Update on the context and situation of children

Bulgaria is an upper-middle-income country and a member state of the European Union (EU) since 2007. Its population was 6,916,548 people as of end 2020, of which 1,189,680 (0-17 y) were children or 17.2% of the country’s population. The demographic trends have been improving over the last five years, but Bulgaria has a negative population growth rate of minus 0.74 (UNDESA data from 2020) due to a combination of low birth rates, high crude death rates due to ageing population and lower life expectancy and net emigration. Data of the latest census (2011) indicate that the main ethnic groups are: Bulgarian’s 84.8 percent, Turk’s 8.8 Percent and Roma 4.9 percent. Bulgaria’s Human Development Index (HDI) value for 2020 was 0.816, which put the country in the very high human development category—positioning it at 56 out of 189 countries and territories. The gender development index is 0.995 (2020), which places the Bulgaria in the group of countries with high equality in HDI achievements between women and men. However, Bulgaria ranks 18th in the European Union on the Gender Equality Index with 59.9 out of 100 points, compared to 68 average for EU-27.

In 2021, Bulgaria went through the worst political crisis since 1997 with three general elections held in less than 6 months and almost one year of interim care-taker Government. The last elections in November 2021, which combined two votes for Parliament and for President, were won by a newly established anti-corruption party “We Continue the Change” (WCC) with 25.7% of the votes and the outgoing President Rumen Radev was reelected. The former ruling party “Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria” came second with 22.7%. In December, a four-party coalition Government was approved by Parliament. It is led by Prime Minister Kiril Petkov from WCC and includes three more parties – the center-left Bulgarian Socialist Party, the anti-system “There Is Such A People” party, and the center-right “Democratic Bulgaria”. The motto of the new government is “Zero tolerance for corruption”, and its first immediate priorities will be cutting high electricity prices, mass vaccination and vaccine hesitancy, judicial reform, and preparing the State Budget for 2022. Overall, there are high expectations for change, and there are positive initial signs that the new Government seeks an active and committed role for Bulgaria both in the EU and in NATO.

Throughout the year the global COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect the social and economic development of the country. After the 2020 recession, the real GDP is forecast to grow by 3.8% in 2021 and to accelerate in 2022 to 4.1% (EC). The unemployment rate has decreased to 4.6% in the Q3/2021 (4.8% for men and 4.3% for women) but has remained three times higher among young people (15-24 years) with 15.2%. The budget deficit is projected at 3.6% of GDP and the government debt to 26.7%. The low vaccination rate among the population (below 30%), the expected fifth wave of COVID-19 and the energy inflation will have a negative impact on the recovery. In addition, the delayed submission of the Recovery and Resilience Plan by the Government will push the advance payments to 2022 and will further delay the approval of the new programmes to be funded by EU structural funds.

Despite the political instability, the interim Government continued to implement a package of socio-economic measures to mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19 on business and households. The key programmes in support of families with children included the payment of one-off benefit to parents of children under 14 who are on unpaid leave; increased one-off cash transfer to the families of first-graders and eighth-graders and removal of income criteria; increased monthly allowance for raising a child up to 1 year up; a new monthly allowance for families with children under 14 who study online from home; a significant increase of the income tax annual deduction for parents - from BGN 200, BGN 400 and BGN 600 to BGN 4,500, BGN 9,000 and BGN 13,500 for one, two or three and more
children, respectively. The COVID-19 pandemic promoted a broader debate on the necessity to increase social spending and, specifically, the funding for child-related programmes but the decision about new reforms is left for the new Parliament. Considering the diverse political affiliations within the new ruling majority, some intra-coalition tensions and instability can be expected in 2022, which could have a negative impact on some key reforms in the social sector – such as the implementation of the new Social Services Act and the adoption of a new Social Protection Code.

According to the EU SILC study “Social Inclusion and Living Conditions “, the share of the children-at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion was 33.3% or 404,200 in 2020 compared to 32.1 % among the general population, and the level of poverty is expected to increase because of the COVID-19 crisis. The engagement of UNICEF with the pilot testing of the European Child Guarantee and the preparation of the two Operational Programmes to be funded ESF+ 2021-2027 - Education and Human Resources Development - contributed to placing children at the center of national recovery and development efforts and leveraging EU resources for combatting child poverty and social exclusion. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan has also included key programmes targeted at children under two (out of four) pillars: “Innovative Bulgaria” and specifically the “Education and Skills” component, and “Fair Bulgaria” – the components on “Social Inclusion” and “Healthcare”.

A total of 10,999 people (10,222 male and 777 female) applied for international protection in Bulgaria, mainly from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Out of all asylum seekers as of end of December (10,999), 3,733 were children (3,478 boys and 255 girls) or 34 %; out of them, a total of 3,172 were UASC (3,142 boys and 30 girls), or 85 %.

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

**Child poverty**

The CO started the implementation of the pilot program “EU Child Guarantee” (ECG), with the main objective to expand the access to and improve the quality of 4 types of modeling services - home visiting services for families with small children; early childhood intervention for children with disabilities and developmental difficulties; quality inclusive pre-school education, and child and family-centered preventive and support services in 10 pilot municipalities on the territory of three districts – Burgas, Sliven and Stara Zagora.

The program reached over **10,000 children, 3,500 parents and 500 professionals**. Children and young people were also engaged in the ECG through child-led research and U-Report consultations. Within EU CG Program, UNICEF supported the implementation of a **deep dive analysis** of the current situation and dimensions of child poverty and social exclusion, and the policies, programmes, services, budgets, and mechanisms to address it. The findings and recommendations of the deep dive analysis were presented and discussed by an inter-institutional working group, established by MLSP, and will inform the development of the National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of the ECG. UNICEF is a leading member of the Working Group, established for the development of the NAP.

**Influencing & Leveraging**

UNICEF was engaged in the Thematic Working Groups for the two programmes “Human Resources Development” and “Education” to be funded by ESF+ in the period 2021 – 2027, which include key priority actions for addressing poverty and social exclusion among children in line with the ECG. The two programmes include priority actions related to the scaling-up of the model services, implemented under the ECG pilot program and are expected to support their sustainability and scaling-up.

UNICEF has prepared the ground for the **European Year of Youth in 2022** and carried out two integrated advocacy and fundraising campaigns – on digital literacy and 21 century skills of adolescents, and on mental health and resilience of adolescents. This enabled the creation of multiple strategic partnerships with institutions, civil society, youth, academia, media, businesses and is a case
of social mobilization to break stigmas (around mental health issues), negative practices (online bullying and disinformation) and create innovations which are targeted solutions for adolescent skills and competences required for sustainable behavioral and social change. As a result of resource mobilization and social mobilization, “Cyber Survivor” and “Love Yourself” will be piloted in 2022 in the form of web-based progressive mobile apps.

**COVID19 response**
Health Buddy chatbot and mobile application were successfully launched together with WHO to support the Government in addressing the vaccine hesitancy. The chatbot promotion reached 380,517 in UNICEF Bulgaria digital channels and is downloaded and used actively by over 10,000, whereas the COVID-19 risk communication and community engagement materials reached a total of 5,796,061 people. This initiative for obtaining factful information about the global epidemic was supported with the two (‘Embrace life’, “Summer Sense” and “Do it all”) campaigns carried out in partnership with the European Commission and WHO. The campaigns provided advice for protective behaviors and reached another 650,447 via UNICEF digital channels. The CO also became a pilot partner to integrate GBV into the Health Buddy+ chatbot for the refugees, migrants and GBV survivors or at risk.

**Major Results achieved and Modelling – ECD and Child Care**

1,125 families and 1,680 children (924 girls and 756 boys) from vulnerable and excluded communities benefited from the outreach and preventive services provided by the Family Consultative Centre for Community Support in Novi Pazar, Shumen region. The model was scaled-up in the pilot project “EU Child Guarantee”, implemented by UNICEF in three other regions of the country. Objective was to improve the quality and strengthen the prevention capacities of existing family support social services by establishing mobile teams for outreach support to children and families in precarious situations, focusing on Roma communities. 7 mobile teams have been established and trained in 6 social services and one municipal administration and reached 976 parents (519 female and 427 males) and 1,277 children (617 girls and 660 boys).

4,529 parents of 5,101 of children under 3 years of age in Shumen and Sliven districts benefited from individualized support, guidance and information on nurturing care provided through the home visiting services, established with UNICEF support. Also, the home visiting services provided essential guidance on prevention of COVID-19 to families with young children. Additional 8,065 parents of children under 5 years of age strengthened their parental competencies through other parenting support modalities, including community-based parenting support programs and digital platforms.

**Inclusive education**

With UNICEF support 11,664 children and adolescents (6028 boys and 5636 girls) benefitted from enhanced pedagogical practices in kindergartens with a focus on children with disabilities and special needs and participated in social and emotional skills development and adolescent empowerment sessions, including non-formal for children on the move. UNICEF engaged further in supporting national policies for children with disabilities and assistive technologies for alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) by initiating Voice for Every Child project and adapted for Bulgaria an open-source AAC application C-Board for non-verbal children and training package for professionals.

The Learn@Home initiative triggered by global pandemic, engaged 2000 young children and their parents in interactive lessons designed to provide a comprehensive support in the child development and learning.

Joint UNICEF and Ministry of Education and Science initiative for keeping the schools safe - STEPS Together scaled up and covered more than 450 schools. And integrated in “Support for inclusive education” project funded by the EU programs and structural funds. The initiative reached 1545 girls and 1370 boys who participated in social and emotional skills development workshops and peer-to-peer support sessions.

Under the component for early inclusive education within EU Child Guarantee 3312 young
boys and 3023 young boys age 2-7 from 30 kindergartens benefitted from more inclusive environment, pedagogical practices, and intensified support to children with special needs.

- The online platform “Help me thrive” (podkrepime.mon.bg), developed with the support of UNICEF corporate partners, was launched at the end of the year, and integrated in the IT structure of the Ministry of Education and Science. So far, 18 boys and 11 girls benefitted from tailored made professional support.

Protection from violence, child justice and children on the move

- 1,295 children (586 girls and 709 boys) and 1,295 parents have benefitted from specialized services to prevent and respond to violence, including the gender-based violence (GBV).
- 4,086 children in contact with the law accessed different legal services - through specialized court panels and units in prosecutor's offices (2,684 children), provision of specialized legal aid (186 children), child-sensitive hearing and forensic interviewing in Blue rooms (77 children). A specialized legal aid was provided to 883 unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) and 349 accompanied children on the move benefited from best interest assessment/best interest determination (BIA/BID).
- The three pilot Child Advocacy Centers (CaCs) in Sofia, Shumen and Montana regions continued with provision of integrated services to vulnerable children and parents- 809 persons benefited from different protective services - 418 children (236 girls and 182 boys) and 394 parents (290 female and 104 male).
- UNICEF with partners (Animus Association, Caritas, Council of Refugee Women, Mission Wings Foundation, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and Center Nadja Foundation) and within the DG Health supported Project, reached 3,617 children on the move. Children were provided access to health care (including immunization), direct support based on vulnerability assessment, child protection legal and mental health support. These services included GBV and access to education, within the US BPRM funded programme. Additionally, the country office supported the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) and Sofia Municipality in the process of relocation of 17 UASC from Greece.

Impact on policy development and revision –

- In the process of development of the Social Services Act 2020 (SSA) bylaws, the Ordinance for Social Services Planning was adopted by the Council of Ministers (CoM). The Ordinance for the Quality of the Social Services is being discussed and is expected to be finalized and adopted in 2022. These two Ordinances will improve the quality and outreach of services for the most vulnerable children, including children at risk and victims of violence and children with disabilities. National 2020 Monitoring report on the deinstitutionalization process was developed which recommends an up-date of the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Vision for Deinstitutionalization of Children in Bulgaria for the period 2022-2025.
- The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) with UNICEF support continued to apply strong policies aimed at keeping the school safe and open during the global pandemic and eradicating illiteracy, guaranteeing a compulsory education, and improving the quality of pre-school and school education. These initiatives are adapted to the labor market needs and defined in the first Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 – 2030) and the newly developed EU Programme Education where more than 200 million BGN are allocated for the implementation of EU Child Guarantee. MoES with support from DG Reform developed the first draft of ECEC Quality Framework, aiming to improve the quality of learning and care for children 0-7 age.
- The Government annual programme for prevention and protection against domestic violence was developed and adopted by the Council of Ministers (COM) during the spring 2021. UNICEF supported creation of the plan and provided technical assistance.
- Significant advocacy efforts and technical assistance was invested to support the amendments to the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act 2005. UNICEF advocated for the establishment of a coordination mechanism between national, local authorities and NGOs, creation of a database and systematic collection and analysis of domestic violence data, regulation of prevention and protection programs and specialized services for victims of violence. These efforts, including accelerated advocacy will continue in 2022.

The Network for legal aid was established within the National Network for Children. The Network lead 6 strategic litigations related to access to justice and engaged in a high-profile case about a girl victim of violence brought to the ECHR - A.S.E against Bulgaria.

With UNICEF support, a mission of the UN Sub Committee of Torture was carried out resulting with a call to ensure humane conditions for detained migrants, especially children.

Within UNICEF cooperation with the Bulgarian Ombudsperson, the institution published two thematic reports on Covid-19 related measures and their impact to child rights and especially to vulnerable children, issued concrete recommendations related to access to mental health of children and psychological support availability in schools, as well as recommendations to the Ministry of Education and Science and Ministry of Health on access and quality of respective services for children during the global pandemic. The Ombudsperson also requested revitalization of the child justice reform, including development of the new child justice law after several decades of stagnation in this matter.

The collaboration with Ministry of Interior was further strengthened by the signing of an MOU and Action Plan at the end of 2021, focusing on children victims and witnesses of violence including domestic and GBV, children in contact and conflict with the law. UNICEF is member of the Thematic Working Group for the development of the 2021-2027 national programme and priorities under the Asylum and Migration Fund. UNICEF inputs related to sustainability of safe spaces, strengthening BIA/BID procedures, including age assessment procedures and development of additional alternative care arrangements for UASC.

UNICEF continued technical assistance in addressing the most critical bottlenecks in provision of GBV and protecting services, advocacy for integrating services for children on the move in the childcare system and developed a comprehensive GBV training programme for the frontline workers. This capacity building package was integrated in the Sofia and Plovdiv University curriculum and this will be scaled up in 2022 with the aim to become a mandatory academic curriculum for social workers.

In partnership with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) a national database for UASC was officially established and will be maintained by the State Agency for Child Protection.

Fundraising
In 2021 UNICEF raised BGN 1,668,311 (USD 967,697) from private sector achieving a 6% increase compared to 2020 because of the strong individual giving program and corporate engagement activities. Individual donations remained the largest private sector revenue source contributing 78% of the total funding. Throughout the year the CO put continuous efforts in expanding its successful face-to-face fundraising program and invested in two major integrated fundraising and advocacy campaigns with the overall focus on youth, specifically on the importance of digital literacy and mental health. The Office achieved 9% growth in the annual corporate income, building on existing business alliances and further developing its corporate engagement plan.

Communication
External communication was focused on to COVID-19 vaccines hesitancy, UNICEF 75th anniversary, violence against children, EU Child Guarantee, Inclusive education and UNDay The integrated advocacy and fundraising campaigns received coverage from the major media outlets including the national TV stations Nova News, Bulgarian National TV, bTV, as well as regional radio stations, print and online channels. The total PR reach (TV, print, online, radio) was estimated at 1,006,298. Through digital channels the campaign reach totaled 1,799,796. The Youth engagement “Postbox for Fairytales” event brought voices of youth on mental health to light. Supported by 11 celebrities and reached 18,000 people with 12,100 video views. A new UNICEF national ambassador in Bulgaria was
announced in 2021— the world renown soprano Sonya Yoncheva became an advocate for UNICEF’s mission and interventions in Bulgaria.

UNICEF Bulgaria’s presence in traditional media scored 46% positive (increasing from 34.2% in 2020), 53% neutral and 1% negative tone of the articles or other materials with UNICEF mentioning or messages. Number of articles/stories with UNICEF mentions in top-tier media outlets reached 59.45% based on the top three top-tier media outlets for each month. The overall digital reach totalled: 6,627,000 (5,797,000 people reached on social media and 830,000 on the website).

**Operations**

The CO has 27 staff members and 3 full time consultants. The overall budget expenditure is 4,325,843 USD from the following sources of funds: RR, OR BMA and ORE. The increase of expenses, compared to previous years, is due to the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee project. All HACT related activities were regularly monitored, and 43 programmatic visits were held, as well as 8 spot checks. The overall volume of cash transferred to partners is 2.3 million USD, also doubled, compared to 2020. With continuous application of zero VAT approach with vendors, and use of rent-free premises the office saved 70,000 USD.

**UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships**

The six UN resident agencies in Bulgaria are IOM, IMF, WB, UNICEF, UNHCR and WHO and with EBRD constitute the UN-Heads-of-Agency (UN-HoA) group under the coordination of UNICEF as UN Designated Official. UNICEF worked closely with IOM and UNHCR in monitoring the situation of children on the move, particularly for unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). In addition to regular monitoring and provision of legal aid to children on the move, a joint round table with relevant national and local authorities was organized to discuss good practices of relocation of children in other EU countries. This experience and lessons learned were crucial to provide necessary support to the Government in relocating 17 unaccompanied and separated children from Greece to Bulgaria.

UNICEF partnered with WHO in implementing a comprehensive risk communication strategy and COVID19 vaccine hesitancy campaigns with the Government and European Commission, utilizing scientific evidence and facts to combat fake news on the global pandemic. UNICEF worked together with the WorldBank in Bulgaria on a household pulse survey with 6 rounds conducted in 2021, the results will be presented in 2022. Engagement with the European Investment Bank was also strengthened in the country.

UNICEF formalized cooperation with the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) to accelerate the work in key areas like the monitoring of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, capacity of professionals working with children and families, prevention and protection of children from violence, child and youth participation. Also, cooperation with the Ministry of Interior was formalized and a Memorandum of Understanding signed, detailing the joint work on violence prevention, access to justice and children on the move.

The country office incorporated Business for Result (B4R) approach into the spring fundraising campaign on Cyber Survivor. As part of the fundraising campaign, 11 companies and the business associations representing the Advisory Council for Business and Results for Children were actively involved by focusing on the importance of supporting parents in raising digital natives. During the annual Back2School with Business campaign more than 20 companies received information on keeping children healthy in the global pandemic conditions, at the beginning of the school year. UNICEF established itself as a key expert and partner to businesses in improving businesses practices and Child Rights and Business Principles. The non-financial engagement has been recognised as a key driver in developing some of the key partnerships with businesses and an opportunity for co-creation of digital solutions for children, for example interest of IBM to create a promotional website for Child Advocacy Centres. With the technical support of UNICEF, the National Network of Children has
developed and launched the first of its kind national “Child-friendly company certificate” that has been granted to 3 leading companies in the country (A1, UniCredit Bank and LIDL).

UNICEF Bulgaria amplified its advocacy efforts using the voice of the business and together with its corporate partners, reached over 4,600,000 people with advocacy messages via the employee and customer networks of more than 40 companies (global leaders and local partners).

### Lessons Learned and Innovations

The implementation of the ECG pilot project has been critical for the strategic positioning of UNICEF as a leader in child poverty reduction and a trusted partner to the Government. The establishment of the Steering Committees under the leadership of Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, district and local authorities has contributed to building ownership and commitment. The Steering Committees have provided a forum for dialogue, raising awareness, and improving the understanding of the objectives and key mechanisms of the Child Guarantee and have facilitated institutional cooperation and networking. In this respect, the role of UNICEF has been critical not only as an expert, facilitator, and convener but also in the agenda-setting and steering the discussions. The political instability in the country, which started after the general elections in April, did not affect the implementation of the pilot project in 2021 as the key ministers and deputy ministers from the caretaker Government confirmed that commitment to the Child Guarantee and were actively engaged. The good progress of the ECG Pilot strengthened the partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and ensured UNICEF technical advisory role in drafting the National Plan of Action on EU Child Guarantee. This is an important opportunity for leveraging of long-term funding for children and will be key focus of work in 2022.

Implementation of the EU CG Pilot Project enabled the convergence of several UNICEF supported models at the local level. Using this opportunity, UNICEF raised the issue of sustainability of models and related services, their integration in the child related systems and budgets and gradual hand-over to the Government. This will be focus of 2022 work and reflected in the National Plan of Action on EU Child Guarantee.

One of the good examples of factoring in the sustainability and the Government ownership from the very early stages of the intervention is development of the online platform podkrepite_mon.bg. This is the country's first inclusive digital education platform which will provide adapted educational resources for the specific needs of every child and unite under one virtual roof specialists, teachers, parents, and children. The Ministry of Education and Science co-managed development of the platform and will be responsible for its maintenance.

In addition to the office need to shift the focus of work from the modeling towards more upstream technical work and bolder advocacy, there is a need for a bolder advocacy and capacity building in terms of child rights safeguard as progress and achievements are highly dependent on political will and contextual factors, over which UNICEF Bulgaria has limited to no control. These points were supported by the preliminary finding of the current CP Evaluation (2018 -2022).

The office carried out two integrated (fundraising and advocacy campaigns) – the one called “CyberSurvivor” did not bring expected results in terms of funds which lead to a conclusion that the audience is still not sensitized about the importance of developing digital and critical thinking skills for youth and adolescent to be able to detect fake news and other live risks. Despite a good awareness raising effect of the campaign, the office did not obtain return of investment. In this regard, only one integrated campaign will be implemented in order to consolidate all efforts in the office, test a topic and prepare a robust fundraising action plan.

The country office scaled up U-Report in the country and used it for national consultations with young people on important topics, including the EU Child Guarantee. More than 250,000 people were reached via social media, seven leading youth organizations were engaged to co-create polls and articles, and the platform was also presented during key youth events. As a result, nearly 1500 young
people in the country are active U-Reporters. U-Report Bulgaria also has a global Youth Champion who is now a member of the European Commission’s first Youth Sounding Board. A Youth Advisory Board is being created at the CO and one of its major roles is to further mainstream U-Report, including with institutions nationally and internationally, especially during the 2022, EU Year of Youth and the ongoing dialogue on the Future of Europe.

The political instability in the country, resulted with the late submission of the Resilience and Recovery Plan (RRP) to the European Commission. The Bulgarian plan is structured around four pillars: Innovative Bulgaria, Green Bulgaria, Connected Bulgaria, and Fair Bulgaria. The plan includes measures in areas such as decarbonization of the economy, education and skills, research and innovation, smart industry, energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, digital connectivity, social inclusion, and healthcare. The RRP covers important areas for children such as education and skills, and social inclusion. However, there should be a stronger focus on vulnerable groups of children and UNICEF will focus in 2022 on closer monitoring of the plan and proactively look for opportunities to further engage and leverage funding for children.

As co-chair of the ‘Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs’ and member of the UN Human Rights Council, Bulgaria continued to actively advocate and promote child rights at regional and global levels. In December 2021, Bulgaria together with the other two co-chairs Jamaica and Luxembourg, organized the first-of-its-kind High-level meeting of the Group of Friends as part of the inaugural Global Forum on Children and Youth (CY21). The session entitled "From Global Champions to Local Action" brought together Heads of Governments, Ministers, as well as child/youth advocates to discuss some of the most pressing issues for children in the 21st century.

While advocacy on Child Rights in Bulgaria itself has been challenging in 2021 due to the political context, Bulgaria plays a strong advocacy role at the global context.