

*No More Children in Institutions: The Success Story of Bulgaria's Child Care Reform*

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Velina Todorova's presentation

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Dear guests,

In general, the institutional model of child care is built on the notion that the state is the best care provider for children lacking parental care. However, for a long time now this concept has been challenged in many societies based on scientific research giving evidence about the harmful effects of institutions on children. The public debate on the child care model in Bulgaria though started only after the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991.

At that time the main reasons for parents to resort to institutional care were predominantly related to social problems as well as disabilities. Thus a demand for public care was created over time (for instance orphans account for less than 2% of children in institutions). Unfortunately, child abandonment is still common with around 2 000 babies entering the system per year, an alarming issue constantly addressed by experts and the civil society. Another negative aspect of the old Bulgarian system was the long term duration of child care - the exit from the institution was mainly through adoption, transfer to another institution or reaching the age of majority.

In the 1990s the emerging civil society inspired by the principles and provisions of the Convention started the movement towards the child care reform in Bulgaria. The latest HR Convention - the CRPD had a similar positive impact.

However, the Conventions were introduced to a society still lacking sufficient knowledge about the alternative models of child care and children's rights in general.

In Bulgaria the reform actually started with the adoption of the Child Protection Act in 2000. As an expert and an NGO activist I was deeply involved in all processes related to drafting the law and the advocacy work for its adoption and full implementation. The law introduced for the first time the model of a child-focused protection system based on the best interest of the child principle. The law made the shift from institutional care to family-type alternative care and the establishment of family support services to prevent separation of the child. The follow-up actions of the Government were to decentralize the system by delegating the management of the institutions to municipalities while keeping the authority over the standards setting and monitoring as well as the funding of the core services. This enabled the local communities to be gradually involved in child care and to become aware of the issues around the deinstitutionalization policy. This was followed by the inclusion of the civil society and the private sector in the delivery of social services which was of crucial importance for the success of the process. Today NGOs in Bulgaria provide 20% of all child care services.

Today we call our deinstitutionalization story a success. This success is the result of a very long and complex social transformation which is still on-going, and a long-term commitment, knowledge and expertise as well as efforts to balance the interests of different actors.

The reform started in 2000 but a good progress was made only after 2007 - 2008 when the society was alerted about severe violations of the rights of mentally disabled children placed in institutional care. More than 300 death cases of such children were made public and thus were investigated afterwards. UNICEF played a crucial role in mobilizing the civil society, the media and the general public to push for change in the policies and practices related to child care.

The major policy shift came in 2009 when the Government adopted an ambitious long-term deinstitutionalization plan envisaging the closing down of all large child care institutions in Bulgaria. This breakthrough plan was elaborated in close collaboration with the civil society and UNICEF, and was supported both politically

and financially by the European Commission, which was instrumental for its implementation.

Since 2009 the number of children in specialized institutions in Bulgaria has dropped three times (130 institutions in 2010 and 38 in 2015). All institutions for children with mental disabilities have now been closed down. Those children were either integrated in the biological or the extended family or moved to small group homes. It is important to note that decision was taken for every child individually based on the specific needs assessment with the aim to prevent any additional harm to the child. For the same period the number of services in the community for children and their families has doubled (241 in 2010 and 543 in 2015). The Government should fulfil its commitment to close all institutions for children below the age of 3 combined with a legal ban on the placement of infants in institutions.

The process of moving away from institutional care to family-based alternative child care services in the community is now considered irreversible in Bulgaria. This is a major achievement but many challenges still remain which have to be addressed in a systematic and coordinated manner in order to achieve sustainability of results by safeguarding the best interest of every child.

The civil society plays a crucial role in moving the process forward. It is important also to keep the Government strongly committed to the reform and to ensure the meaningful participation in the process of all relevant actors, particularly the healthcare and education system and the judiciary, which would result in the effective prevention of child abandonment.

Experts in Bulgaria have identified the following key recommendations for the next stage of the process - take measures to ensure the effective functioning of the new network of services and the child protection system as a whole, provide targeted funding, support the constant capacity building and ensure coordination of policies.

As an expert I strongly believe that the real objective of the reform is not only to close down the child care institutions but most importantly to ensure that every child lives with his/her family or in a family-like environment.

It has been a long journey and we are not there yet but we have made a good progress.

I am proud to have been an active participant in the whole process and remain fully committed to its successful completion as I believe that every child deserves to grow up in a loving, supportive and caring environment.

Deinstitutionalization of child care was the first major topic that I was involved in when I started my professional career more twenty-five years ago. This was a great motivation for me to continue to work in other important areas related to children's rights such child labour, trafficking in children, violence against children, justice for children, children in migration.

I am deeply honoured to be the first Bulgarian candidate to the Committee on the Rights of the Child and I am willing to share my knowledge and expertise and to contribute to the work of the Committee.

Thank you for your attention and for your interest in the topic!