

Child participation and activism in different contexts: Findings from the first national mapping of child activism in Bulgaria

Responsive Conference

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April 22-23, 2024
Bucharest, Romania



Know-how Centre for Alternative Care for Children, New Bulgarian University



Mission: to integrate academia, practice and policy in supporting children and families in vulnerable situations.

- Founded in 2011 to support the government in the process of deinstitutionalisation of state child care
- Create knowledge in partnership with all stakeholders
- Integrate knowledge into practice
- Promote a culture of learning from the changing environment
- Guarantee the rights of all participants
- Increase the capacity of professionals working in the field of child welfare

Fields of work



1. Increasing the capacity of helping specialists

Upgrade existing and create new methodologies and tools in the field of social work

- Manuals and methodologies for practice application in **schools and social services**
- Multi sectoral coordination on local level for supporting the **development of children with complex needs**
- Multimedia tools for **teachers** (Firefly project)
- “Children in Families in Bulgaria System Map” with Nexial Systems to stimulate **radical redesign of the system**

Fields of work



1. Increasing the capacity of the helping specialists

Train and supervise professionals in the social, educational and health sectors

- **Risk assessment** for children and families
- **Prevention methodologies** for school drop-outs
- **Prevention of violence**
- Children and youth in **alternative care**
- **“Psychosocial interventions for children and families”** MA program at NBU
- **AMBIT** with Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, London

Fields of work

2. Academic Research



- Childcare Deinstitutionalisation process – unique data on the progress, challenges and outcomes of the **reform over a 10-year period**
- **DataCare Project** (Eurochild with support from UNICEF comprehensive mapping of child protection data systems across the 27 Member States): analysis and access to data on the situation of children in alternative care in Bulgaria
- Mapping **Children's Participation and Activism** in Bulgaria
- Mapping **Parent Activism**
- Defining **profiles of children with complex needs**

Fields of work



3. Consulting and advocacy for supporting reforms in child protection

- Consulting governmental institutions for **national policy and programme development** (European Child Guarantee, Social Services Act, Child Protection Law, Strategy for the Child and the Family, etc.)
- Coalition “**Childhood 2025**”
- [Transforming Children's Care](#) network
- Eurochild
- Childhub
- Parent advocacy network
- “Present and Future: a push for the empowerment of child human rights defenders in Bulgaria” with ChildRights Connect

The Study

Conducted between **November 2021 and April 2022**.

Aims to **map the available current initiatives**, projects, and programs in the field of child participation (CP) and child activism (CA); to **explore the experience of their implementation**, and **formulate recommendations** for the development of this field in Bulgaria.

The main research questions are:

- What are the CP&CA activities and **who implements** them?
- What is the potential of these activities to **bring social change** and for whom?
- What **concepts**, understandings, and attitudes exist in this field?
- What are the **supportive factors** and what are the barriers to CP&A?

The Research Team

6 professionals with experience from the team of Know-How Center for Alternative Care for Children - *Dr. Zhaklina Andonova, Dr. Radostina Antonova, Elena Ivanova, Dr. Antoaneta Mateeva, Elitsa Lingorski* (also designer of the map), and *Evgenia Toneva* (also coordinator of the research work and author of the report)

5 undergraduate and graduate students from New Bulgarian University who were invited to participate as interns at the NCC - *Gergana Ivanova, Alisa Konstantinova, Irena Lazarova, Anabel Moghadam, and Victoria Stoeva.*

The **literature reviews** are prepared directly in English by international interns of the Know-How Centre for Alternative Child Care under the guidance of Dr. Radostina Antonova and Evgenia Toneva:

- “Global Child Activism and Its Methodologies” by *Uchechi Ichu*
- “International Child Activism in Relation to Deinstitutionalization of Residential Care for Children” by *Nicole Meyers*
- “Enablers and Barriers to Child Activism” by *Efstratios Moskofidis*

Definition

Activism is any conscious and purposeful effort to change the environment and circumstances of the lives of whole groups of people in a vulnerable situation (= effort for a social and political change), while **participation** is listening to the voice of children and involving them in decision-making, including political decisions that affect them.

Stages and Methodology

Preparatory phase (November-December 2021): a questionnaire on CP&CA in Bulgaria, which was uploaded to Google Forms; a framework and guidelines for conducting a semi-structured interview; three thematic literature reviews.

Fieldwork phase (January-March 2022), **160+ organisations were identified** through (1) internet searches (exclusively on social media and children and youth platforms), (2) personal acquaintances of research team members, and (3) a snowball method whereby organisations themselves recommended other organisations they partnered with or whose expertise they knew.

Of the organisations identified, **108 were invited** to take part in the research and tell us personally about their experiences. **62 organisations participated directly** in the study: **35 questionnaires** were completed and **31 interviews** were conducted (4 organisations participated both through a completed questionnaire and an interview).

Final phase (April 2022), the data collected were summarised and analysed; the questionnaire data were analysed separately; two additional reflection meetings of the research team were held

Mapping child participation in Bulgaria, 2022*



Products:

- **Analytical report** with description of the situation, discussion of findings, and recommendations;
- **National map** of the organizations working in the field of child participation and activism in Bulgaria.

Participants

TYPE OF ORGANISATION:	NUMBER:
NGOs	85
municipal administrations	20
youth groups and movements	13
schools	7
online media and platforms	5
state institutions	4
business	2
universities	1
TOTAL:	140

Thirty-five people participated in the 31 interviews conducted:

- **16 children and young people actively** participating and/or developing their own ideas in the field of participation and activism (8 of them identified themselves as Roma youth activists and 1 young person grew up in an institution)
- **19 adults in a professional capacity** who are authors, leaders or coordinators of initiatives and programmes for children's participation or experts with long experience in the field of children's participation

Refusals

It is important to note that we also received **two refusals to participate in the study**. Interestingly, both came independently of each other and from NGOs that work with children and youth with disabilities in residential care services. Their arguments were that the work of professionals with children and young people in these services is related to therapy and care and they do not consider this work meeting the criteria for child participation.

However, other organizations with a similar profile – therapeutic support and everyday care for children at risk – joined the study and shared how through their daily work and thematic projects they are able to empower vulnerable children and young people to become authors of decisions for their own lives, but also for the meeting around them and even for other children and young people in a similar situation.

**Family life is
inviolable.**

**Vulnerable
people are
entitled to
protection.**

**Children must
listen to what
adults say.**

**Children can
contribute to
society.**

**Traditional
norms must
be preserved.**

**Everyone should
be treated with
respect.**



Key findings



The concepts of **“traditional (family) values”** and **“liberal (Western) values”** are juxtaposed to one another.



This opposition is reflected in a differentiation between **acceptable and unacceptable topics and behaviours** in the well-structured field of child participation.



For children, human rights defence actions represent **an opportunity to defy norms and overcome divisions** by standing up for themselves.

Key findings

MAIN CATEGORIES:	TYPES OF ACTIVITIES:	TYPES OF ORGANISATIONS AND FORMATS:
Initiatives to attract and channel children's and youth energy for public benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> volunteering and charity (social) entrepreneurship personal development improving the living environment 	organisations that develop children's volunteering and charity
		organisations that develop mentoring, leadership, and entrepreneurship programmes
		peer-to-peer and involvement of children in awareness-raising campaigns and counselling on socially relevant topics about the organisation's field of work
44 out of 140 organisations on the map		
Initiatives to build capacity for and exercise citizen control over policies and public processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> policy advice civic education and culture media literacy and critical thinking 	school student councils
		municipal children and youth councils (children's councils)
		children and youth advisory groups to institutions and organisations
		organizations that develop children's civic participation and empowerment for social change
		children and youth media and communication platforms
60 out of 140 organisations on the map		
Initiatives to defend and promote human rights and important causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> changing the established order and attitudes Empower advocacy for the rights of vulnerable groups 	organisations working to empower children from vulnerable groups
		children and youth (in)formal groups and spaces
36 out of 140 organisations included in the map		

Key findings



ДЕТСКО УЧАСТИЕ И АКТИВИЗЪМ В БЪЛГАРИЯ: НАКЪДЕ ВЪРВИМ?

КАТЕГОРИИ ИНИЦИАТИВИ ЗА ДЕТСКО УЧАСТИЕ И АКТИВИЗЪМ:



Key findings

- Initiatives in the field of children's and youth participation and activism in Bulgaria are surprisingly numerous and diverse.
- This research reaffirms the finding of the world's leading researchers that child participation initiatives are difficult to categorically assign to one group of activities or another, e.g., to the group of volunteer activities or to the group of empowerment activities alone. In our research, we observe that the boundaries between categories cannot be fixed, because most initiatives appear to contain elements of two or more fundamentally different forms of child and youth engagement already at the level of idea.
- Very few organisations and institutions work to engage with young children. The exceptions to this rule are those organisations whose service beneficiaries are young children anyway and which implement their own programmes to empower and involve children from the groups they work within decision-making.

Children in vulnerable situation

One can count on one hand the number of organisations that strive to involve children and young people from vulnerable groups in activities on an equal footing with children from other social backgrounds. This situation is also already recognised as a problem by many experts and young activists:

"If we continue to maintain only councils, parliaments, we only maintain the formation of an elite that is active without expanding the civic culture of the society. They don't communicate with their peers, the activism gets locked in. Even among them, initiative is limited, a few people drive activities – and this leads to and sustains apathy." (The Small Steps Foundation)

Children are gradually and tangibly transformed from being mere objects of social protection and support into agents of change in the different national, cultural and societal contexts in which they live. In terms of constraints, it is important to note here that the inclusion of disadvantaged children and young people (from residential services, foster care, with disabilities, etc.) critically depends on the will of those entrusted with their care. This is natural because adults have a responsibility and cannot trust just anyone, but it also proves to be a barrier to new and small organisations and especially informal groups.

Children in social services

Children and young people who grow up separated from their relatives in social services face behavioural control imposed by the environment, albeit in a different form. Residential care services in Bulgaria are still a territory of **absolute control over daily life and behaviour, and life choices are largely predetermined**. In such conditions, it is difficult to create a safe space for participation. **Children are either unmotivated or afraid** to raise their voice, or their genuine desire to be active and change the environment they live in **manifests itself as aggressive actions and protests** which are **misinterpreted by the staff as problematic behaviour**.

As it appears, change depends crucially on the child and her/his individual ability to initiate and lead. Most of the children do not initiate constructive actions. **Some of the children and young people fear that if they become active, initiate change, or give voice to the problems they feel, there will be negative consequences for them**. For others, **the need to participate, however, exists and is expressed through protests; through resisting the system aggressively and sometimes even self-destructively**. The lack of understanding of this protests as a way to participate provokes adults' responses that stops participation. There are almost no trained professionals in the services to interpret their resistance and turn it into a constructive process. Sometimes, the lack of specialists dooms even the positive change to random developments.

Children in social services

Most commonly, the care setting is **marked by lack of security and trust between children and adults, violence, extreme poverty, competition between children, stigma and lies**. The care provision setting can hardly be regarded as a **'safe place' for participation**, let alone activism.

Children are typically being moved from one care service to another without the reasons and the purpose for their placement, the tasks to be pursued there and the time frame being explained to them. The theme for their biological family is a taboo. The lack of answers to many important questions deprives the children and the young people from the essential of their development knowledge related to their origin, history of development - theirs and their families'. This situation also essentially **deprives the children from a sense of controlling their lives and without this experience setting future goals and planning their pursuit** – individually or together with others – is not possible. This means that there is no stable basis of activism actually.

Children in social services

As a rule of practice the adults working in the child protection system do not consult or negotiate their decisions with children and young people. Once the children are placed in the small group homes, their participation is limited to making decisions regarding the services they would like to receive or activities/clubs they would like to participate in. While this shared decision-making might be the first step towards stimulating children's participation, in the context of the traumatic abrupt and non-negotiable removal from the family or from the previous institution, it is inappropriate and unethical to analyse this as participation.

In our research, we found that accessing the services of professionals, mentors, volunteers, or others to bring this safe space for dialogue and self-expression is very difficult. The **hierarchical system creates specific problems**: e.g. staff who directly care for children are willing to make a difference or are willing to collaborate on a project external to the service with the children, but the manager or provider refuses access. In practice, it appears that everything depends on the will of those empowered to make the decisions, which often condemns children to constrained contact with the world outside the services out of a misunderstanding of the benefit, out of caution, or fear of change.

Supporting factors

As for the factors that support engagement and activism in the social services, we have observed that those children **who have lived with their families** are more likely to become leaders in comparison with those children who have not had any experience of living with their families.

Important factor is the culture of the small group homes. The children's activism can be stimulated when:

- (1) the staff creates and maintains **partnership with the children** evidenced in their ability to negotiate the children's group home placement;
- (2) the manager protects the **autonomy of the service**; and
- (3) the staff operates in a network of **supporting organizations**.

data gathered by the Know-how Centre of Alternative Care for Children in the course of a national study of the deinstitutionalization reform in Bulgaria – *Deinstitutionalization of child care: The Case of Bulgaria III* – conducted in 2020-2021

Recommendations for stimulating activism amongst children in alternative care

The study of the experience of young activists tells us that when children and young people in vulnerable situations are concerned, the most effective way of approaching them is **to provide them with a possibility for another identity** – instead of insisting on their vulnerability and social status and offering them directly the floor to talk about experiences and the battles they are fighting (which most of them are not ready or willing at all to do), a successful project would focus on giving them **the chance to participate through either something that they are good at (sport or art), or though assigning them completely new role, e.g. researcher or a facilitator of discussion.**

“My most important recommendation to social services is to pay attention to what children like and want to do.”, says the young activist Theodor who has spent his life in institutions and is currently a student at the National Sports Academy of Bulgaria.

Resources and references

-Final report “*Child participation and child activism in Bulgaria: Whereto?*” - <https://knowhowcentre.nbu.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/KHC-Finalen-doklad-detski-aktivizam-2022.pdf>

-*Deinstitutionalization of child care: The Case of Bulgaria III* - <https://knowhowcentre.nbu.bg/balgarskata-deinstitucionalizacia-proval-ili-uspeh/>

-Nenova, G. and Antonova, R. 2023. Children’s rights in Bulgaria between theory and practice: The case of the deinstitutionalization reform. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*. 9, 2 (Sep. 2023), 54–71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v9i2.1126>. - <https://intersections.tk.mta.hu/index.php/intersections/article/view/1126>

-Антонова, Р. и Андонова, Ж. (2022). Преживяването на множество стигми при деца в резидентна грижа, чиито биологични майки страдат от психично разстройство. В: *Обществени аспекти на психичното здраве и психичните разстройства*. Съст.: Димитрова, В., Мартинова, М., Наков, Вл. (52-72). София, УИ „Св. Климент Охридски“. ISBN 978-954-07-5522-9

-Master Programme - <https://knowhowcentre.nbu.bg/course/psychosocial-interventions-with-children-and-families/>

Thank you for your attention!

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