

---

**INCLUSION OF MIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM  
REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

---

**Jovan Bazić**Teachers Training Faculty, University of Pristina-Kosovska Mitrovica, Serbia, [jovan.bazic@pr.ac.rs](mailto:jovan.bazic@pr.ac.rs)**Elena Maksimović**Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, [elena.maksimovic@kirs.gov.rs](mailto:elena.maksimovic@kirs.gov.rs)

*This research has been conducted by support of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia and is the result of work within the science project of the Institute for Political Studies Belgrade Democracy and national capacities of political institutions of Serbia in the process of international integrations, financed by the Ministry of Science and Technological Development (Project no: 179009).*

**Abstract:** This paper examines various aspects of the results of the analysis on the inclusion of migrant children in the education system of the Republic of Serbia. The subject of study in this paper are migrants in transit, to whom Serbia is one of the countries on the route to the final destination. That is the reason why the education of these children in Serbia had a temporary character and did not have the integration into Serbian society as a final goal, as it was the situation during the migration from the post-Yugoslav territories to which Serbia was the final destination. Since the beginning of the migration crisis in 2015 to the end of 2018, about 720,000 migrants passed through Serbia. Over 20 percent of the migrants were children. The inclusion of migrant children in the education system of the Republic of Serbia was a great challenge for the education system as well as for the migrant children. Between 2013 and 2015, the education of these children was mostly in the form of non-formal education. Since 2015, migrant children have been continuously involved in the institutional education system - in primary and secondary schools, most often in the vicinity of centers for accommodation and reception of migrants. The inclusion in the education system had been done with the support of relevant governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations and international organizations. The large influx of migrant children, along with language, cultural and administrative barriers, and non-inclusion in the education process in the country of origin, were the challenges that required great efforts for their inclusion into the education system of Serbia. The most significant factor is the transit character of their stay in Serbia, which has made it difficult to learn languages and monitor teaching, as well as their integration into the new social environment. The transit factor has also influenced the continuity of teaching, which was very difficult for the children and the schools. Parallel with the inclusion of migrant children in the education system, the procedures for their enrollment in school and the manner of supporting their education were regulated. Through various international projects, teachers have been trained to work with migrant children and additional support has been provided to schools. Special attention has been given to adaptation and overcoming stress, intensive language learning, didactic material, methods and engaging in extracurricular activities with peer support.

Schools developed plans to support new students, established teams for inclusive teaching, conducted a preliminary check of the level of education and acquired knowledge directed to determine which class the child would be enrolled in, according to the age. During the education of the children, schools had an adequate communication with parents or guardians. The required documentation was kept on the migrant children involved in the educational process. Because of their discontinuity in teaching, these children were not graded according to the standard system, but with descriptive grades. The student's booklets are given to them mainly because of psychological effect. The school, prior to official withdrawal from the school, produced a report in Serbian and English for each child, which is handed over to parents or guardians as the evidence for the purpose of continuing the education in the country of their next or final destination. The outcomes of the education of migrant children in Serbia can also be considered through the effects of intercultural exchange and as contribution to integration into the destination country.

**Keywords:** Migrant Children, Education System, Serbia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Serbia is a transit country of various migrations characterized as mixed migrations, from forced migrants from war-affected areas, economic migrants to "fake economic migrants" (Duvell, Molodikova & Collyer, 2014). Over 720,000 registered migrants passed through Serbia from the beginning of the migration crisis in 2015 to 2018 (Komercaprijar, 2019). Most of them come from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Serbia provides migrants passing through its territory with appropriate assistance in accordance with international conventions, the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, laws and other regulations (Велимировић, 2018). For the purpose of

---

accommodation of migrants and asylum seekers, the Government of Serbia has provided 19 asylum and reception centers, which are under the jurisdiction of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia and have consistently accommodated over 3,000 migrants in the last year. Every sixth migrant in Serbia has been staying for an average of two years and wants to leave Serbia. These migrants are culturally different and presents a new challenge for Serbian society (Petrovic & Pesic, 2017). Over 20 percent of migrants are children. Many of these children are unaccompanied by their parents. This is why this paper uses the syntagm of *migrant children* and thus covers all children. In addition to the elementary assistance in accommodation, health care, food and non-food items, migrant children are provided with formal education by the Republic of Serbia so that these children can maintain continuity of social integration, regardless of their final goal and destination. This is all a great challenge for Serbia, but also for the education sciences. It was very inspiring to explore how migrant children are integrated into the education system of the transit country, in this case the Republic of Serbia, and what experiences they have in this respect. That is why this paper is devoted to these issues, without too much ambition, but in the great desire to draw attention to this issue. This paper analyzes the relevant documents and publications of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia (Ministry of Education), non-governmental organizations, as well as relevant regulations. During this research, a descriptive-analytical method was applied to identify and describe the basic characteristics of the inclusion of migrant children in Serbia's education system, as well as new experiences in this matter. The basic starting point in these considerations is that the education of migrant children in Serbia is of a temporary nature, because, it does not have the integration of these children into Serbian society as ultimate goal.

## **2. RIGHT TO EDUCATION OF MIGRANT CHILDREN**

The right to education is one of the fundamental human rights guaranteed by: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), and many other documents issued mainly by the United Nations and the Council of Europe. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates the principle that each person has the right to education and that it should be free of charge, especially at the lower levels. Secondly, primary education should be mandatory and vocational education accessible. Also, education should be directed towards the development of human personality and respect for human rights and freedoms; to promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations, racial and religious communities (Article 26). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) is based on four principles: the right to life, survival and development; non-discrimination; the best interests of the child and the respect of the child. This document are also stipulated in principle that all children have the right to free primary education, and the States have committed themselves to encourage the development of different forms of education that would be accessible to every child (Article 28). Only the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants (United Nations, 2016) deals more directly with the education of migrant children. This document obliged States to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of refugee and migrant children, regardless of their status, taking the child's best interests first and foremost. With this declaration, states have committed themselves to providing basic health care, education, psychosocial development and migrant registration.

Apart from international conventions, the right to education of the migrant population is guaranteed and regulated by national regulations. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (Службени гласник РС 98/2006) stipulates that, in accordance with international agreements, foreigners in Serbia have all rights guaranteed by the Constitution and the law (Article 17). In Serbia, each person is entitled to free primary education, which is mandatory, as well as free secondary education (Article 71). The Law on Foundations of the Educational System (Службени гласник РС, 10/2019) stipulates that everyone has the right to education and upbringing, and foreign nationals, stateless persons and citizenship applicants are entitled to education and upbringing under the same conditions and manner prescribed for Serbian citizens (Article 3). For persons who do not speak language in which the teaching or certain program contents relevant for the continuation of education are performed, the school organizes language learning or supplementary teaching, according to a special instruction issued by the Minister (Article 23).

## **3. INSTITUTIONAL PREPARATIONS AND SUPPORT FOR THE INCLUSION OF MIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

Preparations for the inclusion of migrant children in the education system of the Republic of Serbia has been conducted parallel with the inclusion of these children, the same as the other activities related to the reception and care of migrants. In August 2016, the Ministry of Education sent a letter to school administrations requesting schools and preschool institutions to ensure entry into the education and upbringing system of children from families who are migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Serbia (Министарство просвете, 2017b). Facing with the new

---

challenges, the Ministry of Education has been developing new procedures and guidelines for teachers, schools and school administrations in order to facilitate migrant children to integrate into the education system. Thus, in May 2017, a Professional Instruction was issued for the inclusion of refugee / asylum-seeker students in the education and upbringing system (Министарство просвете, 2017а). This guideline regulates "the manner of enroll the students and support measures of inclusion in the educational process". The guideline also determine the obligations of schools to develop a Student Support Plan, which includes: a program of adaptation and overcoming stress, a program of intensive language course, individual tailoring of curricular activities through adaptation of classes' timetable, didactical materials, methods and manner of work, Inclusion in extracurricular activities with peer support, etc. During the August 2017, the Ministry of Education and the Commissariat, in collaboration with UNICEF, distributed brochures about the options and possibilities for children's education during the period of their stay in the Republic of Serbia to parents of migrant children in reception centers, in several languages. Also, with the support of UNICEF, in December 2017, the Ministry of Education also produced a Manual for schools for the inclusion of refugee / asylum seekers in the education and upbringing system (Министарство просвете, 2017b). In August 2018, parenting meetings were organized at the reception centers where counselors from school administrations spoke with parents and guardians of migrant children and informed them about educational opportunities for children during their stay in Serbia. The biggest challenge in teaching migrant children was their lack of knowledge of the language. That is why the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, in cooperation with UNICEF, developed a program of language support (Филолошки факултет, 2018), which provided schools with proposals for methodological solutions. The Ministry of Education, through the project "EU Support to Serbia in Migration Management - MADAD 2", in 2019, issued a "Good Practice Catalog" with examples of activities undertaken aimed at broader inclusion of migrant children in the education system (Министарство просвете, 2019b). The projects involved children, parents and local communities. In 56 primary and secondary schools, following topics were discussed: anti-discrimination, intercultural education, psycho-social support, individualization, teaching methods of Serbian as a foreign language, adoption of migration concepts, acculturation, ethnic identity, encouraging peer support, creating a safe and supportive environment (Министарство просвете, 2019b). Through various projects, in the school year 2018/19, 765 teachers and professional associates were trained to work with migrant children, mentoring support was provided to schools by external assistants, and schools, in cooperation with the local trustees for migration, prepared action plans to support children, teachers and schools in nine school administrations (Министарство просвете, 2019а). Preparing migrant children for the new school year also included: holding parent meetings at reception centers, arranging transportation, escorting to school and supporting classes, mandatory systematic medical examinations, textbooks and worksheets, purchasing ranches and school supplies, snacks, drafting support homework and language learning.

#### **4. MIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

Between 2013 and 2015, the education of migrant children was most often in the form of non-formal education (Kozma, 2018, p. 3). In 2013, children from asylum seeker families in Serbia were enrolled for the first time in school, while in 2014, seven more migrant children were enrolled in the education system. In the first six months of 2015, 30 migrant children were enrolled in primary schools. In the school year 2015/2016 the migrant children are sporadically included in the education system and there is no precise data on the exact number. In the May of 2017. 101 migrant children attended the classes (Министарство просвете, 2019а). Since September 2017, all elementary school age migrant children accommodated in reception centers or homes for children without parental care were included in the education system of the Republic of Serbia. Classes were conducted according to the model: two lessons in the class (by subject) and two lessons of workshop (linguistic and thematic) or two subjects by choice of students if they understand English or Serbian. "In practice, students usually took three regular lessons, most often skills (music, art, and physical education), Serbian, math, informatics, and less often classes in biology, physics, geography, and then they would have a separate Serbian language lessons"(Kozma, 2018, p. 6). In November 2017, classes were provided in 45 schools in Serbia, for 503 students in schools and 83 for which teaching was provided in the centers and for 454 students in schools and 59 in the centers in December 2018. In the school year 2018/2019 the number of migrants children enrolled in 34 primary schools were 348. However, due to dynamic of migrations, the number of students changes on a daily basis (Министарство просвете, 2019а) and data on exact number varies in deferent reports of the Ministry of education, Commissariat and NGOs do to using of different methodologies. At the beginning of this school year (2019/2020), according to Commissariat data, 125 students in 14 elementary schools were enrolled in the education system, (Комесаријат, 2019).

Migrant children who had evidence of prior education were enrolled in the appropriate grade in accordance with age and previously acquired level of education, after recognition of a foreign school document, while children who had

no proof of education were enrolled after prior assessment. Based on this checks, the Student Support Plan was formulated as well as the class to be enrolled in. The school keeps records and pedagogical documentation prescribed by the Law. Student portfolio contains reports on implementation of the Student Support Plan, special interests of the student and his / her success, knowledge of the language, correspondence with parents or guardians and other institutions. Migrant children, because of their discontinuity in teaching, do not receive grades according to the standard system, but receive descriptive grades. Student booklets get more because of the psychological effect. The school prepares a school report for each student before the official leaving the school and prepares a school report that is handing over to parents or guardians in order to provide evidence for continuing the education in the country that will be the next destination. This approach has proven to be effective because "our education system is designed to provide the system for full inclusion of migrant children in which the school adapts to the needs of the children" (Министарство просвете, 2019а).

The short-term stay of migrant children in Serbia and cultural differences, before language barriers, is the biggest obstacles to their integration into the education system. This is also compounded by a lack of motivation, as transit migration has only the final destination as a goal to reach. Regardless of all this, the encounter of cultures in a transit context also carries a cultural exchange that involves contact of domicile and migrant children, their parents, school administration and the entire local community. In the complicated process of intercultural exchange, the inclusion of children in the education system enables: 1) the cultural integration of migrant children (overcoming cultural, religious, traditional, language barriers in the reception country and adopting new patterns - adaptation, assimilation); and 2) formal legal integration (children included in the education system will have equal opportunities in the labor market as domiciliaries, a benefit both for migrants whose motive is to seek a better life and for EU countries facing labor shortages (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017). However, the cultural exchange carried out by the stay of migrant children in schools with its temporary character does not have social integration as a final consequence, as it is the case with educational system in country of final destination.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

From the beginning of the migrant crisis in 2015 to the end of 2018, about 720,000 registered migrants passed through Serbia. Over 20 percent of the migrants were children. The inclusion of migrant children in the education system of the Republic of Serbia was a great challenge for the education system as well as for the migrant children. Preparations for integrating migrant children into the education system were conducted parallel with inclusion in the system. Between 2013 and 2015, the education of these children was mostly in the form of non-formal education. Since 2015, migrant children have been continuously enrolled in primary and secondary schools, most often in those close to migrant collective accommodation centers. And since September 2017, all migrant children have been included in the education system of the Republic of Serbia.

The large influx of migrant children, along with language, cultural and administrative barriers, as well as their non-inclusion in the education process in the country of origin, were challenges that required great efforts for their entry into the education system of Serbia. The most influential factor is the transit character of migrant's stay in Serbia, which made it difficult to learn languages and to monitor teaching, as well as to integrate them into the new social environment. At the same time with the inclusion of migrant children in the education system, the procedures for their enrollment in school and the methods and manner of supporting their education were regulated. Through various international projects, teachers have been trained to work with migrant children and additional support has been provided to schools. Special attention was given to adaptation and overcoming stress, intensive language learning, didactic material, methods, as well as engaging in extracurricular activities with peer support. The required documentation was kept on the migrant children involved in the educational process. The educational outcomes of migrant children in Serbia could also be observed through the effects of intercultural exchange and contribution to integration in the destination country in further period through their mid and long term effects.

## REFERENCES

- Duvell, F., Molodikova, I., & Collyer, M. (2014). *Transit Migration in Europe*, Amsterdam: IMISCOE Research, Amsterdam University Press.
- Филолошки факултет. (2018). *Од српског као страног језика до српског као језика окружења и образовања: оквир програма језичке подршке*. Београд.
- Комесаријат за избеглице и миграције Републике Србије. (2019). *Документација*. Београд., доступно на: [http://www.kirs.gov.rs/wb-page.php?kat\\_id=161](http://www.kirs.gov.rs/wb-page.php?kat_id=161)
- Kozma, R. (2018). *Образовање деце миграната у Србији (основношколско образовање)*. Београд: Фондација Фридрих Еберт | Кancelарија Београд.

- 
- Lafleur, J.M & Stanek, M. (2017). *South-North Migration of EU Citizens in Times of Crisis*. Berlin: Springer Nature.
- Министарство просвете, науке и технолошког развоја Републике Србије. (2019b). *Каталог добре праксе*. Пројекат: „Подршка ЕУ Србији у управљању миграцијама - МАДАД 2“. Београд. доступно на: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Katalog-dobre-prakse-MADAD-2.pdf>
- Министарство просвете, науке и технолошког развоја Републике Србије. (2017b). *Приручник за школе у реализацији стручног упутства за укључивање ученика избеглица/тражилаца азила у систем образовања и васпитања*. Београд.
- Министарство просвете, науке и технолошког развоја Републике Србије. (2019a). *Образовање ученика / миграната у Србији*. Београд., доступно на: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019.Obrazovanje-u%C4%8Denika-migranata-u-Srbiji.pdf>
- Министарство просвете, науке и технолошког развоја Републике Србије. (2017a). *Стручно упутство за укључивање ученика избеглица / тражилаца азила у систем образовања и васпитања*. Београд., доступно на: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/STRUCNO-UPUTSTVO.pdf>
- Петровић, Ј. & Пешић, Ј. (2017). „Између интеграције, безбедности и хуманитарности: ставови грађана Србије о мигрантима“, *Становништво*, 55(2), 25-51.
- Велимировић, С. (2018). *Европска унија и мигрантска криза у Србији. Мигрантска криза, Србија и Европска унија*. Београд: Европски покрет у Србији.
- United Nations General Assembly. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. доступно на: [https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=IV-11&chapter=4&lang=en](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&lang=en)
- United Nations General Assembly. (2016). *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants* 71/1., доступно на: [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1)
- United Nations General Assembly. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*., доступно на: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
- Устав Републике Србије*, „Службени гласник РС“, бр. 98/2006.
- Закон о основама система образовања и васпитања*, „Службени гласник РС“, бр. 10/2019.