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Young People Called „Unaccompanied Minors“ and European Welfare States: A brief introduction to this special issue

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There are currently 65.6 million people who have become refugees worldwide. (UNHCR 2017) Many of these people try to make it to so-called Western welfare states. The latest peak of 2.0 million new asylum claims in 2016 confirms this trend: By the end of 2016, “with 722,400 such claims, Germany was the world’s largest recipient of new individual applications, followed by the United States of America (262,000), Italy (123,000), and Turkey (78,600).” (UNHCR 2017)

As a specifically categorized subgroup of young people who have been forcefully displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations, and who fled without any legal guardian to assumedly safe(r) countries, so-called “Unaccompanied Minors (UAM)” symbolize this general development of flight and migration like few others. In 2015-2016, 300,000 young people became registered as UAM. (Unicef 2017, p. 6) This was neither a sudden development, nor was it unforeseen by those experts who had investigated the phenomenon for years and pointed at it to alert politicians and (social service) administrators across Europe and the world. Instead, the number of UAM increased rapidly and constantly during the last eight years, until the total number of asylum applicants considered to be UAM rose to approximately twenty times the original number in 2008.

This trend specifically applies to the European context, as the latest statistics provided by Eurostat (2017) underline. The data show a strong peak in 2015, with almost 96,500 registered UAM who applied for asylum in EU Member States. In 2016, the number of registered UAM reduced by a third (63,300 asylum applications), albeit remaining five times higher than the annual average of asylum applications by UAM between 2008 and 2013 (approximately 12,000 applications per year).

However, in social policy and social work discourses across European countries, UAM became a hot topic just recently. Obviously, a full-blown crisis was needed to reach the mainstream of politics, social work, and academia. We are well aware of the fact that, to a certain extent, this reflection also applies to us, the guest editors of this special issue. All the more, we are delighted that we were able to persuade some of the most experienced and widely acknowledged experts on the topic to contribute to this and an upcoming second part of *Social Work & Society*’s special issue on “Unaccompanied Minors in Europe.”

The two parts of the special issue aim at taking a closer look at two phenomena that are worth distinguishing when one discusses the broader subject. First, the term UAM represents a socio-politically defined group of young people. As individuals, these young people are one subject of study in the broader controversy on flight and migration in Europe, but still little is

known on their biographical backgrounds, the way they are treated as UAM in European welfare states, and their living conditions in general. Secondly, yet the very term UAM points towards the other end of the discussion: A young person who is being considered a UAM is no UAM by him- or herself. Instead, the term UAM represents a specific societal relation for which the modern concept of national welfare states is essential. That is to say that even only speaking of young people as UAM is related to socio-political contexts of modern (national) welfare states. (Chavez and Menjivar 2010; Clarke 2014) Therefore, whenever there is an academic discussion about UAM as people, it makes sense to keep this relation in mind to not simply reproduce political debates but actually examine and explain what is going on.

As such, UAM are obviously of high interest as a political sub-topic of the more general political debate on flight, migration and social work in Europe. One key reason (among others) for this interest, which can be found on a Europe-wide, perhaps world-wide level of political debates, is again deeply related to the modern concept of national welfare states: Young people considered to be UAM can be read as a specific contradiction confronting national welfare states. This is because “cases of UAM” on the one hand represent people who do not formally “belong” to the welfare state they challenge as cases, as they do not have the right citizenship or even permission to reside. On the other hand, these cases represent children who sojourn in the country without any legal guardian. In effect, this means that by definition, the nation state as a socio-political structure that is legitimized through an effective and active national welfare system might be, on the one hand, uninvolved and innocent, but on the other hand, highly responsible for these cases. (Barbulescu/Grugel 2016; Parusel 2011)

To reflect on this contradiction may offer interesting ways to interpret the handling of “UAM cases” across all European countries, which is the focus of the various contributions in this special issue. As such, the special issue mirrors the different legal, organizational and professional strategies that European welfare states developed to deal with cases of UAM, and these strategies have again various and different impacts on the individual life courses of young people addressed and clientified as UAM.

We feel that it is important to intensify the international debate on this topic, above all as it engages with the academic and political debate on social services for young refugees. Against this background, it is our aim to further strengthen comparative approaches in a narrower sense, as the latter might contribute to both a deeper understanding and more informed social policy and social work approaches with respect to young people who arrive in European welfare states without any legal guardian.

To approach this goal, we did not only collect individual contributions from various experts on European countries and their policy and practice approaches on UAM, but rather urged these experts through some quite arduous criteria in the call for papers that was published prior to this issue to structure their papers along the following lines:

- All authors were expected to provide the readers with basic data, i.e. the respective country’s definition of UAM, the current number and, if existing, further data on the young people who live in the country as UAM.
- Moreover, all authors of this special issue were asked to outline the legal framework and/or the general policy program structure for UAM in the country, as well as possible recent changes of these frameworks and their relation to the UN Children’s Rights Convention.

- Also, the contributors were called to explain the existing clearance practices and care arrangements for UAM in the country they describe. This point was of particular interest to us, as we realized that there is an actual lack of comparative knowledge where it comes to questions of social service provision and care.
- Finally, we asked all authors to provide some information on existing research on the UAM's situation in the country, and on what they assess as research desiderata.

We were delighted and surprised to receive numerous proposals for papers to this special issue. Over the course of the subsequent editorial process that included the usual double-blind peer review of this journal, we ended up with a total of fifteen strong papers.

Given this number of high quality papers, we agreed with the coordinating office of *Social Work & Society* to publish two parts of this special issue, the second of which will follow by the end of 2017. Part I of this special issue comprises eight papers, the upcoming part II will provide the reader with another seven papers. In total, we will have in-depth perspectives on the situation of UAM in thirteen European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom), as well as two papers with a more comparative approach. One of these papers focuses on EU definitions and policies on UAM and on existing trends across EU Member States, the other one will compare the ways in which European welfare states administratively construct young people as UAM by virtue of national policies and care arrangements.

Part I of *Social Work & Society's* special issue on “Unaccompanied Minors in Europe” presents papers on the seven cases of Austria (by *Saskia Heilemann*), Belgium (by *Katrien De Graeve, Marianne Vervliet and Ilse Derluyn*), Ireland (by *Samantha Arnold and Muireann Ní Raghallaigh*), Norway (by *Hilde Lidén, Elisabeth Gording Stang and Ketil Eide*), Romania (by *Raluca Bejan, Andreea Iorga Curpan and Olga Amza*), Sweden (by *Aycan Çelikaksoy and Eskil Wadensjö*), and Switzerland (by *Samuel Keller, Eva Mey and Thomas Gabriel*). The paper of *Bernd Parusel* will explore definitions, trends and policies on UAM in the European Union.

We would like to express our gratitude to all authors who contributed to this and the upcoming second part of the special issue for their diligent work and reliability. We are very much looking forward to further discussing this topic in order to establish a more stable framework for comparative research on Unaccompanied Minors in Europe.

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