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5.6.5. Children in the reception system

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The increased number of children and unaccompanied child applicants throughout 2021 required reception authorities to swiftly adapt capacity and support. For example, in the Netherlands, new facilities were opened but were still insufficient to meet the capacity demand of Nidos, COA and the IND. Facilities were full, leading to high pressure on the quality of reception and support *(see Section 4.7)*.1442 Unaccompanied children with disruptive behaviour remained at the centre of Dutch policy concerns, and a new AMIF-funded project was launched for 2022 to establish methods to counter such behaviour in reception *(see Section 4.7)*.1443 COA observed that these issues reduced interest from municipalities to open reception facilities, leading to shortages in places.

In Bulgaria, safe zones for unaccompanied children needed to be restructured. The Ombudsperson found poor living conditions, with a lack of adequate furniture and overcrowding. When the security zone was full, children were accommodated in the gym separately from adults1444 *(see Section 4.7).* The Ombudsperson also requested the Supreme Administrative Court to adopt an interpretative decision related to children's rights when they are placed in detention together with an adult relative pending a return. The court rejected the request, as it found no contradiction in jurisprudence and practice. It reiterated that children can appeal against a detention decision in their own name, the information provided by the police on the relationship between the child and the accompanying adult was not a binding one, and the authority ordering the detention can further assess this relationship.

New facilities for unaccompanied children were opened in Belgium. Cyprus was also planning to increase its reception facility dedicated to unaccompanied children. The safe zone in Limnes was completed in 2021, with a capacity of 18 places, which could be increased up to 36 places. The bids for a structure in the safe zone in Pournara was foreseen for spring 2022. However, the Cyprus Refugee Council reported that children were accommodated outside of the safe zones and there had been incidents of alleged sexual harassment.1445 UNHCR observed similar instances and expressed concern about the living conditions for children.1446 In March 2022, the Deputy Minister for Social Welfare announced plans to transfer children from Pournara to a dedicated facility in Famagusta.1447 The move followed the opinion published by the Ombudsperson for Children,1448 decisions taken during the extraordinary meeting of the Council of Ministers on the situation in Pournara1449 and the president's visit to the centre.1450

Due to a rise in arrivals, the number of specialised reception places for unaccompanied children was increased in Slovakia. In Slovenia, amendments to the International Protection Act clarified that unaccompanied children should be accommodated in child-friendly institutions, instead of reception centres.[1451]

The Italian SAI network's capacity for unaccompanied children was increased from 3,887 places in 148 facilities to 4,672 places in 239 facilities at the end of 2021. The Ministry of the Interior signed an agreement with UNICEF to monitor reception conditions for unaccompanied children.[1452]The Ministry's Department of Civil Liberties and Migration published an operational handbook on the identification and reception of unaccompanied children, developed with support from the EUAA and other international and national stakeholders.[1453] To provide immediate support, the department signed an agreement with the civil society organisation Terres des Hommes Italia for psychological and psychosocial assistance from disembarkation to first reception.[1454] The department also concluded an agreement with Save the Children to continue the provision of targeted support to unaccompanied children.[1455]

Reception conditions for unaccompanied children in Spain, especially in Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands, remained of serious concern. Accem reported that the government of the Canary Islands had started an investigation into alleged cases of sexual exploitation in a reception facility for unaccompanied minors.[1456]

The AIDA report for Germany cites a study from the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors published in 2021, which acknowledged general improvements in reception conditions for unaccompanied children but highlighted vast differences across the federal states.[1457]

In a case related to Greece *(see Section 5.6.2),* the European Committee on Social Rights noted that the state did not provide adequate protection for applicant children from physical and moral dangers, and that children did not have access to education, neither on the islands or on the mainland, nor access to sufficient health care on the islands. The committee found that the state failed to provide adequate accommodation for applicant children on the islands and long-term accommodation on the mainland.

In this light, Greek authorities made some further steps to provide a safe space for unaccompanied children, and the Ministry for Migration and Asylum established a National Mechanism for the Detection and Protection if Unaccompanied Children, in cooperation with the IOM, Aris, METAdrasi and the Network for Children's Rights. The mechanism includes a hotline in six languages to help guiding homeless unaccompanied children to emergency accommodation in Athens and Thessaloniki.[1458]

The Swiss Observatory on Asylum and Foreigners' Law published a series of articles highlighting the gaps in the reception of unaccompanied children, for example in monitoring special facilities,[1459] procedures to follow when a child disappears from a facility,[1460] and inconsistencies in the roles and responsibilities when a child is at risk of abuse.[1461]

The Portuguese High Commission for Migration signed a cooperation protocol with an NGO to develop targeted support for single-parent families and children in reception.[1462]

The Swedish Migration Agency issued a new legal position to clarify that municipalities and regions are entitled to be reimbursed for the care of unaccompanied children from the moment they express a wish to apply for asylum.1463

Faced with several cases on the detention of children, the courts highlighted that this always should be a measure of last resort *(see Section 4.8).*

EU+ countries undertook several measures throughout 2021 to further facilitate educational opportunities for applicant children, but delays in enrolment and gaps in support persisted in some countries and under certain circumstances *(see Section 4.7.2.4).* This could have a detrimental effect on educational attainment in the future when they continue with education as beneficiaries of international protection *(see Section 4.14.4.3).*

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