the stay of UAMs in Serbia has been prolonged. UAMs may try other routes, namely Bosnia Herzegovina (BH), but in all cases they stay longer, between weeks and years.

To a certain extent, this information gap is linked to the fact that despite being stopped, they are still 'on the move': such unstable situations are not conducive for research. However, during preliminary discussions to define my study, I realised that some knowledge about UAMs' transit lives exists but is not captured. Field practitioners have details about the UAMs with whom they are working, and could provide an interesting perspective on UAMs' transit trajectories. In particular, in their daily work, their social practices may be challenged by the previously mentioned agency/vulnerability dichotomy, trying to respect UAMs' desire to move further, and at the same time, intending to protect them from the dangers awaiting them ahead on their route.

To this end, this paper aims at exploring the interactions between social workers and UAMs in transit in Serbia. To do so, I first situate my subject in the broader academic debates related to transit theories, child migration and social work (section 2). Next, I rapidly contextualise my interview findings (section 3). Then, I present my methodology and offer considerations in researching 'with' or 'about' UAMs (section 4).

1 Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/10/14/deux-migrants-retrouves-morts-sur-une-plage-du-pas-de-calais_6015503_3210.html.

2 C Menjívar and K Perreira, 'Undocumented and unaccompanied: children of migration in the European Union and the United States' (2019) 45(2) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 197-217.

3 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Guidelines on Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (November 2018).

4 E. Paynter, 'The liminal lives of Europe's Transit migrants' (2018) 17(2) *Contexts* 40-45.

5 A. Farmer, 'Finding a new balance: bringing together children's rights law and migration policy for effective advocacy for migrant children' in J. Bhabha, H.T.H. Chan, J Kanics, D. Senovilla Hernández (eds) *Research Handbook on Child Migration* (Elgar 2018).

6 Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), *Exclus et traumatisés : la situation des mineurs non accompagnés en France* (2019).

7 J. Bhabha, 'Introduction' in *Research Handbook on Child Migration* (n5).

8 J. Sardelic, *From temporary protection to transit migration: responses to refugee crises along the Western Balkan route* (EUI 2017).

9 Belgrade Center for Human Rights (BCHR), *Unaccompanied and separated children in Serbia* (2017), available at: http://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Unaccompanied-and-Separated-Children-in-Serbia.pdf

10 Save the Children (StC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), *Out of sight, exploited and alone* (2017), available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/12103/pdf/out_of_sight.pdf

11 StC, *Struggling to survive, Informal practices of unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Balkans route* (2019) Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/16944/pdf/struggling_to_survive_uasc_travelling_the_western_balkans_route_0.pdf

I have articulated my research questions around the intersection between the care practice (with UAMs) and the transit stage. I seek to understand the extent they influence each other, and I have organised my findings sections accordingly. First, I intend to capture how the transit stage has an impact on the care practice (section 5). Second, I explore what are caregivers' perceptions of UAMs' transit experiences (section 6). Finally, I elaborate on how practitioners become themselves actors at the transit stage (section 7). I conclude with some perspectives for future research (section 8).

Along my analysis, I attempt to see if their positioning in the reception system (front-liners versus case-managers) can explain some patterns in the ways practitioners perceive UAMs. Also considering the dichotomy existing between agency and vulnerability, I seek to analyse to what extent practitioners perceive UAMs as capable agents, and how accordingly they position themselves in UAMs' trajectories.

2. Theoretical background and literature review

To begin, I examine three theoretical frameworks which have informed my research: the literature on transit migrations and transit spaces; studies about children in forced migrations; and research about social work responses to the situation of UAMs.

2.1 Critical approach of transit migrations and transit spaces

First of all, it is important to situate Serbian social workers' accounts of UAMs' transit experiences within the important body of literature which has developed over the last ten year about transit migrations. Adopting a critical approach of the traditional concept of transit, the theory of 'fragmented journey'[12] has strongly influenced this field of research: by demonstrating that transit migrations are much more than linear curves from point A (country of origin) to point B (country of arrival), this theory sheds light on the diversity of 'movements and non-movements' encapsulated in the category of transit migrations, as well as on the centrality of intentions in shaping migrants' journeys[13]. Consecutively, other scholars have evidenced that migrants experience phases of mobility and immobility during their 'migration trajectories', that their intentions and strategies are changing throughout their journey[14]. The concept of 'matryoshka journeys'[15] is particularly powerful to describe the 'nested' experiences lived by migrants during their journey with a succession, over time and over space, of phases of 'empowerment/disempowerment', of 'mobility/immobility' periods, of 'planned/unplanned' sub-experiences.

Academic debates have also focused on border enforcement and its consequences for migrants, who remain in limbo in transit spaces, including at the edge of the EU and in the context of the so-called 'refugee crisis'.[16] Across Europe, asylum-seekers endure 'liminality' in their quest for refugee status, whether they get stranded in Switzerland[17] or in Hungary.[18] The role of Greece as a transit space has been specifically investigated in recent research. Asylum-seekers collect information and/or money to pursue their journey from Greece, which is perceived 'like a door' to Europe.[19] Frequently, Afghan transit migrants re-evaluate their migratory projects, some continue their route and unintentionally find themselves stranded in Serbia.[20] They are transit migrants by accident, such as the asylum-seekers in Croatia, who feel trapped and have become 'reluctant asylum-seekers'.[21]

2.2 Child migrations and UAMs' experiences

Next, in order to analyse Serbian practitioners' narratives on UAMs' transit experiences, it is key to also have in mind what has been evidenced by scholars over the past decade about the increasing migration flows of UAMs around the world. A large number of studies have focused on the challenges related to migrant children' integration in receiving countries[22], exploring the risk and resilience factors shaping their adaptation experiences.[23]

Accordingly, the transit stage has been analysed as part of the migration process, focusing on the impact of detention

12 M. Collyer, 'Stranded Migrants and the Fragmented Journey' (2010) 23(3) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 273-293.

13 M. Collyer, and H. de Haas, 'Developing dynamic categorisations of transit migration' (2012) 18 *Population, Space and Place* 468-481.

14 J. Schapendonk, 'Migrants' Im/Mobilities on Their Way to the EU: Lost in Transit?' (2012) 103(5) *Journal of Economics and Social Geography* 577–583.

15 N. Brigden and C. Mainwaring, 'Matryoshka journeys: Im/mobility during migration' (2016) 21(2) *Geopolitics* 407-434.

16 . Molodikova, F. Düvell, and M. Collyer (eds), *Transit Migration in Europe* (Amsterdam University Press 2014).

17 M. Gold, 'Liminality and the asylum process in Switzerland' (2019) 35(3) *Anthropology Today* 16-19.

18 I. Molodikova, 'Hungary and the System of European Transit Migration' in *Transit Migration in Europe* (n16 above) 153-184.

19 A. Dimitriadi, 'Greece is Like a Door, You Go Through it to Get to Europe': Understanding Afghan Migration to Greece (ELIAMEP, IRMA Case Study, *Criminal Justice, Borders and Citizenship Research Paper* No. 2628805, 2015).

20 Ibid.

21 M. Valenta, D. Zuparic-Iljic and T. Vidovic, 'The Reluctant Asylum-Seekers: Migrants at the Southeastern Frontiers of the European Migration System' (2015) 34 *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 95-113.

22 Menjívar and Perreira (n2).

23 L. Ko and K. Perreira 'It Turned My World Upside Down': Latino Youths' Perspectives on Immigration. (2010) 25(3) *Journal of Adolescent research* 465-493. B. Carlson, J. Cacciatore and B. Klimek, 'A Risk and Resilience Perspective on Unaccompanied Refugee Minors' (2012) 57(3) *Social work* 259-69; S. Hapeman Scott, *Resilience in Undocumented, Unaccompanied Children: Perceptions of the Past and Future Outlook*, Unpublished thesis (PhD.) 2009), National Catholic School of Social Service, Washington DC; M. Raghallaigh, 'The integration of asylum seeking and refugee children: resilience in the face of adversity' in *Research Handbook on Child Migration* (n5).

experiences and life-threatening experiences at borders.[24] UAMs who reach their final destination are the survivors of extremely traumatic journeys.[25]Over the last couple of years, facets of UAMs' experiences during transit have been explored in more detail. Scholars have demonstrated that UAMs endure liminality but also possibilities in transit spaces: either waiting in a refugee centre in Greece and dreaming about their relocation,[26] coping with uncertainties through learning strategies in Turkey[27] or in Lesvos,[28] hoping to reach UK while intercepted in Belgium.[29]

In general, these recent studies have evidenced the capacity of children migrants, and UAMs in particular, to be agents, despite the debilitating situations they face, to be social actors capable to adjust to extraordinary circumstances during the journey and once they have reached their final destination. In this field, one study has been particularly influential in framing my research, related to the different forms of expressions of agency developed by UAMs held in Mexican youth detention centres. Adopting an approach that defines the 'development of agency as a process', Thompson and colleagues have characterised 'subforms of assertion of agency', which embrace a variety of strategies, which UAMs use while being in detention, leading them to receive humanitarian recognition and/or to be deported.[30]

Another key theme emerging from the literature is the inadequate reception conditions to respond to the specific needs of separated children on the move. Research has shown that UAMs' rights are neglected in the reception mechanisms, in countries such as Italy[31] or Greece.[32]

Scholars have argued that a 'patchwork of incomplete policies' also prevail in transit countries, which are in the frontline of refugee reception and where a protection framework is not adapted to inter-continental immigration.[33] In the case of Serbia, gaps in protection have also been documented,[34] as well as the role of procedural safeguard played by the appointment of a competent and available guardian.[35]

In general, it appears that UAMs lack protection, either as asylum-seekers, or as transit migrants. In fact, scholars have analysed that child migrants' best interests are overlooked in the protection mechanisms, despite the existence of child-centred protective legal provisions, codified in the Child Rights Convention (CRC) and translated in domestic laws.[36] As such, best interest determination has been analysed by academics in the context of asylum procedures, revealing barriers to access asylum and inconsistencies in applying children's legal rights.[37] Less attention has been paid however to what it means to determine best interests of UAMs in the context of transit, where the motivations of the migrant children on the move may be contradictory with their best interests.[38]

2.3 Social work responses to UAMs' situations

A third body of literature is relevant to inform the interactions between UAMs and Serbian practitioners: social work

24 Ibid.

25 M. Werthern, G. Grigorakis and E. Vizard, 'The mental health and wellbeing of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs)' (2019) *98 Child abuse & neglect* 1.

26 E. Arvanitis, N. Yelland and P Kiprianos 'Liminal Spaces of Temporary Dwellings: Transitioning to New Lives in Times of Crisis' (2019) 33(1) *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 134-144.

27 E. Tibet, 'Learning as agency: strategies of survival among young unaccompanied Somali asylum seekers in Turkey' in *Research Handbook on Child Migration* (n5).

28 V. Digidiki, 'The experience of distress: child migration on Lesvos, Greece' ibid.

29 I. Derluyn and E. Broekaert 'On the way to a better future: Belgium as transit country for trafficking and smuggling of unaccompanied minors' (2005) 43(4) *International Migration* 31-56.

30 A. Thompson, R. M. Torres, K. Swanson, S. A. Blue, and Ó. M. H. Hernández, 'Reconceptualising agency in migrant children from central America and Mexico' (2017) 45(2) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 235-252.

31 E. Rozzi, 'Unaccompanied minors in Italy: children or aliens?' *In Research Handbook on Child Migration* (n5).

32 A. Fili and V. Xythali, 'The Continuum of Neglect: Unaccompanied Minors in Greece' (2017) 15(2) *Social Work and Society* 1-14.

33 Farmer (n5).

34 A. Čekerevac, N. Perišić and J. Tanasijević *'Social Services for Migrants: The Case of Serbia'* (2018) 18(1) *HKJU-CCPA* 101-125. I. Brankovic and A Burgund 'Child protection of children on the move – Serbian context' (2018) 8(1) *The International Journal for interdisciplinary studies* 17-26.

35 N. Milutinovic, *Institute of guardianship for unaccompanied children or children separated from parents/guardians: Analysis of the situation and recommendations for improvement* (StC, 2019), available at: https://nwb.savethechildren.net/sites/nwb.savethechildren.net/files/library/Institute%20of%20guardianship%20for%20unaccompanied%20children%20or%20children%20separated%20from%20parents-guardians_SCNWB.pdf

36 J.M. Pobjoy, 'The best interests of the child principle as an independent source of international protection' (2015) 64(2) *International & Comparative Law Quarterly* 327–63.

37 L. Ottosson and A. Lundberg, 'People out of place'? Advocates' negotiations on children's participation in the asylum application process in Sweden' (2013) 27(2) *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family,* 266–87.

38 J. Doering-White 'The shifting boundaries of 'best interest': Sheltering unaccompanied Central American minors in transit through Mexico' (2018) 92 *Children and Youth Services Review* 39-47.

studies. First, scholars have demonstrated that social work – which is a profession and an expertise – is especially qualified to deliver services to UAMs, thanks to its attested engagement and experience with the most vulnerable groups, as well as to its capacity to understand complex societal issues such as forced migrations.[39]

Existing studies have stressed the importance for the social workers to understand UAMs' specific vulnerabilities,[40] and to recognise both UAMs' similarities and differences with other teenagers.[41] In general, research pieces have evidenced the protective role of caregivers, especially in resettlement contexts.[42] Social workers, and guardians in particular, are often presented in the literature as bridges between the migrants' heritage and the reception country's culture.[43]

Among these contributions, Kohli's approach about social work with UAMs is particularly useful to frame the logics of care with UAMs. Kohli identifies three domains of practice for guardians[44] ((1) domains of asylum, (2) welfare and (3) social networks) and explores how guardians provide protection to UAMs who are moving simultaneously at three levels: (1) across spaces (their journey across borders), (2) across time (getting older and accumulating experiences) and (3) psychologically (transition from childhood to adulthood).

Kohli's theoretical framework, though developed about the resettlement context, appears to be of particular relevance to make sense of the movements and life-course transitions experienced by UAMs in the uncertain and shifting context of transit. In addition, an interesting qualitative study about how UAMs make sense of their relationships with their mentors in Austria helped me in my analysis.[45] In particular, the author points out that UAMs are perceived as children, because of their minority, but which can be debated, and which produces regimes of protection and (im) mobility. Likewise, he argues that contrasting social practices can produce different instances of '(un)belonging' and '(im)mobility'.

Last but not least, Doering-White's cutting-edge work about the interactions between UAMs and migrant shelters' workers in Mexico has been informative in this work. Among other findings, his study reveals the opposition between a 'caring' approach (focusing on the use of available protection mechanisms to keep UAMs safe), and a 'mobile' approach (prioritising UAMs' expressions of intention to pursue their journey). Accordingly, social workers face a dilemma and must choose between protecting UAMs or respecting UAMs' decisions.[46]

2.4 Research gap

Building on the debates in these three areas of investigations (transit, child migration and social work), I investigate the intersection of the three, which has been overlooked so far. Indeed, few studies have paid attention to the practices of social care with UAMs in transit spaces.[47] Exceptions include, in addition to Doering-White's study, a research about the interactions between caretakers and UAMs in the context of learning activities in Lesvos.[48]

Likewise, I intend to explore the interactions between field practitioners and UAMs during their transit in Serbia. This is important given the increasing number of UAMs in the context of border enforcement described above. Indeed, the growing securitisation logic constructs the illegality of migrants, not only in receiving countries but also in transit areas,[49] for instance at the edge of Europe or in Mexico, where 'the boundaries of UAMs' best interests are shifting in the context of 'externalised border regime'.[50]

39 M. Popescu and K Libal, 'Social Work With Migrants and Refugees, Challenges, Best practices and Future Directions' 18(3) (2018) *Advances in Social Work* i—x.

40 J. Linton, E. Kennedy, A. Shapiro and M. Griffin 'Unaccompanied children seeking safe haven: Providing care and supporting well-being of a vulnerable population' (2018) 92 *Children and Youth Services Review* 122-132.

41 K. Gustafsson, 'The reception of separated minors in Sweden: To receive with grace and knowledge' in Elli Heikkilä, Auvo Kostiainen, Johanna Leinonen, Ismo Söderling (eds), *Participation, Integration, and Recognition: Changing Pathways to Immigrant Incorporation* (2015) 111-124.

42 T. Luster, A. Saltarelli, M. Rana, D. Qin, L. Bates and K. Burdick, 'The Experiences of Sudanese Unaccompanied Minors in Foster Care' (2009) 23(3) *Journal of Family Psychology* 386–395; A.D. Christensen and S.Q Jensen, 'Roots and routes: Migration, belonging and everyday life' (2011) 1(3) *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 146-155.

43 R.K.S Kohli, 'Protecting Asylum Seeking Children on the Move' 30(1) (2014) *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 83-104.

44 Ibid.

45 E Raithelhuber, 'If we want, they help us in any way': how 'unaccompanied refugee minors' experience mentoring relationships' (2019) *European Journal of Social Work* 1-16.

46 Doering-White (n38).

47 Ibid.

48 I Daskalaki and N Leivaditi, 'Education and Hospitality in Liminal Locations for Unaccompanied Refugee Youths in Lesvos' (2018) 1 *Migration and Society: Advances in Research* 51-65.

49 C Menjívar, 'Immigration Law Beyond Borders: Externalizing and Internalizing Border Controls in an Era of Securitization' (2014) 10(1) *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 353-369.

50 Doering-White (n38).

Acknowledging the findings about the amplification of border enforcement and its devastating consequences on UAMs' trajectories, I focus on the micro-level, to explore the social workers' narratives about their field practices and how such practices structure the ways in which UAMs navigate in a place of transit. It is a way to address the relation/separation between policies and practices affecting UAMs.[51]

Endorsing evidences about the liminality and the violence experienced by the UAMs in transit spaces, I choose to pay attention to the supportive relationships established between the field practitioners and the UAMs, and more precisely to the perceptions in which these relationships are grounded. Indeed, it is interesting to analyse practitioners' conceptions about UAMs' development of agency and to examine which type of role the social workers themselves intend to play in UAMs' fragmented journeys.

51 Ibid.

3. The migration context in Serbia and the reception system for UAMs

Despite a discrepancy about the numbers (between NGOs and UNCHR official data), there is an agreement about the migration patterns prevailing in Serbia. First, the number of migrants in Serbia has significantly reduced since 2016, when hundreds of migrants were arriving every day. The closure of the Western Balkans route, resulting from the EU-Turkey deal,[52] made refugee migrations more dangerous, by pushing the migrants to take riskier routes and means, depending on smuggling and trafficking networks.[53]

Second, there is an important proportion of UAMs among these migrants. Between March and May of 2019 (period of my field research), it was estimated[54] that 3,685 migrants and refugees arrived in Serbia, among whom 86% have been identified as children travelling alone. Afghan UAMs represented the largest group (82%) followed by Pakistani children (11%).

Third, the migration routes in Serbia are complex and changing constantly, adapting to the increasingly strict measures placed at and beyond EU borders to restrict movements. At the time of my research, migrants arrived mainly from Bulgaria and North Macedonia, and were trying to head west towards BH, the only border surrounding Serbia that was not totally protected with physical barriers and police forces.[55] Usually, UAMs resort to local smuggling agents (themselves in contact with a main smuggler[56]) to continue their journey. UAMs are frequently pushed-backs at borders, at times violently by police officers, as documented by existing monitoring networks.[57]UAMs who do not succeed in crossing the borders illegally find themselves 'stranded' in Serbia, 'between closed borders'.[58]

To contextualise the interview findings, it is also important to describe the main characteristics of UAMs' reception system in Serbia. When UAMs reach Belgrade, usually their first stop is Refugee Aid Miksalište Hub, where Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide them with basic assistance. Then, UAMs register (or not) their intention to seek asylum in Serbia.[59] In the second quarter of 2019, only 231 UAMs registered, compared to the figures above.[60] Under the Serbian Family law, registered UAMs are appointed a temporary guardian by the Social Work Centres, under the umbrella of Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs (MLEVSA), but the appointing procedure can take up to several weeks.[61] In average, a guardian looks after 25 UAMs. In total, in July 2019, 358 UAMs benefited from this guardianship model, which is primarily funded through civil society organisations.[62]

Once registered, UAMs are proposed to live in asylum or reception centres. Some UAMs do not go to reception facilities, for different reasons, including lack of financial resources to reach the centres.[63] In June 2019, all accommodated UAMs were staying in Belgrade, either in Krnjača[64] center, or in safe houses, such as 'Pedro Arrupe' safe house funded by JRS,[65] depending on their age and vulnerability assessment.

During their stay in Serbia, UAMs enjoy relative freedom of movement. They also have access to Serbian schools and are proposed learning activities by NGOs who operate in the same facilities (Miksaliste, Krnjača), under the supervision of SCRM. In 2018, only one UAM obtained international protection.[66]

52 The Agreement between EU and Turkey which came into effect in March 2016 was intended to limit the influx of irregular migrants entering the EU through Turkey.

53 A Greider, *Outsourcing Migration Management: The Role of the Western Balkans in the European Refugee Crisis* (Migration Policy Institute, 2017).

54 Save the Children (StC), *Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub Data and Trend Analysis: Regional overview* (April-June 2019).

55 Ibid.

56 StC (n11).

57 Available at: https://serbia.bordermonitoring.eu/2020/01/01/violence-monitoring-pushbacks-on-the-balkan-route/.

58 Crisis Response and Policy Centre (CRPC), *Between Closed Borders, Joint agency paper on refugees and migrants in Serbia* (2017).

59 Ibid.

60 Belgrade Center for Human Rights (BCHR), *Right to asylum in the Republic of Serbia: Periodic report*. (2019).

61 Ibid.

62 Most of the professional guardians are employed by IDEAS, through a project funded by UNHCR in cooperation with the MLEVSA. UNCHR, *Serbia* updates (July 2019).

63 Refugee Aid Serbia, (RAS), *Effectiveness of Procedures Regulating the Legality of Migrants', Refugees' Stay in Serbia*: *Field report* (2018).

64 Krnjača center, located in downtown Belgrade, is the one of the biggest centre for accommodation of migrants and asylum-seekers in Serbia (up to 1,000 places at time of emergency).

65 Available at: http://jrsserbia.rs/en/projekti/integration-house-for-vulnerable-groups-of-refugees/.

66 BCHR (n60).

4. Methodology and data

In this research, I explore the narratives of 13 field practitioners who work with UAMs in Serbia and whom I have interviewed using a qualitative method. In the following paragraphs, I draw on methodological considerations in the field of child migration and social work, to explain my approach and its limits, given the fact that I have decided not to research 'with' UAMs directly.

4.1 Benefits of interviewing field practitioners

As illustrated by recent studies with UAMs, it can be challenging to interview separated minors.[67] First, as reminded by Bhabha, it is ethically risky.[68] The possibility to cause non-intentional harm to interviewees can be higher than the expected scientific benefits, given the traumatic experiences which they have been exposed to. Moreover, there is an intrinsic difficulty for UAMs to tell their stories while they are still on the move. Indeed, prior research illustrates that UAMs start to think about what happened to them (at home, on their way) once they have reached their final destination.[69] As conceptualised by Kohli,[70] true narratives – 'thick stories' – emerge over time, in the context of informal exchanges, in contrast with 'thin' stories which are pre-fabricated. However, and even when a degree of intimacy has been reached, certain aspects of UAMs' narrations remain 'obscure and confused'.[71]

On the contrary, it appeared early in my research that it would be less problematic – from a methodological standpoint – to interview social workers. Thanks to prior contacts established with their organisations, I realised that social workers were eager to speak about their practices, generally overlooked in the Serbian context. Field practitioners who are in direct contact with UAMs have first-hand knowledge about their situations. Acting as coordinators, psychologists, legal guardians, child protection officers and case-managers, they usually know how to establish safe environment with them.[72]

4.2 Methodological limitations

Commentators have examined the risk to misrepresent refugees' voices,[73] to impose political and social constructions on their experiences and to produce scientific knowledge on 'them', as different and disconnected from 'us'.[74] As such, and as reflected by my research questions, my intention is not to explore UAMs' experiences, but field practitioners' perceptions about these experiences. By interviewing social workers, I am also aware of the risk to overlook child migrants' agency and to attribute too much weight to external circumstances or to those taking decisions on UAMs' behalf. Instead, I choose to analyse the degree of autonomy that the caregivers attribute to the young migrants.

Finally, and as illustrated in prior research,[75] I acknowledge that practitioners' narratives are produced in a specific context, shaped by political and social discourses. Given my limited sample and my qualitative approach, my research does not aim at formulating any generalisation about social practices with UAMs in transit, but rather at shedding the light on the interactions between UAMs and caring adults, and accordingly at suggesting ideas for further investigation.

4.3 Sample description and interviews setting

I carried out 13 semi-structured interviews with a sample of field practitioners performing different roles in the

67 Tibet (n27).

68 Bhabha (n7).

69 J. Bhabha, J. Kanics, and Hernández, D. Senovilla, 'Conclusion' in *Research Handbook on Child Migration* (n5).

70 Ibid R.K.S. Kohli, 'Protection: migrant children and institutional protection'.

71 D Hernández and O Uzureau 'Children's voices: listening to young African migrants in France' In *Research Handbook on Child Migration* (n2).

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Raithelhuber (n45).

75 U Wernesjö, 'Across the threshold: negotiations of deservingness among unaccompanied young refugees in Sweden' (2019) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 389-404.

reception of children migrants. Informants were selected to reflect the range of services provided to the UAMs, as well as the variety of situations experienced by the minors. Accordingly, I met with protection officers working in Miksaliste (3) – providing first support and making referrals to specialised organisations, children protection officers following-up on UAMs in the camps of Krnjača (2) and Obrenovac[76] (1), legal guardians in charge of UAMs in Krnjača (2), a case-manager from Palilula CSW[77] (1), a social worker supervising a safe-house (1), a legal officer (1), a clinical psychologist (1), and a case-manager supporting UAMs identified as victims of violence (1). In total, 10 organisations agreed to participate: nine NGOs and MLEVSA. The organisations are based in Belgrade but most of them have a national outreach across Serbia.

In order to investigate the impact of social workers' positioning on their practice, I have divided the sample into two main groups: five social workers[78] are working on the frontline (providing first support and making referrals), whereas eight occupy case-management positions[79], providing specific and medium to long-term support. For the purpose of the analysis, they will be named hereinafter 'front-liners', and 'case-managers', respectively.

I conducted all the interviews in one-on-one settings in Belgrade. I obtained permission to record 12 of them. The length of the recordings ranged from 1h15 to 2h10, with an average of 1h35. The fact that I interviewed only professionals based in Belgrade does not present a geographical bias. Rather, it is because of the concentration of UAMs accommodated in Krnjača at the time of the interviews. Of course, this research does not account for the presence and movements of the UAMs at the borders and existing push-backs.

It is also important to mention that all the interviewees work with officially registered UAMs, except for one case. Indeed, in June 2019, Obrenovac camp officially accommodates only adult migrants. However, the child protection officer explained that, in practice, she provides support to minors who are in the camp and who have declared themselves as adults.[80] I decided to include her in the sample to add her unique perspective about UAMs who are not officially in the UAMs reception system.

Except for two, field practitioners whom I have interviewed are young (in their twenties or early thirties) and had their first ever job at the end of 2015 or beginning of 2016, when hundreds of migrants were arriving every day in Serbia. Almost half of the interviewees are social workers or educators. The others hold a degree in social or political sciences. I also met with two psychologists and one lawyer. I interviewed four men and nine women. All social workers could take a step back and speak about the specificities of working with children on the move, having also the experience of dealing with families and adults, or with domestic children, especially Roma children.

4.4 Terminology

Some terms and concepts used in my research can be disputed according to the context, so I intend to clarify them below. I use the terms 'transit' and 'transit migrants', even if I situate my work in line with critical transit migrations theories. As mentioned above, and along my analysis, my purpose is to make sense of the variety of nested experiences[81] lived by the UAMs during their fragmented journeys.[82]

Likewise, I use the term 'unaccompanied minor', aware that it is a constructed label. In some instances, I also refer to them as 'adolescents on the move', 'separated minors', or 'minors', especially when I cite interview quotations, having in mind that interviewees preferred sometimes other terms than UAMs: 'children', 'kids'. Similarly, I refer to 'migrants' and 'refugees' without presuming if individuals fall within the refugee definition.

I use the term 'field practitioners', 'front-liners', 'case-managers' to refer to the professionals who are in direct contact with UAMs and whom I have interviewed. I also refer to 'social work' (and 'social workers') as the direct practice of providing services to children migrants, aware that social work can refer to other activities in other settings.[83] I use also the terms 'caregivers', 'caring adults', 'social practitioners', when I reflect on broader findings about social work.

Building on Thompson and colleagues' approach about UAMs' agency, I use their definition of 'agency': 'individual

76 Obrenovac center, located 30 km away from Belgrade, opened in January 2017 to accommodate a larger number of migrants (900 places).

77 Palilula Center for Social Work is located in one of the most involved municipalities in the reception of UAMs in Belgrade.

78 Interviews 1, 2, 3, 8 and 9

79 Interviews 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12 and 13

80 Interview 8.

81 Brigden and Mainwaring (n15).

82 Collyer (n12).

83 Popescu and Libal (n39).

intrinsic capacity for intentional behaviour within a certain environment and subject to environmental influences'.[84] Finally, I have identified risk and protective factors, based on the domains identified in previous research[85] and adapting them to the transit context in Serbia.

84 Thompson and all (n30).

85 Ko and Perreira (n23), Carlson, Cacciatore and Klimek (n23).

5. Impact of the transit stage on the care practice with UAMs

In this section, I consider the practice of social work with UAMs in transit. I explore what it means for the field practitioners to accompany these children who – *a priori* – are in a temporary situation in Serbia and who do not intend to stay. I also attempt to identify differences and/or similarities in their practice as compared to social practitioners in reception countries. Also, I analyse their narratives to see if all interviewees describe their practice in the same way.

All field practitioners said that they work in majority with UAMs aged between 16 and 18, only boys, coming mostly from Afghanistan and then Pakistan. Front-liners explained that, on average, they keep contact with the UAMs for a few days, sometimes for a few weeks, before the children are referred to other places or before they leave Serbia. The case-managers interact only with registered UAMs, over a longer period of time, on average between six to nine months. One of the guardians disclosed that he was following up on twelve children for more than a year (out a total of 27).[86] Still most of the case-managers clarified that the duration of each case could vary significantly, from days to months.

5.1 The meaning of protection and the domains of social practice

Regardless of their positioning (front-liners vs case managers), all interviewees discussed extensively their role of coordination: 'I am like a connection between those kids and the system'.[87] Along the same line, field practitioners described themselves as listeners. 'We must hear what the minors really need and want, not ask what we need to hear'.[88] In the Serbian context, where the majority of UAMs does not stay in the country long enough to be able to meaningfully request asylum, it is not surprising that all practitioners, including the case-managers, associate protection with safety and absence of immediate harm, by providing UAMs with safe accommodation or information on the risks which they would encounter if they pursue their journey'.[89]

Yet, given their respective roles in the reception system, front-liners and case-managers explained that they do not intervene in the same domains of practice, as per Kohli's categorisation (welfare, asylum, social network).[90] Front-liners' main objective is to provide information and to refer the UAMs to other organisations according to the specific needs identified. As such, they essentially work in the 'welfare' domain of practice. As for the case-managers, they can intervene in the three domains: supporting in asylum process, providing welfare and regenerating social network. Of course, UAMs sometimes refuse to participate in educational activities during their stay in Krnjača center.[91] Still, 'the presence of opportunities over time',[92] was mentioned by several case-managers, mostly in relation with schooling experiences, for UAMs who stay long enough in Serbia to be enrolled in the education system. Respondents explained how UAMs like going to school, how they learn the Serbian language and make friends and girlfriends.[93] Field practitioners expressed proudness of their country and of the educational system that is able, even for a minority of cases, to 'generate a sense of being home', the ultimate goal of the protection.[94]

5.2 The dimensions of social practice and the role played by emotions

Kohli has identified three different ways to work with UAMs, which are all successful in helping the minors in their new lives.[95] These three dimensions are present in Serbian practitioners' narratives: 'offering practical assistance', 'being emotionally attuned', and 'establishing durable relationships'.

As front-liners spoke about their practice, they appeared either as practical helpers, attempting to maintain a certain distance with the UAMs, or relying on their emotions to embrace the complex situations of the minors and help them to repair the parts of their lives which have been broken. 'It is very important for this job to be an empathetic person,

86 Interview 11.
87 Interview 11.
88 Interview 9.
89 Interview 7.
90 Kohli (n43).
91 Interview 7.
92 Kohli (n43).
93 Interviews 5, 6, 7.
94 Kohli (n43).
95 Kohli (n70).

I easily gain trust with them because I see them as persons'.[96]

In some cases, case-managers described an approach falling in the third dimension, as they can build trusting and lasting relationship when UAMs stay during a long period in Serbia. One of the guardians provided different examples of such durable relations with UAMs, for instance inviting one of them in his own family for Easter holiday.[97]

Most of the social workers said that they are very close with the children, expressing forms of caring, goodwill and generosity. Several practitioners, both front-liners and case-managers qualified the interactions which they have with the children as friendly. 'We are like friends'.[98] Others described family relations. The lawyer, for instance, said that she is more than a legal adviser in the asylum process: 'we are like a family'.[99] Strikingly, eight of them, including one front-liner, explained that they are called 'Mum' or 'Dad' by the UAMs. 'I am very close with the persons, usually children are boys and they call me Mum'.[100] Practitioners explained how they can play different roles with the same child, according to the moment of the interaction, sometime being a 'friend, a teacher, a guardian';[101] 'sometimes a mother or a sister'.[102]

5.3 Main challenges faced in social practice

When asked about the main challenge encountered in their daily practice, the field practitioners elaborated on two levels of difficulties: those related to the protection gaps in the reception system in Serbia, and those arising from the interactions with UAMs due to their specific profile. Interestingly, it is not according to their positioning that field practitioners mentioned either conditions-related or children-related challenges. Front-liners were divided, like the case-managers. However, there is a correlation between the dimensions of practice and the reported challenges. Those who said that they are led by emotions tend to perceive the challenges in the interactions with the UAMs and the multiple transitions which they are going through.[103] Those who have a more pragmatic approach tend to speak first about the reception system and its limits.[104] Still, narratives tended to be similar in acknowledging the limitations to fully protect UAMs.

The first level of challenges raised by the field practitioners is related to the reception conditions in place for UAMs. Even if all of them acknowledged that protection capacities improved since 2015, they alluded to the persisting shortage of resources and to the hurdles of coordinating/overlapping with other stakeholders. The lack of accommodation places in safe houses was brought up in several interviews. 'I get frustrated when the system does not have capacity, I feel I betray that child'.[105]

The second half of the respondents suggested that the most complicated aspect of their work is related to the complexity of interacting with the children migrants, being minors and being in transit at the same time. The first difficulty mentioned was related to the fact that UAMs are entitled to specific rights, precisely because they are under-aged. They insisted on the difficulty to determine with certainty what constitutes the best interest of each child as enshrined in the CRC ratified by Serbia.[106] Interviewees mentioned both their own hesitations and disagreements with other stakeholders: 'you have laws and articles but nobody can say'.[107]

Additionally, the field practitioners commented on the difficulties to interact with children moving across space and time. Two front-liners[108] elaborated about the constraints related to temporariness of the presence of the UAMs in Serbia: 'The problem is that UAMs are on and off, they leave, disappear, show up again, so we lack continuity in our work'.[109]

The practitioners also pointed out the complexity of interacting with children moving psychologically. For instance,

96 Interview 9.
97 Interview 11.
98 Interview 13.
99 Interview 5.
100 Interview 4.
101 Interview 2.
102 Interview 13.
103 Interviews 1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10 and 11.
104 Interviews 3, 6, 8, 12, 13.
105 Interview 11.
106 Official Gazette of the SFRJ – International Treaties No. 15/80, Sl. list SRJ – International Treaties Nos. 4/86 and 2/97.
107 Interview 8.
108 Interviews 1 and 8.
109 Interview 8.

they elaborated on the situations when UAMs do not want to be helped or do not want to speak. 'Sometimes, you just try to have eye contact with them'.[110] As analysed by Kohli,[111] field practitioners are confronted with the strategies of 'silence and distrust' of UAMs who prefer remaining silent, primarily because they need time to start making sense of what is happening to them, and also because they do not know if they can trust the caring adults in front of them, after having being abused or mis-used in their home country or during their journey. One of the respondents explicitly named the 'developmental and accidental crises' which UAMs must deal with,[112] requiring specific psychological support or trauma counselling.

Finally, some suggested that there is reciprocity in the interactions with the minors: 'healing the children, we are helping us';[113] 'you give them much, they will give you twice'.[114] It is as if practitioners were moved by and moving with UAMs along their geographical, temporal and psychological trajectories. In turn, in the next section, I analyse practitioners' perceptions about these trajectories.

110 Interview 9.

111 Kohli (n70).

112 Interview 10.

113 Interview 1.

114 Interview 5.

6. Social practitioners' perception of minors in transit

In this section, I examine how field practitioners perceive UAMs' experiences and to what extent their perceptions are linked with their positioning in the reception system.

6.1 Perceptions about UAMs' migratory projects

This subsection explores how field practitioners speak about minors' migratory projects. The research reveals that practitioners, regardless of their positioning, are divided into two groups: those who describe UAMs being constantly on the move and that nothing will stop; and those social workers who believe that UAMs' migratory projects keep changing and that UAMs' stay in Serbia can influence the rest of their journey.

The first half of the respondents answered that UAMs share the same main goal, which is to go further West and reach a member country of the EU. These interviewees think that UAMs perceive Serbia just as a transit country and that very few are interested in requesting asylum. These interviewees recognise that Serbia is more than a simple stop, as UAMs use their stay to gather resources (financial and physical), evaluate the different options, and maybe change their route according to their encounters in Serbia. But at the end, they think that UAMs will go further: 'every first opportunity to go, they will go'.[115] This portion of the sample explained how many times UAMs attempt to cross illegally the borders, before succeeding, as if they were just waiting for their chance, and that the minors keep moving onwards because of their quest for social and economic benefits, which UAMs associate only with EU welfare states.[116] This reflects findings about transit in Greece, where the desired protection model is not available for Afghani asylum seekers.[117]

The other half of the practitioners also agreed that the minors dream about Europe, but they tended to think that the transit stage in Serbia can affect their migratory projects, to the extent that some minors will change their mind and decide to stay. 'Their project is changing on their way'.[118] 'In my perspective, when you have really something to offer, they decide to stay here'.[119] Interviewees perceive minors' transiting experience in Serbia as an essential constituent of their trajectories. 'Serbia is part of their life, they spend longer period than expected, some will decide to request asylum'.[120] These narratives confirm Collyer's theory[121] about aspirations which are changing on the move. Interviewees insisted on the fluidity of children migrant trajectories, the possibility to change their mind, which echoes the stories of Afghan asylum seekers who constantly re-imagine their migratory project while stranded in Greece.[122]

Besides, interviewees emphasised the important relation between the minors' migratory intentions and the reasons why in the first place they have left their home country. 'UAMs cannot have the same project, they are different; some wanted to go, some were told to go now'[123]; 'UAMs who are victims of human trafficking prefer to stay here'.[124] The family geographical situation is perceived as key factor: some UAMs still have their parents in their home country, others have been separated during the journey, and others are intending to join one of their family members who has already obtained refugee status in one EU country: 'their goal is changeable, it depends why their family sent them'[125].

6.2 Perceptions about risk and protective factors

In this subsection, I explore whether interviewees perceive the same risk and protective factors which shape UAMs' journeys and transit experiences. As summarised in Table 1, social workers share the same conception about each factor, except for the perceived role played by UAMs' families.

115 Interview 12.
116 Interviews 1 and 2.
117 Dimitriadi (n19).
118 Interview 9.
119 Interview 6.
120 Interview 3.
121 Collyer (n12).
122 Dimitriadi (n19).
123 Interview 9.
124 Interview 4.
125 Interview 7.

Factors which shape UAMs' experiences	*Front-liners*	*Case-managers*
Smugglers	Main risk factor	Main risk factor
Past journey and traumas	Both risk and protective factors	Both risk and protective factors
Family	**Protective factor**	**Risk factor**
Education and age	Protective factors	Protective factors
Peers	Protective factor	Protective factor
Reception system (schooling opportunities and guardianship system)	Protective factor	Protective factor

Table 1: Perceptions about risk and protective factors according to practitioners' positioning.

6.2.1 Smugglers

Unanimously, field practitioners insisted that smuggling networks represent the main risk for the UAMs during their stay in Serbia, as smugglers expose them to many dangers to cross illegally the borders, and sometimes abuse them. 'Smugglers are terrible'.[126] Some of the practitioners spoke about the blurred boundaries between the peer networks and the smuggling networks, as smugglers recruit intermediaries among the minors themselves.[127]

6.2.2 The journey and past traumas

The length of the travel before reaching Serbia was pointed out by the field practitioners both as a risk and protective factor. It was mentioned as a protective factor, when minors spent time in Greece or Turkey and managed to work and save money. It can be also a risk factor, as with longer journeys, it is more likely that UAMs have been exposed to degrading treatments, especially during push-backs at the borders.[128] Interviewees also insisted about UAMs' situation of despair when they were stranded and unable to continue their journey: 'Since the closing of official route, it is much more dangerous for UAMs, they are devastated'.[129] At the same time, and paradoxically, almost all field practitioners explained that transit stage in Serbia can be positive for UAMs who have been victims of abuses: 'With time, trauma can appear at the surface'.[130] Practitioners described how UAMs catch their breath in Serbia, allowing traumas to be detected.[131]

6.2.3 Family

Family is the main factor for which the research revealed a significant difference between front-liners and case-managers' perceptions. Except for one,[132] all case-managers said that the family is a risk factor for the UAMs, as parents are perceived as pushing their children to continue their journey and reach Western Europe. Most of the time, families have paid a large amount of money to the smugglers, with whom they are usually still in contact, and they want the children to continue their travel, so their investment is not wasted. Recent research about Afghan migrations to Europe confirm that the cost of journey is between 3,000 to 4,000 USD, mainly paid by the family.[133] Social workers said that most of the families do not perceive the real dangers of illegal border crossing: 'a child would say to his parents that a smuggler is beating him, and they would say continue'.[134]

Front-liners' views about the role of the family are reversed, as most of them presented the family first as a protective factor, providing help and advises, even if practitioners acknowledged that it is what keeps the children moving.

126 Interview 4.
127 Interview 1.
128 Interview 5.
129 Interview 10.
130 Interview 6.
131 Interview 7.
132 Interview 12.
133 Ibid.
134 Interview 10.

'Children feel thankful for supporting them on their move'.[135] As reflected in broader findings, these views confirm that family ties can be a source of psychological security for UAMs to face adversities along their journey.[136]

It is prudent to associate the tendency for case-managers to accentuate the risks represented by the family with the average longer duration of interactions with UAMs. Consequently, a first level of analysis can suggest that case-managers have more access to 'thick stories',[137] when the children can elaborate about the relations with their family and the pressure they feel: 'one boy refuses to speak with his family, last time he was beaten at the border, his father says that he should cross seven times a day'.[138]

A second level of analysis can interpret that the longer the UAMs will stay in Serbia, the more the tensions between their intentions and their parents' ones will emerge. Prior research has shown that Afghan adolescents feel a huge responsibility towards their parents and their extended family, to honour the trust that has been placed in their capacity to reach the desired country of destination.[139] Therefore, with the time passing during their stay in Serbia and circumstances changing, UAMs are more likely to be caught between contradictory moral orders. It is also corroborating the finding that UAMs' decisions to flee and move onwards are far more complex than 'the myth of the anchor child', according to which UAMs' intentions are reduced to their parents' plans to send them to create home in another country.[140]

6.2.4 Personal profile

According to interviewees, personal characteristics play also an important role in shaping UAMs' experiences in Serbia. First, the role of education is perceived as central: the more educated they are, the less risks they are going to take.[141] Likewise, practitioners observed that usually Afghan minors who grew up in the capital Kabul, or in Iran, are more educated, come from wealthier families and speak a better English than those who come from rural areas. Respondents also identified age as an important factor, explaining that the younger UAMs tend to be less aware of the environmental constraints, listening exclusively to their parents and sometimes taking more un-calculated risks than older minors.[142]

6.2.5 Peers

Most of the practitioners declared that peers have a supportive role in UAMs' transit experiences. Peers are friends or acquaintances, whom minors meet along their journey. Migrant children share a lot between themselves in the absence of parents. They analyse together the different possible options to move onwards. 'Journey is easier with friends'.[143] Interviewees also mentioned that peers influence UAMs' decisions: 'In all actors, peers have biggest influence, they try to do the things the same way'.[144] The caring professionals also elaborated about peers' influence in the information sharing, via social medias: 'They already know about Miksaliste when they are in Greece'.[145] Peers are also perceived as a driving force for the minors to continue their journey, because those who have reached France or Germany usually keep sending messages, confirming and reinforcing the imaginary about the desired country of destination.[146]

6.2.6 Reception and guardianship system

Unanimously, practitioners spoke about the accommodation system, schooling opportunities and guardianship model as protective factors, as long as the required resources are available. According to interviewees, the more

135 Interview 2.

136 Ko and Perreira (n23).

137 Kohli (n70).

138 Interview 7.

139 A. Donini, A. Monsutti and G. Scalettaris, *Afghans on the move: seeking protection and refuge in Europe. 'In this journey I died several times; in Afghanistan you only die once'* (Geneva, The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Global Migration Center 2016).

140 P. Lalander and M. Herz, 'I am going to Europe tomorrow": The Myth of the Anchor Child and the Decision to Flee in the Narratives of Unaccompanied Children' (2018) 8(2) *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 91-98.

141 Interviews 8 and 12.

142 Interview 5 and 12.

143 Interview 10.

144 Interview 1.

145 Interview 3.

146 Interview 13.

UAMs can benefit from the reception system, the more they are protected: children accommodated in safe houses and going to school are perceived as less likely to be exposed to dangers.[147] 'They don't care if the borders are closed because they have a math test'.[148]

Overall, practitioners' narratives reflect academic findings about the singularities of migrant children experiences, which are fundamentally shaped by the circumstances forcing them to exile, but also by the reception and the transit contexts.[149] Interviewees' accounts are also consistent with UAMs' testimonies and 'their ambivalent attitude' to their journey, as evidenced elsewhere.[150]

6.3 Perceptions about UAMs' agency

In this subsection, I examine whether field practitioners share the same approach to UAMs' agency, and how they explain that UAMs are on the move or stuck, or both at the same time. I found that social workers, regardless of their positioning, have two types of conceptions about the spectrum of strategies[151] which UAMs can deploy: the first group speaks about UAMs who are able to resort to a wide spectrum of strategies, while the second group mainly describes UAMs' forms of dependency.

In general, practitioners pointed out that UAMs are resilient, given their capacity to recover from traumatic experiences: 'they are resilient to situations which are not common for us'.[152] However, practitioners tend to think that all UAMs do not have the same ability to resist to adversity. 'It depends on their individual capacity, their age, their education, their matureness'.[153] Three case-managers shared the same outstanding story of one boy who went to school for the first time when he arrived in Serbia, who can now read and write Serbian, who has applied to asylum and who succeeded in presenting his paintings in an art exhibition.[154] 'He is an amazing kid talented in art'.[155] For the practitioners, this boy is an illustration of the remarkable individual capacity of some minors to recover from traumatic episodes and adjust to new situations. But such story was presented as an exception, not as the rule. 'You can be intelligent and be stuck, it is a combination of intelligence and resilience which lead you to different experiences'.[156]

Beyond these generic comments about UAMs' resilience, a first group of respondents expressed a nuanced approach to UAMs' agency, as they described UAMs capable to use a wide range of expressions of agency, from assertion to suppression, including sub-forms of assertion such as 'guarding information', 'motivation', 'pragmatic dependency', 'strategic parroting'.[157] One case-manager provided an example of active assertion in crossing the border illegally. She explained that one UAM went to the Croatian border, to see by himself the setup, 'he found out that it depends on the train schedule, on the police shift, he identified the perfect moment and it worked'.[158] Likewise, a front-liner explained that some minors express 'motivation', when for instance they decide to get separated from the group which they are travelling with: 'they have option to keep travelling and they decide to stay'.[159]

Some case-managers and front-liners also described how UAMs can establish some 'pragmatic dependencies' in order to achieve their goals, namely when they allow the smugglers to have power on them, in order to continue their journey. One front-liner provided an interesting narrative about the illegal border crossing which the adolescents call 'the game': 'in agreement with a smuggler, minors accept to go to the border only to divert police attention to accumulate 'points'; which eventually after many attempts will allow them to cross the border '.[160] The front-liner reflected on the words which UAMs use to describe such dangerous experiences, 'game', 'points', pointing out that it is UAMs' active choice, that they know that they are played by the smugglers, but they accept it as the only way for them

147 Interviews 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 12 and 13.

148 Interview 5.

149 T. Crea, B. Roth, J. Jayshree and B. Gracea 'Unaccompanied Immigrant Children: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Needs and Responses' (2018) 92 *Children and Youth Services Review* 1-3.

150 StC (n11)

151 Thompson and all (n30).

152 Interview 6.

153 Interview 5.

154 Interviews 5, 10 and 11.

155 Interview 5.

156 Interview 10.

157 Ibid.

158 Interview 6.

159 Interview 1.

160 Interview 1.

to move further. Likewise, interviewees explained that UAMs can refuse accommodation outside Belgrade, just to stay close to the 'game': 'My game starts in Belgrade'.[161] These accounts confirm that UAMs are 'associates in the smuggling process', as revealed by their own declarations.[162]

As such, these social practitioners described UAMs being on the move despite being stranded. They explained that UAMs make use of their freedom of movement to assert their agency, including taking risky actions. They go to 'the game' and come back to Belgrade if they fail. Practitioners described the UAMs switching between phases of immobility and mobility, cycling through 'nested' periods of expression of agency and periods of limitation of their will:[163] 'minors stop, regroup, collect information and make right decision about next phase'.[164]

Accounts from practitioners in this first group also revealed that UAMs can withhold strategic information, such as their age, in order to meet a goal. For instance, some minors claim to be more than 18 to avoid the system. As evidenced by the protection officer in Obrenovac centre, where only adults are officially accommodated, some UAMs lie about their age, to stay with some friends, or just to keep more flexibility, as if they choose autonomy against protection.[165] Likewise, one case-manager commented about how some UAMs acknowledge the ideas of others or can adopt group strategies: 'they prefer going as a group and supporting each other'.[166] Of course, in this first group, participants also acknowledged that there are situations when UAMs have complete loss of agency, when they die in a gas cistern during the border crossing[167] or when they are just are too exhausted to decide for themselves.

In contrast with this first group, another portion of the respondents expressed the idea that UAMs do not deploy a large set of strategies, and that most of the time, they express forms of dependency more than agency. 'They don't have real active strategies'.[168] 'They were told to behave as if they have agency'.[169] Interviewees think that UAMs do not know their rights: 'minor don't have a clue about their rights'.[170] In the same way, these respondents suggested that relying on a smuggler to cross illegally the borders is not 'pragmatic dependency': 'it is pure dependency', 'minors are totally groomed by the smugglers';[171] 'at the end, minors don't control anything'.[172]

For this second group, loss of agency is more frequent than the expression of sub-forms of agencies: 'they stand in front of me like flowers'[173] - 'they are victims of the circumstances.[174] Interestingly however, this second group explained that UAMs can express agency if they receive external help. 'I don't think they are capable on their own, at least they need one adult person on their side'.[175] Several case-managers pointed out that UAMs need external help to reveal their potential and their capacities, which is precisely where they see their role as caregivers.[176] In turn, it is interesting to focus hereinafter, on how field practitioners perceive their own role in UAMs' transit experiences.

161 Interview 3.
162 StC (n11)
163 Brigden and Mainwaring (n15).
164 Interview 1.
165 Interviews 1 and 8.
166 Interview 13.
167 Interview 7.
168 Interview 11.
169 Interview 10.
170 Interview 4.
171 Interview 4.
172 Interview 3.
173 Interview 4.
174 Interview 9.
175 Interview 9.
176 Interviews 3, 4, 8, 9 and 11.

7. Practitioners becoming actors of the transit stage

As seen in section 4, field practitioners' report how complex it is to support the UAMs in their geographical, developmental and psychological transitions, due the transitory nature of their stay in Serbia and their specific vulnerabilities. I now examine, drawing on their perceptions about minors' trajectories and agency, how field practitioners perceive themselves as actors of such transitions.

7.1 Empowering

First, the majority of interviewees stressed their role in providing accurate and useful information to enable the UAMs to make their own decisions, especially with respect to the continuation of their journey, supporting them in moving across spaces in the safest way possible. Acknowledging UAMs' intentions to cross the border illegally, both front-liners and case-managers explained how their interactions with the youngsters intend to raise their awareness and to make resources available for them. For instance, one front-liner explained that based on minors' own stories, his role is to make the youngsters realise that they have more resources than they imagine: 'Many of them are surprised to realise that they have learnt things during their trip; it is my role, as a field worker, to gather this experience into awareness'.[177] Likewise, a case-manager said: 'I help the minors to recognise the situation of abuse before it happens; my job is to give them the strength to decide'.[178]

Interviewees said they do not intend to influence the result (pursuing or not their journey), but to help the minors in questioning the different options available to them. As such, field practitioners expressed that they contribute to the re-evaluation of UAMs' migratory trajectories and intentions. By doing so, they recognise the assertion of minors' agency as a process, in which they can play an important role. Both front-liners and case-managers alluded to situations where they support minors to become aware of their entitlements: 'Once I was explaining to a group that they have rights, and one of them started to cry, he raised his hand asking if he had rights to do that. He didn't know he had rights'.[179] The legal advisor provided a similar testimony: 'minors are not aware that they are rights-holder, I educate them as well'.[180] 'I am here to support them to make decisions'.[181]

These accounts are consistent with prior research showing the role of social support at two levels, 'instrumental' via the provision of accurate information, and 'nurturant', nourishing self-esteem and empowerment.[182]

7.2 Supporting UAMs' life-course transitions

Moreover, interviewees suggested that their interventions help UAMs to deal with temporal transitions and to work out the changes between their past and their present situations, as evidenced by Kohli.[183] To begin, regardless of their positioning, practitioners pointed out that they consider UAMs as children, with the same needs as other children: 'all children have same needs; when boys are here for more than two years, their biggest problem becomes their girlfriend, they do not think about the 'game' anymore.[184] 'They are children anyway'.[185] Interviewees also explained how they try to reconnect UAMs to their childhood. Both front-liners and case-managers mentioned that UAMs have lost their childhood before or during the migration process, and that part of their role, as caregivers, is to make the minors remember what it means to be a child.[186] 'Many children went through a lot and perceived themselves as adults'.[187] 'It is a fact they have forgotten what it is to be a child, we are here to remind them that they can feel free to

177 Interview 3.
178 Interview 4.
179 Interview 8.
180 Interview 5.
181 Interview 13.
182 Raghallaigh (n53).
183 Kohli (n70).
184 Interview 6.
185 Interviews 4 and 9.
186 Interviews 2, 3, 4, 6 and 10.
187 Interview 1.

feel like a child.[188] 'It is very hard to reach their childhood'.[189] 'For a child who has been 2 or 3 years on the journey, he cannot remember what is to be a child.[190] 'They missed their childhood, they lost the joy'.[191]

Interviewees mentioned also UAMs' individualities and their personal histories. Practitioners stressed that by establishing trustful relationship with UAMs, case-managers help them to think about their personal path and to step back from the complex situations they have to deal with. One case-manager for instance quoted a discussion held with one minor during a boat trip on Easter day: 'my uncle is not right about pushing me to continue my journey, I am here, not him'.[192] The case-manager explained that it was a very complicated step for the UAM to take distance with his uncle, and that himself, as a case-manager, was very proud to see him make this move thanks to their discussions. Such story illustrates that 'transitions are ways in which you make sense of what has happened to you'[193] and that interactions between caregivers and UAMs during transit contribute to such transitioning, from past to present situations, from adolescence to adulthood. Tangentially, it came up in the discussions that practitioners recognise both the similarities and the differences of UAMs with other children, adopting an approach described by Gustafsson 'as ethics of grace', which creates the conditions for UAMs to receive recognition and to be actors.[194]

In some cases, thanks to therapeutic support, practitioners also help UAMs to move psychologically. When identified as victims of violence, UAMs are proposed psychological care and start to recover from these abuses. The psychologist explained that some UAMs accept to come to the sessions quite rapidly after the detection of abuses; others need more time, months, to be ready to do so. Most of the time, she is dealing with UAMs who have been abused in their home country or during their journey.[195] But she also provides care to minors who endure liminality after dozens of unsuccessful attempts to cross illegally the border: 'some minors try fifty times, enough to re-open the question of the meaning of life'.[196] It reflects findings of prior research according to which UAMs learn throughout their interactions what can be socially recounted or not.[197] Indeed, UAMs' interactions and conversations with caring adults during their transit can contribute to the consciousness and the emergence of a discourse about UAMs' un-ordinary experiences as migrant children.[198]

7.3 Family-type relations

Field practitioners also alluded to their availability with UAMs in what Kohli has described as 'a familial way'.[199] As seen above, eight of the interviewees, regardless of their positioning, said that they are called 'Mama' or 'Papa' by the UAMs. Therefore, it is interesting to analyse further the field practitioners' discourses and see what type of role they may play in family dynamics altered by UAMs' separation with their parents.

Case-managers explained that it happens that they speak directly with UAMs' parents to tell them about the hazardous conditions in pursuing the journey (meteorological, police violence, smugglers' negligence and abuses). 'Sometimes I call the parents and we have parental discussions'.[200] Case-managers claimed that, in some cases, they manage to influence some family decisions related to the end or the continuation of UAMs' journey.[201] 'A child's mother was pushing him very hard to cross the border illegally; we called the mother to explain her the dangers; what he wanted, we made it come true: his mother is not pushing him anymore'.[202]

Both front-liners and case-managers suggested that UAMs can call them 'Papa' or 'Mama', without necessarily establishing a parental-type relation with them: 'Sometimes they call me Grandma, I don't know why, maybe because I am always asking if they want some food and if they are hungry'.[203] Likewise, interviewees acknowledged that UAMs

188 Interview 2.

189 Interview 3.

190 Interview 6.

191 Interview 10.

192 Interview 11.

193 R.K.S. Kohli and H Connolly, 'Young People Seeking Asylum. In Alison Petch (Ed), *Managing Transition: support for individuals at key points of change* (Policy Press, 2009) 73-92 at 75.

194 Gustafsson (n50).

195 Interview 10.

196 Interview 10.

197 Hernández and Uzureau (n32).

198 Thompson and all (n30).

199 Kohli (n43)

200 Interview 4.

201 Interviews 4 and 5.

202 Interview 5.

203 Interview 7.

miss their parents and speaking with them: 'Minors miss talking to their mother and father, they are constantly looking for that feeling, so they are glad to speak when I sit with them'.[204]

Only case-managers described a family-like relationship with the UAMs, either playing the role of mother/father, or sister/brother.[205] A guardian explained for instance how he had established a relation that resembled that of a father (himself) with his son (the minor): 'Last year, one of the minors was accepted to go legally to Hungary. He was calling me Tata.[206] The day he left, I bought two tee shirts and I told him: 'son and father have the same tee shirt' ; he replied to me: 'first you were my guardian, then my father, and now you are my brother'; I started to cry, I was happy and then sad also'.[207]

Such story confirms prior research about the existence of a reciprocal dimension in a family-like relationship, established between a caregiver and a UAM in the context of prolonged transit.[208] It also reflects broader findings about the fact that people on the move develop attachment to places and to individuals, representing some continuity and security in the context of unstable lives. As such, the interactions with the case-managers can be seen as UAMs' 'roots' along their 'routes'.[209]

These instances of attachment and separation experienced by UAMs can also be interpreted as expressions of successive and 'nested' phases of immobility and mobility during transit stage.[210] Immobility and waiting periods are conducive to the development of forms of belonging and attachment. Mobility creates rupture and loss to those forms of belonging and attachment.

Ultimately, it is important to raise the question of the effect on the longer term of the relationship with a caregiver developed during the transit stage. Is it a source of resilience for the UAMs for the continuation of their journey, and for their acculturation process in the country of asylum, as evidenced by some research?[211] Or is it a debilitating factor, since the separation with the caregiver can play a disruptive role in the development of UAM's identity, as suggested by Werthern and colleagues,[212] who also call for further research as the issue is overlooked in the current literature.

7.4 Decisions and determination of UAMs' best interests

Case-managers explained that sometimes they can influence decisions and have an impact on UAMs' experiences: 'One minor was sick, I explained him that it is not good for him to go, I cannot say that I refused, but I affected the decision.[213] Further, case-managers suggested that their decisions account for minors' agency and mobility. For instance, according to an informal rule, when a minor is leaving the safe house to go to 'the game', the organisation waits three days (for those older than 15 years) and seven days (for those who are less than 15 years) to see if the minor is coming back or not, before allocating the place to another one.[214]

In general, practitioners elaborated about their decisions in relation with determination of UAMs' best interest principle, which presumes that children are legal persons entitled to their own rights and interests.[215] CRC and UNCHR guidelines mandate that children's perspective is considered in the decisions concerning them, not as the unique prevailing criterion but as the primary determining factor. It is not about allowing children to decide, but about ensuring that their voices are heard by those who decide. Few interviewees mentioned that UAMs' perspectives are overlooked in the decisions affecting them: 'sometimes the importance to hear the children is forgotten.[216] On the contrary, case-managers suggested that they always listen to the minors, even if UAMs do not decide in the end.[217]

Majority of interviewees spoke about the difficulty to determine best interests for children who do not want to seek

204 Interview 8.
205 Interviews 4, 5, 11 and 13.
206 'Tata' means 'Dad' in Serbian.
207 Interview 11.
208 Daskalaki and Leivaditi (n48).
209 Christensen and Jensen (n42).
210 Brigden and Mainwaring (n15).
211 Luster and all (n42).
212 Werthern, Grigorakis, and Vizard (n25).
213 Interview 13.
214 Interview 6.
215 Pobjoy (n36).
216 Interview 1.
217 Interviews 4, 6 and 11.

asylum in Serbia. 'It is very difficult to decide because they don't want to stay';[218] 'you cannot lock of them up'.[219] It is consistent with prior research about the dilemma faced by social workers in determining best interests of migrant children who do not want to stay in Serbia.[220]

In his article about UAMs transiting in Mexico, Doering-White[221] has evidenced similar difficulties for shelter workers and analyse them as tensions between a 'caring approach' – focusing on the protection of UAMs and their vulnerabilities–, and 'a mobile approach' –recognising UAMs' agency and their willingness to continue illegally their journey.

7.4.1 Divergences between a governmental and non-governmental approach

Doering-White goes further in his analysis and points at the divergences between governmental and non-governmental actors: on the one hand, Mexican state agencies tend to ultimately prioritise family reunification in children's best interests, and as a consequence organise UAMs' deportation to the country from which they are escaping; on the other hand, non-governmental shelters tend to give priority to UAMs' decisions, in consultation with their families, offering alternatives to detention (and deportation) to the UAMs and some possibilities to continue their clandestine journey.

Similarly, during the interviews, some front-liners and case-managers explained that they tend to give priority to UAMs' intentions over the protection they are entitled to as children in Serbia. They suggested an opposition between a non-governmental approach, respecting UAMs' intentions and not separating them from the persons they are travelling with, and the procedural safeguards enclosed in the Serbian law. 'Sometimes, you need to contact CSW and share some information, but you know it is not in UAMs' best interests'.[222]

Likewise, the child protection officer working in Obrenovac explained how she provides support to individuals who are minors and does not always report them: 'at the same time, I know they would be better inside the system, they should be protected'.[223]

Even when they are not the decision-makers, it is interesting to see how field practitioners think that they should respond to transit circumstances. For instance, the psychologist explained that her organisation 'is at risk all the time because we respect people when they do not want to be identified'; 'by law, you have to refer them, but they want to move, if we refer them, they will lose the money their parents sent'.[224] A front-liner reported that it can happen that some state regulations are not in the best interest of the child: 'our child-friendly spaces and our regulations are more adapted'.[225]

These accounts are consistent with Doering-White's findings about conflicting principles between NGOs and state agencies in assessing what constitutes children best interest.

However, the transit context in Serbia is different than in Mexico, as UAMs are not likely to be at risk of deportation in Serbia.[226] Further, based on the interviews, I could not establish a clear correlation between a non-governmental approach and a 'mobile approach'. Indeed, some case-managers working for NGO expressed their tendency to adopt 'a caring approach': 'best interests of the child is to be considered as children, separated from adults, to protect them from other influences'.[227]

7.4.2 What constitutes best interest and conceptions of UAMs' agency

It confirms that such area merits further research, but also that other variables should be analysed in order to understand their influence on the conception of what constitutes child best interest. As evinced by social work commentators, it is dependent of cultural and political assumptions, varying across the contexts and countries, where childhood and adolescence are not framed in the same ways.[228] It is also highly related to the interpretation of migrant

218 Interview 12.
219 Interview 6.
220 Brankovic and Burgund (n34).
221 Doering-White (n38).
222 Interview 7.
223 Interview 8.
224 Interview 10.
225 Interview 2.
226 BCHR (n9).
227 Interview 5.
228 Doering-White (n38).

children's agency. As evinced by Thompson and colleagues,[229] state authorities in Mexico tend to assess UAMs' best interests by adopting a binary perspective, reducing UAMs either as 'victims' or 'criminals'.

In the present research, I could not establish a strong correlation between practitioners' perceptions of UAMs' agency and practitioners' conceptions of what constitutes children best interests. But rather, it merits further research. However, it is interesting to note that in the discussions, field practitioners did not elaborate much on the fact that majority of UAMs are adolescents, and as such have specific rights and needs: 'approaches required to ensure the realisation of rights of adolescents differ significantly from those required for younger children'.[230] Asked about the determination of best interests, practitioners pointed out the challenges related to UAMs' mobility, but they did not speak much about their transition from childhood to adulthood.

On the contrary, throughout the interviews, practitioners insisted about the importance of reconnecting UAMs with their childhood[231] and on what Raithelhuber describes as their 'child(like)ness'.[232] Except for some mentions that UAMs have girlfriends when they stay longer in Serbia,[233] only one practitioner elaborated on the specificity of the adolescence period.[234] It is possible to assume here that practitioners' tendency to perceive UAMs as children may play a substantial role in their assessment about what constitutes UAMs' best interests, and as such privileging a 'caring approach' in their decisions. It should be confirmed through further investigation.

7.5 Field practices and forms of attachment

Beyond the issue of best interest determination, practitioners' hesitations exist between a 'caring approach' and a 'mobile approach'. These confirm the dichotomy between UAMs' agency – UAMs' willing to continue illegally their journey, and the social practices aiming at protecting them – and eventually restricting UAMs' migratory projects. As such, it is interesting to come back to practitioners' narratives and analyse them in view of an attachment/belonging perspective, as proposed by Raithelhuber.[235]

Along the discussions, practitioners alluded to the development of various forms of attachment with UAMs: the influence played by emotions in their practice, the establishment of durable relationship and companionship with UAMs, the existence of family-type relationships with UAMs, the interferences played in UAMs' family decisions, their role in the development of UAMs' agency or protecting them from powerful agents. Such narratives/practices can be considered constitutive of forms of attachment/immobility with UAMs, ultimately in contradiction with UAMs' strategies to assert their agency and their mobility. In such conceptions, mostly suggested by case-managers,[236] UAMs tend to be perceived first as children and then as migrants, in line with a 'caring' approach described earlier.

In contrast, other elements of practitioners' narratives insisted more on the instances of detachment with UAMs: provision of practical assistance through a pragmatic approach, emphasis on the protective role of UAMs' family and peers, recognition of pragmatic dependency and sub-forms of UAMs' expression of agency, recognition of UAMs' imperatives to move on, mention of UAMs' growing independence as adolescents. In such perspectives, often pointed out by front-liners,[237] UAMs are first perceived as migrants and second as children, consistent with a 'mobile' approach. In such cases, their role, as practitioners, is to reduce risks but not to eliminate them.

However, there is some co-existence of both dimensions in the narratives of some practitioners,[238] which means that it is not relevant to strictly oppose a 'mobile' approach to a 'caring' one. Instead, it suggests that caregivers intend to strike a delicate balance between the two approaches, which ultimately illustrates that the existing protecting framework does not match the needs of UAM in transit, as already evidenced in Mexico context.[239] It demonstrates that a 'mobile approach' and 'caring approach' should not be opposed in defining social work practice with UAMs in transit, but on the contrary, that a mobile perspective should prevail to re-define the available protection mechanisms.

229 Thompson and all (n30).

230 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No 20 on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence' (6 December 2016)

231 Interviews 1. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10.

232 Raithelhuber (n45).

233 Interviews 6 and 7.

234 Interview 10.

235 Raithelhuber (n45).

236 Interviews 4, 5, 7 and 11.

237 Interviews 1, 2, 3 and 8.

238 Interviews 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11.

239 Doering-White (n38).

8. Conclusion

Drawing on field practitioners' narratives, I explored in this dissertation the interactions between social workers and UAMs during their transit in Serbia, and how transit stage and social practice influence each other. Social practitioners explained how they become actors of the transit stage, in supporting UAMs' migratory, developmental and psychological transitions. The research establishes that, through the provision of practical assistance, empowering support, and therapeutic care, practitioners help UAMs in dealing with their complex and fragmented personal itineraries. In some cases, social work interactions contribute to transform transit periods into meaningful experiences. Regardless of their positioning in the reception system, social practitioners described different approaches to respond to transit circumstances, especially in relation to what constitutes UAMs' best interests in an unstable migration process. Revealing the tensions between a 'caring' or a 'mobile' perspective, social workers prioritise either UAMs' protection or UAMs' agency.

By choosing to understand transit as seen by social workers, the research findings feed into the debates of the reviewed literature at various levels. First, social workers' perceptions are consistent with the critical approach of transit migrations, since field practitioners insisted about UAMs' fragmented journeys and nested experiences. Interviewees elaborated about UAMs' changing migratory projects and intentions. Because of the complex interplay between individual, family and environmental dimensions, UAMs are perceived as stopped in Serbia, but not necessarily stranded. The findings also contribute to better understanding the ambivalent role of Serbia as a transit space, where UAMs are stuck but also can find resources.

In addition, the present research builds on existing debates about UAMs as social actors. Regardless of their role, practitioners expressed contrasted views about UAMs' agency: some tend to acknowledge the existence of sub-forms of agency assertion, presenting UAMs' risky actions as clear expressions of their decisions to continue their journey. Other practitioners tend to elaborate more on the instances of UAMs' agency suppression. In such cases, minors are seen totally dependent of the circumstances and the authority of others, except if they receive the support of a caring adult.

Further, the research also sheds light on the overlooked issue of the social practice during transit. Research findings suggest that caring for UAMs in transit is a specific practice, as UAMs are practically moving in three dimensions simultaneously, over space, over time and psychologically. Both front-liners and case-managers expressed divergent narratives about the role of emotions in guiding their practice, and accordingly, about the type of challenges they face in their daily practice. With accuracy and appropriateness, practitioners portrayed young migrants who can be actors of their lives, especially if they receive support. Practitioners' narratives deconstruct the idea that transit periods are only risk factors, in the context of border enforcement. Instead, and according to provided care, social interactions can support UAMs in their transitioning: transit is not only about liminality but also companionship, intimacy, empowerment, recovery.

More broadly, the existence of supportive and complex relationships during UAMs' transit illustrates that social practices at field level can be disruptive with border enforcement and inflexible policies, prevailing in and at the edges of the EU. Such relationships should be acknowledged in the reception contexts. Case-managers are the ones establishing the most durable relationships with UAMs, even in some instances suggesting some family-like relationships. Because they deal with cases of prolonged stay, they insisted more on UAMs' life-course transitions. They described interactions with UAMs which clearly expressed certain forms of attachment. Interestingly, case-managers spoke with the same voice about the risks represented by UAMs' family pressure to pursue their journey.

In general, however, the research has not established a clear relation between practitioners' positioning and the prevalence of certain perceptions about UAMs. Regardless of their role, practitioners provided divergent narratives about the impact of the transit stage on their practice, about UAMs' trajectories and autonomy, and about their role in influencing UAMs transit experiences. Notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that it is when practitioners have the longer influence on the transit stage, that they contribute to some form of immobility regime: in the case of prolonged transit, intervening in all the domains (asylum, welfare, social bonding) of practice, case-managers substantially support UAMs in their multiple transitions, and finally, in a few cases, they contribute to transforming the transit stage into a permanent and stable situation, the obtention of the asylum status being the ultimate stage of the protection/immobile regime.

This could encourage further research on social work practices with UAMs in transit, and on how contrasting practices can produce different forms of attachment/belonging and regimes of (im)mobility.[240] Likewise, extra research, including UAMs' testimonies, could explore more specifically the role of social practice interactions in shaping the continuation of UAMs' journey and their adaptation in new contexts. UAMs' voices should be heard about how they perceive their interactions with field practitioners during transit: helpful? coercive? Both?

240 Raithelhuber (n45).

Further research could also look at how social practices are linked to certain perceptions of UAMs' agency. Particular attention could be paid to the variables influencing what constitutes best interests of UAMs in transit stage, especially in relation with perceptions of UAMs' autonomy as adolescents. This questions once again the distinction between agency/vulnerability, and the necessity to reconcile a 'mobile' and 'caring' approach in the social practice with UAMs, in order to promote simultaneously UAMs' autonomy and the protection which they are entitled to. Ultimately, it reinforces the broader argument that protection solutions should reconnect refugees to their movements and recognise their mobility strategies.[241]

241 K Long, 'When refugees stopped being migrants: movement, labour and humanitarian protection' (2013) 1(1) *Migration Studies* 4–26; K Long, 'Rethinking 'Durable' Solutions' In E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (OUP 2014) 475-487.