

Bulgaria

Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

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33.9%

Children at risk of poverty or social
exclusion (AROPE) in 2019



Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/SGHs	Number of children
Institutional care (in total) in 2019		
Institutions for children with disabilities	0	0
Institutions for children 0-3	13	256 (0-3) 170 (over the 3 years) 406 are children with disabilities, 20 children without disabilities
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019	268	2,876 (including young adults)
Number of children in family-based/ foster care in 2019		6,496
Number of children in kinship care		4,548
Number of adoptions		500 (national adoptions)
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2019		620 unaccompanied children ¹ 524 unaccompanied children ²

Alternative Recommendations

Bulgaria should take action to:

- Keep families together including re-integration to prevent institutionalisation of children by engaging families, professionals and communities in the process.
- Establish more alternative services and family-based care for children in vulnerable situations as well as promote adoption and fostering to guarantee children aged 0-3 years will grow up in a family environment.
- Ensure that young people ageing-out of care will receive adequate financial and personnel support to start their independent life.

¹ According to the State Agency for Child Protection

² According to the State Agency for Refugees

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on children in alternative care

The divergence of opinions expressed by the government and by scientific experts led to confusion among the public. This situation was exacerbated by a lack of clarity in the guidelines and regulations on how to react to the COVID-19 crisis. Some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had to adopt their own procedures for working in a pandemic to respond to their clients' needs.

The measures taken by the government such as the provision of non-interest-bearing loans, financial compensation for employers or food donations were mainly aimed at employers, poor families, the unemployed and schools.

At the end of March 2020, the Council of Ministers published Decree No. 55 determining the conditions and procedures for the payment of compensation to employers in order to maintain employment in emergency

situations¹. Unfortunately, the majority of NGOs will not be able to benefit from these compensations because one of the conditions for receiving the aid is to declare a 20% reduction in sales revenue.

Concrete measures to support families with children have been:

- Parents who have lost their jobs and single parents are entitled to receive BGN 375 as a one-off financial assistance.
- Amendments to the law to reduce VAT on baby food, baby diapers and baby hygiene items, as well as for books from July 2020 to December 2021.
- Families of eighth graders will receive BGN 250 to cover part of the expenses for the beginning of the new school year²³.
- Under the Food and/or Basic Material Assistance Operational

Programme 1,400 tons of food were distributed to 58,300 individuals and families, including families with children were supported.

On the other hand, the civil society organisation members of the National Network for Children (NNC) supported over 6,500 children in 3,200 families with 4,404 food packages in March and April 2020. These donations, which came from the emergency programmes and private philanthropists and amounted to BGN 135,454, provided food including formula for newborns, medicines, disinfectants, PPE and various social services. They have also distributed more than 400 electronic devices to children in poor families as part of the initiative called "Old Devices for a New Beginning". Moreover, civil society organisations provided 24h/day 7 days per week telephone help lines and other means of consultation. Additional humanitarian support was given

to 42 families by For Our Children Foundation.

NNC's members working with poor families reported that there were many families that needed to survive on BGN 5-10 per day, which they earned by collecting and selling herbs and plastic, window cleaning, etc. The number of extremely poor families increased due to staff cuts or forced unpaid leave. There is a real danger that children who have been recently reintegrated into such families will be abandoned again.

NGOs also reacted promptly to address the needs of children at risk by mobilising staff and resources to reach out to communities and families and children in vulnerable situations. They came to help at the most difficult time.⁴

Most children in Small Group Homes (SGH) are children with disabilities who are very vulnerable and fragile health-wise. During the lockdown

1 The measure is 60/40 = 60 % workers' insurance income, and 40% for the employer, but only if the company keeps the jobs despite the crisis.

2 To be granted the aid, the average monthly income of a family member for the previous 12 months must be lower than or equal to BGN 450.

3 It is a measure for supporting families with children 13-14 years old, because children start a new grade and the text books are not provided by the school/state. The benefit is received if the average monthly income of a family member for the previous 12 months is lower than or equal to 450 BGN.

4 Picture 1, Picture 2.

the service providers, including NGOs, ensured PPE for staff, work materials and other hygiene items. The Cedar Foundation and the Bulgarian Coalition Childhood 2025 explain that social distancing was not possible in an SGH setting as many of the children require intensive care that cannot be provided without close contact with the staff. SGH staff have had to cope with an additional workload in order to comply with all the regulations (disinfection, reporting, etc.) as well as carry out new activities and therapies in order to address the children's mental health needs.

The lack of access to day-care centres and other social services during the lockdown posed extra strain on the service provider who was supposed to replace day-care centres and provide some therapies in the facility. Online learning was one of the biggest challenges due to lack of technical equipment and lack of personnel to support it. For a long time, there was no clarity about what steps to take in case a child or a member of staff became infected,

since isolation in a small group home setting was not possible.

Challenges for civil society organisations (CSOs)

There has been a significant increase in the expenses of the small group homes (for food; protective equipment; disinfection materials; medication; devices for online learning; psychological support, etc.). Social services are generally underfinanced, and the crisis put additional strain on them. Yet, there has been no financial support from the state for NGOs and/or social services (including small group homes) at a time when fundraising from other sources e.g. attracting private donors, has become more difficult.

There was an urgent need to reorganise work with clients and colleagues. Within a few days, social service providers shifted consultations and meetings to the

virtual space. Group trainings were initially postponed until the virtual meetings were organised for group formats.

Initiative

A survey⁵ conducted by the Social Activities and Practice Institute (SAPI) in collaboration with Sofia University found that care professionals (including psychologists) and social workers encountered the following main challenges: technical; on content and process level; difficulties in establishing a deeper connection with new clients; managing institutional collaboration and communication; specialists' attitudes vis-a-vis lockdown and social distance; fears over the unknown; professional pessimism; quick adaptation to the new situation by using new approaches and tools⁶.

Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

The prolonged isolation, along with the economic consequences for families (such as loss of employment and income) has given rise to other types of crises in families - increased cases of domestic violence, neglect, online bullying, conditions for deteriorating mental health, or psychological problems for both families and children. These risk factors required the intervention of highly qualified specialists in the field in order to identify them in a timely manner and undertake the necessary measures. However, these needs have been met only partially, therefore Bulgarian child rights NGOs are urging the authorities to invest in increasing the capacity of specialists in the child protection system, with a view to build a better professional system for early warning in the presence of risk factors.

5 Sofia University together with SAPI conducted a survey "Community-based Social Services during the State of Emergency" in the period 26 April – 6 May 2020. The survey included 119 respondents from 113 social services across the country. Participants mainly work in Community Support Centres, followed by representatives in Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration, which make up about one fifth of all participants.

6 СОЦИАЛНИТЕ УСЛУГИ В ОБЩНОСТТА В УСЛОВИЯТА НА ИЗВЪНРЕДНО ПОЛОЖЕНИЕ ... резултати от проучване сред професионалисти.

Initiative

During the period of isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Hope and Homes for Children - Bulgaria (HHCB) focused its work exclusively on prevention of separation, applying the model of active family support. They managed to support 151 families and their children from the districts of Sofia, Burgas, Vidin, Vratsa, Veliko Tarnovo, Sliven, Stara Zagora, Kardzhali, Haskovo, Yambol and Pleven in the field and through numerous consultations. They also maintained constant communication with the Child Protection Departments on the local level. Furthermore, they have developed and applied another model of work – the District De-Institutionalisation Coordination Mechanism (DDICM) – an instrument and platform for gathering of resources, authorities and decision-makers for concrete cases of children (0-3 years old) and families at risk. The organisation established 21 DDICMs and at the moment is working with 12 DDICMs in Sofia, Burgas, Vidin, Vratsa, Veliko Tarnovo, Sliven, Stara Zagora,

Kardzhali, Haskovo, Yambol and Pleven⁷.

Progress on child protection and care reform

Bulgarian CSOs have been raising the issue of the lack of effectiveness of the Permanent Expert Working Group on De-Institutionalisation (DI) for several years. The group was established in 2010 to monitor the implementation of the Action plan on DI in Bulgaria, as well as to discuss and give recommendations to the government about different aspects of the DI process. However, it has turned into a group that only produces monitoring reports, but has no access to information about the current developments in the implementation of DI reform or future plans in this respect. In a few instances, the recommendations given by the group were not passed to the government, and as a result, no feedback was received or action taken. The crisis made it even

harder for the group to function in a meaningful way, as all requests from the NGO members for online meetings were declined.

According to the government's plans, the assessment of the children in the remaining institutions needs to be carried out by the end of 2020. The deadline for training the staff in the new small group homes and the medical staff in the maternity wards is also planned until the end of 2020. These activities are all part of the Agency for Social Assistance's project under Human Resources Development Programme (HRDP) (2014-2020). Given the crisis, it is expected these activities will be delayed. Similarly, the process of closing down specialised institutions has been stopped including moving children from institutions to small group homes or foster families.

Bulgarian children's rights organisations suggest the COVID crisis has in a way supported a positive development in child protection. The new Social Services

Act (SSA) entered into force in July 2020 after six months of delay because there were many public disputes and protests initiated by conservative groups. These protests were suspended and the situation required effective solutions that the new law ensures. Children's rights CSOs were pleased with this development as it included their recommendations based on their direct experience of working with children and families.

Care leavers

There is no state policy with respect to care leavers in Bulgaria. There is a general provision for preparation of a care leaving plan which in practice means a meeting between a social worker and a care leaver to complete a template. To address this, NGOs have programmes and projects that aim to support care leavers. Based on their experience they have been making recommendations to the government for a holistic approach, but there was no commitment on the state level so far. During the

⁷ During the pandemic HHCB – Bulgaria provided consultations only to the members of the DDICMs. From June 2020 the sessions of the DDICMs started to function in line with the all epidemiological requirements and such meetings were held in Haskovo and Stara Zagora with the participation of 33 members and with discussions on the challenges and plans for work, status of Homes for medical and social care for children in the pandemic.

current pandemic, no services or support have been offered by the state to care leavers, despite their vulnerability.

CSOs have been filling that gap in Bulgaria. They have been in contact with young people leaving care, supporting them with paying the rent for housing, and assisting them in accessing health care and continuing education. Currently, SOS Children's Villages is working on a project to support young people leaving alternative care which aims to support 210 young people from all over the country⁸. Similarly, SAPI piloted a pathways tool with five care leavers. Young people were supported in the planning process via phone and online apps. Despite the original difficulties care leavers found it very useful.

Children in migration

National Network for Children Bulgaria publishes annual Report Cards to assess the situation and well-being of children. Its

2020 Report Card included the recommendation to optimise the procedures for the transfer of information between the state authorities in order to ensure reliability and accuracy in the number of unaccompanied children⁹. In Bulgaria unaccompanied children are guaranteed 24-hour care, provided by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

The opening of the Safe Zone is a positive development in ensuring the safety and care of unaccompanied children. However, the number of children who left before the end of their procedure and for whom there is no information about their location still remains very high. According to data provided by the IOM, it concerns 178 children, which is 91 % of all children accommodated in the Zone. The Safety Zone does not have the status of a social service and children can be there during the procedure for granting international protection. Till the end of 2019, 196 unaccompanied children were accommodated there. According to the Agency for Social Assistance

16 unaccompanied children have been accommodated in the social residential services.

Because of the lack of equal standards, the legal representation of unaccompanied minors remains largely formal. For example, the municipalities have different practices, such that in once case one representative represents 318 unaccompanied children while in another three representatives represent 147 children. Bulgarian children's rights organisations are calling for improvement because this approach violates children rights.¹⁰

EU funds

During the lockdown, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) reported that the implementation of projects had been suspended during the entire lockdown. A significant amount of funds from the Human Resources Development Operational Programme (HRDOP) are allocated to policy reforms where the majority of these funds are for pre-designed

projects implemented by the state authorities. To respond to the emerging needs under the HRDOP, BGN 45 million were transferred for social patronage and BGN 20 million for paying an extraordinary up to BGN 1,000 per month for the medics who work in places where COVID-19 infection is present.

For more information, please consult the [2020 Eurochild Report](#) or contact Enrico.Tormen@eurochild.org and Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org.

⁸ Up to date, 30 young people are supported - Picture.

⁹ Мерки за ограничаване на разпространението на COVID-19.

¹⁰ Information from the National Network for Children Report Card 2020.