

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

“Next Steps for Refugee and Migrant Youth in Europe”

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**The Briefing Was Held From 10:00 a.m. To 11:03 a.m. in Room SVC 203,
Capitol Visitor Center, Washington, D.C., Mischa E. Thompson, Senior Policy
Advisor, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding**

Date: Tuesday, January 23, 2018

THOMPSON: Good morning. My name is Dr. Mischa Thompson. And welcome to “Next Steps for Refugee and Migrant Youth in Europe,” a briefing hosted by the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission. For those who may not know, the Helsinki Commission is an independent U.S. government agency focused on human rights, economics and security in the 57 North American and European countries that make up the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or the OSCE. The Commission is chaired by Senator Roger Wicker, bicameral and bipartisan, and comprised of 12 members of Congress and the executive branch, including the U.S. State Department.

The OSCE has had a focus on diverse and vulnerable populations, from Roma and Jewish populations to national minorities and migrants in Europe and the United States since its Inception. This focus has increased in response to the recent influx of refugees and migrants in the region. This includes the creation of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly’s Ad Hoc Committee on Migration, in which members of our Helsinki Commission participate, and ongoing initiatives by the OSCE to build the capacity of civil society and governments to respond. Our commissioners also serve as special representatives within the OSCE’s parliamentary assembly on trafficking and intolerance.

Today we will discuss the current situation of refugee and migrant youth in Europe, with a focus on support, protection and integration services being put in place. This follows several events our Commission held in 2017 focused on trafficking and arrivals by land and sea. I am very pleased to be joined today by expert Sofia Kouvelaki, Executive Director of The HOME Project in Athens, Greece, an organization that addresses the needs of refugee children, and Ms. Kathleen Newland, Senior Fellow and co-founder of the Migration Policy Institute, one of Washington’s premier institutions on global migrant and refugee policy analysis. You can find their bios in the blue folders and online.

And given that we only have an hour, I will begin by asking our speakers a few questions, after which we will have time for questions and discussion with our in-house and online audience. We are able to take comments via Facebook and can be followed under the Twitter handle @HelsinkiComm – so it’s Helsinki C-O-M-M. We should all be certain to speak loudly into our microphones today for our online viewers. So, with that, I will actually begin by asking Ms. Kathleen Newland to begin by giving us a short overview of what the current situation of refugees and migrants is in Europe. And how many people are we talking about, for example? Where are they coming from and why is it that they’re coming to Europe?

NEWLAND: Thank you very much, Mischa. It’s a pleasure to be with you today and I’m delighted to meet Sofia. I’ve followed her work with great interest.

The refugee and migrant situation – and these are categories that are often very hard to separate with a bright line, has – the good news, I suppose, is that it has gone down quite substantially from the peak of the crisis in 2015. But it still remains high, with hundreds of thousands of people arriving in Europe, mostly by sea. As you may know, an agreement between the EU and Turkey to disrupt the smuggling routes from Turkey to the Greek islands

was put in place in March of 2016, and resulted in quite a sharp drop in the eastern Mediterranean route, and proportionally an increase in the much more dangerous, longer, and abusive central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy.

We're particularly concerned about youth in this briefing. And it's very hard to get an accurate assessment of the numbers. Certain categories of children are counted fairly reliably, particularly those that formally apply for asylum. And there were about 400,000 asylum applicants age 17 or younger in Europe in 2015 and 2016 alone. That was a huge increase over 2014. And the proportion of children, defined as those that are under 18, is – again, it's – it's not a very reliable proportion, but it's assumed to be about somewhere between 15 and 20 percent. About 5 percent of those are unaccompanied children, who are obviously the most vulnerable.

During this crisis from 2015 onward, the composition of the flow has changed quite dramatically. Before 2015, most of the youth arriving in Europe and claiming asylum were from the western Balkans – Kosovo, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia, et cetera. But since 2015, the top countries of arrival for children have been Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. And I should point out that the recognition rates for those who apply for asylum from those countries is very high. It's like 68 percent. So children who actually manage to file an asylum claim – which is not so easy in many countries – are recognized as being refugees at a very high rate. Of course, it varies from country to country.

There is – if I can just mention some of the problems. And I know Sofia will go into this in greater detail looking at Greece particularly. But some of the biggest problems are an acute lack of appropriate reception centers and shelters for children, for unaccompanied minors in particular, but also for families. Long wait times for asylum hearings, which sort of leaves people in limbo and inhibits their access to services. Detention of children is widely recognized as a terrible problem. And of course, it's related to the lack of appropriate housing. And in the sort of middle and long term, there's a great concern about the need for firewalls between access to public services and immigration enforcement. This, of course, is particularly acute for undocumented children who are – data for undocumented is very poor, and causes all kinds of alarms.

Last year the European Statistical Agency reported that 10,000 children had gone missing – were unaccounted for in Europe. Well, and in that year, there were more than 10,000 reported missing from Italy and Germany alone. So that was a nice round number of that people, sort of threw out there, but no one really knows what's happened to those children, whether they were double counted to begin with, whether they reunited with their families or, in the worst-case scenario, whether they were trafficked and sort of disappeared into the criminal underworld.

Let me stop there for the moment, Mischa. There's lots more. And I'm sure other issues will come up in the discussion.

THOMPSON: And I was actually hoping that you could really give us a first-hand account of what you are seeing in Greece in terms of arrivals from children, how they're actually being treated when they first arrive in the country, and if we're really seeing some of these policies in place that have long been talked about.

KOUVELAKI: So thank you, Mischa. It's a pleasure, Ms. Newland, to be on the same panel with you.

And as Ms. Newland said, there are – at the moment thousands of children that travel and arrive in Europe all alone. I think in terms of child protection the term migrant or refugee crisis cannot begin to explain the complexity of this phenomenon. The HOME Project is a nonprofit organization that, at the moment, has operations in Greece with a mission to offer protection, support, education and social integration services to children that arrive in Greece, in Europe, all alone. After the EU-Turkey agreement, as Ms. Newland said, the general number of arrivals has decreased. However, the number of arrivals of unaccompanied minors is constantly increasing.

A large part of this problem is that we don't have exact numbers. So according to official estimates, since the beginning of 2016 around 11,000 unaccompanied minors have been officially registered. Now, of those, as we speak, 2,300 children in Greece are homeless. Which means they are in camps, in the streets, in detention. And if a child is not placed into a shelter, he or she cannot start to receive any kind of services, nor any information on their rights. These children are exposed to all sorts of dangers – from child abuse to organ trafficking to sexual exploitation, which is now a very urgent phenomenon in Greece, in the center of Athens, and on the islands. Children are prostituting themselves for survival.

So it's very urgent to provide all the adequate accommodation for these children in Greece and in Italy, which are the entry points of Europe, because integration starts at the point of entry. And those experiences follow these children all along.

THOMPSON: Thank you. Now, Ms. Newland, at the beginning in your first description of what's happening you actually described a list of things that you're seeing happening with children. So, detention, inability to get services, et cetera. Can you tell us what is actually supposed to be in place? So what policies and procedures are supposed to be in place for children when they arrive at any of the European borders?

NEWLAND: Yes, – that's a very fundamental question, Mischa. I'm glad you asked it. I think the first thing to understand is that all members of the European Union have signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The European Asylum and Migration law also incorporate the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. And the convention, which is the most ratified international treaty in the world – every country in the world has ratified it, except the United States. And it requires that a child is treated as a child first and foremost, and is protected regardless of their immigration status, regardless of their legal status, period. And that is across the board. It's not divisible. You're not supposed to separate groups of children and give them differential access to their rights.

But in fact, that happens all the time. There is a sort of hierarchy of benefits and protection within Europe, which does depend on the legal status of the child. So children who are permanent residents have – generally speaking, have access to the same benefits and protections as citizen children. Asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors have a degree of protection, or are supposed to have a degree of protection – although, you know, the capacity of

some of these states has really been overwhelmed by the volume of children arriving. And I can say a bit more about that. But at the sort of bottom of the hierarchy are undocumented children, those who haven't applied for asylum, those who haven't registered with any of the authorities.

And while some countries – 10 European countries give undocumented children the right to education, nine give them the right to health care. But that's out of 28 countries. So undocumented children have a particularly tough time. In addition, there are some really bad practices. Like, in Germany – which has received the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers overall – doctors are supposed to report on the immigration status of the children they see, which is obviously a huge inhibition for children from seeking medical care. I believe the same is Greece. So that's a bad practice that really should be eliminated by the construction of firewalls.

I think, to understand some of the public opinion around this issue, it's also important to understand that the great majority, almost two-thirds of the children who arrive, are late – in their late teens and they're overwhelmingly male. So it's 16-, 17-year-old boys who form the bulk of this population. And unfortunately, they are not seen as the most sympathetic group by many members of the public. And, when groups are prioritized by vulnerability, people don't necessarily think of almost adult males as being the most vulnerable. But in fact, in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, they are the most vulnerable to forcible recruitment, to being killed in the context of these conflicts.

THOMPSON: Thank you. Can you talk a little bit about how this is actually playing out in Greece? And so once you all are able to help provide housing to children – and Ms. Newland specifically actually talked about adolescent males. So can you talk a little bit about what that situation is actually looking like in terms of what HOME Project is doing?

KOUVELAKI: I think the best way to answer your question would be to share a story with you. So it's the story of two Syrian brothers, Adnan and Ayaz, age 10 and 11 years old. Adnan and Ayaz were the oldest boys of a family of five children. They were living with the rest of their family in Aleppo. After the war broke out, and because of financial and security reasons, they had to move to Damascus. There, the two boys reported witnessing firsthand bombings, killings, decapitations, and all forms of violence. In 2013, their parents, together with their three younger sisters, started their journey to Europe. There weren't enough resources to finance the move of the whole family, so the two brothers were left behind with their grandfather.

Their family managed to reach Germany, following illegal routes through Greece. The two boys stopped going to school and started working at a hookah factory in order to support themselves. In 2015, the father managed to send enough money to finance their move to Europe via smuggling networks. Adnan and Ayaz had to walk all the way to the Turkish coast through very dangerous routes. They report being physically and sexually abused by the trafficker along the way, as well as being held at a house for a month where we suspect they were repeatedly raped.

They tried to reach Greece three times. The first two failed and the kids were arrested and returned and detained in a Turkish refugee camp, where they experienced even more

violence. The third time, they managed to reach the Greek island of Chios. Ayaz and Adnan were detained for more than three months in a closed reception facility, co-existing with adults in horrible living conditions. One day, the youngest of the two brothers attempted to end his life. He tried to hang himself using his own t-shirt. His attempt failed because the t-shirt was torn. The child was hospitalized with his brother for five hours at the local hospital and then returned to the detention center due to a lack of appropriate accommodation on the island.

We were notified by a volunteer regarding this case. And in collaboration with the public prosecutor for minors and the local authorities, we went to Chios and escorted the kids to one of our shelters. The kids are now safe, and they're receiving a holistic network of services in The HOME Project shelter that covers their basic needs such as food, shelter of course, material provision, medical support, psychological support, psychiatric supervision, education – they started going to school – and legal support. We have started all of the relevant legal and administrative processes to reunify them with their family in Germany. Both kids suffered from physical injuries when they arrived, PTSD, depression, and they were often resorting to self-harm.

Now, Adnan and Ayaz ended up in one of our shelters, so in a way they're two of the fortunate lone refugee children. Sadly, this is not the case for the majority of the kids. At The HOME Project, we don't work with refugees. We don't work with migrants. We work with children – children that have been marginalized to the point of invisibility. Our mission is to provide support, protection, education, and social integration services to children that arrive in Greece, in Europe, all alone. We are currently supporting the operation of 10 shelters. Seven of them are for boys. Six out of the seven are for teenage boys, 12 to 17, because this is the majority of the arrivals. But we also have a shelter for toddlers, and ages 6 to 11, because we are seeing arrivals – the percentage of younger unaccompanied minors is increasingly lately. And two of the shelters are for girls and unaccompanied minors – minor mothers with their babies.

So our youngest child at the moment is three years old and our oldest is becoming 18 in the coming months. So The HOME Project shelter model is based on three pillars. First of all, we co-operate shelters with local and grassroots communities, where we offer a holistic network of services to the kids, offering them the coverage of their basic needs but also psychological, legal, and educational support. This is an integration model. So at the moment we're focusing a lot on skills building and training, because our ultimate purpose is for the children that will stay in Greece to be able to integrate into the job market.

The second element of our work is that 50 percent of our staff comes from the refugee community itself, and the other 50 percent from Greek youth that also suffer from 45 percent unemployment. And the third element is that we find buildings that have been abandoned or unrented for a very long period of time – the victims of the Greek financial crisis. We renovate them with minimum cost, because we want most of our resources to be allocated to services for the children, and we pay the property taxes to the owner. So what we want to do is create a win-win situation for everyone – for the children, for the refugees, but also for the Greeks. And we've seen this is the only sustainable way to create a community of support around the children. But also, that's the only way we can fight racism, xenophobia, and violent local reactions.

THOMPSON: So that was a very difficult story to listen to, but one that I'm glad that you actually shared. It actually details a number of the things that children are going through, given that there aren't necessarily safe routes to reach Europe at this point to escape some of the situations that they are currently present in. It also, I think, details what services are actually needed along the route. And as a staffer at the Commission, I've been able to visit some of these places. I was able to see some of the shelters and actually see the children, and how they are receiving a secure place to be at this point, when you have interlocutors such as HOME Project and a number of other civil society and government organizations step in.

That I think, as we heard earlier, it's not enough. And one of the reasons I wanted to highlight I was able to see some of these things firsthand, is because there have also been a number of other policymakers that have been able to see these things firsthand. They know the issues. They know the problems. But as Ms. Newland indicated earlier, there seems to be something that's not happening in terms of implementation. And I was hoping, Ms. Newland, you could talk a little bit about just where – policymakers are on this issue in Europe, and why it is – despite maybe repeated policy documents and other things and really a call to better address this problem – we're continuing to have stories such as the one that Ms. Kouvelaki outlined.

NEWLAND: Well, there are many, many things you can criticize the governments for. And we have. And, you know, many groups continue to do that. I think it's important to realize that some of the European governments are trying really hard. And look at a country like Sweden with 5 million people it's a tiny country. They had 40,000 unaccompanied minors turn up 2015 into 2016, although in 2015 a third of all the unaccompanied minors went to Sweden, mostly Afghan older males. So for a small country like that, the facilities to deal with these children were just nowhere near adequate. And they tried very hard, but there are many failures. You could say the same of Germany. A much larger country, initially smaller numbers, but now in 2016 they were the top country of arrival for asylum applicants under the age of 17.

So having said that, I think there is also, in some countries, and it's been alleged in the European Union, that there's a tendency to view these horrible reception conditions in Greece particularly – which bore the brunt of the 2015 arrivals – as a sort of deterrent. You know, if word gets around that you're going to be in detention as a child with adult prisoners, in some cases that you may be kept literally in a prison or in a tented camp through winter conditions, that this might discourage people from coming.

That is a completely unacceptable policy. And it is – I mean, it's just profoundly shocking. And I'm sure Sofia can tell you more about that, and Mischa, she's been there to see these conditions exist in Europe. I mean, it's just the conditions in Europe are worse than they are in some of the countries in the region. And I would say they are definitely – although Turkey is considered part of Europe – in the EU, reception conditions in Greece are worse than they are in Turkey.

So, in my view, there are reasons for terrible conditions prevailing in the emergency phase, and no one was expecting these arrivals and the numbers were very high. But two years later, and more, I think they're beginning to run out of excuses. And the obligation – their legal obligation under both international and EU law to protect children really should be paramount.

One of the other bad practices that is occurring now – and, again, you can sort of understand it from a policymaker’s point of view – is that family reunification policies have been tightened up. So Germany is making it very difficult for recognized refugees in Germany to bring their families. So the Syrian brothers that Sofia was talking about, I hope they’ve arrived in Germany to join their family because it’s getting more difficult. And you know, that, again, it’s just sort of trying to control the numbers and better match the capacity to deliver services to the numbers. But it has – it has really disastrous knock-on effects.

Again, some of the countries – particularly Northern European countries – are trying hard to improve conditions, particularly for children, in education and health and housing. Sweden, for example, allows children to enroll in school even before their asylum cases are completed. But that is one thing that there should be really minimal delays in getting children back into school. It’s the most sort of stabilizing investment, and investment in the future, that you can make. Similarly, for health care, many EU countries are trying to incorporate asylum seekers and refugees into their systems, but there are real sort of practical barriers beyond just the legal barriers that have to be addressed – things like language and just knowledge of where to get help.

A lot of emphasis now is on integrating these populations. But the integration task is – sort of goes along with a, let’s kind of freeze the numbers where they are so that we can integrate those who are here, rather than having a continuing stream. That is just not a realistic proposition as long as the conditions that are driving children and others out of Afghanistan, out of Iraq, out of Syria, continue to persist.

THOMPSON: Thank you. Given there is only an hour, we are going to open this conversation up to the audience. One of the questions I hope that will be answered during that time is to really think about how long it is children are expected to actually be in Europe. There have been leaders that have talked about children as actually being Europe’s economic future, given the declining birth rate in some countries. And what types of skills and things would actually be needed. And so I hope that’s something that we can also have come out during the question and answer period.

But with that, we have someone with a microphone that will bring it to the audience member. Please say your name, what organization you’re with, and speak into the microphone for our online audience.

Q: Hi. Thank you very much for this presentation. It was extremely compelling. I’m Erika Schlager with the staff of the Helsinki Commission.

And I think my question is for Ms. Newland. Last week the government of Hungary introduced a legislative package that is targeting organizations that provide humanitarian assistance to migrants. If you’re familiar with that legislative initiative, can you give me your thoughts on it and what it might mean if that were replicated elsewhere? Thank you.

NEWLAND: Well, in answer to your last question, it would be a real disaster if it were replicated elsewhere, because the NGO community has picked up quite a bit of the slack in

government capacity. (Background noise.) Excuse me. And I think the Hungarian actions are part of the sort of populist wave in Hungary, which has been quite focused on the sort of anti-immigrant, anti-refugee strand of the populist argument has been very powerful in Hungary, and particularly, along with that, an anti-EU and anti-foreign strand.

So a combination of a sort of foreign strand. So the combination of a foreign headquartered humanitarian organization serving migrants and refugees is a particularly toxic one in Hungary. It's also true that Hungary has been in the top 10 among destinations for young asylum applicants – for 17 and under asylum applicants. You know, it's a country that until very recently really didn't have refugee laws, didn't receive migrants. This is all sort of quite new. And the institutional capacity just is not there.

So the combination of a lack of capacity and the political environment has really made for an extremely, extremely difficult one for migrants and refugees, probably the most difficult one in the EU at the moment. And as you may know, Hungary is being reprimanded by the European Commission for its policies and its political rhetoric.

THOMPSON: We're going to go to both sides of the room. So we'll come here and then we'll come here.

Q: Hi. I'm Andrew Fallone with the Embassy of Liechtenstein, although I formerly was working with the Office of Migration and Integration in Freiburg, Germany.

And we worked a lot with civil society actors to coordinate our efforts, as you addressed. And do you see the turn to more reliance on civil society actors – as many people in our office in Germany were very excited about – as detrimental, given that many, many actors will talk about how the United States model is so beneficial as it increases reliance on oneself and decreases reliance on one's government? They talk about a sort of increased independence in integration. Yet, that can be dangerous when the United States model is based off of such a limited amount of integration for refugees, given that there's no route from Libya to the United States, but there are routes from all sorts of places in Europe? And just given the amount of refugees, and specifically refugee children that countries are seeing, is a shift to – so, like the shift to new public management in Sweden – a shift to more reliance on civil society actors instead of sound government policy dangerous for the long-term sustainable support of refugee children and refugees in general?

NEWLAND: Mmm hmm, well, that's a great question. And I think – do you want to start with that?

KOUVELAKI: I mean, at the moment in Greece there is a serious lack of adequate social welfare facilities to accommodate these children and provide the necessary services. So there's a gap. There's a gap in children's protection, not only for refugee children but also for Greek children. So someone has to fill that gap, but it all depends on the way this is done. We try to operate with private sector standards. I mean, we were founded and we're solely funded by the private sector. The Libra Group is our founding sponsor. And we have been recently scaled up by the Ikea Foundation.

So the standards we are using are very high and transparent. So there is always a way that civil society can operate. We try to be very inclusive in our model and include other NGOs with whom we collaborate. But our monitoring and evaluation and reporting mechanisms are quite of a high standard. Otherwise, we could not ensure the needed quality and quantity of services to provide support and care for the most vulnerable of the refugee and migrant population. But, I mean, if – were it not for the civil society, there wouldn't be anyone else. So I guess it's a very tough choice to make.

NEWLAND: I think in European countries with higher government capacity there has been quite a strong inclination to think that the government will handle all sort of social service issues, both for the native-born population as well as for immigrants. That clearly has fallen apart during this crisis. And I think there is interest in Europe at looking at the U.S. model for refugee resettlement and the extent to which NGOs play a sort of key part in that. Now, those NGOs, in the first instance, the nine national resettlements, are funded by the government to do the initial stages of integration and settlement. But, I mean, there are a couple of things.

For one, I think you really have to make a distinction between a resettlement program and an inflow of asylum seekers, because resettlement is planned for. You can anticipate needs and figure out where to place people and so on. When you have, as we have across the Mexican border, just an arrival – an unanticipated arrival a lot of people, and particularly in that case children, it's a much more difficult challenge because, people just aren't prepared for it, and institutions aren't prepared for it. So we have many of the same issues as the Europeans are facing. The conditions are not quite as dire as they are on the Greek islands, I think, but they're pretty bad. Children are detained. There are very long waiting lists for asylum hearings – there's a backlog of over 600,000 now. So, we face many of the same struggles, with access to education, access to medical care, and so on, with the children who arrive as asylum seekers in this country.

Having said that, I think that there is a very good integration story, for the most part, in the United States. And that does result in part from a sort of tough love policy, where refugees are expected to get on their feet and become self-sufficient in the shortest possible time. And we've looked at a number of studies on that at my institute, that keeping these populations dependent on government aid, making it possible for them to continue to depend on government aid, is not necessarily the best way for them to integrate. So I think as far as NGOs and government goes, it needs to be a partnership. It is a partnership here. I think that partnership is growing in Europe, but it has started from a much lower level because the social safety net funded by government has been much stronger in most European countries – but not all.

THOMPSON: Oh, sorry. This gentleman in the front, please?

Q: Thank you. I'm Scott David with the State Department.

In the sad story that Sophia told, if I have it right, these, you know, young boys originally, when they reached Greece, were on one of the islands. You said Chios, I think. And then made it to the mainland, which you didn't say so but I got the impression that your shelters

are on the mainland. So my question is, given the terrible conditions on the islands and the greater resources on the mainland, and recognizing the asylum process is very slow, as Kathleen just said, why has Greece been unable to move more of the people that are on the islands in these shelters, in these camps, to the mainland? Thank you.

KOUVELAKI: Well, the issue is the EU-Turkey agreement, to be perfectly honest. According to that agreement, after the 16th of March 2016, any refugee that enters Greece is not allowed to move to the mainland. Now, in theory, that is not the case for unaccompanied minors. But what has happened is that with the closure of the borders, the children are now trapped in Greece, because they used to use Greece as a transit point to go to Germany, Sweden, Austria, anywhere else. But now, the children are trapped. And all the relevant accommodation facilities are at full capacity.

So that's why the intervention that we are providing is very targeted. The goal is to increase the number of shelters in order to be able to move a child from the island to the mainland, because there are no available spaces, which is the problem at the moment, a child could not move. So they are imprisoned on the islands where, as Ms. Newland said, the situations are horrible. There are multiple violations of human rights and multiple threats to the mental and physical health of these children. So that's why The HOME Project advocates for more available spaces, so that there's no excuse to keep children in situations like that.

Q: So the agreement specifies that adults have to stay on the islands?

KOUVELAKI: Well, paradoxically, the word "children" is never mentioned in the text of the agreement. So now in theory, unaccompanied minors are considered the most vulnerable part of these arrivals, so they should be moved to the shelters. In theory, also, a child should never be detained. This is a violation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. But unfortunately, that's not what is currently happening.

NEWLAND: I can just add to that, under the terms of the EU-Turkey agreement, Greece is – and European countries are entitled to return to Turkey any asylum seeker whose case is not accepted. So if people have already moved to the mainland, it's more difficult to sort of move them back. So they're supposed to have their asylum cases heard on the islands, and then they can be sent back if their asylum cases fail. But, you know, there's just nothing like enough capacity to hear these cases on the islands or, indeed, anywhere in Greece. But particularly on the islands.

KOUVELAKI: Exactly. So just to add to that, that asylum applications on the islands are rarely processed because there isn't an adequate amount of staff or adequately trained staff to do that. So the implementation of the agreement is not really possible at the moment with the resources that exist.

Q: Hi, there. I'm Siobhan Spiak with CACI.

I have a question for The HOME Project. So, as far as getting arrivals – you said that right now you can't really take people in right now. So what is the length of time that you let

children stay? It is up till they're 18? Or how do you process them and help move them forward?

KOUVELAKI: Well, in the past year we've had a record of family reunifications. We've had 40 family reunifications, because we give a big emphasis to process those cases the fastest possible. So some of these children leave. But then the children are eligible to stay with us, according to law, until they reach the age of 18. In reality, we never let anyone go if we haven't catered for their next step. So a program that we're currently doing is called the Youth to Youth Program, that we're implementing in collaboration with the American Community School in Athens, where our kids buddy up with students from the school and they go to the campus and they do English, Greek, computer science, art, music, and sports. And the idea is, through education, to start integrating these children and bring them in touch with private sector stakeholders who will eventually offer jobs for these kids. So 10 of our kids will start working in April. So it's because the ultimate goal is integration, we never let anyone go without the next step.

NEWLAND: And this is a huge problem in government programs and in many programs for youth generally, is that people age out of those programs. And there's really very little for them after that. They just sort of get released and that's it, which causes, huge, huge problems. I mean, any country has reason to be concerned about a large population of unemployed young males without prospects. I mean, it's a recipe for unhappy outcomes.

KOUVELAKI: And if I can add something to that. I mean, this is the most sensitive, let's say, population in terms of expressing the violence that they have experienced. So if we don't stop the cycle of violence, there's a huge risk that at some point these children will have to express their anger and despair. And that can prove much more dangerous for European societies than actually integrating them.

Q: Hi. I'm Xander Kott from Congresswoman Norton's office.

My question is, would you guys say that a bigger obstacle to helping these children integrate would be the lack of resources? Or would you say that it's more of the political climate and the political opposition to doing that?

KOUVELAKI: Well, in the Greek case, we're not talking about 1 million or an unsolvable number. It's 2,300 children. So if The HOME Project, with the support of our donors, managed to accommodate 200 children in one year, this is a problem that can be solvable, because very often we hear that this crisis is overwhelming or it can't be solved. And this is the best excuse not to do anything.

NEWLAND: Yes, I think there's a sort of iterative relationship between the lack of resources and the lack of political support. If communities have – or see children coming in and it's obvious how great their needs are for education, for health care, for psychological support in particular, and everybody knows those things cost money and these are mostly pretty high tax environments anyway. So there's a sort of potential wedge there. And it's been great to see in many European countries the outpouring of support from civil society and from civil society

organizations. But on the other hand, we've also seen the rise of populist movements who target refugees in particular, and who play on this argument why are we spending money on these people when we have great needs at home.

So the lack of resources and the political potential toxicity of this argument sort of play into each other in a way that can be very difficult if leadership decides to try to take advantage of that politically. And, it's happening probably most prominently in Hungary, but by no means only in Hungary. Also in many of the Eastern or the former Soviet countries, former Soviet bloc countries, that have very limited experience with receiving refugees or migrants are seeing this kind of populist fringe in some cases, not so fringe in others.

Q: Good morning. My name is Allison Hollabaugh. I'm counsel at the Helsinki Commission. And I'd like to thank both of you for your attention to this issue and keeping us up to date on the latest details that we can use in our policies here.

My question is for Ms. Kouvelaki. Thank you so much for your work on the front lines with these children. I'm wondering if you have heard of cases, such as we've heard out of the Nordic countries, where children are being trafficked from the shelters themselves? So living at the shelters at night, but then during the day disappearing and coming back with new cellphones and other things that would indicate sexual exploitation during the day. And if you have any suggestions for best practices that are most effective in helping to prevent those types of situations while respecting the freedom of the children, as well as to make them want to stay in the shelters voluntarily.

KOUVELAKI: So you just brought up an issue that – you know, it happens. And we have to remember the situations these children are coming from. And what we also have to remember is that because of the EU-Turkey agreement and the conditions on the island, the kids have lived for a very long time in horrible conditions. And so some of the children – I mean, all of the children that arrive in our shelters have been physically abused. Many have been sexually abused. Many had to resort to child prostitution. And the shelters are not prisons. So we don't lock the children in. It's like a home with parents that take care of their children.

So sometimes if we have 16- or 17-year-olds, we can't really lock them in. The only way we can – we can try and prevent them from getting involved in criminal or illegal networks, let's say, is by giving attention to what is happening in the house, in the home, to be able to provide individualized care to them to cover their basic needs but also give emphasis on their mental health. I mean, more than 35 percent of our children suffer from serious mental health issues. And we've seen that with time and with the right support they start trusting us. And they start not wanting to go, I mean, out of the house, in the sense of, you know, getting involved in illegal activities.

So I think the only solution to that is love, really, and the improvement of the quantity and the quality of care, to answer it in a more professional way. But children need a support system, a loving system. They need parents. So our staff has to substitute for the missing family and the missing social welfare state. And when that happens, we increase the chances of having the kids safe.

Q: Thank you. Jimmy Athanaspoulos from Libra Social

The breadth and depth of the services provided to these children is amazing. What is the cost of these services, which is an holistic approach as we can hear – what is the cost of that? And how is that compared to the government run and operated shelters? Thank you.

KOUVELAKI: Well, we had to operate with private sector standards, meaning that we had to be very efficient and immediate in our operations. So just to give you an idea, the per unit, per child cost per day is around 20 euros, where in government run – funded facilities can be three times larger than our costs. So we try to operate with a minimum cost to provide the best quality of care in order to be able to have a sustainable intervention.

THOMPSON: So, I would actually like to thank you both for being here today. If there was a comment that you wanted to make as a way of wrapping up, I would love to allow you to have closing remarks.

NEWLAND: Oh, thank you. Well, I think we've covered a lot of ground. And the bottom line here is really to observe the standards set up in the Convention on the Rights of a Child, not just as a matter of legal obligation but a matter of sort of human response – you know, treating children as children, understanding the needs that they have, and really trying to serve and protect them, as The HOME Project is doing. It's a very sort of shining example of good practice. And I hope will inspire many others to follow that model.

THOMPSON: So, again, thank you both so much for being here today. We at the Commission are very pleased that you were able to travel here from Greece. I think, as has been mentioned before, you're one of the few voices that talks about children as children, and really helps to humanize the situation so that people see this beyond the numbers. I think as we've heard today, refugee and migration flows are continuing. This isn't a situation that's going to end tomorrow.

While there are promising practices, there are a number of systems that just are not firmly in place, and in some cases the political will is also not in place to address the myriad of needs of youth. The reality is these children are not only Europe's future, North Africa's future, the Middle East's future, we're in a global world. It's also our future. And so there's a real need to continue the focus on this issue, work together where we can, and really begin to embrace some of the promising practices that we've heard here, but also not get some mired in some of the problems and conflicts that we can't begin to work together on solutions.

And so, with that, I thank everyone for being here. And I hope – we will be around for another, I think, 10 minutes or so for anyone who has questions afterwards. Thank you.
(Applause.)

[Whereupon, at 11:03 a.m., the briefing ended.]