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## Process of deinstitutionalization of children at risk in Bulgaria

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### Abstract

In recent years in Bulgaria the type of institutional care for children at risk is changing giving priority to family and close to family environment. The will to implement this process of all involved responsible agencies, institutions and non-governmental organizations has found expression in a number of regulations, strategic and program documents, as well as innovative and successful practices. Economic, political and social changes that accompany the transition has led to new problems and exacerbated existing problems. Current study makes analyses of the national strategy for deinstitutionalization of children and concludes on important recommendations concerning national policy development. The policy should be based on the respect of child rights, norms, standards and principles of universality, indivisibility and nondiscrimination, while characterized by high sensitivity, flexibility and preparedness to meet the challenges. It is important and necessary to develop a policy that will not only offer appropriate care for children at risk in the short term, but will prevent similar problems in the future.

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### 1. Introduction

Deinstitutionalization is the process of replacing institutional care for children with care in a family or family-like environment in the community, not limited to the children leaving institutions. This is the process of preventing the placement of children in institutions, creating new opportunities for children and families to receive support in the community. It takes place on many levels [1]: working with families and professionals from social and close to it fields on prevention of abandonment and institutionalization of children with a view to the

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limiting and gradually cease of placing children in institutions and to support the reintegration of children in their native families; reform and work in the social welfare system for the implementation of programs for social support and protection to support the native and the extended family for the prevention of abandonment and encouragement of growing children in a family environment; provision of alternative forms of services and care in order to create opportunities for children to leave institutions or prevent their accommodation; promotion and development of adoption fostering care with a focus on development of services for children 0-3 years; engaging the public in the support to children leaving institutions and their social inclusion; putting children and families at the center of the work of all working with children.

The main principles as accepted by the National strategy "Vision for deinstitutionalization of children in Bulgaria"[1] are the following: actions to protect the interests of the child according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the guiding principle that the interests of the child should be placed above the interests of all others, including parents, potential adoptive parents, foster parents or staff of the institution; the family is the best environment for child development - all working in the field of de-institutionalization should have a common understanding about the negative impact that institutional care has on children and how important is child to grow in a family environment; social inclusion of children is paramount - it must be achieved by providing opportunities for all children to participate in all aspects of community life, incl. attending local kindergartens and schools and use local health, transport and other public services.

Some of the key factors that influence the institutionalization are: insufficient number of services for children and families that meet complex needs and uneven distribution throughout the country; lack of financial resources, which often resulted in the exclusion of families and placement of children in institutions; lack of developed system of alternatives to institutional care community-based; prevailing medical model to child's disabilities, according which the institution offer the best care for children; lack of inclusive social and architectural environment; changed patterns of family behavior that lead to an increase in illegitimate births and parents who provide care for children by their own.

The process of deinstitutionalization of children in the Republic of Bulgaria enters its most important phase in 2014. It is the most important stage - the actual change for children from the specialized agencies and placing them in new services, supported by the implementation of projects that are working to implement the National strategy for deinstitutionalization of children in the Republic of Bulgaria [1] and the action plan to it [2]. They are funded by European structural funds through operational programs and carried out by the State agency for protection of children, Social Assistance Agency at the Ministry of labor and social policy and Ministry of health. Despite investment, life of children in residential care is not getting better, neither quality services get better. Institutional organization of life can not meet the basic needs of children, and has a negative impact on their development and behavior. This, in turn, leads to further economic and social cost to society.

## **2. Peculiarities of the process of deinstitutionalization in Bulgaria: problems and perspectives**

### *2.1. Background of the problem*

Institutions for children are part of the legacy left by the totalitarian state, which established the policy based on the idea that the state is able to better care for children than their families. This policy continued for more than 40 years and left lasting traces on public attitudes and mentality of people in the country. Twenty years after the political changes, the institutionalization of child care in Bulgaria continues to be an unresolved issue that can not be explained only with the totalitarian past. The lack of clear political will to close the homes lead to their "reform" and "restructuring", which are often has been perceived as repairs of the buildings and did not lead to a significant change in the way of care and children's lives.

Not all establishments that provide care and shelter for children are defined as an institution. As institutions are identified those imposing strict life that do not provide necessary attention and individual care, vital for the

development of a child lacking personal concern of the people with whom he/she is in contact. Often children stay indefinitely. Usually they are unable to maintain relations with their biological parents and there are no attempts to support the families with the aim of reintegration of the children if it is in their best interest [3].

Collected data [1] in December, 2009 show the existence of 137 boarding institutions (Table 1). Annual allowance per child amounts to over 3000 euro for different types of institutions. Total annual allowance per institution provided by budgetary grants amounts to over 4 million euro. In addition to the budgetary grant pointed above donations in cash and kind only for specialized institutions in 2008 amounted to near 3 million euro for 2008. The trend towards reducing the number of children placed in institutions, started even before the adoption of the national strategy, but in the period 2010-2014 it has accelerated and it is fair to acknowledge that in a greater part this was due to work on the projects of the national plan for deinstitutionalization [4].

Table 1. Boarding institutions where children are permanently separated from the family environment (excluding educational boarding schools and social and pedagogical boarding schools)

Type of an institution	Number	Number of accommodated children	Annual allowance per child in the different types of institutions Standard per child (in euro)	Total annual allowance for different types of institutions (2009) Annual allowance (in euro)	Total amounts of donations (2008) Amount of donations (in euro)
Homes for medical and social care for children aged 0-3 years	32	2421	3366.85	14701868.77	875131.79
Homes for children deprived of parental care aged 3-18 years	80	3770	3430.77	18987846.59	1288849.24
Homes for mentally retarded children and homes for children with physical disabilities	24+1	1386	3906.27	6375042.82	772586.06
Total number / Total amount	137	7577	-	40064758.18	2936567.08

## 2.2. Goals and approaches in the recent reforms in the system of deinstitutionalization of children in Bulgaria

The main goal in the undertaken reform is to guarantee children's right to a family environment and access to quality care and services according to their individual needs. Among the specific goals the following should be mentioned [1]: legislative regulation, funding and staffing of a wide range of services for children and families in the community on the basis of the best practices and attracting innovative approaches; increasing the capacity in the system of child protection by clearly defined and efficient allocation of powers and responsibilities of child protection, service providers and the provision of adequate professional capacity for the effective operation of the system; closure of 137 institutions for children within 15 years from the adoption of the national strategy; prevention of the placement and growing children from 0 to 3 years in residential care of any type after the reform. Long-term goals in the reform of the system are focused on: creation of services for prevention of the placement of children under 3 years outside of their families and the development of alternative family care for children who are separated from their families; and replacement of homes for children with new integrated services in the field of health and social welfare in community to support families with young children and special attention is directed to children with disabilities. Short-term goals include development and implementation of projects aimed at providing integrated services in the field of health and social welfare.

The approaches in the process of the deinstitutionalization could be summarized as follows: for each child there should be implemented needs' assessments that include an evaluation of parental capacity and the

opportunities the child to be grown up in his/her family; no child should be taken out of an institution without a plan of action and care co-developed with the people which are taking care of him/her and will in the future, and featuring his birth family when possible; maintaining contact and emotional connection between the biological family and the child, whenever possible, should be a key element of providing constant care for each child, whether or not there is an opportunity for future reintegration; for all children from institutions intended for closure accommodation should be provided in a family or family-like environment, no child should be omitted; institutions are not closed by moving children from one institution to another; advantage to accommodation in a family environment is provided - in service demand, alternatives to stay in an institution, first all efforts should be made to reintegrate the child into his/her family home when it is appropriate and it does not endanger the child's life. Where this is not possible, opportunities to be sought for long-term solutions in the best interest of the child initially searching for accommodation in a family of friends or relatives, then in foster or adoptive parents; children are placed in residential care services for small children only when it is not possible family accommodation, and the demand for family form of care in the system of protection does not stop with the placement; search for a permanent solution for the child is a key part of the action plan and its monitoring [2] to minimize the transfer from one form of care to another; children should be included as much as possible in making decisions about the form of care that will be selected; siblings must be kept together, unless it is not appropriate and possible; after taking out children of the institutions, their capacity must be reduced to the final closure; with priority will be closed institutions for children with disabilities in parallel with homes for medical and social care of 0-3 years as stay of children in institutions of this kind and at this age is the most detrimental to their development; active involvement of staff of the institutions in the process of deinstitutionalization, development and implementation of programs for retraining and directing staff to alternative social services in order to use the existing capacity and human resources.

### *2.3. Experience in project implementation and recommendations*

The process of deinstitutionalization so far have shown a number of risks and challenges, some of which are related to specific projects of the national plan, others refer to the process as a whole [4]. The example of the project "Childhood for all" shows that troubling practices about moving children from institutions to new residential services are displayed. Children are moved without updating their assessments or without preparation. That's why sometimes this led to the return of "serious cases" from small group homes to institutions again. There are serious concerns that the relocation is carried out not by the best interests of children, but with view on the need to be filled in the places in the new services. The methodology for funding services only on the basis of the number of children placed without a separate standard maintenance services creates dependence and desires to place children in order to provide the allowance. The other observed serious problems are with the transfer of information from "the old" to "the new" services and the uncertainty about which children where are housed, as well as lack of any information on the lives of children in new services and what happens after moving. Furthermore, there is a high level of staff turnover and lack of motivation due to low pay and lack of training and supervision as well as low capacity to deal with challenging behavior.

The system of child protection is the key to the process of deinstitutionalization. For this reason the national plan were set projects and initiatives through which its capacity to be built. Unfortunately, departments "Child Protection" continue to operate under congestion and shortage of all types of resources. There is a huge turnover among social workers, making it difficult workflows in the system and work with families at risk. A major problem is the lack of standards and training of social workers to work on individual cases and the lack of an adequate support in the form of training, supervision, equipment and more.

The analyses of the practices in the period 2010-2014 has led to the recommendation for a "new" national plan for deinstitutionalization of children including the following goals [4]: preventing separation of children from their parents, including prevention of abuse and neglect; increasing the effectiveness of the protection

system;deinstitutionalization of child care and provision of alternative care.Some other statements [5] focus on the improper planning of projects' goals and expected results. Considering the project "I have a family too" it is stated that the role of nongovernmental organizations is not clear as a provider of social services and they were excluded from the application opportunities. Furthermore, it is underlined that the approach local administrations to act as social services providers suffers the lack of experience and resources. The recommendations are connected to the need of encouragement of the collaboration between local authorities and nongovernmental organizations. There are a number of critics to other implemented projects too [5] but the accent that should be pointed is the following:development of a mechanism to monitor the quality of social services for children and family that is result-oriented and allows for comparison of performance of different providers;licensing of all providers and certification of providers according to the quality of their services;elaboration of standards for social work with children, as well as standards regarding the acquisition of the profession of social worker and further improvement.The recommendations could be summarized as follows [6]: essence and attitudes towards deinstitutionalization, management and implementation of the process, resources and expertise, and community services development.

### 3. Conclusion

The use of an effective policy for the deinstitutionalization requires a change in philosophy about caring for children with a focus on: risk prevention, early intervention, family support and providing a family or close to family environment. Achievement of these goals requires an integrated policy carefully targeted to children and their families, and changes in following sectoral policies: adoption of a broad concept for the welfare of all children and to guarantee their full rights; services to support parents to fulfill their responsibilities towards their children, and not to the state to take on these responsibilities, and to improve the quality and effectiveness of alternative forms of care and services; a modern approach to the care of health, which supports women before, during and after the birth of their children and do not allow sick children and children with special needs to be separated from their parents for long periods of time; an educational system, which have a volume and resources to support the various needs of all children. a child protection system, which is clearly separated from the social assistance system; a favorable and suitable for the child justice system, where every child who appears in court - whether as a victim of a crime or accused of involvement in crime - should be considered in the first instance as a child; introduction of a new approach to funding children's services in which resources are directed to the service to meet specific needs of children and their families and efficiency, rather than to the buildings where they are available.

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