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INTEGRATION OF REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN IN CROATIA AND SERBIA: PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN NGOs

Master thesis

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INTRODUCTION

Europe has seen in the last six years a significant growth in the flows of migrants reaching the continent to seek protection and to look for better life prospects. In this context, social workers are among the professionals who provide essential services to this vulnerable group of people from the first reception to the subsequent, often complex process of integration into receiving societies, and their voices, experiences and own perspectives will be at the core of this research. This study, in fact, focuses on the role of social workers in the integration process of a particular group of beneficiaries, namely migrant children who are seeking or have already been granted international protection, an aspect of social work practice that has not been analyzed comprehensively thus far. Statistics show that starting from 2015 the EU countries saw a relevant increase in the number of people claiming asylum if compared to the figures prior to the migration crisis that hit Europe in that year (Eurostat, 2021). Between 2015 and 2020, each year around 30% of asylum seekers in the EU were children, either accompanied, unaccompanied, or separated, and alone in 2019, children seeking international protection were slightly over 200,000 (UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM, 2020). In 2020, the number of asylum applications dropped significantly due to the impact of COVID-19, and while asylum claims from children decreased of 32% if compared to the previous year, the number of unaccompanied children who sought asylum remained steady according to the available data (UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, 2021). Children represent 30% of the world population, yet they account for 42% of forcibly displaced people, and alone between 2018 and 2020, almost a million children were born refugees (UNHCR, 2021). Climate change, increasing technology-based connectivity, and a growing inequality of opportunities around the world are expected to increase the scale of child migration in the future (Bhabha & Abel, 2020). The integration of this group, especially that of unaccompanied and separated migrant children, is subject of concern both at international level (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005; UN General Assembly, 2018a) and EU level (European Commission, 2017) where the topic found space for debates, declarations and the development of legal documents and guidelines. The objective 16 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (UN General Assembly, 2018a), for example, is about the inclusion of migrants in the society and looks at their empowerment as a means to achieve it. The integration of migrants, moreover, is believed to be a process that promotes cohesive societies in that it encourages them to become active members of the society and at the same time it promotes the engagement from the community's side as well (UN General Assembly, 2018a). Two different theoretical approaches to integration in the migration context can be found in the literature. On one side, Berry (2001) refers to integration as an acculturation

strategy that is possible in a society in which multiculturalism, hospitality and inclusion are fostered, whereas Ager and Strang (2008) regard integration as the merely fulfillment of basic needs and civil rights. With these premises, Viola, Biondo, & Mosso (2018) consider social workers determinant for the success of migrants' integration since, with their practice, they promote social cohesion and both individual and community empowerment.

Given the above-mentioned numbers and trends, social workers across Europe find themselves to be more and more involved in direct work with children who were forced to flee their home and, given their age and status, need special support to integrate in receiving societies, especially when considering those who are unaccompanied and therefore more vulnerable. Recent literature on social work with migrants has mainly focused on the implications of the migration phenomenon for the profession of social work (MartinezBrawley & Zorita, 2011; Boccagni & Righard, 2015; Zaviršek, 2017) and, in particular, on the challenges that social workers face when working with migrants (Wirth et al. 2019; Mette et al. 2020). In doing so, they did not concentrate on the children population but rather provided a general outlook on the issue. Regarding social work practice with migrants, some authors investigated the approaches that are overall employed by social workers (Robinson & Masocha, 2017; Tribe, Sendt & Tracy 2019), while others suggested practices to adopt when working with refugees specifically, given their vulnerabilities and traumatic experiences (Lacroix & Sabbah, 2011; George, 2012). Viola, Biondo & Mosso (2018), in their study on the role of social workers in promoting immigrants' integration, focused merely on adults of both European and non-European origins and did not make a distinction among different categories of migrants, e.g. economic migrants and refugees, thus it was assumed that the integration process goes beyond factors such as age, nationality, reasons behind the decision to migrate, and life experiences, without taking into consideration that refugees and asylum seekers have their own needs and peculiarities that characterize their condition and distinguish it from that of other migrants.

By providing insight into how social workers who engaged with migrant children experience and understand their role within the integration process of their young clients, it is expected to fill a gap on two sides – focus on migrant children and on the integration process –, and to revel relevant information that could influence the organization and provision of social services to asylum-seeking and refugee children, who, for their status and age, cannot be compared to other groups of migrants. A rich insight into this phenomenon will allow to provide guidance on support provisions for social workers and, overall, to better understand how they make sense of their professional role in the practice with migrant children. In the event of increasing displacement of refugees and asylum seekers across Europe, this study intends to collect evidence on the potential of social work

practice that may be used in the future in countries that do not have significant experience of migration waves as Croatia and Serbia have been collecting since 2015.

The research object of this study concerns social work practice with migrant children as a potential driving force of their integration. The goal is to investigate social workers' professional experiences to determine their position in the promotion of the integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children in their host country. For this purpose, after describing various approaches to social work practice with migrants with an emphasis on children, and comparing different perspectives on integration - as theoretical objectives -, it will be necessary to research the social workers' own understanding of integration, and thus their own definition of this concept and which components they consider fundamental and desirable in order to achieve a successful integration, by asking "What does integration mean to you?" but also "How can refugee and asylum-seeking children integrate in their new country? and "What challenges do they face in the process?". Assuming that social workers' personal conceptions of integration influence not only the way they look at their role but also the type of services they provide, the second empirical objective is, hence, to find out to what extent social workers consider their practice as a means to facilitate the full integration of their clients, and through reflecting on this, it is expected that obstacles will arise and will be discussed as well. Upon answering the question "In what ways do the services you provide to migrant children impact their integration?", the third empirical aim is to understand the social workers' view of their role in relation to the integration of the children they work with through narratives of their own experiences.

To answer the research question "What is the role of social worker in the integration of migrant children?", the qualitative research method involving six semi-structured interviews was employed. The paper is structured in a way to provide a theoretical background first and then present the findings of this study. After defining the concepts of migrant children, social work with refugees and asylum seekers, and integration, results stemming from the interviews with social workers in NGOs will be presented starting from the investigation of their own understanding of integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children and moving on to their work and role in it. After that, conclusions will be drawn and recommendations to relevant stakeholders will be displayed as well.

PART I: SOCIAL WORK WITH MIGRANTS: TOWARDS THE INTEGRATION OF REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN

Below, key concepts specific to this research study that delimit the field of inquiry will be defined. After specifying categories of migrant children on which this research will focus, namely asylum seekers, refugees, and beneficiaries of complementary protection, and discussing features of international child migration, the second part will provide an outlook on social work practice with migrants, where implications, challenges, approaches, and best practices will be presented while keeping a focus on underage service users. The third and last chapter will then discuss different facets of the integration process of migrants and present several conceptual approaches to integration, as well as recent research findings on integration challenges and needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children, and it will conclude with some of the perspectives of service providers on the integration process of their clients that emerged from the latest studies.

1. MIGRANT CHILDREN ON THE MOVE TO EUROPE

The term "migrant" has no universal definition and is not defined in any international legal document, but it is commonly understood as a person who, for different reasons, moves from their residency within or outside their country for a short or longer period of time (International Organization for Migration, 2019). For the purpose of this study, the inclusivist approach that includes in the category of migrants all types of movements and thus also those people who are forced to migrate to seek asylum will be adopted. This paper, in fact, focuses primarily on three specific categories of international migrants, namely asylum seekers, refugees, and beneficiaries of complementary forms of protection.

The term asylum seeker applies to any person who moves away from their country to seek international protection and to whom asylum has not been granted yet or whose asylum application has not been rejected yet by the country in which asylum was claimed (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020). Once protection is granted, successful asylum applicants receive the status of refugee or are recognized as beneficiaries of complementary protection. More specifically, a refugee is a person who fears persecution in their country of origin or, if stateless, in that of usual residence, because of their race, nationality, religion, political opinion or affiliation to a particular group, and in light of that well-founded concern, they are unable or reluctant to seek protection from their country and find themselves outside its borders (Convention Relating to the

Status of Refugees, 1950). Particularly relevant for asylum seekers reaching Member States of the European Union (EU) is the subsidiary protection, a complementary form of international protection that can be granted in case the requirements set by the Geneva Convention for the acquisition of the refugee status are not fulfilled, but nevertheless the person has a well-founded fear of suffering serious harm in their country of nationality or habitual residence in the form of risk of death sentence or its execution, torture or any other form of inhumane and demeaning treatment, as well as serious individual threat to life in case of indiscriminate violence during an armed conflict - even if the actual risk emerged after the flight - and therefore are unable or, for the mentioned reasons, unwilling to seek protection from their country (Council Directive 2004/83/EC, 2004).

The increase in the number of people claiming asylum is a phenomenon with which European countries have been dealing with in the past few years. According to Eurostat, between 2014 and 2015 the number of asylum applicants in the EU doubled reaching a total of 1,322,645 asylum applications in 2015. Data shows that in the following years the figure of people claiming asylum in the EU remained higher than in the years prior the migration crisis of 2015 and from that year to 2019 around 30% of asylum seekers were minors, most of which migrated together with their family (Eurostat, 2021). Since this is not always the case, it is important at this point to further distinguish between two specific categories of migrant children. Children who have been separated from their parents or primary caregiver appointed by law or customs along the journey are defined as unaccompanied children or minors, whereas if migrating together with other adult relatives, they are considered separated children (Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 6, Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, 2005). Children who migrate do so for different reasons including family reunification, survival, safety, as victims of trafficking, or in search of better opportunities, but since a distinction between forced and voluntary migration is often unfeasible due to the combination of more reasons behind the decision to leave the country of origin, the expression “children on the move” has been widely used to refer to all categories to which children may belong (Bhabha & Abel, 2020). Children on the move are more vulnerable and exposed to violence, trafficking, exploitation, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse than adults. Many migrant children face human rights violations and dangers at all stages of their migration journey among which risks to injury and death when trying to cross borders and enter the EU to seek international protection and better life prospects; they also witness the use of more and more violent, intimidating pushbacks along the route, and when in the destination or transit country, they sometimes experience poor detention and reception conditions and live in non-age-appropriate accommodation facilities where they are not effectively

protected while waiting for long asylum procedures and where their needs are not fully met (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). All this, together with the oftentimes traumatic separation from their families, lack of adequate educational opportunities in refugee camps, and unmet mental health needs, has an impact on children's well-being (Bhabha & Abel, 2020), and shows a side of international migration, that which is irregular, therefore unsafe, and potentially exploitative, and which entails life-threatening routes, dangers, and exposure to all types of violence and abuse along the way.

Given the focus of this research paper on the integration process that requires the intention of settling in a country and given the variety of situations and the interrelation of reasons behind migration that characterizes international child migration and that makes it difficult to categorize a child on the move into one single category, the starting point for this research will be asylum, either granted or sought. In an attempt to investigate the integration process from the social workers' perspective, this study will focus on migrant children only, who for this purpose mean any person below the age of eighteen - as children are defined under Art. 1 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) - who is outside their country of residence, either with their caregiver or unaccompanied, seeking or having already been granted a form of international or complementary protection, and who will be further referred to as refugee and asylum-seeking children as well.

2. SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH MIGRANTS

Social work is internationally defined as a practice-based profession whose core mandate is to promote social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (IFSW, 2014). By engaging people and structures and adhering to the fundamental principles of human rights, social justice, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities, the objective of social work is to address people's life challenges and enhance their wellbeing (*Ibidem*), as well as to work with people in a non-discriminative way to establish mutually acceptable interactions among members of the society (Baláž & Čemová, 2019). With regard to asylum seekers and refugees, the IFSW Human Rights Commission, by observing International Migrants Day in 2019, stressed the social workers' commitment to reduce the suffering of those who are persecuted in their countries (IFWS, 2019). Despite the relevant work that social workers do in serving refugees and asylum seekers, relatively little has been written on social work practice with this specific category of people (Denov & C. Shevell, 2019). On that note, this chapter seeks

to provide an overview of social work practice with refugees and asylum seekers, and it starts by discussing implications and challenges for social workers, which can be grouped into cultural differences, language, racism, lack of adequate resources, and work-related stress. Next, it explores approaches and best practices that have been recently identified in the literature, and it concludes by focusing and highlighting aspects of social work with refugee and asylum-seeking children.

2.1. Implications for social workers

Social work practice with migrants seeking or having been granted international protection includes a range of activities aimed at finding lasting solutions to their situation and supporting them in their adaptation and inclusion in the receiving society. In a study conducted by Zakova and colleagues (2015), social workers in Slovakia viewed at social counselling and social assistance in different areas of everyday life as essential part of their work with international protection holders and stressed that the provision of these services should aim at strengthening the independence of their clients and avoid the vicious circle of dependency. But what are the implications and challenges that social workers face in their work with refugees and asylum seekers?

Refugees and asylum seekers in Europe mostly come from geographically and culturally distant countries. In 2019, asylum seekers in the EU mostly came from Syria (11.9%), Afghanistan (8.6%), Venezuela (7.1%), Colombia (5%), Iraq (4.3%), and Pakistan (3.9%), with the largest groups granted some sort of protection being Syrians, Afghani, and Venezuelans (European Commission, 2019). Given the significant cultural differences between social work service providers and service users and the diversity and heterogeneity of both experiences and needs of refugees and asylum seekers, social work practice must be based on the foundation of cultural competence (Denov & C. Shevell, 2019), defined as the ability to respond effectively to individuals from different cultures, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors, in a respectful manner and in a way that acknowledges, affirms, and values their inner worth and dignity (National Association of Social Workers, 2015). Culturally competent social workers share a set of attitudes and behaviors that enables them to work effectively in cross-cultural settings (*Ibidem*). Among these, particular relevant is cross-cultural knowledge, which is the possession and continue development of knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of different cultural groups, combined with cross-cultural skills that allow to implement this know-how and to acknowledge the importance of culture and cultural differences in practice (*ibidem*) and that include the expertise in different theories, especially those pertaining to ethnicity, an understanding

of the influences coming from several forces and levels within the environment, as well as the acknowledgement that generic social work practice is itself culture bound as it was developed in the specific cultural context of the Western society (Potocky & Naseh, 2019).

Social workers' multicultural perspective and competence affect their level of understanding of their clients' point of view, opinions, limits, and strengths, and so the effectiveness of their intervention strategies (George, 2012). Refugee and asylum-seekers, for example, in most of the cases have a conception of childhood and family that differs from the Western one (Denov & C. Shevell, 2019; Sanfelici et al., 2020).

Social workers must also possess the so called cultural humility, which refers to attitudes and practices towards the service users based on self-awareness, intended here as the awareness of their own ethnic background that allows to be more flexible and open towards members of other ethnic groups and to avoid judgmental attitudes, as well as of their own set of beliefs, negative attitudes, and biases, together with self-evaluation and self-critique, all resulting in a humble attitude characterized by the willingness to continuously learn (Potocky & Naseh, 2019). In light of this, it is fundamental that social workers establish a collaborative alliance with service users in which their understanding of key concepts such as "well-being", "illness", "coping", and so forth, are discerned and understood as socially constructed and thus having a potentially different meaning and implications from one individual to another (Denov & C. Shevell, 2019).

Beyond cultural differences, another challenge is represented by language barriers. In a study conducted by Zakova et al. (2015), social workers expressed their concern for the effectiveness of their work with migrants as not having a language in common oftentimes led to misunderstandings and a general inability to communicate properly. When such problems are encountered, social workers must dedicate more time to overcome linguistic barriers or request the presence of an interpreter to facilitate the communication (Potocky & Naseh, 2019).

Looking beyond the encounter between service provider and service user and focusing on the general society and on the impact that this has on the work of social workers serving refugees and asylum seekers, it is important to mention that cultural clashes may take place not only between service providers and service users but in the wider society as well, which is something social workers must be aware of. In hosting communities more and more characterized by growing racism and xenophobia, apart from locating skills, capacities and desires of migrants, social workers are required to regard at their practice from a critical perspective and adopt an anti-racist approach (Zaviršek, 2017). In the context of discriminatory and excluding global discourses on refugees, social workers' responsibility is to work towards changes in such attitudes and be part of the change (Briskman & Latham, 2017). The duty that comes from adherence to the code of

ethics of the profession and the principles of human rights, human dignity, and social justice, consists in challenging harmful policies and practices (*Ibidem*) that basically exclude this population from a fair participation in the society and prevent their potential to be fulfilled, and that are mainly the result of negative narratives based on prejudices and stereotypes. Also, social workers' values and ethical principles themselves are affected by the political and prescriptive context in which they operate and that consists in the laws, policies, and actual opportunities of integration for migrants, as well as in the nature of the narrative associated with them (Jani & Reisch, 2018; Boccagni & Righard, 2015). When the narrative is mostly negative, social workers must employ anti-oppressive practices in their everyday work with migrants (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita, 2011), about which more will be discussed in the next section of the chapter. In Tarsia's (2020) study carried out within the Italian reception system, social workers reported their role in constructing the collective imagery around forced migrants and in building support networks for refugees and asylum seekers while facing prejudice in the society and stressed the difficulty of having to balance between their advocacy function and their role in the governmental reception system.

In providing support and enhancing the well-being and development of large groups of asylum seekers and refugees, social workers often face a mismatch between what the profession and the ethics require them to do and what can actually be implemented (Zaviršek, 2017). Negi and colleagues (2019) identified the lack of resources as a source of frustration among social care providers working with migrants who consequently feel unable to comprehensively meet their clients' needs. The condition of scarcity in which they work affect the quality of services provided to migrants, allowing only limited resources to be mobilized, and it represents a major cause of work-related stress. Frustration also arises from having to navigate complex bureaucratic systems to obtain necessary services and resources for their clients, as well as from the lack of coordination among different actors involved, continuously changing processes, and unclear communication among multiple agencies and service providers (Negi et al., 2019). Additionally, in a recent scoping review (Wirth et al., 2019), evidence on the working conditions of social workers involved with refugees indicate as common job demands and sources of stress heavy workloads, the perception of their clients' suffering, and little success in ameliorating their situation, as well as maintaining boundaries which can be seen at the same time as a way to cope with such demands. Despite the copying strategies employed by social workers, including assigning meaning to work and seeking social support, the prevalence of burnout and other mental health issues among social workers serving refugees is high (*Ibidem*). Training, supervision, good work organization, and effective time management may reduce work-related stress according to social workers themselves

(Mette et al., 2020). Moreover, additional stress factors identified by social workers working with refugees include cultural and language barriers - previously identified as challenges -, negative stance of the general society towards their job and the people they serve, the increasing size of their target group, high emotional involvement, lack of staff, and overtime work, all of which result in a sense of fatigue and stress, and in the long-term in sleep deprivation, depression, and burnout as well (Wirth et al., 2019).

2.2. Social work approaches and best practices with refugees and asylum seekers

Social workers are the professionals who oftentimes coordinate and initiate support services provided to refugees to meet their extensive and interrelated needs, and for that, they tend to work in multidisciplinary teams and in cooperation with other relevant stakeholders (George, 2012).

Social workers working with refugees and asylum seekers serve a particular vulnerable target group. The vulnerability lies in general in their precarious living conditions and in the risk of exploitation by human traffickers, child exploiters, and criminals (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita, 2011), and in particular in their condition of forced migrants and the stressors associated with it such as difficulties in finding employment, precarious status, communication problems, racism, risk of seclusion, and cultural shock, among others. And so, for these reasons, social workers must adopt an holist approach that takes into consideration the particular circumstances of this category of migrants and recognize their complex situation while at the same time considering them unique individuals (Robinson & Masocha, 2017) with unique needs but also strengths to draw from.

When working with refugee population and ethnic minority groups, two useful approaches potentially influencing other forms of social work are the anti-oppressive and multicultural sensitivity approach (Payne, 2021). The anti-oppressive approach to practice seeks to combat the oppressive outcomes of discrimination, such as the exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers from equal participation in the society, and it distinguishes from the anti-discriminatory practice in that it does not aim at preventing and opposing discrimination in the first place but at dealing with its result –oppression itself - through social change (*Ibidem*). Anti-oppressive practice combines helping individuals with changing the society and its structures and aims at eradicating oppression and thus achieving social equality and justice for oppressed groups, while on the other hand, multicultural sensitivity approach includes concepts of cultural competence and cultural diversity and promotes valuing diversities in societies and better relationships between different social groups. Instead of looking at ways in which structural change can be achieved, this perspective seeks to find ways to deal effectively with conflicts in social relationships (*Ibidem*).

Social workers' role of advocates is quite acknowledged in their work with refugees and asylum seekers (Baláž & Čemová, 2019, Sanfelici et al., 2020). Social workers in fact are involved in advocating for the rights of this population and promote national policies and practices that can fulfill its needs (Al-Makhamreh et al., 2012).

Empowerment is another important aspect of social work with refugees and asylum seekers. It involves strategies to enable the service user to feel competent and valuable, strengthen their personal self-image, assume personal responsibility, and take action for change (Potocky & Naseh, 2019), and in practice it can be seen in the use of intervention negotiation (George, 2012) and in the recognition of the fundamental role of the client, who is the expert of his or her own life, in the process (Potocky & Naseh, 2019).

Relevant to social workers working with asylum seekers and refugees is also the concept of resilience. Connected to the client's empowerment, the goal of social work practice with migrants is indeed the development of self-reliance and resilience. To promote their well-being, social workers are expected to identify and strengthen resilience factors that might be inside the individual or in the environment, and in doing so, to reduce the impact of the traumatizing experiences that they may have lived in their countries or en route (Robinson & Masocha, 2017), such as war, genocide, violence, torture, rape, grief, displacement, and other traumatic events that may continue to impact their lives in the aftermath of the displacement. Nevertheless, George (2009, as cited in George, 2012), argues that most of the mainstream interventions focus on identifying and addressing problems and issues rather than looking at the same time at the strengths of refugees, including those resulted from and used in overcoming traumatic events pre-migration as well as in dealing with difficulties associated with settling in the new country. Refugees, in fact, consider the process of adaptation to the society of the host country as challenging as or even more difficult than the hardships and adversities faced during their forced migratory journey (Marlowe & Adamson, 2011).

However, traumatizing experiences that took place before the journey and social and psychological aspects associated with postmigration must be taken into careful consideration when planning interventions with refugees (Lacroix & Sabbah, 2011). To ensure that the services and interventions delivered to promote refugees' and asylum seekers' integration are of quality and effective, social workers must have a deep understanding of both the experiences their clients have been through and the way these interact with their new environment, and they also must ensure that migrants' voices are heard and taken into consideration as the starting point (George, 2012).

When refugees experience post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or anxiety deriving from the events that led to the displacement, the migration journey itself, and other stress factors

encountered in the postmigration phase such as hostility, seclusion, poverty and cultural shock, professionals have over time employed different types of psychosocial interventions among which narrative exposure therapy (NET) has proven to have the most positive outcome on adult traumatized refugees from different backgrounds (Tribe et al., 2019). In a recent systematic review of psychosocial interventions for adult asylum seekers and refugees (Tribe et al., 2019), apart from NET, other types of interventions identified were eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, culturally sensitive CBT, standard CBT, trauma-focused CBT, and multidisciplinary interventions combining assistance for social needs, psychotherapy, counselling, physiotherapy, and pharmacotherapy.

From another perspective, Denov and C. Shevell (2019) affirm that traditional forms of psychosocial support for refugees dominated by the Western view of individualistic, trauma-focused, and sometimes even pathologizing approach to practice, risk to overemphasize trauma, oversee important cultural aspects, and be ineffective when working with individuals who have a different conception of what trauma is and how to handle it. An example of effort to go beyond a purely trauma-focused approach is represented by Allan's (2015) psychosocial/structural model of practice for counseling with refugees which, by combining the trauma/recovery model and the social model of healing, recognizes the interrelation between the refugees' well-being and emotions and the structural inequalities, and indicates how societal conditions, and in particular structural power relations and structural inequalities, may negatively affect the psychological wellbeing of refugees.

Within the counseling approach, George (2012) proposes a group-based intervention strategy built on cultural competence, spirituality, and strengths-based practice as an effective way of supporting refugees in a way that goes beyond the one-to-one counseling strategy. Group counseling can contribute to establishing support networks and decreasing the feeling of isolation and loneliness in the new community (Asner-Seif & Feyissa, 2002, as cited in George, 2012).

Focusing now on conflict-affected children and youth, common elements of psychosocial interventions identified by Brown and colleagues (2017) are access promotion, psychoeducation for both children and parents, insight building, relationship building techniques, cognitive strategies, narratives techniques, exposure, and relapse prevention. For children having faced adversity, as refugee and asylum-seeking children may have, prompt access to effective interventions contribute to improving their mental health status, well-being, and full participation in the society (*Ibidem*). Social workers play a central role in the development and delivery of services, especially those targeted at unaccompanied and separated migrant children (Seidel & James, 2019). In working with this group of children, in providing support for the development of

their skills and potential, and in helping them create social networks to deal with issues related to their migration and integration, social workers are asked to both adapt existing services and elaborate new psychosocial interventions (*Ibidem*). Social workers who work in transit accommodation and long-term residential care settings for unaccompanied and separated migrant children are responsible for their daily care, and through a set of interventions they aim at providing the child with the structure needed to create a sense of security and attachment in their new environment (*Ibidem*). Social workers are also involved in early child protection interventions in the form of interviews within a multidisciplinary team that take place as soon as the unaccompanied minor enters the country and in integrated interventions with staff of the reception centers and local institutions with the goal of defining personalized projects and integration programs (Sanfelici et al., 2020). Apart from their needs, assessment should include the children's strengths and capacities and take into consideration the definition of child in their community of origin (George, 2012), as well as their family system and social networks (Seidel & James, 2019). Moreover, avoiding generalization, taking into account the high diversity of this group, and establishing professional relationships are a prerequisite for children's engagement and assessment and they allow to better locate individual agency and vulnerabilities (Sanfelici et al., 2020). Jani and Reisch (2018) affirm that social workers, in addressing the needs of unaccompanied and separated migrant children, are nowadays more concerned about their psychosocial issues than their material needs, even though research shows that the provision of mental health services is more effective if concrete needs are addressed first, suggesting a shift to case management approach with a focus on practical issues (Jani, 2017, as cited in Jani & Reisch, 2018).

When supporting refugee children, a family-approach can help assess the existence of protective factors in the systems around the child that can mitigate the effects of exposure to persecution and the consequent migration, as well as identify risk factors in the family and other systems they are part of (Denov & C. Shevell, 2019). Adversities experienced in both the country of origin and during the migration process impact not only the children but their entire family systems which may experience stressors hindering the adults' ability to care for and nurture their children (Betancourt et al., 2015, as cited in Denov & C. Shevell, 2019). To prevent and face such situations, social workers can make use of child-friendly space interventions in refugee settlements and reception centers. Child-friendly spaces, a safe environment for the promotion of the children's social and emotional well-being, their skills and knowledge acquisition and their protection from violence, abuse, and exploitation, have proven to be beneficial to children for their psychosocial well-being and developmental assets in the short-term, especially for girls (Metzler et al., 2019).

Another way of working with refugee children that has also being taken into consideration and researched is represented by art-based therapy. Art-based techniques are therapeutic, restorative, and empowering for refugee children (Denov & C. Shevell, 2019). In the example from Canada, refugee children participated in different psychosocial activities to support growth, healing, and adjustment to the host country with the use of photography, hope quilt, and development of narratives (Yohani, 2008). In Georgia, art therapy was used in the work with refugee children to create a space and opportunity for dialogue to help them safely explore and express their thoughts and emotions related to their experience through drawing and verbalizing (Decker et al., 2017).
Several are the approaches that social workers can use in practice to work with refugees and asylum seekers. According to Baláž and Čemová (2019), forms of social work interventions such as counseling, therapeutic, and activist interventions can all be implemented to deal with the multiple issues experienced by migrants in their environment, including the problematic interactions between these and their social environment, and to contribute to their integration in the new society.

3. INTO THE CONCEPT OF INTEGRATION

Integration is a multifaceted concept that can be assigned several meanings and it is individually and contextually understood in different ways (Robinson, 1998, as cited in Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020), thus no general accepted definition of what integration means can be found in the literature, but instead, multiple different understandings for a single phenomenon whose relevance has been widely acknowledged. Despite the lack of agreement, in fact, integration of migrants has always been high on the agenda of the International Community and single countries' governments, especially in the aftermath of the migration crisis with which Europe had to cope back in 2015.
At international level, the full integration of migrants is believed to promote cohesive societies and it can be realized through their empowerment, by encouraging them to become active members of the society, and through the promotion of positive engagement from the community's side as well (UN General Assembly, 2018a). With regard to refugees, local integration is considered a solution to their situation as opposed to voluntary repatriation, and it is seen as a process requiring efforts by all parties involved, that is the refugees having to be prepared to adapt to their new society on the one hand, and the host communities and institutions having to be ready to welcome refugees and meet their needs on the other hand (UN General Assembly, 2018b). This bidirectional feature is also stressed by the EU and its definition of integration as a two-way process in which

both migrants and locals must accommodate each other and which is believed to benefit the countries' economies and their social cohesion, and to promote a sense of security and cultural diversity at the society level (Council of the European Union, 2004).

At national level, several are the areas connected to the integration issue, with integration policies ranging from the field of labor, education, family, and culture (Pasetti, 2019), indicating once again the complexity and multidimensionality of this phenomenon. The Migrant Integration Policy Index 2020, for instance, measures policies to integrate migrants in eight areas of labor market mobility, family reunification, education, political participation, permanent residence, access to nationality, anti-discrimination, and health, through 58 indicators. Key dimensions underlying a country's integration policy and determining a country's approach to integration are basic rights, equal opportunities, and secure future. A comprehensive approach that promotes a successful integration is characterized by enjoyment of comparable rights and opportunities as nationals and a sense of security about long-term settlement prospects and the future in general (Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2020). Yet, remarkable differences in terms of approaches to integration policies can be found in Europe, especially between old EU Member States on one side and those who have more recently joined the EU and the Western Balkan countries on the other one (Lukić & Tomašević, 2020).

At a more individual level, for many refugees and community members, integration means more than absence of conflict between cultural groups, and involves positive interrelations and, at a higher level, a sense of belonging (Ager & Strang, 2008). Besides that, its definition remains highly individualized and contextual. More recently, the economic crisis, increasing levels of poverty and negative biases against migrants in receiving countries have worsened the life conditions of many refugees and asylum seekers and at present this represents an obstacle to their successful integration and a challenge for social workers who are determinant for the success of migrant's inclusion (Viola et al., 2018).

After highlighting the relevance and complexity of migrants' integration, the next session will move to the policy frameworks of integration to look at how countries understand this process. Then, two opposite yet complementary conceptual approaches to integration found in the literature will be analyzed and implications for social work practitioners will be suggested. At last, recent research findings on the integration of migrant children in their host societies will be discussed to see what challenges and needs have emerged from the literature.

3.1. Multidimensionality of integration at policy level

At EU level, integration is seen as a process that takes place at individual, family, community, and State level, affects several aspects of a person's life, and requires a diverse but coordinated response form the EU Institutions, Member States, regional and local authorities, social partners, and civil society organizations (Council of the European Union, 2004). By the EU, integration is understood as a dynamic, two-way process for which the respect for the values of the EU, employment, education, and a knowledge base of the country's language, history and institutions are crucial, and which can be supported by equal, non-discriminatory access to institutions, goods, and services, regular encounters between migrants and the larger society, and the migrants' active participation in the democratic life of the country as well as in the formulation process of policies and measures that directly affect them (EU Commission, 2010). Although defined as a bidirectional process involving a "mutual accommodation", when looking at the common basic principles for integration in the EU reaffirmed in 2014, most demands and much of the responsibility for the success of the integration process are placed on the migrants, leaving to the receiving society the responsibility for creating the opportunities for social interactions and the favorable conditions in which migrants can adapt to the greater part of the society and thrived economically and socially.

The EU Commission and OECD (2018) further define integration as "*the ability of immigrants to achieve the same social and economic outcomes as natives taking into account their characteristics*", using a comparative approach in which integration is measured as a gap between migrants' and nationals' outcome in the labor market, educational, social, and civic engagement field, and suggesting once more an understanding of integration as the attainment of national standards.

With the current use of the so called Zaragoza indicators, a set of indicators in the priority areas of employment, education, social inclusion, and active citizenship, it is possible to see which areas are considered fundamental to evaluate in order to monitor the integration process. The sphere of employment and labor market integration is once more at the top of the priority list, together with education which is seen as a necessary component for migrants to successfully become active members of the society (Declaration of the European Ministerial Conference on Integration, 2010). Among this set of indicators, the share of overqualified workers, self-employment, language skills, experiences of discrimination, trust in public institutions, voter turnout among population entitled to vote, and sense of belonging are the indicators that the majority of EU countries consider most relevant to track (*Ibidem*).

With the large-scale influx of migrants starting from 2015, the EU Institutions' call for full participation and early integration of all non-EU citizens, including refugees, requested countries

to fulfill their immediate needs and integrate them into the labor market and the society (EU Commission, 2016). In this framework, integration is more than participating in the labor market and learning the language of the country. It is about participating actively in the community's life, establishing meaningful relationships and contacts, and contributing to the social, cultural, and political life of the host country for the better good of the entire society, and for which a welcoming and inclusive attitude from the receiving society is needed (*Ibidem*). The Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals launched in 2016 encourages the development of measures to promote migrants' successful integration in the host society that range from the field of education, training, employment, basic services such as housing and health services, to the participation, social inclusion, and fight against discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and hate speech in an attempt to promote a more positive approach to diversity. In addition to this, it highlights the role of intercultural and interreligious dialogue on one side and the respect of human rights and European values on the other for the success of integration, and stresses for the first time the importance of pre-departure and pre-arrival measures which are particularly relevant when it comes to the relocation and resettlement of refugees across the EU and their integration prospects.

3.2. Belonging to two cultures: integration fostering adaptation

When migrants arrive in the new homeland, contacts between their culture and that of the larger society result in cultural and psychological changes known as acculturation process, a process that involves adaptation for both cultural groups that come to be in ongoing direct contact (Sam & Berry, 2010). Resulting cultural changes for the members of these groups should be understood not only in terms of practices but also in terms of values and identifications that together constitute one's cultural identity (Schwartz et al., 2010). Individuals acculturate in different ways and, as a result, they adapt differently according to the strategy they choose to relate to the receiving society and to their cultural background. Acculturation strategies, in fact, are based on the degree of maintenance of heritage culture and identity on one side, and degree of contact sought with the new culture on the other side: the extent to which one is eager to maintain their cultural heritage and at the same time to engage with the larger society determines the acculturation strategy that will be adopted (Sam & Berry, 2010). Among four possible strategies identified by Berry (2001), namely integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization, integration is chosen by those who are willing to maintain links to their culture of origin and to seek interactions with the larger

society as active participants, and so those individuals who identify with and feel comfortable in both cultures.

From a social work perspective, integration is the desired outcome because, unlike separation and marginalization, this does not presuppose any harm to the individual but rather allows them to engage with the new culture while preserving their own heritage culture, whereas assimilation can be considered oppressive since it implies that the individual gives up their culture of origin to assimilate to the dominant one (Potocky & Naseh, 2019). In this sense, social workers should therefore include in their practice strategies that foster the integration of migrants, since, by engaging with both cultures, they adapt better from a psychological and social point of view than if they engaged with only one or no cultural group (Berry & Hou, 2016). In a study conducted by Berry & Hou (2016), integration resulted to be the overall most preferred acculturation strategy employed by migrants and was associated with a higher level of both life satisfaction and self-rated mental health, thus a greater well-being if compared to other strategies. In general, the effects of acculturation on the well-being were larger than those of other social and demographic factors oftentimes considered predictors of well-being (*Ibidem*).

Having determined the relevance of acculturation strategy for the well-being of migrants and moving on to children, while integration appears to be the preferred strategy (Berry et al., 2006), assimilation is not excluded as a choice by many underage migrants (Berry & Hou, 2016). Migrant children of a very young age, in fact, tend to identify with the culture of the receiving society more easily than individuals who migrated as adolescents and adults (Schwartz et al., 2010), which explains their preference for integration and assimilation as acculturation strategies at this age.

Focusing on integration, children who choose it as preferred acculturation path share a dual cultural identity, have high to average language proficiency in both their language of origin and that of the host country, which they use in a balanced way, have peer contacts with both groups, and share values in respect to family relations that belong to both cultural systems (Berry et al., 2006). Moreover, their preference for integration increases over time spent in the new country and is associated with ethically mixed communities and a lower level of perceived discrimination (*Ibidem*). For unaccompanied migrant children who do not benefit from the direct support of their family, to settle in a non-diverse community where their ethnic group is not represented might therefore result in the pursue of the assimilation path over integration. Similarly to adults, the study conducted by Berry and colleagues (2006) shows that integration, unlike assimilation, influences positively both the sociocultural and psychological adaptation of adolescent migrants: life satisfaction, self-esteem, school performance, and social competence in general are higher in those who choose integration, and at the same time, migrant children who follow this path show fewer

psychological and behavior problems, meaning that a combined involvement in both cultures promotes a positive adaptation and has better outcome on their well-being than an involvement in one culture only.

Given the considerations made so far, integration – and thus the establishment of ties with the society while maintaining bonds with the heritage culture and ethnic group – should be encouraged as preferable acculturation strategy by young migrants and preferred over assimilation, as the combination of cultural maintenance and involvement with the receiving society boost both their psychological and sociocultural well-being (Smith et al., 2020).

In this perspective, the acculturation outcome at individual level is seen as the result of choices made by migrants and migrants only. However, social workers involved in promoting the integration of migrant children should be aware that demographic and contextual factors such as the degree of cultural similarity, characteristics of both the child, their ethnic group, and their country of origin, the resources available, the country in which they settle, and the host community itself can influence the child's choice and affect their acculturation process, while other factors such as proficiency in the local language, age of migration, trauma, and experiences prior and during migration can also pose some challenges to the process (Schwartz et al., 2010).

If integration is considered the outcome of one's choice of engaging with both cultural groups, social workers should consider that its success, however, is particularly influenced by the attitudes of the larger society and its members' expectations towards the acculturation of migrants (Sam & Berry, 2010). A person can be willing to engage but the extent to which this will be possible and the degree to which they will feel a sense of belonging to the hosting society can be deemed by negative attitudes and behaviors from the community's side. Social workers seeking to promote integration should therefore be aware that it is not enough to look at the single individual, but it is necessary to consider them in their environment and in the context of the whole society as well.

Among societal factors that influence migrant sense of belonging, and thus their integration prospects, discrimination should be specifically taken into consideration and addressed. In a society characterized by discrimination, migrants will likely choose other acculturation strategies over integration (Berry & Hou, 2016), thus, the need for interventions at the level of the society. If on one hand social workers should encourage migrant children to engage with both cultures, they should also work with the larger society to establish the circumstances for positive contacts and relationships to take place. When migrant children experience discrimination, they tend to turn to their heritage culture and refuse to be closely involved with the society, with negative consequences in terms of sociocultural adaptation (Berry et al., 2006). Along with perceived

discrimination, also the perception of unfavorable context of reception can lead to the same choice (Schwartz et al., 2010).

From this perspective, integration that involves the conservation of one's own culture and at the same time intergroup relations is possible in societies in which multiculturalism, hospitality and inclusion are fostered, in societies that are open towards cultural diversity recognizing all members' right to live in a culturally different way, and that are willing to adapt their institutions to meet the needs of all (Berry, 2001). Multiculturalism is the necessary framework that should be sought at the level of the society in order to allow positive interactions and adaptation among different cultural groups in a context of mutual acceptance, and for that, social cohesion and a non-discriminative environment are needed (Berry & Hou, 2016). If members of a community are in continuous evolution constantly negotiating and renegotiating identities and relationships through everyday experience (Cherti & McNeil, 2012, as cited in Drolet & Moorthi, 2018), and if changes in the relationships between migrants and receiving societies along structural, social, and personal dimensions take place during integration (Penninx & Garces-Mascarenas, 2016, as cited in Kappa, 2019), this relational and interactional dimension of integration suggests to consider the general society to the same extent as migrants when working towards their integration.

In conclusion, the choice of migrant children to engage with their heritage culture and with the culture of the receiving society has proven to be beneficial to their well-being to a greater extent than a partial cultural engagement or no engagement at all. Social workers who work with migrant children should therefore encourage involvement in the society and relations to the child's culture of origin to the greatest possible extent, and at the same time be aware of all possible obstacles to integration and promote through interventions at the macro level favorable societal conditions for the integration of migrant children to take place successfully.

3.3. Integration as the fulfillment of needs and rights

Moving away from a perspective of integration as a result of engagement choices and a subjective sense of belonging, a different approach to the understanding of integration covering other relevant aspects of a migrant's life in the new country and focusing on its essential components is provided by Ager and Strang (2008). The authors outline a conceptual framework within which integration is understood as the successful fulfillment of rights and needs. Between the provision of employment, housing, education, and health – considered markers of a successful integration and at the same time means to achieve it – on one hand, and rights and citizenship as its foundation on

the other hand, social connections in the form of social bonds, links and bridges and facilitators such as language and cultural knowledge, stability, and safety allow to overcome structural barriers and ease the communication and integration at local level (Ager & Strang, 2008).

All these domains are interrelated and, consequently, the integration outcome can be both facilitated and jeopardized by their interrelations (Strang & Ager, 2010). The extent to which facilitators are supported by policies that reflect the prevailing notion of citizenship and rights can in fact influence achievements across all domains or promote one or the other outcome and affect the course of the integration process and its general outcome (Yohani et al., 2019). Among the key elements of integration, when thinking about migrant children in particular, housing and education have an important sociocultural impact in that they provide learning opportunities and chances to establish continuous contacts and lasting relationships with locals in support of their integration (Ager & Strang, 2008).

What Ager and Strang (2010, 2008) add to the previously considered theoretical framework of integration is the consideration of the prevailing understanding of nationhood and citizenship in a particular society as factors affecting the integration process. The concept of nation in eastern Europe, for instance, is seen as an ethnic and cultural entity, due to the history of this region, and for this reason, the asset of a nation-state is believed to consist in its cultural and ethnic homogeneity which must be preserved and protected from any threats (Schweitzer, 2015, as cited in Miholjcic, 2019). In Central-Eastern Europe, ethnicity is the prerequisite for belonging to a nation-state, and multiculturalism that requires to welcome people of different cultures and religions is rejected and contrasted with xenophobia, conservatism, and negative narratives that direct national policies to an anti-immigrant discourse and that result in migrants' social isolation and a de facto impossible integration (Miholjcic, 2019). Also the concept of citizenship and migrants' rights that characterize the society influence integration prospects for migrants, the understanding of integration, and its practice. Appropriate policy on access to citizenship and rights is the foundation for migrants' integration, but since rights alone are not enough to ensure integration, support for access to these rights is needed (Ager & Strang, 2008). For unaccompanied and separated children who are outside their country of origin, local integration, which is envisaged when the return to their country is not possible or not in the best interest of the child, is based on a secure legal and residence status and on access to the same rights accorded to national children (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005).

The foundation domain implies once again that the concept of integration is rather subjective and can vary significantly from one society to another, making it difficult to establish a set of criteria for a general accepted definition and description of this phenomenon and its components. National

policies on migrants' integration in European countries and thus countries' understanding of integration are indeed heterogeneous, but generally they could be grouped into two main patterns that determine an Eastern and Western configuration, with the former being more restrictive in areas of employment, education, political participation, and citizenship (Pasetti, 2019).

As for Berry (2001) integration results from migrants' choices, Strang and Ager (2010) indicate that according to refugees, integration – which begins from the very first moment of arrival in the settlement country – is affected by their own intentions and ambitions and by their early experiences in the country. Apart from the relevance attributed to the migrants' willingness and effort, another analogy between the two approaches can be found in the degree of importance associated with social connections. While in Berry (2001) social connections to both ethnic culture and larger society are important markers of integration, Ager and Strang (2008) look at social connections as a domain of a much larger framework for the understanding of integration, as promoter of integration and linkers between rights accorded to migrants and their achievements in the field of employment, housing, education, and health. Moreover, in this broader framework provided by Ager and Strang (2008) that suggests a complex, unpredictable interplay of all components affecting the integration outcome, the migrants' well-being is not only the result of their integration process but also a means to achieve integration. In compliance with this perspective, in a recent study conducted by Viola and colleagues (2018), social workers working with adult migrants associated the integration process with resources allocation and fulfillment of migrants' basic needs, and even though multiculturalism was recognized as promoting migrants' integration, no intervention at the society level was envisaged.

While different, both perspectives analyzed so far reflect the significant role played by social connections in the integration process of migrants and suggest therefore a deeper engagement from the side of the professionals working with migrants at societal level, with the use of multidimensional interventions that focus simultaneously on both individual migrants and the general host society, aimed at promoting positive intergroup relations and enhancing integration prospects of newcomers.

3.4. Needs and challenges of refugee and asylum-seeking children in integration

Legislation, policies, and programs designed for refugees and asylum seekers influence the way migrant children are received in the society and affect their integration process (Sanfelici et al., 2020). Irrespective of the understanding of the concept of integration, these children face a series of challenges in their everyday life while integrating into their host country (EU Commission,

2016). The social and health problems they encounter and how they integrate in the new environment depends on a series of factors related to their pre-migration experiences, the migration process itself, and post-arrival experiences (Robila, 2018), all of which involve challenges and threats to a successful integration in the country of destination. However, it is important to note that psychosocial challenges that migrant children face involve also developmental needs that all children, and especially adolescents, have regardless of their status in the country or previous experiences (Seidel & James, 2019). When it comes to refugees' pre-migration experiences, these are mostly traumatic ones such as exposure to war, conflict, and poverty - with all their consequences on their everyday life - and the witnessing of violence in all its forms (Sanfelici et al., 2020); during the migration journey, young refugees leave behind their daily lives and loved ones with uncertainty as for the future, and along the way they might even experience abuse, trafficking, harsh living conditions, and separation from their caregivers; when in the host country, language and cultural barriers, as well as discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion make it more challenging and difficult for refugees to adapt to their new environment, and, together with the challenges pertaining living conditions, access to school, long asylum application processes, precarious status, and the everyday challenges and mental health issues experienced by their parents (Gervais et al., 2021; Measham et al., 2014), these can represent serious obstacles to a successful integration of migrant children in their host country. Challenges and needs arisen from the literature on the settlement and integration of young refugees encompass a variety of factors that will be discussed below in separated sections.

3.4.1. Mental health

Upon arrival, young asylum seekers bring with them, besides their personality, education, social status, religion, and cultural values, the traumatic experiences they have lived in their country of origin and/or along the route (Robila, 2018). Refugee and asylum-seeking children are likely to have suffered human rights violations with threats to their safety, relationships, and identity (Betancourt et al., 2012) and consequences on their mental health and integration prospects. The experience of serious trauma can challenge one or more of the interdependent psychosocial systems of safety, attachment, identity, sense of justice and existential meaning that are meant to promote a balanced fit between individuals and their social environment (Silvoe, 2006 as cited in Yohani, 2015), whereas in the post-migratory period, acculturative stress can have a strong impact on the child's psychological adaptation, even stronger than the past traumatic experiences (Montgomery, 2008). Acculturative stress includes for instance the struggle in acquiring language and cultural knowledge of the host country while at the same time preserving the culture of origin,

distress caused by changes in parental roles and practices, family conflicts resulting from ethnical and values clashes, and the perception of a discriminative environment and non-acceptance from the community's side (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008, as cited in Gervais et al., 2021), which contribute in shaping the child's experience, limiting their resilience, and affecting their development (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018).

Most of the literature on refugee children has focused on their mental health identifying depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), psychosomatic symptoms, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors as common issues among young refugees (Oppedal et al., 2020; Satinsky et al., 2019; von Werthern et al., 2019; Yayan, 2018; Hadfield et al., 2017; Soykoek et al. 2017; Measham et al., 2014). Major risk factors for asylum seekers' mental health problems include their experience of war, violence, and persecution, their consequent flight, material losses, disruption of social networks, but also post-migration living conditions and uncertainty about the future (Steel et al., 2009 as cited in Satinsky et al., 2019). After arrival, a supportive and adequate environment and the reduction of stresses experienced in the receiving country, on the contrary, can decrease the probability of insurgence of psychological problems (Montgomery, 2008).

While poor mental health itself can be considered an obstacle to the integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children that should not be overlooked, it is beyond the scope of this paper to further develop this area. From another perspective, barriers in accessing mental health services represents an additional obstacle. Migrant children's underutilization of mental health and psychosocial support services is indeed well acknowledged (von Werthern et al., 2019; Jani, 2017 as cited in Crea et al., 2018) and it has a relevant impact on their already vulnerable condition. Among barriers to access to these services, Satinsky and colleagues (2019) identified language, reluctance to seek formal help and care for mental health issues, poor knowledge of available services, low awareness of mental health, experiences of negative attitudes by service providers, low acceptability of ethnically diverse staff, different cultural perspectives and understandings of mental problems and their causes, and stigma for which mental illness is still a taboo topic in many cultures.

3.4.2. Inclusion into education and family issues

A significant set of literature has also focused on refugee and asylum-seeking children's integration in the host countries' educational systems. School settings are important sites for refugee and asylum-seeking children's integration (Yohani, Brosinsky & Kirova, 2019), but they are not exempt from limitations, especially for refugee adolescents (Correa-Velez et al. 2017, as cited in Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). Challenges related to the educational integration are limited

proficiency in the language of the host country, with an impact not only on academic advancement but also on social and emotional adjustment, and also segregation, discriminative attitudes, barriers to enrollment, inconsistent school attendance prior migration and consequent educational delays, different cultural expectations for education increasing the risk of school dropout, limited availability of bilingual and additional educational, school-based mental health and other supportive services due to underfunding, low levels of cultural sensitivity, and inappropriate assessment of children's educational needs (Simopoulos & Alexandridis, 2019; Vidal de Haymes et al., 2018).

Beyond these two major discussed areas of concern around the topic of refugee children's settlement – psychological adaptation and educational integration –, it is important at this point to reflect on challenges pertaining other aspects of life. Refugee and asylum-seeking children's integration can in fact be impacted by secluded, unstable, or inappropriate living conditions and by their family's own difficulties in integrating (Robila, 2018). With regard to family issues, in particular, parents' challenges such as language barriers, safety concerns, lack of equitable access to services as a result of systemic barriers, social isolation and related stress result in behaviors influencing the child's development and adaptation (Yohani, Brosinsky, Kirova, 2019). Refugee children's well-being and adaptation is also indirectly impacted by their parents' mental health state (Henley & Robinson, 2011, as cited in Yohani, Brosinsky, Kirova, 2019; Measham et al., 2014), therefore, when looking at the adaptation of refugee children in their host country, children should always be considered in their context and within their family system (Measham et al., 2014).

3.4.3. Reception of unaccompanied migrant children

As it was mentioned earlier, children do not always migrate with their families. With regard to unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee minors, not enough is known from the literature about their unique needs and the challenges (Seidel & James, 2019; Crea et al., 2018). In addition to facing the same difficulties as accompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children, those who are unaccompanied must cope with loss of or separation from their families, deal with all the issues associated with the migration and settlement alone (Bates et al., 2013, as cited in von Werthern et al., 2019), and navigate through the integration process and complex systems of social service delivery without the support of their primary caregivers (Perreira & Ornelas, 2011, as cited in Crea et al., 2018), which puts them in an even more vulnerable position in respect to other groups of underage migrants.

While each child has a unique story depending on the circumstances of their country of origin and the reception contexts in which they settle, most studies revealed once again major concern around the mental health of unaccompanied migrant children (UMC), and an increasing concern also around the mismatch between their needs and services provided (Sanfelici et al., 2020; von Werthern et al., 2019; Crea et al., 2018). Unaccompanied refugee minors tend to show more depressive symptoms (Seglem, Oppedal, & Roysamb, 2014), with those in the asylum process displaying even higher levels of distress due to the uncertainty about the asylum process outcome and their future in the country (Berg & Tronstad, 2015, as cited in Oppedal et al., 2020). Despite the large need for mental health support, a significant gap exists between the mental health needs of unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children and their access to services (von Werthern et al., 2019), which calls for increased support and promotion of mental health services utilization. For their mental health well-being and positive development, moreover, the maintenance of bonds with the heritage culture and a sense of belonging is preferable (Oppedal et al., 2020).

UMC are a very diverse group in terms of culture, reasons for leaving the country, among which poverty, lack of opportunities, search for employment or education, loss of parents, experience of violence such as ethnic conflicts, wars, forced military recruitment, and persecution, and also in terms of past experiences which may include torture, rape, physical, sexual, and psychological violence, maltreatment, and human trafficking (Sanfelici et al., 2020). As a diverse group with heterogeneous experiences, individual needs must be taken into account and individualized responses organized, also when it comes to the provision of care for UMC, which can range from foster care, residential care, and small-scale independent accommodation options (Horgan & Raghallaigh, 2019). Each of these solutions encompass a variety of challenges, among which relationship building seems to cross all mentioned situations: while in foster care, children may face difficulties in establishing relationship with their foster families on one side and difficulties in maintaining peer-contacts on the other (*Ibidem*). Establishing relationships with people of the same age and from the same culture is a coping strategy that can help with the adjustment to the new environment and the maintenance of ties with the culture of origin at the same time (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). Children in residential care, on the other side, may struggle with following the rules and adjusting to shifts and changes in staff, finding it more challenging to establish close bonds with their caregivers, while those in a more independent type of accommodation might miss affection bonds, support, and stability throughout their independent living (Horgan & Raghallaigh, 2019). And so, considering individual's needs when providing care to UMC is fundamental for the child's well-being, as well as balancing between the provision of

care and protection as response to their vulnerability and the provision of opportunities to develop their resilience and autonomy (*Ibidem*).

While most of the studies on UMC have been traditionally conducted using a gender-neutral approach, a few ones focused on girls and young women only (Bjerneld et al. 2018, Brook & Ottemöller, 2020) reveling needs and peculiarities of this subgroup of UMC. For females, emotional support from their caregivers and other members of the society has arisen as something that can help them integrate better (Bjerneld et al., 2018), together with language competence which is regarded to as the most important key to integration and acceptance into the society and as means to create social networks with locals, and also close relationships with caregivers which provide a sense of security, as well as bicultural identity, skills acquisition, desire to belong to the society, and the goal of succeeding academically (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020).

The mismatch between the needs of UMC and services provided to them has implication on their social, educational, and health outcomes (Crea et al., 2018). This could be maybe overcome if UMC were first and foremost considered as children on par with local children (von Werthern et al., 2019), and if, besides practical needs, the need for their voices to be heard and taken into considerations were fulfilled too (Kauhanen & Kaukko 2020, as cited in Brook & Ottemöller, 2020).

3.4.4. Resilience

Most of the research on refugee and asylum seekers integration has focused on the challenges that they face in the host country not fully considering the resources they draw upon (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020). Instead of focusing on their vulnerability and problems, Wernesjö (2012) suggests looking at their agency and resources and so moving away from the risk of pathologizing this population. From an empowering perspective, to focus on refugees' strengths and resources rather than purely on their challenges and needs, allows to change the prevalent "at risk" discourse that tends to put refugees and asylum seekers in a powerless position and to shift the view on this population as "needy".

Contrary to expectations, most of UMC show capacities to adapt well to their new situation (Sanfelici et al., 2020) thanks to protective factors, namely strengths and resources that come from the individual and their environment and that temper the impact of risk exposure on the child and promote at the same time their resilience (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020). Sources of resilience among young refugees that should be promoted as protective factors are social support by their family, ethnic group members, peers, and service providers, close family bonds, educational achievements and positive experiences at school, religion, hope, goals and aspirations for the future, and a

concurrent engagement with the culture of origin and that of the host society (Sleijpen et al., 2016; Fazel et al., 2012). Moreover, individual challenges and barriers can be addressed and overcome by supporting the child's family resilience, cultural heritage, native language competence, and bilingualism/multilingualism (Brosinsky et al., 2018; Georgis et al., 2017 as cited in Yohani, Brosinsky, Kirova, 2019). Protective factors for the adaptation and integration of refugee children also include the attribution of meaning to their migration experience through family discourse, communication within the family that provides support and a sense of unity and that conveys a family history of immigration, the positive perception of their new life and of the place they arrived in as a safe one, their status as refugees, good relationships with parents, and meaningful relationships and social connections within the host society (Gervais et al., 2021; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018).

To conclude, research suggests that seeing refugee children as either vulnerable or resilient is over-simplistic, as many of them show both vulnerabilities and resilience at the same time (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010).

3.4.5. Service providers' perspectives

When investigating the integration process of migrant children, service providers' perspective has not sufficiently been taken into consideration, and their voices have been quite absent in the literature despite their significant involvement and fist-hand experiences (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). Among the few studies focusing on service providers' standpoint, Smith and colleagues (2020) investigated youth workers' experience in supporting refugees' integration and reported their view of integration as a process that requires not only the adjustment of newcomers but also the engagement of young people form the majority culture. Importance of peer relationships emerged as well, together with the difficulties that refugee children meet when trying to establish friendships with peers in the host society and that are considered to arise mainly from discrimination and racism issues besides linguistic barriers and trauma, and that could be tackled by creating a space to bring together young refugees and young people from the majority culture where preconceptions are challenged and attitudes are changed on the basis of mutual engagement and discovered commonalities (Smith et al., 2020).

Focusing on young refugees, Cheyne-Hazineh (2020) revealed service providers' perspective on their needs after two to three years their resettlement. Considering integration as a quite long process, service providers identified interrelated systemic challenges in the areas of education and employment and issues in the field of social engagement and mental health and wellness undermining young refugees' successful integration. Among these, linguistic barriers, literacy

gaps, segregation, limited resources, need for additional educational support within and outside the school setting involving technology, innovative tools and individualized plans and approaches, together with the need for adequate educational and career guidance for adolescents. In school settings, lack of interest and lack of initiation of social interactions were seen as negatively affecting the establishment of social connections considered beneficial to both refugees and young people from the host country. On the contrary, forms of leadership, involvement, and volunteering initiatives both at school and in the local community were considered as early signs of successful integration. Importance of formal programs to facilitate social integration, community programs, more integrated programs involving citizens, more spaces to come together, recreational and sport activities, for the mutual benefit, were also acknowledge (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020).

In Yohani and colleagues' (2019) study, cultural brokers highlighted integration challenges among refugee families with young children such as psychological distress and mental health concerns of parents threatening family bonds and children's attachments systems, safety concerns, adjustment to changing gender roles and relations, distress related to shifts of power within the family, challenges in finding new meaning in their lives, and experiences of insensitive encounters with service providers impacting their sense of belonging and feeling of security, all of which are necessary for a successful integration.

Service providers' perspectives emerging from the recent literature (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020; Smith et al., 2020; Yohani et al., 2019), reveals challenges related to cultural aspects such as the stigma towards mental health, the concept of family and the importance of family unity, cultural-based preconceptions, encounter with the culture of the host society that could result in shifts of power within the family, changing gender roles and relations and related distress, and unpleasant encounters between service providers and clients. Such culture-related challenges might be addressed by developing a higher cultural sensitivity by both sides with the final aim of promoting a successful integration (Robila, 2018).

The perspective of service providers on the integration of young migrants and their families provided by these studies shows a multifactorial, rather complex process upon which multiple aspects should be taken into consideration, and in doing so, it supports the idea of multiple ways of understanding the concept of migrants' integration. This research study, in particular, will focus on social workers' experiences with the integration process of the refugee and asylum-seeking children they work with, and for this purpose, apart from acknowledging the importance of integration and considering successful integration as promoting the psychological and sociocultural adaptation of migrant children in the form of well-being, mental health, and social competence (Berry, 2001), no definition of this complex phenomenon will be provided beforehand

to the research participants so to leave complete space for the investigation of their own point of view and understanding of this phenomenon.

A systematic and consistent support from social workers who help migrant children in meeting challenges and needs and navigating in the new community has proven to be central for their successful integration (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019). While integrating, in fact, an individual is inevitably confronted with their environment, and social work, whose role is to enhance positive interactions between individuals and their environment and mutually acceptable relationships among people (Baláž & Čemová, 2019), can play a significant role in promoting migrant children's successful integration.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Considering the unique and potentially rich insight that social workers can provide, this research study aims at contributing with an investigation of social workers' perspective on the integration of migrant children and their role in this process. In this research paper, data analysis will be built on the psychosocial theory, according to which people's behavior is affected by the causal interactions of different systems and their adaptation is based on the interplay between individuals and their environment and the equilibriums that are continuously established according to needs and resources (Turner, 2017). According to the author, since larger systems and factors such as poverty, racism, persecution, and war can be sources of stress and disrupt balances, the role of social workers consists in locating strengths and resources available in their clients' environment and in nurturing resilience. People are helped to cope with life circumstances and the final aim is the promotion of their well-being, the establishment of a better fit between the individual and their social environment and their adaptation. While looking at the client's physical and social environment, biology, cultural and spiritual beliefs, developmental history, ego functions and psychodynamics, both personality characteristics and intrapsychic dynamics as well as social factors are considered, and the focus is kept on the person-in-situation. Central to the psychosocial approach is the quality of the relationship between service providers and service users, seen as a constructive alliance that promote client's growth and self-esteem in response to trauma. Clients' reflections about their experiences and the meaning they give to the events and situations are also important. Clients are in fact seen as experts of their own life and their perceptions, mostly influenced by their culture, are to be taken into account. In psychosocial assessment and interventions, especially with immigrant clients, attention is given to trauma, cultural beliefs,

spirituality, resilience, protective factors, risk factors, resources that are accessible in multiple systems and possibilities for change, and the basis for change is considered to be the active participation of the client and their self-determination (Turner, 2017).

The psychosocial approach to social work practice with migrants allows to consider both refugees' and asylum seekers' past experiences and the effects of these on their physical and mental health, as well as present sources of distress arising from different interacting systems. By adopting this perspective, the focus is placed on the role of the relationship between social workers and their clients in promoting their integration into the society. In most cases, in fact, social workers are the only connection that migrants have in the society and a fundamental reference point for both newcomers and migrants who have been living in the country for a longer period of time.

In social work practice with refugees and asylum seekers, paying attention only to individual needs, available resources, and the quality of the relationship between the social worker and the client may not be enough. When working with individuals with fewer opportunities such as people with a refugee background who mostly enjoy comparable opportunities to citizens only on paper while in reality are excluded from equal participation in the society, the adoption of an anti-oppressive approach may be contributing. In dealing with what is first and foremost the outcome of discrimination against refugees and asylum seekers, social work with this group consists in a twofold engagement and requires working individually with clients and at the same time advocating for changes in the system. Working with the oppressed in fact demands advocating for social change too, and so combining individual support with the promotion of changes in the society to achieve social equality for the oppressed (Payne, 2020) may represent an effective strategy.

Anti-oppressive practice is a model oriented to social justice which, by embracing human diversity and drawing on antiracist and anti-discriminatory perspectives, seeks to empower and liberate people (Cocker & Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). This approach represents an alternative to mainstream social work practice, in particular casework, which, by underlining people's failings and by pathologizing the client, tends to exclude the political dimension of social problems and oversee structural deficiencies (Amadasun, 2010, as cited in Amadasun & Evbayiro Omorogiuwa, 2020). On the contrary, by recognizing that the issues people go through stem from their limitation in choices and opportunities that are conditioned by structures of power in the society, the anti-oppressive model seeks to change policies and practices that result being oppressive for some groups and to increase people's awareness, power, and control over their life (Dominelli, 2002). Overall, anti-oppressive social work practice aims at fighting marginalization and creating safe and inclusive environments for all members of the society, not least the most disadvantaged.

PART III: METHODOLOGY

The type of research that has been chosen for this study is the qualitative methodology which, by seeking to understand the behaviors, values, beliefs and experiences of the participants, allows to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon from the respondents' point of view (Rossman, & Rallis, 2017). The unstructured feature of the qualitative methodology allows to discover the deep opinions that social workers have about their own role in the integration of children with whom they work, to grasp different perspectives, and, if new themes and concepts arise during the process of data collection, it is possible for the investigation to take another direction due to the flexibility of this methodology.

The sampling technique that was first applied is convenience sampling, a type of non-probability sampling that allows the researcher to include as participants those individuals who are more accessible, available, and willing to participate in the study (Natale, 2007). This method fits the qualitative research design whose aim is not to generalize but to generate insights into a particular phenomenon (Becker, Bryman & Ferguson, 2012), in this case the perception of the integration process of underage refugees and asylum seekers from the social workers' perspective and their understanding of their role in this process. This non-random sampling technique, moreover, is less time-consuming and more cost-effective (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016) if compared with other techniques, meaning that this choice will benefit this academic research in terms of both time and cost saving. In this study, convenience sampling was combined with snowball sampling, a technique that facilitates access to potential participants by use of networks and for which only a few individuals are needed as initial participants to direct the investigator to others (Kumar, 2014). Respondents were indeed asked to refer potential participants that were then included in the sample. After defining the target population, in this case social workers with experience in working with asylum-seeking and refugee children in NGOs in Croatia and Serbia, the sample was chosen based on the criteria of accessibility and availability to take part in the research study. The sample size was not determined beforehand, but its final determination was based on the criteria of saturation of data, hence, data collection continued until enough insight was considered to be collected.

Concerning data collecting instruments, interviewing, which is a method for collecting qualitative data that allows to develop a deep understanding of the research participants' perspectives and meanings that they attribute to events and experiences in their life (Becker, Bryman & Ferguson, 2012), was used. In the context of this research, interviewing is the best way to investigate social workers' perspective of their own role in the integration process of young refugees and asylum

seekers because through semi-structured interviews it is possible to look at the way they make sense of their everyday practice and how they perceive their status, and to see how they understand the integration of their clients in the society and what meaning they assign to it. By adopting this data collecting technique it was expected that relevant themes would arise throughout the process and that in-depth data would be collected for further analysis. The instrument used to collect data is an interview guide consisting of five questions to which more were added during the process:

1. What does integration mean to you?
2. How can refugee and asylum-seeking children integrate in the society?
3. What are the challenges to their integration?
4. In what ways do the services you provide to refugee and asylum-seeking children impact their integration?
5. How does this picture reflect your experience and role in relation to the integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children you work with?

A total of six semi-structured interviews were carried out for a total of 280 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded with written permission and then transcribed. Moreover, for the aim of investigating social workers' experiences, the narrative method through the use photographs inspired by the photovoice methodology was applied too. Pictures tend to evoke feelings and facilitate the storytelling. The use of visual images was meant to help dig deeper in the social workers' perceptions of their role. Pictures, in fact, can be used to communicate experiences and perceptions and their oral interpretation and narration facilitate the expression of people's voices and feelings (Bromfield & Capous-Desyllas, 2017).

As far as data analysis is concerned, collected data were thematically analyzed through a manual coding process. Thematic analysis segments, groups into categories, and reconstructs qualitative data so that relevant concepts and themes are extracted, and patterns of experience are identified (Given, 2008). By relying on this method, it was intended to identify shared experiences and meanings regarding different aspects of the research topic so that the phenomenon is investigated in all its facets. The thematic analysis process involved three stages (Miles & Huberman 1994, as cited in Alhojailan, 2012), namely data reduction, data display and data conclusion or data drawing. Data were segmented into codes and identified codes were then organized and grouped under categories and themes. These were partially pre-established and guided by the open-ended questions that structured the interviews but were also organized inductively, as new topics emerged throughout the interview conduction.

With regard to the concept of validity, the use of respondent validation, which is a method of validation that suggests submitting important materials for the research to their source for checking

(Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004), consisted in handing in interview transcripts to the interviewees to read and confirm the content, so to eventually ensure the validity of the investigation.

Ethical issues related to this research concern the areas of informed consent and voluntary participation, right to privacy and confidentiality, and respect for gender differences. To obtain informed consent, the study participants were given beforehand all information that could potentially affect their availability to take part in the study, and, based on that, they were able to make a deliberate decision to participate (Alasuutari, Bickman, & Brannen, 2008). Nevertheless, the use of semi-structured interviews in this study and their open-ended, scoping essence question if truly informed consent can be gained before conducting the interviews when the researcher is not completely aware of the nature of information that will be provided by the research participants, making it overall difficult to secure fully informed consent at such stage (Haverkamp, 2005, as cited in Alasuutari, Bickman, & Brannen, 2008). As far as confidentiality is concerned, it was made clear to the research participants through the informed consent form how this would be ensured throughout the research. Moreover, in case unexpected, confidential information that may represent a risk to privacy and confidentiality and that is not considered relevant to the research arises during the interview, it is made sure that the conversation is redirected, but if, on the other hand, the unanticipated personal information is believed to be pertinent to the research questions, a re-consent has to be negotiated and obtained (Alasuutari, Bickman, & Brannen, 2008). Finally, in order to respect gender differences and to avoid gender discrimination, attention was paid to include a non-sexist language and to not discriminate against women or men in any stage of the research (Dench, Iphofen, & Huws, 2004).

While this study provides a deeper understanding of the social workers' role in the integration of migrant children, it is not exempt from challenges. First, this research is limited to the voices of social workers in the non-governmental sector, not including the perspectives of social workers employed at different levels. Another issue is the geographical limitation of this study whose focus is only on two countries. Although this choice allows for a comparison of two countries with a similar migration situation, more European countries should be included in future studies to expand the investigation and collect more extensive and varied data which could provide a clearer picture. Moreover, the sampling techniques based on proximity, availability, and networks, whose choice was justified by the limited presence of social workers working with migrant children in non-governmental organizations, may have excluded from the participation those social workers with the best experience and knowledge.

PART III: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS OF MIGRANT CHILDREN IN CROATIA AND SERBIA

Participants of this study are professional social workers working with refugee and asylum-seeking children for non-governmental organizations in Croatia and Serbia. The interrelated domains emerging from the data collection about the respondents' experiences include the integration process of migrant children, the society's positive and negative contribution, and the social workers' impact. The goal of the investigation was to determine the potential of the social work profession for the integration of migrant children and how this can promote integration prospects of this group. The analysis and presentation of the findings will in fact aim at determining a potential connection between the social workers' view on the integration of children and that on their role, in particular how their understanding of the process affects the way they look at their role and their practice. In an attempt to answer the research objectives, starting from the social workers' own conception of integration, their perspectives on the children's needs, strategies, and obstacles will be discussed too. Before concluding with the social workers' point of view on their role, practice, and challenges in their everyday work, space will be given to their opinion on the society and how this affects the integration of the children they work with.

5. SOCIAL WORKERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

How do social workers look at the integration of migrant children? What are the implications? In this first chapter, meanings that emerged from the investigation of the social workers' approach to the concept of integration will be discussed. Then, the focus will be moved onto the needs that children have in integration and what strategies they use to integrate according to social workers. Lastly, the challenges that they identified in the process will be discussed too.

5.1. What does integration mean?

Unlike the social workers interviewed in a recent study conducted by Viola and colleagues (2018), participants in this study revealed a broader understanding of the concept of integration of refugees and asylum seekers which goes beyond the interpretation of integration as the mere fulfillment of migrants' basic needs. In their definition, research participants focused on different aspects, confirming the idea that integration is a varied concept that can be assigned several meanings and

understood in different ways (Robinson, 1998, as cited in Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). In line with Ager and Strang's (2008) conceptual framework in which the access to and the fulfillment of rights represent the foundation of integration and its essence, respondents linked the concept of integration with having access to the same rights as the citizens of the country in which the children claimed asylum. Mentioned rights include having access to either education or employment and to national services, as well as "*having personal documents and relevant status*". Following the Recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005), alongside enjoying comparable rights and opportunities as nationals, social workers recognized a secure legal and residence status as the basis of integration.

Broadly speaking, being integrated means, in their opinion, having enough means to sustain themselves so not to have to rely completely on governmental institutions and civil society organizations for constant support. It follows that, in general, migrants are integrated when *"they can live by themselves, like they don't need help […] so they can live normally life*".

On the other hand, integration was associated with having significant social connections in the local community. A participant explained: "*It's about having a social network, so having somebody you can rely on, somebody you can call your friend in a certain local community".* Having social links and ties with locals as well as feeling part of the community was perceived as a good example of integration, especially in the case of children. A participant shared: "*This was actually a very good example of integration, […] he started feeling like a part of the community"*.

Integration was also connected to the inclusion in the host community's life. The establishment of meaningful contacts and relationships is indeed considered by the EU Commission (2016) what integration is about.

This is a good example of some form of inclusion. We were making a party and the party was organized by local children, Serbian children in the school […]. So they organized the party, they prepared everything […] and it was really, really nice.

If on one hand contact with the local society is required, on the other hand interviewed social workers recognized the importance for children to maintain traits of their culture of origin. One participant in fact explained that according to her, integration is about

[…] understanding the new environment and understanding how to navigate in the new environment without having to give up important parts of your identity. […] It's important for their identities to keep the fact that they are perhaps Muslim or that they speak a different language, they feed themselves differently, they eat with their hands, they eat different kinds of food.

The importance of preserving parts of their culture emerges also from different authors who showed how retaining links to the heritage culture while engaging with the host culture is beneficial for the child's psychosocial adaptation (Berry & Hou, 2016) and their overall well-being (Berry et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2020).

Furthermore, integration is perceived by social workers as a two-way process in which the host community plays an active role. Part of this process consists in listening to the refugees' voices, as they are the experts of their own life, circumstances, and perceptions. Social workers and the host society should be open to listen to and understand the refugees' point of view as they know better what their needs are and what it is that the general society could do for them.

That's what the word integration is about: "I'm listening. I'm trying to learn and understand". And he (refugee child) is telling me "I need this, we need this".

The two-way process, in fact, presupposes openness and a welcoming attitude towards the newcomers (Berry, 2001). As stated by the Government of the Republic of Croatia, the two-way feature stands for efforts in strengthening the capacity of the host communities and giving migrants the opportunities to participate in the life of the community in which they are residing, to become an active part of the society, and to feel that they belong to it (Ajduković et al., 2019).

Integration is a two-way process […] It means that the local community and Europeans in general should step out of their comfort zone a little. That doesn't mean that we should change who we are, but we should make our environments more accommodating for people from different cultures. […] The two-way thing means that we (host society) should start being open to seeing different cultures, seeing people of color, hearing different languages, having different kinds of activities going on in our local community that we had never seen before.

As indicated in international documents by the UN General Assembly (2018b) and the Council of the European Union (2004), integration is a process which requires efforts and readiness to adapt and change by both sides and mutual accommodation. Social workers stressed that the two-way characteristic of the process presupposes changes in the host societies, especially in the way of thinking of the Western society. Challenging unconscious biases and addressing changes in the way people think of and perceive the other and what is unknown to them is part of the inclusion process (EU Commission, 2020). Awareness, acceptance, and desire to learn about the other is something that host societies should be ready to do, as much as migrants are expected and asked

to. Eventually, both incomers and locals should accept each other and each other's values, so that they can live peacefully together in the same place and feel at ease in it.

After all, integration is, according to the participants, a long-term, ongoing process, whose results cannot be seen immediately, and which should start as soon as a person arrives in the destination country. However, in countries like Croatia and Serbia which are primarily transit countries along the Balkan route, most of the people in seek of asylum are only transiting through, and while most of them express the intention to apply for international protection, only a few of them lodge an application and even fewer receive some form of international protection at the end. Integration intended as adjusting to the life of the host community is a hard process in the case of short stays. For that reason, the concept of integration may assume a different meaning. For social workers working with migrant children whose intention is to head to other European countries and seek international protection there, integration means being included in the society for as long as they intend to stay in the country.

Include them (children on the move) in the society while there they are in Serbia. It's impossible to integrate them fully, but for example, provide them with education, provide them with activities that will make them feel as a part of the community, making friends in the local community. Give them knowledge and skills that we can provide for them that will be useful for them in the future.

Especially in transit countries where the stay lasts on average up to few months, one social worker thinks it is important to provide the children with the knowledge and skills that will be useful in the near future while on their way and later on for their life in the destination country. Respondents communicated that refugee and asylum-seeking children are extremely motivated to integrate. They come with a set of strengths deriving from what they have survived and the desire to go to school and participate in several activities for the goal of a better life. Indeed, refugee children mostly show resilience and determination to thrive and fulfill their potential (UNICEF, 2019).

To summarize, the multidimensionality of the concept of integration was confirmed by the diverse responses provided by the social workers. Integration is considered a long, complex, two-way process that involves the local society to the same extent as migrant children, and which is based on equal access to the same rights as national children and on a secure residence status in the country of settlement. In the social workers' understanding, integration presupposes establishing meaningful connections in the local community and a sense of belonging, together with the maintenance of the child's cultural identity, as Berry (2001) indicates in his definition of integration as an acculturation strategy.

5.2. The needs of migrant children in integration

As for the meaning of integration, the responses about the needs of migrant children in the process were diverse and multidimensional too. The first identified need concerns the presence of a person in the country of destination who has a knowledge of the local community and who can help the child fulfill their rights – a social worker for instance -, as well a wider support from the society and its institutions, so that the child has access to the resources needed for their integration. This finding is consistent with Sleijpen and colleagues' study (2016) in which support from service providers is considered, together with that of the family, ethnic group members, and peers, a promoting factor for the child's successful integration. Moreover, for social workers participating in this study, it is important that that first contact person and provider of support is perceived by the child as a safety figure, someone who can reduce their fear by providing them with all the necessary information and whom they can trust, especially when talking about unaccompanied migrant children who cannot benefit from their family's support and sense of safety.

First, they really need some safety figure, one person who is safe for them, they can trust, who can give them information about everything and reduce the fear that they feel.

Connection to the culture of origin emerged as well in the discussion around the needs of a child in integration. In line with Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) for whom the establishment of relationships with people from the same cultural background is beneficial for the child's adjustment process, social workers believe it is fundamental for the child to be connected "*with somebody who is closer to their culture of origin, somebody who can keep their connections with their cultural origin intact, and who can support their relation to their background".*

In the participants' opinion, integration for migrant children is therefore possible by understanding and navigating the new environment without having to give up their cultural identity. According to them, refugee and asylum-seeking children should not be forced to change their habits nor their religious and cultural identity beyond the extent to which they are willing to. In this sense, it is fundamental to have someone who supports them in navigating the new environment and someone who is close to their culture of origin and who would allow them to maintain connections with their cultural background, as engaging with the culture of origin represents itself a source of resilience (Fazel et al., 2012).

Apart from personal support, be it in adjusting to the new environment or retaining bonds with their culture, other needs that were identified as relevant for the child's integration process are

language competence, enrollment in education, and assistance in school. Both the knowledge of the language of the host country and education are two domains often recurring in the discourse around migrants' integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; EU Commission, 2010). Learning the local language is a crucial prerequisite for a successful integration (EU Commission, 2020) and according to the respondents, refugees and asylum seekers should learn it on a certain level in order to be able to communicate, understand their rights, and express their needs. "*Croatian language has to be like on some level so that they can integrate"*, one social worker claimed.

Concerning education, going to school is for most of the children and their parents a priority, as it largely represents one of the main reasons for undertaking the journey to Europe and a way for children to understand the host culture, engage with the local community, integrate, and improve their employment prospects and their overall wellbeing (UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, 2019). Social workers in this study recognized the importance for children to be enrolled in education. In their opinion, "*children from refugee and migrant population come in contact with the local society mostly via the school system".* School settings, in fact, provide the opportunity to establish contact and lasting relationships with the locals (Ager & Strang, 2008) and enhance refugees and asylum-seeking children's integration (Yohani, Brosinsky & Kirova, 2019). Being included in education is a major theme, since being enrolled in school is seen as a prerequisite for the full integration of the child in the host community. Education is perceived not only as a means to support their subsequent labor market integration but also as an opportunity to forge their identity and increase their perception of contributing to the new community. Besides that, supporting observations made by Cheyne-Hazineh (2020), participants of this study identified the need for additional educational support in schools.

They really need a lot of support, they need intensive Serbian language classes, they need some supplementary classes for various subjects, they need regular follow up provision of books.

After an initial short period of so-called immersion or introduction classes, continuous additional support should be given in regular classes in the form of second language classes and multilingual classroom assistance to reduce the language barrier (Crul et al., 2019). According to one social worker, the provision of extra support must be consistent and in the form of assistants present in schools in order to facilitate the complete integration in the new school.

They should be given a teaching assistant, at least for a period of a few months, just to ease this transition into fully integrating in the school […] I think at least in the first few months, this person (assistant) would be a great tool for

to mediate the relationships between a refugee child who can barely speak any local language and the local children, because without that, there is nobody to establish any kind of connections.

In the participants' responses, significant attention was attributed to the socialization process of migrant children and the establishment of friendships in the local community as two of the most relevant integration needs. According to social workers, migrant children want to "*be part of the community and feel "normal", like everything is normal"* and "to *be accepted and to make friends"*. Meaningful social connections and relationships with the host society are indeed promoter factors for migrants' integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Gervais et al., 2021), especially peer relationships (Smith et al., 2020) in the case of children and youth. For refugees, the need for socialization is nevertheless accompanied by preoccupation around acceptance.

They (migrant children) are really worried about that thing if they are going to be liked by the other people, especially when they are like in high school, they are all the time concerns. "I will not make any bad things. I will show in my best way to, you know, to other people see that I am good". […] He (a refugee teenager) all the time repeating that sentence "I want to show the world that not all refugees are terrorists and not all refugees are bad. Like how you have bad people in Serbia, we have also bad people in Afghanistan. But we are the same".

Eventually, social workers acknowledged that migrant children have the same needs as any other child, including developmental needs that exist regardless of their status as refugee or asylum-seeker (Seidel & James, 2019). Social workers claimed that *"they (children) should have childhood, they should have something for fun. […] They need something in that time to not lose their childhood",* recognizing the importance of activities and play besides school and emphasizing their identity as children first and foremost. For their wellbeing it is also important that the asylum process for children seeking international protection is the shortest possible. As one participant expressed:

(It) is important that they don't stay long in the waiting process of getting international protection. This feeling, not knowing if they will stay in this country or they will need to move or what will happen to them, it's the feeling that they... that feeling destroy everything.

Starting from the belief that migrants' children have the same needs as any other child, additional specific needs that were identified in connection to the status of refugees and asylum seekers include support from both local people who have a knowledge of the system and the environment

and who can connect them with services, and someone from the same cultural background who can support them in maintaining links to their culture. The need for such a support is linked to the need of being able to understand and navigate the new environment and feeling comfortable in it, while at the same time keeping the connections to their background and not having to give up their cultural identity to the extent they are not willing to. Moreover, other identified needs include language competence, access to education, and extra support in school. In line with their understanding of integration, social workers also identified the need for socialization, friendships, sense of belonging to the new community. In conclusion, social workers believe that migrant children's most important need is to have a normal childhood, to engage in activities beyond educational ones, and to stay in the asylum process the shortest possible.

5.3. Strategies to integrate

Strategies that children utilize to integrate in their new environment and that were mentioned by social workers according to their experience concern education and socialization. On one hand, the school was identified as the place where integration takes place, in line with Yohani and colleagues' (2019) finding that schools support the integration process of refugees and asylum-seeking children. Education is in fact the foundation for successful social participation and schools can potentially become real hubs of integration both for children and their families (EU Commission, 2020). In this investigation, the age of the child was seen as an important factor. From the social workers' point of view, for young children it is easier to be included fast in the new school setting because they pick up the language faster and because local children of that age do not have preconceptions and are open to engage with them and forge friendships.

They've been most integrated when they're going to school. […] when you are smaller, it's easier to be integrated. You will fast learn the language and you will easier find the friends because when you are really young, your friends doesn't care that you are from Iran, Afghanistan, from Syria. They like you and they want to hang out with you.

Apart from that, through socialization migrant children can learn about the country and the culture in which they settled, which positively contributes to their adjustment to the new social environment.

They were calling him on their birthdays to the parties to celebrate something. And (name of the child) is still going on that kind of events […] Also it's the moment when he learn about our holidays.

However, assimilation as an acculturation strategy emerged as the preferred option by several migrant children with whom the social workers work. If integration is understood as a balance between maintaining one's cultural heritage and seeking contact with the new environment (Berry, 2001), assimilation involves giving up to one's cultural identity to completely assimilate to the new cultural environment as a sort of blending in.

When they (unaccompanied migrant children) are in some social circles in the local community, I think they don't want to stress their origin or certain parts of their identity because they want to feel like they want to feel the same as the peers they are relating to in this community.

According to what social workers reported, children tend not to want to stand out, be recognized as different, nor feel different. To be accepted by their peers, they might be willing to let go of some features that are distinctive of their culture and that distinguish them from local children.
For several children, especially those of a very young age and unaccompanied, integration is likely to turn into assimilation (Berry & Hou, 2016). As one social worker stated: "*They really want to blend in. They don't want to be different".*
To conclude, schools appear as the setting where integration can take place through socialization with local peers, allowing migrant children – especially those of a young age – to establish meaningful connections in their new social environment and to feel more comfortable in it. Despite that, socialization processes in schools and other places of aggregation can turn into a driver for assimilating behaviors, which social workers recognized as being often preferred by children over the strategy of integration. As critiqued by social workers, it is very likely that migrant children decide to let go of their cultural identity in order to be accepted and feel equal to their native-born peers.

5.4. Challenges and obstacles

Challenges in integration have been widely and consistently investigated in the last years amid the massive influx of migrants in seek of protection starting from 2015. All respondents in this study claimed that, while integrating, migrant children face a series of challenges. The different perspectives and professional experiences, however, allow to grasp multiple domains, all of which will be presented and discussed below in separate sections.

5.4.1. Uncertainty about the future and cultural isolation

One of the first challenges for migrant children concerns long asylum processes and the state of uncertainty that stems from the precarity of their status in the country in which they arrived (Measham et al., 2014; Gervais et al., 2021). According to social workers, not knowing what will happen in the near future impacts the children's willingness and ability to establish connections in the society, which is one of the prerequisites for their effective integration.

I know a lot of them they didn't want to learn, they didn't want to do anything, they didn't want to have friends because it's really difficult for them, because what if they will need to leave again? Because this is not the only country they came. So each time when they need to move from one place to another and they meet some friends, for them it's really difficult to say goodbye to these friends, to move and not to see them anymore.

Apart from the stress associated with the asylum process and its duration, considerable amount of time is taken for the paperwork, as a social worker noted. This amount of time is for the children and youngsters an important part of their life that gets "wasted". The process of waiting is, especially in the case of traumatized children, an added concern that might deteriorate their mental health conditions and have long-term consequences for the child. This particularly concerns unaccompanied migrant children, whose levels of distress caused by the uncertainty about the permanence in the country have shown to be higher while in the asylum process (Berg & Tronstad, 2015, as cited in Oppedal et al., 2020). As one social worker working with unaccompanied migrant children explained about a child on the move, "*he feel a huge anger and anxiety*" not knowing what his future will look like.

The wellbeing of the children was taken into great consideration by the social workers who were asked about the challenges related to integration. Significant concern was attributed to the children's mental wellbeing in relation to the different challenges faced. Connected to the mental wellbeing, the loss of connections to the culture of origin and the absence of a refugee community from the same countries who might ease the sense of isolation, are two challenges that were mentioned as well, both by respondents from Croatia and Serbia. One participant suggested that "*a lot of the problems stem from being cut from where you came from and being forced to adapt fully to this new environment with disregarding who you were before",* blaming the society for a closed approach towards diversity and multiculturalism. "*Giving up of too much (of the culture) might make you feel very lost",* this respondent claimed. Such distancing might be reinforced not only by the pressure from the society's side but also from the fact that migrant children, especially those who migrate alone, do not enjoy a support network consisting of other refugees from the same community, since "*still we do not have some refugee communities here in Serbia, like*

Afghani community or Pakistani community. And then they (children) feel quite isolated and without relevant support".

Feeling lost in the uncertainty and isolated from all sides are results of the conditions in which the children live when they first enter a country seeking protection and were identified by social workers as two major challenges affecting the children's integration process at its initial stage.

5.4.2. Identity and safety issues

With regards to the maintenance of their cultural identity, social workers do not think that "*people of color, for example, migrants or refugees, feel empowered enough to take things from their own culture and act like that here*", denoting a lack of empowerment that doesn't allow them to take positions and act irrespectively of the judgment around them. In the social workers' opinion, this might be linked to the perception of differences that exist between migrants and the host society, together with the issue of feeling safe in the community. In particular, children acknowledging such differences tend to hide them in order to be accepted and feel safe. As one social worker explained: "*They don't want to go to the beach because they will get a darker tan and they don't want to stand out even more so […] they would be recognized even more and they would feel different*". Differences are not only those who are perceived by the children, but also those rooted in the culture and that contrast with the hosting environment. These differences were identified by the social workers too, as for example differences in food, way of eating, and way of dressing.

Refugee and asylum-seeking children leave behind their environment and are sometimes forced to adapt to the new one by disregarding their cultural identity, which, according to social workers, might cause problems and challenges in their integration process, even though changes in one's cultural identity are considered part of the acculturation process and results of a mutual accommodation between two different cultures that enter in contact (Schwarz et al. 2010). Furthermore, being a teenager implies having to deal with the issues that all teenagers go through at a certain point in their life, and this is well acknowledged by social workers working with migrant children. Respondents are indeed aware of the difficulties that being a teenager entails and believe that it is even more challenging for refugee and asylum-seeking teenagers who left their comfort zone and what was known to them, to face a new environment that is oftentimes contrasting to what they were used to, and they do so at a vulnerable stage in their life where they may still have to figure out who they are.

Being a teenager is a difficult stage in life in itself for anyone […] because at the age of 15, you are forming your identity. […] And I think it's all the more difficult for children who left their safe spaces where they know their family,

their local community, who they are very familiar with. And then they arrive to something that is completely opposite from everything they know at such a vulnerable stage where they have to figure out who they are.

An added difficulty that was identified is the attribution of being a refugee, a term that oftentimes is negatively connotated. Having the status of a refugee is perceived as a label that carries heaviness and grounds for discriminatory behavior. Stigmatization, and racism are challenges to their integration and adaptation process in the new country (Gervais et al., 2014; Measham et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2020), as the perception of being discriminated against distances the child from the new environment and pushes them not to engage with it (Berry et al., 2006).
Connected with discrimination, safety issues occupied a significant part in the social workers' narratives about the challenges of refugee and asylum-seeking children in integration. A distinction between the perception of unsafety conditions and actual lack of safety must be made. On one hand, social workers reported children not feeling safe due to negative experiences and incidents reported from older migrants in the local community.

They might not feel safe because they might be attacked from a person, from an adult person, from the local community. […] Every other guy I spoke with was beaten up in the street and 99 percent of them never reported it because some had experiences with reporting it and they weren't taken seriously by the police. And I don't think they feel safe and especially the kids.

Whereas actual lack of safety arose from two examples that the respondents provided in their discourse. One social worker who was assigned the legal custody of an unaccompanied child reported his experience of bullying acts from older youth in the reception center where he was accommodated and his way of engaging in fights as a form of self-protection, which negatively compromised his well-being. Moreover, another participant talked about the accommodation conditions of some unaccompanied children, who, not having anyone taking care of them while on the move, in the saddest case end up being accommodated and staying with adult strangers for a considerable amount of time, lacking any form of protection.

The worst case, that youngsters, kids, that they're not protected, that they don't have someone who take care of them, stay in the place with a lot of adults that they don't even know, they're not even family members or anyone.

5.4.3. Language barrier and access to (quality) education

Refugee children usually face more obstacles than other foreign-born children (Bloch et al., 2015, as cited in Crul et al., 2019). Access to education is for example a big challenge for refugee children, especially when referring to secondary education, as data largely show the lowest share of children enrolled at secondary level (UNICEF, 2019; UNHCR, 2021). In Serbia, for instance, figures about the enrollment drop remarkably to 12% in upper-secondary education from an average of 90% in the previous levels (UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, 2019). Moreover, social segregation and school drop-out represent two issues that may be caused by prolonged periods spent in the parallel school system while excluded from the regular one (Crul et al., 2019). Another major challenge concerns the availability of services, especially their proximity to the children. As reported by one participant, access to early childhood education is, in the case of very young children accommodated in the second largest reception center in Croatia, compromised by the distance between the accommodation facility and the only kindergarten available in the town where asylum-seeking families with children are accommodated. Furthermore, not only educational facilities are located far from the children, but also NGOs offering educational programs together with psychological support and interpretation services.

There is another center which is far away from Belgrade, which is in the south of Serbia. […] it is far away from Belgrade and we are not really happy to see children sent there because it is situated in an underdeveloped of Serbia. And just without NGO support there, […] and without sufficient access to education, to health and also, I have to say that the majority of NGOs that are dealing with unaccompanied children are situated in Belgrade and also in other two bigger cities, but not in that area.

For refugee and asylum-seeking children who are granted access to schooling, one social worker in this study identified challenges related to their quality education. For those who manage to access education, in fact, not enough knowledge of the country's language results in a non-effective enrollment in school. As this respondent pointed out, "*sometimes children are just formally enrolled into education, they do not understand the language of instruction […], they go to school for a week or two and then they just give it up because of that language barrier*". Not mastering the language at a certain level is therefore problematic when it comes to the educational and social integration of children, with consequences on both their academic performance and their socialization process. Limited proficiency in the local language is recognized as one of the challenges related to the integration of children in education (Vidal de Haymes et al., 2018; Simopoulos & Alexandridis, 2019). Although all migrant children may be formally enrolled in schools, for social workers that "*does not mean that they all have access to quality education […]. You do not know actually how many children have efficient access to education, for how long they*

stay in the education". If sufficient language competence is missing, the period spent in school risks to turn into a waste of time for children and make them disinterested in school. Moreover, many families and children in transit countries such as Serbia might already not be motivated to learn the language as they do not intend to stay (UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, 2019).

In addition to this, in times of COVID-19, social workers could identify additional challenges that the pandemic brought, such as online learning and limited access to education for certain groups of children.

They attend online classes now since March last year. Yes, unlike local children who attend online classes or they go just physically to school, depending on the current COVID situation, but these children (with families) have been attending online classes […] While children who are accommodated in these five centers or shelters for unaccompanied children, they attend classes like local children, […] kids in those three centers are actually completely excluded from regular attendance.

Especially in reception facilities where conditions of scares internet connection and overpopulation are common, online learning may have represented an additional challenge to the integration of children in the host country's educational system, with consequences on the amount and quality of interactions with local children and teachers as well (UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM, 2021).

In conclusion, starting from the social worker's understanding of the integration meaning, it was possible to reflect on the different needs and the strategies of children in integration. When integrating in their new community, children face challenges that are also partially connected to their needs. These include long asylum processes reinforcing a state of uncertainty, mental wellbeing, the distancing from their own culture, changes in their identity due to challenges related to both acculturation process and personal development, discrimination and perception of unsafety, language barrier, and lack of access to quality education.

6. THE POSITION OF THE SOCIETY TOWARDS REFUGEES

When referring to the obstacles, social workers participating in this study looked at the society's attitudes towards migrants as one of the main challenges to their integration. The following chapter is meant to provide an overview of the attitude of the Croatian and Serbian society towards refugees and asylum seekers as it emerged from the participants' narratives. After unveiling those that are considered negative challenges for the integration of migrant children which are connected

to the society's adverse attitude, attention will be given to the role of the media in the creation and consolidation of negative discourses. After that, examples of more positive attitudes from the society's side will be presented too, as these were also mentioned by the respondents.

6.1. "New refugees" vs "our refugees"

In their discussion, interviewed social workers revealed the topic of reactions of other people towards their work with refugees and asylum seekers. Pity and lack of understanding emerged as the consequence of people's perception of social work with refugees as a difficult and unsafe job. One social worker shared: "*When I explain to people what I do, I work with refugees, everyone's reaction is «oh, it's so difficult»".* Negative stance of the general society towards their profession and the people they serve may become a source of stress among social workers working with refugees (Wirth et al., 2019) and impact the quality of service delivery.

According to social workers, both in Croatia and in Serbia the general society has a distorted conception of who refugees are. For some of them, refugees "*should stay there (in their countries) and fight […] and they shouldn't come here",* while others identify them as soldiers and look at them as a threat. On the whole, social workers agreed that *"people have this very simplistic idea of who refugees are and why people migrate"* and tend to see them as people looking for better life prospects or migrants who wants to reach Europe only to find a job or live on social benefits.

The inability to make a distinction among different categories of migrants and reasons for leaving their home countries, and thus to distinguish refugees from economic migrants, is rooted in the lack of knowledge of the asylum system. "*My close friends and my family don't know anything about this theme"*, admitted one social worker. Generally, it was acknowledged that "*they (locals) don't have a basic understanding of how the asylum system works and about human rights",* which makes it harder for them to look at refugees for whom they truly are. In Europe, 61% of citizens in fact do not feel well or at all informed about the realities of migration and integration and related issues (EU Commission, 2020).

Lack of information may bring to indifference and stigmatization. Research results on Croatians' attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers consistently show the existence of prejudice and fear (Ajduković et al., 2019). Apart from stigma, social workers in this study recognized the lack of knowledge and understanding of other cultures among the general society. A social worker communicated: "*They don't really know a lot about the East or any culture, Syrian, Lebanese, Turkish"*, while another one shared: "*Usually we have some problems with parents (of local children) because they don't understand culture*", when referring to migrant children's inclusion

in education. Negative biases against people from other cultures concretely represent an obstacle to migrants' successful integration in receiving countries (Viola et al., 2018).

Although both Croatians and Serbians experienced displacement back in the 90s as a consequence of the war, social workers noted a lack of empathy, compassion, and understanding of today's refugees' situation within the host society. In their opinion, a large group of citizens forgot about their past, and even those who understand the struggle of being a refugee tend to make a distinction between their situation and that of the people who are currently seeking asylum in their country, and thus between what are considered by them *nove izbeglice* ("new refugees") and *naše izbeglice* ("our refugees").

Some people understand (what it means to be a refugee), but they won't accept people who went to similar path because they usually say it's not the same.

Another negative aspect that contributes to making the attitude of the society a challenge for refugees' and asylum seekers' integration is the society's close mindedness. The notion that multiculturalism in Central-Eastern European countries is vastly opposed with conservativism, discriminatory narratives, and anti-immigrant discourses (Miholjcic, 2019) was upheld in this study as respondents claimed that multiculturalism is not accepted in their society to the extent that would make it possible for people from different cultures to integrate. One social worker admitted: "*We are still a society traditional, and we are not open to it (receiving refugees)"*. In this study, it was generally believed that the society is closed towards cultural diversity and consequently the reception of refugees for several reasons. One of them is the fear of these people, which is a recurring topic in the participants' responses. In Serbia, for instance, social workers identified a "*big fear that somebody come and will take our land and our culture and our religion. […] (People say) «these refugees will take our land, they will take our jobs, they will marry our daughters»"*. This statement upholds the notion that Nation-states in Central-eastern Europe are ethnic and cultural homogenous entities which citizens feel the need to protect from external threats (Miholjcic, 2019), as refugees belonging to a different culture may represent to them. In a recent study conducted by Ajduković and colleagues (2019) on Croatians' attitudes towards refugees, these were identified as a cultural, security, and economic threat for the country. This contributes to making Croatia one of the least accepting countries in terms of reception of migrants (Gallup, 2016, as cited in Ajduković et al., 2019). With regard to children, the experience of discrimination and the perception of a hostile environment may decrease their desire to engage

with the host society and have a negative impact on their integration prospects (Berry et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010).

6.2. The influence of media and fake news

A recurring theme in the social workers' narratives is the role of mass media and social media. Media in general are considered by the study participants to have the power to influence both the society's attitude towards migrants and the general discourse around refugees' issues. Especially for those who do not live in communities where refugees are present, the media are the only way these people are informed about this group. Social workers acknowledged the influence that media have on the society's view of refugees, especially in Serbia where, for the last three years, respondents have been noting a greater number of news depicting refugees with a negative connotation.

All the time migrants and refugees going out in news like bad people who are irregular, they are stealing, they are raping, they are, you know, doing some bad things […] All the time when something bad happen, we don't know who did it but, you know, in the news, it shows the refugees.

The way refugees are represented in the media, which is most of the times as a security threat, has strongly influenced the public opinion and contributed to the spread of anti-immigrants groups on social media and anti-immigration movements in the streets which may negatively affect other people's integration efforts (Lažetić & Jovanović, 2018). "*(There) is a lot of hate speech in the public space, on different social platforms, then in the newspapers"*, a social workers noted. With the increasing use of social media by all age groups where fake news are constantly and freely circulating, those virtual spaces have recently started representing a threat to the image of refugees and their safety. *"Our society still believes in a lot of fake news. They are there in the media, a lot of like half informations".* As an example of this, a social worker explained the existence of an anti-immigration Facebook group in which fake news about refugees are repeatedly published.

When was police hour during the pandemic, in that group came out news that we are close, we cannot go out because our government is bringing refugees and migrants from the south. I think on Bulgaria, Kosovo and Macedonia. They're bringing them with the busses and they will give them land in Serbia. And because of that, we are in house, to not see that, to not see that happening.

This quotation underlies the influence that social media platforms have in shaping the narratives about migration and refugees and their potential danger. Unsurprisingly, a survey conducted by the Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation in 2017 showed that the adverse attitude of Serbian citizens stems from the negative portrayal of refugees in the news. According to the majority of respondents in that study, information in the media affected them the most in the development of an attitude towards refugees. The same can be claimed for Croatia, where mass media and social media are considered the most common sources of information about asylum beneficiaries and deemed to portray refugees in a slightly negative by citizens (Ajduković et al., 2019).

6.3. Positive and promising attitudes

If on one hand social workers looked at the society's general attitude as an obstacle for the integration process, on the other hand they also identified positive examples fostering the integration of refugee children. Participants mentioned that in the beginning of the great influx in 2015 and 2016, it was simple for some people in Serbia to make a connection with and sympathize those escaping armed conflicts because of the experience of the Western Balkans with refugees during and in the aftermath of the war following the dissolution of former Yugoslavia. One social worker shared this reflection:

I remember when thousands of people was in the center of Belgrade. People are coming. Nobody asked for help, but they are coming. They're bringing the food, they're bringing the clothes, bringing everything what they need and sharing with families. You know, they just came and wants to help the people in any way they can.

The initial response of Belgrade citizens was warm and welcoming as people coming reminded them of Serbians experiencing displacement and of people from neighboring Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina seeking refuge in Serbia. By looking at this as the result of a humanitarian crisis and by thinking that people would only temporarily stop in Belgrade before proceeding towards other Western European countries, locals responded to the massive arrivals of asylum seekers by bringing goods such as clothes, shoes, food, and hygiene items to the people gathered in parks around the city. However, after the closure of the Balkan Route in 2016, the average stay in Serbia extended from the initial few weeks to over a year by summer 2017, as migrants were left stuck at the borders, and consequently the attitudes of the local population changed, and concerns emerged. What contributed to that change in the public opinion was also the fact that with migrants being

moved to reception centers in the outskirt of the city in 2016, interactions between them and local people decreased, making it harder to empathize (Lažetić & Jovanović, 2018).

On a more positive note, participants in this study emphasized that broadly speaking people have a different opinion and attitude towards refugee children than towards refugee adults. As one social worker distinguished, "*there is a difference when you are telling that you are working with children, especially children without parental care […] because people have sensitive feelings about children and about those who don't have parents".* Empathy for unaccompanied children was an important consideration. As this participant shared: *"I think they (other children's parents) felt sad about, you know, because he was without parents, he was really small".* Besides that, local children and local volunteers were mentioned as two groups that are more open towards migrant children and their integration. Social workers acknowledged the big impact of volunteers and their work in changing the mindset of other people to accept refugees in their community and also the potential of local children in changing the negative attitudes towards migrants of those around them, starting from their families.

I think it really starts, for our society, with children, because then they can say something to their parents and then I think that we'll open up more people who are not on the same view as us.

Social workers in this study seemed keenly aware of the mostly negative attitudes of the local society towards refugees but at the same time they mentioned examples of more positive attitudes. For instance, a growing interest in the reception and integration of refugees in different parts of Croatia were noted too. While an open attitude is expected from the local society in order for integration to be possible in the first place, social workers participating in the study identified a general neutral attitude towards migrants too. In that aspect, respondents pointed out that such a disinterested attitude and the lack of effort do not foster the integration of migrant children. This view is in line with the results of public opinion studies on Serbian and Croatian citizens' position towards refugees that reveal an average neutral attitude (Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation & USAID, 2017; Ajduković et al., 2019), as well as with the EU Commission's call for a better involvement of the host communities and mutual contribution and engagement in the process for the purpose of a sustainable and successful integration (EU Commission, 2020).

7. THE CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIAL WORKERS FROM THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL SECTOR

After having presented what integration is from the social workers' point of view and how the society negatively and positively influences the process, attention will be now drawn onto the social workers' perception of their part in the integration of their young beneficiaries. The first two sections of this chapter will focus on the participants' own view of their role and will provide an overview of their activities promoting the integration of migrant children. Afterwards, the necessary qualities to work with this specific group that were identified by the respondents themselves and the challenges that they face in their everyday work will be presented too.

7.1. Social workers' stance on their role

Social workers are the first contact for refugees and asylum seekers, and the professionals who not only coordinate but also initiate support networks and services for this client group (George, 2012). According to the study participants, they represent *"the first person of contact", "one person they (refugees) can talk about everything and anything"*. This is particularly true in the case of unaccompanied minors for whom social workers represent the first reference point since they are responsible for the interview as soon as they enter the country (Sanfelici et al., 2020) and for the daily care in the accommodation settings where the children reside (Seidel & James, 2019). Moreover, for some unaccompanied children, social workers can be appointed as their legal guardian, a fundamental role when it comes to the protection of children without parental care.
When looking at their role in relation to the integration of migrant children in their new country, social workers participating in this study seemed to act as a bridge between the child and the community.

If the child wants to explore their artistic side, if the child wants to go to some sports […] I would encourage and try to find ways as a social worker to connect the child with NGOs, with sporting clubs in the community, with anyone who could support the child in socializing and exploring their talents, their interests.

"Connect the child with all these micro communities within the community" and *"be a liaison between all these micro communities"* were mentioned too among the roles. In respect with linking the child with multiple actors and services available in their surroundings, one social worker indicated that her role consists in exploring different ways in which the child can be involved and participate in the community. This concept is supported by the psychosocial theory of social work for which the role of social workers consists in locating strengths and resources available in the

person's environment to increase their beneficiaries' well-being and support their adaptation (Turner, 2017).

Social workers also deemed their role as being multidimensional. In one social worker's opinion, "*sometimes a social worker needs to change their role*", acknowledging the importance of being flexible and ready to adapt to different situations and needs of their clients. According to this respondent who works in a shelter for unaccompanied migrant children,

a social worker needs to be what the beneficiaries need in that moment. […] it can be sister love or hug, some emotional support, or sometimes it can be like only to hanging out, to draw something. In pandemic, you know, we were closed and we have restrictions to going out. And somebody needs to cut their hair, and because I know to, I'm not an expert, but I know how to do it, I was the one (cutting their hair).

Besides that, two participants indicated that their role is to accompany their beneficiaries, both in a concretely and figuratively way. One social worker admitted: "*For me, just giving information for the right it's not my job. I didn't have a problem to stay longer on my job and go with them in some institutions*", while another communicated that "*in the NGOs it's really the role of be part of their lives, just do everything that they need with them*", and so to accompany them in their journey of settling and integrating in a new environment as a foreign country represents to them.

Data from this study suggested that social workers believe in the potential of the profession in providing effective support to children in their integration. As one respondent shared: "*The knowledge that we gain is much more systematic. So we tend to focus on the resources that exist in the community, in the person, in the family and so on*". Beyond the acknowledgment of their potential, social workers are aware of the importance of their professional values. One participant expressed: "*I think that social work lies on some of the great values that if implemented could help refugees and migrants here*".

As an explicative example of the difference that a social worker can play in the life of a refugee child, one social worker talked about her experience with a little girl accommodated with her family in the reception center for asylum seekers. During a visit to the room organized for the children's recreation time, she noticed a very aggressive young girl who seemed not to be able to communicate with anyone, not even with her parents. Her father seemed to have given up on her daughter's inability to communicate and explained that she did not suffer from any trauma nor mental health problem and that she started behaving aggressively and stopped communicating properly when they arrived in the reception center. There, no one addressed the issue. "*Before me, no one worked with her, she was there few months, no one even like tried to come to her because*

even her father was like «No, it's ok, she's just like this. Don't bother yourself with her, play with other kids»". After a successful attempt to make the girl communicate through color pens and drawing, the social worker assumed that the little girl might have had troubles adjusting to the changes and her new environment, and that she might not have felt safe to express herself. After that encounter, the social worker connected her with her colleague, a psychotherapist, and started to work with this family to improve the little girl's behavior and communication skills. After only a few months, the little girl showed impressive improvements: not only she stopped being aggressive but also learned perfectly Croatian and adjusted completely to the new environment to the point of becoming one of the best and calmest children in her kindergarten.

Just I want to say the story because for me, that was really showing how the integration process, waitings, how it can be devastating for the young kids. And in same way, if you give them this safetyness, now you are here, this is your home. You can find your friends and you can, you know, have a normal life. Then even when the parents start to feel ok, after three months, they already start researching the job, they also start Croatian course, they feel safe. Then she also feels safe.

This quotation implicates that the waiting process can be detrimental for the wellbeing of asylum-seeking children and how their perception of safety is a great concern. Moreover, stress experienced during the migration process by the entire family system may impact the child both directly and indirectly by affecting the capacity of the parents to take care of them (Betancourt et al., 2015, as cited in Denov & C. Shevell, 2019). As noted by this social worker, if the parents feel safe in their new environment, also the child feels safer, as all components of a family system are interconnected and affecting one another. For all these reasons, the presence of professionals around people on the move who can detect issues and provide support to implement changes and better adjust to their new environment appears fundamental. For instance, child-friendly spaces in reception centers can represent a safe environment for the nurturing of the child's wellbeing and early detection of problematic issues (Metzler et al., 2019), when professionals are present and attentive of the children's and their families' behavior and problematic issues.

In summary, social workers participating in this study view their role in the integration process of migrant children as a multidimensional, flexible role that involves mostly being a reference point for the children, bridging them with their new community and what is needed at that moment, and accompanying them throughout their integration process. Significant attention was given to the potential of the profession to provide effective support to this group of people. Unlike other professions, by taking into consideration and linking the various systems surrounding the individual, social workers can locate resources other than those inherent in the child and thus

provide a more comprehensive support to their integration. Also, by focusing on the environment as well, they can early identify problematic areas and potential threats to the child's wellbeing. The multidimensionality of the integration concept seems in fact to require a multidimensional assistance drawing from different systems and dealing with multiple levels of the child's life for integration to be successful in the first place.

7.2. Social workers' activities

To realize their roles, social workers in the study implement a series of activities in their daily work. As stated by Balaž and Čemová (2019), social workers can support migrants in dealing with issues concerning their adaptation to the new environment with interventions in the form of counseling, therapy, and activism. Respondents communicated a variety of ways in which they claim to enhance migrant children's integration prospects. Below, each finding is addressed separately, first by focusing on social workers' activities that involve children directly and then on which actions can be taken within the broader society. In conclusion of this section, assets and qualities that social work practitioners should have to work with migrant children are addressed as well.

7.2.1. Direct work with children

As oftentimes the first experts that refugee and asylum-seeking children encounter, social workers can provide them with a sense of safety and trust and all the relevant information needed, especially in the case of unaccompanied children who, by definition, lack family support when they arrive in the host country. The way social workers approach them appears therefore crucial. As one participant explained:

If you approach a child with the sense of "Ok, I am here to support you, to see what we can do, I will be at your disposal. I am now your person who will make you feel safe here". I think that's a very important approach. […] If you approach the child actually wanting to hear and understand what the child is going through, I think he will feel much safer and much more empowered to reach out to you and to ask what his options are, what his rights are, where is he going next?

Considerable attention should be paid to provide comprehensive information about the status of the process which, according to the social workers, empowers children and makes them feel safe in the yet unknown and unexplored environment.

Particularly for children migrating alone, professional social workers play a central role in developing and delivering services to support the development of their skills and potential, the creation of strong social networks (Seidel & James, 2019), and their adaptation process through individual integration plans and programs (Sanfelici et al., 2020). To successfully achieve these goals, it appears crucial to have a complete understanding of the individual's needs. As one social worker in this study stated, it is important to "*understand and focus on the needs of the person*" as a starting point. Then, unlike other professionals who, according to respondents, focus only on the child's personal needs and strengths, social workers are constantly looking for available resources at the level of the state, local community, and family, as well as in the children themselves, and ways to use these resources to provide further support to the child.

We are always looking for some resources. […] This is what was also leading me when I was working with children refugees, like "what can I do? Who can help me? Who can I find?"

Social workers usually work in multidisciplinary teams and in cooperation with other relevant actors (George, 2012). Integrated interventions in the form of collaboration with multiple stakeholders within the community is a topic that emerged in this study too. Social workers believe that partnerships, good work relationships, and ongoing communication with lawyers, psychologists, pedagogues, teachers, State's institutions, the child's care givers, and other NGOs are fundamental. For that, establishing links and listening to all the service providers the child is in contact with is a relevant part of their work and an important task in order to support the child at best. "*You need to have connections with the community and the actors in the community*", a respondent believes, and to *"cooperate together to get the full protection that children need*". The main goal is to provide the child with a sense of safety, stability, and attachment. To reach this, participants also shared how they support children in having a normal childhood and access to education. With regards to childhood, one social worker reported seeking to "*find quality ways for the child to spend their free time […] and to feel like a child*". Access to education was also a major theme. "*We first talk with the schools that are nearby*", a respondent communicated when talking about her task of connecting children and their families with local schools. Moreover, social workers explained that they provide support in accessing further education too and ways to obtain qualifications that would not only help them with the later labor market integration but also with their sense of identity and contribution to the community.

Lastly, participants talked about their activity in the non-formal education field with migrant children. "*I help them with the integration process, in some psychological and social workshops*",

said one social worker when asked about the ways in which she affects the integration process of her beneficiaries.

7.2.2. More opportunities to promote integration

From another point of view, social workers can also be involved in formal and non-formal education with the local community. Concerning formal education, one social worker shared her experience with social work students at the University and the way she intends to pass on her knowledge about social work with migrants: "*I do educate future social workers […], we also did implement another new subject regarding children, migrants and migration*", she commented. With a look at non-formal education and the general society, respondents talked about educational activities with local students, professionals working in the reception system, and other members of the local community. One social worker shared about the time she taught local students about migration and helped them explore ways in which they could contribute to the integration of their foreign peers and other newcomers in the framework of an innovative project.

I was going to schools and teaching curriculum there where the kids would learn about migration and get involved in certain small projects for them to discover ways of how they can make the integration work, what they as teenagers can do to make people feel welcome.

Another way in which social workers can positively influence the integration outcomes of migrants by use of non-formal education is through workshops and activities involving the civil society. Previous research with social workers suggests their positive contribution to the construction of the society's view on forced migrants (Tarsia, 2020). One participant of this study commented that social workers can indeed "*educate people about the difference between migrants and refugees*", for instance.

In addition to that, social workers can also organize intercultural meetings within the community to create a space where migrants and locals can come together. With only roughly half of Croatians having had any contact with refugees (Ajduković et al., 2019), developping opportunities for residents and newcomers with a refugee background to come in contact, interact, and exchange seems a logical strategy to foster positive, contructive encounters. As suggested by the EU Commission in its latest Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for the period 2021-2027, the engagement of both parts will contribute to developing a more welcoming, cohesive, and inclusive society. Since migrants' successful integration depends a lot on the level of xenophobia,

discrimination, racism, and hate speech in the society, intercultural and interreligious dialogue can play a key role in promoting a more positive approach to diversity (EU Commission, 2020).
According to the multicultural sensitivity approach to social work, in fact, social workers can play a key role in promoting the appreciation of diversities within the society and better relationships between different groups by forging social relationships and increasing people's cultural competence at the same time (Payne, 2021).

We are really trying to advocate for them. We have some intercultural meetings with local communities. […] We were in Split and Rijeka […] they had the opportunity to talk a little bit with people who are living in those cities.

Advocacy belongs to social workers' daily work with refugees and asylum seekers (Baláž & Čemová, 2019; Sanfelici et al., 2020), a group of people whose rights are oftentimes only partially fulfilled. As an example of this, one social worker shared her experience with advocacy in the media when she was interviewed on the topic of refugee integration in her country. With her team she also advocated for changes in the policies regarding access to university for refugees, a category of students that was not contemplated previously. Advocacy is an important task for social workers, especially at the governmental level where excluding policies and harmful practices for vulnerable groups must be challenged and changed (Al-Makhamreh et al., 2012; Briskman & Latham, 2017). From an anti-oppressive perspective, advocacy reflects the goal of addressing structural and social inequalities by promoting political and legal changes at the macro (Amadasun & Evbayiro Omorogiuwa, 2020).
Lastly, all social workers agreed that mediation is a fundamental part of their job. One participant provided an example of how she facilitated the inclusion into school of one of the unaccompanied children she works with.

We were speaking and negotiate with school […], we will be on meeting, and we will speak with family, with parents about this case (an unaccompanied minor). And we want to show good will to help them to understand better situation about (name of the child), […] explain to the parents who he is.

Being a link and mediating is a task that social workers carry out also in other contexts such as with their colleagues from other institutions and the community. One social worker communicated that in her daily work, when contacting people to find an accommodation for refugee families, she has to explain the situation of refugees over and over and convince potential landlords to sign a contract with the center for Social Welfare and accept refugees as tenants. Especially when asylum

seekers came to Croatia for the first time in large amounts, this social worker recalled going to different institutions to explain to employees their rights, that asylum-seeking children have the same rights as their local peers, for instance.

My colleagues aren't educated enough on this topic […] It's really challenging to explain to social workers (in Social Welfare centers) that... or another colleagues in schools, that they have similar rights as the Croatian people.

For the fulfillment of refugees' rights, in the respondents' opinion it is important to mediate between their clients and other people working with them, so to better understand their situation and then work cooperatively on any issue.

The people who are working there (in other institutions) they don't understand the situation, we need to approach them and to help them to better understand situation enough that we will find together a solution.

7.2.3. Necessary assets

In the interviews, the question also emerged of which requirements should social workers meet to work with migrant children and the necessary qualities. Given the cultural differences and heterogeneity in the cultures refugees and asylum seekers represent, social work practice with this group of people must be based on cultural competence (Denov & C. Shevell, 2019). This and the readiness to continue educate themselves were reported by respondents to be fundamental requirements to work in the migration field. One participant suggested that social workers need "*to learn about the culture with the group they are working, but also to learn about their customs, to learn about that people*", and make constant extensive research on this.

Not only it is important to have sufficient knowledge of the children's culture of origin but also to be aware of the situation in the children's home countries and their background. As one respondent emphasized: "*We need to educate us to go on training to do better, to better know situation about from what backgrounds are the kids we are working, you know, to our work with them to be good and be... contributional*". Multicultural competence, in fact, allows social workers to have a proper understanding of the children's circumstances and to work more efficiently with them by providing effective interventions (George, 2012). Thus, cultural knowledge and ongoing training and education to increase their know-how appear essential in the context of social work with refugees and asylum seekers.

Participants in this study also discussed other skills that they deem important in their job. Apart from the knowledge of the legal system of their country, its framework, laws, and procedures,

social workers indicated a valuable set of soft skills that they consider crucial, including empathy, sensitivity, and patience, as well as flexibility, time management, and organizational abilities.

Social worker needs to be really organized, needs to manage everything and needs to all the time finding solutions to this problem. "Ok, this is the problem. And what kind of resources I have around me? Ok, what I can use?" And, you know, solution will come somehow.

Additionally, respondents put emphasis on communication and listening skills and suggested that social workers need "*to hear from the first line what is their needs and how they see the situation, how our beneficiaries see the situation in where they are*". If on one side empathic listening is important, so is the ability to set boundaries, a competence that was mentioned and described by most of the study participants.

You need to know where is your limit, you need to repeat where is your limit. […] You cannot come in that role of a superhero where you can resolve anything and you will change the world. You need to know what you can do and what you cannot do. […] a lot of social workers now, they are taking responsibility for something that is not up to them.

To conclude, social workers in this study supported the integration process of refugee and asylum-seeking children mostly through services such as provision of information and connection to resources, as well as advocacy and mediation. According to their experiences, mentioned tasks based on the implementation of social work values regarding direct work with migrant children include the provision of sense of safety and trust, delivery of information, assessment of their needs, search for resources, establishment of good connections with other actors, provision of support in childhood, non-formal education, and support in accessing education. Considering what social workers can do with the general society, their perspectives showed examples of formal and non-formal educational activities with multiple actors, organization of intercultural meetings contributing to increasing the opportunities for encounters between migrants and locals through culture and food for example, advocacy, and mediation. Consistently, the main goal was for the child to feel safe and to provide them with a sense of stability, normality, and attachment. The rich and diverse role of social workers in the integration process of migrant children that emerged from their responses was better confirmed by their experiences concerning tasks and activities in their daily work with this group. Overall, participants of this study suggested that in working with migrant children cultural competence is critical, together with an ongoing improvement of their expertise and soft skills.

7.3. Structural and everyday challenges

At the end of their narratives, social workers also shared the challenges that they face as professionals working with refugee and asylum-seeking children. Challenges range from those related to the reception and integration system and the profession of social work in general to more personal ones involving their emotional state and wellbeing.

7.3.1. Cultural appropriate practice and cross-culture communication

One of the mentioned challenges is the lack of academic preparation to work with refugees and asylum seekers. One social worker admitted that in five years of university studies, she did not hear nor was aware that her beneficiaries could be this group of people. Another participant shared: "*When I was starting to work, I had no idea, anything and I didn't know anything about refugees and migrants*", while another reported feeling unprepared when she started working with people from other countries and cultures and worried about this lack of expertise.

I didn't know a lot about their culture, how will I work, how we will speak. It (the start) was a little bit challenge for me. […] I should like learn fast about the law, learn fast how to speak with them, learn about the cultures and check their countries, how it's custom for them how to even say hello, how to shake the hand, like how to approach them.

Social workers agreed that one of the main challenges at the beginning of their work with foreign language speaking clients was to deal with language differences. As one respondent shared: "*That was the challenge, the start, to start with the language because you need to have interpreter and you should know how to even have a consultation with them with interpreter*". Language barriers, in fact, represent a problem in their daily work with migrants, especially with those who do not have any basic knowledge of the language of the country. Research suggests that social workers are concerned about the extent to which their practice is effective when they do not share a language with their clients (Zakova et al., 2015). Linguistic barriers were indeed identified as an objective challenge by social workers in this study. Because of these, social workers working in the field of migration "*are in this triangle constantly, and they need to be very well able to manage this conversation, which is difficult […]. It's much easier when you're speaking on your language*". If on one hand interpreters can ease the communication by overcoming linguistic differences (Potocky & Naseh, 2019), on the other hand the question arises as to which extent misunderstandings can be avoided and communication between the social worker and their client can be effective. The presence of interpreters can as well represent an added challenge as they

stand in between the social worker and the client and in the way of the process of establishing a professional relationship. About this issue, one respondent shared that children "*oftentimes reach out to interpreters*", overseeing the social worker's role.

After acknowledging the interpreters' relevance and the difficulty that having to manage a three-way communication implicates, social workers also underlined the shortage of interpreters and the lack of funds for interpretation services at different levels, which contribute to making the working environment more challenging.

I didn't have the real interpreter from Farsi in that moment that he could be free to speak so his friend who speak Farsi and Arabic, he was translating Farsi in Arabic, and I have interpreter who speak Arabic. So just to hear his story. And that was like really difficult conversation from four different languages to translate because my interpreter he speak English, Arabic and I should from Croatian speak English. It was really, really difficult.

7.3.2. Lack of professional social workers, defined standards, and consistent practices

Social workers in this study highlighted the shortage of not only interpreters but also of professional social workers, especially in the non-governmental sector. Another challenge for the field of social work with migrants is the definition of the profession and its blurred boundaries. One respondent admitted that there are "*not so much like real social workers, social workers by education, working with refugees in Serbia*", and complained how most of the professionals who work with this group providing social work services are not prepared to work with them in these terms as they did not receive appropriate education in the social work field.

The profession of social work is lost somehow because of our system and how it functions […] We have case managers and case managers can be anyone […] Case worker could be a psychologist, of course a social worker, even a sociologist, pedagogists. And some of them, most of them, actually, are not social workers but we call them social workers because they are employed in the social welfare center.

One respondent also identified the lack of defined standards for practitioners working with migrant children in Serbia, including social workers and all other professionals who do the job of social workers. How these service providers look at the child's integration, interpret their needs, and direct their practice is evidently different and at the same time crucial to determine the integration outcomes.

There are, of course, international documents, the CRC and the local legislative. Everything is in place. But then how do they (professionals) understand it differs from one person to another.

Although social workers acknowledged the potential of non-governmental organizations for social work with migrant children and their flexibilities when it comes to the delivery of relevant services, they also identified the shortage of professionals who are competent to work with children in those organizations, as well as the lack of coordination with this sector and the State level, with implications for the children who bear the consequences of this in the last instance.

NGOs are carriers of big amount of services that are provided to children and people in general. So in NGOs you don't always find people who are educated or understand fully how to plan or implement some activities for children. And that's issue because the NGOs as they are given so much jurisdiction, let's say like that because the government isn't always quick to answer to the needs and NGOs are very flexible.

7.3.3. Setting boundaries and lack of support

Recent research indicates as common sources of stress among social workers the shortage of resources including staff, complex bureaucratic systems, lack of efficient coordination and communication with other stakeholders, cultural and linguistic barriers, heavy workloads and overtime work, emotional involvement, and the maintenance of boundaries (Negi et al., 2019; Wirth et al., 2019). Social workers participating in this study reported heavy workload being a challenge for their colleagues from the centers for Social Welfare. Because of the amount of work that exceeds their capacity, their colleagues have to work overtime and generally in difficult conditions, under stress and lacking time. "*They (in the centers for Social Welfare) are not so much directly involved because they do not have time*". According to respondents, they "*are swamped in all their work and they start seeing people as cases and forget to see a person as a human being*".

About the challenges that are more related to their everyday work, social workers employed in non-governmental organizations providing alternative care indicated for instance emotional attachment and the mental health state of unaccompanied migrant children as challenging. One participant shared her experience in a shelter for unaccompanied minors and talked about how easy it is to make an emotional connection with the children accommodated there since interactions happen on a daily basis. She described how every emotional state, be it positive or negative, is unavoidably shared, how they easily became a sort of family, and the huge responsibility that she feels on them. She also stressed that children who do not benefit from the presence of their parents tend to make an emotional attachment to social workers and look at them as the replacement of that role. However, as a social worker, "*you need to be the one who is authority […], you cannot*

become their parent", and so establishing and maintaining boundaries may be a good strategy, also to avoid dependency from support in anticipation of the child leaving the accommodation and becoming self-reliant and independent.

Furthermore, considering the circumstances in which some children on the move live, one social worker shared her experience in dealing with difficult situations in the shelter:

I know it was happening like suicide attempts and everything from self-harm, beatings between the children. […] It became impossible for me to work because I didn't know what will happen, will some somebody hurt themselves so much that I will not be able to help. It was really, really stressful at that point.

With regard to distress, literature suggests that supervision for social workers may reduce their work-related stress (Mette et al., 2020). Instead, the lack of support was identified by one social worker with experience in working with migrant children without parental care. "*I don't think it was understood by the people on the higher hierarchy that we need to have someone to help us cope with the stress that we are facing*", she complained. Not having the possibility to talk to someone and receive emotional and practical support to deal with the stress that social workers face especially when working with traumatized refugee and asylum-seeking children was of much concern. After all, the prevalence of burnout among social workers working with refugees is high (Wirth et al., 2019) and supervision could decrease the chances of burnout in the long-term. As this social worker pointed out, the stressful working environment and the lack of assistance made her reached a point in which she started lacking empathy and not feeling anything about any situation, which bothered her to the point of considering changing her job.

CONCLUSIONS

Starting from the understanding that social workers participating in this study have of the concept of integration, it was possible to investigate their experiences in relation to the integration of the children they work with and to gain an overview of their perceived role in this process.

From the participants' responses, the view on their role seems to be in line with their definition of integration, which suggests that how a social worker understands the integration process of their clients affects the perception of their role and work. Since there is no unified interpretation of this debated phenomenon, the aim at root was not to judge the social workers' understanding of integration as either right or wrong but rather to grasp the different facets that were then reflected in the narratives about their everyday practice and in their stance on the role they play.

In this study, integration was understood by social workers as a complex process and its definition varied from context to context, meaning that each practitioner expressed their own point of view and shared their personal experiences about their activities and professional contribution. Despite that, some topics recurred, and shared perspectives could be identified as well.

Given the multiple needs connected to the integration of migrant children, social workers reported focusing on the individual's needs to begin with and then searching for resources not only inside the child but in their surroundings as well. In doing so, social workers act as bridge and connect the individual with the resources needed in the given circumstances. Their conception of integration of newcomers in their host country appears to correspond to the psychosocial approach to social work practice for which people's adaptation to their environment is affected by their interaction with the environment itself and the constant fulfillment of needs through available resources.

Besides being a liaison, social workers operate as advocates and mediators too in that they facilitate the access to and the fulfillment of the child's rights, a prerequisite for their integration to be successful at all. This reflects what can be considered the other side of social work practice with refugees and asylum seekers in which the promotion of peoples' rights is realized through the contextualization of their problems and consequent advocacy activity, as suggested by the anti-oppressive model described previously.

In general, social workers accompany refugee and asylum-seeking children in the process called integration and are alongside them through all the steps, as the professional values of service, empowerment, social change and justice, collective responsibility, human dignity, and human rights require. For the child to have social connections in the community and feeling part of it, social workers can find and create possibilities for them to actively participate in their social

environment. Since integration is a two-way process, the contribution of the host society is fundamental. Social workers can enhance the role of the community and promote its participation in this process by challenging unconscious biases and addressing changes in the way people think of and perceive the other. Social workers can educate the society about refugees and other cultures to reduce stigmatization and organize intercultural meetings in the community as an opportunity for the society to learn about others. In doing so, it is expected that disinterested and neutral attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers will change into positive ones. Moreover, for those children who do not want to maintain traits of their culture of origin and prefer assimilation over integration due to the fear of being discriminated against and socially excluded, social workers can intervene at the society level by promoting cultural competence and appreciation for diversity starting from the school context, in order to prevent situations for which migrant children would wish to give up their culture to feel the same as their peers and to feel accepted. By working with local children and migrant children at the same time, social workers can contribute to changing the reception environment by promoting changes in the perception of differences and diversity on one hand and supporting migrant children individually in dealing with issues of discrimination and exclusion on the other hand. By acknowledging the relevant role played by the host community and recognizing the tendency of migrant children to prefer assimilation over integration when they meet a hostile, non-supporting environment, social workers not only look at the community as a pool of resources to provide the child with the support needed but also see in their own role the potential to promote a change at the level of the general society, especially in its attitude towards migrant children and its implications for their integration prospects.

Apart from taking into consideration and connecting different systems in the individual's environment to locate resources and protective factors and to identify problematic areas and potential threats to the child's well-being and adaptation process, the potential of the social work profession in the integration of migrant children that was suggested by this study is reflected in other areas as well. Through their services and the interaction with children and their families, social workers can for example provide them with a sense of safety, trust, stability, and normality. The provision of safety should be of great concern when working with people who are not familiar with their environment, as refugees and asylum seekers are, especially but not exclusively in the first period of their stay, and for that, the quality of the professional relationship that the social workers manage to achieve is fundamental. The establishment of a non-hierarchical, trust-based work relation between social workers and service users is at the center of social work practice both from a psychosocial perspective and an anti-oppressive point of view, and it is essential for any change to happen in the first place.

To conclude, recognizing how the values, standards, and ethics of the social work profession can be applied successfully when working with refugees and asylum seekers and the potential of the profession in the integration of migrant children, social workers represent a resource that should be always included in the non-governmental sector dealing with the integration of this group of people. The importance of social workers in non-governmental organizations was acknowledged as well by the study participants themselves.

"Like an octopus who has many arms and brings all those needs and things together in one place […] we can help one person or family on more levels that just one."

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the above-mentioned conclusions, recommendations stemming from this study are addressed to governments, policy makers, faculty members, national associations of social workers, and social workers in NGOs as follow:

1. To enhance the cooperation between the non-governmental sector and governmental agencies. As providers of several services targeted at migrant children, NGOs should for instance be given more support by the State in terms of funding to employ additional professional staff and expand their capacity.
2. To include the social workers' point of view in the design of integration policies. Since they are in contact with refugees in the first line, social workers represent a source of knowledge about integration issues, needs, and strategies from which policy makers could inform their decisions.
3. To create more possibilities for collaboration in the field of education between social work practitioners and teaching staff. Reflecting the importance of migrant children's inclusion into education, social workers should collaborate with educational institutions by offering their service and expertise to their colleagues in schools, for example with regards to the child needs assessment and the provision of extracurricular educational activities to promote access to quality education and social integration.
4. To involve social workers with experience in working with migrants in teaching university students and preparing future professionals, and in educating professionals from other fields about migrants' issues, in particular about the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.
5. To systematically prepare future professionals in higher education to work with refugees and asylum seekers. Students of social work study programs should receive specific training to work in this field. During their studies, they should be given the chance to work on their skills, e.g., learn how to work in cooperation with other professionals, especially interpreters, learn how to deal with the interpreters' presence in the relationship with their clients, and train other soft skills such as flexibility, multidimensional and lateral thinking, and adaptability. Challenges that working with foreign clients involves may discourage social workers from engaging in practice with refugees and asylum seekers in the first place, thus the need to make the profession appealing and to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and assistance necessary to feel prepared to enter this field and perform the job at best.

6. To rethink the profession of social work in the field of migration, provide standards for the professionals working with refugee and asylum-seeking children, and clearly define roles.
7. To establish a network to exchange best practices and peer-to-peer support among social workers working with refugees and asylum seekers. Since social work with this group of people is a relatively new field, social workers may benefit from connections with colleagues dealing with similar contexts, situations, and challenges.
8. To provide more opportunities for social workers to train and enhance their multicultural competence and other important skills. Possibilities for life-long learning and development of expertise should be available throughout the social workers' career in a consistent way.
9. To offer additional support to social workers and extend their capacity. Given the relevance that social workers have in the integration prospects of migrant children, more support to social workers and more specialized social workers, not least in the non-governmental sector, are needed to provide the best assistance in their integration process. Supervision to social workers working with the most vulnerable children in NGOs should be consistently provided.
10. To increase opportunities for meaningful interactions between newcomers and locals. In order to fight stigmatization and turn neutral attitudes from the society's side into positive ones, more spaces for people with a refugee background and citizens to meet should be created by social workers and NGOs.
11. To inform the society about refugees' stories and issues by means of social media. Social media may represent a valid, efficient channel to spread news about this group, advocate for their rights, and ultimately change people's mind and preconceptions.
12. To boost the role played by volunteers in integration activities. Social workers should focus on the potential of volunteers in NGOs to enhance their contribution to the integration of migrant children, not only by working directly with children but also in the community as potential promoters of social change and shifts in the society's narratives and attitudes.

SUMMARY

Whether to flee conflict, poverty, or persecution, whether with their families or alone, children continue to migrate to Europe in search of protection and a new home. Although the number of asylum seekers in EU countries decreased in 2020 due to the pandemic situation, the phenomenon of child migration did not stop and never will. Thus, the need for sustainable and successful integration, a topic that is being debated a lot across borders. What is the role social workers play in this process? How do professionals working with migrant children understand integration? Through 6 semi-structured interviews with social workers from non-governmental organizations in Croatia and Serbia, this study aims at investigating their perspectives and experiences and learning about their contribution to the integration process of the children they work with.

Findings show how the social workers' stance on their role is in line with their definition of integration. Participants suggest a diverse, multilevel understanding of integration and for each dimension they identified related needs, with particular attention to education and socialization, and obstacles as well, among which lack of access to quality education and discrimination were acknowledged as areas for improvement. For integration, the role of the host society is a key concern. Social worker warned from children's preference for assimilation and how discriminative behavior and neutral attitude from the society's side can negatively impact integration prospects. Besides that, a positive contribution of the participants' role and practice to the integration of their young service users emerged too. This study documents the potential of the profession in integration on three sides: 1) support in the adaptation to the new environment by provision of information and resources to the child based on their needs; 2) improvement in the number and quality of the child's interactions with the social environment by involvement and education of the host community and creation of spaces for positive encounters; 3) fulfillment of the child's rights through activity of advocacy, mediation, and assistance.

With regards to the challenges faced in their everyday practice, social workers indicated a need for additional support when working with unaccompanied migrant children, as well as clearer standards and guidelines for the profession of social work with migrants. Future professionals will have to be prepared to work with this group of people and acquire the necessary skills and knowledge, and possibilities for ongoing development of expertise should be provided. Areas for enhancement include cooperation between non-governmental and governmental sector, as well as collaboration among professionals and involvement of social workers in other relevant fields such as education. Overall, this study presents social workers as a great resource for the integration of migrant children and suggests valuing this profession in the non-governmental sector alike.

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Annex I: TABLE OF ANALYSIS

Theme	Categories	Codes	Quotations
1.View of the integration process	Meaning of integration	Access to rights	Integration is about accessing the rights in a given country, so the same rights as any other citizen in that country Having the full access to all relevant national services, having access to health protection to education, […], and of course, having personal documents and having relevant status In Croatia, it basically means to firstly to put them through education system It's about being either in education or in employment
		Independence	Having any means to support yourself. So being independent in this community, not having to rely on institutions or organizations for constant support They can live by themselves, like they don't need help to others to live, so they can live normally life
		Social connections	It's about having a social network, so having somebody you can rely on, somebody you can call your friend in a certain local community. Having social ties, work ties, cultural ties to your local community Close connections with Croatians
		Participation in the community's life	Integration for me is […] integrating fully in the life of the host communities This is a good example of some form of inclusion. We were making a party and the party was organized by local children, Serbian children in the school, the international school, the school they were going twice a week. So they organized the party, they prepared everything, they had like a show for the children and for them, and it was really, really nice. All

	the children were there, they were playing sports, but then they were watching some movies It is inclusion into the society Include them (children on the move) in the society while there they are in Serbia. It's impossible to integrate them fully, but for example, provide them with education, provide them with activities that will make them feel as a part of the community, making friends in the local community. Give them knowledge and skills that we can provide for them that will be useful for them in the future.
Sense of belonging	This was actually a very good example of integration […] He started feeling like a part of the community.
Maintenance of culture of origin	Understanding the new environment and understanding how to navigate in the new environment without having to give up important parts of your identity It's important for their identities to keep the fact that they are perhaps Muslim or that they are they speak a different language. They feed themselves differently. They eat with their hands, they different kinds of food.
Two-way process	Integration is a two-way process […] It means that the local community and Europeans in general should step out of their comfort zone a little. That doesn't mean that we should change who we are, but we should make our environments more accommodating for people from different cultures The two way thing means that we (host society) should start being open to seeing different cultures, seeing people of color, hearing different languages, having different kinds of activities going on in our local community that we had never seen before

			The two sidedness of integration is a lot has to change in our minds in the Western way of thinking That's what the word integration is about. "I'm listening. I'm trying to learn and understand". And he (refugee child) is telling me "I need this, we need this". I don't feel that the integration it's only one street process […] it's like a two-way street, because also we (host society) need to accept some things, to raise awareness about some things and to learn about them, […] to make better, like connection and cohesion. Integration is like that incomers and local people have like a place to live together and to go, that it feels safe to... to feel good in this nation and that both of them, they accept the values of the life, that they can like live together.
		Duration	Integration should start immediately when some person came to one country Long term process […] You cannot see the results really soon. But when you see it is it is really great success from both sides
	Integration needs	Support	I think they can integrate if they have somebody from the receiving country, a social worker or somebody who supports them in the process Somebody who knows the local community, who can provide support in accessing the rights First, it really need some safety figure, like one person who is like safe for them, like they can trust, who can give them information about everything and reduce the fear that they feel Support from the wider community and institutions and resources
		Connection to the culture of origin	(Being connected) with somebody who is closer to their culture of origin, somebody who can keep their connections with their cultural origin

	intact, and who can support his relation to his background Somebody who can keep you connected with your culture and background
Language competence	People should learn the language of the local community and I think they should be able to communicate in it in at least on a basic level Learning the language because the language is the most important so they can understand everything and they can speak about what they want, about their needs, about their rights Croatian language has to be like on some level so that they can integrate
Education	Being included in education Go to school Education Children from refugee and migrant population come in contact with the local society mostly via the school system
Assistance in school	They really need a lot of support, they need intensive Serbian language classes, they need some supplementary classes for various subjects, they need regular follow up provision of books Continuous support Assistants who are present in the school They should be given a teaching assistant, at least for a period of a few months, just to ease this transition into fully integrating in the school […] I think at least in the first few months, this person (assistant) would be a great tool for to mediate the relationships between a refugee child who can barely speak any local language and the local children, because without that, there is nobody to establish any kind of connections

		Socialization in the community and friendships	Be part of the community and feel “normal”, like everything is normal They are really worried about that thing if they are going to be liked by the other people, you know, especially when they are like in high school, they are all the time concerns. You know, I will not make any bad things. I will show in my best way to, you know, to other people see that I am good. To be accepted and to make friends He (a refugee teenager) all the time repeating that sentence "I want to show the world that not all refugees are terrorists and not all refugees are bad. Like how you have bad people in Serbia, we have also bad people in Afghanistan. But we are the same. He wants to be part of this society Friends
		Every child’s needs	Their needs are like every other child's needs They should have childhood, they should have something for fun. […] They need something in that time to not lose their childhood Activities besides school
		Short stay in the asylum process	Is important that they don't stay long in the waiting process of getting international protection. This feeling, not knowing if they will stay in this country or they will need to move or what will happen to them, it's the feeling that they... that feeling destroy everything
	Integration challenges	Uncertainty about the future	I know a lot of them they didn't want to learn, they didn't want to do anything, they didn't want to have friends because it's really difficult for them, because what if they will need to leave again? Because this is not the only country they came. So each time when they need to move from one place to another and they meet some friends, for them it's really difficult to say

			goodbye to these friends, to move and not to see them anymore
		Waiting time	After waiting half a year to get international protection, then you need half year just to make a paperwork for them.[…] For kids, for youngesters, this is the lost part of their life, which is the most important part. So especially for kids that they suffer from some traumatic experience, and this is one of that that we can say this dramatic experience, it can have a huge consequence on their mental health. It can cause some mental illness or disease. So it is really, really important that the integration process is the shortest possible for the kids and youngsters.
		Mental health	He feel a huge anger and anxiety
		Loss of connections with heritage culture	I think a lot of the problems stem from being cut from where you came from and being forced to adapt fully to this new environment with disregarding who you were before. Giving up of too much (of the culture) might make you feel very lost
		No refugee community in the host country	Still we do not have some refugee communities here in Serbia, like Afghani community or Pakistani community. And then they (children) feel quite isolated and without relevant support
		Lack of empowerment	I don't think that people of color, for example, migrants or refugees, feel empowered enough to take things from their own culture and act like that here
		Perceived difference	They don't want to go to the beach because they will get a darker tan and they don't want to stand out even more so […] they would be recognized even more and they would feel different
		Cultural differences	The cultural background. Maybe in schools when is that together lunch, they don't eat food which is not halal, maybe or something like that.. from like that little things to the main things, they're all important for integration
		Identity formation	Being a teenager is a difficult stage in life in itself for anyone […] because at the age of 15, you are forming your identity. […] And I think it's all the more difficult for children who left their safe spaces where they know their family,

	their local community, who they are very familiar with. And then they arrive to something that is completely opposite from everything they know at such a vulnerable stage where they have to figure out who they are
Refugee label	They have this identity of being a refugee [...] So having this added difficulty, I guess this, and the term refugee has a bit of hardness to it
Lack of (perceived) safety	They might not feel safe because they might be attacked from a person, from an adult person, from the local community Every other guy I spoke with was beaten up in the street and 99 percent of them never reported it because some had experiences with reporting it and they weren't taken seriously by the police. And I don't think they feel safe and especially the kids Other guys there that they was older they was bullying him in this reception center, and he was usually protecting himself by fighting back The worst case, that youngsters, kids, that they're not protected, that they don't have someone who take care of them, stay in the place with a lot of adults that they don't even know, they're not even family members or anyone
Language barrier	Sometimes children are just formally enrolled into education, they do not understand the language of instruction, which is Serbian, they go to school for a week or two and then they just give it up because of that language barrier
No quality education	All of them can be formally enrolled, but it does not mean that they all have access to quality education. […] you do not know actually how many children have efficient access to education, for how long they stay in the education. They attend online classes now, since March last year. Yes, unlike local children who attend online classes or they go just physically to

			school, depending on the current COVID situation, but these children (with families) have been attending online classes […] While children who are accommodated in these five centers or shelters for unaccompanied children, they attend classes like local children […] while kids in those three centers are actually completely excluded from regular attendance
		Distance from services	There is another center which is far away from Belgrade, which is in the south of Serbia. It is (name) and currently there are only around 10 unaccompanied children there […] it is far away from Belgrade and we are not really happy to see children sent there because it is situated in an underdeveloped of Serbia. And just without NGO support there, there are no... and without sufficient access to education, to health and also, I have to say that the majority of NGOs that are dealing with unaccompanied children are situated in Belgrade and also in other two bigger cities, but not in that area Often they are without interpretation support, without psychological support because it takes around five or six hours to get there to provide, for example, psychological support, and as I said the main service provider are situated in Belgrade The problem is everything is happening in Zagreb. All NGOs coming from Zagreb, not from Kutina. Kutina is a small city, it's almost a village and there is no jobs, no nothing. There is only one school and one kindergarten there. Really difficult for kids to go in this kindergarten. For school maybe because they have maybe bus, but for kindergarten it's far from the center, so the families cannot walk to go there. They don't have a car. So how they will send a kindergarten kid to kindergarden?
	Integration strategies	Education	They've been most integrated when they're going to school. […] when you are smaller, it's easier to be integrated. You will fast learn the language and you will easier find the friends because

			when you are really young, your friends doesn't care that you are from Iran, Afghanistan, from Syria. They like you and they want to hang out with you
		Socialization	They were calling him on their birthdays to the parties to celebrate something. And (name of the child) is still going on that kind of events […] also it's the moment when he learn about our holidays
		Assimilation	When they (unaccompanied children) are in some social circles in the local community, I think they don't want to stress their origin or certain parts of their identity because they want to feel like they want to feel the same as the peers they are relating to in this community. They really want to blend in. They don't want to be different. It's easier to kind of let go of some things because you feel you would be a bit more accepted here

Theme	Categories	Codes	Quotations
2. Society	Society's negative attitude	Perception of social work with refugees	When I explain to people what I do, I work with refugees, everyone's reaction is "oh, it's so difficult" They (other people) have faces like this "you are working with refugees, oh,", like they are feeling pity about me That question comes from that closeness, because "are you sure? why are working there? are you safe?
		View of refugees	They have their ideas. They should stay there (in their countriws) and fight […] and they shouldn't come here They (society) often say they are soldiers. They are just soldiers People have this very simplistic idea of who refugees are and why people migrate For them, all of them are just migrants who are looking for better life, that's it Generally they are seen as people who just want to reach EU countries in order to be social welfare beneficiaries, to get some job. They (society) see them as a threat
		Lack of knowledge of asylum system	My close friends and my family don't know anything about this theme They don't have a basic understanding, actually, of how the asylum system works and about human rights Generally people do not make difference between migrants and refugees. […] people know nothing about it
		Stigma	There is a lot of prejudice, unfortunately, about them

Lack of knowledge of other cultures	They don't really know a lot about the East or any culture, Syrian, Lebanese, Turkish Usually we have some problems with parents because they don't understand culture
Lack of empathy	They all forget that Croatians migrate a lot Some people understand (what it means to be a refugee), but they won't accept people who went to similar path because they usually say it's not the same
Close mindedness	When you go in some other European capitals, like Vienna or Paris, you know, like it's it's so mixed culture, but we cannot accept it Croatian people are not still open to refugees in general We are still a society traditional and we are not open to it (receiving refugees)
Fear	Big fear about that somebody come and will take our land and our culture and our religion. […] "these refugees will, they will took our land, they will took our jobs, they will marry our daughters" There was no so many people that they are open for this contract with the government (to accommodate refugees) and stuff, they are afraid of this a little bit
Media	We are here facing with a lot of political, I think it's the public opinion, a lot of our public opinion and maybe the media is doing really bad things, especially from three years ago till now […] all the time migrants and refugees going out in news like bad people who are irregular, they are stealing, they are raping, they are, you know, doing some bad things.[…] all the time when something bad happen, we don't know who did it but, you know, in the news, it shows the refugee Some common people who are living somewhere in Serbia, not in Belgrade, they know about that it is only what they could hear in the news. And

			that is like... I think that is the biggest problem that we have only negative news Is a lot of hate speech in the public space, on different social platforms, then in the newspapers
		Fake news in social media	Facebook group "antimigrant Serbia" […] they said, OK, our police is not doing anything. We will be now in charge for cleaning the park, for cleaning the Belgrad, for cleaning the bus station from refugees, because police is not doing anything. We will be in charge to clean, clean our land. […] when was when was police hour during the pandemic, in that group came out news that we are close, we cannot go out because our government is bringing refugees and migrants from the south. I think on Bulgaria, Kosova and Macedonia, they're bringing them with the busses and they will give them land in Serbia. And because of that, we are in house, to not see that, to not see that happening. Our society still believes in a lot of fake news. They are there in the media, a lot of like half informations
		Indifference	Local society they didn't really make any issue, they were not really happy that they are going with their children, but they were not making any issues. […] I think the local community is like "OK, they are there, we will not make problems, but we will not really make an effort to integrate them more". That is my experience. So they're pretty neutral, not making issues, not making effort
	Society's positive attitude	Acts of kindness	When we have this huge influx of Middle Eastern immigrants, refugees from Middle East, that first period I'm speaking about, for example, 2015 and 16. A lot of people feeling sad about situation, they are like they can make a connection with refugees, especially from Syria, because we share the same destiny. You know, during the Balkans war, civil war in ex former Yugoslavia, we have a lot of refugees first from Bosnia and Croatia and after that in 1999 from Kosovo. And, you know, people make connection, all the time

			humans have that good thing, when something like that happening we better make connection. You know, I remember when, like, thousands of people was in the center of Belgrade. People are coming. Nobody asked for help, but they are coming. They're bringing the food, they're bringing the clothes, bringing everything what they need and sharing with families. You know, they just came and and wants to help the people in any any way they can Some people in Croatia already know because of our war what it means to be a refugee
		Empathy for children	There is a difference when you are telling that you are working with children, especially children without parental care […] because people have sensitive feelings about children and about those who don't have parents. I think they (other children's parents) felt sad about, you know, because he was without parents, he was really small and they were really sad and the first time, you know, they were all the time calling us: "oh, sorry, maybe he don't understand it, tomorrow he needs to bring that kind of, you know, that kind of homework or that kind of notebook. They will need it, I don't know how much he understand. My daughter told me to call you to check". You know, they're so concerned about him, you know, and because they were really small, they were calling (name of the child) on their birthdays
		Local children	Local children are very open I think it really starts, for our society, with children, because then they can say something to their parents and then I think that we'll open up more people who are not on the same view as us
		Local volunteers	Very big impact of our volunteers for working with children because they're with them, they're organizing trips, they go to movie theaters and theaters. […] And then volunteers and children like work together on that open mind of other people in Croatia

Theme	Categories	Codes	Quotations
3. Social workers' impact	Social workers' role	First contact	The first person of contact One person they can talk about everything and anything
		Legal guardian	I'm the legal custody of three children
		Bridge to the local community	If the child wants to explore their artistic side, if the child wants to go to some sports […] I would encourage and try to find ways as a social worker to connect the child with NGOs, with sporting clubs in the community, with anyone who could support the child in socializing and exploring their talents, their interests. Be a liaison between all these micro communities, if you will, NGO, sport clubs, school paracord Be able to manage […] different potentials for the child to be involved in the community Connect the child with all these micro communities within the community that can provide him with the more sense of stability and safety and ways for them to explore their identities and what they are good at I talk with a lot of institutions, social welfare center, Jobcentre, and then doctors for some health problems
		Multidimensionality	A social worker needs to be what the beneficiaries need in that moment. […] it can be sister love or hug, some emotional support, or sometimes it can be like only to hanging out, to draw something. In pandemic, you know, we were closed and we have restrictions to going out and, you know, somebody needs to cut their hair, you know, and because I know to, I'm not an expert, but I know how to do it, I was the one (cutting their hair) Sometimes a social worker needs to change their role
		To accompany	They usually told me like "but your job, that's not your job. Like, you shouldn't do these extra stuff.

			You know, your job is just to, you know, give them information about their rights. That's your job". But for me, just giving information for the right it's not my job. I didn't have a problem to stay longer on my job and go with them in some institutions. In the NGOs it's really the role of be part of their lives, just do everything that they need with them
		Effective helper	I think that social work lies on some of the great values that if implemented could help refugees and migrants here The knowledge that we gain is much more systematic. So we tend to focus on the resources that exist in the community, in the person, in the family and so on
	Social workers' activities in their practice	Provision of sense of safety and trust	If you approach a child with the sense of "Ok, I am here to support you, to see what we can do, I will be at your disposal. I am now your person who will make you feel safe here". I think that's a very important approach. If you approach the child actually wanting to hear and understand what the child is going through, I think he will feel much safer and much more empowered to reach out to you and to ask what his options are, what his rights are, where is he going next?
		Provision of information	We should provide as many information as possible because the information and knowledge empowers you Is very important to keep the child constantly informed about everything that's going on
		Understanding the child's needs	Understand and focus on the needs of the person
		Search for resources	We are always looking for some resources, something that nobody else is looking at. And then we try to make it as a positive thing for the child. This is what was also leading me when I was working with children refugees, like "what can I do? Who can help me? Who can I find?"

	We need to keep constantly searching for resources from the local level, national level or our small local community, what is the resources and how we can use it
Cooperation with other professions	Definitely I would always consult a psychologist. […] And I would always consult people in education pedagogues and be in constant contact with them I think it's very, very important for the social worker to be in contact with the living environment of the child. And also health services, if there is some issue You need to have connections with the community and the actors in the community. Cooperate together (with other professions) to get the full protection that children need. I was working for an NGO and I was in the good relation with the social workers and the lawyers from the social center. So we have a good connection I mean good working environment
Support for their childhood	Find quality ways for the child to spend their free time […] and to feel like a child and yeah, explore organizations that can provide spaces just to play and making sure the child goes to parks or something like that
Non-formal education	I help them with the integration process, in some psychological and social workshops
Support in accessing education	We should support staying in education and support people getting any kind of certification well into their 20s if it's necessary, because I think that will support them not just later on with the labor market, but with their sense of identity. And I think they would feel stronger and like they maybe have something they can provide to the community and strengthening what they already know (In university there's) no category for refugees. And we need to change in front of university procedure that there is a category of refugees

		We first talk with the schools that are nearby
	Education for future social workers	I do educate future social workers […] we also did implement another new subject regarding children, migrants and migration
	Education for the local community	A project where I was going to schools and teaching curriculum there where the kids would learn about migration and get involved in certain small projects for them to discover ways of how they can make the integration work, what they as teenagers can do to make people feel welcome One project that has a curriculum for schools, elementary, high schools , and faculty, and the teacher had that curriculum about immigration, integration through their education system. And that was really fun to see how children reacted to refugee and migrants in the beginning and in the end of that six workshops that we had with them. Educate people about the difference between migrants and refugees Education for a lot of people who are working in the system
	Organization of intercultural meetings	We are really trying to advocate for them. We have some intercultural meetings with local communities. We were in Split and Rijeka […] they had the opportunity to talk a little bit with people who are living in that cities
	Advocacy	(name of the organization) is doing something to change it (only negative news in the media). (Names of two young refugees) were interviewed […] and it's appeared in a lot of news and also our local news (name), they make some reports about this
	Mediation	We were speaking and negotiate with school […], we will be on (parents') meeting and we will speak with family, with parents about this case (an unaccompanied minor) and we want to show good will to help them to understand better situation

			about (name of the child), […] explain to the parents who he is The people who are working there (in other institutions) they don't understand the situation, we need to approach them and to help them to better understand situation enough that we will find together a solution I was in my NGO I was on the phone and calling people and explaining and trying to find someone who can accept this contract with the government, with the social welfare center. So I helped them to find accommodation When I was going in the institutions, in the social center, they didn't know what they should do. The first they was looking me "what? He can go to school? No, how he can go to school? I say "yeah, by the law, he has the right to go to school, so you should provide him to go to school". My colleagues aren't educated enough on this topic […] It's really challenging to explain to social workers that... or another colleagues in schools, that they have similar rights as the Croatian people
	Social workers' requirements	Cultural knowledge	They (social workers working in migration field) need […] to learn about the culture with the group they are working, but also to learn about their customs, to learn about about that people You need to educate yourself. You need to make a lot of research We need to educate us to go on training to do better, to better know situation about from what backgrounds are the kids we are working, you know, to our work with them to be good and be... contributional
		Legal competence	I really took all the law about international perfection in Croatia, and learned all these articles in my mind, to know how to do it Know all the procedures

		Ongoing education	To learn a lot Go on trainings
		Soft skills	Empathy Be sensitive with people Know how to manage time Social worker needs to be really organized, needs to manage everything and needs to all the time finding solutions to this problem. OK, this is the problem. And what kind of resources I have around me? Ok, what I can use and, you know, solution will come somehow Patience Communication skills (They need) to heard from the first line, what is their needs and how they see the situation, how our beneficiaries see the situation in where they are Some of the basic knowledge that I had from the faculty regarding values, regarding standards of work, regarding ethics helped me to just... to be flexible and then implement those values in working with refugees and migrants
		Boundaries	You need to know where is your limit, you need to repeat where is your limit. […] You cannot come in that role of a superhero where you can resolve anything and you will change the world. You need to know what you can do and what you cannot do. […] a lot of social workers now, they are taking responsibility for something that is not up to them Set boundaries
	Social workers' challenges	No preparation to work with migrants from the University	When I was in faculty I didn't hear about... like my beneficiaries could be refugees. I didn't hear it in five year education

			When I was starting to work, I had no idea, anything and I didn't know anything about refugees and migrants I didn't know a lot about their culture, how will I work, how we will speak. It (the start) was a little bit challenge for me.[…] I should like learn fast about the law, learn fast how to speak with them, learn about the cultures and check their countries, how it's custom for them how to even say hello, how to shake the hand, like how to approach them That was the challenge, the start, to start with the language because you need to have interpreter and you should know how to even have a consultation with them with interpreter
		Communication barriers	Objective challenges like language barrier They (children) oftentimes reach out to interpreters They (social workers working in the field of migration) are in this triangle constantly, and they need to be very well able to manage this conversation, which is difficult […] It's much easier when you're speaking on your language and when you don't need the third person (interpreter) to stand in between
		Shortage of interpreters	They (social welfare centers) do not have any funds for interpretation services I didn't have the real interpreter from Farsi in that moment that he could be free to speak so his friend who speak Farsi and Arabic, he was translating Farsi in Arabic, and I have interpreter who speak Arabic. So just to hear his story. And that was like really difficult conversation from four different languages to translate because my interpreter he speak English, Arabic and I should from Croatian speak English. It was really, really difficult
		Lack of professional social workers	Lack, shortage of social workers In the NGO that I started working I was the only social worker there

	Two years ago this NGO, they didn't have any social worker Not so much like real social workers, social workers by education, working with refugees in Serbia
Definition of the profession	Social workers in Serbia, they are not always people who are educated to be social workers. They are just called social workers, but they are not really social workers. So we have for example field social workers who are not really by education social workers. […] the vast majority of professionals are not social workers by education, but are working as social workers. The profession of social work is lost somehow because of our system and how it functions.[…] We have case managers and case managers can be anyone and psychologists and pedagogists Case worker could be a psychologist, of course a social worker, even a sociologist, pedagogists. And some of them, most of them, actually, are not social workers but we call them social workers because they are employed in the social welfare center Other professions do not receive appropriate education
No defined standards	There are no adequate standards for the professionals working... for very big amount of the professionals working with children in Serbia
Different practices	There are, of course, international documents, the CRC and the local legislative. Everything is in place. But then how do they understand it differs from one person to another Sometimes it was a challenge to convince them (service providers) that this is really written, and then they should do something because they didn't have procedure from before
Heavy workload	Social workers are swamped in all their work and they start seeing people as cases and forget to see a person as a human being

			They are really overworked. Those social workers, they work in very difficult conditions They (from the social welfare system) are not so much directly involved because they do not have time I know a lot of them there that they was actually working after their working hours just to solve the cases. So they was like with a lot of cases
		Emotional attachment	It is really easy to connect with the beneficiaries. And you are every day here, you know, you are sharing with them everything, when you are sad, when you are happy, you are celebrating holidays, you know, you become like some kind of family. And you have so much, huge responsibility about them When that children make connection with you, they become... they make emotional attachment to you, you know, and because they don't have their parents, you are coming in that role. You are replacing and that is really challenging, you know, because you need to be the one who is authority, but you are still... you cannot become their parent.
		Difficult situations in accommodation for unaccompanied UMC	I know it was happening like suicide attempts and everything from self-harm, beatings between the children
		Lack of support	The lack of support for the professionals working with these children. I don't think it was understood by the people on the higher hierarchy that we need to have someone to help us cope with the stress that we are facing
		Stress	It became impossible for me to work because I didn't know what will happen, will some somebody hurt themselves so much that I will not be able to help. It was really, really stressful at that point
		Burnout	Burnout… I wasn't really feeling anything about the situation. And it was really bothering me to the point that I was thinking about leaving [name of the Organization]

Annex II: INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH STUDY

Investigator	Institution
Eleonora Nicolaci	Mykolas Romeris University
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You are being asked to participate in a research study under confidentiality terms. This form includes information about the study so that you may make a fully informed decision regarding your participation.

Purpose of the study: this research study is part of a Master Thesis project within the Master Program "Social Work with Children and Youth", Faculty of Human and Social Studies at Mykolas Romeris University. Its purpose is to investigate the role of social workers in the integration process of refugee and asylum-seeking minors.

Procedure: you will participate in 1 semi-structured interview. Modality (face-to-face or online), time, and location will be agreed in advance. Interview will be audio recorded.

Assurance of confidentiality: interviews will be transcribed within 14 days. After transcription, recordings will be deleted. Interview transcripts will not include your name. At all stages of the research, data will be treated with confidentiality, meaning that you can be identified by the investigator only and your name will not be revealed in any context. Access to only parts of the interview transcripts may be given to the Master Thesis supervisor on request or in case advice is sought by the investigator for data analysis purposes.

Voluntary participation: your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to withdraw at any time. You are free to refuse to answer any question.

Assurance of protection from any harm or distress: You will be protected from questions which may cause you any harm or distress, or which may be seen as unduly intrusive. Risks or embarrassment associated with participating in the study are not envisaged.

Benefits to study participants: none

For more information about this research study, please contact:

Eleonora Nicolaci
+ 39 3404218163
elnicolaci@stud.mruni.eu

Make sure that your questions are answered to your satisfaction.

By signing below, you acknowledge that you have been informed about and consent to be a participant in the study described above. You agree that the interview will be audio recorded and that your words will be transcribed and may be used as anonymous quotations in the Master Thesis document.

A signed copy of this informed consent agreement will be kept by the investigator. You are entitled to retain a copy as well.

Study Participant's Name _____
Study Participant's Signature _____
Date: _____

Investigator's Name _____
Investigator's Signature _____
Date: _____

Annex III: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What does integration mean to you?
2. How can refugee and asylum-seeking children integrate in the society?
3. What are the challenges to their integration?
4. In what ways do the services you provide to refugee and asylum-seeking children impact their integration?
5. How does this picture reflect your experience and role in relation to the integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children you work with?