

# CASE STUDY

## NORTH WEST BALKANS

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**Children ‘Parliamentary sessions’ lead to improved lives among unaccompanied refugee and migrant children in camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina**



When three teenage boys Malik\*, Mohamed\* (Afghanistan) and Ahmed\* (Pakistan) left their homes and families, in hopes of finding safer and better lives in Europe, they could have never imagined the challenges awaiting them along their journey. Days of exhausting walking, extreme weather conditions, lack of food/water/shelter, dangers of border crossings, and interactions with smugglers and border guards, very often filled with violence, is all in the experience of refugee and migrant boys who travel alone, without a parent or an adult guardian who could watch over them.

Upon arriving in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the boys found a temporary shelter in one of the refugee centres in Bihac, a city in north-western Una-Sana Canton.

In the centre, the boys joined the Boys' Parliament, a group supported by Save the Children to enable the representation of the voices of unaccompanied refugee and migrant children.

While they had to rely on themselves for the most part of their strenuous journey, in the Boys' Parliament they found a group to which they can belong to, and a safe place where they could speak about their needs and support others by speaking on their behalf.

There are around 400 identified unaccompanied and separated children in the accommodation centres across Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the key countries on the Balkans Route hosting around 9,000 refugees and migrants. The real number of children is probably much higher since the country, similar to many other countries on the route, still struggles with identification procedures and other key protection services for children on the move, including children travelling alone.

**DUTIES OF REPRESENTATIVES OF BOYS PARLIAMENT**

You as a representative of Boys Parliament are elected by your friends coming from your countries.

**You as a representative of Boys Parliament** prior to reception of new friends to TRC Bira, will together with SCI and IOM will introduce them to the basic and main house rules of the TRC, as well as to their rights and possibilities.

**Together with SCI** you will do tour of the TRC Bira, so we make sure that our new friends immediately know where and how to access every service.

**In a case you will go to the Game,** please inform SCI, so we can elect another representative of your nation!

**YOU HAVE VERY NOBLE AND IMPORTANT JOB!**

**Thank you for your assistance!**

**IN ORDER TO DO YOUR JOB EFFECTIVELY, PRIOR TO MEETING THAT IS HELD EVERY MONDAY AT 11 O'CLOCK, YOU WILL:**

- Talk with your friends and collect questions that they may have
- After the meeting you will approach your friends and pass them information SCI and IOM shared with you
- Minutes from every meeting are posted on the info point, so everyone can access it and read what has been discussed

Leaflet explaining representatives' duties and responsibilities

## THE BOY'S PARLIAMENT

The Boys' Parliament is made of representatives elected by all unaccompanied boys staying in a camp. The Parliament holds meetings every other week, to identify needs and problems, as well as to discuss possible solutions and actions that could improve the lives of unaccompanied and separated boys in the camp.

Save the Children staff, along with other NGOs/agency staff working in the camp, attend these meetings to hear directly from the boys about their needs. Save the Children child protection officers and caseworkers ensure that everything said in these meetings is recorded on paper and presented in actionable points. Minutes from every meeting are posted on the info point board, so everyone can see what has been discussed.

***The purpose of the Parliament is to have everyone's opinion heard. Some minors do not dare to speak in public, but they can tell their representatives what to address on their behalf. It makes me happy that, as a representative of minors from Pakistan, I can express not only my opinions, but also the opinions of my friends.***

Ahmed\* (16)

Boys like Malik\*, Mohamad\* and Ahmed\* have been regular participants. By translating for his peers, Malik\* is a valuable facilitator of the group's work. *"With this, we feel that someone cares about us. It is very interesting; it looks like it's politics. I think it's good for our guys. It could be one of the solutions to make the environment safe and make plans,"* 16-years-old Malik\*.

Mohamad\*, who acts as a representative of the Afghan community, says: *"This is a new experience for me. It is interesting to hear opinions; everybody can express their thoughts. And when they ask for my opinion I feel very good."* Despite recently turning 18, Mohamad\* will remain in the camp and keep his place in the Parliament, since his work in supporting his community was praised by the other boys.

In addition to the Parliament's work, boys, together with Save the Children team, create a camp's bulletin, in which the opinions and experiences of unaccompanied boys are presented through their stories and interviews, creative writing, art and reports about the activities and the workshops.



Read [\*\*Borici Express\*\*](#), a bulletin of the temporary Reception Centre Borici created by the unaccompanied children staying in the camp.

## RESULTS

The boys take the work of the parliament very seriously, coming prepared to every meeting with a precise list of requests, and take part in discussions by using valid argumentation. Furthermore, they use the parliament as a platform to address the quality of the services in the centre, mostly accommodation issues, such as heating, hygiene, covid-19 isolation accommodation, meals, but also other resources and activities available to them.

As a result of their work and petitions formulated during the meetings, the accommodation containers were winterized in time by installing additional heaters, blankets and winter clothes were secured, and various appliances were fixed or replaced, such as a washing machine, a kitchen stove, and a boiler. The hygiene in the toilets and the areas where the boys gather was significantly improved.

In addition, some crucial protection and security issues, such as alcohol consumption among the boys, treatment by staff working in the centre, inadequate behaviour towards girls staying in the camp, were successfully addressed as well.



Ahmed\* is one of the many boys who has greatly contributed to the work of the boys' parliament. Upon his arrival in the camp, he went through a difficult period, struggling with suicidal thoughts and resorting to self-harm. With the support from the Save the Children staff and his peers, the boy started recovering and participating in the educational and recreational activities, including the Boys' Parliament.

Apart from the “big issues” solved by the Boys' Parliament, many other things that are very important for the quality of everyday life were provided to the boys, such as hair dryers, nail cutters, and electric shavers. Moreover, as a result of the consultation process, Save the Children is currently in the process of procuring guitars for musical workshops and a sewing machine, which will be used for classes provided by one of the boys who is skilled in sewing.

*“We are proud of the boys and their work, particularly as they themselves have initiated a set-up of regular meetings between the representatives and other boys in the camp. In turn, the representatives present the topics*

*that were discussed during the previous Boys' Parliament session and collect information about the needs and opinions of others, which are then presented at the next session. These meetings are followed-up by our child protection staff, case workers and legal guardians, and these meetings are, for us, a great opportunity to get better insight into the lives of children we are working to support.”* explain Emir Fazlovic and Dalila Midzic, Save the Children's coordinators supporting the work of the Boys' Parliament.

Besides the many improvements in everyday lives of unaccompanied refugee and migrant children achieved through the work of the Boys' Parliament, feedback received from children also tells about the importance of the networks that the refugee and migrant children create in strengthening their resilience<sup>1</sup> and enabling them to reclaim their joy by doing something for themselves and the community.

*“It's very good to help someone and it makes me feel good... it makes my soul feel happy,”* says Malik\*.



Boys' Parliament session

<sup>1</sup> More about the importance of the networks for unaccompanied children can be found in the report „Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and separated children on the Western Balkans Route“, issued by Save the Children's Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub; <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/struggling-survive-unaccompanied-and-separated-children-travelling-western-balkans-route>

## SAVE THE CHILDREN SUPPORT

The Boy's Parliament was firstly initiated in the Bira Reception Centre, a former factory turned to an accommodation centre for up to 2,000 children and adults, located in Bosnia's north-western Una-Sana Canton. The centre was closed in September 2020.

*"The main idea behind Boys' Parliament was to enable children to advocate for their needs and rights in this, often harsh, environment, with many shortcomings in basic services. says Sabiha Kapetanovic, Save the Children Child Protection Programme Coordinator, who developed the Boys' Parliament model from the very beginning. "At that time, there were over 400 unaccompanied children in Bira alone, and providing them an opportunity and space to raise their voices, without fear, was a necessity. To prepare them, we talked about democracy, human rights, parliament and elections. The meetings significantly improved communication with the boys, helped us to understand them, accommodate house rules to their needs, and communicate the rules to them in a way that will ensure that the rules are respected."*

The Boys' Parliament model was replicated and further developed in the other reception centres where the organization is working with the unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children.

Save the Children runs operations in the Una-Sana Canton, Tuzla and Sarajevo Canton, focused on emergency assistance, child protection and education in emergencies activities. We run 24/7 child protection teams in reception centres in Una-Sana Canton, providing protection for unaccompanied and separated children, ensuring safety, monitoring, access to services, referrals, provision of psychosocial support activities, and occupational and non-formal education activities. Outreach teams, operating in Una-Sana Canton, Tuzla and Sarajevo Canton are reaching out to the newly arrived UASC, those staying out of reception centres or those who have been pushed back from borders. They provide humanitarian kits and ensure early identification, referrals, access to accommodation, registration, and other services. Save the Children sends social workers to the Social Welfare Centres to perform the role of legal guardians for children travelling alone.

Currently, the Boys' Parliaments operate in the reception centres Borici and Sedra in Bihac, and Miral in Velika Kladusa, in Una-Sana Canton.

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Save the Children promotes knowledge management, regional exchanges, documentation and dissemination of good practices through the **Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub** initiative. The Hub, working within SC North West Balkans, researches trends in migrations across the Balkans to contribute to quality programming and conduct robust advocacy to ensure that children are better protected and have access to learning. More publications at the [Resource Centre](#).