

Committee on the Rights of the Child 48th Session

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The quality of care for children is one of the essential criteria of the maturity of any society. Society is therefore bound to create all necessary conditions under which all young people could fully develop their abilities and realize themselves as fully-fledged members of the community.

This philosophy is enshrined in the **Child Protection Act**, adopted by the National Assembly of Bulgaria on 31 May 2000. This philosophy also underlies the State's current child policy: a policy based on the rights of the child, incorporating the norms, standards and principles of universality, indivisibility and non-discrimination - all rights for all children, everywhere.

Along with these principles, the concrete commitments undertaken with the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child determine the key areas of the comprehensive reform in all spheres of child policy that has been implemented in the Republic of Bulgaria in recent years.

The Convention plays a key role as a regulatory framework facilitating the process of legislative reform, the elaboration and implementation of child policies and programmes ensuring the best interest of the child.

Allow me to outline here in more detail an important topical aspect of the reform. Its guiding principle is the understanding that the care for children at risk must focus on the right of the child to grow up in a family environment, which is why the Bulgarian State has identified the **reduction of the number of children in institutions** as one of its foremost priorities. The efforts are aimed at the development of a network of modern social services, providing support to children at risk and their families as an alternative to institutional care.

The development of new services, alternative to institutional care and handled by licensed providers, requires guarantees of the **quality of the service** and respect for the rights of the child.

Thus, a **child care monitoring system** was developed starting from 2003 in support of the deinstitutionalization process. This system comprises three main components:

1. Statutorily defined quality standards (in the Ordinance Establishing Criteria and Standards of Child Welfare Services);
2. Ex-ante control through the introduction of a licensing regime for the providers of child welfare services;
3. Ex-post control over compliance with the standards of child welfare services.

The decentralization process also necessitates a stronger commitment by local government and more active involvement of civil society in the process, building of partnerships with the municipalities and the non-governmental sector for the development of the network of child and family welfare services.

The esteemed members of the Committee are aware that the principal challenge to the system of child protection in Bulgaria has been the **institutionalized child care**, a legacy from the totalitarian past and a model which had no realistic alternative at that time.

The large number of children placed in institutions: 12,609 children in 165 institutions in 2001, was a serious problem facing the Bulgarian State in its efforts to modernize and bring the child care system into conformity with contemporary standards.

Despite the difficulties, the number of children raised in institutions has been steadily decreasing in recent years. Concretely, the number of children in institutions **dwindled by 36.4 per cent** within seven years - from 12,609 in 2001 to 8,019 in 2007.

Between 2003 and the end of 2007, a total of 8,375 children were reintegrated into their biological families or were adopted; 21 children's institutions were closed down; the institutionalization of 8,338 children was prevented; a total of 5,829 children were placed with immediate and extended family members at the end of the year; 135 children were placed with foster families.

Today, the number of **children at risk provided with protection measures in a family environment already outnumbers children in institutions**, but 8,019 children still remain placed in 144 institutions.

Deinstitutionalization of child care is impossible without a sufficiently developed system of child welfare services, but this process requires a very well-considered and careful approach, tailored to the specific needs of each child.

The need to take **urgent action** for the closure of the homes which do not provide adequate high-quality care to children was taken into account by the Bulgarian Government, and a decision on their closure including the provision of financing and resources for this process, has already been made.

In support of this process, after a series of consultations between the government institutions and non-governmental organizations, and with the support of UNICEF, a concerted position regarding the action necessary to accelerate child care reform was jointly elaborated.

The cooperation was ensured through the **National Council for Child Protection**, whose members include Deputy Ministers concerned with this issue, as well as representatives of a broad range of non-governmental organizations. The Council performs advisory and coordinating functions under the Chairperson of the State Agency for Child Protection in the formulation of the priorities of the state policy and in the synchronization of the regulatory framework in the sphere of child protection. This made it possible to hold a broader and more professional discussion of the strategic documents, priorities and programmes, ensuring the commitment of the institutions at a high level and transparency of decision-making in connection with the development and implementation of the state policy in the sphere of child protection.

Furthermore, with a view to optimizing the system of child protection, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria formed an inter-agency working group to review the regulatory framework of social relations in the sphere of childrens' rights. In addition to an analysis of the operation of sectoral child policies in Bulgaria, proposals for legislative amendments were drafted and other measures intended to ensure respect for the rights of the child and the encouragement of responsible parenthood.

We are also actively working for human resource development in the sphere of child protection and for a change in public attitudes.

In support of the monitoring system, the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria plays an important active role in ensuring respect of children's rights, as does the Council for Children and Youth established with the President of the Republic.

The overall policy of child protection in Bulgaria aims at the prevention of violence, of sexual and labour exploitation of children, of children dropping out from school or ending up in the street, ensuring their security and safety on the road, safeguarding them against the possible risks linked to the use of Internet, at the full integration of children with disabilities and children from minority groups etc.

The long-term objectives of the Bulgarian Government in the field of protection of childhood underlie the **National Strategy for Children 2008-2018**, which was elaborated by the Government and adopted by the National Assembly in January 2008. The Strategy is entirely based on the rights of the child and on the concept of partnership and building integrated child policies in conformity with the established international standards.

The National Strategy was elaborated in accordance with the principles and provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Child Protection Act regarding the place of the child in society, the right of the child to live in a family environment, ensuring conditions for the effective exercise of the rights of children, improvement of children's health and reduction of the risk of child poverty. The Strategy covers the broadest range of children from all target groups and in all spheres of public life relevant to child welfare: family environment, health services, education, recreation and leisure, alternative care, living standards and social assistance, elimination of child exploitation and child abuse, special protection measures, children's opinion and right to identity and protection against discrimination.

The Strategy is elaborated entirely in the spirit of the need to regulate the rights of the child as requiring specific action on the part of the responsible institutions and their partners. The idea is to pool and coordinate the efforts of all institutions in the country so as to create conditions for children in Bulgaria to grow up healthy, educated, informed, socially active and responsible in an environment of safety, security and support by the family and community.

The draft of the Strategy for Children was subjected to broad public discussion with the participation of representatives of government institutions, non-governmental organizations, municipalities, media, including children of the Children's Council with the State Agency for Child Protection and from across the country.

In conclusion, I would like to assure you of our commitment to further improve the welfare and quality of life of Bulgarian children and their families, to the creation of optimum conditions for the realization of children's rights in Bulgaria in accordance with the provisions of the Convention.

Thank you. My colleagues and myself will now respond to questions from the esteemed Committee members.