

**Four leading European newspapers, members of the European Alliance of Newspapers Leaders (LENA), have joined forces with the support of the European Programme of Integration and Migration (EPIM) and the King Baudouin Foundation to investigate the fate of unaccompanied minors in four European countries: Italy, Greece, Germany and Belgium.**

**Written by by Paolo Brera, *La Repubblica***

**In Belgium, each unaccompanied refugee minor receives the assistance of a guardian  
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Belgium could teach other countries a lot on the subject of taking in minors. Our detailed investigation on the whereabouts of unaccompanied minors in Europe.

Like Romulus and Remus with the Tiber River and the she-wolf, these children saved from the waters have had to fend for themselves among wolves. And just like Rhea Silvia, the vestal virgin killed for having conceived after being raped by a god, their parents also experienced tragic stories. Khorched, a handsome boy with gentle eyes and the build of a boxer, was saved by his mother, who hid him from his Taliban father before he had a chance to make him disappear, like his brother: “He had taken me to a madrasa, a Koranic school, where I was to learn to pray and make myself explode with an explosive belt. Mum entrusted me to the neighbour, imploring him to pay the people smugglers so that they would take me as far away as possible”, he explains. He was 12 at the time. Today, he is 18. He has started working and his daughter is due to be born in a few days.

**Who are they?**

His story, like that of little Lision, 9 years old, who arrived in Belgium just before the bombs exploded at the airport and in the metro, and who on that bloody day exclaimed, with a terrified look on his face, “there are Taliban here too?”, will perhaps help people understand who these children are, who land alone on European coasts, as we watch them, moved and afraid at the same time. We all remember that boy, 17 years old, Riaz Khan Ahmadzai, who, with bulging eyes, announced his imminent martyrdom before attacking five people with a machete on board a train on the Treuchtlingen-Würtzburg line in Germany. He too was an “unaccompanied minor”. But perhaps we should especially remember boys like Amin, who were not spared during the war, who arrived as furious and aggressive as mistreated kittens, and yet who blossomed here, in Brussels, like the flowers that bring colours to Flanders in the spring. Having already completed a degree, Amin is currently pursuing a master’s in civil engineering. Amin is a happy man and a person who only wishes to prove himself, and no longer be seen as a problem that needs to be solved.

“I left Jalalabad in 2011”, relates Khorched in a small room of Mentor Escale, an NGO that takes care of child refugees by helping them become independent adults before the Belgian social assistance system, although solid, abandons them, “and I didn’t really understand what was going on. I had never been to school, my dad did not want me to go, but one day he told mum that I was old enough and that the time had come to take me. None of us knew that he was a Taliban. He entrusted me to another Taliban, who made me get into his pick-up truck while complimenting my father: “you were right to bring him, well done”, he said to him. My father and the Taliban brought me to Chenury, a small village in the mountains. They were all wearing long white robes; there were weapons everywhere.”

In the madrasa, the Koranic school, “We were forced to pray all day, and while praying, they taught us how to make ourselves explode. I slept on the ground with four other boys, and they made us recite the Koran from dawn. They explained that we had to engage in jihad, the holy war, and get rid of the Americans. One day, they took one of the four boys who slept near me. They made him wear clothing with an explosive belt and he never came back.”  
“If you don’t pay me, I’ll cut off your ears and your nose.”

This is what Khorched escaped from, and it was not easy. Just like it was not easy to understand that he was allowed something else: “Every three or four months, they would let us go home for a few days. My mum would ask me how I was doing, and I always told her that everything was fine; but one day, I told her the story about the explosives, and that’s when mum understood. My brother, who was in his twenties, had disappeared a few years earlier”. That day, Khorched’s mother gave him life a second time. “She took me to a neighbour, who entrusted me to a man.....” The story of his trip should be told in a book, not an article in a daily paper: the cold, the borders, Iran, seeing lights that illuminate villages at night for the first time, the snow, the truck beds filled with 40 people where it was impossible to breathe, the poor old man who died of hunger on his donkey, the house in Turkey and the threats against twins, travelling companions, who had only one paid “ticket”: “you, yes. You, no. If you don’t pay, I’ll cut off your ears and your nose.”

All those who drowned, the fear of dying while at sea when the waves tipped the boat and we grabbed a floating tree trunk. Finally, Greece. “Eight months in Athens, then Patras”, the failed attempt to leave on a boat, hiding in a trash can, and, finally, the deadly embrace with steel beneath a truck bed. Here we are in Italy. “Jump as soon as it stops after it leaves the harbour, I had been told. But it wasn’t stopping, and I couldn’t take it any longer. So I started pounding under the truck so that he would hear me, and he came to look. The driver was furious, he hit me, but I fled.” Then, the train, then: “in Paris, I met boys who wanted to go to Belgium, they said life was good there. So I joined them.”

Others could learn a lot from Belgium.

It was in Brussels that he was taken in by the social network for children arriving without their parents, put in place by this small country shaken by terrorism (a country which fortunately persists in wanting to improve this network). Despite the colossal town-planning mistakes made

in the past (such as the terrible ghettoisation of second-generation immigrants in Islamised neighbourhoods such as Molenbeek, where the jihadists who bloodied Paris lived), and even if discrimination (in opportunities for employment, for example) is a fact of life, Belgium could teach other countries a lot on the subject of taking in minors.

“In six weeks, explains Jean-Pierre Luxen, director of Fedasil, the federal agency that manages asylum applications, we guarantee all minors access to school, even those who have never gone to school. We offer them a place to sleep, medication, psychological support, legal protection and training. We welcome them in special classes to teach them French or Flemish, and after a year, we integrate them into regular classes. Each unaccompanied minor is assigned a guardian who takes care of his education and helps him resolve all the problems he encounters”. Becoming a guardian requires taking a two-month training course: “My spouse’s sister also became a guardian”, adds Mr Luxen. It is the guardian’s responsibility to accompany the child before a court, if he has problems. “Unfortunately, that is not unusual. Problems with the police on weekends, for example, are much more frequent than we would like.” These desert flowers must have their thorns handled delicately and with know-how. That is why the human and professional side of guardians, their training and their availability, are one of the key elements of the system. Many children in fact find themselves alone in a system that tends to push them as soon as possible towards autonomy, with the help of guardians for whom this work is only paperwork among other paperwork.

### **Explosion in numbers**

The explosion in numbers during the crisis last year seriously tested the system. The record for arrivals occurred in December, a few months after the great exodus on the Balkan Road, taking account of the time necessary to arrive and be intercepted: 725 children arrived alone at that time. Then came the agreement with Turkey on migrant flows: since then, the decrease has been steady: 201 children in January, 64 in May and 43 in August.

The Belgian system has developed a reception procedure consisting of three phases. The first one, named “observation and orientation”, only lasts a few weeks and serves to identify the child, evaluate the conditions in which he is in, and orient him towards the best available solution. The second consists of sending him to a specialised centre, if he is very young or has serious problems, or to a collective reception centre - centres where minors are free to come and go as they please, but where they are asked to follow group rules, under the supervision, more or less close and effective, of adult youth workers for a stay “of six months maximum, except for special situations”. The third phase still needs to be put in place: it is an invitation to spread their wings, which for the moment often means a kick in the backside: a check of about 800 euros per month to pay rent and get by on their own, until they turn 18, and while they wait for refugee status to be granted. Can you imagine your son or daughter, obliged to figure everything out by him or herself at 16, in a foreign country light years away from what he or she is used to and where he or she doesn’t even understand the language? Well, all these children have no choice. And all those whose asylum application is declined will need to make a choice, once they become adults, to flee

and become clandestine, or return home, with help from social assistance services which provide them with a small sum to help them get started on the job market.

It was to avoid the “kick in the backside” effect that wealthy foundations, such as the King Baudouin Foundation, related to the royal family in name only, decided to invest a fortune for the benefit of unaccompanied minors; these organisations hope to turn them into a real resource, like Amin, the engineer, rather than a problem needing to be solved through prisons and clandestine mosques. Associations such as Mentor Escale or Minor Endako are excellent examples of communities through which Europe puts its best face forward. The first is a meeting point, where boys and girls learn about the present and meet the future: if Belgians already have trouble figuring things out, between housing assistance and administrative paperwork, imagine a young boy from Afghanistan (the most represented country of origin by far this year in Belgium, followed by Guinea, Somalia and Morocco).

And help to deal with the bureaucracy in order to obtain financial assistance from the social services, to find a doctor or learn to manage a budget, practice sports or learn to play an instrument. Just seeing them dance in the living room, a sea of smiling faces, or struggling with the octopus and spices boiling in the cooking pot, is enough to understand the inevitable difference there is compared to State centres such as the Petit Chateau, the huge centre directly managed by Fedasil and which receives up to 900 persons on the bank of the canal that separates the centre of Brussels from Molenbeek, while doing its best to separate unaccompanied children from families and persons who came alone. However, only the most difficult cases, at the end of the first phase, are sent to excellent establishments such as Mentor Escale, which sometimes organises a “Citizenship Week” during which the children are taught “cultural differences, rights and duties, household management and transport, school, and we finish with the city game: locate and discover interesting places”. There, then, is the third phase: learning to do things for yourself, but with the help of NGOs largely financed by foundations, and also finding a family with whom to learn from for a bit until the children have become perfectly self-sufficient. Belgian citizens, European citizens.