



## “A different childhood”

### Addressing child neglect and abuse in Albania

He is seven years old and until April 2017 he never played in a playground. He never went to cinema or theater. He had no friends. He doesn't know his father. He was a street child. His name is Arbri.

His entire world was confined to his mother and her occasional partners. His life has been a come-and-go to various social service centers, police stations, courts, mothers' relatives. He was used to it and it is his childhood.

In January this year, ARSIS, a local organization that is supported by UNICEF to address violence against children in Albania, has received an emergency case from the Police office. “The Police called us because we are the only providers of (child protection) emergency services for children 24/7 that they know,” says Juli Vokopola, case manager at ARSIS.

Arbri was found alone in the street

by the CPU employees, with high fever. That night ARSIS has offered shelter for both mother and child and the next day, they have been accompanied to her relatives in another city. But, suddenly in February they got back to Tirana and resumed living in the street. The mother of Arbri is a victim of

**With the financial support from the European Commission, UNICEF in partnership with ARSIS offers free emergency shelter, psychological counselling, legal support and recreational services to children and women, survivors of abuse and violence**

alcohol abuse, but when she is sober, she wants her child to be safe. For this reason, she denounced a man she has left the child at custody for some hours, because she suspected him to have abused her child. They've got sheltered at the Center for Victims of Violence, but she escaped the day after. Arbri was found by the field team of the Child Protection Unit (CPU) and immediately asked for a Protection Order again. From his mother, this time. From that moment on, the ARSIS staff got engaged again. As a first step, the child was received by the social worker and the psychologist. They explained to him why he was in the center and what would happen next. Then he took a shower, ate his dinner and went to bed. In the following days, together with the CPU officer at the Municipality, the case manager completed the procedures with the Court until the Protection Order was out. The alternatives were: putting the child

in a care institution or under kinship of his relatives. The latter had shown no interest, so it was decided to place the child in a care institution. Arbri learned that from that day on he might be, without his mom, for a while until she could get better.

While Arbri's placement related matters were arranged, he was staying in the ARSIS Centre and could play with other children, eat regularly warm meals and get prepared for the "new life" with the support of ARSIS team. He stayed 4 days at the Center.

As she speaks about the case of Arbri, Juliana takes a thick folder from the shelves. For every case, the coordinators keep specific documents. Everything is carefully captured there: when the child was admitted, in which condition, what is his story, and then all the documents produced for the case, the correspondence with state authorities, the analysis at the hospital, process-verbals of entrance and exit from the ARSIS center.

"I can remember his face when we first met- she says. "He looked calm in appearance. He listened very carefully and followed our advices. He is a kind boy."

His new teachers at the care institution used the same words for Arbri. "He was calm in appearance" however this might be just an appearance.

Nevertheless, the interventions from ARSIS and CPU yielded in some positive results – Arbri went to school in September, for the first time! "The first day of school he was so excited, he wanted to show us his new clothes, the flowers"



says the Head of Social Care at the care institution. Like everybody else.

The social worker put on the table a mignon toy – "a gift from Arbri", she says. Usually, kids are expecting to receive the gifts, but "this is a sign that he has a lot of affection inside he wants to distribute", explains the psychologist.

He loves his mother and he is able to make a difference why they cannot stay together. "She makes me upset when she is drunk", he said to social worker after one of

the meetings, " but I love her". Arbri's progress is affecting even his mother, which now tries harder to change her lifestyle. She seems to be eager to take her son back into custody after protection order expires, but until then there is a long road.

The government of Albania is rolling out a network of child protection units throughout the country to better address the situation of children affected by abuse, neglect and violence, an initiative that is strongly supported by UNICEF.



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