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Editorial: Unaccompanied Minors in Europe – Part II

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To this date, there is a lack of data on the absolute number of people who became refugees in 2017. There are reasons to assume, though, that the global situation regarding flight and migration has not changed significantly since we published Part I of this special issue on “Unaccompanied Minors in Europe” in the fall of 2017. However, there seem to be new trends with regard to refugees seeking asylum in the EU, generally, and concerning those young people who arrive and live in Europe under the label of being an unaccompanied minor (UAM). This applies to various constituents. For example, the refugee routes currently seem to be changing; the number of young people coming to Europe seems to be declining, policies are becoming more restrictive while at the same time formally putting forward the best interest of the child and, alongside this, the challenges for professionals dealing with UAM are obviously changing.

The latest general data on asylum claims in Europe shows that in 2017, there was a new trend as compared to the two previous years: after the latest peak of 2.0 million new asylum claims in 2016 (Sandermann & Zeller 2017), in 2017 these numbers declined to 705,705 new asylum seekers throughout the EU, with Germany still being the main receiving country, followed by France, Italy and Greece. This data includes approximately 31,750 UAM (Eurostat 2018). Even if we consider that there are limitations to the available data on children and unaccompanied minors who arrived in Europe in 2017, we can still assume that this number represents a significant decline in asylum-seeking young people considered to be UAM as compared to the years of 2015 and 2016 (Sandermann & Zeller 2017).

Apart from this general development, there have been more shifts. One thing that is interesting in this respect is that in 2017, Italy received 9,945 UAM, replacing Germany (9,085 UAM) as the main receiving country for UAM (Eurostat 2018). Other data (UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM 2018) shows that between January and September 2017, approximately 15,000 unaccompanied and separated children arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Spain, with the vast majority landing in Italy. This data gives some indications of the refugee routes: after the so-called Western Balkan route was virtually closed against the background of the EU-Turkey treaty of March 18th, 2016, the Central Mediterranean route was the most-used path to Europe for refugees in 2017 (UNICEF 2017). Consequently, there was a relative increase in the number of young people who fled to Europe from African countries. Among all the UAM who arrived in Europe in 2017, young people from Guinea, the Cote d’Ivoire and Gambia were the three most frequent types (UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM 2018).

UNICEF (2017) points out that meeting the basic needs of UAM can still be seen as the key challenge of UAM reception and protection. In many, if not all European countries, poor reception conditions, child migration detention, persistent discrimination against refugees and

migrants, and poor access to education continue to exist. However, the political discourse across Europe does not concentrate on these issues, but symbolizes a dissent between the conflicting priorities of implementing further restrictions (e.g. concerning legislation on family re-unification) and amendments to better meet the best interest of the child.

Some months ago, a colleague who contributes to this special issue emailed her revised paper and made us promise to publish it ideally right away, because otherwise the data drawn together for the paper might no longer be relevant. This appeal shows that currently, research on UAM is a fast-moving business, as welfare state policies and practices are continuously changing. This makes it hard to keep up with developments as a researcher.

As this is certainly the case, we feel that this makes it even more relevant to provide carefully developed knowledge based on available data, which is not solely focused on gathering available information on the current situation of UAM in various countries in Europe as sources of direct policy advice, but which instead contributes to a more systematic production of knowledge on UAM in Europe that includes interpretations and more systematic analyses and that might even provide explanations for what can be seen. Such careful research takes time, and is therefore chronically delayed. The upside to this is – hopefully – a longer-lasting body of knowledge on variations in how UAM in Europe are legally and politically addressed, categorized, accommodated, and the patterns of how these young people are generally treated across Europe. To this end, all articles collected in both parts of this special issue attempt to systematically explore the situation of UAM in a respective European country, the EU in general or in a comparative perspective. This is a collective attempt to systematize and thereby also widen the perspective on this increasingly established topic of social policy and social work research.

The second part of the special issue on “Unaccompanied Minors in Europe” at hand consists in six articles presenting the current state of research on UAM in specific European countries; to be precise England (by Jim Wade), France (by Isabelle Frechon and Lucy Marquet), Germany (by Maren Zeller and Philipp Sandermann), Greece (by Andriani Fili and Virginia Xythali), Italy (by Monia Giovannetti) and the Netherlands (by Elianne Zijlstra, Jet Rip Daan Beltman, Carla van Os, Erik J. Knorth and Margrite Kalverboer). Moreover, the volume contains a paper by Philipp Sandermann, Onno Husen and Maren Zeller that takes a comparative perspective and explores how young people are addressed and socially constructed as UAM by virtue of and through specific contexts of European welfare state policies.

We would like to express once again our gratitude to all the authors who contributed to this and the previous part of this special issue. Without their diligent work and reliability, a special issue of this kind would not have been possible. We hope this collective piece of work will deliver valuable insights for the prospective academic and political debate on UAM in Europe.

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