

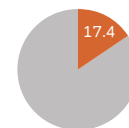
“Country recommendation

Bulgaria should take action to strengthen the rights of children from families living in intergenerational poverty and children with disabilities. More effort should be made in order to guarantee that the necessity principle is applied consistently as to prevent unnecessary family separations.

Country
Profile 2023



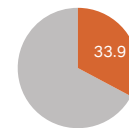
Bulgaria



Child Population:

1,188,803

17.4% of total population



Child Poverty:

403,004

33.9% (2022)

▲ +0.9% compared to 2021

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):

[Hope and Homes for Children – Bulgaria](#)

[Know-how Centre for Alternative Care for Children, New Bulgarian University](#)

[National Network for Children](#)

Children's Rights in Bulgaria

At national level, the State Agency for Child Protection (DAZD) and the Agency for Social Support (ASP) are the main public authorities responsible for protecting children's rights in Bulgaria.

Together, Eurochild members in Bulgaria - Hope and Homes for Children (HHC) – Bulgaria, Know-how Centre for Alternative Care for Children, and National Network for Children (NNC), identified several key areas related to children's rights, namely in the areas of child participation, safety online, children impacted by war and migrant children, and child protection.

Child participation

Children still have limited opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them and in

public debate. Eurochild members identify the lack of understanding of children's right and belittling a child's position in relation to that of an adult as the main barrier for wider civic participation. Despite some great examples of ensuring child participation (such as young people taking part in the 95th Session of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and creating a child friendly report related to the event¹), the needs of children for free expression and respect for their opinion on topics affecting them, are hardly and variously recognised.²

Anti-child rights movements

Violations of children's rights and human rights in general, have become more visible in Bulgaria. This is particularly applicable for children standing up for their views against the so-called 'traditional societal

norms', and children from minority groups (child refugees and migrants, ethnic minorities, children from the LGBTI community). Their vulnerability is largely due to widespread discriminative mindsets, high level of misinformation, fake news and hate speech on a daily basis. Children from these groups can very often become victims of harassment, violence, and violation of rights.³

Child safety and well-being online

Since the beginning of 2023, the hotline managed by the [Safer Internet Centre](#) has received almost 10,000 reports, 90% of which are for online sexual exploitation, including bullying⁴ and sextortion. The quality of the National Children's Telephone Line (the second tool in Bulgaria for supporting children who

are victims of violence) has deteriorated due to lack of the necessary expertise among the officials who manage it, including lack of qualification to provide psychological support for the children calling and seeking help.

Child protection systems

The child protection system in Bulgaria remains reactive, with about 2,000 children entering the system annually. Child protection departments still have severe staff shortages and high staff turnover. There are also gaps in actions to encourage change of attitudes that stigmatise poverty and marginalisation.

Children's rights are being undermined and violated in the new residential homes meant to overcome the institutionalised model of raising children. Further efforts to build and strengthen

1 Hope and Homes for Children – Bulgaria, [The Child participation programme of Hope and homes for children at a UN session](#), 2023.

2 National Network for Children, [Report Card 2023: What is the average government score for childcare?](#), May 2023.

3 ARETE Youth Fundation, [People Think we are a Threat to Them!](#), 2023.

4 Any form of harassment of the child, including verbal hate speech, image abuse, sexting, blackmail through personal data and/or images etc.

multi-sectoral cooperation and coordination between all public institutions constituting the elements of the child protection system is needed.

Children in migration and refugees

Bulgaria has the largest share of unaccompanied minors who apply for asylum in the member states of the European Union. Specifically, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, nearly 150,000 Ukrainian refugees have passed through Bulgaria; the percentage of children among them is consistently around 40%. Less than 10% of those children (approximately 2,200 children) are enrolled in the Bulgarian education system.

Eurochild members underline that all refugee children's access to education and social services must go beyond policy

commitments. However, families face a number of practical obstacles to access education, such as language barriers and low administrative and financial capacity of service providers in enrolling, attending and support for children.

Climate change and children's rights

Environmental pollution is a relevant topic among children. The research⁵ conducted by Know-How Centre shows that they participate in initiatives or create projects about nature conservation. Additionally, the *Children-researchers joint initiative*⁶ between NNC and Eurochild studied the children's opinions on the topic of ecology and environment. The findings indicate that children's most common association with regard to nature is related to reducing the use of plastic, using air and

water purifiers, and increasing the sensitivity of society on the subject.

Children's mental health

The *National Strategy for the Mental Health of the Citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria 2020–2030* was adopted in 2021 and it foresees strengthening the focus on child and youth mental health. Activities include programmes supporting children with mental health conditions and their families, modules on the problems of violence against children and training of healthcare professionals and general practitioners to integrate activities and services for early diagnosis of mental health problems.

The strategy outlines the development of a public register of approved qualified professionals providing mental health help to children and young people. To

extend these positive practices, more robust collection of data on children's mental health is needed. Eurochild members recommend a mapping on children's mental health needs and the provision of support by schools to help pupils cope with the demands of the education system.

Other developments for children's rights

The Know How Centre and NNC are working on empowering children to become defenders of their rights, while NNC is advocating introducing reforms in Bulgaria's juvenile justice system. HHC – Bulgaria is active in the deinstitutionalisation of childcare, child participation and advocacy for the rights of the child and support for the cause of every child to live in a family.

⁵ Know-How Center for Alternative Child Care, New Bulgarian University *Child participation and activism: Where are we headed?* Sofia, 2022.

⁶ In this initiative, teams of young people research six meaningful topics that they themselves have identified as important to them and the community in which they live.

Poverty and Social Exclusion – Experiences of children, families, and communities

Child poverty in Bulgaria

Bulgaria has a total child population of 1,18 million, 33.9 % of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion as of 2022. That amounts to an estimated 403,004 children in need in Bulgaria. The rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has increased since 2021. There is a serious discrepancy between the general child poverty rate and that of children from different ethnic backgrounds - 37.5% children from Türkiye and 69.4% from Roma backgrounds respectively are growing up in poverty.

Nearly 20% of children in Bulgaria live in households with three or more children, and those are the ones traditionally at the

highest risk of poverty and social exclusion. Additionally, children from marginalised⁷ communities and children with disabilities are among the ones currently placed in out-of-family state sponsored care due to a consistent failure to apply the ‘necessity principle’ in child-family separations. Furthermore, there are groups of children in state sponsored alternative care that are overrepresented - children with disabilities (31% of all children in institutional/residential care) and Roma children (figures as of 2021).⁸

The abolishing of fees for kindergartens and nurseries for families with children is a positive intervention to address child poverty. In addition, the amount of financial benefit for raising children in the second year of maternity leave was increased, and so were the tax benefits for working parents. Nevertheless,

there is a challenge with providing integrated support for the poorest and most marginalised families and children.

There are a number of pilot initiatives throughout the years addressing different aspects of the generational poverty, however these usually lack long-term financial stability and do not transition beyond the pilot phase to a stable national policy.

In its report ‘Poverty takes away the right to childhood’: Children’s perceptions of poverty in four EU Member States, Eurochild provides an overview of the situation of poverty on the ground in Bulgaria bringing children’s voices into the conversation. The report is the final product of a series of consultations and surveys with children carried out by four National Eurochild Forums, among which the National Network for Children in Bulgaria.

The European Child Guarantee

Bulgaria’s National Action Plan

2023 marked the third year of the European Child Guarantee’s implementation, and two years since Member States were requested to submit their National Action Plans (NAPs) to outline how they would address child poverty at national level.

The National Action Plan of Bulgaria was published on 05 December 2022.⁹ The NAP identifies the children most in need in the country, namely children with disabilities, children in migration and refugees, children from minority backgrounds, children in alternative care and those leaving care, especially children in residential care and children from households with more than three children, single-parent families.

⁷ Toneva E., *Protection as punishment: alternative care for children in Bulgaria, Structural violence and human dignity*, 2023, ISBN: 978-619-01-1275-4, pp. 81-103.

⁸ UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, *The situation of children in Europe and Central Asia*, 2023.

⁹ The lists of Child Guarantee National Coordinators and National Action Plans, where published, are available at the bottom of [this page](#).

Moreover, the plan also mentions the importance of regional differences in terms of an extended risk of poverty and social exclusion, such as children living in isolated and difficult-to-reach regions who are subjected to a multitude of risk factors.

The NAP contains measures against social exclusion and fighting child poverty, but they are not specifically tied to the target groups of children in need. The Plan does not include robust indicators and a monitoring framework on how measures would be implemented or coordinated between responsible governmental institutions. There is a measure in the plan aimed at collecting sufficient data on different groups of children using cross-institutional system and cooperation; however, this is something yet to be implemented.

To ensure that interventions set out in Bulgaria's NAP can be effectively monitored and evaluated, Eurochild members recommend developing a tool to assess outcomes by

municipality, rather than on a national level. This would help target regional differences and will prompt adjustments of future measures. In addition, monitoring and evaluation should include feedback from children and their families in order to provide a comprehensive picture of effectiveness.

Funding for measures set out in the NAP will draw on both national and EU sources. Funding from municipalities budgets or non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) budgets are combined with different Operational programmes, such as 'Education', 'Equal Access to education', the 'Development of regions'.

To support the NAP's implementation, Eurochild members recommend developing a working cross-sectoral co-ordination between representatives of all institutions responsible for children's care and protection on a municipal level in order to support every child in need. In addition, our members would like to see the highest

political level responsibility towards the Monitoring and Evaluation of the results of the European Child Guarantee.

However, there are concerns among the NGOs that the NAP will be implemented as another pro forma document through which institutions will report activities, rather than making real policies to improve children's lives in Bulgaria.

European Semester 2023 – Country reports and recommendations

Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's European Semester Country Report for Bulgaria outlines vulnerable groups of children that should be targeted by national policymakers, namely children with disabilities, Roma children, children living in rural and remote areas, children impacted by the pandemic, and children with a migration background. On the other hand, the Country Report failed to include children

in alternative care, child participation, and children's rights in the digital environment. Eurochild members underline that there is no specific mention of the topic of deinstitutionalisation.

Eurochild members in Bulgaria were not involved in the Semester Process 2023.

The adoption of the National Strategy for Mental Health of Citizens is a promising development. It should enable improvements in health services for children by regulating minimum quality standards for the provision of social services. Eurochild members welcomed adopted measures to address shortages of healthcare professionals and better geographical distribution across Bulgaria.

Lastly, concerning the importance of investing in children, Eurochild members welcomed the inclusion of the amendment of the Pre-school and School Education Act, to make pre-school education mandatory from the age of four.

Our members urge for quality, age-oriented, and accessible Early Childhood Education and Care practices to encompass the needs of children in bigger cities, where there is lack of some services, and better geographical distribution to address the needs of children in smaller, more remote settlements.

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations on addressing the mitigation of energy poverty, quality of

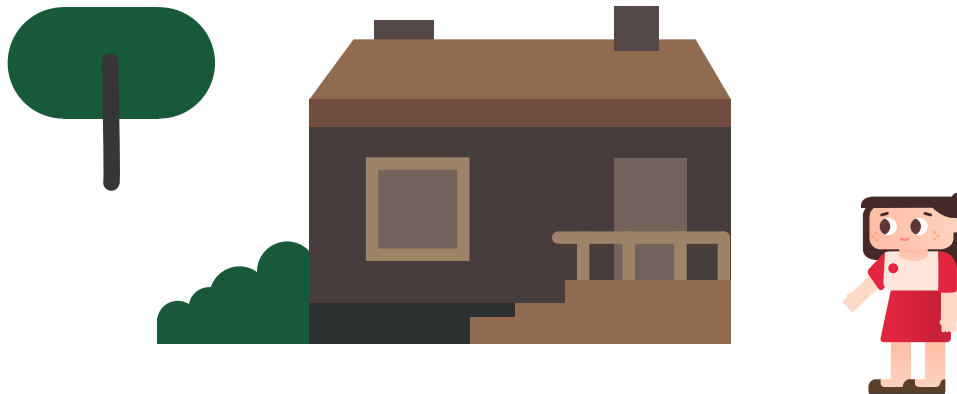
education and training included in the Country Report do correspond sufficiently to reform needs on the ground in Bulgaria. These recommendations respect the right of children to decent quality of life and supports their future development in line with the changing labour market needs.

In the Country Specific Recommendations for Bulgaria, the European Commission made social recommendations to allocate higher spending on social, health and educational

policy, as well as higher spending on public investment. These are necessary factors to support children's development. However, to ensure that all children reach their potential, a more targeted approach for children in disadvantage is necessary.

Spreading the measures equally across all groups of children will not solve the problem due to regional imbalances, vulnerabilities and inequality. Eurochild members recommend more strategic and cross-sectoral

reforms concerning the protection of children's rights; only then can support and financial investment achieve the desired positive change in the well-being of children.



Eurochild advocates for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of policymaking. We are a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. We influence policies, build internal capacities, facilitate mutual learning and exchange practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all our work.



Eurochild

Putting children at
the heart of Europe

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