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Thirteen year old Roxanna and her family live in Bacau County Romania. The family receives support from a social worker and community nurse through UNICEF's Minimum Package of Services, a programme which provides vulnerable families with integrated access to healthcare, social protection and education.

National Responses to Adjust Child Protection Systems (COVID 19)

At the end of March 2020, the Child Protection team in the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) designed a brief online survey to take stock of what national authorities are doing to adjust national child protection systems and services in the Wake of COVID 19. Between April 1st and April 14th the survey was administered online to 23 UNICEF offices in the region (Annex 1 – Questionnaire). All 23 UNICEF offices¹ responded based on their ongoing work with national authorities and partners to reform and strengthen national and sub-national child protection systems and services. This report aims to synthesize the responses across the region; support national and international child protection agencies, organizations and authorities to identify promising practices, challenges, risks and opportunities; and promote exchange of experience and practices across the region and globally.

This survey report is complemented by UNICEF ECARO's ongoing effort to compile tools, trainings, guidance, and other documents which are available to UNICEF offices on our internal share point site: <https://unicef.sharepoint.com/teams/ECAR-ChildProtection>

Important additional information about UNICEF's response and needs in the region can be accessed through the UNICEF ECARO COVID-19 Situation Reports (there have been 5 to date) which contains important information on UNICEF's response to the crises across the region, including on dimensions of child protection. The COVID 19 Situational Reports for the entire organization are public, and can be found at: https://www.unicef.org/appeals/Novel%20Coronavirus_sitreps.html

Contact: Aaron Greenberg, Regional Advisor Child Protection – agreenberg@unicef.org

¹ Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (UNSCR1244), Kyrgyzstan, Republic of North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan – in addition, UNICEF Greece Partnership Office and the Italy Refugee and Migrant Response team responded to the survey.

National Coordination Mechanisms and Plans for Protection of Children

- 17 out of 23 national governments in the ECA region have put in place multi-sectoral COVID-19 response plans.²
- From the 17 countries with overall COVID-19 response plans, 11 have put in place a coordination mechanism to address child protection, social services and family support delivery.³ From the 11 countries, 9 (Armenia, Georgia, Montenegro, Serbia, Italy, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) have prioritized child protection/social service delivery within the overall national response plans. In addition, North Macedonia and Romania do not have national COVID-19 response plans but have established a national coordination mechanism to address child protection, social services and family support. The coordination mechanisms across all 13 countries are either led by CP/Child Rights agencies or Ministries of Social Welfare / Protection.
- Many of these countries had pre-existing CP coordination mechanisms in place and did not require the establishment of a new mechanism.
- 13 out of the 23 countries reported that their governments have put in place measures for places of detention (pretrial and post-trial) and other forms of deprivation of liberty including refugees and migrant reception centers.⁴
- 16 out of the 23 countries reported efforts within the justice system (courts, prosecutors, and police) to address the impacts of COVID 19. The actions range from prioritization of cases, postponement of hearings and use of online options for continued operations.

Highlights: Essential Protection Services, and Social Work

- **In the majority of countries social work departments at local level continue to operate,** often with reduced staffing and functions. In Croatia for example, the social welfare system was re-organized in a way to minimize the risk of infection within the social service workforce. This has included providing remote support to families at low and moderate risk remotely with face-to-face support reserved only for high risk families.
- **The vast majority of countries⁵ indicated that there are lists of social services deemed essential and are permitted to continue to operate.** These services include: Residential care facilities and family and community based alternative care services (mainly foster care); and domestic violence shelters and shelters and services designed to support children living or working on the street. In some countries (Italy, Moldova) while national level regulations permit operation of essential social/CP services, the situation differs at local and regional levels. While essential social services remain fully operational in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, it is important to note that these countries have not reported any COVID-19 cases and thus have not introduced any strict restrictive measures.
- **The vast majority of social work case management has shifted to online, phone, and other forms of remote communication** to ensure children and families continue to receive follow up. Hotlines for domestic abuse and violence cases across the region are being strengthened, reactivated or established.
- **In Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Georgia boarding schools and special schools for children were closed and children returned to their families.** These institutions were closed at the same time as the rest of the mainstream schools. Children were sent home for the period of lockdown and it is anticipated that they will be returned to the institutions after the lockdown.
- **In Croatia, Tajikistan and Armenia family support outreach work/emergency teams were created;** some countries stopped undertaking proactive social work but allowed work to continue on emergency family support cases, including Turkey, Moldova and Albania. In Tajikistan home visiting staff- para-social workers and home visiting nurses are operating.
- **In Georgia, Armenia, Kosovo, Croatia and the Ukraine crisis centers for victims of violence continue to operate and new teams were established.** For example, in Croatia, the government established new special crisis teams that respond to reported cases of family violence.
- **In almost all countries day care services, including for children with disabilities were suspended** leaving many children and families without an alternative. In Armenia day care services provide outreach services only.

2 Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan

3 Albania, Armenia, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, Moldova, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan

4 Albania, Armenia, Kosovo (UNSCR1244), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, N. Macedonia, Montenegro, Turkey, Greece, Azerbaijan, Italy. Those that have addressed migrant and refugees are: Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Kosovo (UNSCR1244), North Macedonia

5 Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (UNSCR1244), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan

Highlights: Key Justice Responses for Children

- **Access to detention facilities (for visitors, service providers) have been restricted in Montenegro, Turkey, Albania, Armenia, Georgia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Azerbaijan.** In Bosnia and Herzegovina there has been restricted movements of children in detention to protect from health related risks including: suspension of visits; suspension of use of services outside the facilities; compulsory quarantine for all newcomers; and restriction of access to detention facilities for all visitors.
- **Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, Georgia and Bulgaria are providing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in places of detention.** Albania and Bulgaria developed information materials/technical guidance for staff and children in the justice system on Covid 19 prevention and protection measures. This includes distribution of leaflets with illustrations and videos.
- **In Albania, the health personnel of the Institute for Execution of Criminal Sentences of Juveniles is applying regular daily checks for detained children,** both medical and non-medical personnel of the facility are equipped with and are required to wear protective equipment when entering the zones where children are placed. In addition all physical meetings between the probation officers and children under probation have been suspended and replaced by telephone.
- **In Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey and Serbia courts are having face-to-face sessions only for urgent cases regarding deprivation of liberty.** In Bosnia and Herzegovina, criminal proceedings for child victims of crime are also proceeding, and prioritized. Other criminal cases and restriction orders are considered on-line, or delayed/postponed. Non-urgent cases are postponed until the end of the state of emergency. In Turkey, all probation-related Psycho-social Support services are postponed until June (UNICEF is working to ensure remote PSS services are still provided). In Italy, Children's Courts are putting efforts to digitize the pending files and organize video-hearings with children and legal representatives.
- **Refugee and Migrant Children:** In Kosovo, authorities established separate quarantine facilities run by the Ministry of Interior for refugee and migrant children. In Greece, COVID-19 preparedness and response plans have been drafted for the Reception and Identification Centers in the islands, as well as in open accommodation sites in the mainland. In Italy, the Ministry of Interior asked all reception centers for refugee and migrants to adopt all the measures envisaged in the Decrees issued by the MoH. In particular, to equip each reception center with a room to be used in case of person to be placed in quarantine. However, it is said that these measures are unlikely to be adopted for the majority of the centres and that there is no national monitoring mechanism in place. In North Macedonia, the reception centers are also following all of the recommendations issued by the Ministry of Health and have established a room for isolation, while one transit center will be used as a quarantine for asylum seekers for which the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy is preparing a protocol.



Stanislava is a 15-year-old girl. After her birth she was placed in several old type state institutions for children. Now she lives in a family type placement center (small group home) for children with disabilities and attends mainstream school. Stanislava is supported by teachers, caregivers, social workers, psychologists, speech therapists and rehabilitators.

Key Gaps and Concerns

- **There seems to be little psychosocial support to the workforce by national governments.** In general, support to child and social protection is provided through UNICEF (in some countries through the Red Cross).
- **Children with disabilities** – in particular their overrepresentation in institutional care and the increased risks to their health and well being during the COVID crises, but also the support needed by families who can not access day care centers which have been closed temporarily.
- **While hotlines to address VAC cases are gaining closer attention and some investment, it is not clear from the response plans how further referrals and follow ups are taking place** as almost all social workers/case managers deliver remote support only. Some countries have established special response teams, others have not.
- While national governments give due attention to the messaging on VAC, abuse and disciplining at home, **there is very little information on how parents are supported to promote positive discipline measures.** Distribution of tips and materials through internet and TV seems to be limited, or mainly happens with the support of UNICEF and/or other organizations.
- **The rapid reintegration of children from institutional care in some countries raise concerns.** Many of these children were sent home without proper preparation for child reintegration and family reunification. This return in many countries coincided with shutdown of other social work statutory services leaving these children and families without timely assessment, monitoring and support to ensure the best interests of the child are maintained. Quick and unprepared reintegration or placement of children with extended families may lead in many situations to unanticipated emotional stress, exacerbated health issues, and lack of education, as well as an increased risk of child abuse, neglect and exploitation. It is important that UNICEF starts advocacy and programming efforts to help governments to support these children to remain in safe family care after the health measures are uplifted.
- **Very limited PPE for frontline social work and social service workforce** including key workforce who remain at the centers for the victims of DV/trafficking/ street children; social workers who are still requested to respond to the emergency cases such as VAC at homes; etc. This is resulting in suspension or interruption of key family support services and interventions.
- **New case management technologies are missing** with many social work systems struggling to manage cases remotely or follow up and share information with other key actors due to a lack of integrated online case management tools.
- **Only 4 countries have indicated that children's cases been categorized as urgent and trial proceedings will continue during this period.** This implies that in many countries cases involving children are suspended /postponed. There is a gap in arrangements for ensuring that children continue to have contact with their families, given that in almost all countries, visitations have been restricted.
- **The release of children from detention has been reported only in Albania and potentially forthcoming in Turkey.** Advocacy to encourage releases and advance justice reforms in countries with high detention rates should accelerate.

Promising Practices

- **The Government of Georgia has taken proactive measures across a range of child protection dimensions.** Specialized TV education programs for parents with children with disabilities are being initiated in a partnership with the Georgian Public Broadcaster, twice per week on the main educational channel. Experts will be sharing with parents strategies to care for children with disabilities in a supportive family environment. Topics will include how to provide emotional support to children, how to manage/influence behavior at home, how to develop independent living skills at home. **A specialized Child Hotline 111** was launched. This is an initiative of the Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee of the Parliament of Georgia aimed at responding to the immediate needs of children (and is operated by the Agency for State Care and Assistance including for Victims of Human Trafficking). The hotline will enable children and their families fast-track access to enhanced public services including: cash benefits; health; social services and programmes; prevention of violence and referral of children victims of violence; equipment and assistive technology; housing and home adaptations. **UNICEF is contracting NGOS to support the government agencies to provide comprehensive support to child protection cases.** The complementary support includes psychosocial support to children in state care and their caregivers. Children in foster care, small group homes, and 1 institution are getting individual and group sessions. Caregivers are also given individual sessions. The project (operational for one week at the drafting of this report) has already conducted more than 100 sessions and covered more than 100 children and caregivers. Another local NGO was contracted to support social workers of the State Care Agency and the justice sector social workers (probation, penitentiary) to be able to

provide quality services during the COVID outbreak; the project entails development of special guidelines for social workers tailored to their needs as well as providing professional supervision to social workers.

Guidelines for religious leaders to prevent violence against children were also developed and are being shared with Orthodox, Muslim and Lutheran communities. Organization of online trainings will be made available.

- **Romania: A good example of coordination at national and local level.** On March 13, 2020, the National Authority on child protection set up a Crisis Cell for ensuring comprehensive management of the social services and protection during the COVID-19 epidemic at the local and national level. Based on the established communication protocol, the National Authority collects data and information on a daily basis regarding the evolution of the situation including: # of cases of social work / workforce staff in isolation or in quarantine; # of foster careers in isolation or quarantine; # of children separated by families because of COVID; # of available places for protection of children affected by COVID; children whose caregivers fall ill, are quarantined, hospitalized or die are at high risk of being left without protection and care. Based on data collected in real time, feedback from beneficiaries and staff, recommendations from other Ministries and also UNICEF and WHO, the National Authority is issuing recommendations on case management, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable.
- **North Macedonia: A good example of support to children left behind in residential care.** As a first response, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy disseminated information from the Ministry of Health and instructed directors and managers to use current budgets (regardless of previously earmarked funds) to procure personal protective items, disinfection, hygiene products, etc. Through coordination with UNICEF, preparations began on identifying and training contingency staff that could be deployed in urgent situations. Also, efforts are underway to ensure that more specific and detailed protocols for working in small group homes are relevant to the COVID-19 situation.
- **In almost all countries day care services were suspended with no obvious support provided to the former beneficiaries. But there are a few noteworthy practices. North Macedonia** closed day care centers for children with disabilities, however the government is taking efforts to ensure at least one parent in each of the households where the children from day centers live are provided a salary so they can stay at home and provide care to their child. In **Armenia** day care services provide outreach services. In **Georgia** day care centers for street children continue to operate.
- **In Kazakhstan new Psycho-Social Support services and mechanisms have been introduced**, such as on-line psycho-social support to families and children. **In Moldova**, starting 15 April, for four months, professional psychologists will deliver 24 live online sessions to talk to teenagers and young people about their needs.
- **Albania is a good example of a comprehensive justice response for children, and is the only country to release children from detention at the issuing of this report.** The attorneys of the children in pre-trial detention (constituting over 90% of detained children), have all been contacted by the Ministry of Justice to encourage them to request in court the replacement of the measure “arrest in prison” with the measure “arrest at home”. The General Department of Prisons is examining carefully children’s cases with a view to give special permission to stay at home to those who fulfil the criteria for such measures. As a result, 17% of children have already been sent home (either with special permission, or with a replaced measure of “at home arrest”). Measures were taken to ensure their safe travel home. In addition, the Minister of Justice has requested the prosecution to consider using non-custodial measures for offences committed during the pandemic. Furthermore, the Government issued an order that suspends all court processes during the pandemic, with the exception of the most urgent cases, and those processes affecting children have been included under the definition of the urgent cases. These cases not only address children in criminal cases, but also children in family law (civil) cases. **Turkey is the only other country that has signaled potential releases of children from detention.** 90,000 convicted persons will be released from prison due to a recently adopted law - including an estimated 550 children. As of the release of this report, the releases had not yet taken place.
- **Bulgaria is another good example of a tailored justice response (although there have not been any releases as of yet).** On the 16th of March, the Supreme Judicial Council put all administrative, civil and criminal court proceedings on hold for the duration of the state of emergency, with a few exceptions that ensure safeguarding human rights and the protection of children at risk. As a result, the courts will continue processing a) domestic violence cases in which an issue of a restraining order was requested; b) forensic interviews of victims and witnesses of crime in front of a judge; and c) interim measures for removal / suspension or assignment of parental rights. All documents to courts are submitted only by mail or electronic mail during the lockdown. All courts have instituted a rotation of a minimal number of judges on duty available to preside over the abovementioned cases, while all other judges and administrative personnel are teleworking, having access to the electronic case-file systems.



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Klejdi, age 3, with his foster mother in their home in Gjakova, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244)

Opportunities and Examples to Further Consider / Build on Across the Region

The current situation provides insights into where countries need to strengthen their CP systems. Reforms that were struggling to gain traction prior to COVID may see room for acceleration due to the emergency. In addition, there may be more opportunities to advocate for key child protection investments or efficiencies.

- Across almost all countries in the region, the issue of **Domestic Violence and Violence Against Children** is a high priority for governments. This could be used to further advocate for stronger child protection mechanisms to respond to VAC cases in the COVID response, as well as in the next phases. Examples include: the need to have specialized cadres of social work teams that can flexibly respond (often in tandem with police) to reported cases of violence, and to consider their needs (mobility, protective equipment, training and supervision); as well as the urgency of modernizing the case management tools used by social workers to move away from paper to online platforms.
- In some countries **social workers** are asked to reach out to the most vulnerable groups (difficult to reach, those without access to phones or internet). This demonstrates the trust and confidence placed on social workers by national and local authorities under these difficult circumstances. This can help make the case (post COVID) for the continued professionalization and investment in the social work and social service workforce.
- **The current situation puts the alternative care systems at great risk.** Some institutions are being closed, children sent home with no preparation and support. Very little is being done to mobilize and provide support to vulnerable families whose number is increasing every day. The need for alternative care is increasing but few efforts are being done to reconfigure the child care system and invest in family and community based care. **At the same time, closures of large institutions in a number of countries present an excellent opportunity to provide support to these governments to assess and keep these children in family care, and redirect funding from institutional care to support family and community based care.** Governments should be supported to understand that they cannot afford to keep large institutions that are very costly and damaging for children. The particular vulnerabilities of children in institutional care, including children with disabilities during the COVID crises provides added evidence for these reforms.
- **There are opportunities around the Justice response that require further advocacy and attention:** a) the use of alternatives to detention and non-custodial options, including the release of children from detention during this pandemic; b) ensuring cases of children as victims of violence are categorized by the judicial systems as essential, cases continue to be heard, and services for victims continue to operate; c) strengthening the role of social work and a social approach to juvenile offending, drawing on the pandemic as yet another reason to accelerate these reforms; and d) strengthening the role of ombudsman offices to monitor children's access to justice.
- **The risks associated with restrictions that have been imposed have a bearing on access to services, support to children and families and handling of children cases in the justice system– and migrant and refugee children are especially vulnerable.** Prioritized court cases are defined by each country, so advocacy and support is needed to ensure that vulnerable children's cases are included in these national parameters. As witnessed in Bulgaria, it also means limited access to services for refugees and migrants in reception/asylum centres as most of the civil society organizations are no longer providing in-person services. The situation is even more dire for refugees and migrants who are not in the formal reception site and/or on the move towards other countries. Procedures on applications for international protection, which require direct participation (physical participation) of the asylum seekers and/or their legal representatives, consultants, etc. have been suspended in most countries.
- **Measures being instituted (social distancing etc.) are impacting on procedural safeguards e.g for child friendly hearings and interviews and evidence collection.** In Bulgaria for example, it is reported that in some courts, the 'Blue Rooms' – facilities for child sensitive hearing and forensic interviewing – are currently not being utilized in cases of violence against children. A case of sexual molestation of a 10 year old boy is cited in which the boy was interviewed in the biggest courtroom instead of in the specialized facility for child-sensitive hearing due to the difficulty of ensuring enough space for the participants in the proceedings to allow for keeping the necessary social distancing (something deemed not possible in the Blue Room). The biggest district court in the country has issued regulations that all court hearings, on the above mentioned types of cases, during the state of emergency happen in the largest courtrooms to prevent COVID spread, but the protections for children have not always been accommodated.

ANNEX 1 - Questionnaire

Coordination / Social services and the work force	
a) Does the government have a coordination mechanism in place to address child protection and social service/family support delivery in the COVID 19 context?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes – which Government ministry / department leads the coordination? Is UNICEF a member?</p>
b) Is there a COVID Preparedness and/or Response plan?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes, is protection and social services addressed? Yes/No</p> <p>Please attach the plan if possible.</p>
c) Are any child protection or social services deemed essential, and are permitted to continue to operate?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes – which services or protection operations are permitted to continue to operate (in terms of face to face interaction and freedom of movement)?</p> <p>If No – are there plans to ensure certain core protection services are able to continue their work? Yes / No</p>
d) For existing case management work and caseload – is there a mechanism to continue providing support to families and children?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes-please describe briefly what that mechanism is (e.g. online, WhatsApp calls, phone calls, group sessions online).</p> <p>Also describe briefly any innovative ways government and partners are reaching particularly vulnerable households who may not have access to internet or phones.</p> <p>[Links to more info]</p>
e) Has the government put in place measures to increase the workforce capacity to operate (this would include using mobile technology, internet conferencing with clients, etc.). This would also include increasing the numbers of social workers or social service workforce professionals, increasing capacity of hotlines, etc.	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes-please describe these measures (e.g. training and deployment of volunteers)</p> <p>If No – is this being planned?</p> <p>[links to more info]</p>
f) Has the government put in place measures for the safety and psycho social needs of the social services work force?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes- please describe briefly these measures (e.g access to PPE, mental health support)</p>
g) Does the Government have a mechanism to deploy / strengthen social workers or case workers for social services into the health system and COVID 19 health response?	<p>Yes/ No</p> <p>If Yes – please briefly describe</p> <p>If No- Is one being planned? Yes / No</p>
h) Has the government taken measures to strengthen psychosocial support to families caring for children?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes – please briefly describe</p> <p>If No – Are measure being planned or explored? Yes / No</p>

Coordination / Social services and the work force Attention to most vulnerable children/families	
i) Is there a mechanism established to address reported cases of neglect, violence, abuse, exploitation and/or separation from family with social work / social services / police where home visits or a protective response intervention would be needed?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes – please describe briefly what that mechanism is and elaborate whether it is also linked to GBV / domestic violence response.</p> <p>If No – Is such a mechanism being planned? Y/N</p>
j) Does the country have a child help line linked to government services?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes – briefly describe it is it still operational, and how is it being used?</p>
k) Has the government developed an approach to integrate messaging on violence against children into mainstream media or through existing systems?	<p>Yes / No</p> <p>If Yes- please provide some brief information about the sectors and approaches used and the target groups.</p>
l) Does the government have a mechanism to reach particularly vulnerable families and populations (e.g Roma or children with disabilities) with case management / continuity who would not have internet or phones?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes -please describe what is being done</p> <p>If No – is one currently being planned?</p>
(m) Has the government put in place measures for alternative care in relation to the COVID-19 crises, including the response to migrant and refugee children?	<p>Yes / No</p> <p>If Yes - Please briefly list the key measures and reference, (e.g. Banning of all new admissions to residential care facilities until ... (date)</p> <p>Monitoring by Ombudspersons, etc)</p> <p>If No – is this being discussed / planned? Yes / No</p>
n) Has the government put in place measures for all places of detention (pre-trial / post-trial) and other forms of deprivation of liberty?	<p>Yes / No</p> <p>If Yes - Please briefly list the key measures.</p> <p>If No – is this being discussed / planned? Yes / No</p> <p>[links to more info]</p>
o) Are there any efforts within the justice system (courts, prosecutors, and police) to address the impacts of COVID 19?	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>If Yes- please describe briefly what actions are being taken</p> <p>If No – is this being discussed / planned? Yes / No</p>

