Childcare in Post-Communist Welfare States: The Case of Bulgaria

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Abstract

In transition societies such as contemporary Bulgaria, the legacy of the communist past in childcare policy is reflected in the state-centred mentality of officials, the tendency towards over-regulation and the complex and inefficient relations among multiple state actors. The traditional approach to children as objects of protection rather than as subjects of rights still prevails. Efforts to modernise legislation and to introduce innovative childcare schemes lack provision of implementation mechanisms. Such efforts are often driven more by the government’s need to show progress to international and EU agencies than by commitment to a rights-based approach in childcare. Bulgarian and international NGOs gradually assume a more decisive role in childcare. Reform is needed in institutional care, legislation, administrative structures of childcare, training of professionals and the mentality of care providers, politicians, bureaucrats and the wider public. However, reforms depend on genuine political will to change and implement policies, allocation of funds and change in attitudes.

Introduction

In industrial societies, childcare was initially understood as a set of services targeted at the most disadvantaged groups of children. The first goal of childcare policy was to provide minimum physical subsistence. Soon, services expanded to include social and psychological help. The idea that it was the responsibility of the community to provide children with the advantages that their parents could not supply is a twentieth-century development. In 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child introduced the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. It was then that the collapse of the Ceausescu regime in Romania, at the end of 1989, revealed the tragic situation of vast numbers of children abandoned in institutions where the treatment strongly resembled that of past centuries. The World Summit for Children, which followed in 1990, set out ‘an ambitious but feasible agenda for the well being of children to be achieved by the year 2000’ (UNICEF, 1990). The collapse of the communist regimes in the region of south-eastern Europe had a dramatic impact on children.
In Bulgaria, however, the transition to democracy was significantly different from the developments in neighbouring south-east European countries, as the political and institutional change took place within a framework of law rather than through a naked clash of power (Bell, 1997).

Research on the welfare state in the post-transition period has concentrated on pensions, unemployment protection and social assistance policies (e.g. Deacon, 1992; Feige and Kolberg, 1992; Milanovic, 1998; World Bank, 2000). Childcare policies have attracted comparatively little attention. In this article, we discuss the case of childcare in post-communist Bulgaria as an example of some of the problems and prospects that social policy faces in post-communist societies. The region of south-eastern Europe, in particular, includes some ethnically mixed societies, which in the 1990s suffered acute economic hardship or went through civil strife. Thus, the difficulties of revamping the welfare state after the transition from communism were exacerbated. Welfare state retrenchment hit the most vulnerable categories of the population – such as children and ethnic minorities – the hardest (Deacon, 2000).

Our research on this issue was undertaken in Sofia in the summer of 2004. Interviews were conducted with 15 experts, government employees and childcare professionals, while reports of NGOs and international aid organisations were consulted. Our focus was on aspects of institutional care, legislation, public administration, training and the mentality of the service providers involved.

We first present our research design and then summarise the institutional aspects and the prevailing mentality and culture of childcare provision in Bulgaria today. Next we consider the needs and prospects of reform in childcare and we conclude with a discussion of the challenges to post-communist childcare policy.

**Research and data collection**

For the purposes of this research we chose the structured interview, selecting a short questionnaire as the most appropriate technique for gathering information. We conducted 15 structured interviews, which we conducted in Sofia, Bulgaria in July 2004. Twelve of our respondents were Bulgarian, two were Austrian and one English. The interviews were conducted in English, and an interpreter was used only in one case.

The open-ended questionnaire used for the interviews consisted of nine questions divided into three thematic areas. The first of these covered the current situation of childcare in Bulgaria and included four open-ended questions. The purpose of these questions was to identify what interviewees considered to be the major strengths of childcare in Bulgaria, as well as those areas in need of change. Respondents were asked to justify their replies in the space provided in the questionnaire.
The second thematic area (two questions) concerned the main key actors and their involvement in the planning and implementation of childcare policies. Our assumption — based on previous experience in the field and on published reports of projects implemented in Bulgaria — was that the key actors were the following: state institutions, local NGOs and international organisations (including international NGOs). Respondents were asked to rate the involvement of the key actors in planning and implementation of child welfare policies. The last part of the questionnaire (three questions) referred to the legislative framework and specific policy measures. Respondents were asked to express and justify their opinion on the strengths and weaknesses of the legislative framework, as well as on the advantages and disadvantages of the policies targeting children and their families.

We selected our sample of 15 respondents using two main criteria: their background (that is, their childcare experience and their professional and educational background) and their current job. Our aim was not only to ensure a broad representation of the main expertise involved in child welfare, but also a representation of the main relevant institutions. Therefore, the group of experts interviewed included Bulgarian professionals working in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the International Labour Organisation, ‘Save the Children UK’ in Bulgaria, ‘Romani Baht’ Foundation (an NGO established to promote the rights of Roma), the ‘Assen Zlatarov’ Home for Children, the State Agency for Child Protection and the World Bank Project for Child Welfare Reform. Our sample also included international experts working for the European Commission Delegation, international NGOs and other projects funded by the European Union.

**Childcare in Bulgaria today**

Like other post-communist countries in the region, Bulgaria is undergoing a period of transition marked by economic, fiscal and institutional reform. More concretely, the social pacts and ‘Round Table’ discussions among the political actors, introduced in Bulgaria at the beginning of the 1990s, resulted in a series of political and institutional reforms. Childcare reform is, however, still constrained by economic and political conditions. It is also a policy area, which, in Bulgaria, as in most post-communist countries, has undergone little transformation, while other sectors of the state have experienced considerable development (Kornai, 1997; Deacon, 2000; Stubbs, 2001). The reform process has led to growing poverty and inequality in the country. Women, older people and ethnic minority populations are the worst affected. About 16 per cent of Bulgaria’s 7.8 million-strong population (World Bank, 2003) is made up of ethnic minorities. The largest of these are the Turkish and Roma communities. Children constitute a quarter of the total population. Bulgaria’s falling birth rate is reported to be the lowest in Europe. In 2003, infant mortality rate was 12.3 per 1,000 live births,
while in 2002 the under 5 mortality rate was 17.1 per 1,000 live births (World Development Indicators Database, April 2005).

In many cases it is poverty that prevents children from attending school due to unaffordable expenses (text books, transportation and so on), thus leading to child labour or homelessness. Moreover, owing to a falling birth rate, the number of schools is diminishing, while a number of the remaining ones are inaccessible (due to insufficient public transport, a lack of facilities for disabled children and so on). Such situations encourage school dropout.

Children are at increasing risk of being abandoned and placed in care. There are no effective measures available to support families at risk of family breakdown. The two underlying issues facing children in Bulgaria today are:

- the social and economic impact of transition on children and their families;
- the inadequate legislation to protect children, and an absence of adequate child protection procedures and regulations governing the whole system of childcare.

The prospect of Bulgaria’s accession to the EU dictates the fulfillment of certain requisites so that the country meets the Copenhagen criteria. In this framework, Bulgaria is moving toward a ‘Europeanisation’ or rather ‘westernisation’ of childcare, assisted by European and global actors, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other international organisations and NGOs. While our research findings question the overall political will to improve the situation, we believe that it is mainly due to the external pressures that some positive developments in the area of childcare have taken place. Public consensus on these reforms also seems to be modest, as older generations still seem to trust and prefer the communist system of social and child protection schemes. Older people tend to consider the state as the main provider of benefits.

The transition from a centrally, de-commodifying to a less de-commodifying system and from a universalistic social protection scheme to a scheme including assessment-based provisions; the remaining strong influence of the communist old guard; and the adherence to socialist values along with the weak democratic features in public administration, all have led Bob Deacon to classify Bulgaria as the post-communist conservative corporatist type (Deacon, 1992). Currently, in Bulgaria as in other post-communist societies, the state is no longer the single welfare provider. International and Bulgarian NGOs gradually play a decisive role primarily in implementing projects and in policy making. Before 1989, the state was the only relevant institution in charge of childcare. Today, there is an array of relevant institutions.

Institutional aspects of childcare in Bulgaria

The historical institutional perspective in the social sciences understands institutions in a broad sense (Steinmo et al., 1992; Pierson, 1994; Hall and Taylor, 1996). Institutions include legal frameworks; organisations such as public
administration, local government and NGOs; vocational training and other schemes; the dominant culture as well as the mentality; and norms of certain social groups such as, in our case, administrative officials and childcare professionals. In this section, we briefly survey aspects of institutional care, childcare legislation, public administration and training, before moving to a discussion of the mentality prevailing in childcare provision.

Institutional care
The whole residential care system in Bulgaria is in need of drastic reform (European Commission, 2004; Save the Children, 2002). Its current structure and functioning makes it unable to meet the most basic of children’s human rights. Institutional care has existed for 40 years in Bulgaria. During that time service recipients and providers have generally acknowledged it as a means of social protection. According to one of our respondents (an international expert working in a EU-funded project), ‘reform of institutional care is the “hot potato” of child welfare in Bulgaria today’. Eight out of our 15 interviewees recognised institutional care reform as one of the top priorities in Bulgaria. By adopting targeted policies on de-institutionalisation, the Bulgarian government has declared its concern to improve the situation. However, the government’s urgent drive to reduce the number of children in institutions without planning alternative measures mainly stems from the European pressures to meet the requirements of the *acquis communautaire.*

In Bulgaria, there are more than 30,000 children in institutions (NGO Regular Report, 2004). The exact number of institutionalised children is still unclear because many types of institutions, such as Special and Auxiliary Schools for disabled children and Correctional Boarding Schools for juvenile offenders, are excluded from the de-institutionalisation plan. Owing to a lack of data, it is impossible to estimate formal, institutional and informal childcare as a proportion of the total. There are data on only some aspects of institutional care. In detail, most day care resources (86 per cent) are devoted to children, while the rest (14 per cent) to adults and older people; by contrast, the resources of specialised institutions are mostly devoted to adults and older people in need (78 per cent) and much less to children (22 per cent) of all resources (see EC Directorate General on Employment, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities 2005: 17).

The introduction of foster care as a viable alternative to institutionalisation of children, and the development of community work for prevention and re-integration are still at a very early stage. This reflects the dominant statist (that is, state-centred) mentality and the lack of strategic thinking.

Legislation
In the late 1990s in Bulgaria, developments in childcare changed the prevailing approach towards children’s issues in a positive direction. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified. The Child Protection Act,
adopted in 2000, regulates the provision of public protection for vulnerable children and the relationship between children and the welfare system (Todorova, 2000, 2002). The most important development in Bulgaria in the field of childcare is the establishment of a legislative framework. In order to stress the importance of this development, one of the participants in our research added: ‘The culture in Bulgaria is that nothing functions unless there is a law.’

Public administration

However, public administration in Bulgaria has not shifted from the notion of ‘protection’ to the notion of ‘welfare’, and rejects the necessity of a structure solely dealing with children’s issues. A basic administrative infrastructure has been created at both the state and municipal levels (Child Protection Departments, the State Agency for Child Protection and the Agency for Social Assistance), which indicates the government’s determination to move towards a more comprehensive system of child welfare. The enlargement and strengthening of the State Agency for Child Protection by creating regional services is also deemed as a positive development of child welfare in Bulgaria today, as it works like a pilot system, providing an example to other developing agencies. In addition, the provision of more services via the municipal initiatives (social support centres) reflects the political will to assign more responsibilities to local authorities. NGOs and local authorities are currently in the process of establishing a partnership aimed at improving services to those children who are in most immediate need.

The goal is to streamline the process of need assessment, in order to deliver services more efficiently. To date, this public/private partnership is working. However, at least one of our respondents criticised the Bulgarian state’s efforts towards the improvement of child welfare as ‘not consistent’. He attributed these efforts not to a genuine interest in children’s issues but rather to EU pressures on the Bulgarian government to meet the EU accession criteria and adopt the *acquis communautaire*. However, given the number and range of institutions involved in childcare today, streamlining appears a daunting task.

The ministries currently involved in child welfare planning and implementation include the following: the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Interior, in addition to the State Agency for Child Protection, which is accountable to the Council of Ministers (the Cabinet).

There also exist *ad hoc* commissions at a regional level, the members of which are appointed by government according to political criteria. A National Commission at the central government level is accountable to the Ministry of Interior and supervises the function of the regional ones. These structures are deemed as remains from the communist regime as they reflect the involvement of the communist party in governmental policies. The duplication of structures
and the lack of harmonisation are reflected within the system of commissions functioning in parallel with ministerial structures; the former, in fact, being more powerful than the latter.

According to our respondents there is a need for coordination between the ministries and consequently between their policies. This discord among state actors involved in childcare leads to the lack of a coherent and comprehensive coordination within the system. Moreover, there is no interaction between central/state agencies and services at the local level. Such interaction does not appear to be a government priority, since no state institution is prepared to make productive use of evaluation tools or of the feedback received. As very clearly stated by one of the professionals interviewed, ‘Yes, there is feedback but it seems that nobody cares to do something with it.’ Another interviewee observed: ‘Neither positive criticism nor civil dialogue is developed. Instead, only very military attitudes apply.’

**Training**

As far as training is concerned, Schools of Social Work operate at university level in Bulgaria, but the quality of skills they offer is questionable. Field placement of students and supervision are still in their infancy. A positive development is that current trends in the education of social workers are focusing more on children’s issues. Capacity-building activities are considered a major step towards the establishment of an effective welfare system. Efforts made by the universities and the public administration to enrich the education of professionals and to offer possibilities of expanding their horizons through participation in EU and internationally funded projects are particularly valued. This contrasts with the previous monolithic nature of training in social work that afforded few opportunities for professional growth.

Knowledge and experience in childcare from different countries are now recognised as useful when dealing with corresponding situations in Bulgaria. Individual care and a case-by-case approach (traditionally West European models) are being introduced through interdisciplinary work in the classroom and are being implemented in agencies throughout the country. Nevertheless, the frequent contacts with European models and experiences – a positive result of EU pressures – are not systematically regarded by the state as strengths of the childcare system. This exchange of experience and expertise is valued more on a personal level by childcare professionals who, unfortunately, despite their demonstrated commitment, do not participate in the decision-making process at either the political or the administrative levels.

In Bulgaria, part of the World Bank’s Child Welfare Reform initiatives has involved the transformation of institutional structures and the introduction of alternative care schemes. Therefore, enhancement, enrichment and development of knowledge related to the new welfare system have been considered necessary. In
this framework, training projects have been financed and supported by European, international and local actors.

One important prerequisite for providing quality services is that professionals are empowered and supported in their everyday work and provided with the necessary means. In this respect in Bulgaria there are two issues of concern. First, most services have a limited budget and bureaucrats do not recognise the necessity of expanding it; and, second, there is no culture facilitating the participation of professionals in decision making, so any expression of ideas or opinions that are not considered in line with government choices may have a serious negative impact on the career of the dissenting person. Moreover, it seems that governmental bodies and state institutions do not acknowledge the contribution of their employees; in fact, they do not want committed professionals. On the contrary, they are used to the conventional notion of employees carrying out government orders and implementing policies without question or criticism.

Regarding professional competency, the two primary concerns are: first, the lack of expertise and of relevant educational/training activities to provide employees with skills and knowledge so that they can meet the demands of a changing welfare system; and, second, the fact that there is high staff turnover in public administration (Sotiropoulos, 2002). In Bulgaria, many government positions are filled by members of the ruling political party and often the criteria for making these appointments are purely political, having little to do with actual expertise.

The mentality and culture of childcare provision

One of our respondents – a European expert and employee of an international NGO – said of childcare in Bulgaria: ‘Everything needs to be changed, but there must be a starting point: mentality.’

Many of the professionals interviewed (80 per cent) stressed that the present situation was a reflection of the dominant mentality – on a political level – which was characterised by:

- Failure to perceive the broader context of ‘welfare’, which would address all children (not only those at risk of exclusion or in institutional care), as opposed to the present limited area of ‘protection’. This is a mentality attributed to a continued legacy surviving from the communist regime. In this context, children are still seen by a large part of the political and administrative elite as objects for protection rather than as bearers (subjects) of rights.
- Failure to grasp the whole de-institutionalisation concept, and lack of strategic thinking. Despite the government’s will to work with this concept in a long-term and systematic fashion, the priority is to reform childcare and particularly
institutional care in a legalistic, non-substantive manner and as rapidly as possible, in order to meet EU expectations.

- Prevention is not recognised by the government as a priority. Most serious attempts for preventive work are planned, financed and implemented by NGOs or international organisations (such as UNICEF).

- Failure to realise the need of child- and family-friendly legislation and policies, be they fiscal, employment, taxation or educational. As one of our respondents stressed, ‘child- and family-friendly policies are those taking into consideration the impact on children and their families. Court procedures, tax legislation and bureaucracy are anything but child friendly. In many cases delays, such as in court, have a devastating impact on children and their families’.

- Failure to recognise the importance of family resources and networking.

Another problem that emerged during our research was the lack of democracy in public administration. Feedback from practitioners in the field is not valued; on the contrary, it is criticised, and, in many cases, has resulted in the relocation or even dismissal of employees. It could therefore be important to explore in depth the democratisation process within child welfare state structures, as it is indicative of the general democratisation in the country. It is also indicative of state mentality that employees are seen as obedient pawns in a game where rules are set by the elites.

Finally, in three out of our 15 interviews, the issue of information dissemination was brought up. As a legal expert told us, ‘people cannot trust what they do not know’. It was understood that there is lack of information not only about the new child welfare initiatives introduced, but also about resources available for service recipients. It was directly implied that the more resources are kept ‘invisible’, the more the costs decrease, as allowances and benefits are not claimed by potential beneficiaries. In other words, as a result of this ignorance, funds are not being distributed and, therefore, the amount originally earmarked is less than what is eventually allocated. In this way, a false picture is created as to the actual amount necessary to fulfil actual needs. Visibility and clarity of the governmental choices – apart from being considered a basic democratic feature – would contribute to their legitimisation. Older generations, in particular, prefer to refer to the old structures, since there is limited or no information about the new ones.

**Prospects for reform**

In view of the problems in the institutional context and the mentality involved in childcare in Bulgaria, what are the possible prospects and guidelines for reform? In this section we sketch possible answers to this question, touching again upon aspects of institutional care, legislation, public administration, training and mentality.
Changes in institutional care

Institutional care reform needs to set goals that are more feasible by applying needs assessment, educating foster care professionals, introducing more comprehensive legislation and applying realistic family development and support policies. Most children in institutions are Roma. Thus, policies for de-institutionalisation have to harmonise with policies towards Roma in order to ensure a way of coexistence with, and mutual respect between, the rest of the Bulgarian population.

A gradual approach may be the solution. Changes in the way institutions function by introducing a personalised approach and individual care plan, by training and supporting the staff (who in many cases are also at risk of institutionalisation) and by creating new positions for experts (such as family workers) may result in an equally effective reform. This, however, would involve a generous funding commitment on behalf of the government.

Legislative changes

Three of our 15 interviewees claimed that inadequate budget prevented the application of newly developed legislative measures. Moreover, in their opinion, legislative changes and new strategies should be based upon the evaluation of previously applied policies and upon recruiting properly trained staff to implement them. In parallel, the judicial system has to be child friendly, updated and sensitive to the reality and everyday life of all children (including minorities, children of illiterate families, Roma, homeless and so on). Changes within the judicial system should involve the engagement of experienced and specialised professionals, the tackling of corruption and the creation of more flexible mechanisms in the best interest of all children and their families.

Administrative structural changes

It seems that childcare in Bulgaria needs to be organised with its own independent professional structure within public administration. A new structure would help to reduce fragmentation and develop jointly agreed standards, policies and measures. The establishment of a single independent body would facilitate the making and monitoring of policies, which would be implemented by various actors at the local level. Thereby decentralisation would be reinforced and parallel structures – such as the commissions – would be abolished.

Irrespective of when the need for the new independent structure is recognised by the government, it is imperative that all actors are included in policy- and decision-making processes, both at the central level and, most important, at the local level.

A flexible framework of cooperation, where employees and especially practitioners in the field are invited to contribute their experience and feedback, would eventually result in the design of realistic policies. Having said that, it is
worth stressing the need for independent evaluation of already applied policies and programmes which would help identify the strengths and weaknesses of the system and the areas in need of further development. The few public resources available could then be reallocated according to the priorities determined through this process.

The creation of more clearly defined structures within the public administration would facilitate harmonisation between policies and the various actors involved. The abolition of the aforementioned ad hoc commissions and of other parallel structures is regarded as the number one priority for change, because it would allow the state to move towards establishing a more democratic and expertise-based welfare system.

**Changes in training of childcare providers**

According to the opinion of almost half of the experts interviewed, training and further education activities should aim at:

- enhancing the participants’ knowledge of dealing with children, according to the principles and values deriving from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and within the newly developed legislative framework;
- providing participants with updated knowledge and skills so that they meet the demands of a changing welfare system and become active participants in the process of welfare provision;
- acquiring skills in collaborating with other professionals for the best interests of the children and their families through the promotion of an interdisciplinary approach;
- raising awareness on children’s rights of those not directly involved in service provision within the childcare system, including decision makers and politicians;
- contributing to developing a new mentality and fresh attitudes, which would perceive children as bearers of rights.

Training projects, already implemented in Bulgaria by international or European actors, are valued as long as they do not aim at imposing a certain model of childcare education and service provision, without considering the specific parameters of the country.

**Changes in mentality**

There is a need for a coordinated effort to raise awareness among the public, professional service providers and parents. Changes in structures and policies have to go along with changes in public opinion, which is the legitimising base of government choices. In this context, as one of our respondents put it, ‘professionals have to realise that they work for the benefit of children and not for that of institutions’. Raising parents’ awareness of children’s rights has to
go beyond simply campaigning, and educational and supportive activities need to be expanded. Grass-roots changes will eventually lead to the development of social solidarity and to a civil society that is still in its infancy in Bulgaria. Promotion of children’s rights has to be understood as a necessity for society’s development and not as a priority that will facilitate the country’s accession to the EU. Therefore, initiatives related to promoting children’s rights have to be accompanied by social research and needs assessments at all levels, the results of which will be taken into consideration by the politicians and other policy makers.

Conclusions

In this article we have tried to explore developments in childcare in Bulgaria nearly 15 years after the country made a transition from communism and, in a relatively smooth way, moved towards establishing democracy and a market-oriented economy. A number of issues, which are listed below, emerged from our research.

Three of the interviewed professionals openly expressed their reservations regarding genuine political will to move towards an effective reform in the field of child welfare. Although it was not clearly stated by other respondents, it became obvious during the interviews that a large number of them shared these concerns too.

A second issue pointed out was the need to tackle organised crime and corruption, that literally reigns in the political arena of post-communist south-eastern Europe. This would be achieved primarily by establishing an independent body with the power to investigate everything from the appointment criteria of key persons to budgets and expenditures of public services.

According to the opinions of the above three respondents, the core of the political system has not really changed: it was simply modified in order to adjust to the new political situation. The sheer interest of most politicians to promote their personal or family priorities is reflected in the relationships between the persons appointed to key positions. Open preferential treatment, based on political and personal criteria, can be seen at all levels of public administration. The only genuine political will is to show the government’s commitment to meet EU expectations.

As our research findings indicate, nepotism and corruption are still to be dealt with; state policies need to be more transparent and services provided more efficiently. Moreover, our interviewees repeatedly stressed that efforts to modernise legislation and to introduce innovative childcare schemes lack provision of implementation mechanisms, which is another typical problem of post-communist south-eastern Europe. Once an Act is passed in Parliament, there are no accompanying guidelines for its implementation and no accompanying programme of action. The new Public Education Act (adopted in 1991 and
amended in 2002), the Social Assistance Act (adopted in 1998), and the Child Protection Act (2000) are examples of the pattern of inconsistency between official pronouncements and actual developments (Deacon, 1992; Sotiropoulos et al., 2003).

A peculiarity of Bulgaria is the priority it grants to passing sizeable legislation in order to undertake reform. This is partly a legacy of the communist past when the functioning of society and administration was heavily regulated. The benefit and role of public debate in formulating new public policies do not appear to be recognised. In contemporary Bulgaria as in other transition countries, policy-making is narrowly perceived: it is tantamount to passing a host of new laws and ratifying international treaties. This over-dependence on the need for a detailed legal framework wastes attention and energy in the amendment of existing legislation and the drafting of new laws. The lack of regulations governing the whole system of childcare is frequently used as an excuse for the lack of alternative, community-based care provision and experimentation.

Responsibility for the care of children is split among five Ministries. The relations between them are characterised by poor communication, competition and rivalry. There are overlapping areas of interest and areas of non-responsibility among ministries and between central and local government. The provision of appropriate and alternative care for, as well as social and leisure facilities available to, children is lacking.

The need for an alternative to the community-based system of childcare and social services, offered to other vulnerable groups, has recently been highlighted by the European Commission, which has singled out the fate of children living in institutions as a major problem of social exclusion in Bulgaria (European Commission, 2005: 49). Living conditions in such institutions are inappropriate, but even if they were appropriate they would not resolve the aforementioned problem.

A related issue is the nature of childcare in the context of the social protection system as a whole. Bulgarian social protection was traditionally directed towards dispensing cash benefits. This type of social provision was not effective in the sense that it did not contribute to the reintegration of the recipients of benefits, such as vulnerable groups, into Bulgarian society. In short, the institutionalisation of children and the dispensing of cash benefits to socially excluded families are not effective measures. The Bulgarian government has gradually shifted towards the provision of social services instead of cash benefits, but the de-institutionalisation process leaves a lot to be desired.

Such complex reforms in childcare require not only an upgrading of the administrative capacity of the competent state agencies but also resorting to resources outside the state apparatus, such as those provided by NGOs. According to our research findings, there is a need for greater transparency in the relationship between NGOs and government, in order to ensure that there is wide and genuine
consultation. Given the considerable experience of Bulgarian NGOs in working with disadvantaged groups, and the extensive international resource network to which NGOs have access, it is unfortunate that more use of their expertise is not made. If government officials work in genuine partnership with NGOs, there will be benefits to both (NGOs and the government), such as an increase in administrative capacity and ultimately the successful design and implementation of policies.

Furthermore, the Bulgarian authorities, with the help of international organisations and NGOs, should promote more research on childcare, in order to identify better the needs of children and the criteria upon which needs assessment will be based. Currently, it is doubtful whether these criteria reflect the Bulgarian reality or are just imported from other European countries.

In Bulgaria and in other post-communist societies, the acknowledgement of children as bearers of rights has marked a shift from the traditiona approach to the rights-based approach in child welfare. Should this be accompanied by genuine political will, allocation of funds for comprehensive family policies and change in public attitudes, Bulgaria’s children stand a good chance for a promising future.³

Notes
1 Other relevant actors, the study of whom requires separate research, are the church and private donors. The church has a long tradition in philanthropy, including childcare. On the other hand, private donors offer funds to the church and/or to NGOs. However, data on these aspects of childcare are not available, and we have not been able to conduct separate interviews in order to assess the contribution of these actors to childcare.
2 The acquis communautaire is the body of European Treaties, laws and norms. It is composed of 31 chapters, which all countries must adopt prior to enlargement (Glenn, 2003).
3 The authors acknowledge the help of the editors of JSP and particularly Jane Dennett in editing this article.

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