



Save the Children

## Spotlight on the situation of refugee and migrant children in Romania



February 2021

In 2020, Romania saw the all-time high number of refugees and migrants arriving into the country. Numbers grew progressively towards the end of the year, when more than a one-third increase compared to the beginning of 2020 resulted in overcrowding of the accommodation centres, poor shelter conditions and lack of essential services.

The services need to be significantly improved in order to provide adequate support and protection for children, warns Save the Children in Romania (Salvati Copiii). This is particularly the case in Timisoara, a city in western Romania that became a hotspot for refugees and migrants, where families have been sleeping on the floors of the accommodation centre without proper access to food and hygiene. Throughout the country, unaccompanied children lack access to protection, as there are gaps in the identification procedures and referral mechanisms. COVID-19 pandemic further worsens the situation for vulnerable children and adults, as there are no shelter capacities for preventive isolation, and access to health services is ineffective.

The number of people on the move in Romania might be higher than registered, as the data available is collected only through the registration of asylum seekers, while some refugees and migrants stay out of the registration system as they are trying to continue their journey swiftly. The authorities share the data on new arrivals and those present in the country with agencies working in the humanitarian sector only by request, rather than regularly and publicly. Lack of timely and accessible data affects the visibility of children and adults and their needs and, consequently, the timely provision of quality support services to this vulnerable group.

A coordinated response is necessary, as well as a long-term strategy for responding to the needs of refugees and migrants.



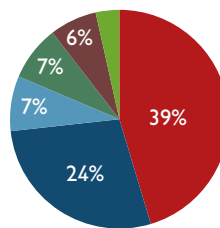
Around **1,000** refugees and migrants are present in six official reception centres.

The total accommodation capacity in the country is **1,360**.



Children make up to **25%** of new arrivals in Romania<sup>1</sup>; every **fifth** child is a girl<sup>2</sup>.

Almost two-thirds of the children are unaccompanied children.



Countries of origin of the asylum seekers arriving in Romania are: **Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Maghreb countries (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia), Pakistan**<sup>3</sup>.

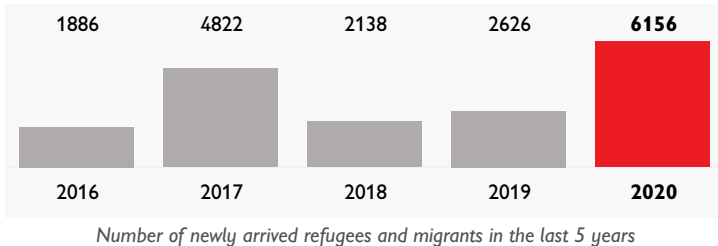


Over **13,000** pushbacks were reported from Romania to Serbia in 2020<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> According to the unpublished official data collected by the Romanian General Inspectorate for Immigration (GII) in cooperation with UNHCR, during 2020, children made 25% of the official new arrivals.; <sup>2</sup> While official data on children have not been segregated for the whole 2020, in the first 9 months of the year girls made around 22% of the new children arrivals.; <sup>3</sup> According to the segregated data available only for January-September 2020; <sup>4</sup> January-December 2020, Serbia Statistical Snapshot, UNHCR; <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/southeasterneurope>

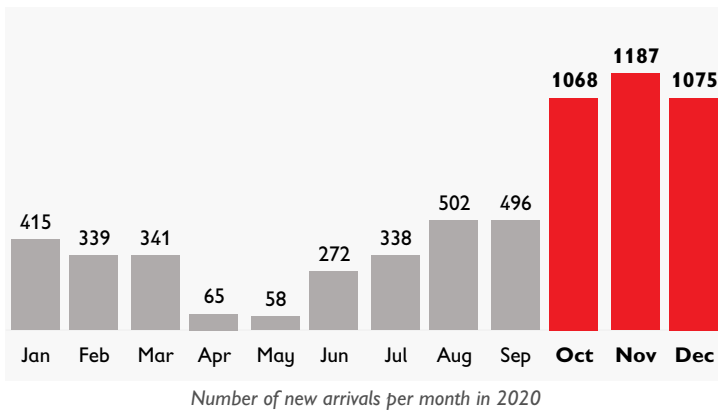
## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

While Romania has been a part of the Balkans migration route since 2015, it gained prominence at the end of 2019, when the number of refugees and migrants transiting through the country increased.



Until 2017, Romania received an average of approximately 1,400-1,500 asylum applications per year. In the last 4 years, 15,742 persons applied for asylum, out of which about 40% of the applications were submitted in 2020.

Regardless of COVID-19 restrictions, Romania has seen more officially registered newly arrived refugees and migrants in 2020 than in any previous year. Out of 6,156 new arrivals recorded, more than a half (54%) entered Romania in the last quarter of the year.



Romania is mostly used as a transit corridor from Serbia to the Central and Western European countries, bypassing the well-controlled border between Serbia and Hungary. In 2020, most of the asylum seekers (90%) entered the country irregularly – out of which 92% through the border with Serbia<sup>5</sup>. According to some testimonies collected by Save the Children in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, refugees and migrants in the Balkans have been increasingly using the route through Romania to evade reported violent push backs on the other prominent route in the region - the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia.

People arriving in Romania have often been on the road for months, suffering from cold, and are physically exhausted, with injuries caused by harsh weather, long walking and lack of proper hygiene. The length of stay in the country varies but is visibly shorter when it comes to single men. The country is mostly perceived as a transit country. Families choose to stay longer (3-6 months) than single adults, who usually leave the country after several days or weeks. The length of stay for unaccompanied children is from a couple of days up to 2 months. The main exit point from the country is its north-west border with Hungary.



Upon their arrival to Romania from Serbia, in the Timisoara area, migrants and refugees are registered by the Immigration Office and offered a chance to apply for asylum. Those who do not apply for asylum are transferred to detention centres. Asylum-seekers are accommodated in six reception centres that are run by the General Inspectorate for Immigration<sup>6</sup>. Persons who do not register as asylum seekers are placed in detention; in practice, children are not detained. As other five reception centres are far from the border they want to cross, many refugees and migrants abscond from the centres they have been assigned to and return to Timisoara in an attempt to continue their journey. Some migrants chose to stay outside the centres because they hope to move faster as it is easier for them to interact with smugglers. Those staying outside do not have access to proper hygiene and often lack resources, including to buy food. Cases of robberies and violent incidents between migrants and local population have been reported, including a case involving an unaccompanied child.

## RISKS FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR NEEDS

Due to the increased number of persons arriving and limited accommodation capacities, families and children often stay in inadequate conditions. There are cases of families and unaccompanied children being accommodated in the same room with male adults. In the reception centre in Timisoara, kitchens and hallways are used as sleeping accommodation and parents cannot prepare meals for their children while the food is not provided by the authorities managing the centres.<sup>7</sup> Despite the efforts of international agencies, NGOs and managements of the centres, hygienic conditions in many reception facilities remain poor, exacerbating the health situation in relation to COVID-19 risks.

Children over 16 travelling alone (the majority of UASC) can choose between being accommodated in a child protection centre or staying in the reception centre. Many older children opt for the reception centres since they don't want to be separated from the group they are travelling with. All children reporting that they are travelling with a relative, even those younger than 16, are often automatically placed in a reception centre, without an adequate assessment of their situation. None of the facilities has dedicated space for unaccompanied children. Therefore, the children are placed in the same room with male adults. They often end up living in the streets, train stations, parks and abandoned buildings by following the men they are travelling with, who were never proven to be their relatives.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Romanian General Inspectorate for Immigration (GII); <sup>6</sup> In Timisoara, Somcuta Mare, Radauti, Galati, Bucharest and Giurgiu; <sup>7</sup> Food is not provided by the authorities in the reception centres. Asylum seekers receive a daily allowance of 3,33 EUR, provided by the state.

Unaccompanied children under the age of 16 are supposed to be accommodated in child protection centres run or licenced by the state<sup>8</sup>. State-run accommodation facilities are not purposely used for refugee children only but are designed for all children in foster care. Private licensed accommodation facilities for vulnerable groups that are maintained by civil society organizations and charities rely on project funding and donations. These facilities have limited capacity and often accept only certain groups, such as families with children or single women. However, the level of service is significantly better than in state-run facilities with access to food, education and psychosocial support. Foster family accommodation is envisaged in the law but not provided in practice.

Legal guardians accompany children to the asylum procedure interviews, but they are often not capacitated and supported to provide holistic assistance to children, help them navigate the protection system and advocate appropriately for their rights. As the number of unaccompanied children in the country significantly increased, many unaccompanied children met by Save the Children reported not having enough information about the protection services available to them, and never meeting their guardian in person.

Children, including UASC, have access to non-formal education, including programmes run by Save the Children, provided in the reception centres or child protection institutions (for UASC accommodated there). The enrolment process into official education is lengthy, often lasting up to 3 months, in which period most of the families and children leave the country; therefore, most children do not have proper access to education while in Romania.

## PUSHBACKS AND VIOLENCE AT THE BORDERS

Children and adults travelling through the Balkans route continually testify about alleged systematic violence at all borders in the region. In Serbia, over 13,000 testimonies about irregular pushbacks from Romania were collected in 2020. These reports include testimonies about border guards expelling individuals and whole groups from the territory of their country without providing access to international protection mechanisms and ignoring explicit requests for asylum. In many cases, refugees and migrants testify about border guards in Romania using physical and verbal violence, seizing or destroying valuables and personal items. The reported number of pushbacks from Romania grew progressively through 2020, correlating with the increase in the movement and the number of arrivals in the country. No data about pushbacks inside Romanian territory is available.



## A CHILD'S TESTIMONY

Sharif\*, a 17-year-old boy from Afghanistan, arrived in Romania in December 2020. Save the Children team has supported the boy since his arrival with food, hygiene, medicines, clothing and footwear.

"In 2016, my father was kidnapped from work by a military group, and my family had to pay a large sum of money for them to release him. The next year he started again to receive life threats, and he told me to leave Afghanistan because I could have been killed. He paid a smuggler to take me to Pakistan, and from there, I went to Iran and then to Turkey. I stayed in Turkey for two years, and I managed to get a job in a clothing factory. From Turkey, I continued my journey to Bulgaria. I stayed there for about four months.

Then I went to Serbia, where I spent about a year and a half before reaching Romania. Bulgaria and Serbia were very bad for me, it was a difficult experience, and I don't want to experience something like this again. I ended up in Romania because I wanted to go to Italy. I asked for asylum, but I don't have any hope. I will continue my journey, hoping that things will, one day, get better in my country, that my family will be safe, and I would be able to return to continue my life next to them.

All I wanted was to have a normal life, like other boys of my age. To go to school, play football, make friends. I left my country in 2017, it's been three years on the road, and I don't know what to expect any longer. It was a difficult journey. There were days when I had nothing to eat or drink, my clothes were dirty, and I was almost all the time in danger. I saw people fighting for food and stealing from other migrants. All I wanted in those moments was to be home with my parents and my brothers and sisters."

## SAVE THE CHILDREN IN ROMANIA

Save the Children Romania is working with asylum-seeking and refugee children, including unaccompanied and separated children, providing direct services in and outside the reception centres. We respond to the immediate needs of children, providing food, clothing, hygiene and health kits, and run education and psychosocial support programmes to facilitate their stay and integration. In addition, we provide assistance to parents and vulnerable adults (pregnant women, disabled people, single parent families, elders).

In 2020 Save the Children supported **677 child refugees and asylum seekers**, out of which **410 were unaccompanied minors**. We also provided aid to **1,077 vulnerable adults**. Over the past 5 years, we supported **3,654 refugee and asylum seeking children and 4,185 adults**.



Learn more about our work in Romania at:  
[www.salvaticopiii.ro](http://www.salvaticopiii.ro)  
[lavinia.varodi@salvaticopiii.ro](mailto:lavinia.varodi@salvaticopiii.ro)

<sup>8</sup> General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) or in licensed accommodation provided by other entities if DGASPC or GII sign an agreement with them



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Authorities should ensure all those arriving are registered and have access to quality reception, including by increasing reception capacities and creating reception initiatives focused on families and the most vulnerable. Integrated services for children should be provided from the first day of arrival, in accordance with their needs. Reception conditions should be upgraded to include the provision of adequate food and other services such as psychosocial support.
- There is a need for better coordination between authorities, particularly central and local authorities, and other relevant actors in the migration management. Given the evolving nature of migration trends, it is necessary to plan adequate measures, flexible enough to respond to a changing context regarding long-term planning and timely in responding to the current needs of refugee and migrant children and refugee and migrant population in general.
- Sufficient budgets need to be available for ensuring quality services for children at all levels and in each stage of their stay in the country. Funds need to be flexible and available to all licensed service providers, including civil society organizations maintaining shelter accommodation for vulnerable groups.
- Data collection and information sharing on refugees and migrants arriving to Romania should be improved, including by ensuring the availability of data segregated by gender, age and other relevant criteria.
- Identification of unaccompanied children, age assessment, family profiling procedures and practices and referral mechanisms need to be improved to ensure better protection of unaccompanied children. Guardians should be available for children and capacitated to provide them with adequate support, so children can exercise their rights.
- Legal pathways for families and children, including unaccompanied children, should be strengthened.
- Monitoring and accountability are needed to prevent violence at the borders of Romania.

This report is issued by the Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub and Save the Children Romania. The Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub, working within Save the Children North West Balkans, researches trends in migrations across the Balkans to raise visibility of children on the move and advocate for their needs. The Hub also promotes knowledge management, regional exchanges and dissemination of good practices in programming for girls and boys refugees and migrants, and their families, to ensure children are better protected and have access to learning.



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