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ALERT



Introduction of Early Alert System in Missing Children Cases 'Amber Alert' in Serbia: A Threat or an Opportunity?

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When the news about a missing child spreads across media and social networks in Serbia, almost without exception, a wave of anxiety, assumptions, and the need to identify the perpetrators and underlying causes, is prompted. A part of the public, with the wholehearted support of certain media, succumbs to panic. Consequently, reminders of the tragically ended cases of missing girls from the past decade resurface, and calls for the implementation of effective search measures, tightening of supervision and control to solve the current case intensify.

The problem of missing of children is deeply disturbing for the entire society, and the lack of official statistics makes it even more difficult to analyse the causes, consequences and interconnectedness of the circumstances leading to disappearance. The lack of data leaves room for speculation, presenting exaggerated figures and estimates which contribute to the existing panic and anxiety among citizens.

Who are the missing children in Serbia? How many are there and why do they disappear? How are these cases resolved? Who and how reacts when a missing child is reported? Could institutional reactions be more effective? Do we need a system for early alert in cases of missing children in Serbia? Are there conditions and adequate support in place to introduce such a system? What are the main characteristics of the system for early alert observed from a comparative perspective? Is there an underlying correlation between the effectiveness of the system for early alert in cases of missing children and the enhanced system of biometric surveillance in public areas? These are the most common questions raised in relation to the missing children phenomenon in Serbia, which this document attempts to answer, while also providing findings and recommendations for further action when designing a system of early alert in cases of missing children.

Missing children in Serbia in the last decade

Child abduction cases are still very rare (3%) in Serbia. In the last 10 years, two cases of child abduction have been recorded, both with extremely disturbing, tragic epilogues. The next two most common categories of missing children are children running away from home or an institution (45% of the total number of reports made through 116000 hotline) and parental child abductions (18%). Next, due to the specific geographical position of Serbia and its exposure to numerous legal and illegal

migration flows, 17% of cases of missing unaccompanied child-migrants have been recorded. The same percentage (17%) is recorded in cases of lost, injured, or otherwise disappeared children, who do not belong to the already mentioned categories. This data is supported by a ten-year overview of the cases recorded by ASTRA, a member of the PrEUgovor coalition, through both the European number for missing children in Serbia - 116000¹ and work with parents, guardians and institutions, whose data largely coincide with police records. However, official statistics on the number and structure of missing children in Serbia are not publicly available.

A suspected missing child case is initially reported to the police. Upon analysing the circumstances of the disappearance, the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) proceeds in line with its own procedures and, based on the specificities of each individual case, assesses whether it is necessary to disclose information about the missing child to the general public, mainly through the media. Based on the public statements made by the representatives of the Ministry of the Interior, it can be concluded that the Ministry of the Interior receives numerous reports of missing children every year (over two thousand reports in 2021), and that most of these cases involve running away from home or social care institutions. Also, representatives of the MoI note that it is not uncommon to receive 40-50 reports annually for the same child from individuals and/or institutions (repeated disappearances), which also affects the statistics and creates an impression that the number of such cases is much higher.

ASTRA's statistics show that the most frequently reported cases involve children between the ages of 13 and 17, of which 58% are girls and 42% are boys. Also, the largest number of cases (89-98%) are resolved positively². The reasons for running away from family and other forms of accommodation are different, but the most common ones are lack of support, neglect of the child's needs, verbal, psychological and physical violence, and the like. Parental child abduction is one of the most common forms of the manipulation of the system and the 116000 hotline, because in these situations, a parent who has not been granted the right to custody or has a restraining order against the other parent and children due to violence, tries in every way to get in contact with the other parent and children. Children unaccompanied by parents and guardians in migration flows pose a specific challenge because they are in a vulnerable position to become victims of abuse or human trafficking in many ways.

1 [Missing Children Serbia: EUROPEAN MISSING CHILDREN HOTLINE 116000 IN SERBIA – The First Ten Years of Operation](#), ASTRA – Anti Trafficking Action, 2023.

2 Having in mind that ASTRA Support Team has not received a feedback on the outcome of each individual case, it is possible that actual percentage is different from (higher than) the one stated.



European Number for Missing Children in Serbia – 116000

As of May 2012, Serbia is the first country outside the European Union with the European Missing Children Hotline – 116000. A member of the PrEUgovor coalition, ASTRA – Anti Trafficking Action obtained a licence to operate this hotline after intense collaboration (in the course of several months) and support of the European organisation for missing children – Missing Children Europe (MCE) and Greek organisation – Hamogelo. Thanks to the teleoperator's support, all calls made to 116000 within the territory of Serbia are free of charge. Almost 10 years ago (2014), ASTRA and the Serbian Ministry of the Interior (MoI) signed a Memorandum on cooperation in cases of missing children. Also, in May 2023, ASTRA signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications on the prevention and protection of children from violence and abuse.

All previously mentioned activities are one form of cooperation model which contributes to a better response to missing children cases: competent government authority consents to using the hotline, internal affairs organs cooperate with a civil society organisation, the initiative is supported by telecommunication companies, etc.

Establishing a Team to implement Amber Alert in the Republic of Serbia

Since the introduction of the 116000 hotline, ASTRA has advocated for the introduction of an early alert system in Serbia in cases of missing children. For over a decade, several state institutions, together with a number of civil society organizations, dealt with this issue, and international organizations also showed interest. However, not a single tangible result has been produced. Finally, at the beginning of 2023, the media announced the establishment of a Team for the introduction of Amber Alert in the Republic of Serbia, with strong political support, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior. Referring to the existing Memorandum on cooperation with this authority, as well as the experience it gained during 10 years of managing the European Number for Missing Children, ASTRA contacted the MoI

offering its input, data and reports on this topic, and eventually, ASTRA was included in the Team.

The Team for the introduction of Amber Alert in the Republic of Serbia consists of 17 members: representatives of five sectors of the Ministry of the Interior, one representative of each of the nine other ministries³, the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office, and two civil society organizations (Center for Missing and Exploited Children and ASTRA – Action against human trafficking). As stated in the Decision on the formation of the Team⁴, its responsibilities include the Analysis of Initial State, Plan of the activities required to implement the Amber Alert system in the Republic of Serbia, drafting the necessary protocol proposals on cooperation between competent authorities, as well as the implementation of all activities necessary for the application of the system. The deadline for the implementation of said tasks is 1 November 2023 (nine months from the formation of the Team). By the end of 2023, the Team met three times.

The main findings of the analysis⁵ conducted by ASTRA, a member of the PrEUgovor coalition, indicate that there are no major obstacles to the introduction of such system in Serbia, that a supporting legislative framework for the system is in place (provided that certain acts are specified), and that experts from various institutions and authorities are willing to offer their expertise. Also, useful findings and guidelines from countries where this system has been operating for many years are available.

Early alert systems in missing children cases in other countries

The comparative analysis of the "Early Alert System in Cases of Missing Children"⁶ includes an overview of the legal framework (both international and domestic), an insight into institutional practice in Serbia, followed by a comparative overview of normative, institutional and operational practices in four countries (Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands and Croatia)⁷. The summary of the findings derived from the interviews held with representatives of state bodies/institutions⁸ is particularly important because it indicates that not a single institution representative sees any obstacles to introducing the system, with clearly defined criteria and competences and focus on the protection of personal data.

3 Namely, the Ministry of Justice; Information and Telecommunications; Culture; Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue; Education; Family Welfare and Demography; Internal and Foreign Trade; Tourism and Youth; Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Issues.

4 Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia, Minister's cabinet, Decision 01 no.: 011-77/23-6 from 2 February 2023.

5 [System of Early Alert in Missing Children Cases](#), ASTRA – Anti Trafficking Action, Belgrade, 2023.

6 Ibid.

7 In addition to the comparative analysis, ASTRA conducted additional research as a member of the Missing Children Europe (MCE) and Global Missing Children's Network (GMCN), and gathered additional information on the system specifics in different countries (April/May 2023)

8 The Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Republic Public Prosecutor's office, the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications (Centre for Child Safety on the Internet), the Republic Institute for Social Protection; and the Office of the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection.



In comparative practice, the system of early alert in cases of missing children is generally managed by the police, in cooperation with the Prosecutor's Office. Upon receiving a missing child report, an assessment of the case and circumstances is carried out. If the existence of one, more or all criteria is confirmed (see sidebar), depending on the local procedures, the so-called Alarm in case of a missing child is activated. Certain countries use this type of alarm exclusively in cases of suspected kidnapping by a third party (e.g. France, USA), while in other countries, the alarm is activated in cases when additional criteria are met (a very young child or a baby, the child's health is at risk, etc.). The frequency of the reactivation of the alarm varies, but typically, after 48 hours from the initial activation of the alarm, the case becomes a regular missing child case, that is, the alarm is not reactivated. The task of the Team for the introduction of Amber Alert in the next few months will be to elaborate the criteria to be applied, to determine the duration and frequency of the alarm activation, as well as to agree on the name that will be used.

Criteria for alarm activation in the event of child disappearance

1. Child/children at an early age: younger than 18, e.g. prioritisation of children who are very young or new-borns, as they are not able to communicate their needs or their whereabouts.
2. Clear signs indicating that the child's life or health may be at risk: they need medication, they have a certain medical condition, and the like.
3. Suspected abduction or abduction of a child: e.g. eyewitnesses' accounts of a possible abduction, signs of a struggle or forced entry, or other indications that the child is not where they are supposed to be.
4. Activation of the system will help in identifying the child: It is believed that information provided by the public can help identify a missing child and lead to their safe recovery.
5. The police assessment confirming that the activation of the alarm will in no way endanger the child: e.g. situations where the abductor may harm the child in retaliation, or where activation of the system may reveal sensitive information about the child or their family.

Search for a missing child and mass biometric surveillance

One of the most intense public disputes concerning the early alert system coincides with the public debate on the Draft Law on Internal Affairs (Draft) which, among other things, envisages biometric mass surveillance in public spaces.⁹ Although, after consultations with relevant civil society organizations, the Ministry of Interior significantly limited the purpose and method of the system utilisation, which were very broadly set in the previous versions of the Draft, from August 2021 and December 2022, representatives of the Ministry of Interior still justify the need to monitor biometric profiles in real time for the purpose of searching for missing persons, especially for missing children. On the other hand, [statements of concern have been made](#), emphasizing that justification of the association of public alarm in the event of a child's disappearance with increased biometric monitoring is just an excuse for human rights violation and intensified state surveillance. Namely, real-time surveillance¹⁰ is always massive and indiscriminate, even when it is limited to certain public spaces and selected timeframes, therefore, the risk it poses to the basic rights of our citizens is unacceptable.¹¹

Meanwhile, pressured by professional organizations and the public, the Ministry of Interior gave up on regulating this matter through the widely contested and amended Draft Law on Internal Affairs, and instead, sent the proposal to the working group in charge of drafting amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code. This, however, did not eliminate the danger of adopting bad solutions, but rather redirected it (admittedly, to the right instance). Therefore, it was necessary to establish whether, in comparative practice, biometric surveillance in public spaces is part of the alarm system in case of missing children.

Subsequent to the analysis of the situation in several countries with different approaches to video and biometric surveillance (Germany, the United Kingdom), as the initial idea behind such alert system (*Amber Alert*, 1996), the PrEUgovor coalition concluded that the alarm in cases of missing children does not necessarily need (even in general) to depend on biometric surveillance and cameras in public spaces. The initial idea behind the alarm (which subsists even after almost three decades), is to generate a quick reaction of the citizens in the specific region where the abduction or disappearance of the child took place.

9 PrEUgovor, [Pushing and Pulling: What's Wrong with the New Draft Law on Internal Affairs? Brief Alert #8](#), Belgrade, February 2023.

10 Another type of surveillance is the subsequent comparison of the extracted biometric data from the recording of the selected place and time with the criminal database maintained by the police.

11 This conclusion is in line with the recently adopted position of the European Parliament on the Draft [Artificial Intelligence Act](#). The MEPs introduced amendments which, among other things, absolutely prohibit the application of the remote biometric identification system in public areas in real time, while the application of this system is allowed retrospectively only on the basis of a court order in exceptional cases – if it is necessary for criminal prosecution for serious crimes.



Citizens cover much larger areas than cameras and can contact the police by phone the moment they notice something suspicious. As for recordings from video and biometric surveillance equipment, their inspecting, processing, storage and maintenance, these issues must be strictly and precisely prescribed, in accordance with applicable laws.

Properly used surveillance systems have many benefits and can really help when the missing child alarm is activated. However, concerns expressed by a part of the general public are understandable, having in mind the absence of the rule of law, corruption, and the state of the media in Serbia.¹² In given circumstances, the manipulation of material collected through surveillance systems can turn into a powerful political weapon.



Closing remarks

Thousands of missing children reports do not suggest thousands of permanently missing children. There are numerous obligations imposed by the constitution and legislation, as well as those undertaken by the ratification of various international conventions and agreements on the protection of children, including children at risk and missing children, to improve the state system's response to this complex issue.

The problem of disappearance of minors should be resolved before it actually happens, but it is equally important to provide adequate support for these children. Prevention involves careful monitoring of the needs of children at risk. There is not enough quality data or analysis available to demonstrate how children from the largest category (running away from family or social care institutions) are provided with long-term and adequate support following their return, in order to overcome problems, become stronger and overcome the urge to escape from the circumstances in which they live.

The conclusion of the PrEUgovor analysis is that there are no major obstacles to the introduction of an early alert system in cases of missing children in Serbia. However, while considering this option, it is necessary to keep in mind the following guidelines:

- The early alert system in cases of missing children is activated in accordance with clear, previously set criteria.
- The system is managed by a state body - the police in cooperation with the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office.
- The system is supported by public and private legal entities and natural persons, in accordance with their respective authorisations, obligations and social responsibilities (where there is no legal obligation and where cooperation is not formalized by protocol).
- The system is also supported by specialized civil society organizations that provide support and services to children at risk, missing children, parents, guardians and other interested organizations and institutions (for example, the European number for missing children in Serbia - 116000).
- The system is not and does not necessarily need to be associated with the strengthening of biometric surveillance measures in public spaces

About prEUgovor

Coalition prEUgovor is a network of civil society organisations formed in order to monitor the implementation of policies relating to the accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU, with an emphasis on Chapters 23 and 24 of the Acquis. In doing so, the coalition aims to use the EU integration process to help accomplish substantial progress in the further democratisation of the Serbian society.

Members of the coalition are:

Anti-Trafficking Action (ASTRA)

www.astra.rs

Autonomous Women's Centre (AWC)

www.womenngo.org.rs

Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)

www.bezbednost.org

Centre for Applied European Studies (CPES)

www.cpes.org.rs

Centre for Investigative Journalism in Serbia (CINS)

www.cins.rs

Group 484

www.grupa484.org.rs

Transparency Serbia (TS)

www.transparentnost.org.rs

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