

# OPENING DOORS FOR EUROPE'S CHILDREN

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STRENGTHENING FAMILIES. ENDING INSTITUTIONAL CARE.

## BULGARIA



### COUNTRY FACT SHEET

In the past decade, Bulgaria has pushed on with a comprehensive transformation of its child protection system. There has been an 80% decrease in the number of children placed in institutional care: from 7,587 children in 2009 to 979 children by the end of 2017<sup>1</sup>. Of the 137 institutions that were identified for closure in the National Strategy “Vision for De-institutionalisation of Children in Bulgaria” in 2009, only 36 remained by 2017. As of 2017, all specialised institutions for children with disabilities have been closed. There are more than 600 social services for children funded by the national budget. The DI strategy and the Action Plan supported the investment of more than €100mln allocated for the DI reforms from the EU structural funds, including the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. The process of transformation was additionally supported by a number of international and local organisations, private donors and UNICEF.

However, challenges still exist as more than 10,000 children live in the out-of-home care, separated from their families. As of September 2017, there were 2,346 children in foster care, 5,375 children in kinship care and 2,961<sup>2</sup> children in 283 small group homes (more widely known as the “Family Type Placement Centers”) in Bulgaria. Civil society raise serious concerns about the quality of all types of alternative care placements and the ways that decisions in relation to children are made, implemented and monitored.

<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that a different type of institutions – for children in conflict with the law and for children with delinquent behaviour – were not included in the strategy on deinstitutionalisation. As a result, approximately 200 children who live in six of such institutions were not included in the official statistics as “being institutionalised”, even though they are undoubtedly living in institutional care.

<sup>2</sup> As of 30 June 2017.

#### KEY DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS CHILD PROTECTION REFORM



OVER €160MLN  
HAVE BEEN  
ALLOCATED FOR DE-  
INSTITUTIONALISATION  
REFORMS IN BULGARIA  
THROUGH EUROPEAN  
STRUCTURAL  
INVESTMENT FUNDS.

## KEY RECOMMENDATION TO THE EU



**TAKE MEASURES TO ENSURE MONITORING OF THE EX-ANTE CONDITIONALITY ON DEINSTITUTIONALISATION AND THAT EU FUNDS ARE USED IN LINE WITH THE ACTION PLAN FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2016-2020 NATIONAL STRATEGY ON DI.**

The Bulgarian child protection system is severely under-resourced: there is an acute shortage of staff, poor material resources, high turnover of social workers who lack competency-based standards, training and supervision. This has a detrimental impact on the process of deinstitutionalisation, in particular, work with the birth parents and the overall quality of alternative care. Furthermore, it fails to guarantee the protection of children's rights.

In 2017, the Bulgarian child protection has been also challenged by the influx of children in migration. Over the last year, 1,150 migrant children have sought protection in Bulgaria of whom 389 were unaccompanied and separated children. Almost all of the unaccompanied and separated children were accommodated in the reception and registration centers for refugees. Lack of safe and appropriate accommodation for unaccompanied children remain one of the biggest gaps in Bulgarian child protection system and require urgent solution.

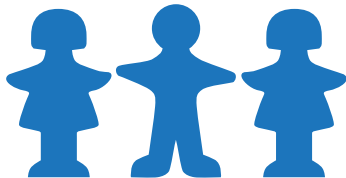
Another key challenge concerns the appropriate funding, legal regulation and ensuring financial sustainability of the new services, including those envisaged in the Action plan for 2016 – 2020 (e.g. mother and child's health centres, centres for children with high-risk behaviour, etc). Furthermore, there was a strong expectation that services created and piloted with the help of EU funds during the first stage of deinstitutionalisation reform will continue to be funded from the state budget. While this has been relevant to some of the services, including small group homes, it cannot be applied to foster care. Following a decision to continue funding foster care through EU, the foster care project "Accept me 2015" was extended until 2020. In addition, some of the preventative and family support services, such as family counselling services, mother and child's health centres, early intervention centres, created as part of the "Direction: Family" project which was the vehicle for the closure of pilot infant homes, did not continue functioning due to the lack of shared understanding between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy on how integrated approach should be legally regulated.

## KEY RECOMMENDATION TO THE MEMBER STATE



**TAKE ACTION TO ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE EU-FUNDED REFORMS THROUGH RING-FENCING OF THE NATIONAL BUDGET AND DEVELOPMENT OF DETAILED FINANCIAL STANDARDS FOR THE VARIOUS TYPES OF ALTERNATIVE CARE SERVICES.**

In line with the "Opening Doors" focus on strengthening families, the National Network for Children in Bulgaria advocates for shifting the angle in legislation, policies and practices from children at risk towards prevention and early intervention as well as guaranteeing the rights of all children. There are more than 20 primary and secondary legislative acts and strategies that regulate support for families and children, however, they are not integrated to address their needs in a comprehensive way. Most plans, programmes and services are primarily focused on children at risk and interventions to address problems that have already occurred; there is lack of focus on targeted prevention, active field work and family support which result in children being often removed from the poor families and placed into various services and centres. A new Child and Family Welfare Act and administrative and institutional reform aim to overcome duplication of functions and inefficiencies in the work of responsible institutions, to implement a family-centred approach and to introduce mandatory, legally regulated coordination mechanisms of activities for different institutions and professionals working with children and parents. Deinstitutionalisation of children can only be achieved if roots of the problems are appropriately addressed and there are investments available to tackle poverty and Roma exclusion through effective family-oriented approach, integrated services and targeted policies starting from the earliest years of child's development.



National Network for Children

### OPENING DOORS NATIONAL COORDINATOR IN BULGARIA

The National Network for Children is an umbrella organization which unites more than 130 NGOs working with children and families in Bulgaria. Their mission is to strengthen and facilitate co-operation among all stakeholders related to children's rights and well-being. They are advocating and working in partnership with NGOs, businesses, institutions, children and families. To find out more visit [www.nmd.bg](http://www.nmd.bg)

### NATIONAL PARTNERS

Members of Coalition "Childhood 2025": Bulgarian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (BAPID), Bulgarian Center for Not-for-profit Law, Bulgarian Clinical Psychology Association, De Passarel Bulgaria Foundation, Equilibrium Association, FICE Bulgaria, For Our Children Foundation, Haralan Alexandrov, Hope and Homes for Children Bulgaria, International Social Service Bulgaria, Karin Dom Foundation, Know How Centre for Alternative Care for Children, SOS Children's Villages Bulgaria, The Cedar Foundation, Tulip Foundation. Members of the National Network for Children: <http://nmd.bg/tchlenove/>

The Opening Doors for Europe's Children campaign supports national efforts to develop child protection systems that strengthen families and ensure high-quality family and community-based alternative care for children, by leveraging EU funding and policy and building capacity in civil society.

It is a partnership between 5 international organisations and civil society across 16 European countries. For more information go to [www.openingdoors.eu](http://www.openingdoors.eu)