

Country
FACT SHEET
2020*



BULGARIA

Contributor: Trust for Social Achievement (TSA)

* The information provided in the country fact sheets reflects the situation by end of August 2020.

first years
first priority

**A FAIR START
FOR *every* CHILD
IN EUROPE**

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Bulgaria has made adequate efforts over the past year to deliver on early childhood development policies and to support families with young children. 

Bulgaria has a national law or act guaranteeing access to basic ECD services in Education, Health, Nutrition, and/or Social and Child Protection for all children under 6. 

The Government of Bulgaria (GoB) recognises the critical importance of early childhood development (ECD) through the range of national laws and regulations in place to promote the provision of adequate early childhood interventions. Responsibilities are shared among several ministries and agencies, including: the Ministries of Education, Health, and Labour and Social Policy, as well as the State Agency for Child Protection. The National Council for Child Protection (NCCP) has a consultative mandate to oversee the establishment and implementation of all child development policies. **Essential ECD services are still delivered in a fragmented manner, however. Better mechanisms are needed for effective coordination both at the national and service delivery levels.**

The GoB has **not yet developed a specific, comprehensive, multi-sectoral ECD strategy**. Tailored measures for the life cycle of child development were included in the project for a National Child Strategy 2019-2030. Its adoption is currently frozen, however, due to a political backlash. Currently, there is **no official policy guaranteeing a minimum level of funding for ECD services** to ensure sustainable investment in ECD in Bulgaria. Every year, the Council of Ministers determines the basic standards and financing for public services according to the Annual National Budget Act. A new Social Services Act has been in force since July 2020, and will regulate the planning and implementation of services for families with young children in vulnerable social situations.

According to a survey conducted among member organisations of the National Alliance and National Network for Children (NANNC), the **biggest challenges** in Bulgaria as regards early childhood development are:

- 1. The lack of integrated ECD policies and of a cross-sectoral approach to their planning and implementation;**
- 2. Poorly developed services in support of families and children under the age of three.**

* This country sheet is based on a contribution from national coordinators, including the ratings - between  (worst) and  (best)

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE DURING THE FIRST WAVE

Children are one of the groups most affected by the pandemic, especially those who live in poverty and/or deprived areas. According to the recent data for Bulgaria, the share of children under 16 years old at risk of poverty or social exclusion is 33.8%¹ – one of the highest in the EU. A survey conducted by TSA in June 2020 identifies the most urgent needs for support of families with young children experiencing socio-economic difficulties:

- 1. Access to health and health-related services** – family members with interrupted health insurance status could not afford healthcare services due to their financial instability (individuals engaged in seasonal work, informal work without formal labour contracts, etc.). Equal access to prenatal care by uninsured pregnant women was already problematic before the pandemic and got worse during the lockdown. Medical care for persons with an insecure income is also a challenge, since they are unable to pay fees.
- 2. Ensuring basic daily essentials** – families with young children, including pregnant women, were struggling to ensure regular meals for themselves and family members during the pandemic. The Ministry for Social and Labour Policies allocated 9 million BGN to municipalities to support certain vulnerable groups by providing a hot lunch. However, families with young children were not explicitly mentioned among the target groups eligible for inclusion in this programme.
- 3. Information and support for the prevention of COVID-19 transmission** – many Roma families with young children live in poor housing conditions, lacking basic sanitary facilities, such as a bath, shower and indoor flushing toilet. The EU MIDIS II report for 2018 shows that in Bulgaria 44 % of Roma households are without tap water inside the dwellings². In the context of COVID-19 the lack of tap water could increase the risk of transmission of the virus. The government has not taken any specific action to address this.

Community-based social services were re-structured by the local municipalities³: community-based social services were provided through online consultations, and placements in residential care were stopped, except for those cases assessed as high risk.

The “Alliance for Protection from Gender-Based Violence” offered free counselling services by phone and e-mail for those in need during the state of emergency in the country⁴.

Employment support services: the central government initiated measures in support of employers⁵. However, these measures were not accessible for those individuals working without a formal labour contract, such as the majority of the Roma population, thereby excluding them from this support.

Educational services: the lack of digital equipment and access to the internet was a serious barrier faced by most vulnerable families. The Ministry of Education reached out to support the students most in need by providing a Wi-Fi connection and laptops. Unfortunately, this measure covered only a few locations across the country.

1 Eurostat data, 2019, retrieved from: <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

2 EU MIDIS II, p. 33, available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings_en.pdf

3 Guidelines n°08-00-5443 of 30.04.2020, on taking measures and actions by municipalities in identifying users with coronavirus infection in social services

4 Agency for Social Assistance, available at: <https://asp.government.bg/bg/koronavirus-covid-19/alians-za-zashtita-ot-nasilie-osnovano-na-pola-bezplatni-konsultativni-uslugi-po-telefon-i-po-elektronna-poshta-za-nuzhdaesh-tite-se-ot-pomosht-v-perioda-na-obyavenoto-izvanredno-polozhenie-v-stranata>

5 MLSP website: <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/eng/mtsp-startira-tri-merki-za-zapazvane-na-rabotnite-mesta-i-namalyavane-na-bezrobotitsata>

Access to health and health-related services: many families with young children living in vulnerable situations have faced difficulties in accessing health services, due to the following reasons:

- The mandatory health insurance model limits access to healthcare and medical treatment;
- Regional disproportions in the health workforce limit access to health services for families living in deprived and rural areas;
- Limited work opportunities have decreased family incomes, and medical treatment for their young children was difficult to afford;
- The discriminatory attitudes of health professionals towards families and children from poor communities.

EUROPEAN SEMESTER

The 2020 Country Report in the framework of the European Semester includes many elements supportive of ECD reform in the country, such as the high share of population at risk of poverty and social exclusion, especially among children, persons with disabilities, and Roma children. The report confirms low qualification levels and family background as the main determinants of poverty risk. It also points to limited access to and low public expenditure on healthcare, low participation rates in early childhood education and care, especially in certain regions and among children in vulnerable situations. It highlights the inequality of opportunity among children, high levels of housing deprivation, and the exceedingly severe challenges facing the Roma population.

Even though the Country Report rightly covers most of the worrying trends, TSA highlights some additional elements. Firstly, the lack of a national strategy for ECD and a centralised unit that would oversee the planning of inter-sectoral policies and services for young children. Secondly, the lack of public debate and policy actions to improve the social assistance model, in order to make it more inclusive for families with young children. Thirdly, a lack of targeted action to improve housing conditions for the most excluded Roma families with young children, and ensure access to running water, electricity and playgrounds in Roma neighbourhoods.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve the cross-sectoral approach to planning central policies with a direct impact on child well-being;
- Develop a National Strategy for ECD policies, services and interventions;
- Establish a Coordination Unit in charge of ECD policies at national and local level;
- Improve mechanisms for the participation of civil society organisations in the policy planning and implementation process at national, district, local and community levels;
- Invest in an ECD workforce;
- Invest in the improvement of the housing conditions of the most excluded families with young children, including upgrading the social housing model currently implemented in the country;
- Create a more direct link between labour and social services;
- Create a more direct link between health and social services;
- Improve access to healthcare for persons in vulnerable situations.



This material has been produced with the financial support of the European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) 2014-2020:
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>.

The views expressed by Eurochild do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

**OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS**

With support from Open Society Foundations.

The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

Campaign coordinator: Dr. Agata D'Addato, Senior Project Manager Eurochild (agata.daddato@eurochild.org).

National Coordinators: Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Child Rights Alliance (Ireland), Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France).