



The Coming of Age of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors in Six European Countries

FRANCE

What happens to unaccompanied foreign minors when they turn 18, from a legal point of view?

Unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) are entitled to legal residency in France and cannot be deported while they are underage. Consequently, they are not required to apply for a residence permit during their minority, nor can they be classified as staying irregularly on French soil. However, upon reaching the age of 18, every foreign resident, including those who remain under the care of the State, **must be able to prove their right to residency**. For UFMs taken into care before the age of majority, there are three main legal pathways to regularize their status:

- **Residence Permit for Family and Private Life:** UFMs placed under child welfare services (Aide Sociale à l'Enfance, ASE) or by a trusted third party before the age of 16 may apply for a one-year residence permit. Eligibility requires proof of participation in general or vocational education and evidence of integration into French society, including social ties, schooling, and personal or professional development.
- **Exceptional Admission to Stay:** For minors taken into care between the ages of 16 and 18, the prefecture may grant a residence permit through an exceptional admission to stay. This discretionary measure is based on several criteria: completion of at least six months of professional training, demonstrated integration in France, and minimal ties to the country of origin. The latter is assessed based on the youth's connection to France in contrast with their own declarations about ties and communication with their home community.
- **International Protection:** UFMs who applied for international protection during their minority and were granted status receive long-term residency. This includes a 10-year residence permit for refugees or stateless persons and a four-year permit for those granted subsidiary protection.

In addition to residency options, **some UFMs under ASE care may qualify for French nationality before reaching adulthood**. A minor placed under ASE by court order may acquire nationality if raised by a French national or if entrusted to ASE for at least three years before reaching adulthood. This provision reflects a legal recognition of their integration into French society and ensures continued stability as they transition into adulthood.



How does the care and guardianship system change when the unaccompanied foreign minor turns 18?

Turning 18 marks a significant shift in the care framework for unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) in France. While they legally become adults, many are not yet ready to live independently. To bridge this gap, France provides a transitional mechanism known as **the Young Adult Contract** (Contrat Jeune Majeur), which allows eligible individuals to remain under the protection of child welfare services (Aide Sociale à l'Enfance, ASE) **until the age of 21**.

Established under Article L.222-5-1 of the Code of Social Action and Families, the Young Adult Contract offers continued access to housing, legal support, and education or vocational training. Beneficiaries are typically placed in dedicated residential facilities, where professional staff—such as social workers, educators, and counselors—support their gradual move toward autonomy. This continued care is especially important for young people still enrolled in professional training programs, as stable housing allows them to pursue their studies without the added burden of immediate housing insecurity.

In practice, however, **the implementation of the Young Adult Contract varies significantly across departments**. While the legal framework requires that it be offered to qualifying individuals, some regional authorities provide robust and extended support, ensuring continuity and allowing young adults to progress in their integration journey. Others impose more restrictive conditions—such as proof of academic or behavioral progress—or grant contracts of very short duration, often insufficient for meaningful development. Consequently, **some young adults may find themselves without continued assistance** just as they are expected to take on adult responsibilities.

Near the end of their eligibility for ASE housing, the transition becomes more challenging for a young adult. Finding independent accommodation requires navigating a complex housing system and managing unfamiliar administrative procedures. Educators and social workers play a crucial role in this phase, helping young adults identify appropriate housing options, such as places in Foyers de Jeunes Travailleurs (FJT) or other supported living structures. They also assist with essential administrative tasks—applying for housing benefits, securing financial aid, and understanding rental obligations—ensuring that young adults are not left to face these bureaucratic demands alone.

The Young Adult Contract thus serves as a critical but unevenly applied tool in supporting UFMs as they exit the formal guardianship system and begin building independent lives. Its proper implementation is key to preventing abrupt breaks in care and ensuring a smoother, more stable transition into adulthood.



Challenges in the transition to adulthood

The transition to adulthood presents significant challenges for unaccompanied foreign minors in France, particularly in relation to legal status, access to services, and administrative autonomy. The administrative procedures related to residence permits, housing, and social benefits are often so opaque and inconsistent that they become inaccessible. **This can place UFM's at risk of becoming undocumented shortly after reaching adulthood.**

Although **Article L.222-5, 5° of the Code of Social Action and Families** theoretically provides for continued support for young adults under 21 who lack sufficient resources or family support, this provision is rarely applied in full. In practice, access to support is often curtailed well before the age of 21, with **significant variation across departments**. These inconsistencies, combined with a lack of structured preparation for life after care, contribute to what many caregivers describe as “sudden exits.” **Young people may find themselves without housing, employment, or access to essential services**, sometimes facing a severe risk of homelessness.

For minors who arrive in France after the age of 16, the stakes are particularly high. In order to qualify for a residence permit tied to employment, they must complete at least six months of vocational training. Before entering these programs, however, they must undergo an academic assessment by the CASNAV (Academic Center for the Schooling of Allophone Newcomers), which evaluates their proficiency in French and other core subjects. Based on these results, some youth may enter vocational tracks directly, while others are required to complete preparatory language and academic courses.

This process is not implemented uniformly across regions. Some minors benefit from early access to French language instruction, which accelerates their entry into professional training. Others are placed in general French language classes without a clear path to vocational education, leading to delays that may prevent them from meeting the training requirement in time. Coupled with the challenge of securing an apprenticeship placement—often a prerequisite for the training itself—these barriers add significant pressure at a moment when legal and social stability is most needed.

The lack of consistent, coordinated support during this critical phase underscores the structural vulnerabilities faced by unaccompanied foreign minors as they approach adulthood. Without prompt access to guidance and resources, their ability to secure legal status and achieve meaningful integration is severely compromised.



GREECE

What happens to unaccompanied foreign minors when they turn 18, from a legal point of view?

In Greece, the transition to adulthood marks a critical juncture for unaccompanied foreign minors, as reaching the age of 18 typically results in the loss of access to child-specific protection measures. Upon attaining legal adulthood, **individuals are no longer entitled to the support mechanisms granted to minors, including state-provided accommodation, guardianship, and targeted welfare services.** As a result, many find themselves navigating complex legal and administrative systems without adequate preparation or institutional support.

In some cases, accommodation facilities initiate **preparatory activities** from the age of 17 in an effort to facilitate this transition. These measures may include referrals to organizations providing job counselling, assistance in securing independent housing, and guidance aimed at fostering autonomy. When implemented effectively and with sufficient lead time, such support allows minors to pursue education, develop language skills, and build the competencies necessary for independent living. Some individuals who are well-prepared and wish to remain in Greece succeed in integrating into the local community and labour market.

Who Can Be Appointed as a Guardian? How Is a Guardian Appointed?

Given that the transition to adulthood within the Greek context is an abrupt process, and many times the resources available are insufficient to cover the needs of minors, the guardian stands out as a very important figure in their lives, offering positive guidance regarding their asylum process, family reunification, as well as concerns regarding education, recreational activities and future plans.

However, **guardians are often overwhelmed and lack the time or resources** to adequately prepare minors for adulthood. When a child approaches the age of majority, guardians typically take two main steps: referring them to an adult support organization (often asking the young adult to navigate the process themselves) and requesting accommodation at a camp, even though many minors fail to follow through. In some cases, guardians may help minors earn diplomas or attend seminars, which can be useful when updating their CVs. However, **the role of the guardian, while vital, is primarily focused on legal proceedings** rather than providing comprehensive guidance for the minor's future. Ideally, guardians should play a more active role in helping young adults transition to adulthood by including integration support in their processes.



Challenges in the transition to adulthood

In Greece, reaching the age of 18 often triggers **a sudden and difficult rupture in the support system** available to unaccompanied minors. At this point, many lose access to shelter, social services, and legal protection, with no structured transition in place to help them assume adult responsibilities. This abrupt shift frequently places young adults in highly precarious situations, including **homelessness, unemployment, and exposure to exploitation**.

One of the most immediate challenges is housing. Upon turning 18, many young adults are required to leave shelters or other child protection facilities without any viable alternative in place. While few manage to secure places in Supported Independent Living (SIL) programs or other accommodations for adults, **these options are scarce, largely NGO-run, and subject to strict eligibility criteria**. Most are left to search for housing through informal networks or, lacking financial means, ending up without a shelter at all.

The limited availability of integration services only compounds these vulnerabilities. Language classes, educational support, and psychosocial assistance are not widely accessible, and **what exists is primarily delivered by non-governmental actors rather than by the state**. For instance, the only state-supported program aimed at assisting former unaccompanied minors – **HELIOS Junior**, which is managed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and is designed to support the integration of former unaccompanied minors into Greek society and the labour market by providing personalized services to help them transition smoothly from accommodation facilities to independent living, was not in operation until very recently. It has started its operation again very recently. Without sustained institutional support, many young adults are left to navigate complex bureaucratic and social systems alone.

Access to employment is another major barrier. Although some youth eventually succeed in entering the job market or continuing their education, many struggle due to limited vocational training, insufficient language skills, and the lack of job placement services. The **scarcity of state-provided programs for job counselling or professional development** means that most support must come from NGOs, which face their own limitations in reach and funding.

The **absence of structured legal assistance** further complicates matters. Young adults may face significant challenges in renewing residence permits or accessing basic rights and entitlements, often without the guidance they previously received as minors. This legal precarity pushes many into informal or **exploitative work**, heightening their exposure to **abuse and marginalization**.

In summary, the transition to adulthood for unaccompanied minors in Greece is marked by **abrupt institutional withdrawal, limited state involvement, and a fragmented safety net largely sustained by external organizations**. Although guardians and NGO staff play critical roles, the broader system lacks the continuity and capacity required to support these individuals as they move toward independence. As a result, many find themselves caught between childhood protection mechanisms that end too soon, and adult systems they are unprepared to access.



POLAND

What happens to unaccompanied foreign minors when they turn 18, from a legal point of view?

In Poland, reaching the age of 18 does not automatically terminate the support provided to unaccompanied foreign minors. While the general rule is that care in institutional settings ends at legal adulthood, there are exceptions that allow for continued support beyond this threshold. In particular, **young adults who have been granted international protection may be eligible for further assistance through state mechanisms.**

Those who obtain refugee status or subsidiary protection can apply for an **Individual Integration Program (IPI)**, if they submit their request within 60 days of receiving protection. The program includes both financial support and practical aid to facilitate integration, such as assistance with housing, employment, education, and language learning. Beneficiaries of international protection also become eligible for a **residence card, which can lead to permanent residency and, eventually, Polish citizenship** through an expedited process.

However, in practice, **many unaccompanied minors do not remain in Poland** long enough to reach adulthood within the system. A large proportion of minors leave the country—often in pursuit of family reunification or better opportunities elsewhere in Europe—before completing the legal or protection procedures. As a result, it remains difficult to comprehensively assess how effectively the Polish system supports unaccompanied minors once they become adults, especially given the high rate of absconding during the asylum or protection process.

How does the care and guardianship system change when the unaccompanied foreign minor turns 18?

In Poland, the legal guardianship of unaccompanied foreign minors—typically exercised by a court-appointed curator—formally ends when the minor reaches the age of 18. At that point, the individual is considered an adult and assumes full legal responsibility for their own affairs.

However, in situations where legal or administrative proceedings are still ongoing, **former curators may continue to support the young adult in a more limited capacity.** In such cases, they can act as legal representatives by mutual agreement, assisting with procedures related to asylum, residence, or integration. While this continued involvement is not mandated by law, it can provide continuity and stability during the transitional period.

Despite the formal conclusion of guardianship at adulthood, contact between the former minor and their curator may continue informally for some time. This support, however, tends to diminish gradually, eventually concluding as the young adult becomes more independent.



Challenges in the transition to adulthood

Assessing the challenges faced by unaccompanied foreign minors during the transition to adulthood in Poland remains complex, primarily because, as mentioned, a significant number of minors do not remain in the country long enough to complete the process. As a result, the effectiveness of post-majority support mechanisms is difficult to evaluate. While legal provisions allow for continued support through integration programs for those granted international protection, the limited number of minors who stay makes it **challenging to determine whether these measures are sufficient to ensure a stable and autonomous transition into adulthood.**

SLOVENIA

What happens to unaccompanied foreign minors when they turn 18, from a legal point of view?

In Slovenia, there is no established legal framework or protocol specifically governing the transition to adulthood for unaccompanied foreign minors. The national legislation addresses individuals as either children or adults, without provisions for a gradual or safeguarded transition between the two statuses. **Legal guardianship ends automatically on the minor's 18th birthday**, and there is no formal obligation for stakeholders—such as legal guardians, accommodation centre staff, or integration counsellors—to prepare minors for adulthood.

While the Handbook for Legal Representatives of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Applying for International Protection recommends that guardians and counsellors begin addressing the transition months before the child reaches majority, **there is no official process or tool in place to support this preparation.** As a result, support during **this critical period largely depends on the personal initiative and commitment of individual guardians and staff.**

The experience of transitioning into adulthood varies depending on the minor's legal status. **Those who are granted international protection before turning 18 benefit from greater support:** in addition to accommodation centre counsellors, they are assigned an integration counsellor from GOSIM and a custodian from the Centre for Social Work. Although formal guardianship ends upon the granting of protection, former guardians often remain informally involved, providing continued guidance. Upon reaching majority, custodianship ends, but integration counsellors remain engaged in supporting these young adults.

In contrast, **minors who turn 18 while still in the asylum application process face greater difficulties.** They do not benefit from the additional support available to protection-status holders and must navigate adulthood with significantly fewer resources. Upon reaching majority, they are transferred from child accommodation centres to facilities for adults or, if granted international protection, to integration houses or private housing. Although accommodation centre staff are required to prepare an individual care plan for each minor, the legislation does not mandate any specific measures to address the transition to adulthood within these plans.



How does the care and guardianship system change when the unaccompanied foreign minor turns 18?

In Slovenia, all formal guardianship arrangements for unaccompanied foreign minors cease upon reaching the age of 18. The legal guardian's role also ends earlier if the international protection procedure is concluded before the child reaches majority. Once a minor receives a final decision on their status—either the granting of international protection or initiation of return procedures—a new custodian is appointed in accordance with the Family Code. As a result, **an unaccompanied child may be assigned up to three different guardians during their stay in Slovenia**, depending on the stage of their asylum or protection procedure.

However, once the child turns 18, no further guardianship or extended support arrangement is foreseen, even if the young adult remains in education. **The Slovenian system does not provide for any prolonged or transitional guardianship after a UASC reaches adulthood.**

For those granted international protection, some additional support is available through an integration counsellor, who provides assistance in areas such as accommodation, access to financial aid and social benefits, healthcare, education, employment, and legal aid. The law guarantees monthly appointments with the integration counsellor for the first twelve months following the granting of protection, although in practice these professionals often remain accessible beyond this period. While this support plays an important role during the transition to adulthood, it is only available to individuals who have been granted protection and **is not, on its own, sufficient to meet the complex needs of young adults during this critical time.**

Despite the formal end of the legal guardian's mandate, many young adults continue to **rely on their former guardians** for guidance and support. This ongoing informal relationship underscores the crucial role that legal guardians play—not only in legal matters but also as trusted figures during a vulnerable period.

Challenges in the transition to adulthood

One of the main challenges faced by unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) in Slovenia is the abruptness of the transition to adulthood and the absence of a formal legal framework to guide or support this process. The legislation makes no provision for a gradual shift from child to adult status, nor does it require any specific preparation or transitional support from guardians, accommodation centres, or other institutions. Once a young person turns 18, all forms of guardianship and child-specific support end immediately, regardless of their readiness or ongoing needs. **This sudden withdrawal of support leaves many young adults unprepared to navigate the complex demands of independent living.**



Accommodation is one of the most immediate and pressing challenges. Upon turning 18, young adults are transferred out of facilities for minors, often without adequate preparation or a clear housing plan. Securing private accommodation is difficult, particularly for those without a stable income or access to financial support. Many struggle to pay rent and a security deposit in their first months of independence. For beneficiaries of international protection, financial housing assistance becomes available later, helping to alleviate some of the burden. However, applicants for international protection—those still in the asylum procedure—are not entitled to such support, placing them in a particularly vulnerable position.

Even for those who are eligible for financial assistance, **finding housing can remain difficult due to discrimination.** Landlords may be reluctant to rent to refugees, and bureaucratic hurdles can further complicate the process. These barriers contribute to housing instability and **increase the risk of homelessness or exploitation.**

In summary, the lack of transitional planning, the sudden withdrawal of support, and structural barriers to housing and self-sufficiency create significant obstacles for young adults in Slovenia. While some targeted support is available for individuals with international protection, **the system remains fragmented and insufficient** to ensure a safe and stable transition into adulthood.

ITALY

What happens to unaccompanied foreign minors when they turn 18, from a legal point of view?

Upon reaching the age of 18, unaccompanied foreign minors in Italy face a significant legal and practical transition. The residence permit for minors, which grants access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and accommodation, expires upon adulthood. However, **Italian law provides several mechanisms to ensure continuity of protection and facilitate the young person's integration.**

One of the key measures is **the conversion of the minor's residence permit into a new permit for study, work, or job-seeking purposes.** To obtain this permit, the young adult must present a valid passport and receive a positive mandatory opinion from the Ministry of Labour, which evaluates the individual's integration path during their time as a minor. This assessment is based on various factors, including:

- Duration of residence in Italy: the minor should have resided in Italy for a reasonable period of time.
- Attendance in school and Italian language courses: the minor should have attended an Italian language course, demonstrating integration efforts.



- Social Service feedback: the competent municipality's social services should provide a positive assessment of the minor's progress and adaptation.
- Behavioural conduct: the minor should demonstrate respectful and positive behaviour within their community setting.

The Ministry collaborates closely with municipalities and reception facilities to collect documentation and ensure an individualized review. **Although the evaluation is guided by internal criteria rather than fixed rules, it reflects a case-by-case approach that requires significant coordination and administrative effort.**

In parallel, Italian legislation offers another essential safeguard through **the Extended Administrative Support (Prosiegua Amministrativo)**, outlined in Article 13 of Law 47/2017. This provision allows care and protection services to continue beyond the age of 18, **up to the age of 21**, for those who are not yet self-sufficient. Eligible young adults—typically those who were under the care of social services as minors—can request this support to complete their education, participate in vocational training, or find employment. The application must be submitted to the Juvenile Court before the minor turns 18 and is evaluated based on the individual's needs and circumstances.

Young adults benefiting from this extension may remain in reception facilities and continue to receive assistance with housing, financial support, health care, education, and labour market access. While this measure significantly improves outcomes for vulnerable youth, **its availability and implementation can vary across regions depending on resources and local administrative practices.**

The transition process is heavily dependent on timely and well-coordinated support, particularly with regard to residence permit conversion, which must be initiated within a 60-day window before or after the expiry of the minor's permit. The residence permit plays a vital role not only as a legal safeguard but also as a tool for integration, granting access to services and employment. **Social workers and reception facility staff often play a crucial role** in initiating and managing the application process.

Overall, Italy offers a relatively structured framework to support UAMs as they transition into adulthood. While access to services and legal status beyond 18 is possible, **successful outcomes depend heavily on timely action, availability of local resources, and ongoing administrative support.** When implemented effectively, these measures help prevent legal uncertainty and social marginalization, supporting young adults in achieving autonomy and integration into Italian society.



How does the care and guardianship system change when the unaccompanied foreign minor turns 18?

Although legal guardianship officially ends when unaccompanied foreign minors reach the age of 18, **many young adults maintain close relationships with their former voluntary guardians**, who continue to serve as important points of reference, offering guidance, emotional support, and practical assistance. This enduring bond underscores the crucial, long-term role of voluntary guardianship—not only in facilitating the initial transition to adulthood but also in providing ongoing mentorship during the critical period that follows.

A noteworthy practice emerging within this framework is the concept of **social guardianship**, which **formally recognizes the continued involvement of voluntary guardians after the legal guardianship mandate has expired**. First introduced in Sicily, this practice entails including the guardian's name in the administrative decree that extends protective measures for young adults. The Juvenile Court of Messina was a pioneer in adopting this approach, which acknowledges the guardian's ongoing role in supporting the young person's social and labour integration, even though it does not grant any legal authority after adulthood. Participation in this arrangement requires the mutual consent of both the young adult and the guardian.

Social guardianship offers a structured point of contact during the transition to independence, helping to mitigate the abrupt loss of support that often accompanies the end of formal care. By allowing guardians to continue offering informal guidance—such as assistance with education, employment, and administrative issues—this approach fosters a more gradual and supported passage into adulthood. **Expanding and standardizing this model nationwide could greatly enhance the continuity of care and improve integration outcomes for young migrants.**

In addition to social guardianship, each minor should benefit from an individualized transition plan tailored to their specific needs, aspirations, and challenges. These plans typically address securing long-term housing, enrolling in education, or finding employment opportunities. **Reception centre staff play a vital role in coordinating transitional programs that extend services beyond the age of 18**—such as continued access to housing or job training—particularly for those not yet ready for full independence.

Many of these programs are funded through local initiatives or European sources like the European Social Fund (ESF), which helps maintain continuity of care for those aging out of child protection. However, **the reliance on project-based funding limits the systemic and sustainable integration of these measures**. Building young adults' self-reliance through life skills training—including cooking, budgeting, and navigating public services like healthcare and transportation—is a critical priority. Effective collaboration among reception centres, guardians, institutions, schools, healthcare providers, and NGOs is essential to creating a comprehensive support network. This multi-stakeholder approach ensures that all dimensions of the transition are addressed, promoting long-term stability and social inclusion.



Finally, both reception communities and guardians provide essential support in guiding minors through the residence permit conversion process as they approach adulthood. Navigating the additional bureaucratic requirements involved in securing adult legal status can be complex, and the assistance of experienced professionals and guardians is key to ensuring young adults successfully obtain the permits needed to remain in Italy legally and continue their integration journey.

Challenges in the transition to adulthood

One of the most critical challenges in the transition from childhood to adulthood for unaccompanied foreign minors in Italy is **the lack of structured support once they turn 18**. Upon reaching legal adulthood, young people are required to leave reception facilities, which are exclusively reserved for minors. This abrupt change often results in **the loss of stable housing, financial security, and clear guidance**, leaving many vulnerable to **precarious living conditions and social exclusion**.

The difficulties of this transition are particularly acute for those whose integration during their minor years has been incomplete. Limited time in reception facilities, language barriers, restricted access to vocational training, and scarce employment opportunities hinder the development of essential skills and social networks necessary for independent living. **Without sufficient preparation, young adults risk missing crucial administrative deadlines**—such as converting their residence permits—which can lead to loss of legal status and additional barriers to integration.

While some support services exist for young adults, accessing them requires proactive efforts to build and expand support networks before aging out of the system. Since reception facilities provide for all basic needs during minority, **many minors struggle to recognize the importance of actively preparing for independence before they turn 18**. This lack of awareness poses a significant obstacle, as young people often fail to perceive the urgency of gaining autonomy while still within institutional care.

Among the various difficulties faced during this transition, housing stands out as the most pressing issue. The **severe shortage of dedicated accommodation options for young migrants**, coupled with the **absence of a systematic and coordinated housing strategy**, leaves many struggling to secure stable living arrangements. Without stable housing, the prospects for continuing education, vocational training, or employment are severely undermined, increasing **the risk of social and economic marginalization**.



SLOVAKIA

What happens to an unaccompanied child when they turn 18?

In Slovakia, there is no formal law or policy specifically governing the transition to adulthood for all unaccompanied refugee and migrant children. This means that when unaccompanied children turn 18, they are generally treated as adults. Special protections and supports may cease and without the right support in place; **children and youth may even lose their right to stay in Slovakia, becoming undocumented, placing them in a particularly vulnerable position.**

Children report having to rely on information from their peers and may not always know how to access specialist free legal assistance. As a result, **they are not always fully informed or properly advised about the right steps to take to secure the residence permit best suited for their circumstances.** This can lead to significant difficulties securing safe and appropriate accommodation as well as challenges navigating financial management, education, work, and healthcare impacting their wellbeing and increasing their vulnerability to **homelessness, abuse and exploitation.**

Not all stakeholders are formally required to prepare unaccompanied children for adulthood and to assist them to access the rights to which they are entitled. As a result, the level and quality of support provided during this critical period can largely depend on the personal initiative and commitment of those supporting the child as well as assistance provided by the child's peers.

However, **protections are available within the Slovakian system for those identified as unaccompanied during their childhood** benefiting from greater support. This is because they are taken into state care, assigned an institutional guardian mandated by UPSVaR (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family), and placed **in state-supported Centres for Children and Families.** The allocated guardian is normally a social worker and the child is also able to access other specialist assistance in these centres, including a lawyer. Although the formal guardianship role ends when a child turns 18, in specific circumstances described further below, a child can remain in these centres and continue to receive aftercare support from a social worker, educators, and psychologists as they transition to adulthood.

This contrasts with the situation for children who are not identified as unaccompanied before turning 18. These children are not linked into any protection system meaning **they are not placed into care and are unable to access a guardian and other critical services as they transition to adulthood** greatly increasing their vulnerability to harm.



Some other children may have been given **a temporary residency status** based on the fact that they are a minor (called a tolerated residence permit in Slovakia). Unless their guardian (who can be an institutional guardian or a natural person appointed by the court) takes proactive steps to ensure that another type of residence permit is in place for the child, the residence permit ends when the child turns 18. This means they will no longer have the right to lawfully remain in Slovakia, without submitting an application for another type of residence permit. **These young adults then become undocumented and at risk of being removed from Slovakia**, which makes accessing other support even more difficult at this critical time, increasing their vulnerability.

For children who are granted international protection, were in the asylum procedure before turning 18 or have another type of residence permit (not connected to their minor age), their residency status does not change when they turn 18.

How does the care and guardianship system change when an unaccompanied child turns 18?

In Slovakia all formal guardianship arrangements (whether undertaken by an institution or a natural person) cease upon reaching the age of 18.

If a child is in care within a state-supported Centre for Children and Families, they may benefit from ongoing support as a child is able to stay in these centres up until the age of 25, if they have international protection or remain in the asylum process or have another type of valid residence permit, they are studying or preparing for a profession and an agreement is signed between the youth and the centre. This aftercare support continues until the youth becomes self-sufficient and is able to secure housing. Importantly, the social worker assigned to the child by the centre typically remains involved throughout this transition, offering consistent guidance and assistance beyond the age of majority. All key actors work together with the youth to develop an individual plan to support them to become more resilient and self-sufficient.

If a child is not in one of these centres, or is unable to remain there after turning 18, **there is no law or policy that allows for a transition period and aftercare support**. Key actors may remain involved, such as social workers, but **the support becomes more informal**, and **many youth may not understand how to access specialist support**, including legal assistance. This means that many children and youth may need to navigate this period by themselves.

Despite the formal end of the legal guardian's mandate, many youth continue to rely on their former guardians and other key actors such as social workers or educators for guidance and support. These ongoing informal relationships underscore the crucial role that legal guardians and other key child protection actors play—not only in legal matters but also as trusted figures during a vulnerable period.



In summary, **the presence of a guardian and other trusted adults is crucial** in ensuring the protection, regularisation of stay, when necessary, and legal assistance and other support is in place to ensure access to comprehensive sustainable solutions for unaccompanied youth in Slovakia.

Challenges in the transition to adulthood

One of the main challenges faced by unaccompanied refugee and migrant children and youth in Slovakia is **the absence of a formal legal framework to guide or support children transitioning to adulthood**. Slovak law makes no provision for a gradual shift from child to adult status, nor does it require any specific preparation or transitional support except for those children who are placed in care within the state-supported Centres for Children and Families.

Unaccompanied children in Slovakia would benefit from an individualised plan and period of aftercare supporting them through the transition period. Children transitioning to adulthood need **tailored and continued support** to allow them to navigate the sudden shift from childhood to adulthood and the disproportionate impact this transition can have on an unaccompanied child. Children rely on a trusted adult, such as their guardian, to prepare, guide, and empower them during this process. **Guardians may also require support to undertake this role**, such as access to free, quality legal assistance.

While targeted support is available for some unaccompanied children in Slovakia, a formal legal framework would ensure a safe and stable transition into adulthood for all unaccompanied refugee and migrant children in Slovakia which includes training, resourcing and support for guardians. Ensuring **consistent, informed decision-making and early planning for longer-term solutions is essential** to protecting the rights of unaccompanied youth and supporting their successful integration into society.