

Advancing the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria

Position Paper

The European Child Guarantee aims to break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion for children in the EU by ensuring access to quality key services. The implementation of the European Child Guarantee (ECG) in Bulgaria is a crucial step toward ensuring that every child has access to essential services such as early childhood development, quality education, housing, healthcare, nutrition, and family support. With a focus on all children living in extreme poverty, including Roma children and children with disabilities.

This position paper acknowledges Bulgaria's progress in implementing the ECG and provides recommendations for closing existing gaps based on the discussions from the three-day event, 5-7th March, in Sofia that brought together a diverse group of stakeholders including NGO leadership, policymakers, researchers, advocates and activists focused on child welfare, rights, and development. The recommendations are presented in no particular order of priority.

1. Progress:

1.1 Effective Implementation of ECG:

- Government plans to define and map extreme child poverty.

1.2 Early Childhood Development Services (ECDS):

- More children are using ECDS, and more services are available.
- Good practices for children with special educational needs.
- Free early childhood education and care settings.
- Free food in kindergartens.

1.3 Education:

- Reduced school dropout rates.
- Reform in legal educational framework.
- Increase in teacher's remuneration.
- Free textbooks for children up to 16.

1.4 Family Strengthening:

- Fewer children in institutions and recognition of the importance of a family or community approach.
- Family strengthening approach in some services.

1.5 Health:

- Increase in immunisation.
- Free healthcare services for children.

1.6 Nutrition:

- National association in support of breastfeeding.
- Free vouchers for meals for children aged 0-3.

1.7 Housing:

- Some good practices at the local level.
- Local coordination mechanisms in some municipalities.

2. Key Recommendations to Effectively Implement the ECG:

2.1 Interventions of ECG should be directed at the most vulnerable children and families.

- It is essential to **collect relevant data** and create **national indicators** to monitor and evaluate the success of the Child Guarantee. **Monitoring and evaluation** should be **transparent**, allowing for accountability and continuous improvement.
- **The voices of children and parents'** must be included in the decision-making processes. Mechanisms should be established to ensure their meaningful participation and regular feedback.
- **Funding** should be flexible to adapt to the changing needs of those it aims to support, with efforts to **diversify funding** sources to ensure **sustainability**. Funding applications must be transparent and uncomplicated to complete.
- Municipalities must **work effectively and collaboratively** across sectors, including **NGOs** and the **private sector**, to ensure coordinated and impactful solutions.
- Investment in **service providers to tackle the shortages of social workers** and ensure **quality services**.
- **Local measures** must address **local problems**, and ensure relevant and effective cross-sectoral collaboration.

2.2 Family Strengthening

- A more **holistic system** should be developed to target **families and children in rural and areas of extreme poverty**, ensuring access to community-based support services such as family counselling, employment assistance, and healthcare.
- Create national policies that support **families**, ensuring Roma experts are included in all stages of the policy creation.
- Best practices for **stakeholder engagement** should be mapped, evaluated and scaled up to ensure broader reach and impact.
- **Parental support** should be prioritised, helping parents to better care for and nurture their children. It is also essential to **ensure a safe family environment** for children, providing the resources and support needed for healthy family dynamics.
- To increase Roma children's attendance, funding should be provided to employ parents at the education centres, e.g. as supportive staff while their children attend and develop basic skills.
- Provide a specialised training to foster families that take care of children with disabilities.

2.3 Early Child(hood) Development Services

- Must be **quality-driven, integrated, and accessible** at the **local** level.
- A **comprehensive home-visiting and screening program** should be established to provide **parental support**, ensuring families receive guidance on child development and early learning. This approach should involve **specialist professionals**, including sufficient experts in **special educational needs**, to **identify and address the needs of every child** from the earliest stages.
- Make early childhood education and care (ECEC) accessible and inclusive to the most vulnerable children, including those who grew up in alternative care, by opening new facilities or expanding the capacities of the existing ones. Avoid segregation in ECEC services.
- Services should meet the individual needs of a child through a **family-centred approach**, through **early intervention strategies**, and ensuring that families have access to **clear and practical information** about available resources and support systems. For children without parental care, alternative caregivers and professionals should be equipped with the necessary training, support and resources to provide consistent and nurturing early development opportunities.
- Ensure training for early years' teachers and professionals focusing on children's rights and the holistic needs of the child. This should include a focus on supporting children from alternative care backgrounds, recognising their specific emotional and developmental needs, and equipping professionals with trauma-informed approaches.

2.4 Access to Quality Education:

- It is essential to ensure **quality, inclusive education** in **local facilities**, working closely with parents and the community starting from ECEC.
- **Teacher training** should include **inclusivity** and **adapting learning** to meet diverse needs, including overcoming language barriers for the child, alongside **child development training** to understand how children grow and learn.
- **Education should be truly free**, including **transport** and **learning supplies and materials**. For example, a free transport card or vouchers for travel for students.
- Schools should be **safe spaces**, and efforts should be made to **counteract bullying** by both children and teachers, while ensuring **children's voices** are heard through **children's councils or parliaments** in schools.
- **Health education** should be integrated into the curriculum, and the goal of ensuring **single-shift systems** in Bulgarian cities by 2026 should be achieved.

2.5 Strengthening and Expanding Housing Solutions:

- Develop a comprehensive national housing strategy that treats social housing as a long-term municipal investment, focusing on cross-sector coordination and infrastructure development. This strategy should incorporate a Housing First approach, prioritising Roma children and families, and include options for beneficiary self-participation.
- To address local resistance, **community engagement** and **awareness campaigns** should be implemented, highlighting the **benefits** of inclusive housing policies.
- **NGOs and civil society** must be actively involved in planning and implementation.
- A solution should be found to ensure **social housing for children who grew up in residential care**, providing them with stable living conditions.
- Additionally, a **clear process** should be established to **legalise informal settlements**, ensuring safe access to housing and services for vulnerable families.

2.6 Improving Health Systems:

- To improve healthcare access for all children living in poverty in Bulgaria, it is crucial to provide **free access to medication and healthcare**, prioritising those in **extreme poverty**.
- Focus should be on **preventative care**, including **early screening**, preventive treatment, and **community health programmes** addressing local issues.
- **Mental health services** and **psychological support** must be expanded, beginning in maternity wards and hospitals, with a particular focus on children with disabilities and their families.
- **Health funding** should be increased, with **specialists in rural areas** to improve access.
- **Rare diseases** should be prioritised, and a **national children's hospital** should be established.

- Healthcare services should be **child-friendly**, with more **health (medical) professionals**, including **health mediators for Roma**, to improve accessibility.
- **Health education** should be included in schools.
- **Cooperation is needed across health services**, and also with education and social care services.

2.7 Nutrition (Free Healthy Meals)

- To improve nutrition for children in Bulgaria, **free warm meals** should be provided in schools to ensure no child goes hungry.
- **Healthy food** must be made **affordable** and **accessible** for all families.
- There should be more **information on healthy eating** for both parents and children, for example, board games for children, alongside clearer **food labels** to help families make informed choices.
- Support for **breastfeeding from birth** should be encouraged and promoted.
- Additionally, **free food vouchers** (for vulnerable families with children between 0-3) should be implemented with streamlined processes to remove bureaucratic barriers, and data should be collected to assess their **use** and **impact** on child nutrition.
- Social services should have **an emergency fund** for material support and prevention in crisis situations, and also provide for food.

To ensure the full and effective implementation of the ECG in Bulgaria, it is evident a **holistic and multi-faceted approach** is needed. Establishing a robust system for tracking child well-being indicators - in collaboration with universities and research centres - will enhance data collection and monitoring, allowing for evidence-based policy decisions. Strengthening collaboration between **government agencies, NGOs, the private sector and research institutions** will improve service delivery and efficiency. Additionally, securing **long-term national and EU funding** is essential to sustaining ECG initiatives and ensuring that resources are allocated effectively to support the most vulnerable children and families.

The European Child Guarantee presents a transformative opportunity to improve the lives of children and families in Bulgaria. While progress has been made in key areas, sustained efforts and targeted investments are required to address existing gaps. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this paper, Bulgaria can move closer to ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, has access to the essential services they need to thrive.

This position paper was co-developed by 70 policymakers, activists, and researchers, and has been endorsed by 22 individuals and organisations. Below are the signatories that agreed to be visible:

CEDAR foundation

Central Union for Child Welfare

Code Participation Foundation

CONCORDIA Bulgaria Foundation

Community Social Centre “Our House” Foundation

Karin Dom Foundation

Know-how Centre for Alternative Care for Children, New Bulgarian University

Hope and Homes for Children Romania

Nataliya Hristova-Mihaylova

Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth

SOS Children's Villages Bulgaria

The Social Teahouse

Trust for Social Achievement