INFORMATION BY THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

Contribution to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material

In view of the preparation of a thematic report on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material, the government of the Republic of Bulgaria would like to convey the following information:

1. Content, awareness and attitudes underpinning the sale and sexual exploitation of children

The Bulgarian legislation places particular emphasis on the issues related to violence prevention, coordination between the institutions and support for child victims. The Child Protection Act is the main specialised regulating act addressing the state policy towards children at risk. It guarantees the right of the child to protection against involvement in activities that are unfavourable to his or her physical, mental, moral and educational development. Crucial to ensuring the protection are the complex efforts of all responsible authorities to take appropriate action to prevent the effects of the experience, and contribute to the provision of child support in time.

On a national level, there are campaigns for raising public awareness on the matter. For instance, there is a campaign for the prevention of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and teenagers and a website that provides information on the four forms of sexual exploitation. Trainings and information meetings are organized to build capacity among police officers to work with child victims.

1. Risk factors, root causes and demand for the sale and sexual exploitation of children

There is a number of factors relevant to the root causes of these crimes. Among the strongest factors prevails the socio-economic one related to the standard and environment of the perpetrators' life. Additional risk factors are demographic, migration and educational-cultural type.

1. Children’s vulnerability to sale and sexual exploitation, incl. in the context of cross-border challenges, technology and innovation

The identified groups of persons at risk of trafficking for sexual or labour exploitation are women and children, boys and girls of working age, from areas of high unemployment, low social status, no or low education and no specific profession, living in difficult living conditions and with financial difficulties.

Children’s vulnerability to sale and sexual exploitation is shaped by external (environment, family and friends) and internal (experience, access to information, personal development) factors.

Children who live in adverse socio-economic conditions are among the most vulnerable groups.

Based on the type of criminal activity, there are different vulnerable groups. In the case of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, the most at-risk group of children is between 14-18 years old while the distribution of sexual violence and exploitation of children online – is between 7-9 years old.

1. The overarching legal-normative framework, commitment and institutional capacity

The relevant legal base is laid in the Criminal Code, Child Protection Act and the Implementing Rules of the Child Protection Act and National Programme for Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children 2017-2020 and the National Strategy for Combating Human Trafficking (2017-2021). The Child Protection Act implements on a national level the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

By signing the Agreement on cooperation and coordination of the work of the territorial structures of the protection bodies in cases of children, victims or at risk of violence and crisis intervention, the Bulgarian authorities provide an inter-agency approach and work in a multidisciplinary team in actions related to cases of violence and abuse of a child.

In addition, campaigns for the prevention of sexual abuse and misuse of children are organised on a national level by the relevant authorities.

1. New and innovative strategies to effectively prevent and protect children from sale and sexual exploitation

The Bulgarian institutions are actively working to increase the capacity of professionals, working with children, and to improve inter-institutional cooperation and coordination. There are multidisciplinary teams, which develop an action plan for the protection of the child or for the prevention of violence. The action plan consists of health, social and educational services which will prevent the violence or will assist in the recovery of the child.

One essential element of the overall process of supporting and protecting the rights and interests of children and families is building a network of social services in the community. Those social services could be of a consultative and residential type. A residential social service is the crisis centre. On the territory of Bulgaria, there are 19 crisis centres for children.

Another important element in the prevention of violence is the 24-hour National Telephone Hotline. It was created in 2009 with the support of UNICEF and is managed by the Animus Foundation, with a harmonized pan-European number. Through the line are reported children at risk, including child victims of violence.

1. Data and monitoring

The Bulgarian State Agency for Child Protection is responsible for collecting quarterly information on child victims of violence by all child protection departments in the country.

The information is collected through specially designed information cards on paper or electronically and publishes it on the website of the Agency. The indicators in the information cards are agreed upon and approved by child protection authorities and the National Statistical Institute.

In 2018, the State Agency was referred to 23 cases of children, victims of trafficking. The dynamics for the last two years show a lower number of cases than in 2016, when the cases were 28. In 2017, the cases were 18. In terms of gender distribution, out of the 23 trafficking cases in 2018, 15 are girls, and the other 8 are boys. The average age of the total number of children in 2018 is 14.1 years. Most of the children involved in the cases in question are from settlements, located in the Southern Bulgaria region.

Parents' reports for children at risk are 26%, followed by those from the Ministry of the Interior - 22% . Relative share of National telephone line 116 116 signals are 12% and the share of educational institutions is 16%, while in healthcare institutions - 7%. In 2017, almost half of the signals, collected by the multidisciplinary team, were related to physical violence - 41%. In 19% of cases, the reports refer to sexual abuse of a child, 28% to mental abuse and 12% to neglect.

1. Institutional accountability

There are two national mechanisms, which coordinate the efforts of the social and police authorities to the prevention of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children. Those mechanisms are the Coordination mechanism for interaction in cases of children who are victims or at risk of violence and cooperation during crisis intervention and the Coordination mechanism for referral and care of unaccompanied children and children victims of trafficking returning from abroad.

The State Agency for Child Protection, in partnership with the Ministry of Interior, the Social Assistance Agency and the Regional Administration, annually monitors the implementation of the Coordination mechanism for interaction in cases of children who are victims or at risk of violence and cooperation during crisis intervention. The State authorities, within the framework of their competence, implement the child protection policy through the established and effective child protection system.

*Sofia*

*October 2019*