



Lithuania to tackle deficiencies in the policy on the protection of children's rights and child welfare

ESPN Flash Report 2017/26

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MAY 2017

A few months ago, Lithuanian society was shocked by the death of a child caused by violence in the family and failure of the child protection agencies to provide the needed timely support. Children's rights activists, the mass media, and the President have drawn attention to the inefficiency of previous attempts to improve the child protection situation and stimulate the government to reorganise the whole child welfare system.

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Description

On 14 February 2017, the Lithuanian Parliament held an extraordinary session to discuss the possibility of adopting a framework for an integrated multi-dimensional child welfare strategy. The decision to hold this session was made after a four-year-old boy was severely beaten by his parents and died in hospital in January 2017. A series of recent cases of violence against children and child neglect, when children suffered extreme violence in childcare institutions and families or when they were killed by relatives, drew the attention of the whole society to the inefficiency of the policy on protection of children's rights and child welfare.

Despite the fact that the rate of "child murders" (which include a combination of deaths resulting from interpersonal violence, i.e. maltreatment, neglect, abuse and peer-to-peer violence) has decreased from 2.8 per 100,000 in 2004 to 1.7 per 100,000 in 2014, Lithuania remains among the countries where this rate is highest (World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe, 2014).

The newly elected Government shares the view expressed by the President of Lithuania that "an efficient system to ensure safety of our children" requires "a centralised decision-maker who is fully authorised to make decisions and

is not part of the region in question" (The Baltic Times, 2017).

Another proposal, coming from the newly elected Parliament, is to criminalise corporal punishment. It prohibits violence against children through an amendment of the Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child (last amended on 8 June 2006). For this, a clear definition of "violence against children" will be needed. Although the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence (2011) already requires authorities to respond quickly to threats to children and offers comprehensive support to households with children, this law does not provide a satisfactory definition.

A number of politicians opposed the provisions to prohibit corporal punishment in families. They treated the criminalisation of corporal punishment as intrusion into the private sphere of family life.

Non-governmental organisations, together with children's rights activists, have rallied against the ineffective policy on children's rights and protection and complained about the lack of political will to address the problems of violence against children.

Outlook & commentary

Implementation of the children's rights and welfare policy in Lithuania is complicated because of the shortage of skilled professionals used to working with children and the slow development of community-based services for social risk households with children.

Moreover, decentralised municipal children's rights protection services have great difficulties dealing with violations of children's rights as this requires additional municipal resources. In addition, the heavy workload of professionals working with children hinders the provision of high-quality services to families. The residential childcare reform, which started in 2003, has been met with direct and indirect opposition and the last decade has seen no substantial breakthrough. On the other hand, closure of childcare institutions without the development of alternative services creates additional problems when children remain in unsafe family environments.

The Minister of Social Security and Labour has concluded that the current system of protection of children's rights does not work properly, and improving the system will require not only additional skilled professionals but also fundamental changes in society as a whole.

Further reading

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