



REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

**ACTION PLAN
FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COUNCIL
RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2021/1004 ESTABLISHING A
EUROPEAN CHILD GUARANTEE
(2030)**

I. Introduction and national context

The plan lays out the measures at national level for implementing the Council Recommendation of 14 June 2021 establishing the European Child Guarantee¹ with the main objective to prevent social exclusion by guaranteeing access of children in need² to key services such as pre-school training and care in early childhood, education (including school-based activities), health, healthy nutrition and housing. The plan encompasses these main policy dimensions and includes measures for the main target groups of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion identified in the Recommendation – homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation, children with disabilities, children with mental health issues, children with a migrant background, children of minority racial or ethnic origin (especially Roma), children in alternative (especially institutional) care and children in precarious family situations.

In accordance with the objectives and guidelines of the Guarantee, this action plan brings together a wide range of measures at the national, regional and local levels within the scope of the various sector policies – education, health care, social services, housing, etc. It incorporates the key measures and interventions until 2030 to reduce poverty among children in Bulgaria and to promote their social inclusion.

Main legal and strategic framework

Bulgaria has a well-developed legal and strategic framework, policies and measures targeted to the needs of children and their families. Guaranteed access to free health care for children, maternity protection policies and paid parental leave, developed preschool education and child protection systems are among the most significant achievements. Since 1 April 2022, parents do not pay a fee for the use of kindergartens and nurseries, as well as a fee for meals in compulsory preschool education. In view of the complex nature of child poverty and social exclusion, a number of steps have been taken to apply an inter-sectoral and holistic approach in the field of child protection and well-being. In this context, in recent years, priority efforts have been steered towards inter-coherence of measures, ensuring complex care and protection of children and improving inter-sectoral coordination at all levels.

Bulgaria is closely committed with the European strategic priorities and objectives in the field of policies for children and families. Considering the importance of these policies, our country has set an ambitious target for reducing the number of children under 18 years at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 196,750 persons in implementation of the Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and in accordance with the European target for reducing poverty by 2030. The specific sub-target takes into account the serious challenges related to the high level of child poverty or social exclusion in Bulgaria. For its achievement will contribute the measures and activities included in this plan. The target to reduce poverty and social exclusion among children represents 25% of the overall national target to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 787,000 persons by 2030.

The national legal framework in the field of children and families support is determined by number of laws and regulations within the scope of various sectoral policies – child protection, education, health care, financial support for families with children, housing, etc. The understanding that the family is the best environment for raising and development of every child underlies the entire child protection legislation. This is the overarching principle of the

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/BG/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32021H1004>

² Children in need according to the Council Recommendation are “persons under the age of 18 who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion”.

philosophy of the Child Protection Act, which is the main specialised law regulating the state policy concerning children at risk. Ensuring access to quality education is a key policy and tool in the context of promoting child well-being. With the Preschool and School Education Act, which is the main legislative act reflecting the state educational policy, education is emphasised as a leading national priority, and children and students are at the centre of the education process. Matters related to child and maternal health are regulated as well. The Health Act sets the general framework for children's rights as patients and the provision of health care for them. It regulates their right to full and free medical assistance until the age of 18 years, as well as their unlimited access to health services.

Children and their families also have access to various forms of financial support through the special legislation in this area. The provision of financial support under the Family Allowances Act (FAA) is an important part of children and families support policies in Bulgaria. Family benefits aim to support the upbringing of children in family environment, while promoting pre-school and school education, access to health care, etc. In addition to the FAA, financial support is also provided under the Social Assistance Act, which is the general law regulating the social assistance to which people in need, including families with children, are entitled. The social services related matters are comprehensively regulated in the Social Services Act (SSA). The law regulates the right of children to use social services, which are fully cost-free for them. According to the law, parents and families do not have to pay for the use of social services financed by the state budget to support the development of parental skills, counselling and support for parents on early childhood development and on raising children, prevention of child abandonment and support for parents for reintegration, early disability intervention for children, etc. The SSA emphasises on integrated services and integrated provision of support as well. An essential element of supporting families with children are the policies regulating the balance between professional and family life, which are regulated in the Labour Code and the Family Code.

In line with legislative measures and initiatives, policies for children and families are in the focus of a number of strategic documents, some of which are also aimed at this target group. A special emphasis on poverty reduction among children as a vulnerable group and on supporting children and families is placed in the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2030. One of its specific objectives is aimed precisely at limiting the intergenerational transmission of poverty and social exclusion. The Strategy contains measures in the field of various sectoral policies – promoting the employment of parents, reconciling professional and family life (including through flexible working arrangements), expanding the network of services for early childhood development, ensuring access to health care, increasing the quality and effectiveness of the network of social services to support children and their families, financial and material support for families with children, etc. For the implementation of the National Strategy, two-year action plans are developed and adopted, which include specific measures and activities, indicators, responsible institutions, sources and amount of funding, etc.

Child poverty is a very significant and complex problem that increases the vulnerability of children and seriously violates their rights. Children who grow up in conditions of poverty and social exclusion face number of barriers in exercising their rights to education, health care, adequate housing, etc. Living in poverty and limited opportunities in the childhood affect the child's life as an adult. Therefore, and in order to guarantee a more equal future for all children, it is necessary to break the vicious cycle of intergenerational transmission of poverty and disadvantage, so that all children can live a fulfilling life. Ensuring access to key services in the field of health care, education, parental support, etc., as well as opportunities for a meaningful everyday life, recreation and leisure (through games, sports and cultural activities), supports the development and ensures the well-being of every child.

In view of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of child poverty, measures and activities to overcome it are laid down in a number of other strategies, programmes and documents in policy fields related to labour market and income support, reconciliation of professional and family life, education, early childhood development, healthcare, housing, etc.

Data on poverty and social exclusion among children

According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI) data as of 31 December 2021, the number of persons under the age of 18 in Bulgaria is 1,188,803 (17.4% of the total population). Bulgaria is among the countries where the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion is significantly higher than the average for the European Union (EU)-27 – 33% or about 400 thousand in 2021 compared to 23.8% for EU (in 2020). Their share is also higher compared to the total share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the country – 31.7% (2,194 million persons).

The factors causing poverty among children are many and of a different nature – low educational status and unemployment of parents, low income, household composition, etc. In 2021, seven out of ten children (73.2%) whose parents have primary or no education, live in poverty. Approximately 12 times less, or 5.9%, are the children living at risk of poverty whose parents have a higher education. In 2021, the share of children living with severe material and social deprivation is 20.0% (deprivation of 7 out of 13 indicators). Children's risk of poverty and material deprivation is also determined and influenced by their ethnic belonging. According to NSI data, in 2021 the relative share of children with material deprivation (deprived of at least one of 13 indicators) is as follows: 26.3% of the Bulgarian ethnic group, 31.8% of the Turkish ethnic group, 90.3 % from the Roma ethnic group and 45% from another ethnicity. The data on the main indicators of poverty and social exclusion, as well as the overall analysis of the pilot project testing the Child Guarantee in Bulgaria, highlight as particularly vulnerable groups of children those who live in low-income families, in families with many children, children raised by single parents, children with disabilities, children of Roma origin, etc.

The regional overview of poverty reveals substantial differences, whereas districts with better economic indicators (employment and income) are generally characterised by lower levels of income inequality or relative poverty, including among children. According to NSI data, in 2021 the risk of poverty or social exclusion among children is lowest in the North-Central and North-East regions (27.1%), followed by the South-West region (30.4%). Significantly higher levels of poverty were reported in the North-West region (43.4%), which is characterised by serious lagging behind the rest of the country in almost all observed areas of socio-economic development, and then the South-East region (42.7%). In 2021, the districts with the highest child mortality rates are in these two regions – the districts of Sliven (14.8‰) and Vidin (13.3‰) – whereas the average child mortality rate for the country was 5.6‰.

The crisis related to the spread of COVID-19 has particularly affected people who are already exposed to a high risk of poverty and social exclusion and live in greater material deprivation. In this context, a number of families in Bulgaria were faced with problems of a different nature, related to financial difficulties, deepening educational inequality, limited access to health care, deterioration of the mental health of children and youth, etc.

The health crisis was followed by the military conflict in Ukraine, which exacerbated already existing social and economic challenges. The sharp rise in energy and food prices has a particularly severe impact on vulnerable households and families with children, exposing them to severe deprivation and difficult access to key services. It is extremely worrying that the military conflict is affecting children and their rights in an unprecedented way. Especially vulnerable among them are unaccompanied children, who need additional integrated support, as there is a greater risk of becoming a victim of trafficking and exploitation.

Pilot project for implementation of the Child Guarantee

Bulgaria is one of the seven EU member states in which pilot projects are implemented for testing the Child Guarantee. The pilot project is implemented in partnership with UNICEF Bulgaria and is aimed at children with disabilities and developmental disorders and children from families in a vulnerable situation. The results of its implementation have an important contribution for the development of this action plan, the identification of the main target groups and the formulation of specific measures to support disadvantaged children. The project's main objective is to expand access and improve the quality of four types of services – home-visiting care for families with young children, early intervention for children with disabilities and developmental disorders, inclusive quality pre-school education and prevention and supporting services aimed at children and families. The project activities are carried out in 10 municipalities on the territory of three districts of the country.

Within the framework of the project, a report was developed “Un/equal childhood – Deep Dive of the current state and dimensions of child poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria, as well as the policies, programmes, services, budgets and mechanisms to address them”.³ The purpose of the analysis report is to contribute to the overall understanding of child poverty and social exclusion, the determining factors, as well as to support the process of planning, implementation and monitoring of policies to promote the well-being of children in Bulgaria. The report formulated recommendations in various areas covered by the Guarantee, which supported the process of action plan development, including the identification of the main target groups, as well as the measures planning.

The Deep Dive also identified the main barriers that children from vulnerable groups encounter in terms of their access to key services. One of the main findings is that many of the barriers faced by different groups of children in the respective areas overlap. Financial difficulties are identified as a significant factor concerning the access to education, health care, healthy nutrition and housing. Other significant factors are the uneven territorial distribution of services, the lack or limited access to mobile services, capacity of specialists to work with children and parents, stigmatisation and discriminatory practices, the need to improve inter-sectoral cooperation, which has a key role in the provision of a complex and integrated support. Identified as leading challenges in the field of early childhood education and care are the insufficient capacity of the existing network of nurseries and kindergartens, as well as their uneven distribution on the territory of the country, the lack of a variety of forms and services for early childhood education and development, the need to increase the qualifications and skills of those working in this field. A high significance of language and cultural barriers in terms of access to education was emphasised, especially for children of Roma origin. The uneven territorial distribution of health services and specialists has been identified as the main barrier in the field of health care. In the area of housing, the main barriers are related to the lack of housing policy and specific measures aimed at families with children. The lack of engagement, lack of awareness or neglect of children on the part of some parents has been highlighted as a serious challenge. In this regard, raising parents' awareness and sensitivity about the importance of services and programmes provided, and support and empowerment of parents are essential.

II. Main target groups

Identifying the specific groups with an increased risk of poverty or social exclusion and determining the factors and causes of this vulnerability are crucial to plan and formulate

³ UNICEF, Un/equal childhood: Deep Dive in Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Bulgaria, 2022.

adequate and targeted measures to support disadvantaged children. In view of the poverty driving factors and the diverse risks, children from the different target groups overlap to a large extent and very often fall into more than one category. The regional dimension of poverty and the existing territorial differences are also important. These factors unveil the group of children living in remote and isolated areas as a particularly vulnerable, which are exposed traditionally to a disproportionately high risk of poverty or social exclusion and have limited access to key services. For example, access to online and digital learning for children living in remote or sparsely populated areas has been particularly hindered in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

In accordance with the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee and based on the findings and conclusions in the report “Un/equal Childhood – Deep Dive of the current state and dimensions of child poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria, as well as the policies, the programmes, services, budgets and mechanisms to address them”, the action plan is mainly aimed at the following target groups of children:

- **Homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation**

Homeless children and children experiencing severe housing deprivation are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. The lack of a home and poor housing conditions such as household overcrowding, lack of water, electricity, heating, lack of permanent or own housing, difficulties in paying rent or utility bills, put children in extremely risk situations. The most vulnerable in this regard are children in poor families, children raised by single parents, children of Roma or migrant origin. A serious problem in the analysis of this target group is the lack of official detailed statistics on the profile, characteristics and number of homeless children and those living in extremely poor and inadequate housing conditions.

Homelessness is also associated with temporary stay in services providing temporary accommodation and protection, such as temporary accommodation centres for migrants and refugees, shelters, including in cases of domestic violence, etc. This group also includes run-away children, leavers from special schools with imposed intervention measures (reformatories or social school boarding houses) or compulsory medical treatment institutions, as well as children living on the street with their families. In addition to the child protection bodies, children in a situation of temporary homelessness fall into a group tracked also by the Central Commission for Combating Anti-social Behaviour of Minors and Juveniles (CCCABMJ) and are classified as “neglected children”. According to the 2021 data of CCCABMJ, a total of 652 children resided in temporary foster institutions – children “without an established identity and place of residence, who have been caught in vagrancy, begging, prostitution, drug and narcotic substance abuse, who had without permission left compulsory correctional or compulsory medical treatment institutions, who had committed an offence against public order and had lapsed in a status of neglect”.

- **Children with disabilities and children with mental health issues**

Children with disabilities are a specific vulnerable group. They are at increased risk of being separated from their biological families, more likely to be placed in residential care, or to be excluded from pre-school or school education. Stigmatisation and discrimination of children with disabilities or with special educational needs regarding their access to the general education system are also among the challenges faced by the children from this target group. A serious factor hindering the access of children with disabilities to education is the high number of children in kindergartens’ groups and the lack of an accessible architectural environment. The high share of families with children with disabilities, in which one of the parents is excluded from the labour market, additionally has a negative impact on the quality of life and access to

services. The conclusions drawn in the Deep Dive Report under the pilot project highlight as particularly vulnerable those children who, in addition to disabilities, also have an accumulation of factors such as discrimination based on ethnic minority, gender, migrant origin, etc. In this regard, it is essential to ensure access to and full participation in quality forms of early education and care for children with disabilities and children with developmental disorders, with a focus on monitoring child development and early identification of developmental difficulties and provision of early intervention services.

According to data from the Agency for People with Disabilities (APD), as of July 2022, the number of officially registered children with permanent disabilities in Bulgaria is 28,080. In the Deep Dive, the most common reasons for certifying children with disabilities in 2020 are: mental and behavioural disorders (22.7%), respiratory diseases (19.4%), congenital anomalies (17.9%) and of the nervous system (12%). This ratio between groups is maintained over the years.

Bulgaria lacks a comprehensive system for collecting statistical information by region and type of mental health issues among children. According to data for Bulgaria from UNICEF's global report "The State of the World's Children 2021", approximately 11.2% of children aged 10-19 years (73,808 children) have some type of mental health disorder. In a survey of self-reported mental health among 6,245 children between the ages of 6 and 12 years, 27.9% of children reported at least one problem. The Deep Dive in child poverty states that the stigma associated with mental health is one of the main barriers for children and young people in accessing professional help. In a survey conducted by U-Report Bulgaria in 2020, 63% of responding teenagers indicated that the reason they did not seek help was anxiety or shame, while 17% indicated not knowing where to seek help.

- **Refugee and migrant children, with a focus on unaccompanied or ethnic minority children**

Children with a migrant background are at higher risk of poverty, poor housing, violence, trafficking or exploitation. Many of them are unaccompanied, meaning they travel without their families or an adult legally responsible for them. According to NSI data, in 2021, 3,112 children aged 0-17 years from non-EU countries and 2,284 from EU countries were settled in Bulgaria.

In the first half of 2022, 8,840 persons seeking international protection were registered at the State Agency for Refugees to the Council of Ministers (SAR to the CM), which represents about 80% of the total number of persons seeking international protection for 2021 – 10,999. In 2022, there were 2,504 children seeking international protection in the Republic of Bulgaria. In 2021, the total number of children who sought international protection was 3,733. If the trend of children seeking protection continues until the end of 2022, the forecast shows an increase of 20-30% compared to the previous year. For the first six months of 2022, the number of unaccompanied children who sought international protection as of 30.06.2022 was 1,514, with no increase in the number of unaccompanied children seeking international protection compared to 2021. As in 2021, in the first half of 2022, the largest number of unaccompanied children are from Afghanistan – 75% of all unaccompanied children who submitted applications, followed by Syria – about 20% and from other countries of origin – about 5%. According to the stated age, 826 unaccompanied children are 16-17 years old, 560 – 14-15 years old and 128 – under 14 years old.

For the 2021-2022 school year, with the assistance of SAR to the CM, a total of 119 children were enrolled in the Bulgarian education system and 10 children were enrolled for the first six months of 2022. The inclusion of unaccompanied minors in the education system in compulsory school age, which make up 87%, or 1,323 children in this age group, remains a

challenge. A large part of them are illiterate in their own mother tongue, have no interest in education and no desire to settle in the country and they stay in the territorial units of the SAR for a short time.

The current situation related to the deepening crisis in Ukraine and the ongoing migration developments as a result of the military conflict have led to an increase of the number of persons seeking protection in Bulgaria. Among them are also many parents with children. According to SAR data as of 30.06.2022, the number of persons seeking international protection from Ukraine was 1,287, of which 525 children. As of 09.08.2022, 47,890 children have sought temporary protection, of which 516 unaccompanied. A priority in the context of the evolving international situation is the provision of timely and targeted support and protection for children from Ukraine, possibly involving unaccompanied children.

In order to improve inter-institutional cooperation regarding ensuring the protection of unaccompanied children, which are particularly vulnerable, in April 2022 a Coordination Mechanism was approved for interaction between institutions and organisations in cases of unaccompanied children or foreign children separated from their families residing on the territory of Republic of Bulgaria, including children seeking or granted with international protection. Its main objective is to ensure effective coordination and coherence in the implementation of the specific obligations of all stakeholders, with a view to guaranteeing the observance of children's rights.

Children of minority ethnic origin are another specific vulnerable group, given the impact of a number of factors – poor housing and living conditions, household overcrowding, limited access of Roma households to basic services, sanitary and hygiene infrastructure, health care and other services. The educational status of children of Roma origin in Bulgaria is generally significantly lower than the average level for their peers in the country, and the rate of early school leaving among them is particularly high. The crisis caused by COVID-19 has exacerbated these problems and highlighted new ones, such as limited access to digital devices and significant gaps in the education of parents being not able to support their children in online learning.

- **Children in alternative care outside the family, especially those placed in social services for residential care, including children and young people leaving alternative care**

According to the national legislation in the field of child protection, children placed outside the family are children at risk. These children are usually left without the care of their parents and there is a risk of impairment of physical, mental, moral, intellectual or social development, risk of abuse, violence, exploitation or any other inhumane or degrading treatment. Children placed in residential care services are particularly vulnerable. Having a disability, experiencing a crisis or other traumatic event further increases such vulnerability. Various challenges and barriers contribute to the vulnerability of these children, such as difficult access to adequate childcare and health care, quality education, etc. As children placed in residential care services are not raised in a family, this fact is sometimes a prerequisite that makes it difficult to provide individual care and attention according to their needs.

The childcare reform has already achieved significant results, one of the most important being the prevalence of care in the family. The data on children in public care show that, compared to 2010, the share of those raised in families of relatives or close friends and in foster families is much higher (66%), compared to the number of children in residential care (34%). As of May 2022, 4,188 children were placed in families of relatives or close friends; 1,714 children placed in foster families, and 2,779 children/young people placed in Centres for Family-type Accommodation. For comparison, about 80% of children in public care in 2010

used residential services (7,587 children). All specialised institutions for children were closed. As of 31.07.2022, there are 205 children placed in only 4 Homes for Medico-social Care for Children – to be closed by the end of 2022 – managed by the Ministry of Health.

Despite the positive results of the childcare deinstitutionalisation process and the measures taken to support children and families, children are still placed outside of the family. In this regard, at first place, it is necessary to improve risk prevention measures, including the risk of child separation from the family and placement out of the family, by providing targeted, effective and timely support for children and families at the earliest possible stage. Providing complex and integrated support to children and families in the implementation of reintegration measures through returning the child to the biological family or adoption is also important. On the other hand, when it comes to children in public care, especially children placed in residential care services and in foster care, it is important to change public attitudes and overcome the stigma that these children are “different”.

Children and young people leaving the public care system also need additional comprehensive and integrated support for social inclusion in preparing them for the transition to independent living. Special emphasis should also be placed on promoting youth employment, providing sustainable solutions for permanent housing for young people from vulnerable groups, etc.

- **Children from low-income families**

Children from low-income families face various risks arising from difficulties and insecurity in the family environment. These children face barriers to access key services – education, health, and are exposed to a higher risk of poor housing conditions, overcrowding and energy poverty.

The socio-economic status of families is closely related to the success rate of children at school, which is also confirmed by the data from the international study PISA 2018 for Bulgaria. The reading performance of students with an advantaged socioeconomic status exceeds the performance of students with a disadvantaged socioeconomic status by 106 points, which equates to more than 2.5 years spent at school. Overall, 70% of students with disadvantaged socioeconomic status have reading difficulties compared to 25% of their peers with an advantaged socioeconomic status.⁴ This gap of 45 percentage points is the highest in the EU and shows that intergenerational poverty and low educational levels are strong factors limiting children’s access to education. There is also a serious gap among students from rural areas compared to those from urban settings.

Low household incomes are also among the main reasons for children’s unequal access to health care and healthy nutrition. According to the data from the 2017 EU-SILC supplementary survey on child health issues, 2.0% of children in Bulgaria have unmet health needs compared to 1.6% on average for the EU-27.

Data on poverty and social exclusion highlight children living in families and households with three or more children and children raised by single parents as particularly vulnerable. According to NSI data, in 2021 the relative share of the poor among households with three or more children is 49.3%, and among single parents with children – 35.7%. The high risk of poverty for households with three or more children is determined by both the number of children and the type of households that have many children – ethnical and cultural issues. Key factors in this regard are parents’ education and access to the labour market. The statistical data, as well as the conclusions of the Deep Dive in child poverty and social exclusion in the country, clearly show that single parenthood as a social phenomenon has become

⁴ Source: OECD/PISA, 2018

increasingly widespread in recent years and affects more and more women, both in the national and European context. Children raised by a single parent are particularly at risk of poverty, again driven by factors such as households inclusion in the labour market and the dependence from the parent's steady level of income. The absence of employment, insufficient labour income and benefits, the high risk of unemployment and the engagement in low-paid work are serious prerequisites for children falling into poverty. Facilitating access to education and employment for single parents, providing affordable and quality childcare services and providing financial support and existing tax reliefs should be among the leading tools for child poverty prevention.

- **Children in precarious family situations (children-victims of violence, children raised by single parents, teenage mothers and their children, children of labour migrant parents, etc.)**

This category includes children in a vulnerable situation and with limited access to key services due to various factors and risks. This broad category includes children victims of violence, teenage mothers and their children, children of labour migrant parents, etc. Domestic violence is one of the most significant factors causing precarious family situation. According to 2021 data of the State Agency for Child Protection 738 reports of violence against children were registered on the National Telephone Line for Children 116 111. Multidisciplinary teams under the Violence Coordination Mechanism worked on 1,563 reports of violence against children. For the first six months of 2022, 516 reports of children at risk were registered, of which 337 were about child abuse. The line supports all children and families, including children and families from Ukraine.

In recent years, children with parents working abroad have been increasingly recognised as a group at risk and vulnerable. This group was also identified in the Deep Dive in the child poverty and social exclusion in the country. With the highest frequency, the phenomenon is observed in North-West Bulgaria, which is the poorest and fastest depopulating region in the EU. For this group of children, poverty is not so much a factor directly influencing their social exclusion but the emotional and behavioural problems caused by the separation from their parents. Main risks faced by the children are difficulties related to the lack of support in learning, dropping out of school, financial problems, consequences on health, mental health and social relationships, etc.

Teenage mothers are a particularly vulnerable and at risk group, with teenage births being especially prevalent among the Roma population. According to NSI data, in 2021 the number of children born to mothers under the age of 18 in Bulgaria is 3,015. There is an increased health risk for teenage mothers, as they often give preterm births and births to underweight children. The problem of early marriages and teenage births is a significant social topic, because it is a vicious circle, whereas the negative patterns are reproduced throughout the generations, which then hinder the full development of entire generations. The causes of early pregnancies and births are diverse and related to social and economic as well as societal and cultural factors. Along with the socio-economic situation and the lack of resources, the cultural specifics of some Roma groups, including early marriage as part of the girls' life realisation, are among the factors for the high rate of the preterm births.

In addition, apart from the restrictions mentioned in the previous section, children raised by single parents are at increased risk of leaving their specific needs unmet due to the nature of the single parenthood and the problems arising from changes in everyday life and child-rearing patterns.

III. Targets, areas of intervention and measures

Main target

- ✓ Improving the quality of life of children from vulnerable groups and promoting their social inclusion by providing access to key services

Specific Targets (ST)

- ✓ ST 1 Reducing the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion
- ✓ ST 2 Reducing the share of the poor among households with three or more children
- ✓ ST 3 Reducing the share of the poor among single parents with children
- ✓ ST 4 Expanding the coverage of children aged 0-7 years in early childhood education and care
- ✓ ST 5 Reducing the share of early school leavers
- ✓ ST 6 Reducing the share of students with scores below critical values (average for the three PISA areas – reading, mathematics and science)
- ✓ ST 7 Reducing the number of children in residential care
- ✓ ST 8 Increasing the number of children and parents/carers supported through social services for prevention, early intervention, information and counselling, therapy and rehabilitation, training and other community-based services
- ✓ ST 9 Reducing child mortality
- ✓ ST 10 Expanding the coverage of children with mandatory immunisations
- ✓ ST 11 Reducing the number of births of girls under the age of 19 years
- ✓ ST 12 Expanding the coverage of children with disabilities using health, social and integrated health and social services
- ✓ ST 13 Reducing the percentage of overweight and obese children
- ✓ ST 14 Reduction of household overcrowding

The intermediate and target values of the set targets with a view of tracking the achievement of specific results are included in the national framework for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Child Guarantee in Bulgaria and for data collection, presented here in Annex1.

Areas of intervention, measures and activities

In accordance with the objectives and scope of the Guarantee and the priority policies to promote children's well-being in the national context, the measures and activities are systematised in the following areas of intervention:

- 1. Early Childhood Education and Care**
- 2. Inclusive Education and School-based Activities**
- 3. Healthcare**
- 4. Healthy Nutrition**
- 5. Adequate Housing**
- 6. Other tools to overcome social exclusion and reduce child poverty**

With a view of targeting and focus and in accordance with the leading areas of intervention, the main groups of measures, which in their totality and interlinkages will be at the centre of the actions for the implementation of the Guarantee by 2030 in Bulgaria, are presented in Annex 2 “Areas of interventions, measures and activities”.

IV. Financing

The implementation of the national action plan will be financed mainly with funds from the state budget and the European funds (Education Programme 2021-2027, Human Resources Development Programme 2021-2027, Regional Development Programme 2021-2027, Food and Basic Material Assistance Programme 2021-2027) and other sources. The state budget finances all types of activities related to free healthcare, pre-school and school education, early childhood care, provision of social services to children and their families, various types of social and family assistance, tax reliefs, pensions and benefits, etc. From the European funds, specifically for implementing the Guarantee in Bulgaria, the following financial resources are planned:

- Education Programme 2021-2027 – BGN 198,829,711;
- Human Resources Development Programme 2021-2027 – BGN 81,281,936;
- Regional Development Programme 2021-2027 – BGN 897,517,471.79 (indicative): general budget for measures related to education, health, social infrastructure and to improve the housing conditions of marginalised groups, including Roma, some of which are related to the implementation of the Child Guarantee in Bulgaria;
- Food and Basic Material Assistance Programme 2021-2027 – BGN 13,140,000 (indicative).

The Education Programme 2021-2027 will finance measures to support personal development in preschool and school education, prevention of bullying and violence and reducing aggression in schools, creating conditions for access to education by overcoming demographic, social and cultural barriers, municipal-level measures for school desegregation, prevention of secondary segregation and anti-discrimination, measures to promote intercultural education through culture, science and sports, etc. At least 170,000 children and 128,000 parents are expected to be supported.

The Human Resources Development Programme 2021-2027 will finance mainly measures to provide support for improving child care in early childhood, development of health and integrated health and social services in order to prevent health related complications for children with disabilities, developmental disorders and chronic diseases, measures to prevent early marriages and births and individual support for teenage mothers/pregnant mothers and their children, support for young people leaving alternative care, etc. At least 40,000 children are expected to be supported. At the same time, other investments under the programme contribute to achieving the objectives of the Guarantee, such as measures to improve the capacity of the social system, measures to support human resources in the field of health care, measures for employment, qualification and training of parents, measures to support the reconciliation of professional and family life, etc. At the moment, the ESF also finances the measures for the deinstitutionalisation of childcare.

The Regional Development Programme 2021-2027 will finance mainly measures related to education, health and social infrastructure and improving housing conditions of marginalised groups, including Roma.

The Food and Basic Material Assistance Programme 2021-2027 will finance measures to ensure access to healthy nutrition for all children in need and to provide material and financial support for families with children from vulnerable groups. At least 10,000 children are expected to be supported.

The Programme under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2021-2027 will also support a number of measures. Investments for complete repairs and construction of kindergartens and schools are planned under the Bulgaria's National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

V. Consultations and public awareness

The implementation of the Guarantee is not only a tool for ensuring access to key services for those in need, but also a step to guarantee the fulfilment of children's rights. Encouraging children's participation is an important element of the European Child Guarantee pilot project in Bulgaria, under which training and consultations were held with children and young people on key issues included in the Guarantee. The aim is that the views and opinions of children and young people are taken into account in the development and implementation of the specific measures and programmes in order to consider the specific needs of different groups of vulnerable children and to be more effective. Within the framework of the Children-Researchers Programme, as part of the pilot project activities, in 2021, three teams of young people were formed from the three pilot areas: Burgas, Stara Zagora and Sliven, which were trained on children's participation and introduced to the objectives of the European Child Guarantee. As part of this activity, young people conducted research among their peers and in their communities on selected important issues within the scope of the European Child Guarantee: access to quality healthcare, education, childcare, adequate housing and healthy nutrition. In addition, three national consultations were held through the U-Report application in 2021 attended by more than 200 young people aged between 14 and 29 years from the entire country. The main topics of the consultations were related to the access of children in need to health care, education and healthy nutrition. The results of the consultations confirmed some of the conclusions made in the Deep Dive in child poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria – the need to address discrimination against children from vulnerable groups, increasing awareness and empowerment of parents, etc.

In addition to the activities of the pilot project, the development of the action plan purposefully involved activities for considering the views of children. The action plan was discussed within the Children's Council to the State Agency for Child Protection.

Alongside the promotion of children's participation and consultation, an important dimension is the development of effective measures to inform children from vulnerable groups and their families, including at the local level, and to raise their awareness on the measures, activities and support that are available for them.

As part of the plan preparation process, a series of webinars dedicated to the Child Guarantee and its implementation in the national context⁵ were held in early 2022. The webinars covered various thematic areas of the initiative (health care, healthy nutrition, education, housing conditions, etc.) with the purpose to popularise the initiative, its concept, mission and objectives, as well as the implementation tools. The webinars were attended by representatives of various stakeholders at the national and local levels, including specialists working in the field. Conducting similar thematic events is a good and useful practice that will also be applied during the implementation of the plan in order to promote its objectives and activities among the general public and the various target groups.

Within the plan framework, initiatives will be promoted to increase public awareness and engagement on the issues of child poverty and social exclusion (for example, conducting information campaigns with a view to better understanding the problem and promoting a culture of tolerance and empathy). Actions will be focused primarily on:

- the importance of the role of the family for the proper and full development of children and protection of their rights;
- increasing the public intolerance towards acts showing disrespect of children's rights;

⁵ The webinars were organised by the National Network for Children in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

- changing attitudes towards disadvantaged children and the opportunities for their full social inclusion;
- promoting volunteering;
- promoting mutual respect and mutual support among children;
- increasing the role of the media in support to the above objectives.

In parallel with raising public awareness, direct involvement of society in various activities to combat child poverty and to support children from vulnerable groups is essential. Priority is given to activities that focus on promoting a culture of tolerance and empathy among students, young people, parents, etc., with the aim of establishing in the society a lasting culture of acceptance towards those vulnerable and with different capabilities.

VI. Governance and coordination

In accordance with the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee and with a view of the need for effective coordination for its implementation, the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy has been appointed as the National Coordinator of the Republic of Bulgaria. The National Coordinator meets the requirements set out in the Council Recommendation, including the availability of adequate resources and a mandate enabling effective coordination and monitoring. The higher level of representation in terms of the National Coordinator takes into account the multi-sectoral nature of the policy for reducing child poverty and the need for full involvement of all responsible ministries and institutions and ownership of their commitments in this process. This being said, the functions of the National Coordinator are related to the implementation of active communication and dialogue with all stakeholders in the national context, as well as with the European Commission and the national coordinators of other Member States. The National Coordinator chairs the established inter-institutional working group for the development of the action plan. The working group brought together representatives of all stakeholders – state institutions, social partners, municipalities, non-governmental organisations, representatives of academia.

The National Council for Child Protection, in its capacity as a consultative body to the State Agency for Child Protection, which includes representatives of state institutions and the civil sector, was also included in the process of discussing and agreeing on the action plan.

With a view of the horizontal nature of the policy to reduce child poverty, all responsible institutions and units will be involved in the implementation of this plan. Local authorities, social partners, representatives of the civil sector, academia are among the identified stakeholders, who are also expected to play an active role and support the realisation of the plan's objectives and measures.

The following coordination mechanism will be established:

- ✓ High-level inter-institutional working group for governance and coordination of the plan implementation (all responsible institutions at the level of ministers and heads of institutions will participate; the group will be chaired by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy);
- ✓ Permanent expert working group to support the coordination and monitoring of the plan implementation (involving representatives of all responsible institutions and organisations, including the civil sector and academia; the group will be chaired by the National Coordinator of the European Child Guarantee).

The permanent expert working group will have the following tasks:

- to ensure the coordination between the state institutions and other organisations involved in activities of the action plan for the implementation of the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee;
- to monitor the implementation of the measures and activities included in the action plan;
- to develop two-year operational plans for the implementation of this action plan;
- to develop two-year reports on the progress and results of the implementation of the Council Recommendation.

Annex 1: National framework for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria and for data collection

Targets	Indicators	Source of information	Frequency and geographic scope of data collection	Current value (latest data available)	Intermediate value by 2025	Target value by 2030
Reducing the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion	Share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	33,0% (2021)	26,0%	21,0%
	Share of children at risk of poverty	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	24,2% (2021)	22,0%	18,0%
	Share of children experiencing severe material and social deprivation (7 out of 13 indicators)	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	20,0% (2021)	17,0%	15,5%
Reducing the share of the poor among households with three or more children	Share of the poor among households with three or more children	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	49,3% (2021)	45,3%	37,5%
Reducing the share of the poor among single parents with children	Share of the poor among single parents with children	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	35,7% (2021)	31,0%	25,0%
Expanding the coverage of children aged 0-7 years in early childhood education and care	Share of the children aged 0-2 enrolled in ECEC	NSI	Annually/Bulgaria	20,6% (2021)	22,0%	25,0%
	Net enrolment ratio of children in the education system from 3 years to entering first grade	NSI	Annually/Bulgaria	80,4% (2021/2022)	84,3%	86,3%
Reducing the share of early school leavers	Share of early leavers from education and training	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	12,2% (2021)	10,2%	7%
Reducing the share of the students with scores below the critical values (average for the three PISA areas – reading, mathematics and science)	% of 15-year-olds with poor average results in the three areas: reading, mathematics and science	OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	Every three years/EU-27	46,0% (2018)	36,0%	25,0%
Reducing the number of children in residential care	Number of children placed in residential care services	ASA	Annually/Bulgaria	3 022 (2021)	2 600	2 000

Increasing the number of children and parents/carers supported through social services for prevention, early intervention, information and counselling, therapy and rehabilitation, training and other community-based services	Number of users of social services for children and families (consultative, for prevention and early intervention, day care), financed by the state budget	ASA	Annually/Bulgaria	11 795 (2021)	14 000	20 000
Reducing child mortality	Infant mortality by newborns	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	5,6 per 1000 (2021)	4,8 per 1000	3,1 per 1000
Expanding the coverage of children with mandatory immunisations	Immunisation coverage with essential immunisations	NCPHA/WHO	Annually/EU-27	90% (2021)	minimum 93%	minimum 95%
Reducing the number of births from girls under 19 years	Number of births given by girls under the age of 19 years	NSI	Annually/Bulgaria	4 408 (2021)	2 100	1 100
Expanding the coverage of children with disabilities using health, social and integrated health and social services	Number of children with disabilities using social, health and integrated health and social services	MH, ASA	Annually/Bulgaria	7 587 (2021)	9 000	10 000
Reducing the percentage of overweight and obese children	% of children underweight born children	NCPHA	Annually/Bulgaria	9,7% (2020)	9,7%	9,2%
	% of overweight children from 1 to 4 years (overweight + obesity)	NCPHA	Every five years / Bulgaria	12% (2020)	12%	11,4%
	% of overweight children aged 5 to 19 (overweight + obesity)	NCPHA	Every five years / Bulgaria	32% (2020)	32%	30,4%
	% of obese children from 1 to 4 years	NCPHA	Every five years / Bulgaria	2,1% (2020)	2,1%	2,0%
	% of obese children aged 5 to 19	NCPHA	Every five years / Bulgaria	12,8% (2020)	12,8%	12,2%
Reducing household overcrowding	Housing cost overburden rate among children at risk of poverty	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	29,5% (2021)	27,5%	25,5%

	Overcrowding rate among children at risk of poverty	NSI, Eurostat	Annually/EU-27	75,9% (2021)	70,0%	65,0%
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Annex 2: Areas of intervention, measures and activities

Area of intervention: Early Childhood Education and Care

Measure 1: Providing support to improve early childhood care:

- Expanding the network of services for early childhood development, including provision of home-visiting care for pregnant women and families with young children in all 28 districts of the country;
- Developing a strategy for early childhood development;
- Introducing and implementing a National Quality Framework for ECEC;
- Improving interaction and coordination between the education, health and social systems in the field of early childhood development;
- Developing and implementing standards for early childhood development;
- Building/renewing of infrastructure for early childhood education and care and ensuring accessible architectural environment;
- Increasing capacity and developing competencies of employees in early childhood development services, including working with children from different target groups;
- Raising parents' awareness about issues of health, development and care for the new-borns and children in early childhood age;
- Involving parents in early childhood education and care services.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 4, ST 5, ST 8, ST 9, ST 12

Responsible institutions: MES, MH, MLSP, MRDPW

Participating organisations and structures: NCPHA, medical treatment facilities, municipalities, NGOs, nurseries, kindergartens, schools with compulsory preschool education groups, RDE, ASA, social service providers, health mediators

Source of financing: SB, HRDP 2021-2027, RDP 2021-2027

Measure 2: Expanding the coverage of ECEC through promoting and improving the interaction between the health, education, social and other systems:

- Increasing the capacity and skills of the teams under the “Interinstitutional Mechanism on Coverage, Inclusion and Prevention of Early Leaving of the Education System of Children and Students”;
- Carrying out targeted information activities, working with parents and promoting the establishment of sustainable partnerships between schools, kindergartens, municipalities, community centres, non-governmental organisations;
- Establishing a coordination mechanism for the implementation of ECEC policies;
- Ensuring additional financial resources to support the activities of the teams (under the Mechanism).

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 4, ST 5, ST 6

Responsible institutions: MES, MH, MLSP, MC, EPEA

Participating organisations and structures: RDE, municipalities, ASA, NGO, nurseries, kindergartens, schools with compulsory pre-school education groups, RHI

Source of financing: SB, EP 2021-2027

Measure 3: General and additional support for personal development in the ECEC system:

- Additional activities to overcome learning difficulties and support for children with SEN, at risk, with chronic diseases, developmental disorders, gifted children and other vulnerable groups, including Roma;

- Ensuring inclusive environment and support for children with special needs in nurseries and kindergartens.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 4, ST 5, ST 6

Responsible institutions: MES, EPEA, MH, nurseries, kindergartens, schools with compulsory pre-school education groups, RHI, RDE

Participating organisations and structures: municipalities, RCSIEP

Source of financing: SB, EP 2021-2027

Area of intervention: Inclusive Education and School-based Activities

Measure 1: Creating conditions for access to quality education by overcoming demographic, social and cultural barriers:

- Increasing the capacity and qualification of pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff, including education mediators;
- Developing quality standards for education;
- Building/renewing of infrastructure for primary and secondary education and ensuring accessible architectural environment;
- Improving the skills of children and students for learning and communicating in a multicultural environment, including psychological support and additional training for children/students with educational difficulties;
- Providing additional educational and psycho-social support to the children placed in the Social School Boarding Houses (SSBH) and Reformatories and their referral to appropriate services;
- Raising parents' awareness about their rights and obligations regarding their children education and developing parent's motivation for active inclusion of their children in the school education system, including through the participation of education mediators.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 4, ST 5, ST 6, ST 8, ST 12

Responsible institutions: MES, MRDPW, MC, schools, EPEA

Participating organisations and structures: municipalities, NGO, education institutions

Source of financing: SB, EP 2021-2027, RDP 2021-2027

Measure 2: Ensuring access to the education system and an inclusive environment for children and students in compulsory pre-school and school age seeking or granted with international protection, including unaccompanied children:

- Improving the process of referral, admission and training of children and students seeking or granted with international protection, including unaccompanied children;
- Increasing the capacity of specialists to work with refugee and migrant children, including unaccompanied children and applying a multidisciplinary approach to assess the best interest of the child;
- Providing additional training in Bulgarian as a foreign language for children and students in compulsory pre-school and school age seeking or granted with international protection, including unaccompanied children;
- Conducting regular information sessions and individual consultations with parents and children, including unaccompanied children seeking international protection.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 4, ST 5, ST 6, ST 8

Responsible institutions: MES, SAR,

Participating organisations and structures: RDE, NGO

Source of financing: SB

Measure 3: Strengthening intercultural education through culture, science and sport:

- Effective implementation of intercultural education through interest-based activities, joint activities among kindergartens and schools;
- Promoting opportunities for professional and personal development of students through education in a multicultural environment;
- Carrying out cultural and educational initiatives promoting reading and literacy in libraries, as part of the training in the education directions.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 5, ST 6

Responsible institutions: MES, MC, EPEA

Participating organisations and structures: RDE, municipalities, education institutions, NGO

Source of financing: SB, EP 2021-2027

Measure 4: Comprehensive programmes at the municipal level for desegregation of schools and classrooms, prevention of secondary segregation and against discrimination:

- Promoting desegregation of schools and classrooms, ensuring a supportive education environment and establishing a supportive public environment through inter-school activities;
- Preparing and implementing practical guides, information campaigns, training seminars on prevention and countering of discrimination in education institutions, including representatives of the local authorities;
- Preparing and introducing adapted learning materials and aids for students whose mother tongue is different from Bulgarian language.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 5, ST 6, ST 8, ST 11

Responsible institutions: municipalities, EPEA

Participating organisations and structures: RDE, MES, NGO, education institutions

Source of financing: SB, EP 2021-2027

Measure 5: General and additional support for personal development in school education of children/students with special educational needs and chronic diseases and ensuring functional assessment of their educational needs:

- Additional activities to overcome learning difficulties and support for children with SEN, at risk, with chronic diseases, with developmental disorders, and gifted children;
- Ensuring an inclusive environment in mainstream schools.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 4, ST 5, ST 6

Responsible institutions: MES, EPEA, RCSIEP

Participating organisations and structures: schools, municipalities

Source of financing: EP 2021-2027

Measure 6: Prevention of bullying and violence and reduction of aggression in schools:

- Carrying out campaigns for promoting approach of tolerance and improving the communication among students, providing psychological support to children and students, pedagogical specialists and parents;

- Increasing the competences of teachers to use and apply forms and methods of countering bullying, violence, aggression, anger, etc., creating a supportive environment in the classroom, working with children and students with SEN, working with parents;
- Student's participation in school management and support for volunteer initiatives, as well as participation in activities developing civic and global competences, including debating and public speaking clubs and competitions.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 8

Responsible institutions: MES, EPEA, schools

Participating organisations and structures: education institutions, NGO

Source of financing: SB, EP 2021-2027

Measure 7: Providing conditions for improving education results for children and students from vulnerable groups who have gaps or difficulties in mastering the educational content, with the aim of completing a higher class, stage and level of education:

- Implementing additional training in subjects with an emphasis on studying Bulgarian language for students from vulnerable groups for whom the Bulgarian language is not their mother tongue and who do not have a good command in Bulgarian;
- Developing information materials in a relevant language to meet the children needs tailored to their age, religion and nationality.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 4, ST 5, ST 6

Responsible institutions: MES, CEICSEM, EPEA

Participating organisations and structures: education institutions, NGO

Source of financing: SB, EP 2021-2027

Area of intervention: Healthcare

Measure 1: Improving the coverage and access of children and pregnant women to medical treatment, health care and services, as well as to medical products, dietary foods for special medical purposes, and medical devices for children with chronic and rare diseases:

- Providing accessible, quality and effective health activities for pregnant women and children (0-18 years);
- Creating conditions for overcoming the differences in the child and maternal health indicators in the different districts of the country;
- Providing medical products, diet foods for special medical purposes, and medical devices for children with chronic and rare diseases.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 8, ST 9, ST 10, ST 11, ST 12

Responsible institutions: MH, NHIF

Participating organisations and structures: municipalities, medical treatment facilities

Source of financing: SB, NPIMCH 2021-2030

Measure 2: Improving children's mental health:

- Providing day psychiatric care and community care for children and adolescents with mental disorders in all country's administrative districts;
- Implementing programmes, including online platforms, for the promotion of mental health of children and adolescents;
- Training and counselling for parents to recognise the symptoms of mental health issues for children and adolescents.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 8, ST 9, ST 11, ST 12

Responsible institutions: MH, MES, medical treatment facilities

Participating organisations and structures: NGO, social service providers, childcare facilities and schools

Source of financing: SB, programmes and projects

Measure 3: Improving the competences of medical and non-medical specialists in the field of maternal and child health:

- Increasing the qualification of medical specialists from out-patient and in-patient medical care for early identification of risks for children and pregnant women;
- Developing training programmes for professionals (general practitioners, paediatricians, teachers, social workers and those employed in children's and school healthcare) on mental health issues of children and adolescents and on recognition and referral at early signs of a mental problem;
- Expanding the coverage and coordinating the activities of health mediators;
- Creating and developing an early intervention system, including improvement of mechanisms, effective interaction and staffing of units for early diagnosis of disabilities and developmental disorders, timely therapy and rehabilitation.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 8, ST 9, ST 10, ST 11, ST 12

Responsible institutions: MH, NCPHA

Participating organisations and structures: MES, universities

Source of financing: SB, HRDP 2021-2027, RDP 2021-2027

Measure 4: Developing health and integrated health and social services in order to prevent health related complications with children with disabilities and with chronic diseases:

- Improving access to quality and effective health and integrated health and social services, with a focus on children with disabilities and with chronic diseases;
- Systematic improvement of the qualifications of specialists providing health and integrated health and social services.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 8, ST 9, ST 10, ST 11, ST 12

Responsible institutions: MH, MLSP, MRDPW

Participating organisations and structures: ASA, municipalities, medical treatment facilities, NCPHA

Source of financing: SB, HRDP 2021-2027, RDP 2021-2027, NRRP

Measure 5: Ensuring health care for refugee and migrant children:

- Carrying out mandatory primary medical examinations and vaccinations (according to the National Immunisation Calendar) of children seeking international protection, accommodated in the TD of the SAR to the MC;
- Providing assistance to ensure health care and access to medical products.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 8, ST 9, ST 10, ST 11, ST 12

Responsible institutions: MH, RHI, NHIF, RHIF, SAR

Participating organisations and structures: NGO

Source of financing: SB

Area of intervention: Healthy Nutrition

Measure 1: Ensuring access to healthy nutrition for all children in need:

- Developing a comprehensive strategic framework for the implementation of an intersectoral policy for healthy nutrition;
- Providing a voucher/card for a children's kitchen to families from vulnerable groups with children from 10 months to 3 years of age;
- Introducing mechanisms to provide cost-free lunch for children from disadvantaged and low-income families, as well as in-kind or financial support in extraordinary circumstances which lead to temporary closure of schools.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 2, ST 3, ST 7, ST 9, ST 11

Responsible institutions: NCPHA, MH, MES, MLSP, MA, SAR, ASA

Participating organisations and structures: municipalities, social service providers

Source of financing: SB, Food and Basic Material Assistance Programme 2021-2027

Measure 2: Raising the awareness of pregnant women, parents and families about healthy nutrition:

- Carrying out information, education and counselling activities with families regarding the importance of healthy nutrition;
- Improving the qualifications of medical and other specialists in matters of healthy nutrition for pregnant women and children.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 9, ST 11

Responsible institutions: NCPHA, MH

Participating organisations and structures: GP, medical treatment facilities, NGO

Source of financing: SB

Area of intervention: Adequate Housing

Measure 1: Improving the housing conditions of vulnerable groups:

- Developing a National Housing Strategy and national/targeted programmes aimed at achieving the specific goals;
- Providing affordable housing, direct assistance to vulnerable persons;
- Programme for renovation of the housing stock;
- Social work with families with early aged children accommodated in municipal housing with the aim to support long-term solutions of their housing needs.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 2, ST 3, ST 7, ST 8, ST 14

Responsible institutions: MRDPW, NAMRB, municipalities

Participating organisations and structures: MLSP, ASA

Source of financing: SB, RDP 2021-2027

Measure 2: Providing affordable housing:

- Providing financial support by means of targeted assistance for housing adaptation and construction of an accessible architectural environment, according to the Persons with Disabilities Act;
- Providing adequate social infrastructure – playgrounds, parks, sports grounds and gaming rounds, etc.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 2, ST 3, ST 7, ST14

Responsible institutions: MRDPW, MLSP, BBP, municipalities

Participating organisations and structures: ASA, APD

Source of financing: SB, RDP 2021-2027, NRRP

Measure 3: Improving the efficiency of the process of unaccompanied foreign children identification placed in the MD's SHTPF and improving the living conditions of the accompanied migrant children during their stay in the SHTPF, ensuring that the placement of children in the SHTPF is a measure of last resort used for very short periods of time and only when other less restrictive measures are not feasible:

- Increasing the professional qualification of police officers for working with migrant and refugee children;
- Improving the material conditions for accommodation of children and families in SHTPF under MD.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 7, ST 8

Responsible institutions: MoI

Participating organisations and structures: international and non-governmental organisations

Source of financing: SB, projects

Measure 4: Ensuring appropriate accommodation conditions for children seeking and granted with international protection:

- Ensuring appropriate material conditions for accommodation and adequate care and social services for unaccompanied children seeking and granted with international protection;
- Conducting multidisciplinary trainings on assessment of the best interest of the child and on case work with children seeking and granted with international protection.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 7, ST 8, ST 14

Responsible institutions: SAR, SACP, ASA

Participating organisations and structures: municipalities

Source of financing: SB

Other measures to overcome social exclusion and combat child poverty

Measure 1: Improving access to social services for children and their families:

- Developing and expanding the network of accessible and appropriate social services for children and families at the levels of municipality, district and the country;
- Increasing the capacity of social service providers, as well as the representatives of the various bodies and institutions involved in the process of referral, management and control of social services;
- Carrying out information campaigns to promote and present the existing social services

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 5, ST 7, ST 8

Responsible institutions: MLSP, MoI, ASA, AQSS, SACP, municipalities

Participating organisations and structures: NGO, social service providers

Source of financing: SB, HRDP 2021-2027, RDP 2021-2027, NRRP

Measure 2: Providing support for young people leaving alternative care (foster care and social and integrated health and social services for residential care):

- Increasing the capacity of social workers and mentors of young people in residential care services;
- Testing innovations to support children and young people leaving alternative care, including by developing working habits, social skills, housing assistance, family planning, etc.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 5, ST 7, ST 8

Responsible institutions: MLSP, ASA, EA, municipalities

Participating organisations and structures: NGO, social service providers

Source of financing: SB, HRDP 2021-2027

Measure 3: Improving the capacity of the child protection system:

- Improving the child protection system work, as well as their inter-institutional cooperation and coordination;
- Developing standards for social work (for quality, efficiency and workload) of employees from “Child Protection” Departments and “Social Assistance” Directorates;
- Improving the quality and expanding the scope of foster care.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 7, ST 8

Responsible institutions: MLSP, MH, SACP, ASA, AQSS

Participating organisations and structures: municipalities, academic institutions, NGO

Source of financing: SB, HRDP 2021-2027

Measure 4: Providing material and financial support for families with children from vulnerable groups:

- Providing material support to new-born children from poor families and families at risk;
- Providing material and additional financial support for prevention of child abandonment and reintegration into a family;
- Ensuring and providing material support to children seeking international protection.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 2, ST 3, ST 7, ST 9, ST 13, ST 14

Responsible institutions: MLSP, ASA, SAR

Participating organisations and structures: municipalities, social service providers, NGO

Source of financing: SB, Food and Basic Material Support Programme 2021-2027, NGO projects

Measure 5: Ensuring accessible information through information and communication systems and technologies:

- Improving digital inclusion for children and promoting equal access and availability of online services and connectivity, especially for children in rural areas and children with disabilities;
- Creating an interactive digital platform and conducting national/regional campaigns for prevention of online bullying and digital harassment against children in the Internet.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 5, ST 7, ST 8

Responsible institutions: MeG, MTC, MLSP, MES, municipalities, national representative organisations of and for people with disabilities

Participating organisations and structures: NGO, ASA

Source of financing: SB, HRDP 2021-2027, NRRP

Measure 6: Ensuring conditions for independence and personal mobility:

- Providing conditions to overcome barriers to the communication of deaf and deaf-blind persons;
- Providing financial support for personal mobility of people with permanent disabilities.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 7, ST 8

Responsible institutions: MLSP, ASA, SPF

Participating organisations and structures: APD, municipalities

Source of financing: SB, NPAHEPM

Measure 7: Creating conditions for sports and promoting healthy physical activities through participation in organised sport events for children from the target groups – children with disabilities, children at risk, disadvantaged children and those from vulnerable groups:

- Implementing programmes and initiatives aimed at promoting the physical activities of children from vulnerable groups;
- Supporting healthy physical activities for students with impaired hearing, vision and physical, and cerebral disabilities.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 13

Responsible institutions: MYS

Participating organisations and structures: RDE, schools, municipalities

Source of financing: SB

Measure 8: Promoting the employment of unemployed parents:

- Promoting the employment of single parents (adoptive parents) of children up to 5 years of age;
- Facilitating access to information for unemployed single parents about their labour rights and opportunities for employment and training.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 2, ST 3, ST 7

Responsible institutions: MLSP, EA

Participating organisations and structures: employers, LO, NGO, municipalities

Source of financing: SB

Measure 9: Prevention of early marriages and births and individual support for teenage mothers/pregnant mothers and their children:

- Developing and implementing community programmes for prevention of teenage marriages and births;
- Developing and implementing appropriate services for sexual and reproductive health, including family planning programmes and provision of free contraceptives.

Relevance of the measure to the specific targets: ST 1, ST 2, ST 3, ST 7, ST 8, ST 9, ST 10, ST 11

Responsible institutions: SACP, municipalities, MH, ASA

Participating organisations and structures: health mediators, NGO

Source of financing: SB, HRDP 2021-2027

List of abbreviations

APD	Agency for People with Disabilities
AQSS	Agency for the Quality of Social Services
ASA	Agency for Social Assistance
BBP	Beautiful Bulgaria Project
CCCABMJ	Central Commission for Combating Anti-social Behaviour of Minors and Juveniles
CEICSEM	Centre for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities
CM	Council of Ministers
CPD	Child Protection Department
EA	Employment Agency
EAg	Executive Agency
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECG	European Child Guarantee
EP	Education Programme
EPEA	Education Programme Executive Agency
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
FAA	Family Allowances Act
GP	General Practitioner
HRDP	Human Resource Development Programme
LO	Labour Office
MA	Ministry of Agriculture
MC	Ministry of Culture
MD	Migration Directorate (of the Ministry of Interior)
MeG	Ministry of e-Governance
MES	Ministry of Education and Science
MH	Ministry of Health
MLSP	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
MoI	Ministry of Interior
MRDPW	Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works
MTC	Ministry of Transport and Communications
MYS	Ministry of Youth and Sports
NAMRB	National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria
NCPHA	National Centre of Public Health and Analysis
NEMC	National Expert Medical Commission
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NHIF	National Health Insurance Fund
NPAHEPM	National Programme for Affordable Housing Environment and Personal Mobility

NPIMCH	National Programme to Improve Maternal and Child Health
NRRP	National Recovery and Resilience Plan
NSI	National Statistical Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OP	Operational Programme
RCSIEP	Regional Centre to Support the Inclusive Education Process
RDP	Regional Development Programme
RDE	Regional Department of Education
RHI	Regional Health Inspectorate
RHIF	Regional Health Insurance Fund
SAD	Social Assistance Directorate
SAR	State Agency for Refugees
SB	State budget
SACP	State Agency for Child Protection
SEN	Special Educational Needs
ST	Specific Targets
SSBH	Social School Boarding House
SPF	Social Protection Fund
SSA	Social Services Act
SHTPF	Special Housing for Temporary Placement of Foreigners
TEMC	Territorial Expert Medical Commission
WHO	World Health Organisation