



Early childhood education and care services for children under the age of 3 in Bulgaria well below the Barcelona target

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The percentage of children aged 0 to 3 in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Bulgaria is well below the 33% target set by the Barcelona objectives. The reasons for this are complex and include lack of state services, lack of affordable private nurseries or other alternative forms of care, etc. In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Science initiated, for the first time in Bulgaria, the development of a strategy for ECEC.

Description

The percentage of children aged 0 to 3 in kindergartens and forms of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Bulgaria is well below the 33% target set by the Barcelona objectives. In 2017, the share of children under 3 years of age in crèches was 9.4% on average, according to Eurostat data. In the big cities, the main obstacles to enrolment include lack of state services such as crèches and kindergartens and lack of affordable private services or other alternative forms of care. In rural areas, very often no services at all are available, and there are also some cultural and economic barriers that prevent young parents from sending their children to kindergarten before the compulsory preschool age.

There are many reasons for such low enrolment figures for the youngest age group; one of them is undoubtedly the guaranteed paid maternity leave, which is one of the longest not only in Europe, but also in the world. Bulgarian mothers receive 90% of their average daily gross wage until the child reaches the age of 1, and, since the beginning of 2018, 380 BGN (about €190) monthly for the second year of maternity leave. During the final year, until the child reaches the age of 3, the mother does not receive any payment, but her job position is secured. In addition, there is a legal option which allows the mother to transfer the remaining part of her maternity leave, up to the third year, to the child's father or one of the

grandparents and return to work after the child reaches 6 months of age; but this option is rarely used.

There are state-owned nurseries/crèches for children from 10 months to 3 years, as well as nurseries attached to kindergartens for older children. There are also a limited number of private nurseries, mostly in bigger cities. There are practically no services for children under 10 months of age. The only options for the first year are the family (grandparents, etc.), if available, or private babysitters, whose fees take up usually half or even more of the mother's salary; this makes it unreasonable for most mothers to return to job and work primarily to pay the babysitter.

According to the National Statistical Institute, the share of children under 3 years of age in crèches is highest in Sofia (23.4% in 2017); in some regions with predominant populations of Roma and/or Turkish origin (such as Silistra, Sliven, Kardzhali and Pazardzhik), it is under 10% and has even declined in recent years. In addition, the lack of services has a negative impact on early development of children in groups most at risk, as some of them only receive basic knowledge of the Bulgarian language and social skills for the first time in the crèche/kindergarten.

In big towns, very often there are 25-30 or even more children in one group in the kindergarten/crèche, although the state sets standards of 18-20

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children per group under the age of 3. Another problem is the very unfavourable children to adult care ratio, due to the absence of normative regulation on this. This significantly reduces the quality of service and even jeopardises the safety of children.

In rural areas, the small number of children in villages that are far from each other causes financial and logistical difficulties for the organisation of independent childcare facilities. The problem is partially solved by agreements between villages and bigger towns' kindergartens or by setting up childcare facilities covering a larger area, but parents have then to be able to bring their children to these facilities and this may be difficult. It makes the service ineffective, especially in the cold season of the year.

Outlook & commentary

In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Science launched, for the first time in Bulgaria, the development of an ECEC strategy; one of its goals is a reform of the services and the care system for children under the age of 3. The reform would include introducing standards for ECEC (related to healthcare, education, early intervention, etc.), support and training for staff working with children aged 0-7 years, developing the system of state services and providing a more flexible approach, with the introduction of alternative forms of care and support. Social, educational and health institutions as well as social stakeholders are in favour of the new strategy. They see it as an important way of developing an interdisciplinary approach to ECEC. The ECEC strategy is also widely supported by all parties and external organisations such as UNICEF. The strategy was adopted as part of the new Strategy for the protection of the child, which is currently being discussed at the State Agency for

the Protection of the Child. However, the strategy is still at an early stage and many debates will shape its structure, vision, targets, goals and outcomes.

At the same time, there is almost no developed system of alternative forms of childcare in Bulgaria, such as home-based services or cooperatives. As can be seen from the Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe (European Commission 2014), Bulgaria is one of the countries with highly standardised and restrictive requirements for childcare facilities; these are subject to strict control by the state and the regional departments of the Ministry of Health. This makes the development of alternative services (such as home-based care, parent cooperatives, small-group day-care facilities or even legal private nurseries) virtually impossible.

The development of alternative services and more flexible funding for services, according to parental choice, would be a possible solution to these challenges, both in large cities and in small towns and villages. As the construction of kindergartens and crèches is expensive and involves a complex and slow process, the state should consider a change in the legal framework to make it possible to create cooperatives and home-based services that are not so closely subject to the strict requirements for the organisation of such childcare facilities. This will make it easier for parents, and help mothers to return to the labour market as soon as they wish.

At the moment, no such measures have been taken. Municipalities are being pushed by public opinion to build new kindergartens and crèches and expand existing ones as a way of addressing the problem, but this is also a matter of municipal priority, and is not working equally well in all of the country.

Further reading

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014), Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe. 2014 Edition. Eurydice and Eurostat Report, Luxembourg: Publications Office.

Eurostat (2018), Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare, statistical table for EU: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tepsr_sp210&plugin=1

National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria (2018), Scope of children aged 0-3 in childcare by 31.12.2017 by statistical zones, statistical regions, districts and municipalities, statistical table.

The World Bank/ Trust for Social Alternatives (2017), Supporting disadvantaged children to enter kindergarten. Experimental Evidence from Bulgaria, report.

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