

Insights and perspectives on children's rights in Bulgaria

**Bulgaria's country profile – additional information based
on an exchange with Bulgarian Public Authorities**



Eurochild
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the heart of Europe

10 April 2024

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On the 20th of November 2023, on World Children's Day, Eurochild published a new report [**Children's Rights: Political will or won't?**](#). It compiles information gathered from **38 Eurochild members in 26 countries across Europe** and provides an overview of the current situation of children in these countries. The report aims to **identify good and promising practices, working solutions, and country-specific recommendations** for EU decision-makers and national governments to draw from, when addressing children's needs.

The report and its findings have been presented and discussed with stakeholders from both national and European levels from countries such as Greece and Bulgaria.

Most recently, we've shared the findings provided by our Bulgarian members with the National Coordinator for the European Child Guarantee Ms. Natalia Efremova. Representatives of the State Agency for Child Protection, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), and Permanent Representation of Bulgaria to the European Union were also present in the discussion. During the exchange, Eurochild received supplementary knowledge related to each category discussed in the report.

The piece seeks to share developments captured by the abovementioned stakeholders with our members in Bulgaria. It aims to act as complementary information to the findings provided in Eurochild's Children's Rights: Political will or won't? Report. It also shares upcoming opportunities related to the implementation of the Child Guarantee National Action Plan.

Child participation

There are already some structures that mainstream child participation such as the Council for children. It was established as an advisory body to the chairman of the State Agency for Child Protection. The Council consults children ages 14-18 from all 28 administrative regions in Bulgaria, in addition to 4 children from vulnerable groups and 1 child granted international protection in Bulgaria on policies that affect them.

Children in the Council participated in a consultation meeting related to Bulgaria's National Strategy of the Child. In addition, a working group that discusses prevention of violence forms part of the Council.

Furthermore, between October and December 2023 the State Agency for Child Protection, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, conducted the initiative "The Voice of Children and their Families" related to the development of the draft National Strategy for the Child 2024-2030. A series of discussions were held with different target groups of children (Roma children, children placed in institutions after committing an antisocial act, children from residential services, children placed in foster families, children with special needs, preschool children, children with outstanding gifts, etc). The initiative took place in several cities in Bulgaria including Sofia, Dupnitsa, Veliko Tarnovo, Vidin, Vratsa, Podem. The aim of the initiative is to outline the main challenges to the

development of children and the possibilities to overcome them. The “Voice of Children and Their Families” initiative is a part of the consultation process on the draft of the National Strategy for the Child 2024-2030. The children's opinions and suggestions captured during the discussions within the Initiative are reflected in the draft Strategy.

Child protection system

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) has already adopted several policies and measures to ensure the quality standards for social services including those for children in alternative care. The Ordinance for Quality of Social Services was adopted in June 2022, establishing criteria for implementation of social services, as well as the methods for monitoring and evaluation of their efficiency.

Deinstitutionalisation

Closing the remaining four institutions for children is a priority for the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP). From information provided by our member Hopes and Homes for Children – Bulgaria, Eurochild is aware that there is a Council set up as an expert advisory unit to the Ministry that would support the process of removal of children placed in medical-social care homes. The Council's tasks include identifying challenges related to the completion of the process of deinstitutionalization of children, proposing measures to overcome them, and developing prevention measures for placement in other institutions.

Under the guide of the Ministry of Health, the closure of these homes should be accomplished this year as per legislative requirements stipulated in the Social Services Act. Eurochild commits to continue monitoring any developments in the area of deinstitutionalization.

Implementation of Child Guarantee

Bulgaria introduced additional targets on child poverty and social exclusion. Those come complementary to the EU targets to reduce child poverty by 5 million by 2030. The 2-year Operational Plan for 2023-2024 provides a detailed framework for the implementation. There are activities that have already been implemented. For example, young people who become of age and leave family type care receive training and support that help create work habits, support on housing, and educational and career support.

To have a better overview of which areas in Bulgaria need more targeted attention, MLSP proposed to launch a process of defining the extreme poverty and consequently to map children living in extreme poverty as part of the implementation of the National Action Plan. The Interim report for the Child Guarantee in Bulgaria is expected to be published in April 2024.

Child safety and well-being online

The hotline supported by the Safer Internet has introduced a new chat service.

The State Agency for Child Protection supports the work of the national Centre for Safer Internet and the SafeNet-124 123 Hotline. The MLSP reports to have received feedback that the hotline is found to be extremely useful in preventing child abuse online, as well as supporting the implementation of many other activities benefitting children affected by cyberbullying. The good cooperation between the State Agency for Child Protection and the Bulgarian Centre for Safer Internet is developing over the years, whereas a number of joint initiatives and projects were implemented mainly on the topic of cyber security for children. More information about the centre can be found at <https://www.safenet.bg/>

Funding

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy reports that the implementation of the National Action Plan will be financed mainly through state budget funding and the European funds. The Education Programme (EP) and the Human Resources Development Programme (HRDP), both co-financed by the European Social Fund+ will make a significant contribution to the implementation of the Bulgarian Action Plan. The total amount of the funds under the two programmes is over EUR 143 million and is expected to address the needs of over 200,000 children. While the areas of focus of the HRDP are social inclusion, tackling child poverty, and access to social services, the EP Programme prioritises ensuring access to quality and inclusive preschool and school education.

The HRDP 2021-2027 funding, in addition to national budget resources, committed up to 2,11% of the Programme budget, equating to approximately EUR 41.6 million. The commitment relates specifically to the implementation of Child Guarantee in Bulgaria. Some of the activities planned to be funded by the HRDP Programme include:

- Expanding the network of services for early childhood development – formation of parenting skills; provision of advice and support to parents on early childhood development and parenting; prevention of child abandonment and other supportive services in the context of the European Child Guarantee;
- Supporting access to health care and health promotion by provision children health counselling and prevention activities;
- Developing services for early intervention of disabilities for children;
- Supporting the process of providing preventive and supportive services in the community for children and youth – development of services for prevention and reintegration, including activities for prevention of institutionalisation and increasing the quality and efficiency of child support services and their families, integrated support and integrated cross-sectoral services, support and training for the acquisition of social skills of young care leavers and their preparation for the labour market, as well as the creation of services to providing support to homeless people.

The key procedure under the HRDP Programme is “Future for Children”. The call was open to social services providers, municipalities, NGOs and medical facilities. A total of 148

project proposals were submitted as of 20 February 2023. A total of 107 projects were submitted by municipalities, 41 by private providers of social services, incl. NGOs. A total of 27 projects submitted by NGOs were approved and successfully contracted, in addition to other contracted projects partnering with 6 NGOs.

The MLSP reports that all interested stakeholders are involved in the decision making and the programming process, including the elaboration of selection criteria and guidelines. Representatives of NGOs are members of the Monitoring Committee of the HRDP where they can propose, comment and approve selection criteria. Those can then be included in the Annual Indicative Working Programme, which is a tool that prepares potential eligible beneficiaries for future calls for proposals.

With the information presented thus far, Eurochild has the observation that despite creating various channels such as advisory boards, communication with diverse CSOs has to be better developed. There is room for improvement and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy stated they are keen to enhance their reach to stakeholders, including NGOs.

Eurochild continues to stay involved alongside its members, to build upon the Flagship report and other joint resources to facilitate these useful exchanges.

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