



Investing in children in Bulgaria: Where are the parents?

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Deinstitutionalisation of children in Bulgaria is a fact, but the number of children in formal care remains high and child poverty and social exclusion is among the highest in Europe. This indicates that state attention to parents and families needs to be enhanced so that they are supported in their efforts to raise their children and improve their well-being. The National Network for Children developed a proposal for the introduction of family-oriented approaches in all relevant areas based on clear objectives, measures and activities.

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Description

The “Vision for deinstitutionalisation of children in Bulgaria” is a strategic document developed in 2010 in partnership with all stakeholders. This document sets out an ambitious vision for the closure of all large-scale residential care institutions for children in the country within 15 years. Its main purpose is to guarantee the right of children to a family environment as well as to access to quality care and services according to their individual needs. It provides for an investment of €119,768,372.94 from the EU structural funds.

Six years after the adoption of the strategy significant progress has been made. Between 2009 and the beginning of 2016, the number of institutions dropped from 137 to 50 and the number of children placed in them from 7587 to 1495. Whereas the number of institutionalised children has decreased significantly, the number of children in formal care remains very high. At the same time, the percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Bulgaria is one of the highest in Europe – in 2014, 45.2% versus 27.8% for the EU as a whole.

The current legislation regulating support for families and parents is dispersed between more than 20 normative acts, pieces of sub-delegated legislation and strategies, most of which are piecemeal

and not based on an integrated and coherent approach. One conspicuous example is the fact that Bulgarian parents get 1.67 Bulgarian levs (€0.85) income tax reduction per month for raising a child. Unsurprisingly then, a recent survey by the Bulgarian Academy of Science (published in National Network for Children, 2016b) found out that 91% of Bulgarian parents are not satisfied with the state support they get and are in need of more financial benefits as well as of access to universal services.

Drawing from this evidence, in 2016 the National Network for Children – Bulgaria (NNC), an alliance of 137 civil society organisations working with and for children and families, developed a “Vision for Family Policy” which provides a framework for developing a strategy for holistic support for children and families. The document contains horizontal measures, such as transparency, subsidiarity and training of professionals working with children, which aim at increasing the effectiveness of sectorial policies (healthcare, early childhood development, education, social policy and child protection, justice, taxation, balancing personal with professional life, regional development, transport, etc.) The NNC document was presented at the National Assembly on the 1st of April 2016, where the Chairwoman of the National Assembly

and the Chairwoman of the Education and Science Commission committed to supporting it. Representatives from Ministries and other state institutions also endorsed the initiative. These NNC advocacy efforts have been praised by the State Agency for Child Protection. They represent a first step towards bringing parents back into the spotlight.

Outlook & Commentary

The data presented above demonstrate the urgent need for a separate family policy outlining clear objectives, measures and activities, and for adoption of a family-centred approach in all spheres related to child welfare. Such a step reflects the 2013 Recommendation of the European Commission on "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage".

The adoption of a family policy requires both political will and common understanding of what an integrated approach is. For the reform to take place, various ministries and other institutions have to take concerted steps and coordinate their work in the relevant spheres, as all of them are interconnected. What is more, there must be streamlined definitions of core principles, such as integrated working and services, in order to facilitate the development of common perceptions and minimise failures which could arise as a result of a lack of communication.

Further reading

European Commission (2013), "Commission Recommendation C(2013) 778 final" of 20 February 2013, Brussels: European Commission:
http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/c_2013_778_en.pdf

National Network for Children (2016), "Report Card 2016: what is the average government score for childcare?": http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/EN_Belejnik-2016_web.pdf

National Network for Children (2016a), "Vision for Family Policy" (only available in Bulgarian):
<http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Book-Vision-Family-Policy.pdf>

National Network for Children (2016b), "Vision for family policy – the opinions of parents, the European experience and the point of view of psychoanalysis" (only available in Bulgarian):
http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Family-Policy-Vision_Europe-and-Parents-View_web.pdf

UNICEF (2014), "Deinstitutionalisation of Children in Bulgaria: How far and where to?":
<http://www.bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Deinstitutionalization%20of%20Children%20in%20Bulgaria.pdf>

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