



OPENING DOORS FOR EUROPE'S CHILDREN

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STRENGTHENING FAMILIES. ENDING INSTITUTIONAL CARE.

BULGARIA



2018 COUNTRY FACT SHEET

Since embarking on the comprehensive child protection reform in 2007, Bulgaria has made a commendable progress. The Government's commitment to achieve a complete transition from institutional to family- and community-based care by 2025, coupled with continued EU support, made Bulgaria a pioneer Member State in leveraging EU funding for catalyzing reforms in child protection. Some of the most important outcomes of the reform include 80% decrease in the number of children placed in institutional care: from 7,587 children in 2009 to 979 children at the end of 2017. Of the 137 institutions that were identified for closure in the National Strategy "Vision for De-institutionalisation (DI) 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 has also been a considerable increase (over 200%) in the number of children in foster care. Admissions to institutions for children in Bulgaria have witnessed a 60% decrease. There are more than 600 social services for children now funded by the national budget. Over €100 million from the EU structural funds, including the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, have been allocated to support the process of deinstitutionalisation. The process of transformation is additionally supported by a number of international and local organisations, private donors and UNICEF.

In 2017, in line with the National Strategy on deinstitutionalisation, 6 more institutions for children were closed down in Bulgaria. However, the National Network of Children Bulgaria, the Coalition 2025 and the Expert Working Group on Deinstitutionalisation¹ express concerns that the 2016-2020 Action Plan for deinstitutionalisation lacks clear division of responsibilities between relevant authorities; there is no multilateral coordination of activities with partners and stakeholders; the document lacks detailed planning, including specific timelines and monitoring. Furthermore, there was no consultations held regarding different operations under the Operational Programmes: neither in the Expert Working Group on Deinstitutionalisation nor in the Inter-Ministry Working Group (within the Council of Ministers).

¹ The expert working Group on Deinstitutionalisation sits under the State Agency for Child Protection where authorities involved in deinstitutionalisation process, as well as civil society organisations are represented

KEY RECOMMENDATION TO THE EU



TAKE MEASURES TO SUPPORT THE DEINSTITUTIONALISATION PROCESS BY RING-FENCING FUNDS AND RE-INVESTING THEM INTO QUALITY ALTERNATIVE CARE, SOCIAL SERVICES, FAMILY SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY AS WELL AS SMART INVESTMENT IN RETENTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES

There are still more than 10,000 children who live in the out-of-home care, separated from their families in Bulgaria. In 2017, there were 2,320 children in foster care, 5,283 children in kinship care and 3,059 children in 283 Small Group Homes (SGHs)² in Bulgaria.

Even with clear progress, challenges still exist in Bulgaria. It is a worry that 49% of children in institutional care in Bulgaria are at an early age (0-3) who are considered the most vulnerable in any care system. Almost 200 children in conflict with the law and children with delinquent behaviour remain in institutional care, although institutions for children in conflict with the law are excluded from the strategy on deinstitutionalisation. As a result, children who live in six of such institutions are not included in the official statistics as “being institutionalised”, even though they are undoubtedly living in institutional care. A plan for the closure of these institutions and their transformation into new type of services is envisaged in a new draft legislation the adoption of which is already pending for 3 years.

Furthermore, unaccompanied and separated children arriving in Bulgaria continue to be placed mainly in the reception and registration centres for refugees (RRCs) where there are no suitable conditions to provide adequate care and to ensure children’s safety. Currently, State Agency for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration are working on a project that will ensure “sure zones” in two RRCs in Sofia.

In 2017 the work on developing a new Social Services Act was resumed. A large number of different stakeholders consolidated their efforts around the need for a new approach to social development and new bridges for dialogue in support of changes to benefit all people in need of social assistance. This marked the beginning of a reconsideration of cooperation opportunities between the civic sector and state authorities in public policy making.

In September 2018, Bulgaria began implementation of a two-year project “Continuing support for deinstitutionalisation of children and young people”. This EU-funded intervention under operational programme “Human Resource Development” will be realised by the Agency for Social Assistance in partnership with the State Agency for Child Protection, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education and Science. It is expected that upon completion, all old-type institutions for children will be closed. Through newly-built social infrastructure, including family-based care alternatives and community-based support services, children will receive better quality individual care. The grant totals to 3 million leva (1.5 million Euro).

Civil society raises 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. The Bulgarian child protection system is severely under-resourced. There is an acute shortage of staff, poor material resources, and high turnover of social workers who lack competency-based standards, training and supervision. At the same time, problems related to the work of the SGHs remain unsolved, although these are the main services that provide alternative care to children who were removed from the institutions. All these challenges have a detrimental impact on the process of deinstitutionalisation reforms and the overall quality of alternative care in Bulgaria.

² More widely known as the “Family Type Placement Centers”

KEY RECOMMENDATION TO THE MEMBER STATE



TAKE ACTION TO ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE EU-FUNDED REFORMS AND THE PROMOTION OF A FAMILY-ORIENTED APPROACH IN POLICIES, PRACTICES AND SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT NATIONAL LEVEL



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

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