

Thank you, Mr President.

We welcome the chance to discuss the High Commissioner’s report on Principles and Practical Guidance on the protection of the human rights of migrants in vulnerable situations, A/HRC/34/31.

Since 2015, approximately 700,000 migrants crossed through Serbia, many unaccompanied children. While groups on the ground do acknowledge the Government’s response, we are concerned that protection gaps remain. We are also concerned that, when they work to fill those gaps, human rights defenders and organisations in Serbia face obstacles to their work.

First, during the registration process, unaccompanied children have been arbitrarily registered as being of legal age. When there are shortcomings in age assessment, children may not be able to access the protections they need and to which they are entitled.

Many Social Welfare Centres are staffed with dedicated social workers who tirelessly seek to provide guardianship and support in the child’s best interest, but this is unfortunately not the case for all. The quality of the services provided need to be consistent across jurisdictions, and enhanced so as to meet both domestic and international standards. For example, far greater efforts need to be made to ensure formal education to all migrant children, unaccompanied or otherwise. In Serbia currently, only a small part of this population attend schools regularly.

Finally, we want to emphasize the critical role that civil society organisations can play, including by providing services when the government cannot. Despite this fact, some NGOs in Serbia report being denied access to facilities and information necessary for their work.

We are also worried about legal constraints. A draft Law on Free Legal Aid has been mired in Serbian Parliament for some years. We worry that the Law could have a serious impact on activities of all NGOs that provide legal aid services in cases of human rights violations.

We note that in the High Commissioner’s report, Principle 18 clearly states that governments should ‘respect and support the activities of human rights defenders and others working to rescue and provide assistance to migrants’.

We urge delegations to take the principle and guidance prepared by the OHCHR under serious consideration, and to use them to act now to address the situation of migrants. This includes supporting – not suppressing – the work of those who seek to defend migrants’ rights and to provide them with life-changing, and sometimes life-saving, assistance.

Thank you.