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Asylum and migration: EU must do more to protect unaccompanied children

Every year thousands of unaccompanied minors travel to Europe seeking a new life. The majority has fled from wars, conflicts or other difficult living conditions and some have even lost family members along the way.

Today in a report on the situation of unaccompanied minors in the EU, the Commission calls for improved efforts at both national and European level to respond effectively and in full respect of the rights of the child to this complex transnational challenge.

The arrival of unaccompanied minors from third countries is not a temporary phenomenon, but a long-term feature of migratory flows to the EU. In 2011, there were 12,225 asylum applications by unaccompanied minors across the EU27, a number comparable to previous years and unlikely to change in the coming ones. A much greater overall number of unaccompanied children are entering Europe via irregular migration channels, as estimates provided by some member States suggest. Italy provided data, which indicated that there were 5 959 unaccompanied minors on Italian territory on 31 December 2011; France provided an estimate of 6 000 UAMs in its territory; in Spain, the aggregated figure of UAM for the period 2008-2011 was over 5 500; Belgium estimates the number of UAM at 4 000.

"The minors arriving alone to our borders are among the most exposed and vulnerable in our societies. Although it is encouraging that EU policies have helped to improve the conditions and protection of the children, more challenges lie ahead. We need to improve our procedures to ensure that these children receive a dignified welcome at Europe's borders. This includes better cooperation and information sharing between EU countries", said Cecilia Malmström, Commissioner for Home Affairs.

To increase the protection of unaccompanied minors entering the EU and based on the respect for the rights of the child, the Commission adopted in 2010 an Action Plan that helped bringing into focus the issue of unaccompanied minors who arrive in Europe: each decision affecting a minor's future must be taken with the best interests of the child at heart, regardless of his migratory status.

The Commission adopted today a mid-term report on the implementation of the Action Plan on unaccompanied minors (2010-2014) – [IP/10/534](#). The report takes stock of the progress made and identifies the areas which require more attention and targeted action during the next two years.

Over the last two years the Action Plan has had positive impact:

- The explicit recognition of the best interests of the child as the guiding principle has contributed to increased protection in the new EU legislative instruments (in the field of asylum, immigration and trafficking in human beings).
- The common EU approach has ensured that greater prominence is given to funding measures for this particularly vulnerable group of migrants.
- It has facilitated discussions among institutions, national authorities, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations and allowed enhanced exchange of knowledge and practices, for example on guardianship and age assessment.

But further efforts are needed:

- Additional efforts in quantitative and qualitative data gathering and exchange are needed, concerning for instance the numbers of minors disappearing from care facilities or the numbers of returned unaccompanied minors. It is necessary to further improve the comparability of data collected across the EU.
- Continuous engagement and exchanges, by the EU and by Member States, with countries of origin and transit is essential: to share experiences and good practice, to better understand these countries' needs and to find concrete solutions in relation to prevention, family tracing and safe return of unaccompanied minors.
- The Commission will continue to prioritise funding for projects. Member States, international and non-governmental organisations are encouraged to use the available financial resources to their fullest potential.
- The EU is committed to having a common EU asylum system in place by the end of 2012. The Commission has proposed higher standards of protection for unaccompanied children and hopes the Parliament and the Council will find common ground.

Useful Links

[MEMO/12/716](#)

[Mid-term report on the implementation of the Action Plan](#)

[Commission Staff Working Document](#)

[Cecilia Malmström's Op-ed on unaccompanied minors](#)

Cecilia Malmström's [website](#)

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