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Beleva, Iskra

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The Provision of Out-of-School Care in Bulgaria

Author: Iskra Beleva,

Senior Research Fellow, Ph.D. in Economics Ph.D. in Economics

1. Introduction

Child care is an important topic within the debate on gender equality, as identified in a strategic EU document.¹ The problem is recognized as a key issue of demographic development and reconciliation between work, private and family life in Bulgaria as well. The National Strategy for Encouraging Gender Equality for the period 2009-2015 specifies the need to stimulate gender equality in reconciliation professional and family life, particularly child care, as national target 2.²

According to the definition in the Act on implementing the National Educational Law, out-of-school care includes activities organized in the time free of school classes, which provide education and development of the children in accordance with their interest in the field of art, science, technique and sport (Act.98a).

Out-of-school care is carried out either in school or in so-called “service organizations”, located out of school. The latter are public, municipal or private. They included “joint children complexes”, “children complexes”, “national children palace”, “centres for technics and science”, “children sport schools” and “centres for work with children”, “children clubs”. The existing net of such institutions, located in all 28 regions of the country, is under the supervision and control of the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth and the respective municipality.

Today the provision of out-of-school care in Bulgaria is under reformation, following the undertaken reform in the educational system as a whole. This reform is progressing slowly, since it needs consideration between many social groups (parents, teachers, governmental institutions, local authorities, etc), a task not easy to achieve, especially in significant financial constrains.

Out-of-school care has been considerably well developed before the transition, when the child care has been a national priority of the social policy and fully financed by the state budget. The socialist system has financed the child care generously. The efficiency of the expenditures has not been a priority, unlike now. The kindergarten and school net has covered all settlements and access to them has been free of charge. The out-of-school care has also been free of charge and children have been stimulated to participate in different forms of out-of-school activities. However, the participation in these out-of-school activities is a personal choice and preference, and depends on the talent and interest of the children.

With the start of the transition (1989) and the transformation of the system of financing the child care services, the existing forms of activities in most schools have been liquidated due to

¹ Strategy for Equality between Men and Women 2010-2015, EU.

² National Strategy for Encouraging Gender Equality for the period 2009-2015, MLSP.
http://www.mlsp.government.bg/bg/docs/Strategy_Finawithcomments.doc

financial restrictions. The alternative forms of child services start to appear after 2000, with the development of private schools and kindergartens. However, the access to such forms of child care services is limited because of the price participants have to pay. In many of the smaller and remote settlements the existing facilities have been closed due to lack of enough number of children or because of lack of finance. New ones have not been opened.

Today there are some signs of restoring the traditions and rebuilding some of the successful forms of out-of-school activities and attracting children to participate in them. The ideas and vision of the government in force, presented in a Concept for further development of the educational system (2010), pay special attention to pre-primary school and out-of-school child care by pointing out the forms and the norms for development of out-of-school care within the existing educational system.

2. Organisation of pre-primary and primary education

The National Education Act points out the following stages in the educational system in Bulgaria:³

- Pre-school level (children aged 3-5 years)
- Primary level (1st to 4th grade)
- Lower secondary level (5th to 8th grade)
- Secondary level (9th to 12th grade)
- Higher education
- Education for adults

Pre-school level is for children aged 3-5 years, and precedes the formal and obligatory education. It is located in kindergartens and its purpose is to socialize the children and give them elementary knowledge and habits in reading, writing and calculation. This pre-school level starts when the child is 3 years old, but only the last pre-school year is obligatory.

Prior to higher education, the educational system is organized in two major levels: basic and secondary and comprises 12 grades.

Basic education (grades 1st through 8th) is subdivided into two sub-levels: primary (grades 1st through 4th) and lower secondary (grades 5th through 8th).

Secondary education normally encompasses grades 8th through 12th, but can start earlier depending on the type of school. There are two major types of secondary school: secondary comprehensive, usually called *gymnasia* (high school) and secondary vocational, most often referred to as *tehnikum* (vocational school). Special schools at all educational levels accommodate students with impaired health. Private schools are a new element in the structure of the education system.

Special schools accommodate students in need of special care because of learning disabilities, health, or emotional problems. There is a wide variety of special schools, catering to children who are chronically ill, mentally retarded, blind or visually impaired, hearing and speech

³ National Education Law. Ministry of Education, Youths and Science. 2009, p. 6.
<http://www.minedu.government.bg/opencms/export/sites/mon/left_menu/documents/law/zkn_prosveta.pdf>

impaired, or who have behavioural problems bordering on juvenile delinquency. A significant number of special schools function as boarding schools.

The curriculum is structured into three components: compulsory, elective, and optional. The correlation between these varies for the different types of schools. Subjects fall into the following 8 major areas of content: Bulgarian language and literature, foreign languages, mathematics, information technologies, social sciences and civics, natural sciences and ecology, music and arts, physical culture and sports.

Schools operate on a five-day week schedule. September 15th, or the workday after it, marks the beginning of the school year.

The duration of the school year varies by school level and grade, and depends on the quantity of material that needs to be covered. It ends on May 24th for grades 1st and 12th (in the latter case the intention is to provide time for the matriculation examination). School year ends on May 31st for grades 2nd through 4th, on June 15th for grades 5th through 8th, on June 30th for grades 9th through 11th. School year is divided into two *sroka* (terms, singular is *srok*); the first term begins on September 15th and ends on February 4th, the second one starts on February 9th. There is a Christmas break (December 24th through January 6th), an inter-term break (February 7th – 8th), a spring break (April 1st – 10th), and a two-day break before Orthodox Easter. In addition, first graders only have a short break in the fall (November 11th – 13th). The summer vacation spans from the end of school year until September 15th. If schools are to be closed due to inclement weather or fuel shortage, the days missed are compensated at the expense of vacation time.

Students from grades 1st through 12th normally spend half a day at school. The other half is dedicated to homework and independent study at home. In elementary school and sometimes in pre-secondary school there is an option called *zanimalnya* (extended care) for students to spend the other half of the day at school working on their lessons under the control of a teacher. This is done upon the explicit request of the parents. Schools in big cities operate according to a two-shift scheme (morning and afternoon) because of shortage of school premises. In small cities and villages the one-shift scheme prevails.

There are significant regional differences in the distribution of the school system – presently the small settlements miss educational institutions and children travel everyday to the nearest location with available school. The reform of closing schools in areas where the number of children is not enough happens during the last 10 years within the reforms for decentralization of budget location and limited financial resources of the national budget.

In figures the organization of pre-primary and primary education in 2009/2010 school year includes 2262 kindergartens (48 of which private). In 2006/2007 school year there are 2470 kindergartens (32 of which private). **The primary level** of education in 2009/2010 school year includes 1560 schools (3 of which private). There are 1453 basic schools (1st – 8th grades), including 29 private. Lower secondary level includes also 14 *progymnasia* (5th – 8th grades), 2 of which are private and 165 *gymnasia* (9th – 12th grades), including 29 private.

3. Out-of-school services: facts and figures

3.1 Out-of-school services for children in pre-primary education

As mentioned above, the pre-primary education in Bulgaria is available for children aged 3-5 years and is obligatory for the last year before entering school. The pre-school services are located in kindergartners in general and in schools – for the children aged 5 (only in case there are relevant conditions).

Table 1 shows the dynamic of kindergartners and number of participants for the period 2006-2010.

Table 1 – Pre-school services in Bulgaria

	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010
Number of kindergartners	2470	2456	2291	2262
Number of enrolled children	206745	207682	212454	217804
Number of personnel in pre-school care (teachers and managers)	19305	19456	19348	19466

Source: Statistical Reference Book 2010, National Statistical Institute, Sofia, p. 56-61.

The demand for pre-school services is higher than the supply. After a period of decline, in the last years the number of children increases and this raises the demand for pre-school services. The distribution of kindergartners is very uneven – in the small towns the supply is higher since the number of children is less than available places. In big town, particularly in the capital, the supply is lower due to the huge demand. The reason is that many young people move to big towns and the capital where they can find jobs. Due to the higher demand for childcare services, parents often remain in waiting lists. This is especially valid for the public kindergartners, while the private services are available for everybody who can afford to pay the fee.

The pre-school services include permanent and seasonal services. Permanent services can be full day and half day (see table 2).

Table 2 – Number of kindergartners by types

	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010
Total number of kindergartners	2470	2456	2291	2262
Permanent kindergartners, including:	2467	2453	2288	2261
Full day	2456	2443	2279	2249
Half day	11	10	9	12
Seasonal kindergartners	3	3	3	1

Source: Statistical Reference Book 2010, National Statistical Institute, Sofia, p. 62.

Figures in table 2 point out that most of the supply services are provided for full time. This completely reflects the demand, since parents prefer full day child care services, which allow both parents to be in full-time employment.

Table 3 – Number of children in kindergartners by types

	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010
Total number of children in kindergartners	206754	207682	212454	217804
Number of children in permanent kindergartners, including:	206671	207603	212370	217759
Full day	187899	189523	195993	201049
Half day	18772	18080	16377	16710
Number of children in seasonal kindergartners	74	79	84	45

Source: Statistical Reference Book 2010, National Statistical Institute, Sofia, p. 62.

In school year 2009/2010 the average number of children in a class is 22, and the average number of children per teacher is 12. These figures are considered a success, indicating increasing coverage of children in pre-school care.

Minister of Education is in charge of the state pre-school institutions (Art. 6 of the National Education Act). Depending on the source of financing, pre-school public institutions are state and municipalities. The opening and closing of municipal kindergartens is in the authority of the mayor, after a decision of the Municipality Council. There are also private out-of-school services, which are licensed to provide child care service under state standard.

Pre-school care services, as all other educational services, are provided under specific national standards in accordance with Art. 16, National Education Act. The Act states that pre-school education is obligatory for children two years before entering school but not before the child has aged 5 years (Art. 20, National Education Act). The same article defines also that pre-school education is organized in environment relevant to the children's age and in accordance with their physical and psychological health. In addition, pre-school education is organized if there is available personnel (teachers and supporting personnel) with relevant education. The organization of pre-school education requires also relevant organization of the pre-school process in accordance with the state standards, everyday transport and nutrition in accordance with the existing health standard. The children with health problems are directed for pre-school education to specialized kindergartens in accordance with their illness.

Children in kindergartens may participate in different forms of out-of school services, like foreign language courses, dancing and singing classes, art schools, sport schools, etc. Depending on the child's interest, parents decide in which form of activities to include him/her. As mentioned, the activities are provided by "service organizations", and children paid additional fee. We cannot provide exact data on how many of the children visiting the kindergartens participate in additional forms of activities. However, according to expert opinion based on informal interviews with parents, most of the children participate in one or two forms of activities. In addition to child care provided in the kindergarten, children participate in privately provided out-of-school care services, e.g. foreign language lessons at home or at specialized school, music lessons, etc. There is no available statistics to report all these forms of services and number of customers.

3.2 Out-of-school care for school going children

3.2.1. Availability

The out-of-school care for children is part of the whole educational process, and this is stated in the National Education Act, Art. 33 – "In accordance with the interest and the talent of the children in the sphere of culture, science, technique, sport, etc., activities in the free of classes time are organized in school or in supporting institutions".⁴ Following this legal norm, the schools organize many initiatives for their pupils depending on the personal choice. The activities of the supporting organizations are coordinated with the Minister of Education and are carried out in the area of science and informatics, sport, managing international projects, etc.

⁴ National Education Act.

http://www.minedu.government.bg/opencms/export/sites/mon/left_menu/documents/law/zkn_prosveta.pdf

The forms of activities are quite various depending on the interests of the children, the initiative of the school management and teachers, the support of the municipalities, when the school is municipal, the available financial resources, etc. Some of the forms are:

- Work on the lessons after classes in *zanimalnia*, a place where pupils are organized for self-work and could consult their work with a teacher;
- Work in study groups, formed on a specific topic of interest (literature, theatre, astronomy, foreign language, tourism, etc.);
- Sport teams;
- Singing and dancing groups;
- Olympiads groups;
- Work with exceptionally talented children;
- Hourly care services provided in private childcare clubs.

Eurostat (SILK) data indicate that **formal child care** in Bulgaria for the age group from 3 years to minimum compulsory school age is 30 hours and more. It varies in the years starting from 53% (over the population of each age group) in 2006 to 50% in 2007, 61% in 2008 and 48% in 2009. Compared with EU-27 (40% in 2007, 43% in 2007 and 44% in 2009), the percentage in Bulgaria is higher, which means that more children of this age group are included in different forms of child care. However, the tendency is declining and the gap between Bulgaria and EU-27 decreases.

The National Annual Calendar on out-of school activities⁵, located on the website of the Ministry of Education, lists all activities planned for the year. The main topics for grouping the activities are:

- International activities in “Science and Technics” (participation in international networks for pupils, like “Ecoparad”, “The world of animals and plants”, “The world – our common home”, etc.; “Arts” (international folk festivals); “Sports” (children chess Evrika-64). All these activities are organized in Bulgaria.
- National activities in the area of:
 - Science and technics (includes 33 concrete activities). Among the concrete activities most interesting are the national competition for children photo and video art, national competition “Clean Water for All”, World Day, national competition on aero modelling and space rocket modelling, national competition “Cosmos, Present and Future for Human Being”, “Green Week”, national competition “Bulgarian Rose”, “River Danube Days”;
 - Arts – national cheerleading festival, national painting competition, national folk festival “From Christmas to Vasil Day”, national competition “My Children’s Dreams”, national literature competition “What We Love”, national theatre days, national dancing days, etc.
 - Sport events and competitions in different calendar.

Regular statistics on the coverage rate of pupils in out-of school care is not available both as a total coverage rate and by type of care. According to expert opinion from Ministry of Education, the coverage rate is over 50%.

⁵ National Calendar of out-of-school activities

http://www.minedu.government.bg/opencms/export/sites/mon/left_menu/olympiad/kaledar_izvanuchilishti_dejn_osti-2007.pdf

Total number of pupils (in grades 1st to 12th) in 2009/2010 is 627 163, including 258 340 in basic education level (grades 1st to 4th), 220 196 in lower secondary education level (grades 5th to 8th) and 148 627 in secondary educational level (grades 9th to 12th). This means that more than 230 000 pupils from the basic educational level are involved in different forms of out-of-school care. A report of the Ministry of Education on development of out-of-school activities in 2008 says that only in the national programme “The school – a territory for the pupils” the number of participants is more than 68 000 pupils.⁶ Another 150 000 children have participate in out-of-school sport activities, included in the National Sport Calendar.

The 2009 Report on the Progress of the National Demographic Strategy 2006-2020 states that in different children clubs, located in schools or in the so-called “Centres for Children”, within the programmes in health and eco education, arts and science, the number of participants is between 10 000 and 60 000 pupils per year. The number of participants in different activities, aiming to increase the information for children and to encourage their activity, is about 150 000 pupils per year.

The National Donor Fund “13 Centuries Bulgaria” sponsors many national events and local activities on the development of children with exceptional talent.

Private service care providers are relatively new institutions. As mentioned above, they have become popular in the last ten years. The so-called “Child Clubs” provide hourly services during the day. The clubs are a type of kindergartners. The child care provided in these clubs is organized in a more flexible way, since parents may leave their child for one, two or more hours. Professionally qualified people provide the services. The clubs are licensed in accordance to the legal requirements. Nutrition is provided as well for the children staying there the whole day.

As mentioned above, national service institutions realize the out-of-school child care, financed by the state budget. They include the national child palace, national complexes and centres for child relax and sport. All these institutions are in charge of organizing the activities of out-of-school child care. The definition of national service institutions is described in Art. 6 of the Law for Implementation of the National Educational Act.

The availability of the provided out-of-school care services for children differs from a regional point of view. It is understandable that the provision of such services is higher in the capital and big towns, where there are many suppliers of such services in addition to the care services provided in school. For instance, in Sofia, the capital of the country, there is a National Child Palace, where many services are supplied, as well as a lot of opportunities for the parents to choose services. In the small towns and villages, in particular, the availability is limited to the abilities of the teachers to be helpful in organizing out-of-school forms of activities. Moreover, in settlements where schools are closed and children travel everyday to another school, there is no such care. The children living in such places have no chances to participate in out-of-school forms of care.

⁶ Report on out-of-school activities for 2008, Ministry of Education, <http://www.minedu.government.bg>

3.2.2 *Quality*

The quality of the childcare services is fixed by the existing state norms, which are presented in Chapter 2 of the National Education Act in Bulgaria. However, the standards present only part of the problem, since the quality of the services depends to a higher extent on the way the standards are implemented and strictly monitored. The subjective assessment of the quality by parents and children is also part of the problem.

Norms on number of children per group

Number of classes and number of children per class in Bulgaria is fixed in a Regulation No 7/29.12.2000 (see Defining number of classes and number of children per class in kindergarten, schools and servicing institutions. State Gazette No 27/2008).

According to this regulation, full day, half day and seasonal kindergarten have minimum 12 and maximum 22 children in a group. The pre-school class includes minimum 12 and maximum 16 children. The number of children per class in the schools is as follows: minimum 16 and maximum 22 children for 1st to 4th grade; minimum 18 and maximum 26 children for 5th to 8th grades, and the same for classes from 9th to 12th grades.

The number of children per class differs in case the school is “internat” (boarding school) or semi-internat (semi-boarding school). It is 17-22 children per class if the organization of the educational process includes personal work after classes in so-call *zanimalnia*, and 20-25 in case the educational institution is a boarding school. The number of children per class is 13 when the form is out-of-school study group or interest group.

The music class includes 12 children, but in some cases 6 children, depending on the musical instruments children are playing. The dancing class includes 12 children, while theatre class – 13 children. Number of children in a sport class varies between 12, 13 and 15 depending on the type of sport. Art. 27 of the Regulation says that the number of classes in the institutions providing service care for children in accordance with their interests is defined by dividing the number of children on above-mentioned norms.

Norms on teaching

Regulation No 5/14.05.2002 (Norms on the teachers and personnel in the education system. State Gazette No 27/2008) presents the norms. According to this regulation, the norms on a teacher in kindergartens is 30 hours per week; teacher in 1st to 4th grade – 21 hours per week; foreign language teacher in 1st to 4th grade – 648 hours per year. Teachers in out-of-school classes have annual norms of 720 hours, and 72-80 hours for individual work with pupils.

The ratio of pedagogical and non-pedagogical personnel is as follows:

- in kindergartens with 12-22 pupils – 2.08 to 2.20;
- in primary school (1st to 4th grade) – 1.85 to 0.50;
- in lower secondary school (5th to 8th grade) – 1.85 to 0.50;
- in secondary school (9th to 12th grade) – 2.20 to 0.50.

According to Art. 10 of the Regulation mentioned above, the norm per teacher for out-of-school classes in accordance with the so-call “free chosen classes” is 8 hours per week for art

study groups (singing, dancing, etc.) and 2 hours per week for sport, science and other activities.

There is no minimum qualification requirement for a person to be employed as a child caretaker. There is a list of fixed qualification requirements a person should meet in order to work with children. They include level of education, diploma, seniority, health status, etc. The requirements are numbered in a regulation and controlled by the respective bodies.

The assessment of the quality of the educational process includes not only the “natural indicators” mentioned above, but also “value indicators”. The value standards relate to finance and include annual updating of the subsidy paid from the state budget to the school for the out-of-school activities. In 2011 this subsidy is 14 BGN per pupil involved in out-of-school forms of education. In addition, there is a fixed amount for nutrition per child in pre-school level and primary level (1st to 4th grade). The standard for full day school for 1st grade is 427 BGN.

There is also a subsidy for transportation to school for children living in remote places. The subsidy is 287 BGN per pupil. In addition to the state subsidy, municipalities also contribute to financing the out-of-school care.

Inspection

The control over the activities of the education institutions is an implicit part of the whole process. The regional inspectorates are in charge of providing permanent control of the school and out-of-school activities on their correspondence to the legal norms concerning the content of the programme, health and safety condition, hygiene, etc. Art. 35 of National Education Act states that the Minister of Education is in charge of the control, and regional inspectorates are the local institutions, which control the observation of the legal rules.

3.2.3 Flexibility

The flexibility issue of out-of-school child care and activities refers to the interest of both sides – suppliers and demanders of those services. However, the flexibility is limited in the frame of the existing rules, fixed in the Law and respective regulation for its implementation. Moreover, flexibility is also limited by the fact that the activity is a subject of control by respective bodies, and as such it has to be planned and announced in accordance to the school rules.

Considering flexibility from the point of view of the supplier, state and municipal providers are less flexible in view of fixed hours of provided services. Private suppliers are very flexible from this point of view – they offer flexible time services, including during holidays. “Child Clubs” are open during the whole day, from 8:00h to 20:00h, but the time may be extended even to 22:00h in case the parents are occupied. On weekends these clubs organize children’s parties, e.g. birthday celebrations.

Considering the demand, parents would like to have flexible time arrangement and pay reasonable price. This confronts with the fixed hours the state and municipal child care providers have.

3.2.4 Affordability

As already mentioned, the schools are one of the institutions providing out-of-school care. They are financed by the state and municipality budget. The other providers of child care services are the so-called “service organizations”, recognized as out-of-school provider. Some of them are financed by the municipality or partly subsidized by the state budget, and some of them are privately financed.

The schools are financed by the so-called delegated budgets. In case there are additional financial sources or the headmaster has realized savings within the delegated budget (this happens when the school is big and the number of pupils is high enough), he/she can initiate some forms of out-of school care in the school. The most popular case is when the so-called service providers offer their services to schools and kindergartner, and depending on the demand contract with them. The children pay for the services, and the service providers share the payment with the school in case they carry out the services in the school and use its facilities.

The municipal service providers are subsidized by the municipality depending on the municipal budget. For example, in 2010 a relatively small municipality of Balchik declares that the annual payment per child engaged in out-of-school care is 23 BGN or 11.5 EUR. A governmental document says that in 2011 in accordance with the state budget the amount of money to be paid for out-of-school care in the system of secondary education is 14 BGN per child or 7 EUR.⁷ The annual organization of full day school for pupils in 1st grade is 427 BGN or 214 EUR per child in accordance with Decision of Council of Ministers No 186.

Prices of supplied services vary, and it is a decision of the headmaster and the parents whether they will accept it. For instance, swimming classes cost 20 BGN or 10 EUR per month, paid by the parents. Dancing classes, organized in the kindergartens by service care supplier, cost 16 BGN or 8 EUR per month.

Private out-of-school care providers offer services on market principle – prices are higher compared with those provided in school or municipal care net, e.g. language classes cost 750 BGN or 325 EUR annually. The services in private “child clubs” are paid depending on the hours the child is there, and the price is 3 BGN or 1.5 EUR per hour.

Mentioned prices present only part of the picture, but they tell us at least two things: first, that the state and the municipalities are able to give only small amounts of money for developing out-of-school care activities because of the limited budgets. This means that the subsidy from these two agents in the process is not enough for developing these cares and that the schools have to look for additional sources of financing. Parents pay a share of the price as well. The second point relates to the household’s incomes and the share of families who can afford to pay the prices offered by the private out-of-school care companies and the service institutions. The average wage per year in 2009 is 7094 BGN or about 3535 EUR, and the minimum wage is 240 BGN or 120 EUR.

In fact, the affordability of the offered services highly depends on the employment status of the parents – if they are employed and the level of their wages is about the average, then it is not a problem to afford child care services. However, the affordability of these services is a

⁷ Art. 22 of Decision of Ministers of Council No 334/29.12.2010.

problem for many households: families with unemployed parents (or one parent); families with parents' wages at a lower level than average; families with more than two children; Roma families where there are many children, where parents are unemployed or paid at a lower level since they have low education and lack skill. However, having in mind the increasing social differentiation, the share of families, which cannot afford service care, is significant.

3.2.5 Attitudes

The attitude towards using child care services depends on the parents' needs of such services: it is a matter of contract agreement between providers and parents in case this is a private agreement. In case the services are provided in kindergartens or schools, the schedule is fixed for all children and the services are provided during the whole year (with small break).

The attitude to use child care services is also a matter of social behaviour. For example, today more and more families are interested in out-of-school child care services. The benefits of such participation for both children and parents are commonly recognized. Even if there is a grandmother at home who wishes to care for the child, parents prefer to use out-of-school forms as alternative because of the education process, as well as the fact that the child is in contact with other children at his/her age, makes friends, etc. This shows that the attitude has changed during the years and more and more families nowadays look for child care services.

3.2.6 New developments

Some new developments are outlined in a governmental document entitled "A concept for the new principles and innovative points of the new Law for Preschool and School Education" (2011). Accordance to it, "the early integration of children to the educational system through introduction of obligatory pre-school education for children aged 5 years is a key point in the ongoing reform". The government takes the responsibilities to provide proper conditions for this integration. Moreover, there is an idea the obligatory pre-school education to begin when children are 4 years old. This is a new discussion among the public.

Another new point is the introduction of full day education for children in primary school (from 1st to 4th grade). The introduction of such scheme, however, needs new innovative methods and techniques of the education process.

The third point underlined as innovative concerns the qualification of the teachers. According to the document there is a need for increase of their knowledge on new innovative educational technologies.

3.3 Debate

The hot debate today is focused on the vision of developing "centres for personal development and creation", where child care services will be provided. These centres are supposed to contribute to the integration of local, regional and district efforts and to development of inter-sectoral policies for child care. The current institutions, engaged with out-of-school pedagogical child care, will be transformed in such centres under the new

organization of pre-school and school education. This reform is debated in the society in line with the discussion of the new law.

The question whether the demand is met is debated periodically, e.g. when the parents have to apply for a place and wait for hours to do that, or when the lists of the accepted children are announced, etc. This means that the higher demand creates social tension and debates whether the procedure is transparent, etc. However, all these debates occur in the capital and the big towns, as already mentioned.

4. Child care services: research, policies and challenges

Development of child care services in Bulgaria is part of the policy focusing on children problems and children development. In this respect, there are many governmental documents treating the children development environment from different points of view and designing relevant policies. The efforts are towards a complex approach on policy design, following from the new social and economic environment. In this respect, the child care services are considered part of a continuing and complex integration process of the social value norms, cultural and behaviour models in the child care services. So, equal access to cultural values and models is a key element of the policy.

National Child Strategy 2008-2018 outlines the most current view of the policy as a vision, target and mechanisms, including child care out-of-school services. The main efforts in the child care leisure time, relaxation and talent development services are focused on the following:

- Further development and updating of the traditional for the country “centres for children cultural and creative work and activities” – schools, *chitalishte* (local cultural centres) and other service provider institutions.
- Establishment of municipal children complexes and centres in settlements where they lack based on public-private partnership. The specific ethnic cultural characteristic of the population in the relevant municipality and region has to be considered in this respect. The last is important, since Roma population, as well as ethnic Turks, live in relatively compact groups.
- Special care for children with exceptional talent, considered as national treasure.
- Municipalities are in charge of developing policies for stimulating talented children based on their own financial funds.
- Municipalities are in charge of financing and organizing the child care services during leisure time and activities during school breaks. They have to plan these services in accordance with their annual municipality programme.
- Participation of non-governmental sector in child care service provision has to be stimulated based on proper legal condition.
- State institutions, like theatres, museums, libraries, galleries, etc., which are financed by the state budget, have to include in their annual plans joint activities with schools and child care service providers for out-of-school activities. The numbered institutions are obliged to provide joint activities with schools by visiting the remote settlements and presenting their child care services (theatres, shows, exhibitions, etc.).
- Developing sport facilities for children and easing the access of children to them is also a key point of the policy. Special attention is paid on disabled children and the way they can use the available facilities.

- The role of the mass media is considered a factor stimulating the creative work of children by organizing competitions, special programmes, etc. The Internet world is of special interest as a tool for developing children's talents and interests.

The realization of the mentioned areas of child care state policy relies on different concrete measures and activities at national and local level. However, we cannot provide any recent research on child care services, which to be representative for the country. The existing research by different non-governmental organizations is mostly oriented towards child prevention, children rights, etc., and less to child care.

4.1 Labour market achievements

The childcare is responsibility of both parents. However, mothers and fathers participate in different way in the child care at home, at school and in out-of-school activities. A number of studies published in a book "Working Time, Labour Conditions and Demographic Behaviour" (2007) indicate some specifics for the family and gender behaviour in regard to child care. According to M. Nikolova, fathers spend 65 minutes per day on child care in the total balance of time for home activities, while mothers spend 115 minutes per day. This fact outlines that women are almost twice more engaged in child care. However, the survey does not specify whether this care concerns out-of school activities. Further the study underlines that 22.1% of working women aged 21-30 spend over 3 hours per day on child care, as well as 21.3% of working women aged 31-40 and 11.8% of women aged 41-50.⁸ It is also interesting to point out that according to the same study, the higher the education of the mother is, the more the time spent on child care in institution is. This means that women with higher education are more reluctant to go back to work after the birth of the child in comparison with less educated mothers. In this respect, the active labour market policy has designed some policies, aiming at encouraging the labour market reintegration of less educated and qualified young mothers.

National programme "**Support of Maternity**" is a successful active labour market policy aiming at mothers' labour reintegration after birth. The programme encourages employment reintegration of young women and their professional career by ensuring child care for their children. The programme engages unemployed people with proper qualification to care for children, or early-retired people who would like to provide child care services. This might be a person close to the family – grandmother or other elderly woman (friend, relative, etc.), who is unemployed or pensioner. The programme creates more favourable conditions for equalization of the women participation in employment, since it gives employment opportunities for both young and elderly women. The programme is funded by the state budget (about 80% of the total amount in 2009) and social insurance fund "General Illness and Maternity" (about 20% in 2009). It is implemented in 2007 and extended in 2008 by expanding the target group with pensioners under different pension schemes (not only the general scheme). Further extension of the programme in 2010 includes a new module "Back to Work". Under this module unemployed people in pre-pension age with relevant qualification and training in education, health and social area, are engaged to provide child care services to families where both parents are employed or self-employed. In 2009 the number of people employed under the programme is 4148 average per month, 2188 of them pensioners. In 2010 the participants are 1059 people average per month (during the period

⁸ Nikolova, M. Time for Child Care and Child Bringing Up. – In: Working Time, Labour Conditions and Demographic Behaviour. 2007, pp. 165-166.

January – September), 496 of which pensioners. In 2010 under the module “Back to Work” nearly 500 unemployed people are engaged after passing short courses of training.

Another active labour market policies, which aims at encouraging the labour market integration of single parents (both mothers and fathers), is a measure under the Employment Act for encouraging employers to hire vulnerable groups, including single parents with children. Single mothers with children up to 3 years old are 6160 people average in 2009; this number is higher by 21% compared with 2008. This data outline that labour market re-integration after birth is quite a serious problem for single mothers because of lack of professional and qualification competitiveness on the labour market and because they cannot afford child care services without being in employment.

National policy related to female and male employment patterns is focused on increasing the equality between mothers and fathers in relation to child raising and child care. In this respect in 2009 a paternal leave is introduced. In Bulgaria **maternity leave** in 2009 is fixed at 410 days (45 days of them before birth). Payment is 90% of the salary. In 2008 maternity leave is 315 days or 45 weeks, paid at 90%. The insurance period for eligibility increases in the last three years – in 2008 it is at least 6 months, in 2009 – 12 months, and in 2011 – 18 months.

Parental leave is available until the child becomes 2 years of age. In 2008 it is partly paid and is less than 2/3 of the salary. In 2009 payment is fixed at the minimum wage level (240 BGN or 120 EUR).

Paternity leave is introduced in 2009. It is available after the child becomes 6 months old. Additional case: after the child becomes 1 year old and the mother/father decides to go back to work or the child is in kindergarten – then payment is reduced in half.

In conclusion, we can outline that there are efforts for stimulating young mothers to re-enter labour market after birth by creating conditions for more alternatives regarding child care. Meanwhile, there are some groups of the population, like Roma communities, which are excluded to a high extent from these policies and measures. The reasons are: first, their unemployment and inactivity, and second, personal behaviour of the parents who prefer to receive child allowances (which are significant source of incomes because of the number of children) instead of registering as unemployed and working under active labour market policies.

4.2 Child development

As mentioned above, the assessment of the policy and the ways of its monitoring is a matter of legal norms and institutions in charge of their monitoring. A number of non-governmental organizations are also active in this area, raising debates in the public society, and alarming in case of offence.

Priority 7 of the “National Programme for Child Protection – 2010” includes a number of goals concerning the quality issue and the monitoring process in the child care services. Here are included policies for development of a national information system for child protection and for enhancing the information flows concerning child care problems and services. One of the targets is development and implementation of national and international comparative

indicators of child welfare. There are also a number of measures aiming to improve the system of managing the child protection system.

The National Integration Plan for implementation UN Convention for Children Rights 2006-2009 mentions a number of activities, like development and implementation system at national and local level for monitoring the children's rights, development of municipalities' strategies for child protection and dissemination of good practices.

The development of child care policy in Bulgaria in the last 20 years has evolved from total rejection of the traditions of out-of-school child care (during the first 10 years of transition) to more concentrated efforts for building up a new system, in which some of the positive and effective traditions are restored. The goal is to restore local cultural and educational institutions (so-called "chitalishte"), which are financed by the municipality budgets. The system includes also development of private child care institutions and a more balanced and effective cooperation between the state, municipal, and private institution.

There are many strategic documents and plans for enhancing and improving out-of-school child care. However, their implementation at municipality level faces difficulties, including financial restrictions and lack of human capacity. It should be outlined that focus of the policy continues to be child protection from trafficking, violence, etc., and less out-of-school care. Another problem is the fragment assessment of the progress of the designed policy on children development at national and local level, and the lack of regular assessment.

4.3 Social inclusion

One of the goals of the governmental policy concerning child care is the reduction of poverty. The point is that social inclusion helps children to obtain knowledge and practice, which should contribute to their development.

The problem of children poverty in Bulgaria becomes a concern. The country is ranked as one of the first in EU with 17% poverty among children. That is why the improvement of the standard and quality of life of the children is outlined as a key point of the social anti-poverty policy. The focus now is on integral actions in education, health and relevant social policy. This new approach should replace the fragment policy, which has been provided in the last 20 years.

More concrete measures are as follows:

- Full day education for children up to 7th grade of lower secondary education as a prevention of children drop-outs from school;
- Improving schools health services;
- Decreasing share of children living in boarding schools.

There are 138 special institutions, in which live about 7000 children without parents' care. These children are at risk of poverty to a high extent, which focuses the efforts of the government on developing new type of care – placement of children in family houses or "centres of family type", where a modern care for orphans is provided by specialists –

psychologists and social workers. The financing of the activity (20 million EUR) is from Operational Programme “Regional Development”.⁹

Special project “School on Two Gears” targets children with difficulties in the learning process. The main goal of the project is to make the learning process at the basic level of education easier and more attractive for pupils, thus reducing the early school drop-outs. The project is financed by Operational Programme “Human Resource Development”. One of the activities on the project is that 1344 teachers have passed special training for working with children who do not know well Bulgarian language and have no habits to work systematically on their lessons. During the first stage of the project (November 2009 – May 2010) the number of participants is 2502 children. The list of participants for the second and third stage of the project includes 4803 children. This means that 7305 children are included in the project till now. 3159 of them are from the ethnic minority.

Another area of concern is the so-called abandoned children. According to the statistics, the number of abandoned children in 2009 is 7276 (compared with 8019 in 2008). According to the non-governmental organizations, in 2009 the number of abandoned children is 9000, 3000 of them are up to 3 years old. Only 140 of them are orphans.¹⁰

Report of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy on the Demographic Strategy Progress for 2009 outlines some achievements concerning integration of children from ethnic minorities. From 44 302 children at school for 2008/2009 more than 3189 have been integrated to school through the above mentioned project. There are 683 groups where Roma children are integrated. Regional inspectors report that more than 2911 pupils from 113 schools have participated in “Ethnic Folk Culture and History” – Roma folk clubs – as a form of out-of-school activity. About 100 teachers are trained as mediators to work with pupils from ethnic minorities at school. They train other teachers, thus transferring the experience on integration of these children to school.

The integration of immigrants’ children is also part of the social inclusion. There are several directions of the provided policy: free of charge education in Bulgarian language, training of teachers to work on the integration of these children to school, provision of out-of-school care for children of immigrants, etc.

Another initiative of the whole package of policies concerning the social inclusion of children is the National Programme “Care for Each Pupil”. The programme includes two modules. Module 1 provides education to talented children in view of their participation in “Olympiads” (each school is financed additionally depending on the number of participants who have been successful at national level or are granted on Olympic level). Module 2 provides additional education for pupils, who are not sufficiently successful at class, at pre-secondary educational level (5th to 8th grade). The criteria for deciding a child is not successful enough are based on external evaluation (success under 50% of the average for the

⁹ http://hope.bg/attachments/-01_Statistika2008_bg.pdf

¹⁰ http://www.mlsp.government.bg/bg/docs/DEMOGR_OTCHET_2009_cor.doc

school year at national level) and internal evaluation (success under 50% of the average for the school year at school level).

Schools are eligible to participate in the competition concerning both modules: total available funding for the programme is about 4.5 million BGN. In 2009 the number of participants in the first module is 229 schools, 977 teachers and 8218 pupils, and the total funding of the module is about 1 million BGN. The number of participants in the second module is 746 schools, 1149 teachers and 6256 pupils, the spent money is about 2 million BGN.

Summarizing the above mentioned, it should be outlined that the efforts of the policy concerning social inclusion of children in school and out-of-school activities are directed towards inclusion in education, creating healthy school conditions and relevant social policy for encouraging participation in school. The efforts are directed both towards talented and less successful pupils. The talented pupils are encouraged to participate in competitions and to develop further their talent and knowledge. The less successful pupils are supported to overcome the lack of language proficiency or other knowledge and to participate on equal basis in class.

4.4 Debate

The debate in the society on the socio-economic impact of the provided child care services, their availability and affordability, as well as the quality of the services, is quite fragmented. The reasons are not only the current crisis and financial restrictions, but also the fact that during the transition process the society has become less sensitive to young children and working women problems. This is because people face a lot of new problems they have to solve every day in order to survive, which reduces the responsibility for the future of the society – the children and the social care for them.

The debate is fragmented, as already mentioned, and is initiated usually by mothers or teachers, when some problems escalate. The debates are quite hot on Internet and give an idea on the scale and depth of the children problem. Journalists are also among those raising some problems concerning the child care.

5. Summary and conclusions

Summarizing the analysis in the report, we have to outline that in Bulgaria in the last 10 years quite rich net of out-of-school child care activities, provided by different institutions (state, municipalities, private) is established. So, the out-of-school services provided in Bulgaria are relatively well developed in view of forms and providers. The legal base clearly points out the terms and conditions, under which child care services are provided in the country. In this respect, development and provision of child care services, including out-of-school care, can be considered successful. The provided services are in line with the demand concerning forms and quality of the services. However, the demand is not met since there is a significant gap between demanded services by type of providers and place of residence. This means that the demand for child care services, provided by state and municipal providers, is higher, while

private child care services are less demanded. The second gap is that the demand is higher in bigger towns and the capital; and lower in small towns and villages. The concentration of young people in the bigger living conglomerates is due to the higher employment opportunities there. As a result, demand and supply of child care services is unevenly disproportional from regional point of view. This is valid especially for the services provided at pre-school level and primary educational level. The higher demand is provoked by the lower price and more experienced staff.

The quality of the provided child care services is determined by the legal frame. It is quite clear concerning the quality of personnel, number of children served by a teacher, financing per child, etc. The inspectorates, located in all 28 districts of the country, strictly monitor the quality. However, this is valid for places where child care exists as a supply. In small towns and villages there are no such services, or if there are, there is little option of choice since the provider is only one.

In the villages most of the children have to help their parents with homework or cultivating land during free-of-school time. This shows that children are not in equal position concerning availability and access to out-of-school services, depending on the socio-economic characteristic of the place they live. The affordability of out-of-school forms is a problem for many families, where there are many children or when the family is poor.

Thus, summarizing the obstacles, we should outline that there is uneven supply of child care services from regional point of view, there are places with no such services, children have different access to child care services depending on the place they live and the social status of the family. There is a difference concerning the affordability of the services. There are parents who have no problems to afford any type of child care service, including private one, and there are families, which cannot afford any child care services. In majority of the cases parents prefer the public services, which are less expensive.

The main result of not improving the situation is an increasing gap between the children concerning their potential for personal development. This gap increases in the transition period, and the social polarization between the children becomes more and more evident – children in good living conditions and children marginalized from the society.

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