

# STORIES FROM THE FIELD //

## Bulgaria — Family Consultative Centre

"It is the first time in my life that I have felt appreciated for who I am", says 12-year old Filka, with tears of joy in her eyes, after winning a traditional dance competition in the Roma community of Novi Pazar, a small town in the North-Eastern part of Bulgaria.

There were people cheering, clapping their hands, smiling, applauding the little girl who only months before had been completely isolated and ridiculed by the people in her own community. And this is because Filka and her 7 siblings belong to a sub-group of the Roma community – an ethnic minority within the minority. Her family is extremely poor and they suffer from social exclusion and discrimination, both due to their social status and their ethnic background.

"No one, absolutely no one, wanted to lend a helping hand or to even speak to Filka and her family", remembers Maria Nikolova, director of the Family-Consultative Centre in Novi Pazar, which is supported by UNICEF in Bulgaria. "No institution, no community member, no child protection, or educational institution has made the slightest effort to reach out to these vulnerable children and their parents. There were cases when they were deliberately rejected, and they had no one but themselves to rely on. This attitude of the community and the professionals had turned them into scared people, with very low self-esteem, no motivation to study or work, completely abandoned. Until we arrived..."

The UNICEF-supported Family Centre started working with Filka and her family over a year ago. "The first steps were difficult; we had to build trust in those people and to convince them to start attending the family centre activities." Filka and her siblings had a lot to catch up on. They had not been exposed to any learning opportunities before, and the family centre was their first chance to start developing their skills. "I have learned how to draw pictures, how to write letters. I received toys for the first time in my life. I made new friends and I also started having fun", says Filka.

"If it wasn't for us, these young boys would be doing hard physical work in the woods and these young girls would have probably ended up in child marriages or sexual exploitation", explains Maria Nikolova. The UNICEF-supported family centre continues working with Filka and her family, and with many other families, too. They are part of a team of professionals in various regions of Bulgaria who support the inclusion of Roma children and families, as well as their access to health, education, and social protection services as a means to break up the circle of poverty, exclusion, and deprivation, in addition to challenging community stereotypes and prejudices around Roma. "The best is yet to come, for Filka and for so many other children", Maria Nikolova concludes.

By Iyaylo Spasov, UNICEF Bulgaria.

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# Turkey — Conditional Cash Transfer for Education increases school attendance of Syrian and refugee children

"When we first arrived in Turkey, the very first thing I did was to look for a school for my children", says Leyla

Reshid, a mother of three girls and one boy. The Reshid family fled Syria to Turkey in 2012, eventually settling in Istanbul. Leyla says that despite the challenges associated with their new life, as parents they want to provide their children with a brighter future. "We need to pay the rent and pay the bills. My husband and I even thought about

Ahmad becoming another breadwinner", she says, referring to her 13-year-old son. "But for God's sake, he is still a child. He belongs in school. He needs to continue his education." Ahmad has benefitted from the extension of the CCTE programme since May 2017. "We need money to send all four of them to school", Leyla says, explaining that all her children have been supported by the CCTE since July 2017. "They love their school and do not want to miss a day. I feel very proud every morning when they leave for school and I feel more hopeful every evening when they come back home", she adds. Leyla remembers the increasingly harsh conditions they lived

under in Syria. "We suffered bombings; our home was hit and destroyed. Thank God none of us were hurt. With no water and no electricity, no home" the family embarked on their escape to Turkey. "The journey was physically and emotionally very hard on all of us. The atrocities we witnessed still has psychological effects on us. Especially on my twins, Melek and Zeynep. When they hear a loud noise they still jolt in terror. We are slowly recovering from the trauma of war." Trying to leave those terrible days behind, Leyla says that she wakes up every day thinking about a hopeful future. "My happiest moment of the day is when I send my children off to school. I pray for them and watch them from the window of our house as they walk to school. My hope for them is to build their own lives. Proper education will provide them with an opportunity for a better future. I want them to have much better lives than us. They will be educated, and they will get a good job when the time comes. I could only make it to the 9th grade in school and my biggest dream is to see my children go to university", she concludes.

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## Armenia — Leveraging Funds for Children

On November 20, 2018, the world celebrated World Children's Day. This is also the day when the UN Convention on Child Rights was adopted! In 2018, to mark World Children's Day in Armenia, a special discussion was held in the Tumo Creative Center, where children voiced the issues they are concerned about. Children were joined by the President of Armenia, Sarkissian, UNICEF Representative, Tanja Radocaj, VivaCell-MTS General Manager, Yirikian, Director of Synopsys Armenia, Musayelyan, Acting Minister of Education and Science, Harutyunyan, and many other guests to discuss possible solutions to their problems. The call for investing in children was voiced by an adolescent called Hayk, at a meeting with the President and several Ministers. This was part of

UNICEF's advocacy efforts to sensitise both government counterparts and adolescents on the need to measure and track investments in children. Hayk talked about the lack of investment in children's development in Armenia and what needs to be done. His speech's key message centred on being savvy with public finance, saying that "I do understand that our economy does not always allow us to allocate needed funding. But it is always possible to find a way by spending the available resources more effectively, or involving other partners, like the private sector." He stressed that "If the government provides adequate financing for the children's education, this can be a turning point for the country's economy in several areas."

*Original source and video:* Link to video on its hosted site. UNICEF Armenia. 2018. Without Strong Social Protection Services, it will be Difficult to Overcome this Situation: Hayk's talk on World Children's Day. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/armenia/en/stories/without-strong-social-protection-services-it-will-be-difficult-overcome-situation>

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## Ukraine — A Boy who Changed the Transport System for the Entire City

Vinnitsa, a city in west-central Ukraine. A population of 372,300, of whom 70,000 are children. Vinnitsa joined the UNICEF Child and Youth Friendly Community Initiative, becoming one of the first cities in Ukraine that set the goal of creating a friendly environment for children, as well as ensuring their participation in local-level decision making. To achieve this goal, the city administration developed a Child Ombudsmen programme that is still running today. Mustafa Evtimur, who is now 23 years old, became one of the first Child Ombudsmen in 2012 when he was in Grade 10 at school. Today, Mustafa has Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Vinnitsa and Kyiv Universities, respectively. He works as an assistant lawyer and an assistant to a Vinnitsa city councillor. When he recalls his two years as Child Ombudsman, Mustafa's eyes shine with enthusiasm.

Children who participated in the Child Ombudsmen programme undertook special training from lawyers, sociologists, and psychologists to learn how to communicate with other children about their problems. This training and new knowledge proved to be very useful when the city administration decided to reform Vinnitsa's transport system. The reform, which is currently well-known all over Ukraine, was intended to renovate and increase the use of public transport. Without any hesitation, the

Child Ombudsmen decided to actively participate in this initiative. Reviewing the newly developed public transportation routes, Mustafa and his peers checked if they had been designed to ensure easy access to all the schools in Vinnitsa. "Our goal was to make sure that all children can easily get to their schools from any location in the city. We also launched a campaign to inform children about the reform and to explain the advantages of the new system", said Mustafa. Mustafa and his team noticed that two new bus routes were inconvenient for children seeking to access several schools. The Ombudsmen submitted a proposal to the city administration to change the routes, and this was immediately supported by the city administration. All the children in Vinnitsa can now easily get to school using public transportation. Vinnitsa is the most convenient city in Ukraine to live in, according to a national poll, and particularly thanks to the transportation reforms that took place there. In conclusion, Mustafa recalls that "The Vinnitsa mayor, Volodymyr Hroysman, who is an ex-Prime Minister of Ukraine, used to tell us that Child Ombudsmen are a bridge that connects children and the municipality. We had regular meetings with the city administration where we could talk openly about challenges children face in Vinnitsa."