Bulgaria is an upper-middle-income country and a member of the European Union since 2007. Data from the 2021 census show that the total population is 6,519,789. According to the TransMonEE data, there are 1,188,803 children in Bulgaria (close to 18 per cent of the total population). The country has a negative population growth rate of minus 0.8 (UNDESA data from 2021) due to a combination of low birth rates, high crude death rates due to ageing population, lower life expectancy and net emigration. Ethnically, the population is homogeneous, with Bulgarians making up 84.6 per cent of the total, followed by Turks (8.4 per cent) and Roma (4.4 per cent). With a Human Development Index of 0.795 (2021), Bulgaria is in the high human development category, ranking 68 out of 191 countries. The gender development index is 0.995 (2021), 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 averages for EU-27.

The unprecedented political crisis, which started in 2021 when three general elections were held in less than 6 months, deepened throughout 2022. In June, the four-party coalition government of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, which entered office in December 2021, had to resign following a non-confidence vote by Parliament. After three unsuccessful attempts by the political parties to form a new coalition Government, the President dissolved the 47th National Assembly and appointed a new caretaker government. The fourth early parliamentary elections, which took place on 2 October 2022 together with the regular elections for President, produced a very fragmented Parliament, consisting of 7 parties and with no clear majority. By the end of December 2022, the parties were not able to form a new regular government, despite the growing public pressure, and Bulgaria continues to be governed by a caretaker government. The continued unprecedented political turmoil, in a situation of deepening economic crisis combined with international crisis due to the war in Ukraine, had a negative impact on the effective implementation of policies and measures to address the parallel crises, including the response to the refugees from Ukraine. The adoption of key legislation, which is a prerequisite for the allocation of RRP funds, has been delayed and the country’s ability to fully absorb EU funds may be reduced.

The war in Ukraine has had an adverse impact on Bulgaria’s economy due to the imported price inflation and the uncertainty related to the natural gas supply. The real GDP is forecast to decelerate from 3.1% in 2022 to 1.1% in 2023 and the inflation rate is set to come down from 12.8% in 2022 to 7.4% in 2023 (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 fiscal position is expected to worsen with the budget deficit projected at 4.2% of GDP and the government debt at 28.6% (WB). The rising food and energy prices have affected negatively the poorer Bulgarian households who spend a disproportionately high share of their income on these items. The Government adopted anti-inflationary measures, including indirect tax reduction for energy consumers, pension increases and energy price subsidies, but more measures targeted at the most vulnerable households are needed.

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% or 400,000 in 2021 and is significantly higher than the EU average (24.4%)6. In 2022, the Government adopted a very ambitious national target of reducing the number of children living at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 197,000 by 2030, which is Bulgaria’s contribution to the EU target of reducing the number of children living at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 5 million by 2030. The National Action Plan for the European
Child Guarantee, which was approved by the Council of Ministers in November 2022, includes a comprehensive framework of key measures and interventions for addressing child poverty and social exclusion. The development of the ECG NAP was informed by the Deep Dive analysis, conducted by UNICEF, as well as by the evidence and lessons learned generated by the ECG pilot project. The provision of policy advice and technical assistance for the effective implementation of the NAP, as a key instrument for breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion among children, is a key cross-cutting priority in the new CPD 2023-2027.

During 2022 about 150,000 Ukrainians have been granted with Temporary Protection in Bulgaria and about 600 from Russia, Armenia, Moldova and other countries. The Unaccompanied children from Ukraine with Temporary protection for 2022 were 589.

In 2022, a record number of international protection applications were registered by the State Agency for Refugees: 20,407, out of which 8598 claims lodged by Syrian nationals, 7164 by Afghan nationals and 1721 by Moroccan nationals. In 2022, 3,348 children were granted with International Protection.

### Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF Bulgaria made significant progress in supporting and influencing national policy development. In partnership with the Ministry of Environment and Water, UNICEF Bulgaria was amongst the first countries from the region to sign the Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action. This strong political will in the area of climate action was reconfirmed during the UNICEF – Government of Bulgaria joint launch of the Innocenti Report Card 17: Places and Spaces - Environments and Children’s well-being and followed by various forms of engagement of youth as well as discussions related to the upcoming CRC General Comment 26.

UNICEF supported the elaboration of the National Action Plan (NAP) for the European Child Guarantee (ECG), which was approved by the Council of Ministers in November 2022. The NAP was informed by the key findings and recommendations of the Deep Dive analysis, which was conducted by UNICEF, as well as by the evidence and lessons learned generated by the ECG pilot project. All four model services, tested under ECG pilot project, have been included in the NAP. The home visiting, the early childhood interventions, and the outreach preventive and support services are included in the operation “Future for the Children” (BGN 82 million from ESF+), which was launched by MLSP in November 2022. It will provide funding to municipalities and other service providers and is expected to reach 40,000 vulnerable children. UNICEF will support pilot municipalities to apply for funding to ensure sustainability of the model services until they receive State delegated funding. In addition, the operation “General and additional support for personal development in pre-school education”, to be launched by MES in 2023 (BGN 105 million from ESF+), will provide funding for inclusive pre-school education services.

UNICEF facilitated the establishment of the first Youth Advisory Council, which consists of 12 boys and girls and played a crucial role during the development of the CPD 2023-2027. During this process, the office strengthens its partnership with the Ministry of Sport and Youth looking ahead for the EU Year of Youth. This partnership will be formalized at the beginning of 2023.

UNICEF has provided policy advice and expert support for the development of the Ordinance on the quality of social services which was adopted by the Government in June 2022. The by-law defines the standards for quality of the social services in the country and the criteria for their implementation. The country office has also actively participated and contributed to the working group established for the development of the National Programme for Prevention of Violence and Child Abuse 2023-2026 and the Action Plan for its implementation for the period 2023-2024. The policy documents envisage a comprehensive and holistic approach to prevention of violence and include priority actions related to scale up of UNICEF supported models and systems strengthening. Following the adoption by the
National Council for Child Protection in Dec 2022, the Programme and the Action Plan were submitted for adoption by the Council of Ministers (CoM).

UNICEF has also provided input and supported the development of the annual National programme for prevention and protection against domestic violence, adopted in May 2022, the Guidance to the bailiffs/court enforcement officers on handing over children in cases of parental conflicts, adopted by the MoJ in July 2022 and the National Action Plan (NAP) for promoting Equality Between Women and Men for the period 2023-2024. As a result, the Programme and the NAP include specific measures to early identification of risks and vulnerabilities including GBV for refugees and migrants, capacity building of front-line workers and using the results of the UNICEF supported model for integrated VaC/W service provision in the development of the National Map of Social Services.

UNICEF continued supporting the national and local authorities’ capacity to provide appropriate protection and care to refugee and migrant children including as part of the Emergency Response. The country office contributed to the development of Instructions on work with unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine (UASC), adopted in March 2022; the Co-ordination mechanism for working with UASC, adopted by the MLSP in May 2022 and the Rules for placement of UASC in social services, adopted in Oct 2022. In addition, assistance was provided to the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) for the development of a video to support the implementation of the Rules by the staff in the registration and reception centers.

UNICEF has also coordinated and led the translation and dissemination among key stakeholders of the joint UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF advocacy report “Safety and dignity for refugee and migrant children: Recommendations on alternatives to detention and appropriate forms of care in Europe”. The findings of the report and its recommendations will be further discussed with key Ministries, Agencies and partners at a joint round table planned for the beginning of 2023.

UNICEF supported the development of the first plan for the implementation of the Strategic Framework for the development of education, training and learning (2021-2030) as well as the development of the first cross-sectoral ECEC Quality Framework in Bulgaria and supported the piloting of the framework in 10 kindergartens which were part of the EU Child Guarantee project.

In 2022, UNICEF provided technical assistance and policy advice as part of the EEA grants supported programme “Local development, poverty reduction and enhanced inclusion of vulnerable groups” for the selection of 10 municipalities to establish centers of functional services for children from vulnerable groups to the total amount of € 6 029 412.

The Ministry of Education and Science took over the maintenance of the UNICEF supported digital platform www.podkreime.mon.bg and fully integrated it into the digital learning infrastructure of the ministry. The platform was a trigger for legislative changes in the Inclusive education state standard allowing online provision of additional support to children with disabilities and special needs.

UNICEF contributed to the co-creation of the National RCCE Strategy for COVID-19 response and is providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Health for the elaboration of the National Vaccination Strategy on routine child immunization, while supporting the first ever joint Government-WHO assessment of the health system to respond to the needs of refugees (end of 2022) to serve as basis for system strengthening (in 2023 and beyond).

In parallel with the support to policy development, UNICEF with partners ensured direct impact and better life of the most vulnerable children, women, and families.

More than 40,000 children and 52,639 parents/caregivers were supported with essential services and protection interventions (legal aid, MHPSS and reintegration services). 53,461 vulnerable families with young children were provided with family care services and support; 256 pregnant women and 1,699 families with young children received home visiting service. The ECG pilot project supported
16,315 children and 10,059 parents and has strengthened the capacities of 816 professionals from the health, education, and social sectors.

Together with the newly established Youth Advisory Council, UNICEF reached 340,102 and engaged 54,419 people online. More than 25,000 children and adults were reached with MHPSS and GBV mitigation response and referral to adequate services.

UNICEF supported Ministry of Health during the process of development of a National communication strategy for vaccination through targeted technical assistance and evidence generation. Over 3.3 million people were reached through messaging on prevention and access to services, 23,733 people participated in SBC activities.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, UNICEF leveraged and expended its strategic partnerships with line ministries and local authorities to strengthen the capacities of national systems through technical and financial support, supporting the government to ensure access to services, protection, and social assistance for the most vulnerable populations, including Ukrainian refugees.

Six UNICEF-Blue Dots were established reaching more than 4,500 children and 10,200 caregivers with child-friendly spaces, legal aid, counselling, MHPSS, provision of information and support to access social services.

UNICEF reached 4,180 Ukrainian refugee children with informal education and learning opportunities by supporting Ukrainian refugee teachers and educators, providing learning materials, improving access to the internet, and providing additional catch-up support for primary grade students. More than 52,000 caregivers have been reached with relevant information for nurturing care – more than 24,000 downloads of Bebbo App and more than 27,055 visited the Parenting UNICEF website for information. To assist Ukrainian mothers and primary caregivers in providing the best care for their young children, UNICEF adapted and translated the Bebbo application, a free mobile application, now available in Bulgarian, Ukrainian and Russian, benefitting over 23,000 caregivers in Bulgaria, including refugees from Ukraine.

UNICEF launched its first winterization operation, reaching 15,000 people with blankets, winter clothes, and hygiene kits during the winter. Inter-Agency Contingency plan was established for the provision of accommodation, meals, legal assistance, and protection for an additional 10,000 people in case of massive influx from Romania.

19,350 children and adolescents (10,002 girls and 9,348 boys) were reached through UNICEF interventions in formal and non-formal learning activities. Out of those 8,891 are young children 2-7 years old, 3,865 are children with disabilities and 4,940 refugee and migrant children.

Together with all sectors and multiple implementing partners, UNICEF Bulgaria reached 3,401,854 people (refugee and host communities) through SBC messaging (online and offline) on prevention and access to services; engaged 75,346 people in community actions for social and behavioral change; enabled 1,399 people to share feedback through established mechanisms. Social cohesion events and campaigns – such as UNICEF Global GWA Maria Guleghina’s visit on World Refugee Day, Ukrainian children and families’ participation in Sofia Summer Fest, mini-World Cup, Christmas bazar – targeted 80,000 people on the ground and reached 1.8 million via TV, radio, digital. 4,500 Ukrainian parents were directly engaged in community awareness session for “Back to School”, while 4,221 health workers were trained on interpersonal communication for vaccines confidence. 123,584 people were reached online and there are 22,686 downloads and users of the Health Buddy+ mobile application for COVID-19 information. 239,874 people were reached online and there are 7,394 downloads and users of the new “UNICEF room” (“Razkazhi Mi”) mobile application for mental health of adolescents, launched on World Mental Health Day (October 2022). Another 69,326 people
were reached online and 2439 engaged via the new youth-led mental health podcast series “Inside Out” launched during European Mental Health week (May 2022). Over 20 000 parents were reached with messages on nurturing care and importance of ECI for children with developmental delays, 114 kindergarten staff were trained and a global UNICEF toolkit on addressing stigma against children with disabilities was developed in 2022 and will be tested in Bulgaria in 2023.

Within the framework of continuous monitoring and learning, UNICEF utilized the findings and recommendations of the Country Programme Evaluation, during the finalization of the CPD 2023-2027 and prepared and implemented a detailed management response. UNICEF further contributed to evidence generation and research by commissioning an independent evaluation of a joint programme between UNICEF and MoES on prevention of violence in schools to inform the scale up of the model; initiated a mapping of good national practices on social-emotional learning and recommendations for introduction of social-emotional skills in education. UNICEF Bulgaria is also part of key multi-country ongoing evaluations like on the innovative Bebbo experimental evaluation, on deinstitutionalization and on Ukraine emergency response. Also, UNICEF conducted a study on attitudes and preparedness of pre-school teachers to work with children with disabilities as part of the ECG pilot model and published a study on knowledge, attitudes and practices of professionals to use AAC. To further strengthen the awareness and effective use of assistive technologies in Bulgaria, UNICEF supported an international conference on AAC which gathered over 1000 professionals and parents, finalized and published an AAC catalogue.

Study on Social norms and discriminatory attitudes towards children with disabilities and developmental delays was carried out under pilot ECARO and Drexel university methodology and within pilot UNICEF HQ/H&M Foundation project for ECI.

In terms of Fundraising, UNICEF Bulgaria started the year with a highly successful fundraising TV event with a new format in Jan 2022 which was broadcasted live in prime time on NOVA TV. As a result of the event over 7,000 new pledge SMS and online donors were recruited, which exceeded the initial target. The expected ROI for 12 months is over 2.

In 2022, Bulgaria CO raised 2,522,376 BGN (1,373,095 USD) and exceeded the annual target by 39%, reaching 51%. This is a further increase versus 2021 achieving a record gross revenue from the private sector since the establishment of PSFR operations in Bulgaria.

The CO launched an emergency appeal for Ukraine in Feb 2022 gathering over 645,000 BGN (357,000 USD) from individuals and corporate donors. There was an unprecedented increase in online donations. Bulgaria CO continuously put efforts in conversion of one-off emergency donors to pledge via telemarketing, e-mail and Viber. Corporate partners and donors were activated and engaged in via corporate donations, customer fundraising activities, employee giving and advocacy.

This major fundraising campaign focused specifically on the needs of children in Ukraine, as part of UNICEF’s general appeal that was released in the first months after the war started. It was followed by several awareness and tolerance campaigns during the summer months on UNICEF CO Bulgaria’s actions to support refugees from Ukraine in the country - opening Blue Dot sites and a “Back to school” campaign to enroll refugee children in school. The UNICEF Ukraine response campaigns generated total reach in traditional media of 2,920,000 people and 7,731,723 in social media channels. Most popular post was the story of Yana from Kramatorsk – 1,110,000 unique people reached and 10,647 engagements in our social media channels.

UNICEF Bulgaria’s presence in traditional media scored 68% positive (increasing from 46% in 2021), 31% 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 was 4867 and reached 72.45% based on the top three top-tier media outlets for each month. The overall digital
reach total was **22,858,492** (22,381,160 people reached on social media and 477,332 on our website). In comparison with 2021, 2022 has better results in terms of engagement rate (2.72%). In 2022 Instagram reach was nearly tripled, 2,600,000 people, compared to 2021, with 879,000 people reached. In Twitter overall performance in 2022 is better than in 2021. All Twitter metrics are improved – 144,000 impressions were gained in 2022, in comparison with 81,000 in 2021. The engagement rate is improved to 5.58% (for 2022) from 1.77% (2021). UNICEF Bulgaria TikTok profile was launched at the end of 2022. For two months (November and December) it already has 1426 likes, 155 followers and 137,828 impressions and 3340 video views.

UNICEF has 27 staff members and 3 full-time consultants at the beginning of the year. Due to the war in Ukraine and activation of L3 emergency procedures, the office recruited 7 additional staff. This was supported by additional emergency funding, so that overall budget expenditure reached 8,339,565 USD from the following sources of funds: RR, OR BMM, BMD, BMS and ORE.

### UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Throughout the previous Country Programme 2018-2022, the country office continued to leverage UNICEF expertise to provide technical assistance to the government and several line ministries. The ongoing emergency response amplified the importance of partnerships and UNICEF intensified its partnership with police and migration authorities on child rights issues. 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 UNHCR and IOM on the Ukraine Refugee response, and other Refugee and Migrants. UNICEF has a very strong partnership with WHO, establishing the Coalition on Mental Health in 2022 in Bulgaria, and UNICEF continued to work together with the WorldBank in Bulgaria on a household pulse survey in 2022.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, UNICEF played a role of convener between Government, CSOs, international and local actors on child rights issues. Together with the State Agency for Child Protection, UNICEF is co-chairing the sub-group on children set up under the Social Issues Working Group. Together with the Ministry of Education and UNHCR, UNICEF is co-chairing the Education Working Group, and supported the development of a policy on formal and non-formal education for Ukrainian refugees, including provision of Bulgarian language classes for children and hourly daycare for children between 2 and 6 years.

The partnership with local authorities has been strengthened and several MoUs have been signed for a long term collaboration with municipalities. This will include network of CSOs (Misson Wings, CRWB, BRC, BHC) and several Ukrainian CSOs for a response rooted in the capacities and needs of the communities.

UNICEF has supported summer programmes in seven locations in partnership with Ukrainian community-led NGOs Adra and Fund Good. UNICEF has supported the social and cultural integration of nearly 200 Ukrainian youth through psychosocial interventions and non-formal educational and leisure activities. Specialists and educators from Ukraine are employed within UNICEF-supported interventions.

UNICEF incorporated Business for Result (B4R) approach further into the programme in 2022, 11 companies and the business associations representing the Advisory Council for Business and Results for Children were actively involved during the development and consultations of the new UNICEF Country Programme (2023-2027).

Together with the UN agencies further efforts were made to streamline processes and achieve efficiencies in joint operations. Close coordination on the Ukraine response was achieved by initiating a joint NGO salary survey with UNHCR, as well as piggy-bagging on translation, events and transportation services. Two UN security meetings were held to agree and approve the Bulgaria Security plan and the Security Risk Measures for the period November 2022 – October 2023. The UN Designated Official and the CSFP functions remain with UNICEF.
Lessons Learned and Innovations

The previous Country Programme, including the year 2022 demonstrated added value of UNICEF supported models of innovative services, especially if linked and in synergy with UNICEF support for national policy revisions and development. This was confirmed by the Country Programme evaluation conducted in 2022. This was used as the main modus operandi in 2022. For example, the implementation of the ECG pilot project, which involves more than 100 partners at national, regional and local levels – line ministries, agencies, district administrations, municipalities, health, education and social services providers, universities, NGOs, training institutions and many other actors, has been critical for the strategic positioning of UNICEF as an expert and partner of choice and has strengthened its convening role. Through its participation in the working group for the development of the National Action Plan as well as in the monitoring committees for the operational programmes, funded by ESF+, UNICEF was able to influence the key national policies and interventions for child poverty reduction and to ensure the sustainability and scaling up of the model services. The political instability in the country, which continued throughout 2022, did affect the implementation of the CG pilot project as UNICEF has secured the commitment and active engagement of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the CG National Coordinator. A key factor for the successful testing of the model services was the leading role of the municipalities and the establishment of the coordination and monitoring committees at local level.

Additionally, the EU Child Guarantee as an EC initiative aiming to ensure that the most vulnerable children have access to healthcare, education, childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition, and targeting the most vulnerable children with disabilities, in precarious family situations, residing in institutions, migrant and refugee children, and Roma children is a best practice of how to link our Humanitarian and Development programming. Building on the experience of the EUCG pilot project, which was implemented in 10 pilot municipalities in 3 districts – Burgas, Sliven and Stara Zagora - the CO is now expanding its existing partnerships with municipalities/regional governments, to support access to social services for Ukrainian refugees and is preparing model MoUs with the municipalities of Burgas, Varna, Sofia, Plovdiv where most of the refugees are hosted.

Throughout the Country Programme 2018-2022, and especially during and post COVID period, UNICEF invested in innovation and development of digital platforms as useful tools to be integrated and sustained by the child related system. For example, UNICEF has invested in expanding the access of adolescent boys and girls to innovative and technology enabled mental health services and strengthening its strategic positioning as convener, expert and partner of choice in accelerating MHPSS priorities, building on increased global and regional awareness and momentum. As an innovative approach Bebbo parenting App was introduced in partnership with Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education as a powerful digital parenting program for strengthening the caregivers’ skills for provision of nurturing care. The App was launched in June 2022 and it has been downloaded more than 24,000 times in just over 6 months.

The country office’s emergency response and all related resources has been used to strengthen the national systems and seek for long–term sustainable solutions. The emergency response is implemented in close collaboration with national institutions and aims at strengthening organizational and institutional capacity of national and local actors, improving the national and local service delivery and management systems, and building the readiness and resilience of national social protection systems, for longer term and sustainable results.

Additionally, UNICEF is working with both State Agency for Refugees and State Agency for Child Protection to strengthen the National Child Help Line for MHPSS service for vulnerable children and women as a first contact point to share information about children at risk, including Ukrainian
unaccompanied children.

Internally, the office optimizes the use of L3 and L2 Emergency Procedures which also implies capacity building and learning from RO, countries in the region and strong support from management. The recently established Emergency team (significantly funded by ORE) has been integrated in the regular programming team. The Emergency response is entirely embedded into the strategy, partnerships, and advocacy of regular programmes. The scale down is prepared through full integration of emergency outputs into regular programming, focus on system strengthening, and policy advocacy.

This programmatic shift, of downsizing the direct implementation of UNICEF and scaling up of the upstream work supported by the strong evidence was the main strategy in 2022 and will be further elaborated in 2023. With a stabilization of the political situation in the country hopefully expected in 2023, UNICEF is positioned to have a significant role as technical advisor to the Government and continues to leverage resources for children.