



OMBUDSMAN OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

MONITORING OF THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD IN BULGARIA

SUMMARY OF REPORT 2024

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THE CONVENTION

The Convention is a legal document with clear obligations on how rights are to be respected and fulfilled, and many of its articles refer to the conditions, resources, protection and freedoms that a child needs to achieve his or her full developmental potential. The Convention does not offer children more rights than other human beings, but recognises that additional safeguards may be needed to make sure that children have access to the human rights that everyone has. It stands out among other international agreements in that it contains the full spectrum of human rights: civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights.

The Convention is based on three categories of rights – participation, protection, and provision – and is guided by four core principles: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and respect for the views of the child. The implementation of the Convention and the Optional Protocols is monitored by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and every five years Bulgaria reports to the monitoring body on its progress in implementing the rights of the child. The CRC then makes recommendations on how to improve the protection of children's rights and often highlights where the government has done well or failed to fully realise children's rights. These recommendations are an effective mechanism for the Ombudsman institution in conducting monitoring, as well as for advocacy and campaigning to raise public attitudes towards children's rights.

According to the UN Convention, children are real actors in the transformation of our communities, and each one of them, with their abilities and talents, their faith and capacity, is part of the change. Every child has a unique potential and it can be developed in the right conditions, in a safe and secure environment, if they are loved and supported by their parents and the adults who care for them. He or she must have secure access to quality education, health care and an adequate social sector. Children's well-being is influenced by a range of factors, including their actions and relationships, the networks and resources of those who care for them, and public policies and the national context. Children need to feel that they are listened to, that the state supports their parents, and that it allocates the necessary resources for a happier childhood. It is



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important how national strategies consider children in different social, educational, financial and natural contexts.

The National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) is mandated to promote and protect the rights of children. This has been highlighted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which notes the key role that the NHRI has to play in its establishment, organization and activities to promote respect for the views of children on all issues that affect them. The existence of an independent mechanism dedicated to the protection of children's rights sends an important message to children: that they have rights and that there are means within their means to ensure that these rights are respected.

The defined objectives of the ombudsman are focused on monitoring the situation and protection of children's rights in Bulgaria, working on complaints alleging rights violations, drafting special reports, organizing initiatives and other events related to the topic, which is carried out for the benefit of Bulgarian society. Emphasis is placed on defending the rights of the most vulnerable groups of children, as well as working with children themselves and protecting their right to participation. The work of the Ombudsman is based on the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention), the ratified Optional Protocols, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and all international and European documents governing children's rights. The Ombudsman monitors the implementation of the standards of the instruments by sending special questionnaires to the protection authorities. Monitoring the implementation and enforcement of international treaties is an obligation that derives from the UN Statute A, which the Ombudsman institution received as an independent human rights organisation that complies with the Paris Principles relating to the status of NHRIs adopted by the UN General Assembly. The minimum standards for the work of human rights institutions established by these Principles commit the Ombudsman not only to propose the ratification of international human rights instruments, but also to monitor and promote their effective implementation by the competent national authorities

UN CRC IMPLEMENTATION IN BULGARIA 2024

The Ombudsman's annual report contains an overview of our country's progress in implementing the UN Convention and its optional protocols, as well as of the measures taken by national institutions in response to the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child ("the Committee"). The Ombudsman's annual monitoring provides an independent contribution to the reporting process to the Committee.

For the purposes of horizontal monitoring of the protection of the rights of the child, the Ombudsman turned to the Bulgarian institutions which, according to the Child Protection Act (CPA), are protection authorities, sending them specially prepared questionnaires. This study



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includes targeted consultations with protection authorities to gather views on the feasibility, effectiveness and benefits of national policies for children.

The questionnaires are structured around the overall implementation of the Convention, its optional protocols and the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The approach to developing the questionnaires is based on specific, measurable and achievable results for children.

Taking into account that civil society organisations play an important role in society in promoting human rights and the rights of the child, and also taking into account the proven partnership between the institution and civil society structures, in 2025 the Ombudsman turned to the For Our Children Foundation and Teach for Bulgaria with a special questionnaire to assess the situation in our country.

Recalling that the Committee examined Bulgaria's consolidated sixth and seventh periodic reports at its meetings held on 17 and 18 January 2024 and adopted its concluding observations, the Ombudsman notes that a number of recommendations were made to our country whose implementation is part of the monitoring process. The Committee welcomed the submission of the consolidated sixth and seventh periodic reports of the State party under the Convention in accordance with the simplified reporting procedure which allows for a better understanding of the situation of children's rights in the country.

The Committee welcomed the measures taken in implementation of the Convention, including amendments to the Child Protection Act (2020), Family Benefits for Children Act (2016-2023), Pre-School and School Education Act (2020), Labour Code (2022), Family Code (2023), Protection against Domestic Violence Act (2023), Criminal Procedure Code (2023), Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (2018), Asylum and Refugees Act and the Victim Support and Financial Compensation Act (2023); the adoption of the Social Services Act in 2019, Persons with Disabilities Act in 2018, Personal Assistance Act in 2018, National Strategy for the Child 2024–2030, Action Plan in Implementation of Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a European Child Guarantee (2030), National Program on Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children 2023-2026, National Strategy to Reduce Poverty and Promote Social Inclusion 2030, National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, National Youth Strategy 2021–2030 and updated Action Plan in Implementation of the National Strategy Vision of Deinstitutionalisation of Children in the Republic of Bulgaria 2016.

The Committee recalled that all rights enshrined in the Convention were indivisible and interrelated, and emphasised the importance of all recommendations contained in the concluding observations.

Despite the economic recovery and the increasingly clearer context of Bulgaria's policy to promote child well-being in a number of sectors, the measures taken are not commensurate with the scale of the challenges. Much more targeted efforts and policies are needed to put children at the centre.



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The Committee recommended that the State ensure the implementation of children's rights in accordance with the Convention, the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography throughout the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Program. The Committee called upon the State to ensure the full participation of children in the development and implementation of policies and programs aimed at achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals, insofar as they related to children.

General measures of implementation and monitoring (Articles 4, 42 and 44 (6) of the Convention)

Bulgaria was among the first States to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), enthusiastically ratifying it without reservations as early as 1991. In accordance with Article 44 of the CRC and pursuant to Article 5, para 4 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Convention became part of the State's domestic law on 13 July 1991. The entry into force of the Convention was marked by the turbulent days of Bulgaria's historic transition.

The Convention became a living instrument and inspired all those working with and for children to view its implementation not as a formal approach but as an energizing and exciting process of work for a better life for children because the Convention is not just a legal instrument guaranteeing children's rights but a set of principles and ideas for supporting and developing children and families that goes beyond legal norms.

Following the adoption of the two optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Bulgaria ratified them timely in November 2001.

As one of the objectives of monitoring, the Ombudsman sets for itself the task to develop sufficient expertise and experience to be used for the independent contribution to the national reporting process to the Committee, in accordance with the provisions of the Convention, as well as to "monitor the integrity of State reports to bodies established under international instruments relating to the rights of children, including through dialogue with the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its pre-sessional working group, as well as with other relevant treaty-based bodies".

In relation to the Committee's recommendations to Bulgaria, the **For Our Children Foundation** notes that several recommendations have not been implemented by our State:

- Improve the collection, quality, and analysis of data on children, including children with disabilities.
- Implement targeted policies and programs to eliminate discrimination against children with disabilities.
- Encourage the participation of children with disabilities in the family, community and school.



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- Strengthen early detection and early intervention services and ensure inter-institutional cooperation to refer children with disabilities to accessible and effective health services.
- Ensure the right of children with disabilities to grow up in a family environment.

The main challenges to their implementation are:

- Lack of systematic and accessible data in general on children at an early age, including children with developmental difficulties and disabilities and other vulnerable groups of children.
- Need for a comprehensive strategic vision of the State for early childhood development. In 2024, an Annual ECD Plan was adopted but no comprehensive long-term strategy.
- Need to develop a cross-sectoral system of services for parents and caregivers of young children who are at risk, have developmental difficulties, disabilities, behavioural problems or mental health support needs.
- Need to increase the number of specialists (speech therapists, model teachers) supporting the inclusion of children in pre-school and school education. Need to improve the skills of teachers and other staff in nurseries, kindergartens and schools for work with children with special educational needs.

It is important to note that, in exercising the powers and statutory functions, the Ombudsman systematically draws the attention of the Council of Ministers and the National Assembly to important international conventions and optional protocols. It is indisputable that, as an EU Member State and a party to universal human rights treaties, the Republic of Bulgaria strives to develop and improve its national legislative framework to enable and guarantee, to the maximum extent possible, the implementation of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Bulgarian citizens.

It is essential for our State to accede to all optional protocols to the relevant conventions that provide for the possibility of individual complaints in cases of violations of fundamental rights.

The Ombudsman institution strongly encourages national action to accede to the Third Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which was adopted at the 66th session of the UN General Assembly by means of Resolution 66/138 of 19 December 2011 in view of the need for enhanced protection to ensure the observance of the rights of the child. However, concerted efforts are needed to prepare in advance and to create the necessary administrative capacity and to ensure the availability of the financial resources required by the Protocol.

It should be noted that the Bulgarian legislation lacks a mechanism to regulate the implementation of recommendations made by control authorities under the relevant conventions in cases of upheld individual complaints against Bulgaria, which further complicates the decision-making process regarding our country's accession to the aforementioned optional protocols.



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The Ombudsman institution extends gratitude to all institutions and organisations to which it addressed questions for their timely responses.

General measures of implementation and monitoring (Articles 4, 42 and 44 (6) of the Convention)

Legislation

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Any law, ordinance or rule that is adopted and affects the rights of children needs to be subject to prior assessment of its compatibility with the Convention.*
- *Conduct a preliminary assessment of the impact of new legislation or amendments to existing legislation, followed by an ex-post assessment of the impact of the acts adopted.*

Overall policy and strategy

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Take action to ensure comprehensive regulation of children's rights.*
- *Adopt a National Strategy for the Child 2025–2030.*
- *Carry out systematic reforms in areas affecting children such as justice, violence and protection of the rights of children at a disadvantage.*

Coordination

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Introduce a budgeting mechanism that takes into account the perspective of children's rights, with clearly established budgetary resources for children in the relevant sectors, including specific indicators and a monitoring system.*

General principles (Articles 2, 3, 6 and 12)

Anti-discrimination

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Establish protocols for the prevention and condemnation of hate speech used by public officials and politicians and investigate incidents of racist hate speech and hate-motivated violence.*

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- Monitor effectively the impact and effectiveness of the existing anti-discrimination legislation and the relevant measures against discrimination based on ethnicity.
- Implement a multidisciplinary approach to eliminating discrimination in Bulgaria, strengthening the institutional mechanisms to promote equal treatment.

Standard of living (Articles 18 (3), 26 and 27 (1)–(3))**Recommendations of the Ombudsman**

- Improve in practice the existing social protection policies and measures aimed at eradicating child poverty.
- Increase social assistance in line with rising living costs, applying individual needs assessments.
- Repeal the provision in the Family Benefits for Children Act pursuant to which family benefits are suspended in the event of five unexcused absences from school.

Family environment and alternative care (Articles 5, 9–11, 18 (1) and (2), 20, 21, 25 and 27 (4))

o.	Social service	Number	Number of places¹
	Daycare centre for children and/or adults with disabilities	95	2 624
	Daycare centre for children with disabilities (with an early disability intervention program)	1	20
	Daycare centre in support of children with disabilities and their families	19	570
	Daycare centre for children and/or adults with disabilities with multiple disabilities	21	655
	Daycare centre for children with disabilities – weekly care	6	143

¹ Depending on the type of service, the target groups include children and adults for some numbers.

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	Social rehabilitation and integration centre	78	2 688
	Social rehabilitation and integration centre (with an early disability intervention program)	5	265
	Social support centre	172	8 020
	Social support centre/community centre for children and families	16	884
0	Mother and Child Unit	12	75
1	Centre working with children in the street	28	624
2	Crisis centre	20	212
3	Family-type accommodation centre for children/youth without disabilities	144	1 683
4	Family-type accommodation centre for children/youth with disabilities	126	1 695
5	Family-type accommodation centre for children/youth without disabilities in need of constant medical care	9	73
6	Transitional home	22	174
7	Assistant support	263	21 710
TOTAL:		1 037	42 115

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Take targeted measures to prevent the separation of children from their families and provide the necessary support resources.*
- *Perform quality monitoring of the care provided in the community and ensure specialised support services for children residing in and leaving alternative care.*
- *Improve the capacity of the protection system and enhance the inter-departmental coordination.*



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Freedom of the child from all forms of violence (Articles 19, 24 (3), 28 (2), 34, 35, 37 (a), 39 and Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography)

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Conduct a comprehensive assessment of the extent, incidence and nature of violence against children, including domestic violence, to support the implementation of the relevant strategies and programs.*
- *Ensure systematic and coordinated collection and analysis of data on violence against children by establishing a specialised national database that includes: the possibility to report more than one type of violence in annual summary reports.*
- *Improve the capacity of professionals working with and for children, including social workers and law enforcement agencies, to identify and support children at risk of violence and to prevent, report and respond to cases of violence.*

Special protection measures (Articles 22, 30, 32, 33, 35, 36, 37 (b)–(d), 38–40)

Juvenile justice

At present, **12 judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)** on various family law matters and other matters related to children's rights are in the process of execution. For the purposes of monitoring the execution by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, some of the judgments have been grouped together on the basis of their similar subject matter and the violations of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms ("the Convention") found.

Nencheva and Others v. Bulgaria (application No. 48609/06, final judgment of 18 September 2013) – death of children in the Home for Children and Youth with Several Mental Disorders in Dzhurkovo Village and ineffective investigation of these cases. The case is under the enhanced monitoring procedure.

Group of cases *A. and Others v. Bulgaria* (application No. 51776/08, final judgment of 29 February 2012), ***D.L. v. Bulgaria*** (application No. 7472/14, judgment of 17 October 2016), in standard monitoring procedure, as well as ***I.G.D. v. Bulgaria*** (application No. 70139/14, judgment of 7 September 2022) – placement in institutions of minors and underage persons. The group is under enhanced monitoring.

The latest judgment in a similar cases was issued in 2022 in *I.G.D. v. Bulgaria* and the Committee of Ministers put it immediately under enhanced monitoring. The case concerns the lack



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of direct access to automatic and periodic judicial review in relation to the placement of the applicant, a minor at risk, in a closed boarding school between 2012 and 2015 (violation of Article 5 § 4).

Group of cases *Aneva and Others v. Bulgaria* (application No. 66997/13, final judgment of 6 July 2017), *X and Y v. Bulgaria* (application No. 23763/18, final judgment of 6 February 2020) and *Pavlovi v. Bulgaria* (application No. 72059, final judgment of 1 February 2022) – failure to enforce judgments on the exercise of parental rights. The cases are in a standard monitoring procedure.

Penchevi v. Bulgaria (application No. 77818/12, final judgment of 10 May 2015) – excessive length of proceedings concerning a request for permission for a child to travel abroad in the absence of consent from a parent and an overly formalistic approach resulting in rejection; the case is under standard monitoring.

E.S. v. Romania and Bulgaria (application No. 60281/11, final judgment of 19 October 2016) – excessive length of proceedings for the recognition of a foreign judgment on parental rights; the case is in a standard monitoring procedure.

Osso v. Bulgaria (application No. 51056/21, final judgment of 13 June 2023), *Kukavica v. Bulgaria* (application No. 57202/21, final judgment of 13 June 2023) and *A. And Others v. Bulgaria* (application No. 28383/20, final judgment of 9 May 2023) – violations of Article 8 of the Convention due to the decision-making process and/or the length of court proceedings under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

Children in conflict with the law

Number and type of crimes and antisocial acts committed by children in 2024

Number of crimes committed by minors and underage persons (total)	4916
Of them: by minors	1387
by underage persons	3529
Perpetrators found (suspected) – total	4113
Of them: minors	1285
underage persons	2828
Premeditated murder (completed)	3
Premeditated murder (attempted)	1

Number of child victims of crime in 2024, by type of crime and by Articles of the Criminal Code

Number of registered criminal offenses against children (total)	189
Number of crimes uncovered against minors and underage persons (total)	952



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Child victims – total	189
Of them: minors	802
underage persons	109
Premeditated murder (Articles 115-116, 118 of the Criminal Code) – completed, the object is a minor or underage person	3
Premeditated murder (Articles 115-116, 118 of the Criminal Code) – attempt, the object is a minor or underage person	1
Robbery, Articles 198-200 of the Criminal Code	126
Theft, Articles 194-197 of the Criminal Code	252
Drug-related crimes:	2
Fornication (Articles 149-150 of the Criminal Code)	125
Rape (Article 152 of the Criminal Code) (completed)	31
Bodily injury (Articles 128-135 of the Criminal Code)	456
Hooliganism (Article 325 of the Criminal Code)	63
Crimes against marriage, family and youth (Articles 176-179, 181-193 of the Criminal Code)	440
Crimes in the situation of domestic violence	128
of which: threat	5
bodily injury	118

Number of crimes uncovered against minors and underage persons

Robbery	151
Theft	2217
Of them: Burglary	152
Pickpocketing	58
Home robbery	313
From shops	858
Of parts and items from vehicles	94
Of agricultural products, livestock and poultry	329
Drug-related crimes:	529
Fornication (Articles 149-150 of the Criminal Code)	18
Rape (Article 152 of the Criminal Code) – completed	4



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Bodily injury (Articles 128-135 of the Criminal Code)	284
Hooliganism (Article 325 of the Criminal Code)	151

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Introduce mandatory specialisation in working with children for pre-trial and judicial authorities.*
- *Improve significantly the quality of the social reports submitted by the Social Assistance Directorate to the court.*
- *Develop an individual assessment form prepared by the Ministry of Interior in cooperation with other services and adopt a methodology for the work in an inter-institutional environment.*
- *The social report is to be an important part of the individual assessment.*
- *Introduce a mechanism to protect children from secondary or repeat victimisation, intimidation or coercion at every stage of the proceedings.*
- *Phase out gradually the use of reform boarding schools and, in the meantime, ensure that every child placed in such boarding schools has access to protection measures in accordance with the Child Protection Act.*
- *Review systematically the placement of children in boarding schools with the possibility of terminating it.*
- *Take urgent measures to repeal the Combating Juvenile Anti-Social Behaviour Act and to ensure that children below the minimum age of criminal liability are not subject to punitive measures, including placement in boarding schools.*
- *Ensure that children accused or found guilty of violating criminal law are provided with qualified and independent legal aid at an early stage of the proceedings and throughout the criminal process.*

Asylum-seeking children, refugees and migrants

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Work on all signals related to violent repulsion by border officers.*
- *Limit the prolonged stay of asylum-seeking children and refugees in closed-type reception centres with living conditions that do not meet international standards.*



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- *Provide more resources for the children's access to effective integration measures.*
- *All measures need to ensure that the best interests of asylum-seeking children are a primary consideration in all asylum procedures.*

Education, leisure time and cultural activities (Articles 28–31)

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Improve the cooperation among the ministries responsible for early childhood development in order to identify and support children with SEN in a timely manner. Monitor periodically the implementation of the Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development adopted by the Council of Ministers.*

- *Analyse in detail the reasons for the sharp decline in the number of students with SEN in lower and upper secondary education and identify measures to improve it, especially in vocational education.*

- *Ensure the financial and human resources for appointment of teaching assistants in groups and classes with three or more children and pupils with SEN provided for in the Ordinance on Inclusive Education.*

- *Improve the mechanism for collecting data on the inclusion of children and pupils with SEN in the individual modules of national programs in the field of education with a view to more informed adoption of new measures and policies.*

- *Examine the accessibility of the architectural environment in municipal kindergartens and schools, as well as the availability of specialised spaces such as sensory rooms and occupational therapy rooms, in order to develop future policies to improve the facilities.*

- *Ensure sufficient human and financial resources to provide additional support for children and pupils with SEN. In this regard, the Ombudsman institution welcomes the ideas for differentiating the standards for resource support in order to take into account the greater needs of children and pupils with complex deficits.*

Health (Articles 6, 24 u 33)

Doctors by specialisations as of 31 December 2023

Total for the country

Total

Including recognised
specialisation

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Paediatric gastroenterology	12	9
Paediatric endocrinology and metabolic diseases	27	24
Paediatric cardiology	36	28
Paediatric Clinical Haematology and Oncology	32	21
Paediatric nephrology and phthysiology	37	26
Paediatric psychiatry	22	16
Paediatric rheumatology	9	9
Paediatric surgery	65	53
neonatology	270	189
paediatrics	1445	870
midwives	3 256	
Nurses – all profiles	28 570	

Recommendations of the Ombudsman

- *Focus systematically on prevention, prophylaxis and screening in children's health.*
- *Achieve integration among the systems of education, healthcare and social services.*
- *Conduct a national campaign to raise the prestige of paediatricians.*
- *Ensure sufficient human, technical and financial resources for the implementation of the activities under the National Program for Improving Maternal and Child Health 2021–2030.*
- *Promote the implementation of appropriate medical practices in maternity wards and neonatal units.*
- *Ensure the availability of health mediators throughout the country.*
- *Develop a national program for children's mental health, providing adequate resources and including measures for: therapeutic and interdisciplinary mental health services in the community; screening for mental health problems and early prevention services in schools.*



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- *Expand the scope of children and their access to medical foods for therapeutic purposes.*
- *Improving the quality of medical devices.*
- *Increase the access of children with disabilities to rehabilitation.*
- *Guarantee the access of every child to timely, quality and effective health services tailored to their needs throughout the different periods of their childhood.*

Main recommendations:

1. Ratify the Third Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
2. Introduce a mechanism to involve children in the development and fulfilment of policies and programs related to the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Program.
3. Adopt a National Strategy for the Child.
4. Develop a special procedure to assess the impact on children's rights of all policies, regulations and administrative decisions relating to children.
5. Establish a mechanism to monitor and evaluate the adequacy, efficiency and fairness of the allocation of resources for the implementation of the Convention and its protocols.
6. Improve the data collection to cover all areas of the Convention.
7. Guarantee that all children have access to independent complaint mechanisms in schools, places of detention and deprivation of liberty, residential services, foster care.
8. Create mechanisms to monitor the quality of inclusive education and to guarantee that children with special educational needs are recognised as a target group by the National Education Inspectorate, thereby bringing inclusive education in line with quality assurance standards.
9. Develop targeted measures to address the problems with the high dropout rate of children with disabilities from the education system and to ensure the right of all non-verbal children and children with special needs to inclusive education in general schools.
10. Ensure systematic and mandatory training on children's rights, the UN Convention and optional protocols for all professionals working with children and introduce special classes in higher education programs.



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11. Implement systematic reforms in the areas of juvenile justice and the protection of children at a disadvantage, including Roma, refugees, migrants, etc.
12. Take specific measures to prevent and condemn hate speech and investigate effectively specific cases.
13. Improve the coordination among the institutions in implementing the Coordination Mechanism for Unaccompanied Refugee Children and recognise the Mechanism as a working tool with a binding force. Encourage all participants in the process to sign the Coordination Mechanism.
14. Establishing a model and practices for the placement of unaccompanied children who are foreign nationals in social services for children and implement a holistic support method that reflects their specific needs.

THE OMBUDSMAN IN DEFENCE OF CHILD RIGHTS IN BULGARIA

The year 2024 was another difficult year marked by a political crisis and a series of failed attempts to form a regular parliament. This affected the sustainability of child policies, with some of the results achieved being stopped, which naturally led to a deterioration in their situation.

Taking into account the problems raised in the complaints and reports, the Ombudsman notes that children's rights are still not a sustainable social norm and remain a challenge. Poverty is a serious problem and many Bulgarian children grow up in such a situation. According to Eurostat data, Bulgaria is among the countries where the risk of poverty for children is well above the European average, with a rate of 33.9% last year.

A large number of children are still subjected to violence and abuse, as well as inequality and discrimination. Corporal punishment is socially and legally tolerated and, unfortunately, widespread. The unfinished reforms in the area of child policies violate children's rights; the situation regarding the reform of the juvenile justice system is particularly worrying. Our social environment continues to be unfriendly to children with disabilities.

Despite some encouraging achievements, Bulgarian families do not feel sufficiently supported in their responsible parenting role. The protection system needs new approaches and resources; its situation is highly alarming. Children and young people without parental care need not only our compassion, but also a sustainable social support plan to give them the chance at an effective social integration.

In 2024, 510 complaints and alerts related to children's rights were reviewed.

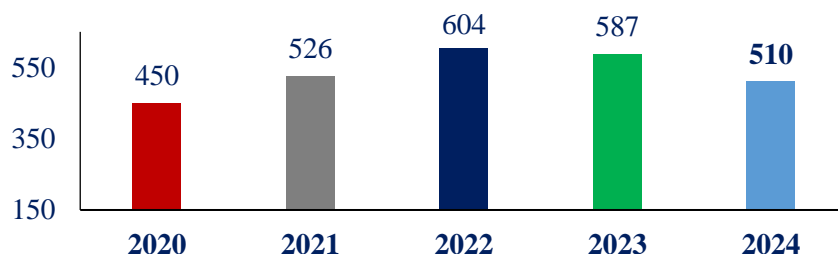
Figure 20 – *Number of complaints and signals related to the rights of the child for the period 2020–2024*



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In 2024, a **total of 562 inspections were completed** on complaints related to the rights of the child.

In the complaints where violations were found over 300 recommendations were made and over 250 opinions were expressed. More than 150 recommendations were implemented in whole or in part. Three recommendations for regulatory changes were made.

Successful intermediation was achieved in more than 50 cases. Advice was also provided in a large part of the complaints.

In certain complaints no violations were found, but recommendations or advice were given. Intermediation was carried out in 42 complaints, 29 were partially successful and 1 was unsuccessful.

The Ombudsman sent more than 400 recommendations, some of which were based on specific cases, while others concerned the rights of larger groups of children. Most recommendations were addressed to protection authorities: Social Assistance Directorates (SAD), the Social Assistance Agency (SAA), the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP), the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and regional education authorities (REAs), the Ministry of Health (MH), and the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF), followed by mayors and law enforcement agencies. In response to the recommendations, the Ombudsman was informed about the actions taken, including violations found and sanctions imposed. The Ombudsman notes that a number of recommendations made in the 2023 Annual Report Activities of the institution were not implemented in 2024 and require longer-term and comprehensive measures where adequate solutions are still being sought.

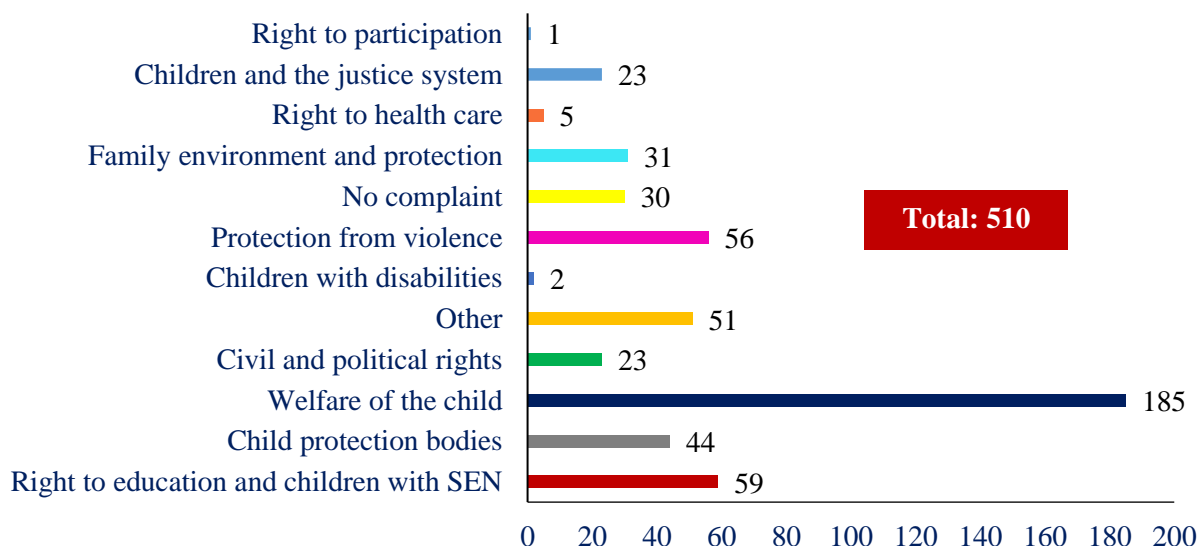
Figure 21 – *Number and % of complaints and signals in the area of the rights of the child by type in 2024*



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The issues most frequently brought to the attention of the institution include:

- Applications for financial and social support from parents who are raising their children alone and currently have no income;
- Complaints about protection measures imposed under the Child Protection Act (CPA);
- Support for children at risk;
- Children with special educational needs and their right to integration in the educational environment;
- Prolonged parental conflicts;
- Harassment at schools and quality of the education process;
- Violence and harassment at children institutions – nurseries and kindergartens;
- Sale of laughing gas and various smoking devices to minors;
- Abandoned playgrounds;
- Advertisements with inappropriate messages;
- Online harassment of a child.

Traditionally, there is a high number of complaints related to the right of children to maintain contact with both parents, involving children who grow up in an environment of parental conflict. In 2024, there was an increase in complaints seeking support to improve the social and economic protection of children suffering from poor quality of life, poor living conditions and lack of resources.



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Complaints concerning children with disabilities were particularly numerous, most of them following amendments to the legislation and their negative impact on the children's rights.

Parents are becoming increasingly sensitive when their children come into contact with the judicial system. Long delays, prohibitive court fees and an insensitive judicial system are just some of the problems brought to the attention of the Ombudsman.

The complaints related to the children's education show that the educational and social environment is not fully prepared for inclusive education. Some complaints reveal the other side of inclusion – children who are rejected and labelled as incorrigible, teachers and school principals who propose the establishment of “special schools for aggressive children”.

The problems gaining traction in 2024 include complaints from parents reporting violence against their children in childcare facilities and schools, as well as work methods and approaches that humiliate the children and undermine their dignity.

The issues being addressed include complaints related to fees for leave notes requested by doctors from parents.

Complaints from parents of children who play in sports clubs and are disadvantaged by coaches and sports conditions. More than 10 complaints were received from parents of children from SSSC Botev 2000 Vratsa water polo club who expressed their outrage at a decision taken by the Executive Director of the Water Polo Federation as a result of which their children had been removed from the national championships.

Unfortunately, there was a consistently high number of complaints related to allegations of a lack of individual approach in social work, insensitivity of the system and formality in its work.

In relation to the special medical foods for children, the institution is actively working, having been approached by a large group of non-governmental organisations working in this field. Together with these organisations, significant progress has been made in persuading the National Health Insurance Fund to reimburse therapeutic food as government care, instead of children having to wait for donation campaigns; since the spring of 2024, free food has been provided to dozens of people in need throughout Bulgaria. However, a large group of children and adults with protein-calorie malnutrition still remain without access to life-saving care.

With the support of the Ombudsman institution, the Ministry of Education and Science approved 15 days of absence with a leave note from a parent, instead of a medical note in case of a mild illness of the child. The measures were initiated upon an open letter from parents, civil society organisations, doctors, and teachers. The change has eased the burden on families and reduced the administrative burden on school principals.

The institution brings to the attention of the political and executive authorities a number of problems that were not resolved last year:

- Launch of accessible universal services for families with children;



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- A family-oriented approach has not been introduced in Bulgaria to place the child in the family at the centre of work and to invest resources in providing housing, income, services, and social norms;
- There is still no shared institutional and civic understanding of the best interests of the child;
- The state of the child protection system remains critically alarming and effective action is needed to achieve a respected, competent and professional social work;
- Application of an individual approach to working with children at risk;
- Suspended reforms of juvenile justice;
- Unresolved problems in inclusive education and with children with special educational needs;
- Lack of a quality standard in education;
- A broader concept of child protection focusing on children's rights, prevention and clear roles and responsibilities;
- Ineffective monitoring of the rights of the child;
- Child poverty.

This is the reason why the main tasks in the focus of the institution continue to include:

- Resources to support families at risk of separation from their children.
- Formulation of a targeted family policy in Bulgaria that sets out Bulgaria's objectives for cross-sectoral support for families.
- Protection of the rights of children in conflict with the law.
- Effective measures against parental conflicts.
- Poverty and vulnerable groups.
- Inclusive education and the rights to access to quality education for children with special educational needs.
- Attention to chronic problems in child and maternal health.
- Strengthening the child protection system.
- Ensuring a safe, secure and healthy public environment for children.



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Right of children to personal relations with both parents

Parental conflicts

For yet another year, the Ombudsman institution reports that the right of children to maintain personal relations with both parents is systematically violated in cases of parental conflict. The right to personal relations and direct contact with both parents, unless this is contrary to the best interests of the child, is enshrined as a fundamental right in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and is in accordance with Article 24 (3) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

It can be responsibly noted that almost every third complaint to the Ombudsman concerning children relates to parental conflicts, where the complainants are parents, relatives, lawyers, and even children but, undoubtedly, the majority of the complaints are submitted by parents seeking the Ombudsman's assistance to establish personal contact with their child. There are complaints from lawyers who sometimes advise their clients that they should behave in a manner appropriate to the proceedings, which includes filing complaints with various institutions and collecting responses from inspections that may be used against the other parent.

In addition to the violation of the personal relations with the child, the complaints concerning parental conflicts also cover the following problems:

- Allegations of failure to provide adequate care or upbringing of the child in unsuitable conditions by one parent;
- Frequent allegations of violence against the child by the other parent;
- The complaints also show a tendency for the Domestic Violence Act to be used as an additional means of gaining power;
- Change of permanent and current address of children without the knowledge and consent of the alienated parent;
- Change of school without the knowledge and consent of the alienated parent;
- Dissatisfaction with the work of social workers in Child Protection Departments and social service providers.

The violation of a child's right to personal relations is most often the result of serious parental conflict which has not only legal but also psychological and social dimensions. Cases of parental conflict are characterised by:

- Prolonged in time;
- A huge number of complaints and reports to various institutions, with frequent cases of parents coming into conflict with the institutions;



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- Every parent has their own point of view on the interests of their child and this leads to non-compliance with the measures taken by social workers and non-compliance with court orders. In many cases, the right of the child has been transformed into a right of the parents;
- Refusal of parents to cooperate and use various services to which they are referred;
- Lack of an integrated assessment of the child and repeated hearings by different authorities, including expert witnesses appointed by the court in relation to forensic expert examinations;
- In some cases, the Ombudsman found that the actions taken by the Child Protection Departments could be described as formal and inappropriate for the specific situation. Alarming are cases where social workers take action without assessing the interests of the child with the sole aim of satisfying the request of one parent;
- It should also be noted that the enforcement procedure for the hand-over of a child is not sufficiently effective in cases where the parent refuses to comply with the court judgment on the hand-over of the child;
- Most complaints are submitted by fathers provoked by the State's inability to guarantee their legal right to exercise parental rights after the end of marriage or cohabitation, but there is a persistent tendency for complaints to be filed by both parents regardless.

What we observe:

- The child is subjected to constant stress because of the actions of social workers, psychologists, therapists, lawyers, enforcement officers, police officers, who become part of their life for a long time.
- Violation of other rights of the child – right to education; right of the child to grow up in a safe environment; right to access appropriate social services; right to a fair trial.
- Refusal to provide information about the child's development.
- The child must frequently confirm one parent's claim that the other is abusive and experiences a conflict of loyalty in the context of the deteriorated relationship between the parents.

What we recommend:

To guarantee the child's right to personal relationships and family life, the Ombudsman has always emphasised that the State has a duty to provide mechanisms and means for the implementation of child-parent relationship after a decision on the exercise of parental rights or a personal relations regime has been made, including interim measures.

In our national legal system, various authorities have powers to assist in the enforcement of court judgments on personal relations and, more generally, to assist in the implementation of the



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child's right to personal relations: enforcement officers, Ministry of Interior authorities, Social Assistance Directorates, prosecutor's offices, and lawyers. The question arises as to how effective the actions of all these bodies are in situations of parental conflict where a parent refuses to cooperate in the exercise of the child's right to personal relations with the non-custodial parent.

- Carry out an accurate assessment of the child's interests, on the basis of which to determine the measures and actions to be taken.

- Develop a methodology to assess and, respectively, ensure the best interests of children, enshrined in the current legal framework and applied uniformly by experts in the field.

- Change in the child protection system to empower and ensure impartiality and a professional approach by social workers to cases.

- The conflict between parents is a major cause of obstacles to the child's contact with the absent parent. The efforts of the authorities should be directed towards helping to resolve the conflict and facilitating contact.

- Make it possible for employees of the social system to take stricter measures, where necessary, against parents who refuse to cooperate in social work.

- Provide for the procedural status of social workers in court proceedings, as well as the opinion and report of social workers.

- Take actions in a reasonable time frame, as children are particularly vulnerable in situations of conflict between their parents and it is unacceptable for their childhood to be spent in such conflict.

- Conduct an analysis of the mediation currently in force in parental conflicts and its effectiveness.

Right of children with SEN to access to quality education

The number of complaints and signals received by the Ombudsman institution concerning the rights of children with SEN and their right to access to quality education have made this issue a priority for the Ombudsman. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in complaints and signals related to the integration of children with SEN into the educational environment. Our work on specific cases provides guidance for the dozens of recommendations we make in search of answers to the many questions surrounding the inclusive education of children and students with SEN. This is also the aim of our various initiatives, as well as the meetings and discussions we organise. Our mission is to draw the attention of Bulgarian institutions to the right of every child to development and this is why we monitor whether actions are taken with respect for the rights and legitimate interests that the State has a duty to protect. In our work as experts, it is important to find meaning in how the legislation in this area and the socio-educational environment meet the needs of children; the complaints we receive are the clearest indication of the problems.



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In connection with the development of inclusive education for children with SEN, and more specifically for children with the most severe deficits who are educated in individual and combined forms, a model was developed together with parents for **collective educational support with the following functions**: providing collective additional educational support during school hours for pupils in combined and individual forms of education and providing support for self-study, recreation and activities based on the children's interests within the framework of a full-day educational program as well as specialised spaces for learning, therapeutic support, and free activities for each student with SEN who has difficulty with their behaviour and acceptance in the general education environment. These students are excluded from afternoon activities and full-day attendance is prohibited by law for children in individualised education. In our proposal, groups can bring together students from different stages of education – primary, lower secondary, upper secondary.

Our recommendations:

- Make inclusive education a part of the options for teacher training and education.
- Develop skills to accept and support each child's individuality.
- Allocate resources for high-quality adaptation of educational content as a key component of inclusive education and part of the design of a supportive and inclusive environment in modern general education schools, a bridge between the state educational requirements and the abilities of students with different difficulties, giving them the chance to learn alongside their peers.
- Properly allocated funds + environment are the factors for the development of an innovative and flexible learning environment.
- Develop indicators for a positive educational environment.
- Make inclusive education a part of the professional development.
- Promote the development of leadership capacity in building inclusive schools.
- Involving parents in learning/development opportunities.
- A sustainable approach and clear performance indicators.
- Amendments to the regulatory framework to ensure funding for teaching assistants and reduce the number of children for whom they are assigned, especially in the case of children with complex needs.
- Initiate a public and expert debate on the building of a vision for the Bulgarian education as an education that guarantees an equal start for the development of every Bulgarian child.

The Ombudsman institution regularly receives complaints from parents of children with various food allergies in relation to the lack of appropriate food in nurseries, kindergartens, and



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schools. The Ombudsman has prepared a special report on this issue. A number of recommendations have been made in response to these complaints. It has been emphasised that:

- ✓ Bulgaria does not have a vision to identify and address issues related to children with food allergies and intolerances.
- ✓ No national survey has been conducted on the number of children with similar problems related to food allergies and intolerances.
- ✓ There is no specialised recipe book for the preparation of food in kindergartens and schools for children with specific dietary needs.
- ✓ There are no instructions to principals and teachers.
- ✓ There is no public and institutional understanding or support for parents raising children with food allergies and intolerances.

Recommendations:

1. Develop special regulations for the nutrition of children with special dietary needs, assigning it the National Public Health Centre to elaborate a special recipe book containing appropriate recipes for the children's nutrition, to be used by all childcare facilities, schools, and residential services for children.
2. Conduct a national survey of children with food allergies, starting with the systematic collection of statistical data.
3. Develop a national form for an Individual Admission Plan for children with allergies in kindergartens and schools.
4. With the support of the WHO, examine European and international practice in this area.
5. Strengthen the control of the competent authorities over manufacturers of dietetic foods.

Protection of the rights of children with disabilities

There was a significant number of complaints concerning children with disabilities, most of them following changes in the legislation and the negative impact such changes often have on the children's rights.

The findings from the complaints indicate that a significant number of children with disabilities still encounter difficulties in receiving the support they are entitled to in a timely manner due to delays in the medical expert examination and, in particular, in the issuance of expert decisions.

In addition to the non-compliance with statutory deadlines, another serious problem concerns expert decisions issued to children under the age of 16 to determine the type and degree of disability which are valid for life. There are many cases where families are not familiar with the



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requirements of the current legislation and do not take timely action to initiate the re-examination procedure.

Complaints continue to be submitted regarding the diverse practices of the TEMCs in the country when determining the duration of disability and the right to assistance for children with Down syndrome.

In addition, the institution insists that steps be taken to amend the needs assessment form under Article 20 of the Persons with Disabilities Act when determining the number of hours of personal assistance for children with Down syndrome.

Recommendations:

1. Introduce a mechanism to update the monthly benefits under Article 8e of the Family Benefits for Children Act.
2. Streamline the practices of the TEMCs in the country when determining the duration of disability and the right to assistance for children with Down syndrome.
3. Take action to amend the needs assessment form under Article 20 of the Persons with Disabilities Act when determining the number of hours of personal assistance for children with Down syndrome.
4. Accelerate medical expert examinations and ensure that children with disabilities and their families receive the support they need in a timely manner.
5. Reissue expert decisions for children up to the age of 16 with a lifetime term automatically and *ex officio*.
6. Inform parents in an appropriate manner about the requirements of the applicable regulations so that they can take timely action to initiate the re-examination procedure.

Right of the child to child-friendly justice

In 2024, one of our top priorities was again juvenile justice, even though there were not many complaints in this regard. However, it is clear to the Ombudsman institution that this is an area in need of more fairness, accurate data and, most importantly, reforms.

The challenges that the Ombudsman has highlighted in this area for yet another year are:

- ✓ Insufficient coordination and cooperation between the protection system, on the one hand, and the police, prosecutor's offices and courts, on the other hand.
- ✓ Limited access to specialised legal aid for children.
- ✓ No holistic approach is applied in working with children in conflict with the law.



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- ✓ Lack of sufficiently trained professionals to work with children.
- ✓ Insufficient number of questionings of children in the blue room.
- ✓ Lack of accurate data.
- ✓ Lack of specialisation of the participants in pre-trial and judicial proceedings.
- ✓ Formal personal profiles and lack of a methodology for their preparation.
- ✓ Children are not adequately informed about their rights, nor are their parents..
- ✓ Substantial delay in the introduction of the new legal framework on restorative justice for children.

Recommendations:

1. Introduce mandatory specialisation in working with children for pre-trial and judicial authorities.
2. Improve significantly the quality of social reports submitted by the Social Assistance Directorates to the court.
3. Develop a personal profile form prepared by the Ministry of Interior in cooperation with other services and adopt a work methodology.
4. Introduce a mechanism to protect children from secondary or repeat victimisation, intimidation or coercion at every stage of the proceedings.
5. Phase out gradually the use of reform schools (boarding schools) and, in the meantime, ensure that every child placed in such boarding schools has access to protection measures in accordance with the Child Protection Act.
6. Review systematically the placement of children in boarding schools, with the possibility of terminating it.
7. Take urgent measures to repeal the Combating the Anti-Social Behaviour by Minors Act and to ensure that children below the minimum age of criminal liability are not subject to penal measures, including placement in boarding schools.
8. Ensure that children accused or found guilty of violating criminal law are provided with qualified and independent legal assistance at an early stage of the proceedings and throughout the criminal process.



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Right of children to quality medical care

In 2024, important strategic documents were adopted in the field of children's health – a National Health Strategy until 2030] work on a long-term program for maternal and child health; progress was made on the construction of a National Children's Hospital. The National Health Insurance Fund adopted two codes to reimburse the cost of medical food for home treatment. Human resources remained a serious problem in healthcare, with a shortage of paediatricians, child psychiatrists, and nurses with a paediatric specialty; in the country practiced 1,626 paediatricians, 141 neonatologists, 15 paediatric gastroenterologists, 21 paediatric neurologists, 22 paediatric psychiatrists, and 22 paediatric surgeons.

There were more than 50 complaints and signals in relation to the children's right to access to quality and timely medical care. The protests by parents and patient organisations, as well as the increasing number of complaints in the healthcare sector for children, show that there are a number of structural problems in the field of children's healthcare that require adequate measures to be taken.

Types of complaints:

- Refusal to perform an examination with a referral and referral of the child to a paid service.
- Financial problems in conducting the necessary genetic tests of a young woman.
- Children's access to doctors specialising in Paediatrics.
- Complaint from a patient organisation regarding: Discriminatory access to treatment and risk of interruption of life-saving therapies when patients turn 18 years of age.
- Violation of the right to treatment and access to healthcare for children suffering from rare diseases that are not oncological or oncohematological.
- A citizen raised an issue which, in her opinion, affected hundreds of children in Bulgaria. She noted the difficulties experienced by the hospital structure of MPHAT National Cardiology Hospital EAD where operations were performed on newborn babies and children with congenital heart defects and pointed out that the suspension of its activities put at risk and condemned all newborns with CHD, as well as all children in urgent need of heart surgery.
- A complaint from a citizen who noted that she was a single adoptive parent of a 3-year-old child and described the difficulties she encountered in obtaining a sick leave certificate for childcare due to restrictions introduced for periods exceeding 40 days.

Delays in medical expert examinations of children and disagreement with the decision of the TEMC, mainly regarding examinations of children with Down syndrome.

Challenges

- ✓ Mortality of children aged up to 1 year.



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- ✓ Establishment of a centralised paediatric care system.
- ✓ Low remuneration for paediatric care.
- ✓ Limited human resources.
- ✓ Health inequalities among children in different regions.
- ✓ A large number of children are still being treated through donation accounts.
- ✓ Low citizen satisfaction with the complexity of health services for children.
- ✓ Free sale of cigarettes, alcohol, energy drinks, laughing gas and vapes to minors.

Recommendations:

1. Focus systemically on prevention, prophylaxis and screening in children's health.
2. Achieve integration among the systems of education, healthcare and social services.
3. National campaign to raise the prestige of paediatricians.
4. Ensure sufficient human, technical and financial resources for the implementation of activities under the National Program for Improving Maternal and Child Health 2021 – 2030.
5. Encourage the implementation of appropriate medical practices in maternity wards and neonatal units.
6. Ensure the availability of health mediators throughout the country.
7. Develop a national program for children's mental health, ensuring adequate resources and including measures for: therapeutic and interdisciplinary mental health services in the community; screening for mental health problems and early prevention services in schools.
8. Expand the coverage of children and their access to medical foods for therapeutic purposes.
9. Improving the quality of medical devices.
10. Increase the access of children with disabilities to rehabilitation.
11. Guarantee every child's access to timely, high-quality and effective health services tailored to their needs throughout the different periods of their childhood.



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Safe and secure public environment – advertising, gambling, playgrounds

This year, citizens are once again concerned about the lack of social and cultural infrastructure for children in small places; the condition of playgrounds; the harmful public environment and advertising; the lack of suitable television programs for children; the children's access to inappropriate services through mobile operators; and the sale of energy sweets and drinks to adolescents.

Complaints about damaged playground equipment and unsafe playgrounds with inadequate surfaces to be submitted systematically. The municipalities which own the playgrounds complain that they try to maintain them even with their limited resources, but the playgrounds are repeatedly vandalised, mostly by young people. Civil initiatives to maintain the playgrounds in the residential districts were found in very few places. They do not partner with municipalities and districts, and only send complaints and signals to them.

Recommendations:

1. Have more park spaces, green streets, and boulevards – reforestation campaigns with the participation of children (this recommendation was made by children and young people from SOS Children's Villages Bulgaria).
2. Have more bike lanes, playgrounds, street fitness areas and sports fields.
3. Ensure free access to sports facilities for children up to 12 years of age.
4. Implement policies that ensure an accessible, safe and shared urban environment and public spaces for recreation and leisure for children and families.
5. Adopt a media policy for effective protection of children from harmful content in the media.
6. Ensure public spaces which are accessible for mass sports and physical activities.
7. Build gymnasiums in all schools and kindergartens in the country.

Children's participation and initiatives

What do children want?

The children's opinion was presented to the Ombudsman institution at a special meeting under the project "Together: Working in partnership with children and young people for a better inclusion of their rights in decisions related to overcoming the consequences of COVID-19 and other extraordinary circumstances" implemented by SOS Children's Villages Bulgaria to



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strengthen the participation of children and young people in decision-making processes affecting their lives.

- ✓ Support for their parents in difficult financial times.
- ✓ Peer education programs for children and young people to build capacity for full participation in public decision-making processes.
- ✓ Online courses and programs to raise awareness among decision-makers in institutions and society, as well as professionals working for and with children and young people, on how to improve the participation of children and young people in advocacy.
- ✓ Information videos created for children by children and young people with the aim of building on their knowledge of their rights and how they can express their opinions.
- ✓ Information webinars for professionals and decision-makers to increase their knowledge of how children and young people want to be involved in emergency response.
- ✓ Special lessons on tolerance and non-discrimination, for cultural awareness of different ethnic groups.
- ✓ Observe 19 November, World Day for the Prevention of Child Abuse, at the national level with children, parents, teachers and government officials marking the day together.
- ✓ Training programs against violence and for improving parenting capacity.
- ✓ Training programs for abusers – 10-day therapy and training camps.
- ✓ Increase in the budget for residential social services for children, as well as funds for children in foster care, funds related to the maintenance and development of children.
- ✓ Twice a year, experts from the State Agency for Child Protection/Child Protection Departments to hold meetings with children in alternative care: the children will provide feedback on the care they receive and the attitude of adults towards them (verbally, through questionnaires, discussions).
- ✓ Adults who provide care for children in alternative care (foster care, family-type accommodation centre) should be aged between 25 and 60.
- ✓ Create safe spaces and environment for participation; ensure a safe and tolerant environment where children can express their opinions without fear of judgment.
- ✓ Set up a community of children in care, including an online platform, where children and young people can submit ideas, vote on policies and communicate.
- ✓ Confidentiality and protection: ensure protection for children who express their views on sensitive issues and guarantee that their participation will not expose them to pressure.



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- ✓ Encourage cooperation between adults and children; Establish public councils that include both adults and children for the joint development or evaluation of policies, ensuring that equal weight is given to both parties.
- ✓ Ensure feedback and accountability: provide feedback to children on the significance and impact of their involvement.

Main strengths, challenges, and recommendations:

The conclusions to be drawn are that many of the old problems identified by the Ombudsman over the years have not been effectively resolved. The challenges the protection system faces remain unaddressed; there are no adequate resources to support families; integrated approaches are not applied in the work of protection authorities; there are difficulties in integrated education and working with children with special educational needs; and these are only some of the issues that are compounded by new ones arising from rapid regulatory changes, delayed reforms and/or poor law enforcement.

Strengths

- ✓ Will and readiness of institutions and non-governmental organisations to work towards improving the well-being of children.
- ✓ Successful implementation of the process of deinstitutionalisation of child care.
- ✓ Rolling out a wide range of social services for children and families.
- ✓ Professional network of civil society organisations working in the field of child rights protection.
- ✓ Progress in the cause for a National Children's Hospital.
- ✓ Availability of functioning mechanisms for signals from and about children – National Hotline 116 111 and National Hotline for Online Safety for Children 124 124.

Challenges

- ✓ Lack of comprehensive and competent approaches and models for the support of children in the family.
- ✓ A protection system that focuses on risk rather than risk prevention.
- ✓ Lack of an integrated data source on children, especially victims of violence and harassment.
- ✓ A judicial system that is not adapted to the needs of children.
- ✓ A complex and unreformed child protection system.
- ✓ Significant inequalities in household income and poor impact of social payments.
- ✓ Lack of effective measures to support children in particularly vulnerable situations – children in poor households, children from immigrant and refugee families.



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- ✓ Children continue to be separated from their families due to poverty, poor living conditions, lack of housing and disabilities.
- ✓ Challenges in inclusive education for kids with special educational needs.
- ✓ Poor media and unethical environment with regard to children.
- ✓ The children's access to organisations and institutions that can protect their rights is generally limited.

General Recommendations:

1. Ensure the right of the child to live in a family environment by developing and implementing policies to support families and the family environment.
2. Implement effective and targeted policies to reduce the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by improving the access to education, healthcare, childcare, adequate housing and nutritious food.
3. Provide income support for families whose children are at risk of social exclusion: single parents, parents of children with disabilities, large families, families with unemployed parents; social assistance conditional on responsible parenting.
4. Strengthen effective and shared forms of child participation.
5. Provide targeted investments in the protection system.
6. Decentralise management and financing in the social sphere to local authorities.
7. Continue the reform in juvenile justice.
8. Ensure the full integration of children with special educational needs into the educational environment, providing a sufficient number of specialists, teacher training, adapted curricula and teaching aids.
9. Establish mechanisms for regional coordination and introduce a cross-sectoral approach between the three main areas – education, healthcare and social.
10. Adopt national program with adequate resources and funding to support and integrate young people leaving residential care.
11. Encourage children's participation by developing various forms.
12. Create safe spaces and environment for participation; ensure a safe and tolerant environment where children can express their opinions without fear of judgment.



OMBUDSMAN OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

MONITORING OF THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD IN BULGARIA

SUMMARY OF REPORT 2024

13. Take urgent measures to repeal the Combating the Anti-Social Behaviour of Minors Act and guarantee that children below the minimum age of criminal liability are not subject to penal measures, including placement in reform boarding schools.
14. Accelerate the reform of the juvenile justice system by adopting a law on diversion from criminal proceedings and ensure that it effectively promotes the use of non-judicial measures such as diversion, mediation and psychosocial support for children.
15. Improve the children's access to quality healthcare and boost the parents' awareness of issues related to children's health.
16. Prioritise the reduction of the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by improving the access to education, healthcare, childcare, adequate housing and adequate nutrition.
17. Pursue active policies on recreation, leisure and the development of the children's abilities.
18. Ensure that every child is in a family that provides love, appropriate care, security, protection and the opportunity to develop all their talents.