

# Country Report Bulgaria

## Eurochild Child Guarantee Taskforce

Recommendations for the Child  
Guarantee National Action Plan  
in Bulgaria



**Eurochild**  
Putting children at  
the heart of Europe

## Taskforce Lead

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Hope and Homes for Children - Bulgaria



There are 1,189,680 children in Bulgaria. Children make up 17.1% of the total population. 36.2% of children in Bulgaria are at risk of poverty or social exclusion

# Governance

## National actors and their functions

At the time of publishing this report, it was not possible to name the National Coordinator for the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria. The European Commission publishes [a list of National Coordinators](#) as provided by the national governments. It is not necessarily up-to-date.

In Bulgaria, three Ministries have a major commitment to the European Child Guarantee, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Health. Cross-sectoral policies are not well developed in Bulgaria and in many cases are completely absent.

## Best practices of reaching out to stakeholders and relevant parties

To date, there has not been an open campaign to promote the European Child Guarantee and to involve all stakeholders in Bulgaria due to the current political situation. However, in the last quarter of 2021, more than 40 experts from various fields were

invited by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy to join an Interdepartmental Working Group for the Development of the National Action Plan for the Child Guarantee. The group included representatives from almost all ministries, government agencies, as well as representatives of the non-governmental sector, business, trade unions, UNICEF Bulgaria, academics and researchers. The consultation was conducted online and each organisation had the opportunity to provide proposals on the structure of the National Action Plan and identify opportunities for contributing to its future implementation based on their activities in the field of access to services for children. However, the group has not met again, since November 2021.

According to the draft National Action Plan, the Bulgarian government is considering setting up consultations with children on the Child Guarantee. We strongly recommend that the consultation should involve the widest possible range of stakeholders, especially those working in the field who know the profile of different groups of children, as well as the barriers and reasons why change to children are at risk of poverty and who can provide working solutions.

## Main Recommendations by Taskforce Bulgaria

- The government needs to clearly and concretely state the commitments, goals and powers of the National Coordinator and needs to instil accountability and commitment from across relevant national institutions and government agencies involved in implementing the Child Guarantee;
- The National Coordinator needs to be able to effectively monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Child Guarantee. This can only be done through a comprehensive and robust data monitoring process at national level that also aligns to an EU level monitoring framework;
- The Child Guarantee must be adequately and transparently funded, with EU Funds and a national budget. The National Coordinator needs to be able to monitor and evaluate the budget to be able to effectively implement the Child Guarantee;
- Children's policies deserve special attention and a targeted approach that outlines problems and places a real focus on child poverty and possible solutions in the short and long term.

# Children in Need and Outreach Measures

## Towards a consensus on who children in need are and why

One in three children in Bulgaria lives at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Poverty implies not only material deprivation, but also diverse challenges to access basic services. The dimensions of child poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria can be seen from the following data:

- Poverty line: BGN 451.00 (EU 225.00) / month per household member;
- Persons below the poverty line: 23.8% (1,659,900 people);
- Proportion of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion: 33.3%;
- Proportion of children living in poverty: 28.3%;
- Share of children living in material deprivation: 38.5%;
- Large families at risk of poverty: 59.2%;
- Single-parent families at risk of poverty: 39.5%;
- Students at risk of dropping out of school: 25% (180,000).

There are significant regional differences in the numbers of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. However, from the data, the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion is for large families

(nearly 67% of families, with two adults and three or more dependent children). The next risk group is single parents (nearly 49% of single-parent families with dependent children).

The educational status of the parents is also important; children are ten times more likely to be at risk of poverty and social exclusion when their parents have primary level/lower education compared to children whose parents have higher education.

The employment status of parents and the intensity of economic activity of households are essential with 90.3% of children in households with an intensity of economic activity of less than 20% are at risk of poverty, and this figure decreases with the increasing intensity of economic activity of parents.

## Stepping up efforts – reaching more children in need

There is much to be done in Bulgaria to achieve the outcomes of the Child Guarantee. A starting point should be to create a comprehensive approach to the planning, implementation and monitoring of policies addressing child poverty and social exclusion. This could be done by:

- Defining child poverty as a separate problem for which specific goals and specific indicators should be formulated;
- Establishing mechanisms for intersectional exchange of information and cooperation across government ministries, municipalities, social services providers and NGOs, working with children and families;
- Supporting a comprehensive reform of human resource policy and the provision of human resources in the childcare sectors. In particular, the social sector and the child protection system, creating effective working mechanisms of interaction between institutions working with children and families, with a special focus on children in need.

Reducing child poverty and increasing child welfare in Bulgaria is impossible without breaking the cycle of generational poverty. A new policy approach is urgently needed. This process must involve parents and families by:



- Supporting parents to be active participants in the labour market through different services which are connected to the support of the family and the child;
- Ensuring inclusion and active involvement in the services and activities that support the child, having a family-oriented approach, as well as rethinking the system of social assistance.

## Key Services and Policy Reform for Children in Need

### Current national policies and strategies

The most recent and complete review and analysis of the legislation in the field of children's rights are included in the UNICEF, A Deep Dive into the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria, (UNICEF ECARO and UNICEF Bulgaria, 2022), [forthcoming](#). The following analysis of key services and policy reform are based on this report.

As the Deep Dive into the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria report states, the current legislative framework relating to social assistance, the [Family Benefits for Children Act](#) in Bulgaria does not create a favourable environment for overcoming poverty due to an inadequate coverage of the guaranteed minimum income. There are one-time and monthly childcare allowances, as well as tax relief, but these measures fail to adequately compensate for inequalities, are not linked to social support, and some of them are discriminatory. For example, disproportionate

suspensions of monthly allowances for unexcused absences from school.

The [Child Protection Act](#) does not explicitly address the topic of child poverty, but formulates principles for action such as ensuring the best interest of the child are respected, identifies the categories of children at risk and determines the protection measures and their sequence and family support.

The [National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2021-2030](#) is the main national instrument that the government uses regarding the reduction of child poverty. The strategy proposes an integrated approach to activities based on children's rights. The strategy focuses on several target groups of children, but unfortunately there is very little data available on these children and it does not include all the mentioned groups. There is a lack of in-depth analysis of the factors that determine child poverty and the intersectionality of children in the

target groups. The strategy pays special attention to the parents of dependent children, for example by including measures to encourage employers to hire unemployed parents with children and organising training to update the knowledge and skills of parents after parental leave.

### Gaps and omissions in current national policies

The legislative framework relating to social assistance does not create a favourable environment for overcoming poverty due to inadequate coverage of the guaranteed minimum income. Social assistance in Bulgaria is designed so that it does not lead to a real 'lifting out of poverty' for most of its beneficiaries, as the conditions for receiving benefits are limited to a very small group of families, and does not achieve the goal of leading to real change in the quality of life. At the same time, there are forms of assistance that are very minimum but are aimed at a very wide range of families, some of whom do not need benefits, but do need other forms of support. There is still no support system in place for energy poverty and utilities, which is one of the factors leading to very poor housing conditions for many children.

There are one-off benefits for pregnancy and child-rearing (including those not linked to family income) and monthly benefits that are linked to income and school attendance. For the upbringing of children with permanent disabilities in a family environment, as well as for children raised by a single parent, family benefits are provided regardless of the family's income. While total public spending on social assistance in the period of 2015-2019 has increased by more than 25%, childbirth and parental benefits have witnessed little to no increase.



Other significant relevant frameworks include the National Development Programme of Bulgaria 2030 and the Draft National Plan for Reconstruction and Sustainability of the Republic of Bulgaria. These documents set out priorities, target groups and areas of intervention aimed at reducing inequalities and social exclusion. However, as stated in the forthcoming UNICEF Deep Dive into the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria report, they do not present child poverty as a separate sub-objective and, consequently, do not prioritise it.

At the moment we do not have detailed information on specific measures for the implementation of the Child Guarantee and combating child poverty. The only developed part of the National Plan contains only general positions and areas of impact without mentioning any specific measures. Furthermore, the available part of the plan completely omits considerations on the regional and local level.

A Strategic Framework for the Quality of Early Education and Care is currently being finalised. This should be available in January 2022. This instrument will also fill a regulatory gap with regard to early childhood development and early education and care services for children aged 0-7. Its upcoming adoption should launch serious reforms in this sector. A large-scale legal framework for the new Social Services Act is currently being developed. This framework will become the basis for reform in services provision and support, including services for children. The adoption of secondary legislation on the implementation of the Social Services Act is expected to facilitate access to the provision of services, create quality and financial standards.

Social workers in Bulgaria are critically understaffed and underpaid. This poses a great risk on the quality of the provided services due to constant personnel changes. In addition, people who went through the qualification process tend to leave the system very soon. There is a need not only for better wages for social workers, but also for supervision, intervention, support and further training, qualifications and professional development.

We believe there is a need for a comprehensive review of legislation affecting children. Currently, legislation is not well synchronised, some of it is outdated.

Real reform requires the complete removal of barriers to access for all vulnerable groups of children to all services. This requires an approach aimed at active engagement with parents, which is inclusive and supportive. There is also a need to change attitudes within society, that will lead to the removal of stigma and restrictions that create and enforce the marginalization of these children. Attention should be given to: removing barriers to the access of all children to health, education, social and other public services; creating an approach that involves and supports parents and carers; promoting systematic and consistent work to eliminate stigma and discriminatory practices.

An Updated Action Plan with a horizon to 2025 for the implementation of the National Strategy Vision for Deinstitutionalization of children in the Republic of Bulgaria ( 2010 - 2025), should be elaborated in line with the National Action Plan for the Child Guarantee. The closure of old-type institutions is not an end goal of the reform process but a means for achieving what is best for every individual child in the context of social inclusion and a family environment.

A National Paediatric Strategy is also needed, as child healthcare services suffer from staff shortages; do not ensure quality services to eliminate regional disparities; and there is a predominance of hospital care over early intervention such as pre-hospital care and prevention.

## Building an Enabling Policy Framework to create a ‘whole of government approach’

### Current national policies and strategies on children and young people

Children are not adequately recognised in the general measures to reduce poverty and support families, as there is insufficient recognition and understanding in government that child poverty is a problem in itself. This has resulted in national institutions working in isolation from each other and matters being addressed only as ad hoc problems. There has not been the creation of long-term plans and policies that structure a comprehensive approach, a clear vision, transparent financial plans, secure and sustainable resources, and the recognition of human capital.

Since the beginning of 2021, Bulgaria is both in a crisis caused by the COVID pandemic and a political crisis, which includes elections being held three times in one calendar year, as well as presidential elections. The new government, consisting of a coalition of 4 parties, was elected on December 13, 2021 with Prime Minister Kiril Petkov. Due to this, it is impossible to predict what will be the policies and principles of the new government.

### Suggested steps to improve the national response to child poverty

The Child Guarantee must be adequately funded, and that funding must be transparent. The EU Funds include ESF+ funding, which must be at least 5% of the ESF+ allocation. This means that the Government of Bulgaria must financially support the Child Guarantee with EU Funds and a national budget. There are high hopes that the new government and new political players will bring a new style of work more in line with European standards and trends. A key factor in building an enabling and effective framework for child-centred policies is the general understanding of the importance of the issue. Children's policies deserve special attention and a targeted approach that outlines problems and places a real focus on child poverty and possible solutions in the short and long term, include financial securities to a much greater extent (change of socio-cultural and economic models, behaviour, attitudes, life prospects). They should benefit from the creation of comprehensive support through services and qualified professionals.

# Accountability - Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

## Existing checks and balances

There is a lack of sufficient and systematically collected data to build a comprehensive profile for specific groups of children. For many groups of children there are no data, including the number of sub-groups, for example, the education children with disabilities are receiving, which is partly a problem of defining the boundaries of the group. It is necessary to create a framework and collect quantitative and qualitative data on the number, profile and factors influencing the lives of children living in each of the groups. To effectively monitor the implementation of the Child Guarantee nationally and across EU countries, national specificities must be taken into account.

## Suggested steps towards a more robust monitoring and evaluation framework

In Bulgaria, the monitoring process should include specific data on: the number of children in residential care (institutions and residential social services); the number of children in alternative care; the number of children in formal family-based care; the percentage of children in residential care as a proportion of the total number of children in alternative care; children with disabilities (in all forms of care, including family care); child labour; school dropouts; children of single parents; orphans; migrant children; child victims of trafficking, exploitation, and domestic violence (or other forms of abuse).

There is no dedicated Children's Ombudsperson in Bulgaria. However, there is a large amount of support for an Ombudsperson and the vast circle of non-government organisations (NGOs) currently working for the benefit of children and in the field of children's policies can provide much knowledge and expertise. However, the capacity of NGOs in Bulgaria is limited by financial instability. They are also negatively affected by the attacks on the NGO sector in recent years, coming from far-right movements, traditional and religious formations and the spread of misinformation and fake news. In this sense, NGOs are in great need of external and internal support for their work and for

the establishment of civil society as a working and meaningful corrective aid to the state, especially with regard to holding the government accountable.

NGOs in Bulgaria will continue to participate in all the working groups, consultations and formations that are relevant to the application of the Child Guarantee, as well as initiating our own activities to influence the government institutions. The Eurochild Child Guarantee Taskforce in Bulgaria is planning to develop a communication strategy that aims to reach the maximum number of people - not only professionals but also citizens, to inform them of the European Child Guarantee, and to understand the goals, benefits and the opportunities it provides. However, the National Coordinator should organise a series of events on the topics of the Child Guarantee, with the aim to educate the representatives of the involved institutions about the national context and about possible solutions. The National Network for Children are keen to discuss these ideas further with the National Coordinator, when nominated.

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**The Eurochild Child Guarantee Taskforce in Bulgaria has extensive experience in working with different governments and institutional partners over the years and in the dynamically changing environment of NGOs. We are able to create the necessary prerequisites and relationships with the responsible institutions and politicians to closely monitor and influence the implementation of the Child Guarantee while protecting the best interests of the child and high standards practices.**

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