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Economic and Social Council

**Committee on Economic, Social and
Cultural Rights**

**Seventh Periodic Report submitted by Bulgaria under
articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant**

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List of abbreviations

ARA - Asylum and Refugees Act

CPA – Child Protection Act

CPD - Commission for Protection against Discrimination

DM - Migration Directorate

EPA - Employment Promotion Act

ESDCA - Execution of Sentences and Detention in Custody Act

FAA - Family Allowances Act

FRBA - Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act

GDES - Directorate General Execution of Sentences

GDI - Gross National Income

HJC - High Judicial Council

ICT – Information and Communication Technologies

LC - Labour Code

MLSP – Ministry of Labour and Social Services

NCCTHB – National Commission for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings

NCF – National Culture Fund

NHIF - National Health Insurance Fund

NIJ - National Institute of Justice

NEETs - Persons not in employment, education or training

NLAB - National Legal Aid Bureau

NPM - National Preventive Mechanism

NRM - National Mechanism for Referral and Support of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings

NSI - National Statistical Institute

ODA – Official Development Aid

PADA - Protection against Discrimination Act

PWDA - Persons with Disabilities Act

RICPA - Rules of Implementation of the Child Protection Act

SAA – Social Assistance Agency

SACP - State Agency for Child Protection

SAD - Social Assistance Directorate

SAR - State Agency for Refugees under the Council of Ministers

SDG - Sustainable Development Goals

SHTAF - Special Home for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners

SSA - Social Services Act

I. Introduction

1. The Republic of Bulgaria submits its seventh periodic report under Articles 16 and 17 to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereinafter “the Covenant”), which the State ratified on 21 September 1970.
2. The seventh periodic report is prepared in accordance with the relevant reporting guidelines¹. It also provides responses to the concluding observations of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereinafter “the Committee”) on the sixth report of Bulgaria².
3. The reporting period of the seventh report is from March 2019 to November 2024. As requested in paragraph 56 of the concluding observations, the State provided in time written information³ on the implementation of the recommendations contained in paragraphs 36, 45 and 49(c) of the Committee’s concluding observations. The present report focuses only on the new developments in the country in the area of implementing the Covenant and in response to the concluding observations of the Committee.
4. The seventh periodic report should be read in conjunction with the Common Core Document, which Bulgaria updated in 2024.
5. The preparation of the seventh periodic report has been coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The report includes information provided by all relevant State ministries and bodies. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination and the Ombudsperson were involved in the preparatory process. Interested NGOs were also invited to provide comments. The report was published for comments on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

II. General provisions of the Covenant

Information relating to paragraph 5 of the concluding observations

6. In 2019, following amendments to the Ombudsman Act, the Ombudsman was formally accredited by the GANHRI’s Sub-Committee on Accreditation with the highest “A” status, in accordance with the Paris Principles, as a National Human Rights Institution.
7. The mandate of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) is established in the Protection against Discrimination Act (PADA). It is not as broad as the mandate and functions of the Ombudsman. According to Article 40(1), the CPD is an independent specialised state body for prevention of discrimination, protection against discrimination and ensuring equal opportunities. The CPD decides on citizen appeals regarding direct and indirect forms of discrimination based on the constitutional grounds as well as all grounds provided in law or in international agreement to which the Republic of Bulgaria is a party.
8. The Bulgarian government updates on an annual basis both the budget of the Ombudsman and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination in accordance with the adequate needs for effective performance of duties.

Article 1 – Right to self-determination

9. The protection of the right to self-determination in Bulgaria, under Article 1 of the Covenant, has been duly clarified in the previous State reports.
10. Bulgaria shares the well-established approach that the rights of persons belonging to different ethnic, religious or linguistic groups are an integral part of the general complex of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Bulgarian citizens have the opportunity to declare their belonging to a particular ethnic, religious or linguistic group. The protection of the individual rights and freedoms of persons belonging to these minority groups is guaranteed by the Constitution, the national legislation and Bulgaria's

¹ Doc. E/C.12/2008/2 of 24 March 2009 and HRI/GEN/2/Rev.6 of 3 June 2009.

² Doc. E/C.12/BGR/CO/6 of 29 March 2019.

³ Doc. E/C.12/BGR/FCO/6 of 3 November 2021.

international legal obligations. The principle of non-discrimination and equality of all citizens before the law is strictly respected.

Article 2 – Progressive realization of rights

11. The protection and promotion of the rights enunciated in the Covenant in Bulgaria has been duly clarified in the previous State reports.

Climate changes

12. In October 2021, the Council of Ministers adopted a Long-term Mitigation Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Climate Change until 2050. The Strategic document sets a framework for climate change adaptation actions and priority directions for all branches of the economy. The sectors included are agriculture, biodiversity and ecosystems, energy, forests, health, transport, tourism, urban environment and water.

13. Bulgaria actively participates in the common efforts to mitigate climate change and adapt to the changes that have already occurred. Since 2014, the Climate Change Limitation Act has been in effect. Bulgaria successfully participates in the European greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme with 127 installations in the country. Together with the other EU Member States, Bulgaria strives to fulfil a common goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030 with the adoption of the 2030 Climate and Energy Policy Framework.

14. In the period 27 July - 2 August 2024, Bulgaria hosted the 61st session of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)⁴, which brought together delegates of 195-member governments and endorsed two reports - a Special Report on Climate Change and Cities and a Report on Short-Term Climate Forcers.

Official development aid

15. According to the commitment made upon its accession to the European Union, Bulgaria, strives to reach levels of 0.33% of the Gross National Income (GNI) of the allocated official development aid (ODA) funds by 2030. The EU's common position on development financing was also confirmed in the Council Conclusions of 26 May 2015, which reaffirmed the commitment of the EU as a whole to achieve the 0.7% ODA/GNI target by the end of the Development Agenda time horizon after 2015, with new member states countries aiming to achieve 0.33% ODA/GNI.

16. Despite the consequences of the global economic crisis in the period 2008-2009 and the tendency among some donor countries to reduce the volume of official development aid provided, in the period 2016-2019, Bulgaria maintained a constant level of the provided funds for development aid in amount of 0.11% of GNI. During this period, the tendency to increase the share of bilateral aid also strengthened.

17. Currently, only 4.48% of Bulgaria's ODA is allocated to finance bilateral projects, including through the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The planning and allocation of development aid and humanitarian aid is based on a reasoned rationale in accordance with internationally accepted standards of good governance and effectiveness as enshrined in the 2005 Paris Declaration, the 2011 Busan Declaration, the Action Plan by Addis Ababa since 2015 for development financing and related international arrangements. The Medium-Term Programme for the period 2020 - 2024 further developed and enriched the geographical and sectoral priorities of the Bulgarian ODA, as set out in the previous strategic documents on the topic, and expands the circle of participants.

Information relating to paragraph 7 of the concluding observations

18. Bulgaria has a solid track record of sustainable fiscal policy. The fiscal policy objectives are directed towards ensuring sustainable public finances, which should stimulate economic growth and provide enough resources for development of social services and public investments. The Ministry of Finance provides equal opportunities

⁴ See here: <https://www.ipcc.ch/2024/07/24/ipcc-meets-in-bulgaria-for-ipcc-61/>

for access to financing under national programmes and programmes co-financed by the EU budget.

19. Progressive taxation of income existed in Bulgaria until the end of 2007, when a proportional taxation of income (the so-called "flat tax") with a single flat rate of 10% was introduced, effective January 1, 2008. The State policy in the area of direct taxation, applied for many years now, is based on low corporate and personal income tax rates, a broad tax base and a small number of tax incentives as main incentives for economic growth, investment and employment.

20. Regarding the possible return to a system of progressive income taxation in Bulgaria, it is important to note that the proportional tax system with a low tax rate is an appropriate measure to combat shadow economy.

21. In 2019, a new Social Services Act⁵ was adopted by the Parliament. It introduces a new philosophy and changes the legal framework for planning, providing, financing and monitoring social services. Its main aim is to improve access to social services and enhance efficiency, by mapping social services so as to regulate the need for such assistance on the ground. The Act establishes a new Agency for the Quality of Social Services at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, which has operated since 2020.

22. A new Ordinance for Financing Social Services was adopted in April 2021. The Ordinance regulates the criteria for determining the social and integrated health and social services at the municipal and regional level and the maximum number of users of these services, for which full or partial funding is provided from the state budget by including them in the National Map of Social Services.

23. In April 2024, the Council of Ministers adopted the National Map of Social Services. It introduces national level of planning of social services, financed from the state budget. All social services, that are financed in whole or in part from the state budget and are included in the Map, correspond to the priorities of the state policy in the field of social services.

24. With the adoption of the abovementioned documents, the State confirmed its commitment to create a complete network of social services throughout the country in the long term to ensure equal access to them for all people who need support.

Information relating to paragraph 9 of the concluding observations

25. The Public Finance Act (2013) was adopted to provide the overarching framework within which the State budget would be formulated. In the last decade, the Act has succeeded in establishing a medium-term budgetary framework with a strong emphasis on promoting fiscal discipline.

26. Bulgaria has absorbed funds under the European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE), REACT-EU, Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) due to COVID-19.

27. During the 2019-2023 period, social and health insurance payments under the consolidated fiscal programme increased from BGN 17,249.1 million in 2019 to BGN 29,947.3 million in 2023. According to estimates for the 2024, the expenses under the consolidated fiscal programme will reach BGN 35,141.3 million. This includes payments for pensions, current transfers, allowances and benefits for households and health insurance payments. The largest increase is in pensions, with the amount for pensions increasing from BGN 9,900.8 million in 2019 to BGN 19,208.4 million in 2023, and estimates for 2024 are payments to reach BGN 21,709.2 million. In the case of current transfers, benefits and assistance for households (including Health insurance payments), the increase is from BGN 7,348.4 million to BGN 10,738.9 million for the period, and the forecast for 2024 is for BGN 13,432.41 million. Health insurance payments also increased, from BGN 4,208.9 million in 2019 to BGN 6,621.7 million in 2023, and the forecast for 2024 is for BGN 7,869.7 million.

⁵ Full text of the Social Services is available Act in English at: <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/uploads/35/sv/zakon-za-socialnite-uslugi-en.pdf>

28. According to the Public Finance Act, first-level spending units under the state budget shall also apply a programme budget format. The Council of Ministers shall submit to the National Assembly the approved draft state budget act, along with the updated Medium-Term Budget Forecast, which incorporates the reasons thereto, and the programme formats of budgets of the first-level spending units under the state budget. "Programme budget format" means a budgetary document which presents the medium-term objectives of a budgetary organisation that require the relevant financing, expenditure under budget programmes that, once implemented, will lead to the achievement of objectives, as well as performance indicators that include information necessary to measure the results achieved and the implementation of the budget programmes.

29. According to the Statutory Instruments Act, the author of a draft statutory makes an impact assessment of the statutory instrument which can be *ex-ante* and *ex-post* impact assessment and indicates the degree of achievement of the objectives of the statutory instrument. The *ex-ante* impact assessments reflect the extent of impact on different target groups from the application of the instrument.

30. On 30 May 2024, the Open Budget Survey of the International Budget Partnership published its results. Bulgaria increased its score for budgetary transparency in the survey to 79 points, thus keeping its position in the second group of countries in the index with a score between 60 and 80 points (out of 100 in total), which are considered to provide "significant information" on the budget.

Information relating to paragraph 11 of the concluding observations

Legal base

31. On 19 March 2021, the Council of Ministers adopted the National Strategy for the Prevention and Counteraction of Corruption (2021 - 2027)⁶. The Strategy reaffirms the principles laid down in the previous strategy for the period 2015-2020. It envisages elaboration on the activities in implementation of some of the previous priorities, as well as includes new priorities and measures conditioned by the need to achieve specific results. The strategy includes seven priorities, namely:

- strengthening the capacity and increasing transparency in the work of anti-corruption bodies and units;
- combating corruption crimes;
- strengthening the capacity and improving the work of the bodies charged with control and sanction powers in the administration;
- increasing transparency and accountability of local government;
- freeing citizens from "petty" corruption;
- creating an environment for public intolerance to corruption;
- timely response to the need to update the anti-corruption measures laid down in the national strategy for the prevention and counteraction of corruption, including in response to recommendations made by international institutions.

A Roadmap has been approved for the Strategy, which foresees the measures for each priority, implementation actions, indicators and deadline for implementation, expected results, funding and responsible institutions.

32. On 21 September 2023, the National Assembly adopted the Anti-Corruption Act, aiming at improving the institutional system for fighting and preventing corruption. It established a new Commission for Counteracting Corruption, which has three members, elected for a six-year term by the Members of the Parliament on the basis of a two-thirds majority. The Commission for Counteracting Corruption now has a special directorate for Counter-Corruption mandated with detecting and investigating holders of public office suspected of involvement in corruption. The existing body for combating corruption was renamed to Commission for Confiscation of Illegally Acquired Property. Currently, the

⁶ Both the National Strategy for the Prevention and Counteraction of Corruption (2021-2027) and the Roadmap for its implementation could be found in English here: <https://www.strategy.bg/strategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=1353>

available resources provide the necessary conditions for the implementation of the legal powers of both commissions.

33. In 2018, the National Council on Anticorruption Policies, chaired by the Prime Minister, adopted Guidelines on elaboration of anticorruption plans of the state bodies. Every year the ministries and agencies prepare plans with measures to counteract corruption which have deadlines for implementation and responsible structures. The information is then submitted to the Commission for Counteracting Corruption, which prepares an analysis. All information is public and accessible.

34. By an Order of the Prime Minister № P-15/23.01.2024, an Inter-institutional working group was established to develop a draft act amending and supplementing the Administration Act. The draft texts should guarantee the independence of inspectorates from direct or indirect interference in their work by members of political cabinets and Secretary General. The draft Administration Act has not been finalized and work is ongoing.

35. To strengthen the capacity of the Chief Inspectorate in the Council of Ministers, following a written order of the Prime Minister from 23 July 2024 the procedure for the amendment of the Structural Regulations of the Council of Ministers and its Administration has been launched. The amendment foresees the staff of the Chief Inspectorate to be increased from 12 to 16 employees.

36. The legislation on anticorruption is an element of conditions for the country to be granted under the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, whose funds must be used to transform and modernise Bulgaria's economy. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan foresees the implementation of measures grouped into four reforms aimed at promoting the principles of the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice (Sustainable Development Goal 16.3), as well as the development of efficient, accountable and transparent institutions (Sustainable Development Goal 16.6). The envisaged reforms relate to ensuring accessible, efficient and predictable justice, combating corruption, expanding the use of alternative dispute resolution methods and introducing mandatory mediation in certain types of cases, as well as strengthening the bankruptcy procedure.

37. On 27 January 2023, the National Assembly adopted the Protection of Persons Reporting or Publicly Disclosing Information on Violations Act. The new Act regulates the conditions, order and measures for the protection of persons from the public and private sector who file reports or publicly disclose information about violations of the law that endanger or damage the public interest. Protection will be provided to any person who discloses information about violations that became known to him in a work context.

38. The Act on Amendments and Supplements to the Judiciary Act was promulgated in the State Gazette, № 84, on 6 October 2023. The aim of the changes is to strengthen the role and capacity of the Inspectorate at the High Judicial Council (HJC) for the prevention and counteraction of corruption in the judiciary. On 30 October 2023, the plenary session of the HJC approved the Code of Ethical Behaviour of Bulgarian Judges and the Code of Ethical Behaviour of Bulgarian Prosecutors and Investigators. The codes are published on the website of the HJC⁷.

39. In 2023, legislative amendments were made to the Criminal Procedure Code. To ensure control over the actions of the prosecutor in the investigation of crimes committed by the Prosecutor General, the figure of the supervising prosecutor was introduced to exercise control over the actions of the prosecutor under an investigation. By appointing a supervising prosecutor who is outside the structure of the Prosecutor's Office, full hierarchical and practical independence is ensured for the investigation against the Prosecutor General. The transitional and final provisions of the law also included changes in the Criminal Procedure Code, which also provide measures to limit the *de facto* power of the Prosecutor General, institutionally regulate the investigation against the Prosecutor General or his deputy, as well as to increase the accountability of the Prosecutor General regarding the prosecution of corruption crimes, limiting prosecutorial oversight of legality, overcoming criticized practices within the prosecutor's office.

⁷ See <https://vss.justice.bg/page/view/5247>

Specialised trainings

40. The Institute of Public administration of Bulgaria (IPA) provides specialized training courses for Bulgarian civil servants, including courses developed in accordance with the national legislation and the Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Corruption. Since 2019, a total of 1,040 civil sector professionals have enrolled and successfully graduated from on-demand trainings that strengthen their capacity in recognizing and combating fraud and corruption.

41. Every Bulgarian civil servant who takes on a managerial position for the first time, must additionally partake in a compulsory training on the topic of "Prevention of corruption". Under the training, in the period 2020-2024, 1258 managers have successfully graduated. In the same period, 7,460 newly appointed civil servants have undergone a mandatory training on the topic of „Code of Conduct for Employees - Functions and Main Emphasis" organized by the Institute of Public administration of Bulgaria.

42. In full-time and part-time undergraduate police courses, there are trainings in the disciplines "Combating corruption", "Combating organized crime" and "Combating economic crime" offered to both full-time and part-time police undergraduates.

43. In the framework of the ongoing qualification of magistrates, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) conducts a series of trainings aimed at strengthening the capacity of judges, prosecutors and investigating magistrates to effectively prosecute corruption and organised crime. Issues related to preventing and countering corruption and strengthening the integrity of magistrates are addressed in a number of training modules of the mandatory initial training programme for candidates for junior judges, junior prosecutors and junior investigators.

Information relating to paragraph 13 of the concluding observations

Elaboration of the framework documents

44. On 5 May 2022, the Council of Ministers adopted the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma (2021-2030) and the National Action Plan for its implementation for the period 2022-2023. The Strategy establishes three horizontal goals - equality, inclusion and participation within the six spheres of action - education, health, housing, employment, rule of law and non-discrimination and culture. The fight against discrimination is a horizontal priority in all four spheres. The Strategy contains measures for monitoring, evaluation and control of the implementation, including at regional and local level.

45. In March 2024, the Council of Ministers adopted the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy for the period 2024-2027. The National Action Plans include targeted activities, measures, and indicators with assigned responsible institutions, clear timelines, and funding sources. A monitoring mechanism overlooks their implementation. Financial support for the implementation of activities set out in the National Action Plans is carried out through financing and co-financing of thematic projects under programmes of the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank, the Council of Europe and others.

46. The General Directorate National Police of the Ministry of Interior implements a project "Improving coordination and dialogue between the police and the Roma community" which is aimed at strengthening coordination and dialogue between the police and the Roma community for the prevention of radicalization, violent extremism and hate speech. By December 2023, under the project were trained 40 police trainers and 240 frontline police officers to work in multi-ethnic environment.

Awareness raising

47. Each year the Ombudsman organizes at least one joint event with Roma organizations with a focus on specific problems of the vulnerable groups. In 2022, the Ombudsman was key partner of the discussion forum "Policies for equality, inclusion and participation of the Roma: an investment in the better future of Bulgaria", organized by the Amalipe Centre for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance.

48. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination organises a national campaign to increase public awareness regarding protection against discrimination. The campaign covers 480 broadcasts on central and regional radio stations throughout the country. Regional representatives of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination also hold informational meetings all year round with directors of schools, kindergartens and social homes, representatives of community centres, children's pedagogical rooms, regional education departments and NGOs.

49. In the period 2019 – 2024, there were 2940 complaints and signals for discriminations submitted to the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, of which the number of initiated cases was 2708. The number of reported cases of harassment, including sexual harassment, received between 2019 and 2024 is 168. The statistics are maintained by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. In 2024, awareness campaigns are conducted in different regions of the country to inform the public about the rights of persons belonging to vulnerable groups and their protection from discrimination.

Access to legal aid

50. The National Legal Aid Bureau (NLAB) at the Ministry of Justice continues to play a crucial role in providing legal support to vulnerable groups, including Roma women, through mobile aid units. In 2022, the Legal Aid Act was amended in order to extend the categories, entitled to free legal aid and the grounds for its admission. According to the amendments persons to whom legal aid is already admitted are exempt from court fees.

51. To facilitate the access of Bulgarian citizens to legal aid, including those of the Roma, the NLAB has opened a National Telephone for Primary Legal Aid. It is a hotline where every citizen can receive free of charge oral legal advice or consultation from experienced lawyers. 23 Regional Centres at the Bar Councils in the country have also been established to provide legal advice and consultations to persons from vulnerable social groups.

52. The number of decisions issued by the Chairperson of the NLAB for the provision of legal aid for the period March 2019 to June 2024 was 12,948, including regarding domestic violence, unaccompanied minors and underage foreigners, maintenance obligations arising from a family relationship, parentage, marriage or affinity, under Council Directive 2003/8 EC, after consultation to persons in regional consultation centres.

53. For the period from March 2019 to June 2024, 22,401 consultations were provided by lawyers through the National Legal Helpline. Broken down by year, the number are 4,630 (in 2022), 4,467 (in 2023) and 5,061 (in 2024). For the same period, 2,434 consultations were provided by lawyers through the Regional Consulting Centres.

Accountability

54. The Bulgarian legislation, namely the Criminal Code, provide an adequate legal framework for the timely identification, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of criminal acts, including acts of discrimination and violence. In July 2023, the Bulgarian National Assembly adopted amendments and supplements to the Criminal Code. The changes provide for the introduction of racist and xenophobic motives as constituent elements in other criminal provisions. They also envisage heavier punishment when an act is committed "based on racist or xenophobic motives".

55. The Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria acts on every criminal report for an act of discrimination and violence, which constitutes a crime under the Criminal Code. The activity of the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria does not allow collection of information for the citizens concerning their racial or ethnic origin, for political and religious beliefs, including for a membership in political parties and organisations, as well as about their health. The submission of statistical information for the activity of the Prosecutor's Office to state bodies, organisation and the public in the cases provided for in the law takes place in accordance with the procedure of the Guideline on the Organisation of the Information Activity in the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria.

56. Until 31 December 2021, the registration of the criminal offences having a discrimination motive, including hate crime, in the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic

of Bulgaria was carried out in accordance with the general procedure. No statistical information was collected for the different features in the constituent elements of the criminal offence. The abovementioned Guideline on the Organisation of the Information Activity was amended and entered into force on 1 January 2022. Data on criminal offences containing a discrimination element, including hate crimes is collected and processed for the files and cases initiated for criminal offences containing a discrimination element, including hate crimes. Among the discrimination elements are features related to xenophobic motives, race, skin colour, religion/creed, origin (including social), nationality, and ethnic belonging.

57. Statistical data from the official statistics of the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria for the criminal proceedings investigated for criminal offences containing a discriminatory element, including hate crimes, is provided in Annex I and Annex II.

Article 3 - Equal opportunities for women and men

58. Bulgaria continually encourages the meaningful participation of women and girls in all aspects of political and public life. The advancement of women's rights is considered to be a crucial element of the protection and promotion of human rights. The State has committed on two separate occasions to further enhance the full realisation of human rights of women and girls in the national voluntary pledges as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, respectively for the periods 2019-20218 and 2024-20269.

59. In 2024, awareness raising campaigns were conducted to inform the public about the rights of persons belonging to vulnerable groups and their protection from discrimination. In the first half of 2024 roundtable discussions on this topic were held in the cities of Varna, Burgas and Ruse.

60. The Bulgarian government adopted the National Strategy for Promotion of Equality between Women and Men 2021-2030 in the end of 2020. The Strategy is implemented through National Action Plans for Promotion of equality between women and men which follow the principles, goals and priorities of the strategy. The goal is to achieve parity through unified, consistent and sustainable state policy. The strategy is built around five priority areas related to:

- Equality between women and men in the labour market and equal degree of economic independence;
- Reducing the gender pay gap and income;
- Promoting the equality between women and men in decision-making processes;
- Combating gender-based violence and protecting and supporting victims;
- Overcoming the gender stereotypes in various spheres of public life and sexism.

Information relating paragraph 16 of the concluding observations

61. Bulgaria has developed legislation to provide legal guarantees for equal opportunities for women and men in the care of their families. All paid and unpaid maternity, adoption, parental and temporary incapacity for work leave for caring for and accompanying a sick family member shall be counted as non-contributory service and shall be considered in determining entitlement to benefits and pensions.

62. According to the Labour Code, the mother is entitled to paid maternity leave of 410 days, of which 45 days must be taken before the birth of the child, as well as paid parental leave until the child is 2 years old. With the mother's consent, after the child reaches the age of 6 months, these leaves may be taken in her place by the father or by one of the mother's parents or the father's parents when they are employed. Special leave for a period of 365 days from the day the child is given up for adoption, but not later than the age of 5 years, is also regulated for the adoptive parents.

63. Where a child is adopted by spouses, the leave may, with the consent of the adoptive mother, be taken in her place by the adoptive parent or by one of the adoptive parents

⁸ Doc. A/73/316 of 7 August 2018.

⁹ Doc. A/78/78 of 25 April 2023.

after the expiry of 6 months from the day on which the child is given up for adoption. For fathers, who are adoptive parents, a leave of 15 days is also provided for the birth/adoption of a child.

64. In addition, each parent is entitled to take 6 months of unpaid leave to care for a child until the age of 8, which may be taken after maternity leave and parental leave until the age of 2. Each of the parents may take up to 5 months of the other parent's leave with his/her consent.

Information relating to paragraph 18 of the concluding observations

65. Bulgaria is among the European countries with traditions in policies for equal rights and opportunities for men and women. Women in Bulgaria have equal opportunities with men for education and professional development. This reflects in the reached relatively high levels of education, economic activity and employment of women.

Participation in labour market

66. A wide variety of measures are implemented to promote the full participation of women and men in the labour market. They are aimed at activation, improvement of qualifications, counselling, motivation, mentoring, regulation of home work and remote work and skills development through vocational training.

67. Support for the participation of women and men in the labour market is focused in the following areas:

- Provision of a wide range of services tailored to the personal profile - motivation for active behaviour on the labour market, participation in job search workshops and job fairs, mediation in information and recruitment of jobs advertised in the real economy, inclusion in programmes and measures for training and subsidized employment, support from psychologists and case managers, etc.;
- Development of skills through inclusion in training for acquisition/improvement of professional qualification and acquisition of key competences, including acquisition of digital skills;
- Financing of labour costs of employers who provide employment to unemployed persons from disadvantaged groups on the labour market.

68. Women were active participants in the following programmes and incentive measures implemented during March 2019. - June 2024 with a financial resource from the state budget:

- "Career Start" programme which provides opportunities for young people with completed higher education up to the age of 29 to gain professional experience in their specialty by working in the public administration;
- National Retirement Assistance Programme which provides support for the transition from unemployment to work and retirement for unemployed persons over 60 who are actively looking for work and are registered at the labor offices;
- Programme for training and employment of long-term unemployed persons;
- Training and employment projects initiated and implemented by the social partners, which support the inclusion in the labor market of persons from vulnerable groups through the acquisition of professional qualifications and key competences sought in the labor market;
- Measures under the Employment Promotion Act that support finding a first job, territorial mobility of unemployed persons, provide opportunities for internships and apprenticeships, encourage entrepreneurship, etc.

69. Specific measures are introduced in order to ensure work/life balance and to provide employment to unemployed persons. The latter includes offering childcare opportunities, encouraging employers to hire unemployed persons, introducing flexible working schemes, sharing family responsibilities. During the period 2019-2023, a specific measure financed with funds from the state budget was implemented, which encouraged employers to hire single parents and mothers with children up to 5 years of age.

70. Another preferred option for career development among women is starting their own business. Bulgaria has a favourable eco-system, institutional and demographic environment for women entrepreneurs. Evidence for this is the fact that in the last twenty-five years there has been a steady increase of the number of women with their own business. The share of women with their own business in 2010 was 27%, and in 2022 it was 29%, which proves a permanent upward trend.

71. Unemployed women can participate in all the programmes and incentive measures that the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy implements. In 2024, under the Employment Promotion Act, measures were taken to encourage employers to hire disadvantaged persons, including parents of children up to 4 years of age. Employers are provided with funds for wages, social and health insurance for employees, funds for professional training and for a responsible person (mentor). Statistical data is provided in Annex III.

Equal remuneration

72. To guarantee equal opportunities and access to the labour market for men and women, the legal framework in Bulgaria does not distinguish between workers on the basis of sex, except in specific cases of protection of women during pregnancy, childbirth and caring for young children. Employers should apply the same evaluation criteria to all staff, remuneration agreements should be understandable and transparent, and the applied criteria should be non-discriminatory and consider the nature and type of work.

73. The Protection against Discrimination Act (PADA) stipulates that the obligation of equal remuneration for equal or equivalent work covers all remuneration paid directly or indirectly, in cash or in kind, irrespective of the duration of the employment contract and the length of working time. Article 243(1) of the Labour Code expressly provides that women and men are entitled to equal pay for equal or equivalent work.

Women representation in various sectors

74. Over the past 20 years, there has been an almost continuous increase in the female economic activity rate. In 2003, it was 55.3%, then in 2022 it was 69.7%. In terms of employment, it is important to note that a significant percentage of leading and managerial positions are held by women.

75. Bulgarian women entrepreneurs are accepted as equal to men in business. In our country, there is no evidence related to the low assessment of the entrepreneurial spirit and skills of women. Business environment set requirements on entrepreneurs, regardless their sex. In 2022, 38% of all executive positions were held by women.

76. The comparative analysis for all economic activities shows that in almost all sectors 1/3 of the companies are managed by women. With higher value stand out several economic activities: trade (33.78%), hospitality and catering (32.41%), professional activities and scientific research (41.19%), human health care and social work (52.15%) and other activities (56, 15%). The share of female entrepreneurs in the last ten years ranges between 27% and 32%.

77. As of 2022, Bulgaria had the largest share of women among employed information and communication technologies (ICT) specialists in Europe. Bulgarian women held almost 29% of positions in ICT, representing the highest male-to-female ratio in Europe. Bulgaria has traditions in education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), with one of the highest relative presence of women among graduates - 37%.

III. Specific rights contained in the Covenant

Article 6 – Right to work

78. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Bulgaria had to adopt certain emergency measures to limit the spread of the disease. All measures were undertaken with respect to the principles of rule of law, democracy and human rights with the understanding that the measures were limited to only what is strictly necessary, proportionate and temporary in nature. Equality and access to essential social, economic and cultural rights was guaranteed to all Bulgarian citizens without discrimination.

Information relating to paragraph 20 of the concluding observations

79. One of the key priorities of the employment policy in Bulgaria is the provision of conditions and opportunities for increasing employment and reducing inactivity and unemployment among young people.

80. In January 2023, the National Assembly adopted the National Strategy on Youth 2021-2030. The document defines the specific goals and priorities in the area for the next 10 years, as well as the measures to achieve them. It aims to develop capable, engaged and empowered young people, ready to develop their full potential and consciously contribute to the development of Bulgaria.

81. The Ministry of Youth and Sports is responsible for the implementation, coordination and monitoring of the National Youth Strategy. The Council of Ministers annually adopts annual action plan for the implementation of the national youth strategy.

82. The National Youth Programme (2021-2025) is one of the tools used by the Ministry of Youth and Sports to directly implement the national youth policy in the country. The programme follows the objectives of the National Youth Strategy (2021-2030) as an implementing tool of youth policy in the country. The annual budget of the programme is around € 200,000.

83. In 2022, the Employment Promotion Act was amended to introduce regulations for exchange of data between institutions regarding the population of the country. According to Article 7a, the Employment Agency exchanges information on persons aged between 16 and 65 with the institutions that process information according to their competence. A database of labour resources is in process of elaboration.

84. A number of targeted measures to activate inactive and unemployed young have been undertaken. There has been a significant decline - from 16.7% in 2019 to 13.8% in 2023 among persons aged 15-29 years, who were not engaged either in education, employment or training. Another tool for activating young people are the job fairs organized by the Employment Agency. In the period March 2019-June 2024, a total of 3,508 young people started work after participating in the initiative.

85. In April 2023, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the National Association of the Municipalities in Bulgaria, the representative organizations of employers and employees, as well as youth organizations signed a National Framework Agreement for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee. The aim is to provide young people with all opportunities for labour integration or inclusion in education and training

86. Detailed information on the programmes aimed at young people is presented in Annex III.

Increasing the number of mediators

87. Funds are allocated annually from the state budget within the national employment action plans to increase the number of Roma labour mediators appointed in labour offices under the National Programme "Activation of Inactive Persons". Each year, funds are also allocated from the state budget to increase the wages of Roma mediators. In 2024, their remuneration has increased by 20% compared to the previous year. In municipalities, youth mediators are engaged to activate young people, including those who self-identified as Roma, also financed by the National Programme. To economically inactive individuals, Roma mediators are assisted by 141 specialists hired under Component 1 "Activation" of the "Starting a Job" project under the EU Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2021-2027.

88. The National programme "Activation of inactive persons" aims to activate and include inactive persons in the labour market, including discouraged persons, long-term unemployed persons on social assistance and young people up to 29 years old (inclusive) who do not work or study, through individual and group application of tools and services to attract and motivate them to register in the Labour Office Directorates of the Employment Agency and promote their inclusion in training, re-entering the education system and/or employment.

Table 1. Results of implementation of the National programme “Activation of inactive persons”

		March- Decem- ber 2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Janua- ry- June 2024
Roma labour mediators	Number	78	78	73	78	88	83
Youth mediators*	Number	93	92	89	83	84	80
Activated persons of Roma origin	Number	5 705	5 415	5 670	7 183	9 561	4 424
Meetings of Roma labour mediators with employers	Number	-	-	-	1 599	1 948	839

*Youth mediators are not self-identified representatives of the Roma community

Source: Employment Agency

Information relating to paragraph 22 of the concluding observations

89. The Agency for Persons with Disabilities administers publicly funded measures that promote the employment of persons with disabilities and are intended to support both quota enforcement and other forms for the exercise of labour by the representatives of the target group.

90. Measures under the Employment Promotion Act (EPA) are financed with funds from the state budget to encourage employers to open jobs for hiring unemployed persons with permanent disabilities. The subsidy granted to finance the measure under Art. 51, para. 2 of the EPA is for not less than 3 and not more than 12 months, providing amounts of up to 75% of eligible costs for the subsidy period. Under Article 52 of the EPA employers are encouraged to open part and full-time working places for persons with permanent disabilities.

91. During the reporting period, a "Standardized package of mediation services" was developed and implemented especially for unemployed persons with permanent disabilities. They are provided with information, counselling, psychological support, motivation for active behaviour in the labour market, referral to vacancies on the primary labour market and to appropriate programmes and measures for employment and training and support through specialized services such as "Consultation and mentoring after starting work" and "Family Labour Consultant".

92. Through the funds of the Operational Programme "Human Resources" 2014-2020, projects were implemented specifically for people with disabilities, the aim of which was to integrate inactive and unemployed persons with permanent disabilities, registered in the Labour office directorates, in employment with an employer in the real sector or local self-government institutions.

93. The National Programme for Training and Employment of People with Permanent Disabilities is aimed at increasing the employability of unemployed persons with permanent disabilities registered at the labour offices or persons of working age who have successfully completed a course of treatment for addiction to narcotic substances, such as a prerequisite for overcoming their social isolation and for their full integration into society. Priority is given to persons with and over 71% reduced working capacity; military disabled; persons with sensory disabilities; persons with mental disabilities.

94. In order to ensure sustainable employment of people with permanent disabilities in a regular work environment, through provisions of the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWDA), a quota has been introduced, according to which employers have a commitment to appoint employees with permanent disabilities, as follows: employers with 50 to 99 employees - 1 person with permanent disabilities; employers with 100 and over 100 employees – 2% of their average number of staff. To fulfil the quota, there could be introduced alternative measures to encourage other forms of employment, such as specialized enterprises and cooperatives for people with disabilities and social enterprises.

95. Employers are exempt from quota obligations when they apply alternative measures listed in the Regulations for the Implementation of the Persons with Disabilities Act. The employer could instead purchase from specialized enterprises or cooperatives of disabled people, social enterprises or directly from disabled people carrying out independent economic activity, the goods produced or traded by them, or the services provided by them. The monthly amount of the funds for the purchase of the goods or for the use of the services should not be less than twice the monthly amount of the minimum wage established for the calendar year, for each vacant job for a person with a permanent disability.

96. Detailed information on the programmes aimed at persons with disabilities is presented in Annex III.

Article 7 – Right to just and favourable conditions of work

97. National legislation on occupational safety and health is fully aligned with EU law and practice and is in line with the main conventions of the International Labour Organisation in this area. The regulatory framework includes the Labour Code, the Social Insurance Code, the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Labour Inspection Act and their implementing regulations.

98. Between 2020 and 2024, several amendments to the Labour Code were made to improve conditions of work in the country, namely:

- in 2020, new regulations were introduced regarding overtime work and work in flexible hours. The amendments transpose into the Bulgarian legislation the European Union Directive 2003/88/EC concerning certain aspects of the organisation of working time;
- in 2022, amendments aimed to promote the security and predictability of the employment relationship, and to improve the possibilities for reconciling work and family obligations were introduced. The amendments transposed into the Bulgarian legislation the EU Directive 2019/1152 on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union and EU Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU;
- in 2023, the amendments provided that the minimum wage for the country for the next calendar year is determined by September 1 of the current year in the amount of 50% of the average gross wage for a period of 12 months, which includes the last two quarters of the previous year and the first two quarters of the current year;
- in 2024, the amendments ensured the provision of health and safety working conditions for off-site workers and regulate the employer's obligations when using information systems for assigning and reporting work, including with regard to algorithmic management systems, as well as the right to opt-out for teleworkers.

99. In Bulgaria the minimum wage is statutory and determined at a national level for the entire country and for all workers, regardless of the industry in which they are employed. By the first quarter of 2024, the workers employed at the minimum wage are about 421,949 which is around 18.2% of all workers. For 2024, the minimum wage for the country is set at BGN 933 which marks an increase of nearly 67% compared to 2019.

Information relating to paragraph 24 of the concluding observations

100. The Executive Agency General Labour Inspectorate implemented a project “Cooperation for Decent Work” under the Norwegian Financial Mechanism with a budget

€ 800,000 in the period 2019-2022. One element of the project was “Know Your Rights” campaign with the participation of labour inspectorates in Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia, Lithuania and Norway. The campaign aimed to inform workers from the four countries working in Norway about their labour rights in order to promote their intolerance of the shadow economy and labour exploitation and to achieve sustainability in the labour market.

101. In January 2024, the Executive Agency General Labour Inspectorate joined a campaign launched by the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee: "Zero accidents at work". All EU Member States participated in the campaign. Its main goal was better occupational accident prevention among employers and workers through raising their awareness in relation to identifying and addressing the causes of accidents.

102. The EU Council Directive 2004/113/EC implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services is fully transposed into the Bulgarian legislation. The act included a definition of “sexual harassment”, which was implanted through the Protection Against Discrimination Act.

103. Sexual harassment has many forms of manifestation, which are outlined in a number of criminal compositions included in the Criminal Code, such as e.g. inducing suicide, coercion, insult, etc. Part of the relevant norms of the code also contain qualified compositions of the corresponding crime, when it was committed by using a position of dependence. When such official dependence is not present, but the act is carried out at the workplace, this circumstance is considered by the court when individualizing the punishment.

104. In cases of harassment in the workplace, persons can submit complaints to the Executive Agency General Labour Inspectorate and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination.

Article 8 – Right to trade unions

105. The protection of trade union rights under the Covenant in Bulgaria was duly clarified in previous State reports.

106. In 2020, the amendments to the Labour Code provided improvement of the regulation on social dialogue and collective bargaining. The possibility for bilateral cooperation is introduced – between trade unions and employers’ organizations on the issues of employment relations and relations directly related to them, social security relations and living standard.

107. There have been no significant changes in the legislation since the previous report with regard to the existing restrictions on the right to strike of senior civil servants and railway workers.

Article 9 – Right to social security

Information relating to paragraphs 26 of the concluding observations

108. In 2023, Bulgaria implemented significant reforms in its social assistance system, shifting from a guaranteed minimum income to a poverty line-based approach¹⁰. This reform led to an increase both the range of eligible individuals and the amount of benefits provided. The poverty line is a basis for determining the amount of financial support for persons with disabilities, social assistance under the Social Assistance Act (SAA), financial assistance and funds (for prevention and reintegration, raising the child with relatives or relatives and in foster families) under the Act on Child Protection, as well as for determining access to a social pension for old age under the Social Insurance Code.

109. There has been an essential transformation of the support system by linking the social benefits to the poverty line, which resulted in achieving a level not lower than 30% of it for the respective year. The survey for determining the poverty line for the country

¹⁰ The poverty line is a monetary indicator for identifying the poor, which is used in determining social protection measures. It is determined according to a Methodology for determining and updating the country’s official poverty line for the country (adopted with the Council of Ministers’ Decree No. 241 of 2019), amended in 2021 (Council of Ministers’ Decree No. 277 of 2021). With these amendments, the level of the country’s poverty line is determined according to the European methodology.

is being annually conducted by the National Statistical Institute, according to Eurostat's methodology. Thus, every year, on the basis of the estimated poverty line, there is an automatic recalculation of the limits for access to support. In this way, the necessary regulatory conditions were created to expand the scope and increase the amount of aid and ensure their regular updating.

110. The poverty line is set at BGN 526 in 2024. The analysis shows that the size of the poverty line has increased since 2019 until 2024 with 51.1%

111. Bulgaria is making efforts to increase insurance payments. The average pension for the period March 2019-March 2024 has been increased by 127%. The minimum amount of unemployment cash benefit was also increased by 100% over the same period, while the average amount of benefits paid increased by 71%.

112. The right to social support for foreigners with a permanent residence permit in Bulgaria or who have been granted asylum, refugee status or humanitarian status or benefiting from temporary protection is equated with that of Bulgarian citizens. This support is non-contributory. The aid is financed from the state budget.

Information relating to paragraphs 28 of the concluding observations

113. The health insurance in Bulgaria is mandatory and it provides certain type, volume, and scope of medical care, which is funded by the budget of the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF). In order to improve access to health services on an annual basis, the regulations defining the package of health activities and preventive examinations and dispensaries, guaranteed by the NHIF budget, are updated by extending the scope of medical activities.

114. The amendments and supplements to the Ordinance No. 26 of 14 June 2007 of the Minister of Health on the provision of obstetric assistance to uninsured women and to carry out medical examinations outside the scope of the compulsory health insurance for children and pregnant women provide for extension of medical services to uninsured pregnant women. These amendments increased the number of preventive examinations available to uninsured women from one to four and expanded the range of medical and diagnostic tests provided during pregnancy. The amendments introduced refined guidelines regarding the type and frequency of examinations, facilitating optimal scheduling and planning. Notably, uninsured pregnant women now have expanded access to medical services, including the ability to utilize the 'Inpatient care in high-risk pregnancies' clinical pathway twice during their pregnancy term.

115. Outside the scope of health insurance, the budget of the Ministry of Health finances health activities that are provided to citizens regardless of their health insurance status - emergency medical care, preventive examinations and tests and obstetric care for all uninsured women, long-term treatment of premature and disabled children, psychiatric care, a rehabilitation programme for women with breast cancer, organ, tissue and cell transplants, assisted reproduction, blood and for the prevention, early detection and timely treatment of congenital diseases, screening programmes for new-born children and pregnant women, irrespective of their health insurance status, are conducted outside the scope of compulsory health insurance.

116. Every Bulgarian citizen is entitled to mandatory immunizations and re-immunizations, vaccines under special conditions, specific serums, immunoglobulins, and other bioproducts for communicable disease prevention, as well as comprehensive anti-epidemic activities. Access to health activities included in national, regional, and municipal health programmes is free and independent of health insurance status.

117. The National Programmes for Prevention and Control of HIV and Tuberculosis for 2021-2025 provide free diagnosis and treatment for HIV and tuberculosis to various persons in vulnerable situations, including Roma, migrants, and asylum seekers in Bulgaria.

118. During the COVID-19 pandemic health mediators were included in the municipal crisis headquarters. They supported both the families with the highest degree of vulnerability in the Roma districts and the institutions.

119. In 2022, the Ministry of Health started the implementation of a Project “Health for All”, in partnership with the National Network of Health Mediators. Health mediators from 6 municipalities were involved in the activities and made a detailed mapping of the health situation with a focus on maternal and child health, sexually transmitted infections and family planning. Currently, 235 health mediators from all over the country hold certificates that they are prepared to support the care for patients from vulnerable situations. Within the framework of the Project, an electronic system for reporting and monitoring the activity of health mediators was developed and trainings for working with it were held. The system is fully functional from November 2023.

Article 10 – Rights of families, mothers, children and young people to protection

Information relating to paragraphs 30 of the concluding observations

120. Bulgaria is an example of good practice in the implementation of one of the most large-scale reforms in the social sphere, related to the deinstitutionalization of childcare. Among the most significant results is the prevalence of care in a family environment.

121. Compared to 2010, when the reform was launched, many more children in public care are currently being raised in a family environment e.g. in families of relatives or close friends and in foster families, compared to children in residential care services. Towards the end of June 2024, there were 3,979 children placed in families of relatives or close friends; at the same period, the children placed in foster families were 1,484, and the children/young people placed in residential care services (in family-type accommodation centres) were 2,779.

122. In 2023, two Inter-ministerial working groups were formed to develop plans for the closure of two of the last four remaining homes. To support the process, a Council for Supporting the Process of Removal of Children Placed in Homes for Medical and Social Care for Children and Prevention of Placement of Children in these Homes has been established and is functioning as an expert advisory unit to the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. On 17 July 2024 the Council of Ministers adopted a Decree on structural changes in the health care system, which provided for the closure of the Home for Medical and Social Care for Children (HMSSC) in the city of Kardzhali on 1 August 2024.

123. Almost all specialized institutions for children were closed (over 97 %). Compared to 2010, when the number of institutions was 137, the last 3 homes for medical and social care for children at the Ministry of Health are currently active and they are also about to be closed.

124. As of 30 June 2024, there are 439 social services for children, with a total capacity of 15,997 users. These services include day care centres for children and young people with disabilities, social rehabilitation and integration centres, and community support centres. These facilities provide various forms of support, including hourly support, therapeutic and rehabilitation activities, and social and psychological counselling.

125. Emphasis in the current stage of the reform is placed on supporting children and families to prevent risks and create conditions that best meet the individual needs of children and guarantee their rights and interests, including through the development of various forms of social services in the community. The main focus of efforts is on the implementation of an integrated approach to child care and the development of cross-sectoral services to support parents and children, to monitor child development, to identify early difficulties, to refer to early intervention services and others. Our country has established a network of services that exemplify an integrated approach to providing early childhood development services aimed at informing and counselling parents, preventing early childhood risks, including through early disability intervention services, better reaching and improving children's readiness for inclusion in the education system, etc. The Social Services Act (SSA) explicitly regulates that social services for parenting skills support, counselling and support to parents on early childhood development and child rearing, and early disability intervention for children are unpaid.

126. One of the key prerequisites for guaranteeing children's rights is related to increasing the professional capacity of all social workers who in practice carry out direct work with children and families and implement the policy at local level. The SSA regulates the

introduction of standards and criteria for the quality and effectiveness of social services and the control and monitoring of social services. Special emphasis is also placed on the staff carrying out referral activities for the use and provision of social services and their right to training and supervision, the obligations of social service providers to ensure the professional and career development of their staff, the development of workload standards, etc.

127. The Ordinance on the Quality of Social Services (2022) introduces specific requirements for the composition, positions and professional development of staff involved in the provision of social services. Requirements are also introduced for social services for residential care for children without disabilities and for children with disabilities. The categories of employees for each type of social service are also specified, and they are basic specialists and recommended specialists (psychologist, social activities specialist, social educator, occupational therapist), employees directly involved in the service of the users (social activities assistant, caregiver) and supporting the functions employees.

Information relating to paragraphs 32 of the concluding observations

128. Bulgaria is strongly engaged in the fight against domestic violence and violence against women. The Bulgarian government and civil society are actively involved in preventing such forms of violence and in providing protection and support to its victims. The Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence includes legal concepts related to non-binary and non-biological notion of "sex" that are incompatible with the main principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. Pursuant to Constitutional Court's Decision 13/27.07.2018, Bulgaria is not in a position to ratify the Council of Europe's Convention. This does not undermine the State's commitment to combat all forms of violence, including domestic violence.

Strengthening legal, institutional and policy framework

129. Bulgaria pursues a consistent policy aimed at preventing and eliminating all forms of discrimination and creating understanding and tolerance towards persons belonging to different ethnic, religious or linguistic groups of the population. The national legal framework for combating all cases of hate crimes, racism, intolerance and xenophobia is solid and up-to-date.

130. In July 2023, the National Assembly adopted important amendments and supplements to the Criminal Code to consolidate further the prevention and combatting of gender-based violence and domestic violence, as well as to protect and support victims.:

- the sexual orientation of the victim was included as a separate discriminatory bias in the qualifying provisions governing a range of crimes: murder, bodily harm, kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, unlawful destruction or damage of another's movable or immovable property, and manifest incitement to commit a crime in order to include severe penalties on such offences;
- the qualifying provisions of a number of offences (offences of kidnapping; unlawful imprisonment; coercion, threatening, stalking, insult, desecration, destruction or damage of a religious temple, house of prayer, shrine, graves or tombstones, unlawful destruction or damage of another's movable or immovable property), manifest incitement to commit a crime, and arson have been supplemented with new paragraphs providing for a heavier penalty in the event of the offence being committed "with racist or xenophobic motivation";
- the provisions governing hate speech as well as crimes against the labour rights of the citizens have also been supplemented with "colour", "origin" and "sexual orientation";
- the definition of "offence committed in the context of domestic violence" was changed thus enabling the victims to benefit from criminal protection at an earlier stage.

131. In August 2023, the Bulgarian National Assembly approved new amendments and supplements to the Criminal Code and the Protection from Domestic Violence Act, providing protection for people who have experienced violence in the context of an intimate relationship, outside an actual cohabitation. The Act provides for quick and effective protection for victims of domestic violence and it has preventive and deterrent impact on the perpetrator of the violence as well. The amendments also extend protection measures to victims who are minors as well as those unable to seek protection due to their helpless state or dependence on the perpetrator.

132. A National Council for Prevention of and Protection against Domestic Violence was established. This permanent collective body comprises members from executive and judicial authorities, alongside representatives from non-profit NGOs dedicated to domestic violence prevention and protection. The Deputy Prime Minister serves as the Council's Chair. The Administration of the Council of Ministers has established a Unit for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence, Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, and Interaction with Civil Society. This unit serves as the Secretariat of the National Council and oversees administrative, technical, organizational, and financial support for implementing policies related to domestic violence.

133. Regarding the prevention and protection from domestic violence, 55 awareness campaigns on the "domestic violence" problem were conducted by the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, the State Agency for child protection, UNICEF and NGOs. 17 campaigns of them were for raising awareness of the problem in educational institutions, 7 campaigns were for promoting the the National Telephone Line for Children - 116 111 and one campaign was for the health and education system.

134. In the National Programme for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence for the period 2024-2026, which was adopted by the Council of Ministers, it is planned to carry out 21 awareness campaigns on the problem of "domestic violence" by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the State child protection agency, the National Legal Aid Office and the State Road Safety Agency. The campaigns cover higher awareness and sensitivity in society about the problem, improve coordination and interaction between the bodies involved in the process of supporting and protecting persons who have suffered from violence and promoting the National Telephone Line for Children - 116 111.

135. A significant achievement in the field of policies for the prevention of violence against children is the National Programme for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children (2023 - 2026) and the Action Plan for its implementation (2023 - 2024), which was adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2023. A policy of zero tolerance to all forms of violence, increasing awareness and sensitivity in society about children's problems, reducing cases of violence against children by 20%, reducing child exploitation are part of the programme's goals. The programme is focused on prevention measures and services that will reduce child abuse to the greatest extent. One of the main emphasis is the timely and competent help and support of parents and relatives of children, if they need it, so as to prevent any risky environment for the child. Emphasis is also placed on the support and protection of children involved in parental conflicts, children whose parents reside abroad for a long time, as well as children with disabilities and complex communication skills.

136. In 2024, a Coordination Mechanism for Victim Support was introduced to establish procedures for coordinating support among various agencies to ensure timely assistance for victims. The mechanism system is crucial for facilitating collaboration among the National Council, responsible institutions, and NGOs in executing policies for domestic violence prevention and protection, including coordination mechanisms for assisting and supporting victims.

137. The National Telephone Line for victims of domestic violence, managed by the NGO "Association Animus" Foundation is operational. It is funded by state resources through the Administration of the Council of Ministers.

138. From the beginning of 2024. the implementation of new Methodological guidelines for the actions of the Ministry of Interior employees under the Domestic Violence Act,

approved by order of the Minister of the Interior, has begun. Mechanisms for action at each stage of receiving the signal, visiting the place, talking to victims, working with the perpetrators, etc. are outlined. A risk assessment algorithm with attached protocols (questionnaires) is attached to the guidelines as an Annex. A specialized Automated Information System "Domestic violence and gender-based violence" has been created, which will allow police officers to respond more adequately and quickly to all received reports of domestic violence.

139. Funding has been allocated in the national budget for projects and services related to domestic violence prevention and victim support, including specialised programmes and helplines. Special provisions have also been made to provide legal aid to domestic violence victims, including expedited decision-making processes.

140. Among the priorities of the newly adopted National Strategy for Promoting the Equality of Women and Men for the period 2021-2030 is the fight against domestic violence and the protection and support of victims. Two of the measures included in the Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy for Promoting the Equality of Women and Men for 2023-2024 are specifically aimed at the prevention and protection from domestic violence.

Accountability

141. The amendments and supplements to the Criminal Code (2019) have provided additional protection against acts related to domestic violence. A legal definition and a new qualifying circumstance for a crime committed in the context of domestic violence has been introduced. Crimes for which a heavier punishment is provided are murder, bodily injury, kidnapping, illegal imprisonment, coercion. They also include the threat of a crime and a criminal act. The Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria deals with every report of a crime from these categories.

142. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in Bulgaria has prioritised enhancing the capabilities of judges, prosecutors, and investigating magistrates to effectively address and prevent domestic and gender-based violence. During the reporting period, NIJ significantly advanced the training and resources available to Bulgarian legal professionals on issues of domestic and gender-based violence. With over 800 participants trained as part of ongoing qualification through various initiatives, including specialised courses, development of a case management guide and public discussions, and 385 junior magistrates' candidates trained on these issues as part of their mandatory initial training, NIJ has made substantial progress in aligning national practices with international standards and enhancing the effectiveness of legal responses.

143. A National Programme for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence for 2024–2026 was adopted by Decision No. 669 of 1 October 2024 of the Council of Ministers. Its budget of BGN 6,2 million is intended for the prevention of domestic violence in all its forms, as well as for specialized services for the provision of protection, assistance and support to persons who have suffered from domestic violence or are at risk. National information campaigns, conferences, seminars and explanatory meetings are planned.

144. From 2022, the Prosecutor's Office systematically collects data on crimes with discriminatory elements, categorised by various motives. Statistical data on such crimes and domestic violence are included in the annual report of the Chief Prosecutor, published on the Prosecutor's Office website and submitted to relevant authorities. Recent legislative developments have introduced new legal definitions and qualifying circumstances for crimes committed in the context of domestic violence.

145. Statistical data for women victims of criminal offences in the context of domestic violence under newly initiated pre-trial proceedings is provided in Annex IV.

Article 11 – Right to an adequate standard of living

146. Under the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, all citizens are equal before the law. The Social Assistance Act further provides that no direct or indirect discrimination is allowed in the provision of social assistance based on sex, race, religion, nationality,

ethnicity, marital status, or property status. This legislation guarantees full equality and equal rights for all citizens.

Information relating to paragraph 34 of the concluding observations

147. The COVID-19 crisis, in addition to direct health impacts, resulted in severe social and economic consequences. It had long-lasting impact on various indicators related to the implemented policies in the field of the labour market and the social sphere. The social services sector, like most public sectors, has also been strongly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, as well as by the ongoing processes of digitization and digitization of society.

148. The National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2030 succeeded the existing strategic document. The Strategy sets the vision, objectives and measures for the development of the policy in the field of poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria until 2030. For the implementation of the National Strategy, an Action Plan for the period 2023-2024 was adopted by the Council of Ministers, which includes specific measures and activities, indicators, responsible institutions, sources and amount of funding and deadlines for implementation. A significant focus in the Action Plan is placed on measures for the integration of the economically inactive and unemployed persons in the labor market, including from disadvantaged groups, as well as for increasing the adaptability of employed persons. The Plan includes also activities to promote the development of social enterprises, as well as to ensure employment of persons from vulnerable groups. Focus is also placed on increasing the coverage of children and students in compulsory pre-school and school education, reducing the share of early school leavers, and improving the access of vulnerable groups to medical care.

149. The Action Plan sets intermediate values for some of the main indicators for poverty and social inclusion – Gini coefficient, risk of poverty and risk of poverty or social exclusion. The following trends could be outlined in the period 2019-2023¹¹ - the share of population at risk of poverty decreased by 2 percentage points (pp), reaching its peak in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic; in 2023, the decline in the values of the general inequality indicators continues (compared to 2019, the Gini coefficient decreased by 3.6 pp. to 37.2, reaching its lowest value so far); in the medium term, the number of persons at risk of poverty or social inclusion decreased by 394 thousand in 2023¹².

150. In accordance with the Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European target to reduce poverty by 2030, Bulgaria has set a national target to reduce the number of persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 787,000 people by 2030. A specific sub-target has been also set and it places a special focus on the reduction of the number of children under 18 years at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 196,750 persons.

151. The National Council on Social Inclusion under the Council of Ministers was established in 2009. It coordinates the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of state policy in the field of social inclusion.

152. The Council includes representatives of all stakeholders – state institutions, social partners, municipalities, NGOs, as well as representatives of academia. It convenes at least twice a year. All strategic and programme documents in the social inclusion field were presented and discussed at the meetings of the Council, including the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2030 and the action plans for its implementation, the National Strategy for Long-term Care, the National target to reduce the number of persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 787,000 people by 2030, etc.

153. Family allowances are intended to support raising children in a family. The Family Allowances Act provides for twelve types of allowances with a distinctive criterion assigned for each of them, in accordance with the purpose of the particular family benefit. Most types of family benefits are granted to families, regardless of their income. For another part of the family benefits, there are specific criteria according to their purpose or legally defined income per family member for the respective year. For children with

¹¹ Official data on poverty and social inclusion indicators for 2024 from the annual Statistics of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) survey are expected to be officially published in spring 2025.

¹² The data can be accessed on the official page of Eurostat (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>).

permanent disabilities, children with one living parent, children with single adoptive parent and children placed in families of relatives or close friends, or in foster families, all types of family benefits are provided in a relieved regime, regardless of family income.

154. Monthly allowances for a child until graduation from high school, but not after the age of 20 under the Family Allowances Act may be provided either in cash or in kind. If the mother is under 18 years old, assistance must be provided in kind, such as goods or services tailored to the child's individual needs. These benefits are distributed through vouchers issued by the Social Assistance Agency. The monthly allowances for a child until graduation from high school, but not after the age of 20 and the monthly allowances for raising children under the age of one are now applicable to children who are eligible or ineligible for a survivor pension from a deceased parent, as well as to single adoptive parents, irrespective of family income.

155. In 2023, the Family Allowances Act expanded the eligibility for the one-off allowance for pupils which now includes all students enrolled in first, second, third, fourth and eighth grade, regardless of family income and school type. The right to support children up to age 20, regardless of family income, is now applicable to those with a deceased parent's pension and single adoptive parents. Furthermore, the monthly support for raising children up to one year old is now available irrespective of family income, including for children with a deceased parent's pension and single adoptive parents.

Information relating to paragraph 36 of the concluding observations

156. Bulgaria has transposed and fully implements the European legislation on drinking water quality, including the requirements of Directive 2020/2184 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the quality of water intended for human consumption. In accordance with the laws and regulations in the country, both the quality of underground and surface water used for drinking and domestic water supply, as well as the drinking water from the consumer's tap, are monitored.

157. A comprehensive monitoring is carried out by the water supply organizations, and the competent control bodies carry out control monitoring.

158. In case of non-compliance with the quality and safety requirements, the water supply organizations, under the control and methodological assistance of the competent authorities, take timely and adequate measures to prevent risks to the health of the population, including informing them and providing recommendations as necessary.

Provision of sanitation and water services

159. The national legislation provides as a basic principle the right of every citizen to have access to water for drinking and domestic purposes as a basic necessity of life. The right of every citizen to have access to water for drinking and domestic purposes is a priority of the state policy and the policy implemented by the local self-government bodies. Bulgaria is distinguished by a high percentage of population covered by centralized public water supply (99.5%). The implemented policy makes no difference for the population on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria regarding their belonging to different minority groups and other distinctions. The state's policy regarding the Water Supply and Sanitation sector is carried out in close cooperation with local authorities, with the State providing support, including financial support for the construction of water supply infrastructure.

160. With the entry into force of the Spatial Planning Act in 2001, the implementation of administrative control over territorial planning and construction, the prevention of illegal construction and the removal of its consequences of the construction of certain categories of the nomenclature of types of construction, which are included in the circle of endangered, are fully included in the duties and powers of the mayor of the municipality concerned.

161. In the case of an order for the removal of an illegal building - dwelling, before proceeding to the enforcement of the order, after receiving a signal from the responsible authority, the Social Assistance Directorate (SAD) at the current address shall assess the circumstances of the family, health and socio-economic status of the occupants of the dwelling, taking adequate measures on the basis of the legislation in force in the social

sphere and providing timely support, including referral to an appropriate social service, the use of which is in accordance with the provisions of the person. It should be noted that the SAD does not have competences in the area of solving housing problems.

162. In order to cover the costs of providing citizens with housing needs, monthly targeted assistance is provided for the payment of rent to persons using municipal housing, subject to compliance with certain conditions: the accommodation order is issued on their name and their income from the previous month is up to the poverty line for the relevant year, if they are persons over 70 years of age living alone, or a parent raising a child/children alone, provided that the child is enrolled in compulsory pre-school and school education, unless this is impossible due to his/her health condition. The monthly targeted assistance for payment of rent for municipal housing is granted on the basis of an application-declaration submitted by the persons in a form to the Social Assistance Directorate, which is valid for one calendar year. The allowance is granted after an assessment of all the data and circumstances established by a social survey and is paid on presentation of a supporting document.

163. The conditions and procedure for removal of illegal construction are equal for all citizens, irrespective of their ethnicity, social status or the location of the illegal construction. The orders are issued pursuant to the Spatial Planning Act. All orders to remove illegal constructions are strictly monitored for compatibility with relevant legal requirements.

164. Bulgarian law lays down the principle of proportionality in Article 6 and further developed in Article 272, paragraph 1, p.1 of the Administrative Procedure Code. Those rules provide that administrative authorities must exercise their powers in a reasonable manner, in good faith and fairly, and that administrative acts and their implementation may not prejudice rights and legitimate interests beyond what is most necessary for the purpose for which the act is issued.

165. In exercising the powers under Article 222, paragraph 1 of Spatial Planning Act, including when taking actions for the implementation of entered into force orders for the removal of illegal constructions, the National Construction Control Directorate to the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works and its bodies shall observe the rights and freedoms of the citizens, as well as the principle of proportionality, regulated in Art. 6 of the Administrative Procedure Code.

166. The municipalities can offer alternative housing only to citizens with proper address registration.

167. In accordance with the interim measures ordered by the European Court of Human Rights in June 2018, the National Construction Control Directorate authorities refrain from actions related to the demolition of the only dwelling, including the demolition of illegal housing. When initiating proceedings relating to the removal of illegal constructions, the competent administrative authorities do not establish the origin, social status and ethnicity of the perpetrators of the illegal constructions, but merely comply with the legal provisions established in the interest of the society and the state.

168. In line with the 2024-2027 National Action Plan for the implementation of the National Strategy for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of the Roma 2021-2030, specific amendments to the Spatial Planning Act are prioritized. These amendments aim to introduce principles like proportionality in addressing non-compliant housing and neighbourhoods, especially those constituting the sole dwelling for occupants. The amendment seeks to balance the enforcement of regulations with ensuring that vulnerable families are not left homeless due to legal actions against their informal dwellings.

169. Furthermore, the Action Plan outlines specific objectives to improve housing conditions and overall infrastructure in areas of concentrated poverty:

- Providing conditions for the acquisition of affordable housing and introducing alternative models of social housing (Objective 2);
- Construction and renovation of infrastructure for integrated health, social, and community services for vulnerable groups (Objective 3);

- Reconstruction of social infrastructure facilities for education, culture, etc. (Objective 4);
- Improving legal and economic conditions for addressing non-compliant housing under the Spatial Planning Act (Objective 5);
- Expanding legal access to quality water, electricity, and sanitation in designated neighbourhoods with concentrations of poverty (Objective 6).

170. These objectives are implemented through Integrated Territorial Investments Concepts to leverage EU funds and through amendments to the Spatial Planning Act. District planning and municipal efforts are crucial in achieving these goals, ensuring that Roma and other vulnerable communities benefit from improved housing and infrastructure provisions.

Provision of adequate housing

171. Under the EU Operational Programme “Regions in Growth” 2014-2020, the provision of 801 dwellings was supported and 1580 persons belonging to marginalized communities were provided access to adequate housing conditions. Under the succeeding Operation Programme “Development of Regions” 2021-2027, it is provided funding for modern and affordable housing, including to persons in vulnerable situations. The measures related to the renovation/construction of the building stock should be implemented in an integrated manner with measures for improved urban infrastructure, including measures for the improvement of territories with unfavourable socio-economic characteristics, considering the needs of local communities.

172. In addition, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works has actively participated in the implementation in the project "Creation of a network and tools for communication and interaction between administration and citizens for responsible housing decisions" in partnership with the “Shelter for Humanity” Foundation and with the financial support of the Operational Programme "Good governance", co-financed by the European Social Fund. During the implementation of the project a survey was conducted regarding the status and management of the municipal building stock, including social housing, during which information was collected from all 265 municipalities in Bulgaria, including the 24 district administrations in the capital Sofia. The information gathered was later on used as a basis for a Report with recommendations for improving the social housing policy in Bulgaria.

173. In the period March 2019 - December 2023, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies financed a total of 242 project proposals worth BGN 9,424,990, providing an accessible environment for 368 persons with disabilities, including 263 persons with permanent disabilities moving with wheelchairs and 105 persons with permanent disabilities with mobility difficulties, through the construction of 303 facilities (including 217 stair platforms, 38 vertical lifts, 35 ramps and 13 elevators).

Information relating to paragraph 39 of the concluding observations

Conditions in reception/detention centres

174. The State Agency for Refugees under the Council of Ministers (SAR) and the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of Interior take constant measures to improve the conditions in the reception/detention centres where foreigners are accommodated. Refreshing repairs are periodically carried out of the main buildings of centres. Personal belongings and clothing for the accommodated foreigners are provided. Washing machines, dryers, as well as vending machines for hot and cold drinks and packaged foods are available.

175. The State Agency for Refugees under the Council of Ministers has a total of six territorial subdivisions on the territory of the country: Registration and reception centre – Vrazhdebna (Sofia), Registration and reception centre – Ovcha kupel (Sofia), Registration and reception centre – Military ramp (Sofia), Registration and reception centre – Banya, (Stara Zagora region), Registration and reception centre – Harmanli (Haskovo region) and Transit centre – Pastrogor (Haskovo region).

176. The Migration Directorate of the Ministry of Interior implements the project "Provision of funds to improve the conditions of accommodation and security in the Special Houses for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SHTAF)" under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. Within the framework of the project, basic repairs are carried out with a total value of BGN 5,867,400. Some additional construction and assembly work in the two SHTAF, such as major repairs of building installations, bedrooms and sanitary facilities, construction of sheds on walking areas, are foreseen. Funds under the project are also foreseen for new furniture and equipment for the sleeping areas and canteens.

177. The National Commission for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (NCCTHB) follows and monitors the implementation of measures included in the National Mechanism for Referral and Support of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings (NRM), according to the Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings Act. In this regard, specialized shelters and centres for protection of victims of trafficking in human beings have been established. At present under the NCCTHB are functioning seven services, specialised specifically for adult victims of trafficking in human beings, including 3 shelters for temporary accommodation, one shelter for subsequent reintegration and 3 consultative services – centres for protection and support, in regions of Sofia, Varna and Burgas. A Crisis Centre with priority accommodation of children, victims of human trafficking, as a state delegated service is functioning also in Sofia since 2020.

178. The services for victims of human trafficking under the NCCTHB provide specialised social and psychological support during the reflection period, the long-term assistance period and the reintegration period with a possibility to accommodate survivors together with their children. The NRM is applied equally for Bulgarian citizens and third-country nationals regarding the identification, referral and support of victims of human trafficking.

Assessment of specific situation and vulnerability

179. The initial assessment of the persons' vulnerability is carried out by the accommodating police officers when placing a foreigner in the SHTAF on the basis of accompanying documentation, an initial interview and a medical examination. Methodology for social work with accommodated foreigners is applied to assess the individual needs of foreigners according to criteria including medical, social and psychological assessment. The team approach is applied in working on cases within the framework of daily team meetings with the participation of the interviewer leading the case, a psychologist, a medical person and a leading employee of the SHTAF. In subsequent discussions with the accommodated foreigners, police officers and psychologists further assess the presence of indicators of vulnerability of the accommodated persons, such as experienced physical violence, involvement in trafficking or other forms of abuse, with a view to identifying support and recovery measures.

180. A similar assessment of vulnerability is made in the centers of the State Agency for Refugees under the Council of Ministers.

181. The legislation in the field of child protection and social services guarantees the fundamental rights of all children, including children, foreign citizens and refugees or migrant children, residing in the territory of the country, including unaccompanied or separated children-foreign citizens.

182. The food of the accommodated individuals in the territorial subdivisions of the SAR under the Council of Ministers is provided by a licensed company, according to a contract with the SAR under the Public Procurement Act.

Raising monthly allowance

183. Since May 2022, the amount of the BGN equivalent of the 24-hour norm of food products per foreigner has been increased and additional overhead costs of up to 40% of the value have been set. The authorities have strengthened the control over the quantity and quality of food.

184. The food for the foreigners accommodated in the SHTAF is provided after public procurement. The external suppliers, thus offer food, which corresponds to the legal

requirements for the physiological norms for feeding the population, which include average energy needs, and recommended dietary intake of protein, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals.

185. The amount of the financial value of the daily meal portion for a foreigner is determined by an order of the Minister of Interior. A varied diet is ensured by daily inclusion of foods from different food groups, including dietary food. The food available is in accordance with the religious norms to which the foreigners adhere. In addition, the SHTAF offer food specifically tailored to the needs of people with chronic diseases and young children.

Accommodation of unaccompanied children

186. A guiding understanding when working with unaccompanied children-foreign citizens and refugees, including unaccompanied Ukrainian children with temporary protection status, is that they are children at risk. For accommodation and support of children-foreign citizens and refugees at risk, the national legislation provides for the use of the network of social services established in the country. Protection measures provided for in the Child Protection Act for children at risk also apply to unaccompanied children as children at risk.

187. Article 28a, paragraph 1 of the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act provides an opportunity to regulate the legal status of unaccompanied children-foreign citizens by allowing long-term residence on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria until they reach the age of majority, and this provision creates important guarantees for the exercise of the rights of unaccompanied children-foreign citizens in full.

188. The Asylum and Refugees Act (ARA) was amended in 2020 to include procedural safeguards for unaccompanied minors and minor children-foreign citizens. Practically working legal regulations and mechanisms have been created to ensure the conduct of the proceedings for their protection in compliance with the requirements for legality and quality.

189. Unaccompanied children-foreign citizens are accommodated in the reception centres of SAR under special conditions and care. In cooperation with the Regional Health Inspectorates, the vaccination of all asylum-seeking children who are subject to compulsory immunization according to the Immunization Calendar of the Republic of Bulgaria is organized. In the SAR there are separate premises for pregnant women and single parents in order to implement an individual approach to meet their specific needs. Pregnant women receive the necessary medical care and preventive health consultations from a general practitioner and a specialist physician and have access to the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Units in the health facilities and the new born baby consultation.

190. The Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act does not allow the accommodation of unaccompanied children-foreign citizens in the SHTAF managed by the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of Interior.

191. The Asylum and Refugees Act (ARA) was amended in 2020 to include procedural safeguards for unaccompanied minors and minor children. Practically working legal provisions and mechanisms are established to ensure the conduct of protection proceedings in compliance with the conditions for legality and quality.

Article 12 – Right to health

192. The National Health Strategy 2030 was adopted by the National Assembly on 18 April 2024. It presents a long-term vision for the development of the health system in Bulgaria and sets out the strategic objectives and priorities, as well as specific policies for their implementation. The document sets out three main objectives: sustainable improvement of health and the living environment; ensuring health security and reducing inequalities; and efficient management of resources. Reducing premature deaths caused by air pollution by 55%, focusing on cardiovascular disease and cancer, developing organ donation, improving maternal and child healthcare, mental health and psychiatric care are some of the priorities set out in the strategy. To achieve these objectives, it is envisaged to implement targeted policies and interventions, grouped into three interlinked and synergistic priorities:

- building a healthier nation through four public health policies.
- creating a health system oriented to the needs of people - policies for the development of the different levels of the system of medical care (outpatient, emergency, hospital), for drug policy, for the digitalisation of the health system and for better planning of the health workforce.
- implementing targeted strategies to address specific public health issues - policies on maternal and child health, oncological and cerebrovascular diseases, donation and transplantation; on mental health and psychiatric care, on healthy ageing and geriatric care and on limiting antimicrobial resistance.

Information relating to paragraph 41 of the concluding observations

193. The Ministry of Health is implementing project aimed at promoting specialisation in specialties and areas with a shortage of medical specialists. Additional financial support is provided to graduates working in regions with a shortage of medical specialists and to those specializing in areas with the greatest national shortage. It equals two and a half minimum wages per month. As of 15 July 2024, the first application campaign is underway and contracts are signed with the qualified graduate students. The initiative aims to achieve a more balanced distribution of specialists across the country and increase the attractiveness of high-need specialties.

194. Medical education in Bulgaria ensures and guarantees the volume and quality of training of medical specialists. Their training is carried out on the basis of uniform state requirements for each medical profession, approved by regulations of the Council of Ministers. Postgraduate training in the healthcare system is conducted on the basis of curricula that also contain the knowledge, skills and competences that the postgraduate student should acquire.

195. Medical assistance in Bulgaria is carried out through the application of methods and technologies approved by medical science and practice. The quality of medical care is based on medical standards, approved by ordinances of the Minister of Health, and the Rules of Good Medical Practice, adopted and approved by professional organisations of medical specialists.

Information relating to paragraph 43 of the concluding observations

196. The National Health Strategy 2030 focuses on expanding mental health promotion, enhancing knowledge among parents and professionals about early signs of mental disorders in children, continuing deinstitutionalization, integrating psychiatric care into the general medical system, and developing comprehensive mental health services near patients' homes. Staff training in new mental health approaches is also emphasised. The Strategy also focuses on healthy ageing, particularly for those over 65, ensuring equal access to medical and dental services and affordable medicinal products, especially in remote areas.

197. Social services in Bulgaria are decentralised. The municipalities are the main provider of social services, and they are responsible for their management and provision at the local level and for the legal spending of the funds allocated to them from the state budget. They initiate the creation of new social services, which are financed from the state and municipal budgets in accordance with national priorities and service needs. In addition to municipalities and legal entities specially established by them for the provision of social services, social services may also be provided by private providers. There has been a steady increase in social services financed by the state budget, as well as in the funds provided annually by the state budget. In May 2024, the number the social services was 1,857 for 64,341 users compared to 1,358 services for 35,712 users in 2019. The amount of the financial resources provided from the state budget for providing social services for 2024 was BGN 902,666,178 compared to BGN 260,875,261 in 2019.

198. A key normative act for the social services sector is the Ordinance on the Quality of Social Services. It has set new and more precise quality standards for social services, which are for organization and management, for the qualification and professional development of staff and for the effectiveness of the service in terms of outcomes for the people who use them. The planning of social services in the country was completed

through the adoption of the National Map of Social Services by the Council of Ministers in August 2024. Through the national planning of social services, the state is committed to creating a complete network of social services across the country in the long term. The Ordinance on the standards for the remuneration of employees who carry out activities of providing social services that are financed by the state budget, which entered into force on 1 January 2022, created conditions for increasing the remuneration of employees, which is one of the prerequisites for increasing the quality and efficiency of services.

199. The process of deinstitutionalisation of care for the elderly and people with disabilities is a national priority, which is implemented not only through the legislation in the social services field (the SSA and its subordinate regulations), but also through the implementation of the National Strategy for Long-Term Care, and the action plans for the period 2018-2021 and for 2022-2027. The SSA regulates the priority of support in the home environment and in the community as the use of social services for residential care is allowed only in case the possibilities for supporting the persons through social services in the home environment and in the community are exhausted, and the care is organized in a way that does not allow isolation of the persons from the community. Social services are provided only in accordance with the wishes and personal choices of persons. The Act also envisages the existing Homes for adults with disabilities to be closed by 1 January 2035 and the existing Homes for elderly to be reformed by 1 January 2025 to meet quality standards for social services. This process is implemented on “step-by-step” approach in accordance with the measures provided in the national strategic policy documents.

200. The National Strategy for Long-Term Care, adopted in 2014, was designed to enhance the quality, accessibility, and sustainability of long-term care services for the elderly and people with disabilities. The first Action Plan for the period 2018-2021 led to the closure of nine specialised institutions and reduced capacity in the largest institution for adults with mental disabilities. The current Action Plan for the period 2022-2027 aims to close about 60% of existing institutions for adults with disabilities by 2027.

201. In addition to the state budget, the reform is supported by the Human Resources Development Programme (BGN 632 million) and the Regional Development Programme (up to BGN 139.7 million). Under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), investments amount to BGN 753 million. The investments planned under the NRRP include the creation of 250 new social and integrated health and social services for residential care and accompanying specialised social services with a total capacity for over 10,000 persons with disabilities, including persons with mental disorders.

202. In the reporting period, within the framework of the reform of the social services system, the SAA implemented a project for specialized training of employees in the child protection and social services system. The Ministry of Labour and Social Services carried out a training project for the employees of the new Agency for the Quality of Social Services, the local structures of the SAA and the municipalities in connection with the implementation of the newly adopted Ordinance on the Quality of Social Services.

203. In 2020, the Rules of Procedure for the Implementation of the Social Services Act were adopted. They regulate the procedure for referral for the use of social services and the preparation, and update, of the assessment of individual needs and the individual support plan. They also regulate the procedure for cooperation and coordination between social service providers when a person uses social services from different providers, as well as the coordination in cases of support from different systems.

204. In 2021, a National Strategy for Mental Health of Citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030 was adopted. It aims to address the key problems of the psychiatric care system in the country and to strengthen mental health promotion, protection and care provision across several sectors. In July 2022, a National Council on Mental Health was created to provide advice to the Council of Ministers. The National Council is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the National Strategy for Mental Health, including overseeing multi-sectoral coordination, cooperation, and consultation.

205. Under the National Strategy for Mental Health 2021-203, training programmes for medical staff, family doctors, social workers, and educators are organised to detect and prevent early aggression and suicidal conditions. Training modules approved include:

"Suicide prevention," "Methodology for working with a psychiatrist in general practice," "Case management in psychiatric practice," and "Social skills training."

206. The main providers of social services in Bulgaria are the municipalities. The social services are funded by the state and municipal budgets. They are provided either by legal entities specially established for the provision of social services or by private social service providers. In their work, the municipalities aim to provide easy-to-access services and complex support through various activities. In the area of mental health, the municipalities are guided by a Methodology for the assessment of persons with mental disorders, Methodology for closing specialized institutions for persons with disabilities and Methodology for reforming homes for the elderly.

207. As a result of the implementation of the measures and activities in the home and in the community, the Action Plan for Long-Term Care (2022-2027) foresees to support more than 50,000 disabled and elderly people unable to care for themselves. It is envisaged that many more persons will be supported in their home and community environment compared to residential care. Persons with disabilities, in addition to being entitled to support from an assistant (over 70,000 persons with permanent disabilities receive assistance support and personal assistance), receive financial benefits (665,000 persons with permanent disabilities living only in home environment receive these benefits on average each month under the PWDA) and many other benefits, and have access to a very wide range of social services in the community. 209. As of May 2024, the capacity of all still functioning homes for adults with disabilities in Bulgaria is for 4,419 persons, and of residential services for adults with disabilities are for 4, 326 persons, or a total of 8,745 users, with an occupancy rate of about 90%. Against a background of over 665,000 adults with permanent disabilities living at home and receiving financial assistance, the number of disabled people using services in the adult homes for disabled people that are to be closed or in residential care services is only about 1%, and they use these services of their own volition.

208. In order to protect the rights of people with mental disorders, an Ad Hoc Committee on the Protection of the Rights of Mental Patients and the Drafting of Legislative Changes to Guarantee Them was established by the National Assembly in 2024. The Committee discussed the national coverage of residential and consultative social services for persons with mental disorders, as well as the provision of social services for these persons in the National Social Services Map which was adopted by Decision No. 574 of 8 August 2024 of the Council of Ministers. In March 2024, the territorial structures of the Agency for Social Assistance carried out needs assessments of 257 persons permanently accommodated in state psychiatric hospitals with a view to referring them to appropriate social services and preparing for their discharge from the hospital environment.

Information relating to paragraph 45 of the concluding observation

209. The draft of the Natural Persons and Support Measures Act was prepared in 2016. During the analysis, a question arose of a possible contradiction between some of the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. This contradiction affects two controversial issues, on which no agreement was reached during the preparation of the draft law - the planned abolition of the institution of placement under interdiction and the exercise of the active and passive right to vote by persons with intellectual and psychosocial disorders. In 2020, a decision was made to organize and conduct an academic discussion with professors of constitutional law from all higher education institutions in the country on the topic: "The constitutionality of the draft of the Natural Persons and Support Measures Act, the planned abolition of the institute of placement under interdiction and the use of active and passive electoral right of persons placed under interdiction". This activity is currently not completed.

210. In March 2024, an interdepartmental working group was formed in the Ministry of Justice to analyse the legislation and, if necessary, propose legislative amendments ensuring effective access to justice for persons with disabilities in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

211. As a positive development in this area, a proposal has been submitted by the Ministry of Justice to amend the Domestic Violence Act, which will allow proceedings

for the issuance of a protection order to be instituted at the request of the injured person, if he has reached the age of 14 or is placed in full or limited custody. In this way, every person whose rights have been violated is given ample opportunity to have direct access to justice. Given the specifics of domestic violence and the fact that the Criminal Code introduces a special regulation that takes into account the fact that domestic violence can seriously damage the life, health, personal freedom and integrity of individuals, the proposal was enshrined in the Domestic Violence Act (promulgated in State Gazette No. 66 of 2023).

212. Other amendments to the Domestic Violence Act introduced in 2023 provide additional guarantees for the protection of the rights of individuals and enhanced protection of the vulnerable category of individuals by the state. It is envisaged that the director of the Social Assistance Directorate will be able to submit an application when the injured person is a minor or a minor and/or is in a helpless state as a result of severe disability, illness or old age or is placed under interdiction.

Information relating to paragraph 47 of the concluding observations

213. The Ministry of Health incorporates HIV prevention and harm reduction activities for drug users into Bulgaria's National Programme for Prevention and Control of HIV and Sexually Transmitted Diseases for 2021-2025, funded through the Public Procurement Act.

214. In 2023, under the priority "Ensuring quality follow-up, treatment, care, and support for people living with HIV," the Ministry of Health allocated funds to Regional Health Inspectorates to organize regional meetings for medical professionals.

215. For the prevention of the abuse of prohibited drugs, activities are being carried out under the National Strategy for Combating Drugs – prevention in school and out-of-school environment. Two national programmes for the prevention of drug use in school environment are being implemented for age groups 5-7 and 8-11 grades. Programmes are also being implemented at the municipal level, aimed at different age groups.

216. Adequate treatment of persons under 18 years of age is carried out in specialized medical institutions. Treatment of drug addicts over 18 years of age is carried out in 28 programmes for treatment with agonists and agonist-antagonists of persons addicted to opioids, located in different cities in the country

217. Psychosocial rehabilitation is implemented by organizations that have received consent for the implementation of these activities. They are aimed at persons under 18 years of age, and persons over 18 years of age. Psychosocial rehabilitation programmes are residential type (therapeutic community type) and non-residential type (day centre type), where support is provided to users and their families

218. The Ministry of Health is implementing the fourth National Programme for Prevention and Control on HIV and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021-2025. Within 6 priority areas, resources are provided for HIV prevention among groups most at risk, updating HIV and STD testing policies, ensuring quality follow-up, treatment, care and support for people living with HIV, improving epidemiological surveillance, assessment procedures and creating an environment for a sustainable response.

219. The Republic of Bulgaria has introduced a policy for mandatory electronic prescription and dispensing of antidiabetic and antibacterial medicinal products for systemic use. This initiative aims to overcome the cases of lack or shortage of antidiabetic medicinal products in the pharmacy network and to regulate more effectively the dispensing of antibacterial agents in pharmacies, while at the same time provides more detailed monitoring of their consumption and prescription. By increasing the level of payment to 100% of medicinal products for the treatment of the cardiovascular system, the aim is to reduce the co-payment by patients, and therefore to improve adherence to the prescribed therapy, prevent hospitalizations and complications from the main disease and an increase in the quality of life.

Article 13 and 14 – Right to education and compulsory primary education

Information relating to paragraph 49 of the concluding observations

220. Since 2017, a Mechanism for joint work of institutions on the inclusion and retention in the educational system of children and students of compulsory preschool and school age has been established and is fully functioning. The purpose of the Mechanism is to unite the efforts of the interested institutions and to include all eligible children and students in preschool and school education, who can successfully participate in the educational process. The mechanism includes creation, updating and activity of teams for joint work of the institutions for coverage and inclusion in the education system of children and students of compulsory preschool and school age (coverage teams); interaction of the institutions on the implementation of a complex of measures for coverage and inclusion in the educational system and prevention of early dropout of children at risk. The share of children and students dropping out of the education system has decreased by 40% over the last seven years thanks to the efforts of the teams under the mechanism. During these years, over 50,000 children were returned and detained in school.

221. Over 75,000 parents and children in kindergartens and nursery groups will receive support under the "Strong Start" project, implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science and financed under the Education Programme 2021 - 2027. One of its main goals is to develop the potential in preschool education through support for personal development with a view to more successful social realization.

222. The project "Success for You" under the Education Programme 2021 - 2027 which is co-funded by the European Union, enables schools with a range of activities to support students to improve their educational outcomes. It is focused on general support for personal development of students at risk of dropping out from grades I to VII. The project also includes training for over 4,000 pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff.

223. Since 2019, the Centre for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minority Groups has administered a national programme aimed at applying an integration approach in practise. The Centre manages and implements a National Programme, which aims to provide a supportive educational environment, promoting positive interaction between all participants in the educational process in the conditions of receiving educational institutions

224. The budget of the National Programme was BGN 1,000,000 each for the academic years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 and BGN 500,000 each for the academic years 2021/2022 and 2022/2023. In the period 2019 – 2022, a total of 33 projects of 15 municipalities were financed.

225. The programme provides funds for transport within the settlement for children in compulsory pre-school education and for students attending schools with a concentration of vulnerable groups in order to access education in reception educational institutions, as well as for children and students living in remote areas, but attending ethnically mixed educational institutions. The programme also provides an opportunity to appoint educational mediators, as well as to purchase tools and materials for children and students from vulnerable groups.

226. There has never been a policy of school 'segregation' of Roma children in the national education system of the Republic of Bulgaria. In some neighbourhoods of certain towns and cities individual schools are attended predominantly by pupils of Roma origin, which is related only to the place of residence of the families. A child's ethnicity is not related in any way to the admission in public school.

227. Students with special educational needs are also enrolled and trained in the institutions of the education system. On average about 10% of all children and students subject to compulsory preschool and school education have special educational needs, and the majority of them receive additional support, including resource support, in general educational institutions (kindergartens and schools). According to data from the Centre for Information Assurance of Education as of 15 March 2024, resource support is

provided to a total of 25,336 children and students with special educational needs from kindergartens and schools.

228. For the school year 2021/2022, the Ministry of Education took measures against dropping-out of students in vulnerable situations. Over 1,300 teams of teachers, psychologists, social workers, police officers, municipal and health workers, were formed whose duties were to work with the families and to encourage the children who did not enrol or did not attend school to return. Based on their work, for the following school year 2022/2023 around 8,700 children were returned to school.

229. A National Programme "Support of Educational Mediators and Social Workers" was adopted and implemented between July 2022 - July 2023. The programme provided both an increase of the wage of the educational mediators and funds for activities with parents, organized by the relevant school together and the educational mediator.

230. The policy of the authorities to expand the network of educational mediators, as well as to guarantee sustainability of the activity of educational mediators, reflected in regulatory amendments in July 2023. According to the amendments to Article 52a to the Ordinance on Financing Institutions in the Preschool and School Education System, the State budget provides funds, especially for the appointment of educational mediators, social workers, and/or teacher's assistants.

231. According to Article 52a, paragraph 4, item 1 of the Ordinance, the financing includes funds in an amount determined according to the number of children and students in the institution and the corresponding annual funding amount for one child and student. According to Article 52a, paragraph 4, item 2 of the Ordinance the financing includes funds in an amount determined on the basis of the number of appointed educational mediators, social workers and/or teacher assistants as of January 1 of the relevant calendar year. This is the specific resource for the appointment of educational mediators, social workers and teacher assistants, which the Government set from 2023 to ensure sustainable funding for these important positions.

232. The allocation of funds under Article 52a of the Ordinance for the budget year for kindergartens and schools is approved by order of the Minister of Education and Science and is published on the website of the Ministry of Education and Science.

233. The purpose of the amendments made to the Ordinance on the financing of institutions in the system of preschool and school education was also to guarantee sustainability of the activity of educational mediators. Funds for educational institutions (kindergartens and schools) with a concentration of vulnerable groups in 2021 amount to BGN 30,651,041, for 2022 – BGN 34,723,800, for 2023 the amount was BGN 36,078,916, and for 2024, the amount of funds is BGN 48,601,057.

234. From the beginning of 2024, for the first time, the mediators are included in the scope of the Collective Labour Agreement for the preschool and school education system.

Article 15 – Right to participate in cultural life, to enjoy benefits of scientific progress and to copyright protection

235. See comment in response to article 1.

236. There are no 'national minorities' in Bulgaria and this terminology does not exist in the national legislation. Bulgaria recognises individual rights, which can be exercised jointly by a group of people. The State has ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe with the understanding that the legal act establishes a good balance between the obligation to guarantee the rights of persons, belonging to minority groups, and the right of the State to choose the means to achieve this objective.

237. The Bulgarian citizens have the opportunity to declare their belonging to a particular ethnic, religious or linguistic group. The protection of their rights and freedoms is guaranteed by the Constitution, Bulgaria's international legal obligations, and the national legislation. The principle of non-discrimination and ensuring equality of all citizens before the law is strictly respected.

238. The Day of Rescue of Bulgarian Jews and of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust and of the Crimes against Humanity has been marked on 10 March since 2003, by a government decision of 13 February 2003. In 2023, Bulgaria marked the 80th anniversary of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews during World War II and commemorated the victims of the Holocaust.

239. In October 2023, after more than two years of work, the Bulgarian government adopted its first National Action Plan on Combating Antisemitism 2023-2027. The structure and goals of the National Action Plan are modelled after the European Strategy to Combat Antisemitism and Foster Jewish Life. The drafting of the document started after a comprehensive opinion poll, targeting both the society in general and the Bulgarian Jews in particular. All state institutions involved in the fight against antisemitism, as well as representatives of the academic community and non-governmental entities, including organizations of Bulgarian Jews, participated in the process of developing the document.

240. The National Action Plan on Combating Antisemitism 2023-2027 has three chapters aimed at fighting antisemitism, preservation of the traditions and the cultural heritage and education, research and remembrance. It covers the period until 2027 and includes concrete measures, responsible intuitions, measurable benchmarks and a monitoring mechanism. A review will be conducted after its implementation, including a second comprehensive opinion poll, in order to identify the lessons learned and outline the potential follow-up.

Information relating to paragraph 51 of the concluding observations

241. From 2019 to 2021, under the Cultural Entrepreneurship, Heritage, and Cooperation Programme funded by the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism 2014-2021, the Ministry of Culture launched five calls for proposals totalling €10,800,000. This programme aimed to reduce social and economic disparities by leveraging culture and cultural heritage for local and regional development, emphasising employment, social inclusion, and cultural entrepreneurship.

242. The Ministry of Culture, in collaboration with municipalities and other institutions, focuses on improving Romani access to public cultural life, preserving Romani culture, and combating prejudice. The National Action Plans for 2022-2023 and 2024-2027 outline measures to support Romani cultural preservation and integration, with the Ministry of Culture responsible for various initiatives. Long-term goals for 2022-2030 include promoting cultural diversity, preserving heritage, and utilising cultural wealth for social cohesion and economic benefits. The implementation of these goals is monitored through an evaluation system and annual reports. For 2023-2024, 16 projects under the same Programme, totalling €1.14 million, aim to improve arts and culture awareness among ethnic minorities, especially Romani people, by engaging them in cultural activities and using culture as a tool for education and capacity building.

243. The National Culture Fund (NCF) supports decentralisation, promoting quality cultural products in smaller towns and rural areas to stimulate local economic and social development. Equal access to culture for all social groups is a fundamental principle, with programmes tailored for children, the elderly, people with special needs, migrants, and refugees to ensure their active participation in cultural life. Efforts are also made to preserve diverse cultural expressions, traditions, and customs of different ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities. Additionally, the NCF works on removing barriers that hinder older people and those with special needs from fully participating in cultural activities.

244. The Ministry of Culture annually organises calls for tenures for financial support, which are open to all Bulgarian citizens and their representatives. Every year, the ministry provides financial assistance for the realization of events and festivals covering multicultural projects, through which diversity is promoted and the mutual relationship between the various social groups in the country is supported.

245. A Roma Public Council on Cultural Affairs was established, as well as a Council on Cultural Diversity, with the main objective of supporting the Ministry of Culture in its policy for the cultural integration of minority communities in Bulgaria. A concept for the functioning and activities of Roma cultural and information centres has been developed.

The first stage of the creation of a Roma musical theatre is in the process of being implemented. Two Turkish music-drama theatres were also created - in Kardzhali and Razgrad.

246. Information on the projects implemented by the Ministry of Culture is presented in Annex V.

IV. Other recommendations

Ratification of international instruments

247. Bulgaria continues to examine the possibility of ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Covenant and analyses currently its national implementation, including through the domestic remedies perspectives and given the complex character of the obligations entailed by the Covenant.

248. The Concept on the Criminal Policy 2020-2025, adopted on 11 May 2020 by the Council of Ministers, does not foresee at this stage the ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance due to other prevailing issues in the area of criminal justice.

249. Aligned with the common EU position, Bulgaria has no plans in signing and ratifying the International Convention on the Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. National legislation, bilateral agreements and applicable EU legislation properly guarantee the rights of migrants and third parties.

Information relating to paragraph 53 of the concluding observations

250. In April 2023, the Council of Ministers adopted Decree No. 52/2023, establishing a coordination mechanism to monitor and report on SDG progress at the national level. A Development Council, chaired by the Prime Minister and comprising cabinet members, coordinates the management, monitoring, control, and reporting of the implementation of the National Development Programme BULGARIA 2030¹³. Additional functions related to SDG progress reporting were delegated to the Development Council through Decree No. 77/2023.

251. For each SDG there is a designated lead institution responsible for monitoring and reporting on its implementation. In July 2023, a Permanent Working Group was formed to support the Development Council, comprising experts from the lead institutions, partner institutions, and the National Statistical Institute (NSI). The NSI elaborated a National list of indicators to measure progress towards the SDGs. The list was approved with the Council of Ministers' Decision № 613 of 11 September 2023 and published on NSI's website.

252. The National Development Programme BULGARIA 2030 is implemented through three-year Action Plans, which are elaborated and updated on an annual basis. In September 2023, an analysis was conducted to identify policy areas in need of attention, leading to additional measures incorporated into the second Action Plan under the National Development Programme BULGARIA 2030. These efforts underscore Bulgaria's commitment to fulfil its SDG obligations and improve national development outcomes in a transparent and accountable manner.

V. Conclusion

253. Bulgaria will continue its consistent efforts to ensure full compliance with all international human rights treaties to which the State is a party and guarantee the protection of the human rights of its citizens. Bulgaria will further contribute to the activities of various UN bodies committed to the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

¹³ The National Development Programme Bulgaria 2030 is available in English <https://www.minfin.bg/en/1394>