

Care reform in Bulgaria is far from over

Statement in reaction to Disability Rights International Report

Brussels 20 March 2020

This statement reacts to the report ‘A Dead End for Children Bulgaria’s Group Homes’ published by Disability Rights International in 2019.¹ It documents the assessment of 24 small group homes for children and young adults with disabilities where severe violations of children’s human rights were identified. Based on their observations they concluded, ‘*DRI finds that group home placement can be emotionally and physically dangerous for children and is likely to result in increased disability. Placement in group homes is dehumanizing, socially isolating and does not contribute to the habilitation and the development of skills that contribute to further inclusion in society.*’ According to the report Bulgaria has some 145 homes for children without disabilities and 125 homes for children with disabilities². Many have been built within the framework of deinstitutionalisation reforms co-funded by the European Union.

Eurochild welcomes this report in that it raises serious concerns about the treatment of children and adults with disabilities in small group homes. Despite important progress in Bulgaria over the last decade, the report clearly shows that deinstitutionalisation reforms are far from over. Furthermore there are important lessons to be learnt for the future use of EU funds.

As a network advocating for children’s rights in Europe, Eurochild has been actively influencing child protection reforms for over a decade. Our membership spans 34 countries. Members include organisations working with vulnerable children and families, often supporting families to prevent separation. Others are providers of alternative care, whether that be within families or in small residential settings. Our work is informed not only by the experience and expertise of organisations working on the ground, but also children and young people with care experience themselves.

All our members subscribe to the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children³ which emphasises two key principles. 1. ‘Necessity’ requires that families are given every possible support to fulfil their caregiving responsibilities, ensuring separation only happens exceptional circumstances and when absolutely necessary. 2. ‘Suitability’ requires that children who are placed in care, grow up in a loving environment responsive to their individual needs. The most natural environment for a child’s healthy development is in a family. Therefore placement with extended family members (kinship care) or with non-related families (foster care) is the preferred option. Occasionally placement in small residential

¹ <https://www.driadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/Bulgaria-final-web.pdf>

² p. vi

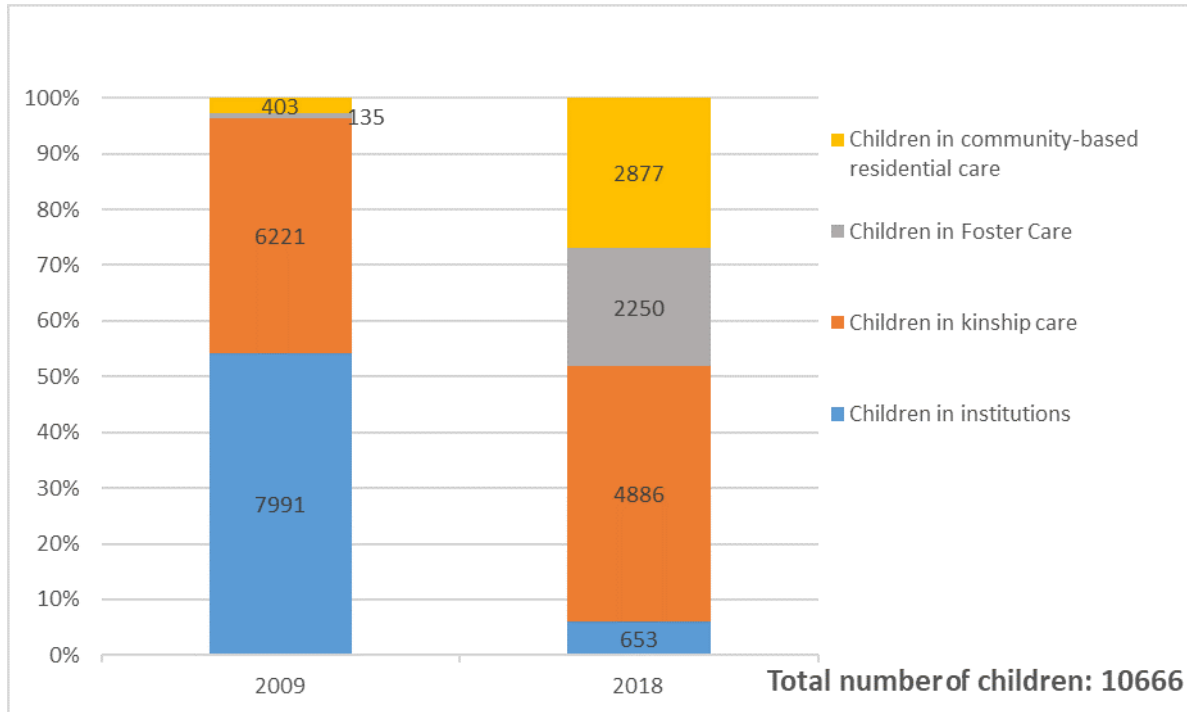
³ https://www.unicef.org/protection/alternative_care_Guidelines-English.pdf

settings will be in the child's best interest, either due to their complex needs or past trauma experienced within families. Some countries have an underdeveloped foster care system with too few, or poorly trained and supported, foster families. Here too some residential care will be necessary and it is important that attention is given to the quality of care in these settings, whilst also simultaneously investing in increasing the provision and the quality of foster and kinship care.

Together with its allies, Eurochild has supported the European Union efforts to push deinstitutionalisation reforms. Through the '[Opening Doors for Europe's Children](#)' campaign we have documented significant progress towards ending institutional care and strengthening families across the 16 countries where we have been active, including [Bulgaria](#). Much of this progress can be attributed to the political pressure and funding made available from the EU.

Bulgaria is often held up as the 'poster child' of how the EU can support deinstitutionalisation. The DRI report challenges that claim. Eurochild shares many of DRI concerns. In particular our members are critical of the disproportionate investment in building new small group homes across Bulgaria. Even if a majority of the old-style institutions have now been closed (653 children in 2018 compared to 7,991 children in 2009), some of these new small-scale residential care settings perpetuate an institutional culture due to lack of inclusion in the community combined with low staff morale, training and support.

However Bulgaria should receive credit for progress that has been made. A majority of children are now placed in kinship care (4,886 in 2018) and foster care (2,250 in 2018). In addition new social services have been developed helping to prevent children from being taken into care.



Source: For Our Children Foundation Bulgaria, the figures show mixed trends: the share of foster care is increasing together with small group homes while the share of institutional care is decreasing as well as kinship care.

In many respects Bulgaria offers a test case in how the EU political influence and funding should support social care and child protection reforms. Unfortunately the story is far from over. The DRI report illustrates the sad reality of some of those intended ‘beneficiaries’ of deinstitutionalisation reforms, still suffering dehumanisation at the hands of over-stretched care workers.

At a wider societal level, the speed of reforms may have contributed to growing public resistance to human rights and more progressive social policies and services. Rather than defending the reforms and explaining their importance to the public, the Bulgarian government appears to be scapegoating civil society. It is a toxic mix where the most vulnerable in society have the most to lose – in particular children.

Building on the lessons learnt, Eurochild and the National Network for Children calls on

the EU to:-

- Mainstream the reform of child protection systems and the transition towards family- and community-based care in all relevant policies and bilateral processes and ensure that, in the 2021-2027 period, the programming and implementation of the European Social Fund Plus and the European Regional Development Fund prioritises deinstitutionalisation reforms.

- Ensure that the guidance including the *Checklist⁴ that ensures EU-funded measures contribute to independent living by developing and ensuring access to family-based and community-based services* is used in the scope of the programming of the EU funds.

and the Bulgarian government to:-

- Ensure the Social services act adopted in March 2019 is enforced and its implementation is supported by the development of the relevant secondary legislation and by-laws.
- Develop a road map to operationalise the second Action plan for the implementation of the national strategy “Vision for deinstitutionalisation of children” for the period 2020 – 2025 and a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to monitor progress, challenges and inform policy and practice development.
- Improve quality of alternative care and support the establishment of a robust gate-keeping mechanisms to ensure that children are admitted to the alternative care system only after all possible means of keeping them with their parents or wider family have been examined and exhausted.
- Undertake urgent measures to address the systemic gaps in the child protection system which includes but it is not restricted to professionalization of social work and making it an officially recognised profession, ensuring adequate training, supervision and support for people working in the system.
- Develop a mechanism to regularly assess how much and how effective resources are invested in children in general and in children at risk and ensure planning for the new financial period 2021 -2027 is consulted with all stakeholders including children and people with care experiences.

The statement was prepared by [Eurochild](#) and its member [National Network for Children](#) in Bulgaria. The National Network for Children is an alliance of civil society organisations and supporters, working with and for the children and families across the whole country.

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⁴ European Expert Group on the transition from institutional to community-based care with Hope and Homes for Children (2019) [Checklist to ensure EU-funded measures contribute to independent living by developing and ensuring access to family-based and community-based services](#)